DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

THE TIMES

SATURDAY

February 1 2025 | thetimes.com | No 74633

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Inside Montecito
Harry and Meghan's super-rich home town

Magazine



My Trump makeover
Bouffant hair, spray tan, orange glow

Simon Mills, Magazine

Long-term sick facing crackdown on benefits

PM will curb £65bn bill with back-to-work push

Chris Smyth Whitehall Editor
Max Kendix Political Reporter
Oliver Wright Policy Editor

The long-term sick will be required to look for work and many will see their benefits cut as part of an overhaul of welfare being drawn up by ministers.

Hundreds of thousands of people could have their sickness benefit payments reduced under reforms designed to encourage them back to work and to control a ballooning welfare bill.

Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, is preparing changes that would prevent the long-term sick receiving benefits with no requirements and that are likely to address the financial incentive that arises because they can be paid twice as much as jobseekers.

People with mental health conditions will find it harder to claim separate disability benefits under what would be the biggest changes to the welfare system for more than a decade.

Sir Keir Starmer could be pitched into a bitter fight with his party. The changes are likely to anger Labour's base and provoke significant opposition from campaigners. Discussions with disability groups are thought to have begun and ministers promise detailed consultation.

Kendall insists that the present system is "broken" and change is needed to help people to get back to work and the economy to grow but she is under pressure from the Treasury to find billions of pounds in savings in the coming weeks.

Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, is desperate to avoid an emergency tax-raising budget in March to meet fiscal rules that are under strain from higher borrowing costs. The Treasury has told City bosses spooked by the prospect of further tax rises that savings in the welfare bill will prevent that.

A package is due to be finalised in the next two weeks to convince the Office for Budget Responsibility that the benefits bill can be brought under control. Britain spends £65 billion on sickness benefits, more than the £60 billion defence budget and dwarfing the £20 billion spent on the police.

A range of options is understood to be under consideration although none has been agreed. All are expected to include tougher conditions for those signed off sick, most of whom have no obligation to prepare for or seek work. Figures published this week showed that 2.4 million incapacity benefit claimants had no work conditions attached, up 50 per cent in five years.

Kendall is said to want to give them a "duty to engage" with employment services, from actively seeking work to getting help with CVs, training or other preparation to enter the labour force. Kendall believes that many people on incapacity benefits are put off seeking

Continued on page 2

TOM JACKSON FOR THE TIMES



Labour's big brother

A digital ID system and live facial recognition cameras could defeat populism by tackling crime and illegal immigration, Sir Tony Blair, the former prime minister, says. Interview, pages 32-33

INSIDE TODAY



Meet the Brit who French women want to look like
Magazine

Niall Ferguson
America's new New Deal
Comment, pages 28-29



The Scrum
12-page guide to the Six Nations
Pullout

9 771742 498769 05>

News

Today's highlights

8.50am **Sir Niall Ferguson** on joining The Times to write about history, economics and global affairs

12.15pm The Times columnist **Giles Coren** discusses his cancer diagnosis, which he writes about today on page 22

2.45pm **Nicky Kelvin**, head of The Points Guy UK, shares his tips for cheap travel

7pm **Sir Stephen Fry**, right, delivers a special lecture at Oxford University on the power of words



TIMESRADIO
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TODAY'S EDITION

King to star in Amazon film

The King is to star in a feature-length film for Amazon Prime that will show viewers how to "transform people, places and ultimately the planet", based on his 2010 book *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*. Filming began at Dumfries House in Ayrshire last month. Page 5

Civilians hunted in 'drone safari'

Civilians in the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine claim they are being deliberately targeted by Russian attack-drone operators who hunt them down before posting video of their kills on Telegram. The practice has been given the macabre nickname "drone safari". Pages 36-37

FTSE 100 hits another record

London's leading share index, the FTSE 100, clocked up its best monthly gains in more than two years as investors sought to diversify out of American stocks. President Trump's threats of tariffs have prompted investors to look for alternatives to US assets. Page 41

COMMENT

'We could well manage the next couple of decades better than any other country in Europe'

FRASER NELSON, PAGE 21

LEADING ARTICLES 25 | BUSINESS 41 | REGISTER 70
WORLD 36 | MONEY 51 | CROSSWORD 75

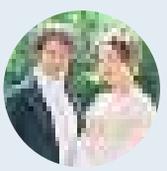
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WEEKEND



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SATURDAY REVIEW



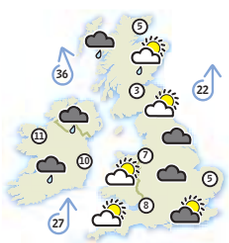
ENDURING LOVE
Jane Austen's timeless appeal on her 250th birthday
PULLOUT

SPORT



TRANSFER GOAL
Villa weigh up loan move for Rashford after Durán exit
PULLOUT

THE WEATHER



Showery rain in Ireland and parts of Scotland but dry with sunny spells elsewhere. **Full forecast, page 69**

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Labour accused of 'dropping ball' on AstraZeneca scheme

Alex Ralph

Jeremy Hunt has accused Labour of "dropping the ball" after AstraZeneca scrapped a plan to invest £450 million in a vaccines facility in Liverpool.

Britain's most valuable public company said yesterday that after "protracted discussions" with the government it was no longer pursuing the investment at its site in Speke.

The FTSE 100 company, valued at £176 billion, said several factors had led to the decision, "including the timing and reduction of the final offer compared to the previous government's proposal".

The decision is a blow to the government, which is under growing pressure to lure private sector investment to help deliver economic growth after hitting business confidence in October with its tax-raising budget.

The announcement was made days after Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, referenced AstraZeneca in her speech about the Oxford-Cambridge "growth corridor", listing the company among those "delivering jobs and investments across Britain".

The proposed investment, to expand manufacturing and modernise technology at the nasal flu vaccines site, was first announced by Hunt in his last budget speech as chancellor in March.

However, after the general election in July, AstraZeneca became frustrated by the handling of the process in government, including a cut in financial support offered by the Treasury.

Delays in getting the support led AstraZeneca to miss nn internal deadline, despite Jonathan Reynolds, the business secretary, having been warned shortly after the election that it was an "urgent issue". A source familiar with the matter said: "Politically they offered warm words, but in practice the system was sclerotic."

Hunt said that he had "made a huge effort to get this deal over the line working personally with Sir Pascal Soriot [AstraZeneca's chief executive] to do so". He added: "It is an absolute tragedy the government has dropped the ball on it — manufacturing high-end vaccines is a massive opportunity to develop and deepen our strength in life sciences.

"I am also worried that traditional Treasury short-termism is trumping the sentiments in Rachel Reeves's growth speech. A good speech won't grow the economy — factories will."

A spokeswoman for the government said: "A change in the make-up of the investment originally proposed by AstraZeneca led to a reduced government grant offer being put forward. All government grant funding has to demonstrate value for the taxpayer and unfortunately, despite extensive work from government officials, it has not been possible to achieve a solution.

"AstraZeneca remains closely engaged with the government's work to develop our new industrial strategy, and more broadly we continue to have a thriving life sciences sector, worth £108 billion to the economy and providing over 300,000 highly skilled jobs across the country."

AstraZeneca scraps UK vaccine plant in blow to government, Business, page 41

Tenth of farmland marked for net zero

Ben Cooke, Max Kendix

England could turn a tenth of its farmland over to solar panels, forests and nature reserves, the government has said, as it attempts for the first time to reconcile competing demands on land.

Under the land-use framework announced yesterday, 9 per cent of agricultural land would be put to other uses by 2050 and a further 5 per cent converted to less intensive farming practices that give more space to nature.

Steve Reed, the environment secretary, said he wanted to "strengthen food production ... increase yields, not see them diminish because of the impacts of biodiversity collapse". His department's own analysis, however, said the claim that food production would be unaffected by a reduction in farmland was "subject to significant uncertainty".

The framework draws upon data concerning which parts of the country are vulnerable to flooding, which have most potential for nature restoration and renewable energy, and which are suited to housing. Government departments and councils would need to take it into account when deciding upon new projects such as housing and net-zero infrastructure. Reed said: "We want to make sure we build homes in places where it won't encroach on food production and farmland."

The Lake District and Devon would have some of the most drastic shifts in land use, flooding peat bogs to prevent the release of carbon dioxide. Uplands seen as ripe for nature restoration contribute little to food security. The least productive 20 per cent of farmland, dominated by sheep farming, produces 3 per cent of consumed calories.

Farmers will be given a 12-week consultation period to have their say. Reed said he was not telling farmers what to do with their land but "putting this out for consultation and giving them access to this incredibly rich data, and asking people, what are the best ways to get to the outcomes we want to see".

Farmers would be offered incentives to change the use of their land, he said.

Victoria Atkins, the shadow environment secretary, said Reed had taken "six long months to launch a list of questions". She said: "This framework will have no legal weight, meaning Ed Miliband [the energy secretary] and Angela Rayner [the housing secretary] can ram through net-zero and development, whatever the grade of land."

Tom Bradshaw, president of the National Farmers' Union, said: "We must have a land-use plan in place ... that has British food at its heart and ensures we make the best use of our most productive agricultural land."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Welfare overhaul

employment for fear of losing their payments if a job does not work. "Many sick and disabled people want to work, given the right support, but are unfairly shut out," said a government source. "We will bring forward big reforms that help more people into work, protect the most vulnerable, and boost growth — while putting the benefits bill on a more sustainable footing."

Under one option, the universal credit "limited capability for work or work-related activity" category would be abolished, requiring claimants to prepare for work and losing them about £5,000 a year. Ministers want to scrap the work capability assessment used to approve incapacity benefits and align the system more closely with assessments for personal independence payments (PIPs), separate disability benefits that are paid whether or not someone can work.

PIPs will also be overhauled and it remains unclear whether the most severely disabled would be compensated for the loss of disability benefits. Those with conditions such as depression and anxiety are likely to find it harder to claim. Ministers have told business leaders that changes to PIP thresholds and eligibility will be the first priority.

Options include one-off payments for some, instead of a regular income, and means testing. A source said Downing Street was looking at whether claimants would have to routinely provide medical evidence in support of claims, rather than undergoing an assessment as at present. A senior figure in the Department of Work and Pensions disputed that.

Radical reforms to get people working are welcome, leading article, page 25

Behind the story

Nobody thinks the sickness benefits system is working (Chris Smyth writes). Incapacity benefit claimants have risen by one million since the pandemic and, on present trends, will top four million by the end of the decade.

While some of this is down to Britain's worsening health — almost one in four people of working age say they have a disability — it is clear the welfare system is funnelling people away from work. The decision to cut payments to less severely incapacitated claimants in 2017 means there is a huge financial incentive to be signed off sick.

Some claimants can double their income and free themselves of onerous conditions if they are deemed unfit for any work. Hardly surprising, then, that increasing numbers are being put into this highest category — half of applicants, up from little more than a third five years ago.

Yet many long-term sick want to work. Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, is particularly taken with a project in Barnsley that found seven in ten wanted to work yet only one in ten had any contact with employment services. Many fear trying to work in case they lose their higher levels of benefits.

Welfare reform is sensitive and slow but Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, needs to find savings quickly.

Sir Keir Starmer rode towards No 10 by facing down the left. As past Labour leaders have found, nothing provokes the party's activists more than welfare.

Stump up or Einstein heritage will turn to chalk dust, plead scientists

Tom Whipple Science Editor

When Einstein first scratched a stick of chalk over this previously ordinary Nottingham blackboard, it was for a packed celebrity lecture.

Then that evening in 1930, after he had regaled that audience with a brief history of space-time, he signed the board. An ordinary blackboard no more, sanctified by the greatest scientist of its time, it was preserved behind glass.

And today? It is still behind glass. It is even labelled "Einstein's blackboard". But, Nottingham's physicists lament, this piece of scientific heritage is in need of urgent care.

Einstein's blackboard looks down, these days, not on a packed public lecture but a utilitarian staff room, where the physics department academics convene to drink instant coffee and endure PowerPoint presentations. Sometimes, they watch as building work next door shakes Einstein's scrawled reference to gravitational waves and rattles his citation of Descartes.

Now, they think it's time to give this blackboard a better home — and they want a donor to help them. "This is history right here," says Dr Emma Chapman, a cosmologist.

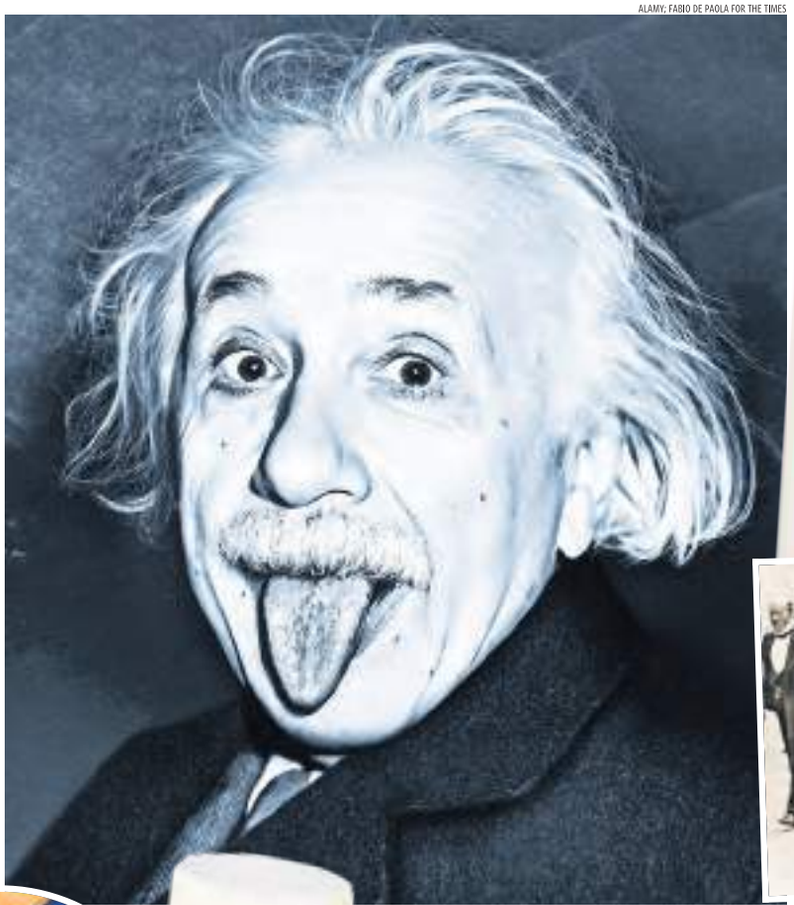
When Einstein visited Nottingham, it was an event covered in the press. One paper described him as having "a slightly lost air of benevolence and bewilderment".

"I thought he looked with this wonderful hair, like a mixture between an amiable lion and one of those calm-looking pandas that we see in zoos," the correspondent wrote.

So understated is the blackboard's presentation today, though, that for the first year she worked in the department, Chapman says, she didn't even realise the blackboard was special. She pauses as another blast of power tools vibrates the wall.

The last line on the board, before the signature, is a reference to Einstein's failed search for a unified theory — to mathematically join together the universe's forces. Somehow, those forces have persisted for almost a century in holding the chalk to the blackboard.

ALAMY; FABIO DE PAOLA FOR THE TIMES









Einstein visited Nottingham in 1930, signing a blackboard that could be exhibited with chalk stick that has its own story

But, says Professor Tony Padilla, this is more cosmic luck than design. He wants to move the board to a quieter and better-protected location, where it can also be better appreciated. His dream is for it to go on display by the university's Gravity Laboratory. "I would like all visitors to see cutting-edge gravitational research past and present showcased right there."

There is a problem though. He and his colleagues' expertise extends happily to the fourth dimension and even, in the case of the string theorists, to the fifth. What it does not extend to is cultural preservation. They know they need funding for a professional from the art world to house it properly and move it safely.

As well as displaying the board, ideally they want to reunite it with another related artefact. After the lecture, a student "borrowed" the chalk.

"So the story goes, this chap took the piece of chalk, snapped it in half, kept half, gave half to his mate," says Nick Botterill, from the School of Physics and Astronomy. One half made its way back to the university fairly rapidly. The other half stayed with its liberator. "Then, 50 years later, he wrote to the vice-chancellor, and sent back his half of the chalk."

Exhibiting the returned chalk would be a bonus. The main goal is to ensure the blackboard is safe. Historically, not all such blackboards have been.

This is not the only Einstein blackboard in Britain. Oxford University has an unsigned one. It used to have two unsigned ones, in fact, but one was accidentally erased in an over-zealous bout of cleaning. The thread of history is precarious — especially when it is written in chalk.

The right frame of reference, leading article, page 25

Vice-president takes potshot at Rory Stewart in neighbourly love row

Hugh Tomlinson Washington

JD Vance has accused Rory Stewart of having "a low IQ" after Stewart criticised the American vice-president's interpretation of Christian values.

The dispute arose when Vance claimed during a Fox News interview that there was a religious justification for the "America first" policies of President Trump's new administration.

"There's this old-school — and I think it's a very Christian concept, by the way — that you love your family and then you love your neighbour, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then, after that, you can focus [on] and prioritise the rest of the world," Vance said on Wednesday, in his first interview since taking office. "A lot of the far left has completely inverted that."

Stewart, co-host of the podcast *The Rest is Politics*, called Vance's remarks a "bizarre take on John xv, 12-13", which states: "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that a person will lay down his life for his friends."

Stewart dismissed Vance's position as "less Christian and more pagan tribal". He said: "We should start worrying when politicians become theologians, assume to speak for Jesus and tell us in which order to love."

Vance, who converted to Catholicism in 2019, responded by accusing Stewart of having an inflated opinion of his intelligence. "Does Rory really think his moral duties to his own children are the same as his duties to a stranger who lives thousands of miles away? Does anyone?" Vance wrote. "This false arrogance drives so much elite failure over the last 40 years."

He added: "Rory Stewart thinks he has an IQ of 130 when it's really 110."

Stewart responded wryly: "An honour to have my IQ questioned by you, Mr VP. But your attempts to speak for Christ are false and dangerous. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that love is to be prioritised in concentric circles. His love is universal."

Alastair Campbell, the podcast's co-host and a former director of communications for Tony Blair, defended Stewart. Campbell said: "Very odd that the vice-president of the USA has nothing better to do than troll my podcast partner."

The exchange came after the Trump administration issued a sweeping directive suspending up to $3 trillion in funding for government programmes, including foreign aid. The move was swiftly rescinded amid legal challenges and widespread confusion.

Vance joined Trump at a press conference on Thursday to address the air disaster in Washington that killed 67 people, the worst air crash on US soil for a generation. Trump has blamed the crash on diversity, equity and inclusion schemes, which he said had undermined safety standards in America's skies.

Vance echoed the president's claim, saying: "When you don't have the best standards in who you're hiring it means, on the one hand, you're not getting the best people in government. But on the other hand, it puts stresses on the people who are already there."



Rory Stewart quoted from John's gospel

News

LORNE CAMPBELL/GUZELIAN



Fine edge Ian Sampson, who has made cricket bats by hand since 1972, working on an English willow blade at his Warrior workshop in Wakefield, West Yorkshire

European leaders divided over peacekeeping force for Ukraine

Larisa Brown Defence Editor

Britain and other European countries are divided over the viability of deploying a large-scale peacekeeping force to Ukraine, diplomats and officials have told The Times.

The UK, France and the Nordic states support the idea of a European-led initiative sending tens of thousands of troops in the event of a ceasefire deal. However, Germany and others are opposed, it is understood.

The Baltic states and Poland are believed to be concerned that the proposed mission could divert much-needed resources from Nato's border states with Russia, leaving them exposed.

There is a growing consensus, however, that such a post-conflict deployment would need to have President Trump's "buy in" and security guarantees. A senior British government source said Europe alone could generate the ground force if necessary but ministers were asking the US to provide "air cover".

This could be in the form of Patriot surface-to-air missile batteries that can shoot down ballistic missiles or aircraft with intelligence and surveillance assets, capabilities Europe lacks.

The British Army could, in theory, send a division-sized force of 10,000 to 25,000 troops, an army source said, although it may be a stretch given that troops are already stationed in Estonia.

A UN peacekeeping force made up of troops from countries such as India, Bangladesh and China is deemed by some to be more achievable.

Sir Keir Starmer is expected to discuss the issue with EU leaders and Mark Rutte, the Nato secretary-general, at a meeting in Brussels on Monday. He will also hold a bilateral meeting with Rutte on the same day.

John Healey, the defence secretary, is pushing for the UK to show strong leadership on the matter. Yet some officials believe they are still to convince Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, of the importance of Ukraine and fear she sees it as a "money pit".

A huge stumbling block is whether President Putin would agree to a force of this kind during peace talks led by the US. "If Russia does not buy the idea, it is dead and if the US does not provide a hammer, the idea is dead. Never say never, but I do not see this albatross getting off the ground," a senior military source said.

Allies are sceptical as to whether Europe alone could generate a force large enough to stop Russia from mounting a new attack after it has had time to rebuild its military. President Zelensky has said it would have to be 200,000 strong, which in reality would mean having 600,000 troops either deployed to Ukraine, preparing to go or in recovery.

Zelensky has also said that any effective peacekeeping force would need to include US troops because his European allies do not have enough soldiers to pose a realistic deterrent to Putin, comments that irked some diplomats in Europe last week.

Some diplomats and military sources believe a UN peacekeeping force is a wiser alternative and one more likely to secure the agreement of Putin. This could involve 100,000 peacekeepers positioned inside both Ukraine and Russia and would not require any direct US involvement. "They [the Russians] are not going to attack the Bangladeshis or the Indians," a second military source said.

As for a European-led force, the Germans are understood to be against making a commitment because of uncertainty over the forthcoming election. Another European diplomatic source said the US would need to be involved to provide a stronger deterrent to Russia and "because they have capabilities that all of Europe lacks", such as intelligence and surveillance capabilities and the "ability to retaliate at scale if needed".

According to reports, Trump has previously suggested the US should not contribute troops or finance the mission. One defence source suggested he might be persuaded otherwise, saying: "I don't think the US will be able to keep their fingers out of the pie."

'Drone safari', pages 36-37

Q&A

What size would a force be? Although President Zelensky has said it would need to be 200,000-strong to be a credible deterrent, it would probably end up being much smaller. Britain might be willing to commit about 20,000 soldiers — about a quarter of the army — supported by reserves and commandos.

Could it be done without the US? Probably not. While it might not need US troops on the ground — which President Trump is believed to be against — it would require some form of American "buy in". European countries fear a European-only force would be vulnerable to attack. One way round the problem could be for the US to provide another type of support, such as air cover in the form of Patriot missiles.

How would a UN peacekeeping force work? A force of Blue Helmets would be neutral, and convention dictates that it would be made up of countries that are not party to the conflict. They would be authorised to use force only to protect themselves and would monitor a ceasefire. The aim would be to help the two countries make the transition from war to peace. It took a UN framework and 90,000 peacekeepers to enforce Bosnia's independence in the 1990s. The UN, however, is struggling to find enough troops for existing missions so might find it challenging to muster a force of about 100,000. Such a deployment would also require the approval of the UN security council, which includes Russia and China.

Does President Putin need to agree? It is hard to see how a plan would work if he did not. Anything that looks like a Nato initiative or involves Nato infrastructure is likely to be a red line.

Some Putin allies believe there is no sign of him wanting to come to the negotiating table.

Quintagram® No 2167

Solve all five concise clues using each letter underneath once only

1 One hundredth of a euro (4)

— — — —

2 Sharp-tasting, tart (4)

— — — —

3 Playing pieces (8)

— — — — — — — —

4 Interpret in a certain way (8)

— — — — — — — —

5 Defeats comprehensively (8)

— — — — — — — —

C	C	C	C	E	E	E	E
N	N	N	N	O	O	O	O
R	R	R	R	S	S	S	S
T	T	T	T	U	U	U	U

Solutions see page 75
Cryptic clues see Review page 45

Body found in river

The Hungarian family of two sisters who went missing has been informed after a body was taken from the River Dee in Aberdeen. Henrietta and Eliza Huszti, both 32 and from a set of triplets, were last seen near the river on January 7. Police Scotland said the body had not been formally identified. The search is continuing.

Farmer blockades ban

The supermarkets Morrisons and Safeway have been granted an injunction that stops farmers from blocking distribution centres in protest over inheritance tax rises and pricing polices. Judge James Tindal, sitting in the High Court, said that food deliveries to vulnerable people would be in jeopardy if farmers were allowed to blockade the centres.

Police find commenter

A woman who commented "hey guys" on a police wanted appeal about her on Facebook was traced to a property in Manchester and arrested. The 22-year-old was held on suspicion of failing to appear in court for the alleged assault of an emergency worker, theft and drug offences. She was further arrested on suspicion of assaulting a police officer.

Church gig raises hell

Parishioners of York Minster are planning a protest after it was announced that a heavy metal gig is planned at the cathedral. The event on April 25 will include a set by Plague of Angels. Two of its members previously performed with Cradle of Filth, a band that once sold a T-shirt with the words "Jesus is a c***". The members are said to "deeply regret" this.

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King's starring role to save planet

Kate Mansey Assistant Editor

The King will star in a feature-length film for Amazon Prime to "show, not tell" viewers how to "transform people, places and ultimately the planet".

Filming began in January at Dumfries House in Ayrshire, and will focus on the philosophy the King outlined in his 2010 book *Harmony* in which he called for a "dramatic revolution" in the way we see the world.

The documentary will focus on the King's philosophy that people, nature and the built environment are interlinked, and the film-makers will look at his international charity work. It is a radical departure for the palace, which has previously preferred to work with domestic filmmakers such as the BBC and ITV.

A source said: "Filming has started for the Amazon production and the crew have had some time with the King. More than any other documentary he has done before, the aim seems to be to tell the world what the King stands for and what he is all about."

A palace source confirmed: "The King is greatly looking forward to seeing how the *Harmony* concept can be communicated to a new and international audience.

"This is a chance to 'show, not tell' how they can transform people, places, and ultimately the planet. I think many will be genuinely amazed at the scale, scope and vision of it all, for which Dumfries House continues to be the 'living laboratory'."

It is understood that several platforms were consulted before Amazon was given royal approval. The film is expected to be broadcast towards the end of this year or the beginning of 2026.

It is unlikely to be welcome news to Amazon's rival, Netflix, which has a multimillion-dollar deal with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.

In 2022, the Sussexes made a six-part documentary series with Netflix called *Harry & Meghan*, which looked at their exit from royal life. It featured an interview with the couple in which Meghan expressed her surprise at learning that she was expected to curtsy to Harry's grandmother, Elizabeth II.

Harry has also released a series about Polo and Meghan's lifestyle programme, *With love, Meghan*, is due to be released by the streamer in March.

Netflix also caused consternation at the palace with their portrayal of the royal family in their drama *The Crown*.

However, Amazon is not necessarily an obvious choice for the King. Last year it produced the three-part series *A Very Royal Scandal*, a dramatized retelling of the Duke of York's disastrous *Newsnight* interview with Emily Maitlis in which Prince Andrew, played by Michael Sheen, failed to show any regret over his friendship with the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The new is not intended to be a "fly-on-the-wall" look at the life of the King. A palace source said: "The film is not about the King, it is about the work that he has inspired around the world in exploring and finding ways for communities to work in closer connection with nature and towards a more sustainable future."

Nevertheless, it is expected to show the King's work in a new light, by tying together the many strands of his various interests as outlined in his book.

In it, Charles wrote: "This is a call to revolution. Revolution is a strong word, and I use it deliberately. The many environmental and social problems that now loom large on our horizon cannot be solved by carrying on with the very approach that has caused them. This will involve taking all sorts of dramatic steps to change the way we consider the world and act in it."

As the longest-serving prince of Wales in history, Charles appeared to express frustration about how his work was perceived by the public.

He wrote: "Perhaps I should not have been surprised that so many people failed to fathom what I was doing. So many appeared to think ... that I was merely leaping from one subject to another, from architecture one minute to agriculture the next, as if I had spent a morning saving the rainforest, then in the afternoon jumping to help young people start new businesses.

"What I have actually been trying to demonstrate is that all of these subjects are completely interrelated, and that we have to look at the whole picture to understand the problems we face."

Many will see the film as a way to cement Charles's legacy around topics on which he was sometimes seen to be controversial. For example, in the past he was criticised for some of his views on architecture, including his suggestion that a proposed extension to London's National Gallery was like "a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend".

CHRIS JACKSON/BUCKINGHAM PALACE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Filming with the King began in January at Dumfries House and will focus on the philosophy outlined in his book, Harmony

Royal forays into television

Royal Family (1969, BBC and ITV) Intended to revive public interest in the royals, critics said this 110-minute documentary trivialised the monarchy. It has not been aired in full since 1972.

The Prince and Princess of Wales Talking Personally with Alastair Burnet (1985, ITN) Charles and Diana discussed their marriage and family, and joked about their disagreements.

The Grand Knockout Tournament (1987, BBC) Princess Anne, the Yorks and Prince Edward all featured in this charity episode of *It's a Knockout* with stars such as John Travolta. It raised more than £1 million but was widely criticised.

Charles: The Private Man, the Public Role (1994, ITV) Jonathan Dimbleby asked the prince whether he had been faithful to his wife. Charles replied that he had "until it became clear that the marriage had irretrievably broken".

Monarchy: The Royal Family at Work (2007, BBC) This followed Elizabeth II, Prince Philip, Charles and Anne for more than a year.

Her Majesty the Queen: Behind Closed Doors (2024, ITV) The show covered a year of Camilla's efforts to raise awareness of domestic abuse.

Witch avoids jail for harassing wizard

Jaya Narain

A barrister known as the White Witch of Rye was given a suspended jail sentence after she admitted to harassing an elderly man and going on a violent rampage around his house.

Barbara Maura Lane was said to have become obsessed with Alfred Douglas, 80, a self-proclaimed wizard and expert on the occult, after signing up for his magic course.

In May, 2023, Lane, 42, who was allegedly drunk, broke into Douglas's home and went on a rampage, smearing food into his computer and clothing and damaging his possessions.

Douglas fled to his bedroom "in fear" and locked himself in his bathroom. After he escaped with the help of friends and family he was confronted by Lane at a coffee shop.

She was arrested and later pleaded guilty to harassment and causing criminal damage to Douglas's home and smashing his greenhouse. The Dublin-based lawyer also admitted deluging the author and academic with phone calls and text messages.

Lane appeared at Hove crown court on Friday where she was sentenced to four months in prison, suspended for 18 months, and ordered to pay £2,597 in compensation.

After the hearing Douglas's nephew, Paul Wilson-Patterson, and his wife, Anna, said: "We're very relieved that this bizarre episode is behind us.

"Barbara Lane was treated with great kindness and generosity; she responded with malicious and violent behaviour. Her vicious cruelty to our family friends has caused great sadness."

Lane, who has since lost her job, first visited Douglas's home in Rye, East Sussex, in 2019 on the pretext of seeing his library on the occult. They became friends and, when Covid broke out, she stayed in his garden flat, claiming she had nowhere to live after her father died and her mother suffered a stroke.

Friends and family said that Lane took control of Douglas's bank account and controlled what he ate, drank and wore, and which friends he saw. Lane allegedly lied to locals about being his carer, falsely suggesting that Douglas was suffering from dementia. Douglas told police that he felt "intimidated" by her "coercive behaviour".

Wilson-Patterson and his wife discovered that Douglas had changed his will, making Lane the sole beneficiary, leaving her his home and shop, which were worth about £1.5 million.

Lane told officers that Douglas was suffering from dementia and she was his carer, claiming she was owed £6,000 in unpaid wages.

She was charged with seven offences including stalking, criminal damage and assault on Douglas and his family. On the first day of her trial in May, Lane pleaded guilty to harassment without violence and criminal damage.

As well as a four-month sentence, Lane was ordered to take part in 20 rehabilitation days and do 150 hours of unpaid work. She was also given a restraining order forbidding her from contacting Douglas for five years.

Barclays IT outage causes chaos on tax-return day

Frederick Foulston

Barclays bank was hit with serious IT problems affecting its app and online banking services yesterday, preventing payments between accounts.

Customers said they were unable to make essential transactions, from buying baby milk to completing a house purchase. Barclays has not revealed what caused the IT issue or the number of people affected, but apologised and said it was "working hard" to fix it.

Customers reacted with fury on social media, with one saying their card had been declined despite them having adequate funds. Another said that her January wages had "disappeared".

Barclays is one of the UK's largest banks. It has more than 20 million UK retail customers and processes at least 40 per cent of the nation's credit and debit card transactions.

The outage hit on the deadline for self-assessment tax returns, with some customers saying they were unable to make payments to HMRC.

The tax authority said that millions of people had not filed their returns, and warned of £100 fines for those who did not meet the deadline. However, it said it was "working closely" with Barclays to minimise any impact on customers. A spokesman added: "Our services are working as normal, so customers will be able to file their returns on time. Today's issues will not result in late payment penalties as they don't apply until 1st March."

Barclays said: "We will ensure that no customer is left out of pocket because of delayed payments caused by this incident."

Dan Card, a cybersecurity expert for BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, said that the incident "goes to show how cybersecurity and digital resilience is so tightly integrated into our lives".

News Sara Sharif murder

Revealed: the judges who put

Ben Ellery Crime Editor
Jonathan Ames Legal Editor

The judge who gave custody of Sara Sharif to her father and eventual murderer despite a decade of allegations of violence was named yesterday as a board member of HM Courts & Tribunals Service.

Judge Alison Raeside, 66, oversaw the bulk of the ten-year-old's care proceedings, including making her the subject of a child protection plan when she was six days old.

Raeside, who earned about £174,000 a year until the end of last year when she stood down as the designated family judge for Surrey, where Sara lived, could not be identified after an unprecedented restriction was imposed by a High Court judge when Sara's father and stepmother were convicted of her murder last month.

After an appeal by the press, including The Times, Sir Geoffrey Vos, the country's second most senior judge, ruled last week that she could be identified because "transparency of justice [is] fundamental".

Two family court judges who have since retired and played peripheral roles in Sara's care, Peter Nathan and Sally Williams, can also be named.

In 2019, Raeside gave Sara's father, Urfan Sharif, and his wife, Beinash Batool, custody at a private hearing at Guildford family court, and he was left free to subject Sara to abuse, including burning her with an iron and making her stay up all night doing sit-ups.

A report prepared for that hearing detailed Sharif's four arrests for suspected violence against three Polish women, including Sara's mother. Sharif had been accused of holding women against their will and threatening to kill them with a knife, and of punching Sara's four-month-old sibling.

Earlier assessments prepared for Raeside had noted that Sara's siblings had "unexplained bruising, bites and burns". Sharif claimed he had "addressed his anger issues. He considers that any repetition of previous types of his angry behaviour will not happen."

The decision to give Sharif custody was supported by her mother and the local authority. Sara's mother also had allegations of violence against her.

The murder trial jury saw text messages sent by Batool to her sister four months after they won custody, saying: "Urfan is on a rampage."

Three times during Sara's life, Sharif was required to sign an undertaking not to chastise or be violent towards her. At least one was signed off by Raeside.

In his decision to overturn the ban on naming Raeside, Vos said: "It is not for this court to evaluate the course of the historic proceedings. But it should be noted that the historic judges had, as in all cases of this type, the difficult task of assessing the risk of future harm which could only be done against the background of the evidence before them."

Raeside also allowed Sara to stay with her father in November 2014 after an allegation that her mother had bitten one of the children. A visit by social workers to Sharif's house found that Sara had nowhere of her own to sleep and shared a bed with her father.

Sharif and Batool killed Sara at their home in Woking, Surrey, in August 2023, before fleeing to Pakistan. When police found Sara's body, they learnt that she had endured years of torture. Her back had been broken ten times.

The authorities' actions before Sara's death are the subject of a local inquiry.

In his decision to award Raeside, Nathan and Williams anonymity, Mr Justice Williams (no relation), said he was preventing a "virtual lynch mob".

During the appeal Chris Barnes, for two freelance journalists, said that Williams, a High Court judge of the family division, had formerly held a "leadership position" over the judges and asked if it was appropriate for him to award them anonymity.

Allowing the judges to be named, Vos said: "The claimants have not put forward any credible and specific evidence that one or more claimants is at particular risk of any such threat."

He allowed seven days after his order for the identities to be published so that HM Courts & Tribunals Service could "consider and implement whatever measures they consider appropriate to protect and safeguard the historic judges from unwarranted attacks".

Sir Robert Buckland KC, who was lord chancellor under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, said that the Court of Appeal had been "right to emphasise the central importance of the principle of open justice, and the fact that there was no jurisdiction to prohibit their names being published". He added: "Importantly, the door is not closed to anonymity being conferred in the most exceptional of circumstances where there is significant and compelling evidence of risks to particular judges."

This week, the lady chief justice, Baroness Carr of Walton-on-the-Hill, wrote to all judges announcing a "security task force". She said that as well as physical incidents, she was "increasingly concerned" about threats made to judges on social media.

Anonymity is no recipe for justice, leading article, page 25



Frustration, tears and long delays ... inside Britain's family courts

Sian Bradley

The parents had attended a dozen custody hearings by the time I joined them at West London family court for the father to appeal against a court order. He had been sent on a parenting course to understand how the "continued abuse" of his former partner affected their child. Although he had been granted permission to visit his daughter under supervision, he had not done so for a year.

The room was tense. The father flicked through his notes forcefully, repeatedly accusing the mother of alienating their child against him. He represented himself which, as the judge acknowledged, is a difficult thing to do, but something people choose to avoid high legal fees.

"You're punishing me", the father told the judge, Aileen Downey, when she dismissed his appeal. "[All this] because I swore at her mum? Pathetic." He was given another chance to see his daughter under supervision.

I attended this case as part of a transparency project in November to encourage reporters into family courts. Two years after a pilot scheme, journalists and legal bloggers can apply for a transparency order in any family court in the UK, allowing them to report on proceedings, provided that they follow strict rules on anonymity.

Family courts are still adjusting. During my week in West London and Birmingham, ushers insisted that proceedings were private, judges chuckled that my presence forced everyone to be on their best behaviour and legal representatives reacted with indignation at my perceived intrusion. Parents, sitting too close to me to whisper, texted their counsel to say they wanted me to leave.

At Birmingham family court I saw dispute before Judge Jean-Jack Chalmers. A mother, paralysed by a fear of driving after four car accidents — one with her son was in the back — and a father frustrated by 18 months of 100-mile journeys. "I have offered [the father] money to compensate him. I am happy for him to not give me any child support," the mother said. Her voice broke as she pleaded with Chalmers: "The most important thing is for me and my child to be alive."

Chalmers ruled for the father, advising the mother to take the train to make the child available for shared custody.

Family courts often face complex and sensitive decisions, such as determining custody for a child whose parent is under investigation for sexual assault. In some instances, parents are referred to the family drug and alcohol court, a programme designed to address substance misuse and assess whether a person can keep custody of their children. It is a "unique experience", Judge Leonie Rollason said as she introduced one such case. "But progress can be made." In this instance, a mother agreed to a parenting assessment and hair-strand testing in the hope of getting custody of her children, who were "desperate to be home".

It was long past 2pm on my final day in Birmingham when Judge David Hadley called us in for the 10am hearing. The applicant, a woman who sat separated from her former partner by a blue screen, had withdrawn her application for a non-molestation order after accusing him of domestic abuse and stalking.

He denied the claims. Through his counsel, Jason Hughes, he alleged that the applicant had "weaponised the power of arrest" tied to the order. "She used this process to harass and intimidate him," Hughes said. Hadley urged both parties to "stay away from each other" and dismissed the case.

Outside, the respondent described feeling punished by the police and the family court. "She's able to abuse me through this system," he said.

To judges, these cases are about navigating complicated dynamics and systemic delays to protect children. For parents, they can be a painful reckoning with perceived failure — and one that dictates when they see their children.

Sara in care of violent father





Sara Sharif was beaten to death aged ten by her own father, Urfan Sharif, below, who has been sentenced to at least 40 years in prison. Judges Peter Nathan, Alison Raeside, and Sally Williams, right, were anonymous before the press appealed against the decision. The most senior civil judge in England and Wales, Sir Geoffrey Vos, Master of the Rolls, found in favour of the media saying "the whole idea of anonymising the judge was, I have to say, misguided"





The rulings that shaped a short but tumultuous life

Sara Sharif was known to be in danger before she was born but was always returned to her father, writes **Ben Ellery**

Judge Alison Raeside made Sara Sharif the subject of a child protection plan when she was six days old, and later made the decision to put her in the care of her father, Urfan Sharif — the man who would murder her.

Concerns before Sara was born

Sharif had been on the police's radar since 2007 and had racked up a string of allegations of violence against women, as well as against a sibling of Sara.

The family became known to Surrey county council's social services in 2010 after allegations of child neglect and domestic violence between Sharif and Sara's mother, Olga Domin.

Days before Sara was born, in January 2013, the council applied for "unborn Sharif" to be the subject of a child protection plan for fear that she would be at risk of abuse and neglect. A social services report noted "domestic abuse ... with father as the perpetrator".

The case was transferred to Guildford county court, where Raeside heard the application six days after Sara was born. The council initially applied to take the children into care but changed its application to a supervision order, which allowed the children to remain at home with "a high level of support from professionals". The application was signed off by Raeside.

A psychological report said Sharif and Domin were capable of meeting the children's needs, and in September 2013 Raeside allowed Sara to remain at home under a 12-month supervision order.

Sara's parents signed a legal agreement with social workers undertaking "not to use any physical chastisement on any of the children", and agreed to a ten-week parenting course. In October 2013 a child was burnt with an iron, which was deemed accidental. Sara's murder trial would later hear that she had been repeatedly burnt with an iron.

Foster care — but home days later

In November 2014 a different judge, Peter Nathan, made an out-of-hours protection order for Sara and she was put in foster care after Domin was arrested and charged over claims that she had bitten one of the children.

The foster carer reported that Sara had been seen standing facing a wall, saying "it appeared this is what she was used to". They raised concerns about scars on Sara's body and said she was "very skinny". Three days later, Raeside decided not to extend the protection order. Sara was allowed to return to Sharif after he said he would not let Domin into the home.

One child in care, but Sara remains

A visit by children's services to Sharif's property found that Sara shared a bed with her father. One of the children was put in foster care, but Sara stayed at home despite more abuse allegations.

A report in March 2015 concluded that Sharif and Domin could provide "good enough parenting". Sharif signed a second agreement promising "not to physically chastise the children" in April 2015, and was required to attend domestic violence awareness courses. Domin accepted a caution and was allowed to return to the family home.

Parents separate

At a "dramatic" hearing in May 2015, overseen by Raeside, a local authority plan for Sara to stay permanently with her parents was thwarted when Domin said she wanted to separate from Sharif.

Domin said she was a victim of coercive abuse and Sharif had threatened to take the children to Pakistan. She had said before that life with Sharif was "like being in prison" and accused him of dousing her in liquid, which she believed to have been flammable, before his cousin stopped him from setting her on fire. Sara was put in foster care, and later joined her mother in a refuge.

Father allowed to visit

In July 2015 the local authority made an urgent application to change the care plan after becoming concerned that Sharif was meeting Domin and Sara. It said Sara was "likely to suffer significant emotional and physical harm" in her parents' care. Another judge, Sally Williams, made an interim care order and Sara was again put in foster care.

In August, Raeside returned Sara to her mother under a supervision order. She ordered two more assessments, which found that Domin was able to look after Sara. Three months later, she gave Sharif supervised visitation rights, and he signed a third undertaking not to "use ... or threaten violence" against Domin or the children.

Sharif and Batool granted custody

Sara lived with her mother but in March 2019 she alleged that Domin had physically abused her and she was placed with Sharif and his new wife, Beinash Batool, who would also be convicted of her murder.

Sharif and Batool had applied in a private court hearing, heard by Raeside, in October 2019. In preparation for the hearing, a report was prepared outlining the criminal allegations against Sharif and Domin.

It revealed Domin's caution for biting a child, and Sharif's four arrests for suspected violence against three Polish women and Sara's sibling. Sharif was not charged, and it was suggested at his murder trial that after each arrest he had been able to place the blame on his vulnerable victims.

During the application by Batool and Sharif for custody, Raeside heard submissions from the local authority and Sara's mother supporting the move.

A social worker from Surrey county council wrote that Sara had said the things that made her sad were "when people punch me, when mum slaps me and people who shout at me". They added: "Sara said, 'Ummi [Batool] doesn't hit me or slap me, she puts me in the naughty corner'."

In her final interaction with the family, Raeside granted the couple custody. Months later, Batool began sending her sister text messages worried about Sharif's anger towards Sara.

Sara was found dead at her home on August 10, 2023.

Polish village where 'young angel' has been laid to rest

Ali Mitib Eastern Poland

A thousand miles from the home in Surrey where she was subjected to a campaign of abuse and murdered by those who should have protected her, Sara Sharif has finally found peace.

In the shadow of a wall of pine trees lies the ten-year-old's grave, adorned by fresh bouquets of flowers in a beautiful cemetery. A photograph of Sara smiling, her long black hair falling on to her white and blue stripy jumper, is mounted on the black marble tombstone. Ornate lamps hold extinguished candles.

"Sleep, young angel," the inscription for Sara Domin reads. In death, she bears the surname of Olga Domin, her mother, not that of her father, Urfan Sharif, 43, who must serve at least 40 years of a life sentence in prison, handed down in December, for Sara's murder at the house in Woking. Sharif's wife, Beinash Batool, 30, was sentenced to at least 33 years for murder, and his brother, Faisal Malik, 29, who lived with the family, was sentenced to 16 years for causing or allowing the death of a child.

A "cheerful little soul", Sara loved singing and dancing and had dreams of appearing on *The X Factor*. Instead, she will be remembered for a life of unspeakable suffering and the repeated failures to save her. The Old Bailey trial was told that she had suffered 71 injuries including at least 25 fractures, human bite marks and burns made with an iron. Her back was broken with a force comparable to that from a 20ft fall.

When Domin went to identify her daughter at the mortuary she could barely recognise the battered body dressed in Mickey Mouse pyjamas. After the tragedy, Domin, who had been living in Britain for more than a decade, moved back to her native Poland to build a new life with her partner and their infant son.

In December, she paid tribute to her "angel" and condemned her killers as "sadists and executioners". She revealed that she was "under constant psychological supervision" and "taking strong sedatives" as a result.

Domin, who lost custody of Sara to Sharif five years ago, was granted her wish to bury her daughter in a corner of eastern Poland, a country the child knew little of in her short life. In search of peace, Domin, 37, and her new family live a short drive away from Sara's grave, in a remote hamlet of a few dozen detached homes nestled among woodland. The village, which has just a few short roads and a single shop, makes Woking look like a metropolis. Only the sound of cars heading to a larger village nearby disturbs the tranquillity of the countryside.

The grieving mother has kept a low profile since moving to the area. She visits her daughter's grave every day to light prayer candles and lay flowers.

Residents said that although they recognised Domin, she kept to herself and did little to integrate. "We only started seeing her here earlier this year. She is very quiet," one said.

Some, however, were aware of the tragedy that led her to flee Britain. "It's such a horrible story and I don't know how she is coping going through all this," a resident said. Another recalled a small, private funeral service, presided over by a local priest with only Domin's new family laying the child to rest.

The Times understands that Domin believes the authorities' failure to protect her daughter led to her death and that she was unfairly portrayed during the trial as a poor mother.

Sylwia Kurz, Sara's maternal grandmother, said Sharif and Batool were "beasts", and that none of her family could bear to attend the trial to hear about the abuse Sara had experienced.

Back in Woking, in the playground of St Mary's Primary School, lies another memorial: "Sara's buddy bench" painted with polka dots by her classmates. "She was often called a mother hen," Jacquie Chambers, the head teacher, told the BBC. "She would love to look after all the little children ... that's why they thought of the buddy bench. We're a big school, but every adult knew Sara. That's why we're impacted by her death. It's hard to put into words ... I don't think I've ever known such sadness."

News

ALISON ALLEN/SOLENT NEWS



Back in the swing Jarang, a young orangutan at Blackpool Zoo, play up to the crowds. He is making a good recovery from surgery last year after being born with a hernia that had hampered his mobility

Brand presented Comic Relief year after complaint

Alex Farber Media Correspondent

Russell Brand was booked as a co-presenter of *Comic Relief* a year after a BBC staff member complained about the presenter for a second time.

The actor and comedian, 49, appeared as part of the presenting line-up for the charity event and telethon in March 2017 where he introduced a series of stand-up performers to help secure donations.

His appearance on the show came after a staffer re-submitted a complaint about Brand that they had originally made almost a decade earlier.

It related to Brand's behaviour in the studio during a recording of his Radio 2 show in 2007 when he urinated into a cup and, on another occasion, into a bottle. He also aggressively threw objects at a screen when a mistake was made by a member of the production team.

In 2016 the individual, who left the show after the incidents, re-submitted their complaint and shared suggestions that Brand would bring "groups of girls" to BBC premises.

Inquiries by the BBC prompted another staff member to raise a complaint about his behaviour which they had previously made informally.

The revelations have emerged as part of a 15-page BBC report into Brand during his two years at the broadcaster from 2006, which found many people "felt unable to raise concerns" about his behaviour.

In the report, Peter Johnston, BBC director of editorial complaints and reviews, found that the complaint in 2016 was not investigated because it came too long after Brand's departure from the BBC.

Programming bosses at the BBC and its production arm BBC Studios, which is responsible for *Comic Relief*, were not made aware of the complaint which is understood not to have gone beyond the corporation's HR department.

The BBC investigation was prompted by a joint investigation by The Times, The Sunday Times and Channel 4's *Dispatches* in which four women accused Brand of sexual assaults between 2006 and 2013.

Brand, who did not take part in the BBC investigation, has previously denied allegations of rape, assault and emotional abuse and said that all of his sexual relationships were "absolutely always consensual".

The complainant had also raised concerns about the Radio 2 incident as part of a review into BBC workplace culture in 2013 led by Dinah Rose KC, prompted by the fallout from the Jimmy Savile scandal.

Last year, the broadcaster launched a subsequent culture review after the revelations about the newsreader Huw Edwards, who admitted to making images of child abuse.

A BBC spokesman thanked the individuals who took part in the review into Brand's conduct. "It is of great concern that some of these individuals felt unable to raise concerns about Russell Brand's behaviour at the time, and the BBC has apologised to them as part of this review," he added.



Threat of noise notice to tackle padel club racket

Laurence Sleator

A racket club in an upmarket part of Hampshire faces a formal reprimand after neighbours complained about the "gunshot" noises from its padel courts.

Winchester Racquets & Fitness (WRF) is set to be handed a council notice to mitigate the sound of "aggressive hard-hitting shots" within six months to avoid a fine or even prosecution.

Under the order, the club would have about six months to find ways to reduce the level of noise.

A padel racket has is thicker than a tennis, squash or badminton racket and is solid, meaning it makes a very loud noise when the ball is struck.

The row began last year when the club wrote to its members, saying it was keen to double the number of padel courts to six.

People living in the area, where houses can cost £1 million, said they would be willing to go to the Supreme Court to stop any development. One neighbour, Peter Russell, 75, said that life in his home would become intolerable if the expansion were to proceed.

"Tennis has never caused this level of opposition," he said. "We can live with tennis — it's nothing like padel."

He added that he and his wife, Liz, felt that "any sense of relaxation" in their garden would be gone due to the "gunshot-like" sounds.

Other neighbours complained of continued "foul language" sometimes used when shots were is missed.

After a council officer visited the site, the club sent an email to its members. "WRF has not yet been served with a noise abatement order but we have been formally advised that notices will be served under section 80 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990," it wrote in an email last month.

The club urged them to be "mindful of verbal noise" and said "the noise of bat on ball" had been deemed excessive. It said it was "urgently reviewing" its padel policies and hoped to become compliant with the order.

Winchester city council said: "Following some recent noise complaints from neighbours living close to Winchester Racquets and Fitness, we have visited the site to assess the noise and are now working closely with WRF to try and find a positive solution for everyone involved."



Liz and Peter Russell, who live near by, said padel was just not tennis

Labour asks if PM is the problem as Reform closes in

Starmer told to talk the language of disaffected voters to win them back, **Steven Swinford** and **Geraldine Scott** write

Until recently, the message emanating from No 10 has been that Reform poses the biggest threat to the Tories. That if Labour gets it right on delivery, the right will effectively eat itself.

That thinking is changing, with Sir Keir Starmer and his most senior ministers concerned about Nigel Farage and his nascent party. The question of who will be the real opposition come 2029 is being asked with increasing urgency in Downing Street.

"At the next election we will be the incumbent, and some version of the populist right will be the challenger," is how Pat McFadden, the Cabinet Office minister, will put it in a speech next week. "In almost every developed country, a majority of voters think their country is heading in the wrong direction and want change.

"We cannot allow the battle to be between the disruptors of opposition and the disrupted of incumbency. We too have to be disruptors."

With that in mind senior figures in No 10 have begun drawing up a detailed strategy for taking on Reform UK. It suggests that its voters — and those leaning towards it — are so disaffected that they have stopped listening to the main parties entirely.

No 10 acknowledges that there is no silver bullet. However, they point to the fact that the concerns of those backing Reform tally with the very problems Labour is attempting to address — the cost of living, the state of the NHS, immigration and a general state of decline.

The ultimate strategy is to "govern away" those concerns.

But Labour also wants to go for the jugular with Farage. It is planning a three-pronged approach — depicting Farage as a "cheerleader" for President Putin, highlighting his support for Liz Truss's disastrous mini-budget and bringing up previous comments about the role of the private sector in the NHS. Labour has created several attack adverts based on this theme.

Labour MPs will also be told to use their "incumbency bias" to become champions for their constituents in an effort to stave off the threat posed by Reform. However, there are increasing concerns in Labour that the man in No 10 himself may be part of the problem, with voters looking to Reform in part because they dislike Starmer so much.

One senior Labour source said that there was evidence that the "two-tier Keir" attack by Farage and Elon Musk — a reference to claims that far-right protesters are treated more harshly than protesters from minority groups — has stuck with some voters. Others suggest he is seen as out of touch with the concerns of ordinary voters.

Starmer is already the least popular political leader in Britain, with YouGov polling giving him a net favourability rating of minus 41 earlier last month, lower than Farage. Among those who support Reform, 96 per cent have formed an unfavourable view of Starmer, and 93 per cent of those who intend to vote Tory have an unfavourable opinion. A fifth of Labour voters have formed an unfavourable view of him.

This is rejected by other senior figures in Labour, who believe the prime minister can take on the populists by emphasising his working-class roots. They say that far from being a liability he will lead the attack.

What is undeniable is that Reform is drawing strength from disaffection with the main parties, which polling shows is a bigger draw for voters than immigration. YouGov found that 19 per cent of those thinking of voting Reform put "it's not Labour or the Conservatives" or "another party needs a go" as their main reason. Farage is cited by only 4 per cent of possible Reform voters.

Farage welcomes Labour's attacks: "We take the view that they are all the same. They've all got a record of failure on mass migration, on illegal migration, on net zero. If they think they can govern away their problems they are wrong." He says he wants the NHS to remain free at point of use but is "open-minded" about how it should be funded. "They can take selective quotes but it's not going to help them," he said.

The turbulence of Starmer's first six months in government did not help, with confusion about core messaging and purpose of the new administration.

This week represented an attempt to change that, with Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, leading the charge. She gave a speech which, in contrast to the doom and gloom that dominated Labour's first six months in power, was almost relentlessly positive.

Labour, she said, will pursue growth at all costs. She made a flurry of announcements, including on expanding Heathrow, relaxing planning rules and effectively a declaration of war on newts and bats. She used an interview with The Times to suggest that there could be as many as six interest rate cuts by the middle of next year. The Bank of England is widely expected to cut interest rates next week to stimulate the economy.

But just as Reeves makes her Damascene conversion to full-blooded boosterism, what is to come looks grim. Economic growth remains anaemic and on March 26 she is expected to have to announce a deep round of spending cuts in response to downgrades in official forecasts. Reeves notably refuses to say whether people will be better off by the end of the year, in part because she cannot — it is too dependent on external factors. The hangover from the budget, with its huge package of tax rises, shows no sign of fading.

The decision by AstraZeneca to pull a proposed £450 million investment in Merseyside — just days after Reeves hailed it as one of Britain's great companies — has not helped.

Steve Reed, the environment secretary, told a conference in London last weekend that Labour needed to do better. "Politics is the art of competitive storytelling because it's stories that connect with people emotionally, not statistics and not strategies," he said. "So we have to tell a story about Britain, about what it can become, and show people their place in it, and their community's place and their family's place in it. Now we need to get that story right.

"We need to get it better than it has been over the last six months. But you know, we've all been very, very distracted for the right reasons, moving into departments, setting these strategies in place, starting to make that change happen. We need to remember we have to communicate it well."

People in Labour, he said, had a habit of talking about "grand strategies" but did not focus enough on what it means for people. For a government that has announced six milestones, five missions, three foundations and six first steps the confusion is perhaps unsurprising. "We won't do it if we talk to people about what we're achieving in ways that go over their head," Reed said.

"Language matters... It's not just doing the right things, it's talking about it in language people understand. For me, that's the language you'd use across a coffee shop table or the kitchen table or the pub with your mates. It's not some of the language that all of us fall into when we're giving political speeches."

Additional reporting by Lara Spirit and Chris Smyth

Call for mini nuclear plants

Chris Smyth Whitehall Editor

Labour MPs are urging Sir Keir Starmer to allow mini-nuclear power plants to be built around the country in the next phase of his deregulation push.

Pro-growth backbenchers are demanding that ministers crack on with approving more nuclear energy, saying that demonstrating "intent" on atomic power must be a key part of Labour's dash for growth. A final decision on investment in the Sizewell C nuclear plant is expected soon, and 50 Labour MPs have urged Rachel Reeves to ensure cash is found in June's spending review.

In a letter to the chancellor, they say the plant will be a "major contributor to our growth mission" while helping to keep the lights on, but warn that "the window is narrowing" for a final decision.

Jack Abbott, the Ipswich MP behind the letter, said: "The Sizewell C project could be a flagship of the government's missions to boost growth and strengthen our ... energy security. It is crucial that a final investment decision is made at the spending review, so we can turbocharge the creation of thousands of jobs and generate billions of pounds for our economy."



Happy Brexit birthday but how much do you remember 5 years on?

Yesterday marked the fifth anniversary of Britain's departure from the European Union and with it a (partial) end to years of political turmoil, diplomatic stand-offs and endless unintelligible jargon (Oliver Wright writes). So, with Brexit now heading into the historical rear-view mirror, can you recall your backstops, meaningful votes and Norway models?

1. Who actually coined the word Brexit?
A Dominic Cummings
B Nigel Farage
C Peter Wilding
D The Economist magazine

2. Which region of the UK voted most strongly for Brexit in the 2016 referendum?
A East Midlands
B Wales
C North East
D West Midlands

3. Which of the following Conservative leaders did not back Brexit?
A Boris Johnson
B Liz Truss
C Rishi Sunak
D Kemi Badenoch

4. What gift did the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, give to his British counterpart, David Davis, on the first day of Brexit negotiations?
A A book on mountaineering
B A facsimile copy of Magna Carta
C A hiking stick
D A copy of Isaiah Berlin's book *The Hedgehog and the Fox*

DANIEL LEAL, FRANK AUGSTEIN, OLIVIER HOSLET/AFP







Jubilant crowds celebrate Brexit Day on January 31, 2020; Boris Johnson campaigning for the general election in 2019; the Union Jack is removed from the European Council building; the referendum battlebus in 2016; and below, a lobster fisherman in Cornwall who can no longer export his catch

EU 'to play tough' over Starmer's reset appeal

Bruno Waterfield Brussels
Oliver Wright Policy Editor

The European Union will treat Sir Keir Starmer in the same way as it treated Boris Johnson, demanding tough concessions as the price of a "reset", diplomats in Brussels have said.

Starmer will seek progress on a security and defence pact with EU leaders at a dinner in Brussels on Monday, the first to be attended by a prime minister since Brexit in 2020.

He will be told his proposals for a closer relationship will be treated as a package, with no progress on security unless concessions are made on fishing, alignment with EU laws and mobility for young Europeans.

A diplomat said: "It worked for us the first time around with Boris and it will work for us again with Starmer."

Polling for The Times has found that a majority of the public supports Starmer's attempts to negotiate closer trading ties with the EU.

The YouGov survey found that 61 per cent of voters — including 20 per cent of Reform voters — backed a closer trading relationship with Europe. Only 11 per cent wanted a more distant relationship and 16 per cent said that the present arrangements were "about right". YouGov also found only 11 per cent of the public thought Brexit had been more of a success than a failure.

Senior EU figures have linked progress on security co-operation — seen as pressing after the return of President Trump — with maintaining European access to British fisheries, letting more young Europeans study or work in Britain and aligning with EU laws on food, safety and energy.

The government is drawing up proposals for a youth mobility scheme that would give EU students the right to study in Britain for a limited period. The EU is demanding a broader scheme that would allow people in their twenties to live and work in Britain.

The issue could be one of the most difficult in the negotiations. The government fears that agreeing to a wider scheme would be portrayed as a return to freedom of movement.

Starmer wanted to separate the security and defence element of the "reset" and hoped to announce a deal at the first UK-EU summit, to be held in Brussels in spring. The EU insists, however, that a security deal cannot be negotiated in isolation from other issues.

A senior EU diplomat said: "The security part is essential. We share security interests with the UK but ... there is no beating around the bush that fisheries are also very important."

Starmer chaired a meeting of the cabinet committee on EU relations on Tuesday, the second since the election. Brussels and parts of the Foreign Office have been frustrated because the UK has yet to set out its reset demands. It considered papers on a food standards agreement to reduce checks on goods crossing the Channel and proposals to align the UK with Europe's emissions trading scheme.

Brussels negotiators are open to both but will demand full alignment with European legislation.

Donald Tusk, Poland's prime minister, will back Starmer's expected appeal for the EU to negotiate an urgent and quick security pact.

A senior diplomat said: "There is nothing more important than security. For Poland, it is security first."

5. What was Article 50?
A The article in the Treaty of Rome that enshrined Britain's membership of the European Union
B The article in the Lisbon treaty that set the mechanism for a member state to leave the EU
C The article in the withdrawal agreement that formalised Britain's departure from the EU
D An article in the Maastricht treaty that allowed EU citizens to live and work in Britain

6. What is a customs union?
A An agreement that removes all trade tariffs between members
B An agreement that allows goods produced in one country to be sold without checks in other countries
C An agreement that allows the free movement of people within the union
D All of the above

7. How did Donald Tusk humiliate Theresa May at a summit in Salzburg in 2018?
A He forced her to leave a dinner before she had eaten pudding
B He told Emmanuel Macron that she was "finished" as prime minister
C He posted a picture of her visiting a cake stand with the caption "no cherries"
D He said Jeremy Corbyn would be a better prime minister than her



8. Which of these isn't real?
A The Malthouse compromise
B The Norway model
C The Benn ultimatum
D The Kyle/Wilson amendment

9. How many times was Theresa May's Brexit deal rejected by MPs?
A Once
B Twice
C Three times
D It was never voted on

10. How many government ministers resigned over Brexit during Theresa May's time as prime minister?
A 5
B 11
C 25
D More than 30

11. Who did Theresa May begin negotiations with to get her Brexit deal through parliament in April 2019?
A Boris Johnson
B Jacob Rees-Mogg
C Jeremy Corbyn
D John Bercow

12. What happens when you prorogue parliament?
A MPs have to return to their constituencies
B Parliament is suspended
C An election is called
D All government ministers have to resign

13. What was the backstop?
A A plan to delay Brexit if a trade deal could not be agreed
B A plan to keep Britain in the single market until a wider deal could be agreed
C A plan to keep the UK in the customs union until a wider deal could be agreed
D A plan to keep Northern Ireland in the customs union if a trade deal could not be agreed

14. When was the Brexit trade deal agreed?
A December 31, 2020
B January 14, 2020
C October 31, 2019
D December 24, 2020

Answers: 1C, 2D, 3B, 4C, 5B, 6A, 7C, 8C, 9C, 10D, 11C, 12B, 13C, 14C

Attorney-general at odds with boats bill

Geraldine Scott
Senior Political Correspondent
Patrick Maguire

The attorney-general's support for international law risks causing a split in Downing Street and undermining reforms to tackle the small boat crisis, government sources suggest.

Lord Hermer told the Council of Europe this week the government would "never withdraw from the European Convention rights, or refuse to comply with judgments of the court".

Government sources privately asked how that statement was compatible with the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill and the retention of powers to exclude from support potential victims of modern slavery who may have committed crimes.

"Both of these announcements were made on the same day," a source said. "How can they possibly be reconciled?"

There is also concern that Hermer's position in the Lords means he has not been attuned to the feelings of voters on issues such as migration. A Labour figure said: "There's a lot of chatter about the government needing to be disruptive, yet he's the anti-disruptor."

Sir Keir Starmer said yesterday that he had full confidence in Hermer after The Times reported that ministers feared his belief in the supremacy of international law was creating a "freeze on government" in several areas.

The key concern with the borders bill, introduced on Thursday, is that although it repeals elements of the Tories' Illegal Migration Act (IMA), it can still disqualify potential victims from support on "public order grounds".

It means a migrant who has committed a crime is unable to apply to remain in the UK under the national referral mechanism (NSM), despite being a potential victim of modern slavery. The Conservative government introduced the ban in response to concerns that migrants were exploiting the NRM.

It is believed that this may be challenged under article four of the European Convention on Human Rights or parts of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking.

Dr Marija Jovanovic, from the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at Oxford University, said the bill addressed some human rights law concerns but "if the UK government is serious about abiding by its legal obligations it should go further".

Hermer told the Council of Europe this week: "The new UK government will never withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights or refuse to comply with judgment of the court or requests for interim measures."

A Home Office spokesman said: "The sole modern slavery measure being retained from the IMA, if commenced, would allow more foreign national offenders to be considered for disqualification from modern slavery protections on public order grounds."

PETER BYRNE/PA



Kemi Badenoch, Tory leader, visisted a farm yesterday near Nantwich, Cheshire

The attorney-general's supporters suggest he is the victim of an orchestrated briefing campaign. Some in government have advocated for him to be sacked, a proposal Starmer loyalists say will be rejected.

The Times revealed claims yesterday that cabinet ministers were criticising Hermer, claiming his changes to legal advice led to a "freeze on government".

Downing Street launched a staunch defence of him. The prime minister's spokesman said failing to engage properly with the law led to delays that "cost taxpayers tens of millions of pounds".

Labour's law to tackle small boats will retain the ban on migrants claiming modern slavery protections, the powers to detain child migrants and a string of other measures that the party previously strongly opposed.

Graham Stringer, the Labour MP, said the plans would not work. He told GB News: "I wish they would because my constituents are really angry about this. We don't know who's coming in."

Migrants with children won't be punished

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

The parents of children who enter the UK on small boats will be excluded from prosecution under the Labour Party's new Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

The bill will create an offence of "endangering another during sea crossing to UK". It will criminalise migrants who refuse offers of assistance or rescue by French patrol boats as they cross the Channel and those who threaten or intimidate other migrants.

However, a legal impact assessment published by the Home Office says: "Parents who bring their children on the type of journeys that the endangerment offence captures will be excluded from prosecution in almost all circumstances."

This is because of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to a family life, as prosecuting a parent could result in the break-up of families.

The exception will raise questions about the effectiveness of the new offence given that migrants will know they will not be prosecuted if they are a parent accompanying a child.

The Home Office expects the legislation to be ready to implement by the end of July. It said that the Crown Prosecution Service always considers whether it is in the public interest to prosecute individuals.

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CIARAN MCCRICKARD FOR THE TIMES





Businesses in Farnham have banded together to fund high street patrols. Top left, MB Cyclery in Haslemere was burgled

Gangs target shops in sleepiest towns

Nestled among Surrey's hills is Haslemere, a quiet market town lined with timbered and tiled shops, cafés and cottages (Charlie Parker writes). The town boasts more Waitrose staff than police officers but behind its chocolate-box exterior a problem has been brewing.

Shopkeepers say the area is being targeted by both well-heeled thieves and balaclava-clad gangs, making it one of many such communities hit by a surge in shoplifting and burglaries. Retail crime is "spiralling out of control", according to the British Retail Consortium, which said theft reached an "all-time high" last year as 20 million incidents cost retailers £2.2 billion.

Experts link the record rise in thefts to organised criminals "systematically targeting stores, stealing tens of thousands of pounds' worth of goods and rotating around multiple stores". Although gangs have been known to sweep items off shelves in big cities, smaller communities say their experiences are often overlooked. The police make few patrols in affluent areas where crime is typically low.

When The Times visited Haslemere and other market towns this week, business owners said antiques, bicycles, toys and cosmetics had been stolen, sometimes in sophisticated smash-and-grab raids. The Ark Stores, an antiques shop in Haslemere, was burgled three times in a week before Christmas. Neil Guy 65, the owner, said the town was "an unlikely place" for crime "because it's so prosperous". Gesturing through his shop door, he said: "Outside you've got the Waitrose with its car park full of gleaming 4x4s." Guy has now installed security cameras. He added: "The police station closed about five years ago. I haven't seen a bobby on the beat in years."

Opposite the old police station, which is being redeveloped, is MB Cyclery. The bike shop had its front ripped off in the summer by masked burglars who used heavy equipment to smash their way in after hours. Tom Gunner, 23, the assistant manager, said: "They cut a small hole in the window, put a chain around the shutter and dragged the whole window frame out. They wore balaclavas and came in a white van."

He added: "They took five boxed bikes, rather than ones on the shop floor, so it was easy for them to get in their van. It was so quick, all done in under ten minutes."

About 30 minutes away in Farnham, a bigger market town in Surrey, businesses have banded together to fund a security team to patrol the high street. Sandra Lunness, 50, the manager of Elphicks, an independent department store, said shoplifters had become more brazen and violent. She said they tended to steal Lego sets, which are in high demand from collectors online, as well as Barbour menswear, women's cosmetics and electronics.

"It's people from all ages and walks of life," she said. "Sometimes it's people who you don't think will steal — they are very well dressed, some could be in suits."

She stressed that the situation had improved over the past two years thanks to an increased police presence.

Andrew sought billions in China

David Brown, George Greenwood

The Duke of York wanted secret advice from a Chinese minister and had covert meetings with the country's ambassador as he raised money for his personal interests, court documents have revealed.

Andrew's relationship with Yang Tengbo, an alleged spy who helped to broker the deals, was ruled a "threat to national security".

Extraordinary details of the duke's connections with Yang and his cultivation of Chinese officials were revealed in papers released yesterday. They raise serious concerns about Andrew's willingness to use his royal status to raise money for his private benefit despite the risk of compromising Britain's security.

Andrew planned to raise $3 billion of international financing for the Eurasia Fund by using his family's international reputation, according to a document found on Yang's telephone. It boasted that the fund would "leverage the role of the royal family" to "play a significant role in supporting China's efforts to build international partnerships".

"The foundation will rely on the traditional friendly relationships of the British royal family with certain countries to foster friendships and mutual trust between these parties and Chinese partners," it added. "The royal family, being above party politics and unaffected by election cycles, can pursue long-term visions and exert stable, enduring influence."

The fund intended to establish "a 'golden triangle' of friendship among the Duke of York, Middle Eastern nations and China" and "break unproductive technological and talent blockades against China". Chinese investors were expected to contribute $2 billion and Andrew had completed discussions with the leaders of Abu Dhabi and Bahrain, who were planning to contribute $500 million each, it claimed.

The document said the fund was aligned with China's Belt and Road foreign infrastructure operation. Documents retrieved from Yang's phone show Andrew allegedly wanted advice from a Chinese minister while preparing to set up an international think tank to promote China's "rise in the world". His plans were leaked to Jiang Jianguo, a minister of China's State Council Information Office, in 2019.

Alistair Michie, secretary-general of the British East Asia Council, which promotes links with China, told the minister that Andrew wanted to organise a conference in China for world leaders. "I know that HRH The Duke of York will value your private thinking. In turn, that will help him formulate his plans and so enable a consensus to be reached," he wrote. "When I am in London I can privately and informally get the view of HRH The Duke of York."

The suggestion is among material that led to a Home Office security assessment to conclude: "Yang's relationship with Prince Andrew represents a threat to national security."

The review said that Yang had failed to reveal to Andrew his links with the United Front Work Department, the Chinese Communist Party's foreign intelligence and propaganda unit. Yang, a former Chinese government official, was able to operate freely for more than two decades in the UK. He befriended Andrew, met at least two prime ministers and cultivated influential contacts at the top of society.



The Duke of York meets the Chinese minister Jiang Jianguo in Beijing

Andrew was forced to step down from royal duties after a BBC *Newsnight* interview with Emily Maitlis in 2019 in which he was asked about Virginia Giuffre's claims that she was coerced into having sex with him. Andrew has always denied any wrongdoing. The timing was potentially disastrous for Andrew's efforts to secure Chinese funding for Pitch@Palace, his *Dragons' Den*-style entrepreneur plan, and investments in his Eurasia Fund.

Dominic Hampshire, the duke's senior adviser, wrote to Yang on Buckingham Palace notepaper in March 2020, confiding: "We have dealt with the aftermath of a hugely ill-advised and unsuccessful television interview." He added: "We have wisely navigated our way around former private secretaries and we have found a way to carefully remove those people who we don't completely trust."

In February 2023, Yang was barred from returning to the UK on national security grounds. His appeal to the Special Immigration Appeals Commission (SIAC) was rejected last December.

Yang said in a witness statement unsuccessfully challenging the ban: "The Chinese ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, was an early supporter of Pitch and wanted to know what was going on with the duke and Pitch after the Maitlis interview given there was huge negativity in the Chinese media.

"The ambassador said that the best way for him to do his job was to see the duke and then report back to China about whether there was still a commitment to continue Pitch in China."

Yang said it was arranged for the details of the ambassador's number plates to be taken so he could drive straight into Royal Lodge, Andrew's home on the Windsor estate, without the usual security checks. "It would have been damaging for the ambassador to be seen meeting with the duke because the duke's reputation in China was so bad at the time," he said.

Hampshire later sent a letter to Yang confirming that Andrew had given the alleged spy "authorisation to represent him in China" to seek investors for the Eurasia Fund. Andrew also appointed Yang to lead the Chinese arm of Pitch@Palace. The alleged spy said he became involved after meeting Amanda Thirsk, Andrew's former private secretary. Yang said his understanding was that the programme was a "commercial arrangement" from which he believed, but was not certain, that Andrew drew a salary.

Yang's witness statement suggests that the UK security services were focused on the Eurasia Fund. He said a member of his staff had been stopped at Heathrow under counterterrorism powers in September 2023 and questioned about the fund. The documents suggest it was to raise money to invest in companies that were identified through Pitch@Palace events.

Yang said: "Any formal communications with the Chinese government in relation to the concept for the Eurasia Fund were done by the duke's office through the Chinese embassy in the UK, and always through Mr Hampshire." He claimed the fund would seek cash from investors in China and the Middle East.

Yang denies any wrongdoing and highlighted Rachel Reeves's visit to Beijing last month as demonstrating the UK's "erratic" dealings with China.

"I reiterate that the allegations against me are entirely unfounded, I have done nothing wrong and I am seeking permission to appeal the decision reached by SIAC," he said in a statement yesterday. "The UK's position on its dealings with China is inconsistent and erratic … In the weeks since the media circus surrounding the publication of the SIAC decision against me, the UK's chancellor has met with Chinese vice-premier He Lifeng in Beijing, saying: 'Choosing not to engage with China is no choice at all.'"

News

Experts' guide to inexpensive healthy eating



Tom Whipple Science Editor
Andrew Ellson
Consumer Affairs Correspondent

Healthy meals on a tight budget are possible, nutritionists insist, as long as people know what to shop for.

Food experts contacted The Times to highlight affordable, nutritious alternatives to the cheap, ultra-processed foods common on shop shelves. They said cooking from scratch with fresh, seasonal ingredients could make for nutritious spreads at low prices.

The Food Foundation, an independent think tank, published a study this week that claimed eating healthily had never been more expensive. The paper by Cambridge University researchers looked at the nutritional value of foods listed in the consumer price index. It suggested that half the foods with the most nutrients were, on average, twice as expensive per calorie as half the foods with the least nutrients.

Marilia Chamon, a registered nutritional therapist, pointed out in response that some of the healthiest foods were the cheapest "if you know what to look for". She said: "The key is to focus on foods that give you the most nutrition for your money. My budget-friendly staples include oats, lentils, beans and tinned fish such as sardines or mackerel."

Sandra Cohen, a nutritionist on the Doctify website, said many clients believed healthy eating meant spending more. She said, however, that nutritious meals were affordable "with the right strategies". She recommended frozen fruit and vegetables for "budget-friendly, nutrient-dense" meals. They were often cheaper than fresh fruit and vegetables and at least as nutritious as they were picked at peak ripeness.

Cohen also recommended buying "wonky" produce. "Subscription services, such as Oddbox, offer surplus or imperfect fruits and vegetables at lower prices," she said.

All nutritionists recommend cooking from scratch.

Deepak Shukla, chief executive of Wellness in Italy, said: "Meal planning prevents waste. Making whole, unprocessed foods a priority is essential. Legumes, cereals and fresh produce are inexpensive. You do not need to buy expensive meat to get enough protein. Cheaper options like eggs, beans and lentils are nutritious and cost less. Unsweetened yoghurt and other dairy alternatives also provide vital nutrients." Buying vegetables in season is another tip. Toral Shah, a nutritional adviser, said broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, rocket and watercress were cheap at this time of year. She recommended Asian-inspired stir fries with garlic, chilli and ginger. For dessert, Alexa Mullane, a nutritional therapist, said apples were abundant: "They contain a high amount of vitamin C, which can help to prevent colds and flu."

Budget choices

● Less healthy option
● Healthier option

	PRICE	Energy kcal	Fat	Saturates	Sugar	Salt
Breakfast						
● White bread toast and butter, one slice	8p	133	4.6g	2.8g	1.5g	0.49g
● Wholemeal brown bread toast and reduced fat butter, one slice	8p	118	3.55g	1.2g	1.5g	0.42g
Lunch						
● Tesco meal deal of sausage, egg and bacon sandwich, Tropicana orange juice and a packet of kettle chips	£4	820	29.2g	6.1g	21.1g	3.35g
● Tesco meal deal of chicken salad sandwich, bottle of Evian water and mango	£4	432	0.9g	4.5g	21.1g	0.99g
Dinner						
● Tesco pepperoni pizza	£3.50	772	23.6g	9.8g	9.4g	1.11g
● Homemade bolognese and wholemeal spaghetti, with 1kg mince, three onions, four carrots, four celery sticks, four tins of tomatoes, herbs and four garlic cloves	£1.56	618	11.9g	3.7g	14g	0.44g

Methodology: prices and nutritional information taken from Tesco website.

For 8 portions. Details per portion



Sky Full Fibre 150 available to 51% of UK homes Offer ends 03/02/25. New Sky TV and broadband customers only. Requires Sky Stream and Broadband (min. speed 25Mbps). Connects to TV via HDMI. Availability subject to survey. Not available to customers without a mobile signal at home or reliant on their landline for emergency services. Sky Talk service uses your broadband connection to make calls. Average speeds: 150Mbps (download) and 27Mbps (upload). Average download speed shown for fixed line connection to your Hub; excludes Wi-Fi performance which varies by device and home environment. Separate 24-month contracts for Sky Full Fibre 150 (£20pm), Sky Pay as you Talk (£0pm) and Sky Essential TV (£15pm). Prices may change during contracts. Standard prices apply after 24 months (currently £40pm for Sky Full Fibre 150 and £21 for Sky Essential TV). Sky Stream Packs are loaned to you at no cost and must be returned when they are no longer registered on your account. Sky Hub is loaned to you at no cost, it must be returned at the end of the broadband subscription. Essential TV features a selection of Sky channels (including Sky Atlantic, Sky Sports News, Sky Sports Mix) plus Discovery+ and Netflix Standard with Ads (RRP £9.99). Netflix terms of use apply. Subject to status. 18+. UK, CI & IoM only. Further terms apply.

Put down that phone, your vehicle is watching you

Mark Sellman
Technology Correspondent

A driver looks around quickly to check for police before they pick up a phone at the wheel. It's a dangerous practice that happens every day around the world, costing thousands of lives.

However, AI technology being rolled out in millions of cars can now identify if you are on the phone, smoking or wearing a seatbelt, as well as your age, sex, weight and mood.

Two cameras, on the steering wheel and rear view mirror, scan the cabin using AI and ensure the driver is paying attention to the road, especially as cars become semi-autonomous. In Europe they will be required on every new car sold from 2026 — the driver can get alerts if they are distracted or drowsy.

The capabilities extend far beyond monitoring driver's attention, though. The Times was given a demonstration by Seeing Machines, whose driver monitoring systems have been installed in more than 2.6 million vehicles, including BMW, Mercedes, Ford and GM models, plus lorries and transport vehicles. Damien Balachandran, head of applications at Seeing Machines, said at the CES tech conference in Las Vegas: "The more you can see of the cabin, the more things you would potentially track."

He showed how the AI system can identify the name, gender, height and weight of the driver and passenger, which could be used to determine how hard an airbag should be deployed. These details could inform emergency services who is in the car after a crash.

Balachandran also showed "some very early stage face expression detection — we don't call it emotion detection — so it's ... happy, sad, or, surprised".

Seeing Machines's cameras can perform 26 functions beyond monitoring driver attention and drowsiness. Nick DiFiore, its strategic project adviser, recently told US investors that car companies are keen to utilise the potential of the cameras.

"Once the technology is regulated and has to go into vehicles, the OEMs [car makers] very quickly then start searching for ways to monetise that and profit from it, because they certainly don't profit from the regulated features," he said.

Mike Lenné, chief science and innovation officer at Seeing Machines, said: "In-cabin sensing is definitely going to be the safety technology of the decade."

China's standards for driver monitoring include an alert when a phone is handled behind the wheel.

Paul McGlone, the chief executive of Seeing Machines, said: "If we take phone use and alcohol in the same context: both very dangerous for different reasons. It can be done. But if it's done, what do they [regulators] do?"

Edmund King, president of the AA, said: "Even though some of this monitoring stuff might sound somewhat Big Brother, I think for things like phones and driver distraction there could be a role for it. It depends how it's done. But it will be something I think that legislators will be looking at to reduce road deaths, which have been stubbornly plateaued."



In-car cameras can identify your age, sex, mood and if you are making a call

Matthew Beecham, an analyst at S&P Global Mobility, said: "Cameras improve driving but also transform cars into rolling surveillance units."

A spokesman for the Department for Transport said: "Consideration is being given to which of these technologies are suitable and appropriate for mandatory application in Great Britain."

TMS

diary@thetimes.co.uk | @timesdiary

From Pitt to footie pitch

Two hundred years ago, politicians settled their differences like gentlemen: with pistols. Two sitting prime ministers, Pitt the Younger and Wellington, met an opponent at dawn to fire from a dozen paces without causing a by-election. Modern duels involve football studs. Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, has challenged Sir Keir Starmer to a kick-about. "I'm confident I would see him off," Philp told *Political Thinking*. He said captains always picked him first in five-a-side games since "they don't want me trying to tackle them because they're worried they'll end up with a broken ankle". How tough. Last year "Chopper" Philp, below, got a black eye when he was punched by one of his team-mates in a match. An accident, apparently. Perhaps he should follow what one of Starmer's friends says is the PM's central rule of playing friendly football: "Don't be an arse."

John Prescott's funeral on Thursday included a nice reference to his nickname as deputy prime minister when the cortège comprised two Jags. A similar in-joke appeared at the funerals of both the Two Ronnies, where four candles were placed before the altar (fork handles might have been even better), and Elizabeth Taylor left instructions for her own that, in a nod to her famous tardiness, the coffin should arrive 15 minutes late.

THE IRONY LADY

Today's episode of the Radio 4 show *What's Funny About ...* features Jonathan Lynn, the creator of *Yes Minister*, who recalled the cringing sketch Margaret Thatcher wrote and performed in for an awards do in 1984. Paul Eddington and Nigel Hawthorne both asked Lynn to tell Thatcher they were unavailable, but he told them they should say no themselves. "They didn't because they were scared," he said. Lynn later learnt that Thatcher had rehearsed her lines 23 times with officials. "What they were doing rehearsing a sketch rather than running the country is baffling," he said. All politicians are frustrated comic actors.



MAGGIE OPUS

First the skit, now the opera. The historian Dominic Sandbrook and the composer Joseph Phibbs are writing one about Britain's first female prime minister to mark the centenary of Thatcher's birth, in October. The mezzo-soprano Lucy Schaufer is lined up for the lead role. While no one would dare to suggest that "la donna di ferro è mobile", perhaps they might adapt Puccini and have her sing an aria called *Your Tiny Budget is Frozen.*

Mike Amesbury, the suspended Labour MP who pleaded guilty to assault two weeks ago after punching a constituent, tabled a parliamentary question to ask what the government is doing to support sport in Runcorn, and was told it will receive £165,000 via an "arm's length body". Sounds like the safest distance to approach Amesbury.

BEYOND THE PALIN

When Sir Michael Palin published the first volume of his diaries in 2006 (there are now four), he worried that revealing his thoughts might cost him friendships. The best response was from Terry Jones, Palin tells The New York Times, who suggested the Pythons could write footnotes to the next one to "cut me down to size". Take a cut of the proceeds, more like.

Palin is helping to raise money for a statue of Jones in Colwyn Bay, but wants a more subtle memorial for himself: the words "gone to lunch" on his grave. "To be silly after I'm dead is important," he said.

PATRICK KIDD



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News

Why so many children miss primary school

Nicola Woolcock and **Yennah Smart** look at the data behind an 'epidemic of absence' to identify the key factors

Truancy has long been a problem with disaffected teenagers but now young children are regularly missing school.

Although overall absence rates are slowly heading in the right direction, they are still far higher than before the pandemic, and the number of young children who are severely absent is continuing to grow.

Dame Rachel de Souza, the children's commissioner for England, says some parents who work from home are allowing children to stay at home on Fridays. Amanda Spielman, the former head of Ofsted, has suggested that the social contract between parents and schools is broken.

Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, said on Thursday that there was an "epidemic of school absence" and children missing school were harming themselves and their classmates when teachers helped those who were absent to catch up.

THE MISSING

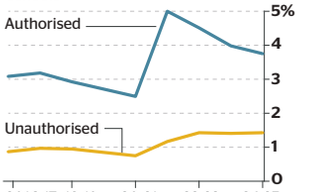
There are about 4.6 million children at primary school in England and the overall absence rate so far this academic year has been 5.2 per cent — 240,000 pupils off each day, on average.

There are three main categories: attendance, persistent absence (those missing more than 10 per cent of lessons) and severe absence (missing half of their school days). The proportion of persistently absent primary pupils (missing at least a day a fortnight) was 8-9 per cent before the pandemic. By 2021-22 it had risen to 18.2 per cent but has fallen to 14.7 per cent — almost one in seven, more than 676,000 pupils. Severe absence has equalled the worst rate recorded — 0.8 per cent or 37,000 pupils.

Thousands who are home-schooled or flexi-schooled have fallen off school rolls or were never registered.

Absenteeism rates

Authorised and unauthorised absences among children at state-funded primary schools



Source: DfE

AGE

Experts say it is vital to address attendance issues in primary school as these are likely to be exacerbated at secondary level for those already struggling. Professor John Jerrim, research director of ImpactEd Group, is leading a commission examining links between engagement, wellbeing and attendance, conducting surveys of 100,000 pupils. "Attendance levels drop as pupils transition into secondary school," he said. "Data identifies year 7 as the critical period when pupils experience a sharp decline in engagement with their education, which never fully recovers."

The youngest children may be showing signs of better attendance. Analysis by the Education Policy Institute relating to spring 2023-24 showed that absence had increased in every year group above year 2, compared with the year before. However, younger children had lower absence rates partly because fewer were ill.

MENTAL HEALTH

The absence rate so far this academic year is made up of 3.8 per cent that were authorised and 1.4 per cent unauthorised. The largest proportion of authorised absences were for illness — 3.2 per cent. This means, on average, one child in each class is off sick every day. Head teachers say vast numbers of absences are due to mental health problems and anxiety over mild illnesses. The Department for Education acknowledged that more children may be absent because of anxiety and said being in school could help to alleviate the underlying issues.

TERM-TIME HOLIDAYS

Tougher rules mean fines have risen from £60 to £80 for term-time holidays. Figures published on Thursday show the practice is soaring. Higher penalties are dwarfed by the savings families make by travelling outside school holidays. Those with primary-aged children are more relaxed about the impact on learning than families with teenagers. The latest figures show that a record number of fines were issued to parents for taking their children out without permission — 487,344 in the 2023-24 school year, generating £29 million, a 22 per cent increase on the 398,796 fines issued in 2022-23. Heads suggest the government speak to travel firms to tackle the problem.

POVERTY

This is to blame in many cases, according to a recent report by the Centre for Young Lives, as children on free school meals are over-represented in the figures. Some children share shoes in their families, alternating days they attend, or miss school because they cannot afford PE kits, the report says. Others cannot afford to travel to school or stay at home as carers.

Anne Longfield, the centre's executive chairwoman and former children's commissioner for England, said: "Persistent absence and severe absence are much higher among pupils eligible for free school meals. A lack of money should never stop a child from attending school."

Children with special educational needs or on an education, health and care plan who need more support are more likely to be severely or persistently absent than their classmates.

GEOGRAPHY

London tops the table for persistent absence at 16.1 per cent. The lowest is in the southwest, at 14.3 per cent. Nine of the ten local authority areas with the highest unauthorised absence are in the Midlands or the north of England, topped by Knowsley in Merseyside. Persistent absence is worst in Newham and Tower Hamlets, both in east London, and in Westminster.

SOLUTIONS

Simon Kidwell is head of a primary school in Cheshire that is working hard to bring attendance back to pre-pandemic levels. Although sanctions have their place, encouragement and working with families is more effective, he says. This ranges from breakfast clubs, which Phillipson plans to introduce nationally, to working with families to set short-term goals and turning up at the homes of reluctant pupils to support parents trying to persuade them to attend. He said those reluctant to attend may have older siblings who skip class or families with "generational hostility" to school.



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Ofsted plan to colour-code pupils' new report cards

Nicola Woolcock Education Editor

Ofsted is expected to reveal plans for a colour-coded scorecard next week.

An internal presentation seen by the Financial Times says single-word judgments could be replaced with one or two-word judgments in eight areas.

Ofsted announced last year that it would overhaul its school judgment system and introduce report cards.

The eight core assessment areas are: achievement, leadership, curriculum, developing teaching, personal development and wellbeing, attendance, behaviour and attitudes, and inclusion, the FT reported. The ratings will range from "causing concern" in red to "exemplary" in dark green.

A review criticised Ofsted's handling of Ruth Perry, a head teacher who committed suicide in 2023 after her school was downgraded from outstanding to inadequate over safeguarding concerns. An inquest said that the Ofsted report had contributed to her death.

Sir Martyn Oliver became Ofsted's chief inspector in January 2024. Within days he had to respond to a "prevention of future deaths" report from the coroner. He said at the time: "I was shocked and saddened by the death of Ruth Perry. We accept the coroner's findings and have responded to the recommendations of her report in full. We must carry out our role in a way that is sensitive to the pressures faced by leaders and staff, without losing our focus on children."



Lamb loin and spiced belly by Timberyard, a restaurant in Edinburgh that is shortlisted for drinks list of the year with its sister restaurant Montrose

JUSTIN RODRIGUES



Stuart Ralston is the head chef at Lyla, a fine-dining restaurant in Edinburgh that has made the Good Food Guide shortlist

Fine dining and sizzling banter in new foodie capital

Mark McLaughlin

When choosing the best place to eat, the criteria mostly revolve around the menu, at a stretch the drinks' list. However, for the chef whose restaurant is in the running to be crowned Britain's best new food spot, it is decided primarily on banter.

Stuart Ralston has said it is "Scottish banter" specifically that makes Edinburgh, where his shortlisted restaurant Lyla is located, the best place for food — and he's not alone in his praise. The Good Food Guide is fawning over Scotland's capital before its award ceremony on Monday. There are four Edinburgh restaurants on the shortlist.

Ralston, whose father worked at The Caledonian, one of Edinburgh's grand old hotels, started out as a kitchen porter at his father's pizzeria aged 13. "The Edinburgh food scene was very different back then," he said. "There were a lot less Michelin stars."

He added that Edinburgh's new identity as a hub for top-tier restaurants and talent had also been led by revolution in chefs' work-life balance. He said: "Today chefs are much more professional. They're not out drinking and smoking like sailors, and that toxic atmosphere of chefs yelling at each other is gone. I lose less cooks now than I used to because they look after themselves."

Ralston moved to New York in his early twenties to work under Gordon Ramsay and witnessed his famously foul-mouthed motivational style. He said: "When the cameras were in it was always more intense, but off screen there was still a lot of passion and intense focus on standards."

However, he said the heat in American kitchens was nothing like the "brutality" in London. He said: "I worked in one Michelin-star restaurant where the pastry chef burnt the bread, and the head chef grabbed him by the neck and dragged him across every shelf in the dry store.

"When I opened my restaurants I had to adjust to a new way of working where you don't fly off the handle when things go wrong. You don't hear of many toxic kitchens in Edinburgh and anyone that behaves like that has probably been exposed by now."

Ralston left New York, and after a short stint in Barbados, returned to his native Scotland and opened Lyla, which he describes as an "unashamedly classical fine-dining restaurant" with ten lined tables and attentive staff.

The Good Food Guide said Edinburgh's appeal lay in its "cool, casual restaurants", but is it a category that Lyla fits into? "I think so," Ralston said. "We won't talk down to you, unlike some restaurants I worked in ... I like my staff to express their own personalities, tell jokes, connect with people, get to know them and why they came to Edinburgh."

Many chefs say the Edinburgh lifestyle is conducive to running a great restaurant, with relatively affordable rent within easy commuting distance, unlike the gentrified sprawl of London or New York. Rodney Wages, who moved his Avery restaurant from San Francisco to Stockbridge in Edinburgh last year, would agree. "It's a really lively environment to be creative in while also being family-friendly," he said. Avery started as a pop-up outlet in 2016 before becoming a permanent residence and earning a Michelin star in 2021.

Edinburgh's proximity to the natural habitats and its fresh produce was also a draw. Wages said: "We would import Scottish langoustines and wild birds to San Francisco and now I can get them here. I send pictures to my friends and they're like, 'Holy crap, that looks amazing,' and they're kinda jealous."

The Good Food Guide award winners will be announced at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in London.

Edinburgh's Timberyard and its sister restaurant Montrose have been jointly shortlisted for drinks list of the year; and The Palmerston is nominated for best-value set menu.

Chloë Hamilton, the guide's co-editor, said: "Every year, our coverage of Edinburgh's dining scene ranks among the most-read content by our knowledgeable readers and this is the era in which the city is answering their voracious appetite for great restaurants at every level."

Our critic's Edinburgh picks

1. Lyla
An epic ten-course seafood-led tasting menu, opening with the most beautiful snacks you've had.
2. Timberyard
A game-changer that revolutionised Edinburgh dining and, in 2023, was awarded its first Michelin star.
3. Mirin
Most exciting Asian fusion, tucked away on Leith Walk. Thrilling, innovative and fun. Small but mighty.
4. Montrose
Most exciting new opening. Unapologetically romantic. The most interesting drinks list in town.
5. The Palmerston
The best gastropub you can imagine, married to the best bistro, with the best on-site bakery, and best locally sourced meat, fish and vegetables.
Chitra Ramaswamy is food critic for The Times Scotland

TikTokers can't get enough of £105-per-kg Dubai chocolate

Chiara Brown

It has been everywhere on social media feeds: a slab of velvety chocolate being poured over a crunchy green filling, usually followed by an influencer taking a big satisfying bite out of it all.

This is "Dubai chocolate", a milk chocolate bar filled with pistachio cream and knafeh, a traditional Arab dessert often made of a shredded filo pastry called kataifi, akkawi (a chewy, soft cheese), date syrup and nuts. It's sweet, crunchy and now very popular.

The trend started when Sarah Hamouda and Yezen Alani, the owners of Fix Dessert Chocolatier in Dubai, sent their knafeh chocolate bar — "Can't get knafeh of it" — to influencers in the hope of bolstering business. Since their opening in 2022, expansion had been slow and they hoped this decision might help with marketing. The influencer Maria Vehera was one of the recipients and posted a video of herself eating the bar in the front seat of her car. Taking a bite, she seemed to be thoroughly enjoying every bite with her eyes closed and pistachio cream covering her hands. Think of it as an update to the Cadbury's Flake adverts.

The post went viral, getting 6.4 million likes and 112 million views on TikTok. This meant Hamouda and Alani quickly went from selling one chocolate bar a week, according to a recent interview, to selling about 30,000.

The social media craze took on a new form in the months that followed as users started making their own versions at home, buying chocolate moulds and creating the pistachio and knafeh fillings themselves. Some fans posted hacks on what to order at Starbucks to achieve the Dubai chocolate taste. In Germany the trend really took hold, with Dubai chocolate-flavoured crêpes, hot chocolate and nuts at last year's Christmas markets. A woman was apprehended at Hamburg airport after she failed to declare 90kg — 460 bars — of Dubai chocolate. By the end of last year Deliveroo reported that the knafeh bar was the global bestseller for the year, even though it is available on the app only in Dubai.



The chocolate bars contain pistachio cream and knafeh, an Arab dessert

Today the appetite for Dubai chocolate is far from sated. You find it at grocery stores such as Morrisons, and off-licences around London, and it has also caught the attention of posher chocolate brands. Lindt has created a version that retails for £10, and the mega-fancy Läderach now sells its own slab of Dubai chocolate — Frisch-Schoggi Dubai — for £10.50 per 100g (£105 per kg). Demand has been so high that the company has limited it to one slab per person.

According to Tony Turnbull, food editor of The Times, pistachio is actually one of the easiest ways to test chocolate quality. A poor quality pistachio shows up on your palate quickly, so you really can't cheat. This probably explains why the Läderach chocolate version I got the chance to taste recently was so much more delicious than the one I picked up on a whim at a local supermarket after noticing excitedly that it was in stock. Though the latter still cost me £10, it was only about the size of two full-sized Twix bars.

When we took it back to my boyfriend's family dinner for a taste, the feedback was decidedly fine. No one was really fussed and, considering the price, we weren't rushing to buy it again. Although some light online sleuthing has led me to believe there is a chance we may have even accidentally tried one of the many imposter brands that have started floating around.

News

JAMES LINSELL CLARK/SWNS



Middle England and radicals join forces against Heathrow plans

Adam Vaughan Environment Editor

From protesters grounding planes on runways to "climate camps" and screaming helium balloons at aviation events, opposition to a third runway at Heathrow has rarely been boring.

But it is arguably the unexciting alliance of "Swampies and Middle England", combined with businesses, local authorities and MPs, that explains why campaigning against the airport's expansion has been so successful.

"It was this diverse coalition that was terribly important," said John Stewart, who fought the runway for two decades. Stewart, 75, chaired the biggest and most organised local group — Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (Hacan) — from 2000 to 2020.

Hacan united local residents concerned about noise and homes being bulldozed, and still has thousands of members. They were backed by big, established environmental groups such as WWF but also by more radical activists such as the group Plane Stupid.

Leo Murray, who co-founded Plane Stupid, said opposition to a third runway had modelled itself on the anti-roads movement of the 1990s, including protesters against Newbury bypass.

"The recipe for success was this alliance of grassroots and deep greens, Swampy types who are prepared to go and climb trees and chain themselves to things, and Middle Englanders who didn't want road expansion near them," said Murray, who thinks a similar approach would work on Heathrow.

The Blair government backed the third runway in 2003, just as Murray was becoming more concerned about the consequences of climate change. By 2005, Murray said, "It was keeping me up at night. I was freaking out about the end of the world and looking for something to throw my weight behind." That something was opposition to airport expansion.

There followed an intense period of non-violent action, intended to increase the financial and political cost of expanding airport capacity. In 2006, Plane Stupid shut down East Midlands Airport with a Baptist minister delivering a sermon on the runway. "We literally cut through the fence and stopped planes taking off," Murray said. It was the first time green activists had shut down an airport.

Later, one activist was accidentally thrown by security staff through a plate glass window at an aviation conference, where campaigners had tied rape alarms to helium balloons. A 2009 speech by the then transport secretary Geoff Hoon was repeatedly interrupted. "There were half a dozen of us scattered through the room at tables and we all had air horns. And every time he started speaking, we 'Hooned' him," Murray said.

Lord Mandelson was "slimed" with green custard by a Plane Stupid activist in 2009, the year after Murray and colleagues had stormed the roof of the Houses of Parliament. "Gordon Brown was very peeved," he said. A week-long climate camp was held near Heathrow in 2007 in Sipson, a village which faced demolition if a third runway went ahead.

Murray thought politicians after David Cameron, who opposed the expansion, alighted on the third runway when they ran out of ideas for growth. "Heathrow expansion just keeps on rising like a zombie from the grave. People keep disinterring it. Rachel Reeves is like: 'I'm fresh out of ideas, so give me a spade and I'm going to dig this up, see if I can resuscitate this corpse.' It just smacks of desperation," he said.

Judicial reviews, letters, page 24

Billionaire's £30,000 a night venue upsets locals



Blyth Barn, being developed by Jon Hunt, below, is set to open in May but locals are concerned about traffic



Residents of a Suffolk village have said they are fighting a "David and Goliath" battle against a billionaire entrepreneur's plan to create a £30,000-a-night wedding venue (Peter Chappell writes).

Locals in Huntingfield, which has a population of 150, said Blyth Barn — owned by Jon Hunt, founder of the estate agent Foxtons — would dwarf their village when it opened in May. Its website says it can host nearly 300 people for "decadent" luxury events.

The 22,500 sq ft centre is part of the luxury resort Wilderness Reserve, owned by Hunt, which has been visited by stars such as the influencer Zoe Sugg and the comedian Jack Whitehall. Ed Sheeran lives near by.

East Suffolk council have already agreed to grant a 24-hour alcohol licence which, along with the threat of increased traffic and the noise of helicopters, has left locals fearful that their rural idyll will be destroyed.

Wilderness Reserve has sought "part retrospective" planning permission to reconfigure three approved holiday lets into a single guest house to create Blyth Barn.

At an extraordinary general meeting of Huntingfield parish council on Thursday, 50 objectors turned up to discuss the "biased" application. The local parish is likely to vote against the application, but the ultimate decision lies with East Suffolk council, which has yet to decide upon an outcome.

Hunt, who grew up in Colchester, is thought to be worth about £1.5 billion and, since 1995, has bought up 8,000 acres of Suffolk's Yox Valley countryside.

The 17-room property will have a swimming pool, hot tub, sauna, gym and party room and will be available for £30,000 a night. It will also have two grand dining rooms.

Blyth Barn is still being developed, but is being promoted as available from May for weddings and events. Wilderness Reserve has been contacted for comment.

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TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JAMES GLOSSOP



Spick and span Niamh Kelly, left, and Samantha Welsford take advantage of limited winter opening hours at Harewood House, near Leeds, to give its large collection of paintings and artefacts a deep clean

I'm proof that bill is fatal mistake

Peter Sefton-Williams considered assisted dying and suicide after a misdiagnosis of MND, he tells **Fiona Hamilton**

Will the NHS set up a National Death Service?

After three days of intense parliamentary hearings, only one thing seems certain when it comes to legalised assisted dying: no one has a clue about what such a service would look like (Eleanor Hayward and Poppy Koronka write).

About 50 expert witnesses were summoned to the Boothroyd Room in the Commons this week to be grilled by a cross-party committee of MPs responsible for scrutinising the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. The legislation would allow adults in England and Wales with under six months to live to legally receive assistance to end their lives, subject to approval by two doctors and a judge.

But this week's evidence sessions raised more questions than answers about how this would be delivered. Understandably, the NHS is not particularly keen to take on the responsibility of setting up a National Death Service. Judges, also, have said they simply would not have the time to sign off each case.

The NHS is still in the dark about whether it would be required to help patients to die. The bill says only that it "may" be required to provide it as "part of the health service". Yet Wes Streeting, the health secretary, opposes the legislation and fears assisted dying would come "at the expense" of other NHS care.

Professor Sir Chris Whitty told MPs the NHS should not be rushed into delivering assisted dying within two years, as the bill stipulates. He said: "I would argue against putting a firm deadline [in place] ... We are going to have to sort out multiple different things to get this to work."

The bill has huge implications for the NHS workforce. Medical unions have made clear that helping patients to die must not be "any part of a doctor's normal job". Whitty claimed that only a minority of doctors would be "happy to take part in the final stages" of delivering drugs that hasten patients' deaths.

Training would have to be provided to those helping patients die. Rather than being a branch of the NHS, external groups would receive funding from the health service, mirroring the system created after the Abortion Act 1967, when clinics were set up by charities such as Marie Stopes.

Two doctors must agree that a patient has less than six months to live. But Whitty said it would be "extremely difficult" for doctors to come up with a list of conditions that meant people qualified as terminally ill. Although doctors could take a "reasonable central view", there was always uncertainty. "Some people will die significantly earlier than they're predicted to, some people will die — in small numbers — very significantly later," he said. The committee was also told that poor palliative care or difficulties accessing pain relief could push some into assisted dying. Dr Rachel Clarke, a palliative care specialist, said: "The real-world conditions of the NHS today are such that people's suffering means occasionally they will beg me to end their life."

Professor Nicola Ranger, head of the Royal College of Nursing, told the committee it "could be possible" that patients might choose assisted dying because inadequate palliative care left people in distress.

Meanwhile, legal experts told the committee it would be impossible to implement the provision in the bill for a High Court judge to sign off on every assisted death. Sir Nicholas Mostyn, a former High Court judge, said there could be 6,000 assisted dying applications a year in the UK. If judges took two hours to process each case, that would take 12,000 hours of court time. He said: "Each High Court judge does 1,000 hours in court, so you are talking about three quarters of the entire family division doing nothing but this. It is impossible, in my opinion, for this to be done by the High Court."

Lord Sumption, a former Supreme Court judge, said the requirement to have a High Court judge hear each case was "unnecessary and in some respects undesirable" and that "it is not entirely clear what the judge is supposed to do".

Campaigners are looking to have the requirement for a High Court judge to be involved dropped and MPs are considering whether a panel of experts should make decisions instead.

MPs also questioned the effectiveness of the Mental Capacity Act in deciding whether a person had the mental capacity to choose an assisted death.

As Peter Sefton-Williams sat opposite a neurologist awaiting his diagnosis, a thought clouded out all others. "I just thought, 'Please don't let it be motor neurone disease'," he said. "I think most of us know it's probably the worst thing you can get."

When the doctor delivered his devastating verdict — that he not only had motor neurone disease (MND) but could have as little as six months to live — Sefton-Williams "just lost it, really", he said. "I was obviously scared about how you could deteriorate. Absolutely terrified. I knew more or less how the end comes. You can't breathe. You can't move any of your muscles. You can't swallow. You can't speak. I just thought I wasn't brave enough, really, to cope with all of that."

Sitting in his bright and tidy flat overlooking a park in Beckenham, south London, sunshine streaming through the large windows, Sefton-Williams takes a deep breath, steeling himself to describe the turmoil he endured a year ago. He immediately made preparations, completing the paperwork to go to Dignitas in Switzerland for an assisted death. He had a plan B, scoping out a notorious cliffside suicide spot in Sussex.

The 71-year-old retired journalist and marketing manager updated his will and spoke to a palliative care specialist. A few weeks after the diagnosis he dismissed the idea of assisting dying or suicide, partly due to his strong Catholic faith but also, he said, because "I realised I personally could never press the button — I think you have to be quite brave to press that button". He selected a care home, drew up an end-of-life directive and decided to die in a hospice.



Peter Sefton-Williams contacted Dignitas

Specialists told him he might live as long as five years but that it could be between two and six months. Yet his symptoms — twitching hands and legs, muscle wastage in his right hand — did not get worse. He lived in fear and expectation of deterioration until late last year, when he had further tests and was given astonishing news: he had multifocal motor neuropathy, an autoimmune disease that closely mimics the symptoms of MND but is treatable and minor in comparison.

It gave him a new lease of life but his brush with death, and particularly his consideration of assisted dying and suicide, troubles him greatly. It was "the most traumatic experience imaginable" and has prompted him to speak publicly against the assisted dying bill.

Sefton-Williams is concerned the landmark legislation, at the committee stage in parliament, could lead to unnecessary deaths in cases of misdiagnosis like his. "The doctors got it wrong," he said. "On suicide [and assisted dying], I said 'no'. I thought I would just have to go through with MND.

"But others would not have taken that view. If I had been insistent on end-of-life treatment, people would have said, 'Well, he wanted a dignified death, it was his choice to end his own life on his terms'. I would have killed myself and nobody would have known that in fact I wasn't ill at all."

The legislation would require two doctors to approve the request to end life. In Sefton-Williams's case, two of the country's top specialists agreed he had MND and he expects a judge assessing his case for assisted dying would have found no fault in it.

He said: "There seems to be an assumption that the doctors at least are certain about what disease you have. Doctors are fallible. As my case shows, I could have thought that was a way out and I would now be dead. Whereas, as far as I can tell, there's very little wrong with me."

MPs have had enough of experts in this debate, Janice Turner, page 23

News

Chinese maths prodigy who wants to rule the world of AI

Fiona Hamilton Chief Reporter

As a middle school pupil, Liang Wenfeng had already mastered high school mathematics and was tackling university level concepts. He showed clear promise, according to his teacher, but was a quiet figure in the classroom.

A recent interview given by the DeepSeek founder, whose AI company took the tech world by storm this week, shows how determination and steel lay beneath that reserved exterior.

He was not looking for a "quick profit", Wenfeng told Waves, a Chinese technology media platform, but "rather to reach the technical frontier and drive the development of the entire ecosystem".

Speaking in July, he said that until then China had been merely following the US, which excelled at technological innovation. It was time to actually "join the game" and become a leading contributor, he said.

DeepSeek certainly did that, immediately surpassing its American rival ChatGPT in downloads, despite being built at a fraction of the cost. Wenfeng's success alarmed not only Silicon Valley but those who warn of China's motivations in becoming technologically dominant.

According to Jessie Yin of the Atlantic Council, a US think tank on foreign affairs, the advanced stage of DeepSeek "further exacerbates anxieties that China can outpace the United States in cutting edge technologies and surprised many analysts who believed China was far behind the United States on AI".



Liang Wenfeng, the DeepSeek founder, is challenging America's AI dominance

Concerns were immediately raised about DeepSeek's collection of data, and it emerged that it censored itself over information about China and responded to questions with fake news and official Communist Party lines.

Luke de Pulford, the executive director of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, warned: "DeepSeek collects a vast amount of your personal information. This isn't unusual for native or web-based apps. What is unusual is that DeepSeek is required by law to hand over any data that Beijing demands, and to keep any such request secret. If this happens, you'll never know and there's nothing you can do about it, because China is a total Wild West when it comes to data rights."

China's National Intelligence Law in 2017 requires all private firms to accept government demands for information if it is deemed necessary to protect national security. It means that the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) could potentially compel tech companies, including DeepSeek, to pass over data about its users and their searches.

But while some of the country's big tech giants have touted their ties to the CCP in the past, Wenfeng, who also founded a quantitative hedge fund and expanded into AI just two years ago, has gone under the radar.

It was only after the launch of R1, the latest DeepSeek model that shot to the top of the Apple download charts, that he was invited to a high-level government symposium in Beijing.

R1 was seen as a direct challenge to ChatGPT as it appeared to match its reasoning model at a fraction of the cost.

OpenAI has quickly responded to the Chinese company by releasing yesterday what it claims is a faster, cheaper and more capable reasoning AI called o3-mini. The tit-for-tat appeared to be the beginning of a new price war between the main AI companies.

On Wednesday Sam Altman, the chief executive of OpenAI, promised to "deliver much better models" after DeepSeek had been released.

SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES



Voice of hope **Joni Mitchell, 81, performs Both Sides Now in a rare appearance for California wildfire relief in Inglewood, Los Angeles. Thousands have lost homes**



Trump's New Deal: 100 days to reverse the legacy of FDR
Niall Ferguson
Pages 28-29

Comment

Britain is decoupling from Europe's decline

While competitors grapple with falling birthrates, the UK is going in the opposite direction: we should welcome that



Fraser Nelson
@FRASERNELSON

If demography is destiny, then Europe is in a fair bit of trouble. Almost every country in the continent is bracing itself for a decline in its working-age population, raising difficult questions about who will support the fast-growing number of pensioners. Emmanuel Macron wants more babies and "demographic rearmament". Giorgia Meloni has created a minister for the birthrate "for the simple reason that we want Italy to have a future again". Countries caught in a demographic death spiral, she implies, don't have much of a future.

Only one major European nation is forecast to escape decline. The good news was confirmed this week — except no one, anywhere, saw it as good news. A third of this country's babies are now born to immigrant mums, says the Office for National Statistics. New arrivals will make sure our working-age population growth proceeds at the normal, healthy pace. But the idea of 5 million more working-age Brits by 2050 has been treated as a kind of self-invasion, a crisis that our islands might not survive.

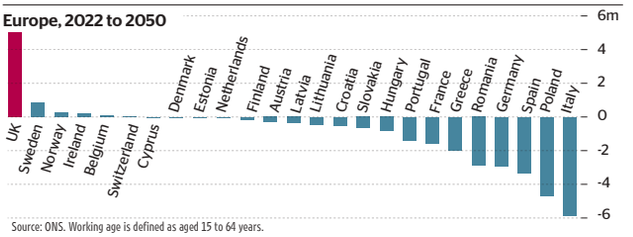
"Shocking and unacceptable," says Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary. "It can and must be stopped from materialising." Britain's "quality of life is declining due to the population explosion," says Nigel Farage. Robert Jenrick warns, "A fourth decade of mass migration would be utterly disastrous for our country." There's no doubt that his view is widely shared, but it all depends on your definition of disaster.

The fashionable fear in the 1970s was of a population explosion that would bring famine and war. China went furthest in response, imposing a one-child policy, whose implications became clear only once it was far too late. China is now expected to see a 25 per cent fall in its working-age population by 2050, with a consequent slide in global power and relevance. Beijing has now declared marriage and childbirth to be "major issues affecting national survival" but the tap of human supply, it seems, is far harder to turn on than off.

Perhaps no country has done more to try to increase the birthrate than South Korea, which declares its demographics a "national emergency" and spent more than $200 billion to incentivise babymaking. It has succeeded only in beating its own record for the world's lowest birthrate, year after year. Russia's health minister at one point advised workers to engage in procreation "during breaks". To no avail. "The fate of Russia," says Vladimir Putin, "depends on how many of us there will be." He wants to annex people, not just land, which helps explain why 20,000 Ukrainian children have been seized and taken to Russia.

Immigration doesn't always solve things. Spain, now vying with Italy to become the oldest country in the world, is preparing to take in 10 million over the next 30 years but the Bank of Spain says three times as many would be needed to keep its worker-to-pensioner balance. Germany has taken in more than Britain but still faces a huge working-age population decline. The Merkel-era immigration brought no end of problems, with precious few benefits. New arrivals have pushed German violent crime to a 15-year high. Surveys show crime here near record lows.

Projected working-age population change



Source: ONS. Working age is defined as aged 15 to 64 years.

Quadrupling net migration, as Britain did in the years after lockdown, was a blunder for which the Tories are, quite rightly, still apologising. They didn't understand the post-Brexit visa system they built and only grasped the scale of what they'd done after they lost the election. They broke the golden rule

> Even if all of this is done, we would still need mass migration

of immigration: only take in as many as you can digest. But they did so because immigration was a way of covering up social and economic failure, a short-term solution to almost every problem.

Stopping the arrivals will not fix those problems. The immigrants came in such numbers because welfare dysfunction — dumping millions on sickness benefit — had created a vacuum in the jobs market, sucking in new workers. Failure to fix the housing market led to chronic under-supply, an issue made all the more acute by the migration surge. Failure to train enough doctors and nurses has left an NHS staffing vacuum. The failure of companies to automate has left too many humans stuck in jobs that machines could and should be doing.

But this is all fixable. It is possible to have a visa system that works properly.

Keir Starmer could get his 1.5 million houses if he properly deals with the planning red tape and the concentration of power in the hands of too few builders. Boosting the workforce by reversing the rise in sickness benefit could give us the G7's fastest growth. Automation and training would lift skills and salaries. But even if all of this is done, we'd still need mass migration — to keep the working-age population growing in spite of our low (and declining) birthrate. It's a plausible option for the UK, as confirmed by the figures this week. But less so, it seems, for most of the rest of Europe.

We certainly have a problem with integration. The parts of Blackburn, Oldham and Bradford that are 90 per cent Muslim are hardly adverts for a well-balanced society. But the rise of religious sectarianism in politics has more to do with British-born voters than it does with recent arrivals. The gangs in Sweden who have been detonating bombs at the rate of one a day so far this year tend to be second generation. These problems need special attention, frank discussion and won't be remedied by cutting visas.

The Farage policy — net-zero immigration — is certainly possible. But unless he also has a policy to reverse the birthrate decline (something that no country in the world has been able to achieve on a sustainable basis) it would be a formula for national decline. The Reform UK agenda would steer Britain straight into the welfare state crisis that is causing so much agony in so much of Europe — and in Japan, whose prime minister says it is "standing on the verge of whether we can continue to function as a society". The UK is set to follow America's trajectory, both in immigrant levels and demographic prospects.

That's why our debate is so different. We don't see Starmer appointing a minister for births, nor hear babymaking tips from Wes Streeting. Civil servants are not being put on four-day weeks, in the hope they'll use the fifth day for parenthood (as will soon happen in Tokyo). We certainly have no shortage of people who talk about Britain's civilisational collapse — but they envisage too many people, rather than too few. The first problem can be fixed, with the right policies. The second one can't.

So Britain is being granted an exemption from the politics of human shortage. Demographic decline means shrinking tax revenues, crumbling welfare systems and economic disaster: this, it seems, is not our fate. Instead, we see an extraordinary opportunity. Get our social and economic model right and we could well manage the next couple of decades better than any other country in Europe. Quite a prize — and there for the taking.

Ann Treneman Notebook

We must keep talking about those we've lost

It is two years ago to the day since Ian died and it feels like a good time to share a story that I have been thinking about. A few months ago I received a message from a reader who got straight to the point: "I welcome the mentions you make of Ian in your articles. No sentimentality. Just a natural connection to something you are doing or an event."

His wife had died some months before but friends, after the initial sympathy card phase, had seemed reluctant to speak of her. "Following your example, I continue to say her name whenever the context is appropriate. The response is warming, and they begin to mention her in the same way, too. Sometimes it does cause the tears to well up but better that than 'cancelling' her."

He tells of another friend, a widow, who noted that her friends too had shied away from mentioning her husband out of fear of upsetting her. "I'd much rather be upset than for him to be forgotten," she said. I have thought often of this reader and his message and how, in an age of instant messaging and AI, we still are unsure of how to speak of the dead. For many of us, it is comforting to hear their names. They are still part of our lives.



Bats bite back

I am wondering whether Rachel Reeves has undergone some type of shamanic intervention, involving burning sage and finding her spirit animal. I guess in her case it would be an animal spirit a la John Maynard Keynes and so more of an economic idea than an actual animal but, frankly, you never know. Is it pure coincidence that her desire to unleash our animal spirits has coincided with an obsession with bats?

First, does Rachel know that bats are mammals, like us? They are the only mammal that can fly. For some time, bats have led a charmed life in the UK, protected by law against almost everything. Except, as it turns out, Rachel. But what Rachel may not realise is that bats have friends in high places (and not just in zillion-pound tunnels).

Even now, as I type, they will be unleashing their "spirit humans", lawyering up and consulting the most formidable spirit animal of all time. I speak of badgers. I was there, covering parliament, when the badgers moved the goalposts. They still rule.

I'm beating AI

I have beaten "Copilot", which Microsoft thinks I want but which I hate. For now, at least, its irritating little icon is dimmed. I am fully prepared for it to pop back up, though, as AI rarely gives up so easily. Emboldened by this victory, I am now going to try to disable the confusing Gmail function that retrieves unanswered emails and moves them to the top of the queue with the message: "Follow up?"

Pedestrian flossing

The news that you can reduce the risk of having a stroke by flossing is puzzling. The people in this study did not necessarily floss twice a day (as my dentist demands) or even once a day. Instead, they flossed just once a week. Do people really do that? In terms of actual dental hygiene, this seems pointless. But not, apparently, when it comes to strokes.

A whispered cheer

Football news: I shouldn't say this, because the possibility of a jinx is ever present, so I will whisper instead. Sheffield United are not having such a bad season. It's great to be listening again without requiring therapy. Up the Blades.

Ann Treneman on gardens, Weekend

Comment

Cancer latest: my prostate is bang on trend

I only asked for a test because of the good work of others. Now I've joined the largest group of patients in the country

Giles Coren



How about this for a piece of couldn't-make-it-up professional timing: in the very week that it was announced on the front page of The Times that prostate cancer is now the commonest cancer in England ... I have been diagnosed with it!

And I tell you what, if the NHS had been just a teeny-weeny bit quicker (although biopsy results take the time that they take, and it isn't a blame thing), I would have been diagnosed on the actual day that we (that's me and my cancer) went top of the table.

As it was, The Times reported on Tuesday that prostate cases have risen by 25 per cent in the past five years to finally overtake breast cancer (you lose again, girls!), and I merely thought, "Ah, that reminds me, I'm getting my biopsy results tomorrow. Must remember to tell Times Radio that I am hard out at 9.30am after doing the panel with Stig and Aasmah, because that's when the duty urologist is calling to tell me that I haven't got cancer."

I also asked our podcast producer, Neil, to push back that morning's recording from 10 to 11, as the urologist might be delayed — they're busy guys, what with prostate cancer being so fashionable just now — and not call till a bit later on.

Also, there was a 20 per cent chance, statistically negligible, tantamount to impossible, that they would tell me that I *did* have cancer, and then I might not feel like podcasting. And this way, if I did have it, like, badly, I could call Neil to cancel.

This delightful journey started a couple of years ago when I had to demand, literally demand, a prostate specific antigen (PSA) test along with my annual cholesterol check, because not only is it not mandatory on the NHS but your GP is not even allowed to suggest it unless you have symptoms (which is an absolute scandal — and men are dying because of it). And it came back a bit high.

I had only asked for the test because such good work has been done lately to raise awareness, by people like Stephen Fry and Bill Turnbull (and latterly poor Chris Hoy), and now here I was with a score of 4, where higher than 2.5 is considered abnormal and facing imminent death.

"It's not imminent death," said my GP. "All men get it, if they live long enough. It's a slow cancer. Most men die with it, not of it. And a raised PSA doesn't necessarily mean cancer anyway. I'll send you for an MRI scan."

> The lance that Henry V carried at Agincourt was heading for my…

"You're not going to put your finger up my bum?"

"Not unless you especially want me to."

He's a laugh, my doctor. Very much the GP I deserve.

Long story short: the scan came back "meh", not definitely cancer but not definitely not cancer. They offered me a biopsy — into my prostate with a sharp thing to carve bits out and test them — or just monitoring. So I thought about it for several milliseconds and then said no thanks to the knife up the arse.



The actor and writer Stephen Fry has raised awareness of prostate cancer

"We don't go through the rectum any more," they said. "It's a transperineal biopsy, we go in just below the scrotum with a ..."

"TMI!" I shouted, and hung up.

A year later my PSA had risen to 6. But again, I declined the anal swordsmanship.

"It's not anal! And it's not a sword! What we do is ..."

Click. Brrrrr.

Then it went to 7. And this time the urologist was a bit more insistent. The blood in the urine and semen would only last a few weeks. Long-lasting impotence and incontinence were vanishingly rare. So I thought to myself, "I'm 55, how many more erections do I need? And what's a dribble of wee between friends?"

"OK, fine," I said. "Up my bum you go."

"It's not actually ..."

So a couple of days later I strolled down to the Royal Free, prepared to strip off my clothes, have my gonads taped to my tummy to keep my aged knackers out of the way, put my feet in the stirrups ("ha, I know those stirrups!" Esther laughed — women are great, aren't they?) and await multiple sharp object butthole penetration.

"I'm Bill," said the senior urology nurse, shaking my hand as I entered the brightly lit room. "I'll introduce you to the others."

The others?

"This is Rob." A nice-looking bloke in his 30s. Fine. "And this is the junior urology nurse, Ciara."

I turned to my left. Ciara was a woman. Duh. Late 20s, Irish, neat green scrubs, incredibly pretty. Like in a nightmare. I was about to be spatchcocked like a poussin with my goolies round my ears and my hairy arse exposed to the world, with one of The Corrs holding my hand.

And now Bill, having slipped a well-lubed ultrasound monitor the size of the Nautilus up my rectum, took the exact same lance that Henry V carried under his arm as he rode into battle at Agincourt and cantered towards my...

"It's very bright," I said, increasingly aware of how undignified I looked. "Any chance you could dim the lights?"

"I could," said Bill. "But then I might not be able to see what I'm doing."

I told him the light was fine.

"So what line of work are you in?" said Ciara.

"I write for The Times," I said. At which point Bill stabbed me hard between the legs. "F*********!" I said. "You're a reader, then?"

With the anaesthetic now delivered to my prostate, Bill pushed in a probe that would cut multiple tiny slivers from my benighted gland, delivering a small punch each time, as if from a stapler, and making an audible "click".

"So what do you mainly write about?" Click! "Aargghh!"

"Say again?"

"Well I'm the restaurant critic, so —" Click! "Aargghh!"

"It'll be easier if you try to relax, Giles."

"I'm trying! But every time I relax, Bill stabs me in the — " Click! "Aarghh!"

"It's not actually your arse, Giles. It's ..."

And then a week later, bang on 9.30am Wednesday, Ciara phoned up and said in her lovely voice, "Now we did find some cancer," as if it were actually quite a nice thing that they'd happened upon. "But less than a millimetre in just three of the 21 samples."

Ciara said that this gave me a "Gleason score" of 3+3. Which is the lowest possible rating for a malign tumour and that no treatment would be necessary for the moment. Just monitoring.

"Well, thanks, I guess," I said. "And I'm sorry I was so wet about it."

"No problem," she said. "Maybe we'll meet again during the monitoring process."

"I hope so," I replied. "I'm much more charming with my trousers on."

But the line was already dead.

Miriam Darlington Nature Notebook

I spy black blobs of life wallowing in the mire

Dartmoor was slicked and sodden after the storm. Spate water flooded down into the river Dart swelling it into tempestuous brown. I walked on to the moor between showers; there was light on the river, light reflecting in ivy leaves, light held in mist; there was even light caught in the gloss of a rotund Dartmoor pony. The winter-reds of the bare birches, their twigs soaked and dripping, turned mahogany-purple. The hawthorns shook light from crazy garlands of green hair as their beards and mops of lichen dripped.



The moorland was at its still point, poised before the spring. In the many banks and paths snowdrops will start to show soon, but not quite yet. I walked between the bare hawthorns and lone rowans beside a dry-stone wall. In a dip where the path faded toward a gleam of water, rushes, ice melt and the tang of old Molinia grass cradled a small pool.

Something caught my eye — something was alive there. The ground was scattered with knuckles of granite, among shallow and deep water. This is a mire, but to call it a mire sounds threatening even though that's its true ecological name. The word brings folklore to life in the mind. Dark stories: of drowned souls, Beowulf and his vengeful mother; the satanic jaws of a black hound. Our ancestors saw water pools such as these as apertures into the underworld. As dusk falls you can imagine the grasping mud ready to pull you in, your mouth disappearing and nobody to hear you go.

In reality it was just a paltry patch of water, but it was shining with cloud on cloud. For a moment, my feet stuck between the bushy manes of the tussocks, I couldn't tell which was sky and which water pool.

Then I saw it – a kind of shivery delta, a bulbous texture where the water had curdled. There were blobs. Hillocks of jelly, each glutinous nest dotted with black clusters of cold-blooded embryos. The frogs had been here, grasping limb on limb, their topaz eyes glaring like little gods of the bog. My heart gave a little amphibian jump. Soon there would be tadpoles, then froglets. The world was still working after all. At least it was here, in this wet pocket of moor.

Cue the curlews

Unseen by human eyes most of the time, the mires have been here since the end of the last Ice Age, and the pollen of millennia is sealed inside their peat. They have grown deep as layer upon layer of moss has rotted down, absorbing rain, cleaning and slowing the water that arrives in our towns and cities. Rare water-loving plants and insects live here. Curlews arrive to nest here. Their sad note "cue, cue", like calling voices with no answer, a sorrowful flute-trill. Lapwings might come next, with their crested splendour and their gawky tumbling sky-fall. Then first wheatears, and redstarts, and in April the water might covet a reedwarbler pair, followed closely by the unsettling gurgle of cuckoos.



Bog asphodel brings a miniature forest of saffron spires. Left, a Dartmoor pony

You could stand here, now, and imagine the spring arriving. Like the birth of a lamb. And at my feet, the jelly squiggles would turn into froglets and slither away among the sphagnum moss and sticky sundews. Free from contamination, farm spill and dirt, the mire's water is moss filtered and as fresh as when it fell from the sky.

The mire births many rills and streams that are cleaned by gravel so that the salmon, who need cold water, might return to lay their eggs.

Battle of the bog

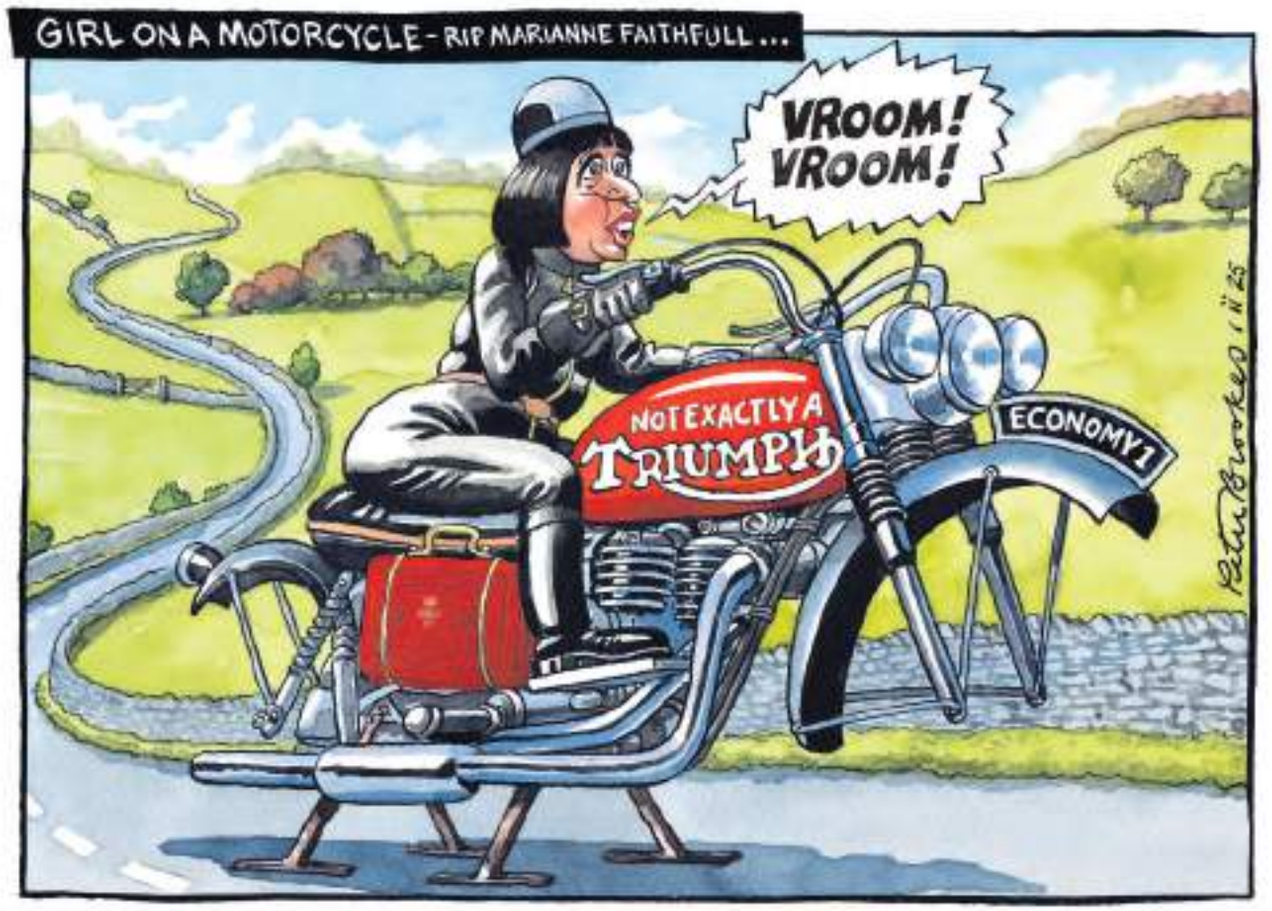
Sphagnum wetness is nutrient-poor, so many plants compete for a niche here and each has its place: delicate blood-red sundew; the pea-green leaves of the bogbean; intricately fine tendrils of marsh St John's wort. In spring the warm russet orange flowers of bog asphodel appear,with a miniature forest of saffron spires.

Sometimes a heron unfurls, shakes its feathers, lengthens its neck for a strike, breast white as the cotton grass. Twelve different species of sphagnum moss create colours that weave from bright yellows to deep greens and rich reds. The soaked fur of drowned kitten moss floats just beneath the surface of the pools. Insectivorous sundews lure invertebrates with the sticky glisten of dewy tendrils.

As spring blooms, the mire's plant life gradually begins to brighten: bog myrtle and bog orchid will begin to grow and flower; along with water crowfoot and bog pimpernel. Very soon, small red and blue tailed damselflies will breed. If you can kneel down and get your ear in, as the spring gathers momentum, stay by the water and listen. You might hear the click and flicker of chitin wings and spot the iridescent shimmer of golden-ringed dragonflies.

Miriam Darlington's latest book is The Wise Hours

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Dash for assisted dying ignores palliative care

The champions of Kim Leadbeater's bill are as zealous as Brexiteers but we must not give up on dignified natural death

Janice Turner



@VICTORIAPECKHAM

A palliative care doctor is called to A&E to attend to an elderly man who has arrived in severe pain with metastasised prostate cancer. "I just want to die," he tells her. Yet when she sits with him, the doctor learns he lives alone and she is the first person to whom he has unburdened his fears. She prescribes morphine, puts in place what she calls "rudimentary palliative care" and two days later he goes home, no longer wanting to die.

This doctor, who works in a large city hospital, tells me she is not opposed to assisted dying, seeing it as a valid last resort for a small number of patients. She is under no illusions she can ease all suffering: she cannot, for example, end a motor neurone patient's sense of incarceration in their own body. But she believes the choice to die should not be driven by lack of assistance to live, and is concerned that palliative care is too patchy and inadequate for many vulnerable people to make a truly free choice. "I don't want to torpedo the bill," she says. "I just want it to be what was always promised, that it will be the safest in the world."

Perhaps the most positive outcome of Kim Leadbeater's committee has been the light shone on a medical field few of us think about until we or a loved one are in mortal crisis. I can't be alone in my horror at learning that 40 per cent of hospitals do not have weekend face-to-face palliative cover. Imagine writhing in pain on a Saturday night, unable to see a specialist until Monday morning. For those coping at home, just a third of the UK has a 24-hour palliative phone line, although this was recommended by Nice in 2011.

Watching the committee made me ponder what I'd need to endure a terminal illness. To stay at home as long as possible, my symptoms under control; adequate pain management; someone to cry on occasionally who was not a loved one — since a dying person is a heavy load — and then perhaps, in my final months, a well-run hospice. If life was still unbearable then, yes, I'd want the choice to die.

> Living in chaos, pain and poverty, wouldn't you want to die?

Yet for many terminally ill people this is a remote scenario: about 100,000 people of the 550,000 Britons who die every year miss out on the care necessary for dignified death. The majority of the terminally ill die in institutions because community care is overstretched and the alternative may be lying at home in an unchanged adult nappy. Since most hospices are charities, finding a bed will be easier in wealthier areas that garner bigger donations.

Then there are non-clinical pressures: Glyn Berry, co-chair of the Association of Palliative Care Social Workers, spoke movingly of patients with insecure housing, no one to advocate for their needs or sort out their benefits. Living in chaos, pain and poverty, wouldn't you want to die?

In this debate the concept of coercion has focused mainly on how relatives might put pressure on an old person to choose death over wasting vast sums of inheritance on residential care. Such is the selflessness of elderly parents and the pitiful value put on old people's lives, this is easy to imagine — although, remarkably, Leadbeater has refused evidence from the British Geriatrics Society. But less is heard about "societal coercion", where desperate circumstances might make someone feel life had no point.

Yet Leadbeater's allies seem to believe poor palliative care is being deployed as an excuse to block their bill. When the health secretary Wes Streeting and the justice secretary Shabana Mahmood cited it as their reason for voting against the second reading, some saw it as a mere cover for religious objections. As palliative care doctors gave evidence this week, the MP Kit Malthouse tutted and scrolled through his phone, while the Lib Dem Tom Gordon asked Dr Sarah Cox, president of the Association for Palliative Medicine, with unconcealed exasperation, "how do you ever define when palliative care is sufficient?"

> The right to choose assisted death is being trumpeted as progress

I detect in these impatient MPs trying to expedite a bill that raises more questions than it answers the zeal of Just Get Brexit Done. They've had enough of experts raising tiresome complexities, wanting all angles covered. They only want to hear from those who agree with them. Like the Australian doctor utterly relaxed about "feeling a burden" being cited as a reason for suicide by a third of patients, or the academic who dismissed concerns about Oregon allowing anorexics to die as a "red herring". When Baroness Falkner, head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, proposed the bill consider an impact assessment for all vulnerable groups, especially the disabled, you sensed the froideur.

Yet since a commission on improving palliative care has already been launched, it seems bizarre to push through assisted dying before it reports later this year. Palliative care will never be perfect but a universal minimum standard could be put in place first.

Leadbeater's supporters seem to have a platonic ideal of a dying person: a rugged individual, master of their own destiny; someone, like Esther Rantzen, who has the confidence and wealth to have exhausted every other medical avenue first. Such a person is less likely to feel a burden to those they love, or that society is signalling by its indifference to their fear and pain the unimportance of their life.

The right to choose death is being trumpeted as progress — a yearned-for piece of landmark legislation for Labour, equivalent to David Cameron's same-sex marriage victory — so woe betide those who point out its cruel inequities. But it's far easier to dismiss the religious objectors than earnest NHS doctors who don't want any patient to choose death for want of the right drug or a hand to hold.

Comment

Write to Feedback by emailing feedback@thetimes.co.uk or by post to 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Here's one style tidbit: never use grim genteelisms

Rob Nash
Feedback



@TIMESFEEDBACK

Recently I defended "get", a little word entirely in keeping with our guiding principle of using the language of our readers at its best, clearest and most concise. Euphemisms might be seen as the opposite of that approach.

We do not go as far as Eric Partridge, who in a bizarre digression in *Usage and Abusage* advocates killing off euphemisms by doing away with synonyms so that the only available words are "to copulate" and so on, for then "the squeamish would be reduced to using gestures and then, by force of public opinion and a growing shamefacedness, to employing the sole terms". No, that would be insane. But we do prefer, by and large, to tell it straight: perhaps the best illustration of this comes in our style guide's entry for death: "People die, and we must say so. Write simply that someone has died: never use horrid genteelisms ('passed on', 'passed away', 'passed') unless unavoidable."

What could be worse than a genteelism? And yet last week I was accused of exactly that faux pas. "I have to agree with Jonathan Morton, who, in his comment on your column, wondered why you used the word 'tidbits'," wrote Bob Lock. "For me, we Brits would always say 'titbits', and for our North American friends it's 'tidbits'. While not going quite as far as J Docherty, who in his comment suggested that bowdlerism was in play when you used the word 'tidbits', I really hope that we don't have to start referring to our ubiquitous garden bird as a 'bluetid'!"

Some dictionaries do indeed suggest a British-American split, but I'm going to call in my defence the OED. Its earliest citation for both forms is 1641, and it links the word to the adjective "tid", meaning playful and, later, dainty. A pleasing citation from 1743 caught my eye: "My Farce is an Oglio of Tid-Bits," Henry Fielding wrote of his play *Eurydice Hiss'd*. Even better was this, from 1755. "Tid, adj. (tydder, Saxon), tender; soft; nice. Titbit (properly tidbit; tid, tender, and bit), nice bit; nice food," recorded no less an authority than Samuel Johnson, in his dictionary. And I think we can all agree that accusing Dr Johnson of genteelism would risk pericombobulation.

Dancing machines

Reading reports from 100 years ago while I compile our "From the archive" slot gives unexpected perspectives on today's world. Many countries in 1925 are unfamiliar places, among them China. A long dispatch attempted to convey the lie of the land but admitted: "It is no light matter to attempt to explain to the European reader the complexities of the position in China, to indicate the numerous conflicting interests … One can but try, in the hope that the high lights in the picture may come out clearly, even if the background remains largely unintelligible."

It continues: "The one element in China that counts to-day is military power" — and suddenly we are not so far away. Such power was hinted at this week in a video of a troupe of robots celebrating the lunar new year by dancing in a most alarming fashion. Dozens of readers agreed with J Patel when he commented online that it was all "a little chilling", though G Muir shrugged: "I'd rather be gunned down by an American Terminator in a cool leather jacket and shades than a Chinese one in a sparkly, colourful, fluffy little waistcoat." A Khurana said such reactions were "symptomatic of why we in Europe have stopped advancing in technology. It is about time we start learning something from China, rather than sniggering at their accomplishments". No more laughing at dancing robots, then.

Sticking up for polls

Actually we're not totally against Chinese technology. Or at least if we are, we're even more against Elon Musk, it seems. In a report headlined "Elon Musk is putting Britons off buying Teslas" we noted that 59 per cent of people in the market for an electric car said Musk's influence would deter them from choosing a Tesla, whereas 56 per cent said they would be happy to buy a Chinese electric car.

Bill Coles of Edinburgh isn't fond of this style of reporting: "You've been running a lot of stories based on opinion polls: how people feel about the death penalty, or Sir Keir Starmer, or kids preferring a dictatorship. To me, it's a bit of a stretch to call these polls news."

I'm going to stick up for polls: an interest in what our fellows are thinking is one of the things that makes us human. The ipsos.com website has a page on the history of political polling in Britain, which describes its genesis in the 1930s: "Gallup began in both the USA and in Britain as a means of journalism." The British Social Attitudes survey followed in 1983, and then in 2000 came YouGov, the pioneer of kitchen-sink polling. It's true that the advent of the internet caused a poll explosion and one or two could be axed, but surveys are a useful tool for newspapers, because we quite like to know what you think.

Yours faithfully

Is it safe to talk about *The Traitors* yet? Last weekend we angered one faithful fan of the show, who accused us of the ultimate treachery: "How is it that your online subs saw fit to put a banner headline on the front page with a spoiler for the winner? 'A huge victory for liars' — you don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work out that the 'faithful' lost. I am so fed up." Of course, we had done no such thing: the headline cunningly betrayed almost nothing, given that everyone on the show had secrets of one sort or another.

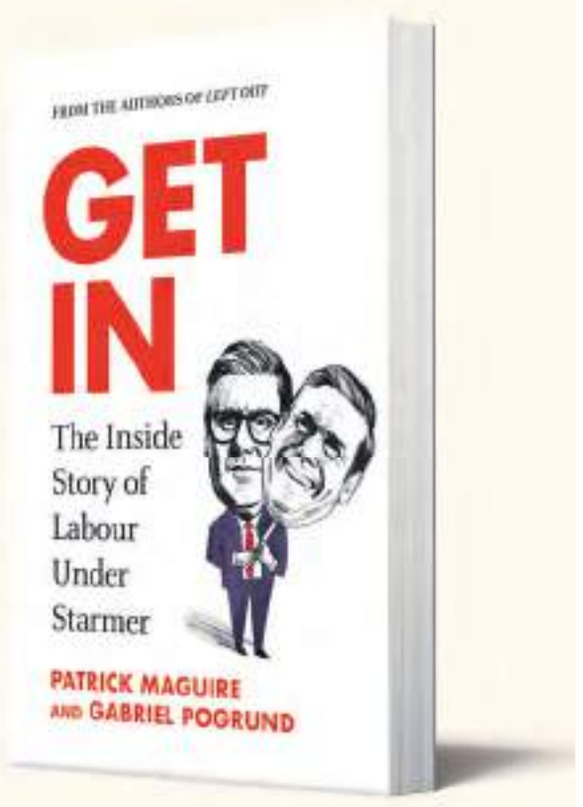
It's not the first time this has happened. After the final of *Bake Off* in November a reader complained that we had given away the winner by our choice of photo. Again, it was misdirection: the winner was not the person front and centre in the picture. I do hope both readers still watched the final — and found the ending even more of a surprise than everyone else.

T BOOKS

Exclusive extract: Labour's dramatic reinvention

Don't miss the serialisation of Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrund's inside account of Keir Starmer's rise to power. Find out what the people running the government really think of the prime minister – and how close they came to replacing him.

Starting exclusively in The Sunday Times tomorrow



THE TIMES
THE SUNDAY TIMES

Didn't get that ministerial job? Don't worry, you'll be great as a trade envoy

Lara Spirit



Sign up for Lara's Politics newsletter at **thetimes.com/newsletters**

My congratulations to all 32 trade envoys appointed this week. Or to our new "global growth team", as they are formally known.

Is this a real job? We are told that these unpaid envoys, a mix of peers and MPs, "will unlock new markets" around the world, albeit without any keys. They won't be responsible for trade negotiations or have any policy responsibility. We are also told that they have been "drawn from across the political spectrum". That's quite a stretch when you know they comprise 28 Labour MPs and peers, one Labour-leaning independent, two Lib Dems and a single Tory.

So what does it involve? You commit to a minimum of two fully paid trips a year to your "market", where, as one senior government source puts it, "you get treated like a king". You might also host dignitaries and meet delegations.

So it's good, fairly unaccountable fun. But it performs the additional function of expanding the de facto payroll vote in parliament and securing an expectation of loyalty from those appointed. The Institute for Government has calculated that, what with the 27 "mission champions", 20 Labour MPs who are trade envoys and 32 parliamentary private secretaries, the de facto payroll vote is 171 MPs, just 92 of them ministers. Sir Robert Walpole and his 18th-century chums would marvel at these sinecures.

The 32 new envoys include a few amusing sub-groups. Lords Watson, Spellar, McNicol and Austin are from Labour's old right machine. Some are MPs from hyper-marginal seats, others, such as Josh MacAlister and Dan Carden, you might call ambitious faces of the future. But there is a more interesting, and larger, sub-group: the dozen Labour MPs who held shadow roles but were passed over for ministerial roles in July. Some in No 10 increasingly recognise that, for all the fear of sharp-elbowed new MPs falling out of line, it is these experienced parliamentarians who now merit closer attention.

In giving roles to those destined for backbench perpetuity, the government has also sent a clear message that nobody is dead. This includes Kate Osamor, the Labour MP who in 2018 threatened to smash a Times reporter's face with a bat and who is now a trade envoy to East Africa, and shows just how seriously that maxim is taken.

But the wider the whips seek to embed loyalty, the clearer it is who has been left in the cold. And where will their loyalties lie? On Monday, I'm told, Ruth Cadbury, chair of the Commons transport committee, openly disputed the merits of a third Heathrow runway in a meeting between the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, and Labour MPs. On Wednesday Cadbury announced that her committee would be examining "how clear the links [are] between airport expansion and growth". It will embarrass Reeves if the committee's answer is "not very".

Cadbury, by virtue of her position, has grandee status within sight, irrespective of No 10 favour. The government has, in bolstering its informal payroll this week, cut the number of those at risk of rebelling. Or they've increased the power of those who might rebel. Take your pick.

King-sized bombshell sits in FBI files

Assassination documents will disappoint Kennedy conspiracists but reveal full extent of bureau's drive to defame MLK

Ben Macintyre



@BENMACINTYREI



AP

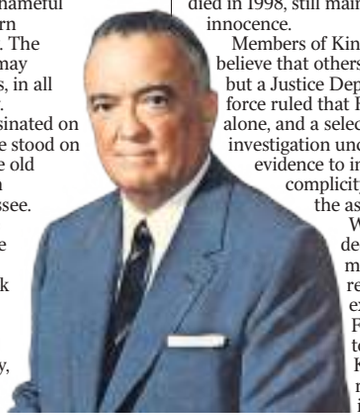
Martin Luther King, second right, and Jesse Jackson, second left, at the Lorraine Motel, Memphis, the day before the shooting

In one of his first acts as president, Donald Trump ordered the release of all remaining documents relating to the assassinations of John F Kennedy, Robert F Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

"Everything will be revealed," declared Trump. With an instinct for historical symbolism, he also ordered that the Sharpie used to sign the executive order be presented to RFK's son, Robert F Kennedy Jr, his nominee for health secretary.

The JFK files are not expected to contain bombshell revelations. The RFK assassination documents were released from local agencies and the FBI to the California State Archives in the late 1980s. It will be the files on King, America's revered civil rights leader, that may offer the most startling disclosures. Because there undoubtedly was an FBI conspiracy targeting King. Not to kill him (although the bureau did not do enough to protect him), but to harass, intimidate and defame the black leader in the years leading up to his murder.

FBI chief J Edgar Hoover's personal campaign against King is one of the most shameful episodes in modern American history. The declassified files may finally expose this, in all its tawdry cruelty.



King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 as he stood on the balcony of the old Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was rushed to hospital, where he died of a bullet wound to the neck at the age of 39.

The murder weapon was fired by James Earl Ray, a criminal drifter and two-bit racist who had been on the run for almost a year having escaped from Missouri State Penitentiary, where he was serving a 20-year sentence.

Ray fled the country but was captured on June 8, 1968 at Heathrow. Extradited to the US, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. Ray recanted his confession almost immediately. He died in 1998, still maintaining his innocence.

Members of King's family believe that others were involved but a Justice Department task force ruled that Ray had acted alone, and a select committee investigation uncovered no evidence to indicate complicity by the FBI in the assassination.

What the declassified files may instead reveal is the full extent of the FBI operation to destroy King's reputation, and in particular Hoover's Cointelpro project (counterintelligence programme), a series of covert and illegal actions between 1956 and 1971 intended to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralise" the activities of political movements that the FBI considered subversive: American communists but also civil rights activists, anti-Vietnam war demonstrators, Black Power affiliates and feminists. King was the prime target.

Trump claimed that the release of the files would bring "transparency and accountability" but it is also a way for him to humiliate the FBI, which he blames for investigating allegations that his 2016 campaign colluded with Russia, and for searching his Florida properties in 2022 and discovering more than 100 classified documents. Exposing the FBI's past crimes is a settling of scores.

Hoover loathed King with a weird passion, describing him as "the most notorious liar in the country" and "a tom cat with obsessive degenerate sexual urges". In 1963, the FBI began tapping King's home and office telephones and bugging his hotel rooms, while also sowing divisions within the civil rights movement and spreading false rumours. Assistant FBI director William C Sullivan, who led Cointelpro, later admitted that "no holds were barred" in the "war" against King.

The attorney-general, Robert F Kennedy, approved the electronic surveillance after Hoover told him that King was a "secret member of the Communist Party", which he was not. Former FBI director James Comey kept the framed original of Hoover's application to wiretap King on his desk, a daily reminder of how far his predecessor had violated American law.



James Earl Ray, King's assassin. Far left, FBI director J Edgar Hoover

King angrily denied that the civil rights campaign had been infiltrated by communists. "There are as many communists in this freedom movement as there are Eskimos in Florida," he said.

The FBI campaign reached its peak with a forged letter sent to King in November 1964, shortly before he accepted the Nobel peace prize. The blackmail package contained audio recordings documenting King's sexual indiscretions and warned him: "There is only one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation." Many believe it was intended to persuade King to kill himself. King was subsequently informed that the tapes would be released to the media if he did not submit to FBI coercion tactics.

In 1977, following allegations that the FBI was "weeding" its files, a federal judge ordered the bureau to turn all its material over to the national archives, ordered it sealed for 50 years and prohibited the disclosure of these files except by an order from a court.

If all the FBI's transcripts and tapes of its Cointelpro wiretaps are now declassified, some of the material is likely to damage King's posthumous reputation. In 2019, the American academic David Garrow uncovered an FBI file that described an incident in which King and other preachers invited some women to their Washington hotel room. When one of the women was raped by a preacher, a handwritten comment, appended to the document, claims: "King looked on, laughed and offered advice."

King's descendants and other relatives have asked the US government for "the opportunity to review the files as a family prior to its public release". That is unlikely to be granted.

The president gave US federal agencies 45 days in which to review all archives related to King's assassination and submit a plan to the White House for "the full and complete release of these records".

That release is likely to embarrass the FBI and may anger King's family and supporters. But at least it will bring one of the grimmest episodes in American history out of the shadows at last. As King himself said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that."

Comment

WEEKEND ESSAY

Trump's New Deal: 100 days to reverse the legacy of FDR

In the first of his monthly essays, **Niall Ferguson** compares the executive orders of the past ten days with a similar blizzard from the president who shaped modern America



If you're wondering why the past two weeks in American politics strike you as unprecedented, it's because you weren't around in 1933. No, I am not talking about Germany in 1933 (please can The New Yorker finally retire its absurd "Trump is Hitler!" analogy). I am talking about the United States in 1933 — to be precise on March 4 of that year, the day an equally radical administration began 100 days of national transformation.

In fact, "national consecration" was the phrase Franklin Delano Roosevelt used in his fiery, uplifting inaugural address. But what he immediately set about was to recast fundamentally the scope and structure of the federal government. To this day, FDR still holds the record for the largest number of executive orders in the first hundred days of a presidency: 99, compared with Joe Biden's 42 and Trump's 33 in his first term. But that record is about to be broken by Trump 2.0.

It is worth reflecting on the speed with which the New Deal was rolled out. On day one, Roosevelt proclaimed a four-day national "bank holiday" to end the disastrous bank runs that were sucking the cash out of US economic life. At a special session on March 9, Congress passed the Emergency Banking Act — the first of 15 major legislative measures enacted in the first hundred days.

There was an "Act to maintain the credit of the United States Government", which authorised spending cuts. The Cullen-Harrison Act legalised the sale of beer and wine for the first time since Prohibition had begun in 1920. The Agricultural Adjustment Act created a new system of support for farmers. Other acts created the Civilian Conservation Corps; the Federal Emergency Relief Administration; the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation; the National Recovery Administration; the Public Works Administration; and the Tennessee Valley Authority — the largest government-owned industrial enterprise in American history.

The following year saw the creation of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Communications Commission. In 1935 came the crowning glory of the New Deal: social security, the US equivalent of the state pension. To an extent that few people today appreciate, many of the distinctive features of the modern federal government date from FDR's New Deal. Even the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the expansion of the exceptionally large US prison system date from the 1930s.

As I said, Trump seems intent on beating Roosevelt's record. Since his inauguration, in just ten days, there have been 64 executive orders, 20 of them relating to the structure and running of the government itself, including five getting rid of every Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programme; ten on national security and foreign policy; nine on immigration; and six apiece on the economy and energy.

The way to think about Trump 2.0 is as the New Deal reversed. If FDR began the vast expansion of federal agencies that continued in the 1960s and 1970s, DJT is attempting to turn back the clock: to shrink the federal bureaucracy with a barrage of presidential decrees.

Consider the sheer range of targets Trump has hit so far. He has imposed a hiring freeze; a regulatory freeze; an end to working from home; an end to the "weaponisation" of the government (meaning the "lawfare" waged against him by the Department of Justice); a ban on federal censorship; even a rule that agencies should no longer be housed in ugly modern buildings. Where Roosevelt created a host of new agencies, Trump has created just one, the Department of Government Efficiency (Doge) — the sole function of which is to shrink the rest of the government by making it more tech-savvy.

In their own right, the five anti-DEI executive orders, which end not just DEI but also the 60-year-old policy of affirmative action, represent a counter-revolution in government of historic significance, as Christopher Caldwell pointed out in The Free Press.

There are other resemblances between DJT and FDR. Roosevelt sold his revolution to the public with cosy, folksy "fireside chats" on the radio. Trump's equivalent are the "truths" he posts on Truth Social, the platform he created when he was kicked off Twitter in January 2021. FDR faced opposition. In February 1933, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by Giuseppe Zangara. In May 1935 the Supreme Court declared the act establishing the National Recovery Administration unconstitutional. A 40 per cent cut in spending on veterans' benefits sparked a successful popular backlash. The equivalent resistance to Trump will come from lower, more liberally inclined courts, and from the public sector unions, as well as the legacy media.

True, Roosevelt enjoyed much larger majorities in the Senate (59 of 96 seats) and House (nearly three-quarters of 405 seats). But that did not make Congress a rubber stamp. Democrats were deeply divided and often unruly. He had to make frequent use (or at least threaten to use) his veto power, and even more frequent use of presidential patronage to buy votes. But there are two much bigger differences. First, Roosevelt was sworn in near the end of the Great Depression, the worst period of economic contraction since the Industrial Revolution. Trump is coming in after a sustained post-pandemic boom that has defied what most economists regarded as the gravity of higher interest rates.

Second, on foreign policy FDR started out as a pygmy. Apart from his early "Good Neighbor" policy with Latin America, he was a study in weakness. He slashed military spending by 29 per cent between 1932 and 1934. He resumed relations with the Soviet Union in November 1933, disregarding the evidence of Stalin's evil. The isolationist Neutrality Acts prevented arms exports. In practice, the first Roosevelt term was the most isolationist in American history. He "torpedoed" the World Economic Conference held in London in July 1933. He also raised tariffs even higher than the Smoot-Hawley Act of 1930.

Trump, by contrast, has returned to Washington as commander-in-chief in such a belligerent mood that it smacks of hubris. You might think he had enough on his plate with an axis of authoritarians that threatens not only Ukraine and Israel, but also Taiwan and the Philippines. But Trump seems to be enjoying smacking down the leaders of little countries, notably Colombia, Denmark and Panama. His trolling of the outgoing Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, was a





Donald Trump is set to smash the record set by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, above, for the largest number of executive orders made in the first 100 days of a presidency. Their aims are very different, however



grotesque way to treat a neighbouring state with which the US has more in common than just a border. His brusque insistence that Binyamin Netanyahu should settle with the terrorists of Hamas was unnerving to staunch supporters of Israel. Trump has been tougher on Russia than expected; softer on China and Iran. If this is a national security strategy, its logic is obscure.

Roosevelt is fondly remembered today. But it is not because the New Deal worked. Economically, it was largely unsuccessful. Recovery came only when the US belatedly but massively armed itself against the threat posed by the Axis powers. And nostalgia for FDR has much more to do with his deft wartime leadership than with the bureaucratic creations of his first 100 days.

This is not The West Wing

What does that imply for the way Trump will be remembered? To answer that question, one must first rid oneself of what I call the Woodward Illusion.

For half a century, Americans have been encouraged to think of their government as a real-life version of the TV drama *The West Wing*. Each president receives a minimum of one bestselling book by the journalist Bob Woodward. There's a monarchical figure called the president. The drama plays out in his White House. There are two factions: the Good Guys (officials willing to talk to Woodward) and the Bad Guys (their enemies). Sometimes the king himself is wicked (Nixon); sometimes he is admirable but flawed (Clinton); sometimes he is in over his head (Ford, Bush Jr). But the cast of characters is manageably small. And there is usually one big issue (eg, Bush Jr and the War on Terror).

In the real world, the US federal government is quite different. The president sits atop a sprawling "org chart". There are 15 executive departments and 430 federal agencies — 229 agencies and 201 sub-agencies. The process whereby the executive branch constantly subdivides itself like some kind of rapidly growing cellular organism can be traced back to FDR. Within the White House itself there is a National Security Council and a National Economic Council, to name just two sources of presidential advice.

The true role of the president is to try somehow to ensure that this vast array of institutions collectively functions in ways that vaguely resemble the platform he campaigned on. More accurately, the president acts as the arbiter when the collisions between competing agencies cannot be sorted out within the bureaucracy.

And this is just the executive branch. At the far end of the National Mall is Congress, which the constitution gives the power to make laws. The Supreme Court has the final say if a presidential order or act of Congress is challenged as unconstitutional or illegal. And let's not forget an equally independent body, not foreseen by the founding fathers and established only on the eve of the First World War: the Federal Reserve, which has the responsibility to influence the rates of inflation and unemployment and determines the ease or difficulty with which the Treasury can fund its deficit.

Yet the org chart is misleading. First, only a small fraction of key positions have been filled. Of 1,300 that need Senate confirmation, we have six confirmed, 70 under consideration, 38 awaiting formal nomination — and 569 without a Trump nominee. And the confirmation process gets slower every time. Trump 1.0 managed just 238 confirmations in his first year.

Second, with all this frenetic activity, snafus are inevitable. On Wednesday the White House Office of Management and Budget had to rescind a memo issued two days before that had frozen federal grants and loans. Did Trump even know about this memo (OMB Memorandum M-25-13)? Unlikely.

Third, as is always the case, even those people hired by a president break down into factions, and these are not necessarily congruent with the org chart. At present, I see the emergence of about six distinct factions:

- The Maga originals, or Magans, around the deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, for whom immigration is the number one issue.
- The red-pilled tech bros, who joined forces with Trump only last year and whose leader, Elon Musk, aspires to do to the federal government what he did to Twitter when he took it over: drastically shrink its payroll and purge it of "the woke mind virus". (Note that this week's "Fork in the Road" memo offering federal workers a severance package was copied and pasted from Musk's downsizing of Twitter.)
- The Wall Street wise guys, in particular the Treasury secretary, Scott Bessent, who know that the president is playing with fire if he says or does anything "Mr Market" doesn't care for, and whose ideal is to rerun the presidency of Ronald Reagan.
- The hawkish national security types, including the secretary of state, Marco Rubio, and the national security adviser, Mike Waltz, who see their job as containing China, Russia, Iran and North Korea.
- The realists or "restrainers", notably the defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, and the vice-president, JD Vance, who worry more than the hawks about stumbling into a Third World War.
- The outright isolationists, influenced by Tucker Carlson (a key figure without an official position) and the president's eldest son (another), who passionately hate the previous generation of Republican foreign policy makers — "the neocons" — whom they see as over-eager to commit US resources to the Middle East and, in particular, to the support of Israel.

Henry Kissinger once memorably observed that there is "no such thing as an American foreign policy". There is, he wrote, only "a series of moves that have produced a certain result" which they "may not have been planned to produce" and to which "research and intelligence organisations, either foreign or national, attempt to give a rationality and consistency ... which it simply does not have". The title of the 1968 essay where those lines appeared was *Bureaucracy and Policy Making*. The key to all administrations is how far they can manage a bureaucracy of career officials who like nothing better (as Kissinger wrote in his memoirs) than "to confront the policymaker with the [three] choices of nuclear war, present policy, or surrender".

> The five anti-DEI executive orders, which also end the 60-year-old policy of affirmative action, represent a counter-revolution in government of historic significance

President as The Decider

George W Bush once defined the role of the president as to be "The Decider". As FDR's biographer James MacGregor Burns showed, Roosevelt derived his power from a certain amount of organisational chaos. He would give three jobs to one man and one to three men, then see what the ensuing competition would produce. Then he would decide. But FDR also knew how to inspire, despite being confined to a wheelchair — or perhaps because he had overcome polio with his joie de vivre undimmed. "After spending an hour with the president," an ordinarily sober agency chief exclaimed to a friend in 1933, "I could eat nails for lunch!"

Trump 2.0 unquestionably has something of that about him, unlike the thin-skinned and edgy first-term version. Surviving assassination and securing decisive re-election have put a spring in his step. He has shed pounds. But can all this new energy be channelled into effective decision-making? In his first term, Trump never allowed his chief of staff to be an effective gatekeeper. Like some of the American artificial intelligence models the Chinese have been so busy copying, the president is open-source; too many people can get to him. And he is liable to be impressed by anyone who can convey their pitch concisely and amusingly. Whether or not Susie Wiles can do better as chief of staff than her four predecessors — Reince Priebus, John Kelly, Mick Mulvaney and Mark Meadows — remains to be seen. Battle number one is to keep Elon out of the White House, and the jury's out.

What seems more than likely, then, is that we shall end up with a national security strategy in the Kissingerian sense — "a series of moves that have produced a certain result" which they "may not have been planned to produce".

FDR did not set out in 1933 to become the architect of victory in a world war 12 years later. The goals of the New Deal were 100 per cent domestic. DJT's Art of the New Deal is an equal and opposite phenomenon, aiming to shrink the government but expand US power from the Panama Canal to Greenland. We are clearly in for as frenetic a hundred days as our grandparents witnessed 92 years ago. But where will it lead? The law of unintended consequences is a binding constraint, even on the most powerful man in the world.



Middle-aged rowers face Atlantic fears



Team Sea Soar survived a capsize on day 11. Niall Brannigan, John Watling, Sam Weber and Jason Wilder, top left, are now close to the finish line

When he cast off to row across the Atlantic with three crew mates, Niall Brannigan's biggest fear was capsizing (Will Humphries writes).

Just 11 days into the World's Toughest Row his nightmare became reality as a 50ft wave swept three of his mates overboard, leaving Brannigan, the skipper, in a flooded cabin.

"It was one of those moments when I thought I was saying goodbye to my wife and children," he said.

Yesterday, 50 days into the voyage, Brannigan described over satellite phone how disaster struck the four Britons who comprise Team Sea Soar. A gale meant those on deck, for their two-hour night rowing shift, could not hear the instructions Brannigan was giving them from inside the stern cabin.

"One of the crew opened the hatch door a tiny bit — an absolute crime in our book — and all of a sudden this huge rogue wave hit and ripped open the door and filled up the cabin," he said. "I pulled the door shut but for four or five seconds I thought that was it for me."

The boat can right itself after a capsize but not if the cabins are flooded. The three crew on deck were thrown into the sea but they were tethered to safety lines. "At one point they said they could see themselves underwater," Brannigan said.

"Eventually they pulled themselves back on to the upturned hull."

Brannigan, trapped in the partially flooded cabin, told them to put all their weight to one side to get the boat to roll upright — it worked.

The next day they found they had lost their automatic steering system and most of the electronics.

"Two of the crew said 'that's it, I want to go'," Brannigan said. "It was a quick pep talk to say, 'This is ocean rowing, we can't push a button to get off the boat.' Very quickly the lads came around."

They reverted to manual steering with lines and soon afterwards were "rewarded" with visits from a pod of orcas, leaping dolphins and a whale with its calf.

Brannigan, 56, John Watling, 58, Sam Weber, 52, and Jason Wilder, 57, didn't know each other before they began looking for a boat to join the 3,000-mile race.

The team, who are raising money for the charity Lyme Disease UK, expect to arrive in Antigua tomorrow.



Appeal enters last weekend with £1.1m

THE TIMES
THE SUNDAY TIMES
CHRISTMAS APPEAL

Lara Wildenberg

Readers have two days left to donate to The Times and Sunday Times Christmas Appeal, which ends this weekend.

The total raised — which has recently surpassed £1.1 million — will support our three chosen charities: the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, James' Place and Hope and Homes for Children, which have all expressed their gratitude for readers' generosity so far.

Readers can donate at thetimes.com/christmasappeal until midnight tomorrow. Phone lines closed yesterday.

Since Tom Kerridge launched the appeal at the start of December, the newspapers have published 60 articles on the charities' work, including dispatches from five foreign countries.

The appeal also received the support of Sarah, Duchess of York, and benefited from our first ever phone-in day last week.

Hope and Homes for Children closes orphanages where children are at risk of violence, neglect and trafficking, reuniting them with their families where possible or finding them a foster family to call home.

Mark Waddington, chief executive of the charity, said the generosity of readers would accelerate its work to make Romania, Moldova, Rwanda and Bulgaria completely orphanage-free in the near future, with the latter "months away".



Hope and Homes for Children held a sponsored run around a wine cellar in Moldova. It is backed by the Quantum of Solace star Olga Kurylenko, right

Waddington said: "In a world that is being increasingly defined by conflict, climate change etc, this is an issue that is completely winnable — and winnable in our lifetime. Times readers are making that even more so, making the world a better place for children to grow up in."

James' Place, a men's suicide prevention charity with three centres across the UK, said readers' donations would contribute towards the opening its fourth centre in Birmingham this year.

The charity was founded by the parents of James Wentworth-Stanley, 21, who took his own life in 2006.

Clare Milford Haven, James's mother and chair of the charity, said: "The Times appeal has meant so much to all of us at James' Place, and I know James would be so proud.

"Crucially, I know the appeal will help many men in crisis find their way to James' Place, and feel less alone in their struggles."



The Natasha Allergy Research Foundation is named after Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, who died aged 15 from a severe allergic reaction to sesame in a baguette in 2016.

Her parents, Nadim and Tanya Ednan-Laperouse, who started the foundation to help fund clinical research, campaigning and education, said they were "very grateful" for readers' donations.

"The appeal has allowed us to showcase a number of the different facets of the charity's work, including supporting bereaved families, lobbying government, funding medical bursaries, clinical research and raising awareness through education," they said.

"With the help of match funding from Morrisons and Marks & Spencer, we will use this money across current projects, including our new national education programme, Allergy School, which will launch in February."

Since the first joint charity appeal in 2020, The Times and Sunday Times have raised £10 million for 12 charities over four campaigns. Please show your support again this year.

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

Every pound donated to James' Place will be matched up to £165,000 thanks to an anonymous donor, Fenwick, The Henry Oldfield Trust and The Nick Kilhams Foundation.

Every pound donated to the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation by readers up to £100,000 will be tripled, thanks to matched funding by Morrisons and Marks & Spencer.

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Donations will be administered by the Charities Trust on behalf of the chosen charities. Donations may be refunded only in exceptional circumstances. Ts&Cs apply

Greens trash hopes of new dawn

The party's plans to cut bin collections and lollipop patrols have enraged Bristol, writes **Will Humphries**

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL; BRAD WAKEFIELD FOR THE TIMES; IAN WEST/PA



Carla Denyer led a tide of support for the Greens when she took the Bristol Central seat last year, joining three colleagues in Westminster. Yet the party is losing favour in the city's Barton Hill area and Glen Ford, below, says that it has lost his vote





The Green Party has long been the party of protest but after gaining control of Bristol city council last year the shoe is on the other foot.

The latest Green proposal to bring out the proverbial pitchforks was a plan announced this week to turn the left-wing city into the first local authority in England to have monthly bin collections to save £2 million a year and combat falling recycling rates.

Tony Dyer, the council leader, has told Bristolians the city faces bankruptcy if it cannot close a £43 million budget gap. The council has performed a series of screeching U-turns on cost-cutting proposals in response to howls of protest from residents and the Labour opposition, which said the plans "would make Margaret Thatcher blush".

Some of the most controversial proposals, such as slashing the city's libraries budget in half to £2.4 million, ending all school lollipop crossing patrols to save £314,000, closing three museums to save £132,000, ending £635,000 in funding to cultural groups and cutting £3.4 million from the council tax reduction scheme, have been either dropped or pushed back by 12 months.

Plans remain to cut financial support for community and voluntary organisations by £350,000, to take £140,000 from domestic abuse services, and to raise £1.1 million through increased car parking charges, as well as hiring more enforcement officers to reap an extra £100,000 in penalty charges. Council tax in the city is to rise by 5 per cent for the fifth year running.

Labour administrations also proposed cutting lollipop patrols and library services but faced similar protests. Some Green voters in the city are becoming disillusioned with a party they felt promised to be different.

Glen Ford, 67, a retired factory worker in Barton Hill, to the east of the city, said he voted Green last year because they said they would install sprinklers in his high-rise block of flats but nothing has changed since the election.

"I thought they were going to improve things but they have done naff all," he said. "I feel let down. That is why I won't be voting for them ever again."

The council said work to install fire alarms and sprinkler systems in blocks with flammable cladding had been delayed by a year due to "normal contract issues, supply chain issues, issues sourcing materials, as well as unfortunate delays due to on-site contractor performance". The delay means the council has to spend an extra £2 million on "waking watch" fire prevention patrols.

Ford was also unhappy, like many others, that the Greens pursued the East Bristol Liveable Neighbourhood, a Labour trial to reduce traffic by creating a series of no-through roads and cul-de-sacs to filter all through traffic on to main roads in the area.



Some residents say their car journeys have doubled or tripled in length since work began. Police were called on Monday when protesters stopped council contractors blocking their road. Residents jeered Heather Mack, the deputy council leader, when she intervened. Mack was found guilty of a public order offence for taking part in an Extinction Rebellion protest that stopped traffic in London in 2019.

Rosa Carter, 35, and Jean-Michel Maheu, 50, said they liked "the green air" as they walked with their children through Barton Hill, one of the areas in the trial. "But we don't want people to get stuck who need access," they added.

Carter, a nurse, added: "If it had been managed slightly better there would be less resistance. I think they said there was a lot of community consultation but there are parts of the community where that is news to them."

Car owners decry the perceived assault on their ability to drive through the city. The Green councillor at the heart of plans to pedestrianise and transform the former Broadmead shopping district, told the local newspaper: "If you're thinking of driving into Bristol by car, don't bother."

Laura Llamas, 39, of St Anne's Park, said she was "very pro-Green" but she was unsure if she would vote Green again. "It's more difficult now to get into town because of what they've done with the cars," she said after collecting her son from nursery. "And there aren't enough buses. The town now is just becoming student houses."

Labour was in power for eight years with Marvin Rees as mayor, until the Greens won 34 of the 70 council seats last May, leaving Labour second with 21. The mayoral system has been scrapped, so the Green group leads the council and six of its eight policy committees, with the other two led by their Liberal Democrat coalition partners.

Tom Renhard, leader of the Labour group, said the council faced budget pressures "primarily" due to overspending — £21.4 million on children's services, £7.8 million on adult social care and £3.5 million on temporary accommodation.

"Despite claims of the council being on the edge of bankruptcy, the Green-led administration has found tens of millions to put the brakes on their more unpopular policies," Renhard said.

"These repeated U-turns demonstrate a lack of leadership and accountability. There's no political direction — the Greens put forward a policy, disown it, then act like they had nothing to do with it. This isn't what Bristolians voted for. I really hope they get their act together, for our city's sake."

The council agreed to receive a £53 million bailout from the Department for Education to address a ballooning budget deficit.

Anise, 34, a charity worker, said the Greens were dealing with "a lot of things left behind by Labour". She said: "They have inherited a broken system. They have been in power for a few months and I see more transparency."

Dyer, the Green council leader, said the crisis in local government finances had been driven by rising costs, a lack of government funding, a failure to reform the country's health and care system, a housing crisis and a need to guard vulnerable children and adults.

"We cannot keep salami-slicing public services, nor can we pretend that words like 'efficiency' and 'productivity' hold all the answers," Dyer said in a blog post on the council website. "Too often the savings haven't been made, the can has been kicked down the road and we have overspent our budget."

Last year, however, the council revealed it was owed £229 million in unpaid debt, including nearly £52 million of council tax it had failed to collect.

There were also unpaid clean air zone (Caz) charges worth £32 million as well as more than £4 million in outstanding penalty charge notices for parking infringements and bus lane encroachments.

The authority disclosed that almost £19 million in overpaid housing benefits had not been recovered, while £15 million of rent and other fees had not been paid by current and former council tenants and leaseholders.

The council has written off nearly £19 million of debt that it concluded it would never recover, including £5 million of council tax and £3 million of Caz fines.

An internal audit also found that the city council lost track of £1.8 million in petty cash transactions by staff last year, with social workers issuing payments of up to £500 without any follow-up checks on whether the emergency payments were legitimate. After the audit the council said it would carry out a review to "significantly reduce the number of non-essential accounts".

The Bristol Green party must hope that its latest proposal for monthly bin collections does not cause it to follow its colleagues in Brighton and Hove city council, who after years of waste mismanagement lost control of the authority last year.

The minority Green administration, which has now swung back to Labour, had a deteriorating record on recycling and had to deal with two refuse strikes, which caused rubbish to pile up on the streets.

Mack said that her party was "committed to a more transparent approach that puts people at the heart of all decision making". She added: "We will genuinely listen to all voices to inform our decisions, led by our values that are clearly shared by the people of Bristol.

"The budget that the Greens have been implementing for the last eight months was set by the previous Labour mayor and the overspends that councillor Renhard points out are exactly the unrealistic savings that meant the Greens did not support the budget last February, while he did.

"Following this and a number of failures from the previous Labour administration, 14 years of Conservative cuts to local authorities and an increase in demand for some of the vital services that the council provides, the challenges we face are significant.

"To overcome these, we need to first instil a greater level of financial sustainability across all levels of the organisation which, as he points out, the last budget did not. By doing this we can deliver needed services in a fair and equitable way in the future."

Mack said local authorities across the country would "continue to have to make cuts unless this Labour government delivers more support so we can provide vital services that some of our country's most vulnerable people rely on".

Over the past five years the Green Party has doubled its councillor numbers across the country. In local elections last year it gained 74 council seats, boosting its councillors to more than 800, a record number. It is now the largest party in Bristol, Hastings, Stroud, Forest of Dean, Lewes, Mid Suffolk, East Suffolk, Babergh, Folkestone and Hythe, and East Hertfordshire.

'Britain needs digital IDs and facial

Tony Blair is convinced that the public would sacrifice some privacy for control of immigration and a more efficient state, he tells **Rachel Sylvester**

Before he became prime minister, Tony Blair famously promised to be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime".

Now he is convinced that technology will allow Sir Keir Starmer to be tough on populism and tough on the causes of populism.

With Nigel Farage and his Reform Party snapping at Labour's heels in dozens of parliamentary constituencies, Blair is urging the government to introduce a national digital ID system and roll out live facial recognition cameras to tackle illegal immigration, crime and benefit fraud. "What the populists do is they take a real grievance and they exploit it but they very often don't want to have a solution because solutions are much tougher than talking about problems," Blair says.

"The grievance would be on immigration that the thing is out of control. The grievance would be on crime that we're not doing enough on it. So you say, 'OK, here's what you do'. And then you have a big political fight. The populist is forced to choose. You've got to create an agenda that the other side has to respond to."

It is, Blair suggests, only by fully harnessing the power of artificial intelligence (AI) that ministers can deliver the improvements to public services that voters want while also achieving the savings the Treasury needs.

"You've got to reorder the government around this technology revolution," he says. "You should be able to have a state that is smaller, more strategic and providing greater efficiency at lower cost. That is the holy grail of governing, which people have always aspired to. Technology is the instrument that allows you to do it."

I have come to see him for The Times Crime and Justice Commission in the west London office of his Institute for Global Change. Dozens of policy advisers and data analysts are tapping away on computers at long banks of desks. Photographs of the former prime minister with an array of global dignitaries are arranged around the waiting room.

Blair, 71, is dressed in black jeans, boots and a jacket — casual but ready for business. Although he left Downing Street almost 20 years ago, he remains influential at Westminster and is still highly engaged in British politics. His think tank churns out policy papers at a rapid rate and hosts breakfast briefings for Labour MPs. Blair meets regularly with cabinet ministers and is seen as a useful sounding board in No 10.

When he was in Downing Street, he struggled to work his computer and never used his mobile phone, but since leaving office he has become evangelical about technology. The biggest regret he has about his first term is that he did not go further, faster, on public service reform. Starmer, he says, must avoid making the same mistake and be bolder, especially on tech.

"All of these things are being done in different parts of the world, so it's not like you're doing something that no one's ever thought of before or you're having to invent new technology," he says.

Starmer has promised to turn Britain into an "AI superpower", with plans for digital driving licences and passports being discussed in Whitehall. But, Blair tells me, the prime minister must go further. He insists the Labour government should introduce a universal digital ID system.

"We need to take a firm decision that we're going for digital ID. We are putting in place the building blocks for it, so that's good. But we should embrace it fully and roll it out as soon as we can because it will have an immediate set of benefits."

Blair says the public mood has changed since he tried to introduce physical ID cards in 2006 — a plan that was later shelved by the coalition government following a backlash from civil liberties campaigners. "There will be a big debate coming down the line — and this is the political argument people should have — which is: how much privacy are you prepared to trade for efficiency? That's the real question around technology and public services. My view is that people are actually prepared to trade quite a lot."

Far from being "an instrument of government control" he sees digital ID as a tool that "empowers the individual, it allows you to simplify your transactions with the government". Some cabinet ministers are nervous about championing a compulsory scheme, but Blair says Starmer should relish a battle that would give his administration definition.

"It brings it home to people and I think it's a political debate the government will win. It will also flush out a lot of people who want to talk about issues like immigration or benefit fraud but don't actually will the means to get to the end."

The NHS is trialling AI scanners and schools are piloting software that creates tailored lesson plans for teachers but the former prime minister thinks it is on immigration and crime that technology has the greatest potential to transform the public's perception of the government. These are the issues Reform is fighting on, particularly in the red wall of Labour marginal seats.

A digital ID system "will allow you to know exactly who's got a right to be here and who hasn't, so it's got a benefit in respect of the immigration debate", Blair says. "We have a vast flow of people coming through our borders. The small boats are one part of that. This allows you to identify those people. If they turn up and they're sick and they can't prove their identity ... if they're in a serious condition, I'm sure the medical

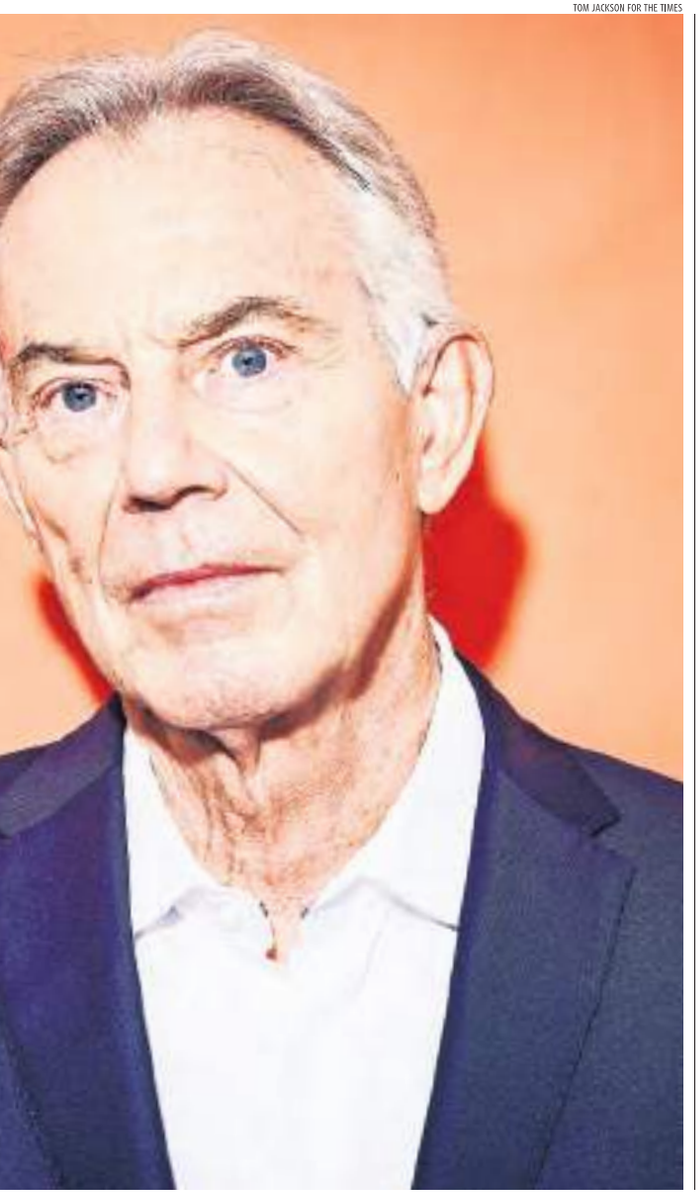


Tony Blair says that the country will back new technology that can dramatically cut crime, illegal migration and fraud. "We just need to get on and do it"



recognition to defeat the populists'

TOM JACKSON FOR THE TIMES



profession will always want to treat those people. But you then know that they're not entitled to be here and you can start to take action. Then, obviously, you can prevent people claiming benefits. It's sending a signal that there's no point in thinking you're going to come here and disappear into a kind of grey economy."

A universal scheme would also allow the government to get a grip on the spiralling welfare bill, Blair suggests. "If you have a digital ID and people have to prove their identity before they claim benefits, you would do an enormous amount to reduce the £10 billion a year that goes on different types of benefit fraud."

Digital ID could also help reduce crime. "Online fraud is a huge thing now but it's a curable thing so we should cure it," the former prime minister says. "There will be certain vulnerabilities you bring into your system because of the accumulation of data and the ability of people to conduct sophisticated cyberattacks. But if you don't do it you just carry on as we are, where you're spending a lot of money and not getting a very good outcome."

A poll of 12,000 voters by Blair's institute found that there had been an 18 per cent fall in the vote share of the centre left and centre right across the democratic West since 2010. Voters want delivery rather than ideology, it concluded. The report concludes that mainstream parties must "disrupt or be disrupted".

Around the globe, nations as varied as India, Singapore and Estonia have demonstrated the technology can work. "All countries will move in this direction. If they don't, it becomes much much harder to make your system work efficiently. It's just the way the world is going to be," Blair says. "Digital ID is a personal enabler. It allows you to simplify your transactions with the government and in time it will become the simplest way you deal with your private sector interactions as well. Rather than having to prove your identity in all sorts of different ways, it allows you to have one single source of truth and it prevents people misusing your identity."

Sir Anthony Charles Lynton Blair

Curriculum vitae
Born May 6, 1953
Educated Fettes College in Edinburgh; studied law at St John's College, Oxford
Career Became a barrister after graduating, specialising in employment law. Elected as Labour MP for Sedgefield in 1983. Became leader of the opposition in 1994 after the death of John Smith. Elected prime minister in 1997, winning two more elections before quitting after a decade. Took on a role as Middle East envoy for the UN. Set up the non-profit Tony Blair Institute in 2016 advising governments on policy and strategy.
Family Married to Cherie Blair. They have four children.



Tony and Cherie Blair on the steps of No 10 after winning the 1997 general election

In terms of the privacy arguments, he insists: "For what the government needs in order to operate, you'll give more personal information — much more — to the various services you use online, whether it's shopping or Netflix."

On crime there are other innovations that Blair thinks could help. He wants live facial recognition technology — which has been piloted in London and Wales — to be brought in around the country. Last year the Metropolitan Police arrested 578 suspects during facial recognition deployments, including 55 rapists and sexual offenders. "I don't know why we have to keep on trialling all this stuff for ever. Just get it introduced," Blair says. "Everywhere it is trialled it has a dramatic impact on crime. It allows you to trace people. We should be accelerating all of this."

Civil liberties campaigners warn of a surveillance state but Blair insists: "The important thing is to have the debate with the public where you say, 'If you are prepared to have facial recognition, we can cut crime very considerably'. My view is that the public will say, 'Yes, why wouldn't you do that?' You've just got to be very open with people."

A barrister before going into politics, Blair says that the criminal justice system "has completely broken down", with court backlogs spiralling and prisons overflowing. "A large part of police time is spent on things that really aren't to do with crime-fighting ... and the criminal justice system itself is incredibly antiquated," he says. "You can use technology to improve these processes enormously. You could have a police officer interviewing someone with a camera, then artificial intelligence could take that and turn that into a note. You could save them hours of time. The things we can do are immense and we just need to get on and do it."

Blair says there are also implications for prisons, with new tools offering innovative ways to tackle the overcrowding crisis. He admits that when he was prime minister, between 1997 and 2007, he saw longer jail sentences as the "only instrument" to combat crime. That has changed. "Technology today provides you with ways of tracking people and of helping them rehabilitate in ways that you just couldn't have done before," he says. "Tagging can be done infinitely better and more effectively so you've got other things at your disposal."

New GPS trackers and alcohol tags — which trigger an alert when an offender has a drink — could help reassure the public that community sentences are an effective and robust alternative to jail. That could make it easier for the government to win public support for reducing the prison population.

"It's got to be clear that whatever is not prison is something that has integrity and that works," Blair says. "Technology can do an immense amount if you're prepared to deploy it."

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News

My Week Rachel Reeves*



Monday
It's time to stop worrying about the bats and the newts! So we're starting the week with a cabinet meeting about growth. And I'm explaining that we shall be bold and brave. And absolutely nothing is off the table!

"So how about," suggests Angela Rayner, "reversing that rise in employers' national insurance?"

"Off the table," I say, immediately.

"Oh," she says.

"But there is Heathrow," I say.

"No way," says Ed Miliband. "Also off the table. Really bad."

Then Ed says he thinks we should be chasing more investment from China.

"Ha!" says David Lammy. "Scrap that. Trump will freak. What about rejoining the EU instead?"

"You've lost your mind," says Yvette Cooper.

"It's weird," I say, "how we're not really getting anywhere. What's the big problem we're all missing?"

"Must be regulation," shrugs Keir Starmer.

Tuesday
Ed Miliband has asked for an urgent meeting about the Heathrow third runway. Because he says we're supposed to be the net-zero guys. And doing this just makes us sound really Tory.

"You've misunderstood," says Keir. "It's not Tory when we do it."

Ridiculous how some people still don't get this!

Although Ed says he's still worried it will make him look like a hypocrite, and he's not sure what to do about that. Unless, he suggests, he just keeps his head down and hides and never speaks, and acts like he isn't really part of this government at all.

"Gosh," says Keir. "Imagine you doing that."

"It's fine," I say. "Anyway. Actually a new runway will improve London air quality. Because planes will do less circling."

Ed wonders how I can say this without smiling.

"She can say anything without smiling," says Keir.

"Also," I say, "there have been huge advances in sustainable aircraft fuel. Which means there is now only one small part of the process that even damages the environment at all!"

"Which small part is that?" says Ed.

"The part where you actually use it," I explain.

Wednesday
Today it's my speech on growth. Although just before I'm due to give it, Keir calls to check I'm not planning on using the metaphor from his article about red tape being like Japanese knotweed. Because the Palace has been in touch, and the King thinks we should change the name of Japanese knotweed so as not to offend the Japanese.

"So instead," says Keir, "use the other one. About a raft of pro-growth deregulation policies that will help us shift gears."

"But do rafts," I ask, "actually have gears?"

"Oh bugger," says Keir. "I'm thinking of a pedalo."

Thursday
Now I'm back with cabinet, debriefing. And I'm explaining that we're going to dismantle barriers to growth. And build things! Which aren't barriers.

"I'm quite worried about this new Silicon Valley," says Wes Streeting. "Because it sounds really expensive."

"I mean, that part of the country is famously really flat," agrees David Lammy. "So it's a hell of an excavation."

"And I'm worried," says Ed, "that we've thrown bats and newts under the bus."

"Between Oxford and Cambridge?" I say. "It's a train."

Then Heidi Alexander, the transport secretary, says they'd better not be the wrong kind of bat. Or else the trains won't work.

"Look," I say, starting to feel a bit cross. "This is just how it works now. Growth! Boldness! And no longer will major infrastructure projects be blocked by rare bats!"

"They can't be that rare," says Heidi, "if there's enough of them to block a train."

I scowl at her. Although I've actually never understood it either.

Friday
"Morning," I say, dropping in next door to speak to Morgan McSweeney. "Any growth yet?"

Morgan looks up from his computer. Then he says there has been a massive growth in the number of people who think Keir is doing a bad job as prime minister.

"All growth is good!" I say.

"I'm not sure you're listening," says Morgan.

"I don't care about the politics," I tell him. "All that matters is that people feel more optimistic about their own finances by the end of the year."

Morgan says that according to this polling, they actually might.

"Hooray!" I say.

"But only," he says, "if you've resigned."

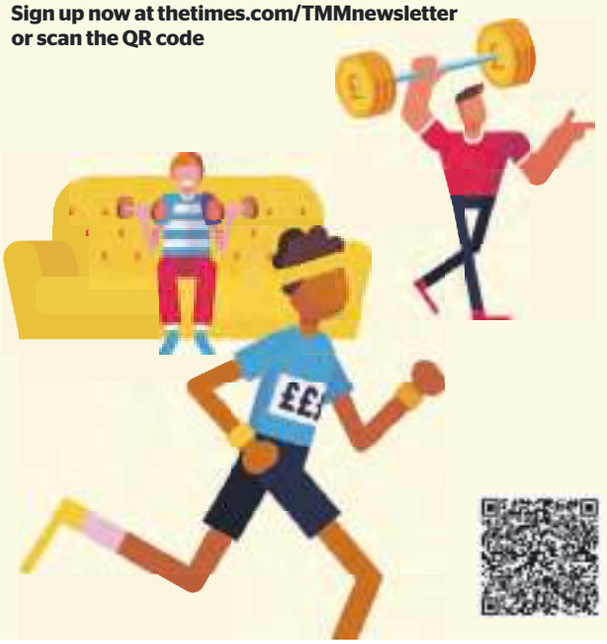
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Cancer patients offered HRT to ease menopause

Eleanor Hayward Health Editor

Women with cancer are receiving tailored menopause support and hormone replacement therapy having previously been left to "suffer in silence" through symptoms.

Historically, cancer survivors, particularly those with breast and gynaecological cancers, had been advised by doctors to avoid taking HRT because it could increase the risk of their cancer coming back.

Thousands of women a year go into sudden early menopause as a result of chemotherapy and surgery.

Now doctors are advocating a more personalised approach, supported by new medical guidelines, because the benefits of HRT in relieving debilitating menopause symptoms such as hot flushes can outweigh the risks.

Dr Susanne Hooper, who co-runs Oxford Hormone Clinic, has set up a multidisciplinary team of cancer and menopause specialists, who work out the options and risks for each patient and ensure they can make an informed decision. "A lot of patients with breast cancer or gynaecological cancer are told they cannot have HRT and are just left to do nothing or to live with the symptoms," she said. "Cancer patients will see their oncologist, the oncologist treats them for the cancer, and then they're just left alone. Often the treatments put these patients into abrupt menopause."

Use of HRT has increased notably in recent years as a result of celebrity awareness campaigns, and the drugs are taken by 2.6 million women in England. However, HRT can increase cancer risk because it provides oestrogen and progesterone, which fuels the growth of some hormone-sensitive breast and gynaecological cancers.

Hooper said: "Some women are really happy taking a minimal risk by starting on HRT, because their quality of life is just so bad. They think, 'I'm not living if I live like this'. They have horrendous flushes, horrendous night sweats, hot flushes, low mood, anxiety, you name it. It's about giving the patient a choice and giving them the right information."



Susanne Hooper and Sarah Blagden

The Oxford clinic works with two oncologists who evaluate details of the cancer and tumour type to determine the risks of HRT. They include Dr Sarah Blagden, professor of experimental oncology at Oxford University, who specialises in gynaecological cancers. She said oncologists could be "over-cautious with HRT" and that it was usually safe in patients whose tumours were not hormone-sensitive.

Blagden urged doctors to discuss menopause with breast and ovarian cancer patients. "Patients often feel that they don't want to burden the doctors — they're very grateful to be alive, they think menopause symptoms are just a minor thing," she said.

Specialists at University College London have devised an app called MENO.pause, which will be released this month and allows doctors to apply national guidelines based on each individual patient.

Motherhood joke was not unlawful

Jonathan Ames Legal Editor

Joking that a pregnant colleague is "mad" for having more children does not amount to discrimination, an employment judge has ruled in a dispute between two NHS staff.

Judge Graeme Hodgson said that the "difficulties of parenting" can be felt regardless of race, sex or religion, and that therefore "rueful but warm" light-hearted comments did not breach equality law.

Samina Ashraf, a patient safety manager at the NHS training body Health Education England, sued over the comment by her boss, David Marston, that she was "mad for having more kids" in a speech when she went on maternity leave in 2019.

Marston told a tribunal in central London it had been a "bad joke" at his own expense because he had two young children at the time, so having more children "sounded like madness" to him. The judge ruled that the remark was "well meant".

Ashraf also claimed that after she returned from maternity leave she asked to start a postgraduate degree, and that Marston questioned how she could do it as a mother. She claimed he compared her with a male colleague who had done the course, saying: "He is younger than you, single and does not have a kid."

The judge found there was no evidence that Marston had made either remark, and dismissed all 33 of her allegations including discrimination and harassment on the grounds of sex, religion and race.

ANITA VERDE, CHRIS GUG, GRANT THOMAS/DIVEPHOTOGUIDE



In depth Blacktip reef sharks off French Polynesia, a clownfish in Lembeh Strait, Indonesia, and a swim in Swallows Cave, Tonga, made for winning entries in the DPG Masters Underwater Imaging Competition

Treat pick-up artists like extremists, urged officials

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

Select a target in a group, approach within three seconds with confidence. Then ignore your target, neg your target, isolate your target. Create an emotional connection, extract your target to a seduction location, make physical connection but keep her wanting more.

This was the step-by-step guide to pulling women in bars followed by young men introduced to the world of pick-up artists (PUAs) by Neil Strauss's 2005 book *The Game*. It popularised the art of how to coax women into sex and gave men — even self-described "dweebs" like Strauss — the techniques to punch considerably above their weight.

Techniques outlined in his book such as "negging", where men throw out a backhanded compliment or accidental insult to attract a woman's interest, and peacocking, whereby men wear particularly flashy clothing to stand out from the crowd, became popular on university campuses in the US and UK.

Twenty years later the PUA movement has been identified by Whitehall officials as an area of the "manosphere" that is helping to fuel extreme misogyny and needs to be stopped via official government policy.

"PUAs objectify women and view sex as a commodity," according to an internal Home Office report, which The Times obtained a copy of. It added: "Some utilise techniques that deem women's sexual consent irrelevant and may endorse sexual harassment, stalking and even sexual violence.

"Some PUA techniques cross into criminality such as rape and sexual assault, but the movement and influencers do not necessarily meet any definitions of extremism."

Home Office officials explained how PUAs form part of the wider online subculture called the "manosphere" that contains a "significant amount of content directly focused on misogyny".

The large and unwieldy nature of this world means the UK's approach to extremism needs to be overhauled, they said. Extremism should no longer be based on specific ideologies but "on behaviours and activity of concern".

This central recommendation has been rejected by Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, as she prepares a strategy on extremism for later this year. However, sources close to the home secretary have made clear that the findings of the report on misogyny will be considered and pursued as part of the government's strategy on combating violence against women and girls, set to be unveiled in the spring.

The PUA world has evolved significantly. Dr Tim Squirrell at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a network of independent, non-profit organisations dedicated to researching extremism and misinformation, said the rise of online dating has made the PUA techniques less socially acceptable but also less necessary.

A big change in the manosphere in recent years, according to Squirrell, has been the emergence of hugely popular influencers who have made misogynistic attitudes more mainstream. Foremost among these was Andrew Tate, the British-American influencer under criminal investigation in Romania for trafficking minors, sexual intercourse with a minor and money laundering.

The way to combat extreme misogyny, which is still rife, he said, is not through counterterrorist schemes but through schools. "It's very clear that teachers in schools are crying out for additional resources to deal with this."

Cost cuts hit computing projects aimed at girls

Oliver Wright Policy Editor

Ministers are to slash funding aimed at encouraging girls to study computing and support science teachers working in schools as part of budget cuts in the Department for Education.

In a move described by critics as "completely counterproductive" Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, has axed grants for Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) learning that helps hundreds of schools across the country improve their science teaching. The programmes, worth £30 million a year, provide mentoring to thousands of staff teaching chemistry, biology and physics despite not having a degree in the subject. They also support schools to encourage girls to take up computing at A-level.

Senior government sources said they had been forced to make the "invidious" decision because of core budget shortfalls and blamed the Conservatives for allowing grants to run out in the middle of the school year. They said they were looking to find "philanthropic" funding to replace government grants.

The move came despite warnings by Labour that schools were facing a "recruitment and retention crisis on an unprecedented scale" among specialist science teachers. In the election Labour pledged to recruit 6,500 specialist teachers, particularly in Stem subjects, at a cost of £450 million but has yet to say how it will reach this target. Research in December found the pledge could cost the government billions of pounds as it would require ministers to raise salaries across the profession to encourage recruitment and retention. The schemes have been in place for almost two decades and cost the taxpayer £30 million, reduced to £7 million from the next financial year.

Séverine Trouillet, chief executive of Stem Learning, which runs the schemes, said: "This is completely counterproductive. We have thousands of staff having to teach a science-based subject which they are not specialised in. These programmes support them and give them confidence to go into the classroom, which will benefit their pupils' attainment and life prospects."

Hari Rentala, head of learning and skills at the Institute of Physics, said the government needed to offer an alternative. He said: "We need to see a clear and coherent plan for the alternative: what is the strategy for recruiting more physics teachers, improving their retention and investing in retraining for the long term? How will government meet its commitment to recruiting 6,500 teachers in shortage subjects, how many will be physics and how will they be secured?"

World

Russian drones hunt down

Anthony Loyd and **Jack Hill** witness brutal war tactics in Kherson



It is hunting season in Kherson. Humans are the prey.

The sport starts before dawn, when the first Russian drones fly low across the Dnieper river in search of Ukrainians to kill. Some days the drones chase and blast paramedics, police officers and firefighters.

Mostly, though, they wound or kill commuters on their way to work, or pensioners eking out a survival in the winter cold. Afterwards, the drone operators post footage of their kills on Russian Telegram channels such as "Moses", "From Mariupol to the Carpathians" and "Judgment Day" — dark trophies of the civilian head count. No wonder a chilling phrase has emerged to describe the hunts on Kherson's bleak and brutal streets: drone safari.

"We call it 'drone safari' because that is what it is," Kateryna Drobinina, 53, said in a ward of the wounded in Kherson's Luchansky City Hospital, a surgical fixator around her shattered right leg. "We are deliberately hunted."

Drobinina and her husband were helping a neighbour whose house had been bombed by a drone when they heard the sound of another drone above them. They rushed to shelter under the eaves of a low roof, and hugged one another as the noise of the rotors grew louder. The drone dropped to head level and slowly closed in.

"We could see it up close and it could see us," Drobinina said from her hospital bed. "It dropped a grenade right in front of us, as my husband and I held each other. The explosion got us both. We were hunted, like a sport."

'It's after us'

For some Ukrainians in Kherson, commuting is the most frightening part of the day. Iryna Lyba, a 30-year-old employee of the local administration, was on a bus on her way home from work on January 6, along with 15 other passengers, when a kamikaze drone chased them.

"A young woman near the front suddenly said she could see something in the sky near by," Lyba recalled. "We told her not to worry because there was some anti-aircraft fire and we thought she was getting it confused. Then she stood up and said, 'It's after us'."

A kamikaze drone slammed into the bus. The man sitting in front of Lyba was killed. A woman in front of that man died later from her wounds. Six other passengers were wounded, among them Lyba, who staggered out of the bus bloody and dazed, with shrapnel in her foot. Afterwards, a Russian Telegram post included a video clip of the drone's final seconds of footage before it struck the bus, complete with mocking voiceover. "Today will be wonderful," the voice gloated.

Occupied by Russian forces after the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Kherson became a symbol of Kyiv's hopes for an against-the-odds victory when it was liberated by Ukrainian troops in November the same year.

Russian artillery has continued to shell the city ever since, however, and fewer than 80,000 of Kherson's pre-war population of 300,000 ever returned. Last autumn the artillery fire began to lessen. In its place, waves of Russian strike drones began to menace Kherson's streets, flying from the east bank of the Dnieper to terrorise the Ukrainians who remained on the western side.

Most attacks involve DJI Mavic drones, used to drop F-1 grenades or V-25 bombs on pedestrians and cars, as well as the FPV kamikaze drones that target larger vehicles.

Sometimes the drones drop clusters of PFM-1 butterfly mines around the city too, leading to an increase in foot amputations.

Over the past six weeks the drone strikes have intensified, moving in from outlying districts to kill in Kherson's centre. Now, in a time of battlefield setbacks for Ukraine and uncertainty over the future of American support for its struggle, the city that once celebrated winning its freedom from occupation has become a dystopian test tube of modern warfare in which drones are the cornerstone of a terror campaign.

Kherson's authorities have collated statistics to chart the reign of drone terror.

Across the wider Kherson region, between August and December last year 12,000 Russian drones were recorded crossing the Dnieper to target Ukrainians, resulting in 64 dead civilians and 609 wounded.

"The aim of the drone campaign is pure terror," said the head of Kherson's regional military administration, Oleksandr Prokudin. "The Russians aim to depopulate the western bank of the Dnieper. Returning to Kherson remains a Russian aim."

To counter the drone threat, a third of Kherson's regional 2024 budget was spent on defensive measures including jamming systems, early warning alarms and public information campaigns.

Many key workers, including emergency responders, now carry portable early warning drone detectors and the sound of alarms mingles with the noise of war across the city: the sporadic shellfire, the whine of the drones themselves and the bursts of Kalashnikov fire as Ukrainian soldiers along the river banks blast away at the incoming machines.

Adding to the brooding futurism of the city, thousands of posters displaying the black silhouettes of Russian grenade-dropping drones have been distributed, urging civilians to run to cover as soon as they hear a drone. "Treat the sound of every drone as the enemy," the warnings read.

The Russians too have adapted and fibre optic drones, impervious to electronic jamming, fly over the streets with increasing regularity.

Overall, the attacks are increasing and the casualty toll is rising. A few months ago, before the pattern of strikes began to close in on the city centre, drone casualties were usually brought in from distant districts to the Luchansky hospital, one of four big medical facilities in the city. These days, the wounded are as likely to be pedestrians blown up by drones on the street outside.

"They don't care who they target," said the hospital's chief of emergency surgery, Vitaliy Khomukha, 43. "I have treated hundreds of drone wounded in the past few months, all civilian."

'Kids in uniform'

Most of the casualties are pensioners. Khomukha had 25 patients, all seriously wounded by drones, on his ward when The Times met him last week.

Their average age was 65. Two were 79, their limbs shattered. The youngest on the ward, Nataliya Dergach, 47, had been wounded by shrapnel in her head and legs 12 days earlier, having been chased by two Russian drones while walking her dog.

She had dropped to her knees and crawled under a bush, then lay there immobile with fear. There the drones came for her.

"I lay still, terrified," Dergach said. "They dropped two grenades either side of me anyway."

Medical staff are regularly targeted. Ten days earlier, Svitlana Kharchenko, a 56-year-old nurse, was killed on her way home after finishing her shift at the hospital. An oncologist and an ambulance driver have also been killed, while the wounded include 19 medics, nurses and doctors as well as 20 ambulance drivers.

What bothers Khomukha — every bit as much as the civilian death toll, the elderly victims smashed on the streets, the flaming ambulances and blown-up buses, the thought of women paralysed with fear being bombed at close range on camera by flying machines — is the pleasure all that destruction is clearly giving to Russian drone pilots.

"The most horrible thought of all," the surgeon reflected, "is of kids in uniform the other side of the river, flying strike drones into Kherson like it's part of a video game, having fun killing people here.

"I can't imagine what goes on in their head, their joy."



Nataliya Dergach, below, is one of the many civilian victims of Russian drone attacks in and around Kherson. Video footage of drone strikes is often posted on Russian Telegram channels, accompanied by gleeful commentary

Millionaire taboo-breaker eyes victory in Germany
Page 38

Mercy in short supply as junta and rebels wage war
Page 40

civilians in the street

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL; TELEGRAM



Kremlin attacks Trump's plan for 'Star Wars' shield

Russia
Tom Parfitt

The Kremlin has accused President Trump of trying to erode Russia and China's nuclear potential with a plan for an Iron Dome missile defence system.

The programme was "yet another confirmation of the US focus on turning space into a scene of armed confrontation and deployment of weapons", Maria Zakharova, chief spokeswoman of the Russian foreign ministry, said. Trump issued an executive order this week mandating a process to develop an "Iron Dome for America", a reference to Israel's aerial defence shield.

Zakharova said it implied "a sharp intensification of the US national missile defence project and its expansion to a scale comparable to Star Wars, [the US president at the time Ronald] Reagan's strategic defence initiative". The project "is openly oriented on, above all, the devaluation of Russian and Chinese strategic deterrence potential" and would "by no means contribute to reducing tensions or improving the state of affairs in the strategic sphere, including the creation of a basis for a fruitful dialogue on strategic offensive arms", she added.

A US version of Israel's Iron Dome would take years to develop and is envisaged as a far larger air defence network that would deploy space-based interceptors, or weapons positioned in orbit, to destroy missiles.

Trump said its task would be to protect American borders from the "catastrophic threat" of attack by ballistic, hypersonic and cruise missiles, and other advanced aerial weapons.

The White House sees the network as necessary to meet the danger posed by rogue states, or of new weapons developed by Moscow and Beijing. President Putin has repeatedly said that Moscow would only discuss arms control as a broader package of issues relating to Russia's security, including its concerns about Nato enlargement and western support for Ukraine. This month Putin said he was ready to meet Trump and "talk calmly on all those areas that are of interest to both the United States and Russia".

Trump said at the World Economic Forum on January 23 that he and Putin wanted "denuclearisation" and that such talks should include China.

He said: "Tremendous amounts of money are being spent on nuclear, and the destructive capability is something that we don't even want to talk about today, because you don't want to hear it. It's too depressing."

Diplomat's siesta runs foul of 'Little Napoleon'

Spain
Isambard Wilkinson Madrid

A Spanish ambassador has been sacked for falling asleep during a lengthy speech given by his political master.

Alberto Antón, the ambassador to Belgium, was dismissed by José Manuel Albares, Spain's foreign minister who is nicknamed "Napoleonchu", or Little Napoleon, after he nodded off during a conference in Madrid this month. Albares acted after a video was broadcast online of Antón taking a siesta during the minister's one-hour monologue at the annual ambassadors' conference, Spanish media reported.

The Socialist minister's removal of at least seven senior officials in "revenge" for perceived personal slights or moves against government policy has led to "a climate of terror" among the diplomatic corps, according to El Mundo. An unnamed diplomat told the newspaper: "For the first time, beyond political sectarianism, personal vendettas are the day-to-day business of the ministry."

An unnamed ambassador told the newspaper ABC that the minister kept a list of names of diplomats against whom he held a grudge. "We call it 'the notebook of Monte Cristo' [in allusion to the Alexandre Dumas novel] and revenge is unleashed," he said.

Juan González-Barba, the Spanish ambassador to Croatia, was removed from his post recently before completing his term. Diplomats linked it to an article he wrote defending King Felipe's role in Spain's international relations.

In 2023 Javier Benosa, then the head of Spain's Gibraltar office, wrote about the discomfort he felt at having to defend Madrid's controversial amnesty for Catalan separatists. Three weeks later he was relieved of the post he had held for only nine months, The Objective news website reported.

Albares has also been criticised for packing his ministry with political appointees. Spanish media said that the latest change has allowed Albares to give the ambassadorship of Belgium to the ambassador to Luxembourg and to replace him with Nieves Blanco, who was until now ambassador to Lithuania. She is also the wife of the permanent representative of Spain to the European Union, Marcos Alonso, who is Albares's protégé.



José Manuel Albares is said to have engendered a "climate of terror"





UFFIZI GALLERY; ALAMY

The offer recalls Agnolo Doni and his bride Maddalena Strozzi, who were honoured by Michelangelo's Doni Tondo and Raphael portraits

Two-for-one Uffizi offer has couples swooning

In a tribute to the romantic union of two wealthy Florentine families five centuries ago, visitors to the city's Uffizi Galleries can enter free — if they bring their significant other (Philip Willan writes).

The early Valentine's Day offer, which lets couples buy two tickets for the price of one and was available yesterday, recalls the marriage on January 31, 1504, of Agnolo Doni, a cloth merchant, to Maddalena Strozzi, a banking heiress whose family competed with the powerful Medici dynasty.

The discerning and deep-pocketed patrons of the arts were immortalised in separate portraits by Raphael and by Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*, a circular representation of the Holy Family with the infant John the Baptist in oil and tempera on wood. The painting is believed to have been commissioned to celebrate the birth and baptism of the couple's daughter Maria, in 1507, shortly before Michelangelo began work on the Sistine Chapel. It took pride of place in the pair's bedroom.

Simone Verde, the Uffizi director, said: "The 'Day of the Doni' is the Valentine's Day of the Uffizi — a beautiful event with which the museum celebrates an iconic union of love which, over half a millennium ago, led to the creation of one of the treasures of the gallery, Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*."

The initiative, letting couples buy two tickets for the price of one, is a play on the Italian word *doni*, meaning gifts. "I invite all couples, all lovers, to come to the museum to take part in this day and magically seal it in the presence of one of the masterpieces of western art," Verde added.

The *Doni Tondo* and the Raphael portraits are now on display in one room.

Raphael's vivid rendering of their brightly coloured clothes and Strozzi's pearl pendant underline their high social status. The union of the two families may have owed as much to financial convenience as to love.

The Uffizi's romantic discount, which was trialled in 2019, has become a popular feature of the gallery's calendar.

Gynaecologist barred over trans patient

France

David Chazan Paris

A gynaecologist has been barred from practising for a month because he refused to examine a transgender patient on the grounds that he was only qualified to treat "real women".

Dr Victor Acharian was accused of transphobia and LGBT groups lodged complaints after he turned the patient away in August 2023. The patient described his refusal as "hyper-violent".

He appeared before a disciplinary board of the French Medical Council in December and has now been suspended for a month from March 1, with an additional five months' probation.

Édouard Martial, the patient's lawyer, said: "We have the satisfaction of having confirmation that what happened that day was totally abnormal."

Acharian, who practises in Pau, southwest France, said he had offered to refer the patient to a specialist. But the patient shouted "you're transphobic" and insulted his secretary. Acharian said: "I was only trying to be honest when I said it wasn't my speciality ... I offered to refer her to services that could take better care of her."

The patient's partner left a Google review complaining about the refusal. Acharian responded with a message addressed to a "gentleman", saying that he only treated "real women". He wrote: "I have no skills to take care of men, even if they have shaved their beards and tell my secretary they have become women. My examination table is not suitable for examining men." He later apologised for his "clumsy" words and denied being transphobic.

Marguerite Stern, a women's rights activist, said: "Gynaecologists are only qualified to treat women ... We are living in a world of lunatics."

Millionaire taboo-breaker eyes victory

Friedrich Merz's rural upbringing shaped his Berlin power plays, **Oliver Moody** and **Charlotte Alt** write

When Friedrich Merz first ran for the leadership of the Christian Democratic Union, he had been out in the wilderness for so many years that he worried even political obsessives might no longer remember his surname.

"It's Merz, with an E," he said, just in case anyone were to mistake it for *März*, the German word for March.

No one has that problem now. Today Merz, 69, is on the cusp of the German chancellorship. As of this week, he also stands accused of cynically taking a jackhammer to the "firewall" that is supposed to neuter the hard-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which gleefully played the decisive role in hauling him to victory in an asylum vote in the Bundestag on Wednesday.

Two days later, he stood at the same lectern and recycled an inaccurate AfD factoid about "daily" incidents of gang-rape by asylum seekers as he tried to pass a law to restrict immigration, again with the radical right's backing.

His gambit backfired, however, and the bill was defeated by 12 votes. Rolf Mützenich, parliamentary leader of the ruling Social Democratic party (SPD), told Merz he had "damaged the essential veins of our democracy" and likened him to the conservatives who had disastrously tried to work with Adolf Hitler in the dying days of the Weimar Republic.

Merz is under attack not only from the usual suspects on the centre-left but also from Angela Merkel, the Protestant and Catholic churches and some of his own increasingly rebellious MPs.

The closer he gets to the finish line at the election on February 23, the more questions are piling up about whether Merz truly has the skillset, character and judgment required to lead Germany and Europe through their most testing period in at least half a century.

There is no doubting his determination, or his readiness to slaughter sacred cows. His recipe for shaking Germany out of its slump has barely changed since he set it out in a book five years ago: "To find joy in the new and the unknown, to take risks, to make mistakes and yet not to give up — in short, to rethink what Germany is."

Merz's allies and admirers rattle off lists of his finer qualities: his boldness, his rhetorical vigour, his ruthlessness, his depth of business experience, his moral clarity on support for Ukraine, his instinctive grasp of where the balance of public opinion lies.

His many critics, however, maintain that each of these characteristics has a shadow side. The boldness, they say, shades into thin-skinned recklessness; the magniloquence into bombast and provocation; the 16 corporate board posts on his CV into cosiness with vested interests; and the pursuit of the popular into naked populism.

Many voters share this wariness. Merz's party is ahead in the polls, but his personal approval ratings are middling at best. There is a lingering suspicion that the multimillionaire corporate lawyer, who flies around the country in his own private aeroplane, has no real empathetic understanding of just how hard-pressed German household budgets are.



Friedrich Merz has faced criticism from Angela Merkel, who led their party for almost two decades

He is often portrayed by his opponents as a dinosaur whose view of society has barely altered since the last century. More to the point, he has less experience of government than any postwar German chancellor, which is to say: none.

The best way to judge how much merit there is in these criticisms is to visit the Sauerland, a Catholic and deeply conservative patch of rolling hill country where Merz has lived for almost his entire life. The region remains his lodestar to such a degree that locals say he still wears the cap of his hometown's shooting club, and takes part in a biennial tradition in which 2,000 men beat the bounds of its towns, slosh back litres of pilsner and read out municipal contracts from the high Middle Ages. Merz's childhood in Brilon, a rural spa town, was a world apart from the present. His primary school split boys and girls in the playground, making them use separate entrances. No roads were paved and many houses had dung heaps outside. When a baby was born, the head of the family would fire his hunting rifle into the air: one bullet for a girl, two for a boy.

By all accounts Merz had a rough time at his grammar school, with a cheeky and rebellious streak. On one occasion he and his classmates removed the hinges from a door so their French teacher came tumbling in after it as she entered the room.

Merz's grades were so poor that his father, an austere lawyer and Wehrmacht veteran who had spent four years in a Soviet prisoner of war camp, suggested he become a builder.

"His mother told me that up to Year 10 he basically didn't do any work, he didn't do much at all, he was lazy, bored and got stupid ideas," said Gereon Fritz, 82, a friend of the Merz family and former headmaster of the school.

After Merz failed his end-of-year exams, Fritz said, he switched schools and became a "different person". It was in the Christian Democratic Union's youth wing, the *Junge Union*, that Merz finally found his feet.

"I think he has kept ... his willingness and courage for change," said Johannes Slawig, 69, an old CDU sparring partner of Merz from this period. "He is not someone who wants to manage, in the sense of organising what already exists, but rather he is someone who wants to initiate change."

Ludger Schindler, 65, one of Merz's childhood neighbours, said his rootedness in the area was a good reason to trust his political integrity. "The Sauerland is a very conservative area and you can take people by their word. That's why I say that I believe it when Friedrich says that he won't enter into a coalition with the AfD."

Yet trust may be where Merz comes unstuck. Some of his MPs worry he pushed things too far, and snatched defeat from the jaws of victory with his asylum stunts this week. They fret his flirtation with the AfD, seen as breaking a taboo, means other parties of the centre will refuse to form a coalition after the election because they see him as a loose cannon. Were that to happen, German politics would descend into bedlam. One scenario doing the rounds in Berlin is a Merz-led minority government propped up by ad-hoc majorities, leaving him at the mercy of the AfD.

Only one thing is certain: Germany will be a markedly different country after this election.

Trump dreams of a new Gilded Age

United States

David Charter Washington

President Trump has long vowed to "make America great again" but is only now making it clear that the past glories he hopes to emulate come from the Gilded Age of the late 19th century.

His fascination with raising tariffs on imports, which has caused consternation among allies of the United States, stems from this era, when there was no personal income tax and the Treasury was funded chiefly by border duties.

Trump announced last night that the US will impose tariffs of 25 per cent from today on America's closest trading partners Canada and Mexico, adding that he wants to force them to restrict the illegal entry of people and drugs, as well as 10 per cent tariffs on China.

William McKinley, a Republican whose presidency marked the end of the Gilded Age and who made his name as "Tariff Man", was quoted approvingly by Trump in a speech to Republican members of Congress this week.

The 1870s to the 1890s were not only marked by protectionism and a manufacturing boom. In 1898 the US annexed Hawaii and seized Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico — moves echoed in Trump's wish to take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal.

Historians caution that conditions in the Gilded Age were very different from today, as the growth was fuelled by rapid immigration and mineral exploitation. Nor was it a smooth ride. The economic crisis of 1893 was America's worst until the Great Depression. The era was named from a book by Mark Twain satirising greed and corruption.

In his final speech, the day before he was shot dead in 1901, McKinley backed away from the aggressive tariffs he had promoted, declaring that "commercial wars are unprofitable" and calling for "reciprocity treaties" for freer trade.

Robert Merry, author of *President McKinley: Architect of the American Century*, said: "McKinley adopted high tariffs and protectionism as a signature position ... when he became a member of the House of Representatives after the Civil War. He built that brand throughout his 14 years in the House and fostered the Tariff Act of 1890. But it had a devastating political effect: prices were raised, people were angry, inflation ensued, McKinley lost his seat."

He rebuilt his career as governor of Ohio and was elected president in 1896, promising that higher tariffs would restore prosperity after several years of recession. Merry said: "Once he became president, McKinley saw something that was very significant and he adjusted to it. The productive capacity of the United States was so explosive that ... the American market, as vast as it was, was not large enough to absorb all the goods being produced. So he became the advocate of what he called reciprocity, going into bilateral agreements with other nations — 'I'll reduce my tariffs if you reduce your tariffs'."

Trump referred to the Gilded Age on the campaign trail at a barber shop in the Bronx, New York, saying: "When we were a smart country, in the 1890s ... this is when the country was, relatively, the richest it ever was. It had all tariffs. It didn't have an income tax."

At the start of the year, he posted on Truth Social: "The Tariffs, and Tariffs alone, created this vast wealth for our Country. Then we switched over to Income Tax. We were never so wealthy as during this period. Tariffs will pay off our debt and MAKE AMERICA WEALTHY AGAIN!"

To chair his Council of Economic Advisers, Trump nominated Stephen Miran, an economist and investment manager who has written that the US could be better off with average tariffs of about 20 per cent and as high as 50 per cent, compared with the present average of 2 per cent.

McKinley's Tariff Act of 1890 raised average US duties from 38 per cent to 49.5 per cent. Trump quoted his predecessor, saying: "In the words of President McKinley, who is the tariff king, 'The protective system invokes the highest law of nature, that of self-preservation. There's every reason founded in justice why the American producer should in every way be favoured against a foreign producer whose products compete with his.'"

Douglas Irwin, a professor of economics at Dartmouth College, identified these words from a speech in 1888, when McKinley was advocating the Tariff Act. "I've always said there are two McKinleys and Trump only focuses on one of them," Irwin said. "When McKinley was a representative in the House for a district of Ohio, most of the Republicans came from the north, where the industry was. Britain had industrial supremacy in textiles, steel and many other products, so the industries in the US wanted protection from competition. They wanted high tariffs to keep out British goods. McKinley, representing his Ohio constituents who were producing iron and steel, reflected that.

"As president, McKinley said, 'I don't just represent Ohio any more, I represent the country. We have a lot of excess capacity — we should be exporting to the world.' In his final address before he was assassinated, he said that the 'period of exclusiveness is past'."

The US Treasury relied on tariffs without an income tax until 1913, when public spending deficits needed addressing. Tariffs were considered too regressive as the gap grew between rich and poor. Irwin added: "In the 19th century government spending as a share of GDP was 2 to 3 per cent. Now government spending is over 30 per cent of GDP, so you need a much bigger tax base and imports are only about 15 per cent of GDP ... Imports are just too small to fund the federal government."

How Trump aims to overturn FDR's legacy, Niall Ferguson, pages 28-29

Helicopter 'flying too high before collision'

President Trump appeared to shift the blame for the deadly crash between a passenger plane and a Black Hawk helicopter over Washington on the fact that the military aircraft was flying too high (Will Pavia writes).

A day after taking aim at his Democratic White House predecessors and claiming they had made air travel less safe due to diversity hires, yesterday the president appeared to point the finger at the flight path of the helicopter for causing an accident that left 67 people dead. Trump said in a post on Truth Social: "The Blackhawk helicopter was flying too high, by a lot. It was far above the 200 foot limit. That's not really too complicated to understand, is it???"

The crash remains under investigation by the federal transportation authorities and a provisional report is expected within 30 days. An army official, speaking on condition of anonymity, urged caution and patience as the investigation continued. For safety reasons the altitude on helicopter flights near the Ronald Reagan Washington national airport is capped at 200ft (61 metres).

Pete Hegseth, the US defence secretary, has acknowledged there may have been an elevation issue with the Black Hawk. However, speaking before Trump's remarks, he said it was still inconclusive. He told Fox News: "We're looking at altitude, and the president was clear about that: someone was at the wrong altitude. The investigation will help us understand that. Was the Black Hawk too high, was it on course? Right now, we don't quite know."

Investigators were still searching for the helicopter's black box after retrieving the cockpit voice recorder and flight data recorder from the American Airlines jet. Helicopter flights close to the airport have been restricted indefinitely.

Officials said they had recovered 41 bodies but the rest remained lost in the Potomac River where both aircraft plunged.

On board the military aircraft were First Officer Ryan O'Hara, 29, who had a wife and a one-year-old son. "He doted on that boy," Gary O'Hara, Ryan's father, told The Washington Post. "As a parent, how do you take the news like this and not be totally broken?"

Also on the Black Hawk was Andrew Eaves, a chief warrant officer from Brooksville in eastern Mississippi. His wife, Carrie Eaves, confirmed he was on the helicopter in a Facebook post. She wrote: "We ask that you pray for our family and friends and for all the other families that are suffering today. We ask for peace while we grieve."

The pilot of the helicopter has yet to be named.

Immediately after the crash it emerged that several young elite ice skaters were on the passenger plane travelling from Kansas to the capital after attending a training camp. Brielle Beyer, a 12-year-old figure skater from Virginia, and her mother, Justyna Magdalena Beyer, were travelling on the passenger jet. Andy Beyer, the father of Brielle and husband of Justyna, confirmed their deaths yesterday. Paying tribute to the pair, he told NBC News: "In everything she [Brielle] did, she lived life to the fullest. She was so proud of herself in figure skating. She just had a passion for everything she did in life. She had a beautiful singing voice and I will miss that so much."

Olivia Ter, 12, from Maryland, was also a skater. "The impact of Olivia's life will continue to resonate in our youth sports community, and she will be sorely missed," said Bill Tyler, director of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

Another young skater on board was Cory Haynos, who had been tipped as a future Olympian. He was travelling with his parents, Roger and Stephanie Branton Haynos.

The American Airlines pilots were named as Jonathan Campos, 34, the captain, and Sam Lilley, 28, who recently got engaged.



Andrew Eaves, who was on the Black Hawk, and Olivia Ter, left, and Brielle Beyer, below left, both ice skaters, were killed in the collision. An FBI agent, below, collected debris from the banks of the Potomac River





World

Mercy in short supply as junta and rebel forces wage civil war

Four years on from the coup, Myanmar is mired in chaos and cruelty, **Lorcan Lovett** writes from Falam

Everyone in the Myanmar resistance knows the brutality of the country's ruling junta but even by the regime's standards the cruelty inflicted on Timothy and Isaac was difficult to comprehend.

They were found in the town of Falam in the far west of the country, where a battle is raging between the junta's forces and the rebels who surround them. The two young resistance fighters, members of the Chin ethnic group, were injured in a skirmish and dragged by their junta enemies to a nearby school.

The next day, Chin fighters took back the building. The bodies of Timothy, 20, and Isaac, 19, were inside, mutilated in the most horrible way imaginable. They also captured the government soldiers who had tortured and murdered the prisoners.

"They plucked out my comrade's eye with a motorbike key," said Commander Biak Run Thang, who led the unit of the Chin National Defence Force (CNDF), weeping as he mimed the action. "The other one, they beheaded him."



Biak Run Thang wept as he described the junta's torture of his comrades

Biak Run found himself driving the captured murderers across the mountains to a detention camp for prisoners of war. During the six-hour journey there was only one thought on his mind. "I was furious," he said. "I wanted to kill them."

It would have been a simple matter to stop the vehicle, draw his knife and take revenge. All over the country, the civil war is forcing ordinary people, who until a few years ago had no thought of fighting or torture, to face similar dilemmas.

It is four years today since the military coup that drove from power the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The ensuing conflict has gone through terrible evolutions.

For a few weeks it was dominated by peaceful demonstrations against the junta in cities. When these were violently suppressed, they gave way to ragged but bitter clashes between the army and an assortment of regional guerrilla groups and the People's Defence Force, which fights in the name of the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) of deposed elected politicians. The resistance groups then joined forces with ethnic armies that have for decades been fighting to secure regional independence for Myanmar's borderlands. For a long time they were outgunned and outnumbered by the forces of the junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing.

In late 2023 the resistance achieved a series of morale-boosting victories. The rebels now hold dozens of towns and Falam may soon be one of them. Some 600 Chin fighters outnumber and surround a government garrison of 120 trapped in the town's hilltop military base.

The CNDF did not exist before the coup. It is made up of civilians such as Biak Run, 34, a construction site manager. If it is successful, the offensive — codenamed Mission Jerusalem — will drive the junta from the former capital of Chin state, a predominantly Christian territory on the border with India. According to the CNDF, it would be the first time a resistance organisation has captured a district centre without support from longstanding ethnic armies. Unlike the established ethnic forces, which seek to protect their own territorial enclaves, they dream of marching on Yangon, the largest city, and the capital, Naypyidaw. Salai Tihau, 33, a senior CNDF figure and former teacher, said: "We will fight until the junta falls. We want to become a standard army with well-trained soldiers. Our end goal is to overthrow the military dictator. Until that is achieved we will continue to fight."

Obstacles include the junta's Russian and Chinese-made fighter jets and helicopters and the resistance's factionalism. As the war has intensified, so has the cruelty of both sides. More than 6,000 civilians have died in four years of war. Nearly 3.5 million have been displaced inside the country and one million driven abroad.

The junta is accused of countless atrocities, including the indiscriminate bombing of towns and villages. Then there is the kind of small-scale sadism inflicted on Timothy and Isaac, which has provoked reprisals from resistance troops.

John Quinley of Fortify Rights, a human rights organisation, said: "The main perpetrator of atrocities over many decades is the Myanmar military. As the NUG gains more of a physical presence on the ground, one of their mandates should be to ensure people who commit abuses in the resistance are held accountable."

Many of the junta's troops are victims too, conscripted recruits sent to fight with scant training. One junta captive in Chin said: "Our commanders knew nothing of their strength here. No instructions on what roads to take, no strategy."

At the prisoner camp, Biak Run's restraint failed him. He punched the killers — but then the devout Baptist stopped himself. "I didn't do further harm," he said. "It was not allowed."

SIVARAM V FOR THE TIMES; RAVIKANTH KURMA/SHUTTERSTOCK







Prasanth Puthuvelil's mechanical elephants, top, can replace live animals at ceremonies. Bottom right, one of his models, Ganesh, returns from a function

Robots to the rescue of India's gentle giant

Prasanth Puthuvelil runs his hand around the eye of his latest creation: an 11ft mechanical elephant due to be delivered to a Hindu temple next week (Hannah Gardner writes).

The artist, from Kerala, is checking that the rubber wrinkles feel natural but as he does, the power comes on and its eye moves, as if to focus on him.

Kerala is obsessed with elephants. It is one of three Indian states to use the animal in its official crest and, around the cities of Thrissur and Kochi, no religious gathering is deemed complete without one — even for non-Hindus.

For years that was a big problem for animal rights campaigners, who noted rising reports of cruelty. When they saw Puthuvelil's life-sized replicas they knew they had found a viable alternative. Since 2023 the Indian branch of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) has been donating mechanical elephants to temples or religious institutions willing to renounce the real thing.

Khushboo Gupta, a director of advocacy projects at Peta India, said: "Mechanical elephants help retain age-old traditions in a modern way and help ensure real elephants can remain with their families in their natural jungle habitats."

Next week Peta will hand over its eighth mechanical elephant and has a waiting list for other temples in India.

Kerala is home to 400 captive elephants, largely held by Hindu temples and private owners who rent them out for thousands of pounds a day. Most of Kerala's captive elephants are male because tall elephants with tusks are more prized. As a result, all Puthuvelil's creations are bull elephants that combine the best features of Kerala's most prized celebrity elephants, such as Asia's tallest, Thechikottukavu Ramachandran.

Puthuvelil's elephants are a few inches taller than Ramachandran's ten and a half feet, but in all other respects the head-swaying, ear-flapping, trunk-raising robots are proportionally correct. "It's a matter of realism," he said. For one event he even made fake dung, which he sprayed with sugar water to attract flies.

Puthvelil started making animatronic models out of disused machines and rubber with friends when he was still at school. Today all four are still in business together. They do not take a public position on the use of real animals.

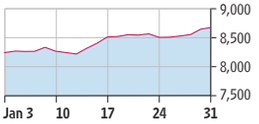
Ravi Namboothiri, the priest who will receive the latest elephant next week, said he loathed the cruelty associated with using live elephants and used to fear for the public every time he hired one. According to Heritage Animal Task Force, a Keralan-based NGO, 540 people have been killed by elephants at religious gatherings since 2007, a figure collated from local newspaper reports.

He added, however: "Elephant owners are very powerful. No one wants to offend them."

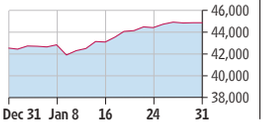
Business

WORLD MARKETS (Change on the day)

FTSE 100
8,673.96 (+27.08) ▲

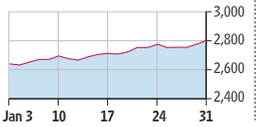


Dow Jones (Midday)
44,879.47 (-2.66) ▼

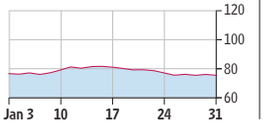


COMMODITIES

Gold
$2,807.82 (+30.28) ▲

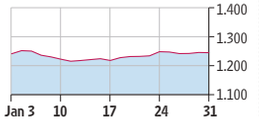


Brent crude
$75.50 (-0.50) ▼

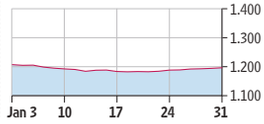


CURRENCIES

£/$
$1.2443 (-0.0007) ▼



£/€
€1.1965 (+0.0017) ▲



Investors get their way as Smiths Group announces plan to split up

Robert Lea Industrial Editor

Smiths Group, the last of the UK's large listed industrial conglomerates, is to break itself up.

The news sent shares in the £7 billion FTSE 100 engineering and technology group to a new high, up 215p, or 11 per cent, to £20.80. They closed at £20.66

A break-up has long been sought by some investors. Yet news that Smiths is to finally dismantle itself will come as a shock to many especially as only last month it had rebuffed a demand by Engine Capital, one of its shareholders, to do just that. Furthermore, Smiths shares had touched new peaks this year and the company had announced an upgrade in its forecast revenues and profits.

The company now says it is to concentrate on its subsidiaries John Crane, which makes components that enable and control the flow of liquids and gases and the management of heat in the oil and gas industry, and Flex-Tek, which works especially in the US construction market.

It will lose what is perhaps its best-known brand, Smiths Detection, which produces the components for security scanners in airports and for buildings and events access.

The company is already working on disposing of its most high-tech business, Smiths Interconnect, which makes components for satellite and aerospace communications and the relay of high-frequency data.

A former fifth leg of the business, Smiths Medical, was sold off during the pandemic after longstanding campaigns by some that the group needed to be more focused and realise under-appreciated value in its divisions

The plan is understood to have been under consideration since Roland Carter took over as chief executive last March, although there has been no indication in any statements from the company, not least in its response to an open letter demanding change from Engine Capital.

The decision comes amid change at the top of the company. Steve Williams, a career oil man, has been chairman for less than 18 months after succeeding the industrialist Sir George Buckley. Carter, a Smiths lifer, has been chief

Continued on page 43

AstraZeneca scraps UK vaccine plant

Pharma giant axes £450m investment at Speke

Alex Ralph

Britain's biggest public company has pulled a proposed £450 million investment for a new vaccines plant in the north of England in a significant blow to the government's attempts to attract private-sector investment.

AstraZeneca said that following "protracted discussions" with the government "we are no longer pursuing our planned investment at Speke".

A spokesman for the Cambridge-based business said: "Several factors have influenced this decision, including the timing and reduction of the final offer compared to the previous government's proposal."

Astra's decision to cancel the investment plans at its site near Liverpool comes after The Times reported that delays in securing government support had led the company to miss a key internal deadline, despite the business secretary being warned privately that it was an "urgent issue". It follows mounting frustration internally with the government's handling of the process.

The announcement is a blow to Rachel Reeves's renewed attempts to deliver economic growth and convince investors after her set-piece speech in Oxfordshire on Wednesday, during which the chancellor name-checked the drugs giant.

The proposed investment was first announced by Jeremy Hunt, the chancellor in the last Conservative government, in his March budget speech, alongside a separate £200 million expansion of its global research and development headquarters in Cambridge.

However, correspondence obtained by The Times under the Freedom of Information Act showed that Shaun Grady, Astra's UK chairman, wrote to Jonathan Reynolds, the business secretary, shortly after Labour was elected to say that it was "crucial" that the pharmaceutical industry received early assurances on the future of the government's advanced manufacturing plan and that it was "particularly important" given AstraZeneca's proposed investment.

Grady had said it was an "urgent issue" because the company needed to begin work on the project in August to meet its "business case timelines".

It is understood that Astra did not get the early assurances it had sought when Reynolds took office. Instead, the company received a final grant offer of support only months later after a fund was announced in Reeves's first budget at the end of October. It meant that Astra's project in Speke did not begin in line with its internal timelines.

The spokesman for AstraZeneca added that the Speke site "will continue to produce and supply our flu vaccine".

AstraZeneca, which is valued at about £176 billion on the London Stock Exchange, is due to post its full-year results on Thursday.

Sir Pascal Soriot, Astra's group chief executive since 2012, was critical of the UK's fiscal and operating environment towards the end of the Conservatives' time in government. In February 2023 he blamed a "discouraging" tax rate for the company's decision to invest in a $360 million manufacturing plant in Ireland, rather than Britain.

The company has recently announced large investments in the United States and Canada.

CODY BURRIDGE/BBC



ITV at round table with Abu Dhabi fund

ITV is in talks with an Emirati-backed fund over a merger of their studio production businesses. RedBird IMI owns All3Media, the firm behind *The Traitors*, presented by Claudia Winkleman, which ITV wants to combine with its Studios business. Full report, page 48

FTSE 100 breaks yet another record

Lauren Almeida

London's leading share index continued its record-breaking run yesterday, clocking up its best monthly gains in more than two years as investors sought to diversify out of American stocks.

The FTSE 100 closed higher for a fifth-consecutive day, recording a rise of 27.08 points, or 0.3 per cent, to 8,673.96 for a January percentage gain of 6.1 per cent, the best since November 2022, and a weekly increase of 2 per cent.

Although official data this week showed that the eurozone economy flatlined in the final quarter of last year as growth contracted in France and Germany, its two largest economies, the Dax index in Frankfurt also closed at a record high, as did the Stoxx Europe 600 benchmark of the continent's biggest companies.

The unexpectedly strong rise in European equities in December has been in part triggered by President Trump's threat of trade tariffs, which has prompted investors to look for alternatives to US assets, particularly big American technology stocks.

A survey of global fund managers by Bank of America found that there was a big rotation out of American equities in January, down to 19 per cent of those surveyed overweight in the region, from 36 per cent overweight in December. Allocation to stocks in the eurozone rose by 26 percentage points, the biggest monthly rise since February 2015, to net 1 per cent overweight.

Nor were equities the only asset class in demand. Gold also hit successive highs during the week and, despite dipping to $2,844.10 yesterday, it recorded its best monthly gain since August 2011. The price of the precious metal was driven up by investors looking for a safe haven or hedge against Trump's threat of tariffs generally and, more particularly, to impose specific tariffs on gold imports to the US.

The more domestically focused FTSE 250 also enjoyed a strong start to the year with a January gain of 2.7 per cent and a weekly rise of 2.1 per cent.

Market report, page 48

Need to know

1 Jeremy Hunt accused the government of "dropping the ball" after AstraZeneca abandoned a proposed £450 million investment in a new vaccines facility in the north of England. Pages 2, 41

2 England could turn a tenth of its farmland over to solar panels, forests and nature reserves under the land use framework announced by the government yesterday. Page 2

3 Smiths Group, the last of the UK's large listed industrial conglomerates, is to break itself up. Page 41

4 London's leading share index clocked up its best month since 2022 as investors diversified out of US stocks. The FTSE 100 gained 6.1 per cent in January to reach 8,673.96. Page 41

5 Orsted, the world's biggest offshore wind farm developer, has ousted its chief executive after the group lost 80 per cent of its value in his four-year tenure.

6 Chevron has become the first big energy company to adopt the term "Gulf of America" after President Trump's edict to rename the Gulf of Mexico.

7 Gavin Patterson, the former boss of BT, has become the latest senior business figure to help find a cure for dementia, Britain's biggest killer. Page 44

8 The US pharmacy chain that owns Boots has suspended its dividend, ending a run of quarterly shareholder payouts that lasted more than 90 years. Page 45

9 ITV is in early-stage talks with the Emirati-backed fund selling the Telegraph titles over a merger of their studio production businesses. Page 48

10 "There are real benefits in using ... pension capital to drive UK domestic growth," says Maggie Fanari of RIT Capital Partners, who spent years at a $250 billion pension fund in Canada. "It's a win-win if done well for pension savers as well." Her latest preoccupation is to cut investment trust discounts. Lunch with The Times, page 49

"O'Leary's right ... when it comes to growth, Reeves's plans just won't fly



Dominic O'Connell, page 45

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

Diageo seeks new lease of

Jessica Newman
Leisure Industries Correspondent



Taking over the top job at Diageo has not been easy for Debra Crew.

As the FTSE 100 maker of Guinness, Johnnie Walker whisky and Smirnoff vodka prepares to reveal its half-year results on Tuesday, the group's shares are hovering at a five-year low and closed down 0.4 per cent at £24.19 — some way off the near £33 they were changing hands for when Crew took over in June 2023.

Under her predecessor, Sir Ivan Menezes, who ran the company from 2013 until his death a decade later, shares in the world's largest spirits group more than doubled.

The timing of Crew's appointment was tricky, not least because Diageo, which also makes Baileys liquor and Tanqueray gin, was grappling with a post-pandemic hangover.

Covid lockdowns had triggered strong demand for its premium brands such as Don Julio and Casamigos tequila and Bulleit bourbon as consumers unable to visit bars and pubs whipped up their own cocktails at home.

The comedown was made worse by raging inflation leading customers to rein in spending.

But it hasn't been the only bad news for Crew, a former tobacco and Pepsi executive. She had been in charge of Diageo for only five months before blindsiding investors with a shock profit warning after realising that unsold stock was piling up with wholesalers in Latin America and the Caribbean as a result of consumers trading down for cheaper brands.

Crew, who has been at Diageo for more than four years and was previously its chief operating officer, has said managers had not been properly assessing the demand for its products in the market, but she did not change any personnel, saying later that nobody was "intentionally doing something wrong". The challenges culminated in a decline in annual global sales, the first since the pandemic.

The combination of these self-inflicted wounds and an acute cyclical downturn has meant Diageo has struggled to restore investor confidence. Industry observers have said it is imperative that Tuesday's results point to stability and some signs of incremental improvements going into the second half.

Notwithstanding any nasty surprises, Diageo's half-year report is expected to highlight many trends seen in the second half of 2024, including persistent weakness in Asia, driven by China, and overall demand for spirits remaining subdued. In the US, its largest market, the company remains under pressure as the Covid boom fades.

The consensus among analysts is that Diageo will deliver organic net sales growth of 0.4 per cent for the six months that ended December 31, and net sales of $10.7 billion. The company is also expected to report operating profit of $3.3 billion, broadly flat compared with the same period last year. For the year, analysts have pencilled in an operating profit of $5.6 billion on sales of $20 billion.

There are likely to be droplets of good news, including Guinness, the venerable drink that has soared in popularity in recent years and is now a firm favourite with younger consumers. No doubt there will be plenty of questions regarding a potential auction of the Guinness business. Bloomberg reported that Diageo was weighing up a sale of the brand to raise a possible £8 billion as well reviewing its 34 per cent stake in LVMH's drinks division, Moët Hennessy. The company subsequently denied that it was looking to divest either.

Analysts at RBC said they were not "terribly surprised" by Diageo's confirmation that it does not intend to sell, while Edward Mundy, an analyst at Jefferies, argued that Diageo's confirmation "points to confidence in the organic story", adding that the present backdrop is "suboptimal for the sale of either asset".

However, the real focus for investors will be whether Crew, alongside Diageo's new chief financial officer, Nik Jhangiani — a well-known and well-respected figure in the drinks industry — will row back on the company's

Orsted boss blown away by 80% fall in share value

Emily Gosden Energy Editor

The world's biggest offshore wind farm developer has ousted its chief executive after the group lost 80 per cent of its value during his tenure.

Orsted, majority owned by the Danish government, said it had agreed with Mads Nipper "that it's the right time for him to step down" and had appointed Rasmus Errboe, his deputy, to succeed him. The switch comes before the company's annual results next week.

Nipper joined Orsted in the top job at the start of 2021, coinciding with the group's shares hitting a record high. They have since been on a downward trajectory as the industry has met obstacles including rampant supply chain inflation and setbacks in the nascent US offshore wind market that have forced Orsted to book billions of dollars in write-downs.

Lene Skole, chairwoman of Orsted's board, said: "The renewable energy market has fundamentally changed since January 2021. The impacts on our business of the increasingly challenging situation in the offshore wind industry, ranging from supply chain bottlenecks, interest rate increases, to a changing regulatory landscape, mean that our focus has shifted."

Jenny Ping, analyst at Citi, said she expected that Errboe "could launch a strategic review of the group businesses" and would need to "resolve challenges in its US offshore business". She added: "If Orsted is able to address its stretched balance sheet without having to sell more of its highly prized assets, we see potential for a more structural re-rating of the shares."

Orsted started life as Dong Energy, the Danish Oil and Natural Gas company, but rebranded in 2017 as it shifted focus to renewable energy and became the world's most prolific developer of wind turbines at sea. It has a commanding position in the UK, where its projects include Hornsea One and Two, which successively claimed the title of the world's largest offshore wind farms, and Hornsea Three, which is under construction and is on course to take that crown on completion.

Nipper worked at Lego and then ran the pump-maker Grundfos before joining Orsted. Errboe joined Orsted in 2012 and is its chief commercial officer as well as deputy chief executive. He previously served as regional head of its European markets and chief financial officer of its global offshore business and was responsible for its stock market listing in 2016 and the offloading of its oil and gas business the following year,

Ahmed Farman, analyst at Jefferies, said Errboe had a "deep understanding of the business and the offshore industry" and he believed he would be "well liked by investors".

life as sales go flat

MATTHEW LLOYD/BLOOMBERG/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTOPHER L PROCTOR FOR THE TIMES; SAM BARNES/SPORTSFILE







The Guinness brewery in Dublin was the backdrop for a photoshoot with the actress Saoirse-Monica Jackson and the brand sponsors sporting events, below. Johnnie Walker, above, is a top seller for Diageo, led by Debra Crew, right



medium-term goals, which some City observers say may no longer be realistic. Organic sales growth of between 5 and 7 per cent is being targeted over the medium term. That is a goal that was set by Menezes in November 2021, on the back of Covid lockdowns driving sales of its premium brands. Diageo's organic net sales jumped 16 per cent in 2021, beating the 13.7 per cent rise forecast by analysts. A lot has changed since then. Last year, sales declined 0.6 per cent.

While a downgrade to its medium-term guidance could risk Diageo being out of step with its peers, such as Pernod Ricard, which is still aiming for up to 7 per cent organic top-line growth in the medium term, and Remy Cointreau, which is anticipating "high single-digit" sales growth, a cut could provide investors confidence that Diageo is being realistic and not sticking by overly ambitious goals.

At the company's annual results in July, Crew said that it was hard to say when its challenges would recede, warning that the "negative pressure" on its organic operating margin in the second half of its financial year would probably "persist" in its present financial year.

James Edwardes Jones, an analyst at RBC, has said that key to rebuilding investor confidence was to "under-promise and over-deliver" and hopes Diageo will abandon its medium-term target. "Diageo has the opportunity to reset expectations based on a future as a conventional staples business," he said. "This should involve kitchen-sinking revenue and profit guidance, a prerequisite of repairing confidence."

Fintan Ryan, an analyst at Goodbody, argued that the medium-term guidance did not reflect the state of the global spirits market. "It will be more credible for the company to say that they can't deliver in that range but can, more likely, get in time to somewhere between 4 per cent and 6 per cent average sales growth while delivering consistent margin improvements over time," he said.

Jefferies and Barclays are forecasting medium-term organic sales growth of between 3 and 6 per cent, while UBS estimates a downward revision to "mid-single" digit growth.

However, in light of the threat of President Trump imposing additional swingeing trade tariffs, which could have a serious impact on key products such as tequila, it is plausible that Diageo may wait to present any new medium-term targets until further down the line. Ryan said: "I don't think Diageo would want to be a hostage to fortune to pull out new targets on Tuesday, and then Trump brings in tariffs. I think management will want to get a better lie of the land when it comes to the tariff environment before they commit themselves explicitly to something."

As well as a refresh to the company's financial targets, the City is banking on finance boss Jhangiani, who arrived at Diageo from Coca-Cola Europacific Partners in September, to bring a fresh perspective on cost discipline.

Jhangiani served as chief financial officer since 2016, and had been doing the same job at predecessor company Coca-Cola Enterprises from 2013. During his tenure, he played a role in the merger between Coca-Cola Enterprises, Coca-Cola Iberian Partners and Coca-Cola Erfrischungsgetränke in 2016 as well as the acquisition of the Australian bottler Coca-Cola Amatil in 2021 and, two years later, the acquisition of Coca-Cola Beverages Philippines.

Described as personable and charismatic by industry observers, Jhangiani is expected to set the agenda on Tuesday. The expectation is that he will promise to deliver on the company's existing cost-savings programme, as well as bringing a bold approach to cost control, including marketing.

Breaking up is ever so easy despite all the earlier denials

Behind the story

Thirty years ago, the last two totemic British industrial conglomerates began the big break-up (Robert Lea writes).

ICI, once the apotheosis of British innovation and technology, was scattered to the four winds.

Its legacy is most obviously found at AstraZeneca, a pharmaceutical company of world renown and even more so after the race to find vaccines for Covid-19 during the pandemic.

The brilliance in ICI continues to be found, though sometimes less obviously so, in Ineos, the chemicals empire of Sir Jim Ratcliffe, a throwback to an age of buccaneering industrialists; in Croda, the FTSE 100 chemical and life sciences company; in Johnson Matthey, one of the great innovators in the clean-energy technologies of the future; and in a host of overseas companies, too, including AkzoNobel, the home of the rehoused Dulux dog, DuPont and Huntsman.

Hanson, "a company from over here that is doing rather well over there" as it used to boast of its cracking of the US market, was the great, unashamedly diverse conglomerate. Put together by Lord Hanson, the swashbuckling asset-stripper of the corporate world, it was then dismantled into its constituent parts.

Imperial Tobacco is still what it is, though the tobacco bit has been replaced by the name "Brands". The Hanson construction materials businesses were sold off and are to be found in various places like the Heidelberg multinational and Forterra, the British brickmaker. Its energy interests were parked either side of the Atlantic and in the UK included the privatised Eastern Electricity. Its mainly US chemicals business became Millennium Chemicals.

Break-ups of conglomerates have historically happened for at least a trio of reasons.

The custodians of the conglomerate have moved on and dismantling their empires is the most obvious course. Or the business has fallen to the curse of the conglomerate that the group becomes obviously valued at a discount to the sum of its parts. Or that shareholders, covetous of better returns, see a disassembly as a fast way to gain cash.

All three causes are present in the decision of Smiths Group. It had already started along the path with the sale, under pressure from shareholders, of Smiths Medical during the pandemic.

Yet all along the journey since the 2007 sale of Smiths Aerospace to General Electric of the UK, Smiths chief executives have insisted that the group was not a conglomerate in the conventional form of the word, there was more in the four businesses that bound them than divided them.

But chairs and chief executives have gone and the incumbents have been working together for just ten months. From day one, they say, they have been working on the strategic review that culminated in the plan announced yesterday — a refocusing, they insist, not a break-up.

The final thing to go in such exercises tends to be the name. One can only wonder what they might come up with should they ditch the Smiths name, whose heritage goes back to the Victorian jeweller and clockmaker the company once was.

Smiths deal could be worth £9bn

Continued from page 41

executive for less than a year. This month the firm's finance director quit.

In a statement to the Stock Exchange Carter, who is reversing the policies of the past three Smiths chief executives, said: "Since my appointment the board has spent considerable time evaluating the options to maximise shareholder value and address the persistent discount to the significant value embedded within the group.

"We start from a position of strength and as we execute this strategy we will become a more focused business with significant potential for future growth and value creation. Focusing on our world-class John Crane and Flex-Tek businesses and carefully managing the separation of Smiths Interconnect and Smiths Detection, we will deliver significant value for all stakeholders."

Analysts at JP Morgan Cazenove said the move would eliminate the "conglomerate discount" at which, they said, Smiths' shares trade. Their analysis suggests that the break up could be a £9 billion deal, arguing that on a sum-of-the-parts valuation they could be worth £27.20 a share to investors, a 46 per cent upside to where the stock was trading earlier in the week.

Chevron toes the Trump line and renames Gulf of Mexico

Emily Gosden

Chevron has become the first big energy company to adopt the term "Gulf of America" after President Trump's edict to rename the Gulf of Mexico, one of the world's most prolific oil-producing regions.

Announcing fourth-quarter and annual results that disappointed investors on Friday, Chevron referred throughout its release to its activities in the Gulf of America, making no mention of the basin's usual name.

Trump issued a flurry of executive orders when taking office, including one entitled "restoring names that honour American greatness", which instructed the renaming of the gulf within 30 days.

Mike Wirth, chief executive of Chevron, told Bloomberg: "That's the official position of the US government. If Google Maps is using it, then Chevron is using it."

The renaming order shows how Trump's policies may test companies' diplomatic skills. Google said on Monday it would change the name once it is officially updated in the Geographic Names System in the US.

The change will be visible in America but it will still be named the Gulf of Mexico on maps accessed in Mexico. Users elsewhere will see both names. President Sheinbaum of Mexico said Google was wrong to make the change.

The London-listed Shell and US group Hess, which Chevron is acquiring, continued to refer to the Gulf of Mexico in annual results this week. ExxonMobil, which also reported on Friday, made no mention of the gulf.

Chevron and Exxon's results were a mixed bag as both companies were hit by a collapse in fuel refining margins. Chevron's fourth-quarter earnings of $3.2 billion were 43 per cent higher than a year ago yet disappointed Wall Street by falling short of expectations. Exxon's fourth-quarter profit was broadly flat on the year before but exceeded analyst forecasts.

Trump's renaming order described how "the area formerly known as the Gulf of Mexico" was "an indelible part of America" and renamed it in recognition of the "flourishing economic resource and its critical importance to our nation's economy".

Highlighting the gulf's fossil fuel industry, the executive order said: "The bountiful geology of this basin has made it one of the most prodigious oil and gas regions in the world, providing roughly 14 per cent of our nation's crude-oil production and an abundance of natural gas, and consistently driving new and innovative technologies that have allowed us to tap into some of the deepest and richest oil reservoirs in the world."

● **Shell is warming towards retaining its UK domicile as American oil companies refocus on the home market and US politics becomes more contentious. The oil and gas group has not ruled out moving its listing as it seeks to close a valuation gap with American rivals. Shell now sees "advantage, in the context of US peers retracting their business model more towards the US, in accessing new growth opportunities by being positioned with the political neutrality a UK-domicile would offer", the Citi analyst Alastair Syme said after meeting Shell's chief executive, Wael Sawan.**

‘I’m done with corporate. It’s time to find a dementia cure’

Gavin Patterson, the former boss of BT, has a new calling as chair of Alzheimer’s Research UK, writes **Alex Ralph**

Gavin Patterson, the former boss of BT and senior executive at Salesforce, has been appointed as the chair of Alzheimer’s Research UK, becoming the latest senior business figure to help find a cure for Britain’s biggest killer.

In an exclusive interview, Patterson, 57, says he has committed to the role for the long term. “Over my lifetime, I’m hoping that we make a real breakthrough,” he adds.

The voluntary position forms part of Patterson’s growing portfolio of non-executive roles, which includes directorships at the online grocer Ocado, Kraken, the technology platform, and Kahoot, the educational firm, since he left the United States two years ago. In the corporate world, he was, until 2023, chief strategy officer at Salesforce, the $329 billion software giant.

Speaking at The Park, a restaurant near Hyde Park in London, he explains that the “mission is critical” for Britain’s health system and economy and, unlike his predecessors, fortunately he has not experienced first-hand the devastating disease.

“I’m unusual on the board because I don’t know somebody directly in my family who’s suffering from dementia ... if nothing changes, one in two of us will be directly affected by dementia — either by caring for someone with the condition, developing it ourselves or both,” he says.

Kate Swann, 60, the former chief executive of WH Smith and SSP Group, who was chair briefly from 2022, witnessed the “truly heartbreaking” impact dementia had on her mother, who she described as “a force of nature; the matriarch of our family”.

Despite the threat of the disease in the UK, where almost one million people are living with dementia, there are no treatments available on the NHS to slow, stop or prevent it. It is estimated to cost £42 billion a year and families foot almost two thirds of the expense, according to Alzheimer’s Research UK.

Since the charity was founded in 1992, it has invested more than £237 million in dementia research, helping to fund drug discovery research, diagnostics and scientific understanding of the genetics of the condition. Last year, it invested about £27 million.

Income has grown to £57 million, and the board wants to double it. The appointment of Patterson, who will formally succeed Mike Cooper on February 12, came about after contact from David Mayhew, the vice-chairman of JPMorgan’s global investment bank. Mayhew, 84, was chairman for more than a decade before becoming vice-president in 2023. The two know each from Patterson’s time running BT.

After a 34-year career, including marketing roles at Procter & Gamble, the consumer goods corporation, and Telewest, a broadband firm, Patterson will aim to tap into his network on both sides of the Atlantic to raise funding and awareness, including of lifestyle choices and among employers.

JOSHUA BRATT FOR THE TIMES



Gavin Patterson has had a lofty career and has made the personal sacrifices, he says, but that has given him the freedom to commit to his new important mission

“I mean, it’s not as though dementia only affects people who are retired,” he says. “It can affect people earlier. And in many cases the carers are family members who have to take time off work to look after the person, so it is an issue that employers need to take seriously.”

The charity is based at Granta Park, a technology and science campus in Cambridge, and the research it has helped fund is “beginning to have an impact”, he says. “But when you see the scale of the problem and you look at the treatments available, the understanding of what causes the condition, you realise there is a long way to go.”

In October, the drug donanemab, made by Eli Lilly, the world’s biggest pharma company, which has been shown to slow the progress of Alzheimer’s disease by several months, was rejected for use on the NHS.

Nice, the health watchdog, said it “does not currently demonstrate value for the NHS” and its cost-effectiveness estimate was five to six times above what the regulator normally considers an acceptable use of NHS resources.

The drug has been deemed safe and effective by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for patients in the early stages of Alzheimer’s and is available in Britain for those who can pay for it, although charities said it would be “unaffordable for the vast majority”.

Two months earlier, the drug lecanemab was rejected for NHS use despite also being approved by the MHRA.

Both drugs are designed to help clear amyloid, a protein that builds up in the brains of people with Alzheimer’s, and to slow memory and thinking problems.

Patterson is concerned about the lack of funding and investment for serious health conditions compared with oncology, where Big Pharma, including AstraZeneca, Britain’s biggest public company, has made important breakthroughs and treatments have become more effective, safer and cheaper.

“Where there are treatments available, or your speed of getting access to them is being curtailed because of budgets, essentially, and affordability, then that’s deeply frustrating for people,” he says.

The potential of artificial intelligence presents a “once in a lifetime” opportunity to accelerate drug development, including by mining NHS health records, and moving to a model where there is a “mixture of paid and free at the point of use” are, he believes, the solutions.

“I think relying on everything to be free is something that has to change. Easy to say but difficult to change. And I think we need to take a longer term view,” he adds.

Patterson, who has four adult children with his American wife, did that personally when he decided to end his career in executive leadership.

“I finished at Salesforce in January 2023 and at that point I knew I was done,” he says. “CEO jobs ... they’re a lot harder than they’re portrayed for the glamour and the profile and obviously the money. There’s a lot of trade-offs and a lot of sacrifices. They do affect your health and your relationships.”

When Mayhew came calling, the board was “looking for somebody who had not just the personal time to put into it, but the years ahead of them”, Patterson says, adding: “Hopefully.”

MARKETING COMMUNICATION

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Dominic O'Connell



O'Leary's right … when it comes to growth, Reeves's plans just won't fly

Lots of bosses boast about their self-discipline — getting up at 4am to go to the gym, 30 minutes of meditation and no booze — but Ryanair's Michael O'Leary has demonstrated the kind of iron self-control that puts him on another level.

When I stuck a microphone in front of him to ask him about Rachel Reeves's growth plan, announced that morning, he refrained from swearing for nearly five minutes. A colossal feat of self-denial, as O'Leary is to swearing what Nureyev was to dancing and had for the previous hour run through his repertoire in the abuse of Labour in general and Reeves in particular.

The chancellor should not feel singled out. Tirades against politicians have long been O'Leary's thing and his colourful rants are the biggest weapon in the Ryanair publicity machine — all entirely by design: when he took over in the mid-1990s he refused even to have his picture taken, until he worked out that the only thing worse than being talked about was not being talked about.

His comedic value, however, sometimes distracts from the message. He has a shrewd and wide-ranging business brain. You do not turn a tiny loss-making Irish carrier into Europe's biggest airline by not understanding finance, politics and what people want.

His criticism of Reeves is that her growth plans contradict themselves. That morning she had come out strongly in favour of expansion of the aviation industry, putting the government's weight behind plans for a new runway at Heathrow, another at Gatwick and an expansion of capacity at Luton.

On the other hand, one of her first acts as chancellor was to increase taxes on flying. Air passenger duty was increased in the budget from £13 per short-haul ticket to £15. This takes effect from April next year. Ryanair's average ticket price from the UK is £44. This means, as O'Leary says, that the tax rate on the airline's products will be about 33 per cent.

The result is not expansion, which Reeves claims to favour, but stagnation. The airline announced seven new routes from Stansted this week but this was balanced by the culling of flights from regional UK airports. Total UK capacity year on year will be flat and the company is instead expanding its operations in countries where aviation taxes had been cut: Sweden, Italy, Poland and Hungary. Sweden, which gave us the idea of *flygskam*, or flight shame, has ditched its £6-a-ticket aviation tax. It will get four new Ryanair aircraft this summer and Hungary will get three.



There are bigger decisions coming on where to put aircraft. Ryanair, which already operates 560 planes, has another 300 on order from Boeing. Even though deliveries are likely to be delayed by the turmoil at the US manufacturer, that is a lot of new aircraft for which to find work.

In the past Ryanair has put about 40 per cent of its new capacity into the UK. Would any of this batch be coming here if taxes stay at their current level, I asked. "No," O'Leary said, although he later recanted a little. "I mean you can never say never. If easyJet went bust we would have to do something."

Ryanair has tried the carrot as well as the stick. Shortly after the budget O'Leary wrote to Reeves offering to put 30 extra aircraft into the UK, enough to take its annual passenger numbers here from just short of 60 million to 80 million. The condition was that Reeves had to scrap air passenger duty. He received a negative reply not from the chancellor, but from James Murray, exchequer secretary, or as O'Leary describes him, "some dopey junior minister".

The Ryanair boss, by the way, is in favour of more runways. The airline has never flown from Heathrow and is never likely to but O'Leary has no objection to development there. His criticism is that a new runway is decades away, if it happens, but a cut in taxation would deliver what Reeves claims to want now. Instead she has increased taxes on flying, which will have a chilling effect on activity.

There is a wider, and perhaps more damning criticism too. O'Leary contrasted the last new Labour government, that of Blair and Brown, to the new one. "They [Blair and Brown] had thought about it and came in with a big plan — independence of the Bank of England — this government had lots of time to think about it, to come in and hit the ground running. There has been nothing. I am astonished."

O'Leary, of course, is talking his own book and his complaints about the government are aimed at Ryanair making more money. The logic, though, is sound: if you say you want something but do things to prevent it then you either don't really want it or don't have a clue what you are doing. Reeves might be forced to confront this reality quite soon. Having talked so much about growth, embarrassment looms if meaningful improvement does not arrive this year. Forecasts for growth are going down, not up, and there are faint signs of her position shifting.

Speaking to Times Radio the day after her growth speech, Reeves conceded "there are consequences" from her increase in employer national insurance contributions. That sounded very much like a politician trying to get ahead of a looming disappointment.

PS Bullshitters often give themselves away by their choice of words. Roger Nouveau, the *Fast Show* character who claims to be a lifelong football fan, betrays himself by saying he would like to try supporting "that Newcastle Athletic". So it is with Sir Keir Starmer and growth. He pledges that he will do anything to get the economy going, but his words suggest that he has not really got to grips with the subject. In an article for this paper on Wednesday he talked about his desire for deregulation. He even invoked the spirit of Margaret Thatcher, saying that her government "deregulated finance capital". Did what? She deregulated the financial industry, perhaps, or deregulated the City, but "finance capital" as a phrase is meaningless. It gives the impression that someone junior was asked to write something and came up with an important-sounding phrase, provided, perhaps, by DeepSeek. Maybe Sir Keir will remember to shout for his beloved Gonners next time he is at the Emirates stadium.

Dominic O'Connell is business presenter for Times Radio

Walgreens pulls plug on 90 years of payouts

Isabella Fish Retail Editor

The US pharmacy chain that owns Boots has suspended its dividend, ending a run of quarterly shareholder payouts that lasted more than 90 years.

Shares in Walgreens Boots Alliance (WBA) fell $1.41, or 12.3 per cent, to $10.05 in early trading on Wall Street on Friday after it announced the dividend suspension, making it the worst performer on the S&P 500.

The company said it had made the move to strengthen its balance sheet and improve its cashflow as bosses attempt to turn around its fortunes.

Walgreens has suffered amid low drug reimbursement rates, rising costs, thefts and squeezed US consumers avoiding high-priced items.

The business, whose executive chairman, the billionaire tycoon Stefano Pessina, is its largest shareholder, is in the middle of a turnaround that includes the closure of 1,200 of its 8,500 stores in the US.

Walgreens said it needed the extra cash over the next few years to cover litigation and debt refinancing.

The US justice department filed a lawsuit last month accusing Walgreens of filling millions of prescriptions without a legitimate purpose, including some for opioids. Last summer the company agreed to pay $106 million to settle separate litigation over false payment claims.

The dividend suspension comes after Walgreens cut its quarterly dividend almost in half last year. It slashed the payout to 25 cents from 48 cents after spending about $1.7 billion on cash dividends in the 2023 financial year.

It comes despite Walgreens' first-quarter results showing signs that a turnaround strategy under Tim Wentworth, its chief executive, is bearing fruit. Walgreens' US retail pharmacy unit posted sales of $30.9 billion for the quarter, above estimates of $29.1 billion.

Overall, WBA's first-quarter sales increased 7.5 per cent against the same quarter the previous year to $39.5 billion. The group reported a net loss of $265 million compared with a net loss of $67 million a year ago, after costs associated with store closures.

Boots, the jewel in the crown of Walgreens, reported an 8.1 per cent rise in like-for-like retail sales in the three months to the end of November. However, Anthony Hemmerdinger, managing director of Boots UK and Ireland, warned of "heightened cost pressures" this year.

Left, right and everything in between

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Business

Confidence is key if the economy

Keynes could provide some inspiration as Rachel Reeves tries to shift the public's mood, writes **Jack Barnett**

Rachel Reeves would be well advised to turn to the works of John Maynard Keynes, the intellectual underpinning for the Labour Party's economic policy-making, for validation of her latest attempt to revive growth.

"Most, probably, of our decisions to do something positive", Keynes wrote in his magnum opus *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, "can only be taken as a result of animal spirits."

"A large proportion of our positive activities depend on spontaneous optimism rather than on a mathematical expectation," he elaborated.

In layman's terms, the typical person does not care about things like gross domestic product or the real rate of interest. They just get a good or bad vibe about buying a new house or a car.

Leading indicators of consumer and business sentiment have fallen sharply since October's budget, while expectations for trading activity are glum. Companies have warned of a hiring freeze owing to the £25 billion employer national insurance rise. Others have threatened to increase prices to offset higher tax bills.

The UK economy is suffering from a confidence deficit, which in turn holds back spending, constrains investment and curbs employment despite the economic fundamentals being solid.

The chancellor tried to tackle this with her speech on growth this week, turning to bullishness and reinforcing the government's determination to complete infrastructure projects.

As Keynes argued, when an economy is in stagnation, the government should step in with increased spending to boost demand and revive animal spirits. With this change in tone, the chancellor seems to have recognised that the key to growth may well lie in dispelling the cloud of pessimism, and its corrosive growth. Luckily for her, confidence is one of the easiest economic indicators to turn around.

And there are reasons to be cheerful about the economy:

HOUSEHOLD FINANCES ARE EXCEPTIONALLY STRONG

There has been a squeeze on household finances since the 2008 financial crisis. Real wages, a measure of living standards, are barely higher compared with 17 years ago. But this pattern has inverted of late, with pay growth well in excess of inflation since July 2023. The debt burden on households — measured as debt as a share of income — is the lightest in more than two decades, at about 120 per cent.

Paul Dales, chief UK economist at Capital Economics, said: "The financial position of households looks pretty solid at the aggregate level, with real incomes rising and plenty of scope for the saving rate to fall. At some point, households will increase their spending more rapidly."

Jamie Constable, partner and market strategist at Singer Capital Markets, said: "Consumption is over 60 per cent of the UK economy, employment is high and the consumer balance sheet continues to improve."

"The household sector is in relatively good health," Hetal Mehta, head of economic research at St James's Place, said, adding that the chance of a recession was pretty low.

ELEVATED SAVINGS SUGGEST CONSUMERS HAVE CASH TO SPLASH

The household savings ratio — the share of income set aside each month — stood at 10.1 per cent at the end of last year, above the historical average, excluding pandemic-affected months, of 8.2 per cent.

Greater propensity to save is likely to have been supported by three factors. First, interest rates are much more attractive compared with the recent past, so the incentive to save rather than spend is stronger. Second, experiencing a series of economic shocks in quick succession — the financial crisis, Brexit, Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine — may have instilled greater caution into households. Third, joblessness concerns have inched up.

However, amid rising real wages and high savings, households have the resources to charge economic growth, which has stagnated since the summer, by ratcheting up spending.

"Consumers have the means to unleash more consumption, if they so wish," Ellie Henderson, an economist at the investment firm Investec, said.

That real wages have grown sharply but consumption remains downbeat suggests households lack the necessary confidence to part with their cash.

LABOUR MARKET STILL A BRIGHT SPOT DESPITE TAX WORRIES

For all the warnings from businesses about a retreat from hiring, the labour market is in pretty good shape.

Unemployment is low, at 4.4 per cent, and vacancies, while down to their lowest level since spring 2021, remain higher than when compared with before the pandemic, even after companies rushed to hire millions of staff after lockdown restrictions were lifted.

Crucially for the Bank of England, the number of available workers per vacancy has risen over the past year, suggesting that the risk of manufacturing an inflationary impulse via the labour market with interest rate cuts has receded. Rates were also left at a peak of 5.25 per cent for a year without a noticeable rise in unemployment, while inflation is now within the range of the Bank of England's 2 per cent target.

Nonetheless, there is a risk that the government's policies, most notably the rise in employers' national insurance contributions and the 6.7 per cent rise in the minimum wage, weaken the labour market in the coming months. Sainsbury's recently announced 3,000 redundancies, while Tesco and Morrisons also intend to lay off staff. The government's plan to raise workers' rights will increase employment costs too.

INTEREST RATE CUTS MAY BE THE CATALYST FOR GROWTH

The problem with government spending is that it can take decades to yield benefits and the chancellor, as she insisted last week, is in a hurry. In this endeavour, she could be handed a reprieve from the Bank of England.

Interest rate cuts are almost immediately seen by households and businesses via news headlines, lower mortgage and corporate borrowing rates. Among economists, the consensus is four cuts this year, taking borrowing costs down to 3.75 per cent from 4.75 per cent. Markets predict just two.

Henderson said: "With lower rates, consumers' appetite for saving could diminish and the attractiveness of investment rise, amplifying any boost from pro-growth policies."

Andrew Bailey, the Bank's governor, and the rest of the monetary policy committee are expected to kick off this year's policy easing with a 25 basis point cut on February 6, which could be the spark the economy, and Reeves, needs.



Half full or half empty?

No clear path on interest rates for

Analysis

Since the start of the year the UK's bond markets have been hit with tumult, the government has been forced to unveil a package of growth-enhancing reforms and surveys of private sector output have fallen stagnant (Mehreen Khan writes).

This is the backdrop against which the Bank of England — arguably the most powerful economic authority that determines the country's immediate growth prospects — will next week make its first policy intervention of the year.

The Bank's monetary policy committee (MPC) is widely expected to lower interest rates by a quarter of a percentage point on Thursday, reducing the base rate to 4.5 per cent.

The decision will be a welcome boost for corporate borrowers and mortgage holders and will mark the third rate reduction since autumn last year. But unlike its peers in the eurozone, US and Canada, the Bank is not yet ready to support flatlining economic growth with sizeable interest rate cuts after more than two years of fighting raging inflation. Rather, economists and traders say next week's decision will be the latest in the "stop-start" approach to monetary easing for a committee that is still deeply divided on how far to remove its foot off the brakes of the economy.

"The uncertainties that have prevented the MPC from committing to cuts beyond immediate meetings remain," Moyeen Islam, fixed-income strategist at Barclays, said. "The risk is that the market will be disappointed by a non-committal [decision]."

The UK's ratesetters are confronting a potentially "stagflationary" dilemma that central bankers fear: the economy and labour market are showing prolonged signs of weakness, justifying easing policy. Yet inflation, which is what the Bank is tasked to control, is likely to keep creeping up this year. The latter would suggest borrowing costs should at the very least be held at the currently restrictive levels.

"The Bank of England's projections are likely to show its low-growth, above-target inflation dilemma has worsened," Matt Swannell, chief economic adviser to the EY Item Club, a forecaster, said.

Market developments over the past month make the MPC's decisions more complicated. The jump in UK and US bond yields at the start of January tightened global financial conditions, exerting a downward force on inflation and the economy.

On the flip side, the pound has been one of the worst performing big currencies and has weakened by more than 2.5 per cent on a trade-weighted measure since November — a development that will stoke inflation on imported goods.

is to flourish



Source: GfK consumer confidence index, S&P Global, ONS

the Bank of England

The nine-strong committee differs on the relative importance of all these factors and has been consistently divided on the best course of action. At its previous decision in December, six members voted to keep rates on hold, and three said they should be reduced. Economists expect an 8-1 split in favour of a 0.25 percentage point cut next week, with only Catherine Mann, an external voter, dissenting.

For Chris Hare, senior economist at HSBC, the UK's poor growth outlook "is more concerning" than worries about a resurgence in inflation. "There is clearer evidence of stagnation in the GDP data, a post-budget drop in sentiment, and the potential adverse impact of higher market interest rates on the government's fiscal plans and on those with mortgages," Hare said.

Financial markets think the opposite is true and are betting on only one more rate cut after February this year. Traders will be guided by a new set of Bank forecasts on growth and inflation that will be published alongside its decision at noon on Thursday.

The forecast for GDP growth is widely expected to be cut for this year and next, while the short-term path of inflation will be higher. City analysts expect annual consumer price inflation will reach 3 per cent (from 2.5 per cent) by the end of the year on the back of base effects on energy prices and sticky wage growth. A 3 per cent rate would force Bank governor Andrew Bailey to write a letter to the chancellor explaining the overshoot.

One factor that won't change the needle for the Bank next week is the announcement of a series of planning, investment and transport decisions from Rachel Reeves this week.

Promises on more housebuilding and a third runway at Heathrow, if it happens, will affect the long-run supply-side of the economy only over the coming decades rather than the coming years.

Growth in house prices slows in January

Martin Strydom

UK house price growth slowed in January but the market remains resilient despite buyers continuing to struggle to afford a mortgage, according to Nationwide.

Prices rose by 0.1 per cent over the month, less than the 0.3 per cent increase forecast by economists, and year-on-year the rate of growth slowed to 4.1 per cent, compared with 4.7 per cent in December, the mortgage lender's latest house price survey showed.

The average UK house price in January is £268,213, down from £269,426 last month. Robert Gardner, chief economist at Nationwide, said: "The housing market continues to show resilience despite affordability pressures."

He said that although there had been a "modest improvement" over the past year, affordability remained stretched by historical standards.

A prospective buyer with an average income and buying a typical first-time property with a 20 per cent deposit would face a monthly mortgage payment equivalent to 36 per cent of take-home pay: well above the long-run average of 30 per cent, he said.

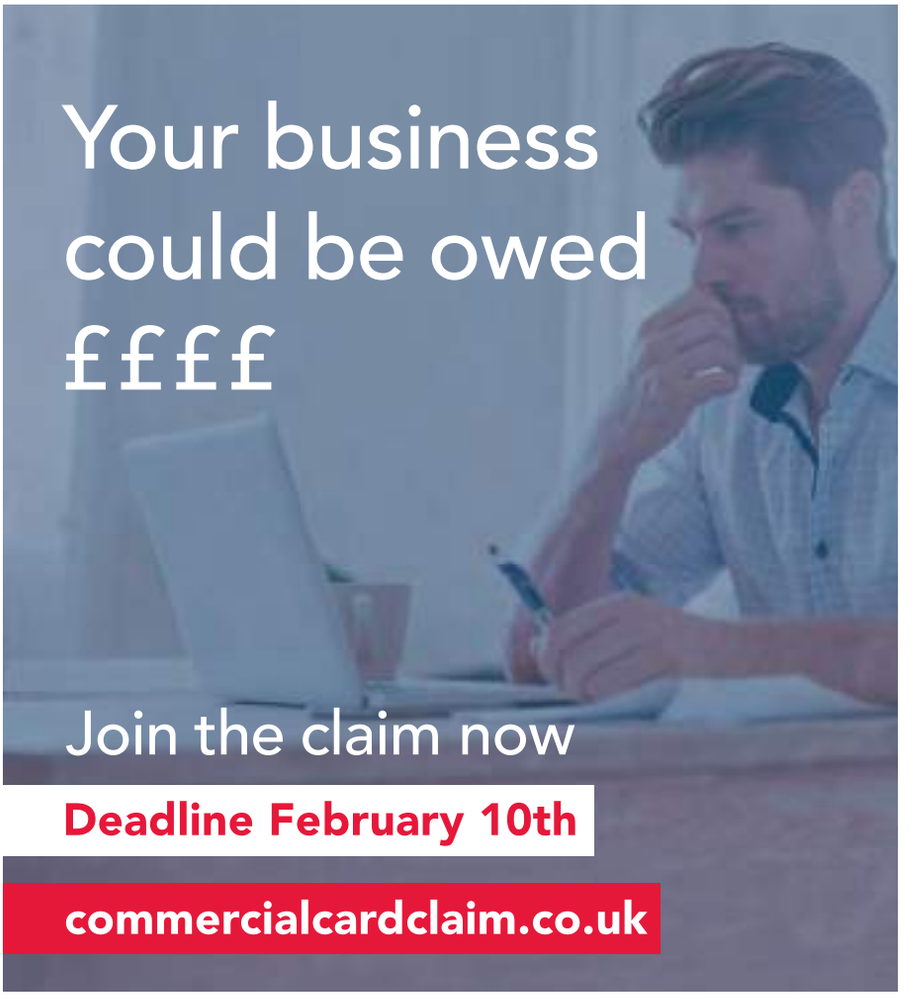
About 40 per cent of first-time buyers had some help to raise a deposit, either in the form of a gift or loan from family or friends or through an inheritance, Gardner said.

There have been signs of a pick-up in demand. Bank of England data on Thursday showed that net mortgage lending volumes rose in December by the greatest amount in more than two years and the property website Rightmove reported this month that sellers had flocked to the market since Boxing Day, giving buyers the highest level of choice at the start of a year since 2015.

It said, however, that asking prices were nearly £9,000 below May 2024's record, reflecting buyer affordability constraints and "sticky" mortgage rates. It also pointed to uncertainties, including the pace of interest rate cuts and the impact of the ending of a temporary cut to stamp duty on March 31.

HARCUS PARKER

Commercial Card Claim



Mastercard and Visa are unlawfully overcharging businesses for accepting card payments on commercial cards. You can join the claim if your business has received payments from customers using commercial cards anytime between 6 June 2016 and 6 June 2022.

The claim is being led by Harcus Parker, a specialist litigation firm with deep experience of running collective actions. The claim is fully funded and insured, meaning no cost and no risk to you should you choose to join.

Freedom day for Rosenblatt

The founder of one of the City's best-known law firms has relaunched the company, ending a bitter boardroom fight for control (Jonathan Ames writes).

Ian Rosenblatt, 65, who founded RBG Holdings in 1989, said yesterday he had started a new entity, Rosenblatt Law, trading as Rosenblatt. Like its predecessor, it will specialise in complex disputes and arbitration.

Rosenblatt, right, said the change — "with the same team and drive" — meant "independence".

Jonathan Watmough, of RPC, is chairman and Adil Taha, a former banker, is chief executive.

RBG HOLDINGS



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ITV in talks with Abu Dhabi fund over studios merger

Emma Powell

ITV is in early-stage talks with the Emirati-backed fund controlling the sale of the Telegraph titles over a merger of their respective studio production businesses.

Discussions between the broadcaster and RedBird IMI have centred on a combination of ITV's Studios business and All3Media, the production company behind *The Traitors*.

ITV examined an acquisition of All3Media in 2023 and judged the production company to be a good strategic fit with its Studios arm. It was outbid, however, by RedBird IMI, which completed a £1.15 billion acquisition of the company, which consists of more than 50 production and distribution businesses around the world.

RedBird IMI is led by the former CNN executive Jeff Zucker and is backed by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates royal family.

One option that is reportedly being explored is for ITV to separate its broadcast business and merge Studios, which produces television shows including *Love Island* and *The Voice*, with All3Media, with RedBird IMI and ITV holding stakes in the entity. The talks were first reported by Reuters.

Any deal would create one of the largest production companies in Europe, with revenue of just over £3 billion, based on 2023 figures published by the companies.

The talks come as RedBird IMI searches for a buyer for the Telegraph after RedBird Capital Partners, the American private equity business that runs RedBird IMI, was blocked by ministers last year from taking control of the newspaper group. The fund has been in control of the Telegraph's future for eight months but has not secured a buyer able to pay the price tag it set.

ITV and RedBird IMI declined to comment on the reports.

Dame Carolyn McCall, ITV chief executive, is under pressure to revive the broadcaster's share price and unlock value from its Studios business, considered the jewel among its operation. Speculation over a bid emerging for ITV has also continued to swirl, with potential suitors including the private equity firm CVC Capital.

ITV has been hit by a slowdown in advertising over the past two years as economic confidence has been shaken. Total advertising revenue staged a recovery during the first nine months of the year, growing 6 per cent on a year earlier, led by digital spending. However, that has been offset by a decline in studios revenue, which has suffered as a result of the Hollywood actors' and writers' strike.

McCall said in November that the company was on course to save an additional £20 million in costs this year, on top of the £40 million in savings already outlined, as it attempts to boost its bottom line. The business is due to report full-year results on March 6.

The shares, which closed ¼p, or 0.4 per cent, higher at 74¼p, have more than halved in value since McCall was appointed in 2018.

In a world of uncertainty, 'prudent' Next is a rock

MARKET REPORT

Analysts at UBS upgraded Next to "buy" from "neutral", saying they believe the retailer is at an inflection point in terms of growth and valuation (Tom Saunders writes).

Next's share price rose by 176p, or 1.8 per cent, to £99.52 after the bank pointed to its "prudent" guidance for 2025 and its long track record of beating its guidance in an "uncertain" wider consumer landscape. "Next beat its initial profit-before-tax guidance in 11 out of 14 years," the analysts added. "This year likely is another one."

Overall, the FTSE 100 rose by 27.08 points, or 0.31 per cent, to 8,673.96, completing a 6.1 per cent rise over the month, its best since November 2022. On the week it rose by 171.61 points, or 2.02 per cent.

Smiths Group was the biggest riser on the FTSE 100, up by 201p, or 10.8 per cent, to £20.66 after the industrial group announced a series of strategic moves, including plans to separate two of its four units and to increase its buyback programme.

At the other end of the index, despite spot gold prices surpassing $2,800 per ounce for the first time, the goldminer **Fresnillo** fell by 16½p, or 2.3 per cent, to 696p. In the FTSE 250, **Hochschild Mining** also dropped by 3.80p, or 2.1 per cent, to 176p.

Overall, the FTSE 250 rose by 145.41 points, or 0.7 per cent, to 20,950.48 and was up on the week by 432.43 points, or 2.11 per cent.

Tritax Big Box Reit, the warehouse owner, rose by 3½p, or 2.4 per cent, to 146p after it said in a trading update that it was entering 2025 with "growing confidence" after it secured £22.7 million of contracted rent in 2024.

Elsewhere, James Halstead, the flooring supplier, warned it had experienced "more caution" following Labour's budget. Its shares were down by 2½p, or 1.4 per cent, to 172p.

Wall Street report

Indices were mixed but stocks had mainly recovered from Monday's sharp tech sell-off. At noon the Dow Jones industrial average was down 2.66 points, or 0.1 per cent, at 44,879.47 as the S&P 500 was 3.19 points, or 0.1 per cent, lower at 6,067.98. The Nasdaq was up 61.07 points, or 0.3 per cent, at 19,742.82.

The day's biggest movers

Company	Change
Smiths Group Announces Review	10.8%
Bridgepoint Yields fall	6.1%
Paragon Banking Group Gilt yields drop	4.9%
Tritax Big Box Reit Strong trading update	2.4%
Next Broker upgrade	1.8%
Anglo American Tariff concerns	-0.4%
Taylor Wimpey House price worries	-0.6%
Barrat Redrow House price growth slows	-0.9%
Antofagasta Copper price falls	-1.2%
Investec Pound rises	-1.3%

‘I think we’re all in agreement that discounts need to be addressed’

Maggie Fanari of RIT Capital Partners aims to emulate the Rothschild golden years, writes **Patrick Hosking**

SONJA HORSMAN FOR THE TIMES



Maggie Fanari, pictured at Il Vicolo, near St James’s Palace, has doubled down on share buybacks and crystalised some tasty profits from some unlisted investments

Maggie Fanari, a fund manager with RIT Capital Partners, has chosen a favourite haunt of the late Lord Rothschild for our lunch. The legendary dealmaker and investor dined frequently at Il Vicolo, an unpretentious Italian tucked away in an alleyway a stone’s throw from St James’s Palace in London.

The three daughters of the restaurant’s late proprietor, who run it today, fondly recall his frequent visits. The scion of the banking and wine dynasty would routinely arrange for one of his fabulous bottles to be delivered to the restaurant for uncorking a few hours before turning up to dine himself.

A display of empty bottles is devoted to the Rothschild palate, including a weathered-looking Chateau Lafite Rothshild 1953. One fancifully imagines it being cracked open perhaps to celebrate the founding in 1971 of Rothschild Investment Trust, now renamed RIT Capital Partners, which Fanari manages today.

Or maybe to mark his most seismic moment — the audacious but ultimately unsuccessful break-up bid for BAT (British American Tobacco) with Sir Jimmy Goldsmith and Kerry Packer — a record £13 billion battle that mesmerised the City in 1989.

All ancient history, of course. Rothschild retired from the board in 2019, though as a 22 per cent shareholder directly and through charitable trusts, he maintained a keen interest. He died early last year, with his eldest child, Hannah, taking on family responsibility.

RIT, a £4 billion FTSE 250 company, is a rather different beast today. It is more professionalised and perhaps less daringly opportunistic, though still seeking to be true to Rothschild’s philosophy of resilient wealth generation even in adverse markets.

Fanari joined the RIT board as a non-executive director in 2019 and then stepped across to head the management company J Rothschild Capital Management (JRCM), which runs the trust, in 2024. She recalls being interviewed for the initial role by Lord Rothschild, who bowled her a googly with his very first question, which was about the direction of the Brazilian real. She obviously passed muster and Rothschild took her to lunch at Il Vicolo.

“That was Jacob,” she says. “He was very good at pulling information and asking questions, and getting the best of people.”

It’s time to order. No wine, thank you: “I have to stay sharp.” A glass of tap water is fine for Fanari, who confesses she frequently eats lunch at her desk. She recommends the mozzarella salad, which we both choose as a starter. She then opts for the chargrilled sea bass, while I go for the ravioli and walnut sauce.

She loves eating out, though not cooking, she says, and adores the variety of international cuisine in London, where she has lived for more than ten years. “And there’s always Deliveroo as well,” she adds. A Canadian raised in the suburbs of Toronto by her teacher father and company manager mother, she is so enamoured of the UK she has taken British citizenship. Yet she still travels and is just back from trekking in Patagonia.

The conversation soon turns to Boaz Weinstein of Saba, the New York activist investor laying siege to seven UK investment trusts and setting the whole sector aflutter. Just two days earlier Weinstein had been emphatically knocked back by shareholders of one of his targets, Herald Investment Trust.

It’s all been about the discounts at which the trusts have traded relative to their net assets, she says of the drama. “I think we’re all in agreement, whether it’s shareholders, management teams or boards, that discounts need to be addressed.”

Doing so is hard though, as Fanari is discovering. RIT, which has not been on Saba’s target list, trades on one of the widest discounts of any of the UK’s biggest trusts: 24 per cent on the day of our lunch, and now 26 per cent.

It is “very frustrating,” Fanari says, spearing a chunk of succulent mozzarella. After all, RIT had for many years traded at a premium, as befitted a trust that even today can boast an excellent long-run track record of 10.3 per cent annual total share price return since inception. Tens of thousands of small investors enjoyed investing on the same terms as the Rothshild family.

But the golden years ended abruptly in 2022, as interest rates started to rise and doubts surfaced about RIT’s heavy weighting to unlisted shares. That discount has stubbornly remained even though Fanari has doubled down on a big share buyback programme, rebalanced the portfolio more to listed shares, while also crystalising very decent profits from some unlisted investments.

These include Coupang, dubbed “South Korea’s Amazon”, where RIT made seven times its original investment.

There are many more potential winners, she argues. RIT farms out much of its private investing to acclaimed third-party managers in the US such as Thrive, which owns a stake in OpenAI, and Iconiq, a fund seeded by Meta’s chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, which has delivered a 34 per cent internal rate of return since 2015.

A more robust IPO market would help, she believes, so that RIT could exit more of its early investments. “The momentum is building, we just need that momentum to continue, and then the market [will] figure it out pretty quickly.”

Fanari is also forging ahead with a much bigger push to sell the RIT story to wealth managers and retail investment platforms.

My soundings of investors and analysts after our lunch say the mood music from RIT has definitely changed. One long-time shareholder says Fanari has got off to a good start and has high hopes for more wins from RIT’s investments in AI and crypto-related start-ups. One analyst says that while investment performance has yet to pick up, the investor relations at least have “improved immeasurably”.

As our mains arrive, we talk about some of the misunderstandings about RIT. Fanari reckons it has been unfairly seen as expensive. The problem came to a head last year when the Fidelity investment platform dropped RIT for a while, a problem now resolved.

RIT’s total expense ratio is an unexceptional 0.77 per cent. I mischievously point out that the 40-strong management team at JRCM do work in a palace — literally: the lavish Spencer House, a magnificent 18th-century pile that looks across Green Park to Buckingham Palace. It and some of its antique treasures are owned by RIT and in the balance sheet at about £25 million. It might give the impression, fair or not, of the managers living high on the hog, I suggest.

Fanari disagrees. “It’s a great place to hold meetings. It’s very strong for our brand. And there’s a successful and profitable events business too.”

As we finish with espressos, our chat turns to Fanari’s long spell at Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan, one of those Canadian institutional investment giants that Rachel Reeves is eager Britain should replicate. Fanari straddled both publicly listed and private investments as global head of high-conviction equities at the $250 billion colossus.

“I think it’s really encouraging. There are real benefits in using ... pension capital to drive UK domestic growth. It’s a win-win if done well for pension savers as well.”

Investment is a long-term game and requires skill and patience — a lesson both government ministers and RIT shareholders are having to learn, I conclude, as we head out into the rain.

CV

Age: 45
Education: York University in Canada, Schulich School of Business.
Career: KPMG, 2001-2005; Scotia Capital, 2005-06; Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan, 2006-24; J Rothschild Capital Management 2024-.
Family: Unmarried, no children

RECEIPT

2 x cover charge	£3.60
2 x insalata Caprese	£29.80
1 x sea bass with rocket and cherry tomatoes	£19.90
1 x ravioli with tomato and walnut sauce	£18.90
2 x espresso	£6.40
13.5% service charge	£10.61
TOTAL	**£89.21**

Il Vicolo SW1Y

THANK YOU!!



Money



Retiring early was the best thing we ever did
Pages 54-55

Should governments invest in crypto?
The Big Question, page 52



BA put our family reunion at risk
Your Money Matters, Page 57

Get ready for the big pension tax grab

Bringing retirement savings into the inheritance tax net could raise £65 billion by 2047. Here's how to protect yourself, says **George Nixon**



Families could hand over an extra £65.4 billion to the taxman over 20 years after pensions become liable for inheritance tax (IHT).

At the moment pension pots are exempt from IHT, but this will change in April 2027. The reform, introduced in the budget in October, will hit those leaving a pot to anyone other than a spouse or civil partner.

The Treasury said it will bring in £640 million in the first year, £1.34 billion in the 2028-29 tax year and £1.46 billion in 2029-2030. But new estimates from the consultancy Lane Clark & Peacock put the extra raised at more than £6.2 billion a year by 2047.

In 2023-2024 total IHT receipts were £7.5 billion, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility.

"Applying inheritance tax to pension balances could be a real gold mine for the government for many years to come," said Tim Camfield from LCP.

How will it work?

Every estate gets a £325,000 IHT allowance and anyone leaving their main home to a direct descendant gets another £175,000 residence allowance (estates worth more than £2 million get less). Anything left to a spouse or civil partner is IHT-free and they can also inherit each other's unused allowances, meaning that a couple can pass on £1 million tax-free.

Pensions, for now, are not counted as part of your estate for IHT purposes, but if you die after 75, the person who inherits your pension will have to pay income tax on it. From 2027, however, any money left in your pot will be added to your estate, which could push many families over the IHT threshold.

For example, a couple with a £900,000 house, £100,000 cash and pension pots worth £2 million and £600,000 would face no IHT on their £3.6 million estate if they both died before April 2027. If they died later, they would lose some of their residence IHT allowance and be charged 40 per cent IHT on £2.95 million of their estate, so a bill of £1.18 million, said David Gibb from the wealth manager Quilter Cheviot.

The pensions affected are the most common type — defined contribution (DC) pensions, where the pot of money you get at retirement depends on how much was paid in and how your investments perform. These include most workplace pensions, and private and self-invested personal pensions (Sipps). The pensions that will not be affected are workplace defined benefit (DB, also known as final salary) schemes, which guarantee an income for life and so do not have a "pot" that can be passed on, although some include provision to pay out to a spouse or partner after your death.

How it will change the way we save

The lack of IHT on pensions has been seen as a lucrative loophole by many families. Those with additional sources of retirement income, such as savings, investments or money from their home, look to use those up first so that they have more pension to pass on to children or grandchildren.

Once the change comes in, they may start to spend more of their pension money and be less likely to take equity release products or downsize, which could have a knock-on effect on the housing market. Roger Clarke, a partner at the advice firm The Private Office, said: "There's a lot of people with pensions that they weren't going to use themselves. So there's got to be a bit of a rethink."

A big pension could also reduce your £175,000 residence IHT allowance if it pushes your estate value above £2 million.

An unfair penalty?

LCP said that about £33 billion of the expected £65.4 billion to be raised from IHT on pensions by 2047 will come from those savers who transferred out of generous DB schemes between 2015 and 2020.

After rules changes in 2015 made it easier to take money from your pension without having to buy a guaranteed income through an annuity, large numbers of retirement savers swapped their DB pensions for large cash sums. Many savers thought that they could invest those sums and get higher incomes than they were guaranteed to get from their pensions, while others were simply tempted by the cash on offer.

Because interest rates at the time were low, DB pensions were given very generous valuations — firms looked at the income the pension offered and worked out the size of pot needed to generate that income if returns were 1-2 per cent a year.

"Transfer values were astronomical. It was common to see people being offered 40 times their final salary as a cash amount," said Clarke. "The most we ever saw was 75 times salary."

Gibb said that some who transferred out of a DB pension did it because they were thinking about inheritance.

About 214,000 people transferred out an estimated £80 billion between April 2015 and March 2020, according to LCP analysis of figures from the Financial Conduct Authority, the City regulator.

The average transferred pot was worth £352,303 between April 2015 and September 2018 and £405,178 between October 2018 and March 2020. Those transferring were typically in their late fifties.

LCP estimates that the annual IHT paid from pots transferred out of DB schemes will go from £468 million in 2029-30, to more than £3 billion a year by 2045. Camfield said: "As the DB transfer generation gets older, the government will start to see a multi-billion pound revenue stream from the income tax or IHT on their pots."

How to avoid IHT on your pension

The short answer is to spend it, or give it away. Every year you have an annual £3,000 gift allowance and there is no tax due on any gifts made seven or more years before you die.

You can also make regular gifts from excess income, so if you take more than you need from your pension, you can give that away IHT-free. The gifts must be regular, and cannot affect your standard of living. Keep records of anything you give away.

Money

The big question

Is it right for a government to hold crypto?

The Treasury stands to win a chunk of £5 billion of bitcoin seized from organised crime. Should it be allowed to keep its stash?

Yes



Keld van Schreven from the digital asset investment firm KR1

I believe that the Treasury and Bank of England should buy bitcoin and other digital currencies such as ethereum to add to the country's asset reserve and fund Britain's future.

Bitcoin has proven to be a robust and secure financial network that is free from interference and quantitative easing. It is why the Trump administration in the US is exploring a national cryptocurrency stockpile — reflecting a major policy shift toward supporting digital assets.

The key question now is whether the US will start buying bitcoin beyond its current holdings. Regardless, this marks a significant endorsement of the cryptocurrency, and the UK will be closely monitoring developments before deciding its own course.

The government is in a strong position after seizing bitcoin in 2021 during the prosecution of Jian Wen — a former takeaway worker jailed for more than six years in May for her involvement in laundering the proceeds of an investment fraud. The value of that haul has soared.

This gives the UK the fourth-largest stash of bitcoin (approximately 61,000 BTC, worth about £5.2 billion), among nation states, behind the UAE (420,000), the US (213,000) and China (roughly 200,000).

But if the government sold that bitcoin haul, as the German government did recently, it would be a huge missed opportunity for the UK. Holding rather than selling it would solidify the country's position on the global stage of digital assets and signal a new era of growth and innovation in technology.



But actively buying more bitcoin would raise some complex questions, including over the source of funds and potential market risks. Treasury and Bank of England officials are likely to remain cautious about investing in cryptocurrency — but if Trump starts buying bitcoin it could fire a starting gun.

Government bitcoin reserves could also hedge against inflation or currency devaluation, much like gold, or even be put to work and "staked" to earn a yield.

Along with overdue regulatory changes, this would send a clear message that the UK is open for business in the digital economy.

LAST WEEK'S BIG QUESTION POLL

Is it time to scrap the £100 contactless payment limit?

17% YES

83% NO

No



Richard Murphy, professor of accounting practice at the University of Sheffield

The answer to whether the government should be allowed to hold or invest in bitcoin is a resounding no. Bitcoin is economically meaningless and there is no value to it. It has no known use except to facilitate illicit transactions, very often in illicit substances.

Those who claim it can be used to make payments always ignore the fact that when doing so, its value is determined by translating it into another currency such as the pound.

So, why is bitcoin worth so much? It is the power of modern marketing. The myth has been sold that people need privacy in their finances from the government and that crypto will help to deliver that. They are also told that bitcoin is a hedge against inflation — but its massive price volatility proves it is anything but.

And they are also told that because bitcoin is in scarce supply, demand means that its price will go up, and it might just do, so long as the hype is maintained. But one day the bubble will burst, spectacularly, as such bubbles always do. Bitcoin is something I would not invest £1 in and nor should the UK government.

There are strong political reasons for the government steering clear. As all bitcoin enthusiasts make clear, their excitement about it is based on the claim that it undermines the money issued by governments.

Those enthusiasts want to destroy the government's control over the UK economy. That is bitcoin's destructive political goal and the UK government should have nothing to do with it. Not least because almost all bitcoins have now been mined, so if the government were to buy more, it would have to do so second hand. It is estimated that 90 per cent of bitcoin is owned by just 2 per cent of the people who own cryptocurrencies.

Bitcoin wealth is, then, intensely concentrated among a few wealthy owners who are now desperate to find someone gullible enough to part with good money for their spurious tokens.

For the government to buy bitcoin, or hold on to the bitcoin it recovered from criminals, would, therefore, reward the wealthy with real currency in exchange for their worthless assets. That is the last thing that a responsible government should be doing. Bitcoin is a con and the government should not fall for it.

Ask the experts Tom Selby from the wealth management firm AJ Bell offers his advice

I want to use one pension for holidays but still save into another

Q I will turn 76 shortly and have no intention of retiring any time soon, although I would like to start taking more time for holidays. I am self-employed and save into a self-invested personal pension (Sipp). I also have a smaller pension from previous employment. What are the implications if I start using my smaller pension pot to fund my travels? Will I still be able to contribute to my Sipp?
Nigel, Yorkshire

A Usually when you save in a pension such as a Sipp (which is just a flexible type of personal pension), you get upfront tax relief, automatically boosting the value of your contribution by 25 per cent.

For example, an £80 Sipp contribution will automatically be turned into £100 through the addition of tax relief. Higher and additional-rate taxpayers can also claim extra tax relief from HM Revenue & Customs, with this usually paid via an adjustment to your tax code.

However, tax relief is only available until your 75th birthday. Given that you are soon to turn 76, any contributions you make to your Sipp will not qualify for tax relief.

There can still be reasons to contribute to a pension after 75 — for example if you benefit from employer contributions, which won't be the case for you as you are self-employed — but it is important to factor this in when deciding where to put your money.

An Isa could be an alternative worth considering for your spare cash because you can invest your money tax-free and access it at any time, tax-free too. If you opt for an Isa, the maximum you can pay in each year is capped at £20,000.



If you choose to access your smaller pension, you are still entitled to pay into your pension up to 100 per cent of your earnings (although as mentioned earlier you won't benefit from tax relief on your contributions).

A key thing to think about when flexibly accessing taxable income from a pension for the first time will be the fact that you will be triggering the money purchase annual allowance (MPAA).

This would reduce the amount that you can save into a pension each tax year from £60,000 to £10,000. Even over-75s who don't get tax relief are still subject to this, and could end up with tax charges if the limit is exceeded.

There are ways to avoid triggering the MPAA. If you only access your 25 per cent tax-free cash (available from the age of 55), you will retain a £60,000 annual allowance.

Equally, you can access up to three "small lump sums" (worth less than £10,000) from non-workplace defined contribution pensions, such as Sipps, without triggering the MPAA. This will only work if the small lump sum you access extinguishes the entire pot, however.

More broadly, you should also consider the sustainability of your overall withdrawal plan when accessing any of your pensions to make sure that you aren't risking running out of money completely in retirement.

Even in your mid-70s, provided that you are still healthy, there is a decent chance your pensions will need to last two decades or more, so while you should of course enjoy your retirement, making sure you don't overspend is really important.

Tom Selby is the director of public policy at AJ Bell and has campaigned for retirement reforms such as banning pensions cold-calling and increasing pension allowances

The fire safety firm that will scupper your flat sale



Checks by the firm Tri Fire are not being accepted by mortgage lenders after its director was accused of unprofessional conduct, writes **Jack Simpson**

Thousands of homeowners living in blocks of flats may not be able to sell their homes because of problems at the company that issued their crucial fire safety forms.

The fire engineering company Tri Fire issued EWS1 (external wall system) forms, which owners often need before they can sell flats in buildings with external cladding.

But lenders including NatWest, HSBC and Nationwide have refused to offer mortgages on properties with Tri Fire certificates while investigations continue into the actions of the company's director, who has been accused of unprofessional behaviour.

Ian Aldridge is one of those affected. When his 55-year-old son died in November 2023, it fell to him to deal with his son's estate and sell his flat in central Brighton. Aldridge, 83, whose name has been changed, was struggling with his grief after his son took his own life, and was also caring for his wife Susan, who has dementia. So it was a huge relief when he accepted an offer on the flat in November.

But then the buyer's mortgage application was rejected because the lender, NatWest, would not accept the EWS1 issued by Tri Fire. Aldridge said he was caught in a "bureaucratic nightmare" that was adding to the stress of dealing with his son's estate. "It's very frustrating because if it doesn't go through I've wasted six months and there will be costs inevitably with all of this, costs that will all be eating away at the estate."

2,400

The blocks that still have dangerous cladding, according to Wajid Khan, a housing minister

What is going on?

The Tri Fire company director, Adam Kiziak, was suspended by the Institution of Fire Engineers, an industry body, in August last year after it found he had "failed to work within professional competence".

The institution began investigating Kiziak after complaints that he had breached the body's code of conduct, and "failed to discharge his professional duties with honesty, integrity, impartiality, and objectivity". The institution said he was suspended because he "failed to work within professional competence" and breached its principles of "accuracy and vigour".

What is an EWS1?

The fire safety form was created for lenders in 2019 after the Grenfell tragedy in 2017 because banks had become reluctant to lend on properties with cladding. It either outlines what needs to be done to improve safety, or it gives a building a clean bill of health.

To get an EWS1 the owner or manager of a building needs a chartered fire safety engineer to inspect its cladding, insulation and fire barriers. Banks have since relied on the forms to agree thousands of flat purchases. Government figures show that between July and September last year, they were used for almost half the 4,000 mortgage valuations carried out on high-rise buildings (those with seven or more floors) by six of the big lenders.

Tri Fire became one of the most popular fire safety firms to use. It was employed by housing associations such as Notting Hill Genesis and L&Q, which own nearly 400 high-rise buildings between them, and the managing agent First Port, which manages more than 310,000 homes.

The Building Safety Register (BSR), a data firm, saw 410 EWS1 forms that Kiziak signed for Tri Fire between March 2020 and December 2021. Matt Hodges-Long from the BSR said: "Only Kiziak will know how many forms he has signed but, if our sample is anything to go by, it could easily exceed 4,000."

Tri Fire has been suspended from the government's cladding safety scheme list of approved assessors, which provide checks on buildings whose owners have applied for government funds to improve safety. The government said it was carrying out an audit of all Tri Fire reports.

HSBC, Virgin Money and NatWest have said they are not offering mortgages based on EWS assessments from Kiziak or Tri Fire. Nationwide said it was "temporarily unable to make lending decisions based on its reports without further information and validation".

Giles Grover from the End Our Cladding Scandal campaign group said he had heard from dozens of leaseholders concerned that their building's EWS was written by Tri Fire. "We fear this is only the tip of the iceberg as the scale of this horror show and the impact on ordinary people grows each day," he said.

'I cannot move back to Greece'

Andreas Antypas, 50, wants to sell his one-bedroom flat in Camberwell, south London, but the building's EWS form was signed by Kiziak. Antypas, who is hoping to move back to Greece after 20 years in London, found a buyer in November but is now worried that the sale will fall through because the buyer can't get a mortgage."There is nothing I can do, I feel totally helpless. I'm trapped in this block," he said.

Some lenders, such as Santander, do not require EWS forms but instead rely on information from third party valuers and questionnaires completed by building owners.

Those hoping to sell could ask their building owner to find a new engineer to do an EWS check, which can take up to ten weeks and cost up to £10,000 for a low-rise block under 11 metres high, and up to £100,000 for a high-rise block of seven floors or more. These costs can be passed onto leaseholders through service charges.

Tri Fire said: "We can confirm that Adam Kiziak's membership of the IFE has been suspended pending the completion of an investigation. He is able to work but does not currently have the benefit of the IFE accreditation. We can't offer any further detail. No determinations have been made. Mr Kiziak and Tri Fire are very sorry for the difficulties that the situation may have caused. It is working to resolve these issues. Any allegation of fraudulent activity is strenuously denied."



Money

Why retiring early was the best thing we ever did

Stopping work while you are still healthy is the dream — just plan it right, says **Ali Hussain**

When the Covid pandemic hit in March 2020, Joe Hamilton decided that it was time to retire. He was only 60, but he had been planning it for years. In 2018 Joe and his wife Aileen had cleared their mortgage and paid off all their other debts and he then he went to Saudi Arabia to work for a management consultancy. The couple have large savings and investment pots, as well as various workplace pensions.



"We felt it was the right time for us to retire. We had built up sufficient savings and pensions, and although I was earning about £240,000 a year in my last job, I resented how much of that I was paying in tax," Joe said. "We also both have ageing parents, and me being away from home for so long during my last job placed the burden on Aileen to support them."

Joe, now 65, and Aileen, 57, who retired in 2023 from her job at a lettings agency, now live in Bishopton in Renfrewshire and have not regretted retiring for a minute.

They are among many who are choosing to retire before state pension age to enjoy as active and healthy a retirement as possible. Until 2010 the state pension age was 65 for men and 60 for women but is now 66 for both, and set to increase to 67 between 2026 and 2028. There are plans to increase it to 68 between 2044 and 2026.

However, 62 per cent of about 1,000 people surveyed by the pension firm Just Group last year said that they had retired before state pension age. About 13 per cent of 9,000 surveyed by the investment platform Interactive Investor said they retired between 50 and 55.

Why you shouldn't leave it too late

Marcus Ellis from the wealth manager Quilter said: "Some question whether it is worth retiring as late as the state pension age, especially if poor health might prevent you from enjoying your retirement. However, often the bigger risk is that people do not realise how long they will live and how expensive that might become."

A woman aged 65 has, on average, about ten years of full health to look forward to, according to the Centre for Ageing Better, a campaign group. From 75, they can expect an average of 11 more years of life with some form of health problem. For men, a 65-year-old can expect about ten years of life in full health and about nine years with some sort of problem, including conditions such as arthritis and hearing or vision impairment.

Myron Jobson from Interactive Investor said: "While financial security is crucial, so is being able to enjoy retirement in good health. There's a growing sentiment that stopping work earlier allows people to make the most of their early years of retirement, when there is less worry that declining health might limit their options. Of course, this requires careful planning, but for those who can afford it, the prospect of more good years to enjoy life's pleasures is an enticing one."

Saving for the future

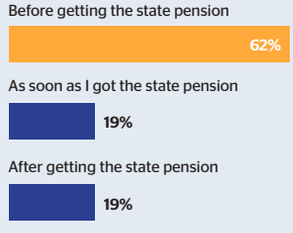
Joe has a defined benefit (DB) pension from his Saudi Arabian employer, which gives him a guaranteed income of about £7,000 a year for life, and a separate DB pension from the 13 years he worked in the army, which also pays about £7,000 a year for life.

He has another DB pot from a previous employer that went bust. This pension was transferred to the Pension Protection Fund, a lifeboat scheme that covers DB pensions run by companies that went bust. It pays him £1,400 a year.

Joe also has about £420,000 in a private pension, which he transferred from Standard Life to Pension Bee in 2022, a move that he estimates saves him almost £6,000 a year in fees. He also has £200,000 in fixed-rate cash



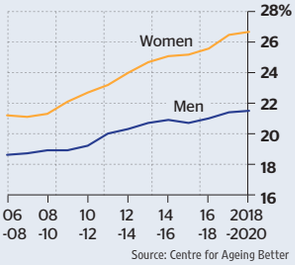
When did you retire?



Based on a survey of 1,050 people aged 55 and over who are retired or semi-retired

Source: Just Group

Proportion of life lived in poorer health



Source: Centre for Ageing Better



‘We wanted to be able to enjoy London’

Matthew Dobson, 58, retired last year after downsizing with his husband, Oscar-Alvarez Robles, 59, from a four-bedroom terraced house in Chiswick, west London, to a two-bedroom flat in Lancaster Gate in the centre of the city, mortgage-free.

“We wanted to be in central London to do more Londony things, like visit restaurants and go to the theatre.”

Dobson was diagnosed with blood melanoma in 2013 but continued to work while having treatment. He had planned to retire at 60, but chose to fast-forward his plans to enjoy more spare time. “Work was just causing too much anxiety,” he said.

He had built up a defined benefit (final salary) pension from his 16 years working as a management consultant at Marks & Spencer, from which he will get an income for life. He also has a private defined contribution pension with the insurer Scottish Widows from which he has taken his 25 per cent tax-free lump sum.

Robles, who moved from Spain in 2012, still works and runs his own management consultancy firm. The couple spend about half their time in Spain. Dobson said: “This was not possible for me while I was working as I had so many face-to-face meetings with businesses we provided services for.”

Overall the couple live on an income of more than £100,000 a year. Dobson manages his money using the investment platform Bestinvest.

“We believe we will be able to fund our lifestyle and build our investments before reaching the official retirement age,” he said.



accounts. Joe has an income of about £30,000 a year, including the cash he takes from his savings and private pension.

Aileen has £30,000 in a defined contribution (DC) pension, where the size of your pot is based on what you paid in and how well your investments grow. She has not yet touched her pot. Unlike a DB pension, these schemes do not pay a set income for life and so you can run out of money if you withdraw cash too quickly.

Aileen also has savings and investments, built up over about twenty years, from which she takes an income of about £12,000-£15,000 a year. She hopes to continue doing this until state pension age at 66. Altogether the couple have a total income of £42,000-£45,000.

£11,973

The annual value of a full state pension from April

Joe said: “This is more than enough. We have frequent UK holidays and take one or two larger overseas trips a year. We also run an eight-year-old car and a camper van.”

When Joe turns 66 next year and gets his state pension, he plans to take more from his private pension to bring his income including the state pension to £43,662 — the limit of the 21 per cent income tax band in Scotland.

How much money do you need?

Stephen Lowe from the retirement specialist Just Group said: “One of the reasons some people haven’t stopped working is because they don’t realise they can afford to. We help people to think through what they want to do in their life after work, and to crunch the numbers — it’s like a lightbulb going on, a joyful eureka moment.

“We are seeing more people who didn’t realise they have already saved enough in their pensions, savings and investments to stop work immediately or perhaps go part-time.”

Working out the income you need for the lifestyle you want in retirement is a sensible starting point. Assuming you own your home with no mortgage, a single person will need £14,400 of post tax income a year for a minimum living standard, according to the Pensions and Life Savings Association, a trade body. This would give you £50 a week for groceries, £25 a month for eating out and a week’s holiday in the UK each year, for example. Couples would need £22,400 after tax between them.

For a moderate standard of living you would need £31,300 a year after tax. This would be enough for £55 a week for groceries and £30 on eating out, plus a two-week three-star holiday abroad each year, as well as a long weekend in the UK. Couples would need £43,100 a year after tax.

For a comfortable retirement, which gives you £70 a week on food and £40 a week on meals out, a four-star foreign holiday and three weekends away in the UK each year, a single person would need £43,100 a year and a couple £59,000 after tax.

However, these sums don’t take any debts into account. Having a mortgage or unsecured loans, or having to pay rent in retirement could severely undermine your financial security so it is important to consider how they might be cleared before you stop working. The Pensions Policy Institute, a research organisation, suggests that by 2041 up to 3.6 million people could be renting during retirement.

> “Some people just don’t realise that they can afford to stop work

How to be like Joe

One challenge is to work out how to bridge the gap between early retirement and your state pension. A full state pension is worth £11,502 and will rise to £11,973 from April.

Most savers are able to take a 25 per cent lump sum tax-free from their pension at 55 (rising to age 57 from April 2028), and this is often how people fund an early retirement. If you have Isas or other savings these can also be used to avoid depleting your pensions too quickly.

Make sure you qualify for the full state pension. If you do not have the 35 years of national insurance contributions you need, consider buying missing years — but it is wise to seek advice to ensure that you will actually be better off after making the payments.

While Joe did lots of preparation to ensure that he was on track for a decent retirement, the financial planning does not end the moment you stop working. He had hoped to pass on most of his DB pensions to his son, but his plans changed when the government announced that pension pots would be subject to inheritance tax (IHT) from April 2027.

Joe said: “The recent IHT changes have significantly changed how I will invest and manage my pensions and other savings. I will also now use a significant portion of my pension to buy an annuity [which pays a guaranteed income for life], which is something that I would not have considered before the IHT change.”

If all else fails, go back to work

About 15 per cent of people who retired have returned to work or are considering going back, according to a survey of 6,000 people by the insurer Standard Life.

It found that that the main drivers for this were financial pressures and the desire for social connection. Some 7 per cent of people who retired after the age of 55 had already gone back into work, and a further 2 per cent were actively looking for employment. Another 6 per cent said that they were considering it.

About 34 per cent said that their living costs had increased, while 27 per cent realised their pension did not give them enough income to live on. Some 43 per cent of those surveyed wanted to earn more money so they could treat themselves in retirement.

Of those that went back to work post-retirement, 38 per cent said they were bored and 20 per cent admitted they were lonely.

‘We needed more time to look after our parents’



Peter and Lynn Liddle from Pontefract, West Yorkshire, retired in 2022 when they were 57 and 58.

They have defined benefit pensions that give them enough income for a “moderate” standard of living, according to the Pensions and Life Saving Association. When they get the full state pension from 67, this will put them into the PLSA’s comfortable lifestyle category.

The couple also have savings and other pensions that they have not dipped into yet. They have paid off their mortgage and their two sons have left university and support themselves financially.

Peter, who worked as a contracts manager for a construction company, said: “We wanted to take advantage of retirement while we remain healthy. We also have elderly parents who have needed help, particularly over the past 18 months, so having more free time makes this easier.”

The decision to retire was also prompted by the Covid lockdowns. Peter said: “You could say Covid spurred us on to stop working. The lockdowns gave us an insight into what life would be like not needing to work and how much we actually needed to live on.

“We enjoy walking the dog and having more free time to see people and help our family. If I were offered double what I used to earn to go back to work, I would not take it”.

The couple took advice before making their decision from their wealth manager Quilter. Peter continues to work part-time as an exam invigilator at a school, to keep him busy. Lynn had already been planning to retire from her role as a manager at a supermarket and was then offered redundancy.

Your Money Matters Katherine Denham

BA put my family reunion at risk, but is refusing to pay compensation



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Our consumer champion gets to grips with your problems



I am a 90-year-old British citizen, but I live in Atlanta in the US. My husband died four years ago and in May I was due to fly to the UK to visit my family. I paid $4,667 for a return business class ticket with British Airways but the evening before flying I tried to check in online, only to discover that BA had cancelled my flight. No reason was given.

I started to panic about the arrangements I had with my family, who all live in different parts of the UK. It's a complicated exercise to arrange to see everyone. I haven't seen my son, brothers and grandchildren in a long time, so it was dreadful to think that I might not get this chance.

As part of this trip I was also going on a holiday to Italy for ten days with my son and daughter-in-law, so I was worried about missing that too.

BA offered me a replacement booking the following day, which was completely unsuitable. It would have involved me getting to the airport early in the morning, which is difficult for me, then waiting in Miami for a connecting flight for several hours, and then asking my son, who lives in Wiltshire, to pick me up from Heathrow at 7am.

I thought that BA could do better than that so I said no and asked for an alternative, but it didn't have any business class seats available for the rest of the week. The only other options it gave were also at awkward times so I turned those down too.

I searched online and found a suitable flight the next day with Virgin and Delta airlines. I paid $8,900 for a return ticket. This was expensive, but I felt it was the only option that would give me peace of mind.

After having a wonderful time with my family, when I got home I asked BA for compensation, plus an amount that reflects the extra I paid.

That was back in June and after many emails from BA assuring me that it was looking into it, six months later it refused my request. It gave no reason.

In all the years that my husband and I flew all over the world, I have never had a flight cancelled, so this unwelcome experience has made me feel cautious about flying again. I was looking forward to my granddaughter's wedding in the UK later this year, but I now feel apprehensive about it.
Patricia, Atlanta

Katherine Denham writes
Once upon a time, British Airways was the UK's beloved flagship carrier, but it's the airline that I now get the most complaints about. Many are from readers who are struggling to get refunds and compensation for cancelled flights.

You had spent a lot of time making these plans with your family, so I could see why you didn't want to rearrange them. When a flight is cancelled, the airline should offer you a refund or a replacement flight.

I asked BA if it would refund the $4,233 difference in the fare, so that you weren't out of pocket — after all, it wasn't your fault that the flight was cancelled. But in the airline's view, it had fulfilled its obligations by offering you a number of replacement flights and I couldn't get it to change its mind.

I was surprised that BA had refused compensation, though. Your flight had been cancelled for technical reasons and as you arrived at your destination more than four hours late — a day later in fact — you were entitled to £520 under UK law. It was only after my involvement that the company agreed to pay you this, which is poor form on its part.

While it wouldn't say why it initially rejected your compensation claim, BA said: "We have apologised to our customer for their experience and have been in touch to resolve the issue."

You said: "Thank you for your persistence. I hope that if I decide to go to the UK this year that it will be smooth sailing."

£341,285
– what Katherine Denham has saved readers this year

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It refunded our friends, so why not us?

My wife, our three children and I were due to fly to Dubai with British Airways in April. We had bought the tickets using Avios companion vouchers and supplemented these with a payment of £1,704.

Our friends were booked on the same flight. But the day before we were due to depart, our friend Ben went to check in online only to find that our flight had been cancelled. It took five hours for BA to send me a text message about the cancellation. I was disappointed that it didn't offer an alternative.

As I had booked ten nights at a non-refundable hotel, as well as a variety of excursions, I was scrambling around trying to find a flight for the five of us. I booked with Emirates, flying the same day, and paid £2,851.

After coming home, we got a refund of £1,704 for our BA flights. But when I tried to claim a refund for the £1,147 difference in cost, my claim was refused.

Our friends ended up booking a more expensive Emirates ticket too and BA refunded them the difference, so I can't understand why the airline is treating us differently. As our Emirates flight arrived several hours later than planned, I also believe we are entitled to compensation.
Joey, London

Katherine Denham writes
I agree it was unfair that British Airways wouldn't cover the extra you paid for the new Emirates flights, especially when it hadn't offered you any other options. Plus, it was strange that it applied a different policy to your friends.

Like Patricia, you had spent months chasing BA. But once I intervened, it paid you £1,147. Unlike Patricia's case above, the company paid out because it hadn't offered you any alternative flights.

Airlines only have to pay compensation if the cause of the cancellation is within their control. BA told me that your flight was cancelled because of severe flooding across the United Arab Emirates. You disputed this and pointed out that several flights to Dubai operated as normal that day and that there were no issues with your Emirates journey. But the floods prompted Dubai's international airport to restrict air traffic as it dealt with waterlogged runways, so I'm afraid BA had a solid argument.

You were frustrated that it had been so difficult to get to this point, whereas your friends got a refund without much fuss, and I think you are justified in feeling this way. I am hearing far too many cases of poor customer service at BA making life difficult for its passengers.

T AUDIO

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But not all turmeric supplements are created equal. Many focus on one key active ingredient called curcumin – but it's very difficult for our bodies to absorb, and unless it's made 'bioavailable', it can pass through the gut unused, even if we take lots of it.

To overcome these challenges, scientists in Cambridge developed a unique supplement called Turmeric+ Gold, featuring the world's most scientifically researched bioavailable curcumin formulation, and users are saying that restoring their joint health can be life changing.

FutureYou Cambridge receives hundreds of 5-star Trustpilot reviews for Turmeric+ Gold, like Paul Goddard from Essex. 'Soon after taking it I experienced that 'light-bulb' moment - I realised my knees felt like they used to. I take Turmeric+ Gold religiously now,' he said.

The nutritional experts at FutureYou Cambridge used a patented Curcuma Phospholipid Complex formulation called Meriva® that makes curcumin 30 times more absorbable than standard turmeric powder.

'Our advanced formulation works by using plant based lecithin to mimic the way the body naturally absorbs curcuminoids after eating turmeric cooked with fat,' explains Dr Miriam Ferrer, PhD, from FutureYou Cambridge.

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FutureYou CAMBRIDGE

Readers' lives

Marriages and engagements

'Good times are better shared'

Val Jacobs, 62, a retired course leader at University Centre Colchester, and **Jan Roberts**, 62, an engineer, were married on September 27, 2024, at Marylebone Town Hall, in London



LUCY J TOMS PHOTOGRAPHY



Val Jacobs and Jan Roberts chose to have a simple and stress-free wedding day

Dating slowed down during the pandemic to the point that it felt more like courting. There were rules. "It felt lovely and old-fashioned," says Jan.

Val and Jan met via a dating app and courted online for three months before getting together in person. From her profile picture, he liked her orange sweater and big gold hoop earrings. They got chatting, shared an ironic sense of humour, and bonded over their matching "salt and pepper" hair. They both had long hair at the time.

Friday was their weekly date night, for two hours. They would dress up and pour themselves a gin and tonic — Val at home in Colchester, and Jan in Newmarket, Suffolk. "It allowed us to get to know each other really slowly, which I think was a good thing," she says. "And didn't frighten each other off."

As restrictions eased, they met in person in Castle Park in Colchester for a socially distanced coffee in July 2020. He was late and left with a parking fine, but the date went well. She recalls him being tall, dark, handsome and funny. "I saw her legs for the first time," says Jan.

They share an interest in design. Raised in Essex, and taught to sew by her mother, Val studied fashion and textiles at St Martin's School of Art in London before launching her own label. She then designed for Topshop, River Island and M&S. For 30 years, she taught BA fashion and textiles and was a course leader at University Centre Colchester.

On leaving school in Portsmouth, Jan worked as a lighting technician in theatre. After studying 3D design and then theatre design at college, he built sets for companies including Scottish Ballet. He now works for an engineering company. His hobbies are ceramics, photography and jewellery making.

Meeting one another's friends and family had to wait due to restrictions. "There was no feedback from anyone else," says Val. She has a son, Joe, aged 30, who is getting married in May. Jan, who divorced in 2018, has a daughter, Amber, 21.

They would meet for long walks. One route in Suffolk took them from Dunwich to Walberswick. Val turned up in white espadrilles, while Jan was in proper walking boots. He remembers holding Val's hand for the first time on a different walk on Holkham beach. "We don't take ourselves or life too seriously," he says.

Jan lost weight, became fitter, had his hair cut shorter, and learnt from the pandemic to make the most of the present. "In your sixties, you can get settled in your ways," Val says. "It was absolute fate that we bumped into each other because we are very well matched. I think there is a lot of luck involved."

Now retired from her role as a course leader, Val works in the Annabelle 87 fashion boutique in Colchester. "She is gorgeous, kind and selfless," says Jan. They bring out the best in one another. "I love his energy, humour and patience," she says. "He is very romantic, an old-fashioned hand-holder, and a giver of unlimited hugs and kisses."

In 2021, Jan moved into Val's house in Colchester. He appreciates waking up next to her and sharing their time together. "Good times are better shared," she says. Her mother met Jan before she died in 2022. "She would have been thrilled that I finally got married," she says.

The couple were sunbathing on West Mersea beach when Jan spontaneously proposed in August 2022. His Christmas present to her that year was their blue British ragdoll cat, Bluebell. When Joe proposed in 2023, Jan ended up making two engagement rings and four wedding rings. He also made Val's wedding earrings.

They wanted their wedding to be stress-free and simple. Val made a white wedding dress but unintentionally lost weight when Jan started eating healthier, and it ended up being too big. He chose a lime green suit by Gresham Blake and she picked out a silver dress by the Vampire's Wife.

On the eve of their wedding, they stayed at the Culpeper pub in Spitalfields, and had a quiet dinner together.

On the morning of their wedding, they went to the hairdressers together. They arrived five minutes late for their own wedding, due to traffic, at Marylebone Town Hall at 3pm.

Val and Jan walked in together to Neil Young's *Harvest Moon* in front of nine guests. Their rings were passed between their guests as part of a ring-warming ceremony. The newlyweds exited to the Beatles' *All You Need is Love*.

Next stop was Soho, where they are frequent visitors to Ronnie Scott's jazz club. The wedding party celebrated with cocktails at The Ivy Soho Brasserie and dinner at Dean Street Townhouse. On returning to the Culpeper, customers bought them a bottle of champagne.

They went to the Seychelles on honeymoon. For their next project, they are moving to Portsmouth to refurbish a house.

It is a four-year renovation until Jan retires. "We are together for ever now," says Val.

If you would like to feature a wedding or engagement or the birth of a child on these pages, call 020 7782 5583, Mon-Fri, to discuss the content and cost, or email: readerslives@thetimes.co.uk

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New readers



Elizabeth Kai Hui Yeoh and **Paul Kai Zhi Yeoh** were born on October 17, 2024, at St Thomas' Hospital in Lambeth, London, to **Joanna Saw**, 34, and **Christopher Yeoh**, 39



At their 12-week scan, Joanna and Christopher found out they were having twins. It was a bit of a shock — neither have a history of twins in the family and Joanna had mentally prepared for one child — but a happy one all the same. Life has since been a whirlwind. They've bought a new house in East Dulwich, south London, had a constant stream of visitors and stayed active. Chris has made the most of a four-month paternity leave and they've spent the time walking around parks, having coffees with friends and going to museums. "It has been a joy welcoming them into the world," says Jo.

The twins are rather different. The elder of the two, Elizabeth, is sweet-natured, calm and always smiling. Paul, on the other hand, is determined to get attention and can be very chatty.

Both Jo and Chris have Chinese ancestry — Jo is Chinese Malaysian and Chris is Chinese Australian — and the twins' middle names follow a Chinese tradition in which each member of a generation shares the same first syllable of their middle name, in this case, "Kai". "Zhi" means intelligence and "Hui" means wisdom.

Jo and Chris are Christians — they first met at a church in London — and chose the children's first names from the New Testament. Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist and the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, and Paul the apostle spread his teachings into the world. The twins were going to church on Sunday at three weeks old.

"Though they are twins they are separate people," says Jo. "We want to encourage them to become individuals with their own unique interests."

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'Our families had been friends for years'

SARA GOREE, 32, AND CHRIS BEAUMONT, 33, WERE MARRIED ON JANUARY 17, 2020, AT THE MANOR HOUSE IN CASTLE COMBE, WILTSHIRE. THEY FEATURED IN THE TIMES ON JULY 18, 2020

THE TIMES

Remembering loved ones

Gregarious banker and founder of the G30 forum

Geoffrey Bell, 85

It was known of the banker and consultant Geoffrey Bell that if he was returning home to host one of his drinks parties and happened to meet someone he liked along the way — the child of a friend or a casual acquaintance — he would invite them along. It was his imperative to hear from people from all walks of life.

In 1978 Geoffrey brought to the Rockefeller Foundation a proposal to set up a forum to foster international economic policy. The idea was that the Group of Thirty or the G30, as it became known, would "deepen understanding of economic and financial issues ... explore the repercussions of decisions ... and examine the choices available to policy makers". It was important to him that the nonpartisan, non-profit group comprise a range of members from around the world, and from the public, private and academic sectors. The meeting was a success, and shortly afterwards Geoffrey was asked to conduct a feasibility study to put the proposal into effect.

While Geoffrey's idea was to bring international economics and finance together, he also made the point of including "academics to make sure people understood what each other were saying. It had to be a tripartite group." His initial suggestion, which failed to materialise, was for a Group of 29 simply because, he said, he liked prime numbers.

Forty years later the Group of Thirty, now chaired by the former governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney, continues to be well established and highly regarded, with Geoffrey an integral part of its development. He was proud of how much it had achieved and how far he had run with it in his positions as a trustee and as executive secretary. With his outgoing, astute nature, he had a knack for inviting individuals who could bring something to the table. At the chairman's side during meetings he made sure that no one felt excluded and that every view was heard. He was regarded by many as a true friend.

Geoffrey Bell was born in 1939 in Grimsby, Lincolnshire, and into a modest but closely knit family. His father, Walter, was a railway signalman whose first wife died, leaving him to bring up an only son before marrying Fanny (née Barnes) and having Geoffrey. His half-brother, Barnard, was 13 years older than him.

In his early childhood academic ability took a while to come to light. He failed his 11-plus and ended up at a technical school in Grimsby being taught how to lay bricks. A few years in, the school, to its credit, noticed a spark in the pupil who was never going to engage fully with manual work, and he was given extra lessons. In 1958 he won a place to read economics at the London School of Economics and after graduating he went to work for the Treasury.

It became apparent that Geoffrey's talent lay in recognising a problem, encapsulating it, and working out how to address it. He spent time with the US Federal Reserve in St Louis,



Geoffrey Bell in 2012. He was raised in Grimsby but decided to base himself in New York. Below, with his daughter Allison



returned to teach at the LSE and was then offered a job as an economic adviser to the British embassy in Washington. It did not take him long to realise that the US would be the best place for him to progress professionally.

Even so, by 1969 he was back in London as the assistant to Gordon Richardson, the chairman of Schroders, who in 1973 became the governor of the Bank of England. For Geoffrey's part he was moved into international areas, tasked with addressing financial, corporate and managerial issues around the world, particularly Latin America.

In 1971 on a night flight from New York to London he met Joan Abel, an American adviser to BOAC. They struck up a conversation on the bus from the airport and realised they lived near each other in Kensington. Two years later they were married. They had a daughter, Allison, and, having flitted for a few years between their properties in London and New York, decided to base themselves in the Big Apple.

The Group of Thirty was set up while Geoffrey was working at Schroders and in 1985 his former boss, who had become Lord Richardson of Duntisbourne, took over as chairman. According to one member, Richardson's particular talent was for getting people during meetings "to keep their mouths shut".

After Schroders Geoffrey started his own consultancy, Geoffrey Bell & Co, which advised central banks, governments and corporations on financial issues. He was a kind and helpful mentor to younger colleagues and with his peers happy to spend time clarifying concerns. Between 1987 and 1993 he was made chairman of the bank Guinness Mahon Holdings. His book *Euro-Dollar Market and the International Financial System*, published in 1973, has been translated into several languages.

Tall, elegant yet unpretentious, Geoffrey kept friendships for life, including those from Grimsby and the Treasury where he started out. According to his wife, he had a smile that "lit up the room".

Family remained a priority, closely followed by reading books on economics and the Second World War, including a tome on Winston Churchill that Joan once took to him in hospital that "weighed about eight pounds and was heavy lifting". In New York he was unable to continue with the cricket he had enjoyed as a child, but played golf. For lunch he tended to restrict his diet to tomatoes and fish, a throwback perhaps to his upbringing in the Lincolnshire port town overlooking the North Sea.

If you would like to commemorate the life of a relative, friend or colleague, call 020 7782 5583 to discuss the content and cost, or email: readerslives@thetimes.co.uk.
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Passionate cook with a love of learning and a flair for creativity

Freddie Braithwaite-Smith, 12

For Freddie Braithwaite-Smith the Wednesday evening Facebook announcement of the shellfish haul due to land at his local fishmongers the following day was eagerly anticipated and he would then persuade his parents to take him to Hulme's in Ashbourne, Derbyshire, to peruse the catch of lobster, prawns, mussels and langoustines. Depending as much on his natural instinct for cooking as to what he found in his recipe books and on social media, Freddie loved to make a homemade seafood pasta with a sauce from roasted shellfish.

Cooking was a passion from an early age — at four months he was photographed stirring the Christmas pudding — and he never tired of his quest for the perfect pizza topping. Indeed, for a gentle child of some reserve the subject could make him quite animated. Naturally, the tomato sauce was homemade, and he used the best fresh ingredients: mozzarella, basil, a quality olive oil, perhaps a few shavings of red onion and a dash of truffle oil. Alongside recipes such as meatballs with fennel ragù, and lobster tagliatelle, he included them in a cookbook of his top 50 recipes for his younger sister, Bessie.

Freddie enjoyed learning from leading chefs and aspired to be a food critic; in one year alone he ate at, reviewed — and sometimes worked in the kitchens of — 59 restaurants, ranging from local curry houses to Michelin-starred restaurants.



Freddie was awarded a Chief Scout's Medal from Bear Grylls in 2023

Freddie's creativity also embraced art and design; the arrival of a glue gun was a revelation to him, a prelude to his later delight in more sophisticated design tools such as laser cutters and 3D printing. When he was seven, his "pizza clock", complete with a working mechanism and pepperoni slices for numerals, made it on to the CBBC art programme *Art Ninja*. During Covid his large abstract "cave painting" depicting the pandemic, with charcoal images of the NHS rainbow, masks, Joe Wicks and his beloved cat Nutmeg, was one of only 100 exhibits, from a total of 33,000 entries, at the Royal Academy Young Artists' Summer Show.

Frederick William Braithwaite-Smith was born in 2012 and raised in Ellastone, near Ashbourne. His mother, Karen Braithwaite, was until recently the head of operations at Nottingham's School of Veterinary Medicine. His father, Gregory Sambrook Smith, is a professor of geography at Birmingham University.

At Norbury CoE Primary School, Freddie relished learning, but also enjoyed drama and played guitar with the school rock band. He was a keen Scout, being a member of the 2nd Ashbourne Scout Group, and in 2023 received from Bear Grylls at Windsor Castle the Chief Scout's Medal for Meritorious Conduct.

In July 2022, when Freddie was nine, he was diagnosed with a rare brain cancer and underwent three operations, two courses of chemotherapy and two courses of radiotherapy. He dealt with his illness bravely, attending school as much as possible between hospital visits. At the age of 11 he won an art scholarship to nearby Denstone College, which catered exceptionally for his academic abilities. He was awarded a platinum Denstone diploma for managing to achieve 150 hours of work outside the school curriculum, and was proud to have his name inscribed on the awards board. Away from school, in his last year he also managed to feed lions, hunt truffles, mush huskies in Sweden and snorkel over Roman ruins near Pompeii.

During his last summer holidays, the college provided extra tuition so that Freddie could continue with his design and technology ideas. He spent time making a set of spoons that he wished to be handed out at his funeral. Touchingly, they were marked with the words: "When you stir this dish, think of me. Freddie x"

To donate, in Freddie's name, for a new scout hut, go to https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/2ndAshbourneScouts


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Choose your love nest! Where

From a chic hotel room with a roll-top bath to a secluded cabin in a meadow, discover your perfect retreat


Cliveden House, Berkshire


The Scarlet, Cornwall

5 chic huts and cabins

Craftsman's Cabin
Martock, Somerset

In a peaceful meadow on the edge of the Somerset Levels, this stylish wood cabin — decked out with the work of local artists and makers — comes with a full kitchen (stocked with local sourdough and eggs), a cosy wood-burning stove, a king-size bed and an outdoor rolltop bath. Light the fire pit as the sun sets and take in vast skies, watching at this time of year for magnificent starling murmurations, or stroll to the Wyndham Arms, a lovely pub a few minutes away in the pretty village of Kingsbury Episcopi, with live music every Sunday from 4pm to 7pm. The cabin's owners are happy to help with recommendations, from the area's top bakeries and restaurants to the best gardens to visit and local walks.
Details A one-night stay for two costs from £170; craftsmanscabin.co.uk

Callow Hall Hives
Ashbourne, Derbyshire

Set within 35 acres of meadows and woodlands surrounding the chic country house hotel of Callow Hall are its "hives", secluded treehouses that are perfect for couples — and two are still available over Valentine's weekend. Inside, the feel is of rustic luxury, with wood-clad walls, comfortable king-size beds, rainfall showers and plush bathrobes, while outside, each hive has a private deck with views through the treetops. Should you want to stay put, order a breakfast hamper of fresh croissants, jams, local butter and homemade granola to be delivered to your door. Otherwise you are a short walk from the main house with its restaurant, bar and spa treatments.
Details A one-night stay for two costs from £296; wildhive.uk

The Cable Hut
Abermach, Pembrokeshire

This historic cabin sits in a fantastic location between the quiet beaches of Abermawr and Aberbach, where dolphins and seals are regularly spotted. Take in fabulous sea views from the floor-to-ceiling windows, curl up beside the log-burning stove or spend an evening stargazing from the cabin's outdoor hot tub. Should you want to get outdoors, there are excellent walks from the front door — being just metres from the Pembrokeshire coastal path — as well as sea swimming and surfing. Alternatively stay in the warm to enjoy the welcome hamper, which includes freshly baked bread, local eggs, cheeses, cakes and shortbread, plus a bottle of fizz and handmade toiletries.
Details Three nights (Sat and Sun) or four nights (Mon to Fri) for two costs from £995; uniquehomestays.com

Holly Water Cabin
Crediton, Devon

In a quiet spot on a working family farm, this cabin is the perfect combination of comfort and seclusion. Enormous sliding glass doors open out onto the front deck, where you'll find a copper outdoor bath and a fire pit (which can also be used for cooking), while inside there is a full kitchen, a wood-burner and a huge window overlooking trees and fields at the foot of the cabin's king-size bed. Guests can expect a welcome hamper of tea, coffee and breakfast supplies such as local eggs, honey and fresh bread, but there is also a great farm shop nearby and a good pub, the Ring of Bells, where walkers can pick up a packed lunch of local cheese, handmade sausage rolls, fresh fruit and walk maps.
Details A two-night stay for two costs from £360; hollywatercabin.co.uk


Heckfield Place, Hampshire

Rest and Wild Cabins
Yorkshire Dales

Deep in the woods overlooking the beautiful Wensleydale Valley and the River Ure you will find five black-clad off-grid cabins. Each one comes with its own outdoor bath, sheltered beneath towering pine trees, as well as king-size beds positioned so that you wake to fabulous views from the window. Try one of the many beautiful walks from the front door or take a cold dip in the nearby Catrigg Force pool; just don't forget to order your dinner (and breakfast) hamper for your return. Tthe former might include risotto, steak or pasta dishes to be cooked over the cabin's outdoor fire pit. Two cabins are still available for a three-night stay from February 14.
Details A two-night stay for two costs from £350; restandwild.co

Emily Sargent

8 great country hotels

The Cavendish Hotel
Baslow, Derbyshire

This 28-room hotel in the Peak District is quite possibly one of the most romantic locations in the UK. It's set on the fringes of the Chatsworth Estate, aka Pemberley in the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Take the 20-minute stroll up to the main house and you'll see why Elizabeth Bennet fell in love with it. Then retire to your room — perhaps with a four-poster bed. All have lovely antique furniture, impressive art (spot the print by Barbara Hepworth) and views across the countryside.
Details Doubles from £170; cavendishhotelbaslow.co.uk

The Scarlet
Mawgan Porth, Cornwall

An adults-only hotel on a magic stretch of the north Cornish coast with a superb spa, this place ticks a lot of boxes for a loved-up weekend. Each of the rooms benefits from coastal views — and some have their own balconies. But you'll want to spend most of your time exploring the spa. There are wooden hot tubs on the clifftops, four hour-long couples'

to go for a romantic weekend

COVER: YVES BOTTALICO/ADVANTAGES/CAMERA PRESS, BELOW: ELLIOT WHITE; CANOPY AND STARS; ADAM LYNK





Holly Water Cabin, Devon



Callow Hall Hives, Derbyshire

treatments, a cedar-wood sauna and an open-air pool with more of those stand-out views. Rooms are available for Valentine's Day.

Details B&B doubles from £235; scarlethotel.co.uk

Cliveden House
Taplow, Berkshire

This grade I listed stately home has a famously saucy past. It's where, in 1961, on a hot summer's day, Christine Keeler dipped into the glorious outdoor pool. John Profumo was looking on, and soon their infamous, politically scandalous affair started. Inside the historic house, grand rooms feel like they're from another era thanks to antiques, chandeliers and original artworks. Some have four-poster or canopied beds. Club Rooms have private hot tubs and there's availability on the 14th. Cliveden puts on fabulous events to book as well, like its Ridge Vineyard wine pairing and six-course dinner coming up on March 10 (£240pp).

Details B&B doubles from £398; clivedenhouse.co.uk

Thyme
Southrop, Cotswolds

Thyme feels more like a tiny village than a hotel, given that its rooms are spread through a collection of honeystone buildings in gorgeous grounds. You'll find impressive floral displays everywhere you go (thanks to the cutting garden on site), as well as scented candles that give off notes of eucalyptus, thyme and river mint (part of the hotel's own line of beauty products, Bertioli). The 31 rooms are best described as English garden chic and there is availability for February 14. The Botanical Bothy Signature Ritual is the perfect couples' treatment — and when it's done your therapists will run two side-by-side bubble baths in a private courtyard.

Details B&B doubles from £400; thyme.co.uk

Ynyshir
Machynlleth, Snowdonia

If food is your love language, it's hard to do much better than Ynyshir. This high-end (yes, expensive) two-Michelin-star restaurant with rooms in the wilds of the Welsh countryside has a tasting menu showcasing spectacular seasonal dishes with a Japanese influence. The rooms are great, with exposed wooden beams and dried flowers — though it's the food, rather than the lodgings, that is the big draw. Breakfast is top-notch and traditional: try the sausage and egg muffin, which you can enjoy in bed.

Details B&B doubles with dinner for two from £1,224; ynyshir.co.uk

The Tawny
Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire

This is no ordinary country house hotel. The main building has a grand glass exterior, shaped like a tawny owl's face, and houses a swish brasserie that overlooks the estate's 70 acres, home to lakes, follies and woodland. Rooms are spread through the grounds in a collection of charming structures: treehouses, shepherd's huts and boathouses. Freestanding tubs come with most rooms, but the real treat is those that have one of the huge outdoor spa baths overlooking the ducks on the lake.

Details B&B doubles from £265; thetawny.co.uk



Cwm Hill, Pembrokeshire

Heckfield Place
Heckfield, Hampshire

The Georgian mansion where Heckfield Place is found is filled with cosy corners for curling up in. There's not one but several elegant sitting rooms with marble fireplaces and board game (complimentary tea and delicious fat slices of cake are served here in the afternoons). There's the chic but cosy Moon Bar with a crackling fire and cocktails made with house tinctures, the subterranean screening room with leather sofas, the serene rooms with carefully curated books and minibars — the list goes on. You'll also want to head to the spa, the Bothy, to sit in the hot tub overlooking the listed parkland and farm. There's still some availability for Valentine's Day.

Details B&B doubles from £600; heckfieldplace.com

Fife Arms
Braemar, Aberdeenshire

This beautiful Victorian coaching inn is owned by Manuela and Iwan Wirth, co-founders of the Hauser & Wirth art gallery empire, so it's no surprise that inside you'll find more than 14,000 artworks and antiques. Highlights include a 19th-century chimney-piece carved with scenes from Robert Burns's works and Pablo Picasso's oil painting *Tête de femme*. Rooms have more incredible art, some even have freestanding copper baths — and some are still available for V-Day. The intimate, pink, art deco Elsa's Bar is the place for a romantic tipple; and you might want to book a remote picnic experience to feast on cheeses and meats alongside dappled glades in the neighbouring Cairngorms National Park.

Details B&B doubles from £307; thefifearms.com

Lizzie Frainier

10 posh pubs

The Village Pub
Barnsley, Gloucestershire

This is the Pig Hotel group's first pub and it's as chic as their other digs. The Village Pub is a grade II listed, 18th-century classic pub with the Pig twist: dark painted rooms with bright William Morris soft furnishings, Bramley toiletries and plush beds to enjoy after a night sipping on negronis in front of the bar's crackling fire. The pub's menu is wonderfully nostalgic, with dishes such as ox cheeks and smoked haddock fish cakes. Of the six rooms, the Pub Comfy Luxe is the biggest treat. The Pig also owns Barnsley House — the country house hotel across the road from the pub — and guests can visit the gardens and use the facilities.

Details B&B from £215, two-night minimum stay at weekends; thevillagepub.co.uk

More stays next page

Yes, I have a hot tub. I'm common to the core

Alan Titchmarsh, 75, talks to Stephen Armstrong about class, snobbery and what he thinks is naff in the garden

NEIL HEPWORTH



You know what you get with Alan Titchmarsh. No-nonsense geniality from a Yorkshireman who doesn't suffer fools. He'll happily dive into a scrap about cancel culture, agitate for government compensation for the interminable roadworks on the M25 and A3 that have decimated visitor numbers to RHS Garden Wisley and, as he approaches his 76th birthday, dismiss rewilding as nonsense.

"Anybody who's studied ecology knows the 'natural' state of this country is covered in oak trees or brambles," he says. "[Getting back to that state] won't help biodiversity. Whereas with gardeners who garden responsibly, it doesn't matter which country flowers come from, the bees and the butterflies want nectar."

Titchmarsh added a CBE, the highest ranking Order of the British Empire award, to his existing MBE in the King's latest new year's honours list, for services to horticulture. "I don't know why they let me jump over the OBE," he laughs. "I mean, you look at other folk who've got the CBE and it's, oh gosh. I've got to be a bit more grown-up now."

Up there with Monty Don as one of the nation's favourite gardeners, Titchmarsh hasn't really changed what he's been doing since discovering his love of growing at eight years old. Though he admits he found his Ilkley childhood tough.

"I was little," he says simply when we speak over the phone. "I was 4ft 10in when I left school [at 15]. I felt completely different to the other kids. I was bullied a bit."

He left with one O-level to become an apprentice gardener for Ilkley council but the teasing didn't stop. "I remember somebody telling me, 'You know they call you the council weedster,'" he says with a sigh. "To go along the poshest street in Ilkley with a denim apron, watering the hanging baskets, when all the kids were on the way to grammar school to do their A-levels, it's like running the gauntlet every morning."

Still, it was gardening that saved him. After earning a diploma in horticulture at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, he went on to edit gardening books, joined *You and Yours* on Radio 4 as a gardening expert in 1977, then moved into TV, presenting the 1983 Chelsea Flower Show. This, he recalls, gave him something more valuable than public recognition — it made his plumber father proud.

"He was a classic Yorkshire father: cloth cap, quiet man and not effusive in terms of affection," Titchmarsh explains. "Whenever I went back home from Kew the television would be on and I'd sit at his feet, leaning back against his chair. During the course of the evening just once he'd drop his hand on my head and ruffle my hair. He never said he was proud of me but I wouldn't have expected him to. It'd have embarrassed us."

It's fair to say that Titchmarsh has not adopted this reserved parenting style. In the garden of his Hampshire home there's an oak bench, a gift from his wife, Alison, and daughters Polly, 44, and Camilla, 42, with Jenny Agutter's "Daddy, my daddy" line from *The Railway Children* carved into it. Guaranteed to reduce any father of daughters to jelly, Titchmarsh can't actually recite the line over the phone to me without his voice breaking.

"It's pathetic, really," he sighs. "I'm a grown man and I have to leave the room if my girls put *The Railway Children* on. They've got their own houses now, their own husbands, their own children — the oldest is 13 and the youngest is 9. But their rooms are still here and they've still got their names on the door."

In one of his books — he has written 71, of which 12 are novels — he penned the line, "Fathers of sons have expectations. Fathers of daughters have worries." "You worry about them all the time," he sighs. "I mean, not in a paranoid way, because I delighted in their company and they're now mums themselves and I've got four grandchildren. But you're only as happy as your unhappiest child and that spreads to grandchildren as well."

He and Alison will celebrate their golden wedding anniversary this year — the secret to their long marriage, he says, is friendship, trust and weekly Pilates. "I keep being asked to do *Strictly* but Alison says my knees aren't up to it." He's also got a slightly dodgy lower back and he's on statins because "all the men in my family had heart trouble. My dad died when he was 62 so ..." He trails off uncomfortably.

"I really try to guard against what we call in this household 'the organ recital', but, at 75, whatever you do, bits of you start to wear out. My doctor said to me, 'Remember that your prostate was never meant to last as long as you're living. When you're 70 you'll be getting up twice a night.'"

> "I keep being asked to do Strictly but my wife says my knees aren't up to it

I wonder if it was kneeling down in the garden that did for his knees and his back but he waves me away. Gardening, he insists, is therapeutic in every way.

"It's kept me sane," he says. "There's such an emphasis on tragedy these days, whether it's environmental or human, that people lose a sense of proportion. But if you do anything with local people, local volunteering, all that kind of thing, you'll realise that 99 per cent of the world, or 99 per cent of the population, are good folk."

When he started out there weren't any trends in gardening. "You had somebody in to do it if you lived in one of the big houses up the posh end of town, or you had an allotment and grew your own vegetables," he says with a laugh.

Now gardens are so subject to changing fashions that Titchmarsh has decided to share his, admittedly tongue-in-cheek, list of what's in and what's out. He deems pampas grass as common as mulch. Wind chimes, gladioli, blue ceramic pots and hot tubs also make the list of horticultural nonos he has just published on Scribehound, a subscription website for garden writers.

Titchmarsh's common-or-garden list is a bit like the designer Nicky Haslam's annual round-up of all the things he finds common — teasing but with an element of truth. To be honest, a lot of the crimes on the list are ones he has perpetrated himself. "Blue ceramic pots? That's down to *Ground Force*. But that was the 1990s," he says. "And decking! I get it in the neck all the time for decking. When I started doing *Ground Force* B&Q's annual sales totalled £9,000. A year [later] that reached £8 million. It earned me a place in Quentin Letts's book *50 People Who Buggered Up Britain*."

He laughs, then pauses. "And I have to admit I do have a hot tub." Really? Isn't that top of the naff list? "We didn't want one!" he protests. "It was there when we bought the house. I thought, I'll get rid of that. But then it was sitting there early one morning and we slipped in and listened to the birds as we laid back among the foaming suds ... oh dear, I'm common to the core."

My perfect weekend

Lark or owl?
Lark. I don't like to waste the day, particularly when it's light in the morning. And I stop play at ten o'clock at night. That's it.
Green juice or fry-up?
At the weekend it's definitely a fry-up. During the week it's Shreddies or porridge.
What's the last thing you googled?
A greenhouse thermometer.
What's on your phone screensaver?
A picture of my daughters.
Signature dish?
I'm very good at bacon and eggs.
Tiger grandparent or free range?
I believe in the butterfly syndrome. If you run after them, you can never catch them — if you stand still, they'll come to you.
Milton or Shakespeare?
PG Wodehouse.
I couldn't get through the weekend without ...
Seeing my grandchildren. Preferably in the garden.

Dry January is over: here's how to stay soberish now

Maria Lally asks the experts how to extend the benefits from last month's abstinence into February and beyond

FREDERIC CIROU/FREDERIC CIROU/GETTY IMAGES



Dry January is over. A staggering 15 million people in the UK were planning to ditch the booze this past month, according to one estimate. Who knows how many managed to stay on the wagon, but while many of us are looking forward to cracking open something cold and fizzy tonight, just as many are keen to extend the benefits of an alcohol-free month into February and beyond.

We have a reputation for being one of the booziest countries in Europe, but according to a YouGov survey of more than 2,000 adults published this week, Britons' relationship with alcohol is changing. Half of the 35-54 age group said they now only drink on "special occasions", while two in five of the over-55s are cutting back.

The evidence about the health risks of drinking even moderate amounts of alcohol is becoming harder to ignore, but among my own group of fortysomething friends there are other reasons for calling time on wine o'clock culture. Mostly the way alcohol ruins our sleep, increases perimenopausal anxiety, ages our skin, adds weight and makes us less focused at work and snappier parents at home.

We may not be talking about giving up for good, but we're definitely interested in staying soberish — maybe only drinking socially, or only having one or two glasses of wine a week, or only doing so when eating out (which is less and less these days).

Catherine Gray, author of the Sunday Times bestselling book *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*, says: "When I first gave up alcohol [11 years ago] people reacted strongly, but in the last few years there's been less judgment and more curiosity. I think it's lovely that people seem freer to say they are going soberish for a while."

Although the scientific consensus is shifting increasingly towards abstinence, in practice "the message now is the less alcohol you drink, the better", says Dr Linia Patel, a state-registered dietician who is also a research scientist at the University of Milan. "Going completely sober isn't right for everybody," says Karen Tyrell, CEO of the charity Drinkaware. "Science tells us that any reduction [in alcohol] offers huge benefits."

If you're interested in being soberish, here's how to do it.

Aim for at least two to three alcohol-free days a week — all in a row is even better

The current advice is that men and women shouldn't drink more than 14 units of alcohol a week, "but that's an upper limit, not a figure to aim towards," Tyrell says. A pint of beer typically contains two units, so drinking one a day will mean you hit that weekly limit, while a large (250ml) glass of 12 per cent wine contains three units: drinking one a night will thus take you over the limit by 50 per cent. "Try to have some alcohol-free days each week for your liver to be given a chance to regenerate," Patel says. According to the British Liver Trust, having at least three alcohol-free days in a row gives your liver an even better chance to recover and repair itself.

But don't drink your 'quota' at the weekend

A lot of us have absorbed the message about alcohol-free days and fooled ourselves into thinking that abstaining all week and drinking only at weekends is healthier. Not so. "Avoid drinking all your units in one go or over the course of a weekend," Tyrell says. "A binge is defined as six units in one sitting for a woman and eight for a man, and we know binge drinking can affect mood and memory, and in the longer term lead to an increased risk of alcohol-related cancer and heart disease."

Try not to drink late at night

In defence of daytime drinking, friends and I now meet for a 4pm glass of wine on a Saturday rather than at 8pm, largely as it's better for our sleep. Alcohol disrupts neurotransmitter systems important in the regulation of sleep, making you more likely to have a disturbed night, according to research from the University of Michigan.

"We process one unit of alcohol per hour, so a lunchtime or late-afternoon drink, unless it's excessive, will be out of your system by the time you go to bed," says Dr Neil Stanley, a sleep expert and author of *How to Sleep Well*.

A glass of wine isn't the worst thing for your health

A teetotal life is simply not realistic or practical for many people, says Professor Tim Spector, the gut health expert known for the Zoe nutrition app, who is hardly an outlier for enjoying a regular glass of red wine, especially with friends.

"If you drink red wine in moderation, eat plenty of plants and fermented foods and make sure you have alcohol-free days, any negative impacts are likely to be relatively minor," he says, "especially when you factor in the benefits of polyphenols and social connection."

> "Science tells us that any reduction in alcohol offers huge benefits

Look for wines with lower alcohol content

The average alcohol content of a bottle of wine has crept up to about 14 per cent, which means a large glass contains 3.5 units, whereas the same measure of 9 per cent wine will contain just 2.25 units.

Jane MacQuitty, the Times wine critic, recommends The Doctors' Riesling (9 per cent, Majestic, £11.99) while 6Percent Red Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon (6percent.wine, £12.50) has half the calories and alcohol of claret (albeit half the flavour).

Find a good alcohol-free beer

The Times fitness expert, Harry Jameson, stopped drinking after Christmas and intends to go soberish this year: "I've got three to four things between now and April, including a 40th birthday and a lads' ski trip, where I'll allow myself some drinks. Other than that I'm having a dry first quarter, and I already feel leaner, sharper and more energised. As a lover of beer I've switched to non-alcoholic versions, my favourites are Lucky Saint, Heineken Zero and Athletic Brewing."

Exercise can decrease your appetite for alcohol

If you stick to a structured exercise regime you're less likely to want to drink, Jameson says, echoing the findings of a 2021 study from Loughborough University, which showed that exercise significantly reduced alcohol craving and improved mood.

"If you decide to go soberish you'll feel good, you'll have more energy in the morning and consume far fewer calories," he says. "Feeling fit and energised can become as appealing as wanting to drink."

Think about what drinking does to your skin

"Even as a beauty editor I underestimated the impact sobriety would have on my skin," says Donna Francis (@thebeautyed), who went sober last summer. Alcohol doesn't just dry skin and dilate capillaries, it directly accelerates ageing by damaging DNA in telomeres, according to research published in Molecular Psychiatry in 2022. "I wake up with fewer creases and have fewer breakouts," Francis says. "My skin just behaves so much better."

Don't have alcohol as your first drink after work

"I find an 'event drink' at around 6.30/7pm means I'm likely to stay dry for the rest of the night," says Harriet Walker, the Times fashion editor. "By event I mean something that feels sophisticated rather than sugary, something you wouldn't drink during the day — for me that's Botivo, which has the bitterness of a good aperitif but none of the next-day downsides. I have it with a giant ice cube, soda and a slice of orange in a nice glass (crucial)."

Practise sober socialising

January is such an unsociable month that spending it dry doesn't do much to hone your sober social skills. It helps to have some options up your sleeve for when someone suggests catching up for a drink. "Try an evening talk at a bookshop or one of those saunas on the beach," Gray suggests. "I think we give alcohol too much credit when the real enjoyment comes from spending time with our friends."

If your meet-ups do involve booze, Tyrell advises setting the expectations of those you usually drink with, explaining that you don't want to drink too much, want to be home by a certain time or need to drive. "Even if you're not really driving, you can still tell people you are," Gray adds.

Try having a Sober Spring

Besides being an antisocial month, January is a cold, dark, miserable one that many are glad to see the back of. That's why Gray launched Sober Spring with the charity Alcohol Change UK — a three-month alcohol sabbatical from March 20 to June 20.

"People in their forties probably have over two decades of habitual drinking under their belts, and need longer than a month to reset their drinking habits," she says. "The shift to spring can be a good cue to create positive new habits because of the sense of renewal it brings."

My friends are vibrator show-offs

Dr Suzi Godson
Sex counsel

Q All my friends keep telling me that they use vibrators with their partners and on their own, and that I'm missing out. I feel quite satisfied with my sex life as it is, but are they right?

A Your friends are obviously excited about what they are getting from their new sex toys but that doesn't mean you and your husband are missing anything. Vibrators make it easier and faster to achieve orgasm so more and more women are using them alone and with a partner. It's hard to get an exact figure for how many women have one — sex toy companies estimate about 55 per cent but academic research suggests the number is much higher. The most robust academic research dates back to 2010, when Debbie Herbernick at Indiana University in the US conducted a study with 3,800 women aged 18 to 60 and found that more than half regularly used vibrators.

Herbernick's study captured a growth period in the sex toy market that began in the early Nineties, when companies such as Myla and Coco de Mer began selling design-led vibrators aimed at women. These looked nothing like the oversized replica genitalia that had previously defined the market. Suddenly sex toys were acceptable. By 2018 retailers such as Boots and John Lewis stocked them and the UK has the largest sex toy market share in Europe.

The leader in the field was, and still is, the Swedish company Lelo. It was one of the first to create fully rechargeable sex toys and opening them felt more like unboxing a new Apple product. More recently Lelo and other companies have embraced sensonic technology, which has revolutionised clitoral stimulation. There have been several incarnations of the Lelo Sona now, starting at about £79, and it really is a phenomenal little machine. Without even making direct contact it delivers waves of pleasure that can result in a mindblowing orgasm. Although the Sona was designed for women, many men say it feels incredible too.

The Sona is probably the closest thing we have to Barbarella's orgasmatron but sometimes it seems as if vibrators now have more in common with kitchen gadgets than anything else: 32 settings that pulse, throb or gyrate, USB charging, fully waterproof, dishwasher-safe and so on. With the right sex toy you could get from a standing start to the big O in 60 seconds.

Although there is no right or wrong way to enjoy it, as you and your husband know, sex is about human connection: two people being intensely in tune with each other, knowing each other's bodies inside out and understanding what feels good. Good sex is not two people turning on a sex toy. It is two people turning on each other. Yes, vibrators can add variety and enhance pleasure, but they're not a requirement for a fulfilling sex life. In fact the more reliant we become on toys that provide a short cut to orgasm, the less likely it is that we will take the time to discover the joys of a more circuitous route to that destination. Sex toys can provide a temporary thrill but they are no substitute for connection between you and your partner — which it sounds like you already have.

Send your questions to weekendsex@thetimes.co.uk

> "Sex is about human connection: two people being intensely in tune with each other



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CIARAN MCCRICKARD FOR THE TIMES



Fiona Bugler



Fiona, centre, with her niece Gemma, left, and daughter Ciara, right

I've run 20 marathons. This is the one that made me cry

Her niece's brain injury led Fiona Bugler, 57, to take on the biggest running challenge of her life

My running life started in 2002 when I was accepted, on my first entry in the ballot, to run the London Marathon. I was 35, just divorced and bringing up two young children under five while juggling my job as a writer. It was the catalyst for the positive change I needed at that point and, although I didn't know it then, running would be the thing that defined my life for the next 22 years. I'd go on to edit running magazines and punctuate every year with a new long-distance challenge, anywhere from New York to the Himalayas.

At the beginning of 2024, with 19 marathons under my belt (five completed in less than 3 hours 15 minutes), I decided I would run my best "for age" time at the Manchester Marathon in April. I never made that race but I did make one in Chengdu, China, in October. I ran it in one of my slowest ever times but it was one of the greatest and most emotional days of my life.

It was at 4am on February 27 last year that life took a turn in another direction. I was jolted awake to see multiple missed calls from my sister Clare, who was on holiday in South Africa to celebrate her early retirement. "It's Gemma," she said tearfully when I finally got through — Clare's 23-year-old daughter, my niece, had been in a head-on collision on a dark country road and was in a critical condition at University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff.

> "At the finish the family gathered under the shade of some trees, some of us sobbing, others hobbling

Within minutes I'd thrown on some clothes and left my home in Brighton. With Clare and her husband, Adrian, so far away, I knew I had to rush to be with Gemma, who was just three weeks older than my own daughter, Ciara.

The goal, the surgeon told us, was for Gemma to see the morning. She'd had a craniotomy to deal with a traumatic brain injury, while she also had two cervical spine fractures and her kneecap was split in two. She was in an induced coma to allow her brain to recover and her neck was in a brace.

After a gruelling 24-hour journey, Clare and Adrian spent long days rollercoasting through intense emotions in the family room at the hospital's intensive care unit. When Gemma was taken out of the coma after two weeks, her first words were "I want my mum." As a physio specialising in musculoskeletal conditions who had run a clinic in Cardiff Hospital, Gemma worked out where she was and wanted to know exactly what she was dealing with. Despite her traumatic injuries, miraculously she was able to speak, move a little and laugh. Gemma was still Gemma.

She was discharged from intensive care three weeks later to begin her recovery in temporary accommodation in Cardiff. As soon as she could, Gemma began to map out her own physio recovery plan, lifting weights while still wearing her neck brace. She sought out help from a specialist physio and began rebuilding her knee by running on an AlterG Anti-Gravity Treadmill, a specialist bit of kit that allows you to run without using bodyweight. Eventually she moved back to live with her friends, fellow physiotherapists affectionately known as Team Gemma.

Our lives slowly returned to normal and we were able to think beyond the here and now. My focus went back to running. As Manchester was out of the question I set my eyes on Chengdu, the capital of China's southwest Sichuan province and the city where my 27-year-old son Frankie's new fiancée, Duo, was from. Their engagement party would coincide with the Chengdu marathon, which Ciara and I decided to enter — it would be my 20th race and my daughter's first.

Momentum gathered. Other family members, including Clare, our brothers and their families, decided to join us and run the race as a way to celebrate Gemma's recovery — all of us together. Quickly, a combination of sibling rivalry and excitement built and 19 flights were booked. A Strava group for the ten runners in the family, ages ranging from 21 to 62, was formed. Plans were hatched for training and fundraising.

On that bleak February night in Wales several individuals had helped to save Gemma's life. The passengers in the other car acted quickly to safely remove her from her vehicle; a young off-duty female police officer provided care while emergency services were called; and the crew from Wales Air Ambulance intubated Gemma at the side of the road and transported her to the trauma centre in Cardiff for life-saving surgery. So we decided to raise money for Wales Air Ambulance.

At this point no one imagined that Gemma would take part too. But having run her first half-marathon a few months before her crash, she dared to dream that she could do it again. She didn't tell anyone but as well as transitioning back to work — with the many hidden challenges of brain injury, including debilitating headaches that painkillers couldn't touch — she quietly started to prepare.

As a physio she understood that the key to running success was balancing training with avoiding injury. She returned to the gym and did Pilates, walking, cycling and a light run schedule. Then, right at the last minute, she entered herself into the half-marathon section of the Chengdu race.

Clare was filled with anxiety for Gemma — and herself. At 62, she was the oldest of our group and had had very little time to train, but as we gathered on the morning of the race the sight of a helicopter flying overhead was a symbolic reminder of the reason we were running. Resolute, she jogged the entire route without stopping.

For me, running alongside my daughter in her first marathon gave me a new, very special runner's high. I saw the race through her eyes — the exhilaration of the crowds cheering us on, the other runners jostling at our side, the feeling that we were all in it together, the private moments of darkness and the serotonin-induced moments of total joy. And even though we lost each other for the last few miles, we ran the bulk in perfect sync, crossing the line in 3 hours 43 minutes (me) and 3 hours 45 minutes (Ciara).

Meanwhile Gemma ran her half in an incredible 1 hour and 48 minutes, despite being hit by a headache at 10km, crossing the finish line in tears. It was eight months to the day since her accident and while running 13.1 miles might not have been exactly what the doctor ordered, proving to herself that she could move on from that awful night was worth every minute of the pain. At the finish the family gathered under the shade of some trees, some of us sobbing, others hobbling. I soaked up the smiling faces of two generations, riding the wave of the energy of racing. Not for the first time I saw the power of running in action.

On the surface Gemma's recovery has been miraculous — she's on a dream trip to Australia at present — but there are long-lasting challenges that are hard for a 24-year-old to manage. For her, our family and me, the Chengdu race was much more than just a run from A to B. It marked a line in the sand, another step in the right direction and, although the journey is challenging, a commitment to keep moving forward — and to keep on running.

NICO SCHINCO



Carolina Gelen

The Gen Z chef everyone is talking about

At only 26, Carolina Gelen has a global following thanks to her comfort food with a twist. Hannah Evans reports

The chef Carolina Gelen is one of social media's original food influencers, thanks to sharing mouthwatering videos and pictures of her dinners for almost a decade. Her dishes are simple but innovative, attracting the attention of the foodie establishment as well as Instagram users. Now 26, she is fêted by top chefs and foodies, and has a bestselling cookbook under her belt.

Her recipe book, *Pass the Plate*, reached number eight on the New York Times bestseller list and she has 1.2 million followers on Instagram, each of them lapping up videos of her cooking orange, fennel and shallot roast chicken or baking brown butter coffee cookies. She also writes columns for some of the world's largest food publications, including Food 52 and The New York Times. But a few years ago she was living in her native Romania, studying computer science at university in Transylvania, posting the odd picture of the meals she made after work.

"There was no thought behind it. It was never something I thought would be a career. It was just photos of what I made," Gelen explains. The first post she shared was a millennial cliché: a plate of avocado on toast with a poached egg, which she uploaded on March 13, 2015.

She never thought that being a cook or chef was a viable option for her. "I was raised to think that you were either a lawyer, a doctor or a disappointment. Vocational careers weren't encouraged," she says. From humble beginnings living in a one-bedroom apartment in Transylvania with her parents, she learnt to cook from her mum — and through watching hours of American and British cookery shows with chefs including Jamie Oliver and Yotam Ottolenghi. It was "truly surreal", she says of the time last December when she and Ottolenghi met up to cook one of his recipes together on Instagram to publicise his *Comfort* recipe book. Watching those shows was also how she learnt to speak English. If her local shops didn't stock the ingredients that her favourite chefs used — puréed pumpkin, say, or cranberry sauce — she'd teach herself to make them from scratch.



Gelen with Yotam Ottolenghi

It was in her early twenties, when she moved to Utah as part of a university exchange programme, that she began to take her interest in food seriously. "I worked in a five-star hotel with an award-winning chef. That switched things for me and I realised I could make a living doing what I enjoyed doing."

To say that Gelen's life was next changed by a plate of humble potatoes wouldn't be an exaggeration. On October 19, 2020, having gathered just a few thousand followers on Instagram, she shared a video of her making crispy golden smashed potatoes. Within a few hours it had racked up two million views and she'd received tens of thousands more followers. "It was the first really viral thing I'd ever done," she explains. "Almost straight away people began recreating that video."

Today Gelen, who now lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, with her family, has dozens of hit recipes, such as her garlicky chicken couscous and her orange, olive oil and cardamom cake. "It's one of my most loved recipes. I think it's such a beautiful celebration of citrus but it's also such an approachable dessert that looks impressive but in reality is not that difficult to make." Her recipe for bread made using cottage cheese has been watched 6 million times; her recipe for shaved frozen peaches and cream 11 million times.

"People tell me that my videos make food make sense," she says. "I get people commenting that they never would've done what I've done with an ingredient but now I've shown them how to do that little twist or try something different with it, I've translated cooking for them. It's exciting now."

A Liddle bit of Rod

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Outside

Redesign your garden: this is the time to do it

If you need to move shrubs and other plants, take action while they're still dormant, says our expert Joe Swift





The best time to move plants is between November and March

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Page 19

‘We walked through beech woodland that has cloaked the hillside for centuries’

Jen and Sim Benson’s good walk



Mulch the roots with plenty of compost to lock in moisture

In my new garden I want to move some plants as well as plant plenty of new ones. Some I inherited are lovely things (roses, a myrtle, a philadelphus and many perennials) that I definitely want to keep but just don’t fit in with my new plans where they’re currently sited. And some will have to be moved to make way for hard landscaping and paths.

There’s plenty of information on heights and spreads of plants, but sadly they can’t read the rules and will perform very differently in different gardens (depending on soil conditions, aspect, local climate etc), and it’s very easy for less experienced gardeners to be over or under-ambitious when it comes to predicting a plant’s growth over time. Well-established mature shrubs can be very difficult to move (but not impossible with a digger), so for many I wouldn’t advise it. Those that have been planted in the past two or three years, however, should be pretty easy to lift, while those planted up to five years ago will be trickier but should still have a high transplant success rate.

The dormant period between November and March, when the ground is soft (but not frozen or waterlogged), is the best time to move plants and plant new ones. Some guidelines say deciduous shrubs are best moved earlier in that window and evergreens later as we near spring, but frankly there’s little in it if they’re fully hardy plants. The time to do it, as with much gardening, is when it fits in best with your plans. More tender plants (salvias, exotics), or those that may be flowering now (such as winter-flowering viburnums and daphnes) are the ones best left till they’ve finished flowering, so tackle them later in February or March.

> “Use a very sharp spade and make sure the soil around the roots isn’t too dry before digging



Myrtus communis Tarentina shrub

My tips for lifting and moving shrubs

Go carefully. You won’t know what the rootball is like until you start digging, and the aim is to keep as much of the existing soil on the roots as possible. On sandy soil this isn’t always possible because it falls away, but as long as you replant straight away and don’t let the roots dry out it should be OK. Before digging make sure the soil around the roots isn’t too dry; if required soak well the day before. With larger shrubs tie any branches together and out of the way for easy access and to stop them poking you in the eye.

Using a very sharp spade (I sharpen mine with a stone) start digging around the outside of where you think the roots are, being generous because you can always work your way in. The roots tend to sit a little outside the drip line of the plant’s leaf canopy. Once you have an idea of where the roots are, dig a trench all the way around and begin working the spade underneath, moving around it as you go. With larger plants it may help to have someone else lean the plant back as you start to dig underneath. Have a sharp pair of secateurs or loppers to cut any larger stray roots cleanly if needed; never leave a hacked end. Lift the rootball onto a piece of damp hessian (you may need to drag or move in a barrow at this point) and ideally transplant it as soon as possible.

Prune off about a third to half of the branches to balance out the plant with its new, smaller rootball to avoid it getting stressed in spring when it puts on leaf growth. If it’s spring-flowering, you’ll lose flowers this year. Try to maintain an open, graceful shape when pruning, always looking for an outward-facing bud to prune back to.

Dig a generous hole (use a stick to measure the diameter and depth of the plant’s rootball as a guide). Fork over the bottom of the hole and incorporate some leaf mould or compost, and add some sharp sand or grit on heavy soils. Planting too deep or too shallow can be disastrous for many plants, so add or take away the soil beneath until it’s planted to the same level as it was before you dug it up (there’ll be a soil mark on the main stem). Backfill the hole with soil, firming as you go (with your hands for smaller plants and gently with the heel of your boot for larger ones) to avoid any air pockets. Water in well.

Don’t let the soil dry out for its first year. Mulching the roots with plenty of compost (avoid building mulch up against the stem) will lock moisture in and smother weeds. Apply a little general fertiliser such as fish blood and bone in spring.



Some rose shrubs are dormant in winter

Consider lifting and dividing perennials too

When lifting shrubs there are often perennials and grasses in the way and you’ll be left with a gap that may be nicely filled with a clump of something you already have. Most perennials benefit from being divided every few years anyway as they can die out in the middle and generally lose vigour over time.

Dig up the entire clump. Shallow-rooted plants will probably break up instantly, so look out for healthy individual chunks or mini plants that can be kept. Larger fibrous rooted plants may come up in one large clump or break into smaller pieces. Small plants can probably be pulled apart by hand into individual-sized plants, or use a sharp knife to cut cleanly through the roots.

With large clumps take two forks, push one through the middle of the clump and place the other one so they are back to back and facing away from each other so you can prise it apart (a particularly satisfying job). Very tough plants and large grasses may need their roots cutting through with a sharp spade, or use an old serrated saw or knife. Discard any unhealthy or spent roots or shoots and divide again so you end up with fist-sized rootballs or three to five strong shoots. Condition the soil a little and replant about three to six plants per square metre, depending on the type of plant.

NICOLA STOCKEN/GAP PHOTOS

What kind of gardener are you?



Ann Treneman on the many gardening tribes — and the ones she most identifies with



A 'Shed Life' gardener sees the sanctuary as an essential part of life

This week I found myself up at 3am, sitting up in bed, scribbling away at a list of my favourite plants. If January is all about grand plans and fever dreams, February is all about getting real. It suddenly seemed imperative to make the list that will begin to form a planting plan for my new garden.

Most of you aren't starting from scratch, as I am in my new garden, but it is still an eye-opening exercise to make a list of your favourite plants or, perhaps, what you'd like to see in your garden this year. The first plant? Much to my surprise it was bronze fennel which, light and airy, works in the front and back of a bed. Aromatic, good in salads and fish, excellent tea. I think the list is informative in that it nudges you back to which plants truly bring you fulfilment.

It also reflects what kind of gardener you are. For some time I have been working on creating a quiz that will point gardeners towards their tribes. My tribal categories are still a work in progress and do feel free to send me more. Here's where I've got so far:

Neat and tidy You like a perfect lawn and enjoy experimenting with stripe patterns. Flowers are fine but no floppy ones. You find the idea of embracing weeds revolting.

Classic cottage
Used to just be called cottage gardening, now christened "cottagecore". Roses, arches, bulbs galore, lavender, curved beds. Includes a potager sub-category with a mix of flowers and veg.

The specialist You enjoy creating a collection and having a theme. Could be anything including conifers, tropical, roses, alpines, white flowers, silver leaves, green foliage and topiary.

The perennialist You're a fan of the New Perennial movement dedicated to creating a "prairie bed" of mid to tall flowers and grasses with all year successive flowering. Looks "natural" but requires huge effort and planning.

Trends R Us You love the latest thing. Early adapter of the bulb lasagne. Obsessive about dahlias. You've bought several "display" metal watering cans. Still trying to nail the "Piet Oudolf grass waving in the sunset" look. Willing to spend a fortune on a mature olive tree.

It's all about the party For you the perfect garden is paved with a few raised beds for "cocktail glass" flowers. Borage, anyone? You love the outdoor/indoor vibe. Willing to spend on lighting, seating and (the holy grail) an outdoor kitchen.

Birds and bees The garden is full of "wildlife furniture" — ie bee boxes and a Manhattan-esque skyscraper of bird feeders. The summer lawn is a field and you've had to put up a sign for passers-by explaining that you aren't lazy, you are just doing your bit for nature.

Save the world, type 1 Big on fruit and veg, no-dig methods, natural pesticides and fertilisers.

Save the world, type 2 Embracing drought-resistant plants in the face of climate change. Can be confusing, especially when it's been raining for weeks.

It's all for show As a garden influencer, you are devoted to creating luscious photos for others to drool over. Requires endless trips to garden centres. Like Chelsea but more cut-throat.

Play time The garden is a toy graveyard. There's a discarded sandbox, an old Wendy house, a wrecked paddling pool. Every spring you buy bedding plants that then die.

Pets R Us Your garden has gone to the dogs, or cats or rabbits. The dogs are in charge, which explains the holes. Cats (never your own) are also bed wreckers.

Shed life For you a shed (or greenhouse) is a sanctuary and an essential part of life. This type may or may also value tools more than flowers.

You can be several of these and I always find it interesting to see what I am not (I'd love to be a perennialist but may not have the patience). I do recognise myself in cottagecore (potager sub-category), specialist and saving the world, part 1.

I also love a greenhouse/shed. My middle of the night "must have" list reflects this well with the Simon and Garfunkel combo (parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme), wild roses, daisies, lavender, ferns, hostas, rhubarb, dark veg, nasturtiums, cornflowers, elderflower, spurges. I love my list: it makes me feel that spring is indeed on the way.

Chelsea Flower Show news

The underwater Seawilding garden, inspired by Loch Craignish on the west coast of Scotland, features a 3,000-litre Perspex saltwater pool with seagrass, a pebble beach and a freshwater bog. Afterwards some of the garden will be relocated to the ocean floor. Wildly ambitious but interesting.

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STROUD VALLEYS PHOTOGRAPHY, ALEX APPLEBY, NEIL MCALLISTER/ALAMY





A good walk Haresfield Beacon and Standish Wood, Gloucestershire

How hard is it?

5 miles, moderate

The Cotswold Way runs for 102 miles between Chipping Campden and Bath, tracing the limestone escarpment along the western edge of the Cotswold Hills. It's a National Trail that's appealing for many reasons: an inviting route packed with historical interest; rolling, wildlife-rich countryside; good pubs nestled in honey-coloured Bath stone villages. But there is some serious walking here, featuring precipitously steep hills and some surprisingly remote stretches of trail.

On clear days, far-reaching views are a regular companion thanks to the elevated edge created by the tilted uplift of the limestone layer. A recent walk took us to Haresfield Beacon, a National Trust estate in a prominent position across three spurs of the escarpment. We had barely left the car park before we had to stop for the views, picking out far-off landmarks: the distant gleam of the Severn estuary, the Forest of Dean, the Black Mountains. A strategically important site for this reason, there are Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman earthworks and a Second World War brick bunker at Haresfield Hill.

Our route dived into Standish Wood, following the Cotswold Way through beech woodland that has cloaked the hillside for centuries — records show it was owned by Gloucester Abbey in 1297. Now carefully managed to prevent overcrowding, light flowed through the leafless canopy. A mile down the hill, the track known intriguingly as Robbers Road cut through an Iron Age cross dyke, one of four scheduled monuments close to Randwick village.

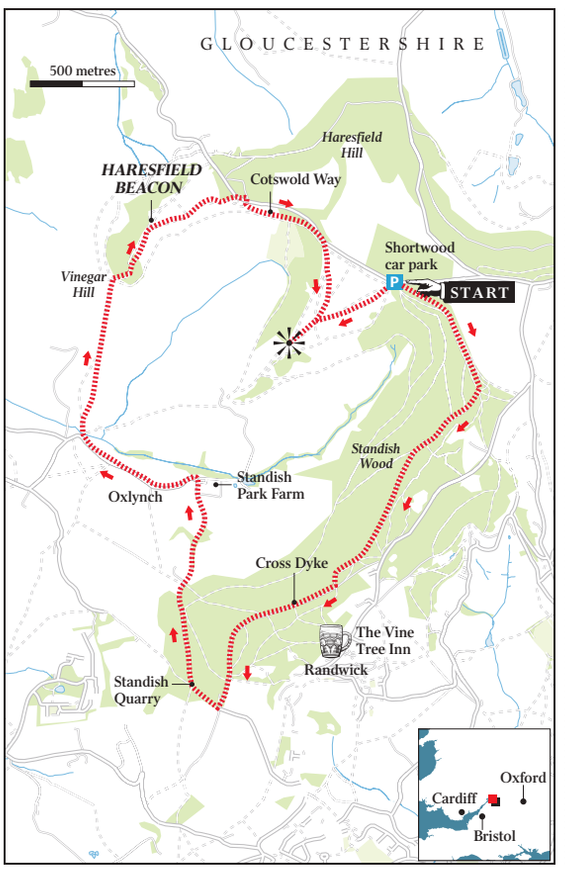
Emerging from the woods we threaded our way through the valley on narrow lanes and muddy footpaths, crossing small streams flowing from the edge westwards to join the Severn. At Oxlynch, at the foot of the central spur, Standish Park Farm makes artisan single and double Gloucester cheese using milk from a herd of rare Old Gloucester cows.

At the far side of the valley our ascent tackled the steep, grassy bank to Vinegar Hill, steepening further towards the top at Haresfield Beacon. We took time to explore the Bronze Age long barrow and the recently cleared Iron Age ring hill ramparts, taking in new views to the tree-topped May Hill and the Malverns.

Back on the Cotswold Way we traced the edge of the scarp to the twin barrows and topograph on the extraordinary V-shaped central promontory of the Haresfield Estate. A kestrel, hunting the grasslands in the valley below, hung in the air almost level with our vantage point. We truly had a bird's eye view.

Crossing the final stretch of open grassland to the car park, we made straight for the Off Road Bean — also known as Nigel Davis and his modified, eco-friendly Land Rover Defender 110 — for a much-needed post-walk flat white.

> “On clear days far-reaching views are a regular companion



Top left: Haresfield Beacon. Top right: a kestrel. Above: the Falcon in Painswick

Start Shortwood car park, GL6 6PP (OS ref SO831085)

Getting there Trains to Stroud and then 63 bus, alight opposite Harefield Farm; by road, small roads north of Stroud via the A46, signed to Haresfield

Walk Follow Cotswold Way (CW) into Standish Wood, descending to Ash Lane (823065) above Randwick village. Turn right onto track, leaving CW and bearing right at the disused quarry. Walk through woods to path junction at field edge (821071). Follow FP along hedgeline to right of house and across fields to Standish Park Farm. Follow FP through farm, then left, following lane to sharp bend with FP on right (817078). Follow FP, bearing left up Vinegar Hill. Turn right at path junction and continue uphill to trigpoint on Haresfield Beacon (820088). Rejoin CW at the escarpment and downhill across grassland to viewpoint (826083). Retrace steps to CW, bearing right to return to car park.

Lunch The Vine Tree Inn, Randwick (01453 763748, thevinetreeinn.com)

Accommodation The Falcon, Painswick (01452 222820, thefalconpainswick.com) also serves excellent local food

More information Cotswolds National Landscape (cotswolds-nl.org.uk); Visit Gloucestershire (visitgloucestershire.co.uk)

Jen and Sim Benson

Travel

Page 42

‘It’s that cat-in-the-sun contentment that makes Uruguay bucket-list bliss’

Julia Buckley on South America’s hidden winelands

ALAMY



Ermoupoli, Syros

Secret Greece: where to go

From hidden villages on the mainland to empty beaches on under-the-radar islands, James Litston has 25 great spots

Greece attracts 35 million visitors a year, about 4.5 million of whom are Brits — enough to make it our most popular overseas destination after Spain, France and Italy. Given that the bulk of these holidaymakers come at the height of summer, you won’t be surprised if the obvious spots are much less serene than they looked in the brochure.

But there’s more to Greece than the mega resorts of Rhodes and Crete or the non-stop buzz of Mykonos and Santorini. Skip the mainstream towns — be that on the islands or the mainland — and you’ll find places where the vibe is authentic and prices aren’t sky-high. Last summer, while spending a glorious few weeks hopping around Greece by ferry, I discovered just such a spot: Prasonisi, down at the bottom of Rhodes. It’s far from the big resorts and it’s mostly diehard water-sports fans who bother to schlep the full two hours from Rhodes Town to get here, leaving the crowds at the island’s other end. It felt delightfully undiscovered: a place for travellers rather than tourists.

Earlier on that same trip I spent several days exploring Syros, the island next to Mykonos but almost empty of tourists (my meal in its capital, Ermoupoli, cost a fraction of Mykonos’s prices). I had a similar experience in Thirasia, which is effectively part of Santorini but feels like its larger sibling must have done before the age of mass tourism. The same would be true in spots such as Kimolos in the southwest Cyclades and Kastellorizo in the Dodecanese, two small islands served by local ferries instead of the major ferry routes, making them that bit more adventurous as destinations.



Manolas, Thirasia

On the Greek mainland too are towns and villages where only clued-up travellers go. Spend time in any of them and you’ll feel that those 35 million visitors must be on another planet. So whether you’re looking for a beach break, a villa stay, an active escape

Great stays next page

▶ or a guided tour that captures Greece's essence without sticking to the well-worn tourist trail, you'll find inspiration among these, our pick of the best secret Greek havens.

Ermoupoli Syros, Cyclades

As the Cycladic archipelago's administrative capital, Ermoupoli isn't exactly a secret. However, barely an hour's ferry ride from Mykonos, it hardly registers with non-Greek holidaymakers. Those who find their way here will discover a prosperous town with marble-lined promenades intersected by backstreets packed with boutiques, bars and restaurants. Once you've admired the neoclassical architecture, head down to the waterfront beneath Saint Nicholas Church for a sea swim followed by cocktails as the sun sets behind its grand blue dome. The family-owned Hotel Aktaion, right on the harbour, is simple but comfortable and friendly.
Details B&B doubles from £79 (aktaion-hotel.gr). Fly to Mykonos

Manolas Thirasia, Cyclades

Santorini is one of Greece's biggest tourist traps but it's a different story on Thirasia, its under-the-radar sibling. This island forms the western edge of the sea-filled Santorini caldera and is crowned by the whitewashed village of Manolas. Wander its lanes, discover dome-roofed churches and sip Thirasian wines, all while wondering where everybody is. You'll be far from the crowds that gather at sunset in Santorini's villages — and you get much the same spectacle all to yourself when you stay at the super-chic four-suite Santa Irini Retreat, down by Thirasia's harbour, where you'll arrive by ferry from Santorini.
Details B&B doubles from £328 (santairini.gr). Fly to Santorini

Old Perithia Corfu

Don't expect to find touristy attractions in Old Perithia. Founded in the 1300s, it was built on a mountainside so as to be hidden from passing pirates and became the island's wealthiest village before falling into decline. It was abandoned in the 1960s and its ruins are being restored. Admire its Venetian architecture, pausing for lunch in one of the five reinvigorated tavernas. Three miles downhill in Loutses lies the three-bedroom Villa Orizzone Blu, which makes a handy base for exploration of northern Corfu.
Details Seven nights' self-catering for six from £1,098 (vintagetravel.co.uk). Fly to Corfu

Olympiada Halkidiki

Beyond its three peninsulas Halkidiki's mainland portion is far less visited. Olympiada, on its east coast, looking out towards distant Thasos (the northernmost Aegean island), is a hidden, time-forgot kind of place that's heaving with charm. Named after Alexander the Great's mother Olympias, it's where the Greek philosopher Aristotle made his mark. Follow in some of his footsteps on the Aristotle Trail then relax on the town's sandy beach or take a cookery course — ideally using the famed local mussels — with Loulou, the formidable owner of the chic, foodie-focused Liotopi Hotel.
Details B&B doubles from £109 (hotel-liotopi.gr). Fly to Thessaloniki

Spartochori Meganisi, Ionian islands

While other islands rushed to develop tourism in the 1970s, sleepy Meganisi let the hubbub pass it by. Even today this Ionian isle will make you feel like you've stepped back to a gentler time. Spartochori is the loveliest of its three main villages. Prettier than Vathi, the capital, it has all the white-painted walls and bright bougainvillea of your holiday dreams, plus beaches and waterfront dining on Spilia Bay. And it's 15 minutes' walk from Villa Natalia, whose pool deck benefits from dreamy views.
Details Seven nights' self-catering from £949pp, including flights, car hire and ferry (ionianisland holidays.com)





Vikos Gorge, northwestern Greece

Macheria Rhodes

This tiny end-of-the-road seaside hamlet at the opposite end of the isle from Rhodes Town stands out for one key element: water sports. What makes it so special is Prasonisi, a hilly islet connected to the coast by a broad, sandy spit. As well as granting access to the island, this beach offers sea on either side for a choice of choppy or calm shores. It's perfect for learning or practising wind-winging and kite-surfing at the water-sports schools. Refuel at Prasonisi Lighthouse, a beachfront taverna with 13 bright, modern rooms.
Details B&B doubles from £125 (prasonisilighthouse.gr). Fly to Rhodes

Vradeto Zagori

Northern Greece's Pindos mountains are sufficiently wild to harbour wolves and bears. This is proper hiking country, with the big draw being the Zagorochoria, a series of more than 40 mountain villages connected by stone-block bridges and age-old cobbled trails. The highest of them all is Vradeto, where wood-and-stone architecture harmonises with the forested backdrop. Enjoy a relaxing day here as part of a guided walking holiday, taking in several other villages and the spectacular Vikos Gorge, and staying in simple guesthouses.
Details Nine nights' B&B from £1,459pp, including flights and transfers (walksworldwide.com)

Loutraki Corinthia

Though the Athens Riviera throngs with beachgoers from the city, things are quieter if you follow the road out west. A 90-minute drive will bring you to Loutraki, a Gulf of Corinth beach town that's known for its mineral springs, scenic promenade and string of sand and pebble beaches. Best of all, though, is Vouliagmeni Lake, whose waters draw swimmers year-round. You're also only half an hour from being able to watch ships squeeze through the Corinth Canal. Explore it all from Villa Elena, a ten-bedroom beauty near the lake.
Details Seven nights' self-catering for 25 from £8,466 (oliverstravels.com). Fly to Athens

Patmos Dodecanese

Said to be where St John the Divine wrote the Book of Revelation, Patmos is steeped in history. Its sacred sites have long been pilgrimage favourites, though today's visitors are more likely to be drawn by its cosmopolitan edge (don't miss the Aegean film festival in July) plus the hilltop old town's well-preserved mansions and 16th-century windmills. Being slightly less straightforward to get to — the best ferry connections are via nearby Kos — Patmos rarely feels crowded. For hassle-free island-hopping, visit on Celestyal's Iconic Greek Islands cruise, via Athens, Santorini and Mykonos.
Details Three nights' full board from

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Monemvasia, Peloponnese



Beach near Villa Elena, Corinthia



Manolas, Thirassia

£499pp, departing on April 25 (celestyal.com). Fly to Athens

Koroni Peloponnese

Mani is the star of the three southern Peloponnesian peninsulas just south of Athens, leaving less rugged, more fertile Messinia to its own devices. Messinia's natural assets drew the attention of Venetian colonisers, who gave medieval town Koroni its castle and attractive architecture. Within its fortifications lies a maze of narrow, cobbled lanes. Below them the modern town has a waterfront with fishing-village charm and, to the south, you'll find the golden-sand Zaga beach. Stay at the family-run Sofotel — not to be confused with the similarly named international chain.

Details Seven nights' room-only from £956pp, including flights and transfers (sunvil.co.uk)

Edessa northern Greece

The homeland of Alexander the Great in the Macedonia region is filled with historic attractions, among them Edessa, a Roman-era town with waterfalls and cascades. Located where the Macedonian plain collides with wooded mountains, Edessa rewards explorers with medieval frescoes, ancient churches and lovely views accompanied by the sounds of running water. Stay in good hotels, including a traditional stone mansion, on Peter Sommer's Exploring Macedonia tour, which takes in ancient tombs, crusader castles and relics of the Byzantine empire.

Details 12 nights' full board from £4,695pp, including transfers and guiding (petersommer.com). Fly to Thessaloniki

Ierapetra Crete

Most of Crete's resorts are strung along its north and east coasts so if you're not a fan of busloads of day-trippers, head directly to the south. Ierapetra, a seaside town in the southeast, is a suitably sun-splashed hideaway. As well as a sandy beach, the town has heaps of history, including a Venetian fortress and a house where Napoleon once stayed. It's also the gateway to Belegrina beach on the castaway isle of Chrisi, a few miles offshore. The luxury seafront resort Numo Ierapetra is the town's most stylish retreat.

Details B&B doubles from £150 (numoierapetra.com). Fly to Heraklion

Karystos Evia, Aegean islands

Although Evia is Greece's second largest island (after Crete), its profile pales in comparison. Consequently, its towns and villages are packed with authentic charm. Chief among them is Karystos, which sits near the southernmost tip. Climb up to the town's Venetian castle for panoramic views, then descend to explore its cobbled lanes and picturesque café-lined squares. Or opt for the archaeological museum before lounging on urban Psili Ammos beach. Stay five minutes' drive away at Villas Speos, whose seafront location lulls with the soothing rhythm of the waves.

Details Seven nights' self-catering for six from £3,063 (oliverstravels.com). Fly to Athens



Olympiada, Halkidiki

Agia Galini Crete

To the west of Ierapetra on Crete's southern shore is Agia Galini, a pretty village spread around a harbour beneath a mountainous backdrop. You'll find cosy tavernas in the winding streets and on the waterfront, the most popular of which face a bay filled with colourful fishing boats. The village's relative remoteness ensures crowds are kept at bay — as suggested by the name, which roughly translates to "sacred calm". Hotel Neos Ikaros has comfortable, simple, laid-back digs.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £482pp, including flights and transfers (olympicholidays.com)

Kalavryta Peloponnese

Snowy Kalavryta bucks the trend in a nation known for beach holidays. Its blue, red and black runs make this one of Greece's most popular ski resorts but the picturesque village has year-round appeal too. Ride the scenic Odontotos railway, an engineering marvel carved into vertical Vouraikos gorge, or take to the hills and visit the cliff-hugging Mega Spileo monastery, whose monks make wines from mavro kalavrytino and other local grapes. Whatever the season, the nine-room Revi Mountain Resort provides comfortable lodgings with alpine vibes close to Kalavryta's central square.

Details B&B doubles from £222 (revimountainresort.gr). Fly to Athens

Piraeus Athens

The Greek capital's primary sea port is changing fast. Driven in part by the huge Piraeus Cultural Coast regeneration project, this once uninspiring seaside suburb has become somewhere you'd want to linger rather than simply hurry through on your way to the islands. Boutiques and galleries have popped up and there's lots of waterfront dining. Being just 15 minutes by metro from central Athens, Piraeus makes a viable city break stay. Choose the Alex, whose rooftop restaurant and bar have fabulous views.

Details B&B doubles from £90 (santikoscollection.com). Fly to Athens

Monemvasia Peloponnese

This fortified medieval town was designed to be difficult to access, which might explain why it still flies under the radar. Built on the side of a monolith rising out of the Aegean, Monemvasia can only be reached by a heavily defended causeway — hence its name, which translates to "one way in". Narrow streets and stairways lead uphill to an ancient castle, passing stone-built mansions converted into guesthouses and shops. There's more in terms of space and facilities in Monemvasia's modern extension. Try Kinsterna Hotel, a sustainably minded five-star on a 25-acre estate.

Details B&B doubles from £150 (kinsternahotel.gr). Fly to Kalamata

Skala Agistri, Saronic islands

As the closest islands to Athens, the Saronics are hugely popular with weekenders from the city. Among them, pine-covered Agistri — about an hour from Piraeus's port — is perfect for peaceful escapes. Head to Skala, 15 minutes from Agistri's port, to find more restaurants than you'd expect in a town of this size, all strung along a sandy bay. It's geared towards domestic tourism so hospitality costs far less than in more familiar towns. The 52-room Oasis Scala Beach Hotel offers excellent value for money.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,050pp, including flights and transfers (sunvil.co.uk)

Assos Cephalonia

Fiskardo is famed as the prettiest village in Cephalonia, drawing day-trippers up to the top of this Ionian island in droves. Few, however, stop en route to visit postcard-worthy Assos. On a rocky isthmus tumbling down to a gentle bay, this village charms with its cheerfully painted houses, serene setting and pine forest, which has walking paths to a ruined castle. Discover it from Villa Eutixia, a luxurious one-bedroom holiday home

More ideas next page



Grandeur *designs*

Whether you're touring the Amalfi Coast or following the Silk Road, the secret to getting the most out of an adventurous travel itinerary is small groups, expert knowledge and endless curiosity

To bear the name Jules Verne is no small responsibility for a tour operator. It speaks of adventure and discovery – because the man who wrote *Around the World in 80 Days* practically invented wanderlust.

It's only fitting, then, that Jules Verne has been turning travel into an art form since 1978, when it embarked on its inaugural trip to China, years before the country really opened its doors to the world.

Jules Verne isn't only about where you go, though – it's about how you do it. Escorted tours, with an average group size of 10 to 16 travellers, foster a shared spirit of curiosity among kindred adventurers, ensuring each moment feels considered. And with everything arranged, you're free to give yourself to the experience.

Whether it's gliding along a river or wandering the timeworn streets of a historic town, these tours provide an uncommon mix of convenience and exhilaration. Expert guides bring texture, depth and colour to your travels. This is storytelling in motion, with each journey a thrilling new chapter.

Jules Verne throws open windows on new worlds, where history, culture and the beauty of nature come together unforgettably. These three very popular destinations – India, Uzbekistan and Italy – are a taste of the travelling pleasure that awaits.

LAND OF COLOUR, CHAOS AND CALM

India is more like a continent than a country, and Jules Verne truly captures its kaleidoscopic nature. The north is a study in contrast.

> It's easy to see why Scheherazade spun her tales from a palace in Samarkand

Delhi assaults the senses with its relentless energy while Agra's Taj Mahal is ethereally calm. Jaipur's palaces blush under the desert sun, Jodhpur's cobalt streets glow like a cloudless sky and Udaipur seems to hover, weightless, over its many lakes. Spy wild tigers in Ranthambore or trek to the hushed hill stations and hidden temples of Himalayan India.

In the south, drift through Kerala's backwaters on a houseboat or take a mountain railway through the tea plantations of Munnar and Ooty. In Tamil Nadu, known as the Land of Temples, the almost fearsome beauty of its towering Dravidian architecture could make you a believer. And then there's multicultural Kochi, where the Portuguese established the first European settlement in India.

STORIES FROM AN ANCIENT CROSSROADS

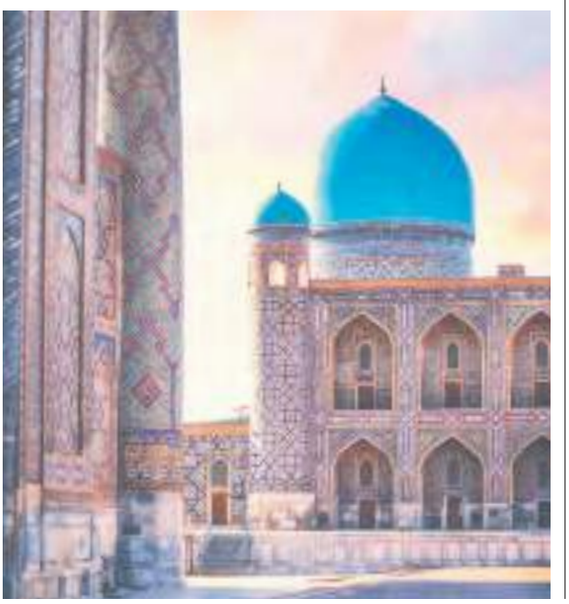
A vital trading centre on the Silk Road, which brought together people from across Asia for more than 1,500 years, Uzbekistan is a place where history didn't just pass through – it stayed and made itself at home. You can feel it today.

Tashkent, the capital, is a city suspended between worlds: glass-and-steel towers rise beside bazaars thrumming with life, their rhythms as ancient as the hills. Meanwhile, Bukhara has the Ark fortress, a city within a city and home to its rulers for more than a millennium. Some caravanserais (medieval inns where merchants were fed and watered) are still trading; and the Lyabi Khauz, a manmade pond with edges softened by centuries-old mulberry trees, remains a social hub.

To the east is Samarkand, fabled capital of the Timurid Empire under Tamerlane, one of history's most formidable conquerors. At the heart of it, the Registan dazzles, with patterned minarets, glistening cupolas and mosaics in blue and gold. The effect is enchanting: it's not hard to see why the author of *One Thousand and One Nights* had Scheherazade spin her tales from a palace in Samarkand.

Jules Verne leads you through Uzbekistan not as a spectator but as a guest: dinner in an Uzbek home, laughter shared, the smell of bread baking... all folding you into the scene.

Palatial awareness
Clockwise: Italy's shimmering Lake Como; the Taj Mahal in Agra, India; the Registan in Samarkand, Uzbekistan





THE ARCHITECTURE OF SHEER DELIGHT

With grandeur at every turn, Italy is a stage set for gasps. Jules Verne knows this and aims to reveal *la dolce vita* in all its unapologetic glory.

In the north, backed by the Alps, Lake Como shimmers like some kind of dream, its shores lined with elegant villas and flower-filled gardens. The Venice and the Ducal Cities tour takes you on a river cruiser through the Venetian Lagoon, with stops in Padua, Mantua and Verona. Art lovers can lose themselves in Florence, where Renaissance domes and Medici treasures threaten a splendid case of visual overload.

Heading south, the Amalfi Coast is a cascade of drama and charm with sheer cliffs that have towns like Positano and Ravello dotted among them. And the haunting ruins of Pompeii are a mere hour away.

In Puglia, the heel of Italy's boot, you can discover the cone-shaped *trulli* (dry-stone houses) of Alberobello. To its west are Matera's ancient cave dwellings, while Sicily blends Greek, Roman and Norman history, from the ruins of Agrigento to the slopes of Mount Etna.

With more than 150 tours across 75 countries, Jules Verne offers expertly curated holidays that explore the most fascinating destinations. With everything included, from return flights and transfers to most meals, a stress-free experience is guaranteed. Solo travellers are warmly welcomed, with no single supplement on selected tours. To book your next adventure, call 020 3733 0802 today or visit vjv.com. Scan the QR code to discover the full range of journeys and start planning yours.

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Chorio, Kimolos



Villa Hydria, Lesbos

▶ with a sunset-facing infinity pool and steps down to a platform that's perfect for sea swims.
Details Seven nights' self-catering for four from £2,035 (braunishorio.com). Fly to Cephalonia

Petra
Lesbos, Aegean islands

This historic village in northern Lesbos, an island tucked into the Turkish coast, offers all the elements your holiday merits (great food, nice beaches, stacks of history) plus a busy summertime roster of events. August around here is particularly lively, with its back-to-back billing of the Molyvos International Music Festival and the feast of the Holy Assumption. At other times Petra appeals for its pretty squares packed with artisans' shops and an ouzo distillery. For a waterfront home-from-home near the beach, choose the peaceful Villa Hydria P.
Details Seven nights' self-catering for four from £1,695 (oliverstravels.com). Fly to Lesvos

Chorio Kimolos, Cyclades

The basic rule of thumb when exploring Greece's many islands is that the harder it is to get somewhere, the more authentic it will be. Kimolos is a perfect example. As it's bypassed by the main ferry routes, getting there requires a flight or ferry south from Athens to the island of Milos, then an onward ferry. From the port, a 15-minute walk uphill gets you to Chorio, a whitewashed Cycladic village with labyrinthine lanes made extra rewarding for bestowing an in-the-know, like-a-local sense of smugness. Check in to one of the five typically Cycladic studio rooms at Mikro Parisi, a 15-minute walk from Psathi beach.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,184pp, including flights and transfers (sunvil.co.uk)

Patitiri Alonissos, Sporades

The easternmost of the inhabited Sporades east of the Greek mainland, Alonissos maintains a pleasant atmosphere of "real Greece". Patiriri, its capital, may be home to the island's main port but it's framed by pine forests and fronted by a dazzling blue bay. There's a cute little beach here too but you're better off cresting the hill to Roussoum Yalos, a beachside hamlet on the next bay along. Between the two is Atrium of Alonissos, a charming hotel with two pools overlooking Roussoum Yalos's rooftops to the sea.
Details B&B doubles from £63 (atriumalonnissos.gr). Fly to Skiathos

Aitoliko Western Greece

Island-hopping comes with a twist in overlooked Aitoliko in the Gulf of Patras. Rather than being in the Aegean or Ionian seas, Aitoliko — like a Greek version of Venice — floats in the brackish vastness of Missolonghi lagoon, tethered to the mainland by three narrow bridges. Tavernas specialise in fish sourced from the lagoon by flat-bottomed *priari* boats, while waterfront strolls might mean spotting flamingos and pelicans. Accommodation is thin on the ground; this two-bedroom waterfront Airbnb is among the better options.
Details One night's self-catering for four from £66 (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/632607012808884363). Fly to Preveza

Portaria Pelion peninsula

The forested Pelion peninsula juts out into the north Aegean and is famous for its time-stands-still mountain villages. Portaria is a standout among these stone-built settlements, still connected today by cobbled mule trails called *kalderimia*. During the Ottoman occupation Portaria was known for producing silk, a source of prosperity reflected in its magnificent, well-maintained mansions. Ramblers Worldwide's self-guided Pelion walking holiday takes you out to the villages, with stays at good hotels.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £659pp, including transfers and backup assistance (rambleworldwide.co.uk). Fly to Volos

Kastellorizo Dodecanese

Greece's furthest-flung corner is the isle of Kastellorizo, which hugs Turkey's coastline close to the Turkish town of Kas. The island and its single town are named after the castle (Castello Rosso) that rises over the port on a reddish-rock hilltop. The port itself is lined with pastel-painted townhouses, minarets and church towers. Loggerhead turtles swim along the waterfront, entertaining onlookers at the cafés and restaurants. Kas's proximity lends itself to cross-border twin-centre breaks. Split your time between the family-run Hotel Poseidon on Kastellorizo's harbour front and the adults-only Casi Bi Hotel, ten minutes outside Kas.
Details Seven nights' B&B — three in Kastellorizo, four in Kas — from £1,095pp, including ferry and airport transfers (fleewinter.com). Fly to Dalaman

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Dining at Las Espinas



Uruguay: South America's new wine destination

For oenophiles, the country's lesser-known rural wineries give Argentina a run for its money, especially when combined with laid-back coastal hotels. By Julia Buckley

Once upon a time, a man sailed across the globe in search of a better life. He left the only village he had ever known, boarded a ship to a destination he could barely read the name of and docked nearly 7,000 miles and a hemisphere away in a new land. Everything around him had changed: the sea had become a vast muddy river, his emptying village had become a thriving city of the future and the mountains that had surrounded him — well, they simply weren't there any more.


Bracco Bosca Winery

One thing, however, had not changed: the vines under his arm. Before leaving, he had snipped some cuttings from his ancestors' vineyard and sneaked them on board. So on arrival in this new land, blinded by the modern city, he moved north until he found countryside, where he planted those vines. Poverty meant he had left home for ever, but wine meant he had brought a bit of home with him.

That was a story I first heard at Pisano, a five-generation winery run by three brothers in Progreso, 20 miles north of Uruguay's capital, Montevideo (pisanowines.com). But although it was first told to me by Daniel Pisano — pointing to a photo of his Italian great-grandfather, Francesco, as he poured — I've heard the same story, and variations of it, across Uruguay in a decade of travel to South America's second-smallest country.

Red wine, steak, tango: the South American holy trinity. Most people will think of Argentina as the continent's natural paradise, followed by Chile if you swap the tango for another bottle of carmenere. But strike out from Buenos Aires across the River Plate to tiny, teardrop-shaped Uruguay, and you'll also find all three. While Argentina has ruled the malbec scene for decades, Uruguay's wine industry is still bijou. "In most wineries you talk to the owner and hear amazing stories," says Fabiana Bracco Bosca.

She would know — she's a fifth-generation vintner whose great-grandparents carried their cuttings from Piedmont in Italy to Atlantida, a beach town 30 miles east of Montevideo. Today her winery, Bracco Bosca, is one of several bucolic vineyard stays springing up across Uruguay. In 2020, she built two modernist wood cabins in the middle of the vines: merlot on one side, moscatel the other, the Milky Way overhead. It's so heavenly — peaceful, simple and undeniably Uruguayan — that I've stayed twice. The first time, I had dinner with Fabiana and her family. Her husband, Edison, grilled us an *asado* (barbecue) while she wielded the corkscrew. Syrah, petit verdot, claret — they were all wonderful, but the real star of the show was the tannat.

Tannat is an oddball grape. In its place of origin, Madiran in France, it's usually blended with cabernets because its sky-high tannin content makes it bitter. But the Pisanos, the Braccos and their ilk didn't have space for two under-arm bundles; everyone brought what they could. Soon they noticed that one grape in particular was adapting to Uruguay's terrain. They called it Harriague, after the man who brought it over from the Basque Country (another major immigrant route), and Harriague (which was actually tannat) became Uruguay's national grape. Over the decades, in a triumph of the underdog, Uruguayan winemakers have teased gutsy-but-elegant reds out of rough-and-ready tannat. Unable to compete on price with Argentina, they blaze a trail on quality, innovation and joyful vineyard visits.

That first night at Bracco Bosca, walking back through the vines to my cabin, I saw a shooting star cleave across the night sky. The next time I stayed — last March, on my now-annual visit — I sat in the sun as they harvested around me, birds swooping down to nick a last few grapes off the vine.

It's that cat-in-the-sun contentment that makes Uruguay my favourite South American country: less bucket-list sightseeing, more bucket-list bliss. The easiest way to get there is by flying to Buenos Aires and crossing the River Plate (that muddy river the width of a sea) by hydrofoil. With apologies to my Buenos Aires-born mother, Montevideo is Lecce to Buenos Aires' Milan: simpler, daintier, less highly strung. Follow the 15-mile shoreline out of town and you'll find a country where horses graze at the roadside, where "modern" architecture means art deco, and where one of the most taxing things to do is to hit the beach after an *asado* and let the waves sing you to sleep. Clearly all

GETTY IMAGES



Luz Culinary Wine Lodge



Piriápolis



Las Espinas

those Italians slung some dolce vita under their arms too.

Uruguay's wineries double down on this feeling. Over the years I've stayed amid vines near the River Plate's source at El Legado, a tiny vineyard in Carmelo, 150 miles northwest of Montevideo, where the Plate flashed silver (*plata* in Spanish) in the sunset as I drove to dinner (B&B doubles from £147; bodegaellegado.com.uy). I've slept in a cabin under the stars at Sacromonte, an hour north of the beach resort Punta del Este (B&B doubles from £449; sacromonte.com), and religiously followed the Mapa del Vino, a map of every winery in the country produced in 2022 by Uruguay's vino queen (more on her later; instagram.com/mapadelvinouruguay).

Today the vineyard focus has moved from the outskirts of Montevideo to the coastal region of Maldonado, where the Plate meets the Atlantic, the dunes are skyscraper high and modernist-style bungalows lurk in pine forests behind the beaches. Thirty miles east of Atlantida is Piriapolis, whose history is pure Uruguay. It was founded in 1890 by Francisco Piria, an alchemist who believed powerful ley lines crossed the *cerros* (quartz-filled mini mountains) that garland this sandy crescent where the silver *Plata* fuses with the mercury-grey ocean.

A century later it was a faded beach town but now those ley lines have been recharged by wine, with the recent openings of two significant vineyards. Last year I zigzagged up a vine-swaddled cerro to a wooden shack: Cerro del Toro, a fast-growing winery that opened a restaurant here in December 2021. Overlooking Piriapolis, I paired lemon-drizzled grilled chicken with ocean-salted albariño (mains from £13; cerrodeltoro.uy). The next day I ate atop the neighbouring cerro at Las Espinas (mains from £17; bodegabouza.com). It's a 2023 offshoot of Bodega Bouza, perhaps the classiest of Uruguay's wineries. At its HQ outside Montevideo, I once had a filet mignon so beautifully marbled, it knocked any wagyu into a cocked hat. At the glass-walled Las Espinas I had another — worth the airfare alone — adding cerro-grown tannat as the Atlantic flashed in the sun.

The loveliest part of Maldonado, though, is Jose Ignacio, an hour east of Punta del Este. A fishing village turned upmarket resort town, it's foodie heaven, from just-netted fish at mom-and-pop restaurant Popei (mains from £13; instagram.com/popeirestaurant) to a dune-wedged grill at La Huella (mains from £17; paradorlahuella.com). Solera, a divine tapas bar, is owned by the sommelier Soledad Bassini, Uruguay's *reina del vino* (queen of wine). She stocks 300 regional wines and created La Mapa del Vino as her lockdown project (mains from £13; instagram.com/soleravinosytapas).

Jose Ignacio used to be all about the beach: when it came to hotels the closer to the dunes, the better. That changed in 2022 when Luz Culinary Wine Lodge opened four miles inland. I tutted when Bassini first urged me to visit. Who wants to be in the fields when you could sleep in the dunes? Then I parked in a pine grove, walked into the Pompeiian red courtyard around which the eight rooms are drizzled and felt my shoulders drop.

A loveable thing about Uruguay is that here luxury is quiet, where in Argentina it is brash. Luz is one of the dreamiest places I've stayed in but it's just that — dreamy, not dripping in gold. There's no zeitgeist art in the rooms; instead, Mother Nature becomes Michelangelo, tiny windows framing the trees outside. The restaurant tables — all hulking slices of tree trunk — are set around a quiet pond, facing the water, not each other.

To reach the pool you step past the fire pit and into a pine grove — a liminal space that snuffs out the sun and muffles your steps through the pine needles underfoot. You emerge, beatific, into the garden. Will you slide into the baguette-slim infinity pool, slicing through the green? Sit in a booth at the bar, with a house-brewed shrub — a tangy, vinegar-based drink marinated with home-picked fruits? Or take to a sunlounger on the gently tumbled lawn overlooking fields, vines and olive groves? So many choices, so little to do. Welcome to the *dulce vida uruguaya*.

Of course, one thing you can do is drink more wine. One sunny morning I dragged myself into the car and drove to Pueblo Eden, an aptly named hamlet in the undulating hills behind the coast. Revving up another granite-puckered cerro, I toured the winery — super-modern, very eco, with a top-notch farm-to-table restaurant — at Viña Eden before sitting on its terrace for a tasting (from £31; vinaeden.com).

Beneath me vine-braided hills unrolled like a rumpled bedspread towards a small lagoon and the glittering Atlantic beyond. A vulture skimmed across the vines, parakeets trilled from eucalyptus trees and the fluffiest of clouds tiptoed overhead. Marselan, chardonnay, pinot and, of course, tannat — the glasses kept coming, each better than the last. Eden by name, Eden by nature in this immigrants' promised land.

Need to know

Julia Buckley was a guest of Luz Culinary Wine Lodge, which has B&B doubles from £328 (luz.com.uy) and Bracco Bosca, which has B&B doubles from £127 (braccobosca.com). Twelve nights' B&B from £3,853pp, including three at Luz and two at El Legado, car hire and guided visits to Bracco Bosca and Viña Eden (journeylatinamerica.com). Fly to Montevideo

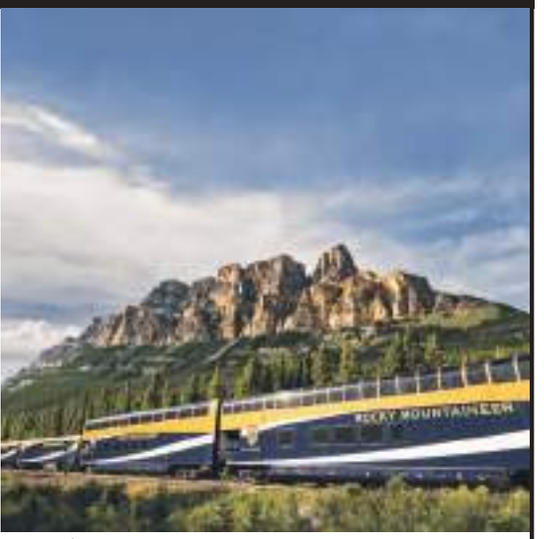


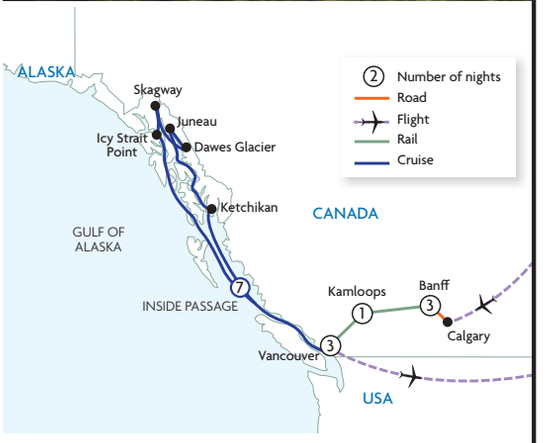
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Art, gardens and no crowds —

A characterful old town, fabulous food and a comeback spirit after last year's floods make the Spanish city a joy — and a great option for a short break, says Sarah Gordon

They do things a little differently in Valencia, Spain's third largest city and the place I've called home for the past six years. Its tapestry of cycle paths means the best way to travel around is on two wheels, while its restaurants and markets are filled with sun-ripened produce from farms that ring the city, and sunny weekends are spent at the beach. No wonder locals say it's a city that feels like a village.

The gothic old town is all honeyed streets and terracotta colours, while the gleaming City of Arts and Sciences — a collection of futuristic buildings hosting the city's science museum, opera house, Imax cinema and Europe's largest aquarium — looks like it just landed from space. And the best way to move between both areas is via the Turia Gardens, a five-mile-long park that unfurls along what was the Turia River before it was diverted out of the city following a deadly flood in 1957.

It's a special city and I'm not the only fan. In recent years Valencia has been named the World Design Capital and Europe's Green Capital and was just beginning to hold its own against its big sisters Madrid and Barcelona. But all that ground to a halt when floods hit Valencia once again on the night of October 29 last year. A year's worth of rain fell in just a few hours, causing swollen rivers to burst their banks and turbulent waters to rip through the city's outskirts, killing 224 people.

True to its village-like atmosphere, the first help on the ground was from locals. Farmers who had lost everything used their tractors to help to clear roads, and volunteers cleaned streets and houses armed with little more than wellies and a broom. Thanks to the rerouted Turia River, the centre of Valencia remained untouched by the devastation, but over the following weeks hotel bookings plummeted as worried travellers cancelled their trips. Tourism is still down 18 per cent.

Valencia is open for business, however, and in a city where hotels and restaurants still buy their ingredients from nearby farms and producers, the money you spend can have a positive effect. With about 300 days of sunshine a year, Valencia glows with Mediterranean warmth even in the winter months — last weekend I was enjoying alfresco lunches with friends. Stay in the old town, where the sherbet-lemon Palacio Vallier offers views of the cathedral from the rooftop terrace. It is the flagship property of the home-grown Myr Hotels group, with just 31 rooms and striking art deco interiors, all black-and-white marble with gold accents and delicate ceramic artworks by the Valencian brand Lladro.

From here, pop across the square to the cathedral, a grand gothic space with a very small, very special chalice (£7.50; catedraldevalencia.es). Many believe that the simple agate cup in a glittering gold reliquary, tucked in its own chapel, is the true Holy Grail. And 2025 is a jubilee year, a special celebration that occurs every five years during which visiting pilgrims can receive plenary indulgence (the removal of time spent in purgatory).

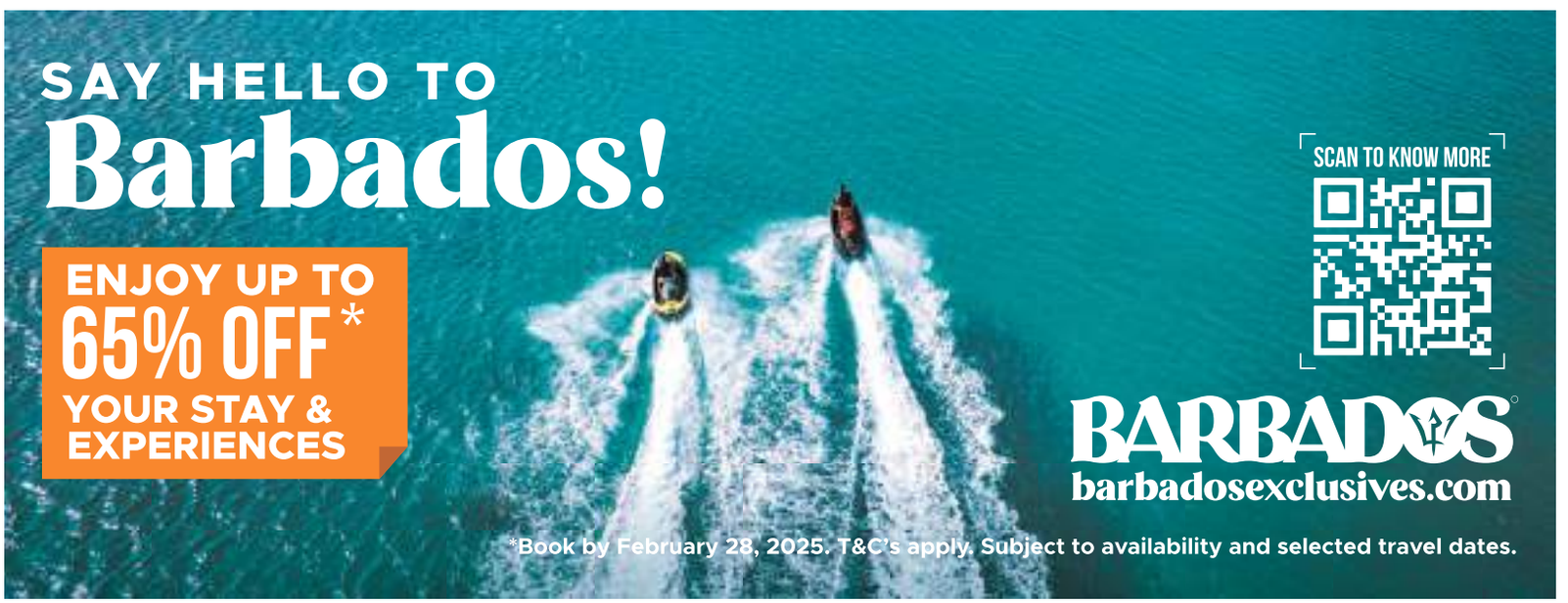
Need to know

Sarah Gordon was a guest of Palacio Vallier, which has B&B doubles from £151 (myrhotels.com). Fly to Valencia



The fishing district of Cabanyal





now is the time to see Valencia

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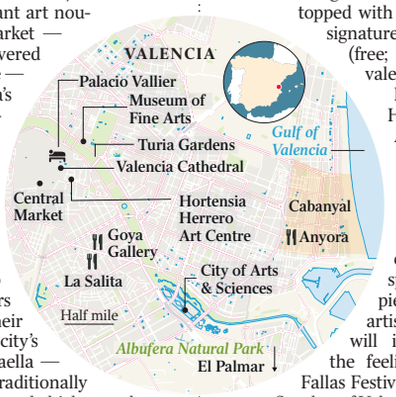
Plaza del Ayuntamiento, Valencia



City of Arts and Sciences

The old town itself, with its tangled lanes and lively street art, is made for getting lost. Visit the San Nicolás Church to marvel at the incredible ceiling frescoes (£9; sannicolasvalencia.com), and wander among the twisting columns of the Silk Exchange, a 16th-century homage to an industry that gave the city its riches (£1.70; comunitatvalenciana.com). Then head to the elegant art nouveau Central Market — the largest covered market in Europe — where Valencia's prized local produce is bought by the city's chefs and home cooks.

Eating at locally owned restaurants is a great way to help Valencia's farmers to get back on their feet. Dine on the city's signature dish, paella — the rice dish traditionally made with rabbit and chicken and spiked with saffron and paprika — at Goya Gallery, in the restaurant-packed Gran Via neighbourhood, just south of the old town (paella from £16pp; goyagalleryrestaurant.com). Or head to the coastal fishing district of Cabanyal, where Bodega Anyora serves tapas dishes of Valencian coca flatbreads topped with smoked sardines, and fried octopus with almond and pepper romesco sauce, in an old fisherman's house (dishes from £3.35; anyora.es).



The Michelin-starred La Salita treats vegetables with the same reverence as meat and fish and serves inventive tasting menus (from £108; anarkiagroup.com) in a former palace in the smart Ruzafa neighbourhood, known for its boutiques and coffee shops. La Salita celebrates its 20th anniversary this year and Begoña Rodrigo, the chef, was key in helping to raise millions of euros for small businesses following the floods.

"It has been very difficult but Valencians are tough," Rodrigo told me. "I buy all my vegetables from a farm on the edge of the city and on the first day they called me crying because they had lost everything. But on the second day they called and said they would be planting everything again from scratch, and asked what would I like them to grow. That's just how Valencians are."

As well as its association with good food, Valencia is famous for its artistic prowess. Joaquín Sorolla was known as the "master of light" for his paintings capturing the sun dancing on the waves as fishermen worked and locals paddled at the beach. You can see an impressive collection of his works at the Museum of Fine Arts , a former 17th-century seminary college overlooking the Turia Gardens and topped with one of Valencia's signature blue domes (free; museobellasartes valencia.gva.es).

I love the new Hortensia Herrero Art Centre, a private collection of contemporary art housed in a restored palace (from £8; cahh.es). Here, a bespoke audiovisual piece by the British artist Mat Collishaw will immerse you in the feeling of Valencia's Fallas Festival.

So what of Valencia's most important cultural event? Las Fallas began as a carpenter tradition to mark the beginning of spring by burning the pieces of wood that propped up their lights in winter. These days it is a louder, more colourful affair. The most exciting dates are from March 15 to 19, when the streets are taken over with huge statues depicting satirical scenes. There are outdoor concerts, kiosks selling churros dipped in molten chocolate and, on the final night, everyone gathers to watch the works of art burn to the ground. This year Las Fallas will mark the city leaving behind one of its darkest winters for the optimism of spring.

Just six miles south of the city is Albufera Natural Park, with sandy beaches, pine forests and Albufera Lake. Here, the rice used for paella is grown in emerald-coloured paddies. The village of El Palmar sits right on the water and is where Valencians go for long lunches and boat tours with local fishermen. In recent months, however, El Palmar has been quiet.

Elena Marco is the third generation of her family to run Bon Aire restaurant in the village, still following her grandfather's recipes (paellas from £14pp; restaurante bonaire.com). "For weeks nobody came at all," she told me. "People thought we had been affected by the floods but we hadn't. We're all family-run businesses here and buy our ingredients from local fishermen and farmers, so it is a very circular economy."

About an hour to the west of the city, Utiel-Requena has a winemaking heritage dating back almost 3,000 years. Floodwaters here ripped up vines, but with community help many vineyards managed to reopen just a month later. You can order velvety native bobal wines or zingy cavas at any Valencian restaurant or sip your way along the route, helping local businesses as you visit different vineyards (tours from £30; rutavino.com).

In Valencia everyone is connected. And even the shortest of city breaks sends ripples of support out to the farms, the fishermen and the winemakers. But I suggest you take a few days, slow down to Valencian pace and join our village style of city living.

What else to see in the city

Where to stay

In the seaside neighbourhood of Cabanyal, Balandret Hotel makes a good case for having it all: dreamy seaside views, affordability and tram connections to the old city — though you're already walking distance from restaurants, shops and museums. Rooms are done up in sun-bleached driftwood colours, and there's nothing but boardwalk between the breakfast terrace and the beach (B&B doubles from £67; balandret.com). Myr is the city's small chain of affordable boutique hotels (which includes Palacio Vallier) and its four-star Marques House puts you in a cool side street off a central tree-lined boulevard. At street level, the 19th-century manor has a wonderful bygone grandeur, which lightens and brightens up the stone stairs in the common areas, artfully graffitied on a monochrome background and furnished with pops of yellow. The doubles have views over the surrounding pedestrian lanes, and bathrooms with a mountain of marble. You'll get a terrace if you go up a mere £13 (room-only doubles from £75; myrhotels.com).

What to drink

Fend off the effects of the sultry Spanish weather with a cold horchata, the local iced beverage with "designation of origin" status — the café Horchataria Daniel is just off Plaza de la Reina. Daniel was to Valencia street life as Café de Flore was to Paris. Even Salvador Dalí came for a taste of his sweet, thick milkshake-style refresher, made with milk from the tiger nut, or chufa (from £2.70; horchateria-daniel.es). To experience the head-scrambling effects of the local quaff — a mix of vodka, gin and cava cut with the juice of Valencia oranges — venture five minutes north to Café de las Horas, a shamelessly baroque cocktail den where jugs of the stuff cost £28 for six glasses (cafedelashoras.com).



Horchata

What to eat

Venture out from the city centre and plenty of small neighbourhood joints will reciprocate with lovingly prepared dishes and super-social village spirit. Bar La Negri, in the small residential community of Benimaclet, is generous with the proportions of its pork ribs and Asian-inflected dumplings (dishes from £6.50; barlanegri.es). South past the bull-fighting arena in the neighbourhood of Russafa, you'll find lively after-work crowds outside El Almacen, sharing bottles of Valencian rosé and plates of ceviche. A black-pudding bao topped with a quail's egg is all you need to line your stomach for the evening (tapas from £3.30; elalmacenncr.com).

And do make the trip out to Valencia Marina for a sunny walk to the beach and lunch in one of the homely streets behind. You'll know La Sastreria for its distinctive blue-painted stucco and, crucially, the riot of tilework inside. Sit at the chequerboard bar and partake in the house salt cod, chilli crab and cuttlefish sashimi (dishes from £10; lasastreriavalencia.com).

What to do

Valencian architects have a talent for repurposing derelict heritage buildings for modern consumption, and the past few years have netted two greats. At the Centre del Carme Cultura Contemporania, steps away from the modern art museum, you'll be captivated by in-your-face graphic art and experimental performance pieces by the city's network of eccentrics and provocateurs. Galleries revolve around a central cloister and contemporary sculpture garden — the building was a convent, dating back 700 years (free; consorcimuseus.gva.es). And a Victorian-era factory just beyond Turia Gardens has transformed into a massive digital art showcase called Bombas Gens. You can peer down at an ancient wine cellar beneath a glass floor in the basement, and explore a tropical garden with citrus trees, pomegranates and palms (£8; bombasgens.com).

Ellen Himelfarb



Café de las Horas

Luxury Caribbean

My stay on Branson's idyllic private island

In the British Virgin Islands, Sarah Turner gets a chance to visit the billionaire's collection of high-end holiday rentals



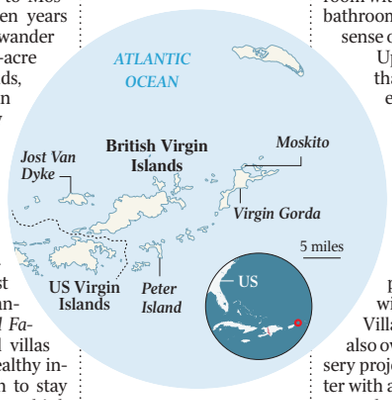
The Point estate

On the back of Hurricane Irma a group of chickens found themselves unwittingly relocated to Moskito island. Seven years on, as they wander around this 125-acre outcrop in the British Virgin Islands, they seem very happy. Who can blame them? The only hassle they get is from phone camera-toting rubes like me trying to get a shot of them strolling outside my room.

I'm pretty happy too. Moskito is an island in the poshest, most exclusive part of the British Virgin Islands, the archipelago just east of Puerto Rico, and I'm channelling *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* as I get to snoop around villas owned by some exceptionally wealthy individuals. If you have to be rich to stay here, you have to be a billionaire to think about buying one of the plots. Until now mere journalists haven't been able to get a look-in but I've sneaked in for a privileged view of ultra-privilege. And it's quite the education.

Bought by Sir Richard Branson in 2007, within sight of his original BVI project Necker Island, which he rents out sometimes and lives in at other times, Moskito has become a breeding station of Neckeresque villas. Owners include Paul Salem, chairman of MGM Resorts, and the tech entrepreneurs Michael and Xochi Birch. The owners may have to co-exist on the same island but there's plenty of space between the villas so they can express themselves ... in luxury real estate terms.

I'm at the Point, one of four estates on the island that are available to rent exclusively by groups or equally well-heeled families. It's owned by Salem and his background in hotels shows in many delightfully varied ways. My suite, Ocean View, is roughly the size of a pickleball court. A bank of French windows looks out at quintessential tropical perfection — lush emerald green hills cascading down to a golden beach. As a bonus, the skylights in the ceiling over my bed look into the infinity swimming pool above so I can see the occasional person paddle past. And — because this is all the rage in ultra-posh villas these days — there's also a separate room with eight bunk beds (and two more bathrooms, lest you think that there's any sense of privation for those bunking up).



Upstairs the villa has one vast room that takes in a home cinema, a sunken bar, seating and dining areas and the comet-shaped swimming pool that's over my bedroom, which has a swim-up bar at its centre. Of the four other villas on Moskito that can be rented, Cape Stout has a basketball court that transforms into an outdoor cinema, its own 13m powerboat and a hangout area with a wall of vinyl records. At the Village, the owners, the Birches, who also own the more philanthropic Woolsery project in Devon, have gone one better with a DJ booth that rises from underground at the flick of a button and a slide that goes down the hillside into a swimming pool. On the highest point of the island, the Oasis is superyacht-sleek with terraces jutting out in every direction, softened by an orchard of tropical fruit.

And then, on a rocky peninsula, there's Headland House, Branson's own home, which is full of family photos and squashy sofas. It's relaxed and — yes, these things are relative — unshowy and was where Barack Obama and his family chose to come after the 2016 US election and where the former president learnt to kitesurf. All the villas, including the Point, sleep at least 16 people (not counting the bunk rooms). The optics are staggering, the experience fantastic in a let's-hang-out-together billionaire way. Across all the villas, the staff — a mix of British Virgin Islanders and UK nationals — are fun and fabulously efficient, whipping up cocktails and sushi while also scooting us around the island on Mokes and souped-up golf carts.

It's about good times here. There's also a communal space, the Beach House, that can be used by all the different estates. A week's rental comes with three slots included in the price: hang out at a different stretch of sand, have meals or get married (yes, whole island bookings have occurred

Need to know

Sarah Turner was a guest of Moskito Island Estates, which has one night all-inclusive for ten from £13,200 (moskito.com); Dream Caribbean Blue, which has seven nights' all-inclusive for eight from £22,663 (dreamcaribbeanblue.com); and the British Virgin Islands Tourist Board (bvitourism.com). Fly to Tortola

What else is new in the islands



Bitter End Yacht Club

Peter Island
This resort has used Irma's destruction to reinvent itself. Reopened last December, the 52 rooms and suites are set around the idyllic Deadman's Beach. Its eponymous 1,800-acre island is the largest private island in the BVIs and there are five more beaches to choose from. The resort also has a marina, restaurants, pickleball and bocce courts, as well as a new swimming pool.
Details B&B doubles from £796 (peterisland.com)

Bitter End Yacht Club
On Virgin Gorda, one of the largest islands in the BVIs, which has been owned by the same family since 1969, this stalwart has considerable landlubber appeal too. This month the six marine lofts set over the water will be joined by four new beach villas. It's relaxed and very charming indeed — there are sailor-friendly wood-fired pizzas and a bar with cine reels from the 1970s provided by previous guests. There's also a shop where the provisions on sale run the gamut from Marmite to Château Margaux for those getting ready to sail out of its marina.
Details Room-only doubles from £558 (beyc.com)

Oil Nut Bay
Also on Virgin Gorda but reachable only by boat, this resort is very luxe. It has a series of villas, ranging in size from one to seven bedrooms, on an 800-acre estate. All come with a golf cart, while there's a wide stretch of sand, beach clubs and water sports, two restaurants and a marina. A spa, set over the water, has just opened.
Details One night's self-catering for two from £520 (oilnutbay.com)

The Hideout
This collection of seven very glam villas, with a mix of one and two bedrooms, opened in 2022 next to — and run by — Hendo's Hideout, one of Jost Van Dyke's best-loved bars and restaurants. Each villa has a plunge pool, while direct access to White Bay's glorious stretch of sand and clear waters means you won't miss a larger swimming pool.
Details Room-only doubles from £688 (thehideoutbvi.com)
Sarah Turner

CAROLINA ANSALDO



for weddings). I happen to be on Moskito at the same time as a group of ultra-luxury travel agents checking it out for clients and one of them offers me some perspective. "So," she says, "this starts at £13,000 a night but absolutely everything is included, from activities to food and alcohol. I've just booked some clients into a hotel in Belize which was £16,000 a night with just breakfast included." I decide to treasure this example of value-added holiday budgeting for the ultra-rich.

It's more than a decade since I stayed on Necker, the neighbouring island owned by Branson since 1976. I expected bling and brashness. Instead I fell fully in love with the whole flip-flops-as-formal-wear vibe, the most beautiful beaches I've experienced and its palpable sense of parties past, even as we spent evenings doing a newspaper crossword that somebody's partner faxed over each evening. The tech dates me but it was also because — until relatively recently — communication here could be a bit hit-and-miss.

Wherever Moskito's chickens were evacuated from, they are fluffy reminders that nature will always be in charge here, albeit in ways that encourage you to detach from your phone or computer. Even when you fly into the main hub of Tortola, you can trundle your own suitcase to a jetty five minutes' walk away and hop onto a ferry or, if you're lucky, a charter boat. If you time it well, you'll have a chance for your first painkiller cocktail at a bar before you sail and you can sit, feet in the sand, watching the waves lap against the shore.

These islands, with their central casting names — we sail past one called Dead Chest — are still best experienced from the water. And however lovely Moskito is, and it really, really is, exploring it by boat adds a whole other experiential layer.

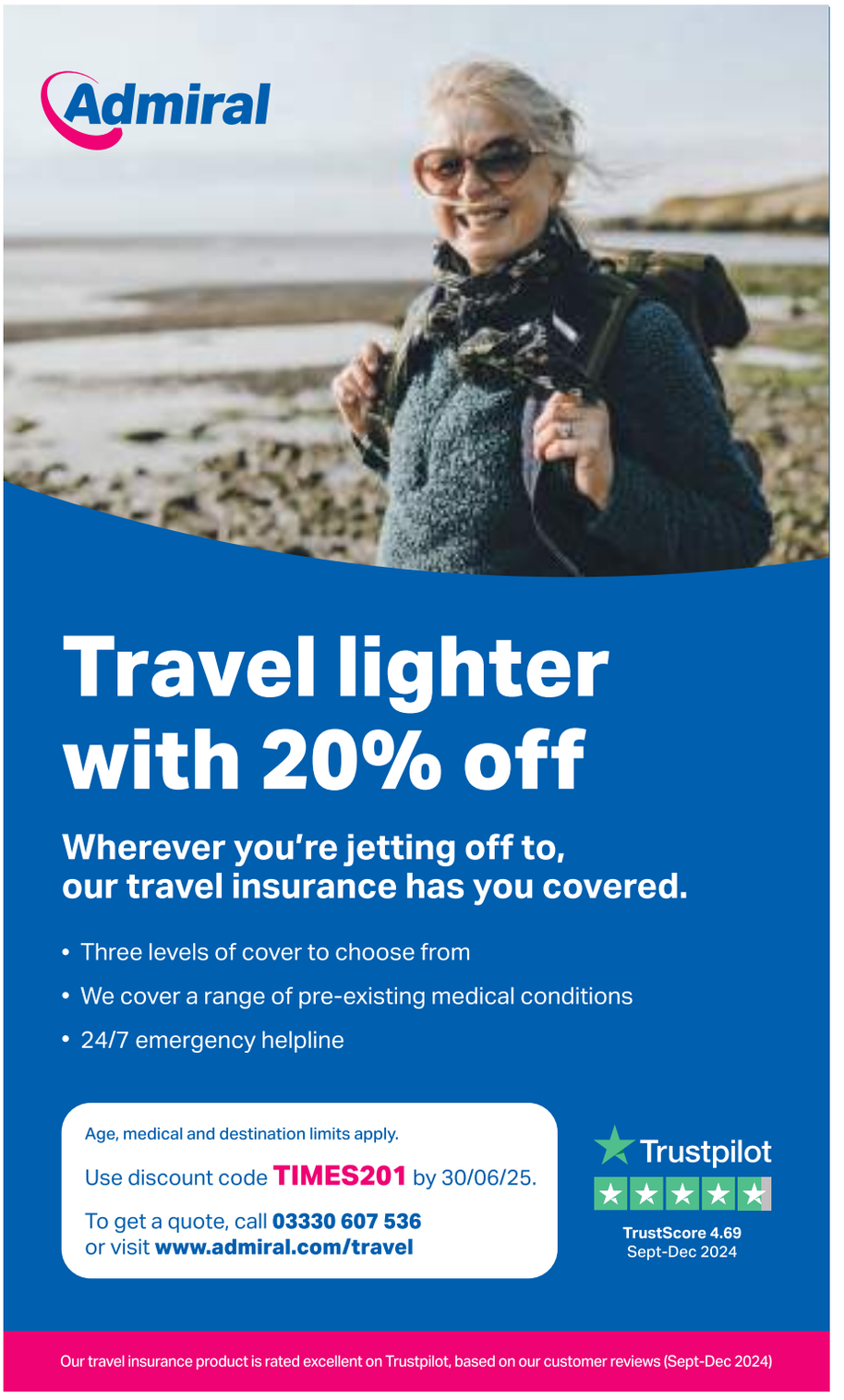
The captain of High 5 (apparently named after the bestselling beer at the owners' bar) is Umbi, who is Sicilian. This 16.76m rental catamaran, available through the yacht company Dream Caribbean Blue, sleeps up to eight people and the food on board is extraordinarily good thanks to the chef Daryl, who is South African. Staff wear branded polo shirts but that's where any similarity with *Below Deck* stops — we swan through the water with an absence of any drama bar the scenery, especially when we moor up at buoys so we can snorkel around the Indians rock formation while pelicans dive bomb for fish. We also go for a hearty meal at Pirates Bight on Norman Island, which Robert Louis Stevenson recast as Treasure Island (mains from £16; piratesbight.com). However, the meals on the boat are even better, with poke, pizza and, in the mornings, French toast with halloumi.



A room at the Point

Our next stop is Jost Van Dyke, the BVI's party island. The painkiller — dark rum, pineapple juice, orange juice, cream of coconut and nutmeg — was invented 50 years ago at its Soggy Dollar beach bar. But we head for its quieter offshoot around a headland and Umbi drops me off at Ocean Spa, bobbing offshore (theoceanspabvi.com). Created from the wooden debris left after Irma, it has four floating treatment rooms. Over the course of an hour, with a window set into the floor so I can see fish swim past, Jamie, from Jamaica, gives me one of the best massages I've had but refuses to take credit for it. "The choppier the water, the more relaxing it is," he says.

Afterwards I'm dropped off by boat on the beach about 30m away. Never has there been a name as correct as Ivan's Stress Free Bar, all whitewashed breeze block on a crescent of lemony-white sand, the water a paint chart of blues and greens (ivanswhitebay.net). Locals are sitting at the bar and the menu is on a tattered bit of paper. There's a lengthy wait for food but that gives me time to discover that Ivan's daughters rent out the bungalows behind for £120 a night — and as I sit gazing at the sea with an ice-cold beer and a plate of conch fritters, my feet in the sand, I decide there's nothing in the world that feels more luxurious than this.



SPONSORED CONTENT





Shutter island *A local plays didgeridoo with an Uluru view; swimmers on Bondi Beach; whale shark moment. Credit: Eugene Tan*

Bondi-based photographer ***Eugene Tan*** *reveals the wild glory of his favourite dazzling vistas across northwest Australia*

The Northern Territory and Western Australia offer intense colours, vast landscapes under vivid skies and ancient Indigenous culture. When you reach the Northern Territory, it's a sea of red. Arriving is like landing on Mars. I typically photograph the coast so this feels like a very special place to shoot. It's sparse, with an air of complete isolation. The region also has a strong connection to our First Nations people.

This is a place that's best seen at sunset. It's the desert air. Something magical happens in the golden hour, which produces amazing gradients of sky. Your number one stop has to be Uluru. My first sight of the enormous rock was truly unforgettable. The experience felt almost spiritual.

The Field of Light, where 50,000 glowing spheres illuminate the desert at dusk, is particularly memorable, as is supper served among nearby sand dunes. I arrived at sunset with a local playing the didgeridoo with Uluru in the distance. As we dined, he used a pointer to explain how his people read the stars and planets, recounting the stories they see in the sky.

I also headed north into Litchfield National Park, where waterfalls pour off sandstone escarpments into clear pools surrounded by monsoon forest. My helicopter landed on the rocks among its gorges and cascades, right next to Sandy Creek and Wangi Falls, where we jumped in for a swim.



The chopper flew above Kakadu National Park and – with First Nations permission – landed in Arnhem Land to study cave paintings dating back thousands of years. It's a reminder that Australia is an old land where people have lived for an awfully long time. The rock art is in the middle of nowhere. It's astonishing that our Indigenous communities survived somewhere so remote. They're true wilderness people.

I grew up in Western Australia and have photographed across the state. It's massive, as big as Europe, with remarkably varied landscapes. Broome, where the desert's red dirt meets the crystal clear Indian Ocean, is beloved by an eclectic pub crowd from pearl divers to backpackers, while Ningaloo has its whale sharks, and El Questro in the Kimberley mixes mountains, rivers and yet more beautiful waterfalls.

Western Australia is home to Rottnest Island, quite possibly my favourite island in the world. In parts, the water is so blue it resembles the Aegean. From my childhood home in Margaret River, whose excellent waves produce many professional surfers, I'd head north to dive off Rottnest at night.

Right now I'm driving through the Southern Forest, photographing a coastline renowned for its water's dazzling hues. Around Denmark, where beautiful white beaches are backed by limestone cliffs, the sea is a fluorescent blue, its clarity incredible. And, wonderfully, there's hardly anyone here. Yesterday I swam off Esperance's huge beach without another person in sight. It's the same at Lucky Bay – although you'll likely share the sand with kangaroos.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time around Dirk Hartog Island and Shark Bay's red earth, crystal blue water and prolific seagrass. As a kid, I camped there and rode dirt bikes with my mates. I'd love to return now as a professional photographer. It's the colours – they would be fantastic to shoot from the air.

In the past 25 years, it's Sydney's Bondi Beach – home to my family and my Aquabumps gallery – that I've photographed most. I head over there at sunrise to capture the brilliant light, diverse humanity – from clubbies to surfers – and busy activity. Few beaches on Earth have so much going on.

TAN'S TIPS

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

It's huge, so plan well. Jetstar's new direct route from Sydney to Busselton Margaret River Airport is a game-changer for this location. In the Margaret River region, Smiths Beach Resort's ocean-side villas and shacks offer stunning views along the pristine beach and headland.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Fly straight to Uluru and experience the sunset. For photographs, line up the dying sun with the huge rock from the Field of Light. Be careful not to wander off-track – this is sacred land.

NEW SOUTH WALES

For the best colours, take a photograph at sunrise from South Bondi across Icebergs Club & Swim School. Late February to March is a great time, with smaller crowds, 22C seas and super clear water.



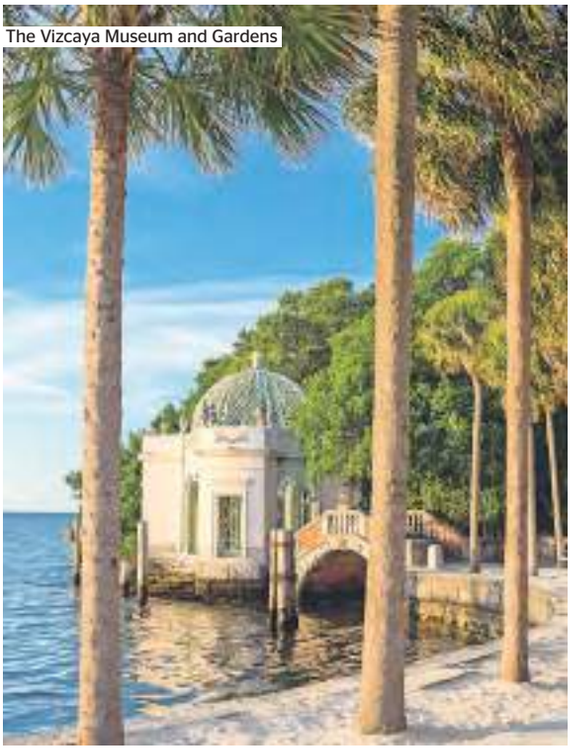
Eugene Tan is an acclaimed surfing and ocean photographer. His fourth book, 25 Laps Around the Sun, documents a quarter century of capturing beaches worldwide. aquabumps.com

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Miami's boho neighbourhood


A bar at Mayfair House Hotel & Garden


The Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

In Florida's coolest city, Coconut Grove is now the go-to area for bar-hopping and chic stays, says Susan d'Arcy

The legendary hotelier Conrad Hilton made millions by sticking to his mantra of "location, location, location". I'm neither legendary nor a millionaire, sadly, but when it comes to Miami I suggest you ignore Mr Hilton.

I've been to Florida's fabulous city by the sea many times and visited its best beach addresses, from Gianni Versace's quirky Casa Casuarina and the 1950s landmark the Fontainebleau to the stealth-wealth Four Seasons at the Surf Club, the brilliant Baz Lurhmann-designed Faena and the Asia-inspired A-list favourite the Setai.

The truth is that while those hotels are great, locals complain that their beachfront locations, where most of us holidaymakers base ourselves, are increasingly overpriced and that South Beach is becoming horribly tacky. And I did spot a worrying number of Bianca Censori-style bikinis and that so-called Aussie "classic", the budgie-smuggler, in SoBe. I didn't know where to look but I did know where to escape these crimes against fashion — because last summer I discovered the city's ultimate luxury hotel bargain.

So now my tip is to bypass the beach. If you think that's nuts, you'd be correct — that is, if you're talking coconuts. Miami's Coconut Grove neighbourhood is about a 20-minute cab ride from South Beach and is the easygoing bay-front bolt hole you should have on your radar for your next trip. This is where people who actually live in Miami spend their free time, grabbing a cup of cold-brew Joe for a Saturday morning wander through its farmers' market (glaserorganicfarms.com), lunching at laid-back cafés such as the wickedly good Harry's Pizzeria (pizzas from £12; harryspizzeria.com) and dividing nights between fancy dinners at restaurants such as the Michelin-starred Los Felix (set menu £47; losfelixmiami.com) and friendly dive bars such as Barracuda Taphouse (Instagram: @barracudagrove), where the beer and the jukebox keep things lively.

The Grove is Miami's oldest continually inhabited neighbourhood, a boho backwater sprinkled with yesteryear charm courtesy of a refreshing number of family-run businesses and Gilded Age mansions shaded by sturdy oaks. It has been in and out of fashion since the Bahamians and Brits settled here in the late 1800s, including a notable high in the Nineties when Madonna lived here.

After 20 years out of the spotlight it has emerged post-pandemic as a popular relocation destination for discriminating creatives fleeing New York. The Grove's renaissance was confirmed when it was named as one of the coolest neighbourhoods in the world by Time Out. The icing on the cake came last year when the foodie bible Michelin published its first hotel guide. Only four properties in Miami achieved a coveted two-key rating, denoting an exceptional stay. All four properties are listed on Booking.com. Three are in Miami Beach and for a random day in March the room-only rates were from £1,068 for the Setai, from £1,095 for the Faena and from £2,949 for the Four Seasons at the Surf Club — predictably expensive. Then there's the curveball: the Mayfair House Hotel & Garden in Coconut Grove, which has chic rooms, spacious enough for living areas and terraces, that are all yours from £423 a night, room only.

I went to investigate and immediately warmed to the Mayfair (mayfairhouse miami.com). It's an architectural beauty, with all the braggadocio I associate with South Beach, except this grande dame commands two entire blocks smack bang in the middle of the Grove. It was built in 1985 by Kenneth Treister as an ode to his hero, Antoni Gaudí. Consequently the Mayfair struts the sort of voluptuous curves for which the Spaniard's Sagrada Familia is revered.

Walk through the ornate original wooden door and the Mayfair's extraordinary lobby is in your face. It has a Kew Gardens' worth of tropical plants draped across almost every inch of its creamy, carved stone walls as well as calming reflecting pools and smiling mixologists on starter's orders behind the lobby bar's counter, which is converted from the original elevator car. The WFFHs (working from fancy hotellers) don't appear to be taking the "W" bit of their acronym too seriously and could almost pass for the holidaymakers. Mainly Americans, they are as chilled as their margaritas.

Later they'll all gravitate to Sipsip, the rooftop pool and bar. It's named after the Bahamian word for "gossip" in a nod to the Grove's Caribbean heritage. A colourful mural by the Bahamian artist Angelika Wallace-Whitfield and potent rum-laced drinks reinforce a calypso vibe. I'm told the Friday night DJ sets regularly witness a string of Miami vices. In between the lobby and the rooftop are 179 individually designed and personality-packed rooms. Decorated in jewel tones, they have carved wooden headboards, freestanding bathtubs and some private walled gardens and outdoor showers, though none have views. Enthusiastic and efficient service comes from the top down. Rhys O'Connell, the debonair general manager, has worked for big names such as Nobu Hotels and Shutters on the Beach in Santa Monica. He's Australian but I doubt he owns any budgie-smugglers.

It's £25 each way in an Uber if you're missing the beach but the Grove has persuasive reasons for you to stay put, including one of the city's best days out, the Vizcaya Museum and Gardens (£20; vizcaya.org). In 1914 the Chicago industrialist James Deering set out to emulate the grandeur of Italy's finest villas with this Venetian-style mansion, which is now a museum. He succeeded and his collection of Renaissance tapestries, rococo furniture and Roman sculptures has the added bonus of orchid-filled gardens, which make the perfect picnic spot.

The boardwalks of the Grove's waterfront parks also make civilised alternatives to the sand for a vitamin D hit. A word of warning, though: the scene can get pretty wild in Peacock Park, literally. One of the quirky features of Coconut Grove is that about 1,500 peafowl roam freely in the neighbourhood. They're not as intimidating as Rod Hull's emu but they can be astonishingly noisy.

You can afford to go wild yourself — given you've saved on your accommodation — with some retail therapy. There are branches of the big names of course but also plenty of artisan options, from fashions at Guadalupe Design (guadalupedesign.com), to homeware at Moorish Ambiance (Instagram: @moorishambiance) and bikinis at Agua Bendita (int.aguabendita.com) handmade in rural Colombian communities — swimwear that will get you noticed for all the right reasons.


Michelin-starred food at Los Felix

Need to know

Susan d'Arcywas a guest of Virgin Atlantic, which has Heathrow-Miami returns from £439pp (virginatlantic.com)

Late deals

12 of the best trips to book now


Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu, Maldives

UK

Berkshire country house

Fit for any *Downton Abbey* fantasies, Easthampstead Park is a handsome Victorian mansion in 80 acres of formal gardens and woodland. Near Wokingham and just 30 minutes' drive from an even grander residence, Windsor Castle, it's also a tranquil hotel that lays on 93 modern rooms and, inside its chandelier-lit Terrace Restaurant, inventive seasonal dishes. Available at a 52 per cent discount until March 31, B&B doubles cost from £178 including glasses of prosecco on arrival, afternoon tea and late check-out. Valentine's Day is excluded (greatlittlebreaks.com).

Castle stay in Scilly, Cornwall

"One of the most perfect star-shaped Renaissance forts ever built in the British Isles." That's how the historian Dan Snow recently described Star Castle, a 16th-century fortress turned hotel on St Mary's in the Isles of Scilly, 25 miles west of Land's End in Cornwall. Staying in characterful rooms, guests can visit nearby Bronze Age burial chambers or go wine-tasting before returning for seafood. From March 6-17, when temperatures in this mild archipelago usually linger around 10C, there are savings of 33 per cent, meaning three nights' half-board starts from £314pp (star-castle.co.uk).

Kentish nature reserve

On Kent's low-lying Isle of Sheppey, Elmley is the UK's only nature reserve that you can spend the night in. All this month, when visitors can enjoy frosty water meadows, wildfowl galore, wide skies and prolific sightings of owls at dusk, Times readers can exclusively save 20 per cent. There's good availability, including during half-term. Choose between chic, contemporary shepherd's huts, cabins with picture windows and espresso machines or larger cottages. Three nights' self-catering for two starts from £349 using the code TIMES20 (elmleynaturereserve.co.uk).

EUROPE

Norwegian coast cruise

Norway's eco-conscious Havila Voyages focuses on the country's coastline, from mighty fjords to mountainous islands. Until March 10, it is offering an on-board credit of £318 per cabin if you book onto its coast-hugging round trips from Bergen. That might be spent on excursions, from ebiking city tours to snowmobiling adventures, or on drinks in the bar of your comfortable, all à la carte expedition ship. Eleven nights' full board with a sea view starts from £1,910pp; travel before March 31, 2026 (havilavoyages.com). Fly to Bergen.

Luxury French skiing at half-term

According to OVO Network, a French chalet provider, heavy pre-Christmas snowfall in the Alps triggered a surge in demand for its high-end properties. Still, seven of its properties are available for a discount during the main half-term week. Among them is the five-bedroom, two-kitchen Chalet Polanka, which has underfloor heating and timber decor, in the traditional Savoyard village of St Jean de Sixt near La Clusaz. Saving £830, seven nights' self-catering for 12 starts from £3,825 beginning on February 15 (ovonetwork.com). Fly to Geneva or take the train to Annecy.

Croatian campsite

Eurocamp's Big Splash sale was already delivering savings of up to 20 per cent; now, every Spanish or Croatian campsite is subject to an additional 10 per cent discount until Wednesday using the code "EXTRA10". Consider Zaton Holiday Resort, on Croatia's Dalmatian coast, where a seven-pool waterpark, five restaurants, direct access to a mostly sandy Blue Flag beach and activities from horse riding to pedalo hire await. Over the May half-term, seven nights' self-catering for six in a spacious motorhome starts from £706 (eurocamp.co.uk). Fly to Zadar.

Luxury Venice in winter

Whisper it, but the Floating City is arguably at its best in winter. The tourist throngs are gone, leaving Venice's vaporetti, art galleries and waterside restaurant terraces — most with heaters — queue-free as romantic mists roll in off the lagoon. Until March 31, you can save £212pp on a short break at the decadent Metropole hotel, where the many antiques and food reflect Venice's historic trade ties with the east. Three nights' B&B begins at £1,198pp, including flights, water-taxi transfers, Doge's Palace tickets and a concierge service (kirkerholidays.com).

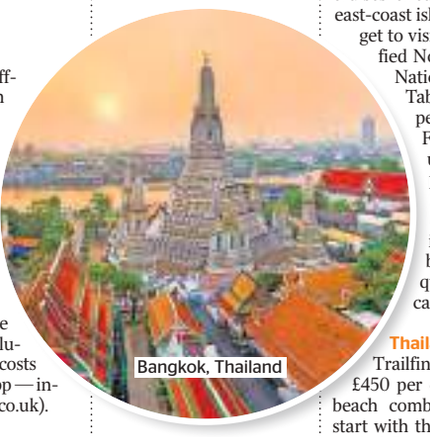
Serviced Lisbon apartments

The Hermitage Castelo group's Casa Chafariz is an elegant building overlooking the Chafariz da Esperança — a baroque fountain and national monument dating to 1760 — in Santos, Lisbon's design quarter, close to boutiques and galleries. Behind its sienna-red walls are five upmarket serviced apartments, each featuring an excellent kitchen, ornate ceilings and designer furniture. Book before Monday and you can save 20 per cent on week-long stays until June 30. Seven nights' self-catering for two starts from £990 (mrandmrssmith.com). Fly to Lisbon.

LONG HAUL

Red Sea resort, Egypt

The Grand Hotel on the low cliff-tops south of Sharm el-Sheikh on Egypt's Red Sea was refurbished last year. As well as plenty of restaurants, bars and swimming pools to investigate, you can expect nightly entertainment and, best of all, a coral reef off the private sandy beach, meaning guests can snorkel off the jetty. All of that is five minutes by taxi from the Old Market's souk-style bazaars. Seven nights' all-inclusive, departing on March 12, costs from £710pp — a saving of £170pp — including flights (redseaholidays.co.uk).


Bangkok, Thailand

Maldives biosphere bliss

Within the Unesco biosphere reserve of Baa Atoll — which explains why there is such terrific diving and snorkelling — is Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu, one of those classically dreamy Maldives resorts. When not lolling on your thatched beach-front or overwater villa's private terrace, you can visit a rescue centre for injured turtles, spend all afternoon on a deserted sandbank island or sip mojitos on over-sized beanbags in the Conch bar while watching the sunset. Thanks to savings of up to 40 per cent, seven nights' all-inclusive in March costs from £2,879pp, including flights and seaplane transfers (luxuryholidaysdirect.com).

Explore Canada's Newfoundland

The tour operator Frontier Canada is offering exclusive 20 per cent savings on cruises circumnavigating the large, wild east-coast island of Newfoundland. You'll get to visit North America's only verified Norse settlement, Gros Morne National Park's orange-coloured Tablelands and the isolated, 60-person fjordside community of François. All that aboard an upmarket small ship with a pool. Departing on September 29, 13 nights' full board costs from £5,875pp, including flights, fees and activities; book by February 28 and quote "WTN25" (frontier-canada.co.uk).

Thailand two-centre holiday

Trailfinders has savings of more than £450 per couple on a classic city and beach combination in Thailand. You'll start with three nights in the engrossing capital, Bangkok, staying in a central hotel with an infinity pool. Then it's off to Phuket for ten nights at the Best Western Premier Bangtao Beach Resort & Spa, whose two stylish pools and leafy grounds border a sandy beach and the turquoise Andaman Sea. The deal expires on Monday so act quickly. Eleven nights' B&B starts from £999pp, including all flights (trailfinders.com).

Richard Mellor

Winter in the Netherlands — an

ALAMY



Kwade Hoek, South Holland



Inter Scaldes, Kruiningen

The beaches and islands around the Zeeland region make a perfect foodie escape, says Ellen Himelfarb

Rumour has it there's a beach in the Netherlands where, in the dead of winter, you can spot a colony of European flamingos poking at the shore in search of tiny grey shrimp. Not in all my *Miami Vice*-watching days would I have taken such a claim seriously. You might as well have told me about a band of wild unicorns skipping over the dunes 120 miles east of Harwich. Yet nearly everyone I ask in the Dutch province of Zeeland, those witchy fingers of land reaching into our shared stretch of North Sea, insists this is so.

"That's no rumour," says my waiter at Seafarm, the dining room of a family shellfish farm in Oosterschelde National Park (seafarm.nl). "I sometimes see them from the bridge when I'm driving from Rotterdam." Whether they ended up here after a wrong turn from Spain or owe their ancestry to zoo escapees, nobody can quite agree. But the estuary waters around the Oosterschelde, a diverse tidal area at the centre of Zeeland, suits them just fine, even — especially — in winter.

To be honest, I never do spot one myself. But I come to believe the hype over a long weekend in and around Zeeland, the remote fringes of the low country. I sense real *Pirates of the Caribbean* energy in this archipelago 25 miles south of the Eurostar terminal in Rotterdam and 50 miles north of Brussels Midi. I spot a barnacle-coated shipwreck teetering on a beach, a porpoise nosing around a dive centre and mountains of seals lazing on sandbars at low tide. Seabirds cackle at the rich cache of molluscs in the shallow surf. An entire salt marsh has grown up around the sunken city of Saeftinghe, inundated by floods in the 16th century. Zeelanders liken their landscape to a permanent safari, where the big five include roe deer and sea eagles.



A dish at Inter Scaldes

My base is Inter Scaldes — or "between the scheldes" — a restaurant in the rural village of Kruiningen with two Michelin stars and twelve suites next door. The rooms sit rather unassumingly in a cosy, thatch-roofed house, their plush upholstered furnishings looking out of French doors to luxuriant gardens smelling of fresh herbs. Yet the chef, Jeroen Achtien, stresses that the restaurant is the main draw for its delicate way with North Sea delights, venison and hamachi from a neighbouring fish farm. "We're a restaurant with rooms," he says. "On Monday until Wednesday, when the restaurant is closed, so are the suites."



My explorations start with a long blustery beach walk an hour away at Kwade Hoek, the sunken-ship capital in nearby South Holland, scanning the shore for oystercatchers, spoonbills and, of course, flamingos, as kites soar overhead. The beach is as broad and deep as that of Holkham in Norfolk, and the distant views do me good after a long dark winter in the city peering at screens of various widths. The air smells of salt, the skin on my cheeks feels like a baby's and the medley of wind and waves soothes me. When I hear someone wolf-whistle in my direction I whip around to see a flock of terns flapping off like hummingbirds.

My drive to lunch at Seafarm passes old brick lighthouses, battered windmills and a long spit of sandy beach where kitesurfers cluster offshore. The road unfurls along the ridge of a six-mile storm-surge barrier between two rustic islands. In the Middle Ages this coastline was dotted with thriving maritime towns, sited on reclaimed land protected by dykes. But excessive peat-digging, destructive wars and freak torrents caused a whole civilisation to be inundated by sea. These emergency locks and dams allow life to continue safely, even if the industry has shifted from seafaring to seafood.

With hindsight the switch may have been fortuitous. People no longer burn peat or captain frigates, but they do consume the sheer tons of oysters, mussels, scallops and opalescent razor clams that flourish in the eastern estuary. This is Seafarm's raison d'être. Walking in past tanks of oysters I study a streamlined menu focusing only on what has been hauled in. Shellfish arrive on ice, *a la plancha* or on tiered plates. The 12-hour marinated turbot bisque is a thick velvety coating for a wedge of molasses-dark bread (mains from £19).

Industrial fishing is banned in this 37,000-hectare expanse of brackish water — it now makes up the Netherlands' largest national park. Yet a handful of fish farmers have designated hectares to cultivate. And many operate firelit bistros or wine bars on the banks of the Oosterschelde serving what they harvest. These are a saving grace in winter, when the climate, though reasonably temperate, comes

adventure on the north coast

with a strong waterlogged breeze. The seafront village of Yerseke (pronounced ear-sucker) has several, punctuated by an intimate acre of beach shrouded by a steep dyke.

I'm in town for a tour of Oesterij, a 120-year-old oyster farm and tasting room where couples see out daylight over platters of milky-white shells and German white wine (oesterij.nl). Inter Scaldes is a devoted customer of the family outfit, and offers an afternoon tour and tasting with its weekend package. So while an ibis perches in the distance I follow my guide, Melanie Brouwers, out towards sea, past a grid of deep, watery wells where the oysters are brought to mature. On the shell-littered beach she points to a seal bobbing on the water beyond and explains the ins and outs of the ecosystem (tour £67pp; oesterij.nl).

Since the 1960s, when shipping traffic was redirected south, "the Oosterschelde has had the cleanest water in Europe — if it wasn't salty, you could drink it", she tells me. It makes sense when you consider each oyster filters 100-200 litres of water a day, and 30 million grow here each year. "They're natural bottom-feeders so their shells are always open," she says. "That's their natural state."

Each morning fishermen dredge, clean and sort their catch into the wells. When the tide comes in, water and algae surge into the wells via long pipes, and the oysters filter out sand from the sea floor. In a week they're ready to slurp — Oesterij employs a champion shucker called Peter Oreel for that purpose. As part of her tour Brouwers hands me a pair of waders and we kick off our shoes and trudge out, shells cracking beneath our boots. She peels a couple of wild Pacific oysters off a rock and gets out her knife. "I never go anywhere without this," she says, jabbing it into the shell and prising it open like a pro.

A confession here: my allergy to oysters has been a source of great shame in my life. But Brouwers has brought a taster along, an intern from Oesterij's kitchen. She loosens the breathing, bubbling meat and hands him the shell, which he knocks back, rolls around on his tongue and savours before reaching and grabbing the next.

It's best that I don't spoil my appetite in any case. Back at Inter Scaldes, Achtien is preparing me a menu of his greatest oyster-less hits. Each combination of ingredients comes as a gorgeous, layered package, topped with a curl of fried cod skin or a pebble-shaped onion, a big Zeeland export. The pretty presentation belies Achtien's tendency to build his terrines and soups "from offcuts of the ugliest, flattest oysters", to use the fatty fin of a turbot and to layer a savoury parfait with pickled string beans, smoked egg yolk, crispy quinoa and Dutch brown beans. "Peasant food," he calls it. "But we like to use every part of everything, even though it takes time to prepare well."

It's not all tantalising. He pipes duck liver through a tiny nozzle so that it resembles grey matter with a scoop of blood-red beetroot jelly. But I fall for the brioche, prepared with flour from a nearby mill, buttery and flaky as a croissant. The Dutch version of fine dining is a curious thing. But so was this entire weekend. I'll come back for those flamingo claims but I'll stay for the food.

Need to know

Ellen Himelfarb was a guest of Inter Scaldes, which has room-only doubles from £268 (pillowshotels.com); and Eurostar, which has London-Brussels Midi returns from £88 (eurostar.com)

More breaks in the Netherlands

Amersfoort, Utrecht
This close sibling to Utrecht has all the best bits of the Netherlands, with a terrific medieval centre of church towers, water gates, canals and great art from Piet Mondrian, who grew up in the city. Post-industrial creativity in Amersfoort has led to districts evolving and factories now revitalised as galleries, theatres and sustainable start-ups. Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park is good for castles, cycling and deer-filled estates. For a stay with plenty of charm try Amrath Berghotel Amersfoort, a 122-year-old hotel a 30-minute walk (or a quick bus ride) from the centre.
Details Room-only doubles from £60 (amrathberghotelamersfoort.nl). Take the train to Amersfoort or fly to Amsterdam


Blokhuispoort, Leeuwarden

Leeuwarden, Friesland
Leeuwarden is the capital of Friesland, in the northern Netherlands. Cycle through the city to see the lopsided De Oldehove tower that tilts more than the one in Pisa; the wonderful Fries Museum; fields filled with Friesian horses; and the barmy Blokhuispoort, a renovated prison with a cultural centre and restaurant. Plus, the Royal Eise Eisinga Planetarium, which has the world's oldest working solar system model. Stay in what was once the city's main post office, the Post-Plaza Hotel & Grand Café, which is decorated with mailboxes, brass telephones and a wooden switchboard.
Details Room-only doubles from £100 (post-plaza.nl). Take the train to Leeuwarden or fly to Groningen

Nijmegen, Gelderland
In the central Netherlands, the country's oldest city serves up plenty of history, from Roman archaeology to castles from the Middle Ages. It's also said to be haunted by ghosts and has plenty of worthy sights including the country's oldest shopping street and its largest bike museum. The site of one of the biggest airborne operations in history in 1944, the city's De Oversteek Bridge is lit nightly as a memorial. Stay in Berg en Dal at Fletcher Hotel-Restaurant Erica, once a refugee centre for those who lost their homes during the Second World War.
Details Room-only doubles from £57 (hotelerica.nl). Take the train to Nijmegen or fly to Weeze
Mike MacEacheran

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ABTA V7545

The Times hotel guide Townhouse by Hive

Ceredigion

Rooms and suites 9/10
Food and drink 9/10
What else is there? 6/10
Where is it? 8/10
Overall score 8/10


One of the bedrooms


Aberaeron wharf

Tickled by Cardigan Bay waves and full of Georgian elegance, the harbour town of Aberaeron has always held appeal. But in the past 20 years dynamic new players have put it on the tourist map: food and hotels here are now as rosy as the town's rainbow-painted streets. The Townhouse is one of the latest additions. In 2023 Rhys and Rhodri Davies, brothers who run the Hive café/restaurant opposite, transformed this corner plot on Quay Parade from a solicitors into a six-bed retreat with a touch of Nordic style.

Rooms and suites

The six rooms have subtle lighting, curved edges and handmade furniture, while velvet headboards warm up the Scandi cool. There are two rooms per floor. The best are on the left: first-floor Belle Vue and top-floor Vulcan. Both have dual-aspect windows overlooking the town and quay, plus copper baths in the bedrooms. There are plenty of thoughtful details: well-placed sockets, charging leads, snacks and a free minibar. The building isn't accessible but ground-floor Cadwgan, with a walk-in shower, caters to those with some mobility issues. Children over five are allowed but it feels like an adult place.

Food and drink

Right on the wharf, ten steps across from the Townhouse's bright-orange door, Hive was once a coal storehouse, then an ice creamery. Now it's a laid-back café/restaurant where you can sip a Bay Coffee Roasters brew by the wood-burner or laze outside by the harbour, weather permitting, with an ice cream. It's made on site, with flavours spanning pistachio and Turkish delight, and Townhouse guests get a free scoop. Evening dishes are staples done well and in abundance. The burger — Welsh beef topped with brisket and cheddar — is mountainous. The wide choice of breakfasts and brunches, served à la carte, are also generously portioned.

What else is there?

There isn't even a reception — check-in is over the road at Hive — but zapping a QR code opens a welcome guide. There's access to a gym, thanks to a partnership with the local SE Fitness: guests get a key fob enabling 24-hour access. The Townhouse has no parking but nearby Market Street car park is free.

Sarah Baxter was a guest of the Townhouse by Hive, which has B&B doubles from £130; mains from £16 (hivetownhouse.co.uk)

Where is it?

Fifteen miles south of Aberystwyth, Aberaeron is like a Welsh Tobermory, a fine old fishing harbour hugged by houses in every colour — a local landlady, fed up with all the grey, started the trend in the 1950s. The 60-mile Ceredigion Coast Path, which runs from Cardigan to Ynyslas, beckons in both directions; New Quay, inspiration for Dylan Thomas's fictional Llareggub in *Under Milk Wood*, is a wonderful 6-mile walk south.

Sarah Baxter

Door-to-awe

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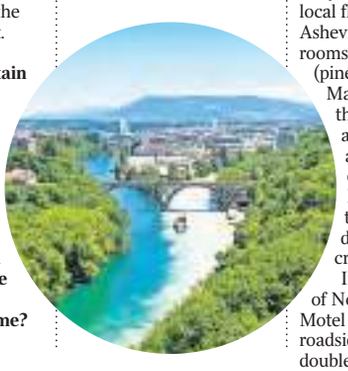


Julia Brookes
Consumer expert

SHUTTERSTOCK; ALAMY



Above: the town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, France. Below: Geneva, Switzerland



Q We're a group of eight friends who've enjoyed some great city breaks together. Plovdiv in Bulgaria last January was fantastic: great flight times, cheap meals, good accommodation and the people were so friendly. We're all turning 60 so we've planned another three-night break for October, but we're struggling to find a city with good flight times that's not expensive. Our budget is about £300pp for flights and the hotel. Any suggestions?
Sarah Sloman

A Autumn is the perfect time of year to visit Nice. It's still balmy, there are fewer crowds and it's a surprisingly affordable city break. There are Ryanair flights from Stansted starting at £88 return, plus plenty of good-value hotels including Aria, a stroll from the Promenade des Anglais and where room-only twins start at £225 for three nights (hotel-aria.fr). Keep costs down by taking the tram from the airport and doing day trips by bus along the coast to Villefranche-sur-Mer, a classic Riviera stop, for a waterfront lunch; Saint Jean Cap Ferrat; and Monaco — the hour-long trip to the principality costs just £2. If you want to take trains as well, perhaps to Ventimiglia in Italy, the Sudazur three-day pass gives unlimited travel and costs £30 (ter.sncf.com). Eating out can be affordable too: don't miss wood-fired socca, a chickpea flatbread, sold at the city's excellent Cours Saleya market.

Q I'm planning to go to the Mountain Song Festival in Brevard, North Carolina, in September and want to stay in Asheville, Brevard and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. I'll need to hire a car and am aware parts of the Blue Ridge Parkway are closed due to the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. Will it be open by autumn and can you recommend anywhere to stay? Is there a company that would put a package together for me?
Jayne Nicholls

A The Mountain Song Festival is a bucket-list experience for acoustic music fans so you'd be wise to book early. B&Bs are brilliant for a bit of local flavour and Pinecrest B&B in Asheville serves top-notch breakfasts; rooms start at £206 in September (pinecrestbb.com). Cabins at the Marshall's Creek Rest Motel on the edge of Gatlinburg have a porch with rocking chairs and it's an excellent base for exploring the Smoky Mountains; Dolly Parton's Dollywood theme park is nearby. Room-only doubles from £85 (marshallscreekrest.com).

In Brevard, the waterfall capital of North Carolina, the retro Sunset Motel regularly appears on top 10 US roadside motels lists and room-only doubles start at £109 in September (thesunsetmotel.com). If you want to take all the hassle out of arranging the trip, Bon Voyage could put together a tailor-made package and give you the latest information on the Blue Ridge Parkway (which should be repaired by the autumn); its new app has insider tips on what to see and do en route (bon-voyage.co.uk).

Q I'm 95, able to walk a little but have a wheelchair. My son and daughter-in-law would like to take me on holiday the week after Easter to a good-quality hotel with decent food, which can cater for disabled people like me. We're Bristol-based and don't want too long a drive.
Richard Winn

A The Cottage in the Wood, near Malvern in Worcestershire, is not in the woods but sits on a hill and has knockout views across the Severn Valley; enjoy them over a top-notch lunch at its 1919 restaurant. B&B doubles start at £154 while B&B in a Very Good accessible room with a roll-in shower in the Coach House annexe starts at £214 per night the week after Easter (cottageinthewood.co.uk). If you're a music lover, the Elgar Route is nearby.

Q Last May I bought five return tickets from Humberside to Geneva for a family half-term holiday this month with KLM. Unfortunately one member of the family can no longer come, so I want to change the name on the ticket to allow someone else to take their place. When I bought the ticket I selected the mid-range price because it said the tickets were changeable for a £60 fee, plus any change in ticket price. I'm now being told I can't change the name on a ticket, I can only change the name if it's been misspelt. I feel I've been misled as the website doesn't make this clear.
Elizabeth Hillary

A I'm afraid you will have to buy a new ticket. Many "legacy" airlines such as KLM will allow you to correct a name but they won't let you transfer a ticket to a different passenger. These carriers insist tickets are non-transferable because of security issues but it's actually a ruse to stop tickets being snapped up when they're cheap and then resold. Low-cost airlines tend to offer a lot more flexibility: Ryanair will let you transfer a ticket to another person for £110 if this is done online. EasyJet flights are also transferable and the fee depends on how close to departure the change is made.

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*Prices listed are based on two sharing a twin/double room. Single supplement on request. Flights on holidays booked more than 11 months in advance may be subject to supplements when airline fares are published. Operated by and subject to the booking conditions of Wendy Wu, ABTA W7994 ATOL 6639, a company wholly independent of News UK. ^Book by February 28, 2025.

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Don't put up with this
The airline lost my bag but ignored me

On our way back from Dublin in October, my wife's bag arrived at Heathrow after our Aer Lingus flight but mine didn't. I was told it would turn up in the next day or so and be delivered to my home. I was in touch with Aer Lingus's baggage support team for the next few weeks, and they said they were still hunting for it. Aer Lingus states on its website that it considers a bag to be lost if it's not returned within 21 days of the flight, and a claim can be submitted for the value of the bag and contents under the Montreal Convention. Soon after the 21st day of my bag being missing, I raised a lost-bag case and completed a questionnaire, which asked for the bag's contents and value. It's now been 11 weeks since my flight, eight since Aer Lingus considered my bag to be lost and seven since I filed my form. I've made multiple phone calls to the missing baggage team. I'm told I can't be put through to the claims team but someone will get back to me. No one has. What can I do?
Nick Hearne

You're one of many readers who've been ghosted by their airline when trying to make a claim for lost luggage. If you can't get a reply, the alternative is to claim on insurance but that usually involves paying an excess. Fortunately, when I waded in, Aer Lingus took action. A spokesperson said: "Aer Lingus sincerely regrets the inconvenience caused by the loss of this customer's bag during a recent flight. We understand how frustrating this situation can be. Our customer care team has reached out to offer our apologies and to inform the customer that the compensation payment has been processed." You've now received £1,369, the maximum under the rules.

THE TIMES

Saturday February 1 2025

saturday review

Inside Your 7-day guide to TV, radio and films



No nepo baby
Jared Harris on his famous parents and playing Gorbachev



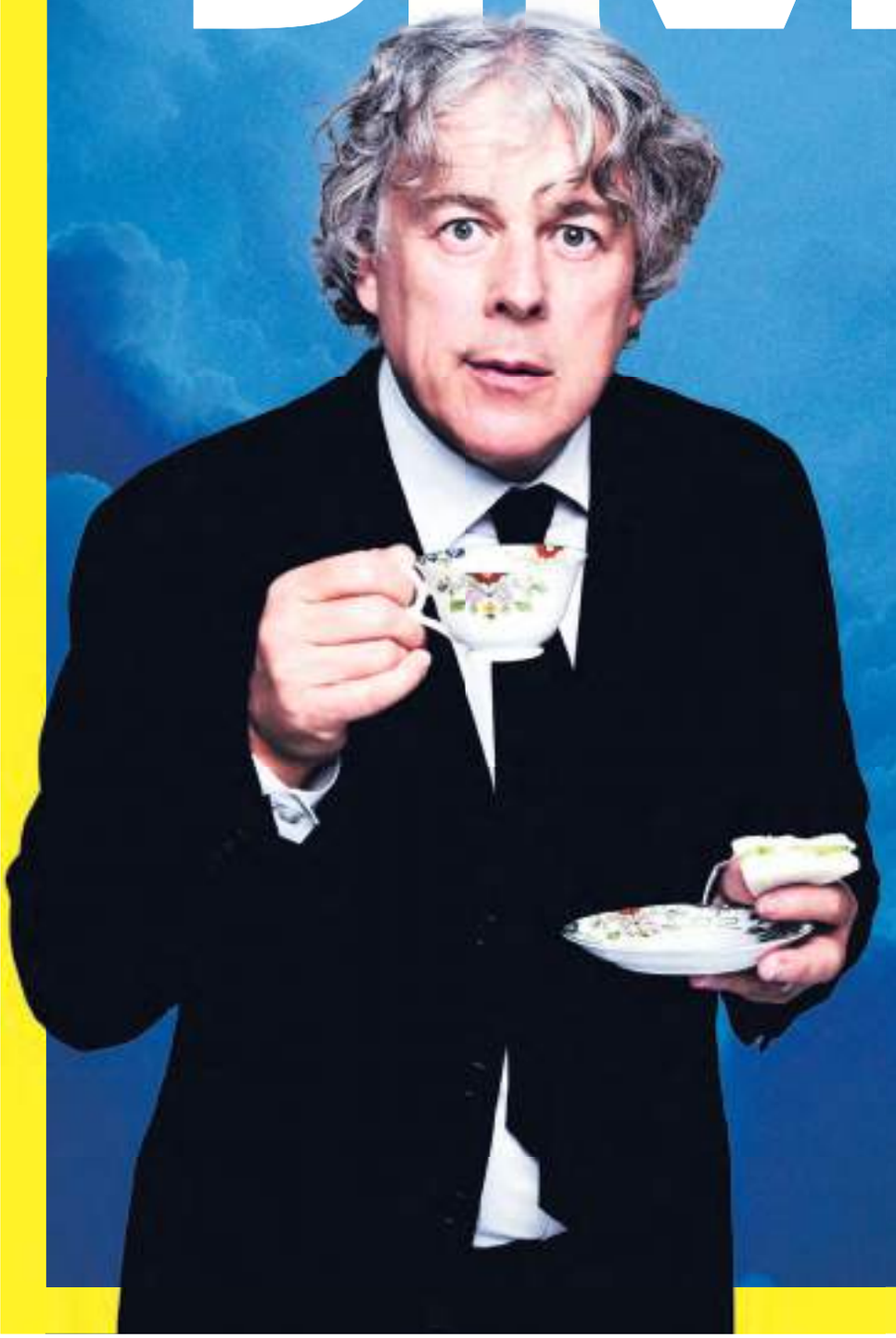
Bonnets! Bennets! Breeches!

Jane Austen at 250 — how to celebrate

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ALAN DAVIES

THINK AHEAD



AUTUMN TOUR 2025

September
19 **BASINGSTOKE** The Anvil
20 **FOLKESTONE** Leas Cliff Hall
26 **NORTHAMPTON** Royal & Derngate
27 **WIMBLEDON** New Wimbledon Theatre
29 **BIRMINGHAM** The Alexandra

October
02 **SHEFFIELD** Octagon Centre
03 **NOTTINGHAM** Playhouse
04 **IPSWICH** Corn Exchange
09 **STOCKTON** Globe
10 **YORK** Grand Opera House
11 **CARDIFF** New Theatre
16 **LINCOLN** The Engine Shed
17 **STOKE** Victoria Hall
18 **CAMBRIDGE** Corn Exchange
30 **OXFORD** New Theatre Oxford
31 **SWINDON** Wyvern Theatre

November
01 **WOKING** New Victoria Theatre
03 **LONDON** Cambridge Theatre
06 **WARRINGTON** Parr Hall
07 **SOUTHEND** Cliffs Pavilion
08 **GUILDFORD** G Live
12 **MANCHESTER** Opera House
13 **BRIGHTON** Theatre Royal
14 **SOUTHAMPTON** O2 Guildhall
15 **EXMOUTH** Pavilion
20 **EASTBOURNE** Congress Theatre
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What to do this week by our critics

My hot ticket



Dominic Maxwell
chief comedy critic

Stewart Lee vs the Man-Wulf

After 35 years in the business, you have to mix it up a bit. Even if you are the most critically acclaimed comic of your generation, a man who has made an art form out of tearing your own act to bits even while continuing to delight your fans with it. He's not for everyone, but those of us who like him tend to love him. This time, though, for at least part of the act, he is performing from inside a cumbersome werewolf costume. The Man-Wulf is the sort of taboo-busting comic whose ribbing of the lily-livered, liberal-left status quo supposedly fills arenas and delights Netflix algorithms. Lee, 56, brackets him alongside Ricky Gervais, Dave Chappelle and even Jordan Peterson. Nobody can accuse him of playing it safe. Then again, this is the man who once called himself Baconface for an Edinburgh run in which he wore a Mexican wrestling mask with strips of bacon hanging on it. Compared to that, *Stewart Lee vs the Man-Wulf* sounds like *Michael McIntyre's Big Show*.

Theatre Royal York, tonight; Oxford Playhouse, Mon-Feb 8; then touring to Nov 19

PHOTOSHOT/TOPFOTO



The comedian Stewart Lee in Man-Wulf mode. Below: the Birmingham Royal Ballet principal Momoko Hirata as Cinderella

Pop

The Brian Jonestown Massacre

Will Hodgkinson

Immortalised in the rockumentary *Dig!*, which features their volatile frontman Anton Newcombe screaming, "You broke my sitar, motherf***er!", the Brian Jonestown Massacre remain one of the greatest psychedelic rock bands. For such a combustible outfit they have proved remarkably enduring. Their 2023 album *The Future Is Your Past* captured their heady, dreamlike sound perfectly and Newcombe recovered from a heart attack in 2024 to lead the band through some of their best gigs in years.

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, tonight; Marble Factory, Bristol, tomorrow; then touring to Feb 20

Theatre

A Good House

Clive Davis

Plays about South Africa often end up banging a very loud drum. What's refreshing about Amy Jephta's satire set in a gated community is that you never quite know where the story is heading. Into a peaceful, manicured suburb comes a squatter's shack that threatens to bring down property prices. Will the well-heeled black couple Bonolo and Sihle agree to become figureheads for the campaign to get rid of it? If it starts like a simple racial morality tale, Jephta adds complications that are as much about class and money. Nancy Medina's production has a dream-like quality and there are terrific performances all round.

Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court, London, to Feb 8

Dance

Cinderella

Debra Craine

Birmingham Royal Ballet takes David Bintley's staging of Prokofiev's musical fairytale out on tour. The high classical choreography beautifully illustrates Cinderella's journey from scullery maid to princess, while John Macfarlane's gorgeous designs start in a grim kitchen reality and end up as a star-studded fantasy. The cast of characters includes mice, lizards and even a dancing frog.

Mayflower, Southampton, Thu-Feb 8, then touring to Apr 12

Visual art

Ithell Colquhoun

Nancy Durrant

It's surprising that the British surrealists were conventional enough to have expelled the artist Ithell Colquhoun for refusing to give up her membership of occult groups. Perhaps it was more about the male castration theme of some of her paintings. Colquhoun's fascinating, mysterious, sometimes sinister writings, drawings, paintings, theatre projects and mural designs — many never exhibited publicly before — go on show in a retrospective opening this week at Tate St Ives (she bequeathed her occult work to Tate on her death). It then comes to Tate Britain in June.

Tate St Ives, Cornwall, to May 5



Classical

The Flying Dutchman

Richard Morrison

Wagner's perpetually peripatetic mariner and his ghostly crew have washed up in some strange places in recent productions, including deep space and 1940s England. Annabel Arden, directing Opera North's new staging, says her approach has been influenced by talking to local asylum seekers, and Daland has been converted into a "home secretary".

Grand, Leeds, to Feb 21, then touring

What we learnt

Growing pains

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, might now be one of the richest men — and therefore one of the biggest catches — on the planet, but as a teenager his dating life was slow to get started. At school, he joined a drama class because it was where the girls were. "Since the main activity in the class was to read lines to each other," he admits, "the odds were very good that I'd actually talk to one." *Page 11*

Mighty molluscs

The German Peasants' War of 1524-25 was set off by snails. In Stühlingen in southern Germany, the Countess of Lupfen ordered her exhausted peasant workforce to gather up the creatures' shells for the ladies of her court to use while sewing. The total madness of her request proved the nobility's true indifference to their workers. *Page 13*

Inside today Our TV and radio guide **Pages 19-43**



cover story

Why do we still ❤ Jane Austen? 'It's

Fans don't just reread her books — they go as far as they can to inhabit her world. As we mark the author's 250th birthday, Laura Hackett asks the experts about her enduring appeal

Just under 250 years ago, on December 16, 1775, in Hampshire, a baby girl was born. Her father wrote that she was to be a "plaything for Cassy", her older sister. That little girl grew up to be much more than a plaything. She became perhaps the most beloved female writer in English literature — scratch that: most beloved writer.

It is hard to overstate just how much people love Jane Austen, a full quarter of a millennium after her birth. This year thousands of people will flock to Bath to celebrate the anniversary by dressing up in frocks and bonnets, attending balls, parading through the city and talking about all things Austen — over afternoon tea, of course.



Those of us who lack the appropriate Regency-wear for such an occasion will be offered televised treats. From the BBC, there is *Miss Austen*, about Cassy, who went on to burn most of Jane's letters, and *The Other Bennet Sister*, about poor, studious Mary Bennet. If that is not enough, Dolly Alderton, the author of *Everything I Know About Love*, is writing a "progressive" *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation for Netflix — rumour has it that *The Crown*'s Emma Corrin will star.

There are books too. Gill Hornby is set to publish *The Elopement*, her follow-up to *Godmersham Park*, in May. And even cosy crime has gained a bonnet or two. Jessica Bull's *Miss Austen Investigates* series has been hugely successful (a new instalment is coming in March) and an old foe is given a new lease of life in *Miss Caroline Bingley, Private Detective* by Kelly Gardiner and Sharmini Kumar.

So why has this Regency author, so little appreciated in her lifetime and whose books are primarily about the social manners of the age (one punchy Amazon review of *Pride and Prejudice* claimed the novel was "just a bunch of people going to each other's houses"), achieved such strong and lasting fame? What is it about Jane Austen that compels fans not just to read and reread her books, but to go as far as they can to inhabit her world?

You're unlikely to meet a Heathcliff in the office. But we've all met a Mrs Bennet

For Paula Byrne, the academic and author of *The Real Jane Austen*, it is all about her wit. "The thing about Jane Austen that people don't always understand is how funny she is," she says. "I grew up in Birkenhead in a working-class culture and Austen was about villages in the south of England. It should have felt very alien to me, but it didn't. It felt like that voice was speaking directly to me."

Austen's characters might have been living 200 years ago, but they feel fresh and relatable in a way that many of her contemporaries' characters do not. Think about it. You are unlikely to meet a Heathcliff in the office (thank goodness) or run into a Miss Havisham in the pub. But we have all met a Mrs Bennet, loud and nosy, or a Miss Bates, well meaning but deadly boring. And who among us has not been left heartbroken by a Willoughby or a Wickham? The language might be different, but the character traits haven't changed a bit.

It all goes back to Austen's irony, her use of which, Byrne says, was "pioneering". Austen was one of the first authors to use free indirect speech. That sounds technical but, as Byrne explains, it simply "allows us to simultaneously be inside and outside a character's mind".

Most people I speak to, when asked about their Austen origin story — the moment they were hooked by her stories and characters — don't talk about her narrative innovation. They talk about Colin Firth, dripping wet and emerging from a lake in a white shirt. The 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* celebrates an anniversary of its own this year: 30 years of making viewers laugh, swoon and order a copy of the novel immediately.

The man behind the series — and the lake scene — is Andrew Davies, the uncontested king of the British period drama. "I had the advantage of going to a coeducational grammar school," the 88-year-old says. "A lot of boys never got the chance to read Jane Austen, but we read girlie books as well as manly tales of adventure and so on."

He particularly enjoyed *Pride and Prejudice*, which he later taught during a spell as a teacher, but he couldn't get on with the many TV adaptations of the novel. "People were getting Jane Austen wrong and thinking her books were just social comedies with everybody buttoned up and being very restrained," he says. "And of course there was an element of that, but beneath that the books were about real stuff — you know, love, money, betrayals."

When Davies and the producer Sue Birtwhistle finally secured funding for their adaptation, they decided to put the "real stuff" front and centre. Theirs was a *Pride and Prejudice* of movement, energy and vitality. The characters rode horses, fenced and ran. He remembers the opening scene. "The first thing you see is a couple of big horses galloping along, gentlemen in tight trousers, massive thighs."





Emma Thompson and Hugh Grant in Sense and Sensibility (1995). Above left: Jane Austen

But where the massive thighs were an intended dose of sexiness into the story, the lake scene was an accidental swoonfest, Davies says. "That wet shirt thing completely took us by surprise. I just thought of it as being a funny scene rather than a sexy scene. When I was writing it, I had a slightly wanky notion of nature and culture, and that Darcy is dying to escape from the straitjacket of all these social ties and obligations ... And he sees his lake and he thinks, God, wouldn't it be nice to just dive in there and just forget everything and be like an animal swimming underwater?"

The responses to the subsequent scene had something of the animal about them at least. Membership of the Jane Austen Society of North America increased by 50 per cent within a year.

Even today the series has potent cultural capital. The lake scene is practically canon. "I feel very guilty about those A-level students who include it in their exam answers," Davies says.

Ben Fensome, a 38-year-old actor, has spent six months lip-syncing the series via short videos on TikTok, "sort of by accident". The response to the videos (which feature low-fi costumes, such as a doily on his head for Mrs Bennet) has been such that he has been given his first TV and audiobook gigs.

And then there are the "Janeites", the Austen fans who express their adoration by dressing up in Regency outfits. The best place to do so is at the Jane Austen Festival in Bath. The first festival took place in 2001 and has become the highlight of any true Janeite's year, offering the chance to don a bonnet, attend lectures about the novels, drink tea in the Pump Room and dance the

the real stuff: love, money, betrayals'





Keira Knightley in Pride and Prejudice (2005). Top right: Mia Goth and Anya Taylor-Joy in Emma (2020). Below: Regé-Jean Page and Phoebe Dynevor in Bridgerton (2020)



night away at a ball. The festival's director, Georgia Delve, was introduced to Austen through the 1995 adaptation and began volunteering at the festival aged 18. Now she has the task of planning a year's worth of anniversary celebrations, including, she hopes, a ball themed round each novel.

Over the years Delve has spotted various age groups at the festival. The middle-aged attendees were often hooked, like she was, by the 1995 adaptation. "And then we have the thirtysomethings who have enjoyed it from the 2005 version [starring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen]. And then we get the youngsters who are finding it from *Bridgerton*, the 20-year-olds."

The Netflix series *Bridgerton*, which was premiered in 2020, set its stories in a familiar Regency landscape, but swapped whispered confessions of ardent love for ripped bodices and ardent lovemaking. It was an overnight sensation — Netflix claims season one has been viewed 113 million times — and despite its marked difference from Austen's original works — it is based on a series of novels by the contemporary novelist Julia Quinn — it has sparked new interest in them. The number of attendees at the Jane Austen Festival has tripled since before Covid, from about 400 to more than 1,200, and *Bridgerton* is a huge factor, Delve says.

She expects these numbers to increase in the anniversary year. An option to become a "friend" of the festival (and get priority booking for events) by paying a membership fee usually sells out after four or five months. This year it took 48 hours.

One person hoping to get tickets is the writer Emily Jupp, who has been going to the festival with a group of friends for ten years. Jupp discovered Austen in her twenties ("I was a little bit late to the party"), but made up for lost time with commitment. She even makes her own dresses. "There are Regency patterns and they're really easy to run up on a machine," she says. "I can make a basic Jane Austen frock in a day."

For Jupp, the festival represents a supportive space for women. Tight jeans are replaced by the loose fabric of the dresses ("You can eat as much as you like and feel completely free and comfortable in it") and corsets are optional, being mainly worn by "some of the heavier-bosomed ladies". And Regency manners are just as welcome as the era's clothing.

"There's something about the world today that feels quite dangerous, especially for women. So there's a safety in the idea that a man can't even approach you for a dance without having been formally introduced to you."

Byrne has spent time with members of the Jane Austen Society of North America, where frocks and bonnets are

The world is so frightening. Regency dress and manners provide an escape

just as popular as they are in Bath, and comes to a similar conclusion about the appeal of harking back two centuries. At an event called Jane in Jammies (talking about Austen while wearing your pyjamas), Byrne asked the women there why they felt such an affinity with the author's fictional worlds. "It was just after 9/11 and people said, 'The world is so frightening and this is an escape,'" she says. "I think that is an honourable and noble thing. Academics are really snobby about people who dress up as Jane Austen, but I'm on the Janeites' side."

Jupp has taken her obsession beyond the ten days of the festival. She is writing a contemporary version of *Pride and Prejudice* and she has even incorporated Austen into her love life, once spending a week dating as though she were Emma Woodhouse. When I ask how effective it was, she deadpans: "I didn't get laid, let's put it like that."

Perhaps *Bridgerton* would be more useful in that endeavour, but Austen's intelligent wit offers something much deeper. As your social calendar for this anniversary year fills up, it is worth making the time to return to the particular bright genius of the novels.

Join the party: nine birthday events to book

Visit the house she lived in
Jane Austen's house in Chawton, Hampshire, naturally has a series of events planned for this anniversary year. The writer lived in the large cottage for the last eight years of her life and it was where she wrote and revised all six of her great novels. A permanent exhibition, *Jane Austen and the Art of Writing*, has already opened, and another called *Austenmania!* celebrates three adaptations of Austen's work released in 1995. Festivals celebrating three of her books are planned for later in the year.

Visit the house she died in
For the first time, Winchester College will open to the public the house Austen died in — No 8 College Street in Winchester — with tickets available for June, July and August. Elsewhere in the city, the cathedral (where Austen is buried) will host a special service, theatre performances and tours, and will unveil a new clay statue by Martin Jennings in September.

Visit her schoolroom
Austen didn't only live in Hampshire — when she was nine, she and her elder sister, Cassandra, and their cousin Jane spent 18 months at Reading Ladies Boarding School in Berkshire. From April to October, visitors can see the place she was taught as part of a tour of Reading Museum's Abbey Quarters.

Listen to an expert
The historian Lucy Worsley has written two books about Austen: *The Austen Girls*, a young adult novel in which she reimagines the lives of the novelist's two nieces, and *Jane Austen at Home*, an insight into the places and possessions that mattered to the author. She will be discussing the latter at the Forum in Bath on May 27. On February 7 at the National Portrait Gallery in London the Austen expert Joe Bray will look at the role of portraits in her novels.



Go to a ball in Bath
Every year, Bath holds a Jane Austen festival in mid-September celebrating the five years she spent in the city. Extra events have been added for 2025: visitors can attend a ball, and a large-scale *Sense and Sensibility*-themed event, among other activities to be announced.

Watch the story of her sister
The BBC made arguably the best Austen adaptation: *Pride and Prejudice* starring Colin Firth. Now it is turning its attention to Austen's life with *Miss Austen*, starring Keeley Hawes as her sister, Cassandra. Netflix is also planning a new *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation, written by Dolly Alderton and potentially starring Emma Corrin. *BBC1 from Feb 2 at 9.05pm*



The Jane Austen festival, Bath. Below: Keeley Hawes in Miss Austen

Watch a spoof
Faithful versions of Austen's work have long charmed viewers, but there is also a happy market for comic rewritings. *Pride and Prejudice (sort of)*, which includes musical numbers such as *You're So Vain*, is touring the country until June, while the comedian Cariad Lloyd's improv show *Austentatious* is touring to June 7.

See the opera
Jonathan Dove's 2011 opera version of *Mansfield Park* began as a chamber show, but has enjoyed a rich life in opera houses thanks to its score and a witty libretto by Alasdair Middleton. It is being performed at the Barbican in London by students from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. *Feb 24-Mar 3*

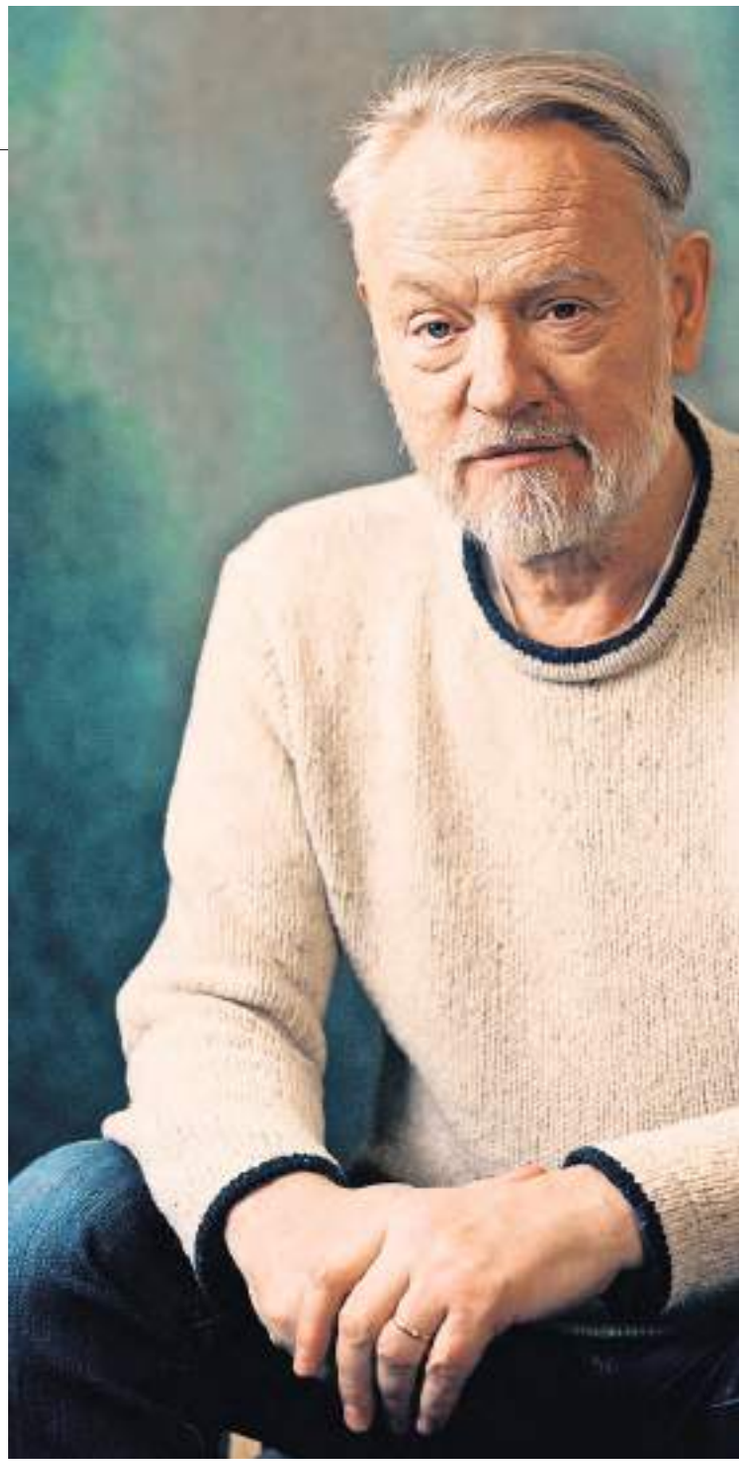
Watch a crime version
Death Comes to Pemberley, the crime writer PD James's 2011 mystery reimagining of *Pride and Prejudice*, was made into a BBC series in 2013 starring Matthew Rhys. This year the stage adaptation is premiering at The Mill at Sonning, Reading. Captain Denny is murdered in the Pemberley woods and suspicion falls on Wickham as Elizabeth and Mr Darcy are thrust into a whodunnit. Expect plenty of Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lydia too. *May 1-Jun 28*

Blanca Schofield

theatre

Actors always get called 'nepo babies'. We don't do it to the sons of farmers

Jared Harris — the son of Richard Harris — is about to act in Hamlet at the RSC. He talks to Ed Potton about the realities of having famous parents and his next screen role: Gorbachev



The opening night of the Royal Shakespeare Company's new *Hamlet* is just days away and the windows of the rehearsal space in south London have been flung open to clear the aroma of instant coffee and stressed-out actors. It is, as Jared Harris, who plays Hamlet's usurping uncle Claudius, puts it, "Alex Ferguson squeaky-bum time".

Directed by the Olivier-winning Rupert Goold, the cast features Anton Lesser (*Wolf Hall*) as the Ghost of Hamlet's father, Elliot Levey (another Olivier winner, for *Cabaret*) as Polonius and the fast-rising Luke Thallon as Hamlet. Harris, though, will be the reason many people make the trek to Stratford-upon-Avon. The 63-year-old is one of our most successful and engaging character actors, having played the tragically uptight English accountant Lane Pryce in *Mad Men*; a noble Soviet scientist in *Chernobyl*, for which he won a Bafta; a weary captain in *The Terror*; and a movingly vulnerable George VI in *The Crown*.

The son of thespians — the Irish hellraiser Richard Harris and the Welsh socialite Elizabeth Rees-Williams — Harris can measure out his life in *Hamlets*. He has seen at least a dozen,



Above right: Jared Harris and, above, in Mad Men with Christina Hendricks. Right: as George VI in The Crown. Top right: in 1964 with his parents, Elizabeth and Richard Harris, and brothers, Damian and Jamie

When Jared played Hamlet his father was the Ghost. 'He did it as a birthday present'

played Fortinbras opposite Mark Rylance for the RSC in 1989, when he was just out of drama school, and took the lead role at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival in 2001. Having watched a recording of the latter, he says: "I didn't realise I was such a nutcase. But if you encountered the ghost of your dead father, who confirmed all the things you've done wrong that you're going to pay for in the afterlife and finally goes, 'I want you to go and kill the bastard who killed me' — it would f*** your mind."

Now he is playing the bastard: Claudius, who murdered Hamlet's father and married his mother. He is a nuanced villain: none other than Abraham Lincoln thought his confessional speech ("My offence is rank it smells to heaven") better than "To be or not to be". Harris has a new take on the role, but won't say more. "You're not going to get me to talk about that. I've seen your sort before."

When he played Hamlet in New Jersey his father appeared on screen as the Ghost. "He didn't really want to do it, but he did it as a birthday present," he says. It must have been bittersweet for Richard, who never played the Dane himself. "He was going to do it with Lindsay Anderson, but that didn't happen." What kind of Hamlet would he have made? "He was such a physical, powerful, dangerous person that it would have been interesting to see him finding the reasons to delay that impetus towards action."

You wouldn't call Jared dangerous, but he has his spiky moments, glowering at my suggestion that people may not know Thallon, the 28-year-old new Hamlet. "I knew him. I saw him on Broadway in *Patriots* [directed by Goold] and I saw him in *Present Laughter* at the Old Vic. He made me laugh a lot. It's always good if you have a Hamlet with a good facility for comedy."

Rylance certainly did, he says. "He's a natural clown. You've got to mix it up — that tragic nerve goes numb if you keep hitting it. He's a phenomenal actor. I saw that they're thinking about him as a possible Dumbledore [in the upcoming Harry Potter TV series]. He would be wonderful because there's already something otherworldly about him."

Harris knows all about Dumbledore, of course: his father played him in the first two Potter films (after his death in 2002 he was replaced by Michael Gambon). "Dad was offered Gandalf and Dumbledore at the same time, but he didn't want to spend all that time in New Zealand [where the *Lord of the Rings* films were shot]," he says. Harris thinks his father's Dumbledore had "more of a mischievous comic touch" than Gambon's.

Born in London, Harris went to Catholic boarding schools in East Sussex and Somerset that he described to me when I interviewed him in 2014 as "painful". He then left the UK to "reinvent" himself at Duke University in North Carolina. He and his wife, Allegra Riggio, a lighting designer and presenter, mainly live between homes in New York and Los Angeles, Florida, where her parents live, and "whatever eastern European country is giving producers the biggest tax break". He still speaks in crisp RP, but there is a distance in the way he talks about "the English". What does he make of America's returning president? He frowns. "There's no question that a majority of the public voted for this adventure. We'll see what happens."

Before meeting Riggio he was married to Jacqueline Goldenberg, then Emilia

JACK LAWSON FOR THE TIMES; EVENING STANDARD/GETTY IMAGES





Fox, part of the Fox acting clan. Had Harris and Fox been coming up now they would be branded as "nepo babies", which he thinks is ridiculous. "When you walk down the high street and you see 'WH Smith & Sons' do you think: nepo babies? It's a weird thing. It's only attached to the entertainment industry. Farmers teach their children how to go into the business, so do lawyers. It happens all the time."

Besides, being a "son of" can work against you. Harris did a series of auditions early in his career "for directors my father fired" including Philip Prowse, who at the time was a co-director of the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow. "I walked in and he goes, 'Good Lord, are you?' He looks at my headshot. 'Oh my God, you are.' He turned his chair to face the wall and would not look at me for the whole audition."

Harris's mother, who died in 2022, was as big a character as his father. "She was a force of nature — think of the people that she married," he says. After his father, to whom she proposed, came the *My Fair Lady* star Rex Harrison, then the stockbroker Peter Aitken and finally Aitken's cousin Jonathan Aitken, the former Tory MP who went to prison for perjury. "She did not marry wilting flowers."

He adds: "There's a wonderful story — I'm sure Jonathan wouldn't mind me telling it. He'd gone in for an operation on his gut and wasn't supposed to eat, but they told him you can eat whatever you want. The solid food ripped the stitches apart and his gut started to go necrotic. He said to my mother, 'My darling, I'm afraid the next time you see me may very well be at my funeral.' And she looks at him and goes, 'I know just what to wear.'"

His mother was at Rada with Peter O'Toole, Alan Bates, Albert Finney and Roy Kinnear and said that the jovial

My mother was a force of nature — just look at the people she married

Kinnear — now the least celebrated — most impressed his peers. "At drama school they cast you against type so he would have played Hamlet and figured out a way to make it work. With his gift for comedy they were fascinated by him. Then he gets trapped in playing fat funny guys [such as Veruca Salt's father in the 1971 *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*] for the rest of his life. But she said he was mesmerising."

Coming up, Harris is starring with Idris Elba in an untitled White House thriller directed by Kathryn Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*), and playing Mikhail Gorbachev in *Reykjavik*, a film dramatising the Reykjavik summit of 1986, where the Soviet leader and the American president Ronald Reagan had historic talks that led to an arms control treaty. Reagan is played by Jeff Daniels — "incredibly affable, he has you in the palm of his hand", Harris says — while George Shultz, the secretary of state, is portrayed by JK Simmons. Did he have the famous Gorbachev birthmark? "Oh yes. You've got to go the whole way with that. It's a very famous face."



Among the things he learnt while making the film was that when the Americans spied on the Soviets via satellite they discovered they had far fewer missiles than the 4,000 claimed. "They didn't have 400. They didn't have 40. They had four. And the Americans went, 'Well, we need to pretend they've got four thousand.'"

Gorbachev is loved in the West, but loathed by many Russians, who blame him for the destruction of the USSR. "He never intended that: he was trying to give more freedom to the satellite states," Harris says. George Bush Sr, who became president in 1989, said America needed to support Gorbachev after the fall of communism. "They were worried that he would be undermined or there would be a coup. What a different world it would be if he had had that support."

There will be those who scour *Reykjavik* for inaccuracies, just as they did *The Crown*. "If people want to get hung up on that stuff and take themselves out of the story, then go ahead and do it," Harris says with a sigh. "The only people who really get upset about it, by the way, are the English."

***Hamlet* is at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, Feb 8 to Mar 29**

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exhibition



Why tarot's future is bright again

The ancient practice is no longer the preserve of cranks, with a new show and Demi Moore's endorsement, says Fiona Lensvelt

When Demi Moore took to the stage in shock last month to receive her Golden Globe award for best actress for her role in *The Substance* — the first top award of her 45-year career — she knew who she needed to thank. Alongside her agent and co-stars, she singled out her tarot reader.

"You can know the value of your worth if you just put down the measuring stick," the reader told the 62-year-old actress, who was "at a low point" when the script landed on her desk. "The universe told me, 'You are not done,'" Moore said.

But even before Moore reached for her tarot cards, the practice had been shedding its associations with fairground fortune tellers in favour of something more mainstream. I first met a tarot reader in the lobby of a swanky London hotel on my birthday a decade ago. I was a book critic for The Times and had little knowledge of what tarot readings involved, but I knew that the cards had inspired writers and artists such as Sylvia Plath, Italo Calvino and Salvador Dalí, so I was interested.

I wanted to know how the cards worked and find out what so many creative minds had seen in them. Maybe I'd get an article out of it. I also wanted to know about my great destiny, which had so far eluded me.

So you can imagine how I felt as my reader began by telling me that I was about to encounter the lowest point in my life and that I should be prepared for trouble. Happy birthday to me! This may not have been the most cheering of experiences (the prophecy of doom was, I can say with distance, wrong), but I couldn't get the reading out of my head.

It wasn't because of what was said, but because of the cards themselves. On the table were mythical images that drew me into a world of kings and queens, hanged men, magicians, high priestesses and devils, and women who tame lions. Here were ancient symbols and archetypes that connected age-old struggles and experiences with a visual language that made them more interesting. There was a power here that I hadn't expected and it didn't lie in fortune telling.

Tarot is en vogue. So far this year we've seen the actress Christina Ricci create her own tarot deck and the actor Andrew Garfield date (and split from) the tarot reader Kate Tomas. The supernatural horror film *Tarot* was panned by critics last year, but it was a box-office hit, grossing $49.3 million worldwide against a budget of $8 million.

Tarot is in Vogue, too, with fashion houses from Dior to Chanel revelling in the rich imagery and mystique they offer. Even Oxbridge is at it: visit the Weston Library at the University of Oxford before the end of April and you'll discover *Oracles, Omens and Answers*, an exhibition that features tarot prominently as it explores the impulse for divination as a way of facing uncertainty. (If you can't make it to the exhibition, you can still enjoy one exhibit at home: in the memoir *What Does Joan Say?* the author Joan Quigley recalls her career as an astrological adviser to Ronald and Nancy Reagan during their White House years and discusses her impact on US policy.)

Yet while it is clear that tarot is a tool that has long fascinated and inspired people, its artistic and cultural value has been overlooked. This is starting to change. Last year the Warburg Institute, which is associated with the University of London, opened its Kythera gallery after a £14.5 million revamp. Its new exhibition, *Tarot: Origins and Afterlives*, is a fascinating look across the past 600 years or so of tarot's history. It draws on significant and previously unseen tarot works held in the Warburg's collection, as well as from the British Museum, the Wellcome Collection, the Magic Circle and beyond. It shows that tarot is worthy of critical appreciation.

One of the most curious things the exhibition reveals is that tarot began its life, not as a fortune-telling device, but as playing cards. Tarot, it turns out, existed for centuries before the earliest records of cartomancy.

The oldest surviving decks were commissioned in the mid-15th century by the duke of Milan Filippo Maria Visconti and his successor, Francesco Sforza. These gilded decks — an example of which is in the exhibition — contained cards that offered allegories. They became status symbols for upper-class Italians, who used them to play tarocchi, a trick-taking game like bridge.



Demi Moore thanked her tarot reader in her Golden Globe speech

The practice spread to France where in the 18th century Antoine Court de Gébelin, a Protestant pastor, turned tarot into an occult device when he claimed that the cards held the secrets of the Egyptians. Within a couple of years the printmaker John-Baptiste Alliette, known by the pen name Etteilla, had published a technique for reading tarot (a tableau of Etteilla's Livre de Thot cards appears in the exhibition) and the practice of tarot reading was born.

When tarot reached British shores, it attracted mystics including the poet Arthur Edward Waite, who commissioned one of the most popular tarot decks today, the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, and the controversial occultist Aleister Crowley. Among the most striking exhibits are paintings of Crowley's Thoth tarot by the artist Frieda Harris, which have not been shown in England since Harris's death in 1962. Tarot, this exhibition shows, has always been whatever those using it want it to be: a game, an outlet for Egyptomania or an occult tool. And its purpose is shifting again.

While people do still use tarot cards for reading the future, they are increasingly being used as a tool for examining the present. This is the case for my friend Jen Cownie and me. For us, it became a tool for interviewing cultural figures on TV and on stage. We've travelled the country, drawing cards for Melvyn Bragg, Jarvis Cocker and the radio presenter Jane Garvey. The reading acts as a playful conversation prompt. (Helpfully, the hierophant — aka the pope — appeared in our reading with the comedian Frank Skinner, who is Catholic.)

Why is an exhibition like this on at the Warburg? Its founder, the art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg (1866-1929), was a tarot fan and among the first modern scholars of tarot cards, although he was sceptical about its esoteric practice. The Warburg Institute is located on Woburn Square in London, but its origins lie in Hamburg at the start of the 20th century, where Warburg established the institute to trace the roots of the Renaissance.

In the years leading up to his death, Warburg began a project called the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* — an image atlas of art and memory. The principle behind the *Bilderatlas*, which contains about 1,000 images, was that visual symbols and motifs are a form of cultural memory. Study it and you will find evidence of the evolution of visual expression from the Greco-Roman world to the Renaissance and, on panels 50 and 51, the evolution of tarot. Bill Sherman, the director of the Warburg Institute, says Warburg was "interested in visual, portable phenomena that move through time and space, often at the edge of the rational and the non-rational, and sometimes even the outright magical. That's exactly what tarot is."

Elsewhere in the exhibition you will find the painted deck by the British artist Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956), which was discovered in 2013 in the Magic Circle's archive by Jonathan Allen, a co-curator of the exhibition. The deck had been virtually unnoticed since its accession in 1944. "I couldn't quite believe what I had in my hands," Allen says. "It turned out to be essentially a lost relic of the British occult revival." What marks it out as unique is that Spare draws across the boundaries of individual cards, although they don't quite match up. "It is fractured, chaotic and, in my view, offers a rather modernist vision of a world that is harmonious one minute and clashing and broken the next."

After Allen rescued the deck from an archive, it had "a significant valuation" from an auction house. The exhibition concludes with a Tarotkammer — a cabinet of curiosities that includes tarot decks designed by contemporary artists that show the appeal of the form today.

It often feels strange to me that, in such a data-driven age, we should find ourselves in the middle of a tarot resurgence, but perhaps it is for this very reason that it is thriving. Allen makes the point that while there are plenty of online tarot readers, and even tarot bots, "there's much more interest in an encounter with another human being. I think that could reflect the way culture is increasingly digitised and anonymised. A tarot reading is an encounter in a space and these spaces are decreasingly available to 21st-century subjects."

As for a certain Hollywood star, does her future contain a glittery gold Oscar? Let's hope she doesn't lose the tarot reader's number.

***Tarot: Origins and Afterlives* is at the Warburg Institute, London, to Apr 30**

books

The origin story of a supernerd

Book of the week

Obsessive coding, tripping on LSD and not pulling girls — Bill Gates's self-effacing memoir of his youth. By Tom Whipple



Source Code
My Beginnings
by Bill Gates
Allen Lane £25 pp336

Bill Gates still remembers his first program. 10 INPUT X, Y, he typed into his school computer, in the syntax familiar to anyone who learnt to code before the mid-1990s.

20 LET A=X+Y
30 PRINT A
40 END

Does your heart flutter? His did. He ran it, and it worked. "It was like a jolt of electricity".

It was 1968 and computers were young. Gates was young too — just 13. He was one of the members of the school's new programming club. And he was hooked.

But he needed more jolts, bigger jolts. One of the older and cooler kids ("cooler" is very much a relative term throughout the book), challenged him to solve another problem he had been struggling with. "Bill," he said, "you think you're so smart, you figure this thing out." That boy's name? Paul Allen.

This anecdote is as close as Gates's autobiography gets to a superhero origin story. This is Spider-Man getting bitten by the spider, the Incredible Hulk getting exposed to radiation. From this one moment — the first program, and the programming friend — Microsoft's trajectory can be traced.

And for those who didn't feel a portentous shiver at the name of his friend? Well Allen was the less well-known (marginally), less well-remunerated co-founder of Microsoft, who spent his many billions on less-worthy causes. But who did die in 2018 owning a very, very, very big yacht.

Mind you, if you didn't feel the flutter, then it's also probable that you are not the market for this, the first of a planned three-volume set about Gates's life. *Source Code* starts with Gates in nappies and "a notable early trait" he had for rocking. It continues chronologically — Gates was always a completer finisher — through his views on the grading system at primary school (it was, the seven-year-old Gates believed, irrational) and the first girl he asked out (she said no).

This is very much a book, as its subtitle explains, about Gates's beginnings. You might be waiting for the arrival of Windows — you will have to wait for the second volume. The drama, instead, derives from a race against the clock to write a school-lesson-scheduling program and then, after graduating, software to convert machine code into the BASIC programming language. This is a book, then, for the real Gates aficionados. I must confess, I am one.

Gates felt like the future once. He built operating systems. He was the face of the PC revolution. Then, having become richer than any human before, he decided to give it away. He became Davos man, meeting global leaders, tackling global problems. These days we have brash Trump-backing billionaires calling for closed borders, allying with antivaxers and spending their fortune on big rockets. It feels a little naive to consider Davos man, with technocratic dreams of techno-globalist solutions, a good thing.

Thousands of words have been written, in fact, about why Gates is a bad thing (one book critiqued him by pointing out he once claimed a particular health intervention he backed had saved ten million children, but on another occasion only six million. The monster.) However, I still hold the unfashionable view that a man who has devoted a third of his life and all his fortune to things such as eradicating polio is probably, on balance, what we want our billionaires to be.

And this is despite the fact that the first time I met him was tricky. The Times had run articles alleging waste in the UK overseas aid budget, and he called me and my colleagues "piece-of-shit journalists". Mr Gates likes overseas aid budgets.

Perhaps that is why I appreciated the many sections in the book where he admitted to being a bit of an arse.

"Even today I cringe when I think about my rudeness," he says of one such occasion — albeit not the one when he called me a shit. "My mom surely would have called me out for being a precocious brat."

The book has some lovely anecdotes, and quite a few smelly ones. On more than one occasion he describes multi-day programming binges in which he falls asleep at the keyboard, subsists on pizza and doesn't wash. Don't, then, expect romance. Occasionally, females who aren't blood relatives get a mention — but largely as near-mystical and wholly inaccessible beings. He joined drama class, he writes, because girls did drama. "And since the main activity in the class was to read lines to each other, the odds were very good that I'd actually talk to one."

Throughout, there is the dramatic irony of what is to come. When, at last, the one-day richest man in the world started making a bit of money, he celebrated by buying a second-hand Porsche. He continues, he says, to feel guilty about this extravagance. This frugality might explain, incidentally, why the second time I interviewed him, after a catered event at his London office, the world's first centibillionaire gave me an Asda Wensleydale with cranberries wrapped in tin foil to take home lest it went to waste.

I remember something else from that meeting: how, just as he did as a baby, he rocked back and forth throughout. Gates is not, it hardly needs saying, a normal man. Rocking is a habit he references repeatedly, from childhood into adulthood. "[It] was like a metronome for my brain," he writes. "It still is." Only in the epilogue does Gates explicitly state what is implicit throughout. "If I were growing up today I would probably be diagnosed on the autism spectrum."

This book is not corporate puffery. There are bits that are frank, and bits that a PR adviser would excise. It feels real. As someone who has dabbled in programming, I have never read anything that so vividly describes the pizza-fuelled shower-dodging obsessiveness that can descend mid-problem.

But, still, there were passages where I did wonder whether we needed quite so much of the Gates origin story. One of the longer sections concerns the legal intricacies of Microsoft's negotiations with a long-defunct Seattle software firm, and really should be lost to history. During the passage when he quoted verbatim from a contract, I pondered how many public figures there are of sufficient significance that I would want 300 pages on what they did before they became significant? "Hitler: my watercolour years" would work, I guess — but I would still want the Führer to go light on contract law. Stalin also had an eventful enough subsequent career that I could draw portents and meaning from early domestic banalities. Although it's worth remembering that even Jesus did some judicious editing when it came to chronicling his early years.

Mind you, whatever his aspirations to alleviating global suffering, there are some things Gates did that definitely don't pass the what-would-Jesus-do test. Because while this book is wholly lacking in sex, and barely touches on rock'n'roll (he knows he should like Hendrix, but prefers listening to Donovan's *Mellow Yellow*), it does have some drugs. Under the influence of Allen, Gates confesses to trying LSD.

He recalls during the trip a friend tracing what looked like a reversed capital E twice in the dew on a car bonnet. To most of us it would have been a backwards E, but to these Harvard computer scientists it was something else: the mathematical symbol for "there exists".

"'Bill, see this,'" his friend said, meaningfully. "'Existence exists.'"

Gates can't even take acid without being a nerd.

DEBORAH FEINGOLD/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY





Bill Gates holding a Windows 1.0 floppy disc in 1985. Above: aged 17

He is frugal. He once gave me an Asda Wensleydale in tin foil to take home lest it went to waste

To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935

books

The quiet genius of Anne Tyler

The secret to the author's success is her enduring belief that an ordinary marriage can be as dramatic as any thriller. By James Walton



Three Days in June
by Anne Tyler
Chatto & Windus
£14.99 pp176

Calm good sense is perhaps not the sexiest attribute a writer can have, but it has helped to earn Anne Tyler a deserved place at the literary top table. For more than 60 years her clear-eyed but kindly approach to people moving through recognisable daily life has enabled her to serve up a convincing combination of sharpness, tenderness, mild satire and rueful comedy, not just in a single book, but sometimes in a single sentence. ("Like most families, they imagined they were special.")

Famously, Tyler's scope isn't wide, with her subject matter ranging from families in Baltimore to other families in Baltimore. Her tone has also remained defiantly unchanged. As long ago as 1965 she complained that "there aren't enough quiet, gentle, basically good people in a novel" and ever since she's sought to show that "most human beings do try to be as responsible and kind as they can manage".

It may therefore not come as a huge shock to Tyler readers that *Three Days in June* is about a family in Baltimore.

At first sight, the prose of the narrator, Gail Baines, seems a dead ringer for Tyler's typical third-person voice: accepting, amused, able to summarise people in a couple of killer sentences, willing to admit the unworthy thoughts that flit across the worthiest of minds and, above all, wise.

Only gradually do we realise that much of what Gail is telling us lies somewhere between the overly self-protective and the flat-out self-delusional. This in turn leads to two questions that give the novel its growing feeling of tension. Will Gail realise it too? And if she does, would that be a good thing or a disaster?

LEXEY SWALL



The novel opens on the day of her daughter's wedding rehearsal, a day that gets off to a bad start when, aged 61, Gail is let go from her job at a private school. Nor does it improve when her former husband, Max, shows up, asking to stay for a couple of nights. As a rule, Tyler's husbands tend to be more stolid and buttoned-up than their impulsive wives. Here, it's — or appears to be — the other way round, with Max's breeziness soon reminding Gail of what she used to find annoying about him. For her part, Gail fights a propensity to worry by keeping people at arm's length — often quite bluntly — and her life as uneventful as

Anne Tyler: "Most human beings do try to be as kind as they can manage"

Anne Tyler's three finest novels

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant (1982)
In Tyler's work sibling rivalry is never just for childhood — and here she gives the theme a thorough and often painful airing as three siblings remember their childhood and mother very differently. Reviewing it in The New Yorker, John Updike said: "She has arrived at a new level of power." Great title, great book.

The Accidental Tourist (1985)
Proving she can write just as well from a male perspective, Tyler brings us the many tribulations of Macon Leary, a writer of travel guides whose marriage disintegrates after their son is killed in a shooting at a fast-food restaurant. There's no denying that the book is stolen by his brassy dog trainer, Muriel.

Breathing Lessons (1988)
Concluding a golden decade for Tyler, this Pulitzer winner may well be the best of her portraits of a long marriage, with all its delights, disappointments and satisfactions.

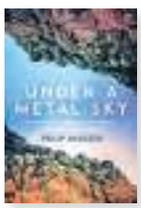
A globetrotting guide to getting your rocks off

An enthusiastic and lyrical look at the metals and minerals that make our world go round. By Ceci Browning

According to the geology boffins who know about these things, iron makes up about 35 per cent of the Earth's total mass. But throughout history much of the iron put to good use by humans came from space.

A couple of thousand years ago a sizeable meteorite touched down in Greenland, and some sensible Inuit people decided to cold-forge the iron it contained into harpoons and knives. Then in 1894 the explorer Robert E Peary tracked down a few leftover lumps of that extraterrestrial metal, transported them — with difficulty — to New York, and sold them to the American Museum of Natural History for $40,000 (equivalent to $1.4 million today). Of the three chunks still on display, "the largest is so heavy that it is fixed by supports that go straight down through the floor, through the basement and the building's foundations, to the granite bedrock of Manhattan".

This is just one of a great number of fascinating elemental anecdotes that can be excavated from Philip Marsden's memoir-cum-travelogue-cum-history, *Under a Metal Sky*. Since becoming obsessed with rocks as an infant, when "a truckload of gravel" was tipped on to his parents' driveway, Marsden has been acutely aware of the vital presence of metals and minerals in the lives of human beings — from "money and nails, lunulae and torcs, axes and mattocks, hair clips, belt buckles, armour and goblets" to "aircraft fuselages, electric cables and semiconductors". Worried that following this passion would "lead only to arid regions of specialised debate", he long resisted acting on it. Until now.



Under a Metal Sky
A Journey Through Minerals, Greed and Wonder
by Philip Marsden
Granta £20 pp352

ANTONY SPENCER/GETTY IMAGES



A tin mine on the coast of Cornwall

Marsden's investigation of key natural resources begins in his home county, Cornwall, with its quarry scars and corked mineshafts. He joins a Facebook group for mining enthusiasts and mineral collectors called Beardy Weirdies through which he meets Trevor, a former electrician with a wheelbarrow's worth of crystals stashed all over his house, and Sam, an urban explorer who enjoys nothing more than weaving through "collapsing structures of toxic rocks". Taking their lead, Marsden straps on a hard helmet and heads deep into the ground.

Like a true scientist, Marsden is rigidly methodical, guiding us through the surprising histories of our planet's minerals one by one. Ochre, which he describes as "clay tinged with oxidised iron", is first. Used as a pigment for ancient cave paintings of bulls and bison, it can be considered "the original medium, the first substance to be employed for that strange human faculty — to imagine what is not there, to use two dimensions to recreate the complexities of three".

Next is tin, a metal with obvious strengths and invisible weaknesses. In 1812, Marsden explains, two British merchants bought the patent for tin cans from an inventive Frenchman and built the world's first cannery in London, a turning point in food preservation. But the same year, during the retreat of Napoleon's army from Moscow, the tin uniform buttons of half a million French soldiers crumbled due to cold temperatures and thousands of them froze to death.

Arriving in the Netherlands, a "small boggy country", Marsden turns his attention to peat, a dense energy-rich earth that the poet Seamus Heaney once called "kind, black butter". Then, in East Germany he delves into the history of bronze, a "miraculous" tin-copper alloy that made weapons "more deadly, more prestigious". He sums up the significance of the orangey metal with reference to three unwittingly sexy archetypes: the metalworker, "sweaty from his cabin of secrets, hammer in hand, bare armed and leather aproned", the whip-wielding, mule-driving trader, who lugs bulks of

possible. (When the boss who lets her go suggests doing "something you've always dreamed of", Gail wonders "what on earth [the boss] imagined that might be. I am not the kind of woman who dreams of doing things.") Nevertheless, the pair achieve enough amiability to get through the rehearsal and the next day's wedding together.

As ever, Tyler is painfully good on how "children veer out from their parents like so many explorers in the wilderness" — and on how bereft that leaves the parents. The large cast of wedding guests allows for plenty of those winningly deft character summaries. "Everything Sophie said was about three degrees too vivacious," Gail says of the groom's mother. "It seemed that she lived on some other level than ours, someplace louder and more brightly lit."

But all the time there's the problem of what Gail feels (or can permit herself to feel) about Max. As it turns out, the book's biggest flaw is when we learn, in a sudden, rather implausible twist, why they divorced — the implausible bit being that it goes unmentioned for so long, with the delay clearly owing more to the structural needs of a novel than to any psychological realism.

Happily, after the belated revelation is made, there's still room for Tyler to steer a highly satisfying course to an ending that, without at all feeling too easily earned, is exactly the one we were rooting for. "An ordinary, run-of-the-mill marriage," Tyler once wrote, "has in many ways a more dramatic plot than any thriller" — and while this remark might have a touch of uncharacteristic hyperbole, in *Three Days in June* she proves yet again that it's by no means ridiculous.

gleaming ore across perilous landscapes, and third, the warrior in his burnished armour, "the very model of mortal perfection". Anyone else blushing?

What results from this country-hopping is an eclectic book with an episodic documentary-style plot. After bronze comes silver, radium ("lurching and fizzing into the room like a hyperactive socialite"), aerolite, mercury, copper, gold, lithium and finally soil.

Marx, Goethe (who once penned an ode to granite) and Faust get honourable mentions, along with Alexander Graham Bell, Wassily Kandinsky, William Blake, Isaac Newton, Joseph Stalin and even Abba. Despite his wide-eyed infatuation with the topic, Marsden doesn't overlook its dark side: "conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone, emerald gangs in Colombia, moldavite hunters in southern Bohemia — what sparkles in a jeweller's window does not always have a glittering past".

Considering that many people will have a limited tolerance for rock facts, the book is probably a little longer than it needs to be, but this is forgivable on account of Marsden being such a poetic writer. The best bits are where he evokes the ghosts of a bygone era. In one "musty, spore-thick" deserted Cornish mine he finds "an old wooden barrow, a broken earthenware flask, the stem of a clay pope, candle stubs, the felt rim of a miner's hat". The metals collected may not seem like much, he says, but "of all the earth's wonders, they are the grandest, the oldest, and the slowest".

So next time you wrap your sandwich in tin foil (which, despite its name, is usually made from aluminium), take a moment or two to contemplate which corner of the world it came from.

DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES



The murderous horde v Brother Fatted Pig

Inspired by Martin Luther's gospel of liberation, German peasants rose up in mass revolt. But they were disowned by him — and brutally suppressed. By Gerard DeGroot

It all started with snails, or so the folklore suggests. Finding a point of origin for the German Peasants' War of 1524-25 is difficult since unrest erupted from various places simultaneously. In a very short time the revolt spread over an area roughly the size of modern-day Germany. One flashpoint was Stühlingen, in what is now southern Germany. The Countess of Lupfen ordered her overworked peasants to collect snail shells for the women of her court to use while sewing. The issue seems small because it is, but a straw can break a camel's back. "The sheer idiocy of the demand," Lyndal Roper writes, "spoke volumes about the lords' indifference to peasant life."

The nobleman Georg Truchsess could not understand why his peasants wanted to join the revolt. "I have never oppressed my poor people," he claimed. That word "my" is significant. Peasants were chattels. Lords controlled who and when they married and could barter their children to other estates. Justice was dependent on the lord's mood. Violence reinforced authority. Lords had first call on a peasant's labour, which explains those snails.

Luther called on his followers to 'smite, slay and stab' the rebels

Roper, Regius professor of history at Oxford, published in 2016 a superb biography of Martin Luther. This book is the next logical step because the Peasants' War grew out of Luther's thoughts on freedom. He insisted that he was concerned exclusively with spiritual freedom, but peasants were understandably inclined to consider the temporal ramifications of that incendiary word. The *Twelve Articles*, which set out the demands of the peasants, included the statement: "For Christ redeemed us ... the lowliest shepherd as well as the greatest lord, with no exceptions. Thus the Bible proves that we are free and want to be free."

"Small wonder that the peasants drew on [Luther's] ideas for their cause," Roper writes. "Small wonder they assumed he would support them." Luther, however, saw no common cause and considered the rebels "mad dogs". In his *Against the Robbing, Murderous Horde of Peasants* he called on his followers to "smite, slay and stab" the rebels and claimed that killing them was God's work. He mocked the ideas of Thomas Müntzer, one of the movement's leaders, claiming they came out of his "rauchloch" — his "smokehole" or anus. Feeling justifiably betrayed, the peasants called Luther "Brother Fatted Pig".

Previous studies of the Peasants' War have stressed the big actors: Luther, Müntzer, Philip of Hesse etc. That, however, distorts the nature of the struggle. "This was a movement, not a drama of Great Men," Roper insists. In examining the conflict from the ground up, she sets herself a difficult task. The lords left a written record, but the peasants did not. Many of the latter couldn't read or write. Roper solves the problem by ranging widely over the sources, bits here and there knitted together to form an impression of the peasant multitude. Since the rebellion was rooted in soil, she familiarised herself with its landscape. The best way to do so, she insists, "is to feel it in your legs ... Over the nine years it has taken me to write this book, I have walked or cycled most of the places it mentions."

That word "movement" is packed with meaning. This movement coalesced by moving. Individual peasants transformed themselves into a powerful group by talking, marching, fighting, eating and drinking together. "Marching was, in a sense, the war," Roper writes. "Peasants recruited by marching, adding new members like a rolling snowball." They had to maintain movement because their supply chain was ahead of them, in the form of towns and castles to plunder. Marching, Roper writes, "divided the world into those who were and those who were not on Christ's side, those who marched and those who did not".

Their unity at first made the peasants invincible. Since there was no central authority in German lands, castles and monasteries were left to fend for themselves when the peasants approached. The trouble usually started with a letter that basically said: "We are going to attack tomorrow." Then came the sound of drums and the sight of colourful banners. The peasants' reputation preceded them, striking fear everywhere. Some knights would simply give up on seeing those banners. The movement was a voracious beast. Two hundred castles round Bamberg were destroyed in just ten days. A force of perhaps 100,000 peasants for a brief time held dominion over an area the size of present day Germany.

At first the uprising was good humoured and carnivalesque, like a stag do but with principles and purpose. They looted castles, taking food, but also luxuries they found enticing, like fine wines, pillows and mattresses. Looting was not simply stealing, but also a rebuttal of inequality. "We are not here to harm anyone," they proclaimed. They tended to humiliate, not kill. An abbot was stripped to his shirt, placed on a donkey and sent packing with a few coins in his pocket. In time, however, violence began to exert a powerful hold.

Roper never tries to hide her fondness for the brotherhood of peasants and their ideals. "What mattered to them also matters to us," she writes. They fought an oligarchy and, for a brief moment, dreamt that they could change the world. "It was a time of optimism and dreams ... We know with hindsight that their actions were doomed to fail, but they did not know that." It's refreshing to read a historian unafraid to discuss feelings.

The end came quickly and ever so violently. It took a while for the noblemen to form themselves into a credible army, but when they did they were unstoppable. Because they had cavalry, they could cut through the peasant hordes. To this day, a gully near Frankenhausen is called Blutrinne because in 1525 it ran with *blut*.

During the summer of blood perhaps 100,000 peasants were killed, some executed grotesquely for maximum impact. Instead of hanging, which was the customary punishment, rebels were beheaded in market squares Heads were left on pikes until they rotted away.

The artist Albrecht Dürer suggested a monument for the defeated. His sketch shows a pillar made of milk pails, cheese, eggs and grain, atop which sits a forlorn peasant with a sword in his back. Roper's regret spans centuries: "There can hardly be a more vivid demonstration of the tragic reimposition of order — and the end of the Lutheran movement as a gospel of liberation."



Summer of Fire and Blood
The German Peasants' War
by Lyndal Roper

Basic £30 pp544



Martin Luther. Top: a satirical German cartoon dating back to the peasants' revolt

books

It's Jane Eyre meets American Psycho

An unhinged governess is drawn to the 'Darkness' in this gloriously outrageous piece of mock Victoriana. By Siobhan Murphy

Winifred Notty arrives at Ensor House, in the village of Grim Wolds, three months before Christmas. It is England, some time in the 1800s, and she is to be the Pounds's new governess. "It is early fall, the cold is beginning to descend, and in three months everyone in this house will be dead," she informs us. And we're off ...

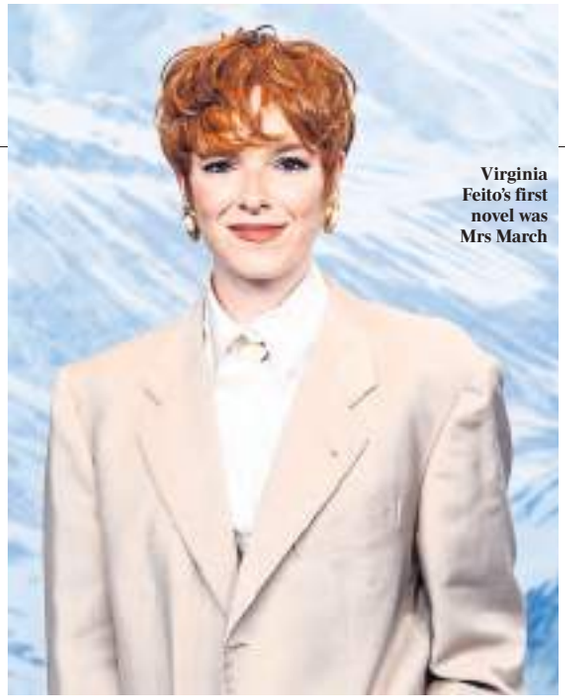
Virginia Feito's 2021 debut novel, *Mrs March*, was a gloriously ghastly gambol through the fraying mind of an over-privileged Upper East Side wife who comes apart at the suggestion that the protagonist of her husband's latest bestseller — a repulsive French prostitute — has been based on her. The resulting frenzy becomes bloody.

It was a blast — *Mrs Dalloway* dialled up to 11. But for *Victorian Psycho*, Feito has really let the brakes off, creating an elegant and viciously funny pastiche of the Victorian novel, with added mass slaughter. Think Jane Eyre meets Patrick Bateman — Feito's admiration for Bret Easton Ellis is obvious well beyond her book's title.

Surveying her bedroom, Winifred notes: "It consists of more dark oak and heavy drapes and appears all in all harder to set on fire than my previous lodgings." She is equally unimpressed by her new employers and her charges — the spoilt, brattish Andrew and the seemingly pathetic Drusilla, who "is developing a vanity improper for a girl her age", Mrs Pounds announces at breakfast. Winifred sets about teaching them "history and arithmetic and what corpses smell like and French", and calculatingly worming her way into Mr Pounds's affections.

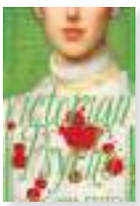
Winifred's psychopathic dispassion sets a sardonic sheen over her account. "I awake to birdsong so shrill I believe it is Mother screaming again," is the opening sentence to chapter three. And yet something is stirring — a blooming Darkness in Winifred and, she surmises, in others around her. Our outrageous antiheroine finds its pull harder and harder to resist — and with a houseful of guests expected for Christmas, this can only be a bad thing.

JUAN NAHARRO GIMENEZ/GETTY IMAGES



Virginia Feito's first novel was Mrs March

Her disgust finds visceral expression. Bodies — their emanations and slow decay — grotesque descriptions of food and eating, and heightened stenches are piled into the narrative, as in *Mrs March*, challenging your gag reflex. Feito plays with us mercilessly, nimbly strewing gruesomeness into pitch-perfect mock Victoriana. Winifred observes an afternoon-tea gathering of Mrs Pounds's society friends "imagining they are drinking loose stool of varying shades".



Victorian Psycho
by Virginia Feito
4th Estate £12.99 pp192

Sudden shocking violence is couched in terms that make you wonder if she is relating her delusions, especially as at times she admits to "elaborate flights of fancy" (another nod to Ellis — but, alas, no such luck for the Pounds household).

And tantalising snippets of what has brought Winifred to this particular family start to build up. We learn early on that she hails from Hopefernon (hope for none?) where she was brought up, an illegitimate child, by her mother and her stepfather, the village vicar. It was not a happy childhood ("Mother first tried to kill me when I was three months old"), but we are led with exquisite deliberation towards the full horror.

An early clue: the dead there were buried in safety coffins, with bells that could be rung from inside, in case someone was buried alive. Winifred was convinced she could hear them at night. And on discovering where she's from, people invariably ask her about "the babies", she tells us — "Awful business. (Five discovered in unmarked graves, one shoved down the privy.)" There's more to learn about those babies — of course there is ...

Clocking in at just shy of 200 pages, this brisk, invigorating dip into a nightmarish world, soaked in pitch-black humour, rattles towards its climax. And what a sensationally unhinged set piece awaits us there. The film rights for *Mrs March* were snapped up by Elisabeth Moss, of *The Handmaid's Tale* fame. A film of *Victorian Psycho* is already planned, with Margaret Qualley — the star of *The Substance* — down for the lead role. It should make Coralie Fargeat's body horror film look as confronting as an episode of *Friends*.

Incels, sexism and shame: dating in the digital age

A savage and dispiriting depiction of the lives of a terminally online generation. By Johanna Thomas-Corr

In late 2019 the American author Tony Tulathimutte achieved a rare kind of internet fame when his short story *The Feminist* went viral. The model for this sort of success is *Cat Person*, Kristen Roupenian's account of a repugnant date and, in many ways, *The Feminist* feels like a morbid outgrowth of its themes — the trials of miscommunication between the sexes, as well as a preemptive strike on some of the assumptions of identity politics.

The Feminist of the title is a "narrowed-shouldered" champion of women who can't understand why his vocal allyship — which includes owning a READ MORE WOMEN tote bag — doesn't yield the rewards he believes he deserves. Craig proclaims on his dating profile that he is: "Unshakably serious about consent. Abortion's #1 fan." He insists on paying for drinks, "joking that it's not chivalry, it's reparations for sexism".

Repeatedly "friend-zoned" by the women he fancies, he gathers his "thickening dossier of unfairness" over a 30-year period until he swallows the red pill, joins a forum in which his fellow narrow-shouldered men bleat about their involuntary celibacy and ... well, I shan't spoil the surprise. But the story serves as a telling curtain-raiser on Tulathimutte's savage imagination, a place where dreams go to die, hope is almost a form of self-harm and many of his protagonists "find solace in the simplicity of hate". Too often online.



Rejection
by Tony Tulathimutte
4th Estate £16.99 pp272

Tony Tulathimutte's short story The Feminist went viral

VINCENT TULLO/GUARDIAN/EYEVINE



Rejection offers seven interlinked stories, including *The Feminist*, set against an all-too familiar digital-age backdrop of startup bros, incel violence, toxic group chats and desperate dating app profiles. Together they form an excruciating examination of modern losers in psychic distress. Tulathimutte captures a world in which we have too much communication and not nearly enough real human contact.

There are no redemptive arcs of the kind that Tulathimutte, 41, gestured towards in his debut, *Private Citizens* (2016), a satire about four angst-ridden Stanford graduates that New York Magazine called "the first great millennial novel". Here, Tulathimutte offers his lonely characters nothing by way of consolation or catharsis. They simply turn inwards as they struggle with online call-outs, tech-enabled sexual humiliation and a veritable "scab collection" (as one puts it) of romantic failure. I won't lie — it's a tough read for January.

In the grim masterpiece *Ahegao*, Kant, a 30-year-old video game designer — and "porn-sick Asian virgin" — is newly out as gay, a process he has found disconcertingly easy. Much harder is trying to explain his "cartoonishly yucky" domination fantasies to his boyfriend, Julian (who is working on a "Studio Ghibli-themed novelty tarot deck" — Tulathimutte always nails the killer detail). Fleeing the unconsummated relationship, Kant turns to a custom-order porn production company to make his fantasy a reality.

Much of the comedy lies in the discrepancy between the shuddering violence of Kant's fantasy and his ethical niceties. He provides a helpful recipe for making fake sperm with "pantry staples", careful to include a vegan alternative. But it's also the way Tulathimutte lays bare his characters' urges and micro-calculations. Few other contemporary writers have captured so acutely what it feels like to stumble and lurch into emotional, sexual and social checkmate.

Still, after the initial transgressive thrill, the book tested my patience. The stories end one way and it's right there in the title. By the time we get to *Main Character*, the prose becomes tiresomely saturated with references that only the terminally online will understand. This story goes on to introduce Tulathimutte as a character and possible co-conspirator in a digital hoax. And now the metatextual layers arrive thick and fast. The final story has "a fictional jury of scowling publishers" reject *Rejection* itself, detailing their criticisms of each of Tulathimutte's stories at length, including this last one. "The only thing more boring, exhausted and self-indulgent than breaking the fourth wall at the end of the story is pointing it out," Tulathimutte writes. I'm glad he said it.

Amid this mirrored labyrinth of self-reference, I was reduced to asking a basic bitch question: what did this book make me feel? For all his talent and wit, Tulathimutte left me weary and scoured of spirit, poisoned by the noxious fumes of shame, impotence and degradation. But ultimately it's not just the negative emotions so much as the hyper-vigilance of his prose that's depleting.

So much of the pleasure of fiction comes from interpreting stories for ourselves. Tulathimutte deprives us of the thinking space we need to feel like active participants. *Rejection* took ten years to write and you can feel it in the tightly crammed excess of the sentences. I finished the book both awed and bored by his talent.

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The hit author with 5,000 rejection letters

Angela Marsons tried for 25 years to sell a novel to publishers. Now she has sold 6m. By Helen Rumbelow



Angela Marsons (with Roxy) gave up her job to pursue her dream of writing

It is an "overnight" success story that involved Angela Marsons sending 5,000 letters pitching her writing to publishers and editors over a 25-year period. All were rejected. At Marsons's lowest moment, close to penury aged 47 after giving up her day job to give writing one last shot, she was selling her furniture, books and jewellery on Amazon Marketplace. Broken-hearted after abandoning her dream of becoming a published novelist, she applied for work at an Amazon warehouse. She was turned down.

Four months later — a heartbeat in publishing — and Marsons's first crime thriller, *Silent Scream*, was No 1 on Amazon's Kindle charts; it held off the publishing juggernaut *The Girl on the Train* for a month and went on to sell a million copies. Now, even on the ten-year anniversary of her 2015 debut, Marsons is still referred to in the publishing world as "the bestselling author no one's heard of".

She has sold more than six million books in the English language alone, millions more if you count the 32 languages they have been translated into. In 2023 the BBC optioned *Silent Scream* and the other books in Marsons's Black Country series featuring Kim Stone, an awkwardly rude, darkly funny detective. Yet you won't see an Angela Marsons crime thriller on the shelf of a British bookshop. Hers isn't just a story of unrelenting persistence to overcome a lifetime of rejection — it is also the story of how an agile digital publisher got the jump on its traditional rivals.

"If people say to me, 'Oh, they're not real books,' I'm no longer offended," Marsons says. "There is snobbery out there — it doesn't bother me any more. I don't need to be on a shelf. When people send me messages that my book is helping them through horrific situations, giving a moment of peace or distraction, there is no better reward than that."

There is, of course, financial reward. Marsons, 57, the daughter of a long-distance lorry driver and a factory worker from the Black Country, now lives in a sandstone farmhouse in Worcestershire with a swimming pool and seven acres. Has her life transformed?

"Totally. We appreciate what we have every single day," she says, turning her laptop round so I can take in the home's golden brick walls. "The dream was always to call writing a job. The fact that Kim Stone became popular means we can live a dream I didn't even know I had."

Before she was ignored by traditional publishers, Marsons's skill as a writer was buried under low aspirations in her West Midlands home town of Cradley Heath, a place built on the long-gone chain-making industry. Marsons loved to torture herself and her three siblings with imaginary scenarios. "I would pretend my dad had left, and I would be in tears writing down my inner thoughts. He had only gone to the pub. I told my brother he was adopted just so I could see how he reacted — I couldn't not write that down."

But she couldn't say "I want to be a writer" to anyone offering her career advice — "that was far too aspirational for where I went to school. We knew we had to learn to type, and then we could get a job in an office." Escaping factory work was ambition enough. "As far as I was concerned, writing was a closed industry. It was, think yourself lucky to get an office job, girl."

That is what Marsons did, aged 16. But she still couldn't stop spinning into words on a page the "terrible secrets" she imagined for anyone she met. Every month she would walk to the post office to send off about 20 letters pitching her short stories and novels. "One by one they would land back on the mat," she says. "It was a constant."

Finally, she thought she had struck gold. This bit of her story could be titled "Be careful what you wish for", however. For decades Marsons had been writing novels based on what she thought London editors would like. *Silent Scream* was her "rebellion book", built from the towns, people and humour she knew. She wrote it in a month during coffee-fuelled late nights in her cramped house. Its speedy plot is girded by industrial-strength Black Country humour.

Silent Scream made its way to the slush pile of a London agent. In particular, to Keshini Naidoo, who was employed there as a reader of new submissions. Naidoo told me she started to read *Silent Scream* on her morning commute, and recognised immediately that it was "something special". Kim Stone was young and fierce, "a cut above the grizzled, drinks-too-much detective that I'd read in too many police procedurals", Naidoo says. The agent signed up Marsons — on Naidoo's recommendation.

'We had run out of money and were selling our possessions. I couldn't even get a job at an Amazon warehouse'

"It was unbelievably exciting," Marsons says. Yet, even with an agent sending out her manuscript, the result was the same as for all those letters she had sent herself: no one liked Kim Stone, it seemed. The agent thought she should write another Stone book. So Marsons gave up her job of 19 years — managing a team of 70 security staff at a shopping centre — and wrote the sequel. And another. But again: no, no, no. Even though Marsons had had thousands of rejections, these ones hurt the most.

"Those were the most miserable two years of all of my writing existence," Marsons says. "I'd never felt so worthless. That's the only time I didn't want to write."

With her dream finally in the dustbin, Marsons was in a bleak place. "We had run out of money," she says. "We were selling our possessions while I looked for a job, borrowing from family. We were packing up anything and putting it on Amazon. Books, cameras. I couldn't even get a job in an Amazon warehouse."

Marsons had been dropped like a stone by her agent. But Naidoo hadn't forgotten Kim Stone, and when Bookouture, a digital publisher, appealed for new writers, Naidoo went rogue and sent *Silent Scream* in her own time.

Marsons was numb to the possibility of a breakthrough. "I was polite, but I said to Keshini, 'You know what they're going to say.'" In desperation, she had taken a job doing night shifts for a security company. "I had never done nights before, but it was just so important to earn this money. I had thrown everything I possibly could at this dream and it hadn't worked out. I'd abandoned it."

Oliver Rhodes, the managing director of Bookouture, called Marsons. Not only would they take *Silent Scream*, could they have her other two Kim Stone books too? And the cherry on the cake — they also took on Naidoo as Marsons's editor.

That was in October 2014; in February 2015 Rhodes was almost as excited as Marsons: *Silent Scream* had become Bookouture's bestselling book. Rhodes would email her at all times of the day to report record preorders and record sales. The moment Marsons hit No 1 on the Kindle charts was historic for the industry: a new digital publisher had proved it could dominate without recourse to paper and ink.

"There were so many firsts for both of us. Oliver said, 'I always hoped this year would be our first to get a No 1, but I didn't expect it to stay there for this long.'" Does she think this experience meant that there was something wrong with the traditional publishing model? "Yes, exactly that. Clearly somebody did want to read it after all."

Marsons has written 22 Kim Stone books and her appetite to write remains strong. She writes two books a year, addicted to what she calls "the bite" of storytelling — "I can hardly get the words and ideas down fast enough, and the house could burn down around me ... If I only did one book a year I would waste ten months of the year."

After the success of *Silent Scream*, many of the publishers who had rejected Marsons multiple times wrote grovelling emails trying to seduce her. She rejected them right back. "Loyalty is very important to me. No one at Bookouture has made me feel inferior to other authors. They treat each of us the same. I like that sense of fairness. Bookouture will have to get security to throw me out, and then we'll be done."

Bookouture don't force her out on the road either. Marsons has never been interviewed on television or appeared at a literary festival. Marsons's mother once told her: "You have to do these things to be a famous author."

"I said, 'Mum, I never wanted to be a famous author. I wanted to be an author.'"

If there was one dedication page that could encompass 22 books, it would be to Julie, her teenage girlfriend and now wife, who lives with her and their three giant dogs in rural seclusion. Julie, Marsons says, is the secret to her phenomenal persistence. Each time a rejection slip came through the letterbox, Julie would say: "Their loss." "She never stopped," Marsons says, "making me feel like a writer."

books

The dark world of 'boutique porn'



Naked bodies and nutcases in Glasgow. Plus, Delaware and Sturgis are back. By Mark Sanderson

crime

Book of the month

To Pay the Ferryman by Pat Black
Polygon £9.99 pp416
Detective Inspector Lomond has a lot on his plate. Not only is some sicko slitting the throats of young women, but the Swedish feminist activist Ursula Ulvaeus, blaming the patriarchy for the killings, is creating mayhem on the streets of Glasgow. Furthermore, Lomond's daughter, a student documentary film-maker, is reporting on the progress of the case, which may have links to the death of another girl 20 years ago. Is the 5ft 8in copper out of his depth?

Well, he is when — much to the amusement of his mouthy but faithful sidekick, Sergeant Slater — he falls off a launch on the Clyde and headbutts a whale. Thereafter their inquiries take them into the worlds of art and "boutique porn". Naked bodies and nutcases are everywhere.

Pat Black has breathed new life into the police procedural in *To Pay the Ferryman*, the first novel in what promises to be a highly entertaining series. The slapstick offsets a thoughtful analysis of the male gaze. How does an attraction to beauty so often cause such ugly consequences? Ulvaeus attributes it to "a power imbalance", not toxic lust.

Making a Killing by Cara Hunter
Hemlock £16.99 pp368
DCI Adam Fawley has been going down the clean streets of Oxford since 2018 when *Close to Home* was published. Seven years on, somewhat unusually, he is asked to reinvestigate the case from that novel, namely the disappearance of eight-year-old Daisy Mason. Might it be connected to the recent discovery of a shallow grave below the twisted branches of the Crone Oak by Hescombe Mere? You bet it is.

Cara Hunter takes a kaleidoscopic approach to crime. The narrative comprises emails, newspaper cuttings, photographs, post mortem reports and extracts from a deeply disturbing Shadow Journal, in which its keeper is attempting Jungian self-analysis. Hunter crosscuts rapidly between a large cast to create an ever-changing picture of an utterly devious killer. Fawley is not the only one to feel he has whiplash.

Dirty Money by Charlotte Philby
Baskerville £16.99 pp320
Madeleine Farrow of the special crimes investigation department returns to London from Vietnam, where she helped to smash a paedophile ring, and is soon investigating the wife of a corrupt oligarch from Kazakhstan. The reporter Ramona Chang is in hiding after helping to convict a drug lord and, now working as a private detective, is investigating a dodgy dating site.

It takes over 100 pages before this pair of miserable women meet. Madeleine, 50, is going through the menopause and mourning the end of a gay love affair. She is rich and lives in Marylebone. Ramona, who is half her age, is missing her ex-boyfriend and lives in Hackney. They are "outliers: destined to love no one and nothing as much as their work".

Their first collaboration — part of a projected series — also involves the murder of an MP, but is burdened with tons of backstory. Charlotte Philby, aiming for the portentous, has a habit of stating the bleeding obvious — "the future is coming, whether we embrace it or not". However, after a final flurry of fun and games, she leaves you keen to meet her odd couple again.

The Frozen People by Elly Griffiths
Quercus £22 pp352
History plays a big part in the novels of Elly Griffiths. Her first series features the forensic archaeologist Ruth Galloway and her second, featuring DI Stephens and the magician Max Mephisto, is set in 1950s Brighton. The opener of this new series has the red-haired and nose-ringed Ali Dawson time-travelling back to the 1850s to investigate a series of murders, a case so cold that those involved are said to be frozen. Think crinolines, horse-drawn carriages and men with beards. Although well-researched and well-written, it is not meant to be taken seriously. If you can suspend your disbelief, you will enjoy a light-hearted caper that solves murders in the past and present. A better title would have been *The Crime Machine*.

Open Season by Jonathan Kellerman
Century £22 pp288
The detective Milo Sturgis and the psychologist Alex Delaware hunt a sniper who kills his victims with a single shot to the neck that severs the carotid artery, the jugular vein and the trachea. It is a case that takes them all over a Los Angeles that is "seductive and perverse". It is 40 years since Jonathan Kellerman and Delaware made their debut in *When the Bough Breaks*, and the gripping *Open Season* is the 40th novel to feature Delaware and Sturgis. Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch has appeared in 25 novels, James Lee Burke's Dave Robicheaux in 24, Robert Crais's Elvis Cole in 20 and Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins in 16. Will anyone writing today match these grand old men of crime?

Rereading Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom

'Devote yourself to loving others.' The life lessons of a dying man became a blockbuster. By Adam Silverstein

My grandad, Joseph, was the kind of man who could walk into a room and light it up with his wit and charm. He would always tell the same jokes, but only because he knew they worked and he wanted to make people laugh. At Christmas in 2009 I visited him as usual. When he answered the door he could barely move. He looked distraught. It's a moment that haunts me, seeing his spark gone.

We discovered that he was suffering from late-stage stomach cancer and he died four months later, aged 79. That Christmas I happened to be reading *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a 1997 memoir by the American author Mitch Albom. Sometimes you read a book at exactly the right moment.

Morrie Schwartz was Albom's sociology professor at college and a mentor to him. They used to meet every week in Schwartz's office. Albom promised at graduation to keep in touch with Schwartz, but 16 years passed while Albom chased a career in journalism and they hadn't spoken a word. By accident one night, in 1995, Albom saw Schwartz being interviewed on TV about living with motor neurone disease. A shocked Albom gave Schwartz a call.

As he did in college, Albom began to pay weekly visits to Schwartz at his home in Massachusetts, and so meaningful was their time together, he wrote *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Twenty thousand copies were initially printed and Albom's intention was to help to pay some of Schwartz's medical bills. But it went on to sell more than 18 million.

The book recounts the pair's conversations in Schwartz's final weeks as he taught Albom his greatest lessons from life: "It's not just other people we need to forgive. We need to forgive ourselves"; "Do the kinds of things that come from the heart"; "Devote yourself to loving others"; "Neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have"; "The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in"; "Accept the past as past, without denying it or discarding it." Some of these do sound like the kind of sap you would find on a cushion from Homesense, but from the perspective of a man dependent on an oxygen tank it's wonderfully authentic.

In my grandad's final months, as his cancer worsened, Albom's visits to Schwartz inspired me not only to spend more time with him but to ask him questions I'd never asked before. What were his biggest regrets? Did he believe in God? What, to him, was the meaning of life? It was painful to witness my grandad as a shadow of the jovial man I knew him to be, but in indulging my curiosity I could at least see a bit of his old spark. And at least I had his answers.

But as much as *Tuesdays with Morrie* is about life lessons, it is also about the acceptance of death. "We are so afraid of the sight of death," Schwartz told Albom. "As soon as someone dies in a hospital, they pull the sheets up over their head ... It's not contagious, you know. Death is as natural as life."



Morrie Schwartz and Mitch Albom

Morrie is a sweet old man on his deathbed talking from experience

This terminally ill man saw his impending demise as something quite unexceptional. If we all just relax and accept that we're going to die one day, as Schwartz suggests, we can focus on what actually matters. "Learn how to die," he tells Albom, "and you learn how to live."

And living, to Schwartz, meant rejecting our empty and destructive buy-it-now culture and investing in ourselves and each other. He's not wrong, obviously. It's hard to disagree with just about anything Schwartz tells Albom. What makes this book so remarkable, and probably explains why it has touched so many people, is that Schwartz isn't pretending to be some self-help guru — he's a sweet old man on his deathbed talking from experience.

Since my grandad's death, I start every year by reading *Tuesdays with Morrie* — a wise and essential kick up the backside. I'm thankful I first read it when I did because despite all of Schwartz's wisdom it was something my grandad told me that has stayed with me most. When I asked him the meaning of life, he didn't think that there was one. "Just treat people how you wish to be treated," he said, "and you'll be all right."

MindGames

Samurai Sudoku No 961 — Hard

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

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Solution to last week's Samurai Sudoku

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

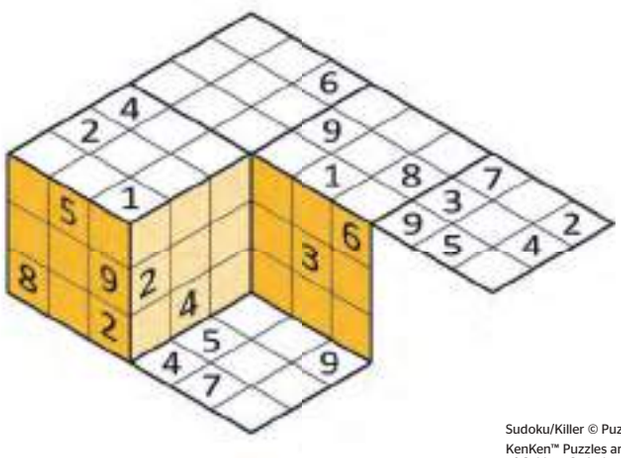
Our five-grid Sudoku will test your powers of logic and deduction.

Fill each grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9. Where the puzzles overlap, the rows and columns do not go beyond their usual length. The interlocking nature of the grid gives you more clues — and more complexity.

Remember — don't try to solve each Sudoku grid in turn; the puzzle has to be tackled as a whole.

Stuck? Call 0901 293 6263 to receive four clues for today's Samurai Sudoku. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm)

Tredoku No 1875 — Medium



Tredoku is similar to Sudoku: the digits 1 to 9 must appear once only in each 3x3 box and in each line of nine consecutive cells. However, since the puzzle is three-dimensional, the lines may be straight or bent around angles. Follow each line's direction in search of clues.

Sudoku/Killer © Puzzler Media

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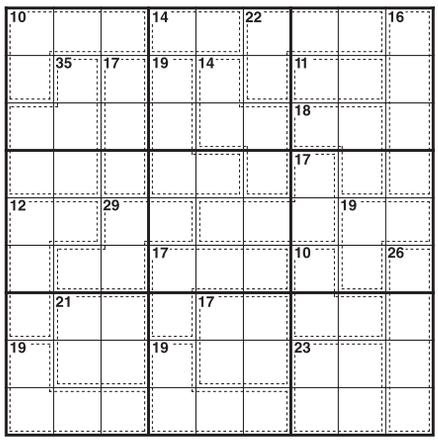
Sudoku No 15,590 — Fiendish

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

How to solve Sudoku. Fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9

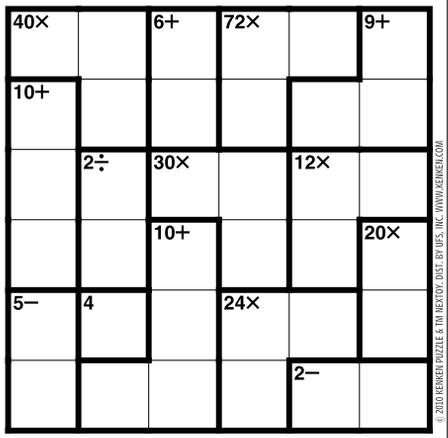
Stuck on KenKen, Killer or Sudoku?
Call 0901 293 6263 before midnight to receive four clues for any of today's puzzles. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge.
SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

Killer No 9919 — Deadly



Fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9. Each set of cells joined by dotted lines must add up to the target number in its top-left corner. Within each set of cells joined by dotted lines, a digit cannot be repeated.
For solutions to KenKen, Sudoku & Killer see Times2 on Monday

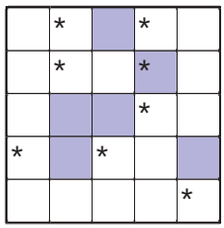
KenKen No 6432 — Medium



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All the digits 1 to 6 must appear in every row and column. In each thick-line "block", the target number in the top left-hand corner is calculated from the digits in all the cells in the block, using the operation indicated by the symbol.

Square Routes® No 309 — Hard
Ian Simpson & Richard Heald



BRONYGARTH
BRAYTHORN
TORBRYAN
BRAYTON
TORBAY
RATBY
RABY
AYR

Put one letter in each cell so that each word on the right can be spelt out by moving from cell to cell without using diagonal moves. You can use a cell more than once in a word (including backtracking into a cell you've just used), but double letters (eg, the LL in ALL) must use two adjacent cells. The words start in the coloured cells and the vowels are shown by asterisks.

Solution on Monday

Answers

Friday's solutions

KenKen No 6431

30× 5	5− 1	6	9+ 2	3	4
2	6 6	200× 4	5	÷ 1	3
3	2	5	8+ 1	2− 4	÷ 6
3− 1	9+ 5	3	4	6	2
4	3	1	13+ 6	2	5
10+ 6	4	5+ 2	3	4− 5	1

Sudoku No 15,585

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

Sudoku No 15,586

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

Sudoku No 15,587

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

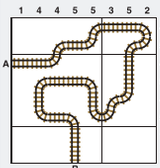
Killer No 9916

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

Killer No 9917

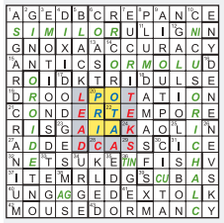
2	1	8	5	9	6	4	7	3
7	5	9	1	3	4	2	8	6
3	6	4	7	2	8	5	9	1
8	2	7	3	1	9	6	4	5
9	3	6	4	5	7	1	2	8
5	4	1	8	6	2	7	3	9
1	7	2	9	8	5	3	6	4
4	8	5	6	7	3	9	1	2
6	9	3	2	4	1	8	5	7

Train Tracks No 2464



Codeword No 5439

W	O	R	K	M	A	T	E	■	A	J	A	R
I	■	Y	■	A	■	E	■	U	■	U
L	I	E	G	E	■	R	O	W	■	D	I	M
D	■	■	S	■	M	■	E	■	I	■
■	F	O	N	T	■	A	P	R	I	C	O	T
J	■	P	■	R	A	C	E	■	■	I	■	U
A	U	T	H	O	R	■	A	P	L	O	M	B
C	■	O	■	■	I	S	L	E	■	U	■	A
K	U	M	Q	U	A	T	■	R	U	S	K	■
■	■	E	■	N	■	R	■	P	■	■	■	L
B	U	T	■	D	U	O	■	L	A	R	V	A
O	■	R	■	O	■	L	■	E	■	O	■	Z
O	N	Y	X	■	F	L	E	X	I	B	L	E



The Listener 4850 Counterfeit by Charybdis
In 16 clues "or" (gold) was replaced by single letters, spelling "Merchant: three, two", the scene in *The Merchant of Venice* where Bassanio rejects a gold (and a silver) casket in favour of a lead one containing "Portia's counterfeit" (her portrait). In clashes, Au was rejected in favour of a different metal. The unclued grid entries are gold substitutes. More details at listenercrossword.com. The winners are Michael Crapper of Whitchurch, Hampshire; Nick Gibbs of Scarrington, Nottinghamshire; CH Price of Knenhall, Staffordshire.

More Sudoku, Killer and other puzzles online
Go to thetimes.com

Cryptic Quintagram®

Solve all five cryptic clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Language in old city said to be enough (4)

_ _ _ _

2 Language: we don't say a word about head of Latin (5)

_ _ _ _ _

3 Language of Asia from Alpine ground (6)

_ _ _ _ _ _

4 Language of bridge is hard (7)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

5 Language of drunk person disheartened Scotsman? (10)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

A	A	A	A	D	E	E	H
H	H	I	I	I	I	L	L
L	N	N	N	N	P	P	R
S	S	S	T	U	U	U	W

Answers below

Word Watch
David Parfitt

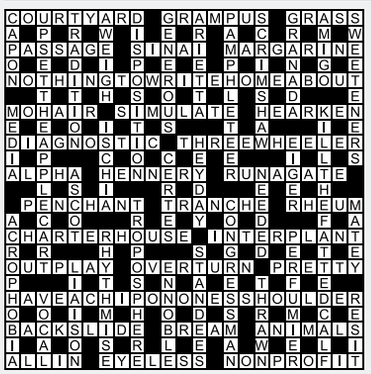
Periclitate
a. To eclipse partially
b. To endanger
c. To travel restlessly

Metewand
a. A figure of speech
b. A shooting star's trail
c. A standard of measurement

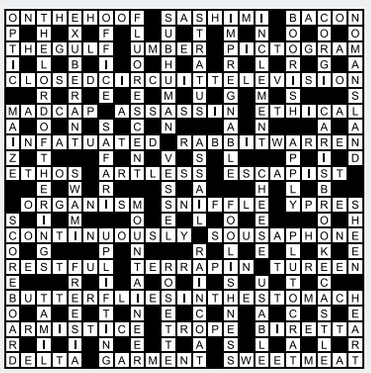
Practisant
a. A lay preacher
b. A massage therapist
c. A conspirator

Docimasy
a. Scrutiny
b. Compliance, submission
c. Unshakeable belief

Answers below

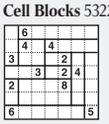


Solution to Cryptic Jumbo 1713
The winner is Paul Adams of Truro, Cornwall



Solution to times2 Jumbo 1713
The winner is S Harding-Wyatt of London W5

Cell Blocks 5322



Suko 4341



Mindset
1. a is {AL}, b is {ET}, c is {BIR}. Answers are: (a) ALL (b) TE (c) RIB (a+b) ATTLEE (a+c) BLAIR (b+c) BITTER (a+b+c) IRRITABLE.
2. 511. To find all the integers start with 123456789 and decide one digit at a time whether to include it. This gives 2^9=512 options — minus 1 for the case where you choose none of them.
3. BREAD and WATER. {BREAK (precedes BREAD), LINE (follows BREAD), SODA (precedes BREAD)}; {BREAK (precedes WATER), LINE (follows WATER), SODA (precedes WATER)}.

Word Watch
Periclitate (b) To endanger (*Chambers*)
Metewand (c) A standard of measurement (*OED*)
Practisant (c) A conspirator (*Collins*)
Docimasy (a) Scrutiny (*Chambers*).

Polygon
heme, herm, home, homer, meow, mere, mesh, mews, more, mosh, mower, rehome, rheme, seem, seme, semée, shmeer, shmo, smew, some, **somewhere**, whom, worm.

Scrabble
BACKSTORY (H7a); SEAFRONT (A8d) (also playable at E3a for 72 points).

Literary quiz
1 Ford Madox Ford **2** Robert Graves **3** Julian Barnes **4** Colleen Hoover.

Cryptic Quintagram
1 Urdu **2** Welsh **3** Nepali **4** Spanish **5** Lithuanian.

Scrabble® Paul Gallen

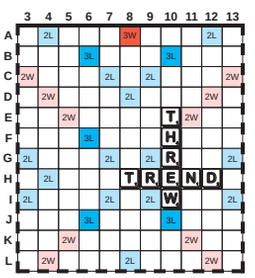
It is widely acknowledged that one's natural vocabulary will only be useful to a certain point when it comes to playing Scrabble optimally. The most successful players focus on learning the words that are mathematically most likely to appear on one's rack. Those seeking to improve their game will therefore start with familiarising themselves with the two and three-letter words, along with some seven-letter words that are likely to feature. For example, the word OTARINE is regarded as the most probable seven-letter word to appear on one's rack.

In the recent UK Open, the eventual champion, Harshan Lamabadusuriya, had to rely on spotting a word that featured in his natural vocabulary at a key moment in the tournament. Can you find his standout 98-point move, which is playable on the main board diagram beneath the column?

C O R S T Y _

In a separate game, Lamabadusuriya spotted another common word, which scored 95 points and helped him develop an early lead. His eight-letter word would also be regarded as highly probable owing to its lack of duplicates and the presence of a number of single-point tiles. Can you find it using the rack and board extract below?

A E F N O R S

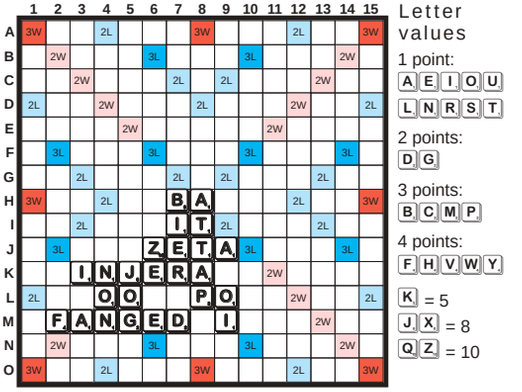


In contrast to the above examples, Lamabadusuriya had to trust his instincts with an opening rack of DIMNOWX in a decisive game. He deliberated for nearly five minutes on the validity of the obscure MIXDOWN. Eventually, he decided to play the word and was rewarded with 106 points on his first move.

Definitions
OTARINE relating to seals with ears
MIXDOWN (in sound recording) the transfer of a multi-track master mix to two-track stereo tape
ZETA the sixth letter of the Greek alphabet

Collins Official Scrabble Words is the word authority used.
Word positions use the grid reference plus (a)cross or (d)own.

2L double letter square (dl) 3L triple letter square (tl) 2W double word square (dw) 3W triple word square (tw)



Letter values
1 point: A E I O U L N R S T
2 points: D G
3 points: B C M P
4 points: F H V W Y
K = 5
J X = 8
Q Z = 10

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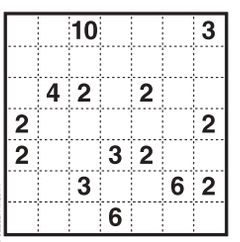
Polygon Roger Phillips



Using the given letters no more than once, make as many words as possible of four or more letters, always including the central letter. Capitalised words, plurals, conjugated verbs (past tense etc), adverbs ending in LY, comparatives and superlatives are disallowed.
How you rate: 14 words average; 19, good; 29, very good; 39, excellent.

Answers to Friday's Polygon are to the left. Today's answers are printed in MindGames on Monday

Cell Blocks 5323



© PUZZLER MEDIA

Divide the grid into square or rectangular blocks, each containing one digit only. Every block must contain the number of cells indicated by the digit inside it.

Yesterday's solution, left

Chess David Howell

A Clash of Styles

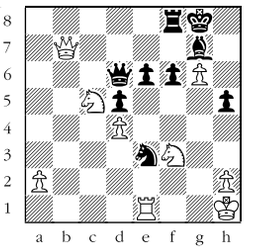
The Dutch coastal village of Wijk aan Zee is best known for its wind-swept beaches, its pea soup, and its long-standing chess tradition.

At this year's Tata Steel Masters, a prestigious annual tournament that counts many chess titans among its alumni, one of the most fascinating encounters was between the new world champion, Gukesh D, and his compatriot Pentala Harikrishna.

Not only was the game a clash of generations, but also of styles.

The 18-year-old Gukesh seemed relaxed and willing to take risks, aiming to utilise his famed calculation skills. Meanwhile fellow Indian grandmaster Harikrishna, 38, attempted to steer the game into quieter positional waters where his greater experience could play a role.

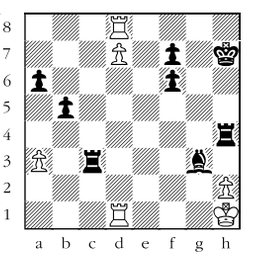
White: Gukesh D
Black: Pentala Harikrishna
Tata Steel Masters,
Wijk aan Zee 2025
French Defence
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 e5
The Advance Variation. During his successful world championship campaign, Gukesh employed 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 e5 Nfd7 5 Nce2 as his main weapon. Harikrishna, however, has been part of Gukesh's coaching team for the past 12 months so the players instead chose to debate a position that they have not analysed together in the past.
3...c5 4 c3 Nc6 5 Nf3 Bd7 6 Be2 Nge7 7 0-0 cxd4 8 cxd4 Nf5 9 Nc3 a6 10 Kh1
This sidestep is useful if White plans to push his kingside pawns. There is also a secondary tactical reason.
10...Rc8 11 Rb1 Qb6 12 g4 Nfe7
The purpose behind Gukesh's tenth move becomes clear after 12...Nfxd4? when 13 Be3 wins a piece, as 13...Nxf3 does not arrive with check. Harikrishna, however, could have tried 12...Ncxd4 13 gxf5 Nxf3 14 fxe6 fxe6 15 Nxd5 exd5 16 Bxf3, with mutual chances.
13 Be3 h5 14 g5 Nf5
Locking the kingside with 14...g6 was safer.
15 g6!
This pawn will be a thorn in Black's side.
15...f6
Avoiding 15...fxg6 16 Rg1 when White obtains strong play on the g-file.
16 exf6 gxf6 17 Bd3 Nce7 18 Rg1 Bg7 19 Na4 Qd6 20 b4 b6 21 b5 axb5
Swapping off the "bad" French bishop on d7 is usually desirable, but here it was more prudent to keep the queenside closed with 21...Nxe3 22 fxe3 a5.
22 Bxb5 Bxb5 23 Rxb5 Nxe3 24 fxe3 Rc6 25 Qb3 0-0 26 Nxb6 Bh6 27 Na4 Nf5 28 Rc5 Rxc5
Black could have limited the damage with 28...Rfc8, when it remains difficult for White to invade.
29 Nxc5 Nxe3?
Harikrishna finally cracks under the pressure. 29...Bxe3 30 Qb7 Qe7 31 Qxe7 Nxe7 was the best try to hold on.
30 Qb7 Bg7 31 Re1!



Calm and steady play has been the key to Gukesh building a large advantage. Harikrishna now realised — too late — that his intended defence had a major flaw.
31...Nf5
A sad necessity. 31...Qf4 allows the trick 32 Qxg7+! Kxg7 33 Nxe6+, winning a piece.
32 Nxe6 Rb8 33 Qf7+ Kh8 34 Nxg7
Gukesh decides to dominate the seventh rank. 34 Re5! was even more deadly, since 34...fxe5 35 Qxf5 leaves the black king defenceless.
34...Nxg7 35 Re7 Rg8 36 Rd7 Qb6 37 Rxd5
A knight is a king's best friend, as they say. The f3-knight protects its monarch perfectly, allowing Gukesh to fully focus on his own attack.
37...Qb1+ 38 Kg2 f5 39 Rc5 Qb2+ 40 Kf1 Qa1+ 41 Kf2 Qb2+ 42 Kg3 h4+ 43 Kf4
Avoiding 43 Kxh4? Qf2+.
43...Qb8+ 44 Re5 Qd6 45 Kg5
Black resigns
A triumphant king march by the new king of chess. 45...Qb8 46 Kh6 is one sample continuation, when Black can barely move.

Winning Move

White to play. Praggnanandhaa-Fedoseev, Wijk aan Zee 2025. What is White's only winning idea?



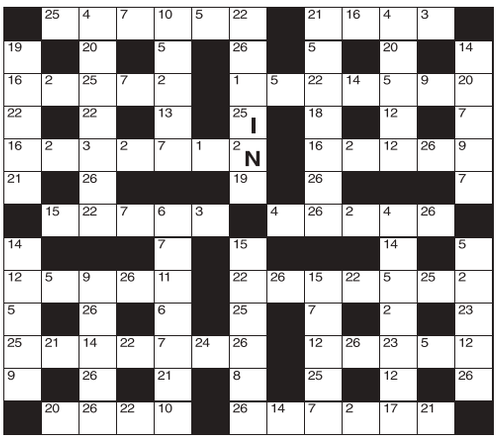
The first correct entry drawn on Saturday wins *The Times Mindset Puzzles Book 1* and *The Sunday Times Teasers Book 2*. Two runners-up will receive a book prize. Answers on a postcard to: The Times Winning Move, PO Box 2164, Colchester, Essex CO2 8LJ, or email to: winningmove@thetimes.co.uk. Open to 18+, UK and ROI residents only. The answer will be published next Saturday.

Solution to last week's puzzle: **1...Qxg3+!** wins: **2 Rxg3** (or 2 Kd1 Qxg1+ 3 Be1 Qxe3) **2...Rh1+ 3 Bf1 Rhxf1+ 4 Ke2 R7f2 mate**
The winner is Tony Loader of Ringles Cross, East Sussex. The runners-up are Patrick Cooper of Clearbrook, Devon, and Jeremy Clivaz of Harrow, Greater London.

MindGames

The Times Crossword, Latin Crossword, Saturday Quiz and Suko are in the back of the main paper

Codeword No 5440



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

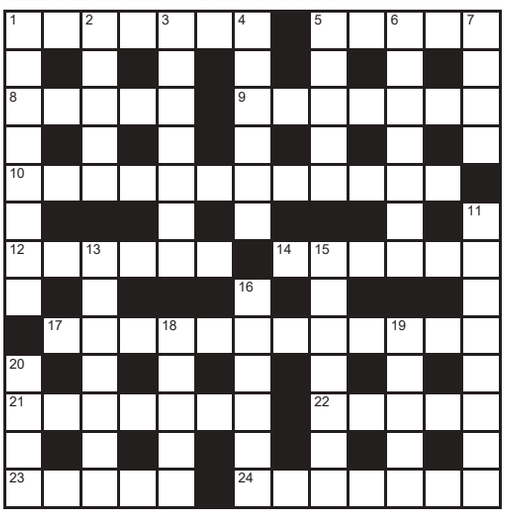


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Every letter in this crossword-style grid is represented by a number from 1 to 26. Each letter of the alphabet appears at least once. Use the letters already provided to work out further letters. Enter letters in the main grid and the smaller reference grid. *Yesterday's solution on page 44*

Stuck on Codeword? To receive four random clues call 0901 293 6262 or text TIMECODE to 64343. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge. Texts cost £1 plus your standard network charge. For the full solution call 0905 757 0142. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm).

times2 Crossword No 9756



Across

1 Capital city of Iraq (7)
5 Disorderly crowd (5)
8 Traverse (5)
9 Nation (7)
10 Collective radio audience (12)
12 Dash, run quickly (6)
14 Receives and passes on (information) (6)
17 Paramount, vital (3-9)
21 Church tower (7)
22 Pursuit (5)
23 Unseemly, sordid (5)
24 Come before (7)

Down

1 Widespread negative response (8)
2 Sheen, lustre (5)
3 Perceive, make out (7)
4 Stevedore (6)
5 Garden molluscs (5)
6 Greek white wine with pine flavourings (7)
7 Indigenous people of Central America (4)
11 So to speak (2,2,4)
13 Assuage (symptoms of illness) (7)
15 Otalgia (7)
16 Maintenance (6)
18 Hint at (5)
19 Die down, diminish (5)
20 Applications, purposes (4)

Solution to Crossword 9755

	B	B		B	B		B	B						
A	R	E	A		A	D	R	I	A	T	I	C		
	U		B	L		A		U		R				
A	N	N	O	Y	I	N	G		B	L	O	C		
	E		O				G		L					
A	T	O	N	E	D		A	C	E	T	I	C		
	T			R		R				M				
A	E	R	A	T	E		T	R	A	G	I	C		
		R		N				B		T				
A	G	O	G		C	E	L	E	R	I	A	C		
	O		U		H		E		O		T			
A	L	O	E	V	E	R	A		A	L	E	C		
	D		D		D		D		D					

Need help with today's puzzle? Call 0905 757 0143 to check the answers. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

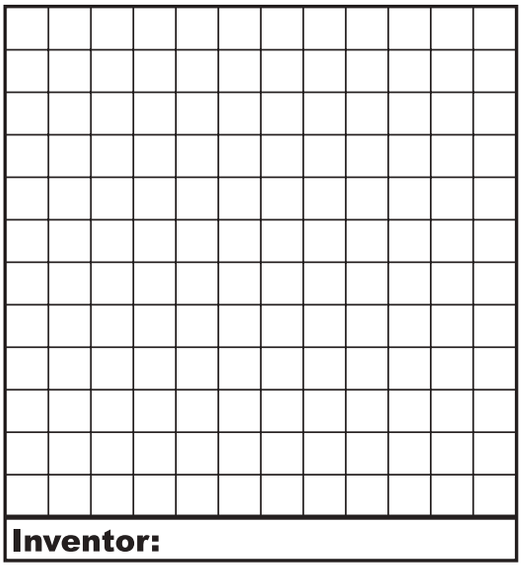
The Listener Crossword No 4853 Twisted Sister by Ifor

Senders of the first three correct entries drawn will receive *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* or may choose from a selection of other books (see below). Send your entry with contact details completed to: Listener Crossword 4853, **19 Fairfax Drive, Pontefract, WF8 1NU**, to arrive by February 13.

Listener 4850 solution on page 44

Prize options and more at listenercrossword.com

More information about Chambers books can be found at chambers.co.uk



Inventor:

Name.....

Address.....

Postcode..... **Phone/email**.....

Clues are in the normal order; the bar pattern is not symmetrical and must not be shown. Taking the letter at position *n* from the start or end of each clue, where *n* is its answer length, spells a hint to a thematic effect. The hint can also be read as wordplay for the inventor's name (6,6), which must be written below the grid. The alternative letter choices name possible participants. The initial grid contains 16 empty cells; in line with the effect, these must be filled by moving a block of letters, making new words. Solvers must then add bars to enclose the moved block and two others of the same shape, and highlight all three enclosed areas, which contain only real words. *The Chambers Dictionary* (2016) is the primary reference.

Across

Surrounded by assistance, entertaining master
Facial adornment more than one friend backs
Staggering lamb, one that's lost left foot
Oath to depend on acceptance of fine
Joint part in piece with several voices showing inversion
Turn up with snout after nurse's put firmly into place
Ridicules bars for strengthening
Former unit used to weigh article in small store in Arkansas
Eager craving is about puncturing old hurt
Behind the Times article, a contribution to partisan election
Vary women's discarded possessions
Faults mistreated without returning thanks erroneously
What flowers sprang up round window?
Both losing sides in hollow non-event polled
Twelve roused into occupying region in Greece
Impression of raider lacking every right when challenged
Level stair, not having it split around base
All types of worn-out toy with last on discount
Heretofore unpaid workers Essen's mixed up
Seeing ahead in places, taking finale from Stones to end Proclaimers' acts

Down

Chemical spray withdrawn after onset of rashes
Disappeared computer uncovered amid new inventions at first
Retreats cut in revolutionary movement
Family tree joined up between son and small child's female parent
Diver holds the thing erect, such as aftershave
A repair *fin de siècle* is fine for Parisiennes
Quill that is ready for Elizabethan wordsmith
Final pairs leaving Noah's Ark, assorted species of bovid
Roundabout opportunity to tie up clipper, say
Poisonous vine: best it were left to toxicology to untangle
Ordnance discharged across empty room jams
Interim gain's first lost, putting on another day?
Deliberate foul after first half's spent in rocky formation
TV camera on civilised broadcast missing damned lies
Negative effects constraining electronic markets without fixed price for volume
Moving reaction skips parts of an arousing ode?
I'll exhibit low bare trend, turning rearwards
Tempting opening to some, but previously accepting rule
Frightening round includes one over the eight?
Lyrics, somewhat morose, Doors sent up
Spread of French toast out of oven on the rise
Small serving of Scotch swallowed after the bar ends in haste

Mindset by 700

1. a, b and c are sets of letters with no letter in more than one set. Using ALL of the letters in the sets indicated (possibly with repetition), and no other letters, words or names can be made with the following definitions. **Identify all of the answers.**
(a) Every (b) Tellurium (c) Tease (a+b) Labour Prime Minister (a+c) Labour Prime Minister (b+c) Resentful (a+b+c) Touchy

2. 5, 28 and 13469 are examples of numbers with strictly increasing digits. **How many positive integers share this property?**

3. Identify the two linked themes:
BREAK, BREAK, LINE, LINE, SODA, SODA

Answers on page 45

Literary Quiz
The Times Literary Desk

The Last Hurrah!
Who wrote these finale-themed books?
1 *Parade's End* (1924)
2 *Goodbye To All That* (1929)
3 *The Sense of an Ending* (2011)
4 *It Ends With Us* (2016)

That's all from us! We hope you've enjoyed our quizzes over the years. With best wishes from the Times Literary Team

Answers on page 45

Bridge Andrew Robson

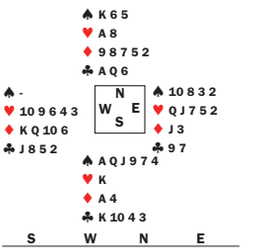
Cricket really took off in India as a result of India unexpectedly defeating the all-conquering (at the time) West Indies in the final of the 50-over World Cup in 1983. It may be the most consequential cricket match ever played.

Around that time, Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the People's Republic of China; and he loved playing bridge (he'd learnt it during a work-study program in Paris in the early 1920s). The game, which had been banned in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), now sprang to life.

The first bridge tournament in China took place in 1979; the Chinese Contract Bridge Association was formed a year later. These days, China routinely competes for medals in world championships in both the Open and Women's series.

It wouldn't quite be accurate to say China is to bridge as India is to cricket. However, there is a very prestigious Chinese Premier League, which attracts many of the world's best players. Take this deal featuring Shiyu Sun (North) and Kamil Nowak (South).

Dealer South N-S Vul

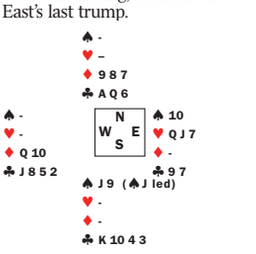


S	W	N	E
1♠	Pass	2♦	Pass
3♠(1)	Pass	4♣(2)	Pass
4NT(3)	Pass	5♣(4)	Pass
6♣(5)	Pass	7♠	end

(1) Forcing to game, facing a response at the Two-level.
(2) Control bid agreeing spades.
(3) Roman Key Card Blackwood.
(4) Zero or (clearly) three of the "five aces" (including ♠K).
(5) Asking for third-round club control (ie the queen or a doubleton) for the grand slam.

Declarer won West's king of diamonds lead, unblocked the king of hearts and drew three trumps finishing in dummy (West discarding hearts). He cashed the ace of hearts, shedding his low diamond, then ruffed a diamond.

In this ending, declarer drew East's last trump.



If West discarded a diamond, declarer could cross to a top club, ruff a third diamond then cross to a club and cash a long diamond. When, in practice, West let go of a club, declarer could cross to the ace-queen and return to the king-ten. Grand slam made.

andrew.robson@thetimes.co.uk

For more crosswords including Quick Cryptic go to thetimes.com

Jumbo crossword No 1715

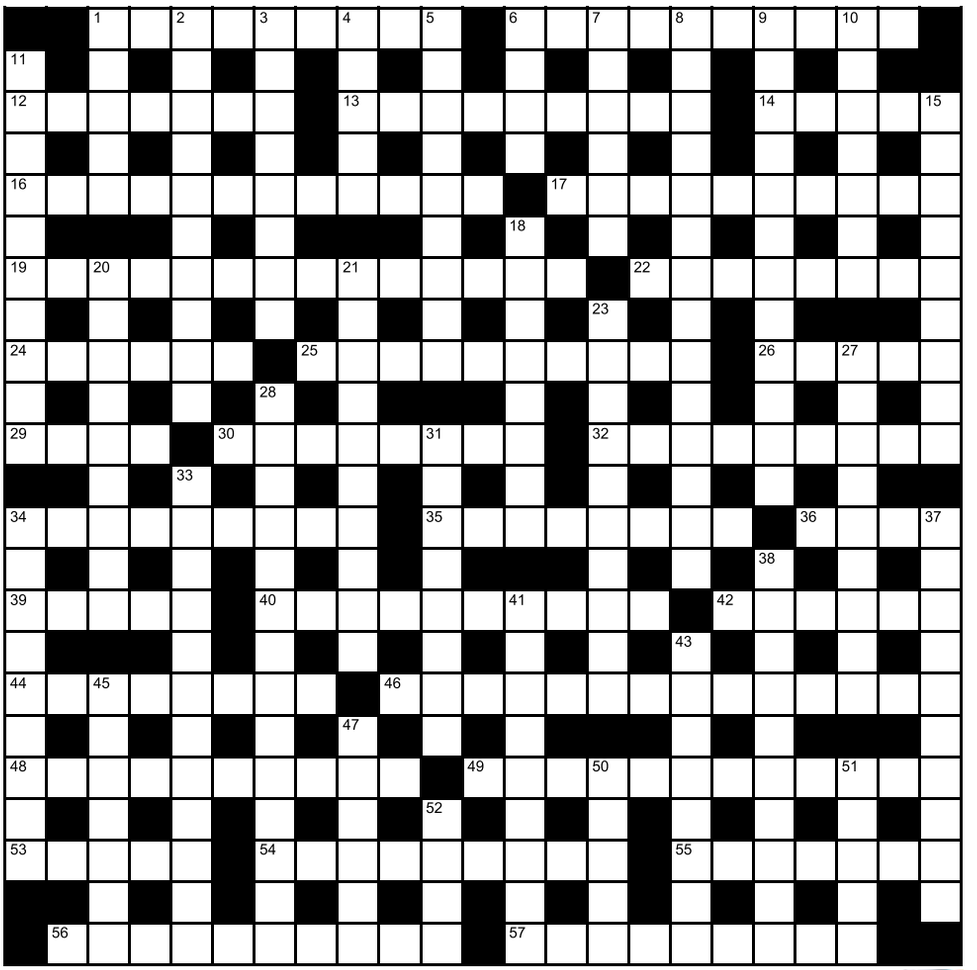
Cryptic clues

Across

1 Dancing is out after swelling puffed up (9)
6 Be indebted to group behind European politician giving authority (10)
12 Trace 22nd letter about someone living in a dump (7)
13 I follow vocal instruction to extract sap from coniferous wood? (9)
14 Tea at high volume that's worth little (5)
16 Critical democrat not available to keep two conservatives apart (12)
17 Hot emotional intensity in total (3,3,4)
19 Former president's wretched ball and chain on arm (7,7)
22 Butler maybe getting page out of Spanish paper for French writer (8)
24 Not yet having left home, shortly drop in (6)
25 Small arm aristocrat carries when leading riot (10)
26 One of the Reds welcomes good sport (5)
29 We back away from Notts town informer (4)
30 Tossed fragments of tin etc after refining (8)
32 Complex variable pair opposed to some number dividing half of cube (9)
34 The speaker's to perform in a tick, short of dramatic high point (9)
35 There's whiskey in odd roll transported from Eurasia (3-5)
36 What may improve view of people like Deighton? (4)
39 Champagne maker limiting temperature and composition (5)
40 Watch part established to hold male South Africans? (10)
42 Wool provided by farmer in Otago (6)
44 Absolute terror allowed (8)
46 Dent with Ford Prefect for the fifth time, not causing much damage? (6,8)
48 Defensive position's vice-like grip (10)
49 One evades partygoer flipping in photo by a Glastonbury sight (12)
53 BBC pioneer backing row with husband (5)
54 Not the last painting where a polar bear is black (9)
55 One eats a lot of fish, large one in some pie filling (7)
56 Aesthetic judgment about rude photo that's applied with brushing (10)
57 *ER* I'd spoiled with TV set showing *Top Gear* feature? (4,5)

Down

1 Two lads, the first one stunted — hardly any matter! (5)
2 Plant deliveries not allowing a run on hospital ventilation (10)
3 Time proverbially not on our side? (3,5)
4 Start in place for shooting (5)
5 Crass cake smashing competitions you'll have in the bag? (4,5)
6 Board member formerly with European Commission (4)
7 Delayed crossing delta from the south, missing hotel pool (6)
8 Exhausted Republican breaks habit with barbarian spree (4,2,1,7)
9 Illicit profiting from wheel-turning mechanism, and pinions replaced by rear of axle (12)
10 A river repeatedly goes over here (7)
11 Clearing assessment when learner leaves for start in college (10)
15 Complimentary hairdresser's offering to improvise (9)
18 Red-stained flower almost perished (8)
20 Terrier vs Terries in a tangle (9)
21 Smearing Fife, a cynic not working (10)
23 Hugging old sailors, with bristles, in a stiff way (10)
27 Auditor's man had to cover inside advice (9)
28 Facing punishment to achieve bar clearance? (3,3,4,4)
31 Emma in films, however acting to entertain politicians (8)
33 Extract iodine collected by Geiger, possibly radioactive, leaving dig (8,4)
34 Soviet official's order to overlook breaking wheels (9)
37 Very little money for lace (10)
38 Liver rodents left with first pair to finish pasta (10)
41 Fluid defence keeps closed round ball — nothing to row about (9)
43 Cross-border crime force drops its case for unfortunate dead plant-eater (8)
45 Left unfinished, religious image in place of pillars (7)
47 A Knight wooing Lady shuns embraces (6)
50 Vain thugs regularly struck Christian martyr (5)
51 Divine Greek article cracked by Young Conservatives (5)
52 Drive Golf into river (4)



Name.....

Address.....

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..... Postcode.....

Phone number.....

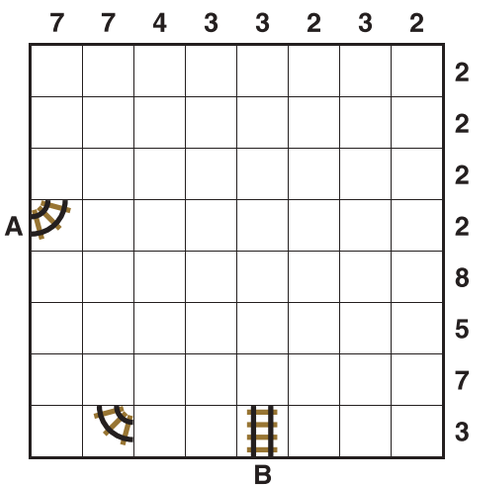
Prizes



The prize for each of the first correct solutions to the Cryptic and times2 Jumbo clues to be opened will be a collection of Times reference books — including *The Times Reference Atlas of the World*, *Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus*, and *Bradford's Crossword Solver's Dictionary* published by HarperCollins. Entries should be marked "Cryptic" or "times2" and sent to: The Times Jumbo Crossword 1715, PO Box 2164, Colchester, Essex CO2 8LJ; or emailed to: jumbo@thetimes.co.uk, with "Cryptic 1715" or "times2 1715" in the subject line, to arrive by February 13. Open to 18+, UK & ROI residents only. The winners and the solutions will be published on February 15.

Train Tracks No 2465

Lay tracks to enable the train to travel from village A to village B. The numbers indicate how many sections of track go in each row and column. There are only straight sections and curved sections. The track cannot cross itself. *Solution on Monday*



times2 clues

Across

1 Common garden shrub (9)
6 Capable of being argued (10)
12 Grooming product (4,3)
13 Boundary between two things (9)
14 Location (5)
16 Genie producer (8,4)
17 Squeezed together (10)
19 Process of rebuilding (14)
22 Bright star in the constellation Eridanus (8)
24 Life's profession; rush in a wild manner (6)
25 Hackneyed newspaper writing style (10)
26 Smooth glossy fabric (5)
29 Animal's den (4)
30 Give a detailed account of (8)
32 Christmas entertainment (9)
34 Interstellar craft (9)
35 Cause to adopt extreme opposing positions (8)
36 Game with clubs (4)
39 Make minor improvements to (5)
40 Glasses (10)
42 Social environment (6)
44 Official procedure (8)
46 Saying something is less than it is (14)
48 Shield bearing a coat of arms (10)
49 Provide evidence to support (something) (12)
53 Eg, native to Riyadh (5)
54 Repulsive (9)
55 Heavy dark sherry (7)
56 Continuing, recurring (10)
57 Garden area with many woody plants (9)

Down

1 Port of Israel (5)
2 Something messy or bungled (4,6)
3 Finally; fully (2,6)
4 Cook under a flame (5)
5 Height gauge (9)
6 Having little or no light (4)
7 Eg, autumn (6)
8 Surprising quality (14)
9 Awareness and understanding; fearful feeling (12)
10 Mutual co-operation (7)
11 Excessively dramatic (10)
15 Toleration; ability to continue (9)
18 Predatory fish (5,3)
20 Gristle (9)
21 Empty (10)
23 Female big cat (10)
27 Common fossil (9)
28 Devil who bought Faust's soul (14)
31 Lacking power (8)
33 Coin toss call (5,2,5)
34 Cutting nature (9)
37 *Little Lord* —, novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett (10)
38 Soup of vegetables and pasta (10)
41 Too ready to believe things (9)
43 Underground cemetery (8)
45 Close up, stop (7)
47 Place associated with particular events (6)
50 Nothing other than; perpendicular (5)
51 Extreme suffering (5)
52 Closed (4)

THE TIMES
SATURDAY FEBRUARY 1 2025

Sport



SERENA TAYLOR/NEWCASTLE UNITED

SANDRO TONALI EXCLUSIVE

MY ROAD TO REDEMPTION

Newcastle midfielder opens up on ten-month betting ban and how he has returned a new man, pages 2-3

Villa considering Rashford loan

Charlotte Duncker

Aston Villa are weighing up a move to sign Marcus Rashford on loan from Manchester United before Monday's transfer deadline.

United are willing to let Rashford leave after Ruben Amorim left him out of his side's past 12 games in all competitions for what the head coach has described as training reasons.

Villa have now registered their interest and are scrambling to bring in a forward before the window closes after Jhon Durán completed his move to the Saudi Pro League side Al-Nassr for a fee in excess of £70 million.

Villa have also rejected a £40 million bid from Arsenal for Ollie Watkins and they are not interested in letting another attacker leave.

With Villa eighth in the Premier League — only four points off the top four — and into the last 16 of the Champions League, Emery is hoping to get another two or three signings through the door to bolster the squad for the second half of the season.

With Durán's departure now confirmed, Rashford has emerged as a potential option that the club are now exploring.

Rashford's representatives have held talks with numerous clubs about a potential loan move but as of yet there has been no agreement. His wages, which are about £325,000 a week, have been a major sticking point in negotiations. United would prefer any club interested in signing Rashford on loan to cover all of the forward's wages, which would be unlikely for Villa because of their financial situation. It is also not known whether the 27-year-old would consider a move to another Premier League team, with a move abroad favoured.

Rashford's representatives have also been in talks with Barcelona, who also have a precarious financial situation, while staying at Old Trafford beyond Monday's deadline hasn't been ruled out either.

João Félix and Marcos Asensio are also on Emery's list of potential targets, with Villa having a longstanding interest in both. However, there is an acceptance that there would have to be a compromise when it comes to covering their salaries.

Monchi, the Villa president of football operations, highlighted in an interview with Spanish radio on Thursday how Emery excels in working with

Continued on page 3

Buttler criticises India for not using 'like-for-like' sub

Elgan Alderman
Pune

Jos Buttler hit out at India's use of a concussion replacement as "not like-for-like", in breach of regulations, during England's defeat in the fourth T20I.

A 15-run loss consigned England to a 3-1 series defeat with one match left in Mumbai tomorrow. A key wicket-taker in their unsuccessful pursuit of 182 was Harshit Rana, a 90mph bowler on international debut in a format in which he is a tailender.

ICC playing conditions stipulate that a concussion substitute should be like-for-like and not advantageous to the team. Harshit replaced Shivam Dube, who had scored 53 from No 6, after the batting all-rounder was struck on the helmet in Jamie Overton's final over.

"It's not a like-for-like replacement, we don't agree with that," Buttler said. "Either Shivam Dube has put on about 25mph with the ball or Harshit has really improved his batting. I still think we should have gone on to win the match but we disagree with the decision.

"As I came out to bat, I was thinking, 'Who's Harshit on for?' I was told he was the concussion replacement, which I obviously disagreed with. [The umpires] said the match referee had made the decision so we had no say in it. We'll ask Javagal Srinath [the match referee] some questions just to get some clarity around it. Maybe at the toss next game I'll say we're going to play 12 as well."

Report, pages 12-13



SANDRO TONALI
THE BIG INTERVIEW

After 308 days banned for breaching betting rules, the Newcastle midfielder opens up to **Martin Hardy** about nerves on his return and helping others to beat gambling problems



The feeling had changed as Sandro Tonali went to bed the night before he finally stepped back on to a football pitch. He will talk of a nervous night's sleep, but then of a weight being lifted and there will also be a revelatory moment during our time together when he opens up about an overwhelming feeling of being free.

He was a fit footballer who could not play football for 308 days, banned for breaking betting rules in the game; it was a period of pain, of guilt, confusion, recovery and an overriding desire to forget that episode of his life.

August 28, 2024, then, is the day he began a new life, when he left his home in Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, said "ciao" or "see you later" (he cannot remember which) to his partner, Juliette, and to Margot, the French bulldog with whom he now likes to walk along the beaches of Tynemouth and Bamburgh, and went back to work.

His punishment, the ban and the routine that had gone with it for ten months, had finally ended. "It was different inside," he says. "My feelings, my mood, maybe it was different when I went to sleep. When I woke up, everything was different. I was a new person. I am a new person."

There was still an old routine to go through, a drive to the Newcastle United training ground, getting back on the team bus, sitting in the away dressing room at the City Ground and then the walk down a tunnel to play football.

"Before the game I was nervous. I was physically nervous," he adds. "Nervous in my stomach."

And then Sam Allison, the referee, blew a whistle to officially signify that his exile was over.

"When the game started I was another player, now without a ten-month ban, without the media, the press, without my press, everything. I was with my team, I was a football player in a normal game.

"I was, for the first time, free.

"Before the game I was one person, and after the game I was a different person.

"I don't think for the ban, but I think for the person inside, for the gaffer, because he worked with me for ten months, every day, and for every player at Newcastle, and every member of the staff at the training ground, for this it is not only for me and for Sandro Tonali football player but for [all of us together]."

He would vomit on the pitch because of the physical demands of the game, he would be elbowed in the throat — "Yes, welcome back!" he says, laughing — and then watch, having been substituted, as Newcastle advanced from the second round of the Carabao Cup — a competition they can still win — in a dramatic penalty shoot-out. It was then he was serenaded by a travelling support of 3,000 from Tyneside.

The Italian tricolour fluttered among the black and white. "Sandre, olé, olé, olé," was the chant for more than two minutes. He was emotional then, and he is emotional now as we watch a rerun. "I put together in this match the best three moments of my life," he says. "Amazing."

When he returned home, in the early hours, his parents, Mariarosa and Giandomenico, were there, along with Juliette, waiting. "They were smiling," he adds. "I was nervous before the game, I came back different, lighter."



'My grandmother watches every game – she has every subscription'

It has been a long road and Tonali is still only 24.

He was born in Lodi, about four kilometres from Milan, and grew up in Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, a small town with a population of about 13,000. His was a close-knit family. He talks of his father going to work at 5am, of every family member, including his grandmother who named him Sandro after his maternal grandfather, helping Gina, to drive him to training and to games, and then the rise up a ladder that went from Piacenza to Brescia to Milan and then to Tyneside in a £52 million transfer in the summer of 2023.

"Without my family it is not possible I [would be] a footballer," he adds. "My brother, my sister, my mam and dad, all the family was together for me and my football. It was a team for me, for my football."

Grandmother Gina, he reveals with a smile and an affectionate roll of his eyes, still does not miss a kick from her grandson.

"Yeah, now she has the social media and every day after the game she sends me interviews, she sends me anything, everything! After the last game, after the goal against Southampton, my phone was full of images from my grandma!" Tonali says.

"I am happy. I know she loves me, she watches every game, every friendly, every pre-season game and this is amazing for a grandma. She is 80!

"She still lives in Sant'Angelo Lodigiano. She has a subscription to the media, to Newcastle TV, to Sky UK, to TNT, to get every game! Every week is a different channel."

Does she ever criticise a performance, I ask. "No, never! For her I play always very, very well. Eight out of ten, nine out of ten, every week!"

It is what made the period of implosion that took place in his life even more difficult.

'It was hard to come home and talk about my hidden problem'

Tonali was away with the Italy team in October 2023 when he was taken from a training camp in Coverciano, Florence, by federal prosecutors for questioning about having potentially gambled on matches from 2021-23 through to 2023-24.

He would admit immediately to the severity of his problem and his agent would talk of an addiction. There would be a similar admission to the FA in England, where he had bet on between 40 and 50 games. The ban from the Italian football federation was for 18 months, with ten months suspended, and he later received a suspended two-month ban from the English FA for contravening betting rules.

His world fell apart.

How difficult was it then to talk with his family, about a problem he had kept hidden?

"It was hard," he says. "My mam and my dad were sad, but sad because if you say your son is in difficulty, you're sad but you want to be a good

Successful passes

Premier League since December 14



SERENA TAYLOR/NEWCASTLE UNITED



Tonali told our football writer Martin Hardy, left, of his nerves on his return

parent. You only have one way and for the first month I was back in Italy to speak with the federation, with the lawyer, and every time I come back at home with my family, I was alone but I was not alone.

“How did I get through that period? I don’t remember. I removed it from my life.

“The first two months I removed everything from my life. I removed social media because social media kill any people in the world. Now it is crazy. If you have a problem and you are in the public, you are in difficulty and they kill you. I was safe, with Juliette, my family and at Newcastle. Then after two months I was in training every day and I worked hard, very hard.”

As part of his suspension and rehabilitation, there would be 16 public appearances to raise awareness of gambling disorders. His final one was in a Tyneside factory, where he addressed 120 workers. Tonali away from the pitch is unlike the on-field Tonali, who has the swagger of someone who knows they are good at something.

In person he is slight, very sharp, and during our time together he rarely needs the help of a translator, sitting close by because his English is so good, but he seems naturally quiet. Sharing his story with 120 Tyneside workers could have been daunting.

“I spoke with these people and 75 of them gambled and they asked me what is the key for stopping today, in three days or one week and, really, I don’t know,” he adds. “I don’t know. I don’t know because if I was a normal person, not a football player, it is different.

“If you don’t have the rules in your life, if you don’t have the ban, maybe you play [gamble] again, but in this ten months I work four times a week with a psychologist, and for 1½ hours every day for ten months.

“The first three months was very difficult. Maybe it was similar to being at school in a lesson. The people say to me, ‘You need this, you need this, you need this.’ After three months I understand more. After six months I understand my problem.

“Once you understand your problem, you can speak with the people for this problem, for stopping gambling.

“If you want to speak with the people to stop one problem, and you don’t know the problem, this is impossible.”

He would hear back from three of the 75.

“Three people texted me and said they had stopped gambling because they had seen me,” he says. “When I received this message, I was happy, not for me, happy for these people and their family, and for their kids, because for one normal family, this problem changed their life.

“For my situation it is difficult because my salary is different, because my work is different, and I love when these people text me about this problem and for stopping gambling.”

‘Tonali table for Wetherspoons – I might have to get it as a tattoo’

It feels, hopefully, that Tonali too is on the path of redemption. He praises Eddie Howe, the Newcastle head coach, for playing a vital role in his recovery.

“It was not easy for me last season but he worked every week, training with me, me with the team, and I remember him [being a] great person and a great gaffer. When the gaffer loves you, you have a different feeling towards the gaffer.”

There is warm appreciation for his supportive team-mates, especially Bruno Guimarães, Joelinton and Miguel Almirón, who rejoined Atlanta United this week. “These three players, they speak Spanish and Spanish and Italian is so similar,” he says. “They were a big help and Bruno, especially, was so important the first three or four months for me.”

He clears up the mystery of his much maligned meal in the Wetherspoons on Gosforth High Street, where he had even booked a table in advance.

“Sssh!” he says initially, before offering clarification and revelation. “If you go in Italy and you don’t speak with your friends and you see one normal restaurant, you try. No?

“I don’t know the rules in England for Wetherspoons but after a game I was in Sainsbury’s with Juliette and her mam and when we came back home she booked it. No, it was not my team-mates. My team-mates after! For maybe two months, every day they go, ‘Tonali table for Wetherspoons, 19.45 tomorrow.’ I have a new tattoo in my life! You need to write it was Juliette’s fault.”

More than anything, it appears he has survived a personal nightmare and is now flourishing. Since becoming the pivot of Newcastle’s midfield, as a No 6, they have won ten of 11 games. He could be part of the best midfield in the Premier League. He is back playing football at the very highest of levels.

On his right wrist the word “impossible” is tattooed in block capitals, with the first two letters inked out in red.“I think everything is possible,” he says. “My family was not a rich family. It was a normal family. My dad [starts] work at 5am every day and comes back at 4pm. My mam worked from home.

“Sometimes you need to dream. You need work, you need passion and you need luck, but you need to dream.”

We talk about the fact Newcastle have not won a significant domestic cup since 1955. Only four Italian players have won the League Cup and Newcastle have a 2-0 semi-final lead over Arsenal heading into the second leg at St James’ Park on Wednesday. Can you win the competition, I ask.

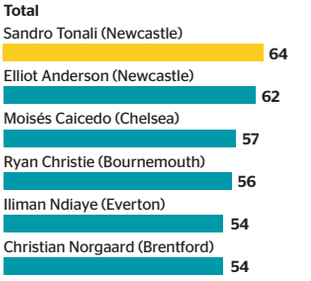
“First there is Fulham [in the league today],” he replies, deadpan.

Right there, in that moment, Sandro Tonali sounds what he once more is: a footballer.

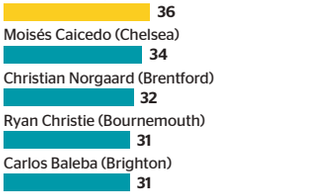
Possession won

Premier League since December 14

Total



In middle third



Tomori and Tel cool on Spurs moves

Tom Allnutt, Gary Jacob

Ange Postecoglou insists Tottenham Hotspur will not beg reluctant players to join them with Mathys Tel and Fikayo Tomori needing persuasion to accept offers before the transfer window closes on Monday.

Tottenham had reached a verbal agreement with Bayern Munich for a permanent transfer worth £50million for Tel but the 19-year-old winger is holding out for a better offer from other interested Premier League clubs, with Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea and Aston Villa also keen. Tel wants to play more regularly but may also prefer a loan move rather than severing ties with Bayern completely.

Spurs are yet to sign an outfield player this month, despite the club’s injury crisis, with nine players still unavailable for the trip to Brentford in the Premier League tomorrow.

The north London club have, however, offered £21 million for the England defender Fikayo Tomori after talks with AC Milan over a move. Milan, who have already rejected an approach from Aston Villa for a loan deal for Tomori this month, want to sell the 27-year-old, who is keen to return to the Premier League.

Spurs’ position — 15th in the Premier League — and the club’s injury crisis could put players off in the coming days but Postecoglou maintains Tottenham are still an attractive proposition, particularly given that they are still in contention in the Europa League, FA Cup and Carabao Cup.

“It depends what the players are looking for,” Postecoglou said. “You can look at it in two ways, OK the league form is not great but there’s some pretty big possibilities to have success here in the last three of four months [of the season]. It’s still a big club, it’s still a club that can challenge for honours and it’s whether the player sees the potential that we see right now, or certainly that I see. If it’s too much of a hard sell it’s probably not the right one for us.”

Tottenham have also inquired about AC Milan’s forward Noah Okafor, although they are yet to make a bid. Marcus Rashford could become a target, but the Manchester United player was lower down Tottenham’s list of targets.

Spurs’ pursuit of Tomori or another central defender will depend on the extent of Radu Dragusin’s injury after the Romanian twisted his knee during the 3-0 win over Elfsborg on Thursday. “It might be an area we need to look at and certainly this weekend [we are] exploring some options,” Postecoglou said. “There’s definitely a need for us.”

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

players to turn their careers around. “Emery has been able to recover players who were considered lost in his history as a coach,” he said.

As such, the idea of coaching a player like Rashford would appeal to the Spanish head coach. Rashford has been included in only one match-day squad since his first omission on December 15 for the Manchester derby. Having been an unused substitute in the game against Newcastle United he has failed to make any other squad and Amorim said after the win against Fulham last weekend, in response to a question about Rashford, that he would rather pick his 63-year-old goalkeeper coach over “someone who doesn’t give the maximum every day”.

How Van Dijk set highest standards for life after Klopp

Philosophy of Arne Slot at Liverpool has turned veteran captain into a tone-setting playmaker, writes **Paul Joyce**

Over the past few days, a clip of an interview in which Antoine Semenyo discusses the most difficult defender he has faced has resurfaced.

"I remember running in behind and all I can hear is this man's footsteps — dum, dum, dum," the Bournemouth attacker said last summer.

"He is fast, he has got presence, you can hear him coming. So I am trying to focus on getting my shot across and he puts me off completely. His aura just puts me off."

The opponent in question was Virgil van Dijk, though when acquaintances are renewed today both parties will know the scale of the task facing them.

Liverpool's decision to rest the majority of their first-team squad, Van Dijk included, for the midweek Champions League defeat away to PSV Eindhoven highlighted the importance that their head coach Arne Slot has placed on the trip to the Vitality Stadium.

Bournemouth's hopes of maintaining an eye-catching run of form that has propelled them into contention for European qualification face a searching examination. In Van Dijk they will confront an imposing barrier, a player whose form has been crucial to Liverpool's pursuit of the title and who continues to set the standards to which his team-mates must aspire.

Rising to the challenge

The outward expectations of the post-Jürgen Klopp era have proved very different to what has actually transpired thus far. The smoothness of the transition to Slot's leadership owes much to the attitude of the players and their appetite to improve. Van Dijk returned to training last summer with the belief he had to prove himself to the new man, not the other way around.

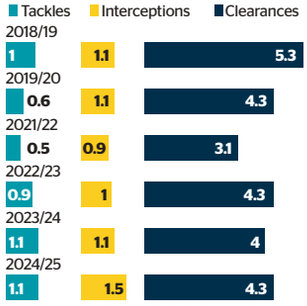
"From the first session, I was like 'wow'," Slot said of his 33-year-old captain and Dutch compatriot. "He is the one who leads the team from start to finish, so when I go out on the training ground and blow my whistle I will hear one player for sure and that is Virgil."

In their first conversations together, the Netherlands captain was identified as someone whose passing range could bring a different emphasis to Liverpool's build-up play.

Liverpool's defensive structure was also addressed in an early group meeting, with the squad presented with numbers showing how many bodies they should have behind the ball when an opponent is in the final third. "I would say that has definitely changed," Van Dijk said.

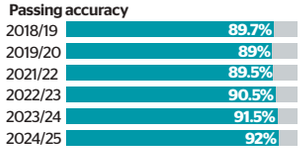
Rock at the back

Van Dijk's defensive statistics per 90 minutes this season are among the best they have been during his Liverpool career



2020/21 season excluded due to lack of games played

Van Dijk's 92 per cent passing accuracy this season is his best rate in his Liverpool career



Setting the tone

A look at Van Dijk's statistics this season shows he is making more interceptions and tackles than at any point in his Liverpool career and more clearances than in his first full campaign at the club. There could be a simple explanation for that, with Liverpool's average possession this season of 58.3 per cent, the first time the club have averaged below 60 per cent in a Premier League season since 2015-16 (57 per cent), when Klopp arrived mid-campaign.

Having less of the ball has led to a marginal dip in Van Dijk's touches and passes and also means he has more defending to do. Yet it seems that Slot trusts his team to defend without the ball and control games.

But there has also been a clear intent by Van Dijk to set the tone in matches. In the home match against Ipswich Town last weekend he won an aerial challenge against Liam Delap in the opening minutes, and put in a tackle on the striker soon after. His dominance was established and there have been other examples of Van Dijk making the game about himself and ensuring opponents know there will be no easy pickings. In the win over Manchester City in December, he ensured an afternoon of frustration and toil for Erling Haaland.

There was a period when Van Dijk appeared happy to jockey rivals, rather than engage directly with them, but that is no longer as prevalent. He is determined to make his mark. The fact that Slot has chosen to use Ryan Gravenberch in a hybrid midfield/centre back role against Fulham and Nottingham Forest speaks to the faith he retains in the man alongside him.



Life without the imperious Van Dijk would be unthinkable for Liverpool

Virgil the playmaker

Bournemouth sought to limit Van Dijk's influence when the sides met at Anfield by cutting off his passing options and limiting how often he received the ball. He had his joint second fewest touches in the league this season in that 3-0 victory (58) with only the match against Manchester United in January, when he had 56, coming in below that. The trouble for Andoni Iraola's side is that Ibrahima Konaté stepped forward and had a hand in all three goals in that September victory over his side instead.

There has been more onus on Van Dijk to start attacks where possible, passing through the lines, as opposed to a midfielder dropping deep or a full back inverting, as was the case last season with Trent Alexander-Arnold.

He has enjoyed that responsibility under Slot and the chance to show that he can vary his distribution away from the 70-yard pinged passes that had been his trademark.

"I am in a position where you can see, for example, how the opponent puts pressure," Van Dijk said. "Are the opponent's full backs high or not? Do they play with one or two controlling midfielders? There are different options every time.

"I've talked about it with the coach since day one. We sat down, with images. The development after that has only been good. I'm really enjoying it. He has asked a lot of me, but I like that."

A pass accuracy of 92 per cent is the highest of his Liverpool career.

An extra motivation

The contract saga rumbles on, with Van Dijk repeating twice last week that he did not know what the future will hold beyond the end of the season when his existing deal expires. He has made no secret that he wants to stay and there appears a determination on his part to prove to Liverpool that, despite turning 34 this summer, he remains at the peak of his powers.

There remains an expectation around Liverpool that Van Dijk will stay at the club he joined seven years ago and that he can uphold his exacting standards for a couple of more years at least. Life without him remains unthinkable.



From bailiff visits and

Harry Redknapp can't believe club he used to train in the park are on cusp of Europe's elite, he tells **Kit Shepard**

Harry Redknapp knows better than anyone that Bournemouth's pursuit of Champions League football is utterly ridiculous. For much of the 53 years he has been associated with the south-coast club it has been almost comically small-time.

Bournemouth did not have a training ground during Redknapp's four years as a player there in the 1970s. When he was the Bournemouth manager from 1983 to 1992 they trained at the local park and the park keeper could intervene at any moment.

"We'd go there, take a chance, mark out a little area for a pitch where people were walking their dogs, and we'd get thrown off," Redknapp, 77, says.

During one summer Redknapp's side trained in Fordingbridge, Hampshire. He would buy the players baguettes from a nearby supermarket for lunch while his wife, Sandra, would make ham and cheese sandwiches. And in a winter that featured away games in York and Darlington within the space of four days, the players travelled in two minibuses and slept in four-a-room guest houses.

Redknapp's tales make Bournemouth's situation now all the more incredible. They currently sit seventh in the Premier League, only one point off the fourth-placed spot that would guarantee Champions League football.

They have scaled their dizziest heights yet in the past two weeks, defying an injury crisis to beat two of the division's other in-form teams in Newcastle United and Nottingham Forest by an aggregate score of 9-1. Be it Andoni Iraola's clever tactics, smart player recruitment or a disdain for their opponents' superior history, everything is coming together brilliantly.

An even sterner challenge, the visit of leaders Liverpool, awaits. Toppling the

PETER TARRY FOR THE TIMES; RICHARD HEATHCOTE/GETTY IMAGES







Bobbie Redknapp, Harry's grandson, gets a haircut from a Gura-Lowe, who recalls raising £40 for the club in tougher times. Right, the team celebrate their latest scalp in beating Forest at a stadium for which there are plans to double the size. Orchard, below, says he'll be skint if they join Europe's elite



bucket collections to big time: the rise of Bournemouth

champions-elect should feel impossible but Bournemouth's season has been predicated on normalising the logic-defying.

This is a club that have spent 15 of their 112 seasons no higher than the third tier and first played top-flight football as recently as 2015, when Eddie Howe was masterminding their rise. Of cities with at least one Premier League club, Bournemouth's population (196,455) is the smallest by more than 40,000, while their 11,464-capacity stadium is the 63rd largest in the top four divisions.

"When I started playing and even after that, the club had financial difficulties and a lack of players, investment and facilities," says Brett Pitman, who spent eight years at Bournemouth during two stints between 2005 and 2015. "The club is now pushing for a European place. The first team are about to move into a brand new training ground. It's like two different clubs."

As Pitman references, financial troubles have plagued Bournemouth's history. The club were on the brink of folding in 1997 and also went into administration in February 2008, starting the subsequent season on minus 17 points in League Two.

Yet during those brushes with liquidation, Bournemouth's small but dedicated fanbase rallied. A fans' trust fund rescued the club in 1997 and there were similarly selfless efforts over the lean decade that followed.

"Twenty years ago I was arriving at games with buckets to collect pennies to pay the bills, to help pay the wages," Gayle Hope, the secretary of the Cherries Trust, says. "My youngest son learnt to count by helping to sort out all the pennies we used to pay the bills. Even 15 years ago we were still on first-name terms with the bailiffs. And here we are, competing for the Champions League. It's just mind-blowing."

The voluntary work of fans helped to keep the club alive. Hope also remembers cleaning the stadium toilets before match days. Others raked the leaves. James Gura-Lowe, who happened to be giving a haircut to Redknapp's grandson Bobbie when we visited and also cuts some of the Bournemouth players' hair at Grade 92, the local barbershop chain he co-owns, did his bit through a three-mile run that raised £40.

"It's always been a community club but the way we've come together in adversity and managed to do the impossible has really helped," Sam Davis, of the Bournemouth fans podcast *Back of the Net*, says. "We've had a siege mentality during most of our livelihood, be that chasing off the bailiffs or trying to overcome being at the bottom of the Football League on minus 17 points.

The town, like its football club, possesses very little that screams elite European football. "It's a sleepy seaside town," says Paul Orchard, who owns the football memorabilia shop In Off The Far Post, less than a mile from the Vitality Stadium. His verdict is supported by the pleasant, picturesque sight from the roads that slope down to Bournemouth beach.

A stroll into the town centre unearths a second identity that also does little to suggest the superstars of Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and AC Milan could be here next season.

"It's quite a vibrant town but it could be a lot better," Hope says. "A lot of businesses have moved out, the town centre's a bit rank."

Indeed, Bournemouth is a symbol of the contemporary high street, which has been stifled by the rise of the internet, the legacy of the pandemic and today's dominance of online shopping. "It used to be fantastic," Redknapp says of the Bournemouth to which he arrived in the 1970s. "Westover Road was like Oxford Street with beautiful shops, lovely hotels. It needs a big uplift."

The football club do provide a symbol of hope. Stability started to emerge in 2009 when the local businessman Adam Murry bought them and Howe steered the team to League Two safety. Maxim Demin then led Bournemouth prudently before selling to the American Bill Foley in 2022. The stable financial footing is allowing fans to dream.

"If it's Champions League next season, I'll be skint at the end of it," Orchard says. "Fans would have to go to the four games abroad because it probably won't ever happen again."

Or will it? Bournemouth appear well set for sustainable success. Players sold to bigger clubs for high fees have been replaced effectively and Foley's multi-club ownership model is built around Bournemouth. That new training ground is nearing completion and plans for a 20,000-seat stadium on the site of the Vitality are advanced.

The reasons to sign for Bournemouth extend beyond the club's impeccable set-up. Gura-Lowe can discuss the players' motivations with authority, be that when nattering with them during a haircut or in meetings with Adam Smith and Lewis Cook, two of Bournemouth's longest-serving squad members who invested in Grade 92's branch in Poole. He insists the area has its perks for footballers. "It's a nice place to live," Gura-Lowe says. "You've got the beach, some really nice areas. It's just the whole lifestyle here. It's not as full-on as London or Manchester."

It is probably naive to expect a club to reverse an entire town's fortunes but football can undoubtedly make locals feel a little better about themselves.

"People look forward to going to Bournemouth games now," Redknapp says. "We're still lucky to live here. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

Time running out if Arsenal want to avoid the nearly tag

Premier League
Gary Jacob

Second in the Premier League and scrambling for a deal in the dying days of the transfer window: there is distinct feeling that a third straight nearly season beckons for Arsenal. Having finished behind champions Manchester City in the past two campaigns, Mikel Arteta's side have been unable to capitalise on their rivals' slump.

Beset by injuries, increasingly reliant on set pieces for goals and unable to win more than three league games in a row, Arsenal have been searching for a forward to add creativity and finishing power to help close the six-point gap to Liverpool, which could be nine when they kick off against City tomorrow.

To rub salt into the wounds, Pep Guardiola's side have already strengthened to the tune of £135 million with the additions of Omar Marmoush, Abdukodir Khusanov and Vitor Reis.

Arsenal's dilemma has been whether to spend big this month on a player who has not been a long-term target, or stick to their recent recruitment model and wait for a younger potential star in the summer, such as Benjamin Sesko, the 21-year-old RB Leipzig forward.

This week Arsenal offered about £40 million for Ollie Watkins, the 29-year-old England forward who has not previously been a long-term target, after being told that Aston Villa would accept £60 million.

Arteta claimed that the decision on whether or not to invest would not depend on the result against City. "No, the result, no," the Arsenal manager said. "If something happens that obviously is not planned, it would put the squad in a dangerous position. That would mean that we haven't planned anything and we're just reacting to something at the last second, which is not good."

Trying to sign a top player can be a lengthy process. It was around this time two years ago that Arteta began a pitch to Declan Rice. Arsenal sanctioned a much more expensive deal than was originally envisaged, paying up to £105 million to West Ham United for the midfielder seven months later.

It was not the same outcome when Arteta made overtures to Sesko's advisers around February last year. The forward began a hot streak, ending the campaign with 14 league goals and a strike rate bettered only by Stuttgart's Serhou Guirassy and Bayern Munich's Harry Kane. Sesko was far from a finished article and Arsenal could make no guarantees to the Slovenia forward that he would start ahead of Kai Havertz.

They were arguably right to take a step back. Sesko fluffed his lines on the big stage, missing good chances for Slovenia against Portugal and England at Euro 2024. He decided to continue at Leipzig, where he has scored eight goals in the Bundesliga and four in the Champions League this season.

Alexander Isak's advisers got a similar impression from Arsenal over the summer but any deal with Newcastle United may have been complicated by the clubs' relationship cooling. Arsenal have wanted to restrict the financial muscle of state-owned clubs such as Saudi-backed Newcastle.

Arteta was also unsuccessful with moves for the wingers Raphinha, Nico Williams and Jamal Musiala. In the end they landed Raheem Sterling on a last-minute loan from Chelsea and added depth with the signings of Mikel Merino and Riccardo Calafiori.



Arsenal held talks over RB Leipzig forward Sesko last year and have to decide whether to wait until summer for the 21-year-old or sign a big-name player now

What they lacked were the elite players that Edu, then the Arsenal sporting director, had identified they needed after they were beaten by Bayern Munich in the Champions League quarter-finals last season. Edu wanted another attacking midfielder but Arteta pushed for Merino and did not want to block the development of Ethan Nwaneri, 17. The club's owners were prepared to back a big deal but wanted Edu to raise money through fringe players, some of whom went unsold.

Arteta is short after injuries to Bukayo Saka and Gabriel Jesus. The manager previously used the mid-season window to sign Martin Odegaard, initially on loan, Leandro Trossard and Jorginho. He sold Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang without signing a replacement and a strike force of Alexandre Lacazette and Eddie Nketiah failed to get them into the top four in 2022.

Unless Arteta signs an attacker before Monday's 11pm deadline, he will be left in a similar position if Havertz is injured — only this time they are still fighting on three fronts, in the league, Champions League and Carabao Cup.

Arsenal's revenue grew by 35 per cent to about £600 million last season owing to a return to Europe's elite competition and a rise in broadcasting and commercial income, according to Deloitte's Football Money League. Success this season will be linked to Arteta's summer transfer budget. Arsenal have the headroom to commit a significant outlay on a player and stay within the league's financial rules but are conscious of running the club sustainably.

Edu resigned in November last year — he will lead Nottingham Forest's multi-club group from May — leaving his deputy, Jason Ayto, to take over his duties while the club began a process of finding a successor. Edu was well liked and a good schmoozer. Arsenal did not feel that their former midfielder's departure would have an impact on this transfer window as they had identified targets in the autumn. They were mainly defensive players that might have been needed because of injuries.

Arteta has called Ayto "phenomenal", which suggests he may get the job permanently. Ayto has been at Arsenal since 2014, initially as a scout before being given greater responsibility by Edu when the club made cuts to that department during Covid.

Ayto, who speaks Portuguese, helped Edu construct a network focusing more on data to identify and filter players. James Ellis, who had a good reputation scouting at Fulham, was promoted to Arsenal's head of recruitment in March 2023.

They formed a close bond and Edu helped to develop his skills dealing with players, agents, families and clubs. They helped to identify Jorrel Hato — a talented defender who can play at centre back or left back — who decided against a move to north London before he signed a deal with Ajax last June.

Arsenal have been attempting to correct the mistakes from last summer and are confident that Martín Zubimendi, the Spain midfielder, has agreed to move from Real Sociedad for £51 million at the end of the season.

Time will tell whether there is a more immediate solution in the coming days to prevent another season of falling agonisingly short.

City v Real now a derby, jokes Pep after fifth draw with champions

Champions League
Paul Hirst

Pep Guardiola joked that Manchester City versus Real Madrid was becoming like a derby fixture after the two clubs drew each other in the Champions League for the fifth time during his nine-year spell in charge.

After scraping through the league stage with a 3-1 win against Club Bruges, City knew that they would be pitted against either Real or Bayern Munich during the draw for the play-offs yesterday. Given that they have played each other so often, it came as no surprise to Guardiola that his team were paired with the Spanish giants.

"It's starting to look like a derby," the City manager said. "For four years in a row we've faced Madrid. It will be extremely difficult but hopefully we can arrive in the moment as best as possible, win the first leg here and the second game one week later in Madrid."

Elsewhere in the play-off draw, Celtic were handed a daunting tie with the six-times winners Bayern. Arsenal, Aston Villa and Liverpool were not involved in the draw as they finished in the top eight of the new 36-team league, which took them directly into the round of 16.

It will be the ninth and tenth matches against Real since Guardiola took charge of City in 2016. He previously came up against them 15 times during his four seasons managing Barcelona.

In 2023, the year that City won the Champions League for the first time, Guardiola enjoyed one of his finest nights in management when his team destroyed Real 4-0 in the first leg of their semi-final at the Etihad Stadium.

Three years earlier they beat Real 2-1 at the Bernabéu on their way to defeating the Spanish side 4-2 on aggregate in the round of 16.

The Bernabéu was, however, the scene of City's great collapse in a 2022 semi-final defeat, while last season the 15-times European champions eliminated Guardiola's team on penalties.

City have a particularly difficult month coming up, starting with tomorrow's match against Arsenal at the Emirates Stadium. After playing Leyton Orient away in the FA Cup next Saturday, City have a home game against Newcastle United in between the two dates with Real. City then host Liverpool at the Etihad Stadium on February 23 before rounding off the month with a midweek trip to London to play Tottenham Hotspur, their bogey team in recent seasons.

Guardiola is not expecting any help from broadcasters or the Premier League when it comes to the scheduling of the fixtures. "There are leagues, like the Portuguese league and the French, that play [domestic fixtures] on Friday before the Champions League so they can have one more day of rest, but not here," Guardiola said.

Liverpool, Arsenal and Villa will discover their round-of-16 opponents on February 21 once the play-offs have been completed.

Liverpool will face one of Monaco, Brest, Paris Saint-Germain or Sporting Lisbon, while Arsenal will play one of Juventus, PSV Eindhoven, Feyenoord or AC Milan. Villa will come up against one of Sporting, Borussia Dortmund, Bruges or Atalanta.

In the Europa League, both Manchester United and Tottenham will play one of Midtjylland, Galatasaray, Real Sociedad or AZ Alkmaar. The play-off fixtures will take place on February 13 and February 20, and the full knockout draw will be on February 21.

City's game against Arsenal tomorrow afternoon is the first between the sides since tensions boiled over in September, when Erling Haaland and Gabriel squared up to each other at the end of a 2-2 draw at the Etihad. Mikel Arteta, the Arsenal manager and Guardiola's former assistant, accused City of being specialists in the "dark arts".

"No," Guardiola said when asked if there was any needle between him and Arteta. "We have an exceptional relationship, between us and our families."

Guardiola, meanwhile, has told Rodri that he must be cautious about his recovery from his anterior cruciate ligament injury. The Spain midfielder still travels with the team to matches even though his knee has not healed.

"To come back [early] and have a setback for next season would not be intelligent," Guardiola said. "Of course he wants to play and he feels really good. He would love to play on Sunday. I know that. But bodies are bodies."

Play-off fixtures

Club Bruges v Atalanta; Sporting v Borussia Dortmund; Manchester City v Real Madrid; Celtic v Bayern Munich; Juventus v PSV Eindhoven; Feyenoord v AC Milan; Brest v Paris Saint-Germain; AS Monaco v Benfica

Ties to be played on February 11-12 and February 18-19

Kelly: City assassinated my character

Women's Super League

Kit Shepard

Chloe Kelly has accused Manchester City of trying to "assassinate my character" after joining Arsenal on loan at the very end of Women's Super League deadline day.

Kelly, who famously scored England's winner in the Euro 2022 final at Wembley, wants more playing opportunities to increase her hopes of featuring in this summer's title defence. Sufficient minutes were not forthcoming at City and her relationship with the club deteriorated in recent weeks. Once her move to Arsenal was confirmed, Kelly claimed that the club had tried to damage her reputation.

"So disappointing to find out tonight that people at the club are briefing journalists against me if I am to sign at a club before the window shuts," Kelly, 27, posted at 11pm on Thursday, the exact time her transfer was announced.

"They've called reporters to assassinate my character and tried to plant negative stories about me, which are false accusations. Women should look after each other and build each other up... not shoot them down to protect their employers. To those responsible, I am disappointed." City have been contacted for comment.

Gareth Taylor, the City head coach, was reluctant to address Kelly's claims yesterday. However, he did emphasise the importance of "committed" players and implied that City's version of events is different to Kelly's.

"[Kelly's accusations] are kind of new to me," he said before tomorrow's match against Arsenal — for which Kelly is ineligible. "My job is to really prepare the team for a big game against Arsenal and work with players that are really committed to the club. I can't go into real detail about how we see it and our side of the story. We wish her all the best and she has achieved the move that she was looking for."

Taylor, who was appointed as head coach a month before Kelly signed for City in 2020, rejected the notion that City had blocked Kelly from moving.

"We're in a selection-based business where decisions have to be made for the betterment of the team, and sometimes players can fall on the sharp end of that," he said. "We've certainly not stood in the way of any player making the move they wanted."

Kelly's return to Arsenal, with whom she began her professional career, should give her more chances to play.

Keira Walsh, the England midfielder, has signed for Chelsea from Barcelona for one of the largest transfer fees in women's football history. It is understood that Chelsea have paid Barcelona about £440,000 for the 27-year-old, the fifth-highest fee for a women's player.

JAMES GILL/DANEHOUSE/GETTY IMAGES



Kelly, left, takes on Arsenal's Laia Codina last season — they are now club colleagues after the forward's move from City

Everton close in on Alcaraz loan move

Paul Joyce
Northern Football Correspondent

Everton are hoping to seal a loan agreement for the Flamengo midfielder Carlos Alcaraz, which would include an obligation to buy the former Southampton player.

Alcaraz, 22, appeared as a substitute on the opening day of the Premier League season for Southampton before moving to the Brazilian club in August for a fee of about £16 million.

Despite playing for two different clubs between August and December, Everton believe they can sign him because he is moving between two clubs belonging to associations with overlapping seasons. Alcaraz joined Southampton in January 2023 before moving to Juventus on loan 12 months later. He returned to St Mary's last summer and then moved on to Flamengo.

Everton's need for reinforcements has been exacerbated by the season-ending knee injury to midfielder Orel Mangala, plus setbacks to Dominic Calvert-Lewin and Armando Broja.

Calvert-Lewin does not require surgery on a damaged hamstring but could be out for at least six weeks, while efforts to cut short Broja's loan spell and send him back to parent club Chelsea have not progressed, with the player keen to stay despite also facing six weeks out with an ankle ligament issue.

In addition, Dwight McNeil has also undergone "minor" surgery on the knee injury that has kept him sidelined since the start of December.

"We're still hampered with PSR [Profitability and Sustainability Rules]," David Moyes, the Everton manager said. "At the moment, we're not quite there, but we don't want to get ourselves in a position we've been in before with points deductions. So we have to be really mindful of what we do."

Week that reopened referees' wounds

Martyn Ziegler
Chief Sports Reporter

It has not been a good week for Professional Game Match Officials Limited, the body that oversees referees for the Premier League and EFL.

First, one of its top two match officials, Michael Oliver, and the video assistant referee (VAR) Darren England made what was widely regarded as one of the worst blunders of the season by awarding a straight red card to Arsenal's Myles Lewis-Skelly for his tackle on Matt Doherty during the Premier League match against Wolverhampton Wanderers.

While that controversy was still raging, the recently sacked elite referee David Coote gave an interview saying he had taken cocaine to cope with the stress of covering up his sexuality, and insisting he had not taken any money for booking a Leeds United player that he had talked to a friend about cautioning in the run-up to the match.

The Coote case, in particular around the booking conversation, has caused "reputational damage", a board member has admitted. It has been a challenge for an organisation that has to put trust and integrity at the heart of its operations, which insiders say was the reason Coote was immediately suspended and then sacked.

The Lewis-Skelly red card, however, was the type of mini-crisis that PGMOL has to deal with fairly regularly, but the FA regulatory commission members that overturned the sending-off "were unanimous in their opinion that the referee had made an obvious error", though perhaps the VAR was more at fault.

It has not been pleasant for Oliver either, with his family put under police protection this week as a result of horrible threats made on social media.

The controversy has again focused attention on the decision by PGMOL and the FA to allow Oliver and England to earn four-figure sums by refereeing a domestic match in the United Arab Emirates in September 2023, and Oliver to referee a match in Saudi Arabia in April that year.

Insiders say the decision at the time was taken with the best of intentions — to broaden officials' international experience to impress Fifa. Although the match officials are blameless in the matter, it has led to a problem around perceptions — given the nation-state connections of some English clubs — and the policy has since been changed.

But was it ever thus? Is it only VAR and an increasingly toxic social media intensifying scrutiny and pressure? A straw poll of Premier League club chiefs revealed that some share the opinion of The Times columnist Matthew Syed, that PGMOL needs radical restructuring. Others are less critical of the organisation and put the blame at the door of VAR.

One senior club figure said: "There is an air of disappointment and frustration that things have not improved more. Uefa seemed to have it all much slicker and more professional at the European matches this week."

Another, also speaking on the basis of anonymity, said PGMOL needed restructuring to have better governance, to be more independent and more transparent.

Other club figures are more conciliatory, with one saying referees have "an impossible job trying to implement outdated laws of the game" that have not kept pace with technology.

Another told The Times: "Their critics should cut them a bit of slack. Every club has fans with conspiracy theories, including our own. They are doing their best, but the job has actually been made more difficult by VAR."

Certainly VAR is at the heart of much of the club discontent. Several clubs believe the protocol imposed by Fifa and the International FA Board (Ifab), the game's law-making body, whereby referees are not allowed to ask VARs to check things before they make a decision — VARs can only intervene and suggest a review on a monitor if they believe an obvious error has been made — is wrong.

Some also believe that hierarchy can be a problem, with more junior match officials working as VARs telling their more senior counterparts they have made a mistake.

PGMOL says that is not backed up by the figures — of 33 on-field reviews in the Premier League this season and 65 last season, the most senior referees, Oliver and Anthony Taylor, were sent to the monitor in line with the average or more than the average.

PGMOL is jointly run by the FA, Premier League and EFL, with each providing a board member who has had long experience in football: Andy Ambler, the FA's director of professional game relations, the Premier League's chief football officer Tony Scholes and the EFL's chief executive Trevor Birch. The independent chairman is Martin Glenn, the former FA chief executive.

Howard Webb is the chief refereeing officer who runs PGMOL on a day-to-day basis, and it is he who is at the forefront of clubs' wrath. He is also the man who has to front up for any refereeing or VAR mistakes, via a monthly TV programme *Mic'd Up* — though some clubs believe even that push for greater transparency has intensified fan anger.

Match officials' appointments are planned several weeks in advance and then tweaked nearer the fixture depending on their form. Officials usually rotate around clubs and avoid the same team in consecutive matches. Although 23 officials are trained as VARs, the practice now is for the dozen or so who are best suited to the system to be the video officials.

PGMOL insiders say formal complaints are very rare and dealt with in conjunction with the relevant competition — the Premier League, EFL or FA for the FA Cup. Most unhappiness over decisions is dealt with by Webb via private dialogue with club managers and executives, and regular meetings.

Those who have had many years of experience of PGMOL are insistent the organisation has improved considerably, but now face different challenges around VAR and social media.

"People thought VAR would eradicate mistakes and debate and that was never going to happen — we are still on a journey with VAR," one said. "I am not sure we have got VAR right across the game. The intervention point is different in different countries."

‘I wish they’d take the mantle’ – can Southampton beat Derby’s 11-point low?

Gregor Robertson says Ivan Juric’s side are on track to plumb greater depths than dismal Derby in 2008



‘Any year you see a team get remotely close to it, you’re willing them to take the record, because you’re fed up of being the brunt of jokes and quiz questions,” the former Derby County defender, Michael Johnson, says. “For the lads involved, and myself, it’s always been that itch on your back you can’t scratch. A record that nobody wants to hold: the worst team in Premier League history.”

With every passing week at St Mary’s, home of lowly Southampton, however, Derby’s 11-point Premier League tally in 2007-08 — the worst ever top-flight total and the lowest recorded by an English team since the introduction of three points for a win — looms larger on the horizon.

After 23 games, a solitary win (against Everton) and three draws amount to six points on the table going into today’s meeting with Ipswich Town who, in 19th, are one place but ten points better off than Southampton.

Even Derby had claimed one more point at the same stage of their fateful campaign. If Ivan Juric — whose record reads played six, lost six since he replaced Russell Martin in December — and Southampton’s players wish to avoid claiming one of football’s most unwanted accolades then the visit to Portman Road would be a good place to start.



“I think everyone knows now that Southampton are going to go down,” Paul Jewell, Derby’s manager for the final 24 games in 2007-08, says. “Their only hope is not to do so with the fewest number of points. I do see similarities. Some of the basic mistakes. They’re in games, doing OK, and five minutes later they’re two or three down. In the Premier League it’s almost impossible to come back from that against a team who are better than you.”

Only one other team since the formation of the Football League — Loughborough in 1899-1900 — has gone through a season winning one league game. Derby’s campaign also yielded a record number of defeats (29), the fewest number of goals scored (20), the longest run without victory (32 games), the earliest relegation (March 29) and finishing the furthest adrift of 19th place (24 points) in Premier League history.



Derby briefly moved off the bottom of the table with victory over Newcastle, left. Jewell, right, took over in November 2007 and brought in old heads, such as Savage, inset below, but the side still broke unwanted records that Southampton, below, could break again

It is a season that left a lasting impact. “It certainly harmed my managerial career,” says Jewell, whose reputation was high when he replaced Billy Davies in November 2007, after success with Bradford City and Wigan Athletic. “To be honest, I’d turned the job down in August. Billy was the manager, and I would never interview for a job while they’ve got a manager in situ.

“When they came to speak to me again, David Moyes rang me up. They’d [Everton] not long played Derby. He said, ‘They won’t win another game all season.’ I didn’t believe him, but he was right.

“I remember after our first training session walking back in and saying to my assistant, Stan Ternent, ‘We’re in serious trouble here.’ The training session wasn’t what I was used to. It lacked quality, intensity. But listen, my name’s on that relegation. I had 24 games to try and get it right, and I didn’t. So I have no problem taking my share of the blame.

“But there were rumblings from the day they were promoted. And I don’t know if any of the players in that squad ever played Premier League football again.”

Jewell has a point: David Jones, Tyrone Mears, Giles Barnes, Craig Fagan and Andy Griffin were, in fact, the only members of Derby’s squad to be seen again in the top flight. Discontent had been brewing from the moment Derby defeated West Bromwich Albion in the 2007 Championship play-off final, given that Davies had got wind of a potential takeover and raised doubt about his position before the champagne corks had even been popped.

After a fractious summer, during which the strikers Kenny Miller and Robert Earnshaw and the centre half Claude Davis accounted for most of Derby’s £10 million transfer outlay, Pride Park was buoyant after Derby’s 2-2 draw with Portsmouth on the opening day.

By the end of November, though, the scale of the challenge was laid bare as Derby shipped four against Tottenham Hotspur, five against Arsenal and West Ham United and — after one bookmaker had promised to pay out on the club going down if they failed to win away to Liverpool on September 1 — six without reply at Anfield.

A 1-0 win against Newcastle United — courtesy of Miller’s half-volley from 30 yards — in mid-September briefly lifted Derby off the foot of the table. But Davies was sacked in late November, less than 48 hours after criticising Derby’s new chairman, Adam Pearson, for a lack of support after a 2-0 home defeat by Chelsea.



“I remember when I signed for Derby, Billy had talked about a three-year plan — we got promoted in one,” Steve Howard, who scored 16 goals in Derby’s promotion campaign and one in the Premier League in a 4-1 loss at Old Trafford, says. “We came into the Premier League totally unprepared.

“By the time Paul Jewell came in, he didn’t have a chance. We were already dead and buried. I think a few of the lads had given up. It’s so easy to get into a losing mentality. That’s what Southampton are in now. They think, ‘Come on, we’re gonna get a win today.’ But they don’t really believe it.”

Johnson agrees. “You go into games, there’s a real nervousness, particularly if you concede first,” he says. “It’s that ‘oh no, not again’ syndrome. You look at the fixtures, try to see where you might nick a point or a win. When the big boys roll

ALEX LIVESEY/GETTY IMAGES



into town, you're thinking, 'Is it going to be a cricket score?' The fans give up hope. And you've got your own self-pride.

"The lads stuck together. But as you can imagine, when you're losing five, six, seven games in a row, you reach a breaking point. The togetherness goes. But you still had to go out there and try your best, as professional footballers. And that's what the players did that year. They tried their best. But it just wasn't good enough."

Jewell tried to shake up Derby's squad in the January transfer window, shipping out a raft of players, including Johnson and Howard, and bringing in seven, including the experienced Robbie Savage, below, Danny Mills, Alan Stubbs and Roy Carroll.

"I missed a penalty against Blackburn," Howard says of a 2-1 defeat on December 30. "I was in my car on the way home and Paul Jewell rang me and said, 'Can you report to Leicester the next morning?' I went, 'Oh right, have you got us in for training, are we training down there?' He went, 'No, I've sold you.' I was like, 'Oh, right.'

"A few started to jump ship. It's funny, Derby supporters, even now, say to me, 'I can't believe you left!' I didn't, I got sold! I'd worked all my career to get to the Premier League. It was really bittersweet for me."

Jewell — who was dismissed midway through the following season, before an eight-month spell at Ipswich Town between 2011 and 2012 marked the end of his managerial career — admits that he never recovered from the experience. "I do wish someone else took the mantle," Jewell, 60, says.

"I got asked by one of the betting companies to do an advert not long ago, make a bit of a joke about that season. I turned that down very quickly because it was no laughing matter to me, that season."

Even now, though, he reflects on moments and games that might have made the experience a little less harrowing. "My first game was away at Sunderland, on December 1. We lost 1-0. I think they scored in the 93rd minute through [Anthony Stokes]," he recalls.

"My first home game was Middlesbrough: Tuncay scored one of the goals of the season, and we lost 1-0. Then we went to Newcastle, were 2-1 up in the 87th minute, and [Mark] Viduka equalised.

"We played Liverpool on Boxing Day: it's 1-1, [Steven] Gerrard scores in the 92nd minute. Then on [December] 30th, we played Blackburn. We're 1-0 up and [Howard] missed a penalty to go 2-0 up, and we lose the game 2-1. And on January 2nd, we played Bolton, and lost to a 91st-minute winner.

"I'm not saying we would have stayed up. But out of those games, we might have had about eight extra points. Southampton have that problem now: even if they won three games on the spin, which is very difficult in the Premier League, they're still going to be in the bottom three. Psychologically, that has a huge effect on everyone."



Worst top-flight seasons since 1888

(based on points per game, assuming 3pts for a win)



Derby County, 2007-08 0.29 points per game (P38, 11pts)
Managers
Billy Davies, Paul Jewell.
Previous season
Third in second tier

So bad was Derby's season that they would still have finished bottom had they earned 27 points per win – they recorded one victory and finished 24 points behind second-bottom Birmingham. To sum up their misfortune, their only winning goal of the campaign — by Kenny Miller against Newcastle United — was missed by television, which was showing a replay of a previous incident as the ball hit the net.

Sunderland, 2005-06
0.39 ppg (P38, 15pts)
Managers
Mick McCarthy, Kevin Ball (caretaker).
Previous season
First in second tier

Sunderland's 19 points in 2002-03 constitutes the seventh-worst season of all time but they managed to shave four points off even that pitiful tally the next time they were back in the top flight. McCarthy had lost all nine league games as their manager in 2002-03, taking over in March when all hope was lost, and he himself only lasted until March 2006 before he was put out of his misery.

Stoke City, 1984-85
0.4 ppg (P42, 17pts)
Managers
Bill Asprey, Tony Lacey (caretaker).
Previous season
18th of 22 in top flight

Their eye-catching names included the regulars Steve Bould, Sammy McIlroy and Mark Chamberlain and the less-selected Joe Corrigan and Alan Hudson but wins over Manchester United and Arsenal were among only three achieved all season. Attendances fell to a low of 4,597 for the defeat by Norwich City.

Huddersfield Town, 2018-19
0.42 ppg (P38, 16pts)
Managers
David Wagner, Mark Hudson (caretaker), Jan Siewert.
Previous season
16th of 20 in top flight

Huddersfield had just escaped relegation in 2017-18 on their first time back in the top flight since the early 1970s, with David Wagner hailed for steering them into the Premier League and then keeping them there. But he could not engineer a repeat the following season as a run of 21 defeats in 23 matches sealed the Yorkshire club's fate.

Sheffield United, 2023-24
0.42 ppg (P38, 16pts)
Managers
Paul Heckingbottom, Chris Wilder.
Previous season
Second in second tier

United had accrued 23 points in finishing bottom of the Premier League in 2020-21, with Paul Heckingbottom replacing Chris Wilder as manager during the campaign. They tried the reverse here, Wilder stepping in for Heckingbottom in December, but the outcome was even worse. Home fans winced at several heavy Bramall Lane defeats: 5-0 by Aston Villa and Brighton & Hove Albion, 6-0 by Arsenal and 8-0 by Newcastle, above.

SPORT NOTEBOOK



SPORTS JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR

Martyn Ziegler
Chief Sports Reporter

Greenland keen on an alliance with US (not that one, Trump)

Greenland may be trying to fend off Donald Trump-inspired American interest but its football association, KAK, is desperate to join the confederation that includes the United States. The autonomous territory, controlled by Denmark, has unsuccessfully sought to join Uefa in the past but has now set its sights on Concacaf, which covers 41 member associations in North America, the Caribbean and central America.

A KAK delegation is heading to Miami this month for talks but a well-placed source told this column that Greenland's hopes look certain to be dashed, ruling out the possibility of Barbados and other such sun-kissed islands having to play away matches on pitches next to an ice sheet.

Trump has refused to rule out using military force, saying it is an "absolute necessity" for the US to control Greenland, which has a population of 57,000 and 18 football pitches, for his country's security. "If Trump has his way then maybe the players will be eligible to be selected by Mauricio Pochettino for the USA team," said the source, perhaps only half-joking.

The KAK's president, Kenneth Kleist, said: "The invitation [to talks] is not related to the current geopolitical interest in Greenland. Being able to play international matches would mean an awful lot to Greenland."

Infantino PR push

After his breathless trip to Trump's inauguration, the Fifa president Gianni Infantino flew back across the Atlantic to Rome where he presented pennants to Elon Musk's brother Kimbal and Italy's far-right deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini.

The Fifa pennants were personalised with the two men's names on them and Infantino posted pictures on his Instagram account describing it as "a moment in the eternal city to further explore opportunities to positively impact people's lives through the beautiful game".

They probably did not discuss Fifa's much heralded collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) — Salvini this week followed Trump's lead in proposing a law that would lead to Italy leaving the WHO.

Licence to spill

The football agent Barry Silkman had a book launch this week for his autobiography *The Not So Secret Football Agent* which details his colourful career, including as a professional player in the lower leagues.

"Silks", as the larger-than-life Cockney is widely known, has been involved with many West Ham United deals, including those for Lucas Paquetá and Tomas Soucek. The not-so-secret agent persona extends to his mobile phone number, which ends "007" and his voicemail plays James Bond music.

It'll be ref justice

Football's lawmakers will be asked next month to change the drop-ball rule relating to what happens when the ball hits a referee.

Since a law change in 2019, an uncontested drop-ball is given to the team that previously had possession.

However, there have been incidents — including in the 2023 Women's World Cup — in which a ball has been kicked clear and would almost certainly have ended up with the opposition had it not struck the referee, so in those instances, dropping the ball back to the team who would otherwise have conceded possession does not seem fair.

A proposal to the International FA Board, which meets in Belfast on March 1, is understood to suggest that referees have leeway to decide what should happen.



Six Nations stays

Any move by the Six Nations to sell the TV rights to the tournament to a subscription channel would have to be approved by the broadcasting watchdog Ofcom, which is another indication that they are likely to remain on terrestrial TV.

The Six Nations is defined as a group B listed event, which means that coverage — but not necessarily live coverage — is widely available to UK audiences for free. Ofcom has approved the BBC and ITV's broadcasts of this year's tournament "noting that their plans would secure that live coverage of the tournament is available for free and to audiences across the UK". It said responses to its consultation process included a number which "noted how much they had valued the BBC and ITV's live coverage in previous years".

TNT Sports, the subscription service, said this week it would be "very challenging" to be involved in covering the tournament. The Six Nations is no doubt desperate for competition to push up the price but it is looking increasingly likely that the arrangement where the BBC has Wales and Scotland home matches and ITV has the rest is the favourite to continue next year.

Davis and Taylor still big draw, 40 years after snooker's JFK moment

The prog-rock DJ and the former altar boy tell **Rick Broadbent** about touring land to re-enact last frame of 1985 final

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARC ASPLAND



Davis and Taylor are re-enacting their classic final, below, during a national tour. Inset Taylor celebrates with wife Trish

In his sporting afterlife, Steve Davis has played the modular synthesiser with his electronic band The Utopia Strong at Glastonbury and then, last summer, DJ'd for Britpop darlings Blur at Wembley Stadium. He also wrote one of the most left-field books by any back-page celebrity, complete with anecdotes about overloading his manager, Barry Hearn, with Brazilian jazz fusion LPs on transatlantic flights and lines such as: "I doubt if you bought a space cake in a reputable shop in Amsterdam that it would have been anywhere near the premiership Ozric Tentacles-tinged monstrosity I allegedly accidentally nearly ate." He is nothing if not interesting.

Now Davis, a slim 67, is backstage at the Hexagon in Reading with Dennis Taylor, ever-avuncular at 76, as they go on tour, re-enacting the climax of the 1985 World Snooker Championship final. It was a 1980s odyssey, nigh on 15 hours and 19 million post-midnight viewers, the supposedly ditchwater dull Essex metronome and the Northern Irish underdog looking prematurely middle-aged with his "big, silly upside-down glasses".

Davis led 8-0 but it ebbed and flowed to 17-17 and came down to the last black. A fine cut to win was fluffed and Taylor capitalised. He waved the cue over his head and wagged a finger at a friend. The length and breadth of the clash of contrasts made for an event that still has 630 people coming out on a cold, wet Tuesday night in Berkshire to see Davis lose again.

Even the aftermath 40 years ago was memorable as the BBC presenter, David Vine, suggested it was a pretty tough moment.

"Yes," said an ashen-faced Davis.

"Can you believe what's happened?"

"Yeah, it happened in black and white."

Had he experienced anything like it before?

"No."

Monosyllables were used to mock Davis thereafter. The "interesting" moniker was the basis of his *Spitting Image* satirical puppet, although Davis would debunk that barb by recounting how he replaced himself with the Latex caricature in the marital bed and thus gave his then-wife the night of her life.

"David was brilliant, but he probably asked the wrong question there," a sympathetic Taylor says, as we sit in dressing-room No 4, waiting for the call.

"No, I think it was a good question," says Davis, who is happy to engage on subjects ranging from Cold War chess matches to the animalistic shamanism of French prog-rock drummers. "You have to spare a thought for the presenter in any sport if the loser is on his knees. Stephen Hendry was told to do an interview with someone at the Masters and said, 'Christ, what do I ask?' He had a point because all they can come out with is bitter, twisted, excuse-ridden, not-wanting-to-be-there shit."



The loser was big news in 1985. After that Sheffield final Taylor says a group of players went to Kuala Lumpur. "They stopped the traffic in the streets and there was a huge banner outside the club. In big letters it said, 'Welcome Steve Davis' and then underneath it said 'and colleagues'. I was the world champion but everyone knew Steve."

Davis won six world titles and 28 ranking tournaments, and is the only snooker player to have won the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award, in 1988. Taylor's only other world final had come in 1979, but his peak was snooker's Mount Olympus.

It is easy to squint back and assume it was all better then. "It's interesting, but there are people in the UK who think snooker has gone down the pan," Davis says. "That's hilarious because the game is bigger than it has ever been — by miles. It's one of the UK's best exports now and we're all quite proud." He adds that it has sufficient amateur associations to get Olympic recognition. "Every session of the Masters [at London's Alexandra Palace] is now a 2,200 sell-out and we didn't have that," he says. "What you can't replicate, though, is that first wave, and we were new."

Sketch shows mined snooker for comedy gold. Taylor says he was on *Wogan* three times a year. The impact of that final frame was evident in the way Taylor navigated the sectarian divide. "I could go anywhere," he says. A Catholic in the time of Troubles, one of the first exhibitions he played as world champion was on the loyalist Shankill Road. "I was a little old altar boy from Coalisland, very Catholic, but they welcomed me with open arms," he adds.

His only problem came when Cliff Thorburn accompanied him to Derry for two dates, one in a Catholic venue, the other Protestant. "Cliff got up and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure to be here in Londonderry'. The place went deathly silent. I got up and said, 'Cliff, that's tomorrow'. Luckily, that brought the house down."

Of course, they have got lots of old tales but they are also co-commentators these days, and are as interested in putting the present in context. So Taylor politely rejects the idea that Davis was a sporting genius. Alex Higgins? "Alex could play genius shots but you could beat Alex."

Davis interjects: "There's a danger that the only people you call genius are the ones who are flawed. It's an overused word. I think it means this weird, sort of unearthly thing, something the rest of us can't access. The only player I'd ever call a genius is Ronnie O'Sullivan."

Taylor agrees. "The fact he can switch hands and clear the table. There's genius." Cue the letter from a fan impressed that Taylor could also, temporarily, change hands. "He wrote, 'I'd give my left arm to be ambidextrous."

Even in his seemingly monomaniac pomp, Davis was always passionate about his music. In 1989 he promoted three gigs at London's Bloomsbury Theatre for his beloved Magma, a little-known jazz-classical-symphonic group that had devised their own language. He says it was the only time he has ever felt star-struck.

He started to DJ with community radio in Brentwood, met multi-instrumentalist Kavus Torabi and eventually used his links in the electro-dance world to get a slot at the Glastonbury Festival.

By contrast to those sessions with The Utopia Strong, he says the DJ gigs are easy — a case of pressing buttons — and he did Glastonbury again in 2023 before the call came from Blur. He is still not sure why. "Out of the blue," he says. "There was somebody who worked with Blur in a recording studio who knew my agent, Maybe that was it. I didn't really get any clue they were big snooker fans, although they are from Essex."

Davis dismisses analogies between his two performing careers. Two worlds collided in 1986 when Davis and Taylor joined Chas & Dave to take the insanely catchy *Snooker Loopy* to No 6 in the charts. "It became an earworm that unfortunately you can't get out of your head, but shows you Chas & Dave could write melodies," he says.

Taylor's extra-curricular endeavours included a stint on the third series of *Strictly Come Dancing*, when the winner, Darren Gough, "entertained" the dancers by singing *Snooker Loopy* in rehearsal. "I didn't even know the words," Taylor says.

It was not all knockabout fare in the old days. Higgins and Jimmy White suffered from substance abuse and Willie Thorne once told me his gambling debt led him to take "enough pills to kill an elephant". Davis says it could be a lonely life and you needed "a mate, a wingman, a gofer" rather than a coach.

On cue, the promoter arrives with two pints of lager. "You've got ten minutes," he says. Just time to consider why we are here, all these years on, with punters willing to pay extra for a meet-and-greet.

"Timing," Davis says. "The World Championships had been on the BBC for around six years, reached an incredible level of popularity, and I'd become that dominant player that I think is good for any sport, someone to beat. That was handy."

Soon these two friends are back on stage, Davis racking up a 70-break before he has to miss the black again. Taylor says his strategy was not to lose a golden chance playing safety shots and so went for a double to win, or in Davis's words "a fluke". In its time warp, the Hexagon purrs.

Later, Taylor nails the simple, enduring appeal of the black-ball final. "A man came up to me earlier and said there have been lots of other brilliant finals — and we don't remember any of them," he says. It was a JFK moment with Ted Lowe and is now a slice of lost youth. Much like a favourite record stuck in the groove, the happily loopy of Reading are still relishing the same old song.



Hundred likely to raise £800m – it's incredible for event in its infancy



Mike Atherton
Chief Cricket Correspondent

Often described as cricket's Brexit, given how it has split opinion, the Hundred will produce an immediate financial dividend the likes of which the Brexiteers could only dream. After an astonishing bid valuing the London Spirit franchise at close to £300 million yesterday, the eventual value of the entire tournament could come in at about £800 million, producing an immediate windfall for each first-class county of between £10-12 million, for the minority stakes that have been sold off.

London was the jewel in the Hundred's crown, and Lord's the most glittering host venue of them all, its name and cache the only possible reason why the tech titans from America have ventured about £145 million for 49 per cent of its franchise. The phrase "after the Lord Mayor's show" came to mind for Cardiff, who nevertheless followed up with a still impressive bid from the owners of Washington Freedom of about £39 million for their 49 per cent.

An £800 million valuation for the Hundred would be scarcely believable for a competition in its infancy, for franchises with nascent balance sheets and uncertain future revenues, as well as for cash-strapped counties who will have a chance to repair their own balance sheets — if not their business models — now. Whether it will be a good result for investors remains to be seen, but, as suggested last week, it is a bet on the resilience of the global sports market and the direction of cricket to come.

In that sense, the Hundred will have delivered on the intentions of its architects, Tom Harrison and Colin Graves, which were focused resolutely on the bottom line. It was always about the money. Forget the talk of a new audience, the concept of the Hundred was, first and foremost, a hard-headed business decision designed to create non-member-owned entities, through which private investment could flow into English cricket for the first time.

And that was a perfectly rational position to take, by the way, the inevitable ructions to come between old and new notwithstanding. With virtually every other cricketing nation attracting private investment, the competition for talent was likely to get more expensive. That, and the fear of declining interest and television revenues for bilateral international cricket, encouraged the ECB to want to control more of its destiny in-house.

So any judgment of the outcome of this sale process has to focus primarily on the money as well. Sure, franchises want the right fit and Richard Thompson, the ECB chairman, has said he wants a variety of ownership — unlike South Africa, whose franchise tournament has become IPL-lite — but the final amount matters above all, because that was the overwhelming reason for it.

And after two days of the auction, the coffers have been filling up. The four lots of 49 per cent each of the Oval, Lord's, Cardiff and Birmingham have been sold for just shy of £300 million in total. Three of the four winning bidders are non-IPL, leaving some of the key IPL players, such as the Sun group, and Sanjiv Goenka's RPSG group, to get involved for Manchester, Leeds and Nottingham next week.

But what constitutes a good financial outcome? In November 2022, the private equity firm, Bridgepoint, made a speculative offer of £400 million for the entire tournament, which could be fairly taken as a minimum acceptable figure for the value of any sale thereafter.

In late 2022, on England's tour of Pakistan, Thompson set a much higher benchmark when responding to the Bridgepoint news. "We would need to think very long and hard if we were to sell four or five weeks of the English summer to a third party," he said. "What we won't do is be opportunistic. We'll think things through and we won't sell the game short. Lucknow Super Giants, one team in the IPL, sold for a billion. One team. That should establish a benchmark of value. I think we've got a long way to go before we do something," he said.

Thompson's "long time" duly became two years, and it is likely that the result will sit closer to a billion-pound marker than to Bridgepoint's. Once contracts are signed and sealed — an exclusivity period will follow now — it will, in any event, be a very sizeable windfall that has come to English cricket. Although the extent of the outlay also means it is more likely the investors will want to call the shots as well.

With the arrival of private money, English cricket has taken a radical, irreversible new direction. That the debate will continue, was evidenced on social media on Thursday, when two former England cricketers, Michael Vaughan and Jack Russell, jousted about what it all means for the county game, with Vaughan arguing the money will help its survival and Russell calling it a short-term fix. What happens, Russell wondered, when this money runs out?

There is so much that is yet uncertain. How wisely, for example, will the non-host counties use the money? How much influence will the new investors look to exert as they try to recoup these enormous sums? For now, the ECB and architects of the Hundred can reflect on things with some satisfaction: they created a new competition to raise money for the English game and that is exactly what it has done. As one disappointed potential investor said to me yesterday: for the ECB, this week has been "a very good result".

Who are the bidders?

The auction took place between four bidders — the Silicon Valley tech consortium; RPSG, the owners of Lucknow Super Giants in the IPL; Avram Glazer, the Manchester United co-chairman; and Cain International, who have a stake in Chelsea FC. Bids were taken every few minutes, with the price going up by about £3 million every 15 minutes.

The successful tech consortium comprises a group of 11 senior executives using their own money and includes the chief executive of Microsoft, Satya Nadella, who was born in Hyderabad in India but now has American citizenship.

It also includes Sundar Pichai, 52, the chief executive of Google, and Shantanu Narayen, the chief executive of Adobe, another Indian-American businessman. Nikesh Arora, formerly a senior executive at Google with an estimated personal net wealth of $1.5 billion, is involved alongside Satyan Gajwani, the Major League Cricket co-founder and vice-chairman of Times Internet, and Egon Durban, the chief executive of Silver Lake Management.

'Next time we'll pick

India v England

Pune (England won toss and elected to bowl)
India beat England by 15 runs

Fourth T20 international

Elgan Alderman
Pune

England had two reasons to be unhappy. They lost a match, and a series, and among India's wicket-takers was a concussion replacement they deemed to be far from "like for like".

Harshit Rana, making his T20I debut as a mid-match substitute for Shivam Dube, took three wickets after Dube's half-century from No6. Dube is a batsman who can bowl, Harshit a 90mph seamer (he has a first-class century but he has batted three times in his T20 career, scoring two runs from No11). Jos Buttler, the England captain, named Ramandeep Singh as a more reasonable candidate for change.

"It's not a like-for-like replacement," Buttler said. "Either Shivam Dube has put on about 25mph with the ball or Harshit has really improved his batting. It's part of the game. I still think we should have gone on to win but we disagree with the decision.

"There's no consultation. I was thinking: 'Who's Harshit on for?' [The umpires] said the match referee had made the decision so we had no say in it. We'll ask Javagal Srinath [the match referee] some questions just to get some clarity."

Buttler was asked if it reminded him of the IPL "impact player". "Maybe at the toss next game I'll say we're going to play 12 as well," he said, before adding

RESULTS

Basketball

NBA
Cleveland Cavaliers 137 Atlanta Hawks 115, Washington Wizards 96 LA Lakers 134, Utah Jazz 113 Minnesota Timberwolves 138, Memphis Grizzlies 120 Houston Rockets 119, Portland Trail Blazers 119 Orlando Magic 90.

Cricket

Sri Lanka v Australia, First Test
Galle International Stadium (third day of five): Sri Lanka, with five first innings wickets in hand, are 518 runs behind Australia
Australia: First Innings 654-6 dec (U T Khawaja 232; S P D Smith 141; J P Inglis 102; T M Head 57)
Sri Lanka: First Innings (overnight 44-3)

L D Chandimal not out	63
P H K D Mendis c Carey b Starc	15
*D M de Silva st Carey b Kuhnemann	22
†B K G Mendis not out	10
Extras (lb 4nb 1)	5
Total (5 wkts, 42 overs)	136

N G R P Jayasuriya, K N Peiris, J D F Vandersay and A M Fernando to bat.
Fall of wickets 1-7, 2-15, 3-30, 4-67, 5-107.
Bowling Starc 8-1-13-2; Kuhnemann 13-2-48-2; Lyon 15-2-43-1; Murphy 6-1-28-0.
Umpires: A T Holdstock and C B Gaffaney

Australia Women v England Women
Test Match
Melbourne Cricket Ground (second day of four): Australia Women, with five first-innings wickets in hand, lead England Women by 252 runs
England Women: First Innings 170 (N R Sciver-Brunt 51; A M King 4 for 45)
Australia Women: First Innings (overnight 56-1)

P E S Litchfield c Jones b Bell	45
A J Sutherland b MacDonald-Gay	163
*A J Healy lbw b Ecclestone	34
†B L Mooney not out	98
A K Gardner c Filer b Ecclestone	44
T M McGrath not out	9
Extras (b 6, lb 7, w 4)	17
Total (5 wkts, 120 overs)	422

E A Perry, K J Garth, A M King and D R Brown to bat.
Fall of wickets 1-19, 2-99, 3-170, 4-324, 5-405.
Bowling Bell 25-3-94-2; Filer 21-4-78-0; Sciver-Brunt 15-3-29-0; Ecclestone 39-6-134-2; MacDonald-Gay 19-3-69-1; Knight 1-0-5-0.
Umpires: E Sheridan and C A Polosak

Australia A v England Lions
Four day match
Sydney Olympic Park (second day of four): England Lions, with eight second innings wickets in hand, need 141 runs to avoid an innings defeat by Australia A
Australia A: First Innings (overnight 262-3)

K R Patterson lbw b Cook	137
†J R Philippe not out	120
W J Sutherland b Cook	7
X C Bartlett c sub b Baker	7
F P O'Neill c Hurst b Baker	8
B J Doggett c McCann b Pennington	0
J S D Buckingham b Pennington	0
C J Rocchiccioli not out	3
Extras (lb 19)	19
Total (9 wkts dec, 98 overs)	373

Fall of wickets 1-0, 2-174, 3-177, 4-286, 5-304, 6-313, 7-336, 8-337, 9-341.
Bowling Cook 21-3-58-3; Tongue 13-2-56-0; Pennington 21-3-72-2; Baker 18-6-60-3; Bashir 19-1-74-1; Coles 5-0-32-0; McCann 1-0-2-0.
England Lions: First Innings

*A L Davies c Goodwin b Bartlett	0
B S McKinney c Sutherland b O'Neill	26
F W McCann c Philippe b Bartlett	0
†M F Hurst c Philippe b Sutherland	33
J M Coles c Patterson b Doggett	14
R Flintoff c Sutherland b Doggett	29
J C Tongue c Philippe b Sutherland	0
S Bashir c Philippe b Sutherland	0
S Baker c Patterson b Doggett	3
S J Cook c Bartlett b O'Neill	2
D Y Pennington not out	0
Extras (lb 5nb 4)	9
Total (37.3 overs)	116

Fall of wickets 1-0, 2-6, 3-30, 4-59, 5-106, 6-106, 7-106, 8-112, 9-116.
Bowling Bartlett 9-4-22-2; O'Neill 8.3-4-19-2; Buckingham 3-0-22-0; Doggett 7-2-17-3; Rocchiccioli 2-0-11-0; Hardie 3-1-13-0; Sutherland 5-0-7-3.
Second Innings

*A L Davies c Philippe b Buckingham	28
B S McKinney not out	67
F W McCann c Doggett b Buckingham	2
S Baker not out	0
Extras (b 8, w 7, nb 4)	19
Total (2 wkts, 24 overs)	116

Fall of wickets 1-106, 2-115.
Bowling Bartlett 4-0-12-0; Buckingham 4-0-19-2; O'Neill 4-1-8-0; Doggett 3-0-17-0; Sutherland 4-0-27-0; Rocchiccioli 3-0-19-0; Hardie 2-0-6-0.
Umpires: P J Gillespie and T M Penman

Ice Hockey

NHL
Tampa Bay Lightning 3 Los Angeles Kings 0, Carolina Hurricanes 3 Chicago Blackhawks 2, Ottawa Senators 5 Washington Capitals 4 (OT), Montreal Canadiens 0 Minnesota Wild 4, Boston Bruins 2 Winnipeg Jets 6, Philadelphia Flyers 0 New York Islanders 3, Edmonton Oilers 2 Detroit Red Wings 3 (SO), Calgary Flames 4 Anaheim Ducks 1, Vegas Golden Knights 1 Columbus Blue Jackets 2(OT), Seattle Kraken 6 San Jose Sharks 2.

Golf

USPGA Tour AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am
Pebble Beach: First round scores (US unless stated): **64** R Henley. **65** C Davis (Aus), R Hoejgaard (Den), V Hovland (Nor), J Knapp, J Rose (Eng), S Straka (Aut). **66** P Cantlay, E Cole, L Glover, L Hodges, S Lowry (Ire), R McIlroy (N Ire), J Thomas. **67** A Eckroat, T Finau, Si-Woo Kim (S Kor), T Pendrith (Can), S Scheffler, S Stevens, S Theegala, E van Rooyen (SA). **68** C Bezuidenhout (SA), S Burns, H English, R Fowler, T Hoge, M Hughes (Can), Sung-Jae Im (S Kor), S Jaeger (Ger), R MacIntyre (Scot), M McNealy, M Pavon (Fr), N Taylor (Can), G Woodland. **69** A Bhatia, T Detry (Bel), N Dunlap, N Echavarria (Col), B Griffin, M Hubbard, Joo-Hyung Kim (S Kor).



INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Rana helped India to seal the series win as he bowled Overton, left, and took two other wickets after being introduced as a concussion replacement for Dube, above, in a move that was questioned by England captain Buttler, below



12' – Buttler blasts India for bending rules

on whether Harshit won the game on his own: "No, he didn't, but he helped."

The ICC men's T20I playing conditions stipulate that a like-for-like player can be a concussion replacement provided they do not "excessively advantage his/her team for the remainder of the match".

"The ICC match referee should consider the likely role the concussed player would have played, and the role that would be performed by the nominated concussion replacement," they read. "The ICC match referee may impose such conditions upon the identity and involvement of the concussion replacement as he/she sees fit."

Even as he critiqued, Buttler retained the smile he has been practising all winter. Seen on his face at the Ed Sheeran concert on the eve of the game, it continued when he won the toss for the first time in the series, which concludes tomorrow, and England finally chased.

Of course, England could still have won. They will look at how they were able to dismiss three members of India's top order in the second over and have them 98 for five after 13, and then be batting at 62 without loss in the powerplay only to lose by 15 runs.

Saqib Mahmood made his first appearance on tour and was on a hat-trick at his first opportunity. Buttler ramped up already attacking fields: three in the cordon, himself at short leg, and a fielder in front of the wicket on both sides. Mahmood missed the hat-trick but had to make do with a triple-wicket maiden.

This was not what the home fans expected as they walked in their droves to this Test venue in the village of Gahunje, just off the Mumbai-Pune Expressway. The approach to the ground from gate to gate comprises the occasional encounter with roaming cows, though several flat blocks nearby betray the urbanisation of the village.

The 53s of Dube and Hardik Pandya were India's bedrock. Abhishek Sharma went after Adil Rashid, who was allowed to wheel away serenely in the past two matches, before Dube took up the burden, making 25 runs off 11 balls of spin. Dube could have been out before he had scored or taken a bouncer to the helmet, but Buttler dropped a fast, one-handed diving effort at slip.

Hardik concentrated on pace and helped compile 83 runs from the final seven overs. In Jamie Overton's excellent final over a short ball struck the helmet of Dube, who passed his on-field test but then did not field. There was no question over his absence, only the identity of his replacement.

Phil Salt and Ben Duckett established a flying start at better than ten an over. Duckett, reverse-sweeping well, swiped at the last ball of the powerplay and Salt again tried to cut left-arm spin and missed. Buttler hit Ravi Bishnoi to short third man and England had lost three wickets for five runs in ten balls.

Harry Brook's 25-ball fifty kept hopes high until he signed his own warrant, guiding a scoop/sweep to short fine leg. England at last had Overton where they want him, against pace at the death, needing 25 off the final two overs, but he was floundering when Harshit bowled him with his final ball, adding to his previous victims of Liam Livingstone and Jacob Bethell.

Scoreboard

INDIA	R	B	M
†S V Samson c Carse b Mahmood	1	3	7
A Sharma c Bethell b Rashid	29	19	37
N T T Varma c Archer b Mahmood	0	1	1
*S A Yadav c Carse b Mahmood	0	4	3
R K Singh c Rashid b Carse	30	26	40
S R Dube run out (Buttler)	53	34	63
H H Pandya c Buttler b Overton	53	30	35
A R Patel c Bethell b Overton	5	4	5
A Singh run out (Salt/Overton)	0	1	1
R Bishnoi not out	0	0	3
Extras (lb 3, w 5, nb 2)	10		
TOTAL (9 wkts, 20 overs)	181		

V C Vinod did not bat

Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-12, 3-12, 4-57, 5-79, 6-166, 7-180, 8-180, 9-181

Bowling: Archer 4-0-37-0; Mahmood 4-1-35-3; Carse 4-0-39-1; Overton 4-0-32-2; Rashid 4-0-35-1

ENGLAND	R	B	M
†P D Salt b Patel	23	21	30
B M Duckett c Yadav b Bishnoi	39	19	26
*J C Buttler c Rana b Bishnoi	2	3	7
H C Brook c A Singh b Vinod	51	26	33
L S Livingstone c Samson b Rana	9	13	13
J G Bethell c Yadav b Rana	6	9	22
B A Carse c R K Singh b Vinod	0	2	1
J Overton b Rana	19	15	21
J C Archer b Bishnoi	0	2	3
A U Rashid not out	10	6	15
S Mahmood c Patel b A Singh	1	2	3
Extras (lb 5, w 1)	6		
TOTAL (19.4 overs)	166		

Fall of wickets: 1-62, 2-65, 3-67, 4-95, 5-129, 6-133, 7-137, 8-146, 9-163

Bowling: Singh 3.4-0-35-1; Pandya 1-0-11-0; Vinod 4-0-28-2; Patel 3-0-26-1; Bishnoi 4-0-28-3; Rana 4-0-33-3.

Umpires J Madanagopal & N Menon (Ind) **Player of the match** Shivam Dube (India)

● *India lead five-match series 3-1*

First T20i India won by seven wickets. **Second** India won by two wickets. **Third:** England won by 26 runs (Rajkot). **Fifth: Tomorrow** (Wankhede).

DP World Tour Bahrain Championship
Second round scores (GB & Ire unless stated) **131** C Tarren 64 67. **133** D Brown 68 65; A Pavan (It) 68 65. **134** P Larrazabal (Sp) 66 68. **135** T Pulkkanen (Fin) 66 69. **136** J Campillo (Sp) 70 66; F Laporta (It) 70 66; Jeong-Weon Ko (Fr) 71 65; J Lagergren (Swe) 67 69; B Robinson-Thompson 61 75. **137** L Canter 68 69, I Cantero (Sp) 73 64; N Colsaerts (Bel) 68 69; M Couvra (Fr) 66 71. **138** D Bradbury 70 68, B Wiesberger (Aut) 70 68; R Ramsay 66 72; M Schneider (Ger) 69 69. **139** P Reed (US) 71 68; A Cockerill (Can) 71 68; C Syme 69 70; J Scrivener (Aus) 69 70; J Kruyswijk (SA) 71 68; R Fisher 67 72; R Cabrera (Sp) 67 72; A Dumont (Bel) 69 70; K Reitan (Nor) 70 69; M Lindberg (Swe) 69 70. **140** J Guerrier (Fr) 74 66; A Otaegui (UAE) 72 68.

Snooker

German Masters
Berlin: Quarter-Finals Xiao Guodong (China) bt A Hill (Ire) 5-0; K Wilson (Eng) bt A McGill (Scot) 5-4.

Tennis

Davis Cup
Qualifying: First round: Y Nishioka (Japan) bt B Harris (GB) 7-5 6-1; J Fearnley (GB) bt K Nishikori (Japan) 6-3 6-3.

ATP Open Sud de France
Montpellier: Quarter-finals: F Auger-Aliassime (Can) bt Y Bu (China) 6-3, 6-4; J De Jong, (Neth) bt T Griekspoor (Neth) 7-6 (7-5), 6-4; A Rublev (Russ) bt N Basilashvili (Geo) 5-2 ret.

WTA Upper Austria Ladies Linz
Quarter-finals: D Yastremska (Ukr) bt M Sakkari (Gr) 7-5, 6-0; C Tauson (Den)bt A Blinkova (Russ) 6-4, 6-3; K Muchova (Cz) bt A Potapova (Russ) 6-3, 3-6, 6-3.

WTA Singapore Tennis Open
Quarter-finals: A Li (US) bt K Birrell (Aus) 7-6 (7-2) 7-6 (7-4); A Kalinskaya (Russ) bt M Sawangkaew (Thai) 6-3 4-6 6-0; X Wang (China) bt J Teichmann (Switz) 6-7 (5-7) 7-6 (7-5) 6-4; E Mertens (Bel) bt C Osorio (Col) 6-4 6-2.

FIXTURES

Today

Football

3.0 unless stated

Premier League Bournemouth v Liverpool; Everton v Leicester; Ipswich v Southampton; Newcastle v Fulham; Nottingham Forest v Brighton (12.30); Wolves v Aston Villa (5.30).
Sky Bet Championship Derby v Sheffield United; Hull v Stoke; Leeds v Cardiff; Millwall v QPR; Oxford v Bristol City (12.30); Plymouth v West Brom (12.30); Portsmouth v Burnley; Sheffield Wednesday v Luton; Swansea v Coventry; Watford v Norwich (12.30).
League One Barnsley v Burton (12.30); Birmingham v Rotherham; Blackpool v Charlton; Cambridge v Wycombe; Crawley v Wrexham; Leyton Orient v Stockport; Northampton v Huddersfield; Reading v Bolton; Shrewsbury v Mansfield; Stevenage v Exeter (12.30); Wigan v Lincoln.
League Two AFC Wimbledon v Bradford; Bromley v Grimsby; Carlisle v Swindon; Cheltenham v Chesterfield (12.30); Doncaster v MK Dons; Gillingham v Notts County (12.30); Harrogate v Crewe; Morecambe v Fleetwood; Newport v Barrow; Port Vale v Accrington; Tranmere v Colchester; Walsall v Salford.
National League AFC Fylde v Oldham; Braintree Town v Hartlepool; FC Halifax Town v Ebbsfleet United; Tamworth v Barnet; Wealdstone v Solihull Moors; Woking v Rochdale.
National League South Chelmsford City v Chesham United; Chippenham Town v Aveley; Dorking Wanderers v Slough Town; Eastbourne Borough v Tonbridge Angels; Enfield Town v Farnborough; Hornchurch v Salisbury; Maidstone United v Torquay United; St Albans City v Hampton & Richmond; Truro City v Bath City; Weston-super-Mare v Hemel Hempstead Town; Weymouth v Welling United.
National League North Buxton v Southport; Curzon Ashton v Rushall Olympic; Hereford FC v Brackley Town; Kings Lynn Town v Radcliffe; Leamington v Marine; Needham Market v Warrington Town; Peterborough Sports v Chester FC.
William Hill Scottish Premiership Dundee v Hearts; Hibernian v Aberdeen; Kilmarnock v Dundee Utd (5.45); St Mirren v St Johnstone.
Championship Airdrieonians v Queen's Park; Dunfermline v Raith Rovers; Hamilton v Ayr; Partick Thistle v Morton.
League 1 Cove Rangers v Arbroath; Dumbarton v Alloa; Inverness v Queen of South; Kelty Hearts v Annan; Montrose v Stenhousemuir.
League 2 Bonnyrigg Rose v Clyde; Edinburgh City v Stirling; Elgin v East Fife; Peterhead v Forfar; Stranraer v The Spartans.

Rugby union

Guinness Men's Six Nations Edinburgh: Scotland v Italy (2.15); Dublin: Ireland v England (4.45).

Tennis

Davis Cup first round Miki: Japan v Great Britain

Tomorrow

Football

Premier League Arsenal v Man City (4.30); Brentford v Tottenham (2.0); Manchester United v Crystal Palace (2.0).
Sky Bet League One Bristol Rovers v Peterborough (3.0).
William Hill Scottish Premiership (3.0): Motherwell v Celtic; Rangers v Ross County.
Women's Super League (2.0 unless stated): Aston Villa v Chelsea (2.30); Brighton v Crystal Palace; Everton v Leicester; Liverpool v West Ham; Manchester City v Arsenal (12.0); Tottenham v Manchester United (6.45).

Cricket

Fifth men's T20 international Mumbai: India v England (1.30).

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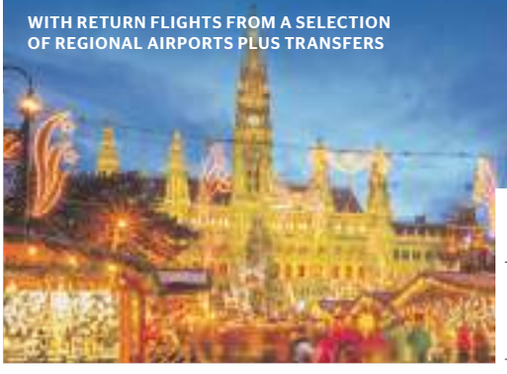
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The Danube's Imperial Cities and Yuletide Markets

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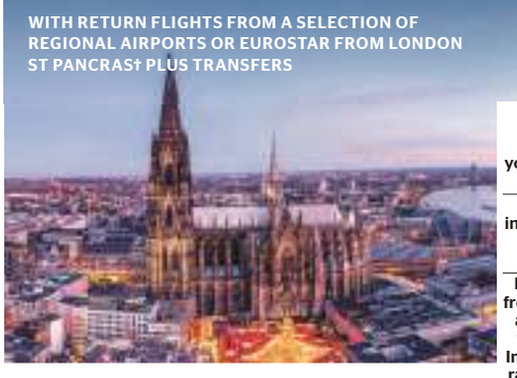
- Three guided tours including captivating Budapest, charming Bratislava and elegant Vienna
- Three Christmas market visits including Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna

Enchanting Rhine and Yuletide Markets

for Solo Travellers

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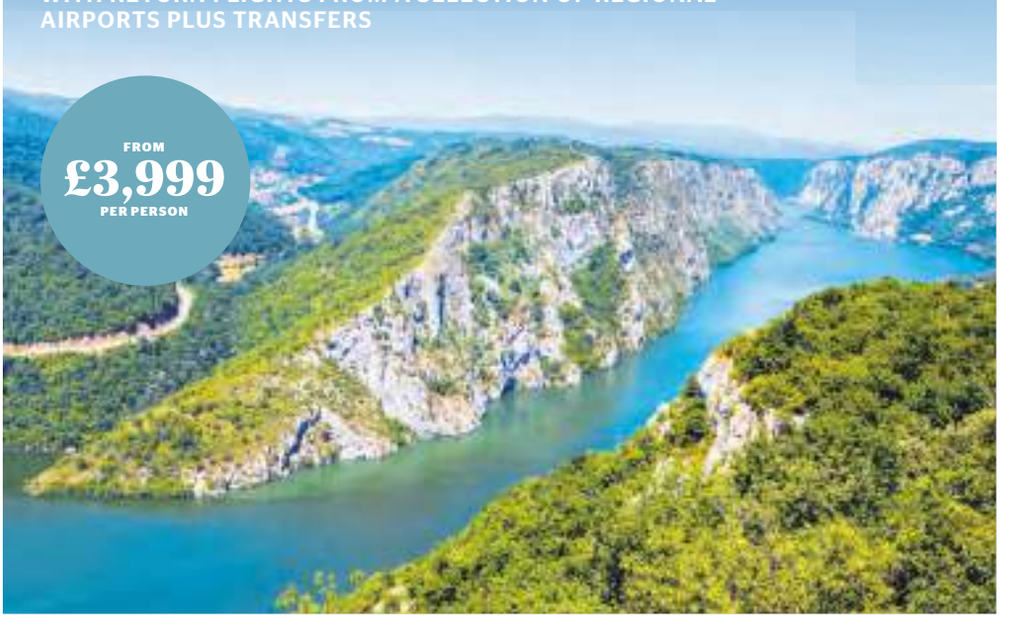


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