



THE SUNDAY TIMES

‘We’re constantly looking for light in the darkness’

- Two Southport families give their first interview
- Parents pay tribute to ‘angels’ Bebe and Elsie
- They recall horror of the day their daughters died

David Collins
Northern Editor

The families of two of the girls killed in the Southport attack have spoken out for the first time about their memories of their confident, happy and affectionate daughters and recalled the day they lost them.

Bebe King, six, and Elsie Dot Stancombe, seven, were stabbed to death at a Taylor Swift-themed dance lesson in July.

Their parents want them to be remembered for the characters they were rather than for the tragedy or for the nationwide riots that followed.

Jenni Stancombe, Elsie’s mother, said: “Everyone says it, don’t they, that they’re one of a kind? But she truly was. It was an honour to be her mum. Sometimes I think people are born special, and I genuinely believe she was.”

Bebe’s mother, who cannot be named for legal reasons, called the two children “angels”, and said: “Bebe had this power to connect with people, and the relationships she had with all her family members were different but very special. She had this innate kindness. She had a spark.”

They died last year along with nine-year-old Alice da Silva Aguiar after a 17-year-old armed with a knife burst into their dance workshop. Eight other children and two adults – the dance class leader, Leanne Lucas, and a businessman, Jonathan Hayes – were seriously wounded.

The parents recalled how they rushed to the scene after news spread of an attacker at the class. David and Jenni Stancombe ran out of the house and drove on the wrong side of the road to reach the Hart Space studio in Southport, where the attack was unfolding. Bebe’s mother rushed in a taxi only to learn from a police officer while standing on the corner of a street that her daughter had died.

Elsie’s father said: “You knew when you got there how bad it was. No human being should ever have to witness what we witnessed on that day.”

The perpetrator was jailed last month for a minimum of 52 years for a crime that shook the country and sparked riots and disorder in Southport, Liverpool, Manchester, London and many other towns and cities. By December more than 400 people had been sentenced for offences

COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES



Elsie Dot Stancombe was “grateful for life”; Bebe King, right, “had a spark”

‘NO ONE SHOULD SUFFER LIKE THIS’



INTERVIEW, PAGES 4-6

in connection with the unrest, from a 12-year-old boy in Southport who threw stones at the police to a 27-year-old man who was jailed for nine years for starting a fire outside a hotel that housed asylum seekers.

The Southport killer’s court proceedings and detail in the judge’s televised sentencing remarks upset the families greatly, and they are speaking today so that people remember their girls for their personalities.

In a three-hour interview:

- The parents did not mention the killer’s name at any point.
- They praised the support and work of their police liaison officers.
- They criticised the judge for his televised sentencing remarks, which they said went into too much injury detail.



● Elsie’s parents said she had been booked into the dance class at the last minute.

● Elsie’s father revealed his struggle with police officers to get inside the venue to find his daughter.

● They spoke of the comfort they received from the royal family, particularly the Princess of Wales during her first public appearance since being treated for cancer.

● Bebe’s family praised Alder Hey hospital’s bereavement team for helping them say goodbye to their daughter.

● Both families thanked the people of Southport and the wider public for their support.

Now the court proceedings are over, the families want people to know what their daughters were like. Elsie was

“grateful for life”, said Jenni, 35, and a girl of “pure enthusiasm” for simple things like taking out the bins with her father or going to the supermarket with her mother. When her father, David, 36, lost his mother two years ago, she wanted to help. “David would go out running, and when we lost his mum, she would be like, ‘I’ll run with you, Dad; I’ll go out with you, Dad,’” Jenni said.

Jenni described her daughter as her “best friend”. She was so caring that her mother suggested she might like a job as a nurse, but Elsie was keen to be a fashion designer by day and a cheerleader at night.

Bebe King had been to puppy yoga classes run by Lucas. Her family described the little girl as “headstrong” and a “natural performer” who loved

singing and acting out pop songs and musicals in front of friends and family.

“She used to make me belly-laugh,” her mother said. “She would do impressions. She would try stupid accents. Even when she was a baby she would have me belly-laughing.”

Her father remembers taking her to children’s birthday parties in church halls, where Bebe would be the first to spot a child being shy and help them have a good time. “She would literally pull them in,” he said. “She was so confident and full of life.”

Hours before the interview they met Sir Keir Starmer, who travelled to Southport in the week his government published a damning review of the Home Office’s Prevent scheme, which is designed to de-radicalise extremists before they become dangerous.

Axel Rudakubana, the killer, was referred to it three times between 2019 and 2021 because of his interest in terrorist attacks and school shootings. He had been caught carrying a knife on many occasions and had attacked a child at his old school with a hockey stick, with a knife in his bag. Despite this, his case was closed three times by Prevent officers and referred to other agencies, such as social services and mental health services. Starmer has said the Southport attack “must be a line in the sand” and “nothing will be off the table” in the public inquiry into the attack.

The families welcome the inquiry. “The next step is for the families to help shape the terms of reference for the public inquiry,” said Sara Stanger, director and head of serious injuries and public inquiries at Bond Turner, the law firm representing the families.

Bebe and Elsie’s families described the comfort and support they received from the royal family in the months after the attack. In August they visited King Charles at Clarence House, London, and in October the Princess of Wales visited them in Southport. It was her first public engagement since finishing chemotherapy. “That meant so much to Jenni,” David said. “I won’t say what they said to us, but what they shared with us was really, really powerful, and it was a powerful message and heartfelt, and it meant a lot.”

NEWMAN'S VIEW



Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire

Sir Keir Starmer asked the cabinet secretary to urge the BBC not to run a story revealing that Sue Gray, his top adviser, earned more than him.

Simon Case spoke to the corporation’s director-general and political editor last year when Downing Street was scrambling to stop the chief of staff’s salary becoming public along with allegations about how she had been awarded it.

The prime minister turned to the nation’s top civil ser-

vant soon after the BBC contacted Downing Street saying it was preparing to report that Gray had asked for and received a rise taking her pay to £170,000 – £3,000 more than Starmer’s.

Starmer and his team did not want information about Gray’s pay to be public. They concluded that it would set a dangerous precedent and rejected the claim that she had given herself the rise.

They also believed the BBC should not be publishing hostile and anonymous briefings about Gray, a career civil servant who wrote the report

about Downing Street gatherings during the Covid lockdowns before she joined Starmer’s top team.

Case first called Chris Mason, the BBC political editor, and then tried Tim Davie, who, as director-general, is the BBC’s editor-in-chief and responsible for all editorial output.

Such conversations – which are revealed in *Get In*, a book chronicling Starmer’s path to power – are rare and usually reserved for stories that, if published, could have national security implications or harm personnel involved in

military or intelligence operations. Even then, the BBC is free to invoke its editorial independence and the public interest.

One person familiar with previous approaches by senior civil servants to the corporation and its journalists noted that it was unusual for Case to be involved in what was in effect a party political dispute – namely a row between Starmer’s advisers that long predated Labour’s entry into government.

Mason told Case he had spoken to a number of sources – he later spoke of “several

senior figures” in government – who had confirmed the core details of the story. He said that this showed the scale of disquiet in Downing Street, strengthening the case for publication.

Case protested that certain details about Gray’s role in setting her own salary were inaccurate. He was particularly concerned about the claim that she had awarded herself the pay increase, saying that was incorrect.

In the eventual story, Mason reported that Gray sat on the committee that set pay for special advisers, of which

she was one. He also said she “declined” the suggestion that she might wish to earn less than Starmer. Whitehall sources said Case made no attempt to stop the story once Mason made clear that the BBC intended to proceed, saying that he simply repeated his wider concerns. He did, however, contact Davie.

Case asked the director-general to consider the wider implications of the story, including the idea that people might be discouraged from public service – in the civil service or in broadcasting – if they were subjected to intense

media criticism to which they could not respond publicly.

He argued that reporting Gray’s salary would cross a line.

While the Cabinet Office does not publish specific figures, special advisers have long had their remuneration released by band annually, meaning Gray’s salary, to

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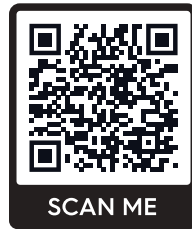


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Israel’s anger over emaciated hostages

President condemns ‘crime against humanity’ as Hamas parades gaunt trio in public before handover to Red Cross

Izzy Lyons and Peter Stubley

Three more Israeli hostages were released by Hamas yesterday morning during a ceremony condemned as a “crime against humanity” by Israel’s leaders.

Eli Sharabi, Ohad Ben Ami and Or Levy appeared gaunt and emaciated after 491 days in captivity in Gaza as they were paraded across a stage by armed Hamas fighters.

The scenes prompted the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is arranging the hostage exchanges agreed as part of a ceasefire deal, to call for future swaps to be held in private.

“The ICRC is increasingly concerned about the conditions surrounding release operations,” the ICRC said in a statement after it completed the fifth exchange. “We strongly urge all parties, including the mediators, to take responsibility to ensure that future releases are dignified and private.”

Since January 19, 21 have been freed in exchange for more than 700 Palestinian prisoners. A further 183 Palestinians were due to be released in exchange for the three Israelis.

Sharabi, Ben Ami, and Levy were escorted onto a stage by masked fighters in Deir al-Balah before being handed over to Red Cross workers and taken to Israel.

Isaac Herzog, the Israeli president, said the “cynical and cruel spectacle” was “what a crime against humanity looks like”. Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, said the “shocking images” would “not go unaddressed”.

Family members expressed concern about the health of the three men. “He looked like a skeleton, it was awful to see,” Ben Ami’s mother, Michal Cohen, told the Israeli TV Channel 13 News.

Sharabi’s brother-in-law, Stephen Brisley, who lives in south Wales, told The Guardian: “You can see the clothes are hanging off of him. You can see his face was gone. The spark and the light has gone from his eyes. His cheeks are sunken.”

Live TV coverage of the handover



Eli Sharabi is handed over to the Red Cross, left. The undated photo above shows how much weight he lost in captivity. Below, Or Levy before and after his kidnap ordeal



shocked many Israelis gathered in front of large screens in Tel Aviv’s Hostages Square. The crowd cheered and cried as images of the men appeared on screen. One man held a sign which read: “Sorry it took so long, welcome home.”

During the ceremony in Gaza, two Red Cross workers were asked to sign documents before the hostages were asked to give “interviews” into a microphone, in effect at gunpoint.

The hostages were escorted to Israeli military forces in Gaza, then taken to a reception point in Israel for a medical assessment before being reunited with family members.

Sharabi, 52, was abducted from his family home in Kibbutz Be’eri in southern Israel. His wife Lianne, who was born in Bristol, and their daughters, Noiya, 16, and Yahel, 13, were killed in the October 7 attacks. His brother, Yossi Sharabi was killed after being taken captive.

Brisley, Lianne’s brother, told the BBC that the family did not know if Sharabi

was aware of their deaths. “I just hope he already knows, because it’s just going to be another layer of torture for him to have survived for the 490 days and then to come out to that piece of news,” he said.

Levy, 34, was abducted from the Supernova music festival and his wife Einav, was killed. Their three-year-old son, Almog, has been living with his grandparents ever since.

Ben Ami, 56, who has dual German citizenship, was also abducted from his home in Kibbutz Be’eri. His wife Raz was taken hostage but freed after 54 days.

Ben Ami was welcomed home by his three daughters, Yuli, Ella, and Natalie, who said earlier: “Our father has emerged from the horror, and you can see the trauma he endured written on his face. But we are staying strong for him here, just as he stays strong for us, and soon we’ll be able to embrace him. We got our father back. Now we must not stop until the last hostage is returned.”

Epilepsy drug victims ‘can’t wait any longer’

Shaun Lintern
Health Editor

Most nights, Siobhan Halliwell, 26, sleeps on the floor, propped up against a wall or a chest of drawers. It is the only way she gets any respite from the chronic pain.

A £2,500 adjustable bed would grant her more sleep, but her parents, Paula and James, cannot afford it. They have asked the NHS and their local council, but they have been slow to help.

Halliwell, of Thornton, Merseyside, is a victim of sodium valproate: her mother took the epilepsy drug when pregnant. She is also a victim of delays in compensating the thousands damaged in what has been called the new thalidomide scandal.

As many as 20,000 babies in the UK may have been harmed by the drug since the 1970s. Details of the risks it posed to babies were intentionally withheld by UK regulators. Four in ten babies exposed to it were left disabled, some with severe deformities in their arms, legs and internal organs. Many require full-time care.

A year after a landmark report set out how a compensation scheme might work, nothing has happened. The recommendations by Dr Henrietta Hughes, England’s patient safety commissioner, said victims deserved redress as they had been failed by the state. She suggested a two-stage process with interim payouts of up to £100,000.

In opposition, Labour MPs backed campaigns for financial redress. Wes Streeting, now the health secretary, was pictured with families in parliament.

On Wednesday, the Rushcliffe MP James Naish asked Sir Keir Starmer when the government would respond. Starmer said families had met Baroness Merron, the patient safety minister, in December and a response would come “at the earliest opportunity”.

Halliwell’s disabilities – including a condition called trigonocephaly, where a

baby’s skull fuses too early – developed in the womb. At six months, she had surgery to remove almost all her forehead. An infection last year meant implants had to be removed from her forehead, leaving her in near-constant pain. Sleeping with her head raised eases the pressure in her skull.

Her brother, Kian, 22, also needs an adjustable bed. He was also born while Paula was taking sodium valproate, and his disabilities affect the blood supply to his feet and lower legs: he has to sleep with his legs raised.

Looking after their children, who have severe learning disabilities, is a full-time job for the Halliwells. They have applied for grants to pay for beds but keep being referred back to the NHS, which cannot help. Paula, 50, said: “I feel really angry when Siobhan is crying, she is in absolute agony and I can’t do anything.”

James, 64, said: “We go around in circles: you speak to one person, they pass it on to another and then they pass you back to the first one.” He called on Streeting to spend a day with affected families “to see what the children go through”. Hughes said government delays were unacceptable. “Patients cannot wait any longer. They and their families are suffering right now.”

Emma Murphy of Infact, the sodium valproate campaign group, said: “Children have been harmed through no fault of their own, but by state failure and misregulation. When will this Labour government, who backed, supported and stood up for us in opposition ... bring forward a redress scheme?”

The Department of Health and Social Care said: “As The Sunday Times has shown, the injustices and harm caused by sodium valproate continue to be felt today. Our sympathies are with those affected by the drug and we are fully focused on how best to support patients and prevent future harm.”

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“She is in absolute agony and I can’t do anything

Starmer wanted Sue Gray story killed

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within £5,000, would always have been published. The fact that such information was being disclosed by a reporter, and to a precise figure, was nevertheless exceptional.

Case did not explicitly say the story should not go ahead but he made clear that No 10 had grave reservations. In the background, Starmer’s aides were concerned about the tone of anonymous briefings against Gray being leaked to the BBC. Some mocked her. “If you ever see any evidence of our preparation for government,” one said, “let me know.”

Downing Street failed to convince the corporation that such comments were inappropriate to repeat.

Davie made clear that he did not intend to intervene and the BBC ran the story on

September 18. The revelations swiftly led to accusations of dysfunction at the heart of Downing Street. The fallout proved toxic and Gray was sacked a fortnight later to be replaced by Morgan McSweeney.

This controversy and a row over freebies overshadowed Starmer’s first party conference as prime minister. Many now say he squandered his first 100 days by ignoring concerns that Gray was not an appropriate appointment.

Since the controversy, Gray has been nominated for a peerage and Case has retired as cabinet secretary.

The disclosures offer a glimpse into the high-level conversations between the government and the BBC. There is no evidence the BBC coverage was affected by No 10’s action but the revelations are likely to prove awkward for Starmer who, in opposition, criticised Rishi Sunak for lobbying the BBC.

Get In: The Inside Story of Labour Under Starmer by Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrand will be published by Bodley Head on Thursday, £25. Order at timesbookshop.co.uk

DESIGNERS TRIUMPH AT EURO AWARDS

The Times and Sunday Times have scooped a record 26 wins at the European Newspaper design awards. Newspapers from 22 countries took part in the 26th European Newspaper Award in Vienna. In the 20 categories there were more than 3,000 entries, making it one of the largest such competitions in the world.



More than 600,000 listeners turn to Times Radio

Times Radio is Britain’s fastest-growing speech radio station, with weekly listeners up by 23 per cent to 604,000.* More than 4.4 million hours were listened to towards the end of last year — another huge leap as audiences put their trust in Jane Garvey, Fi Glover, John Pienaar, Andrew Neil and others. Find out what all the fuss is about. Listen for free today and every day.

* Source: Rajar



Today’s highlights

7am Michael Shanks, energy minister

11.05am Sir Lawrence Freedman on Google ending its ban on using AI in weapons development

1pm The Times at One with Andrew Neil

3.35pm Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist, on raising children phone-free and his book The Anxious Generation

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The joy of sticks – a joke between friends branches into an Insta sensation

Matt Rudd

Why would almost three million people follow an Instagram page dedicated to reviews of sticks? Why is everyone suddenly passionate about sticks? You know the answer. The internet is a binfire of strife and rancour but in one very particular corner of it, there is refuge. At @officialstickreviews, there are no culture wars, no pile-ons and no cancellations. There are only reviews of sticks.

A woman in Tenerife shows off a stick that looks like a set of bagpipes. A woman in Iceland thinks her stick looks like an elk's horns. There's a "magical" curly-fry stick on an island in the

Philippines, a very, very long stick on a beach in Jamaica and, in the absence of any trees, an ice stick in Antarctica.

There are the classics – the sword sticks, the ninja sticks, the Gandalf sticks, the propeller sticks, the snake sticks and the sticks which come with enthusiastic dogs attached. There are regional variations – temperate, mossy lichen sticks from Mitteleuropa, water-sculpted driftwood sticks from exotic archipelagos and the Scottish Highlands and, for some reason, lots and lots of bludgeoning sticks from Serbia and Poland.

And there are, inevitably, the celebrity sticks. Most recently, the composer Lin-

Manuel Miranda interrupted a January hike with his two sons in upstate New York to submit a review of the fallen limb they'd found shaped a bit like an "abandoned lacrosse stick". "Um great stick," he concluded poetically.

Don't roll your eyes. Instead, meet the two young men who began what they call Stick Nation as a joke and then watched it grow into the most wholesome viral sensation since a cat cuddled a dog who was terrified of fireworks in 2016.

In September 2023, Boone Hogg, who works in marketing, and Logan Jugler, a physician's assistant, were on a weekend hike with their girlfriends and three other friends in Arches National

Park, Utah. "We were all having fun, we were in such a positive mood, and then Logan started reviewing this stick he'd picked up like he was on *Antiques Roadshow*," says Hogg of that epic moment. "It wasn't an epic moment," he corrects me. "It was a moment of friends sharing."

"It made sense at the time," says Jugler. "I started reviewing it like I was a great stick expert. It was just a joke but the more I thought about what made it good, the more I realised it really was a great stick." Hogg set up the Instagram page the next day. For the next couple of months they kept each other and no one else amused, but that November they got their first stick review from a



Sticks resembling elk's horns are among those that have helped Stick Nation become a global hit

stranger. More followed, and in January 2024 they had enough entries to hold a Stick of the Month competition. Then a review of a British stick "which made a cool whipping sound" went viral, and by June they had a million Instagram followers and many more on TikTok.

Which raises the key question – why? The friends, both 31, have had some time to think about this. "The first reason is that it's fun," says Jugler. "We all picked up sticks when we were kids but it's one of those things you forget when you grow up. So, yes, it's tuning into a more playful, childlike experience."

Hogg is keen not to become overly philosophical – it is, after all,

just about sticks – but he does think there's something different about what they've created. "Everyone's been on social media for 15, 20 years now," he says. "There's this certain culture that has set in and it is not necessarily wholesome. It's self-serving. It's fabricated. It's meant to get the person who posted it money. Our page doesn't take part in that. It's not trying to influence anyone."

Hogg and Jugler have no plans beyond fundraising for the Los Angeles wildfires and a book of favourite sticks to turn their little joke into a more lucrative side hustle.

"We just want to keep the joy and magic of the page going for as long as possible," says Jugler. Let's hope they stick at it.

We love (outdoing) each other, that's the only secret

On a tour of Nepal, the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh reveal the reasons for their happy marriage: rivalry and laughter

Roya Nikkhhah Nepal

The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh are battling it out over who is more successful at that most staple of royal duties: tree planting. "The first thing we always check is that the trees are doing really well," said Sophie. "It's a bit of a competition between the two of us when we plant a tree. Whose does better over the years?"

Last week, the Edinburghs, who have been married for 25 years, visited Nepal for the first time. In an interview on Friday, after four hours mostly standing in the hot sunshine at the "attestation parade" for new Gurkha recruits, they reflected on following in the footsteps of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, who visited Nepal in 1986.

"It just reminds you that there had been numerous visits and each of them remembered very fondly," said Edward after planting a magnolia tree on Thursday, next to one planted by his parents, in Nepal's National Botanical Garden.

While planting the tree, the couple joshed like a pair who still genuinely find each other amusing. Edward, 60, is the only one of his mother's four children not to have divorced.

BRITISH EMBASSY NEPAL; YUI MOK/PA



The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh trekked in Nepal and Sophie lent her support to a refuge in Kathmandu for victims of gender-based violence

"There was a wonderful confusion because they wanted us both to plant the tree but Sophie was then going to go and plant a rhododendron," said Edward. "Well, hang on a minute, if you're going to plant the rhododendron I should plant the tree – there was a lot of banter going on." Sophie laughed, agreeing they are "always" competitive, even when walking, which they are doing today, trekking to the mountain village of Ghandruk. "Got to be competitive going up those hills," she said.

After more than a quarter of a century since their wedding in Windsor in June 1999, what is the secret of their happy ship? "We're best friends," said Edward. "That's true," said Sophie, adding: "There's always got to be humour. Especially when you're travelling and you've got no idea what's about to happen. You've got to laugh."



“When you’ve no idea what’s about to happen, there’s got to be humour”



The couple have two children, Lady Louise Windsor, 21, who is in her third year reading English at the University of St Andrews, and James, Earl of Wessex, 17, who is studying for A-levels next summer at a boarding school in Oxfordshire.

There has been lots of laughter during their tour, a more low-key affair than most trips with the royal machine. The Edinburghs have travelled with their two private secretaries, one press secretary, and a small security team. The King and Queen take a much larger entourage overseas. Sophie does her own hair and make-up, and her wardrobe is an informal mix of floral, re-worn dresses, espadrilles and hiking gear.

Their six-day visit at the request of the British government, which ends on Sunday, aims to celebrate and strengthen Nepal's diplomatic relationship with the UK of more than 200 years. It has focused on the Edinburghs' key causes, including supporting young people, Sophie's work on highlighting

human trafficking and women's rights and Edward continuing his late father's legacy with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, which has an active network in Nepal. Edward joined Sophie in Kathmandu on Tuesday from India, where he undertook a two-day official visit.

After the Duke of York stepped back from royal duties in 2019, and the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's departure in 2020, the list of working members of the royal family has shrunk and the spotlight has shone more on the Edinburghs. The Prince of Wales is a fan of the couple and wants them to play a bigger role in public life when he is King. Traditionally, members of the media have not always been invited to join them on overseas trips, but there are signs that is changing. After Princess Anne and the King (in that order), Edward and Sophie are the third and fourth hardest-working members of the royal family, clocking up 293 and 257 engagements respectively in 2024.

On Friday, after the couple had inspected the 275 new Gurkha recruits – selected from more than 13,000 who applied for this year's intake – to a medley of Lady Gaga hits played by the military band, Edward gave a speech reminding them that "Gurkhas have served the crown for over 209 years". He added: "Always remember who you are – a soldier in the British Army but most importantly, a son of Nepal. Be proud of both."

In keeping with tradition, the new soldiers – all men, as Nepali women are not eligible to join the Gurkhas – swore an oath of allegiance to the King, marched up to two tables at which Edward and

Sophie stood, saluted a portrait of Charles and touched the Union Jack. "That moment today ... I found it really emotional," Sophie said.

Charles, 76, has maintained his mother's tradition of having a Gurkha serve the monarch as an orderly, who attends on the sovereign at ceremonial events, and on Thursday Edward and Sophie met some of the veterans who served the late Queen. "Everybody admires them," said Edward. "They have a particular reputation ... And an extraordinary fighting spirit."

During a day of solo engagements in Kathmandu on Wednesday before joining Edward in the evening, Sophie visited organisations supporting vulnerable women and victims of human trafficking, causes she has long been raising awareness about.

She is also increasingly known for her work highlighting sexual violence in war-torn countries. Since committing herself to the cause of helping to eradicate conflict-related sexual violence in 2019, after researching the taboo issue, she has travelled to Ukraine, Kosovo, Iraq, Colombia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Chad, to hear from survivors.

They are not issues that are traditional royal territory, so why has she taken them to her heart? "Because so often women are excluded or at the bad end of the deal. Unfortunately women are affected the most when there are difficult issues to deal with. So whether it be conflict or other causes, we're starting to see the effects."

"In Nepal, one of the things we've been focusing on is climate change and I'm looking at that because we've got populations becoming more at risk due to it who are going to find it harder to remain

where they are. Therefore if they have to move, they migrate and then become vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

"If people in my position don't champion people like that, they have very little voice ... In some of the more recent conflicts that have happened, people have really woken up to the fact that these are very real issues. And to change behaviours you have to keep banging the drum. So I keep on banging the drum."

Among the charities Sophie visited was Maiti Nepal, a refuge that supports up to 1,000 victims a day of human trafficking, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, including children. "I met some of the young women there and they are really changing their lives with the help of Maiti," she said.

Sophie was shown photos of Charles's visit to the charity in 1998, after which he sold a watercolour he had painted and donated the £67,275 proceeds to the shelter. "There's been countless women that have gone through and that goes back to the connection with the then Prince of Wales, who sold his painting and allowed them to purchase the land that they're now on," said Sophie. "It really was a game-changer for them."

For Sophie, the visit encapsulated what an overseas royal visit can – and should – help to achieve. "They're looking for local help from ministers. It's amazing what a royal visit will do."

Edward nods in agreement that the purpose is to lift up the unsung: "There are some brilliant organisations and some brilliant people, whose work, most of the time, is unsung. If we can just shine a bit of light on the work they're doing, and it helps them to be able to tell the story better and to give them a better profile, then that's what you really hope for."

From the lab to the labradors: would you put Petri dish dogfood in front of your pet?

Sophia Money-Coutts

It's an unusual cry to hear in a southeast London park: "Pâté! Pâté! Wilberforce, pâté!" I watched last month as a woman handed a panting cockapoo a cube, before asking if my pet could have one too. You need permission to give someone else's dog a treat, these days, in case it is – genuinely – vegetarian, grain-free, not allowed sugar, or has allergies. It's a faux pas (I've learnt) simply to hand

someone's dog a bit of manky old Bonio from your coat pocket. On previous park trips Dennis, my ten-month-old terrier, has tried to eat chicken bones, broken beer bottles and a used condom. Pâté was certainly an upgrade.

Dogfood may be an unlikely new entry in the culture wars, but why not? The fight, much as with humans, is between ultra-processed food and proper stuff: meat and vegetables.

Some people are happy to give their mutts dubious jellied meat and cheap biscuits; but others cry this is tantamount to abuse, and making our dogs ill.

Now the battleground's set to become even more fraught, because the world's first lab-grown meat for dogs, Meatly, was launched on Friday at a branch of Pets at Home in Brentford, west London. The range includes something called Chick Bites (£3.49 for a 50g pouch, so £70



Sophia Money-Coutts with her terrier Dennis. His current food deliveries cost about £80 a month

a kilo). These are dog treats that apparently taste like chicken but are, in fact, grown from a few chicken egg cells. According to Meatly, 22 per cent of all meat consumed in this country is by pets, and shrinking that figure would reduce the UK's carbon pawprint enormously.

Butternut, the brand I buy for Dennis, is another trendy newcomer. For about £80 a month (I know, I know) it feeds me a box of different frozen minced meats and

vegetables. The packets have names such as Pork This Way and Wham Bam Lamb, which comes with dried rosemary, thyme and a pinch of turmeric. My dog is eating better than I am.

As for the lab-grown Chick Bites ... they're tiny, which may be useful if you have a chihuahua.

The ingredients list reveals that they're only 4 per cent "cultivated" chicken. Otherwise, they're mostly chickpea flour, sweet

potato, dried banana and dried strawberry. Moulded in the shape of a minuscule paw, they smell of nothing, so I hold one out for Dennis. He looks nonplussed. I drop it to the carpet and he sniffs again, before swallowing and looking up for another. So a vote of approval – but the thing is, he happily swallows everything else too. As with the vast majority of dogs, he's not the one who's a neurotic fusspot. That, I'm afraid, tends to be their owners.



COURTESY OF THE FAMILIES; ANDREW MCCAREN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

‘Something awful has happened. It’s really bad. You need to get here now’

Speaking for the first time since the Southport killings, the parents of Elsie Dot Stancombe and Bebe King tell *David Collins* about the horror of the day their daughters died, the aftermath and how they are remembering them



Elsie Dot Stancombe and Bebe King never knew one another, but their parents believe they were alike and could have been friends. They use the same words to describe their daughters: confident, happy, emotionally intelligent, enthusiastic, affectionate. Both girls cared deeply about others.

It has been six months since seven-year-old Elsie and six-year-old Bebe were killed, alongside nine-year-old Alice da Silva Aguiar, at a Taylor Swift-themed dance workshop in Southport, run by Leanne Lucas, a home tutor who set up the two-hour class on July 29. Eight other girls and two adults, including Lucas, were seriously injured. Lucas was Elsie’s private tutor, giving her extra help with reading and writing. Bebe had been to puppy yoga classes run by Lucas.

Neither family has spoken publicly until now. They want to speak today so that their children are remembered not by the sentencing remarks of a judge in Liverpool crown court but for their personalities and characters. We meet in a hotel on Lord Street in Southport and are sitting at a round table in a conference room. They have just left a meeting with Sir Keir Starmer in the week that a damning report was published on missed chances by counterterrorism police to stop the attacker.

“Everyone says it, don’t they,” Jenni Stancombe says, “that they’re one of a kind? But she truly was.” It takes her a few moments to gather her strength to speak. Everybody at the table is crying, the grief of two mothers and two fathers absolutely raw; people struggling but staying strong. Jenni is every inch the protective, loving, caring mother. Her main worry today is not being able to find the words to do her daughter justice. “It was an honour to be her mum. Sometimes I think people are born special, and I genuinely believe she was. Everything she did was pure enthusiasm. It could be the most boring thing – even, like, David taking the bins out – and it was like, ‘I’ll come!’ She was grateful for life.”

‘ELSIE WAS MY BEST FRIEND’

David Stancombe remembers that same enthusiasm and energy. “On a school day you would have to drag her out of bed. But on a Saturday, she was up at 6.30am, and it was like, ‘Morning Mummy, morning Daddy!’” David’s mother died two years ago and, Jenni says, when he went out running, Elsie “would be like, ‘I’ll run

with you, Dad. I’ll go out with you, Dad.’” Elsie once saw her father with his head on the kitchen counter. “She came over and said, ‘You’re thinking about Nana, aren’t you?’” says David, 36. “And I said, ‘yeah’. But she would always ask Jenni about her Nana and not me. It’s like she just knew.”

“I watched *Soul* [the Disney Pixar film about a near-death experience] with her. And she had a lot of questions about passing away because she couldn’t understand why Nana wasn’t there,” says Jenni, 35. She cries, calling Elsie her “best friend”.

Jenni and David hold hands at times; beside David is Jenni’s brother, Chris, an architect based in Liverpool. Jenni worked as a Sainsbury’s store manager. They have another child, four years younger than Elsie.

There are so many memories. They would go on holiday to Mallorca and Corfu. David remembers a time when he ran to Ainsdale train station, Elsie riding her bike alongside him. “There’s a children’s library section in the train station and there’s a picture of her holding up a train ticket with a story we’ve read,” he says. He had been unable to look at pictures of her until the previous night, when he scrolled through his phone and found the photo.

Elsie never liked her parents to be alone. Jenni would say she was going to the shop and immediately Elsie would say “I’ll come” – even if it was iPad time on a Friday evening, a rare treat. She enjoyed crafting – her last Christmas present was a sewing machine, which she used to make dresses and tops.

She would try every club – gymnastics, swimming, ballet – before eventually settling on cheerleading. She was highly intelligent, with an exceptional memory for history lessons, such as the Great Fire of London, but struggled a little with her reading and writing.

So her parents hired a private tutor for an hour every Saturday morning. That tutor was Leanne Lucas, who so bravely tried to protect the children from their 17-year-old attacker, enduring life-changing injuries from his knife. During the three-hour interview, not once is the attacker mentioned by name; when he must be referred to he is “he”, “him” or “the offender”.

“Elsie was so emotionally intelligent, but she struggled to read and write,” Jenni says. “They thought she might be dyslexic, because the teachers told us a child cannot be that intelligent and so articulate and struggle so much with

Top, Jenni and David Stancombe. They said Elsie was one of a kind. Top right, the Kings. Bebe had an innate kindness. Bottom, the Prince and Princess of Wales visiting Southport, where they met the victims’ families

William and Kate were very human

DANNY LAWSON/PA



reading and writing. Elsie went to Leanne for 18 months for private tutoring every Saturday morning. I was just trying to give her a better start in life, that’s all it was...” She cries at the thought, knowing those lessons eventually led Elsie to the Taylor Swift dance class.

Elsie loved going to Lucas’s house for lessons. “She really came on in her reading and writing,” David recalls. “Leanne ran a competition and all the children submitted a story. Elsie’s story was called ‘The Bear and the Reindeer’. She came runner-up and had her story put on the wall of the local arts centre and she was just over the moon.”

Jenni remembers the moment well. “She got a £100 book voucher. She was so proud,” she says. “For somebody who struggled with reading and writing it was a big step. She loved Leanne’s little dog, Maggie. We would drop her off at her house. She had it all set up, really professional. Leanne was obviously a very capa-

ble teacher. Elsie came on. We only stopped the lessons a couple of weeks before what happened. Even the day I dropped Elsie off on that day, Leanne was saying, ‘I missed you, Elsie’, and she picked her up and hugged her. Leanne adored Elsie. You couldn’t spend that amount of one-on-one time and not fall in love with her.”

‘BEBE WAS HILARIOUS’

Bebe’s mother and father have been listening quietly across the table, both of them in tears hearing a story so similar to their own. They cannot be named due to a court order. Bebe’s mother, 41, is a training executive for a travel firm. She is confident and articulate with a good sense of humour.

Bebe’s father, 43, who works for HM Revenue & Customs, sits beside her, holding it together as they learn how to navigate their new lives. They also live in Southport but did not know Jenni and David until the aftermath of the tragedy.

Bebe was taught ballet by Heidi Liddle, Lucas’s friend, who helped her run the Taylor Swift event, and also did puppy yoga with Lucas. “I literally just think they’re angels,” Bebe’s mother says of the two girls. “Bebe operated on such a high frequency. She had this power to connect with people and the relationships she had with all her family members were different but very special. She had this innate kindness. She had a spark.”

“One of the things that was really special about her was that she was hilarious. She used to make me belly laugh. She would do impressions. She would try stupid accents. Even when she was a baby she would have me belly laughing.”

“When she was three she loved *Willy Wonka* and *the Chocolate Factory*. We used to do videos on the phone, and do characters, and pick a Disney character. She would look at camera and go, ‘SNOZZWANGERS’ [the name of the predatory creatures in Loompaland]. She would come out with the most random stuff. She would do it and look at you and laugh as if to say, ‘I’m dead funny, aren’t I?’ She would give you this hug and say, ‘I love you, Momma.’”

At the same time, Bebe was headstrong. “I was looking at videos of us in Marks & Spencer, and in one she picked up an Elsa [from *Frozen*] dress and looked at me, and I said, ‘Bebe, you’re not getting that dress’, and she said” – her mother puts on a stern voice – “‘I’ve told you five times I want this dress’.”

Bebe’s father remembers the court-

less children’s birthday parties – classic church hall affairs, chairs around the sides, parents not knowing each other, children who were shy. “She would go over to the shy ones and she would literally pull them in. She was so confident and full of life,” he says.

A natural performer with a love of musicals, Bebe would often grab a microphone and start singing in front of a group. “She would sing a lot of *Frozen*. I’m a big fan of Beyoncé and she would sing and perform her songs, like doing *Energy* with all the moves, EN-ER-GY,” Bebe’s mother says, laughing through her tears, acting out her daughter’s dance moves. “We would sing it and it would be full belt – in the car – going for it.” The family would sing along to the *Shrek* musical, each of them doing their own part. “We took her to see *Wicked* the musical. She was so excited to watch the film,” Bebe’s mother cries, looking down. The film premiered in the UK in November, four months after the attack. “We only just missed it.” She recovers after a moment. “She was the best. She was just ... Me and her had our own little language. Sometimes we would just look at each other and know what each other was thinking.”

Bebe had become interested in Taylor Swift at the start of last year, and loved her song *Love Story*. “She wouldn’t just sing it,” her mother says, “she would perform it.” Her parents came up with her name after a trip to Hollywood, where they saw the blues guitarist BB King’s star on the Walk of Fame. “We used to go into the pharmacy and see the looks when they said her name on the computer – ‘Bebe King’. She wanted to change her name to Matilda, like the musical.”

And like Roald Dahl’s Matilda, Bebe was a big reader, above average for her age. Her father would take her to the library, where they would sit together in a little boat in the children’s area, reading stories together. He wells up with tears as he recounts this. “He had a really special bond with Bebe,” his wife says.

‘LEANNE FOUND US A SPACE’

The murders of the girls prompted a summer of unrest, including riots in Southport, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Stoke, Blackpool, Belfast, Darlington, Plymouth, Hartlepool, Rotherham and London. As police clashed with protesters, Starmer condemned the “far-right thuggery”.

By December, more than 400 people had been sentenced for offences in con-



nection with the disorder, from a 12-year-old boy who threw stones at police in Southport to an 81-year-old man from Nottingham who received a two-year suspended sentence after admitting assault. A 27-year-old man from Swinton, near Rotherham, was sentenced to nine years in jail, with a five-year licence period, for starting a fire outside a hotel that housed hundreds of asylum seekers.

Southport is an affluent, safe and family-friendly seaside town – a perfect place to raise a young family. “I’m such a risk-averse person, honestly,” Jenni says. “I’m renowned for being the boring one. I just weigh up every risk. David lets them go to school on a scooter. I won’t even let them go to school on a scooter if there’s a tiny bit of kerb that is slightly lifted in case they go over the handle bars and hurt themselves. In our friend group I ruin every activity because I make sure it’s safe. I wouldn’t let the wind blow on the kids, honestly. For anyone for this to happen to ...” Jenni stops to cry, her words hardly audible. She pushes through: “I would never ever have put her in danger, ever. I just never would. I still cut Elsie’s food into tiny bits for the fear. I was probably overly obsessed that she was OK.”

The Taylor Swift dance class advertised by Lucas quickly sold out. Jenni was in a WhatsApp group with about 50 parents. Lucas wrote a message in it – “By the way guys...” – and shared the details of the class. “Everybody was like, ‘Put me on the waiting list’,” Jenni says. “The 23 spots just went like that.” One of Elsie’s school friends was going to the class and her mother messaged Jenni saying, “Have you got her a space?”

“And I was like, ‘Oh no’. I knew it had sold out, so I messaged Leanne saying, ‘Aw, I totally forgot to pay for Elsie’. And she messaged saying: ‘No problem. I’ll always have a place for Elsie.’ And she kept one. I just always think if she’d given it away...” Jenni looks away, tears streaming down her face, “but then I would never have wished this on anybody else.”

‘WE JUMPED EVERY RED LIGHT’

The class was a one-off, two-hour workshop at Hart Space, a studio tucked away behind quiet residential streets. Elsie loved everything about Taylor Swift: her music, her performances. “She was a Swiftie through and through,” Jenni says. Jenni and David dropped her off at 10am. The mother of Elsie’s friend said Elsie was welcome to come back to her house for a playdate afterwards, if Jenni did not mind. “She said, ‘I’ll drop her off at three. I asked Elsie, ‘Do you want to go to your friend’s afterwards?’ and she said, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah!’”

Jenni took Elsie up the stairs to the studio and Lucas was at the door to meet her. She picked her up and hugged her. Jenni watched her daughter run into the studio where the other children were sitting in a circle. Elsie had just had her ears pierced – after two years of asking – and was excited to show her friend. “I watched her sit down and waved her off and I left her.” Jenni takes a moment to steady herself before continuing.

They returned home. Just before midday, Jenni got a call from the other mother. “Something awful has happened. Somebody’s stabbed the kids,” she said. “I said, ‘What do you mean?’” Jenni says. “She went, ‘It’s really bad. You need to get here.’” Jenni and David left their house, speeding in their car. “I just ran. I left the whole house open and got in the car.

“It’s a five-minute drive from ours and we must have got there in a minute. We kept our hands on the horn, going faster and faster, jumping every red light on the road, we were on the other side of the road, people throwing their hands up to us. I just didn’t care, I just kept whacking the horn. We got there and just deserted the car in the middle of the road and just ran. And by that point police started trying to push people back.”

They both tried to get inside the studio. David fought with police officers to get inside but they held him back. “The police just lifted David off his feet and said, ‘You’re not getting in there, mate’.”

They ran off in different directions, searching for Elsie. “You knew when you got there how bad it was,” David says. “No human being should ever have to witness what we witnessed on that day.” Jenni called her brother, who drove from Liverpool, ambulances passing him in the other direction, helicopters in the sky, police sirens going past him.

‘ARE YOU BEBE’S DAD?’

At the scene, David overheard somebody saying there had been two fatalities, which would later become three. “I didn’t move from the gate the whole time,” David says.

They asked police for information. “I wanted to be told she’s in an air ambulance and tell me where she is so I can go to find her.” Jenni’s hands shake as she remembers. “I was just like – come on, come on.” Elsie died inside the dance studio during the attack.

Bebe’s parents tell their own story of the day. Bebe’s aunt was getting married the next day and the whole family were busy preparing. “We woke up that morning, got ready. Bebe was moaning about what she wanted to wear,” her mother remembers. “In the end she came in with a beautiful pink outfit. They dropped me off at the beauty salon. I was getting my nails done for the wedding.” Bebe’s father dropped Bebe off at 10am at Hart Space and went home, returning just before midday for pick-up.

“I got down Hart Street and saw straight away there were ambulances all over the place,” he says. “I couldn’t park down there. I pulled up. There were residents walking around. I asked, ‘What’s going on?’ and somebody said, ‘There’s somebody there stabbing kids’. And it still didn’t register. I got closer and closer and there was no cordon.”

He could see Lucas outside. He could see Lucas, who was in a bad way, receiving medical attention. He has a memory of seeing Jenni at the scene, running down the street. “I walked down the road and there was a house with ten kids [who had gone seeking refuge] in it. I didn’t really get how serious it was. I was just in shock. All the parents were there.



Leanne Lucas, the dance teacher who was stabbed when she tried to save her pupils’ lives. Right, Alice da Silva Aguiar, nine, who was also murdered

“Bebe would give you a hug and say, ‘I love you, Momma’”

“Elsie was born special. She was grateful for life”

“I could feel the blood drain from me and I went cold”

It was madness.” He rang his wife and told her: “You need to get here.”

Bebe’s mother remembers being in Marks & Spencer. “I was about to put my card in the machine, and he called. ‘I can’t believe I’m telling you this but somebody has gone into the dance class with a knife,’ he said.” She ran outside and jumped into a taxi. The driver dropped her off at the end of the street – “and I just ran.”

Bebe’s father at that point still thought Bebe might be in a house, being looked after. He searched around the streets. He gave the police a description of Bebe. Then a female police officer approached.

“We had given people Bebe’s description. When that person came towards me, I could feel the blood drain from me and I went cold. I knew she was going to tell me something. And she did. ‘Are you Bebe’s dad?’ As soon as I said yes she said she had passed away.”

Bebe’s mother was just behind him. She fell to her knees screaming. Chris – Elsie’s uncle – was there, and says he will never forget the sound. She has no memory of what happened in those moments. Paramedics draped her in blankets to keep her warm. “They told me Bebe had died when I was standing on the corner of a street,” her mother says, shaking her head, eyes red from crying.

A relative who lived close by pulled them into her house. “We were in that house and the whole family came,” Bebe’s father says. “I called my mum and sister and they were at the wedding venue. The wedding got cancelled.”

He had no idea at the time who had carried out the attacks. David never gave it a second thought. “I honestly didn’t have the logic to put a perpetrator in the building, to think, ‘That’s who did it’. I just thought, ‘What is going on?’”

Bebe’s family were assigned family liaison officers by Merseyside police and say they became more like “friends”. Both families agree: “The police liaisons were amazing.”

‘WE COULD HEAR SIRENS’

While the parents struggled to cope with the trauma of their children being killed at an event they had booked as a treat, news began to spread the next day that the far right had arrived in Southport and a riot had broken out at a mosque. In the hours after the attack the families were

told by the liaison officers to come off all their social media accounts.

Chris remembers being in David and Jenni’s house with a group of Jenni’s friends. “It was six or seven in the evening,” Chris says. “All we could hear was sirens and helicopters.”

Jenni decided to post a message on Facebook: “This is the only thing that I will write, but please stop the violence in Southport tonight. The police have been nothing but heroic these last 24 hours and they and we don’t need this.” Elsie, Bebe and Alice’s names had been released hours earlier.

David and Chris both went incognito to the scene of the riot the next day to witness the wreckage in the street. The families did not want to comment on the riots. Bebe’s family avoided the news altogether. But David says: “I had sympathy for the police and that’s the truth. After what they’d been through. That’s God’s honest truth. How dare you put them through that?” The riots continued from July 30 to August 7.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

At 11am on Saturday, August 17, Bebe’s funeral took place in a private ceremony at St Cuthbert’s church in Southport. “It was beautiful,” her mother remembers. “It was Bebe’s church for the day. She used to love this T-shirt that said ‘Strong Girls Club’ on it. All our friends and family wore them.

“We were allowed bubbles in the church. It was beautiful. My friends were like little worker bees. We made everybody a little package of bracelets which had shimmer and star on. And they got a set of bubbles and wildflower seeds to spread in the garden. And we had the celebration afterwards.” Bebe had a white horse and carriage. “It’s not very us,” her parents laugh, “but it was for her and we knew she would want that.”

They say the community really helped them during that time – the funeral directors would accept no money and gifts and donations flooded in. “It’s about this community. It has brought light in the darkness, these little moments. And that’s what we’re constantly looking for right now.”

Bebe’s parents also found the opportunity to say goodbye in their own way. Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool was a bereavement suite that allowed them to

spend time with Bebe before the funeral. “We spent a week with her after,” her mother says, “and she was perfect. It was like she was asleep. She had pyjamas on. There were night lights and it was like she was asleep. Even though it was hard for us at first, we know now, for us, it was the right thing to do. I held her hand. All our family came. We got her christened. We were supposed to get her christened aged two, but we did it in the suite and the whole family were there. Everybody could say their goodbyes the way they wanted to.”

On the last day, her mother and father did a final bedtime routine, reading her *Jack and the Beanstalk*, her favourite book, before leaving. “I kissed her,” her mother says, “and that’s how we will remember her.”

A few weeks later came Elsie’s funeral, at St John’s church in Birkdale. In a eulogy read on their behalf, her parents said she had brought them “nothing but happiness”. “It was an amazing day,” Chris says. “The police did an amazing job. Shut the roads. The whole community came out. Friends and family. David and Jenni. We had a procession. We didn’t anticipate what it would be like – it was like a state funeral. There were thousands.” David remembers the number of roads they had to walk to get to the church – five. “Jenni was saying, ‘One, two, three’ ... counting the roads,” he says. The funeral was public to represent her nature. “She was very outgoing,” David says. “She was just like Jenni. I used to say to Elsie, ‘Just be like your mum’.” He struggles to say that sentence. He is strong, but the grief is overwhelming.

One source of genuine comfort for the families has been the efforts of the royal family. In October, the Princess of Wales visited the families in Southport, her first public engagement since finishing chemotherapy. “That meant so much to Jenni,” David says. “Because it was her first public appearance. I won’t say what they said to us, but what they shared with us was really, really powerful, and it was a powerful message and heartfelt, and it meant a lot.”

Bebe’s mother adds: “They were very human [William and Kate].” The families also met the King at Clarence House, his London residence, in August. They said he was “genuine”. “We could see how much he cared,” David says, laughing about the moment Elsie’s sister offered the King a biscuit.

THE SHOCK OF NO TRIAL

January was one of the hardest months for the families. They were preparing for a trial at Liverpool crown court with the Crown Prosecution Service and the police. It was a difficult process with endless meetings. “We were in fight-or-flight mode for the majority of it. January was horrific,” Bebe’s mother says.

Neither family was in court on Monday, January 20, when Axel Rudakubana suddenly changed his plea to admit to three counts of murder, ten counts of attempted murder, one count of possession of a knife and charges relating to production of ricin and possessing a study of an al-Qaeda training manual.

The families had been braced for four weeks of hearing harrowing evidence about their daughter’s final moments. They were no longer going to have to endure it. “We were at home,” Bebe’s father says. “My mum texted and then called. We just sat there in silence, mouth on the floor.” David adds: “Completely gobsmacked. Jenni was in tears. I said, ‘What’s it mean, what’s it mean?’”

And Jenni said, ‘We’re not going to have the trial now’.

“And then there was a moment and a little bit of hope that none of it was going to come out. Then there was a phone call that night off the [liaison officers] saying ‘We need to tell you – because it’s all going to come out.’ Then we were like, **Continued on page 6 →**



‘Panic postgrad’ degrees in danger after cash-hungry universities raise fees

**Louise Eccles and
Joey D’Urso**

The cost of a one-year master’s degree has risen £2,000 in three years to an average of £12,700 – and more than £80,000 for some courses – as universities seek to boost their finances.

Many cash-strapped universities have increased postgraduate fees. Unlike undergraduate tuition fees, they can charge what they like for a master’s. Mark Bennett, of FindAUniversity, said it was “one of the few levers they can pull in terms of domestic fee income”.

Oxford charges £53,340 for a master’s in public policy; Cambridge charges £24,162 for a master’s in social anthropology; and the London School of Economics charges £28,900 for one in behavioural science. A one-

year MBA at Oxford’s Saïd Business School will cost £83,770 for 2025-26.

Bennett said: “Master’s degree fees have been steadily rising since the introduction of the first postgraduate loan in England in 2016. It looks like we’ve reached the point where, for many students, the loan is completely negated by the fee, with nothing left for maintenance costs.”

Academics fear only students from wealthier families will be able to afford further studies. The average adult under 65 in England with a postgraduate degree earns £45,000 a year, compared with £40,000 for those with bachelor’s degree only, according to graduate labour market statistics.

FindAUniversity helps universities to recruit postgraduates. Its research

shows that the average fee for domestic students is £12,853 for 2025-26, based on a sample of 3,000 courses from 119 universities. Analysis by Times Higher Education shows the average fee rose from £10,480 to £12,703 between 2021-22 and 2024-25.

The maximum student loan a postgraduate in England can take out is £12,858 in 2025-26. Many graduates are hugely in the red by the time they leave university, with an average debt of £48,470, according to the Student Loans Company.

The average cost of a master’s has reached the maximum student loan amount, leaving no money to fund accommodation, transport or other living costs. Scotland and Wales offer more generous loans.

Nearly one in three postgraduate degrees,

excluding MBAs (master of business administration) and dentistry, exceed the maximum student loan amount, set by the Department for Education. This is a rise from about a quarter three years ago, according to Times Higher Education.

Growing numbers of UK graduates are choosing to study for master’s degrees. An additional 37,000 took taught postgraduate qualifications, excluding predominantly research degrees such as PhDs, in 2022-23, compared with 2018-19, a 12 per cent increase.

This has been attributed partly to a rise in graduates doing a so-called “panic master’s” or “procrasti-master’s” to delay entering the world of employment and prolong the university experience. For others, the

year after graduation proves such a struggle to find a graduate-level job that they decide to return to studying after a fruitless 12 months of interviews and rejections.

Last week, the Bank of England halved its growth forecast for this year to just 0.75 per cent. The big four

accounting firms have slashed graduate jobs and shed thousands of staff outside official redundancy rounds.

The average employer received 140 applications per graduate job in 2023-24, a 59 per cent increase on the previous year, according to

data from the Institute of Student Employers, based on a study of 145 employers.

Professor Paul Wakeling, at York University’s department of education, said: “In the undergraduate market you have oversight to ensure that universities are taking seriously the number of students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, but there’s no monitoring of who is being admitted into postgraduate courses. It’s a free-for-all.”

Hollie Meehan, 21, completed a bachelor’s degree in philosophy at Lancaster University and is studying for a master’s in the subject, after which she hopes to work in academia. Her course fees are £10,600 for one year, which includes a 10 per cent discount for alumni. To fund her master’s she took out the full £12,000

loan and received a £2,000 grant from the university, but works in a supermarket to cover her living costs.

She said: “The rising cost of postgraduate education means that the diversity of those who can apply is severely limited. In turn, this limits the type of people who can enter academia as a career, limiting our perspectives in research and literature.”

The Russell Group, a collective of 24 leading universities, said its members “all offer support via scholarships and bursaries to help remove financial barriers for students from under-represented backgrounds”. The Department for Education said: “Loans for master’s and doctoral degree courses in 2025-26 will increase by 3.1 per cent.”

Richard Assheton Dubai

From the penthouse of the tallest building in the world you could see it all: the skyscrapers piercing the haze in clusters, including one modelled on the Elizabeth Tower housing Big Ben; the islands shaped like palm trees jutting into the Arabian Gulf; the desert shimmering beyond the city.

Asad Khan, the estate agent who is managing the £40 million sale of the apartment, is one of the growing number of Britons chasing the Dubai dream of wealth, sunshine and a life on fast forward. “In Dubai you’re so busy, you don’t have time to miss the UK,” he said. “You haven’t got time for a cup of tea.”

Today more British people live in this booming Emirati city than in Oxford: at least 180,000.

Back at ground level, in a wood-panelled restaurant overlooking a golf club, Jas Reimers and Christie George sat sipping drinks. They are the kind of people the UK might like to keep. Both are 31, work full-time and are married with children. Reimers, from a family of Hertfordshire builders, works as a financial consultant in Dubai for Oxford Economics, a top British research company. His wife works in compliance. George, from Kent, is a project manager for the local franchise partner of Harvey Nichols. Her husband works in the Dubai office of the accountancy firm Deloitte.

They are both in it for the long term. “I’m extremely patriotic,” Reimers said. “And when I’ve had debates and stuff back home with friends about it, they’ll say [that I’m abandoning Britain]. But my priority is my family. I’m not that much of a Little Englander where I would sacrifice everything, including them, to consciously give them an inferior lifestyle.”

George said: “I have a nanny that lives with me. I could have never worked full-time at home ... I probably wouldn’t have had a third baby if we weren’t living here.” She is one of many Britons posting on social media about how to make a success of moving to Dubai.

Another recently shared a checklist of everything on which she said Dubai outperformed the UK. It included the affordability of good private schooling (much of it following the British curriculum, but starting at about £10,000 per year), healthcare (expat employers are required to pay insurance), the weather (a brutally hot summer lasts only a few months, with blue skies in winter) and leisure options (Dubai has more restaurants per capita than New York or London).

Dubai is by far the largest of the seven royal territories that make up the United Arab Emirates. Its rulers plan to use immigration to double the population of 3.7 million by 2040. They also intend to quintuple the size of public beaches and build more parks. The UAE’s first casino is in the works along the coast.

Katy Holmes, head of the British Chamber of Commerce Dubai, said she “would feel comfortable” to say there are more than 180,000 Britons living in Dubai. Oxford Economics thinks it could be as many as 250,000 – equivalent to the population of Southampton: Britons made up 6.7 per cent of inhabitants in 2022. Some surveys suggest the UAE is the third most popular destination for people leaving the UK. In the past two years the perfumer Jo Malone, the boxer Amir Khan and the fitness coach Bradley Simmonds have all moved here.

Waitrose and Marks & Spencer each have several branches. Dozens of British



Rain, crime, penury and debt. Dubai to all that!

Tired of the drawbacks of their homeland, expats are flocking to a booming emirate that now boasts more Britons than Oxford

and Irish pubs are bursting with twenty-something estate agents from the UK. Dubai eased its alcohol laws for non-Muslims in 2023, making it simpler to drink in restaurants and bars – although one pub chain charges £10.90 for a pint of lager.

Money is what motivates many Britons to make the move. Kevin Goodall, 41, from Rutland, sold his IT business last year. After a decade holidaying in Dubai, he and his pregnant wife made the leap.

“It was giving the [UK] government 50 per cent for something that you’ve built for 20 years,” Goodall said. “It just didn’t sit right with me, after everything else you pay tax on.”

He still works for the company, running its UK business remotely, and is rent-

ing a villa while preparing to buy. His three eldest boys have moved from the independent Oakham School in Rutland, to Repton Dubai, the Middle Eastern outpost of Repton School in Derbyshire.

Their new school charges about £17,000 a year for younger children. Since the introduction of VAT on school fees, Oakham costs more.

In the UAE there is no income tax, although in recent years the government has started to charge foreign citizens, who are thought to make up 90 per cent of the population, various “fees”. Average salaries in the UAE are two or three times higher than in the UK.

British money is flooding into Dubai. Daniela von Rotz, who runs an estate



The attractions of Dubai are convincing Britons such as Christie George, left, with her family, to make a long-term move

“**M&S and Waitrose both have outposts there**

agent, said Britons were her No 1 client nationality, investing most in property to get a “golden visa”, granting five or ten years’ residence. To get the full ten you must spend about £400,000 on a property or set up a business worth £10,000. Von Rotz’s business partner, Daniel Duric, said Europeans were seeking “a plan B”. “When I look at the European and western community in the UAE, definitely the Brits [are] No 1,” he said.

The Netflix series *Dubai Bling* exposed excess – but residents insist those displaying unbridled materialism make up a tiny, if noisy, percentage.

Beth, 32, who works for an events company and hid her full name because she was worried about Dubai’s free speech

laws, lives on the 40th floor. She said: “I miss the countryside massively. It’s the one thing I do find really hard.” But, she said, it was “super-safe” and she would not think twice about getting home safely at any time of night.

Traffic congestion is a hot topic, and in April more than a year’s worth of rain fell in a few hours, killing at least 21 people.

Asked about the downside, Reimers paused. “The thing that I do struggle with is with the kids,” he said. “The lack of exposure to hardship ... just to build some resilience. Because here you can have whatever you want, whenever you want it. Genuine, there’s an app where, in 30 minutes, someone will be there to clean your shoes.”

The burglar left behind his bail form, name and address. Police told me to call 101

Izzy Lyons

After being burgled six times in eight years, Paul Powlesland had given up on phoning the police.

But after two more break-ins, the barrister went to his local Metropolitan Police custody suite last week to ask for help. This time he was armed with something he was certain would bring the culprit to justice: he had left behind a bail form with his name and address on it.

“I was told quite rudely that there’s no police and I should try 101,” Powlesland said. “As if I was stupid for thinking that they might be able to help me.”

Armed with the bail form,

which identified a 40-year-old man who was released just hours before the break-in, Powlesland repeatedly tried to draw the authorities’ attention over the following days, to no avail.

Powlesland, who lives on a houseboat next to a Met building in Barking, east London, eventually had to go to his closest police station in Ilford to report the crimes in person. “When you have got such direct evidence and the police do nothing, you just stop bothering. You just accept that people will get away with it and the law won’t protect you,” he said.

His experience – and frustrations – are shared by thousands of victims of crime

New figures show that 38,030 residential burglaries were recorded by the Met in the year ending last March – 82.4 per cent of which were closed with no suspect identified. Only 3.2 per cent resulted in a charge or summons. Across the country, 75.4 per cent of residential burglary cases were closed with no suspect identified, while 4.8 per cent resulted in a charge or summons.

Last month, Katrina Burroughs, the interiors editor of The Sunday Times, described how her stolen car was given 31 parking tickets, identifying its location, but police did nothing to recover it.

Powlesland, who grew up in Chertsey, Surrey, moved to a houseboat eight years ago to start the River Roding Trust, which relies on volunteers to clean up the river he lives on, report illegal sewage spills and build community resources. During the week, he works on legal cases.

His houseboat has been the target of numerous break-ins and criminals have stolen thousands of pounds’ worth of tools used for his volunteer work. In two cases, the Met have arrested and charged suspects. Powlesland said: “They have stolen tools, I would estimate six or seven times, but I’ve stopped reporting it because there is nothing the police can do

apparently, and it wastes my time to go and report it.”

Two weeks ago, Powlesland and his partner were woken up by an armed drunk man smashing down the door. “I asked him to leave and he wouldn’t. I threatened to physically remove him and he then pulled out a kitchen knife. I didn’t even report that to the police because what’s the point?” he said.

On the night of January 28, he came home to find the padlock smashed off the yurt where he keeps personal possessions, next to his boat. The place had been trashed and, in the mess, he found a Met bail form showing the man had been released from

custody hours earlier.

Powlesland doubted the police would help and, after noticing that nothing had been taken, he did not report it. Four days later, while away, he received a phone notification that £15.45 had been spent on his bank card at a shop in Barking. He returned home to a smashed padlock on his houseboat and his bank cards missing.

The second break-in, along with the bail form, encouraged Powlesland to go to the police custody suite on February 3. Staff refused to help and directed him to the 101 phoneline, where an operator said they would dispatch officers before asking whether he would

consider moving out of the area to avoid the high crime. “Yes, there is a lot of crime,” he said, “but have the police thought about investigating it and stopping it?”

After speaking to 101, Powlesland waited until 11pm to give police a statement and hand over the bail form. Nobody turned up.

Officers at Ilford, where he later reported both break-ins, were “nonchalant” about the bail form.

A Met spokesman said: “We aim to resolve burglaries as quickly as possible, but understand in this case there were unfortunate delays and apologise for this. An investigation is ongoing and no arrests have been made.”



The beech by the River Cam had stood for 180 years



It was felled before it could fall and demolish the bridge

Dr AI calls high-risk patients to front of the queue – and breadwinners could be next

Shaun Lintern Health Editor

Hospitals are using artificial intelligence to select high-risk patients to go to the front of the 7.5 million-long NHS waiting list.

Software trained on more than 200 million records in 46 countries considers blood pressure, age, respiratory rate and where a patient lives to give them a risk score.

Its introduction is part of urgent efforts by the health service to manage record numbers of patients stuck on waiting lists for routine treatment. Many will be deteriorating while they wait.

Earlier this month, The Sunday Times revealed thousands have died, gone blind or suffered serious injuries, including having limbs amputated, because of delays and failures in their care. The problem is costing almost £900 million a year in negligence payouts.

The NHS last hit its target to treat most patients within 18 weeks of a referral by their GP in February 2016. Now trusts are experimenting with new ways to balance the risks of such large waiting lists.

AI software developed by

the Cambridge-based company C2-Ai is being used in nine hospitals in Cheshire and Merseyside; similar tools are being piloted elsewhere.

The technology helps identify patients at high risk of deteriorating while they wait, or who might struggle to recover after major surgery. These people are given help to improve their health while waiting and can be prioritised for surgery sooner.

Almost 1,000 patients have benefited from interventions such as health coaching before and after surgery. The approach has almost eradicated post-op chest

“**Health coaching’ has slashed post-op chest infections**”

infections and halved the rate of other complications. It has also reduced the amount of time patients are staying in hospital by more than four days – making beds free for those awaiting surgery.

One beneficiary is Tim Ashcroft, a 74-year-old businessman diagnosed with oesophageal cancer in 2023. After six weeks of chemotherapy, Ashcroft, from Winsford, Cheshire, had surgery to remove his oesophagus and possible cancer of the colon. After the surgery he had a stoma – an opening in the abdomen – which led to a double hernia; he was put on a waiting list to have the procedure reversed.

Ashcroft had lost five stone since the initial surgery. In October, the C2-Ai technology flagged him as a potential risk and he was given a referral to use a phone app, Surgery Hero, which provides tools for exercise, tracking food intake and mental health support. The app linked Ashcroft with a dietitian who helped manage his nutrition and maintain his weight. They also spoke to consultants to bring forward his surgery, which he hopes

RACHEL ADAMS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Tim Ashcroft, with his wife Renye and dog Christabelle, has been referred to an app that gives him support and advice while he waits for surgery

to have in the coming weeks. “It gave me a sense that I can look after my health while I wait, and that’s important especially as waits are so long at the moment,” Ashcroft said. “If this is a process which can save time and save lives ... I don’t think anyone would object to that.”

Rowan Pritchard Jones, medical director of the Cheshire and Merseyside NHS region, said it was right for the NHS to prioritise higher-risk patients. “We really need to think more smartly about the risk that is sitting on our waiting lists,” he said. “Nobody gets better while

waiting but certain groups of patients disproportionately deteriorate while they wait – patients whose [mortality risk] might move from 15 per cent to 45 per cent.”

According to Cheshire and Merseyside, 40 per cent of its highest risk patients – those living with multiple diseases or conditions – come from the 20 per cent most deprived sectors of the population. Pritchard Jones said: “We have patients to worry about, who will do badly. Let’s think about stratifying patients by risk.”

C2-Ai’s technology is not the only innovation being tried to spot those at higher risk from waiting times.

In Coventry, the cardiologist Kiran Patel developed an algorithm to identify patients who had higher clinical risks and underlying demographic and social factors that meant they should be prioritised for treatment. It took into account whether a person had made repeat visits to A&E, whether they lived in a deprived area or had other health conditions.

Patel, now chief medical officer at University Hospitals

Birmingham, believes similar approaches could be considered there. “We know from the evidence that people are dying more from non-pandemic related issues and deprivation of care,” he said. “So that evidence is out there, and the fact that we have long waiting lists, would suggest that it’s inevitable some may be dying.”

The approach is likely to prove controversial, if it is used to prioritise patients according to factors such as getting them back to work.

Jo Andrews, a consultant anaesthetist and chief medical officer at the consultancy Carnall Farrar, said: “If we look at the national challenge around people who are off work sick, we need to go after the things where it’s going to make the greatest difference.

“That requires a difficult conversation with people, because you would be saying to the 75-year-old waiting for their hip replacement who can’t play golf, ‘Sorry, you’re going to have to wait a bit longer’, because the 65-year-old who can’t work and is the sole breadwinner for their family needs to take priority.”

Ousted NHS boss laments unsafe wards and sewage in handbasins

The outgoing chairman of NHS England praises staff but says the service is ‘sclerotic’ and relies too heavily on politicians

Oliver Shah Associate Editor

Richard Meddings is “disappointed” and “dismayed” to be leaving NHS England, having resigned in October as chairman under pressure from the health secretary.

But until he goes at the end of next month, the former banker will continue to visit sites around the country. Last month he went to see the new £1 billion Midland Metropolitan University Hospital in Smethwick, Birmingham, a 40-minute drive from his old school, Wolverhampton Grammar.

He thought the hospital, built to replace two nearby – City and Sandwell General – was “amazing”, but its story also exemplifies some of his frustrations with the health service. Conceived in the New Labour heyday of 2001, it was meant to be built under a private finance initiative deal, but its construction was delayed by the collapse of the contractor, Carillion, in 2018. It opened in October – six years behind schedule – after the government stepped in at huge expense.

Meddings, 66, has had three turbulent years, taking in six health secretaries, a period of “steepening inflation” and disruptive strikes by junior doctors and nurses. But one thing that has surprised him about the NHS is the “very tired” state of its buildings and equipment.

“I can’t remember the number of incidents we’ve had where we’ve closed operating theatres or wards because they’ve become unsafe. You’ve got some hospitals where you’ve got sewage coming up through the washbasins. It cannot be like this,” he said.

The health service’s maintenance backlog has more than doubled in less than a decade and stands at £13.8 billion. Lord Darzi of Denham, who carried out a speedy review for Labour after last year’s election, diagnosed the service as suffer-

“**There are too many hands on the levers**”

ing from “capital starvation”. When Meddings replaced the former Conservative Party chief executive Lord Prior of Brampton in March 2022 in the aftermath of the pandemic, there were a record 5.3 million people waiting for 6.4 million NHS procedures. There are now 6.3 million waiting for 7.5 million – figures that are down only slightly from their peak in 2023. His replacement has not been announced for what Meddings described as “a really tough role”.

Sir Keir Starmer started the year promising to make reviving the NHS the “cornerstone” of his agenda, but a damning report last month by the House of Commons public accounts committee (PAC) accused the health service of “remarkable complacency”. It claimed: “The scale of government’s ambitions is great but senior officials do not seem to have ideas, or the drive, to match the level of change required.”

Meddings did not want to criticise the PAC – “parliamentary scrutiny is hugely important,” he believes – but felt its findings were “misguided” and “unfair”. “I don’t see any complacency whatsoever,” he said. Meddings described Amanda Pritchard, the NHS England chief executive who was interviewed by the PAC, as “extremely pragmatic”. He also pointed out that under his tenure a restructuring had removed 9,000 management jobs and his team had drafted a long-term plan on how to increase the workforce to 2.3 million and raised the NHS app’s subscriber base to 36 million.

However, he said: “The difference between the private and public sectors is there are many more pairs of hands on the levers [of control in the public sector], so my team’s ability to pull the lever depends upon us persuading multiple other people – from our political masters to other departments of Whitehall – to be willing to pull that lever at the same time.”

A critical issue is a shortage of beds, both in the NHS and the ailing social care system, a patchwork of private-sector and local authority operators. That has left thousands of patients who are medically fit to be discharged but have nowhere to go stuck in NHS beds that desperately need to be freed up.

£14bn

Cost of NHS maintenance backlog

15%

Rise in England’s population since 2000

33%

Fall in number of hospital beds since 2000

9,000

Number of NHS England management jobs cut over past three years



Meddings said England’s population had risen by 15 per cent since the turn of the millennium while the number of hospital beds had shrunk by a third. “Go to [an emergency department] and you will see paper-tissue-thin fragile elderly people lying in the cubicles or sometimes on trolleys waiting to be admitted,” he said. “We can’t admit them – one, because of the bed cut, but two, can we get them out at the other end? So much of that waiting time comes from the fact that you can’t get flow through the hospitals.”

Measures to ease the strain were often derailed by political churn and shifting strategies, he said. He gave the example of virtual wards, where patients were attached to monitoring devices at home and observed remotely. “You’re starting to invest and then the funding is taken away, or there’s a change of priorities in other parts of the system, so you end up with a bridge built halfway across the river,” he said.

“Coincidental with my appointment was an announcement that the NHS was going to roll out between 40,000 and 50,000 virtual-ward beds. About two years into the programme, we’d built 12,700 virtual-ward beds, utilised at about 85 per cent. And then the programme stopped. It stopped for a variety of reasons, but the funding stopped. [In these situations], other things come up and they just squeeze it down.”

Meddings, who made his name as finance director of Standard Chartered, has been particularly irked by what he sees as excess-

Richard Meddings says he will miss the NHS’s capacity for innovation

sive bureaucracy in the approval of NHS spending. He said that when Boris Johnson’s pledge to build 40 hospitals was announced – it has since been scaled back by Labour – the health service had to get ministerial sign-off for every amount over £500,000.

“It feels like government is a series of concentric circles of negative control,” Meddings said. “When you go through a major programme, you have multiple sign-offs at very low spending levels. On one hand that’s sensible, because you must spend the money wisely, but on the other hand it’s sclerotic. There’s a bias that thinks financial control is handing out money in small parcels. In reality, it can undermine financial control because it elongates the project and you bring in a greater risk of inflation or other challenges. You don’t execute at pace.”

Rachel Reeves awarded the NHS an extra £22.6 billion over two years for day-to-day spending in her budget. But the bigger budget component, a £25 billion increase in employers’ national insurance contributions, takes effect in April. NHS sources said the changes would cost it about £2 billion in support to the healthcare ecosystem. “There’s an indirect but real impact,” Meddings said. “It’s like water seeping under the door.”

He will miss many elements of the job, including witnessing what he sees as the NHS’s “remarkable” capacity for innovation. “Last year we were world-leading in introducing a cancer vaccination, for bowel and lung cancer. It’s tailored to the DNA of the tumour and the patient. We can now do nano-robotics that will mend single cells and go into the brain and mend a brain aneurysm.”

Meddings’s wife, Henri, will not miss the intensity of her husband’s job. She has still not quite forgiven him for an incident a couple of months after he became chairman, when she broke her ankle as they were going home from the Chelsea Flower Show. He insisted on not telling staff at A&E who they were because he “wanted the whole patient experience”.

Henri had to sit up all night on painkillers as a result. “She accuses me of tripping her up, which I absolutely deny,” Meddings said, laughing.

‘Greta felt a bit better. I think Arno was already dead’: visit to methanol couple on final night

Hugo Daniel

A friend of a British woman and her fiancé who died after drinking contaminated alcohol in Vietnam has described visiting them on their last night as they battled what they thought were terrible hangovers.

Todd Ford went to see Greta Otteson and Arno Els at a riverside hotel, the Hoi An Silverbell Villa, which they ran together, at 10pm on Christmas Day, about 24 hours after they drank the limoncello. Two bottles of the lemon liqueur had been delivered to the hotel’s reception desk for them on Christmas Eve.

Otteson, 33, had been suffering what she described as “the worst hangover ever” and was in bed drinking coconut juice after vomiting and seeing “black spots”.

When Ford arrived she told him she had last seen Els, 36, about four hours earlier, that he also was not feeling well and had probably fallen asleep in the room where he

kept his musical equipment and computer. The couple had recently got engaged.

“I went up and I knocked. I called his name. I didn’t see any lights on ...” Ford said. “I got Greta water and went to check on her. I said: ‘Do you want me to break the door down?’ She was like, ‘He probably fell asleep playing his video games and his hangover’s probably even worse than mine.’

“She wasn’t concerned. But I believe in hindsight that he probably had already [died] at that stage because he consumed a lot more than her.”

On Friday, Vietnamese police arrested a bartender for making the limoncello, allegedly using 70 per cent “medical alcohol”, which is not for consumption.

Ford, an expat who runs a bar in the city, had been sent by a friend to check on the couple after they had fallen ill. “[Otteson] was cosy in her pyjamas in bed. I sat there talking to her and she had her little rescue dog, Bambi, in

the bed with her. She told me that the hangover was subsiding but she had some vision issues that were worrying her. I said, ‘Well why don’t we go to the hospital and have it checked out?’ And then she goes, ‘I don’t know if it’s worth it. I’m probably being overly sensitive. Maybe I can just sleep it off.’

Six weeks earlier, six people, including Simone White, 28, a British lawyer, died as a result of methanol poisoning after drinking contaminated vodka shots in Laos.

Ford said he and Otteson talked about the tragedy that evening. Both thought methanol poisoning could not be the cause of her illness because the limoncello had come from a “very well respected” restaurant.

About 30 minutes after he left, Otteson texted to thank him for checking on her. “That was the last message until they were



Le Tan Gia has been arrested after Greta Otteson and Arno Els were served contaminated limoncello



discovered by the caretakers the next day,” he said.

Otteson and Els moved to Vietnam in February and had been running the riverside hotel for ten months.

On Friday, Quang Nam province police announced the arrest of Le Tan Gia, 46, for the offence of “violating regulations on food safety”.

A statement posted on the police Facebook page and provided to the family said: “At 3.30pm on December 24, 2024, Le Tan Gia – a bartender of a restaurant in the city Hoi An – used 70-degree medical alcohol (the type used only for disinfection, not to be drunk or used in food processing), mixed with filtered water, lemon peel and white sugar to create two bottles of Limoncello wine (liqueur), then delivered to two tourists.

“After drinking, both suffered serious methanol poisoning, leading to death.” The investigation was continuing, police said.

Otteson’s parents, Susan and Paul, who live in Bahrain, visited their only child in November. Last night Paul Otteson said the police had told them the alcohol came from an Italian restaurant, Good Morning Vietnam, which was still open. The restaurant did not respond when The Sunday Times tried to contact it.

It has been open since 1993, offering “home-made” limoncello, including free shots to customers after meals. According to its website it also has a sister restaurant in nearby Da Nang which is called Limoncello.

Paul Otteson said: “We visited three or four times with Greta and enjoyed the food and beverage. We want it shut. All the expat community are mad. They want it shut as well. Nothing can mend what’s taken place. Our hearts are broken. We can’t bring them back, but we are happy with what the Vietnamese police have done and the support from the Hoi An community.”

As Reform surges in the polls, the PM has railed against fashionable opinion on migration, while Kemi Badenoch has unveiled a harsher stance of her own, write *Tim Shipman* and *Caroline Wheeler*. Small wonder that many believe Nigel Farage is ...



When Sir Keir Starmer addressed ministers at a six-hour cabinet “away-day” meeting at Lancaster House on Friday, he had some blunt words for those in his party who are queasy about controlling immigration. “Progressive liberals have been too relaxed about not listening to people about the impact of it,” he warned. The prime minister also railed against those who are “complacent about the effects of globalisation” on voters who feel left behind.

Starmer was named after Keir Hardie, founder of the Labour Party, but the political realities he has inherited have given him a curious new role model: Donald Trump. Last week he adapted the US president’s “drill, baby, drill” mantra to “build, baby, build”, advertising his willingness to change planning laws to speed up infrastructure projects.

This is all part of a Downing Street seek-and-destroy mission – seeking to emulate Trump in order to destroy Trump’s closest British ally, the Reform leader Nigel Farage. Last week Reform took the lead according to the pollsters YouGov for the first time.

Tomorrow Yvette Cooper will release the first footage of migrant deportation flights removing foreign criminals from Britain. The home secretary will also join a raid this week to stamp out illegal working.

“It’s something the Trump team have been very good at,” a senior government source said candidly. “We recognise the need to ‘show, not tell’ what’s being done to tackle illegal immigration.” However,

Starmer’s increasing stridency on immigration, net zero, welfare and public spending cuts has sparked the first signs of rebellion from backbenchers who are horrified that the first Labour government in 14 years is taking its cues from the White House. Farage’s growing strength also prompted the Tory leader Kemi Badenoch to break her self-denying ordinance on unveiling new policy by revealing plans to make it more difficult for immigrants to get British citizenship.

Farage’s emergence as the puppet-master of British politics is emphasised by a megapoll by JL Partners, which predicts that if an election were held tomorrow Reform would get 102 seats. Labour, on 200, the Conservatives on 190 and the Lib Dems on 70 would not be able to form a government thanks to the Reform effect. Cabinet ministers including Cooper, Angela Rayner, Pat McFadden, Wes Streeting, Shabana Mahmood,



Progressive liberals have been too relaxed about the impact of migration, the PM told cabinet

Bridget Phillipson, John Healey and Jonathan Reynolds would lose their seats. Other models have shown Reform with higher numbers but this survey is significant because JL Partners was the most accurate pollster in the world when it came to predicting Trump’s victory. James Johnson, the company’s co-founder, said: “Labour or the Conservatives will struggle to form the next government without removing the threat of Nigel Farage’s party. Reform is taking votes from Labour in the old red wall. And it is stopping the Tories from making gains against Labour elsewhere. Their instinct might be to attack each other, but unless they get the hulking figure of Nigel Farage out of the ring first, landing a blow won’t matter.”

A key moment in Labour’s new approach came when Starmer’s chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, watched Trump’s inauguration speech. While many in the party were horrified by the president’s tone, McSweeney told colleagues it was “impressive in some ways” how Trump formulated a story about his administration in blunt simple language and was prepared to challenge the status quo. McSweeney believes incumbent governments must drive change themselves or they will be swept away. Starmer echoed this approach when he urged his ministers to “be the disruptors” or end up being disrupted themselves.

McSweeney was instrumental in pressing the Home Office to get approvals from airlines, airport and ground staff to broadcast footage of the migrant returns. It shows staff packing bags at a migrant removal centre and then escorting returnees – half of whom were foreign

criminals – off a bus and up the covered stairway of a charter jet. One of the most disruptive cases is shown with his hands shackled, escorted by seven border enforcement staff.

The Home Office will also issue a leaflet – a mock-up of a red-top newspaper – declaring that “Labour is tackling illegal immigration” after “14 years of Conservative failure”. Some on the left will see this as a return to the “hostile environment” fostered by Theresa May when she was home secretary, culminating in so-called “go home vans” driving around cities.

Labour has a decent story to tell but doesn’t think the public has noticed. Since the election, returns of those with no right to be in the UK are up 20 per cent, deportations from prison are up more than 30 per cent, and illegal working raids up 23 per cent. Home Office officials say most of those raids have been against nail bars and car washes but the next wave of raids will focus on larger employers.

Cooper, who represents Pontefract, Castleford & Knottingley, is a very willing spearhead. When she addressed the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) meeting for the first time since the election last week, she was outspoken about the need to get tough. “Yvette sees the anger on the doorstep in her constituency,” an ally said. “MPs in Reform-facing seats fully understand why we have to go further. Those in metropolitan areas say we need to remember our values and do more on safe legal routes for refugees. But Yvette thinks we have to earn consent by restoring faith in enforcement.”

After a question about her approach from a London MP, Cooper told the PLP: “Public confidence in border security or the whole immigration system has plummeted. People are sick and tired of government promises on immigration that were never delivered. That’s why we have to restore grip and order. It’s vital that our borders are strengthened and the rules are respected and enforced.”

The home secretary also wants an escalation in raids to detect illegal workers, having faced complaints from her European Union counterparts that Britain’s reputation as a “soft touch” has increased the “pull factor” for migrants crossing Europe. However, this crack-down is expected to fuel growing disquiet and rebellion on the Labour back benches, where MPs are preparing to rebel on several bits of legislation. Dire figures from the Bank of England, which last week halved its prediction for economic growth in 2025 to just 0.75 per cent, at a time when inflation is predicted to rise to 3.7 per cent, mean Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, will demand further cuts from ministers in the upcoming spending review.

Some MPs are furious that the government is planning to send up to £18 billion to Mauritius as part of a deal over the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands while cut-

Pulling the strings



ting winter fuel benefit for pensioners. Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, angered others by paving the way for bigger cuts last week, saying some on sickness benefits were “taking the mickey”.

Reeves is also seen as the driving force behind the neutering of Ed Miliband’s crusade towards net zero, a move which unnerves London MPs and those fighting the Greens and Lib Dems. The energy secretary was last week forced during an interview on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* to mouth his support for a third runway at Heathrow, a project he has long condemned, and leave the door open to government approval of the Rosebank oil field in the North Sea, which he previously branded “climate vandalism”. One MP observed: “He sounded like he was in a hostage video.”

The Tories might look at all this and see the chance of a return to power in 2029, but Farage is a bigger problem for Badenoch than Starmer. JL Partners polling suggests Labour could get a majority if it won back 23 per cent of Reform’s current vote. The Tories would need to win over 37 per cent.

One senior Tory said Reform’s growing strength had “forced [Badenoch’s] hand” on unveiling plans to double the length of time new arrivals have to be in the UK before they can apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) from five years to ten. Under Tory plans, they could only apply for citizenship after 15 years. Her stance

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Time for Europe to shoulder US’s Nato burden, says Lammy

Harry Yorke and Ramsay Hodgson

Labour will tell European nations they “must do more of the heavy lifting” in Nato as President Trump shifts America’s focus towards China and defending the US.

The message will be conveyed by David Lammy, the foreign secretary, and John Healey, the defence secretary, at the Munich Security Conference, which begins on Friday and where they will be joined by key members of Trump’s team.

They include JD Vance, his vice-president; Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, and Keith Kellogg, the special envoy for Ukraine and Russia.

President Zelensky will also attend the conference, as he looks to convince Trump to maintain US funding for Kyiv in exchange for a trade partnership involving Ukraine’s valuable stores of rare earth minerals.

Sir Keir Starmer made similar overtures to EU leaders in Brussels last week,

with Lammy and Healey’s intervention seen as an attempt to placate the new US administration, which has made clear it wants the UK to lead on Nato in Europe.

Trump is also demanding Nato members increase their spending to 5 per cent of GDP, with some, including Spain, Belgium, Canada and Italy, spending well below the current target of 2 per cent. The UK spends 2.3 per cent but Starmer has pledged to up this to 2.5 per cent.

Senior British defence sources believe it is inevitable that some American defence resources and capabilities in Europe will be redeployed elsewhere as part of a “rebalancing” exercise that aligns with Trump’s focus on the US homeland and the Indo-Pacific.

UK government sources said Healey and Lammy would be making clear that Britain was ready to step into a leadership role, while also increasing pressure on other European nations.

Healey will also chair a

Rod Liddle

As MPs get cold feet, can’t we book the assisted dying bill a flight to Dignitas?



One of my principal objections to the weasel-worded assisted dying bill is that it would be nigh-on impossible to seek legal redress if, having been helped on your way, you subsequently came to regret your decision and question the legitimacy of the various medical clergy who connived in the whole thing. Hell is unquestionably full of lawyers, but they are all otherwise occupied down there.

This makes assisted dying very different from other elective medical procedures, such as transitioning surgery – you can, once your penis has been removed and redeployed in the hallway as a novelty hat peg, sue the clinic for failing to spot that you were patently deranged when you made the call. Those writs will soon be coming in thick and fast, I think. But there will not be any from the dead. They will simply be wailing in perpetual night. There is a certain conclusiveness to dying: you don’t get to try it out first.

It seemed, only a few months ago, that we were absolutely avid to buy the farm, with public support in favour of legislation that enabled us to kill ourselves whenever the mood took us riding at more than 63 per cent in the opinion polls. It seemed as though this fervid clamouring to be dead was becoming a new national pastime, alongside more established expressions of wickedness such as adultery, acquisitiveness and cycling.

You may cavil at my description of assisted dying as applying to “whenever the mood took us” – but, when push comes to a shove through those crematorium curtains, it is not so terribly far from the truth. Yes, we would be allowed to have someone put us down only if we were suffering from a “terminal illness” – but that draws the boundaries very wide indeed. In a sense, we are all suffering from a terminal illness, one we call “life”.

It is no wonder, then, that so many experts and charitable groups were

seriously worried when the bill was passed in parliament by a majority of 55. Right now, it is possible that anorexia, depression and being really old may play a part in buying you a one-way ticket to an afterlife whose custodians – if they exist – may not look kindly upon arrivals who jumped the gun and pushed to the head of the queue for release from a forlorn world of Rachel Reeves, Ant and Dec, people who think Lego is transphobic and Rory Stewart (I do have some sympathy for the death-wishers, you see).

One is also minded to consider the position of the GPs in such instances and their somewhat unquestioning assent to signing sick notes for their patients so that they can lie at home all day watching *Cash in the Attic*. This is, in a sense, just another kind of sick note – although at least it won’t cost the state a lifetime of benefits. How rigorous will the procedures be? Strongish at first, one suspects – and then loosening with every year that passes.

Still, if the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill has done anything so far, it has made me begin to look a little more kindly upon our politicians – because

“It has made me begin to look a little more kindly upon our politicians

the way things are going right now, the bill is itself going to be on an early flight to Dignitas. Kim Leadbeater, who introduced the private member’s bill, was heralded by fellow MPs as a straight-talking, compassionate and committed sort of politician, of which we have all too few. A kind of cross between Peter Shore, say, and the Angel of Death. Not so much now.

She has gerrymandered the committee convened to scrutinise both the bill and possible amendments, to the degree that several members of her own party have been left fuming and sent angry emails detailing her partisanship. First the committee was weighted 14 to 9 in favour of those who think we should all kill ourselves, and second she has been accused, with some justification, of portraying a one-sided view of the expert evidence as it has come in from countries that have already embraced assisted dying (Canada, Australia – you know, the usual suspects).

For example, evidence from Canada suggested that 35 per cent of those who applied for assisted dying did so out of a wish not to be a burden on their families, but this remarkably large (and shocking) figure was disdained by Leadbeater. It is, of course, the crux of the issue – that however copious are those questions about why you wish to die, somewhere locked within your mind is the almost unspeakable, harrowing fear that your continued existence might make life inconvenient for your family, especially as you have saved money all your life and have a hefty wodge to pass on.

Anyway, at least 30 Conservative MPs who voted “aye” before are now minded to drop out – which, if they voted against, would be enough to scupper the bill. That’s before you add in the disaffected members of Leadbeater’s own party. And so one feels a desperate sadness for those in the last, incalculably painful stages of motor neurone disease or cancer, which is just about outweighed by the knowledge that other valuable lives might be saved.

Trump’s controversial proposal



The problem with Labour nostrils

We learn that Sir Keir Starmer had voice-coaching sessions to sound less like a tetchy car park attendant who is coming down with flu. I assume he is in line for a refund.

The important question for me is, why are almost all centre-left people adenoidal? They all sound as if someone has rammed grout and crushed-up Pringles deep inside their sinuses. Is it being unable to speak properly that makes them left wing? Or is it the other way around – their asinine world-view compels them to speak with a stuffiness that obscures comprehension?

Perhaps crypto-fascists like me just think they are adenoidal because we don’t like them, but I don’t think so. I mean, can you imagine what Ed Milliband’s yearly Sudafed bill looks like?

Strange beliefs in the health service

On *Question Time*, the panel turned to the parlous state of the NHS. The Labour MP Michael Shanks said that every week his constituents told him they were spending their savings on private medical treatment but “not because they believe in private healthcare”. A fascinating statement. Obviously they do believe in private healthcare, or they wouldn’t be spending their money on it. Perhaps Michael meant they didn’t believe in it in the way one might believe in the Bible, or the Quran.

My colleague Alex Massie suggested that the failure of the NHS in all countries of the UK might suggest it was the NHS model itself that was the problem. Others on the panel looked disgusted, as if he’d dared to say the birth of Jesus might not have been parthenogenic.

● A Pakistani man who groomed pubescent girls will not be deported thanks to the thoughtfulness and decency of a judge.

The unnamed official said that if the man were sent back to Pakistan it might occasion him trouble because his family would take a “dim view” of his behaviour. The paedophile had already served 18 months in prison. This is a new one on me – not deporting someone because their mum might tell them off. “Ooh, Asif – up to your room. No soup for you!”

I don’t know, incidentally, that he’s called Asif. The courts have ordered that he should remain anonymous. To protect his security, you see.

T BOOKS

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TERRY HARRIS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Children paid the price in the steel town that was POISONED

Twenty-six years ago The Sunday Times revealed how the demolition of a steelworks in Corby unleashed a toxic ‘sandstorm’ that led to a rash of birth defects. Three mothers who fought for justice hope a new Netflix drama will help other affected families join the dots

ROSAMUND URWIN

Media Editor

When Tracey Taylor went into labour with her first baby in 1996, midwives at Kettering General Hospital sent her husband, Mark, home because they expected the birth to progress slowly. An hour later, Taylor’s mother was up a ladder banging on the couple’s bedroom window. The baby was coming – fast. “A bomb wouldn’t wake him when he’s asleep,” says Taylor, now 53.

Mark made it to the birth and it seemed like one of those funny stories they would one day tell on repeat to their children. But comedy swiftly turned to tragedy.

First, Taylor noticed her newborn daughter, Shelby Anne, had a malformed ear. Then the young mother started haemorrhaging and was rushed to the operating theatre. Hours after she woke, her daughter was dead. Shelby Anne was four days old.

She was one of a cluster of children born with health defects in and around Corby, where Taylor worked, a scandal first exposed in April 1999 by The Sunday Times. The parents alleged that toxic waste released during the clean-up of the town’s former steelworks had interfered with the babies’ development in the womb. Most were born with malformed hands or feet.

The scandal is now the subject of a Netflix drama, *Toxic Town*, released this month, which tells the stories of Taylor and two other mothers, Susan McIntyre and Maggie Mahon, and their fight for justice against Corby borough council. The three women believe the publicity around the drama could encourage more parents to come forward, wondering if their child too had been affected. While many locals saw it as an isolated problem affecting one housing estate, the dust and contamination is estimated to have been capable of being carried five miles away.

“When I was in [hospital], there was a lady in the bed opposite me who had a son born with toes missing on his foot,” says Taylor. “We think there are still some people who haven’t realised, which is why we think this show is so important.” It may not only be children, either: the three women point to potential effects on adult health in Corby, a hypothesis never really investigated.

The Netflix drama, which stars the former *Doctor Who* actress Jodie Whittaker, Rory Kinnear and the *Bridgerton* star Claudia Jessie, was written by Jack Thorne, who co-wrote the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and made by Broke and Bones, the production company of Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, the creators of *Black Mirror*. The four-part series will shine a light on the biggest child poisoning case in the UK since thalidomide.

Between 1984 and 1999, Corby’s steelworks – which had been closed in 1979 – was demolished and redeveloped. As open trucks ferried debris away from the site, toxic waste spilt over the roads, releasing poisonous dust into the air.

The children’s parents faced an 11-year legal battle to hold the council responsible. An internal report found residents had been exposed to high levels of zinc, arsenic, boron and nickel, and the council’s auditor said there was a “cavalier approach” to the operation, while in court,

exposure to cadmium was linked to the birth defects. A professor of paediatrics also found that between 1989 and 1998, children in Corby were two and half time more likely to be born with upper limb defects. Despite this, the council continued to deny any link.

In 2009, the High Court ruled that the council had been negligent in its management of toxic waste. It was a landmark decision – the first in the world to establish a link between birth defects and atmospheric rather than waterborne toxic waste. The council appealed but a year later reached out-of-court settlements with 19 families, at a total cost of £14.6 million.

Stephen Bevan, one of the journalists who worked on the story, feels it has not had the attention it deserved because it took place in Corby. “It if had been London or Birmingham, I’m sure it would have been followed up much more,” he says. “The council [acted] as though they were invincible and unaccountable.”

In *Toxic Town*, red dust keeps sweeping across the screen. “It was like a sandstorm in the desert,” recalls Taylor, who lived in Kettering but worked in Corby. “It was so thick you couldn’t have the windows open some days.” She remembers discussing the dust with her colleagues, but they all thought it was just dried mud kicked up in a hot summer by the lorries clearing the site.

Mahon, 53, whose son, Sam, was born with a club foot, grew up in the town and remembers her mother running out to

get nappies off the line because black smoke was billowing over their garden from the steelworks. “Back in the day, people just weren’t as aware – they were thinking ‘the nappies might get dirty’ rather than ‘this might affect our health’,” she says. Her husband, Derek, drove the lorries carrying the waste. She would have to beat his jeans on the washing line to remove the dust.

When Sam was born in July 1997, Mahon – played by Jessie in *Toxic Town* – recalls being told by the midwives as they handed him to her that his foot was twisted. “They said it may be the way he was lying in the womb, it might straighten out,” she says. “But it was really turned in.” She and Derek, with whom she also has a daughter, Hannah, asked why it had happened, but got no answers: “You worry that it’s something you’ve done, but I didn’t dwell on it – people have worse things.”

Sam’s childhood was peppered with operations on his foot. At six months old, he had to wear boots day and night so his feet were set in position. Mahon wells up at the memory. “Sometimes reliving it is even harder,” she says. “He used to hate those boots, and he had this metal bar around his right leg. He would sleep in the bed with us and sometimes he would just lift his feet up and whack them down on you – it was so painful.”

Sam loved playing football as a child, despite having a splint, but he had to stop aged eight as he was in too much pain. His feet are two shoe sizes apart.

“You have to buy two different pairs of shoes,” Mahon says. “And he has muscle wastage, so his leg is much thinner. He is prone to arthritis. But I always brought him up, not to ignore it, but not to highlight it.” Sam is now qualifying to be a chartered accountant.

“I always said to him, ‘Get a job where you’re sitting down’,” Mahon says. “A lot of people have amputations when they’re older. The operations don’t mean it is OK. He’s not OK. The deformities the children have are there for life.”

McIntyre’s son, Connor, now 28, was born without fingers on his left hand. He was so badly bullied about it at school that he once tried to cut the hand off. Connor had repeated corrective surgery as a child, including having two toes removed to try to graft them onto his hand, but McIntyre says the results have been disappointing: “He didn’t even get a grip at the end of it.”

McIntyre, 56, who came to Corby from Scotland at the age of three, is a single mother with another son, Daniel, 30, and used to work in factories around the town. She had a tough pregnancy with her second child: “Everything went wrong, from pre-eclampsia to gestational diabetes. I was in hospital for about five weeks up until when I had him.” After a caesarian section, Connor was brought to McIntyre wrapped in a blanket. “[The medical staff] kept whispering among themselves and to my partner,” she says.

McIntyre – played by Whittaker in the drama – is formidable and a doer. She would become a leader of the campaign for justice. “The Sunday Times came to my door, and said, ‘We think there’s some problem in Corby with children born with deformities, could we tell your story?’ That was the start of it, and then it never stopped,” she recalls. At one point, she went to get a sample from a local stream, to test it for toxic matter.

She picked Des Collins – played by Kinnear – as their lawyer because, at their first meeting, he got down on the floor to play with Connor, and because he knew the area, having worked at the steelworks for a summer in his youth.

“At the start, we just wanted the council to put its hands up, admit they had done something wrong and apologise,” says Mahon. “It was when they wouldn’t do that, and kept saying they hadn’t done anything wrong, that’s when the determination of all of us came together.”

Taylor, who worked in the industrial estate across which lorries were transporting the toxic waste, became involved in the claim after she saw McIntyre on television in about 2003. “I stopped in my tracks – it was next-door to my work,” she recalls. “It was like a jigsaw puzzle with all the pieces flying at me at once. All that time I had been blaming myself, and my husband and I were thinking, ‘What did we do wrong? Was it using the microwave?’ You blame yourself because you have no answer.”

Taylor – played in the drama by the

Maggie Mahon, left, and Susan McIntyre, right, got compensation. Tracey Taylor, centre, did not. Below, Jodie Whittaker in the Netflix series and the 1999 Sunday Times report

doctor here, I will drag myself around the hospital until I find one’.”

A doctor arrived and Shelby Anne was immediately whisked away to the special care baby unit. Staff were still trying to reassure the couple, suggesting the baby was just jaundiced. On the Sunday morning, the Taylors walked in on staff reviving Shelby Anne. They were told she would be put in an incubator in an ambulance and sent to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, which was better equipped to treat seriously ill newborns. Before she was moved, Taylor, a Christian, had her blessed and christened in the hospital car park, because the priest was not allowed into the special care unit.

In Oxford, the doctors took scans, MRIs and x-rays, discovering that Shelby Anne’s heart had only two chambers rather than four and that her lungs had not formed properly. The doctors offered to operate, but Shelby Anne’s chances of surviving surgery were very low.

“So we decided, as her parents, that we would take her off the machine and see what happened,” Taylor says. “We decided that if she managed to breathe on her own, we’d let her go into the operation. She only lasted ten minutes.”

Afterwards, they found many people deserted them. “We lost people who had been our friends for years, including my chief bridesmaid and our best man, as they didn’t know how to respond to us once we got home without a child,” she says. She still includes Shelby Anne in family life, visiting her grave at Christmas and putting up a stocking for her.

Taylor was soon pregnant again, this time with twin boys, who are now 27. She couldn’t enjoy the pregnancy, though. “I worried that something was going to go wrong with them, that I could lose them too. For quite a few months afterwards, I kept thinking the boys would go [too].” She stayed at home to look after the twins and had another boy five years later.

After she saw McIntyre on TV, Taylor contacted Collins. “I showed him where I worked, where the dust and lorries were. I was at the epicentre,” she recalls. “Des said we were their missing link, because a lot of the mums had either just passed through or had partners who had taken it home on their clothes. I was the one in the middle of it all.”

This is a story of partial justice, though, since although McIntyre and Mahon received compensation, Taylor was not part of the case that Collins took forward, because Shelby Anne’s condition was very different from that of the other children. Taylor did, however, give evidence as part of the case, adding: “Shelby Anne is a hero because if we hadn’t had her and she hadn’t died, I don’t know how the other children would have got on.”

Taylor still takes joy in Shelby Anne’s life. “There are people in this world who would love to have children and have never had that,” she says. “We had four days with her, so even if we never had more children, we still have something other people don’t have.”

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In crumbling Cuba,
the old go hungry
and the young
just...go



Sixty-six years of ruinous communist rule and punishing US sanctions have forced a tenth of the population to flee abroad, and many who remain can barely afford to eat. *Louise Callaghan* meets the people struggling to survive on an increasingly empty island



The road turns into a dirt track entering the town of San Felipe, home to those who can't leave. In the main square, five men are hunkered down in the porch of a once-great mansion, trying to fix a bicycle with a hammer. "Everywhere is empty," one of them says. "Cuba is empty."

Sixty-six years after rebels led by Fidel Castro overthrew the brutal government of Fulgencio Batista, many Cubans say their lives are worse than ever, and that the island's communist rulers are growing ever more paranoid and repressive.

This time the threat to the Cuban revolution is not a US-backed invasion or the collapse of the Soviet Union, but a slow gutting of Cuba's future as young people give up on its prospects. For decades, Cubans needed to apply for permission to leave the island, but since 2013 those restrictions have been lifted.

Between 2022 and 2023, one in ten Cubans – nearly a million people – left the island, mostly for the United States. In small towns such as San Felipe, an hour and a half from Havana, with a pre-pandemic population of 2,000, the only ones left are the very poor, the infirm, the elderly and the especially patriotic.

The exodus is primarily due to an economic crisis that has driven prices to impossible levels while incomes remain incredibly low. Institutions including Cuba's once-famous health and education systems are imploding under the burden of international sanctions and endemic state mismanagement. The jails hold hundreds of political prisoners. Anyone publicly criticising the government, including on social media, risks joining them.

"The Cuban revolution has completely failed," said Yuniors Garcia, a dissident leader who was forced to flee the country in 2021. "And the only way they can stay in power is through the use of force."

Cuba's government still tries to project to the outside world a sanitised image of a socialist paradise, where the derelict mansions of Havana are a shabby-chic backdrop for tourists' Instagram posts rather than a sign of desperate poverty.

In reality, though, it is a country where

people are going hungry. Where pharmacy shelves are empty and doctors have little choice but to tell their patients to buy medicine on the black market at prices few can afford. Where surgeons work in corner shops because they make more money there than on the wards.

Pensioners who can't survive on their monthly 1,500 pesos – just under \$5 at the black market rate – sit on the street in Old Havana begging from the dwindling numbers of tourists. Children are sent home from school because there aren't enough teachers (state wages, even for university lecturers, are about \$10 a month). And at the weekend there are fewer parties.

"People are thinking more about eating than having fun," said Yasiel Berroa, 34, an Afrohouse DJ, standing outside the near-empty block of flats in Havana where he grew up. While almost all his friends have gone to the US, because of President Trump's new restrictions on the border he is going to try to make it to Dubai instead. Unlike his parents' generation, who were raised supporting the revolution, younger people in Cuba wanted more, he said.

"It's ironic, because so many of those who fought for and defended this [country], they have so many medals but their freezers are empty," Berroa said.

"Here even the people my age who support the government, they realise at some point that they can't take out their girlfriends, that they have no money to do anything."

The economic downturn of the past few years came out of a "polycrisis" caused by inflation, the pandemic (which cut desperately needed tourist dollars) and badly thought-through attempts to reform the economy to allow some private enterprise, along with the effects of the existing US economic blockade.

It was magnified by geopolitics. For decades after the revolution, Cuba's economy was kept afloat by aid from USSR-aligned countries. Now Venezuela is in its own economic crisis, Russia is at war in Ukraine and Cuba has been left essentially alone.

Blackouts plague the country. Queues for petrol stretch for hours. Buses,

“People think about food, not fun

JORGE RICARDO FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



already wildly unreliable due to a lack of spare parts, have become a rare sight.

Shops stock basic products but the prices are out of reach for most Cubans. At one shop in Old Havana last week, a bar of chocolate cost 700 pesos (\$2), half the monthly pension for someone who has worked for the state for decades.

As a result, Cuba has been divided into two classes: people who receive money from abroad or who have successful businesses on the island (lobby groups in the US say some have links to the regime). These people can afford to buy food at vastly inflated prices. Then there are those who work for the state and try to live on ration books, sticking to their socialist ideals. They can't afford to eat.

Ten years ago there was hope. The presidents of the US and Cuba, Barack Obama and Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother, announced plans to restore diplomatic relations. Soon, the US had loosened decades-old restrictions on US companies

doing business there (although Congress prevented Obama from ending the 1962 US economic embargo).

American tourists flocked to Havana, lavishing dollar tips for overpriced daiquiris at the Floridita, a bar where Ernest Hemingway once drank. Europeans came even faster, spurred by a fear that hulking US hotel conglomerates would soon rob the island of its "character".

Then, in 2017, Trump came to power, backed by Cuban-American anti-Castro voters in Florida. He reinstated travel and trade restrictions – later labelling Cuba a state sponsor of terrorism – and limited the amount of money that could be sent to the island.

Joe Biden removed some of these restrictions but Trump immediately reinstated the terrorism designation and is seeking to roll back the protections given to Cubans seeking asylum in the US.

For months, powerful Cuban-American lobbyists have petitioned Trump and

“Prices are out of reach for most Cubans

his allies to stop daily commercial flights to the island and to further reduce the remittances that can be sent from the US.

This would cut off a lifeline for Cuban families. About 2.3 million people of Cuban origin live in the US and at least a third of people in Cuba have close family living abroad. Overseas remittances regularly hit \$3 billion a year.

María Antonio Martínez, 70, says she is one of the lucky ones. Her son in the US sends her money for food.

"I know people who don't have the money to eat anything in the morning. They just make a kind of infusion from leaves. Cubans are overwhelmed by the need to survive, there's nothing else."

Rations of basic goods such as rice, beans, oil and sugar are supposed to be provided at state-run bodegas on the first of every month. But it's been years since the system worked properly. Last month Arbelá Ramos Gonzalez, 81, a retired accountant, got only 2lb of sugar: nothing



‘Our house still stands but the rest is rubble’: a 14-year-old returns to Gaza



Nadine Abdullatif said the streets she once knew had gone

Amal Helles and Gabrielle Weiniger

The night before the long walk home, Gaza's displaced were wide awake.

Two siblings sat in the small room where they had been sheltering and talked.

"Do you know where we're going?" Nadine Abdullatif, 14, asked her younger brother Joud. "We're returning to Gaza [City]. Are you excited to return to Gaza?"

At daybreak on January 27, they saw thousands of people in front of them, waiting to cross into northern Gaza under the ceasefire deal.

Over the next three days half a million people made the journey back through the Netzarim corridor, a wide, paved road flattened by the Israeli army to isolate Hamas forces in the north. Some were quick to turn back around, finding nothing waiting for them.

Nadine, a blogger who has 127,000 followers on Instagram, was astonished by what greeted her and her

family. "Returning to Gaza after everything that has happened feels unreal," she said last week. "The streets I once knew are gone, replaced by rubble. My neighbourhood is barely recognisable, houses turned to dust, families are struggling just to survive another day."

"We wake up, search for water, food, and a way to stay warm. We check on neighbours, we listen for news, and we wait."

There is no electricity, with residents relying on solar panels or the torch on their phones at night. In a culture where hospitality is a treasured value, Nadine says families are now having to put themselves first.

"There is solidarity among people, but it is not as strong as before. Before the war, Gaza was a place where neighbours helped each other without hesitation. Now, it's different. People are exhausted. Everyone is focused on their own survival. Some share the little

they have, but others simply can't afford to. If they give away their water or food, they might not have enough for their own families. There is no right or wrong in this situation, just desperation."

Six days after their return, Nadine and other Gazans learnt that the US president planned to evict them once again and turn their devastated homeland into the "Riviera of the Middle East".

She was in a makeshift internet café near her home, where residents stand in the doorway to try to connect to the spotty internet connectivity or to charge their phones for three shekels (£0.70), when she first heard. All around her, she said, people became filled with anxiety. Trump's proposal carried an unmistakable echo of the *Nakba* ("catastrophe" in Arabic) when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were driven from their homes during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

"Everyone in the streets is talking about Trump's

statements," she said. "Some say they will never leave, that Gaza is their home no matter what. 'If we die, we die here,' they say. But others, especially the younger generation, feel differently. They dream of leaving – not because they don't love their land, but because they don't see a future here any more."

"I am torn. If I had the chance to leave, I probably would. But who will take care of my mother? My little brother? My father, who is getting older? We carry water together because no one can do it alone. If I leave, I will never forgive myself for abandoning them."

Nadine, her parents, her married sister and younger brother fled from their home in Al-Shati, a seaside refugee camp near the heart of Gaza City, in November 2023, exactly a month after the war began. They left after her older brother Ahmed, 21, was killed in an Israeli airstrike that targeted a relative's house. They kept moving as the shadow of the war chased

them south, "never staying in one place for long".

When the ceasefire finally came, Nadine's family managed to find a car for their journey. It was searched by Palestinian police at a Hamas-run checkpoint some 300 metres away from the official inspection site, manned by the Red Cross and Egyptian and US personnel.

The family were travelling with three small backpacks, bags they had brought from home and carried throughout their five displacements.

It was the Israeli army, who watched from a distance, that scared Nadine most as they drove through.

"I was terrified, afraid of being targeted," she said. "My mother warned us not to open the car windows, and we stayed fearful the entire time."

Hamas and Israel have resumed indirect talks on the second phase of the ceasefire – which focuses on the withdrawal of the troops that have occupied the Gaza Strip since the ground invasion

began in October 2023, after Hamas-led militants burst into southern Israel and killed more than 1,200 people and took 250 more hostage.

They are leaving behind a craggy moonscape, particularly in northern Gaza where homes, schools and hospitals that were used as shelters during the war have been razed. Northern Gaza became home to rounds of military operations, including within hospital walls, where Israel says Hamas were operating inside or in tunnels underground. The Israeli military detailed numerous findings of weaponry and published videos of tunnel demolitions that pulled buildings into the earth.

The Abdullatif family did not know what they would find on their return, but had followed the destruction of northern Gaza closely on social media, watching fires lick through hospitals and schools, including the two where they studied.

"When we reached our home, I was speechless," said



else. “There’s no rice, no protein,” she said. “We have infinite problems with the transport. It’s a good thing I can still walk or I wouldn’t be able to get around.”

There are widespread fears that under Trump, and particularly his secretary of state, Marco Rubio, who has Cuban roots and is highly critical of the regime, the US embargo that was designed to crush the revolution will now get tighter.

“We’re in a very tense situation. We’re expecting that Mr Trump will be unleashed at any point against us,” said Carlos Alzugaray Treto, a former diplomat and professor who is critical of both the Cuban government and the embargo.

“It is really very stupid to say that the measures the US government takes is only against the Cuban government. Come on, let’s be serious. You’re making life difficult for Cubans so that they overthrow their government. That’s the whole point. And of course it’s false,

“There are fears of what Trump will do



A giant image of Che Guevara in the Plaza de la Revolución, far left; fruit sellers in Old Havana, centre; Alegrna Martínez Ramos, left, and her mother Arbela Ramos Gonzalez, who struggle to make ends meet

because we’re not stupid. Why should we overthrow the people you want us to overthrow when you’re punishing us?”

Yet the general consensus, gleaned from a week of interviews in Cuba with leading economists, diplomats and historians, is that while the US trade war has for decades strangled the island’s economic development, at this point government mismanagement is at least as much to blame. Though many predict tough times ahead, no one we spoke to believes the regime will collapse: after decades of survival under isolation and pressure, the Cuban system is tenacious.

As Cuba has crumbled, so have its most vaunted institutions. Cuban doctors, and the country’s medical system, were for decades considered among the best in the region. Today, some of the most basic medicines are available only on the black market and people going to hospital for major surgery must bring their own needles, suture thread and surgical masks.

One doctor, who asked not to be named, started to cry as she explained how she couldn’t leave the country because of her ageing parents. She makes 5,500 pesos (about \$16) a month working full-time at a clinic in Havana, and knows she cannot give her young daughter a life here.

“It’s so hard,” she said. “You tell your patients that they need medicine, but that they have to find it on [the black market via] social media. And you know they can’t afford it.”

Anger has boiled over. In 2021, during the pandemic, thousands of protesters took to the streets across the country, calling for better living conditions. The government response was immediate, and harsh. Hundreds were arrested and the rebellion quashed.

There is no free press but the government can’t hide the low quality of life here from its citizens, who are linked via their smartphones with relatives from Miami to Spain. The young people of Cuba have seen what is out there and are voting with their feet: leaving on flights to Nicaragua or Uruguay, from where they begin the long journey north to the US, or waking up before dawn to take an (illegal) fast boat to Florida, 90 miles away.

“I think for my parents’ generation, there was a sense of duty to the revolution,” said one young artist, who didn’t want to be named. “Like they’d been through so much, and they were committed to it. Now we don’t have that. We just want to live like everyone else.”

Musk’s babyfaced minions are moving fast and breaking things. USAid is the blueprint



New York

In less than three weeks it was all over. The process started days after the inauguration, when a group of President Trump’s political appointees walked into the Washington headquarters of the United States Agency for International Development (USAid), responsible for administering foreign aid and humanitarian assistance, and stationed themselves in an isolated “bunker” on the sixth floor.

Paranoia swept through the 1,400 civil servants in the office. They whispered at their desks, convinced they were being listened to, or left the building to talk.

“Then I just heard sobbing,” said Kristina Drye, 31, a USAid speech writer. About 60 senior employees received an email putting them on administrative leave and they were escorted out of the building. Thousands more of the 14,000 worldwide workforce were then cut. Drye continued: “One day a person would be sitting beside you and the next day they were gone.”

Late one night, Elon Musk’s team from the Department of Government Efficiency (Doge) entered the office. The USAid website was taken down, the building was locked and email addresses were suspended.

The White House published a list of projects it said were evidence of “waste and abuse”, including a \$1.5 million grant to an LGBTQ group in Serbia and a transgender opera in Columbia.

On Friday the president made his own view clear. “The way in which the money has been spent, so much of it fraudulently, is totally inexplicable,” Trump wrote on Truth Social. “The corruption is at levels rarely seen before. Close it down!”

A lawsuit was filed by a government workers’ union to block USAid’s dissolution, and in response a federal judge issued a temporary halt to the 2,200 workers due be put on paid administrative leave from Friday night.

But unless higher courts support his ruling, the agency with a \$40 billion budget that helped about 120 countries fight poverty, disease and crises in 2023 might effectively be no more.

Ukraine received the largest amount of funding from USAid in 2023 at

\$16 billion. This was solely economic aid, with military aid distributed by other government departments.

The second largest programme managed by USAid, but funded by the Department of State, which could be affected by Trump’s plans is the contribution to the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria. This \$800 million worldwide programme also receives contributions from governments including the UK and private sector supporters such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

On Tuesday, some of USAid’s global health initiatives, such as those tackling malaria and tuberculosis, were awarded a waiver to allow them to continue their activities, though it is unclear how quickly the money will start flowing again.

Other key programmes financed by USAid invest hundreds of millions of dollars to provide emergency food assistance in countries such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia and South Sudan; humanitarian funding in Syria, and a global basic education programme.

USAid also operates the world’s famine detection system, funds efforts to contain the spread of ebola in Africa and contributes to programmes providing prosthetic limbs to soldiers injured in Ukraine.

The dismantling was one of the first steps in the new administration’s promise to slash spending and shrink government, and will probably form a blueprint for other agencies.

America’s bureaucratic class have been left reeling as the Silicon Valley bros move fast through the Capitol and break things. But why are they doing it, and do they have a point?

The USAid operation was more extreme than expected. Even Project 2025 – the controversial right-wing initiative published by Trump allies – suggested that the agency would simply be “scaled back”. Instead it was, in Musk’s words, fed “into the woodchipper”.

Trump said the organisation was “run by a bunch of radical lunatics”. Musk has called it a “viper’s nest of radical-left Marxists who hate America” and a “criminal organisation” that should “die”. Marco Rubio, secretary of state and now acting administrator of USAid, painted it as a rogue agency that “answers to

“The building became a ghost ship, the signage gone

Elon Musk, who showed off an oversized Maga hat in the White House, has been tasked with cutting costs by President Trump



no one”, operating on its own liberal whims.

Andrew Natsios, a lifelong Republican who ran the agency under President George W Bush, said that these were not established conservative positions. “We have never had these kinds of charges against USAid before; they are the most bizarre things I’ve ever heard,” he said. “Musk’s words in particular, about ‘Marxists’, are a bold-faced lie.”

There is valid criticism of the Biden administration’s overemphasis on “ideological, culture stuff”, he added, citing the agency hanging LGBTQ flags through the building as an example. “They were under pressure from the [Biden] White House to advance those agendas,” Natsios said. “But a new administration should change the agenda. Republicans move it right, Democrats move it left. That’s how it should be.”

The agency was created in 1961 by President John F Kennedy, aiming to respond to humanitarian crises and provide aid in developing countries in light of the belief that American national security depended on the economic and political stability of other nations.

It was established to be independent of other departments, a status enshrined by law in 1998. This ensured that aid was a tool for soft power, separate from the more strategic, political and diplomatic missions of the State Department.

Its independence means it would be illegal for Trump to abolish, move or consolidate the agency without consent from Congress, said Nick Bednar, professor of administrative law at the University of Minnesota. “There are certain functions

the president might be able to transfer between USAid and state, but that isn’t a blanket authorisation to get rid of it.”

Between 95 per cent and 97 per cent of the agency’s budget is controlled by Congress, earmarked into hundreds of pieces. USAid then contracts third-party for-profit and non-profit agencies to enact the work.

There are valid arguments around wastage, said George Ingram, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and principal deputy assistant administrator of USAid in 1998.

“They are spending too much on administrative processing, accounting for where the dollars are going, so you end up with 75 per cent of each dollar going to the project,” he said. Planning is also done years in advance, so the allocation process can be excessively cumbersome.

Its spending, however, is only 0.6 per cent of the federal budget.

In Trump’s first administration, it took his political appointees months to arrive in the USAid office, employees said. This time it was within hours – and their sights were set.

Last weekend, Musk’s team of baby-faced assassins of bureaucracy, thought to be aged 19 to 24 and working for Doge, entered the office carrying bags of coffee and creamer, setting themselves up in the IT suite. They sought access to sensitive systems, reportedly resisted by senior staff.

The director of security, John Voorhees, and his deputy were then put on leave. By Tuesday, the building was a “ghost ship”: entirely empty, the signage taken off glass doors.

The speed is “part of the genius”, said Donald Kettl, professor emeritus of public policy at the University of Maryland. “Flooding the zone makes it almost impossible for anyone to keep up.”

There are several reasons why Trump and Musk might have started the cuts process with USAid, Kettl said. First, the beneficiaries of aid are not the electorate, meaning there is little political damage; second, it is a dramatic statement of slashing big government to wipe out an entire agency at once; and third, it shows them as disentangling themselves from foreign politics, one of the main aims of Maga.

“Politically, administratively and symbolically, it is the perfect target for the new Trumpism,” he added.

Additional reporting: Katie Tarrant

Nadine. “The house behind me was ours, but the streets no longer had any recognisable features.”

They were among the luckier ones: their home remained standing, with damage to several rooms – including hers and Joud’s. The UN says that in most cases the displaced have no physical homes to return to in the north, with nearly 70 per cent of buildings across Gaza destroyed or badly damaged by Israeli bombings.

“Where are our neighbours? Where are my friends? Everything about the place has changed,” Nadine said. “To my right was our garden, full of lemon, orange, cherry, and olive trees. We spent so much time there, and my father worked hard to make it beautiful. Now, it’s all gone.”

Nadine and Joud found some of their possessions, including her favourite mug and his schoolbag. The absence of their older brother hurt the most. They have not found his body.

According to the Gazan health ministry, which is still linked with Hamas, rescue workers have retrieved 526 bodies from rubble since the ceasefire took hold. They say the war, which lasted more than 15 months, killed more than 47,000 Palestinians, a figure that includes civilians and combatants. As bulldozers come in to clear the rubble, many bodies are likely to be lost.

In the last military operation before the ceasefire, in the northern city of Beit Hanoun, 16 Israeli soldiers were killed in Hamas ambushes. Throughout the ground offensive, 406 Israeli soldiers died in combat, with no sign of Hamas being defeated.

Nadine is at least relieved to sleep in her own bed and dreams of newly planted trees in their garden.

“My father reminds us that we will rebuild,” she said. “We will try to find new seeds to plant our garden. We will do what we can, and create some sense of home again.”

Gaya’s friend was held hostage for 471 days ... and we were trapped in limbo. At last we know how our daughter died

Izzy Lyons

Gaya Halifa’s mother always knew that her daughter would never be coming home. But when news broke that her best friend Romi Gonen – who was by Gaya’s side as they fled the onslaught of terrorists at the Nova music festival on October 7, 2023 – was returning to Israel after 471 days in captivity, she knew she would bring with her details of her daughter’s last moments.

“We cried a lot. We hugged,” Sigal Halifa said of meeting her daughter’s friend the day after her release from Gaza on January 19.

“It was a mixed feeling. You realise that Gaya [is] never going to come back. But, at the same time, I am happy for Romi and everyone

coming back from Hamas. Romi is the last memory from Gaya so I hugged her.”

The friends set off for the festival early on the Saturday from the Halifa family home in Kiryat Ono, a city 11km east of Tel Aviv. “We were very happy that she was going to the festival and doing the things a young woman is supposed to do,” Halifa, 54, a school administrator, said.

“But at the same time, we were afraid. We told her that we didn’t like this place but Gaya told us not to be afraid. She told us, ‘It’s okay, it’s safe over there, there’s lots of police.’” Her husband, a 57-year-old chief executive, was particularly concerned.

The friends arrived at Nova two hours before Hamas fighters crossed the border, killing 1,200 people and

taking 250 people hostage. Gonen, who was freed last month, insisted on seeing Gaya’s parents as soon as she returned. The conversation shed light on the events that led up to Gaya’s death and brought the family a sense of closure they had been missing in the daily chaos that followed October 7.

Halifa said: “She told me that Gaya behaved like a commander and she felt very safe with her. But then Gaya started to feel that it was going to be the end that day. She told her, ‘Romi, I’m afraid I’m going to die’, and she started praying in the bush. This is something that I would never have known if Romi had not told me.”

The friends “stayed together until the end”, Halifa said, escaping the festival in a

car with Ben Shimoni, 31, later nicknamed the Angel of Nova for his journeys to the festival to save lives.

He had already rescued nine people on two trips. He then promised his girlfriend he would complete one final journey to get his friend Gaya, whom he had met when they worked as waiters in a restaurant in Tel Aviv.

“He knew that she was at the festival and he told her ... he will come and get her,” Halifa said. “She told him not to come because she could hear the shooting. But he said: ‘No, I’m coming to pick you up.’”

“Gaya then called us and said, ‘My friend Ben Shimoni is coming to pick me up.’”

The family started to make plans to collect their daughter from Shimoni’s car in

Ashdod, a city between Tel Aviv and Gaza.

He returned to the festival and collected Gaya and Gonen, who were hiding in a bush. A third passenger, Ofir Tzarfati, joined them and they sped off. Shimoni’s vehicle was nearly out of the danger zone when the terrorists, who had set up a checkpoint, opened fire.

Gaya called her father, who had set off. “Avi answered the call and Gaya started to scream, saying there’s a lot of shooting over here, and she saw the Hamas terrorists. At the same time, Avi heard machineguns and then her two last breaths,” her mother said through tears.

Shimoni and Gaya were shot dead. Gonen, who was shot in the hand as she checked if her friend still had

a pulse, was abducted.

Gaya, one month shy of her 24th birthday, was due to start studying business at university that month.

Five days later, her family were told that a body had been found. Halifa said: “Everything from October 7 seems like a movie. You live a regular life and you go to work, go home. Then suddenly, one day, it’s like someone put your life in a shaker. We lost our daughter. We lost our lives. Everything is hard, it’s not the same. You see it in the movies. You don’t believe it can happen to you.

“Gaya didn’t choose to be murdered. Romi didn’t choose to be kidnapped. But this is the situation. Gaya died and Romi lived, and we must be blessed for everyone who lives.”

NEWS REVIEW

Our surprising words have been muttered by Labour politicians around Westminster of late, Words you would never expect to hear uttered by staunch centre-left statist Remainder politicians: “Dominic Cummings was right.” Cummings has long railed against the bloat and sluggish corpulence of Whitehall, arguing for the abolition of the overmighty civil service and describing cabinet ministers as empty suits who simply read out the scripts handed to them by mediocre Sir Humphreys.

Now, as it flails about in Whitehall, suffocated by Treasury orthodoxy and pulling broken levers, the Starmer government is coming round to the idea that the man David Cameron once called a “career psychopath” might have had a point.

Cummings, not a man famed for his modesty, is unsurprised by his apparent vindication. “If you go back even four or five years in Westminster, the conventional wisdom was that the position I’ve held for ten or 15 years, that the old permanent bureaucracy is completely rotten, was a very extreme position,” he says. “By lots of people in Westminster, it still is. But by millions of other people now, it’s not seen as an extreme position. In fact, the extreme position is trying to claim that the system can work.”

A few months ago, as the name Cummings began bubbling up transgressively again, I began trying to track down the 53-year-old Northumbrian. We still hear from him regularly via his famously prolix blog and splenetic X feed, but he has given vanishingly few interviews since leaving Downing Street in 2020. As reports spread of him feeding vicious tweets about Britain to Elon Musk and backing insurgent campaigns tackling crime and economic growth, I wanted to actually ask him some questions.

Eventually, I persuade Cummings to join me for lunch at the De Beauvoir Arms in Hackney, north London. He arrives late and looking reliably on brand: beanie hat, jumbo noise-cancelling headphones, thick North Face hoodie and tracksuit bottoms. We weave past the mulleted hipsters to the back of the pub, order a pearl barley mushroom risotto each and immediately begin talking about William Pitt the Younger.

Of late, when not visiting Palo Alto or hanging out with his wife, the writer Mary Wakefield, and their young son, Cummings has been absorbed by *Britain Against Napoleon: Organisation of Victory*, by Roger Knight, a book that analyses how the British state built a machine to defeat France’s imperial might.

“Whitehall in 1800 was much more like SpaceX in 2025,” he says, referring to another Musk company. “The government actually controlled the government. Pitt did not have NPC ministers and scripted meetings. They took elite talent very seriously, they took procurement really seriously. They had lots of serious investigations and they fired people for failure – they even threw people in jail for corruption. Now ... we give everyone gongs for failure and promote them to the House of Lords.”

The phrase “NPC” is key to Cummings’s thinking. It is internet slang for “non-player character”, referring to the avatars that populate computer games but aren’t controlled by the character and so have little agency or power. In Cummings’s view, politicians, and most ministers, are NPCs who wield “fake responsibility and fake power” while the bureaucrats control everything.

His overarching theory of the British state, then, is that it peaked in efficacy under Pitt but then began to decline markedly after the Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1854, which was “the beginning of the rot” and led to the creation of the permanent civil service.

A big shift towards bureaucracy came in the decades after the Second World War. “Thatcher could sort of bend the system to some of the things she wanted to do,” says Cummings. “But she never took on the permanent civil service. Major was obviously completely hopeless. Once Blair came in then in lots of ways the official system really took over. The Tories never really understood what happened and never wanted to grapple with it. They were in office but never actually in power.”

And Starmer’s Labour? “Obviously I said beforehand that he’d fail fast for obvious reasons.” For Cummings, Starmer’s early decision to hire Sue Gray as his chief of staff was a billowing great red flag. “It showed he didn’t understand a lot of things,” he says. “She embodies the problem. Sue Gray was an HR Nazi for Jeremy Heywood [the late former cabinet secretary]. Only a modern MP could confuse an HR person with someone who was actually in charge of No 10.”

The disruptor who torched the Tories is back, linked to rumours of a new political party and a pact with a tech tycoon. *Josh Glancy* finds him happy to explain himself

BREXIT, MUSK AND WHY I BROUGHT DOWN BORIS

DOMINIC CUMMINGS

Does he sense that Starmer, who has declared war on nimbyism and red tape, might at least be learning on the job? “To some extent, yes. Because you can’t not. Because they’re now in these insane meetings where they’re told, ‘Well, you can do one of three things, minister’, and all three things seem completely mental. And then they’re like, ‘But why can’t we do the sensible thing?’”

WORKING WITH MUSK?

Cummings’s critique of the British state is derived in part from the roles he has played, first as Michael Gove’s chief adviser between 2007 and 2013, helping him turbocharge the academy schools system; then as the brains behind the Vote Leave campaign; and then as the animating spirit of Boris Johnson’s “Get Brexit done” election victory in 2019.

After that he became Thomas Cromwell to Johnson’s Henry VIII, chief adviser and hatchet man, but their relationship was shorter and more fractious, foundering over plague and plotting third wives and trips to Barnard Castle, and eventually ending with Cummings’s decapitation in November 2020.

And yet his role in the British political imagination is greater than his CV. He looms larger across the political spectrum: to his detractors he is a dangerous and destructive populist; to his fans he is a radical prophet whose jeremiads offer an escape route from national decline.

Both might be true. He certainly enjoys the darker side of politics and so it made sense last month when a story in The Mail on Sunday suggested that Cummings was “in cahoots” with Musk in a joint plot to “sabotage British politics”. The story claimed that Musk’s use of British vernacular, such as calling the prime minister “two-tier Keir”, was evidence of the collusion.

Has he been working with Musk? “No, the stories are completely false,” he insists.

Where have they come from then? “Elon and I obviously know a lot of the same people. And a lot of conversations that I have overlap with a lot of conversations that Elon’s having with the same people. But that is not the same as me writing Elon’s tweets. I’ve never written any of his tweets. It’s just not – it’s completely false.” But are the pair in touch generally? “No.”

Cummings is certainly thrilled by the radical war on the administrative state being waged by Musk in the US. In many ways, the Trump-Musk revolution seems like a grander manifestation of what he hoped he and Johnson could do with the British state.

What does he make of Trump? “It’s basically all great from my perspective,” he says. “We’ve got a government that’s actually trying to control the government for the first time since FDR.”

In his view, the Franklin Roosevelt project, built around the New Deal, was the last time a president fundamentally reshaped the American government. He adapts the “four turns” theory of US history, arguing that there have been three basic 70-year eras of the American republic: the founding era, the post-Civil War era, the post-New Deal era. With the

MARK THOMAS/ALAMY; ANDREW PARSONS



Election night in 2019 was the high point of the relationship between Johnson and Cummings. Within days, Cummings was thinking about getting rid of him. Johnson’s wife Carrie, left, thought the same about Cummings

arrival of Trump, we may be entering a fourth era.

“Everyone is now rattling around in the kind of dead machinery left by FDR. It was created by him, but he’s long dead,” says Cummings.

“Someone now has to go in and actually make the system work again. It’s an extremely similar argument to what I’ve been saying about Whitehall. We’re living in this kind of legacy system created by people who are all dead that now rattles around out of control. We have fake elections and fake promises and fake strategies and fake plans. The system, uncontrolled by anybody, just kind of follows its own dynamics.”

Does he think Musk’s highly caffeinated revolution will work? “Well, I think you have to separate out two questions,” he says. “Can Elon go into an entity, fire more than half the workforce, and radically change how it functions, and switch it from not working to being extremely high performance? Of course he can, because he’s done it repeatedly [at Tesla, for example].

“But the fundamental question is similar to the question of Boris in 2020. How much are Trump and his political team prepared to make an effort to change these things and therefore back Elon and all the other high-calibre people going in with him?”

‘I HAD TO GET RID OF JOHNSON’

Ultimately, Johnson didn’t back Cummings’s project. But anyone who paid even passing attention to Johnson’s downfall in 2022 knows that Cummings wreaked his revenge, in full.

As the drip-drip of stories leaked about lockdown-breaking shenanigans, destroying Johnson’s legitimacy, Cummings winked and hinted on Twitter, usually by means of a shopping trolley emoji, his preferred metaphor for the man he helped install in No 10.

But it’s something else to hear him explain it, publicly, for the first time. Was he the man behind the partygate scandal? “Yeah, I mean obviously,” he says. “I orchestrated it with a bunch of other people in Westminster who agreed with me that leaving him rattling around No 10 making a whole set of appalling decisions should be ended as soon as we could do.”

Why did he do it? “We had a sort of responsibility for it, right? We won the 2019 election. We told people to vote for it and we put him in. And then if you put someone in and then they kind of go off the reservation and start actually vandalising the country, well, you’ve obviously got a responsibility to do something about it.”

But there was surely more than just a sense of national duty motivating Cum-

mings. Johnson, after all, had sacked him as de facto chief of staff in November 2020, a few months after Cummings had been savaged by the media over his decision to drive to the northeast of England and stop at Barnard Castle while ill with Covid. Was this also about revenge?

“Well, I mean, obviously there’s all kinds of personal and emotional aspects to all of these things,” he acknowledges. “But the fundamental thing was we didn’t win the 2019 election so Boris could rattle around being an idiot with Carrie and her friends controlling No 10 and with all the madness that that entailed.

“So my view, and the view of the other people who helped me remove him, was that it’s just an unpleasant task but it’s a cleaning the sewers sort of role. No one wants to spend their time doing something like that, but you’ve got a responsibility to do it.”

One wonders why, if Johnson is such a reckless clown, Cummings worked so hard to get him elected in the first place. “Obviously he’s not the character that one would pick in lots of ways to drive through the sort of things that you wanted,” he says. “On the other hand, he wasn’t a pure insider that would just follow the scripts of the system. Not an NPC. We needed someone prominent inside the system who would take it on.

“The basic problem was ... the fundamental thing about Boris was that it was all about him. It wasn’t about the project. So in 2019 he was prepared to act extremely radically and take on Whitehall. [But] after the election, he thought, ‘Oh right, I’ve won now, I’ve got four years as the king’.”

That 2019 election night picture, Cummings clasp his laptop, Johnson pumping his fists with joy, represented the apogee of the pair’s relationship.

Within days, Cummings has acknowledged, he was thinking about ousting him. “It’s not to do with the country,” he says. “It’s to do with his perception of himself and his own appetites. As he said to me the week I left, ‘I’m sure you’ll end up being proved right on my decisions. I’ve almost definitely f***ed it all up. But what’s the point of being the king if I can’t f*** everything up? What’s the point of me being the king if I’m just going to do what you tell me to do?’”

Cummings’s true nemesis, of course, was not Johnson but his wife, Carrie, to whom he attributes his downfall. “From her point of view, once we won the election that was it, we’d fulfilled the thing that she wanted, which was her and Boris are now there for four years.

“She knew Boris was obviously not going to be in charge of a lot of things that are happening in the government, because he’s not interested in it. So [she thought], ‘Why would I let Dom be the person in charge? Why shouldn’t it be me and my friends in charge?’ You can sort of see her logic.”

BREXIT WAS ‘BOTCHED’

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the breadth of his machinations, Cummings is often described as Machiavellian after the great Renaissance schemer. But he aspires more to the adjective Bismarckian and has immersed himself in the political life of the iron chancellor Otto von Bismarck, founder of modern Germany, even writing a 400-page chronology of his career up to 1867.

Last week, one of Cummings’s subterranean sleights of hand was highlighted in the serialisation in The Sunday Times of *Get In* by Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire, which revealed that in 2019,

months before he helped get Johnson elected, he was meeting senior advisers to the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and suggesting that he could help make Corbyn prime minister in order to get Brexit over the line.

What was going on there? “It’s certainly true that I was engaged in secret back-channel discussions with elements of the Corbyn team throughout the process,” says Cummings. “Yes. If you read my Bismarck chronology, you’ll know that if you’re trying to learn from the master, then you have to keep as many irons in the fire as you can. You’re trying to get information about what they’re thinking, and you’re trying to nudge them into thinking certain things.”

In his present guise, when not reading about William Pitt, Cummings is working on a number of projects that he says he

Continued on page 18 →



Cummings leaving No 10 after he was sacked by Johnson in November 2020

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Anyone serious who dealt with Kemi Badenoch before knew she was a complete useless dud

→ Continued from page 17
“can’t talk about”, while helping campaigners such as the academic Lawrence Newport on problems including economic growth and street crime.

A notable absence in all this activity is Brexit, which Cummings helped deliver. Five years on from Britain’s departure, few people think Brexit is working. Have we botched it?

“Well, obviously yes, in lots of ways. If you go back to 2016,” he argues, “Remain makes some sense and reasonable people can argue that we should have stayed in. Leave and change things very significantly makes sense. Leave and then just sit there changing nothing is obviously moronic. But that’s where Boris and [Rishi] Sunak ended up taking us. So to that extent it’s obvious the Tories just completely botched it.”

To deliver the benefits of Brexit, in fact to save Britain from inexorable decline, Cummings believes we need a new “start-up party” to defeat the tired 20th-century institutions of Labour, Liberal Democrats and Tories. What does he think of Nigel Farage’s Reform UK, which is leading all three in some polling?

“It’s just a completely natural product of the situation,” he says, pointing out that the government is in a “flat spin”, the Tory party is “intellectually dead” and “Farage is more famous than the whole shadow cabinet put together.”

He’s not a Kemi Badenoch fan, then? “It’s just a bad joke,” he says. “Anyone serious who dealt with her before knew she was a complete useless dud. I think Kemi will be got rid of before too long. The Tories will have another spasm.”

‘POLITICS NEEDS A CLEAR-OUT’

Cummings has been sceptical of Farage in the past, but why not get on board with his pro-Brexit, anti-immigration, anti-Westminster insurgency? “No one knows now what it’s going to become. The Reform of the 2024 election was a one-man-band – Nigel, packet of fags, an iPhone and not much else, right? Is it a plausible party of government in 2028? Do they want to and can they build and attract elite talent?”

Why doesn’t he help them do that? “Engagement with Westminster is not tempting to me, no. Helping people outside build things is more interesting to me.” He argues that to renew a rotten state and benefit from the AI revolution, there is no use “just shuffling around Tories and Farage and Reform. What’s needed is a clear-out.”

Instead, Cummings hopes to build a movement that will lure “actually high-performance and talented” elites out of hedge funds and tech start-ups and back into the political arena. Again he looks to the US, where a subset of Silicon Valley swung behind Trump to help him overhaul the system. “In America the capable elite said, ‘F*** this, we’re not going to tolerate it any more.’ Something similar is needed in Britain.”

Will he succeed? Cummings views a political revolution as inevitable, because at a certain point the Potemkin politics of Westminster will collide with the harsh realities of the 21st century. Whether he is the man to orchestrate such an overhaul remains to be seen.

Cummings is one of the most remarkable figures to emerge in British politics over the past 50 years, but his project to change Britain has stuttered. Johnson flamed out. Brexit is a disappointment. The insurgent force is all with Farage.

Politics, as his hero Bismarck said, is the art of the possible and the attainable. But all too often it seems that Cummings, despite his erudition and acute political instincts, has attempted the impossible and been too impatient with compromises and half-measures. As a result his projects have failed, leaving him on the outside, reading and plotting and dreaming. He had his moments of change with Gove, with Vote Leave and then in Downing Street. Will there be a fourth turn for Cummings? I wouldn’t rule it out.

JONAS GRATZER/GETTY IMAGES



A dream of tolerance shot down in flames

Guns, gangs and anger over migration have turned Sweden into a tinderbox. As recriminations begin after the mass shooting, Will Lloyd charts its descent

Students scattered and found cover. Classrooms were barricaded and corridors turned into instant crime scenes. A woman used her shawl to try to stop a man next to her from bleeding to death. A witness told a newspaper that he saw a “bloodbath ... the sickiest thing I’ve ever seen”.

On Tuesday, one police chief described the scene at Campus Risberg-ska, an adult education campus in Orebro in central Sweden, as resembling an “inferno”. Flags are flying at half mast and the following day King Carl XVI Gustaf said: “All of Sweden is mourning.”

The mass shooting was the worst in Swedish history. But it was also another tragic waystation on Sweden’s journey from a peaceful, liberal high-trust society, a paragon of a modern social democratic state, into an increasingly fractious, armed and at times violent country. Orebro is a unique and unparalleled tragedy for Sweden, but it has hit a country already ill at ease with itself.

When I visited recently, taking in the Stockholm, the industrial city of Sodertalje and the pretty towns of Mariefred and Sigtuna, almost every conversation came back to two factors: migration and crime. Swedes, whether they were mem-

bers of parliament or former gang members, new migrants or natives, talked about segregation, vigilantism and gated communities with a candour and sadness that would have amazed their grandparents.

Materially the country still seemed well-off. But politically it was haywire. The collapse of the Social Democrats, the centre-left party that ruled the country for most of the 20th century, left a void that has been filled by a hard-edged right-wing nationalism. The Sweden Democrats, whose roots are in neo-Nazism, surged in popularity in the 2010s, becoming one of the largest parties in the Riksdag and setting the political agenda.

A growing awareness of gang crime shootings and bombings connected with a huge influx of migrants and the burgeoning drugs trade since 2015 had shifted political allegiances.

For years the Swedish left had argued that crime was rooted in poverty. But the argument of the Sweden Democrats, that crime was intrinsically connected with migration and integration failures, won over millions of voters.

Over a Guinness in a kitsch Irish pub in Sodertalje, Jan, a 51 year-old who works in a paint shop, said that his town had been transformed. Today it was a “gang town”, he said: a few weeks ago, after a

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All the violence affects innocent people. You ask, Can you be safe?

dispute about entry, the pub was shot up by a gunman. “Ten years ago there were no child soldiers,” Jan said. “But now 15 and 16-year-olds are on the front line.” He grimaced. “Sodertalje is not always strawberries and milk.”

Scant information on the killer’s motives has been released by the authorities since the atrocity last week. There are only two hard facts so far: the perpetrator was white Swedish and the school where the shooting took place had a large immigrant student body.

At least 11 people, including seven women, and Rickard Andersson, the suspected gunman, died. Syrians and Bosnians were among the dead, according to embassies of those countries. Six more people were injured.

Andersson, 35, took his own life on Tuesday surrounded by three licensed weapons and unused ammunition. Anna Bergkvist, the lead investigator, told the BBC: “We are looking at different motives and we will declare it when we have it.”

A roiling culture war about migration, terror, crime and the far right has rocked Sweden since the attack. “When a white man carries out a massacre, people look for explanations other than terrorism,” wrote Victor Malm, a columnist for the Swedish daily newspaper Expressen on Thursday. “Terrorists are the others.”



Swedes mourn those shot dead by Rickard Andersson on a campus where many students were migrants

“All the violence that happens in today’s Sweden affects innocent people,” Andreas Sundling, a 28-year-old student, who hid from Andersson, told Expressen. “You ask yourself, ‘Can you be safe in today’s Sweden?’”

Orebro, about 120 miles west of Stockholm, is a university town of about 160,000 people and a medieval castle that looms across the river Svartan. It is also a window into radical changes in Sweden over the past 40 years. When the German travel writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger trotted around Sweden for his book *Europe*, *Europe* in the 1980s, he called Swedes “world record-holders in docility”.

The country Enzensberger described was modern, peaceful and tolerant, but it also collectivist and dull. Like other Scandinavian nations, Sweden was characterised by high social and political trust. Its economic success was led by innovative companies such as Volvo, Ikea, Tetra Pak and Ericsson. Sweden’s welfare state, the *Folkhemmet* (people’s home) was one of the most extensive and generous in the world. In 2005, *The Guardian* described Sweden as “the most successful society the world has ever known”.

Things are somewhat different today. In August 2023, the paper visited Orebro to find that “guns are so easy to come by that social services say most of the high-risk young people they work with in relation to youth crime could get hold of one in a day”. Children as young as ten were wielding them as gang wars intensified in the illegal drugs trade.

Guns, which are licensed by the state, were relatively rare in Sweden before the 2010s. Gun murders were even rarer. In the early 2000s the number of annual gun murders in the country was in single digits and one of the lowest in Europe.

But in recent years, Sweden, with a population of ten million, is third after Montenegro and Albania for the highest number of gun murders per 100,000 inhabitants in Europe. In 2024 there were 296 shootings in Sweden, which resulted in the deaths of 44 people and injuries to 66 people.

Anyone over 18 without a criminal record can apply for a permit for a shotgun, handgun or semi-automatic rifle. But in the wake of the shooting, the centre-right coalition government has announced plans for tougher controls.

Sweden is caught in a “perfect storm”, the security analyst Magnus Ranstorp said. There are at least 30,000 gang criminals, forming a “violent extremist milieu”. He contrasted Sweden with neighbouring Denmark, home to just 1,500 serious criminals. A fear of conflict has led Swedish governments to ignore the storm, Ranstorp said. “Sweden is a consensus-oriented society. We didn’t want to see reality staring us in the face.”

Night the hare coursers raised hell in the fens

A ‘Mad Max’ convoy of masked men invaded Cambridgeshire farmland to create an arena for their illegal blood sport – so why didn’t police respond? *Matthew Campbell* investigates

Matthew Latta was about to sit down to lunch with his family when he heard a revving of engines in the usually quiet lane outside. Peering through a window he watched a riotous convoy of four-wheel-drive vehicles roaring into his farmyard.

Dozens of men, some in balaclavas, got out of the cars. “They came into our back garden,” Latta recalls. “My seven-year-old daughter was quite terrified. She was in tears, saying, ‘Daddy, what’s happening, are they going to come into the house?’”

This was not a scene from a war zone. It happened two weeks ago in the Cambridgeshire Fens where, for a few, terrifying hours of pandemonium, citizens were left at the mercy of intruders who robbed petrol stations, raced through villages and rampaged across fields to stage an illegal hare coursing tournament on Latta’s land.

They carried out this unruly incursion with impunity, not once challenged by police.

“I counted 13 vehicles and 70 men, they took over our farm for several hours, cutting through padlocks on

gates, turning the place into their playground,” says Latta, 50, who grows onions, potatoes, wheat and barley on 2,000 acres just north of Cambridge. He called the police three times that afternoon – in vain. “They said they would come. We’re still waiting four days later. We’ve felt alone and very vulnerable.”

It seems as if a shadow has fallen across parts of green and pleasant England, now in the grip of a rural crime epidemic and policing crisis, the latest, menacing manifestations of which are marauding convoys of rural road warriors.

“It was like something out of *Mad Max*,” recalls Robert Sears, 73, who farms 1,500 acres near the village of Manea. He was at the wheel of his car on a private road when he saw two dozen vehicles charging towards him, many of them via a field: they had driven over one of Sears’s new sapling hedges to gain access.

The farmer had received a warning earlier that day that hare coursers were on the way. “I thought, ‘Bugger this, I can’t just do nothing,’” he says.

Sears positioned his car to

try to block the convoy. But it made little difference. “They rammmed me out of the way,” he said, pointing to a dent on the rear left side of his Jaguar. “There was a hefty bang. It’ll cost about £3,000 to put it right.”

The invaders, thought to be from the Traveller community, then roared into Manea, a village with 2,000 inhabitants and surrounded by fields that are a haven for thousands of overwintering Russian swans. “We’re a sleepy, one-horse, fenland town. I’ve never seen anything like it,” says Charlie Marks, a local Conservative councillor.

He was walking along the pavement when he heard the screeching of wheels as the first wave of a dozen 4x4s came round the corner.

“They were doing about 70mph in a 30mph zone, and sometimes up on the pavement,” he said.

“They were full of guys with balaclavas and sunglasses, one of them

hanging out of the window grasping a pickaxe handle.”

He, too, called the police to no avail. So did the manager of the service station in nearby Wimblington. One of the convoys had pulled into the forecourt that morning and the balaclava-clad men had burst into the Family Shopper store.

“These men were in masks, they spoke most disagreeably to other customers,” says Sonish, 47, one of the cashiers. They made off with sandwiches, crisps and other food. “They were throwing items on the counter, shouting ‘Hurry!’ at me, but they wouldn’t let me scan the things. They took it all without paying as well as petrol from two of the pumps.”

Later, at Latta’s farm, the men released dogs to chase hares through the field. Others stood on the top of cars watching the action with binoculars.

In a modern twist to this age-old practice (banned in Britain since 2005) coursers

have been livestreaming the chase on the dark web, inviting bets from punters as far as China on how many hares are caught or which dogs will kill the most.

“There’s big money involved,” a police source tells me.

After the weekend of terror, 400 people gathered in Manea’s village hall to grill Nick Dean, the county’s chief constable, about why his force had not intervened. He said there was “no excuse” for the lack of response and an investigation was being launched to find out what went wrong.

Dean told the meeting he had gone with his “gut feeling” over the allocation of extra resources to tackle hare coursers. “I perhaps got it wrong in hindsight,” he added, to laughter from the hall.

Police say this is part of a rural crime wave involving farm machinery and other stolen goods worth tens of millions of pounds each year. Organised crime families in

the Traveller community are said to ship the gear to Europe and have links to criminal organisations overseas.

In their spare time, they enjoy coursing events and have been known to threaten anyone who objects: a video filmed recently in Wiltshire by the hare coursers shows a farmer in a field by his car, holding a stick as other vehicles circle him, their drivers shouting abuse at him and ramming his car.

Prosecutions are complicated, Latta says: “They say, ‘We took the dog off the lead and it started chasing a hare, we couldn’t stop it.’”

Manea’s villagers, meanwhile, are still reeling from the assault. “I know an 85-year-old woman who is scared to go out,” Marks says. “Who knows if and when they’ll come back?”

He worries what will happen next time if police fail to come to the rescue. “We could end up with another Tony Martin on our hands,” he says, referring to the farmer who shot dead a 16-year-old intruder at his fenland home in 1999 and died last week. “That would be tragic.”

Six men have been arrested on suspicion of violent disorder and four vehicles have been seized, as well as hare coursing equipment, according to Cambridgeshire police.



Hare coursers abandoned an SUV on Robert Sears’ farm



A scammer, a thieving pal... Being trusty has got me into trouble

Livia Giuggioli Firth, former wife of Colin, tells *Roisin Kelly* why she closed down her eco company and is now far happier selling £13 pasta sauce made at her Umbrian farm

It has been three minutes since I arrived at Livia Giuggioli Firth's Umbrian farm and the Italian eco-activist is already pushing a plate loaded with beige carbohydrates towards me, urging: "Eat, eat!" She senses my polite hesitation. "What? I'm an Italian mama," says Giuggioli Firth, 55, with a shrug, plying me with potato-topped pizza slices and giant arancini balls. Two dogs sniff around our feet and I lose count of the cats jumping on and off the table.

"Ah, the cats," she sighs. "I think we only have nine now."

It is a sunny January day at Quintosapora ("the fifth taste"), the rustic sustainable farm in Città della Pieve in Umbria that Giuggioli Firth – the ex-wife of the Oscar-winning actor Colin – co-founded in 2020 with her twin brothers, Nicola and Alessandro Giuggioli.

Born in Rome, Giuggioli Firth was 25 when she met Colin on the set of the 1996 BBC miniseries *Nostromo* – he was the star of the Joseph Conrad adaptation, she was a production assistant.

They married the following year and had two sons; Luca is now 24 and Matteo 22. The couple separated briefly in 2015, then reunited, but announced their permanent split in December 2019, after 22 years of marriage. She moved back to Umbria after the pandemic.

"We always came here for holidays, the kids grew up here," Giuggioli Firth says, in perfect albeit heavily accented English. "I just thought, 'Why am I going back to London?' Città della Pieve was our holiday home and then it became my home."

At the time, Giuggioli Firth was already running a successful business: Eco-Age, a consultancy specialising in sustainability that had headquarters in London and Milan and worked with everyone from supermarkets to luxury brands such as Harrods and Diesel. Eco-Age's initiatives, such as the Green Carpet Challenge, where celebrities walk the awards season's red carpets in environmentally friendly gowns, helped to make conversations around fast fashion mainstream.

Last summer, though, after 17 years, Eco-Age suddenly registered for voluntary liquidation. The circumstances were shrouded in mystery.

"Tragically the business was targeted by criminals and although we tried, we have been unable to recover financially from the impact," Giuggioli Firth wrote on Instagram at the time. "Due to an ongoing police investigation, we are unable to comment further on the specifics of the case. But we look forward to justice in due course."

Although she is still somewhat circumscribed by legal restrictions, Giuggioli Firth is able to say that her company fell victim to a "very sophisticated crime which hap-

pened in various stages", starting with a cyberattack two years ago.

"We were hacked and we lost a lot of money overnight," she says. "I was really, really shocked by the UK banking system, because they allowed money laundering to happen incredibly easily. I was completely shocked about how they dealt with it, how they behaved. We were so let down by the system."

The financial impact was so big that Eco-Age had to close its Milan office, cutting 19 jobs from a staff of more than 30. Unbeknown to Giuggioli Firth, things were about to get worse. Last year she discovered "by accident" that somebody she trusted at the company had been funneling so much money out of it that there was no option but to close completely.

"It was brutal," Giuggioli Firth says. "Eco-Age was a family. It was a huge betrayal. Personally, it took a huge toll because relationships are based on trust. I was traumatised."

She can't disclose how much money was stolen, just that it was "a lot, enough to force us to do what we did". Companies House records show that Eco-Age owes creditors £1.2 million and had assets of just £27,000, although Giuggioli Firth is protected by the company's limited liability. The police are investigating.

It isn't the first time Giuggioli Firth has

“**If I wasn't Colin Firth's wife, I could never have done what I did**”



STEPHANIE GENGOTTI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Livia Giuggioli Firth in Umbria and, below, with her ex-husband Colin Firth

been betrayed by someone close to her. In 2018, lawyers representing her and Colin brought stalking charges against Marco Brancaccia, a former friend she had known since childhood.

Brancaccia was accused of sending her threatening phone calls and texts, and emailing photographs of Giuggioli Firth to her husband. Brancaccia denied the claims and said they had an 11-month affair beginning in the summer of 2015, after a family party at the Firths' holiday home in Umbria.

It later emerged that Giuggioli Firth and Brancaccia had indeed had a brief relationship during her first separation from Colin a few years earlier. Both sides disputed the details and the charges were dropped. Aside from a short statement from Giuggioli Firth's representatives at the time, she has never spoken publicly about it.

"I had a really bad stalking case, but no one questioned him because he's a man," she says. "I immediately became the perpetrator because I am a woman. There's so much inequality in that treatment. That affects you. I was like 'Wow, this is reality'. And it was public, so ... everyone knew about it, it was very upsetting. Mamma mia, that was tough."

She believes her tendency to trust people got her in trouble in both cases – the stalking and the business. "I'm known to be a very trusty person," she says. "I want to believe everyone is good and has good intentions."

She may no longer be "Colin Firth's wife" but she is grateful for the platform their marriage gave her. "If I wasn't Colin Firth's wife, I could never have done what I did with Eco-Age," she says. "I could only do it because I was Colin's wife. If you use that attention in the right way, it's fantastic. If you don't use it in the right way, it's almost dystopian, because you're getting attention but you're not using it."

At Quintosapora, the farm produce is sold to restaurants in Italy and jars of tomato sauce and smoked courgettes are sold in the UK for almost £13 each at Nattoora, a high-end greengrocer. That is quite pricey for pasta sauce.

"These products cost a lot of money because they take endless hours to prepare," Giuggioli Firth says. "Every single person that works here is paid a living wage and is fully employed with a contract. You have to look at the whole thing."

Giuggioli Firth isn't doing any farming herself, although she almost looks the part in a pair of muddy brown boots. Her focus is "the commercial side, events, communications, partnerships ... that sort of thing", while her brothers and their 13 employees manage the rest.

Pasta sauce aside, is she enjoying a slower life in Italy? "My life in London never felt that crazy," she says. "I've always been very relaxed, even with the boys at school. I spent most weekends in my pyjamas."

In July, the same summer she lost her business, Giuggioli Firth underwent surgery for breast cancer after a routine mammogram found carcinoma. She believes it was stress-related and feels "incredibly lucky. It was a very nasty cancer but they caught it at the very beginning, so I didn't have to have chemotherapy. I was like, 'You know what? The universe is trying to tell me something.' Particularly with things like the company and money, you think, 'It is what it is'. You let go much more easily."

For someone who has endured her share of adversity, Giuggioli Firth is remarkably sanguine. She doesn't worry much about ageing – at least, not enough to be tempted by Botox. "I've never met a woman who looks good with it," she shrugs. The most difficult thing about getting older, she says, is menopause: she was catapulted into it "overnight" after the cancer diagnosis meant she could no longer take HRT.

"I lost so much muscle mass and my memory is terrible – my brain and my body are kind of mushed," she says. "It's really difficult, but I've accepted that I'm completely discombobulated."

Does she ever miss the glamour of red carpets and film premieres? Not at all. She thinks award ceremonies such as the Oscars are "starting to look a lot like *The Hunger Games*" and she doesn't "want to be a part of that circus".

"Colin is very private, so we always separated public life from our life," she adds. "When you take that approach, you become like an avatar. You go there, you call your mum to say you saw George Clooney ... but your real life has nothing to do with that. So when you don't have it any more, it's much nicer, because it was never you in the first place."

She and Colin remain "very, very close friends". She watches all of his films and says their relationship is "very healthy", which she is "incredibly proud of ... We're very, very close. We love each other."

They spent Christmas together in Italy with her family, including their sons – both musicians, and "really, really good boys, a fantastic mix of English and Italian" – and her new partner, Callum Grieve, a Scottish climate activist she has been dating for two and a half years. "We're like this huge crazy family now," she says with a laugh.

For now, the farm is Giuggioli Firth's focus. She is proud of what Eco-Age achieved but has no plans to resurrect it. "Sustainable fashion doesn't mean anything any more, the greenwashing is rampant," she says. "Now, instead of going to an office, I go to the farm. The main difference? A lot more cats."

Something on your mind? It could be a brain full of microplastics

New research shows there are 50 per cent more tiny particles inside our heads than a decade ago. *Ben Spencer* examines the evidence to see how concerned we should be about a toxic issue

The toxicologist Matthew Campen takes a straightforward view of the plastic in his brain, and yours. "I have yet to encounter a single human being who says, 'There's a bunch of plastic in my brain and I'm totally cool with that', said the professor in pharmaceutical sciences at the University of New Mexico, announcing the results of his team's remarkable analysis of tissue samples in the state.

This study, published in the journal *Nature Medicine*, made global headlines last week. It showed that in samples taken from 52 people who died in 2016 and 2024, microplastics – shards of disintegrated plastic as small as 100,000th the width of human hair – were found in the tissues of the liver and kidney. More worryingly, they also found microplastics in samples from the brain, and at even higher levels.

"I'd never have imagined it was this high," Campen said. "I certainly don't feel comfortable with this much plastic in my brain."

It is hard to argue with that – but how worried should we actually be?

"The finding that microplastics are accumulating in human brains is concerning," says Antonis Myridakis, lecturer in environmental sciences at Brunel University of London. "However, it is too early to draw conclusions about direct health risks."

We are increasingly aware that microplastics get everywhere – they have been found at the north and south poles, on our highest peaks and in our deepest seas, and now it appears they are in our brains too. It sounds troubling, but scientists still do not know what this means for our health.

This ambiguity is fuelling some pretty acute alarm. The brain could contain "a spoon's worth" of plastic, according to an article in the *Smithsonian* magazine (extrapolating heavily from the tiny samples examined). "Dementia risk is increased by microplastics," another claimed.

The findings are also likely to fuel the reforming zeal of Robert F Kennedy Jr – Donald Trump's choice to be the next US health secretary – who views plastic and chemical pollution as a significant threat to human health and has threatened the plastics industry with a clampdown.

Studies about plastic pollution are published all the time, but there were three key things about this research paper that caught the eye of scientists. First, the accumulation of microplastics in the brain samples of those who died in

2024 were about 50 per cent higher than in those who died in 2016, suggesting the concentration in our bodies is rising as the environment becomes more polluted.

Second, the study showed that microplastics were crossing the blood-brain barrier – the filter designed to stop contaminants getting into the inner workings of the brain.

Third, the brain samples taken from the 12 people in the study with a recorded diagnosis of dementia contained as much as 10 times more microplastics than those of anyone else.

Researchers stressed they could not prove the plastic has anything to do with the dementia – they had shown correlation, not causation – but Campen stressed that a firmer link might be demonstrated in the future.

Environmentalists have been warning about plastic pollution for decades, and it is a message that has always resonated because litter is visible and tangible – far easier to get a grip on than invisible, remote threats such as climate change. As Tamara Galloway, professor of ecotoxicology at Exeter University, puts it: "A single-use plastic item is designed to be used for 20 minutes and then thrown away. And then it lasts for 500 years."

And it is not just litter. Car tyres now contain a high proportion of plastic. Cosmetics contain microplastics. Even doing a load of washing can contribute, with fibres shed from clothing passing into drains and then out into our waterways.

Microplastics were catapulted into the public consciousness in 2017, when Sir David Attenborough's *Blue Planet II* showed a pilot whale towing her dead calf across the ocean for days, unwilling to accept it had died.

Galloway, however, is optimistic. "In this study, the concentrations increased over time. But the reverse to that is that if we were to reduce exposure, we could reduce the concentrations in human bodies."

Scientists are investigating the use of enzymes to break up microplastics and sound waves in the ocean that could push them to accumulate into focused channels, where they can be collected.

But first, Galloway says, we need to stop producing more and more plastic that simply gets thrown away (which may prove difficult with Trump vowing last week to end US government bans on plastic straws). "You can't just treat the environment like one great big dump. What you throw away could well come back to hurt you."

Yes, 'romantasy' elves are sexy, but the talking is the real turn-on

With its seductive fairies and predatory villains, Tolkienesque erotica is big business. *Flora Joll* explains what its attractively communicative cast of characters tells us about female desire

Romantasy is the hybrid of two genres serious readers love to sneer at: romance and fantasy. Populated by faeries, goblins, shapeshifters and sorcerers, these novels turn up the charm with fantasy's high stakes and epic tropes.

Sarah J Maas and Rebecca Yarros are its dominant authors and their readers take the genre seriously: an estimated £27 million worth of romantasy books were sold in 2023, according to The Bookseller, up from £15 million in 2022.

Yarros tops the Sunday Times bestsellers list for hardback fiction, with *Onyx Storm*, which sold 2.7 million copies globally in its first

week, and paperback, with *Fourth Wing*. Maas's *Throne of Glass* and *Crescent City* series have brought sales to Bloomsbury not seen since the glory days of Harry Potter.

I have devoured hundreds of romantasy titles, including much of the "dark romance" sub-genre, which goes beyond the slightly more vanilla sagas of Yarros and Maas. Dark romance tends towards kink and can feature nefarious villains, predatory behaviour such as stalking, the blurring of sexual consent and taboo relationships involving transgressive age gaps or family members.

I found it disconcertingly easy to veer to some fairly violent sexual tropes, almost

without meaning to. Much of the genre's popularity is being driven by "BookTok", TikTok's literary ecosystem. One of the most popular titles on BookTok last year, *The Villain*, by LJ Shen, involves a masked protagonist breaking into the heroine's house and concealing cameras to watch her. (They soon embark upon consensual sexual adventures plus a few murders, for texture.)

This is a big contrast with the half-faerie hero Rhysand in Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, whose smouldering attraction to the protagonist Feyre builds over the course of several books before he makes a move.

What does this swirl of desire, kink and publishing bonanza tell us about contemporary female desire? One recurring theme in romantasy books is that the men in them are good verbal communicators. The

narrative is dominated by the men talking to women before and during sex.

This is a reflection of the fact that so much of sexual pleasure for women emanates from anticipation. It is all about the build-up – the singer Paloma Faith points out that foreplay starts the minute you open your eyes in the morning and hope you don't have to nag your partner about a domestic chore. It's what you talk about the whole day, not just 15 minutes before wanting an orgasm.

Roman

A24/NIKO TAVERNISE/PA



Sarah J Maas's fans love the slow burn of her romance novels set in a fantasy world. Nicole Kidman submits to Harris Dickinson in *Babygirl*, above

often praises Feyre in intimate ways, telling her how intoxicating he finds her.

This praise kink goes a step further in *Babygirl*, the film in which Nicole Kidman plays a chief executive having an affair with a younger man. Kidman's character, Romy Mathis, is tested to see how submissive she is prepared to be: she is told to stand in the corner, wait and, notoriously, to sip a glass of milk.

Kidman's character loves to be called a good girl and I've heard friends and colleagues express a desire to be praised in such a way. (None of them is saying they want carnal knowledge of an elf. At least not yet.)

This isn't necessarily a bad thing – praise is great and being more articulate about it is to be encouraged – but the question is control. The women feeding this demand are usually quite empowered, and a desire simply to hand

over the reins to someone else (often a relative stranger) feels ... complicated.

In 2012, at the height of Fifty Shades fever, the American essayist Katie Roiphe argued that as women became more empowered in public they fantasised more about submission and domination in private.

Does this still hold true? In post-pandemic Britain it doesn't feel that way: the rate of women leaving the workforce to care for their families has started to rise after decades of decline.

Male dominance still looks shaky, but only because the men dominating the public sphere are shakier, rather than because there are fewer of them. To me that is the perfect excuse to escape into a world dominated by powerful, capable and yet highly communicative and emotionally literate hot faeries.



Housing crisis won’t be solved without immigration control

Boris Johnson told voters that Brexit was the only way to take back control of immigration. A month before the 2016 referendum, he remarked that a net 184,000 people had arrived from the EU the previous year, “adding a population the size of Oxford to the UK”. That kind of number now looks quaint. As prime minister, Johnson presided over what critics came to call “the Boriswave”. The post-Brexit visa regime his government introduced in 2021 led to a surge that peaked with a net 906,000 migrants arriving in 2023. Whereas before 2016 the majority of people coming to the UK were EU citizens, last year the biggest contingent came from India, followed by Nigeria and Pakistan. The Boriswave was fuelled by people arriving on health and care visas, plus international students bringing family.

The long-term impact of this post-Brexit spike should not be exaggerated. The number of people granted permanent residence in 2023 was just 120,000, although more will become eligible in future years. Last week the prime minister – clearly rattled by the rise of Reform UK – told his cabinet that “progressive liberals have been too relaxed about not listening” on the subject. Indeed the implications of immigration running at an elevated level for a long time should not be underestimated. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) last month forecast that net migration would stabilise at 340,000 people a year after 2028. The ONS said the UK’s population could swell by almost five million by 2032.

Net migration is essential for a nation like the UK, which has an ageing population and many people out of work. The NHS has long been reliant on foreign staff – about 40 per cent of doctors are trained abroad. The arrival of new people is the reason the UK will be one of the few western countries to enjoy an increase in its working-age population over the coming decades. But the trend has become embedded without explicit public consent, and only now is there some semblance of political debate. The surge in arrivals poses serious questions about the provision of public services and infrastructure. NHS England has 6.3 million people waiting for 7.5 million procedures. Although it is only right to note that migration helps the health service with staffing and by lowering the average age of the

population, the expansion in users will put it under more pressure. The same is true of housing. While immigration is not the cause of the housing shortage, the fabled figure of 300,000 new homes needed in England every year – which has not been hit in more than five decades – was based on an assumption that net migration there would run at 170,000 a year. A few years ago the Centre for Policy Studies calculated that a net migration rate of just over 500,000 would raise the number of new homes needed in England a year to 430,000.

Rishi Sunak started to apply the brakes, making it harder for students to bring over family members and tightening the scrutiny of employers’ applications to sponsor care workers. Labour should focus visa approvals on genuinely skilled workers who contribute. Just 12 per cent of visas issued between 2021 and 2023 were for skilled workers, and almost two thirds of those 12 per cent were people on the health and care sub-route, where the average salary is £24,000. With a quarter of the working-age population either unemployed or economically inactive, Britain must wean itself off importing low-paid staff. Kemi Badenoch, who has apologised for the Johnson-era splurge, has also proposed making it harder for immigrants to secure what is known as indefinite leave to remain (ILR). Under her plans, those who have not worked, have been claiming benefits or have criminal records would be excluded. It is difficult to argue with this, although her promise to double the time it takes to apply for ILR, and to make recipients wait a further five years before being able to qualify for British citizenship, may be on the severe side.

An underreported aspect of last month’s ONS forecasts was the figure of almost five million: the number expected to emigrate from the UK by 2032. As we also report this week, many young people are choosing to live in places such as Dubai, which offer tempting lifestyles and rock-bottom taxes. Britain’s fiscal constraints mean that tax cuts are unlikely any time soon, so while migration control is vital, so is hanging on to the brightest and best of our own citizens. Labour is planning a string of housing announcements and pledges to speed up conveying and planning. All well and good, but if it fails to solve the immigration conundrum and give hope to those graduating here, it could pay a brutal electoral price.

The wheels of justice turn all too slowly for NHS victims

The wheels of justice turn slowly, especially when the NHS is involved. The infected blood scandal, in which tens of thousands of people were infected between the 1970s and early 1990s, reached what appeared to be a moment of catharsis in May. A five-year inquiry concluded that successive governments had “closed ranks”. Rachel Reeves set aside £11.8 billion to compensate victims. So far, however, just 11 offers of payment have been made. Draft legislation to go before parliament will propose allowing parents and children of victims to apply for compensation too. It will also propose additional awards for people who underwent exceptional outrages, such as unethical medical testing. This will all be subject to parliamentary approval.

Meanwhile, victims and their families continue to experience hardship and perish. For example, just 30 of the 122 pupils who underwent improper treatment at a

boarding school that had a specialist NHS haemophilia centre are still alive.

An even greater lack of urgency is arguably evident in the sodium valproate scandal, also exposed by The Sunday Times. Up to 20,000 babies in the UK may have been harmed by the epilepsy drug, which is dangerous when taken in pregnancy. A year ago a report by England’s patient safety commissioner recommended a two-stage compensation process for victims of sodium valproate and pelvic mesh implants, suggesting interim payments of £100,000 for the former. Labour backed compensation in opposition but has been slow to act in government. Baroness Merron, the patient safety minister, met families in December. No news has been forthcoming since then.

The chancellor did the right thing in finding funds to compensate infected blood victims. The same must be done for victims of sodium valproate.

Grace of Southport families

It is often the little details that bring home the horror and tragedy when young lives are taken. The princess outfit worn by six-year-old Bebe King. The joy Elsie Dot Stancombe, 7, took in putting the bins out with her dad. In all the political and institutional mudslinging that followed the Southport attack, in all the coverage of the killer, it has been easy to forget that young families have been left with a gaping hole in them.

Today the courageous families of Bebe and Elsie have spoken at length about their daughters. Some of it makes hard reading, as when Elsie’s mother, reflecting on how her daughter was squeezed into the sold-out dance class at the last minute, says: “I just always think if [the teacher] had given [her place] away ... but then I would never have wished this on anybody else.” But we urge you to read their stories nonetheless.

Dominic Lawson

The new No 10 svengali picked the wrong PM



Morgan McSweeney isn’t the first chief of staff to feel buyer’s remorse

What does the PM think? If there is a clear answer to this question, which can be grasped intuitively, then the civil service has the sense of direction it desperately needs. Without that, inertia is inevitable. Unfortunately, what emerges from *Get In* – a revelatory book by my colleagues Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire, published this week, is that not even Sir Keir Starmer’s closest colleagues can penetrate the carapace that obscures whatever his political purposes are (other than “winning”).

Into this vacuum stepped Morgan McSweeney, now Starmer’s chief of staff, then the director of an organisation called Labour Together, devoted to removing Jeremy Corbyn and all he represented, who before the crushing 2019 general election defeat had decided Starmer would be the appropriate vessel for this journey. That Sir Keir had been director of public prosecutions appealed to McSweeney: as a campaigner in Lambeth, formerly the fiefdom of the Trotskyite council leader “Red” Ted Knight, he was made viscerally aware of how much the party’s traditional working-class voters had been alienated by the hard left’s view of law and order as some sort of capitalist conspiracy.

Now, we are told, McSweeney wants Starmer to become an “insurgent” against a stultifying bureaucratic establishment. Yet it is hard to imagine anyone in the entire Labour Party less suited to such a role. Sir Keir is that establishment personified, no more so than in his obsession with legalism as the highest moral calling. That lies at the heart of the PM’s perverse determination to hand over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, along with £10 billion, on the grounds that he is following a ruling by the International Court of Justice. The Conservatives had started on this process, but David Cameron as foreign secretary had then slammed on the brakes, perceiving the strategic idiocy. And, as three legal scholars pointed out in a report by Policy Exchange, since the UK never submitted the matter to ICJ jurisdiction, its ruling is merely advisory.

Anyway, this is hardly what McSweeney must have had in mind when he saw Starmer as the man to re-establish Labour’s law and order credentials among voters on crime-infested council estates.

There is a peculiar parallel here with the arrangement between Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings. Johnson, like Starmer,

carried a very light burden of ideological baggage (to put it politely); but Cummings, the architect of the Brexit campaign, saw in him a character who had whatever it took to carry the obligations of that victory through a recalcitrant House of Commons.

Cummings, however, wanted much more than that. He was set on an insurgency within the British state: he regarded its administration as entirely outmoded and grotesquely inflexible – indeed, he wanted to end the concept of a permanent civil service, which he described as “an idea for the history books”.

There were a number of reasons for Johnson’s eventual sacking of Cummings – though Carrie Symonds, as she then was, wanting him out was the most pressing. Also, the most unconventional PM was still not someone with the stomach or the inclination to take on the established order: he appreciated its architecture, even if from time to time he relieved himself against its pillars.

And, to be fair to Johnson, he never indulged in rhetoric that promised the sort of revolutionary change for which Cummings – as he describes in an interview in *News Review* today – campaigned. Starmer did, however, when on December 5, in an excruciating episode, he “relaunched” his government of less than half a year. The PM appeared to blame the civil service for the fact that his original administrative rocket failed to move with sufficient velocity: “I do think too many people in Whitehall are comfortable in the tepid bath of managed decline.”

And next, after the civil service union kicked off ... Starmer apologised. The PM sent a grovelling letter to all civil servants (“I know first-hand just how fortunate this country is to have a civil service that is admired across the world ... You want to change the country and make Britain a better place”).

At the time of Starmer’s original statement the BBC political correspondent Henry

Zeffman tweeted: “One of the most striking themes in Keir Starmer’s speech today – his frustration with Whitehall. For weeks I’ve been asking Labour people what they make of their time in government and one sentiment comes up again and again: ‘Dominic Cummings was right’”. To which the man himself responded: “Wasn’t expecting ‘Cummings was right’ to be the relaunch news but interesting McSweeney’s team figured it out in weeks and the brain dead Tories couldn’t in 25 years”.

By the way, this illustrates a crucial difference between McSweeney and Cummings. Starmer’s chief of staff is a Labour man to his core, whereas Cummings has never been a member of the Conservative Party, and long regarded its MPs with contempt. So McSweeney’s and Starmer’s interests are aligned in a way that wasn’t true of Johnson and Cummings.

On the minus side (for the present lot), Johnson was a prodigiously talented politician when it came to oratory and campaigning. Starmer, in that vital role, is a dud, beyond the help of even the most dedicated voice coach. And McSweeney knows it, to judge from the devastating words attributed to him in Pogrund and Maguire’s book: “Keir acts like an HR manager, not a leader.”

McSweeney himself is a campaigner, not a policy man. And the skills that win an election are not the same as those required to run a coherent administration. A month ago in these pages Tim Shipman wrote: “Starmer discovered, within days of entering No 10, that ‘there was no plan’.” My mouth fell agape on reading that. Starmer, on entering Downing Street, expected there to be “a plan”, provided to him – by whom? – which he would dutifully carry out. But having “a plan” was his job.

During the briefings that the leader of the opposition and his colleagues have with senior civil servants in the run-up to an election – so the bureaucrats can get prepared – the men in Whitehall were given no idea what Labour intended. They presumed that was because Starmer and co were worried about leaks. The permanent secretaries were astounded, after Labour won its expected landslide, to find the reason was ... they really didn’t have any plan (other than to put VAT on school fees).

In this light, the civil service, for all its infuriating rigidity, is absolutely not to be blamed for any lack of direction. The responsibility for that lies solely with the King’s first minister. And besides, the country elected him, not Morgan McSweeney.

“He wants Starmer to be an ‘insurgent’ against bureaucracy

Hadley Freeman

Men are not women — at last the US is united



Whether it’s gender ideology or grooming gangs, denying reality never works

Garry Kasparov, a man who knows a thing or two about political extremes, wrote last week that the “demagogue dynamic” happens when someone decides to “identify real problems traditional politicians fail to acknowledge. Propose unrealistic but simple-sounding solutions”.

Kasparov was referring to Trump’s seemingly tossed-off proposal for the US to take over Gaza, which takes a real problem (international aid being funnelled into Hamas, which then uses it to attack Israel) and proposes a ludicrous solution (kick out the Palestinian people and pepper the Gaza Strip with Trump casinos).

This may well be the most destructive idea Trump has ever had – and he once advocated injecting bleach to cure Covid. Yes, sensible people want Hamas out; no, we do not want Palestine to become Trumpland (for God’s sake, haven’t the Palestinians suffered enough?) Trump never understands that overreach will always end up alienating the majority, which is ironic, because he owes his entire political career to the left’s overreach.

A mere 24 hours after Trump announced his Gaza plan, he became a feminist champion – an unexpected development for a man who only two years ago was found liable for sexual abuse. But thanks to the Democratic Party’s overreach on gender, there’s a new feminist kween in town. On Thursday night Trump signed an executive order ending federal funding for educational programmes that insist boys and men – aka trans girls and trans women – be allowed to compete on female sports teams. Yes, most people respect trans people’s right to live as whatever gender they choose; no, they don’t think sport should therefore be mixed sex. And signing this executive order is the most popular thing Trump has ever done, supported by 79 per cent of the public. At last, America has found an issue the nation can come together on, and it is ... men are not women.

I assume that, by now, most Sunday Times

readers are au fait with gender ideology, which contends that a man magically becomes a woman simply because he claims to feel like one. Left-wing papers and politicians gasped in horror at Trump’s bill, and the congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez insisted only “bigoted” people would see males in women’s sport as a presidential priority. But President Biden opened women’s sports teams to males on *his first day* in office. This led to the deluge of videos of males clattering their female opponents, which ultimately curdled public opinion. You can’t argue that the question of males in women’s sports teams is the civil rights issue of our generation, and then insist only bigots focus on it just because you don’t like their answer.

The left was the big champion of gender ideology, and the right the naysayers, but it’s so easy to imagine it the other way round. Arguing that men’s desires should take priority over women’s safety, and any woman who objects to males in their private spaces should be denounced as a prude and a bigot: that really could be a far-right argument. And yet, because rapacious activist groups realised there was money to be made in convincing progressives that trans rights were exactly the same as gay rights, the progressives blindly went along with it. And, in doing so, left the door wide open for Trump and Elon Musk, who only had to say “men are not women” to look like the sane ones in the room.

Attempting to suppress an obvious truth

never works. Musk capitalised on this with gender, just as he did last month in regard to the UK’s grooming gangs scandal, when he wrongly thought the crimes had been wholly covered up but rightly spotted that many liberal factions had tried to avoid acknowledging that the groomers were Pakistani men and their victims white working-class girls. Again, it’s easy to imagine this issue switching sides, with the right shrugging its shoulders and the left accusing it of misogyny and classism. And yet, because the left was so loath to admit the racial element of the story, Musk seized on it. Turns out that trying to legislate by scolding people not to see what’s in front of their eyes is a bad tactic. Who knew?

It’s because the left is so bad at dealing with the world as it is, rather than as it would like it to be, that demagogues such as Trump keep gaining power. At one end of the silly scale there’s the business secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, insisting on Radio 4 last week that Labour’s plan to expand Heathrow will in no way conflict with its net zero ambitions. But denying that economic growth generally comes at the expense of decarbonisation is like insisting one plus one equals tree. And at the other end there’s Hamas, which too many on the left, blinded by their loathing of Israel, insist on seeing as freedom fighters rather than terrorists. Which then leads to Trump and his Mar-a-Lago of the Middle East.

It’s tragic. I’m happy for American female athletes, but needing Trump to sweep out gender ideology is like having to bulldoze your house to get rid of dry rot. He will be so destructive – to Ukrainians, to Palestinians, to Americans themselves – and the left allowed this to happen, simply by denying reality. So when I hear the American left – still – insisting that males should be in women’s sport and prisons as, all the while, Trump causes havoc around the world, I think of what the lawyer Joe Welch said to the fanatical anticommunist Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954, finally breaking his reign of reality-denying terror: “Have you no sense of decency?”

“The left is bad at dealing with the world as it is



Matthew Syed

Trump’s jackals are not ‘saving the West’ in any sense that I recognise



Maga Republicans’ disdain for the institutions of democracy is a grave danger to our way of life

You’ve seen them. Perhaps read them. Maybe even, who knows, nodded along with them. To be honest, I have too. I’m talking about the books, columns and assorted writings that proclaim to be defending “the West”. They have titles like *Ten Years to Save the West*, *The Salvation of the West*, *The War on the West* etc. And by “the West”, they don’t tend to mean some geographical region demarcated by longitude. They mean something more: a concept, an ideal, a civilisation.

And these authors are, in their different ways, impressively clear about the identity of these threats, dangers and creeping calamities. Immigration. Islamism. China. Cultural Marxism. I worry about those things too, by the way. These authors also worry about woke ideologues, hyperliberals and ultraprogressives, by which they mean the virtue-signalling elites that were recently described by one pundit as the “internal enemies of the West”. As I say, you may agree with much of this analysis. I know I do.

Yet it was only last week that I realised something that, frankly, should have struck me yonks ago. In all these years of reading these people, listening to them, I’d only ever gained a sense of what they were against. “The West” was defined in terms of its enemies. It was (to use a reference they might warm to, given they’re such scholars of western literature) what Socrates characterised as definition by negation. But what was their positive account of “the West”? We knew what they were against; what were they for?

Well, I now realise that “the West”, as a concept, is rather more amorphous than I’d imagined. You see, watching

these people gurning and grinning at the inauguration parties for Donald Trump and justifying each new calamitous action during a dizzying couple of weeks, I realised that their conception of “the West” is somewhat different from my own; that when they describe Trump as the “saviour” of western civilisation, as one did, it doesn’t quite tally with my idea of salvation or, indeed, civilisation.

You see (and apologies if I’m a tad slow), I’m struggling to square Trump’s brazen disregard for the rule of law with the luminous writings of Cicero; struggling to see how inciting an assault on the Capitol and putting pressure on officials to overturn the peaceful transfer of power tallies with the prose of Jefferson; struggling to see how threatening to invade an ally (Denmark) coincides with the imperative of the West standing together against the tyranny of the Chinese Communist Party and its puppets in Moscow, Tehran and Pyongyang.

I don’t see how the deployment of tariffs (including threatening them on Mexico, Canada and the EU) is in line with the work of Adam Smith – so often cited by these jackals, sorry, intellectuals – given that it would impoverish American workers and push the victims of the policy towards closer trade links with China; don’t see how scapegoating pilots for a tragic air crash before the black boxes have been retrieved lives up to Locke’s writings on natural justice; don’t see how removing armed protection from Mike Pompeo and John Bolton because they didn’t always agree with you, leaving them vulnerable to assassination, fits with the notion of impartiality meticulously articulated by Kant.

Strange, isn’t it? Strange that these staunch “defenders” of the West are the

“Let me say to western politicians: find courage. You don’t need to genuflect

chorus section during one of the most brazen attacks on western values in my lifetime. Strange that their paeans to rationality, due process and law seem rather quaint now that they’re clapping like seals for Trump’s scorched earth policy. Strange that the more they excuse, dissemble or merely ignore Trump’s pardoning of people who attacked the police, serial dishonesty and corrupt monetisation of personalised memecoins (he and Melania have reportedly made billions while those who invested are on the hook for similar amounts), the more they see themselves as “defenders” of the West.

Indeed, one almost feels like saying that these people have unmasked themselves. By offering a substantive definition of what they mean by “western values”, if only through association with the man they keep eulogising, they have been outed as people who don’t have a Scooby-Doo about the West or its values. I mean, did Locke, Montesquieu and Wollstonecraft go to their graves fervently hoping that their writings would be used to justify the turning of a political community into the cult of a narcissist who seemingly believes he is World King?

So let me say to western politicians: find courage. You don’t need to genuflect before Trump or accept the grotesque parody of western values his sycophants are pumping out like sewage. You can demonstrate your fidelity to those values by calling out this bully and standing up to the platoons of Russian bots that amplify his divisive, wicked nonsense. That will strengthen the West, not weaken it. And it needs to be done collectively. Tactical retreats, even cosmetic ones like that of Canada (which appointed a “border tsar” to

stave off punitive tariffs), will only feed this bully, as appeasement always does.

And let me say one other thing. I’m convinced that there is a solid majority in virtually all western nations for a push against woke madness and open borders, not to mention government inefficiency and bureaucratic overreach. Most sane people can see that sections of the Democratic Party became an ideological cult, a view in no way diminished by its convention. The British Conservative Party was one of the more egregious examples in Europe with its radical policy of mass immigration and other betrayals.

Yet I hope people will agree that this “negative” diagnosis of what went wrong doesn’t mean we must acquiesce in a pendulum swing to cultlike insanity on the other side. Can’t one be deeply worried about Islamist extremism while being horrified by those who tarnish all Muslims; wish to protect single-sex sports and spaces while abhorring the demonisation of trans people; recognise that multiculturalism went way too far while abhorring outright racism against immigrants? (Oh, and don’t give me the cant that populist stooges were the first to speak out about these dangers – some of us have been warning about uncontrolled immigration for decades.)

This, for what it’s worth, is my positive definition of western values. Rationality. Due process. Fairness. And standing up to bullies and would-be tyrants because we wish to preserve the normative structure of this luminously impressive civilisation. The very men who shout loudest about democracy are the ones who destroy it, Demosthenes observed more than two thousand years ago in the cradle of western civilisation. Today, our task is to ensure that this bitter irony doesn’t repeat itself.

What’s Appening



The PM’s positively green growth agenda group chat

Ed Miliband I’m not happy, prime minister

Keir Starmer I’ve told you, blood is thicker than water. Just talk to him

Miliband Not that. I’ve just been put in impossible positions by Charlie Stayt and Nick Ferrari

Reeves Too much information

Starmer About the rising energy bills you promised would come down?

Miliband No. Well, yes. But also Heathrow. Do we really need a third runway? I was very clear that this was a red line for me. I said we owe it to future generations not just to have good environmental policies but to act on them and that was why I’d always vote against it

Reeves Yes

Miliband Yes, I can vote against the third runway?

Reeves Yes, we need a third runway

Starmer Government, Ed, is about principles. Knowing when to stand by them and when to abandon them. Just do the thing about the cabinet’s collective responsibility

Miliband I tried that. I said that even though I didn’t support the third runway, I did support the government, and if the government supported a third runway and I supported the government, then I supported the government not supporting what I supported. And I support that

Starmer Christ, what happened?

Miliband Stayt asked if all that meant I supported the third runway and I just wanted to be swallowed up

Reeves Like a bacon sandwich?

Starmer Look, Ed, I’ve got these Birmingham councillors giving themselves pay rises, I’ve got these Brighton councillors making kids get three buses to school and I’ve got a planning system which blocks power plants because power plant workers might not speak Welsh. I don’t want any resignations. I want growth

King Charles Prime minister, one has just had to spend an insufferable evening with Stanley Tucci. One is happy to do state visits, but if one is also being put out to do themed dinner parties and if the theme is Italian, then one would hope to have Italians there, not a Yank in a turtleneck

Starmer And, Ed, I’ve got the King moaning about Stanley Tucci. Time to fall into line

Miliband Yes, Your Majesty

Starmer What?

Miliband Sorry, I was just thinking about His Majesty

Starmer Your Majesty, lovely to hear from you. Her Majesty told me you liked Mr Tucci

Charles She likes him – a lot – even though he’s bald and I’m not. I can’t stand him. Thinks he’s sophisticated just because he made one cocktail in lockdown (and used completely the wrong glass, so gauche)

Miliband Well, I have to have another red line, then. It’s the principle

Reeves You’re becoming far too red-liney, Ed. We’re already doing all the wind turbines and the solar panels, and by the time we do the third runway, the planes will be electric or we’ll have Jeff Goldblum’s telepods so it won’t matter. We need growth. Or at least the appearance of growth. Or at least the appearance of the possibility of growth at some point

Charles Even Bruno Tonioli is less irritating and more Italian

Starmer I’ll talk to the Foreign Office, Your Majesty

Miliband I insist we cancel the Lower Thames Crossing

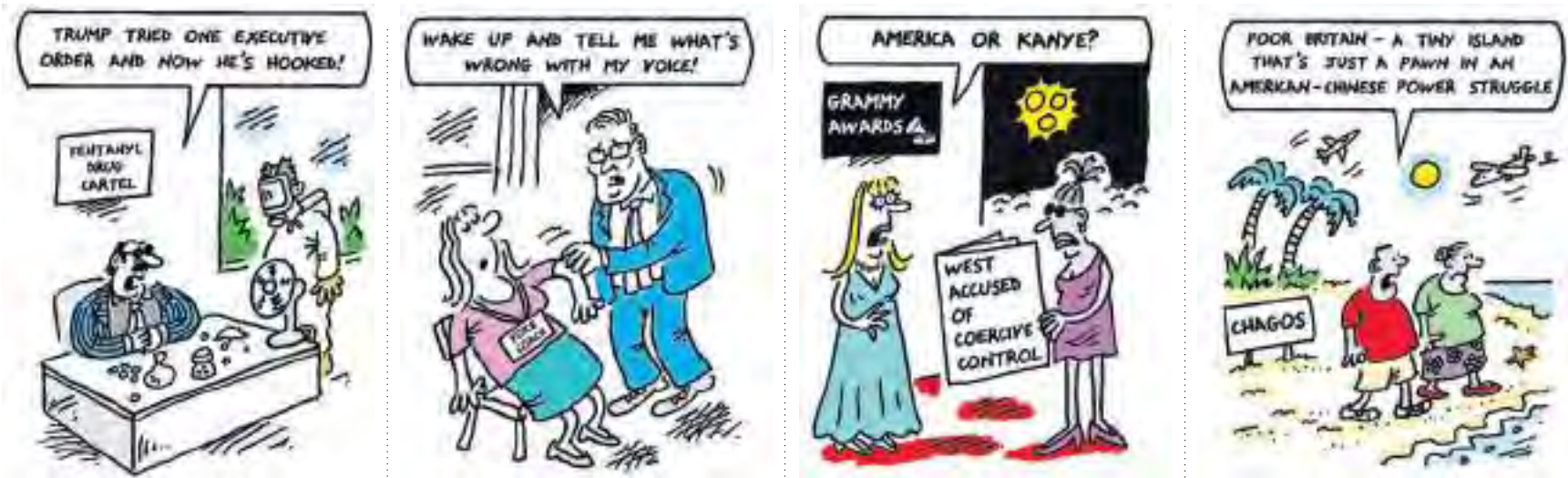
Starmer Oh, that’s fine

Miliband Really?

Starmer Yes, they’ve found some newts

*As imagined by Matt Rudd

NEWMAN’S WEEK



SPORT

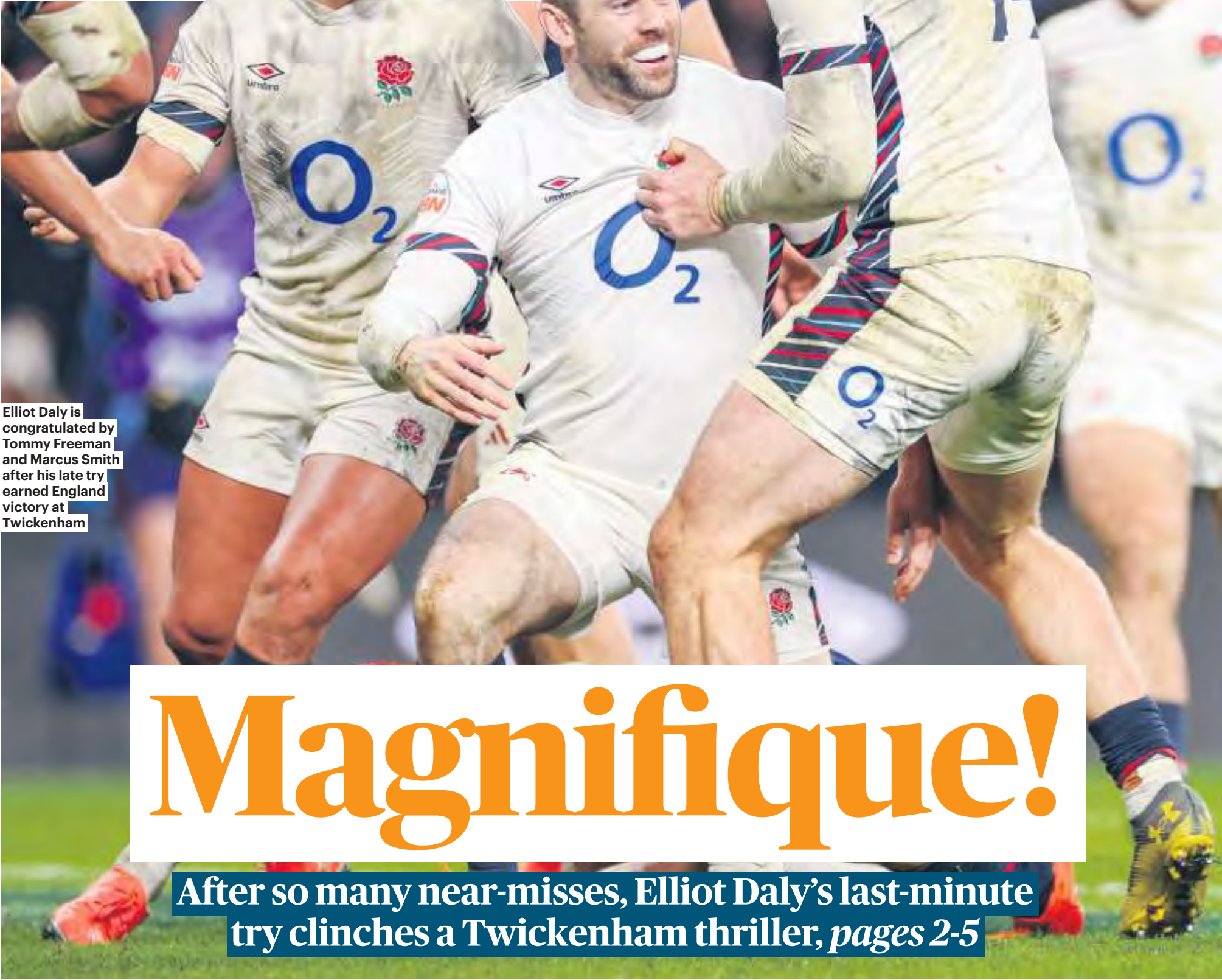
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FRANCE



Elliot Daly is congratulated by Tommy Freeman and Marcus Smith after his late try earned England victory at Twickenham

Magnifique!

After so many near-misses, Elliot Daly's last-minute try clinches a Twickenham thriller, *pages 2-5*

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United might as well aim for Mars as the title
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SMITH CONTROL HELPS ENGLAND END THE AGONY

 **26-25** 

England | France

STEPHEN JONES



Rugby Correspondent
Twickenham

Titanic battle? Well, sort of. But sometimes only because the action reminded you of a sinking ship. There was a magnificent closing sequence in the final ten minutes in which England edged a point ahead after long periods when they looked like losing.

France then came back with a sumptuous try from Louis Bielle-Biarrey, almost the only time they truly looked like themselves in a fierce blizzard of bungling.

And then, at six points behind, England had one more chance after France had been penalised down the left. Alex Mitchell began a move from a lineout with Elliot Daly, the pedigree, racing on to Fin Smith's pass and over at the posts to vast Twickenham joy, converted by Smith. England gained the win they had craved, painfully, horribly, and finally successfully. The wave of relief almost blew the stands over.

Steve Borthwick suggested afterwards that the match had been a delight for both sets of supporters. Let's say that the French hid their joy extremely well. It had been there for the taking.

In its way it was an epic, it ended years of agony – or perhaps we can say for now that it interrupted years of agony. England were piloted to victory and towards the final score by two factors. First was the absolutely dismal performance by the French team, who had all the attacking intent but committed probably the biggest number of silly handling errors of any match in their history.

The second factor was the control exerted by Fin Smith at fly half, at last in the position that he should have been in years ago. And there was a notable injection of pride and passion from the bench, Jamie George, Ollie Chessum and Daly bringing brimstone.

After England finally installed Fin Smith, they were unable to drop Marcus Smith, so they came up with a lot of drivel about a twin-Smith attack with Marcus at full back as if it was the most natural in the world.

Marcus Smith had a terrible match, he made no inroads whatsoever from full back – we were promised a fiesta of attacking from the back – and he made no ground and made errors.

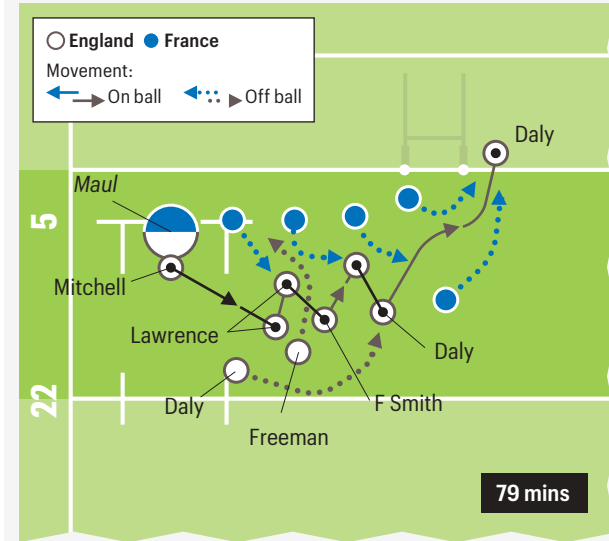
Even when he had acres in front of him, he had no impact. But they also trusted him to kick at goal, and he missed two easy kicks by almost the same distance as he had been kicking from in the first place. Talk about blind faith.

Back to France. Thomas Ramos and Matthieu Jalibert were so far off

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France had all the intent but committed the most silly handling errors of any match in their history

THE WINNING MOMENT

England roll a maul towards the line before Mitchell breaks off and feeds Lawrence. Right wing Freeman comes hard on a dummy line that sits down the French defender and allows Lawrence to release Fin Smith in space out the back. The fly half puts Daly, who has swept around from the blind side, through a hole and the replacement back has just enough pace to get over



their game that they may have affected the whole effort. France were superior in principle up front and behind the scrum but shelled so many balls that it was as if the old oval had suddenly become red hot. They always managed to hit back with a brief moment of magic when they were threatened, except that when they finally lost the lead there was no time left.

England were kept going by their back row, by the two Currys, by the effervescent Tommy Freeman and by the authority under pressure of Fin Smith.

And yet France could so easily have been over the hill and far away by half-time, but their finishing was as abject as their approach work had been sensational.

In the end it seemed as if it was anxiety which stopped them. Early on, Ramos burst away down the left with Bielle-Biarrey inside him running free. But the French wing could not stop himself accelerating too quickly so in the end the pass went astray.

There were two more occasions with a long period of French dominance when a little less panic by the supporting runners would clearly have led to tries. There were signs that French frustration was growing, because although England deserved credit for their excellence defence, they really had little to offer in attack.

In the end, it took most of the half

RESULT A VINDICATION OF HARD WORK, SAYS CAPTAIN ITOJE

The England captain Maro Itoje said that his team felt vindicated after their first big win in nearly a year, beating France 26-25 at Twickenham (Will Kelleher writes).

England had lost seven times in a row to tier one opposition, but triumphed against the French when Elliot Daly scored in the 79th minute and Fin Smith kicked the conversion.

Itoje was delighted with the win, saying it was testament to the commitment England have shown in their run of defeats.

"I'm incredibly happy with the result," Itoje said. "The team has been working and been consistent

throughout this period and I guess the result is a vindication of the hard work of the players, coaches and all the support staff. We are happy with the win.

"Steve [Borthwick, the head coach] told the group to be ambitious, to be brave, to go out and score tries and our backs were incredibly brave, incredibly ambitious and took the opportunities when on other days we might have tucked the ball and taken the conservative option. There is a whole load we can get better at — this game was by no means perfect."

England next play Scotland at Twickenham on February 22.

DAVID ROGERS/GETTY IMAGES



Dupont is watched closely by Itoje, left, as France attack but the England captain was tasting victory at the final whistle

to make the score that they deserved. The France flanker François Cros wrapped the ball under his foot to secure possession, France attacked and a clever kick by Damian Penaud left the ball at the mercy of Bielle-Biarrey. The French wing reached it first to score.

However, England finally established a pressure platform. Freeman came into an attack on three occasions, the ball came back and although the ball went loose in front of Henry Slade, it was picked up by Ollie Lawrence for the try and the conversion by Marcus Smith made it 7-7 at half-time.

France probably only had themselves to blame because they should

have been well ahead, but apart from a few poor kicks by Marcus Smith, England maintained their composure and at half-time all the French chances were forgotten in a burst of raised England hopes.

They came up offside once too often to allow Ramos to kick a penalty to make it 10-7 and then the match could have ended as a contest when France burst away down the left wing for Bielle-Biarrey to break away with a man inside him.

Those of us who had been witness to the French wing being sick on the field three or four times just before doubted that he would get there but his inside pass to Peato Mauvaka was dropped, as were so many French

passes, and the move foundered.

And we felt that England was still in it. A break led by Freeman, England's best attacker, gave them hope and when Fin Smith chipped the ball high for his Northampton Saints colleague Freeman, the wing leapt high and scored an excellent try.

Then we saw France playing like France for the first time. Encouraged after Marcus Smith had made a terrible hash of the conversion of Freeman's try, they launched a brilliant move and this time decided to hold onto the ball, before moving the ball to the left and right to allow Penaud to score almost at his leisure on the wing. Ramos missed the conversion.

But how well England reacted. They feasted on a penalty call by the referee, won the lineout and won the match. It is step one. But better than reverse.

England: Tries: O Lawrence (36min), T Freeman (58), F Baxter (70), E Daly (79). **Cons:** M Smith, F Smith 2. **France: Tries:** L Bielle-Biarrey (30, 75), D Penaud (61). **Cons:** T Ramos 2. **Pens:** Ramos 2. **ENGLAND** M Smith; T Freeman, O Lawrence, H Slade (E Daly 75), O Sleightholme, F Smith, A Mitchell; E Genge (F Baxter 51), L Cowan-Dickie (J George 61), W Stuart (J Heyes 58), M Itoje (c), G Martin (O Chessum 61), T Curry, B Earl, T Willis (B Curry 53). **FRANCE** T Ramos; D Penaud, P-L Barassi, Y Moefana, L Bielle-Biarrey, M Jalibert (N Le Garrec 66), A Dupont (c); J-B Gros (C Baille 56), P Mauvaka (J Marchand 56), U Antonio (G-H Colombe 56), A Roumat (H Auradou 49), E Meafou (M Guillard 66), F Cros, P Boudehent (O Jegou 49), G Alldritt. **Referee** N Amashukeli (Geo). **Attendance** 81,000.

MATCH STATS

◆ England ◆ France

50	Possession %	50	8	Linebreaks	9
47	Territory %	53	30	Defenders beaten	24
4	Tries	3	115	Total passes	148
95	Carries	135	5	Offloads	9
700	Metres carried	952	12	Handling Errors	27
476	Metres gained	606	10	Turnovers conceded	19

Player ratings

By Stephen Jones

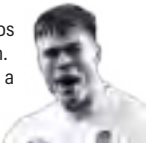


England

MARCUS SMITH 4/10
Was chosen out of position, he was woeful, had no spark in attack and his kicking was dire

Star man

TOMMY FREEMAN 9/10
One of the Northampton tyros who fuelled this England win. Took a try brilliantly and had a splendid match



OLLIE LAWRENCE 7/10
The ball did not go his way, one or two errors but clearing enjoyed playing outside Fin Smith

HENRY SLADE 6/10
Again, not much chance in attack but his left foot came in handy and he defended well

OLLIE SLEIGHTHOLME 6/10
Tended to be too excitable, notably when drawing a penalty which he did not deserve

FIN SMITH 8/10
Now in the team for years, played calmly and stayed calm when France twice struck back

ALEX MITCHELL 6/10
He tried hard to make breaks but in the end his appetite for the fray tided him through

ELLIS GENG 5/10
Was the first England front rower to be taken off, looked a little under pressure up front

LUKE COWAN-DICKIE 6/10
Is giving Jamie George a fierce battle for the starting place, another good game

WILL STUART 7/10
One of his better games, he'll never demolish opposite number but held on gamely to Gros

MARO ITOJE 8/10
Clearly inspiring team, but following referee around the pitch in debate was not so good

GEORGE MARTIN 7/10
Probably one of his better games, up against a monster forward pack and did extremely well

TOM CURRY 8/10
Becoming one of the best back-row forwards in the Six Nations, superb until replaced

BEN EARL 8/10
Made some match-turning efforts in the game, still going strong towards the end.

TOM WILLIS 8/10
Waited too long for this moment, odd that he was taken off. Will stay for rest of the season

Total
103/150



France

THOMAS RAMOS 5/10
Nothing like his true self, a great player losing his levels throughout

DAMIAN PENAUD 7/10
The great wing finished his try well but otherwise was almost a spectator

PIERRE-LOUIS BARASSI 5/10
France are missing dreadfully Jonathan Danty and Barassi is nothing like as good at present

YORAM MOEFANA 6/10
A very fine player having a very off day, tried desperately to hold things together

LOUIS BIELLE-BIARREY 5/10
Has talent, but he had to interrupt his game to be sick on the field on several occasions

MATTHIEU JALIBERT 6/10
Can be a fine player but could make little of shambles around him caused by dire handling

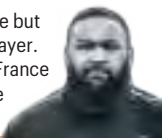
ANTOINE DUPONT 8/10
Did amazingly well, not only at scrum half but also at fly half where he created a great try

JEAN-BAPTISTE GROS 6/10
Was lively around the field, but probably not as good a scrummager as his replacement

PEATO MAUVAKA 6/10
For a man of his dynamism he was very quiet, dropped the ball when he had an easy run in

Star man

UINI ATONIO 9/10
He may be a massive figure but he is also a tremendous player. He seemed to be holding France together most of the game



ALEXANDRE ROUMAT 7/10
Is happier at No 8, but he has a natural athleticism and played well in two positions

EMMANUEL MEAFOU 5/10
Hardly existed for much of the game, way down on his standards he sets for Toulouse

FRANÇOIS CROS 8/10
The best French forward perhaps, was quick and active and his resistance was unceasing

PAUL BOUDEHENT 6/10
Normally a reserve and this showing probably did little to promise him a spot in the first team

GRÉGORY ALLDRITT 6/10
Played below himself, normally such a world-class force but was sucked into the morass

Total
95/150

Fin settles Smith debate after 15 ice-cold minutes

Stuart Barnes



Fifty-eight minutes have gone and England are within six points of France. Fin Smith takes a pass and steps, counterintuitively, back to the direction from whence the pass came. He assesses the situation and weights his kick – to perfection. His Northampton Saints teammate Tommy Freeman is waiting. It's a play perfected on the Northampton training ground. The catch is good, the surge superb and England are back in the game at only one point down.

Marcus Smith has a conversion from wide. He has kicked superbly this season but this one is missed and France hold the narrowest of leads. One of the Smiths' fortunes is on the rise. Are we seeing the other's falling? Fin is then suddenly arcing on to the gainline and sending Jamie George across it. Having had an indifferent 59 minutes, he now looks like a veteran.

A Damian Penaud try reverts the France lead to six points but Smith, with a shot at cutting the lead to three points, kicks it as though petrified. It is awful. Another England try and this time it is the rookie who is handed the huge responsibility of kicking England into the lead. Commentators can call this "straightforward" but it is anything but for someone with limited experience. The kick is true and for a few minutes England have the lead. Dream time?

Not yet, not by a long shot. France find their true selves, briefly, to retake the lead. Surely England cannot come back. But there's an England penalty, a kick – not to the corner, but close

1

This was England's first win against a team other than Japan since last year's Six Nations

27

Handling errors by France in the wet at Twickenham, compared to just 12 from England



Smith lands the winning conversion

enough. Fin Smith, who in a few minutes is set to be announced man of the match, runs and passes with all the calmness of a Dan Carter to Elliot Daly, who crosses for what will be a match-winning try.

A match-winner because Fin Smith, you just know, is not going to blow landing the conversion in the final minute to regain the lead. The final whistle blows and the cameras cut to Fin. Soon enough they zoom in on Marcus Smith. I worked in the television industry for more than two decades. Directors know the story. It's an emotional one. Marcus Smith smiles, even as he sees his future diminish. There is only one Smith for the present. The dispute has been settled after 15 of the coolest minutes imaginable from such a relative newcomer.

Fin Smith strode on to Twickenham as a starter for the first time. Not his first cap. That was in Rome last season. Since then he has appeared on six more occasions. But always as a replacement. Most recently he produced a cameo of passing against an overpowered Japan team. But this wasn't a cameo and this wasn't Japan. France are one of the finest teams in the world.

Here he was, wearing the No 10 shirt that has created such disagreement in recent months. Smith or Smith? Everybody shouting, "Which side are you on?", as Bob Dylan sang in *Desolation Row*. All those defeats, the desolation of one after the other against top teams. Everyone is now on the Saint's side. It was a brutal evening for Marcus, even in victory.

That was post-match. Before kick-off, the answer that Steve Borthwick came up with was: both. A controlling influence at fly half and a mercurial fly half at full back. That first start. It feels like the first cap. Fin had responsibility for the England kick-off. It wasn't great. It was better than the charge-down suffered after 37 seconds. Not

the stuff of nightmares but enough to unnerve. The other Smith, the one with 41 caps, chose to counter rather than kick with his first opportunity. Thomas Ramos, his opposite number, the France full back with a fly half's brain, produced a low, skiddy 40-metre kick. England to counter, France to kick?

Ramos missed a penalty, Matthieu Jalibert was charged down before Fin Smith dabbled a far-too-heavy kick behind France, who countered. Nothing special yet. The Saint produced a good high ball from a penalty and the Harlequin a little show-and-kick. The Smiths were kicking to keep the ball infield. Most threats were French, so too the fluffed passes.

Fin hadn't been bad in the first 40 minutes. Nor was he good. Marcus caught the eye but there were times when you wondered whether the brave countering wasn't forced. Still, Marcus's knockers can never accuse him of cowardice. His attacking instinct was there for all to see, so too a horrible crumbling finale.

Fin was nowhere near man of the match on his first-half form but this, being a first start for Fin, should be taken into account. He was doing all right, Marcus was more eye-catching without quite catching fire as he had from full back in Lyon last season. France, dropping passes all over the place, were finding space and spilling ball. England were being offered a chance and the Saint was set to take it.

They didn't combine until the 45th minute, the Saint using the Harlequin one man out. The touch kick was tolerable. Next up, Marcus hit a weak cross-kick. As his game fell away, Fin gathered momentum.

It was the most subtle of final 15 minutes on the Saint's part. That TV director knew what he was doing. England beat France but within that scenario there was an unforgettable battle going on for the England fly-half jersey. It belongs to Fin. Marcus has been dethroned.



Lawrence Dallaglio

At last England show they can think on the hoof – the players got themselves out of trouble



Whether it was the outstanding form of Toulouse, the seemingly unstoppable force of Antoine Dupont, or the ruthless attacking play of Bordeaux-Bègles, France had been built up before this match as a team that were beyond England's reach.

In that atmosphere, the fans could have been forgiven for arriving at Twickenham more in hope than expectation. And there is no doubt that France are one of the leading teams in the world – though if they were that formidable, they would've won the Six Nations for the past two seasons, not Ireland. But England stared them down, watched their incessant handling errors – 27 – and realised they were beatable.

I am delighted for them. A loss here could have been terminal. They needed this scalp desperately. In defeat, Steve Borthwick and his coaches would have been facing very difficult conversations.

Instead, they found a performance full of bravery, resilience and, ultimately, ruthless execution at the end. I thought the energy of Ben Curry and Ben Earl, inset, in the second half was outstanding. And the composure of the Northampton Saints pair Fin Smith and Alex Mitchell for the final try was the killer instinct England have lacked.

In the past year, they've suffered narrow, late defeats to France, to New Zealand, to Australia, and for a while, it looked like the same story. France had kept England at arm's length for most of the match and then, with ten minutes remaining,

Fin Baxter muscled over to give England a one-point lead. Then came what felt like the inevitable: Louis Biele-Biarrey scored his second try and England had squandered another lead.

Only they hadn't. They found something that I was beginning to think this group of players lacked. In that run of defeats, I had never questioned their ability. What I had questioned was their ability to summon up and sustain the requisite emotional levels. They seemed to fluctuate throughout matches. They were letting go of matches at the end and I couldn't grasp it. But here they found it.

One of the most pleasing aspects of the way they came through to win 26-25 was that it was the players out on the field who thought their way out of trouble. So

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A loss here for England could have been terminal. They needed this scalp desperately

many times during the past few years, they have been criticised for a failure to adapt on the hoof. But it wasn't Borthwick out there yesterday – though his work in bolstering the bench certainly deserves enormous credit – it was Mitchell zipping the ball away from



TIMES AND SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARC ASPLAND

Freeman plucks a chip from Fin Smith, his Northampton team-mate, out of the sky to score a sublime England try

Edinburgh clash may decide who Lions centres are

Garry Ringrose is certain to be on the plane to Australia, but leaving him on the bench today might give Scottish pair opportunity to impress, especially class act Tom Jordan

Stuart Barnes

Yes, it is no longer a 15-a-side game. The eight players off the bench can be deliberately selected to either add impact or solidity, depending on what is needed. Even so, Garry Ringrose cannot be happy to be on the bench for Ireland's assignment in Edinburgh.

He has been one of the best and most consistent outside centres in world rugby. But Robbie Henshaw's selection ahead of him for the Scotland clash is possibly unnerving for the Ireland international.

Four years ago, Ringrose did not make Warren Gatland's British & Irish Lions tour party for South Africa. Bundee Aki wasn't then the player he would become but he was included in the Test team along with Henshaw, who played both No13 and No12.

The other Test centre in South Africa, Chris Harris, cannot get near a current Scotland team packed with overwhelming talent in midfield.

The decision to start Tom Jordan, Glasgow's versatile Kiwi, at No12 is an emphatic statement of attack. The New Zealander is a class act. The first time I saw him in the flesh at fly half against Harlequins last month, his speed, passing and running lines were massively eye catching. Outside him and lining up against Henshaw is Huw Jones, another Glasgow back who can flourish outside the Finn Russell/Jordan axis having scored a hat-trick against Italy last week.

A week ago, I thought this match was set to be a mini shoot-out between Ringrose and Jones. The art of Ringrose's defence against the subtleties of Jones's running lines.

I am not the only person left surprised by the switch. Brian O'Driscoll "didn't see it coming", rather like Jones and his late change of direction. If this pick is an Irish show of strength on the part of Simon

Easterby, the stand-in head coach, it is brave because Jones is a match-winner, especially with Russell firing off his defence-shredding passes.

When Russell played for Bath against Leinster, the juggernaut Irish province stationed Ringrose on the wing during a first half in which Ollie Lawrence unpicked their midfield with sly, late changes of direction. In this instance it was the need to get all the midfield on the pitch – with Jordie Barrett the revolving point and aid to the young fly half Sam Prendergast from No12 – that coaxed the selection decision.

At national level Ireland look a little less subtle without Ringrose and his keen rugby eye. Andy Farrell would surely have seen today's game as an early Lions Test indicator, with the unfortunately injured Sione Tuipulotu against Aki at 12 and Ringrose facing Jones at 13. Now Ireland start with what appears to be a battering ram of a midfield, looking to blunt the genius of Russell, the touches of Jordan and the cutting edge of Jones.

Farrell recognises the football brain and the all-round game of Ringrose. Whether the selection will catch Scotland by surprise or defensively backfire, expect Ringrose to be bound for Australia.

Warren Gatland should have made Russell his Test No10 in the 2021 series. Ringrose was not even on the plane. Farrell will not leave his trusty defensive linchpin behind but who knows, Easterby's surprise selection could just open up Ireland to Jordan, Russell and Jones. Short term, long term, it is an intriguing Irish selection at 13 and a fascinating Scottish choice at 12.

ON TV TODAY

Scotland v Ireland
2pm BBC One, kick-off 3pm

RAMSEY CARDY/SPORTSFILE



Jordan will be Scotland's No 12 this afternoon when they take on Ireland



a driving lineout that had stalled, and it was Fin Smith giving a lovely delayed pass to Elliot Daly. Smith even had the sense to watch the clock and run it down as close to the 80-minute mark as he could.

By his own admission, Smith took some time to grow into the game, but in the second half he was outstanding, a deserved man of the match. No disrespect to Marcus – they are just different players – but Fin gives the team balance. He doesn't have Marcus's running strength, but he brought the players outside him into the game in a smooth way. His relationship with Mitchell and Tommy Freeman helped too.

If I were an England player today, I would be immensely satisfied. They have woken up too many times on Sunday morning

recently with a sore head – from defeat, not too much to drink. There was so much at stake for them – their futures with England, their places on the British & Irish Lions Tour this summer – and as a group they made the right calls at the right time.

Now comes the real task. England's 23-22 victory over Ireland last year was the peak of the Borthwick era. They were excellent across the field that day, but they did not kick on. Against Scotland in a fortnight, they cannot make the same mistake. They haven't beaten Scotland since 2020, so you would hope that they won't lack for motivation, but they can't leave it to chance. However they prepared mentally for France, they need to bottle it and they need to use it against Scotland. I can't wait.



Italy | Wales

John Westerby Rome

We now have confirmation, if indeed it were needed, of just how far Wales have slumped. The 14th consecutive defeat in a long and miserable sequence may have been the most painful of all, as they were comprehensively outplayed by Italy in a torrential downpour in the Stadio Olimpico, a defeat that leaves Warren Gatland's future as Wales head coach in grave doubt. He clung onto his job by the skin of his teeth following a post-autumn review by the WRU.

After a 43-0 defeat away to France eight days previously, Gatland's side are now facing the prospect of a second successive wooden spoon and, in 12 Six Nations matches since the 61-year-old returned to the role that he had previously filled with such success, Wales have won just once.

As a team, they look rudderless, and Gatland himself, for all his experience, does not appear close to finding any answers. Whether another coach would have any more luck with such an inexperienced group of players is a moot point, but the calls for change will now inevitably grow in volume.

Two late tries, through Aaron Wainwright and a penalty try, gave the scoreboard a flattering look for Wales, and meant they had outscored the home side by two tries to one, but they came as scant consolation. Gatland bemoaned a series of opportunities towards the end of the first half, which Wales were unable to convert, but they were comfortably second-best in most areas.

Asked whether he still has the appetite to continue, Gatland said: "Yeah, definitely. It's not the easiest position to be in. We're frustrated, the

Strange selections leave Wales facing wooden spoon

MATCH STATS

◆ Italy ◆ Wales

46	Possession %	54
55	Territory %	45
1	Tries	2
74	Carries	111
372	Metres carried	547
228	Metres gained	235
1	Linebreaks	2
15	Defenders beaten	20
59	Total passes	129
0	Offloads	3
4	Handling Errors	15
8	Turnovers conceded	11

Gatland will face further scrutiny after Wales suffered a 14th defeat in a row



players are frustrated, the coaches are frustrated. But you've got to be strong, to go back and look at the areas we can get better."

In the unaccustomed position of starting as favourites, Italy rose to the occasion magnificently, bouncing back from their defeat to Scotland a week earlier. They defended voraciously, won the territorial kicking game by a distance and, in Paolo Garbisi, they had a playmaker who could rise above conditions. He created a lovely try for Ange Capuozzo in the 20th minute, opening up a gap that Wales never looked likely to close, for all their late rally when Italy had taken their foot off the gas. For much of the rest of the

game, Italy's pressure consistently forced Wales into errors and indiscipline, with 14 penalties conceded, five of which were kicked by Tommaso Allan.

For so long, since they joined the tournament 25 years ago, Italy had struggled to produce a homegrown fly half. Garbisi, 24, has finally filled the void, and Italy continue to grow, looking to build on the progress they have made under Gonzalo Quesada, the head coach, having enjoyed their best Six Nations last year, when they won twice and drew with France.

The contrast between Garbisi and Ben Thomas, the hapless Wales fly half, summed up the different directions in which these teams are heading. In conditions where tactical kicking was always going to be crucial,

Thomas was completely exposed. Unsurprisingly so, given that he is an inside centre for his club, Cardiff. For Gatland to ask him to attempt to marshal a team at international level, with little kicking expertise other than Tomos Williams to support him, felt cruel in the extreme. Thomas was on a hiding to nothing and was duly replaced shortly after half-time.

There was a remnant of Wales' former glories under Gatland in the form of Taulupe Faletau, 34, returning from injury at No.8. But they had suffered a double blow before the match, forced into making two late changes, as Liam Williams was ruled out with a knee injury and Dafydd Jenkins, the lock, was forced to drop out due to illness. Given Wales' lack of depth, such wounds cut deep.





431-215

Cumulative margin of defeat for Wales across their 14 consecutive losses. Their last victory was against Georgia at the 2023 World Cup

The incessant downpour made handling desperately difficult and for long periods both teams were simply content to kick, waiting for the other side to make a mistake. Allan gave Italy the lead when Wales were offside at a ruck, then Thomas levelled the scores when the home side committed a similar offence. Still further change was required for Wales, temporarily, when Nick Tompkins left the field for a head injury assessment, to be replaced by Josh Hathaway. Tompkins was back in action 11 minutes later, but in his absence Italy took the lead with the first try of the game. From a dominant scrum 30 metres out, Martin Page-Relo, the scrum half, attacked down the blindside, then Garbisi threw a dummy that was

How they stand

Team	P	W	D	L	PD	B	Pts
France	2	1	0	1	42	2	6
England	2	1	0	1	-4	2	6
Scotland	1	1	0	0	12	1	5
Ireland	1	1	0	0	5	1	5
Italy	2	1	0	1	-5	0	4
Wales	2	0	0	2	-50	1	1

bought by Hathaway, leaving a gaping hole for the fly half to burst through, threading a perfectly-weighted grubber onto which Capuozzo dived joyously in the right-hand corner. That moment of inspiration from Garbisi brightened up an otherwise drab first half like a ray of sunlight. Shortly afterwards, he unfurled another party piece, a banana kick from tight to the left touchline that gained his side 40 metres. The contrasting fortunes experienced by Thomas, his opposite number, were starkly illustrated when the Wales fly half was hammered way behind the gainline by Tommaso Menoncello. With Italy's defence on top, Allan stretched Italy's lead to 16-3 with two more penalty goals. But then, towards the end of the first half, Wales began to assert themselves. In a sustained period of pressure, Josh Adams – for the second time in the game – was unable to scoop up a kick from Williams, when a clean pick-up would have left the line at his mercy. Adams' handling let him down once again when a forward pass to Jac Morgan squandered another promising position, leading to a scrum from which Italy won a penalty and successfully cleared their lines. These were moments, Gatland thought, when his side could have played their way back into the game. "We created chances, but we missed some opportunities," he said. "We've got to be more clinical." Adams' miserable afternoon continued when he overran a challenge and clashed heads with Garbisi, earning himself ten minutes in the sin-bin

RESULTS AND FIXTURES

ROUND 1
France 43 Wales 0
Scotland 31 Italy 19
Ireland 27 England 22

ROUND 2
Italy 22 Wales 15
England 26 France 25

TODAY

Scotland v Ireland
3:00pm, BBC

ROUND 3
SATURDAY FEB 22

Wales v Ireland
2:15pm, BBC

England v Scotland
4:45pm, ITV

SUNDAY FEB 23

Italy v France
3:00pm, ITV

ROUND 4
SATURDAY MARCH 8

Ireland v France
2:15pm, ITV

Scotland v Wales
4:45pm, BBC

SUNDAY MARCH 9

England v Italy
3:00pm, ITV

ROUND 5
SATURDAY MARCH 15

Italy v Ireland
2:15pm, ITV

Wales v England
4:45pm, BBC

France v Scotland
8:00pm, ITV

and, although Allan missed two shots at goal, Wales' indiscipline meant the penalty chances kept coming. In the 70th minute, Wainwright was driven over from a maul and, when another maul was collapsed by Italy, Wales were suddenly back within a score, with Italy reduced to 13 men. But it was too little, too late and Wales now find themselves in 12th place, below Georgia, in the world rankings. "That's disappointing," Gatland said. "But that's where we are at the moment."

Scorers: Italy: Try Capuozzo (20min). **Con** Allan. Pens Allan 5 (7, 29, 34, 61, 74). **Wales:** Tries Wainwright (70), penalty try (79). Pen Thomas (17). **Italy** T Allan (J Trulla 73min); A Capuozzo, J I Brex, T Menoncello, M Ioane; P Garbisi (Trulla 59-68), M Page-Relo (A Garbisi 68); D Fischetti (L Rizzoli 66), G Nicotera (G Lucchesi 53), S Ferrari (M Riccioni 53, sin-bin 78), N Cannone, F Ruzza (D Lamb 61, sin-bin 79), S Negri (R Vintcent 61), M Lamaro (M Zuliani 66), L Cannone. **Wales** B Murray; T Rogers (J Hathaway 61), N Tompkins (Hathaway 17-28), E James, J Adams (sin-bin 59); B Thomas (D Edwards 49), Tomos Williams (R Williams 67); G Thomas (N Smith 45), E Lloyd (E Dee 45), H Thomas (K Assiratti 45), W Rowlands (Teddy Williams 58), F Thomas, J Botham (A Wainwright 58), J Morgan, T Faletau. **Referee** M Carley (Eng).



“
Wales look rudderless and Gatland, for all his experience, does not appear close to finding any answers

From Allianz Stadium, the home of England Rugby, to your home, we've got you covered from £145.

Football

Bargain ‘\$12m back’ one step from greatest season in NFL history

Super Bowl LIX

Paddy von Behr New Orleans

February 9 is always a big day for Saquon Barkley, but this one could be extra special. How many people can say they won the Super Bowl on their birthday?

Barkley, of the Philadelphia Eagles, is one game away from completing the greatest season by a running back in NFL history. Almost 3,000 scrimmage yards, 20 touchdowns and one play that broke the internet – now only the Kansas City Chiefs stand between this jet-heeled 28-year-old and everything he has ever dreamt of.

It’s worth beginning with the story of how Barkley ended up in Philadelphia, because it’s a funny one... if you like laughing at the New York Giants, that is. It’s also a story that – unfortunately for the Giants’ general manager Joe Schoen – played itself out on national television.

In one scene of the NFL’s fly-on-the-wall documentary series *Hard Knocks*, Schoen argues against renewing Barkley’s contract last spring because the team recently handed a four-year \$160million (about £130million) deal to quarterback Daniel Jones. “Daniel is making a lot of money,” Schoen says. “We’ve got to figure out if he’s the guy, so we’ve got to protect him, we’ve got to put resources there [in the offensive line]. You’re paying the guy \$40million [a year], it’s not to hand the ball off to a \$12million back.”

By November, the Giants had released Jones from their roster, while Barkley had joined a division rival and was well on his way to a historic season. Howie Roseman, Schoen’s equivalent in Philadelphia, looks rather clever in comparison. “I’d like to say he’s exceeded expectations, but he’s always been one of the best players I’ve ever seen,” Roseman said. “So, I’m really not surprised by any of this.”

Schoen’s “\$12million back” comment reflects a wider view that running back is not the smartest place to put your money. Expendable, interchangeable and undervalued, a perception has developed that they don’t win you championships and that plugging a cheap back into an otherwise well-built offense is the most sensible recipe for success.

Barkley, along with the Baltimore Ravens running back Derrick Henry, has done his bit to change that attitude this season. “There are going to be owners and GMs who think you don’t need a [star] running back,” Barkley said this week. “One thing we did show is that if you’re an elite player at any position, you’re going to be able to help your team win.”

That impact was acknowledged on Thursday night, when Barkley was named the NFL’s Offensive Player of the Year, an achievement that looks all the more impressive if you reflect on September 2020, when Barkley suffered a torn ACL and sprained MCL.

That is typically enough to leave pundits questioning whether a running back will ever regain his dynamism, and at the start of this week he spoke about “teaching myself how to walk again”, which is difficult to imagine when you watch him leaping backwards over a Jacksonville Jaguars defender or a highlight reel of huge touchdown runs this season. In these play-offs alone he has scored three times from at least 60 yards out.

“When you play someone like Saquon, who can score with any touch he has, you have to really know your playbook and know your responsibilities,” Efe Obada, defensive end for the Washington Commanders and one of the UK’s greatest NFL exports, says. “You have to trust the scheme and eliminate any indecision.”

On top of what Barkley calls a “God-given ability” to make defenders miss, he has something else in his favour: an elite offensive line punching holes for him to run through. “I have the best offensive line in the league,” he said, “and you could make an argument that it’s the best of all-time.”

Then there is the Kansas City defense, which hasn’t allowed an opposing player to rush for 100 yards in 18 straight games. Steve Spagnuolo, their wily co-ordinator, has a habit of delivering unpredictable and devastating blitz patterns when the game is on the line. “We’ve got so many different looks, I think that confuses the quarterback and the opposing team,” Chris Jones, the Chiefs’ star defensive lineman, said. “You never know what you’re gonna get from Spags.”

The good news for Philly is that if quarterback Jalen Hurts can react quickly, they have the perfect back to catch a dump-off. Could Spags’ signature move leave the door open for a counter-punch, with Barkley tearing into the open space vacated by blitzing linebackers?

“I’m not going to tell him [Spagnuolo] how to do his job,” Obada says with a laugh, “[but] Hurts has been able to process disguises better and they have offensive linemen who are houses. Seeing how they pick up blitzes is going to be very interesting. Just don’t get Saquon in open space.”

ON TV TODAY

Philadelphia v Kansas City 11.30pm (GMT), Sky Sports and ITV



Guardiola’s rigid positional play appears to be losing its edge as more risk-embracing styles bring Premier League rewards for a new breed of coaches

JONATHAN NORTHCROFT



Football correspondent

Erling Haaland should be one of the wonders of football, appointment viewing whenever he straps on the hairband and laces his boots. He recently signed a contract worth £250million with Manchester City, a deal the club celebrated by releasing a video of children who idolise Haaland from around the world.

Ancelotti’s Real will know what to expect from City on Tuesday



podcast Jamie Carragher and Paul Scholes captured a mood by last week asking: “Have Pep’s tactics expired?”

And then there was a striking observation made recently by one of the sport’s greatest thinkers: “Modern football is the way Bournemouth play, that Newcastle play, like Brighton play, like Liverpool.” That philosopher? Guardiola himself.

Tuesday reunites Guardiola with a nemesis in Carlo Ancelotti, who is so light-touch it can seem he directs Real Madrid’s superstars with no more than an eyebrow raise and pat on the back. “There is no style for me. No Ancelotti style,” he told Martin Samuel. “The style takes into consideration the preparation of the players.”

The core objective of positionism

Chaos

The kids are from Ghana, Mexico, Japan, Abu Dhabi, Brazil, New York, Oslo – everywhere. “He’s fun to watch,” one says. For another he is “a role model for how I live my life”.

So what did the world see when City met Arsenal last Sunday? After 14 seconds Haaland making a tackle; after four minutes Haaland playing a two-yard pass. And then? Thirty-six minutes passed before he touched the ball again. He finished with ten touches in total.

Yes, he scored – but if football is in any way connected to joy, if watching is to be “fun”, this was miserable use of a star attraction. You watched Haaland, paddling from William Saliba to Gabriel and back to Saliba, knowing no cross or through-ball was ever coming his way, but that the rules of City’s football demand he stays in his area making those same movements while the team work methodically up the pitch.

He was less a performer expressing himself in a role than a piece of machinery carrying out tasks, which made you think of the other Haaland, that charismatic, elemental, exciting force who first swept into the Premier League. Is he happy? Is a lion – no matter the comforts – in a cage?

It was from this standpoint, one of aesthetics and is-this-really-a-good-thing pondering, that I wrote about standardised, micromanaged football in December, with Jack Grealish my example of systems killing individuals. The purpose was not to attack Pep Guardiola – a genius – but to ask whether his ideas had assumed such power (over his own team and throughout the game) that a reset is required.

City’s struggles since then have meant that questioning has moved to a practical level. On *The Overlap*

TRENT ALEXANDER-ARNOLD



is control. The teams Guardiola perceives as playing “modern football” embrace, to varying degrees, chaos. Andoni Iraola lives for it, suffusing Bournemouth with aggressive high-pressing, man-marking, dribbling, and fast, vertical transitions. He is a disciple of Marcelo Bielsa (whom he played for) and a fan of Jürgen Klopp and told me in a 2023 interview: “It’s a matter of how much you want to risk the ball. I tell players whenever you recover it, your first look has to be not even to the No 9, but the ‘keeper. Can you score?”

Guardiola is the coaching opposite. Even the City manager’s confidant and biographer, Martí Perarnau, describes his “Germanic tendency to direct and control”. If Ancelotti had won with different tactics, shapes, teams and ruses across his remarkable career, Guardiola’s has been devoted to the incredible perfecting of one idea – *juego de posicion* (positional play), developed at Barcelona from the passing triangles and exploitation of space of Johan Cruyff.

In it, set positions on the field have to be filled, the passing is simple and short and the movements and actions – based around creating overloads – are rehearsed. Perarnau described Guardiola’s teaching of it when he came to City as like downloading into players “a whole load of complicated new software”. It’s rigid, structural, mathematical and conceptualises a pitch divided into four horizontal zones, five vertical lanes and players who carry out three categories of work.

This season there has been a breakdown, with City failing to win half their games, and opponents anticipating their plays to defend them comfortably, press them out of

LAMINE YAMAL

Bournemouth's Kluivert, Spain and Barcelona's Yamal, Real's Mbappé and Liverpool's Alexander-Arnold all play in systems where they can express themselves



and high-level coach himself – he was a key member of Roberto Mancini's staff when Italy won Euro 2020, and a technical coach at Juventus under Andrea Pirlo.

Alongside the Scottish coach and influential tactics thinker Jamie Hamilton, he was an early advancer of arguments against the hegemony of "Pep-ball", bold enough to ask in an article in 2023 – even though City were en route to the Treble – "Is the era of positional play coming to an end?"

Gagliardi argued from personal experience. Mancini's Italy were a finely drilled positional team, building with the classic Guardiola 3-2-5 structure and beating England in the European Championship final through that classic positional trick of outnumbering the opposition in mid-field. Pirlo's Juventus were positional too. But Gagliardi found, in the 18 months after Italy's triumph, the effectiveness of the strategy diminishing. "I was enchanted by Guardiola's Barcelona...I was almost a fundamentalist, convinced that you couldn't win any other way," he said.

"[But] as time went by, I saw that we were having more difficulties... the advantages we had were less and less, because teams were changing the way they defended."

Gagliardi views tactics as the eternal push-pull between attack and defence. In Italy, Arrigo Sacchi revolutionised football by questioning man-marking and switching to zonal defending – perfected with his extraordinary AC Milan team. But



JUSTIN KLUIVERT

having Arsenal press as Stefan Ortega played out to his defenders.

But then, in their third meeting of the season, knowing Arteta too well, Eddie Howe had Newcastle do the same to Arsenal in Wednesday's Carabao Cup triumph. Newcastle's second goal resulted from man-to-man marking so aggressive and committed that a centre back, Schär, dispossessed Declan Rice on the edge of Arsenal's area.

More Premier League teams are going man-to-man again. The way to beat it? Long passes, which bypass the opposition press. This is why "to not have variety will kill you". It feels we're heading away from positionism hegemony to a place where teams employ different weapons and counter-weapons against each other. Coaches cannot but be adaptable. Even Guardiola may have to go long (he did so in a recent win against Chelsea) at times.

A diversity of approaches would please Hamilton, who has long pushed back against modern assumptions that positionism is the only way. On his superb podcast, *The 3rd Circle*, Hamilton quoted an article in *El País* from the 2006 World Cup that railed against the teams' identical football, in flat 4-4-2s, when England played Paraguay. "System against system. Everything predictable. The wingers on the wing. The forwards up front ... everything very correct, very organised," it read.

The author was Guardiola and the irony is he could have been an observer in 2025 writing about a meeting of two positional teams. The point is, his ideas replaced the hegemony of 2006 and were exhilarating but no revolution lasts for ever. They became hegemonic themselves. In football, in life, just around the corner, there are always other ways.

An alternative style championed by Hamilton and Gagliardi is "relationism", rooted in South America, involving intricate combinations between players not spread in a pre-designed structure but rather orientating themselves around the ball. It promotes fluidity and improvisation. Argentina won the 2022 World Cup that way.

Among Europe's relational teams are the Swedish champions, Malmö, the Spanish second-division leaders, Racing Santander, and a side that compels Gagliardi, Simone Inzaghi's Inter Milan, who are full of fluidity and rotation.

Inzaghi's assistant, Massimiliano Farris, explained recently that "we set out the sheet music but then it's up to the players to perform it" and Gagliardi likes that relational football offers "the possibility to see more skills, more players that try personal solutions" and a world where coaches take a humbler role. "The game is for the players," he says.

Guardiola will find solutions – geniuses do – but may never again be able to pose a riddle the rest can't answer.

Haaland? Season on season at City, his average touches have declined. At Borussia Dortmund he touched the ball 63 per cent more. He has less than half the touches Kylian Mbappé enjoys at Real.

But at least he stays in position. Everything very correct, very organised. Arsène Wenger said recently that "[football] has lost the freedom that allowed people to express their vision of the game". But maybe it's coming back.

MOST LONG PASSES ATTEMPTED

By outfield players in the PL this season

T Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	291
I Zabarnyi (Bournemouth)	261
J Andersen (Fulham)	252
P Porro (Tottenham)	230
JP van Hecke (Brighton)	222
F Schär (Newcastle)	220
B Fernandes (Manchester Utd)	218
M Guéhi (Crystal Palace)	216
C Palmer (Chelsea)	211
J Tarkowski (Everton)	192

Source: fbref.com

THE TEAMS THAT TAKE A RISK

Most 'miscontrols' in the PL this season

Bournemouth	380
Brighton & Hove Albion	365
Ipswich Town	359
Nottingham Forest	358
Wolverhampton Wanderers	347
Brentford	333
Tottenham Hotspur	330
Leicester City	315
Everton	313
Liverpool	313

Source: fbref.com

attack-orientated coaches decided (in Gagliardi's words): "OK, so you defend the spaces, fine, now I'm studying how to attack the spaces." Positional football began.

For quarter of a century it swept all. Even coaches from a different tradition, such as Klopp, were forced to adopt its principles. Its tropes and patterns – the five in attack, the two-touch play, the midfielders in pockets, the cut-backs and balls slid down the sides of the area – have become such an orthodoxy that many can't seem to imagine "good football" without them.

But the change Gagliardi experienced? Teams beginning to dare to adopt countertactics, especially man-to-man marking. Its proponents had never gone away but rather had been living as guru-outliers – like Bielsa, Ralf Rangnick and Atalanta's Gian Piero Gasperini.

Why is it such kryptonite to positional football? "Pressing man to man is too easy if you stay in position," Gagliardi says. Like wrecking balls, such pressing has recently been seen demolishing build-up structures. Knowing Guardiola's playbook, Arteta devastated City by

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ



possession and hit them with what Guardiola fears most – transitions. Most other positional teams – including Chelsea, Aston Villa and Arsenal themselves – have been up and down too. Teams with alternative styles, notably Nottingham Forest and Bournemouth, have been revelations.

But fortunes ebb and flow in football and a leading coach suggests City are simply in a bad moment because of injuries and burnout. "Pep-ball is not over," he said. "Though [in the future] to not have variety will kill you."

He talked about the spread of Guardiola's style, through former assistants such as Mikel Arteta and Enzo Maresca becoming managers and because "sporting directors all want Pep-ball, it's the most

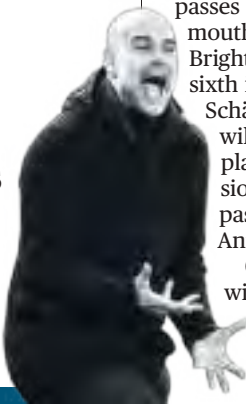
statistically productive style". They hire coaches who implement it and copying is easier than ever because of video analysis.

Bournemouth and Brighton & Hove Albion are first and second (and Liverpool and Forest place highly) in a niche metric. "Miscontrols" in the 2024-25 Premier League. It reveals attitude to risk: miscontrols are defined by losing control of the ball on dribbles and are more likely when trying to beat opponents in a situation where the chances of success are lower. Bottom are City, Arsenal, Chelsea – the league's most positional teams.

Another element is playing passes over distance. Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold is the Premier League's top outfielder for long passes attempted, next is Bournemouth's Illia Zabarnyi, fifth is Brighton's Jan Paul van Hecke and sixth is Newcastle United's Fabian Schär. This again shows a willingness to allow certain players to take risks in possession. The re-adoption of long passing is also part of the story Antonio Gagliardi tells.

Gagliardi is a remarkable witness. A brilliant writer on tactics, educator at the Italian FA's revered coaching school at Coverciano, Florence,

Countertactics have been like kryptonite to Guardiola's positionism



Football FA Cup fourth round

DONLEY'S 45-YARD STRIKE



Donley pounces on a loose ball just past the halfway line



His lofted strike causes panic for Ortega in the City goal...



...who could not stop it going over his head and hitting the bar

Orient steal show with wondergoal

1-2

Leyton Orient

Ortega 16 (og)

Manchester City

Khusanov 56
De Bruyne 79

JONATHAN NORTHCROFT



Football Correspondent
At the Gaughan Group Stadium

Richie Wellens's trump card was Darren Pratley, a good pro, but one who turns 40 in April and with the mileage of 722 senior matches on the clock. Pep Guardiola's was Kevin De Bruyne. And so gravity took over, but it took so long to do so; for so long Leyton Orient's spirits were up in the sky. De Bruyne came on in the 72nd minute, in a double substitution with Phil Foden, a show of Manchester

City's star power. They needed every bit of it, for Orient had rattled them, embarrassed them and led them, between the 16th and 56th minutes, through a goal – forced by Jamie Donley's audacity and skill – that will go down as a great FA Cup moment. When De Bruyne was introduced it was still 1-1 and City were still playing below themselves and Orient above themselves – to the extent it still felt possible that we could have any result. Wellens had put on Pratley to shore up midfield and the old fella diligently went about winning balls, closing spaces and organising others. However, after a long, careful sequence of City passing, Jack Grealish took possession on the left and chipped a superb diagonal pass into the penalty area. He spotted De Bruyne making a run, but Pratley had not and De Bruyne escaped to reach the ball and flick it past Josh Keeley. Orient's goalkeeper, otherwise excellent, was a little slow off his line and, though he tried to recover, De Bruyne's effort squirmed in. So we had finally arrived at the likely scoreline, but what a cup-tie it remained. In the 90th minute Keeley, who scored against Oldham in the second round, was up in City's area for a

Tom James free kick. It sailed over him but dropped to Dan Happe, who smashed his golden chance into the stand. A true centre back's finish. Happe, though, was one of Orient's heroes, as was Keeley, as was Donley, as was the game and tireless Charlie Kelman. Nobody was especially good for City, except possibly De Bruyne. Guardiola, having been mocked by Orient supporters, went on a lap of honour and spoke generously about how much he loved the day. "[FA Cup games are] impossible to control. The vibe and the smell of the crowd, you don't find it in other competitions," he said. "We were lucky at the end because they had chances but we created a lot of chances. It was a tight game but we behaved really well, we reacted with character and it's always nice to be in the next round." It had not felt like we would see something intense or momentous, walking to the Gaughan Group Stadium past the Orient and City fans quietly enjoying lagers at Rapture on Leyton High Road. There was the sense of two teams, from different worlds, who would dutifully play their preordained parts: Orient the nice hosts, City the big, effi-

cient winners. Yes, Guardiola included two debutants (Vitor Reis and Nico González) and the 19-year-old Nico O'Reilly, and left Erling Haaland at home, but his squad cost £600 million. At present turnover, Orient would need 78 years to earn that. But Wellens had a plan for flipping the dynamic. An old one. Make your opponents do those things they least want to do. It was there in the opening moments, when Orient pumped the ball into the corner, forcing Reis, as his first action in English football, to win a header. A long throw from Jack Currie found the elegant González having to defend. They kept asking Rico Lewis to turn and chase back-

Donley was onto it immediately and from 50 yards sent a lob over a stranded Stefan Ortega. The ball-striking was sweet, Donley sending his effort on just the right flightpath, with the height but then dip, to loop over Ortega and strike the underside of the bar, bounce down against Ortega's body and in. It went down as an own goal – a travesty from Donley's point of view. A 20-year-old Tottenham Hotspur loanee, his class was evident. Wellens said if he keeps progressing he'll be playing against teams like City every week and Guardiola cooed over him. "What a fantastic shot – the quality, the technique, the speed, the flight

wards by feeding balls down the left for Diallangjaiyesimi or their chase-anything striker – who caught Guardiola's eye – Kelman. They kept pressing the venerable and weary 34-year-old Ilkay Gundogan. City missed chances, Gundogan scuffing horribly after arriving on to Savinho's cross, but so did Orient. Then came a moment of pure FA Cup wonderment. As Gundogan tried to control on the halfway line, Kelman snapped in and muscled him off the ball.

of the ball. When you concede this goal, just congratulate Donley. He's an incredible left-footed player and he made a fantastic goal," Guardiola said. There were scenes: Barry Hearn cavorting and home supporters singing "sacked in the morning" at Guardiola. He took it well. "When they say you're getting sacked in the morning, it's a routine in all the stadiums now. With this result, I think my chairman is not going to sack me," he said. He also mused about González learning valuable things about the English game. The midfielder went off in the 22nd minute,



Tarkowski made to pay by Iraola's inventors

0-2

Everton

Semenyo 23 (pen), Jebbison 43

Bournemouth

Paul Joyce

There was a moment in the opening half when, much to the amusement of Everton's fans, the Bournemouth head coach Andoni Iraola lost his footing and fell on to his backside. His side would suffer no such slip-ups. Iraola already has this slick, inventive team dreaming of qualifying for the Champions League and to that ambitious wish list should be added domestic cup success. In the last FA Cup tie to be played at Goodison Park the visiting team claimed victory after surviving a late onslaught in which Everton struck the woodwork on three occasions. In August Iraola had been full of

apologies after his team overturned a 2-0 deficit in the 87th minute to win 3-2 but, even allowing for that four-minute spell when Everton roused themselves, the Spaniard will not feel that his team relied on good luck to prevail on this occasion. Bournemouth were slicker, boasted razor-sharp players such as Antoine Semenyo, whom Iraola described as being in a "lovely moment", and should sense an opportunity after progressing into the fifth round in consecutive seasons for the first time. David Moyes has asked his Everton team to play more football since returning as manager but that will be easier against some opponents than others. James Tarkowski



began by threading passes into midfield but, by the interval, had reverted to leaving a foot in on Semenyo after a torrid half in which he was culpable for both goals. Everton were opened up by passes from Dean Huijsen and the left back Milos Kerkez, while Semenyo was flattened by Tarkowski after bursting into the area. Semenyo, left, assumed responsibility from 12 yards and smashed a shot beyond Jordan Pickford. Then, just before the interval, Tarkowski accepted a pass from his goalkeeper by his own six-yard area, clipped a ball to the left but picked out Marcus Tavernier rather than a blue shirt. A shot struck Jarrad Branthwaite but ricocheted

to Daniel Jebbison, who bundled home at the second attempt. "Terrible" and "un-Everton like" was Moyes's caustic assessment of his side's defending for both goals. Carlos "Charly" Alcaraz made his debut as a substitute after his loan move from Flamengo and struck a post with a free kick in the 71st minute. Semenyo then cleared Iliman Ndiaye's header off the line. A frenzied passage continued when a cross from Jack Harrison hit a post before rebounding into the grateful arms of Kepa Arrizabalaga. Everton (4-2-3-1): J Pickford 7 — J O'Brien 5, J Tarkowski 4, J Branthwaite 6, A Young 6 — J Garner 6 (T Iroegbunam 74min), I Gueye 6 (M Keane 84) — J Lindstrom 5 (J Harrison 65, 7), A Doucoure 5 (C Alcaraz 65 7), I Ndiaye 6 — Beto 5. Booked Ndiaye. Bournemouth (4-2-3-1): K Arrizabalaga 6 — L Cook 6, I Zabarnyi 6, D Huijsen 7, M Kerkez 7 — T Adams 6, R Christie 6 (S Silcott-Duberry 90+2) — M Tavernier 7 (D Brooks 78), B Winterburn 6 (J Kluijvert 64, 7), A Semenyo 8 — D Jebbison 7 (D Quattara 78). Booked Adams, Kerkez, Brooks. Referee J Brooks.



The ball ends up in the net after bouncing off Ortega's back

“
It went down as an own goal – a travesty from the point of view of Spurs loanee Donley

FA CUP FIFTH-ROUND DRAW

The draw for the Emirates FA Cup fifth round will be made live tomorrow on BBC1's The One Show. It will take place at about 7.10pm.

clutching his side, but will need to be tougher.

Methodically, City pursued the equaliser. Wellens complimented them for not panicking and playing their football. But there was a lack of speed and conviction about their work at times. Grealish showed strange hesitancy when, instead of shooting, he took the ball down and laid it back, and Bernardo Silva and Savinho missed decent chances.

Happe and Jack Simpson blocked shots. Keeley, another Spurs loanee, made saves. Jaiyesimi was an outlet with his dribbling and the combination of Donley's brain and Kelman's lungs continued asking questions of City's defence.

In it, Rúben Dias and Reis were replaced at half-time by Abdurkadir Khusanov and John Stones and in the 56th minute, City's luck changed. After a short corner, Lewis shot from the edge of the box and it pinged off Khusanov's head past Keeley.

You expected a second City goal to follow swiftly, but James McAtee volleyed wide and Keeley made another good save from a low Gundogan shot. At 2-1, Kelman tested Ortega and then came Happe's miss. Home fans sang that their gilded visitors were only here to see the Orient anyway.

Leyton Orient (4-2-3-1): J Keeley 8 — T James 7, D Happe 8, J Simpson 7, J Currie 7 — J Brown 7 (D Ball 85min), E Galbraith 7 (Z Obiero 86) — S Perkins 7 (B Cooper 65, 6), J Donley 8 (D Agyei 85), D Jaiyesimi 7 (D Pratley 54, 6) — C Kelman 9. **Booked** Cooper, Obiero.
Manchester City (4-2-3-1): S Ortega 5 — R Lewis 7, V Reis 6 (A Khusanov 46), R Dias 6 (J Stones 46), N O'Reilly 7 (K De Bruyne 72) — N González 4 (B Silva 22, 6), I Gundogan 5 — Savinho 6, J McAtee 6 (P Foden 72), J Grealish 7 — O Marmoush 6. **Booked** McAtee.
Referee D Bond. **Attendance** 8,749.

Toothless Chelsea dumped out of cup by magic Mitoma



Brighton
Rutter 12, Mitoma 57



Chelsea
Verbruggen (og) 5

2
1

Peter Rutzler

The financial tropes are well-worn when Chelsea meet Brighton & Hove Albion but they will continue to be relevant for as long as Chelsea struggle to defeat them. There is no love lost, but Brighton continue to thwart Chelsea's hopes of silverware.

For Chelsea, their large outlay demands silverware. They likely will achieve it this year in the Conference League, but the FA Cup offered the last good hope for this season. Failure here, after a disappointing Carabao Cup run, adds greater scrutiny.

It took until the second half for Brighton to show a response to last week's 7-0 defeat away to Nottingham Forest but it was enough to secure safe passage here, led by Georginio Rutter, who equalised in the first half after a calamitous own goal from Bart Verbruggen, before teeing up Karou Mitoma, right, for the winning goal.

Chelsea returned to winning ways by defeating West Ham United on Monday but they faced new issues after Nicolas Jackson and Marc Guiu picked up injuries in that game. Christopher Nkunku was tasked with leading the line here as one of six changes.

Fabian Hürzeler made just the one alteration to his team after the humiliation at Forest, bringing back Carlos Baleba after injury.

A reaction was expected, also because their form has underwhelmed; they had won just one of their previous eight matches at home.

The reaction, though, was limp initially. Brighton handed Chelsea the lead after only five minutes, thanks to a dreadful howler from Verbruggen. Cole Palmer miscued a cross on the volley but inexplicably the Dutchman spilt the ball into the back of his net.

Rutter found a cavernous gap between Trevoh Chalobah and Tosin Adarabioyo to head Joel Veltman's cross past Sánchez for parity. But the first half was bitty.

Chelsea targeted the Brighton left, trying to encourage Pedro Neto to challenge Tariq Lamptey, who endured a chastening visit to the City Ground last week while again playing out of position. Lamptey looked more effective going forward, inverting while Mitoma held the width, but he looked vulnerable.

Chelsea, though, crafted little. The visitors were struggling to prise open gaps in their "strikerless" system. They were relying on vertical runs from midfield, and while they were forthcoming, they were infrequent.

Palmer and Nkunku split the Brighton back line on the half-hour with parallel runs in behind, with Moisés Caicedo picking out Nkunku.

He tried to square it to Palmer, but he could only head the ball over. But they lacked a focal point.

Marc Cucurella surged forward on 40 minutes but upon reaching the box, found no one to target.

Brighton's reaction to their thrashing at the City Ground last week was saved until the second half, as they sparked into life, playing with greater intensity.

They deservedly took the lead when Rutter collected a poor clearance and scooped the ball smartly into Mitoma's path, who calmly controlled the ball with his chest and prodded it high into the net past Sánchez.

Chelsea's response was piecemeal.

They had a moment of intensity once Enzo Fernández entered the field with half an hour remaining.

He chipped a shot over the crossbar while Palmer stretched to meet a Cucurella pass but the shot skewed harmlessly wide.

But Brighton had control and made it through.

Brighton & Hove Albion (4-1-4-1): B Verbruggen 4 — J Veltman 7, JP van Hecke 7, L Dunk 6 (A Webster 46min, 6), T Lamptey 6 — J Hinshelwood 6 (D Gomez 67) — Y Minteh 6, G Rutter 9 (J Pedro 74), C Baleba 7 (Y Ayari 74), K Mitoma 8 — D Welbeck 6 (M O'Riley 89). **Booked** Rutter, Veltman.
Chelsea (4-2-3-1): R Sánchez 6 — M Gusto 5, T Adarabioyo 5, T Chalobah 5, M Cucurella 6 — M Caicedo 6, K Dewsbury-Hall 5 (E Fernández 59) — P Neto 5 (N Madueke 74), C Palmer 6, J Sancho 5 (T George 74) — C Nkunku 5. **Booked** Dewsbury-Hall, Caicedo.
Referee J Gillett.

MILLWALL FANS' 'VILE' CHANTS ANGER LEEDS

Leeds United have strongly criticised "vile" chants from Millwall fans that mocked "football tragedies" during the London side's 2-0 FA Cup win at Elland Road (Jason Mellor writes).

The Championship leaders say they will work with the police to identify those responsible for songs relating to the deaths of the Leeds fans Kevin Speight and Christopher Loftus, who were stabbed in Istanbul before their side's Uefa Cup semi-final against Galatasaray in 2000.

"When something happens, normally the whole football world stands together and we should do that," Daniel Farke, the Leeds manager said.

"If they didn't reach those standards today, it's important to look into this situation."

Millwall advanced thanks to a goal in each half from Femi Azeez.

Willock double keeps cup kings on track



Birmingham City
Laird 1, Iwata 40



Newcastle United
Willock 21, 82, Wilson 26

Gary Jacob

Chris Davies will feel he has been justified in believing this is a sign of what is to come for Birmingham City. With grand plans unveiled, the League One leaders showed they can compete at a higher level, getting under the skin of Newcastle United and nearly causing an upset. If they secure promotion, a few summer additions will make them a tough

act and their owners have plans to return them to the Premier League, where they last played in 2011.

Ethan Laird sparked delirium after 41 seconds and Tomoki Iwata levelled with a glorious strike. They could not keep up the pressing and aggression and Newcastle's greater stamina and quality told. There was no shame. Only Fulham had beaten City here this season and this was a first defeat in 19 matches. "I am pleasantly surprised with how we coped," Davies said. "I am proud, we gave them a game. We will go somewhere if we continue that way. We showed a wider audience our spirit, heart and determination."

Eddie Howe made nine changes

to his Newcastle side that reached the Carabao Cup final in midweek and they managed the game better after the break. He could afford not to properly use his biggest guns for a 12th win in 14 games. Callum Wilson did much to drag Newcastle back into it, helping to make and score one, before Joe Willock drilled home his second a week after he was racially abused. "Mentally, physically – you could see a few players were on the edge," Howe said. "We navigated a tricky game."

Birmingham's owners want to inject razzmatazz and there was an American feel in the build-up with local rapper Jaykai performing on the pitch. Not that it was needed. The ground was rocking. Kieran Dowell struck a corner deep for Keshi Anderson, who headed back for Laird, who

swept a shot that went in after clipping Wilson.

The noise rose. Marc Leonard, who was excellent before going off to a leg injury, floated a free kick that was headed back for Anderson to sweep a volley that took a slight deflection which made Nick Pope's save even better.

Wilson then drifted to the left and clipped over a cross. William Osula pulled it back and Willock, left, poked goalwards. Bailey Peacock-Farrell tried to adjust his feet but his momentum carried him behind the line. In the absence of technology, Nigel Lugg, the assistant referee, judged the ball had gone in.

Osula started the move for Newcastle's second with a subtle touch to escape Alex Cochrane. His shot was parried before Tino Livramento's low cross hit Osula's



standing foot as he tried to convert and fell fortunately for Wilson.

Birmingham hit back as Matt Targett's header fell into the path of Iwata, who caught it sweetly to send the ball flying high into the net. Osula's foul on Jay Stansfield sparked handbags before half time.

Newcastle worked their winner from the left. Sean Longstaff pulled back and Willock struck through the legs of the goalkeeper. There was 12 minutes of stoppage time but no more drama.

Birmingham City (4-2-3-1) B Peacock-Farrell 6 — E Laird 7, C Klarer 7, B Davies 7, A Cochrane 6 — T Iwata 7 (G Hanley 84min), M Leonard 8 (W Willumsson 62, 6) — K Anderson 7 (A May 76), K Dowell 7, S Wright 7 (K Bielik 77) — J Stansfield 6 (L Dykes 77). **Booked** Anderson, Stansfield, Klarer, Willumsson.
Newcastle United (4-3-3): N Pope 7 — T Livramento 7, E Kraft 6, D Burn 5 (F Schär 55, 6), M Targett 6 — S Longstaff 7, B Guimarães 6 (S Tonali 46, 7), L Miley — W Osula 8 (A Isak 90+14), C Wilson 7 (J Murphy 55, 6), J Willock 8. **Booked** Burn, Osula, Willock.
Referee M Donohue. **Attendance** 27,994.

United might as well target Mars as a 21st title by 2028

Martin Samuel

The voice of sport



From the moment Gareth Bale walked through the door at Real Madrid, all he heard about was La Décima. The tenth one. Real had won nine European Cup and Champions League titles going into season 2013-14 but the last had been in 2002 and reaching double figures was now a Castilian obsession. So much so that when Bale was presented to the Real fans, he delighted them by promising to win it.

"I was told all about it when I signed," Bale recalled. "There has always been a lot of expectation at Real Madrid but there was just enormous expectation surrounding that." As a club, Real remain defined by their performance in Europe's marquee competition. It is what makes their meeting with Manchester City this week so special.

In the same way, the modern Manchester United have been characterised by dominance in the Premier League. They have 20 top-flight titles, but the last was won in 2012-13. It is why Ineos's plan to Make United Great Again is known, not as the rather unfortunate Muga, but as Mission 21. This is United's equivalent of Real's Décima dream, except with one marked difference.

Have a look at Real's squad in 2013-14. Not just Bale, but Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, Sergio Ramos, Xabi Alonso, Luka Modric, Dani Carvajal, Ángel Di María, Fábio Coentrão, Sami Khedira, Iker Casillas, a youthful Raphaël Varane and Casemiro, Marcelo, Pepe, Isco. They should win the Champions League. Many went on to win it time and again. La Décima was far from a fantasy. Now consider the squad leading United towards Mission 21. It is nowhere; it is, by comparison, nothing. Mission 21 is linked to the wider Project 150, to be delivered in 2028, which is the club's 150th anniversary. So that's three years from now. United are targeting a 21st title for the 2027-28 season. In their present state, they may as well target Mars.

It was only a week ago that the club balked at a £5million loan fee for

Mathys Tel of Bayern Munich, who subsequently reversed a decision to reject Tottenham Hotspur. Already there have been warnings that next summer will bring another transfer window of parsimony, due to Profitability and Sustainability Rules. And it is not as if United are nearing the end of a rebuild, as Liverpool were when they signed Alisson and Virgil van Dijk in 2017-18. How many of United's present squad are Mission 21-ready? Most of Bale's Real team-mates would have walked into any squad with ambitions to win the Champions League. Yet how many of Ruben Amorim's group could get regular games for a club with serious title ambitions? Bruno Fernandes? He'll be 33 in September 2027. Kobbie Mainoo, Alejandro Garnacho, Amad Diallo? These are works in progress. Nothing is guaranteed. Marcus Rashford was United's future once.

So whereas Real, and others, were fully prepared to realise their ambitions, United seem an age away. They

need pretty much a starting XI to supplement an abundance of squad men. Hampered by poor investments and financial curbs, this is not a mission that can be accomplished in a hurry. Three seasons, four or five transfer windows, may not be enough.

Sir Dave Brailsford is taking a more active role, we hear, but what does that actually mean? He has recruited James Morton, a head of nutrition and performance from his Team Sky days, and Harry Marra, a 78-year-old athletics coach with a knowledge of biomechanics and general conditioning. Again, this is the cake's icing when Amorim does not have a

“

Biomechanics is the cake's icing when Amorim needs a goal machine to play against Palace

goalscorer he trusts to play ahead of Mainoo against Crystal Palace.

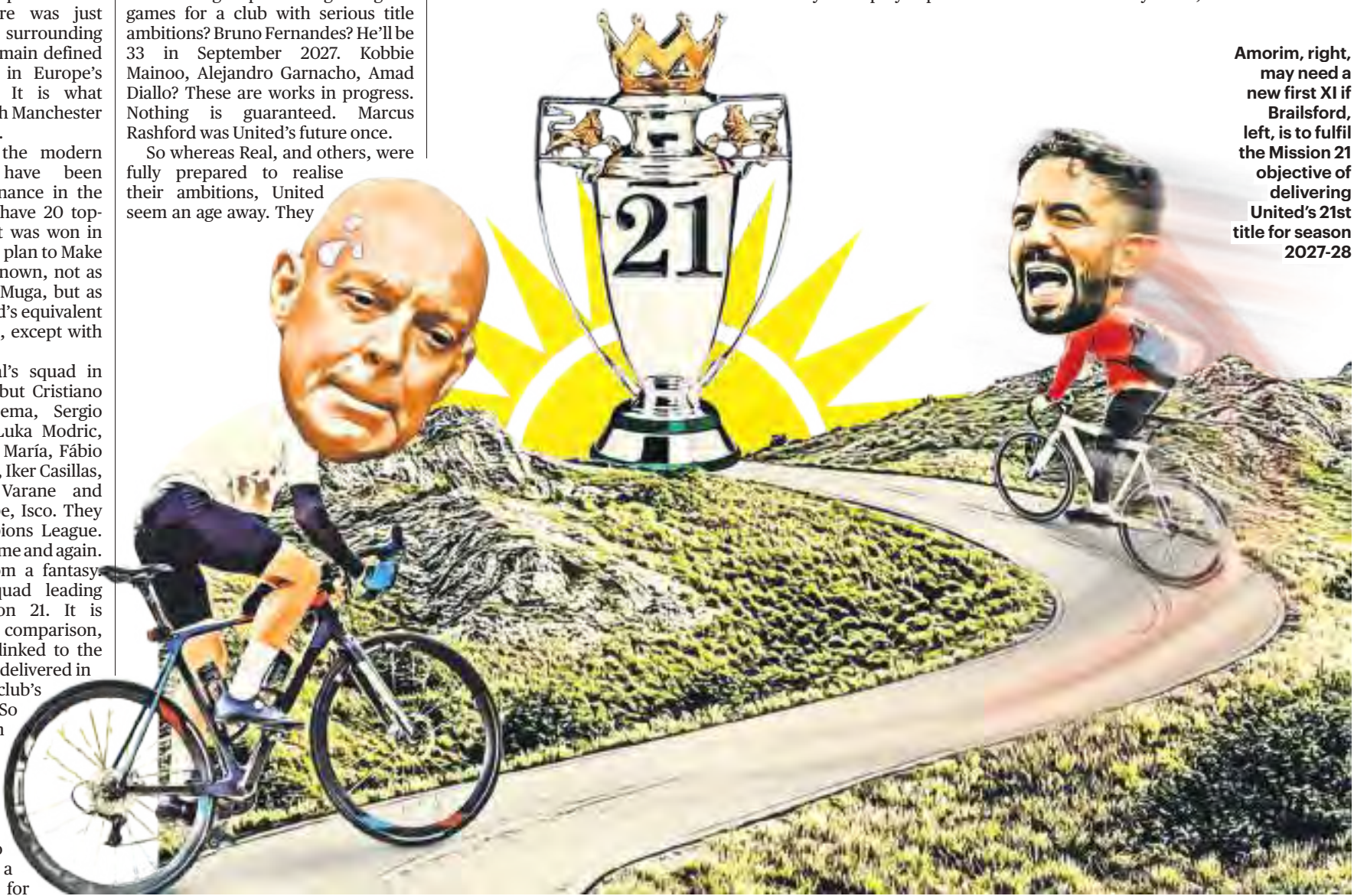
In sports in which victory is measured in hundredths of a second, marginal gains can be the difference. Yet, over 90 minutes, if Rasmus Hojlund gets barely a kick – no goals in his past 14 matches now – how much is biomechanics going to be a factor? It is not as if opponents haven't gone there before. Every team United face are likely to employ experts in condi-

tioning and nutrition. Morton was Liverpool's performance nutritionist between 2010 and 2015 – a period that delivered a single League Cup, won against Cardiff City, on penalties.

Bale did make good his pledge to Real's supporters. He scored a vital goal as the club won their tenth European crown against Atletico Madrid in 2014, scored in the penalty shoot-out when they won their 11th in 2016, then claimed one of the greatest goals in Champions League history when they clinched a 12th a year later. Real's dominance in the competition is such they are now pursuing El Decimosexto – the 16th. AC Milan have seven titles but players in the squad that Bale joined have almost matched that figure. Modric and Carvajal have won the Champions League six times each, Ronaldo and Benzema five. Real's coach, Carlo Ancelotti, has seven, as player and manager combined, too.

Here was a group that was ready, that was primed to conquer, that had a goal and the wherewithal to shoot for it. What United have no doubt looks good on a binder, or as a Power-Point presentation. But the rest, from where they stand, remains blank.

Amorim, right, may need a new first XI if Brailsford, left, is to fulfil the Mission 21 objective of delivering United's 21st title for season 2027-28





Arteta knows he needs to win silverware

It will take trophies for Arteta to deserve 'genius' tag

Arsenal loyalists get very protective about Mikel Arteta. They cite consecutive eighth-placed finishes in 2019-20 and 2020-21, the six seasons spent outside the Champions League, as proof of what he has achieved. That much is true.

Although Arteta was wholly in charge for one of those eighth-placed finishes, and for three of the seasons beyond the major European competition, he has still turned around the club. He has made Arsenal competitive again, he has made them energetic and youthful. He has Arsenal, in other words, exactly where they should be.

Eighth, those were the exceptional years. A club with every

advantage of size and influence recast as mid-table mediocrities. That was truly the impossible job. The same with Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur now.

This isn't the benchmark. Just improving on 13th and 14th place would not be a feat. Clubs with presumptions to join a Super League should never be where those two are. The same with Arsenal. It is why the discussion around them has now progressed to frustration at not delivering trophies. Arsenal should be in the top four, they should be in the Champions League top eight. This is par, at best, for a club of Arsenal's standing. Since winning the 2020 FA Cup, Arsenal have finished runners-up in the league twice, made two Carabao Cup semi-finals, have never been beyond the fourth round of the FA Cup and have not travelled beyond the last eight of the Champions League, or the last four in the Europa League.

This is not all Arteta's fault. It was January 11 when I wrote on these pages that Arsenal should test Aston Villa's resolve to keep Ollie Watkins, and January 29 when the club tabled a bid. By then Jhon Durán's £64 million move to Al-Nassr in Saudi Arabia was as good as done, and the imperative to comply with Profitability and Sustainability Rules had eased. Had Arsenal moved sooner, though, who knows?

It must be galling for Arteta to now see reports of a big recruitment drive promised in the summer. This is what used to happen to Arsène Wenger, who operated under financial restrictions in the aftermath of the Emirates Stadium move, while the club briefed that he was the one reluctant to spend money. Had Arteta been in charge of player recruitment, one imagines Arsenal would have signed a striker by now.

Yet none of this eases the imperative to win a trophy. This is not just about coming up short to Pep Guardiola's brilliant Manchester City. Leicester City and the worst

Manchester United team in modern history have both won the FA Cup in the past four years; United have won the League Cup too. And European competitions in which Arsenal have competed have been won by Villarreal, Eintracht Frankfurt and Sevilla. So, if eighth is the yardstick, yes Arteta is a genius; if the potential of modern Arsenal is considered, however, he knows there is much work still to be done.

RISE OF CELEBRATION POLICE

Karma arrived on the express train after Arsenal's teasing goal celebrations against City last week. The mockers became the mockees, losing 4-0 on aggregate to Newcastle United in their Carabao Cup semi-final. Football is like that. It is the master of rebukes.

So what is certainly not needed is Tony Scholes, from the Premier League's ministry of thought, having oversight of goal celebrations. Scholes, the chief football officer, was responding to such harmlessness as Myles Lewis-Skelly, right, mimicking Erling Haaland's zen pose, or Jamie Vardy pointing to his Premier League badge, to indicate Leicester's title win, after scoring against Tottenham.

Now we can argue the merit in Lewis-Skelly taking a dig at a much more experienced and successful

opponent, whom he may face multiple times across the next decade. We can ponder whether a team whose last major trophy was the FA Cup in 2020 should be quite so lacking in self-awareness. But what we can certainly agree on is that Scholes's attention is unwanted. "We all like to see celebrations," he said. "Some of them have been very funny and entertaining, but there is a line. Once it crosses over into mockery or criticism then we would need to deal with it."

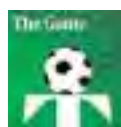
Here is a man who would have



Lewis-Skelly mocked Haaland

gagged Muhammad Ali. Who is Scholes to decide what amuses, or where some imaginary line exists? If a celebration advocates violence, or racism, that would be different. One thinks of Paolo Di Canio's fascist salute while playing for Lazio, or Nicolas Anelka's quenelle gesture at a time when it was linked to anti-Semitism in France. The antics of Lewis-Skelly or Vardy are simply not the same. As for Gabriel appearing to taunt Haaland after Arsenal's opening goal, there are ways to deal with that beyond edicts from on high. A yellow card, for unsportsmanlike conduct, would suffice if a referee thought an action

Martin Samuel on The Game podcast



Listen to Martin's views every Thursday as he debates the latest talking points in football with Jonathan Northcroft,

Gregor Robertson and other Times and Sunday Times writers. Search 'The Game' on your podcast app or go to: [THETIMES.COM/PODCASTS/THE-GAME](https://www.thetimes.com/podcasts/the-game)

Hurry up and scrap extra time, Uefa, or we'll miss the last train home

Uefa has been discussing scrapping extra time in European knockout ties as one way of reducing the physical demands on elite footballers. After the second 90 minutes, if the scores are level, the game would move straight to penalties. Traditionalists will no doubt be outraged. Yet one man, who knew a thing or two about deciding football matches, would have been all for it. Jimmy Greaves changed my opinion on the unfairness of penalty shoot-outs.

I can hear him now. "Mart, they've had 90 minutes to win the game – how much longer do they need?" Jimmy's attitude was that we've all got homes to go to and after 90 minutes the players had forfeited the right to have the outcome decided by any rational means. So penalties it is. In the knockout rounds of European competition that 90 minutes becomes three hours with extra time, plus six instalments of stoppage time, likely to push it nearer to four. And is it really fair that one team get an additional 30 minutes at home, and any shoot-out at their place too?

A better reform would be two lots of 90 minutes and, if level,

penalties. The home team get choice of end, the away team get first kick. And everyone gets their last train.

SPARE US THE WINDOW PAIN

In 2018, the Premier League clubs decided to close the summer transfer window early. It was a disaster, as unilateral action often is in a global market. Europe stayed open and English football felt vulnerable. This development was flagged by some – OK, me – from way out and the strategy lasted only two years. Now the biggest European leagues open and close as one. Saudi Arabia can still cause problems, but in recent seasons its summer window has not shut until October, which would be

Muirhead will not be setting a medal target

impractical to mirror. Still, stupid is as stupid does, so another early curtailment for English football is on the agenda again.

Not just closing before the season opens on August 16 but restricting the January window to two weeks. No other business so consistently wishes to wrap itself in unnecessary red tape. If English football goes ahead, and Europe does not fall in line, the same insecurities will surface. Yet these proposals were

discussed at a meeting of the 20 Premier League sporting directors.

Aren't these guys supposed to be the brains of the operation?

EVE'S MEDAL HUSH

Eve Muirhead, Olympic gold medal-winning curler and Team GB chef de mission at the Winter Olympics in Milano Cortina next year, says it is unfair to set medal targets for her athletes. Team GB won only two medals in Beijing in



too provocative. Yet again, football overreacts. The Premier League will not be satisfied until all aspects of its competition are safe and sanitised, with no alarms or surprises. What befell Arsenal at St James' Park is really the only check and balance required.

A TRUE TUNNEL VISIONARY

Big plans afoot at Birmingham City. Not just a 60,000-seat new stadium, but a new tunnel, beneath the city, to link it with Birmingham New Street station, a distance of 1.5 miles.

"Subways are very complicated and expensive to develop," Tom Wagner, the club's chairman, said. "We thought to simply tunnel under existing rail lines and use electric buses running underground."

Sounds fabulous and futuristic. One query. Wagner estimated the cost to be "roughly £20 million". Sounds quite cheap, given that just to rebrand the London Overground came in at £6.3 million, without a single hole being dug. Just a botched attempt to install a new IT accountancy system at Birmingham council overspent by £80 million. If Wagner can tunnel under the city for £20 million, it might be worth putting him in charge of Heathrow's third runway. Either that or he's Batman.

CLAUSE CONCERN FOR KANE?

Harry Kane has a £67 million release clause in his contract with Bayern Munich. The question is: why do we know this? Kane is happy in Bavaria, we are told, and Bayern should be happy with him, considering they are six points clear in the Bundesliga, in which he's got 19 goals in 18 games – plus six in seven Champions League matches. So why the revelation now? Either Bayern secretly fancy cashing in, Kane secretly fancies cashing out, or someone in the middle is getting ideas. No other motivation for mischief exists.

2022 – both in curling – having targeted between three and seven. Muirhead now says expectations should be tempered to allow athletes to compete without pressure.

"We don't put numbers on it – I think it would be unfair to put that pressure on the athletes," Muirhead said. "They will perform the best they can." And that's fine – if it's school sports day. If, however, it is public money that is funding the endeavour – and the country is skint – then pressure comes with the territory. Nobody can expect to compete in an elite sporting environment as if the outcome is immaterial. Nobody can expect snowboarding or curling to be funded for its own sake. So we cannot demand victory, but, equally, this isn't a fun run. It's the Olympics. Pressure is part of it, or don't go.

UNITED MAKE VAR LOOK GOOD

Well, that didn't take long. No VAR and Manchester United win an FA Cup tie at home in stoppage time with a goal that is naked-eye offside. We don't need to ditch VAR; we just need better officials.

Football

TOM
KERSHAW

The best football agents tend to be great raconteurs but few have a transfer story that includes Arsène Wenger, Diego Maradona and the Pope. It was deadline day in the autumn of 2014 and the Arsenal manager had agreed to moonlight as the coach in a multi-faith charity match at the Olympic Stadium in Rome.

The issue was that he also desperately wanted to sign a new striker. Wenger and his long-time adviser, Leon Angel, were in a queue of about 300 people as part of a private audience invited to meet Pope Francis inside the Vatican when they had to urgently finalise a deal. The pandemonium up ahead as Maradona was introduced to his fellow Argentinian bought them some leeway, but the ushers kept enforcing a strict no-phones policy. Then, just as the pair reached the front of the line, Wenger's mobile died. Rushing to the stadium afterwards, Angel eventually had to tiptoe into the dressing room and get Wenger to approve the deal before the teams went out for kick-off and the window closed. "That is certainly one that stands out," Angel, 69, says with a wry smile.

An accountant by trade, Angel became one of the first FA-licensed agents in the early 1990s. One of his first clients was Gary Pallister. On a framed shirt in Angel's office, given to him after he negotiated a contract extension that made Pallister the highest-paid player at Manchester United, the defender wrote, "Thanks a million... or very nearly", but football is a different beast now.

Angel founded Base in 1997 and co-manages the agency with Frank Trimboli. In 2019 the business was acquired by the global talent powerhouse Creative Artists Agency. CAA Base now has more than 700 clients, including the likes of Cole Palmer, Kyle Walker, Son Heung-min, Carlo Ancelotti and Frank Lampard.

This January alone they were involved in more than 100 transfers, loans and contract extensions, including Patrick Dorgu's £25 million move to United and Walker's loan to AC Milan. In their London office, among the 100-plus staff, there are not just agents but data specialists, performance analysts and even former academy directors poached from clubs so that the agency can identify young talent before their competitors.

It is an unrecognisable industry to when Angel started and the stereotypes of cigars, strong-arming tactics and backhanders are more dated – albeit far from extinct. One of the sport's so-called superagents, Angel agreed to his first newspaper interview in almost three decades to shed light on what the life of an agent actually entails, as did Joel Pannick, who has worked with him for the past 15 years. "Agents might have a bad reputation but when I go into a club generally

they may not all love us, but they respect us," Angel says.

'HE KEPT COMING BACK LIKE A BAD PENNY'

After Pannick, whose father, Lord Pannick KC, is the lead barrister for Manchester City in their battle with the Premier League, graduated from Nottingham University, he met executives at three agencies and was greeted by the same response: "You don't have any contacts in the world of football. You can't offer us anything we don't already have."

To carve out a niche, after noticing that English clubs were increasingly looking to South America, Pannick uprooted to Argentina. "I moved in with a family who didn't know a word of English and went to Spanish school for four months. Then I moved to Rio and did the same thing in Brazil and learnt Portuguese. When I got back, I said to Leon, 'I can look after the South American players the company brings into the market,'" Pannick says.

Angel puts it a little more brusquely. "I tried to discourage him because

In a rare interview Leon Angel, whose agency has more than 700 clients, and Joel Pannick talk about how to navigate deadline day, keep clients happy – and secure dog visas

The Secrets football agents



everyone thinks 'What a glamorous industry to be involved in and meet these superstars', but he kept coming back like a bad penny."

In Pannick's first proper meeting he acted as the translator for Wenger when Arsenal signed Samuel Galindo, a Bolivian teenager, in 2010. A few months later Tottenham Hotspur signed the Brazil midfielder Sandro, who became Pannick's first client. "He didn't speak a word of English, it was his first time living outside Brazil, so I was with him pretty much 24/7," Pannick says. "I was at the training ground every day translating on the side of the pitch and in the dressing room when Harry Redknapp was giving his team talks."

"It was an amazing experience. We became very good friends and Tottenham signed more South American or Spanish-speaking players. I got immersed with that group and it opened a lot of doors. It was a great way to get into the business at a high level but also to appreciate the challenges these young players face in this crazy bubble."

SCHOOLS, PETS AND
TAX RETURNS

The job of a football agent is no longer just about facilitating a transfer. Most big agencies will now have an in-house concierge service that helps agents to arrange everything from accommodation, flights and schools for their players' children to holidays, birthday presents and even a restaurant booking on Valentine's Day.

"We had a Japanese player who moved to Scotland that was incredibly attached to his dog, which didn't have an electronic chip. We managed to get the dog up there via Paris and London," Pannick, who now heads CAA Base's Japan operation, says. "One of my first Japanese clients was Maya Yoshida, who played for Southampton. Someone had smashed his car window and he didn't know how to deal with the insurance company."

"A few weeks later he had to submit his tax return. The previous year he'd had to ask his next-door neighbour to help him do it. Ultimately, we're just trying to take any strain off a player and his family's mind. It's not a babysitting service, but for young players who don't speak the local language it can be really difficult."

While maintaining their client base – Pannick represents 62 players –



of



Sandro, far left, was the first client of Pannick, above. Main, Angel, second from right, and Trimboli, far right, with Walker. Varane, top, is represented by CAA, while Angel once worked on a deal to sign Ronaldo, left

agents are also constantly on the lookout for the next potential star. “It’s a combination of live eyes from scouts that I trust and understanding the mentality of the player and his family, and we’re now incorporating video and data where possible too,” he says.

One example is the Fulham striker Rodrigo Muniz. Sam Jackson, who previously led the recruitment department at Middlesbrough, is now the player identification manager at CAA Base. He had tracked Muniz’s data since he was a teenager in Brazil and was adamant his value would rise significantly. CAA Base then made every effort to sign Muniz after he moved to Fulham for £6.5million in 2021. The 23-year-old, who has 18 months left on his contract, was subject to interest from several clubs

in January, with a transfer fee quoted at more than £30million.

In most cases, though, the best young players will be known to all the big agencies, even more so recently given the rise in social media accounts that specifically follow academy football. Agents are not legally permitted by the FA to sign a player until the January of their under-16 season, but the money involved – as an industry standard, agents will receive a commission of 5 per cent of the value of a player’s contract – means agents have been known to approach families at a far earlier age with financial incentives such as cash, cars and clothing.

“We will do a presentation with data, video, and you think it’s gone well and you’re going to get the player, then a parent goes, ‘What’s in it for me?’ It’s a lot worse nowadays. Integrity is very important to us, and we lose out on a lot of opportunities. A lot of people say the industry is not clean. There’s a lot of good agents, but there are a lot of bad ones,” Angel says.

PRESSURE TO ‘PRODUCE MAGIC EVERY 12 TO 18 MONTHS’

The incentive for agents to agitate for a transfer or a new contract is duly obvious. “We are an easy target. It’s simple to say the agent made this happen or is taking money out of football, but it’s complete nonsense,” Pannick says. The truth is most players are acutely aware of their worth, how it compares to their peers in the dressing room and want to ensure they maximise the earnings from a short career.

An agent is also only permitted to sign a maximum two-year contract with any player, meaning there is a constant urgency “to produce some magic” – be it a transfer or new contract – within that period. “There’s an expectation from the player’s side that every 12 to 18 months something should be happening,” Pannick says.

In the final days of the January transfer window negotiations can be spontaneous and chaotic as clubs are tempted into last-ditch attempts. “We had one deal on deadline day that started at around 1pm and the terms were all agreed by 7pm. That was the quickest but most don’t go that smoothly,” Angel says.

But the majority of transfers at the top level are now planned much further in advance. Raphaël Varane had resolved to leave Real Madrid around a year before he joined Manchester

United for £34million in 2021 and used the data department at CAA Base to assess how he would fit into the team, the patterns of play, and strikers he would face, much in the same way a club recruitment department would analyse potential signings.

An agent will already be feeling out interest in a player who is open to a move or entering the latter stages of their contract. Kyogo Furuhashi, one of Pannick’s clients, was ready to leave Celtic in January but wanted to do so amicably after scoring 85 goals in 165 appearances for the club.

“It’s my job to understand what the player’s objectives are. We had teams from all over the world express interest. There are certain markets where it would have been a very lucrative contract, but what sporting ambitions would be achieved, particularly with the World Cup in 18 months? Then we had to speak to Celtic to understand their perspective because a club has no desire to lose their best player halfway through the season,” he says.

Those conversations took place about two months before the window opened, ensuring Celtic had time to finalise a deal for a replacement. Only then was Furuhashi able to complete a £10million move to Rennes in Ligue 1.

“These things are never easy. Often clubs will talk directly up to a certain point and the big number will be agreed, but then the dates of the payments, bonus structures, sell-on percentages, these small points can become sticking points,” Pannick says.

“There’s no travel booked without the permission of the club. Then there is a two-part medical at a hospital and the training ground. There’s cardio work, blood tests, a check-up. Some clubs are very stringent, others not so much. Then there is a final check of the paperwork. Your lawyer comes in at that point and the media team will take the player off to take some photos and co-ordinate the announcements.”

Another key aspect of Angel and Trimboli’s focus now is no longer just player representation but brokering on behalf of clubs, who engage them when high-profile transfers are proving difficult to get over the line. “There are various chairmen and chief executives who people find difficult to negotiate with. The more difficult they are, the better it is for us because we will work with them,” Angel says.

He refuses to give examples and stresses the key to successful brokering is privacy, but it is an influential and potentially lucrative line of work, and the agency can also then help to find a suitable replacement for a reluctant selling club.

“We once tried signing the old Ronaldo from Brazil for a club and we were doing the deal for three months and nobody knew anything about it,” he says. “Nowadays you can’t move anywhere without someone leaking something, but that’s where our credibility lies.”

It is a money-spinning business played out inside a pressure cooker, and “the reality is 95 per cent or more of what we try to do will not be successful, which can be very frustrating,” Pannick says. The celebrations when a deal is finally signed are not always as extravagant as one might imagine either. Shortly before the transfer window closed on Monday, the agents ordered pizza to the London office. “The feeling once it’s done, I wouldn’t say it’s joy, it’s almost ten seconds of relief that I’ve done a good job for my client and then it’s, ‘Now, what’s next?’”

Counties relieved to get Hundred windfall – but is it a golden handshake?

SIMON WILDE



Cricket Correspondent

“The counties have nothing to do with it any more.” These were the words of Colin Graves, the Yorkshire chairman and an architect of the Hundred, when I asked him about what financial involvement the 18 clubs will have with the tournament, and they sum up the situation that exists – or at least will once the money has been distributed from the sale of the eight franchises.

The auction process is due to be completed this week with the disposal of Trent Rockets and Southern Brave. Precisely what buyers in the Hundred get for their money, and what the counties sacrifice through relinquishing the asset, is not much talked about. This might be because the ECB is being opaque on the matter, but also because the details may not yet have been fully signed off.

It is understood that the ECB will take 20 per cent, but the bulk of future revenues accruing from the Hundred, such as broadcasting and commercial rights, are set to go to the new owners.

“All that sort of stuff goes into the Hundred pot,” Graves says. “The ECB has sold their 49 per cent. They still own the tournament, but not the teams. The [new] teams have bought the revenue streams. That is the way it will work. From their point of view, that is why they have done what they’ve done.”

For the counties, this is the rub. Although the 11 non-host counties stand to each make about £25million out of the sale, it comes at a price: in the long term, their annual “handouts” from the ECB, which have been their lifeblood for so long, are set to fall.

The Hundred was estimated to have contributed £40million a year to the present media rights deal. Unless the value of the rights for England’s bilateral international cricket, the other element to the rights deal, goes up by an equivalent amount – which it will not – the counties are going to have future incomes decline.

Yorkshire’s approach to this one-

FORTUNE 18 CLUBS ARE IN LINE TO RECEIVE

The sale of the ECB’s 49 per cent stakes in the eight Hundred teams has generated £371million. The sales of Trent Rockets and Southern Brave are likely to take the total to at least £425million – equating to the 11 non-host counties receiving £26.6million each. The revenues are divided as follows:

- First £275million – 90 per cent goes to the 18 counties and MCC **£13million each**
- £275million to £425million – all goes to the 11 non-host counties **£13.6million each**
- Above £425million – will be shared among the 18 counties and the MCC

off cash windfall will be typical of many counties: pay off debts, then explore infrastructure projects. This is what the ECB wants them to do – total debt among the counties stands at £180million to £195million – and will encourage them to do.

Speaking to county members in the past few days, the reaction to the size of the sale appears to be one of relief that balance sheets will be improved, mixed with concern that there will probably be less welcome consequences.

What is the future of smaller counties such as Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Worcestershire? Are they feeder clubs for the bigger boys? Will they play in front of ever-smaller crowds as the Hundred continues to steal their audiences?

Some question whether £25million will turn out to be £25million. Raine Group needs paying about £10million for overseeing the sale and there may be as yet unstated tax implications. One or two floated the idea that with clubs no longer servicing debt, there will be pressure from players to be paid more out of the savings.

Everyone is conscious that whatever decisions are made, the clubs must get them right, as there will not be another chance like this. Some plans are laced with risk. A number of counties – Durham and Gloucestershire among them – have ambitions to become franchises, if it grows. But there are signs that the eight host clubs, and doubtless the new owners, have no intention of seeing the tournament expand. And why would they, when it would mean a further dilution of revenues?

Richard Gould, the ECB chief executive, has said that the Hundred sale has the capacity to recapitalise the county game for the next 25 years. It would be amazing if it sustains things that long. With time, some counties may look back on this moment as the day they got a golden handshake.

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Tennis

Stuart Fraser
Tennis Correspondent

The slim and fanciful hope that some followers of British tennis had of a high-profile coaching partnership between Emma Raducanu and Andy Murray will not be coming to fruition any time soon. All being well with present discussions, Murray will remain in the corner of Novak Djokovic as the season proceeds towards the French Open and Wimbledon this summer.

Raducanu and Murray had always been an unlikely player-coach duo after events at Wimbledon last year. While Raducanu has since reached out via text message to apologise for withdrawing from Murray’s last scheduled match at the All England Club in the mixed doubles, it still seems a little too soon for Britain’s two most recent grand-slam singles champions to happily work together on a formal basis.

Instead, Murray and Raducanu could be crossing paths in the Californian desert at next month’s Indian Wells Open. The first ATP Masters tournament of the season, which combines with a WTA 1000 event, is considered the likely next meeting point for Murray and Djokovic as they decide upon the best schedule for an extension of a fascinating coaching trial that was largely successful before a groin injury forced Djokovic to retire from the Australian Open semi-finals.

Whether Raducanu turns up in Indian Wells from March 3 with a permanent coach by her side remains to be seen. After her split with Nick Cavaday last month, the 22-year-old has relied on temporary assistance from familiar faces. At the Abu Dhabi Open last week she called in Roman Kelecic, her former junior coach who is now based in Dubai.

This week it is the turn of Jane O’Donoghue to help out at the Qatar Open. At various points over the past four years, the former LTA national women’s tennis coach and top-200 player has been drafted in to assist with Raducanu’s preparation for tournaments. It is an arrangement like no other on the tour as O’Donoghue has to be given leave

The 22-year-old could benefit from a change of tack by splitting the job between a high-profile figure and a confidant

Raducanu needs two coaches (but one won’t be Murray)

from her day job in the City for an asset-servicing bank.

The use of childhood mentors is common for Raducanu. Often she prefers to call upon those she knows already because of the level of trust that already exists from previous dealings. Even Cavaday was a hark back to the past as he used to lead the high-performance coaching programme at Raducanu’s local Bromley Tennis Centre.

Now Raducanu faces a pivotal decision on her next coaching appointment. Does she again seek familiarity with someone she already knows or is it time again, as she did with Torben Beltz and Dmitry Tursunov in 2022, to go further afield for fresh input? That Raducanu recently said she is in no rush to sign up someone suggests that she is carefully considering the pros and cons of both.

The answer may actually lie somewhere in between through the hiring of two new members of staff. As is the preference of many top players these days, a pair of coaches

are used to share the workload during the demanding tennis season. Often this consists of a high-profile figure who acts as the lead, accompanied by an assistant and friend who does all sorts from hitting to logistics, such as practice arrangements and racket stringing. An example of this is Djokovic’s present set-up, in which Murray works alongside Carlos Gómez-Herrera, a former top-300 player from Spain.

The departure of Cavaday could push Raducanu towards this. Because of an undisclosed chronic health issue, Cavaday felt he was not capable of working a full schedule as her sole coach. Bear in mind that Raducanu has increased her frequency of tournaments this season, contesting three consecutive

weeks since her third-round run at the Australian Open.

An issue for Raducanu is the timing of this coaching change. At this early stage of the year there are fewer potential candidates than there would be at the end of the season, when the carousel is in full flow. It is also far from ideal to be conducting a search when she is in the midst of a run of tournaments.

As a result, there are no obvious candidates as it stands. Names being thrown around in conjecture include Goran Ivanisevic, Brad Gilbert and

Tomasz Wiktorowski – all of whom have respectively departed the camps of Elena Rybakina, Coco Gauff and Iga Swiatek over the past six months. Another free agent who is highly spoken of in tennis circles is the American Eric

Hechtman, who has previously worked with Serena and Venus Williams.

In the coming days Raducanu has an important tournament to focus on as a wild card in Doha. The Qatar Open offers inflated ranking points as a WTA 1000 event, giving her the chance to rise from the world No 56. First up she plays the world No 25 Ekaterina Alexandrova for the chance to meet the world No 1 Aryna Sabalenka in the second round.

One wonders, though, if Raducanu might have been better off signing up for qualifying rather than taking a 12th main-draw wild card in her 17th tournament since the start of 2024. After consecutive first-round exits in Singapore and Abu Dhabi, Raducanu could do with a run of wins to build her confidence and the preliminary phase would have offered her the chance for an easier start against a player ranked no higher than No 94 in the world. It is a factor that would surely have been given more consideration if she had a new coach or two on board.



Raducanu, with the help of O’Donoghue, below, will face Alexandrova in the first round of the Qatar Open



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Ainslie has the stomach for another America's Cup fight – but does Sir Jim?

No one has ever thought of Sir Ben Ainslie as a litigious sort, so when he threatens “significant legal action” against his former backer Sir Jim Ratcliffe, you know something serious is up. Ainslie is a sailor, Ratcliffe an insanely wealthy entrepreneur, so who in their right mind gets their solicitor to write a threatening letter to a billionaire?

Whose side are you on? Ainslie's or Ratcliffe's?

I've interviewed both. Liked Ainslie, wasn't sure what to make of Ratcliffe. With the latter, there was an uncomfortable moment when I asked about his decision to leave the UK for Monaco, perhaps disappointing those who would prefer one of Britain's most successful businessmen to pay his taxes in the UK. At first he said “no comment” but then he offered an off-the-record briefing.

He explained he'd taken the decision before the 2017 general election because he feared that, if Labour won, people like him would end up paying 90 per cent tax. He seemed to believe this was entirely plausible. To move the interview along I asked if it was a case of him wanting to keep control over his wealth so he could set up foundations and choose the causes he most wanted to support.

The puzzled look on his face threw me. Had I said something daft or otherwise incomprehensible? Thankfully his two PR guys bailed me out. “David, that's exactly it,” they chorused. Sir Jim's look of bewilderment was then trained on them. What he really wanted was to get inside elite sport. What is money for, if not to live the dream.

That meeting with Ratcliffe took place in September 2018 at the exalted setting of the Royal Yacht Squadron (RYS) club in Cowes on the Isle of Wight. A year before, I'd met Ainslie at the 2017 America's Cup in Bermuda. Those were heady times for the sailor and his backers at the time. They'd raised £80million in funding, built their boats, hired their crew and support staff, got a title sponsor in Land Rover and were now at the start line.

Sir Charles Dunstone and Sir Keith Mills were the two founding investors. Successful in business, they had both sailed with Ainslie, seen him perform under pressure and believed he could deliver Britain's first victory in the

America's Cup. Besides that, they truly loved the sport and encouraged other investors to get on board. Without them, it couldn't have happened.

Five weeks at the 2017 America's Cup left me with one overriding impression – the strength of the opposition was why Great Britain had never won the prize. Ainslie thought he had a decent boat, but on Bermuda's Great Sound they were nowhere near. Dunstone, Mills and the others took it on the chin and were ready to go again.

Ainslie, though, needed more investment for a second tilt and aimed for £120million. His backers encouraged him to get out there and talk to people. They would stay on board.

“

Legally threatening a billionaire is akin to kicking an elephant on the shin. He ain't going to fall over

Basically he needed to find an extra £40million. At a London pub in March 2018, Ainslie sat down with Ratcliffe.

The multimillionaire said that he could do better than provide the extra money Ainslie was seeking. He would put up the entire £120million, provided Ainslie ditched every other backer and sponsor. Ratcliffe didn't believe in governance by committee. That put Ainslie in a difficult position.

Ainslie and Ratcliffe after Ineos Britannia secured their place in the 2024 America's Cup, a campaign that ended in defeat



Without his original backers, he wouldn't have sailed a British boat in Bermuda and probably would never have got to Ratcliffe. The offer, though, was just too good.

Ainslie accepted. Difficult conversations with Dunstone, Mills and others followed. This all played out seven years ago, but Mills's recollection is vivid. “After a couple of meetings with Ben, Jim Ratcliffe said, ‘I will bankroll

the team but I really don't want any other shareholders. And if you can take the team from the other shareholders, then I will back you.’ We, the shareholders who'd put millions into the team, had a meeting in Charles Dunstone's office. We sat round a table and the proposition was: if we sell the team, which had all the boats and everything else, to Ben for a pound, he then has control and can

do the deal with Jim Ratcliffe, and that's what happened.”

Which meant kissing goodbye to the money you'd put into the team?

“Yes, exactly. The whole group, eight or nine of us, were all pretty passionate about what Ben was trying to do and got completely behind the team, both financially and emotionally. We were all very sad that we needed to step back but the bottom line was, if we didn't, there was a real prospect that Ben couldn't continue to compete. So we all bit the bullet and said, ‘Let Jim Ratcliffe fund the team, at least we will have a British team with Ben Ainslie competing in New Zealand in 2021.’”

Having thought often about the decision Ainslie made, I know I would have done the same. That isn't to say it was the right thing. When you desert those who stood by you at the beginning, you make a very big decision. Ineos Britannia competed at the 2021 and 2024 America's Cups, disappointing in New Zealand four years ago, but doing well to make the final match race in Barcelona last year.

Somewhere along the way, most likely in Barcelona, relations between Ainslie and Ratcliffe soured. After the final race in Spain in October, people noticed Ainslie appearing in shirts and tops that didn't carry the Ineos logo. At first they spoke about the team continuing but with new backers that would lighten Ineos's financial burden. Suddenly, governance by committee wasn't the worst thing in the world.

It is also true that Ineos invested £240million over the two America's Cup cycles and, even for Ratcliffe, that was a lot of money.

No one foresaw what happened two weeks ago: a press release from Ineos saying it wished to proceed without Ainslie, one that pointedly refused to mention his contribution. Ainslie replied by promising “significant legal action” because of the not insignificant question around who owns the team, its intellectual property and the data accumulated over three America's Cup cycles.

Legally threatening a billionaire is akin to kicking an elephant on the shin. He ain't going to fall over. This is not to say that Ainslie must take his punishment and creep silently away. Far from it. As soon as the 2024 America's Cup ended, Ineos Britannia was accepted as the challenger of record for the next America's Cup. That comes with a say in where the next competition happens and the protocols under which it will be staged. This right to be the challenger belongs not to Ineos but the RYS, who get to nominate the team that will represent them. The RYS has a contract with Ainslie's Athena Racing team to be its representative at the next America's Cup, which is not to say that Ineos Britannia can't compete in the next edition, only that it will not be the challenger if Ainslie finds backing for his team.

Mills, Dunstone and the original backers say they still believe in Ainslie and will offer whatever help they can. Sailors and support staff who worked with Ainslie in Barcelona also remain supportive. What happens if Ainslie can't soon find the funding for a new campaign? Sailors need jobs. I hope to see Ainslie stay in this fight because you know he's got the stomach for it. The America's Cup is his *Moby Dick*.

Despite what the press release said, I'm not sure the same is true for Sir Jim.

BUSINESS & MONEY



WHY DON'T MEN
BACK FEMALE
FOUNDERS?
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BITTER TASTE
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THE HIGH EARNERS
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Jaguar warns EV targets may stall investment

Ramsay Hodgson, Oliver Gill and Harry Yorke

Jaguar Land Rover threatened to cut back investment in the UK as it pressed the new Labour government to relax quotas on the number of electric vehicles it must sell.

Correspondence obtained by The Sunday Times revealed how Adrian Mardell, JLR's chief executive,

privately warned ministers that pushing ahead with the zero-emission vehicle (ZEV) mandate without changes would hit the car industry.

Labour promised in its election manifesto to reinstate a 2030 ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles as part of its net-zero drive. However, after intensive industry lobbying, ministers are now consulting

on whether to relax the targets. The eight-week consultation will allow views to be submitted on EV rules, including how existing "arrangements and flexibilities are working". Government sources said that this will result in the quotas being relaxed, but the details are yet to be published.

Last year, the electric vehicle (EV) targets cost manufacturers £4.5 billion as

they discounted their electric models to attract buyers.

Car dealer Vertu Motors warned last week that profits will come in "significantly" below expectations after the ZEV mandate caused "severe disruption" to the market.

The correspondence lifts the lid on JLR's intense Whitehall lobbying campaign ahead of consultation coming to an end later this month.

In an email sent to business

secretary Jonathan Reynolds in October, Mardell highlighted how consumer demand for EVs "currently falls far short" of the quotas imposed on manufacturers.

Describing the shortfall as a "significant problem", he added that the "negative effects in our industry are immediate" and that urgent changes were needed to ensure "UK investment is maintained at current levels".

He told Reynolds it was of "paramount" importance that his Department for Business & Trade (DBT) worked with car manufacturers to ensure that regulatory changes do "not damage the domestic automotive industry".

JLR employs 34,000 people in the UK and has pledged to invest £18 billion in transforming its Solihull and Halewood works.

M&S chief attacks Whitehall 'snobs'

Jill Treanor

The chief executive of Marks & Spencer has accused Rachel Reeves of raiding the retail sector like a "piggy bank" as he called for urgent changes to tax to prevent a contraction in the industry.

Stuart Machin said that even though retail was a "huge" growth engine for the economy, successive governments had treated the industry with "snobbery".

Writing in The Sunday Times, Machin asked Reeves to stagger her budget rise in national insurance contributions, launch an urgent review of business rates, and delay the phase-in of environmental fees. "The blunt truth is, left how it is, the budget means UK retail will get smaller," Machin said.

He added that "retail is being treated like a piggy bank, and it's unacceptable" as the extended producer responsibility (EPR) levy, which retailers will pay for the cost of recycling packaging, will not solely be used to help the environment but for general purposes.

Machin, who started his

career in retail aged 16 as a shelf stacker in Sainsbury's, said the tax raid on the sector was a concern as it employs three million people directly and two million in its supply chain. "For some reason, this huge economic and employability engine is seemingly ignored by governments, and I wonder if some of that comes from a place of snobbery," he said.

Machin has been M&S boss since May 2022, having joined the retailer in 2018 after a spell in Australia leading the Coles supermarket chain.

In the budget, Reeves cut the threshold at which national insurance must be paid from £9,100 to £5,000 from April.

Machin said the increase in the EPR levy should be delayed and that a rethink on business rates was needed, not just a "tweak".

The Treasury said: "We delivered a once-in-a-parliament budget to wipe the slate clean and deliver the stability businesses need, laying the foundations for economic growth".

'Change course', page 3

UK retailers scramble to avoid US tariff chaos

Fashion firms put exports on hold and Next considers corporate rejig

Sam Chambers

British retailers are considering restructuring US operations or have put exports on hold, amid chaos and uncertainty over Donald Trump's tariff regime.

In the past week, the president imposed an additional 10 per cent tariff on Chinese-made goods, then scrapped and reimposed "de minimis" rules allowing goods worth less than \$800 to be imported without paying duty.

The U-turn over the latter loophole – used by online giant Shein and many British fashion retailers – came on Friday night after packages piled up at the border. The US Postal Service proved unable to check the roughly one billion de minimis parcels that enter the US each year.

Next is understood to be considering establishing a US corporate entity to mitigate the impact. By shipping orders to a US subsidiary, rather than directly to consumers, retailers would be liable for tariffs only on the cost price of goods, rather than the selling price. However, setting up a US entity comes with challenging administrative burdens for smaller firms.

Superdry has stopped shipping China-made products directly to US consumers to avoid the extra 10 per cent tariff.

"It [tariffs] just makes them unprofitable," said chief executive Julian Dunkerton. "We are also worried about shipments with products of mixed origins – like some being from China and some from Turkey – it becomes a horrible

mess. It adds complexity that wasn't there before, but we will get a solution."

A source at another major retailer said the company had effectively "turned off" its website during the confusion.

One sportswear retailer said US wholesalers were nervous over taking orders. "They're thinking 'Will this product be taxed? How will that affect my margin?'. Everything is taking longer and the general sense of uncertainty is hurting everyone. It's making it harder to do business."

The prospect of the permanent removal of the de minimis exemption is particularly damaging for fast-fashion giant Shein, which has made extensive use of the tax break. Shein is set to cut the target valuation for its planned London float to about \$50 billion, nearly a quarter less than its \$66 billion valuation in 2023, according to a Reuters report last week.

Last weekend, Trump announced that the US would be imposing 25 per cent tariffs on all goods coming from Mexico and Canada, before suspending the measures after talks with their leaders. Despite the climbdown, next week Trump plans to escalate his trade war by levying 'reciprocal tariffs' on multiple countries. This will mean the US imposes the same tax on imported goods as equivalent US products face when they are exported.

During a meeting with the Japanese prime minister Shigeru Ishiba last week, Trump warned him that Japan could still face US tariffs if it did not close its trade surplus with the US.

IVY BRACES FOR £6M TAX HIT

DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES



Patricia Caring, David Furnish, Sir Elton John and Richard Caring at charity gala night last year

Richard Caring, the head-turning restaurateur behind The Ivy and its branded offshoots, is bracing for a £6 million annual hit from increases in employer national insurance contributions, according to sources familiar with the situation, writes Oliver Gill.

Caring put The Ivy restaurants up for sale more than a year ago. He co-owns the business with Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber al-Thani, the former prime minister of Qatar.

Sources insisted that the national insurance hikes would not blow the sale off course. Caring's team had identified head office savings to compensate. Increasing prices would also help offset Labour's raid, they said.

The Ivy group is understood to have made £60 million in earnings before interest, taxation, depreciation, and amortisation.

The group includes the original restaurant in London's Covent Garden, and its 50 or so Ivy Collection sites as well

as Ivy Asia, Granary Square and Brasserie of Light concepts. A £1 billion price tag was hung on the business following advice from HSBC.

Caring seemed to be on the brink of a sale to Si Advisers, a London-based private equity firm, last September, but the deal is thought to have been delayed by Si bringing in a co-investor. Insiders insisted the deal was "very much alive" but were tight-lipped on the identity of the other party.

Representatives for The Ivy declined to comment.

BT set to blow final whistle on sports

William Turvill

BT has started talks with Warner Bros Discovery about offloading its 50 per cent stake in the companies' joint venture broadcaster, TNT Sports, signalling the end of its foray into live sport.

The British telecoms giant sold the first half of TNT, formerly known as BT Sport, in a 2022 deal worth up to £633 million. It is understood that a call option for Warner Bros to buy the remainder of TNT is now active.

While BT had indicated it could hold on to its half of TNT Sports, industry sources expect chief executive Allison Kirkby to push for a sale as part of a wider effort to dispose of non-core assets.

Sources close to the talks stressed they are at an early stage and no deal is imminent despite Warner Bros' option to take control going live in September. It has till the end of next year to secure a deal.

BT Sport was launched in 2013 when the telecoms provider was led by Gavin Patterson. It spent big sums to secure TV rights for football's Premier League and



BT boss Allison Kirkby

Champions League to compete with Sky Sports.

Under his successor, Philip Jansen, BT came to view its sports broadcaster as a non-core distraction. He agreed to sell half of the business to Warner Bros Discovery.

Kirkby took over from Jansen a year ago and has made it her mission to strip out unnecessary costs and assets to create a "simpler BT". In the last nine months of 2024, BT cut three per cent of its workforce to 117,000.

BT and Warner Bros Discovery declined to comment.

Turning things around, page 6



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CHARITY IS GIVING OUT

Charity shops aren't immune from taxes. The smart ones are going after Gen Z, writes *Abigail Glickman*

UNDER PRESSURE

● Love them or loathe them, charity shops are a staple of the high street. From rummaging in the racks of second-hand clothes to scrabbling in a bargain bin of children's toys, they can be a treasure trove – all while raising money for good causes. In some towns, hit hard by online shopping, they are a rare growth industry: there were 11,200 charity shops in the UK last year, up 10 per cent, according to the Charity Retail Association. Yet, like its retail rivals, the sector is not immune to pressure. Last month, the disability charity Scope announced it would be closing 77 of its 138 shops. Chief executive Mark Hodgkinson blamed rising costs and a gloomy economic outlook. While charity shops aren't run for profit per se, their goal is to raise as much money as possible. So, how can they adapt?



HEARTS OF GOLD

● Like Scope, the British Heart Foundation is on the front line of the industry. As the country's largest charity retailer, it has 680 shops and 3,500 full-time, paid staff, working alongside 15,000 volunteers. Last year it recorded profits of £18.8 million, a 24 per cent decrease. **Allison Swaine-Hughes**, retail director, blamed the fall in profit on "the combination of high inflation and interest rates impacting customers' disposable income and increasing our cost base". This year she is bracing for the hike in employers' national insurance contributions from April. The BHF is fighting back, though. To compete with online platforms, it has become the largest eBay charity seller in the world, selling second-hand medical devices such as defibrillators and blood pressure monitors.



Tariffs on Scotch will be hard to swallow

Trump's trade war threats have put whisky distillers on edge. With US sales of £1bn a year, the prestigious industry has much to lose, finds *Jim Armitage* on Speyside

On certain crisp winter afternoons in the Scottish Highlands, the sunlight shifts from blinding bright to golden, washing the land with a warm, amber hue. The frosty pastures and pine woods around the River Spey look magical against the snowy Cairngorm mountains in the distance.

Despite being the 24th generation of his family to own the land around him, none of it is taken for granted by Guy Macpherson-Grant, a partner in the Ballindalloch Distillery.

"Ah, she's putting on a show for you today," he smiled, gesticulating to the scene as he jumped down from his Land Rover in green tweed and peaked cap.

The Ballindalloch castle and estate on Speyside has been in his family since 1546. It tempted him back up from a London career in venture capital to launch a new distillery in this, the ancestral home of Scotch whisky.

Since producing its first bottle in 2023, sales have been brisk thanks to the quality of its single malts – made with spring barley from the family's fields next door – and the unique family history. Priced at upwards of £100 a bottle, they have been selling well in Holland, Italy, Germany, Taiwan and Korea. This year, the Insead-trained Macpherson-Grant is poised to take the whisky to America.

But there's a potential fly in the golden liquor. As with other distillers in the £7.1 billion Scotch whisky economy,

those American ambitions depend to some extent on just how aggressive Donald Trump decides to be in his negotiations over trade tariffs with the UK.

Within days of his inauguration, Trump, whose maternal roots go back to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, slapped tariffs on China, Mexico and Canada. While his tone has been softer on the UK, the fear is that Britain could be next in line to feel the heat.

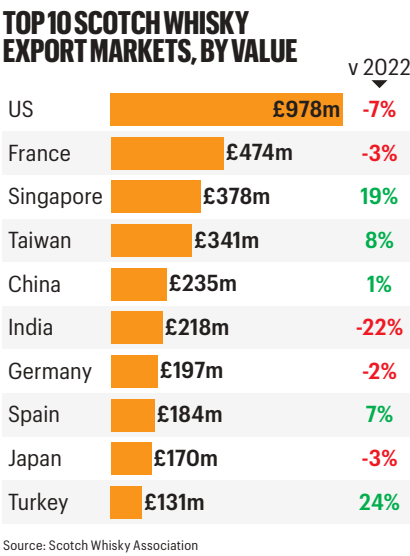
While Macpherson-Grant is confident that his high-end customers will not be as price-sensitive as those drinking less premium brands, he said: "It is concerning. Economic history tells you that a tariff war doesn't benefit anyone longer term."

Scotch is one of Britain's biggest exports to the US, by far the biggest export market for the industry, totalling £978 million in sales last year. Its second-biggest market is France at £474 million, followed by Singapore at £378 million.

Scotch makers have been here before. In a long-running trade dispute between the US and EU over pre-Brexit subsidies to Boeing and Airbus, in 2019 the US imposed a 25 per cent tariff on all single malt scotch. Exports from Britain to the US tumbled by a quarter, with the Scotch Whisky Association saying that more than £600 million of distillery sales had been lost by the time the UK and US agreed to lift the tariffs in March 2021.

Last week, Diageo, owner of Johnnie Walker blended Scotch and a host of single malts on Speyside, warned investors it could no longer predict what its sales would be, partly due to the uncertainty

ALAMY; PETER JOLLY FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



around Trump's tariffs. Chief executive Debra Crew said that was largely because of the threat of levies on its exports of tequila from Mexico and whisky from Canada – two massive sellers for Diageo. But Scotch is another risk factor. About 9 per cent of Diageo's net sales in the US come from Scotch, with sales worth many millions of dollars in jeopardy.

American single malt lovers will not feel the pain of new tariffs instantly. Rather than being applied at the shop or restaurant, the tariff is charged on the price the distiller in Scotland sells it to the US importer. During the last round, some distillers cut their prices to keep the retail price down. A £100 bottle might initially have only risen to, perhaps \$105 or \$110. Eventually, however, the 25 per cent got passed on pretty much in full.

On the other side of the Spey from Macpherson-Grant's estate, is Tamdhu, an independent operation lovingly run by head distiller Sandy McIntyre. Tamdhu has 133,000 sherry casks maturing its single malt in 28 imposing black warehouses. A fruity, acidic smell hangs around from the "mashing" process of heating the grain, while a sweeter, winery smell hangs in the warehouses.

Family-owned by Ian Macleod Distillers, the US is its biggest export market. IMD's head of Americas, Daniel Sherry, recalled how badly tariffs hurt last time round. "It was catastrophic: we lost 25 per cent of our US business."

If it happened again, though, it could be worse, he warned. Last time, single malt whisky sales were strong and grow-

ing rapidly around the world. That offset some of the impact of tariffs for distillers such as Tamdhu, where the "entry level" bottle sells in America for about \$70 (£57). Now, though, the global cost of living crisis, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, has hit whisky sales hard. Pricier single malts, as opposed to blends, have suffered the most.

"People are feeling the pinch and the industry has taken a big, big hit," Sherry said. "To have tariffs on top of that would be a two-punch combination. Some distillers are looking at cutting back on their production already, having grown it every year for two decades. This tariff talk has instilled some panic."

One distiller said Kentucky bourbon makers would be relishing the prospect of higher tariffs on their Scottish rivals, but the Americans insist nothing could be further from the truth. There are close ties between the makers of Scotch in Scotland and bourbon in the US, not least because big conglomerates own distillers in both territories.

For a start, Scottish distillers spend upwards of £240 million a year on American bourbon casks, using them for the distinctive vanilla and honey flavours they bring. Also, UK imports of bourbon and other US spirits are valuable to American producers.

Chris Swonger, a proud Texan and chief executive of the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, recalled how, the last time there were tariffs, annual US sales to the UK fell by 24% to \$113 million by 2022. "Our industry is in a



Airlines' warning over Heathrow's third runway

Oliver Gill

The bosses of British Airways and Virgin Atlantic have held crunch talks in Downing Street with Sir Keir Starmer's top business adviser, warning him that they will not back Heathrow's third runway without a major shake-up of the airport's landing fees.

BA chief Sean Doyle, Luis Gallego, the boss of the carrier's parent IAG, and Virgin head Shai Weiss met Varun Chandra and other No 10 advisers last week as fears grow that airlines will foot the bill for Heathrow's expansion, according to Whitehall sources.

Also there were billionaire hotels tycoon Surinder Arora, one of the biggest owners of land around Heathrow, and a representative for the airport's other carriers.

The government has put Heathrow's third runway at the centre of its push to kick-start UK economic growth.

Chandra was brought in by Starmer last July to be the government's special adviser on business and investment.

BA and Virgin are said to have told Chandra that they are broadly in favour of the expansion – but, crucially, not at any cost. The third runway is forecast to cost up to £63 billion, the business leaders are believed to have told the Downing Street representatives.

At present, Heathrow is able to recoup spending through its landing fees.

The airlines say that the fees regime needs to be changed because of the sheer cost of building a third runway, which will include moving a stretch of the M25.

But changing Heathrow's landing fees regime could cause months, if not years, of delays in the process, one source said.

Virgin Atlantic said: "We are supportive of growth and expansion at Heathrow, if, and only if, there is fundamental reform to the flawed regulatory model to ensure value for money for consumers and affordability for UK plc."

An IAG spokesman said: "Any proposals must be affordable and sustainable, with transparency on the plans and costs."

Arora said: "We have a longstanding position that the costs of doing business at Heathrow are far too high and do not represent good value for passengers and businesses around the airport, such as ours."

Fears over 1,000 jobs at Boohoo

Sam Chambers

Struggling fast-fashion retailer Boohoo is considering closing its huge warehouse in Burnley in a move that would put more than 1,000 jobs at risk.

The plans would involve Boohoo closing its facility in Lancashire, which spans more than a million square feet, and consolidating its warehouse operations into a single facility in Sheffield, which is heavily automated and more efficient. Boohoo declined to comment.

Closing the facility would continue Boohoo's rapid retrenchment in the face of an onslaught from fast-fashion giant Shein. Last year, Boohoo closed a warehouse in Crick, Northamptonshire, as well as its US distribution centre in Pennsylvania. The

fashion retailer is fulfilling US orders from Sheffield.

The plans are being considered as part of new chief executive Dan Finley's wide-ranging business review. Finley will update investors on his thinking at a capital markets day in the spring. A source close to Boohoo said no decisions had been taken regarding the Burnley warehouse.

Shein has pioneered a new approach to fast fashion in which it ships orders directly from Chinese factories to customers' homes. Shein escapes UK import duties as individual consignments fall below the threshold at which import duties are levied.

Boohoo is also shrinking the number of products it sells and looking to reduce inventory by shifting towards a marketplace model.

Boardroom stars line up for the 2025 NED awards

The best of Britain's boardroom talent will be celebrated next month at the 2025 Non-Executive Director Awards, organised by Peel Hunt and supported by The Sunday Times.

The contenders in the FTSE 100 chair category are Roger Devlin of Persimmon; Baroness (Rona) Fairhead of RS Group; Christine Hodgson of Severn Trent; Thérèse Esperdy of Imperial Brands; and Peter Ventress of Howden Joinery.

In the FTSE 100 NED category are Susan Kilsby of Diageo; Jock Lennox of Barratt Redrow; Alison Platt of Tesco; Laura Wade-Gery of Legal & General; and Sara Weller of BT Group.

Competing for the FTSE All-Share award are Mike Clasper of SSP; Sue Farr of THG; Peter Hill of Keller



Ruth Cairnie of Babcock will chair the judging panel

Group; Vanda Murray of Marshalls; and Karen Whitworth of Rank Group.

In the FTSE Aim category are Zillah Byng-Thorne of M&C Saatchi; Cathal Friel of hVIVO; David Latin of Serica Energy; Murray Legg of

GlobalData; and Leslie-Ann Reed of Learning Technologies Group.

The contenders for NED to Watch are Maggie Chan Jones of Sage; Shruthi Chindalar of Bytes Technology Group; Hounaida Lasry of Britvic; Victoria McKenzie-Gould of Allwyn; and Katie Priestman of Oxford Nanopore.

In the private equity category are Sharon Doherty of Allwyn UK; Debbie Hewitt of Compare the Market; John Maltby of Allica Bank; Mary O'Connor of Carne; and Nicholas Thain of Amerge.

In the not-for-profit/public service category are Debbie Hewitt of the FA; Richard Meddings of NHS England; Orna Ni-Chionna of the Eden Project; Dame (Linda) Pollard of Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust; and Jenny Watson of GAMSTOP Group.

BUSINESS

TARGET GEN Z

● “Thrift shopping” has become increasingly popular among young people, both for price and environmental reasons. Robin Osterley, chief executive of the Charity Retail Association, believes Generation Z — those born from the mid 1990s to the early 2010s — is leading the trend because they want something unique and are more environmentally conscious. “Gen Z is very careful and mindful. Charity shops also provide an income to a good cause, which attracts customers,” said Osterley. A poll of 4000 UK adults conducted by OnePoll for Amazon found four out of 10 Gen-Zers expected at least 75 per cent of their purchases would be second-hand by 2027. “Generation Z has helped eliminate the stigma of shopping second-hand,” added Osterley.



POP-UP PUSH

● Charity shops that have created a distinctive brand for themselves are enjoying growth. One of the innovators is Charity Super.Mkt, which organises pop-up stores where different charity shops are brought together under the same roof. Last month it started a pop-up in Spitalfields Market in east London and will be launching another one in Cardiff this week. Charity Super.Mkt is marketed directly at Gen Z shoppers; at weekends, its sites boast live DJs to create a livelier shopping experience. Since launching in 2023, it claims to have made £2.8 million in sales, re-sold 350,000 items of clothing, and prevented 97,000kg of textile waste ending up in landfill. Designer **Wayne Hemingway**, co-founder of Charity Super.Mkt with **Maria Chenoweth**, said: “Buying second-hand has become the norm for the new generation.”



BOUTIQUE STYLE

● Successful charity shops have been ditching the musty-smelling jumble sale feel, creating a boutique atmosphere to lure in new shoppers. Cancer Research Wales is one. Its head of retail Lorraine Boyd, said: “We’ve had customers come to our shops and they don’t realise they are in a charity shop. There have been cases of people picking something up off one of the racks and asking, ‘Have you got this in a size 12?’” The charity is growing fast, with five new shops opening this financial year, taking it to 15 across Wales. Boyd suggested shoppers were reacting to the online fast-fashion giants, which pump out designs quickly to capture trends, but whose clothes are not always built to last. “There is a growing interest in wanting to buy pre-loved, quality clothing over fast fashion.”



The then Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall visited Guy Macpherson-Grant's Ballindalloch Distillery in 2015

£600m

The cost to the trade of the tariff war in 2021

£240m

Annual spend on American bourbon casks

41,000

Number of distillery workers in Scotland

line of one,” he said: “There’s no light between any of us around the world when it comes to concern about tariffs.” Swonger hoped a full tariff attack could be averted if the countries on the other side of the talks – Britain, in Scotch whisky’s case – resolve Trump’s “issues”, much as Mexico and Canada did a week ago by offering concessions on his demands on drug trafficking and border security. “Countries that work transactionally with this White House can very likely avoid a trade war,” he said. One of Trump’s aims is to reduce America’s trade deficit with other countries. For the UK, that should not be a major factor: in 2024, US exports to the UK were worth \$11.9 billion more than its imports. But with Europe, it had a trade deficit of \$235.6 billion, according to the US Department of Commerce.

For Lord (David) Frost, famed for leading Britain’s Brexit negotiations, being out of Europe gives the UK an advantage over the EU in its tariff talks. He declared on X: “I have consistently maintained that taking charge of your national affairs is the best strategy for any country. No matter how large you are, you can’t control external events, but you can position yourself to respond to them optimally. That’s exactly what we can do after leaving the EU.” Frost is a former chief executive of the Scotch Whisky Association. The impact of tariffs on Scottish jobs could be harsh. The industry supports about 66,000 UK workers, of which 41,000 are in Scotland according to the Scotch Whisky Association; from the coopers making the casks at Speyside Cooperage which pile up outside in surreal pyramids, to the drivers at McPherson, whose lorries shuttle spirits and spring barley to and fro. Little surprise, then, that Highlands and Islands MSP Douglas Ross said any tariffs would be “devastating” for the local economy. For some, the damage has already been done. Gordon Quinn, whose Badachro Distillery overlooks the sea water Gair Loch on the west coast of Scotland, matures his Scotch in casks once used for red wine, ruby port and Caribbean rum. Having succeeded in exporting to markets from Germany to Taiwan, the US was next on the list for his eight-strong team. “Then Mr Trump comes along with the threat of significant tariffs,” he said. “It’s put our ambitions on hold until we can get more transparency about how it’s going to pan out. “I’m disappointed, frustrated. We get a lot of American visitors coming here and buying from our shop. They get home and write to us asking where they can buy more, but we just can’t get it to them.” It seems Macpherson-Grant was right: nobody wins in a trade war. *Additional reporting Greig Cameron*

Lockdown gave me the time I needed to make my passion a business



AIMEE SMALE, FOUNDER OF ODD MUSE

Lucy O'Brien In those seemingly endless months of lockdowns during Covid, many people took up new hobbies to fill the time. Some learnt to bake banana bread, but for Aimee Smale, then in her early twenties, the pandemic presented an opportunity to turn her passion into a business. Less than five years later, she is running a multimillion-pound fashion brand. The company she founded, Odd Muse, is a women’s “affordable luxury” clothing label, best known for its party dresses. Based in Brentwood, Essex, it started as a hobby for Smale, then a fashion student who spent her spare time during Covid sketching designs and scouring Pinterest for inspiration. Today, she has two permanent stores, one in London’s Soho and another in the heart of New York City, and employs a team of 56. In 2024, Odd Muse had sales of £22.5 million and pre-tax profits of £3 million, a milestone reached without any external investment – something that Smale insists she has no plans to change for the foreseeable future. What’s the secret to her success? Social media, she said. Smale launched Odd Muse’s online presence by taking selfies of her modelling her designs at her family home. Her social-first tactics coincided with TikTok’s rapid growth – the app had about 850 million downloads in 2020 alone – and Smale reaped the benefits. “When I first started, TikTok was used for people dancing to viral music; it wasn’t a place where brands posted,” she explained. “So because we took it quite seriously from the beginning, we became established fast.” Since then, Odd Muse’s TikTok account has accrued 16 million likes and 490,000 followers, as well as a further 900,000 Instagram followers. “When I started, I had no marketing budget,” said Smale. “I just thought, I’m going to talk to all of these

people online, and I’m going to tell them I’m quitting my job to start a brand – and then I’m going to back it up with an amazing product.’ It worked.” Another element to her success has been tapping into the demand for fewer, higher-quality garments as an antidote to trend-driven fast-fashion brands such as Shein. Odd Muse’s prices range from £55 for a fitted top to £185 for a formalwear dress, with the clothes made in Guangzhou, China. Her argument is that she is turning young women away from ever-changing micro-trends, with clothes made from cheap fabrics, and instead, investing in staple, good-quality clothes that will last longer than a season or two, remaining in women’s wardrobes for many years. Smale grew up with her parents and two siblings in Chafford Hundred, Essex, where she attended local state schools before becoming the first in her family to go to university. Her father, Peter, owned his own shop selling white goods and her mother, Shelly, supported him there as a shopkeeper. It was her parents’ commitment to the family firm that, Smale said, gave her the confidence to go it alone in business. “I’ve got such fond memories of my father starting his firm and taking

things into his own hands.” So when she graduated in fashion buying and brand management at Ravensbourne University London in 2021, she took a job as a fashion buyer’s assistant at Asos – but already had bigger things in mind. On a salary of £20,000, she designed logos for small firms in her free time for extra cash. Ultimately, she saved £12,000, and this became the initial start-up capital for Odd Muse. Her designs went viral quickly and



Aimee Smale

her firm’s social media presence caught the eye of Lorna Luxe, a UK-based fashion influencer, who bought one of Smale’s blazers during the brand’s initial launch and posted about it on Instagram. With social media fame came sales. “We pretty much sold out in the first two weeks. There was so much demand that I pulled the trigger on an order of 700 units with my supplier. I did not have the money to invest in those units, but I did have all the people waiting there ready to buy. So I launched a pre-order system to fund the stock,” she said. Getting the first sale is one thing, persuading people to return for a second can be a challenge. How did Smale turn what could have been a flash in the pan into a sustainable business? “I think that so many brands get their moment and just let it fizzle out and lose momentum,” she said. “But we’re constantly thinking about what’s next.” There have been big hits along the way. One came in 2022 – at which point, Odd Muse’s sales were in the six figures – when its best-selling pearl dress pulled in £1 million in a single quarter after its launch. “It almost tripled our revenue and led the way for the business,” Smale said. “Now, we really are a dress brand.” Since then, her dresses have been worn by celebrities including Molly-Mae Hague. After the former *Love Island* star posted a picture of her wearing one on Instagram, Smale sold out of the dress within an hour. Success hasn’t come without its challenges, though. “I do still feel very much at the mercy of this brand because it dictates how I feel – it’s been very hard to separate,” said Smale. But this year she is looking to lighten the demands on her time, having recently advertised for a new head of creative, which will be the first significant creative hire since the brand’s inception. Smale said she’s looking forward to sharing the load. “I’m 27, approaching 30, so recently I’ve started not to care less about Odd Muse but to care more about myself... how [well] I want to sleep.”

Stuart Machin
Dynamic retailers are being raided like a piggy bank



At Marks & Spencer we are transforming, and we have our gaze firmly set on the future. We’re committed to long-term growth, investing in a new modern store estate, supply chain transformation, innovative digital technology, sourcing capability and world-class product development. But we can’t take our eyes off the task in hand today – we have so much to do and much progress to make right now – trading well today is fuelling our investment in tomorrow. The chancellor has her own balancing act to do, and it is an extremely precarious one. Many of the announcements in Rachel Reeves’s speech last month were commendable – a focus on long-term planning, good ideas to free up investment in infrastructure and a more positive tone. But the speech failed to address the

significant impact of the budget on the here and now, and at its heart remains a contradiction: long-term growth ambitions are laudable, but they are at risk of remaining only that unless action is taken to encourage growth today. If the government wants to invest in the future, then lightening the burden that the budget loaded onto the retail sector should be at the top of its immediate action list. Retail anchors the UK economy, it is fast-paced and dynamic, employing three million people directly and two million people in its supply chains. It isn’t just the country’s biggest private sector employer, it’s the country’s engine. For some reason this huge economic and employability engine is seemingly ignored by governments, and I wonder if some of that comes from a place of snobbery. The blunt truth is, left how it is, the budget means UK retail will get smaller.

The sector already pays an effective tax rate of 55 per cent and the chancellor’s budget will add £7 billion of extra employment costs and an increased packaging levy to a sector working on margins of 3-5 per cent. While businesses like M&S will fight to hold down prices for customers, the British Retail Consortium and Institute of Grocery Distribution are projecting food inflation of more than 4 per cent. Extended producer responsibility (EPR), born as an environmental levy to fund recycling, will give retailers a tax bill 20 times the current amount, with £2 billion going straight to the Treasury as general taxation and no improvement to recycling. Retail is being raided like a piggy bank and it’s unacceptable. The Bank of England halved its growth forecast for the year and economists are warning that increased government borrowing costs and lower growth forecasts will squeeze the

“The blunt truth is, the budget means the retail sector will get smaller

Treasury’s fiscal headroom even further. As her leeway evaporates, the chancellor’s iron-clad rules will be put under further pressure as she faces the disastrous prospect of breaking her manifesto promise not to raise personal taxes. Reneging on that commitment would be bad for everyone: business, consumers and the economy. For the Labour government, that isn’t just an economic problem, it’s a political one.

Measures announced in October’s budget are contributing to lower growth forecasts. But there are some immediate steps that the government can take now to reverse that malaise and drive growth today, and we have been clear on these in our communication with the chancellor and her team. My ask of the chancellor is to get the balance right, show her strength of leadership and pivot in four key moves: ● Phase the timing of the national insurance contributions threshold decrease over two years to help employers manage the impact. It will give retailers some breathing space to manage the increase in the National Living Wage, which I see as a good cost. ● Delay the increase in extended producer responsibility (EPR), a levy to fund recycling, and, more broadly, pause and review all Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) circularity recycling

schemes. They’ve been poorly planned and nigh on impossible to operate. ● We need a proper review of business taxation facing retailers, not a tweak that redistributes funds within the sector. ● Ensure the Defra minister works with the sector, not against it. At M&S we talk about “the unvarnished truth” – getting the thorny issues on the table and admitting when we need to change a decision. Business leaders constantly react to a changing world and new pressures, balancing the short and long term, being open when we get things wrong and course-correcting. Looking after growth today, to enable investment in tomorrow. The government must do the same and it will be respected for its strength of leadership and honesty if it does. The chancellor must act now.

Stuart Machin is chief executive of Marks & Spencer



Laith Al-Khalaf

During his nine-year tenure as chief executive of Serco, Rupert Soames famously kept a toilet brush on his desk. His “shit-o-meter” was meant to symbolise the precarious performance of the outsourcing giant, which had earned pariah status after it was found to have over-charged the Ministry of Justice for its contracts to electronically tag criminals.

“It’s not as if I didn’t know there were going to be difficulties. It’s just the order of how many tomatoes that are going to be thrown at you,” said Soames at the end of his first day, just after issuing Serco’s third profit warning in six months.

But Soames stuck the course and managed to steady the ship. By the time he handed over to his successor, Mark Irwin, in 2023, Serco was growing again, and had restarted its dividend.

He appears to have been a tough act to follow. Last month, Irwin abruptly announced he would be stepping down as chief executive, after just two years at the helm of the FTSE 250 company.

These days, chief executives (CEOs) are more likely to be an Irwin than a Soames. An unprecedented churn is sweeping the ‘C-suite’ – so named for all the job titles beginning with ‘chief’. Chief executives, and their chief financial officers (CFOs), are jumping ship at a record rate.

Figures published last month from the headhunting firm Russell Reynolds Associates show that 202 CEOs leading companies in 13 of the world’s largest stock markets stood down in 2024, nine per

Crisis in the C-Suite

Chief executives and their financial head honchos are jumping ship at a record rate. Why is life proving so tough at the top?

cent more than in 2023. Last year’s departures included Noel Quinn of HSBC and Peter Harrison of Schroders.

Data from the stockbroker AJ Bell also showed that nearly a dozen listed CFOs have already stepped down this year including Mary Basterfield, at Martin Sorrell’s media firm S4Capital, and Steve Gunning, who left engineering firm Halma. The data also showed that the

average tenure of a CFO is down by 20 per cent to just four years.

Many in the City say the top jobs are not what they were. “These days, life as a public company CEO in the UK is nasty, brutish and short,” chortled one City veteran. However, the former chief executive said people should not to feel too sorry for their ilk. Top bosses make millions of pounds each year in return for

increased public scrutiny. “It is a very exposed job. You are under huge pressure and there’s huge accountability, but that’s what you get paid the big bucks for.”

So why are the top brass increasingly likely to throw in the towel?

It’s the economy

Part of the problem may lie with the state of the economy. Higher interest rates and inflation forced many boards to overhaul strategies and fire CEOs.

“This is a function of increased volatility, which has made the role harder, more relentless and higher pressure,” said Laura Sanderson, head of Europe, Middle East and India for Russell Reynolds. “Boards are acting on poor performance or dispensing with leadership that they don’t think can meet the challenge.”

While the FTSE 250 saw a rise in CEO departures in 2024, the FTSE 100 saw two fewer jumping ship. Russell Reynolds predicts a large rise this year.

Under the microscope

FTSE bosses claim that a general slump in valuations has placed added pressure on CEOs to revive share prices. For example, activist investors take stakes in companies and start agitating for change, often calling for the head of the chief executive.

“Any hint of poor trading and the activists come in and start calling for some break-up of the business,” said one City veteran who had run several FTSE companies. “Investors are less patient and forgiving and there is added pressure to see results immediately. Even the threat of that is enough to make some CEOs say, ‘f*ck this, I don’t need this’ and opt to

leave,” they added.

Another former FTSE100 CEO said: “If you run a public company, you’re in the public eye. There’s no privacy in this sort of thing. You have to get used to that. It’s just very intrusive and I think that has only got worse.”

Another CEO pointed out the increasing frequency of “take-private” deals, where private equity buy companies off the stock market, and usually clear out the management team soon after.

Kit Bingham, a partner at headhunters Heidrick & Struggles, said some bosses decided working for private companies was a better bet. “The deal is much more simple: ‘we expect our pound of flesh and then some, we will expect performance – but if you do well, you will have skin in the game and will be rewarded and away from public scrutiny’.”

The fall guys

The chief financial officers have their own gripes, mainly around just how far

“You have to act as if you’re not frightened to be fired

their remit has expanded in recent years. Traditionally, they reported to the CEO and the board and were given a fairly narrow brief. They were tasked with accurately reporting a company’s financial statements and deciding on key issues around its capital structure, investment decisions and accounting practices.

Their descendants, the modern CFO, have far greater responsibilities, according to David Anderson, a partner in the finance department of the accounting firm Deloitte who surveys CFOs as part of Deloitte’s CFO programme.

“The CFO’s job would be much easier to manage if it were neatly defined. The reality? The CFO’s role is continuing to expand far beyond their traditional responsibilities,” he said. Now, CFOs inform decisions on everything from a company’s AI strategy, its climate initiatives, the cybersecurity threats it faces and how resilient its supply chain is.

Russ Mould, head of investment research at AJ Bell, said: “The reporting burden is greater than ever. When I started as a fund manager, BP’s annual report was about 15 pages; I think it’s now several hundred, so there are a lot more hoops through which you have to jump.”

Nick Leslau, a property entrepreneur who has listed a dozen companies, said: “When we listed our first company in the Eighties, the entire IPO document was 35 pages long. Today the ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] section is nearly that long alone. I am not saying ESG is a bad thing but we are being swamped by regulation.”

One veteran restructuring consultant, added: “The job is just so much more difficult than it used to be. You have to do more roles and during tough economic times you are inevitably carrying the can. Plus you can be the fall guy if anything goes wrong financially.”

Another finance director agreed that a large part of the job was about giving bad news to the CEO, and falling on your sword: “You have to act as if you’re not frightened to be fired.”

Lonely at the top

Given all the stress, it is a wonder anyone wants these jobs at all. “There are moments that are thrilling,” said one recovering FTSE 100 chief executive. “But it is really tough and often unpleasant because a lot of the worst decisions at the end of the day come down to you on your own. It can feel really lonely.”

They added: “I was working 80 hours a week. And unless you’re careful, your health suffers because you don’t exercise, you eat late at night. And you become a little bit more insular because you’ve got all these things on your mind that you can’t really share with people because you are a public company. That can make your relationships suffer.”

Others see it differently. One current CEO at a FTSE company remarked that all the scrutiny on their job was a good thing because it kept management honest. They added that they earned more than their friends who are doctors could ever dream of making. “I probably don’t have a lot to complain about, really,” they said.

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Female-led firms outperform rivals. So why is raising cash a struggle?

Lucy Tobin

After seven years in asset management at Goldman Sachs, Farah Kabir thought she knew everything there was to know about flourishing in a male-dominated environment.

Then she quit banking to launch a sexual wellness start-up called Hanx, and began pursuing funding in venture capital boardrooms.

“Fundraising is incredibly difficult for women because of the sexism,” she said. “Our first battle was to be taken seriously; investors would refer to my co-founder and me as ‘two young girls’ and treat our pitch like a joke – when I’d left a banking career and she was a gynaecologist.

“Pitching to one angel syndicate, an investor in his fifties grinned and asked me to demonstrate putting on a condom. No one would ask that of a man. But we had to smile and ignore it because in the UK, capital is always deployed by men.”

Of the £8 billion of UK equity investment in the first

half of 2024, fully female-founded teams received just £145 million – 1.8 per cent of the total – according to the research firm Beauhurst. All-male teams won £6.92 billion, over 86 per cent of the total.

Research by the Kauffman Foundation found that female-led tech teams generated a 35 per cent higher return on investment than all-male teams.

When First Round Capital, the venture capital (VC) firm, analysed its 300 investments over ten years, it found the female-founded firms it backed did 63 per cent better than its all-male businesses.

One key reason is that men back men. Male investors are half as likely to fund a woman as a female investor would be, Kauffman found. And only 5 per cent of angel and VC investors across Europe are women.

Marta Zaccagnini, European manager for Village Capital, a VC firm whose “mission is to unlock early stage” funding defines this as “the tendency to invest in people similar to oneself”.

“Investors struggle to allocate funds to women-led companies due to the lack of diversity within their own ranks,” she said.

When a female founder walks into a VC boardroom, investors quiz her about risk. When a man does the same, the questions focus on growth. “When I was pitching, I faced ‘what if?’ questions and worst-case scenarios, while male founders were asked about vision and growth,” said Janthana Kaenprakhmroy, whose insurance firm for the self-employed, Tapoly, is now valued at £10 million.

Andrew Leek, founder of private equity firm Ignite Growth, said some men in his industry “still think a successful founder has to have the stereotypical macho swagger”. He added: “I’ve heard some male investors say after a pitch, ‘It’s a super business, she’s great,

but I can’t invest in her because she’s just got married – what about the risk of a baby?’ ”

One male angel investor backing a female-founded firm valued at £60 million said: “I’ve had investors wait until a [female] founder has left the room, then nudge me and say, ‘Oh well, she would have been

completely lost without you backing her’.”

Lemon Fuller, founder of the underwear brand Lemonade Dolls, has raised nearly £4 million via “six uncomfortable rounds”, with investors depositing her in the first. “I took money from a syndicate that was part of a very large VC,” Fuller said. “They replaced

me as CEO with a man because, they said, I was ‘inexperienced and couldn’t be trusted’.”

The man put in her place ultimately faltered. “In effect, I was chief executive – I was even told to write emails on his behalf – but I had to accept the investors’ terms.”

Fuller added. “When I was presenting data about the investment gap to a leading accounting and investment firm, a senior director advised me to ‘be less emotional and stick to the facts’. The room fell silent. I was presenting facts.”

Johanna Jensen, Farah Kabir, Janthana Kaenprakhmroy and Lemon Fuller have all faced problems with male investors

Joanna Jensen, who sold her toiletries firm Childs Farm to PZ Cussons for almost £40 million in 2022, said female and male founders may use different styles when pitching to investors. “Women are typically honest about numbers and expectations, whereas men can have a certain fluidity around those items and brush them aside.”

Assumptions could also be colouring decisions. The average sale of a consumer firm founded by men was 18 per cent higher than the price fetched for female-founded firms between 2013 and 2023, according to research by the accountancy firm Buzzacott, but a key reason is that female entrepreneurs tend to get out earlier. “For many women, selling early can feel like the safest option,” Kaenprakhmroy at Tapoly said, due to “the immense pressure to deliver quick success after overcoming the challenges of raising funds”.

The dominant flow of capital is going to AI

businesses, of which only 7 per cent have been started by women. Michelle He, co-founder of the AI fintech Abound, is part of that 7 per cent. Her firm has raised £1.3 billion. “The discrimination problem I hit was my past career,” she explained. “People very bluntly said, ‘I don’t invest in founders from consultancy backgrounds’.”

Investment firm Astia, which will back enterprises only if they have at least one female leader, encourages companies to pitch “blind” via its website, with applications reviewed by its advisers.

Managing partner Evie Mulberry said removing bias works: companies that successfully passed through this process in the past five years had a 1.5 per cent failure rate, against a more general 90 per cent failure rate for start-ups.

“We’re removing gut-based decisions. The problem is not women – it’s the barriers within investment and networks.”



BUSINESS

We’re ready for take-off – Etihad will fly to market

The airline’s chief executive is poised to float a stake of up to 20% in Abu Dhabi, which could value the business at £4bn

INTERVIEW
OLIVER
GILL



A man who typically turns left when boarding a flight, Antonioaldo Neves is used to the finer things in life. And funnily enough, cold coffee isn’t one of them.

“I’m not having this,” the Etihad Airways boss says, after taking a sip and putting the cup down dismissively.

Cue flapping from his public relations minders inside the hotel suite overlooking Cadogan Square in west London, where we meet. Should we phone down to the concierge to complain? they ask.

“You should, because we probably paid for that,” says Neves.

Such is the eye for detail of a former partner at McKinsey, a management consultancy famed for its penny-pinching advice. But it’s an approach that has stood him in good stead over the years – not least, when bringing airlines to the financial markets.

The Brazilian is on the cusp of taking his second major airline public in less than a decade. Etihad, the Abu Dhabi carrier known as much in the UK for its ties to Premier League football champions Manchester City as it is for flights, is set to unveil plans to float a stake of up to 20 per cent on the Abu Dhabi stock exchange as soon as this month. Sources say the airline could command a valuation of \$5 billion (£4 billion).

“I can tell you: Etihad is ready,” explains Neves, who oversaw the float of Azul, Brazil’s third-biggest airline, on the New York Stock Exchange in 2017.

“Any airline in the world that has the aspiration to grow and to be relevant – they need to tap into different sources of capital,” he says, speaking before recent reports that Etihad could soon rekindle plans to go public. “The way I see IPOs [initial public offerings], it’s just another source of capital.”

Talk of growth will come as a blessed relief to many within Etihad. The brain-child of the late UAE president Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Etihad was one of a number of new flag carriers to come to prominence in the 2000s, offering an alternative to drab legacy carriers such as British Airways and Lufthansa with its gleaming new aircraft and accommodating cabin crew.

Along the way, it has scooped awards, including the World Travel Award for best customer experience last year. Yet it has proved a costly venture for the oil-rich state. Billions have been sunk on

“Our A380s could fly for another 12 years

Boeing and Airbus jets, while it snapped up stakes in overseas airlines such as Air Berlin, Alitalia and Virgin Australia. Between 2016 and 2019, Etihad racked up losses of \$5.6 billion.

Small wonder that many thought Etihad would not survive the pandemic – even if it was owned by the sovereign wealth fund of an oil super state.

And yet, survive it did.

In large part, this was a result of Etihad unapologetically slashing costs. Going into the pandemic, it employed 20,000 people even after axing thousands of positions in the preceding years. Nowadays, it has a headcount of little more than 10,000.

In February 2021, Etihad vaccinated all pilots and cabin crew to bounce back quickly from pandemic travel restrictions. By 2022, the airline was in profit. It has been in the black since.

Cost-cutting is only part of the story, however. Etihad has also benefited from big spending on Zayed International, the second-busiest airport in the UAE behind Dubai. “The Zayed terminal is seven minutes from curb [arriving at the terminal] to gate,” explains Neves.

“If you go to our competition, it’s at least 45 minutes from curb to gate. There’s security screening, passport control, train transit and then a bus.”

The bosses at Etihad also hitched on to a post-pandemic trend for customers to opt for luxury. Over the past 18 months, the airline has doubled the number of planes with first-class seats, Neves adds.

It has gone from carrying 10 million passengers to 18 million in one and a half years (British Airways, by contrast, flew 38 million people in 2023), and has a target of operating 170 jets by 2030, from a fleet of 93 now. Profit margins are up and the airline is focused on providing more flights to destinations within three to four hours of Abu Dhabi and launching long-haul services to the US and Asia.

Of course, it helps that Etihad is prepared to fly to destinations that western airlines cannot. It has daily flights to Moscow and St Petersburg, for instance, drawing criticism from some quarters.

Although services to Russia are “not that big of an operation”, Neves says, he defends the airline’s refusal to treat the country as a pariah state. “I really admire the UAE leadership because they are about consensus building – about fraternity and about trying to build bridges. There’s a market there, and anywhere we can fly a customer, we do it.”

Neves grew up in Bahia, a state in the northeast of Brazil that retains strong ties to Portugal – it was once one of the bastions of support for colonial rule before the country gained independence in 1822. He studied civil engineering in Sao Paulo before going to business school in

LUCY YOUNG FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES; ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL



Rio de Janeiro, and joined McKinsey in 2000. He stayed with the management consultancy for 14 years, during which time he spearheaded the privatisation of Brazil’s airports.

His move to Azul in 2014 climaxed three years later when, as president of the airline, he took it public. After that, in 2017, he moved to the Portuguese flag carrier TAP to be chief executive.

Despite winning plaudits for turning TAP around – he was credited with improved customer service and an increase in passenger numbers – Neves was sacked in July 2020 when transport minister Pedro Nuno Santos announced his dismissal on live TV in the wake of the airline racking up huge pandemic losses.

He then struck out on his own by launching the online holiday retailer

Football fan Antonioaldo Neves brushes aside any suggestion that investigations into Manchester City could tarnish Etihad Airways

Öner Travel, which he sold to a larger travel company two years later. In October 2022, Neves was hired by Etihad.

As a Brazilian, he is, not surprisingly, passionate about football. So he could hardly turn down the chance to lead an airline that has become deeply ingrained in the sport.

Manchester City play at a stadium that its fans call “The Etihad”. The airline’s logo is emblazoned across the front of the team’s sky-blue jerseys and planes pop up at regular intervals on the bright perimeter boards during games.

But the club’s runaway success in recent years – Premier League champions in six of the past seven seasons – is at risk of being tarnished by the outcome of an investigation by league officials into whether it breached more than 100 financial fair play rules between 2009 and 2018. Neves was last year forced to deny that Etihad paid more than the market rate for sponsorship. Manchester City and its owners have denied wrongdoing.

Neves brushes aside suggestions that the probe will besmirch the Etihad name. “I think the opposite,” he says. “We only get good things about the relationship we have with the club. Sometimes we get too much stuck into the club itself, but we forget it’s a business. And it’s so amazing what they’re doing ... I think it’s one of the best examples of how professional management and long-term vision can really build something.”

It is hard to know whether such effusiveness comes from the heart or is part of a carefully managed script. Where Etihad has not stuck to the script, however, is in its approach to its fleet of gas-guzzling Airbus A380 planes.

The four-engined “superjumbo” has fallen out of favour in recent years as airlines attempt to champion their greener credentials by switching to newer, more fuel-efficient aircraft. Such was the lack of demand that Airbus halted production in 2021.

Etihad has ten A380s, which can carry nearly 500 passengers each. Some of these, however, are currently in maintenance. The airline operates three flights between Heathrow and Abu Dhabi and a further two from Manchester every day.

Neves says that once the planes have completed their 12-year checks – an expensive procedure that involves stripping down the aircraft’s cabin and replacing its landing gear – the A380s will be good for another 12 years.

“I don’t see any reason why this plane is not going to fly for 24 years [in total]. So assuming current market conditions, yes, it can fly [for another] 12 years.”

Like many other airlines, Etihad is waiting for delayed deliveries of Boeing and Airbus jets. In part, Neves explains, this is one of the reasons for keeping the A380s in service.

Boeing has attracted many of the negative headlines for production delays, but Airbus has also had to reduce targets – primarily because of supply-chain strictures.

“If we don’t have the production back on track, we’re going to have constraints all over. And you know what happens? It’s supply and demand. The day you have fewer planes, ticket prices go up. It’s as simple as that,” warns Neves.

The Brazilian believes that it will not be long before there is a third option, however. The Chinese plane-maker Comac is increasingly being touted as a challenger to the global duopoly, despite scepticism about its technical proficiency.

Would Neves buy Comac jets? “Eventually, yes. I don’t see any reason why not. It’s the same question probably someone was asking 20 years ago about [Chinese] cars. Comac is going to be an amazing company. The key question for companies that are starting now to manufacture airplanes ... [is] how to build up support capability. Because in the end, let’s say the plane is amazing, but if it breaks and I don’t get the parts, then I’m not going to buy it.”

For now, Chinese jets can wait, however. Delivering the float for Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund ADQ, Etihad’s sole shareholder, is Neves’s priority.

“I’m pretty comfortable, based on what I’ve experienced in the past, that we’re ready,” he says. “We’ve done our homework.”

THE LIFE OF ANTONOALDO NEVES

Born: 1975
Status: married with three children
Education: civil engineering degree from Escola Politécnica, Sao Paulo; MBA from Virginia University’s Darden School of Business; and a master’s in corporate finance from IAG business school in Rio
First job: civil engineer
Home: Abu Dhabi
Pay: undisclosed
Watch: Apple
Favourite film: *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One*
Music: anything upbeat
Drink: coffee
Gadget: iPhone
Last holiday: desert safari to the Liwa Oasis, Abu Dhabi
Charity: Al Etihad Charity Foundation

WORKING DAY
Like other airline chief executives, no day is the same for Antonioaldo Neves, not least because he often



wakes up in a hotel abroad. If he is on the road, he will juggle checking in with local teams with head office calls to discuss daily issues.

The Liwa Oasis and Tom Cruise and Hayley Atwell in Mission: Impossible

DOWNTIME
Neves loves watching lots of sports when he has free time, but football is his passion. He achieved his

dream last year meeting Brazilian World Cup winner Ronaldinho when Abu Dhabi hosted an NBA basketball game. He says: “I met him and I told him: ‘You’re my hero.’”

Why big tech is beating a path to the Pentagon

Silicon Valley has changed sides as AI, war and resentment for the Democrats push it to embrace the defence sector

DANNY
FORTSON



Seven years ago, tech giant Alphabet faced a crisis. Employees revolted after it emerged that its Google subsidiary had agreed a drone contract with the Pentagon. Petitions were signed demanding it get out of the “business of war”.

The company caved and, under duress, drew a line in the sand, publishing a list of seven AI applications that it would not pursue. These ranged from weapons and surveillance systems to “technologies that cause or are likely to cause ... harm”.

Last week, Alphabet quietly deleted those principles and signalled that it was ready to dive back into the business of war. “Google is updating its AI principles because the technology has become far more widespread,

and companies in democratic nations must serve government and national security needs,” wrote Sir Demis Hassabis, the British head of Alphabet’s AI efforts.

It was the latest sign of the stunning “vibe shift” in Silicon Valley. Famed as a progressive heartland, the West Coast’s biggest firms have linked arms with the defence establishment, and Donald Trump’s administration in particular.

Alphabet’s move came just weeks after chief executive Sundar Pichai stood in the gallery at Donald Trump’s inauguration. And it isn’t alone. Meta announced in November that it had changed its policies to allow its AI models to be used by the military. San Francisco-based Anthropic said it would start selling AI to the military via a partnership with Palantir, the software giant that bills itself as the “operating system” of western intelligence and defence agencies.

Silicon Valley’s handbrake turn is, in part, both a tech story and a geopolitical one. Intelligence officials have for years been warning that AI presents a threat similar to the nuclear bomb – a

technology so powerful that whoever controls it will render its enemies defeated without even firing a shot.

The release in November 2022 of ChatGPT, an AI tool that was instantly better than humans at any number of tasks, gave ballast to that argument. The AI age had finally arrived, but the West could at least rest easy knowing that America had stolen a march on China.

This sense of security was shattered last month with the release of DeepSeek, a Chinese AI model that rivalled the capabilities of America’s top companies.

Matt Pearl, director of the strategic technologies programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington DC think tank, said DeepSeek “sent shockwaves through the administration”. He added: “We are in an AI arms race and we saw it exponentially heat up.”

Meanwhile, leaders in the field from Anthropic boss Dario Amodei to OpenAI chief executive Sam Altman and Google’s Hassabis have all predicted recently that “superintelligence” – a system better than the best humans at all cognitive tasks

– is barreling towards us far faster than they had originally anticipated. The stakes, in short, have ratcheted up.

At the same time, wars have broken out in Israel and Ukraine, where drones, AI, Elon Musk’s Starlink satellite-based internet service, and other technologies have taken on a central role.

Sales have soared for Anduril, the defence tech startup founded by 32-year-old billionaire Palmer Luckey,



Anduril’s Palmer Luckey has become a darling of the right

“Hundreds of thousands of well-paid workers have been sacked

who has become a darling of the right. Last week, it was reported that Peter Thiel was leading a \$2.5 billion funding round for Anduril that will value it at \$28 billion, double its valuation six months ago, as the industry booms.

Shares in Palantir, also deeply involved in the conflicts, have exploded 13-fold in just two years.

Tech’s rightward lurch, however, runs deeper than profit motives and technology leaps. Marc Andreessen, founder of the venture firm Andreessen Horowitz, was an enthusiastic Democrat for decades. But then, in Andreessen’s telling, the Democrat government turned on Silicon Valley as its wealth and influence grew.

Under former president Joe Biden, prominent tech critic Lina Khan was made head of the Federal Trade Commission, which pursued antitrust suits against Alphabet, Meta, Amazon and Apple. Andreessen said that the tech industry came to be seen as “presumptively evil”.

Alarmed by this, last year he endorsed Trump.

In this shift, however, there is also a tinge of revenge from execs who felt like they had been forced to bend to

worker demands on diversity, remote working and even forcing companies – as Google’s staff did in 2018 – to hie to their moral compass.

That balance of power has shifted greatly, especially in the post-Covid era, in which large employers have sacked hundreds of thousands of well-paid staff – and done better than ever.

It is no coincidence that just as Meta and Google bin their DEI policies, they have also focused on the Pentagon – a move that in another era they would have been reticent to make, for fear of upsetting their workforces.

“Companies have been really successful at laying off workers without having it hurt their productivity,” Pearl said. “So there are tech employees who might have spoken up who are less likely to do so now.”

Margaret O’Mara, author of *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America*, said: “The public image that these companies had cultivated so carefully seems to have slipped away, partly in response to the real and perceived power of the new president ... which is really quite extraordinary.”

‘We’re turning things around – just like the UK’

Heads have rolled and BT’s share price is up over 35% since Allison Kirkby took charge. But can she drag her workers back to the office, asks *William Turvill*

Allison Kirkby has established herself as a regular in the 15th-floor canteen of One Braham, the modern east London office block that serves as the headquarters of telecoms giant BT. The chief executive’s favourite order? A bacon butty – white roll, butter, no ketchup – usually a reward for a Friday morning session in the gym. “She’s in the canteen all the time,” says one staffer, no doubt deploying a touch of artistic licence. “She walks around the building talking to people. She very much wants to be seen and heard.” It’s one year since Kirkby, 57, took on one of corporate Britain’s toughest gigs – a role that attracts close scrutiny from ministers, regulators, its 30 million customers, almost 120,000 employees, big shareholders and an army of retail investors who bought the stock when Margaret Thatcher’s government privatised British Telecom 40 years ago. “Is everything going to plan?” muses Kirkby, as she reflects on her first year on a call with The Sunday Times. “Well, first of all: I’m loving it – so that is going to plan.” A glance at BT’s share price, up more than 35 per cent since she took over, will tell you it’s so far, so good for Kirkby – though one former senior staffer notes, with a dash of British glumness: “It would have been hard for it to go much lower.” Key to Kirkby’s strategy has been a push for the BT Group to focus more of its attention on improving in the UK. “I want to get BT to be a national champion

again, that everyone can be proud of: customers, the country and our owners,” she says. “We need to defend and retain our customers by delighting them more often.” It has been a year of change at BT. Thousands have lost their jobs, senior executives have jumped or been pushed, non-core assets have been sold or put up for sale, and some imposing new investors have arrived on the shareholder register. Top of the list is Sunil Bharti Mittal, a self-made billionaire known in his native India as the “telecoms tiger”. Mit-tal was in London last week to meet Kirkby and other BT executives, who presented him with their plans to overhaul a creaky telecoms behemoth. His company, Bharti Global, has a 24.5 per cent stake in BT, bought from Altice, controlled by embattled French-Israeli billionaire Patrick Drahi, last year. Kirkby and Mittal are thought to have a good relationship, and supporters of the chief executive frame his investment as an endorsement of her vision. But

“I have to have the right people on the bus for the journey ahead for BT

others speculate that he could ultimately represent a threat to her. “He’s not going to be a passive shareholder,” said one former executive. “He’ll want results quickly.” Kirkby says of Mittal: “He definitely will have a lot to add considering the business that he has built in India and internationally.” To propel BT into the future, Kirkby will need help from Westminster. The chief executive has met both prime minister Sir Keir Starmer and chancellor Rachel Reeves in the past couple of weeks. Top of her wish list for the new Labour government is planning reforms to make it easier for BT to build infrastructure to help it deliver faster mobile reception and internet services. One of the measures it is pushing for is for poles or masts of up to 20 metres to be exempt from planning permission. Kirkby says she’s in “very good dialogue” with Labour but, perhaps hinting at some frustration, she adds: “Clearly, we want to ensure that digital infrastructure planning red tape is getting the same priority as housebuilding, which they’ve been very vocal on so far.” Despite being hit with an estimated bill of £100 million from the autumn’s tax-heavy budget, Kirkby is less critical of Starmer’s regime than many other business leaders. “The government

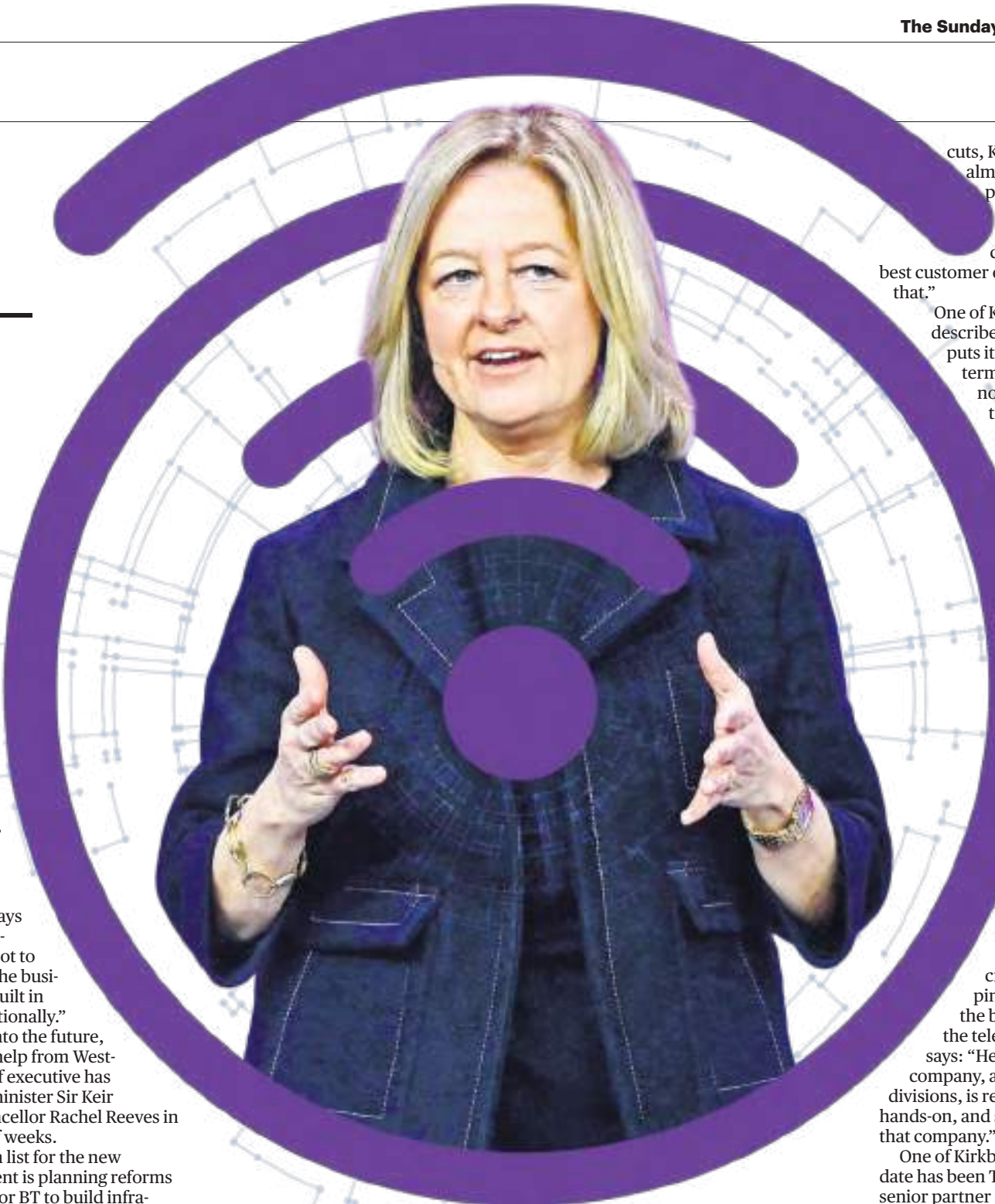
inherited a difficult situation,” she says. “They had to address the balance sheet they inherited.” Kirkby adds: “They are on a marathon, not a sprint. A bit like myself at BT. You can’t turn around a company like BT, or a country like the UK, in a few months.” “And as long as they are setting the right direction to get the country back to growth, and society is feeling optimistic and positive about that, and they deliver on their promises along the way, I think we’ll all feel good about it. And it’s exactly the same for me.” Kirkby grew up in working-class Glasgow. She started her career straight from school as a trainee accountant in the Scotch whisky industry. She went on to land a job at consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble, where she worked for 20 years before entering the telecoms industry with Virgin Media. Her first chief executive role was at Tele2, a Swedish telecoms challenger business. Kirkby later took charge of Stockholm’s state-backed Telia.

Her work in Sweden caught the eye of BT, where she became a non-executive director in 2019, before taking the top job five years later. Kirkby became the boss at a difficult moment. There had been some heady days in the mid-2010s, when Gavin Patterson launched BT Sport as a challenger to Sky and bought EE for £12.5 billion, but since then the company’s shares had been in decline. Patterson’s replacement, the former Worldpay boss Philip Jansen, arrived with a stellar reputation but presided over a halving of the share price as investors balked at the level of investment needed – £15 billion – to replace the old copper-wired network with high-speed fibre optic cables. When Kirkby took charge, BT’s share price was just over £1, having peaked

close to £5 under Patterson. Since then, more cost-cutting and a raised dividend have taken the shares back to £1.49. Critics say Kirkby joined at a fortuitous moment – just as long-term infrastructure investments were paying off – and that the cuts had already been started by Jansen. But supporters say this understates the degree to which she has “rolled up her sleeves” and immersed herself in the business to find savings, saleable assets and areas in need of restructuring. She trimmed BT’s workforce by 3 per cent to 117,000 in the nine months to the end of 2024. Asked if it was easy to find

cuts, Kirkby says: “BT lives with almost 180 years of legacy platforms, products, services, and therefore has a huge amount of inefficiency and not always the best customer experience because of that.” One of Kirkby’s senior employees described BT as “bloated”. She puts it in more diplomatic terms: “Our productivity is not where it should be relative to peers.” Meanwhile, she has set out plans to “optimise” BT’s global services division, which could lead to a sale. It has more than 1,000 corporate clients. And it is understood that BT has started negotiations with Warner Bros Discovery about selling its 50 per cent stake in TNT Sports, formerly known as BT Sport. The company sold the first 50 per cent, to make TNT a joint venture, in a 2022 deal that was worth up to £633 million. One senior insider credits Kirkby with “scrapping and street fighting” for the business. Paolo Pescatore, the telecoms industry analyst, says: “Her understanding of the company, and the products and the divisions, is remarkable. She is so hands-on, and she is a force for good for that company.”

One of Kirkby’s key appointments to date has been Tom Meakin, a former senior partner at McKinsey who became BT’s first chief strategy and change officer. Harmeen Mehta, an outspoken chief digital and innovation officer, left at the same time. Jon James, from Danish telecoms provider Nuuday, has taken charge of the business division. And Claire Gillies, from Bell Canada, is replacing Marc Allera, who missed out on the top job to Kirkby, as boss of the consumer division. Clearly, Kirkby can be ruthless where necessary. “I have to have the right people on the bus for the journey ahead for BT. And a number of my team have been around, you know, for quite some time.” Kirkby also makes it clear that she’s not afraid to have frank conversations with her staff. “I always have very honest, transparent conversations with all of my people,” she says. Above much else, Kirkby wants to shape and change the “culture” of BT, a sprawling company with 30 major offices across the UK alone, from Salford and Stratford, to Inverness and Eniskillen in Northern Ireland. Last month she changed BT’s work from home guidance – “three together, two wherever” – into policy, meaning office attendance is now strictly monitored and non-compliance can result in disciplinary action. “We weren’t hitting three days a week,” she explains. “We weren’t even hitting two days, really.” Kirkby’s policy is no small thing. As a supplier of home internet and mobile phone services, BT has been a long-standing advocate of homeworking. As far back as 1999, BT was endorsing “teleworking”. By 2014, nine per cent of its workforce was full-time remote. This was down to 2.2 per cent last year. Needless to say, BT’s energetic and sociable boss works from a BT office five days a week. “I’m personally not very good at working from home,” she says. “I thrive on being around my colleagues, customers and people. That’s what gives me energy.”



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UK rolls out red carpet for Disney

Chris Sylt and Caroline Reid

As a leafy village with an old-fashioned sports hall and a 16th-century pub opposite the parish church, Iver Heath is not famous for glitz and glamour. But it also features what looks like an industrial estate on its outskirts: Pinewood Studios. Inside, Britain’s finest set decorators, designers and painters are busy building a futuristic city that will soon be populated by perhaps the biggest gathering of A-list actors outside of the Oscars. Robert Downey Jr, Tom Holland, Pedro Pascal and Elizabeth Olsen will all be there. From March it will be home to *Doomsday* and then *Secret Wars*, the latest instalments in Disney’s Avengers movie saga. No expense has been spared on the sequels to *Avengers: Endgame*, which became the highest-grossing film in history, with global takings of \$2.8 billion, when it was released in 2019. They are expected to create thousands of jobs for crew members and support staff. Disney chose Britain over America, Canada and Middle Eastern nations thanks to its generous incentives for film-makers. Over the past 15 years, Disney has banked almost £1.6 billion of taxpayers’

money in return for filming in Britain, even though it made \$127.8 billion of pre-tax profits during that time. *Avengers: Endgame* and *Avengers: Infinity War* are two of more than 50 films and TV shows that the US studio has made in Britain since 2010. Others include *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, the past five Star Wars movies and the upcoming live-action remake of *Snow White*. Studios shoot in Britain to benefit from the Audio-Visual Expenditure Credit (Avec), which gives them a tax credit of up to 25.5 per cent of the sum they spend. At least 10 per cent of the total core costs need to relate to activities in the UK and, to demonstrate this to the taxman, studios set up separate companies here for each production. Thanks to some financial wizardry, the tax credit is paid in cash. Studios give their British subsidiaries 74.5 per cent of the projected production cost in cash, with the remaining 25.5 per cent coming in the form of loans that are not counted as revenue. The Indiana Jones film, made in UK

because they need to be repaid, so the production company makes a loss equivalent to 25.5 per cent of a film’s budget. As the amount is equivalent to the loan that the company owes its parent, the cash can be passed to the studio as repayment. And *voilà*: the government covers 25.5 per cent of a film’s costs. Britain’s movie-making incentives were introduced by HM Revenue & Customs in 2007 and Disney soon took note: the number of its productions under way in Britain doubled from five in 2010 to ten in 2023. Analysis of more than 350 sets of accounts shows that Disney’s tax credits breached the £1.5 billion barrier in 2023, the latest year for which filings are available. Disney’s total handouts surged 10.2 per cent to £1.59 billion in 2023.

A blockbuster payment of £101.2 million was banked for Star Wars spin-off TV series *Andor*, shot at Pinewood and on location in less glamorous surroundings such as Winspit Quarry in Dorset. Its second season will be on the Disney+ streaming platform in April. The £1.6 billion handed to Disney is thought to be the largest payment by HMRC to any studio, and represents almost 20 per cent of the total rebate handed out over the past 15 years. It was driven by Disney spending a total of £10.6 billion on 50 UK productions since 2010. There is more to come, as Disney announced in August 2024 that it planned to invest \$5 billion over the next five years in films, television and streaming shows made in the UK and Europe. Disney declined to comment. The latest data from the British Film Institute (BFI) shows that, in 2019, every £1 of reimbursement handed to studios generated £8.30 of additional “gross value added (GVA) benefit for Britain’s economy”. It led to a total of £7.7 billion in GVA being generated in 2019. The BFI’s triennial Screen Business report, released in December 2021, showed that in 2019, studios created 37,685 full-time equivalent jobs in London and 7,775 throughout the rest of Britain.



Oliver Shah

Diageo needs a sharper strategy to recover from its long hangover



At the start of last year, I identified Anglo American, Diageo and JD Sports as succession dramas to follow. The three newish chief executives involved – Duncan Wanblad, Debra Crew and Régis Schultz, respectively – have all survived the transition from domineering predecessors ... so far. But I claim vindication in that each company has had a dalliance with disaster. Anglo was targeted for a £39 billion takeover by BHP, the giant rival miner nicknamed the Big Aussie. It is now breaking itself up, having agreed to sell its coking coal and planning to spin off its platinum business and the De Beers diamonds empire. JD has repeatedly warned on profits due to stumbling consumer appetite for Nike and Adidas gear, leaving Schultz's football shirt hanging from a wobbly peg. Diageo, the distiller of Johnnie Walker whisky, is the one that interests me most. Previously a rock-solid blue-chip known for its reliable dividend growth, it has served up a nasty share-price slump over the past three years – despite a long

run of double-digit sales growth from Guinness. This was partly due to a kerfuffle over crashing sales in Latin America and the Caribbean, with drinkers trading down to cheaper stuff and its teams there failing to spot the trend until late in the day. Diageo has also fallen victim to the more general receding of at-home cocktail-making, which boomed in Covid, and the wave of “revenge conviviality” that followed. One of the reasons there is not more chatter about Crew being hauled away by bouncers is that Diageo is performing creditably versus its peers. Investors have lost 32.3 per cent of their money since she became chief executive; it says a lot about the state of the global industry that such a dreadful return puts Diageo in the middle of a pack of ten big drinks companies. Rémy Cointreau has managed to pour away two-thirds of its market cap over the same period. Another reason is that people around the company remember the first few years of Crew's predecessor, the late Sir Ivan Menezes. Having taken over from the swaggering Paul Walsh in 2013, he was hit by a Chinese crackdown on

IN THE RED

Returns since June 2023

Kweichow Moutai	-13.9%
Wuliangye Yibin	-22.6%
Carlsberg	-25.1%
Heineken	-28.5%
Constellation Brands	-30%
Diageo	-32.3%
Pernod Richard	-47.1%
Brown-Forman	-52.2%
Daيدة Campari Milano	-58.3%
Rémy Cointreau	-64%

Source: LSEG Refinitiv data compiled by AJ Bell

gifting and the collapse of Venezuela's economy. He was often compared to the doomed Manchester United manager David Moyes. But Menezes ended up being lionised as one of the best business leaders of his generation. Just as the early criticism was excessive, so, probably, was the eventual adulation. Menezes unwisely increased Diageo's forecast sales growth to 5-7 per cent at the peak of the Covid era. Crew may have been too respectful of his legacy – last year she told me that

Menezes was “a father to this company” (she also said I reminded her of Barbara Walters, the late American broadcaster who specialised in encounters with lachrymose celebrities). She clung to that unrealistic sales range for too long, finally dropping it amid the smoke of Donald Trump's tariff threats last week. There are mixed views among analysts over whether the drinks industry's woes are cyclical – and will fade as cost of living pressures ease – or something more enduring related to less thirst for alcohol among younger people. UBS is in the first camp: it thinks Diageo is back where it was a decade ago, and that with “consistent execution”, it will recover. Crew and new finance director Nik Jhangiani want to lighten the balance sheet, which is loaded with almost \$22 billion of debt, and focus on cost cuts and improved productivity. Another drab set of results last week revealed modest market-share gains, including in the US. But that's not a particularly inspiring story. Trevor Stirling, a Bernstein analyst who is more in the second camp, said the company was “bouncing along the bottom”, with no obvious catalyst for a

re-rating in sight. Crew, 54, a former US military intelligence officer who served in Bosnia, has not been a sparkling communicator. She struggled to explain why Diageo missed the looming sales slide in Latin America until late 2023, and lost some City credibility by sticking with the overly ambitious sales forecast. A former colleague told me last year that her style of presenting strategies could be “off the wall” – that “the music didn't quite match the words”. Diageo needs a clearer narrative about how it is going to pick itself up off the pub floor, based on more convincing measures. The lack of deep industry experience in its top ranks – Crew and Jhangiani both built their careers in the broader consumer goods sector – may be a hindrance in this regard. As long as the competition remains in the doldrums, Diageo should be able to hold off external calls for change. If it starts to lag behind the others, it will become dangerously exposed. Another successor – Sir John Manzoni, who made his name in oil rather than alcoholic liquids – took over as chairman from

former Bacardi boss Javier Ferrán last week. He has much to mull as he savours a weekend dram. Trump carries on attacking PE It is curious to see Donald Trump revive his threat to crack down on private equity, given his plans to roll over trillions of dollars in tax cuts that will benefit the rich. But the 47th president wants to do what he backed down from doing as the 45th and raise the rate of tax that dealmakers pay on carried interest. In the US, it is 20 per cent, far lower than the 37 per cent top income tax rate. Governments occasionally vow to close this “loophole”, then realise it will only work with global co-ordination. PE firms are mobile and good at persuading politicians they will move to lower-tax climes. Rachel Reeves raised the tax on carry to 34 per cent – still well below a top income tax rate of 45 per cent. If Trump gets his wish into law in the ancestral home of private equity – which is very unlikely – it could be existential for the industry. Expect maximum lobbying leverage to be applied. oliver.shah@sunday-times.co.uk

Interest rates are falling. When do we feel the benefit?



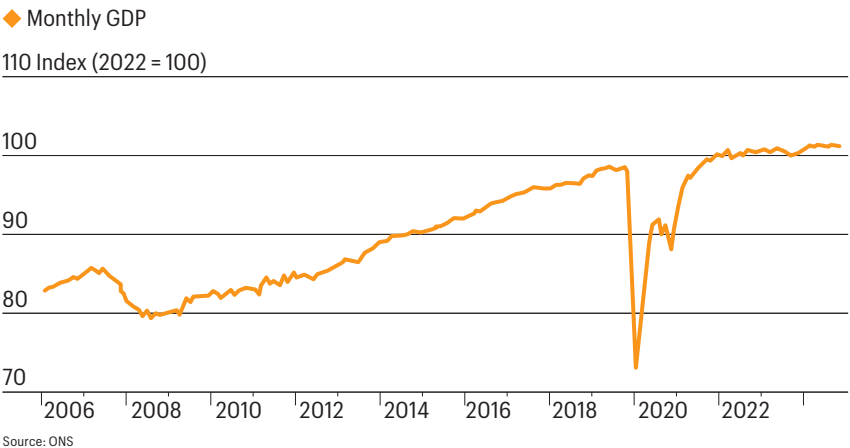
David Smith Economic Outlook

The Bank of England did what it had to do on Thursday in cutting interest rates. To have not done so, as I wrote a few days ago, would have been playing with fire, so solid were market expectations of a reduction from 4.75 to 4.5 per cent in Bank rate. But while the outcome was widely anticipated, these operas are never over until the Old Lady (of Threadneedle Street) sings and the announcement is made. Although the decision was predicted, it did not come without surprises. Indeed, there was a “knock me down with a feather” aspect to the monetary policy committee (MPC) vote to cut rates. All nine members voted to cut and two by 50 basis points – half a percentage point – rather than the 25 agreed upon by the majority. The big surprise was that one of the half-point cutters, the previously “hawkish” Catherine Mann, had been expected to vote to keep rates on hold. The Bank's new forecast also contained some surprises. It would be wrong, I think, to describe the UK economic outlook as “stagflation”, which many rushed to do. An unexpectedly sharp rise in inflation in the third quarter of this year, to 3.7 per cent, is in its view due to higher energy bills and other regulated prices, including water charges. It should be temporary, with any “second round” effects through higher wages limited by a looser labour market, though getting back to the 2 per cent target rate of inflation will take a while. As for the downgrade in the Bank's growth forecast, from 1.5 to 0.75 per cent, this was expected as it reflects what has already happened – the economy's weakness in the second half of last year – with the Bank expecting that this week's gross domestic product (GDP) figures will show a 0.1 per cent fall in the final quarter of last year. With GDP in the current quarter predicted to be only 0.4 per cent above the corresponding period of last year, a halving of growth for this calendar year was perhaps inevitable. The way in which interest rate changes affect economic growth, known as the transmission mechanism, has evolved. The Bank, however, has not become noticeably gloomier about the growth outlook. It sees GDP rising by 1.5 per cent over the 12 months to the first quarter of next year, only marginally down on its previous 1.6 per cent projection. The growth forecast for the following 12 months is 1.3 per cent against a previous prediction of 1.1 per cent, though this is nothing to write home about. Why – when interest rates have started to fall, and are set for further reductions – isn't the growth outlook sunnier? It is an interesting question, and although some will blame the government's fiscal policy (though higher public spending boosts growth), it is worth explaining why. At one time, it was straightforward enough. Most people buying their homes, owner-occupiers, had mortgages, and most were on variable

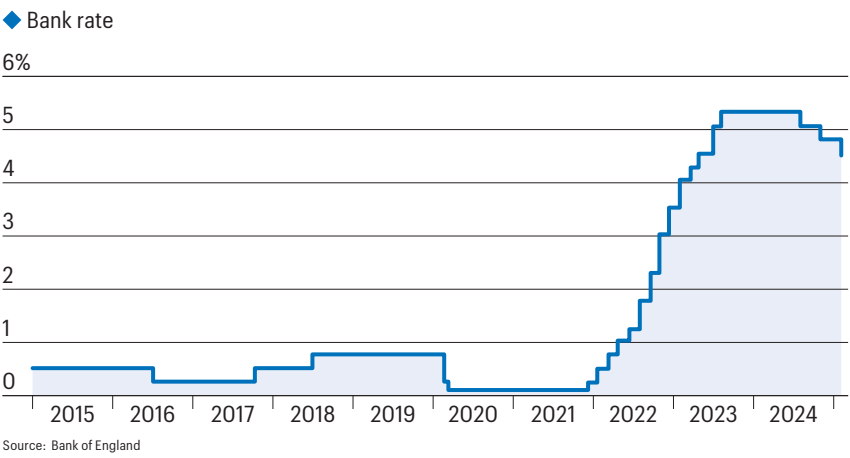
Remember that the economy's been through a huge shift in the cost of borrowing rates. Every time official interest rates changed, there was an immediate effect: monthly mortgage payments went up or down, either forcing households to reduce other spending, or, in the case of a cut in interest rates, encouraging them to increase it. Monetary policy was thus a potent weapon of short-term economic management. Tax changes, by contrast, took longer to be decided upon, and longer to affect the economy. True, interest rate cuts reduced the income of savers. The calculation was that mortgage borrowers, who tended to be younger, such as families with children at home, were more likely to spend any net gains than savers were to reduce spending. In economic terms, they had a higher marginal propensity to consume. A cut in interest rates put more money into the hands of higher-spending borrowing households, so boosting growth.

Things have changed. More than ten years ago, in 2013-14, the number of owner-occupiers owning their homes outright overtook the number buying with mortgages. Official figures show that in 2023-24, 16 million households were in owner-occupied homes, 65 per cent of all tenures. Of this, 35 per cent of owner-occupiers owned outright, while 30 per cent were buying with a mortgage. The remaining tenures were private renting, 19 per cent (4.7 million households), and social renting, 16 per cent (4 million). That is not the only change. Less than 10 per cent of outstanding mortgages are on standard variable rates, with a big majority of borrowers on fixed rates, in contrast to the situation in the past. The combination of these factors means that when official interest rates are cut, as now, the pass-through to demand is slower than it used to be. This is a mirror image of what happened when interest rates were on the way up. Although the Bank began raising rates in December 2021, this did not result in an overall squeeze on households until two years later, December 2023. Saver households gained more than borrower households lost, many of whom had yet to re-fix their mortgages. Mortgages and savings are not the only way in which changes in official interest rates feed through into economic activity, but they are an important one. Much business borrowing is also on fixed rates, as are most buy-to-let mortgages.

THE ECONOMY IS FLATLINING ...



... AS INTEREST RATES EDGE LOWER



PS Talking of growth, I was discussing this recently with old friends and former colleagues Mihir Bose and Nigel Dudley, in our Three Old Hacks podcast. It is available, as they say, on all the usual platforms, though a minnow in comparison with the chart toppers. The issue was how people “feel” economic growth, because they don't spend any time talking about GDP figures in the Dog & Duck. Inflation is easy enough, because everybody can see when prices are rising; growth is harder to spot. Perhaps it is a general sense of economic wellbeing. An economy without growth will cause higher unemployment, recalling the adage that it is a recession when your neighbour loses his or her job, a depression when you lose yours. Fortunately, I have a foolproof way of spotting growth. I am talking, of course, about my age-old skip index, based on the number of builders' skips on my street, where zero is equal to no growth or recession, two show an economy growing in line with trend, and four mark an unsustainable boom. It has been quite a fallow period, but there is one skip on the street now, suggesting – whatever this week's figures for fourth-quarter 2024 growth show – that the economy is just about recording a pulse during the first quarter of 2025. david.smith@sunday-times.co.uk

Trump is looking towards his legacy

Irwin Stelzer American Account

Trump threatened Mexico and Canada with swingeing, 25 per cent tariffs unless they devoted more resources to controlling the flood of fentanyl crossing their borders into the US. That triggered a massive share sell-off and a precipitous collapse in stock prices. Both countries agreed to shore up their border controls. Trump called off the tariffs. By the end of the trading day, share prices were about where they had been when traders were sipping their morning coffees (Starbucks shares up 3 per cent). Kevin Hassett, the estimable head of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers, had it right when he warned that his boss's move was not the start of a trade war, but a war on drugs. The lesson to be learned is that economists must change their focus. We are accustomed to pointing out that tariffs are bad news. They slow growth, burden consumers, upset intricate supply chains. To which the answer now is: “So what?” Yes, some tariffs are about trade. Call them trade tariffs. But in Trump's hands, the power of tariffs to deny access to the world's largest consumer and investment market is a hammer aimed at more nails than mere trade deficits. Call them policy tariffs. Given Trump's plan to use tariffs as a cudgel in economic policy areas having nothing to do with trade, consistency demands that we measure their cost against a wide variety of benefits. We now see that they can add to border security and fewer deaths from fentanyl – 10,000 Mexican troops on our border and Canada adding helicopters to be used by a new Border Czar surely count as benefits to be tallied against any costs associated with the tariff threat. To the benefits from the threat of tariffs must be added the willingness of countries of origin to accept deported illegal aliens who are charged with often heinous crimes. Venezuelan gang members and other illegal miscreants are being frogmarched onto planes, headed to whence they came, or to Guantanamo, no longer threats to the safety and security of American citizens. Suppose the threat of tariffs forces Nato members to come up with more cash for Nato and Ukraine, or the EU to lower its 10 per cent tariff on US autos to the 2 per cent level we charge on those made in the EU. Suppose tariffs on Russian steel force the use of steel made with cleaner technologies, and that tariffs on imported lithium encourage the development of domestic mining that has fewer lethal consequences than those that seem to accompany foreign mining. Or that the 10 per cent tariff on Chinese imports, on top of those imposed in the last round, does staunch exports of fentanyl precursors to Mexico and the US. Something China's rather restrained response suggests is within reach of a Trump-Xi negotiation. China responded rather mildly, signalling a desire to negotiate. It didn't tariff soybeans, political touch paper for Trump, and restricted exports of only a few rare minerals. Consultants at Capital Economics reckon that China levied fees on about \$20 billion worth of US products, compared with the \$450

billion of Chinese products covered by Trump's threatened tariffs. All of which has been taken as a signal of a willingness to deal on a wide range of issues. Trade wars are for men of little vision. Grand policy settlements are for men with their eyes on history, Trump's on a Nobel Peace Prize, Xi's on returning China to the centre of world affairs. On the domestic front, Trump is engaged in a different war – to best the bureaucracy in a battle to shrink the government, pressing hard on constitutional guardrails. His hit-man, Elon Musk, dismantled USAID, retaining only 290 of the 10,000 employees who have been doling out some \$40 billion of foreign aid annually, including \$40,000 for seminars on gender identity at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, and millions to LGBTQ groups in Cyprus,



We are witnessing a drive to establish a new American imperium

Serbia, Albania, Slovakia and Africa. Law suits under way. Finally, we are witnessing a drive to establish a new American *imperium*. Greenland, with its natural resources and strategic location, is to be brought under American control, heading off the Russians and Chinese in the Arctic. Control of the Panama Canal is to be regained, a threat that has prompted Panama's president to withdraw his country from its Belt and Road Deal with China, cancelling contracts with Chinese firms involved in the Canal. There's more. America is to “take over” Gaza. Its two million inhabitants will be offered “beautiful homes” elsewhere to follow the 150,000 who have moved on since October 2023. The Gaza strip will become “the Riviera of the Middle East,” just as Beirut was “the Paris of the Middle East” until Hezbollah emerged. Hamas sees a launching pad from which to destroy Israel. Trump breaks a taboo on discussing alternatives. He sees a 365-square-kilometre demolition site cleared, its 40 kilometres of Mediterranean coastline glistening with luxury hotels, condos and casinos. A legacy to rival the Pharaoh's pyramids. Better even than the Nobel Peace Prize. irwin@irwinstelzer.com Irwin Stelzer is a business adviser

RICK AND I
STARTED OFF WITH
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The cash Isa is cherished by millions of savers, favoured for its simplicity, security and generous tax perks. More than £41 billion was added to these accounts in the 2022-23 tax year, compared with £28 billion invested in the stocks and shares equivalents.

But the cash Isa may be under threat. The chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is being lobbied by the City to limit the tax breaks it offers, to encourage savers to invest more of their money and help to boost the UK economy. She has not rebuffed the idea.

Adults get a £20,000 annual allowance that can be spread across the various types of Isa, including cash; stocks and shares; and Lifetime Isas, which are aimed at saving for a first home or retirement. Any interest earned on cash, or gains made on shares in an Isa are tax-free for life, unlike standard savings and investments accounts.

As with all investing, holding money in a stocks and shares Isa comes with the risk of losses, which is why many savers prefer cash Isas, especially fixed-rate accounts where the return is guaranteed. High interest rates since 2022 have added to their appeal.

But critics say that the amount of money stuck in cash Isas is damaging to the economy. The economic secretary to the Treasury, Emma Reynolds criticised the hundreds of billions of pounds saved in cash Isas, which could be invested in the London stock market. She said the UK was “lacking an investment culture”.

Investing might be better for the economy, but would a switch to stocks and shares Isas benefit savers? We crunch the numbers

CASH V STOCKS

Fixed-rate cash Isas have surged in popularity thanks to higher interest rates over the past three years. The Bank of England base rate, which affects high street savings and mortgage rates, hit a 15-year high of 5.25 per cent in August 2023 and stayed there for 12 months.

It is now on its way back down, dropping from 4.75 per cent to 4.5 per cent on Thursday. Although savers can still find fixed-rate cash Isas paying more than 4 per cent, these will not stick around for long.

For anyone thinking about getting the best return on their Isa over the long term, however, the numbers only point one way. Laura Suter from the investment platform AJ Bell said: “While cash interest rates may have been higher recently, it’s important to see this as a small snapshot in time rather than the normal trend.

“History shows us that investing delivers higher returns than cash and inflation over long periods, which can supercharge your future savings.”

According to the latest Barclays Equity Gilt Study – the world’s longest running analysis of global stock markets – UK shares returned an average of 1.2 per cent a year above inflation in the decade to 2023. Cash savings, on the other hand, fell 3.1 per cent in real terms.

Investing has outperformed cash for as long as the study has been running: £100 invested in cash in 1899 would be worth more than £22,000 today, while the same amount invested in UK government bonds would be worth just under £36,000. If £100 had been invested in a basket of UK shares in 1899, with the basket updated twice since, it would be worth about £3.7 million today.

Rob Morgan, the chief investment analyst at the wealth manager Charles Stanley, said: “Sadly lots of people in the UK hold too much cash and not enough in investments, which is a missed opportunity to drive long-term wealth creation.

“Other assets, such as shares, don’t



Savers have billions stashed in tax-free savings accounts but ministers may prefer your money to be in the stock market. Do they have a point, and is it worth the risk, ask Rachel Mortimer and Ali Hussain

Time to end the love affair with your cash Isa?

Cash doesn’t significantly outpace inflation over long periods

offer immediate security of capital, and you could get back less than you invest. Yet over long periods leaving too much in cash could end up being more damaging to your wealth than taking risks with investments, even though it’s bumpy at times, because cash doesn’t significantly outpace inflation over long periods.”

Someone who maxed out their £20,000 allowance every year for the next ten years would have £223,374, assuming AJ Bell’s predicted return of 2 per cent a year from a cash Isa. The same sums invested in stocks and shares returning the predicted 5 per cent a year after fees would give £264,136 – £40,762 more, AJ Bell said.

The difference is amplified over longer periods. Investing £20,000 a year for 20

years into a stocks and shares Isa returning 5 per cent after fees would give you £694,385, whereas the same amount held in a 2 per cent cash Isa would give £495,666 – £198,719 less.

SHOULD YOU SWITCH TO STOCKS AND SHARES?

It depends. Investing is generally only suitable for money that will not be needed for the next five years or more, Suter said.

“Make sure you have paid off any expensive debt and that you have your emergency savings in cash, as well as any money you’ll need in five years – for a big holiday, a new car or buying a home.

“Any money beyond what you need in

the next five years could be ideal for investing. And if you have longer you could invest in higher-risk investments because you will have longer to ride out the ups and downs of more volatile markets.”

Cash Isas have their benefits, especially as higher interest rates mean that savings held outside Isas risk triggering tax bills. The personal savings allowance allows basic-rate taxpayers to earn £1,000 a year of interest outside an Isa without paying tax, while higher-rate taxpayers can earn £500. Additional rate payers get no allowance. Any interest earned above the allowances is subject to income tax.

You could also earn interest on cash held in investment Isas. “Some now offer extremely attractive rates of interest on cash savings. That means you can earn interest on your savings until you are ready to dip your toe into the stock market, by holding both cash and investments in one Isa account,” Suter said.

AJ Bell pays 2.07 per cent on up to £10,000 on uninvested cash held in a stocks and shares Isa and 2.42 per cent up to £100,000, then 3.09 per cent on sums above that.

Brian Byrnes from the savings app Moneybox said: “Cash Isas are perfect for anyone looking to build up emergency savings and achieve short-to medium-term financial goals.

“Once people have the peace of mind and security that cash savings provide they are more likely to have the confidence to start investing for their future, but this shouldn’t be rushed.”

Suter said: “While the government’s push for growth and increased investment is admirable, it is hard to imagine any future Isa framework that doesn’t at least allow investors to hold a decent chunk of their fund in cash.”

HOW TO TRANSFER CASH TO STOCKS AND SHARES

Any move of funds between Isas must be done properly to keep the tax benefits intact. Don’t just close one account, withdraw the funds and invest them in another Isa. You will need to fill out a transfer form with the company that will be managing your new account – it may

£41.6bn

The amount added to cash Isas in the 2022-23 tax year

£28bn

The amount added to stocks and shares Isas in the 2022-23 tax year

£300bn

The total amount invested in cash Isas today

What maxing out an Isa could give you

Years held	Cash Isa	Stocks and Shares Isa	Difference
5	£106,162	£116,038	£9,876
10	£223,374	£264,136	£40,761
15	£352,786	£453,150	£100,364
20	£495,666	£694,385	£198,719

Assuming full £20,000 contribution each year, 5% investment growth after fees and 2% cash interest

Source: AJ Bell

be the same firm that holds your cash Isa or a new one. It should sort out the rest within a few weeks, although transfer delays are not uncommon.

It is not necessary to empty the cash Isa completely – you can transfer some money and leave the rest. Crucially, however much is transferred will not eat into your £20,000 annual allowance for the year if done correctly.

Some firms charge to transfer stocks and shares Isas, so if you are moving your investments around, check for fees first. Leaving a fixed cash Isa before its maturity will also incur exit fees.

But don’t let the admin put you off. Morgan said: “Savers are benefiting from high headline returns compared with a few years back, as well as easy, digital methods of moving money around. They shouldn’t ignore the basic principle that keeping too much in cash can be counter-productive in the longer run.”

I'M ALL FOR INVESTING, BUT CASH ISAS HAVE THEIR PLACE
Ian Cowie, page 11

Johanna Noble Money Editor

Your mortgage might get cheaper but everything else could cost more



At last!” mortgage holders rejoiced on Thursday as the Bank of England cut its base rate down to 4.5 per cent.

After a bumpy start to the year, with turmoil in the bond markets quickly dashing hopes of a January mortgage rate war, it looks as if rates are now finally on their way down.

Barclays, Lloyds and HSBC were among 15 lenders who cut prices on fixed-rate deals before the anticipated announcement on Thursday. Shortly after the Bank’s decision, Santander cut its variable-rate mortgages by 0.25 percentage points.

While we won’t return to the heady days of sub-2 per cent mortgages, rates are at

least becoming more affordable.

In November 2022, just after the disastrous mini budget, the average two-year fixed mortgage rate was 5.9 per cent. Now it is about 4.5 per cent. Someone with a £300,000 loan over 25 years at 5.9 per cent would pay about £250 a month less at 4.5 per cent, taking their repayments to about £1,660.

But while your mortgage costs may drop, it’s unlikely that you will have much spare cash in your pockets – if any at all.

That’s because the Bank of England had some gloomy news too. Only three months after it said that it expected UK growth to be 1.5 per cent in 2025, it has cut that prediction in half to 0.75 per

cent. It has also forecast that inflation will rise to 3.7 per cent this year, as energy bills go up.

Gas and electricity prices went up on January 1 when the latest Ofgem energy price cap took effect. The latest predictions are that the cap, which limits what suppliers can charge customers on standard variable tariffs, could go up as much as 5.7 per cent in April.

The problem with inflation is that a drop in the rate does not mean prices are coming down – it only means they are not rising as fast. So that expensive grocery bill is here to stay.

If inflation started to take off in a significant way again it would add a huge burden to households – though it’s

unlikely that we are heading back to the double-digit inflation we saw in 2022. Fingers crossed.

A stalling economy and out-of-control inflation: it looks as if we could be heading for stagflation, a mix of the two. Britain was battered by extreme stagflation in 1974 and 1975 when the economy shrank 2.5 per cent and 1.5 per cent respectively, while inflation hit 16 per cent and 24.2 per cent. The government had to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund in 1976.

Stagflation defies fiscal logic. Prices should not rise if no one is spending. And it’s a tricky thing to solve. The tools often used to combat the two problems are opposites.

Inflation often happens when there is too much spending, stagnation when there is too little. In a recession, you can cut interest rates to stimulate growth. With stagflation, cutting rates might help to boost growth but can further exacerbate inflation.

How the government decides to tackle this is yet to be seen, but it will cost a lot of money. Rachel Reeves has pledged not to increase taxes further, but with the “fiscal headroom” – the spare cash in the Treasury attic – having seemingly evaporated into all the little holes that needed to be filled, a U-turn looks more likely.

I wouldn’t be surprised. It could be a taxing year for us all.

@JohannaMNoble

The handy shortcut that could take a year off your electric car tax

Jack Simpson

Electric vehicle owners could delay paying road tax by up to a year by using a simple trick.

Electric cars will no longer be exempt from vehicle excise duty from April 1 and how much you pay depends on when your vehicle was first registered.

Road tax will be £20 a year for EVs registered before March 31, 2017 and £195 for those registered between April 1, 2017 and March 31, 2025.

For cars registered after

April 1 this year, drivers will pay £10 in the first year, then £195 a year.

But those subject to the higher £195 charge could avoid it by sorting out their tax early.

Although EVs are exempt from road tax, drivers must still register their vehicle using a V5C Registration Certificate (logbook) each year. Electric vehicles that are retaxed in March – even if the tax is not due yet – will be zero-rated for a full year and will not be liable for road tax until the next time they renew.

Quentin Wilson, the founder of the renewable energy campaign group Faircharge, said: “Taxing your EV before April 2025 will give you an extra year of zero road tax. It’s a simple and perfectly legal trick of extending the government’s concession and it is easy to do on the government’s website.”

Taxing a vehicle online is

easy – you just need the car’s registration number and the V5C form. Once on the government website, you will be asked to confirm that you want to tax your car early, which you should accept.

Drivers can retax their vehicle any time before March 31 to take advantage of this relief, and will pay the usual rate of vehicle excise duty at renewal next year. Bear in mind that new cars costing £40,000 or more and registered from April 1, 2025 will also be subject to an “expensive car supplement”, now £410, which you cannot avoid.

Jack Cousins from the AA motoring group said that EV drivers who do not own their cars outright may not be able to benefit. “A large proportion of EVs are company cars or run through a salary sacrifice scheme, so therefore they won’t be able to use the system as their vehicle will be taxed through a leasing company,” he said.

Ian Cowie Personal Account

I’m all for investing, but you need balance. Cash Isas should still have a place in your heart

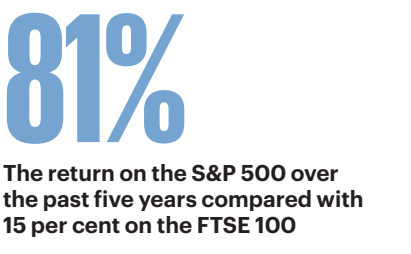


Nobody should ask a barber if they need a haircut and then be surprised by the reply. Similarly, if you seek financial advice from a fund manager, don’t be amazed when she or he recommends that you buy more funds.

Now City suits are lobbying the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, to block cash Isas and encourage more people to invest in the stock market. The Financial Times reported that big firms have urged the chancellor to scale back tax breaks for cash Isas. And speaking to the Lords financial regulation committee on Wednesday, the economic secretary to the Treasury, Emma Reynolds, added further fuel to the debate after she said that the UK had “failed to drive an investment culture”.

Let me say straight away that nobody is a keener devotee of the cult of the equity than me. The last time I saved in cash was for a Raleigh Wayfarer bicycle, when I was a schoolboy. Since then, it’s always been stock market-based pooled funds and direct shareholdings in individual companies.

Why? Because cash is not as “risk-free” as it seems. Inflation insidiously erodes the real value, or purchasing



power, of cash savings because most accounts do not pay enough interest to keep pace with rising retail prices.

Never mind the theory, you would need nearly £20 today to buy the same things £10 bought when Tony Blair became prime minister, according to the Bank of England. To be precise, a tenner in May, 1997, was worth the same as £19.34 today.

Nor is this a party political thing, because the purchasing power of sterling tends to shrink whoever forms a government. For example, £10 when David Cameron became prime minister in 2010 would match £15.16 today.

Put like that, many miserly bank savings rates seem more like a return-free risk than a risk-free return. By contrast, stock markets have often rewarded long-term investors for accepting the danger that prices might fall. For example, £1,000 invested in the FTSE 100 index of Britain’s biggest shares a decade ago would be worth £1,887 today, according to the investment platform Interactive Investor. The return on the Standard & Poor’s 500 index of US stocks would have taken a £1,000 investment to £4,387 over the past ten years.

Meanwhile, according to the comparison website Moneyfacts, the same sum held in the best fixed-term savings accounts would have grown to £1,263 – bear in mind that you would need £1,355 just to match inflation.

Against all that, the London Stock Exchange’s (LSE) proposals to scrap cash Isas overlook the fact that not everyone can afford to accept the thrills and spills of the stock market. There is nothing theoretical about the risk of catastrophic loss.

As pointed out here before, the FTSE 100 has nearly halved in value twice this century and will probably do so again before I am past caring. The first peak to trough plunge occurred after a technology bubble burst in 2000. Sounds familiar? The second halving happened during the global financial crisis of 2008.

However, investing internationally can help to diminish risk by diversification. This is because it reduces our exposure to the danger that any single country – including the one we live in – might do something silly.

This raises another worry about self-serving proposals from the LSE and some British fund managers. They not only want cash Isas scrapped but for stock market investments within Isas to be restricted to British funds and shares.

When the Conservatives first came up with this wheeze to force company pensions to be more patriotic, I asked in this space how much of the

Parliamentary retirement fund was invested in Britain. Answer came there none but the investment bank Peel Hunt reckons that UK shares represent 1.3 per cent of MPs’ pension pot.

That’s less than half the 3 per cent of all global equities’ value represented by London shares, according to Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI). This falls a long way short of a ringing endorsement from our politicians.

Why don’t they lead by example? Without wishing to be too personal, why won’t the chancellor and other politicians follow disclosures by US congress members and tell us where they have invested their own money?

Now that would be interesting. A bit like my “forever fund” where anyone can see all the funds and shares online at any time. Full disclosure – my top ten by value is led by three Americans: the tractor-maker Deere; the iPhone giant Apple; and the burger-flipper McDonald’s. Then it’s the Franco-Italian eyewear firm EssilorLuxottica; the USA’s weight-loss wonder drug-maker Eli Lilly; the British consumer goods giant



Unilever; the Australian miner BHP; the German sports goods group Adidas; the self-descriptive, London-listed investment trust Ecofin Global Utilities and Infrastructure; and the American oil giant Exxon Mobil.

Don’t blame me for half the top ten being Yanks; that’s where 66 per cent by value of all the shares on this planet are listed, according to MSCI. Reeves can talk about “going for growth” as much

as she likes but the FTSE 100 delivered total returns of 15 per cent over the past five years, while America’s Standard & Poor’s 500 soared 81 per cent.

MPs scarcely need to bother with markets. Fortunately for them, they can all rely on the good old taxpayer to subsidise gold-plated, risk-free pensions, based on career average earnings.

No wonder the pensions minister, Ed Miliband’s former adviser, Torsten Bell,

has already given the thumbs up. Bell indicated in more than one tweet, since deleted, that he is quite relaxed about the rest of us being forced to take more risk with our life savings. Cheers, mate!

More positively, stock market funds and shares should reward medium to long-term investors for the risk these assets entail by delivering higher real returns than bank or building society savings. Share prices fluctuate constantly but tend to rise over most periods of five years or more.

But there is plenty of evidence that short-term speculation is a much riskier game for people who might need their money back within five years. As I pointed out here the other day, the Barclays Equity Gilt Study has analysed stock market returns since 1899. It found that shares beat cash in 70 per cent of all the periods of two years. So there was a 30 per cent chance that cash savers would do better than short-term speculators. However, over five-year periods, shares did best 77 per cent of the time and, over any decade, they beat cash 91 per cent of the time.

So rather than listening to lobbyists who want to ditch cash Isas, I believe Reeves should opt for a different tactic. She could start by scrapping stamp duty on shares, because Britain is one of the few countries to impose a tax on investments in stocks.

Finally, before the government considers forcing millions of small savers with cash Isas to run the risk of a haircut they won’t like, she should ask her new best friends in the Square Mile why they are so keen to spend more time with our money. Remember, the City definition of a stock broker is a person who invests your life savings until they are all gone.

ST DIGITAL
Read a breakdown of Ian Cowie’s “forever fund”
thesundaytimes.com/cowieholdings

Annuity action: lock in a retirement income before rates start to fall

Lucy Andrews

Savers considering buying an annuity to help fund their retirement may need to act quickly before rates fall.

Annuities are insurance products that pay a guaranteed income for life in exchange for a lump sum, usually taken from your pension pot.

The amount of income you can buy is linked to the Bank of England base rate, which was cut 0.25 percentage points on Thursday to 4.5 per cent.

Experts are expecting annuity rates to start falling as a result, which means that pensioners will get less for their money. This may not happen immediately, because a rate cut was widely expected and had already been baked in to rates by many insurers.

Annuity rates are also influenced by government bonds, known as gilts, because insurers buy these to fund the guaranteed incomes that they pay out to annuity holders.

Mark Ormston from the

annuity firm Retirement Line said: “All projections are pointing to annuity rates being lower at the end of the year than they are today.”

Annuities have become more popular since the Bank of England started raising its rate. It went from a record low of 0.1 per cent in December 2021 to a peak of 5.25 per cent for the year until August 2024.

Last year £5.2 billion of savings was used to buy annuities, according to the trade body the Association of

British Insurers, up 46 per cent on 2022. Despite recent cuts to Bank rate, annuity rates have been going up. A 70-year-old in good health with a £100,000 lump sum last week could buy an income of £8,320 for life, up from £7,920 in August.

Ormston said that annuities were still rising because gilts had not followed Bank rate downwards. They have increased amid concerns about borrowing and the UK economy.

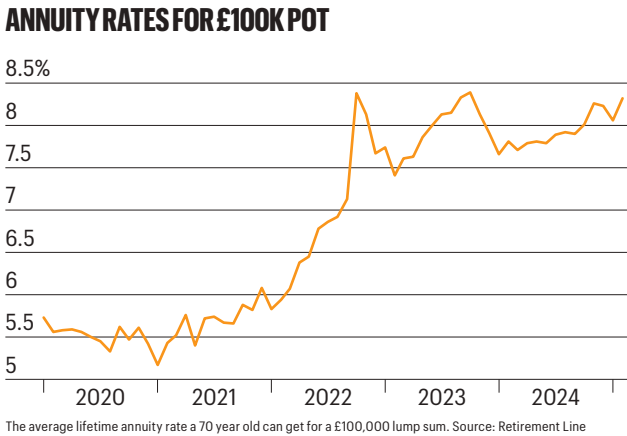
“It means that someone needing an annuity in the very near future might find that it makes sense to act now,” said Ed Monk from the investment platform Fidelity International.

The main appeal of an annuity is the guaranteed income. You do not have the stress of managing an investment portfolio in retirement or have to worry about your pension pot running out.

Annuities are inflexible, however – once you have bought one there is no going back. They cannot be passed on when you die unless you have chosen a specific policy that pays out to a spouse (these annuities typically pay a lower income).

Savers can mix and match at retirement, using some of their savings to buy an annuity that will pay enough to cover essential outgoings, and leaving the rest invested to continue to benefit from market growth.

It is usually recommended to take advice before buying an annuity, and to always shop around for the best rate.



The average lifetime annuity rate a 70 year old can get for a £100,000 lump sum. Source: Retirement Line

‘Poor value’ Hargreaves funds hold £800m

Ali Hussain

Hargreaves Lansdown has admitted that four of its in-house funds, holding almost £1.4 billion of customer money, are performing poorly.

The company – the largest DIY investment platform in Britain – made the admission in its latest assessment of value report, which fund managers are required to produce to justify their fees.

The four failing funds are its £672 million Global Bond, £431 million Multi-Manager UK Growth, £148 million Emerging Markets, and £134 million Select UK

Income fund. Hargreaves said the first three funds have reduced their fees since last year, but the report covering the year to September 2024 is likely to add pressure to lower charges further.

It also concluded that a further five funds required “additional focus to deliver value” in terms of their performance. These were: MM European (£166 million under management), High Income (£431 million), UK Income (£1.8 billion), MM Special Situations (£1.8 billion) and the US fund (£1.36 billion).

The report assessed at least one year’s worth of

performance data from 19 funds. Only 10 were found to offer value compared with the performance of benchmark funds – typically low-cost tracker funds that invest in similar companies to the manager of the fund being assessed.

For example, Hargreaves Lansdown said that over the 12 months to September 30, its Select UK Income fund, which charges 0.6 per cent a year, returned 11.6 per cent, while the FTSE all-share index, against which it is assessed, returned 13.4 per cent. If you had invested in the Vanguard FTSE all-share tracker fund, which has

annual fees of 0.06 per cent, your returns would have been 13.34 per cent after charges.

Despite the poor performance, only two funds – Emerging Markets and Global Bond – were assessed to offer poor value overall. This is because the others were assessed to be good for measures such as “service quality” and whether they passed on economies of scale to customers, for example in the form of lower costs.

Hargreaves Lansdown said: “Of the funds assessed, 90 per cent are delivering value according to our rigorous assessment.”

The Scottish American Investment Company (SAINTS)

Tempted by a tasty short-term yield? You could regret it.



There are investments out there offering some mouth-watering short-term yield figures. Understandably, it’s all too easy to bite. Trouble is, succumbing to short-term temptation can be fatal when it comes to long-term growth. The Scottish American Investment Company (SAINTS) focuses on capital growth as well as income. Aiming for growth plus yield. You could fall for the short-term trap. Or you could take a longer-term view – and let your investment mature.

Please remember that changing stock market conditions and currency exchange rates will affect the value of the investment in the fund and any income from it. Investors may not get back the amount invested.

Find out more at saints-it.com
A Key Information Document is available. Call 0800 917 2112.

Baillie Gifford
Actual Investors

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How crypto became a must-have for fraudsters

As bitcoin and other digital currencies soar in value, they are fast becoming essential tools for criminals, warns *Jack Simpson*

The number of reported crimes involving crypto has more than doubled as fraudsters turn to bitcoin and other currencies to scam their victims out of thousands of pounds.

In 2023 there were 10,308 crime reports about crypto investments, according to the latest figures from the City of London police, which takes the lead on this type of crime for the whole country – up from 5,106 in 2020. Victims lost £175.2 million in crypto-related scams in 2023 at an average of £17,000 each.

Cryptocurrency, a digital form of money that does not require involvement from banks, was used in 40 per cent of the investment scams reported to Action Fraud, the national reporting centre for fraud and cybercrime, in the 12 months to January 31 last year.

It is also being used in romance scams and employment frauds as criminals take advantage of the lack of regulation around digital currencies.

“The use of cryptocurrency in scams is rife. It’s making it too easy for fraudsters to disappear with scam victims’ money without trace,” said Martin Richardson, the owner of National Fraud Helpline, a law firm that specialises in fraud cases.

WHAT’S GOING ON?

Interest in bitcoin and other cryptocur-rencies has reached fever pitch. Last month bitcoin hit record highs of \$109,000 when Donald Trump said he

would become the “crypto president” and outlined plans to create a national crypto stockpile after winning the American election.

About 12 per cent of UK adults own crypto, according to a survey last November by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), the City regulator. In 2021 it was 4.4 per cent.

Richard Mbombo, 59, from north London, signed up to the crypto trading platform EvincoInvest in July after seeing a Facebook advert promising significant returns. “I don’t gamble, I don’t do the lottery, but when I saw the advert I thought there may be a chance, let me try,” said Mbombo, a cleaner who has four children.

After he signed up on the website, he was contacted by a manager who said he could make big returns on crypto investments. He initially invested £168 into a trading account and checked that he could withdraw funds. Then he put £1,000 into the account from his savings.

Mbombo was contacted by an employee from EvincoInvest who suggested he take out a loan so that he could invest more. He was told he would make his money back within an hour.

“Everything seemed very genuine, I

couldn’t suspect anything wrong in what I was doing,” Mbombo said.

He took out a £10,000 loan but when he tried to transfer the money from his bank account, the request was refused and his account was locked for 24 hours. EvincoInvest said he should transfer amounts below £5,000 to avoid triggering security checks. He transferred two lots of £4,250 into his EvincoInvest account before his bank blocked a third payment.

After seeing negative reviews and complaints about EvincoInvest online, Mbombo asked to withdraw his money

but was told he could not. He visited the company’s listed headquarters in east London but when he got there he couldn’t find any sign of the firm being based there. The address given for the company online appears to be occupied by a McDonald’s.

When he messaged the company via WhatsApp to ask again for a refund, he was sent abusive messages in reply, Mbombo said. He never got his money back and is still paying off his loan. In October, EvincoInvest was put on the FCA’s warning list of unauthorised firms.

When Mbombo realised he was a vic-

tim of fraud he felt ill. “I was very depressed, and very disappointed. Even now as I talk about this I’m digging the wound inside me. I feel sick.”

WHAT IS CRYPTO?

The first digital currency was bitcoin, launched in 2009. It is virtual money, “mined” by powerful computers solving complex calculations. Coins and transactions are recorded on a digital ledger known as the blockchain.

There are now hundreds of cryptocurrencies and the market is estimated to be worth about \$3.2 trillion. It had been as high as \$3.6 trillion in December.

But crypto is not regulated in the UK, which means you are not protected if you lose money. This has made it a useful tool for fraudsters to take payments from victims because they are harder to trace.

“It’s a lot easier to recover money for fraud victims when crypto isn’t involved, which is why the fraudsters have latched on to it,” Richardson said.

He said that 81 of National Fraud Helpline’s 200 most recent cases involved scammers being sent money via crypto platforms or digital wallets.

Many of these were authorised push payment (APP) frauds, the most common type of financial scam, which involves scammers tricking victims into transferring cash under false pretences. The money is then quickly moved to other accounts, making it hard for banks to detect the fraud and recover the money.

Losses to APP scams were almost £460 million in 2023. Rules brought in by the Payment Systems Regulator in October mean it is now mandatory for banks to reimburse victims of APP fraud unless the victim has shown “gross negligence” in allowing the payment to be made, such as ignoring direct warnings from the bank.

Fraudsters are also posing as “block-chain retrieval companies”, offering to recover lost money to victims for a fee. “We had one client who lost over £200,000 on a crypto investment scam.

Then while he was dealing with us, he lost another £40,000 to one of these companies,” Richardson said.

Alan Jagolinzer, a professor of financial accounting at the University of Cambridge, said: “Because crypto is now mainstream, the risk of people falling for a scam is higher because there is a perception that it is less risky and people feel like they are missing out.” Jagolinzer said crypto had created a “perfect setting for naive people to get duped”.

THE HIGHER THE PRICE, THE HIGHER THE FRAUD COUNT

On Wednesday the price of bitcoin stood at almost \$99,000, up more than 30 per cent since Trump was elected in November. “It definitely helps fraudsters when the crypto market is bullish [rising], whereas when the market is more bearish people are more cautious,” said Daniel Holmes from the fraud prevention tech company Feedzai.

Some banks have taken measures to try to curb crypto fraud. HSBC, for exam-

I don’t gamble but when I saw the ad I thought there might be a chance

ple, limits its customers to £2,500 a day for crypto transactions, with a 30-day maximum of £10,000, while Nationwide has a £5,000 daily limit for customers buying cryptocurrency.

The FCA warns you to be wary if you are contacted out of the blue, pressured to invest quickly or promised returns that sound too good to be true. While cryptocurrency trading is mostly unregulated, with no consumer protections if you lose money because the firm holding it goes bust, companies that want to market crypto investments or provide a crypto trading platform must be registered with the FCA.

To make the FCA’s register, crypto companies must pass money laundering and conflict of interest tests, and have sufficient capital to support the business. You can find its register online, including the correct contact details for approved firms.

Anyone who fears they have been the victim of fraud should contact their bank immediately to get the payment blocked.

Best buys

CURRENT ACCOUNTS

CREDIT INTEREST					
Provider	Account name	Account fee	Interest rate	Balance (for reward)	Contact
Nationwide BS	FlexDirect	None	5% ¹	–	03457 30 20 10
Kroo Bank	Current Account	None	3.4%	–	via app
Starling Bank	Current Account	None	3%	–	0207 930 4450

OVERDRAFTS*					
Provider	Account name	Account fee	Interest rate ²	0% overdraft limit	Contact
Starling Bank	Current Account	None	15%	£0	0207 930 4450
First Direct	1st Account	None	39.9%	£250	0345 600 2424
Virgin Money	M Plus Account	None	19.9%	£0	0800 678 3654

¹Introductory rate for a limited period. ²Equivalent annual rate. ³Based on the lowest cost of an overdraft of £500 over 30 days. Some accounts require minimum funding/direct debits to open or get rates shown

CREDIT CARDS

INTRODUCTORY RATES					
Provider	Card type	Introductory purchase	APR ¹	Reward	Contact
Barclaycard	Platinum Balance Transfer	0% for 22 months	24.9%	No	0800 151 0900
MBNA	Dual 0% Transfer & Purchase	0% for 22 months	24.94%	No	0345 606 2062
Lloyds Bank	0% Purchase and Balance Transfer	0% for 21 months	24.94%	No	0345 603 7239

BALANCE TRANSFERS					
Provider	Card type	Introductory purchase	Transfer fee ²	APR ¹	Contact
Barclaycard	Platinum Balance Transfer	0% for 32 months	3.45%	24.9%	0800 151 0900
NatWest	Longer Balance Transfer	0% for 31 months	3.49%	24.9%	03457 888 444
Royal Bank of Scotland	Longer Balance Transfer	0% for 31 months	3.49%	24.9%	0370 907 0010

CASHBACK CARDS				
Provider	Card type	APR ¹	Cashback	Contact
American Express	Cashback Everyday	30.4%	0.5%-1%, Intro 5% for 5 months (max £125)	0800 917 8047
NatWest	Travel Reward	27.9%	0.1%-1% ³ on spend over £1 a year	03457 888 444
Bank of Scotland	Credit	10.94%	0.25% on spend in first 36 months	0800 328 5984

¹APR = annual percentage rate, dependent on credit rating. ²Fee charged on the amount of each balance transfer during the introductory period

³Eligible travel spend only for higher cashback. Borrowing rates and availability of products are subject to individual credit ratings. Terms apply to cashback

SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

EASY ACCESS				
Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Coventry BS	4 Access Saver	£1	4.85%	coventrybuildingsociety.co.uk
Monument Bank	Limited Access Saver	£25,000	4.75%	via app
Chetwood Bank	Easy Access	£1	4.66%	closesavings.co.uk

NOTICE ACCOUNTS					
Provider	Account name	Notice period	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Prosper	Santander 185 Day Notice Tracker	185 days	£20,000	5.08%	via app
Charter Savings Bank	120 Day Notice Account	120 days	£5,000	4.86%	chartersavingsbank.co.uk
Vida Savings	95-Day NoticeAccount	95 days	£50	4.85%	vidabank.co.uk

LONG-TERM FIXED-RATES					
Provider	Account name	Term	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
JN Bank	5 Year Fixed Term Savings	5 years	£100	4.6%	jnbank.co.uk
Oxbury	5 Year Bond	5 years	£1,000	4.53%	oxbury.com
Shawbrook Bank	5 Year Fixed Rate Bond	5 years	£1,000	4.52%	shawbrook.co.uk

DEALS ARE LISTED ONLY IF THEY ARE COVERED BY THE UK FINANCIAL SERVICES COMPENSATION SCHEME (FSCS) OR A EUROPEAN EQUIVALENT

FOREIGN CURRENCY

Interbank rates at 5pm on Friday, which show where the market is trading. They are not indicative of the rate you could get.

EURO
GBP>EUR

1.19

USA
GBP>USD

1.24

TURKEY
GBP>TRY

44.84

AUSTRALIA
GBP>AUD

1.97



MORTGAGES

2-YEAR FIXED RATES						
Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
First Direct	4.23%	Fixed for 2 years	60%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.69%	Fixed for 2 years	80%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	5.09%	Fixed for 2 years	90%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48

5-YEAR FIXED RATES						
Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
First Direct	4.13%	Fixed for 5 years	60%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.46%	Fixed for 5 years	80%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.74%	Fixed for 5 years	90%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48

LONG-TERM FIXED RATES						
Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Santander	4.44%	Fixed to 02.05.35	60%	£999	PV	0800 555 100
Nationwide BS	4.84%	Fixed for 10 years	80%	£999	PV	0333 060 0325
Nationwide BS	5.19%	Fixed for 10 years	90%	£999	PV	0333 060 0325

TRACKERS* / DISCOUNTS						
Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Nationwide BS	4.94%	Base rate + 0.19% for 2 years	60%	£999	LV	0333 060 0325
Leek BS	4.74%	3.25% discount for 2 years	80%	£995	V	0808 169 6680
Cambridge BS	5.24%	2.8% discount for 2 years	90%	£199	LSV	0345 601 3344

FIRST-TIME BUYER / LOW DEPOSIT						
Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Loughborough BS	5.3%	2.64% discount for 2 years	95%	£0	V	01509 610707
West Bromwich BS	5.34%	Fixed to 30.06.28	95%	£499	V	0800 298 0008
Leek BS	5.08%	Fixed to 30.04.30	95%	£1,495	V	0808 169 6680

BUY TO LET						
Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Santander	4.42%	Fixed to 02.05.27	75%	£1,749	PV	0345 607 3021
The Mortgage Works	4.54%	Fixed to 31.03.27	75%	£1,495		0800 555 100
NatWest	4.42%	Fixed to 31.05.30	75%	£995	LSV	0345 026 0008

Early repayment charge applies unless otherwise stated. *Most deals track Bank of England base rate. A = £500 cashback; B = £250 cashback; C = £300 cashback; D = £350 cashback; E= No early repayment charge; F = First-time buyers only; G = £150 cashback; H = £400 cashback; I = £1,000 cashback; L= Free legal work for remortgages ; P = Purchases only; R = Free legal work and valuation for remortgages; S = Remortgage only; T = £250 towards legal fees; V = Free valuation

CASH ISAs

EASY ACCESS					
Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest	Transfers in	Contact
Trading 212	Cash Isa	£1	4.9%	Yes	trading212.com
Tembo	Bank of Scotland - Tembo Cash Isa	£1	4.8%	Yes	via app

FIXED RATE						
Provider	Account name	Term	Min deposit	Rate	Transfers in	Contact
Coventry BS	1 Year Fixed Rate Cash Isa	1 year	£1	4.5%	Yes	coventrybuildingsociety.co.uk
Hinckley & Rugby BS	5 Year Fixed Rate Cash Isa	5 years	£500	4.25%	Yes	In branch or by post

CHILDREN’S ACCOUNTS

Provider	Account name	Rate type	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Halifax	Kids’ Monthly Saver	Fixed	£10	5.5%	halifax.co.uk
Saffron BS	Children’s Regular Saver	Variable	£5	5.25%	In branch or by post
Coventry BS	Young Saver	Variable	£1	4.75%	In branch

JUNIOR ISAs					
Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest rate	Rate	Contact
Nottingham BS	Junior Isa	£1	4.5%	Variable	In branch
Coventry BS	Junior Isa	£1	4.5%	Variable	In branch or by post
Stafford Railway BS	Junior Isa	£1	4.5%	Variable	In branch or by post



THE TOP FIVE ARTICLES ON TIMES MONEY MENTOR THIS WEEK

Our sister website, Times Money Mentor, has guides, tools and best buys to help you to manage your finances. Here’s what you have been looking at.

1 Best home insurers

Some 51 per cent of us could save an average of £222 on building and contents insurance according to Quotezone. This was one of the most popular pieces for readers in the fifth week of Couch to £5k, our financial fitness course.

2 Savings to have in your 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s

We compare the ideal targets with the actual average savings for different age groups.

3 What is an IVA?

Rebecca Goodman explains how individual voluntary arrangements for clearing debt work, how expensive they can be and how they can affect your credit rating.

4 Best credit cards for earning rewards

A reward credit card can go a long way to help to boost your finances. We list some of the best options and explain how to use your card effectively.

5 Is now a good time to buy US shares?

US stocks have soared over the past two years, but many experts consider the market to be too expensive.

Your Money Matters Lucy Andrews

My parents spent £63k on an Aviva life policy. It's now worth

Our consumer champion delves into the small print of the insurance cover that one couple paid for across 30 years – and finds some disappointing sums

I think my father took out an insurance policy with Aviva 30 years ago, but I am struggling to get to the bottom of how much it is worth. I have been helping my 92-year-old mother sort out her finances. I have power of attorney and in December I discovered a load of letters stuffed into one of my mother's drawers from the insurer Aviva.

The letters were unopened and related to a “maximum protection plan” that my father bought in 1993. He died in 2010. It was the first I had learnt of the policy, but when I contacted Aviva it said it was unable to share details of the plan with me.

It looks to be some sort of insurance policy with a monthly premium of £165. My parents have paid about £63,300 into the plan, but the payout value on death is only about £24,000. There is the option to cash in the policy now for about £22,400.

I've asked my mother what the policy was for, but she doesn't know. I know that my father was trying to plan for a possible inheritance tax liability and wonder if it is something to do with this. I'm at a total loss as to what the policy is and why it is worth so much less than my parents paid in.

Michael, Cumbria

LUCY ANDREWS WRITES

I really sympathise with the tricky situation you have been left in. Dealing with the financial admin that someone leaves behind can be difficult and traumatic, which is why it is helpful to leave clear instructions for your affairs after death.

I asked Aviva to help me unpick this complicated web for you.

Your parents bought a life insurance policy in February 1993 when they were in their early sixties as a way of covering any inheritance tax (IHT) liability. Some families turn to life insurance to provide a lump sum that will settle any tax bill and ensure that their loved ones do not lose a chunk of their inheritance to the taxman.

A married couple buying this insurance would usually opt for a joint life second death policy, which is what your father bought. Anything left to a spouse or civil partner is already exempt from IHT, so the policy instead pays out on the death of the second partner, when anything left over the usual tax-free allowances would trigger a tax bill.

Your parents' policy was written into a trust, which is an important thing to do for IHT purposes because the policy is then considered to be outside your estate, and so won't be subject to the tax. Setting up a trust is complicated and it is best to seek professional advice.

You think a financial adviser helped to set the policy up for your parents, but suspect that they did not fully understand what the policy meant. You think this is why your father left no notes behind, and why your mother does not know what the policy is.

They bought £77,390 of cover – the amount that would be paid out after the second death – and paid a monthly premium set at £164.90. To add to the confusion, Aviva mislabelled the plan as a “maximum protection plan”, which was a different iteration of the plan they originally bought, but luckily this has not affected the way that the policy has been set up. Your father chose a reviewable

policy, which meant that the amount they paid in premiums would be reassessed by the insurer after a certain time, and could rise dramatically with age. It's not uncommon for even fairly wealthy families to be in a position where they are struggling to make the payments in later life.

Your mother continued to pay after your father died in 2010 but in February 2019 Aviva wrote to tell her that her £77,390 level of cover could no longer be maintained without raising the monthly premium. Aviva said she could either pay £297.80 a month to keep her current level of cover, or keep the monthly premium at £164.90, which would mean the level of cover would reduce to £62,650.

Aviva said it had no record of your mother replying, so the default policy was to keep premiums the same.

From that point on Aviva sent annual statements and reviews to your mother, alerting her when premiums needed to increase if she wanted the same cover. Again, your mother didn't reply, so Aviva kept her premium cost but dropped the level of cover until by 2021 it was worth £23,720 – the minimum offered for that type of policy.

There was the option to cash out and close the policy, which would have given her a payout of £22,396.50. But cashing in would have meant that the money could be considered as part of her estate for IHT purposes, depending on the trust's terms.

You could not find any of this out, however, because Aviva said it couldn't share details of the policy with you. Aviva has admitted that this was a mistake – you were listed as a trustee, so were entitled to know, and you also had power of attorney for your mother's finances – and it has offered you £100 as apology.

Aviva said: “We sympathise with our customer. Her policy, which was taken out in 1993, is not an investment policy but a life insurance policy. When it was taken out, the reviewable nature of the policy was clearly included in literature alongside the fact that premiums could increase, or that the benefits might need to be reduced in the future.”

The main risk lies not in the accounts themselves but in falling victim to online fraud or scams. Fortunately, there are several practical steps you can take to protect yourself. Here are some tips to help keep your online savings as secure as possible: Create a unique password, combining upper and lowercase letters, numbers, and symbols. Avoid using information such as birthdays or pet names.

Enable two-factor authentication and/or biometrics. This typically involves getting a one-time code on your phone or email to verify your identity, and you may be able to enable Face ID or Touch ID when logging on.

Watch for phishing scams. Be wary of unsolicited emails, texts, or phone calls that ask for your personal information. Banks and building societies would never ask for your password or PIN via email, text or phone unless you called them.

Keep your devices secure. Install reputable antivirus software and ensure your operating system and apps are regularly updated. Avoid using public wi-fi when accessing your financial information and check your account regularly for unusual activity.

There is also the authorised push payment (APP) fraud reimbursement policy, which means that you should be recompensed if you are tricked into making a payment to a scammer, as long as you took reasonable steps to protect yourself. Again the cover is up to £85,000.

Anna Bowes has worked in financial service for 30 years and helped to set up Savings Champion in 2011

You told me that you are now planning on taking financial advice about what to do with the policy, which is a very sensible move. You said: “This has been a difficult and time-consuming process for me, not helped by Aviva. It really does underline the value in getting one's financial affairs in order as one gets older and I am grateful for your help in getting to the bottom of it all.”

LET DOWN BY EMIRATES AIRLINE I've been trying for five months to get Emirates to send an important document so that I can claim for a missed flight from my travel insurer, Admiral.

My wife and I went to visit friends and family in Dubai in April last year, but our return flight home was cancelled because of devastating floods. A record 14cm (18 months' worth) of rainfall was recorded in the United Arab Emirates in one day.

Emirates cancelled our flight because Dubai International Airport was in chaos. The next direct flight back to any UK airport was in seven days, so we rang customer service. Emirates said it could book us a replacement flight in two days' time, but this would be to Düsseldorf, in Germany. We were told that we would have to pay for our own flights from Düsseldorf back to Heathrow with another airline, but that Emirates would reimburse us.

I ended up paying £2,071 on this last leg of the journey and contacted

How can its value be so low after 30 years?

Emirates later that month to recoup the cost. It was over two months before it replied, asking for more documents relating to the flights. After providing this paperwork I was offered no reimbursement, and told to contact our travel insurer, Admiral. It told me that we were not covered for the emergency flights under our travel policy, but that it would make an ex-gratia payment [where the insurer doesn't legally have to pay out]. But first the company needed a statement from Emirates to confirm that the airline had not already reimbursed us for the return flights.

I asked Emirates for this statement in August and five months later it still hasn't sent it, despite me chasing.

I'm disappointed Emirates went back on its word. The least it could do is send the statement we need. David, Winnersh, Berkshire

LUCY ANDREWS WRITES

You have been stuck in limbo for months while Emirates seems incapable of

sending you a simple piece of paper to resolve your problem. It's disappointing that the company went back on the verbal agreement it made with you over the phone to cover the cost of your flights home from Germany. You said that as a pensioner £2,071 is money you couldn't afford to lose.

I tried to persuade Emirates to honour its promise and reimburse your tickets, but it has not. It did, at least, finally provide you with the statement you desperately needed.

Emirates said: “We are sorry to hear of our customer's experience. We are in direct contact and actively working to resolve the issue.”

Admiral has offered £1,150 to partially cover the cost of the flights and you are thrilled. You said: “A huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders and has made me realise how much of a negative impact the whole saga has had. It may only be 50 per cent of what we spent but that's 50 per cent more than we would have without your intervention.” Katherine Denham is away



Ask the experts I loved my saving passbook. Where can I still get one?



ANNA BOWES FROM THE PRIVATE OFFICE, AN ADVICE FIRM

I am suspicious of online savings and want to manage my money by passbook, but Nationwide is stopping this. Are there any other building societies that still operate a passbook system? Tara, address supplied

With regard to Nationwide, it is worth clarifying that while the building society is discontinuing the old passbook system, it is being replaced with something that is really just a more modern version. You can still visit a branch and get mini-statements to keep track of your balances, and you can still deal with people in the branch if you prefer.

In addition to the new version at Nationwide, there are building societies that continue to offer passbook-based accounts, such as Coventry, Yorkshire, Dudley and Nottingham. The

downside is that you may have to accept a lower interest rate, or travel further to find one that will let you use a passbook. You could ask at your local branch to see what it is offering.

Alternatively, you could consider postal savings accounts. A paper application form is sent in the post and any requests for withdrawals or closure are also by post. This option is slow but it can work for those who are not comfortable using online services.

That said, it is hard to ignore the growing dominance of online savings accounts. They tend to provide higher interest rates, immediate access and the convenience of managing your money from home. Many savers may feel concerned about security, but understanding how to protect yourself can help to ease those fears.

In general, online savings accounts are very secure. UK

banks and building societies are highly regulated and must follow strict security protocols. They use encryption and multi-factor authentication to protect your money. Your funds are also covered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme – up to £85,000 per banking licence is protected in the event of a bank failure.

COVENTRY
YORKSHIRE
DUDLEY
NOTTINGHAM

Some of the building societies that still have passbooks

Introducing our new presenters

Kate McCann Monday to Thursday, 6-10am

Geoff Norcott Friday, 7-10pm

Rod Liddle Saturday, 10am-1pm

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Home



Farm friends

A group of families brought their community dream to life by creating palaces out of a pigsty **6**

Plus High street heroes for spring **10** French tourism with a twist **12** Yvette Fielding's spooky space **14**



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Making moves

House of the week

KENT £3.15M

Dukes Place in West Peckham (no, not that Peckham) is a 5,000 sq ft Tudor country house, with an impressive double-height vaulted hall. There are oak beams, leaded windows and inglenook fireplaces. It has seven bedrooms including a two-bedroom annexe. There are almost five acres of gardens, plus a swimming pool. West Peckham is a village equidistant from Sevenoaks, Maidstone and Tonbridge. [knightfrank.co.uk](https://www.knightfrank.co.uk)



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Couch to £5k. Tony did it.

Personal trainer Tony quit his £40-a-day tap-happy habit to save £5,000 in Couch to £5k, Times Money Mentor's financial fitness challenge.

Find out how in The Times this Saturday



The best of this week's property on sale



COVER: RACHEL ADAMS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES. THIS PAGE: FROM THE AIR PROPERTY: ANGUS BEHM/SQUARE FOOT; BAOSHAW & HARDY LTD



WEST SUSSEX £800,000

A two-bedroom grade II listed cottage in the village of Amberley, six miles from Arundel. The sitting room has an inglenook fireplace and the kitchen an oil-fired Aga and butler sink. **jackson-stops.co.uk**



EDINBURGH OFFERS OVER £2.15M

This traditional terraced five-bedroom West End family home blends modern luxury with original period features. Lennox Street is a stone's throw from the Water of Leith. **rettie.co.uk**



CUMBRIA £375,000

Back Garth is a three-bedroom Georgian townhouse in Alston, 20 miles from Penrith. The house, with its exposed beams and original floorboards, featured in the 1999 ITV adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. **finest.co.uk**



NORFOLK £2.75M

Set in 5.6 acres, Orchard Farmhouse has a south-facing terrace for soaking up the sun, plus woodland and a range of outbuildings housing a gym and sauna. It is in the village of Saxlingham, eight miles from Norwich. **sowerbys.com**



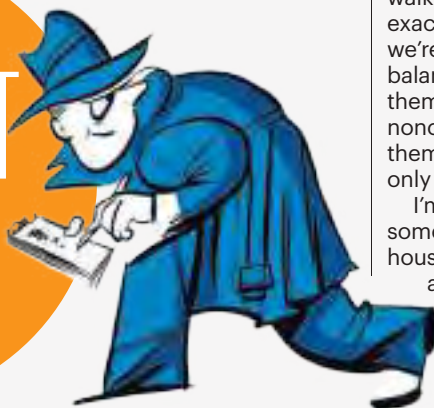
SURREY £2.35M

Within strolling distance of pubs and a village shop in Betchworth — a bucolic Mole Valley village — this five-bedroom family home extends to 4,144 sq ft of living space. The kitchen opens on to a new orangery. **fineandcountry.co.uk**

We've been waiting for an offer on a gem in Kensington that's been promised for months. It's been challenging. Our clients, the sellers, are lovely and decent and of an age. More pressingly, they need the money to service a bridging loan. The agent for the buyer has continually promised an offer is forthcoming. "They want the weekend, so we'll be in touch on Monday ... you'll get something in writing by close of play tomorrow ..." And on it goes.

To date they've failed to offer anything at all. I have stopped reporting the agent's promises to my clients, who are losing faith and hope. They are the type of people who, if they say they'll give you an answer tomorrow, they do. It doesn't seem a revolutionary concept, but it's

THE SECRET AGENT



'Months of empty promises are testing my patience'

increasingly rare for agents and buyers to live by their own proposed timeframe.

We can't let the buyers get a whiff of our desperation, though. Were that to happen, they'd surely come in with a lower offer than planned. But if we're too robust and say we don't want to deal with them if they can't deliver on

their promises, they might walk away. After all, it's not exactly a seller's market. So we're striking a delicate balance: gently encouraging them, while appearing nonchalant and subtly letting them know they're not the only game in town.

I'm fantasising about someone new seeing the house, falling in love with it and sending through an offer the same day. It nearly happened this week. A buyer did see the place, did fall in love with it, but, not having been in the market for more than 15 years, was horrified by the stamp duty.

I'm not good at being patient, nor am I good at hiding my hand in the game of life. If you want something I believe in putting your cards on the table. I've been told that in matters romantic that's the wrong way to

operate, that one needs to hold back, not offer too much too soon. But I think if you really like someone or something, you should trust your instinct. Life is short; it's much better to get on with things and state your case.

I was promoting this philosophy to friends the other night as a counterpoint to the inertia of the couple who genuinely love the Kensington house but can't seem to commit. "It sounds good in theory," one friend said, "but how's it working out for you, you know, in your actual life?" Harsh.

In the property sphere, if not in the romance department, my willingness to put my metaphorical cards on the table has been rewarded. The few times that I've bought for myself, I've known instantly it was the move to make. And I've never regretted a purchase. But we

all work to different rhythms, so I accept that being thorough and process-driven is an equally valid modus vivendi. But repeatedly promising an offer without ever delivering is just unacceptable.

Alas, in the Kensington scenario the buyers are not only holding the cards, they're gripping them tightly. They have the total advantage — for the moment. Let's see what next week brings. Patience may be a virtue, but so is optimism. I feel a new buyer may be just around the corner ... and heading our way.

*The Secret Agent is the author of *Highly Desirable: Tales of London's Super-Prime Property* (Headline £12.99 384pp). Buy from timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Discount for Times+ members*

Home



It was never meant to be the ultimate *Grand Designs* drama, but that is what happened when three families built their own community in a pigsty. On an old pig farm near Guildford, Surrey, the Schoonraad, Weingartz and Thomas families transformed a concrete and asbestos wasteland into four houses. It took a decade and, after their builder went bust, they had to finish the work with their own hands. Now it is finally done.

“I don’t think it was ever our idea to have grand houses. It was to have a community,” says Annelize Schoonraad, 51, as the three families gather around coffee and fresh bread in her kitchen. Outside it is close to freezing. Inside they warmly tease one another.

“You can go to your neighbour’s for matches anytime,” says Jacques Weingartz, 55, an IT consultant. “Or for eggs or onions or spices – community can take many forms,” his daughter, Siena, a 25-year-old university student, interjects.

In fact, when they first moved in, the children would find out which family was having the tastiest dinner and go there to eat. “It was very funny,” says Jacques’ wife, Belinda, 55.

Annelize and Waldi Schoonraad live in their five-bedroom house with their four children, aged 12 to 20. The Weingartzs are next door in a five-bedroom house, with their four children, aged 15 to 25, plus Belinda’s parents. A third house, with two bedrooms, belongs to Margo and Ian Thomas. The fourth home, with one bedroom, is a guest house that they share.



“Then you can keep your house smaller, because everybody doesn’t need a guest room,” Annelize says. The idea germinated ten years ago. Annelize, an accountant, and Waldi, 57, an IT executive, were living with their four children in southwest London, far from family support. “It appealed to me that you can build in a way to enhance community, not a row of houses next to each other with fences in between. You take the fence away and all of a sudden it’s a very different feel,” she says.

Annelize read about Lilac co-housing, a community in Leeds that completed 20 permanently affordable eco-homes in 2012. In 2014 the Schoonraads asked eight families if they would be keen to do a similar project. Five were.

Over the next 18 months Annelize hunted for a site in the home counties. “If it wasn’t for her, driving up and down the A3 looking for land, this wouldn’t have happened,” says Margo Thomas, a caterer. For Margo, 53, and Ian, 51, building their first home with their friends meant they could afford a bigger house than if they bought one. “And we were able to design it how we

Our pig farm paradise

Against the odds, a group of friends pulled together to transform a derelict site into a community of four homes. By *Martina Lees*

wanted it to be, which is a dream,” she says. On a frosty January morning in 2016 Annelize found the pig farm on the edge of the village of Normandy. The children pushed each other around in a clapped-out pink toy car they discovered on site. A friend messaged: “Annelize, if there’s anybody that can turn a pigsty into a palace, it’s you.” To find out whether they stood a chance of getting planning permission, she emailed the architect Nicolas Tye, “literally 12 o’clock at night because I was so scared”. To her surprise Tye immediately replied that he

was keen. He thought the plot had potential. The Schoonraads sold their house in Surbiton and bought the pig farm for £600,000. It did not yet have planning permission for homes, which made it cheaper, but also riskier. The farm is on the green belt, where most new buildings are banned. But it already contained farm buildings and a dilapidated five-bedroom house that they could knock down and replace. They were advised to apply to convert the farm buildings into homes and, once that was in the bag, apply to demolish and replace them all. It worked.

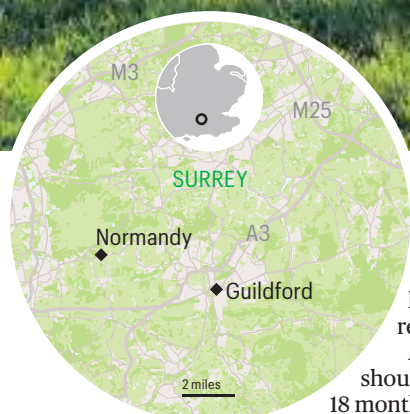
They won permission for four new homes in 2018. In the spring of 2019 they knocked down the farm buildings – and found asbestos, which stalled work for the summer. That was just the start of the trouble. The glazing supplier went under, causing the builder to lose tens of thousands of pounds and eventually fold themselves. By then the post-pandemic building boom was at its height. “Somebody quoted me £60,000 to paint one house inside. That is how crazy the prices were,” Annelize says. Down to earth, yet with evident steel, Annelize took on project management. She was

“so impressed” when she signed her first contract with a plasterer who turned up. However, on the third day he didn’t arrive. Worried, she phoned him: “Are you all right? You said it would take ten days.” He said, “I didn’t say ten consecutive days.” I learnt that you have to specify.” With tradespeople in short supply, the families knuckled down to finish the job themselves. Annelize put up timber cladding. Ian chiselled stonework. Jacques welded gates. Waldi tiled, “starting off with a herringbone marble slope in the shower. It’s the most difficult thing to do ... because I literally couldn’t find

“You take the fence away and all of a sudden it’s a different feel”



RACHEL ADAMS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES; IAN THOMAS



Above, from left: the Weingartz, Thomas and Schoonraad families at the site in Normandy, Surrey. Inset: the old pig farm

a tiler," says Annelize. (The tiles are perfectly laid, I can report.)

A build that should have taken 18 months ended up taking four years. "It was an adventure until the main contractor walked out," Annelize says. "Then the romantic side stopped."

For most of this time the Schoonraads were living in the old farmhouse. It was less than 12C inside in winter. "The fire in the living room went constantly – we used three tonnes of wood every winter," Annelize says. "It taught us that if the space where you live is cold and mouldy, you don't have the same mental health as in a place where you're warm." It gave her "real empathy" for families in unfit, overcrowded homes, she says.

Meanwhile, the Thomases, who had to move out of their rented home, spent 18 months sofa-surfing between friends. The Weingartz family sold their home to help to fund the build, then ping-ponged between Airbnbs, caravan parks and Travelodges before

moving into their unfinished house in 2021. Now the houses are complete. Beautifully clad in stone and timber, this collection of buildings with their simple, contemporary silhouettes appear to have always belonged together, like a farmstead.

Air source heat pumps keep the highly insulated homes at a constant temperature. Full-height glazing looks out over the countryside. "We've never had space like this," Belinda says. They have no fences and share a driveway and gardens. "People think we live in each other's spaces all the time. We don't," Margo says. Weeks can go by without seeing the others. Yet small things make life easier. "If somebody goes to town [they will ask], 'Do you need anything?'"

Annelize says: "Wouldn't it be better for developers to build clusters of homes together where friends can buy, rather than go through this whole ten-year process?"

Jacques adds: "As hard as it was, we were in it together."

Together they have turned the pigsty into a palace, I tell them. "It's not quite a palace," Annelize replies, "but we're very happy."

WHY SO MANY VIENNESE LIVE IN SOCIAL HOUSING — AND COULD IT WORK HERE?

Half the population of the Austrian capital live in council homes, much of it is affordable and high-quality. Now UK town planners are taking note

Reinhard Zierhofer wants to clear up a misunderstanding. The comfortably off Viennese professional often finds himself explaining to puzzled non-natives why he — like many middle-class residents of Austria's capital — chose to live on a council estate in affordable housing.

"Americans in particular struggle with this concept," he says, describing how eyebrows raise further when he explains that he joined a group of strangers to build the block of flats that he now calls home.

Forget images of brutalist council housing, though: in Vienna social housing is a source of pride. It's also a key reason why the city consistently tops global liveability rankings.

About half Vienna's 1.8 million residents live in subsidised dwellings — either in one of 220,000 municipal homes or 200,000 co-operative flats built with council support. A remarkable 80 per cent of residents rent.

"Unlike other European cities, the treatment of municipal housing estates as an object of profiteering was always out of the question," says Kathrin Gaal, Vienna's deputy mayor and councillor for housing.

Unlike most cities, profit-driven developments and the property market do not shape Vienna's housing landscape. Red Vienna, born from the ashes of the First World War and Austria's dying empire 100 years ago, was an unabashedly socialist scheme that built millions of decent affordable homes and made housing a right, not a privilege. It was also about creating a community and fostering a sense of belonging.

Today, the Viennese enjoy an enviable supply of sustainable, high-quality, affordable developments, some with swimming pools.

Zierhofer's path to homeownership exemplifies Vienna's approach. Rather than buying traditionally he joined a *Baugruppe* (building group), where people get together to design and build their own housing. Residents contribute more than just



Above: Zierhofer's apartment block. The residents get together for drinks on the roof, below

money: some offer construction expertise, Zierhofer, 42, a finance professional, managed the project's accounts.

"I didn't want to buy a flat and get into an anonymous building with anonymous neighbours," he says. "I wanted to be part of a social community." The result? Twenty-one professionals created luxury flats at significantly reduced costs while forging lasting bonds.

Vienna council provided cheap land, financing and even experts. This is all part of the city's bid to make housing more diverse and affordable. Aspern Seestadt, a new district that will house 20,000 people, epitomises Vienna's holistic vision. Despite being nearly all affordable or state-subsided housing, it looks and feels like a high-end resort. "In Aspern it's not just housing. It's about good public transit, green spaces, walkable streets. We're building a community," Zierhofer says.

Through resident expertise, building costs typically drop by about 20 per cent. Zierhofer secured his

106 sq m flat for just €310,000 — a bargain by any standard. The city assists with low interest rates and innovative financing methods that compete effectively with private market offerings.

Most homes are built not by developers but by people using "housing banks" —

Wohnbaubanken — which specialise in financing residential construction. These institutions raise money in similar ways to conventional banks and hedge funds, but direct their profits towards social good.

The social sector builds about 20 per cent cheaper than private developers without compromising quality. Maria Vassilakou, the head of the consultancy Vienna Solutions, which advises on urban transformation and management, says: "The system must rely on non-profit developers — housing corporations — [which are] not out to maximise profit, though their work is profitable. They must then reinvest those profits into affordable/social housing."

"Encouraging the formation of non-profit housing developers or renters' associations is key." The city's provision of subsidies is bound to quality standards and the non-profits compete for land and subsidies. "The criteria produces high quality and unleashes high innovation potential," she says.

While cities like Cardiff and Cambridge are exploring Vienna's approach, implementing that model in Britain might face significant hurdles. The UK's entrenched class system and stigmas pose a challenge to a socially mixed housing model. Kurt Hofstetter, an urban development expert and Zierhofer's neighbour, says: "We take pride that in Vienna you can't guess someone's income just by looking at their address. The mix of incomes in our housing projects is vital to their success. It ensures that these are vibrant, desirable places to live, not ghettos."

Michael Fitzpatrick

Home

These are tough times for British gîte owners. In the old days retirees would buy a house in the French countryside and rent out the cottage in their garden to top up their pension. Now Brexit has made it complicated to stay for more than 90 days; taxes are going up and bookings are down.

“When I think back to pre-Brexit, pre-Covid, pre-cost of living crisis and pre-Ukraine war, it was so easy to get inquiries,” says Rupert Springfield, co-owner of Le Mas, a luxury gîte in the Dordogne. “I remember taking the dog for a walk and by the end, after 45 minutes, my phone would often have pinged. That doesn’t happen any more. So when we do get an inquiry, we take it really seriously. We react within 20 minutes. We’ve had to be very proactive in marketing.”

Springfield grew up in Wiltshire, but is allowed to live in the EU full-time because he has a passport through his Dutch husband, Franck van der Hooft. But the couple are about to face a hefty rise in taxes and onerous paperwork. They have been registered as microentrepreneurs, which has tax advantages and simple accounting: 50 per cent of revenue is automatically deemed as costs and 50 per cent profit; no detailed bookkeeping is required.

But this year the French government has lowered the ceiling of how much gîte owners can earn under the microentrepreneur tax scheme from €188,700 a year turnover to €77,700. Because



Dordogne ... but different

their gîte’s 2024 turnover was double the €77,000 ceiling, they will now be classified under the “régime réel” scheme, where you are taxed on actual profits and must prove your revenue and costs with detailed bookkeeping. “A lot of gîte owners who are getting close to €77,000 will carefully consider how much revenue they want to create,” Springfield says. “That might mean they limit their ceiling.”

A law passed last week means many gîtes earning over €25,000 a year have to add 10 per cent VAT on to their rates. It was suspended on Thursday following complaints from small businesses, but changes are afoot. Springfield knows tax policy well as he and his husband run a consultancy, Gîte Guru, which advises expats on how to run a French holiday let, from accountancy to Brexit rules to marketing. And his message to all his clients right now is to have a



British gîte owners in France feeling the effects of Brexit, rising taxes and fewer bookings are having to get creative, finds *Hugh Graham*

USP to make your gîte stand out from the crowd – there are 3,016 in the Dordogne alone – and to embrace your passion.

For Paul and Fiona James, who moved to the Dordogne from Gloucestershire, that passion is motorbikes. Paul, 63, a builder, and Fiona, 49, who worked in management at a college, spent 19 years riding around the Dordogne on motorbikes every summer.

“In the UK we were like two ships passing in the night – if we got to spend a couple of hours together every day we were lucky,” Paul says. “We wanted to change our life so we could hopefully earn a living from our passion.”

France is popular with motorcyclists. “The French drivers are so courteous to motorbikes, it’s refreshing,” Paul says. And bikers love the

technically challenging and scenic roads of the Dordogne. So they bought a crumbling wine storage building in Thénac and spent eight years – and about €500,000 – transforming it into a six-bedroom gîte, Le Chai Villa, living off the savings they made after selling their house in the Forest of Dean and some rental properties. During the renovation, they lived in a



Above: Le Mas, owned by Rupert Springfield of Gîte Guru. Paul and Fiona James, left. Top right: La Maison Rose, which puts on an art week, below left



one-bedroom chalet on the 1.5-acre grounds, where they also stay during peak season while the gîte has guests.

It opened last spring, and Springfield has encouraged them to target motorcycle groups. The couple have a garage on the site where bikers can tinker, and they lead day trips for groups of up to 12 at a time. "Some bikers like to be in groups," Paul says. "When you stop for lunch, there's good banter. There's always a discussion of some of the tight bends they have to negotiate."

They don't rely entirely on bikers. Under the guidance of Gîte Guru, they jumped through all the hoops to get their gîte classified and earn a four-star rating, another niche (only 10 per cent of the gîtes in the Dordogne are four or five-star). Fiona, a qualified sports massage therapist, is offering that skill to guests too.

The couple moved to France just before Brexit. They have *cartes de séjour*, which are renewed every five years – they just have to prove they have the funds to sustain themselves. "An income of €1,500 a month is more than adequate to keep yourself here as far as the government is concerned," Paul says. "In the summer season, and with the massages, we're going to be over that, so hopefully this year we'll get a ten-year card."

The vibes at Bel Crewe's gîte couldn't be more different. La Maison Rose, a pink manor house in the Tarn-et-Garonne, has been in her family for 40 years. In the village of Miramont-de-Quercy, the hilltop gîte dates to the 12th century. Crewe, 59, who is the manager of a charitable foundation in London, has taken over the running of the place as her mother, Sally Ashburton, is 90 and widowed. Because they live in the UK, they have to pay for full-time management of the house and garden – about €50,000 a year – and let it out to cover costs. When Crewe approached Gîte Guru for advice, they advised her to get classified by the French tourist board to lower their taxes – this requires that you pass an inspection and provide things

like sockets by bathroom sink if you want a high star rating. Springfield also advised them to make the most of the family's incredible history. Crewe's grandfather was the artist John Spencer-Churchill, nephew of Winston, with whom he used to paint. The house is filled with art, including her grandfather's landscape paintings. So last year the family started offering an art week – the next starts on June 10 – during which guests (the gîte sleeps 14) paint in the studio and *en plein air* under the guidance of the artist Francesca Shakespeare.

Crewe's mother was a textiles designer in the 1980s and 1990s, and her floral patterns give the gîte the feel of an English country house. "You enter a courtyard through these old carriage doors. Once you shut the doors it is like being in Narnia, you are in a little of oasis, your own kingdom," Crewe says.

Springfield and van der Hooft have a few niches. They target multigenerational families, because Le Mas has a five-bedroom house and a one-bedroom cottage, and an outdoor kitchen from where parents can watch children in the swimming pool. "Often the kids contact us and say we're thinking of a family holiday, and then the grandparents pay."

“Anything that sets you apart helps, like fishing or classic cars

They also offer packages for guests to stay and learn how to buy, run and market a gîte. Springfield says. "Anything that sets your gîte apart helps. If our clients have a passion, we look for ways to market it, from carp fishing to classic car maintenance."

Despite the challenges, a gîte is still a good investment, Springfield says. "France is the most popular tourist destination in the world. If you're going to earn less than €77,700, you can be a microentrepreneur and run a simple business without being taxed heavily. We often hear that running a gîte only tops up your income or pension. But it is also possible to run a successful business. Ours has replaced our salaries."

It's still a dream job – it's just got a little bit harder.

THE TWO ROBS

Your questions on being a landlord and investing in property answered

WHAT DO THE NEW EPC REQUIREMENTS FOR RENTALS MEAN?

I understand there has been an announcement about energy performance certificate (EPC) requirements for rentals, which says all properties will need a grade C by 2028. I have three rental properties, two of which are rated D. When should I start taking action?

Marcus, London

The headline is that all privately rented properties in England and Wales would need an EPC grade C by 2028 for new tenancies, and by 2030 for existing ones. If that grade isn't achieved it will be illegal to rent out the property.

What makes this more complicated is that the government is also in the process of changing how EPCs are calculated. Instead of just focusing on energy costs like the present system does, they plan to add measures that capture factors like climate impact. It's thought that there will be two parts to meet: a primary "fabric standard" relating to the building's structure, and then either a heating system standard or a smart energy requirement – with landlords being able to choose which.

This new system is also under consultation, and should be in place by late 2026. But that doesn't mean you have to wait: if you improve your properties to meet current EPC standards before then, that will count until your certificate expires. They are valid for ten years.

Landlords we've heard from are worried about both the cost and practicalities of upgrades. When it comes to cost, the bad news is that the suggested cost cap is as high as £15,000. The consultation talks about affordability exemptions that will lower the cap in some cases, but says determining eligibility is "not straightforward" and the government "has an open mind" about how it will be done – which rather suggests

they're a bit stuck for ideas.

There's better news when it comes to practicality. There's an exemption for older properties where the only way of meeting the requirements is with wall insulation and written expert advice states that this would damage the fabric or structure of the building. There's also an exemption for cases where a third party – like a tenant or the freeholder of a block of flats – doesn't give consent for the works needed.

Our bet is that the deadline will shift. Given that 52 per cent of England and Wales's estimated 4.8 million rental properties don't meet the present standards of EPC E or above, it seems highly unlikely that there are even the tradespeople available to make the upgrades needed in time – even if there were no other barriers. So at this stage we would recommend that you start investigating your options, but don't rush into expensive actions yet. The consultation is open for responses until May, so further details should emerge later this year that will give you a firmer basis to base your plans on.

“Privately rented homes will need an EPC grade C by 2028



SHOULD I WRITE ANNUAL RENT INCREASES INTO TENANCY AGREEMENTS?

I've always tried to be fair to my tenants by keeping their rent the same. My recent tenants moved out after five years, and when I looked at similar properties locally I was shocked to see how much rents had risen. I feel like I've been too generous, so I'm wondering if for future tenancies I should write annual retail price inflation (RPI) increases into the agreement? I want to be fair to my tenants but also protect my investment.

Sarah, Leeds

Many landlords, ourselves included, have properties where the rent has barely changed for years. It feels like the right thing to do: you keep good tenants happy, avoid awkward conversations, and tell yourself you're building long-term goodwill.

The rental market has changed dramatically over the past few years, though. The latest Office for National Statistics data shows rents up 9.1 per cent year-on-year.

Writing RPI increases into agreements is an option now, but won't be once the Renters' Rights Bill comes into effect. Instead you'll be able to propose one increase per year, which can't exceed the market rate for similar properties in your area. Tenants who think an increase is excessive can refer it to a tribunal.

Even under the existing rules, though, in our opinion adopting a market-based approach actually makes more sense than linking it to inflation. It means tenants will never end up paying more than they could pay elsewhere locally, and prevents you from losing out when rents surge beyond the level of general inflation.

So an approach that will work is to review rents annually against the local market. When you do propose a rise, explain your reasoning clearly – perhaps even sharing examples of similar properties. If tenants can see they're getting good value, they're much more likely to understand the change.

This doesn't mean you can't still reward loyal tenants: you might choose to keep their rent below market rate to recognise their reliability. But small regular increases, when the market justifies them, tend to work better than leaving things unchanged for years then having a huge chasm to close.

Submit your questions for the Two Robs at propertyhub.net/sundaytimes

Rob Dix and Rob Bence present The Property Podcast

Home

TIME AND SPACE YVETTE FIELDING

‘We use our seance shed regularly’

The Most Haunted presenter on her spooky house, including a mummified cat

My home is in Cheshire. I’ve lived here for 21 years. When the gates open I imagine the music from *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit* playing because I love it so much. I’m a huge Tolkien fan. We have what my daughter calls a “plake”; it’s a bit bigger than a pond and a bit smaller than a lake. The house dates back to the 1600s so there are very low beams and all the doors are wonky. Now the kids are grown, it’s just me and my husband, Karl [Beattie, a director, producer and cameraman], and our very farty bulldog, Watson.

How different was your home growing up to your home today?
I loved my childhood home. It was a three-bedroom semi-detached house on a new housing estate in Bramhall in Cheshire. My dad put these wonderful 1970s-style curled railings around the top of the flat garage. At the time I thought it was incredibly posh. He also installed some smoked-glass mirrors, depicting stallions running through water, and we had a mock Spanish fireplace. I adored growing up there and playing outside. I was the only girl in the boy gang. I remember building a den. When we finished and put the roof on, I stood on top of the roof and the boys said: “You can’t be in our gang any more because

you’re a girl.” The leader of the gang picked up a full brick and threw it [at me]. It landed in my face, and I lost my teeth. It was my first experience of the patriarchy.

You’re synonymous with ghosts as the presenter of *Most Haunted*. How spooky is your home?
When we viewed the house it felt haunted. When we first moved in I remember we all felt, “Oh gosh, it’s a bit spooky this house, isn’t it?” Within the first couple of weeks the doorbell would go, there’d be knocking at the door, but no one was there. Things would go missing. You’d hear this little girl’s voice saying, “Mummy,” when nobody was in. It was bizarre. The worst incident was when everyone was away and I came down in the morning and all the chairs had been put in a pyramid, perfectly evenly positioned, on top of the kitchen table.

An OCD ghost?
Absolutely. It was frightening and, no, I hadn’t downed one too many bottles of tequila the night before. Guests have seen things too, like a man standing over the bed in a black hooded cloak.

That wasn’t your husband going to a fancy dress party?
No, I checked with him. Although he does have a monk outfit.



OLIVIA WEST/MIKELAWN/SHUTTERSTOCK



Tell us about the mummified cat in your house.
It’s from the 16th century. It was common for people to keep them to ward off witches and negative energy. The previous owners kept it on the wall. We keep it on a box frame under the bath in the guest room, but guests don’t know that.

They do now. What about the seance shed?
That’s still there and we use it regularly. I do private sittings for people who have lost loved ones in tragic circumstances and are really grieving. People are cynical but seeing is believing. I’m a spiritualist. Some people can take the pee about it all, and I think, “You wouldn’t be rude to a Catholic person or a Jewish person or a Muslim person, so why are you being rude to me as it’s my religion?” If we can help people who are grieving, what’s the problem?



Yvette Fielding in 2019 with her bulldog, Watson, in her Cheshire home, where axes used by executioners and armour serve as decor

Any curious collections?
It’s more my husband’s collection than mine, but we do have a large amount of crime ephemera. He’s got death cell letters from the child murderer Mary Cotton, axes used by executioners and death masks, which are casts of famous dead people’s faces that were later displayed in museums.

Is it your forever home?
We’re going to move soon as the children have left home and it’s simply too big for the two of us. We’re rattling around in here. We’ll stay in Cheshire or Staffordshire. I’ve seen an old vicarage for sale that looked quite nice.

Any significant renovations?
We transformed the soggy basement into a cinema room. It’s not swanky. It’s just a room with a great big TV, but I don’t watch horror movies or anything to do with the paranormal. It scares me too much. I love a good Agatha Christie film or *Frasier*.

Who puts the bins out?
Karl does, God bless him. He does the bins and collects the post. And he holds the door open for me. He’s very chivalrous.
Interview by Nick McGrath

Most Haunted Houses is published on April 3 (Andersen Press £7.99). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

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FOR FURTHER DETAILS AND VIRTUAL TOUR CONTACT THOMAS HOWE - 077615 14760 or email: thomas.howe@exp.uk.com

HOW CAN I INSULATE MY FREEZING BASEMENT?

Q

The basement in my Victorian house is always freezing cold. The space has bare brick walls and a concrete floor, with approximately 6ft high ceilings. Some water seeps in when it rains heavily. Can you share some ideas for insulating?

Jamie

A

Cold spaces such as basements can significantly affect your home's comfort. The key decision is whether to include the basement in your home's thermal envelope or retrofit it to remain outside. With your basement's low 6ft ceilings and the substantial work required to make it liveable, we assume it will be used for storage. Based on this, we recommend retrofitting it to remain

outside the thermal envelope. Here are the steps:

● Address water seepage

Determine the extent of water seepage and identify its source. Seal any entry points to ensure the basement remains dry.

● Ensure ventilation

Install brick vents, and if the basement is deep, consider telescopic vents to ensure adequate airflow.

● Install insulation

Remove any boarding on the basement ceiling to access the joists. Insulate between the joists with fibrous insulation such as Rockwool, which fully fills the cavity.

● Fit a wind-tight membrane

such as Pro Clima Solitex

HOME HELP

Fronta WA to the insulated ceiling. Use a reliable tape such as Pro Clima Tescon Vana to seal the membrane edges to the walls. Wooden battens can be installed perpendicular to the joists to secure the membrane.

● Seal the door

Treat the basement door as an exterior door. Add good draught-proofing to prevent cold air from entering the home through this access point.

As well as these steps, a proper ventilation strategy to the outside is essential to manage moisture and airflow.

Bill Butcher, founding director, 21degrees.com, and certified Passivhaus consultant

Readers' clinic

Q

What's the best way to get rust off secateurs and other garden tools?

Jennykenny

Protect the surface, open up the tool and spray with household cleaner, leave for a bit and then, using a heavy-duty green pan scourer and elbow grease, get the rust off. Rinse and leave to dry, then spray with WD40.

Debra Rowlinson

FUTURE QUESTION

Whatever product I use, my kitchen floor tiles have an ever-so-slight greasy feel. Any tips to avoid this?

Samantha

Send tips and questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice given without responsibility

February 9, 2025

THE SUNDAY TIMES
Travel

Lapland lovers

The actress Vicky McClure on her
honeymoon in the Arctic Circle **16**

Plus The new Brussels-to-Venice sleeper train **5** Bargain ski destinations **13** Anita Rani in Oman **22**

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The seven best UK breaks inspired by rom-coms

From Notting Hill to About Time, take the lead from your favourite film for a loved-up mini-break

With Valentine's Day just around the corner and a new Bridget Jones film landing on the same day, rom-com love is most certainly in the air. Though it's not just the blossoming romance of the leads that captures our hearts – there are often several on-screen locations to fall for too. From Anna's suite in *Notting Hill* to the cosy pub in *The Holiday*, these are the UK hotspots to cosy up in.

NOTTING HILL IN LONDON

This classic 1999 rom-com shows off Notting Hill with aplomb. A trip here is all about popping into independent galleries and browsing the stalls of Portobello Market. Don't miss the Notting Hill Bookshop, which inspired the location where Hugh Grant's Will first bumps into Julia Roberts's Anna (thenottinghillbookshop.co.uk). Nearby is *that* blue

door where Will lives (280 Westbourne Park Road) and Rosmead Gardens, where Will and Anna sneak off to. If you want to follow the film to a tee, the palatial Trafalgar Suite at the Ritz has retained the decor from the time when the press interviews scene was shot (B&B doubles from £2,800; theritzlondon.com). The bohemian Lost Poet on Portobello Road is a sweet alternative for non-A-list budgets.

Details B&B doubles from £200 (thelostpoet.co.uk)

THE HOLIDAY IN SHERE, SURREY

Channel your inner Amanda (aka Cameron Diaz) and decamp to someone else's home in a picturesque village for country air and cosy pubs. You can't stay in the cottage that featured in the film – Rosehill was built for it then dismantled – but there are several Airbnbs in the village where the film was shot – Shere, near Guildford. The pick of the bunch is a snug

suite at the back of a 16th-century cottage with exposed brick walls and antique furniture. You'll recognise lots of scenes as you wandering the streets and the surrounding Surrey Hills. Round things off with a drink at the White Horse, which also featured in the film (chefandbrewer.com). **Details** A night's self-catering for two from £130 (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/15431879)

ONE DAY IN EDINBURGH

It will only take one episode of the Netflix adaptation of David Nicholls's *One Day* to convince you that Edinburgh is one of the most romantic cities in Europe. Visit the university's Old College to see the spot where Emma and Dexter, played by Ambika Mod and Leo Woodall, celebrated at their graduation ball, and admire the grand neoclassical buildings. You'll also want to make like the pair and climb the Vennel Steps for a stirring view of Edinburgh Castle or

hike to the top of Arthur's Seat to gaze over the city. The hedonistic House of Gods just off Grassmarket is the place to lay your head and is surprisingly affordable – even on an Em and Dex-style student budget.

Details B&B doubles from £98 (houseofgodshotel.com)

EMMA IN SALISBURY, WILTSHIRE

The concept of the rom-com existed long before we had the films – hello Jane Austen and Shakespeare, but the 2020 adaptation of *Emma* – with Anya Taylor-Joy, Johnny Flynn and Bill Nighy – was particularly fun. Wilton House near Salisbury plays a starring role as the home of Mr Knightley and you can see why: it's a grand Palladian-style

building with landscaped gardens, ornate furnishings and a serious art collection. In real life it's the home of the Earl of Pembroke, gifted to the family by Henry VIII in 1544, and visitors are welcome from April to September (£19; willtonhouse.co.uk). Spend the night opposite at the Pembroke Arms, an 18th-century pub with rooms. **Details** B&B doubles from £96 (pembrokearms.co.uk)

ABOUT TIME IN CORNWALL

The director Richard Curtis knows how to make Britain look good – especially when it comes to the Roseland peninsula near St Mawes in *About Time*. The leading man, Tim (Domhnall Gleeson), hails from Cornwall, with a rambling family home, and there are many



scenes that were shot here worth visiting – perhaps the glorious Vault beach near Gorran Haven, the pretty fishing village of Portloe or the sweet St Michael Penkivel Church, where the film's lovebirds, Tim and Mary (Rachel McAdams), eventually marry. You can even rent the whole of the as-seen-on-screen family home, the grade II listed mansion Porthpean House, for 21 of your nearest and dearest. **Details** Three nights' self-catering for 21 from £3,900 (thebigbeautifulbeachhouse.com)

BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY IN LONDON

Rom-com inspired mini-breaks aren't just for couples – and if you're single, there's no better heroine to embody than Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger). Start at the Globe Tavern in Borough Market, southeast London (theglobeboroughmarket.com) and pose with a pint outside Bridget's flat next



Clockwise from above: the Cornish village of Portloe, as featured in *About Time*; the film's stars, Rachel McAdams and Domhnall Gleeson; the Ritz's Trafalgar Suite, seen in *Notting Hill*; Leo Woodall and Ambika Mod in *One Day*, set in Edinburgh

door, at 8 Bedale Street, then make your way to Rigby & Peller in Mayfair (a location from the sequel) for a spot of lingerie shopping – the bigger the pants the better (rigbyandpeller.com). The Light Bar in Shoreditch is the place to gossip over your love life with your best Jude or Shazzer (drinks from £6; lightbarlondon.com). Stay nearby at the fun-loving Hoxton on Great Eastern Street. **Details** Room-only doubles from £175 (thehoxton.com)

THE ENGLISHMAN WHO WENT UP A HILL BUT CAME DOWN A MOUNTAIN IN LLANRHAEDR-YM-MOCHNANT, POWYS
This feelgood rom-com is based on a true story about a Welsh community determined to get their hill on the map, adding earth so that it exceeds the 305m (1,000ft) required to be deemed a mountain. One of the cartographers (Hugh Grant) falls for a local woman, of course. Although the real-life story was in Taff's Well, near Cardiff, the quaint village of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, on the border of England and Wales, was chosen for filming thanks to its remote setting. Visit nearby Pistyll Rhaeadr, the tallest single-drop waterfall in Britain, and hunker down in a traditional stone cottage with a log-burner – there's one in the village listed on Airbnb that is perfect for a loved-up weekend. **Details** One night's self-catering for two from £82 (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/1020744808102165042) **Lizzie Frainier**

Main Character: Lessons from a Real-Life Romcom by Lizzie Frainier (Piatkus £20) is published on February 6. To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Special discount available for Times+ members

THE £600 HOLIDAY

A trip to Las Vegas, for vintage shops, museums and desert tours



Early March is a great time to grab a travel bargain and jet off somewhere sunny. The peak prices of half-term have passed and the Easter school holidays are still some weeks off. Yet Las Vegas is already gearing up for summer, with temperatures in the early to mid-20s, blue skies and outdoor pools reopening this month. Even if you're not planning on risking your life savings, you'll have extra cash to splash on the roulette table with this deal. A week's room-only at the Rio Hotel & Casino, a Destination by Hyatt Hotel, including flights on the budget airline Norse Atlantic Airways from Gatwick, costs £627pp with Thomas Cook, departing on March 4. A small 10kg cabin bag and personal handbag are included, but it costs an extra £125 return to check in a 23kg suitcase. It's easy to grab an Uber or taxi at the airport for the 20-minute drive into Vegas (about £25; taxi.nv.gov). The hotel is less than a mile from the Strip, above, and was

renovated last year – its large, tasteful rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows. There's a sprawling pool area, casino, neon-lit mini-golf with a live DJ and 18 restaurants. The hotel theatre also hosts the magicians Penn & Teller's long-running show (£63; riolasvegas.com). You don't even need to gamble a cent to enjoy this brash, fun-focused city. Wander around the huge themed hotels on the four-mile Strip to gawp at the dancing fountains of the Bellagio, the replica Eiffel Tower at Paris Las Vegas and the Colosseum theatre at Caesars Palace. Head off the Strip to see even more. Trendy Downtown has fantastic vintage clothing shops, a container park converted into restaurants and the best frozen custard in town (from £2.50; luvitfrozencustard.com). There are great museums

close by, including the Mob Museum, which traces the history of organised crime in the US (from £28; themobmuseum.org), and the Neon Museum, a graveyard of retro Vegas signs (from £16; neonmuseum.org). In March it will still be cool enough to leave the city and explore the cactus-studded prairies and rust-coloured cliffs of the Mojave desert. A Grand Canyon helicopter tour is a once-in-a-lifetime experience (from £215pp; papillon.com). You can also sign up for riding in Red Rock Canyon (from £71; cowboytrailrides.com). **Siobhan Grogan**
WHAT YOU GET FOR YOUR £627PP
● Return Gatwick-Las Vegas flights, departing on March 4
● Seven nights' room only at Rio Hotel & Casino (thomascook.com)

“Trendy Downtown Vegas has the best frozen custard”

Feeling flush?
If you're inspired by Las Vegas and have more to spend, try one of these...

THE £1,100 HOLIDAY
If you're looking for something more laid-back, Virgin Hotels Las Vegas – Curio Collection by Hilton appeals to a younger crowd with its kitsch desert-themed decor, live music venue, juice bar, bottomless rosé brunches, resident DJs and vast Mykonos-inspired pool for all-day lounging. Rooms are spread across three towers but even standard ones are large. The Strip is about a mile away but the hotel has several restaurants on site including a Nobu outpost. **Details** Seven nights' room only from £1,102pp, including flights, departing on March 5 (virginatlantic.com)

THE £1,300 HOLIDAY
For a more luxurious take, choose the Strip's newest hotel, Fontainebleau Las Vegas, which spans a staggering 25 acres. It's unashamedly glam, with chandeliers, mirrored surfaces and a vast lobby perfumed with fresh flowers. Rooms are more muted in soft greys and blues with floor-to-ceiling windows. Downstairs, there are – wait for it – 36 bars and restaurants, plus a six-acre pool area for soaking up that spring sunshine. **Details** Seven nights' room only from £1,270pp, including flights, departing on March 4 (britishairways.com)

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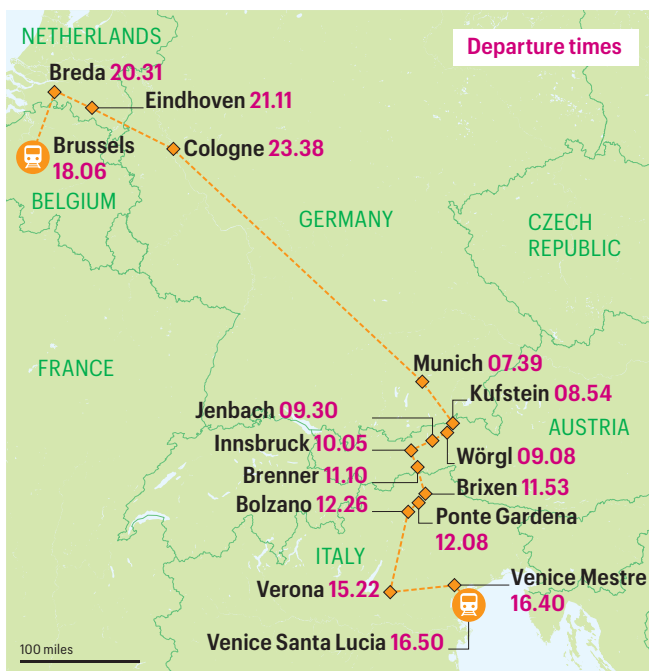




First class?

Europe's new night train

A sleeper from Brussels to Venice via the Alps departed for the first time last week. *Andrew Eames* bunked up – and hoped for the best



Walking through the carriages an hour after leaving Brussels on the European Sleeper, the newest addition to the Continent's overnight rail services, was like making my way through a picnic. Tables in cabins were laid and wine bottles were open. There was music, jigsaws and playing cards and everyone had their doors open so they could chat with passers-by.

We had left the Belgian capital just after 6pm and would arrive in Venice in time for dinner the next day, having passed through the Netherlands, Germany and Austria – at a fraction of the price you'd pay for a trip on

the Orient Express. Many passengers would be getting off at stops in the Alps for winter sports, while the rest of us would stay on board until the retro assortment of coaches swept into La Serenissima. Well, that was the plan.

It turns out that trying to run a new service through five countries, with all the complicated logistics involved, is ambitious to say the least. And this pilot journey – the first of four trips planned for February and March – duly hit the buffers with the news that crossing into Italy on the European Sleeper would not be possible on this occasion. Venice-bound passengers would still reach their destination on

time, but would have to transfer to another train company at Innsbruck in the morning, 16 hours after leaving Brussels.

Not that any of the passengers seemed concerned by the disruption. In the dining car, among a convivial crowd who had reserved seats and were enjoying curry and wine, I met Alex Münch, a geography teacher from Berlin. He was on board simply for the ride and would be flying home as soon as we got to Venice. Having to change trains didn't faze him. Nor was it a concern for Lian Shen, a PhD student from Beijing who was only going as far as Munich, where he would disembark just after 7.30am with his impressive haul of Belgian chocolates.

Lian and I were sharing a couchette, a cabin with half

a dozen seats that can be turned into berths when you are ready to turn in. Most of the train was composed of these six-berth compartments, allocated to individual (usually same-sex) passengers. Washing facilities were at the end of each corridor.

A further two carriages were proper sleepers in that they had beds, a table and chairs and a washbasin. And if you were prepared to rawdog it through the night there were seats by the dining car. Most of the rolling stock was old with unpredictable lighting and heating. There's been such a surge of interest in sleeper trains that getting hold of suitable carriages is difficult and these were sourced from central and eastern Europe.

Despite these eccentricities, I love sleeper trains. Especially

“Everyone had their doors open so they could chat with passers-by”



Andrew Eames boards a retro carriage; main, the Grand Canal in Venice

how they get under way in the dead of night, like an orchestra tuning up. First the tap of a conductor's baton, then the squeak of a spring, followed by an answering chorus of squeals from the wheels and the percussive rattling over points. After which the whole orchestra settles into its rhythmic stride, with a movement that rocks you to sleep. You wake

up occasionally thanks to a bang or thump, but the rhythm of the train soon sends you back to sleep.

Out in the corridor in the morning, I got into a conversation with Anders Kievits from Amsterdam, now retired, who was heading to Verona for a city break with his wife. Most of the carriages were more than 50 years old, but when I suggested to him that it may be time to update them, he was horrified. “This is perfect,” he said. “Look at this: everyone talking to everyone. This is nostalgia. It's a road trip on a train.”

He had a point. And I look forward to trying the European Sleeper again when those logistics are sorted.

Andrew Eames was a guest of European Sleeper. The next Brussels-to-Venice departures are on Friday (for the Carnival), March 4 and 12, with berths in a shared couchette from £116 (europeansleeper.eu)

Continued on page 6 →

TravelEurope

→ Continued from page 5
MORE GREAT EUROPEAN
HOLIDAYS BY SLEEPER TRAIN

ARCTIC ADVENTURE

The sleeper train that links Stockholm with the north of Sweden is at the heart of an adventure into Lapland, with dog-sledding, ice-fishing and the northern lights. This round trip from London takes its time crossing northern Europe, via Brussels, Cologne, Hamburg and Copenhagen. The two nights in Stockholm include island-to-island ice skating. Settle into a private cabin for the 500-mile overnight journey to Boden, and again a week later on your 14-hour return from Gällivare to Stockholm. Accommodation in Lapland features a lodge in a snowy forest, the Icehotel and a Sami tent. A new luxury sleeper called the Norient Express is coming to Norway in 2026. **Details** Thirteen nights' B&B, with two on a sleeper train, from £3,900pp, including various activities (originaltravel.co.uk)

PRAGUE AND 'SAXON SWITZERLAND'

European Sleeper's year-old Brussels-to-Prague service is a meandering ride to central

Europe. Having spent a night in a private cabin you'll have three in Prague, staying at a mid-range hotel (you can upgrade if you wish) while you sample excellent beer, admire the old town and pose for pictures on the Charles Bridge. From Dresden onwards the route follows the River Elbe through a spectacular German landscape nicknamed "Saxon Switzerland". Take the opportunity to break the journey – the sleeper stops at the resort of Bad Schandau – and go hiking in a landscape made famous by the artist Caspar David Friedrich. **Details** Five nights' B&B, with two on a sleeper train, from £949pp, including Eurostar from London (fredholidays.co.uk)

ODYSSEY TO SICILY

This is an itinerary for the train and culture lover, combining Florence and the Amalfi coast with a return-leg sleeper journey from the foot of Italy. The outward routing is from London to Zurich, then on to Florence for a couple of nights at the elegant Grand Hotel Baglioni and down to dawdle around Taormina and Messina in Sicily. The return

checks out the Amalfi coast before you board the sleeper at 11.30pm in Salerno, arriving in Milan just after 10am. From there it's back to Zurich and Paris, where you'll spend a night at a Montparnasse hotel, then London. The travelling is spread across 14 days. **Details** Twelve nights' B&B, with one on a sleeper train, from £1,746pp (byway.travel)

CROATIAN ISLAND-HOP

The EuroNight sleeper between Stuttgart and Zagreb takes the sting out of this long journey to the Adriatic. The first stage takes you from London to the German university town of Heidelberg, after which comes the sleeper in a private cabin. Spend the night in the Croatian capital, Zagreb, before making tracks for Split, the jumping-off point for the glamorous island of Hvar. After three nights at the Amfora Hvar Grand Beach Resort in its own bay, you catch a ferry for a mini cruise through the islands to Dubrovnik, where you'll spend a night before making your own way home. **Details** Twelve nights' B&B, with one on a sleeper train, from £1,499pp (tailormaderail.com)



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FROM PARIS TO THE RIVIERA

The SNCF's Intercités de Nuit are ideal for spiriting the kids away to the Med. Half a dozen depart from Gare Austerlitz in Paris for southern France, with favourite destinations including Marseilles, Nice, Montpellier and Narbonne, Latour de Carol, near Andorra, and even the Catholic shrine of Lourdes, near Pau. If you book the family a four-berth couchette on the overnight train to Narbonne you can be by the sea by lunchtime, staying on the huge stretch of campsite-thronged sand that extends to Perpignan. Here, the Canal du Midi threads through town, heading out into vineyards towards the walled city of Carcassonne.

Details First-class couchette berths from £52pp one way (snf-connect.com). Take the Eurostar to Paris

VIENNA CITY BREAK

The new Paris-to-Vienna Nightjet is at the core of this short break linking two of Europe's most beautiful

capitals on a round trip from London. You will spend a night in Paris on the way out, then a night on the train in a private compartment for the 15 hours to Vienna, where you'll stay for two nights at the smart Hotel Daniel near the Belvedere Palace, before returning to Paris on the sleeper. In Vienna there's a surfeit of riches, from the Stephansdom cathedral to the Schönbrunn Palace, but it is also worth seeking out the *heuriger* wine taverns in villages such as Grinzing.

Details Five nights' B&B, with two on a sleeper train, from £1,350pp (ffestiniogtravel.co.uk)

MYTHICAL TRANSYLVANIA

The land "though the woods", Transylvania, is a compelling slice of old Europe with haystacks and horse and carts trundling around villages, not to mention bears among those trees. Getting there from London is a long haul, partly alleviated by a night in Munich and the 14-hour sleeper between Budapest and Brasov, but it's worth it. Your base will be a village guesthouse near Sighisoara, a beautifully preserved medieval town. From here you hike and

explore handsome Saxon villages where King Charles has invested.

Details Ten nights' B&B, with two on a sleeper train, from £5,385pp, including guided tours (originaltravel.co.uk)

GROUP TRIP TO THE BALKANS

The logistics of less-familiar destinations involving multiple trains are made less intimidating with a guided group. The journey to Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina has a number of stops,

From far left: Old Town Square in Prague; aboard the new Paris-to-Vienna Nightjet; Isola Bella beach near Taormina, Sicily

including Matera in Italy and hiking to remote villages in Albania. The 13-hour sleeper, in a private compartment, is from Zagreb to Stuttgart on the way home, but only after you've had a meander through Montenegro and visited the lovely Bay of Kotor, which is a Unesco natural and culturo-historical region.

Details Thirteen nights' B&B, with one on a sleeper train, from £4,795pp, including guide and tours. Departs London on April 16 (responsibletravel.com)



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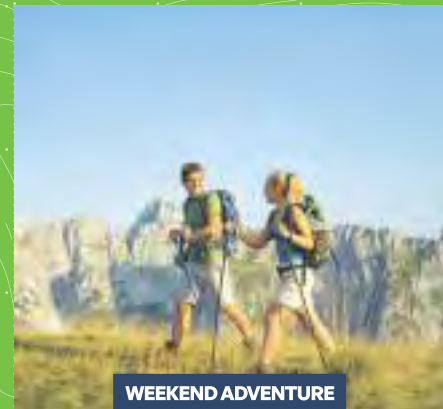
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James Stewart eschews Amalfi for Anglesey and whisks his partner away for a romantic weekend of beach walks, log fires and spa treats

Did you know that the first mention of Valentine’s Day as a romantic event was by Chaucer? In *The Parliament of Fowls* he writes of flocks of birds selecting their mates on the feast day of St Valentine. So now you know who to blame for today’s diamanté love hearts and sad garage roses. A pal of mine sidesteps all that. Each year he and his wife offload the kids and go away for a Valentine’s Day weekend. It seemed a smart move, so I suggested Anglesey to my partner, Hayley. When she later told her friends, their looks were somewhere between sympathy and concern. I get it. A frigid British island pales beside the Amalfi coast in the romance stakes. Yet I had a hunch Anglesey could deliver the goods. When I asked Google about the best romantic gestures it suggested beach walks, special dining experiences and spa treats. Check, check and check again.

Anglesey, I reasoned, could be *Love Island* without the preening narcissism. More than anything it had St Dwynwen, the Welsh patron saint of lovers. More on her later. We packed the car and crossed to Anglesey beneath a sky like a dishrag. By the town of Menai Bridge was the Swellies, the most treacherous stretch of water in the Menai Strait and a bosky shoreline of improbable beauty. Silver-blue water swirled around an islet with a tiny church. Oystercatchers piped on

sandbanks. There was that invigorating coastal tang of salt and seaweed. “Gorgeous,” Hayley cooed. “So mysterious and romantic.” Which is not something you’d say of many places beside a Waitrose car park. We were staying five miles up the coast in Beaumaris, at the Bull’s Head Inn, a 15th-century coaching inn of beams and fires where modest rooms were available for a steal in winter (half-board doubles from £99; [inncollectiongroup.com](#)). Outside was Anglesey’s answer to Tenby: candy-coloured façades, gift shops and galleries, a toybox castle. Across the strait, Eryri National Park (Snowdonia) looked like a watercolour. Hazy peaks reared out of shining water. Distant valleys glowed in

From left: James soaks in a whisky barrel; Twr Mawr lighthouse on Llanddwyn Island; by the fire at the Bull’s Head Inn, Beaumaris



DARK, ENIGMA IMAGES; JAMES STEWART; THE BULL'S HEAD INN

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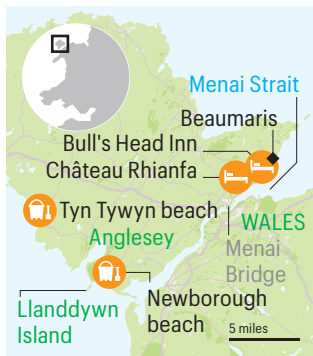
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sudden beams of sunshine before returning into gloom. The scene was like a landscape being repainted as you watched – and we had it all to ourselves: February wasn’t such a daft time to visit after all. One reason I’d fancied Anglesey for Valentine’s Day was Newborough beach. It’s a wild arc of sand on the island’s south tip, dunes and pine forest on one side and at its far end Llanddwyn Island, the 5th-century home of St Dwynwen. The story of the prettiest daughter of the Welsh king Brychan Brycheiniog is that of star-crossed sweethearts throughout history: girl loves boy; father betroths girl to another; boy tries it on then has a hissy fit when rebuffed; girl is heartbroken; boy is turned to ice by angels. The

point is Dwynwen entreats God to grant the wishes of all true lovers, which is why the Welsh also turn up the romance on January 25, St Dwynwen’s Day. We crossed sandflats to the island at half-tide. Ahead in a dell were the ruins of a church built where St Dwynwen was said to have established her convent. You couldn’t fault her logic. Scalloped by tiny beaches, Llanddwyn Island seemed a place to remember what mattered. We walked hand in hand, crunching along paths of cockle shells, relishing the pause from life’s hurly-burly. I expect Sir John Hay-Williams thought the same when he re-created a Loire Valley château beside the Menai Strait as a gift to his wife in 1849. Bristling with turrets, water shimmering beyond palatial rooms, it is now a hotel of 27 rooms, Château Rhianfa. Quite the spot for a romantic dinner. In the restaurant we were shown to a turret just big enough for a table for two. I can recommend the seabass

with buttered clams (three courses £60; chateaurhianfa.co.uk). Things were going splendidly, despite the spa treats lined up for the next day. The truth is, I find spas dull. That’s why I’d booked two outdoor experiences at the quirkier end of the wellness spectrum. But a storm was cartwheeling off the Atlantic and by the time we reached Tyn Tywyn beach for treat No 1 the weather was biblical. In the car park a woman was splitting logs outside a wooden cabin. “Lovely day for a sauna,” Caroline Coch said. Ensconced in bergamot-scented heat, Coch explained how work in the Scandinavian Arctic had inspired her to co-found Sawna Bach in 2023 (from £15pp; sauna.wales.co.uk). Even she was surprised by the enthusiastic take-up of visitors. Frankly, I wasn’t. Outside was weather to chill you to goosebumps in a minute. Yet here we were, relaxed and snug, chatting together.

“We were shown to a turret just big enough for a table for two”



As every Scandinavian knows, you need cold as well as heat to benefit from a sauna’s contrast therapy. So it was out through dunes to the beach to stand waist-deep in swimming cossies in the water, whooping at the mad exhilaration of still feeling super-heated as nature threw a winter tantrum. “If I come to the sauna grumpy I always leave feeling euphoric,” Coch said. She has seen couples propose afterwards. Let’s call it the Anglesey effect: “There’s the opportunity to be outdoors and reconnect with the person you love.” All we needed now was the post-sauna hot tub. Cue spa treat two. At the sea-salt manufacturer Halen Mon we were led to a row of whisky barrels in a field. “Hmm,” said Hayley. Well, quite.

The company pipes 40C freshwater from salt production into old barrels then plops in seaweed to offer an idiosyncratic take on the spa experience (£39.50pp; halenmon.com). The Irish have been doing it for ever, apparently: warm water releasing oils from seaweed (toothed wrack since you ask), antioxidants that moisturise skin. Something like that. For 45 minutes we marinated gently in oily water. Sometimes we chatted. Sometimes we sat in companionable silence as gauzy mountains materialised through the clouds. It felt a bit bonkers and entirely glorious. They say St Dwynwen advised “nothing wins hearts like cheerfulness”. It’s an aphorism only someone from Anglesey could have coined. If the Amalfi coast dazzles with expensive fripperies, Anglesey is a gentle reminder about simplicity being what matters in a relationship. It’s the having fun together, the making memories, the being present without distractions. I’ll see you there next year. Probably in a whisky barrel. James Stewart was a guest of Visit Wales (visitwales.com)



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Land and see Voyages along Norway's soaring west coast deliver onshore adventure – including a train trip crossing Kylling Bridge, which appeared in a Harry Potter movie

The latter includes two nights in Bergen, with its colourful Unesco-listed wooden houses in the Bryggen district dating from the 18th century.

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Travel Skiing



As the cost of hitting the slopes spirals ever up, *Sean Newsom* looks at bargain alternatives to the French Alps

The excitement is building. February half-term is almost upon us and for thousands of British families that means the start of their annual ski holiday. They're scanning webcams to check on the snowfall, rooting in the back of their drawers for ski socks, and – most of all – buzzing at the thought of getting back on the slopes.

Among them is the family of Chris Morgan. He is ex-army with tours of Afghanistan under his belt, as well as a successful winter ascent of Mont Blanc. He's now based in London and works as a project manager. "Our two sons are especially excited," he tells me. "The eldest has just finished his GCSE mocks. He desperately needs the fresh mountain air, as well as some exercise and a break from his screens."

Where are they heading? "Bulgaria," Morgan says. "It's the first time for us. We wanted a change of scene – and to rein in the price of the holiday."

They're not alone. This winter the ski specialist tour operator Crystal reports 25 per cent growth in bookings to this traditionally affordable ski destination, with packages still available for February half-term.

And it's not the only "fringe" country that's on the up – right now Norway is even more in vogue. A combination of the weakening krone currency and an increase in the number of flight options from the UK is helping to stoke demand there; so too the promise of somewhere calm, cute and low-key.

This season Crystal has added another resort to its Norwegian roster, bringing it to eight, and has reported mushrooming demand – up 115 per cent year on year. Its February half-term programme is now sold out, though there is still availability in March. In the small resort of Gausta, self-catering packages start from £546pp including flights, based on four sharing, with accommodation in apartments only a couple of minutes' walk from the slopes.

It's not hard to understand why



Save your ski trip try Bulgaria or Norway



demand for these B-list destinations is growing. Ski holidays have always been a big-ticket expense. It's not just that flights and accommodation jump in peak holiday weeks; lift passes, ski hire and lessons will significantly

boost the final cost. In recent years prices have (for the most part) risen inexorably – and this winter we seem to have reached a tipping point.

"Increasingly, our customers fall into one of two categories: those for whom money seems to be no object and those that are having to cut their cloth," says Nick Edwards of Snowfinders, a travel agency and tailor-made tour operator.

And no wonder, given the data. In its latest Ski Report, Post Office Travel Money combined typical prices for six days' ski hire, lift pass, tuition and lunches to produce a league table of in-resort costs – and revealed that in the past 11 years these had doubled almost everywhere. In Val d'Isère, France, the total had risen from £503.66 to £1,141.63, and in Mayrhofen, Austria, from £421.12 to £871.97. In Bansko, Bulgaria, it doubled too, but from a lower base – its total now stands at £572.95, or half the price of Val d'Isère.

However, this doesn't mean that skiers in Bulgaria will be having a holiday only half as good as their counterparts in the French resort. Yes, its ski areas are much smaller than those at the mega-resorts of

Continued on page 14 →



Clockwise from top left: Sean in Borovets, Bulgaria; Drei Zinnen, in the Italian Dolomites; a street and ski lift in Bansko, Bulgaria

Travel Skiing

→ Continued from page 13 the Alps – and you’ll need to be up early to dodge the peak-season morning lift queues in some places – but if you pay close attention to the piste maps, pick a resort that suits your ability and book plenty of lessons (so you don’t get bored skiing the same pistes), you’ll have a blast.

I did this in Borovets last year. There I found a surprisingly steep and feisty handful of pistes and had two blissful days in the company of Krasi the Carver



Snowshoeing in Drei Zinnen; below, the OVO Network’s Chalet Arsene et Lea in Manigod, France

(Krasimir Vasilev of the Samokov ski school) and a group of capable Brits. Krasi is one of the steadiest, most indefatigable instructors I’ve skied with. On and on he goes, never breaking his rhythm, however steep the slope. Trying to follow his smooth, sharp-edged turns down the mountain made me a steadier and braver skier too.

You don’t need to rough it either. At the time of writing there are still February half-term Bulgarian packages left with Crystal (crystalski.co.uk) and Heidi (heidi.com). They start at about £1,000pp half-board – cheaper than a self-catering trip to a big-name French resort in the same week.

Bulgaria and Norway are not the only destinations enjoying a B-list bounce. Snowfinders is experiencing a surge in demand for Andorra in the Pyrenees, while Heidi reports that Zakopane in Poland “has seen huge growth since we started offering it this season”. Thanks to increased flights to the Scandinavian Mountains airport in Sweden, bookings with SkiScandinavia have jumped for Stoten, which is 20 minutes’ drive from the arrivals lounge.

In the Alps, many lesser-known Italian resorts – including Bardonecchia, high-altitude Passo Tonale and spirited little La Thuile – offer good value, as do the resorts of East Tyrol, Austria.

And for those who are set on France, chic but affordable ski chalets can still be found thanks to the growing OVO Network of properties in less famous resorts. For example, a week’s self-catering at its swanky, ski-in, ski-out Chalet Mussol in St Nicolas de Véroc in March starts at £285pp. Perhaps it’s no surprise then that bookings across its

portfolio are up 44 per cent year on year.

We’re also learning how to look fabulous for less, thanks to ski-clothing rental companies such as EcoSki. “I wanted to help to reduce the unnecessary footprint that ski clothing had,” says its founder, Rachael Westbrook. “But I didn’t want customers looking – and feeling – threadbare and dreary. So our stock includes both hard-working technical clothing and pieces that are pure glam.”

Among its outfits this year is a shimmering gold Cortina puffer jacket with black Holly salopettes from Protest that can be rented for £81 a week; to buy it would be £290.

There’s one other significant benefit of affordable skiing, as James Gambrill, chief operating officer of the Ski Club of Great Britain, has discovered since he started holidaying in Drei Zinnen. On the

northern edge of the Italian Dolomites, the resort was forged in 2014 from the union of three smaller ski areas – and is almost unknown in the UK. But as word spread among his friends about how much more affordable it was over half-term than its A-list competitors, the size of his group ballooned. This year it’s 50 strong. His family holiday has become a social event.

Does he miss holidaying in resorts such as Val d’Isère? “Genuinely not,” Gambrill says. “I will, after all, be skiing on good snow, with beautiful scenery, great food and a load of friends. Why would I be looking over my shoulder at somewhere else?”

His kids will be loving it too. “We’ve got about 20 children and teenagers coming on the trip this year,” he says. “That’s enough to have a pretty good snowball fight.”

“There’s been a surge in demand for Andorra in the Pyrenees”

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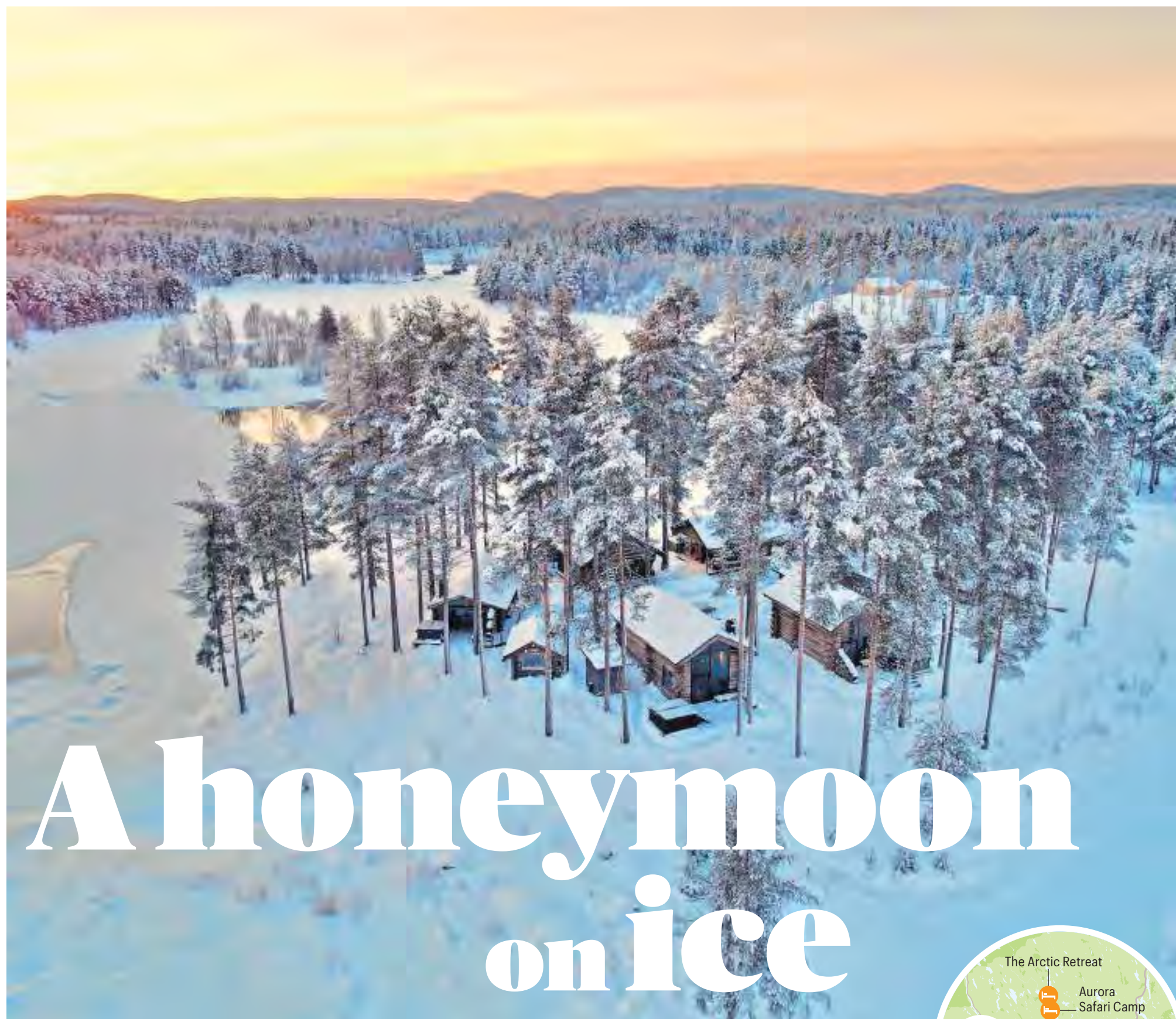
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THE ARCTIC RETREAT; VICKY MCCLURE; AURORA SAFARI CAMP; EVEN BELL

A honeymoon on ice

Marriage was the perfect excuse for the Line of Duty actress *Vicky McClure* and her husband to snowmobile, ice-swim and husky-sled in Lapland

Heading into the Arctic Circle in the middle of winter may not be everyone's idea of a honeymoon. My husband, Jonny, and I were keen to go because we loved Sweden when we went to Stockholm a few years ago, deejaying at a club called Bangers 'n' Mash, and more recently visited Gothenburg for a wedding. But we had never gone into the Arctic.

On a map it doesn't look far from the Swedish capital, but



when you're inside the Arctic Circle it's completely remote, with miles and miles of empty landscapes and almost no people. It takes a full day to get there from the UK – a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Stockholm and another hour and a half by plane to Lulea, in the north of the country, then an hour's drive to the camp on empty, pitch-black roads in a 4x4 with spiked tyres. The plan was to spend two nights at the Aurora Safari Camp and three nights at the Arctic Retreat a little further north.

Arriving at the camp feels like descending into Narnia. On the edge of Lake Degersælet, which is frozen solid in winter, there are four teepees and a cabin surrounded by forest. We spot reindeer and squirrels;

Jonny goes for a walk one evening and sees some footprints that we think belong to a fox. We don't see anything larger because the bears are hibernating, which I'm quite thankful for.

Our wooden tepee, based on a traditional Sami design, feels adventurous and eco-friendly and is very cosy, with pine walls and a stove that burns wood pellets. It's simple yet incredibly stylish; there's a glass-fronted veranda so that you can enjoy the view without freezing, a huge double bed and an incinerating loo.

It's cold, of course – the temperature falls to minus 20C at one point and there's a beautiful downfall of snow. It's manageable if you wear

plenty of clothes – it feels as though we're putting on about 900 layers at first, but then we acclimatise a bit and it's not so strange. Before leaving home we did a bulk order from Uniqlo because thermals and double-thick socks are a must, but the places where we stay provide equipment such as snowsuits, boots and balaclavas. The gloves covered by mittens are a revelation.

It's pointless to sit around waiting for the northern



lights to appear because there is no way of knowing whether you're going to be lucky enough to see them, so you have to throw yourself into the activities on offer and keep your fingers crossed.

I was the "star in a reasonably fast car" on an episode of *Top Gear*, so I thought that I'd be super-confident with snowmobiling, but Jonny makes a much better job of it than me. When it comes to the husky-driving, though, I love it. I've been scared of dogs from a young age, but I'm not *too* bad now, and the huskies are so well looked after. They run out, so friendly and happy in that "Oh, we're going out, we're

going out" way. It's the kind of thing you never expect to have an opportunity to do and it's wonderful to be pulled through a forest on a sleigh. There's only four hours of daylight in the heart of winter here, but the sunrises and sunsets are magical.

I decide that there is absolutely no way I'm going for a swim in a hole that somebody has cut in the ice, but our guide, Jonas, tells us after taking us on to the lake that it's all about mindset. First we heat up in a wood-

fired sauna then he suggests that we go outside in swimwear and just stand there to get used to the cold. Then we go back into the sauna and get really hot again, then back out and head down some steps into the water – just the three of us for as far as the eye can see.

It's exhilarating and the scenery is breathtaking, and the sense of genuine remoteness amazing, but I start to realise that it's about the people here as well.

The local vicar, Mogens, takes us to meet some of his friends in the indigenous, partly nomadic Sami community. We meet Lars Eriksson in his *lavvu* tepee, a tent-like building that the Sami use because it can be moved easily, allowing Eriksson to stay near his herd of reindeer. He makes us reindeer stew and a berry crumble, and it's a privilege to feel that we're able to be part of his life for a couple of hours. When Mogens hears that this is our honeymoon he asks whether we'd like him to bless



Clockwise from below left: Vicky and Jonny in Lapland; the Arctic Retreat; the Aurora Safari Camp; husky-driving

covered in snow, with lights marking the way between the various buildings. The aurora still hasn't made an appearance, but everything else is so wonderful that I'm OK with that.

Then, one night we are having dinner when the owner pops in to say hello and adds: "I'm assuming you've seen the lights?" We pile on our layers and, along with a family from Arizona, head out. Like the Aurora Safari Camp, the Arctic Retreat has been designed to have as little light pollution as possible and we stand among the snowy trees and frozen lakes under a magnificent green sky. It takes our breath away.

It's one of those experiences that you may have only once in your life and we were just trying to be in the moment as it was so beautiful. And it's not taken for granted by the locals – they all run outdoors to see the lights too.

Interview by Sarah Turner

Vicky McClure and Jonny Owen were guests of Off the Map Travel, which has five nights' full board from £4,545pp, including activities (offthemap.travel). Fly to Lulea via Stockholm



our marriage in Eriksson's home. It's a very special moment and one of the times we truly feel that we aren't on a normal type of honeymoon.

I'm not going to tell my nephew that I've tasted reindeer, but another of our foodie activities involves a forager named Eva Gunnare. She takes us into the forest and we sample the bark and sap of trees, and berries that I've not tried before, inspired by the obvious dedication she has for what she does. She cooks us mushrooms that

couldn't be any more natural and organic. In fact, all the food we eat on this trip is amazing, as each camp has restaurants that cook with local ingredients, and everything is delicious.

For our last two nights we move to the Arctic Retreat, a ten-minute drive along the Rane River from the camp. There are three huge wooden cabins here – ours has a loft bedroom and a lower floor with Scandi-style furniture; the windows span the two levels. Everything outside is

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I was hoping for a chance to slow down and reflect, yet here I was strapped to a man with a parachute, screaming and running off a cliff. We're paragliding over jagged mountains – like riding a terrifying rollercoaster in the sky – and heading to a luxury spa hotel where the plan was supposed to be to chill out. It's a James Bond-style entrance befitting of the Six Senses Zighy Bay, but so far I'm anything but relaxed.

Midway through 2023 I panicked. I felt overwhelmed with the pace of life. I didn't want to slow down but suddenly seemed unable to keep up with the tempo of London. My work-life balance was off and I didn't have the capacity to deal with things that were piling up. My forties had brought an even greater sense of urgency after I untethered myself from

what I thought was destined to be my life – marriage, a house, children – when I separated from my husband of 14 years at the age of 45.

So I made a few promises to myself about how I was going to live thereafter. I wanted to be authentic, vulnerable and more compassionate to myself. Most of all I wanted to travel to new and interesting destinations.

After my stint on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2015 I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I disappeared to the Six Senses Ninh Van Bay in southern Vietnam when I wanted somewhere luxurious with delicious food, a spa, activities and immense natural beauty. But after my recent

separation I was set on the Six Senses in Oman. I'd previously visited the Middle East only for work, but I loved the culture and generosity of spirit

of the people there, with everybody offering you mint tea, so I knew that Oman would be special.

This luxury resort is designed as a sort of exclusive Omani village, on a private stretch of beach near the town of Zaghi in the Al Hajar

Mountains, in the Musandam enclave of Oman – about three hours' drive from Dubai. It has 82 rustic-chic villas made of natural stone and wood, each with a private pool, sandy garden and patio with outdoor shower. Elsewhere there are two main pools,

“
Paragliding fits
with my motto
of saying yes
to everything

Flying solo

in Oman



SIX SENSES ZIGHY BAY; ANITA RANI; FORRAY DIDER/ALAMY



The newly single broadcaster *Anita Rani* wanted to say yes to more travel after a difficult year – and that included detoxing and retoxing on the coast



Clockwise from below: the Six Senses Zighy Bay; Anita cutting loose in Oman; a villa at the resort; a mosque in the local village

including the only saltwater pool in the Gulf, as well as an activity centre, a spa, tennis court, mini souk selling souvenirs and three restaurants. It's entirely secluded and almost surreally cocooned by the mountains.

Halfway through the drive from Dubai, having ascended the mountains, I spotted the hotel in the distance after stopping to stretch my legs. I was met 950ft above Zighy Bay by Sehrish, my concierge, who had driven there in a golf buggy. She told me that she could help to arrange anything I wanted during my stay, but first I had to decide how I would prefer to arrive at the resort: via a bumpy 4x4 drive down the mountains or by paragliding (£248pp).

Paragliding fits perfectly with my new motto of saying yes to everything, which is why I didn't resist the thrill. I was

utterly terrified, but there was something beautiful about feeling as free as a bird.

I arrive at check-in with a spinning head and a churning stomach – although as I've just spent five days at Glastonbury Festival, I can't entirely blame the paragliding. For the next 24 hours I feel very ropey indeed, and this is when I see the true qualities of this place.

If you're going to feel delicate on holiday, try to make it while you're staying here. Nothing is too much trouble for the staff. Since the paragliding made me spin out all I can think about is the nourishing comfort of homemade kitcheree, a simple dish of mildly spiced rice and yellow dhal. It's all my tastebuds want and my stomach can handle, but it's not on the menu. Not a problem, the hotel says, and in a flash the most delicious and authentic kitcheree turns up at my villa.

I'm staying right on the beach, with a little gate separating my villa from the sand. It has a huge living room and two outside showers. I take my shoes off when I arrive and find no reason to put them back on.

I admit that I'm a classic Indian abroad and usually start craving spice at some point during every holiday; I've been known to pack chilli sauce in my handbag when I'm filming in the UK. This place has me covered, though, because there are cuisines and chefs from all over the world. Everything tastes incredible and I go to bed each night bursting at the seams

– the absolute highlight is slow-cooked lamb, a local speciality. And I'm overjoyed by the "Maharajah's night", which is an Indian food extravaganza.



The Six Senses Zighy Bay takes its environmental responsibility seriously. The resort grows seasonal vegetables on site, uses reverse osmosis to produce its own bottled water and allows goats to roam the grounds freely, which delights the *Countryfile* presenter in me; I try to pet them but they're not having any of it.

There's also the spa, in which Cleopatra herself would delight; a fantastic Japanese restaurant, built high in the mountains, away from the main resort; and a private beach cinema with popcorn and headphones where I watch *Pan's Labyrinth*. Along with relaxing I want to throw myself into the activities on offer, so I take a cooking class (£126pp) and learn to make the tastiest falafel and my favourite dish, fattoush salad (pomegranate, molasses and plenty of fresh lemon juice are the key ingredients); I also kayak out to sea during a perfect sunrise and snorkel in a secluded cove as the sun is going down.

But it's the people I meet who really make this trip special. Each one treats me as though I'm a member of their family. Chomouri, a mixologist at the resort, concocts inventive cocktails with his own blended vermouth and syrups, and I'm still dreaming of his negronis.

The resort is exactly what I need after a terrible year. It gives me space to think, recharge and plan my next trip. I'm an adventurer, a dreamer, an ants-in-my-pants kind of traveller, but I don't feel the need to leave this piece of paradise, and that feels like progress to me. Maybe I have found compassion for myself in Oman after all.

Anita Rani was a guest of Scott Dunn, which has seven nights' B&B for £6,710pp, including flights and transfers (scottdunn.com)

Three more remote retreats

AMANGIRI IN UTAH, US

Desert chic abounds at this outpost from the Aman group, *below right*, next to the Utah-Arizona border. It's a drive of nearly five hours from Phoenix airport, but the otherworldly wilderness is worth it. Spread over 900 acres of red-rock landscape are 34 minimalist suites and ten tented pavilions, providing a back-to-nature feel. There are two restaurants overlooking the dunes, more than 12 miles of designated hiking trails and a sensational spa offering mindfulness walks, aqua shiatsu and yoga on the soaring Tower Butte sandstone summit. Helicopter tours, hot-air ballooning and boating on Lake Powell are also available.

Details Full-board doubles from £3,131 (aman.com). Fly to Phoenix

VIGILIUS IN SOUTH TYROL, ITALY

Getting away from it all is a given in a spa resort with no road leading to it. The only way up to Mount Vigilius in the Italian Alps is via a cable car that whizzes guests 1,500m (5,000ft) above sea level to this eco-friendly mountain resort. Thirty-five rooms and six suites have a simple, soothing alpine style with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Dolomites, stone feature walls and birch floors. Meals are made with local ingredients and a tasting menu is available at weekends. Activities focus on wellbeing with sound baths, forest bathing and meditation sessions alongside a spa, sauna and steam bath.

Details B&B doubles from £338 (vigilius.it). Fly to Bolzano

ANANTARA BAZARUTO ISLAND RESORT IN MOZAMBIQUE

Only accessible by boat or helicopter, this far-flung resort about 19 miles off the coast of Mozambique can (almost) be your private island. There are 44 luxury villas, each with direct beach access, as well as thatched patios and bathtubs overlooking the ocean. Three restaurants, including a pool bar, are a barefoot wander away. In-villa dining is also available, or a table for two can be set up on the beach. The spa has an oceanfront relaxation area, an ice pool and a hot tub, and you can also enjoy snorkelling, whale-watching and a sunset cruise in a dhow boat.

Details All-inclusive doubles from £670 (anantara.com). Fly to Maputo

Siobhan Grogan



GETTY IMAGES; ANTONELLA BOZZINI



Check in

and sail away

Superyachts are the ultimate indulgence, but they are pricey. Last January I spent a few days on the £170 million Carinthia VII in St Maarten. The rental fee? £285,000 a day. But what if you could have a similar experience for £20,000 a week? Would that be tempting? Alejandro Reynal, the chief executive of Four Seasons Hotels, thinks so.

Reynal and his investors are spending £1 billion on three superyachts, the first of which will set sail next year. Hotel chains building branded cruise ships is the hot new trend in ritzy travel. Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection has launched Evrima and Ilma; France's Accor group, under its Orient Express brand, will unveil the Corinthian; Aman is building a 50-suite cruiser called Sama.

I was the first journalist to see the Four Seasons I, as the Canadian hotel chain's first vessel is unimaginatively named, as it floated out from dry dock at the Fincantieri shipyard in Ancona, Italy, last month – and the first to tour the model suites.

It is big for a yacht – 207m long with 14 decks – but it's small in comparison to most other cruise ships you've seen. There are only 95 suites for 220 guests, served by 210 staff. In contrast, Icon of the Seas – the world's largest cruise ship, operated by Royal Caribbean – can accommodate 7,600 passengers.

While the yacht has a dull name, it looks anything but. The exterior is not the usual white; it's ivory, inspired by the colour of the 1950s Porsche owned by the vessel's lead designer, Fredrik Johansson, the executive director of Tillberg Design.

Johansson has looked to the past to give the yacht a classically elegant profile. "We wanted to evoke the golden era of yachting, so we created a very large aft deck, in homage to the iconic Christina

The refined Four Seasons hotel brand has launched its own cruise ship. *John Arlidge* is the first to board



O," he tells me, referencing the vessel built by the Greek shipowner Aristotle Onassis in 1943.

The extended rear deck not only gives the yacht a distinctive look, it creates enough space for a 20m swimming pool, with a perforated steel floor that can be raised to create a dancefloor.

Step inside the mock-up suites and it's like walking into a privately owned yacht, rather than a floating branded hotel. "We want it to feel residential,

like you are chartering your own yacht," says Jillian Ostek, the right-hand woman to Prosper Assouline, the vessel's creative director, who is better known as a book publisher. The art deco-style lights, floors clad in warm-coloured woods and brass details make the rooms and hallways look like a boutique apartment building.

The cabins are all suites, starting at 50 sq m including the veranda space, with a ceiling height of 2.4m.

Each has a terrace between nearly 6 sq m and 13 sq m – and this is just the entry-level suites. The bed is not positioned at 90 degrees to the terrace facing the wall-mounted TV, as is often the case on yachts and cruise ships. Instead, you wake up and go to sleep looking at the ocean, through sliding doors that lead out onto the terrace.

All the suites have walk-in wardrobes, and the bathrooms, some of which have

Above, take in views of Martinique on a Lesser Antilles voyage aboard Four Seasons I, inset. Below, one of the yacht's art deco-inspired suites



large bathtubs, are clad in what looks like dark grey-green marble but is actually celadon.

One of the vessel's suites is the largest yet built on a luxury yacht. The four-deck, 927 sq m Funnel Suite has 280-degree views, three bedrooms, dining and living areas, a gym, outdoor shower, pool and a private lift.

When they leave their suites guests can detox in the spa and gym and retox in the cigar lounge and 11 bars and restaurants.

Four Seasons I guests can sail the Caribbean in winter and the Mediterranean and Adriatic in summer. They can opt to do the 11 or 12 nights it takes to cross the Atlantic. The first voyage will be next January from Barbados, after the vessel's formal launch in Miami.

It's snazzy stuff, but does it come with a price tag that will make you want to walk the plank? Not if you are a Four Seasons regular, in which case you will find it rather good value. A week in an entry-level suite for two is £15,975, including breakfast, wi-fi and water sports. Lunches, dinners, drinks and tips on board or on land add about another £4,000 – the yacht is unusual in that it does not offer full board – but £20,000 would not even count as a day's tip on Carinthia VII.

The price of the Funnel Suite is a toppy £40,000 a night, but Reynal is confident he can fill that too. "From a pricing perspective we have no concerns," he tells me. "We started selling Four Seasons I last year. We established the booking pattern that we wanted to see in order to have the journeys filled to capacity."

With so many new branded yachts setting sail, what makes Four Seasons I distinctive? In different ways Assouline and Reynal insist that the social mix on board will be *très correct*. Assouline dismisses Ritz-Carlton's Evrima by telling me that "my wife would never go on it because there's too many people. Because it's corporate."

Reynal points out that Four Seasons does not have a loyalty programme (unlike Ritz-Carlton, which is part of the Marriott group's Bonvoy points scheme), so there won't be a mix of "people that are paying and people just redeeming their points". Translation: we don't want freebie merchants lowering the tone.

Big ships have a big image problem: people think they are bad polluters. "It is a tough one," Reynal concedes. Four Seasons and the shipbuilder Fincantieri have installed engines that burn the cleanest fuels and have a catalytic converter to minimise nitrogen oxide emissions. The vessel can, at times, run on electric power. Water is reused whenever possible and the sewerage system is as green as can be.

The biggest question of all is will the yacht feature in a new series of *The White Lotus*, the hotel drama that uses Four Seasons properties to poke fun at the foibles of the 0.1 per cent? "We've asked our guests if they like the affiliation to *The White Lotus* and we've got a really high response rate saying yes. It's become part of pop culture," Reynal says.

So, expect Four Seasons I to appear on TV soon, but with perhaps less drama on board than in the most recent series set in Sicily.

Four Seasons Yachts has seven nights' B&B from £15,975 per suite on a Lesser Antilles itinerary, including wi-fi and access to the watersports marina, departing on February 1, 2026 (fourseasonsyachts.com). Fly to Aruba and from St Maarten

“It's big for a yacht – 207m long – but it has only 95 suites

TravelCity breaks

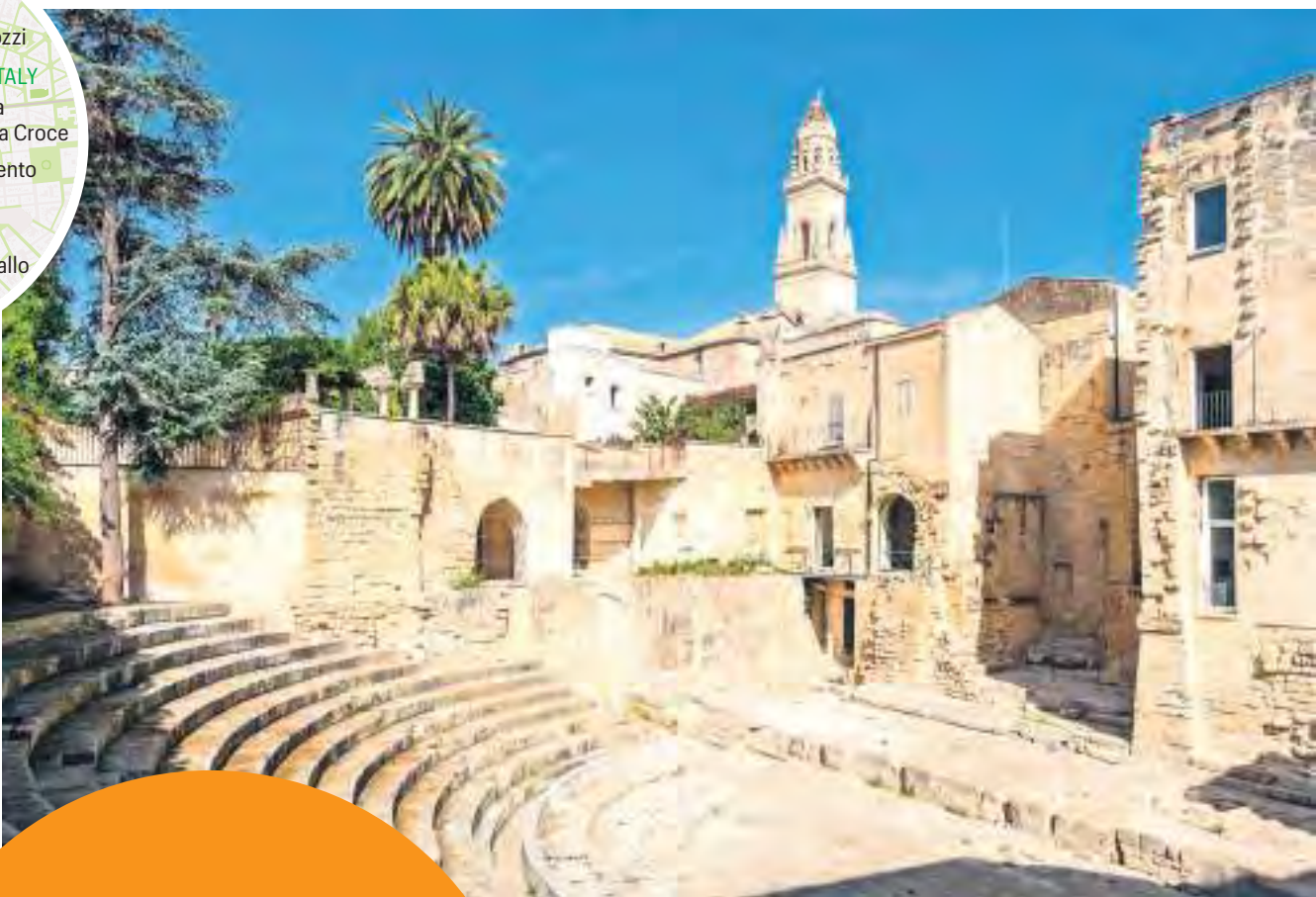
What did the Messapians, Romans, Byzantines and Normans ever do for us, eh? Well, it turns out in Lecce, in the heel of Italy, quite a lot, actually. While evidence of their prowess is clearly on display in the city of 100,000 residents, it's the baroque splendour of this "Florence of the South" that lures visitors. From the 15th century, trade – particularly in high-quality olive oil from the surrounding Salento region – made the city rich. The result was a small army of frenetic chisellers whose imagination went into overdrive on churches and public buildings, and whose results define the city today. Add in easy access to local beaches, delicious Pugliese *cucina povera* (food of the poor), and this city confirms itself as an enchanting spot in which to spend a few days sightseeing, cooling off with a caffè leccese (iced black coffee with almond syrup), or something stronger.

DAY 1 MORNING

Lecce is an embarrassment of baroque riches. Start at the stunning façade of the 16th-century Basilica of Santa Croce, built by the Celestines to house relics of the True Cross, before venturing inside to



The Roman amphitheatre in Piazza Sant'Oronzo; below, a room at Palazzo Maresgallo



48 HOURS IN... LECCE

Roman ruins, baroque buildings and perfect pastries await in southern Italy, says Will Hide

feast on more ornate carvings. A LecceEcclesiae pass covers entry here as well as to several other churches, the cathedral, its bell tower and Palazzo dell'Antico Seminario (£18; chieselecce.it). Pause along the way for the local speciality, pasticciotto, a warm, custard-filled pastry, and a Maria d'Enghien (almond sponge cake and lemon-flavour ice cream) at Natale (cakes from £2; natalepasticceria.it). **Eat at Re Mida** Is there any greater pleasure than sitting outside eating scrumptious Italian food, observing the passers-by, a glass of wine in hand? You get all that at Re Mida, where the chef-owner Stefania Indraccolo cooks simple dishes such as orecchiette pasta with tomato and beef (mains £11; fb.com/ReMidaRestaurant).

AFTERNOON

Palazzo Vernazza dates to the 15th century, but archaeological digs revealed foundations that actually went back to the Iron Age. You can journey down, literally, through the ages aided by virtual-reality technology that lets you immersively explore a Roman temple (£8.50; palazzovernazza.it). **Drink at Quanto Basta** This diminutive cocktail bar mixes drinks inside and then serves them to you at

Need to know

Getting there Ryanair flies to Brindisi from Stansted and Manchester; easyJet flies seasonally from Gatwick, and British Airways from Heathrow. Buses from the airport to Lecce cost £6 one-way and take about 50 minutes (brindisiairport.net), but you may want to just pre-book a taxi through your hotel (35 minutes). Lecce is compact and all sites can be reached on foot. **Visit sustainably** Avoid crowds by visiting in April and May, when skies are sunny and temperatures much more pleasant than high summer. The city is almost at the end of Italy's east coast rail line: trains reach Lecce from Rome in under six hours, from Bologna in just over seven hours and from Milan in about nine hours.

tables in the street, so it's great for people-watching. A cristoforetti (gin, elderflower cordial and lemon juice) is very refreshing on a warm evening (cocktails from £7; quantobastalecce.com).

EVENING

The 17th-century bell tower of the cathedral has something that not many others do: a lift. So there is no schlepping to the top (72m) for great sunset views over the city (entry with LecceEcclesiae pass; scheduled to reopen in April after restoration). **Eat at 300Mila** This all-day bar-restaurant is tourist-friendly without being touristy and becomes nicely buzzy in the evening. You'll find classic risotto, pasta and fish dishes alongside less traditional sushi and poké (mains from £12; 300mila.it).

DAY 2 MORNING

A window-shop around Luciano Treggiari's antiques store Ship in Arte on Via Federico d'Aragona is pleasant – even if a £67,000 pair of 18th-century Venetian wooden horses aren't for you. But email in advance and he'll open up his storage

rooms to show you a staggering Aladdin's cave of art dating back to the Renaissance with the chance to see old masters such as Tintoretto up close (free; shipinarte.com). **Eat at Capilungo** It's a bit of a walk outside the centre, but come here for an authentically Pugliese take on lunch. Peek behind the counter to see the small army of pastry chefs at work, then order a plate of aperipranzo snacks and a glass of wine (lunch plate £12; pasticceriaalucapilungo.it).

AFTERNOON

Museo Sigismondo Castromediano is a fascinating archaeological museum and art gallery housing paintings from the medieval period to the modern day. It's free, air-conditioned and open until 10pm (fb.com/MuCastromediano). **Drink at Bluebeat Pub** Lecce is a student town and you might catch some at this craft beer pub, along with business folk and young families with babies in prams. In other words, everyone is welcome. Sit at a communal table, order a drink, nibble on lupini beans and join in the chat (beers from £4; fb.com/BluebeatPub).

“Pause along the way for the speciality pastry pasticciotto”

EVENING

A guided sunset stroll in the extensive grounds of Villa Reale can be arranged if you email in advance. The private gardens were laid out in the 1920s by the renowned landscape architect Pietro Porcinai. If you're lucky the debonair owner might invite you inside his design-magazine palazzo for a nosey (free entry to gardens; apgi.it). **Eat at 3 Rane** There are just four tables here – a few more outside in summer – with one waiter and only the owner-chef in the kitchen. Tasting menus are packed with sumptuous Salentine flavours (four courses £38; fb.com/3raneristoro).

Will Hide was a guest of Kirker Holidays, which has three nights' B&B from £1,036pp at La Fiermontina, including flights, transfers and concierge service (kirkerholidays.com), and Art Work Cultura (artworkcultura.it). For more information visit Comune di Lecce (comune.lecce.it)

Where to stay

RISORGIMENTO RESORT

Stay near the heart of history This 47-room hotel is located a couple of minutes from the Roman amphitheatre in Piazza Sant'Oronzo. It has several restaurants, including a seasonal rooftop one that's perfect for sundown spritzes. There's also a spa and wellness centre for massages and Turkish baths (B&B doubles from £152; risorgimentoresort.it).

PALAZZO BOZZI CORSO

Suites and sculptures Pack an 18th-century townhouse with modern art and cool design and you get this super-stylish bolt hole in the centre of town. There are ten suites and a rooftop pool. For something more contemporary, the nearby sister property La Fiermontina has a larger pool in its expansive sculpture and olive tree-strewn garden (B&B doubles from £300; lafiermontina collection.com).

PALAZZO MARESGALLO

Chic central oasis With just 12 rooms, this is another grand Leccese townhouse that has been tastefully converted to a hotel, with entry through a courtyard located in the shadow of the Duomo. Rooms are individually and chicly decorated. There's a small garden with a pool, a basement wellness area and a lovely roof terrace for when the sun shines (B&B doubles from £393; palazzomaresgallo.com).

Travel

MY HOLS TOM PARKER BOWLES

The chef in our villa was spying on us

The Queen's son on childhood trips to Ischia and what the King is like on holiday

Tom Parker Bowles, 50, is a restaurant critic and food writer. He is the son of the Queen and her first husband, Andrew Parker Bowles, and grew up in Wiltshire. He became Tatler's food critic in 2001 before going on to write regular newspaper columns and nine cookbooks. He has two children — Lola, 17, and Freddy, 14 — with his former wife, Sara Buys, and lives in London.

I had a very happy, privileged upbringing and holidays were of two kinds: Italy in summer or skiing in winter. My parents, sister and I would spend a week every December in St Anton am Arlberg in Austria, Chamonix in France or Verbier in Switzerland. My mother hated skiing, though, so she would send us up the mountain with a guide while she read a book. She would come up in the ski lift to meet us for lunch and one time tried to make conversation with the guide, asking him, “*Aimez-vous les chevaux?*” (Do you like horses?), to which he replied, “*Oui, avec les frites!*” (Yes, with chips!)

Every summer my grandparents would take us and our cousins and their parents to Ischia, an island near Naples. We'd stay at the Excelsior Belvedere, a grand, old-fashioned hotel with a wonderful swimming pool. It was a lovely place and we had the same routine for 15 years or so. We children would have our mandatory siestas in the afternoon, which we hated. Then we would do

la passeggiata, wandering up and down the streets, and my cousins and I would buy stickers and toy robots from the shops, followed by dinner at six o'clock.

Shortly after I'd left school I had a nightmare holiday to Sintra, in Portugal. It was me, my mother, my sister and various other family members and friends — my parents were divorced by then. We were staying in this beautiful old house, but it sat in a cloud and everything was damp... and the cook turned out to be a News of the World plant and there were paparazzi in the garden. It's funny looking back on it, but it wasn't much fun at the time. Still, I'm desperate to return to Sintra — I love Portugal and its people. I recently stayed in the Bairro Alto Hotel in Lisbon, a stroll from Cervejaria Ramiro, for me one of the world's best seafood restaurants.

Great hotels are an art form. I hate those where they charge you for internet and water and it's impossible to turn off the lights. I love Lime Wood, in the New Forest, and the Pig hotels. I remember going to country hotels when I was younger and you'd have to wear

The Italian island of Ischia was a regular haunt for Tom Parker Bowles and his family



a shirt — it was all very formal and rather pompous — then more relaxed boutiques such as the Pigs came along and they're incredible. Overseas, I love the Mandarin Orientals — the one in Tokyo is wonderful — and the Plaza Athénée in Paris.

I travel a huge amount for work and at last I've come round to Rimowa bags — they're expensive but fantastic. When I travel I pack about 400 pens, from hotels across the world, my Moleskine notebook and Tabasco sauce. I like to travel light when I'm flying short haul — all you really need is a few pairs of pants and some T-shirts.

My father usually takes me and my children to the Carlisle Bay hotel in Antigua during half-term, which is very nice. My mother loves travelling, but she's mainly based in the UK nowadays. I tend to go to Scotland with the kids during the summer holidays, staying with my mother and the King at the Birkhall estate in Aberdeenshire. It took me a long while to “get” Scotland, but once you've got it you're totally in love. I especially like a restaurant called Fish

Shop in Ballater, Aberdeenshire, and the Fife Arms is great too.

I haven't flown with my mother for years, but when my sister and I were young it was always in economy with British Airways. I love BA staff — they're the best in the world — and Terminal 5. But BA will never catch up with the Singapore, Qatar or Emirates airlines. I have a sort of toxic relationship with BA, especially since it changed its loyalty scheme.

My mother and I love walking so we just wander off together. She hasn't changed at all over the years — if you give her the sun and a book she's perfectly happy. The King loves walking too, but he's the most hard-working man I've met — I don't think he's the sort of person who can just flop onto a deckchair and disappear into a book.

Interview by Claudia Rowan

Tom Parker Bowles's episode of Travel Secrets with Tanya Rose is available via Spotify, YouTube and podcast stores

COMPETITION

WIN A WIN LUXURY BREAK IN MARRAKESH WORTH UP TO £3,000 WITH IZZA

WHERE WAS I?

Friend is blowing hot and cold about our day out. He's intrigued by this affluent inner suburb. But he doesn't like the frigid forecast, nor all the walking I've planned. So he insists that we park near a university and go no further.

But it's not hard to coax him on. After we've seen the university's main building — agreeing that, yes, it does resemble a fictional school — I persuade him to visit the gallery behind it, on account of the glowing colours of its paintings.

Then it's on to a palatial glasshouse half a mile north of the university's main building, to check out its orchids and tree ferns.

“Maybe they've got some cactus dahlias too,” I muse.

“I love those!” Friend exclaims. “They're so lush — especially the black narcissi.”

Our last stop is the river that edges much of the suburb. It gave its name to a unit of measurement, via an

ennobled professor who used it in his title.

Again, Friend hesitates, until I tell him that a little more a century ago a Hollywood star (mother: Kathleen) was born 390 yards southeast of the glasshouse. Was she ever wheeled down to the water's edge in a pram, I wonder.

“Remember that scene?” Friend asks as we descend.

Who doesn't? We fall silent for a moment and let the memory of it wash over us. Then, softly, snow starts to fall. Friend shivers. “It's a long way from here to, you know...”

“Oahu?” I ask.

Friend nods. “I wonder how warm it is there now?” he sighs as we don woolly hats.

It seems an eternity before we're back in the car.

Sean Newsom

THE QUESTIONS

1 What was the first name of the Hollywood star?

2 What is the name of the river?



THE PRIZE

The winner and guest will stay for three nights, B&B, at Izza, the luxury hotel in Marrakesh that mixes contemporary art, Moroccan craftsmanship and mid-century design motifs. A subtle blend of seven riads, it is a launchpad to the city as well as a sanctuary, and has a new restaurant, Noujoum,

across its garden, rooftop terraces, offering sunset views over the Medina and sustainable, seasonal food.

Downstairs, there is a hammam, spa, three pools, a library and works by the Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Selgado and the Ethiopian collective Yatredda. For more see izza.com.

The prize includes one

three-course dinner for two (up to £50pp and excluding drinks), a massage treatment each for the winner and guest and return flights from the UK to a total value of £600. It must be taken between April 24 and December 20, 2025, subject to availability and excluding April 30 to May 5.

HOW TO ENTER

Answer the questions and complete the entry form at [thetimes.com/travel/where-was-i](https://www.thetimes.com/travel/where-was-i) by the end of Thursday, February 13. One entry per person. Full terms and conditions apply, and your information will be used in accordance with our privacy policy at [newsprivacy.co.uk](https://www.newsprivacy.co.uk).

LAST WEEK'S PRIZE

The answers are Edgehill and In the Night Garden. Helen Simmons from Berkshire wins a family holiday to Rhodes worth up to £6,900 with Mark Warner.

9 things I've learnt about... road trips

Chris Haslam shares his expert tips on getting the most out of a driving holiday



Each spring I do a circumnavigation of the British and Northern Irish coastlines to research The Sunday Times Best Beaches guide. The journey – of 5,500 to 7,000 miles, depending on route – takes about six weeks, during which I sleep in a tent and live out of the back of a car. This year will be my 17th sortie, but it's not the only long drive I do. In the past two decades I've driven around Australia, Canada, the US, South America, Africa and India, through central Asia to China, and in Japan, southeast Asia and almost every country in Europe. Here's what I've learnt about road-tripping.

FOR PITY'S SAKE, PLAN "Where we going, man?" Sal asks in *On the Road*. "I don't know but we gotta go," Dean replies, proving you should

not take road trip advice from Jack Kerouac. The only way to truly enjoy the freedom and endless possibilities of the open road is to prepare a detailed plan that includes restaurant reservations – otherwise you'll experience only the freedom to sleep in your car and the endless possibilities of not having dinner. Use Google Maps for route planning, aim to drive no more than five hours a day, build in 90 minutes for chance encounters and get your tent up/check in before sunset.

SLOW DOWN You are a tourist, not a commuter, so get off the motorway and stop being a slave to the destination. For every driver you see chilling beside a loch on the North Coast 500 there are 49 others racing past with the grim determination of delivery drivers. Effective route

planning allows you to factor in hikes, swims, snoozes and picnics and make it to your hotel or campsite before the restaurant closes. And if your idea of a road trip lunch is a petrol station Ginsters crammed down at the wheel, you're doing it all wrong.

THERE'S NO EXCUSE FOR GETTING LOST It was when the armed gang surrounded the car on a track in the Thar desert in India that I accepted we were lost. My companion had suggested as much an hour earlier, but I had pressed on, certain that the street lights in the far distance were the tarmac NH11 in Rajasthan. In doing so I had broken three big rules: I had neither bought a paper map nor downloaded the Google Maps data, which had become a problem when the signal died 60 miles south of Jaisalmer; I was driving at

night, when the risk of fatality is about three times higher than the daytime rate, according to a US study; and I had lacked the courage to turn back. The gunmen patiently explained that the lights were the Pakistani border, and that a swift U-turn would be best.

BE FASTIDIOUS The safari guide's day does not end when he drops you back at your lodge after sundowners. He washes and cleans the vehicle, checks the tyres and refills the tank. After years driving the world's highways in vehicles that resembled badly packed skips, I now follow this example. Not only am I much calmer as a consequence, but I can also see out of the rear window.

USE THE ODO

Your odometer is a useful navigation tool in remote areas – such as the outback or the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan – where you can't rely on sat-nav or Google Maps. Paper maps show the exact distances between junctions, so get used to resetting the odo to zero at one junction to count down the distance to the next. This will stop you taking a wrong turn or missing the right one.

LIVE OFF THE LAND

Roadside signs announcing produce for sale often offer the chance encounters you will remember longest. I've bought oysters in Scotland, cheese in the Jura, sausage in Switzerland, mushrooms in Ukraine, hammocks in Mexico and hand-knitted socks from nuns in Chile – and in each case the conversation has been as good as the shopping. Beside a cemetery in rural Portugal I saw a sign advertising homemade wine at €5 for five litres. The elderly vendor put four of my euros in one jar and one in an old coffee tin. "That's the Devil's share," she said. She declined to explain why.

BUILD YOUR OWN BREW BOX

The brew box is an essential accessory for the road-tripper. Mine are unnecessarily elaborate. I varnish an old wine box, fit a hinged lid and stays, line the interior with baize and pack it with aluminium mugs, an MSR Pocket Rocket stove, a gas canister, kettle and an AeroPress coffee maker. Repurposed treacle tins containing tea, ground coffee and powdered milk fit

inside the mugs, while leather strapping holds a lighter, teaspoons and an Opinel knife in place. The stove can be set up inside the box with the lid acting as a windbreak. You could use an ammo box or a Tupperware container instead. And thus every beauty spot becomes your own private café.

ESSENTIAL KIT

Whether you're road-tripping around Scotland or driving the Creb Track to Cape York in Queensland, you'll need a first aid kit, work gloves, Gorilla tape, a multitool, jump leads or a jump starter, a 12V tyre inflator, tow rope and 25-litre water carrier. In hot countries you should buy either a 12V coolbox or one with ice blocks to refreeze at your accommodation. Other useful kit includes bug remover and microfibre cloths for the windscreen, a mini shovel and a compass. Don't forget to check the spare tyre, jack and wrench before you leave the rental depot and, when driving in remote areas, to stop and fill up at every petrol station you come across.

DO YOU NEED THE CONVERTIBLE?

I understand the lure of the droptop, but in practice going all *Thelma & Louise* can be more irritating than liberating. You get less room in the boot because the roof mechanism takes up so much space, the wind noise drowns out the radio and you risk sunburn in hot climates and ridicule on more temperate trips, such as along the NC500 and the Wild Atlantic Way in Ireland (where it rained on 27 days in August 2024). But if you are driving slowly on quiet backroads in fair weather – in Provence or Sonoma, for example – you might enjoy a convertible.

Loyalty schemes are not a new idea. They go back at least to the 18th century, when an American salesman handed out copper tokens for customers to collect and exchange for goods. Fast forward 250 years and instead of tokens airline passengers get "status points" or "tier points" that can be redeemed for airport lounge access, seat upgrades and other shiny incentives. Loyalty might have been upgraded from copper to snazzy membership cards in silver and gold, but battling for travellers' business with perks is as important as ever. Last week British Airways (BA) backtracked on some proposed changes to its Executive Club loyalty scheme following outcry from frequent flyers. The



CATHY ADAMS

BA has backtracked on its points scheme – but it may be too late

airline irritated passengers last year when it announced that flyers would earn tier points based on how much they spend with the airline, rather than distance flown – leading some passengers to complain it would be harder for them to reach the tiers and retain their perks. However, last Wednesday BA said it would allow commuters on short, cheap routes (London to Geneva,

for example) to continue to hold elite status if they flew a certain number of flights a year, and that it would extend a special tier-point bonus offer until the end of 2025. In simple terms it means the airline will allow some passengers to retain their status even after the scheme changes from April 1. In the background other airlines have been cannily tweaking their own loyalty

programmes, offering "status matches", which allow disaffected customers to transfer to another airline loyalty scheme while retaining their existing elite level. Status matching isn't a new idea either, but Mark Ross-Smith, who runs Statusmatch.com, which helps flyers to transition between schemes, says that in January the site had an 800 per cent increase in Brits registering their interest. Flying Blue, the Air France/KLM loyalty scheme, has launched a status match programme specifically for UK residents. Meanwhile, Virgin Atlantic says it has seen a threefold increase in the number of members applying to join its Flying Club over the past month. Gilbert Ott, the founder of the frequent flyer website God Save the Points, says that travellers feel an

"emotional attachment" to loyalty schemes because "reward points are free money". He adds: "People seem to have a natural desire to want to be a VIP, and when programmes are functioning well they're driving increased loyalty from travellers by providing a better experience. People want that feeling all the time, not just when they pay full price for it." I'll admit I have what Ott calls an emotional attachment to my chosen loyalty scheme. I've just squeaked my way to BA Silver status, which gives me lounge access and a priority customer service helpline – at least until April 2026, when the status changes kick in. Then, like many others, I'll decide if my custom is better rewarded elsewhere ... and whether to start collecting another airline's copper tokens.