DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

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My encounter with Justin Baldoni

By Andrew Billen

INSIDE TIMES2



Christmas with my single mother

Young drivers break the law to keep insurance costs down

Andrew Ellson
Consumer Affairs Correspondent

Nearly one in five young motorists are on the road illegally as the cost of car insurance rises to record levels.

Research has found that 21 per cent of male drivers aged 17 to 25 and 15 per cent of female drivers are committing insurance fraud by falsely claiming that they are not the main driver on their policy. Known as fronting, the practice is a criminal offence and anyone caught could face a driving ban, having their car seized or being issued with an unlimited fine.

Young drivers face the highest insurance costs of any age group because they are the most likely to have an accident. The average annual cost of cover for a 17-year-old is now £2,728, according to Confused.com, the price comparison website. For those aged 18-21 the figure is £2,350 — 10 per cent of the average income of this age group.

By comparison, the average driver aged 45 pays £814. This price differential has encouraged the parents of some young motorists to claim that they are the main driver of their child's car and the child is just added to the policy as a named driver. Misrepresenting details about the driver's age or claims history, as well as driving on a fronted policy, can lead to the insurance being invalidated and claims being denied.

Katriona Cunningham, a senior underwriting manager at Aviva, which conducted the study, said: "While it may be tempting for a few young drivers to try to be clever with the truth, it's important that they understand the consequences of driving without adequate insurance."

A growing number of young people are also choosing to drive without any insurance at all. Last year a record 6,316 drivers aged between 17 and 20 were convicted of the offence — a 117 per cent jump from 2021.

Fifth of the forces can't be relied on to fight

Thousands of regulars medically unfit or limited

Larisa Brown Defence Editor

More than 10,000 serving sailors, soldiers and air crew cannot go to war because they have been declared medically unfit.

In addition, nearly 15,000 personnel can only be deployed if the mission meets certain criteria, such as the weather is not too hot or too cold and they are not exposed to noise.

Overall, one fifth of the regular armed forces cannot be relied upon to fight, according to the figures disclosed by Al Carns, the veterans minister, after questions by the Conservatives.

Nearly a quarter of soldiers and officers in the regular army cannot engage in combat without any restrictions and nearly 3,000 sailors are deemed unfit to go to sea under any circumstances.

In the case of the army, 16,335 troops are either "medically not deployable" or "medically limited deployable", out of a total of 71,340 personnel, amounting to 23 per cent of all troops. Only 55,005 troops in the army are considered fully deployable.

Mark Francois, the shadow armed forces minister, said the figures were "deeply worrying, especially within the army". He added: "Not only has the army now shrunk to just over 71,000 soldiers, almost 2,000 below its established strength, [but] of those, almost a quarter are not medically fully deployable. This requires urgent action, not just regarding recruitment and retention but also remedial action, especially physiotherapy, to ensure our remaining soldiers are truly fighting fit."

Francis Tusa, a defence analyst and editor of the Defence Analysis newsletter, said: "This shows, again, that some of the key problems facing the MoD and the services are not necessarily equipment and ammunition — they are, more broadly, personnel issues.

"The MoD and services need to work out what is causing these medical problems and take action. If there needs to be more physiotherapists, then hire them, even at a premium."

John Healey, the defence secretary, has already warned that the size of the army is expected to shrink further next year to below 70,000.

In a speech said to have angered No 10, Carns said this month that the entire army would be killed or wounded within six months to a year of war with an adversary like Russia. With an army of 55,000 regular troops, based on Russian casualty rates of about 1,500 a day in Ukraine, the army would in fact be destroyed in little over a month.

American military chiefs have previously expressed their concern at the size of the British Army and its reliance on the US for support assets.

In the case of the Royal Navy, 2,922 sailors cannot go to sea at all and 2,363 are considered "medically limited

Continued on page 2

AARON CHOWN/PA



Change of address The King, who is being treated for cancer, chose an old hospital chapel rather than a royal residence to record his Christmas message. Page 11

Humbling truth of how slow-thinking humans are

Eleanor Hayward Health Editor

The human brain processes thoughts at only millionths of the speed at which information is transmitted over the internet, research has found.

A team at the California Institute of Technology assessed the speed of conscious thought by examining data on human behaviour such as reading, writing and solving Rubik's cubes.

They calculated that humans think at a rate of 10 bits per second. A bit is a basic unit of information in computing, representing the smallest possible piece of data. They said this was "ridiculously slow" in comparison with a typical wi-fi connection, which processes 50 million bits per second.

However, the team noted that there was a "paradox" as the brain processes sensory information from sight, smell and noise much more rapidly. This is processed at about 100 million times the rate of thinking, but the brain then "filters" out the important information needed for decision-making.

Researchers said this "speed limit" on thinking meant that the idea put forward by people such as Elon Musk that humans could one day be hooked up to computers to increase the speed of our brains would never become reality.

Dr Markus Meister and Jieyu Zheng, who led the research, published in the journal Neuron, were surprised to find that the brain only transmitted 10 bits of information per second.

"That number is ridiculously small compared to any information rate we encounter in daily life," they write. "We get anxious when the speed of the home wi-fi network drops below 100 megabits per second, because that might compromise our enjoyment of Netflix shows. Meanwhile, even if we stay awake during the show, our brain will never extract more than 10 bits per second of that giant bitstream."

The researchers said that the slow pace of conscious thought could represent an evolutionary mechanism as it was the optimum level to make decisions to survive, such as finding food.

News

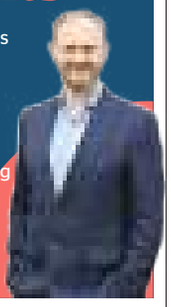
Today's highlights

8am **James Heappey**, the former Armed Forces minister, on the battle readiness of British troops

8.50am The chef **Jack Stein** gives his tips for Christmas dinner

12.45pm **Brett Smitheram**, the Scrabble World Champion

3.35pm **Mark Gatiss**, right, on writing and directing A Ghost Story for Christmas: Woman of Stone, being shown on BBC2 tonight



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TODAY'S EDITION

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Why booing former players is all in the game
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'Doubt is a more interesting and difficult political virtue than is commonly acknowledged'

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What's behind the rise in food allergies?

The number of people with food allergies in the UK has more than doubled since 2008, so what's behind the increase and are we close to a cure?

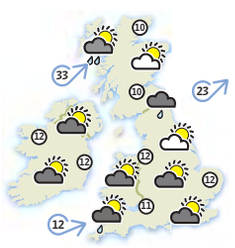
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THE WEATHER



Mainly cloudy with rain in places but also some sunny periods at times. **Full forecast, page 42**

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Thames Water 'planned to pay staff bonuses out of eco fund'

Jonathan Ames

Britain's largest water company has been accused of planning to pay shareholder dividends and bonuses out of millions of pounds allocated to environmental projects.

Senior managers at Thames Water, which serves 16 million people in London and the home counties, were said to have balked at the move after having assessed the legal and reputational risks of going ahead.

According to a report in The Guardian, secret discussions at the company resulted in the managers rejecting the idea of diverting the funds to shareholders and to paying bonuses after it was decided that it could have been unlawful.

Sources are reported to have told the newspaper that internal discussions around diverting funds that were meant to be allocated to environmental projects took place at the company in 2021 and 2022. Despite continuing to charge the public for the environmental work, the company formally told Ofwat, the regulator, last year that it planned to stop those projects.

The company, which reported revenue last year of £2.3 billion, told Ofwat that it would not deliver 98 of 826 schemes under the water industry national environment programme over five years as promised.

The delivery of these projects, which included schemes to cut phosphorus pollution in rivers, was a key justification for how much Thames was allowed to charge customers. Ditching the environmental projects did not prevent Thames from paying shareholder dividends or staff bonuses, the report said.

The Guardian said that when its reporters had first asked the company about the allegations that it had diverted funds, it had said they were "entirely false and without merit", but in a later statement Thames merely said the allegation that the company had done so "secretly" was false.

Thames said it had been "very open" about the difficulty it was having in meeting targets under the water industry national environment programme, owing to above-inflation costs.

However, Thames said it was "fully committed" to meeting all those commitments and "all the outstanding projects are currently under way and in the process of being delivered".

The company went on to say that "shareholders have not received an external dividend since 2017 and our business plan assumes dividends will not be paid before 2030".

The government's water industry national environment programme was created to address water companies' "role in protecting and enhancing the environment" after a series of sewage and pollution scandals. It was intended to "challenge" water suppliers to provide resilient, safe and environment-enhancing services to consumers.

"It is right that we are held to account for complying with our legal obligations," Chris Weston, the chief executive of Thames Water, said on a call with journalists on December 10, as he noted a sharp increase in pollution caused by the business.

"We've also maintained high levels of capital investment for the benefit of our customers and the environment," Alastair Cochran, the chief financial officer, said on the same call.

Water industry national environment programme projects include statutory obligations for water companies, with potential criminal liability if they breach their licence by failing to deliver them.

Migrants warned they face slavery if smuggled to UK

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

Vietnamese people are being targeted by a Home Office advertising blitz warning that they face slavery, exploitation and other "very scary" conditions if they pay people smugglers to bring them to the UK.

Videos funded by the UK taxpayer were posted on Vietnamese social media last week. They warn would-be migrants of the risks of the journey and seek to dispel myths perpetuated by smugglers, explaining that living illegally in Britain differs from the impression they may have been given.

The advertisements feature migrants who have made the journey relating how they were exploited by criminal gangs. They carry Home Office messages explaining they will not be able to get a job, claim benefits or gain access to public services and picture migrants with their arms restrained by zip ties.

The Home Office is trying to crack down on small boat crossings from the countries whose citizens make the most attempts. The number of Vietnamese migrants landing in small boats has surged with 3,132 crossing the Channel in the first nine months, amounting to one in eight arrivals, up from 1,306 in the whole of 2023. Their numbers are second only to Afghans, with 4,160 crossing from January to September.

Freedom of information requests submitted by The Times have revealed that the Home Office has spent £430,000 on advertisements in Vietnam over the past two years.

They sought to emulate the perceived success of a £134,000 campaign in Albania last year, which coincided with a 90 per cent fall in crossings by migrants from the Balkan country.

Early next year similar advertisements will be launched in Kurdistan, the semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq where some of the biggest people-smuggling gangs originate.

One of the videos shows squalid sleeping conditions as people shout in the background. A Home Office message tells viewers illegal migrants are banned from working in the UK. In another video, a migrant says: "I was promised a well-paid job. Instead I was a slave. I was physically threatened if I refused to work."

Dame Angela Eagle, the border security and asylum minister, said the campaign "hits people smugglers where it hurts by exposing their lies and cutting off their supply of victims".

PM may send troops to train Ukrainians

George Grylls Political Correspondent

Sir Keir Starmer has hinted that British troops could be deployed to western Ukraine to train soldiers.

The prime minister agreed with President Zelensky that "refining" the offer of training was important as Ukraine struggles to recruit troops.

About 51,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been trained in Britain under Operation Interflex. However, getting troops to Britain involves a multi-legged journey and there are concerns that Ukrainians are reluctant to sign up because of fears they will not receive proper training or equipment before being sent to the front line.

Moving the training to Ukraine could reassure those avoiding the draft.

Russia is suffering its highest casualties but is also making rapid advances as President Putin tries to capture as much territory as possible before the inauguration of Donald Trump.

Putin has been able to sustain the war by advertising high salaries to those from poor regions and the disparity in manpower is one of the main reasons for Russia's recent successes.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Forces unfit to fight

deployable", which means they may still be allowed to serve at sea under certain conditions.

The RAF has the highest proportion of personnel classified as medically not deployable, with 3,721 individuals out of 27,969 overall, amounting to 13 per cent of the force.

Limited deployability means deployment is limited owing to a medical condition, risk arising from exposure to extreme weather, the need to avoid exposure to elements such as noise or chemicals, or medical requirements, according to the MoD.

General Lord Dannatt, former chief of the general staff, described the figures as alarming and called for "vigorous remedial action". The Russians in Ukraine had lost the equivalent of four times the size of the British Army, he said. "This says something about the Russian willingness to take casualties and the absurdly small size of the British Army."

Across the armed forces, 14,350 personnel are classified as medically limited deployable, while 13,522 are medically not deployable.

Francois said that the figures, which exclude many reserve forces, were another reason why ministers needed to put a firm date on spending 2.5 per cent of national income on defence.

The Labour government has yet to outline its plans to spend more on defence despite promises during the election campaign to do so.

A defence source said that there was a "massive range of military roles" so "even if they are not boots on the ground they can still be in supportive roles ... It doesn't mean they can't be useful in another capacity."

The Times revealed in October that as the size of the armed forces was steadily shrinking, the number of civil servants in the MoD was rising.

An MoD spokeswoman said: "The vast majority of our service personnel — around 90 per cent — are deployable at any point, with most of the remaining members of our armed forces employed in wider military roles. We are committed to providing world-class medical treatment to ensure personnel can return to duty where possible, or to support their transition to civilian life."

The painful truth behind Taylor Swift's favourite cat

Experts say Scottish fold's genetic mutations are harmful and the breed should be banned, **Emma Yeomans** writes

With its distinctive owl-like face and flat ears, the Scottish fold has been adored by cat owners since the 1960s.

While the highly sought after breed may count the likes of Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran among its super-fans, it could soon be banned from Britain.

The genes which give the cats their unusual looks also cause many of them crippling pain when they run, jump or play thanks to defective cartilage formation.

Now a report from the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC), which advises the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as well as the Scottish and Welsh governments, has recommended their breeding be restricted due to the pain caused by their genetic health problems.

The AWC looked at whether feline breeding should be more tightly regulated. It said any restrictions on cat breeding should prevent the breeding of Scottish fold cats, as well as another breed nicknamed "munchkin" cats.

The report said: "Breeds should not be perpetuated where they suffer from health and welfare problems linked to characteristics selected for or associated with that breed. Licensing legislation should explicitly prevent licensing of those breeding these animals throughout the UK.

"Specifically, it is recommended that there is sufficient evidence to justify inclusion of the Scottish fold, munchkin and other dwarf breeds within this prohibition, due to the almost inevitable and frequently severe physical suffering and behavioural restrictions highly likely to be experienced by all individuals within these breeds."

The stance has been welcomed by the charity Cats Protection, which says there is "growing public concern" about the issue. Sales of pedigree cats have now overtaken non-pedigree cats for the first time, and animal welfare groups have warned buyers and breeders are putting aesthetics over the health of pets.





Taylor Swift's Scottish fold cats appear on her Instagram posts at home and with friends such as Paula Abdul

The first Scottish fold cat was a single white barn cat named Susie, who was found at a farm in Coupar Angus. A local cat fancier, William Ross, was amused by her folded ears, and began a breeding programme to see if it could be passed on.

Initially Ross registered the breed in the UK, but the British Governing Council of the Cat Fancy put a stop to it, citing concerns for the animals' health.

Instead, Ross introduced the cats to the US with the help of a geneticist, where they were registered with the American Cat Fanciers Association and began to appear in cat shows.

They have become increasingly popular. Taylor Swift regularly uses Instagram to show off her own two Scottish folds — Olivia Benson and Meredith Grey, named after characters from the TV shows *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Sheeran also owns a Scottish fold, Calippo, which has his own Instagram account alongside his other cat, Dorito.

However, growing scrutiny over pedigree pets and designer breeds has led to concerns being raised over both the Scottish fold and the munchkin cat. A Cats Protection petition calling for the regulation of cat breeding attracted more than 50,000 signatures this year.

Madison Rogers, associate director of advocacy, campaigns and external affairs for Cats Protection, said: "Some pedigree cats are bred with extreme traits which may look pleasing to us but actually have a disastrous effect on the cat's health and welfare or its offspring.

"For example, the mutation that causes the striking folded ears of the Scottish fold cat also causes debilitating pain when the cat moves, jumps or plays.

"Cats Protection has been calling on the government to urgently introduce regulations to licence cat breeding.

"Following engagement earlier this year with the Animal Welfare Committee we are delighted to see they have released an independent report recommending that the government regulate cat breeding and ban the breeding of cats with known and harmful extreme traits."

Mice and men are a recipe for 'emotional harm', schools told

Will Humphries

Of Mice and Men has been taken off the GCSE curriculum by Welsh exam chiefs branding it "psychologically and emotionally" harmful for children.

The 1937 work by John Steinbeck will be removed due to concerns about racism. It is one of five book options offered to schools as part of a unit in the Welsh Joint Education Committee's (WJEC) English literature GCSE, but the exam board said this would end and that it had selected new "a wide range" of "appropriate and inclusive texts".

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee published in 1960 has also been removed.

Rocio Cifuentes, Wales's children's commissioner, backed the removal of *Of Mice and Men*, saying discussing it in class had been "psychologically and emotionally" harmful to black children. She said that, while researching racism in school many black children "specifically mentioned this text and the harm that it caused them".

Cifuentes, who began her £95,000-a-year role in 2022 and will serve a seven year term, said she welcomed "opportunities for positive, constructive, informed discussions on race and racism", but that there were "alternative texts available, which could still offer the same opportunities but in a less directly harmful way".

She said: "It's not censorship. This is safeguarding the wellbeing of children who have told us how awful those discussions have made them feel.

"They've very often been the only black child in that classroom when discussions all around them are focusing on very derogatory, negative depictions of black people."

The book was dropped from GCSEs in England in 2014 when Michael Gove, then education secretary, called for more works by British authors to be studied.

WJEC said it was merging English language and literature into one GCSE and had employed an anti-racism consultant over appropriate books "to help us ensure our qualifications reflect a modern and inclusive Wales".

It added: "We have provided a choice of work from writers of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, genders, and communities ... We believe this new selection will enrich the educational experience by providing a choice of texts that explore themes that will resonate with learners."



Some black students have been upset by the novel

Rhian Evans, an English teacher at Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin in Carmarthen, said the book "would be missed" as it allowed discussion of "how we treat each other in general in our societies".

Evans told BBC Wales they would never repeat the use of the "N-word" when discussing the book in class and would "always discuss why we don't use it and I think it does allow for that discussion, but I think the truth is that, as a white woman, I will never know what it feels like to be a child of colour in a classroom where they are forced to encounter that word as part of their GCSE education."

Marley, 16, a black student, said he listened to the audiobook with the rest of the class and when it came to the racial slurs, people "laughed and giggled and stared at me and it made me feel really uncomfortable".

Harry, 17, another pupil, said: "I felt it was a good place to [discuss the sensitive subjects raised in the novel] in school where if you had any questions you can discuss with the teacher or any of the pupils who were learning it with you. As long as we associate the behaviour in the book as something that isn't OK, I don't think learning about it will be any problem".

News

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE



All together The choristers celebrating Christmas at St Paul's cathedral include girls for the first time in its 900-year history. The present building was finished in 1710

Tea and coffee linked to lower risk of mouth and throat cancer

Kaya Burgess Science Reporter

Drinking three to four cups of coffee a day may be linked with a reduced risk of mouth and throat cancer, a study has suggested.

Tea drinking is also associated with a lower risk of head and neck cancer, but only among those who consume an average of no more than one cup a day, according to research published yesterday.

Researchers from the Huntsman Cancer Institute and the University of Utah analysed the findings from 14 studies looking at coffee and tea consumption and rates of cancer in the mouth and in the throat around the larynx.

Their findings, published in Cancer, the journal of the American Cancer Society, "support reduced head and neck cancer risk among coffee and tea drinkers", the study concluded.

Head and neck cancers are the seventh most common form of cancer worldwide.

The analysis included data on 9,548 people with those cancers and 15,783 people without cancer as comparison points.

The researchers found that, compared with those who drank no coffee, people who drank four or more cups of caffeinated coffee a day appeared to have a 17 per cent lower risk of head and neck cancer, with a 30 per cent lower risk of mouth cancer and 22 per cent lower risk of throat cancer.

Drinking three to four cups a day was associated with a 41 per cent lower risk of hypopharyngeal cancer, found at the bottom of the throat. The risk reduction was still recorded, although not as strongly, among those who drank decaffeinated coffee.

Drinking an average of up to one cup of tea a day was linked with a 9 per cent lower risk of head and neck cancer overall and a 27 per cent lower risk of hypopharyngeal cancer. However, among those who drank more than one cup of tea a day, the risk of laryngeal cancer was 38 per cent higher.

Dr Yuan-Chin Amy Lee, the study's senior author, said: "While there has been prior research on coffee and tea consumption and a reduced risk of cancer, this study highlighted their varying effects with different sub-sites of head and neck cancer, including the observation that even decaffeinated coffee had some positive impact.

"Coffee and tea habits are fairly complex and these findings support the need for more data and further studies around the impact that coffee and tea can have on reducing cancer risk."

The study did not examine the types of tea consumed.

Tom Sanders, a professor of nutrition and dietetics at King's College London, who was not involved in the study, said it did not conclusively show that drinking tea and coffee directly led to a lowered cancer risk. He noted: "People who drink a lot of coffee and tea may be more likely to avoid other harmful behaviours such as drinking alcohol and using tobacco and so may be at a lower risk of these cancers for other reasons."

He added, however, that the study nevertheless "may be reassuring for coffee and ordinary tea drinkers".

A separate study this year found that drinking two to three cups of tea a day could help to keep your heart healthy, while coffee also provided a protective effect. It found that the more coffee and tea participants drank, the higher their levels of a type of cell that protects against heart attacks and strokes.

There has long been debate over whether caffeine is good for the heart, with concerns that it could be linked to increased blood pressure and may cause palpitations; but there is mounting evidence showing that caffeine is good for overall health.

Music shown to reduce distress of dementia patients

Researchers have shown how and why music can reduce distress for people with advanced dementia.

There are an estimated one million people living with dementia in the UK and more than half are diagnosed with advanced dementia, which can require specialist care. The condition is often accompanied by behaviour such as agitation, aggression, wandering and resistance. The new study, published in the journal Nature Mental Health, examined the different benefits of music and offered a blueprint for implementing effective music therapy for those with advanced dementia.

The research team said that the therapy could include singing, playing or listening to music. A therapist can also identify specific ways that music could be used by families and carers in a daily routine.

The study, led by Naomi Thompson of Anglia Ruskin University, was the first music therapy dementia care realist review, and used academic research to develop guidelines for delivering personalised interventions. It showed that if music therapy was personalised, it could deliver an "immediate", short-term reduction in agitation and anxiety for people with advanced dementia, and improvements in attention, engagement, alertness and mood.

Thompson, a PhD student, explained that musical interactions could help people feel safer and more orientated in their surroundings, which can lower distress and improve wellbeing.

She said this was because music delivers cognitive and sensory stimulation and activates networks across both sides of the brain, enabling access to the person's remaining abilities and memories. This helps people to manage their emotions and remain calm. The researchers collaborated with the specialist nursing charity Dementia UK.

Quintagram® No 2133

Solve all five concise clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Arrive (4)

_ _ _ _

2 Practical jokes (6)

_ _ _ _ _ _

3 Happy and carefree (6)

_ _ _ _ _ _

4 Putting on (clothing) (7)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

5 Vehicle's fascia (9)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

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

Solutions see T2 MindGames p11
Cryptic clues T2 MindGames p10

Novice in death crash

A soldier faces a possible jail term after admitting causing the death of a passenger, Laionie Kennard, 18, by careless driving last year in Dorset. Poole magistrates' court was told that Joseph Pickett, 20, had just passed his test. The case has reignited a debate over whether novice drivers should be banned from carrying passengers. He will be sentenced later.

Black KC to lead the Bar

Barbara Mills KC, who was born in Ghana, will become the first black leader of the barristers' profession when she takes over as chairwoman of the 130-year-old Bar Council of England and Wales on New Year's day. Mills, who is one of only eight black female KCs, has also been serving as a deputy High Court judge since January last year.

Racist rioter jailed

A man who acted like a "general" in a mass riot outside a Southport mosque last July has been jailed for two and a half years. Brian Spencer, 40, admitted violent disorder and racially aggravated harassment at Liverpool crown court. He said he had drunk ten pints and a litre of rum. Footage showed him taunting police officers and being hit by bricks.

PM's Christmas wish

Sir Keir Starmer wished for peace in the Middle East and said he was hoping for a "better, brighter future for every person" in his festive message, in which he also extended thoughts to those who will be lonely. The prime minister will spend Christmas at Chequers, his official country residence, before going abroad for his first holiday since taking office.

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Royalties row over 'queen of curves'

David Brown

Dame Zaha Hadid is associated with some of the world's most dramatic buildings of the past 40 years.

Eight years after the death of the architect known as the "queen of curves", her name is at the centre of a legal battle over the royalties paid for its continuing use.

Her eponymous practice wants to end a licence agreement to use the name which requires it to pay 6 per cent of its net income to the charitable foundation she established. The foundation has received £21.4 million of royalties from the practice since 2018.

It is the latest legal skirmish between Patrik Schumacher, Hadid's protégé who now runs the architectural practice, and Sir Brian Clarke, the architectural artist and painter who is chairman of her foundation.

Hadid, the first woman to win the Pritzker architecture prize, had agreed that the royalty payments would start in 2013. The architectural practice sued the charitable foundation at the High Court in London, claiming it had the right to give 12 months to end the naming agreement and that the deal was an unfair "restraint of trade".

Clarke, 71, told the court it was Hadid's intention that the practice would "continue to trade under her name in perpetuity". He said Hadid wanted the deal to be part of her legacy to produce a stable and significant income for her foundation.

Schumacher, 63, said the agreement was only intended to provide Hadid with an income during her lifetime to regularise a "rather haphazard system of Dame Zaha claiming remuneration and expenses on an ad hoc basis" that could lead to press scrutiny.

The practice claimed "the financial burden that this imposes ... has the effect of sterilising the company's economic activity as an architecture firm" even though its annual income has increased from £37 million to £69 million over the past decade.

It also argued that although Hadid's name had "significant value historically" there has been "diminishing significance" so it was unreasonable to pay royalties on income not associated with her name.

Mr Justice Adam Johnson dismissed the application to end the agreement, saying it was legally fair.

ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS/ALAMY







Designs by the architect Dame Zaha Hadid, left, included the London Olympics aquatics centre, above, and the Guangzhou Opera House in China. Her former practice is objecting to an agreement in which it pays her charitable foundation to use her name

Hadid became one of Britain's most recognisable architects of the late 20th and early 21st centuries with work that included the Aquatics Centre at the London Olympics, the Guangzhou Opera House in China, the MAXXI museum in Rome and the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Baku, Azerbaijan. She died of a heart attack in March 2016, aged 65, and her funeral was held at St Paul's Cathedral.

Hadid appointed Schumacher, Clarke, Lord Palumbo, the Conservative peer, and her niece Rana Hadid as executors of her estate, which was valued at £65 million when she died.

Schumacher was later denounced by the other executors for telling the World Architecture Festival that London's housing crisis could be solved if social housing were scrapped. He resigned as a trustee of the charity foundation and went to the High Court in a failed attempt to remove the other executors of Hadid's estate.

The bulk of her estate, which had grown to £100 million by 2020, went to the charitable foundation while her shares in the architecture practice were transferred to a tax-efficient employee benefit trust, chaired by Schumacher.

Advent of fame for printmaker at 60

Lucy Bannerman

You'll probably recognise Angela Harding's work when you see it. There will be otters rollicking in rivers or whippets bounding around fields or swallows wheeling through wild, dramatic skies.

Her prints adorn teatowels, tote bags and the covers of several bestselling books by acclaimed British authors such as Ted Hughes, James Rebanks, Katya Balen and Simon Armitage.

But it is only recently that she has hit the big time as the queen of the advent calendar.

The 64-year-old printmaker from Rutland, in the east Midlands, spent the first part of her artistic career making ends meet. She juggled various part-time teaching roles with engraving demonstrations, running a print workshop and at one point even spending a couple of unglamorous years cataloguing bricks for a pottery museum in Stoke-on-Trent, before carving a niche within the publishing industry as the go-to illustrator for books about nature.

Then, aged 54, she decided to explore new territory by printing a run of advent calendars. "I could never find an advent calendar I really liked," she says.

Her calendar sales have rocketed from 5,000 to 50,000 over the past ten years and her calendars now outsell everything else she does. She attributes her success to the custody arrangement she agreed with her ex-husband 20 years ago, when their son and daughter were 10 and 12. Rather unusually for the time, they agreed to split child-caring equally, freeing Harding up for half the week to concentrate on turning her art into a business.



Angela Harding's style is distinctive

"It's a room of one's own, isn't it? It just gave you time to think," she says.

She later remarried and with her second husband, who had two children, co-raised their blended family.

"As 50 approached, I was getting used to being pulled in lots of directions. So I really knuckled down and thought, you've got to push the boat out a bit," Harding said.

She gave up teaching, abandoned painting and embraced the linocut style that would make her name. She is now relishing this stage of her career.

"It's very satisfying to be successful in a subject that can be quite difficult. I think finding the energy to keep exploring [is key]."

War widow bit and kicked new partner in fit of rage

Frederick Foulston

A woman who became a campaigner for military personnel after her husband was killed by a Taliban bomb has been spared jail after she was found guilty of assaulting her new partner.

Christina Plumb, 49, whose husband Olaf Schmid was a bomb disposal expert, hit, kicked and bit her new husband Adam in an attack at their home in Devon, a judge heard.

At Plymouth magistrates' court yesterday she was given a jail sentence of 12 weeks suspended for 12 months. A two-year restraining order was put in place.

Alistair Verheijen, for the prosecution, said Plumb had been drinking gin when she tried to cuddle her husband, 41, in bed in September last year.

He said he tried to go to another room to sleep but she kicked him and bit him in an attack lasting up to 20 minutes.

He had told the court: "I could not get her off me. When I went to leave she bit me in the middle of the back." He added: "It was full-on raging."

The court heard Plumb had later claimed she was victim of domestic violence but Judge Stuart Smith said this was a "failed scheme" to get her husband arrested.

Plumb became a figurehead for bereaved service families after Schmid died in 2009. She called on politicians to "fight as hard as Olaf did" for peace. Her work led to a meeting with David Cameron, then prime minister. She also met Queen Elizabeth in a private ceremony and received the George Cross on behalf of her late husband.

Economy has ground to a halt

Jack Barnett Economics Correspondent

The economy flatlined in the months after Labour came to power, with the latest data revisions suggesting the GDP has contracted since the election.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) yesterday showed that the economy had zero growth between July and September, down from an initial estimate of growth of 0.1 per cent in the quarter.

GDP fell by 0.1 per cent in July and September and expanded by 0.2 per cent in August. The ONS also downgraded its estimate for second-quarter growth to 0.4 per cent from 0.5 per cent.

The figures suggest the economy has shrunk since Sir Keir Starmer took office in July. Separate ONS data released this month showed that GDP dropped by 0.1 per cent in October.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at Capital Economics, said the downward revisions "suggest that after a bumper first half of the year, the economy ground to a halt in the second half of the year due to a combination of the lingering drag from higher interest rates, weaker overseas demand and some concerns over policies in the budget.

"Our hunch is that 2025 will be a better year for the economy than 2024 but more recent data suggest the economy doesn't have much momentum as the year comes to a close."

Worse activity than was estimated in the legal and advertising sectors prompted the ONS to lower its third-quarter GDP figure. It added that pubs, bars and restaurants had a downbeat performance in the three months to September. For much of the second half of this year, weak demand in Europe has weighed on UK exports, contributing to the ONS's GDP downgrade.

The Bank of England warned last week that the economy would stall in the final three months of the year having forecast 0.3 per cent growth, which would mean that, since July, growth in the economy has stagnated.

Liz McKeown, the ONS director of economic statistics, said: "The economy was weaker in the second and third quarters of this year than our initial estimates suggested with bars and restaurants, legal firms and advertising in particular, performing less well.

"The household saving ratio fell a little in the latest period, though remains relatively high by historic standards. Meanwhile real household disposable income per head showed no growth."

Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, said: "The challenge we face to fix our economy and properly fund our public finances after 15 years of neglect is huge. But this is only fuelling our fire to deliver for working people. The budget and our plan for change will deliver sustainable long-term growth, putting more money in people's pockets through increased investment and relentless reform."

Reeves's inaugural budget on October 30 set out tax increases of £40 billion, including a £25 billion rise in employers' national insurance contributions, which takes effect in April. The measures have been blamed for engineering a sharp fall in business confidence.

She has insisted that she will not announce similar tax rises next year. Since the budget, however, investors have scaled back their expectations on the number of times the Bank of England will lower interest rates which, alongside sluggish growth, has eroded the chancellor's headroom against her fiscal rules. This has raised speculation that further tax increases are likely.

The Office for Budget Responsibility believes that the economy will expand by 2 per cent next year, higher than most experts' predictions.

Matt Swannell, chief economic adviser to the EY ITEM Club of forecasters, said: "It looks like output will remain modest at the end of this year. The final quarter got off to a poor start with GDP contracting in October, while the S&P Global purchasing managers' indices (PMIs) pointed to a slowdown in private sector activity."

He added that "the recent PMIs" suffered weakening corporate sentiment but retail sales recovered "to an extent" last month.

Alongside tax increases, Reeves outlined an extra £70 billion of public spending, including rises in government investment, which is expected to boost growth in the near-term.

Philip Shaw, chief UK economist at Investec, said the weaker growth outlook would make the Bank "more inclined to bring interest rates down early next year". The Bank kept rates on hold at 4.75 per cent this month with inflation rising to 2.6 per cent.

The FTSE 100 rose by 0.22 per cent, or 18.11 points, to 8,102.73 yesterday, while the FTSE 250, which is more responsive to domestic economic sentiment, fell by 0.15 per cent. The pound dropped by 0.27 per cent against the dollar to $1.253.

Economic outlook, letters, page 22



The season to be jolly Angela Rayner, the deputy prime minister, got to work on her Christmas cards, designed by a

Work to tackle advocates of blasphemy laws shelved

Geraldine Scott

The government has shelved work on tackling those who call for blasphemy laws, as warnings over extremism are on the rise.

It paused its work on the issue before the general election in July and there is no guarantee that it will be included as part of a new approach to counter extremism.

Last month Tahir Ali, a Labour MP, called on Sir Keir Starmer to make it an offence to desecrate religious texts including the Quran to dissuade "division and hatred". Starmer did not respond directly but said: "Desecration is awful and ... should be condemned across the House."

Blasphemy laws were abolished in England and Wales in 2008 and the government later said it had no plans to reintroduce them. The Times understands specific work on claims of blasphemy has been shelved since May.

The National Secular Society said Islamophobia was being "deployed as a strategic manoeuvre to reintroduce blasphemy prohibitions subtly". It blamed "growing fundamentalism, often inspired by clerics".

Andrew Copson, chief executive of Humanists UK, said even where blasphemy laws had been abolished "the state has a further duty not to legitimise these kinds of unreasonable grievances". He added: "Blasphemy laws should remain in the history books, not on our statute books."

The government said it had no plans to introduce blasphemy laws, adding: "More broadly we are committed to tackling all forms of division and hatred, and we continue to work closely with community groups, charities, and public sector partners to achieve this."

Billionaires 'queueing to give to Reform'

George Grylls Political Correspondent

Billionaire donors are lining up to give money to Reform, the party's treasurer has claimed.

Nick Candy, the property developer, said it was not just Elon Musk who was prepared to donate to the party. He claimed the windfall would result in Reform overtaking the Conservatives, as he promised a "political disruption like we have never seen before".

Candy, 51, brokered a meeting with Musk at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida this month, after which Nigel Farage, leader of Reform UK, claimed that the owner of Tesla was giving "serious thought" to a large donation.

Musk is not a British citizen, which means he cannot give money personally, and Farage has downplayed reports that Reform could receive a $100 million donation. However, Musk might be able to donate through one of his British companies. Under current rules, all donations above £500 must come from British-based businesses or individuals.

Lucy Powell, the leader of the Commons, said there were "no immediate plans" to change the law. But she told Sky News that Labour was "committed to bringing forward some changes to the way in which elections are run in this country".

Candy, who has promised to give £1 million of his own money to Reform, told the Financial Times: "We have a number of billionaires prepared to donate to the party, not just Elon. The Reform Party is the disrupter — this is the seed round, the series A. This will be political disruption like we have never seen before."

He added: "The oldest political party in the world will be overtaken by the youngest political party on the planet."

Several high-profile Conservatives have defected to Reform in recent weeks, including Tim Montgomerie, founder of the ConservativeHome website, and Dame Andrea Jenkyns, the former MP. Candy, who is married to Holly Valance, the Australian singer, said a number of Conservative donors could switch allegiance and that Musk would "be the first of many wealthy donors legally allowed to donate". He said: "Even the big Tory donors are calling me ... A lot of people will join us. The movement has started."

Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative Party leader, said it would be counterproductive for Reform to receive a large donation from Musk because voters "don't necessarily like to see politics being bought".

Badenoch accused Farage of giving the public "easy answers" and said the Conservatives would take a "tortoise, not hare" approach to winning back voters' trust.

"All Reform is doing is talking," she told BBC Radio 4's *Today*. "I think that if Elon Musk is giving a party, a competitor party money, then that is a challenge for me to make sure that I raise the same."

since Labour won the election



SIMON WALKER/DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE



Ukrainian schoolgirl in London. Boris Johnson dressed as Santa to give his followers on X some last-minute gift ideas

PM fails to rule out more tax rises as recession fears grow

Geraldine Scott
Senior Political Correspondent

Sir Keir Starmer has warned a return to economic prosperity "won't happen overnight" as Downing Street failed to rule out having to raise taxes again next year to balance the books.

Official figures released on Monday showed that the UK economy flatlined in the third quarter of the year, raising fears of a recession.

Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, said she knew that the challenge of fixing the economy was "huge" but that it was "only fuelling our fire to deliver for working people".

Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, told Times Radio that while Reeves "had no choice, really, but to fix some of the massive problems", it meant she may need to "come back for more money" from the public next year.

Downing Street said Starmer was "of course" positive heading into 2025 but "focused on the challenge ahead as well, and he's focused on delivery".

When asked whether Starmer agreed with Johnson that more tax rises could be needed, his spokesman said that the chancellor had previously said her last budget was "a once-in-a-parliament" one that "wiped the slate clean" and "dealt with the £22 billion black hole". However, he declined to rule out future tax rises, saying: "The government is now focused on getting growth in the economy that delivers for working people that they feel in their pay slips."

The Conservatives claimed that "growth has tanked" on Labour's watch and that the economy was becoming "more vulnerable".

Kate Nicholls, chief executive of UKHospitality, the lobby group, said the government needed to reconsider its budget measures because of the "fragile" state of the economy.

"With business confidence already plummeting and a third of hospitality businesses operating at or below breakeven, the planned changes to employer national insurance contributions will make generating economic growth even more difficult," she said.

The Office for National Statistics said that real household disposable income had not grown between July and September. In December Starmer made the metric a key measure for voters to judge his government.

Johnson said he was not expecting a recession but the government would have to talk about "hard choices".

He told Times Radio: "They've got the hardest of all choices to make in the summer when they do their spending review and then I think we'll have a lot of miserable cabinet ministers because they're not going to get very much money. And who knows? It's not impossible that the chancellor will feel she needs to come back for yet more money next autumn if the economy doesn't pick up."

Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, said: "Having inherited the fastest-growing economy in the G7, growth has tanked on Labour's watch. That means greater pressure on our public finances and an economy which, far from becoming more secure, is becoming significantly more vulnerable."

Johnson said it was a "little unfair" to place all the blame on the government. "The last government did leave them absolutely massive problems," he said, adding: "I think some of what they've done to fix it has been less than ideal."

Downing Street said it had been "up front" about the scale of the task but that ministers would "work day and night to deliver growth, rebuild Britain and get public services back on their feet".

Starmer's spokesman said: "That is why we've had to take some of the tough decisions that we've taken since the prime minister came into government. It won't be fixed overnight but we understand the pressure that people are under."

Badenoch tells Tories to be patient and says: I'm not a dictator

George Grylls

Kemi Badenoch has said she is "not a dictator" as she urged voters to remain patient with the Conservative Party.

The Tory leader said she would not "rush out" new policies despite the challenge posed by the Reform party under Nigel Farage, whom she accused of "telling people easy things without thinking them through".

She contrasted Reform's blitz of policy announcements with her leadership style and said the next election was a "marathon, not a sprint".

Richard Tice, the deputy leader of Reform, has called for the renationalisation of Thames Water and said the British Steel plant in Scunthorpe should be taken into public ownership if foreign investment could not be found.

Badenoch declined to comment when asked for her party's position on those issues. She said she would avoid rushing into policy announcements.

"I'm not a dictator," she told *Today* on Radio 4. "I'm not a one-woman think tank. There is not an election right now.

"I am rebuilding something that is really big. I'm not just selling something that is gimmicky. That means that people will need to be patient. What people are going to get with new leadership under me is thoughtful Conservatism, not knee-jerk analysis."

Asked when voters might expect to see new Conservative policies, she said: "You will start to see them soon ... watch this space is what I'm saying."

The Tories suffered one of the worst results in the party's history in July, winning only 121 seats.

Badenoch, 44, was elected Tory leader last month, defeating Robert Jenrick, the former immigration minister, in a poll of party members. As she tries to transform her party's fortunes, the former business secretary said she was inspired by Donald Trump's comeback win after his defeat four years ago.

"He has come back," she said. "He has been arrested, he had that mugshot. As a politician, looking at someone who manages to turn every negative incident into an opportunity, that is quite inspiring. If something bad happens to you, you find a silver lining."

She said she was also taking inspiration from Pierre Poilievre, the Canadian opposition leader, after she met the favourite to beat the prime minister, Justin Trudeau, in elections next year.

Badenoch was asked whether she was disheartened by the recent defections of several senior Tories, including Dame Andrea Jenkyns, who announced that she would stand as the Reform candidate to be mayor of Greater Lincolnshire. "With some of those people, Andrea Jenkyns for example, it's very personal," she said. "[They] don't like me."



Kemi Badenoch says she has stopped the party infighting

Asked why Jenkyns, who was the MP for Morley & Outwood in West Yorkshire, did not like her, Badenoch said: "Honestly, I don't really care. There are loads of other people who do like me. It's politics. Some people will, some people won't."

Reflecting on her first weeks as opposition leader, Badenoch said she was pleased to have ended the infighting that characterised the final years of the Conservative government.

Asked how she thought her leadership was going, she said: "I think it is going well. I think it's going as well as it possibly could do. I was expecting it to be much worse.

"And one of the things that I'm really pleased about is that the party has downed tools on the internecine warfare and the actual being in parliament and seeing a real Labour government reminds everyone who the real opponent is."

She contrasted her approach to winning back voters with the performance of the Tories in opposition after Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997.

She said: "In 1997 what we did was rush out with a whole bunch of things that we're going to do — save the pound, do this, do that, kick every barking dog. It did not work.

"As an engineer, you have to look at the problem that you are trying to solve.

"The public did not kick us out because they didn't like our manifesto. They kicked us out because they did not trust us ... We need to explain why we didn't deliver. We need to re-earn that trust."

A Labour spokesman accused Badenoch of offering "no solutions to the problems the Tories created".

News

‘Abortion at 28 weeks’ trial dropped over BBC reporting

Jonathan Ames Legal Editor

A judge has criticised the BBC for “sloppy” reporting that caused the trial of a woman accused of illegally aborting her baby to collapse.

Sophie Harvey was appearing at Gloucester crown court in May when the jury was discharged after inaccurate reports of proceedings were broadcast. Harvey, 25, was accused of having procured her own abortion pills when she was 19.

The prosecution alleged that Harvey, of Cirencester, took medication on learning she was more than 28 weeks pregnant, well beyond the 24-week legal limit for an abortion in England.

Harvey and her boyfriend, Elliot Benham, 25, of Swindon, always accepted they had purchased abortion pills online. But Harvey insisted she had never taken them and she gave birth to a stillborn child in her bathroom in September, 2018.

During a hearing held in the absence of the jury, the court was told the opening headlines of *Points West*, the BBC regional news programme, had shown archive video on May 16 of a Cirencester property with crime officers working at a tent, stating: “The remains were found in the garden.”

In a later report of that day’s proceedings, in which Harvey gave evidence in court, a journalist said in a piece to camera that the defendant had taken the abortion pill.

At the hearing, Tom Godfrey, a barrister representing Harvey, applied for the jury to be discharged on the grounds that the BBC’s report cast doubt on her credibility, because she maintained that she did not take the abortion pill.

Godfrey told Judge Ian Lawrie, the Recorder of Gloucester: “The prosecution maintain she is lying. It is that issue which the jury will have to decide — whether she is a liar and is not being honest.”

Referring to the BBC’s opening remarks, he said: “That is a wholly false statement. It is wholly untrue by someone at the BBC. It is a terrible error.”

Godfrey said the prosecution did not dispute an element of Harvey’s defence — that after the stillbirth she disposed of the baby in a dustbin.

“There is no suggestion of what happened to that baby is untrue,” he added. “The crown’s case is that she has been untruthful about taking the pills — not what happened afterwards.”

Godfrey added that the false report was more serious because “this was the BBC”. He said: “This was not a Facebook post or a Snapchat and not viewed by a couple of people. This is a headline piece going out on the BBC at 6.30pm — the opening headline to the news.

“It is, I am afraid, unforgiveable that such an egregious error was made. If any members of the jury saw the news or have been asked about it would question her integrity because what they heard on the news is completely contrary to what Sophie Harvey told them all that day.”

Anna Vigars KC, for the prosecution, opposed the application, saying the broadcast errors could be corrected to the jury by a “robust direction”.

Granting the defence application to dismiss the jury, the judge said: “The BBC reporting was not just an error, it was misleading and false, and therefore the defendants’ credibility is at issue.”

A new trial was set for February but last week Harvey and Benham admitted conspiracy to procure a poison with intent to procure a miscarriage.

The pair had previously admitted a charge of concealing the birth of a child. The judge imposed 18-month community orders.

Harvey was given a mental health treatment requirement while Benham was ordered to complete 150 hours of unpaid work. Both were ordered to pay a £114 surcharge.

The BBC said in a statement that it had “apologised to the court for the unintentional errors in some of our reporting [and] our apology was accepted by the judge hearing the case”.

PAUL MARRIOTT



Christmas jumper **Cookie the cockapoo having a festive frolic in Peterborough. Temperatures are expected to rise over the next few days and parts of southern England are predicted to be as warm as Corfu on Christmas Day.** Weather, page 42

Loss of children’s TV ‘a cultural timebomb’

Alex Farber Media Correspondent

A generation of children risk losing their connection to British culture, a BBC programming chief has warned.

Patricia Hidalgo, director of children’s and education at the BBC said: “Despite our continued efforts, the broader children’s media landscape is in decline. Without wider intervention, we risk losing a generation’s connection to British culture and storytelling.”

Hidalgo said that the demise of commercial channels such as CITV and a lack of wider financial support had hobbled the BBC’s efforts to cater for young audiences, despite having shows for children on their festive schedule.

“This lack of market competition and investment means that much of the content consumed by children today is not made for them,” she said.

Spending by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 on children’s programming has remained broadly flat at about £80 million per year since 2010, according to the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, while sites such as YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat have exploded in popularity and are accessed by 96 per cent of those aged 3 to 17.

Last year only 55 per cent watched broadcast TV every week, down from 81 per cent in 2018, and the majority of their viewing time was spent on primetime shows rather than children’s programmes. Audiences in recent weeks for *Blue Peter* on CBBC and iPlayer have fallen below 50,000.

Face checks to keep young safe online

George Grylls

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok will be encouraged to use “highly accurate” facial recognition checks to stop underage children from accessing their sites under plans to be announced by Ofcom.

Amid widespread evidence that children are faking their age to create online profiles, social media companies will be told to enforce a minimum age limit of 13.

Ofcom will recommend that social media companies use the technology to determine the age of those trying to create a profile under guidance to be published in April. Other options could involve showing a passport or using a government digital ID.

About 24 per cent of children aged five to seven own a smartphone, according to research by the broadcasting watchdog, and a third of parents say their children of that age are using social media independently.

Under the Online Safety Act, social media firms will be forced to protect children from online harm or face fines of up to 10 per cent of global turnover, amounting to £10 billion for Meta, the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The executives of repeat offenders will face jail sentences of up to two years.

Jon Higham, Ofcom’s head of online safety policy, said allowing children to certify their own age did not work.

“It doesn’t take a genius to work out that children are going to lie about their age. So we think there’s a big issue there,” he told The Daily Telegraph.

“We will expect the technology to be highly accurate and effective. We’re not going to let people use poor or substandard mechanisms to verify kids’ ages. The sort of thing that we might look to in that space is some of this facial age and estimation technology that we see companies bringing in now, which we think is really pretty good at determining who is a child and who is an adult.

“We’re going to be looking to drive out the use of that sort of content, so platforms can determine who’s a child and who isn’t, and then put in place extra protections for kids to stop them seeing toxic content.”

A government spokeswoman said: “It is for the independent regulator to decide how to implement the act, but the government is clear that services should be taking proactive action to keep children safe including when it comes to age verification, not waiting for measures to come into force.”

Man in court charged with murdering stabbed teacher

A man has appeared in court accused of the murder of a teacher in south London.

James Madden is charged over the death of Gemma Devonish, 42, who was found with stab wounds in Carshalton on Thursday.

Police and the London Ambulance Service attended and Devonish, a teacher at Rosebery School, a girls’ secondary in Epsom, Surrey, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Yesterday Madden, 38, of Brixton, appeared at Croydon magistrates’ court via a video link. He was remanded in custody to appear at the Old Bailey today.

David Lach, the head of Rosebery School, called Devonish “the kindest and most gentle of people”, who “loved her students at Rosebery so very much”.



Gemma Devonish ‘leaves the most incredible legacy’

“She was a wonderful teacher who inspired a love of her subject and went above and beyond to offer her time, expertise and care to the students,” Lach said. “Her loss to our school is incalculable, but she leaves the most incredible legacy in the hundreds of students that have been touched by her energy, passion and empathy.”

EON PRODUCTIONS/ALAMY

James Bond's latest nemesis? Amazon





Daniel Craig as Bond and with Barbara Broccoli, left, who is at odds with the franchise's owner

The James Bond films have been put on hold while cultural differences are resolved between Barbara Broccoli and Amazon, The Times understands (Alex Farber writes).

The British spy's last film outing was *No Time to Die* in 2021, with the three years since representing the third-longest wait for an instalment since *Dr No* was released in 1962.

While the pace of releases has slowed in recent times, new instalments have tended to arrive every two or three years. However, with no sign of a script, director or actor to succeed Daniel Craig, fans are not expecting a new film for at least another two years.

Reports have emerged of a tense stand-off between Broccoli, 64, who controls the franchise, and Amazon, which acquired the rights when it paid $8.45 billion for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studio two years ago.

At the time, the Bond franchise was considered a key reason for the acquisition but relations have soured. Broccoli has been disparaging of Bond's new owners, whom she described as "idiots", according to The Wall Street Journal.

She is said to be particularly suspicious of the tech company's data-driven approach, which is at odds with her more traditional, instinct-led stewardship of the character.

Broccoli, who inherited control of 007 from her father, Albert "Cubby" Broccoli, more than three decades ago, exudes a "den mother authority" over almost every aspect of the franchise, the journal says.

She considers Bond a family heirloom to be cherished and is said to be suspicious of Amazon's background in retail and has quoted her father, who secured the rights to Ian Fleming's novels, by warning: "Don't have temporary people make permanent decisions."

Amazon declined to comment but insiders have privately acknowledged that no announcement of a new film is on the horizon. There is also an acceptance that the slower pace at which Amazon's programming division operates is at odds with Broccoli's more traditional "gut instinct" method.

A reference to Bond as "content" by an Amazon boss, who was dispatched to win over Broccoli, was received as a "death knell".

However, executives at Amazon are understood to remain confident that the cultural chasm can be bridged. They pointed to Broccoli's positive response to Amazon's Bond-themed TV reality series *007: Road to a Million*. The show, which starred *Succession*'s Brian Cox, will return for a second series.

How to beat your family at board games

Want a monopoly on winning family board games this Christmas? Here's my expert guide, writes **Tom Whipple**

As the board games are brought out this Christmas, some people will claim that the contest is not the point, it's the companionship. It's not the winning that counts, they argue, it's the taking part.

It goes without saying that those people are losers.

Ten years ago I wrote *How to Win Games and Beat People*. In it I spoke to preposterously overqualified people to get their advice on winning games.

How would a structural engineer approach Jenga? "Remember friction increases with load." What would Andy McNab do in a pillow fight? "You shouldn't really bite, gouge or go for their bollocks," he replied. What do game theorists do when playing games? Mathematics mainly.

The tips have served me well, enabling me to annihilate aunts, to unman uncles, to conquer cousins. They have ensured my wife refuses to play Scrabble with me. They have, in other words, caused family strife in the service of tragic over-competitiveness. For those who know what Christmas games are really about — a proxy conflict for long-simmering family feuds — here are my tips to ruin your celebrations.

MONOPOLY

Which is the most landed-on square in Monopoly? Jail, of course. You can be sent there, you can roll three doubles in a row, or you can be just visiting. This tells us that the most landed-on properties are those that come in the rolls after jail. And which are they? With two dice, the most common numbers thrown are 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. And the squares 6, 8 and 9 away from jail are the orange ones.

This tells us that if you can buy orange properties, you get the most lucrative revenue stream. The late John Haigh, a Sussex University game theorist, calculated that for every 100 hits on purple or blue, you get 110 on green or yellow and 122 on orange or red.

What's more, when you take into account the cost of houses, in terms of income to capital deployed, oranges are second only to the blues.

SCRABBLE

Do you know your ob from your bo, your yo from your ya? Do you know that "ea" means "river" in archaic dialect but also that "eo" means your opponent is trying to pull a fast one by putting down a nonexistent word?

If not, then you need to. Learning the two-letter words is the quickest way to improve your Scrabble game. These enable "parallel play", meaning that you can have one word going horizontally that adjoins several vertically.

They are also an induction into the real trick of Scrabble — realising it's not about making nice words. Brett Smitheram, the former world champion, once won a game in French by learning all the two-letter words and the most common seven-letter word, *aligoté*. He doesn't speak French.

His tips? Learn a good selection of four and five-letter words too as they can link the scoring tiles. And remember, to get rid of a bad hand, "vrouw" is an Afrikaans word for "Mrs".



Tom Whipple takes on his children

CHARADES

Eventually, in charades, every player reaches the "flapping" moment. A vigorous waving motion accompanied by a squawk — like a fat turkey trying to fly. It is the accepted mime for, "You're really close but not quite there ..."

Mime artists say there are gestures that work better. If the guess is correct, but should be in the past tense, move a hand backwards over your shoulder. If it is the opposite of what was guessed, hold your palms in front of you and swap your hands over.

If someone needs to be more specific — such as guessing "philosopher" rather than "Wittgenstein" — grind a fist into one palm. Language should not be the limits of one's understanding.

CONNECT 4

There is a simple trick, to what seems like random chance. A Connect 4 game between two closely matched players often ends the same way. Both players get a row in which three out of the four positions are filled. Then they wait, hoping the other player will put their tile below. So the rest of the board fills up until, depending on whose go it is, one player is forced to put a tile where he or she doesn't want to, giving victory to the opponent. It can feel like bad luck. It isn't.

Here is the trick. If you go first, ensure your threatened four in a row will be completed by putting a tile on an odd row — the third or fifth. If you go second, ensure it is completed by putting a tile on an even row — the second, fourth or sixth. Then you will win.

RISK

The rules of Risk seem simple. The outcomes, though, are complicated. Almost certainly more complicated than even the creators intended.

Dice are at the core of the game. When an attacker meets a defender, the attacker can roll three dice (assuming he or she has three armies or more), the defender two (assuming he or she has two or more). The top two attacking dice are then pitted against the two of the defender, with the defender winning if they are tied.

With each roll, the defender can lose two armies, one army or no armies. So can the attacker. Then they roll again.

The question is, in any given battle, who is most likely to win? Answering that required Jason Osborne, now a professor at Miami University, to look at the statistics using a technique known as a Markov chain. What he found was that for any evenly matched conflict of more than five armies a side, the attacker has a decisive, and growing, advantage. So in Risk, attack really is the best form of defence.

... AND EATING

In the end, there is only one game, one true arena, where legends are made and titans are toppled. That, of course, is Christmas lunch. From the first smoked salmon, through the pigs in blankets and sprouts, to the mince pie you save for the King's speech, how do you maintain fighting form for a day in which the average Briton consumes double the recommended calorie intake?

The only person to ask is Crazy Legs Conti, the world record holder in competitive buffet eating — apparently one of the more cerebral disciplines in competitive eating. As with all sports, preparation is key.

Some competitive eaters dangle marshmallows on string down their throat to numb their gag reflex. Some use hot water to loosen their sphincters (all but one, one hopes).

Conti prefers to train like the sportsman he is. "I work out. I jog, I run marathons. I used to do yoga. I'd imagine true yogis would probably feel pretty repulsed that I do it so I can eat more hot dogs."

On the day itself, it is about mind over stomach. "The brain does not receive word from your stomach that it is filling up until 10 or 20 minutes after you start."

What slimmers take from this knowledge is that they should eat slowly. And Conti? "It tells me that you have got ten minutes of really frenzied eating before the brain knows what's going on. That's how you get one over on the lucid, rational part of the brain ... to push it past the point of society, of sanity."

So eat up quick and hope you don't have too much indigestion when it comes to charades.

How to Win Games and Beat People: Defeat and Demolish your Family and Friends! by Tom Whipple is available now





NICK HARRISON/ALAMY

The Fitzrovia Chapel in London, once the chapel of Middlesex Hospital, was chosen by the King over a royal residence for the recording of his message

King picks 'space of quiet reflection' for annual message

The King will deliver his Christmas message at a former hospital chapel, away from the royal estate, Buckingham Palace has announced (Laurence Sleator writes).

This year's message, which was recorded two weeks ago, will come from Fitzrovia Chapel, the former chapel of Middlesex Hospital in central London.

It is the first one in 14 years not to be recorded at either Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle. The decision to use a site with a healthcare connection comes at the end of a year in which the King learnt that he had cancer. Last week it was reported that Charles's treatment would continue into the new year, although indications were that it was moving in a "positive direction". Questioned by a member of the public at an engagement at Waltham Forest in north London last week, the King joked that he was "still alive".

Analysis showed that this year the King was the second-hardest working member of the royal family, despite his diagnosis, carrying out 186 engagements. The Princess Royal was the hardest working.

In a statement, the royal family said: "This year, the King's Christmas broadcast was filmed in the Fitzrovia Chapel, London. Formerly the chapel of Middlesex Hospital, it is now a space for quiet reflection, discovery and celebration, connecting diverse communities from all faiths or none."

The Duke of York, later George VI, laid the foundation stone for the chapel in 1928.

The previous time that a Christmas message was recorded away from a royal residence was in 2010, when Queen Elizabeth II filmed hers at Southwark Cathedral. In 2003, when many British servicemen and women were in Iraq, she recorded it at Combermere Barracks in Windsor. This was the first time in the history of the broadcast that an outside location was used.

Nigella advises to leave the turkey outside ... under a son's skateboard

Lauren Del Fabbro

Nigella Lawson has disclosed her secrets to achieving the perfect spiced and super juicy Christmas roast turkey.

The television chef said she left the bird outside for several days to truly tenderise the meat. Her son's skateboard was a protection against marauding foxes.

In a recipe email, Lawson, 64, said immersing the turkey in a salty, mildly spiced solution for a prolonged period led to a more succulent texture.

"Before I had a garden, I put mine by an open window in the kitchen," she said. "It does mean everyone freezes but who am I going to put first — my turkey or my family?

"Out in the garden — if you're lucky enough to have one — would also be fine, though the pan must be securely covered: if I've got a bucket or bin out in the open, I cover it twice with foil and then put my son's skateboard on top to prevent foxy foraging.

"And, though you might find it hard to believe sight unseen, a raw turkey covered in brine — with its oranges, cinnamon sticks and scattering of spices — looks so beautiful as it steeps that I can never help lifting the lid for quick, blissfully reassuring peeks."

Lawson is passionate about brining, adding that she would not eat a plain bird.

"Not only does it tenderise and add subtle spiciness but it makes carving the turkey much easier," she said.

The brine consists of cinnamon, star anise, caraway seeds, cloves, honey and mustard seeds. The turkey should be soaked for up to two days.

Lawson said free range turkeys should always be chosen because they had more fat, making cooking quicker. The turkey must also be taken from the fridge one to two hours before going into the oven.

Lawson's final tip is to serve it with an allspice gravy — a mix of allspice berries, black peppercorns, turkey giblets, bay leaves, cinnamon, onions and carrots, the juice of a clementine, flour and honey.

This is not the first time Lawson has encouraged experimentation in the kitchen. Her ham in cola is among her best known festive recipes.

She has assured followers that the addition of cola "really works".

She wrote in 2015, when the recipe had been tried and tested for some years: "Don't hesitate, don't be anxious. No one who cooks it, cooks it just once: it always earns a place in every repertoire. I cannot urge you to try this strongly enough. The first time I tried it, it was out of amused interest. I'd heard, and read, about this culinary tradition from the deep South but wasn't expecting it, in all honesty, to be good.

"It is: I'm converted. I have to make myself cook gammon otherwise now; though often I don't bother with the glaze but just leave it for longer in the bubbling Coca-Cola instead. But, if you think about it, it's not surprising it should work: the sweet, spiky drink just infuses it with spirit of barbecue. Don't even think of using Diet Coke."



Nigella Lawson likes to experiment in the Christmas kitchen

Morrisons fails to deliver the goods thanks to card glitch

Will Humphries

Frantic shoppers stocking up on food before Christmas have been beset by stock shortages, cancelled deliveries and malfunctioning store cards.

Morrisons has apologised after some loyalty card and click-and-collect orders were affected on Monday.

A spokeswoman said customers would get 10 per cent off their shop as an apology for "some system issues which were affecting our More Card customers. "For click-and-collect orders, we are asking customers to wait for an email to inform them that their order is ready for collection before heading to the store," she added.

Moira Redhead, an immunocompromised shopper, said her Christmas food delivery, including her turkey, was supposed to arrive on Monday. "I've just had an email from you saying you couldn't fulfil my order and it's been cancelled. What am I meant to do? I can't get to shops," she said.

Another shopper said: "Half my Christmas shopping isn't coming, including the turkey and puddings, and they were ordered a month ago."

Meanwhile, some shoppers paying for an Ocado delivery found their orders lacking. Nicola Straker was "very disappointed that a delivery slot booked months ago was totally pointless" after 17 items were missing.

Ocado said some deliveries in London were affected by a problem at a distribution centre, which had now been fixed. Ocado relies on high-tech depots with robot pickers, including one in southeast London, which claims to be "the largest automated warehouse for online groceries in the world".

An Ocado spokeswoman said: "A small proportion of orders were not delivered as expected. This does not meet our usual high standards and we understand the inconvenience this will have caused, especially at this time of year. We are proactively reaching out to apologise to those affected."

One in nine lonely this Christmas

Georgia Lambert

The number of people spending Christmas alone has soared since 1969, a study has found.

One in nine said they would spend Christmas Day alone this year, up from one in thirty 55 years ago.

The analysis, by the Policy Institute at King's College London, compared shifts in festive behaviour and attitudes over time, drawing on surveys of UK adults aged 21 and over from 1969 and 2024.

The researchers found that among young adults aged 21 to 34, one in 11 said they would spend the day solo compared with one in 100 in the late 1960s. The share of over-65s who expect to spend Christmas alone has held steady at 15 per cent.

Sixty per cent of people said they viewed Christmas as a family occasion rather than a religious event, up from 53 per cent in 1969. Belief in Father Christmas has faded: some 62 per cent today said parents should encourage it, down from 75 per cent in 1969.

The view that Christmas items are sold too early has grown. Seventy nine per cent thought that shops jump the gun on festive sales, up from 64 per cent in 1969.

Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the institute, said: "Christmas is a little bit lonelier and less joyous or magical than it was 55 years ago.

"This doesn't mean we've given up on Christmas. Eight in ten still say they enjoy it, and nine in ten will spend it with family or friends. Even [in 1969] eight in ten people complained that Christmas was too commercialised, exactly the same proportion as today."

News

Residents flee their flats after 4x4 rams into shop and is set ablaze

Charlie Moloney

A supermarket burst into flames in the early hours after a car was apparently driven into the building and set ablaze.

The fire at the front of the store in Sparkhill, Birmingham, yesterday quickly spread to flats on the floor above.

Five people fled their homes and escaped without injury, West Midlands Fire Service said.

Isaac Zintaan, a local property developer, said he was alerted to the fire by residents in his premises.

"I have a business close by. The residents heard a loud explosion – 'like a bomb went off', that's what they described," Zintaan, 28, said. "By the time I arrived, everyone was coughing due to the intensity of the smoke."

He said it looked as though a driver had rammed the vehicle into the front of the building.

Video footage showed a Land Rover on fire with its tailgate towards the property, as if it had been reversed into it.

The 4x4 was later pulled clear of the building by the fire service. It was charred and badly damaged while the bay windows of the flats above the shop were destroyed.

Stratford Road, the A34, was closed for some time in both directions as the emergency services secured the area.



The car appeared to have been reversed into the supermarket

A greengrocer, who gave his name only as Ahmed, said it was his store that had been damaged in the blaze. He said he was "completely devastated" when he realised it was his shop on fire.

West Midlands Police said officers were investigating suspected arson.

A statement from the force said: "We were called at around 4.50am to reports of a fire at a shop. It is understood that a vehicle hit the building and it was set alight, causing the shop and flats above to catch fire."

The fire service said: "This was a fire at the front of a retail shop, which spread to shop signage and the bay windows of flats above the shop.

"Five people from the flats had left their properties and received checks from attending paramedics.

"There were no casualties or injuries and everyone has been accounted for."

The fire had been significant with 11 fire engines and two 4x4 brigade response vehicles crewed by about 55 firefighters responding to the incident, the fire service said.

CPL PHIL DYE/RAF/SWNS



Trail blazers The Red Arrows soar over Niagara Falls on the border of Canada and the US, in one of a set of pictures released to mark their 60th anniversary season

Staff 'locked in to finish unsafe e-cars for the owners of Jaguar'

Emma Yeomans

Engineers working for the parent company Jaguar Land Rover were locked in a Vietnamese factory in a rush to get an "unsafe" car to market, whistleblowers have told The Times.

One worker, who claimed he was sacked by Jaguar Land Rover after raising concerns about the electric cars, said he feared the vehicles had "critical" safety faults.

Hazar Denli, formerly an engineer at Tata Technologies Limited (TTL), the UK consultancy arm of the Indian multinational Tata Group, shared his concerns on the website Reddit after witnessing faults in a vehicle produced for the Vietnamese company VinFast.

VinFast, a subsidiary of Vietnam's largest company, Vingroup, contracted TTL to design a range of electric vehicles. It launched its vehicles in the US in 2022, and opened an assembly plant in North Carolina last year, but has scrapped plans to release right-hand drive vehicles.

Denli, who worked in the UK testing VinFast's prototypes, quit his job as he was unhappy being associated with the car. He was later hired by Jaguar Land Rover, a subsidiary of Tata Group. But, after seeing repeated reports of crashes of VinFast cars, which appeared to show serious safety faults, he posted on the forum Reddit with details about the cars.

Although he posted anonymously, his identity was revealed to TTL by the Vietnamese manufacturer, who Denli alleges contacted Jaguar Land Rover to demand his sacking. He has launched employment proceedings for unfair dismissal.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the US road safety regulator, is reviewing the VinFast VF8 after a family of four was killed in a crash in California. Police reported that the vehicle lost control, veered off the road, hit a pole and caught fire.

Denli described a "rushed" development process and said staff were under so much pressure to produce the car that engineers in Vietnam were locked in the factory overnight.

A second member of staff, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed he had been locked in the factory over a weekend as part of VinFast's push for productivity.

In internal documents seen by The Times, a representative of Tata acknowledged a lockdown took place. The document stated: "There was one specific story he referenced [in his Reddit post] at some point during Covid issues they locked down the factory — anyone in the factory was locked in and slept there [...] There were only a few people subjected to that lockdown. We know the guys involved in that and know that Hazar was good mates with one of them. We know not first-hand experience but know who he was getting information from."

However Denli alleged that the lockdown was due to pressure from VinFast for staff to keep working to get the car to market. The second whistleblower, who was subject to the lockdowns, said the production process was so rushed that lockdowns were a frequent occurrence. "There's lots of incidents where people were locked in the factory," he said. The pressure to get the car to market resulted in the testing being "completely rushed", Denli alleged.

VinFast and TTL were contacted for comment. A spokesman for Jaguar Land Rover said: "We do not comment on ongoing legal proceedings."

Palestinians in UK set to sue BP over 'oil for Israel'

Shayma Bakht

British Palestinians have threatened legal action against BP, which they allege is supplying Israel with crude oil. Lead claimants in the case would include a British citizen who lost 16 relatives in Israeli airstrikes and whose surviving family face "dire humanitarian conditions".

A 36-page letter was sent to the multinational before a claim, accusing it of breaching its human-rights responsibilities and commitments to international law over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which it operates and manages.

The 1,768km pipeline is owned by a consortium of 11 companies and carries oil from Azerbaijan. At Ceyhan, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, the oil is distributed to international markets, including Israel.

The letter alleges that "Israel relies heavily on crude oil and refined petroleum imports to run its large fleet of fighter jets, tanks and other military vehicles and operations, as well as the bulldozers implicated in clearing Palestinian homes and olive groves to make way for unlawful Israeli settlement".

The claimants allege that despite the International Court of Justice ruling "that Israel's actions were consistent with the characteristics of genocide", BP has continued to facilitate the oil supplies, which they claim are used to sustain Israel's military operations.

Issuing a letter before claim to BP, the law firm Bindmans demanded an "immediate cessation of oil supply to Israel" and "full disclosure of relevant documents ... relating to BP's operations [in Israel]". It asked for an "admission of liability" and public apology to the claimants for the harm caused.

Tayab Ali, the head of international law at Bindmans, said: "This legal action against BP sets a significant precedent, highlighting the potential liability of corporations for their role in facilitating international law violations.

"If successful it could pave the way for similar claims against other British companies complicit in supplying resources that sustain Israel's military operations in Gaza.

"Moreover it will open the door to corporate criminal liability for complicity in war crimes, underscoring that businesses can no longer operate with impunity when their actions contribute to severe human rights abuses and violations of international law."

BP declined to comment.

News

Budget 'poses threat to sexual violence victims'

Lauren Del Fabbro

Funding cuts and the increase in employers' national insurance contributions will have dire consequences for victims of domestic and sexual violence, charities have said.

A group of charity leaders wrote to the prime minister yesterday warning him that the two measures could force them to close "our doors to vulnerable victims of crime".

The group said the moves posed a threat to the government's mission to halve violence against women and girls.

Rape Crisis England and Wales, Victim Support, Welsh Women's Aid, Imkaan and Women's Aid said in the joint letter that the cut to core police and crime commissioner (PCC) budgets would force them to make redundancies. Victim support services are funded and commissioned by a range of agencies, including PCCs at a local level so the reduction has a knock-on effect.

The organisations say offences of violence against women account for 20 per cent of crime recorded by police.

They added that redundancies and loss of staff were a threat to the sector, with charities already struggling to afford to pay crucial specialist staff well.

The open letter stated that a third of rape crisis centres were expecting to cut staff before the end of the financial year and 30 per cent of directors feared they would have to close their centre.

The funding cut and the increase in national insurance contributions will come into force next April. The charities said the national insurance increase alone would cost them many millions of pounds.

The letter addressed to Sir Keir Starmer, said: "The government has repeatedly said it is protecting services for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence but as providers of these services, this is not the reality."

Katie Kempen, the chief executive of Victim Support, said: "Closing our doors to vulnerable victims of crime is the last thing we want to do. But we could be left with no choice."

A government official said it had inherited a justice system under pressure and a hole in the finances.

"Our mission to halve violence against women and girls remains a top priority and we are committed to ensuring we can deliver the justice victims deserve," the official said. "By protecting support for victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse, we are ensuring help is available to survivors of these awful crimes."

What we asked the NHS for last Christmas

Alcohol consumption, rabies and bites – both animal and human – were high on the list for health advice being sought from the NHS on Christmas and Boxing Day last year, data shows.

People also sought information on burns and scalds, according to NHS England, and views of web pages relating to breastfeeding and drinking were up by 146 per cent compared to the week before. Those looking for advice on rabies jumped by 123 per cent while visits to web pages about animal and human bites rose by a third.

Sir Stephen Powis, NHS England's medical director, said: "We hope everyone has a happy and healthy Christmas – but accidents and injuries can happen, so if you do burn yourself putting the roast potatoes in the oven, or you pick up a winter virus and want some support ... the NHS website is the best place to find useful advice."

On health conditions, the most commonly viewed page after Covid-19 was norovirus, equalling one view every nine seconds in the 48-hour period.



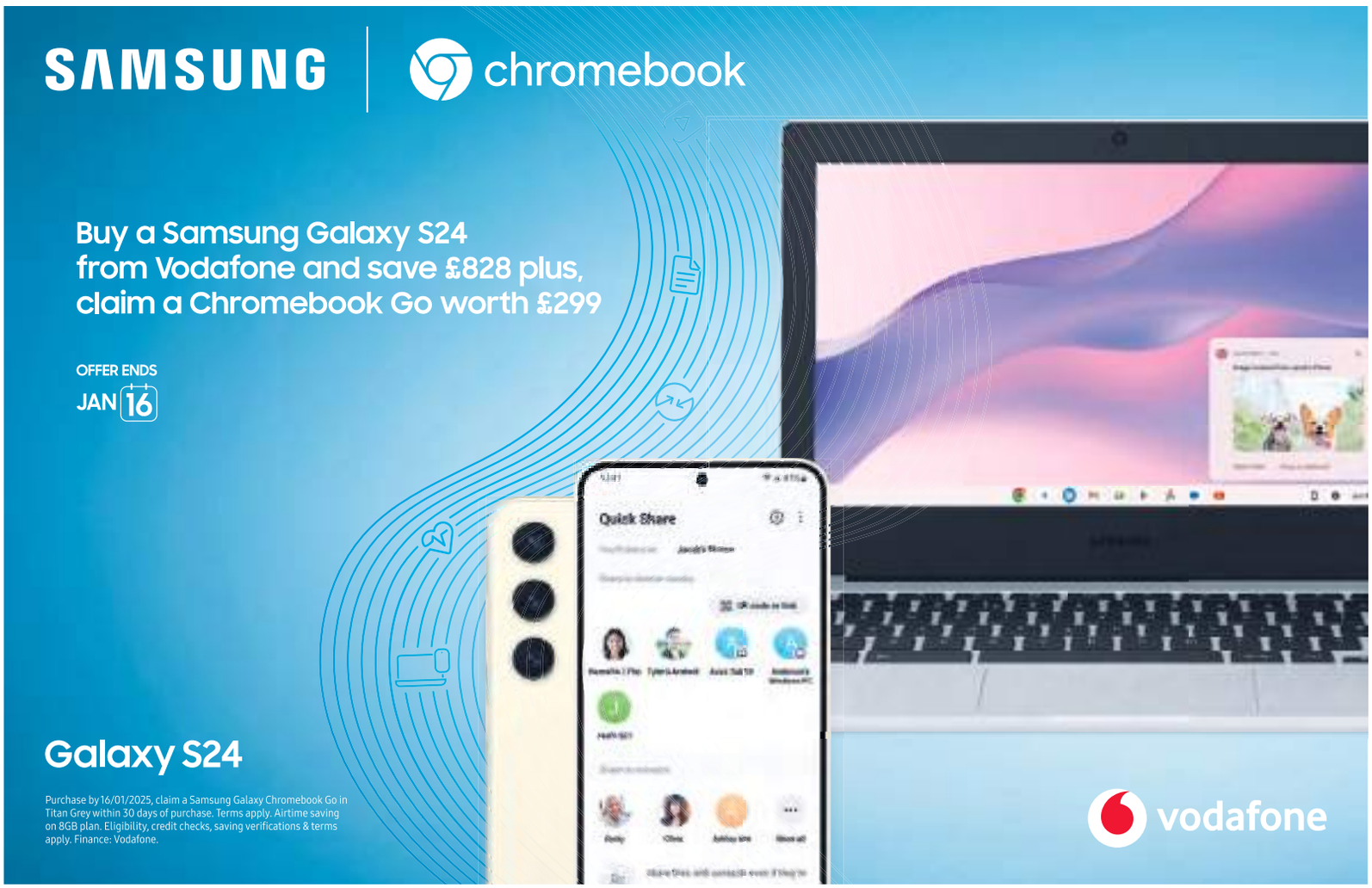
Hidden clue to royal painter's secret son

Hidden in the brush strokes of a portrait that took more than ten years to paint is "one of the most compelling stories of love and lust in British art" (Jack Blackburn writes).

The art historian Bendor Grosvenor believes he has uncovered evidence that demonstrates Sir Thomas Lawrence, an early president of the Royal Academy, not only had an affair with one of his sitters but also had a son with her.

While researching his book, *The Invention of British Art*, Grosvenor delved into the much-rumoured affair between Lawrence and Isabella Wolff. In the early 19th century whispers abounded that the two had had an affair while she was married to Jens Wolff, the Danish consul in London. It has now been discovered that Wolff's son, Hermann, thought to have been born in 1810, was in





ALAMY



Similarities between Lawrence's portrait of Isabella Wolff and Michelangelo's Leda and the Swan, far left, hint at a secret affair

fact born in about 1802, at the requisite time after his mother and Lawrence met. Wolff died in 1829, leaving Lawrence bereft. He died six months later, as Hermann tended him.

The new evidence prompted Grosvenor to look at Lawrence's *Portrait of Mrs Wolff* with new eyes and he thinks the work is laced with clues about their relationship. He cites a letter Lawrence sent to Wolff that said: "A really fine critic should, on looking at a picture, be able to assign a cause and motive for every form and hue that compose it, since nothing in it is a matter of accident."

Grosvenor took this as a challenge and has found some tantalising details. "It is a really emotionally charged, almost erotic picture, albeit within the confines of decency of the times," he said. More intriguingly, he sees a similarity with Michelangelo's *Leda and the Swan,* of which Lawrence owned an engraving.

The myth depicted in the work says that Leda slept with her husband and Zeus on the same night, doing so while the latter was in the form of a swan. She then brought forth two eggs which produced four children. This seems to be a direct reference by Lawrence to their affair, the artist having modestly cast himself as the King of the Gods.

Grosvenor is hesitant to present a magic-eye theory, but thinks there is something hidden in plain sight in the painting. He sees the book open before Wolff as the body and wings of the swan, and believes a "bit of fabric that makes no sense", reaching down from her shoulder, is the swan's neck rising to meet her face, as in Michelangelo's work.

Earl upset by plans to revive Clandon House

Geraldine Scott
Senior Political Correspondent

A burnt-out Palladian mansion will look like "a cross between an office block and an airport" with a Georgian façade if a National Trust renovation goes ahead as planned, fears a relative of its former owner.

Rupert Onslow, the 8th Earl of Onslow, has objected to the proposals for Clandon House, his grade I listed former ancestral home near Guildford, Surrey, which was gutted by fire in 2015.

The earl, whose family owned the estate from 1641, said he did not see how the property could be "resuscitated in any way that's either economically, practically or intellectually beneficial". The house, built in the 1730s, was given to the National Trust in 1956.

The trust has submitted plans for a "purposeful forward-looking response" to the fire, turning the house into an attraction with a restored façade but with the interior remaining blackened. The plans propose suspended walkways, a glass roof and a roof terrace that would include a refreshment kiosk.

The scheme faces opposition from Restore Trust, a group that believes the National Trust is straying from its values. It is raising funds to pay for a barrister to fight the plans.

Onslow said he would rather see the ruins left as they are and believes visitors would "happily" view them without modern additions. "If your Picasso has gone, your Picasso has gone, and [if] someone has painted another one it is not a Picasso, it is a replica," he said.

"My preference for her future is that she is left, secured safely by modern structures, in her current form, open to the elements, the building equivalent of 'ashes to ashes'," he said.

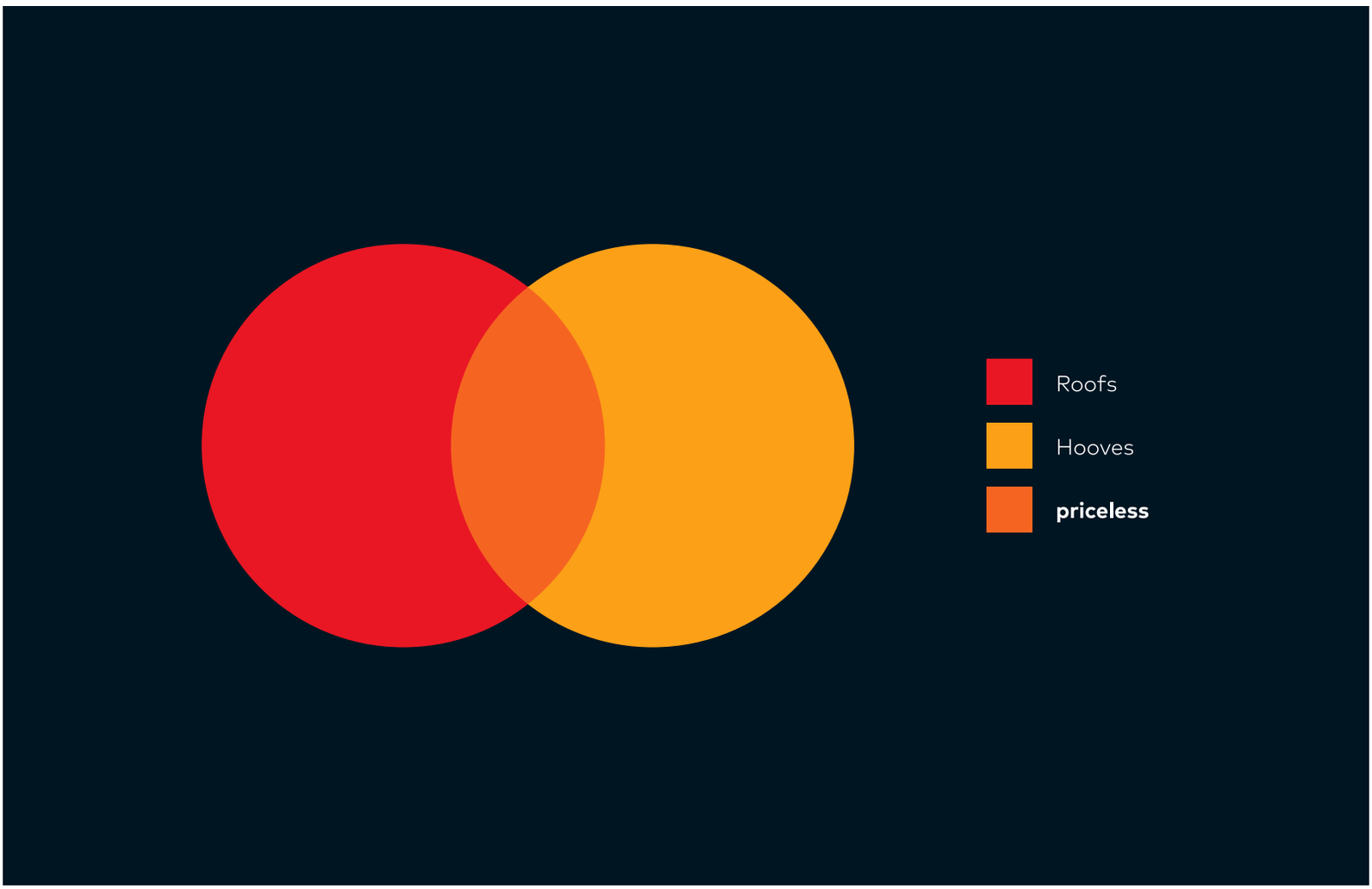
Onslow, who is not a member of Restore Trust, added: "I think the ruins are beautiful, very beautiful, very atmospheric, and are much more in tune with the building ... but this is just going to make it look like a cross between an office block and an airport."



The National Trust wants to retain the burnt-out interior of the building

The National Trust said: "Our vision is for a house that showcases the importance and beauty of what survived the fire and celebrates the stories of the many people who made and crafted it over centuries.

"Public feedback has been overwhelmingly positive."



News

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL



Jack Hill, the Times photographer not only took pictures of the event, he took part in it too. He said the conditions underground — 13C with 98 per cent relative humidity — were a technical challenge

Runners fizzing with enthusiam for 10km cellar race

THE TIMES THE SUNDAY TIMES CHRISTMAS APPEAL

Charity workers take on a sporting challenge to help troubled families stay together, **Lottie Hayton** writes

Eighty metres below the rolling vine-covered hills north of Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, is the world's second largest wine cellar.

Cricova, the "pearl of Moldovan vinification" was created in 1954. It is best known for its sparkling wines but its 70km of tunnels also feature the president's wine collection, an orthodox chapel, the Yuri Gagarin tasting room where the first man to travel into space drank for two days straight, as well as the confiscated 2,000-bottle wine collection of Hermann Goering, the commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe.

On a rainy day this month some unusual new occupants lined up to enter the state-owned cellar. In sports gear and headtorches, 14 runners limbered up in readiness for a 10km run through the labyrinth in aid of Hope and Homes for Children (HHC), a charity that works in Moldova and elsewhere to close orphanages and integrate children into families.

Mark Waddington, 56, chief executive of HHC, and one of the 14, said later: "I wanted to use this sweaty affair to raise awareness and get Moldovan organisations to really buy into what we're doing.

"No child should end up in an orphanage. If there's one thing you can do to generate social coherence in the event of existential crises like invasion from Russia — and the threat in Moldova is felt palpably — is invest in family. You invest in family, you're investing in community and creating social coherence."

The group completed the run in 50 minutes and raised £20,315, beating its £20,000 target. Runners came from across the country, brought together on Facebook by Iulian Bercu, 45, a marathon runner and ambassador of Child, Community, Family (CCF), the partner organisation working on the ground in Moldova for HHC.

HHC chose the location as it is one of the most culturally and politically significant sites in Moldova. Its European hall plays host to the Congress of Local Authorities and meetings between the president and foreign dignitaries are held in the presidential hall. Tourism is recovering from the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, before which the cellars received up to 450 visitors a day.

The temperature is kept between 12C and 14C and the relative humidity is 98 per cent. According to guides at the winery, the stone sides of the cellar contain sediment from the Sarmatian Sea, which existed millions of years ago and covered from modern-day Vienna to the foothills of Tien Shan, central Asia. The porous stone creates the perfect microclimate to store wine.

Sergiu Braga, 35, a former serviceman with a knee problem who runs short distances to stay active, said: "I cannot run 100km any more but I still can run 10km. The oxygen is a bit lower in the cellar so that can make it harder but today was a great day."

Tired but cheery after sharing a glass of Cricova's fizz with fellow athletes, Braga said: "I used to be mayor in a village called Ulmu and I've seen how impactful CCF's work can be. It's a pleasure to participate for this charity."

The effect of CCF and HHC's work can also be seen on the border with Romania, southwest of Chisinau,where Tamara, 37, her son, Andrei, 16, and six other children live in a two-room home. Tamara had suffered with alcoholism and the children were put into two residential institutions but they have been reunited by CCF. The charity ensured she had addiction therapy and could move into a mother and baby unit to be with the youngest four before they came home.

Although their finances are limited, Tamara was emphatic: "I don't have any challenges, everything we wanted we achieved. I am home and here I feel the warmth of my kids and we play together like before." The money raised in Cricova's wine cellars will go towards helping people like Tamara.

Jack Hill, chief news photographer of The Times, found himself doing the 10km run while on assignment for the charity appeal. "I do enjoy running but it had been a while since I'd tackled such a distance," he said.

"What I hadn't anticipated were the unique challenges of the event: running through the dark, winding tunnels of the wine cellar, which made photography a trial. Capturing moving subjects in such conditions was no easy feat.

"On top of that, the chilly temperatures took me by surprise. When I remarked to Mark [who was in shorts] that we seemed underdressed compared to the other runners, he simply replied, 'We're British, after all.' That settled it."

Every pound donated to Hope and Homes for Children by readers will be doubled up to £500,000 by an anonymous donor.



Mark Waddington, the charity's boss, was joined by supporters for the sponsored run

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Forget centrist dads, real doubt can be radical
James Marriott
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Comment

The destruction of nature is harming us all

Studies show how vital the natural world is to our health, happiness and very survival, yet the devastation continues

William Hague



My late mother always insisted that my health would benefit from having a spider plant in any room where I spent a lot of time. So, as I sit in my favourite place for a Monday morning, writing my Times column in my study at home, a large such plant — a descendant of the one my mother gave me — is close by. That plant, science has established, can remove many toxins from the air, including common carcinogens, while helping to maintain a healthy level of humidity, and of course emitting oxygen at the same time. My mother was right.

A spider plant is one tiny example of how proximity to nature brings multiple benefits. Two very different publications this year have demonstrated both the vast potential scale of those benefits and the corresponding danger of thinking we can do without them.

Last week, a UN panel of scientists, IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) published its global assessment, three years in the making and approved by almost 150 countries. It showed nature in decline in all parts of the world, with serious consequences for water supplies, climate change, food production and human health that already cost trillions of dollars a year. And it pointed out that a narrow focus on climate can lead to policies that inadvertently damage nature — fast-growing trees will capture carbon quickly but might produce a dense forest that is of no help to native vegetation and wildlife.

This has indeed been another bad year in the accelerating tragedy of human destruction of the natural world. The global summit on biodiversity, Cop16, racked up some agreements but eventually collapsed without consensus on the main issues. Efforts to negotiate a treaty restricting plastics production failed. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature said more than a quarter of known species are now threatened with extinction; the WWF announced that monitored populations of wild animals have fallen by 73 per cent since 1970; over a third of fish stocks are being over-fished; and on the globally agreed goal of protecting 30 per cent of the Earth's surface by 2030 we are way behind — with about 17 per cent of all land and only 8 per cent of the seas currently under some form of protection. Meanwhile, the

> The cost of tackling biodiversity loss is set to double in ten years

abominable illegal trade in wildlife products continues to devastate many species.

Yet a second and particularly fascinating publication this year was the book *Good Nature*, by the leading biologist Kathy Willis, which explains the emerging science of how nature is critical to our wellbeing. It is well understood that a walk in a park or time spent in the garden can lift our mood, while a few days among mountains and lakes can be completely reviving. Willis sets out the rapidly accumulating studies that show this is not just a feeling: it arises from our chemistry and biology.

It might not be surprising that walking for 15 minutes in a forest produces a sharp fall in the stress hormone cortisol, as well as pulse rate and blood pressure, when compared with walking in an urban setting. But it is more striking that major studies have shown that people who live in greener environments have a lower incidence of mental health disorders; that mapping satellite data on to population health statistics in America showed the loss of two million ash trees in cities was associated with many thousands of additional deaths from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases; and that an analysis of more than 300 studies showed that children exposed to green spaces enjoy a huge — more than 100 per cent — improvement in health and cognitive outcomes.

Perhaps most revealing was the 2020 study in Finland of young children using different play areas over the course of 28 days. Those playing on soil from forests and with peat blocks to climb on showed a large increase in the diversity of the microbes on their skin and in their gut compared with others using more manufactured playgrounds. Their blood samples showed significantly stronger signs of a healthy immune system. That this could be apparent after only a month is remarkable. As Willis notes, "the importance of this study cannot be overstated".

Taken together, the IPBES report and the *Good Nature* book sum up the depressing truth well: every global analysis shows we are still destroying nature at a terrifying rate, while each medical study in localities around the world reveals more persuasively how much our lives depend on it. Both publications point



A 15-minute forest walk is proven to lower levels of stress hormone cortisol

out that there are huge implications for the policies of governments. Many countries are spending vast sums subsidising unsustainable fishing or farming practices and then fighting escalating crises in everything from mental health to flooding and water scarcity as if they were all separate, unrelated issues. The cost of tackling biodiversity loss will double in ten years if it is not addressed, say the scientists.

There is still hope. Examples exist of good governance that combines a healthy ecosystem with a thriving economy, such as in the Galapagos Marine Reserve. And when we allow nature to restore itself, it does so rapidly. But progress will depend on a key recommendation of the IPBES report, that we have to change our views and values to recognise that humans and nature are interconnected. That means that what we do nationally and locally is very important too.

In Britain, Labour ministers have made a decent start on showing their commitment to nature, with measures ranging from a tree-planting taskforce to a review of plans to meet environmental targets and the appointment of the first Special Representative for Nature. This month they announced plans for a Nature Restoration Fund, into which housebuilders will pay, in place of the complex environmental rules that can slow down planning consent.

These policies are certainly well intentioned, but the test of them will be whether the benefits to people are personal and local: urban populations need parks they can walk to much more than they need a nature project miles away. There is much more that we can do. If we accept the new science that is emerging, we would have far more forest schools, keep allotments open and experiment much more with prescribing nature — pilot projects have suggested that nature walks and community planting can often have a better effect on mental health than drugs.

We can at least hope that in 2025, instead of scratching our heads at rising anxiety, depression and unexplained illnesses, we realise that such problems might be connected with laying waste to the ecosystem of which we are a part. And while the implications of that slowly sink into the thinking of governments, we can all act on it. I will be spending as much of Christmas outdoors as festivities and daylight hours permit. The evidence shows that all need the connection with nature that we have so nearly lost.

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Comment

Slow Horses' brilliant losers could only be British

Whether through their personal flaws or redemption arcs, these sidelined spies speak to us all

Melanie Phillips



@MELANIELATEST

Recently I watched season four of the Apple TV drama series *Slow Horses*. The show, the first season of which aired in 2022, has had rave reviews. Perversely, I ignored it. It sounded just too silly. But then I scrolled on to an episode, got totally hooked and over the past few weeks have binge-watched the entire four series. It's compulsive viewing.

The premise is droll and the whole thing is heavy on irony with a helping of outright satire. A group of MI5 agents who have screwed up their careers but haven't been sacked have been exiled to a grotty backwater office called Slough House (the Betjeman line "come friendly bombs and fall on Slough" comes irresistibly to mind).

Their boss, Jackson Lamb, is unkempt and slovenly, has disgusting personal habits and treats his agents with open and savage contempt (with zinging one-line put-downs).

His team of disgraced losers somehow get involved in a series of intelligence ops of great importance to national security. Despite their often hapless blundering, they still manage to out-manoeuvre their regular colleagues in the service and save the day for the nation.

The cast are all excellent, but what makes the show so compulsive are two compelling performances by Gary Oldman as Lamb and Saskia Reeves as his much put-upon, yet ever-loyal secretary, Catherine Standish. Both actors totally inhabit these characters, at whose buried trauma their faces and gestures so expressively hint.

The show isn't perfect. Aficionados debate its flaws. Did season three dip in quality or get even better? Did season four's plot line become too forced and outlandish, as the New York Times reviewer said in September, or was it the best yet and had us all gripped?

The appeal of *Slow Horses*, however, lies in its unique selling point which also makes it a show that could only have been conceived in Britain. That's because it's about a bunch of losers.

> Lamb's bitter cynicism is a carapace meant to keep emotion at bay

The New York Times reviewer loved it as "a terrific blend of mordant, melancholy comedy and absorbing action and mystery, not quite like anything else on TV". Too right: it could never have been made in America where the term "loser" is the ultimate insult. In Britain, it's viewed as the national characteristic. If America is all about "can do", Britain is "can't do".

Lamb's team have all been brought low by personal flaws — addiction to drugs, alcohol or gambling, post-traumatic stress or impulsive behaviour arising from severe feelings of inadequacy. While America worships success and achievement, Britain validates precisely what's on display at Slough House — failure, weakness and personal pain. The British lap up examples of these frailties. They make them feel better about themselves. Think Princess Diana.

But what Britain also loves is redemption and transmutation of disadvantage (think Diana again), and a kick up the pants for people who have prospered on the backs of those who struggle with life's vicissitudes. That's what *Slow Horses* provides in spades.

For Lamb's team of misfits and specimens of human wreckage are more adept than the regulars in the service. Desperately keen to get back into the action, the Slow Horses think outside the box, join up the dots and effortlessly hack into the ostensibly unhackable. They display reckless courage and some even get killed.

Standish, the pathetic office dogsbody and alcoholic, turns out to possess a backbone of steel and a mastery of tradecraft that leaves fellow spies standing. As for Lamb himself, his bitter cynicism and breathtaking callousness is a defensive carapace designed to keep emotion at bay. And that's due to a background in which treachery and betrayal caused him to believe that life was nothing other than nasty, brutish and no great loss if short.

But while he flays his agents with his merciless and abusive tongue, he cares deeply when one of his "joes" is killed. For what drives Lamb is profound and burning anger resulting from a violated requirement to uphold justice over injustice, loyalty over treachery, right over wrong.

Like his much vilified team, he is propelled by the need to ensure that the good guys win and the bad ones get taken out of circulation. So he's not actually cynical and defeated at all. He's actually the best spy in the business, and in a properly ordered world he'd be running MI5 rather than exiled to purgatory in a building so neglected that the team has to kick open the broken front door every time they want to get into the office.

By contrast, the people running the service are corrupt, grasping or drivellingly inept. Satirically drawn, their exaggerated flaws drive home the point that those in charge have only got to where they are by shafting each other, pocketing favours and smarming up to the right people.

Sound familiar? The losers of Slough House provide a mordant and melancholy comment on a Britain of losers, a country whose governing class has destroyed trust and respect and moral sense as it accelerates a national decline it can't stop because the wrong people are in charge.

Did Mick Herron, who wrote the books on which the series is based, or Will Smith, the creator and executive producer of the TV drama, intend *Slow Horses* to be an allegory? It certainly feels like one. Happy Christmas!

Giles Coren Notebook

In the bleak midwinter, sparkling wit made poem

Christmas is a time to think of old friends, and none of mine is older than the great Sir Richard Stilgoe, who, luckily, thought of me this year and sent me quite the most brilliant Christmas card I have ever received. Though, as you may well imagine, I do not receive many.

Whether you remember Richard as the impish musical satirist on *That's Life* and *Nationwide* or think of him as the lyrical genius behind *Cats*, *Starlight Express* and *Phantom of the Opera*, you won't be surprised to hear that his card came in the form of a song. It is a rewriting of *Good King Wenceslas* and, frankly, needs no further introduction, other than to say that he has called it *In the Bleak Midwinter 2024*, and it is best sung aloud ...

Good King Wenceslas looked out
on the feast of Stephen
Where the snow lay round about
deep and crisp and even
Brightly shone the moon that
night, though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight
gath'ring winter fuel.

"Hither, page, explain to me why's
there been this mix-up?
Yonder peasant, who is he? Why's
he picking sticks up?"
"Sire — his payment's been denied;
surely you have read it,
Sadly he had not applied
for his pension credit.

He's out in the snow
and frost in his skimpy
raiment
Poor old fellow — he's
just lost his winter fuel
payment.
And on top of that
he's old, and a fam'ly
farmer
When he dies his
land gets sold thanks
to Sir Keir Starmer.

Those are all the
reasons why he is
gath'ring firewood
He can't simply go
and buy firewood just
as sire would.
And his pension plan
one day will attract
death duties
From now on he
has to pay VAT on
school fees."

Good King Wenceslas said, "Right — go and find this peasant.
We'll invite him home tonight, give him wine and pheasant.
Tell him I'll make him a loan, add his lands to my lands,
Through a company I own in the Cayman Islands."

Pure and free from sin's alloy they shared their Christmas eves,
And wished the whole world Christmas joy — even Rachel Reeves!



Power of the arts

Lest you think it rather lazy of me to bung a mate's song in The Times on Christmas Eve instead of writing something of my own, I have promised to donate my fee for this column to The Orpheus Centre Trust, the charity Richard founded to unlock the boundless potential of young disabled adults through the transformative power of the arts. And, unlike the fiscal promises of Rachel Reeves, it is one I intend to keep. Hang on... *logs on to orpheus.org.uk* ... Have kept.

Reviewing the situation

If you're planning a trip to the theatre, take a tip from me and do the opposite of whatever The Guardian says (good advice generally). So steer away from the cloth-eared, gender-reversed, virtue-signalling *Tempest* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, with its BDSM gimp Caliban and a gawping plank of 2x4 as Prospero claiming once to have been Sigourney Weaver, which The Guardian critic Arifa Akbar loved. But do go and see Cameron Mackintosh's *Oliver!* at the Gielgud, which she didn't.

Akbar dismissed it as "safe, tame and nostalgic" (At Christmas? How ghastly!) and felt it hadn't dealt with the "problem" of Nancy being killed by Bill Sykes (they shoot him dead — what else can you do?).

All The Guardian liked, in its identity obsessiveness, was the fact that they had solved the "problematic" Fagin (everything is a "problem" for these people) by casting an actor "of Jewish heritage". But it's not just any Jew. It is the (second) handsomest Jew I've ever seen. Guy called Simon Lipkin. Esther and Kitty were fanning themselves furiously all through *Gotta Pick A Pocket or Two* and afterwards Esther said, "We've had the hot priest and the hot rabbi. But that right there, that is Hot Fagin."



Starmer's approach to China is reckless and incoherent

Tom Tugendhat

The British public now has an insight into something I have warned of for over a decade — the escalation of China's aggressive attempts to intimidate, pressure and influence the UK. Far from being confined to the fiction of blockbuster TV shows, China's hostile acts are real and dangerous, and the government is not doing enough to keep us safe.

The exposure of the alleged Chinese spy Yang Tengbo came in the same week that MI5 was found by the courts to have acted lawfully in issuing a rare "interference alert" about another alleged Chinese spy, Christine Lee, who is said to have infiltrated parliament to conduct covert political interference on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party.

These are just the latest in a long campaign of hostile acts orchestrated by Beijing, whether penetrating UK politics, businesses and universities, installing secret Chinese police stations in British cities, or assaulting a protester outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester.

Perhaps most shocking, the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities have held a British citizen in arbitrary detention for four years. Jimmy Lai, a 77-year-old journalist, publisher and businessman known for his peaceful campaigning for democracy and media freedom, has been held in solitary confinement in Hong Kong since December 2020. The UN has ruled that Lai is suffering grave violations of his human rights and the UK government has repeatedly called for his immediate, unconditional release.

Faced with this scale of hostile state activity, the government should implement a robust and principled strategy to defend the British people, whether here in the UK or in a cell in Hong Kong. But the Starmer government's approach is reckless and incoherent. Last month the prime minister engaged with President Xi at the G20. This meeting followed the foreign secretary's visit to China in October; the chancellor is due to visit next month. While engagement with China may be necessary to advance our economic interests, the government's present approach is akin to taking a begging bowl to a bully.

Before engaging any further, the government should make clear that Beijing will not be gifted a visit from Rachel Reeves in January unless Lai comes home first. It must also implement the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme to strengthen the UK's resilience against covert foreign interference. China must be placed immediately in the enhanced tier of the scheme so as to properly protect the UK from national security threats. Anything less will jeopardise British safety and prosperity for years to come.

Tom Tugendhat is a former security minister



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Forget centrist dads, real doubt can be radical

In an age of certainty, it's easy to look on political flexibility as woolly or weak but it doesn't have to mean cosy consensus

James Marriott



@J_AMESMARRIOTT

Amid the heart-of-the-Vatican bomb plots, episcopal transgenderism and *EastEnders*-level sexual intrigue, the most improbable event in *Conclave*, the new film of Robert Harris's splendidly twisty papal thriller, is a sermon delivered by Ralph Fiennes's character, Cardinal Lawrence. Addressing the assembled scarlet eminences of the College of Cardinals, Lawrence rails against dogmatism and impertinently recommends to his colleagues the virtues of doubt.

"The one sin I have come to fear more than any other," he tells them gravely, "is certainty." The heart of the Catholic Church, the viewer may reflect, is an unlikely forum for such meditations. After all, the church really has dogmas and cardinals are among the few people professionally required to be dogmatic. But this is fiction and in his homily Lawrence offers a compelling articulation of a political philosophy that is presently unfashionable: uncertainty.

Ours, as you have probably noticed, is an age addicted to certainty. We applaud the public stand, the activist, the "conviction politician". To have stuck to the same position for 50 years is regarded not as a mark of intellectual necrosis but of moral steel. Mental flexibility and a capacity for self-criticism are regarded as kind words for weakness and hypocrisy. The least satisfactory response for any politician harried by a journalist on the *Today* programme is "I don't know" — as Kemi Badenoch discovered yesterday when she refused Amol Rajan's invitation to commit to "fast" and "clear" policy commitments.

Nowadays, conviction lends mediocrity a spurious lustre — witness Liz Truss, who gulled Conservative members into supposing that her brittle zealotry made her a latter-day Iron Lady. The modern lexicon of political invective furnishes ample abuse for flip-floppers, wets, U-turners and melts, but little verbal ammunition with which the embattled doubters may return fire. "You're so passionate!" meant as an insult has an unignorably lame ring to it.

Part of the problem for the politics of doubt is that it has an image problem. Certainty is attractive in an anxious age. Uncertainty is associated with an ineffectual, helpless, compromising political centre whose representatives are being expelled from power across the western world. The radicals at the political extremes have the momentum.

In *Conclave*, Cardinal Lawrence is a reasonable, middle-of-the-road sort of chap wearily trying to steer a path between the vape-toting reactionary show-off Cardinal Tedesco and the impractically over-principled liberalism of Cardinal Bellini. That neat triptych is flattering to the self-mythology of the many centrists who imagine themselves to belong to a rocky and embattled island of honest doubt between the two mad seas of certainty to the left and the right. But I am increasingly unpersuaded that doubt really is a special virtue of the political centre. Nobody who has listened to Emily Maitlis and Jon Sopel's *The News Agents* podcast or found themselves stuck in conversation with a monomaniacally aggrieved Remainer can long sustain the idea that centrists are short of conviction.

> Keir Starmer plods dully ahead and our economy flatlines

Doubt is a more interesting and difficult political virtue than is commonly acknowledged. A true political doubter — someone genuinely willing to have their mind changed on every issue — should end up with a chaotic and ever-changing spread of opinions. There is no obvious reason why a habit of scepticism about one's own views should inevitably land a person at a perfect arbitrary midpoint between left and right.

In my narrow personal experience real doubt is distributed surprisingly evenly across the political spectrum. I count a couple of diehard Corbynistas and at least one Reform voter among my friends. Sometimes (though far from inevitably) those outside the political mainstream can be more ruefully self-aware and sceptical about their politics than my natural allies in the centre. They are reminded of how marginal their ideas are every day. Complacency is easier if your views belong to the consensus and are rarely challenged.

This, I should say, is not a call for Times readers to start voting for Nigel Farage or throwing soup at the masterpieces in the National Gallery. But everyone who prides themselves on their uncertainty and open-mindedness should remember that reasonable centrist types can be guilty of rigid thinking too.

Indeed, it is too rarely remembered that zealotry is not the only enemy of doubt. Intransigence is as often the result of bovine incuriosity as it is of ferocious conviction. Many centrist politicians have struggled to adapt to turbulent times, mulishly ploughing ahead as if nothing has changed since 2005. The mild obstinacy of consensus can be just as dangerous as the wilful obstinacy of radicalism. "France," as my colleague Matthew Syed observed recently in an article on that country's economic woes, "has had governments of left and right and everything in between while delivering policies of stunning consistency for five decades." Something similar is true of the political culture that drove Germany's long unchallenged dependence on Russian gas.

Sir Keir Starmer is not much of an extremist. But as he plods dully and unimaginatively ahead and our economy flatlines, it is difficult to avoid the thought that he could do with a few more profound doubts about the orthodoxies that govern Britain's dysfunctional and sclerotic politics. The problem is what you might call passive rather than active certainty.

Serious doubt can be radical. It doesn't inevitably lead in the direction of comfortable consensus. As anyone who has ever lost their faith will tell you, doubt can be frightening. Presumably Cardinal Lawrence would not advise quite that much uncertainty. For the rest of, remembering to doubt — and I mean really to doubt — is an uncomfortable but essential discipline.

World

We need to build a nuclear bomb, say South Koreans

The mood is hardening due to Kim and doubts about the US, **Richard Lloyd Parry** reports from Seoul



A decade ago it was almost a taboo in South Korea and thought of as a hobby horse for a handful of crackpots and hardliners. Even five years ago it was the minority concern of a few specialists in security and international relations. But in the past two years it has become a matter of mainstream political debate as a growing majority of its people have concluded that South Korea urgently needs to acquire its own nuclear weapons.

The political and practical obstacles are huge, and a nuclear armed South Korea is still years away at the very least. But momentum is gathering for a change that would have profound and incalculable consequences, not only in Korea itself, but for the whole world.

Last year President Yoon, now facing impeachment for an abortive declaration of martial law, caused international alarm by saying that acquiring tactical nuclear weapons was an option for Seoul and that it could be achieved "pretty quickly", although he later said that it was not realistic. But a poll by Gallup Korea earlier this year revealed that 73 percent of South Koreans believe that the country should develop its own nuclear weapons.

As a treaty ally of the US, South Korea shelters beneath the US "nuclear umbrella". US nuclear weapons stationed in the South were, however, removed in 1991. South Korea is a signatory of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and espouses a policy of denuclearisation, aimed at pressuring North Korea into relinquishing its growing arsenal of warheads and the ballistic missiles capable of delivering them.

The problem is that far from making concessions, Kim Jong-un has accelerated his weapons programme. The North Korean leader is reckoned to have dozens of nuclear warheads and has tested rockets of all ranges, up to and including intercontinental ballistic missiles potentially capable of striking the US. The point is not to threaten the US directly. Kim knows that using his puny arsenal to attack the superpower would unleash a massive response that would quickly destroy him, his family and his country. The intention is to sow doubt in the minds of Americans about their own response to a war between the North and South.

Its treaty obliges Washington to defend Seoul against an attack and, in a war fought with conventional weapons, combined US-South Korean forces would undoubtedly defeat the North, after a tough, but unequal, fight. But North Korea's nuclear arsenal changes the strategic equation. Apart from the damage that they could do to South Korean forces on the peninsula, they raise in the mind of any US president a nagging and terrible question: if the US fights with South Korea, am I risking a nuclear attack on the United States?

Even the loss of one of their cities would be regarded by most Americans as an unacceptably high price for defending a faraway Asian country of which they know little. This is the same question that President de Gaulle put to President Kennedy in 1961, when France made the decision to go nuclear, despite being a member of Nato: "Would you be ready to trade New York for Paris?" Would any occupant of the Oval Office trade LA or Seattle for Seoul, or even risk them? More and more South Koreans fear that he would not, and that the nuclear umbrella is ragged with strategic holes.

"The fact that North Korea possesses the nuclear weapons and ICBMs that could attack the United States makes the United States far less likely to wish to engage in a conflict with North Korea," says Cheong Seong-chang of the Seoul-based think-tank, the Sejong Institute. "If North Korea attacks South Korea, will the US be prepared to risk the lives of hundreds of thousands, maybe tens of millions, of its own people to respond?"

That nightmare is made the more real by the strategic alliance between Vladimir Putin and Kim, who has sent North Korean troops to fight against Ukraine. The fear in Seoul — as yet unsupported by evidence — is that Russia will reward Kim with ICBM technology that will increase the chance of successfully targeting the US.

The situation is exacerbated by the imminent inauguration of Donald Trump, whose "America First" slogan hints at the answer he would give to De Gaulle's question. Trump is a sceptic about alliances in any case, and has threatened to force South Korea to pay more for the 28,500 US troops stationed there or to reduce their numbers. "If I were there now, they would be paying us $10 billion a year," Trump said before his election, compared to the $1 billion Seoul contributes at present. "They would be happy to do it. It's a money machine, South Korea."

In technical terms, South Korea has nuclear reactors that can produce the raw material of warheads and would have few difficulties in developing the necessary enrichment facilities. Testing would be a challenge, unless it followed North Korea's example in setting off nuclear explosions deep underground, a measure that would undoubtedly meet opposition.

The biggest obstacles are political. To go nuclear would transform South Korea from a nation with a seat at the table of the world's rich democracies to a proliferation outlaw, with unpredictable consequences.

Such a huge and expensive military and scientific undertaking would be difficult to keep secret. Exposure of it would entail rapid expulsion from the NPT and international condemnation. This was the reason that Yoon gave for ruling out the move.

Under a provision called the Glenn Amendment, a US president is required by law to impose sanctions on any NPT signatory that explodes a nuclear bomb, including withdrawal of military support. This could leave the South in an excruciating transition period — not yet fully nuclear, shunned internationally, unprotected by the US but menaced by the North which could take the opportunity to launch a pre-emptive attack.

Cheong pointed out that India went nuclear, faced sanctions, but re-established itself as a respectable member of the international community. "It doesn't have to be active support, just tacit acceptance," he said. "South Korea could take the Indian route of first acquiring nuclear weapons and then receiving the acquiescence or acceptance of the United States afterwards."

A nuclear-armed South Korea would be uncomfortable for Japan, with which it has tense relations. The same debate would take place in Tokyo, which could also quickly acquire its own deterrent.

When the complexities — and the expense — of going nuclear are pointed out by pollsters, no more than 40 percent of the public support the idea. But like a powerful genie released from a bottle, the debate about a South Korean bomb will continue.

Pyongyang's suicide drones

Tim Hornyak

North Korea is preparing to send more soldiers and weapons to assist Russia in its war against Ukraine, military officials in Seoul have said.

Pyongyang has already sent rocket-launchers and howitzers, but it is preparing to produce more kamikaze drones for Russia after Kim Jong-un oversaw a test last month, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).

Kim ordered the mass production of this type of exploding drone, citing global competition, Pyongyang state media reported. "Suicide drones are one of the tasks that Kim Jong un has focused on," the JCS said.



Diana mine clearers face deadly legacy of Assad's war

After three years of looking for explosives in Syria, Lama al-Haj Kadour doesn't even flinch when the explosion reverberates around Arbaeen Mountain (Oliver Marsden, in Idlib, writes).

The mother of three has been called to deal with a remnant of Bashar al-Assad's brutal rule in what was once a tourist hotspot — an unexploded 57mm tank shell.

Kadour, 32, acknowledges that her husband worries about her work for the Halo Trust, the British mine-clearing charity made famous by

Mossad reveals exploding

Israel

Lianne Kolirin

Israel spent ten years orchestrating its plan to blow up Hezbollah's leadership using exploding pagers and walkie-talkies, two former Mossad agents have revealed.

The attacks, which happened over two days in September, killed dozens of militants and injured thousands.

More details of the operation, which hit the heads of the militant group in Lebanon and Syria, have emerged after the recently retired operatives were interviewed on American television. Wearing masks and speaking with altered voices, they told *60 Minutes* on CBS that the operation started a decade ago when devices were altered and sold to an unsuspecting Hezbollah member.

One of them, using the name Michael, said that Hezbollah had bought 16,000 booby-trapped walkie-talkies at a "good price", which could not be too low to avoid arousing suspicion.

When asked whom the militants thought they were buying them from, Michael said: "We have an incredible array of possibilities of creating foreign companies that have no way [of] being traced back to Israel."

Walkie-talkies are not used from day to day by Hezbollah, however, so Mossad developed another deadly device — the exploding pager. The

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OLIVER MARSDEN FOR THE TIMES







Halo Trust staff gather for a briefing near Idlib, northern Syria, where Lama al-Haj Kadour, bottom, was called to deal with an unexploded shell. Above and below: mine-clearance in Ukraine

Princess Diana. "I told him I want to keep my job and I won't compromise on that," she says.

But she adds: "If you stop feeling fear, you should stop coming to work. Fear keeps you alert."

Weeks after Assad fled to Moscow with his family, Syrians still face the daily threat of his weapons. Unexploded ordnance from all sides of the 13-year civil war litter the country — more than a million pieces, according to estimates by humanitarian workers.



Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the militant group that controlled Idlib before taking over the country, has sought out the Halo Trust to clear the ordnance. It is one of the few international NGOs to have worked in and around the province over the past three years.

Kadour, from Hama in western Syria, was one of the first women to join the charity, and her work is more vital now than ever.

Market attacker is closet jihadist, insists the AfD

Germany

Oliver Moody Berlin

The leader of the German radical right has called for a "time of reckoning" as her party sought to capitalise on the Magdeburg Christmas market attack with a mass rally outside the city's cathedral yesterday.

Last Friday evening a man drove a rented BMW 4x4 into a crowd largely made up of young families. The suspect identified by the authorities is Taleb Jawad al-Abdulmohsen, 50, a psychiatrist from Saudi Arabia.

Abdulmohsen has been a vociferous critic of Islam and declared common cause with the hard-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party against the country's asylum policies and what he regards as its part in the "Islamisation" of Europe.

A nine-year-old boy and four women were killed and at least 205 other people were injured at the market.

With support from some of the most powerful figures in the incoming US administration of Donald Trump, including Elon Musk, the technology billionaire, and JD Vance, the vice-president-elect, the AfD is attempting to pin the blame on the German political establishment and its immigration policies.

The campaign before Germany's snap election on February 23 is dominated by the attack and the search for answers as to how Abdulmohsen was allegedly able to carry it out despite many warnings to the authorities.

The AfD is the second-strongest party, polling at 18 to 20 per cent, or 10 to 15 points behind the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party. At the weekend, however, a poll for Bild found that Alice Weidel, AfD's figurehead, was the most popular candidate for the chancellorship, backed by 24 per cent of the electorate, four points ahead of Friedrich Merz, leader of the CDU.

At the rally, Weidel embraced the conspiracy theory that the attacker had been a closet jihadist, describing the killing as "a crime beyond the imagination of everyone here; a crime by an Islamist full of hatred against everything that makes us human, against us as people, against us as Germans, against us as Christians".

AfD figures and supporters have spread an unsubstantiated theory that Abdulmohsen was a covert Islamist who concealed his convictions under an ancient strand of doctrine called taqiyyah, which maintains that Muslims can hide their beliefs in non-Islamic societies.

Matthias Büttner, an AfD MP who represents Abdulmohsen's constituency, told the rally the attack had been a "super-snafu" (a military slang term originating in the Second World War, meaning "situation normal all fouled up") for the state government.

He dismissed claims Abdulmohsen had been linked with the AfD as "political propaganda" by "state-assimilated media houses", using a term associated with the Nazi regime's takeover of the public sphere in 1933, prompting boos.

The crowd later chanted "deport, deport, deport" as another speaker said that if Abdulmohsen had wanted to "wage the battles of his homeland" in Germany the state should have "sent him back where he came from".

The suspect came to Germany in 2006, initially as a labour immigrant, and was granted political asylum in 2016 based on a claim he would face persecution in Saudi Arabia.

In the past two years he has posted prolifically on social media about his intention to punish the German people for his purported "persecution" and their tolerance of Islam.

The German authorities received at least six separate warnings about him, including four from their Saudi counterparts, three of which were sent to the German intelligence agencies.

Last year police told Abdulmohsen in a letter they were treating him as a "threat" after he said in an email to prosecutors in Cologne: "I have a bad conscience for the events that will happen in the coming days so that justice can be restored." It might have been hard to deport him since he had an unlimited residence permit and asylum status.

pager plot took ten years

second agent, identified only as Gabriel, said Mossad had learnt that Hezbollah bought its pagers from a Taiwanese company.

The pagers were made slightly larger to accommodate the explosives, and repeatedly tested on dummies to determine how much of the substance was required to hurt the target without injuring anyone near by. Ringtones were also tested to find one that sounded alarming enough to make someone pull the pager out of their pocket.

Gabriel said that it took two weeks to convince Hezbollah to switch to the heftier pager, in part by using false adverts on YouTube promoting the devices as durable and energy-efficient.

He said it became the "best product in the beeper area in the world" and described the use of shell companies, including one based in Hungary, to dupe the Taiwanese supplier, Gold Apollo, into unknowingly partnering with Mossad. Hezbollah was unaware that the supplier was working with Israel. "Everything was 100 per cent kosher, including businessman, marketing, engineers, showroom," he said.

On September 17, Israel triggered the attack and pagers all over Lebanon started beeping.

Meanwhile, Israel also claimed responsibility for the first time yesterday for the killing of the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran in July.

Subway woman set alight and killed

United States

Josie Ensor New York

A New York subway passenger allegedly set on fire a sleeping homeless woman before watching her burn to death, in a killing that has shocked a city usually inured to violence on its transit system.

The woman was on a stationary train at Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue station in Brooklyn on Sunday just after 7am when a man approached her and set fire to her clothes with a lighter, in an apparently motiveless attack.

The suspect, identified as Sebastian Zapeta-Calil, 33, from Guatemala, was allegedly filmed getting off the train and watching calmly from a platform bench as the woman was engulfed in flames and succumbed to her injuries.



The suspect is Sebastian Zapeta-Calil, 33, from Guatemala

The New York police department (NYPD) said that there had been no prior interaction between the man and the woman and they are not believed to have known each other. Jessica Tisch, the police commissioner, said officers apprehended someone they believe "carried out one of the most depraved crimes one person could possibly commit against another".

The suspect had emigrated from Guatemala to the US in 2018, according to Joseph Gulotta, the chief of transit for the NYPD.

Kathy Hochul, the governor of New York, deployed 1,000 members of the state police and National Guard to the transit system this year after a series of violent crimes. Nonetheless, subway murders have risen by at least 60 per cent this year. The killing was the second death on a New York subway on Sunday. A few hours earlier, one person was stabbed to death and another was injured in an attack in Queens.

ELIZABETH M RUGGIERO, REBECCA NOBLE/GETTY IMAGES



Mountain anger: Obama name was 'peak vanity'

Donald Trump has vowed to strip North America's tallest mountain of its indigenous name, reversing a decision made by Barack Obama after a decades-long battle (Josie Ensor writes).

The president-elect, 78, said he would rename Denali, Alaska natives' name for the mountain, after William McKinley, the Republican president who was assassinated in 1901.

"They took his name off Mount McKinley," Trump said in a speech to supporters in Phoenix, Arizona, on Sunday, alluding to the Obama administration. "He [McKinley] was a great president," he said, adding that his administration will "bring back the name of Mount McKinley because I think he deserves it". The mountain, which has an elevation of more than 20,000ft, was named Mount McKinley in 1896 after a gold prospector exploring the region heard that McKinley, a champion of the gold standard, had won the Republican nomination for president.

McKinley led the country to victory in the Spanish-American War and raised protective tariffs to promote US industry.

The US department of the interior, in the 2015 order changing the name to Denali, noted that McKinley had never visited the mountain and had no "significant historical connection to the mountain or to Alaska".

State officials changed the name to Denali, meaning the "Great One" in the native Koyukon language, in 1975 and spent decades pressing the federal government to follow suit.



Denali means "the Great One". Donald Trump wants to revert to Mount McKinley

Any proposal to rename the mountain will have to be submitted to the US Board on Geographic Names, which requires a compelling reason for the change, and must also be approved by Congress.

At his first big rally since winning the election, Trump also said he wanted to retake control of the Panama Canal, which the US "foolishly" ceded to its Central American ally.

Death row pardon spree by Biden

Hugh Tomlinson

President Biden has commuted the sentences of 37 of the 40 prisoners on federal death row, sparing them from execution and converting their punishments to life imprisonment.

The move comes less than a month before Donald Trump becomes president for a second time. He has said he will expand capital punishment.

Biden's decision spares the lives of prisoners convicted of murder, including of police and military officers, and those involved in deadly drug deals and bank robberies. The three still facing execution are Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the 2013 Boston Marathon bomber; Dylann Roof, who shot dead nine members of a black church in Charleston in 2015; and Robert Bowers, who killed 11 worshippers at a synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018.

Biden's administration announced a moratorium on federal capital punishment in 2021. Biden, 82, said: "These commutations are consistent with the moratorium my administration has imposed on federal executions, in cases other than terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder.

"Make no mistake: I condemn these murderers, grieve for the victims of their despicable acts, and ache for all the families who have suffered unimaginable and irreparable loss." But he added: "In good conscience, I cannot stand back and let a new administration resume executions that I halted."

Trump, 78, is an outspoken supporter of the death penalty. There were 13 federal executions during his first term, more than under any president in modern history. The final three executions were carried out between Trump's election defeat in November 2020 and his departure from office in January.

Trump cabinet pick 'paid $400 for sex with girl, 17'

United States

Hugh Tomlinson Washington

Matt Gaetz, Donald Trump's first choice for attorney-general, "regularly" paid multiple women for sex, including a minor, and purchased drugs illegally, according to a report by congressional investigators.

The former congressman from Florida paid $90,000 to 12 different women for sex and drugs, the House of Representatives ethics committee found in a draft report published yesterday.

Gaetz, 42, resigned from the House last month when he was chosen by Trump to join his administration, but withdrew from consideration in the face of fierce opposition from Senate colleagues. He has denied wrongdoing.

The final report was released after the ethics committee, controlled by the Republican Party, voted in secret this month to publish its findings. Gaetz had sued the committee seeking a temporary restraining order to prevent the public release of the investigation.

Investigators received testimony that Gaetz had had sex twice with a 17-year-old, referred to in the report as "Victim A", at a party in 2017, CBS reported. The age of consent in Florida is 18.

"Victim A recalled receiving $400 in cash from Representative Gaetz that evening, which she understood to be payment for sex," the report said. "Victim A said that she did not inform Representative Gaetz that she was under 18 at the time, nor did he ask her age."

Gaetz "used or possessed illegal drugs, including cocaine and ecstasy, on multiple occasions", including at his office in Capitol Hill, the panel found. The report concluded that Gaetz had violated multiple state laws.

"The committee determined there is substantial evidence that Representative Gaetz violated House rules and other standards of conduct prohibiting prostitution, statutory rape, illicit drug use, impermissible gifts, special favours or privileges and obstruction of Congress," the 37-page report concluded.



Matt Gaetz said his conduct had been "embarrassing but not criminal"

It drew on testimony from witnesses who told the committee they had been paid to have sex with Gaetz, plus text messages discussing the transactions and Venmo and PayPal receipts.

All of the women who testified said the sexual encounters had been consensual, but at least one told the committee that the use of drugs at parties may have "impair[ed her] ability to really know what was going on or fully consent".

The report said: "Nearly every woman that the committee spoke with could not remember the details of at least one or more of the events they attended with Representative Gaetz and attributed that to drug or alcohol consumption." One woman told the committee: "When I look back on certain moments, I feel violated."

Gaetz, a Trump loyalist, has claimed the allegations are a "smear" by congressional colleagues, including fellow Republicans. After it became clear last week that the committee's report would be published, Gaetz issued a statement insisting his behaviour had been "embarrassing, though not criminal".

He said the justice department under Merrick Garland, the attorney-general, had investigated allegations of sex trafficking against him but found no evidence of criminal behaviour.

"In my single days, I often sent funds to women I dated, even some I never dated but who asked. I dated several ... for years. I never had sexual contact with someone under 18," he said.

Gaetz did not reply to a request for comment. He was the subject of a four-year investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct and sex trafficking but no charges were brought.

Clinton taken to hospital after developing a fever

Alistair Dawber Washington

Bill Clinton has been admitted to hospital in Washington after developing what his spokesman described as a fever.

The former president, who is 78, was taken to MedStar Georgetown University Medical Center on Monday afternoon for what Angel Urena, his deputy chief of staff, described as "testing and observation".

"He remains in good spirits and deeply appreciates the excellent care he is receiving," Urena said.

Clinton, who served in the White House between 1993 and 2001, has suffered a number of health scares in recent years.

In 2004, at the age of 58, he underwent quadruple bypass surgery after experiencing prolonged chest pains and shortness of breath. He returned to the hospital for surgery for a partially collapsed lung in 2005, and in 2010 had a pair of stents implanted in a coronary artery.

A former lover of fast foods and cigars, the Democrat has since adopted a largely vegan diet, which has led to a dramatic loss of weight and reports of improved health. He addressed the Democratic National Convention in Chicago earlier this year, and campaigned for the vice-president, Kamala Harris, before the presidential election in November. She lost to Donald Trump, who in 2016, also beat Hillary Clinton, the former first lady, to the White House.

In 2021, the former president was admitted to hospital for six days in California as he was treated for an infection.

One of his aides said at the time that Clinton had a urological infection that spread to his bloodstream, but was on the mend and never went into septic shock, a potentially life-threatening condition. The aide said Clinton was in an intensive care section of the hospital that time, but wasn't receiving ICU care.

A year later he tested positive for Covid-19. He said at the time that his symptoms were "mild" and he was "grateful to be vaccinated and boosted".

Clinton was born mere months after the former US president George W Bush and Donald Trump.



The former president was said to be in good spirits



Romano Mussolini, the great-grandson of Il Duce, below, scored in Juve Stabia's 1-0 win against Cesena on Sunday. Supporters yelled his surname and gave fascist salutes

FRANCO ROMANO/NURPHOTO/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK; ROGER VIOLLET/GETTY IMAGES



Football cries foul as fascist salutes greet Mussolini Jr

Italy

Tom Kington Rome

As the 21-year-old raced towards fans to celebrate scoring the winning goal, the stadium announcer shouted his first name seven times. Each time, supporters yelled his surname: "Mussolini". Then came the fascist salutes.

The scorer was Romano Mussolini, the great-grandson of Benito, who was playing for the second-division side Juve Stabia in the southern Italian team's home game with Cesena on Sunday.

While his contribution to the match may have been noteworthy, it was the stiff-armed salutes of fans that prompted claims admiration for the 1930s dictator remains widespread in Italy. "Probably nobody expected to ever witness this in an Italian stadium," wrote the daily newspaper Il Fatto Quotidiano. "This is not some dystopic future and was not generated by AI, it's real and has been seen around the world. Another splendid advert for our football," the newspaper added.

The son of the MEP Alessandra Mussolini, the dictator's granddaughter, the footballer has said he hopes he will be judged by the way he plays and not by his surname. "My great-grandfather, Benito, was a very important person for Italy but we are in 2024 and the world has changed," he told the sports daily La Gazzetta dello Sport.

After carving out a career as a right-wing politician, his mother has recently become an outspoken defender of gay rights. Her father, also Romano Mussolini, was a noted jazz pianist who married the sister of the actress Sophia Loren and distanced himself from his father's fascism. The footballer has said he played with Loren's Oscar statuette as a child and has inherited his grandfather's love of jazz.



Fans of Juve Stabia, however, appeared determined to celebrate the fascist past of the footballer's family, reflecting the enduring appeal of Mussolini among a swathe of Italians, despite the dictator's crushing of democracy and his racial laws that ousted Jews from public life.

After the defeat of Italian fascism in the Second World War, his ideology was kept alive by the MSI party, which morphed into the Brothers of Italy party co-founded by the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni. She has distanced herself from fascism, although this year an undercover journalist recorded members of the youth wing of Meloni's party eulogising Mussolini.

"Under this government the memory of what fascism really was is fading," said Emanuele Fiano, a former MP with the opposition Democratic Party. "As long as you condemn the racial laws, you can forget about fascism's abolition of parliament, of the free press, unions and of political parties," he said.

Mussolini was a keen football fan, using Italy's hosting and winning of the second World Cup in 1934 to promote the image of fascism around the world.

Addressing the Italian national team before the tournament, he reportedly told them to win, then drew his finger across his throat to indicate what would happen to them if they lost.

Juve Stabia's 1-0 victory against Cesena propelled them into fourth place in Italy's second division, which means fans can start hoping their team is promoted next season to play in Serie A.

Mussolini Jr, as he is also called, who is on loan at Juve Stabia, may have returned by then to his team, Lazio, the Rome side that has a right-wing core of "ultra" fans. Il Fatto Quotidiano said of the salutes for the player: "Luckily, he is a full-back — at least he won't score too often," the newspaper wrote.

Inmates use big match for 'escape to victory'

Spain

Simon Hunter Madrid

In a caper reminiscent of the 1981 film *Escape to Victory*, two prisoners managed to break out of a Spanish jail by using a football match as a distraction.

Inmates and guards were tuning into a match between Barcelona and Atlético Madrid on the radio when the prisoners, named in the Spanish media as Sergio CD, 43, and David MG, 39, who were serving sentences for robberies using violence and intimidation, escaped from their cells.

They were being held in a special unit for prisoners who have committed violent crimes and used the cover of the noise from the match on the night of their escape as they forced the window bars apart with a metal object.

They slipped down the walls and into the prison courtyard using a rope they had made from bedsheets. They then left the Valencia II prison in the municipality of Picassent, forcing open the gate at the goods entrance, according to the newspaper El Pais without being detected by the Civil Guard officers in charge of security.

The poor state of the prison made their escape easier, according to experts. Nacho Fernández from the professional association of prison workers told *Espejo Publico*, a TV show, that the metal bars in the jail were rusted.

"Prisons in Spain have been left to rot and it means that the jails have rusted bars, meaning it is much easier to move them aside," he said. "Combined with the fact that the alarms do not work either, you have the perfect escape.

The double escape was the 24th of its kind in Spain since 2003. Jailbreaks are becoming something of a Christmas tradition in Spain after Yousef Mohamed Lehrech, aka *el Pastilla* (the Pill), a double murder suspect, slipped out of Alcala-Meco prison in Madrid on December 23 last year by disguising himself among visitors. He was apprehended just over a month later in Germany.

In December 2020, Jonathan Moñiz, aka *el Piojo* (the Louse), and his brother Miguel Ángel escaped from Valdemoro prison in Madrid by breaking the bars of a window, scaling the roofs and jumping the perimeter fence with a homemade rope. They were also arrested a few months later.

Fizz goes out of champagne sales

France

Adam Sage

A row has erupted in the wine region of Champagne, where independent vineyard owners are accusing powerful houses of driving consumers away with unjustified price rises.

The controversy comes amid signs that the region of northeast France that is home to the world's most famous sparkling wine is on track for its worst year of sales in more than two decades, with the exception of 2020 when it was hit by the Covid pandemic.

Champagne makers say they expect to dispatch about 270 million bottles this year, compared with 299 million in 2023 and 325 million in 2022. Annual revenue is likely to fall to about €5.8 billion (£4.8 billion), down by €500 million from last year, according to local media outlets. The argument is pitting the luxury groups and wealthy families that own the most famous brands against the vineyard owners who sell them the grapes while also producing their own, often cheaper, bottles.

David Chatillon, the chairman of the Union of Champagne Houses, which represents such brands as Bollinger, Dom Pérignon, Moët & Chandon, Piper-Heidsieck and Taittinger, blamed the drop on global customer gloom — due to wars in the Middle East and Ukraine — and exacerbated in the domestic market by political instability. "The world is not in a party mood," he said, brushing aside claims drinkers were switching to other sparkling wines such as Italian prosecco or Spanish cava.

However, Christine Sévillano, chairwoman of the Federation of Independent Winemakers of Champagne, said prestigious houses had implemented price rises of up to 40 per cent that "don't go down well with consumers".

Maxime Toubart, chairman of the General Union of Winemakers in Champagne, agreed with Sévillano, denouncing a "very big increase in prices".

L'Union, the regional newspaper, said the average price of a bottle of champagne dispatched by producers before taxes and mark-ups by merchants and retailers was €12.63 in 2009 and more than €22 in 2023. It has dropped marginally to €21.50 this year, although detractors say the fall is unlikely to win back lost custom.

Big champagne houses say that if they are charging more for their bottles, it is because the price of grapes has gone up. Advertising budgets have also risen.

There are perfectly acceptable alternatives, leading article, page 23

One in four breathalysed Parisians test positive

Charles Bremner Paris

Almost one in four drivers tested for alcohol in Paris are over the limit and 37 per cent are on drugs, figures show.

The surveys, reported in an investigation by Le Parisien, showed that police carry out far fewer breath and drug tests in the capital yet 6,000 drivers were over the limit of 0.5 grams of alcohol per litre of blood in 25,000 tests in Paris in 2023 and 6,000 were found positive in 17,000 tests for drugs.

The Paris force said the high figure was the consequence of its "more targeted" testing rather than the broader random checks in the provinces.

According to a different analysis by the national road safety agency, the Sécurité Routière, 15.2 per cent of Paris drivers are over the limit, compared with 3.1 per cent nationally.

"You even see police patrols not reacting when there is an offence right in front of them," François Louis, the head of In My Paris Street, a residents' association, told Le Parisien.

Rémy Josseaume, a lawyer specialising in traffic law, said police were concentrating on speeding and red light offences and only carrying out alcohol and drug tests after accidents.

A police union source denied the force had abandoned the systematic driver checks carried out in the rest of the country but said that "with the drop in staffing levels, we are putting the priority on robberies and assaults."

World



Bing bolthole where JFK wooed Marilyn

In March 1962 John F Kennedy, seeking refuge from the rigours of the presidency, took a break at Bing Crosby's home in the California desert (Keiran Southern writes).

While the first lady, Jackie, was on an ambassadorial holiday in India and Pakistan, JFK, a statesman known for his infidelities, allegedly seduced Marilyn Monroe at the estate. Now, the house in Palm Desert is on the market for $13.5 million.

The owners, Julia and Randall Burt, bought it in 2012 for about $3 million but have since carried out extensive refurbishments.

The home, where Crosby, an actor and singer of *White Christmas*, lived and entertained guests, had fallen into disrepair.

"It was in dire need of remodel and rehabilitation," Mrs Burt, a lawyer, told the Wall Street Journal.

"Some people said, 'Oh, you should just tear it down and build a big new home'. But we thought it was incredibly important to keep the history."

The roughly 6,100 sq ft estate has a two-bedroom main house and three one-bedroom casitas. It has a pool where visitors can cool off from the punishing desert sun, as well as a tennis court.

Crosby, who died aged 74 in 1977, built the home around 1955. Palm Desert is in California's Coachella Valley, a region beloved by celebrities and politicians.

Dwight D Eisenhower, the 34th US president and Kennedy's predecessor, played countless rounds of golf in Palm Springs, which is about a 25-minute drive from Palm Desert.

The Burts, who have no children, are selling to downsize. Fans of Monroe, of whom a giant statue is displayed in Palm Springs, might be disappointed to hear her spirit does not reside in Palm Desert. "Unfortunately, there is no ghost of Marilyn living in the house," Mrs Burt said. "My husband keeps looking for it."

ONE POINT MEDIA GROUP; GENE LESTER, BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES





The Palm Desert home built around 1955 by Bing Crosby, far left, is being sold for $13.5 million after extensive refurbishments. Below: Marilyn Monroe



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For Czechs, Christmas is time to carpey diem

Czech Republic
Jack Clover Brno

For many Czechs there is nothing more festive than a carp in the bath.

Christmas Eve is celebrated in many ways around the world, from rollerskating to Mass in Venezuela to hiding broomsticks in Norway.

In the Czech Republic, as well as in parts of Poland and Slovakia, the night before Christmas has for centuries centred on freshwater fish.

"We eat it every Christmas Eve for dinner, fried carp and potatoes," Vladimir Valouch said as he served a plate of breaded carp from his stall in central Brno — humbly named in English, Fish & Chips.

The ceremony around the carp is a staple of Czech tradition — buying it from a vat outside a supermarket or from a truck in the centre of town, keeping it in a bathtub then killing it and scraping off the scales. But a change is coming.

Tesco, a major supermarket chain in the republic, has joined Lidl and Billa in no longer allowing live carp to be sold from vats in front of its shops. A decline in demand for carp has followed pressure from animal rights groups and the changing habits and tastes of Czechs.

Valouch said the demand for carp was "less" now. "Younger people eat ocean fish or salmon," he added.

His stall is at a Christmas market in the heart of the republic's second city, designated by the EU this year as Europe's "capital of Christmas".

But aside from Valouch's carp stall, the mulled wine, candy canes and churros would not be amiss in any town centre across the continent at this time of year.

"I suppose it's globalisation," Rajendra Chitnis, associate professor in Czech at Oxford University, said. "Czechs have been exposed for more than 30 years to western festive culture and traditions. Czech Christmas has started to look a lot more like the one in *Home Alone* than the one of the archetypal Czech home."

Czech superstition claims that if one fasts on Christmas Eve, by evening a vision of a hovering golden piglet will appear on the wall. Then it is time to eat. The carp is served and one lucky diner will find a scale from the fish under the plate, which will bring prosperity.

During or after the meal a bell will ring, meaning "little Jesus" has delivered presents. Father Christmas, or St Nicholas, has already appeared in the republic — on December 5.

Despite the change in habits, the carp trade seemed to be thriving last week in the ponds of Pohorelice, south of Brno. Chitnis said, however, that the tradition may not be as old as the ponds. "The recipe for fried carp was formalised in a book from the 1820s," he said. "We often imagine these traditions are older than that but like turkey it's relatively recent."

Back in Brno, a plate of breaded carp awaits. It is an acquired taste — the muddy depths of the Pohorelice pond weigh heavily on the palate.

Which perhaps explains the fading of a Czech tradition. Even Valouch, the fish and chips vendor, is swapping carp for salmon this year. Why? "Too many bones," he replied.

Parliament's barber is finally parting

Japan
Tim Hornyak

After 56 years of trimming politicians' hair, a barber in the Japanese parliament, who cannot abide slander, is retiring.

Satoyo Kojika, 85, has seen leaders come and go, from the shiny-pated Kiichi Miyazawa to the lion-maned Junichiro Koizumi. She has styled countless politicians, bureaucrats and staff at the National Diet building, but will switch off her barber's pole for the last time this week.

"I could continue working for such a long time because I had been blessed with people around me," Kojika told the Fukushima Minpo newspaper. "I couldn't be happier."

A native of Kawauchi in central Japan, Kojika began working at a barber's in the Diet aged 18 and was skilled enough to cut the hair of Japan's political elite.

Though she left the job when she became pregnant, she was soon asked to return and open her own shop because her former employer had gone out of business. Kojika's shop opened in 1968 under the unassuming name "Staff Barbershop". Her philosophy was to never criticise others, so whenever her patrons began bad-mouthing colleagues she would quickly change the topic. Instead of political bile, the shop was known for its smiles and laughter.

Before its closure, Diet members stopped in for a trim and to say goodbye. "She encouraged me when I was going through a difficult time and was a great comfort to me," Seiichiro Murakami, minister for internal affairs and communications and a patron of Kojika's for 30 years, told the public broadcaster NHK. "I'm now at a loss as to which shop to go to."

Kojika plans to spend her retirement travelling and relaxing in hot springs.

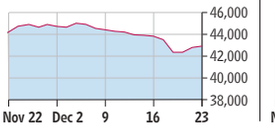
Business

WORLD MARKETS (Change on the day)

FTSE 100
8,102.72 (+18.11) ▲

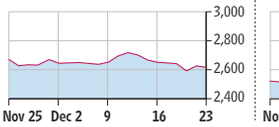


Dow Jones
42,906.95 (+66.69) ▲

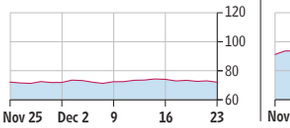


COMMODITIES

Gold
$2,616.05 (-9.49) ▼

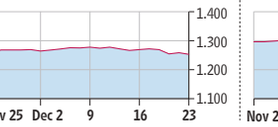


Brent crude
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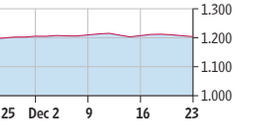


CURRENCIES

£/$
$1.2529 (-0.0055) ▼



£/€
€1.2037 (-0.0030) ▼



Nissan tie-up with Honda won't work, says former boss Ghosn

James Hurley

Carlos Ghosn, the fugitive former boss of Nissan, has said the car manufacturer's pursuit of a deal with Honda shows it is in "panic mode".

Ghosn, who led Nissan as chief executive between 2001 and 2017, said: "If this merger takes place ... personally I don't think it's going to be successful."

The two Japanese car giants are considering a partnership in an effort to create a group with the power to take on the likes of Tesla and Chinese rivals. A merger would create the world's third-largest car manufacturer by sales, behind Toyota and Volkswagen.

Yesterday, the companies confirmed that they had started talks toward a potential merger. Honda is Japan's second-largest car manufacturer and Nissan its number three. The companies aim to conclude the talks in the middle of next year, and then set up a holding company by August 2026.

Ghosn, 70, who fled from Japan by private jet hidden in a musical instrument case in 2019 following his arrest the previous year on suspicion of financial misconduct, said that the merger plans "do not make sense" because the carmakers are too similar.

"The first thing that you look at when you want to envision an alliance or a partnership is a complementarity between the two partners," he said. "Well, I look at the complementarity between Honda and Nissan and I see none. The two companies are two Japanese companies. They are strong in the same fields. They are weak in the same fields. Both of them have very developed technologies. From an industrial point of view, there is duplication everywhere. So, industrially, for me, that doesn't make sense."

Ghosn was speaking from Lebanon, where he has been based since he jumped bail in Japan in December 2019 as he awaited trial on accusations of under-reporting earnings, breach of trust, and misappropriation of funds.

He said of the merger talks that he was not convinced Nissan's management "have the talent to face the challenges ... and that's one of the reasons for which they are surrendering in a certain way, in a panic mode by saying 'please help us'. And they are turning to an arch-rival of Nissan."

Aviva to buy Direct Line for £3.7bn

Deal will create one of UK's biggest car insurers

Lauren Almeida

Aviva has agreed to buy the motor and home insurer Direct Line for £3.7 billion in a move that will create one of the biggest motor insurers in the UK.

The giant insurance group will pay 275p a share for Direct Line, as proposed in a preliminary agreement this month. It represents a 73.3 per cent premium to Direct Line's closing price before the talks began in November.

Danuta Gray, the chair of Direct Line, said the deal delivered "significant value" for shareholders. "The offer represents a substantial premium and reflects the attractiveness of Direct Line, a high-quality business with powerful insurance brands, excellent customer focus and exceptional people," she said.

The deal, which will be completed in the middle of next year, is expected to result in about 2,000 job cuts as the group moves to capture £125 million of cost savings. The new combined business will become one of the biggest motor insurers in the UK, neck-and-neck with its biggest rival, Admiral, and will cement Aviva's position as the country's biggest home insurer.

Dame Amanda Blanc, the boss of Aviva, said: "Aviva and Direct Line share a deep commitment to excellence in looking after customers and this will remain a top priority following the acquisition. The financial strength and scale of the combined group means customers will benefit from competitive pricing, an enhanced claims experience and even better service."

The move is part of an effort by Blanc to simplify the FTSE 100 insurer, refocusing its portfolio on its core markets in the UK, Ireland and Canada. Since 2020 it has sold eight businesses overseas, including in Italy, France, Poland, Turkey, Vietnam and Singapore.

Blanc first tabled a surprise bid last month for Direct Line as well as the insurer Churchill and the breakdown business Green Flag.

Direct Line had been left vulnerable to takeovers after it issued profit warnings in 2022 and 2023 following rising motor insurance claims. Last year Ageas, a Belgian insurer, failed to acquire the group for £3.2 billion. The offer from Ageas came months after Adam Winslow, 45, was poached from Aviva to become chief executive of Direct Line.

Aviva is targeting pre-tax £125 million in cost savings from the deal, including the estimated 2,000 job cuts. It is understood that there are about 800 vacancies at the group, with annual turnover of about 1,300, which could support the redeployment of some staff elsewhere in the business.

Once the combined group achieves its target cost savings it expects earnings per share to grow by about 10 per cent. Aviva said it also intended to increase its dividend in the mid-single digit percentage range after the deal is completed. Its shares yield 7.4 per cent, among the highest in the FTSE 100.

The acquisition includes both a cash and stock component. Each shareholder in Direct Line will be entitled to receive 0.2867 new Aviva shares, 129.7p in cash and as much as 5p in the form of dividend payments. Aviva will own about 87.5 per cent of Direct Line.

Aviva shares closed up 5¼p, or 1.1 per cent, at 462½p and Direct Line closed up 9¼p, or 3.8 per cent, at 252½p.

BRINKHOFF/MOEGENBURG



Abba Dabba Doo Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, the Abba musicians, shared in a dividend of £1.4 million after their production company Littlestar Services, which is behind the musical Mamma Mia!, reported profits of more than £3 million

BenevolentAI mulls London float

Alex Ralph

The drug technology company BenevolentAI is looking at relisting from 2026 — and would consider floating in London.

BenevolentAI announced plans this month to delist from Euronext Amsterdam alongside further job losses and cost-cutting after its founder, Ken Mulvany, regained control of the board following an activist campaign.

Mulvany was appointed executive chairman in October and had become concerned about the slumping share price just two years after listing and the company's strategic direction. He said in an interview that there had been a lack of engagement with investors. "It was a public company running itself as a private company, which is somewhat of a recipe for disaster," he said.

BenevolentAI, whose former chief executive was Baroness Shields, was valued at more than €1 billion but a share price collapse means it has a market value of only about €55 million.

The company is seeking shareholder support to delist from Amsterdam by the first half of next year but Mulvany, who owns 28 per cent, said: "I don't think that the intention is to remain insulated from the public markets forever."

Deutsche Numis was appointed as adviser in July, after Mulvany rejoined the board, and he said London would be considered as a listing destination.

"I'm familiar with the UK listing [environment]. I'm familiar with the investors here, but it would be the same [outcome as Amsterdam] if you don't go out and promote your company."

He added that UK public markets were "difficult" because of "shareholder sentiment" and said BenevolentAI was a globally focused company and had "always maintained its ability to list on Nasdaq" in New York.

Mulvany, 56, plans to review the position from the second half of 2026, including progress on recurring revenue growth. The London capital markets have suffered from a dearth of floats and a series of delistings.

BenevolentAI's new board intends to return the company to its roots as a technology company developing artificial intelligence to help third-party drug companies discover medicines.

Founder to the rescue, pages 32•33

Need to know

1 Thames Water has been accused of planning to pay shareholder dividends from millions of pounds allocated to environmental projects. Senior managers were said to have baulked at the move after assessing the legal and reputational risks of going ahead. Page 2

2 Sir Keir Starmer has warned a return to economic prosperity "won't happen overnight" as Downing Street did not rule out having to raise taxes again next year to balance the books. Official figures released yesterday showed the UK economy flatlined in the third quarter of the year. Page 7

3 Engineers working for the owner of Jaguar Land Rover were locked in a Vietnamese factory in a rush to get an "unsafe" electric car to market, whistleblowers have said. One worker, who claimed he was sacked after raising concerns, said he feared they had "critical" safety faults. Page 12

4 A row has erupted in the wine region of Champagne, where independent vineyards are accusing big labels of driving consumers away. Christine Sévillano of the Federation of Independent Winemakers of Champagne, said price rises of up to 40 per cent "don't go down well with consumers". Page 27

5 Aviva has agreed to buy the motor and home insurer Direct Line for £3.7 billion. The insurance group will pay 275p a share, a 73.3 per cent premium to the closing price before the talks began in November. Page 29

6 BenevolentAI is looking at relisting from 2026 and would consider floating in London. The drug technology company has announced plans to delist from Euronext Amsterdam after its founder, Ken Mulvany, regained control of the board. Page 29

7 Carlos Ghosn, the fugitive former boss of Nissan, has said the carmaker's pursuit of a deal with Honda shows it is in "panic mode". Ghosn, who led Nissan between 2001 and 2017, said: "If this merger takes place ... personally I don't think it's going to be successful." Page 29

8 The owner of Fabergé has said it is evaluating options for the jeweller it bought 11 years ago as it weighs up measures to "streamline the business". Gemfields, which mines in Africa, said it was "assessing strategic options in respect of Fabergé".

9 Retailers have warned of price rises and shop closures after "disastrous" Christmas trading. Early evidence of performance in the final full week of trading before Christmas shows footfall down 11.4 per cent on last year, according to Rendle Intelligence and Insights.

10 The City lawyer who founded RBG Holdings and is its largest shareholder has called for an extraordinary meeting to oust its leadership. RBG said a meeting would be held to "consider resolutions" to remove chief executive Jon Divers, and two other directors. Page 32

How small Scottish charity

The SJ Noble Trust, named after the Loch Fyne Oysters founder, has made 194 loans to fledgling businesses since his death, **James Hurley** writes



When Johnny Noble died suddenly in 2002 aged 65, obituaries mourned that the Loch Fyne Oysters founder's passing had deprived his community in western Scotland of an "unsung benefactor" who had brought "prosperity and optimism" to the region.

More than two decades later, however, and Noble's legacy in Argyll and Bute is arguably stronger than ever.

Christina Noble, Johnny's sister, chairs SJ Noble Trust, an organisation set up in her elder brother's memory that over the past 20 years has made 194 loans to small local companies, creating an estimated 800 jobs in the process: about one in every 33 in the region.

Beneficiaries range from whisky distilleries to coffee shops, from fisheries to a bakery, a broadband provider, a music festival and even a mole catcher.

"Johnny wouldn't believe what his sister has done," Alastair Barge, a local businessman and trustee who knew the Loch Fyne founder, said.



Christina Noble set up the trust in memory of her brother Johnny

Noble said the trust was a fitting legacy for a man who reintroduced the oyster to Loch Fyne in 1978 as a way to tackle the financial burden of the heavily indebted family estate he inherited. His success in building it into a supplier to the trade was credited with putting oysters back on many British menus. A related restaurant chain, bought by Greene King, was at one point the UK's largest chain of seafood restaurants.

"Johnny was remarkable because he started Loch Fyne oysters from nowhere with a great deal of difficulty," Noble, 82, said. "He was an entrepreneur in his heart, a great marketer, he was always hustling but he always wanted business to work for the local community. He would listen to the ping of the till each day as a demonstration it was working for local people. He was not interested in making money for himself: he didn't want to buy a yacht or a football team. I think Johnny would be very proud of the trust."

She was speaking to The Times shortly after the trust's twentieth anniversary celebrations and hoped to raise its profile and perhaps gather some new benefactors, as well as inspire other successful business leaders to get in the Christmas spirit and ask themselves whether they might be able to do something similar in their own areas.

SJ Noble Trust provides small loans — they average about £7,000 — to companies in the region, often helping a first-time business owner to get a venture off the ground. There is a small arrangement fee but the loans are interest free and come with a one-year repayment holiday. Loans are often used for equipment, marketing and premises.

Kate Jackson set up the Northern Lights Cakery with the help of the trust when, after the birth of her daughter, she needed work she could base childcare around. The bakery, based in Glendaruel, Argyll, makes the majority of its sales from supplying wedding cakes and has outgrown the outbuilding in which she started the business in 2020.

Jackson said the support helped her to turn a dream into reality. "I wouldn't have been able to do what I did without the trust," she said. "As a non-working mum, it's unlikely I'll get a bank loan to start a cake business. The trust gives loans on favourable terms so your business has time to grow before you start having to pay the money back."

Daniel Gillespie, a musician, approached the trust for help co-founding the Tiree Music Festival on the most westerly island in the Inner Hebrides.

What began in a car park of a community hall with a few hundred locals in 2010 now hosts 2,000 people each year, is heavily oversubscribed and has won several industry awards. Artists including The Levellers, Sandi Thom and Eddi Reader have played the event.

The trust initially loaned £1,000 to help with some set-up costs. "It doesn't seem like a lot but at that time it was trust [in us] you can't underestimate," Gillespie said. "They will take a risk. Your bank is not getting to lend to you when you have no history.

"I spend a lot of time in America where philanthropy in communities is a massive thing. I hope [SJ Noble Trust's model] happens more often in the UK."

Noble said the trust had stepped in to help fill a gap vacated by banks and public sector agencies alike because such small loans were often viewed as uneconomic. "Banks don't like lending these small amounts as it's not worth their trouble. These kinds of businesses don't fit their machine, tick-box thing."

She said that Jim McMillan, a former Royal Bank of Scotland manager who is a trustee who filters applications, likens the work to what he signed up to do with the bank.

"That [banking] job used to be really interesting because they were sussing out small businesses. That has been neglected," she said,

In another throwback, despite the region's remoteness — the length of the coastline is comparable in length to that of France — the trust will typically only provide a loan once an applicant has met a trustee face-to-face.

"Meeting across the table is very important as people are not necessarily like their CV or their business plan," Noble said. "You can not be very good at writing a business plan but really know what you're doing."

Barge, who has more than four decades of experience in running businesses in the region, said the trust almost "puts the business plan to one

Gemfields considers Fabergé disposal to cut costs

Jessica Newman

The owner of Fabergé has said it is evaluating options for the jeweller it bought 11 years ago as it weighs up cost-cutting measures to help it to "streamline the business".

Gemfields, which mines coloured gemstones in Africa, told shareholders that it was "assessing strategic options in respect of Fabergé", famed for its lavishly decorated "Imperial" Easter eggs that can sell for millions of pounds.

Fabergé, which was founded in 1882 by Peter Carl Fabergé, was bought by Gemfields in 2013 from Pallinghurst, the private equity firm founded by the former BHP Hilton boss Brian Gilbertson for $142 million.

Last year Fabergé made revenues of $15.7 million, down from $17.6 million a year earlier amid softness in the luxury market.

Gemfields is also putting its gold project in Mozambique up for sale; halting all non-essential spending and stopping planned capital expenditure at its ruby development assets in northern Mozambique; and suspending all mining at its Kagem mine in Zambia for six months.

Gemfields' most recent emerald and ruby auctions delivered revenues much lower than in recent years, which the company has blamed on a mix of headwinds including lower production of premium rubies at its Montepuez ruby mine in Mozambique and "disturbed" dynamics in the emerald market.

The latter is because of an oversupply of Zambian emeralds being sold more cheaply by a competing Zambian emerald producer during the second half of 2024.



Fabergé eggs can sell for millions but it's tough times for the luxury market

The Aim-quoted company also pointed to the continued post-election civil unrest in Mozambique, which it said had caused supply chain and logistics problems.

Gemfields, founded in 2005, said that although operations at its ruby mine in Mozambique had so far been unaffected, the "overall operating risk profile has increased". Construction of a second ruby plant in the country is under way and on track to be completed by the end of the first half of 2025.

The update sent shares in Gemfields, which have more than halved in value in the past 12 months, down a further ½p, or 5.7 per cent to 6¾p yesterday.

created 800 jobs

ROBERT PERRY FOR THE TIMES





Kate Jackson set up the Northern Lights Cakery with the help of the trust; Daniel Gillespie, a musician, won support to co-found the Tiree Music Festival

Behind the story

SJ Noble Trust traces its roots back to a dinner held in Johnny Noble's honour shortly after his death. "We said we would set it up if we raised £50,000, and give the money back if we didn't," his sister Christina recalled. More than £100,000 was secured.

Now she wants successful entrepreneurs with a connection to other rural or economically challenged regions to consider doing something similar in their own areas.

Chris Salt, 64, the founder of Headland, a public relations agency that counted Loch Fyne as an early client, is considering answering that call by setting up an organisation to support small businesses near where he lives in west Cornwall.

"[SJ Noble] fills a gap that's been wide open for small businesses," he said.

"It's the people with small garden maintenance businesses and coffee shops, the heart and soul of the economy, that are not well served by banks or quangos that are meant to provide grants and things like that.

"When the money is loaned, it's not from on high, it's active with a continual relationship. I like that. Maybe there's something we can do in west Cornwall. I can provide a float. I need to do work finding trustees, someone to work three days a week. I believe in the idea, I can't find another example of this around but it's a good idea with the right conditions.

"It will take a while but I've got a strong belief it will work. I think it's replicable in some parts of the country and I want to try it in west Cornwall."

Barge said replicating the model required a local "dynamo in the middle". He added: "You can't replicate it from outside. One of Christina's biggest talents is getting people to do something [for the trust]. And people do it most willingly. She's an extraordinary example. What the trust has achieved is amazing."

side" in these meetings. "You're looking that person in the eye and thinking, are they going to be around in 20 years? Because the business plan is going to change. Are these guys going to manage change? Because all sorts of things will be thrown at them."

He reckons that about 60 per cent of borrowers are first-time business owners. "We're doing what banks won't. I'd say our judgment is pretty good."

According to McMillan, the average default rate over the past decade was about 7 per cent: remarkably low given the high risk nature of the borrowers. Noble said: "It's partly because we meet people at the beginning, and partly because we stay in touch. It's not just finance. We urge people to tell us if something is going wrong. People are very reluctant to go to the pub and say how badly things are going, or even tell their partner. It's important there's someone there who can give assistance before things have gone too far."

In January the trust is due to meet to consider how it might finance a plan to offer mentoring to loan beneficiaries and Noble hopes that a well-heeled Times reader might be in the mood to help at Christmas: "If you, with or without connections to Argyll, could help with £20,000 to set this up, it would be a great gift for young entrepreneurs."

She said she was surprised that she had not come across many similar models to the trust elsewhere in the UK. "Once upon a time, people who got rich quite often had a fond connection to where they'd come out with. We're searching for people who have a connection who would like to help."

Closures loom after 'disastrous' Christmas sales

Isabella Fish, Emma Taggart

Retailers have warned of price rises and shop closures after enduring "disastrous" Christmas trading as households battle with cost of living pressures.

Early evidence of the performance of the sector in the final full week of trading before Christmas shows that footfall was down 11.4 per cent on last year, according to Rendle Intelligence and Insights.

On "Super Saturday", the final Saturday before Christmas Day and typically the peak shopping day of the year, footfall was only 4.1 per cent higher than the previous Saturday and only 0.9 per cent higher than a year earlier. Black Friday footfall was 5.5 per cent higher than last year, suggesting that consumers took the opportunity to buy discounted gifts.

Diane Wehrle, chief executive of Rendle, said: "The disappointing results, which come on the same day that we have learnt that the economy failed to grow between July and September, clearly reflect the ongoing cost pressures faced by households following a prolonged period of very high inflation. It appears this Christmas has been disastrous for retail, and a bad omen for 2025."

The build-up to Christmas is a crucial period for retailers and is when they usually make most of their annual sales and profits. Official data showed, however, that retail sales in the UK fell short of expectations in November despite shops starting to cut prices early as part of Black Friday discounting.

Sales volumes rose by a weaker-than-expected 0.2 per cent month on month in November, having fallen by 0.7 per cent in October, data from the Office for National Statistics showed. City economists had forecast a 0.5 per cent rise.

Early retail sales data for December showed little sign of improvement. The CBI's latest distributive trades survey, which mostly covers big high street chains, showed that the retail sales balance improved only marginally to minus 15 this month, from minus 18 in November. Sales volumes were judged to be poor for this time of year, the CBI said.

Martin Sartorius, the CBI's principal economist, said: "Retailers expect sales to fall again in January, while wholesalers and motor traders are braced for sharper sales declines."

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) warned of a January "spending squeeze". BRC-Opinium figures suggested that public confidence in the state of the economy nosedived in December, falling eight points to minus 27. The public's spending intentions, both in retail and beyond, dropped six points, with expectations of spending in nearly every retail category falling.

Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the BRC, said retailers could find themselves facing a new year spending squeeze just as they unveil their January sales, adding: "The weak spending intentions could pave the way for a challenging year for retailers, who face being buffeted by low consumer demand and £7 billion of new costs from the budget. With sales growth unable to keep pace, retailers will have no choice but to raise prices or cut costs, closing stores and freezing recruitment."

● The struggling fashion retailer Quiz has proposed delisting from the Aim stock market after a challenging trading period. Shares in Quiz fell more than 55 per cent after the company announced that shareholders would be asked to approve the proposal on January 8. The retailer, which is based in Glasgow, said it planned to re-register as a private limited company as it grappled with "an increasingly competitive fast-fashion retail landscape". Quiz will need the approval of 75 per cent of shareholders for the proposal to pass. If approved it is expected to delist from Aim on January 23.

Shares in Quiz declined 1¼p, or 57.1 per cent, to 1p.

Economic outlook, letters, page 22

News Corp to sell Foxtel in £1.7bn deal

Martin Strydom

News Corporation has agreed to sell its Australian media business Foxtel to the British-owned sports network DAZN for A$3.4 billion (£1.7 billion).

The company will gain a board seat and hold a 6 per cent stake in DAZN.

London-based DAZN is backed by the Ukranian-born billionaire Sir Len Blavatnik. It is a broadcasting partner for the football Serie A in Italy, LaLiga in Spain, the Bundesliga in Germany and Ligue 1 in France and competes against traditional TV and satellite channels with a range of sports content over its streaming platform.

Foxtel Group was created by News Corp in 1995 and is one of Australia's leading media companies with 4.7 million subscribers. The group's businesses include subscription television, streaming, sports production and advertising. It livestreams Australian Football League and National Rugby League.

Robert Thomson, chief executive of News Corp, said: "This agreement is a victory for News Corp shareholders, DAZN and sport fans in Australia and around the world.

"Foxtel has been transformed into a genuine digital and streaming leader in Australia and we believe DAZN is the right owner to take the business to the next level with their technological capabilities, global footprint and compelling sports rights."

He said the deal allowed News Corp to focus on its core operations of Dow Jones, digital real estate and book publishing. News Corp owns a majority stake in the online real estate platform REA Group and is the parent company of News UK, owner of The Times and The Sunday Times, and of the publisher HarperCollins.

The deal is expected to be finalised in the second half of 2025 and is subject to regulatory approval, News Corp said.

The Australian telecoms company Telstra has also sold its 35 per cent stake in Foxtel to DAZN and will receive A$128 million (£64 million) in cash and a 3 per cent stake in DAZN.

DAZN's overseas ownership means the deal must be cleared by Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board.

Blavatnik is a dual US and British citizen and the founder of Access Industries, a global investment company.

News Corp's shares in Australia rose 3.5 per cent to A$50.79 on Monday. Telstra's shares gained 1.1 per cent.

Frasers to try again after Boohoo board rejection

Isabella Fish Retail Editor

Frasers Group intends to push forward a new candidate for Boohoo's board after shareholders rejected the appointment of founder Mike Ashley.

Almost two thirds of Boohoo shareholders who voted at a general meeting of the retailer on Friday rejected the bid by the Sports Direct tycoon to install himself and Mike Lennon, a restructuring expert, as directors.

Frasers holds a 28 per cent stake in Boohoo. Yesterday it said it "respects the views of the independent shareholders", and would take up the offer to propose an alternative candidate.

"We will put forward a highly qualified candidate in due course and fully expect Boohoo's board to uphold their commitment without hesitation or delay," it said.

The attempted boardroom coup came after a period of stake-building by Frasers: over the past year Frasers has been increasing its holdings in retailers including Boohoo, Asos, AO World and Hugo Boss. On Monday it increased its stake in Asos from 21.1 to 22.8 per cent.

Boohoo shares are down about 20 per cent over the past year and almost 90 per cent over the past five years. The group recently appointed Debenhams boss Dan Finley as chief executive in efforts to put it back on track.

Shares in Boohoo were up ½p, or 1.3 per cent to 33½p while the Frasers stock fell 21p, or 3.45 per cent, to 605½p.

● Homebase is to live on as a brand online and within up to 70 former stores reopened next year as branches of the Range, its new owner has announced.

CDS said it would open the first three converted outlets from the collapsed DIY retailer in January under the Range Superstores name, and then ten a month from February.

The group, which is based in Plymouth, said each would have a Homebase-branded garden centre section, and some would also have kitchen departments badged with the DIY brand.

RBG founder calls meeting to remove management

Jonathan Ames Legal Editor

The City lawyer who founded RBG Holdings and is its largest shareholder has called for an extraordinary meeting in an effort to oust its leadership.

Yesterday, RBG announced to the London Stock Exchange that a meeting would be held to "consider resolutions" to remove Jon Divers, its chief executive, and two non-executive directors.

The move came after it emerged last month that Ian Rosenblatt, who holds a 20 per cent stake, had pressed for the resignation of the three.

The company, which has been quoted on the Aim market in London since Rosenblatt Group floated in 2018, has seen its revenue and share price fall sharply amid difficulties around its management. Its stock price peaked at about 160p in the middle of 2021, but has since dwindled: shares fell another 1.7 per cent to close at 2¾p yesterday.

In a statement, the company said that it would comply with statutory requirements to convene the meeting, but it did "not believe these resolutions are in the best interests of all shareholders".

Reports last month suggested that Adil Taha, a former investment banker, was being lined up to take over as boss of the company.

Rosenblatt is the founder of Rosenblatt Solicitors, a City law firm, and in 2018 he announced it would become the fourth legal practice to float in London. It raised about £43 million when admitted to the Aim market later that year and several months later it launched an independent litigation funding subsidiary, LionFish.

In 2019 revenue at the firm grew by 19 per cent and two years later it took over another law firm, Memery Crystal, in a £30 million deal. But soon after, the business sacked its then chief executive, Nicola Foulston, with the board saying it had lost confidence in the former motor racing chief. The board was then changed, with Divers, who had been the chief operating officer at Memery Crystal, taking over the top job.

Last year the company sold LionFish for £3.1 million and last month the group's second biggest institutional shareholder, Dowgate Group, which had held 14.1 per cent of RBG's shares, reduced its stake to less than 3 per cent.

Law firms have been allowed to list in London since 2008. In 2019 DWF became the largest to do so but just four years later it delisted. With RBG, the remaining listed legal services practices are Gateley, Keystone and Knights.

Founder flies to the rescue of tech company he left behind

Ken Mulvany explains to **Alex Ralph** why BenevolentAI was on the wrong path, and his plan to secure its future



Ken Mulvany: "I felt the company was beginning to drift, somewhat significantly,

Among the outside interests of Ken Mulvany is reindeer conservation work in Lapland.

The America-born, UK-resident technology entrepreneur funds trackers on grazing herds to prevent oil companies drilling when the animals are near by, and recently visited the area.

Closer to home, Mulvany, 56, has also been busy on another project: protecting the future of BenevolentAI, the promising yet struggling technology company he founded over a decade ago.

On the day of an interview at the offices of the company's advisers in the City of London this month Mulvany, the executive chairman, announced a "major strategic overhaul", seven months after he rejoined the board through an activist campaign.

Concerned about BenevolentAI's slumping share price on Euronext Amsterdam and costly shift away from the company's roots as a tech company developing artificial intelligence to support third-party drug companies discover cutting-edge medicines, Mulvany overhauled the board — including ousting heavyweight multinational big pharma figures — to seize control.

Having been appointed to the board in May, alongside three other directors, including Peter Allen, the life sciences boardroom veteran, he is now seeking shareholder approval to delist the company from Amsterdam, just two years after it went public via a special purpose acquisition company.

BenevolentAI was valued at more than €1 billion at the time of its listing. However, its shares have since slumped, leaving it with a market valuation of only about €55 million.

Mulvany, who had stepped down as an executive in 2019 and left the board at the listing in 2022, is also planning a cost-cutting drive and will "look under every seat cushion ... to find some efficiencies". Part of that includes as yet unspecified redundancies, further cutting a workforce of about 180, and a review of its Cambridge facility to help extend the company's cash runway into 2027. The New York office has already been closed.

"I felt that the company was beginning to drift, somewhat significantly, from its technology roots — the things that all of its revenue was coming from, and drifting into a biotech where there was a substantial amount of risk being taken with shareholder funds, where the shareholders like myself and others were tech investors," says Mulvany, who has a 28 per cent stake.

This was due, he thinks, to the big pharma expertise that had been assembled on the board.

"Because you're kind of playing to the strengths of the people who are in charge of the company." The analogy he uses is football versus basketball. "They're different playing fields."

Among the four non-executive directors who resigned at the annual meeting in May were François Nader, a former director of Alexion, the rare diseases drugs specialist acquired by AstraZeneca for $39 billion, and Olivier Brandicourt, a former chief executive of Sanofi, the French multinational. Baroness Shields, a former technology adviser to David Cameron, had earlier stepped down as chief executive in September 2023.

The "drift" towards developing its own drugs pipeline meant the company's own technology and business development were "under-resourced", Mulvany said.

When he founded BenevolentAI, shortly after he had sold Proximagen, his first venture, in 2012 to Upsher-Smith Laboratories for $553 million, AI-driven drug discovery was a "revolutionary" field.

"Going back ten years, there was no tech-bio industry ... but now it's commonplace [for life sciences companies] to need this in their development plan."

The starting point was using AI to help understand the molecular cause of disease: "The issue we have is that we have an incomplete understanding of disease. We have all of this information that's out there. It's disparate, it's sitting over here. It's this type of format. It's this type of data. Some of it is in tabular form. Some of it is the written word: you have all of this information, images, everything, that's all over the place. How do we get it all in one place before we can even begin to reason across it?"

The technology can help drug companies select the right patients to go into clinical studies; to give riskier, earlier stage assets a greater chance of success by choosing the right target earlier; and to extend the patent life of a medicine through a new therapeutic indication.

"Those are the types of technologies that the company has historically been very good at developing and delivering for partners and also for patients because our inventions have saved lives," he says. "And those are the things that we want to invest more heavily in. So we want to revert to the type of balance sheet risk that we had been taking before in developing our technology."

BenevolentAI will retain a drugs pipeline but look to partner earlier in the process to reduce costs and risks.

The company has key large-scale collaborations with Merck and AstraZeneca, but such big, half-a-billion dollar contracts are "lumpy", non-recurring and "fewer and further between", he says. "What I'd like to see is many more smaller contracts."

Mulvany plans to improve the company's business development work and better utilise its "very cool" office on Maple Street in Fitzrovia to host more partnership events. "We haven't done a great job of getting our foot in the door

Mitsubishi sees future in eye-tracking

Robert Lea

Seeing Machines, the Aim-quoted tech company, has raised £26 million in a deal with part of the Mitsubishi empire in which the Japanese company will take a stake in the business.

Seeing Machines is developing driver monitoring systems, using sensors and cameras to keep an electronic eye out for tired, distracted or erratic behaviour at the wheel. The safety systems could play a key role in the arrival of semi-autonomous vehicles and the regulations to oversee them.

Listed on London's secondary stock market for nearly 20 years, the company is a spin-out from the Australian National University. The company said it had signed an agreement with Mitsubishi Electric Mobility for the subscription of £26 million of new shares and for it to become a 15 per cent shareholder.

As part of the transaction Mitsubishi Electric Mobility is arranging to take its holding up to 19.9 per cent by acquiring further shares from Seeing Machines' two largest shareholders, Lombard Odier Asset Management and VS International Venture.

The new stock has been issued at 4p per share. The company said that was a 12 per cent premium to the 30-day average of Seeing Machines' stock price, though in reality it is at a discount to Friday's close of 4½p after a sharp 35 per cent run-up in the shares in the past fortnight, suggesting buyers had got a whiff of something afoot. The shares closed up another ¼p, or 4.5 per cent, at 4¾p last night, valuing the company at nearly £200 million.

Paul McGlone, chief executive of Seeing Machines, said the deal was a "pivotal partnership" for the company.

Oliver Tipping, an analyst at the stockbroker Peel Hunt, said: "This investment secures the next circa 18 months of runway for Seeing Machines, by which point the company plans to be cash-generative."

Stifel, the house broker, said: "We think any investor fears of a potential fundraise now disappear and should therefore be beneficial to sentiment and the share price."

Australian operator to bring low-cost pod hotels to London

Jessica Newman

An Australian operator of pod hotels is set to plump for London as its first location in Europe.

LyLo, which provides budget-friendly hostel-style accommodation targeting young solo travellers, has appointed property agents to hunt for potential sites in Southwark, south London.

The brand, which was launched in 2022, operates 608 compact hotels in Australia and New Zealand. LyLo is part of EVT, an Australian group whose portfolio comprises cinemas, restaurants, and more than 80 hotels.

Pod hotels, modelled on a Japanese phenomenon used mainly by business professionals, provide a compact space that includes a bed, a secure locker and often shared amenities such as bathrooms and dining areas. The concept has grown in popularity for travellers because they are cheaper than traditional hotels and guests can socialise.

"The pod hotel model has proven to be a game changer in the hospitality space," Thomas Rose, co-founder of P-Three, a property consultancy appointed to find sites in Europe, said.

Tim Alpe, managing director at LyLo, believes London is the "perfect city to launch our first property" due to its "dynamic and diverse traveller base".

GETTY IMAGES; SONJA HORSMAN FOR THE TIMES



from its technology roots — the things that all of its revenue was coming from"

... and then becoming more pervasive within that organisation, looking for ways that we can add value to their development. It could be something simple, like assessing the [drug] targets that they have in development."

But he adds: "We're doing more business development now than we've done in our previous three years combined, which is important, and we're getting out there, we're seeing people, we're talking to them, we're understanding what their needs are, and that really helps from a product development road map perspective, so you know what it is that you're going to be delivering in 12 months, 24 months."

Mulvany is also critical of BenevolentAI's previous lack of engagement with prospective investors, which he believes has hindered its Amsterdam listing. Deutsche Numis was appointed in July as its capital markets adviser to help get closer to investors.

Despite the widespread industry adoption of AI in recent years, Mulvany believes many businesses still struggle to develop the capabilities and believes the company can lead the "next generation" of innovation.

The company has the "battle scars from knowing how this works to constantly pushing the envelope" and the industry is now less sceptical about the technology. He says: "I want to see the biggest impact on humanity that I can possibly make and I feel strongly that the models that we're creating and our peer companies ... we're going to be soon in a position where we can see the condensing of innovation that may have taken 50 years, 100 years, into the next five or ten. We're going to see that sort of scale."

Mehreen Khan



Bulls are riding into 2025 with high hopes for a Trump boom

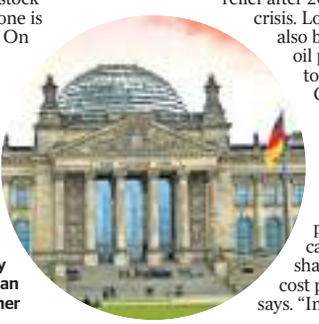
It has been a year of electoral anti-incumbency, revolutions, war and a global economy that survived a few market tremors to expand at a respectable annual rate of about 3 per cent. The economic outlook for next year is already gearing up to be one of the most uncertain since the aftermath of the financial crisis. In the spirit of festive cheer, however, it is time to look back on some of the things that went right in 2024 and why 2025 might not be as ghoulish as most are expecting.

Here is a potted list of the accomplishments of the past year, with some hopeful prognostics about what the new year may hold.

The first is the unbridled mania that has gripped financial markets in the past two months. A US stock market boom is already in train, driven by Donald Trump's victory last month. US equity valuations have been on a tear, with the benchmark S&P 500 on course to deliver an annual return of 30 per cent to investors, more than twice that of Japan, Europe and the UK this year.

Money is pouring into American stocks at the fastest pace in three years, positioning for a "Trump boom". US economic growth is almost certain to outperform its G7 peers next year, powered by Trump's tax cuts, fiscal stimulus and planned deregulation. This sugar rush is coupled with a broader optimism about AI creating a new productivity boom, justifying steep valuations. Stock market bulls are also betting on Trump watering down his growth-retarding measures such as the mass deportation of tens of millions of migrants and a global trade war.

Now, as with any stock market booms, this one is laced with jeopardy. On some measures, US market optimism has hit peaks higher than before the tech bubble in the 2000s or on the eve of the financial crisis. Even Nouriel Roubini, dubbed the "Dr Doom" of markets, has said there is little alternative to US stocks. It may well go the way of stock market bubbles throughout history with a seismic crash. Or this time could be different. "Historical trends are being permanently broken in real time as mega forces, like the rise of artificial intelligence, transform economies," according to BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager.



Elections in February could help the German economy turn a corner

Supporting the case for the bulls in 2025 will be an environment of steadily falling interest rates. Central banks such as the Fed and the Bank of England are unlikely to embark on the bumper monetary loosenings that had been forecast for large parts of 2024 but borrowing costs will still decline as inflation begins to settle at about the 2 per cent mark. This will support risky assets such as equities and provide a leg up to bonds.

The interest rate environment is the second source of optimism for the global economy next year. The once-in-a-generation tightening cycle, where interest rates were yanked up from close to 0 per cent in advanced economies, piled pressure on fiscal deficits and pushed up debt overhangs. The fiscal state of most rich countries, including the US, France and the UK, has worsened since the pandemic and spending demands on governments are only going in one direction. But debt crises are less likely when central banks are cutting interest rates. That is something to tentatively celebrate.

Another unsung development in 2024 is lower oil prices. The price of Brent crude has fallen from just under $90 a barrel at the start of the year to closer to $70, exerting a disinflationary force on global prices and a welcome relief after 2022's global energy crisis. Low oil prices may also beget even lower oil prices, according to Neil Shearing at Capital Economics. "Saudi Arabia and other influential Opec+ members might shift from a strategy of trying to prop up prices to one of capturing market share from higher-cost producers," he says. "In other words, 2025 could be the year in which Opec opens the taps. If this were to happen, oil prices could collapse."

Two countries that have been perennial sources of pessimism in 2024 could also buck expectations in the coming year: China and Germany. China's growth worries have preoccupied policymakers inside and outside the country. Yet the past few months have provided some hope that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is inching closer to the kinds of stimulus-enhancing measures needed to jolt consumers into life. Economic growth in the fourth quarter has been souped up by government measures and the CCP has said promoting consumer demand is its top priority in 2025. The spectre of Trump's 60 per cent tariffs could also accelerate growth-enhancing measures at home.

In Germany, 2025 may well be the year that its infamous constitutional "debt brake" is loosened or even abandoned altogether. Europe's largest economy goes to the polls in February and the centre-right conservatives are expected to be in pole position to form a new coalition. The fiscally hawkish Christian Democrats, who have been most wedded to the constitutional limit on borrowing, are already under pressure to relax the fiscal strictures to pay for their €100 billion in promised tax cuts. Jettisoning the debt brake would be an unequivocal positive for Germany and the rest of Europe, freeing its political class to embark on desperately needed borrowing to fund public investment and rebalancing the eurozone's skewed economy.

One final and often overlooked development that could have a series of growth-boosting consequences for developing economies is the proliferation of weight-loss treatments known as GLP-1 drugs, sold under names including Ozempic and Wegovy. Demand is outweighing supply in big economies, but the coming year could "be an inflection point" with a series of key regulatory approvals due that will "significantly boost growth" through higher labour force participation and lower obesity-related healthcare costs, according to analysts at Barclays.

Mehreen Khan is Economics Editor of The Times

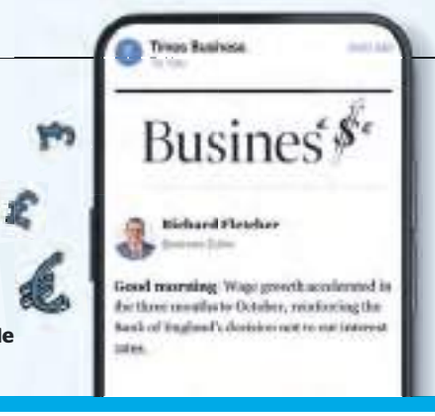
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Spanish actress and socialist who blossomed after Franco
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Register

Obituaries

Sir Robin Nicholson

Cambridge-educated metallurgist who became Thatcher's chief scientific adviser and promoted a market-based approach to R&D funding

As the most powerful person in Britain and an Oxford-educated chemist to boot, Margaret Thatcher did not want a chief scientific adviser. That she eventually relented and even warmed to the idea said much for the charm and capability of Sir Robin Nicholson.

The post was created in 1964 to try to harness what the new prime minister Harold Wilson had called in a speech the year before "the white heat of technology". Thatcher was minded to dispense with the role and when the Lords select committee on science and technology, backed by the Royal Society, also called for the reinstatement of a minister of science and a gallery of "chief scientific advisers" she gave an emphatic "No".

Sir Winston Churchill was once reported to have said that "scientists should be on tap but not on top", but it seemed likely that the tap would be turned off. "Margaret Thatcher much prided herself on being the only scientist in her government," said the diplomat and environmentalist Sir Crispin Tickell (obituary January 26, 2022), whose advice to Thatcher on climate change enabled her to become one of the first politicians to give a speech on the subject in 1988. "Anything that related to science she took a particular interest in, and almost felt that she owned it."

Thatcher felt the role of chief scientific adviser had become a conduit for universities to lobby the government for more funding and was vexed at the reaction she would get in the face of public sector cuts affecting science academia. It became clear that she would only countenance an adviser who could play a more dynamic role in making scientific research more commercially successful.

What was needed, said the cabinet secretary Robert Armstrong, was an "attractive personality". They found it in Nicholson, one of Britain's most distinguished metallurgists who had a "lively mind", the "great advantage of seven years in industry" and, perhaps best of all, was "ideologically attuned" to Thatcherism. He had emerged as the leading candidate at the suggestion of the Royal Society president Andrew Huxley. Testament to Nicholson's progress was that by 1983 the job title had changed from chief scientist at the Cabinet Office to chief scientific adviser "with direct access to the prime minister".

According to one newspaper profile, Nicholson, who had recently been elected as a fellow of the Royal Society, was "slightly rumpled" in appearance with a "disarming smile". He recalled feeling distinctly uncomfortable on his first meeting with the prime minister when she asked for his opinion on the Channel tunnel project she had just agreed with President Mitterrand. "My jaw dropped. I knew nothing about tunnels." But the well-connected Nicholson knew plenty of people who did and came back with rigorously researched advice that satisfied Thatcher.

Other achievements he was proud of during his tenure included action to tackle acid rain in Britain — caused by sulphur dioxide from industrial emissions — which led to an 80 per cent reduction; the emergence of one of the world's first regulated national policies for human fertilisation and embryo research, culminating in the founding of The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in 1990; and continued British government support for the pan-European Airbus project and the Eureka initiative for industrial R&D.





Robin Nicholson with his first wife Elizabeth after being knighted in 1985. Right, a young Margaret Thatcher studying chemistry at Summerville College, Oxford

His good offices were also vital in ensuring that Thatcher was narrowly elected as a fellow of the Royal Society in 1983, with Nicholson having advocated for her at a stormy meeting. Two years later the prime minister would be denied an Oxford honorary degree owing to opposition "led by scientists".

His action on tackling acid rain in Britain led to an 80 per cent reduction

He said all the right things, sharing Thatcher's view about the primacy of private enterprise. For example, he described the British Technology Group, formed in 1981 out of the old Attlee-era National Research Development Corporation and the National Enterprise Board, as having "all the sloth and leaden-footedness characteristic of a state-owned monopoly".

And when the select committee on science and technology produced a report calling for a "national strategy for technology and manufactured products", Nicholson delighted Thatcher by proclaiming it "counter to the government's view that market considerations should guide the support of technological developments". His model of progress was Inmos, the semi-conductor and microprocessor manufacturer. The government had put in £50 million when the company was founded in 1978 and sold its stake to Thorn EMI for £192 million in 1984. By now Thatcher was asking, "What would I do without Robin?"

He was attacked in one article for supporting "disproportionate" R&D funding for the defence sector, with the writer quoting Lord Hailsham, the Conservative lord chancellor, who as minister for science in 1962 warned: "The marriage between science and defence is corrupting ... and will ultimately dry up the wells of inventiveness in the scientist himself."

Nicholson made no apology that much technology research funding was directed to defence projects (about 27 per cent in the UK compared with 4 per cent in Germany). "The huge proportion allocated to defence is necessary to keep up our commitment to Nato and to match the numbers of the potential enemy with quality of equipment," he said.

In 1985 Nicholson published a review of R&D in the UK, which showed that it had fallen to the bottom of the league behind key competitors, such as the US, Japan, France and Germany. New Scientist magazine had editorialised about the "final passing of Britain as a leading member of the world of science", while The Sunday Times claimed that "Nicholson has presided over this decline".

Nicholson was defiant. "Far too much attention is paid to the minutiae of the figures on comparative R&D spending," he told The Sunday Times in May 1986. "Smaller countries like Sweden, Switzerland and the Netherlands spend far less on science and technology and nevertheless have excellent science-based industries."

Thatcher had started to ask, 'What would I do without Robin?'

The key was directing the little funding available to the right places. "In the past the very best people have had insufficient money because it has gone to frankly mediocre people," he said. "It's not how much is spent but who gets it that's the important thing."

He cited government support for the Alvey programme of IT research in British universities, including the country's first R&D on artificial intelligence, for which £350 million was invested between 1983 and 1987, helping to put Britain at the cutting edge.

And Britain needed to do more to turn good ideas into commercial success, he said, citing the country's failure to harness the potential of the EMI CT brain scanner, invented by Sir Godfrey Hounsfield in 1971. He also claimed that scientists who had developed an idea were discouraged from monetising it because of red tape. For example, he called on the Patent Office to be freed from "civil service constraints" that deterred some scientists from patenting their ideas because of complex and cumbersome processes. They then saw their ideas copied overseas.

He also blamed scientists for poor communication skills. "You can't communicate the way you would to a fellow scientist and expect those on the receiving end to educate themselves to the same level; yet it's amazing how many scientists still do this," he said.

Leaving office with a powerful, free-standing role and a secretariat of ten officials, he said: "My service as GCSA was marked by an upsurge of interest in the use of science and technology to understand global events such as climate change, energy conservation, deforestation and agricultural development. I regard my greatest achievement as the application of top-quality science and technology to the understanding of phenomena which shape the world and determine its economic and social future."

Robin Buchanan Nicholson was born in 1934 in Sutton Coldfield (then in Warwickshire) to Carroll Nicholson and Nancy (née Levi). His mother came from a family of silversmiths in Birmingham and had read chemistry at London University. His father, who had studied mechanical sciences at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, worked for Shell. Robin's earliest years were spent in South America during his father's postings in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires.

He was educated at Oundle, a school with a strong tradition in science and where Nicholson grew his first crystal. He also went on to St Catharine's College, although he studied natural sciences and stayed on for a PhD in metallurgy in 1959. Nicholson had married Elizabeth Caffyn in 1958. She died in 1988. He is survived by their son Timothy and their daughters, Helen and Jennie. In 1991 he married Yvonne Appelby, who survives him.

Nicholson became a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge from 1962 and lectured in metallurgy from 1964. He was appointed professor of metallurgy at the University of Manchester in 1966. During his time there he pioneered the use of electron microscopes to obtain high-resolution images in aluminium alloys to inform research into how metals can be strengthened.

He took the opportunity to find commercial applications for his ideas when he joined the European subsidiary of the International Nickel Company of Canada (Inco) as director of its research laboratory. Progress was swift; he became a director in 1975 and managing director in 1976.

After recruiting the computer scientist John Fairclough from IBM as his successor as chief scientific adviser in 1986, Nicholson returned to industry with the knighthood conferred the year before. He joined the board of Rolls-Royce and was appointed chief executive of the electro-optical division at Pilkington Glass to put his preaching into practice about commercialising British innovation.

Nicholson listed statistics among his interests and enjoyed conjuring them at Lord's while watching England play cricket. In retirement, he developed a deep love of gardening. He still dreamt of biological innovation but never achieved his ambition of developing a new breed of rhododendron.

Sir Robin Nicholson, British industrial metallurgist, academic and chief scientific adviser, was born on August 12, 1934. He died on November 15, 2024, aged 90

Register

Marisa Paredes

Outspoken left-wing actress known as 'una chica Almodóvar' whose prolific career blossomed in post-Franco Spain

EL DESEO S A/KOBAL/REX FEATURES



Marisa Paredes, right, with Victoria Abril in High Heels, 1991

Marisa Paredes had been acting for more than 20 years when Pedro Almodóvar cast her as a murderous, LSD-taking nun in his 1983 film *Dark Habits* but ever after she became known throughout Spain as "una chica Almodóvar" (an Almodóvar girl).

Dark Habits was Almodóvar's third feature film as he rode the cultural renaissance known as *La Movida Madrileña*, which followed the death of Franco in 1975 and the end of fascist dictatorship. Paredes played Sister Estiércol ("Sister Manure" in English) and brought a lofty, ascetic beauty to the role, although the film's depiction of drug-taking and lesbianism in a convent led to rejection by the Cannes Film Festival. *Dark Habits* was shown at the Venice Film Festival, but was omitted from the official programme on the grounds of its blasphemy. Despite, or perhaps because of the controversy, the film cemented Almodóvar's reputation as the enfant terrible of Spanish cinema and Paredes became one of his favourite actors.

Over her long career she made almost 80 films for big and small screen, including playing a wickedly snobby socialite in Roberto Benigni's 1997 comedy drama *Life is Beautiful*, which won three Academy Awards. Yet the five movies in which Almodóvar gave her a starring role defined her in the eyes of cinemagoers. After *Dark Habits*, the director went on to cast her in *High Heels* (1991), *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), *All About My Mother* (1999) and *The Skin I Live In* (2011).

In addition there was a blink-and-you-missed it cameo as a party guest in Almodóvar's Academy Award-winning 2001 psychological melodrama *Talk To Her*. "Marisa placed absolute trust in me and gave me everything," Almodóvar said of the films they made together.

In *High Heels* she played the headstrong nightclub torch singer Becky del Páramo, sharing a lover with her daughter in a performance that won her four Spanish film industry awards as best actress. There were more awards for *All About My Mother*, in which she played an actress playing Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, while in *The Skin I Live In* she was a black-clad assistant to Antonio Banderas's mad scientist, helping him to keep a young woman captive.

Yet she kept perhaps her most nuanced performance for *The Flower of My Secret*. Loosely inspired by Dorothy Parker's short story *The Lovely Leave*, she portrayed a troubled romantic novelist approaching middle age with a heartfelt sincerity that typified what the Spanish film academy called her gift for playing "women who were strong, ambivalent, broken, passionate, enigmatic, but who were, above all, very human".

She was awarded an honorary Goya, the Spanish film industry's most prestigious award, for a lifetime's achievement in 2018. In her acceptance speech, she spoke of the "absolute rigour and seriousness" that the acting profession demanded. They were far from idle words and her devotion to her craft was all-consuming: in her teens she had gone on hunger strike to persuade her father to let her act.

When her father stopped her acting she went on a week-long hunger strike

She is survived by her daughter the actress María Isasi from a brief marriage to the writer and director Antonio Isasi-Isasmendi, and by her partner of 40 years, José María Prado, the former director of Spain's national film library, the Filmoteca Española.

María Luisa Paredes Bartolomé was born in 1946 in Madrid, the fourth child of a father who picked up odd jobs as a janitor and doorman in an impoverished country still recovering from the depredations of civil war. She grew up in the then working-class district of Barrio de las Letras, close to Madrid's Plaza de Santa Ana, home to the Teatro Español, which she credited with inspiring her desire to act. "I was born with my vocation but it also had a lot to do with the neighbourhood where I lived," she said. Every day she passed a statue of the 17th-century playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca and promised herself that one day she would take the stage in his plays.

Her father, who she claimed had mistreated her, had other ideas. After she made an uncredited film debut aged 14 as an extra in José María Forqué's 1960 crime drama *Police Calling 091* he insisted there would be no more acting. She told him she would starve herself until he changed his mind. When she ate and drank nothing for a week, he realised that she was deadly serious and relented. At 16 she made her stage debut at Madrid's Teatro de la Comedia.

Her career bloomed rapidly after the actor and director Fernando Fernán Gómez took her under his wing. Three decades her senior, he became her mentor and reputedly her lover. In 1963 he cast her in his film *El mundo sigue* (Life Goes On), although due to Spain's draconian censorship laws it was not seen in cinemas until two years later. On the film's 50th anniversary, the leading Spanish movie magazine *Fotogramas* called it "one of the most terrifying and merciless moral portraits of Francoist Spain ever made". As Gomez's patronage opened doors, she went on to appear in Spanish television productions of Shakespeare, Chekhov and Ibsen in an era when, as she tartly put it, TV had not been taken over by reality shows and was still making an effort to be "cultured".

Before Almodóvar came calling, her most significant big-screen appearance came in Fernando Trueba's 1980 directorial debut *Ópera Prima*, in which she played wittily upon the stereotype of the grand dame. Such roles were to become something of a speciality, not least in her portrayal of the great 19th-century French actress Sarah Bernhardt in the 1992 period drama *Off Season*.

It was perhaps no coincidence that her career blossomed post-Franco for she had loathed the repressive regime under which she grew up and continued to espouse left-wing views all her life. She used her position as president of the Spanish film academy to protest against Spain's support for the United States in the 2003 Iraq war and recently joined other prominent figures in the Spanish arts world to launch a manifesto that was critical of Israel.

On her death Spain's prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, remarked that the country had lost not only one of the finest actresses it had ever produced but a socialist stalwart who cared deeply about social justice and whose "commitment to democracy will be an example to future generations".

Marisa Paredes, Spanish actress, was born on April 3, 1946. She died of heart failure on December 17, 2024 aged 78

Lives remembered

Lt Gen Sir Maurice Johnston



John McNaught DL writes: As Lord Lieutenant of Wiltshire, Maurice Johnston (obituary, December 14) was head of the magistracy in the county.

To the dismay of the lay magistrates, a programme of amalgamation and closure of courts was announced. It was not Maurice's decision but he had the responsibility of seeing it through. Some benches were to lose their historic identities. Feathers were ruffled.

Maurice arranged a meeting of bench chairmen. He was determined that an unwelcome scheme should be understood and accepted on all sides. I was there because I was the liaison judge for the county.

Despite Maurice's calm and polite chairmanship, the understandable opposition within the committee room remained firm and heated to the point of hostility.

To reduce the tension, Maurice suggested that we all take a break and go for a walk in the afternoon sunshine. I watched with admiration as he used his great qualities of charm, courtesy and patience to win over the chairmen.

Within half an hour, albeit grudgingly and against the odds, the scheme was accepted unanimously, just as Maurice had hoped. It was a masterly achievement.

Dr Charles Goodson-Wickes writes: Sir Maurice Johnston's distinguished military and civilian service was well documented, but his talents also extended to garden creation, fishing, shooting and, perhaps surprisingly, to the art of glass engraving.

He and Belinda were marvellous hosts in BAOR and Wiltshire, the occasions often marked by his clear views on matters of the day.

Charles Handy



James Cochrane writes: Charles Handy (obituary, December 17) had a lasting impact on us, his students, with advice such as: "Find the next challenge when you are at the peak of your current job"; "What have you learnt in the past six months and has it been fun? If the answer is nothing and no, try another six months and if the answer is still no, find something else to do"; "If you have not done it in six years, you are never going to do it — move on"; and, lastly, "Know yourself — what are you good at and what are you not good at?" He was an inspirational teacher.

Nick Elam



Lord Wasserman writes: I first met Nick Elam (obituary, December 14) in the autumn of 1959 when I came up to New College, Oxford, as a Canadian Rhodes scholar.

Although I had already earned a university degree, I chose to read for another undergraduate degree in order to experience Oxford college life to the full. But because I was a graduate, I joined the course in its second year, thereby missing the first year's preliminary examinations as well as the first months of college life during which "freshers" are introduced to the college and its traditions.

This is where Nick Elam came in. From the moment we met in the Junior Common Room, where he was already an established figure, Nick made it his business to make me feel at home in the college. Although we were reading different subjects and therefore had different tutors and attended different lectures, he kept a close eye on me and ensured that I was fully engaged in college life and as happy as one could be in a damp and gloomy winter in a strange land.

I have never forgotten Nick's kindness in those early days. My only regret is that I never told him how important a role he played in my decision to continue my education in Oxford after my undergraduate degree and, subsequently, to make this country my home.

If you would like to add a personal view or recollection to a published obituary, you can send your contribution by post to Times Obituaries, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, or by email to **tributes@thetimes.co.uk**

Mike Pawson

'Revolutionary' obstetrician who set up an NHS clinic for women with fertility problems

Mike Pawson believed that giving birth was the best thing a human being could do. Being an obstetrician, he explained to his daughter Lara, was the closest he could get to the process. His deep interest in the psychosomatic aspects of infertility and mental health in pregnancy established his international reputation as one of medicine's quiet revolutionaries.

Where other reformers might scream and shout to effect change, Pawson was a gentle giant empowered by the deep conviction he was right — that women had been undermined by generations of obstetricians and gynaecologists. He would turn on critics with little more than an engaging, disarming smile, determined to evade conflict. His charm and genuine concern for people also gave him an impeccable bedside manner. His mentor was the formidable Professor Norman Morris, of Charing Cross Hospital, London, who in the 1960s accused his fellow obstetricians (mostly men) of neglecting the feelings of new mothers and pregnant women. Morris's crusading helped to make ante-natal classes routine and encouraged husbands to join their partners in the labour room.

But there was a highly personal driving force behind Pawson's ideology. He explained it all in a remarkably frank revelation in a book in which fellow contributors included Hilary Mantel, author of the *Wolf Hall* trilogy and one of his many celebrity patients; and Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*. Writing in *Inconceivable Conceptions: Psychological Aspects of Infertility and Reproductive Technology*, Pawson said: "What is it that makes a gynaecologist take up such a speciality and reflect on mortality and procreation? I am conscious that my motivation to do medicine and then to specialise in women's health and wellbeing, initially in pregnancy and childbirth, was the positive and creative nature of producing a healthy baby.

"Probably a deeper and more complex reason was associated with the fact that I had no communication of any sort with my father from the age of six. This made me interested in parenting and, having seen, understood and taken part in the care of pregnant women, I became aware of the pain of those who were unable to conceive. I became progressively more interested in infertility and started a clinic within the NHS in 1970 dedicated to those with fertility problems."



Pawson was charming and had a genuine concern for his patients

From six years of age onwards Pawson never communicated with his own father

The Charing Cross clinic is believed to have been the first in the UK dedicated exclusively to infertility problems. One in six people were estimated to be infertile — with many enduring a traumatic, life-long sense of loss for what might have been. Pawson's pioneering clinic was a catalyst in what became an explosion in infertility management, including in vitro fertilisation and egg and embryo donation. But his research underlined his dedication to the study of psychosomatic and psychological illness. Unusually, if not uniquely, for an obstetrician/gynaecologist, he considered undergoing psychoanalysis. His papers had controversial titles such as "What has happened to Hippocrates?" and "The infertile patient — does she always want a baby?"

Pawson became the first clinical director of the Assisted Conception Unit at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London, and then its clinical director of gynaecological services. By this time he and his wife Carolyn Handasyde, whom he married in 1961, had three children. Lara is a former BBC journalist and author; Robert ("Bobbie"), a judge and Alexandra ("Xandra"), a counsellor. His wife, children and six grandchildren survive him. He was, said Lara, an affectionate and attentive father who loved taking the kids on treats and outings and who later encouraged them to challenge his politics and philosophy. Lara partly attributed her father's illustrious career to the indefatigable support of her mother — a feature evident in many medical careers.

Pawson was the only child of Edward Basil "Jack" Pawson, a Staffordshire GP, and Mary Bertha Batson "Betty" Pawson (née Stephens). Born in Moseley, Birmingham, in 1937, his childhood passions included Wolverhampton Wanderers, cricket and reading. He later became a collector of first editions and cherished an unfulfilled ambition to run a bookshop. Educated at Marlborough College, he wanted to follow his father into medicine, but a teacher told him that he would "never make a scientist". Defying the warning, he switched to medicine after obtaining a place to study English at Jesus College, Cambridge.

Extremely popular with colleagues, Pawson was the "best-ever" mentor, according to Roger Marwood, a now retired obstetrician/gynaecologist at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. Pawson advised him about a wide range of issues, from dealing with junior colleagues and NHS managers to juggling private and professional life, an occupational hazard in medicine.

Pawson's engaging personality was well suited to the diplomatic demands of committee work. He chaired the British Society of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynaecology in the 1990s and became UK representative on the International Executive Committee of the International Society of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynaecology. He also loved teaching and was an examiner for bodies such as the University of London, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Central Midwives Board.

But he was not flawless. In later life he enjoyed watching TV sport and, in a contradiction that bemused his family, seemed to lose sight of the feminist values that had defined his career. He hated listening to women sports commentators.

Michael Edward Pawson, doctor, was born on June 10, 1937. He died from frailty of old age and heart disease on November 9 2024, aged 87

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THE TIMES

Births, Marriages and Deaths

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AN angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Luke 2.9-11 (NIV) Bible verses are provided by the Bible Society

Births

PELLY-MACLELLAN on 12th December 2024 to Harry and Archie, a daughter, Viola Jenny.

Forthcoming Marriages

MISS A.C. PARKER AND MR J.J.T. STAMPER
The engagement is announced between Alice Catherine, daughter of Mary-Clare and Steven Parker of Blackheath, London, and Jeremy James Thomas, son of Debbie and Allan Stamper of Epsom, Surrey.

Deaths

EDDLESTON Katharine Mary, died peacefully on 12th December 2024, aged 89, surrounded by her family in the Royal Blackburn Hospital after a short illness. A beloved wife, mother and grandmother.

NEWMAN William died peacefully on Wednesday, 18th December 2024, aged 83. Beloved husband of Patricia, father of Alexander and Victoria and grandfather of Leo, Edi, Freddie, Charlie and Oscar. Forever in our hearts.

QUINE Penelope Mary on 7th December 2024. Beloved wife of the late Hector (Bill), mother to Adrian and Francesca, grandmother to Edward and the late Isabel. Funeral on 8th January at 11am at Church of St Mary, Stoke by Nayland, Suffolk.

REDMOND Philip Michael Redmond died peacefully at home on 6th December 2024, aged 88. Much-loved husband of Judy, brother of Anne and the late Bill, father of Rachel, "Pa" of Arthur, Henry and Cecily. Service of Thanksgiving to be held at St Nicholas' Church, Burton-in-Wirral, Cheshire, at 1.30pm on Tuesday 14th January 2025. Donations if wished to Clatterbridge Cancer Charity.

SMITH The Reverend David RM on 7th December 2024, aged 78. He will be dearly missed by his family and friends. Funeral service to take place at Holy Trinity Church, Ambelcote, on Thursday 9th January 2025 at 1.30pm. All welcome to attend. Family flowers only please, with donations in memory of David for Dementia UK being gratefully accepted by H Porter & Sons, Old Church House, 60 South Road, Stourbridge, DY8 3UJ, 01384 395048.

TWIGGE-MOLECEY David John passed away peacefully on 6th December 2024, aged 80. Family and friends are deeply saddened by his passing. David John Twigge-Molecey was much loved and will be greatly missed. The funeral service will take place at the West Brompton Cemetery chapel, London, on Wednesday 8th January 2025 at noon.

VENMORE-ROWLAND Beryl Elizabeth Mary (née Shirley) died on 8th December 2024, aged 98. Beloved wife of the late Owain. Loving mother of Piers and Mark and proud grandmother and great-grandmother.

Thanksgiving Services

GOAD Tima. Service of Thanksgiving will be held at St Mary's Church, Bletchingley, RH1 4PD, on 7th February 2025 at 3.30pm

Acknowledgements

SAINT ANTHONY Grateful thanks to Saint Anthony. Publication promised.

The simple way to place your Birth, Marriage or Death announcement in the Register. Available 24 hours a day. Go to: **newsukadvertising.co.uk**



There is no Court Circular for December 23 or 24

LEGAL, PUBLIC, COMPANY & PARLIAMENTARY NOTICES

To place notices for these sections please call 020 7782 7553

Notices are subject to confirmation and should be received by 11.30am three days prior to insertion

Legal Notices

MEADOW FOODS (CHESTER) LIMITED
Company Number: 01023644
INGREDIENT SOURCING LIMITED
Company Number: 05406056
LIQUID INGREDIENT SOURCING LIMITED
Company Number: 04589511
Principal trading address: Rough Hill, Marlston-cum-Lache, Chester, CH4 9JS

As Joint Liquidators of the Companies, we hereby give notice that we intend to make a final distribution to their creditors. The last date for proving is 6 February 2025 and creditors of the Companies should by that date send their full names and addresses and particulars of their debts or claims to me, Derek Neil Hyslop of Ernst & Young LLP, Atria One, 144 Morrison Street, Edinburgh, EH3 8EX. In accordance with Rule 14.38(1)(c) of the Insolvency (England and Wales) Rules 2016, we may thereafter make the proposed distribution without regard to the claim of any person in respect of a debt not yet proved. Date of Appointment: 12 December 2024. Office Holder Details: Derek Neil Hyslop of Ernst & Young LLP, Atria One, 144 Morrison Street, Edinburgh, EH3 8EX and Richard Barker of Ernst & Young LLP, 1 More London Place, London, SE1 2AF. Further details contact: The Joint Liquidators. Tel: +44 20 7951 7712. Alternative contact: Ursula Du Toit.
Dated 19 December 2024
Derek Neil Hyslop, Joint Liquidator

In the matter of
AVIDITI CAPITAL ADVISORS UK LTD
(Company Number 12444647)
Registered office & Principal trading address: 65 Curzon Street, 6th Floor, London, United Kingdom, W1J 8PE
(In Members' Voluntary Liquidation) ("the Company") and in the matter of the Insolvency Act 1986 and the Insolvency (England and Wales) Rules 2016

Notice is hereby given that written resolutions were passed by the members of the Company on 18 December 2024 placing the Company into Members' Voluntary Liquidation (solvent liquidation) and appointing Joyce Eleanor Thomson and Nicholas James Timpson of Interpath Ltd as Joint Liquidators.
Notice is also hereby given, pursuant to Rule 14.28 of the Insolvency (England and Wales) Rules 2016, that the Joint Liquidators of the Company intend to declare a distribution to the creditors of the Company within two months of 10 February 2025.
Creditors who have not yet done so must prove their debts by sending their full names and addresses, particulars of their debts and the names and addresses of their solicitors (if any) to the Joint Liquidators at Interpath Ltd, 5th Floor, 130 St Vincent Street, Glasgow, G2 5HF United Kingdom by no later than 10 February 2025 (the last date for proving).
The intended distribution is a sole distribution and may be made without regard to the claim of any person in respect of a debt not proved by 10 February 2025. Any creditor who has not proved his debt by that date, or who increases the debt in his proof after that date, will not be entitled to disturb the intended sole distribution. The Joint Liquidators intend that, after paying or providing for a sole distribution in respect of creditors who have proved their debts, all funds remaining in the Joint Liquidators' hands following the sole distribution to creditors shall be distributed to the shareholders of the Company absolutely.
The Company is able to pay all its known liabilities in full. For further details contact Rebecca Woolston on +44 (0) 20 3989 2855 or at rebecca.woolston@interpath.com
Dated: 19 December 2024
Joyce Eleanor Thomson, *Joint Liquidator*

CR-2024-004418
IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE BUSINESS AND PROPERTY COURTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES COMPANIES COURT (ChD)
IN THE MATTER OF INVINITY ENERGY SYSTEMS LIMITED (COMPANY NUMBER 15892542) (TO BE RE-REGISTERED AS A PUBLIC LIMITED COMPANY WITH THE NAME INVINITY ENERGY SYSTEMS PLC)
AND IN THE MATTER OF THE COMPANIES ACT 2006

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that on the 11 December 2024 a Claim Form was issued in His Majesty's High Court of Justice seeking the confirmation of the reduction of the issued share capital of the above-named company by reducing the nominal value of each ordinary share to £0.01 with the amount by which the share capital is so reduced being credited to a reserve.
AND NOTICE IS FURTHER GIVEN that the final hearing of the Claim is directed to be heard before the Insolvency and Companies Court Judge at the Royal Courts of Justice, The Rolls Building, 7 Rolls Buildings, Fetter Lane, London, EC4A 1NL on the 14 January 2025 at 10.30 a.m.
Any Creditor or Shareholder of the above-named company desiring to oppose the making of an Order for the confirmation of the said reduction of capital should appear at the time of hearing in person or by Counsel for that purpose.
A copy of the Claim Form will be furnished to any such person requiring the same by the undermentioned Solicitors on payment of the regulated charge for the same.
Dated 24 December 2024
Charles Russell Speechlys LLP
5 Fleet Place
London
EC4M 7RD
(Tel: 020 7203 5000)
Solicitors for the above-named company
(Ref: AXC – 239264-1)

Sport

IMAGO/GEPA PICTURES/WALTER LUGER



‘I know why I threw up – I’ve learnt from it’

Jack Draper looks back on breakthrough year – and tells **Stuart Fraser** why he ditched coach after only four months

For all the success that Jack Draper enjoyed in 2024, one of the video clips that stands out from his breakthrough season is not of a joyous moment on the court. Viewers of Sky Sports’ US Open coverage — many of them casual tennis fans who had tuned in to watch a young British player in a first grand-slam semi-final — were left somewhat flabbergasted to see him vomiting violently in the literal heat of battle.

The tennis off-season is a time for reflection and Draper has already got to the bottom of why he was sick four times during a straight-sets defeat by the world No1 Jannik Sinner at Flushing Meadows. While nerves and humidity were contributing factors, the 23-year-old has disclosed for the first time that the main culprit was a pre-match dose of ibuprofen for a niggle in his ankle.

“I think some of it was stress related but also I was struggling with some pain I had in my ankle,” Draper explains as he sits in a pub in Hammersmith. These are not his usual surroundings but he is here to reflect on his year before heading down to the Thames for a charity walk in aid of the Alzheimer’s Society.

“Sometimes when you’re dealing with pain as a tennis player, you’re taking ibuprofen and these things to try to help. That can ruin your stomach a little bit. By the time of the semi-final it had got to me and that’s one of the big reasons why I think I was struggling with my stomach and throwing up.

“I had the same feeling when I went to the Davis Cup and played my first match [in Manchester the following week]. I thought: ‘This isn’t anything to do with humidity or heat and I am doing the same thing.’ I had a lightbulb moment to myself.”

It is a lesson that should serve Draper well as he looks to kick on in 2025. After winning his first two ATP Tour titles this year at the Stuttgart Open in June and the Vienna Open in October, he is primed and ready to push up towards the world’s top ten from a career-high ranking of No15. A hip issue has disrupted his preparations but there is confidence that he will have recovered in time for the Australian Open from January 12.

Draper is in candid mood as he looks back on the best season of his fledgling career. For a decade his talent has been monitored in British circles — particularly so as the son of the former LTA chief executive, Roger — but this was the year in which he revealed his capabilities to the wider tennis world. As well as his two pieces of silverware and a deep run at a major, he claimed a straight-sets victory against the four-times grand-slam champion Carlos Alcaraz at Queen’s Club in June.

Unbeknown to us at the time was that Draper was struggling to accept the technical changes that were being recommended by his co-coach, Wayne Ferreira. The former world No6 from South Africa had been hired in April to work alongside Draper’s existing coach James Trotman and was eager to turn Draper into a constant aggressor who would regularly storm forward off a powerful serve. A sudden split before the US Open after only four months together showed that a compromise could not be reached between player and coach.

“Wayne came in, was really positive, was wanting me to be aggressive and try to be braver,” Draper says. “It was a good period to try that but then also understand that that’s not the player I am. I’m not someone who is just a tall player with a big serve and a decent forehand.

“One of my main attributes is my ability to move well for my size [6ft 4in], to get that one more ball back on court, to use my athleticism and fighting spirit, because that’s how I won matches when I was younger and small.

“Yeah, I had to be brave, I had to be more aggressive and I had to change. But I didn’t have to change massive amounts. I just had to understand when to push and when not to.



Draper won his first two ATP titles during a breakthrough 2024, including the Vienna Open, above, in October. He also reached the semi-finals of the US Open, his best result so far at a grand-slam tournament, but struggled with sickness during his defeat by Sinner

“When you’re younger, I think a lot of coaches — I’m not saying Wayne — see players and they think the technique is wrong. You look on the TV and you’ve got players like Daniil Medvedev, myself on my forehand, or all these funky techniques. But that’s the way they play, that’s their style, that’s what makes them great.

“It was a good lesson for me that I just stick with my own style, my own technique and just learn to be more consistent and make it better.”

While the right balance between attack and defence has since been struck, closing the gap on his superiors around the same age is the next step. Draper has looked on with envy as Sinner, 23, and Alcaraz, 21, raced ahead to the top of the sport and believes he can be up there, too.

“I think it [the key to improvement] is sharpening up my service game,” Draper says. “My serve’s a real weapon, but getting that more consistent is something I’ve been working really hard on. Also mixing up my return position a little bit more, looking to come up the court. These guys have played 200, 300-plus matches on the tour and I’ve played 130. The more matches I’m getting at this highest level…yes, I’ll lose some, I’ll win some, but it’s just keeping on learning what I need to do to be more consistent at the highest level.

“The differences between me and them are physically just getting more matches on the tour and mentally understanding more. But I think honestly it’s just experience.”

Not only will Draper be keeping a close eye on his young rivals but there is also a keen interest in the performances of the veteran Novak Djokovic early in the new year. Draper has benefited from the informal mentorship of Andy Murray and is now fascinated to observe what Djokovic and Murray will bring as a player-coach partnership at the Australian Open. “It’s amazing for the sport that those two are coming together,” Draper says. “I figured that maybe Andy would take a break and do other things but one thing I do know about him is that he loves this sport so much. He was always talking tennis when we were away.

“I think he’d be an amazing coach. His tennis brain is huge and tactically I think he’d find it incredibly fun to be around Djokovic and interesting to see how one of his biggest rivals operates. I’m looking forward to seeing that dynamic unfold.”

Stokes to have op and miss three months

Cricket
Elizabeth Ammon

Ben Stokes will undergo surgery on his torn left hamstring in the new year, having been ruled out of action for at least three months.

The England captain picked up the injury while bowling in the third Test against New Zealand this month and it was confirmed last night that he has suffered a tear. It is a recurrence of the injury he sustained playing for the Northern Superchargers in the Hundred in August, which forced him to miss the Test series against Sri Lanka.

Stokes, though, was adamant on Instagram that this latest setback is a challenge that he will tackle head on in an attempt to get back on the field as soon as possible: “Something else to overcome…go on then!!!!!!!! I’ve got so much more left in this tank and so much more blood, sweat and tears to go through for my team and this shirt. There’s a reason I have a Phoenix permanently inked on my body. See you on the field to f*** some shit up.”

The 33-year-old played a full part with the ball in England’s three-match series against New Zealand until he had to limp off on the third day of the final Test, having bowled 36.2 overs — his most in a Test for more than two years.

Stokes was not considered for England’s white-ball tour to India next month and the subsequent Champions Trophy in Pakistan. He will be unable to fulfil his contract with MI Cape Town in the SA20 competition.

England’s next Test is not until May 22, when they take on Zimbabwe.

Bigger squad for ‘rammed’ Ashes

Elizabeth Ammon

Ryana MacDonald-Gay, the 20-year-old Surrey seam bowler, has been handed a maiden Ashes call-up having been named in a 19-player squad as England seek to regain the trophy for the first time in 11 years.

Jon Lewis, the England head coach, said a bigger-than-usual squad was needed because of the “rammed” schedule in the multi-format series, with seven matches in three weeks.

England’s ODI squad Heather Knight (capt; Somerset), Tammy Beaumont (The Blaze), Lauren Bell, Maia Bouchier (both Hampshire), Alice Capsey (Surrey), Kate Cross (Lancashire), Charlie Dean (Somerset), Sophia Dunkley (Surrey), Sophie Ecclestone (Lancashire), Lauren Filer (Durham), Sarah Glenn, Amy Jones, Nat Sciver-Brunt (all The Blaze), Danni Wyatt-Hodge (Surrey).
IT20 squad Knight, Bell, Bouchier, Capsey, Dean, Dunkley, Ecclestone, Filer, Danielle Gibson (Somerset), Glenn, Bess Heath (Durham), Jones, Freya Kemp, Linsey Smith (both Hampshire), Sciver-Brunt, Wyatt-Hodge.
Test squad Knight, Beaumont, Bell, Bouchier, Cross, Dean, Dunkley, Ecclestone, Filer, Heath, Jones, Ryana MacDonald-Gay (Surrey), Sciver-Brunt, Wyatt-Hodge.
Ashes schedule: First ODI Jan 11, Sydney (11.30pm GMT), **second ODI** Jan 13, Melbourne (11.05pm), **third ODI** Jan 16, Hobart (11.05pm). **First IT20** Jan 20, Sydney (8.40am), **second IT20** Jan 23, Canberra (8.40am), **third IT20** Jan 25, Adelaide (8.10am). **Test match** Jan 30-Feb 2, Melbourne (3.30am).

Sport Boxing Day racing

L'Homme Presse can provide the answer to riddle of King George


MIKE HEWITT/GETTY IMAGES

Cheltenham Festival winner L'Homme Presse could provide the in-form trainer Williams with another significant success



Brough Scott

It will be back to the future at Kempton on Boxing Day as Grey Dawning leads the British team facing a cross-Channel challenger appropriately named Il Est Francais. With the white statue of Desert Orchid looking on, this King George VI field will recall the ghosts of Christmas past.

For between 1986 and 1994, Desert Orchid won the big event four times in his 70-run career, as did French-trained raiders, most notably The Fellow, who in the course of 37 races also completed that rarest of doubles: the Cheltenham Gold Cup and its French equivalent, the Grand Steeple de Paris at Auteuil. With only 29 runs between them, neither Grey Dawning nor Il Est Francais is likely to earn a fraction of the eminence or indeed experience of that legendary pair, nor indeed of Kauto Star, the greatest King George winner of them all with five successes. But they head as intriguing a puzzle as has ever been offered in the race's history.

For a start, Grey Dawning and Il Est Francais may be preceded in the betting by the Irish horse Spillane's Tower, who, while owned by the mighty JP McManus, has a trainer who has not had a winner from only nine horses this season, while Grey Dawning's Dan Skelton has had 114 from more than 200. It sounds like the ultimate David versus Goliath battle until you hear the name of Jimmy Mangan, who with Monty's Pass in 2003 pulled off one of the greatest training masterstrokes in the Grand National record book. Even in Mangan's eighth decade, no one suggests that he is not up to sending a King George winner across from his base at Conna in County Cork.

The question is more about the horse. Spillane's Tower's last run, a half-length second to Fact To File with Galopin Des Champs and Fastorslow behind him, brings a favourite's chance but, at six, is he quite ready for a test in which only one of that age has scored over the past ten years? We don't know.

That's the challenge and the joy of racing, and is as good an advertisement for the mental exercise and pain involved in betting on the game as you will ever find. There is a case for and against almost every one of an 11-strong, three-nation field with four runners each from Britain and Ireland, and three from France.

Il Est Francais is accompanied across the Channel by his 100-1 stable companion General En Chef and by the five-year-old Juntos Ganamos, who was favourite before falling in last summer's Grand Steeple de Paris. Ridden and trained by French champions, he would not be a surprise winner, especially if the Il Est Francais from last December turned up. His performance in the chase preceding the King George was one of the most dazzling displays of fence-crossing that has been seen at Kempton and left you thinking that he would have walked the King George if he had run in it.

The trouble is that he started this season with a broken blood vessel and a question mark remains. Yet doubts also persist about the prospects of every one of his opponents. Grey Dawning is a Cheltenham Festival winner but had a hard slog in defeat on his comeback run. Corbetts Cross also won at Cheltenham but does not look quite good enough. Envoi Allen has had a great career but ran dreadfully in this race two years ago. Bravemansgame, who won in 2022 and was second last year, is saddled by Paul Nicholls, a 13-times winner, but there is a feeling he is not quite what he was.

Which leaves us with L'Homme Presse, a length down on Bravemansgame when ejecting Charlie Deutsch in the 2022 King George and not seen since breaking a shoulder in the Gold Cup last March. On the face of it an unlikely contender, but he is a horse of real talent and his trainer, Venetia Williams, and his jockey are in the sort of form when, to conjure up that most treasured of racing clichés, "they could win with the stable cat". L'Homme Presse is 12-1 and gets the nod for each-way money.

But more than anything this will be a race and a day to savour. To think that only 40 minutes before the King George we will have the best hurdle race of the season. The victory here last year by Ireland's grey wonder-mare Lossiemouth, winner of all bar one of her ten races against the unbeaten superstar that is Constitution Hill, but sick and as yet unseen this term, still blazes in the memory. Yes, the ghosts of Christmas past bring good tidings this year.

● There is no racing in Britain until December 26.

Kempton Park

Rob Wright

12.45 Leave Of Absence
1.20 The Jukebox Man
1.55 Lossiemouth
2.30 **Spillane's Tower** (nap)
3.05 Beau Quali
3.40 East India Express

Going: good, good to soft in places
Racing TV

12.45 Ladbrokes Best Odds Guaranteed On Racing Novices' Limited Handicap Chase (£13,202: 2m 4f 110yd) (9 runners) ITV

1	154-F1	**RANGE** 34 S Thomas 7-11-11	D Johnston (3)	124
2	10-313	**ASTA LA PASTA** 27 (T,D) D Skelton 6-11-10	H Skelton	◆132
3	30-454	**FIRST STREET** 67 (W,T) N Henderson 7-11-10	N De Boinville	130
4	P6P-11	**EL RIO** 46 (D) K Bailey 7-11-8	T Bellamy	128
5	1131/2	**LEAVE OF ABSENCE** 31 (T) A Honeyball 7-11-7	T Cannon	129
6	2330-1	**ES PERFECTO** 31 (CD) A King 9-11-6	G Sheehan	126
7	1P0-P2	**FIRE FLYER** 20 P Nicholls 6-11-6	H Cobden	129
8	-21064	**TAPLEY** 15 Miss Suzy Smith 7-11-0	C Deutsch	124
9	2614-5	**LEADER IN THE PARK** 39 B Pauling 6-11-0	B R Jones	124

3-1 Asta La Pasta, 4-1 Range, 5-1 El Rio, 6-1 Es Perfecto, 7-1 Fire Flyer, 8-1 Leader In The Park, 10-1 First Street, 14-1 Leave Of Absence, 33-1 Tapley.
Rob Wright's choice: Leave Of Absence was second to the classy Iberico Lord here last time; he looks fairly treated **Dangers:** Fire Flyer, El Rio

1.20 Ladbrokes Kauto Star Novices' Chase (In Memory Of Nigel Clark) (Grade 1: £56,950: 3m) (5) ITV

1	2-1411	**HYLAND** 41 (D) N Henderson 7-11-7	N De Boinville	147
2	10-212	**MASACCIO** 27 A King 7-11-7	T Cannon	146
3	1322-1	**THE JUKEBOX MAN** 27 B Pauling 6-11-7	B R Jones	◆148
4	2120-4	**WELCOM TO CARTRIES** 20 (T) P Nicholls 6-11-7	H Cobden	125
5	134-11	**WHITE RHINO** 22 O Greenall & J Guerriero 8-11-7	H Brooke	141

11-10 The Jukebox Man, 3-1 Hyland, 9-2 Masaccio, 7-1 White Rhino, 12-1 Welcom To Cartries.
Wright choice: The Jukebox Man beat Masaccio in good style at Newbury; this return to a longer trip should be no problem **Danger:** Masaccio

1.55 Ladbrokes Christmas Hurdle (Grade 1: £74,035: 2m) (4) ITV

1	112-1	**BURDETT ROAD** 39 (T,D) James Owen 4-11-10	H Cobden	145
2	111/1-	**CONSTITUTION HILL** 366 (W,CD) N Henderson 7-11-10	N De Boinville	159
3	215-12	**LUMP SUM** 26 (CD) S Thomas 6-11-10	D Johnston	146
4	/11-11	**LOSSIEMOUTH** 25 (D) W P Mullins (Ire) 5-11-3	P Townend	◆160

Evens Lossiemouth, 11-10 Constitution Hill, 14-1 Burdett Road, 20-1 Lump Sum.
Wright choice: Lossiemouth, a classy mare in receipt of weight from her rivals, can claim a sixth success at this level **Danger:** Constitution Hill

2.30 Ladbrokes King George VI Chase (Grade 1: £148,098: 3m) (11) ITV

1	10-140	**BANBRIDGE** 18 (P,C) J P O'Brien (Ire) 8-11-10	P Townend	165
2	256-23	**BRAVEMANSGAME** 33 (B,CD) P Nicholls 9-11-10	H Cobden	168
3	2F13-2	**CORBETTS CROSS** 59 E Mullins (Ire) 7-11-10	Mr D O'Connor	166
4	3224-1	**ENVOI ALLEN** 54 (T,D) H De Bromhead (Ire) 10-11-10	Rachael Blackmore	168
5	1-3134	**GENERAL EN CHEF** 26 (H,P) N George & A Zetterholm (Fr) 8-11-10	Benjamin Gelhay	149
6	2113-2	**GREY DAWNING** 33 (BF,D) D Skelton 7-11-10	H Skelton	171
7	115-1P	**IL EST FRANCAIS** 39 (BF,CD) N George & A Zetterholm (Fr) 6-11-10	J Reveley	166
8	11-F13	**JUNTOS GANAMOS** 39 (T) D Cottin (Fr) 5-11-10	F de Giles	154
9	U/124-	**L'HOMME PRESSE** 286 (D) V Williams 9-11-10	C Deutsch	169
10	121-12	**SPILLANE'S TOWER** 32 J J Mangan (Ire) 6-11-10	M P Walsh	◆172
11	2P5-U1	**THE REAL WHACKER** 54 (T,D) P Neville 8-11-10	G Sheehan	170

7-2 Spillane's Tower, 4-1 Il Est Francais, Grey Dawning, 5-1 Banbridge, 10-1 Corbetts Cross, L'Homme Presse, 12-1 Envoi Allen, 16-1 Bravemansgame, Juntos Ganamos.
Wright choice: Spillane's Tower ran a cracker when second to Fact To File at Punchestown; he is unexposed **Dangers:** Grey Dawning, Bravemansgame

3.05 Ladbrokes 'Gaffer Of All Accas' Maiden Hurdle (£11,447: 2m) (9)

1	2-24	**BEAU QUALI** 56 D Skelton 4-11-4	H Skelton	◆111
2		**CLASSIC SPEED** F85 Brian Toomey 4-11-4	J Reveley	--
3	5	**CRESTA CAT** 19 G & J Moore 4-11-4	F Mitchell	--
4	P3631/	**JACK HYDE** 695 (T,D) F O'Brien 6-11-4	C Brace	--
5	502	**MOONSHINE MAN** 30 Miss H Knight 5-11-4	H Cobden	107
6		**NAP HAND** F33 A King 4-11-4	T Cannon	--
7	2	**RASCALLION** 31 (H) K Burke 5-11-4	C Deutsch	108
8	1-503	**YOUDECIDE** 8 B Pauling 4-11-4	B R Jones	77
9	11-	**KIENTZHEIM** 313 N Henderson 4-10-11	N De Boinville	--

10-11 Kientzheim, 5-1 Nap Hand, 11-2 Beau Quali, 7-1 Rascallion, 10-1 Jack Hyde, 25-1 Moonshine Man, Classic Speed, 33-1 Cresta Cat, 50-1 Youdecide.
Wright choice: Beau Quali was below-par at Stratford but is worth another chance to confirm earlier promise **Dangers:** Kientzheim, Rascallion

3.40 Ladbrokes Get Rewarded With Ladbucks Handicap Hurdle (£12,674: 2m 5f) (9)

1	0243-1	**HERMINO AA** 27 (D) G & J Moore 7-12-0	F Mitchell (5)	◆140
2	213-01	**SUPREME GIFT** 29 (V) H Daly 7-11-12	T Bellamy	138
3	2310-0	**EMAILANDY** 40 (P,T,D) P Nicholls 6-11-7	H Cobden	134
4	00-24P	**MAHONS GLORY** 108 (H,P,T,CD) P Neville 8-11-6	D Johnston (3)	125
5	2400-5	**DODDIETHEGREAT** 31 (CD) N Henderson 8-11-3	N De Boinville	135
6	610-32	**SAMUEL SPADE** 26 (C,D) B Pauling 5-10-13	B R Jones	137
7	142-U1	**EAST INDIA EXPRESS** 6 (CD) N Henderson 5-10-11	F Gordon (5)	136
8	-41162	**IN THE AIR** 28 (BF) N Henderson 6-10-11	T Cannon	134
9	11-461	**KING OF THE ROAD** 28 B Pauling 5-10-3	G Sheehan	135

4-1 Doddiethegreat, 9-2 East India Express, Hermino AA, 6-1 King Of The Road, In The Air, 7-1 Supreme Gift, 10-1 Emailandy, 12-1 Samuel Spade, 25-1 Mahons Glory.
Wright choice: East India Express escapes a penalty for last week's success at Ascot; can follow up **Dangers:** Samuel Spade, Doddiethegreat

Aintree

Rob Wright

11.55 Lavida Adiva
12.30 Westerninthepark
1.05 Country Mile
1.40 Florida Dreams
2.15 Fortunate Man
2.50 Ballee
3.25 Dalston Lad

Going: good to soft, soft in places **Racing TV**

11.55 William Hill Proper Prices Mares' Handicap Hurdle (£7,922: 2m 4f) (9)

1	22P-50	**LUNAR DISCOVERY** 12 J Moffatt 7-12-2	L Norcei (10)	◆122
2	3PP-34	**LITTLE MISS DANTE** 35 (BF) O Murphy 6-11-13	S Bowen	120
3	1210P-	**VICTORIA MILANO** 246 A Ralph 6-11-10	S Twiston-Davies	114
4	332-60	**LAVIDA ADIVA** 33 Ruth Jefferson 5-11-7	K Woods	119
5	13-3F0	**MAJESTIC JAMEELA** 37 (P,D) S Edmunds 4-11-7	Ciaran Gethings	114
6	FP-4P5	**TOUCHY FEELY** 19 N Henderson 7-11-5	J Bowen	108
7	650143	**COULD BE TROUBLE** 27 (B,T,D) D McCain 9-11-3	B Hughes	109
8	20/F-0	**SWEET MAGIC** 36 A Ralph 6-10-8	L Harrison	85
9	3-112	**CRYSTAL GLANCE** 26 O Greenall & J Guerriero 4-10-5	Ben Smith (7)	108

2-1 Crystal Glance, 7-2 Little Miss Dante, 7-1 Could Be Trouble, 8-1 Lavida Adiva, 10-1 others.

12.30 William Hill Betting Done Properly Handicap Chase (£18,484: 2m 4f) (6)

1	40F0-4	**RICHMOND LAKE** 47 (CD) D McCain 8-12-0	B Hughes	◆143
2	110F-0	**HELTENHAM** 27 (T,D) D Skelton 7-11-11	Ciaran Gethings	142
3	31-110	**IMPERIAL SAINT** 26 (C) P Hobbs & J White 6-11-9	M G Nolan	138
4	14/2-P	**HERBIERS** 29 (P,T,D) O Greenall & J Guerriero 7-11-4	J Bowen	--
5	115-12	**WESTERNINTHEPARK** 39 O Murphy 6-11-3	S Bowen	142
6	-00266	**PETIT TONNERRE** 26 J & A O'Neill 6-10-11	Jonjo O'Neill Jr	135

11-4 Westerninthepark, 100-30 Imperial Saint, 7-2 Richmond Lake, 4-1 Herbiers, 8-1 others.

1.05 William Hill Formby Novices' Hurdle (Grade 1: 56,950: 2m 1f) (7) ITV

1	131-11	**CELTIC DINO** 34 S Thomas 5-11-8	A Wedge	132
2	21-121	**COUNTRY MILE** 13 (D) D Skelton 5-11-8	K Woods	144
3	13-2	**GOOD AND CLEVER** 27 W Greatrex 5-11-8	J Bowen	107
4	222-11	**JUNKER D'ALLIER** 43 (D) O Murphy 5-11-8	S Bowen	131
5	41-211	**MIAMI MAGIC** 31 S Edmunds 5-11-8	C Hammond	132
6	21-111	**POTTERS CHARM** 41 N Twiston-Davies 5-11-8	S Twiston-Davies	◆145
7	/1-111	**ROADLESSTRAVELLED** 33 (D) J & A O'Neill 5-11-8	Jonjo O'Neill Jr	129

13-8 Potters Charm, 4-1 Roadlesstravelled, 5-1 Country Mile, 6-1 Celtic Dino, 7-1 Miami Magic, 10-1 Junker D'Allier, 25-1 Good And Clever.
Wright choice: Country Mile was most impressive at Cheltenham last time; he can continue his rise **Dangers:** Potters Charm, Celtic Dino

1.40 William Hill Offers Top Price Guarantees Handicap Hurdle (£20,812: 2m 4f) (9)

1	6003-0	**CALL ME LYREEN** 240 Eloise Quayle 8-12-0	B Hughes	◆136
2	16-011	**ACT OF AUTHORITY** 40 (D) O Murphy 6-11-13	S Bowen	134
3	10-3P2	**UNCLE BERT** 47 (D) N Twiston-Davies 7-11-12	S Twiston-Davies	135
4	14/2-5	**RED DIRT ROAD** 25 J & A O'Neill 7-11-7	Jonjo O'Neill Jr	119
5	530-15	**FLORIDA DREAMS** 39 (P) N Richards 6-11-5	D McMenamin	127
6	10P3-U	**BINGOO** 53 (CD) J Moffatt 8-11-3	Charlotte Jones	119
7	32-25U	**PATRIOTIK** 33 (D) E Williams 5-10-13	Isabel Williams (3)	125
8	01201-	**EL JEFE** 258 (W,H,T,C) A B Hamilton 7-10-6	Ben Smith (7)	111
9	34-U61	**ONE EYE ON VEGAS** 21 (P,D) S Edmunds 7-10-5	Ciaran Gethings	114

11-4 Act Of Authority, 5-1 Florida Dreams, 6-1 One Eye On Vegas, 7-1 Uncle Bert, El Jefe, 8-1 Red Dirt Road, Patriotik, 12-1 Bingoo, 16-1 Call Me Lyreen.

2.15 William Hill Committed To Top Prices Handicap Chase (£13,008: 3m 1f) (8)

1	00-000	**WHISTLEINTHEDARK** 12 L Morgan 9-12-0	A Wedge	◆147
2	343-3P	**GUSTAVIAN** 26 (T) A Honeyball 9-11-9	S Twiston-Davies	130
3	1160-1	**IKARAK** 36 O Murphy 6-11-8	S Bowen	--
4	12-5P3	**DUKE OF DECEPTION** 19 (P) O Greenall & J Guerriero 7-11-7	B Smith	129
5	131-02	**FORTUNATE MAN** 25 (T) J & A O'Neill 5-11-7	Jonjo O'Neill Jr	121
6	422-2P	**BUSTY BOY** 25 D Bourke 7-11-0	B Hughes	114
7	412-2P	**MOONLIT POTTER** 5 H Daly 6-10-13	J Bowen	111
8	4436-2	**JAR DU DESERT** 54 N Kent 5-10-10	C Hammond	113

3-1 Ikarak, 7-2 Fortunate Man, 4-1 Moonlit Potter, 6-1 Duke Of Deception, 7-1 Jar Du Desert, 8-1 Gustavian, 12-1 Whistleinthedark, 25-1 Busty Boy.

2.50 William Hill Cheltenham NRMB January 1st Novices' Limited Handicap Chase (£13,008: 2m) (4)

1	1U2-P0	**BALLEE** 26 (H) P Hobbs & J White 5-11-10	M G Nolan	--
2	1222-2	**INEDIT STAR** 222 N Kent 6-11-5	C Hammond	◆130
3	14P-13	**BOOSTER BOB** 36 (W,H,BF,D) O Murphy 6-11-1	S Bowen	126
4	140-31	**DOYEN DU BAR** 54 (H,D) Miss P Robson 8-10-12	B Hughes	123

2-1 Doyen Du Bar, 11-4 Inedit Star, 3-1 Booster Bob, 100-30 Ballee.

3.25 William Hill More Top Prices Open NH Flat Race (£8,169: 2m 1f) (6)

1	1-1	**DALSTON LAD** 59 D Skelton 4-11-6	K Woods	◆122
2	1	**OLD BLUE EYES** 30 (D) D McCain 4-11-6	B Hughes	115
3	2-1	**SWINDON VILLAGE** 36 C Longsdon 4-11-6	Jonjo O'Neill Jr	115
4	1-	**IS THIS FOR REAL** 269 F O'Brien 4-11-2	L Harrison	--
5	1	**RACE TO BASE** 68 N Twiston-Davies 4-11-2	S Twiston-Davies	--
6	2-	**THE BLUE ROOM** 256 O Murphy 4-11-2	S Bowen	--

2-1 Dalston Lad, 4-1 The Blue Room, 5-1 Is This For Real, 11-2 Race To Base, 6-1 others.

● Oisin Murphy, the four-times champion Flat jockey, will make his debut over jumps on the Neil Mulholland-trained Ike Sport at Wincanton on Boxing Day. "Although I rode in India on Sunday, I made it to Neil Mulholland's this morning to school over hurdles," Murphy said yesterday. "I'm very grateful that he's giving me an opportunity to ride on Thursday."



Which sporting event, away from your sport, did you most enjoy watching in 2024?

Watching the Jon Jones v Stipe Miocic fight [in November] where Jones won the UFC heavyweight title, and did a Donald Trump dance after. Or even the Alex Pereira v Israel Adesanya fight [in April]. I've loved a lot of UFC — there have been some good fights this year. UFC ticks the box for me!

'Facing the Haka? It's scarier

THE TIMES
2024
MY SPORTING YEAR TO SAVOUR

In the first of a series of interviews with sports stars who helped define the past 12 months, **Will Kelleher** talks to Immanuel Feyi-Waboso

Immanuel Feyi-Waboso cannot quite comprehend what has happened to him in 2024 either.

"It's been the best year of my life. Unbelievable," the 22-year-old Exeter Chiefs wing says. "I don't know how it's going to be topped."

He is more assured than when he catapulted himself into the public consciousness during the Six Nations: the Welsh-born English kid with the devastating break and dazzling smile. Only a little, though.

A healthy, disarming naivety remains, demonstrated when recalling anecdotes such as nearly getting lost before his England debut and life on tour: "Airport lounges! I'd never been in one before"; "Everyone looks bigger on TV"; "Would I go back to Bali? Maybe not, it's a bit far."

It has been a staggering year of development for Feyi-Waboso. He has gone from being on loan at Taunton Titans, in National League 1, in April 2023 to becoming a 2024 World Rugby breakthrough player of the year nominee and a favoured British & Irish Lions pick for the 2025 tour to Australia.

All the while he has been reading medicine at the University of Exeter. Feyi-Waboso's year has been such a whirlwind he does not remember every detail, but the important stuff will be forever etched in his memory.

ENGLAND 23 IRELAND 22 – 'LISTEN TO HOW LOUD IT WAS!'

It is a December afternoon at Sandy Park, so it has long gone dark by the time we finish chatting. The gloom is lifted only by twinkling lights of the Courtyard Hotel next to the ground — significant in the Feyi-Waboso story — and my laptop.

We are reviewing England's 23-22 Six Nations win against Ireland. It was Feyi-Waboso's and England's highlight of the year — frustratingly, a promising performance peak that was not scaled again by Steve Borthwick's team. I want Feyi-Waboso to watch the last two minutes of his first Test start to witness England's intoxicating bravery, which he personified. Staggeringly, he has never seen it. Maybe England should have reviewed this before now.

Feyi-Waboso gorges on it like a fan, literally moving to the edge of one of the blue plastic seats in the stands. I turn up the volume so he can hear the commentators breathlessly namecheck him as he goes past Bundee Aki into Ireland's 22. He chuckles at Twickenham's roar. "So good," he mutters. "Oh my days! This is mental. Listen to how loud it was!"

He drinks in the finish, when England get a penalty advantage after Tadhg Beirne clings on for too long at a goalline ruck — "We had a penalty on the other side too!" — and then Marcus Smith kicks the winning drop-goal with the game's final act. England, defying the pre-match odds, win by a point. Smith wheels away, fist-flailing. "The Marcus fist-pump!" Feyi-Waboso says, laughing.

We see a supporter wearing a green Barbour coat screaming, eyes closed, and Feyi-Waboso lifting Smith up in a great big hug, slapping him on the back three times.

"Jeez," he says, leaning back. "That's unbelievable. Marcus came on and the game just sped up. He gave me so much energy. There wasn't actually a big short side for my carry, but we took it. I said: 'Marcus, let's go, let's go.' He said: 'Let's take this.'

"I saw Bundee Aki and thought, 'Hmm, maybe I could...' My inexperience helped! I was cramping straight after that. I don't know why, but I wasn't really expecting the ball. Marcus couldn't have done it more perfectly. If he had held it for longer, or given it earlier, I would've been in touch. For him to trust me like that, wow. I thought I was in. Normally that line is a good one, going out-to-in on the full back, as they're coming across and you can slice in.

"We're really good when we're the underdogs. Everyone was calling Ireland the best in the world. I don't think they were ranked that way. 'We're better than them,' I thought. People used to talk bad about Twickenham atmospheres, but this was mental. I was so glad I got to experience it. Oh my gosh, goosebumps."

England's victory was one of only five in 12 Tests this year, alongside Japan (twice), Wales, and Italy — and the only one against a team ranked above them.

In 2025 Borthwick must capture that elixir of exuberance from the Ireland win. Feyi-Waboso's dart encapsulated his year, bounding around like a ball of rubber, full of joy.

VERITAS PARK TO STADIO OLIMPICO – 'I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD SNOWBALL INTO THIS'

Feyi-Waboso expected none of this. He points over to the nine-storey Courtyard Hotel when I ask where he was in 2023. With other academy kids and Exeter Chiefs Women signings, he lived in its basement, having arrived in late 2022 after Wasps went into administration, and commuted up the M5 to his loan club, Taunton.

He remembers big wins against Chinnor away and Leeds Tykes at Veritas Park — named after a glazing firm and with an average attendance of 606 — which held off relegation. Feyi-Waboso had no designs on making the Exeter team there, let alone England's.

"Jack Nowell felt like an immovable force in the No14 shirt at Exeter," he says. "I never once considered that I'd play over him."

Playing in the Gallagher Premiership at London Irish on May 6, 2023, was a shock. The Chiefs' director of rugby, Rob Baxter, picked him and those who were staying for 2023-24, as many seniors departed.

"I was getting shot in carries," he says. "I remember running at [the London Irish wing] Ben Loader, getting handed off and going, 'Oh, this is what class backs are like.' I felt physically inferior to everybody. I couldn't do what I was doing with Taunton. It solidified the need for my skills to be better."

Working with Exeter's coaches, Feyi-Waboso found tactical edges through analysis. He played well through the Premiership Cup, during the World Cup, and two weeks after England came third in that tournament Borthwick rang him after Exeter's 34-19 defeat at Northampton Saints on November 12.

"I played really badly and gave away four penalties in 20 minutes," Feyi-Waboso remembers. "Steve said: 'We're keeping an eye on you. It probably won't be for the Six Nations, but maybe the summer.' I was like, 'Oh, this is Steve Borthwick — that's quite mad.'"

After Feyi-Waboso was named man of the match in a 24-14 win over Bristol Bears on December 29, Borthwick changed his mind. "I know you're Welsh qualified, but what about England?" he asked. "It would be a privilege," Feyi-Waboso replied.

Feyi-Waboso was born in Cardiff and represented Wales Under-18, but had no contact from the senior coach

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARC ASPLAND; SHAUN BOTTERILL/GETTY IMAGES







Feyi-Waboso beats Aki, top, in England's win over Ireland in the Six Nations, his highlight of the year, after which he was able to celebrate the 23-22 win with his family, above. The Exeter wing's year also included scoring three consecutive tries against the All Blacks, following up his two on the summer tour to New Zealand with one in England's 24-22 autumn international defeat at Twickenham, left

on the TV'

Warren Gatland. He was surprised that his allegiance switch was big news.

"It was a decision, but also wasn't," he says. "I'd been in England for four years and was English, so it felt right. I stood by it. My family don't have any ties to Wales either — they're British Nigerian — so said they'd be proud no matter what. All my family are English anyway; my uncles and aunties I'll spend Christmas with and my grandma who lives in Cheltenham."

Named in England's Six Nations squad, on February 3 he replaced Tommy Freeman for the final three minutes of England's 27-24 win over Italy in Rome. His Test debut was his 22nd professional match.

"I didn't think it would snowball into this — I thought I'd be a pad-holder — and was excited to do that," he says. He had only ever attended one Test match, when Wales lost 13-12 to Georgia in Cardiff in 2022.

"I've only ever really seen the anthems sung on TV, so being on TV was so surreal," he says. "The Stadio Olimpico was so massive. There's a long walk to the pitch and you come up to it from underneath; I got lost one time, as I turned right instead of left and ended up in the wrong place. I had to ask someone for directions! I wore my cap the whole night."

Feyi-Waboso's first Test try came at Murrayfield against Scotland on February 24; up and away.

HALLS, HAKAS AND HEAD INJURIES

Something was wrong after that Ireland win. "I knew I was concussed. It was an emotional occasion, but I'm not a big crier. I had headaches and ended up crying," he says. "I felt slower and my memory was a bit off."

He missed the France game in Lyon, having told England's medical staff that he was struggling.

"I think it was the right decision, but I would've loved to have played France away," he says. "I don't know if I lacked self-belief, but I thought: 'Me being 70 per cent is not better than Elliot [Daly] playing.' I was surprised I was starting anyway. It would have been selfish for me to play."

Feyi-Waboso was lauded for removing himself but he does not want credit, as a budding doctor. A commitment to his studies at the University of Exeter, where he is now three months into his second year, has been drilled into him by his wider family, who are gynaecologists, opticians and ophthalmologists.

Feyi-Waboso could have lived in the sports corridor at his East Park halls, but eyed books, not beers, and skipped freshers week. "It paid off, as I passed my first year," he says. He wants to become a plastic surgeon, helping children with burns or cleft palates. "It would be satisfying," he says. "It's almost an art, and you get to see how well you've done."

He is asking the university whether he could do a part-time course, like the Welsh rugby players Jamie Roberts or Hallam Amos, but may not be permitted to.

Exeter did not make the Premiership play-offs, and lost in the Champions Cup quarter-final to eventual winners Toulouse, but Feyi-Waboso was the find of the season. He broke records, such as beating 13 defenders in the European last-16 win against Bath or bench-pressing 160kg in England's gym. After his exams on June 10 he joined England's tour to Japan and New Zealand.

It was quite a change going from sleeping on a three-quarter bed in halls, a keyboard stashed underneath to play John Legend or Ludovico Einaudi songs, and cooking meals in a communal kitchen.

"The boys said we'd fly to Tokyo in business class. I wasn't expecting that," Feyi-Waboso says. "I don't get homesick, as camp is a massive step up from halls; I wish I could stay in hotels longer!"

Feyi-Waboso scored three tries on tour, once in the 52-17 win over Japan and twice against New Zealand — in Dunedin during a 16-15 loss and then at Eden Park in the 24-17 defeat, showing great athleticism to catch a Smith cross-kick. Beauden Barrett classily turned both Tests from the bench.

"They have this aura that they're superhumans. I was like, 'Hmm, let's see,' " Feyi-Waboso says of the All Blacks. "It was like the Ireland game — 'Am I good enough to be with these big boys?' The Haka is much scarier on TV. When I see people face to face it's easier. TV makes people seem superhuman, but in person they're normal.

"Barrett was unbelievable. When I think back, what could we have done to stop him? I still didn't feel like I belonged. When will that change? I don't know."

He returned home via Bali with Chandler Cunningham-South, Gabriel Oghre, Alex Mitchell, Freddie Steward and Fin Smith, having let off some steam.

In the Autumn Nations Series, Feyi-Waboso scored a third consecutive try against the All Blacks but was frustrated by another tight 24-22 defeat — "Mate, we should've just beaten them. We have a very good squad" — and another concussion against Australia, which ruled him out of the South Africa and Japan Tests.

A LIONS TOUR TO COME IN 2025?

Feyi-Waboso anxiously taps the table when he remembers November. He had headaches while running, so could not play. He is torn. He knows it was the right decision, but thinks: has he lost his England shirt and a lead on Lions rivals?

"Ollie Sleightholme and Tom Roebuck [England's other No14s] have been playing unbelievably. You don't want to miss games, opportunities. I don't know where I stand right now. I do see some comments about me, but if it's not [the Lions head coach] Andy Farrell, what weight does it have? If it came from him, it'd be really nice. Then I'd know."

In The Times, Sam Warburton has backed him for the Lions. "I'm not sure I've ever seen a young player from the home countries take to international rugby quite as easily," he wrote.

"Legend. Coming from him, that means a lot," Feyi-Waboso responds. "You'd think he'd be biased, being Welsh! It'd be helpful if it was from Andy Farrell."

Feyi-Waboso's Lions dream, unfathomable in 2023, is alive in 2025. He is nervous, though. Will a shoulder injury, suffered against Sale Sharks, deny him a run of games? Will England move on? Why can't Exeter win any longer? These hanging questions help ground him.

"Hopefully there'll be a time where I can go, 'This is my prime, I'm polished, I'm comfortable in every situation', but right now I'm not 100 per cent. It's coming, hopefully."

Shocks, villainy and more Littler mania on cards

Elgan Alderman on what to expect during second half of a World Darts Championship full of early surprises

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The competition returns on Friday for three days of third-round matches, which are best of seven sets. The fourth round begins on Sunday and lasts two days before the New Year's Eve break, and then comes a three-day sprint to the end with quarter-finals, semi-finals and the final on the first three days of the year.

BOY-WONDER WATCH

Luke Littler returned to the Alexandra Palace stage on Saturday night, ending a year that began with his runner-up position at this championship and has brought ten titles and more than £1 million in prize money. For a time the unthinkable, that Littler would lose to Ryan Meikle, was on the cards as he struggled with trebles and was level at one set all.

Then, after taking the third set and banishing heavy nerves, Littler produced the highest-quality set of darts in Ally Pally history, with an astronomical three-dart average of 140.91. He will face Ian White after Christmas.

BEST PERFORMANCE

Littler's final set elevated his match average into three figures, a marker only two men had reached before his appearance. Connor Scutt achieved 101.92 against Ben Robb, but the best came from Callan Rydz against Romeo Grbavac. Rydz, a surprise quarter-finalist here three years ago, went at 107.06, which broke Littler's first-round record from 12 months ago. Rydz impressed again in a 3-0 win over Martin Schindler, booking a third-round match against Dimitri van den Bergh, the No11 seed.

THE BAD SEEDS

Schindler was one of many big names whose tournament ended in the second round. James Wade (No16) and Mike de Decker (24) went early, followed by Michael Smith (2), Gabriel Clemens (27), Danny Noppert (13) and Raymond van Barneveld (32). Sunday brought the departures of Dirk van Duijvenbode (25) and Ritchie Edhouse (29) in the afternoon, then successive 3-0 defeats in the evening for Schindler (22), Ross Smith (19) and Gary Anderson (14), while Gian van Veen (28) lost to Ricardo Pietreczko last night.

WHICH IS THE STRONGEST NATION?

England remains the dominant nation in the tournament, with 14 representatives in the last 32. The Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Wales have multiple players, and there remains interest for Australia, Belgium, Scotland and Sweden. Latvia's Madars Razma is into the third round for the second successive year, and there was history for the Philippines. Paolo Nebrida became the first Filipino to make it to the last 32.

NINE-DART PERFECTION

Christian Kist recorded the 15th perfect nine-dart leg in the event's history and proceeded to lose the match to Razma.

WHO COULD STILL SHOCK US?

Jermaine Wattimena has been around the 99 mark for his average in the first two rounds, winning all six sets and knocking out Wade. Despite being unseeded, the Dutchman should not be regarded as an outsider against Peter Wright, the two-times champion.

Littler's quarter of the draw — he could face Humphries in the semi-final — has seven Englishmen out of eight. In the third section, Joe Cullen impressed in a 3-0 defeat of Wessel Nijman and then left his press conference early at a perceived disrespect over his chances. The No23 seed will face Gerwyn Price, often the pantomime villain for the crowd, in a potentially prickly encounter.

The bottom quarter, where Michael van Gerwen sits, is quite open with Jeffrey de Graaf, Nebrida and Rydz impressing, as well as Robert Owen, the Welshman who beat Clemens.



Anderson crashed out on Sunday

Results

American football

NFL Buffalo 24 New England 21; Dallas 26 Tampa Bay 24; Las Vegas 19 Jacksonville 14; Miami 29 San Francisco 17; Seattle 24 Minnesota 27.

AFC East	W	L	T	F	A	%
Buffalo	12	3	0	469	331	.800
Miami	7	8	0	305	329	.467
NYJets	4	11	0	292	344	.267
N England	3	12	0	259	361	.200
West						
Kansas C	14	1	0	356	278	.933
LA Chargers	9	6	0	328	274	.600
Denver	9	6	0	363	281	.600
Las Vegas	3	12	0	264	390	.200
North						
Pittsburgh	10	5	0	353	299	.667
Baltimore	10	5	0	452	349	.667
Cincinnati	7	8	0	423	393	.467
Cleveland	3	12	0	245	380	.200
South						
Houston	9	6	0	347	327	.600
Indianapolis	7	8	0	318	359	.467
Jacksonville	3	12	0	277	396	.200
Tennessee	3	12	0	284	417	.200
NFC East						
Philadelphia	12	3	0	402	283	.800
Washington	10	5	0	432	348	.667
Dallas	6	8	0	298	380	.429
NY Giants	2	13	0	215	362	.133
West						
LA Rams	9	6	0	329	347	.600
Seattle	8	7	0	339	340	.533
Arizona	7	8	0	344	342	.467
S Francisco	6	9	0	331	349	.400
North						
Detroit	13	2	0	493	299	.867
Minnesota	13	2	0	396	276	.867
Green Bay	10	4	0	379	287	.714
Chicago	4	11	0	283	342	.267
South						
Atlanta	8	7	0	327	349	.533
Tampa Bay	8	6	0	403	326	.571
N Orleans	5	9	0	309	312	.357
Carolina	4	11	0	283	448	.267

Football

Italian Serie A Fiorentina 1 Udinese 2; Inter Milan 2 Como 0.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GDPts
Atalanta	17	13	1	3	42	19	2340
Napoli	17	12	2	3	26	12	1438
Inter Milan	16	11	4	1	42	15	2737
Lazio	17	11	1	5	32	24	834
Fiorentina	16	9	4	3	29	13	1631
Juventus	17	7	10	0	28	13	1531
Bologna	16	7	7	2	23	18	528
AC Milan	16	7	5	4	25	16	926
Udinese	17	7	2	8	21	26	-523
Roma	17	5	4	8	23	23	019
Empoli	17	4	7	6	16	19	-319
Torino	17	5	4	8	17	22	-519
Genoa	17	3	7	7	14	26	-1216
Lecce	17	4	4	9	11	29	-1816
Parma	17	3	6	8	23	33	-1015
Como	17	3	6	8	18	30	-1215
Verona	17	5	0	12	21	40	-1915
Cagliari	17	3	5	9	16	28	-1214
Venezia	17	3	4	10	17	30	-1313
Monza	17	1	7	9	15	23	-810

Darts

Paddy Power PDC World Championship

Alexandra Palace, London: Second round (best-of-five sets): K Ratajski bt A Toylo (Phil) 3-1; A Gilding (Eng) bt M Lukeman (Eng) 3-1; J Rock (N Ire) bt R Griffin (Wales) 3-0; J Clayton (Wales) bt M Mansell (N Ire) 3-2; R Pietreczko (Ger) bt G van Veen (Neth) 3-1; D Gurney (N Ire) bt F Hempel (Ger) 3-2.

Ask Grealish, it's fine to boo former heroes

Football is pantomime. Jeering players, even old favourites, helps to give the game life, writes Villa fan **Joey D'Urso**

"It's the best day of my life," a 23-year-old Jack Grealish said with a grin, shortly after getting punched in the head. The childhood Aston Villa fan was assaulted on the pitch by a Birmingham City supporter in March 2019 and then scored the winning goal against his team's fierce rivals. The game was the second in a sequence of ten consecutive league wins that propelled Villa back to the Premier League.

For seven years Grealish lit up Villa Park with his low socks, cheeky smile and habit of running past defenders that seems largely coached out of the modern game. He is a strong contender for the title of best Villa player of the 21st century.

And yet Grealish joined Manchester City for £100million in 2021 and, on Saturday, was booed at Villa Park by the fans who once adored him as a City team in dire form lost 2-1.

Grealish responded by raising three fingers to represent the league titles he has won with his new club. No doubt he has a new "best day of my life" now. Perhaps scoring for England at the Qatar World Cup or lifting the Champions League trophy in Istanbul. Fair enough.

Those Villa Park boos triggered much pearl-clutching. The commentator Ally McCoist bemoaned the reaction on TNT Sports and Michael Owen, who got a frosty reception when returning to Liverpool with Manchester United, said it made his "blood boil", accurately pointing out that Villa got a huge fee for a player who served the club with distinction and that they have since hit new heights under the guidance of Unai Emery.

These earnest condemnations miss three important things.

First, it is not that deep.

Football is pantomime. The game has worked hard to root out genuine nastiness — violence, racism, homophobia — and there is plenty still to do. But booing opposition players is part of what gives the game life, distinguishing it from other sports that have less of a hold on the national consciousness. People really care who wins or loses.

It sometimes gets emotional. Nobody understands that better than Grealish. "I love when people are on my back and targeting me," he told The Times in 2020. "I always remember when I was a kid — and I am not saying I am anywhere near his level — but Cristiano Ronaldo used to come to Villa [with Manchester United] and the fans used to absolutely cane him.

"He used to thrive off it and that is what I try to do. I try to thrive off the hatred from the fans."

Second, booing works.

Even those sceptical of football's data revolution will be innately aware of one statistic — home advantage in the Premier League is hugely significant. Home teams average 1.63 points a game, compared with 1.1 for away teams. In the 2020-21 Covid season, during which fans were mostly absent from stadiums, away teams won slightly more points. Hostile crowds are not simply part of the Premier League's aesthetic, they also play a direct role in helping their team win.

Grealish did not play badly on Saturday but every time the ball was raked out to him on the left wing with former team-mate Matty Cash bearing down on him, he looked rattled by the boos from fans that once adored him.

If the crowd were polite and respectful, perhaps he would have had the confidence to beat Cash and score one of the brilliant goals he had done so many times before on the same turf.

JAMES GILL/DANEHOUSE/GETTY IMAGES





Grealish shows the booing Villa fans how many titles he's won at City, a far cry from his days as the darling of the Holte End, inset

Most Villa supporters recognise Grealish as a modern great and one of their own, exemplified by a video of fans on a recent Champions League trip to Bruges calling Grealish on FaceTime from a bar.

But for 90 minutes he is the enemy, paid handsomely to do his best to make Villa lose. Fans travel long distances and spend hard-earned cash in the hope of seeing a victory, not to provide an agreeable backdrop for the watching neutrals. Save the applause for full-time.

Third, while pundits, journalists and players must exhibit professional detachment, fans do not. Owen pointed out that footballers "have a limited time in the game and clearly want to be as successful as possible in that short time between first and last contracts".

That is true, and any rational supporter understands it is the way of modern football. But the beauty of being a fan is that it transcends these transactional dynamics that pervade professional life.

Any sane neutral would have left a middling Villa side in 2021 to work under Pep Guardiola — one of the best coaches of all time — win the Treble and get a massive pay rise too. But the fans who pay to be at Villa Park, or any of English football's other stadiums, do not see things this way. For them, one goal in front of the Holte End would mean more than winning 100 trophies with a club to which they have no connection.

Part of Grealish's magnetism at Villa is that for a long time he seemed like a rare breed: a player who was a genuine fan of the club he played for, made all the more special for being managed by Dean Smith, another local lad and childhood Villa fan.

Life moves on. Grealish has done well out of the move and so have Villa. But there is nothing wrong with the booing.

Deep down, as a genuine football fan, Grealish probably gets that too.



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Huijsen's headed opener from a free kick in Bournemouth's victory at Old Trafford on Sunday highlighted United's continuing problems in defending set pieces

How can Amorim solve United's set-piece woes? Sign taller players

Zonal-marking failures, indecisive Onana, and lack of height. **Hamzah Khalique-Loonat** on big headache for new boss

Managing Manchester United is a challenging job at the best of times, but attempting to get results when the team consistently concede set-piece goals is an added layer of difficulty that has quickly taken the shine off Ruben Amorim's new-manager lustre.

United have conceded nine goals this term from set pieces, the second worst record in the Premier League, and seven in their past six games in all competitions under Amorim. In expected goals terms, they fare marginally better, with 7.43 xG faced, the third-worst total.

But the most striking aspect of all is the rate at which their opponents generate shots from set pieces: 34.5 per cent. It means more than a third of all set pieces against United lead to a shot.

It is little wonder that Old Trafford is on edge whenever an opponent places the ball down under the corner flag.

UNITED'S SET-PIECE STRUCTURE

The team's difficulties in defending corners and free kicks comes from their defensive structure. Last season, United tended to use five zonal defenders in the six-yard box for defensive corners, with the remaining six outfielders responsible for blocking or man-marking the attacking players. On some occasions, one of those blockers would take up a zonal position, around the penalty spot.

The former Brentford and Arsenal first-team coach Andreas Georgson was recruited in the summer to help resolve the problems faced by United, but when Amorim arrived last month he put assistant manager Carlos Fernandes in charge of set pieces, which prompted a reversion back to the structure United had retained since José Mourinho's time in charge.

In the past few years, teams have paid more attention to attacking set pieces, scouting weaknesses in the opposition. United's main weakness is the space they leave between zonal defenders.

At Old Trafford last Sunday, Bournemouth took the lead when their 19-year-old centre back Dean Huijsen attacked the space between Joshua Zirkzee and Bruno Fernandes at the near post. Fernandes usually defends set pieces at the front post, and the striker — Zirkzee or Rasmus Hojlund — is expected to be behind him.

Another gap also opened up between Zirkzee and Diogo Dalot directly in front of the goal. It is the sort of gap that opposition scouts would identify as a potential weakness and is relatively easy to expose.

LACK OF PHYSICALITY

Tactics are as much about the players that are executing them as the ideas and United principally lack physicality and height.

Amorim's team are ranked 14th in the Premier League for their aerial duel win-rate this season (49.6 per cent). League leaders Liverpool by contrast have a rate of 57.3 per cent, mainly because they have a group of tall, aerially dominant players, so tend to repel most corners or free kicks.

Of United's players on Sunday, only one of their defensive players is considered a genuine aerial threat or specialised duellist in the air: Harry Maguire.

United have only three players in their squad this season with an aerial duel win rate above 70 per cent: Maguire (76 per cent), Noussair Mazraoui (73.5) and Jonny Evans (72.7).

The next-best placed defender is Matthijs de Ligt, who wins a respectable 64.4 per cent of his aerial duels but was unwell on Sunday.

Only a few years ago United boasted a collection of tall, physically strong players, with an appetite for attacking headers. Some of those, such as Edinson Cavani, Paul Pogba, Nemanja Matic and Eric Bailly — all of whom left the club in the 2022-23 season — may have passed their peak, however their physical presence made them valuable assets specifically for attacking and defending set pieces.

But since the days of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, United have largely moved away from signing physical players, while teams such as Manchester City and Arsenal have not. This summer, United let Scott McTominay and Raphaël Varane depart without bringing in similarly strong aerial duellists.

LONG-STANDING PROBLEMS

Set pieces, and United's lack of physicality, are not new issues. Last season, when they faced the second-most shots in the Premier League, set pieces were a big factor. No team faced more shots from set pieces than United — and by a considerable margin, too (29 more than Sheffield United).

That the Old Trafford side conceded the seventh-most goals (14) from set pieces came in spite of having the highest expected goals against (16.84).

And recent goals conceded against teams such as Manchester City, Nottingham Forest and Arsenal all fit within that broader picture, with recurring themes from last season.

Against City nine days ago, the goal United conceded owed directly to both miscommunication and an unfavourable match-up, as Manuel Ugarte passed responsibility for marking Josko Gvardiol on to Dalot as he pushed up, once City took a short corner. A week before that, Forest's Nikola Milenkovic (6ft 4in) was positioned against Lisandro Martínez (5ft 9in). Dalot, at the front post, jumped but missed the ball (a theme of United's front-post defenders), which allowed Milenkovic to take advantage and score.

But the issue was not limited to Dalot's aerial abilities — United's blocking efforts were pathetic, too. Martínez is usually a flag bearer for rugged, shorter defenders that are able to punch above their weight class, but the Argentine was demolished by Milenkovic, while his team-mate Ryan Yates also steamrollered Kobbie Mainoo.

United's blockers are supposed to ensure the six-yard box, especially the back-post area, is clear for André Onana to come and claim the ball. The goalkeeper is a competent claimer of crosses: an improvement on his predecessor, David de Gea, who preferred to stay on his line. However, Onana is not the most proactive or authoritative, and his decision-making is inconsistent.

It seems as if this season is more of the same for United, but the upside is that there is plenty of room for improvement. Should they recruit well next month, with a couple of taller players who are stronger in the air and harder to push around, it is possible that they could quickly alleviate some of the problems that make them one of the worst set-piece defences in the league.

Proportion of goals conceded from set-pieces

PL 24-25	Set-piece goals conceded*	% of total
Man United	9	40.9%
Wolves	16	40%
Arsenal	5	31.3%
Bournemouth	5	23.8%
West Ham	7	23.3%
Fulham	5	22.7%
Southampton	8	22.2%
Chelsea	4	21.1%
Tottenham	5	20%
Aston Villa	5	19.2%
Crystal Palace	5	19.2%
Everton	4	19%
Newcastle	4	19%
Liverpool	3	18.8%
Leicester	6	16.2%
Brighton	4	15.4%
Nott'm Forest	2	10.5%
Man City	2	8%
Ipswich	2	6.3%
Brentford	1	3.1%

*Excludes penalties

Leaking roof … now mouse droppings at Old Trafford

Charlotte Duncker, Ian Whittell

Manchester United's problems are mounting off the pitch after mice droppings were found at Old Trafford by a hygiene inspector.

A routine inspection at the stadium found the animal droppings last month, which has resulted in their hygiene rating plummeting from four stars to two. A year ago United proudly boasted five stars.

Club staff are working with the local council and pest control experts to tackle the problem. Club sources said that the droppings were not found in any kitchens or food-preparation areas and that they have had a pest control contractor in four to five times a week since the faeces were discovered.

"Manchester United implements a robust pest-control system throughout Old Trafford," United said in a statement. "Multiple weekly checks are made in all catering areas and stringent measures are taken to ensure levels of hygiene and cleanliness are high wherever food is stored, prepared and served. If incidences of this nature do occur at the stadium, immediate and appropriate action is taken."

The stadium's location near to Manchester Ship Canal and the train line makes the problem more likely to occur, with the cold weather also believed to be contributing. A spokesman for Trafford Council said: "Our environmental health officers gave a food hygiene rating of two following a routine visit. We are now working closely with Manchester United to ensure it complies with the rating and carries out the necessary improvements."

Sources said that the club are committed to getting their rating back to five stars. The club have a busy hospitality operation with 8,000 fans in corporate boxes being catered for by more than 29 kitchens on a match day.

It is not the first time that United have found themselves in trouble after food inspections. A year ago they had their food-hygiene rating cut from five stars to one after guests were served raw chicken at a corporate event. Swift action to rectify the problem meant that their rating moved temporarily back up to four.

It is not just the mice problem that needs fixing at Old Trafford. The club have had issues with the roof leaking for years and last Sunday, as head coach Ruben Amorim carried out his post-match media duties after the 3-0 defeat to Bournemouth, the roof in the press conference room started to drip.

The club are going through a consultation process over what to do with the stadium as they look to modernise. A task force is in place to decide whether or not to build a new arena or invest money into the historic ground.

Meanwhile Sir Jim Ratcliffe and other senior figures at United will leave the decision over Marcus Rashford's future at the club completely in the hands of Amorim.

The England forward, 27, was left out of the squad for the third consecutive match against Bournemouth, and it has been made clear that Ratcliffe, the club's minority shareholder who has control over sporting operations, will not interfere despite the potential damage being caused to Rashford's sale value by his absence from the team.

The player, who is represented by his brother Dwaine Maynard, admitted that he felt his future may lie away from Old Trafford in an interview last week.

Postecoglou's rollercoaster rides

Martin Samuel



Three games, eight days, 21 goals…

Tottenham 3 Liverpool 6 (PL, Dec 22)



Tottenham 4 Man Utd 3 (Carabao Cup, Dec 19)





Are you not entertained? Well, frankly, no. Maybe as a neutral, or as a person who likes those all-action highlights reels that fill space on sports channels when no live events are on. But as a paying customer, or a Tottenham Hotspur fan, it would be pushing it a bit to imagine that going 5-1 down at home to Liverpool and then, with 18 minutes left, pulling back a couple of consolation goals is now classed as thrilling. Not least when, made to start taking it seriously again, Liverpool went straight down the other end and scored the sixth.

It was December 1997 when Tottenham previously shipped six in a home game, against Chelsea. They were drawing 1-1 at half-time, then collapsed. Gerry Francis had recently resigned as manager and Christian Gross was the new incumbent. Tottenham were up against a team who included Gianfranco Zola, Roberto Di Matteo, Dennis Wise and Graeme Le Saux and who could summon Gianluca Vialli and Mark Hughes from the bench.

Chelsea would win the League Cup and European Cup Winners' Cup that season, finishing fourth; Tottenham would get dumped out of the FA Cup by Barnsley and end up 14th.

The difference now is that Tottenham's manager is into his second year, the modern club had pretensions to enter a Super League not so long ago, and conceding six at home has somehow been rebranded as part of the club's make-up. It's what they do, and all in the name of entertainment.

Ange Postecoglou was asked if another rollercoaster ride could be expected before the Liverpool game, and smilingly acquiesced. Later he seemed a little testy when asked if injuries had played a part in recent defensive debacles — it is now 13 goals conceded in the past three home games across all competitions — yet he can't have it all ways. If Tottenham are depleted, then surely, adjust. If the goalkeeper Fraser Forster has two left feet, than stop making him play out from the back.

The consternation near the start gave Liverpool an advantage from which they never looked back. They did not score when Forster passed straight to Mohamed Salah, but immediately had confidence they would. Compare that with Chelsea, banging their head against a wall up at Everton an hour before. Just as happened away to Arsenal this month, Sean Dyche's team made plain that they were not going to take any chances or do anything daft. Chelsea, who could have gone top and applied pressure to Liverpool, played out the tamest of goalless draws and barely looked like scoring.

And were we not entertained? No, not that time, either. Yet that's the point of entertainment in sport. It's contextual. It's not the cinema, it's not the panto, and its appeal is different for everybody.

In its own way, for Evertonians, that turgid 0-0 was as much fun as can be had upright. Bored the pants off the rest of us, frustrated the hell out of Chelsea, but it was, in the circumstances, quite brilliant. Cole Palmer kept at arm's length, Jordan Pickford not greatly active.

The moment it became plain that Enzo Maresca was not going to change his style of play despite the wind blowing an absolute hoolie around Goodison Park, Everton dug in, sat tight and let Chelsea have the ball in the many areas of the pitch where it did not matter.

Once they advanced, it was different. On the rare occasions Chelsea went long, when the gale caught the ball and made it do strange things, there was panic in Everton's back line, as there would have been among any group of defenders. Yet Chelsea tried this so rarely — and only then under sufferance, usually if forced into a hurried clearance — that it wasn't a factor. Chelsea have principles and a way of playing and stick to them, even when it is very obvious they are not working. In that respect, they are not dissimilar to Tottenham under Postecoglou. It is great that a manager wants his team on the front foot and, when it works, the method is envied by just about every group of fans. The crowd at West Ham United tired of David Moyes's pragmatism sooner because of the football being played down the road.

Despite changes of manager at several Premier League clubs recently, the firefighters of old — Moyes, Sam Allardyce — are not hearing their phones ring, because coaches like Postecoglou have rendered them outdated. The same happened to a manager like George Graham 20 years ago, when the likes of Kevin Keegan came along.

What Postecoglou is trying to achieve has undoubted appeal. Tottenham's followers have sat through some pretty turgid stuff in recent years, and the excitement

How they stand and festive fixtures

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Liverpool	16	12	3	1	37	16	21	39
Chelsea	17	10	5	2	37	19	18	35
Arsenal	17	9	6	2	34	16	18	33
Nottm Forest	17	9	4	4	23	19	4	31
Bournemouth	17	8	4	5	27	21	6	28
Aston Villa	17	8	4	5	26	26	0	28
Man City	17	8	3	6	29	25	4	27
Newcastle	17	7	5	5	27	21	6	26
Fulham	17	6	7	4	24	22	2	25
Brighton	17	6	7	4	27	26	1	25
Tottenham	17	7	2	8	39	25	14	23
Brentford	17	7	2	8	32	32	0	23
Man United	17	6	4	7	21	22	-1	22
West Ham	17	5	5	7	22	30	-8	20
Everton	16	3	7	6	14	21	-7	16
Crystal Palace	17	3	7	7	18	26	-8	16
Leicester	17	3	5	9	21	37	-16	14
Wolves	17	3	3	11	27	40	-13	12
Ipswich	17	2	6	9	16	32	-16	12
Southampton	17	1	3	13	11	36	-25	6

Kick-off 3.0 unless stated

Thursday Bournemouth v Crystal Palace; Chelsea v Fulham; Liverpool v Leicester (8.0); Manchester City v Everton (12.30); Newcastle v Aston Villa; Nottingham Forest v Tottenham; Southampton v West Ham; Wolverhampton v Manchester Utd (5.30).

Friday Arsenal v Ipswich (8.15); Brighton v Brentford (7.30).

Sunday Crystal Palace v Southampton; Everton v Nottingham Forest; Fulham v Bournemouth; Leicester v Manchester City (2.30); Tottenham v Wolverhampton; West Ham v Liverpool (5.15).

Monday Aston Villa v Brighton (7.45); Ipswich v Chelsea (7.45); Manchester Utd v Newcastle (8.0).

Wednesday, January 1 Brentford v Arsenal (5.30).

are not sustainable





Southampton 0 Tottenham 5 (PL, Dec 15)

How Spurs have baffled fans

W Everton *4-0* (PL, Aug 24)
L Arsenal *0-1* (PL, Sept 15)
W Brentford 3-1 (PL, Sept 21)
W West Ham *4-1* (PL, Oct 19)
W Man City *2-1* (League Cup, Oct 30)
W Aston Villa *4-1* (PL, Nov 3)
L Ipswich *1-2* (PL, Nov 10)
D Fulham *1-1* (PL, Dec 1)
L Chelsea *3-4* (PL, Dec 8)
W Man Utd *4-3* (League Cup, Dec 19)
L Liverpool *3-6* (PL, Dec 22)
** Does not include Europa League*

around Postecoglou was understandable. Yet it is disingenuous to talk about entertainment just because there were nine goals in Sunday's game. The scoreline flattered the losers. Liverpool were so much better than a three-goal winning margin.

Good winners, Tottenham. That's the crux of it. When they win, they win so well it almost obscures what happens in those other weeks. This Premier League campaign has featured seven wins and in those games Tottenham have never scored fewer than three goals. It amounts to 27 in total: 4, 3, 3, 4, 4, 4, 5. There are two other clubs also on seven wins: Brentford have scored 25 goals in their run, Newcastle United 17.

There are also three teams on eight wins, and none have won as emphatically as Tottenham, because Bournemouth and Manchester City have scored 20 goals each in their victories, Aston Villa 19. Nottingham Forest have scored 17 goals in their nine wins, Arsenal 27. So Tottenham are exceptional in the way they sometimes get hold of an opponent. When it all clicks it is marvellous to watch. And, yes, that's entertainment.

Yet that's markedly different from Sunday's game, and there is the disconnect. It is no wonder Arne Slot praised Postecoglou before Sunday's game. Every manager must hope he keeps it as open as this. Yes, there is danger of walking on to one, as seven teams have done this season. Yet there is an equal chance of what happened in the opening hour of Liverpool's visit, when Tottenham conceded five and it could have been eight, or ten.

And are we not entertained? Well, yes, in a way. But not in a way that is sustainable for the club laying on that entertainment, who sit 16 points off Liverpool, but 17 ahead of Southampton and enter the Christmas period in the bottom half of the table for the first time since 2008-09. Because put like that, it doesn't seem much fun at all.

● *Read Martin's brilliant weekly take on the Premier League action every Monday at 7am on thetimes.com/sport*

Corberán's exit worth £2.5m for West Brom

Tom Kershaw, Paul Joyce

Carlos Corberán is set to leave West Bromwich Albion and take over his embattled boyhood side Valencia.

West Brom, who are on the cusp of the Sky Bet Championship play-off places, are set to receive about £2.5 million in compensation for Corberán and his coaching staff after Valencia sacked Rubén Baraja.

Corberán, 41, took over at West Brom in October 2022, when they were languishing in the relegation zone, before embarking on a run of ten wins in 13 matches and only narrowly missing out on the play-offs.

The club then finished fifth in the Championship last season but lost in the play-off semi-finals against Southampton. They are now seventh in the table before a trip to Derby County on Boxing Day.

Corberán signed a contract extension last year amid interest from Leeds United, where he spent several years as an assistant to Marcelo Bielsa, and was also recently a candidate for the Southampton manager's job, which has since gone to Ivan Juric.



He grew up 26km from Valencia and played for the club's academy and Valencia B before retiring at 23 years old.

The La Liga side sacked Baraja on Monday after a 2-2 draw with Alavés. He had overseen a dreadful start to the season which has left them in a relegation battle with only 12 points from their opening 17 games.

They are now in talks with West Brom over Corberán, with a deal expected to be announced soon.

Corberán signed a contract extension last year with West Brom but will now return to his boyhood club Valencia

Saka out for weeks with torn muscle

CONTINUED FROM BACK

to not playing or being injured for long periods of time. He will realise that he is so important in that dressing room.

"His energy level, body language and how he communicates with the team has to be really good because it is the only way at the moment he can help."

Arteta said he felt the injury was probably a consequence of Saka's accumulation of matches. Since August 2021 Saka has played 162 times for Arsenal and 34 games for England. In his absence Gabriel Martinelli may continue on the right after he switched wings against Palace, although Arteta said he could also use Gabriel Jesus, Ethan Nwaneri, Kai Havertz or Leandro Trossard in that position.

"I am putting ideas together," the Arsenal manager said. "I haven't got there yet, and then I want to speak with them to understand how we are going to generate things."

Arsenal are at home to Ipswich Town on Friday and also play Tottenham Hotspur and Aston Villa among five other Premier League matches. They have two league-stage matches in the Champions League, Newcastle United in the first leg of the Carabao Cup semi-final and Manchester United in the FA Cup third round.

This season Saka has started 16 of 17 Premier League matches and five of six Champions League games, in addition to a third-round Carabao Cup tie against League One Bolton Wanderers in September. Last season he missed only three Premier League matches because of small muscle issues, having set a club record of playing in 87 successive top-flight games.



Saka was injured in the game away to Palace, having played 162 matches for Arsenal and 34 for England since August 2021 — a workload his manager feels may be to blame

Forest hire ex-Roma CEO

Nottingham Forest have hired Lina Souloukou as their new chief executive (Charlotte Duncker writes).

The 41-year-old, who was previously CEO at Roma and Olympiacos — where she worked with the Forest owner Evangelos Marinakis — steps into a role which has been vacant since Dane Murphy left the club in January 2023.

Souloukou stepped down at Roma in September after taking the brunt of fan anger at the sacking of club legend Daniele De Rossi as manager. She was reportedly given police protection after threats from fans.

Takeover at Bramall Lane

COH Sports has completed its takeover of Sheffield United, the Sky Bet Championship leaders. Steven Rosen and Helmy Eltoukhy have joined the board as co-chairmen after the deal with the Saudi Arabian United World Group was finalised.

"We are honoured and humbled to become the new owners of this historic football club," Rosen and Eltoukhy told the club's website.

"Like all fans we want to see the club competing in the top flight consistently, not just on a one-off basis, and we have been encouraged by the strong start to this season."

Sport

What was bugging Jack?

Draper reveals why he was sick in US Open semi-final

Page 43



Injuries may force Arsenal to strengthen

Saka out for 'many weeks' after hamstring tear

Gary Jacob

Mikel Arteta is ready to strengthen his Arsenal squad in the January transfer window after saying that Bukayo Saka has torn his right hamstring and will be sidelined for "many weeks".

The Arsenal manager said he could not put an exact timescale on the England forward's return because the injury is still being assessed. Saka, who has been involved in 15 Premier League goals this season, was in pain and used crutches as he left Selhurst Park on Saturday night, having signalled that he wanted to be substituted during the 5-1 win over Crystal Palace.

If Saka is out for about six weeks, he would miss ten matches across all competitions and face a battle to be fit to play at home against Manchester City in early February. Arteta described it as a "huge" blow for his side.

"It is not looking good," Arteta said. "He will be out for many weeks. I can't be too specific because I don't know.

"He was gutted, you can tell that he's not been injured because he was really emotional. He was really down and we need to lift him."

Arteta's problems were compounded by Raheem Sterling, Saka's possible back-up, sustaining a knee injury in training. The 30-year-old, on loan from Chelsea, will have an assessment today to determine the extent of the problem.

Arteta has been considering potential defensive signings after losing a number of players to muscular injuries. He is without the full backs Ben White, Oleksandr Zinchenko and Takehiro Tomiyasu. But now he could need to look beyond that to reinforcements elsewhere

"If something unbelievable is available and if the club is willing to do it, we'll have to consider it," the 42-year-old said.

"The preparation is done and we are ready if something happens. We didn't predict a situation with Bukayo and Raheem at the same time. We predicted more it would be something else: for example, the defensive line. We started the season with one of the thinnest squads in the Premier League — we knew that."

While Saka, 23, has often returned fairly quickly from injuries, the worry is that it is the third hamstring issue he has suffered during this campaign, while he also had a thigh problem last season. He missed two matches for Arsenal in October, including the 2-0 defeat by Bournemouth, after feeling his right hamstring during England's 2-1 home defeat by Greece in the Nations League.

"The way he recovers from game to game, we can be hopeful that we can make that period shorter. But how short? It is a significant injury," Arteta added. "That's why we have to be very careful that when he comes back he's in the right way and with the right form. Then manage him because he's going to be out for a long period.

"He will be fine, he's going to need a few days. He's not a player that is used

Continued on page 51

Feyi-Waboso: My year to remember

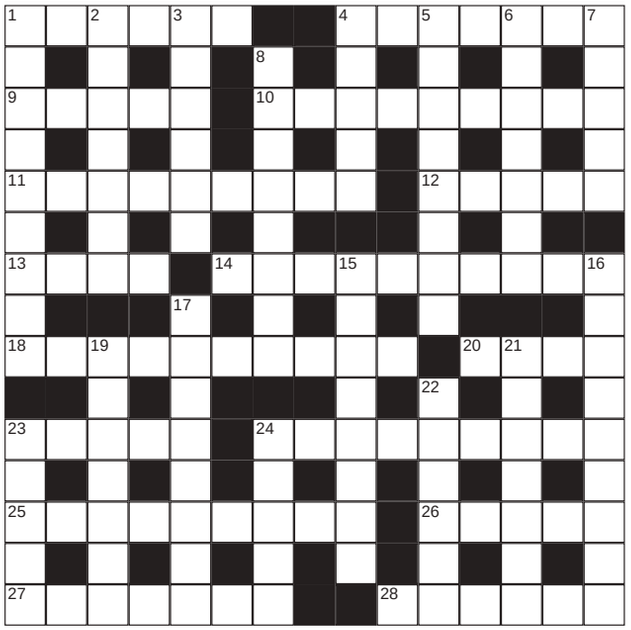
In the first of a series celebrating the sporting heroes of 2024, Will Kelleher meets the England and Exeter Chiefs wing

Exclusive interview, Pages 46-47



PHIL MINGO/PINNACLE PHOTO AGENCY

Times Crossword 29,108



ACROSS

1 Returning show restricted by extremely corny humour (6)
4 Name a soft drink containing a hint of orange (7)
9 Spice Girl accompanying a legendary soprano (5)
10 Call into question opinion given by magazine? (4,5)
11 A way of identifying weapon immediately (2,1,6)
12 Collection of books covering standard, illusionary works (2,3)
13 Instrument does maybe turn around (4)
14 Teacher fabricated rubbish about God (3,7)
18 Bird of course mostly seen in wild gardens (10)
20 Parsnip oddly lacking flavour at first? Yeah, right! (2,2)
23 Empty spaces in front of Tate taken on by an esteemed artist (5)
24 Bachelor being slimy and being inclined to insobriety (9)
25 Helicopter shortly to be scrambled for law enforcers (3,6)
26 Demonstrated, perhaps, what couturiers may use (5)
27 Continue to obtain cheap Aussie wine from here? (4,3)
28 Deadhead ultimately invested in excellent selection of albums? (2,4)

DOWN

1 Guy friends draw parallels between adopting daughter and son (9)
2 Virile guards fighting Trojan? (7)
3 Departs too soon, at significant cost (6)
4 Racehorse runs into lake, uncontrollably (5)
5 Ready to keep on getting corrupted (8)
6 Time for a quick coffee? (7)
7 Action of lifting the foot (5)
8 Writer gets rising pulse (8)
15 Cheered up after games machine finally arrived (8)
16 Dissident about to join family heading north (9)
17 Love in *Macbeth* represented great sacrifice (8)
19 Emissions target number set up. It means nothing! (3,4)
21 Colourful arrays of Bond baddies very nearly dead just before the end (7)
22 Film, we're told, wasn't a hit (6)
23 Type of suit that's partially water-resistant, I guess (4-1)
24 Aerospace company dismissing old person (5)

Yesterday's solution 29,107

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So we can thank Gen Z for the death of the traditional Christmas



Robert Crampton

The traditional Christmas is under dire threat from Gen Z, the cohort aged between 12 and 27. Just about every festive ritual you can think of is being subverted, vegetarianised or simply abandoned by the young folk. I knew my own kids, 27 and 25, consider Christmas pudding to be, and I quote, "utterly minging", but until I went through the data I didn't realise quite how in peril so many customs are.

The classic format, invented by the Victorians and augmented as new technologies arrived (the Queen's/King's message, the Bond film, the long drive back to the parental home) in the last century, is fast disappearing up the chimney. A chimney Santa can no longer, for middle-class youngsters, plausibly navigate, the pipe on mum and dad's wood-burner being too narrow to sustain the pretence.

Last year, just 17 per cent of Brits left out a mince pie for Santa, down from half of us in the late 1990s. Maybe the hipsters offer the big fella a falafel wrap and a kale smoothie, but I doubt it.

As for Rudolph, the second last thing I will do before bed tonight (before brushing chewed carrot cud out of my teeth) is take a bite out of a carrot and position the remains on the hearth. Such devoted paternal playacting will die out with my generation, seeing as how Gen Z, now entering their own childbearing years, won't be performing the same service for their kids. In so far as any of them will have any kids.

Yesterday Ocado revealed that one in five 18 to 24-year-olds will opt for a vegetarian dinner tomorrow. Asda says one in ten of its customers said they are "too scared" to cook a whole turkey. Too scared! They aren't going to be much use, are they, when the Russians come knocking, snow on their boots?

A fifth of Gen Zers will roast their potatoes, assuming they don't have some fervent ideological objection to eating potatoes, in coconut oil, not animal fat. Another one in five reckon fried chicken is a "Christmas essential". Eh? They can't all be Japanese (who like to eat KFC on Christmas Day). Most disturbingly for those of us brought up in an era when your classic stocking filler was a satsuma (plus a walnut and a crappy stationery set from Woolworth's), only one in 20 associate the delightful orange palate-cleansers with the current season. That's where year-round global trade gets you.

Just a quarter of families now hang up stockings on Christmas Eve, perhaps because of the unfortunate association of the word "stocking" with patriarchal lingerie fantasies. Even though the stocking in this context is usually your dad's old hiking socks, not commonly understood as a wildly sexy garment. Mistletoe is a no-no for similar reasons. Crackers are ruled out on eco grounds, disposable as they



are and filled with single-use bad jokes. Actual, proper Christmas cards enjoying a corporeal, as opposed to digital, existence are also out of favour, for similar green reasons, even though they recycle excellently as shopping lists. No one under 40 knows the words to any carols.

As for sprouts, funnily enough I bet youngsters like sprouts, given their penchant for decomposing Vietnamese cabbage. But even this is deeply unorthodox. Nobody is actually supposed to like sprouts. They're supposed to eat them as an act of masochistic repentance to offset all the nice stuff, like chocolate and cake. Sprouts are about suffering, not enjoyment. The same goes for Christmas jumpers. Again, Gen Z is big on the Christmas jumper; you see many more around the office than you did 20 years ago. But I've noticed theirs are muted, expensive, verging on the tasteful. Whereas Christmas jumpers are supposed to be hideous, highly flammable death traps.

As for the centrepiece of the living room, smaller houses have given rise to a phenomenon called "treezempia", as evidenced by a profusion of comically skinny fake trees. Sales of going-through-the-motions artificial trees 3ft or less in height are up 75 per cent this year.

Of course, many Gen Zers will spend this week at their parents' house. But they won't be "driving home for Christmas", partly because many of them still live with mum and dad and partly because barely a quarter of 17 to 20-year-olds have a driving licence. Thirty years ago, half of them did. Chris Rea might have to update the lyrics to his classic. "Riding my Lime bike home for Christmas/ Recklessly fast on the pavement" isn't quite as catchy.

Some Christmas traditions have already died out, of course. Like snow, for instance, with parts of the UK set to be warmer than Corfu tomorrow. We can't really blame the young folk for the weather, to be fair — that one's on us.

What else? Tipping the bin men and postie cannot survive a cashless economy. Just 7.4 million tuned into the King's message last year, as opposed to the 28 million who loyally listened to his mum in 1980. Tearing foxes to bits on Boxing Day is a thing of the past. Personally, I'm OK with that. Most kids don't believe in writing thank-you letters these days. (I'm not OK with that.) And some of them don't believe *Death in Paradise* is a great show, not even the Christmas special, a few going so far as to denounce it as a formulaic, quasi-imperialist hamfest. Through clouds of billowing pineapple vape fog, obvs. I've even heard rumours some young scoundrels might not believe in God.

One thing the kids do like, of course, is a holiday. Or annual leave, as they call it. That tradition is thriving, indeed proliferating. You used to get two days off work, three if you were lucky. Now, many people jacked it in last Friday and won't clock on again until Monday, January 6, a full 17 days later. That's another tradition in danger of expiring: going to work. But maybe now's not the time to get started on that.

Happy Christmas.

Baldoni was the most conflicted man I've ever interviewed

Devoted husband, feminist, former porn addict ... the actor accused by Blake Lively of ungallant conduct struck Andrew Billen as protesting too much

When an avatar of virtue falls from grace, our polite reaction should not be that we are angry, just terribly disappointed. When paragons stumble the first thing we feel in our heart is schadenfreude. And so it was this weekend when I read that the movie star and director Justin Baldoni, whom I had interviewed about his woker-than-woke memoir *Man Enough: Undefining My Masculinity* in 2021, had been fired by his agent after feminism's ally faced allegations from one of his leading ladies about his distinctly unwoke and ungallant conduct.

Legal papers revealed he had been accused by his co-star Blake Lively of sexualised behaviour on the set of their film, *It Ends with Us*. Her complaints had been addressed by the film's producers but once filming was over, according to documents acquired by her lawyers, Baldoni and the lead producer, Jamey Heath, commissioned a public relations firm to orchestrate a smear campaign against her. If even a fraction of Lively's claims are true — and both men deny them — the gap between what Baldoni preaches in public and his conduct as a director, producer and leading man is dizzying. Yes, we should be angry.

But disappointed? I can't say I am. Baldoni was probably the most conflicted person I have ever interviewed. On the one hand he was a devoted husband, present father, an ever-listening and learning male feminist. On the other he was a materialistic, fast-car driving porn addict who objectified no body as much as his own.

"I might be 37 years old, but I'm still that 12-year-old boy who seeks acceptance and validation from men, from boys in my class," he told me ruefully. He was "on a journey" and "still not on the other side of it", he wrote in his book. A month today he turns 41. If 40 is an overgrown boy's last chance to graduate to manhood, perhaps he blew it. If the complaints are true, beneath the glare of studio lights, New Man Baldoni makes Gregg Wallace look like Gary Lineker.

Before all this blew up in his face, Baldoni was best known for two things. The first was as the suitor of the eponymous heroine in the American TV comedy-drama *Jane the Virgin*. It was a role in which between 2014 and 2019 he led with a pair of well-defined pectorals calculated to inflame the show's teenage girl audience. The other was his 2017 Ted



health

A festive warning for lovers, cat owners and champagne drinkers

Dr Mark Porter

The Christmas edition of the BMJ is unlikely to feature on the seasonal reading lists of most households, but it's a firm favourite among many doctors — not least because the journal takes itself less seriously than it does for the rest of the year, giving some insight into the lighter side of medicine. Here's a selection of some of the highlights over the years — not all of which should be taken too seriously.

First, some good news for chocolate lovers from this year's edition. Researchers analysing decades of health data from more than 300,000 American doctors and nurses have discovered that, contrary to what you might expect, chocolate eaters are less likely to develop type 2 diabetes (T2D). Consuming more than five servings a week of a combination of all types of chocolate was associated with a 10 per cent reduction in the likelihood of having T2D, while those favouring only dark chocolate were 21 per cent less likely to have the condition. There was no apparent benefit or harm (except weight gain) in people who ate more than five servings of just milk chocolate. So perhaps best to stick to the dark side.

And, continuing with the theme of indulgence, researchers in 2023 examined the benefits and harms of the ingredients used in *Great British Bake Off* recipes for Christmas cake, biscuits, pastries, puddings and desserts. The results were complicated given the wide variation of ingredients, but suffice to say that most — with the notable exception of sugar and alcohol — fared well. Fruit, coffee and nuts were among those associated with the most health benefits. Or, to paraphrase the authors' conclusion: "Our review suggests that the recipes are more likely to use ingredients that are associated with reductions, rather than increases, in the risk of death or disease. So we are pleased to report that everyone can have their cake and eat it too." To which I would cautiously add: at least over Christmas.

Of course, Christmas isn't all about eating and drinking. September has long been the busiest month for maternity units in the UK because more babies are conceived (but often not planned) around the festive season than at any other time of year. This trend was highlighted in the BMJ by a study that revealed a 63 per cent increase in requests for emergency contraception (the "morning after" pill) following the new year bank holiday. So, plan ahead, please.

Falls also get the Christmas BMJ treatment. Slippery pavements, overindulgence and elderly relatives attempting to navigate unfamiliar surroundings when they visit mean emergency departments see significantly more fall-related injuries at this time of year. And while falls can exact a considerable toll on the individual, their family and the NHS (they cost the service more than £2 billion a year according to Nice) Scottish researchers took a more informal approach to the problem in 2017 when they decided to investigate whether there is any truth in the old adage that pride comes before a fall.

Seemingly not, according to their study of more than 10,000 people, which found that those who rated themselves as most proud were, after adjusting for other factors like age, about 20 per cent less likely to have had a significant fall in the previous two years compared with respondents who were least proud. So, remember to hold your head high this festive season.

Back in 2008, another article focused on myths about poinsettias, a popular plant in many households at Christmas — and one that is renowned for being poisonous. Or is it? To find out, researchers trawled through the national poison centres and identified 27,793 cases involving poinsettias. None was fatal and 96 per cent did not require any medical treatment, including 92 children who had ingested "substantial quantities". Reassuring if, like us, you will have a house full of young grandchildren pottering about this week.

Although, for the sake of completeness, I should report that it didn't end well. In a rapid response published online in a footnote to the article, an irate reader from Germany pointed out that her cat had died after eating poinsettia leaves and urged the BMJ to consider in future just how "dangerous incomplete information can be" — at least to cats, it would seem.

And finally, if you are celebrating Christmas or New Year with some bubbly, be careful with the cork. In a 2023 paper entitled *Cheers not Tears*, the authors reviewed eye injuries caused by corks, a quarter of which left the victims permanently blind in the affected eye. Evidently, the pressure in a champagne or prosecco bottle is about three times that of a typical car tyre and can expel a cork at speeds of up to 50mph, travelling from bottle to eye in just 0.05 seconds — quick enough to beat the protective blink reflex. You have been warned.

Wishing you all a merry Christmas and a happy and healthy new year.



JOHN HERSEY FOR THE TIMES



'There is so much beauty in having an older parent'

As I have grown up, my mother's age has defined our relationship — for the better. It is a gift, writes Zak Asgard

My mother had me when she was 42 years old. It was 1999, and the average age of a first-time mother was 26. Growing up, I didn't think too much about my mother's age — at least not in those early years when time was an abstract concept. But as I got older, and my perceptions changed, I began to understand that a parent's age is more than just a number.

I was seven years old when my mother had her 50th birthday party. All of the children from my class came, as did their parents, and we celebrated the milestone in our flat's communal garden with cake, champagne and music from the 1970s, an era my mother was more familiar with than the rest of the attendees. Though she looked young, she was by far the oldest parent at the party. We didn't realise it at the time, but her age would come to define our relationship — largely for the better.

Single motherhood and having a child later in life are both increasingly common. Last month it was reported that the number of single women undergoing IVF or artificial insemination treatments in the UK had risen from 1,400 in 2012 to 4,800 in 2022. Marry that with the average age of a first-time mother climbing from 23 to 30 in the past 50 years, and it's impossible to ignore this growing demographic of older single mothers.

While much of the world has moved on from antiquated views of the "nuclear family", there is still this outdated undercurrent of scepticism towards women who have children after 40, especially if those women happen to be single parents. To those



Zak Asgard with his mother

people, I say this: there is much beauty to be found in having an older parent, just so long as you know where to look. Having an older parent is a privilege. It may mean that we have less time with them, but that time is no less valuable — in fact, it makes our time even more precious.

Until recently, the term "geriatric pregnancy" was used in reference to a pregnancy in someone 35 or older. Let us make one thing clear: my mother was not a geriatric when she had me. Yes, she was an older mother, but 42 is hardly "geriatric". But I suppose my mother's "older" age did bring a certain experience to our lives.

She had travelled, she had worked abroad, she had made friends, lost friends, found new worlds and left old worlds behind, all before I could say my first word. Her life stories were a source of great inspiration for me growing up. This is one of the many blessings that an older parent bestows upon their child. I liked that she had *done things*. I liked her tales about visiting Peru in her thirties, spending time in Sydney in her twenties, falling in love with a Polish bartender called Tomas, working in the World Trade Center, meeting John Denver in a lift and having "a bit of a flirt".

But being older doesn't mean parenting is any easier. She often talks about the day we returned from hospital after I was born. I was three weeks premature, I weighed seven pounds and I looked a little like a Pom-Bear on account of the jaundice. She was a single mum: "I got back to

> **I liked that she had done things. I liked listening to her tales**

our flat and everyone had gone home. I put you in your cot and I sat down ... and I looked at you and you looked up at me as if to say, 'What now?' and I remember how quiet and still the flat was. In truth, I was scared. But I was determined to be the best mother I could be, and a part of me knew that we were going to be OK, and we were ... for the most part!"

I think the best thing about having an older parent is the gratitude it instils in us. It is a latent gratitude, a gratitude born of seeing a parent do the things that don't come easily with age. I remember how my mother would take me to countless martial arts classes and stand for hours in various freezing sports halls when her sciatic nerve had long since given out. I remember expecting her to do the things that the younger parents did. And I remember her doing them, even though it was that much harder for her. I remember her applying for countless jobs, only to be beaten by younger, inexperienced candidates — employers like to deny that ageism still exists: "Sorry, Ms Asgard, you're just not the right fit, but thank you for letting us pick your brains and steal your ideas. We've decided to move forward with another candidate."

The only drawback to having an older parent is that we understand their mortality at an earlier age. All children will come to this conclusion at some point in their lives, but some of us get there earlier: children who lose a parent, children who live with a chronically ill parent, and children whose parents are at an age where mortality is a topic of conversation. This realisation that our parents' lives are evanescent may come in the form of physical decline, cognitive decline or, in many cases, cancer. My mother called me when I was at university to tell me that she had breast cancer. She had waited a week after my birthday so as "not to upset" me. She had already overcome non-melanoma skin cancer twice. I rushed back home and took care of her after her surgery along with a family friend. Thankfully, the surgery was a success, but it was an early reminder that most of us — not all of us — will eventually live to see our parents fall seriously ill, a reminder that our lives are fleeting and that our parents, if they are lucky enough to grow old, will need looking after just as they looked after us when we were new to this world and knew nothing but them.

Having an older parent is a gift. It teaches us from an early age to value the time that we have with them. But it is important to remember that they too are experiencing life for the first time. In my mother's eyes, she was young when she had me. As she likes to say, "I woke up one day and I was old ... I don't know what happened."

I took the train home for Christmas last week. If I'm being honest, I don't go home enough. But I've never missed a Christmas. When my mother was sick with breast cancer, I took on the responsibility of Christmas lunch. The tradition has stuck, and now I find myself collecting the bird from the local butcher and spending Christmas morning preparing our miniature feast (we rarely have more than three people around our Christmas table). This is the first baton my mother has passed on to me; I'm certain it won't be the last.

I remind myself to be kind to my mum when she has what she calls a "senior moment", when she talks about her fear of Alzheimer's, when she means to send me a photo of the garden but instead sends a blurry selfie, when she looks in the mirror and says, sadly, "What happened to my beauty?" When she accidentally posts a private message on her public Facebook page or when she talks about how life is passing her by. These are things that most of our parents will go through. All of our parents will grow old, I hope, but some of them will get there earlier — and that's not necessarily a bad thing so long as you learn to cherish your time.

JON BOAST/BBC



Dave Myers, left, and his Hairy Bikers partner, Si King, with whom he made 30 series

A lovely, life-affirming tribute to Dave Myers

Carol Midgley
TV review



The Hairy Bikers: You'll Never Ride Alone
BBC2
★★★★☆

All Creatures Great and Small
Channel 5
★★★★☆

Wouldn't it be nice if all those young men who follow Andrew Tate had watched *The Hairy Bikers* instead? Dave Myers and Si King were the antithesis of toxic masculinity, two well-upholstered chaps who at first glance might have looked a bit intimidating with their beards and big motorbikes but were in fact gentle-voiced, northern everymen whose priorities were love, friendship and having a laugh — but never cruelly. They had no problem saying they loved each other. How refreshing.

The Hairy Bikers: You'll Never Ride Alone was a touching, tender reminder of how much Dave Myers, who died from cancer earlier this year, meant to the *HB* viewers. It made me cry more than once. Fans lined the roads in their thousands to applaud a 45,000-bike memorial ride from London to Myers's home town Barrow-in-Furness. A weeping middle-aged man who stepped forward to hug Liliana, Myers's widow, sobbed: "He was such a lovely man." It kind of summed things up.

It was Myers's best friend King who fronted this tender look back at their 30 series together, the pair of them never being smug or entitled but approaching it with the modest "I can't believe we're so lucky" attitude of an ordinary citizen, not macho, sweary trained chefs or restaurant owners. In this respect they were the anti-Gordon, Gino and Fred. "We never lost our sense of wonder, and actually, privilege," King said.

Myers, a former make-up artist, was a naturally funny man with, Liliana said, a gift for words. She was right. One item he was chopping was "as fine as a hummingbird's toenail clippings". Even chemotherapy did not affect his joie de vivre. "Who knows what the future holds, but for the moment I'm living in the present and it's pretty fine, I tell you," Myers said.

It was just a lovely, life-affirming programme, the genuine outpouring of love and respect for Myers showing the best of humanity and perhaps teaching us something more profound about the meaning of life.

Reboots can often be a "why bother?" damp squib. But *All Creatures Great and Small* has to be one of the best remakes ever and this its finest Christmas episode yet. It was about time that ever-stoic Mrs Hall (Anna Madeley) got the spotlight for an episode, instead of just running the household and smoothing her pinny while saying, "There's tea in t'pot."

And this was a real edge-of-your-seat tear-jerker, Mrs Hall not knowing whether her son Edward was dead or alive after the sinking of the Repulse by the Japanese in 1941 (842 men died). This melding of real history with drama is something this series has always done well, but the nuanced way Madeley showed Mrs Hall's hellish torment, checking the newspaper for Edward's name in the list of the dead (just imagine that) but with utter forbearance was very moving.

That she channelled her stress into the saving of a wild fox enabled us to see, once again, how very fond Siegfried (Samuel West) is of her. Those scenes of them standing over the sick fox were quietly poetic. Can't they get married? The relief as she wept with gratitude on the stairs in her housecoat when it emerged Edward had survived was pretty much the ideal Christmas lifter.

MindGames

Tetonor Easy No 529

104	64	16	272
48	40	186	22
37	204	13	72
135	30	42	396

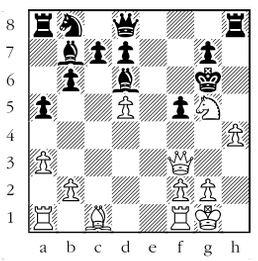
2	3	3	4	6		8	8			18		31	34	45	

When complete, the strip below the grid can be split into eight pairs of numbers. Adding the numbers in a pair gives one of the 16 numbers in the grid. Multiplying them gives a different number in the grid. For example, a 4 and 6 in the strip could be paired to make 10 (4+6) and 24 (4x6) in the grid. Enter each sum below the corresponding number in the grid. The blanks in the strip must be deduced, bearing in mind the numbers are listed in ascending order.

The next Tetonor puzzle will appear on Thursday

For Samurai, Mini Sudoku and Extra puzzles go to thetimes.com/puzzles and click on "PRINTABLE PUZZLES"

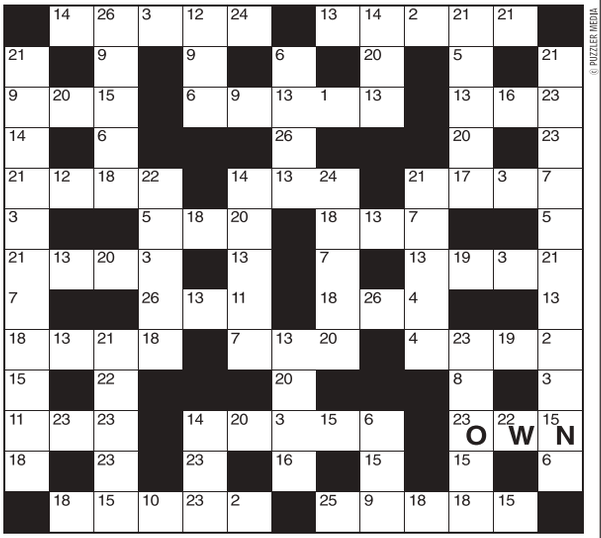
Winning Move



White to play.
This position is from Dinu-Abrashkin, Titled Tuesday, chess.com 2024.

This game featured the classic "Greek gift" sacrifice in which White plays Bxh7+, giving up a piece, to drag the black king out into the open. Perhaps now concerned by the threat to the h-pawn, White played the rather timid 1 Qh3, after which Black went on to win. What more energetic course was indicated?

Codeword No 5406



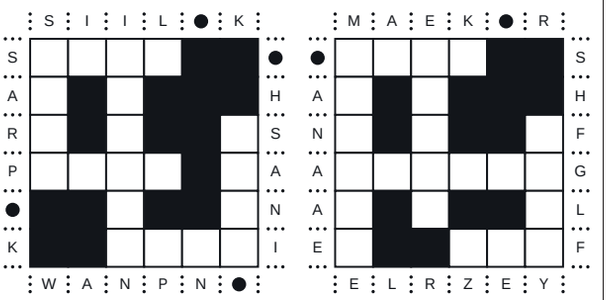
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
14	15 N	16	17	18	19	20	21	22 W	23 O	24	25	26	

Every letter in this crossword-style grid is represented by a number from 1 to 26. Each letter of the alphabet appears in the grid at least once. Use the letters already provided to work out the identity of further letters. Enter letters in the main grid and the smaller reference grid until all 26 letters of the alphabet have been accounted for. Proper nouns are excluded. *Yesterday's solution, right*

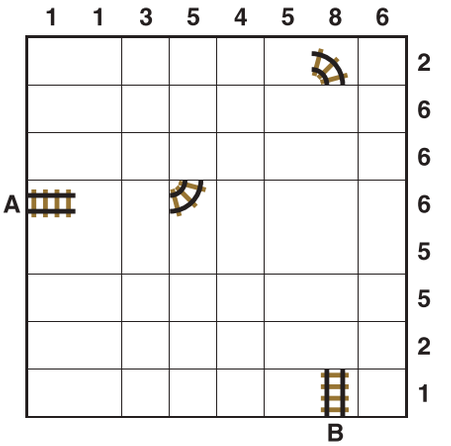
Cluelines **Stuck on Codeword?** To receive 4 random clues call 0901 293 6262 or text TIMECODE to 64343. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge. Texts cost £1 plus your standard network charge. For the full solution call 0905 757 0142. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm).

Lexica Easy No 7857 Hard No 7858



Slide the letters either horizontally or vertically back into the grid to produce a completed crossword. Letters are allowed to slide over other letters

Train Tracks No 2433



Lay tracks to enable the train to travel from village A to village B. The numbers indicate how many sections of track go in each row and column. There are only straight sections and curved sections. The track cannot cross itself.

Quintagram®

Solve all five **cryptic** clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Warmer in Skegness unusually (3)

2 Low point for our satellite? (4)

3 Chief of staff meeting doctors for literally everything! (6)

4 Backward velocity and progress in distant region (4,5)

5 Secret affair an elusive universal presence (4,6)

A	A	A	C	C	D	D	E
E	E	E	K	M	M	M	N
N	O	O	O	O	P	P	R
R	S	S	S	S	T	T	U

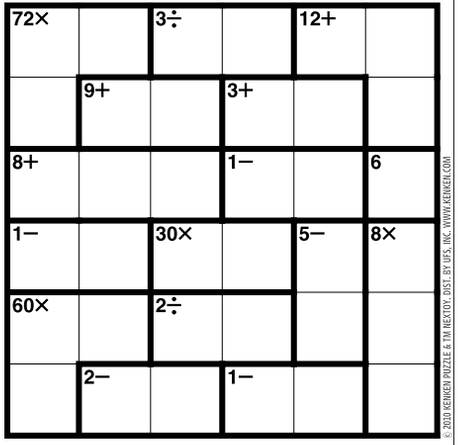
Challenge your mind with these fiendish word and number puzzles



timesbookshop.co.uk

What are your favourite puzzles in MindGames?
Email: puzzles@thetimes.co.uk

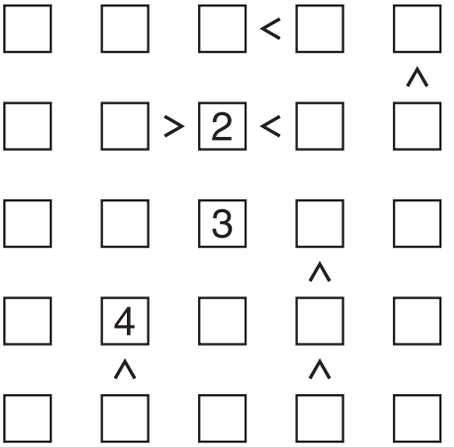
KenKen Medium No 6398



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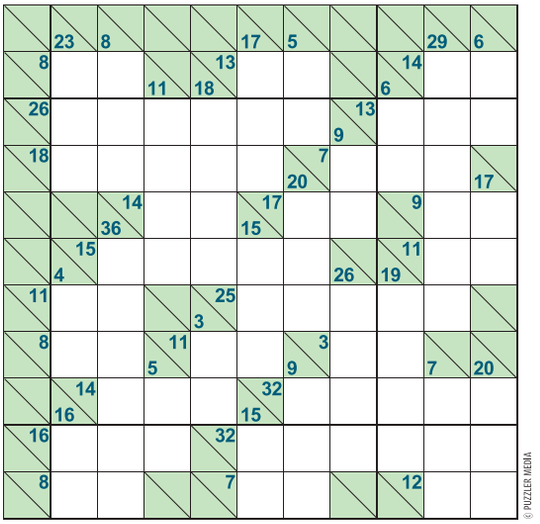
All the digits 1 to 6 must appear in every row and column. In each thick-line "block", the target number in the top left-hand corner is calculated from the digits in all the cells in the block, using the operation indicated by the symbol.

Futoshiki No 4946



Fill the blank squares so that every row and column contains each of the numbers 1 to 5 once only. The symbols between the squares indicate whether a number is larger (>) or smaller (<) than the number next to it.

Kakuro No 3905

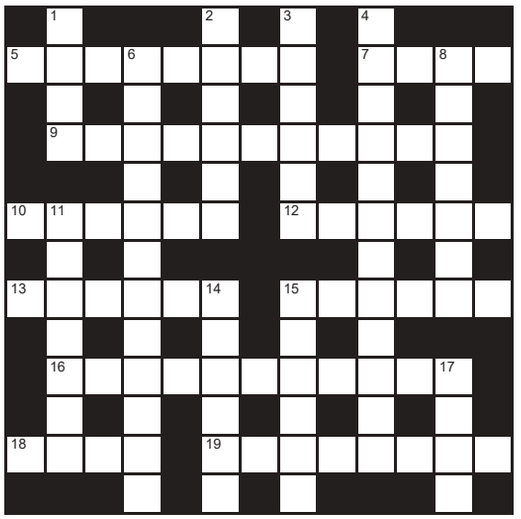


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Fill the grid using the numbers 1 to 9 only. The numbers in each horizontal or vertical run of white squares add up to the total in the triangle to its left or above it. The same number may occur more than once in a row or column, but not within the same run of white squares.

MindGames

times2 Crossword No 9722



Across

5 Boundless (8)
7 Snug (4)
9 Riot control apparatus (5,6)
10 Geographically isolated (6)
12 Winter sport (6)
13 Prove (a commonly held belief) to be unfounded (6)
15 19th-century German composer (6)
16 Vivid shade of blue (11)
18 In close proximity to (4)
19 Excessively tidy, fussily arranged (8)

Down

1 Wintry precipitation (4)
2 Puncture (6)
3 Awards for military achievements (6)
4 From Denmark or Sweden, eg (12)
6 For beginners (12)
8 Word of similar meaning to another (7)
11 Carry out, accomplish (7)
14 Blaring horn (6)
15 Smiled from ear to ear (6)
17 Twin brother of Jacob in the Bible (4)

Solution to Crossword 9721

	H	Z	C			D	D			
L	I	F	E	B	O	A	T		O	M	I	T
	G	A	N		E	T	S					
C	H	A	L	E	T		L	I	C	I	T	
		O	R		E	O		I				
	E	S	T	R	A	N	G	E	M	E	N	T
	Y			D	R				C			
S	E	M	I	F	I	N	A	L	I	S	T	
	D	N	C		P	N						
	R	I	V	E	T		H	O	B	B	I	T
	O		I	E		E	O		C			
S	P	A	T		D	I	S	C	R	E	E	T
	S	E				E	N		D			

Need help with today's puzzle? Call 0905 757 0143 to check the answers. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

Bridge Andrew Robson

The stakes were high on today's deal from a friendly rubber. Quite friendly, anyway.

Do you think South can make 3NT redoubled after East opens 3♥ and West leads ace-king-jack of spades to dummy's queen, East discarding (a heart) on the third?

At the table, declarer ran the queen of clubs at trick four, with an air of resignation. Unsurprisingly, West won the king and cashed two more spades — one down. Redoubled to boot.

Dummy piped up, "I say, old chap, maybe you should have crossed to the ace of clubs as you can't afford to lose the lead to West." Dummy turned to West, "Was it (the king of clubs) singleton?"

Hearing it wasn't, dummy lost interest. "Ah well, nothing you can do about it, old boy. Your deal."

However, South was cogitating. "You know, I think I can make it," he began.

I'll take over ...

After winning the queen of spades, you lead the queen of hearts, covered by the king and ace. You then cross to the jack of diamonds and lead a heart to the nine (you know East began with seven hearts for his pre-empt). You now cash the jack of hearts and the ace of diamonds then lead your remaining queen of diamonds to dummy's king.

You have already garnered seven tricks. West has had to make two discards on the hearts and has presumably discarded a club and a diamond. At trick ten, the coup de grâce, you exit with the fourth spade to West.

West can cash his two winning spades but, at trick 12, must lead from ♣Kx, giving you a second club trick and your redoubled game.

West's best chance is to keep his 13th diamond and bare his king of clubs. Now you have to guess the ending.

andrew.robson@thetimes.co.uk

Dealer: East, Vulnerability: Neither

Rubber

	♠Q943 ♥Q4 ♦KJ3 ♣QJ65	
♠AKJ102 ♥6 ♦10852 ♣K42	N W E S	♠76 ♥K1087532 ♦976 ♣8
	♠85 ♥AJ9 ♦AQ4 ♣A10973	

S	W	N	E
			3♥(1)
3NT(2)	Dbl(3)	Redbl(4)	End

(1) Weak (errr, yes) with seven decent hearts.
(2) A gamble, yes. However, NOT to bid 3NT is also a gamble (on the low side). A rule of thumb here is to bid 3NT on most 16-counts with hearts stopped. South is a point short but the second heart stop and robust five-card club suit more than make up the difference.
(3) Expecting either to run spades off the top or to concede to the queen with a very likely side entry (the king of clubs).
(4) Eleven high-card points is many more than partner can expect here. And North doesn't want partner to take fright and run — after all, North is stopped in every suit.

Contract: 3NT redoubled, Opening Lead: ♠A

Brain Trainer

EASY	32	x 3	− 8	÷ 2	+ 7	x 2	− 18	÷ 4	+ 5	50% OF IT	ANSWER
MEDIUM	104	+ 79	x 3	+ 76	60% OF IT	x 2	− 57	2/3 OF IT	− 84	x 2	ANSWER
HARDER	126	x 8	+ 656	7/16 OF IT	x 3	− 876	50% OF IT	+ 778	+1/2 OF IT	+ 985	ANSWER

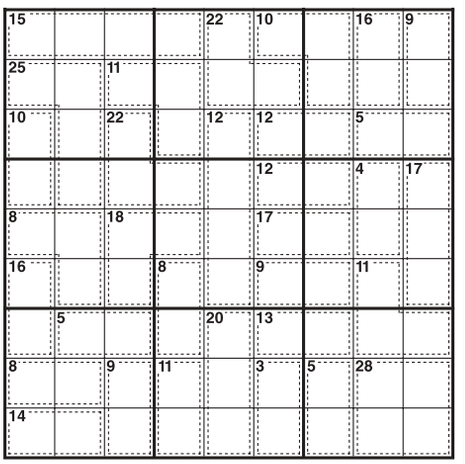
Polygon



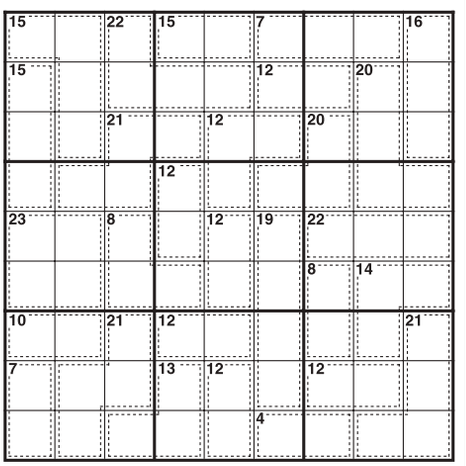
From these letters, make words of **three** or more letters, always including the central letter. Answers must be in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, excluding capitalised words, plurals, conjugated verbs (past tense etc), adverbs ending in LY, comparatives and superlatives.
How you rate 18 words, average; 24, good; 26, very good; 29, excellent

Yesterday's answers
ant, ante, earn, enter, **entreat**, erne, natter, near, neat, née, net, neta, nett, ranee, rant, rent, tan, tante, tarn, teen, ten, tenet, tent, tenter, tern, **ternate**, terne, treen

Killer Moderate No 9850



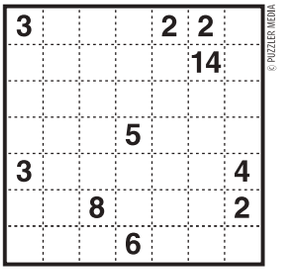
Killer Tough No 9851



As with standard Sudoku, fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9. Each set of cells joined by dotted lines must add up to the target number in its top-left corner. Within each set of cells joined by dotted lines, a digit cannot be repeated.

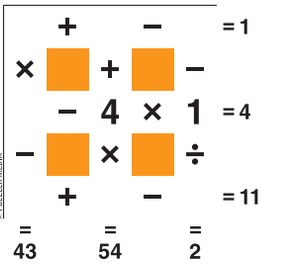
Cluelines **Stuck on Sudoku, Killer or KenKen?** Call 0901 293 6263 before midnight to receive four clues for any of today's puzzles. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

Cell Blocks No 5289



Divide the grid into square or rectangular blocks, each containing one digit only. Every block must contain the number of cells indicated by the digit inside it.

Set Square No 3908



Enter each of the numbers from 1 to 9 in the grid, so that the six sums work. We've placed two numbers to get you started. Each sum should be calculated left to right or top to bottom.

Please note, BODMAS does not apply

Solutions

Quick Cryptic 2866

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

Codeword 5405

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

Kakuro 3904

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

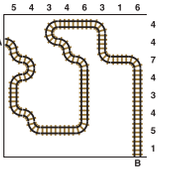
Sudoku 15,483

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

GK Crossword 265

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

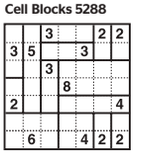
Train Tracks 2432



Sudoku 15,484

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

Cell Blocks 5288



Set Square 3907



Lexica 7855

S	C	R	O	L	L	
O				I		
O		M	A	N		
T		E		E		
Y	E	S		R		
		H				

Sudoku 15,485

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

Futoshiki 4945

3	5	2	4	> 1
1	< 3	4	^ 5	2
4	> 2	1	3	5
^ 5	1	3	2	4
2	4	5	1	3

KenKen 6397

3	4	6	5	1	2
5	3	4	6	2	1
4	2	5	1	6	3
2	6	1	4	3	5
6	1	2	3	5	4
1	5	3	2	4	6

Lexica 7856

S	W	A	M			H
H						U
O			D	I	C	E
W			E		O	
N	O	B	O	D	Y	
			T			

Killer 9848

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

Killer 9849

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

Today's solutions

Concise Quintagram
1 Come
2 Pranks
3 Blithe
4 Donning
5 Dashboard

Cryptic Quintagram
1 Sun
2 Moon
3 Cosmos
4 Deep space
5 Dark matter

Suko 4307



Brain Trainer
Easy 13
Medium 756
Harder 3,133

Word watch

Acral (a) Affecting the extremities (*OED*)
Baldric (a) A sword belt worn over the shoulder (*Collins*)
Penology (c) The management of prisons (*Chambers*)

Chess — Winning Move

1 g4! is the correct way forward. White threatens both 2 h5+ and 2 Qxf5+ and there is no good defence, eg 1 ... fxg4 2 Qf7+ Kh6 3 Ne6+ and mate follows

Quiz

1 Boxing Day **2** Coca-Cola or Coke **3** Pakistan **4** 17th century **5** Ukulele, he also played the banjolele **6** Julian Barnes **7** Kit **8** *Are You Being Served?* **9** Cthulhu **10** Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester **11** Berghaus **12** Flaki or flaczki **13** Billy Hill **14** Junior Johnson; Bridges plays a character called Junior Jackson **15** Harold Wilson

THE TIMES

24.12.24

MindGames

Word watch
David Parfitt

Acral
a Affecting the extremities
b Pertaining to a unit of area
c Arranged horizontally

Baldric
a A sword belt worn over the shoulder
b A large variety of turnip
c A form of narrative poetry sung to a tune

Penology
a The study of flags
b A series of five books or films
c The management of prisons

Answers on page 11

Sudoku

Mild No 15,486

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

Difficult No 15,487

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

Super fiendish No 15,488

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

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Fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9.

The Times Daily Quiz
Olav Bjortomt

1 Which bank holiday is five days before New Year's Eve?

2 A popular drink in Argentina, *fernet con coca* combines Fernet-Branca with which soft drink?

3 Which Asian country uses the internet domain name .pk?

4 Charles I and his sons, Charles II and James II, ruled Britain in which century?

5 Lancashire comedian George Formby was known for performing with his "little ..." what?

6 Which English writer won the Booker prize for his 2011 novel *The Sense of an Ending*?

ALAMY



7 Which three-letter word for sportswear is also the name for a baby ferret?

8 Which sitcom's theme tune features the lyrics: "Ground floor: perfumery, stationery and leather goods"?

9 The sunken city of R'lyeh is the Pacific prison of which entity, created by HP Lovecraft?

10 Princess Margaret's last public appearance was at the 100th birthday celebrations of which aunt in December 2001?

11 Which outdoor clothing brand was founded in 1966 by the avid climbers Peter Lockey and Gordon Davison?

12 The name of which Polish tripe soup means "guts"?

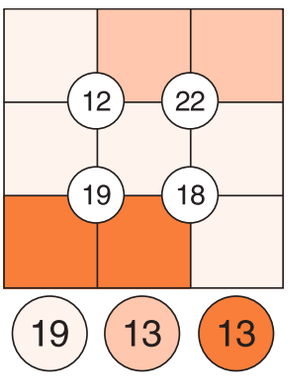
13 *Boss of Britain's Underworld* (1955) is a ghostwritten memoir by which London gangster?

14 Starring Jeff Bridges, the 1973 film *The Last American Hero* is based on which Nascar driver's life?

15 Which prime minister is pictured?

Answers on page 11

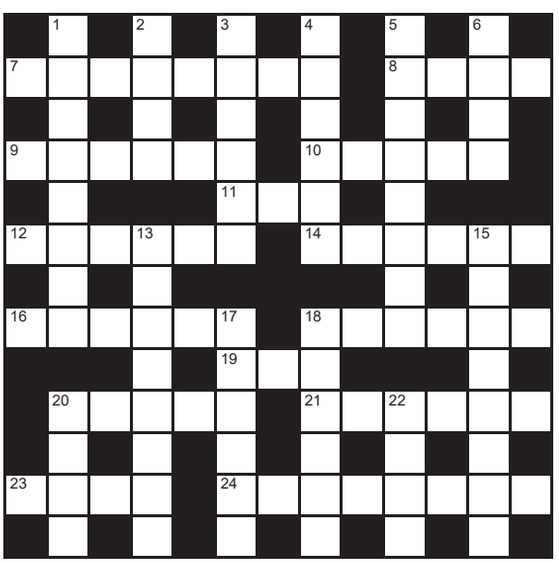
Suko
No 4307



Place the numbers 1 to 9 in the spaces so that the number in each circle is equal to the sum of the four surrounding spaces, and each colour total is correct

For interactive puzzles visit thetimes.com

The Times Quick Cryptic
No 2867 by Hurley



Across

7 One accommodates crude oil there (8)
8 Extract as much as possible from, at heart, timid sort (4)
9 Kind agent leaves missing letters (6)
10 Fruit article — I'm surprised inwardly (5)
11 Recall the German revolutionary (3)
12 Aide during break delivering meal (6)
14 Unusual ways of behaving from those opposed, hundred inside (6)
16 Event Ireland includes without exception (6)
18 Something to wear — no rags involved (6)
19 Position of golfer's ball that's deceptive (3)
20 Courageously confront bachelor party, wild (5)
21 Nick for every policeman (6)
23 Objective globally missed on regular basis (4)
24 Weather table these are feature of periodically? (8)

Down

1 One's free after review — as known beforehand (8)
2 Hard blow gets boxing prize? (4)
3 Amuse fan of water maybe over time (6)
4 Ships in a drama, unconventional (6)
5 I'm person taking items around for business buying from abroad (8)
6 Leading couples in plot, another scheme (4)
13 Good-natured friend from Paris on way to get TV (8)
15 Musical work firm accommodates once, right at the edges (8)
17 Football team, English, left day before November (6)
18 Hidden from general view, group, about to be admitted (6)
20 High point — start of blazing argument? (4)
22 Former Prime Minister's zest (4)

Yesterday's solution on page 11

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