DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

THE TIMES

Wednesday January 1 2025 | thetimes.com | No 74606

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How to lose weight and tone up (without Ozempic)

New year's Jumbo crossword



Warning over Labour's £5bn-a-year plan to recruit teachers

Nicola Woolcock Education Editor
Chris Smyth

A Labour pledge to recruit 6,500 extra teachers could cost £5 billion a year, research has found. Ministers have been warned they may fail to meet their target by the end of this parliament.

The government would have to raise teachers' salaries by 10 per cent a year for the next two years to meet its recruitment target, according to a report commissioned by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

However, that would cost £5 billion a year, the foundation said — far more than the government believes it will raise from adding VAT to private school fees. The tax is predicted to bring in £1.5 billion in 2025-26 and £1.8 billion by 2029-30. The foundation added that the government faced a "considerable challenge" in meeting the target, a view echoed by MPs and policy experts.

From today independent schools have to charge 20 per cent VAT on fees. Some are swallowing part or all of the cost, but many are passing it on in full to parents. Labour's general election manifesto pledge said the levy would help to pay for an extra 6,500 teachers in areas with shortages.

The teacher workforce was only 300 bigger in 2023 than 2022, at 468,693. The number of new trainee teachers in 2024 was 1,400 greater than the previous year but was only 62 per cent of the number required in secondary schools and 88 per cent in primary schools.

The NFER casts doubt on whether Labour will be able to fulfil the manifesto pledge by the end of its parliamentary term in 2029. Its report says: "The government faces a considerable challenge of meeting its teacher supply target and many choices about how to deliver. Our analysis suggests the target is highly unlikely to be met if there is no

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Poll gives Starmer a new year headache

PM talks of rebuilding as voters call government 'dishonest' and put it behind Tories on economy

Chris Smyth Whitehall Editor

Sir Keir Starmer has acknowledged that many in Britain find it "hard to think about the future" as a poll shows Labour falling behind the Tories on the economy.

In a New Year's Day message the prime minister admits that 2025 will have to be a "year of rebuilding" to restore prosperity, repair public services and reverse his own sliding poll ratings.

However, Britain enters 2025 with voters broadly pessimistic about the year in prospect and reporting disappointment in their new government.

Starmer uses the message to acknowledge the downbeat mood across the country while saying he wants Britain to spend 2025 "rediscovering the great nation that we are".

While insisting he has begun the work of change, Starmer accepts that "there is still so much more to do", adding: "For many people it's hard to think about the future when you spend all of your time fighting to get through the week."

Most voters see Labour as "incompetent", "dishonest" and "unsuccessful", and think Starmer will fail on all six of the "milestones" he has set for his government, according to YouGov polling for The Times.

Growth stagnated at the end of 2024 but Starmer pledges "more cash in your pocket", saying: "Until you can look forward and believe in the promise and the prosperity of Britain again, then this government will fight for you."

Only 31 per cent of voters declare themselves optimistic about the year ahead, with 37 per cent pessimistic. Just 40 per cent of those who backed Labour last year are looking ahead with confidence.

Starmer promises that his battle to change Britain "will define this year", but voters are losing patience. Labour's lead on the economy, seen as a central component of election success, has evaporated. Just 21 per cent say they trust Labour most on the economy, with 24 per cent saying they prefer the Conservatives, YouGov has found. Soon after the election, Labour led 29 to 20 per cent, but the Tories have now opened up their first lead since before the Liz Truss era.

Labour voters appear to feel particularly let down, with 46 per cent saying: "I expected them to do well but have been disappointed." Only 34 per cent of those who backed the party in the summer say it has done well. Starmer's personal ratings are similar: 42 per cent of Labour voters profess disappointment.

Overall 29 per cent of voters say they expected better from Labour and have

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ADRIAN DENNIS/AFP



Highlights show **The capital sees in the new year as fireworks explode over central London World votes to party, pages 4-5**

Time to quit smoking? Your watch will help

Poppy Koronka Health Correspondent

With new year's resolutions upon us, smokers hoping to quit could soon find technology giving them a helping hand.

Scientists at Bristol University have designed an app for smartwatches that senses when a person moves to take a drag from a cigarette.

When motion sensors on an Android smartwatch identify hand movements associated with smoking, the app delivers a vibration alert as well as a text message offering help with quitting.

After seeing the message, people can either swipe it away or press a button to display information about NHS smoking cessation services and support.

Chris Stone, of Bristol University's Tobacco and Alcohol Research Group, said: "For those who are trying to give up, an initial lapse is a vulnerable moment. If we can identify this point of lapse, and deliver an intervention precisely at that point, we have an opportunity to improve the success of the quit attempt."

In the study, published in JMIR Formative Research, the smartwatch app was tested on 18 people who were interested in giving up smoking. They wore a TicWatch loaded with the app for two weeks.

The app made them feel positive about quitting and made them stop and think, they said. They reported smoking slightly less, and 66 per cent found it acceptable to wear the smartwatch from morning till night.

Alizée Froguel, from Cancer Research UK, said: "This study shows that smartwatches could be a useful method to help people quit smoking, but more research is needed to understand how effective they are."

News

Today's highlights

8.35am **Lord Robert Hayward**, the pollster
9.35am The spokesperson for US political group Republicans Overseas, **Sarah Elliott**
10am Pienaar's Predictions: **John Pienaar** asks what will 2025 have in store?
3pm Interior designer **Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen**
4.30pm *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* a year on with former sub-postmaster **Lee Castleton** OBE, right



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TODAY'S EDITION

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'Celebrities are increasingly stepping into the vacuum left by failing professional politicians'

JAMES KANAGASOORIAM, PAGE 17

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THE WEATHER



Windy with rain in the south, colder with wintry showers across northern areas. **Full forecast, page 41**

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Energy bills rise today and are likely to jump again in April

Emma Powell

Energy bills will rise today and are set for another big jump in April, adding to pressure on family finances.

The average household will pay £21 a year more under an increase to the price cap that comes into effect today, and experts expect a £47 rise in the months ahead.

Ofgem, the energy regulator, is increasing the price cap by 1.2 per cent for January to March, meaning an annual bill of £1,738 for a typical household using gas and electricity. The increase will add to cost of living pressures.

Rising wholesale prices mean another increase is likely in April, with analysis raising forecasts and predicting a hike twice as big as today's.

Cornwall Insight revised up its previous forecast of a further 1 per cent increase to the price cap in April and now suggests a 3 per cent rise, equivalent to an extra £47 for the average family.

Craig Lowrey, principal consultant at Cornwall Insight, said: "Turbulence in wholesale markets reminds us to remain cautious of predictions, which could very well increase or decrease several times before the April cap is set."

He added: "With a Trump presidency on the horizon and an uncertain geopolitical situation in Ukraine and the Middle East, wholesale market volatility looks set to remain."

The energy price cap does not limit total bills, because householders still pay for the amount of energy they consume. The cap, introduced by the Conservative government in 2019, limits the price that suppliers can charge for each unit of gas and electricity on standard tariffs. It was designed to protect consumers and is updated regularly, based on the regulator's assessment of costs an efficient supplier should incur.

The latest price cap is 10 per cent, or £190, lower than a year ago, and 57 per cent less than during the energy crisis, fuelled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The rise comes as temperatures are set to fall in the coming days. Campaigners have warned that older people will struggle to heat homes as 10 million pensioners lose winter fuel payments.

Emily Seymour, editor of Which? Energy, said: "As we head into the coldest months ... many households will be concerned that the energy price cap is going up this week."

The comparison site USwitch calculated that the average household on a standard variable tariff is expected to spend £165 on energy in January, compared with £135 in December, owing to a combination of higher rates and increased usage at the start of the year.

Elise Melville, USwitch's energy spokeswoman, said: "Customers who don't have a smart meter should submit a reading on January 1, so their supplier has an updated view of their account.

"Leave it later and some of your December energy usage could end up being estimated and therefore charged under the higher January rates."

Water bills will also rise sharply in April as companies get the green light for a five-year series of increases. This year will see an average rise of £86 as the regulator Ofwat allows companies to front-load a raise of £157 over the next five years, before inflation.

Council tax will also go up from April 1, often by the maximum 5 per cent.

Women working from home 'risk losing out on promotion'

Jon Rees

Women could harm their careers by regularly working from home, the boss of Nationwide Building Society has claimed.

Debbie Crosbie said more women had taken advantage of flexible working than men as they were more likely to have to juggle work and childcare, but she warned that they risked losing out on career progression as a result.

Nationwide, which has 18,000 employees, of whom 60 per cent are women, introduced a "work from anywhere" policy for backroom staff during the pandemic. It changed its policy a year ago and requires staff to come into the office at least two days a week.

Crosbie, 54, told *Today* on BBC Radio 4: "One of the only good things that came out of the pandemic was the fact that people got much more comfortable with working flexibly, working from home. And I do think that's very useful. What we find, certainly at Nationwide, is that men are more likely to come into the office than women, and we need to be careful that we don't prevent women from accessing 'development-watching'.

"I benefited enormously from watching excellent leaders and how they navigated challenging problems."

She recalled working earlier in her career for Lynne Peacock, then chief executive of Clydesdale Bank, whom she described as a "very inspiring female chief executive".

Crosbie, who took over as chief executive at Nationwide in June 2022 after running TSB Bank, said she considered herself fortunate to have had her daughter at the age of 32. "It allowed me the opportunity to make different decisions. I got a lot of support from business leaders who let me work part-time for a few years," she said.

Women are now having children later, she added, often in their late thirties — an age when people are typically in line for promotion to senior executive positions.

Five years after the start of the pandemic, 28 per cent of the country's workforce is conducting hybrid working — where staff come into the workplace for part of the week and work from home the rest of the time — while 13 per cent of people are working from home full-time, according to data from the Office for National Statistics.

Working parents are more likely to dial in from home for part of the week than those without children, and more fathers than mothers follow a hybrid working pattern. About 44 per cent of people still commute to work every day.

No discussion on Lockerbie killer's release

Craig Paton, Ed Halford

The release of the man convicted of the Lockerbie bombing was not discussed by the Scottish cabinet ahead of a final decision being made, newly released papers show.

The National Records of Scotland has released the cabinet documents from 2009, which includes the time when the decision was taken to release Abdelbaset al-Megrahi on compassionate grounds.

The former Libyan intelligence officer was convicted for the atrocity that killed 270 people when PanAm flight 103 exploded over Dumfries and Galloway on December 21, 1988. All 259 passengers and crew travelling to the United States and 11 people on the ground were killed in what remains Britain's deadliest terrorist attack. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer while serving his sentence in Scotland.

According to the documents, no discussion was held by the cabinet, which included Nicola Sturgeon, who was then deputy first minister, and Alex Salmond, who was first minister. Megrahi was freed on August 20, 2009 and flown to Tripoli to a hero's welcome which enraged people in the UK and the US.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Starmer's new year headache

been disappointed; 40 per cent had always expected Labour to do poorly.

Only 12 per cent of voters say Labour has been "successful" so far, and 56 per cent regard the government as unsuccessful. Just over half describe the government as "incompetent" and "dishonest", whereas barely a quarter say the opposite.

The NHS is the only big topic on which Labour retains a significant lead: 29 per cent say they trust the party most. Reform UK is second on 13 per cent. Nigel Farage's party is the most trusted on immigration, chosen by 30 per cent, with Labour on 17 per cent, ahead of the Tories on 11 per cent.

Starmer uses the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War this year to try to rekindle a shared sense of purpose. Britain is "a nation that gets things done", no matter how hard or tough the circumstances, he says, likening his task to postwar reconstruction. "The peace and the prosperity that followed [victory] all rested on that same foundation we must rebuild today. The security of working people. That is the purpose of this government."

Analysis of recent council seat losses suggests that Starmer leads "the most unpopular incoming government of all time". A review of electoral tests since July by Lord Hayward, a Tory peer and pollster, found signs that Labour's unpopularity had intensified.

The number of new MPs who had previously been local councillors has led to an unprecedented 176 council by-elections. Labour has made a net loss of 27 seats while the Tories are up 24, according to the analysis, to be broadcast on Times Radio this morning.

Hayward said the results "confirm what people are seeing in the opinion polls — this is the most unpopular incoming government of all time".

The Conservatives have accused Labour of offering "change for the worse". However, Kemi Badenoch uses her own new year message to warn that efforts to turn around Tory fortunes will be "bumpy". Farage claims that Britain has been "appallingly led" by both main parties for decades.

Elon Musk sees the flaws in Starmer's approach, leading article, page 21



GARETH CATTERMOLE/GETTY IMAGES



That's a wrap! Eight years on, Pitt and Jolie finally divorce

Will Pavia New York

On a Friday more than eight years ago, Angelina Jolie announced her intention to separate from Brad Pitt after a marriage that had lasted two years and one month.

Thus began one of the great Hollywood divorces. Now, after a process that has lasted nearly four times as long as the marriage, the pair have reached a divorce settlement. James Simon, Jolie's lawyer, said in a statement: "Frankly, Angelina is exhausted."

Lawyers had been hired and replaced. The private judge they appointed had to step aside over an alleged conflict of interest.

Four of the children they were arguing over had become adults, no longer beholden to a custody agreement. The vineyard in the south of France they had once owned remained the subject of a bitter dispute, known as the "War of the Rosé", even as, by all accounts, it produced some first-class vintages.

The two have consented to an agreement over their marital and property rights, according to a declaration filed this week in a Los Angeles court. Both give up the right to any future financial support, according to the filing, which offers no other details.



Simon added: "This is just one part of a long ongoing process. She is relieved this one part is over."

Pitt's lawyer did not respond to a request for comment. There were claims, however, that he was looking to get married again to Ines de Ramon, 32, his girlfriend of almost two years. A source told Mail Online: "Brad will be relieved he can finally move on."

Though their marriage was brief, Pitt and Jolie had been together for almost a decade before they wed, during which time they gained the title "Brangelina". They met in 2004 on the set of *Mr & Mrs Smith*, in which they played a married couple who were working as contract killers in secret from each other.

"It's a study in marriage and how well you know your partner," Jolie told Vogue at the time. "My opinion of marriage comes from a very cynical place. Do you want to kill your spouse? For me, that's a serious question. Brad Pitt comes from a place of: 'What a funny idea, to kill the person you're married to', because he has a happy marriage."

Pitt was married to Jennifer Aniston but in January 2005 they announced that they were separating.

Jolie was soon portrayed in magazines as the femme fatale who had broken up a beloved Hollywood couple. She told a reporter in 2006: "We just kind of became a pair."

That January she filed to change the surnames of her two adopted children, Maddox and Zahara, from Jolie to Pitt. In May 2006 their child Shiloh was born and the following year they adopted a fourth child. In 2008 Jolie gave birth to twins, Knox and Vivienne.

By then they were renting a 1,000-acre château and vineyard in Provence called Miraval, or "Miracle". Tom Bove, the American owner, said they dropped out of the sky in a helicopter, had lunch with him and toured the estate. He told Vanity Fair that Pitt said: "This is the first place where Angie is smiling."

They bought Miraval for €35 million in 2011 before becoming engaged the next year. In 2014 they were married at the vineyard in front of 22 guests, including Pitt's parents but not Jolie's father, Jon Voight, who seemed to learn of it during an interview.

Two years later, in September 2016, Jolie filed for divorce, alleging that Pitt had physically abused her and their children. The FBI investigated and said later that no charges would be filed.

The couple hired a private judge, John Ouderkirk, who had officiated at their wedding, to oversee the divorce. An amicable settlement was announced in 2018 and the marriage was declared dissolved the following year, but Pitt filed to gain more access to the children and the process began again.

Pitt filed a suit alleging that Jolie had sold her half of the vineyard in breach of an agreement. That case continues.

Angelina Jolie first announced her separation from Brad Pitt in September 2016; four of the couple's children have become adults in the time it has taken for the divorce to come through. Pitt is said to be looking to marry Ines de Ramon, left

Health problems reduce the number of royal engagements in 2024

Kate Mansey Assistant Editor

The number of engagements carried out by the King and the Princess of Wales fell in 2024 as they both received treatment for cancer.

The King undertook 372 engagements, putting him in second place behind his sister, the Princess Royal, who topped the list with 474.

Figures compiled annually by a reader of The Times since 1979 showed that senior royals carried out far fewer engagements in a year marked by sickness. Charles was diagnosed with an undisclosed form of cancer in February, which required him to step back from some official duties.

While the King, 76, continued to attend to his daily red boxes of government papers and other work, the number of public-facing engagements was reduced on the advice of his doctors.

In April, Buckingham Palace announced that he would return to work. He travelled to France for the D-Day 80th anniversary commemorations and made a ten-day visit to Samoa and Australia. At the palace, he hosted the inward state visits of the Emperor of Japan and the Emir of Qatar.

It meant that Charles carried out 329 engagements in the UK and a further 43 overseas. This was down from 422 engagements in the UK and 94 abroad in 2023.

Princess Anne, who will turn 75 this year, is once again at the top of the list, despite her own health concerns.

In June she suffered a blow to the head, which was thought to have been caused by a horse. However, the princess, who is often described as the "hardest-working royal", was back at work within a fortnight.



Anne was the busiest royal despite her health concerns

The third and fourth in the table in terms of the number of official engagements were the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh respectively.

The Queen undertook 182 engagements, 56 of which were on her long-haul visit to Australia and Samoa.

The Prince of Wales made his wife and their young children a priority, which meant that he carried out 137 engagements in the UK and a further 29 overseas, including a visit to South Africa for the Earthshot prize.

Kate, who underwent major abdominal surgery last January followed by chemotherapy, managed 13 engagements in the UK.

Prince William has said that the pair are optimistic that they might make some foreign visits together in 2025.

Tim O'Donovan, 92, has sent his analysis of the Court Circular, which records the official duties of the working members of the royal family, to The Times each year for 45 years.

Busiest royals, letters, page 20

News Celebrating 2025


INDONESIA


YORK

A display fired by 800 drones lights up the sky over Jakarta; Kelly Marie Barr and her daughter Grace, nine, see out the year with a fairground ride in York; jugglers at Dublin Castle entertain the crowds; and fireworks soar across Marina Bay, surrounded by the many skyscrapers of Singapore


DUBLIN


SINGAPORE

After months of elections, the world votes for new year party

David Sanderson

More than 100,000 ticket-holders gathered on the banks of the Thames as the bongs of Big Ben echoed across the capital at midnight and fireworks lit up the night sky to welcome in the new year.

Despite gusty weather, spectators gathered at vantage points across London while millions more tuned in at home to witness the celebrations. This year's festivities marked the 25th anniversary of the opening of the London Eye, which had a key role in the display.

Earlier Robbie Williams led the singalong in Sydney as the world began saying goodbye to one of the hottest and most election-heavy years yet. Nine tonnes of fireworks were sprayed from the landmarks around the harbour of what has become the "new year capital of the world".

Williams opened his set with characteristic cheekiness, no doubt appreciated by the Aussies. He told his audience: "This is my band, this is my arse and you better be good. Because I am phenomenal." His show marked the end of a year almost certain to be the hottest on record, in which a billion people voted in more than 60 countries.

The global extravaganza began in New Zealand, with Auckland celebrating its status as the "first major city" to see in the new year. Crowds climbed the volcanic hill over the city to see the fireworks soar from Sky Tower.

Indonesians were treated to a display of 800 drones over Jakarta while the Japanese quietly swept their temples and homes to prepare for their year of the snake, symbolising change, intelligence and mystery.

In China, meanwhile, there was a reminder that realpolitik cannot be drowned out. State media showed President Xi telling his Russian counterpart, President Putin, their countries would "always move forward hand in hand".

Celebrations in South Korea were scaled back as a national period of mourning began after the Jeju Air crash, in which 179 people died.

India, where a billion people live in a single time zone, celebrated with a warm-up for the Kumbh Mela, when 400 million pilgrims gather at four riverside sites from mid-January into February.

And in a final note relevant to musicians helping to bring people together at the year's end, this year promises rebirths. Oasis will try to recreate their 1990s heyday, while in South Korea the K-pop band BTS will return from at least 18 months of military service.

As the midnight bells sounded further west, muted gatherings were held throughout the Middle East in regions beset by wars. Residents of Damascus, however, spoke of having "overcome our fears" to come out and celebrate after the ousting of Bashar al-Assad, who ruled Syria for 24 years.

In Dubai, thousands craned their necks to watch a fireworks show from the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Across Europe people prepared for the coming year with pre-midnight dips in freezing waters.

The occasion in Italy assumed a relevance celebrated once every 25 years as the Pope declared it a Holy Year, in which the faithful are encouraged to make pilgrimages to Rome. It is estimated 32 million will visit the Vatican to celebrate the Year of Jubilee with its offer of "indulgences".

The last regular Holy Year was held

SUHAIMI ABDULLAH, LOU BENOIST, YASUYOSHI CHIBA/GETTY IMAGES; KATIELEE ARROWSMITH/SWNS; ALAMY; NIALL CARSON/PA; TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JAMES GLOSSOP





EDINBURGH

Two Frenchmen, Hannibal Poenaru and Floran Chaulet, wear kilts to toast Hogmanay in true style in the streets of Edinburgh. Despite the official party being cancelled due to the weather they were determined to make the most of their trip. In their homeland across the Channel, bathers dragged out costumes from the previous century, below, for a dip in the sea at Cabourg in Normandy

FRANCE





Revellers defy the weather to welcome the new year in the centre of Birmingham. Celebrations across England were cancelled after the Met Office warned that "blizzard conditions" were possible

January off to damp start as strong winds and rain wreak havoc

Seren Hughes, Marc Horne
Charlotte Alt

The new year did not start with a bang for some as celebrations were cancelled across the country because of strong winds and heavy rain.

Firework displays were called off in Newcastle and Blackpool, while a New Year's Eve event in the North Yorkshire cathedral city of Ripon was also cancelled. Two firework displays planned for 6pm and midnight on Newcastle's Quayside were cancelled. The city council said that "safety always comes first, and the forecast has made it clear that continuing would pose risks to those attending, as well as our event teams working on-site".

High winds meant that the fireworks in Blackpool were abandoned but the town's other celebrations went ahead, including a midnight projection show.

Edinburgh's Hogmanay street party, one of the largest new year celebrations in Europe with about 50,000 visitors, was the first major event to be shelved because of the bad weather. All the city's outdoor events, including a concert by Glaswegian rock band Texas and a fireworks display on the castle ramparts, were cancelled on Monday for safety reasons, as was the traditional torchlight procession on Sunday. A spokesman said: "We have been unable to continue with preparations and set-up for the outdoor events due to extreme weather. Therefore, for safety reasons, we, along with our event partners, have taken the difficult decision to cancel all outdoor events."

It is the first wave of cancellations since the 2000s. The 2003 event was cancelled just before Erasure were due to perform because strong wind rendered the stage unsafe. It was called off again in 2007 in the face of storm conditions, when the Pet Shop Boys and Paolo Nutini had been due to headline.

The chance to see the northern lights may have offered some consolation last night. The aurora borealis was visible through cloud breaks in parts of central and northern Scotland after a recent coronal mass ejection from the sun.

Other cities were able to enjoy scheduled celebrations. A spokesman for the Mayor of London said the capital's firework display would go ahead despite gusts forecast to reach up to 47mph.

Manchester's fireworks launched from a new location — the top of the Central Library. Councillor Pat Karney said: "Mancunians know that when it's a bit cold and wet you have to wrap up warm, but we're looking forward to seeing everyone."

Forecasters said 50-70mm of rain was possible in many areas of Scotland, and some may see 100-140mm. Blizzard conditions are also possible, especially over high ground. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency had issued 39 flood warnings and nine flood alerts by 6pm yesterday. There were five flood warnings and 85 alerts in England.

The mayor of Newport, Pembrokeshire, cancelled a traditional dip, writing on social media: "As the tide will be out we would have to swim from the beach and the wind and gusts have made it too dangerous."

The weather will remain "tricky", according to the Met Office, as strong winds will cover most of southern England and Wales with gusts up to 75mph over the coast and hills in the south and west. Craig Snell, a meteorologist, said: "It will be a tricky couple of days. Anyone who is planning to travel must keep up to date with the weather forecast and news from their local authorities."

Meanwhile, in Northamptonshire, a truck loaded with 400 kegs of Guinness was stolen from a logistics hub near Daventry in mid-December amid a nationwide shortage of the Irish stout, leaving pubs struggling to meet New Year demand, The Guardian reported. Diageo, the drinks giant that owns Guinness, declined to comment.

Weather, page 41

Strikes by train managers disrupt services across UK

Charlotte Alt

Thousands of rail passengers suffered disruption to services on New Year's Eve because of a strike by train managers, with more walkouts planned in the coming weeks.

Members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union at Avanti West Coast walked out yesterday in a dispute over rest-day working and will strike again tomorrow.

Avanti advised customers to travel on either side of the days of action as a "significantly reduced" timetable would be in place on both days.

One train per hour was running yesterday between London Euston and Birmingham, Manchester and Preston, with a limited service to Glasgow. One train every other hour between Liverpool and Crewe was also operating.

Tomorrow Avanti will run one train an hour between Euston and Wolverhampton (via Birmingham), Crewe and Manchester. There will also be a limited service between Glasgow and Preston.

These trains are operating during limited hours with the first train leaving Euston at about 9am and the last train from Euston departing before 5pm. There are no Avanti services to north Wales, Blackpool and Edinburgh on either day.

RMT members who work as train managers at Avanti will also be striking every Sunday from January 12 until May 25.

Meanwhile, control room staff on the Elizabeth Line will strike for 24 hours from 9pm after rejecting a pay offer. The union is demanding improved holiday entitlements and reductions in working hours.

A Transport for London official said: "If this action goes ahead we expect to operate the Elizabeth Line as planned, but would ask customers to check before they travel."

In separate strike action, Rail for London Infrastructure staff walked out for 24 hours from 6am yesterday, citing issues including pay progression delays, and safety concerns over rosters.

Mick Lynch, the general secretary of the RMT, said: "These disputes highlight the refusal of employers to address legitimate concerns about pay, working hours and safety. Our members are standing firm for fair treatment, and the companies must come to the table with serious offers to resolve these issues."

in 2000 and called by Pope John Paul II. Another is planned in 2033 to commemorate the 2,000th anniversary of the crucifixion of Christ.

Paris was preparing to bid farewell to its Olympic year with the traditional countdown on the Champs-Élysées and a firework display. The organisers could only hope the wild weather that disrupted the opening ceremony in July would not be repeated.

In the desert of Las Vegas, the casino city in Nevada that is several hours behind Europe, officials were preparing to roll the dice for a bit of history.

In the gambling halls, where clocks are hidden so players remain oblivious to passing time, a joint celebration of other time zones was being staged. The world's largest LED screen around the Sphere arena was set to display "culturally themed imagery with countdowns" from cities including Tokyo, Abu Dhabi and London. More than 300,000 people were expected on the streets for a midnight finale with fireworks being sent aloft from the casino rooftops.

New York had already been preparing its riposte to the upstarts from the Mojave desert to retain its title as the new year capital of the United States, with an event in Times Square featuring the British performers Rita Ora and Sophie Ellis-Bextor among others.

The biggest party, however, was being prepared on a beach thousands of miles south in Rio de Janeiro, with more than two million people ready to see in Brazil's new year. Thousands of tourists on cruise ships were getting ready to watch a 12-minute firework display soaring from a fleet of ferries off the Copacabana beach.

The sighs from Edinburgh could not be heard above the very strong winds predicted, after the city's Hogmanay outside events were cancelled due to the adverse weather.

RUSSELL SACH



Finishing touch Colin Reid adds a final polish to a pair of glass works in his "Open Eye" series ahead of the Collect show at Somerset House, London, from February

Make lessons fun to keep pupils in class, says union

Oliver Wright Policy Editor

Ministers are facing union pressure to make the curriculum more enjoyable for disadvantaged pupils after figures showed that school suspensions and expulsions have reached a record high.

Government data covering the autumn term for the academic year 2023-24 reveals a 39 per cent increase in the suspension rate and a 25 per cent increase in the permanent exclusion rate compared with the previous year. In total there were 346,279 suspensions — about nine in every 100 pupils — and 4,168 permanent exclusions — about one in every 100.

The figures have risen significantly over more than a decade and Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, is under pressure to take action to make school more accessible to disadvantaged pupils, who are the most likely to be excluded.

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the union that represents head teachers and principals, wants Phillipson to reconsider changes introduced by Michael Gove, the education secretary in 2010-14, in her review of the curriculum.

Gove placed greater emphasis on maths, English and science. In 2023 Rishi Sunak's Conservative government said this had improved education standards, pointing to 89 per cent of English schools being rated good or outstanding by Ofsted that year, compared with 68 per cent in 2010.

However, critics have said that Gove's changes — and the way schools' performances are measured against them — have caused more children to disengage from education, fuelling suspensions and exclusions.

Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of the ASCL, said the "absolutely shocking" exclusion figures were a symptom of the current situation.

"Young people are in school but not enjoying it — and are struggling to be fulfilled," he said. "One of the biggest drivers of this is the educational reforms of the last government, which narrowed the curriculum and put an intense focus on English and maths, on which schools are judged. This has led schools to reduce the provision of vocational and creative subjects, such as art, which provide an outlet for less academic students."

Phillipson has appointed Professor Becky Francis to review the curriculum and address the "barriers" that hold back children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Francis said she wanted to create a broader curriculum so that children did not miss out on music, art, sport and drama, or vocational subjects.

The Conservatives, however, criticised any watering down of the curriculum. Laura Trott, the shadow education secretary, said: "Soft bigotry of low expectations is back. The idea that children from deprived backgrounds should not do English and maths to a high level ... is misguided and damaging."

VAT 'will hit those with special needs'

Max Kendix Political Reporter
Nicola Woolcock Education Editor
Emma Yeomans

Children with special needs risk "falling through the cracks" because of the government's tax raid on private schools, heads have warned, as figures show soaring demand for fee-paying places.

The number of private schools that take special needs pupils in England has risen sharply to 730, up from 500 before the pandemic.

Parents of pupils who have qualified for state-funded education, health and care plans (EHCP) will not be affected by the 20 per cent VAT charge on private school fees, which starts today.

However, many parents who turned to private education to avoid the delays and cost of applying for an EHCP could be hit. Some 33,500 pupils in independent schools already have the plans but 100,000 do not.

Julie Robinson, the chief executive of the Independent Schools Council, said that private schools created "vital capacity during a special needs crisis" and that children were at risk of "falling through the cracks".

More than half of EHCPs are not issued within the statutory 20 weeks, while thousands of families have faced waits of a year or more to access the support. Cash-strapped councils administer the plans, and this includes the extra cost of special needs education.

A spokesman for the prime minister said: "The government is beginning work to rebuild the Send system. The budget invested £1 billion extra in day-to-day provision, and £740 million was directed to support local authorities to create more specialist places."

Recruitment pledge to cost £5bn a year

Continued from page 1

new policy action. Achieving the supply target through pay increases alone is feasible, but would require pay increases of nearly 10 per cent per year. This scenario comes with the highest cost: £4.9 billion per year from 2026-27 onwards."

The NFER recommends that the government publish a comprehensive strategy for how it plans to recruit and pay for the 6,500 extra teachers, particularly in subjects with severe shortages such as physics, chemistry, computing and maths.

Laura Trott, the shadow education secretary, said: "The rise in VAT will do nothing to help state schools. The promise of 6,500 new teachers has been exposed as hollow and is more proof that this vindictive policy will do nothing but add pressure to the education system."

Teaching unions have welcomed the intention to recruit more teachers but say more must be done to retain the existing workforce. Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said ministers needed to reverse real-terms pay cuts and tackle the "crushing workload" and the inspection regime.

The Department for Education said: "Ending tax breaks for private schools will raise £1.8 billion a year by 2029-30 to help deliver 6,500 new teachers and raise school standards, supporting the 94 per cent of children in state schools to achieve and thrive."

Quintagram® No 2140

Solve all five concise clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Amphibian (4)

_ _ _ _

2 Was aware of (4)

_ _ _ _

3 Tendon (5)

_ _ _ _ _

4 Masonry (9)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

5 Large unit of force (10)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

A	E	E	E	E	E	E	G
I	K	K	M	N	N	N	N
N	N	O	O	O	R	S	S
T	T	T	W	W	W	W	W

Solutions see MindGames, T2
Cryptic clues see MindGames, T2

Christmas killings trial

A man has appeared in court charged with the murder of two women on Christmas Day. Jazwell Brown, 49, appeared at Luton crown court only to confirm his identity. A provisional trial date was set for June 17. He has also been charged with the attempted murder of a man and a teenage boy in the attack in Bletchley, near Milton Keynes.

Marathon man's feat

A man who ran a marathon every day of 2024 said he would not take on such a feat again. James Cooper, 37, from East Grinstead in West Sussex, started at 6am each day so he could work in the afternoon. He raised more than £85,000 for the Samaritans. After the final run he told PA: "It kind of hit me with a few miles to go. Overwhelming joy and gratitude."

Poole 'murder-suicide'

A man and woman in their seventies have been found dead at home in Poole. Unconfirmed reports suggested it was a murder-suicide, and Dorset police said no one else was being sought in connection to the deaths. "This is a very sad incident and we are doing all we can to support the next of kin," Detective Inspector Ian Allen said.

Boris tops TV chart

Pandemic broadcasts, royal events and England football matches lead the list of the most-watched television shows of the decade so far. Boris Johnson's announcement of the first Covid lockdown topped the list with 28.3 million viewers, ahead of Queen Elizabeth's funeral and England's loss to Italy in the 2020 European Championship final.

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Burglar dodged staff by 60 seconds

David Woode

A burglar who broke into the London home of a Hong Kong socialite narrowly avoided a housekeeper during the theft of jewellery and handbags worth more than £10 million.

Shafira Huang, an art collector and social media influencer, received a "huge shock" when the valuables were stolen from her property in Primrose Hill, northwest London, on December 7, a friend said.

CCTV images released yesterday appeared to show the masked intruder striding across a landing barely a minute before a housekeeper came out of a lift. It also emerged that about eight other people were in the house during the burglary.

Csaba Virag, a representative of the family, said he was with about seven other people in the property at the time. He added that it was unusually windy that day. "I heard a door bang," he said. "I thought it was the storm."

The Metropolitan Police said the suspect was "armed with an unknown weapon" when he sneaked in through a second-floor window. No arrests have been made.

The burglar escaped with five Hermès crocodile skin handbags worth £150,000, Chopard earrings, a 10.73-carat diamond ring designed by Graff and £15,000 in cash. Not all the items are thought to belong to Huang.

The friend, who did not wish to be named, said she was not at home but had been shaken by the burglary. "It was a huge shock," the acquaintance said. "This has taken time to digest and face the reality, but she is coping. The fact someone came into her home and stole these items is extremely intrusive."

For five years Huang had documented her glamorous lifestyle on Instagram to 13,000 followers. But when Scotland Yard published details of the burglary on Monday, she closed the account.

She had posted images of herself posing on the red carpet at the Cannes film festival, island-hopping in Greece, skiing in the Alps and visiting Mount Fuji in Japan. Huang was rarely seen without her collection of Chanel and Hermès handbags as she travelled the world by private jet.







A composite CCTV image shows a housekeeper just missing the intruder, who left a footprint while stealing valuables from Shafira Huang



Chris Marinello, the founder of Art Recovery International, which tracks down stolen artworks, said people who showed their wealth online were "advertising to thieves to come and separate them from their valuables".

He said: "Many people do this on vacation, but I suggest you wait until you get home and post: 'Here I am in Ibiza with all my diamonds.' If you do it while you are there, [criminals] will hunt you down and steal from you. And you should never do this from inside your home — it's irresponsible and you're looking for trouble."

Marinello said stolen jewellery was often "cut up and sold for the value of the stones". He added: "The police are outmanned. Criminals are being let out of UK prisons early and there is no deterrent factor any more. It's upsetting. If you have a collection of art or jewellery and it's stolen, you can't rely on law enforcement to get it back for you."

Huang and her husband have offered two rewards of up to £500,000 for information that leads to the burglar's arrest and conviction, and 10 per cent of the recovered items' value for information that leads to their retrieval.

A neighbouring house in the Camden district is on the market for £59.5 million. The Guardian reported that viewings were being held at the time of the raid. One line of inquiry is whether the burglar pretended to be a buyer. The house for sale is similar to Huang's and may have provided a chance to scope details such as whether any windows were open.

The burglar is believed to have been on the roof just after 5pm, when two housekeepers left the property. He entered the house at 5.11pm and left 19 minutes later.

Robbers hit 33 businesses a day last year

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

Robbery from businesses hit a record high of 12,000 last year, or 33 every day. However, barely one in ten ended in a charge and nearly half of investigations closed without police identifying a suspect, analysis shows.

An investigation by Usdaw, the shop workers' union, found that nearly one in five retail staff was the subject of a violent attack last year, up from just under one in 10 in 2022.

Figures published by the Office for National Statistics show that robbery of a business property rose by 52 per cent in the year to June 2024, to 12,000, the highest number ever recorded.

The figures suggest that criminals are increasingly targeting businesses over personal properties, the numbers for which remained stable over the same period. There were 69,931 personal property robberies recorded compared with 69,222 in the previous 12 months.

Robbery is the use of force or threat of force while stealing. It is a different crime from burglary, which is illegally entering a property to steal.

The figures come on the back of a record high in shoplifting, with a total of 469,788 incidents recorded in the year to June, a 29 per cent increase on the previous 12 months.

There was a spate of high-profile robberies targeting food businesses in the run-up to Christmas. In one incident, criminals stole 2,500 pies worth £25,000 from Tommy Banks, the Michelin-starred chef.

The government said that it intended to tackle the wave of property-related thefts by placing an additional 13,000 police officers, police community support officers and special constables to neighbourhood roles in England and Wales.

Dame Diana Johnson, the policing minister, said Labour would also clamp down on property robbery by introducing a standalone offence of assaulting a shop worker.

The government's Policing and Crime Bill, which is expected to be introduced to parliament in the spring, will attempt to ensure that the police treat shoplifting more seriously by scrapping a rule introduced in 2014 that enabled forces to treat thefts of goods valued at under £200 less seriously by making it a summary-only offence. When it was introduced, the Home Office had argued that the move would increase the use of on-the-spot fines; instead, it has led to a sharp decline in all forms of punishment.

Ministry of Justice figures show that only 4.5 per cent of robbery cases recorded by the police led to a suspect being charged in the year to June.

The Office for National Statistics said there had been a "notable increase" in the number of robberies involving a knife, which rose by 11 per cent during the same period.

Woman appears in court over murder of father of six

A woman charged with murdering a father of six on Christmas Day will enter her plea next month.

Kirsty Carless appeared at Birmingham crown court via video link from Foston Hall prison yesterday for a preliminary hearing after she was charged with the murder of Louis Price, 31.

Staffordshire police said they had responded to a report of a man in cardiac arrest at a property in Norton Canes, near Cannock, just before 3.30am on December 25.

Despite medical efforts, Price died a short time later.

Carless, 33, who was wearing a grey T-shirt, spoke only to confirm she could hear the proceedings. Judge Michael Chambers said that she must appear in person at Stafford crown court at the end of this month to enter a plea to the charge of murder. He told the defendant: "Your case is being adjourned, and the next hearing will be a plea and trial preparation at Stafford on January 31, when, all things being equal, you will be asked if you plead guilty or not guilty. In the meantime, you must be remanded into custody."

Michelle Heeley KC, for Carless, said that she would not apply for bail. A provisional date of June 2 was set for the trial, which is estimated to last two to three weeks.

In a statement released through Staffordshire police on Friday, Price's family described him as a "well-known member of the community" who was "well loved" and always smiling.

"He always had time for anyone and would help anyone he could," they said. "He had a passion for fishing and ... loved football: he was a lifelong supporter of Aston Villa."

News

MPs call for fines as postmasters get OBEs before payout

Tom Witherow

A committee of MPs has called for financial penalties on the government for the years-long delay in paying compensation to hundreds of victims of the Post Office Horizon IT scandal.

Of the £1.8 billion set aside for those affected, just £499 million had been paid out by November. Hundreds of sub-postmasters convicted on the basis of faulty data from the computer system between 1999 and 2015 have yet to receive a payout, as well as hundreds who defeated the central Post Office company in court in 2019.

Today the business and trade committee called for a legally binding timetable for compensation, including financial penalties for deadlines missed, as it is feared some will not receive a payout until 2027.

Two postmasters who have yet to receive final compensation were appointed OBE for services to justice in the new year honours list.

Lee Castleton, who went bankrupt in 2007 because of Horizon errors, is one of them. He said: "They should write penalties into the lawyers' contract representing the business department. If you are going to hit them, hit them where it hurts."

Chris Head, too, was made an OBE for his part in the 15-year campaign but has yet to receive final compensation. "I would welcome those penalties, and those must be awarded to the victims affected," he said. "There needs to be proper scrutiny and some kind of proper oversight of all the schemes."

In November the government told MPs on the committee that putting in place hard deadlines with penalties might have unintended consequences, and that they were finding other ways to speed up the process.

In the case of the main compensation plan, the Horizon Shortfall Scheme, one in seven who applied before the original 2020 deadline have still not settled their claims. The committee found that the "schemes are so poorly designed that the application process is akin to a second trial for victims", with an excessive burden placed on postmasters to fill out complicated forms.

Liam Byrne, chairman of the committee, said: "Years on from the biggest miscarriage of justice in British legal history, thousands of … victims still don't have the redress to which they're entitled for the shatter and ruin of their lives. Payments are so slow that people are dying before they get justice. But the lawyers are walking away with millions. This is quite simply wrong, wrong, wrong. We need hard deadlines."

JACK BOSKETT MEDIA



On time Locomotives will blow their whistles at noon today to start a year of events celebrating 200 years of British railways

Radio veteran Johnnie Walker dies aged 79

Caolán Magee



Johnnie Walker retired from BBC Radio 2 in October

Johnnie Walker, the veteran radio presenter, has died at the age of 79, two months after retiring from the BBC.

Walker's death was announced on BBC Radio 2 by his friend and colleague Bob Harris. After David Bowie's *Golden Years*, Harris said: "We also know how passionate he was about his music, went out on a limb many times to defend the music that he loved, and he was passionate about radio."

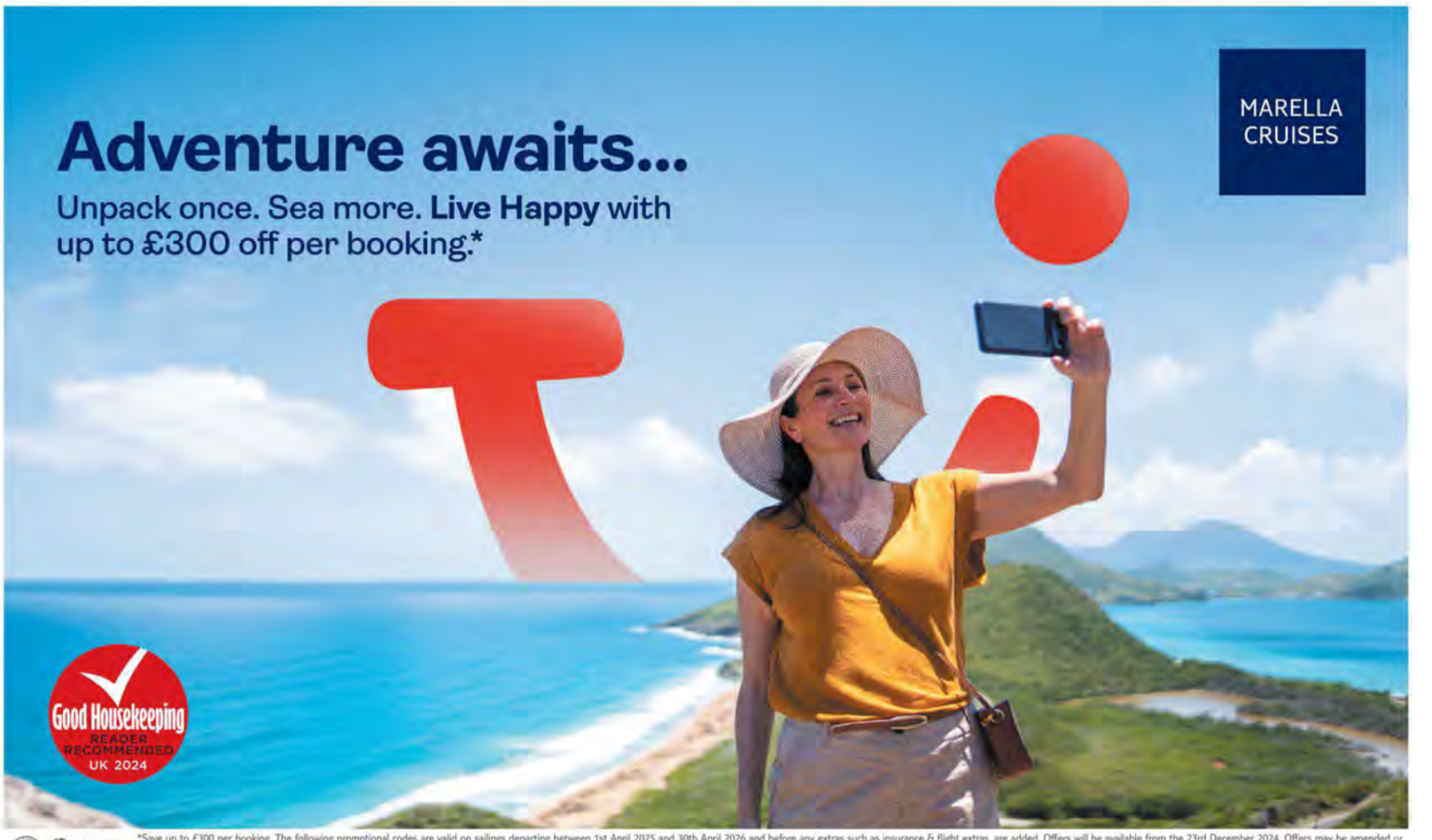
Walker retired in October after 58 years in radio, having been previously given a diagnosis of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

Tiggy Walker, his wife, said: "I couldn't be more proud of Johnnie — how he kept broadcasting almost to the end and with what dignity and grace he coped with his debilitating lung disease. He remained his charming, humorous self to the end, what a strong, amazing man."

The Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant wrote on X: "So long Johnnie Walker, all across the years, a defender and gatekeeper of great musical taste, a cool, kind man who kept the bar high for all of us who loved him."

Born in Birmingham, Walker left school at 15 to train as a mechanic before moving into radio in 1966 with Swinging Radio England, an offshore pirate station. He joined BBC Radio 1 in 1969 and BBC Radio 2 in 1998.

Obituary, page 37



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Earl Spencer's wife 'learnt of affair' on Zoom call

The countess has set out her suspicions in court papers as she faces a privacy lawsuit, **Kate Mansey** writes

Earl Spencer's wife of 13 years has claimed that she pieced together details of her husband's "affair" during a Zoom call with the spouse of his "long-term mistress".

Karen Spencer is being sued by Charles Spencer's girlfriend, Professor Catrine Jarman, for the "misuse of private information".

Jarman, 42, a Norwegian archaeologist who worked with Spencer at his ancestral home of Althorp, has alleged that the countess told the earl, 60, and others that she suffered from multiple sclerosis (MS) without her consent.

The countess, 52, denies any liability and states that any reference to Jarman's condition "was entirely legitimate and justified".

Further details have emerged of the breakdown of the Spencers' marriage after the countess submitted her defence to the High Court.

David Sherborne, the well-known celebrity lawyer who is representing the countess, said that she was "shocked and devastated" when Spencer sent her a text message containing the "hideous" news that he wanted a divorce. This came "just four weeks" after Spencer sent his wife a "romantic message" on Valentine's Day.

Suspecting that her husband had been having an affair with Jarman, who was conducting a dig at Althorp, the countess arranged a Zoom call with Jarman's husband, Tom.

The defence states: "She had been in frequent contact with him over the last few years, having originally used him as an architect before she or her husband had met the claimant, and even hosted their whole family, including their children, in Lady Spencer's marital home at Althorp ... Following suspicions, Lady Spencer contacted Mr Jarman. He informed her that the claimant and he were separating, although Lady Spencer had already been told this by her own husband; she told him in return that Earl Spencer was divorcing her.

"During a subsequent Zoom call on 26 April 2024, Lady Spencer asked Mr Jarman if he was suspicious of an affair between the two of them. Once they compared the account given by the claimant and Earl Spencer of what they had been doing in November/December 2022, the affair became clear."

The defence adds: "It was only after her discussion with the claimant's husband ... that she discovered that their affair had been going on since at least November/December 2022 when the two of them were together in Norfolk (although more likely since 2021)."

The countess "decided to confront" Catrine Jarman. In an email sent to Jarman on May 1, which was shared with the court, she wrote: "First of all, as a woman, I just have to tell you that I am so disappointed in you." She described Jarman's actions as "unbelievably immoral", saying: "Good luck Cat, you're in for a hell of a ride. I think you'll find having him to deal with full-time will be much trickier than the odd five-day escape to Norfolk and a night or two in London here and there."

The countess told Jarman that it was "inappropriate" for her to continue to come for dinner at her home during her stay, writing: "It's not fair to me, our daughter, or the staff who are already distraught at the news of our divorce though having to serve Charles' long-term mistress. It's just too much to ask." The defence document states, however, that Jarman "insisted that she would still be having her meals in Spencer's home for the next month".



The countess's legal team said: "The claimant's behaviour, in the face of her having an affair with Lady Spencer's husband, was callous and bullying. It was also entirely consistent with her threatening to sue Lady Spencer when she called into question the appropriateness of the claimant's dig continuing in such circumstances. It is no surprise that Lady Spencer was left feeling helpless and confused."

Yesterday Jarman described the claims made in the countess's court defence as "untrue and defamatory". Jarman said that she had "repeatedly told Countess Spencer ... in legal correspondence" that the allegation that she had an affair with the earl was "untrue".

She told the Daily Mail that she had issued proceedings against the countess because she told the earl about her "secret" health condition, MS.

The archaeologist, who co-hosts Spencer's podcast *The Rabbit Hole Detectives*, told the newspaper: "I have worked very hard indeed to keep my MS hidden, as should be my prerogative. So only a handful of people have known — and Charles wasn't one of them. I'd been seeing him, romantically, for only two or three months, and still hadn't told him."



DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES

Earl Spencer with his wife, Karen, in 2018, before the breakdown of their marriage; he denies claims of an affair with Catrine Jarman, below left

Jarman added: "I am still not entirely sure who else she shared this private and sensitive information with, which is the point of this legal action."

The countess said that she was told about Jarman's condition by the archaeologist's husband. Her defence papers state: "Lady Spencer believed that the fact that the claimant's husband had volunteered this information to her meant that it was not a 'secret', which is exactly what he said to her."

Lawyers acting for Jarman stated: "Dr Jarman did not, at any time, provide her consent to the countess to disclose that information to any third party or intimate anything to that effect ... This lack of consent should have been obvious to the countess, given the nature of the private information and the circumstance in which it was imparted."

The countess claims that Jarman's lawyers would "hound" and "press" her for a reply, even though she had flown to Canada as her father was dying.

Her defence states: "In the hours after her father's death, whilst Lady Spencer was heavily grieving on Vancouver Island, the claimant instructed her solicitors to demand responses from her under the threat of immediately forcing her into court in London (at the same time as a similar threat was made by Earl Spencer). Lady Spencer will refer to the bullying and highly insensitive manner in which this correspondence was orchestrated by her husband and his girlfriend."

Jarman denied "hounding" the countess, saying that the legal matter she brought against the countess "was urgent because of the severe impact it was having" on her health and "the very serious risk of a life-altering MS relapse". She said that she "was not privy to the details around Countess Spencer's father's health".

Jarman also denies "insisting" on returning to Althorp for her meals.

In his divorce from the countess, Spencer is represented by Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia, the lawyer who acted for Prince Charles in his divorce from Spencer's sister Princess Diana.

Spencer has denied having an affair and also dismissed claims that he ended his marriage by text message. He told the Daily Mail: "The notion that I would end my marriage by text is an absurd attempt to blacken my name. Karen ended the marriage, after endless threats to do so over the years, in early March. She asked me to confirm the end of the marriage in a text of March 18 and my reply was a simple acceptance of her decision."

Countess Spencer declined to comment.

Airport worker loses £1m discrimination claim over 'strip search'

A worker at Heathrow who sought more than £1 million in a race discrimination case over being allegedly strip searched has had her case dismissed.

Veleta Brown said she had been "violated" when Sorien Monfries, a security officer, carried out a "private search" after she was flagged by a scanner.

Brown said she was "treated as a criminal" after being marched out of the room by two security guards, an employment tribunal in Reading was told.

However, a judge has dismissed her case, in which she sought compensation of £1 million for racial discrimination and harassment, ruling that the search was "not related" to her race.

The tribunal was told that Brown, who describes herself as black Caribbean, started working as a delivery project manager at Heathrow in June 2022. She was due to meet a contractor in the airside area of the airport, which meant having to pass through security.

The tribunal was told that if the body security scanner identifies a "zone of concern" then the person is asked to step aside and consent to a search, which involved being patted down over their clothing and scanned with a hand-held metal detector. If the security officer is unable to satisfy themselves that there is no security concern, then a private search is the next step.

On October 22, 2022, Brown walked through the scanner, showed her ID, and was asked to step to the side for a body scan by Monfries after the alarm was activated. Judge Anna Poynton said: "[Brown] accepted when cross-examined that the archway cannot select on the grounds of race."

Brown said she was "patted down" three times over her clothing, which she found to be "excessive". She alleged that Monfries "repeatedly patted around the bra area" before stating that she wanted to do a private search.

Brown alleged that there was a security guard standing in front of the door to prevent her leaving the room. The airport said this was in fact done to stop someone from entering the room.



Veleta Brown said she felt "degraded and violated"

Brown said she had been "treated as a criminal" and felt "embarrassed, humiliated, degraded and violated" after the search.

Brown complained to her line manager about the search before lodging an official grievance, referring to how she did not know any other employees who had been "strip searched".

Her grievance was partially upheld due to a flaw in how it was investigated. However, Brown was told that there was "no evidence to suggest that the incident was an act of direct discrimination".

Brown appealed against the decision, but was not satisfied with the outcome and resigned in June 2023. She then took Heathrow to a tribunal.

The panel ruled that there had been "considerable shortcomings" in the airport's handling of the complaint but that none related to her race. All claims made by Brown were dismissed.


MOD

Fall guy A Royal Air Force parachute jump instructor leaves a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III transport plane at 10,000ft in the skies over Oxfordshire

Teen girls outdrink boys and almost all of Europe

Eleanor Hayward Health Editor

Teenage girls in Britain are more likely to get repeatedly drunk than their peers from almost anywhere else in Europe, a study has revealed.

Only those in Hungary, Denmark and Italy outdrink British girls, according to research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

More than a third of 15-year-old girls in Britain have been drunk at least twice, compared with less than a quarter of boys the same age.

Experts said that alcohol companies were "heavily targeting" young women with adverts that "present alcohol consumption as a feminine practice".

Others say that teenage girls are mirroring their parents' behaviour, with the report warning that British women binge-drink more than those anywhere else in Europe.

The study looked at drinking habits in 34 countries. When 15-year-olds were asked if they had been drunk at least twice, the average for boys and girls together in the UK was 29 per cent, compared with an EU average of 23 per cent.

The OECD report said that historically teenage boys drank more than girls but the reverse was now true in 12 European countries.

Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, chairman of the Alcohol Health Alliance UK, said: "Higher rates of drinking among girls is a real cause for concern, especially given the recent upturn in alcohol-related liver disease that we have seen among women."

The OECD found that women in Britain and Denmark were the most likely to binge-drink — defined as having at least six drinks in one session. Twenty-six per cent of women in Britain regularly did so.

Dr Katherine Severi, chief executive of the Institute of Alcohol Studies, said it was a myth that there was a safe level of underage drinking. "There is still a widespread belief that parents should introduce their children to alcohol to teach them how to drink. However, research shows that the earlier a child starts drinking the more likely they are to develop alcohol-related problems in later life. That's why it's so important to delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible," she said.

Richard Piper, chief executive of Alcohol Change UK, blamed advertising for the rise in young women drinking.

"What we do know is that girls and young women have been heavily targeted by alcohol companies in recent years, with an increase in alcohol marketing designed to appeal directly to them," he said. "Alcohol companies increasingly use gendered approaches to market their products, using women's social roles and entrenched stereotypes. It would be unsurprising to see this having an influence on how much, or how often, they drink alcohol over time."

He said that underage drinking had fallen overall in recent years, but urged Labour to impose stricter restrictions on alcohol marketing. "The environment surrounding our young people works against them. They are constantly exposed to alcohol, from social media feeds to adverts in public spaces, on TV and at sporting events."

The NHS advises that no one under 18 should drink because alcohol can damage the development of organs including the brain and liver, bones and hormones. Drinking at an early age is associated with risky behaviour such as violence, drugs and drink-driving.

How British teenagers drink

Percentage of 15-year-olds who have been drunk at least twice

	Girls	Boys
1 Denmark	43%	46%
2 Hungary	38%	37%
3 Italy	35%	27%
4 UK	33.7%	24.7%
5 Bulgaria	33%	38%
6 Austria	30%	36%
7 Germany	30%	31%
8 Spain	28%	20%
9 Lithuania	26%	23%
10 Croatia	25%	28%
EU average	22.8%	22.6%

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Dog walker dies after falling 200m from the summit of Helvellyn

Caolán Magee

A dog walker in the Lake District has died after falling nearly 200m from the summit of Helvellyn, one of England's tallest mountains.

The unnamed man was reported missing by his wife on Sunday after failing to return from an outing with his black labrador.

Despite "atrocious" weather conditions, mountain rescue teams carried out a two-day search before discovering his body. His dog was found alive and uninjured, perching on a ledge.

The Patterdale mountain rescue team was contacted by Cumbria police after they had been called by the man's wife. She had been tracking his mobile phone but noticed that it had been stationary for several hours. She told the rescuers that he was likely to have set off from their holiday home in Grasmere on a bicycle with their dog.

Seven mountain rescue teams scoured routes leading to Helvellyn's summit, where the man's phone had last emitted a signal.

Two coastguard search-and-rescue helicopters joined the operation but were hampered by low cloud cover and high winds. The man's bicycle and phone were eventually found near the summit plateau's edge.

The Patterdale mountain rescue team said it had made the "difficult decision" to suspend the search, for safety reasons, at 1.30am on Monday. Efforts resumed at first light with additional support from the Cockermouth, Penrith and Kirkby Stephen rescue teams.

Using a rope system, the rescuers descended the steep headwall towards Red Tarn and encountered the dog sitting unharmed on a ledge. The man's body was found nearby and recovered. It is believed he died from head injuries sustained in the fall.

The operation took 20 hours over two days and involved 68 mountain rescue team members and three search dogs with their handlers.

Helvellyn, England's third-highest peak at 950m above sea level, is a popular destination for hikers and climbers and is renowned for its steep cliff as well as Striding Edge, a sharp ridge leading to the summit.

The Patterdale rescue team said: "We would like to send our condolences to the man's family and friends and express our gratitude to the various teams and search-and-rescue helicopter crews who assisted with the search and subsequent recovery."

MAX WILLCOCK/BNPS; ALAMY







Campaign to save Dambuster's local finds unlikely ally

A community campaign to save a pub frequented by Russian spies and Sir Barnes Wallis, the inventor of the "bouncing bomb", has been boosted by German donors (Charlotte Alt writes).

The Elm Tree Inn in Langton Herring, near Weymouth in Dorset, is close to the sea lagoon where Wallis tested the bombs used for the Dambusters raid on Germany's Ruhr Valley during the Second World War.

The pub closed last year after 300 years but three months ago a community initiative was launched to raise £650,000 to buy the pub and run it for the village.

The Friends of the Elm Tree launched a share issue, in which investors buy £1 shares. Already half the amount has been raised.

Nick Carroll, the fund's chairman, said support had come from "all over", including France and Germany. "My son's girlfriend is German," Carroll said. "Her parents visited the pub last year and they liked it very much and have bought shares.

"The shares are £1 each and the minimum spend is £200 and the maximum is £65,000. We had a family who bought £1,000 of shares and divided them between their five children. We also had someone buy £20,000 of shares, the largest amount so far."

Wallis drank and lodged at the inn in 1942 while the bomb was being tested on the Fleet lagoon behind Chesil Beach that stretches 18 miles from West Bay to Portland. During the Cold War, the pub was rumoured to have been a secret meeting place for Harry Houghton and his girlfriend Ethel Gee, both English spies for the Soviet Union.

The Elm Tree Inn was turned into a gastropub, achieving the AA Two Rosette Award before it was closed in November 2023 due to "declining profitability".

Carroll said he hoped enough money to save the pub would be raised by March. "There are very few grants that we can apply for because they require a huge amount of ... form filling," he added. "We are a small village with a steering committee of seven volunteers and we don't have the time for that amount of paperwork."

Langton Herring has lost its bus service so residents are finding it difficult to get to pubs further afield.

Anne Kerins, 68, who is part of the village fund-raising committee, said the pub had been the "absolute centrepiece" of the community since the 1700s. She added: "The residents are really struggling without it."

The Elm Tree Inn provided lodgings for Sir Barnes Wallis, above left, in 1942 when his "bouncing bomb" was tested on the nearby sea lagoon that stretched behind Chesil Beach

Special forces in 'war crimes' inquiry

Larisa Brown Defence Editor

Nine special forces soldiers may be prosecuted for alleged war crimes relating to at least two incidents in Syria, according to reports that Ministry of Defence officials tried to keep secret.

Another member of the armed forces is under investigation by the Service Prosecuting Authority, the military equivalent of the Crown Prosecution Service, over actions in Afghanistan.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) initially refused to disclose the information but the decision was reversed after The Times requested a review.

It emerged last year that five members of the Special Air Service (SAS) could face court martial after being accused of war crimes in Syria.

The serving soldiers were alleged to have shot dead a person they believed intended to carry out a suicide attack. It was claimed, however, that senior officers alleged that the elite soldiers used excessive force and should have arrested the man instead.

Sources told the Daily Mail at the time that a primed suicide vest was found nearby but the suspect was not wearing it when he was killed more than two years ago.

Details around the arrests were limited but they were believed to be the first involving UK personnel linked to operations in the fight against forces with Islamic State.

The Times submitted a freedom of information request to the MoD after the case emerged, asking the department to disclose all cases being examined in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The MoD turned down the request more than two months later, saying that to disclose the information would "undermine the effectiveness of the UK military".

The Times requested an internal review, arguing it was in the public interest, that such information had been disclosed previously and there was "no acceptable justification for withholding the information now".

"It is absolutely in the public interest for the public to know if soldiers are being investigated for war crimes," The Times wrote.

On December 20 the MoD reversed the decision, noting that the request was "not handled in accordance with the timeliness requirements of the Act".

The MoD's information rights team said that two Syrian cases were being reviewed, with one of them involving a lone person and the other eight individuals.

The MoD said a case may relate to one or more incidents. No outstanding cases related to Iraq, while one case involved a person and an undisclosed crime in Afghanistan. No details were provided about the alleged crimes.

Special forces soldiers have carried out operations against Isis in Syria and Iraq for the past decade. Soldiers have been involved in sensitive operations to bring children back to the UK. There has been no official presence of British troops on the ground in Syria.

The actions of special forces soldiers are under intense scrutiny due to the inquiry into allegations that innocent Afghans had been executed.

Sir Ben Wallace, the former defence secretary, told The Daily Telegraph he "came across plots" and "took action", but would have liked to have had more options available. Referring to drone strikes by the RAF he said he would have preferred to have captured "individuals who pose an imminent threat ... rather than deal with by a strike".

The MoD said: "Our UK personnel are respected worldwide for the highest standards and action will be taken against anyone that fails to meet these standards, including dismissal from service, where appropriate It would be inappropriate to comment further on ongoing investigations."

News

In the dark about dark matter? This man could shine a light on it

The son of a curtain salesman is aiming to build the Large Hadron Collider's big brother. **Kaya Burgess** reports

ANNA-TIA DOSS FOR THE TIMES



Professor Mark Thomson says particle physics research helps develop technology that will "filter down into everyday life"

What does dark matter consist of? Does every subatomic particle have a twin? What are the missing pieces in the jigsaw that will help us understand how the universe fits together?

The discovery of the Higgs boson by the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) — one of the most important breakthroughs in modern science — may be the "tip of the iceberg" compared with the revelations in particle physics that lie ahead, the British scientist set to take charge of Cern believes.

Professor Mark Thomson's love affair with subatomic physics was kindled as a teenager in the 1970s when he read a book featuring the work of the world's largest particle physics laboratory, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, better known by its French acronym: Cern.

Almost half a century later he will take charge of that very facility, shepherding Cern's efforts to answer the "very big questions" still plaguing physics and championing plans to build a €15 billion collider in a tunnel that will dwarf its predecessor in size and power.

Just as Nasa uses telescopes to peer ever further into the cosmos, Cern is prying ever deeper into the world of subatomic particles to answer questions on the scale of bosons and fermions — the building blocks that make up all known matter.

Thomson, 58, is head of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, the UK government agency that funds research. "We know there is a lot more out there beyond our current understanding," he said.

In 2012 protons were smashed together in the LHC's 17-mile circular tunnel beneath the Franco-Swiss border, creating a splash of new particles and igniting the world's interest in particle physics. This splash included the Higgs boson, which had been predicted in 1964 by scientists including Peter Higgs but never detected.

The discovery proved there was an invisible force field that permeated the universe. Thomson explained that when particles such as electrons and quarks interacted with this Higgs field it created a "drag", as if they were wading through a field of mud. This is what gives them mass.

Without this field, all particles would race around the universe at the speed of light. Atoms could not form, nor could larger structures like stars and humans.

Thomson said the LHC was to have its brightness cranked up in a "high luminosity" phase from 2030 that would increase the number of proton collisions and could yield a host of new knowledge about the Higgs boson.

He is to have a year of preparation before starting a five-year term as Cern's director-general in January next year. He is also championing a project to build the Future Circular Collider (FCC), which will be almost eight times more powerful than its predecessor.

The FCC will be housed in a circular tunnel more than three times longer than the LHC and, at 56.5 miles, almost twice the length of the Channel Tunnel. The LHC smashes protons together at 13 teraelectronvolts (TeV), or 13 trillion electronvolts, a tiny unit of energy — but colossal for subatomic particles. The FCC, however, will smash electrons into positrons at 100TeV.

Unlike protons, which are made up of quarks, electrons have no smaller constituent parts. Thomson said they would create a less "messy" set of results when they collided. He added: "We might see something completely unpredicted. That's really exciting."

Thomson is moving to Geneva with his wife, Sophie, this month. Fortunately, hiking and skiing are among his hobbies. His two children, a daughter aged 21 and 24-year-old son, are studying medicine and computing in the UK.

"We haven't quite figured out what the family arrangements are going to be," he said.

Thomson's father owned a curtain shop in Worthing, West Sussex, where his mother also worked. He was the first in his family to go to university.

He ended up down a mine — the best place to work with protons and neutrinos, shielded from the cosmic rays that bombard the Earth. "We know most of [what we see] makes up only about 5 per cent of the universe," he said. "Another 20-plus per cent is the thing we call dark matter. We know it's there but we don't really know what it is."

One candidate for dark matter are Wimps: weakly interactive massive particles. "We have theories," he said. "Some of these are things we could see at the collider. We're smashing things together and if we have enough mass, we can make something new. We're seeing the tip of the iceberg."

One of those new things might be a supersymmetric particle. It is theorised that every particle has a twin with different properties. Finding one could address a stubborn gap in the standard model — the best theory for how the basic building blocks of matter and fundamental forces of the universe work together. It could help scientists towards the holy grail of physics: the creation of a "unified field theory" that marries all known forces.

The LHC is to reach the end of its life in 2041. "We've probably analysed only 7 per cent of the total data that will come out," Thomson said. "So we're right at the beginning."

Sir David King, the government's former chief scientific adviser, has dismissed as "reckless" plans to spend €15 billion on a new collider, suggesting that it would be "wiser" to tackle climate change.

Thomson conceded that building the FCC, which would start operations in the mid-2040s, was "incredibly ambitious, but we've got to be ambitious to continue to push back the frontiers of knowledge". Asked why such a big tunnel was necessary, he said: "If we want [the particles] to collide with more energy, we need to steer them around a ring more gently."

The UK government backed Thomson's application to lead Cern, saying he was the man to guide the organisation "at a critical time" thanks to his "outstanding record of service".

Thomson said that while it was important to expand "knowledge for knowledge's sake", particle physics experiments had already led to the development of useful technology, such as accelerators used in cancer treatment.

He added: "We have to develop new technology ... and that will at some point filter down into everyday life."

Teenager died day after grazing leg

Caolán Magee

A 15-year-old rugby player died less than a day after grazing his shin during a match, an inquest was told.

Sam Staple, who played for Lincoln RFC's under-16 team, was found dead on September 24 at his grandparents' home in Tupholme, Lincolnshire.

An inquest was opened on Monday, Lincolnshire Live reported. Jayne Wilkes, the coroner for Greater Lincolnshire, was told that the teenager had sustained a scratch to his right shin during a match the previous day, which had required first aid treatment.

Sam was kept home from school the next day as he felt unwell. His grandparents, with whom he lived, assumed that he was sleeping and checked on him periodically throughout the day. Later his grandmother attempted to wake him but found him unresponsive. Paramedics were called to the house, but Sam was pronounced dead. A post-mortem examination found high levels of medication in his bloodstream. The inquest was adjourned until March 26.

Lincoln RFC paid tribute to Sam on social media: "It is with a heavy heart and great sadness we have to let you know of the passing of a young member of our rugby family, Sam Staple.



Sam Staple, 15, was injured during a game of rugby

"Sam sadly passed away on Tuesday September 24 and will be greatly missed by all.

"Sam was a funny, cheeky, larger-than-life character and was an incredibly special young man.

"A keen supporter of Stockport County FC and Wasps, he was enthusiastic about playing rugby, and enjoying the company of his team-mates, which could be seen by anyone watching him playing with a smile on his face in his final game last Sunday."

The club and Sam's family have established the Sam Staple Memorial Fund, which has already raised more than £5,000. It aims to support rugby in Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire by providing financial assistance for a player seeking to progress from the grassroots game to higher-level competition or by helping a local team with tour fundraising to "encourage players to have the same experience and develop similar memories to those that Sam recently enjoyed so much with his team-mates".

Wood chips and grease will keep us in the skies

Flights from UK airports must use a minimum amount of lower-carbon jet fuel — made from material such as farm waste and used cooking oil — from today.

Under the sustainable aviation fuel (Saf) mandate, all jet fuel has to include at least 2 per cent of the greener propellant. That proportion will rise to 10 per cent in 2030 and 22 per cent in 2040.

The requirement is "ambitious but achievable", according to the Department for Transport. Saf is considered to be vital in reducing the aviation sector's carbon emissions.

If suppliers cannot directly provide enough of the fuel, they can buy certificates from other companies that have surpassed their obligations. Alternatively, they can pay the government £4.70 for each litre of Saf they have failed to provide.

Producing Saf involves about 70 per cent less carbon than conventional jet fuel. It is more expensive, but the price difference is expected to narrow. Jet engines can run on fuel that is up to 50 per cent Saf. The 2 per cent target for this year equates to about 230,000 tonnes.

Mike Kane, the aviation minister, said: "The mandate will help deliver our Plan for Change, helping to grow the economy and giving people the freedom to travel in a more sustainable way." Tim Alderslade, chief executive of Airlines UK, which represents UK carriers, said: "UK airlines support the Saf mandate as both a powerful and practical tool for driving down aviation carbon emissions."

TMS

diary@thetimes.co.uk | @timesdiary

Have you been reading closely?

Test your knowledge of the lighter side of society life. All the answers appeared in the Times diary, so how much do you remember?

1. What did Sir Keir Starmer's horoscope predict for the period after May 1 this year?
a) "Accomplishment across various endeavours"
b) "New opportunities call for a style change"
c) "You'll find that all the best things in life are free"

2. What did the Queen reveal about the King and Harry Potter?
a) He wants a cameo in the upcoming TV series
b) He does all the voices while reading the books to the royal sprogs
c) He calls his robe of state his "invisibility cloak"

3. What prime London real estate came on the market in January?
a) Sherlock Holmes's 221b Baker Street
b) The red telephone box outside parliament
c) Burial plots next to Karl Marx's grave



4. What overlooked item was discovered at Private Eye's office?
a) A drinks stash belonging to Peter Cook, right
b) Admiring letters from Robert Maxwell
c) A journalist's guide to not getting sued

5. In February, the former health secretary Matt Hancock gave a speech at Eton. Why did it backfire?
a) He said he could see the case for VAT on private school fees
b) He criticised recent Tory prime ministers, forgetting that he was at their alma mater
c) He said Jacob Rees-Mogg had been a poor politician, and was heckled by his son

6. Labour's Carissma Griffiths did not become MP for Mid Buckinghamshire as she hoped. What other title can she comfort herself with?
a) Miss Voluptuous UK
b) Winner of the Bad Sex in Literature award
c) Lord Alli's personal shopper

7. The organisers of the Paris Olympics provided 300,000 of which product to the athletes, double the amount at London 2012?
a) Pains au chocolat
b) Bottles of wine
c) Condoms

8. What piece of publishing skulduggery did the former cabinet minister Alan Johnson and the self-help guru Paul McKenna both admit to?
a) Leaving bad reviews on rivals' Amazon pages
b) Rearranging books so they appear at the top of WH Smith's books chart shelf
c) Buying their own books as Christmas presents to boost sales

9. In May, photo ID was required to vote for the first time. What form of identification did a diary reader find to be effective?
a) An MCC membership card
b) An Oxford student card
c) A personal caricature by Peter Brookes

10. The general election result upheld Mortimore's Law. What does it state?
a) If it rains on the day the election is called, the incumbent loses
b) The colour of the FA Cup holders' home strip predicts the winner
c) Tallest leader wins

11. A crowdfunder was set up during the election campaign to raise money for what cause?
a) Stopping Ed Davey's stunts
b) Getting Rishi Sunak a Sky dish
c) The Nicola Sturgeon Memorial Caravan



12. The actor Danny Dyer said he was too frit to go on *I'm A Celebrity*. Of what was he afraid?
a) Having to eat bugs
b) Having to spend time with politicians like Matt Hancock
c) Getting voted off before a politician like Matt Hancock

13. How did Robert Jenrick's second-place finish in the Tory leadership contest compare with his performance at Cambridge?
a) Favourably. He lost to "Ron" (reopen nominations) while running unopposed for JCR president
b) About the same. He narrowly lost out on being president of the Cambridge Union
c) Unfavourably. He won St John's College's Weird Crush of the Year 2002

14. The former Labour minister Ed Balls, ITV's political editor Robert Peston and the Radio 4 arts bod John Wilson formed a band. What did they call it?
a) The Rather Mild Chili Peppers
b) Centrist Dad
c) Podcasthead

15. Barbra Streisand, right, revealed her secret for feigning passion for a leading man she found unattractive. What was it?
a) She imagines every man is Omar Sharif
b) She practises kissing scenes with a pineapple first, to make the real thing more appealing
c) She puts a piece of chocolate cake over their shoulder and desires that instead



16. Diane Abbott gave Jeremy Corbyn advanced sight of her memoir, so he could check the section on their romance. What addition did he request?
a) A mention of his family's vegetarian, booze-free Christmas dinners
b) His idea for a perfect date: a visit to Karl Marx's tomb
c) How good he was at mending the motorbike on their road trip through East Germany

17. Gareth Neame, producer of *Downton Abbey*, knew Dame Maggie Smith since he was a boy. After her death last year, he revealed that she did what with her Oscars?
a) Used them as bookends
b) Used them as doorstops
c) Had them strategically placed in front of photos to obscure Dame Judi Dench

18. And finally, which constituency maintained its 60-year-long run as a bellwether (returning an MP from the party which formed the government)?
a) Dartford
b) Portsmouth North
c) Harlow

Answers
1a) In retrospect, this prediction seemed to tail off around July 6
2b) A charity audiobook has yet to be commissioned
3c) At £25,000, it's one for the wealthier communist
4c) McNae's Essential Law for Journalists was found with the spine uncracked. Editor Ian Hislop hailed the discovery as "30 years too late"
5c) Peter Rees-Mogg defended his father's record, before adding, "Especially as he remained loyal to his wife"
6a) Her name was the most eye-catching in a list of constituency candidates that included two people called Greg Smith
7c) That was 20 *preservatifs* per Olympian. Remarkably, the Parisian condom supply was only half of that at Rio 2016
8b) Johnson confessed to moving his works to No 1, but the rather more ubiquitous McKenna said he got "carried away" and put his books at Nos 1, 2 and 3
9a) A student card would not be enough to allow you to vote, regardless of the calibre of university
10b) Red or yellow predicts a Labour winner, blue or white is Tory, otherwise it is a hung parliament. The law has been correct in three out of every four occasions since 1950, making it at least as reliable as the polls
11b) Sunak had said that his parents denied themselves Sky Sports in order to send their son to Winchester, but thou shalt have a dishy oh little Rishi
12c) "I think it's a disaster if you get voted off a show before Matt Hancock," Dyer said. "Where is your PR after that? Boy George wasn't liked as much as Matt Hancock. That's a kick in the bollocks."
13a) Ron's victory allowed time for a rival to be found, who beat Jenrick in the run-off
14b) After caterwauling through songs by the Who, the Ramones and Abba, Peston ended with *Anarchy in the UK*, which he said "captures our motto: 'Get pissed, destroy'"
15c) Thereby making Mr Kipling the sexiest man of all time
16c) Abbott had already included the other two, and Corbyn had gamely raised no objections to their publication
17b) No word on what she did with her five Baftas, four Emmys and her Tony award. Shockingly though, she never won a competitive Olivier
18a) Harlow returned a Labour MP but its bellwether status runs back to only 1983, while Penny Mordaunt's ex-constituency of Portsmouth North has a run back to 1966. Dartford goes back to 1964, even though it required a Tory majority of 19,160 to be overturned this time

JACK BLACKBURN

Fists fly as shoppers stuck for hours

Lara Wildenberg

Thousands of shoppers were stuck for hours in a huge traffic jam at Trafford Centre in Manchester on Monday, as congestion caused fights among gridlocked drivers.

Management at the centre blamed the jam on a busy day for seasonal shoppers, as well as fans heading to the Manchester United v Newcastle match at nearby Old Trafford that evening.

Staff at the centre were said to have been sent out to the car parks to help direct traffic, as drivers tried to open closed gates to create alternative exits.

Witnesses recalled children crying as drivers became increasingly frustrated at the gridlock.

Cody Fisher, 18, a business administrator who was unable to leave his parking space for five hours, claimed that he saw drivers fighting. "When we got to about 6.30pm, 7pm, that's when people started getting really annoyed," he told the Manchester Evening News. "We edged out of the space, about 30cm. I've got voice messages of people screaming. There's swearing, verbal abuse."

Fisher described other drivers "throwing hands at each other", adding: "It was this lady and another lady, the first lady had a child with diabetes."

Sam Hulme, an affordable fashion content creator, tried to leave the shopping centre at about 3pm but ended up staying a further six hours to wait it out. "The plan was to just to nip in for an hour really to see if I could find any bargains," he told The Times, "I'd probably just been there over an hour when I headed back to my car and it was absolute chaos. It was fully gridlocked. Everyone was pretty confused. The gentleman in the car next to me, we just looked at each other and burst out laughing because we realised that we were going to be there for a long time."

The AA warned earlier last month that the M60 near the Trafford Centre was a likely congestion hotspot during the holiday season.

Retailers were also hoping for a boost in footfall over the Christmas period, with the Trafford Centre reporting they had "prepared for a busy weekend" after a 14 per cent year-on-year increase in footfall in November.

Shoppers with a sense of humour took to social media to share videos of the traffic, parodying the situation by adding comedic sounds over the top.

One posted a clip of the traffic, overlaying the voice of Gemma Collins, the media personality, saying, "I'm not afraid to admit it — it's hell in there. It's horror. You have to be a certain type of person to survive", from a 2015 interview with Heat Radio about *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*. Another used the voice of the Irish journalist Teresa Mannion reporting live on Storm Desmond: "Do not go out, don't make unnecessary journeys, don't take risks on treacherous roads."



Thousands of cars were gridlocked at the Trafford Centre in Manchester

A Trafford council spokesperson said the local authority would be contacting the centre to discuss the issue.

A spokesman for the Trafford Centre told the MEN: "With a busy day at the centre, combined with external factors such as the Manchester United game taking place nearby, the roads in and out of the centre were more congested than usual. We worked closely with Greater Manchester Police and the highways authorities ... to get things moving as quickly as possible. We appreciate our visitors' patience whilst trying to get in and out of the car parks."

PAUL GOLDSTEIN/SWNS







Animal planet Wildlife photographer Paul Goldstein's shots of the year include polar bears on Baffin Island, Canada; a mother giraffe and her calf in Kenya's Masai Mara; and curlews at Snettisham in Norfolk

'Soon there will be thousands of delivery robots on British streets'

Mark Sellman
Technology Correspondent

If you live in Milton Keynes, Leeds, Northampton, Manchester, Bedford or Cambridge, the idea of a robot delivering your shopping is not the future.

Since 2018, Starship robots — small, four-wheeled autonomous vehicles that carry groceries from Co-op stores to customers' homes — have been trundling down British pavements.

What is so remarkable is how unremarkable their debut has been. No alarm bells have been rung about an alien invasion, no mass protests by delivery drivers worried about their jobs.

Instead, most of the clips on social media show people helping the robots up steps or across the road. "Thank you," the Starships say. All very British.

On their side is a label: "I run on love, not petrol." One TikTok post shows a boy dancing to the music the robot plays after its cargo is delivered. A woman from Leeds who ordered some crisps and a bottle of water exclaims in amazement as it arrives.

The man responsible for the robots is Ahti Heinla, an Estonian computer programmer who co-founded Skype, the internet phone company. Its founders sold the business to eBay for $2.6 billion in 2005 and Microsoft bought it for $8.5 billion in 2011.

Rather than retire, he decided his next mission would be to use technology to solve some of our problems. "Not the meaning of life," he told The Times. "I'm not attempting to do that."

Heinla, 52, first tried to develop a humanoid robot for the home. When he discovered how difficult that was going to be, he switched to delivering things cheaply, quickly and sustainably, and co-founded Starship Technologies with another Skype pioneer.



Starship robots were designed to be not too cute, their creator Ahti Heinla said

Ten years later their robots have completed seven million deliveries and travelled more than nine million miles in 100 locations. With little fanfare, Starship covered more autonomous miles than any other company until Google's driverless car unit, Waymo, passed them six months ago. Unlike Waymo, Starship is making a profit.

Heinla said the customers using the fast, within-the-hour delivery ranged from families to younger people with a more "immediate lifestyle". The service was cheaper than sending a van or a courier on an electric bike, he added.

Heinla said hundreds of robots were serving British customers. "But I envision there will be thousands and tens of thousands in a number of years." The vision is that businesses will want to use the technology because of the low running costs.

Heinla insisted the streets would not be clogged with robots. "A suburban street has, let's say, 100 houses," he said. "So they get maybe one robot delivery per day. That means 100 robots enter and exit the street every day. That's not much."



Heinla added that children liked the robots and tried to feed them. He put this down to the design. "We settled on this neutral look. Not too cute — but not like an industrial device."

There have been bumps in the road. In 2023 a Starship robot in Northampton ran over a cat repellent device on a lawn, snapping it in two. When the owner tried to photograph the damage and remonstrate with the robot, it turned on him.

The owner told The Grocer magazine that the robot "started charging at me ... full speed, going back and forth, trying to run me over" and hit him twice. It turned out that the robot was in the control of an overzealous human remote operator, who was given "additional training".

People have also complained of being hit by the 35kg units, which have a top speed of 6km/h. But Heinla said nobody had called the police. Starship says that since January 1, 2023, there have been about 200 minor property incidents and 20 minor injuries over the 4.3 million miles driven.

Heinla said he did not share Elon Musk's vision that humanoid robots would soon be in the home, looking after our children and pets. The technology was too difficult, especially the joints. He was more bullish about self-driving cars, which he forecast were about five years away.

Heinla did have a bit of a downer on Britain, however. When asked how we compared with the five other countries Starship operates in, he said: "The UK is not at the forefront any more. When we started our operation, it used to be. But now ..."

His complaint is a lack of regulation. Instead of there being a national law governing robots, he had to negotiate with every council. So more robot rules, please, he said.

Like Jaan Tallinn, his Skype co-founder, he also had fears about artificial intelligence. "I think it is dangerous," he said. "We're doing 'embodied AI', which is one specific function. But obviously there are companies in the world trying to create a universal AI. And that's dangerous."

Heinla has remained in Estonia, like many of his former Skype colleagues, building up the country's tech industry.

"I've moved enough," he said. "People start looking to their roots when they're 50."

He said that his lifestyle had not changed much since Skype was sold. "I don't fly private. I have a house and a car, like many other people."

Maybe the house got bigger? "A little bit bigger, but not as much as you might think. I live like an upper middle-class [person]. My own net worth doesn't matter to me. I'm not working to make money. In fact, in Starship I get paid minimum wage."

MARY TURNER FOR THE TIMES



Lennan enjoys support from his parents, Linsey and Joseph, and his sister, Lyla

Boy of 12 who goes the extra mile to help

THE TIMES THE SUNDAY TIMES
CHRISTMAS APPEAL

Daisy Eastlake

There were not many people across the United Kingdom who looked out of the window at Storm Darragh in December and decided to go for a run.

However, one person did — Lennan Aspinall, 12, who set himself a remarkable challenge: to run 175km (110 miles), roughly the distance from London to Bristol, in the 21 days leading up to Christmas. Come rain or shine.

Yet the weather was the least of Lennan's concerns. "I think the hard bit is fitting it around footie and that," he says. "I come home from school in the dark, like it's getting dark really early now. It's hard to fit it in."

Lennan ran to raise money for James' Place, a men's mental health charity that offers free treatment for men experiencing a suicidal crisis. It is one of three charities chosen for this year's Christmas charity appeal by The Times and Sunday Times.

James' Place has three centres across the country — in London, Newcastle and Liverpool. In the UK, suicide is the leading cause of death in men under 50. The charity has helped more than 3,100 men since it opened in 2018 and aims to open two new centres by 2026.

Lennan is no stranger to fundraising. With the help of his mother, Linsey Rossiter, he did his first fundraiser aged five, collecting food and donations for a food bank in Liverpool. The physical challenges began aged eight, when he ran 90km throughout November in 2020. In 2022, his running earned him the Liverpool Echo Young Personality of the Year award.

Since then, he has run a total of 490km and once completed three Olympic triathlons in a month.

He decided to raise money for James' Place after a family friend, Michael Woodburn, took his own life in 2018. Woodburn's family has raised awareness among friends and relatives about the support the charity gives to men experiencing depression. When word made it to Lennan, the charity became a favourite for his annual challenges.

"We always set a target of £200 each year," says Rossiter, who helps Lennan to organise his fundraisers.

Donations always soar past his targets. Lennan has raised £11,720 over the years, £5,860 of which was for James' Place. "He does sort of strive for more, and we just couldn't be prouder of him."

Fitting 5km runs around school and extracurriculars is no mean feat and at times the challenges can take their toll. "It is tough on him, we've shared a few videos on his Instagram of when he comes home and he's upset and emotional because he's overtired," Rossiter says. One video shows Lennan in tears after his sports watch battery stopped working during a run, resulting in the loss of that night's personal best.

"[His nan] goes mad. She says he's doing too much," Rossiter says. "And we question him every year and ask, 'Do you think you're going too far?' We always say to him 'people don't expect it', but he wants to. He wants to do it."

Despite having run a total distance that could get him from his home town of Liverpool to Inverness, running is not actually Lennan's chosen sport: like many boys his age, Lennan dreams of becoming a footballer and, unsurprisingly, he is already putting in the hard work to realise his dream.

He is enrolled in Preston North End football academy and holds high hopes for a professional career at the club. He says: "At the moment, I play for Preston North End. I play right back and I've just enjoyed it from [when I was] a baby."



Rain or shine, Lennan Aspinall gets out to train for his running challenges

However, Lennan isn't looking to give up on his fundraising anytime soon. "Since I've started, it's seemed like every year I've really got to that point where I want to do it again and again," he says.

"So, I think I'll do it for quite a bit [...] hopefully when I'm older and, because I'm always raising money for other charities, it'd be nice to start my own charity."

There is one challenge Lennan has set his sights on that his family seem unsure about: "The Three Peaks Challenge," he says.

The National Three Peaks Challenge involves climbing the three highest peaks of Scotland, England and Wales — Ben Nevis, Scafell Pike and Snowdon — often within 24 hours. "It's something adults tend to do, not children," Rossiter says.

Lennan doesn't seem so sure: "I'll be 13 next year. Surely I'll be old enough?"

If you're a man in suicidal crisis in the northeast or northwest of England or London, you can access support from James' Place via jamesplace.org.uk. For immediate support go to your nearest A&E or walk-in centre, call 111, call the Samaritans on 116 123 or text SHOUT to 85258.

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At last, I've discovered the joy of the open road
Sarah Ditum
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Comment

When politicians fail, the celebrities step in

Figures such as Martin Lewis and Jeremy Clarkson increasingly have more recognition, longevity and clout than MPs



James Kanagasooriam

Sir Keir Starmer has had the worst start of any elected British prime minister in recent memory. Fewer than one in five adults approve of his government. Labour has slipped in the polls behind the Conservatives, and in some instances behind Reform too. Starmer's sandcastle coalition, which won him July's election, is being washed away, collapsing from a commanding 45 per cent vote share over the summer to 25 per cent today. In short it could not be going worse, but is it all his fault?

Restless democracies and bumpy poll ratings are creating transitory leadership and blurred political memories. That's what a YouGov poll found in December, with one third of the public unable to list the most recent Conservative prime ministers in the correct order, even when prompted with the first and last in the sequence. It seems the speed of our political cycle is robbing politicians of the opportunity to make long-term connections with the public.

Celebrities are increasingly stepping into the vacuum left by failing professional politicians, with growing frequency and impact. From Esther Rantzen on assisted dying and Jeremy Clarkson at the farmers' protests to Carol Vorderman on tactical voting and Marcus Rashford on free school meals, successful political campaigns are increasingly accompanied by celebrities. And not just as adjunct figures but as the driving force behind change, shaping public opinion and communication. It used to be the other way round.

Back in the 1980s Margaret Thatcher dominated the national scene, not just as a political figure but as a person whose permanence and personal atmospherics defined the decade. The idea of a celebrity going up against her would have seemed nonsensical.

The same goes for New Labour and the Noughties: Tony Blair and Cool Britannia were the zeitgeist, but we knew who the pop stars were and who the political leaders were. British society feels different now, with authority flowing from the once seemingly permanent class of public figures.

If politicians are becoming more ephemeral, long-surviving celebrities are increasingly part of our mental furniture. In 2024 you could have watched Jimmy Anderson bowling for the England cricket team, Kelsey Grammer joke on *Frasier* or Bruce Springsteen sing live. A diary from 2004 would say the same.

> We're only a few years away from electing a celebrity mayor

Our celebrities have a deeper relationship with the public than do our political leaders.

Pollster YouGov holds a database on the popularity and fame levels of Britain's television celebrities and politicians. This resource highlights the level of disparity between the two classes of public figures. It reports 150 or so TV personalities in Britain who are more popular than any of its 290 political figures. The broadcaster David Attenborough, money-saving expert Martin Lewis and actor David Tennant are twice as popular as the most popular politicians in the country — still Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, who classify as crossover celebrities. If you thought approval doesn't necessarily translate into leadership capability, a recent survey carried out by More in Common found that, by a three to one margin, the public thought Martin Lewis would make a better leader than Starmer or Kemi Badenoch, and by 55 to 45 they thought the same of Jeremy Clarkson. These figures would be less hypothetical if we had to hear what cuts Lewis would enact in the civil service or what Clarkson's exact immigration policy would be.

Unlike the United States, Britain doesn't have a directly elected executive or open primaries where individuals can hack the party system, but there are other celebrity tailwinds in UK politics. Our political "grid" of news is no longer controlled by government but by events and well-resourced campaigns on social and political issues. Take the recent "crush crime" campaign by the academic Lawrence Newport to tackle the supercriminals who commit 90 per cent of crime. Discrete single-issue campaigns like Newport's provide an almost risk-free way of celebrity intervention.

Second, the number of executive positions at the devolved level offers entry points for celebrities who wish to govern. We are only a few years away from a celebrity mayor — most likely in London. Social media has bypassed many traditional publications, allowing individuals to have a personal, and perhaps political, relationship with millions.

Nothing is new in politics; the sociologist Max Weber gave a blueprint more than a century ago for how celebrity politicians might govern. Weber argued that there were three sources of authority. The first, "traditional", referred to the



MARTIN POPE/ALAMY

Voters thought Jeremy Clarkson a better leader than Starmer or Badenoch

authority flowing from the monarch or established church. That's now severely curtailed by constitutional change, liberalism and secularism. The second he called "legal-rational" authority, referring to a country's political and economic bureaucracies underpinned by law. Those haven't had the best time of it recently, either. Just ask the civil servant who signed off a £100 million bat tunnel for HS2, or the people unable to build houses due to our "vetocracy". Pessimism that our laws and institutions can deliver is widespread.

This puts Weber's third source of authority, "charisma", into focus. Weber's idea of charismatic authority was that the public could be moved by force of personality and the vision of a charismatic leader. In many ways the discussion about increased involvement of celebrities in our political life is a symptom of the deep failure of our traditions and political structures. But it is also perhaps a recognition that many modern British politicians have failed to connect and explain why they believe what they believe.

Celebrities can evoke a sense of Britain that is more resonant than that delivered by our politicians. Take Clarkson again. He spans different vectors of Britishness that

> Weber believed the public could be moved by force of personality

most politicians would struggle to embrace. The avid Remainer whose vibes are Mr Brexit; the man who loves his gas-guzzling cars but has switched careers to nurture Britain's green and pleasant land. A middle-aged Englishman who is more popular with millennials than with boomers; a once-metropolitan Notting Hill resident who found his people among the "Barbour army" of farmers.

Clarkson's conception of Britishness isn't the quango-approved Danny Boyle version we saw at the 2012 Olympics or the darker nostalgic version that creeps into far-right politics. He personifies British irony, and you're usually left smiling. The nation's favourite farmer has said he doesn't want to stand for office but it's obvious why some are urging him on. With Farage's charisma dominating, a counterbalance is needed. The celebrities might just be coming in 2025.

James Kanagasooriam is chief research officer of Focaldata

Daniel Finkelstein is away

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Comment

Trump can tackle Iran in ways Biden ducked

Tehran has been a problem for every president since Carter but the regime's weakness is evident

Roger Boyes



@ROGERBOYES

Both men, Jimmy Carter and Joe Biden, will go down with the general public as one-term Democrat losers. That's partly a matter of their personal gaucheness. The president attacked by a giant rabbit? That somehow became a metaphor for the hapless presidency of Carter. Collapsing in a sweaty heap in a long-distance running race? Carter again.

As for Biden, his many gaffes, his televised brain-freeze, the petulance and confusion: these all ate away at voter confidence to such a degree that he has become an almost spectral presence in the White House.

Yet, as the obituaries of the centenarian Carter try to make clear, his record was not all bad. The Camp David Accords of 1978 brought Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel together. Despite its shortcomings, the deal secured diplomatic recognition of Israel, Egypt recovered the Sinai and a peace of sorts was put in place.

The brain behind Carter's foreign policy was national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who persuaded him to use human rights as a soft-power tool to give some limited protection to dissidents in the Soviet Union and other communist states. This, as much as Ronald Reagan's high-spending arms competition with Moscow, helped speed the internal collapse of communist power.

Reagan always thought that the Carter-Brzezinski duo had surrendered the Panama Canal, abandoned Taiwan to communist China and negotiated a flawed strategic arms treaty with the Kremlin. Donald Trump's recent comments suggest that he wants to recover part of the Panama Canal at an early stage of his presidency. It remains to be seen whether he will be more assertive on the right of Taiwan to self-government.

Just as Carter was perceived as a welcome change of style after the messy withdrawal from Vietnam,

> The messy withdrawal from Afghanistan sent out a grim signal

Biden was seen as a competent and honest replacement for the first Trump administration. But Biden lacked a Brzezinski-like figure at his side and was overconfident about his own foreign policy expertise. His muddled summer 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan essentially handed the country over to a Taliban government, sending a grim signal to anyone still naive enough to believe in a Pax Americana. Biden did display some of the Brzezinski flair in arming the Ukrainian forces in their fight against Russian invaders, but all too often undermined his own strategy by failing to deliver arms or provide training in a timely way. It was not Biden's fault that he found himself embroiled in two big wars, in the Middle East and eastern Europe, but it has become plain to his allies that he was never cut out to be a war leader. Neither was Carter, and he spent his long post-presidential years making amends by developing mediation strategies and running election monitoring teams.

The ultimate measure of the historical standings of both Carter and Biden, though, will be their fumbling treatment of Iran. Carter ended his term with a slap on the cheek from the Iranian revolutionary leadership, which refused to release the more than 50 diplomats held hostage in the US embassy in Tehran until minutes after the president handed over the reins of power to Reagan. One reason for his defeat had been the catastrophic failure of a secret military rescue mission in April 1980. Many years into his retirement, Carter regretted that he had not ordered more helicopters to take part in the rescue and thus hedge against the crash that foiled it.

In fact, Carter's errors on Iran began with US patronage of the Shah, who stayed in power too long. The sick shah was offered refuge in the US at the last minute — and the way was made clear for the Islamic revolution.

Biden, like Carter, leaves office with an unresolved hostage crisis: about a hundred people held captive by Hamas in Gaza. They are chiefly Israeli, but Biden, in delegating the CIA chief Bill Burns to lead negotiations, has acknowledged that his administration can make demands of Israel only if it deploys diplomatic heavyweights of its own into the fray. There is a sliver of hope that the hostages could be freed, in imitation of the Carter manoeuvre, on Trump's inauguration day.

That is likely to be misplaced optimism, a sign of the fuzzy thinking about Iran that has threaded its way from Carter through Barack Obama to Biden. Is the regime's hostile behaviour a reaction to America's hostile policies (solution: lift sanctions)? Or is it that only greater economic hardship (aggravated by tougher sanctions) can force Tehran to choose between its unravelling imperial dogma and the survival of the regime?

Biden could have reacted earlier to its weakening after the near-loss of Hezbollah, Iran's closest bodyguard, and the implosion of Syria, its most important state-neighbour. Not to mention the evident weakening of the supreme leader Ali Khamenei. Biden could have chosen a path. Instead he hesitated, as Carter did, over ending the hostages' misery.

Rather than being deterred by the complexities of change in Iran, Trump should put it near the top of the agenda. He now has to make the call that Biden has been ducking — maximum pressure not only on the Iranian regime with an escalating ladder of sanctions but also on those powers, including China and India, that have been buying up Iranian oil at a discount. This cash is helping to fund Tehran's proxy wars. Iranians see that those wars are shattering, not furthering, the dream of a greater Iran. Tougher, better-enforced sanctions will show the repressed middle class and the divided elites that they are also making the country poorer.

THUNDERER

It's becoming too easy to demolish our old buildings

John Darlington

Sometimes, despite all the talk of reducing, reusing and recycling, it feels as if we are still living in the Disposable Epoch — or perhaps the Garb Age. Yes, we religiously separate our plastics from the glass and food waste, but what about the very places in which we live, work and play — our historic buildings?

The recent decision by the deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, to approve the demolition of Orchard House, Marks & Spencer's flagship building on Oxford Street, is a case in point. Completed in 1930, this handsome addition to London's most famous shopping street is deemed not to offer an "attractive, pleasant experience for customers". According to the retailer, retrofitting the old store was simply not possible, so now it will be torn down and replaced with a nine-storey building which will include a smaller shop, café, offices and a gym.

M&S's argument against retention has been challenged by campaign groups such as Save Britain's Heritage, which argue convincingly that a retrofit of the old shop would not only save energy but time and precious resources.

Alas, this is a common malaise. Bored with your old building? Too much effort and expense to convert it? Well, don't worry, just knock it down and start again. In the UK, we demolish more than 50,000 buildings a year. Clearly, some will not be fit for purpose but that's still an enormous amount of embedded carbon and spent energy thrown away, to be replaced by a structure that requires still more. This hardly fits the agenda of achieving net zero, especially when we consider that the building and construction sector is responsible for 40 to 50 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually — that's more than aviation and shipping combined.

Not only is this attitude wasteful and shortsighted, it erodes the very character that makes so many of our towns and cities interesting and distinctive. There are countless examples of retrofitting that not only breathe life into old buildings but spark economic and social regeneration, such as Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter or Nottingham's Lace Market. And many have taken place in buildings that are far more difficult to convert than Orchard House, where the challenge was to turn a shop into … a shop.

Organisations such as World Monuments Fund believe our historic buildings and ancient monuments to be some of humankind's largest and most resilient, adaptable and democratic works of art. Why are we so wasteful of them? No more Garb Age — "reduce, reuse and recycle" applies to our historic buildings too.

John Darlington is an archaeologist, author and director of projects for World Monuments Fund

Tom Whipple Notebook

Carter's odd suggestion feels rather special now

A decade ago I interviewed Jimmy Carter. There's an African parasite he took a particular dislike to on leaving office, called the Guinea worm. He decided to devote whatever was left of his career to making it extinct.

We were meeting to chat about the progress. From 3.5 million human infections a year we were, then, down to a few dozen (today it's fewer than ten — the last stage of an eradication is always the hardest). He was particularly proud of a poster he had seen in Nigeria (now Guinea worm-free) that read: "Watch out, Guinea worm. Here comes Jimmy Carter."

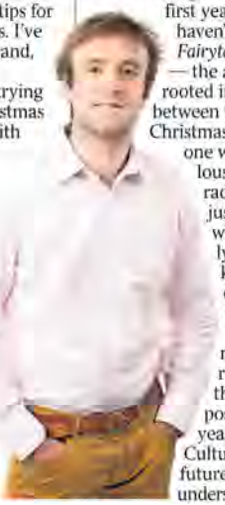
As a science writer I don't often — no, ever — interview former US presidents. It was very exciting, what with the secret service detail and everything. So I was keen to look blithe and professional. The interview went well, I thought. Then, as it ended, he said, "Shall we have our selfie now?" "Our what?" I replied. "Our selfie," he said. Before I could respond he reached over to get my phone and passed it to an assistant — then we posed together for a picture. I was very embarrassed. My mum has it on her mantelpiece, and has spent this week marking his death by sending it to her sisters.

I went back on my word

Over Christmas I wrote an article detailing expert tips for winning at board games. I've always been very competitive and, I argued, there's no point in playing a game unless you're trying to win. Then the spirit of Christmas tested me. Playing Scrabble with my sons, I was dealt N-C-N-T-U-S-Z. My role as a dad and that of an overcompetitive dad were in opposition. Which would win? With reluctance, I played "nuts".

Adding insult to injury

There was a time in my life when many things — unexpected things — were "gay". A friend's lurid green bicycle was gay. Maths homework was gay. Stacking the dishwasher was gay. Once, I remember referring to a window as gay. Why was "gay" synonymous with "mildly bad" in the 1990s? It was not. I would have been adamant, because my friends and I were homophobic. The accusation would have outraged us. We argued vociferously against Section 28. We backed gay marriage. We supported all homosexual rights. We just liked calling things gay.



I bring this up because for the first year it seems we haven't had the traditional *Fairytale of New York* row — the annual argument rooted in the tension between this being the finest Christmas song ever, and also one with the line "cheap, lousy faggot". Instead, radio stations have just used the version with replacement lyrics, the world has kept turning and no one has mustered any outrage.

This seems a good moment, then, to record for posterity the uneasy linguistic position held, for a few years, by the word gay. Cultural historians of the future will struggle to understand the nuances of the homophobic slur in the late 20th century — or why it was truly the case that a band could write the line "you cheap, lousy faggot", a whole nightclub could sing along, and all involved could genuinely consider themselves proponents of homosexual equality (and, in most cases, genuinely be proponents of homosexual equality).

They will also struggle to understand something else — how we were all so remarkably incurious about one glaring inconsistency. We all prided ourselves on our liberal attitude to gay rights, but this attitude was entirely in the abstract; we did not have any openly gay friends. Why did our peers not feel able to come out? Could it be, I wonder, that if you grow up gay in an environment in which the term "gay" was the ubiquitous ironic insult of choice, you don't always wholly agree with the "ironic" bit?

Spoilt rotten

Have we reached peak Hotel Chocolat? The chocolates are yummy, the presentation beautiful. But the value surely comes in what it signals as a gift: you are presenting someone with luxury and exclusiveness. If so, surely its ubiquity this Christmas 2024 will be its undoing. Gifters looking to signal sophistication will need something more obscure. Is the brand about to go the way of Thorntons?



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At last, I've discovered the joy of the open road

Passing your driving test at 42 isn't just liberating, it's proof that new skills can be acquired with age. So what's next?

Sarah Ditum



@SARAHDITUM

In December, according to Google Maps, I drove about 700 miles. I drove to see my family in the Midlands and I drove to see a gig in Manchester. I gave my children lifts and I drove to the supermarket. I was a passenger on the way to Cornwall for Christmas, but I drove all the way back, and I now have extremely developed opinions about the A30 in general (bad) and the Plusha Junction in particular (terrible).

All this is, of course, terribly banal in the general run of things. But none of this would have been in the general run of things for me 12 months ago, because I only got my driving licence in 2024. By the time I passed my test last March (on the first attempt, not that I expect you to be impressed), I was the grand age of 42. I beat my 18-year-old daughter by about a fortnight.

Why did it take me so long? Well, having an 18-year-old daughter, and a 22-year-old son, is part of it. After I'd had children, there never seemed to be money or time to go back to the driving lessons I'd suspended when I went to university.

I figured I'd get round to it eventually; eventually never came. Then, once I hit my thirties, being a non-driver had stopped being a temporary condition and calcified into an essential fact of who I was.

I wasn't exactly wrong to feel the possibility slipping away. As you get older, driving gets harder. At 17, the pass rate is 60 per cent. At 30, it's 44 per cent. At 40, it dwindles to 39 per cent. Presumably, a lot of that can be put down to the fact that people who are actually good at driving get it done earlier: older cohorts have been winnowed down so the incompetent predominate.

I haven't wept in the car since the first time I drove on a motorway

But that wasn't much comfort to me. What if I was one of the incompetents!

Even if I wasn't incompetent to start with, maybe I was by now. As I'd read in hundreds of pop neuroscience articles, brain plasticity declines with age. When I was a teenager, my brain had probably been a fine, light jelly, ready to take the impression of whatever new skill I attempted. Twenty-five years later, I imagined it had turned into a thick sludge, impossible to dislodge from its time-worn channels.

The other thing you gain with age, as well as crusted neurons, is a sense of caution. Teenagers have one major advantage when they get behind the wheel: it never occurs to them that they might be steering a tonne of metallic death. This is also their big disadvantage, since lacking a sense of mortality means they're prone to dumb risks. On the other hand, they're unlikely to burst into tears at the sheer gravity of driving a car.

Which is what I did in my first lesson in my forties. My instructor had taken me out to a quiet estate, where I trundled around the block at about ten miles an hour and then pulled in at the side of the road and cried. Like an adult.

"I just don't think I can!" I sobbed. To which my instructor pointed out that I already had, so I might as well carry on.

From that point, it was just a question of putting the hours in. There was no big drama, no abrupt moment of personal discovery. Just the steady accretion of practice until a novelty became a habit became a reflex (sort of: there's still some trial and error on the parallel parking). I haven't even wept in the car since the first time I drove on a motorway without dual controls. I have, however, wound down my window to scream at a lorry driver who was blocking my road before pulling an angry U-turn, which felt like a significant moment: baby's first road rage. But on the whole, becoming a driver has been a good-vibes experience. I've done more things, seen more people and spent less time waiting for trains that don't come. It's a cliché but it's also true: driving means freedom.

How many bright young things end up as burnt-out relics?

It also means silencing the snide little voice in my head that said I was too old in my forties to learn anything new.

We live in a society that celebrates prodigies. Lists like Fortune's 40 under 40 or Forbes' 30 under 30 imply there's an age cut-off at which your achievements cease to be impressive. Or rather, your achievements stop being the promise of even greater things to come. "Potential" belongs to the young.

Except it doesn't. Leo Tolstoy was 67 when he learnt to ride a bike; Marie Curie was in her fifties when she learnt to swim. And yes, they were both geniuses, but that's even more reason to suppose you've got the capacity to change in midlife and beyond.

They had to specialise fiercely to (respectively) perfect the novel and revolutionise physics. If their brains were still flexible enough to learn new tricks, there's hope for the rest of us.

"Many people do not fully realise themselves until later in life," wrote Henry Oliver in his book *Second Act* last year. Believing you've reached your ultimate form when you've still got decades to go can be a curse. How many bright young things end up as burnt-out relics, tragically repeating themselves while the world goes forward without them?

This isn't a war between age and youth. The brashness of inexperience can be a very good thing, but experience itself is a benefit too. If the great value of maturity is the knowledge you gain, that's a reason to keep on adding to it for as long as you can.

My driving adventure has made me think about what other new skills I might learn in 2025. Take up an instrument? Learn a language? Finally get to grips with GCSE-level maths? Obviously I'm quite busy right now, what with all the driving I'm doing, but that's OK: I've got my whole life ahead of me.

Alice Thomson is away

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor should be sent to letters@thetimes.co.uk or by post to 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Towering success

Sir, You report that the mayor of London "cannot stop councils from removing unpopular low-traffic neighbourhoods" ("Mayor loses court battle to keep low-traffic zones", Dec 19). In fact, the judgment was less clear-cut, accepting that the mayor does have some statutory powers to ensure that local councils implement or retain any plans already agreed: in this case, Bethnal Green's LTNs.

Every LTN is different and their benefits need to be considered case by case. In Tower Hamlets, the opposite of a gentrified enclave, they have been a huge success. Serious road injuries have been virtually eliminated, more people are walking and cycling and air quality is better. There hasn't been any long-term worsening of congestion on boundary roads or in emergency service response times. Local people, schools and businesses want our LTN to stay, as do GPs, the local hospital and the police. My 84-year-old neighbour, who has lived in the East End all his life, remarked that the scheme had brought back some of the community feel of his youth. We will appeal against the judge's ruling because this LTN is helping us to have better lives.

Jane Harris
Save Our Safer Streets in Tower Hamlets

Banishing Musk

Sir, Jawad Iqbal ("Royal Society must stand up to zealots who want Elon Musk out", Thunderer, Dec 31) asks what qualifies Dorothy Bishop, a psychologist, to make judgments on vaccines or climate policy. As a world leader in metascience, the study of science and its methods, she is better qualified than most to judge what scientists do and do not know. More importantly, Musk's downplaying of the climate crisis is not a matter of a difference of scientific opinion. Musk, who once called for a popular uprising against the fossil fuel industry, knows very well the extent and threat of man-made climate change. His change of rhetoric is motivated by the political and business advantages of a close relationship with Donald Trump. And that certainly is contrary to the scientific ethos that the Royal Society exists to promote.

Alexander Bird
Bertrand Russell professor of philosophy, University of Cambridge

Letters to The Times must be exclusive and may be edited. Please include a full address and daytime telephone number.

Corrections and clarifications

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Black marks on Labour's education policy

Sir, It's difficult to explain the prime minister's justification of VAT on private schools except in terms of wilful ignorance of very recent history ("VAT on private schools will help middle class, Starmer says", Dec 31). Even the most openly socialist economies have never achieved their holy grail of improvements for all by destroying private enterprise. So on what grounds can anyone rationally believe that increased taxes on private schools and on employers, and entirely new taxes on the capital value of farms, businesses and pensions, will produce a different result in the UK? Breaking the private sector linkages between aspiration, reward and self-sufficiency can only reduce growth, reduce the tax take and cause public sector spending to spiral. The wealthy will survive, but the prime minister's myth-making will cause huge distress for everyone else.

Nick Ritblat
London NW8

Sir, Melanie Phillips (comment, Dec 31) is correct to highlight the danger to the education system posed by an education secretary who seemingly revels in her intransigence and unwillingness to listen to more than a handful of ideologically driven advisers. The government's desire to destroy independent education — the real reason for the introduction of VAT on fees — is not solely ideological in motive. An often overlooked, but vital, role of independent schools is their very independence in the face of a state educational system that is too often politicised and used as a vehicle for social engineering. The encouragement of excellence, of sport and competition, the promotion of creativity, of languages and the arts, and a broad and rich curriculum that is more than simply utilitarian, are all examples of the sector's vital influence on the educational debate. The government would no doubt be delighted to remove this independent voice.

Mark Mortimer
Perth

Sir, It would be helpful if the prime minister clarified to whom he is referring when he uses labels such as "middle classes" and "workers". Clients of private education already pay tax and fees. I believe in access to high standards within all services for everyone and I suggest that enabling access to the benefits of private education to state school pupils would enhance provision for all. I went to a state school and my brother had a scholarship to a private school nearby. Both communities were successful as educators and the resources and expertise in both schools were shared and, dare I say, celebrated. Isn't it time to applaud and recognise excellence and access for all, rather than obsess over outdated class and worker stereotypes?

Lucy Hall
Tunbridge Wells

Sir, Melanie Phillips states that the purpose of education is to "cement a shared identity and bind the country together". This is not the purpose of education in the United Kingdom. The national curriculum talks of giving pupils the knowledge to be "educated citizens" but does not specify which nation they should be citizens of. It talks of appreciating "human" achievements, but never British ones. It is a functional document, taking little pride in Britain. A properly national curriculum should be able to celebrate as well as educate. Doing so might help to unite us more than a reviewed curriculum which appears likely to divide us yet further in the name of diversity.

Ben Horan
Headmaster, Prior Park College, Bath

Busiest royals in a year affected by illness

Sir, I have carried out a survey of the official engagements undertaken by the royal family in 2024, as reported in the Court Circular.

The King and the Princess of Wales both had treatment for cancer, which considerably reduced the number of engagements they were able to carry out. It should be remembered, too, that all engagements, whether visit, investiture or speech, differ as to time and content, and there is also time taken in preparation.

Except for Christmas Day and Easter Day, the King does not have a day off from the red boxes.

Tim O'Donovan
Datchet, Berks

Royal family engagements 2024

	A	B	C	D	E
The King	79	33	217	329	43
The Queen	89	43	20	152	30
Prince of Wales	88	10	39	137	29
Princess of Wales	10	1	2	13	-
Duke of Edinburgh	122	66	37	225	68
Duchess of Edinburgh	116	58	27	201	56
Princess Royal	224	90	81	395	79
Duke of Gloucester	140	36	40	216	-
Duchess of Gloucester	60	22	16	98	-
Duke of Kent	51	21	25	97	-

A Official visits, opening ceremonies, sports, concerts & charity events

B Receptions, lunches, dinners & banquets

C Other engagements, including investitures, meetings attended & audiences

D Total number of engagements in UK

E Total number of engagements on official overseas tours

Threats to home food production

Sir, The importance of increasing home food production to reinforce food security is well made by Libby Purves (comment, Dec 30). However, all the indicators are that farmland will continue to be diverted to other uses at an ever increasing rate. Powerful demands for alternative uses are inflating its market price to ten times its value for food production.

Housing and infrastructure continue to take land as a priority use; affluent new countryside residents grab land for horse paddocks and recreational use; and wildlife conservationists clamour for more land to be "rewilded" with the aid of government grants. The last straw is the new inheritance tax on family farms, which is to be levied not on an affordable measure of agricultural profitability but on the inflated market value of land for alternative uses. UK food production is in danger of becoming a thing of the past.

Richard Harvey
Oakham, Rutland

NEW YEAR REVELS AT ALBERT HALL

FROM THE TIMES JANUARY 1, 1925

The Chelsea Arts Club held its annual ball at the Albert Hall last night, and carried its festivities well on into the early hours of the New Year. There were over 4,000 present, and towards midnight, when the crowds were thickest, the vast floor presented a variegated spectacle that was not out of keeping with the profession of the majority of the "revellers" or with the season of the year.

The building was decorated in a Venetian scheme, but the hanging canvases and the wall paintings were dominated by a "birthday cake", rising some 30ft from the centre of the floor towards the dome. Set with giant candles and "sculptured" figures, and swept by the long fingers of the searchlights, it made an impressive centre-piece for the winding throngs of dancers.

The costumes were as striking as ever, graduating in every shade and colour from the nicest effects from Mayfair to grotesque conceptions that could have originated only in the studios. Pierrot and Pierrette, Arlequin and Columbine, of course, were there — and the Eastern Potentate — but even these amounted to but a banal speck here and there in the riot of colour.

On the stroke of midnight the figures on the birthday cake came to life, and the cake itself opened to give up a store of gifts to the dancers — chocolates for Pierrette and cigarettes for Pierrot. Then, with the New Year came the customary mummery. This time we had a "gondola" from the Slade (with a real lantern in the stern) as a point of vantage in a "Carnival of Venice". There was an elephant, too, from the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and a monstrous bird, who, seconded from the South Kensington School of Art, came as a phoenix. In the wake of these came, not inappropriately, a "hunting scene", taken straight from the Classics by medical students.

Supper was served upstairs in the Galleries. The Clabon West Orchestra played, among their music being several dance numbers composed for the occasion. Dancing was carried on till early morning, and of those who chased fugitive taxi-cabs up and down Kensington-gore at 5am, there were few who had cause to complain of the welcome that had been offered to the New Year.

THETIMES.COM/ARCHIVE

Romance scorned

Sir, Your article "Pumpkin spice and smut — the rise of 'cosy kink'" (Dec 28) raises an intriguing question: why criticise something that brings others joy? The article also suggests that romance readers are being manipulated by algorithms, as if they lack the agency that readers of other genres possess. My novel *Christmas at the Board Game Café* was incorrectly categorised as part of this trend. My novels are closed-door romances: there is no sex, kinky or otherwise.

Disdain for commercial fiction has a long and ironic history. Dickens wrote for the mass market of his day: was he too responding to the 19th century equivalent of "algorithmic demand"? Understanding the appeal of romance fiction, instead of criticising publishers, might offer more meaningful insights.

Jennifer Page
Cragg Vale, W Yorks

The mighty pen

Sir, I can attest to the power of handwriting (letters, Dec 26, 28, 30 & 31). My husband of 62 years and four months died a year ago. He remained my beloved until the end but I found that I couldn't remember him as he was in his prime, which was distressing. During the Christmas break I found and reread for the first time the hundreds of letters we wrote to each other during our engagement: we lived in different countries, there was no internet, telephone was expensive and the post was cheap.

It is wonderful therapy and a great comfort. I can hear and almost see him as he was then and I find myself falling in love with him all over again.

Aude Fitzsimons
Girton, Cambridge

Wartime secrets

Sir, Further to John Doherty's letter (Dec 30) regarding keeping Bletchley Park and its activities a secret during the war, my mother told an anecdote from that time. She served in the WAAF, feeding signals into BP. Some of that time was spent at Bentley Priory in Stanmore, where all her mail to her mother was postmarked Birmingham. Mum only learnt this when she visited her mother and found out she'd been avidly following news on bombings in Birmingham.

Penny Braithwaite
Winslow, Bucks

Listen with mother

Sir, I grew up in a family where both my parents demanded absolute silence during the *Shipping Forecast* (letters, Dec 30 & 31). We waited anxiously when it came to Humber, Thames, Dover — the area we spent our childhood sailing. We were definitely fair-weather sailors.

Even when my mother had given up sailing, she listened every day to the *Shipping Forecast* and requested that *Sailing By* should be the only music played at her funeral.

J Martin Scott
Shaftesbury, Dorset

Under the cosh

Sir, Perusal of the new year honours list (Dec 31) frequently produces some intriguing associations, this year being no exception.

Congratulations to Manchester Assistant Chief Officer Ian Cosh for "services to policing".

Tom Dehn
Stratfield Mortimer, Berks

Daily Universal Register

UK: The cap on bus fares in England rises from £2 to £3, until December.
Brussels: Poland assumes presidency of the Council of the European Union, until June.

Nature notes



Fancy a new hobby? Nocturnal Flight Call recording, or "nocmigging", is a fast-growing activity beloved of keen ornithologists. Relatively inexpensive and simple to do, it involves setting up recording apparatus in the evening and then leaving it on all night. In the morning, you review what passed overhead. To keep together, birds constantly call to each other as they migrate, and the software identifies individual species by the sound patterns of this vocalising. It's often surprising and rewarding to find out exactly what flew over as you slept. Even in apparently unpromising sites like city centres, the recording picks up everything from whimbrels to golden eagles, hawfinches to whooper swans, cranes to curlews. Moorhens are surprisingly frequent night flyers. JONATHAN TULLOCH

Birthdays today



Dame Mary Beard, *pictured*, classics editor of TLS and writer, *Emperor of Rome* (2023), professor of classics, University of Cambridge (2004-22), 70; **Altynai Asylmuratova**, former prima ballerina with Kirov Ballet, 64; **Alison Bevan**, director, Royal West of England Academy (2013-24), 60; **Tracy Borman**, chief historian, Historic Royal Palaces, chancellor, Bishop Grosseteste University, and author, *Anne Boleyn & Elizabeth I* (2023), 53; **Lord (Nicholas) Bourne of Aberystwyth**, minister for Wales (2017-19) and minister for faith (2016-19), 73; **Jon Callard**, rugby union player, England (1993-95), now coach, 59; **Gia Coppola**, film director, *The Last Showgirl* (2024), 38; **Prof Sir Martin Evans**, biologist, Nobel prizewinner (2007), first scientist to identify embryonic stem cells in mice, 84; **John Fuller**, poet and novelist, *You're Having Me On!* (2014), and expert on WH Auden, 88; **Trevor Grove**, journalist, editor, The Sunday Telegraph (1989-92), 80; **Jacky Ickx**, Belgian racing driver, 80; **Bill Jacklin**, painter, 82; **Stephen Kinnock**, Labour MP for Aberafan Maesteg, minister for care, 55; **Christine Lagarde**, president, European Central Bank, managing director, International Monetary Fund (2011-19), 69; **Paul Lawrie**, golfer, winner of the Open (1999), 56; **Michael Lynton**, chairman, Snap (the Snapchat mobile app), chairman and chief executive, Sony Pictures Entertainment (2004-17), 65; **Jimi Mistry**, actor, *Coronation Street* (2013-15), 52; **Prof Sir Anton Muscatelli**, economist, principal and vice-chancellor, University of Glasgow, 63; **Jonah Peretti**, internet entrepreneur, co-founder of BuzzFeed and The Huffington Post, 51; **Fiona Phillips**, TV presenter, *GMTV* (1993-2010), 64; **Joseph Saddler (Grandmaster Flash)**, hip-hop artist, 67; **Georgina von Etzdorf**, textile designer, 70; **Jack Wilshere**, footballer, England (2010-16), 33.

On this day

In 1962, after an audition, Decca Records rejected the Beatles. They were told that guitar groups were "on the way out".

The last word

"Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future,/ And time future contained in time past." TS Eliot, poet and dramatist, *Burnt Norton* (1936)

Elon's Lament

The world's richest man has highlighted the deep flaws in Sir Keir Starmer's approach to business. His fundamental critique is correct

Elon Musk is a problematic messenger with a very important message. The world's richest man, the mastermind behind Tesla, SpaceX and X, has devoted increasing energy to political commentary, not all of it accurate. On his social media platform, Mr Musk has focused much ire on the UK and the missteps of Sir Keir Starmer's government. Most recently it has been its attitude towards business. "Very few companies will be willing to invest in the UK with the current administration," he lamented over the Christmas break.

His numerous detractors will be pained to admit it, but Mr Musk is, on this, right. Sir Keir's government has claimed to be unashamedly pro-growth and pro-business. The reality could not be starker. During its first six months in office, ministers have seemingly gone out of their way to discourage investment. Rachel Reeves's debut budget will do little to boost growth, according to the government's own figures. The sharp rise in employers' national insurance has drained business confidence. The much-vaunted workers' rights package will cost employers £5 billion.

Sir Keir sought to grasp the nettle of planning reform, yet has shown little proof he will take on the vested interests in councils across the country. Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, has undermined the UK's education successes through pernicious attacks on private education, seeking to strip the curriculum of its rigour, and allowing the growth of free schools and academies to halt. Plus, the decision to undermine family-run businesses and farms through wrongheaded inheritance tax reforms suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the UK's economy.

Mr Musk's attack grasps all that is wrong with the Starmer government. Instead of embracing enterprise, the only clear motivation from Sir Keir's government is to grow an increasingly assertive public sector that will, in turn, squeeze investment. Hefty inflation-busting pay rises doled out to train drivers, junior doctors, dentists and nurses have failed to be coupled with critical improvements in productivity. At every turn, the prime minister's instinct has been to embrace statism. Investors seeking fertile ground to grow their enterprises will find little to like in the UK.

Many of the problems lie in the psyche of senior ministers. Ms Reeves has scant experience of the private sector. Nor does Sir Keir. In fact, almost no senior members of the Starmer government have run or started their own business; their hinterlands tend to be in the public or charitable sectors, in trade unions or professional politics. Businesses are right to feel hoodwinked by Sir Keir and Ms Reeves, who pledged many times during the election campaign that taxes would not shoot up. Instead they have faced £40 billion of rises.

There is a problem in attitude too. Take, for example, how Ms Reeves dealt with criticisms of her first budget. Many of the UK's largest retailers, including Tesco and Boots, have warned that an impending £7 billion increase in annual costs will result in job cuts and higher prices. The chancellor has offered a like-it-or-lump-it response, telling businesses to "absorb" the extra costs through efficiencies. If such a task was so straightforward for British commercial life, it raises the question of why it is so hard to make such gains in the NHS.

As the UK enters a new year, it can take some comfort that it remains a more attractive investment opportunity than some of its European neighbours such as France and Germany. But Sir Keir should heed Mr Musk's criticisms that he has put the country on the wrong economic path. Whether Mr Musk donates a significant sum to Nigel Farage's Reform UK party or not, his critique is salient. 2025 should be a year of reform: to how the British state works and to open the doors to business. Otherwise, if growth stutters further, another kind of Reform will see its support grow.

The world in 2025

Donald Trump's return to the White House will dictate geopolitics in the year ahead

Wars will linger on, Iran will decide whether to press ahead with a nuclear bomb, weak imploding states will cause more geopolitical problems than chest-beating strongmen. Both free and non-free societies will struggle to define the limits of new technology. Perhaps there will be a space arms race, neighbours will quarrel, European establishments will at first cower before new nationalists, then attempt to muzzle or to buy them.

All these are reasonable predictions for 2025, but ultimately much of what happens will hinge on a singular 78-year-old man, Donald Trump, as he begins a second term. It appears, from the depth of his preparations, he wants to be a more disciplined leader. Mr Trump has snatched the interregnum between the election in November and January's inauguration to talk to foreign leaders and gather tech billionaires who want to make American bureaucracy trimmer and fighting fit.

Donald the Second has given his team of loyalists jobs to do from day one, to avoid squandered time. A peace deal between Russia and Ukraine, an American border crackdown that will build up to a mass deportation of illegal migrants, and an acceleration of the American military rivalry with China. Much will depend on the ability of allies and antagonists to change step.

President Putin has been at pains to declare he could do business with the former jihadist who has dislodged the Syrian leader, the Kremlin placeman Bashar al-Assad. The rest of the planet reads this ouster as a humiliation for an increasingly friendless Mr Putin but the old KGB hand could not allow that to stand: to do so would send a message of weakness to the incoming, famously transactional American president. Western allies of Mr Trump are preparing to join in this barn dance. There is quiet agreement in Nato that the Russian-Ukrainian war cannot end at short notice. If Ukraine enters negotiations with Russia, it should do so from a position of strength. A bad deal enforced on Ukraine by an impetuous US president would make him look weak.

The new Nato secretary-general, Mark Rutte, and several European Nato leaders have communicated this to the president-elect. Mr Trump, say these petitioners, should be offered a deal. If the president decides Ukraine should not be given Nato membership for a decade, Europeans should chip in billions in loans to support the Ukrainian military well into 2026. The advantage: Mr Trump would be able to declare a victory with European allies digging deep in their pockets.

The Trump mass deportation scheme, meanwhile, could involve the removal of 1.3 million irregular workers. Combined with higher tariffs, the economy would shrink and inflation would soar. It is in the nature of a US presidential mobilisation that a head of steam builds up worldwide. It may do so on asylum policy: Trump's fascination with the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni suggests he has a kindred transatlantic spirit.

For now, the Sino-American rivalry will focus on Beijing's development of "long wingman" attack drones, designed to lead swarms of smaller drones into combat. The plan is part of a struggle for air superiority between Beijing and the US, and should be watched as a warm-up for a possible hot war over Taiwan. Mr Trump's interest is a signal: he sees China not just as a prime geopolitical rival but also as a potential military foe. Fasten your seatbelts for 2025 — it's going to be a bumpy ride.

Rising from the Ruins

Gisèle Pelicot has been an inspiration to victims of sexual violence worldwide

Many people have moments, both in life and marriage, when things that seemed solid and certain are dismayingly revealed as quite the opposite. But few will ever endure such an unimaginable betrayal as Gisèle Pelicot, or such a devastating liquidation of their world as they formerly knew it. For many years she thought herself a happily married woman living in a tranquil village in Provence, although beset by mysterious infections, memory loss and fatigue.

Then, after the arrest of her husband, Dominique, for a sexual offence, she discovered the grim source of her symptoms during all those years: the drugs that he had crushed in her food and drinks, and the assaults that followed. The police had found videos and photos of her unconscious form being raped not only by her husband, but also numerous strangers recruited on a chat room called "without her knowledge". "Everything caved in, everything I built for 50 years," she said, describing herself as "a field of ruins".

Yet from such ruins arose a truly extraordinary display of spirit, strength and courage. Ms Pelicot waived her right to anonymity and a trial behind closed doors. She allowed the graphic evidence of her rapes to be made public, as proof of what had occurred. And although the most grotesque indignities had been perpetrated upon her, every day in court she exuded a rare dignity and composure.

This French grandmother's case has shone a light, not only on the 51 men convicted of crimes against her, but also on the dark fantasies nurtured by much internet pornography — with its frequent themes of rape, incest and cruelty — and their damaging effects in real life. In 2024, Ms Pelicot acted as a comfort and inspiration to all who have been hurt and humiliated by sexual violence. Her rallying call that "shame must change sides" must not be forgotten in the year ahead.

World

Israel prepares to rain fire and fury upon the Houthis

After routing Hezbollah and Hamas, the IDF is targeting Iran's last proxy, writes **Gabrielle Weiniger** in Tel Aviv

For a brief moment as Lebanon and Israel signed a ceasefire pact a little over a month ago, the Middle East appeared to have stepped away from the abyss of all-out war.

Yet now Israel is weighing its next battle against Iran's last proxy standing: the Houthi rebels of Yemen, who are in the firing line despite being more than a thousand miles from Tel Aviv.

Across the board the Iranian proxies that surrounded Israel have fallen in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and even Iraq, where Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the leading Shia cleric, recently urged Baghdad to achieve military autonomy in a thinly veiled reproach to its Iran-backed militia. Extinguishing this ring of fire around Israel has left Iran exposed, with no air defence systems and signs of deep Israeli infiltration.

A week ago, for example, Israel admitted to the killing of Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas, inside Tehran. The destruction of Hezbollah, Iran's insurance policy that surrounded Israel with 150,000 rockets on their northern border, has left the regime without its most fearsome deterrent.

However, one group remains. The Houthis, who control nearly half of Yemen including its capital, Sanaa, have been firing missiles indiscriminately into Israel at an increasing rate, scaling up their weaponry over time. Yesterday a Houthi leader wrote on X in Hebrew: "Surprises are coming up."

Israel says it is gearing up for another war. "Until a few weeks ago, we retaliated once, twice. But it's fair to say that we no longer see it as just tit-for-tat. Now we're going fully in, and that means there is a plan with escalation steps. It connects to a bigger strategy," an Israeli security source told The Times.

"There is definitive intent on the Israeli side and by its international partners to fully take [the Houthis] on. There is full-fledged set of actions and capabilities that are being built now and will be executed at the right time."

While there are suggestions that the Houthis, who ascribe to Zaydi Islam, an offshoot of Shia, act independently from Iran, Israel's security establishment believes they are in lockstep with their financial and military backers.

The rebels joined the war in support of Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, on the day Hamas attacked Israel, killed 1,200 people and took 250 captive in October 2023. Since then Israel has killed more than 45,000 people in its war on Hamas, according to the Hamas-run health ministry.

The Israeli army is set to re-evaluate its campaign in Gaza. Its present stated goal is to pressure Hamas to accept a "good" ceasefire deal that will include lower-profile prisoners in any hostage exchange. Pressure from the incoming US administration to free all American hostages will play out too.

The Houthis are the only Iranian-backed proxy left standing to continue the Tehran regime's fight against Israel. The Israel Defence Forces and intelligence services are discussing whether to attack them alone, pursue international co-operation or go for the jugular by taking aim at Iran itself, the country that has supplied the Houthis with the power to target Israel with hypersonic missiles.

Israel has struck Yemen four times but the Houthis appear undeterred, leading Binyamin Netanyahu to say Israel is only "just getting started".

Israel has gone to war for similar reasons before. In 1967, when Egypt blocked Israeli shipping from the Straits of Tiran, which lead from Bab el-Mandeb on the Yemeni coast to the Israeli port of Eilat in the Red Sea, it was the *casus belli* for a war that not only changed the character of Israel but reshaped the region. Lyndon Johnson, the US president at the time, said: "The right of innocent maritime passage must be preserved."

Now the same waterway is under attack, disrupting vital global shipping and threatening American interests including military bases in Eritrea and Djibouti. The Biden administration has added the Houthis to the US terrorist list and expanded their sanctions, attacking military targets in an effort to curb their ability to strike commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea.

On this front, there is already some co-ordination between Israel, Britain and the US. Their attacks inside Yemen have been taking place on an almost alternate basis, one at a time. Israel believes closer collaboration is likely, particularly after Donald Trump becomes president on January 20.

Netanyahu, the 75-year-old prime minister, has been leading the charge against a nuclear Iran for two decades.

Israel believes Iran is at its weakest on the world stage and at home, where the Islamic Republic has lost credibility for pouring money into proxies that did not pay off. Local news outlets are reporting protests and strikes in the markets, an omen that heralded the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. With the dollar above 810,000 rials, inflation is at 600 per cent since 2019. Schools have closed and poverty is raging.

Israel's economy has also been downgraded, but the ceasefire in Lebanon edged its economy away from meltdown. With a little under four weeks left to withdraw troops under the terms of the ceasefire, the IDF is signalling that the Lebanese army is not ready to take over. Israel may be bogged down in Lebanon for longer still.

"Israel did the dirty work, clearing the scene of substantial Hezbollah capability and influence. But the Lebanese administration and military are not taking advantage ... it's up to them to protect their country, and they are not doing their part. We have to closely monitor the situation, and anything can change," a Middle East source said.

Israel is looking to make up for the intelligence failure of October 7 and is on the offensive. "Post-October 7 Israel doesn't take risks. The military got into Syria, it took out their navy, air force, their ammunition, because [the new government] has to prove they are no threat. Until we see that, we have to see them as a threat," the source said. "It is very clear to see that Israel intelligence has a reach near and far. The fact there was a failure in Gaza is in no doubt. We knew Hamas had those capabilities, but thought the intention was not to use them. Now, we act on capabilities, not intentions. We changed the equation."

Trump can tackle Iran in ways Biden ducked, Roger Boyes, page 18



Houthis from Yemen are in Israel's firing line but their fighters remain defiant



Facing the future **Balinese traditional dancers prepare for a dance to release the**

Don't embrace Beijing until

China

Richard Spencer China Correspondent

Britain should make the release of Jimmy Lai, the Hong Kong newspaper proprietor jailed for democratic activism, a condition of normalising relations with China, his son said.

Sebastien Lai said his father's matter was straightforward: political persecution of a journalist. He recalled the case of Cheng Lei, a Chinese-Australian journalist working as an English-language anchor for Chinese state television in Beijing who was jailed in 2020 for "endangering national security". She was freed in 2023 as part of negotiations to improve relations between Canberra and Beijing.

"Labour's trying to normalise relations with China — that's the phrase they use," Lai said. "What's happened to Dad, arresting someone arbitrarily for journalism, for standing up for democracy, is not something we ever want to normalise in this country. It's a very easy and costless thing for China to put Dad on a plane. It would take them two hours to send him to the UK."

Jimmy Lai, 77, who was born on the Chinese mainland, smuggled himself to Hong Kong as a child and worked in a factory in his teens. He later rose to become one of the most charismatic figures to emerge in Hong Kong in the run-up to the 1997 handover from Britain. His rabble-rousing tabloid paper, Apple Daily, was notable for its sensationalism, coverage of celebrities and support for democracy.

Lai took British citizenship before the handover but remained in Hong Kong, becoming one of the most high-profile opponents of Beijing's gradual crackdown on popular protest and opposition to the Communist Party in the city's legislative council.

After widespread and sometimes

South Korea air crash families plead for answers
Page 24

The Marseilles mafia so big it's now a brand
Page 26

SONNY TUMBELAKA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



sun of 2024, and then welcome the sun of 2025 at a New Year's Eve celebration in Denpasar on Indonesia's Bali island

my father is freed, Lai's son tells Britain

violent protests in 2019, and the introduction of a national security law at Beijing's behest to give greater powers to control dissent, he was arrested and has faced a series of trials, leading to repeat jail sentences.

His latest trial, in which he gave evidence before Christmas, accuses him of "colluding with foreign forces". It could bring a life sentence.

His son said that Britain could have taken a "stronger position early on". The coalition government headed by David Cameron from 2010 had sought to build a "golden era" of co-operation with China, and only gradually moved away from that policy as President Xi, who came to power in 2012, took a more hostile stance to the West.

Eventually it was Cameron, by now foreign secretary, who formally called for Lai's release last year, three years after his first arrest in August 2020.

"There's no point in crying over spilt milk," Lai said. However, he said that the US and Canada had taken a strong stance "from the start", adding: "Obviously there's more the UK can do, more other countries can do."

The new Labour government has said it wants to improve relations with Beijing, but has made the Lai case central to its plea for that to be accompanied by an improvement in China's human rights record.



Jimmy Lai, the pro-democracy campaigner. has been imprisoned since August 2020

In an unusual move, Sir Keir Starmer used a public, televised portion of his first meeting as prime minister with Xi, on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Brazil, to raise reports of Lai's worsening health. "We are concerned by reports of Jimmy Lai's deterioration," he told Xi, before reporters were ushered to the door by Chinese officials.

Sebastian Lai said his father had made a "deliberate choice" to stay in Hong Kong when the national security law was implemented, despite advice that he was at risk. No one had expected the eventual crackdown would be as severe as it became, he added, but now it was time to negotiate his release and to send him to Britain.

David Lammy, the foreign secretary, said he raised the case on his first visit to China, and that it would be raised in future bilateral engagements. Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, is expected to visit China this month, with trade issues set to dominate relationships in 2025 between London, Beijing and Donald Trump's White House. By that time, Lai's trial will have resumed.

'This is 482. I'm going down!' Kyiv strikes with killer boat drone

Russia

Maxim Tucker

Ukrainian special forces shot down a Russian military helicopter flying off the Crimean coast in the first successful sea-to-air engagement of its kind.

Team 13 of Ukraine's military intelligence, HUR, said that they had carried out a raid on Crimea yesterday morning, with their drones firing missiles at a pair of Russian Mi-8 helicopters dispatched to sink them. The special forces unit released a video of the encounter, apparently filmed by a drone, that showed the unmanned boat ploughing through the waves as machinegun bullets rained from a helicopter above. The feed switches to a targeting camera showing the Mi-8 gunship in the drone's crosshairs, before it launched a pair of missiles from the swell.

The first Mi-8 pops flares as it attempts to evade one missile before plunging into the sea after an apparent strike. The second narrowly escapes another missile launch, although military intelligence said it had been damaged during the attack.

HUR shared audio with The Times it said was a radio intercept from the second Russian helicopter: "I'm going down! [This] is 482, I'm going down! Going to Kimba [airbase]. I'm shot down! Follow me, I'm shot! [This is] 482, I can continue my flight. There was a blast, I was hit. Engines are OK for now. The shot was from the water! After that there was one more flash. I didn't see, where exactly it was directed. First one was directed exactly at me. It exploded near me and I could feel it on the helicopter, some systems stopped working."

Team 13 said it used Magura V5 unmanned surface vehicles, usually equipped with explosives to ram Russian vessels, but adapted to fire a pair of Sea Dragon missiles, a modified version of the R-73 air-to-air missile. The battle took place off Crimea's Tarkhankut Peninsula, more than 100 miles from the Ukrainian-controlled coastline.

The Times visited the elite team at a secret base last year and saw how they were adapting existing models for a range of new tasks. They have helped to sink a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Air Marshal Greg Bagwell, a retired senior RAF commander, said the Ukrainians had developed drone capability that would allow it to "take away any sanctuary for air platforms over the sea". For now the drone is most likely to be effective against slower targets like helicopters but could one day hit jets, he said. Bagwell said he had seen "nothing in service" with this power among the world's biggest militaries, including those of the US Britain, Russia and China, adding: "This type of capability is placed on capital ships for their own or their task groups protection. Major navies are slowly adopting maritime drones — they are all experimenting with them."



The Mi-8 gunship shown in the drone's crosshairs

HI Sutton, a naval expert, said the new Ukrainian craft had two possible uses. "The missiles provide the drone with a degree of self-protection. The craft is now better at defending itself against Russian helicopters and fast jets. One or two of the FrankenSAM USVs [unmanned surface vessels], mixed in with a larger force of regular USVs, may be enough to inhibit Russian attempts to interdict them," he wrote in a post on the site Naval News, after a modified drone was first spotted in May.

"The system opens the possibility of using them to ambush Russian aircraft as they take-off or land on Crimean air bases. The USVs can sit off the Crimean coast and pick off the aircraft ... unawares."

Putin ready to cut allies' gas

Oliver Moody Berlin

The main conduit of Russian gas into central Europe is expected to be cut off today as a transit deal with Kyiv comes to an abrupt end.

While most European states have alternative supplies since the Kremlin's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Hungary and a handful of its neighbours remain dependent on the "Brotherhood" network of pipelines from Russia.

Their governments are now confronted with a rise in energy bills, the loss of their own secondary transit revenues and the prospect of mounting public disgruntlement as one of their primary sources of natural gas vanishes overnight.

This is particularly uncomfortable for Viktor Orban, Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, and Robert Fico, his Slovakian counterpart, both of whom have consistently aligned themselves with Moscow. It is also potentially awkward for the centrist leadership of the Czech Republic, which declared "independence" from Russian gas last year but has since significantly increased its imports.

The five-year agreement between Kyiv and Moscow regulated about half of Russia's remaining exports to the EU and provided Austria, Hungary and Slovakia with two thirds of their supplies. The effect will not be an immediate catastrophe: these countries have enough gas in storage to see them through the rest of the winter.

World

India attempts a superpower move: docking two satellites in orbit

India
Amrit Dhillon Delhi

India hopes to make another leap in the space race next week by trying to connect two spacecraft while they orbit Earth.

The national space agency launched a rocket carrying two satellites in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, on Monday. On or around January 7 it will attempt the complex manoeuvre of uniting — or "docking" — the two satellites.

If successful, the Space Docking Experiment, known as Spadex, would make India the fourth country to achieve the feat after the United States, Russia and China.

Sreedhara Somanath, head of the Indian Space Research Organisation, said the launch of a PSLV rocket had placed the two small satellites, each weighing about 220kg, into the "right orbit" about 290 miles from Earth's surface. Each carries advanced payloads, including an imaging system and a radiation-monitoring device designed to measure electron and proton radiation levels in space, providing critical data for future human spaceflight.

The agency is relying on the technology to achieve goals such as bringing samples from the south pole of the moon back to earth in 2027. In a first for India, the rocket and the satellites were integrated and tested at a private company called Ananth Technologies, rather than at a government body.

Once connected, the docked spacecraft are set to demonstrate the transfer of electric power which would be vital for applications such as in-space robotics, controlling composite spacecraft and payload operations.

Two stages of the PSLV launch rocket — which would usually turn into redundant space debris — are also due to become uncrewed space laboratories to be used for various experiments.

India's space ambitions have acquired new momentum in recent years. Narendra Modi, the prime minister, has often described India as a global power and wants its space capabilities to reflect the country's status as the world's fifth-largest economy and most populous nation. Docking is considered pivotal to complex space missions.

Chaitanya Giri, a space expert with the Observer Research Foundation in Mumbai, said: "Any growing economy will want some measure of space capability and for a country of India's size, it needs multiple capabilities which is why a concerted effort is being made."

Jet crash families plead for answers

South Korea
Tim Hornyak

Relatives of those who died in South Korea's worst air disaster visited the crash site to mourn yesterday as investigators combed the wreckage for clues about the causes.

There were only two survivors when the Boeing 737-800 attempted a belly landing and slammed into a dirt and concrete embankment, exploding in a fireball on Sunday. Families of the 175 passengers and four crew killed on the Jeju Air flight from Bangkok are demanding answers on what brought the craft down, as well as the release and full identification of victims' remains.

A black box flight data recorder recovered at the crash site is missing a key connector and officials are considering how to extract its data, the transport ministry said. Retrieval of data from the cockpit voice recorder has begun.

One of the bereaved, Park Han-shin, said yesterday that the bodies being held in freezers were prepared for transfer to funeral homes but the process could take time. He urged other grieving families to remain patient.

Another bereaved woman from Thailand could be seen weeping as she held a photo of a victim near Muan airport in the country's southwest, the scene of the deadliest aviation crash for five years.

Among those killed was a three-year-old boy who was returning from his first family holiday abroad. Ko Yoonwoo died alongside his parents, Kang Ko, 43, and Jin Lee Seon, 37, on their flight from Bangkok.

Another family lost nine members, including the oldest person on the flight, 78-year-old Bae Yung, who was travelling abroad for the first time to celebrate his birthday. He was with his wife, two daughters, a son-in-law and four grandchildren, who all died, according to Korean media.

Both floors of Muan airport's main terminal remained crowded with bereaved relatives last night as they paid respects at an altar set up with pictures of the deceased.

Mourners also visited a memorial at Muan Sports Complex, about five miles from the crash site. They placed white chrysanthemums before long rows of memorial tablets and offered prayers.

At a public education office in Muan county, staff grieved for five female colleagues who had been returning from a holiday to Thailand to celebrate promotions at work. "It doesn't feel real," Lee Dae-keun, an official at the Jeollanam-do Office of Education who worked in the same department as one victim, said. "She is still lingering in my eyes. Whenever seeing flowers on that empty desk, ah, sadness rushes in."

The investigation is being assisted by Boeing and the US National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration. They are said to be looking at several factors that may have played a part including a bird strike, mechanical failure, a rushed landing and the design of the runway area.

Pilots attempted an emergency landing after the airliner sustained damage to an engine and its landing gear failed to open.

A pre-flight inspection found no issues with the plane, Kim Yi-bae, Jeju Air's chief executive, said yesterday.

Government officials defended the placement and height of the runway's embankment, which has come under heavy scrutiny.

John Cox, chief executive of Safety Operating Systems and a former 737 pilot, said the runway design "absolutely [did] not" meet best practices of having no hard structures within at least 300 metres of the runway's end.

Transport ministry officials said the embankment's localiser, which sends signals to aircraft to help pilots land accurately, had been installed since the opening of the airport in 2007 and met regulations. A spokesman said there were no standards from the International Civil Aviation Organisation that recommend a 240-metre safety area at the end of a runway.

On Monday, Choi Sang-mok, South Korea's acting president, ordered an emergency safety inspection of the country's entire airline operation.

In Seoul, Choi and government ministers laid chrysanthemums and offered prayers at a memorial set up in front of City Hall.

New year celebrations across the country have been cancelled.

KKANGKKO/INSTAGRAM; ENTERPRISE NEWS; NEWS.COM/ALAMY LIVE NEWS







Among the 175 passengers killed were Jin Lee Seon, Kang Ko and their three-year-old son, Ko Yoonwoo, who was pictured looking out of the window during the flight, his first. Relatives of other victims visited the crash site to mourn their loved ones

Arrest warrant issued for president impeached over martial law fiasco

Tim Hornyak

South Korea's political crisis intensified yesterday as anti-corruption authorities obtained a warrant for the arrest of President Yoon over his attempt to impose martial law.

It is the first time a sitting South Korean president has faced arrest. Yoon is already the subject of impeachment proceedings after his short-lived attempt to impose military rule on December 3.

The Seoul Western district court granted the warrant against the president, 64, related to charges of leading an insurrection and abusing power, according to the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials (CIO). Yoon has been suspended from office since December 14, when MPs voted to impeach him.

News of the warrant prompted hundreds of Yoon supporters to gather outside his residence, chanting: "Martial law legal! Impeachment invalid!" Large numbers of police were deployed and shouted at protesters to keep in line.

Investigators also raided the army's Counterintelligence Command offices yesterday and indicted two commanders on charges they said were linked to insurrection and abuse of authority.

Yoon, a former public prosecutor, has denied the insurrection charge and vowed to fight "until the very last minute". His lawyers called the warrant "illegal and invalid" and said the CIO had no jurisdiction to request it. Although Yoon enjoys presidential immunity from criminal prosecution, he is not immune from charges of insurrection or treason. Those convicted of leading an insurrection can face lifetime imprisonment or the death penalty.

The warrant is valid until Monday. Yoon could be detained for 48 hours, after which investigators have to decide whether to apply for another warrant for further questioning. However, executing the warrant may prove challenging because the Presidential Security Service has barred police attempts to search the presidential office and Yoon's residence. The security service has cited part of the Criminal Procedure Act that states "places requiring military secrecy cannot be subject to seizure or search".

The warrant issuance follows Yoon's refusal to obey three summons to appear for questioning in relation to the martial law declaration, which was quickly rescinded within hours after a parliamentary vote.



DISNEY ENTERPRISES



Mufasa: The Lion King had a slow start but has taken $327 million. Inside Out 2, far left, was the biggest global hit. Moana 2 broke Thanksgiving records

Parent power pays off for Hollywood

For more than a decade Hollywood had been in the era of the superhero, but over the past 12 months a new saviour of the box office has emerged (Keiran Southern writes).

Family films have roared back from a pandemic slump and will make almost $7 billion this year, fuelled by a series of hits aimed at parents and children. The year's biggest movie, Pixar's *Inside Out 2*, has made $1.7 billion worldwide since its release in June. A month later *Despicable Me 4* grossed $968 million, and *Moana 2* was released over the American Thanksgiving holiday in November, shattering holiday records in North America with a $225 million opening.

The Broadway adaptation of *Wicked*, another film aimed at families, has made $634 million worldwide. *Mufasa: The Lion King*, a prequel to the 2019 live-action version of *The Lion King*, recovered from a slow start after its release before Christmas and has generated $327 million in global box office receipts. *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*, based on the video game character, was also released before Christmas and has already grossed $211 million worldwide.

The string of successes caps a remarkable turnaround for a genre that appeared in trouble. Filmgoing suffered during the pandemic, but family films were hardest hit. Parents were reluctant to expose their children to crowded spaces, and studios released animated movies on streaming services, training families to watch the biggest releases at home.

Experts track the change in fortunes to the 2023 blockbuster *The Super Mario Bros Movie*, and the recovery has been supercharged over the past 12 months.

David Gross, who runs the film consultancy firm Franchise Entertainment Research, said family movies were likely to make about $6.85 billion this year, the highest since 2020.

"Watching a movie at a theatre is still the premium experience of that story and, for the studios, the most profitable. Studios had to reorient audiences back to theatres, and they've done that."

For Mary McNamara, a culture columnist and critic with the Los Angeles Times, it's a bonding experience.

"In the movie theatre you're seated together and experiencing the same thing. It's magic," she said.

"And you can do it with your kids and your parents, so now you have a multigenerational experience. Those are becoming rarer."

Musk vs RFK in heavyweight bout

United States
Charlotte McDonald-Gibson
Washington

When Elon Musk posted a photo of himself dressed as Santa Claus on Christmas Day, one traditional aspect of the jolly old fellow was missing: the big round belly.

"Ozempic Santa," Musk wrote, a reference to one of the weight-loss drugs that have transformed the debate over obesity treatment in America and elsewhere in the past few years.

However, the tech billionaire was not just showing off his new svelte figure. The post was also a salvo in a looming battle over America's waistlines, with key figures in Donald Trump's incoming administration at odds over how to tackle the nation's obesity crisis.



Elon Musk, who posed as "Ozempic Santa", champions weight-loss drugs

Musk and others in Trump's orbit champion groundbreaking drugs like Ozempic. But Robert F Kennedy Jr, the nominee for health secretary who is poised to have control over US public health agencies, is taking a back-to-basics approach. "The first line of response should be lifestyle. It should be eating well, making sure that you don't get obese," he told CNBC recently.

While Kennedy's conspiracy-theory views on vaccines have concerned medical professionals, his views on taking on the food industry have been better received. "RFK Jr has a lot of focus on how we can increase access to better nutrition and better food options, and having the secretary focused on that would be helpful," said Cristy Gallagher, research project director of the Stop Obesity Alliance.

About 42 per cent of American adults and 20 per cent of children are obese, with rates rocketing in the past 20 years. Obesity is responsible for 300,000 preventable deaths a year and costs its government $173 billion annually.

Kennedy has been clear on who he blames for the obesity crisis. In a post on X in September, he listed culprits including "our sickening food system based on a toxic industrial agriculture; in-the-tank government agencies; and the profitable manufacturing of poisonous and addictive processed foods".

He has been scathing about weight-loss medications, accusing Ozempic's Danish manufacturer, Novo Nordisk, of "counting on selling it to Americans because we are so stupid and so addicted to drugs". He has argued a good diet and lifestyle are the solution, saying that "perhaps we should consider replanting the kitchen garden before sending more money to Denmark".

There is a problem with his approach, however: it has not worked for decades.

Despite numerous pushes by both Republican and Democratic administrations to get Americans to change their diets and lifestyles, obesity rates have crept up every year, because calorific processed foods remain the cheapest and easiest way to feed a family. It is why many members of Trump's circle are enthused by the appearance of an apparent silver bullet. But the cost of anti-obesity drugs is prohibitive: they cost between $900 and $1,300 a month, and insurance companies generally only cover them to treat diabetes.

Another Ozempic champion is Mehmet Oz, whom Trump has nominated to run the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "I think the amount of good done by these medications by helping people lose weight and improve their cardiovascular system — and it might have long-term benefits in a lot of other areas as well where obesity causes inflammation — is massive," he wrote in an Instagram post.

President Biden has put forward a proposal for Medicare and Medicaid to cover the drugs for treating obesity nationwide and it will be on the desk of the incoming Trump administration.

While many experts agree that the abundance of unhealthy processed foods is at the heart of America's obesity epidemic, tackling the huge financial interests behind the industry is no easy feat. "If someone's going to do it, it's going to be an iconoclast who is not afraid to break the rules ... that's an apt description of RFK Jr," said Dr Robert Pearl, an author and former chief executive of Permanente Medical Group.

Musk is right about Labour's approach to business, leading article, page 21

Scholz fires back over 'tyrant' jibe at president

Germany
Oliver Moody Berlin

Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, has used his New Year's Eve address to the nation to rebuke Elon Musk for describing the country's president as an "anti-democratic tyrant".

Musk, the world's richest person and an enthusiastic supporter of anti-establishment parties across the West, has spent much of the past fortnight trying to bolster the hard-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party before elections in February. He has praised the AfD as the "last spark of hope" in an opinion piece in a conservative German newspaper, and spread baseless claims that the Saudi Arabian suspect in an attack at a Christmas market in Magdeburg was an Islamist.

In a speech marking the formal dissolution of the Bundestag on Friday, President Steinmeier warned voters to be on their guard against "foreign influence", singling out Musk's social network X as a platform where external meddling was "especially intense".

Musk responded by tweeting: "Steinmeier is an anti-democratic tyrant! Shame on him." He then alleged that Der Spiegel, one of the country's leading news magazines, had fallen under the "corrupting" financial influence of the Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and said he would interview Alice Weidel, the AfD leader who is vying to be the next chancellor, on X. The maverick tycoon's interventions have delighted the AfD and appalled politicians across the German centre and left.

Leaders of the four largest mainstream parties condemned Musk's remarks, which one of the figureheads of Scholz's Social Democratic Party likened to President Putin's attempts to subvert democratic processes in Europe.

Yesterday Scholz indirectly reproached Musk in his traditional New Year's Eve speech. "It is you, the citizens, who will determine how things will play out in Germany in the future," he said. "This will not be decided by the owners of social media."

The AfD's opponents are worried that Musk's aura of success will lend the populist party a sheen of credibility and allow it to portray itself to the electorate as part of a global uprising against liberal centrism, led by Donald Trump.

While the AfD's ideological programme has considerable overlaps with Trump's and those of various other insurgent right-wing parties, it is treated as an extremist pariah by its peers on the European right because of its historical revisionism and occasional forays into explicitly Nazi rhetoric.

Up to now there has been little sign that Musk's endorsement or the fallout from the Magdeburg attack have tilted the campaign in the AfD's favour.

World

Right stuff: Mussolini named man of the year

Italy

Tom Kington Rome

Benito Mussolini has been named man of the year by a right-wing Italian newspaper, prompting howls of indignation on social media.

Libero ran the headline "He is the man of the year" over a large image of a bronze head of the dictator who killed off democracy in 1920s Italy, passed racial laws targeting Jews and allied with Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

The newspaper ran a front-page editorial justifying the choice by its editor, Mario Sechi, a former spokesman for the prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party evolved from the postwar fascist MSI party.

Sechi said Mussolini had been chosen as a provocative way of poking fun at what he called the Italian left's obsession with the dictator. He said Meloni's left-wing foes continued to wrongly accuse her of lingering fascist sympathies and therefore make Mussolini a constant talking point. "It's been another year of surreal arguments from the left about the return of fascism and about the ghost of Benito Mussolini at Palazzo Chigi," he wrote, referring to Meloni's cabinet office in Rome.

Many commentators on social media failed to see the joke, and turned the page upside down in their posts to recall how the dictator was executed and his body hung upside down in public at the end of the war.

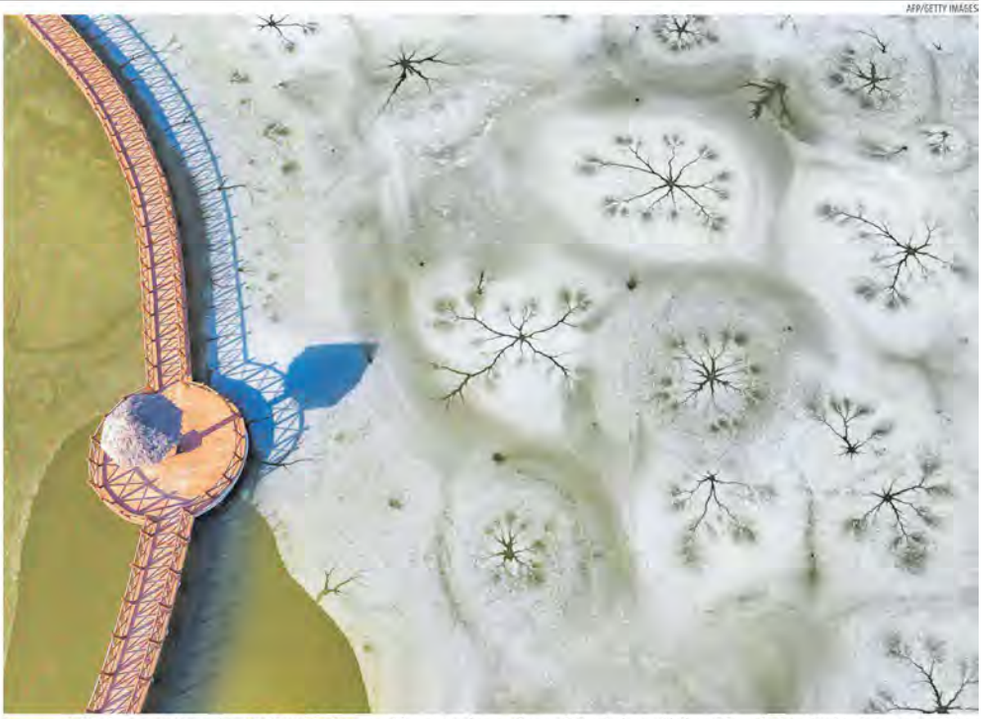
Alan Friedman, an American author who lives in Italy, called the newspaper's decision "grotesque and disgusting".


Libero

È LUI L'UOMO DELL'ANNO

The newspaper said it was poking fun at leftwingers

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Lacework Intricate patterns formed by thin layers of ice coat the surface of Yan Lake at Yellow River Delta Wetland, eastern China



In the capital, Beijing, explore the magnificent Forbidden City and harmonious Temple of Heaven, before a trip to the iconic Great Wall. You'll discover the ancient city walls of Xian and come face-to-face with the enigmatic ranks of life-sized Terracotta Warriors.

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Marseilles mafia so big it's now a brand

A violent drug gang isn't afraid of publicity as it embarks on a bloody crime spree, reports **David Chazan**





The DZ Mafia post on social media. Nessim Ramdane, a taxi driver, was shot by a boy, 14

When a Marseilles grocer received a death threat with a demand for €250,000 from the city's most feared criminal gang, he sought police protection, terrified for himself and his family, knowing he could never raise the money.

The ultimatum came in a text message purportedly from the DZ Mafia, said to be the biggest crime syndicate in a city that has been notorious for gangland killings and drug-trafficking for decades. The message was accompanied by photographs of the grocer's wife and children, his home and his shop.

The police reacted fast, bursting into a circus performance and bundling his family out minutes after he reported the threat on Sunday. They rushed them to a safe location at the home of relatives. They escorted the grocer, whose name has not been made public, to his shop, where he removed valuables and locked up before joining his wife and children.

When investigators identified the sender of the message, they made a surprising discovery. It had been sent by a known petty criminal, but he had no links with organised crime and they were certain he was not part of the DZ Mafia.

Unknown to police until 2023, the gang has expanded at lightning speed over the past 18 months, gunning down dozens of rivals on its blood-spattered ascent to the summit of the Marseilles underworld.

"DZ is a victim of its own success," a judicial source said. "Like big legitimate brands, it's being targeted by imitators trying to profit by copying the real thing. There have been several cases like this. A few months ago a jailed convict claimed to be a DZ member in order to recruit a 14-year-old as a hitman to murder a rival on the outside."

The hit was unsuccessful. The teen shot dead a taxi driver, Nessim Ramdane, who refused to wait while he carried out the planned killing, and then fled without locating the target.

Reports highlighting the age of the hitman prompted DZ to denounce the "unauthorised use" of its name in a video posted on social media in October. It showed 15 masked, black-clad men flanking their leader, who was behind what looked like a make-shift altar, covered with a sheet inscribed with "DZ Mafia" in block capitals. The gang boss, who was not named, denied ordering the 14-year-old to carry out a killing, saying DZ had enough of its own "men, vehicles and resources to act if we had to".

Rather than disavowing the use of violence, he objected to the gang's image being tarnished by association with an amateurish episode.

DZ, short for "Dzayer", which means Algeria in the Berber language, has never shied away from openly claiming its attacks. The gang first appeared on the police radar when it posted pictures of the burning body of a victim in the Busserine district of north Marseilles, beside the words DZ Mafia.

Prosecutors believe DZ was behind up to 80 per cent of Marseilles's 49 drug-related murders in 2023 as it waged war against a rival gang, Yoda. Prosecutors attributed a lessening of violence in 2024, when there were only 20 killings, to the fact that DZ had already asserted its dominance.

Bruno Bartocetti, a spokesman for the Unité SGP Police-FO union, said 2024 marked a turning-point for DZ, which diversified from drugs into extortion and protection rackets, targeting night clubs, shops and rappers. "The important thing for them was to bring in revenue, just like a big multinational company, so they moved into other activities, anything that could earn money."

He said Marseilles gangs of earlier decades, depicted in the 1971 movie, *The French Connection*, had also engaged in protection rackets, but DZ was more brutal. "Today, the way they operate is: 'You pay or you die'. It's far more violent. There's no room for negotiation."

DZ also made threats against prison officers and their families to force them to allow convicted gang members access to illegal mobile phones so they can issue orders to henchmen from their cells. The threats are believed to have been orchestrated by a convict, named as Gabriel O, 29, a former hitman said to be one of DZ's three main leaders.

Need to know

1 Britain's blue-chip stocks rose in 2024 for a fourth year in a row — their best run since the 2000s, though their gains paled in comparison with those enjoyed on Wall Street. The S&P 500, which tracks some of America's biggest companies, including Apple, Microsoft and Alphabet, rose 23.84 per cent in 2024 — outpacing the FTSE 100's 5.7 per cent. Page 27

2 Officials at the Bank of England have grown sceptical of the merits of creating a "digital pound", throwing doubt over the launch of a central bank digital currency before the end of the decade. Page 27

3 The King's gunmaker is bullish about its future after increased turnover helped shrink annual losses. James Purdey & Sons reported an improvement in its financial performance after a surge in demand across its core markets offset declining sales in other countries. Page 27

4 China's economy is on course to have grown by about 5 per cent in 2024, according to President Xi, who suggested he would unleash more stimulus as the world braces for US tariffs under Donald Trump. Page 30

5 DG Innovate, a Welsh electric battery and motor developer led by three former Tesla executives, has become the latest company to reveal plans to quit the London Stock Exchange, which has struggled to attract and retain tech companies. Page 31

"China's economy 'to hit target' as the world braces for tariffs"

Page 30



"It's a new year but UK still has the same old growth problem"

David Smith, page 31



For expert business analysis subscribe to the business newsletter thetimes.com/newsletters

Who rose to the top and

Investors had a bumpy ride thanks to high interest rates, inflation and low consumer confidence — but it wasn't all bad, writes **Tom Saunders**

Stubbornly high interest rates set the tone for a rollercoaster year on the London Stock Exchange, with banks the main beneficiaries as consumer-facing businesses struggled.

UK interest rates, which stayed at 5.25 per cent for most of the year, the highest level since 2008, helped boost banks' net interest margins as lenders passed on rate rises more quickly to borrowers than to depositors, benefiting from the difference.

At the same time, retailers felt the pressure — not only of weak consumer confidence but also of inflation that the higher rates were intended to tame.

Covid-19 still continues to cast a shadow across the FTSE, with a number of companies reporting recoveries from the pandemic for the first time and the leading index reporting its best overall performance since 2021 — up by 5.7 per cent over the year.

However, between these larger macroeconomic themes, there was still space in 2024 for investors to flock to, or run from, particular tales of corporate success or failure.

Banks

Metro Bank rose by 156.8 per cent from the last trading day of 2023, December 29, to December 31, 2024, making it the highest riser of the FTSE 350, which includes the FTSE 100 blue-chip stocks and the more domestically focused FTSE 250. It undoubtedly profited from higher interest rates but also benefited from starting from a low base.

In October 2023, it secured a complex rescue package in which the Colombian billionaire Jaime Gilinski Bacal took a 53 per cent stake. Under the leadership of Dan Frumkin, the American turnaround specialist, the bank has shifted its focus to business banking while axing jobs and cutting the opening hours of its branches.

A much bigger beast, and still comfortably in the top 20 largest risers in the FTSE 350, **NatWest**'s share price was up by 83.1 per cent over the past year, making it the tenth-highest riser.

Profits at the bank in the three months to the end of September reached £1.7 billion, up by a quarter and well in excess of City analysts' forecast of £1.5 billion. In December, Paul Thwaite, the group's chief executive, said the bank could even return to full private ownership in the first half of 2025.

Barclays was the 14th-highest riser in the FTSE 350, up by 74.1 per cent over the year. It also beat City expectations in October, as it reported a pre-tax profit in the three months to the end of September up 18 per cent year-on-year to £2.2 billion, surpassing the consensus estimate of £2 billion.

While not a bank, **CMC Markets**, the spread-betting business founded by the Conservative donor Lord Cruddas, was the second-highest riser on the FTSE 350 in 2024, up by 137.1 per cent.

It did, however, start from a low base after its share price fell considerably in 2023 from pandemic highs when it benefited from the lockdown boom in trading. Yet, it has since embarked on a recovery and reported a pre-tax profit of £49.6 million compared with a £2 million loss a year earlier.

However, not all lenders fared well, with a number taking hits thanks to the Financial Conduct Authority's investigation into discretionary commission arrangements in motor finance deals.

None was hurt more than **Close Brothers**, however, which fell by 70 per cent over the year, dropping out of the FTSE 350 entirely thanks to its exposure to potentially damaging compensation payouts.

Retail

While banks were the beneficiaries of higher interest rates, retail stocks largely lost out as consumers held off spending, knocking a total of four companies in the sector out of the FTSE 100 over the year.

JD Sports Fashion was one of those to lose out. It warned in November that its annual profits would be at the lower end of its guidance because of "cautious consumers". Over the year, shares in the self-proclaimed "King of Trainers" have fallen by 42.6 per cent, but it was far from the only business in its sector to suffer a downturn.

Shares in **B&M**, the discount chain, dropped by 35.1 per cent and **Frasers** was down by 33 per cent, knocking both out of the FTSE 100, as the pair ended the year as the 9th and 13th worst-performing stocks respectively in the FTSE 350.

As cost of living pressures have eased, so spending at discounters has fallen back, which has hurt B&M with City analysts expecting like-for-like sales at the company's UK shops to settle at about 2 per cent over the mid-term, compared with a historic rate of 4 per cent.

Frasers Group, on the other hand, has lost out amid a slowdown in the luxury sector and is facing further pressures thanks to changes to employers' national insurance contributions in Labour's budget.

Commenting on the budget in December, after Frasers issued a profit warning, its chief financial officer, Chris Wootton, said: "Like much of retail we felt we'd been kicked in the face."

Burberry Group, another former FTSE 100 stock that faced demotion this year because of problems in the luxury sector, has dropped by 31.3 per cent over the year. It has also faced the extra challenge of a faltering Chinese economy and in November it reported a pre-tax loss of £80 million in its interim results, compared with a profit of £219 million in the prior year.

However, the embattled luxury brand has recently embarked on an ambitious turnaround under its new boss Joshua Schulman and its shares have since edged up by 31.7 per cent.



British fashion brand Burberry struggled and faced demotion

Ocado Group was yet another company operating in the retail space to be knocked out of the FTSE 100 in 2024, though it has faced somewhat different challenges as it ended the year down 60.1 per cent, making it the second-biggest faller of the year in the FTSE 350.

Its 50-50 joint venture with Marks & Spencer actually beat analysts' expectations in its last set of results though it has battled investor concern about the fact that it is yet to achieve profitability. At the same time, the adoption of its warehouse and logistics technology has slowed at some of its key partners.

Macroeconomic factors have dragged on most of the companies in the sector, though none as much as **PZ Cussons**, whose brands include Carex soap and Imperial Leather.

It ended the year down by 46.7 per cent, dropping out of the FTSE 250, as it wrestled with a dramatic fall in the value of the Nigerian naira, which is down by about 45 per cent against the dollar over the year.

The company has long done much business in Nigeria and as recently as 2023 its Africa operations accounted for more than a third of its sales. However, the dramatic downturn in the country has forced the company to carry out nearly 30 rounds of price increases during the past financial year to keep pace with the weakening of the currency. It has been exploring the sale of its entire Africa business as part of a review.

Another company in the wider industry that faced its own peculiar headwinds was **Pets at Home**, the pet accessories supplier and vet practice operator.

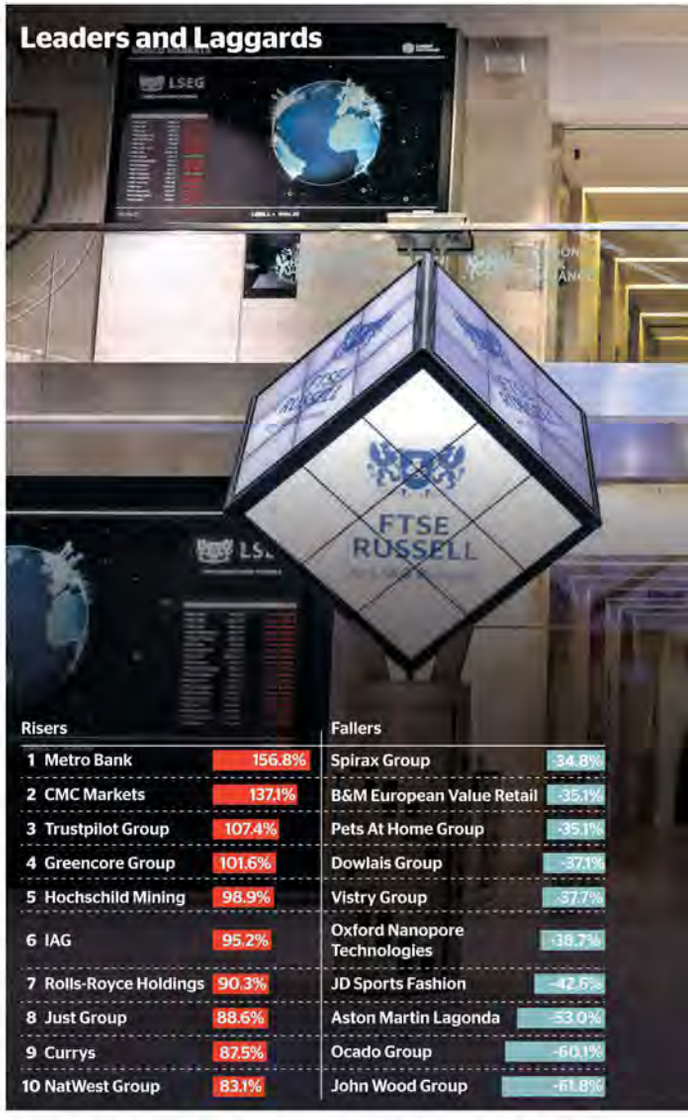
The company's share price dropped by 35.1 per cent, making it the eighth-biggest faller in the FTSE 350 as it suffered from what it said in November was an "unusually subdued" pet market in the first half of the year.

Investors have also taken fright after the Competition & Markets Authority announced an investigation into pricing and competition in the veterinary sector, though the company has maintained that the investigation does not threaten its plan for growth in this area.

Not all retailers have ended up in the doldrums, though, as **Currys** has risen by 87.5 per cent over the year, placing it ninth among the largest risers on the FTSE 350.

The retailer has made progress after struggling in 2023. In its recent interim results, it narrowed its pre-tax losses to £10 million, down from a loss of £44 million a year earlier.

However, much of the share price



Risers		Fallers	
1 Metro Bank	156.8%	Spirax Group	-34.8%
2 CMC Markets	137.1%	B&M European Value Retail	-35.1%
3 Trustpilot Group	107.4%	Pets At Home Group	-35.1%
4 Greencore Group	101.6%	Dowlais Group	-37.1%
5 Hochschild Mining	98.9%	Vistry Group	-37.7%
6 IAG	95.2%	Oxford Nanopore Technologies	-38.7%
7 Rolls-Royce Holdings	90.3%	JD Sports Fashion	-42.6%
8 Just Group	88.6%	Aston Martin Lagonda	-53.0%
9 Currys	87.5%	Ocado Group	-60.1%
10 NatWest Group	83.1%	John Wood Group	-61.8%

who sank in a turbulent 2024?



REBECCA NELSON/GETTY IMAGES



In the dog house: Pets at Home was the eighth-biggest faller in the FTSE 350

rise followed the two take-private offers it received in 2024, from Elliott, the American hedge fund, and JD.com, a Chinese online retailer.

Airlines

Interest rates can't explain all the most dramatic movements within the FTSE 350, however. The fates of two of London's listed airlines for example have diverged entirely, with IAG featuring among the index's biggest risers while Wizz Air counts among its most dramatic fallers.

IAG's recent decision to scrap three-course meals for its British Airways business-class passengers undoubtedly left some customers incensed but it was emblematic of the company's disciplined cost control.

This, along with a remarkable recovery in passenger numbers since the pandemic across its stable of airlines, which includes British Airways, Iberia and Aer Lingus, have led it to reintroduce dividends and even buy back its own shares, pushing its stock price up by 95.2 per cent over the year — making it the sixth-biggest riser over the period.

There has been no such luck for **Wizz Air**, whose stock has fallen by 34.5 per cent over the same period placing it 11th among the biggest fallers.

Engine issues have hampered the low-cost airline for more than a year, forcing it to ease ambitious growth plans. The company said in November that it expected 40 to 45 aircraft to be grounded at any one time over the next 18 months.

Best (and worst) of the rest

Other stocks have also taken their own route up or down the FTSE leaderboard.

Shares in **John Wood Group** fell by more than half in November after the energy services group based in Aberdeen disclosed an independent review into a series of multimillion-dollar writedowns. This contributed to a total drop of 61.8 per cent over the year, making it the biggest faller among the FTSE 350.

The writedowns came after the company rejected two putative bids, firstly Apollo's proposed takeover at 240p a share in 2023 and lately the private engineering and consulting business Sidara's offer of 230p a share. At the end of the year, shares in the company sit at just 62½p.

Rolls-Royce had a very different year, almost doubling its share price over the past 12 months, as it rose 90.3 per cent, making it the seventh-highest riser on the FTSE 350.

SIMON BRADFIELD/GETTY IMAGES



Aston Martin Lagonda seems stuck in the slow lane of the luxury car market

Many of the most successful stocks this year have been driven by capable chief executives carrying out ambitious turnaround plans. None more so than Rolls-Royce, which under Tufan Erginbilgic's leadership has doubled profit margins and led the company to record cashflows.

Much of its performance hinges on its civil aerospace division, which primarily makes engines for the Airbus A350 and Boeing 787, where the company has switched from prioritising market share to margin and has seen its stock price soar.

No such luck for **Aston Martin Lagonda**, which remains largely stuck in second gear. The only publicly listed carmaker confirmed that all its targets for 2024 were too ambitious.

Another embattled stock in the luxury sector, Aston Martin has had to manage cratering demand in China and has also been hobbled by supply chain issues. The stock ended the year down by 53 per cent, the third-biggest faller.

Separately, investors have been drawn to the glint of yellow metal and it has been an excellent year for gold, with the price refusing to fall even as the possibility of rate cuts fell.

This should have been a boon to London's healthy contingent of gold miners. However, **Centamin** was taken over by AngloGold Ashanti in November and **Endeavour Mining** has been embroiled in a scandal regarding payments surrounding its former chief executive Sébastien de Montessus. Only **Hochschild Mining** is left standing, up by 98.9 per cent this year and the fifth-biggest riser on the FTSE 350.

Trustpilot has been on an upward trajectory since mid-way through 2023. Over this past year, shares in the consumer review website have risen by 107.4 per cent, making it the third-biggest riser on the FTSE 350 over 2024.

While this has been in part thanks to a comprehensive share buyback programme, it has also reported a growing number of users. In its last full-year results, published in March, it swung to a profit of $16 million on an adjusted basis, which was ahead of market expectations and stood in stark contrast to a loss of $4 million in the prior year.

Greencore Group ended up as the fourth-biggest riser of the year, up by 101.6 per cent, and that also heralded something of a turnaround after Britain's biggest sandwich-maker struggled during the pandemic.

In its latest unscheduled trading update, in October, the company said it was tracking ahead of City expectations, after turning a £6.2 million loss into a pre-tax profit of £14.7 million in its interim results.

Aim

Despite shrinking to its smallest size since 2001, London's junior index has managed to survive for another year.

With minuscule market caps, the share price fluctuations of some of Aim's tiddlers can often be attributed to a common problem found on the index — a lack of funding.

For example, the ceramic brake manufacturer **Surface Transforms**, with a market cap of £5.3 million, fell by 95.6 per cent in 2024 thanks in part to a lack of funds. **Oxford Biodynamics** — with a market cap of £4.5 million — dropped by 95.2 per cent, for largely similar reasons.

However, there are more interesting stories to be found by looking at just the 100 largest companies on the Aim index.

The biggest faller on this trimmed-down Aim was **Victoria plc**. The royal carpet-maker weathered all sorts of accusations in 2023 and also found itself the target of an activist short-seller.

While it has been largely out of the limelight in the past 12 months, that hasn't stopped it from racking up significant losses, in turn sending its share price down by 77.1 per cent.



The second-largest faller was **YouGov**, which dropped 64.7 per cent. This was despite the fact that 2024 was a record year for elections.

Co-founded by Nadhim Zahawi, pictured left, the former Conservative chancellor, YouGov was accused of poor communications after it issued a profit warning in 2024, causing its stock price to drop by 46.3 per cent in a single day.

However, it wasn't all terrible news for companies with Tory connections. **Marlowe**, co-founded by Lord Ashcroft, a former treasurer and deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, and Alex Dacre, son of the former Daily Mail editor, Paul, was the seventh-highest riser on the index.

It completed a £430 million sale of its governance, risk and compliance services division to Inflexion, a private equity firm, in February which helped its share price rise by 87.4 per cent over the year.

Final payout handed to Madoff's victims

The victims of Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme have received their last payout from a US government fund set up to pay compensation for the scandal, bringing the total amount handed back to more than $4 billion (Ben Martin writes).

The Department of Justice said the fund was making a tenth and final distribution of $131.4 million, which will go to more than 23,000 victims who lost money in the fraud.

Overall, $4.3 billion in forfeited assets will have been repaid to 40,930 individuals and institutions in 127 countries, meaning that victims will have recovered 93.7 per cent of their losses, it said.

The payment draws a line under the biggest Ponzi scheme in history, which shook Wall Street to its core 16 years ago.

Madoff, who died in prison in 2021 aged 82, was once a leading figure in American finance. He rose to prominence as a broker and asset manager and was chairman of the Nasdaq stock exchange.

He was unmasked as a fraudster in December 2008 during the global financial crisis when he confessed to his sons, Mark and Andrew, who were executives at his brokerage operation, that his asset management business was "all just one big lie". They promptly turned him in to the FBI.

Investors were led to believe they had $65 billion with Madoff, but much of this was actually fake investment returns, and he was jailed for 150 years in 2009. His sons, who insisted they had known nothing of their father's crimes, never spoke to him again. Mark committed suicide in 2010 and Andrew died of cancer in 2014.

James Dennehy, assistant director in charge of the FBI's New York field office, said the final payout "represents an unprecedented conclusion of victim compensation from civil forfeiture actions related to the Madoff scheme".

KATHY WILLENS/AP



Bernard Madoff was jailed for 150 years in 2009 after confessing to his sons that his asset management business was "all just one big lie"

Chinese economy 'to hit growth target' as world braces for tariffs

Mehreen Khan Economics Editor

China's economy is on course to have grown by about 5 per cent in 2024, according to President Xi, who suggested that he would unleash more stimulus this year.

Xi said that the Chinese must "implement more proactive and effective macroeconomic policies" to stimulate growth in the face of deflationary threats and weak consumer demand. He said that annual GDP growth would be around the 5 per cent mark long targeted by the Communist Party.

"We must further comprehensively deepen reform ... better co-ordinate development and security, and implement more proactive and effective macroeconomic policies," Xi told party officials. He said the economy was "overall stable".

China's annual growth goal of 5 per cent has been at risk in recent years owing to falling inflation, high local government debts and falling consumer spending. While the manufacturing sector has pivoted to exporting higher-value clean technologies, the domestic economy is weak and China is suffering its worst deflationary streak since the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s.

The International Monetary Fund estimated annual growth at 4.8 per cent in 2024, falling to 4.5 per cent in 2025.

Donald Trump has promised to impose sweeping tariffs of up to 60 per cent on all Chinese imports when he takes office on January 20. Economists have said that punitive US tariffs could force China to carry out more aggressive stimulus policies in 2025. The central bank of the world's second-largest economy has provided about 10 trillion yuan, or $1.4 trillion, in credit and liquidity injections since September.

Economists agree that higher US tariffs, which average at 10 per cent on Chinese goods, would hurt its growth rate. Analysts at UBS said that raising the tariff average to 30 per cent by 2026 would cut 0.7 to 1 percentage point off China's GDP growth over three years.

4.5%

The estimated annual growth for China in 2025

Source: The International Monetary Fund

Latest data from China's private sector shows rising business confidence, with output in the non-manufacturing sector growing at its fastest rate in nine months in December. Manufacturing output was broadly stable and activity in the service sector rose in the final month of the year, according to the Caixin purchasing manager's index.

Falling Chinese interest rates have pushed down the managed exchange rate against the dollar, which is trading at its weakest point of the year. Currency analysts at MUFG, a Japanese bank, said that the authorities would engineer a weaker yuan in 2025, from the current 7.3 yuan against the dollar to 7.5 yuan in the new year.

Kelvin Lam, senior China economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, said: "The authorities recognise that faltering domestic demand urgently needs support. More stimulus policies are planned for 2025 to bolster domestic demand and prevent deflationary expectations from taking hold."

Financial services drive rebound in takeover activity

Ben Martin

A boom in deals for banks and other financial services businesses helped to drive a rebound in takeover activity in Britain last year.

The total value of transactions involving UK companies climbed by a third to $324.2 billion compared with 2023, a markedly weak year for mergers and acquisitions, according to data from London Stock Exchange Group.

The increase has been fuelled partly by bids in the financial sector, which was "the most targeted sector in the UK", LSEG said. Consolidation among lenders was a trend in dealmaking in 2024, with Nationwide Building Society swooping on Virgin Money UK, the high street bank, for £2.9 billion, and Coventry Building Society buying the Co-operative Bank for £780 million.

There has also been a flurry of transactions among other financial businesses, including last month's agreement by the FTSE 100 insurer Aviva to acquire its troubled rival Direct Line for £3.7 billion. Hargreaves Lansdown, the FTSE 100 company behind Britain's biggest DIY investment platform, has also agreed to be bought by a consortium of private equity firms including CVC Capital Partners for £5.4 billion.

Elsewhere, the property sector was also rife with dealmaking last year, including the £2.5 billion takeover of the housebuilder Redrow by Barratt.

The rise in M&A is a fillip for investment bankers in the City, who earn fees by arranging deals but have wrestled with a downturn in blockbuster transactions following a frenzy of takeovers in 2021, when the total annual value of deals with UK involvement reached about $654 billion, the highest since 2007, LSEG data shows.

The aggregate value fell to about $393.3 billion in 2022 and then to $244.1 billion in 2023, the lowest annual figure since 2009, after the geopolitical uncertainty driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the economic turbulence caused by a spike in inflation dampened the appetite for risk.

The biggest deal in the UK in 2024 was the takeover of Nord Anglia Education, which runs international private schools, by a consortium including the Swedish private equity firm EQT for $14.5 billion, including debt.

Goldman Sachs, the Wall Street bank, topped LSEG's league table of advisers that worked on deals involving UK targets last year.

WizzAir seals deal over engine woes

Kendall Field-Pellow

WizzAir expects to return to growth in 2026 after striking a compensation deal with Pratt & Whitney following trouble with its engines that will see about 40 of the carrier's planes grounded.

The FTSE 250 airline, which is based in Hungary, has secured a two-year agreement with the US aerospace manufacturer guaranteeing operational support and compensation for costs directly incurred by having to ground a fifth of its fleet for inspections.

A WizzAir spokesman said: "The company continues to take action to mitigate the financial and operational impact of the grounded aircraft and will continue to work with Pratt & Whitney to ensure that aircraft are returned to operation as soon as possible."

The company said it expected to return to growth in the 2025-26 financial year because it has ordered 50 Airbus A321neo aircraft, which will expand passenger capacity by a fifth.

The budget airline, which flies an all-Airbus fleet, has had problems with its RTX Pratt & Whitney engines that resulted in an average of 46 aircraft grounded for inspection in the past quarter.

WizzAir, which has a fleet of 224 Airbus aircraft, said profits in the first half fell by more than a fifth to €315 million over the six months to September 30.

The airline was founded 30 years ago and operates almost 800 routes between 200 airports in 53 countries in Europe and the Middle East.

Shares in WizzAir, which has lost about a third of its value in 12 months, rose 17p, or 1.2 per cent, to £14.39 in yesterday's half-day trading session.

David Smith

It's a new year but economy still has the same old growth problem



It is the day when we turn the page, at least for those of us old-fashioned enough to have traditional diaries and calendars. It would be splendid if we could also turn the page on the economic issues that preoccupied us at the end of 2024. "Out with the old" in this context would be rather nice.

The economy is no great respecter of calendars. Growth briefly returned during 2024 and inflation was for a short time below the official 2 per cent target. By the end of the year growth had petered out and inflation was back up to 2.6 per cent.

A downward revision of gross domestic product (GDP) growth from 0.1 per cent to zero in the third quarter was an end-of-year gift from the Office for National Statistics that the government could have done without, though because quarterly growth was even weaker a year earlier under the previous government the annual growth rate actually ticked higher, from 0.7 per cent to 0.9 per cent.

A 0.1 per cent revision in other respects is neither here nor there, though it fitted with a story of economic stagnation in which growth in the fourth quarter is unlikely to be much better. It could easily be worse.

We should not waste time obsessing about whether the economy has experienced a "technical" recession of two consecutive quarters of falling GDP. As I pointed out a year ago, when a technical recession happened under the previous government, this is not a useful or sensible measure.

It was invented for political reasons in America in the 1960s but is not used there, for good reason. To see why, imagine two scenarios. In one GDP falls by 0.1 per cent for two consecutive quarters. In the second, it falls by 5 per cent in one quarter then rises by 0.1 per cent in the following one. The first would qualify as a recession, the second not, but it is clear which would represent the more serious downturn. The issue is not technical recession but the very weak growth which makes them more likely.

I must say, however, that I had an "aha" moment when those revised third-quarter figures were released just before Christmas. Though the third quarter ended a month before the budget, all those warnings from the chancellor and prime minister about their grim inheritance, and how tough the coming budget was going to be, must have had an effect, as I wrote here at the time.



DOMINIC LIPINSKI/BLOOMBERG

Despite worrying figures, consumer spending rose by 0.5 per cent in real terms

The detail of the GDP figures does not quite fit that story. Consumer spending rose by a reasonable 0.5 per cent in real terms on the quarter, while business investment increased by a strong 1.9 per cent and was 5.8 per cent up on a year earlier. These were the very elements of spending in which you would have expected to see a "fear factor"-induced slowdown. Exports fell for a third consecutive quarter, for familiar reasons.

The figures are the figures, though there was something a little odd about their composition as we moved into the second half of the year. But they confirmed that the UK's growth problem persists.

Essentially, there has been very little growth since spring 2022, when the economy's ascent out of the depths of the pandemic began to stall. GDP is currently only a little over 1 per cent up on where it was then, suggesting that an already weak growth rate has become even weaker.

As it is, only Germany's troubles have prevented the UK from being bottom of the G7 growth league since the eve of the pandemic. The UK's GDP per head, as you will know, is still below where it was five years ago. That is not yet a record; it took seven years to get GDP per head back to early 2008 levels after the 2008-09 financial crisis.

The pace of recovery in the 2010s was quite strong, particularly when compared with the recent drab performance of GDP per head, which is not only below where it was at the end of 2019 but also where it was at the end of 2021, after the economy's pandemic rollercoaster ride.

So growth is the challenge, as it was last year under the previous government. I have mentioned here before the differences between the views of business and those of economists, which have diverged markedly since the October 30 budget.

The CBI attracted headlines by warning at the end of the year that private sector activity would fall steeply into the new year, with little sign of an upturn in sight. The air is thick with warnings of recruitment freezes and job cuts from firms, in anticipation of April's increase in employer national insurance.

Businesses are not universally gloomy. The latest Lloyds Bank business barometer showed business confidence down slightly but above its long-run average, while optimism about the economy, perhaps surprisingly, improved.

Economists think the economy will do better this year. Growth for the whole of the past year is likely to end up at about 0.8 per cent (comparing 2024 with 2023). The average forecast for 2025 is 1.3 per cent, and some forecasts are higher than that. The OECD predicts 1.7 per cent growth and the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast was for an impressive 2 per cent growth for 2025.

Whether anything like that can be achieved, we shall see. But we should remember that those stronger growth forecasts were a product of the chancellor's boost to government spending, a kind of public sector sugar rush. They did not point to stronger medium-term growth, as the OBR, the official forecaster, was keen to point out. A new year has begun but the UK's growth problem is the one we had last year, and for a while before that.

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EV specialist plans to quit London's main market

Emma Powell

A Welsh electric battery and motor developer led by three former Tesla executives has become the latest company to reveal plans to quit the London Stock Exchange, which has struggled to attract and retain tech companies.

DG Innovate, based in Caerphilly, said it had found it difficult to raise sufficient funds to commercialise its electric battery and motor products since coming to market in April 2022. The early stage company said that "a broad lack of demand" remained among traditional UK institutions for exposure to companies at its current phase of development.

"The DGI directors do not foresee any obvious near-term catalysts likely to change this backdrop and have therefore concluded that the costs, regulatory requirements and additional administrative burden associated with maintaining the company's listing are completely disproportionate to the benefits," the company said.

Discussions with potential investors that might "substantially invest" in DGI if it were taken private have persuaded the management that this would be the best source of funding.

The London market has been hit by a wave of takeovers by private equity firms and overseas trade buyers as well as defections to the US as returns lag those generated in New York.

Since the end of 2023, DGI has been led by Peter Bardenfleth-Hansen, Jochen Rudat and Christian Eidem, who injected £2 million into the loss-making company to secure its future. The three met while working in Europe for the electric vehicle group led by Elon Musk.

Bardenfleth-Hansen, chief executive of DGI, joined from Zaptec, which provides charging systems. Rudat, who played a key role in setting up Tesla in China, will become an executive director alongside Eidem, an early investor in the electric car company.

DGI is developing sodium-ion batteries for EVs, touted as a potentially cheaper and safer alternative to lithium. It has also developed an electric drive system for use in heavy goods vehicles which is claimed to have greater range, lower manufacturing costs and better reliability than existing technology.

Shares in DGI, which is valued at £2.6 million, fell by more than 90 per cent in 2024. It recorded a loss of £3 million in the first six months. The shares are set to be delisted from the main market on January 31.

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Hard-scrummaging rugby forward and chorister
Geoff Wheel
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Obituaries

Johnnie Walker

Pioneering radio disc jockey who made his name on Radio Caroline before joining the BBC in a career that spanned seven decades

As Johnnie Walker lowered the needle on to the record — no mean feat when on a rusty schooner riding the rough winds of the North Sea — he took a deep breath. Though he was about to break the law, he felt more excited than fearful. "How many 21-year-olds get the chance to do battle with the government?" he thought.

It was August 14, 1967, the day the Marine Offences Act became law and made offshore "pirate" stations illegal. These rock'n'roll radio outposts had been under attack from Harold Wilson's Labour government, steered by the postmaster general Tony Benn, since they had emerged three years earlier, and the act was regarded by many as a vindictive piece of legislation that bowed to the BBC's desire for a monopoly over the airwaves. The corporation had only the Light Programme to cater for a young audience thirsty for pop and the pirates were plugging a gap.

Walker was aboard the most notorious pirate ship of all, the Caroline (formerly Mi Amigo), moored three miles off the Essex coast. As the clock struck midnight he played *We Shall Overcome* by Joan Baez followed by the station's theme tune, *Caroline* by the Fortunes, and then the Beatles' *All You Need Is Love*. He marked the occasion by cracking open a bottle of champagne and after delivering a sarcastic "thank you" to Wilson, in his sleepy voice declared to a Europe-wide audience of 20 million: "As we enter this new phase in our broadcasting history, you naturally have our assurance that we intend to stay on the air. Because we belong to you and we love you. Caroline continues."

The pirates rolled spliffs on records and washed their socks in champagne

Other than Robbie Dale, known as "the Admiral", Walker was the only DJ to remain aboard the ship and for the next six months he helped steer the Caroline into a new era of defiance, achieving something like heroic status in pirate radio circles. "Radio was crap before the pirates," he said. "Caroline was the mouthpiece for a generation finding expression in music, art, fashion and politics. It was an exciting time and I didn't want to hear it snatched away from us."

That he went on to become one of the most popular and enduring of all British disc jockeys was perhaps due to a disarmingly simple policy of ignoring fad and fashion and championing good music. He was always an anti-establishment figure, albeit one of mellow persuasion, but it was his refusal to follow the dictates of corporately-compiled playlists, and his insistence on introducing his own eclectic and sometimes maverick musical tastes, that made him so successful for so long.

Walker was born Peter Dingley in 1945 in Solihull, West Midlands, the fourth of five children of Trevor, a rep for an engineering company, and Mary. He had "a comfortable yet modest upbringing — nothing flash. Dad went into debt to pay for me and my siblings to go to the local private school." But his unconventional attitude to life was apparent at an early age: rows with his father were a prelude of clashes to come.

"At Ruckleigh School, Solihull, I remember putting a drawing pin on Miss Atwell's seat. The next day she said: 'I have a message for the boy who left the drawing pin on my chair: I had a very thick tweed skirt on and I didn't feel it.'" He claimed to have deliberately failed his O-levels because he did not believe a piece of paper should dictate his path for life (he failed to turn up for several of them).

Aged 16 he began working as a garage mechanic on £6 a week (in later years his main passion away from music was motorcycles). Another job as a car salesman was peppered with spells moonlighting as a DJ at the local ballroom under the name Peter Dee. Bad acne made him shy and "being a DJ was a way I could be extrovert without people seeing me", he recalled.

"I started DJing in the evening but there were a lot of late nights, so I'd get to work in the morning half-awake. Eventually my manager called me into his office and said: 'Make a decision — one man cannot serve two masters.'"

He quit the car job and landed the midnight-to-six slot on Radio England, an early pirate station. As his first on-air experience it proved challenging. Walker had to juggle jingles, bursts of echo and sound effects, as well as read out news stories without any studio assistance (and on a rocking boat).

Six months later, in October 1966, he joined Radio Caroline and was duly christened Johnnie Walker (it was that or Boom-Boom Brannigan). Not at first given his own show, he kept busy covering those on shore leave and ferrying mail and records over from the mainland every week aboard the vessel's small tender.

Soon he had landed the nine to midnight slot, introduced by the Duane Eddy guitar break that became his theme tune. Within a year one poll found that he was the second most popular DJ in the country. He soon had his own official fan club and hosted a Saturday night show called *Ten O'Clock Turn-On*, on which he championed many of the new American soul singers then emerging, such as Otis Redding.

Life at sea was in some ways just as wild as one might expect: the pirates rolled spliffs on records, washed their dirty socks in champagne during water shortages and requested deliveries of weed live on air by asking for "more tea". At home Walker had been bound by "rules and regulations" and felt "misunderstood, unloved, rejected" but on board "there was such optimism" he said, "such a sense of freedom. We threw away the rulebook. They were wonderful days."

There were hard times too. During heavy storms they had to batten down the portholes with metal shutters, transforming the boat into something more like a submarine. And there were fewer naked women, teenagers losing their virginity and less all-out hedonism than portrayed in Richard Curtis's 2009 film about a pirate station, *The Boat that Rocked*, on which Walker was a consultant. The reality was rather grottier.

In 1968 the Caroline was towed away because of debts and Walker joined many of his former colleagues at Radio 1, which had been launched by the BBC as a youth-orientated pop station to fill the gap left after the pirates had been sunk. "I was invited for lunch and we met on a canal boat," he recalled. "The BBC thought I would feel more at home."

His first stint with the corporation lasted seven years, during which time he developed a reputation as one of the few DJs, along with John Peel and Bob Harris, who accorded more importance to the records he played than the inane chit-chat in between. Though he hosted the prime lunchtime show he insisted on playing album tracks alongside hit singles, and among the then little-known artists he championed were Lou Reed, Fleetwood Mac, Eagles, Steely Dan and Eric Clapton. Light relief was provided by such features as the "Pop the Question" quiz and the "Tuesday chart rundown".

Walker courted controversy in 1975 when on air he denounced the Bay City Rollers as "musical garbage". The group at the time were scheduled to headline a "Radio One Fun Day" at Mallory Park, Leicestershire, and his bosses were not amused. Angry fans jammed the BBC's switchboard and the corporation was even less pleased when Walker told them on air to "take a running jump".

He had also begun to use drugs as a way to deal with his depression. In the Seventies there was a suicide attempt and a bash at alternative spirituality, including joining a "mind control course" and an obsession with the clairvoyant Doris Stokes. Friends began noticing that he was becoming less sensitive to guests on air.

After several further showdowns with the BBC, Walker left Radio 1 in 1976 and moved to San Francisco with his wife Frances Kum, whom he had married in 1971. Within a year he had

Continued on page 38

GETTY IMAGES; REX FEATURES; ALAMY







Walker in the BBC studios in 1971; revisiting Radio Caroline days; collecting the MBE with his children and wife Tiggy in 2006

Premier League half-term report

As the season reaches midway point, **Times writers** pick their star pupils and those being sent to the head's office



1st Liverpool

How has the season been so far?
The level of consistency is proof of Arne Slot's impact.
Star player?
Mohamed Salah. Goals and assists galore.
Player who can give more?
I mean this positively: Ryan Gravenberch as he is yet to score.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Secure contract renewals of Salah, Virgil van Dijk and Trent Alexander-Arnold.
GRADE: A

2nd Nottingham Forest

How has the season been so far?
Exceptional. They have implemented Nuno Espírito Santo's plan to perfection.
Star player?
Nikola Milenkovic.
Player who can give more?
Anthony Elanga.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Retaining the quality already in the squad.
GRADE: A+

3rd Arsenal

How has the season been so far?
Disjointed, with fans left to wonder about injuries, lapses in concentration, and indecision in matches.
Star player?
Set-piece coach Nicolas Jover now has his own mural.
Player who can give more?
Doubts continually follow Gabriel Jesus but the forward has looked sharper of late.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Defensive cover and a forward who can play wide.
GRADE: B-

4th Chelsea

How has the season been so far?
Going quite nicely before two defeats reminded us that they are a work in progress.
Star player?
Enzo Fernández.
Player who can give more?
Noni Madueke: two goals in four months.
Key aim for the transfer window?
A centre back, perhaps a goalkeeper.
GRADE: B

5th Newcastle

How has the season been so far?
Right now Newcastle would fancy their chances against anyone.
Star player?
Alexander Isak — the best striker in the Premier League.
Player who can give more?
Harvey Barnes — but he can't get a start.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Don't lose any of the star men: Isak, Sandro Tonali, Anthony Gordon or Bruno Guimarães.
GRADE: B+

6th Manchester City

How has the season been so far?
Any hopes of a fifth title in a row seem to be dead.
Star player?
Erling Haaland.
Player who can give more?
Kyle Walker. His form this season has dropped.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Find a midfielder who can fill the void left by Rodri.
GRADE: D

7th Bournemouth

How has the season been so far?
Not even the most optimistic supporter would have expected the club to be two points off the top five.
Star player?
Antoine Semenyo.
Player who can give more?
Evanilson.
Key aim for the transfer window?
There is no back up for Milos Kerkez at left back.
GRADE: A

8th Fulham

How has the season been so far?
Impressive especially against the toughest opposition.
Star player?
Alex Iwobi.
Player who can give more?
Emile Smith Rowe.
Key aim for the transfer window?
If Andreas Pereira leaves then cover in midfield would become the priority.
GRADE: B+

9th Aston Villa

How has the season been so far?
Fantastic moments in the Champions League but in the league they have not been consistent.
Star player?
Morgan Rogers.
Player who can give more?
Leon Bailey.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Defensive reinforcements.
GRADE: C+

10th Brighton

How has the season been so far?
A run of seven games without a win has dropped them into mid-table.
Star player?
Carlos Baleba.
Player who can give more?
Yankuba Minteh.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Defensive pace, especially in the central area.
GRADE: C

11th Tottenham

How has the season been so far?
They win majestically and lose through lapses and sloppiness.
Star player?
Dejan Kulusevski.
Player who can give more?
Brennan Johnson has the ability to contribute more.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Centre back and forward cover.
GRADE: C-

12th Brentford

How has the season been so far?
Only lost one game at the Gtech this season. Away from home Thomas Frank's team have mustered only two points.
Star player?
Bryan Mbeumo.
Player who can give more?
Kevin Schade.
Key aim for the transfer window?
A stretched defence needs fresh full back and centre back options.
GRADE: B+

13th West Ham

How has the season been so far?
They have been disorganised, slow in midfield, and concede nearly two goals per league game.
Star player?
Aaron Wan-Bissaka has recaptured form and Lukasz Fabianski has belied his 39 years.
Player who can give more?
Niclas Füllkrug: one goal, compared with 16 strikes and ten assists for Borussia Dortmund last season.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Find a young forward and energetic midfielder.
GRADE: D

14th Manchester United

How has the season gone so far?
It couldn't have gone much worse.
Star player?
Amad Diallo.
Player who can improve?
The whole squad.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Invest in wingbacks who fit the system that Rúben Amorim wants.
GRADE: E

15th Crystal Palace

How has the season been so far?
Slowly improving, if not spectacular.
Star player?
Maxence Lacroix.
Player who can give more?
Eberechi Eze.
Key aim for the transfer window?
More creativity and depth at wingback.
GRADE: C

16th Everton

How has the season been so far?
Everton's paucity in attack continues to hamper ambition.
Star player?
Jordan Pickford.
Player who can give more?
Jack Harrison.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Find more creativity.
GRADE: D

17th Wolves

How has the season been so far?
Vitor Pereira has breathed some life but they will need a big second half.
Star player?
Matheus Cunha.
Player who can give more?
Hwang Hee-chan.
Key aim for the transfer window?
They must strengthen in defence.
GRADE: D

18th Ipswich

How has the season been so far?
A squad that still comprises a core of League One players has been competitive.
Star player?
Liam Delap.
Player who can give more?
Omari Hutchinson.
Key aim for the transfer window?
To keep Delap. And to add an experienced back-up striker.
GRADE: B-

19th Leicester

How has the season gone so far?
Any team who sacks their manager after 12 games isn't having the start of the season that they wanted. Being two points off safety at the halfway point isn't too bad and maybe the best they could have hoped for at this stage given the calibre of the squad.
Star player?
Mads Hermansen.
Player who can improve more?
James Justin.
Key aim for transfer window?
Must tighten up at the back.
GRADE: C

20th Southampton

How has the season been so far?
Many supporters feel the board stuck with Russell Martin for far too long and that relegation is now inevitable for the club.
Star player?
Matheus Fernandes.
Player who can give more?
Cameron Archer.
Key aim for the transfer window?
Add some goals.
GRADE: D

Reports by Paul Joyce, Charlotte Duncker, Gary Jacob, Martin Hardy, Alyson Rudd and Ian Winrow



Chris Wood has been crucial for Forest, as has Semenyo for Bournemouth. Left, Pep Guardiola shows the self-inflicted scars of City's dip

Sport

IAN STEPHEN/PROSPORTS/SHUTTERSTOCK



Fans rely on public transport to reach The Amex Stadium, five miles from the centre of Brighton

Martin Samuel

Blame politicians for empty Amex on Boxing Day

The voice of sport

There was no Boxing Day football for supporters of Brighton & Hove Albion this year. There will be no Boxing Day football for them ever again if the present circumstances remain. Not at home. Brighton fans can roam the country on December 26, if their team is scheduled to play away. But the Amex Stadium will be closed. Our political class, the ones who presume they know how to run football, saw to that.

I had thought the reason Brighton's game with Brentford was moved to December 27 was due to the Premier League's deal with Amazon Prime and was financially motivated. With a competition that was only formed to make rich clubs even richer, joining those dots is invariably the correct thing to do. But not this time. Brighton wanted to play on December 26, the club insisted. They would have done so had it been possible.

So they explained. The many hoops that had been jumped through to get the new stadium sited and built. The many stipulations placed upon them, the many complications that result, ending in the utter impossibility of staging a home Boxing Day fixture, even though this is one of the most cherished dates in the calendar for fans. Sit through the debates around the Football Governance Bill as it makes its way through the House of Lords and nobody mentions stuff like this — the way football supporters are consistently sold out by those in positions of authority. Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb — a Green Party peer — wants the regulator tied to the government's net-zero targets, but there will be no discussion of how environmental demands already in place shortchange fans at Brighton each Christmas.

That was a condition of the stadium build: no public car parks. Despite the Amex being constructed in Falmer, five miles outside the city centre, one of the requirements was that it should be accessed purely by public transport. It was Labour's deputy prime minister John Prescott — who, due to his recent passing, has been reinvented as one of the finest political minds of his generation — who granted planning permission on these terms. When he died, Lord Bassam of Brighton, a member of Prescott's team, said: "Brighton and Hove will forever be grateful for his support for our football stadium. He understood the benefits to the city it would bring — and he wasn't wrong. Without John's backing, we would not have the terrific club we have today. He truly understood the power of football." This is the same Lord Bassam who recently put forward an amendment that would have given the government regulator oversight around the diversity of season-ticket holders. So let's just say that what constitutes an understanding of football may vary.

For if Prescott truly had a finger on the game's pulse, how did he allow a ground to be built that cannot be accessed during the holiday season? That's what Brighton own, as lovely as it is, as much of a lifesaver as it has been. The absence of public parking means fans are reliant on buses, trains, and park and rides. And that's why Boxing Day is a bust.

On December 26, Brighton cannot get all their staff to the stadium, let alone all the supporters. Train schedules are greatly impacted on bank holidays and drivers are increasingly unwilling to work on them, too. This would not matter so much if there was an efficient local bus service across the holiday season. There isn't. Even the park and ride facilities are affected, with contractors telling Brighton they have sufficient buses available, but not drivers. So a club that had to accept restrictive measures to build its stadium is now let down because the infrastructure that was key to it all cannot be delivered on key dates. And that's not on football. That's on government — local and national. That's on the people who think football must listen to them.

This is, in part, also a result of what we must dutifully refer to as our hard-won Brexit freedoms. The freedom to not watch your team on Boxing Day. Wasn't on the side of a bus, which is ironic, but the companies that usually service the Amex Stadium have told Brighton that since Brexit it has been harder to get drivers to cover the holiday period.



Everything for which politicians are responsible — such as an integrated transport network that services public needs — is a mess. So why not also give them football, a rare industry that actually works?

In 2015, Jamie Vardy was chasing one of English football's greatest records: for scoring in consecutive matches. It is held by Jimmy Dunne, an Irishman playing for Sheffield United. Between October 24, 1931 and January 1, 1932, Dunne scored in 12 consecutive league matches. To clarify, Stan Mortensen once did 15 with Blackpool in 1950-51, but he had spells of injury during that run. He played three games, then 11, then one. Dunne did 12 straight. Never missed a match. It's not just about scoring, this record, but also physical endurance. Particularly as the figures show that during this streak Dunne scored in two games back-to-back on Christmas Day and Boxing Day, at opposite ends of the country. December 25: Sheffield United 4 Arsenal 1; December 26: Arsenal 0 Sheffield United 2. No issues with public transport, then, obviously. Nor over the new year period, given that the last match in his scoring run was Sheffield United 3 Blackburn Rovers 2 on New Year's Day, and his first blank came on Saturday, January 2, at Portsmouth. So we could get people, including the teams, around the country for football matches 93 years ago — and from Sheffield to Portsmouth, no less — we just can't get people from Brighton to Brighton now.

And, of course, public transport was utterly integral to society in 1932. The first section of the M1 did not open until 1959 and it was only in 1926 that the A1 began to bypass towns and cities. Football teams and their supporters would have travelled everywhere by train. Yet what's so different? As governments and councils try to disinvent the car — and none more so than this government and the council in Brighton — we are back to 1931, reliant again on the public transport network. With one variance. In 1931, our politicians understood that, if those were the conditions, they had to be met by both sides. Now, stipulations are made and then the logistical consequences ignored. The government, the councils, aren't keeping up their end.

Brighton have contacted their local MPs, Chris Ward (Labour, Kemptown and Peacehaven, parliamentary private secretary to the prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, and a member of his advisory team from 2015 to 2021) and Peter Kyle (Labour, Hove and Portslade, secretary of state for science, innovation and technology) in the hope they can bring pressure to bear and restore Boxing Day football for the many who revel in it. Maybe they could get Heidi Alexander, the transport minister, to ask Govia what happened to the trains, too. One of her Instagram posts this year found her in front of the TV watching an England game. "Feet up, football on ..." it began. And that has always been the relationship. Politicians use football when they seek populist appeal; the least they can do, then, is make sure actual fans can get to the game.

Tamworth should be allowed to cash in

Poor old Tamworth. They must have thought their worries were over when they pulled Tottenham Hotspur out of the hat in the FA Cup third-round draw. Turns out they were only just beginning.

Tamworth are now depicted as the greediest club in football for charging once-in-a-lifetime prices for a once-in-a-lifetime match. There are 518 seats at The Lamb Ground that normally go for £20; for the Tottenham game, that has risen to £42. Under-tens usually get into the terrace for free and pay only £4 for a seat in the main stand. Instead, kids' seated tickets are £29 and it is £38 for an adult to stand. How dare they? It is almost as if Tamworth FC is a business that needs to make money. Their average gate for National League games is 1,289 and the ground holds 4,963. Should they really not take advantage of the 3,674 who will not be setting foot inside the place again after January 12? The glory hunters, the day trippers, the away fans, who will also be getting a unique experience for their money? We've got too high on the notion of football clubs being community endeavours. Yes, they are. But they're not charities. This is Tamworth's moment. They can't just give it away.

One hopes none of those taking to social media to condemn them are taxi drivers. Didn't see too many cabbies charging the regular when it was their special time on New Year's Eve. Publicans and restaurateurs the same. And that windfall is annual, not generational like a cup draw. Tamworth have reached the FA Cup third round before, but in 2006 when they faced Stoke City in a replay, and then when they met Norwich City a year later, both opponents were mid-table Championship teams. Everton were Premier League opposition in 2012, but that match was played at Goodison Park. So this is the biggest tie in Tamworth's history. Why shouldn't they take advantage of it?

Do not, however, believe the argument that this inflation is all the FA's fault for scrapping replays, that the loss of a potential windfall has left smaller clubs with no option. Tamworth are on television. Tamworth are earning. So are a lot of other lower-league teams who are now paid guaranteed participation rates, rather than relying on the hope of a win and a lucky, lucrative draw.

The present system is more sustainable, year on year, than fingers crossed for a golden ticket. And were Tamworth truly likely to get the result that would give them a replay at Tottenham's 60,000-capacity stadium? They didn't get it against York City, Hartlepool United, Barnet, Eastleigh, Altrincham, Halifax Town, Southend United, Oldham Athletic or Rochdale this season. Tamworth are 15th in tier five. We know Tottenham haven't been much cop of late, but the chances of an upset weren't high.

Tamworth aren't graspers. They are a small football club that needs money and should not have to pander to some romanticised vision of grassroots and community. If this soft-focus guff were based in reality there wouldn't be 3,674 empty spaces most weeks — and if Tamworth always sold out, they wouldn't need to put their prices up.



Plymouth Argyle have decided to sack Rooney

It's hard not to feel sorry for Rooney

It would take the hardest heart not to have sympathy for Wayne Rooney, now sacked as Plymouth Argyle head coach. Recent results make it unsurprising, but his sincerity in trying to forge a career in coaching is to be admired. Not sure he gets another chance after this, sadly.

Real's first bid failed - but sent a powerful message regardless

Paul Joyce



Northern Football Correspondent

MARVIN IBO GUENGOER/GES SPORTFOTO/GETTY IMAGES



Alexander-Arnold is friends with Bellingham, right, and could play with him for club and country if he joins Real Madrid

The conversation between Real Madrid and Liverpool did not get as far as crunching the numbers, but Trent Alexander-Arnold can no longer be in any doubt as to just how much the Spaniards value him.

That Carlo Ancelotti's side were prepared to shell out a transfer fee believed to be around £20 million this month for the right back, rather than simply waiting until the summer when his contract is due to expire and they could pick him up for nothing, sends out a powerful message.

Perhaps it was also an opening salvo to try and destabilize Liverpool in the hope that selling him starts to look like the only option. The reaction from fans has certainly been emotional.

And yet the counterpoint to that, in what is already becoming something of a saga, was Liverpool's emphatic response to the Real executives who picked up the telephone to their Anfield counterparts yesterday.

A refusal to countenance losing Alexander-Arnold in the short— and also long — term because of the damage sanctioning a deal might do to their title charge showed that they too are up for the fight.

The world's biggest club, or the team that made his dreams come true? Alexander-Arnold will have to make his decision sooner rather than later.

The 26-year-old has been quick to acknowledge how much he is enjoying life under Arne Slot, whose coaching and attention to detail, Alexander-Arnold believes, have improved him from a defensive perspective. That Liverpool are top of the Premier League and Champions League standings highlights the impact the Dutchman has had since succeeding Jürgen Klopp.

"The style with which he coaches, and the style in which we play and the identity we have got as a team is something that is there to see," Alexander-Arnold said recently.

"The lads have bought into it from day one. The tactics are mind-blowing as well, if I'm honest. We're all enjoying it. He's getting the best out of players. That's all you want as a player."

Yet the opportunity to go to Real and experience a different lifestyle is one which will also carry a certain appeal for a player who has already won everything he can at Liverpool, including the Premier League and Champions League.

His best friend in football, Jude Bellingham, is at the Bernabeu, while Alexander-Arnold spoke recently about a desire to become the first full back to win the Ballon d'Or.

"I want that legacy of being the greatest right back to have played football," he said. "I have got to reach for the stars and that's where I believe my ceiling can go." There will be plenty who feel he can achieve that at Liverpool over the coming years with Slot at the helm, and a personal hope would be that he stays and one day becomes captain.

But staying brings no guarantees and Alexander-Arnold is someone who likes a challenge. Now that he can listen to Real's sales pitch, he would be foolish not to do so as he works out whether he will be best stimulated by them or Liverpool. The prevailing mood in Liverpool is that Alexander-Arnold's Real move is now a foregone conclusion, the presumption being that big clubs do not make bids for star players without some form of encouragement. The coming weeks will reveal all.

It feels pertinent to offer a recap of how things got to the point whereby from today, Alexander-Arnold can legally meet with Real's power brokers to hear what they have in mind for the next phase of his career. There should be no disputing that Liverpool's owner, Fenway Sports Group, dropped the ball when it came to opening negotiations with him on a new deal.

Given his age, discussions should have started at the end of the 2022-23 season rather than in recent months. That was a campaign in which his form fluctuated and before ending he was reinvented as an inverted full back who would step into midfield.

If Alexander-Arnold's performances played a small part in an initial reluctance to bring his camp to the negotiating table, then instability behind the scenes would quickly complicate the landscape.

Sporting director Julian Ward left in the summer of 2023 and a stop-gap in Jörg Schmadtke took over, while in November of that year Klopp informed FSG that he would leave at the end of the season.

Liverpool's priority for the coming months was appointing a permanent sporting director in Richard Hughes, whose first task was to pinpoint Klopp's successor. Contract renewals took a back seat and understandably so given Alexander-Arnold, together with Virgil van Dijk and Mohamed Salah who are also in the final year of their deals, would have wanted to know who was coming in. They would also have wanted to see how things panned out under Slot.

Yet Van Dijk is 34 in July and Salah 33 in June and their ages mean waiting to talk terms was more understandable. Alexander-Arnold is different, not least because there is a clear suitor for him.

The affable Slot could do without these headaches and as much as he insists the noise is not becoming a distraction for him, the gloomy and angry reaction among supporters to developments shows the impact of the situation.

Alexander-Arnold would not blame supporters for their instinctive reaction, as he has chosen to remain silent on his future, whereas Salah, for example, has sought to weaponise fans in some respects by publicly expressing his disdain at the lack of progress on his own deal.

As difficult as it may be amid Real's courtship, the focus has to be on a season of possibilities being realised. And if Liverpool are to be triumphant this season, then they will still need Alexander-Arnold.

CONTINUED FROM BACK

Plymouth part ways with Rooney

made allowances for the squad being depleted by injuries.

Rooney was forced to play Tegan Finn, a 16-year-old apprentice, in the 4-0 defeat by Coventry City, coached by his former England team-mate Frank Lampard, on Boxing Day — the fifth time they had conceded four goals or more in an away game this season. Plymouth are the only Championship side not to have won away from home this season, losing 11 and drawing two of their 13 away matches.

Mike Phelan, who coached at Manchester United under Sir Alex Ferguson, has also left the club less than a month after being named as Rooney's assistant.

Rooney has been the subject of a behind-the-scenes documentary filmed at Plymouth this season, although it is not yet known which platform or channel will screen the show, or when it will go to air. "Plymouth Argyle will always hold a special place in my heart, and I will continue to look out for and take interest in their results," Rooney said.

Rooney joined Derby as a player in January 2020 after a spell in Major League Soccer with DC United. He was put in interim charge in November of that year, when the club were bottom of the Championship. He received plaudits for leading Derby through a difficult period of administration that ended in relegation in 2022 after a 21-point deduction. When sacked by Birmingham, Rooney said the club had denied him the opportunity to strengthen the squad in the January transfer window.

Cunha gets two-game ban

The Wolverhampton Wanderers forward Matheus Cunha has been banned for two matches and fined £80,000 for improper conduct (Charlotte Duncker writes).

Cunha was charged by the FA for his behaviour after Wolves' defeat by Ipswich Town last month and will now miss both the Premier League match against Nottingham Forest on Monday night and the FA Cup third-round tie with Bristol City.

The Brazilian, Wolves' top scorer with ten league goals, was charged with acting "in an improper manner after the final whistle" following the defeat at Molineux. He admitted the charge and the sanctions have been imposed by an independent regulatory commission. The full written reasons behind the ban and fine are expected to be released at a later date.

Footage broadcast after the match showed Cunha involved in an altercation with a member of Ipswich's security team. The video appeared to show Cunha elbowing the man in the back of the head before snatching the glasses off his face.

Results

Football

Vanarama National League

Solihull Moors (1) **2** **Tamworth** (0) **0**
Wilkinson 20, 59

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Barnet	24	15	4	5	50	29	21	49
York	23	14	6	3	47	20	27	48
Forest Green	23	13	8	2	41	19	22	47
Gateshead	24	14	5	5	49	31	18	47
Oldham	21	12	7	2	38	19	19	43
Solihull Moors	25	12	5	8	45	36	9	41
Rochdale	22	12	3	7	34	20	14	39
Halifax	24	9	9	6	26	23	3	36
Altrincham	24	9	8	7	37	30	7	35
Yeovil	24	10	5	9	30	27	3	35
Eastleigh	23	8	9	6	32	30	2	33
Sutton Utd	24	9	6	9	33	32	1	33
Hartlepool	24	8	9	7	29	29	0	33
Southend	24	7	9	8	28	27	1	30
Tamworth	24	8	6	10	26	41	-15	30
Dagenham & R	23	7	7	9	37	33	4	28
Woking	24	6	7	11	23	35	-12	25
Aldershot	24	5	9	10	34	42	-8	24
Wealdstone	23	5	8	10	28	35	-7	23
Braintree	24	6	5	13	23	35	-12	23
Maidenhead	24	6	5	13	30	46	-16	23
AFC Fylde	24	6	4	14	29	50	-21	22
Boston	23	3	6	14	19	38	-19	15
Ebbsfleet	24	1	6	17	17	58	-41	9

North Scunthorpe 3 King's Lynn 0.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Scunthorpe	24	12	8	4	39	15	24	44
Kidderminster	22	13	4	5	36	16	20	43
Curzon Ashton	22	13	3	6	31	18	13	42
Kings Lynn	25	12	6	7	30	25	5	42
Buxton	23	12	2	9	37	27	10	38
Chorley	22	11	5	6	32	26	6	38
Hereford	23	10	7	6	31	22	9	37
Brackley	22	11	4	7	26	19	7	37
Alfreton	22	10	7	5	29	23	6	37
Darlington	23	9	9	5	30	24	6	36
Chester	22	10	6	6	29	24	5	36
South Shields	24	11	3	10	40	36	4	36
Spennymoor	23	7	10	6	32	28	4	31
Southport	23	8	6	9	27	33	-6	30
Scarborough	23	7	8	8	28	29	-1	29
Oxford City	23	7	7	9	36	39	-3	28
Peterboro Sports	23	7	7	9	26	30	-4	28
Leamington	22	7	5	10	28	25	3	26
Warrington	24	5	9	10	21	31	-10	24
Farsley	23	7	3	13	25	40	-15	24
Radcliffe	21	4	6	11	24	41	-17	18
Marine	23	4	6	13	14	31	-17	18
Needham Market	23	4	6	13	16	37	-21	18
Rushall	23	3	3	17	20	48	-28	12

William Hill Scottish Championship

Morton (0) **2** **Partick** (1) **1**
Stuparevic 54, Blues 90+1 — Fitzpatrick 61

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Falkirk	19	13	3	3	37	17	20	42
Livingston	19	10	6	3	25	13	12	36
Ayr	19	10	5	4	29	17	12	35
Partick	19	9	5	5	23	14	11	32
Queen's Park	19	7	4	8	21	22	-1	25
Raith Rovers	18	7	3	8	19	23	-4	24
Morton	19	5	8	6	17	22	-7	23
Hamilton	18	6	3	9	26	32	-6	21
Dunfermline	19	4	4	11	17	25	-8	16
Airdrieonians	19	1	3	15	10	39	-29	6

Tennis

United Cup

Round robin: Group A: Perth: United States vs Croatia 3-0 (United States players first): T Fritz bt B Coric 6-3, 6-2; C Gauff bt D Vekic 6-4, 6-2. **Group D: Sydney: Italy vs France 3-0** (Italy players first): J Paolini bt C Paquet 6-0, 6-2.

ATP Bank of China Hong Kong Open

First round Z Bergs (Bel) bt Moro Canas (Sp) 6-4, 6-4; A Muller (Fr) bt M Huesler (Switz) 2-6, 6-4, 6-3; N Borges (Por) bt Bu Yunchaokete (China) 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (8-6); J Munar (Sp) bt A Davidovich Fokina (Sp) 4-6, 6-3, 6-3; P Martinez (Sp) bt F Passaro (It) 6-4, 6-4; K Nishikori (Japan) bt D Shapovalov (Can) 6-2, 6-3; G Diallo (Can) bt R Carballés Baena (Sp) 4-6, 7-6 (7-4), 7-5; Shang Juncheng (China) bt C Wong (HK) 7-6 (7-3), 6-4.

Brisbane International

First round: Men M Arnaldi (It) bt A Popyrin (Aus) 6-2, 6-2; R Opelka (US) bt FA Gomez (Arg) 7-5, 6-4; F Tiafoe (US) 7-6 (7-5) bt A Walton (Aus); J Mensik (Cz) bt M Kukushkin (Kaz) 7-6 (7-3), 6-4; D Lajovic (Serbia) bt A Cazaux (Fr) 6-4, 6-4; G Mpetshi Perricard (Fr) 7-6 (7-2); 6-7 (4-7); 7-6 (7-3); G Monfils (Fr) bt N Basavareddy (US) 6-4, 4-6, 6-1; N Djokovic (Serbia) bt R Hijikata (Aus) 6-3, 6-3. **Women** E Avanesyan (Armenia) bt P Badosa (Sp) 6-3, 1-6, 6-2; Y Putintseva (Kaz) bt M Kessler (US) 6-2, 7-5; A Krueger (US) bt A Kalinskaya (Russ) 6-3, 6-3; A Sabalenka (Bela) bt R Zarazua (Mex) 6-4, 6-0; M Andreeva (Russ) bt A Blinkova (Russ) 6-4, 6-4; M Bouzkova (Cz) bt J Ostapenko (Lat) 7-6 (7-0), 6-4; O Jabeur (Tun) bt E Alexandrova (Russ) 6-3, 6-2; A Kalinina (Ukr) bt D Shnaider (Bela) 6-3, 4-6, 6-1.

WTA ASB Classic

Auckland: First round H Baptise (US) bt R Jamrichova (Slovakia) 6-0, 6-2; M Keys (US) bt L Bronzetti (It) 6-4, 6-4; G Minnen (Bel) bt A-L Friedsam (Ger) 6-4, 6-0; J Burrage (GB) bt V Yang (NZ) 6-3, 6-3; R Montgomery (US) bt M Hontama (Japan) 6-2, 2-6, 6-0; A Parks (US) bt A Anisimova (US) 2-6, 6-2, 6-3.

Fixtures

Football

Kick-off 3.0 unless stated

Premier League Brentford v Arsenal (5.30).

Sky Bet Championship Burnley v Stoke; Cardiff v Coventry; Hull v Middlesbrough (5.30); Leeds v Blackburn; Luton v Norwich; Millwall v Oxford Utd (1.0); Plymouth v Bristol City (12.30); Portsmouth v Swansea; Queens Park Rangers v Watford (12.30); Sheffield Wednesday v Derby; Sunderland v Sheffield Utd (8.0); West Bromwich v Preston. **League One** Barnsley v Wrexham; Blackpool v Shrewsbury; Bristol Rovers v Leyton Orient; Burton Albion v Peterborough; Cambridge Utd v Reading; Crawley v Charlton; Lincoln City v Rotherham; Mansfield v Bolton; Northampton v Stevenage; Stockport v Birmingham; Wigan v Huddersfield; Wycombe v Exeter. **League Two** Accrington v Grimsby; Barrow v Bradford City; Chesterfield v MK Dons; Crewe v Carlisle; Doncaster v Fleetwood; Harrogate v Salford; Morecambe v Tranmere; Notts County v Walsall; Port Vale v Cheltenham; Swindon v Colchester.

Darts

Alexandra Palace, London Paddy Power PDC World Championship, quarter-finals from 12.30pm.

Rugby union

United Rugby Championship Cardiff v Ospreys (3.0); Scarlets v Dragons (5.15).

Sport

Martin Samuel
Why Brighton can never play at home on Boxing Day
Column, page 48



Tipster of the year
Times man Rob Wright is champion for sixth time
Today's tips, page 44



Liverpool reject Real's Trent offer

Madrid club will hold talks about summer move

Paul Joyce
Northern Football Correspondent

Liverpool have rejected an approach from Real Madrid to sign Trent Alexander-Arnold permanently this month.

The Spanish giants made their first official move in their pursuit of the Liverpool vice-captain by contacting the club's hierarchy yesterday, but an attempt to seal a cut-price deal was immediately rebuffed.

The conversation did not even reach the stage at which numbers were mentioned, with Liverpool offering no encouragement to Real as their focus is solely on winning the Premier League.

The emphatic response underlines Liverpool's determination to keep Alexander-Arnold in the short-term, with their stance appearing to kill off prospects of the 26-year-old leaving this month.

Liverpool also want to keep the right back for the foreseeable future and have been in negotiations with the player and his representatives for several months over an extension to his existing deal. However, there remains the possibility of the England international moving to the Bernabeu in the summer.

Alexander-Arnold is out of contract at the end of the season and from today can officially speak to foreign clubs about a free transfer move.

Despite Liverpool's refusal to countenance any deal, the development was greeted gloomily by supporters of the club, whose fears that Alexander-Arnold will now leave Anfield at the end of the season intensified.

"I love Trent as a lad and a player, but his team would've told Real Madrid to bid and also would've known LFC would turn it down," former defender Jamie Carragher wrote on X. "It's to try and cover themselves when he leaves for free."

Real, who are without experienced full back Dani Carvajal for the rest of the campaign after he suffered an anterior cruciate ligament injury, will exercise their right to speak to the player.

It will then be left to Alexander-Arnold to decide whether he wants to leave his boyhood club and take on a new challenge in La Liga alongside his close friend Jude Bellingham.

Liverpool have not received any indication that Alexander-Arnold intends to leave and the player responded to claims in the Spanish media over the weekend that he had already given Real his word about a move by making a talking gesture when celebrating his goal in Sunday's 5-0 win over West Ham United.

The fact that Real have tried to act now, rather than wait, could be taken as a sign of their confidence in landing Alexander-Arnold, who joined Liverpool at the age of six and has won an array of trophies including the Premier League and Champions League.

Virgil van Dijk and Mohamed Salah are also out of contract in the summer.
Analysis, page 49

SIMON DAEL/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



Alexander-Arnold responded to the rumours after scoring away to West Ham

Amorim told to offload players

Paul Hirst

Ruben Amorim will be unable to bring in the reinforcements he wants this month unless Manchester United offload some of their first-team squad.

Despite slipping to 14th place in the Premier League with an embarrassing 2-0 defeat by Newcastle United on Monday night, the club are expecting a quiet transfer window.

As is common for most head coaches who are appointed three months into a season, Amorim has made it clear to his superiors that he wants to refresh his squad. However, he has been reminded that United are close to their spending limit under the Premier League's Profitability and Sustainability Rules (PSR), so their budget is extremely tight.

Under Erik ten Hag, United spent about £200million last summer to bring
Continued on page 50

Rooney leaves Plymouth job

Gary Jacob

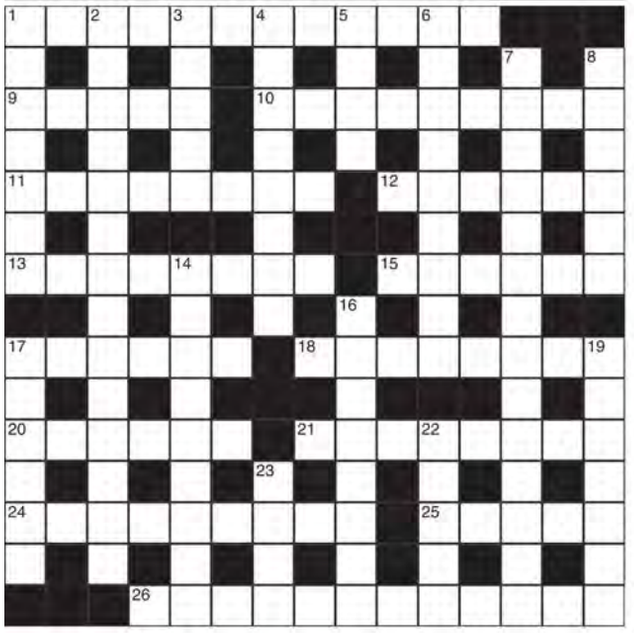
Wayne Rooney has left Plymouth Argyle after seven months in charge.

The former England captain's side have won four of their 23 league matches this season, conceding 51 times, and are four points from safety at the bottom of the Sky Bet Championship.

The 39-year-old succeeded Ian Foster as head coach in May and his departure is another blow to his managerial career after previous roles in charge of Derby County and DC United and a spell at Birmingham City that ended last January after only 15 matches.

Rooney, second on the list of England's record goalscorers after Harry Kane, with 53 goals in 120 internationals, has been under pressure for some time at Plymouth. The club had
Continued on page 49

Times Crossword 29,115



ACROSS

1 Hard to avoid in merciless villain's garment? (5-7)
9 Cheer health organisation work (5)
10 Outlaw in long distance run, I gather (5,4)
11 Tend with cine reels to be needing some censorship? (8)
12 Diver coming out with pants just too short (6)
13 Leave those with possessions to retain large share (2,6)
15 Subject of wartime graffiti: one line in city recalled (6)
17 Shiny metal chain, see (6)
18 Florist primarily is trailing fashionable shop window item? (8)
20 Confine to broadcast as a series (2,4)
21 Busy checking progress of the career-minded? (5,3)
24 Relative disquiet at EU grant (5-4)
25 Get used to another union backing demos (5)
26 A sweet little boy, I keep mum and dad's score! (6,6)

DOWN

1 Physicist's important piece bearing fruit (7)
2 Increasingly cruel to older British, appallingly (14)
3 Subject and object of the selectors, briefly (5)
4 Miscreant dying perhaps to open present (8)
5 Miss artificially produced sounds (4)
6 Training series that's raised a genius with figures (9)
7 Determined to catch late night election procedure — but failing? (3,3,3,5)
8 Spare space, as we see it, outside pub (6)
14 Gentle creature on motorbike races a scooter (9)
16 Pilot quietly longing for somewhere to trade, unofficially (8)
17 Bow Church concealing the sounds of its bells (6)
19 Exercising power every twelve months, briefly becoming irritable (7)
22 Engaged in the writer's revolutionary musical (5)
23 Mount *Juif Errant* (4)

Yesterday's solution 29,114

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

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