

DESERT ISLAND TIMES

Sharing fellowship in

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*Rebuilding of Newport Bridge, 1927
Temporary bridge to the left of the new structure*

*A MISCELLANY OF
CONTRIBUTIONS
FROM OUR MEMBERS*

Expectations Fulfilled! by Stephen Berry

Since my teens I have been an avid reader of British crime fiction – the title that piqued my interest and started me on this wonderful pastime was, not unsurprisingly, “4.50 from Paddington”, one of the Miss Marple books of Agatha Christie. Leaving aside my usual criticism of the railway details in the story (the sort of anomalies that have me shouting at the television whenever a programme featuring railways is shown!), the book was a good read and encouraged me to acquire the rest of her output. Not content with just her work, I moved on through other authors such as Ngaio Marsh, Patricia Wentworth, Ruth Rendell and others from the so-called “golden age” of detective fiction. Later I became acquainted with more modern writers – P.D. James, Colin Dexter, Stephen Booth, Peter Robinson, Ellie Griffiths, Kate Ellis, Joy Ellis, J.R. Ellis (what is it about the name ‘Ellis’? None of these is related to the others!), to name but a few of the many.

Many books – particularly Agatha Christie’s books – have been made into films and a number into television series. I must admit that I find the quality of these varies greatly from excellent to absolute rubbish! When a specific title is made into a film I expect the story line to be followed exactly, though many film adaptations seem to be at best very loosely based on a book of the same name. There are far too many instances where the action in the book takes place, say, in Cornwall, yet the film script has it taking place in a Mediterranean resort. The characters are glamorised and a country vicar becomes an international banker! Is this the peril of reading the book first? Very possibly, but the reverse can also be true.

If one sees such a glamorised version of the story and then decides to read the book, it is very easy to become disillusioned – and, worse still, to blame the author for writing such a dull story! Although modern adaptations tend to be more guilty of this than older ones, I can remember one black and white version of a Christie book that actually had Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot in the same story – something that Christie never did.

This leads on to the principal characters themselves. Early Miss Marple film adaptations often used Margaret Rutherford to play Miss Marple. It would have been difficult to find anybody less like the description of Miss Marple in the written word than this actress! The outstanding actress in this role was, in my humble opinion, Joan Hickson; she fitted the description in every way. Similarly I think David Suchet was the best in the Hercule Poirot adaptations. Also George Baker as Inspector Wexford (Ruth Rendell) and John Thorne as Inspector Morse (Colin Dexter) really do seem to be the characters brought to life.

Many of the more recent additions of authors to my already long list are made simply by looking at books in charity shops. It is often possible to pick up a book for £1 or so and I don’t mind trying a new author if the synopsis sounds interesting. EBay generally comes to my aid if I want to complete a series!

One book I acquired some while ago but have never got around to reading is “The Seagull” by Ann Cleeves. It is from her series about the Northumbrian detective Vera Stanhope, known to many (me included) from the ITV television series “Vera”. I have just finished reading this book – and I have already ordered the other seven books in the series!

The descriptions given of Vera in the book and the dialogue she uses is so perfectly reflected in the television adaptation that it really is possible to visualise the action -everything “rings true”.

I would strongly recommend trying these for yourself if you like this *genre* – and if you too like the TV series.

Greg Goes to Goldcliffe – Greg Platt

Looking for somewhere to escape the confinement of lockdown, my daughter suggested we went to Goldcliff Seawall Tearoom.

Pausing only to peep at Wikipedia, (see entry * below) pick up binos, salmon net, wellies (not necessary), decide to postpone noting loads of historical info re cliff in question, ancient tribes, abbey, school for 60 kids though only 45 attended at time of interview, Newport Wetlands etc ...

* Goldcliff is a popular venue for sea fishing and ornithology. Bird species sighted include little egret, cormorant, chaffinch, magpie, woodpigeon, wren, greenfinch, moorhen, dunlin, ringed plover, lapwing, shelduck, avocets, common redshank, Canada goose, oystercatcher, shoveler, teal, spotted redshank, black-winged stilt, common buzzard, grey heron, tufted ducks, mallard, swallow, black-tailed godwit, skylark, raven, gadwall, common pochard, kestrel, sedge warbler, and peregrine. There are tea rooms, with toilet facilities, at the seawall."

Some brave souls were walking or cycling to and from the tearoom - the road is rather narrow - but it was by no means overcrowded. We left the car, clambered up some steep-ish steps and ...WOW! Acres of wet mud stretching out and along as far as we could see! Tide was out with a vengeance. We spotted a couple of lesser spotted fishermen (they didn't spot us) plus some birds (see above) but it was the sheer immensity of it that mattered.

A walk along the wall and back - no, we didn't see how far it was - then down to sit outside the Seawall Tearoom enjoying a nice cuppa.



2. Cryptic Crossword Pic'n'Mix Clues – Word Exchangers by Angela Robins

Many Cryptic Crossword Clues are 'Pic'n'Mix Clues' which are a mixture of 'The Dozen' types of clues, such as the Word Exchanging Clue:

i.e. First man/ and a worker/ were very determined (7). = Adam/ant. Combined with other clues they yield whole words or single letters to form a composite answer.

e.g. Conservative is ill mannered and coarse (5). = C/rude C is an A-Z Abbreviation and rude is the Word Exchange .

Or - Thus the Devil returns to find musical compositions (7). = So/natas So is a Word Exchange for thus, as also is Satan (reversed) for Devil.

Contact me on valdemos2@gmail.com if you would like to receive my group's easy weekly crossword with hints and answers.

Try these clues - they are a mixture but all include the Word Exchanging Clue element and a definition of the answer required. The answers are on page 6.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Warms up missing starter then devours (4). | Part Word |
| 2. Not using energy - Destiny to become overweight (3). | Part Word |
| 3. Fashionable meeting with skinhead in a bed (5). | Part Word |
| 4. So many with the Tory/ team/ almost a rabble (12). | Part Words |
| 5. Maureen intended to speak in an instant (6). | Homophone |
| 6. He casts a spell to cure. "What choice?" you say and tamper (5,6). | Homophone |
| 7. Put label back on racquet (3). | Reverse |
| 8. Cosy weapons in retreat (4). | Reverse |
| 9. Opera star eager to return (4). | Reverse |
| 10. The pack animal drops the French film with Louise (6) . | A-Z Association |
| 11. Guards dispatched in the Spanish South (9) | Text/A-Z Association +Abbreviation |
| 12. Make a point to warm the cereal (5). | A-Z Abbreviation |
| 13. Measurement, it's a sure thing with carbon removed (4). | A-Z Abbreviation |
| 14. Scandinavian to marry in south east (5). | A-Z Abbreviation |
| 15. Pay attention and /start loading iff /gun (6). | Acrostic |
| 16. Rebel French cafe owner aged badly (8). | Anagram |
| 17. Landmark style a Gutenberg travelling (11,4). | Anagram |
| 18. Make familiar with a hundred so cute (8). | Numbers |
| 19. Greek letter received from ten with thanks (4). | Numbers |
| 20. Signed in one tied around everything (11). | Numbers/Anagram |

Answers on Page 6

Not an Arthur – A poem by Alan Barrow

Peer into the hereafter
and with laughter
break the glass.

Come welcome
my warlock thumb
dispel the sand
seek to greet and clasp
this wizened wizard hand
for I am Cei
aye Cei
not an Arthur.

Once I was Cei Cei
the cry baby
this I know maybe
from way back
from my mother
for no other
suckled me to her breast
then my world was warm
milky and at rest.

For her I was Cei Cei
Her ever hungry cry baby .

Later I was proclaimed
the famed Cei
Cei Hir Cei Hir
tall as the tallest tree.

For nine nights and nine days
I kept sleep at bay
and my eyelids raised
for nine days and nine nights
I without air and no regard for care
inhabited the sea dragon's lair.

Know from the heat of this hand
was rekindled Arthur's land
pray heed what I say
It's a long time since
I did my stint
as the warlock prince
a talisman - not an Arthur.

Try as they will
no one can deny
I am Cei still
Cei fab Cynyr
part saint part sinner.

I have drawn blood from the wind
Yet where is the warrior who has not sinned ?

I am Cei
Cei who cuts to the quick
it is a trick
I learned at my father's back

I am Cei Cei
whose opponents die
I am hard as bone
tested and taught to stand alone.

Know I am Cei
who is feared
Cei son of Cynyr fair beard
proud and stubborn my will
yet not an Arthur still.

As the vanquished in flight
fight against sorrow
they know on the morrow
the victors plight might be sorrier
they understand that I Cei
and my father and my father's father
had no voice no choice
but to play the warrior
always to be a provider
a provider of dead
on which always
the ravens grow red.

In the dying is our living
old wounds may groan
but you will never hear Cei moan
for nothing can surpass
the cutting down
of the tall brave untried
like grass.

It is said what passes for boldness
is a heart dead through coldness
so be it then
as Goronwyn's my boy
and Celemon's my daughter
know both are my joy
but my glory lies in slaughter .

Let others sing and praise our deeds
a warriors weaknesses are his needs
ambition can be sold and bought
but I Cei never sought
to be the fairest man who sat
at that great court
of Arthur called King.

Yet I know my weakness is
that I am that Cei
a Cei who to life's end
remembers him as once my friend

Suppress your laughter
only Arthur's friend
can proudly proclaim
he is not an Arthur.

Barbara Williams remembers

I have always loved going to live music concerts as well as theatre. This started in my teens when we used to go to Cardiff and we saw many famous performers

In those days Marty Wilde was one of our favourites and over the years we have continued as "fans". Recently we have seen him in Blackwood, Cwmbran and Weston Super Mare. In fact we are booked to see him in November but only time will tell whether this will take place. It hasn't been cancelled yet. When I say "we" it's the same set of friends. We call ourselves the 44gang. No prizes for guessing why!

Garry and I are very disappointed that we have been unable to go to The Welsh Proms this year. When we go to the Last Night we always sit in the choir seats as I really enjoy watching Owain Arwal Hughes conducting.

Rod Stewart is another of my favourite performers who I have seen quite a few times

Two occasions stand out. The first time he wasn't singing. I was taking part in a 10 mile walk for breast cancer at Blenheim Palace. Rod's wife Penny Lancaster was taking part. They had lost a friend to this awful disease. She gave a speech after the walk and then they wandered around very naturally. He wasn't the star that day.

The other occasion was a birthday treat. My friend had a significant birthday and for her present I took her to see Rod in the LG Arena in Birmingham. We arrived at our hotel and had some champagne before taking a taxi to the Arena. After our meal we went to find our seats—supposedly the best seats! Needless to say we were in the back but one row.

Having just made ourselves comfortable we were approached by two young men. They told us they worked for Rod and would like to offer us front row seats. Rather apprehensively we went with them and to our delight and amazement the offer was genuine. The concert was fantastic.

When my son walked me down the aisle to get married it was to the music of Rod Stewart.

Cryptic Crossword Pic'n'Mix Clues (page 4) - Answers

1. (H)eats
2. Fat(E)
3. a/S/ cot
4. Con/side/rab(b)le
5. Mo/ment
6. Witch Doctor
7. Bat
8. Snug
9. Diva
10. The l(la)ma
11. Sent/in/el/s
12. W/ heat
13. (C)inch
14. S/wed/E
15. LI sten
16. Rene gade
17. Brand/enburg Gate
18. A/C/quaint
19. 10/ta
20. In/1/ti-all-ed.

Sudoku

Each row and each column has to contain numbers 1 to 9 once only; each large square of nine smaller squares likewise. Do not guess numbers! Work out each by elimination.

The four puzzles get progressively more difficult.

No 1 is "Easy", No 2 is "Medium", No 3 is "Hard" and No 4 is "Evil". Good luck!

1. Easy

9	4		2					1
		5	9	8				
		3	4		5			
4		1		2		7		
2	7	6		5		3	4	8
		9		7		1		2
			7		1	8		
				4	8	9		
7				2		6	3	

2. Medium

		7	4			5		3
	4	3	1		2		9	6
		6		3			4	
	5	1		2				
				4		1	8	
	6			9		4		
8	3		5		4	2	6	
1		4			3	9		

3. Hard

3			1	2	7			
		8	4					
		1				3		
	1				2		8	4
9								2
6	7		8				3	
		5				4		
					5	9		
			3	1	9			7

4. Evil

3	4							5
				2				1
	6		7		9			
2	7		9					
			3	8	2			
					4		1	9
			8		7		3	
9				5				
4							6	8

A Room with a View by Martyn Vaughan

Miller was staring at his wall video when they came for him.

It was a lovely scene showing a waterfall dropping from a high granite cliff into a wide, blue-green plunge pool, half-hidden by tumultuous vegetation.

Miller had heard the soporific white noise murmurs of the waterfall while he leaned back in his armchair with eyes half-closed. He had known that if he stood up and approached the wall so close that his nose was almost touching the image of tumbling white water, the noise would become a distant thunder.

But he liked the sound of the waterfall to be just this pleasant, restful, distant murmur.

Occasionally as he sat there, he could hear the plaintive cries of birds as they flew past the waterfall; some he knew were so brave that they nested behind the tremendous cascading curtains of water and spray.

He loved the waterfall video but occasionally he would change the scene so that sometimes he could watch the sunset colours fluctuate over the ribbed surface of Uluru or watch the archer fish shooting down their insect prey when those creatures dropped too close to the swirling green currents of the Amazon.

The sudden opening of his door was not entirely a surprise to Miller: he suspected that perhaps he had gone too far in his recent blog criticisms of the Council. No doubt they had tired of his continual demands for more democracy; after all, it had happened before. He could not complain that he hadn't been warned that the next time that he transgressed his punishment would be more severe. Still was it necessary for them to come in so violently that the door crashed against the wall with a force that must have damaged the hinges?

'Miller!' the nearest of the two security guards roared, 'Up! The Council Leader wants to see you!'

Miller looked the two over. As usual, they were big burly men; obviously chosen for muscle rather than brains or tact.

He got up slowly, almost lazily, knowing that it would infuriate them.

'Couldn't he have sent a message on the communicator?' he asked sweetly, giving the small TV monitor on the desk a causal glance, 'you two must have something better to do. Like learning to read, perhaps?'

The nearest guard took a step towards Miller, raising a fist as he did so but was held back by the one behind him.

'Better not,' his companion said, 'the Leader doesn't like people taking the law into their own hands.'

The first guard glanced back as the other, then back to Miller and then nodded.

'You're right,' he said and then added, with a wolfish grin, 'I don't think Mr Miller here knows exactly what he's let himself in for this time.'

Miller shrugged, switched the wall video off and left his room with both guards walking directly behind him.

The corridor was well lit, and pleasant woodland scents were being wafted from invisible vents so all three men were aware of gentle breezes blowing softly in their faces, bringing the fragrances of deep, black loam, of gently trembling green leaves and the nodding heads of flowers. This scenario was familiar to them, and so they marched on, with the guards occasionally prodding Miller in the small of the back if they decided his progress was too slow.

Suddenly the fragrances changed and became totally different; instead of the sounds and scents of a woodland glade there came the sharp tang of a marine environment; they could smell the salt in the air; hear the cries of the gulls and the rhythmic pulse of the waves.

This was a rare treat, and all three stopped instantly, waiting for the next phase.

It was not long coming: the walls of the corridor changed from their pleasant, creamy-white opacity to display a marvellous vista of a mighty ocean showing great waves rising and falling in aquamarine ridges topped with crests of sparkling ivory. Wandering albatross sailed serenely above them in the sparkling azure dome of the sky, high above the raucous gulls. And then they saw it: in the distant a great humpback whale breached the surface, raising its colossal body high above the swell before plunging back in a great cascade of spume.

The three men stood transfixed until, far too soon, the sea faded, and the curving white walls of the corridor returned.

'Wasn't that something,' the first guard breathed, turning to Miller. The wonder of that spectacle had momentarily wiped away the power relationship between them, and for a few moments, they were united in the warm embrace of remembered beauty.

It didn't last; no sooner had Miller begun to express his agreement when the expressions of the guards hardened and they resumed their distant, officious manner.

'On we go,' the first said, and added with what was almost a leer, 'we don't want to keep the Leader waiting, do we, Miller? That might make him even angrier with you than he is now.'

Miller said nothing, trying to hold on to the memory of what they had seen for a few moments longer.

But he could not because shortly they were standing in front of the Leader's door.

A red light above the door flashed for an instant, and Miller knew it was detecting his presence.

'Please come in Mr Miller,' a deep, powerful voice said, and then, presumably addressing the guards, 'Thank you, gentlemen, you can resume your normal duties now.'

The door opened automatically and Miller entered the Leader's sanctum.

It was plain and functional, with only a few chairs in front of a large desk. One wall was hidden behind a bookcase, whose shelves were buckling under the weight of the books piled upon them. And behind the desk in a large, undecorated chair sat the Leader.

He was a man whose physique matched his voice: large, powerful, commanding.

He stood up and indicated one of the chairs.

'Please sit down, Mr Miller. It is regrettable that we meet under these circumstances – again.'

Miller accepted the invitation and he and the Leader sat down simultaneously.

'I agree,' he said, 'all you have to do is accept my suggestions and we can never meet again.'

The Leader smiled humourlessly. 'I see that you still haven't grown up, Mr Miller. This is very tiresome.'

'Democracy is tiresome, Leader? I fail to see how.'

'How do you think we got to be in this situation, Mr Miller? Through people disagreeing, squabbling, arguing – each one thinking he alone has the right way, the only way. And when others disagree, finding that the only way to silence them is through violence.'

'And your way?'

The Leader stared at Miller, and the latter felt his self-assurance, his certainty begin to ebb away.

'One man, Mr Miller. One man who decides and by the force of his being, the strength of his will, guides and controls the others so that there is no more in-fighting, no more factionalism.'

'I am that man. And I will not let immature dreamers like you drag us back to the old ways. The ways that got us where we are now.'

Miller did not speak – after all, what was the use? They had had this conversation before.

'And so,' the Leader continued, 'we come to the unpleasant topic of punishment. I have decided to give you a period of solitary confinement.'

Miller was unmoved: he had survived more than one episode of that punishment before. He was ready. The Leader was about to say more when the wall on Miller's left suddenly burst into movement and colour.

A green hill appeared with a slightly cloud-spotted blue expanse behind. The field of view dipped down until a small cluster of trees appeared. The view closed in on a single tree and in the branches they could see a jay feeding a brood of voracious chicks, which were frantically begging for food from their harassed parent. The view tracked to the right until a red squirrel appeared, hanging head-down on the trunk of the tree.

Both men watched, silently entranced, until the vision faded and was replaced by the blank wall.

'I have wondered whether I should increase the duration of those vignettes,' the Leader said softly, 'but then we'd never get any work done.'

He shook his head as if to throw off cobwebs and then returned his stare to Miller.

'Ah yes, your punishment. Solitary confinement. Two weeks. In a room with a view.'

Miller could not suppress a gasp. It felt as if a great cold hand had suddenly enveloped him and was crushing his life force. His hands began to tremble as he extended them towards the Leader.

'With a view? No, no, this can't be right! I haven't done anything that bad! Please, I would like time to think – maybe my opinions are a little too extreme, I...'

But the Leader was already turning away.

'Actions have consequences, Mr Miller. And this is your own, personal consequence.'

Two hours later, Miller stood in the room. There was a chair, a table and a simple bed.

There was a lavatory in the centre of the room.

There was nothing else; no books, no monitors. Not even a vase with a flower in it.

Just the curving bare, white walls that enclosed him in a colourless, featureless dome.

And then the walls began to grow transparent as he had known that they would.

All around him, wherever he looked, images of what lay beyond the dome began to come into view.

And he could see it; in every direction - he could not escape it.

Everywhere he turned it was the same: the grey, twisted, shattered, blasted ruin of what had once been a verdant land and was now a lifeless, sterile radioactive desert; the horrific aftermath of the One Day War.

In the distance, he could see the broken stump of what once had been a great building, the windows long ago blown in, leaving just black holes like empty eye sockets.

Nearer in the cratered grey ash, still resolutely visible, were the remnants of burned human ribcages, sticking out of the ground like black twigs.

He slumped bonelessly onto the floor of his room, covering his eyes with shaking hands.

He knew he would never challenge the Leader again – even if he were to emerge a sane man from the Room With A View.

'How doth the little crocodile...' – David Jenkins

You might recognise the line above. It's from 'Alice in Wonderland', recited by Alice. Written by Lewis Carroll for the novel, it's a parody of Isaac Watts' poem which commences 'How doth the little busy bee...'

Over time I have attended quite a few writing classes and writing groups and despite the urgings of a series of tutors have by-and-large managed to keep away from this particular creative form. For one thing my own views on what constitutes a poem might differ from the opinions of others. So, having little aptitude for poetry, I tend to stay away from attempts at writing it.

(I should mention one exception to this rule of mine – limericks are a simple verse form and can be quite entertaining.)

In the Newport U3A Creative Writing group there are many who can turn their hand to producing poetry, and I can only listen in awe to their work, mixed with a certain regret that I cannot do the same.

I have weakened once or twice over time. The piece below was written quite a few years ago as a response to a tutor who asked on a regular basis that we try to create a poem. It was written in the hope that it would stop her from nagging me!

CONFESSIONS OF A PROSE-WRITER

(A POEM THAT I WROTE IN DESPERATION WHILE TRYING TO WRITE A POEM)

Write a poem she said, try to capture the muse
So with paper and pencil, and plenty of booze
I set out on the journey, determined in time
To capture the feeling, to pin down the rhyme.

In a poem she said, there are words intertwined
With metre and rhythm within it defined.
Sod that for a game of soldiers, thought I,
What - me, write a poem? - I'm more likely to fly!

But a poem she said, can be open and flowing.
A crystalline nugget of meaning just glowing
From inside the form that your arts bring to bear
And I thought - I write stories, I really don't care.

Try a poem she said, just a short one will do,
Into my mind came a couplet or two.
Write it standard or free-form, develop a style
I thought - well I might, if you give me a while.

So, this poem, I thought, I'll give it a crack
I twisted some feelings and words on the rack:
But phrase, form and rhyme all brought nothing but trouble
So I reached for the vodka, and poured one more double.

In my poem, alas! - there will be no deep show
Of literary merit - but what do you know?
When I put it all down with a joke or a jest
It shows, don't you think, that's how I do it best!

Here's a poem, I say, a rhyme there, a verse here
If you've mastered the art then don't be too severe
In judging its worth, when you read what I've done
It's not epic, or clever - but by God, it was fun!

'The Old Wives Tale' by Arnold Bennett – Gerald Lee

I read this novel as part of my course at Queens University Belfast. It was one of the best received novels among the students. The lockdown has given the opportunity to read it again. It a truly enjoyable book with much of the content still pertinent today.

Arnold Bennett published the book in 1908. He was inspired by the sight of a middle aged 'stout, ageing woman' in a restaurant in Paris. He reflected, 'This woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful.' The change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes.' On another occasion he met someone who had witnessed the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. Everyone has a story to tell, even if most of one's life is routine.

The novel is rather unusual in that it covers the whole period in the lives of the two main characters. Their differing personalities and the course of their lives is even suggested by their names, Constance and Sophia. Constance, the elder sister is the more conventional. They live in Burslem in the Five Towns. Their family own a drapery business. They are a solid hardworking family, Methodist by religion and relatively prosperous.

Their father is an invalid after a stroke, so their mother Mrs. Baines runs the business with the two daughters. When the parents decide that both daughters should leave school at the same time, Sophia shows a rebellious temperament.

Sophia is the better looking of the two sisters and more restless and worldly. She rebels and decides she wants to be a teacher. Eventually her parents agree, but then on the death of her father she returns to work in the family business.

Her mother is worried when she suspects she is secretly seeing a commercial traveller, Gerald Scales. He is a handsome young man and well connected, his family owning the business for which he works. However, Mrs. Baines warns her daughter he has a bad reputation and not to be deceived by his looks and charm.

Gerald inherits a substantial sum of £12,000 from his uncle. With this and £5 Sophia has stolen from a well-off aunt they decide to elope together. They marry in London and then go to live in Paris, where Gerald once lived and still has connections.

Sophia sends irregular notes to her family without an address, so they have no idea of her whereabouts in Paris. Arnold Bennett has subtle ways of telling the reader of change and the passage of time. Often it is just by describing how characters physically change, they become stouter, the hair shows bits of grey, their health is more precarious.

The world around them changes. This is apparent in transport during this period. Trains change the way people live. Then the motor car arrives bringing more changes. The effect is not always good. Trains allow the public to shop further afield and gradually smaller shops lose out to bigger towns. We see this today in the way town centres, such as in Pontypool, have been hit by development that siphons trade elsewhere.

Constance marries her parents' employee, Samuel Povey, and together they continue the business. An indicator of change is the new sign, 'Povey' instead of 'Baines'. Gradually Samuel and Constance become the household, Samuel occupying the rocking chair once reserved for Mr. Baines and they occupy the main bedroom in which Mr. Bains died. There is still a room for Sophia should she return.

In the course of time old servants leave and new ones come. It is never easy to find good servants and, as ever, everyone feels standards are falling. A feature of the novel is that whereas life is routine, within that routine there are particular skills, even in such small matters as writing price tags correctly and showing

goods for display. Each aspect of the business has its own 'territory' in the shop and window display with a designated person to maintain it.

In accordance with his introduction, although Samuel and Constance lead conventional lives, they have their heroic moments. Samuel's cousin Daniel faces the death penalty, having been accused of murdering his alcoholic wife, whose neglect of their son Dick results in him having a permanent disability in his leg when a broken knee is not treated in time.

Samuel leads the campaign to save his cousin, but alas, without success. It is clearly a miscarriage of justice. It in turn destroys Samuel's health and leads to his early death.

Changes are also introduced through the lives of other family members, most notably their son, Cyril. They are dutiful parents, but Cyril is suspected of financing the smoking habits of pupils in the school. Samuel confronts him with proof that he stole from the till. It is a bleak moment in an otherwise good school career. He goes on to study art and is a support to Constance after Samuel's death until he too decides to leave home. Nevertheless, he still writes weekly to his mother and she to him.

For over thirty years Sophia has not made contact beyond occasional cards. She enjoys life in Paris at first. Money seems plentiful, until Gerald asks her to seek help from her family. They have high points of drama in Paris. Gerald wishes to witness a public execution by guillotine. Against her instincts Sophia also attends. Otherwise they do not absorb Parisian life. Gerald is drinking heavily, and she suspects he has withheld the truth about their finances from her and may even be thinking of deserting her.

One night when he is incapacitated through drink, she steals English money from him and conceals it in her clothing. He cannot remember how he lost it. As he had not told her about the cash, he cannot mention it or accuse her of stealing it. Sophia suffers a major illness after Gerald leaves her for good. The money allows her to stay in the pension while she recovers. When the unbusiness-like proprietor cannot meet her loans, Sophia uses Gerald's money to keep the pension open in return for a share of the business. Eventually she takes over the management of it herself. She has become fluent in French and has a true acumen for commerce.

She prospers. Still a beautiful woman, she resists any other involvements. When an established hotel is up for sale, she makes a low offer and will not negotiate. It is clear she has purchased the business below value. She has no sympathy for the previous owners, who are in difficulty and need to return to England. Eventually she is, like her parents, owner of a substantial business. If anything, she is more ruthless, never showing empathy for anyone else and denying herself any pleasures.

When she looks at her life, she has only acquaintances; her closest companion is her dog. She has little interest in French culture beyond what she might have seen on a poster. Gerald has long gone. She has no interest in finding him.

Her detachment is demonstrated by her attitude to the siege of Paris and the Commune. The politics do not interest her. Again, the author marks change in a subtle way. Her recollection of the war with Prussia is marked only by the difficulty in buying flour and essential foodstuffs, and the fluctuations in price. Yet she still manages to make a profit. If there is a commune, instead of an Emperor Louis Napoleon, it is of little consequence to her. For her life goes on. The only notable event she witnesses is the attempt some citizens make, including one of her few true friends, to leave Paris in a balloon. His death in the escape does not even provoke any emotion.

Whereas Constance and Samuel change their shop sign to 'Povey', she keeps the original name of the hotel, although she retains her married name, Mrs. Scales.

It must seem hard she does not feel any need to contact Constance or her mother beyond an occasional card. She guesses her mother and aunt must be dead. It is not important to her, even if she begins to realize how alone she is.

Through a friend of Cyril who stays at the hotel, Constance learns that Sophia is alive and prospering in Paris. She writes to Sophia, who does not even know her mother and aunt have died, and that Constance and Samuel Povey are married and have a son, Cyril.

Sophia decides to sell the hotel and return to the family home. Constance is plagued by sciatica, so her nephew Richard meets Sophia at the station. He recognizes her by the cute French dog she brings with her, curiously clipped as no English dog would be. As with any reunion there should be a lot to say, but usually you feel tongue tied.

With Bennett's talent for recording time passing, Sophia becomes part of the household again very quickly. She is much stricter than her sister with the servants. She becomes close to her nephew Cyril. With the money from her aunt's estate and from her parents she is very wealthy.

With the normal course of life, the two sisters settle into old age, with its health problems and the difficulty coping with change. The shop is sold. To their despair an outside firm buys the business and sells mass produced overcoats at twelve shillings and sixpence. The name of Povey is gone; the solid sign of 'Povey' outside is replaced by a vast vulgar display.

All the other established names and businesses are gradually disappearing. There is even an attempt to establish 'federation', to absorb all the towns into one. Almost crippled, Constance, still makes the effort to vote against it. Those opposed to federation win. In reality, everyone knows that in the course of time such change is inevitable and Burslem will be absorbed into a new larger town.

Rather like Becky Sharp in 'Vanity Fair' the sisters unconsciously endorse domesticity as they grow old together. No-one mentions anymore that in her youth the beautiful Sophia ran off with a commercial traveller who deserted her. Richard Povey, despite his limp, builds a successful bicycle business. That his father was hanged for the murder of his mother is lost in time.

The book takes the reader up to the death of the two sisters. Sophia receives a telegram from Manchester to tell her Gerald has sought refuge with the remaining members of his uncle's family, tracing them through the family name of the old business, Brindley's.

He is near death. Tickets in his clothes suggest he has travelled from South America. He is penniless.

Richard, in his new-fangled car, drives Sophia to see him. It is too late; he has already died. Sophia never shows emotion. The strain of the journey leads to a relapse in her health and her own death.

On rereading the book this is a chance missed to explore the relationship between Sophia and Gerald. It would have been interesting to know what they might have said to one another. Perhaps Gerald would just want financial support. It is the unanswered question whether there was ever any deep affection, or even love, between them. Sophia was young. He was older and had travelled. She realized he was calculating and had pretended to be attacked to gain the sympathy of her family when they first met, so what might he have said to her as he was dying?

Many aspects of the story still strike a chord today. Family businesses disappear, buildings fall empty and stay that way. Transport takes commerce away from the old towns. Mass produced goods replace the crafted produce. The next generation does not respect the old values.

The original inspiration of the book is still relevant to many of us. We have high moments of drama in our lives, but for the most part life is routine and steady. Evolution is still change.

There was once a TV dramatization entitled 'Sophia and Constance.' As an admirer of the book I found it disappointing. Perhaps today, apart from Dickens, Victorian novelists are no longer fashionable. However, this is a book that, even after first reading it nearly fifty years ago, I can still enjoy. Its themes of change and its inevitability still have a resonance. Yet each of us has a personal story as well.

Pets' Corner submitted by Barbara Phillips

1. Who said "If a man could be crossed with the cat it would improve the man but it would deteriorate the cat?"	a) Henry James b) Nathaniel Hawthorne c) Herman Melville d) Mark Twain
2. Which actor has a parrot called Angel?	a) Gretchen Moll b) Franka Potente c) Chloë Sevigny d) Hilary Swank
3. Who designed a "catflap" for his many pets?	a) John Evelyn b) Isaac Newton c) Samuel Pepys d) Christopher Wren
4. Which film star had a pet macaw?	a) Joan Crawford b) Bette Davis c) Rita Hayworth d) Lana Turner
5. Which playwright had a Maltese terrier called Poochi	a) John Osborne b) Edward Albee c) Harold Pinter d) Arthur Miller
6. What name did Florence Nightingale give her pet owl?	a) Aphrodite b) Athene c) Artemis d) Demeter
7. Which poet had a Persian cat called Atossa?	a) Matthew Arnold b) John Clare c) John Keats d) Robert Browning
8. Which actor has pet hermit crabs?	a) Kim Basinger b) Glenn Close c) Goldie Hawn d) Jessica Lange
9. Who said "Cats do not have to be shown how to have a good time, for they are unfailingly ingenious in that respect"?	a) Dirk Bogarde b) James Mason c) John Mills d) Laurence Olivier
10. Which Roman emperor had a horse called Incitatus?	a) Augustus b) Caligula c) Commodus d) Nero

Answers on Page 24

AIN'T MIS-BEE-HAVIN' - Jane Parsons

In an earlier edition of DIT (No. 11, p.10) I told the story of how, in late May, Bryn and I were able to capture a swarm of honey bees which had settled in our garden hedge and which we transferred to a hive at Christchurch allotments. I thought some of you might be interested to hear how they had been getting on.

For the first few weeks we left them to do their own thing, our only intervention being to check their supply of sugar solution each day so as to ensure they did not starve before they had time to adjust to their new surroundings - the food was being taken, suggesting that the colony could be thriving. Initially, although there was activity outside the hive, these would have been bees which had formed part of the original swarm, so we couldn't yet be sure the queen had survived and was reproducing. It takes approximately four weeks for new worker bees to reach the point at which they begin to emerge from the hive. Prior to this, after pupating they remain inside acting as 'house' or 'nurse' bees, cleaning cells for the queen to lay eggs in, feeding larvae and the queen, secreting wax to build or repair comb and receiving nectar and pollen from the foragers.

After a few weeks increasing numbers could be seen hovering just outside, facing towards the front of the hive and making characteristic, small, circular flights which enable them to become familiar with their environment while possibly also acting as guards for the colony. So, we could now be confident that the queen was actively laying. Being surrounded by woodland and scrub there is a wide variety of trees and flowers in the immediate area from which the bees can obtain both nectar and pollen at almost any time of year except in the depth of winter, so the feeding routine was reduced to encourage them to forage for themselves. Soon after this, particularly on warm sunny days, increasingly large numbers of bees could be seen setting off on foraging flights and returning so heavily laden they were having trouble landing!

Initially, as is usual with a new colony, the hive had been set up with only two 'floors'. At the bottom, a brood box, (which houses the queen, attendant workers and the brood cells containing eggs and larvae) and, above it, a single 'super' in which nectar can be stored and subsequently converted into honey to be left in the hive over winter to supply the colony with food, particularly when it starts to become active again in the spring. Only the worker bees are able to access the super; the queen and drones, being bigger than workers, are prevented from entering by a sheet of zinc mesh (unsurprisingly called a queen excluder) placed between the two levels.

The Apiary. This photo shows the new hive on the left after the second super has been added; the original hive is in the centre front - the third at the rear is currently unoccupied.

On 20th July, less than 5 weeks after first collecting the swarm, we decided to check the super to see how much honey had been made. A rough idea can be obtained by gently testing its weight and it certainly felt heavy so we removed the roof to take a look - it was well filled so we added a second super. If this also fills well in the next few weeks we may be able to take our first small harvest from this hive next month - after that it will be getting too late in the year. Watch this space!



Just in case you are wondering, our allotment plot currently looks like this. The red flowers are field poppies in a miniature meadow, the crops which can be seen are beetroot, onions, beans (broad, French/green, and runner), and sweetcorn.



Alphabet Soup Quiz submitted by Pam Cocchiara

Which A was the Greek goddess of love?

Which B was the birthplace of Beethoven?

Which C is a football club with its home ground at Highfield Road?

Which D is a device which transforms mechanical power into electricity?

Which E is a well-known character played by actor Barry Humphries?

Which F is the right granted by a company to sell its goods in a particular area?

Which G is the nickname adopted by the TV cook Graham Kerr?

Which brotherly H and H led the first Anglo-Saxons to settle in Britain?

Which I describes the group of prestigious American universities such as Yale and Harvard?

Which J is the book of the Old Testament that follows Isaiah?

Which K is often called The Laughing Jackass?

Which L flows through Dublin?

Which M had a hit in 1966 with *Pretty Flamingo*?

Which N was a 16th century French astrologer best remembered for his predictions of future events?

Which O describes an angle between 90 and 180 degrees?

Which P are tiny organisms that constitute a rich source of food for many marine animals?

Which Q is another name for Mercury?

Which R is the highly ornamental style of architecture popular in Europe in the early 18th century?

Which S was once called Windscale?

Which T is a frozen landscape where mosses and lichens are typical plant life?

Which U has been the name of 8 popes?

Which V is a chamber of the heart?

Which W, later to become Poet Laureate, was born at Cocker mouth in 1770?

In which X did Kubla Khan "*a stately pleasure dome decree*"?

Which Y was the scene of a famous gold rush in the 1890s?

Which Z used to be an inlet of the North Sea in Holland?

Answers on Page 23

Wordsearches submitted by Barbara Phillips

Can you find the 13 words connected with LAUNDRY in this grid?

U	C	C	G	B	D	C	P	F
S	L	S	I	A	S	O	U	G
E	O	R	O	R	W	M	E	N
T	T	L	C	D	B	P	G	I
A	H	N	E	R	R	A	S	H
C	E	R	P	E	T	R	F	S
I	S	E	R	D	R	T	I	A
L	L	I	N	E	N	M	O	W
E	A	L	O	O	W	E	N	N
D	M	A	C	H	I	N	E	S
C	I	T	A	M	O	T	U	A

Can you find the 14 words connected with FLOORS in the grid below?

M	U	E	L	O	N	I	L	E
R	D	Y	M	E	F	J	N	X
W	E	A	Q	D	T	O	N	E
I	T	T	S	W	T	U	I	T
L	P	A	S	S	O	R	J	A
T	E	A	G	N	I	O	C	L
O	G	A	R	O	I	R	D	S
N	L	N	C	Q	Y	M	S	P
F	R	U	G	L	U	E	X	C
S	E	L	T	I	D	E	R	A
A	I	C	A	R	P	E	T	N

Answers on Page 23

“This Nearly was Ours” by Stephen Berry

In my quite extensive library of local history books and other material is a document prepared by Newport Borough Council under the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 and titled “Written Analysis of the Survey of the County Borough of Newport”. It is dated June 1953 – the date of its issue rather than its compilation. It is a rather large volume of around 120 pages in roughly A3 format, typewritten with diagrams and statistical tables as well as a mass of text. It provides, in effect, a twenty-year plan for the redevelopment of Newport and its surrounding areas and provides an interesting read.

As might be expected, much of the document concerns housing and development of the estates, private and council, that were built from the 1950s onwards – and which are still being added to even now. Since most of the development outlined in the book actually came to pass, this is of less interest than the sections relating to the roads and what was planned in the light of the predictions of traffic growth over the twenty years.

Apparently, Government predictions were that, if vehicular traffic were to increase post war at the same rate as it had pre-war, it would more than double in the twenty-year period. Newport, however, decided that this was too generous (or too difficult to cope with) and opted to settle for an increase of only 75%. Hindsight is a wonderful gift, but only 75%? Hmmm!

Interestingly this document makes several mentions of the proposed “Motor Road” – which did materialise in the late 1960s as the M4 Motorway.

I will now take some of the points made by traffic route. Some are quite surprising!

Commercial Road: At the time of this document this was a thriving route, but of a type which planners really didn't like. It was both a shopping and a residential road, it split the residential district of Pill and it was crossed by two railway level crossings, one of which (Iron Gates Crossing by Frederick Street) was quite busy. Interestingly, it is suggested that a good solution would be divert traffic on to Dock Street, build a new road alongside the Old Town Dock and to regain Commercial Road via a widened Church Street. This was rejected, but, in a modified form, was built as Docks Way in the 1990s.

Cardiff Road and Kingsway: Those who remember Newport in the 1950s and 1960s will remember that through traffic from Cardiff to the north or the east entered the town at Ebbw Bridge and followed Cardiff Road through Maesglas, past the Royal Gwent Hospital and, by-passing the town centre (Commercial Street and High Street), took a route along Kingsway, ending up at the Old Green Crossing by means of a short viaduct from the end of Skinner Street. Although it was an advantage that the town centre was by-passed, this was partially negated by the fact that traffic ended up at the same spot, the traffic jams merely being longer along Kingsway than High Street! Planners clearly didn't like the concept of a main road splitting a residential district (Maesglas) but they couldn't offer any alternative. Of course, subsequently the SDR was built and that did remove the problem, though without the prospect of a bridge where the SDR bridge now spans the river, the road would have had no advantage. It was, however, this plan that mooted the provision of a roundabout at the Old Green, together with a pedestrian underpass beneath Kingsway, the demolition of the shops between the Bridge and the Old Green and the stopping-off of Screw Packet Lane. This work, in a slightly modified form, did just about start within the twenty years!

Bassaleg Road: Described as not carrying a heavy weight of traffic at that time, it was recognised that this might increase in time, but no proposals were offered.

Caerau Road: Preferred as the route into town largely because it led almost directly to the Civic Centre – clearly there were delusions of grandeur even in the early 1950s!

Allt-yr-yn Avenue: Amazingly this was identified as the preferred route for traffic from the direction of Risca to approach the town. It was accepted that the natural outlet would be via Mill Street to Shaftesbury Street, both of which were considered “dangerous” and the latter “heavily loaded”. However, the solution given was to improve Godfrey Road (which runs to the east of the Civic Centre and on to Bridge Street) – clearly everything was to be designed with the object of making things easier for the councillors and employees of the council to reach this Mecca on the Hill!

Malpas Road: This section makes particularly interesting reading!

I quote: “Malpas Road is one of the most heavily trafficked roads and it is *possible* (my italics) that the numbers may be augmented by the erection of a new town at Cwmbran..... At the southern portion it is probable that considerable improvement could be brought about by the removal of sub-standard residential property At the northern end ... the council have considered the erection of new housing estates.”

The Divisional Engineer of the Ministry of Transport was consulted with regard to a proposal to divert Malpas Road “from the junction with the proposed Motor Road around the west of the Canal”, though the precise route of the diversion is not given. He, however, was of the opinion that “Malpas Road can be widened and improved to such an extent as to make it reasonably satisfactory for all future traffic requirements.” Had I, when I was teaching, written on a pupil’s report that something was “reasonably satisfactory” I don’t think the phrase would have conveyed any particular delight or enthusiasm for performance!

This section also remarks that “consideration has been given to the creation of an (estate) at Bettws, but one of the factors weighing against this proposal is the strain which would be placed upon the traffic capacity of Malpas Road and the Old Green Crossing.”

Much of this really doesn’t make much sense. Clearly the council knew that large-scale development was going to take place both in Cwmbran and Malpas – and they certainly changed their minds on building the estate at Bettws – but it was many years before any “improvements” to Malpas Road were made – and the traffic still ends up at the Old Green in the main!

Caerleon Road: It was accepted that this road carried a considerable amount of traffic. An interesting proposal was included – a road which by-passed Caerleon, ran alongside the railway and crossed the river on an adjacent bridge, but the good ideas seem to have run out at this point as it is suggested that access to the river bridge could be via Bank Street and Stockton Road! It would be quite difficult to devise a more inappropriate route.

Christchurch Road: No proposals despite the acceptance that traffic levels will increase when the St Julians estate is developed.

Chepstow Road: Again accepted as a road carrying a considerable amount of traffic, the planners once more failed to come up with any real alternative. Their proposal was, however, as bizarre as the Caerleon Road proposal, as it was for a road “parallel and adjacent to the railway.... This will cross part of the lake at Lliswerry ... Libeneth Road ... Conway Road ... Archibald Street. At the end of Archibald Street the route will connect with the approach to the proposed second river bridge”. So there was, even at this stage, a proposal for George Street Bridge to be built.

Corporation Road: No proposals, though again the proposed second river bridge gets a mention.

Spytty Lane New Road: The proposal was for the building of what has become the section of the SDR between Corporation Road, Nash Road and Balfe Road (just north of the railway near to the Spytty Retail Park). This paragraph does, however, say that it would meet the Chepstow Road diversionary road at this point, which suggests that the sketchy detail given in relation to that road implies a route which was doubtless similar to the current route.

That concludes the summary of the information given for each of the main routes into the town. It is by no means the end of the plan, though, because three sections follow giving further plans.

Second River Crossing: “Some improvement in the means of crossing the River Usk must be effected within the next twenty years if a chaotic traffic problem is to be avoided ...” And so was born the George Street Bridge which was planned for in the exact position in which it was built and opened in the 1960s. The plan gave no details of the number of properties that would be demolished to make this happen, nor did it envisage the problems that flooding beneath the Wharf Road railway bridge would bring. As though that wasn’t enough, it was decreed that the proposed height of the roadway above the high water mark should be increased because of shipping using the river (though tall ships had all but ceased by then). To achieve this, it was necessary to create a “hump” in Corporation Road where the roads intersect.

Inner Ring Road: This is the one that really got away! The proposal was for a road connecting Cardiff Road with the Old Green Crossing. From the description given, it suggests that the plan was drawn up using a flat map, possibly in an office in Aberdeen. It certainly does not suggest a site visit of any sort!

It was to leave Cardiff Road at its junction with Commercial Road, move towards Stow Hill, crossing it at the top of Charles Street, swinging in an arc through Baneswell and proceeding “approximately” along the line of Depot Street and Railway Street. It then crossed a corner of the railway goods yard to a new roundabout at the entrance to the station. From there it went via High Street to the Old Green. It is difficult, if not impossible, to envisage such a road and the number of properties that would have had to be demolished to accommodate it would have been eye-wateringly high.

Ministry of Transport Motor Road: There is a touch of irony about this paragraph. No details of the proposed route are given, but it is obvious that the planned route is largely the one which eventually materialised. It is reported that “The main traffic problem in the centre of the town will not be relieved by the construction of this proposed road. The traffic census taken in 1949 revealed that, of the 3361 vehicles recorded as entering the centre of the town in an hour, only 544 were vehicles which had no cause to stop and which could be by-passed around the town centre.” It must be said that if only 544 vehicles per hour were using the M4 nowadays, Mr Drakeford’s recent decision would be perfectly acceptable. However, what we have now is a series of traffic jams, in and out of the city, and also on the M4!

.....

Conclusions:

In hindsight it is amusing to read this plan and to realise how little of it came to fruition as planned. However, it reflects that early post-war era when optimism was rife and there was a real desire for change and improvement. In reality, many of these schemes would have been viewed as impracticable even when they were devised, though it is possible to see that small parts of them did eventually materialise. In fact, it was something that could never have been foreseen that made our present road system possible – the huge reduction in demand for railways to carry coal from the valleys to the docks and the release of much land as the reduction in routes and sidings was realised. This released land for road development and, although still imperfect, our present system does allow a flow of traffic avoiding the city centre.

What We Were Doing This Time . . . - Angela Robins.

For ten years Pat Fackerell and friends have organised a day out to her sister's bowling club at Swansea for our members during the summer break.

Upon arrival we are treated to a sherry and coffee reception in the beer garden. The stewards then arrange us into teams to play a few ends under their very patient guidance - well it's not easy throwing a wobbly missile in a straight line, and to keep it out of the ditch!

We then make ourselves comfortable in the club house. Recently we have been asked to dress within a particular theme such as the 1920s: so donning our costumes causes a bit of a commotion and raises a few laughs while our MCs amuse us with some jokes.

More club members then wine and dine us with a superb two course meal and all the trimmings imaginable. Afterwards we entertain ourselves, depending upon which members have attended. We have had witty poems from Creative Writing, Ukulele members strumming, whilst Choir members lead a singalong. Some give a performance on the Karaoke which leads to a knees-up by the Line Dancers in any available space that can be found. Then there is always a fun quiz involving hilarious forfeits that have to be performed.

The journey home is a lot quieter as most have a well needed nap!

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Euan requested his church to check if they play bowls in Heaven.

After a week the priest approached Euan with the answer. He said "I have good news and bad news. The good news is, they do play bowls in Heaven."

"That's great! So what can possibly be the bad news?" asked Euan.

The priest replied "Well Euan, the word is out that your name is down for the Pairs next Saturday!"





Wordsearches (page 18) – Answers

Laundry:

DELICATES
COMPARTMENT
LINEN
AUTOMATIC
COTTON

CLOTHES
POWDER
WOOL
AIRER

FABRIC
WASHING
MACHINE
LOAD

Flooring:

LINOLEUM
CARPET
PARQUET
WOOD

WILTON
JUTE
MAT
FLAGSTONE

AXMINSTER
SLATE
TILES

Alphabet Soup (page 17) - Answers

Aphrodite
Dynamo
The Galloping Gourmet
Jeremiah
Manfred Mann
Plankton
Sellafield
Ventricle
Yukon

Bonn
Edna Everage
Hengist and Horsa
Kookaburra
Nostradamus
Quicksilver
Tundra
William Wordsworth
Zuider Zee

Coventry City
Franchise
Ivy League
River Liffey
Obtuse
Rococo
Urban
Xanadu

A bit more personal history - Jean Comfort

Having shared my year's sojourn in London during Coronation year, which I'm sure was incredibly interesting to all, I thought a before and after might be of some interest too.

I left school at 15, just before the leaving age was put up to 16. I had passed my eleven plus (heaven knows how) and attended Newport High School. My scholastic career was dire, the only subjects I was any good at were literature and history. At fourteen I was 5' 8" tall and skinny so was also ungainly at sport. I was the only girl who couldn't climb the rope in the gym and nobody wanted me on their team in games. I always ended up in defence in netball merely because I was tall.

This was in the good old days when there was plenty of work around and I had the choice of hairdressing or Post Office telephonist. I found that a career in hairdressing meant a three year apprenticeship and you had to buy your own equipment, the pay was £1.10 shillings per week.

However the Post Office paid the grand total of £2.10 shillings per week and I only had to find my bus fare. I'm sure there are still many of us still knocking about who remember that the only people who had a telephone in the house were Very Important. The rest of us poor mortals had to resort to the red telephone boxes.

For the younger members of the U3A, all calls even to a person in the same town, had to go through the telephone exchange and a lot of people were frightened of this machine that actually spoke to you when you picked it up. I often recall the terror in some voices when I answered with the crisp "number please", particularly if it was a rural area and the only box in the village, trying to explain the process of putting 2d in and pressing Button A when the call was answered; or even worse saying there was no answer and to press Button B for their money back. Also I had a pad and pencil on which all calls had to be written down. This was then passed to a senior section who priced it and then it went to accounts that billed the private numbers by letter. My sons still howl with laughter remembering my mother who died in 2002 at the age of 94, who till the day she died always jumped with fright and said "Who's that" when the phone on the hall table rang.

The telephone exchange in Newport was opposite the arcade in High St. and the actual switchboards were on the second floor. However the clocking in clock (it really was a huge clock) was on the third floor, so you had to climb (or run if you were late, which I frequently was) to the top floor and then back down to the second floor, in through a door next to the desk of the Head of Dept. If you were late you had a telling off and she had a LOOK that saw through any excuse no matter how valid. If you know the expression 'if looks could kill' - she invented it.

I actually loved the job, we wore old fashioned headphones that hurt like hell at first, we were told to rub mentholated spirits on our ears to harden them up - it did work in the end. As the exchange had to be manned 24 hours a day we worked various shifts from 8 in the morning until 8 at night when male operators took over. I even remember having to walk from Maindee one Christmas morning to do a four hour shift. I finally left to go to London.

When I returned to Newport I worked as a clippie on the buses. But that's another story!

Pets' Corner Quiz (page 15) - Answers:

1. Mark Twain
2. Hilary Swank
3. Isaac Newton
4. Joan Crawford
5. Edward Albee
6. Athena
7. Matthew Arnold
8. Kim Bassinger
9. James Mason
10. Caligula

OUTSTANDING WELSH SINGERS

BRYN TERFEL and ELIN MANAHAN THOMAS by Neil Pritchard

Bryn Terfel was a relative newcomer to international opera during the 1990s when he emerged as an acclaimed bass baritone. By 2000, Bryn was distinguished among a rare elite of male singers, having starred masterfully both in the title role of Mozart's Don Giovanni, and on separate occasions, as Giovanni's servant, Leporello. Among the performances in his repertoire, Mozart's Figaro became a major role early in his career. Even in his early thirties, before he started to tackle the heavier operatic roles (usually reserved for middle-aged singers) he possessed a captivating combination of polished vocal skills, supreme acting ability, and an imposing physical physique. He also possessed a warm, charismatic personality, which endeared him to the growing number of his fans worldwide.

Where did it all begin? He was born Bryn Terfel Jones on 9 November 1965, and raised in the fresh air and open space of the town of Pantglas in North Wales where his parents, Hefin and Nesta Jones, kept a sheep and cattle farm. The tiny hamlet was home to no more than a dozen buildings, including a church and a shop, and it was a local family friend, Selyf Jones who initially taught Terfel to sing.

As a youngster, Bryn was a typical boy soprano. He spent weekends with his family, attending public recitals and competitions in the local area. It was the popular Welsh Eisteddfod folk festivals that helped to established his reputation as a youthful singer. Initially he won regional Eisteddfod contests, expanding gradually to compete in increasingly sophisticated challenges. He was particularly adept in the unique Welsh musical tradition of duelling harp and bard, called cerdd dant. In cerdd dant Bryn's stage presence and improvisational skills came through clearly, as he assumed the role of the bard and responded ably with ad-lib verses to a harpist's melodies. Here he is singing a tune you'll be very familiar with:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWU07oVhF_4

As Bryn grew to adulthood, his body assumed a burly girth and a height of six feet four inches. Likewise, his voice dropped to an equally burly bass baritone. His talent developed as his voice matured, and in 1983 he won the Wales International Eisteddfod. Although he sang constantly as a boy in church and at social events, his knowledge of music was drastically limited to pop and religious tunes. It was not until he moved to London in 1984 and enrolled at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, that his musical horizons expanded to encompass the classical repertoire. He said recently in an interview: "We have a saying in Welsh about the 'square mile', the place where you were born, and it was a big decision to leave. My dilemma after school was where to go. I could have stayed at home and gone to Cardiff, but London was a dream; I'd never been there until my first day at college. It opened up a new chapter in my life. If I hadn't left, it might have restricted my development as an artist."

At Guildhall, he studied with Arthur Reckless and then with Rudolf Pierney. Bryn continued working with Pierney even after graduating from the music college in 1989, and at the Cardiff Singer of the World Competition that year, he took second place in the overall competition, with first prize in the lieder competition. He said recently: "The most important week in my life as a student was Cardiff Singer of the World. I was up against Dmitri Hvorostovsky who was the favourite, and he duly won because he was streets ahead of me. It was a kick up the backside because it showed me I wasn't ready. I came second because I was a young, naive singer at the beginning of his career. I went away and learned my trade rather than being thrown into the limelight, which was no bad thing". This is him singing a well-known aria from the Marriage of Figaro (in the competition): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yz8n2tVyGwc>

In 1990 Bryn made his operatic debut as Guglielmo in Mozart's Cosi fan Tutte at the Welsh National Opera, and later in the same season he sang the title role in The Marriage of Figaro, a role with which he made his debut with the English National Opera in 1991. His international operatic career began that same year

when he sang the Speaker in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels and made his United States debut as Figaro at the Santa Fe Opera. In 1992 Bryn made his Royal Opera House, Covent Garden debut as Masetto in *Don Giovanni*, with Thomas Allen in the title role. He went on to make his debut as Figaro at the Vienna State Opera which was, and still is, one of the leading Opera Houses in the world. These were his big breakthroughs and established him as one of the leading baritones in the opera world.

One of the leading record companies, Deutsche Grammophon, signed the singer to an exclusive contract in 1993. The following year heralded his Metropolitan Opera (The Met) debut as Figaro in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. He was a big hit with both audience and critics, and so impressed the opera world that the report of his debut received front-page coverage in the *New York Times*, a rare occurrence for that publication.

The character of Figaro quickly became associated with Bryn as his signature role. On his return to the Metropolitan Opera in 1995, he sang the role of Leporello in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. When he later appeared in the title role of a Met production of the same work, he achieved a rare accomplishment coveted among male opera stars, of performing in two starring roles on the same stage. According to critics, his talent lay in his rare ability to "change voice", a capability that enhanced his dramatic potential within the context of the opera. From smooth tones to guttural straining outbursts, his voice clearly reflected the emotional extremes of his characters. "Only a handful of singers can spin a musical yarn as deftly as Terfel", according to George Jellinck in *Stereo Review*. Likewise, Heidi Waleson noted of his *Don Giovanni* in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1999: 'Every note Mr. Terfel sang was gorgeous. He shaped the recitatives with the mastery of a Shakespearean actor, and when he did "La ci darem la mano" the voice turned soft and exquisitely caressing'.

His role as Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca* shows how he can depict one of the most malevolent villains in opera with such chilling and breathtaking intensity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0euYKIMfV4I>

By the mid 1990s, Bryn was a major force in opera. His 1995 recording of Schubert's 'An die Musik' with Malcolm Martineau on piano, won the Gramophone magazine solo vocal album of the year. He had already won the Young Singer of the Year in 1992 and the Newcomer of the Year in 1993 (from Gramophone). The following year he received the People's Award, also from Gramophone. A well-received recording of Mozart's *Le Nozze*, featuring Terfel in his ever-popular Figaro with John Eliot Gardiner conducting, won both Grand Prix and Edison Awards in 1995. By now the awards were coming in thick and fast, reflecting the major impact he was having in the classical music world, and his fame was also spreading widely both nationally and internationally. He was rapidly turning into the "King of Awards". That year he embarked on a recital tour of Europe, appearing in Vienna, Austria; Munich, Germany; and La Scala in Milan, Italy. By now as you might guess he was in great demand internationally.

In 1996 he expanded his repertoire to include Wagner, singing Wolfram in *Tannhauser* at the Metropolitan Opera. Since then he has appeared in many Wagnerian roles. He said of Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger*: "It's four and a half hours long with breaks, and it's enormously demanding. It's the longest part ever written for the bass-baritone voice and it turned out to be one of the hardest roles I've ever undertaken. I had to believe I could do it, but you never know until you get to the end of the first night. The response was enormous and overwhelming, which fills you with pride. It took me six or seven weeks to recover and separate myself from it. The lines and the tunes were still flying around my head afterwards. It had become part of my world." Bryn is a very proud Welshman, and has throughout his career never forgotten his roots in Wales. He said recently "I can't hide where I'm from and I wouldn't want to. It's like a relay - you just hand the baton on from generation to generation. You have to be proud of that role and I should make as much of it as possible. The Welsh are incredibly supportive in return. They come wherever I play". His career continued to blossom:

- In 1999 he performed the Rugby World Cup anthem "World in Union" with Shirley Bassey at the Millennium Stadium before the 1999 Rugby World Cup Final.
- In 2003, Bryn hosted and performed on the stage with opera tenor Jose Carreras and soprano Hayley Westenra in front of a capacity crowd of 10,000 people from Faenol Festival in Wales.
- In 2007 he performed at the opening gala concert for the re-dedication of the Salt Lake Tabernacle with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.
- Later in 2007, he performed the title role in a concert version of the musical Sweeney Todd that had four performances at the Royal Festival Hall.

This illustrates his versatility and the way he was prepared to take on new challenges. In this respect he has not shied away from popular music either. He has recorded CDs of songs by Lerner and Loewe and Rodgers and Hammerstein, and in 2001 he commissioned and performed 'Atgof o'r Ser' ('Memory of the Stars') in the National Eisteddfod with the composer Robat Arwyn. But his first love was still opera, and here is a fine example of the way he gets to the heart of the role he is playing. Wagner operas are not to everyone's liking, but he's shown that they can be totally absorbing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRu-aRFEsAc>

That sends a shiver up my spine, what a magnificent voice he has - he really lives the part! In September 2007 Bryn withdrew, to severe criticism, from Covent Garden's Der Ring des Nibelungen, when his six-year-old son required several operations on his finger. He commented on this at the time:

"Your family comes first. I caused a storm cancelling a performance after my son broke a finger but I'd do it again, no question. I spent 20 years putting my family second and it was time to make a stand. I'd missed the births of two of my children. I'd have loved to have been there but being a professional opera singer takes you around the world".

In 2010, he made his debut as Hans Sachs in Wagner's Die Meistersinger in a production for Welsh National Opera, in Cardiff and on tour, this was a great success at the time. On 17 July 2010, the cast of this production gave a "concert staging" at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the 2010 BBC Proms, which was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and on BBC Four television. On 31 July, again at the Proms, he performed in a concert from the Royal Albert Hall celebrating the works of Stephen Sondheim, in his 80th birthday year.

In September 2013 Bryn collaborated with Mormon Tabernacle Choir and released the album Homeward Bound which reached No. 58 in the Official UK Charts. September 2014 saw him reprise his role as Sweeney Todd in the "Live from Lincoln Centre New York concert" production of Stephen Sondheim's Sweeney Todd, which was broadcast on the US TV station PBS. This production also starred Emma Thompson. Again, this shows his remarkable versatility and why he has become popular well beyond the world of opera. On a personal note he married his childhood sweetheart, Lesley in 1987. They divorced in 2013. The couple have three sons. In 2017 he and harpist Hannah Stone had a daughter and the couple married on 26 July 2019 at Caersalem Newydd Baptist Church in the bride's home city of Swansea.

One thing we can say is that Bryn has not let stardom change his love for Wales and his close connection to its people. The Faenol Festival, or simply Brynfest, was a music festival founded by him. Launched in 2000, it was held in a natural hollow on the Faenol Estate at Y Felinheli near Bangor. Initially held over three days on August Bank Holiday weekend, it included both classical and Welsh popular music and was soon expanded to four days. In 2006 the four-day festival was attended by more than 35,000 people, a record figure for the event. I'll finish my tribute to Bryn with a memorable Shirley Bassey Bryn Terfel double bill at the 2006 Festival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yRJBf8J70>

I now move on to Elin Manahan Thomas, not as well-known as Bryn Terfel, but equally distinguished in her own right. I have only recently become aware of this wonderful singer, and I can safely say I have been

won over by the beauty of her voice. Elin is one of the most versatile sopranos of her generation. She has performed at many of the world's most prestigious venues and festivals, and with leading orchestras and conductors. Perhaps most famously known for her performances of baroque masterpieces such as Handel's *Eternal Source of Light Divine* at the London 2012 Paralympics Opening Ceremony, Elin is equally at home performing classical and contemporary works, famously singing at the Royal Wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in May 2018. Like Bryn her fame has spread beyond the classical world and she has also been interviewed by the media on a number of occasions. I'll include some of these comments as we go along.

Elin was born in 1977 in Gorseinon near Swansea, the daughter of M. Wynn Thomas OBE, a Professor of Literature at Swansea University, and Karen Thomas. She was educated at the Welsh-speaking Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr in Gowerton. While a pupil there she sang in the Swansea Bach Choir and the National Youth Choir of Wales. In 1995 she won a choral scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge, where she studied Anglo Saxon, Norse and Celtic. She graduated in 1998 with a first-class degree. She has said: "I already had an inkling that it wasn't the life for me. I remember thinking that, rather than living and breathing books, I was looking forward too much to my scone and tea in the university library at 11!"

At Cambridge she had regularly performed as a soloist and appeared on many of the choir's CDs and on BBC Radio 3's evensong broadcasts. "Clare College is choir non-stop, six days a week," she later recalled. "Although it can be an emotional roller coaster, I learned so much. I wouldn't have gone any further as a singer without my time at Clare." In 1999 the Monteverdi Choir invited her to audition for Sir John Eliot Gardiner. "I honestly thought it was someone playing a practical joke, because a friend took the call and I couldn't believe it," she said. "I sang some Bach the following day for John Eliot, he put down his newspaper and listened, and that was it - I was in!" At this time she also fell in love with the music of Purcell and Handel.

Here's the Handel aria that she sang at the Paralympics:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO-u-WNz-FY>

Elin, at the age of 23, in the year 2000, joined the choir for Gardiner's *Bach Cantata Pilgrimage*, a project to perform Bach's 199 church cantatas in venues across the world. John Eliot Gardiner set out with the goal of performing all of Bach's sacred cantatas in churches around Europe and in New York. Over a 52-week period, his orchestra, choir and soloists achieved this unique goal, with a fervour that was almost religious. She commented that "It was an incredible journey. I was being paid to do what I loved doing." She also performed with other professional choirs including The Sixteen, Polyphony and the Gabrieli Consort. A financial award from the Arts Council of Wales took her to the Royal College of Music, where she studied for two years as a postgraduate student and was awarded the Ted Moss and Bertha Stach-Taylor Lieder Prize.

She made headline news as the first singer in almost 300 years to perform Bach's aria *Alles Mit Gott*, a birthday ode written in 1713 and discovered in Weimar, Germany, in 2005. She counts the composer amongst her favourites: "I'm a Bach, Handel and Purcell girl. They're at the top of my list!". Elin signed a five-album deal with the music industry giant UCI (Universal Music Classics & Jazz) in 2006 at the age of 29. They had Katherine Jenkins, Aled Jones and the Fron Choir on their books, and they resurrected their Heliodor label for Elin and other core classical artists. Tom Lewis, UCI's head, said, "Elin's signing came about by a chance meeting, but when she came and performed for us we were absolutely knocked out by the beauty and purity of her sound. Her voice is simply stunning and we had to sign her straightaway."

What better way to reinforce that view than to hear one of her recordings for Heliodor of Dido's Lament from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. The story is about the love of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for the Trojan hero Aeneas, and her despair when he abandons her. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OefIJ71x8M>

The Lament was included in her first recording on Heliodor, Eternal Light, and was released in July 2007. The repertoire choice reflected her desire to bring baroque music to the widest possible audience. While many people tend to ease themselves gently back into their work during January, in January 2009 Elin had no such luxury. In fact, the last few weeks of the previous year had probably been one of the busiest times for the Welsh soprano. She had been performing in cities all over the country, completing a TV documentary and jetting off to Amsterdam for a performance from Scottish composer James MacMillan. Then came the 60th anniversary celebrations for the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. "It's been a massively busy start to the year", she admitted during a rare break between her work commitments. But it sounds like she would have had it no other way, as she excitedly told a reporter from "Wales Online" about performing Messiah with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, recording BBC Radio 3 Songs of Praise in Birmingham with Aled Jones and Welsh tenor Rhys Meirion, and putting the finishing touches to a S4C documentary about Haydn.

Elin at that time was living in Sussex and was planning to return to her native Wales to kick off the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama (RWCMD) celebrations with a performance at Llandaff Cathedral. She said "It's really exciting. It feels like a really great partnership as I've worked with the college many times now on masterclasses and recitals. It's great to be able to just perform a concert for the college and for people to hear some Baroque in action". While most singers of Thomas' generation enjoy performing a more contemporary repertoire, as I have already pointed out she specialises in Baroque music. She says that Baroque is her passion and it's the music that best suits her voice. So here's another baroque composer that she has a special affection for - Vivaldi.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeO7S78WMkU>

She had launched her debut album, Eternal Light, during the summer of 2007. Prior to its launch she showcased songs from the album during a small concert at a packed church in London's Soho and the event was attended by industry representatives and journalists. "I want to make Baroque less elitist and much more accessible", she said at the time. "I want people to understand these are lovely tunes which may actually already be quite familiar to them". Elin has always been keen to support young talent and that is another reason why she was so keen to launch the RWCMD celebrations. "It's good to speak with them so they have a rough idea of what they will be going through", says Elin. "When you're in college you're in a bit of a bubble as you are working so hard on the music side of things. No-one tells you that there's an awful lot more to deal with, such as the admin and the travel and the tax. I also learn from them as it's nice to see that fresh attitude and hope".

Over the years Elin has also appeared on TV and has presented coverage of events such as the National Eisteddfod and BBC Cardiff Singer of the World. In 2010 she sat on the jury of the Choir of the Year competition. She has also over the past 10 years expanded her repertoire to include Opera roles such as Pamina (Mozart's The Magic Flute), the Governess (Britten's Turn Of The Screw), Ninetta (Mozart's La Finta Semplice), Arminda (Mozart's La Finta Giardiniera) and Despina (Mozart's Cosi Fan Tutte). She has performed for many of the world's leading conductors, among them Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Sir Andrew Davis, Harry Christophers, and the late Richard Hickox. Equally comfortable performing contemporary music, Elin has been fortunate to work with Sir John Tavener, John Rutter, Sir Karl Jenkins, James Macmillan, Judith Weir and Eric Whitacre. She has also made a recording of Andrew Lloyd Webber's Requiem. A few years ago she was interviewed on a religious TV programme and then sang the Pie Jesu from the Requiem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBJ77SNy6r4&t=6s>

Alongside concert performances, Elin is also known for her "presenting work". She has been twice nominated for a BAFTA Cymru (Best Newcomer, Best Presenter) and has presented for BBC 4 (The Proms) and BBC 2 Wales (Proms in the Park). Elin regularly presents for Radio Cymru, and is presenter on Radio Three's Early Music Late, on Sunday evenings. She has released five solo albums and appeared as featured

soloist on innumerable discs, for labels such as Universal, Naxos, Chandos and Hyperion. Her recordings range from the renaissance to Handel to Elgar and beyond, and 2016 saw the release of a CD of songs by Morfydd Llwyn Owen (previously unrecorded) for Ty Cerdd, and Karl Jenkins' Cantata Aberfan for Deutsche Gramophon, alongside Bryn Terfel. In April 2016 she was Classic FM's Artist of the Week. In Summer 2018 she released an album of songs by Welsh composer/pianist Dilys Edwards, on the Ty Cerdd label, in celebration of Edwards' birth centenary year.

In addition to her singing and presenting, Elin is a passionate advocate of music education, and is an ambassador for Sing Up. (Sing Up is an award-winning, not for profit organisation providing help and support for schools. Their world famous online Song Bank includes over 500 curriculum-linked songs for assemblies, choirs, celebrations and classrooms. Uniquely, each song is specially arranged for children's voices and comes with high quality audio and written resources to make teaching them easy and fun). Elin has over the years run choral workshops with Eric Whitacre, masterclasses at RWCMD and at the University of Oxford, children's concerts with London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and children's operas with Children's Music Workshop. She was asked last year: 'What is your idea of perfect happiness?' "A world in which I no longer needed my mobile phone. And one where I could play Lego and make-believe with my boys all day, and somehow incorporate that into an opera which also featured Marmite and Maltesers".

What I have found looking at Bryn and Elin is that they've not just concentrated on their own careers but have reached out to the wider community with such enthusiasm, and with a genuine desire to bring classical music to new audiences. I'd like to finish with her singing the beautiful Welsh song Ysbryd Y Nos (Spirit of the Night) with singer/ songwriter Elin Fflur:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CMH9BV0HaA>



Canada geese enjoying a paddle in the canal – photograph by Marilyn Gregory