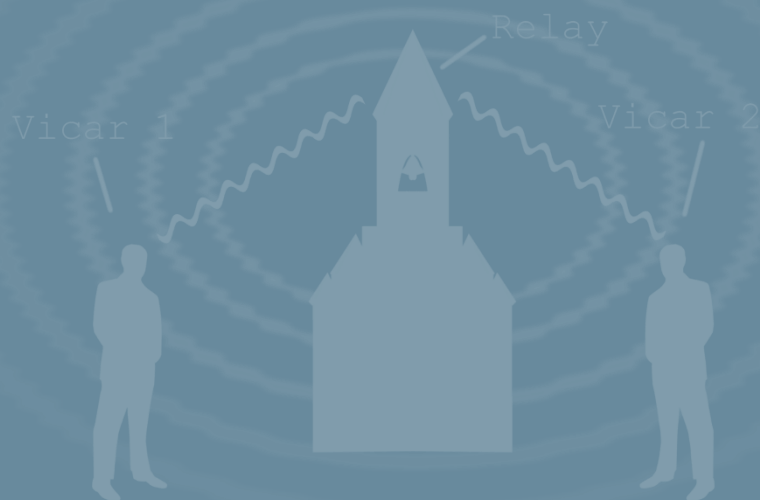


The University of the Bleeding Obvious



Annual 2017

The University of the Bleeding Obvious



The University of the
Bleeding Obvious Annual 2017
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www.bleeding-obvious.co.uk

Hello and welcome to *The University of the Bleeding Obvious Annual 2017*.

My name is Colin Salmon - not *the* Colin Salmon, obviously, the actor from all those films with the shooty guns and car chases and everything. No, I'm Colin Salmon from the Ministry of Fish and if you're thinking that that's not nearly so glamorous, then, well, you'd be right.

Nevertheless, I'm very grateful that the people at The University of the Bleeding Obvious have asked me to introduce this year's annual as it gives me a chance to talk to you about fish.

You know, it's very easy to look down at what remains of your fish supper and say to yourself "Well look at that, it's just skin and bone", but the sad fact is that many fish are grossly overweight. There's nothing worse than seeing a tubby turbot struggling to get his breath back, a portly pike having difficulty getting upstairs or a fat flatfish floundering furiously.

OK, what can be done? Well we have already installed fish gyms in most major rivers and around the coastline, where fish can exercise and get advice on staying healthy, but we need you to play your part as well. We're asking you to think carefully before you feed the fish. Oh, it can be fun to proffer a pork chop to a perch or tempt a tuna with a trifle, but it really doesn't do them any good.

So please think before you feed the fish and together we can do something about corpulent cod, massive minnows and chubby chub.

Thank you.



Paper Cuts

Hello, you're through to Mike, can I help you? Good grief, that's extraordinary! Yes, yes, why yes - I *have* had an accident at work. Just a few moments ago, in fact. How could you possibly have known? And yes, it *wasn't* my fault. Why this is really quite remarkable! By what I can only assume is some form of preternatural sense you have somehow managed to contact the very person who needs your services the most. I can only gasp in wonderment at this awesome incidence of universe-shaking serendipity.

Yes, I can tell you *exactly* what happened and I shall endeavour to leave no detail unaccounted for. I was sitting at my desk - this very desk at which I am sitting right now - when I reached out for a chocolate bourbon, a variety of biscuit of which I am inordinately fond. In the flurry of my hectic activities thus far this working day, some papers had become disordered and it was necessary to move one dangerously sharp sheet aside in order to retrieve my crunchy treat. This I did, and for my trouble I received a small but significant cut to my finger.

That's right, a paper cut. I fear I may need to take the rest of the day off and already I am beginning to feel weak, but I realised that my first priority was to seek immediate financial redress and so I set about the task of telephoning a suitable legal professional to champion my cause. Unfortunately I had sustained the injury to my dialling finger and was just wondering how I might circumvent this difficulty when you called and, amazingly, solved my dilemma for me. Now then, I am looking for £20,000 to compensate me for the mental anguish, but I should point out that a small child could very easily have been injured and this, I should imagine, must be worth at least an additional £5K.

It should also be noted that there were no warning signs in the vicinity. Well, actually that's not strictly true. The piece of paper that caused me this hideous and debilitating wound was in fact a notice cautioning against just

such an eventuality - oh the irony - but since the message was printed on the reverse I was unable to heed it until the damage had already been done. Life is indeed cruel and the pitfalls we face on the journey from cradle to grave are many. So, do you think I have a case?

Well, this is good to hear, but I remain in some apprehension about the course of action which will now ensue. I imagine that you will want to send me some documents - terms and conditions, contracts to sign and the like? I thought as much. You strike me as a very thorough, capable and efficient person and it is only to be expected that you would pursue your duties with the appropriate degree of rigour.

Unfortunately, I fear this approach to the matter is likely to become problematic, as ever since my recent yet potentially life-changing accident I find that I have a mortal fear of paper. The merest thought of it brings me out in a rash and I doubt very much that I will ever again experience the joy of handling a crisp new letter or a warm, freshly photocopied form. I would forever be thinking of the consequences. Today I have suffered a small cut to the finger; tomorrow I could lose an arm or a leg. What would happen if the very paperwork you send me should be the cause of such an accident? You would have blood on your hands - as indeed would I.

No, I believe that it would be too much of a risk and I think, on balance, we had better forget the whole thing. I have a particularly lethal envelope to deal with this afternoon and I really need to keep my wits about me. But please do feel free to call again. There was a man eyeing me up earlier who looks like he might want to sell me an unwanted PPI policy, so there is every chance that I may need your help in future. Goodbye.

Shepton Bassett Borough Council has taken the unusual step of erecting blue plaques to commemorate the many outstanding instances of vandalism that have taken place in and around the town.

“We have a tradition in this country of celebrating the achievements of people who have made their mark,” said Councillor Trevor Smattering, cabinet member for putting the boot in and market trader licensing. “And one thing you can most definitely say about our talented crop of hooligans, thugs and anti-socialites is that they have certainly made their mark.”

The council ran a public poll to find out who people think was most deserving of the honour, and it was hotly contested. Favourites included Emlyn Rumbelow who put in some sterling work breaking the arms off the statue of Isaac Newton in the memorial gardens; Sharon Bendix for the impassioned artwork scrawled on the side of the bus station, casting aspersions on the sexual health of someone called ‘Johnno’; and Dave ‘Davy’ Spanners who has consistently put through the window of Ladbrokes in the high street for the last eighteen Friday nights running.

Honourable mention must also go to whoever it is that keeps stuffing paper towels down the gent’s toilets on the market place, but in the end there was one clear winner. An overwhelming majority voted for the late Gareth Puncture whose remarkable ten-year spate of criminal damage finally came to an end when he heroically managed to spray the legend ‘Wankpigs’ on the side of the footbridge over the bypass.

“Such a daring aerial stunt was a personal first for Gareth,” said Councillor Smattering at the ceremony outside Gareth’s family home. “Sadly, it was also a personal last as he misjudged his footing and plummeted to the carriageway where he came off worse in an altercation with a speeding bus.”

Gareth’s grieving mother subsequently spluttered a few words of her own and unveiled the plaque to rapturous applause. She then tore it down and frenziedly smashed it to pieces before tearfully explaining “It’s what he would have wanted.”

Ross Temperton

Set fire to these bins in June 2014 and February 2015

Caz Hawkins & James Flanders

poured an unidentified oil-based substance over a duck near this site in 2002

Gareth Puncture

Author of ‘Wankpigs’
was born here in 1987

‘Rodders’ Rodderson

Knackered this bus shelter on or around 28th July 1998

Chrissy McDownton

Etched the word ‘cock’ on this lamppost with a bottle cap in 1978

Peter Flump

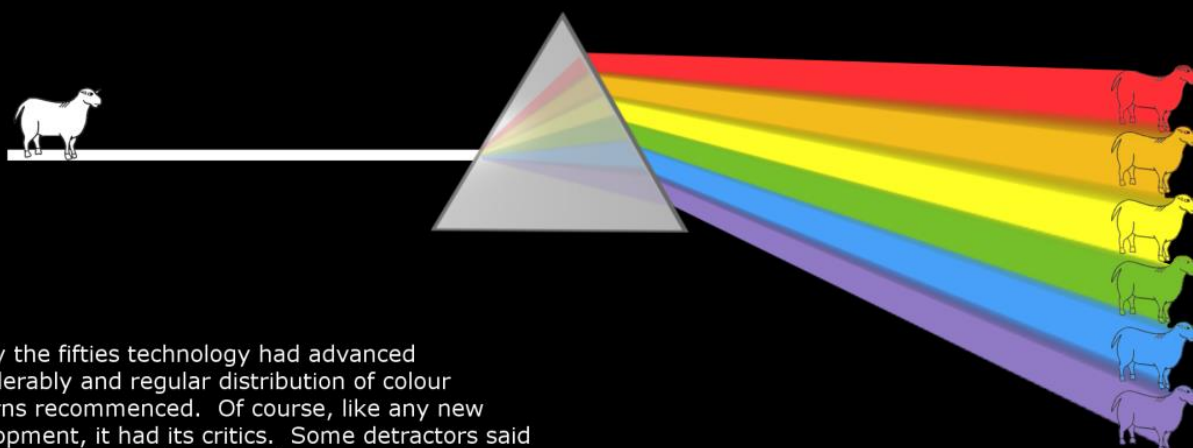
put his boot through the door of a gardener’s hut that stood on this site in 1972

Knitting in Colour

This day in 1956 saw the introduction of the first regular colour knitting patterns by the BBC – the British Bobble-Hat Corporation.

Knitting patterns had already been widely available in black and white for some time, the restricted choice of wool available being due to the lack of coloured sheep. Over the years, many attempts had been made to colourise knitting, including hand painting and looking at sweaters through shaded filters, but the results were always unsatisfactory.

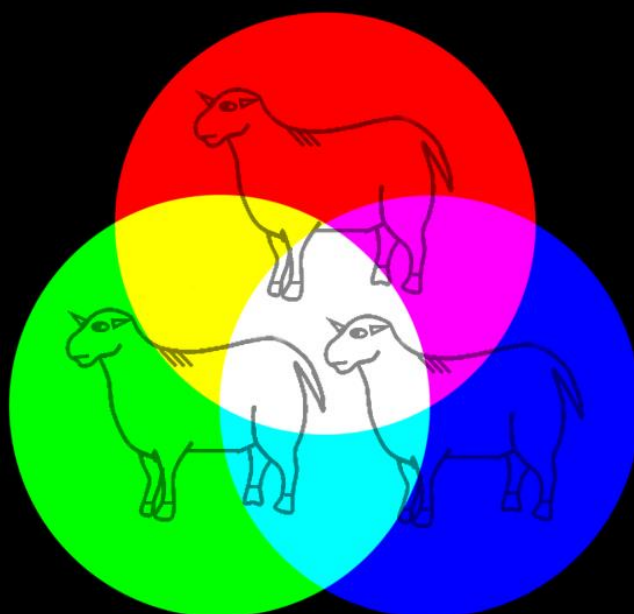
It wasn't until the thirties that a top team of research shepherds succeeded in breeding sheep in red, green and blue, producing wool that could be combined to create a broad palette of different colours. Using this technique, the BBC issued a limited number of low resolution colour patterns, but development was halted by the advent of war and the Corporation's facilities were turned over to the production of machine gun covers and tank cosies.



But by the fifties technology had advanced considerably and regular distribution of colour patterns recommenced. Of course, like any new development, it had its critics. Some detractors said that it was unnatural and that knitting with different coloured wool would irreparably damage eyesight.

At a rally in Manchester, the Right Reverend Josiah Flapps called it an abomination and said that every time someone knitted a coloured scarf the baby Jesus died. He urged his supporters to buy up coloured knitting patterns and bring them along to be burnt on a massive bonfire, and the sudden surge in sales was a huge boost to the fledgling industry. The meeting eventually broke up in disarray following ugly clashes with an Anti-Duvet demonstration in an adjacent field.

Despite such scaremongering, coloured knitting was rapidly embraced by knitters all over the world and nowadays we take it for granted. And the technology has come on in leaps and bounds, meaning that you can buy patterns with more colours than ever before. One wonders what those old monochrome knitters would have made of today's widescreen cardigans and high definition mittens. Oh what an age we live in!



Ken's News & Fags

THE NATIONAL TRUST has today announced that they have taken over the last remaining independently-owned high street business in the UK. The shop, Ken's News and Fags, a newsagent's and minimart in Dudley, has been in slow decline for some years and was facing closure following a lengthy Trading Standards investigation into the supply of counterfeit detergents, deodorants and other household products.

Its owner, Fat Ken Sparks, had defended himself by claiming that the so-called 'fake' goods were not being passed off as the genuine article but were in fact being openly sold as 'tributes' to the real brands. This explanation did not wash. Neither, for that matter, did any of the phony washing powder, which may well have been responsible for an outbreak of skin complaints in the area.

Faced with the prospect of a massive fine, Fat Ken announced that the time had come to finally hang up his pricing gun, a decision which caused much consternation in the area and even made page six of the local paper, just next to an article about dog mess in the memorial gardens and beneath a picture of a shifty-looking resident pointing at a pothole. Where else would people go for odd tasting milk and out-of-date sandwiches? Where would the local school kids buy their fags, knocked off DVDs and mucky magazines? Where else can you find a diary in April?

Concerns were also raised at a meeting of the town council, during which councillors discussed the potential



impact of the redundancies that would follow the closure. These would not be significant in number - just two: the weird gap-toothed woman with the mad hair who worked afternoons, plus the gormless lad who delivered the papers - but all were agreed that nobody wanted these people wandering around with time on their hands.

It therefore came as a great relief to everyone when the National Trust stepped in with an offer to take over the business. As an example of a shoddily run local retail outlet, operating on the frontier of legality and with a casual old-fashioned attitude to health and safety which is rarely seen in today's increasingly litigious world, it stands as a sole surviving example of a world gone by.

"But what really attracted us was Fat Ken Sparks himself," said a National Trust spokesman. "We rarely come across proprietors like this who are still in working condition and it's unusual to find examples who are quite as vile, disgusting and objectionable as Ken. I'm glad that we are able to preserve him for posterity so that he can be enjoyed by future generations."

Tax, What Tax?

UBO: We're here today with Sir John Wyndrell, of Wyndrell Holdings.

Sir John: Nope, sorry, never heard of them.

UBO: I beg your pardon?

Sir John: This Winsome Holdings, or whatever.

UBO: Wyndrell Holdings.

Sir John: Yes, them. Can't say I've ever come across them.

UBO: You are the company's managing director.

Sir John: I don't know who gave you that idea.

UBO: Well, when we phoned your office...

Sir John: No, don't have an office.

UBO: ... your secretary told us that...

Sir John: Don't have a secretary. Good job too. Don't have an office, you see, so there would be nowhere for her to work.

UBO: Sir John, when we phoned your office your secretary told us that you were the very person we needed to talk to in connection with Wyndrell Holdings.

Sir John: Can't see how she could have. Apart from anything else, I don't have a phone. No, I'm afraid there must have been some terrible mix up. I'm nothing to do with this Winkle Holdings of which you speak.

UBO: But you're listed as a director by Companies House.

Sir John: Must be some other feller.

UBO: You are regularly quoted in newspapers and periodicals as a spokesman for the firm.

Sir John: I think you must have an overactive imagination.

UBO: It was printed on the business card you gave us when you came in.

Sir John: Well, yes... what? Oh, Wyndrell Holdings! Sorry, I must have misheard. I have an ear infection. Yes, now you come to mention it, I think I do have some slight connection with the firm.

UBO: Perhaps, then, you could comment on certain details concerning tax affairs that have recently come to light?

Sir John: Well, I'm not sure I have those details at my fingertips. Vis-à-vis the company structure, I usually find myself more on the catering side of things.

UBO: I'm sure you can fill us in on the basics. We understand that Wyndrell Holdings is not registered in the UK?

Sir John: Yes it is.

UBO: No it isn't.

Sir John: Well all right, but so what?

UBO: In recent days speculation has focussed on your use of a tax haven to avoid paying tax.

Sir John: Ah, I think you mean *evade* paying tax.

UBO: Do we?

Sir John: Evade? Avoid? Which one is it that is legal? Either way, there is nothing illegal about what we're doing. Not that I know what we're doing, of course. We're probably not doing anything.

UBO: Don't you think it's rather unethical?

Sir John: Look I think you're being terribly parochial about all this. We operate in a global market. We have to be based somewhere - who cares if it's Panama or the British Virgin Islands or Timbuctoo for that matter?

UBO: Or the Moon?

Sir John: Yes, well... what's that?

UBO: Your company's registered office is on the Moon.

Sir John: Well exactly... err...

UBO: Commuting must be a bit of a problem. Is it actually possible to register a company on the Moon?

Sir John: I imagine it must be if, as you say, my company is registered there.

UBO: So how does it work, then? After all, there is no one there to register it with.

Sir John: Yes there is. There's a little feller who works out of an office in the Sea of Tranquillity.

UBO: No there isn't.

Sir John: Yes there is.

UBO: No there isn't. There hasn't been anyone on the Moon since 1972.

Sir John: He's been on his lunch break.

UBO: All right, we can see that we're not going to get any sense from you.

Sir John: Yes you are.

UBO: Obviously you were determined from the outset that you were just going to be silly.

Sir John: Oh, no, no, no, no, no.

UBO: I think we'll bring this interview to a close, Sir John.

Sir John: Sir who? I don't think I've met him, but if I should bump into him I'll let you know you're looking for him. Bye.

Pop-Up Royals

The British Royal family are a great source of interest, both within the UK and abroad, with their wacky displays of precision waving, their practiced ease in unveiling plaques and their bizarre dysfunctional home lives.

But what of the cost? Running a Royal Family will set you back £20m a year just in hay alone, but on top of that you've got legal fees, medical costs, general maintenance, bungs to the press and Prince Andrew's weekly kebab allowance. So, with all that in mind, it's no wonder that any ideas aimed at reducing expenditure are given serious consideration.

One proposal currently on the table is 'Pop-Up Royals': flattened versions of our current Royals that would be cheaper to store, might be sent easily through the mail, and could be deployed with the minimum of fuss whenever there was a need for some important person to open a community centre, shake an old person's hand or be photographed ambling through a freshly painted industrial unit, pointing at things.

These Pop-Up Royals would be created by flattening our current batch of Royals and then pasting them onto a retractable banner, and the company presently tendering for the contract is keen to point out how painless the process will be.

"It won't hurt us one bit," laughed spokesman Luke Chorley. "Only joking! Honestly though, our precious Royals will hardly feel a thing. It stings a little when they go under the giant roller, but the discomfort soon passes. I'll be straight with you, the process does involve a bit of 'crumpling' but most of the Royal family are pretty creased already. In fact, I can think of a couple where it might be an improvement, eh, eh?"

"Ahhh, just pulling your leg. Seriously, aside from the occasional unavoidable rip, they'll be fine. We understand how important the Royal family is and we know how quickly the nation would grind to a halt if they weren't around to do all the many, many great things that they do, whatever they are. I think one of them flies a helicopter, yes?"

"In fact, I'd go as far as to say that we'd have them pressed, mounted and back to living off the flat of the land in no time, ha, ha, ha, ha! D.you see? 'Flat' of the land? They'll be living of the 'flat' of the land. Ah, don't mind me, I'm just the joker in the pack. Did you know I do stand-up?"



Coming soon to this venue

AN EVENING WITH **BARRY SMITH**

Spend a magical evening in the company of Barry Smith, Shepton Bassett's number one coach driver, as he scratches his arse and bangs on about how immigration is ruining the country, discusses Tottenham's chances of winning the FA Cup and tells you about that time he shat himself outside a Burger King in Stockport.

This magical and enchanting raconteur has entertained celebrities, nobility and heads of state with his fascinating insights into the modern world, which are delivered entirely without the

benefit of facts, rationality or a basic understanding of the subject matter.

Now Barry is embarking on his first nationwide tour, giving fans across the country the opportunity to experience his ignorant diatribes, filthy anecdotes and lewd insults first hand. And not only that, audience members will also get the chance to take part in a Q&A session, in which they can put their queries directly to the great man himself, only to be shouted down before they reach the end of their question and subjected to a tirade of abuse.

"All science is just theories. They don't really know anything. That's why nobody can say for certain how toasters work."

**Book now to ensure
disappointment!**

"Crocodiles' eyes only move from left to right."

"You know that global warming - that's bollocks, that is. We went to Marbella last year and it pissed it down for two weeks. What's that about then?"

"Everything you put in your recycling bin just gets dumped in a landfill in Lancashire. I've seen a picture of it. That's why I don't bother."

"They genetically modify tomatoes so that they taste of pork by injecting them with pig DNA. Think of that - half tomato, half pig. Little buggers snuffling round the farmyard like something not right."

"Zombies exist for real, not just in movies. I've never seen one and I don't have any proof, but it's an absolute stone cold fact."

"People you see being interviewed on the news aren't real; they're all actors. That bloke they were talking to last night who witnessed the robbery... he was in *Coronation Street* last week."

"I never pick up dogs' mess when I'm in the park. It's not natural, is it? When I was a lad, people didn't go around putting dog poo in little plastic bags. I didn't do it then and I'm not doing it now. Mind you, I haven't got a dog."

"Every five pound note that the Royal Mint prints actually costs £5.60 to make. So, it's all very well having a licence to print money, but you'll be out of pocket in the long run."

"There's no back on Windsor Castle. It's just a cardboard façade. The real castle was sold in 1988 to pay the Queen Mother's gambling debts."

"The song *Ebony and Ivory* is played only on the white notes, but you can't play the *Hokey Cokey* on a trumpet. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

"My friend does karate. He can push a pencil through a thick steel plate. He does it really slowly. An HB pencil, obviously, he's not stupid. He can also stop a man's heart just by looking at him. He once killed a dog by coughing."

Local Council Bans Cheesy Bait

by Staff Reporter

Residents are up in arms following proposals by West Devon Borough Council banning the use of cheese in mousetraps to protect rodents that are lactose intolerant.

"It's political correctness gone mad," said local big mouth Tracy Sponge. "I've been using cheese in mousetraps for over thirty years and there's absolutely nothing wrong with it."

Tracy, whose house is filthy and a beacon for vermin, has considerable experience when it comes to despatching rats, mice, foxes and the occasional small horse unwise enough to cross her threshold. She prefers to throttle them with her bare hands, but struggles to cope with the sheer volume and so uses traps to keep on top of the problem. She believes that a ban on dairy products will hit her hard.

"It's the loony lefty euro-bollocks do-goody health and safety brigade sticking their oar in again," she said. "It makes me want to spit. They've no right to tell me how I can kill things in the comfort and privacy of my own home. Phooey!"

Meanwhile, the council takes the view that it has a responsibility for the welfare of all animals in the borough, as their Head of Ants, Colleen Scratchit explained. "When we banned flypaper as a way of preventing insects from getting all sticky, there was uproar," she told us. "But in the twenty-first century we do have a responsibility. As a result of our actions the council was awarded a certificate. Yes, you heard me, a *certificate*. This kind of recognition is not something that you can take lightly and I think it clearly demonstrates that we are on the right track."

"Now we are looking to continue that good work and we are proposing this measure in response to the latest scientific studies - oh yes, *scientific* studies - on the effects of dairy products on mice."

Mrs Scratchit was referring to the recent work of a group in Cambridge which spent six months force-feeding Dairylea to a selection of small animals. What resulted from this experiment were significant numbers of listless gerbils, bloated rabbits and fat mice.

"You can't argue with facts," Mrs Scratchit said. "Because facts are facts, and that's a fact. We want to be leading the way on this, and I think by and large the public will approve. I mean, do we really want to see lactose intolerant mice wandering around, all blotchy and giddy and grumpy? No, of course not. Only by making certain that we avoid using dairy products in traps can we ensure that mice in the West Devon area are alert, vigorous and healthy when they get their necks snapped. And, more importantly, we might just be in line for another certificate."

Rare Bird Visits Derbyshire Town

Birdwatchers from all over the country have been flocking to a small town in Derbyshire to watch a rare European bee-eater called Tony, and frankly he's sick of it. The bird, currently holidaying in the country over the summer, has been pestered by twitchers since he arrived and he feels that it's all gone a bit too far.

"It was very pleasant at first," he told us. "I mean, who wouldn't be just a little bit flattered by all that attention? But pretty soon it becomes way too much. I mean, I can't do anything without some be-anoraked nerd sticking his long lens in. I'm just going about my business, trying to have a few relaxing weeks to myself before I have to get back to the daily grind of catching insects and fighting for survival. But can I get a moment's peace? Can I hell! I tell you, I was thinking of bringing the wife and kids here next year, but if this is how you treat your visitors then forget it - we'll go to Disneyland instead."

Responding to Tony's comments, a spokesman from the RSPB said: "Fuck me, a talking bird!"

MAYOR REMOVED FROM OFFICE

In ugly scenes earlier today, Mr Ronald Hiccup, the mayor of Shepton Bassett, was removed from office. "We've known this was coming for a long time," said a member of the council. "We tried to warn the fat bastard to stop chucking pies down his neck and now it's finally reached the point where he couldn't get through the door."

Firefighters arrived shortly after 5pm and removed Mr Hiccup from his office using crowbars, sledgehammers and a considerable quantity of Vaseline. The process resulted in substantial damage to the fabric of the town hall, which is a Grade II listed building and a site of significant historic interest.

The rescue also resulted in some superficial damage to the fabric of Mr Hiccup, but he's not a site of significant historic anything.

The cost of space travel needn't be astronomical...



With a second-hand spaceship or a recycled rocket from Centuri Space Supplies (Walsall) Limited, the sky's no longer the limit for the amateur astronaut.

Founded in 1982, Centuri Space Supplies are the specialists in reconditioned and nearly-new space hardware. Working with some of the major players in the space industry means that we can source some of the very best used capsules, boosters and landing craft and offer to them to you at a price that won't break the bank.

All of our craft are fully restored and serviced, and with a such a wide range of models, both vintage and modern, you can be sure to find something to suit your needs.

Listen to what one satisfied customer had to say.

I managed to get a complete Saturn 5 rocket for just two hundred quid, with a full MOT and taxed until the end of the year. Centuri Space Supplies even threw in the command capsule for free!

I couldn't be more chuffed, although the wife's not happy because for the moment I'm having to keep it in the front garden. I keep telling her that it's only temporary and I'll buy a new water feature for her just as soon as it's shifted, but she just sulks. I tell you, any more of her moaning and I'm going to get in the damn thing and piss off to Venus. That'll learn her.

Are you constantly being told that you're an annoying, loudmouthed, over-opinionated pain in the arse?

Do you find that your sound judgement, insightful observations and expert analysis are constantly being ignored, no matter how relentlessly you forcibly inflict them on your friends and colleagues?

Do people, in short, think you're a bit of a jerk?

If the answer to these questions is 'yes' then the solution to your problem, my friend, is simple. What you need is...

Dr Friedrich Harpic's
Anti-Assertiveness
Course

Dr Friedrich Harpic first developed his revolutionary Anti-Assertiveness programme back in the sixties. At the time he was forever thrusting his barely comprehensible theories and philosophies on unwilling and unappreciative audiences, often descending into a frustrated stream of guttural mutterings as he endeavoured to persuade his rapidly dwindling circle of associates to recognise his wisdom. It was only when a close friend, in a fit of uncontrolled candour, told him that he was being 'a real prick' that Dr Harpic recognised he needed to shut the fuck up.

Experimenting with a range of different self-degradation techniques, confidence-sapping exercises and humiliation workshops, Dr Harpic soon managed to 'knock the wind out of his sails' and, in consequence, became a much more agreeable, modest and humble companion. In fact, he became so meek that it took him a further fifty years before he summoned up the nerve to tell anyone about his ground-breaking discoveries.

Today Dr Harpic tours the world, delivering Anti-Assertiveness classes to all manner of self-important, long-winded, conceited, pretentious, overbearing, boorish, immodest and bombastic fuckwits. And he personally guarantees that he can turn you from an arrogant tosser into the embodiment of politeness and discretion after just a few short sessions.

Well... maybe 'guarantee' is putting it a bit strong. I mean, we think most people could benefit, but we wouldn't like to impose our own opinions on anyone. It's up to you, really, and whatever you decide is fine, really it is... you know... okay...

At jars4u

we open your jars for you

Like most people, we're sure that you occasionally struggle to get the lids off jars. Of course you do, just look at the state of you. You've got the grip of a deflated party balloon and you daren't go out in inclement weather for fear of being whisked away by a strong breeze.

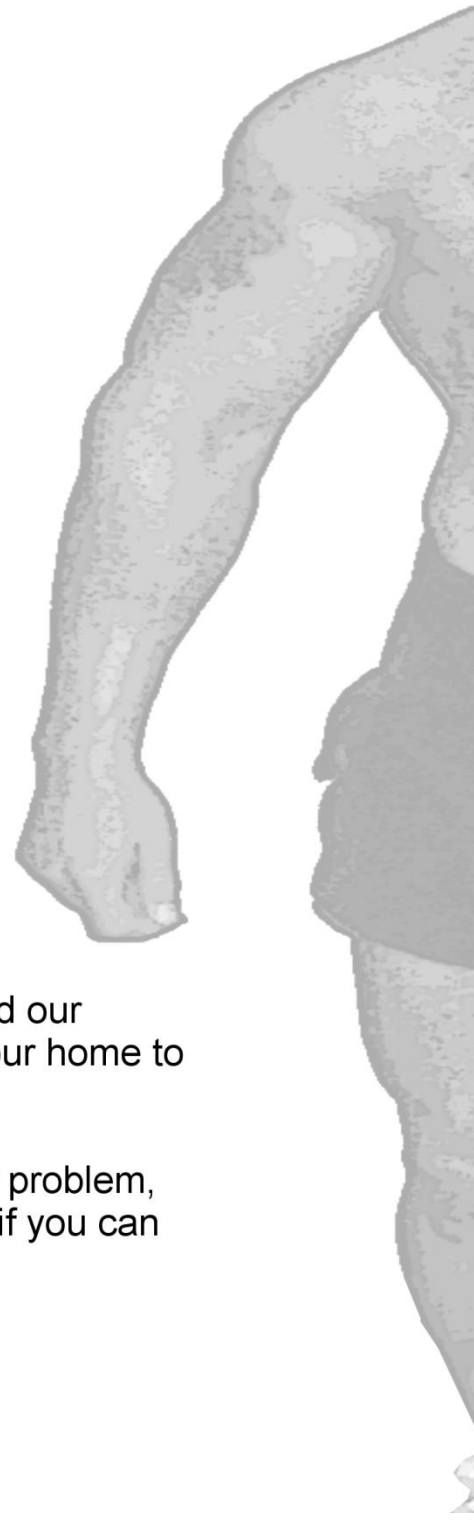
But now there's no need to be embarrassed... well, clearly there is, you wimp, but what we mean is now there's a place you can go in your very own high street where you can get all your jars opened for you.

At Jars-4-u we specialise in jars of all shapes and sizes. Pickles! Jam! Sauces! You name it, we've got the torque to deal with it.



And for a small fee we can send our specialist, Big Tony, direct to your home to loosen all your lids for you.

So the next time you have a jar problem, call in at your local Jars-4-u... if you can get the door open, that is.





by Professor Ricky Stratocaster

ELO

Like ELP, KLF, OMD and KFC, ELO was formed using leftover letters from the 1970 World International Scrabble Championships. Budding new bands might be interested to note that three 'P's, a 'J', a 'Q', two 'T's and a 'W' are still available.

The band was the brainchild of Superstar Wrestler Roy Wood and part time choo-choo train driver Jeff Lynne. Lynne was keen to experiment by incorporating traditional orchestral influences into contemporary music, but Wood wanted to steer the group more in a 'wrestling' direction.

Eventually musical and sporting differences led to Roy Wood leaving the group to set himself up firstly as an exhibition wrestler called 'The Wizard', then as a children's entertainer called 'The Wizard', and then finally starting his own group call 'Mrs Mompesson's Avenging Conglomeration of Assorted Terpsichorean Mung Bean Sniffers'.

The band's initial releases consisted entirely of 12 inch records because their name was too long to fit comfortably onto the label of a 7 inch single. When this became too much of a restriction, Wood changed the name of the group to 'Wizard'. In this guise they had their first hit with 'I Wish You Could See My Baby Jive Every Day at Christmas'. This

seasonal success prompted Wood to release the singles 'I Wish It Could Be Easter Every Day', 'I Wish It Could Be New Year's Day Every Day', 'I Wish It Could Be Harvest Festival Every Day' and 'I Wish It Could Be August Bank Holiday Monday Every Day'. None of these records achieved the same level of success and are now largely forgotten.

Anyway, we were talking about ELO weren't we? Jeff Lynne's ambition to pursue orchestral themes led to him experimenting with a tuba, much to the annoyance of the people in the flat next door. He subsequently got hold of a trumpet which he straightened out using a selection of plumbers' tools, turning it into a single, long brass pipe. In doing so he had inadvertently discovered a reliable and cost effective way of completely knacker a trumpet - a technique which is still in use today.

By this time ELO had already had minor hits with three and a half records, but it was their next single which was to propel them to stardom. 'Mr Blue Sky' was a five minute musical treatise on the dangers of careless weather forecasting. It featured Lynne's patent straightened trumpet and a monkey called Keith Jefferson who played the cymbals. Following this, the band embarked on its first major tour, playing mostly bandstands, chip shops and places where you can get keys cut.

It was the start of the big time for ELO and finally they could afford another letter, extending their name to ELOP. But it couldn't last forever and by the mid-eighties the band found that it was running out of notes. Musical notes were in short supply throughout the industry at this time and as Lynne habitually used a large quantity of them in each of his compositions, he was hit harder than most. Rather than recycling previously used notes and risking infection, Lynne decided to roll up his trumpet and shut up shop. It was at this point that he became a Traveling Wilbury, making a living going from door to door to see if anyone needed any Wilburying doing.

In recent years, Lynne has resurrected the band, writing new songs with some notes that he found behind his fridge one day after moving it to release a trapped bat. And now he's more successful than ever, although if you ever need anything Wilburied you'll find that he's more than willing to help out, as he likes to keep his hand in.

Sheryl's Sheep Shack



**Surely Sheffield's Sharpest
Sheep Showroom**



***Shrewd sheep
shoppers shouldn't
shun Sheryl's!***

Mrs Womble Unseated

We've received a letter from our regular correspondent, Mrs Edna Womble of Hartlepool. It appears that she has recently bought some furniture with which she is not entirely satisfied.

Dear Hartlepool Discount Furniture Bazaar,

I hope this letter finds you well. I have very little doubt that you must be feeling considerably better than I am at the moment, since I recently found myself unexpectedly coming into contact with my dining room floor in quite a sudden, painful and highly undignified manner. What occasioned this misfortune was not, as you might expect, a careless stumble, a clumsy trip or even a freak gust of wind. The direct cause of my accident was a dining room chair, one of a set which I purchased from your store last month. To be brief, what happened was that as I sat down to eat my evening meal I slipped straight off the leather-effect, easy-clean padded seat and terminated my unexpected journey in a crumpled heap beneath the table.

Now, this is not funny. I admit that my nephew, who had joined us for dinner, appeared to find the whole thing riotously droll and laughed so hard that gravy shot out of his nose. But then my nephew has what can best be described as an 'unsophisticated' sense of humour and is easily amused by the most mundane circumstances. Just the other day, for instance, I discovered him guffawing with the most extraordinary gusto at a cat perched on my neighbour's wall. The cat, as far as I could tell, wasn't inherently entertaining and didn't seem to be engaged in any 'comic business' of any kind, but my nephew found the mere existence of the animal absolutely hilarious, much to the bemusement of both myself and the poor creature in question.

But this is by the by. As I sat there beneath the table, listening to the muffled, gurgling laughter from above, my most immediate and profound sensation was one of shock, mingled with blistering indignation. After all, I bought the chair in good faith on the understanding that it would save me from having to sit on the floor; and yet there I was, sitting on the floor. I don't profess to be much of an expert in furniture, but I'm reasonably confident that the sole

function of any chair is to provide a comfortable spacer between my rear end and the ground. Clearly, the item I bought from you failed in this small but crucial respect.

No doubt you will immediately leap to the conclusion that I was using the chair incorrectly in some way. Let me tell you, although I'm not inclined to divulge my age, you should know that I am a woman of experience and I have successfully sat on many chairs in the past. I'm far too polite to reveal how many, of course, but let's just say that I'm no stranger to a leather recliner or an upholstered stool, and the number of times I have fallen off one can be easily counted on the fingers of one hand.

And might I also pre-empt your inevitable glib response that on this occasion I was somehow intoxicated. I should point out that, whilst I do occasionally enjoy a small aperitif, it is widely known that I am a moderate drinker and rarely inclined to partake of strong spirits to such a degree that I am no longer able to reliably use furniture without doing myself an injury.

Since the chair was so obviously faulty, I called at your showroom earlier today to return the item, expecting to be offered a full refund plus whatever reparation you deemed was appropriate to compensate me for my harrowing ordeal. I was accompanied by my nephew who, as the principle witness, was able to give a full account of this horrific incident, albeit punctuated freely with barely suppressed giggles and splutters.

The assistant who served us - a young gentleman with a name tag that conferred on him the unlikely rank of deputy manager - struggled pathetically to understand the situation and asked that I repeat myself several times before he ultimately gave up and concluded that I was 'having him on'. Naturally I insisted that I be taken seriously and pointed out some of the consequences that could flow from wilfully

supplying dangerously unstable furniture. What if - I said to him - what if I had slipped off that chair and fallen onto a small child?

He, of course, had no answer and yet still he denied that the furniture was at fault. To prove this he sat on the chair himself, but I could clearly see that he was gripping the sides and that without such a precaution he would surely have accelerated groundwards in a heartbeat. Nevertheless, on the strength of this demonstration he declared the chair sound and suggested that perhaps it was my bottom that was at fault. At this point it was clear that further dialogue was futile so I promptly left the shop, returning only briefly to collect my nephew who, for reasons I can barely begin to speculate upon, was laughing at a sideboard.

This evening I have eaten my dinner from a crouching position. The problem chair is safely stowed away in the garage, where it will remain until we can both agree to satisfactorily conclude this matter to my advantage. I look forward to your cringing response.

Your Faithfully

Mrs Edna Womble

THE DEVIL'S ARSE ON TOUR

POPULAR CAVERN COMING TO A TOWN NEAR YOU

Peak Cavern is one of the most astounding natural wonders of the Peak District. This filthy Derbyshire hole in the ground, also known as The Devil's Arse, Sticky Bishop's Demise and Mrs Trollop's Last Shred of Dignity on a Tuesday Night, is one of the most celebrated fissures in all the world, outclassed only by The Great Crack of Monmouth, King Falafel's Regal Trench and The Lincolnshire Crater. For while it is not the biggest, deepest, darkest, most splendiferous or most imposing cavity you're ever likely to come across, it is at least the most jaggedy, and that's got to be worth something. Specifically, it's worth £10.50 per head, since that's what you'll be charged for the privilege of plumbing its depths.

Those people who, astonishingly, have not had the pleasure of this experience, or even experienced this pleasure, will no doubt be delighted to learn that Peak Cavern will shortly be going on a nationwide tour of UK cities. "It's a little bit of the Peak District right there in your own town," says marketing director Katy Shovel as she holds up some promotional matter and points at the strapline. "Look, it says so right there."

Of course, moving a large hole around the country must present some unique logistical problems of its own.

"Of course," says Miss Shovel.

Well, of course.

"Well yes, indeed, of course," she says. "One of the first snags you come up against is trying to persuade the local council that it's a good idea. Usually, you rock up and say something like 'Hey, would you like a hole?' and they tend to reply 'No thanks, we've already got one.' Even if you do manage to win them over, you've then got to figure out where to put it. A hole needs a lot of space. Well, this one does anyway."

"Usually, you rock up and say something like 'Hey, would you like a hole?' and they tend to reply 'No thanks, we've already got one.'"



An Hole

Of course.

"Absolutely of course," she agrees. "So you end up considering car parks and market squares and memorial gardens, but wherever you stick it someone is bound to be unhappy."

Inevitably.

"Indeedy-dooddy. Then you've got to get it plumbed in, which is a nightmare all on its own. But it's worth it, you know, it really is - just to see the looks on people's faces when they learn that all their bus routes have been diverted and the traffic has ground to a standstill."

But consequently -

"Oh consequently, I should say so."

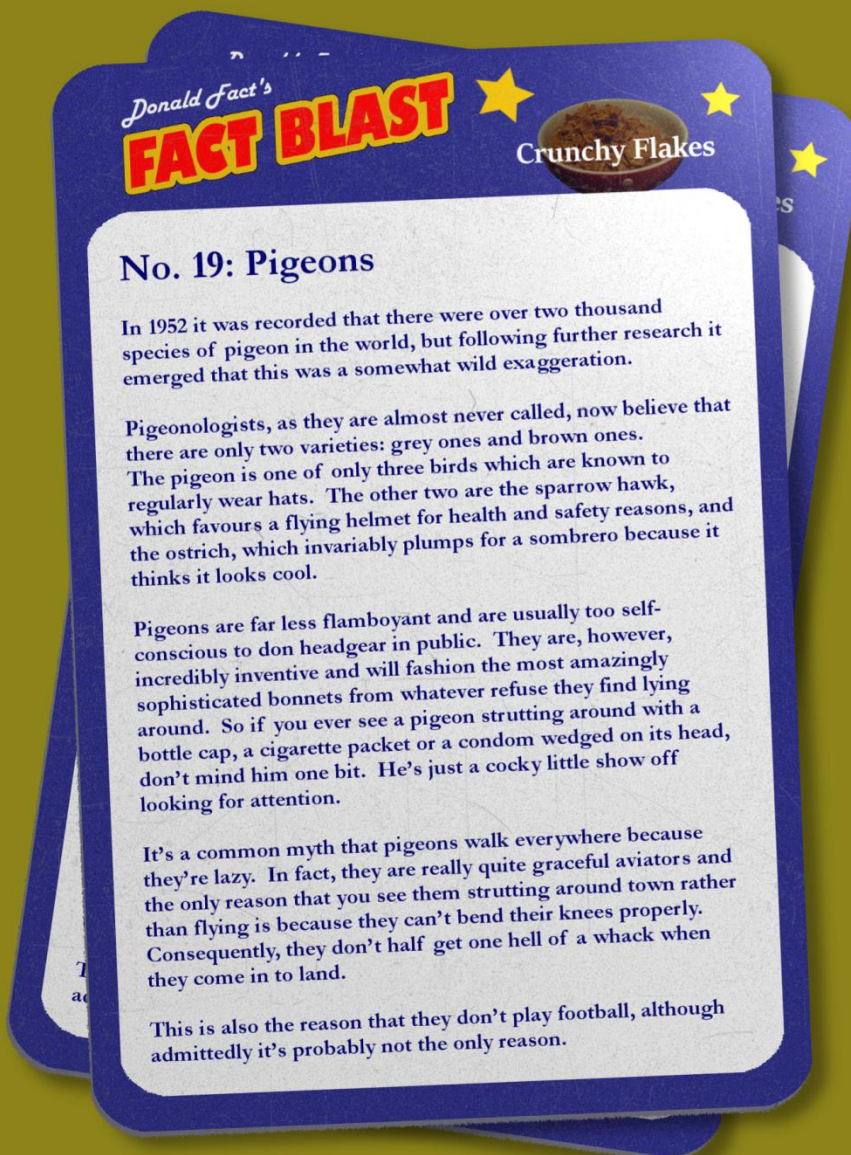
Consequently the temporary removal of Peak Cavern from the spot that it has occupied for billions of years is going to have quite an impact on the landscape. Of course -

"Of course, what happens when you dig up a hole is you get another hole," says Miss Shovel. "A bigger, more impressive and altogether more marketable hole. One for which we can get away with doubling the entrance fee. Oh yes, one way or another we expect to do very well out of this."

Peak Cavern begins its three month tour of the UK in Manchester next week, before commencing an extended run as Wishy Washy in Aladdin at the Prince of Wales Theatre in the West End.

In 1974 the makers of Crunchy Flakes breakfast cereal ran a promotion featuring none other than Donald Fact, the man who compiled the popular It's a Fact! column in IPC Magazines' Chuckles comic.

Promotional packs contained one of the fact master's specially written fact cards. There were twenty to collect in all, covering subjects as diverse as The Loch Ness Monster, Queen Elizabeth I and Trifle. These cards are now extremely rare and highly collectable, but we are fortunate enough to be able to reproduce a few of them here.



No. 17: The Loch Ness Monster

Of all the mysterious creatures rumoured to exist, the Loch Ness Monster must surely be the wettest. The earliest known sighting was about 3 o'clock in the morning. Ross McGonagall was out walking his pet leopard when he saw what he described as a 'fearsome beastie' breaking the dark surface of the water. According to his account, the creature had livid red eyes and a mighty maw that 'could crush a train'.

His friends told him that he had probably just seen a log floating in the water, and since that day, tales of the monstrous Log of Loch Ness were reported with increasing regularity.

Tourists and locals alike have claimed to have witnessed the woody leviathan down through the years. One or two have even reported close encounters whilst out on the water. For instance, in 1952 Colin Frasier is said to have barely escaped with his life after his boat was snagged in the monster's branches. The boat was dragged to the bottom and never seen again, but Frasier fortunately managed to escape and swim to shore.

Tales like this are plentiful, but solid evidence is harder to come by. There have been several blurred photographs of the log over the years, the most famous being the 'sturgeon's photograph' - although forensic studies have since revealed that this is not a picture of a log at all, but rather an extinct species of marine dinosaur.

No. 2: Ink

Is there anything we take more for granted than ink? We use it every day, in fountain pens, ballpoints and printing presses. Why, the very thing you're reading now was only possible because of it!

But what is ink? Where does it come from? And why does it taste so disgusting? There are four different types of ink: black, red, blue and green ink. This is because ink comes from octopuses and each colour has a specific purpose.

Black ink is used for defence, allowing the octopus to cloak itself in a cloud of darkness. Blue ink is a sign of fertility and is used to attract a mate. Red ink signals danger and the octopus uses it to warn that there are predators or frogmen around. The octopus uses its green ink to write angry letters to *The Times* - usually about frogmen.

It used to be thought that there was a fifth type of ink, yellow, but it turned out that this wasn't ink after all, and people quickly stopped using it.

So does that mean that the ink we use today comes from octopuses? Not at all. Writing with octopuses is a messy business as they tend to wriggle and slide about all over the page.

Thankfully, artificial substitutes mean that octopus trouble is a thing of the past. Nowadays you can write a thank you letter to your favourite aunt just by reaching into your desk drawer, rather than waddling down to the sea armed with a fishing net and a harpoon.

Donald Fact's

FACT BLAST

Crunchy Flakes

No. 6: The Great Wall of China

The Great Wall of China started out as a rockery, but things got out of hand. The project was the brainchild of the emperor Qin Shi Huang but his initial plans for a novel ornamental feature rapidly became more ambitious and instead he began work on a walled garden. Unfortunately, as he was soon to discover, he didn't know how to do corners, so he just kept building until his wall ultimately spanned the breadth of the country.

Although hailed by some as an astonishing defensive barrier, the wall actually proved to be a massive inconvenience, effectively sealing off the country from the rest of the world for the next 400 years, until someone finally had the bright idea of putting a door in it.

Tourists visiting the wall today can view the remarkable architecture and appreciate the workmanship, but few realise that they are not seeing it in its full glory. In Victorian times it was reported that there were places where it was still plastered and traces of the original wallpaper were found. Not surprising, perhaps, when you consider that some historians believe that the wall's main function was as a place where Chinese handymen could practise their decorating skills. Some claim that they have detected remnants of coving and even a rudimentary form of Artex.

The National Museum of China even has an ancient Qin dynasty stippling brush and what appears to be a paint roller, although its authenticity is hotly debated.

Donald Fact's FACT BLAST

Crunchy Flakes

No. 11: Mount Everest

As we all know, Mount Everest is the tallest mountain on Earth, but that wasn't always the case. Scientists now know that the mountain started off as a small hillock and has been steadily growing ever since.

There have been many wild theories to explain this mystery. In olden days people believed that a grotesque Pig God lived beneath the mountain, gorging himself on goats and as his enormous belly grew, so did the mountain. This is obviously rubbish: grotesque Pig Gods don't eat goats and actually subsist on a diet of wild kale, tomatoes and baby frogs*.

More sensible theories have included the idea that Everest is being stretched upwards by the gravitational pull of the moon; that it is being inflated by gasses escaping from the Earth's core and will eventually pop; and that it is not actually getting bigger at all, it's just that the rest of the planet is shrinking.

It has since been proved that the mountain was formed by the impact of a meteorite many millions of years ago, which resulted in massive swelling. This swelling is still going on and mountainologists expect it to stop sometime in the next century.

Mount Everest is not the only example of a geographical feature being caused by a close encounter with an object from space. Most experts believe that the Gobi Desert is a giant scab, the Andes mountain range is scar tissue, and the Grand Canyon is a graze formed when the early planet came off its bike.

*See Fact Blast card no 14.

Donald Fact's

FACT BLAST

Crunchy Flakes

No. 5: Trifle

We all love trifle, but I wonder if you realise that it was originally designed as a building material rather than a yummy dessert?

Back in the olden days, when the Romans were building things all over the known world, they found that they had a problem: they couldn't find a suitable substance to line their aqueducts. Traditionally they had used horse manure as it was cheap, created a perfect bond and the horses could lay it themselves as they went along.

Unfortunately, many Roman aqueducts carried drinking water and the taste of horse poo was not typically appreciated by Mediterranean connoisseurs. Enter Marcus Atticus Trifle, an amateur apothecary who believed that he could develop synthetic horse poo.

There had been many who had attempted this before, but they had all made the mistake of first trying to invent the synthetic horse. Marcus' genius had been to cut straight to the manure. He experimented with various ingredients, testing them for viscosity, water resistance and something he called 'plumbosity', which modern scholars have been

unable to translate. But everything he tried either washed away, dissolved or spontaneously exploded. Then, following a freak wheelbarrow accident, he accidentally lined an aqueduct with a combination of fruit, jelly, custard and whipped cream... and voila! That didn't work either, but once it had washed down into the neighbouring villas it became an instant hit - first as an abrasive cleaning agent, then as a wart remover and finally as a delicious dessert.

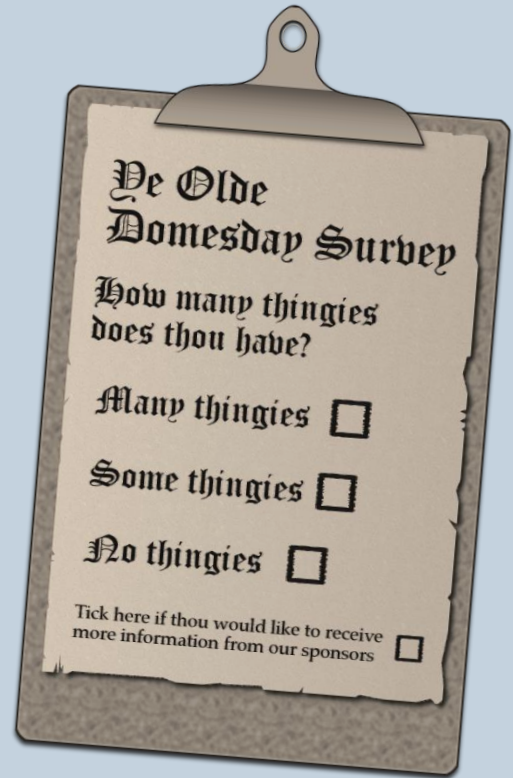
And that's how Marcus Atticus Trifle's invention became the trifle that we all know and love today. It would be another four hundred years before anyone invented the synthetic horse.

The Domesday Clipboard

Archaeologists have unearthed one of the original clipboards that was used to compile the Domesday Book in 1086. This simple but effective item of stationery had already proven decisive in William the Conqueror's victory over King Harold's army at Hastings, enabling him to collect the vital statistical information that was necessary to turn the tide of the conflict. Subsequently William used it to cement his control over his new possessions, it being the main tool employed to assess the taxable assets of his subjects.

It is famously recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that William's men commanded great respect as they arrived in towns and villages across the kingdom. The clipboard would be held aloft, a symbol of power, and the populace immediately understood the wisdom of obedience and submission. In fact, so great was its effect on the British national character that even today just one person with a clipboard can stand in a busy street and persuade dozens of passers-by to surrender the most intimate details of their lives.

Although we know from illustrations that clipboards were in use in the eleventh century - indeed, they appear on the Bayeux Tapestry - this is the first time an example has been unearthed. Experts agree that it is a discovery of unparalleled importance: the clipboard represented a ground-breaking advance in the field of office equipment, and it remained the most significant development in legislative administration until King John's use of correcting fluid to amend Magna Carta in 1215.



Well Stuffed

Police are warning animal lovers in Godalming of a rogue taxidermist at large who appears to be going around stuffing people's pets when they're not looking. This unusual spate of incidents began two months ago when the local constabulary received a complaint from a man who said that his tortoise had suddenly become much more listless, unresponsive and immobile than he was used to.

"This feller reckoned he'd tried all the usual tricks," said spokesman, PC Gary Tremeloe. "Shouting 'walkies', coquettishly tempting it with lettuce, gently kicking it up the arse - none of these things worked. Eventually he sought solace in the arms of a vet who opened up the shell-shocked reptile and found that it was full of sawdust."

This proved to be the first of many such instances as people from all over the district came forward with similar tales of previously healthy pets who had been mysteriously preserved in the night. But in recent weeks the phantom stuffer has upped his game, growing ever bolder.

"Oh yes, now he's started stuffing animals when they're on the move,"

said Sergeant Tremoloe. "Folks have been taking their doggies out for a stroll and this villain nips in when they're distracted, stuffs the poor pooches then he's off. The bemused owner is left shocked, distressed and faced with the prospect of dragging his rigid pet back home again on a long lead."

So, having been presented with such an unusual felony, what have the police been doing?

"We've been having a right old laugh about it," said Chief Inspector Tremoloe. "But apart from that, we've also had a go at profiling the criminal, like what the proper police do. At first we thought this might be the work of an unsuccessful taxidermist - someone who perhaps couldn't cope with all those complicated taxidermy exams and wants to wreak his vengeance against the world. Or something.

"But then we noticed some of the unusual materials that he's using - wadding, polystyrene and foam rubber - and now what we think we're looking at is a failed upholsterer."



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AN 'I LOVE CONSTABLE GARY TREMELOE'
T-SHIRT. ALRIGHT?

The Price of Politeness

There's a familiar saying that may soon become redundant. 'Manners cost nothing' is a refrain that many of us have grown up with, but it seems that we will shortly have to pay a fee now that a California law firm has obtained the intellectual property rights for politeness. We spoke to their Assistant Head of Exaction, Gita Verma.

University of the Bleeding Obvious: Ms Verma, can I say how delighted we are that you agreed to speak to us.

Gita Verma: That's very nice of you to say so. That will be fifty dollars.

UBO: Oh. Right. So that's how it works - whenever anyone is polite, you demand payment?

GV: Yes. Fifty dollars. You will need to pay this now.

UBO: Sorry, yes, here you go.

GV: Your receipt. Yes, payment is due immediately, although you have the option of opening an account. Would you like to do that?

UBO: Um, no.

GV: No what?

UBO: No thank you.

GV: That will be another fifty dollars.

UBO: Oh hell. Ok, here you go. Look, I don't want to appear rude -

GV: Don't you?

UBO: Actually, I suppose I better had if I want to remain solvent. Thing is, what right do you have to charge people to exercise their good manners?

GV: I can show you the relevant legal documentation if you would like to see it?

UBO: Yes I would. Actually, no I wouldn't. There's a moral issue here, the legal side of this is immaterial.

GV: I assure you, if I was to introduce you to our finance director she would say that it's very material. Would you like to see her new car?

UBO: No... Yes, I would... No, listen, you can't just claim ownership of the concept of courtesy.

GV: We very much can.

UBO: You can't monetise manners.

GV: We very much have. It's really no different to any other kind of intellectual property. It's the same as owning the rights to Coca Cola, Batman, Windows 10 or the concept of despair.

UBO: I find it very difficult to... despair? Who owns despair?

GV: Disney.

UBO: Ah. Anyway, as I see it there are two major issues that I'm struggling with here.

GV: I'm sorry to hear that. I'll do my utmost to help.

UBO: That's most kind of you, but I think you've just cost yourself fifty dollars.

GV: I'll charge it to the company account.

UBO: Of course. All right, first point: how can you claim to have a right of ownership to good manners? How can that possibly work?

GV: It was invented by the firm's founder in 1925. We have already successfully defended this claim in a court of law when an action was taken against us by Microsoft.

UBO: I won't even pretend that I can get my head round that. Second point then, and this really zeros in on the sheer impracticality of this set up: how do you expect to be able to collect your fee? It's not like you can realistically have people monitoring every exchange, every interaction that takes place across the planet every day.

GV: No we can't. But we don't have to. The advantage of dealing with a target group of habitually well-mannered individuals is that they will automatically surrender the required remittance purely out of politeness.

UBO: Ah. Yes. That's really rather neat, I suppose I have to congratulate you on that.

GV: It would be rude not to.

UBO: I guess so. Well Ms Verma, thank you very much for speaking to me.

GV: It's been a pleasure. That will be another fifty dollars.

The World Bullshit Record

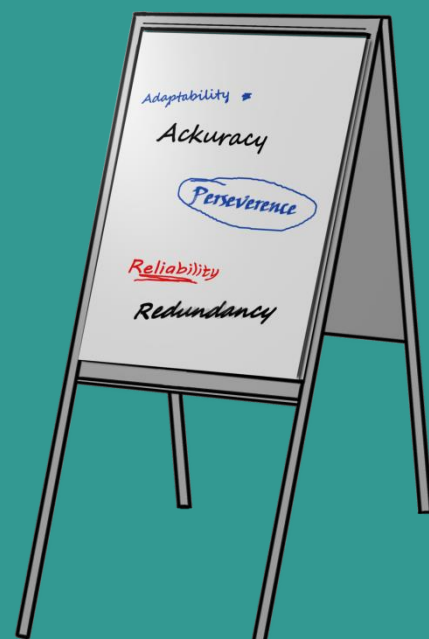
The World Bullshit record has been well and truly smashed at a conference staged by Frisbee Digitally Tracked Logistical Interface Solutions, a logistical interface company from Maidstone which specialises in digitally tracked solutions. And if you don't know what logistical interfaces are and what solutions exist for them, then rest assured that none of the company's six hundred plus staff is any the wiser either following this one-day event which set a new standard for corporate bullshit.



Employees who may have been hoping at last to find out just what it is that their company does were instead treated to a series of 'presentations' from various departmental heads in which the emphasis was - in their words - on 'fun rather than facts'.

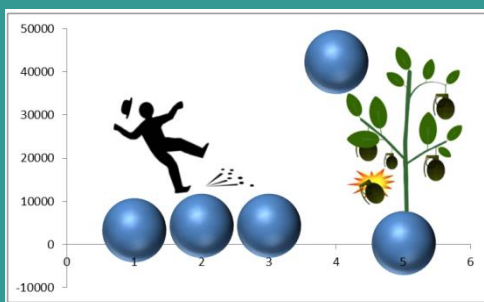
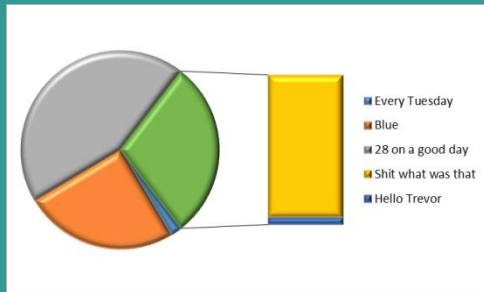
"It's a chance for everybody to let their hair down and put day-to-day pressures of the modular work environment behind them," said Miranda Roots, Assistant Director of Mercantile Compliance, who admits that she doesn't know what her job is either. "Our staff work very hard all year round, doing whatever it is that they do, so this is an opportunity to take our foot off the gas for a day and show that Assistant Senior Upper Managerial Directors and associated pay grades are real people too and know how to have a good time. That's why our presentation consisted of us dressing up in feather boas and florescent wigs and miming to Abba songs."

Mike Frangipane, Head of Domestic Inter-Relational Policy Decisions, echoed Miranda's sentiments, adding: "Team



Nobody knows what this is for.

bonding, goal setting, table top brainstorming, high growth, contingency planning, outcome focus.” He went on to reel off about a dozen other meaningless phrases which he plucked at random from a corporate memo.



A Series of corporate 'Illustrations' - illustrations which are intended to create a distraction.

Amongst the many fascinating events that took place throughout the conference was a group session in which staff were instructed to write arbitrary nouns on a piece of flipchart paper, several briefings in which persons of diminished personality read PowerPoint slides prior to handing out printouts of the same which were too small to read, plus a team bonding exercise involving glue, glitter and coloured streamers. This turned out to be the only high point of the day, but only because it ended in a fight.

The day's events culminated with the results of the annual staff survey which revealed company employees' favourite colour (blue), favourite TV programme (*Strictly Come Dancing*) and favourite choice of knitwear (cardigan was narrowly beaten into second place by balaclava helmet).

And if there was ever any doubt that the whole event was anything other than a dreary, frivolous, childish, crass, pointless, unproductive, ridiculous, unprofessional, silly and entirely unnecessary exercise in pissing money up the wall, then one only had to study the reactions of the majority of attendees who responded to this extraordinary festival of absurdity with a dead-eyed stone-cold silence.

Specialists in tracking logistical interface solutions digitally

JOB PROFILE

Job Title: Financial Director
Department: Revolvement

About the Company

Frisbee Digitally Tracked Logistical Interface Solutions is a great place to work! The emphasis here is on fun, fun, fun. We don't take ourselves seriously and we don't expect anyone else to either.

Employees of Frisbee Digitally Tracked Logistical Interface Solutions enjoy a full package of staff activities including paintballing, crazy golf, greyhound racing, arts and crafts, and much, much more. After all that it's a wonder that there's any time left to get the job done. Actually, there usually isn't but we're progressive enough to realise that work shouldn't get in the way of team-building.

Job Description

You will be responsible for overseeing all aspects of the company's financial mismanagement systems, tax aversion policies and ensuring adherence to the firm's programme of corporate fraud. Probably some other stuff as well. Sorry, this all sounds a bit heavy but in reality there's nothing to it. If you get stuck with anything just ask Malcom, he's been here ages.

Of course, we wouldn't expect you to get the hang of it right away. Our head of human resources still hasn't got a clue what he's doing after fourteen years. Mind you, the prick doesn't know his arse from his elbow most of the time, so that's no great surprise. I'm surprised he's still here, to be honest. There's not a week goes by that someone doesn't lock him in the stationery cupboard. Maybe he just likes the attention.

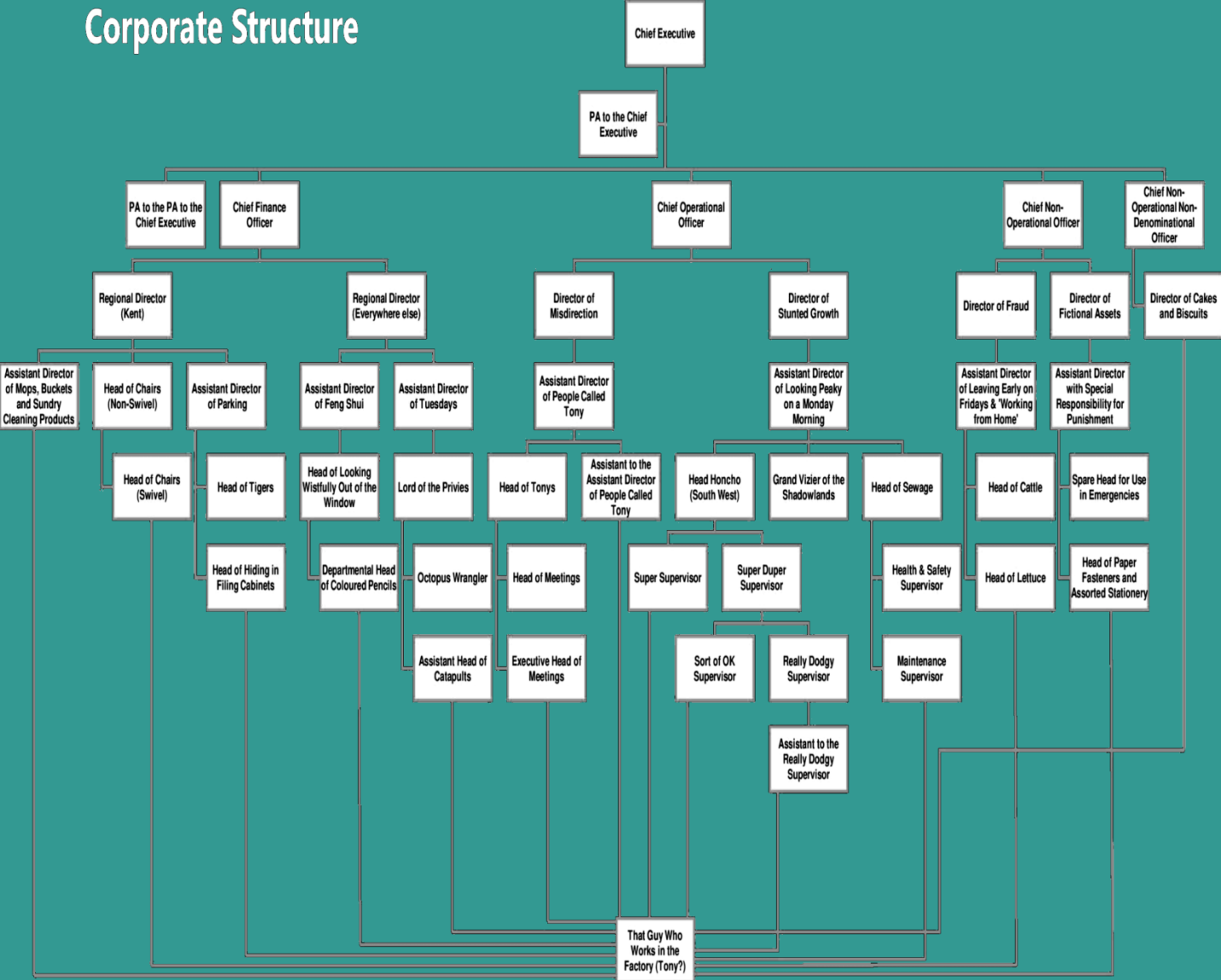
Anyway, you probably want to know what the job is like. Well, you just turn up when you feel like it, no one expects you to be here. Our senior staff 'work from home' if you see what I mean. I don't think I've ever seen our sales director, but I'm not even sure she still works here. Hey, I'm just saying that I'm trying to put ideas into your head.

Person specification

Person specification		
Skills and Experience		
	Desirable	Essential
Ability to get distracted by YouTube videos		
Willingness to bunk off early		✓
Ability to turn up in fancy dress, amusing knitwear or silly party hats		✓
Knowledge of popular films and TV shows		✓
Proven ability in paintballing		✓
Confident in the use of coloured marker pens, sticky tape and glitter		✓
Willingness to spend extended periods tidying up and rearranging the furniture in order to avoid getting any work done		✓
Related to a senior member of the management		✓
Excellent Facebook skills.		✓
Familiarity with financial systems, legislation, procedures and responsibilities	✓	✓

Basically, we're looking for an unmotivated person who is happy to arse about all day, chat with colleagues and have a bit of a laugh. Candidates will be expected to give a brief presentation on what they think of the latest series of *Game of Thrones*.

Corporate Structure



Frisbee . Digitally . Tracked . Logistical . Interface . Solutions

Specialists in tracking logistical interface solutions digitally

Professor Jez Moonbeam's
Science Club



Tripping the Dark Fantastic

What is darkness? According to some scientists, darkness is just the absence of light. But hey, what do those bread-heads know? If they can't monetise it for their corporate paymasters they don't want to know. I mean, you can't sell 'darkbulbs' can you? Nobody's interested in 'darksabers'? Who has any use for a 'darkroom'? Okay, scrub that last one 'cos it is actually a thing, but the point that I'm trying to make is that all those dudes riding the scientific bandwagon are only interested in something if they can make moolah out of it, and that just ain't cool.

Thankfully there are some of us who still have some integrity; who still want to pull back the curtain of reality and push forward the boundaries of knowledge. And all that pushing and pulling takes it out of you, especially when you don't have vast underground atom smashers at your disposal and have to make do with whatever basic mid-priced equipment you can lay your hands on at your local hardware store.

But that hasn't stopped me trying to probe the eternal mysteries of the universe, and it's why of late I have spent my evenings sitting in the dark in my shed. It's all perfectly legitimate, despite what that witch Mrs Collins at number 26 might think. And I would like to remind her, if she's reading this, that I was completely exonerated by the police, even if they did somewhat misleadingly claim that I was 'experimenting on myself'.

Anyhow, what better way is there for a scientist discover to true nature of darkness that by immersing himself in it? What exactly is it, I wanted to know? Where does it come from? What is it made of? I began my researches in a methodical manner with a few basic experiments, the results of which are detailed below.

Experiment 1: What Does Darkness Taste Like?

Method

I sat in my shed in the darkness with my tongue extended for a period of two hours and twenty-three minutes. I waggled my tongue around, recording my observations on a portable recording device.

Result

Darkness is mostly without flavour, although it does appear to taste faintly metallic at times. However, upon putting on the lights I discovered that during this period I may occasionally have been licking a watering can.

Conclusion

Inconclusive

Experiment 2: What Does Darkness Smell Like?

Method

I sat in my shed in the darkness repeatedly sniffing my surroundings, recording my observations on a portable recording device.

Result

I detected aromas of old paint, damp newspapers, stale sweat and an odour that I can best describe as being akin to that of a rotting badger. My experiment was curtailed because I was sniffing so fiercely that I hyperventilated, fell off my stool and smashed my head on a garden gnome.

Conclusion

Inconclusive. Although I did subsequently discover a dead badger under the shed, so the exercise wasn't a complete waste of time.

Experiment 3: What Does Darkness Sound Like?

Method

I sat in my shed in the darkness listening, recording my observations, very quietly, on a portable recording device.

Result

It was difficult to obtain meaningful results as I live in a particularly noisy neighbourhood. In spite of this, once I had managed to filter out the traffic noise, the sounds of my neighbours having an argument, two foxes going at it in a nearby hedge and various assorted bongos, crashes and clatters from the steel drum society practising in the village hall, I was able to discern a constant, unmistakable background noise of wheezing and rasping.

Conclusions

Darkness definitely sounds like wheezing and rasping. On the other hand, I cannot entirely rule out the possibility that my asthma was in some way a factor.

Experiment 4: Is Darkness Flammable?

Method

I sat in my shed in the darkness, striking matches and waving them around in the air, recording my observations on a flameproof portable recording device.

Result

After working my way through two dozen boxes of matches with no sign of any result, I was about to give up for the night when abruptly there was a flicker and a sudden 'Whoosh'. The flames rapidly took hold, burning up the darkness to reveal large patches of intense orange light. Incidentally, there was also a great deal of heat and smoke and it struck me that it would be prudent to evacuate the structure at this point. Fortunately the darkness had mostly gone by this point, which meant that I could easily find the door through which I could effect my escape.

Conclusion

Initially I took this to be incontrovertible evidence that darkness is indeed combustible, but on reflection I have had to reconsider. Once the flames had finally died down the darkness came back but the shed had gone, which leads me to the conclusion that whilst darkness may or may not be flammable, sheds most certainly are.

So, after all this activity I had drawn a big fat blank and had nothing to show for my efforts except for a small pile of ash, a sternly worded letter from the local fire officer and a big heap of bad karma. Bummer!

Some other guys might have given up at this point, but not this scientist. No way. Besides, I had been able to draw one conclusion: darkness is intangible. I certainly hadn't been able to tange it, anyways. Was there no way that I could capture it, I thought? I could examine it properly under strict laboratory conditions if only I had a sample. And a laboratory.

I went out the following evening and tried to obtain a quantity of the stuff using a margarine tub. I thought I had been successful but when I checked the tub the following morning I found that the darkness had been too wily for me and escaped in the night. Also the margarine had gone runny and had bits of grass in it. Perhaps I should have used an empty tub?

Clearly I needed to devote some serious thinking time to this heinous problem, and that's how I came up with my Dark-o-Scope. This was built on the principle of infinitely refracting wavelength modification and was fashioned from a Pringles tube, a system of mirrors, a prism and several feet of aluminium foil. It took a fortnight to create, then a further week to prepare the patent application. Finally I was ready to put my Dark-o-Scope to the test.

It didn't work, so don't expect to find one on sale in your local gadget shop any time soon.

Fortunately, that's not all I'd been up to at that time, no way. I'd also been eating a lot of beans on toast, and beans on toast always makes me think outside the box. Actually, beans on toast always makes me think outside the house, since that's where my mother always makes me go and sit after a heavy bean experience. (Coincidentally, Heavy Bean Experience was the name of the band I was in at college. I played bass.)

No, I had launched another line of enquiry: I had posted a message on the Hawkwind Appreciation Society's online forum asking if anyone could provide me with a sample of darkness. And do you know what - I got a reply! Actually, I got quite a lot of replies, most of them the usual tired abuse, although somebody did call me a 'redundant plank of fetid donkey sick' which I thought was pleasingly inventive. But one cat did come through for me and said that he had a sample of darkness that I could have for the right price. I shouldn't be surprised 'cos those guys are real cool.

I met up with him in a pub later that week. He said he had the darkness with him and he would sell it to me for a pony. I told him I didn't have a pony, just my bike. He said he would let me have it for twenty five quid instead. He handed me a small, opaque plastic



A sample of darkness as seen under a microscope. Scientists have discovered that not only is darkness granular, it also contains particles of lint.

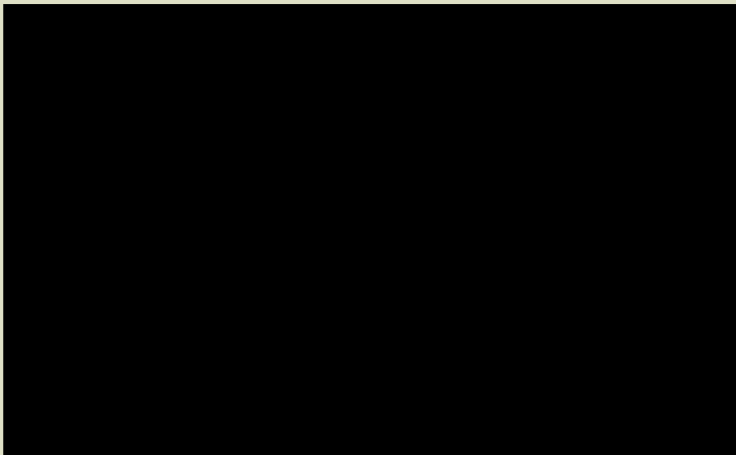
bottle which had previously contained some sort of yoghurt drink. This, he said, contained a quantity of darkness which he had captured and 'processed' last week.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: Hey Jez, we know you're a pretty smart guy, but what kind of scientist is it that takes claims like this at face value? Surely you should be asking this dude some pretty tough scientific questions? Well yes, of course you're right, so I asked him how he had managed to achieve this extraordinary feat. He tapped the side of his nose and said that he couldn't go into too much detail but it was something to do with 'compression'.

Well yes, that made sense. By compressing darkness you concentrate it, give it dimensions, give it mass. Awesome, but I needed more detail. How was it compressed? By what method?

He was reluctant to tell me, which I suppose is quite understandable but after a few seconds playing hardball followed by a few minutes whinging and pleading, he relented.

He leaned over to me, put his lips to my ear and said 'Between two bricks.'



Two goths looking morosely at a black cat on a moonlit night in Blackpool.

Well, that was good enough for me. I handed over the cash and was about to open to bottle to inspect my purchase but he quickly laid a hand on my arm and told me to hold fire. I should only open it in complete darkness, he said. Good grief, of course, I thought, slapping my forehead at my stupidity. I rushed home in a frenzy, thundered up to my room, doused the lights and cautiously levered off the lid.

There it was, right in front of me. Through the inky blackness in my room I could clearly see complete darkness. So, it really was possible to isolate and analyse darkness. It was an awesome moment. There it was at last, just lying there, featureless and impenetrable and smelling ever-so-slightly of mango and apricot yoghurt.

And that's when my mother opened the door, wanting to know if I wanted fish fingers for my tea. The light flooded in and my darkness was gone.

Thing is, it really didn't matter. For a moment I had held it in my hands. I had witnessed positive proof that darkness can exist as an entity which can be studied. Now I intend to do just that, as soon as I can get hold of more of the stuff, and thankfully I know just how to do that. To trap darkness, to process it, to compress it and contain it all I need is two bricks. The next time you hear from me it will probably be when I am nominated for a Nobel Prize.

Petition lights touch paper for Doncaster Space Programme

Space Cadets and Lunarphiles in Doncaster were delighted this week to learn that an online petition to get Doncaster Borough Council to put a man on the moon is nearing its target.

Local man Christian Pyle launched his petition three months ago and thanks to astronomical interest on social media he now has five and a half thousand signatures and is rocketing towards the six thousand mark.

Asked why he wants the council to take this giant step for Doncaster, Christian said: 'It would be great to do something positive for the town for a change. This area is becoming really depressed: businesses are closing, local amenities are falling into disrepair and people generally seem to think that the future for Doncaster is pretty bleak. A properly funded space programme will provide a much needed boost for the local economy and be a source of civic pride.'

Inevitably Christian has been inundated with potential volunteers for the moon-shot, all eager to leave the dismal environs of Doncaster behind them and experience somewhere with even less atmosphere. But Christian already knows the man with the right stuff.

'My mate Tony reckons he's up for it,' he told us. 'He's really bored at the pickle factory at the moment and says that he wants to strike out in a new direction. Also, when we were at school he was always doodling spaceships during the maths lesson, so actually he's halfway to being qualified.'

Surprisingly, Doncaster Borough Council seems to be taking the proposal seriously, even though no one seems confident that the idea will get off the launch pad. 'We don't really have the facilities for this at the moment,' said Councillor Ronnie Backhander. 'Budget restrictions have meant that we've had to

make some severe cuts. Last month we had to let half the street cleaning staff go, which hit us pretty hard, so managing a successful blast off is a big ask. Still, we've got Mary in the Planning Department looking into it and we're expecting to hear from her by Tuesday.'

In the meantime, Doncaster Borough Council remains fully committed to its ongoing project to tunnel to the Earth's core. So far they have a hole nearly three and a half feet deep. Following an injection of cash from a corporate sponsor they now intend to invest in another shovel and hope to reach the upper mantle by next June.

Retroactive Sackings Spell the End to Job Security

A new precedent has this week been set in the field of employment law as a UK-based firm won the right to retroactively sack a quarter of its workforce.

The company, which presently cannot be named for hygiene reasons, is a manufacturer and retailer of cheap leisurewear and has a reputation for harsh and questionable employment practices which frequently test the limits of legality. For instance, the firm has been able to pay considerably less than the living wage by claiming variously that it is a religion, a commune and an offshore windfarm. More recently it successfully defended an HMRC prosecution by offering expert testimony that the company as a physical entity did not exist and was merely a mental construct brought into being by the collective consciousness of its workforce.

This latest action came about after the firm posted considerable pre-tax profits which were, in their own words, not nearly enough. To rectify this shameful situation, directors decided to slash the wage bill by terminating the contracts of 25% of its employees, backdating their dismissal to 1997 and beginning immediate action to recover overpayments of salary.

Following a controversial ruling that the company had not acted outside the law, a spokesman for the government, who cannot be named for operational reasons, praised the firm's entrepreneurial spirit. 'This is just the sort of innovative thinking that British industry needs,' he said. 'I think that we, as a nation, should be grateful that we can produce companies which are bold enough to think outside the box, and I for one am proud to be a shareholder.'

Digital Vicars

One of the greatest mysteries of the Anglican faith has finally been revealed. The question of how vicars communicate with each other over distance has puzzled ecclesiastical scholars for centuries. For a while it was thought to be a variation of nun semaphore but now the Church of England has finally answered the question by explaining that it is essentially a form of shortwave prayer.

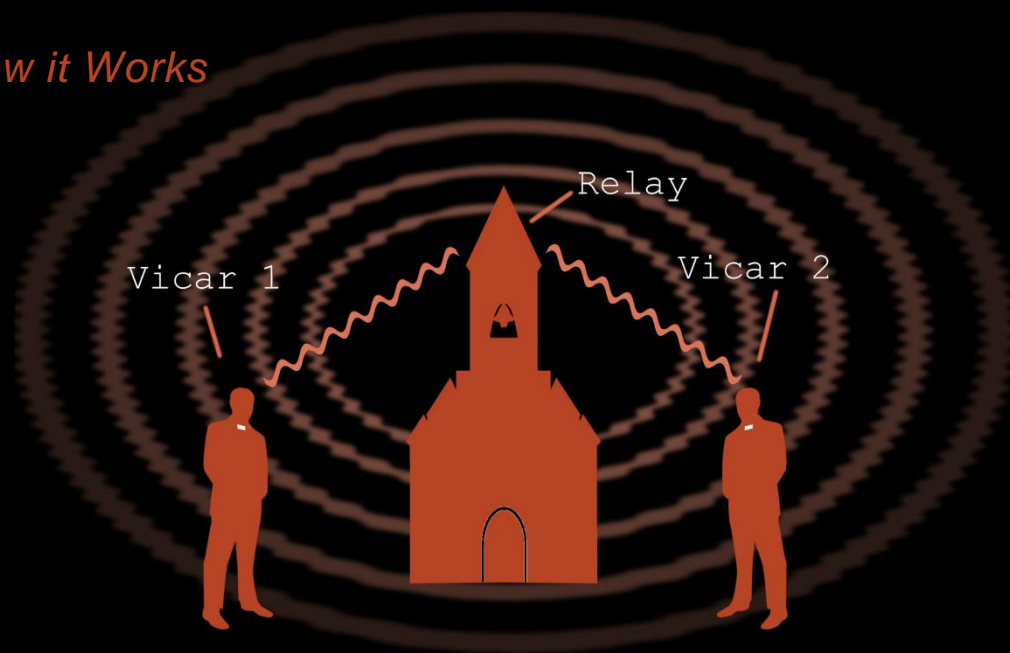
Whether you believe that prayer gives us a hotline to The Almighty is very much a matter of faith, but it's a fact that vicars have been using it to converse with one another since the reformation. They claim that it's more reliable than modern phone networks, more convenient and the data roaming charges are much more reasonable.

The exact mechanics of the technique have yet to be fully explained but it's understood that

before he or she is ordained a trainee vicar will undergo an intensive course of instruction in vicar-to-vicar prayer. By the time they assume their parish duties, each is able to communicate almost instantaneously with vicars anywhere in the world. Some archdeacons can also send images and most bishops support video conferencing.

So far inter-denominational prayer has not been possible, meaning that if a Church of England Vicar wanted to communicate with a Roman Catholic priest, he'd probably have to resort to email. But the introduction of new digital vicars and the gradual phasing out of old analogue models means that this could soon change. There are also plans to turn the Archbishop of Canterbury into a Hub so that anyone within his immediate vicinity will also be able to use the network, as long as they know the security prayer.

How it Works



Firstlode the vicry kneelys in the churchy polpit, with the vestlodes all arrayed splendiciously, and offlys up the prayer unto the magesticaly firmament, most celebraty, deep joy.

Through the wonderol powwow of the gangly spiral the humbly wordals are transpoddled over the ether, all speedymost, and received in gladiole through the thrips streepy. Remarkabold, truly remarkabold!

Lillywhite Lenny

University of the Bleeding Obvious: ...Well what a marvellous spectacle we've witnessed here today at Cheltenham, Lillywhite Lenny, a rank outsider, romped home in the final steeplechase of this April Meeting. A magnificent performance from this horse, the first time this feisty two-year-old has raced at this level. His trainer, I'm sure, will be very pleased. A first, too, for jockey Brendan O'Connell, who is just coming into the press enclosure now, so we should be able to catch a few words. Brendan! Brendan, over here! A few words please. A magnificent performance, you must be very proud.

Brendan O'Connell: Oh, well, you know. It was a good race.

UBO: Tell us what you were thinking when you were coming down that final straight and the winning post came in sight?

O'Connell: Ah, well, mainly I was thinking about not falling off the horse.

UBO: Racing at this level must take a great deal of concentration.

O'Connell: Ah, sure enough. They get awful jiggy, some of these horses. Very easy to just slip off.

UBO: Of course. So how do you prepare for a race like this?

O'Connell: Well, there's not really a great deal of preparation needed. It's the horse that does all the work; I just have to stay on it.

UBO: You lost some ground in the early stages of the race. What went through your head when you slipped back two places at the second corner?

O'Connell: I was thinking about staying on the horse. I was hanging on really tight, so I was.

UBO: Were you considering a change of tactics when that happened?

O'Connell: No, I was just trying to stay on the horse, you know. Just holding on tight and trying not to fall off the fecker.

UBO: What was your main concern at that point?

O'Connell: Trying to stay on the feckin' horse.

UBO: It must have taken all your concentration to hold back for that final sprint.

O'Connell: It took all my concentration to stay on the feckin' horse. It's a bastard, so it is. But it can run faster than I can, so it's important that I try to stay on it.

UBO: What were you thinking during that magnificent final charge?

O'Connell: I was thinking about staying on the bloody thing.

UBO: So, all in all, you must be very pleased with Lillywhite Lenny's performance here today?

O'Connell: Ah, if I had my way it would be on its way to the glue factory, the fecker.

UBO: Brendan, thanks for taking time out to speak to us. I'm sure you're eager to be off and join the celebrations. Any last words of wisdom for the budding jockeys out there who want to follow in your footsteps?

O'Connell: Yes.

UBO: And they are... ?

O'Connell: Try to stay on the feckin' horse. I can't stress that strongly enough. I'm surprised you had to ask.

UBO: Brendan O'Connell, thank you for your time.



Wannabe traffic wardens are being invited to get their applications in early if they want to be considered for this year's **North Yorkshire's Got Talented Traffic Wardens** competition. Following the success of the recent Bake Off contest to find a new dinner lady, North Yorkshire County Council has once more adopted a talent show format for its latest recruitment drive to fill three part- time traffic warden posts in the region.

"We think that this is by far the most rigorous way of finding suitable people for the job," said human resources director, Julian Cyborg. "I often think that traditional interviewing and selection methods don't really give applicants a chance to shine. This way we can really see what our candidates are made of."

The contest will begin with a blind audition presided over by a panel of local celebrities, giving potential traffic wardens a chance to demonstrate their basic observation skills. Shortlisted applicants will then go through to the elimination round where they will be coached by some of the country's top traffic wardens before presenting a display of formation parking meter reading. A public vote will decide who gets through to the final, in which three successful candidates will be chosen to write parking tickets for the Queen at this year's Royal Variety Show.

"We're looking for originality, flair and the dedication that sets them apart from the rest of the pack," Mr Cyborg told us. "And if they happen to have a tragic backstory, then obviously that's a bonus."



The Creeper & Other Motorists

[Setup]

The use of L and P plates for learner and probationary drivers does much to ease tensions on our roads, providing a warning that the car in front could be driven by someone with little experience. Consultations are currently underway to extend the scheme to other drivers, so that motorists can have a better idea of what to expect from their fellow road users. The proposed categories are as follows:

[List]

E The Enigma

Is he going left? Is he going right? One thing is certain, you'll get no warning. The Enigma doesn't believe in signalling, preferring to keep his actions shrouded in mystery.

D The Diarist

Like the Enigma, the Diarist prefers not to advertise his intentions but he is quite fastidious when it comes to documenting his manoeuvres after they have been performed. Thus, if he is turning right he will happily signal once he has turned just to let you know that he's already done it. Likewise, when turning left you can be sure that little winking light will start flashing soon afterwards, just in case you weren't quite sure what you had just witnessed.

K The Klingon

So called because he will 'cling on' to your rear end, come hell or high water. Tailgating you is just his way of being friendly and there is much fun to be had watching the look of panic cross the pudgy, vacant face in your rear view mirror as you unexpectedly apply your brakes.

F The Fidgeter

The Fidgeter cannot remain still. At junctions, at traffic lights and traffic queues his vehicle will be in a constant state of motion, shuffling forward, stopping and starting, straining to be off like a nervous racehorse waiting at the starting gate.

C The Clueless

Characterised by having no idea how road networks operate. In extreme cases they can be found turning the wrong way into one-way streets or attempting to join motorways via the exit ramp. Most often, however, they show their colours whilst waiting endlessly at roundabouts - it's their right of way, but they wonder why no one else is moving.

S The Sadist

This is the driver who will quite deliberately crawl along at snail's pace in a 50mph zone, collecting a queue of traffic behind them. They then take perverse pleasure in suddenly speeding up when the speed limit drops to thirty.

O The Obstructer

These artisans of highway aggravation have mastered the finely tuned skill of parking in the most inconvenient ways imaginable. It's fairly easy for anyone to take up two spaces in a car park, but a true genius can occupy three and obstruct an exit at the same time. Parking on a junction, a blind corner or the brow of a hill is child's play to them and they will often work in teams to block narrow roads and pavements.

Cr The Creeper

This driver doesn't believe in toeing the line. Not when they come to a junction, anyway. They will always stop with a good two or three feet of their front end protruding into the road, forcing other drivers to swerve around them. Occasionally other road users will have no option but to let them out, for which the Creeper will thank them graciously, as if this was somehow a matter of choice.

[See what we did there?]

The Royal Gala Theatre

In the interests of your comfort and enjoyment, please note the following.

Good evening and welcome to this evening's performance. We appreciate that this is an exciting and thrilling occasion for you. After all, the last time you went to the theatre was to see that pantomime when you were six, and you're only at this show because that actor that you like off the TV is in it. Well, that's fine, and we want to make sure you get the most from this experience, which is why we have prepared this list of do's and don'ts.

1. You know like when you're at home and you can shout at your TV or turn to your friend and say 'I'm sure that's so-and-so who was in that thing'? Yeah, well, that's not how it works here. If the performers don't tell you to shut the hell up, then your fellow audience members certainly will.

2. Do not be surprised if the production does not have quite the same visual impact as the latest blockbuster at your local multiplex. Whilst much can be achieved using lighting, costume and innovative set design, theatrical performances rarely make use of CGI or snappy editing, and any location work involved would likely require the entire audience to be marched out of the auditorium and put onto a bus. However, very nearly every play you're likely to see at this venue will be in 3D.

3. You must not attempt to take an active part in the performance. Actors can be very fussy about this and rarely invite you to participate, either as an anonymous voice from the darkness or as an additional member of the cast on stage. You may be surprised to learn that the players work from a script and that the events you see unfolding before you have been worked out in advance. Somebody who takes it upon themselves to call out "The butler did it" or "He's behind you" is unlikely to be able to contribute to proceedings in any meaningful way.

Of course, there are some productions which actively encourage just this sort of participation - for example pantomime, some of the lower forms of light entertainment and certain 'experimental' works. But the advice still stands - you are rarely ever able to contribute to proceedings in any meaningful way and must never be tempted to take part.

4. Do not attempt to watch the performance via your phone, tablet or similar device. We are aware that modern devices can capture colour and movement with remarkable fidelity, but you will find that real life still has far greater resolution. If you feel that you simply cannot be parted from your phone please consider surrendering your seat to somebody who actually wants to watch the performance.

5. It is acceptable to consume snacks and drinks in the auditorium so long as any distractions are kept to an absolute minimum. What is not generally tolerated is unpacking a sizeable picnic, ordering a takeaway or lighting a barbecue before the final curtain has come down.

We are confident that by following this simple guidance you will have an enjoyable and positive experience, and we are hopeful that you will want to return again and again. So please, find your seats, sit down and for God's sake shut up. Thank you.

The Management.

Mrs Womble Puts the Boot In

Thanks to another misdirected letter, we learn that Mrs Edna Womble from Hartlepool has recently been inconvenienced by some haunted shoes.

Dear Discount Shoe Boutique

It is a source of great disappointment to me that I am forced into the disagreeable position of having to write this letter of complaint in response to the distressing chain of experiences that ensued following a purchase I made at one of your stores. It began when your magnificent window display alerted me to the fact that you are in the business of selling footwear and I was encouraged to venture inside by the brightly coloured sign indicating that a sale was in progress.

Being in need of some new sensible shoes I was directed to what I thought was a suitable pair by your assistant (the one with the flaky skin). I should have suspected that something was amiss by the forced smile that did such a poor job of disguising her surly undercurrent of pure malevolence, but in my enthusiasm I'm afraid I overlooked this rather obvious clue.

Yes, I did use the word 'malevolence'; and no, I don't think that this is an over-reaction, as the following will ably illustrate.

Upon making my purchase I decided that I would wear my new sensible shoes there and then, because I can be wonderfully impulsive at times. I left the shop happy with my new acquisitions and full of innocent joy - unaware that my whole world was imminently to come crashing down about my ears.

My intention was to call at the local newsagent's where I had left my nephew staring at the small selection of jigsaws that they keep on display. The colourful pictures have a calming effect on the boy, and as they are stored on a high shelf he is unable to interfere with them without the aid of a stepladder or the assistance of the staff. The staff, you will be pleased to learn, no longer offer him such assistance ever since the 'incident' and watch him closely while he is on their premises. This constant need for vigilance may be a source of anxiety for the workforce but it is nevertheless greatly comforting for me to know that he is adequately supervised.

Incidentally, I have always been surprised that newsagents across the land appear to think that it lies within their purview to oversee the vending of jigsaw puzzles, and one wonders who purchases them. Nobody, I imagine, judging by their inaccessibility and the heaped drifts of dust that settle over them. Perhaps, as you are in the retail trade, you may be able to enlighten me?

Of course, I could have enquired at the newsagent's in order to solve this particular conundrum but on this occasion this was not possible since, without intending to, I somehow managed to cross the threshold of a completely different establishment entirely - an establishment given over to the retail of shockingly lewd magazines, criminally obscene videographic presentations and an array of medical and mechanical machinery such as would probably make your ears pop. In short, filth.

One is aware that such seedy emporia exist, but I was not expecting to accidentally stumble into one such venue practically on my own doorstep. It didn't help that the blacked out windows gave no indication as to what I was letting myself in for, although I realise that the local chamber of commerce might object to the erection of a giant phallus in a prominent window in their posh, award-winning high street.

Suffice it to say that I did not enter those premises according to my own design, which admits of only one possible explanation - your shoes led me there. Far from being the smart, sensible workwear that I had been led to believe, these things were nothing more than patent leather monsters which had forced me to deviate from my true course and had directed me into this den of smut.

In fact, such was that the all-powerful and overwhelmingly baleful influence of my evil footwear that I was not the only one to be drawn into this evil pit

of lust. At the back of the shop I spied my nephew looking excitable and distraught, surrounded by a staggering quantity of pornography. The poor boy was bright red and looked fit to burst.

One's immediate concern in moments like this is, of course, for one's reputation. I certainly did not want word getting around that I was in the habit of visiting such seedy dives and so I announced loudly and clearly to the several patrons who were skulking around the shop that I believed they were all perverts and that the only reason that I now degraded myself by joining their company was that I had been sold defective shoes. I then managed to steer said shoes long enough to storm out, pausing only to collect my nephew who was in the process of having his innocent mind corrupted as he leafed through a copy of *Big Girls in their Pants*.

I feel it only proper that you should compensate me for the mental anguish that I have suffered due to your defective product. I am no expert in these matters, but in my opinion it seems that the shoes were the subject of some sort of curse and I strongly advise you to employ the services of an exorcist to prevent the diabolical sorcery spreading to the rest of your stock.

I eagerly await your fawning response and offer of recompense.

Yours Sincerely

Mrs Edna Womble

Latest figures reveal that mountain rescue teams in the UK's Peak District are called out to help, on average, two people a day. The two people in question are Glenda and Raymond Pottle, a retired couple from Stockport, and emergency service chiefs are getting mightily sick of it.

"Why can't these people just stay at home?" said Assistant Head of Ropes, Malcolm Crampon.

"Sometimes I think they can't go more than two hundred yards from their front door without getting stranded on a cliff face or tumbling into a crevasse. Every time the phone rings now my heart just sinks, because I know exactly what it's going to be: Mr and Mrs Pottle have wandered off into the hills again with nothing more than a flask of tea and an out-of-date bus timetable to help them survive the wilderness.

"What can you do? A couple of weeks ago I told them in no uncertain terms that this kind of thing had to stop; that they were to leave nature well alone and confine themselves to the city. And what happened?"

What happened was that last Thursday, Malcolm's Mountain Rescue team received another

phone call from the Pottles, who had once more managed to get themselves lost in some wild and unknown environment. Quite where they were they couldn't say and, cursing beneath his breath, Malcolm had no choice but to scramble his team.

"There was nothing else for it," Malcolm explained. "They make you swear an oath when you take on this job. Come rain or shine, day or night, you have to spring into action, even if you are looking for a couple of pig-brained dickheads who, in any sane world, would be kept under lock and key for the sake of their own wellbeing.

"In the end it turned into a major manhunt. We had the police out looking for them, helicopters, put out messages on the local radio station. And do you know where we found them? The car park at ASDA. Near the bottle bank, where one of the streetlights was out and it was a bit dark. We had to airlift them to their house two streets away - them and their shopping... You know, the next time there's a call - I don't know, maybe this is a premonition - but I just have this feeling that we may not find them. Pity."

Dash for Glory

Local man dreams of Olympic Gold

Henry Dash is a very special kind of athlete. His training routine is rigorous, unrelenting and demands the dedication and resolve to spend at least fourteen hours a day lounging on a sofa in front of the TV, sliding pizza down his fat neck. Not for Henry the hard toil and sweat of a punishing exercise regime; this couch competitor has developed a whole new approach that steadfastly avoids any physical effort.

"Bollocks to that," he told us. "You won't catch me trussed up in Lycra, shambolically wheezing my way through the local park, disturbing the atmosphere and scaring the ducks. I've watched enough sport to know that the one thing common to all great athletes is 'mental strength'. They all go on about it. At first I simply dismissed it - most sports people are not bright enough to realise that 'mental strength' is not actually a thing, just some hippy bullshit that their trainer tells them about to get them out of bed in the morning.

"I mean, if they were academically blessed they wouldn't have to run up and down and chuck things around and stuff. The only ones I've got any real respect for is the darts players, because at least they can add up. Although, that's not really a sport, is it? That's just a night out.

"But then, when you think about all the medals that these people keep winning, you start to wonder whether there might not be something to it. So that's why I figured I'd give it a go. Right now I'm in training for the next Olympics."

Henry is currently concentrating on improving his mental strength and has very nearly eliminated any kind of physical activity from his life. He has all his meals brought to him and there is someone on hand to regularly flannel him down and 'manage' his sanitary needs. It's not the case that he never breaks a sweat - in fact he's quite clammy most of the time and sometimes reaching for the TV remote can make him dizzy. And, as he admits himself, his mental exercises are often exhausting.

"Today I've been visualising crossing the winning line and I'm bloody knackered," he said. "Tomorrow I'm going to be thinking hard about being presented with a complementary bottle of champagne after the race, and to be honest I'm really not looking forward to it at all."

PET POOP PLANNING PERMISSION

In its latest attempt to clear up the problem of dog mess, Nottingham City Council recently declared that any excrement of five inches or longer will require planning permission. Critics of the proposal have been quick to point out that this will deter no one but the most bureaucratically minded of offenders. Nevertheless, the council is pressing on regardless, in spite of the revelation that the policy has already spectacularly backfired after someone applied to convert a Labrador turd in Wollaton Street into a bungalow.



by Professor Ricky Stratocaster

Carly Simon

One of the most enduring mysteries in the history of music surrounds Carly Simon's *You're So Vain*. Since its release in 1972, Simon has been teasing us over the identity of the subject of the song, despite the fact that absolutely no one cares. After many years spent dropping increasingly unsubtle hints to an indifferent media, Simon finally revealed that the song was about Warren Mitchell, the celebrated British comedy actor who gained much acclaim for playing Alf Ramsey in the much loved sitcom *Death on the Nile*.

But this was not to be the end of the story. Realising that she could still milk it for publicity, Simon qualified her statement, claiming that only one verse concerned Mitchell, the rest being about an ever growing congregation of people who had managed to get on the wrong side of her. In recent years she has continued to scatter clues in the manner of a hysterical drunk hurling breadcrumbs at ducks, revealing that the song contains references to, amongst others, Mick Jagger, David Geffen, Telly Savalas, Sir John Gielgud, Keith Harris (and possibly Orville), Pat Sharp, some bloke who came round to clean out her gutters, an anonymous gentleman who once accidentally brushed against her in a hotel foyer and Hercule Poirot - who, despite being entirely fictional, still managed to piss her off for some as yet unexplained reason.

In fact, the only part of the song about which any mystery remains is the third word of the second line of the final verse. For those of you who don't yet know the piece by heart, that word is 'horse'. Simon has said that she will finally reveal the identity of the inspiration for this word next month, and while most of the planet has remained steadfastly blasé regarding the forthcoming disclosure there was, reportedly, much consternation down in the paddock at this year's Kentucky Derby.

From the desk of
Dr Adolphous Bongo
Family Medical Practitioner
(Knighthood pending)



Happy Clappers

One of the banes of my life, and there are many, is those perennially happy-go-lucky, cheerful types who seem to think that it's acceptable for them to blight other people's peace and quiet with their happy-clappy bubbly bullshit. Thankfully, most of the dismal clowns unwise enough to present themselves as patients at my surgery are miserable, depressed and thoroughly wretched - if not when they arrive, then certainly by the time they leave.

Good evening. My name is Doctor Adolphous Bongo and before I embark on the main topic of this article, I would like to thank everyone who has so far made a donation to my forthcoming sponsored skydive in support of the Royal Midchester Hospital Trust. I sincerely hope that your contributions are significant, and would remind you that you are perfectly at liberty to increase your pledged amounts at any time. In fact, it might be wise to do that now, just to be on the safe side.

To everyone who has not yet donated, and for the benefit of any law enforcement personnel who may be reading this, I should emphasise that sponsorship is entirely voluntary and any unfortunate consequences which may flow from your decision to withhold your support will have absolutely nothing to do with me.

But I digress - back to these insufferable jolly types. What you will not have realised is that persistent and apparently unshakable happiness is actually a disease. The reason that you will not have realised this is because you are not a doctor and 'Googling stuff on the web' is in no way a realistic substitute for spending seven years in medical school. Not that this is any guarantee of competence by itself. Some of my colleagues... No, scratch that, *most* of my colleagues... Actually, *all* of my colleagues seem to think that having a gallery of official-looking certificates on their walls gives them the right to be taken seriously, no matter what moronic and ridiculous theories they choose to advance. Ha! If they are so clever, how come they actually had to *work* for their certificates instead of just buying them off the internet like I did? Exactly.

The fact is, all my 'qualified' and 'accredited' colleagues seem to think that perpetual jollity can be cured. I know that it can't, which is why I have taken a different approach. This discovery was the result of a most extraordinary circumstance: a patient came to see me.

I am pleased to say that these days my reputation is such that interaction with the public is something that hardly ever happens, but on this occasion one of them somehow got through. It was a million to one chance that I would be at my surgery at all, but on this day the rain was battering against the windows, making it totally unsuitable for golf. I was sat in my consulting room, thumbing through a copy of *What Proctologist?* and just as I had started to scribble some obscure but anatomically correct observations in the margin of an article on anal cists by, appropriately enough, that fool Murchison, my receptionist had the infernal cheek to buzz me and tell me that there was someone waiting to see me.

I should have sacked the woman years ago. She's always been a trouble maker. Her eyes are too far apart and she stinks of gravy. I suggested to her that I was busy but her imbecilic bovine wit could not detect the subtle implication that she should tell this fellow to go away. The next thing I knew, she had inserted him forcibly into my consulting room and left the fellow standing there, blinking stupidly. He was no more alive to my feelings on his unwanted presence than my receptionist had been, and when I threw a vase at him he merely ducked, grinned and made some turgid and inconsequential remark about the weather.

He was one of 'them', you see. One of the bluff, chipper, hale and hearty sorts and my heart sank when he addressed me as 'doc' and enquired as to 'how it was hanging'. I don't speak the language myself, but I recognise enough of this 'common talk' to realise that it's rarely worth engaging in conversation with these people. When I asked him what was wrong he told me that he 'couldn't complain' and right then I could have happily disembowelled him with the solid silver letter opener that I keep dangerously close to me on the desk.

After persevering he finally told me that his problem was a slight ache in his left knee. I corrected him, telling him that his real problem was that he was an insufferable jerk, and the fool evidently thought I was joking as he erupted in guffaws of laughter and continued to splutter and burble for some time, whilst all the while my hand edged ever closer to the letter opener.

By the way, I wouldn't like this fascinating account to distract you from anything important - such as sponsoring someone who is planning a skydive. If you're worried that the Royal Midchester Hospital Trust isn't a worthy enough cause, please be assured that every penny you donate will go to someone who really wants it, and the fact that I am the sole trustee should in no way be a cause of concern.

Anyhow, back to this annoying fellow in my surgery. I believe it was when I hit him full in the face with an ashtray that the seeds of an idea first took

root. He reeled and looked momentarily stunned but rapidly recovered his sickening bonhomie. I believe he also made some feeble joke about the incident. I can't remember what it was, but you can trust me that the recollection of it would in no way enhance this account.

I followed up the ashtray attack with a rigorous and extended 'therapy' session in which I laid about him with whatever furniture came to hand in the hope that something, anything, would wipe that syrupy smile off his chubby face. If anything it seemed to make him happier. Perhaps he just thrived on the attention?

An investigation of this man's medical history revealed that he had suffered from this condition ever since he had been a boy. Abuse, tragedy and misfortune had dogged him his whole life, and through it all he had remained unnaturally cheerful. I finally managed to get rid of him by telling him that there was a sale on at Marks and Spencer's, but it was as a result of this encounter that I discovered a whole new and potentially award-winning medical syndrome: Bongo Chipperitis.

Bongo Chipperitis is often fatal. This is not directly attributable to the syndrome itself, but rather the degree of violence that is directed at the sufferer by others. Most sufferers of Bongo Chipperitis are beaten silly long before their third decade. Those who miraculously survive the repeated attacks spend the remainder of their lives in a persistent vegetative state and thankfully no longer exhibit the symptoms.

One other important detail: Bongo Chipperitis is incurable.

But while there is no hope for the sufferer, there is something that we can do for the *real* victims of the syndrome: their families, friends, colleagues and loved ones. That's why I have developed my specialist range of 'suppressants': devices designed to limit the impact of insufferably jovial people and give their associates a bit of peace and quiet. The range includes everything from ear protectors, goggles, noise cancellation devices and spit guards, to professionally-installed isolation chambers and padded rooms.

And in more desperate cases you can arrange to send your pain in the arse on a moderately priced and pleasingly alliterative 'Bongo Break Respite Retreat'. This will allow you to enjoy a few days of much-needed peace and quiet, safe in the knowledge that your irritating friend or relative is being kept busy rambling, mountain climbing, white water rafting or being pushed out of a plane without a parachute.

You see, there's a resolution for every problem so long as you're willing to think creatively.

Rationalising Britain's River Network

There are over eleven billion rivers in the British Isles*, and this figure doesn't include streams, brooks, creeks and tributaries. With such a staggering number of watercourses to manage, it's no wonder that the Government has appointed someone to look into the complex issue of rationalising the entirety of the UK's river network.

"The problem is that there are simply too many of them," says Dame Vera Trickle, the country's new Water Tsar. "It's inefficient, it's confusing and I'm afraid that in the eyes of many visitors to our country it makes us look rather wet."

Dame Vera has made no secret of her dislike for Britain's rivers and most people will remember her from her ultimately unsuccessful campaign to brick up the River Severn. In 1992 *The Mail on Sunday* ran a story that as a child she had fallen into a pond and been savagely mauled by a turbot. Although Dame Vera has never denied that this incident happened, many find it difficult to credit her repeated denials that the traumatic episode had any effect on her impartiality.

"My own personal feelings don't come into it," she maintains. "There is considerable independent research which clearly concludes that the over-abundance of rivers in this country confuses the fish and costs the taxpayer a fortune in bridges, tunnels and ferries.

"Not only that, the cumulative erosion is significantly diminishing large chunks of the UK. Did you know - and I am not making this up - in the last twenty years more than ten percent of Norfolk has been washed out to sea? Heaven knows where most of it has ended up. I know of whole villages that have woken up in the morning to find

themselves floating off the coast of Norway, and we've had a hell of a time arranging to get them airlifted back.

"No, we need to rapidly reduce the number of rivers; we also need to make them straighter and less higgledy-piggledy."

This issue of the 'higgledy-piggledyness' of rivers was also alluded to in a recent press release and seems to be purely a question of aesthetics - although Cory Splosh of the National Rivers Trust is convinced that the entire project is motivated by other reasons.

"It's a money-saving exercise," he says. "Same as every other government initiative. Rivers are very expensive to run, constantly needing to be greased in order to flow properly - not to mention the huge cost of waterproofing them. You didn't realise they needed waterproofing? Course they do, otherwise all the water would just soak into the ground, obviously. Then there's the anti-freeze.

"No, it's an costly business and the more money they can save on expensive waterways, the better, as far as they're concerned."

But could there be another way? Rivers have been part of the industrial and economic landscape for hundreds of years, providing both transport and power. There's no reason to suppose that their glory days are over. In fact, several companies are already taking an interest and one business in particular, a soft drinks manufacturer in Yorkshire, has put in a bid for a large section of the River Ouse. They say they want to fill it with Dandelion and Burdock and charge people £10 a go to canoe down it.

The River Ouse project might seem like a bizarre, impractical and extremely silly idea, but it follows on from the success of a similar idea by an American company which filled the Potomac with strawberry milkshake, an Australian concern which turned the

Murray River into the world's longest gravy train, and an innovative syndicate of investors who transformed Lake Superior into a giant ball pond.

**Estimate*



David Attenburger's **Natural World of Nature**

The Moroccan Dancing Mole

Dusk in the Serengeti and as the dusty orb of the sun touches the tops of distant hills, turning their peaks into burning pillars of red, a movement beneath the dry earth causes ripples and eddies in the red baked soil. Slowly a pink nose breaks through the hard ground, followed by strong claws, scratching away until the gap is wide enough for the animal to emerge. Its shabby coat is slick with grease and grime, and it half-heartedly tries to shake the dirt free as it sits panting and wheezing, trying its best to recover from its efforts.

This is the Moroccan Dancing Mole, though why it bears that name is lost in the mists of time. It has never been observed to dance, preferring to slump sullenly on the edge of dancefloors and just watch. The most common explanation is that the early Europeans who first identified it were simply attempting to be ironic.

This one is a long way from home: Morocco is roughly three thousand six hundred miles away as the crow flies - even longer as the mole digs. But journeys of such length, even if they're not intentional, are not unusual when you can't see where you're going.

Moles are as blind as bats, which, notwithstanding the curious subterranean habits of the stub-nosed tunnelling bat, is all that the two species have in common. But whereas bats can rely on sophisticated sonar techniques, a heightened sense of spatial awareness and sat-nav to find their way about, moles enjoy no such luxuries.

This one is no different. Three months ago it set out on what it thought would be a short trip to the bazaar in Marrakech to pick up a pint of milk, some crusty baps for the weekend and a Curly Wurly as a special treat. Right now it's sitting the middle of a baking

plain, surrounded by zebras and wondering where the off licence has gone.

It sniffs the air, cocks its head to one side listening for the slightest clue as to its whereabouts and shuffles round in a little circle. Night is quickly approaching, and with it the cool breeze. A new cast of predators will shortly take to the stage. This tiny, vulnerable creature, all alone in this strange and terrifying environment, doesn't know much, but it knows enough to realise that it should leave this place. With an almost world-weary sense of resignation, it crawls back into the earth, disappearing back into its dark netherworld to continue its journey and end up who knows where.

Clueless though the Moroccan Dancing Mole may be, it has nevertheless provided researchers with a valuable insight into a question that has puzzled them for some time: can moles swim? They have most certainly never been observed to. Go to any municipal swimming pool and you can be confident that you will never see a mole lazily gliding through the water on its back, or playfully splashing about in the shadows. You will see more than your fair share of stoats and weasels practising their front crawl in the main pool, vigorously towelling themselves off in the changing rooms or embarrassing themselves from the top diving board. But moles have always remained conspicuous by their absence.

And there is a very good reason why the ability to swim might be very important. Because navigation when you are almost blind is a practical impossibility for them, they are constantly driving their tunnels in directions that are simply not healthy for them. There are many reports of lost moles emerging on cliff faces and plummeting to their deaths, getting irretrievably entangled in the roots of trees or simply dashing their brains out by colliding head on with buried rocks. The law of averages surely dictates that they must quite frequently emerge underneath rivers and lakes. Why then have we no reports of their pitiful and misguided carcasses unhappily bubbling to the surface?

It took a team of researchers two years to find the answer, and when they did it turned out to be rather startling: they build airlocks.

Using a vast purpose-built landscape in which they could study the moles at their leisure, researchers observed exactly what

happened when the moles were in danger of tunnelling up through the bed of an artificial lake. The moment the mole detects the first few spots of moisture on the tip of its nose, it springs into action. Using materials that it scavenges from its immediate surroundings - sticks, rocks, discarded bean tins and old inner tubes - it fashions a remarkably sophisticated airlock mechanism, tightly bound together with worms to make it airtight.

Using this arrangement, the mole can pass in and out of the water without the risk of flooding its carefully excavated network of tunnels. And, as it turns out, they *can't* swim, but they *can* hold their breath and actually cut quite graceful figures as they stroll up and down, annoying the fish.

It seems then that water actually presents very few problems for the average mole, whether it's a rushing torrent sweeping through a North American ravine, a muggy swamp on the equator...

... or here in the Arctic, where the wind sweeps a fine cloud of powdered snow down icy slopes to settle on the surface of bright blue pools of crystal brine, ringed with frost.

For a moment all is still then a dark shape from below comes rushing upwards, bobbing violently to the surface and spitting a huge plume of brackish water into the air. This is our Moroccan Dancing Mole again, still no closer to the off licence. Maybe it should have turned left at that last boulder, it thinks as it glances round in dismay and shivers. It treads water for a little while, hoping that one of the locals will come along so that it can ask directions, but after a few short minutes it decides that it's just a bit too nippy round here. It'll catch its death if it hangs about any longer, so it fixes on a likely direction, takes a deep breath, puffs out its fat furry cheeks and disappears back below the surface with a wet plop.



Example of mole airlock made out of rocks... or it might just be some rocks

Man Blames European Space Agency for Domestic Eclipse

Next week sees the start of a legal action which could auger a new age for the space industry. In the case known as *Mr Alexander Cravat vs The European Space Agency*, the plaintiff, Mr Cravat, is seeking damages against the ESA because one of their satellites has been casting a permanent shadow over his house for the last twenty years.

Lurkersat is an artificial satellite that was launched in 1997 to conduct long term studies into the presence of icing sugar in the upper atmosphere. Not only was this mission expensive, frivolous and entirely pointless, it was also apparently necessary to place the satellite in a fixed geostationary orbit above number 22 High Street, Shepton Bassett, and Mr Cravat has experienced a permanent eclipse ever since.

In a recent interview Mr Cravat said that the last two decades had been 'absolute hell'. Lurkersat, he says, has been responsible for drastically lowering the value of the property, has directly led to the breakdown of his marriage and has had a catastrophic impact on his health, mainly as a result of vitamin D deficiency.

"The most heart-breaking thing is that I can't even enjoy my garden anymore," he told us. "I used to be quite a keen gardener. I even won prizes for my fruit and veg. But now my tomatoes are all soggy and my turnip has gone limp. It's very sad."

The European Space Agency has not responded to the complaint, nor has it issued a statement of any kind. They have given no indication that they are taking the action seriously and it seems unlikely that anyone from the organisation will be in attendance at the preliminary hearing on Tuesday.

Most legal experts concur that Mr Cravat stands very little chance of success unless he can prove that the ESA were negligent when deciding where to stick their satellite. Mr Cravat, on the other hand, believes that the issue of negligence doesn't enter into it. He is firmly of the opinion that the ESA *deliberately* placed their satellite in orbit over his house because he was rude to one of their staff during a booze run to Boulogne in 1991. Experts await the outcome of the case with interest.

Recent and Ongoing Legal Actions involving space hardware



Carlos Montalban vs The Pentagon

Mr Montalban claims that light glinting from an unidentified military satellite distracted him while he was playing golf and cost him the match.



Mrs Lillian Festoon vs the International Space Station

Mrs Festoon is suing for breach of privacy, claiming that astronauts in the space station can see right into her bedroom window when she is getting ready for bed.



Barry Fitch vs China National Space Administration

Mr Fitch is seeking damages of no less than twenty Australian dollars after a 'flange' from a Chinese satellite fell onto his ranch in Woomera and startled a sheep.



Wendy Miller vs NASA

Ms Miller, an amateur astronomer from Penzance, is taking action to persuade NASA to move one of their satellites slightly to the left because it is blocking her view of Venus.



Marvo P Zimmerman vs Tuvalu National Space Institute

Mr Zimmerman is suing the Tuvalu National Space Institute, claiming that they have a mothership currently in orbit around the moon which is regularly beaming psychic waves into his subconscious and implanting false memories. In their defence the Tuvalu National Space Institute claims that their most successful launch to date was a firework that they let off last New Year's Eve, and they have significant doubts that it achieved escape velocity.

No Offence

The Right Honourable David McGog, MP for Shepton Bassett, has once again been in the news after apparently insulting one of his parliamentary colleagues.

University of the Bleeding Obvious: Mr McGog, you were recently criticised for referring to one of your fellow MPs as a ‘contemptible sack of porcine discharge’. Do you now regret those comments?

McGog: Certainly I find it deeply regrettable that my comments were so horrendously misconstrued. I have made it quite clear, and I shall repeat myself again, that I did not in any way intend any offence by those words.

UBO: Really? It seems that the meaning is quite unambiguous. I doubt that there is any other interpretation you could place on the phrase you used.

McGog: I disagree. Oh, I can see how someone with a particular agenda might wilfully misinterpret what I said, once the words are taken out of context. But to most people I think my meaning is quite clear, you snivelling streak of piss.

UBO: I beg your pardon?

McGog: I was saying that it’s easy to misinterpret -

UBO: Never mind about that! You called me a snivelling streak of piss!

McGog: Ah yes, but in a nice way. I meant no offence, dickhead.

UBO: What do you mean you meant no offence? And I suppose calling me a dickhead is just a compliment as well, is it?

McGog: They’re just words. I don’t mean anything by them. Just let it go, shit-for-brains.

UBO: Who are you calling shit-for-brains?

McGog: Oh for crying out loud, it’s just a figure of speech. You people really wind me up. Here, see if this helps.

UBO: Urgghph! Hey, what did you do that for?

McGog: I didn’t do anything.

UBO: You just punched me in the face!

McGog: Calm down. That wasn’t a punch; that was just a friendly tap. I’m a very tactile person, you see.

UBO: But you hit me!

McGog: I didn't hit you. Look, this is hitting you.

UBO: Oooof!

McGog: Whereas this is just a playful slap.

UBO: Urrghoof!

McGog: You see, where's the problem in that? People get far too touchy about these kinds of things. For instance, if I was to kick you in the trouser department, like this.

UBO: Aaaaaarrrrrrgh!

McGog: You'd probably bleat about that being, what, assault maybe? I thought so. In reality, it's just my way of saying hello.

You see, I've noticed this sort of over-sensitivity creeping into our culture more and more. In my line of business there used to be a time where if you called a member of the opposition a flatulent bag of crap, or accused them of a sexual misdemeanour, or knifed them in an alleyway, they'd just shrug it off as part of the cut and thrust of politics... Are you all right down there?

UBO: Mmmmmmm.

McGog: You're not bothered about me standing on your head like this, are you?

UBO: Mmm.

McGog: Good. Well, nowadays of course, if you so much as obliquely imply someone might be a bit of a self-important prick, it's all lawsuits and newspaper articles and getting hauled over the coals by the party whip. And then you have to go on television and explain that you never actually meant what you said, even though everybody clearly heard you say it. Yawn! I think maybe we've lost something very important. What do you reckon?

UBO: ...

McGog: Eh?

UBO: ...

McGog: Yeah, that's right, you sleep it off. I'll see myself out shall I, you pox-ridden puddle of feculent slime? No offence, of course.

Night of the Womble

During her lifetime Elisabeth Beresford wrote some of the most beloved children's books of all time, but like many authors she also left a number of unfinished and unpublished works when she passed away. Amongst them was *Night of the Womble*, another instalment in the saga of the loveable inhabitants of Wimbledon Common. Now, finally, Womble fans can look forward to its imminent publication.

They may, however, be in for a bit of a shock. Unlike other books in the series, *Night of the Womble* has a very different tone. Believed to have been written around 1972-1973, the book tells a story of fear, mistrust and exploitation, in which Wombles across the land are rounded up, shackled and put into slavery by their human overlords. It's a harsh and nightmarish vision of the not-so-distant future, made all the more chilling as it could so easily become a reality.

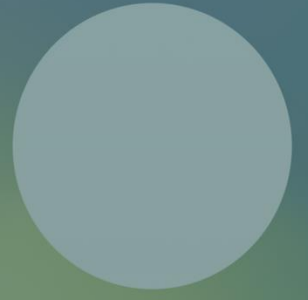
During the course of the story Great Uncle Bulgaria is torn apart by a pack of dogs, Bungo is hanged following a failed coup, Tobermory is executed by firing squad on a trumped-up charge of making good use of the things that he finds and Madame Cholet is sold to a brothel where she is forced to become a Sex Womble.

The ending of the book is depressingly downbeat, closing with scenes of sick and malnourished Wombles being dragged from their burrows and marched across the frozen wastes of Wimbledon Common to an uncertain and hopeless future. However, the trustees of Beresford's estate discovered notes for a sequel which planned to reverse the fate of the enslaved creatures. *Rise of the Wombles* would have been the story of the Womble uprising, depicting a vicious and bloody struggle from which our furry heroes ultimately win their freedom.

It's not known exactly why these books never saw the light of day, although it's easy to see why Beresford's publishers would have been uneasy about her taking the series in a new direction. It's probably the very same reason why we never got to read her take on the spy novel, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Womble*, the horrifying *Zombie Womble*, or the erotic romance *Fifty Shades of Orinoco*.



Night of the Womble



Elisabeth Beresford

Massive Paper Failure Strikes Government Office

by Barry Larynx

The Office of Circumlocution is facing the prospect of a devastating loss of data following a serious error in its paper filing systems. Although the Office has transferred many of its records to secure electronic systems, it still holds a great deal of information in old fashioned paper files. Last night, as a result of a massive stationery failure, those files went down.

"We want to reassure people that their personal information is safe and that we are doing everything possible to get our systems back online," said Rachel Spokes, a spokesperson. "We're looking at the possibility that some of our staples may be at fault, but we can't rule out the potential involvement of treasury tags."

The Office of Circumlocution has already tried rebooting its filing cabinets and now specialist stationers have been brought in, and are currently debugging the ring binders. However, despite the initial announcement, the word is that senior staff are extremely worried that most of the material will not be recoverable at all.

Prime Discovery

The largest prime number has been discovered by a cleaner at the University of Missouri. "I was mopping behind some sort of computer doohicky and it just fell out," said Mrs Sheila Rutherford, who has worked at the University for over ten years. "A great big long thing, it was, with loads of numbers in it and all sort of wriggly."

Thinking that she might have damaged something important, Mrs Rutherford at first tried to push the prime number back into the machine. When this proved impossible she asked one of the security staff, Kieran McCall, to help her and that was when she first realised the importance of her amazing discovery.

"Kieran 's lovely," Mrs Rutherford explained. "He usually helps me fill my bucket, so I asked if he'd come and give me a hand. When he saw this thing, he recognised what it was straight away. 'It's a prime number' he said. 'It's a what?' I said. 'A prime number,' he said. 'What's one of those?' I said. 'It's one of those things they've been looking for,' he said and then he told me that the University would probably be very grateful and that I'd likely get a reward or something. And I did, which is nice, because it means I can go and see my sister in Florida."

The number has yet to be verified as genuine, but University authorities say that this is just a formality and plans are being drawn up for it to feature in a special exhibition this spring. It will join a selection of hyperreal numbers that were found in an attic in Minnesota in 1982 and Fermat's last theorem which was famously discovered wedged down the back of a radiator in 1995, after being lost for more than 350 years.

The Delusion of J Henry Proudfoot

J Henry Proudfoot looks up from his muddy trench, his flapping jowls having momentarily tightened into a triumphant leer. This unanticipated burst of smugness has been occasioned by the discovery of a slender muddy object now clutched in his correspondingly muddy fist. “Ah ha!” he announces and clumsily holds it aloft, pinched between sausage fingers.

We don't know what to say.

“Pah!” he chuffs in response to our bemused expressions. Mumbling to himself, he stuffs the mystery article into the pocket of an anorak drawn so tightly around his midriff as to make him the dead spit of a well-lagged immersion heater. The gurgles and groans that he produces as he attempts to pull himself out of the ditch complete the impression and we fear he's in danger of blowing a gasket as he finally manages to get his arms over the edge. Wriggling and kicking, he succeeds in levering himself partway out, but gravity has a firm hold, the wet mud offers little purchase, and after a brief but promising surge he slowly slides back into his hole.

We lean over to see him at the bottom, squatting in a muddy puddle like a grumpy turd. “Well don't just stand there you cretinous rogues,” he snaps angrily. “Can you not see that I am in need of help? Kindly assist me to exit this filthy crater.” He stands up and immediately slips back onto his backside again with a splash and a grunt. On his second attempt he remains upright long enough for us to grab his arms and, with his legs pumping frantically, we haul him out and roll him onto the grass.

“That's better,” he says from his prostrate position, puffing and wheezing furiously. He twitches and shuffles and squirms in an attempt to get to his feet, but remains on his back like an upturned, shit-covered tortoise. We ask him if he needs any help and immediately regret it.

“No I do not need any help from cretins. I'm perfectly capable of standing on my own two feet.” He rocks from side to side and then, with a herculean final push, he flips onto his front. There is a further sequence of grunts and then, through a mouthful of grass, he screams, “Help me! Help me now!”

It's tempting to leave him there but then we'd be no closer to investigating his extraordinary claim. J Henry Proudfoot is an amateur archaeologist, which is one of many plausible explanations as to why he spends much of his time up to his neck in dirt. What is less credible is his claim that he is an ‘alien archaeologist’.

We help him to stand. This is no mean feat. J Henry Proudfoot is a gentleman of prestigious girth and just getting him up to ground level has already sapped much of our strength. Nonetheless, we persevere and soon our archaeologist is steadfastly perpendicular - if anyone who wobbles with the degree of amplitude and duration that Mr Proudfoot exhibits can ever be said to be ‘steadfastly’ anything.

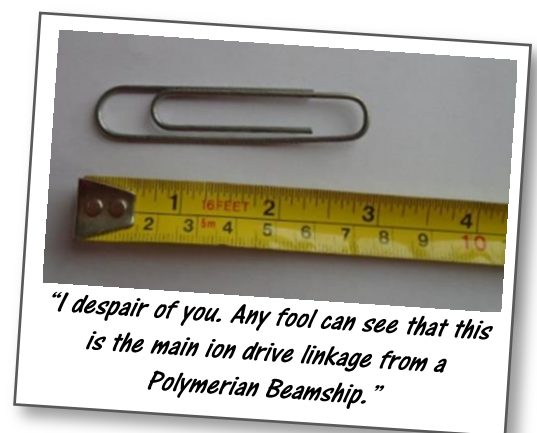
“That is much better,” he says gracelessly. “I was beginning to feel quite queasy down there. One moment longer and I should very probably have been sick on your shoes.”

Snorting laboriously, he removes his ‘find’ from his pocket and attempts to clean it by wiping it on his coat sleeve, succeeding only in producing a slightly cleaner sleeve.

“You see what this is?” he asks. It appears to be a small piece of copper pipe of a type used in domestic plumbing, but J Henry Proudfoot is not interested in our assessment. “Of course it is not, you dismal dullards. Hah! It is no surprise that your contemptible intellects should fail to deduce the true significance of this remarkable object. This is nothing less than the main drive feed of a Telemurian Hover Cruiser from the Praxis Nebula.”

We ask him how he can be so sure, since he does indeed appear to be supremely confident.

He pouts, stiffens and quivers slightly. “I should think I could recognise a component from a Telemurian Hover Cruiser when I see one. I have, after all, unearthed enough of them. But I can see that you’re embarrassed by your foolish display of ignorance. Please do not be. You are fortunate that I am here to instruct you.”



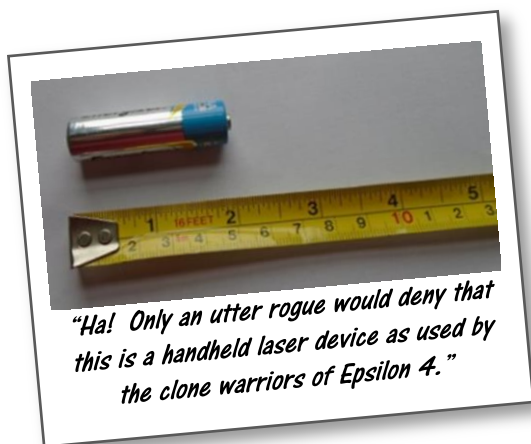
We should explain. When we say that J Henry Proudfoot is an ‘alien archaeologist’ we don’t mean that Mr Proudfoot himself is of extra-terrestrial origin, although it is tempting to think of him as something not of this Earth. We mean that he uncovers what he purports to be alien artefacts. With that in mind, you might wonder how Mr Proudfoot can be so confident of his claims. You might even, if you’re bold enough, cast a cynical gaze over the collection of rusted scrap and discarded knickknackery which our portly friend has amassed and request some proof.

Much good would it do you. Although this is our first meeting with J Henry Proudfoot in the flesh – and a substantial quantity of flesh it is - we have already corresponded with him at some length. He despises telephones, detests email but has, over the space of several months, sent us many lengthy discourses written in tiny script on oversized sheets of flipchart paper. In answer to our numerous questions he has submitted formulas, diagrams, maps and charts and, without question, this ever-growing wealth of material is entirely incomprehensible. What’s more, when we cast doubt on his assertions, his carefully annotated stream of nonsense rapidly morphs into a tirade of abuse in which we are called simpletons, philistines, cretins, nincompoops and, most frequently, rogues.

And, as we have discovered, he is no less charming at close quarters.

“But first, I think we are forgetting something, are we not?” he says, half-glaring at us. By ‘half-glaring’ we mean to say that he was glaring at us with one eye while the other was narrowed, an effect which was simultaneously comic and oddly chilling. “I’m hungry!” he snapped. “When you spoke to my secretary there was mention of food, was there not? Or do you contemptible rogues intend to keep me here, exposed to the elements, and watch me as I waste away before your very eyes? I shall say nothing more until I am fed.”

We know nothing of a ‘secretary’ but we did speak to Mr Proudfoot’s mother, who did indeed make us promise lunch. And so we obligingly drive J Henry Proudfoot to a nearby eatery and, true to his word, he says nothing until his main course and dessert are brought to him – he had insisted on these being served simultaneously in order to ‘maintain the balance of his delicate digestive system’.



“Well then,” he says through a mouthful of chips and trifle. “I am not entirely satisfied that you have brought me to the most salubrious venue in the district. Neither am I particularly impressed with the fare.” He pauses to shovel down a couple more forkfuls. “You may be scoundrels and rogues, but I recognise that you have made an effort, so I am willing to answer your questions, as long as you can avoid being overly asinine.”

We attempt to appear grateful, but we can’t help wincing and feel that our position is precarious. *Physically* precarious since J Henry Proudfoot, his grubby and stained anorak still zipped right up to his chin, has forced himself into a clearly inadequate gap between bench and table. Both are bolted to the floor but are creaking alarmingly, and we feel sure that something is bound to give at any moment.

Precairous also because we still want to know how he can be so sure of his assertion but we fear the inevitable backlash. We try to approach the question from another angle. Other people, we say – not us, of course – *other* less informed, less educated people might *question* his interpretation of his evidence, they might *challenge* the basis of his findings, they might even *ridicule* –

At this, Mr Proudfoot drops his fork which plummets straight down into his steak and kidney pie and stands there quivering and dripping with custard. “Ridicule,” he says, slowly and in a deep growl. “Ha!” He adds. Then “Ha Ha Ha!” before finally bursting forth with “Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” and we watch in some consternation as gravy escapes from his nose.

And just as suddenly he stops. “I have no time for the feeble minded, the lame brains and the criminally cretinous,” he sneers. “Trying to get such rabble to understand

the truth that lies before their eyes is a dismal and ultimately fruitless chore. Making my critics look imbecilic is too easy a task, I take no pleasure in it and I am content to allow them to wallow in their own ignorance.”

“So it doesn’t concern you that your theories are mocked, your analysis derided and you yourself are pilloried as a charlatan, a fantasist, a lunatic, a hare brain and a cretin?”

“Calumny!” he spurts, spitting peas and diced carrot like an overstuffed vegetable volcano.

“Slander! The impudent bleatings of lesser men who delude themselves with the baseless conviction that they are my rivals!” He gesticulates wildly with a knife caked in mashed potato and rhubarb crumble, fragments of which pepper nearby diners in his excitement.

“I shall not hear of it again!” he insists, bouncing frustratedly. We grip the table in consternation. “But,” he says, and he pauses, knife pointing towards us as once more he fixes us with that one, terrible narrowed eye. “I shall show you proof. Oh yes, such proof as you have never seen before. Waiter! Scoop my dinner into a bag – we shall be leaving immediately!”

Outside in the car park, J Henry Proudfoot makes an announcement. We must drive him to a secret location. We must leave immediately. And we must be blindfolded. We are about to receive a great honour, he assures us.

“What manner of incompetent Neanderthal wit can this be?” he erupts when we explain that we are unable to drive blindfolded. “I am in the presence intellectual amoebas, unable to carry out the very simplest of tasks! Must I do everything for you? Very well, *I shall drive.*”

We are not at all happy with this proposal but ultimately concede, allowing Mr Proudfoot to drive while we sit blindfolded in the back. It might have been better had we fallen in with his first suggestion. The journey, though brief, is characterised by churning gears, jerks and jolts and the periodic rending of metal. We terminate the trip with a thump and a sudden halt and remove our blindfolds to find that Mr Proudfoot has impaled a grassy bank with the front two feet of our car. It is at this point that Mr Proudfoot surprises us with the intelligence that he has never driven a vehicle before, which is a concern, but nowhere near as alarming as the discovery that he also has been blindfolded for the duration of the journey.

Awash with relief that we have arrived in one piece, even if our transport has not been so fortunate, we help Mr Proudfoot to lever himself out of the car. It seems to be rather a snug fit for him, and after too much cursing and too little friendly encouragement he emerges with all the vigour of a cork from a bottle, bowling us to



“My keen analytical brain instantly identified that these screws have reverse threads, proving that they hail from a universe of antimatter.”



"No, it is not just ordinary string, you damnable cretins! It is clearly 'space string'. Do not speak to me of this again."

the ground in much the same manner as would an elephant being fired from a cannon.

"What are you doing, you abominable reprobates?" he demands as he pins us to the earth. "Release me this instant or I shall have a heart attack!" We are unable to release him since it is the unshakable force of gravity which is holding him, not us, but since it is also threatening to flatten us in the process we struggle desperately to push the sweaty archaeologist aside.

"I am not accustomed to being manhandled in this way," he screams as we eventually manage to heave him clear and he goes rolling

down the embankment and splashes into a small stream. After getting our breath back, we go to retrieve him and find him damp and bedraggled and extremely annoyed.

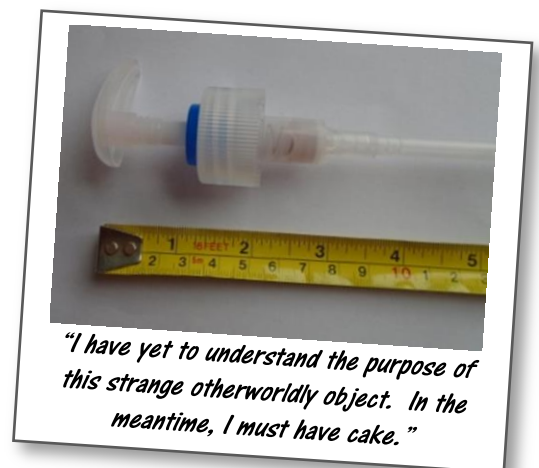
"I shall most probably sue for this," he says. "I have suffered a tremendous shock and I fear that I may have become infested with frogspawn. But we can let our respective legal representatives thrash that out in court – for now there are higher things to consider. Gentlemen, come this way."

He stomps off in the direction of a scrappy collection of bushes and trees that border the road. A muddy track leads into a makeshift layby littered with building debris, takeaway refuse and rusted domestic appliances.

"Gentlemen," he calls grandly over his shoulder as we hasten to catch up with him. He can move pretty quickly for a fat bloke. "Have you ever wondered how you might react if you came face to face with the impossible? How might you comprehend something so wondrous, so beyond your experience that you simply have no words with which to express your awe? My fellows, you are about to witness something truly extraordinary."

He stops suddenly and we slam into him. We note with interest that he wobbles for a full thirty seconds before he settles. "Have a care, you damnable rogues!" he snaps. Then, once he has stopped oscillating, he says in a low, ominous voice: "You must tell no one of what you see here today. No one! Do you hear?"

We hear and we concur.



"I have yet to understand the purpose of this strange otherworldly object. In the meantime, I must have cake."

“Very well,” he says. “What you are about to gaze upon has come from beyond the stars. The like of it has never been seen by human eyes before.”

He turns. Ahead of us there is a large blue plastic sheet caught up in some bushes. At first glance it blends in with all the other rubbish, but looking closer we see that it has been draped there deliberately in order to hide something. With great ceremony, Mr Proudfoot draws it aside.

“A Centurion Class Starfighter from the planet Epsilon Theta!” he proclaims.

We find ourselves looking at the burnt-out carcass of a Mark II Seat Ibiza.

“Can you comprehend the vastness of the cold interstellar void that this mighty battlecruiser had to cross in order to reach our tiny blue planet? What must they be like, those inscrutable alien intelligences that built this extraordinary vehicle? Striking out into the cosmos, daring to challenge the darkness, probing the infinite mysteries of creation, seeking mastery of the very universe itself! How can we, mere puny Earthlings, possibly comprehend...”

And so on, and so on. J Henry Proudfoot probably carries on in this vein for some time but we don't stick around to hear it. We leave the corpulent crackpot to it and return to our car to see if it can be salvaged.

And that is that. We hadn't really expected to find anything different - well of course not, it had been nonsense from the outset. But all the same, we couldn't help feeling just a tiny bit disappointed that we were unable to share in the fantasy. What's more, we sincerely hope that one day J Henry Proudfoot will make his mark upon the world.



“This alien tape measure has markings in Galactic Inches and Space Centimetres, which are almost, but not quite, equivalent to our Earth measurements. Now, be gone. I am tired and I find you irksome.”

“ **Good morning**, you're through to Whip-it-Round Parcel Delivery Services. How may I help? Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. If you give me the tracking number I'll see what information we have on your missing parcel...

...OK, I can see that we have a time and a date for despatch and... No, no delivery date. No, I can confirm that your parcel has not yet been delivered. Well yes, six weeks is rather a long time to wait. No, I'm afraid that the system can't tell me where it is at the moment. Please sir, calm down. No, I'm not able to tell you when it's likely to arrive, or even *if* it's going to arrive.

Please sir, could I ask you to moderate your language, otherwise I will be forced to terminate this call. I do appreciate that sir... well, no I wouldn't... of course, but then it's not *my* package, is it? The thing is, the reality is that it's really rather unlikely that it's going to turn up at all after all this time. It's most likely either lost or stolen.

Well, you say that but actually it happens rather more often than you might imagine. Think about it: a total stranger turns up in a van and you just hand over a valuable item without a second thought. What do you think is going to happen? He's going to have it away with your stuff, that's what's going to happen. Our drivers are very poorly paid so inevitably this sort of thing goes on all the time.

Quite right, compensation! I'd feel exactly the same way in your situation. Let's see what we can do for you... Ah... Now then, well yes, there *is* a bit of a problem. You see, you opted for the Standard Service. Oh no, nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all. It's an excellent service... Oh but I disagree, it really is excellent... Well, because the vans are so clean. And the drivers are really friendly. Well, I understand what you say, but for many of our customers that's enough, and the issue of whether their parcel actually gets to its destination is really a rather minor one. No, I stand by my description. No, there's no problem with the Standard Service; the problem is the insurance.

Yes, the insurance. Specifically: there isn't any. Now, if you'd gone with the Super Quality Red Ribbon Service, not only are the vans they use *really, really* clean, but your parcel would have been covered in the event of theft, loss, combustion, water damage and deliberate mutilation by members of our staff. Oh absolutely - you should take a tour of our

warehouse some time. They're kicking seven bells out of the stuff down there. Honestly, sometimes you walk in there and it's like a bombsite.

It certainly *is* unacceptable. I couldn't agree more. I feel sorry for the poor sod who has to go in and clean up after them, and sometimes all that noise puts me off my lunch. But listen to me talking about my problems when we should be discussing yours. In short, *vis-à-vis* your missing package, you don't have any insurance so you don't really have a claim.

Well yes, I see what you mean but the fact is that you don't have any insurance so you can't make a claim.

I don't doubt that, and indeed you might be right, but the bottom line is that you don't have any insurance so you can't make a claim.

Yes, yes, yes. Everything you say is perfectly reasonable but at the end of the day, all things considered, weighing up all the options, you don't have any insurance so - look must I keep saying this over and over again? Legally, once you have entrusted your parcel to us, we are entitled to steal it, break it, throw it in a hedge, leave it up a tree or pretty much do whatever the hell we want with it.

Unless, that is, you have the proper insurance. Which you don't. As we have established.

Well yes. I think that would probably be best. I don't blame you sir, I really don't. No, if I was in your position, I'd take my custom elsewhere as well. Not at all sir. Goodbye.

”



Doing the Lord's Work

Are you looking for a plastering job that's simply heavenly?

Then what you need is *Vicars on the Job*.

Vicars on the Job have been servicing the Almighty since the year dot, taking care of all His plastering, general maintenance and minor repairs as the Official Contractors for the Holy Trinity.

And now that same service is available to you!

"Yeah, you know that Jesus - we done his kitchen for him. Lovely job, it was. We put coving up, dead proper like. We even done him a breakfast bar that you could eat your last supper off. Very tidy."



Vicars on the Job

Mrs Womble Breaks a Record

The remarkable Mrs Womble takes issue with a publishing goliath.

Dear The Guinness Book of Records

Last year, for Christmas, I purchased for my nephew a copy of your publication, believing it to be the definitive record of the biggest, fastest, tallest, widest and greatest things in the world. My nephew, a young man of little imagination, was nevertheless impressed by its shiny cover, its colourful illustrations and some of the shorter words, more easily accessible to someone of his restricted intellect.

For many months he regaled us with fantastic facts and figures, whether we wanted to hear them or not, and although I confess that it became a little tiresome when I was constantly being told that Colin Beauchamp from Milwaukee has the world's tallest hat (sixteen feet, eleven inches) or that the Bolivian swamp frog can leap higher than the Guatemalan jumping snail (twenty-two feet), we nevertheless put up with the inconvenience for the sake of the boy's self-esteem.

All well and good, you might think. And indeed, on the strength of what I have just told you, your marketing division might well consider using my nephew as the poster boy for your next sales campaign. But not so fast there, Tonto.

Did you know that Theresa Mantell holds the record for eating more marshmallows inside a minute than anyone else in history? Yes? Well, that's what it says in your book, anyways. That's what my poor innocent fool of a nephew has been going around telling everyone, pleased as punch and bursting with juvenile pride.

Except, it's not true, is it? Not anymore. As that poor, trusting, pitiable chump was told in no uncertain terms when he stopped a stranger in the

street to inform them of the fact. Oh, he was expecting the tirade of abuse, the wild, panicky stare, the desperate cries for assistance. But there was one thing that he was most definitely not expecting: to be corrected.

Imagine the dismay, horror and shock of that feeble-minded child as he ran into the toilets in the shopping centre, a place he finds safe and secure from harm, though heaven knows why considering the people who hang about in there. He has a fascination with hand driers that goes beyond the normal inquisitiveness of a curious young mind and skirts the borders of religious idolatry.

Anyhow, that's quite another matter and in time I'm sure it will become the subject of another letter. As soon as I found out what had happened I collected my nephew and we marched off to our local Waterstones to have it out with the manager, whom I held ultimately responsible for selling me this monstrous manuscript of fabricated facts. By now it was well after midnight and it seems the management believe that the lateness of the hour is a sufficient pretext to close their outlets, entirely insensible of the possibility that disgruntled customers may wish to pay a visit in order to shout at their staff.

No matter. I am made of sterner stuff and resolved to wait, oblivious to the biting cold, the howling wind and the pathetic whimpering of my nephew, who kept imploring me to let him go home. The happy result of a few hours of minor hardship was that I was on hand to make my feelings known to the staff as they arrived in the morning. One by one they hurried past me and disappeared into the shop, wherein I observed them milling about with mounting anxiety as they witnessed me yelling and hammering on the glass as opening time drew near.

Nine o'clock struck and barely had they unbolted the door when I burst in, strode up to the counter and demanded to see who was in charge. The young man unfortunate enough to be standing before me at least had the

great good sense not to argue and immediately went to retrieve the manager, whom I understood had been cowering in the stock room.

"What do you call this?" I demanded as I slammed the book down and heard the unmistakable crack of bones in his left hand, which had been resting on the counter at the time. He whimpered slightly and bit his lip as he looked at me through watering eyes. "Did you know that Brian McCarthy of Donegal has the largest collection of dead slugs in the world?"

He looked puzzled and perplexed. "Is that a fact?" he asked uncertainly.

"No! No it isn't!" I cried. "A gentleman in Austria surpassed this record just two months ago. And yet, despite this fact being in all the newspapers and all over TV there's not a word of it in this book that I bought last Christmas."

"All the papers?" he asked, obviously struggling to get to grips with the import of the information I was trying to impart.

I leaned forward, pressing heavily on the disputed book and crunching the knuckles of the hand that still rested underneath. "You see that boy?" I said, gesturing over my shoulder. "It's a wonder he isn't scarred for life. The question is: what are you going to do about it?"

He winced as he tried to drag his hand free, but it was obvious that it wasn't going anywhere, so he quickly gave up. "Well," he began, "the new edition has just come out. I suppose -"

"At last!" I declared at this sudden breakthrough. "Finally, a half-decent stab at customer service." And so saying, I scooped up a fresh copy of the new edition and marched out of the shop, returning only to collect my nephew who was engrossed in colouring in a copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

You might wonder why, having apparently negotiated a satisfactory resolution, I am now writing to you, the publishers. Well, quite apart from the issue of compensation, which I am sure you will agree ought to be considerable in this case, I am seeking assurances that none of the information in your latest edition will become out of date. I am therefore urging you to order a ban on all record attempts for the foreseeable future, something which I am sure must be well within your power. Such an action would not only save my nephew from future embarrassment but is likely to safeguard the already quite severely damaged knuckles of the man in our local bookshop. I look forward to your snivelling reply.

Yours Faithfully

Mrs Edna Womble



The Battersea Wigs Home



Over 10,000 unwanted wigs were abandoned in the UK in the first six months of 2016 alone. That's not a fact that you'll find anywhere in the media, because it's not true, but it is true that the scale of the problem is massively underreported.

Wigs, toupees and hairpieces have never been more popular and most responsible owners know how to take care of them properly. But for a small yet significant minority, wigs are something to be bought and discarded on a whim. Often they are purchased as well-meaning but ultimately misguided Christmas presents, sent as novelty gifts or worn once as an experiment only to be abandoned in the face of ridicule and derision.

And because the wearing of a toupee is traditionally seen as something shameful, ridiculous and crass, their owners seek to dispose of them clandestinely, turning them out into the wild, lobbing them into skips, or simply slipping out into the night and tossing them casually under a bush.

That's not the sort of life for a healthy young wig.

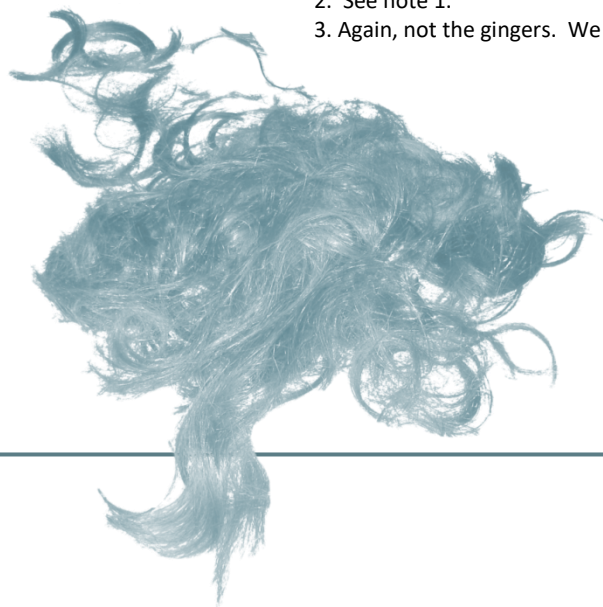
Is it any wonder that so many turn feral, roaming in packs, waylaying lonely pedestrians and stealing their crisps? It was exactly this sort of antisocial behaviour that led to the passing of the Dangerous Rugs Act in 1967, putting a bounty on stray wigs and encouraging armed vigilantes to run them to ground and shoot them through the stitching.

But here at the Battersea Wigs Home we don't believe that a healthy wig should ever be put down¹. For the last thirty years we have been working to save wigs of all kinds², rescuing them from abuse, substance misuse and prostitution. We care for them, nurture them and after a carefully devised programme of rehabilitation we place them with families who can finally give them the caring environment they crave.

Of course, all this costs money - we need to provide food and shelter, the wigs need constant care and grooming, and our CEO wants a new helicopter. This is where you can help: your donations are always welcome and will be gleefully received. And maybe you could even find a little room in your heart to help a wig in desperate need? After all, we believe that all our wigs deserve to find a loving home eventually³.

Notes

1. Unless it's ginger.
2. See note 1.
3. Again, not the gingers. We realise that there are limits.



The Hedgehog King

A Ghost Story for Christmas

You will have heard of Sherringham, the lawyer, I'm sure. Most people have. I know him but slightly, although I have been fortunate enough to hear this curious tale from his own lips. It concerns an episode from his personal history which took place in 1870 or thereabouts, long before he became the celebrated figure that he is today. At that time he had just come down from Cambridge and was due to be apprenticed to a firm of solicitors in Russell Square when he was struck down by some malady that quite set him aback for a space. So it was that, on the advice of his physician, he decided to spend some time in the country in order that he might recuperate.

I don't know the name of the village that he chose as his retreat.

Sherringham was vague upon the subject, perhaps

deliberately so, saying only

that it was a picturesque and moderately-sized settlement somewhere in Oxfordshire.

He described his delight upon

seeing the place for the first

time after alighting from the

train: the tumbledown cottages

that gathered around the village

green, the Saxon church with its

sturdy walls of flint and chert, the

road that wound around the buildings,

twisting and turning and folding back on

itself. There were few other distractions, just a grocery shop and a tavern with

the unusual designation of The Hedgehog King, an establishment which we will

visit later in this account. For now we must be content with Sherringham's first

impressions, which were favourable since he owns that once the locomotive that

had brought him to this idyll had steamed out of earshot, a silence descended

quite unlike anything he had known before, punctuated only with a little

birdsong and the soft breath of the wind.

The house in which Sherringham had arranged to stay was a former manor

whose owners had transformed it into a guesthouse for paying customers. It had

been recommended to him by, I believe, a school friend and was about a mile

from the village. He had hoped there might have been a dog cart on hand to

convey him thence, but there was no such transport to be had and so he had no

choice but to walk. This inconvenience was one that he very quickly met with



gratitude, for it afforded him the opportunity of a pleasant stroll and very soon he began to feel reinvigorated by his surroundings.

His path took him along a neat little coach road which looped around the perimeter of an ancient wood of alder, oak and ash. Before him, and to the right, he had a near uninterrupted view of rolling farmland, dotted here and there with an occasional building or copse, climbing up to a ridge in the far distance. The afternoon sun was bright, though not warm, and so low in the winter sky that it induced him to squint.

Sherringham was delighted with all of it, and became all the more overjoyed when his destination came in sight. It was, he reports, a most curious building. To this day he famously has a passion for matters architectural - you may have read his monograph on the subject - so you can imagine his elation at finding that his home for the week was to be a manor house built on the model of many similar seventeenth century buildings, but boasting the most extraordinary agglomeration of alterations and additions. At some stage in its history, some person of the most astonishing audacity and imagination had done their level best to transform the place into a ramshackle simulacrum of a medieval castle. It was fabricated on a much smaller scale, of course, and it was certainly not a fortification in any functioning sense: the turret that teetered over the west wing most probably concealed a chimney stack and it was unlikely that there was easy access to the battlements that crowned the façade. It was a folly but, in its own way, a charming one and Sherringham couldn't help but beam in satisfaction as he tromped up the gravel driveway.

He says nothing of how he passed the rest of the day, although he speaks with some affection of the highly individual nature of the house and its furnishings. It isn't necessary to dwell upon his observations here, save to mention one detail whose significance I will make plain in a later portion of this story: a suit of armour that stood in the main hall, in front of a portrait of a figure wearing the same. It struck him quite powerfully upon his arrival and he had the opportunity to examine it more closely the following morning before he went in to breakfast.

Never having professed to be an expert in such matters, Sherringham freely admits that he had no idea of its antiquity, but he estimated from its general state of dilapidation that it was medieval rather than a more modern reproduction. He was wrong in this regard, although the error is understandable since the metal plates were buckled and pitted with tiny indentations, like pinpricks. It had been posed in such a way that one leg was slightly raised and the right arm was held aloft. A shield was strapped to the other limb and was held across the body, and this too was similarly distressed.

The entire tableau was evidently meant to closely approximate the attitude of the figure in the picture behind. This was a portrait of a heavily whiskered gentleman of about fifty, wearing this very suit of armour prior to it having sustained damage. Sherringham observed that the upstretched arm in the portrait wielded a sword, a highly decorated weapon with an ornate hilt and

emerald pommel, but such a magnificent object was disappointingly absent from the display.

He would have to make every effort to find out more during the course of his stay, he decided, but for now his immediate concern dealt with the subject of breakfast. As far as he was aware, there were only two other people staying in the house at the time. One was a young woman whom he had noticed sketching in the garden the previous day. The other was somewhat plump middle-aged man called Mr Barnaby, a commercial traveller who supplied local estates. Barnaby was the only other occupant in the breakfast room as he entered, but he was absorbed in the study of a catalogue of agricultural equipment and so Sherringham sat in silence and contemplated how he might spend his day. It didn't take him too long to decide upon his itinerary: he was keen to explore the area and he wasn't so frail that he would permit the thick bands of early morning mist to dissuade him. On completing his meal he went to his room, dug out his thick coat, pulled on a stout pair of boots and set out to enjoy the countryside.

The morning was spent profitably in wandering along footpaths and farm tracks, allowing himself to be guided by impulse and caprice. By midday he had found his way to the ridge that he had noticed upon his arrival, which feature revealed itself to be an old trackway. He followed its course until it delivered him to the remnants of a Neolithic hill fort and from here he had an excellent view of his surroundings. Looking down he could trace the line of the railway as it bisected the landscape, as a knife might score a piece of paper. Then there was the village and beside it the woodland, stretching west and south west until it touched the horizon. Before it, curving around its edge in an almost complete horseshoe, was the coach road and it occurred to him that had he cut through the woods the previous day he might have halved the distance between the village and the manor.

By this time the sun had finally emerged to boil away the morning mists, although damp wreaths still hung around in places, particularly over the top of the dark mass of trees. Sherringham gave an involuntary shudder and quickly turned his thoughts to the subject of lunch. He reasonably supposed that something might be obtained at the tavern in the village and so, taking a sighting on the church tower, he started down the hill.

There were just two other patrons enjoying the hospitality of The Hedgehog King when he arrived, further enhancing the impression that the village was almost deserted. The landlord was a wiry and sallow gentleman, somewhat withdrawn in comparison with most others in his profession, but he was not



unhospitable and informed Sherringham that he could provide him with a light collation of bread and meat. Sherringham took a seat beside the fire while he waited for it to be brought to him, feeling tired but contented by the exertions of the morning. The tavern was small but discerningly appointed, with miniatures and brasses decorating its whitewashed walls. By far the most striking aspect was the fireplace, whose black mahogany surround was ornamented with carvings: long sinuous trunks ran upwards and curled round in spirals in stylised depictions of trees, branches and foliage; folded up within them were representations of numerous small round creatures. Sherringham squinted in the hope of identifying them and when recognition finally struck he could not help but give his discovery voice.

“Good grief, those things are hedgehogs!”

“Yes sir,” the landlord confirmed as he arrived with Sherringham’s meal. “I’m told that the design is unique in all of England, as is the name of this house.”

“Yes, yes - The Hedgehog King!” Sherringham enthused. “I feel sure there should be some extraordinary tale behind it. You must tell me.”

The landlord appeared uncomfortable upon receiving this request but he reluctantly acquiesced. “I’m not so sure about extraordinary,” he said ruefully. “A lot of silliness, it is. There’s a local tradition that the Hedgehog King has dominion over Collier’s Wood and suffers no man to set foot there after dark.”

“Collier’s Wood - the wood on the edge of the village?”

“Indeed sir,” the landlord confirmed. “And such a d----d lot of nonsense I never did hear. All the invention of Sir Ronald, I’m sure.”

“Sir Ronald?”

“Sir Ronald Collier. Lord of the Manor some hundred and fifty years ago. You’re staying at the manor, I take it? Yes, well, by all accounts that was just your regular country house before Sir Ronald took up residence, and did his best to turn it into a castle afore gallivanting around in a tin suit like something left over from the Battle of Agincourt.”

“Quite! I’ve seen his portrait. So, a regular Don Quixote then?”

The landlord shrugged. “Well, I’m sure I don’t know anything about your Mr Quixote, but Sir Ronald certainly had a bee in his bonnet about something. He insisted that there was this thing living in the woods, the Hedgehog King he said, and he pledged to meet it in mortal combat and see that the creature was vanquished. And when he did - or leastways, when he *said* he did - he commissioned this here carving and renamed this tavern in honour of the event.”

Sherringham studied the carvings again. He could see why the landlord might be embarrassed by the tale. “You don’t approve of this little bit of whimsy?”

“Well, I don’t reckon it does us any favours. Makes us out to be superstitious yokels to visitors like yourself. If I had my way I’d tear all this out and we’d make a bonfire of it. *If* I had my way. Unfortunately, this tavern and nigh on half the village is still owned by the Collier family, so my hands are tied.”

Having given his opinion, the landlord left Sherrigham to his lunch, which, by all accounts must have been a good one for afterwards he drowsily settled back into his chair and stared contentedly into the fire. The warmth, combined with the hypnotic flicker of the flames, did its work and he began to feel his eyelids drooping. He dozed for a little while but before sleep took hold of him completely he quite unexpectedly became fully alert to the feeling that he was being watched. He flinched, startled from his reverie, and then leaned forward towards the fire as the glowing coals crackled and spat. The temperature had dropped, or so it seemed to him, and there was a sensation as if of ice flooding through his body. Here was something horrible, something nameless and primordial; he felt it, but didn't see it; knew it, but it was unknown. The dancing halo of light cast around the fireplace seemed to make the carvings come to life, shapes twisting and cavorting on the edge of his vision. But it was the heart of the fire that drew his gaze. He leaned in closer, closer, his breath held, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. Then he saw it - just for a moment. His mouth fell open in a silent, gaping yawn as he fixed upon two eyes deep amongst the embers, red and blazing and watching him with an unnerving intensity.

He sat back with a cry and then the apparition was gone. Something terrible must have told upon his face, for the landlord, who had come to collect his plate, was full of concern.

"Is everything all right sir?"

"What? Yes, yes, I think... Yes absolutely fine I - " Sherrigham ran a hand over his face. "I've not been too well just lately; not quite myself." He got shakily to his feet, announcing that fresh air would no doubt do him the world of good, then after settling his bill he made for the door.

"Perhaps we'll see you tonight at the concert?" the landlord asked, and in answer to Sherrigham's confused expression he added: "In the church - the local choir give a recital every month. It's very popular."

Sherrigham doesn't recollect his response. Clearly he was still feeling the effects of his recent illness and his overriding thought was to get outside. Once he was out in the open the confusion began to pass, but he felt frail and uneasy. A few hours' sleep might be what was needed and so he started to walk back to the manor with all haste. As the coach road delivered him to the outskirts of the village he noticed for the first time a footpath that departed from the road and trailed into the woods. Might this be the shortcut that he felt sure must exist? Should he



chance it? Undecided, he stood for a while, looking along the path as it plunged into the dark canopy of trees and once again he shivered: a faded echo of the feeling that had come over him as he had sat beside the fire.

No, he would not. He told himself that he could not be certain that it wouldn't lead him elsewhere and although he noted a corresponding path emerging from the woods as he reached the manor, he could not regret his decision. There had been something unsettling about those woods; something that had quickened his step as he had paced along the road. He had felt, imagined perhaps, that something had been watching him from the gloom, a thousand tiny eyes hidden amongst the leaves and branches, and it was with some relief that he left the road and hurried up the drive to his lodgings.

He felt much better after he had rested. There was still some vestige of unease, as though he was affected by the nebulous sensations of a half-remembered dream. Could he recollect being lost in the midst of an endless woodland, panic rising as he became conscious of many, many tiny red eyes watching him from the blackness? Could he remember running and running and running, and all the while something malevolent and indistinct always and forever at his heels? He shook the sensations clear, dismissed these thoughts from his head and by the time he went down to dinner he recalled nothing of them.

Afterwards, he once more paused before the suit of armour and the portrait that he now knew to be Sir Ronald Collier. It was easy to see that the artist had captured something wild and unsettling about his subject. Perhaps it was the way those eyes glared out with something halfway between fear and manic zeal. A man haunted by his delusions, perhaps?

"What do you make of him?" asked a voice at his elbow.

Sherringham turned to find the young lady whom he had espied sketching in the gardens the day before. This was Miss Banks: he had briefly been introduced to her at dinner, and now she furnished him with the additional information that she was a distant relation of the Collier family. Anxious to avoid any allusions to insanity that might run in her line, Sherringham evaded the question and substituted it with one of his own. "You're an artist?" he asked, pointing to the sketchpad in her hand.

"Only in a strictly amateur sense," she admitted. "I thought I might soak up some atmosphere. And of course, I'm curious about *him*." Sherringham followed her gaze to the picture and felt it would be safe to reveal what he had learnt about Sir Ronald from the landlord at The Hedgehog King. "You're lucky to have found out so much," she said once he had concluded his account. "They're not proud of him. Of course, you don't believe the tales?"

Sherringham was slightly taken off guard by her manner. She was challenging him to believe something that was absolutely ludicrous and she smiled at his puzzled silence. "Look at the armour, Mr Sherringham. What do you think caused that damage?" Sherringham took a closer look at the battered

armour, pockmarked with little dents. Could those marks be, no, surely not... could they have been made by tiny spines?

“They call them pricklemice,” Miss Banks said. “Local dialect word for hedgehogs. Charming, don’t you think?” When Sherringham looked back she was gone.

Sherringham had no wish to return to his room and, being at a loose end, he was reminded of the invitation to the choir recital and decided that he might as well look in. He was glad that he did as it afforded him the opportunity to see the village in a different light, for the church was quite packed and it happily dispelled the impression that the entire place had been abandoned. After the concert he found himself falling into conversation with a number of the locals and in consequence it was late by the time that he left. So late, in fact, that he considered whether to seek a room at the tavern rather than walk back to the manor, but ultimately he dismissed the idea. After all, it wasn’t far. In fact, the journey might take no time at all if he cut through the woods. Some hours had passed since the sun had gone down but there was a bright moon to light his way, and as he came upon the point where the woodland path met the road he saw that it presented itself as broad and well defined. Any reticence to explore that he may have felt previously had now well and truly dissipated and before very long the familiar coach road was out of sight behind him.

The going seemed easy enough at first: the ground was firm and dry, and bright columns of moonlight struck down through the canopy to guide him, but gradually he began to feel uneasy. There was something uncomfortable in the silence. When he stopped to listen, all he could hear was a soft whispering from above as the wind played through the tops of the trees. Over this, the thunderous sound of his own passage as he rustled through the fallen leaves was hideously conspicuous. He began to fancy that from the dark spaces that the moonlight couldn’t touch he was being watched by a thousand tiny eyes which tracked his journey, like something from a half-remembered dream.

He hastened onwards, ever more eager to emerge at his destination, but the path grew narrower and became more overgrown until finally it split in two and offered Sherringham an unlooked for choice. The left hand fork was broader and more clearly marked but it seemed to rise upwards, which indicated that it was likely to lead deeper into the woods. The other way was the more obvious option as it continued on in a more or less straight line, but it was dark, overgrown and looked barely used.

As he paused to consider, Sherringham was startled by a sharp blow to his shoulder from something which fell from above, and he cried out more in alarm than in pain. Wheeling around he saw something small and round shuffling off into the undergrowth. He put his hand beneath his shirt where the object had struck and when he pulled it away he could see that it was covered with tiny spots of blood; little red pinpricks arranged in a regular pattern. As he wondered at this he shuddered at the sound of another falling object close by. This time he saw what it was before it could hide: a hedgehog which can only have fallen from

the branches above him. Fallen, or *jumped*. An absurd vision of the creature leaping from the treetops passed through his mind, but he hardly had any time to consider this before he detected the sounds of further falls all around him. One creature struck him aside his head and he cried out. It was tangled in his hair, hissing and squealing, and frantically he tore it free, hurled it aside and began to run, instinctively taking the narrow right hand path. All the while he could hear the continued sounds of the plummeting animals in his wake, hurling themselves from the trees. He was outdistancing them, thankfully, but then he found his way blocked by a tangle of thick bushes.

Sherringham says that at that moment he felt terror like nothing he had ever experienced before. He knew he was trapped, that there was no way back, and the only escape was to desperately fight his way through the obstacle. The branches tore at his clothes, clawed at his skin as if they were alive, holding him down, smothering him in clammy leaves and cobwebs. Then, he knew not how, he burst though into a clearing, where he slumped down upon the earth, exhausted.

All he heard as he sat there was the thumping of the blood in his ears and his own laboured breathing, and he recalls that for some indeterminate time he did not care to move. His energies were spent, but eventually, sluggishly, he regained his senses and an interest in his immediate surroundings. The noise of falling animals seemed to be absent but now he could hear something new: a kind of soft, gentle scratching or ticking noise. Before him, in the centre of the clearing, illuminated by a shaft of silver as if it stood in a spotlight, was an oak tree. It was very old and largely hollow and Sherringham fancied that he could make out a faint red glow emanating from a void in its trunk.

After all that he had just experienced, Sherringham didn't know how he had the nerve to investigate the phenomenon, but he somehow felt drawn to it. He climbed to his feet and tentatively approached, leaning into the hole in the trunk and peering down into the dark cavity. There was something glinting, something only just within reach. He manoeuvred so that he could get his arm down inside and the tips of his fingers brushed the dry and crumbling interior of the trunk until they closed on a metal object. He adjusted his position again, got



a firm grip and pulled. It wouldn't move at first, as if it was being held by something that was loathe to give it up. After one more heave he felt it working loose, and then with gathering momentum he pulled it free.

It was a sword and one that was entirely familiar to Sherringham for he had seen it before. The ornately decorated hilt, the emerald pommel - he knew with absolute certainty that this was Sir Ronald Collier's weapon as depicted in the portrait. But there was also something else: the red glow issuing up from the hollow trunk of the tree was brighter now. He craned into the hole once more and then with a sudden cry he fell back. He had seen an eye: a single, red glowing eye deep within the hollow oak, glaring like a red hot coal. And it had been *looking at him*.

He had no time to consider this vision, since from nowhere there erupted a rising storm of chattering, scratching and chirping. There was movement all around as every branch, every bough seemed suddenly fully of spiny little creatures. They ran down every trunk, coursed through the fallen leaves in streams to converge on a spot in the centre of the clearing. Sherringham took a stumbling step backwards as he watched a growing mound of creatures running over each other, twisting, turning and somehow *merging* into a single mass. Still they came, more and ever more of them, running together until some hideous and unnatural entity began to form before him. It was a solid, spiky, malignant orb with one single demonic red eye glowing in its centre, growing, and growing, and growing. *The Hedgehog King!* Sherringham turned and he ran.

What Sherringham recollects of his terrified flight is, by his own admission, hazy and confused. He is not aware that he was in control of his own actions; rather he was in the grip of some primordial instinct to escape. He didn't look back but was aware that the creature was behind him. He heard it rolling through the woodland, crushing and scattering everything in its path and letting nothing impede its journey. There was a moment, Sherringham acknowledges, when he feared that he would never leave Collier's Wood and the instant that he caught sight of the road beyond the trees is one that he still counts as one of the most joyous revelations of his life. Upon gaining the protection of the highway - for instinctively he knew that here he would be safe - he collapsed and remembers little else.

Sherringham later learnt how the staff at the manor had discovered him and put him to bed, where he had slept on until midday. It was Mr Barnaby who woke him by paying him a visit in order to reassure himself as to Sherringham's state of health. Barnaby had been amongst those who had helped him inside and related how shocked everyone had been to have discovered him in such distress. The tattered and torn appearance of his clothing suggested that he had been set upon by someone and the staff were anxious to know if they should call for the local constable.

"Everyone is also rather curious about that?" Barnaby added, pointing to the corner of the room. Sherringham sat up and looked to where Sir Ronald's sword

was lying across a chair. For a moment the only thing he could see was that single burning red eye.

“It has to go back!” he said.

Barnaby was startled at the ferocity with which Sherringham spoke. “My dear fellow, whatever is going on?”

“Please, it must go back,” Sherringham insisted, and as he looked at Barnaby the latter gentleman flinched for there must have been something of the same wild look in his eye that was present in Sir Ronald’s portrait. “Mr Barnaby, I wonder if you would do me a very great favour, although I realise that I have no right to ask it.” Sherringham then told him as much as he was able about the events of the previous night, and of his conviction that the sword must go back whence it came, and that it should do so as soon as possible. Mr Barnaby was rightly taken aback when Sherringham asked him to perform this service, but nevertheless agreed. Sherringham was relieved at his reply and some of the tenseness seemed to leave him instantly. “But mark you do it soon,” he warned, “before darkness falls. And mark you thrust it deep into the heart of that old oak.”

There ended Sherringham’s story. He admits that there has never been any corroboration for his odd tale and he is quite prepared to accept that the entire episode might have been an hallucination occasioned by fatigue and stress, but he says there are still times when he dreams of that one horrible red eye.

Whereas this may be the end of Sherringham’s account there is a sequel that came to me quite recently. There is a young man by the name of Barnaby who has lately been admitted to my club, and who tells a story concerning something that happened to his uncle during his time as a commercial traveller in and around Oxfordshire. Most of this narrative I’m sure I need not relate since it will already be familiar to you, but it does add one further detail. Mr Barnaby, it seems, followed Sherringham’s directions most faithfully. He had no difficulty identifying the clearing and the oak tree from the description he had been given, and he carried out his instructions most faithfully, thrusting the sword deep into the hollow cavity as far as it would go. He has, according to his nephew, never made any comment as to the veracity of Sherringham’s tale, but he does say this: upon plunging that sword down through the dry bark, he heard, most distinctly, a tiny heartfelt squeak.

Signs of the Times

In what has turned out to be a surprisingly successful move, Kent Constabulary has reported a twenty percent reduction in serious crime as a result of their latest campaign.

“For some time now police forces have been experimenting with different promotional approaches to dealing with crime,” said Chief Inspector Dick Barton. “For instance, three years ago we launched our ‘Softly Softly’ campaign in which we attempted to gently persuade people not to commit felonies, using posters with catchy slogans such as ‘Hey sonny, you don’t really want to nick that car, do you?’, ‘Come on now lad, turn it in’ and ‘Now, now - don’t be a murderer’. These met with a lukewarm reaction.

“Likewise, our recent rebranding exercise was equally disappointing. No one responded positively when we officially started calling ourselves ‘Old Bill’, and our brief experiments with ‘The Fuzz’, ‘Da Force’ and ‘Kent Constabulary Five-o’ were judged to have undermined our authority.”

Nonetheless, Chief Inspector Barton believes that their latest scheme has reversed these failures. The idea came about when police bosses noticed how homeowners frequently enjoyed positive results with tersely worded ‘No Parking’ signs erected outside their homes. Despite having no legal force and often being hideously misspelt, such notices have been remarkably effective. Could the same approach be used to deter criminal activity?

Over the last few months Kent Constabulary Five-o has been erecting signs in various locations with stark messages like ‘No Mugging’ and ‘No Breaking and Entering’.

“It’s all down to having a very clear, authoritative and unequivocal message,” explained Chief Inspector Barton. “Combined with a serious-looking font, it sends out a powerful signal.”

Curiously, the force has found that the more specific the instruction, the more readily it is observed. So, for example, a sign saying ‘No Mugging’ will certainly have an impact, but nowhere near as much as one saying ‘No Mugging Between 6PM and 6AM’.

“It works a treat,” said the Chief Inspector. “The only downside is that it does rather give the impression that it’s a bit of a free for all during the hours of daylight.”

**NO MURDERING
ON DOUBLE YELLOW LINES**

**NO ASSAULT
ON
ALTERNATE
TUESDAYS**



**No unauthorised
muggings beyond
this point**

**MAJOR FINANCIAL
FRAUD IS STRICTLY
PROHIBITED ON
THIS HUMPBACK
BRIDGE**

**NO ARSON
BETWEEN
6PM-6AM**

*Hey!
Don't
steal our
shit!*

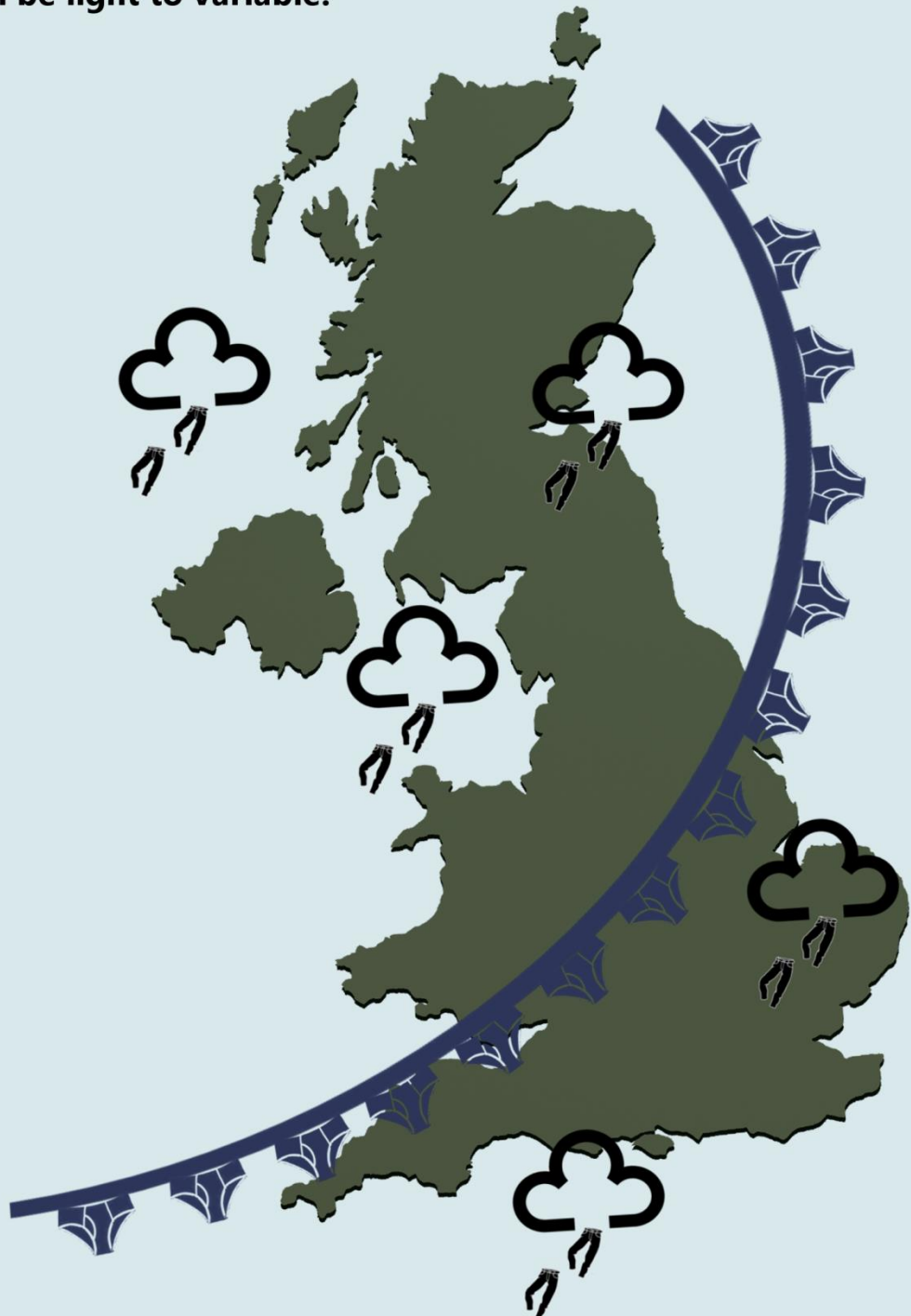
BURGLARY

FOR PERMIT HOLDERS ONLY

And now the long range trouser forecast for the UK.

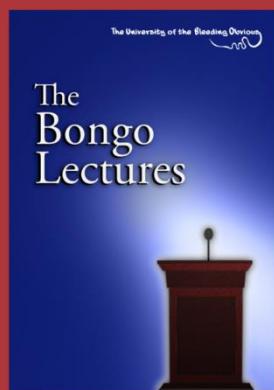
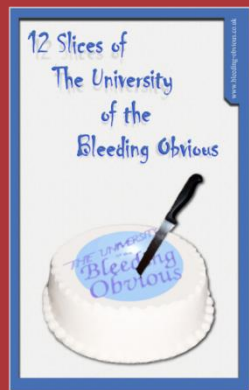
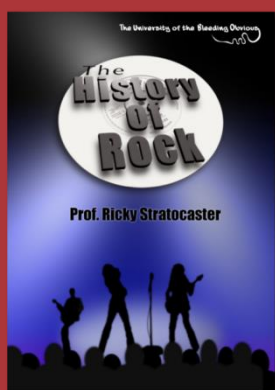
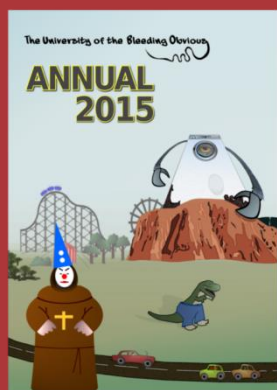
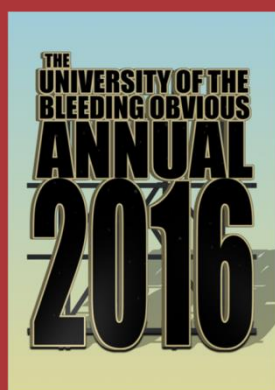
A scattering of corduroys overnight will give way to heavy pants tomorrow. Coastal areas may experience bloomers with occasional dungarees towards the evening. These should clear by the end of the week and Friday will bring chinos and breeches for most parts, although occasional jeans cannot be ruled out. This will likely last until Sunday when a band of knickers sweeping in from the North Atlantic promises torrential slacks throughout most of next week.

Jodhpurs will be light to variable.



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Chinchilla Awareness Week

This week is Chinchilla Awareness week. The chinchilla in question is called Boris and he's sitting just outside the main entrance of Asda in Swansea. We're asking shoppers this week to please be aware of him. Thank you.



