DAILY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

THE TIMES

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I found fake nudes of myself online

Naga Munchetty

INSIDE TIMES2



Giant killing Plymouth knock Liverpool out of FA Cup

The Game

Hostage only learnt of wife's death after release, family confirm

Gabrielle Weiniger

The freed Israeli hostage Eli Sharabi did not know that his British wife and two children had died at the hands of Hamas until he was freed from 491 days in captivity, his family have confirmed.

Appearing unsteady on his feet and clearly emaciated, Sharabi, 54, was paraded in front of the cameras before his release over the weekend alongside Or Levy, 34, and Ohad Ben Ami, 56.

He had been unaware of the fate of his wife, Lianne, 48, who grew up in Staple Hill near Bristol, and their two British-Israeli teenage daughters, Noiya, 16, and Yahel, 13. "I feel very, very happy today to return to my family and friends — to my wife and daughters. I truly hope to see them very soon," he said. Israel's military had to inform him that they had been killed on October 7, it is understood. His family said last night that Sharabi's condition was an "urgent testament" to the need to bring all the hostages home.

Speaking slowly and deliberately at a press conference in Tel Aviv outside the hospital where his brother was being treated for severe malnutrition, Sharon Sharabi said: "Every moment that passes, every second could save lives from Hamas tunnels, from this cruel enemy that massacred us since October 7."

Their third brother, Yossi, was killed in Gaza just over a year ago when Israel bombed a building near where he was being held.

Sharabi was taken from his home in a kibbutz before Hamas militants shot his dog then locked his family in the safe room and set it on fire.

Michael Levy, brother of Or Levy, told reporters at Sheba Medical Center that Or had suspected his wife, Eynav, had been killed when the couple tried to escape Hamas gunmen on October 7, but was unsure until he was released.

"For 491 days he hoped he would

Continued on page 2

Firms cut jobs ahead of Labour tax change

Employment figures hit Starmer's growth plans

Jack Barnett Economics Correspondent
Geraldine Scott
Senior Political Correspondent

Businesses cut jobs or slowed recruitment last month at levels not seen in over a decade while demand for new workers receded to its lowest since the pandemic, laying bare the hit to the labour market from tax rises in the autumn budget.

Two surveys released today showed that companies are cutting costs by scaling back recruitment and trimming their workforce before a looming £25 billion rise in employers' national insurance contributions (NICs).

The Conservatives said the figures showed that Labour measures would "kill growth stone dead" and put "countless jobs at risk".

Data compiled by BDO, a large accountancy and advisory firm, showed private sector employment slid to its lowest since November 2012, while business confidence has fallen to a two-year low.

Separately, researchers at the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) and KPMG, another professional services firm, said vacancies were at their weakest level since August 2020, when the economy was gripped by the Covid-19 crisis.

Demand for permanent staff has contracted for the past 17 months, the two organisations confirmed. A senior Tory blamed the effect of the October budget on the labour market, which had been the bright spot of the economy in recent years. Unemployment is historically low at 4.4 per cent.

Andrew Griffith, the shadow business and trade secretary, said: "The Conservatives warned that Labour's national insurance jobs tax and economic mismanagement would kill growth stone dead, putting countless jobs at risk.

"These reports are deeply concerning, but the bad news doesn't end there. Just last week, the Bank of England halved their growth forecasts and warned that inflation and unemployment will rise. Labour are taking us back to the dark days of the 1970s.

"Under new leadership, only the Conservatives understand that, when you harm businesses, working people are left paying the price."

Last week, the Bank of England warned that the rise in NICs would increase the cost of hiring low-paid staff by 5 per cent, more than high-income workers. Alongside a 6.7 per cent rise in the minimum wage, Reeves announced that in April the main rate of employer NICs will jump to 15 per cent from 13.8 per cent and the earnings threshold that triggers the tax will fall from £9,100 to £5,000 a year.

In addition to the NICs warning, the Bank of England cut its growth

Continued on page 2

JEREMY SELWYN



Another missed target Sir Keir Starmer scooped a penalty over the bar in London, hours after sacking a minister over offensive messages. Texts row spreads, page 6

Packed state schools have no room for private pupils

Aubrey Allegretti
Chief Political Correspondent

State schools have no spare spaces in some year groups across dozens of councils, prompting fears they will struggle to cope with increased demand due to Labour's tax raid on private schools.

Figures obtained by The Times show that at least 27 local authorities are already oversubscribed in certain age cohorts. They range from predominantly rural areas such as South Gloucestershire and Rutland to urban ones, including Bristol, Hull and Coventry.

Across England, Years 7 and 8 have the lowest spare capacity, meaning the strain on state schools from any influx in pupil numbers is likely to hit secondary education hardest.

Eighty-seven areas have declared they have at least one year group with fewer than 100 spare places across the whole council.

Experts said the findings revealed there was little slack in parts of the state school system, which Labour has said should absorb the impact of its tax increase on private schools.

At the start of the year, the VAT break for independent schools ended, leading many to put up their costs by 20 per cent. Business rates relief for private schools is also due to finish from April.

Official government estimates suggest that the moves will lead to a fall in private school pupil numbers of 37,000. Given the increase in fees, 35,000 are expected to seek a space in the state sector instead.

Ministers have stressed that nationally there is enough capacity to absorb any transfer in pupils, and that thousands of children every year move between the state and private system.

Nationally, there are 578,000 unfilled places in primary schools and 465,000 unfilled places in secondary schools. Some 83 per cent of primary schools and 77 per cent of secondaries have at least one spare space.

However, figures released under

Continued on page 2

News

Record number of migrants arrested in 'illegal job' raids

Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

A record number of illegal workers were arrested last month as the Home Office confirmed for the first time that small-boat migrants are working off the books in car washes, nail bars, convenience stores and restaurants and as delivery drivers.

Immigration Enforcement officers raided 828 business premises and made 509 arrests in January, 73 per cent more than a year ago and the highest monthly figures recorded, according to the Home Office.

The raids were part of an intensified month of activity to tackle illegal working in the UK after closer collaboration with the French government, which has consistently blamed the huge demand for Channel migrant crossings on Britain's lax rules and enforcement against illegal working.

It was the highest number of arrests and raids related to illegal working recorded by the Home Office.

The efforts are part of a push by Sir Keir Starmer to tackle soaring numbers of migrants crossing the Channel in small boats. Crossings are up 8 per cent on last year, and 1,489 people have arrived in small boats since Januray 1.

The prime minister will host a border security meeting at Lancaster House, in London, next month with delegates from more than 40 countries and representatives from the EU in an attempt to boost international co-operation on combating people-smuggling gangs.

The government says it will publish video of migrants being deported on charter flights as it attempts to show voters the action that it is taking to tackle illegal immigration. It is aimed at addressing concerns among MPs that increasing numbers of voters are abandoning Labour for Reform UK.

However, the hardline approach to arresting undocumented migrants and deporting them is likely to upset MPs on the left of the party over concerns that it risks repeating the mistakes of the Conservative Party's "hostile environment" and Windrush scandals.

Today, MPs will vote on the government's Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill for the first time, which will introduce counterterrorism-style powers and offences for use by Border Force against people smugglers and small boat arrivals.

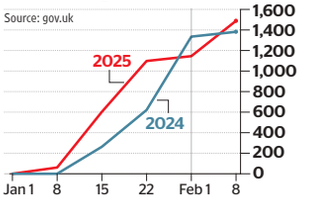
Since entering government Labour has reallocated up to 1,000 Home Office staff and Immigration Enforcement officers who were preparing to implement the previous government's Rwanda deportation scheme. They are now focused on arresting illegal workers, targeting rogue employers and deporting illegal migrants and foreign criminals back to their home countries.

More than 16,400 were deported between July and January, the highest for a six-month period since 2017 but only a fraction were small-boat migrants. The government does not have a way of removing migrants from unsafe countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iran, who make up the highest number of arrivals.The Times reported recently that Albanian people smugglers had deployed new tactics to boost the number of small-boat crossings by offering a package deal that includes a house to rent and a job.

Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, defended the crackdown. She said: "For far too long, employers have been able to take on and exploit illegal migrants and too many people have been able to arrive and work illegally with no enforcement action ever taken."

Migrant arrivals

Cumulative arrivals of small boats across the English Channel



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Hostage learns of wife's fate

return to her," Michael said. "He only found out yesterday, how is he supposed to hear that?"

They were exchanged for 183 Palestinians held in Israeli jails, more than 70 of whom were serving life or long sentences. Sharabi and Levy are being treated in the same hospital as Yarden Bibas, who had also been unaware of the fate of his wife and young sons.

Sharabi's British brother-in-law, Stephen Brisley, who lives in Bridgend, south Wales, flew to Israel last night. "I'm very much looking forward to reuniting with Eli, throw my arms around him and let him know how much I love him," said Brisley. "He will forever remain a part of the British side of his family." He planned to visit Kibbutz Be'eri, where Eli was taken captive. It was one of the worst hit on October 7.

The Sharabi brothers were among 44 siblings to have been kidnapped together, according to a report released yesterday by Israel's civil commission that examines Hamas crimes.

The exchange is part of a ceasefire deal under the first phase of which 33 people taken hostage will be released from captivity in return for 1,900 Palestinians held in Israeli jails, including Gazans detained during the war. So far 16 hostages have been freed and 566 Palestinians. Yesterday the ceasefire appeared set to continue as Israel said it had withdrawn its military from the strategic Netzarim corridor, which divides the north and south of Gaza.



Eli Sharabi, 54, was held hostage for 491 days

Israeli negotiators are in the Qatari capital of Doha at present to discuss the second stage of talks ahead of a March 2 deadline to end the war, but there will be no definitive instructions from Israel until Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, holds a security cabinet meeting tomorrow.

Yesterday the family of Alon Ohel, another hostage, received their first sign of life since his kidnapping. Ohel is being held underground in tunnels in Gaza and is suffering from an eye injury and a severe lack of food, according to the family's statement, adding that he had been staying in tunnels with other hostages who have since been freed.

We must fight back, Adam Wagner and Adam Rose, Thunderer, page 18

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Businesses cutting jobs

forecast for this year to 0.75 per cent from 1.5 per cent. It forecast that inflation will climb to 3.7 per cent in the summer, from 2.5 per cent now, with unemployment rising to 4.8 per cent.

Neil Carberry, chief executive of the REC, said: "An autumn of fiscal gloom, difficulty navigating significant upcoming tax rises and little progress on the practicalities of a costly new approach to employment rights are all acting as brakes on progress."

The government plans to deliver the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation, legislation led by the deputy prime minister Angela Rayner.

Jon Holt, group chief executive and UK senior partner at KPMG, said: "It is unlikely that we will see any significant improvements in the survey data over the near term, as hiring stays muted and staff availability continues to rise."

Despite sluggish worker demand and more available candidates, pay growth for permanent staff rose again last month, a run stretching back to March 2021. Office for National Statistics estimates showed salaries jumped by 5.6 per cent over the past year, too high for the Bank of England to achieve its inflation target of 2 per cent amid anaemic productivity growth.

Carberry said that last week's 0.25-point cut to interest rates would help boost confidence. Financial markets think that the Bank will cut rates three more times this year, down to 3.75 per cent from 4.5 per cent.

Kaley Crossthwaite, partner at BDO, said: "The new year is often time for a refresh, but businesses across the UK are continuing to face challenges that have weighed on them for months."

A government spokesman said: "This government is determined to go for growth and to work in partnership with businesses to invest in Britain's future so we can make every part of the country better off. As part of this, we are providing the certainty businesses need by capping corporation tax for the duration of parliament and locking in permanent full expensing to boost investment. We have also consulted with businesses and unions to ensure the Employment Rights Bill works for employers and workers alike."

Chancellor is at the mercy of events, Simon French, page 31

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

No state spaces for private pupils

freedom of information laws show that some councils have warned they have no spare spaces in certain year groups.

In 20 areas, Year 7 is oversubscribed, with a further two local authorities declaring they have no spare spaces. Nottinghamshire reported the highest number of extra pupils, 468, followed by Walsall on 258 and Bristol on 177.

The figures come from a survey by the Department for Education for the academic year 2022-23, the most recent it has data for. The breakdown by year group has not previously been revealed. DfE sources said that more spaces in some schools had since been created.

Julie Robinson, chief executive of the Independent Schools Council, said concern remained that "there might not be the right spaces in the right places for children whose education is disrupted by [Labour's tax] policy".

A government spokesman said: "We will work closely with councils, as we do every year, to make sure every child who needs a school place has one."

A rethink of this ill-considered law on VAT is urgent, leading article, page 21

Today's highlights

10.15am **Paul Johnson**, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies
10.30am **Mark Urban** of The Sunday Times provides his weekly world briefing
11.05am **Nick Hewer**, former adviser to Sir Alan Sugar on The Apprentice
3.35pm **Baroness Grey-Thompson**, right, on what still needs to be done to make travel accessible for all



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TODAY'S EDITION

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London offers trades in the latest hot commodity
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Dissecting England's fourth successive ODI series defeat
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Meet Martha Hayes, expert organiser for the LA elite
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COMMENT

'Trump's genius is to awaken the part of the liberal mind of which we are secretly ashamed'

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The organised crime groups stealing phones

The Metropolitan Police revealed that it arrested 230 people and seized 1,000 phones in one week. So just who is behind this crimewave, and where exactly do the phones end up?

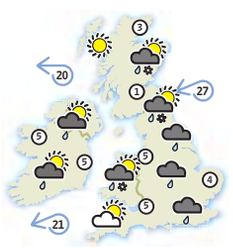
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THE WEATHER



Best of any dry and sunny weather in western areas with cloud and rain further east. **Full forecast, page 45**

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Parking for the upwardly mobile

Can't find a space for your Bentley near the house? These $6m apartments could help, writes **Ben Clatworthy**



Bentley's first branded residential tower will allow homeowners to remain in their cars while riding in a lift to their luxury Miami apartments, where they will enjoy sweeping ocean views

It is one of life's great first world problems. You buy a luxury apartment in a high-rise building but then have to lug your Whole Foods shopping from the communal car park to your door.

It was a conundrum bosses at Bentley, the carmaker, were keen to solve in its first branded residential tower, which opens in 2028 in Miami.

The Dezervator lift — named after Bentley's partner, Dezer Development — is designed to be the "ultimate in seamless privacy" allowing residents to travel directly up to their apartments inside their cars.

Each apartment will have its own huge garage next to it. Residences on the east side of the building have an 144 square metre area that can hold up to four vehicles, while those on the west side have 106 square metres, where they can park three cars.

The 216 residences will be spread over the 62 floors, while each balcony will have its own private heated swimming pool and summer kitchen — with sweeping views of the ocean. Prices for the apartments start at $5.8 million.

The building will also have a private residents' only restaurant led by Todd English, a four-times winner of the James Beard culinary awards, who will curate the dining experiences.

There will also be a cinema, a whisky bar and a beauty salon complete with hair styling, manicure, pedicure, and make-up facilities.

Four-legged residents will be able to indulge at the pet spa that is "designed in partnership with Bentley Motors" and features washing and drying services.





Ben Saltmer, the product and lifestyle design manager for Bentley, said: "We have applied the same attention to detail that goes into our cars into this very building.

"Each space is different, but with distinctive Bentley design cues styled harmoniously throughout — right down to a functional area like the Bentley pet spa concept.

"Despite practicality being paramount, the area should have an elevated experience. We achieve this through exquisite materiality and subtle Bentley design signatures, an ethos we've followed throughout the design of the building.

"For instance, in the pet spa we've used the Bentley diamond motif when giving the surfaces a non-slip quality. This diamond signature extends graphically to the shelving above the main bath area that houses towels, shampoos, and pet-friendly fragrances."

Saltmer said that pets visiting the spa will be "guided up the steps, washed in the bath, guided up to the grey marble surface for drying, then guided down the steps once dry", adding: "This is a practical space but also a luxurious sanctuary for pet and owner."

The building's cinema has been designed to mimic the concept of a Bentley car interior.

Saltmer said: "A cosseting sofa wraps around the back of the rear three walls, embracing residents in the space."

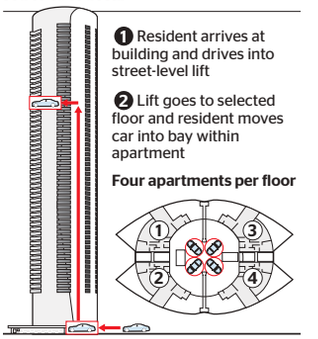
There is also a "state of the art" games room equipped with VR headsets and golf simulators. "The whisky bar design is inspired by the iconic matrix grille of Bentley's cars," Saltmer added. As it will be suspended from the ceiling, the bar will appear to be floating.

Car manufacturers moving into bricks and mortar has become a trend recently. Porsche has already opened a property in Miami while Aston Martin is preparing to do the same.

Mercedes-Benz and JDS Development Group are celebrating the sales launch of the second tower at Mercedes-Benz Places in Miami.

It is the brand's first real estate project in the US and one of the largest under construction in Florida. It launched Tower 1 last year and sold all 100 apartments in just four days.

How it works



Morecambe and Williams: singer buys comic's glasses and pipe

Georgia Lambert

Robbie Williams has revealed he bought Eric Morecambe's glasses and pipe at auction, calling the comedian an "uncle of sorts" whose "spirit has been salve for my soul".

The singer said he cried after winning a bidding war last month with a final offer of £20,000, far exceeding the £2,000 to £4,000 estimate.

The imitation tortoiseshell glasses by Metzler were sold alongside a Barling briar pipe and two black-and-white photographs of Morecambe.

Last month, Hanson Auctioneers offered the comedian's belongings in 700 lots more than 40 years after he died of a heart attack aged 58 in 1984. A lifetime of memorabilia and personal items from Brachefield, his former home in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, went on sale in January, almost ten months after the death of his widow Joan, aged 97, in March 2024.

Williams revealed on Instagram that he had acquired the items as a prelude to his 51st birthday on Thursday after months of promotion for his semi-autobiographical film, *Better Man*.

He wrote that he had designated Mike, a member of his team who manages his digital presence, as "chief bidder" while he was in Los Angeles, preparing to board a plane as the auction commenced. "I treated myself to a done-loads-of-promo-for-my-film prezzie," Williams said. "Also, with my birthday coming up I thought it might be a two for one. As it happens, I got to watch the lot being auctioned live. My iPhone and Mike's iPhone acting like walkie-talkies."



Robbie Williams called the late comedian the best of the best

He described the push to secure the lot as reaching the "primal competitive and irrational" level of "going through the children's inheritance'. Victory triggered "happy, childlike tears", he wrote. "You see, I guess we all need friends-we-never-meet from off the telly. Eric has always been mine. An uncle of sorts ... how [he] made me feel is how I want to make people feel. What a gift to be able to create such joy and have that joy be present just by thinking of them."

He said he would consult the comic's glasses when he had questions and hoped to "maybe get some answers".

In a message signed from "your fan, Robert" with a single kiss, the singer concluded: "Eric, you were and are the very best of the very best. That sunshine you asked for ... you gave to me."

News

JEFF J MITCHELL/GETTY IMAGES



High class The Highland Cattle Society's 134th annual spring show and sale in Oban, Argyll and Bute, attracts buyers from Europe and America. The show ends today

Call for testing overhaul to stop prostate cancer wealth divide

Eleanor Hayward Health Editor

There is "no time to lose" when it comes to overhauling guidelines around prostate cancer, which are driving a gulf in survival rates between wealthy and poorer men, experts have said.

Prostate cancer is the most common cancer in England, with 55,000 men diagnosed each year. There is no routine screening programme but men aged over 50 can request a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test from their GP, a simple blood test which can check for the disease.

Under current NHS guidelines doctors are barred from actively offering PSA testing, which they say is "outdated" and disproportionately affects men from poorer communities, in which awareness of PSA testing is lower and it is harder to see a GP.

Men in the poorest regions of the UK are 29 per cent more likely to be diagnosed with prostate cancer late, when it has spread around the body and is more likely to be deadly.

Charities are calling for the guidelines to be overhauled so that GPs actively offer PSA tests to all men at high risk. They say this would help to save thousands of lives.

Dr Matthew Hobbs, the director of research at Prostate Cancer UK, said that "the main reason for the disparity" in survival was because wealthier men were more likely to have PSA tests.

"At the moment men have to go to their GP and initiate that conversation about getting a PSA test. The men who are well-educated, well-informed and live in areas where they can easily access a GP are much more likely to have that conversation.

Hobbs said that PSA tests were also more likely to be discussed within certain "social bubbles" and that wealthier men, particularly in London and the southeast, often had medical insurance that provides routine PSA tests.

The PSA test looks for high levels of a protein which indicates that men may have prostate cancer and can help catch cancer early before it spreads and becomes incurable.

Last week Giles Coren, the Times columnist and restaurant critic, revealed that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer after having to "demand" a PSA test.

Prostate cancer kills more than 12,000 people each year in the UK. If caught early, nearly 100 per cent survive, but if caught late, only 50 per cent live. In more deprived areas, men tend to be diagnosed later, meaning that survival rates are lowest. Data shows that men in the north and in Scotland are more likely to get an incurable diagnosis than those in London. Meanwhile, black men are twice as likely to die of prostate cancer than white men.

"On a regional basis, there is a very clear disparity. About 12 per cent of all diagnoses in London are at that advanced [incurable] stage, compared to 35 per cent in Scotland," Hobbs said, adding that there is "absolutely no time to lose" in changing the NHS guidelines so that GPs discuss PSA tests with high-risk men over the age of 45.

"It would save lives. We speak to men who were told not to have a PSA test at age 50 or 55. Then at 60 or 65, they are diagnosed with metastatic [incurable] prostate cancer. Had they had the PSA test earlier they could have found the cancer earlier and been cured."

The PSA test has traditionally been seen as too unreliable to be rolled out as a mass-screening tool. However, research suggests that new MRI diagnostic techniques mean the benefits of PSA tests now outweigh the potential harms of overdiagnosis and overtreatment.

NHS Guidelines on PSA testing have not "fundamentally changed" since 2002, Hobbs said. Prostate cancer symptoms include needing to urinate more often or difficulty urinating.

Dirty air blamed as non-smokers die of lung disease

Eleanor Hayward

Air pollution is causing more than 1,000 cases of lung cancer each year in the UK, according to research.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) analysed the link between toxic air and cases of adenocarcinoma, the most common form of lung cancer.

It found that, in 2022, exposure to air pollution caused 515 cases of the disease in men and 590 in women.

The study, published in The Lancet Respiratory Medicine, warned that air pollution is driving a global increase in the number of non-smokers diagnosed with lung cancer.

The disease is the biggest cancer killer, causing 35,000 deaths a year in the UK.

Adenocarcinoma is one of four main subtypes of lung cancer. The IARC analysis said it had become the most dominant subtype and that air pollution was an "important factor".

Sarah Sleet, the chief executive of Asthma+Lung UK, said the study shows the "devastating impact of air pollution on our health".

She told The Guardian: "Sadly, it's not a shock to see the UK so high up in these depressing leagues tables yet still the government fails to take decisive action, even just last week giving the go-ahead to an additional runway at Heathrow — which will undoubtedly increase air pollution."

Previous research has shown that air pollution also causes dementia, heart disease and respiratory conditions.

The Clean Air for All campaign, launched by The Times in 2019, is calling for tighter pollution limits in Britain based on World Health Organisation guidelines.

In 2023 a team at the Francis Crick Institute and University College London identified how air pollution causes lung cancer by "waking up" dormant mutant cells which then grow into tumours.

Quintagram® No 2174

Solve all five concise clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Twist out of shape (4)

_ _ _ _

2 Moral failure (5)

_ _ _ _ _

3 Pill-like item filled with medicine (7)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

4 Technological apparatus (7)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

5 Eating (9)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

A	A	A	A	C	C	C	E
E	E	G	H	I	I	L	L
M	M	N	N	N	O	P	P
P	R	S	S	S	U	U	W

Solutions see MindGames
Cryptic clues see MindGames

Holy wine must be real

Non-alcoholic wine and gluten-free bread cannot be used during Holy Communion, the Church of England's governing body has ruled. Guidance says the bread must be made using wheat flour and the wine from the fermented juice of grapes to be consecrated. Prior to the General Synod, which meets today, opponents called the decision an "injustice".

Shoppers' health kick

Online purchases of exercise equipment rose by 60 per cent last month, compared with December, and sales of multivitamins and fresh fruit and vegetables rose by about 25 per cent, according to analysis of shoppers by Adobe Digital Insights. Online spending totalled £8.4 billion, a 2.9 per cent rise from the same period last year.

Child's rapist jailed

A former motorcycling champion was jailed for 18 years after raping a seven-year-old girl. Connor Behan, 33, of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, came to the attention of police when the victim reported him to her teacher. Behan, an Irish road race winner in 2014, was sentenced at Chester crown court on Friday after being found guilty last year.

Road closed for toads

Charlcome Lane near Bath will be shut until March 25 as the Charlcombe Toad Rescue Group helps toads, frogs and newts to cross to their breeding lake in the valley below. The volunteers are hoping that by patrolling each night they will help more than 3,000 amphibians. The closure reduced the casualty rate from 62 per cent to 6 per cent last year.

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GREGORY DZIEDZIC/HANS LUCAS FOR THE TIMES

Andrew Searle was seen on CCTV hours before he and his wife Dawn were found dead at their home in Les Pesquiès. The couple had been married in the hamlet in 2023. Friends have dismissed the suggestion that they had financial difficulties

Expat did not kill his wife then himself, friends insist

Charlie Parker Les Pesquiès

The British expatriate community in a remote corner of France is adamant that a former financial crime investigator and his wife were murdered and would not have killed themselves.

Close friends of Andrew and Dawn Searle, who were found dead in the tiny hamlet of Les Pesquiès last week, said that they had been enjoying happy and comfortable lives filled with travel and social events.

The community, nestled in the rolling forested hills of the Aveyron region, is awash with speculation over what happened to the couple after French authorities said they were exploring several lines of inquiry.

Sources close to the police investigation initially suggested the crime scene indicated it could have been a burglary that went wrong. They then prioritised the possibility that Andrew Searle's 21-year career investigating fraud and money-laundering may have come back to haunt him. Prosecutors are also considering whether it could be a case of a murder-suicide.

Neighbours said that Dawn appeared to have been beaten to death and that Andrew was found hanged.

Two British couples who were close friends of the Searles and attended their wedding were keen to quash any suggestion of suicide.

The expatriates, who are in their late sixties and live in a nearby village overlooking a 12th-century royal fortress, said: "Us Brits, who knew Dawn and Andy very well, are certain this is not a murder-suicide.

"We saw them last at Christmas — they were absolutely normal. Life was good, why would they want to kill themselves?"

Andrew, 62, and Dawn, 56, had been together for ten years before they were married in 2023 by their neighbour Jean-Sébastien Orcibal, the local mayor. Their friends said that about 160 people attended the wedding.

Questions about possible financial difficulties emerged yesterday. Local sources said that it had taken Searle over a year to pay a bill of several thousand euros amid problems with his UK pension. He was spotted crying in town in December after finally settling it.

However, the British expatriates, who described themselves as "great friends" of the Searles, dismissed any suggestions that they were struggling for money. They said that a murder-suicide "because of financial difficulties" was unthinkable.



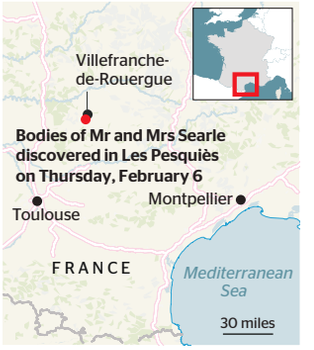
"There was never any suggestion whatsoever of financial or material difficulties — as local businesspeople they always paid us on time," the friends said.

"They weren't flashy by any means, but they were definitely comfortable and had it good out here. They were always travelling." The couple added that the Searles had honeymooned in South America and recently travelled to Scotland, America and Goa for a family wedding.

The British friends said that the couple had a self-contained gîte connected to their home which they rented out and "was occupied most of the time", giving them a "good income".

"They were also still working — Dawn was a project manager and Andy still did some freelance work.

"Every year they did a big gathering of all us expats and it would be a generous occasion, plenty of drink."



The couple had been seen shopping, making appointments and behaving "normally" in the nearby town of Villefranche-de-Rouergue on Wednesday. Their bodies were discovered at their home by a friend on Thursday just after midday.

Two neighbours said that Andrew had seemed distressed while walking through their hamlet on Tuesday.

Antoine Da Silva, 63, a retired council worker who lives in the hamlet, saw Andrew hurrying through the community and looking "very worried" while on the phone to his father, Fred.

Da Silva said: "He said, 'I can't speak with you, I'm on the phone with my dad,' and looked very worried and walked on immediately.

"I knew him very well. He was someone calm and quiet and nice. But the last two times I saw him he was very different."

Former banking colleagues expressed their shock at hearing the news about Andrew, who had retired from a career investigating fraud and money-laundering. One industry source said that his professional background was unlikely to have made him a target.

During two decades in his job at Standard Life, he liaised with police and the Serious Fraud Office on sensitive cases, and then worked as a consultant for Barclays.

A finance industry source said that Searle's work for banks would have been largely anonymous. He said: "These are large departments and organised criminals know that's how it works. It's kind of an anonymous process, frankly."

Polly Peck thief Nadir dies aged 83

Caolán Magee, Sean O'Neill

Asil Nadir, the Turkish Cypriot businessman whose rise in the 1980s ended in financial scandal and self-imposed exile, has died at the age of 83, according to his lawyer.

Nadir was once one of the most powerful business figures in Britain, transforming the struggling textile company Polly Peck into a multinational empire. At its peak the company was worth £1.7 billion and had interests in consumer electronics, packaging and food production.

In 1990 amid allegations of fraud and financial mismanagement Polly Peck collapsed, leaving thousands of shareholders out of pocket.

Nadir, who was facing 66 charges of theft and fraud, fled Britain in 1993 to live in northern Cyprus, which has no extradition treaty with the UK.

Born in Lefka, Cyprus in 1941, he had moved to the UK in the 1960s, where he built his business empire and became a major Tory party donor.



Asil Nadir was jailed in Britain after 17 years on the run

After years in self-imposed exile he returned to London to face trial in 2010 in a deal with the Serious Fraud Office. Two years later he was convicted of stealing nearly £29 million from Polly Peck and sentenced to ten years in jail.

Nadir served four before moving to Turkey under a prisoner transfer agreement. He spent a single night in a Turkish prison before returning to Cyprus, where he was given a hero's welcome.

He continued to contest the case and had a review pending with the Criminal Cases Review Commission. "Right up until the day he died Asil protested that he was innocent and had been wrongly convicted," his British lawyer Giles Bark-Jones said. "After his conviction the Serious Fraud Office suddenly found boxes of evidence relating to the case and those were the basis of his appeal to the CCRC."

Nadir is survived by his wife Nur and six children.

Tulip Siddiq case spreads to up to a dozen countries

Tom Ball, Muktadir Rashid Dhaka

The Bangladeshi authorities investigating Tulip Siddiq and members of her family over alleged money laundering have extended their inquiries to a dozen countries, local officials have said.

Investigators from the Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) are examining claims that Sheikh Hasina, the country's deposed prime minister, and her family misappropriated billions of pounds and that some of the money was used to buy property overseas. Siddiq, a Labour MP, is Hasina's niece.

An ACC spokesman said that investigators were looking into allegations of money laundering that extended beyond the UK. He added that the ACC had requested information from between ten and 12 countries in total, as part of its investigation.

It is unclear which countries investigators have asked for information regarding Siddiq, who resigned as a Treasury minister last month. "Our teams are working to recover funds that were siphoned off [abroad]," the spokesman said. He added that the ACC aims to complete all of its inquiries within 120 days.

Siddiq's spokesman said she "has not been contacted by anyone on the matter and totally denies the claims".

Second MP in sacked minister's

Geraldine Scott
Senior Political Correspondent

A second Labour MP has been named as being in a WhatsApp group with the sacked minister who joked about a constituent being "mown down" by a truck.

Oliver Ryan, the MP for Burnley, was one of the members of a group called Trigger Me Timbers, in which Andrew Gwynne posted comments including antisemitic and sexist remarks.

Ryan, 29, admitted that he made some comments "which I deeply regret and would not make today".

Matthew Pennycook, the housing minister, said that an investigation would take place into "the whole incident" and suggested there would be repercussions for those who had fallen short of standards.

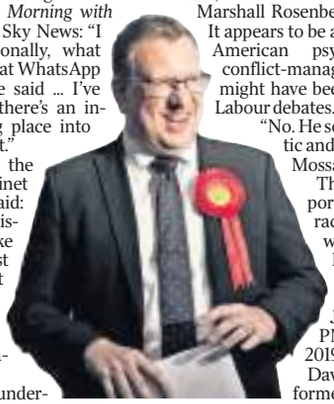
Gwynne apologised for the messages and said they were "badly misjudged" after Sir Keir Starmer sacked him as health minister and suspended him from the Labour Party.

The party would not confirm last night whether Ryan, who became an MP at the last election, would have the whip removed.

Ryan and Gwynne were previously Labour councillors in Tameside, Greater Manchester. Gwynne's wife, Allison, who is still a councillor in the area, was also a member of the group. Ryan was approached for comment.

Pennycook told Times Radio: "I think it's a matter of plain fact that it's not the end of it in the sense that all that we've got is a selection of quotes from those WhatsApp exchanges of that splash overnight. But that's what the live investigation will dig into."

He told *Sunday Morning with Trevor Phillips* on Sky News: "I don't know, personally, what other people on that WhatsApp conversation have said ... I've been very clear, there's an investigation taking place into the whole incident."



Alex Burghart, the shadow Cabinet Office minister, said: "If the prime minister doesn't take action against everyone in that group very quickly, we know that there is still a problem in the Labour Party."

The Times understands that more screenshots of the WhatsApp group messages are expected to be released this week. Ryan did not respond to requests for comment. According to The Mail on Sunday, which first reported the comments, Gwynne joked that hopefully a 72-year-old woman who contacted him about her bins would be dead before the next local elections.

The Stockport resident wrote to her local councillor saying she had not voted Labour, but added: "As you have been re-elected, I thought it would be an appropriate time to contact you with regard to the bin collections."

After the councillor shared the letter among fellow Labour figures in the WhatsApp group, Gwynne wrote a suggested response: "Dear resident, F*** your bins. I'm re-elected and without your vote. Screw you. PS: Hopefully you'll have croaked it by the all-outs."

All-outs are elections at which every council seat is contested at once, in contrast to councils in which only a third of seats are up for grabs at each poll.

Among the other messages from the



Oliver Ryan, left, and Andrew Gwynne were in Trigger Me Timbers

WhatsApp group, which was set up in 2019, is one from Gwynne saying someone "sounds too Jewish" and "too militaristic", apparently from their name.

Discussing a Labour meeting in Reddish, a member of the group asked if Marshall Rosenberg would be there. It appears to be a reference to a late American psychologist whose conflict-management techniques might have been useful in heated Labour debates. Gwynne responds: "No. He sounds too militaristic and too Jewish. Is he in Mossad?"

The MP is also reported to have made race-based jokes while talking about Diane Abbott, the Labour MP, when she stood in for Jeremy Corbyn at PMQs in October 2019.

David McKelvey, a former chief inspector in the Metropolitan Police, said Gwynne should be prosecuted.

Pennycook said the language used by Gwynne was "completely unacceptable" and "in some instances, it's deeply concerning". He said: "What the public can take from the way the prime minister has acted decisively in this case to dismiss Andrew Gwynne is that if any other Labour MP or minister falls short he will act to uphold the highest standards in public office.

"An investigation is taking place, and any action that needs to follow from that investigation will be seen through. I don't think anyone can be in any doubt about this prime minister or this government's commitment to upholding the highest standards in public office and to rooting out antisemitism from the Labour Party, root and branch."

Asked if Gwynne should resign, and therefore prompt a by-election, Pennycook said: "I don't think it is appropriate while there's an ongoing live investigation to speculate on hypotheticals.".."

A by-election could also be called if Gwynne is reported to parliament's standards commissioner and suspended from the Commons for more than ten sitting days. This would cause a recall petition to be triggered and, if enough constituents backed it, a by-election could be held. It is understood Gwynne has not been reported to the commissioner at this stage.

Gwynne said: "I deeply regret my badly misjudged comments and apologise for any offence I've caused. I've served the Labour Party all my life and it was a huge honour to be appointed a minister by Keir Starmer.

"I entirely understand the decisions the PM and the party have taken and, while very sad to have been suspended, will support them in any way I can."

A Labour spokesman said: "Andrew Gwynne has been administratively suspended as a member of the Labour Party ... Swift action will be taken if individuals are found to have breached the high standards expected of them as Labour Party members."

Ryan said last night: "Between 2019 and early 2022, I was a member of a WhatsApp group created by my MP and former employer, Andrew Gwynne. Some of the comments made in that group were completely unacceptable and I fully condemn them. I also made some comments myself which I deeply regret and for that I wholeheartedly apologise."



Rayner doesn't deny insulting Starmer

Geraldine Scott

Angela Rayner has refused to deny claims that she said Sir Keir Starmer was "incapable of running a bath".

The deputy prime minister said she did not recognise the comments but stopped short of an outright denial.

The comment is published in *Get In*, a book by Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrund, journalists on The Times and The Sunday Times, but Rayner dismissed it as "tittle-tattle".

She told *Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg* on BBCI: "Me and Keir don't always agree on everything, but the one thing I will say about him is he won't do what he thinks is popular."

Rayner added: "Well, there's a lot of things that were said in that book that I don't recognise, to be honest, and it's tittle-tattle. So I don't recognise what was said in that book."

She added: "There was lots of other things that people have said about me or anyone else, and no, I don't recognise ever saying that to anybody, but we all have frustrations when we're at work sometimes, and I'm sure people have been frustrated with me at work sometimes."

Rayner did not deny calling Prince Andrew "that nonce" during discussions on legislation over who would deputise for King Charles, which is also



Angela Rayner said claims in a book were "tittle-tattle"

in the book. "I'm not making any comment on what somebody suggests was said in a book, or actually the private conversations that I did have during the passage of the bill, which did get passed, and I did pass the bill, and I wholeheartedly supported the government at the time in passing the Line of Succession Bill through parliament."

Rayner acknowledged she was known for straight talking, but said she had not been "aggressive" in a meeting with Grenfell families last week.

She told the BBC she would be "sincerely upset" if anyone had felt she had been aggressive when she told families and survivors that the tower, in west London, would be dismantled. However, she said there was not a "consensus" among the Grenfell community on what would happen to the building.

The government announced on Friday that the tower would be brought down to ground level. However, some parts may be returned, where possible, to be included in a memorial "if the community wishes".

Rayner told the BBC: "I felt, weighing up all of the different conversations that I had, and the engineering report, that actually the only way forward, really, was to sensitively make sure that we start taking the tower to ground level, but that we have a lasting memorial on that site."

She refused to say how many families or survivors she had spoken to.

Mandelson to begin role amid US trade uncertainty

David Charter Washington

Lord Mandelson will present his credentials as ambassador in Washington this week and learn whether he will have to start his new job with a battle to reverse tariffs as President Trump unveils his trade plans.

His first meeting with Trump will have to wait a little longer, however, with his formal introduction set to take place at the State Department.

British hopes of avoiding sweeping US border taxes were raised after Trump said on Friday that he was leaning towards announcing "reciprocal tariffs" on a country-by-country basis today or tomorrow "as opposed to a flat fee tariff" across the board.

Sir Keir Starmer has worked hard to steer Trump's administration away from blanket duties, explaining that the US-UK goods trade is fairly evenly balanced and should therefore be exempt. Trump delivered a mixed message last week, telling the BBC that "the UK is way out of line, and we'll see ... but [the] European Union is really out of line. I'm sure that one can be worked out." Of Starmer, he said: "We're getting along very well."

A former British ambassador to Washington, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, said that a key part of Mandelson's role would be to nurture the Starmer-Trump relationship.

"Part of what's unusual about the UK-US relationship is, when it's working well, it's the intensity of the relationship between No10 on the one hand and the White House on the other," he said. "This relationship is one of those that has to be managed from the very top."

Mandelson will pick up where Dame Karen Pierce, his predecessor, left off in working to get Starmer to see the US president as soon as possible.

abusive WhatsApp group chat



JEREMY SELWYN; ALAMY; LUCY STARMER/PA





Sir Keir Starmer will hope his efforts to reach political goals fare better than his penalty yesterday in north London. His side went on to lose 11-6. The prime minister, who wore an England shirt, is hardly the first to miss from 12 yards while wearing the Three Lions logo, of course. The national team's troubled history with spot kicks began in 1990; Chris Waddle, below, sent his shot over the bar in the World Cup semi-final against Germany. Starmer did score a historic first, however, by publicly taking an HIV test — something no other western prime minister had done before — in an effort to destigmatise screening. HIV Testing Week begins today

Tories cut jobs at HQ and look for more cash

Geraldine Scott

The Conservative Party has cut the number of staff at its headquarters by three quarters since the general election in July, and one senior party figure has told members there is no "magic money tree" to help the party recover from the defeat.

Local Tory associations have been told they should give the central operation more cash as it had become "more left-wing than Jeremy Corbyn".

The remarks by Scott Pattenden, chair of London Conservatives, which were contained in a leaked recording, will fuel fears that as Kemi Badenoch marks 100 days as leader today, the Tories need millions to stay afloat.

Pattenden told a gathering of members nine days ago: "If you go back in time 25 years ago, almost every association had an amount that they expected to donate to fund [party headquarters]. Somehow, despite being a Conservative organisation, we've become more left-wing than Jeremy Corbyn and we think there's a magic money tree that grows at [party headquarters]. Well [there] isn't and all it does is make us more and more reliant on a small section of donors who will have more influence and more say over the policy that our party delivers."

There has been speculation that the Tories may have to move out of their headquarters for financial reasons and could also close their Leeds office.

A party spokesman said that "everyone, from the parliamentary party, the voluntary party and the professional party, is working hard to renew and rebuild trust with the British people".

The Mail on Sunday reported that Nigel Farage would be prepared to work with Boris Johnson to defeat Labour "in the national interest", but Reform UK later denied that suggestion and said that it intended to win the next election and "return Britain to greatness".

Plans to make gender change easier shelved

Geraldine Scott

Labour has mothballed plans to make it easier to legally change gender, The Times has learnt, in a step to counter Reform UK's surge in the polls.

During the election last summer Labour promised to change the "undignified" process of gender transition by replacing the panel of doctors and lawyers which approve gender recognition certificates with a registrar system. It had been criticised as "self-ID by the back door", letting people change their legal gender too easily.

However, multiple sources said that the reforms were not a priority for ministers. They expect the plans to quietly "go away".

Gender-based issues have been a point of tension for Labour, but Sir Keir Starmer has strengthened his position on biological sex after previous struggles to define a woman.

Yesterday Wes Streeting, the health secretary, bemoaned a decision by the NHS to remove the word "woman" from medical documents. He has also placed an indefinite ban on puberty blockers for children.

One insider pointed to a poll this week that put Reform above Labour for the first time, and said it would be "catnip" for Nigel Farage's party if Labour was to push ahead on gender. Another warned that going ahead would give more ammunition to Elon Musk in his attacks on the government, at a time when President Trump is acting to bolster single-sex spaces.

A third source referenced the fronts on which the government is already defending its position, such as winter fuel payments, the economy and inheritance tax, and said: "Why would we open that particular can of worms for ourselves at this particular moment?"

Changes promised by Labour included making it easier to obtain a gender recognition certificate — the document allowing transgender people to have their affirmed gender legally recognised — by letting a single doctor sign off on it instead of two.

Ministers also intended to drop the requirement that people live as their preferred gender for two years before obtaining a certificate. Doing so would have meant amending the Gender Recognition Act, and there is little appetite within the party to reopen that debate in public.

It is understood that the reforms, which were included in Labour's manifesto, have not been officially dropped because this would start arguments with parts of the party's voter base.

Separate moves for a transgender-inclusive ban on "conversion therapy" are understood to be going ahead.

Some sources suggested that the reluctance to push ahead with broader reform was down to a desire to protect relations with the United States.

Recently, Trump has signed a flurry of executive orders including reducing transgender protections and banning transgender women and girls from female sport.

Today Starmer will attempt to counter Farage's party with a series of hard-hitting videos on immigration. The party has also run adverts with Reform-style branding and messaging. The adverts do not display Labour's logo and use a similar shade of blue to that used by Farage's party.

Reform said yesterday that its membership had passed 200,000, although the veracity of the figures is disputed. The party said its next goal is to overtake the membership of the Labour Party, which stands at about 300,000.

A government source said: "If we're going to push back against Reform this is the kind of thing we need to be doing."

Sex Matters, a charity that campaigns for the primacy of biological sex, welcomed the mothballing of Labour's gender recognition plans. Helen Joyce, its director of advocacy, said: "If this news is correct, we welcome it.

"The next step, once the Supreme Court has ruled in the case of For Women Scotland concerning the meaning of the protected characteristic of 'sex' in the Equality Act, is for the Labour government to make good on its manifesto pledge to protect single-sex spaces."

Streeting said at the weekend that the NHS must stop focusing on "daft nonsense".

He wrote in The Sun on Sunday: "How is it that, in the name of inclusion, the word 'woman' has been erased from many NHS documents?"

"I have told the NHS to get back to basics. I say this as a gay man from a working-class family. If the equalities agenda doesn't speak to the working-class man in me as much as the gay man, or as it should to my sisters or black and Asian friends, then what is it for? Who is it for?"

News

Law stops us teaming up to save courses, says university head

Nicola Woolcock Education Editor

Competition laws prevent universities from working together to save courses, the head of a Russell Group university cutting hundreds of jobs says.

Professor Wendy Larner, vice-chancellor of Cardiff University, called for drastic changes so that universities were not legally forbidden by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) from discussing whether to drop subjects offered by other institutions.

Sir Keir Starmer promised to cut red tape to promote growth and reboot the economy, writing in The Times that deregulation was essential to stop investors being deterred by the UK's morass of rules. He and Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, removed the chair of the CMA over his approach to growth.

Today the British Academy, the main body for humanities and arts, will write to Reeves begging for action over university cuts. It will say: "We are deeply concerned the UK's strengths in higher education and research are threatened by the lack of sustainability in university finances. The cutbacks we are seeing [are] leading to a severe loss in UK capability — almost 100 universities are contracting or closing social sciences, humanities and the arts disciplines in the face of a financial crisis."

Cardiff and Durham, both members of the Russell Group of selective universities, announced on the same day last month that they would lose hundreds of staff to save millions of pounds.

Cardiff will shed 400 full-time jobs and close courses including nursing, ancient history, modern languages, music, religion and theology.

Durham has an underlying operational deficit for the first time and said it would make at least 200 staff redundant in attempts to save £20 million over this and next academic year.

Larner said that she feared humanities, arts and languages subjects would become the preserve of the privileged but that students were "voting with their feet" in rejecting them. She said universities could no longer be "scaled-up versions of Oxbridge" and that radical change was needed, including introducing larger student-staff ratios.

Larner, who started at Cardiff in September 2023, said nursing was offered at two other universities in southeast Wales but that laws prevented her from discussing details with their vice-chancellors. "Are we best placed to offer that provision or could it be better offered elsewhere? If we're going to be more collaborative and play to our strengths, these are precisely the kinds of conversations we need to be allowed to have."

CARL GOUGH/SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK



Skyfall Comet Pons-Brooks over Arundel Castle last year, in a picture commended in the South Downs photography contest

'Complex' tax costs extra £500m to collect

Geraldine Scott
Senior Political Correspondent

Tax policy has been changed so often that it has cost more than half a billion pounds extra to collect revenues.

The National Audit Office (NAO) found that the "increasingly complex tax system" plus more people being dragged into paying had contributed to a 15 per cent rise in the cost to HMRC to collect tax from 2019-20 to 2023-24. Changes announced between 2022 and 2024 will increase costs cumulatively by about £875 million over the next few years, the NAO said.

The NAO found that HMRC's costs of administering the tax system rose by 15 per cent (£563 million) in real terms from 2019-20 to 2023-24. Tax revenue went up at a similar rate. An increase in staff and setting up digital systems, the impact of policy changes and the rise in the number of people paying tax to 36.2 million contributed to this. The NAO said that businesses face about £15.4 billion a year in costs to comply with the tax system.

HMRC said: "It costs us just half a penny to collect every pound of tax revenue, with the NAO recognising our compliance work provides good value for money."



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Offers are correct at time of going to print 06/02/2025. *Save £100 per booking when you spend £1000 or more/Save £200 per booking when you spend £2000 or more/Save £300 per booking when you spend £3000 or more. Only one of the three discounts can be applied on an individual booking. The code for customers to apply when booking their holiday will first be found on the 'My TUI' portal and will initially be available exclusively for customers who log into their 'My TUI' account on the 20th – 22nd December 2024. The code will then become available for all remaining customers from the 23rd December 2024 until 23:59 on the 3rd March 2025. Discount is valid on package holidays departing between 1st May 2025 and 31st October 2026 and is applied before any extras such as insurance, room upgrades & selecting seats, are added. There must be a minimum of 2 people on the booking (including children aged 2 and over) for the discount to apply. Offer is valid on bookings made from 23rd December 2024 until 23.59 on 3rd March 2025 across all sales channels. Offer does not apply to accommodation only, flight only, Marella, TUI River Cruise or Crystal bookings. This offer is only valid for new bookings and can only be applied once on each booking. This discount code cannot be used in conjunction with any other discount code. Offer is subject to availability and may be amended or withdrawn at any time without notice. **Low Deposit offer applies to selected new TUI package holiday bookings only departing between 1st May 2025 to 31st October 2026, and excludes accommodation-only, flight-only bookings and selected packages booked with a third party flight. The deposit amount on short and mid-haul destinations is £60 per person and for long-haul destinations it is £125 per person. The rest of the deposit will be due within 12 weeks of booking your holiday, or you will be required to pay the remainder of the total holiday cost, whichever date comes sooner depending on when you booked your holiday. If you cancel your holiday you still have to pay the full deposit. Deposits are not available on holidays departing within 12 weeks of departure, where full payment is required at the time of booking. If you're paying a low deposit your final balance will be due twelve weeks before you depart. Please see https://www.tui.co.uk/destinations/info/booking-terms-and-conditions or the relevant brochure for booking terms and conditions. Offer may be changed or withdrawn at any time. All the flights and flight-inclusive holidays are financially protected by the ATOL scheme. When you pay you will be supplied with an ATOL Certificate. Please ask for the ATOL certificate and check to ensure that everything you booked (flights, hotels and other services) are listed on it. Please see our booking conditions for further information or for more information about financial protection and the ATOL Certificate go to: www.caa.co.uk. TUI is a trading name of TUI UK Limited, a member of TUI Group. Registered Office: Wigmore House, Wigmore Lane, Luton, LU2 9TN. Registered in England No: 2830117. ATOL No: 2524. ABTA No: V5126.

‘Give fly-tippers penalty points on licences’

Adam Vaughan Environment Editor

Baroness Warsi has called for the introduction of penalty points on driving licences for people caught fly-tipping.

The former chairwoman of the Conservative Party said the move was needed to tackle the country’s litter problem. She said the situation was akin to “mopping whilst the tap is on” and that her experience as a litter picker suggested the issue was worsening. “It just seems like we are literally sinking under this,” Warsi said.

She is backing the campaign group Clean Up Britain, whose volunteers have installed 87 cameras in 19 counties to capture vehicles dumping rubbish in lay-bys and roadsides. The videos are being shared with local authorities to secure fines. Warsi said: “As a Conservative, my instinct always is: don’t legislate, the state shouldn’t be involved in all of these spaces. But I think we’ve reached a point where we have to start taking much more draconian action.”

Warsi proposed that those caught throwing litter from their vehicles should receive three penalty points on their driving licences, along with more severe fines. She also supports introducing a system of number plate recognition that links packaging to buyers, to allow authorities to impose fines.

“The technology exists. If you were to buy a McDonald’s, [then] your number plate is printed on to the packaging. If that was found on the verge two miles from there because you’ve chucked it out, then it comes back to you,” she said.



Some of the most commonly found fly-tipped items are drinks bottles

At least a fifth of councils issued no fines for littering in 2021-22.

Warsi said: “Part of the problem is not enough local authorities are prosecuting. People think that this is a crime where they’re not going to be caught.”

A recent Keep Britain Tidy field survey found only 9 per cent of 1,140 locations across the UK had no litter. The most commonly found items were cigarette butts and packaging (70 per cent of places), sweet wrappers (52 per cent), drinks bottles and cans (31 per cent) and fast-food litter (22 per cent).

Warsi acknowledged that littering might seem trivial compared with other issues but said it had an impact on the environment and community pride. She said: “We have to educate a new generation on the damage this does to the environment, wildlife [and] plants.”

Most fly-tipping is on pavements and roads, accounting for 40 per cent of incidents. While those dealt with by councils fell by 1 per cent last year to 1.08 million, the problem is worse than before the pandemic. There were 957,000 incidents in 2018-19.

Warsi believes firms creating packaging which “become part of this dashboard dining culture which is then thrown out” must do more. “I think they should be paying for it,” she said.

The government is introducing a packaging levy despite opposition from supermarkets and a long-delayed bottle return scheme in 2027.

Warsi refrained from commenting on the Tories’ track record on fly-tipping when in government. She said: “I’m desperate just to build allies across all political parties on this and not make it a party political issue.”

Penalties must be increased and enforced, leading articles, page 21

Wrap up to stay uptown cool in the Big Apple



Ulla Johnson’s designs, far left and centre, were the epitome of soft power dressing — with a splash of colour. Khaite, left, relied on a pick ‘n’ mix of luxurious textures

They’ve ticked off Paris couture and calendar newcomer Copenhagen: now the style set has descended for New York Fashion Week. The Big Apple is where the industry’s biannual month of catwalk shows officially starts (Hannah Rogers writes).

So what do America’s buzziest brands have in store for your autumn wardrobe?

Catherine Holstein has some interesting ideas. Her luxury label, Khaite, is one of the most hyped to come out of the States in recent years.

Since its inception in 2016, what she says is a must-have has been taken as something of a kit list for uptown cool girls.

With the *White Lotus* star Meghann Fahy and tastemaker Olivia Palermo on the front row, its autumn 2025 collection was revealed at a Park Avenue address on Saturday night.

It featured leopard-print coats, skinny jeans tucked into thigh-high boots, preppy argyle sweaters and bakerboy flat caps.

The looks might not hit stores for six months — but the most trend-conscious customers will almost certainly get ahead and start wearing them now.

Minimalist, monochrome-centric tailoring makes up the brand’s bread and butter. This season such ensembles were broken up with pick ‘n’ mix textures.

One sleek chocolate leather bomber came trimmed with fuzzy shearling and paired with a black plumed skirt, for example.

More notable — and new — were the moments that splashes of colour cut through. Leather trousers and avant-garde knitwear were crafted in crimson, while diamond-patterned sweaters offered surprising pops of turquoise.

One floor-length fur coat looked to be typical black at first glance, but was actually a deep, glassy petrol blue.

It might not sound dramatic, but this deviation will help Khaite differentiate itself from its competitors. The label’s best customers also like to spend their money at the likes of Toteme and The Row.

Yesterday morning, Ulla Johnson presented her own vision for next winter.

This designer’s penchant for pretty prints and fluid silhouettes is a lesson in soft power dressing.

Indeed, her autumn 2025 collection was centred on bringing light to winter gloom.

Ensembles played with contrast. Dark-wash denim was lifted with gilded details; gold lamé was crafted into frocks layered over rollnecks.

One gown and skirt suit were crafted in black and bronzed boucle tweed. Polka dots stood out — both as solids on sheer tulle and woven in molten metallic yellow thread.

Outerwear was suitably mood-boosting. A rust-hued shaggy shearling showstopper was nipped in at the waist with a sculptural floral belt that had been made in collaboration with the French artist Julie Hamisky.

Prairie dresses were plentiful. Of course. Johnson is an expert at these. But for all the frills and fluidity, there were cleaner options. One sleeveless, A-line take was made in chartreuse leather.

Something for everyone looking for a little lift next season.

Date with destiny ... but maybe not honesty

A third of single people admit to telling white lies about themselves while on dating websites to make a good impression, a survey indicates.

But while 36 per cent admit to telling small untruths, 11 per cent are not confident that they could spot a romance scam, where a criminal uses a fake online identity before manipulating or stealing money from their victim.

Nearly half — 46 per cent — would ignore red flags and 44 per cent would continue messaging or meeting someone they had met online, even if something did not seem right, according to the research released ahead of Valentine’s Day.

It also found nearly a quarter of people feel under pressure to have a date around February 14.

Over a third — 37 per cent — of people surveyed in January had encountered social media profiles that seemed “too good to be true,” while 27 per cent of dating singles said they had been contacted by a catfish (someone pretending to be a person they are not).

According to the survey of more than 2,000 single people, the most common white lies told online include using old or altered photos, fabricating or exaggerating hobbies such as music, sport or reading lists, inflating a job role or salary and telling fibs about height.

Annya Burskys, head of fraud operations at Nationwide Building Society, which commissioned the survey, said: “Everyone wants to make a good impression when dating, but there’s a clear line between harmless self-presentation and intentional deception.

“Scammers sadly take advantage of people looking for love all year round, but the stakes are higher at this time of year, with our research showing many feel under pressure to have a date.

“Scammers won’t stop at exploiting unsuspecting victims, especially around Valentine’s Day when emotions run high. If in doubt, speak to your bank or building society for support before making a payment you have suspicions about.”

Couples worry about who keeps their pet if they split

Nearly half of unmarried people who live with their partner and share a pet would consider including their animal in a cohabitation agreement if they split up, a survey has found.

But only 26 per cent of unmarried couples surveyed who live together have a cohabitation agreement in place.

Cohabiting couples who do not have an agreement may face complications if the relationship ends, splitting responsibilities like pets, according to Co-op Legal Services, which commissioned the research.

According to business data, cohabitation agreement sales have surged by 200 per cent over the past five years.

While the primary focus of a cohabitation agreement is typically on property and financial assets, the survey also revealed other items that couples would want to safeguard. One in six listed jewellery and watches as assets they would like to protect. Some 44 per cent of cohabiting couples who share pets would consider including them in a cohabitation agreement.

Opinion Matters surveyed 1,000 people across the UK in January who were cohabiting with a partner.

ALAMY





Richard Browning has put on demonstrations in 50 countries. His technology — which is not unlike that developed by the superhero Iron Man, below — is now being bought by western militaries

Military millions for real-life Iron Man

Britain's answer to Iron Man is signing deals worth more than $30 million to supply his jet suit technology to special forces (Will Humphries writes).

Richard Browning, who has flown private displays for the likes of Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, has developed a jet suit that armed commandos can use to board hostile ships.

The former Royal Marines reservist and oil trader has been showcasing his suit's capabilities since launching the company from his shed eight years ago. Those with £6,600 to spare can learn to fly their own jet suit at one of Browning's dedicated training centres in West Sussex and California.

His company Gravity Industries, which employs 25 people, is about to sign contracts with two western militaries and has recently raised $10 million in funding after being valued at $72 million. Two years ago he raised $6 million after the company was valued at $36 million.

"We do something that looks like it should be in a Marvel film and it does look spectacular, but actually it's now a serious international business," Browning, 46, said from his HQ in rural Somerset. "We have split the business into a professional division and an entertainment division and we have flown over 300 events in 50 different countries."

Until recently these shows were Browning's bread and butter, but "special forces mobility is now where we are generating success", he said.

"We are in the process of signing several deals with two western allies, in particular for marine mobility, enabling special forces to rapidly secure maritime targets.

"Instead of trying to snag the railings of a moving ship with a pole and hook, before climbing a caving ladder, or descending from a hovering helicopter, which has its own challenges, we can secure a target in seconds ... from all directions."

Browning and his team have also flown exercises for mountain rescue charities and emergency response organisations, but he did not set out to generate income from these life-saving services.

"The medic response stuff we don't see as a profit centre, but it is still incredibly important to us and we have plans to launch a separate charity to scale this life-saving capability," he said.

"We have learnt an awful lot working around the Lake District, Dartmoor, the Peak District and even Transylvania. We got up a mountain in Transylvania in two minutes rather than the 2½ hours it takes on foot."

Pupils aged 8 taught about stress to boost mental health

Eleanor Hayward Health Editor

Helping schoolchildren to "normalise everyday emotions" such as stress and sadness is the most effective way to improve their mental health, a trial has suggested.

Experts analysed five different strategies to promote children's mental wellbeing, involving 32,655 pupils and 513 schools in England between 2018 and 2024. Schools were randomly allocated different methods, which were trialled in Years 4 and 5 (ages eight to ten) in primaries and Years 7 and 8 in secondaries (ages 11-13).

The method with the best overall effect was Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing, which involves delivering a series of lessons to help students normalise everyday emotions, such as stress and sadness, and understand how to differentiate these emotions from mental ill-health. It was found to significantly improve mental health literacy — specifically the intention to seek help if problems arise in the future — in primary schools and, when implemented in full, led to significant improvements in secondary schools.

A relaxation course involved daily five-minute sessions, and significantly reduced emotional difficulties in primary schools, but was associated with an increase in emotional difficulties in secondaries.

Mindfulness, with teachers trained to deliver daily five-minute sessions, reduced emotional difficulties in secondary schools but with evidence it could have the reverse effect in primaries.

Two other courses focused on improving awareness of mental health problems were associated with greater long-term emotional difficulties.

The study, which began in 2018, was led by the Evidence Based Practice Unit, a collaboration between the Anna Freud charity and University College London, and was funded by the Department for Education.

Jess Deighton, chief investigator and professor in child mental health and wellbeing at UCL, said: "Some of the interventions trialled are only effective when delivered in full or for certain groups, but can cause unintended consequences for some ... more research is needed to help us understand ... how these can be negated."

Conspiracy theories rife in classrooms

Nicola Woolcock Education Editor

Young people are more likely to trust social media influencers than the government, and conspiracy theories are rife in classrooms, research has found.

The largest study of its kind in English schools has concluded that teachers need urgent support because they lack the confidence and training to deal with online misinformation.

Many children see no harm in spreading conspiracy theories, it also found, even if they do not believe them.

Information from social media, such as TikTok, is influencing young people's world views, the report found, with adults and children existing in "information silos" and getting their news from very different sources.

The report, to be published on Monday, is by the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools. It analysed existing research and conducted its own nationally representative surveys of almost 500 teachers, 2,000 parents and 2,300 young people, along with focus groups and evidence sessions with experts.

Children risk falling down rabbit holes online, the report said. Those most susceptible to conspiracy theories were identified as girls, younger siblings, children from poorer homes and those who feel marginalised in society.

Teachers worry about their pupils' ability to discern reality from fiction, but say that some bring up conspiracy theories to test the water or to provoke.

Sixty-five per cent of pupils aged 11 to 18 see no harm in spreading the theory that humans never landed on the moon, and 35 per cent feel the same about telling people that a small and secretive group runs many world institutions. Thirty-five per cent are happy to tell people that young men are being deliberately excluded by society and 25 per cent would say there are deliberate efforts to replace native-born people with immigrants.

One of the concerns for teachers is how conspiracy theories affect the way pupils treat others. Some reach worrying conclusions about the value of academic research, they told the study.

It cited quotes from the misogynist influencer Andrew Tate appearing in schoolwork, indicating that pupils were treating him as just another information source, often without malice or fully understanding the content.

Others saw no difference between events in Britain and the United States, including those around the murder of George Floyd — because "it all came through one digital feed". Children were found to trust their parents more than public institutions, although this trust declines with age.

Among 11 to 18-year-olds, 35 per cent said they did not trust the government at all, compared with 29 per cent who did not trust influencers. Thirty-six per cent said they had changed their mind about a news story because of something on social media.

The requirement for teachers to be politically neutral appeared to be in conflict with the desire to address some conspiracy theories. They felt the most important approach was encouraging pupils to think critically about sources and evidence.

The absence of clear guidance led to increased workload for staff and a lack of clarity about which approaches and techniques work, the study found.

The research was conducted by Public First, a policy and research consultancy, and funded by the Pears Foundation, a charity focusing on social justice. The commission was chaired by Sir Hamid Patel, the head of Star Academies, which runs 36 schools.

Amy Braier, a co-author of the report, said: "Education has changed and young people are living and learning in an online world. Schools and teachers have been left alone to battle a tidal wave of misinformation."

She said the issue should be tackled in primary schools because younger children have more trust in adults and most are given phones by the age of 11.

The report said leadership was needed from the government, Ofsted, academy trusts and local authorities.

The Department for Education was contacted for comment.

Police and prison service clash over sacked governor

David Shipley
Matt Dathan Home Affairs Editor

A prison governor sacked after he breached rules to transfer a convicted fraudster to an open unit has faced no police investigation, prompting concern about potential corruption.

Bobby Cunningham was dismissed from the scandal-hit HMP Wandsworth in 2023, the prison from which Daniel Khalife escaped later that year.

The Ministry of Justice said it referred Cunningham's case to the Metropolitan Police and that the force took no further action, but the Met denied receiving a referral; the Crown Prosecution Service has no record of the case, nor any informal consultation about it with police. The discrepancy has fuelled suspicions of a cover-up.

Cunningham had personally authorised the transfer of Michael Nascimento, who had defrauded elderly and vulnerable investors out of more than £2.8 million, to a category D open prison. Nascimento had been serving an 11-year sentence at Wandsworth, a category B prison in south London, after his conviction in 2018.



Former security governor Bobby Cunningham was described as "too friendly"

He was subject to a Proceeds of Crime Act order requiring him to repay nearly £1 million. By mid-2023 he still owed £540,000 and received a "default sentence" of almost four additional years. But despite prison policy prohibiting the transfer of inmates with significant unpaid confiscation orders to open conditions, Nascimento was moved in July 2023 to HMP Kirkham, an open prison in Lancashire.

Cunningham authorised the transfer, according to records from the Prison Service's National Offender Management Information System. This decision overrode warnings from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and internal assessments that deemed Nascimento a high risk for absconding or interfering with overseas assets.

Nascimento's transfer was reversed when staff at Kirkham identified the error. More than £450,000 of his confiscation order remains outstanding.

By the time Cunningham was dismissed, an internal investigation had identified at least six suspicious re-categorisations linked to him.

John Podmore, former head of the London Prisons Anti-Corruption Team, said: "The failure to properly investigate these allegations undermines public confidence in the justice system." He said a proper investigation was necessary because Cunningham was unlikely to have acted alone.

Staff at Wandsworth have accused bosses of covering up Cunningham's actions to protect one of their own. One officer at the jail said: "It's one rule for us and another rule for the governors."

Current and former Prison Service employees said Cunningham was nicknamed "Nepotism Bob" by other staff at HMP Wandsworth after he was promoted to his role as security governor on a temporary basis despite allegedly failing to sit the required exam. Prison Service sources said he was widely regarded by staff and prisoners as "too friendly" with inmates.

Prison Service sources have suggested that those conducting an internal investigation into Cunningham's conduct at Wandsworth would have been distracted by the separate inquiry into the circumstances that enabled Khalife to escape from the same prison weeks after Cunningham was dismissed.

Khalife triggered a nationwide manhunt in September 2023 after he strapped himself to the underside of a food delivery truck. Last week he was jailed for 14 years for espionage and escaping from prison, where he was held while awaiting trial for spying for Iran. The Prison Service said: "Bobby Cunningham was dismissed ... any matters that relate to a police investigation are for the police." Cunningham was approached for comment.

Do you know someone who made their mark after 70?

Kate Mansey Assistant Editor

Applications are open for The Times Sternberg Active Life Awards, which celebrate the achievements of older people to society and charitable causes.

Created in 2008 by Sir Sigmund Sternberg, a Hungarian-British businessman and philanthropist, in partnership with The Times, the awards celebrate outstanding contributions made by people to their communities and to public life after turning 70.

Last year's winners were Dr Adrian Whiteson, 90, and his wife, Myrna, 88, co-founders of the Teenage Cancer Trust. They remain active in the charity they established in the late 1980s.

Mrs Whiteson had met a woman whose 13-year-old son had cancer and was being treated both in a children's ward and alongside older people in an adult oncology ward. Dr Whiteson, a GP, had seen how teenagers with the disease felt isolated when consigned to wards full or pensioners or youngsters. The trust helped fill that gap; its first unit opened in 1990, and there are now 28 in Britain with more abroad.

Other award-winners include Dr Lydia Tischler, a Holocaust survivor and pioneer of child psychotherapy who was recognised in 2023 for her work. She continues to teach and mentor well into her nineties.

The judges welcome nominations from all corners of society. They are looking for excellence in areas including, but not limited to, community work, fundraising, campaigning, the arts, health and wellbeing, broadcasting and media, science, politics and law.

To nominate a candidate, email a short statement detailing the achievements of the individual, emphasising those completed after the age of 70, to sternberg.events@gmail.com by Friday, February 28.

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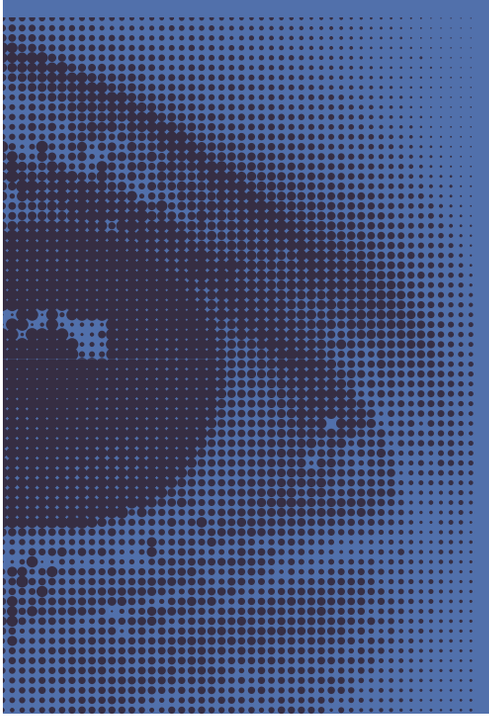


Spirit of the age **A 1909 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost is on sale for almost £1 million by Vintage & Prestige Classic Cars, based in Northampton. Rolls-Royce was founded only in 1906 and Autocar called the model "the best car in the world" a year later**

Gen Z and Millennials.
The difference revealed.

Twenty years ago we surveyed Britain's Millennials to find out what they were thinking. Now we've polled Generation Z and it paints a startlingly different picture.

Discover what Gen Z think all this week in The Times



THE TIMES
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News



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE





The show at Sandown Park racecourse in Surrey had something for all budgets

Investors work the trading card floor

At the London Card Show, collectors survey the Pokémon, vintage sports and Yu-Gi-Oh! trading cards on offer like rare works of art while auctions are live streamed on TikTok (Ellie McDonald writes).

One seller, with tables covered with shiny Pokémon cards in protective sleeves and some in glass cases, had rare decks on sale for £60,000. "With everything going on in the world at the moment, people are moving into alternative investments, into something more tangible," Kevin Clarke, 34, owner of Nostalgia Global, said, gesturing to an individual Pokémon card valued at £18,000.

Clarke, who started his business in 2019 after a job as a trader in the financial sector, added: "Collecting Pokémon cards was where it started, and it's just grown from there."

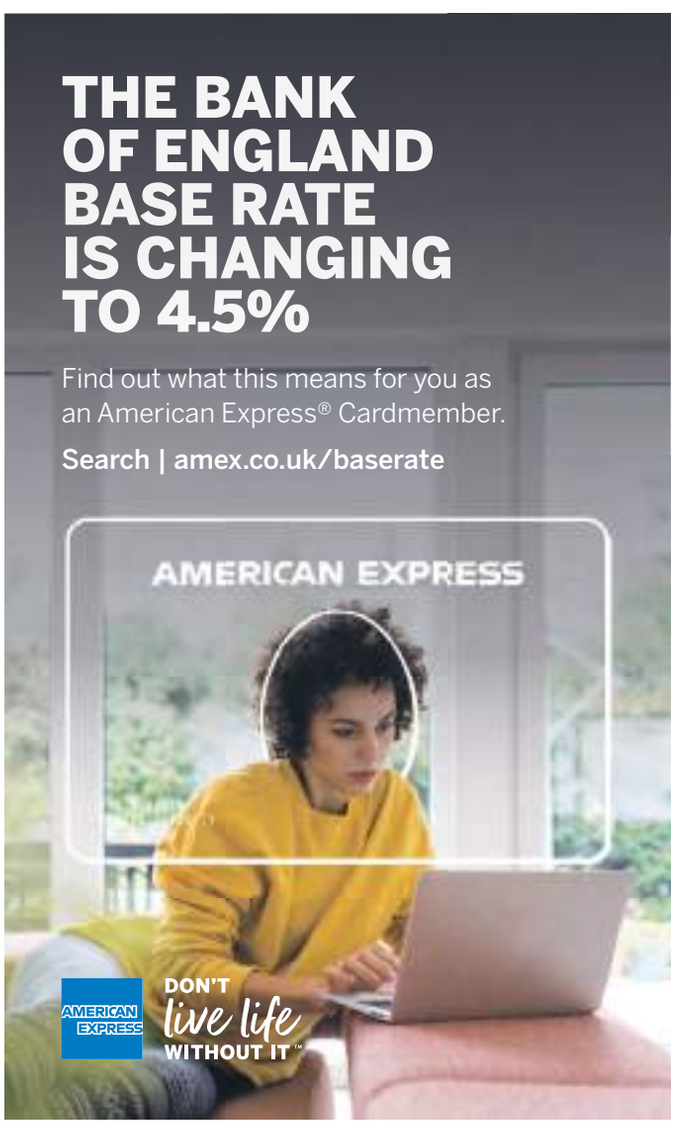
Attendance at this year's London Card Show is up by 75 per cent on last year, as more than 7,000 people passed through its doors. In 2021, 40 enthusiasts gathered on ten tables.

Harry Reynolds, 27, was an investment banker and trading card collector before founding the event alongside his sister, Katie Hughes. "I saw there wasn't a market for card shows in the UK like there is in America," he said.

Recent research suggested that one in ten adults now invest in luxury goods, with trading cards ranking among the top three categories alongside watches and designer fashion.

James Harvey, 31, who works in finance, said that trading cards had become a great way to invest and earn money, and added that he travels to card shows around the UK to build his portfolio. "I paid £900 a year ago for a card that's now worth £5,000," he said. That is small fry.

In 2022, a 1952 Mickey Mantle baseball card sold for $12.6 million, becoming the most valuable sports card yet sold at auction and setting a record as the most expensive piece of sports memorabilia.



Selected Cards only. American Express Services Europe Limited is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Hybrid car crackdown will stall growth, Labour warned

Ben Clatworthy
Transport Correspondent

Ministers risk damaging investment in the UK and undermining the growth agenda unless they take a relaxed approach to the sale of hybrid cars after 2030, industry figures have said.

The government is consulting on whether the sale of old-style hybrids, such as the original Toyota Prius, should be permitted until 2035.

It has already confirmed that it will ban the sale of new pure petrol and diesel cars from 2030. A debate remains over whether the hybrid models sold until 2035 should be limited to plug-ins or include older styles, with smaller batteries charged by a main internal combustion engine.

An industry source said an "almighty row is brewing", with intense lobbying on both sides of the debate.

Adrian Mardell, the chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), has warned ministers that pushing ahead with the zero-emission vehicle (ZEV) mandate without changes would hit the car industry. He spent months trying to secure a meeting with Jonathan Reynolds, the business secretary, saying it was of "paramount" importance that the Department for Business and Trade worked with manufacturers to ensure that regulatory changes do not "damage the domestic automotive industry".

One policy expert said: "This is a topic of fierce debate. You've got the legacy OEMs [original equipment manufacturers] on one hand, and the electric vehicle industry on the other, and absolutely no consensus.

"It's ultimately going to be an entirely political decision. If you piss off all the motor manufacturers you're going to see more closures and more investment flowing out of the UK. So with Rachel Reeves wanting to go for growth you really want to keep those guys happy and their investment flowing into the UK."

The ZEV mandate currently stipulates that manufacturers must ensure that 28 per cent of sales this year are EVs. This will rise to 80 per cent by 2030 and 100 per cent in 2035. Carmakers face fines of £15,000 per vehicle above the threshold. It was revealed on Sunday that JLR threatened to cut back investment in the UK unless the rules were relaxed.

A source said: "The Conservatives ... never defined 'hybrid' for fear of Toyota pulling investment. The industry generally believed the intention to be plug-in hybrid electric vehicles with a 40-60 mile autonomous EV range, but Toyota pushed for old-style hybrids and it was never sorted."

Experts said consultation documents already appear to be leaning towards an emissions cap of 115g/km, which would allow for many traditional Prius-style hybrids.

This would tally with evidence, including from Which?, the consumer group, that such cars sometimes produce less carbon than plug-in hybrids when results are taken from use in crowded cities rather than laboratory conditions.

In addition, some owners of Phevs — especially those with company cars — do not charge their batteries and rely on traditional fuel.

JLR said it was "committed to manufacturing its next-generation electric vehicles in the UK", adding: "We welcome the government's fast-track consultation on changes to the ZEV mandate, as well as its commitment to stimulate demand."

The Department for Transport said: "Industry will help us shape the transition to zero-emissions vehicles in a way that works for businesses, drivers, and the environment."

Alphabet soup drives EV buyers mad

Ben Clatworthy

Electric car campaigners are calling on the advertising watchdog to clamp down on the "alphabet soup" of terms used to describe the vehicles.

Acronyms such as PHEV (plug-in hybrid electric vehicle), HEV (hybrid electric vehicle), FCEV (fuel cell electric vehicle) and MHEV (mild hybrid electric vehicle) should be banned, campaigners said.

Electric Vehicles UK, a lobby group, wants carmakers and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) "to help end consumer confusion". Ginny Buckley, of Electrifying.com, said that a survey of more than 11,000 drivers showed one in five found terminology confusing.

She said: "The widespread myth that a hybrid is a self-charging electric car highlights the urgent need for clarity."

Research commissioned by Transport & Environment, a lobby group, found "much higher emissions than advertised from some hybrids".

Quentin Willson, the former *Top Gear* presenter and founder of FairChargeUK, said: "Most feel that if the word hybrid is somewhere in the car's name, then they will be making an environmentally sound choice. But as we know from established research, that's not always true."

In 2020, Norway's advertising regulator banned Toyota's "self-charging hybrid" campaign. It said: "It is misleading to give the impression that the power to the hybrid battery is free of charge, since the electricity produced by the car has consumption of gasoline as a necessary condition."

An ASA spokeswoman said that it had given new advice to advertisers telling them "to be clear about terminology and technology".

Tech leaders gather amid safety warning

Mark Sellman
Technology Correspondent

A leaked draft of the Paris AI summit declaration has been criticised by a leading expert for its lack of progress on safety commitments.

World leaders and AI company heads gather in the French capital today for an "action summit" that has moved away from the focus on safety at Bletchley Park in 2023. The event is co-hosted by President Macron and Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister, and those attending include JD Vance, the US vice-president on his first foreign trip in office, Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor and Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission president.

They will also welcome a who's who of the AI industry, including Sam Altman, OpenAI's chief executive, Sundar Pichai, the Google chief, Brad Smith, Microsoft's president, and Dario Amodei, co-founder of Anthropic. Britain is sending Peter Kyle, the science and technology secretary.

Two of the key outcomes from the summit will be a final communiqué and the announcement of a public interest foundation for AI. However, concerns over a leaked draft of the joint statement have been raised by Professor Stuart Russell, president of the International Association for Safe and Ethical AI. He said a section pledging that safety would be ensured by an "open, multi-stakeholder and inclusive approach" seemed "meaningless". Of particular concern to Russell was the failure to repeat the commitments in the Bletchley Park declaration to address the serious and catastrophic harm posed by AI models in cybersecurity, biotechnology and disinformation.

Anne Bouverot, Macron's representative at the summit, said announcements from the summit would be from a "coalition of the willing", adding "we don't always agree, all, on everything, and that's absolutely fine." Tomorrow Macron will announce the creation of a public benefit AI institution, funded with billions from governments, businesses and philanthropy. It will help collate large datasets for public bodies to use.

Mike Bracken, founder of Public Digital, which has been advising Macron on the project, said: "Resetting AI as a public asset is the only game in town ... it's not just empty rhetoric."

He said it would get away from the "false binary between existential safety and regulatory capture", but that he did not expect big American AI companies to be part of the foundation, except for the open source platform Hugging Face. Matt Clifford, the UK prime minister's AI adviser, said: "I think one of the big opportunities for this summit: I think deals will be made."

Sir Demis Hassabis, chief executive of Google DeepMind and a Nobel prize winner, said that international co-operation was needed on regulation but "that's also tricky in the current environment".

Hassabis said that DeepSeek, a Chinese low-cost system, was an "impressive piece of work", "extremely good engineering" but there was "no new scientific advance". He claimed that Google's latest models like Flash were "more efficient for performance".

AI 'scraped' my wildlife shots from the web

Two years ago Tim Flach, a British wildlife photographer, took a phone call out of the blue that changed his working life (Mark Sellman writes).

An AI researcher told Flach, 66, he was one of the most "scraped" artists in the world. His photos on the web had found their way into a set created by a German teacher for AI research.

However that study has been used by AI companies to replicate Flach's work without royalties. He compared it to a parasite "sucking the light out of its host".

Flach is painstaking when he takes close-ups of bald eagles, hippos and tigers. He spends thousands of pounds to create stylised portraits, and his photos adorn museum exhibits and illustrate seven books.

But now you can create a Flach photo in seconds using AI. When he typed "snow leopard" into the generator Midjourney it made an image almost identical to one he had taken in Sweden. "These [AI] models are wholly dependent on existing content, which is essentially human endeavour," he says.

The creative industries are suing AI companies for copyright infringement. In the UK they are also lobbying against a change in the law.

Ministers want to let tech firms use copyrighted works free of charge unless an owner opts out. At present the only opt out is to stop search engines "scraping" your website. Flach says this means you can't distribute your content on the internet and you become a "prisoner of your website".

Ed Newton-Rex, a musician who used to work in AI, says opting out is an illusion.

The government said: "The UK's current regime for copyright and AI is holding back the creative industries and AI sector from realising their full potential. That cannot continue.

"That's why we've launched a consultation to develop a balanced framework.

"No move will be made until we are absolutely confident we have a practical plan that delivers each of our objectives: increased control for right holders, access to high-quality material to train leading AI models in the UK, and more transparency from AI developers."

TIM FLACH







Two photos of eagles, one of which is taken by Tim Flach, below. But which one is his and which is based on his image and generated using AI?

● *The eagle on the right was produced by an AI generator*

TikTok makes us want to visit China

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

People who spend hours scrolling on TikTok are more likely to want to visit China, possibly because the platform censors material that portrays the country in a bad light, a study suggests.

Last month President Trump reversed legislation that would have forced its Chinese owners to sell or close down in the US. He said that if Beijing was using it to spy on Americans, most of the eavesdropping would involve "young kids watching crazy videos". However, a study suggested that TikTok users see an airbrushed view of China and its human rights record.

For search terms such as "Tiananmen" or "Tibet", the majority of results on TikTok either portrayed the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in a positive light or were irrelevant. By contrast, on Instagram and YouTube, the majority of results were anti-CCP.

The study, conducted by Rutgers University's Network Contagion Research Institute, also asked 1,200 Americans whether they agreed with the statement "China is one of the most desirable travel destinations in the world".

Among those who did not use TikTok, 22 per cent rated this as true. For those who spent more than three hours a day on the platform, 42 per cent did.

On human rights, they were asked to rate China on a scale that went from one (extremely poor) to ten (extremely good). People who never used TikTok said it was poor, with an average score of 2.6. People who used the platform for more than three hours a day said 4.8.

Lee Jussim, a co-author of the research, said: "We did the studies because there was ample reason long before our studies to suspect CCP manipulation of TikTok. It's one thing to suspect, it's quite another to find it empirically." He added that TikTok "functions to distract people from information the CCP would rather people not find".

The results were published in Frontiers in Social Psychology.

TikTok said the study was flawed because new accounts were created to conduct the research and this "does not reflect real users' experience".

Social media law not tough enough, say bereaved parents

Daisy Eastlake

Bereaved parents who are suing TikTok say that the Online Safety Act does not "bear its teeth" enough to protect young people and claim their children died after "blackout challenges".

The wrongful death lawsuit, which was filed by US-based Social Media Victims Law Center against TikTok and its' parent firm ByteDance, claims Isaac Kenevan, 13, Archie Battersbee, 12, Julian "Jools" Sweeney, 14, and Maia Walsh, 13, all died from injuries suffered while taking part in online challenges in 2022. The "blackout challenge" is a choking game in which participants hold their breath until they pass out on video. Online choking games have caused at least 100 deaths since 2008.

Liam Walsh, Maia's father, told *Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg* that content which encouraged dangerous challenges was harmful but not illegal under the act. "I don't think it is bearing its teeth enough," he said.

TikTok says that it does not allow content showing or promoting dangerous activity or challenges and it proactively finds and removes 99 per cent of content deemed in breach of its rules before users report it to the company.

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Comment

Diversity is the future — better get used to it

Trump is trampling DEI initiatives but, virtue-signalling silliness apart, firms see value in reflecting changing Britain

Trevor Phillips



@TREVORPTWEETS

'Just because the Devil's whistling a tune doesn't make it a bad tune," my grandmother used to say. It was her optimistic take on the warning by the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, in 1882 that "the Devil has all the best tunes but they are only the bait to catch us".

I don't think either General Booth or Grandma Mabel would have fallen under the spell of America's new president, but they might have cautioned listeners to make a careful distinction between loving the song and becoming bewitched by the singer; not to confuse "Trump has a point" with "Trump is right". Some are in danger of doing so on the divisive topic of diversity and inclusion.

There are many who reckon the mood music flooding out of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue could only have been arranged by Satan himself. Well, yes and no. Donald Trump may be the world's noisiest one-man band, but buried in the cacophony is a nagging earworm that plucks at the strings of what we feel are our darker instincts.

At least one aspect of Mr Trump's genius is to awaken the part of the liberal mind of which we are secretly a little ashamed. He calls us to compromise with the selfishness in our own natures. When push comes to shove, most people, most of the time, place the interests of their own families, communities and nations ahead of the abstract, amorphous mass of people we don't know.

Yesterday, talking to the former MP Jack Lopresti who, after losing his seat has signed up for duty in Ukraine's equivalent of the Foreign Legion, was humbling. He rightly says "the defence of Europe starts in Ukraine". But were I at an age and in the shape to be anything but a liability in combat, would I risk my family life for that noble cause? Unlikely.

Trump understands human weakness better than most, and is ruthless in exploiting it both for political advantage, churning out political hit after hit. The success of his 2016 "Build the Wall, Keep Them Out" spawned cover versions all over Europe. In the past week we've heard a couple of new bangers: "Gimme Gimme Gaza" and "Bye, Bye, Third World (feat. Elon Musk)". But the

> First port of call for the global poor should be the Saudis and Qataris

Trump wall of sound always contains a grain of common sense that forces thoughtful people to think twice.

Of course, America is not going to own Gaza, and the international community will clutch its pearls at the notion of human displacement. But does anyone really think it compassionate to fund diplomats in five-star Gulf hotels to debate who threw the first stone while Palestinian leaders haggle over who gets the reconstruction contracts and children camp out for a decade in a bombed-out hellscape?

The withdrawal of USAID will cause suffering. But many Americans and Europeans suffer too; and surely, the first port of call for the global poor should include the Saudis and Qataris, who have all the money in the world. And so on.

Some think Trump's next hit will be a tune he has been trying out for weeks: "Time to Die, DEI". Some organisations — Mark Zuckerberg's Meta — who seem all too eager to dance, however awkwardly, to any tune coming out of Mar-a-Lago, have capitulated instantly, sacking DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) advisers and closing down the very programmes about which they were boasting a year ago.

As I have written before, no one should be forced to bow to fashionable adolescent nonsense about dozens of "genders" being available to men and women. My own employees and staff know I won't be putting pronouns on my emails; there is no reason why a message I send to Martha should be different to one meant for Arthur. Discriminating in that way would fly in the face of everything I've fought for my whole life. But in spite of the many widely recycled examples of progressive overreach, DEI is seen as a plus by most employees. Recent research by the polling company More In Common found that by a margin of 46 per cent to 28 per cent, British workers thought DEI programmes delivered fairer outcomes. Even among "Backbone Conservative" voters, DEI is supported by 39 per cent to 29 per cent. That is probably why 6,000 organisations with upwards of 5 million employees signed up to a five-day challenge last week run by the not-for-profit campaign arm, Race Equality Matters, of Green Park, the executive recruitment company I chair. Jamie Dimon at JP Morgan and David Solomon at



Mark Zuckerberg has closed the DEI programmes at his company, Meta

Goldman Sachs have reaffirmed support for their DEI initiatives. I think they see this as classic Trump: Technicolor demands that require a corrective but in shades of grey.

Most people in western societies can see the writing on the wall. Over the next seven years the UK population will swell by 5 million, virtually all from overseas. The centre-right think tank Policy Exchange has put forward some creative proposals to slow the flow: for example, the auctioning of visas, forcing market discipline on the immigration system. But the impact of such measures will be modest.

We are old. We need young immigrants. By the middle of the century more than half of those who produce our wealth will have been born abroad or else be the children of people born abroad. There are already 30 national communities in the UK of more than 100,000 people. Every workplace will need to acknowledge the background and preferences of a nation that is both objectively and subjectively more diverse than it has ever been.

Trump is a realist who made his fortune as a builder in New York, one of the most multiethnic cities in the world. The website of one of the world's biggest construction

> The rhetoric of DEI needs to be less about doing down white men

companies, Bechtel, states: "We believe diverse and inclusive companies attract and retain strong talent." It supports networks for black, Asian, Hispanic, LGBT, disabled and women employees. The premier US engineering firm AECOM boasts of its commitment to "diverse teams [and] an inclusive workplace". Its awards for diversity are displayed alongside its multibillion-dollar financial results.

I suspect Trump recognises that diverse workforces have to be catered for; he just wants it done with less lefty agitprop and fewer parades. He may be right. At the very least the rhetoric of DEI needs to become less about doing down white men and more about creating better businesses. We need to put every talent to work wherever it comes from and whatever sex, colour or shape it is. To that extent, Donald Trump is doing us a favour. His anti-DEI campaign is less a klaxon warning us to turn around and head back to the 1950s and more an alarm call to drop virtue-signalling silliness and focus on a future that is inevitably more diverse.

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Comment

Can Birmingham beat the constant bashing?

City has become punchbag for those who hold it up as a microcosm of an England in freefall

Will Lloyd



@WILL__LLOYD

In the summer of 1998, the writer and documentary maker Jonathan Meades broadcast a series of films on a somewhat unpromising subject — Birmingham. Meades framed the city as a bewildering public mystery: a city without a shorthand or a trademark. Newcastle had the Tyne Bridge, Liverpool had the Liver Building, and London had several thousand years of being London. When Britain thought regionally, it pitched chippy northern aggression against stuck-up southern arrogance, with the Midlands an enigmatic afterthought.

What exactly was Birmingham? A city dragged into existence by heavy industries and manufacturing jobs but now bereft of both. Riddled with canals but without a major river or estuary. Far away from court, Birmingham maintained a hair-thin literary tradition and barely marked British history before the 18th century. In *Second City*, the historian Richard Vinen records that 1960s city planners "were sometimes perplexed as to why Birmingham had been settled in the first place".

Birmingham's orchestra, exemplary concert hall and choirs had no hold on the national imagination. Less cocksure than Manchester, less flinty than Sheffield, Birmingham was "in the middle of England and middle England", Meades declared, "an ignored void at the heart of the country".

That began to change last year. Birmingham's image shifted. In a less optimistic time than 1998, when Meades concluded that Birmingham stood for Cadbury, motoring and ironical humour, the city instead became a metaphor for squalid national freefall. Rather than being a puzzle, Birmingham was the actual capital of the United Kingdom outside of London and the southeast, leading the nation in decline.

It started on YouTube. In February 2024, Bald and Bankrupt, aka Benjamin Rich, a travel vlogger who

> A stone-faced Robert Jenrick huffs past women in hijabs

made his name shooting grey and grimy post-Soviet countries, returned home to Britain and filmed himself walking around Birmingham's Soho Road. Rich tuts at overflowing bins, knife-amnesty boxes, waterlogged mattresses, one-star hotel rooms and south Asian mini-marts. He is offered sex on the street; he passes crackheads. The resulting film, *Offered Business on England's Worst Street*, has been viewed more than three million times.

Rich's video instigated a new genre of online travelogue. It mixes the microscopic focus on decay found in Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and JB Priestley's *English Journey*, the point-and-judge amorality of *Benefits Street*'s poverty porn and the unfiltered talking points of ethno-nationalists on the continent.

Many more films followed, all featuring young white men striding around Birmingham's immigrant neighbourhoods in Handsworth and Alum Rock. One of them, Joe Fish, claims to have read that around here "rats are the size of dogs and the rubbish can be seen from space". Another, aka "Going GlobAll", says Birmingham "feels like a dying city in a dying country of a dead empire". For Backpacker Ben, "This place is filthy ... people just throw their rubbish on the floor." The word "minging", indiscriminately used by all of them, sums up the vloggers' aesthetic and moral verdict on the city. There is zero compassion for the injuries and insults that have been suffered by these places.

Readers might blanche at being told about young men filming themselves for monetisable clicks. But they have wide influence. Robert Jenrick appeared in Handsworth with a GB News camera crew a few days ago. Dressed in vlogger uniform of black puffa, black chinos and pristine white trainers, a disgusted Jenrick was still less furious than the resulting film's YouTube title: "'Like a slum!' Britons seethe as vandals DUMP hordes of 'filth' outside their homes and council 'does nothing'."

A stone-faced Jenrick huffs past women in hijabs, an abandoned tyre and some soiled underwear muttering about the Labour council. "Good, law-abiding Brits are furious as their streets are being trashed by a small minority who have no respect for their communities," he says. The only surprise was that Benjamin Rich didn't make a cameo to share in Jenrick's despair. With such content, Jenrick has come far closer to hitting on the likely future of right-wing politics in Britain than Kemi Badenoch has. Everybody hates fly-tipping. Nobody likes the idea of urban "no-go" zones. Aping the style and manner of online influencers, this politics will film the most downtrodden and alienating urban areas, then blame multiculturalism for all that's gone wrong.

Far from being an "ignored void", Birmingham has become the most critiqued, and in some ways most representative, city outside London. Whether it's council malfeasance (the local authority is bankrupt), painful industrial action (the binmen are going on strike — again), sectarian politics (pro-Gaza independents surged here last year), stabbings (the West Midlands has a higher rate of knife crime than London), a huge skills shortage (the metro area has a higher proportion of the working age population with no qualifications than all English regions), Birmingham is the crossroads where Britain's most ominous trends meet. Without any obvious civic identity aside from the "diversity" mindlessly invoked by city councillors last week as they gave themselves an above inflation pay rise, Birmingham is also typical of so much British sprawl, from Luton to Southampton.

Can it recover? The emergency surgery begins with £300 million of budget cuts over the next two years. The city's motto is "Forward". It would be a brave person who knew where that led in Birmingham.

Emma Duncan Notebook

At least the disruptors have a bad name again

Once upon a time, we disapproved of disruptors. Disruptive pupils made it hard for others to study. Through reason or discipline, they had to be persuaded to work within the system.

A couple of things changed that. In the 1960s, the system came to be seen as the enemy, normality was oppressive, madness was seen as sane and disruptors heroic. Then digital technology allowed those who disrupted markets to become innovative and rich. They took drugs, wore T-shirts and despised normies or NPCs (non-player characters, for those who haven't yet mastered disruptor-speak).

Now the disruptors are taking over the system. It happened briefly in Britain, when Boris Johnson unleashed Dominic Cummings on Whitehall. That didn't last because Johnson, who is lazy rather than disruptive, failed to take Cummings' side. Now the disruptors have been unleashed in Washington, where they are rampaging through the federal government. Since Trump himself is a disruptor, this episode is likely to last long enough to do real damage. I suspect the only good thing to come out of it will be that we can reclaim the notion of disruptors as troublemakers who need to be sat on, not celebrated.



Gone to the dogs

You are probably familiar with the joke about the diaries of a dog and a cat. Dog: Tinned food! My favourite thing! Morning walk! My favourite thing! Chasing the ball! My favourite thing! Etc. Cat: Day 468 of my captivity. My jailers dine on fine food, while they feed me putrid scraps. Etc.

There's a similar contrast around my new Tesco Clubcard. I don't like the idea of companies nosing around my purchasing habits, so I signed up for one reluctantly, only when I realised how massive the differential in prices: £8.05 for a bottle of olive oil with a card and £11.50 without. My partner is delighted by these savings, and by the exciting accumulation of points, which are worth £8 after six months of buying about £50 of food a week — or 0.64 per cent of the value of our shopping. I regard the rewards as paltry and I'm angry that Tesco fines me for protecting my privacy.

As I brood over this issue, I can see why people tend to prefer dogs to cats (and yes, cat people, surveys show that they do).

Of mice ...

As Mao Zedong found when he demanded the extermination of the sparrows he believed were diminishing the harvest and caused a surge in the insect population which led to a famine, messing with the ecological balance can cause trouble. I may have unleashed something similar. Since moving house last year, I've been having a hard time attracting birds to my bird feeder. I tried sunflower and niger seeds, peanuts and fat balls, but nothing piqued their interest until I put out some dried mealworms.

As tariffs are to Donald Trump, so dried mealworms are to the local tit population. Unfortunately, in their hurry to scoff as many as possible, the birds drop mealworms from the feeder, which are well received by the growing numbers of mice nipping between the pots on the terrace — and which have started to make forays towards the house. It's not the Great Famine, but I fear I may have to choose between birds accompanied by a plague of rodents or a lifeless garden free of both.

Back to the Fifties

The council seems to have given up taking away our garden waste so I spent much of the weekend burning a huge pile of it, in the company of children who toasted marshmallows on the bonfire. Other activities included making bird-nesting boxes and listening to a reading of *Treasure Island* – a wildly exciting, undeservedly forgotten book. I know the past was full of racism, homophobia and terrible food; but as an escape from contemporary gloom, there's a lot to be said for a weekend break in the 1950s or thereabouts.



We must fight back on hostage-taking

Adam Wagner and Adam Rose

On Saturday, Hamas terrorists released three more hostages, including our client, Eli Sharabi. Their condition was shocking. Many compared their emaciated appearances to concentration camp victims.

Hamas's latest "release ceremony" hit a grotesque new low. Eli, whose British wife Lianne and teenage daughters Noiya and Yahel were murdered on October 7, 2023, was forced to tell the watching world how much he was looking forward to seeing them. The armed interviewer kept up the charade as his family watched the televised event in horror.

As lawyers for nine hostages with British links, we have witnessed the torture they have suffered. Eli's brother, Yossi, was killed in captivity. Hamas teased his death with daily propaganda videos, tormenting his family to guess his fate.

This is not random cruelty. It is part of a campaign which began with the capture of 240 hostages, of over 20 nationalities, from southern Israel. One British hostage, Nadav Popplewell, was shot dead in captivity. Other British-linked hostages, including Avinatan Or, Oded Lifshitz and Yossi Sharabi, remain.

Hamas meticulously planned this for years. It built hundreds of miles of tunnels under Gaza, equipped with living quarters for guards and cages for hostages. It developed a sophisticated social media operation to emotionally manipulate its audience.

Hamas, like their sponsors Iran, and other terrorists, will now have learnt that mass hostage-taking works. They have achieved otherwise unattainable objectives, including the exchange of hostages for convicted terrorists, some of whom have murdered British citizens. And unlike al-Qaeda, Hamas has learnt the power of retaining leverage. That is why part of its leadership remains untouched in Qatar, with a place at the top table, instead of hiding in caves.

Civilised nations need to learn from this, quickly. The UK, with its diplomatic and counterterrorism expertise, must do three things. First, appoint a permanent hostage envoy with the heft and independence to fight for families like Eli's. Second, go after the sources of income and the collaborators who allowed Hamas to build its hostage-taking infrastructure. Third, announce it will take the international lead on countering 21st-century hostage-taking, starting with dismantling Hamas.

It is too easy to look at the cruel scenes from Gaza and think they are someone else's problem. They are not. We need to wake up to the threat of hostage-taking now.

Adam Wagner and Adam Rose are lawyers acting for British families of hostages in Gaza



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Victimhood muddies the path of justice

The Grenfell and Lucy Letby cases show how putting individual grief centre stage can hamper cool investigation

Libby Purves



@LIB_THINKS

Is Lucy Letby a killer, or victim of a grievous miscarriage of justice? We cannot ignore the argument now raging, or avoid asking how well our justice system serves such cases. Sir David Davis MP claims "90 per cent" certainty of her innocence. A distinguished neonatologist leads doctors disputing the evidence, statistical experts offer analysis, supporters demand an appeal. But at the same time the parents of seven dead babies are incandescent. One mother tells the BBC that the families "already have the truth" and that they trust the jury and accuse doubters of a disrespectful "publicity stunt".

The web of distress and mistrust hangs over us: horror to think of sick babies and a cruel nurse, empathy for parents, unease that deep moral imbalance could hide within a pleasant young woman. Her crazy scribblings of apparent confession appalled us, both at the idea of guilt but also in case they were caused by no more than the terrible pressure of accusation in an unhappy hospital. Again emotion moves us: if Letby is innocent, how cruel are the accusers? We know too much and not enough. We shiver.

More practically we could ask whether jury trial, our bastion of freedom, is wholly fit for such rare cases. Our system is adversarial, not the inquisitorial fact-sifting of the French style. But when a case stirs such deep pity, and a lay jury faces a mass of highly technical evidence, does it serve justice? Counsels' duty is rhetorically to convince the jury either to condemn or to find "reasonable doubt", weighing what they were told by barely comprehensible scientists. And to do it while looking at a human being in the dock and hearing families racked by grief.

It cannot help if, as in the Letby case, the tide of emotion flows most fluently in the direction of conviction. Human pain demands closure, certainty, a villain to punish. It may be that some of the passion expressed by Letby's defenders comes from a sense that the world always wanted her guilty. Naming and convicting a monster makes it easier to move on.

> Human pain demands closure, certainty and a villain to be punished

More widely, giving weight to emotion in practical matters is increasingly part of our humane society. Justice is portrayed as blindfolded, not tearfully stretching out a sympathetic hand, but the trend both in courts and inquiries such as Grenfell, Covid or the Post Office has edged towards almost prioritising private suffering.

Victim impact statements are useful in underlining the pain a criminal caused, but victims cannot be judges. A lesser crime might hit very hard on one person whose eloquence brings us to tears, while a more robust or cheerfully fatalistic victim of the same attack or fraud might not find the words to express it. Or even want to: one woman robbed and bruised in a mugging firmly told victim support she wouldn't do a statement about psychological damage because it would make her feel feebly pitiable. She might have preferred, like that magnificent child at the Rudakubana trial, to say defiantly: "Spend your whole life knowing that we think you're a coward."

The Grenfell inquiry was a fascinating, initially frustrating example of this new instinct to put individual grief and damage centre stage before a cool inquisition asking how, when, why? The first year heard evidence from bereaved and sufferers, importantly defining the timeline but also asking for harrowing personal stories in detail — even that of a young man who wasn't there but was so traumatised by searching for news of his mother that for a while he became convinced, and stated, that he was inside the tower.

I remember feeling both horror and grief at the time but also impatience. I wanted Sir Martin Moore-Bick — an expert in the hard practicalities of commerce and shipping — to be rapidly moving on to detail: who commissioned and who sold which materials? What precaution and regulation failed? When? Why?

> I wanted faster focus on 'never again!' before reflection on tragedy

He did get there brilliantly, but companies, architects and officials had time to prepare while we listened to sad, timeless stories of private loss and terror. Maybe it had to be that way round; but my outsider's instinct, as with marine accident reports of ships and yachts, wanted faster focus on "never again!" before reflection on "how frightening, how tragic, how psychologically damaging".

Move on, far down from the extremes of tragedy and the need to acknowledge it, and everywhere you find the risk that humane respect for feelings is edging away from cool judgment. Sometimes it creates a hierarchy: the government is now contemplating an irrationally specific blasphemy law because of expressed Muslim pain at seeing the Quran burnt.

And in a Scottish tribunal a middle-aged doctor, transitioned to claim femaleness only the year before, pleads feeling "upset and unsafe" and bullied because a nurse in the changing room, menstruating at the time, found a large male-born presence troubling.

Today, ancient pride in stiff endurance is out of style, and victimhood a desirable tool of privilege. Come right down to the ridiculous, and here's a sacked headmaster claiming "disability" — wholly self-diagnosed — because it affected his golf club role. Well, as a serial sack-ee one knows the feeling all too well.

But it helps to hark back to the disabled, maimed and bereaved Victorian poet WE Henley: "In the fell clutch of circumstance/ I have not winced nor cried aloud./ Under the bludgeonings of chance/ my head is bloody, but unbowed." None of us can guarantee to follow *Invictus*, but as an aspiration it does have something to be said for it. And many, even true victims, achieve it.

World

Kyiv sends its killing machines

Robotics and AI are changing the face of the modern battlefield, Ukrainian commanders tell **Maxim Tucker**

A small robot rolls through the village ruins, heavy machine-gun protruding from its turret. Its little wheels bounce comically over the frozen, rutted soil, but its intent is lethal. A few hundred metres away, another robot advances alongside a parallel path, then another and another — more than five in total.

As they close in on a Russian infantry position across an open field in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine, they take turns to fire, dodging explosions that would easily wound a human soldier.

A few kilometres behind them, soldiers from the land robotics platoon of Ukraine's 13th "Khartiia" National Guard Brigade use joysticks to push their machines towards the fortified trench line. Their commander watches a human v robot battle of the sort once confined to the pages of science fiction, unfold from a drone high above.

This is the first time, the brigade says, that Ukraine has launched an assault with a platoon-size force of robots against the Russians. It is a vision of the future of warfare, one that Ukraine is working to make present-day. By doing so, the country's commanders hope to save their soldiers' lives, gain an edge over the Russians and solve persistent manpower problems.

"Our robots help us to reduce the number of people we need in combat," says second lieutenant "Mathematician", the head of the Khartiia brigade's ground and air unmanned systems. He is a PhD student who has had to pause his academic career to find innovative ways to kill the invading Russians.

The robots use cutting edge AI-assisted targeting, with the decision on whether to pull the trigger left to humans. The Khartiia platoon is working with the armed forces of a Baltic country renowned for its digital savvy to develop better operating systems, Mathematician says. The world's giant arms manufacturers, such as BAE Systems and Rheinmettall, are also watching these developments closely — both have opened facilities in Ukraine.

The platoon still has several logistical issues to work through. The robots' wheels can get stuck in uneven terrain and the sheer number of drones, most of them in the air, operating on various radio frequencies, means their signals are often interfering with each other. There is Russian jamming, too.

However, these are problems Ukrainian manufacturers are working to overcome. At a small factory in Kyiv, engineers from the Legit robotics company are developing next generation platforms, taking lessons learnt on the battlefield by the special operations teams of military intelligence, the HUR, that they provide platforms for.

"Sometimes they shoot tanks or some large vehicles, sometimes they use it in urban combat to destroy buildings. Last time, they laid explosives that destroyed a building with 30 Russian soldiers in it," says Volodymyr Kushnir, Legit's head technician.

Legit has a range of models it wants to build at scale for different tasks, including one with two anti-tank grenade launchers for attacking enemy armour. The tracks and turrets are two separate modules, so that the same base can be used for different tasks. It also means a robot can keep fighting if the base is damaged, or the base can return to its lines if the turret is damaged.

The tracks on their newest platform have sophisticated suspension, modelled on tanks, to allow accurate fire on the move. They use satellite internet rather than radio frequencies to reduce the chances of interference and can accommodate AI that would allow them to continue fighting even if they were cut off from command.

Oleksandr Kamyshin, President Zelenksy's former minister for strategic industries and now his adviser, believes that Ukraine will be able to field a robot army by the end of this year. "We tested them extensively last year," he said.

Ukraine's aerial kamikaze drones have inflicted terrible damage on the Russians, now estimated to have suffered 700,000 casualties while spending $200 billion on their war effort. Yet President Zelensky's vastly outnumbered infantry has struggled to hold on to territory.

The needs of the battlefield are accelerating technological development, yet much of the progress on land drones is still being made by small companies, like Legit, who have honed their technology using the battlefield experience of their close personal connections.

To expand and win big government tenders, they must overcome Ukraine's complicated bureaucracy and a competitive and sometimes corrupt market. Legit's business has already been raided by rivals and one of its founders, a special operations soldier, is under house arrest, accused of profiting from selling products to the military he says he produced at a loss and possessing the explosives he is manufacturing for them. Legit's engineers are also mobilised and sent to the front, despite their specialist expertise, Kushnir says.

Ukraine's infantry, which takes the heaviest casualties of all its armed forces, is desperate for more robots on the battlefield. Inevitably the Russians will copy these ideas, with combat becoming increasingly robot on robot.

For now Khartiia's robot attacks still require infantry follow-up. While the machine-gun robots kept the Russians' heads down, another approached their dugout with anti-tank mines, dropping two inside the trench line, then withdrawing ahead of an explosion.

Ukrainian troops had to retrieve two robots by hand, after one became stuck in a rut and another ran out of power. Without mass production, each is expensive and would be of high value to the Russians, should they capture it.

By the end of the firefight, Khartiia had taken the trench, claiming some 30 Russian soldiers were killed. It was not possible to determine how many by the robots, but their attacks terrify the Russians, Mathematician says.

"It's just metal and machine shooting at you, hundreds of bullets, really precisely with AI," he says. "I can't imagine how I'd react if I was there."

Additional reporting by Roman Sumko

● President Trump said yesterday he believed the US was making progress in talks with Russia over the war. He told the New York Post he had spoken to President Putin on the phone, adding he "better not say" how many times.





Pianos for Putin: China is key to busting sanctions

Richard Lloyd Parry Tokyo
Tom Parfitt

Never looking up from the keyboard, President Putin sat at the baby grand piano and began to play a mournful ditty about wartime Leningrad.

His impromptu performance of Vasily Solovyov-Sedoi's *Evening Song* at President Xi's guesthouse on the outskirts of Beijing was marred by only one thing. The piano was so out of tune that the melody was barely recognisable.

Since Putin revealed his ability on the piano in 2017, his country has become effectively banned from doing business with the West. Yet Russia's piano players continue to use some of the world's best instruments, many of which are made in Japan.

The reason has begun to emerge: the Japanese government is struggling to stem the flow of illegal pianos to a country where wealthy music lovers are finding ways of smuggling them in.

Japan has banned the sale of luxury goods to Russia since the invasion of Ukraine three years ago. This includes grand pianos worth more than ¥200,000 (£1,060).

However, trade data suggests that the instruments are getting through anyway, "trans-shipped" through third countries, above all China.

"The trade in pianos highlights the challenges Japan faces in enforcing sanctions in the context of complex global supply chains," said a recent report by Britain's Royal United Services Institute (Rusi). "Sanctions circumvention remains a significant challenge for Japan, with restricted goods exported from Japan often finding their way to Russia via third countries."

Direct sales of Japanese pianos to Russia were banned in March 2022. But since then, there has been a surge in exports to China, despite the fact that domestic piano sales there have been falling in a worsening economy.

At the same time, sales of grand pianos from China to Russia rose

Berlusconi's daughter in the spotlight at La Scala
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Forest islands are last sign of Amazon's lost ancients
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into first robot war

MAXIM TUCKER FOR THE TIMES







Robots blast Russian trenches or can lay down a hail of gunfire. The tracks and weapons are separate units, so that one can operate if the other is damaged, and sophisticated suspension can allow firing on the move. The land robotics platoon of the 13th "Khartiia" National Guard Brigade operate them from a distance





Vladimir Putin revealed his ability to play the piano before meeting with President Xi of China in Beijing in 2017

sharply from 155 in 2022 to 830 in 2023, although these may include instruments from countries other than Japan.

There is no evidence of direct grand piano smuggling from Tokyo to St Petersburg, but the top two Japanese piano makers, Yamaha and Kawai, both maintain Russian websites. A spokesman for Kawai said that this is "to show our piano line-up". Yamaha said that it is to help customers with "aftercare".

Japanese grand pianos vary in price from ¥2.2 million (£11,600) for Kawai's compact GX-1 with ¥23.1 million (£122,000) for a Yamaha concert grand.

Both companies insisted that they are not actively selling pianos in Russia. "However, if our pianos are sold in Russia at local shops which might have different supply routes, we cannot control that," Kawai said.

One Chinese piano dealer recently posted a video on the TikTok-style app RedNote, boasting of sales to Russians. In the clip, an actor playing Putin gives a thumbs-up sign to show his approval.

Russia's love affair with the piano can be traced to 1774, when Empress Catherine the Great ordered a piano from Johannes Zumpe in London.

In the 19th century, with the help of artisans from German-speaking lands, domestic piano production began in Russia, and there was an explosion of interest in the instrument.

Political exiles of the tsar and inmates of the gulag were among the players. The Russian empire and the Soviet Union would produce a string of virtuosos, such as Alexander Scriabin, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Maria Yudina, Vladimir Horowitz and Sviatoslav Richter. Piano playing in Russia is still widely practised and appreciated.

Although it joins its western friends in sanctioning luxury goods, Japan diverges from the Group of Seven policy in continuing to buy energy from Russia on the grounds of "energy security". It has also relaxed its ban on selling hybrid cars to Russia.

Rainbow nation left off the grid by Musk's Starlink

South Africa
Jane Flanagan Cape Town

A world map plotting the rollout of Elon Musk's satellite internet service shows South Africa as dark. Africa's most industrialised economy is tagged "service date is unknown".

In South Africa's neighbouring countries, meanwhile, Starlink is licensed, and off-the-grid communities are logging on for the first time in Mozambique, Zambia, the failed state of Zimbabwe and Swaziland — Africa's last absolute monarchy.

Washington's recent tirades about Pretoria's global alliances and policies at home have lit up the incongruous gap in the southern African skies.

Affirmative action laws have prevented Musk from launching Starlink in the country of his birth. To qualify for the licence, he would have to provide 30 per cent of the equity in the project to black-owned businesses — which he labelled as "openly racist".

Donald Trump has frozen all aid to South Africa, citing disapproval of its land policy and the genocide case it has brought against Israel. Without evidence, Musk, who moved to Canada after completing school, cited South Africa's murderous targeting of its white farmers.

Many South Africans detect Musk's hand on the trigger for some of Washington's punishment which is reheating deep divisions over the most contentious issues of the post-apartheid era.

Black economic empowerment was adopted as an early policy when Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) came to power in 1994. The intention was to undo the economic exclusion of black South Africans under white rule. The approach has, in reality, enriched only a small number of political insiders, including the current president, Cyril Ramaphosa.

"Overnight politicians became business people with no relevant experience," said William Gumede, an associate professor in the School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

In 2009, Gumede was invited to report to the treasury on the policy's impact and wrote that it was putting a brake on investment and job creation.

"I never heard another word," he said. It was not the white business people who felt the pinch of rules on race quotas, but black entrepreneurs without links to the ANC.

"To protect their interests the private sector has brought in the politically-connected. People who knew about business but didn't know the right people have been held back," he added.

Wealth inequality between the races has not improved and South Africa has one of the world's highest levels of unemployment and more than half its households face hunger.

Ramaphosa has not been shy to use Musk's roots to pitch for his investment. In September, the South African leader told Musk: "I want you to come home and invest here," Ramaphosa recounted later. Musk replied then that Starlink was "still waiting for regulatory approval".

"Black economic empowerment is suddenly in the global spotlight," Gumede concluded, "and the focus should not be about whether the rules should be changed to accommodate Elon Musk but what would actually benefit South Africa."



Elon Musk, who was born and educated in South Africa before moving to Canada, has accused the country of targeting white farmers

Whites reject refugee offer

Kate Bartlett

For years right-wing Afrikaner groups have been lobbying Washington to act on what they claim amounts to discrimination in democratic South Africa against the white minority.

When Donald Trump signed an executive order promoting the "resettlement of Afrikaners as refugees in the US", however, they rejected his offer to relocate away from South Africa. While they appreciated the recognition of "injustice", Dirk Hermann, chief executive of an Afrikaner trade union, said they were "not going anywhere".

The idea of Afrikaners leaving their estates to "[work at] Walmart and live in a shitty state apartment in the US," is laughable, said Naledi Mashishi, an author.

South Africa's foreign ministry said it was "ironic" that Trump's order provides refugee status for an "economically privileged" South African group while vulnerable people in the US were "being deported and denied asylum".

World



SEBASTIEN SALOM-GOMIS/AFP; STEPHANE MAHE/REUTERS

Home and dry **After almost 91 days at sea Violette Dorange, 23, from France, sailed into Les Sables-d'Olonne and became the youngest ever finisher of the Vendée Globe solo round the world race. It was not easy. Last month off Brazil she had to climb the mast of her yacht Devenir in 20 knots of wind and 2 metres of swell**

Tinned tuna won't kill you, French told

France

David Chazan Paris

Tuna producers have started a campaign to reassure consumers after research suggested there were high levels of mercury in the tinned fish.

Nine brands placed a joint full-page advertisement in French newspapers to claim their tinned tuna contained on average three times less mercury than permitted levels.

The producers were responding to alarm over research commissioned last year by Bloom, a French environmental group, and Foodwatch, a European consumer organisation. This found that 57 per cent of tins contained mercury exceeding permitted levels.

The researchers, however, had applied the maximum mercury level in other fish such as cod and salmon, which is lower than that allowed in tuna. The maximum permitted mercury content for tuna is 1.0 mg/kg but only 0.3 mg/kg for cod and other types.

The findings led 45 per cent of French consumers to eat less tuna, according to a survey in December.

The brands pointed out that mercury is naturally present and found in all fish. It is higher in tuna because mercury builds up in predators from the fish they eat, which is why the level tolerated in tuna is higher.

The producers said 2,700 tests of tinned tuna over eight years showed that the mercury level was three times lower than the maximum 1.0mg/kg.

Consumer groups, however, want the maximum mercury level in tuna to be reduced to the limit for other fish.

A poll to revive stalling German giant

As the economy falters its leaders are caught between old and new worlds, **Oliver Moody** and **Charlotte Alt** write

Every few seconds, giant bulldozers, tractors, lorries and concrete-mixers thread their way like an endless column of mechanical caterpillars through one of the largest building sites in Germany, the size of a thousand football pitches.

At the Salzgitter industrial complex near Braunschweig, a great mass of old-fashioned blast furnaces burn through coking coal and churn out steel with the same basic chemical processes that the manufacturer has used since the mid-19th century.

Right next to them, though, Salzgitter is being noisily and expensively refashioned into a flagship project for the future of German industry: a carbon-neutral steelworks that will run on green hydrogen and electric arc furnaces, subsidised with a billion euros of public funding.

When Olaf Scholz, the chancellor, talks of a "green jobs revolution", this is what he has in mind — the wholesale modernisation and decarbonisation of the country's industrial backbone. Like so many of his government's economic promises, however, this one has had a bruising collision with reality.

Before what may be Germany's most consequential election in at least a generation, the 2025 growth forecasts have been hacked back to about 0.3 per cent of GDP, after two years of mild recession. The *Wumms* (boom) with which Scholz promised to lead the country out of the pandemic has been more of a protracted wheeze. The average household's income has declined by at least 3 per cent over the past five years. Industrial production has fallen 10 per cent below pre-Covid levels.

Manufacturers are shuttering plants, cutting jobs by the tens of thousands, and moving to cheaper or more dynamic countries such as China and the US.

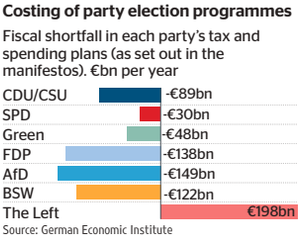
"We've had five years with no growth," said Veronika Grimm, a professor at Nuremberg University of Technology and one of the "five sages" on the government's economic advisory panel. "While the EU has grown by 4 per cent and the US by 12 per cent in this period, the German economy has just been treading water. And the outlook for the future is dark."

Germany's politicians are professionally obliged to be more optimistic. With a fortnight remaining before the national election, the campaign is framed as a tug-of-war between two fundamentally different visions of how to unleash the country's supposedly pent-up reserves of economic strength.

"The situation is quite serious," said Michael Kellner, state secretary in the economics ministry. "But Germany has good prospects: a very-well educated population, a high degree of stability, and many, many clever ideas. So I'm not anxious about the future, but these are and have been difficult years."

Kellner's Green party and Scholz's Social Democrats (SPD), which are still running a caretaker minority government together, argue that the main diagnosis and the most urgent prescription are one and the same: investment.





From the underequipped armed forces and classrooms to disintegrating bridges and perennially delayed trains, they say they are struggling with the results of a decade of parsimony.

The answer is, in their view, to loosen the constitutional "debt brake" that strictly limits public borrowing and splurge on national reconstruction. "We've been tying our own hands behind our back," said Kellner. "No other developed industrial county does it like this, and we are paying a heavy price."

Friedrich Merz, the probable next chancellor, and his conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party argue, on the other hand, that the animal spirits of German business are being stifled by a state that siphons off far too much money — 40.8 per cent of GDP — while coddling the unemployed and swaddling the private sector in red tape. They have pledged not only to retain the debt brake but also to take a hatchet to the tax code and many areas of state spending.

In the eyes of some leading economists, however, both sides of this debate are indulging in boosterism at best. Analysis by the German Economic Institute found that every party had a hole in its spending plans: €30 billion a year from the SPD, €48 billion from the Greens, and €89 billion from the CDU.

The more serious charge, though, is that the manifestos have little or nothing useful to say about the other structural problems that are weighing down the economy, because the solutions are too unpopular.

One of the most significant of these issues is demography. The state pension bill is about to bulge in spectacular fashion as the baby boomer generation retires and the ratio of workers to pensioners heads for a steep decline.

Yet even the most circumspect proposals for raising the retirement age are seen as electoral poison by parties across the political spectrum. Another factor is the instinct to protect Germany's old sources of industrial strength, such as chemicals and the petrol engine, even where they are no longer internationally competitive.

"Germany is a rather conservative country," said Kellner. "We cling on to the old. The internal combustion engine will be declared sacred right up to the point where our Chinese and American rivals leave us trailing in the dust. We treat ourselves to completely ridiculous debates about heat pumps instead of moving on into the new world. And that worries me."

Salzgitter is skewered on the horns of a national dilemma between preserving the old and advancing the new.

The €2.3 billion low-carbon steelworks, known as Salco, is a product of the net-zero zeitgeist that prevailed a decade ago after the UN's Paris agreement, before voters began to balk en masse at the costs of decarbonisation.

The bet on a future of hydrogen-forged steel no longer looks quite as safe as it did. Gunnar Groebler, chief executive of Salzgitter AG, the mother company, said an "unfavourable mix" of high energy costs, slumping demand and cheaper competition from China, India and Russia was making life "very difficult" for the German steel industry.

The loss-making firm is pouring up to €5 million a day into the green steel plant, the first parts of which are scheduled to start operating next year. With a takeover bid looming, it is starting to look like a risky investment.

Groebler says he remains confident that it will succeed and their order book is full until 2027. With nearly half of the project's costs funded by the state and federal governments, however, the last thing Salzgitter needs is uncertainty over whether Germany's political leaders are still committed.

Yet that is exactly what Merz provided a fortnight ago, when told an audience he thought that the "quick switch" to green steel was destined to fail.

The CDU leader later backtracked, but the damage was already done.

World

Netanyahu: Saudis have room for Palestinians

Israel

Gabrielle Weiniger

Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has angered Saudi Arabia by suggesting that a Palestinian state could be established there as they have "a lot of land".

Speaking to a pro-government channel over the weekend, Netanyahu replied to a slip of the tongue by the interviewer who said there would be no advance on normalisation with Saudi Arabia without a "Saudi state".

"You mean a Palestinian state, unless of course you want a Palestinian state to be in Saudi? They have a lot of land there, a lot of land," Netanyahu told the Channel 14 interviewer, who replied that it was worth exploring.

Saudi Arabia looked to be heading towards a normalisation deal with Israel before the attacks in October 2023, when the Palestinian issue was catapulted back to the regional forefront. This week Saudi Arabia reiterated that it would not establish ties with Israel without the creation of a Palestinian state.

While Netanyahu appeared to speak in jest, the comments follow President Trump's suggestion that Palestinians should be sent to a third-party Arab nation.

In a statement the Saudi foreign ministry rejected the suggestion that it absorb Palestinians, and accused Netanyahu of trying to "divert attention" from Israel's actions in Gaza and reaffirming "that the Palestinian people have a right to their land, and they are not intruders or immigrants to it who can be expelled whenever the brutal Israeli occupation wishes".

It added: "The kingdom of Saudi Arabia appreciates the condemnation, disapproval and total rejection announced by the brotherly countries towards what Benjamin Netanyahu stated," the statement said, referring to the quick condemnation of Netanyahu's comments by Jordan and Egypt, two countries proposed by Trump to absorb Gazan refugees.

The United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iraq, as well as the six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council and Qatar all rejected Netanyahu's comments. Qatar's foreign ministry said that they were "provocative".

RAKIBUL ALAM KHAN/SOLENT NEWS



Hard labour In Dhaka ships carrying sand and gravel are unloaded by hand for delivery to building sites across Bangladesh

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Forest islands are last sign of Amazon's lost ancients

From our correspondent
THOMAS GRAHAM
LLANOS DE MOXOS

The engine started to wheeze, then the accelerator stopped working. The car rolled to a halt. "It's one thing after another," muttered Umberto Lombardo, an archaeologist in the Bolivian Amazon, as he shook the grasshoppers out of his shirt and heaved the bonnet up to look at the engine, not for the first time that day.

We were in the Llanos de Moxos, a vast expanse of floodplains on the edge of the rainforest. At a glance, it's a place without history. You can drive for days and not see a soul. But what you will see on the horizon are mysterious clumps of trees. And these forest islands are a clue that the Llanos de Moxos wasn't always so lifeless.

"This place is absolutely full of archaeology," said Lombardo. "They say if you put up a roof, you'd have a museum."

People used to think the forest islands were natural, but when Lombardo excavated one in 2006 it turned out to be full of signs of human habitation, and 7,000 years old. Others were over 10,000 years old. He has since mapped thousands of them across these plains, raising the question of how many people once lived in this now desolate landscape.

That is the question we were there to answer, by drilling into the centre of the forest islands and extracting the cylinders of sediment that tell their human history — not unlike the way climate scientists take ice cores from the Arctic to measure historical carbon dioxide levels.

With earth cores from a couple of hundred islands, Lombardo will be able to say how — and why — the population of the Llanos de Moxos changed.

It sounds simple enough. And it usually starts with Lombardo poring over satellite images to choose a cluster of forest islands, then tracking down the owner of the ranch in question to ask permission to visit, perhaps over whisky and cigars.

But everything changes in the field. On the road, the team told stories of the last place they visited: the owner slaughtered a cow and they spent the night charring chunks of beef over an open fire. But as we approached Tamarind Ranch the chatter died down.

The owner was nowhere to be seen, and had forgotten to tell the caretakers about us. They gave us vague directions to the nearest forest islands.



Kate Dudgeon scrapes with a trowel as she looks for shells or ceramics

"The name is the prettiest thing about this place," said Lombardo, as he took in the filthy pond we would be drinking from for the next few days.

After dozens of islands, the team has a routine. They park on the edge and Giovanni Manzella and Lautaro Hilbert draw machetes to hack a path to the centre. Meanwhile, Andrés Mejía Ramón flies a drone overhead to map its topography, and Kate Dudgeon scrapes away with a trowel, looking for shells or ceramics. Lombardo watches on, chain smoking, and sometimes plugging a snake-shaped hole with a rock. Then Giovanni manoeuvres the drill through the bush, to begin the coring.

When we think of Latin America's ancient cultures, we think of the stone temples of the Inca and the Maya. It is often assumed that the Amazon was pristine wilderness before Christopher Columbus made landfall in 1492. But the Llanos de Moxos debunks that notion.

First, people lived on the forest islands. Then complex societies formed that built with what they had: earth, piling it up to make paths that rose above the annual flooding, and digging ditches and reservoirs to channel water. Look carefully at satellite images, and you can still see these earthworks tattooed across the landscape. Beneath the canopy in the rainforest, the same is true. Some estimate that millions once lived throughout the Amazon basin.

We know these people disappeared — but not precisely how. The arrival of Europeans and smallpox is the key event, but the details of the story need fleshing out, said Lombardo. Pre-Columbian archaeology is only now beginning to provide answers.

Three islands later, the light was fading. We were out of boiled pond water and down to the made-in-Bolivia cigarettes. And we'd left the worst to last.

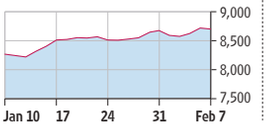
"Some idiot" brought Africanised honeybees to the Amazon not long ago, Lombardo said. And it is these that are the real danger. They don't much like the jolts from the drill, and are quite persistent in the chase. But, if it's dark enough, might just sleep through it. We parked the car a hundred metres from the island and left the headlights on while Giovanni and Lautaro marched off.

"If you hear anything, run to the lights," Lombardo called after them. "And don't stop!"

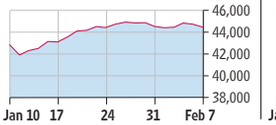
Business

WORLD MARKETS (Friday's close. Change on the week)

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8,700.53 (+26.57) ▲

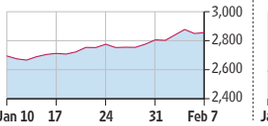


Dow Jones
44,303.40 (-241.26) ▼

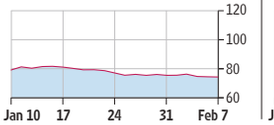


COMMODITIES

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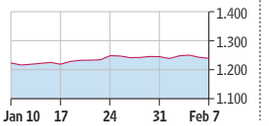


Brent crude
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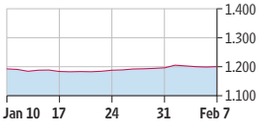


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AstraZeneca to continue paying Russian doctors despite Ukraine war

Alex Ralph Chief Business Correspondent
Tom Saunders Business reporter

The chief executive of Britain's biggest pharmaceuticals company has vowed to continue making payments to Russian doctors and healthcare organisations despite the Ukraine war.

AstraZeneca has spent about £45 million in Russia since the war against Ukraine began, during which time the UK's involvement in the conflict by providing assistance to Kyiv has deepened, recent analysis by The Times of company data issued in Russian showed. A significant part of the money was spent on studies and trials but some also went on consultancy fees, donations, grants and sponsorship, such as hosting scientific events.

Asked about the payments at the company's full-year results last week, Sir Pascal Soriot, the chief executive of AstraZeneca, said: "With Russia we have a big portfolio ... Our mission is to bring new medicines to patients all over the world. That's very simple. And it's sometimes difficult to implement because you have geopolitical tensions, you have issues in countries and we try to stay away from politics and issues and stay focused on our mission.

"In fact medicines are never under sanctions. They're always excluded because they have a responsibility to bring those products to patients ... We need to do clinical trials to launch them in Russia, and therefore we have investments in those trials."

The Cambridge-based business, which is Britain's most valuable public company, made payments of £24.4 million in 2022, when Moscow invaded, and £20.6 million in 2023, the analysis showed. The figures for 2024 are yet to be disclosed. The payments have been criticised by Andrii Onopriienko, who leads the Leave Russia project at the Kyiv School of Economics, which keeps track of foreign companies operating in Russia. He said in December: "It is neither acceptable nor justifiable for UK pharmaceutical multinationals to continue operating in Russia while the UK supports Ukraine."

Western multinationals have pulled out of Russia since the war but Big Pharma deems its activities distinct because companies believe that everyone has the right to access medicines.

Elliott stake piles pressure on BP chief

Activist is expected to force change of strategy

Jessica Newman

One of the world's most aggressive activist investors has amassed a stake in BP in a move that will increase City speculation that the FTSE 100 oil giant will come under pressure to consider a break-up or full sale.

The move by the American hedge fund Elliott Management comes at a crunch time for Murray Auchincloss, BP's boss, who is already grappling with simmering investor frustration over the company's lacklustre stock market performance.

The energy group is due to update shareholders tomorrow, when it is expected to report underlying fourth-quarter profits of $1.26 billion, down from $3 billion a year earlier, and a highly anticipated update on BP's broader strategy is scheduled for February 26.

Elliott wants BP to consider "transformative" measures to boost shareholder value, according to Bloomberg, which was first to report the hedge fund's stake-building.

The size of the Elliott investment is unknown. Even so, the hedge fund, which was founded by the billionaire Paul Singer, has a long record of successfully shaking up the companies it targets, and its decision to train its sights on BP suggests Auchincloss could face calls to pursue a significant change of strategy.

There has already been speculation in the stock market that BP risks falling prey to a takeover, with Abu Dhabi's state oil company Adnoc tipped as a possible buyer last April. Shell has also been mooted as a potential suitor.

Shares in BP, which has a market value of almost £69 billion, have fallen more than 9 per cent since this time last year. Its London-listed rival Shell has risen 6 per cent and the US group Exxon Mobil by 7 per cent, widening the valuation gap for the oil major that had sought to set itself apart by pivoting towards greener forms of energy.

Auchincloss, 54, who was previously BP's finance chief, is now attempting to rebuild investor confidence after the abrupt departure of his predecessor Bernard Looney in September 2023.

He has already taken steps to reverse Looney's strategy of shifting away from oil and gas in an effort to boost profits. Last year the group faced pressure from Bluebell Capital, an activist investor behind campaigns at Glencore and BlackRock, to increase its oil and gas production and stop investing in any more "ill-conceived" wind projects.

In December BP said it would spin out its offshore wind business into a $5.8 billion joint venture with Jera, Japan's largest power utility.

Auchincloss has also set out plans to save at least $2 billion in costs by the end of 2026 and has frozen external hiring, except for frontline roles, well-site leaders and other safety-critical roles.

At the strategy update, he is expected to tell investors that BP is curtailing its green investment targets. He is expected to abandon a goal to reduce oil and gas production by 25 per cent by the end of the decade, a central tenet of the pivot towards greener types of energy that he helped to set up as finance chief.

A formal target to allocate half of BP's capital expenditure to low-carbon projects by the end of the decade could also be dropped.

Elliott and BP declined to comment.

CHARLES MCQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGES



Sales target The rise of Luke Littler, who at 17 became the youngest world darts champion, has won over a new generation of fans for the sport and helped the group behind Flight Club Darts venues to record a 24 per cent increase in sales Page 30

Airlines fear big bill for third runway

Ben Martin Banking Editor

Airlines that fly from Heathrow have called on the aviation regulator to conduct an "urgent and fundamental review" of the airport over fears that they face a jump in costs to finance a multibillion-pound third runway.

In a sign of the obstacles in the way of expanding Britain's biggest airport, the bosses of the British Airways owner, International Airlines Group, and Virgin Atlantic have urged the Civil Aviation Authority to start a sweeping reappraisal to address "spiralling costs".

Writing in The Times, they warn that "Heathrow's regulatory model actively encourages inefficient overspend and leads to the highest charges in the world, leaving passengers paying more for less". Luis Gallego, who runs IAG, and Shai Weiss, of Virgin Atlantic, write: "With runway expansion plans being drawn up, the scale of investment means that passenger charges will rise again. There must be wholesale reform, which is necessary and achievable without delaying spades in the ground."

The plea to the CAA, which also came from Nigel Wicking at Heathrow AOC, which represents the interests of airlines, and Surinder Arora, who operates hotels at Heathrow, comes after Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, backed a third runway last month. Expansion is likely, however, to face significant challenges, including concerns about emissions and noise pollution. Resistance from airlines to footing the bill is another.

Heathrow levies landing charges on airlines, which are capped by the CAA, and the cost of these is passed on to passengers through fares. The airport is widely expected to recoup the cost of a third runway — which in 2014 was estimated at £14 billion but is likely to have risen significantly — by seeking to lift these charges. "If Heathrow is to expand and build a third runway, it cannot continue to gold-plate its construction costs and spend inefficiently," Gallego and Weiss warned.

The CAA and Heathrow did not comment. A source at the airport said it planned to propose a different long-term regulatory model but that "it makes little sense to suggest that passengers will have new runways and terminal buildings for free".

Regulation has failed, page 33

Need to know

1 Businesses shed staff at the quickest pace in over a decade last month while demand for new workers receded to a post-pandemic-low, new figures compiled after Rachel Reeves's tax rises in the autumn budget have revealed. Page 1

2 One of the world's most aggressive activist investors has amassed a stake in BP in a move that will increase City speculation that the FTSE 100 oil group will come under pressure to consider a break-up or full sale. The move by Elliott Management comes as frustrations over BP's lacklustre stock market performance have grown. Page 27

3 Sir Pascal Soriot, chief executive of AstraZeneca, Britain's biggest pharmaceuticals company, has vowed to continue making payments to Russian doctors and healthcare organisations despite the war in Ukraine. Page 27

4 Airlines that fly from Heathrow have called on the aviation regulator to conduct an "urgent and fundamental review" of the airport amid fears they face a jump in costs to finance a third runway. Page 27

5 A bank that worked on the £2.6 billion listing of Canal+ is betting against shares in the TV and film production company only weeks after it made its debut on the London stock market. JPMorgan Chase was an adviser that earned fees for handling the spin-off of Canal+ from the French media conglomerate Vivendi.

6 Elon Musk has quashed rumours that he may buy the Chinese-owned video-sharing app TikTok, which the United States is trying to ban on national security grounds. There had been speculation that the world's richest man could combine the American operations of TikTok with X. Page 30

7 The majority of water companies have yet to back Ofwat's decisions on pricing and spending settlements with little more than a week before a deadline to take the regulator to the Competition and Markets Authority over the plans. Page 35

"'Leaving public finances at the mercy of small changes in economic conditions is not what iron chancellors do'

Simon French, page 31



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Clubcard at 30: the loyalty scheme that transformed retail

Initially a three-month trial, it now has more than 20 million users and Tesco's customer card has been an enduring success, **Isabella Fish** reports

When Edwina Dunn and Clive Humby were approached by Tesco in 1994 to help it to create a loyalty card, the Dunnhumby founders were told not to get their hopes up.

The British supermarket chain was adamant: this was a one-off, short-term trial. "Tesco told us it didn't use consultants," Dunn said. "They just needed someone to analyse their test data for a three-month project."

At the time Tesco was experimenting with a fledgling loyalty card concept in nine shops to see if customers would spend more when incentivised with rewards but was struggling to find someone who could hold the test data and analyse it. "We had invested and developed a tool to do that, an early-stage technology pioneering move," Dunn said. "Fortunately, we'd been talking about it at a conference and someone from Tesco was there. They said, 'OK, we're going to give you the data, see what you can do.' "

What started as a short-term experiment ended up redefining the loyalty landscape. Now, 30 years on this week, the Tesco Clubcard for ever changed the way retailers interacted with their customers. It was the UK's first mass-market loyalty scheme and in just over a year enabled Tesco to overtake Sainsbury's and become the UK's largest retailer. "Nothing at this scale had ever been looked at before," Dunn said. "This was huge."

The partnership between the marketing company Dunnhumby and Tesco ended up lasting far longer than either side anticipated. Grant Harrison, Tesco's Clubcard director at the time, soon realised that the supermarket would need more than a guiding hand once Dunnhumby delivered its results. According to Dunn: "He kept asking questions when we fed back the results from the test and the more questions he asked the more he realised his bosses ... were going to ask even more questions: ones he couldn't answer."

Women's data 'key to growth'

The co-founder of the Tesco Clubcard has urged businesses to prioritise collecting better data on women, arguing that it is essential for driving economic growth.

Edwina Dunn, the co-founder of Dunnhumby, a retail consultancy that helped to create the loyalty scheme in 1995, said: "Women ... are not well understood, not well researched, and the data on women is poor. Yet women make the majority of purchasing decisions for households."

She highlighted how women's evolving roles in society, such as delaying marriage, having children later or becoming household breadwinners, are often overlooked by businesses. "The world has changed dramatically and male leaders have missed it," she said.

Dunn, who now heads *The Female Lead*, a community of nine million women, is working to shine a light on the importance of understanding women's needs. She said: "It's about recognising that women are half the world's population and should not be treated as a minority. Businesses need to understand what women want because they control so much of the purchasing power. Pay attention to what women want and the economy will grow."

Costs and timing also helped to cement Dunnhumby's partnership with Tesco. Tesco estimated that it would take three years and £50 million to introduce a nationwide loyalty card; Dunnhumby quoted £250,000 and ten weeks. The partnership lasted until 2010 when Tesco bought Dunnhumby for a reported £93 million.

Before the Clubcard, loyalty programmes in the UK were largely limited to airline schemes. Tesco's innovation was to bring the concept to the high street, using data to personalise rewards and promotions. Shoppers earned points for every pound spent, which could then be redeemed for discounts, vouchers or exclusive offers.

"The only other loyalty schemes in place at the time were for the airlines where they rewarded the people flying the most," Dunn said. "But that was for the elite and this was for everybody."

Tesco had to prove the naysayers wrong, she said. "Everybody said, 'There is no way that a mass marketeer can ever make a loyalty scheme work because personalisation doesn't work when items have such low margins.' "

Other supermarkets initially dismissed the Clubcard's significance but they soon realised its impact. By giving Tesco detailed insight into customer behaviour, the scheme allowed the retailer to personalise its offering, target promotions more effectively and ultimately strengthen customer loyalty.

Sainsbury's eventually followed suit, launching its Nectar scheme in 2002. By then Tesco was firmly established as the market leader.

"Initially, Sainsbury's spoke out and said, 'Oh, this is just another promotion,' and they didn't realise that Clubcard data was going to be the key that would unlock the value that ultimately led to them being able to create their own brands," said Dunn. "It was probably eight years before other supermarkets realised that the data was far more than a promotional tool."

Clubcard remains central to Tesco's success. More than 20 million shoppers use it regularly and it is used in more than 82 per cent of its sales. The scheme has become synonymous with Tesco, underpinning its reputation as the supermarket that knows its customers best. It has helped it to retain its crown as Britain's largest supermarket, even as the German discounters Aldi and Lidl began to disrupt the market.

Join the club

8m
Number of members in the first year of Tesco Clubcard

23m
Households with a Tesco Clubcard today

289m
Clubcard coupons issued in 2024

82%
Sales at Tesco that use a Clubcard



"Tesco has got a 30-year head start over everyone else," Kien Tan, a senior retail adviser at PwC, said. "It was the pioneer of loyalty and has an unrivalled understanding of its customers."

Ashwin Prasad, Tesco's chief commercial officer, said: "I don't think there is any denying the success and influence of Tesco Clubcard on loyalty schemes in the UK grocery market: it was the first supermarket loyalty card in the UK after all. Where Tesco Clubcard has led ... other retailers have tried to follow."

The scheme has overcome external scrutiny in recent years. Big players such as Tesco and Sainsbury's were

JPMorgan shorts Canal+ shares after helping IPO

Ben Martin

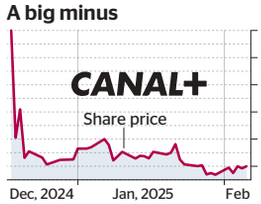
A bank that worked on the £2.9 billion listing of Canal+ is betting against shares in the TV and film production company only weeks after it made its debut on the London stock market.

JPMorgan Chase was an adviser that will have earned fees for helping the spin-off of Canal+ from the French media group Vivendi in December.

Shares in Canal+ immediately slumped, however, following their debut at 290p apiece and fell further to close at 190p at the end of last week. In a further blow, disclosures with the Financial Conduct Authority, the City regulator, show that the asset management arm of JPMorgan has now amassed a short position in its stock.

Shorting is used by investors that are seeking to profit from share prices that they believe will fall. It involves borrowing stock from another investor for a fee and then selling it. The aim is to buy the shares back at a lower price then return the stock to its original owner, pocketing the difference in price.

A big minus



JPMorgan Asset Management is the first investor to have built a short position in Canal+ large enough to require public disclosure to the FCA under City rules, data from the watchdog shows. JPMorgan Asset Management's short in Canal+ was 0.51 per cent at the end of January.

The asset management division of JPMorgan is a separate legal entity from the banking business that worked on the Canal+ spin off and operates independently. Even so it is likely to raise eyebrows in the City that one part of JPMorgan helped to list shares in Canal+ on the London Stock Exchange while the other has since started to bet against the same stock.

Both divisions of JPMorgan declined to comment, as did Canal+.

The poor performance of Canal+ shares since the spin-off has dealt a blow to London at a time when there are already fears about the health of Britain's stock market. There has been a sharp drop in the number of companies seeking to join the London Stock Exchange since the last boom in flotations in 2021. At the same time, a string of big businesses, including the gambling giant Flutter Entertainment and the building materials supplier CRH, have swapped London for New York as their main stock market quotation.

These trends have stoked fears that the London exchange risks becoming a backwater, prompting regulators and the government to loosen the listing rules to try and make the UK a more attractive market for companies seeking to go public. The Canal+ demerger involved handing shares in the company to Vivendi investors and took place on December 16.



accused last year of artificially inflating non-member prices to make their loyalty price appear more attractive.

A review by the Competition and Markets Authority found, however, that almost all products scrutinised — 92 per cent of about 50,000 items on loyalty promotion — offered a genuine saving against the usual price in the same shop.

As retail evolves, so does loyalty. The rise of artificial intelligence is expected to take schemes like Clubcard to the next level, offering even greater levels of personalisation. Dunn said Tesco had "lots of fuel in the tank for the next era of AI and personalisation. I think they will be one of the front runners."

With AI, Tesco could predict shopping trends, create hyper-personalised offers and engage with customers in real time, further cementing their loyalty.

Ken Murphy, the Tesco chief executive, said last summer that the company could harness AI alongside data from its Clubcard loyalty discount scheme to suggest that shoppers make healthier choices and reduce waste. "I can see it nudging you over time, saying: 'I've noticed over time in your shopping basket that your sodium salt content is 250 per cent of your daily recommended allowance. I would recommend you substitute this, this and this,'" Murphy told the Financial Times Future of Retail conference.

Prasad said Tesco was "looking at the opportunities that technology can provide to make Clubcard even more tailored to the customer, both in the near future, and in the years ahead".

The Tesco Clubcard remains a symbol of innovation and a key pillar of the retailer's success. What began as a cautious experiment in nine shops has become one of the most influential retail strategies of the past 30 years, a testament to the vision of Edwina Dunn, Clive Humby and the supermarket that dared to think differently.

Emma Duncan, Notebook, page 18

Profit woes for firms with DB pensions

Patrick Hosking Financial Editor

Profit warnings by UK-listed companies with traditional pension scheme liabilities reached their highest level for four years, according to a new analysis that could have implications for the unlocking of pension surpluses.

The study by the pensions consultants EY-Parthenon identified profit warnings by 81 listed companies still operating defined benefit (DB) schemes last year, which was one in four of all listed DB scheme sponsors.

The surge in profit disappointments was the highest since the pandemic year of 2020 when 249 companies with DB schemes issued warnings. Worst hit were companies operating in the construction, household goods, retailing and industrial support services sectors.

The trend appeared to be worsening, with 28 DB sponsors issuing warnings in the final quarter of the year. The reasons for warnings ranged from rising costs and contract problems to tougher credit conditions. This could create a tension at some schemes, with company sponsors increasingly eager to unlock surpluses to help to find cash for their operations, but scheme trustees are likely to be more cautious because of the red flag raised by a profit warning.

Last month the government proposed a relaxation of rules to make it easier for sponsors of traditional schemes to grab back surpluses that have built up but with safeguards.

Unlike modern-day defined contribution (DC) schemes, members are guaranteed their promised pensions and employers are required to make up any shortfall. Rising bond yields over the past three years have pushed many schemes into surplus. Companies with an urgent need for cash might push hard to access surpluses.

Trustees assess the creditworthiness or so-called covenant of employers in determining whether any surplus could be extracted. Profit warnings can be unimportant if seen as transitory one-offs but can raise more serious concerns if regarded as reflecting a permanent deterioration in a company's prospects.

Companies with DB schemes that warned on profits last year included Diageo, which has a $689 million surplus, Kingfisher, with a £99 million surplus, and Vistry, with a £34.3 million surplus. Most DB schemes are legacy arrangements, with current employees enrolled in cheaper defined contribution plans.

The week ahead

The earnings season for Britain's biggest listed banks gets started in earnest this week, with Barclays reporting annual results for 2024 on Thursday, followed by NatWest on Friday. The numbers from Barclays come a year after CS Venkatakrishnan, its chief executive, unveiled his turnaround plan for the bank and will be scrutinised for signs of progress.

Barclays owns Britain's leading investment bank and it is expected to have been lifted by an increase in trading activity in the final months of last year, as were its American rivals, which enjoyed boosts from such activity. City analysts reckon this will have buoyed Barclays's overall full-year performance, with the lender expected to report a rise in annual pre-tax profit to £8.1 billion, from £6.6 billion a year earlier.

Some analysts believe the bank will announce a provision to cover its past exposure to the motor finance market, where a mis-selling scandal is brewing. Profits at NatWest, which is focused on retail and commercial banking, are forecast to have slipped to £6.1 billion from £6.2 billion in 2023. Its outlook for the UK economy will be closely watched.



CS Venkatakrishnan launched a turnaround plan at Barclays last year

TOMORROW

With the news at the weekend that Elliott, one of the world's biggest activist investors, has built a stake in BP, fourth-quarter figures from the oil group take on a renewed significance. The company is expected to report underlying quarterly profits of $1.26 billion, down from $3 billion in the same period a year earlier.

Biraj Borkhataria of RBC Capital Markets said BP needed to cut the rate of share buybacks but it was unclear whether it would do this alongside results or wait for an investor day later in the month. He added that he anticipated "questions around a potential peace deal in Russia-Ukraine and what this may mean for BP's stake in Rosneft, and whether it is even possible to realise proceeds from an eventual sale".

Interims: Dunelm, MJ Gleeson

WEDNESDAY

The main message from the handful of builders that have already updated the market this year is that trading was resilient towards the end of 2024 and that their order books are bigger than 12 months ago.

Barratt Redrow, Britain's biggest housebuilder, is expected to echo that sentiment when it publishes its half-year results. The London-listed developer said in October that although customer demand was sensitive to the wider economy, would-be buyers were being tempted back by increased mortgage availability and affordability. Investors will want to know whether Barratt still expects to build 17,200 homes — at most — in its current financial year, which runs to the end of June compared with 17,724 a year ago.



The company expects to generate cost savings of at least £90 million from the acquisition of Redrow last summer, although the consensus in the industry is that this figure will be beaten.

Finals: Smurfit WestRock, TBC Bank
Interims: Barratt Redrow
Economy: Opec monthly oil market report

THURSDAY

Unilever, the consumer goods group, is due to update the market with its fourth quarter results. Company-compiled consensus showed that underlying sales growth is expected to have slowed to 4.1 per cent in the final three months of the 2024, compared with 4.5 per cent in the third quarter. Unilever is also expected to report a slowdown in volumes from 3.6 per cent to 3 per cent.

The data and information group, Relx, formerly known as Reed Elsevier, is due to publish its fourth-quarter results. According to Factset, analysts expect sales of £9.6 billion, up by 4.2 per cent from the same three-month period a year ago. Analysts are forecasting an adjusted pre-tax profit of £2.87 billion, up by 5.7 per cent.

In its interim results, published in July, the company pointed to its further shift towards combining its large datasets with novel AI technologies. In December the company completed its £1 billion share buyback programme. Analysts at Investec said of the company's interim results that the completion of the repurchase programme would leave "plenty of headroom for bolt-on acquisitions" to bolster its AI transition.

Interims: Renishaw
Finals: Barclays, British American Tobacco, Coca-Cola HBC, Relx, Unilever
Economy: ONS first quarterly estimate of GDP

FRIDAY

Finals: NatWest, Segro

Chinese new year brings rise in inflation

Consumer inflation in China rose at its fastest pace since August, as an increase in spending before the lunar new year lifted prices in the world's second-largest economy (Emma Taggart writes).

The country's consumer price index rose 0.5 per cent in January compared with a year earlier, an increase from 0.1 per cent in December, according to figures from the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics released yesterday.

The inflation figures received a boost from the lunar new year, China's largest annual holiday, that began in January this year as opposed to February in 2024. Shoppers typically spend more before the national holiday as they buy food and other products in preparation for family celebrations.

Investors around the world are preparing for the economic fallout from a potential trade war between America and China after President Trump imposed new tariffs on Chinese products, prompting Beijing to respond with levies of its own.

Despite the rise in consumer price inflation, China recorded another month of producer price deflation amid weak factory demand. Figures from the statistics bureau showed that product prices declined 2.3 per cent from a year earlier, marking the 28th consecutive month of declines. The fall in the producer price index matched December's 2.3 per cent decrease and was greater than the 2.1 per cent decline forecast by economists.

Economists expect that China will continue to experience further deflationary pressures this year unless Beijing can revive demand in the economy.

Last month official figures revealed that China's manufacturing output had unexpectedly contracted in January. The reports of a sluggish manufacturing sector are expected to add to calls on the government for additional economic stimulus.

China is expected to maintain its 5 per cent forecast for economic growth in 2025 but uncertainty surrounding American tariffs looks likely to put pressure on the country's exports, which have boosted China's economy in recent years.

President Xi has signalled that future economic support will be focused on increasing domestic spending, something that economists have said is necessary for China to retain strong growth over the next few years.



XINHUA/ALAMY

Spending surged before China's biggest holiday, the lunar new year, as people prepared to celebrate

It's just not my style: Musk denies rumours that he is to buy TikTok

Emma Taggart

Elon Musk has quashed rumours that he may buy the Chinese-owned video-sharing app TikTok, which the United States is trying to ban on national security grounds.

There had been speculation that the world's richest man could combine the American operations of TikTok with X, which Musk bought for $44 billion in 2022 when it was called Twitter. In his first public comments on the rumours Musk denied any interest in a deal.

"I have not put in a bid for TikTok," he told a conference organised by a unit of the German media business Axel Springer. "I usually build companies from scratch," he told the event late last month in comments that were only released at the weekend. "I don't have any plans for what I would do if I had TikTok."

There has been uncertainty about the app's future. The platform, which is used by about 170 million Americans monthly, was due to be banned in the US last month but on his first day in office President Trump signed an executive order delaying the ban for 75 days.

The deferral has granted TikTok more time to find a non-Chinese buyer for the app, a requirement in the law signed by President Biden.

Musk, the billionaire behind Tesla electric cars and SpaceX rockets, told the conference that his purchase of X had been "highly unusual".

"I do not acquire companies in general, it's quite rare," Musk, who joined the event remotely, said. Buying Twitter was "important to preserve freedom of speech in America" and he was unsure "if the same logic applies to TikTok".

"I don't acquire things just for economic reasons. It's not clear to me what the purpose of acquiring TikTok would be apart from economics."

TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, was told to sell the American assets of the video-sharing platform by January or face a ban. ByteDance has said that it doesn't have any plans to sell TikTok but a number of American investors have expressed an interest in acquiring it. The attempted ban of TikTok arose because of American politicians' concerns that it was a potential security risk and over fears that data on US users could be shared with China. TikTok has denied that it has or ever would share American user data.

Trump's executive order to delay the ban came only hours after his inauguration, which was attended by Shou Zi Chew, the chief executive of ByteDance. Trump was in favour of banning TikTok during his first term as president but has recently spoken in support of the app. "We won the young vote. I think I won it through TikTok, so I have a warm spot in my heart for TikTok," he said.

Since the law took effect neither Apple nor Google have brought TikTok back to their app stores. Trump is expected to make a decision on the future of TikTok in the US this month and said he was in talks with a number of individuals about the purchase of the app.

The Canadian businessman Kevin O'Leary and Frank McCourt, the former owner of the American baseball team the Los Angeles Dodgers, have expressed interest in buying the app. Jimmy Donaldson, a TikTok and YouTube influencer known as MrBeast, posted online last month that he was interested in acquiringthe video-sharing platform.

TikTok was contacted for comment.



Elon Musk "likes to build from scratch"

Don't panic about a US TikTok ban, Meagan Loyst, page 37

'Non-toxic' social media wins backing

Emma Taggart

A British social media start-up that is trying to fight toxicity online has raised $50 million from investors in a funding round.

Wunder Social, which is behind a platform that is due out in the UK later this year, differs from competitors in that it will verify each of its users to eliminate bots and anonymity.

It said that verification of all accounts on the site would allow people to focus on having more meaningful online interactions and sets it apart from its rivals.

The funding for Wunder, which is led by the investor Rollman Management, comes as concerns are rising about platforms such as Facebook and X.

"Social media doesn't have to feel like the wild west anymore," Jay Boisvert, the chief executive of Wunder, said. "We believe in freedom of speech but it should come with a little accountability: say what you want, but do it as your real self."

The latest $50 million in financing marks the company's third funding round. Wunder has previously raised $2 million in pre-seed and seed funding.

Unlike other social media sites Wunder said its business model was not fully dependent on advertising revenues, which it claims will reduce the monetisation of accounts using the platform. Wunder also plans to share a portion of its advertising revenues with users through "Wunder Tokens", which can be used for charitable donations.

Victor Rollman, who is behind Rollman Management, said: "We saw Wunder as a transformative idea with the power to fix what's broken in the digital world and we could not be prouder as a business to be backing it."

Flight Club and Electric Shuffle hit the bull's eye

Jessica Newman

The growing popularity of experience-led nights out has helped to increase quarterly sales at the group behind Flight Club Darts and Electric Shuffle.

Sales at Red Engine rose 24 per cent to £25.3 million in the three months to the end of December, while like-for-like sales, which exclude the impact of new venue openings, grew 3 per cent.

Flight Clubs combine food and drink with games based on darts, a sport that has surged in popularity since the pandemic and the rise of Luke Littler, the teenage prodigy who this year became the youngest world champion.

Electric Shuffle does something similar with shuffleboard, where players shuffle pucks along a table aiming at a marked scoring area.

The group, which opened its first site in Shoreditch, east London, in 2015, now has a total of 34 venues, 13 of them operated by franchise partners. It said all its company-owned sites achieved record weekly sales in the quarter. Red Engine's sales combined with its franchise partners rose 4 per cent on a like-for-like basis to £38.4 million.

Red Engine opened four venues last year in Liverpool, Oxford, Manchester and New York. Supported by NightOwl Entertainment, its franchise partner in Australia, two new sites also opened in Sydney and Melbourne.

With the boom in competitive socialising showing no signs of slowing down, the company, which was co-founded by Steve Moore, a former City futures trader, is aiming to open another six Flight Clubs and two new Electric Shuffles. In recent weeks Flight Club venues have opened in Dublin, Washington and St Louis.

Ross Shepley-Smith, the chief financial officer, said the results feel "all the more rewarding" given the "significant challenges" that the hospitality sector has faced in the past year. "It brings us immense pride to bring joy to others through social experiences, and we look forward to the opportunity to spread that joy even further in the year ahead as we take our brands to new cities across the globe in 2025," he said.

FirstGroup battling to stay on track

As rail returns to public ownership, Britain's largest operator is making investments, **Robert Lea** writes



ALAMY

FirstGroup has run Great Western Railway, which accounts for a large chunk of its revenue, since the start of privatisation

What happens when Britain's largest train operator gets thrown off the re-nationalised railways?

For FirstGroup, the last of the great publicly listed privatised train and bus groups, it is a case of doubling down on attempting to retain a patchwork of private train operations; getting back on the buses in London and snapping up regional operators; and taking a dip into the new energy market investing in the likes of battery storage technology.

When Sir Moir Lockhead, the founder and architect of FirstGroup, left the company in 2010, it was still a giant of public transport bestriding the Atlantic. Britain's largest train company with bus businesses nationwide, it was a beacon of the benefits of privatisation. In the US it was a leading provider of yellow school bus services, city bus networks and owned the celebrated, if not a little faded, Greyhound coaches.

Lockhead, who started as an apprentice bus mechanic, would go on to head Scottish rugby in the twilight of his boardroom career. But FirstGroup was in trouble by the time he left the company, ejected from the FTSE 100 and buckling under the weight of debt it had taken on to enter the US a year before the 2008 global financial crisis.

Through all this FirstGroup had retained its status as the UK's largest train operator. There was barely a part of the national network left untouched by it during the three-decade experiment of putting the railways back in the hands of private capital.

It would take another decade to unwind its interests in the US, just like its great Scottish privatised rival Stagecoach, which had also tried and failed to crack America. For FirstGroup, though, this came not at its own volition but at the direction of US activist investors who spied an obvious dissection of a weakened beast. Then there was Covid-19 and a new crisis of empty trains and buses back in its homeland.

As the Labour government begins its programme of returning the railways again to public ownership, FirstGroup still runs Great Western Railway, as it has since the inception of privatisation; it operates what should be the country's most lucrative train operation, Avanti, on the west coast mainline linking the cities of Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham with the capital; it had been lined up to operate the high-speed trains, should they ever run, on HS2; it has been running South Western Railway on London's busiest and most congested commuter route.

Losing those Department for Transport contracts will open up a huge hole in FirstGroup's finances as and when the businesses are taken under control of Labour's Great British Railways. Last year they accounted for more than three quarters of FirstGroup revenues and about half its operating profits.

Renationalisation has been met by FirstGroup with a flurry of strategic investments.

Its £1 billion-a-year turnover bus and coach operations have been augmented by a re-entry into London, the biggest bus market in the UK, which the company had abandoned more than a decade ago. Just before Christmas it acquired the red bus operations of the French group RATP.

In addition in the past year alone it has acquired fleets of bus and coach companies in Yorkshire, Cheshire and Shropshire, elsewhere in London with a coach business that also serves Heathrow, and most recently in Ireland, to augment existing operations in Dublin and for its airport.

The creation of FirstGroup Energy is not wholly unconnected, as the group teams up with the likes of Hitachi and the interests of Andy Palmer, a former boss of Aston Martin and at Nissan, to access battery technology for the electrification of the group's bus fleet and another venture to convert diesel buses to electric powertrains.

On the railways First has attempted to mitigate its loss of train operations by extending its so-called open-access services, run independently of the Department for Transport, such as its cut-price London to Edinburgh Lumo company and providing the only direct London-Humberside services with Hull Trains. First has developed or acquired the rights to set up more such open-access services from London to Greater Manchester, Sheffield, central Scotland, west Wales and south Devon.

This all seemed like a smart idea until the intervention of Heidi Alexander, the new secretary of state for transport.

Under the now-discarded franchise model, open-access services were seen as complementary, competitive fill-ins to locations that the network or the timetables had forgotten.

Alexander, however, has given warning that any new open-access applications will be heavily scrutinised to see if they undermine the renationalised railway, an indication that Labour may think FirstGroup's plans are a private company cherry-picking the network.

Graham Sutherland, FirstGroup's chief executive, says that in any event there are other markets to unpick. "We continue to monitor developments in the European rail market where, as the market opens up for competition, there are opportunities for new open-access entrants with similar regulatory models to the UK." He will, however, be more than aware that pursuing continental conquests has in the past proved a graveyard for other British transport companies including Go-Ahead, Stagecoach and National Express.

As Sutherland said: "These moves reduce the group's exposure to potentially fickle government decisions on industry funding and policy, even though we remain hopeful that such decisions ought to be supportive of growing public transport usage, consistent with wider decarbonisation efforts."

Buses 'need £1bn subsidies'

Rachel Reeves has been told that the bus industry needs taxpayer subsidies of more than £1 billion a year if it is to help to fulfil her pledges to grow the economy and decarbonise public transport.

In a submission to the Treasury during its comprehensive spending review, the Confederation of Passenger Transport has calculated that bus operation and local transport authorities need a minimum £750 million of support a year to maintain service levels. If the government wants to expand bus services around the country by 5 per cent, the confederation calculates that it would require a further £205 million a year.

The confederation is also urging the chancellor to go further with calls for £200 million a year to help to unlock private sector investment in zero-emission buses and another £200 million in the road network to provide more bus priority lanes.

"Buses are the UK's most popular form of public transport, carrying 11 million passengers a day. They are vital to the economy, enabling people to earn, learn and spend in local communities," the confederation said in its submission.

The bus industry has long been subsidised for rural services and funding for Transport for London.

Regulation has failed; it's time for a complete rethink on Heathrow

Comment

Nigel Wicking
Surinder Arora
Luis Gallego
Shai Weiss

Heathrow expansion has re-entered the national debate, with aviation recognised for its crucial role in the government's growth agenda. As Britain's only hub airport, Heathrow should offer an exceptional experience for passengers but today it is the most expensive airport in the world, with a service that falls well short.

We believe that Heathrow can achieve much more for Britain. Record-breaking passenger numbers, an airport at near-full capacity and the prospect of a third runway all mask the fundamental problem with Heathrow.

For too long the regulatory model's failure to constrain the monopoly has harmed consumers, led to squandered spending and diminished Heathrow's hub status and competitiveness.

With the prospect of expansion, which would be paid for by passengers, it is now time for the regulator to take action.

This is why we have come together to submit our joint proposal to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) for an urgent and fundamental review of Heathrow.

This collective call is born out of the spiralling costs at the airport, which are being shouldered by customers and airlines alike.

Heathrow's regulatory model actively encourages inefficient overspend and leads to the highest charges in the world, leaving passengers paying more for less.

This incentive to spend inefficiently has resulted in more than £15 billion of capital expenditure in the past two decades, which has led to charges doubling in real terms. This is far more than among its peers.

Heathrow's price increases meant that in 2024 passengers and airlines paid £1.1 billion more than if its charges were in line with other big European airports. In return they get a declining experience and ageing infrastructure.

Heathrow is crucial to the government's growth mission, supporting 133,000 jobs, delivering 76 per cent of Britain's long-haul connectivity and processing 70 per cent of its air cargo by value. For Britain to remain competitive, Heathrow must be an efficient option for those connecting passengers.

With runway expansion plans being drawn up, the scale of investment means that passenger charges will rise again. It is now time for the CAA to investigate what has gone wrong before passengers and airlines get locked into higher charges for decades to come. It is more than 15 years since the last detailed review, undertaken by the Competition Commission. An airport that has been the most expensive of its peers for a decade but has failed to modernise at the same pace is a clear sign of the failure of the regulatory system.

Alternative international hubs have realised the opportunity to stimulate growth in more efficient ways. New terminals at Munich, Frankfurt, Madrid and Barcelona all cost half or less, when adjusting for terminal size, than the upgrades to Heathrow Terminals 2 and 5.

If Heathrow is to expand and build a third runway, it cannot continue to gold-plate its construction costs and spend inefficiently. As UK-based carriers and businesses, we of course support sustainable growth and expansion but only if it is affordable and offers value for money to UK plc. To achieve that there must be wholesale reform, which is necessary and achievable without delaying spades in the ground.

The time to act is now. The regulatory model is not fit for purpose. We are asking the regulator to undertake a fundamental review of Heathrow: the first step towards a reimagined Heathrow that delivers for consumers, the government's growth agenda and the country.

Nigel Wicking is chief executive of Heathrow AOC. Surinder Arora is founder and chairman of Arora Group. Luis Gallego is chief executive of IAG. Shai Weiss is chief executive of Virgin Atlantic

Most water firms have yet to accept Ofwat's price plan

Robert Lea Industrial Editor

The majority of water companies have yet to back Ofwat's decisions on pricing and spending settlements with little more than a week before a deadline to take the regulator to the Competition and Markets Authority over the plans.

In December Ofwat issued its final determination on what the ten regional monopolies and a handful of local suppliers will be allowed to charge households from this spring through to 2030.

Amid the most fractious of the quinquennial regulatory settlements since privatisation 35 years ago, industry analysts were initially forecasting that as many as half the 16 companies could refer the regulator to the competition authority, a mass revolt that could send the sector into chaos.

The water companies had initially demanded an average increase in bills, before inflation, of 44 per cent, over the next five years, much of it frontloaded.

Ofwat originally said that the average increase would be nearer half that. After five months of negotiations, however, the regulator alighted upon an average increase of 36 per cent.

Several companies are known to believe that their settlement will still make it tough to honour legal and environmental obligations and spending commitments to upgrade and maintain existing mains, build new infrastructure and prevent pollution incidents.

To date only the three publicly quoted water companies — Severn Trent in the midlands and its associate Hafren Dyfrdwy, South West Water and its associate Sutton and East Surrey, and United Utilities in the northwest of England — have accepted Ofwat's determination, in addition to Dwr Cymru Welsh Water. Of the regional monopolies that leaves the financially troubled Thames Water and Southern Water, plus Northumbrian, Yorkshire, Anglian and Wessex to declare their hand.

One senior industry figure said many boards and, more specifically, their shareholders, all of which are overseas entities, were in a bind. "They might not believe that Ofwat has got the methodology right, they might not believe they have the right balance of revenues and spending commitments. But that has to be weighed with the optics of saying, 'These large increases in bills are actually not high enough,' " the official said.

Thames, whose future is on a knife edge as the courts ponder a contested £3 billion creditor bailout of the company to prevent it falling into administration, has been granted a 35 per cent increase in bills by Ofwat, although that compares with its initial demand of 53 per cent. Last week a High Court judge criticised Ofwat and the government for failing to engage in court proceedings held to decide on an emergency loan for the indebted utility.

"It would have been nice, I think, if either Ofwat or the secretary of state had felt the need to turn up and explain the position to the court," Mr Justice Leech said. He has yet to make his ruling on the loan.

The water companies have had eight weeks to consider their position and have a deadline of Tuesday, February 18, to decide. If any company does refer Ofwat to the CMA then the whole price-settlement process in effect has to start again. That would take months, distracting management and delaying investment decisions, and perhaps up to a year or more if there is a mass referral by companies. In the last funding settlement five years ago four water suppliers referred Ofwat to the CMA.

SEVERN TRENT



Severn Trent is one of only three utilities to have accepted Ofwat's determination

Lights dim on Kretinsky power deal

Jessica Newman

A government scheme aimed at keeping the UK's lights on faces a potential setback after an energy company controlled by a businessman known as the "Czech Sphinx" cancelled a contract for its gas-fired power plant and battery storage project in Yorkshire.

Two years ago Daniel Kretinsky's EPH obtained contracts to build both a 1,700MW gas-turbine plant and a 299MW battery storage project at the site of the old Eggborough coal power plant in East Yorkshire.

EPH ended one of the contracts last month, however, according to regulatory filings seen by The Telegraph, which will halve the amount of electricity it would guarantee to the grid.

EPH won the contracts through the government's capacity market auction, designed to ensure that Britain has enough reliable power plants to keep the lights on by offering retainer-style payments to their owners.

Kretinsky was cleared by the government to buy Royal Mail's parent company International Distribution Services for £3.6 billion last year. His energy business, EPH, owns more than seventy companies in Europe and in Britain operates under the name EP UK Investments. Its assets include gas-fired power plants and the biomass plant at Lynemouth.

EPH did not respond with comment.



Restrictions apply for certain countries.
[1]Source: MarketVue Business Banking from Savanta, YE Q4 2024. The data is based upon 5,829 interviews with businesses with a turnover of £0-1bn (including start-ups) and are weighted by region and turnover to be representative of businesses in Great Britain.
[2]Voted the UK's Best Trade Finance Bank - Euromoney Trade Finance Survey 2017 - 2024.
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Just tell us where we can trade, entrepreneurs cry

THE TIMES ENTERPRISE NETWORK EXPORTS

Businesspeople want action from ministers to help them compete with Chinese traders, **Richard Tyler** writes

"Just tell us which countries we can trade with," came the frustrated cry from a businessman at a trade conference in London Docklands, organised by UK Export Finance (UKEF), the government's trade finance agency.

"I ask, 'Can I do this' and get, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' Then three months down the road, suddenly it's, 'No, you can't,' " he said from the floor of the conference. He wanted to do business in countries such as Libya, Rwanda and South Sudan. "Tell us. Don't waste our time," he protested.

If you are going to invite entrepreneurs to attend a government conference, do not be surprised if they ignore protocol: sitting quietly, listening to platitudes does not put food on the table. This businessman had deals to do, and time was short.

"The French have been kicked out of several countries in west Africa. This is our opportunity, guys," he said, opening his arms to show quite how big the win could be.

The bankers on the panel did not look as if they wanted to be embraced. So he continued: "There is a massive void there ... billions of dollars for our British companies to approach now but please tell us where we can work and then we can go and get the business."

The suits shifted in their seats. Adam Harris, co-head of UKEF's business group, said its list of approved countries was on its website. This list can change, of course, and not all business activity can be backed, even in countries with the green light. The current list shows that South Sudan and Libya are off limits for UKEF, but it is up for £3 billion of insurance and loan guarantees exposure to Rwanda.

The entrepreneur, whose name I missed, also railed about Britain's lack of ambition in Africa, claiming that China had committed £50 billion, with apparently "free money for five years" for its traders.

"What are we doing? We can't compete with that," he said. "We need to be more aggressive in the market. So please, UKEF, we really need to join together and grab more of that African [business]," he finished, to a warm round of applause.

Yoshi Ichikawa, head of Europe, development and agency finance at Standard Chartered Bank, offered some comfort from the stage. He said that Chinese traders in Africa were just as frustrated with their own export agency and finance providers. "At the micro level, Chinese contractors and exporters all have their own issues," he said. "The issues could be symmetrical." Being told that trading in Africa was just as difficult for the Chinese might not have been what the businessman was after but he sat down.

Earlier the audience heard from Iñigo Elosegui Figueroa, director of Incatuk, a UK company that specialises in delivering water and agricultural projects in emerging markets. His main concern was not financing and winning work, but getting paid. "It is an issue," he said.

Harris from UKEF said it could provide insurance. Its country managers could also put in calls and even enlist the high commissioner and ambassador as muscle if needed.

"Our country heads are embedded in our overseas high commissions and they can bring the ambassador and high commissioner with them," he said, painting a picture of well-dressed debt collectors knocking on doors and enunciating their demands in the King's English.

Ichikawa said having banks on your side could also help, as they do not want any bad debts either. "There are multiple ways to assist and add pressure," he said.

The reality of exporting was summed up on stage by Tim Reid, chief executive of UKEF, who said: "Trade is not easy."

A regular survey by the Department for Business and Trade of 10,000 businesses that was released last week proved his point. As of the end of January, 21 per cent of businesses with ten or more employees said they had exported goods, services or both in the past 12 months. Of these businesses, 18 per cent reported that they exported more in December compared with the same month the year before but 24 per cent exported less.

Between 2021, when the Brexit trading rules were introduced by the last government, and 2022 roughly 16,400 businesses (about 14 per cent) stopped exporting goods to the EU, according to a report by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics in December. It found that small firms were disproportionately affected.

Gareth Thomas, the minister for small businesses and exports, said firms had to make their own



It's a case of get up and go

T ANNUAL GUIDES



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As the government encourages more entrepreneurs to begin exporting, Olivia Jenkins, co-founder and chief executive of jewellery firm D.Louise, took her first business flight to New York to run a pop up store for its US customers at the weekend. The 28 year-old's business, which is named after her mother Deborah Louise who died of cancer in 2017, achieved sales of £4.3 million in 2023, more than three times the amount the year before.

calculations as to whether exporting made financial sense, especially given uncertainty over tariffs.

"I would still encourage people to look for opportunities to trade regardless of the debate that is taking place about tariffs, just because the opportunities are considerable and businesses that do trade are more resilient," he said. "Sometimes the news can obscure the opportunities that exist."

Labour is pursuing a reset in relations with the EU, seeking reforms including fewer checks on food and easing rules restricting professionals crossing borders. Sir Keir Starmer has also said that Britain planned to keep its head down in any trade war between America and the EU in an attempt to avoid conflict with either side. He said: "If you look at our vital interests, it's really important that we work with both and that we don't see it as either/or."

Thomas expanded further: "I don't think we should play one off against the other. We want to try and get a better trading relationship with Europe, but the US is a big market for British business so it would be a mistake for Britain to say we are only going to reset with Europe or only trade with the US. We should do both."

Jo Allen, chief financial officer at DEA Aviation, an aerial surveillance technology firm based in Retford, Nottinghamshire, welcomed the government's encouraging words about making trade easier and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. She also wanted to see action. As well as cutting unnecessary red tape, procurement practices in the UK need revisiting if small and mid-sized companies are to contribute, she said.

Thomas acknowledged the issue: "Government is looking at procurement and helping small businesses take advantage of those opportunities is something we are keen to see more of," he said.

Back on stage, Vivek Ramachandran, head of global trade solutions at HSBC, came out batting for globalisation. He said that despite claims that it was going into reverse, the evidence suggests otherwise: "The average delivery of trade travels a little over 5,000 kilometers, which has gone up over the last five years."

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Don't panic about a US TikTok ban, try newsletters

Meagan Loyst



With TikTok's future in the US still uncertain, brands that spent time building a presence on the app find themselves in a tricky position — what do you do when a core part of your marketing could disappear?

Perhaps it's time to go back to the classroom. When it comes to reaching customers, the industry bibles break down your efforts to three distinct areas.

There is "paid media", which is as it sounds — you pay to reach an audience, via messages such as the targeted adverts carried in this newspaper. Then there is "earned media", where someone else markets your company brand and/or message for you. This might be an endorsement on a TV show, user-generated content on social media or coverage in the press. Finally, there is "owned media", which are the marketing channels that you own, such as websites, newsletters and, to a more limited extent, social media profiles.

While one of President Trump's first acts was to give TikTok a 75-day reprieve from the Supreme Court ruling that it had to sell its US operations or close them down, the likely ban raises lots of questions about that third marketing channel, owned media. If someone else has the power to turn that channel off entirely, preventing you from attracting new customers and retaining your existing ones, you clearly don't own that channel.

> "Going viral doesn't mean you've built a genuinely engaged audience for your brand

Instead, brands should think about social media as "rented" space. The plan has to be to take advantage of the discovery and visibility you'd achieve through creating content on a platform like TikTok, and then convert that audience into a channel you do really own so you can build that relationship over time. When you have access to the customer data, you truly own the channel and that's the key difference.

Let's look at an app like the language tutor Duolingo. Duolingo has invested significant time building its presence on social media. It is known primarily for its work on TikTok, where it has a whopping 14.3 million followers. Their goal is to encourage people to move from their social media and into the Duolingo app where they can analyse the customer data, re-engaging them in a place where they determine the user experience.

That observation is not to discount marketing on social media altogether — they will still play a vital role in helping brands to get in front of new customers. Nadya Okamoto, the co-founder of period care brand August, has more than four million followers and over 431 million likes on TikTok on the content she posts promoting her start-up. She explained: "When we have a video go viral, it doesn't necessarily, and very rarely, means translation to sales. But we will often see that virality lead to web traffic and thus email/SMS [text] sign ups, which is also very valuable."

Given the low cost of using social media as a marketing tool it remains a great way to start getting your message out for most businesses. But a lesson from what is happening to TikTok is that you shouldn't rely on any one single social platform. Another is to give equal weight to creating a marketing channel that you really do own, such as a newsletter.

Beehiiv has become a much-loved newsletter platform for startups and founders. Francis Zierer, who edits one of beehiiv's blogs, tells me that having a smaller audience via a newsletter can be even more impactful than a larger one on social media. "It's much simpler to convert a reader to a customer, for example, with a newsletter than with a TikTok video," he said. "The intent is there: they signed up for your newsletter. If you've set up surveys and routinely use polls to collect first-party data, you know more about your audience and can segment your audience according to that data to better drive conversion."

It is clearly true that the people who follow your brand on your social media channels are not all equally engaged. Olivia Moore, a partner at venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, has suggested founders split out "TikTok cohort" data from their overall social engagement figures when talking to investors for this reason. With a newsletter, you're building a higher quality audience.

A newsletter should look different from email marketing, and more similar to sharing targeted insights within your niche as you would do as a company founder or business leader on social media. The founder of beehiiv, Tyler Denk, follows this strategy with his Big Desk Energy newsletter. He started it last year and now has over 70,000 subscribers, which he has grown through a mix of word-of-mouth and promotion on his social media, paid advertising, and beehiiv's own tools.

The bottom line is that if you are reassessing your marketing plans on social media this year, don't stop simply because of what is happening to TikTok in the US. Just reconsider why you are doing what you are doing. And perhaps shift some of your time and energy towards "owned media" like a newsletter.

Meagan Loyst is the founder of Gen Z VCs, a community of Gen Z founders and investors with 30,000 members from 80 countries



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Obituaries

General Sir John Waters

Cerebral officer tasked with demanding roles during the Falklands conflict and as director of operations in Northern Ireland

Despite having been deputy supreme commander of all Nato forces in Europe (DSACEUR) — the position once held by Field Marshal Montgomery — John Waters was never a household name. In 2022, however, during the Channel 4 documentary *The Falklands War: The Untold Story*, he broke a lifetime's habit of low profile with a devastating attack on Brigadier Sir Tony Wilson, the commander of the 5th Infantry Brigade, who had died in 2019 (obituary June 8, 2022). Some thought it in poor taste; others welcomed his forthrightness. Waters seemed to regret it afterwards, but General Sir Michael Rose, who commanded 22 SAS in the Falklands, said in the documentary that the operation to retake the islands was "a command and control muddle from the start".

Within days of the Argentinian invasion in 1982, Brigadier Julian Thompson's 3rd Commando Brigade (Royal Marines), reinforced by two battalions of the Parachute Regiment detached from Wilson's brigade, sailed for the South Atlantic. However, Major-General Jeremy Moore RM (obituary September 17, 2007), the land force commander, remained at Fleet Headquarters in Northwood (northwest London), the controlling HQ for Operation Corporate, with the planning team of the task force commander-in-chief, Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse. Waters, who had recently relinquished command of the 3rd Infantry Brigade in Northern Ireland and was enjoying a year-long course at the Royal College of Defence Studies in London, was told to join Moore in Northwood as his deputy. Moore protested that he did not need a deputy. It was not a good start, and things would not get much better.

Meanwhile, a follow-up force was being cobbled together from what remained of 5th Brigade reinforced by two Guards battalions (Scots and Welsh). The intention was that 3rd Commando Brigade would do the fighting and 5th Brigade the consolidating. However, when the Ministry of Defence recognised, somewhat belatedly, that 5th Brigade might end up fighting too, training in Wales was hastily arranged, which Waters went to observe. What he saw alarmed him.

Wilson himself evidently performed so badly that Lieutenant-General Sir Dick Trant, responsible for the army's rapid-reaction forces for operations outside the Nato area, recommended his removal from command. However, the chief of the general staff, Sir Edwin Bramall (obituary November 12, 2019), decided that to remove him would be a blow to the brigade's morale. In the Channel 4 documentary, Bramall was quoted as saying it was the worst decision he had made in over 40 years as a soldier. What it did not reveal was that Bramall gave Waters authority in writing to remove Wilson from command once in the Falklands if he judged it necessary, and to take command himself.

On reaching Ascension Island, the staging post for the task force, Wilson was joined on the requisitioned Cunard liner QE2 by Moore and Waters. Meanwhile, Thompson and his brigade had managed to land unopposed at San Carlos Bay on East Falkland, the bulk of the Argentinian forces being some 50 miles on the other side of the island at the capital, Port Stanley. By the time Moore arrived at San Carlos with Wilson, Thompson's men were fast advancing east. The SAS had already occupied the heights overlooking Stanley and the next day Thompson flew 42 Commando and a battery of artillery forward by helicopter to take Mount Kent, key ground.

MUSEUM OF THE SOLDIERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE



Waters, left, with The Gloucestershire Regiment, with whom his father had served, in 1991 and, below, talking to a cadet

During the passage from Ascension to the Falklands, however, when the QE2 had only intermittent communications with Thompson and Fieldhouse's HQ, Wilson and Moore had discussed a second axis of advance in the south of the island, to which Waters objected because it breached the principle of concentration of effort. Besides, there was neither the logistic capacity to support two brigades in action simultaneously, nor the capacity in Moore's headquarters effectively to command it. Moore was determined to go ahead.

He did much to maintain Nato's fragile unity after the end of the Cold War

When "The Great Leap Forward", as the southern axis became known, began to unravel — including the loss of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Sir Galahad by air attack, with many Welsh Guards casualties — Wilson appeared to be suffering a crisis of confidence. Waters chose not to remove him, knowing that sacking him would provoke an unwinnable row with Moore. It was evidently to his lasting regret, and perhaps steeled him in later appointments to take a tough line with failing subordinates. (Some, indeed, have thought him overbearing.) When asked what had been the cause of the near-stalling of the land campaign, the bottled-up frustration exploded: "That bloody idiot Wilson".

Charles John Waters was born in Burma in 1935, the only child of a director of Steel Brothers, one of the great entrepreneurial enterprises operating in the then British colony, and of his doctor wife. When the Japanese invaded in January 1942, Waters and his mother escaped to India via ship from Rangoon, and then to England. His father, a reservist officer in The Burma Rifles, reported to 1st Battalion The Gloucestershire Regiment (known as the Glosters) outside the capital with 15 of the company's lorries, and served with them throughout the fighting withdrawal to the Indian border.

After Oundle School and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, in 1954 Waters was commissioned into the Glosters, who at that time were basking in the glory of their legendary stand three years earlier at the Imjin River during the Korean War. His own operational apprenticeship would be in Cyprus during the EOKA terrorist campaign, Kenya, the Aden emergency, and in Northern Ireland.

In the mid-1970s the Glosters had been mechanised infantry in the British Army of the Rhine, and Waters would return to BAOR on promotion to full colonel as chief of staff of 1st Armoured Division. He returned a second time, in 1983, on promotion to major general to command the 4th Armoured Division.

Here he caught the eye of the most formative influence on the British Army of the 1980s, the commander of 1st (British) Corps, Lieutenant-General (later Field Marshal) Sir Nigel Bagnall. Two years later Waters was appointed commandant of the staff college at Camberley, Surrey, the training (and weeding) ground of the army's future leaders. It was no surprise either that in 1988 towards the end of Bagnall's tenure as chief of the general staff he sent Waters to Northern Ireland to be GOC (General Officer Commanding) and director of operations.

In an episode of *Yes, Minister*, when Jim Hacker, the minister for administrative affairs, is unwittingly pursuing a perilously independent line, the chief whip threatens him with the post of Northern Ireland minister. The province was indeed the termination of many an ambition, even of soldiers, and Bagnall risked more work for the sexton by telling Waters to "wake the place up". He himself had never served in the province, having cut his teeth in Palestine in the chaotic aftermath of the Second World War, in Malaya during the communist insurgency, where he won two Military Crosses, and in Cyprus during the EOKA emergency. It seemed to him that both sides in Ulster had decided they could not win, militarily or politically, and had settled for the status quo, as had London — the "acceptable level of violence".



The chief constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Sir John Hermon, was keen to maintain the RUC's recently regained primacy in the border areas. While Bagnall saw the situation as insurgency, Hermon saw it as one of law and order, the RUC being the primary law enforcement agency. On the ground, sensible army commanders and RUC officers usually managed to work with the ambiguity, but at the highest level there was less room for manoeuvre, and Waters, at heart a shy man and lacking the conviviality of others (his inevitable nickname, "Muddy", was not always used with fondness), found it a struggle. "Sadly, John Waters and I could never form a working relationship such as I had had with his three predecessors," wrote Hermon in his memoir *Holding the Line* (1997).

It was not helped when soon after Waters's arrival as GOC, a roadside bomb killed eight soldiers of The Light Infantry returning from leave, infuriating the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, who summoned Waters and Hermon to Downing Street. Bagnall, in his last weeks in office, asserted his right to be present. After hearing them out, she made it plain that heads would roll if the reinvigoration of the campaign against the IRA was not fully supported. Yet, when Waters left Northern Ireland two years later, he felt he had barely begun on the task he had been given.

Promotion to "four star" as commander of United Kingdom Land Forces, with headquarters at Wilton in Wiltshire, was his reward. Then finally, in 1993, Waters became number two to US General Shalikashvili at Mons in Belgium. In the Cold War, DSACEUR had been a somewhat leisured appointment, but with its end and the consequent fracture of the Balkans, the alliance looked at times as if it would tear itself apart. Waters's exertions did much to maintain its fragile unity.

After retirement in 1995 he devoted himself to public appointments, charity work, sailing his cruising catamaran and oil painting. In 1962 he had married Hilary Nettleton, whom he met while adjutant of the Wessex Brigade depot in Devon. Lady Waters survives him along with their three sons: Patrick, a chartered surveyor; and Harry and George, who followed their father into the army before going into business.

A cerebral officer whose somewhat schoolmasterly appearance belied his soldierly instincts, Waters had a line-infantry safe pair of hands to handle more than the usual share of fast balls and baneful chalices.

General Sir John Waters GCB, CBE, Nato Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe, was born on September 2, 1935. He died on January 29, 2025, aged 89

Register

Tony Roberts

Actor who played Woody Allen's nonchalant wingman in several of the director's classic comedies, including Annie Hall

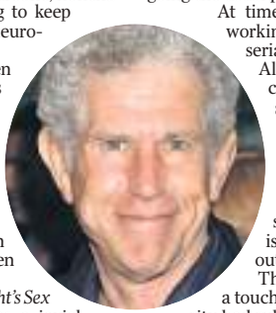
Ruggedly handsome, broad-shouldered and suavely self-assured, Tony Roberts was perhaps everything Woody Allen would have liked to be.

Allen cast Roberts as his tall, confident wingman in no fewer than six of his films, including *Annie Hall* (1977) in which he portrayed Rob, a Hollywood actor and best friend and tennis partner of Allen's Alvy Singer.

In one memorable scene Allen's character ranted about finding antisemites everywhere. "You know, I was having lunch with some guys from NBC and I said, 'Did you eat yet?' and [they] said, 'No, Jew?' Not, 'Did you?,' but 'Jew eat? Jew?' Not 'Did you?,' but 'Jew eat?' "

To which Roberts's character laconically replied, "You see conspiracies in everything."

The exchange seemed to sum up their relationship — the insecure Allen and his good-looking, urbane, nonchalant companion trying to keep his tortured friend's neuroses in check.



Best friends off-screen as well as on it, Roberts played similar types in other Allen films. In *Stardust Memories* (1980), he was a brash, street-smart actor who brought a Playboy model to a film festival while Allen played an angst-ridden move director.

In *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), he was a jovial womanising bachelor who declares that "Marriage, for me, is the death of hope" and in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), he was the effortlessly cool sperm donor who gives Mia Farrow and her infertile husband twin boys. It was not lost on critics that Farrow and Allen, her partner at the time, had attempted to conceive a child together before adopting.

Christopher Isherwood noted that Allen created Roberts's characters as a foil to "epitomise suave charm in contrast to his own hapless shrubbery". Roberts himself was less certain about why they worked so well together. "I don't know what chemistry we lucked upon," he said. "Woody said people like our schmoozing." If it was a case of opposites attract and Roberts fulfilled the role of a fantasy alter ego for Allen, then Roberts admitted that in turn there were times when he wished he were Allen.

"I would like to have his gift and his genius and his brain. He's as knowledgeable on most subjects as anyone I know whether you're talking music or painting or history or politics. That's a pleasure to be around. But I wouldn't want his deeper neuroses," he said of the friend he called "Max" after Allen had asked him not to use his real name in public.

His loyalty to Allen was evident in 2015 when he wrote *Do You Know Me?*, his autobiography. Several publishers told him they would publish the memoir if it included details about Allen's personal life. Roberts refused and had the book published independently, forgoing the usual publisher's advance.

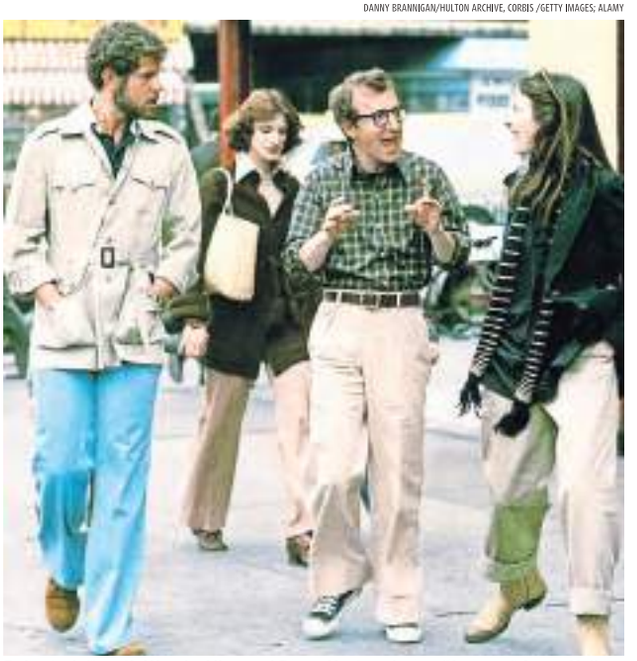
At times when he was not working, he feared that his serial collaborations with Allen might have typecast him. "I was always so vividly the guy Woody wrote that everybody in the business would think of me that way," he said in 1997. "The persona I was for Woody is a hard thing to break out of."

The comment suggested a touch of his friend's insecurity had rubbed off, for in reality, away from the films he made with Allen, he was a prolific actor on stage and screen. Asked if he ever took a vacation, he replied, "No, I crack under leisure."

His memoir began with a stranger interrupting him one afternoon when he was sitting on a bench in Central Park before saying, "I've seen you in something, but I can't place it. What have I seen you in?"

If it was not one of the six films he made with Allen, it might have been in a range of other hit movies from Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973), in which he played alongside Al Pacino, to his lead role in *Amityville 3-D* as the tabloid journalist who buys the infamous haunted house — or in one of the two dozen plays in which he starred on Broadway.

DANNY BRANNIGAN/HULTON ARCHIVE, CORBIS /GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY



Roberts, left, with Woody Allen and Diane Keaton during filming of Annie Hall



Indeed, it was on the New York stage that Roberts first encountered Allen in 1966 when he auditioned for his play *Don't Drink the Water*. It ran for nearly 600 performances over a year and a half, although Roberts claimed that in all that time they hardly exchanged "more than two sentences".

They grew closer when Roberts appeared on Broadway again in *Play It Again, Sam*, written by and starring Allen. Roberts received a best actor Tony nomination for his performance and he and Allen reprised their roles in Herbert Ross's 1972 movie version.

David Anthony Roberts was born in Manhattan in 1939, the son of Norma (née Finkelstein), an animator, and Ken Roberts, a radio announcer. His father claimed he knew his son was destined to be an actor when aged four he was transfixed by hearing Laurence Olivier in Shakespeare's *Henry V* on the radio.

To show his son how a radio station operated, he started taking him to work with him. "We would sit in a room and I would watch grown-ups in suits and ties pretend to be cops, robbers, astronauts, politicians," recalled Roberts.

He got his big break when Robert Redford's stand-in broke an ankle

"They would act in front of a little piece of metal on a stand, but their bodies and their expressions were so invested in their story. It was like watching grown-ups behave like children. That is what did it for me."

He went on to major in speech and theatre at Manhattan's High School of Music & Art and at Northwestern University. He later married Jennifer Lyons, a former dancer, but the marriage ended in 1975; he is survived by their daughter, Nicole Burley.

After graduating he returned to New York and his breakthrough came fortuitously in the first Broadway run of Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* as the backup to the understudy to Robert Redford.

When Redford took a two-week vacation, the understudy promptly broke his ankle playing softball. "His break was my big break," Roberts said. It was while filling in for Redford that Allen saw him and recruited him to appear in *Don't Drink the Water*.

"We were friends and had identifiable repartee," he said of their long collaboration. "The intimacy you saw was real." There was also some gentle teasing. While making *Annie Hall*, Roberts returned to his dressing-room trailer to find he had been robbed. The first thing Allen wanted to know was had Roberts's copy of the script been stolen.

"About a week later, they found it in a garbage pail a mile away," he recalled. "It was my pleasure to make him aware that the thieves thought the script was garbage."

Tony Roberts, actor, was born on October 22, 1939. He died of lung cancer on February 7, 2025, aged 85.

Alan Shoulder

Diminutive striker who became the last miner to play for the coal city of Newcastle, scoring 38 goals in 117 appearances

"I thought the chance had passed me by and when it came I grabbed it." In 1978 Alan Shoulder was in his mid-twenties, working night shifts as a miner in Co Durham, and turning out in daylight as a striker for the non-league club Blyth Spartans.

He had joined Blyth for a fee of £150 and promptly scored the winner in an FA Cup third-round tie. He then continued to star as Blyth went on one of the most remarkable runs in FA Cup giant-killing history. In the fourth round they won 3-2 at Stoke City, then of the second tier, with a header from Shoulder creating the second goal.

In the fifth round at Wrexham Blyth looked destined for the quarter-finals, leading with minutes to go, when a controversially retaken corner allowed an equaliser. In the replay, switched to Newcastle United's home at St James' Park, Shoulder and his team-mates were astonished to find 42,000 fans there, with thousands more locked out. More controversial refereeing decisions meant Blyth lost 2-1, but Shoulder's ability was noted by Newcastle's powers that be. In December 1978 he arrived late for his night shift after being bought by the Tyneside club for £20,000.

In an interview for The Times with Martin Hardy, Shoulder remembered telling the manager of Horden colliery: "I've signed for Newcastle and I'm playing on Saturday." His manager replied: "I'll decide that son. You're a deputy at this colliery and you must give me three months' notice to leave, but it's your lucky day — I'm a season ticket-holder at Newcastle." Shoulder also felt lucky to receive an increase in wages from a reported £14 a week to £300 including bonuses. Never the most flamboyant of characters, he responded by buying a Ford Capri and a tumble dryer.



He was pitched straight into the Newcastle team. A diminutive figure, only 5ft 5in, Shoulder assured his new manager Bill McGarry that he would be robust enough as "I couldn't get kicked any harder than I did in the Northern League". Shoulder's low centre of gravity, mazy runs and predatory movement soon yielded rewards as he scored 38 goals for Newcastle in 117 appearances. Many were poached from inside the six-yard box but there were also thunderous shots from distance and one superb lob from the edge of the penalty area.

He formed a famous "little and large" striking combination with Peter Withe, who would go on to score the winning goal in the European Cup final for Aston Villa. One Times report called Shoulder a "tiny and immensely talented bundle of energy". He was also a reliable penalty taker, scoring in a derby against Sunderland wearing trainers due to a frozen pitch.

In 1982 Shoulder moved to Carlisle United, scoring twice on his debut, and in 1983 succeeded with another memorable penalty in a win over Newcastle. He also played for Hartlepool United until an eye injury ended his professional career in 1988.

Shoulder always remained close to his home region. He was born in 1953 in Bishop Auckland and became a miner in his teens, facing all the daily hazards of that life. "You get into a cage that is going to drop 1,000 feet in about 50 seconds. If that bloke gets it wrong, you know you're dead." On one occasion he suffered a severe neck injury when he collided with tin sheeting underground while riding a pit pony.

The toughness of northern amateur football held few fears after that, and Shoulder overcame any doubts about his size as he appeared for several local teams. After retiring as a professional he continued to play with enthusiasm and intensity, once being sent off aged 47 for arguing with a referee. He made his last appearance for Brandon United at 53. He was also involved in management at teams including Gretna, Willington and (briefly) Blyth.

Shoulder then lived in a former mining village near his birthplace and became a poultry farmer. He was married to Marie, a teacher, and they had three daughters.

A popular notion from the famous northeast "hotbed of soccer" had it that teams could simply whistle at the top of a pit shaft and a striker would emerge. Shoulder, the last miner to play for the coal city of Newcastle, was perhaps closest to fulfilling that fairytale.

His sudden cup fame with Blyth and career with Newcastle was, he mused "a bit like *Roy of the Rovers*" but he "didn't let it go to my head". In the end he was happy to be a low-key but undoubted "local hero".

Alan Shoulder, footballer and miner, was born on February 4, 1953. He died after a long illness on February 2, 2025, aged 71

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Sport

Outclassed England are loss machine

DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Buttler felt England were 30 runs short as India made it six wins in seven to wrap up the ODI series with a game to spare

India v England

Fourth ODI, Cuttack (England won toss): India won by six wickets

Elgan Alderman Cuttack

The gentleman destroyer did it easy. England do not have anyone of the stature of Rohit Sharma. They were outclassed, a sixth loss in seven on tour, and a fourth successive ODI series defeat since the 2023 World Cup.

England's white-ball scheme has a few more troubles. Jacob Bethell is out of the Champions Trophy because of a hamstring problem, and with Jamie Smith's calf complaint keeping him off the field, England have called up Tom Banton for the final ODI in India and probably for the tournament. It would be his first international since 2022.

Rotation and injuries weakened England's bowling and left them a batsman light. Gus Atkinson and Mark Wood replaced Jofra Archer and Brydon Carse, retaining the four-seamer approach without Rehan Ahmed, and Jamie Overton took Bethell's place. In T20s England want Overton at No 7, which is too high in ODIs unless the top six are ironclad dreamboats. There was nothing here to disabuse, though he took two wickets. He was one of three victims for Ravindra Jadeja, sterling again.

On a day when a malfunctioning floodlight stopped play for more than half an hour early in India's chase, the coaches Paul Collingwood and Marcus Trescothick were worst-case substitute fielders because of the injuries. Collingwood played an ODI at this ground in 2008, in which Rohit hit the winning runs from No 6 in a successful chase, consigning England to a whitewash.

That was young Rohit. This is a 37-year-old captain who recently dropped himself from the Test XI. He and Virat Kohli, returning from a knee problem, were desperately out of form, and here he put his fellow megastar in the shade. ODIs hit differently. This was Rohit's 32nd century in the format — twice as many as Joe Root, England's best.

"He really showed in this day and age the modern way of playing 50-over cricket is very dynamic, very aggressive," Jos Buttler, the England captain, said. "He scored at a rate that just confirms the way we want to play is the right way that you have to play to try to win games of cricket."

England could have done better than 304. When Buttler was out, primed to finish the innings, it began a sequence of 85 for seven in the final 11.2 overs. Again — just — England were bowled out short of their allocation.

Ben Duckett and Phil Salt made another great start, marking up a fifty partnership, their third in a row, in the seventh over. The next stage is to reach three figures. Duckett was the senior, albeit streaky, partner, edging three times in the first three overs. He jabbed and cut well. They were content to take singles off Varun Chakravarthy, on format debut at 33, until Salt went large and skied straight up. He had already been dropped on six by Axar Patel — a stinker on the off-side boundary.

"We again started really well," Buttler said. "We just needed one or two of us to kick on and play a real innings of note and push our score up to 330-350 territory."

From 75 without loss after ten overs, the pace slowed as Root and Harry Brook ticked along at four an over. Brook survived a close leg-before appeal, and Axar would have had Root on 16, only the umpire didn't give it and India didn't review.

Brook got moving against seam until he marched at a slower ball and skied it down the ground, where Shubman Gill ran round from mid-off to take a fine catch. It brought Buttler to the crease in the 30th over. As the death neared, Root brought up his fifty off 60 balls but Buttler departed before the final ten, drilling the ball low to mid-off.

Root held the pose as he chipped to long-off, knowing instantly that he had provided catching practice. Liam Livingstone threatened without fully exploding into life, and Adil Rashid helped out. England had added 104 in the final 15 overs, and 74 in the final ten.

In Rohit and Gill, India have openers with outstanding records and double hundreds. They go long and fast. England are fleeting by comparison. Rohit combined his usual modicum of effort and maximum of power with three early sixes: two drives through off, one with the manual pose held, and a flick off the legs. On 36, he survived a leg-before appeal against Mark Wood, umpire's call on height.

Buttler turned to Rashid in the powerplay and Rohit swept his first ball behind square for four. Gill exquisitely threaded the leg spinner through the covers and raised his bat for a 45-ball fifty. Overton yorked him to end the partnership, yet the packed crowd celebrated. In walked Kohli. An on drive was all class, but Rashid dismissed him on review, a thin snick behind to a flighted, 45mph, big-turning leggie.

Rohit reached his hundred off 76 balls with a six down the ground off Rashid. He teed off, all but giving his wicket away via a well-held catch, before a small Indian collapse reduced the margin of victory.

India is a hard place to win — England haven't taken an ODI series here since 1985 — and this is Brendon McCullum's first campaign as white-ball head coach. Under his watch, the Test side have been revolutionised. This has shown the task in one-day cricket. Watchable, yes, but from behind the settee, like a 1960s Dalek. For now, they remain a losing machine.



Sharma brought up a 76-ball hundred with a six

Most ODI centuries



Scoreboard

ENGLAND	R	B	4/6
†P D Salt c Jadeja b Vinod	26	29	2/1
B M Duckett c Pandya b Jadeja	65	56	10/0
J E Root c Kohli b Jadeja	69	72	6/0
H C Brook c Gill b Rana	31	52	3/1
*J C Buttler c Gill b Pandya	34	35	2/0
L S Livingstone run out	41	32	2/2
J Overton c Gill b Jadeja	6	10	0/0
A A P Atkinson c Kohli b Shami	3	7	0/0
A U Rashid run out	14	5	3/0
M A Wood run out	0	1	0/0
S Mahmood not out	0	1	0/0
Extras (lb 2, w 12, nb 1)	15		
TOTAL (49.5 overs)	304		

Fall of wickets 1-81, 2-102, 3-168, 4-219, 5-248, 6-258, 7-272, 8-297, 9-304.
Bowling Shami 7.5-0-66-1; Rana 9-0-62-1; Pandya 7-0-53-1; Vinod 10-0-54-1; Jadeja 10-1-35-3; Patel 6-0-32-0.

INDIA	R	B	4/6
*R G Sharma c Rashid b Livingstone	119	90	12/7
S Gill b Overton	60	52	9/1
V Kohli c Salt b Rashid	5	8	1/0
S S Iyer run out	44	47	3/1
A R Patel not out	41	43	4/0
K L Rahul c Salt b Overton	10	14	1/0
H H Pandya c Overton b Atkinson	10	6	2/0
R A Jadeja not out	11	7	2/0
Extras (lb 1, w 7)	8		
TOTAL (6 wkts, 44.3 overs)	308		

M Shami, H P Rana and V C Vinod did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-136, 2-150, 3-220, 4-258, 5-275, 6-286.
Bowling Mahmood 6-0-36-0; Atkinson 7-0-65-1; Wood 8-0-57-0; Rashid 10-0-78-1; Overton 5-0-27-2; Livingstone 7-0-29-1; Root 1.3-0-15-0.

Umpires C Brown (New Zealand) and J Madanagopal (India).
● India lead the three-match series 2-0

Series details
First ODI India won by four wickets (Nagpur). **Third: Wednesday** (Ahmedabad).

Sport Guinness Six Nations

Classy Prendergast keeps relentless Ireland on track

Scotland	18
Ireland	32

Mark Palmer

Another piece in the puzzle successfully set down by Ireland as they pursue an unprecedented third straight Championship title and a potential grand slam.

For Scotland, meanwhile, this latest chastening defeat to the men in green simply continued many of the patterns that underpinned so many of those that went before.

An 11th consecutive Ireland victory in the fixture was founded on those familiar pillars of relentless physicality and intelligent game-management — especially from the outstanding Sam Prendergast — in addition to the Scots' propensity to shoot themselves in the foot.

Bar a brief home surge either side of half-time, Simon Easterby's temporary charges were almost permanently in charge and pulled decisively clear through third-quarter tries from James Lowe and Jack Conan.

In truth, the match was won and lost in the first half as Ireland pulled their hosts from pillar to post. Gregor Townsend suffered the outrageous misfortune of simultaneously losing two key backs, Finn Russell and Darcy Graham, to injury, but in the round this was no hard-luck story.

Ireland are now four points clear of France and England at the top with a perfect 10 from their first two games. All roads lead to their Dublin clash with Les Bleus on March 8, but Easterby cautioned against looking beyond the trip to Cardiff in two weeks' time.

"There is an opportunity which has been well documented and we've got to make sure that we prepare in the right way for Wales and go to the Millennium [Principality] Stadium with the same sort of mindset that we came here with," the interim head coach said.

Ireland had an instant stranglehold on the gainline battle as the Scots bled a string of penalties. When Calvin Nash crossed out right as the clock ticked into the eighth minute, it was a score that had already been a long time coming.



Sir Chris Hoy, who revealed last October that his cancer was incurable, was given a raptuous reception at Murrayfield as he presented the match ball before kick-off

Prendergast had delivered a perfect long pass over the head of Blair Kinghorn and into the Nash bread basket. Talk about early settlers for a fly half making his first away Test appearance.

Scotland were being pummelled and would have been dead and buried just inside the second quarter had they not twice managed to hold up Irish carriers over the line.

Kinghorn had previously caused alarm with a spill in midfield, from where Ireland kicked ahead to send Nash charging for the corner with Duhan van der Merwe in hot pursuit. The Munster wing launched an ungainly dribble into the in-goal area and Van der Merwe was drawn into a shove.

A TMO check confirmed that the ball had been hacked too far ahead for a penalty try to be awarded, but Van der Merwe was dispatched to the sin-bin.

As the Edinburgh man returned to the field, Prendergast put Ireland 10-0 up with a penalty, Russell and Graham having just clashed heads in a sickening collision. Graham went to hospital last night for scans and was diagnosed with concussion.

Russell also did not return, and so Stafford McDowall stayed on at inside centre, with Tom Jordan having moved to pivot while Jamie Dobie came on out wide. It all added up to a brutal triple blow for Scotland, with two star men out of the game and no backs left on the bench.

Townsend revealed that Scotland had taken the decision to remove Russell despite him having passed his HIA. "We decided it wasn't right. There were a couple of things he wasn't remembering about plays. Darcy is in hospital. I believe there are no issues around his neck. But [it's] more just seeing where the concussion has come from. I'm just hoping there are no broken bones around the face or skull area."

There was only so far bad luck could build a Scottish case for the defence, however. Half an hour in, we were looking at a mismatch, a total no-contest. Doris ploughed over for the second try after Prendergast surged off yet more quick scrum ball.

Ireland were winning every fight, every battle of wills and every collision. A brilliant flying finish from Van der Merwe after McDowall's sublime offload gave the Scots a sniff and within eight minutes of the restart they had trimmed the deficit to six points via a couple of Kinghorn penalties.

However, the referee James Doleman chose not to show a yellow card to Robbie Henshaw when the centre stuck out a hand and knocked on a Ben White pass.

Yet just when it seemed like the visiting team had lost their way, they landed two telling blows in quick succession. First it was Lowe easing through a couple of soft-shouldered Scottish tackles out left to score from close range in typically stylish fashion, then Conan powered on to a Henshaw pop with unstoppable force.

White wriggled over in the 76th minute, but Scotland never got remotely close to claiming the historic success with which they had hoped to bless Sir Chris Hoy on the day the stricken Olympic great delivered the match ball to huge acclaim.

Scorers: Scotland: Tries Van der Merwe 40, White 76. **Con** Kinghorn. **Pen** Kinghorn 2 (43, 46). **Ireland: Tries:** Nash 8, Doris 31, Lowe 54, Conan 59. **Cons** Prendergast 3. **Pens** Prendergast 2 (23, 70).
Scotland B Kinghorn; D Graham (J Dobie 22min), H Jones, T Jordan, D van der Merwe (sin-bin 14-24min); F Russell (co-capt) (S McDowall 22), B White; R Sutherland (P Schoeman 48), D Cherry (E Ashman 48), Z Fagerson (W Hurd 68), J Gray (G Brown 48), G Gilchrist (S Skinner 68), M Fagerson, R Darge (co-capt), J Dempsey (J Ritchie 60).
Ireland H Keenan; C Nash (J Crowley 65), R Henshaw, B Aki (G Ringrose 58), J Lowe; S Prendergast, J Gibson-Park (C Murray 69); A Porter (C Healy 69), R Kelleher (D Sheehan 41), F Bealham (T Clarkson 59), J Ryan (R Baird 65), T Beirne (R Baird 10-13, J Conan 13-19), P O'Mahony (J Conan 52), J van der Flier, C Doris (capt).
Referee J Doleman (NZRU).



Lowe's try ended Scotland's hopes of a

Results

Cricket

Second Test match
Sri Lanka v Australia

Galle (fourth day of five): Australia beat Sri Lanka by nine wickets

Sri Lanka First Innings 257 (B K G Mendis 85 not out, L D Chandimal 74)
Second Innings (overnight 211-8)

†B K G Mendis c Smith b Lyon	50
C B R L S Kumara b Webster	9
K N Peiris not out	4
Extras (b 4, lb 5, nb 1, p 5)	15
Total (68.1 overs)	**231**

Fall of wickets 1-9, 2-33, 3-39, 4-81, 5-128, 6-198, 7-199, 8-211, 9-217.
Bowling Starc 4-0-22-0; Kuhnemann 23-5-63-4; Head 9-0-33-0; Lyon 28-3-84-4; Connolly 2-0-9-0; Webster 2.1-0-6-2.

Australia First Innings 414 (A T Carey 156, S P D Smith 131; N G R P Jayasuriya 5 for 151)
Second Innings

U T Khawaja not out	27
T M Head c B K G Mendis b Jayasuriya	20
M Labuschagne not out	26
Extras (b 2)	2
Total (1 wkt, 17.4 overs)	**75**

Fall of wicket 1-38.
Bowling Wanigamuni 3-1-16-0; Peiris 8-0-34-0; Jayasuriya 6-1-20-1; Karunaratne 0.4-0-3-0.
Umpires A Holdstock (SA) and J Wilson (WI).
● Australia won the two-match series 2-0

Test match
Bulawayo: Fourth day of five Ireland 260 (A R McBrine 90 not out; B Muzarabani 7 for 58) and 298 (A Balbirnie 66, L J Tucker 58; Ngarava 4 for 55); Zimbabwe 267 (N R Welch 90; B J McCarthy 4 for 75) and 183-7 (W N Madhevere 61 not out; M J Humphreys 4 for 41).

One-day tri-Series
Lahore New Zealand 330 (50 overs: G D Phillips 106 not out, D J Mitchell 81, K S Williamson 58); Pakistan 252 (47.5 overs: F Zaman 84). New Zealand won by 78 runs.

Golf

DP World Tour Qatar Masters
Doha GC: Leading final scores (Great Britain and Ireland unless stated): **272** Li Haotong (China) 69, 67, 67, 69 **273** R Neergaard-Petersen (Den) 66, 72, 70, 65. **275** B Robinson-Thompson 66, 68, 71, 70. **278** A Rozner (Fr) 69, 70, 71, 68. **279** J Schaper (SA) 69, 69, 69, 72; M Couvra (Fr) 71, 69, 68, 71; B Schmidt 73, 67, 70, 69. **280** A Dumont (Bel) 69, 71, 69, 71; Kim Min-kyu (S Kor) 69, 67, 72, 72. **281** S Bairstow 67, 72, 70, 72; M Jordan 69, 71, 67, 74; D Brown 69, 68, 78, 66; N Lemke (Swe) 70, 68, 71, 72.

US PGA Waste Management Phoenix Open
Scottsdale, Arizona: Leaders after three rounds (United States unless stated): **195** T Detry (Bel) 66, 64, 65. **200** D Berger 68, 66, 66; R Hoejgaard (Den) 68, 67, 65; M Kim 69, 63, 68; J Spieth 68, 65, 67. **201** M McNealy 70, 68, 63. **202** C Bezuidenhout (SA) 67, 66, 69; R MacIntyre (Scot) 68, 69, 65; T Moore 65, 69, 68.

LIV Golf Riyadh
Riyadh GC: Leading final scores (United States unless stated): **199** A Meronk (Pol) 62, 66, 71. **201** J Rahm (Sp) 67, 67, 67; S Muñoz (Col) 64, 66, 71. **202** L Herbert (Aus) 68, 64, 70; D Burmester (SA) 66, 71, 65. **203**; S García (Sp) 68, 68, 67; B DeChambeau 69, 66, 68; D Puig (Sp) 67, 71, 65; T Hatton (Eng) 66, 67, 70; M Leishman (Aus) 67, 68, 68. **204** C Surratt 66, 67, 71. **205** A Lahiri (India) 69, 67, 69; S Horsfield (Eng) 68, 68, 69; B Watson 69, 68, 68.

Women's European Tour Lalla Meryem Cup
Rabat: Leading final scores (Great Britain and Ireland unless stated): **210** C Gainer 71, 70, 69; D Dagar (India) 70, 73, 67 (Gainer won play-off at the first extra hole). **211** S Tan (Sing) 70, 69, 72. **212** L Walsh 75, 69, 68; N Iturrioz (Sp) 70, 70, 72. **213** N Nadaud (Fr) 70, 72, 71; A Fuller 73, 68, 72. **214** B Law 74, 71, 69; L Sobrón (Sp) 70, 73, 71; A Utama (Tha) 72, 71, 71; C Palomar-Herbin (Fr) 72, 71, 71; L Pettersson (Swe) 71, 71, 72; A Krauter (Ger) 71, 70, 73; K Arwefjaell (Swe) 68, 75, 71; T Toscano (Sp) 74, 67, 73.

LPGA Tour Founders Cup
Bradenton, Florida: Leaders after three rounds (United States unless stated): **195** Y Noh 68, 64, 63. **196** Ko Jin-young (S Kor) 67, 63, 66. **200** Im Jin-hee (S Kor) 66, 66, 68; M Khang 71, 67, 62. **201** N Korda 68, 68, 65; H Green (Aus) 70, 65, 66. **202** M Katsu (Japan) 67, 65, 70; M Yamashita (Japan) 68, 67, 67. **Other: 206** C Hull (Eng) 68, 72, 66.

Rugby league

Betfred Challenge Cup: Third round Batley 24 Dewsbury 4; Bradford 18 Castleford 16; Featherstone Rovers 68 Ince Rose Bridge 0; Goole Vikings 0 Wakefield 82; Halifax 0 Catalans Dragons 14; Hunslet 6 Huddersfield 34; Midlands Hurricanes 10 Salford 46; North Wales Crusaders 20 Widnes 26; Oldham 42 Barrow 4; West Hull 0 St Helens 38; Wests Warriors 0 Leeds 92; Whitehaven 4 Warrington 44; York Acorn 6 Hull 52.

Rugby union

Guinness Six Nations England 26 France 25; Italy 22 Wales 15; Scotland 18 Ireland 32.
● table on page 54

Guinness Under-20 Six Nations Scotland 15 Ireland 33.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
England	2	2	0	0	46	13	0	8
France	2	1	0	1	73	46	1	5
Italy	2	1	0	1	40	30	1	5
Ireland	2	1	0	1	36	34	0	4
Wales	2	1	0	1	39	81	0	4
Scotland	2	0	0	2	25	55	0	0

Rugby Europe Championship: Pool A Georgia 40 Netherlands 7; Switzerland 13 Spain 43.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Georgia (Q)	2	2	0	0	150	7	2	10
Spain (Q)	2	2	0	0	96	37	2	10
Netherlands	2	0	0	2	31	93	0	0
Switzerland	2	0	0	2	13	153	0	0

Pool B Belgium 14 Romania 31; Portugal 56 Germany 14.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Portugal (Q)	2	2	0	0	96	44	2	10
Romania (Q)	2	2	0	0	79	24	1	9
Belgium	2	0	0	2	44	71	0	0
Germany	2	0	0	2	24	104	0	0

Premiership Cup: Pool A Newcastle Falcons 73 Caldy 12.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Newcastle	4	4	0	0	134	85	4	20
Sale	5	3	0	2	157	106	6	18
Doncaster	5	2	0	3	146	154	5	13
Caldy	4	0	0	4	52	144	0	0

Pool B Leicester Tigers 57 Nottingham 19; Northampton Saints 50 Coventry 23.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Coventry	4	3	0	1	153	74	3	15
Northampton	4	3	0	1	114	105	3	15
Leicester	4	2	0	2	155	126	2	10
Nottingham	4	0	0	4	94	211	3	3

Pool C Ealing 10 Harlequins 32.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Ealing	4	3	0	1	148	91	5	17
Harlequins	4	3	0	1	132	97	5	17
Saracens	5	3	0	2	195	132	2	14
L Scottish	5	0	0	5	68	223	2	2

Pool D Bath 50 Ampthill 7.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Bath	4	4	0	0	215	52	3	19
Bristol	5	3	0	2	214	149	3	15
Bedford	5	2	0	3	101	151	2	10
Ampthill	4	0	0	4	35	213	0	0

Pool E Exeter Chiefs 43 Cornish Pirates 7.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Exeter	4	4	0	0	189	31	4	20
Gloucester	5	3	1	1	107	111	3	17
Hartpury	5	1	1	3	91	154	3	9
Cornish Pirates	4	0	0	4	80	171	3	3

Women's Allianz Premiership Bristol Bears 45 Exeter Chiefs 17; Sale Sharks 20 Ealing 33.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	B	Pts
Gloucester (Q)	14	11	0	3	476	293	14	58
Harlequins (Q)	14	11	0	3	424	288	11	55
Saracens	14	10	0	4	521	295	13	53
Bristol	15	9	0	6	537	369	12	48
Exeter	14	9	0	5	372	314	10	46
Loughborough	15	6	0	9	410	429	10	34
Ealing	14	5	0	9	418	443	11	31
Leicester	14	2	0	12	246	630	4	12
Sale	14	1	0	13	186	529	0	4

United Rugby Championship Stormers 32 Bulls 33.

Tennis

ATP ABN AMRO Open
Rotterdam: Final C Alcaraz (Sp) bt A De Minaur (Aus) 6-4, 3-6, 6-2.

ATP Dallas Open
Final D Shapovalov (Can) bt C Ruud (Nor) 7-6 (7-5), 6-3.

WTA Mubadala Abu Dhabi Open
Final B Bencic (Switz) bt A Krueger (US) 4-6, 6-1, 6-1.

WTA Transylvania Open
Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Final A Potapova (Russ) bt L Bronzetti (It) 4-6, 6-1, 6-2.

Fixtures

Football

Kick-off 7.45
FA Cup: Fourth round Doncaster v Crystal Palace.
Vanarama National League: South Chelmsford v Hemel Hempstead.
Scottish Cup: Fifth round St Mirren v Hearts.

Darts

Robin Park Leisure Centre, Wigan Players Championship.

Snooker

Venue Cymru, Llandudno BetVictor Welsh Open.

ANDY BUCHANAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



comeback as Ireland made it 11 wins in a row against their opponents and moved clear at the top of the Six Nations table

First half-hour one of Scotland's worst ever

Gregor Townsend's side had plenty of experience but made it far too easy for Ireland, writes **Alasdair Reid**

When Ireland fly half Sam Prendergast knocked over a long-range penalty in the 69th minute, he took his side's scoreline up to 32 points. Despite this, the giant Murrayfield scoreboards proclaimed their total to be 31. On balance, it was the most impressive display of Scottish defiance all afternoon.

If it was merely an arithmetic error it could be added to a long and gruesome litany of other Scottish failings. You would think that ten successive losses to Ireland might have taught these Scotland payers a thing or two, but their naivety was striking — all the more so as they were fielding a hugely experienced team, with seven of the starting 15 on more than 50 caps.

On paper they should have given Ireland a run for their money. Scotland had home advantage, the boost of a comfortable win over Italy eight days earlier, and a team widely considered to be as good as any they have put out in the past 20 years. Yet instead of challenging Ireland, they made things ridiculously easy for the men in green. Scotland's only consolation was that Ireland added nothing after that Prendergast penalty; at times they looked capable of taking the scoreline into the stratosphere.

That scenario looked most ominously possible in an opening half-hour that will be remembered as one of the most ineffectual passages in Scottish rugby history. Not once in all that time did they have possession of the ball inside the Ireland 22 — and when they did finally break that duck, around the 33rd-minute mark, they turned the thing over. It would be something of an understatement to say that Duhan van der Merwe's try just before the break was rather against the run of play.

The undoubted lowlight of that calamitous first half was the ugly collision between Finn Russell and Darcy Graham that ended the involvement of both after 21 minutes. Scottish teams are rarely burdened by excessive good fortune, but it takes perversity to extremes to lose two of your best players in a self-inflicted incident.

Would it have changed anything if the pair had remained on the pitch? It is hard to make that argument, as neither had been particularly influential prior to their going. Indeed, it is fiendishly difficult to recall any Scot bringing himself to bear in a period when Ireland swarmed forward in unrelenting droves, dominating possession and territory to an extent that was barely reflected by their 7-0 lead at the midpoint of the half.

While things moved on for Ireland — they were 17-0 ahead ten minutes after Russell and Graham departed — Scotland remained in a cycle of errors compounding errors, balls turned over too easily and the constant failure to deal with Irish ruthlessness in contact.

The Scots could say with some justification that Ireland enjoyed favours from a referee that never came their way, but they could hardly blame the bloke for the charged-down kicks that put their line under pressure on three separate occasions.

Had even one of those produced a try then Ireland would have had a far better reflection of their domination. And if Ireland had had a half-decent lineout then they would surely have pulled away more quickly and emphatically.

"It was a tough scoreline to take in the end," Rory Darge, the flanker who assumed sole captaincy responsibilities after Russell's departure, said. "Probably the most obvious difference is just how clinical Ireland were.

"I think the fight was there from everyone on the pitch until the end, but in terms of scoring, getting away from us, it came down to errors from our side and the reverse on their side."

There have been times and games in the recent past when those tough days have been almost tolerable for Scots, when the team has done enough to suggest they have closed the gap on Ireland. But there have been times, too, when Ireland shattered that illusion, most brutally at the past two World Cups. Ireland's domination of this match was on a par with what they did to Scotland in Yokohama in 2019 and Paris four years later.

Gregor Townsend, the Scotland coach, has a proud record of laying hoodoos to rest. His record against England, particularly at Twickenham, is quite remarkable. But Ireland remain his nemesis and nothing we saw at Murrayfield gave cause to believe that pattern will change in the near future.

Should Wales's place be under threat from Georgia?

Italy	**22**
Wales	**15**

John Westerby

When they were struggling through their own agonising run of 36 consecutive defeats in the tournament, stretching seven years, Italy grew heartily sick of the question of whether they were worth their place in the Six Nations. Should there be relegation and promotion, to give an emerging nation such as Georgia the chance to take their place?

That miserable sequence finally came to an end with a victory in Cardiff in 2022 and they have now won three of their past four Six Nations matches against Wales, the latest completed in torrential rain in Rome on Saturday. And now the most uncomfortable questions are being asked concerning the plight of Wales, not only on the future of Warren Gatland as head coach, but also, as they lurch towards a second consecutive wooden spoon, whether they should be the country under threat from Georgia.

While Wales were extending their run of defeats under Gatland to 14 with a dismal performance in the Stadio Olimpico, Georgia were beating the Netherlands 40-7 in Tbilisi. The combination of those two results meant that Georgia climbed above Gatland's side in the world rankings, leaving Wales 12th, their worst placing since rankings were introduced in 2003. "That's where we are at the moment," Gatland said.

There is no prospect of relegation being introduced to the Six Nations any time soon, but the outlook appears so bleak for Wales that they are in danger of becoming ensconced as the tournament's whipping boys. Since Gatland returned for a second stint as head coach, they have won just once in 12 matches in the tournament, and their remaining fixtures, at home to Ireland and England either side of a trip to Murrayfield, offer little hope of respite.

Italy scraped past Georgia 20-17 in Genoa in November and their victory over Wales on Saturday was much more comfortable, more than a scoreline distorted by two late tries suggests. Wales's most recent victory was against Georgia in the World Cup in October 2023, but so much has changed since then, with a new generation of players who are ill-equipped for international rugby, and no signs of progression.

Michele Lamaro, the Italy captain, smiled when he was asked whether Wales were facing a period of prolonged pain.

"My first year as a captain, I was asked that question [about Italy] maybe 50 times," he said. "Most of our players now were there when we weren't performing as we wanted. One thing we remember is that nobody gave us anything for free. Everyone that came here, they were playing as if they were playing the All Blacks. But they [Wales] might be able to turn it the other way soon. With some motivation, you can turn things in a short period of time."

Gatland, for his part, indicated that he has the appetite to continue trying to find a way out of the present parlous position. "There's no doubt it's challenging and you do question yourself," he said. "But we'll continue to work hard to give these players some confidence and self-belief to execute the things we've been working hard on."

If he is not to step aside, the pressure on the Welsh Rugby Union to sack him will mount with every additional defeat. Gatland only just clung on to his job after a WRU review into poor results in the autumn. He is reportedly paid about £600,000 a year on a contract to the 2027 World Cup, so sacking him would be a costly business for the cash-strapped union.

Taulupe Faletau, meanwhile, remarkably made it through 80 minutes and held his own on his return to the side, but his selection after barely playing any rugby in the past 18 months smacked of a desperate attempt to recapture former glories. Which rather sums up Gatland's second stint as Wales head coach as a whole.

Scorers: Italy: Try Capuozzo (20min). **Con** Allan. **Pens** Allan 5 (7, 29, 34, 61, 74). **Wales: Tries** Wainwright (70), penalty (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 52), S Ferrari (M Riccioni 52, 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), T Williams (R Williams 66); G Thomas (N Smith 44), E Lloyd (E Dee 44), H Thomas (K Assiratti 44), W Rowlands (Teddy Williams 57), F Thomas, J Botham (A Wainwright 57), J Morgan, T Faletau. **Referee** M Carley (Eng).

Marcus set the tone for victory – and his alertness sealed it

Full back Smith missed two kicks but his fine work elsewhere meant no one deserved the win more than him, writes **David Walsh**



Allow me to borrow, and bend, just a little from Macbeth. Nothing in this game became it like the ending. Elliot Daly scored the try with precisely one minute and four seconds remaining. Fin Smith was in no rush to take the conversion as the team's water-carrying assistant coach, Kevin Sinfield, suggested he keep his eye on the shot clock. If Smith used the full one minute without straying a second beyond, the game would end. No restart. England safe.

"He's going to run this clock all the way down to 80," said ITV's co-commentator, Ben Kay. But it was tight. The match clock said 79min 48sec. The shot clock said 14 seconds to play with. The margins were too fine for Smith to gamble. "Or is he, no he isn't," said Kay, answering his own question. With seven seconds left on the shot clock, five seconds remaining in the game, Smith converted Daly's try.

There would be a restart.

England had been here before. Against Australia in November. One restart to deal with and victory was theirs. They lost that restart and threw away a Test match they should have won. Since then, they'd spent a lot of time on re-starts. Team meetings where Steve Borthwick reminded them to look at the body language of the player restarting the game, check where the referee is standing and they would know.

From Thomas Ramos's stance, England knew where the ball was going. Their best men in aerial battles, Maro Itoje and Tommy Freeman, stood right there. As Ramos's perfectly judged restart dropped, Oscar Jégou, Damian Penaud and Louis Bielle-Biarrey sprinted forward. Itoje jumped highest, Jégou and Penaud just below him.

Itoje palmed the ball back. Jégou, Penaud, Bielle-Biarrey and Nolann Le Garrec chased it but, remarkably, Marcus Smith had foreseen the knock-down and surged from the midfield. Crucially, he got to that loose ball before the French. On the ground, the ball safely in his arms, the cavalry soon arrived. The ball was secured and one pass from Alex Mitchell followed by Fin Smith's kick to touch and that was it.



Borthwick places a lot of trust in Earl

Lots of things happen in rugby that we don't see. Little things that when added together can decide games. Few in the 82,000 at Twickenham would have seen Marcus Smith make that last contribution to a victory that already ranks as famous. The TV commentators never mentioned that it was Smith who got to that ball. What we did see of the full back, especially in the second half, spoke of a player slightly at odds with himself.

Two missed kicks at goal cost England five points. In a tight game, those misses had the potential to make the difference. There were other equally visible moments that made you wonder if the No 15 jersey is really the right one for him. But if you look at everything Marcus Smith gave to the England performance, there will be no rush to criticise him.

In the lead-up to the game, the head coach, Steve Borthwick, said England could not beat France by bludgeoning them, nor could play conservatively and expect to win. France, he told his players, would score tries and to win they would have to get more tries than the opposition. They could only do this by taking the game to them and that meant being brave with the ball in hand.

Which England player made the most runs? Marcus Smith, 13 carries. Which England player made the most metres? Smith again. His 131 metres were twice as many as the next-best England player. What happened after France went in front with Bielle-Biarrey try in the first half? England attacked down the right, Marcus Smith feinted to pass inside and then surged between Grégory Alldritt and Peato Mauvaka.

This was one of just one six line breaks England made in the game and it was important. From the ground gained, England pinned the French deep in their own half and after Henry Slade, Freeman and Mitchell all did well to take play to the opposition line, Ollie Lawrence scored. A score of 7-7 at half-time would have felt like a minor victory for England because they hadn't got near their best in that opening half.

So much about the second-half performance will please Borthwick. Ben Earl is a player in whom the head coach has huge trust. Earl himself lives with doubts. Penalties for no-arms tackles against France last year and New Zealand in the autumn cost the team, as did the missed tackle on Damian De Allende against South Africa.

"I live and breathe those moments," Earl said two weeks ago. "Not just when they happened, but now. It's awful. All encompassing. It's something I have to deal with as a person. I am so jealous of those who can back themselves. I have so much doubt about myself. You feel you are defined by one moment when in fact rugby is delivered in 80 one-minute lots and as a back rower there's very few minutes you're not in the centre of it."

Certainly in this game, there were few moments when Earl was not involved. Though England continued to use him well in the back field, he was more effective on the flank than he has been at No 8. Having Tom Willis alongside helped him. Earl ran well, tackled well, didn't make a mistake, and then three minutes from the end, he made the most important turnover of the game.

Mitchell, who had a fine game, dinked a little kick down the short side after scrappy possession from a lineout. Ramos caught it but didn't have time to clear and Fin Smith made a good tackle to get him quickly to the ground. French players got to the ruck but not as rapidly as Earl and Ben Curry. Earl got his hands on the ball and that penalty gave England the position from which Daly's winning try came.

A word about Ben Curry. Thirteen days before at England's training camp in Girona, we'd spoken for a long time over breakfast. He talked about how he would love to one day play alongside his twin brother, Tom, in an England shirt but he was far from sure it would ever happen. He said being in camp during the Six Nations wasn't easy if you weren't going to be in the match-day squad.

He didn't expect to be and while helping to prepare the chosen 23 was something he took seriously, returning home on Thursday or Friday was hard when your twin brother and the other 22 were going off to the Test match. He knew this from experience and this year he'd decided that he would just work on getting from Monday to Friday, take it week by week and not see it as a seven-week journey.

Then Ben Curry got picked to play in Dublin, alongside his brother, and that memory will transcend every other. He came on against France and through the final 20 minutes he was again counted, and right there alongside Earl when that last turnover was won. He, Earl and every England player got what they deserved against France and the explosion of sound around the stadium at the final whistle had to be heard to be believed.

And perhaps none deserved to be on the winning side more than Marcus Smith because his willingness to take on France set the tone. I think back to a morning in England's camp 14 days ago. Sinfield invited the players to an optional extra that he called "a spirit meeting". The assistant coach wanted to initiate a conversation that would help to engender better team spirit.



Smith was criticised for his two missed kicks but, inset, helped to seal the restart

Finding an extra gear against France

England's victory over France was their first win in eight matches against top tier opposition. It was also only the second time during that run that England have outscored their opponents in the second half — and both of those have been against France.

Second-half score
Last eight games against tier one nations.
v France (h) 19-18
(Overall match score: 26-25)
v Ireland (a) 12-22 (22-27)
v South Africa (h) 3-10 (20-29)
v Australia (h) 19-22 (37-42)
v New Zealand (h) 10-10 (22-24)
v New Zealand (a) 3-11 (17-24)
v New Zealand (a) 5-6 (15-16)
v France (a) 21-17 (31-33)

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARC ASPLAND



in the final seconds that helped England to see out the 26-25 win at Twickenham

All the players attended. That first meeting considered whether you can be a nice guy and win. Sinfield used the basketball icon Michael Jordan as his example. Jordan wasn't always a nice guy but he was a winner. Sinfield said Jordan held his team-mates accountable and reminded the players of something the legendary basketball coach, John Wooden, once said. "You can't live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you."

After the meeting ended, I spoke with Marcus Smith in the team room.

"What did you think of that?" he asked.

"I think you can be a nice guy and win," I said, adding: "A nice guy can hold people to account, and you don't have to be mean-spirited to give everything you've got for the team."

"That's what my parents brought me up to believe," Smith said.

His performance was far from perfect but the full back gave everything for the team. Beyond landing those kicks, what more could we have asked.

● *David Walsh is the Sunday Times Chief Sports Writer*

Dainty big man Freeman belongs on biggest stage

Stuart Barnes



What is left to be said about Damian Penaud? He fumbled the ball more times for France in the first half than he has for Bordeaux Bègles all season. And yet he still managed to score one try and play the seminal creative role with his boot and brain in France's two other tries, both scored by the flashing Louis Bielle-Biarrey on the other wing.

An instinctive genius and one of the best wings in the world. But, on this error-strewn occasion (at least from the French perspective) to the victor the spoils. Lined up on the England right wing was Northampton's Tommy Freeman. While he doesn't move with the sinuous grace of the French right wing, he played a central role in England's much-needed victory.

Forget that he wears 14. He was right in the thick of England's winning effort. Nothing better exemplified his importance to his team than his role in England's first try. Ollie Lawrence's fending off of Thomas Ramos will be the enduring memory but this try wasn't even conceived without the effort and excellence of Freeman.

The anatomy of the try is stamped with his influence. When Steve Borthwick and the England management analyse this match, it will be the wing's contribution that stands out.

Let's start with an attacking 33rd-minute England scrum between the 10-metre line and the 22. Alex Mitchell fired the initial pass towards the incoming winger who aimed straight for France's fly half, Mathieu Jalibert. There's that subtle step of his. He's a big man but almost dainty. Antoine Dupont had to make the tackle but England were beyond the gainline. They had momentum.

From the next phase Fin Smith kicked into the corner; France were penned in, under pressure and happy to clear their lines. Ben Earl caught the clearance kick and flung it into midfield with Henry Slade ready to set off diagonally. Marcus Smith did something similar in Dublin and the Saint stayed wide; his lack of reaction running the Harlequins fly half out of room. This time he charged off his wing to cut the angle with Slade. He ran through the off-balance Peato Mauvaka and slipped a little pass to the supporting Mitchell, looping on his outside. Mitchell's perfect kick forced France to carry over their line and concede a five-metre scrum.

This was pressure-building Test rugby. Next he ran — again — off Mitchell from the scrum as the first carrier. Again that footwork helped him beat Jalibert before the second man checked him. The forwards rumbled, Mitchell changed direction and there was Freeman on his designated right flank, taking two Frenchmen to stop him. When one man consistently forces double tackles, there has to be room elsewhere.

And, hey presto, there it was as England searched for space infield.

TOBY MELVILLE/REUTERS



Freeman, who rose high to pluck Fin Smith's kick out of the sky for England's second try, also had a hand in several other England scores in a memorable win

There was chaos as the ball bobbled. Tom Curry slapped it backwards, Fin Smith had it dislodged from his grasp but as the ball bounced into one of those defensive gaps that heavyweight carriers create, there was Freeman to collect, having tracked its course from the previous phase. He drew his man and delivered the tryscoring pass to Lawrence. Cue the close-up of the Bath man but this try belonged to the wing and his many varied attributes.

His own try, with France six points ahead, wasn't such a protracted affair. Fin Smith's early kick-offs were poor but this was a good one. Freeman chased, jumped and won it. The restart is often described as the third set piece. If that's the case the winger had just nicked one against the head, or stolen a crucial lineout. He then popped up twice at scrum half with Mitchell trapped elsewhere. As England rumbled towards the midfield, he slipped back to his right touchline. His fly half switched the point of the attack and lofted a kick to the right touchline. The brilliant Bielle-Biarrey was two metres too far infield. Surging from the touchline, Freeman was able to get the jump on the Frenchman. The catch was clean as he stepped past him and around the despairing Dupont for the try.

This is how individuality merges with the collective — Freeman, very much part of what the England manager would unpoetically describe as "the process". For all the much-merited headlines that have gone the way of his Northampton fly half, Freeman's role in his own and the Lawrence try epitomised many of the best aspects of this performance.

Alas, Marcus Smith's individual genius was overwhelmed by anxiety as the clock ticked throughout the second half. One Smith's fortunes rose, the other's fell. The Harlequins ten is a unique talent but until he and England get on the same wavelength, he is destined to play back-up to the other Smith. He can't admit it, not with the team winning, yet I wonder whether Fin's Saturday might leave Marcus with a few psychological scars.

England are not that good that a touch of genius can be ignored but unless Marcus Smith can find a balance between his vision and that of those around him, he might become England's man out of time. To drop him from full back would be demoralising but if George Furbank is fit for the Scotland fixture, the temptation to play the Saints skipper at 15 would be great. A link of Mitchell, Fin Smith and Furbank would give England an innate understanding through their back line. If Furbank is unfit, I would select Elliot Daly at 15.

Much as Marcus Smith would like to wear the 10 or, at a pinch, the 15 jersey, the role from the bench can turn a game. The fly half endured a horrible second half but if England are behind, against their nemesis, Scotland, there is no better man to inject fresh magic than him. No23 might seem an insult to such a stellar talent but after Saturday's travails it might just be the right role for the moment.

Sport Guinness Six Nations

Winning try had everything

Alex Lowe
Rugby Correspondent

England	**26**
France	**25**

"I am really pleased that we gave that pass," Steve Borthwick said. The England head coach largely succeeds in keeping his emotions in check. He will never publicly punch the air in delight nor hammer the desk in anger. Not his style. But there was a flicker of a smile as he considered the critical details that allowed England to finally turn a run of seven narrow defeats into a victory over France.

It was not just the pass. But the pass epitomised how England finally grabbed hold of the game and nailed all the moments that, over the course of almost a year, had let them down in the final quarter: the fluffed lineouts, the dropped kick-offs, the butchered mauls, the clunky and unconvincing back-line moves. This time, energised by the life they had been given by France's remarkable profligacy, England cashed in.

The pass to which Borthwick refers was from Ollie Lawrence. Twice as England chased the game against South Africa in November, they called the same play. It is a common move, throwing a multitude of options at the defence. Back then it was Henry Slade at first receiver. On both occasions he fed Lawrence on the crash ball, and on both occasions England were turned over. This time, it was Lawrence in the pivot role as England pushed for victory in a wild game.

When England conceded late on against New Zealand at both Eden Park and Twickenham last year, they had no comeback. So the sense of déjà vu was palpable when Louis Bielle-Biarrey scored to put France 25-19 ahead with five minutes remaining. Two things ran through Borthwick's mind. He hoped England would stay aggressive. That had been his message. And he remembered a line from Sir Clive Woodward, his former England coach. "Clive would always say — it only takes 30 seconds to score a try," Borthwick said. "You just need to create a chance and that's exactly what they did."

Ben Earl won a jackal penalty. This was the chance. In the huddle, Fin Smith, the fly half making his first Test start, led the conversation as England worked out a three-stage plan. Jamie George nailed the lineout throw to Ollie Chessum and the maul rumbled forward. Elliot Daly and Tommy Freeman were close to joining. When progress slowed, Daly then eyed a potential two-on-one down the blind side with Alex Mitchell. But Smith gave the call and triggered the designed move that won the game.

Lawrence pulled the pass behind Freeman to Smith, a deft contribution, which hints at how much growth there could be in the Bath centre's game. A subtle change of pace and a slight holding of his feet from Smith checked the defender and Daly, carving around from the left wing on a brilliant line, was through the gap for the try. A clinical finish when it mattered from a move executed with much greater conviction than against South Africa.

Twickenham erupted; a year of frustration and disappointment came cascading down onto the field. England then secured the final restart. Their failure to do that against Australia in the autumn had cost them the match. This time, Marcus Smith sensed the danger, dropped on a loose ball and Fin Smith kicked it into the West Stand.

"Being brave enough in the final seconds is why we won the game," Daly said. "Whatever happened today it was like — pardon my French — f*** that, onto the next thing. That mindset put us in great stead, especially in the last 20 minutes where we were chasing it and scored, then chased it again. It allowed us to be free and brave with the ball."

That mindset was underpinned by a number of factors. France should have been out of sight. They had a meltdown at Twickenham. Damian Penaud, Antoine Dupont and Peato Mauvaka all dropped the ball with the line at their mercy. France bossed the first half, they won the kicking duel and manufactured ways to get outside of the Red Rose defence but could not convert. And England scrambled superbly.

Fin Smith's chase created enough of a disruption for Thomas Ramos to push the pass a little too far ahead of Dupont. Ollie Sleightholme's scorching run across the field cut off Bielle-Biarrey's route to the line and forced him to make one more pass, which Mauvaka dropped. England earned those breaks.

"We know that if we run for each other and we scramble like hell, we'll force errors. Seeing those players drop the ball, those errors probably did give us a bit of energy," Freeman said.

Tom Curry was immense again. The man is a machine, not just because he has a bionic hip. He has been England's best player these first two games, executing momentum-shifting turnovers and some shuddering hits. Curry even showed the Smiths a thing or two with a delicate little grubber that put Ramos under some pressure.

And so England were in the game at the interval. The score was 7-7, with Lawrence having scored from close range after neat interplay between Freeman and Mitchell, two of the four Northampton Saints players in England's back line, had earned them a five-metre scrum.

Fin Smith, another Saint, had been edgy in that first period. He was charged down with his first kick and a few touch-finders were a little awry. He admitted to feeling like a "rabbit in the headlights" as France controlled the game.

But Smith was unruffled and grew in authority. He played with a simple control that gave England shape, structure and a calm confidence during a roller-coaster second half as the lead kept changing hands. Smith assumed the goal-kicking responsibilities from Marcus Smith, who was having another shocker from the tee, and he supplied a couple of delightful assists; for Freeman with a cross-kick and then for Daly.

"I thought he played very well," Borthwick said. "I've talked about Fin's character, making 30 tackles in a game [for Northampton]. He is courageous. I think you saw another bit of Fin's character. To have that [charge-down] happen and stay so calm, composed and assured — that's the nature of him as a player."

That confidence rubbed off on those around him, highlighting the benefit of the Northampton connection. Freeman was outstanding, although it helps as a wing when you can read your fly half's body language. He and Smith are best pals. Their girlfriends are close friends too.

"There are cues that I can pick up that probably a lot of lads can't," Freeman said. "I knew he was going to hit that cross-field kick. I know the way he moves, the timing he wants. Whereas with Marcus, it's a bit different."

The difficulty of playing outside of Marcus Smith has become something of a theme, which leaves the Harlequins playmaker in an uncomfortable position 40 Tests into his career. He remains part of Borthwick's plans but not, it would seem, in the No10 jersey he covets. And does George Furbank — another playmaker, another Saint — come back in at full back when fit?

It is feasible that Smith's role in this squad is as a bench utility player who can come on and win games, as he did against Ireland in last year's Six Nations. Borthwick would have a sales job to do — but the impact England's replacements made on Saturday may help in that regard.

Chessum, Ben Curry and George could all have started but their influence was critical off the bench. George and Chessum raised the lineout threat. George and Daly brought nearly 170 caps of experience. Fin Baxter won a scrum penalty and scored a try.

There is a lesson for England to heed from that Ireland game last year. When Smith engineered the match-winning drop-goal, it felt like a breakthrough performance from England but it was followed by almost a year of narrow



Daly bursts clear for the match-winning try and Fin Smith, inset, celebrates with supporters after a performance in which he grew in authority



Borthwick almost afforded himself a smile at the end

Results, fixtures and how they stand

Round one

January 31 France 43 Wales 0 *(Stade de France)*.

February 1 Scotland 31 Italy 19 *(Scottish Gas Murrayfield)*;

Ireland 27 England 22 *(Aviva Stadium)*.

Round two

February 8 Italy 22 Wales 15 *(Stadio Olimpico, Rome)*;

England 26 France 25 *(Twickenham)*.

Yesterday Scotland 18 Ireland 32 *(Scottish Gas Murrayfield)*.

Round three

Saturday, February 22 Wales v Ireland *(Principality Stadium, 2.15pm; **BBC**)*; England v Scotland *(4.45pm; **ITV**)*.

Sunday, February 23 Italy v France *(3pm; **ITV**)*.

Round four

Saturday, March 8 Ireland v France *(2.15pm; **ITV**)*; Scotland v Wales *(4.45pm; **BBC**)*.

Sunday, March 9 England v Italy *(3pm; **ITV**)*.

Round five

Saturday, March 15 Italy v Ireland *(2.15pm; **ITV**)*; Wales v England *(4.45pm; **BBC**)*; France v Scotland *(8pm; **ITV**)*.

	P	W	L	PD	B	Pts
Ireland	2	2	0	19	2	**10**
France	2	1	1	42	2	**6**
England	2	1	1	-4	2	**6**
Scotland	2	1	1	-2	1	**5**
Italy	2	1	1	-5	0	**4**
Wales	2	0	2	-50	1	**1**

Borthwick wants

MIKE HEWITT/GETTY IMAGES



defeats. With this win, England have built some trust in their ability to nail those clutch moments. They have shed some self-doubt. But now they have to back it up. The fixture list this year is more benevolent than it was in 2024, a chance to build some momentum, although Scotland are up next.

England have not beaten the auld enemy in five years but, with that pass, the monkey is off their back. "Now we know we are a good team," Daly said. "You need to win big games to prove you are a good team. But there are still things to work on. We can get better."

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 75min), 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 Atonio (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 (Georgia). **Att** 81,000.

Final two games target for winger

CONTINUED FROM BACK

visiting team to Twickenham on February 22, after a fallow week.

Feyi-Waboso may not be ready to face Scotland but England are hopeful that he and George Furbank, the Northampton Saints full back, can play against Italy and Wales in the final two matches of the championship. Alex Dombrandt, the Harlequins No 8, and the Leicester Tigers scrum half Jack van Poortvliet are nearing returns from minor knocks too.

"He's running well, rehabbing well. Hopefully [he is ready to return]," England head coach Steve Borthwick said of Feyi-Waboso.

"I think Alex Dombrandt is hopefully going to be fit to play for Harlequins this week. Jack van Poortvliet is back running. [George Furbank] is going well. He had a re-x-ray on his arm last week and we are waiting on the specialist to give his view on that.

"Hopefully, he might be available at the end of the tournament but we are still waiting for the specialist's report."

England's players are determined to build on the French win, so it is not a one-off victory like the one they took against Ireland last year. England beat the Irish 23-22 at Twickenham last March, but then lost seven Tests in a row against Tier One opposition until Saturday when they broke that cycle.

"We're not parking up after that," the Harlequins prop Fin Baxter, who scored a try on Saturday, said. "We're going for the rest of them, and that's what we've been going with since I've been part of this team. We haven't achieved anything yet."

Elliot Daly, who took the try in the 79th minute that Fin Smith converted for the win, believes England now go into the rest of the Six Nations with momentum. "We haven't beaten Scotland in the past four times, so we want to make sure we're ready for them coming down here and try to get a result," Daly said.

Curry goes from Kamikaze Kid to brainy back-rower

Will Kelleher
Deputy Rugby Correspondent

The second coming of Tom Curry has been marvellous to witness.

Heroic in defeat against the Irish in Dublin, the flanker was the unofficial man of the match in the victory over France, showing all his usual toughness, grit and skill, but with a new intelligence that points towards an exciting next stage of his career.

It was Steve Borthwick, after the 26-25 win that has breathed new life into England's Six Nations challenge and his tenure as head coach, who singled Curry out for special praise.

"I see a player who is better now than what he was a while ago," Borthwick said; a big statement to make about a man who was such a force when he was younger. Borthwick believes this as he has seen Curry evolve.

"Players change and the really best players, the players who think about the game, think about how the game changes and how they change, they get better through their career. That's what I'm seeing with Tom Curry," he said.

Curry has emerged from his "Kamikaze Kid" era and has moulded his game to become smarter, more selective and more rounded.

To say he has added intelligence does not mean he never had it to start with. Right from Curry's debut as an 18-year-old string bean of an open-side flanker in San Juan, Argentina, in 2017, you could tell he was clever. His ability to sniff a jackal turnover opportunity was obvious — he, at that point, did not quite have the size to last in contact at times, or the nous of Test-match rugby to know when to dip and when not to.

From that great start he rose to a peak of performance in 2019, when Eddie Jones labelled him and Sam Underhill "the Kamikaze Kids" at the World Cup in Japan, where England made the final. Curry was nominated as a World Player of the Year candidate, and his statistics for that year show the insane amount of work he would get through. Curry hit an average of 25 rucks per game, won a career-high nine jackal turnovers in 14 Tests, but was all-in, all the time, as he conceded ten penalties too. Look at his numbers now and you can see his maturation. Work smarter, not harder. Curry now hits an average of seven attacking rucks, but is almost as effective as before; in defence he is better doing less.

The evidence of Curry this year is excellent. He is yet to give away a penalty, and despite winning only two jackal turnovers for Sale Sharks this season, he has four in two matches in this Six Nations. It is here where Curry is not just back to his best, but better than before, as Borthwick said.

Against the French, Curry was everywhere, constantly scanning in defence, barking orders, leading England's defensive pressure and stealing balls back. From the outset he pressurised France.



Curry was effective against France while not conceding any penalties

More efficient

Curry is hitting fewer rucks but making a bigger impact

	2019	2025
Games played	5	2
Minutes	361	160
Carries	6	7
Gainline success %	42	64
Dominant carry %	28	42
Metres gained	15	18
Dominant tackles	1	2
Lineouts won	0	2

Average statistics per 80mins

Nine minutes in he felled lock Alexandre Roumat to stop a dangerous French attack, flying up and forcing him to drop the ball.

Later, when England were under pressure five metres from their own line, he came up with a stunning steal from Antoine Dupont, coming in as a second tackler with Maro Itoje and pinching the ball without the great scrum half noticing. It was a second one-handed steal in as many weeks.

Curry's defence coach at Sale, Byron McGuigan, has seen his development first-hand this season.

"I let him lead the defence as much as possible as he leads by example. He owns the defence, and is leading it with England now too in a system that makes him thrive," McGuigan said.

Curry seems to have become more at home wearing No 6 for England too, with either his twin, Ben, at open-side, or Ben Earl. Having beefed up over the years — he now weighs 110kg (17st 5lb), therefore 4kg heavier than his brother — he has become a more dominant carrier in attack and more powerful hitter in defence, plus a lineout jumper.

All of this is made more remarkable by the fact that Curry is 1) still only 26 years old, and 2) nearly had to retire last year with a degenerative hip condition.

Curry hates that his hip issue is referenced by commentators, writers, pundits or anyone. This is where we are afforded a window into his mindset. Let's just spell this out. The injury Curry had was horrendous. Curry's surgeon, Damian Griffin, said it was "beyond what is possible" that he came back in seven months after having a hip joint shaved down so it fit in its socket and allowed him to move properly. He had to relearn how to run.

When it is explained to Curry, or those around him, that this sort of comeback is not normal, he doesn't understand it. That is why he is playing like he is: committing to self-improvement, coupled with an ability to shut out unhelpful thoughts. Any normal person might be second-guessing every movement. Not Curry. So let's enjoy his revival, and hope there is more to come.

"How good for England to have him back," McGuigan says. "I don't think we've seen the best of him yet; it's really exciting for English rugby, that."

Sport

The Game
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Inside T2



DAVID KLEIN/REUTERS



‘I didn’t pick wrong team’

Slot defends leaving Salah and Van Dijk out after Liverpool lose to lowly Plymouth in FA Cup

Hamzah Khalique-Loonat

Liverpool manager Arne Slot insisted he had no regrets about his team selection after his Premier League leaders were knocked out of the FA Cup by Plymouth Argyle, who are bottom of the Championship.

Liverpool have a vital Premier League match against Everton on Wednesday and Slot left several first-team players in Liverpool for yesterday’s fourth-round tie at Home Park including captain Virgil van Dijk and Mohamed Salah, the club’s top scorer this season. “They trained yesterday and they will train tomorrow as well,” Slot said. “Most of the things we do for a reason, we don’t just do it. I said before, we have to play many games now. For the last few weeks we have played twice every week and now in the upcoming weeks, twice again.”



It was only Slot’s third defeat as Liverpool manager but he insisted his team selection was good for those who he rested and also for those he brought in because “they need the intensity of the game”.

But Slot did not hide his disappointment. “We were not having a very good day. A result like this is the outcome,” he said. “It hurts everyone that is involved with Liverpool — fans, me, players.”

Ryan Hardie, centre, is mobbed by team-mates after scoring the decisive penalty to leave Slot, inset, to ponder his weakened team selection. Report, The Game, page 2

Feyi-Waboso close to return

Will Kelleher
Deputy Rugby Correspondent

England are plotting to get Immanuel Feyi-Waboso back in the side for the last two games of the Six Nations, with the wing returning to camp weeks ahead of schedule on Wednesday.

The 22-year-old dislocated his shoulder before Christmas against Sale Sharks but elected not to have surgery so he can force his England case. If he had undergone an operation, he would have been out for 10-12 weeks from January, so would have missed the tournament.

However, Feyi-Waboso is progressing well in training with Exeter Chiefs and will join England’s squad on Wednesday, when they reconvene after beating France 26-25 on Saturday in a thriller at Twickenham. The result kick-started England’s Six Nations challenge, with Scotland the next

Continued on page 55

Ange: We’ll be outstanding

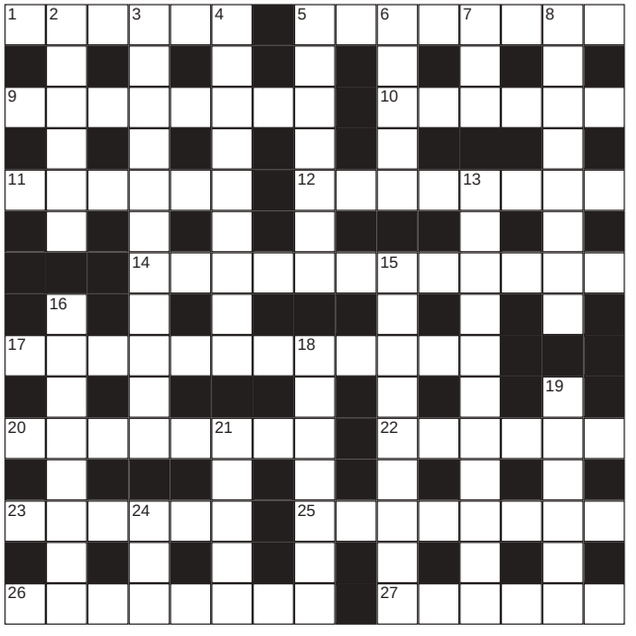
Tom Allnutt

Tottenham Hotspur will be an “outstanding team” once their injured players return, their head coach Ange Postecoglou insisted after a second cup defeat in four days, which effectively means the only trophy they can win this season is the Europa League.

Spurs were without 11 senior players as they lost 2-1 away to Aston Villa in the fourth round of the FA Cup after going out of the Carabao Cup to Liverpool on Thursday to increase the pressure on Postecoglou. But the Australian was full of praise for his players — “they’ve given everything” — and confident the team would soon turn the corner. “I think this group of players once we get the rest of the group in, will be an outstanding team,” he said.

Full story, The Game, page 5

Times Crossword 29,149



ACROSS

1 Pakistani city’s expression of pleasure in folk wisdom (6)
5 Exercises old Turkish ruler before a horsey event (8)
9 Stirrer’s offspring crossing river after meal (8)
10 Wearing formal dress, visit Asian warehouse (6)
11 Persian governor beginning to swig a gin? (6)
12 Small daughter embracing pale woman’s bird minder (8)
14 Engineering con, he emerges as dealer in Cheshire? (12)
17 Big house rebuilt pine shelter by Iowa railway? (12)
20 Appreciative, having plenty of petrol to cover start of holiday (8)
22 Wrapped son’s injuries (6)
23 Bishop involved in test of ethnic group (6)
25 Critical remark from chap cutting opening of bridge club (8)
26 Fellow with jewel, but wanting Liberal leadership (8)
27 English archdeacon following the Spanish team (6)

DOWN

2 Malt vinegar porter possibly put on fish (6)
3 Let former pupils time violent disturbance (11)
4 Company is breaking record in this place where all life exists (9)
5 Information exists on cover of economics book (7)
6 Former of rock group’s first to be introduced to mother (5)
7 It may carry bricks intended ultimately to shore up house (3)
8 Film last of participants in modern dance? (8)
13 Unusually lucky, he’s accommodating single shrub (11)
15 Shabby trick binding husband in the interim (9)
16 Marine creature regularly seen swimming ashore? (8)
18 Ball fits in tiny piece of furniture (7)
19 Fish had to form mental images (6)
21 Sheet of paper primarily focusing on a type of stew (5)
24 Run past when speaking (3)

Prize solution 29,142

B	O	R	S	C	H	T	■	S	I	G	N	O	F	F
L	A	■	L	E	■	I	■	A	■	R	■	A	■	■
A	L	P	■	O	B	S	O	L	E	S	C	E	N	T
D	■	S	■	V	■	T	■	L	■	L	■	■	■	A
D	E	C	R	E	P	I	T	■	F	I	S	C	A	L
E	■	A	■	R	■	F	■	B	■	G	■	O	■	L
R	I	L	L	■	S	Y	C	O	P	H	A	N	C	Y
■	■	L	■	U	■	I	■	N	■	T	■	O	■	■
C	H	I	M	P	A	N	Z	E	E	■	B	U	S	H
L	■	O	■	T	■	G	■	H	■	U	■	E	■	Y
A	M	N	I	O	N	■	M	E	A	S	U	R	E	D
N	■	■	■	W	■	W	■	A	■	U	■	A	■	R
G	R	O	U	N	D	E	L	D	E	R	■	B	O	A
E	■	U	■	E	■	E	■	E	■	L	■	N	■	■
R	A	T	T	R	A	P	■	D	E	R	M	E	N	T

Check today’s answers by ringing 0905 757 0141 by midnight. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company’s network access charge. SP: Spoke 0333 202 3390.

The winners of Prize Crossword No 29,142 are
B Burgon, Kesgrave, Suffolk
I Napier, Glasgow
S Richman, Pinner, Greater London
G Spanton, Bathford, Somerset
P Wormald, Topsham, Devon

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Now Canada, next stop Ghana? The Sussexes' non-royal tour rolls on



Kevin Maher

KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



Harry and Meghan are on the move again. They're like quicksilver, that pair, impossible to pin down. They've only just opened the Invictus Games in Vancouver, Canada, and now it seems they're contemplating the commencement of another "Definitely Not a Royal Tour but Actually a Royal Tour" royal tour of Ghana.

A senior source in Ghana has apparently told The Mail on Sunday that the official seduction process has begun, the invitation has gone out and the west African nation is "ready" for the tour. Ready how? "The red carpet will be rolled out for them," said the source. "A selection of incredible villas with top security would be set aside for them." I don't know about you, but I hear that and I picture Meghan as Renée Zellweger from *Jerry Maguire*, choked with emotion and staring fondly back at Ghana, saying: "You had me at red carpet, incredible villas and top security."

The Invictus Games, meanwhile, were launched with a veritable Meghan and Harry mediagasm, including speeches, photo ops, a bizarre backstage tour in a golf buggy, a selfie video with *I'm Like a Bird* singer Nelly Furtado, and the impromptu announcement from Meghan: "We just arrived, I don't know, a couple of hours ago, and I touched Canadian soil and I went, oh, it feels like home."

The ostensible reference here is the six years that Meghan spent living in Toronto while filming her legal drama *Suits*, but could it have a deeper meaning? In 2016 Meghan declared that she'd be tempted to emigrate to Canada if Donald Trump was elected president. Trump was duly elected but then Meghan's personal life blew up (something to do with a new husband, his emotionally repressed family and Netflix) and the first threatened "Megxit" was averted. In the meantime, however, the animosity between Trump and Meghan has only increased, with the US president declaring (in 2022) that, "Harry is whipped like no person I think I've ever seen. I'm not a fan of Meghan ... I think poor Harry is being led around by his nose."

Trump's "poor Harry" line was essentially redeployed over the weekend when the controversy over the Duke of Sussex's US visa erupted once again — in short, anti-Harry campaigners want to know why someone who (in *Spare*) admitted to taking cocaine, marijuana and magic mushrooms was granted an easy visa in 2020. Asked if, fulfilling his promise to kick out dodgy immigrants, he will now deport Harry, Trump replied: "I don't want to do that. I'll leave him alone. He's got enough problems with his wife. She's terrible."

Ah yes, the "terrible wife" carte blanche. Works a treat every time. Didn't turn up for work yesterday? "Sorry, the old ball 'n' chain's been acting up." Haven't paid your taxes? "It's the missus. She's a nightmare." Spontaneously murdered your neighbour? "Yep. The wife's been at me again. She's terrible."

Trump, of course, is notoriously thin-skinned and capricious, and thus it seems that Harry, for the entirety of this rollercoaster presidency, will remain a single snubbed White House dinner invitation away from a full visa investigation and even a potential one-way flight out of LAX. It might explain Meghan's Canadian "home" comments (laying the groundwork for Megxit 3?). Or indeed it adds context to the couple's rumoured purchase last year of a £3.6 million villa in Portugal ("We just arrived in Lisbon a couple of hours ago, but when I touched Portuguese soil I went ...").

And as for the proposed Ghana trip? Well, some reprehensible cynics are claiming that these "Definitely Not a Royal Tour but Actually a Royal Tour" royal tours are merely an attempt to keep the Meghan and Harry "brand" alive and relevant so as to amplify their other media projects such as the forthcoming Netflix show *With Love, Meghan*. Me, I like to think they're not that ruthless. It's the red carpets, incredible villas and top security. Right?

Sorry if I gave you the ick

Hey, laydeez, you've heard of "the ick", yes? I probably gave it to you right there, with the laydeez thing. It's a feeling of revulsion commonly ascribed to women in the dating sphere when encountering instances of cringeworthy male behaviour. One gets the ick, apparently, when one watches men apply lip balm, or when they do air guitar or play video games or wear sunglasses on top of their head, or announce the commencement of an anecdote with, "This is such a funny story..." It's all serious ick, and can neutralise the prospects for any romantic relationship before it's even begun. Oh, and novelty socks is another one. And "finger guns" while dancing. And using "meister" as a suffix ("they call me the shagmeister" etc). And wearing baseball caps backwards.

Well, it seems that the ickmeisters have finally had enough and are pointing their finger guns right back at the laydeez. Mental health charities such as Manup? are claiming that popular concepts like the ick are causing men and young boys to lose their self-worth, and that ridiculing men is ultimately making them anxious and can be psychologically damaging. "Everyone feels they can have a laugh and joke about men," Manup?'s founder Dan Somers told The Sunday Telegraph. "And nobody will call it out."

And yet the ick, if handled carefully, can surely be your friend? The ick is a set of nifty behavioural guidelines. I wish the ick had existed in my dating days. I wouldn't have worn so many baseball caps backwards or spent so many Saturday nights down on my knees performing an air guitar version of *Rebel Yell* by Billy Idol in the Union bar. It all makes sense now. Those girls visibly wincing at the edge of the dancefloor? The open snarls of disgust? These poor women all had the ick and they didn't even know it. I certainly didn't.

'It's not nice seeing pictures like that... it's disgusting'

When the BBC's Naga Munchetty saw fake nude images of herself online she was shocked. The story behind them made her furious. By Georgina Roberts

'Are you okay?" When Naga Munchetty received that text from her neighbour a month ago she had no idea why he was asking her. "Are you alright with these pictures?" he asked.

"What pictures?" she replied.

Munchetty's neighbour had come across fake nudes of her on Facebook. "They're not nice," he warned her.

In a booth in the BBC studio in Salford where she has just filmed *Breakfast*, the television presenter pulls up the images on her phone. "There's a picture of me with my head obviously photoshopped on to a woman's body," she says. "The body's naked. The breasts have two black squares over the nipple area and one over the groin area. It's just so weird."

As well as Facebook, the image was also appearing on X, and she was soon receiving messages from concerned followers. Munchetty tells me she was "scared" to follow the links that accompanied it in case they took her to a deepfake pornography video of herself or something "putting me out there as a pornography star in a sexual act". When she later alerted her Radio 5 Live producers, they discovered it led to a fake BBC News article that claimed Munchetty had come across a lucrative way to make money. This was a ploy to lure readers into visiting a "cyber trading platform" and divulging their personal details.

"When I realised it was a scam, that's when I got angry," Munchetty says. "Like, how dare you? The scam stuff properly riled me."

Munchetty, 49, is dressed casually today in a black fleece and pink glasses, but she sounds far more fired up than she does when presenting. "I work bloody hard, and the BBC works bloody hard," she says. "These bastard scammers take our images, take our hard work and fleece people. Someone could potentially have their lives ruined because of them."

Was she worried people would think the nude images were real pictures of her that had been leaked? "I haven't got any naked pictures of me to leak," she says. "It's such a ridiculous picture. None of my friends, none of the people who are important to me, are going to believe it.

"What you don't want is people talking about you and saying, 'Ah, have you seen the naked pictures of Naga online?' But they're not of me. It's so obvious they're not of me." Nevertheless, she confesses, "it's not nice seeing pictures of yourself like that. You think, what are people doing? People are disgusting."

As bad as it was, Munchetty reasons, it isn't as distressing as the experiences of schoolgirls she has interviewed who were pressured into taking nudes, only to have them shared around school. "Their lives have been ruined for a time and they've been devastated."

Munchetty isn't one to ignore an injustice. She once took the BBC to task over equal pay, the outcome of which, she later confirmed, was that "all four main presenters of *Breakfast* are paid equally for their work". And last year she gave evidence to the women and equalities committee, where she spoke about her struggle to be diagnosed with the womb condition adenomyosis and to be taken seriously by doctors.

Her physician had dismissed her symptoms as a normal period. "A normal period is not flooding," she says. "It's not throwing up. It's not diarrhoea. It's not hugging a toilet and crying because you're sweating through pain, fainting, cramped over, loading yourself up with painkillers way more than you should be, from the age of 15." During one flare-up the pain was so excruciating that she had to call an ambulance and warned her husband, the TV director James Haggar, that if she wasn't conscious he should not let the doctors perform a hysterectomy on her.

A few days after she alerted her producers about the photographs, the fake news website was taken down for infringing copyright law. The scam trading site to which it was linked, though, could still be operating. "It tells you all about these great deals and how you can make loads and

Sophie's death shows we're failing

Laura Kyrke-Smith's friend took her own life after the birth of her third baby. It's driving the Labour MP to fight for change. By Damian Whitworth

Laura Kyrke-Smith says she will never forget the moment when the husband of one of her closest friends sent her a message containing the worst possible news. She and Sophie Middlemiss had been friends since they were teenagers and had led "overlapping" lives, at the University of Cambridge, the Foreign Office and in motherhood. They both had three children and had been in constant WhatsApp contact about their newborn babies.

Kyrke-Smith had been increasingly concerned about her friend's mental health as Middlemiss worried about how her baby was nursing, but nothing prepared her for that message, which arrived as Kyrke-Smith was feeding her own baby.

"I do not know how to say this and I cannot believe I am writing this, but Sophie died this morning," he wrote.

Middlemiss had taken her life.

"The shock for him and for Sophie's dad and brother and for all of us close friends was enormous," Kyrke-Smith says.

She is the Labour MP for Aylesbury. After her surprise win at the last election, in a Buckinghamshire constituency that had been Tory for a century, she decided her mission would be to campaign, in her friend's memory, for better understanding and support for women's perinatal mental health.

Last week she secured a debate on maternal mental health in Westminster Hall, which was heavily oversubscribed by MPs wishing to contribute personal stories and appeals for action on an issue they believe is overlooked and underfunded.

Kyrke-Smith and Middlemiss met as gap year students on a flight to Moscow. They were contemporaries at Cambridge and then as master's students at the London School of Economics before working in the Foreign Office at the same time.

Kyrke-Smith is godmother to Middlemiss's youngest daughter, who was ten weeks old when her mother died. Her older sisters were six and three.

Apart from the usual "ups and downs" of being a parent of young children, Middlemiss had not experienced previous serious perinatal mental health issues.

In 2021, when she died, Middlemiss, 37, was recovering from a caesarean section and was nervous about Covid. "She wasn't getting out much," Kyrke-Smith says. "It's very easy for mums to get isolated quite quickly. What we saw with Sophie was a pattern of withdrawal, which is quite a common experience for new mums. I knew she was really worrying about whether or not her baby was getting enough milk. Again, a really common worry."

Her friend's sleeplessness, even for a parent of a newborn, was concerning. "I remember being really worried about her sleep. She would be sending messages through the night, clearly worrying about things. People who die by suicide are more likely to have suffered with insomnia."

Three days before she died, Middlemiss went to A&E seeking help with feeding her baby and was kept in for a night. "So they obviously wanted to look after her. But I suspect she was there about her baby rather than about her. And one of the challenges I wanted to highlight is that so often it becomes about the baby and how the baby's doing and not about how the mum's doing.

"I won't ever know whether they asked, 'Are you OK?' And if they did, whether she was asked that compassionately. And then whether the conversations they were having about the baby's feeding were done in a way that was considerate of the mental health struggles that my friend may have been having.

> "It's very easy for mums to get isolated quite quickly

"I hear a lot from mums that they're made to feel guilty because the breastfeeding isn't working or because they're not giving the right amount of formula top-up. Could that have added to my friend's anxiety or guilt that she wasn't somehow able to care for her baby in the way that she wanted to or society would expect her to?"

The reality, those close to Middlemiss told Kyrke-Smith, was that the baby's health was fine. "So you do wonder how much of it was her projecting her anxiety."

After her release from hospital, Middlemiss's messages were increasingly distressed.

"Feeling desperate today," read one message. "Did I worry about her being depressed? Yes. Did I worry about suicidal thoughts? Honestly, yes," Kyrke-Smith said in the debate. "But did I think she might take her own life? No."

One other message leapt out: "I'm just not sure I have it in me to keep going," she wrote. "I remember reading that and thinking, oh gosh, that's worrying," Kyrke-Smith says. "But she was trying to get the baby bottle feeding more. And I thought it might be in relation to her trying to get the shift to happen with her baby's feeding. That she was thinking, can I keep doing this? And I didn't check again what she meant by that. In retrospect, you read things woven into long threads of messages and think, should I somehow have spotted something? Should I have been able to identify them as suicidal thoughts and done something?

"Talking to other people who I've now connected with who have lost people to suicide, I think that guilt is quite common. But I did struggle. I still struggle with it."

Talking in a quiet committee room in Westminster, Kyrke-Smith explains that she suspects Middlemiss was consumed more by postnatal anxiety than depression, but still a mixture of the two. "I wonder if there was a moment of postpartum psychosis or something that happened in those final moments."

When she entered the House of Commons last summer she decided she wanted to "try and shine a light" on the problems many women have in the perinatal period (pregnancy and the first year after giving birth). "I hope to stop other women struggling as badly as Sophie did in the end."

The half-hour set aside for last Wednesday's debate proved to be inadequate as MPs queued to contribute. Michelle Welsh, the Labour MP for Sherwood Forest, said that she had a "traumatic" pregnancy and the mental health situation she faced "never leaves you".

Suicide is the leading cause of maternal death in the period from six weeks after birth to a year, and one in five women who give birth experience a mental health problem during pregnancy or after birth. Between 2021 and 2023, 26 women died because of mental health conditions during pregnancy or in the six weeks afterwards.

"We all know to think about physical challenges and complications



Laura Kyrke-Smith in Westminster and, top right, with her friend Sophie Middlemiss. Above right: Middlemiss at Cambridge

new mums

JOSHUA BRATT FOR THE TIMES





of pregnancy," Kyrke-Smith says. "We're tested, we're monitored. Mental health is not the same. And yet mental health is the biggest complication of pregnancy in the UK. That's not well understood. And until it is, it's not going to be normalised and discussed in the way that it needs to be."

Some 70 per cent of women will hide or underplay maternal mental health difficulties with the result they don't get the support they need. While we may have generally become much more willing to talk about our mental health, new mothers appear sometimes to feel ashamed to admit to anxiety or depression. "Society says it's supposed to be a joyful time in life. And often people can really struggle — and still have moments of joy," Kyrke-Smith says. "It's complex."

While there are perinatal specialist services across the country, help is "clearly not reaching everyone that it needs to". The average woman during pregnancy has 16 contacts with health professionals and Kyrke-Smith would like to see compassionate questions about the mother's mental health asked at those meetings and women routinely informed of what services are available, because often there seems to be a lack of awareness of the help that is on offer.

Middlemiss's father passed on to her a phrase that he had heard at a support group: it's OK not to be OK. This is something she thinks is vital for mothers to know and for the rest of us to have embedded in our approach to mothers.

"Of course, we need to get the professionals trained to ask those questions in the right way and to refer on quickly if additional support is needed," she says. "But it's a matter of public education and it should be OK for anyone to feel confident to ask how people are doing.

"It's OK to ask people if they're feeling suicidal. Don't be afraid to go there and to ask those questions, because asking those questions can affect that person's decision-making. It's preventing suicide in the worst cases but it's also preventing, whether they're extreme or not, mental health challenges getting in the way of a new mum being able to get their baby off to the best possible start in life."

New education programmes require money and there isn't much of that around. Wes Streeting, the health secretary, was criticised recently by charities after key pledges on women's health were abandoned as he halved the number of NHS targets in order to prioritise cutting waiting lists.

"We need to prioritise. In Aylesbury I will get asked about what we're doing to improve GP access. The waiting lists at the hospital are too long," Kyrke-Smith says. As Labour's "national health mission delivery champion" she is hardly likely to criticise the government. She says she is pinning her hopes on the forthcoming ten-year health plan. Research by the London School of Economics, she adds, shows the financial cost of poor maternal mental health, especially because of the effect it has on children.

Before she became an MP, Kyrke-Smith, 41, was executive director in the UK of the International Rescue Committee, the humanitarian NGO headed by David Miliband. She did not expect to win in Aylesbury, where her margin of victory was only 630 votes. In her maiden speech last July she explained that she had been inspired by her "most brilliant" friend to make tackling the mental health crisis a priority as an MP.

She speaks about Middlemiss with the consent of her family. "I hope it can be a catalyst for change for others. She was someone who was very driven to change things and make things better."

She thought hard about whether to highlight her case because she didn't want Middlemiss to become defined by her death. She told her fellow MPs last week about a woman with a first-class degree from Cambridge who had written travel guides and academic papers, had a Foreign Office career, a playful sense of humour and had begun to raise a beautiful family. "I wanted to be really clear in the speech that these were the last few difficult days and weeks of her life," she says. "And her life was wonderful."

I tidy for money. I'm an organiser to the LA elite

After turning 40, I wanted a career change so I took drastic action. Here's what I've learnt, says Martha Hayes

I am standing in the walk-in pantry of a recently renovated multimillion-dollar family home in a leafy suburb of Los Angeles, decanting dried quinoa into a glass container. I'm surrounded by cardboard boxes overflowing with opened packets of food and miscellaneous kitchen equipment. For many, the task of unpacking after a house move is undesirably daunting. For me, it's all in a day's work. This isn't my place — it's a home I've been hired to organise.

If you'd told me when I moved to the city as a freelance journalist five years ago I'd have a second career that involved clearing out messy cupboards and shopping for storage solutions I probably would have spat out my green juice. I'm no stranger to a Hollywood mansion — but it's usually to interview a celebrity such as Gugu Mbatha-Raw or Eva Longoria, not sort through someone else's bathroom cabinet or underwear drawer. So how did I get here?

The short answer is that I entered my forties and couldn't shake off an intense feeling of career disillusionment. I was no longer making a decent living and I knew I had something else in me. When I came across a 12-week course called How to Become a Professional Organiser, run by Dilly Carter of the hit BBC TV series *Sort Your Life Out*, it was like a lightbulb switching on.

I had never admitted it to myself — or anyone else — before but organising is my jam. The physical act of turning something messy and chaotic into something perfect and calm is not only enjoyable to me, it is meditative. When I reflect on the defining moments of my life — from the death of my father when I was 12, to losing my mother when I was 35, to trying to conceive — I can pinpoint the organising projects that helped me through.

So, you see, it's a skill I've been honing since before I knew there was a word for it — and long before the Japanese organising expert Marie Kondo told us to get rid of anything that no longer "sparked joy" in her bestselling 2011 book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* and sparked a global decluttering phenomenon. But it wasn't until I signed up for a continuing professional development (CPD) certification last year that I realised I could make a career out of it.

The course not only arms me with the tools to start my business (from work experience decluttering and organising various rooms to social media marketing) but the guidance to stand me in good stead.

"Eighty per cent of this is your personality and who you are and 20 per cent is organising," Carter says. "You want to leave not only having done a great job but making people feel lovely."

Just weeks after qualifying and completing in-depth case studies, I booked my first official client.





Martha Hayes

> **The act of turning something messy into something perfect is meditative**

A friend whose wardrobe I have organised name-drops me in a WhatsApp group — think high-flying professionals in the entertainment industry swapping recommendations on everything from ob-gyns to earthquake-proofing artwork.

I haven't even had a chance to think of a name for my business. Word-of-mouth continues to help it spread and the next few months are a whirlwind of client consultations and trips to the Container Store (I source everything from drawer dividers to shelving solutions).

It's exhilarating and very hard work. Not just because it's physically gruelling and I'm used to sitting at a desk, but because it's an enormous learning curve. Professional organising is a job no amount of training can prepare you for. You're going into someone's home, pulling out all their belongings, asking them to go through them one by one to decide what they no longer need, then putting them back in a more organised fashion. And that's the bare bones.

It's also an exercise in problem-solving (choosing the right storage solutions is key), time management (it's impossible to predict how long a project will take) and customer service etiquette (you're often dealing with people who are overwhelmed and emotional, eg they're moving house).

It's almost a year now since I launched my business, Rework the Room. I've been to some beautiful homes, met some fascinating people and — I hope — made a difference to their lives. Of course, there are moments arriving at a client's house in my leggings and Crocs when I miss my old life but then I think about how privileged I am to be working for myself, doing something I love.

In a big city, where the successful but time-poor outsource everything they can, professional organisers are now more in demand than ever. And no one is happier about that than me.

GETTY IMAGES; GARETH IWAN JONES

Have you got 'food noise'? It's the new buzzword



Can a failed dieter silence his constant food cravings without Ozempic? Michael Odell has a go

them, say, at 1pm, 5pm and 9pm. The study found that those eating later burnt fewer calories and more slowly.

I tried it. Having my last meal of the day at 5pm was far too early. By 8pm my food noise sounded like AC/DC's Angus Young soloing on a 4ft-long ham and cheese baguette. Usually I am a night owl but to avoid this siren call I went to bed at 9.30pm, slept badly and woke up at 5.30am ... hungry.

One hack suggested by a friend who also hears symphonies of food noise helped. Simply chewing on a handful of nuts before doing any serious

> **Drugs like Ozempic are the new way to get 'food silence'**

damage with an unhealthy breakfast did work. But the connection between loud food noise and fatigue is also important for me. Carbs are what my body demands after a bad night as it thrashes about looking for a quick energy boost (carbohydrates are converted into glucose by the body quickly).

Clearly I could be making better choices here. For me, buttered toast works like a pair of food noise-cancelling headphones made of dough. If I can bear to wait, oats work too, and their slow energy release means the feeling of fullness lasts longer.

My other big challenge is "wine noise". It is not a problem Monday to Thursday but as soon as the weekend is in sight (and bear in mind Thursday is the new Friday) I can hear it like an old BBC radio announcer: "Good evening, this is merlot calling." And the thing is, after a glass or two, I hear food noise in the other ear. It is like a stereo playing tunes by Fat Boy Trying to Be Slim on repeat. Yeo has some useful insights here.

"Not all food noise is the same," he says. "When you've eaten a plate of rice, you're soon full and more of it doesn't appeal. However, your body will still call for something else, something really special and calorific, like a chocolate brownie. A craving after wine is often similar. It's not real hunger."

Yeo is unusual for a scientist. He doesn't talk down to us from lofty heights. He hears the noise too.

"Yes, I hear it," he says. "The days when we simply blamed hungry people for a lack of self-control are gone. There is often a genetic influence at play but, if you're determined to go without weight-loss drug interventions, you still have good options, like exercise."

The 51-year-old keeps himself in equilibrium by commuting 30 miles a day by bike.

"I absolutely love food," he says. "For example, today I have just eaten my lunch but I am already thinking about what I will have for dinner this evening, and I already know what I will eat tomorrow too. My wife is completely different. She doesn't hear that noise at all. The deal I made with myself is: I love food, I try to earn it."



Michael Odell

Professor Naveed Sattar is an expert in cardiometabolic medicine at the University of Glasgow. Last year he was appointed the government's Obesity Mission chair. As well as being an academic he does clinical work at the Glasgow lipid clinic where he treats obesity in some of the most disadvantaged people in the UK.

"I think trying to cancel food noise without recourse to weight-loss drugs is perfectly achievable, but there is no doubt it's easier for people who have the skills and resources to cook healthily and take regular exercise," he says. "It's much harder if income and lifestyle make you dependent on fast food or cheap processed food options. And I'm afraid to say the UK is the sick man of Europe in this regard. Wealth inequality really does equate with who hears food noise and their chances of mitigating its effects."

Drinking a glass of water before a meal. Eating piles of veg, pulses and protein. These have all proved useful to me turning down the food noise volume. But it sounds like it may not be long before self-regulation is unnecessary.

Sattar points to a new generation of weight-loss drugs soon to be available. MariTide, made by the US pharma company Amgen, is undergoing phase 2 trials. It will be delivered by a monthly injection rather than weekly and trials show users losing 20 per cent of their body weight. What's more, those on the trial reported the weight staying off for five months after injections ended — ie they maintained weight loss without further intervention — which has given rise to speculation that even a three-monthly jab might be sufficient.

Perhaps even more enticing is Orforglipron, a weight-loss tablet

> **A craving after wine is often not real hunger**

taken daily that is due to be licensed in the US next year. Without the need for refrigeration or delivery via syringe or pen, this option promises to be cheaper and easier to use.

"To be honest, I wish we didn't need these drugs because, given the right opportunities and environment we can all self-regulate," Sattar says. "But the evidence base is good. They work and, for now, that's where we are."

The NHS spends £6.5 billion a year treating obesity and associated conditions. That's a lot of money to drown out food noise. Coming to compulsive snackers everywhere soon, it is hoped: the sound of silence.

first night

opera

Semele

Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris (185min)

★★★★☆

Paris has had first look at a new Handel co-production heading for the Royal Opera this summer, and it's fair to say that the show — or at least the last half-hour of it — has hit a nerve. The cheers just about outgunned the boos in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées as Oliver Mears — the Royal Opera's director, who staged it — took his bow on the first night.

I'm not surprised by the mixed reaction. *Semele*, written in 1744, has some of Handel's most varied music, performed with scintillating verve here by the chorus and period instrument orchestra of Le Concert d'Astrée under Emmanuelle Haïm's direction. But it also has a brutal mythological plot in which the mortal Semele is seduced by the god Jupiter and then destroyed after machinations by his furious wife, Juno.

I won't reveal how Semele is destroyed in Mears's 1960s-era staging, except to say that it's a bold thing to depict in the week after we have commemorated Auschwitz. The shock is heightened because until Act III we had been watching what seemed like one of those flippant, trouser-dropping Whitehall farces set to unusually high-class music — with Jupiter as a wealthy, Giovanni-like serial adulterer. We even had the veteran bass Brindley Sherratt cavorting around in his underpants. And there's a reworking of one of Jonathan Miller's most famous gags — when the excellent tenor Ben Bliss, playing Jupiter, put a crackly LP on an old record player to launch the opera's hit tune, *Where'er You Walk*.

So it's this jolting shift from frivolity to horror that probably did most to trigger the boos. Shame, because there's plenty of fine singing. Alice Coote froths from all available apertures as the spurned Juno. Sherratt's weighty bass is well deployed. The excellent countertenor Carlo Vistoli, as Semele's rejected lover, hurls out torrents of indignant semiquavers. Niamh O'Sullivan seizes her histrionic chances as Semele's messed-up sister. And Pretty Yende in the title role? She drifts in intonation at times, but the voice has a rich timbre and she plays the naive, besotted and eventually horribly discarded Semele to perfection.

Richard Morrison

To Feb 15; then at the Royal Opera House, London, from Jun 30

HELEN MURRAY



Flawless performances from Harmony Rose-Bremner, Romola Garai, Gina McKee and Deborah Findlay

One woman's world

Annie Ernaux's controversial French memoir is treated to an acting masterclass, says Clive Davis

theatre

The Years

Harold Pinter Theatre, London (115min)

★★★★☆

Forgive me, dear reader, for here comes another of those pesky trigger warnings, although it's not the one you might have expected if you've been following the controversy generated by this adaptation of the memoir by the Nobel prizewinning French author Annie Ernaux. Yes, there is indeed a harrowing description of a backstreet abortion, one which has been causing fainting fits among some audience members. The performance I saw fell victim to the curse too; a pause of about five minutes ensued before things restarted, to much cheering all round.

Still, I'm inclined to press a different kind of red button. It's true that Eline Arbo's production — now in the West End after an acclaimed run at the Almeida — draws first-rate performances from the five actresses playing the central character at different stages of her life. All in all, it's an acting masterclass, though the storyline itself is wooden at times.

Chronicling the life of a woman from a modest 1940s childhood to old age as a member of the middle classes, Arbo and Ernaux embark on a trek through predictable landmarks. "The increasingly rapid arrival of new things", as the script puts it, includes statutory references to the arrival of rock'n'roll in the Fifties, students waving banners in 1968, 1980s aerobics classes and the advent of Windows 95.

Arbo has injected enough humour to compensate for the bien-pensant lantern lecture. When the young unnamed heroine discovers masturbation, Anjli Mohindra throws herself into a comic-strip frenzy, rubbing herself against every object near to hand like an infant Barbarella. And the preludes to each change of generation, in which the characters pose for a photograph against the backdrop of a white sheet, are conveyed with droll nods and winks. Nor will I forget the moment, towards the end, when Romola Garai and Gina McKee throw themselves into an over-the-top erotic encounter that could be a parody of those French arthouse films where Left Bank intellectuals talk Derrida while dallying in bed.

Deborah Findlay and Harmony Rose-Bremner are flawless too. If the soundtrack choices are sometimes on the nose (Jefferson Airplane's *White Rabbit* represents the burnt-out Sixties), the actresses add a little musical embellishment of their own on different instruments; Rose-Bremner has a very soulful voice. As for that abortion scene, the trauma is much milder than James Norton's self-harming extravaganza in *A Little Life*, which ran at this same theatre in 2023. It's a testament to Garai's talent that the words cut so deep.

To April 19

dance

Hidden

Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry (120min)

★★★☆☆

The veteran UK dance-circus company Motionhouse's weightily themed new touring show has quite a lot going for it. As was amply evident at the world premiere at Warwick Arts Centre, there are vigorously acrobatic performances by a young cast as well as the work's mightily impressive design.

Underlying all this is a sense of urgency about the state of the modern world and a recognition of the resilience of the often beleaguered people in it. The company's co-founder Kevin Finnan is concerned with the darkness, division and stories of survival behind today's environmental and political crises. As he puts it in a programme note, "The best of humanity ... is sometimes hidden in today's very fast-moving world." Hence the work's title.

The show is split into two acts. In the first and longer section, seven remarkably strong, agile dancers make choreographed use of Simon Dormon's mobile and mutable set — just two pieces of triangular scaffolding, but under Finnan's masterful guidance the dancers shift the wedge-like objects into many shapes and configurations. Dormon's ingenuity is further enhanced by eye-catching digital imagery (credited to Logela Multimedia and Barret Hodgson), much of which is projected onto the wedges.

As clever as the technical elements are, it is troubled human beings who are the real focus of *Hidden*. Finnan pushes his cast to their limits. They embody drive and anxiety as they slide, climb, swing, flip and leap upon, off, from and around each other and the set. Then a (wisely unspecified) disaster strikes, exposing their vulnerabilities while testing their collective mettle.

Hidden offers some indelible passages — a gorgeous, tender male duet, say, or a striking scene in which a pair of women are cocooned in plastic wrap attached to the moveable set pieces. The second act, staged on and in front of a steep ramp, strikes a more muted tone, repetitive and unresolved. If, by its finish, *Hidden* doesn't quite hit the profundity to which it aspires, at least Finnan and his creative team are aiming sky-high.

Donald Hutera

Touring to Jan 2026

dance

Our Mighty Groove

Sadler's Wells East, London

★★★☆☆

At a time when theatres are struggling financially, it's little short of a miracle to find a new one opening, especially a theatre devoted to dance. But then Sadler's Wells East, the fourth venue in the Sadler's Wells empire, began life more than a decade ago, the grand project of its artistic boss Alistair Spalding.

Now his ambitious new dance palace is up and running in the shape of a striking brick-faced construction (the architects O'Donnell and Tuomey) situated in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in east London. Inside are six rehearsal studios (the building will be a laboratory for new dance), a hip-hop academy, a choreographic school and a steeply raked black box theatre. With 550 seats it's a third the size of the mothership theatre in Islington yet has a stage just as big.



The show celebrated club culture

And the opening show? *Our Mighty Groove*, a loose and likeable celebration of club culture, was designed to put everyone in the mood to party and show off the flexibility of the auditorium. So in the first half we had a conventional theatrical experience, as the choreographer Vicki Igbokwe-Ozoagu and her impressive seven-strong Uchenna dance troupe — augmented by a dozen enthusiastic young dancers from east London — introduced us to the denizens of Club Groove, an underground nightclub (the design was suitably dark and minimal). After a 40-minute interval to remove most of the seats, we were transported inside the club for a second half in which the cast continued their moves on a variety of platforms while the promenading audience was invited to join in.

It had a slow start, but picked up pace once we met the characters who go to Club Groove to lose their inhibitions and find themselves. Among them the club's head of security, the influencer and her BFF, the fashionista and the celebrity.

Igbokwe-Ozoagu's choreography, which blends street dance with African and contemporary dance styles, may not be especially distinctive (neither is the pulsating recorded score), but it was delivered with a sparkly showbiz vibe and an infectious spirit that got the all-ages audience up and dancing in the joyously interactive second half. So job well done.

Debra Craine

SIM CANETTY-CLARKE



‘Enjoying Beethoven sonatas doesn’t mean you can’t also enjoy Mary Poppins’

Pianist Stephen Hough tells Richard Morrison about writing a 9/11 tribute — and his racy second novel

Immaculately suited and booted and sipping afternoon tea in one of London’s grander cafés, Stephen Hough looks as if he has stepped out of a bygone era. Perhaps the era that the polymath pianist turned painter turned novelist turned composer evokes in *The World of Yesterday*, the gloriously atmospheric piano concerto he wrote and premiered last year.

That world was pre-First World War Vienna, as conjured up in a memoir by the Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig (from which Hough also pinched the title for his concerto). Zweig wrote it decades later, in exile from the Nazis, and the book is infused with nostalgia for the dazzling artistic milieu in which Zweig grew up but which had been obliterated by the 1930s.

“Zweig makes the point that the incredible intellectual flowering of 1900s Vienna was very much a Jewish creation,” Hough says. “The measure of success for bright young Jews in that city then was becoming a great painter or writer or musician. And many did.”

Would Cheshire-born Hough, 63, have liked to have lived in the cultural hothouse of Vienna in 1900? London in 2025 doesn’t quite exude the same vibes, does it? Hough laughs. “Actually,” he says, gesturing to the plush, panelled tearoom in which we sit, “this is maybe as close as we can get. No, that world has totally disappeared.”

However, the original spark for Hough’s piano concerto (which he plays on tour this month to coincide with the album release) came not from Zweig’s book but an aborted movie project. “In early 2021 when we were in lockdown and concerts weren’t happening, I got this email from a Hollywood film director,” Hough explains. “He said he wanted to make a movie about a pianist writing a piano concerto, and would I be interested in writing the concerto. I had nothing much else to do so I said yes.”

The movie’s plot, it transpired, was a touch macabre. Set in the 1930s it was about an Austrian baroness who hires a young American conductor to come to her castle and complete some sketches for a piano concerto that her sister had composed before killing herself. The conductor obliges, but the baroness becomes more and more unhinged because the music isn’t turning out the way she wants.

“Anyway, the guy escapes from the castle with his sketches,” Hough continues. “The final scene happens a year later, with him playing the concerto to wild acclaim. But this triumph is interspersed with scenes of the baroness walking into a lake and killing herself.”

Mercifully, perhaps, the funding for the movie fell through. “But I was left with my sketches, so I thought maybe I can turn this into a real concerto.”

Then the idea of basing it on Zweig’s memoir occurred to him, and the rest is history. Almost literally so when it comes to the concerto’s style, which often evokes the lush music of Mahler, Ravel and Richard Strauss.

But there’s another way in which Hough’s concerto steps back into the “world of yesterday”. It’s very much a piece written by a virtuoso pianist for himself to play. “Yes,” he agrees, “I was very conscious that from the time of Mozart to Prokofiev, Rachmaninov and Bartok, most piano concertos were written by pianist-composers for themselves to take on tour, almost like their calling cards. Tchaikovsky was the exception — the one who wouldn’t have been able to play his own concertos.”

Hough, who in 2022 became the first British-born classical pianist for 45 years to be knighted, has revived something else from the era of keyboard giants. When it comes to encores he sees nothing wrong with giving the audience some razzle-dazzle with no intellectual pretensions attached. At the Last Night of the Proms last September, for instance, he slotted in his own hilarious and spellbindingly virtuosic fantasia on *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*.

“One good thing about our present age of eclecticism is that it allows for everything,” he says. “Just because you enjoy playing Op 111 [Beethoven’s last and arguably most profound piano sonata] doesn’t mean you can’t also enjoy *Mary Poppins*. That’s not to put them on the same level, but we don’t have to be serious all the time.”

His most recent major work is a piano quintet subtitled *Les Noces Rouges* (“The Red Wedding”) that he premiered with the Viano String Quartet in New York three months ago. One of the wildest pieces he’s ever written? “Yes,” he replies. “It’s crazy.”

Again it’s based on a book, or rather a short vignette in the middle of a book: Willa Cather’s 1918 novel *My Antonia*. It describes a rural Russian wedding, the subsequent drunken banquet and then a horrific sleigh ride in which the bride and groom are thrown overboard to feed pursuing wolves. Every facet is captured in Hough’s music, which begins innocuously with a Russian Orthodox hymn, accelerates into a passage based on boisterous drinking songs, then culminates in a hell-for-leather prestissimo in which every instrument is pushed to the edge of what’s possible.

“That last movement caused me the greatest trouble,” Hough says. “I knew I had to write manic chase music, but I couldn’t get beyond the first six bars. Then on tour I was holed up in a hotel in Shanghai for a week with a piano in my room and nothing to do except work. So I thought, ‘I’m going to dedicate the whole day to this and crack it,’ and the ideas started flowing.”

Those ideas included depicting the moment when the wolves devour the newly-wed couple with a series of fortissimo bass clusters that sound as if Hough is punching the keyboard with his left hand. “That’s exactly what it is,” he grins. “Well, with the flat of the hand actually. Great fun!”

> “Tchaikovsky couldn’t have performed his own concertos

His other new piece, which just premiered on Radio 3 (available on BBC Sounds), is more sombre. Commissioned as part of Radio 3’s *Sounds of the Century* project, in which 25 composers each draw inspiration from a significant event in the first 25 years of the 21st century, Hough was given the tough task of memorialising 9/11. He took an unexpected approach. His piece is called *Nocturne (September 10, 2001)*. Note the “wrong” date.

“Yes, it’s reflecting on the night before the planes went into the Twin Towers,” he explains. “I wanted to capture the unease of a world that’s about to change but hasn’t done so yet. So the piece begins very innocently, all on the white notes of the piano. Then disturbing elements creep in until there’s a big climax. After that the ending is exactly the same as the beginning, except that the right hand is playing in a different key. I wanted to convey the feeling that it seems to be the same world yet nothing will be the same again.”

Talking of changing history, what about the rumour that his next project is writing an alternative slow movement for Beethoven’s third piano concerto? Beethoven’s own slow movement is generally reckoned to be pretty good. “Oh my gosh, I’m not supposed to say anything about this,” Hough says. “Let’s just say I’ve taken the ecstasy of Beethoven along a different path.”

And his fiction writing? Last time we met, Hough told me he was writing a new novel. His first was a cracker: a confession of sexual addiction by a self-loathing Catholic priest about to kill himself. This new one, he said, would be about a concert pianist who has a stalker ...

“Ah yes, I sketched it all out, but I’m almost afraid to go back and read it. I’m not sure I will like what I wrote.”

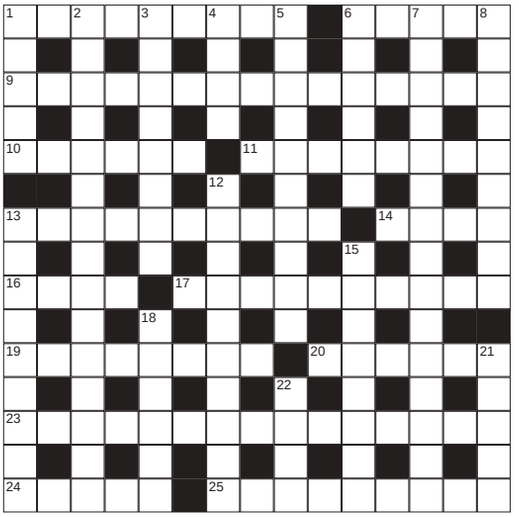
Hough plays *The World of Yesterday* with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra on Feb 26 at the Lighthouse, Poole; Feb 27 at the Bristol Beacon. The recording is out on Hyperion on Feb 28

TIMES+

Times+ members can join Stephen Hough for a three-course Viennese dinner in London on Feb 28. Visit mytimesplus.co.uk for further details

MindGames

General Knowledge Crossword No 272



Across

1 Chewy sweet, or pop music aimed at children (6,3)
6 The Greek goddesses Atropos, Clotho and Lachesis (5)
9 *The* ---, opera featuring the character Figaro (6,2,7)
10 Ornamental shrub of the genus Rhododendron (6)
11 Iron Age defensive structure built on high ground (8)
13 Susan Sarandon's co-star in the film *Thelma & Louise* (5,5)
14 Proofreading mark indicating that a correction should be ignored (4)
16 Shakespearean father of Regan, Goneril and Cordelia (4)
17 Simone ---, French feminist author of *The Second Sex* (2,8)
19 Prestigious award won by the film *Anora* in 2024 (5,3)
20 Metallic element named after a colour of the rainbow (6)
23 Hoagy Carmichael number notably recorded by Ray Charles (7,2,2,4)
24 Agave fibre used for making rope (5)
25 Technical name for indigestion (9)

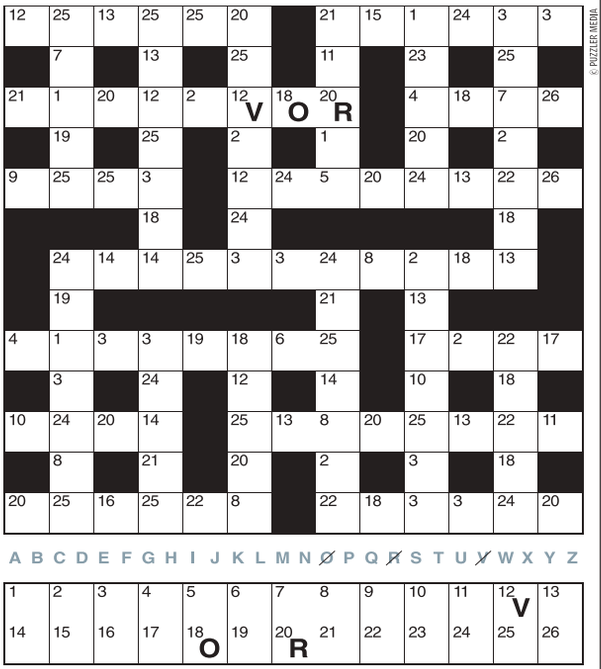
Down

1 Sergey ---, Ukrainian six-time pole vault world champion (5)
2 Huge inflatable obstacles intended to deter low-flying enemy aircraft (7,8)
3 Vassal of a feudal lord (8)
4 Diluted rum (4)
5 Classic wartime drama starring Greer Garson in the title role (3,7)
6 Brazilian shanty town (6)
7 *A* ---, 1859 novel set around the time of the French Revolution (4,2,3,6)
8 *The* ---, political magazine edited by Michael Gove (9)
12 Old name for a giraffe based on its resemblance to two other creatures (10)
13 Biodiverse Pacific island group belonging to Ecuador (9)
15 US TV show (1976-83) starring Jack Klugman as a forensic pathologist (6,1,1)
18 Cat breed with marbled fur (6)
21 Princess who married Jason in Greek myth (5)
22 --- of Court, legal institutions based in London (4)

Last week's solution

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

Codeword No 5447



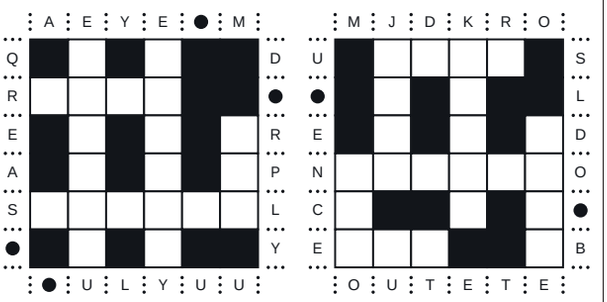
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
				O		R					V	

Every letter in this crossword-style grid is represented by a number from 1 to 26. Each letter of the alphabet appears in the grid at least once. Use the letters already provided to work out the identity of further letters. Enter letters in the main grid and the smaller reference grid until all 26 letters of the alphabet have been accounted for. Proper nouns are excluded. *Saturday's solution, right*

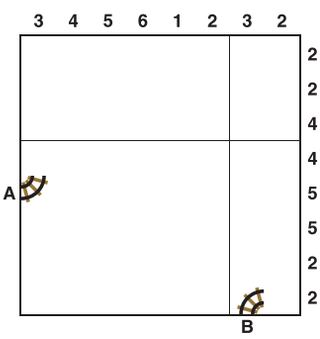
Cluelines **Stuck on Codeword?** To receive 4 random clues call 0901 293 6262 or text TIMECODE to 64343. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge. Texts cost £1 plus your standard network charge. For the full solution call 0905 757 0142. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5.30pm).

Lexica Easy No 7953 Hard No 7954



Slide the letters either horizontally or vertically back into the grid to produce a completed crossword. Letters are allowed to slide over other letters

Train Tracks No 2472



Lay tracks to enable the train to travel from village A to village B. The numbers indicate how many sections of track go in each row and column. There are only straight sections and curved sections. The track cannot cross itself.

Quintagram®

Solve all five **cryptic** clues using each letter underneath once only

1 Badly behaved little girl running back and forth (5)

_ _ _ _ _

2 Penny-pinching drunk (5)

_ _ _ _ _

3 Trust Ruth to display this arrogant gait (5)

_ _ _ _ _

4 Talk with Charlie about poetry (8)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

5 Unusual inn to fail, showing economic issue (9)

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

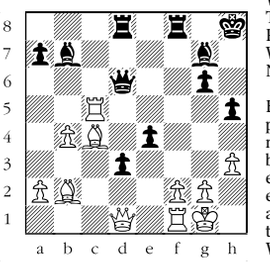
A	A	A	C	D	E	E	F
G	H	I	I	I	L	M	M
N	N	N	O	O	R	R	S
S	T	T	T	T	T	U	V

Challenge your mind with puzzle books from The Times



timesbookshop.co.uk

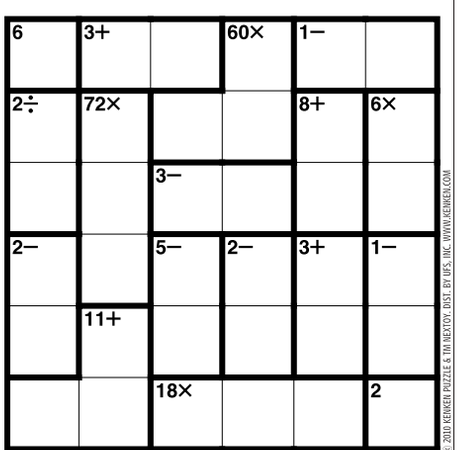
Winning Move



White to play. This position is from Priyanka-Khotenashvili, World Blitz Women, New York 2024.

Black has two central pawns advancing menacingly down the board. All things being equal, this would be expected to convey an advantage. However, things are not equal. What can White play?

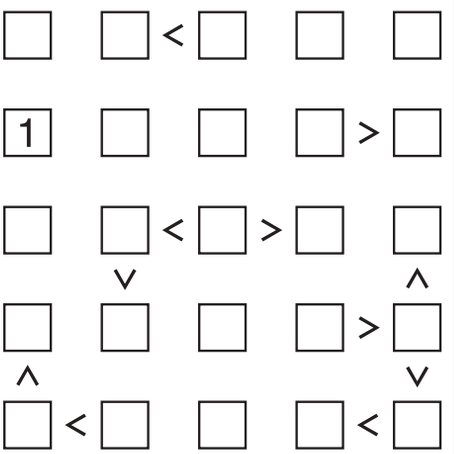
KenKen Easy No 6439



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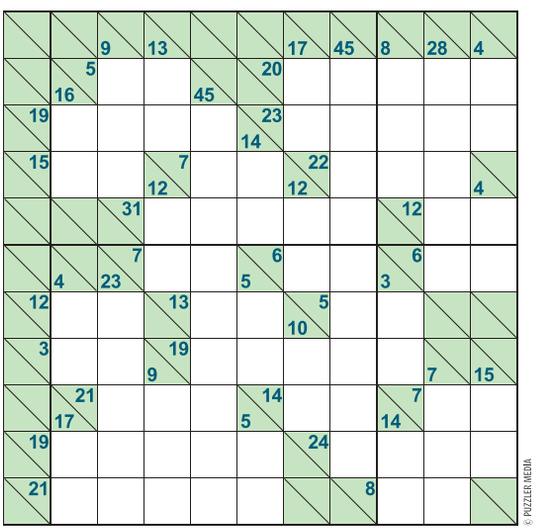
All the digits 1 to 6 must appear in every row and column. In each thick-line "block", the target number in the top left-hand corner is calculated from the digits in all the cells in the block, using the operation indicated by the symbol.

Futoshiki No 4987



Fill the blank squares so that every row and column contains each of the numbers 1 to 5 once only. The symbols between the squares indicate whether a number is larger (>) or smaller (<) than the number next to it.

Kakuro No 3946

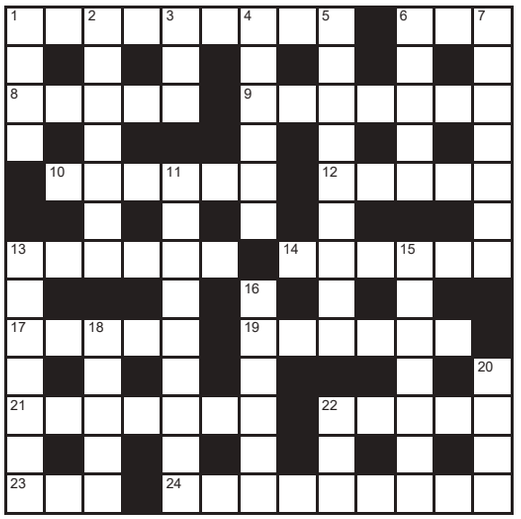


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Fill the grid using the numbers 1 to 9 only. The numbers in each horizontal or vertical run of white squares add up to the total in the triangle to its left or above it. The same number may occur more than once in a row or column, but not within the same run of white squares.

MindGames

times2 Crossword No 9763



Across

1 Good-natured, courteous (9)
6 Hardly any (3)
8 Focused learning (5)
9 Ludicrous (7)
10 Morally pure (6)
12 Distend, bloat (5)
13 Strand of cotton (6)
14 Conifer leaf (6)
17 Utter, articulate (5)
19 Science of vision (6)
21 Null and void (7)
22 Largest bone in the body (5)
23 Bloke (3)
24 In the main, as a rule (9)

Down

1 Instance, example (4)
2 Sales token (7)
3 Place down (3)
4 Public road (6)
5 Protective fabric cover used when redecorating (9)
6 Roughage (5)
7 Cycling trick (7)
11 Component in a combustion engine (5,4)
13 Tough, demanding (7)
15 Of the number ten (7)
16 Jack ---, author of *The Call of the Wild* (6)
18 Diplomat (5)
20 Donkey's cry (4)
22 Distant (3)

Solution to Crossword 9762

		G	M		B		W		Z		E	
	M	O	B	I	L	I	S	A	T	I	O	N
S		S		N		T		Y		N		T
E	A	S	I	E	S	T		L	Y	C	R	A
N		A		R		E		A				I
T	A	M	E		F	R	U	I	T	F	U	L
I		E		V			D		R		M	
M	A	R	R	I	A	G	E		H	E	R	E
E			L		O		S	A		N		
N	E	P	A	L		B	R	A	C	K	E	T
T		R		A		L		I		I		S
A	B	O	L	I	T	I	O	N	I	S	M	
L		P		N		N		T		H		

Need help with today's puzzle? Call 0905 757 0143 to check the answers. Calls cost £1 per minute plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

Bridge Andrew Robson

Wales thrashed England 20-0 in the first weekend of the Camrose trophy for home nations, held in Prestwick, Scotland. Watch Julian Pottage of Porthcawl make a light 4♥ on this deal from the match.

The England West led the top-of-rubbish nine of spades (note, there's no MUD — middle from three small cards — after supporting, as you can't have a doubleton). Declarer won the ace, crossed to the ace of clubs and played a low heart to the jack.

West won the queen and led a second club, East winning the king (felling declarer's queen) and leading a third club. Declarer ruffed and led a diamond to the jack.

East won the ace of diamonds and led a second heart, hoping to lure declarer into finessing. However, declarer did not fall for the bait — for two good reasons.

First, West surely had to have the king of hearts — otherwise he would have a virtual-Yarborough for his 2♠ bid. Second, and even more compellingly, if East had simply continued spades, declarer would have had no way to dummy to finesse in hearts; declarer knew that East realised that. If East held ♥Kxx, East would have exited with a spade (or a diamond) and waited for his king of hearts to score.

Declarer rose with the ace of hearts, felling West's king, and was soon claiming his game. Pottage-Ratcliffe were only N-S pair to bid and make 4♥ at the six tables in play. The English N-S went two down at the other table after declarer took two heart finesses (and suffered a diamond ruff).

Dealer: East, Vulnerability: East-West

Teams

	♠10632 ♥943 ♦J98 ♣A104	
♠975 ♥KQ ♦652 ♣J9753	N W E S	♠KQJ84 ♥875 ♦A10 ♣K82
	♠A ♥AJ1062 ♦KQ743 ♣Q6	

S(Pottage)	W	N(Ratcliffe)	E
			1♠
2♥(1)	2♠	3♥(2)	Pass
4♥	End		

(1) The other alternative for Pottage would be 2♠ (Michaels), showing five hearts and a five-card minor.
(2) Wow — that's a three-Shredded-Wheat bid from Tony Ratcliffe from Barry. But what a successful one. If he passes (as, let's be honest, many would), South will either reopen with a take-out double or 3♦; in either case, North will presumably bid 3♥ (although is there a case for a jump to 4♥ over 3♦?) and the game will be missed. Mind you, 4♥ wasn't necessarily destined to make ...

Contract: 4♥, Opening Lead: ♠9

Back to the English defence to Pottage's 4♥. Although East's second heart after winning the ace of diamonds was quite crafty (albeit unsuccessful), his decision to win the jack of diamonds with that ace was less so. If East lets dummy's jack win, declarer is surely bound to finesse in hearts (after all, declarer led a diamond to the jack to try to reach dummy to take the heart finesse). And down declarer will go. andrew.robson@thetimes.co.uk

Brain Trainer

EASY	41	+8	x2	−8	30% OF IT	+15	÷2	x3	−9	2/3 OF IT	ANSWER
MEDIUM	79	x4	−92	25% OF IT	+84	+1/5 OF IT	+68	+1/2 OF IT	+89	x2	ANSWER
HARDER	116	+773	x5	80% OF IT	+778	50% OF IT	x3	+707	+1/4 OF IT	−958	ANSWER

Polygon

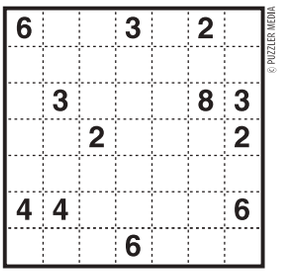


From these letters, make words of **three** or more letters, always including the central letter. Answers must be in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, excluding capitalised words, plurals, conjugated verbs (past tense etc), adverbs ending in LY, comparatives and superlatives.
How you rate 18 words, average; 24, good; 29, very good; 34, excellent

Saturday's answers

abeam, able, alba, amble, ameba, amenable, bagel, bagman, bale, baleen, balm, banal, bane, bang, bangle, beagle, beam, bean, bema, blag, blame, enable, gable, gamba, gamble, glebe, lamb, **manageable**, manbag, nameable

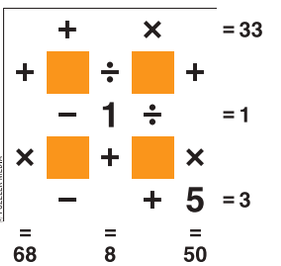
Cell Blocks No 5330



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Divide the grid into square or rectangular blocks, each containing one digit only. Every block must contain the number of cells indicated by the digit inside it.

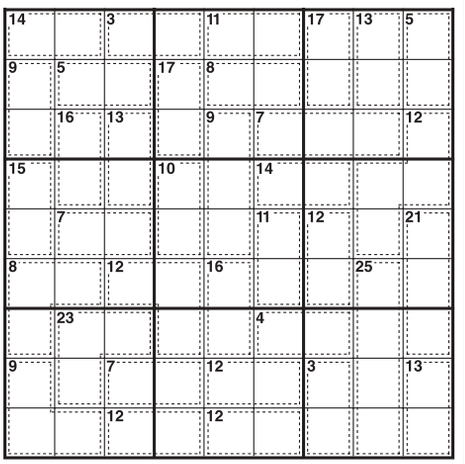
Set Square No 3949



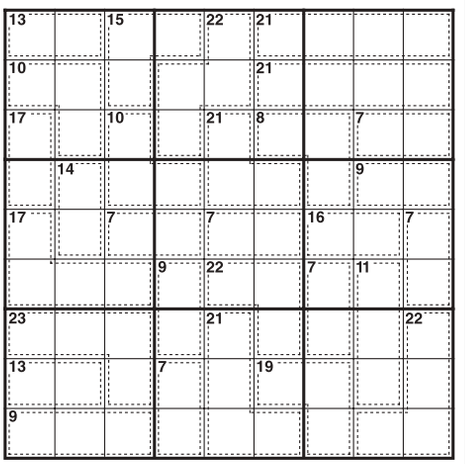
Enter each of the numbers from 1 to 9 in the grid, so that the six sums work. We've placed two numbers to get you started. Each sum should be calculated left to right or top to bottom.

Please note, BODMAS does not apply

Killer Gentle No 9932



Killer Tricky No 9933



As with standard Sudoku, fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9. Each set of cells joined by dotted lines must add up to the target number in its top-left corner. Within each set of cells joined by dotted lines, a digit cannot be repeated.

Cluelines **Stuck on Sudoku, Killer or KenKen?** Call 0901 293 6263 before midnight to receive four clues for any of today's puzzles. Calls cost £1 plus your telephone company's network access charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

Solutions

Quick Cryptic 2906

B	U	M	F		S	T	R	E	A	M	E	R
A		A		W		O		J		A		I
N	U	C	L	E	A	R		E	G	R	E	T
K		O		I		T		C		T		E
R	A	N	D	R		O	U	T	W	I	T	
U			D		I				N		U	
P	E	T	R	O	L		S	T	A	T	I	O	N
T		R			E		N				S	
	M	A	D	C	A	P		O	X	E	Y	E
O		C		H		L		R		V		T
U	L	T	R	A		A	D	A	M	A	N	T
I		O		O	N		K		D		L	
P	A	R	A	S	I	T	E		P	E	K	E

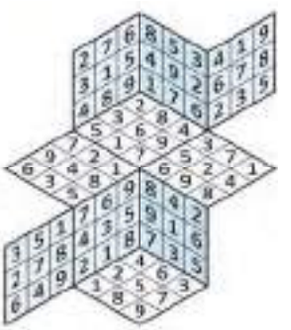
Codeword 5446

S	Q	U	I	R	M		U	N	I	S	O	N
N		N		I			E		P	E		E
E	R	A		S	U	B	J	U	G	A	T	E
E		B		K		A		R				D
Z	E	A	L		A	R	B	O	R	E	A	L
E		S		S		R		T		I		E
	H	A	Y	M	A	K	I	N	G			
E		E	M		C		C		H		T	
G	A	D	A	B	O	U	T		S	T	O	W
R				O		D		S		S		E
E	X	F	O	L	I	A	N	T		O	I	L
S		U		I			N		M		V	
S	P	R	U	C	E		B	R	E	E	Z	E

Kakuro 3944

	6	1		1	6	3		
	9	3	1	4	8	7		
		7	6			2	3	5
	7	9	5	4		8	1	7
1	2			1	2	3		1
3	8		2	3	1			2
	1	2	6		9	2	6	3
4	5	8	9			1	8	
1	3	9		3	7	4	9	1
2	6			1	5	3		

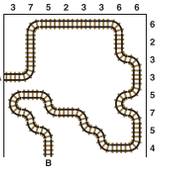
Tredoku 1876



Square Routes 310

R	B	I	L	E
I	L	C	Y	P
E	N	A	S	D
F	T	M	I	N
E	R	O	W	O

Train Tracks 2471



Set Square 3947

7	+	5	−	3
÷		+		+
1	×	9	×	6
×		×		−
8	−	2	×	4

Lexica 7947

T	I	M	I	D	
	N			R	
	T			O	
B	A	B	O	O	N
	C			P	
S	T	U	D	Y	

Cell Blocks 5329

2			6	12	4
2					
		4			
4	4	2			3
				4	2

Futoshiki 4985

3	1	< 2	4	5
2	5	4	1	3
1	< 2	< 3	5	4
4	> 3	5	> 2	1
5	4	1	3	> 2

KenKen 6438

30× 6	5	3	4	1	12+ 2
8+ 5	2	1	3	4	6
1	3	2	10× 5	6	4−
12× 2	4	6	1	7+ 5	3
4	6	5	2	7+ 3	1
3	1	4	6	2	5

Lexica 7948

C	L	O	S	E	
H			O		
E			B	I	D
R	A	G			I
U		E			M
B	U	M	B	L	E

Sudoku 15,608

7	6	5	8	2	1	4	3	9
8	3	1	5	4	9	7	6	2
9	2	4	3	6	7	1	5	8
3	9	2	4	1	6	5	8	7
1	4	7	9	5	8	6	2	3
5	8	6	2	7	3	9	4	1
6	1	8	7	3	5	2	9	4
4	7	9	6	8	2	3	1	5
2	5	3	1	9	4	8	7	6

Killer 9931

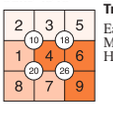
5	2	6	3	9	7	8	4	1
8	7	1	4	2	6	9	5	3
3	4	9	5	1	8	7	6	2
1	9	4	8	5	2	3	7	6
6	8	2	9	7	3	4	1	5
7	5	3	6	4	1	2	8	9
4	6	5	2	8	9	1	3	7
2	3	7	1	6	4	5	9	8
9	1	8	7	3	5	6	2	4

Today's solutions

Concise Quintagram
1 Warp
2 Lapse
3 Capsule
4 Machine
5 Consuming

Cryptic Quintagram
1 Madam
2 Tight
3 Strut
4 Converse
5 Inflation

Suko 4348



Brain Trainer
Easy 36
Medium 886
Harder 8,052

Word watch

Sturmer (b) A variety of eating apple (*Collins*)
Inwick (a) A ricocheting shot in curling (*Collins*)
Nidorous (c) Smelling of burnt fat (*OED*)

Chess — Winning Move

1 Rxh5+! gxh5 2 Qxh5+ Qh6 3 Qxh6 is mate

Quiz

1 7Up **2** Yeti or Abominable Snowman **3** Turin **4** Gilbert and Sullivan **5** Samuel Johnson, in *A Dictionary of the English Language* **6** *Richard Osman's House of Games* **7** Great Yarmouth **8** Texas **9** *Richard II* **10** The Barron Knights **11** Epidemiology **12** Bali **13** Henry Hunt **14** Istanbul **15** Bruce Forsyth

THE TIMES

10.02.25

MindGames

For extra puzzles
See page 10

Word watch
David Parfitt

Sturmer
a An extremely difficult job
b A variety of eating apple
c A period of heavy rainfall

Inwick
a A ricocheting shot in curling
b An administrative area in the Channel Islands
c A deep breath

Nidorous
a Maintaining a nest
b Covered in lumps or knobs
c Smelling of burnt fat

Answers on page 15

Sudoku

Easy No 15,609

				2			7
2					3	1	
		3	6		1		4
7			8		4	9	2
5		8		3			6
9	6	4			5	7	
3	9		1	8		5	
		5	3				
		6	9	5	2		3

Difficult No 15,610

9		6				1	8
	5						6
	1	5	6	8	4	7	2
2			1		9		5
	7	4	8		6	9	3
	2						1
			7	4	2		

Fiendish No 15,611

			7		2		
				1		3	
	8						9
	5		6			2	
4	2	3	8	5			6
8			1				
3	6		5	8	9		
7							
	2	4	6	3			

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Fill the grid so that every column, every row and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9.

The Times Daily Quiz
Olav Bjortomt

1 A 7 and 7 cocktail is named after Seagram's 7 Crown whiskey and which lemon-lime soft drink?

2 The title of the 2019 animated film *Abominable* refers to which legendary creature?

3 Designed by Guarino Guarini, the Chapel of the Holy Shroud is in which Italian city?

4 *The Sorcerer* (1877) was Richard D'Oyly Carte's first commission from which musical duo?

5 In 1755, who defined "Lexicographer" as "A writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge"?

6 "Answer Smash" is always the final round of which BBC2 quiz show?

DANIEL LEAL-OLIVAS/PA



7 Which Norfolk seaside resort is home to Merrivale Model Village?

8 The longest border between two US states is Oklahoma and which large state?

9 The titular king in which Shakespeare play says: "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me"?

10 Which comedy rock band was formed in Leighton Buzzard as the Knights of the Round Table in 1959?

11 What is the study of how often diseases occur in different groups of people and why?

12 Dewi Danu is the water goddess of the Hindus who live on which Indonesian island?

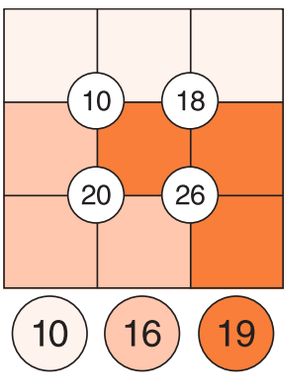
13 In 1832, which radical speaker became the first MP to call for women's suffrage?

14 Which Turkish city will host the next European Games in 2027?

15 Which entertainer (1928-2017) is pictured?

Answers on page 15

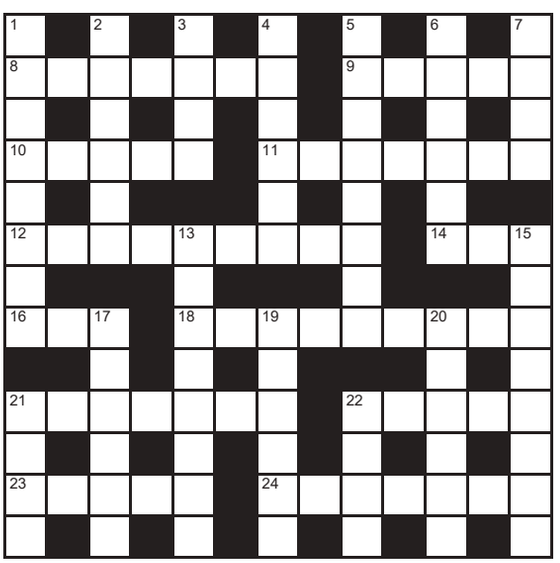
Suko
No 4348



Place the numbers 1 to 9 in the spaces so that the number in each circle is equal to the sum of the four surrounding spaces, and each colour total is correct

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The Times Quick Cryptic
No 2908 by Jimmy



Across

8 Advice on clues in cryptic form (7)
9 A key change ultimately for female pop singer (5)
10 Expensive vehicle parts picked up (5)
11 Discover hunter moving around area (7)
12 Quidditch, in essence, involves some irritation (9)
14 Hint written the wrong way is mine (3)
16 Tuber, in spring time, coming from the east (3)
18 I'm fearing shaking device which blows things up (9)
21 Someone who might instal pipes or soft timber (7)
22 Tropical fruit parent's held in hand (5)
23 Stand in atelier or move gently left (5)
24 Deserving lad denied entertaining delight (7)

Down

1 Lack transport in South London? (8)
2 Open watering hole with a lot of insects (6)
3 Female deity lives repeatedly (4)
4 Gutted criminal with a purpose for part of sentence (6)
5 Glide behind a boat's wake? It's oddly about right (5-3)
6 The French feel effects of hallucinogenic drugs and don't hold back (3,3)
7 Conclusions of treaty saddle China with informal agreement (4)
13 Timothy wanting time on phone still (8)
15 Object about argument, which is disconcerting (8)
17 Creamy confection in seconds consumed by timid person (6)
19 Billions lost from rubbish repair shop (6)
20 Setter's new diet regularly ignored after opening of picnic hamper (6)
21 Tweet cover of Prince record (4)
22 Drama created by Labour's leader blocking workers' reward (4)

Friday's solution on page 15

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LOOK WHO'S BACK

Rashford makes Villa debut as sub as his side cruise past Spurs with 2-1 win in FA Cup fourth round

PAGES 4-5





Masterful Plymouth hold out to stun limp Liverpool

PLYMOUTH Hardie 53 (pen)	**1**
LIVERPOOL	**0**

Hamzah Khalique-Loonat

The good ship Liverpool has run aground. Arne Slot's dreadnought was last seen just off the coast of Plymouth, the same spot where HMS Argyle was sighted, sailing off merrily into the fifth round of the FA Cup.

It has been some time since a giant-killing of this stature, with the Premier League and Champions League leaders being unceremoniously dumped from the cup, by a team affixed to the bottom of the Championship.

This was only their third win since November 5 last year. And it was deserved. Plymouth fought and battled hard. They masterfully manoeuvred tricky tactical waters, then battened down the hatches for nine minutes of stoppage time, in which Liverpool whipped up a furious storm but could not breach that watertight defence.

This was Plymouth's first win over Liverpool since 1956, but it may just have been the greatest act of resilience in these parts since Francis Drake set sail in 1588.

Liverpool's form, experience, and eight FA Cup titles counted for nothing here. What mattered instead was Plymouth's doggedness, their resilience, their utter commitment to the task at hand. And that single, precious goal secured by Ryan Hardie from the penalty spot.

With that goal, whispers of a tilt at a fêted Quadruple were quelled, and murmurs of something perhaps more remarkable — Plymouth staying up — spread.

"This is the biggest moment so far in my coaching career," Miron Muslic, the Plymouth head coach, said. "The biggest moment is yet to come, at the end of the season, when we are staying up."

Had Plymouth survived through good fortune and trickery, those suggestions would be laughed off, but his team deserved to progress; they were well drilled and offered their opponents next to nothing until the end of regulation time.

"We hardly created anything," Slot said. "Sometimes you deserve a bit of luck if you work as hard as Plymouth did."

The Dutch head coach may have fielded a heavily rotated XI, of which he insisted he has "no regrets", but there was still plenty of firepower within it, as it boasted a forward line of Federico Chiesa, Diogo Jota and Luis Díaz.

By the end, even Darwin Núñez was called from the bench, but his efforts could not turn the tide. It was not just a matter of effort for a Plymouth side who were coached to perfection by Muslic, which inspired the home support. Each of their forays was greeted with huge encouragement in the stands, helping to sweep the players forward.

When Plymouth had possession, they used a 3-4-3, in which they left their forward line narrow and positioned up against the Liverpool centre backs. By playing direct, they were able to move up the field, contest second balls and disrupt Liverpool's rhythm.

But without the ball, Plymouth dropped into a 5-2-3, with their 2-3 portion of the team forming a pentagon around Liverpool's midfield pivot, Wataru Endo. If Liverpool dared to pass into him, the Plymouth players would fold around him.

It was smart, but by the fifth minute, Slot proposed a solution. James McConnell was instructed to invert from right back into midfield inside alongside Endo, and Harvey Elliott was told to drop into a conventional right-back space, so Liverpool could build.

Joe Gomez, the team's captain for the day — and one of two Liverpool players to have featured the last time these two teams met in 2017 — needed replacing early on.

"We all know at which moment he felt a bit insecure because he didn't sprint back fully," Slot said.

"Then he said he was not 100 per cent sure and he was afraid that if he made one extra sprint that things would go wrong."

Slot believes the defender avoided a muscle tear.

Isaac Mabaya was summoned from the bench. The 20-year-old debutant was moved to right back, McConnell shuffled into midfield, and Endo was redeployed at centre back.

Muslic responded: Callum Wright, the left winger, followed Mabaya into midfield, but Slot's tactical counter-punch was even swifter; Liverpool began building deeper, to create more space for McConnell, who was supported by Jota, Trey Nyoni and Elliott dropping in and around Plymouth's midfield pentagon.

It took a little longer for Muslic to work out this problem, but he eventually asked his winger on the far side of the ball to mark McConnell, and so the guarded exchange of the opening minutes renewed itself for the rest of the half. The shuffling was more mechanics of the cup than magic, but it set the stage for a gripping second period.

The drama began with an innocuous moment. Darko Gyabi was juggling the ball with his back to the Liverpool goal, inside the away team's penalty area.

DAVID KLEIN/REUTERS; DAN MULLAN/GETTY IMAGES



I'd love United up next, says Devon's new penalty hero

Hamzah Khalique-Loonat

Plymouth Argyle's giant-killing hero is hoping for Manchester United in the next round of the FA Cup, having led his team to victory over Liverpool in the fourth round.

Ryan Hardie's second-half spot kick secured a 1-0 win at Home Park that knocked out the eight-times winners. "I'd love Man United, we'd take them here and have another go," he said.

The forward atoned for failing to convert his penalty in Plymouth's 2-1 defeat by Chelsea in 2022, a memory that, he says, resurfaced the night before the game.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, what will happen if the same thing happens?' " he said. However, "practising every day" paid off as Hardie dispatched his penalty beyond Caoimhin Kelleher, the Liverpool goalkeeper.

The Plymouth head coach, Miron Muslic, described the game as the greatest achievement of his managerial career. Muslic took over last month, replacing Wayne Rooney, with the club at the bottom of the Championship. The upset yesterday was only the club's second win in three months.

The 42-year-old, who joined from Cercle Bruges on a 3½-year contract, masterminded the win with astute tactics. "Normally I'm very good with my words and eloquent," a beaming Muslic said. "But I'm speechless. I realise it's the FA Cup, the biggest and most famous cup in the world.

"We just wanted to be ourselves in the best possible way. To be structured, organised, be brave, show ourselves, use this stage and shine. This is the biggest moment so far in my coaching career. The biggest moment is yet to come, at the end of the season, when we are staying up.

"I am going to go home, rewatch the game, eat some nachos and drink a Fanta."

His opposite number, Arne Slot, insisted that he had no regrets about his team selection. Slot left a number of first-team players in Liverpool, including Virgil van Dijk, the club captain, and Mohamed Salah, the Premier League leaders' top scorer this season.

"They trained yesterday and they will train tomorrow as well," Slot said. "Most of the things we do for a reason, we don't just do it. I said before, we have to play many games now. For the last few weeks we have played twice every week and now, in the upcoming weeks, [it will be] twice again.

"Therefore it is not only for them good to once in a while have a week where they only play one game, but also for the ones here today, they need the intensity of the game because you can keep training but once in a while they need a game."

Slot also handed a debut off the bench to Isaac Mabaya, 20, when Joe Gomez was brought off with a suspected injury. The substitute was then withdrawn himself in the second half as Liverpool chased the game.

"It's a fantastic day for any player to make their debut, and for him as well, but I had to take him off for two reasons," Slot explained.

"He was already on a yellow and there was a game with a lot of duels and intensity and that's their playing style — they bring a lot of long balls in and if you are wrong [with your timing] it is another yellow and then a red. So it was a game that was hard enough with 11, never mind ten.

"And I felt we needed to make an offensive substitution and with Jarell [Quansah], Wata [Endo] and Kostas [Tsimikas], it didn't seem smart to me to take them off, so add that to that decision and I thought I had to tell him, because making your debut and being taken off after an hour, or something like this, is very disappointing for him, of course."



Slot had no regrets over his decision to rest stars

Online today



Martin Samuel's 7am column

"He hasn't scored against them. He hasn't made an assist. Erling Haaland's personal record against Real Madrid is poor. And needs to change. Manchester City need him tomorrow night, probably more than ever — plus he will never have a better chance to break that duck."

With Elliott at his back, he flicked it towards goal, and into the Liverpool's midfielder's outstretched arms — for which Sam Barrott correctly awarded a penalty kick.

Caoimhin Kelleher has an outstanding record at saving spot kicks, but Hardie's effort was dispatched to the opposite corner of the goalkeeper's dive, and Home Park was enraptured.

Amid the bedlam, Slot responded with another change. He withdrew Mabaya for Núñez, and gave the disheartened youngster an extended chat on the touchline to explain his decision.

But before those alterations could bear any fruit, a free kick near halfway had Home Park rocking, and Liverpool teetering on the precipice of needing to overcome a two-goal deficit. Hardie controlled the ball well and struck towards goal, only for a deflection to take his shot on to the post.

The shock roused the visitors, who forced Plymouth deeper, but they offered no space for Liverpool to play through. But for a shot by Díaz, which was blocked, Liverpool had no chances of note in regulation time.



Hardie celebrates scoring from the penalty spot, above and left, before, main image, Hazard pulls off a save to deny Núñez as Liverpool press for an equaliser that failed to materialise

Then came that flash storm: in the 90th minute, Conor Hazard, the Plymouth goalkeeper, ventured off his line, which allowed McConnell to pounce on the second ball, but with bodies around him he struck wide. He then drew another save from Hazard with a rasping volley from range.

Jota, Trent Kone-Doherty and Chiesa tried their luck to no avail. Even with nine added minutes, Liverpool could not find a way through.

In the last of those Hazard produced the most stunning save of all: a fingertip touch to deny Núñez from inside the six-yard box. A touch which secured victory and wrote history.

RATINGS
Plymouth Argyle C Hazard 9 — M Talovierov 8, N Katic 8, J Pleguezuelo 8 (V Palsson 67min, 8) — M Sorinola 8, A Randell 8 (M Boateng 72), D Gyabi 8. T Puchacz 8 — R Hardie 8 (M Obafemi 81), C Wright 8 — M Bundu 8 (M Tijani 72). **Booked** Hazard, Talovierov, Sorinola, Bundu. **Liverpool** C Kelleher 6 — J McConnell 7, J Quansah 6, J Gomez (I Mabaya 11, 5); D Núñez 58, 5), K Tsimikas 5 — H Elliott 4, W Endo 6, T Nyoni 5 (T Kone-Doherty 76) — F Chiesa 3, D Jota 3, L Díaz 3. **Booked** Nyoni, Mabaya. **Referee** S Barrott.

Second light in four days goes out on Spurs' season



ASTON VILLA	**2**
Ramsey 1, Rogers 64	
TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR	**1**
Tel 90+1	



James Gheerbrant

At Villa Park

A vulnerable Tottenham Hotspur suffered their second cup exit in four days to increase the pressure on Ange Postecoglou. Aston Villa breached Tottenham's shaky defence within a minute and never looked likely to surrender that advantage as they gave a performance of mature confidence, sprinkled with the sparkling adventure and invention of the outstanding Morgan Rogers.

The attacking midfielder, surely forcing his way into Thomas Tuchel's calculations, doubled Villa's lead just as Tottenham seemed to be rallying, which left Mathys Tel's first Spurs goal, in stoppage time, a scant consolation.

Villa looked stronger for having had the sort of active January window that Tottenham's restless fans craved for their team, with Donyell Malen impressive as the false nine, and Marcus Rashford emerging midway through the second half to a roar of applause. With Liverpool and Arsenal out of the FA Cup and Unai Emery's expertise at navigating knockout competitions, they are now in the front rank of contenders for this trophy. As for Spurs, a total of 16 shots conceded, having faced 26 in the Carabao Cup semi-final second leg against Liverpool, suggests they are no closer to fixing the structural issues with their press and defence.



Those problems came to the fore within 60 seconds: Rogers received the ball in the centre circle, stepped around Lucas Bergvall too easily, and tied in four Spurs players before releasing Jacob Ramsey, who found the inside-left channel empty of defenders. His shot was misread by Antonin Kinsky, who dove too far and ended up with his hands awkwardly at hip level. The ball burst through them, and on the touchline, Postecoglou allowed himself a rueful raise of the eyebrows.

Much has been made, fairly, of the Tottenham manager's depleted options, and no doubt having Cristian Romero and Micky van de Ven back would help, but here Postecoglou had a full complement of midfielders available, besides James Maddison, yet it was in that area that Spurs looked most vulnerable. The space between Tottenham's midfield and defensive lines often felt chasmic, with Villa's attackers able to run to the edge of the box with white shirts trailing in their wake time and again.

For now, the ire of the Tottenham fans remains trained in another direction. The away end repeatedly chanted "We want Levy out", beginning after their team's nightmare start. After his part in it, Kinsky looked unsurprisingly nervy: a miscontrol on his own goalline, followed by a panicked clearance, led to Villa working the ball quickly to Malen, who fired over. The Tottenham goalkeeper then made a good save to tip away a curling shot by Leon Bailey.

Youri Tielemans then ran straight through the centre of the Tottenham team before side-footing just wide of Kinsky's right-hand post. Then, out of nowhere, Spurs missed a huge chance to equalise: Mikey Moore streaked down the right and delivered a perfect cross into Son Heung-min's stride. The captain couldn't lift his shot over Emiliano Martínez.

Villa, suffering their own crisis in central defence, lost Ezri Konsa to an injury, meaning that Lamare Bogarde came on to partner his fellow moonlighting midfielder Boubacar Kamara. Kinsky had plenty of chances to redeem himself, and when Bailey drove into the box and shifted the ball onto his left, the 'keeper made another decent save, though he ought to have pushed the ball wider, and Ramsey hit the outside of the post from the follow-up.

Rogers was next to dribble unchecked to the edge of the box and fire off a shot: Kinsky made another sprawling save, with Malen unable to direct the rebound. The Dutchman fired into the side-netting in the dying seconds of the half after a poor giveaway by Archie Gray.

At half-time, Postecoglou took off Moore for Yves Bissouma, sacrificing Tottenham's lone ray of sunshine in the hope of patching their leaky midfield umbrella against the downpour of Villa chances. Spurs enjoyed their best spell of the game, but suffered for Son's lack of sharpness.

Twice he took too long to shoot in good positions: first when played in by Dejan Kulusevski, allowing Bogarde to make a fine block, then when a cutback deflected kindly into his path, and he ended up having to pass to Bissouma, whose effort was blocked behind.

Villa, playing more on the break, retained a threat, and when Pedro Porro could only nudge John McGinn's through ball into the path of Ramsey, Kinsky was at the winger's mercy, but made a strong save.

From their next attack, Villa cut through again. It began with Tottenham losing possession from Tel's hopeful forward flick. The Spurs counterpress was anaemic, with Bergvall again too easily bypassed, and Tielemans passed forwards to Malen, who ran away from Kevin Danso. He played in Bailey, who seemed to have overelaborated, but Malen made a clever run looping round and fired the ball across the six-yard box. Porro, falling backwards, could only clear limply, and Rogers rifled into the roof of the net.

Emery introduced Rashford and Marco Asensio. The Spaniard caught the eye first with a gorgeous backheel, which set up Rogers to strafe an outside-of-the-boot shot into the side netting. The porousness of the Spurs press was most brutally exposed by a move which began with the ball at Martínez's feet and ended, after a few seconds of slicing Villa play, in the other box, with Ramsey working Kinsky again.

Danso had a glaring chance to reduce the arrears from Porro's driven low cross, but couldn't keep his shot down from six yards. Rashford, streaking into the box with Kinsky in his sights, was well met by a crunching but fair Gray tackle.

Then came Tel's intervention, a fine nudged volley from Kulusevski's cross, but it was too little too late to stop another light going out in Tottenham's season.

Qualified for fifth round

Aston Villa, Bournemouth, Brighton & Hove Albion, Burnley Cardiff City, Fulham, Ipswich Town, Manchester City, Manchester United, Millwall, Newcastle United, Plymouth Argyle, Preston North End, Wolverhampton Wanderers.

Fourth round: Today Doncaster Rovers v Crystal Palace (7.45pm).

Tomorrow Exeter City v Nottingham Forest (8pm).

● The draw for the fifth round will take place tonight at 7.10pm on BBC One

RATINGS
Aston Villa (4-2-3-1) E Martínez 7 — A García 7, E Konsa 6 (L Bogarde 27, 7), B Kamara 7, L Digne 6 (I Maatsen 81) — J McGinn 7, Y Tielemans 7 — L Bailey 6 (M Asensio 66, 7), M Rogers 8, J Ramsey 7 — D Malen 8 (M Rashford 66, 6).
Tottenham Hotspur (4-2-3-1) A Kinsky 5 — P Porro 5, K Danso 6, A Gray 5, D Spence 6 — L Bergvall 5, R Bentancur 5 (P Sarr 72) — M Moore 7 (Y Bissouma 46, 7), D Kulusevski 6, M Tel 6 — Son Heung-min 5. **Booked** Bentancur, Bergvall, Porro.
Referee A Taylor.

CATHERINE IVILL /AMA/GETTY IMAGES







Rogers, main image, enhances his England credentials on the day of Rashford's debut. Above, Son and Kinsky acknowledge travelling fans after a cup exit that adds to Ange's discomfort, far left

Ange: We will be an outstanding team

Tom Allnutt

Ange Postecoglou declared Tottenham Hotspur will be an "outstanding team" once his injured players return after defeat to Aston Villa in the FA Cup piled more pressure on the Spurs head coach.

The Europa League is now their only chance of silverware this season but Postecoglou launched an impassioned defence of his beleaguered players at Villa Park.

Tottenham, who were without 11 senior players against Villa, crashed out of a second cup competition in four days as the 2-1 loss followed the 4-0 thrashing by Liverpool in the Carabao Cup semi-final on Thursday night. Postecoglou also pointed to Liverpool's defeat to Plymouth Argyle in the FA Cup, after Arne Slot made ten changes, as evidence of the impact of absentees.

"It's not damaging for me, it's obviously disappointing but this small group of players have given everything," Postecoglou said.

"Take out a back four of [Guglielmo] Vicario, [Radu] Dragusin, [Cristian] Romero, [Micky] Van de Ven, [Destiny] Udogie, [James] Maddison, [Brennan] Johnson, [Dominic] Solanke, [Wilson] Odobert, [Timo] Werner — how did Liverpool go today? And they just did that for one game. Do that for two-and-a-half months. Any team. I don't care about me. People will judge me. But you can't judge this group of players."

Asked why the team seem not to be playing Postecoglou's attacking style of football, he said: "Because they're tired, mate. Do you think they can press like [we would]? If we hadn't played Thursday night and I hadn't rotated that team we wouldn't have been pressing aggressively today? Fair chance, unless you don't think they're human beings. I think this group of players once we get the rest of the group in, will be an outstanding team. I have no doubt about that. Whether other people can't see that, that's of no interest to me."

Tottenham are 14th in the Premier League and have won only one of their past eight league games. Postecoglou was asked if he expected to be given more time to turn results around. "I'm not talking about me. People can judge me. They can say I've done a bad job, I'm not up to it or whatever," he said.

"But there's got to be a better appreciation for what a very small group of players have been doing. It can't be that people think that's an excuse. That's just not anywhere near close to objective analysis. That's just agenda-driven stuff. If it's to get rid of me that's fine. Good on ya. Go for it a million times. But in terms of this group, what they've given has been outstanding."

Tottenham are expecting to have a handful of players back from injury in the next couple of weeks, including Vicario, Maddison, Werner, Odobert and Johnson while Solanke is also not far away from a return.

"We'll get three, maybe four, players back this week," Postecoglou said. "More importantly, this group gets a rest. They can go a whole week without having to get up for another game."

Wolves building nicely (with big help of no VAR)

BLACKBURN ROVERS	**0**
WOLVES J Gomes 33, Cunha 34	**2**

Charlotte Duncker
At Ewood Park

Wolverhampton Wanderers will hope this turns out to be a season-defining period as they booked their place in the FA Cup fifth round on the back of an inspiring win over Aston Villa eight days earlier.

The Premier League club were, of course, expected to beat their Championship opponents but after a difficult first half of the season, in which they have been dragged into a relegation battle, they need to build on these moments to breathe more life into their fight to lift themselves clear of 17th place.

They have already had a good start this month because, in addition to beating Villa, they managed to get their best player, Matheus Cunha, to sign a new deal and added two new signings on deadline day before this momentum-building win.

For Blackburn Rovers, who sit sixth, the biggest concern was not the performance of a heavily rotated side, but the doubts that persist over whether John Eustace will still be in charge for their huge game against fellow promotion hopefuls West Bromwich Albion on Wednesday.

Derby County had made an approach to prise away Eustace before kick-off, having parted ways with Paul Warne on Friday, and the 45-year-old was giving consideration to joining the side who he used to play for.

"I'm away from my family a lot, working my socks off to make sure Blackburn are competitive," Eustace said. "When I came here we were on the way down and now we're on the way up and we need to discuss with the owners and see what happens. It's not about bargaining. It's about seeing this club back where it should be and that's pushing at the right end of the league with top quality players."

If this was to be Eustace's final game in charge he could be pleased with the way his players acquitted themselves. The January signing Augustus Kargbo was a menace down the left with his direct runs causing problems for Santiago Bueno, who was replaced at half-time due to the torrid afternoon the centre back was having. And Blackburn should have had the lead when Dom Hyam headed in from a brilliant free kick delivery by John Buckley.

However, the flag was up for offside and despite replays showing that the defender was clearly onside there would not be a reprieve as there is no VAR in this round.

Sadly, all the promise that Blackburn had showed was undone within 60 seconds when they conceded twice. The first was a mistake as they tried to play out from the back with Bueno pressuring Todd Cantwell into losing possession before Wolves moved it quickly through the area for João Gomes to finish. His shot should not have been enough to beat Balazs Toth but the Blackburn goalkeeper failed to stop the ball and it squeezed in under his body.

Then came the hammer blow 39 seconds after the restart. Another quick move and a lovely ball from Nelson Semedo released Cunha in space down the right and his fantastic first-time finish into the far corner was enough to finish the tie. Marshall Munetsi, on for his debut, looked lively and had a couple of good opportunities to extend the lead while Cunha could have had two more.

The hosts had their chances to get back into the contest through efforts from Emmanuel Dennis and Cantwell but this was never a game that Wolves looked like losing.

RATINGS
Blackburn Rovers (4-2-3-1) B Toth 6 — J Rankin-Costello 7, D Hyam 7, D Batth 6, Y Ribiero 6 — J Buckley 7, A Forshaw 6 (R Hedges 84min) — A Cozier-Duberry 6 (T Dolan 57, 6), T Cantwell 5, (M Gueye 57, 6), A Kargbo 7 (A Weimann 66, 6) — E Dennis 6 (C Woodrow 66, 6).
Booked Buckley, Kargbo.
Wolverhampton Wanderers (3-4-2-1) S Johnstone 7 — S Bueno 5 (M Doherty 46), E Agbadou 7, Toti 7 — N Semedo 7 (R Ait-Nouri 83), J-R Bellegarde 7 (André 66, 6), J Gomes 7, R Gomes 7 — G Guedes 6 (M Munetsi 66, 7), M Cunha 8 — H Hee-chan 6 (P Sarabia 46, 7).
Booked S Bueno.
Referee Lewis Smith.

ALAN MARTIN/COLORSPORT/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



Hyam heads in but the "goal" is ruled out for offside — replays showed otherwise

Blunt Chelsea missing Félix's cutting edge

BRIGHTON	**2**
Rutter 12, Mitoma 57	
CHELSEA	**1**
Verbruggen (og) 5	

Peter Rutzler
At Amex Stadium

With ten minutes to play and Chelsea's hopes fading, Christopher Nkunku led a promising counterattack. The France player received the ball off the academy winger Tyrique George, and moved threateningly towards the edge of the Brighton & Hove Albion box.

But then he hesitated. He put his foot on the ball, and waited. The travelling Chelsea supporters vented their near fury as Nkunku looked around hopelessly for a runner, but saw none. Brighton regrouped, and another attack fizzled out into nothing.

If Chelsea's toothless performance needed an image, then this was it.

Nkunku, who is seen as an attacking midfielder, was moonlighting as a striker and that contributed to a blunt display lacking a focal point. Enzo Maresca, the head coach, pointed out at full-time that no one could have foreseen that Chelsea would lose both their recognised strikers, which they did during last week's 2-1 win over West Ham United, but it was hard not to feel that Chelsea's transfer window has hindered rather than helped them.

The timing of these latest injuries was unavoidably ironic. Just as João Félix, the forward, was flying to Milan to complete a loan move, Chelsea lost strikers Marc Guiu and Nicolas Jackson to muscle injuries, leaving a club so often depicted as a bloated vessel, looking short of options up front.

Six players departed during Chelsea's window who had otherwise featured peripherally for Maresca, namely Carney Chukwuemeka, Axel Disasi, Cesare Casadei, Félix, Renato Veiga and Ben Chilwell, with only one incoming, the midfielder Mathis Amougou, 19. It was a calculated gamble, with 14 league games left, to keep disgruntled players happy, providing minutes elsewhere and thus not depreciating their value, while hoping a streamlined squad could compete on multiple fronts.

This has become unstuck. Jackson is set to return in the short term, and he could be an option for this Friday's rerun against Brighton. But Guiu is a long-term absentee and there will now be a lot of pressure on Jackson's shoulders to deliver, a concern seeing as his form reads as one goal in his past ten league games. Indeed, the same goes for Cole Palmer, with Nkunku now acting as a deputy for both of them.

The case for an attacking addition in January was a good one. Chelsea's dip in form has coincided with their attack losing its cutting edge. One statistic defines it: no player in Europe has created more chances since December 4 than Palmer. Yet not one of those chances has been taken, and he has not picked up a single assist in that time.

Chelsea gave good thought to recruiting a forward or a left winger, and they held concrete interest in Alejandro Garnacho, Jamie Gittens and Mathys Tel. Ultimately, they decided to wait for the summer, as they did not see good value options available that would improve on what they already have — without hindering others' development. Consideration was given to a recall for Andrey Santos, the midfielder shining at Strasbourg, who is highly regarded at Chelsea, but it was felt better for his development if he stays in France. Amougou, the £12 million signing from Saint-Etienne, is regarded as a development player as opposed to one who can make an impact immediately, and that was clear on Saturday as he did not step foot off the bench.

All of that makes good sense. Yet it is the departure of Félix that stands out, apart from the questions it asks over his signing for a reported £45 million, because it leaves them short. Chelsea were also without the winger Mykhailo Mudryk, who is provisionally suspended by the FA for a failed drugs test. He denies wrongdoing.

Fate has played a part and it is also ironic that after so much scrutiny of their squad size, Chelsea are now under fire for the opposite. But it hurt them on Saturday, and they will need to hope injuries do not hurt them further in their remaining games.



Nkunku competes for the ball with Lewis Dunk as he moonlights as a striker

Guardiola's love of game revived among Leyton's terraced streets



It's been a while since **Tony Cascarino** has seen City manager as invigorated as he was after intense Orient tie

LEYTON ORIENT	**1**
Ortega (og) 16	
MANCHESTER CITY	**2**
Khusanov 56, De Bruyne 79	

Perhaps the biggest compliment I can pay to Leyton Orient is that I haven't seen Pep Guardiola as invigorated by a game of football for a long time.

Manchester City are in a sticky spot. They lost 5-1 against Arsenal last weekend. Real Madrid are up next tomorrow. The intensity and relentlessness of the Premier League and Champions League can be quite draining at the best of times.

But on Saturday, Guardiola's demeanour felt different. His energy on the touchline. The way he applauded and waved to all four stands at Brisbane Road after a really hard-fought 2-1 FA Cup win. The way he spoke so glowingly about the competition and the unique character of the English pyramid and places like Brisbane Road.

The way he praised Richie Wellens's smartly coached and fiercely committed side. It all felt very sincere. And it was clear to me that he really enjoyed the experience.

Pep was right to compliment Orient — they made this an engrossing tie and it was a wonderful advert for the club and League One. Jamie Donley's strike was a special cup moment, a goal of the highest level — the best own goal you're ever going to see.

His fellow Tottenham Hotspur loanee, Josh Keeley, had another fine game in goal after his penalty-saving, goalscoring heroics in rounds one, two and three. Ethan Galbraith's energy and tenacity in midfield was extraordinary. Charlie Kelman, the striker on loan from Queens Park Rangers, was a real throwback. He made City's defenders work for everything, won duels, ran channels and, on another day, might have capped his performance with a goal.

I was impressed with how Wellens set up his team too. A big part of his game plan was getting in behind City's young full backs, Rico Lewis and Nico O'Reilly. Turning the opposition sounds basic, but turning defenders makes them uncomfortable. If you've got players who can do that well, then it becomes a tactic that can hurt the best sides.

When I arrived in Leyton a couple of hours before kick-off, and was walking up the High Road from the station, a couple of guys asked me directions to the stadium. I pointed up the road and told them to turn left at Coronation Gardens, but in fairness you wouldn't know there's a League One ground here, hemmed in by flats and rows of terraced houses. You wouldn't have known that the English champions were here either.

Only once you walked through the park, past the statue of Laurie Cunningham, Orient's trailblazing winger who went on to play for Real

DAVID KLEIN/REUTERS



Darren Pratley belies his 39 years with a robust challenge on Abdukodir Khusanov in a full-blooded tie at Brisbane Road that ended with Guardiola saluting all four stands before turning his thoughts to Real Madrid in the Champions League play-offs tomorrow

Madrid, and on towards Brisbane Road, could you begin to sense the excitement. Fans gathered by the gates to catch a glimpse of City's superstars. I heard two families chatting about what would constitute a respectable scoreline. "If we keep it under five," was the consensus.

When I got into the lift to head up to the press room, I bumped into the former City player, manager and club ambassador, Mike Summerbee. "Still going then, Mike..." I said in passing. "What d'you mean?" he said, a bit stony-faced. I think he thought I meant still going, aged 82, rather than home and away to follow City. Thankfully, we were laughing about it by the time the lift doors opened.

Before the game I caught up with Nigel Travis, the Orient chairman, who lives in the US but grew up five miles north of Leyton in Woodford, and went to his first game on October 3, 1959 — a 1-1 draw against Sunderland in the old Division Two, in front of 16,000 fans.

Travis headed the consortium that rescued the club after Francesco Becchetti's chaotic reign in 2017 and described Saturday as a "reward" for everyone who has been on the journey since then. He thought back to trips to Guiseley and Havant & Waterlooville in the National League, and told me a story about when Orient played Solihull Moors a couple of games before winning promotion back to the Football League in 2019.

They arrived at Damson Park to find that there was nowhere to film the game from. Orient's cameraman was an ex-scaffolder, and he had to gather some bits and pieces to erect his own platform. Back then, Travis admitted, not even in his most vivid dreams could he have pictured the Os hosting Guardiola's champions at Brisbane Road, live on the BBC. "It's been a remarkable journey," he said, "but we're not finished yet."

After visiting in the last round against Derby County, and again on Saturday, I don't doubt that. There's more ambition in this part of east London than there's ever been. There are hopes of building a new stadium in the Waltham Forest borough. Travis is speaking to new investors. The cup run has earned Orient the best part of £600,000. The club are in the process of selling a 15-year-old academy player to City, and another to Newcastle United, for six-figure transfer fees.

And after the sugar rush of Saturday, when Orient led City from minute 16 to 56, fans were gleefully doing the Poznan and dreaming of an upset, attention turns to the visit of Mansfield Town tomorrow and the race for the play-offs.

While we were talking, Nigel's phone rang. The ring tone was *Tijuana Taxi* by Herb Alpert & The Tijuana Brass — a song that has been played as Orient's players emerge from the tunnel for almost 60 years and, if you know it, a song that is impossible to hear without smiling.

Speak to fans and they'll tell you that song says something about the sense of humour at a club who don't take themselves too seriously and which has always been in the shadows of more vaunted London neighbours.

Retaining that atmosphere as Orient aim for the Championship, and more space to grow into, will be the challenge. But Saturday is a day that will live long in the memory of Orient's supporters — and, I think, Guardiola's too.

For the best football reports go to thetimes.com/sport

Willock: Abuse will turn to player harm

BIRMINGHAM CITY	**2**
Laird 1, Iwata 40	
NEWCASTLE UTD	**3**
Willock 21, 82, Wilson 26	

Gary Jacob
At St Andrew's

Joe Willock fears that a footballer or their family could suffer physical harm unless social media companies clamp down on racist abuse.

The Newcastle United midfielder was subjected to racist abuse last week after missing a chance to restore the lead in the 2-1 defeat by Fulham.

Willock put the incident to one side to score twice to help Newcastle into the FA Cup fifth round in their quest to reach both domestic finals after booking their place in the Carabao Cup final.

"If you are not only coming for my race but threatening my family, wishing bad things on them, you could actually endanger someone if you have that hatred," Willock said. "It's happened to me many times. It was the severity of it. That's when I have to put it out there and report it. I had to do it."

Newcastle have contacted Meta, the owners of Instagram, about the messages, one of which read: "You can't score from such position? Black n*****."

Willock said that he was "comforted" by Eddie Howe's words in a meeting with the Newcastle head coach this week. But he added that black players logging onto social media almost now expect comments.

"Maybe sometimes, it's low lifes, you know?" he said. "They have nothing else to say and the first thing they come for is your colour. Everyone has an opinion on your performance. You can tell me I'm not good enough, you pay to watch us and that's your opinion. But when you bring race into it or family, that's when it crosses the line. Especially when you are threatening to do things. It's different." In 2021 clubs from across football joined a four-day boycott of social media platforms in an effort to combat abuse and discrimination. Willock said nothing changed after the noise died down and the onus was on social media companies to act.

"I feel like there needs to be an extra step to eradicate it from the game," he said. "We seem to be going around in circles. Someone gets it, makes a big deal out of it, then it happens again, then it goes quiet. It happens again. Social media is the problem. It's the only way they can contact us. If they were sending in letters, it wouldn't be the same thing. Social media needs to cut it out. I'm sure they can block these messages. That would be a great start to eradicating it."

Willock turned home a cross and drilled in the winner against Birmingham City for his first goals since August. He had a frustrating time out with hamstring and Achilles injuries last season and last summer he tapped into his mobile phone his aspirations for the season. One of them was a call-up by England after representing the under-21 side. "I need to continue working on the best version of myself, play regularly and push on from there," he said.

"The winner was a good finish, to be fair. I was just delighted when it dropped for me. There was no other thought in my mind other than picking my spot. There have been a few times when I've come off the bench I've snatched at it and I thought: 'This is my time to win the game.' "

Callum Wilson and the lively William Osula were key to Newcastle coming from behind. Osula has featured for a total of 44 minutes in nine substitute appearances in the league since a £10 million move from Sheffield United last summer. But he has played both FA Cup ties, claiming two assists on Saturday after scoring against Bromley. "Anything that showcases his pace, that's his best asset," Howe said. "His strength and directness were key for us."

Moyes braced for rough ride

EVERTON	**0**
BOURNEMOUTH	**2**
Semenyo 23 (pen), Jebbison 43	

Paul Joyce

As Andoni Iraola was left to consider how Bournemouth's season contained all manner of possibilities, David Moyes had only the slog of the homeward stretch on his mind.

Everton's priority over the coming weeks will now be on remaining in the Premier League. Just seven of their remaining 15 games are at Goodison Park, beginning with Wednesday's Merseyside derby. A nine-point buffer to the relegation places, with a game in hand, should be not lost given the paucity of the teams in the bottom three, yet the defeat by Bournemouth reaffirmed how no one can become complacent.

The lack of oomph in the attacking third was compounded by James Tarkowski having the kind of afternoon that has been scarce since his arrival three years ago. He was culpable for both goals.

Moyes wants Everton to play more football, but that will test some players who performed more rigidly under his predecessor Sean Dyche.

The quality at Bournemouth's disposal stood as a sharp contrast, bringing into focus the decision to pull out of a move for West Bromwich Albion's Tom Fellows on deadline day. Fellows, 21, who has the most assists in the Championship this season (11), would have been available for about £10 million, but Everton's new owner, The Friedkin Group (TFG), opted to keep the powder dry before a big summer rebuild.

The one player they did bring in, Charly Alcaraz from Flamengo, showed ingenuity but the obligation to turn his loan deal into a permanent £15 million transfer will, according to sources in Brazil, be triggered only if he makes nine starts.

The strategy in not spending is based on the belief that Moyes can keep eking more from a squad not known for consistency and, therefore, represents a gamble, especially as Beto is the only fit forward and toiled against better defenders than he had encountered against Leicester City.

All things considered it is probably the right approach but TFG must be prepared for the possibility of some more turbulence in the short term.

From Kettering to Old Trafford: tales of 44 Cup games

Doncaster's Billy Sharp reflects on 20 years of magical memories with **Ben Marsden** before his date with Palace tonight

At 39, Billy Sharp is chasing one final dramatic FA Cup story. After 44 appearances in the competition, for six clubs, the veteran is now looking to help Doncaster Rovers, the lowest-ranked side left, beat Premier League Crystal Palace in the fourth round tonight.

Since his FA Cup debut in 2005, no other striker has appeared more often. These are some of Sharp's fondest memories.

"Nothing was going to stop me playing at Old Trafford"

The prospect of facing Manchester United in the third round of the FA Cup was one that delighted Sharp and his Sheffield United team-mates in 2016, but his hopes of a famous cup upset were nearly dashed by a serious injury — to a toe.

"I stubbed my toe after running up the stairs at home before training. I managed to break it," he says, smiling at the absurdity of the injury.

After an x-ray confirmed his worst fears, Sharp was initially resigned to missing out but physios gave him pain-numbing injections to get him through the game. "Nothing was going to stop me playing."

A late Wayne Rooney penalty meant the game ended 1-0, but it was a valiant effort from a side that finished 11th in League One that season. "We tried to frustrate them and we did a great job. It was such a shame we couldn't have the replay."

Handbags against Wrexham

Wrexham's first season under Hollywood ownership looked as though it was heading for a fairytale ending when the National League side forced a replay after a 3-3 home draw with Sheffield United in 2023.

"There was even more needle in the second game from things that were said. It's all part of football."

Sharp's 94th-minute winner sent the Welsh side home but his post-match comments were the main talking point. After claiming the referee was "on Wrexham's side", Sharp was fined by the FA.

"I was harshly treated. I should've said the ref wasn't great on the day, but I would've got into trouble for that too, so I should've just kept my mouth shut." His accidental foray towards Wrexham's changing room, after being called for a TV interview, also led to some players assuming he was trying to cause trouble.

"It ended up in a bit of handbags," he says with a smirk.

United went on to beat Tottenham Hotspur before losing to Manchester City in the semi-finals, the furthest Sharp has progressed in the FA Cup.

A change – but not for the good

Having played in seven replays, Sharp feels strongly about the recent decision to scrap them. "The big boys have dictated that one and I get it, they play a lot of games, but it's unfair."

Despite Doncaster progressing through this season's second round thanks to a 2-1 extra-time win over seventh-tier Kettering Town, he recognises the benefits of replays.

"They [smaller clubs] might not win over two games but they do get a day out for their fans and create revenue for the club. Given we're pushing for promotion we're happy it'll be over on Monday whichever way it goes."

An FA Cup love-in

The Kettering win was a reminder of why he loves the competition.

"Fair play, they battled hard," he says. "That's what it's about — you have to fight for the FA Cup."

If an upset did occur against Palace, Sharp wants one of the "big boys" away from home. "Maybe Liverpool or Newcastle," he says. "I've never won the cup — we're in a great position for promotion but we believe we can do both."

LINDSEY PARNABY/SHUTTERSTOCK



Sharp celebrates the extra-time goal that saved Doncaster's skin in the second round against seventh-tier Kettering, a tie that rekindled his love of the FA Cup

Doncaster Rovers v Crystal Palace
7.45pm, BBC Red Button/iPlayer

Silva: We've changed cup mentality

WIGAN ATHLETIC	**1**
Smith 50	
FULHAM	**2**
Muniz 23, 55	

Ian Whittell
At The Brick Community Stadium

Marco Silva has insisted that he has changed the mentality towards cup competitions at Fulham, a claim that was reflected in a professional 2-1 fourth-round victory at League One Wigan Athletic.

It marks just the third time in the past 14 years that Fulham have reached the last 16 of the FA Cup and their only appearance in a Wembley final came 50 years ago, when they were beaten 2-0 by West Ham United.

It was a record of cup underachievements that Silva addressed after an embarrassing 2-0 Carabao Cup defeat at Crawley Town in August 2022.

"Since my second season when we had a really bad evening in the Carabao Cup, it was a changing moment for us," he explained. "We had a clear conversation because it was a moment for us to change the mentality, the way you see any competition that you are playing in for this club.

"It doesn't matter against who we are going to play, we are going to do our best to go as far as you can. We don't know what is going to happen, what stage someone is going to stop us, but we want to aim high."

Silva's own FA Cup experiences with Fulham feature a stormy quarter-final defeat at Manchester United in which he, plus players Willian and Aleksandar Mitrovic, were sent off in a 3-1 defeat.

"I have to be remind you that two seasons ago, we achieved the quarter-finals and probably didn't achieve the semi-finals for other things that I don't want to speak about here," he said. "Because until the 75 minutes we are clear and with at least one foot in the semi-finals of the competition."

THE WEEKEND IN NUMBERS

OUR STATS GURU **BILL EDGAR** ON THE QUIRKY FACTS AND FIGURES



Liverpool feel underdog bite – 55 years on

Liverpool's defeat by Plymouth Argyle yesterday was their first FA Cup elimination by a team who had yet to reach the top flight since they lost to Watford in 1970. The teams bottom of the four league divisions all won the weekend before last — Southampton, Plymouth, Shrewsbury Town and Morecambe — and last weekend the sides top of the four divisions all lost: Walsall in the league, and Birmingham City, Leeds United and Liverpool in the FA Cup.

Plymouth have knocked more Premier League teams out of the FA Cup this season than all other lower-division sides combined: two (Brentford and Liverpool) to one (Burnley beat Southampton). Warning to Liverpool as they prepare to face Everton at Goodison Park on Wednesday: they have lost the past three times that they have travelled west to play a match — away to Real Madrid in 2023, Everton in 2024 and Plymouth yesterday.

Manchester marvels

Excluding matches against each other —

Jebbison now has a unique place in Goodison's history



they have contested the past two finals — Manchester United and Manchester City have won their combined past 24 FA Cup ties since the start of 2022-23. City's past 38 FA Cup matches have all been settled in 90 minutes, the equivalent of playing an entire Premier League season without a draw. United's past 20 open-play goals (all goals excluding penalties) have come in the second half.

Grim at Goodison

In Everton's final two seasons before moving to a new stadium they have been one of only two league teams (along with Burton Albion) in that period to have exited the FA Cup and League Cup at home on the maximum of four occasions (Aston Villa and Nottingham Forest could yet join them). Over Goodison Park's 133-year history the last goal recorded with no fans present was scored by Daniel Jebbison for Sheffield United in the Covid period in May 2021 and the last ever in the FA Cup was scored by Jebbison for Bournemouth on Saturday.

Blues one of a kind

Birmingham started fast against Newcastle United but suffered a narrow defeat: the team No 1 in League One scored in minute one but lost by one goal to tier-one opponents live on BBC1. Birmingham's only defeat in 19 games has been by Newcastle — and Arsenal's only two losses in their past 22 matches have both been to Newcastle.

Some 84 major domestic and European club trophies have been won since the last one was lifted by an English manager (Portsmouth's Harry Redknapp's after the 2008 FA Cup final), and 168 campaigns for major trophies have been pursued by Newcastle since they last succeeded (the 1969 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup) — yet both runs will end if Eddie Howe's Newcastle beat Liverpool in the Carabao Cup final next month.

Comeback quartet

The winners of the four FA Cup ties televised live on Friday and Saturday all triumphed within 90 minutes despite conceding first: Manchester United, Manchester City, Newcastle and Brighton & Hove Albion.

3

Times Liverpool have reached the FA Cup fifth round in the past ten seasons, the same as Bristol City

Seven up

Brighton and Cardiff City both advanced in the FA Cup seven days after conceding seven goals: Brighton were thrashed by Nottingham Forest but then beat Chelsea; Cardiff were hammered by Leeds but then defeated Stoke City.

Crawley crash

Crawley Town, beaten 4-3 away by Bolton Wanderers, became the first team since 2004 to score three yet lose a league game that was 0-0 at half-time: the last such case was Newcastle 4 Manchester City 3. In League Two this season the highest scorer is Lowe and the player whose aggression has brought the most bookings is Love (Nathan Lowe and Donald Love).

Frustrated Bristol City fans told to 'suck up' defeat by manager

BRISTOL CITY	**0**
SWANSEA CITY	**1**
Tymon 55	

Rob Stewart
Ashton Gate

DAVID DAVIES/PA



Tymon celebrates scoring the only goal in front of 21,554 at Ashton Gate where home side play-off hopes were jolted

Liam Manning said Bristol City's supporters would have to take defeat in their stride after their Premier League dreams suffered a reality check.

City's promotion prospects were given a jolt in a surprise victory for Swansea City which brought to an end their hosts' run of four successive wins at Ashton Gate and ended their own six-match losing streak in front of 21,554 people.

The outcome meant that Manning's team squandered a chance to move into the play-off positions for the first time this season and suggested they are a still a work in progress.

"We're trying to change to something quite big at the club and that takes time," Manning said. "The players are getting better and the team is getting better and there's clarity about what we want to do but it just doesn't happen overnight.

"Unfortunately along the way you have to suck up some annoying, frustrating and disappointing experiences like today."

Josh Tymon, the Swansea wingback, was the unlikely hero as he recorded his first goal since joining from Stoke City in September 2023. "It's frustrating and I'm sure everyone's feeling the same right now," Manning said.

"In terms of performance levels, there were many positives in terms of purpose and intent and we should have been ahead by half-time.

"But a five-minute spell ended up costing us where, collectively, we became a bit passive.

"We have to be clear, we played a game here a year ago and got booed off at half-time and scraped a 1-0 win.

"It's a mark of progress, as frustrating as it is, and I hurt like everybody. I'm fully invested and I'm at the training ground doing mad hours to change it."

Manning's team would have been ahead in the first half but for two excellent saves by Lawrence Vigouroux to keep out Jason Knight and Luke McNally.

Swansea, for whom Nottingham Forest loanee Lewis O'Brien stood out in midfield on his debut, threatened too, but Zan Vipotnik broke clear only to shoot straight at Max O'Leary.

City raised their game after half-time but the Swansea defender Kyle Naughton came to his side's rescue by twice intercepting Mark Sykes crosses aimed at Nahki Wells.

At the other end, like Naughton, Tymon showed excellent positional sense as he put Swansea in control on 55 minutes, driving the ball in from ten yards after O'Leary had pushed Gonçalo Franco's curling effort into his path.

He could have doubled the lead soon after when O'Leary expertly denied Jisung Eom but the referee, John Busby, got in his way as he prepared to shoot.

Swansea lived dangerously in the closing stages and had a lucky escape when the substitute Sam Bell's shot thudded against Vigouroux's right-hand post before a robust defence held firm.

"It was a heroic effort against opposition which is in a good place," Luke Williams, the Swansea manager, said.

"If we came to play a more open game and didn't have that mentality to be really resilient, the game could have been different.

"I wanted my players to defend in a way that shows everyone they're determined to do everything they can to keep the ball out of the net."

RATINGS
Bristol City (3-4-2-1): M O'Leary 6 – Z Vyner 6, R Dickie 6, L McNally 7 (S Bell 7) – M Sykes 7 (Yu Hirakawa 6), M Bird 6, J Knight 7, H Roberts 6 – A Mehmeti 6 (G Earthy 62, 6) S Twine 7 (H Cornick 6) – N Wells 6 (S Armstrong 62, 7).
Swansea City (4-2-3-1): L Vigouroux 8 – K Naughton 8 (J Key 6), B Cabango 7, H Delcroix 7, J Tymon 7 – G Franco 6, L O'Brien 8 – Ronald 6, L Cullen 7 (O Cooper 6), J Eom 6 (Fulton 6) – Z Vipotnik 6 (F Bianchini 70, 6).
Referee J Busby.
Attendance 21,554.

Championship

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Leeds	31	19	9	3	62	19	43	66
Sheff Utd*	31	20	6	5	43	22	21	64
Burnley	31	16	13	2	37	9	28	61
Sunderland	31	16	11	4	47	28	19	59
West Brom	31	11	14	6	41	28	13	47
Blackburn	31	13	6	12	35	31	4	45
Middlesbro	30	12	8	10	49	39	10	44
Norwich	31	11	10	10	50	43	7	43
Bristol City	31	10	12	9	38	36	2	42
Watford	31	12	6	13	42	44	-2	42
Sheff Wed	31	11	9	11	44	48	-4	42
Coventry	31	11	8	12	41	40	1	41
QPR	31	10	11	10	35	40	-5	41
Millwall	30	10	10	10	30	27	3	40
Preston	30	8	13	9	33	38	-5	37
Swansea	31	10	7	14	33	42	-9	37
Oxford Utd	31	9	10	12	34	45	-11	37
Stoke	30	7	11	12	28	37	-9	32
Cardiff	30	7	10	13	33	51	-18	31
Portsmouth	31	7	9	15	37	54	-17	30
Hull	30	7	8	15	31	40	-9	29
Derby	31	7	7	17	33	42	-9	28
Luton	30	7	6	17	30	49	-19	27
Plymouth	30	5	10	15	29	63	-34	25

*deducted 2pts for breaching league rules

CHAMPIONSHIP ROUND-UP

IAN WINROW

Tony Mowbray, the **West Bromwich Albion** manager, defended match-winner Jayson Molumby despite his celebrations leading, indirectly, to his team-mate Kyle Bartley being sent off after the final whistle.

Having scored six minutes into stoppage time against **Sheffield Wednesday** at the Hawthorns, Molumby was accused of taunting visiting fans, leading to players squaring up on the field at the end of the game and Bartley being shown a red card for apparently elbowing Svante Ingelsson in the face.

Molumby had sped down the tunnel by that stage and Mowbray felt his behaviour was indicative of his "quirky" personality.

"He's quite an emotional lad, isn't he?" said Mowbray. "I've only been here for three weeks, I'm still learning about their personalities. I don't know, would you call him quirky?

"He's emotional. He wants to win. I can feel that even when we're doing game prep. He tells me he's emotional. He scores a great goal at the death there, he gets emotional and takes his shirt off and swings it around his head. I was told he celebrates in front of their supporters which causes a bit of trouble at the end. We'll feel the repercussions of that, but I'm pleased for Jayson."

Sheffield United maintained their bid for automatic promotion with a 2-1 home victory over **Portsmouth** although, for once, manager Chris Wilder was critical of his team's performance and attitude.

"The reaction in the second half was better, even though it wasn't to my liking," he said. "But there's a little bit of arrogance about us which I talked about at half-time."

Sunderland preserved their unbeaten home record, but only just, with Dennis Cirkin's 89th-minute equaliser earning a 2-2 draw against **Watford**. Luke O'Nien, who scored the first Sunderland goal, revealed the influence that teenage midfielder Jobe Bellingham exerts on the squad, even when not playing.

Bellingham, 19, missed the draw with a "minor knock" but O'Nien said: "Jobe's wonderful. He even comes in at half-time to give his perspective. We're asking for his perspective on the game because he's a leader in our team. It doesn't matter how old he is. We look to him for advice. We look to him to lead all the time."

Matt Hamshaw, the **Derby County** caretaker manager, revealed the message that had been sent by predecessor Paul Warne, sacked on Friday, before his team drew 1-1 away to **Norwich City**.

"The decision was made and he's called me a number of times. I've called him a number of times," said Hamshaw, after Jerry Yates earned Derby a point from the penalty spot.

"I spoke to him just before we left, and he wanted the players to be really positive. He sent a message today because that's the selfless person he is."

Schumacher stays true to his promise

LEAGUE ONE

The promise by new Bolton Wanderers head coach Steven Schumacher to deliver a more exciting brand of football was soon delivered with a 4-3 win over Crawley Town, sealed by Charlie Barker's own goal nine minutes into stoppage time.

Crawley had Rory Feely sent off after collecting two bookings in the space of four minutes, before Barker deflected in a cross from Gethin Jones deep into the 12 minutes of added time.

"I hope we win every week but I'd like it sometimes to be a little more straightforward," said Schumacher. "But as long as we win, that's most important.

"We said it was going to be exciting and it was. So that's a good start."

The win lifts Bolton to the brink of the play-off places, level on points with Charlton Athletic, who recorded a fourth win in five matches, with Matt Godden scoring for a third consecutive game in the 2-0 win over Stevenage at The Valley. "Matty Godden has scored everywhere he has been, he's got promoted and played in the Championship constantly," said Nathan Jones, the Charlton manager.

"The guy is a class act and today it is as good a centre-forward link-man performance as you've seen here for a while. He had everything today."

Huddersfield Town missed the chance to gain ground after being held to a goalless draw at home to Reading.

The stalemate leaves Huddersfield with just one win from their last eight games. "Reading came to frustrate us, but it's up to us to deal with that," said manager Michael Duff.

Hughes gets help from old team-mates

LEAGUE TWO

Mark Hughes took just five minutes to make his mark as new manager of Carlisle United although, ultimately, it was a familiar story for the EFL's bottom club, beaten 2-1 at Grimsby Town.

Sam Lavelle scored an early goal for Carlisle, who ended the day five points from safety after appointing the former Manchester City and Wales manager as Mike Williamson's successor.

Hughes criticised Zac Kennard-Kettle, the referee, who awarded Grimsby a late penalty, converted by Danny Rose. "The level of competence at this level isn't consistent," said Hughes.

At least he had help from some former Manchester United team-mates, the Class of '92, owners of Salford City. Their 2-0 win over Tranmere Rovers prevented it being an even more costly weekend for Carlisle.

Tranmere remain just above the relegation places with manager Nigel Adkins still under pressure, despite having been given a "vote of confidence" by chairman Mark Palios in an open letter to supporters before the game.

Walsall still hold a six-point lead at the top of the table but their recent decline continued in a 2-1 defeat at Colchester United. Their latest setback was not helped by Taylor Allen being shown a red card for a second bookable offence. The defender took the unusual step of issuing an apology, via club media channels, after the game.

TheGame

Results and fixtures

FA CUP FOURTH ROUND

Aston Villa (1) 2 — **Tottenham** (0) 1
Ramsey 1, Rogers 64 — Tel 90+1

Birmingham (2) 2 — **Newcastle** (2) 3
Laird 1, Iwata 40 — Willock 21, 82
27,914 — Wilson 26

Blackburn (0) 0 — **Wolves** (2) 2
15,141 — João Gomes 33
Matheus Cunha 34

Brighton (1) 2 — **Chelsea** (1) 1
Rutter 12 — Verbruggen 5 (og)
Mitoma 57 — 23,279

Coventry (1) 1 — **Ipswich** (3) 4
Latibeaudiere 8 — Hirst 2 (pen)
30,055 — Clarke 28, 37
Philogene 63

Everton (0) 0 — **Bournemouth** (2) 2
Semenyo 23 (pen)
Jebbison 43

Leeds (0) 0 — **Millwall** (1) 2
34,923 — Azeez 30, 55

Leyton Orient (1) 1 — **Man City** (0) 2
Ortega 16 (og) — Khusanov 56
8,749 — De Bruyne 79

Plymouth (0) 1 — **Liverpool** (0) 0
Hardie 53 (pen)

Preston (0) 0 — **Wycombe** (0) 0
10,444
(aet; Preston won 4-2 on pens)

Southampton (0) 0 — **Burnley** (0) 1
15,253 — Edwards 77

Stoke (1) 3 — **Cardiff** (2) 3
Koumas 42, 46 — Colwill 8, 68
Baker 57 (pen) — Salech 19
12,641
(aet; 3-3 after 90min; Cardiff won 4-2 on pens)

Wigan (0) 1 — **Fulham** (1) 2
Smith 50 — Muniz Carvalho
12,281 — 23, 55

PREMIER LEAGUE

		HOME					AWAY						
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
▶ 1 Liverpool	23	8	2	1	24	9	9	3	0	32	12	35	56
▶ 2 Arsenal	24	8	4	0	27	10	6	4	2	22	12	27	50
▶ 3 Nottingham Forest	24	7	3	2	22	10	7	2	3	18	17	13	47
▲ 4 Chelsea	24	6	4	2	22	15	6	3	3	25	16	16	43
▼ 5 Manchester City	24	7	2	2	24	15	5	3	5	24	20	13	41
▼ 6 Newcastle	24	6	2	4	20	14	6	3	3	22	15	13	41
▶ 7 Bournemouth	24	6	3	3	17	9	5	4	3	24	19	13	40
▶ 8 Aston Villa	24	6	5	1	20	14	4	2	6	14	23	-3	37
▲ 9 Fulham	24	4	5	3	18	18	5	4	3	18	14	4	36
▼ 10 Brighton	24	3	6	2	14	14	5	4	4	21	24	-3	34
▶ 11 Brentford	24	7	2	4	29	25	2	2	7	13	17	0	31
▲ 12 Crystal Palace	24	2	5	5	11	19	5	4	3	17	11	-2	30
▼ 13 Manchester United	24	5	1	7	17	22	3	4	4	11	12	-6	29
▲ 14 Tottenham	24	4	2	6	27	23	4	1	7	21	14	11	27
▼ 15 West Ham	24	4	2	6	16	26	3	4	5	13	20	-17	27
▶ 16 Everton	23	4	4	4	16	13	2	4	5	7	15	-5	26
▲ 17 Wolverhampton	24	3	1	8	16	24	2	3	7	18	28	-18	19
▼ 18 Leicester	24	2	3	7	11	21	2	2	8	14	32	-28	17
▶ 19 Ipswich	24	1	4	8	9	26	2	3	6	13	23	-27	16
▶ 20 Southampton	24	1	1	9	8	30	1	2	10	10	24	-36	9

TOP SCORERS
21 Salah (Liverpool), right
19 Haaland (Manchester City)
17 Isak (Newcastle)
17 Wood (Nottingham Forest)
14 Mbeumo (Brentford)
14 Palmer (Chelsea)
11 Kluivert (Bournemouth)
11 Matheus Cunha (Wolverhampton)
11 Wissa (Brentford)
10 Mateta (Crystal Palace)
10 Watkins (Aston Villa)



SKY BET CHAMPIONSHIP

Bristol City (0) 0 — **Swansea** (0) 1
21,554 — Tymon 55

Norwich (0) 1 — **Derby** (0) 1
Sargent 68 — Yates 90+2 (pen)
26,584

Sheffield Utd (1) 2 — **Portsmouth** (1) 1
Hamer 24 — Ogilvie 27
Rak-Sakyi 73 — 29,104

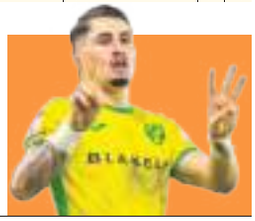
Sunderland (1) 2 — **Watford** (1) 2
O'Nien 16, Cirkin 89 — Dele-Bashiru 43 (pen)
41,329 — Louza 46

West Brom (0) 2 — **Sheffield Wed** (0) 1
Armstrong 74 — Paterson 90+3
Molumby 90+6 — 25,452
Sent off: Bartley (West Brom) 90+9

		HOME					AWAY						
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
▶ 1 Leeds	31	13	2	1	42	7	6	7	2	20	12	43	66
▶ 2 Sheffield United*	31	11	2	2	21	9	9	4	3	22	13	21	64
▶ 3 Burnley	31	7	8	0	16	4	9	5	2	21	5	28	61
▶ 4 Sunderland	31	9	6	0	26	12	7	5	4	21	16	19	59
▲ 5 West Bromwich	31	7	7	1	21	9	4	7	5	20	19	13	47
▼ 6 Blackburn	31	9	2	5	22	14	4	4	7	13	17	4	45
▶ 7 Middlesbrough	30	7	5	4	24	18	5	3	6	25	21	10	44
▶ 8 Norwich	31	7	6	2	37	20	4	4	8	13	23	7	43
▶ 9 Bristol City	31	7	5	3	21	12	3	7	6	17	24	2	42
▲ 10 Watford	31	9	2	4	20	13	3	4	9	22	31	-2	42
▼ 11 Sheffield Wednesday	31	5	7	4	25	23	6	2	7	19	25	-4	42
▼ 12 Coventry	31	7	3	5	25	19	4	5	7	16	21	1	41
▲ 13 QPR	31	6	5	5	22	22	4	6	5	13	18	-5	41
▼ 14 Millwall	30	7	3	6	18	14	3	7	4	12	13	3	40
▶ 15 Preston	30	6	7	2	18	13	2	6	7	15	25	-5	37
▲ 16 Swansea	31	5	5	5	21	18	5	2	9	12	24	-9	37
▼ 17 Oxford United	31	8	5	3	24	20	1	5	9	10	25	-11	37
▶ 18 Stoke	30	4	7	4	18	17	3	4	8	10	20	-9	32
▶ 19 Cardiff	30	6	2	7	18	19	1	8	6	15	32	-18	31
▶ 20 Portsmouth	31	6	5	4	22	14	1	4	11	15	40	-17	30
▶ 21 Hull	30	2	6	8	16	22	5	2	7	15	18	-9	29
▶ 22 Derby	31	6	2	7	19	15	1	5	10	14	27	-9	28
▶ 23 Luton	30	6	4	5	18	17	1	2	12	12	32	-19	27
▶ 24 Plymouth	30	5	6	4	24	26	0	4	11	5	37	-34	25

*deducted 2pts for breaching league rules

TOP SCORERS
15 Sainz (Norwich), right
13 Piroe (Leeds)
12 Maja (West Bromwich Albion)
11 Latte Lath (Middlesbrough)
11 Robinson (Cardiff)
10 Bayo (Watford)
10 Isidor (Sunderland)
10 Lang (Portsmouth)
10 Windass (Sheffield Wednesday)
9 Brownhill (Burnley)
9 Cannon (Sheffield Utd)
9 Cullen (Swansea)
9 Mehmeti (Bristol City)



SKY BET LEAGUE ONE

Bolton (0) 4 — **Crawley** (0) 3
Osei-Tutu 52 — Swan 54
Murphy 68 — Hepburn-Murphy
Sheehan 85 — 50, 62
Barker 90+9 (og) — 20,384
Sent off: Feely (Crawley) 89

Burton Albion (1) 1 — **Blackpool** (0) 1
Burrell 19 — Morgan 90+4
2,965

Charlton (1) 2 — **Stevenage** (0) 0
Godden 44 — 14,093
Berry 48

Huddersfield (0) 0 — **Reading** (0) 0

Lincoln City (1) 1 — **Cambridge U** (1) 1
Draper 17 — Gibbons 42
8,606
Sent off: Gardner (Lincoln City) 86

Rotherham (0) 1 — **Shrewsbury** (0) 2
Odoffin 76 — Perry 68
8,820 — Marquis 77

Stockport (2) 2 — **Barnsley** (0) 1
Olaofe 31 — Keillor-Dunn 90
Collar 35 (pen)

		HOME					AWAY						
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
▶ 1 Birmingham	27	10	3	0	22	7	9	3	2	24	12	27	63
▶ 2 Wycombe	29	8	4	2	20	10	9	4	2	35	20	25	59
▶ 3 Wrexham	29	12	3	1	31	12	4	4	5	12	13	18	55
▲ 4 Stockport	30	10	3	3	27	16	5	5	4	19	13	17	53
▼ 5 Huddersfield	29	8	4	4	18	13	6	3	4	23	13	15	49
▲ 6 Charlton	29	8	5	2	19	10	5	3	6	19	18	10	47
▶ 7 Bolton	30	8	3	5	29	25	6	2	6	18	21	1	47
▲ 8 Reading	29	10	0	3	25	12	3	6	7	18	29	2	45
▼ 9 Leyton Orient	28	7	3	5	19	10	6	2	5	21	15	15	44
▼ 10 Barnsley	30	4	6	5	20	21	8	1	6	22	20	1	43
▶ 11 Lincoln City	30	6	4	5	22	17	4	6	5	14	18	1	40
▲ 12 Stevenage	28	8	2	5	20	15	3	5	5	7	12	0	40
▶ 13 Blackpool	29	2	8	2	16	16	7	4	6	26	25	1	39
▼ 14 Mansfield	28	5	3	6	16	16	6	1	7	19	19	0	37
▼ 15 Rotherham	29	8	3	4	24	16	2	4	8	10	19	-1	37
▶ 16 Wigan	28	4	4	6	13	15	5	3	6	14	13	-1	34
▲ 17 Northampton	30	5	3	5	14	18	3	6	8	15	27	-16	33
▼ 18 Exeter City	29	5	3	7	21	26	4	2	8	12	20	-13	32
▶ 19 Bristol Rovers	28	6	3	4	18	17	3	1	11	10	27	-16	31
▼ 20 Peterborough	29	6	4	6	28	26	2	2	9	17	29	-10	30
▶ 21 Burton Albion	30	3	4	9	19	26	2	7	5	12	19	-14	26
▲ 22 Shrewsbury	29	5	2	7	16	23	2	3	10	14	26	-19	26
▼ 23 Crawley	28	3	3	6	14	20	3	3	10	16	32	-22	24
▼ 24 Cambridge United	29	4	4	6	18	22	1	4	10	12	29	-21	23

TOP SCORERS
16 Kone (Wycombe), right
15 Barry (Stockport)
14 Stansfield (Birmingham)
11 Evans (Mansfield)
11 Smith (Wrexham)
10 Gregory (Mansfield)
10 Keillor-Dunn (Barnsley)
10 May (Birmingham)
10 Poku (Peterborough)
9 Alli (Exeter)
9 Godden (Charlton)
9 Knibbs (Reading)





Queen's Park goalkeeper Calum Ferrie roars with relief after saving a 97th-minute penalty taken by

SKY BET LEAGUE TWO

Accrington (0) 0 — **AFC Wimbledon** (0) 0
2,170

Barrow (0) 3 — **Gillingham** (0) 0
Spence 60, 84 — 3,130
Smith 90+5

Bradford City (1) 1 — **Harrogate** (0) 0
Sarcevic 2 — 17,126

Colchester (0) 2 — **Walsall** (0) 1
Bishop 69 — Lakin 65
Edwards 74 — 4,734
Sent off: Allen (Walsall) 78

Crewe (0) 0 — **Newport Co** (2) 3
4,472 — Antwi 33
Ajiboye 45+2
Baker-Richardson 82

Fleetwood (1) 2 — **Cheltenham** (0) 0
Virtue 44 — 2,257
Helm 90+2

Grimsby (0) 2 — **Carlisle** (1) 1
Obikwu 62 — Lavelle 5
Rose 83 (pen) — 5,788

MK Dons (0) 0 — **Bromley** (0) 1
6,972 — Thompson 60

Notts Co (0) 2 — **Morecambe** (0) 0
Whitaker 66
Jatta 75

Salford (0) 2 — **Tranmere** (0) 0
Adelakun 51, 61 — 3,097

Swindon (2) 3 — **Port Vale** (2) 3
Wright 20 (pen) — Headley 31
Butterworth 45 — Tolaj 40, 87
Cotterill 63 — 7,606

		HOME					AWAY						
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
▶ 1 Walsall	29	11	3	1	36	19	7	2	5	19	13	23	59
▲ 2 Notts County	29	8	3	3	20	8	7	5	3	27	20	19	53
▼ 3 Doncaster	30	8	4	3	21	15	7	3	5	23	22	7	52
▲ 4 Bradford City	29	11	3	1	25	10	3	5	6	14	18	11	50
▼ 5 AFC Wimbledon	28	9	3	2	25	9	5	4	5	14	11	19	49
▶ 6 Port Vale	29	6	5	2	18	13	7	5	4	20	19	6	49
▲ 7 Salford	30	9	2	5	22	15	4	7	3	16	14	9	48
▼ 8 Crewe	30	7	5	3	21	16	5	7	3	15	12	8	48
▶ 9 Grimsby	30	7	2	6	23	24	7	1	7	19	22	-4	45
▶ 10 Chesterfield	29	6	7	2	25	17	5	2	7	23	17	14	42
▲ 11 Colchester	29	6	5	4	19	11	3	8	3	16	19	5	40
▲ 12 Fleetwood	28	6	7	3	19	14	4	2	6	20	21	4	39
▲ 13 Bromley	30	3	6	5	19	20	6	6	4	21	20	0	39
▼ 14 MK Dons	29	7	4	6	21	16	4	1	7	21	25	1	38
▼ 15 Swindon	31	6	4	5	26	22	3	7	6	20	25	-1	38
▼ 16 Cheltenham	29	8	3	4	22	19	2	5	7	15	22	-4	38
▲ 17 Newport County	29	7	2	4	23	19	3	4	9	17	28	-7	36
▶ 18 Barrow	29	7	4	4	24	15	2	3	9	6	17	-2	34
▼ 19 Gillingham	28	6	1	7	17	16	3	4	7	8	16	-7	32
▲ 20 Accrington Stanley	28	3	7	4	15	19	4	2	8	19	26	-11	30
▼ 21 Harrogate	31	5	2	8	12	21	3	4	9	13	21	-17	30
▶ 22 Tranmere	29	4	6	4	12	15	2	2	11	9	33	-27	26
▶ 23 Morecambe	30	2	3	8	14	24	4	2	11	13	24	-21	23
▶ 24 Carlisle	29	2	3	9	11	23	3	3	9	12	25	-25	21

TOP SCORERS
15 Lowe (Walsall), right
14 Cheek (Bromley)
14 Jatta (Notts County)
13 McGoldrick (Notts County)
13 Stevens (AFC Wimbledon)
12 Cook (Bradford City)
12 Smith (Swindon)
11 Molyneux (Doncaster)
10 Gilbey (MK Dons)
9 Matt (Walsall)
9 Rose (Grimsby)
9 Stockton (Salford)
9 Taylor (Colchester)



TheGame

STEVE WELSH/PA



Rangers' James Tavernier, knocking the Premiership side out of the Scottish Cup in the fifth round

NATIONAL LEAGUE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Barnet	31	19	7	5	60	30	30	64
Forest Green	30	17	11	2	50	23	27	62
York	29	18	6	5	57	26	31	60
Oldham	29	15	9	5	47	30	17	54
Gateshead	29	15	7	7	55	36	19	52
Halifax	29	13	9	7	36	27	9	48
Altrincham	28	12	9	7	47	33	14	45
Rochdale	26	13	4	9	38	22	16	43
Solihull Moors	30	12	6	12	46	42	4	42
Hartlepool	30	10	12	8	36	36	0	42
Sutton Utd	29	11	8	10	40	38	2	41
Southend	29	10	9	10	33	31	2	39
Yeovil	30	10	9	11	34	36	-2	39
Eastleigh	29	9	11	9	38	38	0	38
Tamworth	29	10	7	12	33	46	-13	37
Dag & Red	29	8	9	12	42	41	1	33
Braintree	30	8	7	15	29	42	-13	31
Woking	29	7	10	12	29	42	-13	31
Aldershot	28	6	12	10	42	48	-6	30
Maidenhead	29	8	5	16	36	57	-21	29
AFC Fylde	29	8	4	17	35	59	-24	28
Wealdstone	29	5	11	13	32	46	-14	26
Boston	27	4	8	15	24	44	-20	20
Ebbsfleet	31	1	10	20	21	67	-46	13

Altrincham 3 Braintree 1; Boston 0 Barnet 0; Dagenham & Redbridge 1 Yeovil 1; Forest Green 2 Eastleigh 1; Maidenhead 1 Southend 0; Rochdale 0 Ebbsfleet 0; Solihull Moors 0 Oldham 1; Sutton Utd 1 Hartlepool 2; Tamworth 1 Halifax 2; Wealdstone 0 Gateshead 4; York 3 Woking 0.

TOP SCORERS

16 Linney (Altrincham)
16 Pearce (York)
14 Haughton (AFC Fylde)
13 Davies (Sutton Utd)
13 Fondop (Oldham)
12 Newby (Altrincham)
12 Wilkinson (Solihull)
11 Mitchell (Rochdale)
11 Oseni (Gateshead)
11 Scott-Morriss (Southend)
11 Stevens (Solihull)

NATIONAL LEAGUE NORTH

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Chester	31	17	7	7	48	31	17	58
Scunthorpe	30	16	9	5	52	23	29	57
Brackley	30	17	4	9	44	30	14	55
King's Lynn	31	15	8	8	38	31	7	53
Chorley	29	14	9	6	42	31	11	51
Kidderminster	28	15	5	8	43	23	20	50
Curzon Ashton	28	15	5	8	38	21	17	50
Buxton	30	16	2	12	52	40	12	50
Hereford	30	13	8	9	40	32	8	47
Darlington	29	12	10	7	36	28	8	46
Alfreton	29	12	7	10	40	36	4	43
Spennymoor	29	10	11	8	47	35	12	41
Peterboro Sports	31	11	8	12	36	36	0	41
South Shields	29	12	4	13	45	42	3	40
Scarborough	31	9	10	12	43	43	0	37
Southport	30	9	9	12	33	44	-11	36
Leamington	28	10	5	13	36	36	0	35
Oxford City	29	8	9	12	39	49	-10	33
Radcliffe	28	7	8	13	36	51	-15	29
Needham Market	30	7	7	16	30	48	-18	28
Rushall Olympic	31	7	5	19	30	64	-34	26
Farsley Celtic	31	7	5	19	29	64	-35	26
Warrington	30	5	10	15	23	41	-18	25
Marine	30	6	7	17	22	43	-21	25

Brackley 1 Peterborough Sports 0; Curzon Ashton 0 King's Lynn 1; Darlington 3 Marine 1; Farsley Celtic 1 Needham Market 6; Hereford 0 Spennymoor 2; Kidderminster 1 Chorley 2; Oxford City 1 Leamington 2; Radcliffe 4 Southport 1; Rushall Olympic 1 Buxton 5; Scarborough 0 Alfreton 2; South Shields 2 Chester 0; Warrington Town 0 Scunthorpe 2.

TOP SCORERS

16 Blackett (South Shields)
15 Hemmings (Kidderminster)
15 Roberts (Scunthorpe)
14 Caton (Chester)
14 Stewart (Leamington)
14 Whitehall (Scunthorpe)
11 Fletcher (Spennymoor)
11 Peers (Chester)
11 Tear (Scarborough)

NATIONAL LEAGUE SOUTH

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Dorking	32	17	8	7	66	41	25	59
Worthing	29	17	7	5	46	36	10	58
Boreham Wood	30	16	7	7	54	30	24	55
Maidstone	31	15	10	6	46	26	20	55
Torquay	30	15	10	5	44	27	17	55
Eastbourne	31	15	10	6	37	30	7	55
Truro	30	15	8	7	43	28	15	53
Weston-s-Mare	31	14	9	8	45	37	8	51
Hampton & R	30	12	9	9	43	34	9	45
Tonbridge	31	11	11	9	40	38	2	44
Chesham	30	11	9	10	43	44	-1	42
Chelmsford	31	10	11	10	49	45	4	41
Farnborough	30	12	5	13	41	44	-3	41
Slough	31	10	9	12	49	50	-1	39
Chippenham	30	11	5	14	42	43	-1	38
H Hempstead	30	11	5	14	45	55	-10	38
Hornchurch	29	9	10	10	32	32	0	37
Bath	30	9	7	14	26	35	-9	34
Salisbury	29	7	11	11	34	38	-4	32
Welling	31	9	4	18	35	57	-22	31
Enfield Town	30	7	5	18	29	58	-29	26
St Albans	29	3	13	13	28	44	-16	22
Aveley	30	5	5	20	31	54	-23	20
Weymouth	31	3	10	18	24	46	-22	19

Aveley 0 Enfield Town 1; Bath 0 Hornchurch 2; Boreham Wood 0 Weston-super-Mare 1; Chesham 3 Weymouth 1; Farnborough 3 Chelmsford 4; Hampton & Richmond 1 Truro 3; Hemel Hempstead 4 Chippenham 2; Salisbury 0 Dorking 2; Slough 1 Maidstone 0; Tonbridge 1 Worthing 2; Torquay 2 Eastbourne 0; Welling 1 St Albans 1.

TOP SCORERS

20 Appiah (Boreham Wood)
16 Harvey (Truro)
14 Rutherford (Dorking)
13 Blair (Maidstone)
13 Coulson (Weston)
12 Alexander (Eastbourne)
12 Foyo (Chelmsford)
12 Youngs (Enfield Town)
11 Cooke (Torquay)
11 Kabia (Truro)

SCOTTISH CUP FIFTH ROUND

Aberdeen (1) **3** — **Dunfermline** (0) **0**
Guèye 45+1
Jensen 50
Nisbet 85
9,893

Celtic (2) **5** — **Raith Rovers** (0) **0**
Maeda 6, 45+3, 77
McCowan 47
Yang 56
39,207

Dundee (4) **4** — **Airdrieonians** (0) **0**
Robertson 13
Cameron 25, 44
Adewumi 40
4,335

Livingston (1) **3** — **Cove Rangers** (0) **0**
McGowan 25
Yengi 81, 83
1,111

Rangers (0) **0** — **Queen's Park** (0) **1**
35,628
Drozd 69

St Johnstone (0) **1** — **Hamilton** (0) **0**
Sidibeh 87
3,095

WILLIAM HILL SCOTTISH CHAMPIONSHIP

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Falkirk	23	15	4	4	45	21	24	49
Ayr Utd	23	14	5	4	38	18	20	47
Livingston	23	13	6	4	32	17	15	45
Partick Thistle	24	10	6	8	31	28	3	36
Queen's Park	23	8	5	10	25	26	-1	29
Morton	21	6	9	6	21	25	-4	27
Raith Rovers	22	8	3	11	23	31	-8	27
Dunfermline	23	6	4	13	24	32	-8	22
Hamilton	22	6	3	13	27	42	-15	21
Airdrieonians	22	3	3	16	16	42	-26	12

Falkirk (3) **5** — **Partick** (2) **2**
Arfield 1, 40, 60 (pen)
Oliver 35
McCann 76
Chalmers 10
Graham 24
6,471
Sent off: Graham (Partick) 37

LEAGUE ONE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Stenhousemuir	24	11	5	8	34	25	9	38
Arbroath	22	11	4	7	35	25	10	37
Cove Rangers	22	10	4	8	36	26	10	34
Queen of South	24	9	5	10	25	28	-3	32
Kelty Hearts	22	8	7	7	29	22	7	31
Alloa	24	7	10	7	31	28	3	31
Annan	24	7	6	11	25	41	-16	27
Montrose	23	6	8	9	23	28	-5	26
Inverness CT	24	10	7	7	27	27	0	22
Dumbarton	23	5	8	10	29	44	-15	8

Annan (0) **2** — **Dumbarton** (0) **1**
Smith 47
Gibson 77 (pen)
Mumbongo 64
428

Arbroath (2) **3** — **Inverness CT** (0) **0**
Steele 26
Winter 42 (pen)
Dow 70
1,500

Montrose (1) **2** — **Alloa** (0) **2**
Stirton 17, 86 (pen)
502
O'Donnell 53
Buchanan 65

Stenhousemuir (2) **2** — **Queen of South** (0) **1**
Alston 12
O'Donnell 28
Dickenson 90+1
630

LEAGUE TWO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
East Fife	24	15	3	6	50	22	28	48
Peterhead	24	13	5	6	36	27	9	44
Elgin	23	11	7	5	35	26	9	40
Edinburgh City	24	11	4	9	35	33	2	37
Stirling Albion	24	9	3	12	36	42	-6	30
The Spartans	22	8	5	9	27	29	-2	29
Clyde	24	6	8	10	28	37	-9	26
Bonnyrigg Rose	24	9	4	11	31	42	-11	25
Stranraer	23	6	6	11	20	28	-8	24
Forfar	22	3	7	12	19	31	-12	16

Bonnyrigg Rose (2) **3** — **Peterhead** (3) **4**
Ferrie 14, Ross 41
Currie 47
469
Colloty 17
Shanks 24
Barry 26, Smith 88

Clyde (0) **2** — **Stranraer** (0) **0**
Rennie 49
Williamson 84
754

Forfar (0) **0** — **Edinburgh City** (1) **1**
484
Robertson 34

Stirling Albion (2) **3** — **Elgin** (0) **1**
Hilson 29
Harkness 32
Brown 64
Draper 70
632

The Spartans (0) **0** — **East Fife** (0) **1**
630
Trouten 77 (pen)

WOMEN'S FA CUP FIFTH ROUND

Arsenal (1) **2** — **London City** (0) **0**
Laia Codina 32
Blackstenius 81

Aston Villa (1) **3** — **Brighton** (1) **2**
Patten 45+2
Daly 50, Grant 55
Parris 45, 72

Chelsea (2) **4** — **Everton** (1) **1**
Macário 36 (pen)
Ramírez 45+2
Hamano 71
Baltimore 90+2 (pen)
Holmgaard 17

Crystal Palace (0) **2** — **Newcastle** (0) **0**
Weerden 81
Larkin 90+4

Man City (2) **3** — **Leicester** (0) **1**
Leila Ouahabi 18
Kerolin 29
Shaw 59
Las 82

Portsmouth (0) **0** — **Sunderland** (2) **2**
Dear 34, Scarr 45+1
Sent off: Williams (Portsmouth) 89

Rugby Boro (0) **0** — **Liverpool** (0) **2**
Höbinger 84
Enderby 90+2

Wolves (0) **0** — **Man Utd** (2) **6**
Terland 26, Galton 36
Mannion 52, Toone 54
Griffiths 88, 90+5

DUTCH EREDIVISIE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Ajax	21	16	3	2	45	18	27	51
PSV Eindhoven	22	16	3	3	69	24	45	51
Utrecht	22	12	6	4	40	34	6	42
AZ Alkmaar	22	12	4	6	38	21	17	40
Feyenoord	21	11	6	4	46	26	20	39
Twente	21	10	6	5	44	30	14	36
Go Ahead Eagles	21	9	5	7	39	34	5	32
Fortuna Sittard	22	7	5	10	29	40	-11	26
NAC Breda	22	8	2	12	26	41	-15	26
Heerenveen	22	7	5	10	26	41	-15	26
NEC Nijmegen	21	7	3	11	32	30	2	24
Willem II Tilburg	22	6	6	10	25	31	-6	24
Zwolle	22	6	6	10	26	34	-8	24
Heracles Almelo	22	5	9	8	28	39	-11	24
Groningen	22	6	6	10	19	31	-12	24
Sparta Rotterdam	22	4	8	10	19	32	-13	20
Waalwijk	22	4	5	13	31	45	-14	17
Almere City	21	3	4	14	12	43	-31	13

AZ Alkmaar 2 Zwolle 0; Feyenoord 3 Sparta Rotterdam 0; Fortuna Sittard 0 Ajax 2; Groningen 2 NEC Nijmegen 1; Heracles Almelo 4 Go Ahead Eagles 2; Heerenveen 3 Twente 3; PSV Eindhoven 1 Willem II Tilburg 1; Utrecht 0 Almere City 1; Waalwijk 5 NAC Breda 0.

FRENCH LIGUE 1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
PSG	21	16	5	0	58	20	38	53
Marseille	21	13	4	4	45	25	20	43
Nice	21	10	7	4	41	26	15	37
Monaco	21	11	4	6	37	28	9	37
Lille	21	9	8	4	34	22	12	35
Lyon	21	9	6	6	36	26	10	33
Lens	21	9	6	6	25	20	5	33
Brest	21	10	1	10	33	36	-3	31
Strasbourg	21	8	6	7	35	32	3	30
Toulouse	21	7	6	8	23	24	-1	27
Auxerre	21	6	6	9	29	35	-6	24
Rennes	21	7	2	12	29	30	-1	23
Angers	21	6	5	10	22	31	-9	23
Reims	21	5	7	9	26	33	-7	22
Nantes	21	4	9	8	24	32	-8	21
St Etienne	21	5	3	13	19	45	-26	18
Le Havre	21	5	2	14	17	40	-23	17
Montpellier	21	4	3	14	20	48	-28	15

Angers 0 Marseille 2; Auxerre 2 Toulouse 2; Lille 1 Le Havre 2; Lyon 4 Reims 0; Nice 2 Lens 0; St Etienne 0 Rennes 2; Strasbourg 2 Montpellier 0.

GERMAN BUNDESLIGA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Bayern Munich	21	17	3	1	65	19	46	54
B Leverkusen	21	13	7	1	49	27	22	46
E Frankfurt	21	11	6	4	46	28	18	39
RB Leipzig	21	10	6	5	36	29	7	36
Stuttgart	21	10	5	6	39	31	8	35
Freiburg	21	10	3	8	28	36	-8	33
Mainz	21	9	5	7	33	24	9	32
B M'gladbach	21	9	4	8	33	31	2	31
Wolfsburg	21	8	6	7	43	35	8	30
Werder Bremen	21	8	6	7	34	39	-5	30
B Dortmund	21	8	5	8	37	36	1	29
Augsburg	21	7	6	8	24	35	-11	27
Union Berlin	21	6	6	9	20	27	-7	24
St Pauli	21	6	3	12	18	24	-6	21
Hoffenheim	21	4	6	11	26	44	-18	18
Heidenheim	21	4	2	15	25	43	-18	14
Holstein Kiel	21	3	4	14	33	54	-21	13
Bochum	21	2	5	14	19	46	-27	11

Borussia Dortmund 1 Stuttgart 2; Borussia Mönchengladbach 1 Eintracht Frankfurt 1; Holstein Kiel 2 Bochum 2; Freiburg 1 Heidenheim 0; Hoffenheim 0 Union Berlin 4; Mainz 0 Augsburg 0; RB Leipzig 2 St Pauli 0; Wolfsburg 0 Bayer Leverkusen 0.

ITALIAN SERIE A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Napoli	24	17	4	3	39	17	22	55
Inter Milan	23	15	6	2	56	22	34	51
Atalanta	24	15	5	4	54	26	28	50
Lazio	24	14	3	7	45	32	13	45
Juventus	24	10	13	1	41	21	20	43
Fiorentina	23	12	6	5	40	23	17	42
AC Milan	23	10	8	5	35	24	11	38
Bologna	23	9	11	3	35	27	8	38
Roma	24	9	7	8	35	29	6	34
Udinese	24	8	6	10	29	37	-8	30
Torino	24	6	10	8	25	28	-3	28
Genoa	24	6	9	9	22	33	-11	27
Cagliari	24	6	6	12	26	39	-13	24
Lecce	24	6	6	12	18	41	-23	24
Hellas Verona	24	7	2	15	26	53	-27	23
Como	24	5	7	12	28	40	-12	22
Empoli	24	4	9	11	22	35	-13	21
Parma	24	4	8	12	30	44	-14	20
Venezia	24	3	7	14	22	39	-17	16
Monza	24	2	7	15	21	39	-18	13

Cagliari 2 Parma 1; Empoli 0 AC Milan 2; Hellas Verona 0 Atalanta 5; Lazio 5 Monza 1; Lecce 0 Bologna 0; Napoli 1 Udinese 1; Torino 1 Genoa 1; Venezia 0 Roma 1.

SPANISH LA LIGA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Real Madrid	23	15	5	3	51	22	29	50
Atlético Madrid	23	14	7	2	38	15	23	49
Barcelona	23	15	3	5	64	25	39	48
Athletic Bilbao	23	12	8	3	36	20	16	44
Villarreal	23	11	7	5	46	34	12	40
Rayo Vallecano	23	9	8	6	27	24	3	35
Real Sociedad	23	9	4	10	20	20	0	31
Girona	23	9	4	10	31	33	-2	31
Osasuna	22	7	9	6	27	31	-4	30
Mallorca	22	9	3	10	19	28	-9	30
Real Betis	23	7	8	8	27	31	-4	29
Celta Vigo	23	8	4	11	34	37	-3	28
Sevilla	23	7	7	9	25	34	-9	28
Getafe	23	6	9	8	18	17	1	27
Las Palmas	23	6	5	12	28	38	-10	23
Espanyol	23	6	5	12	22	35	-13	23
Leganés	23	5	8	10	19	32	-13	23
Valencia	23	5	7	11	24	37	-13	22
Alavés	23	5	6	12	25	35	-8	21
Real Valladolid	23	4	3	16	15	48	-33	15

Alavés 0 Getafe 1; Athletic Bilbao 3 Girona 0; Celta Vigo 3 Real Betis 2; Las Palmas 1 Villarreal 2; Real Madrid 1 Atlético Madrid 1; Real Sociedad 2 Espanyol 1; Sevilla 1 Barcelona 4; Valencia 2 Leganés 0.

FIXTURES

Kick-off 7.45 unless stated

Today

FA Cup: Fourth round Doncaster v Crystal Palace.

Scottish Cup: Fifth round St Mirren v Hearts.

Tomorrow

Champions League: First knock-out round, first legs Brest v Paris Saint-Germain (5.45); Juventus v PSV Eindhoven (8.0); Manchester City v Real Madrid (8.0); Sporting v Borussia Dortmund (8.0).

FA Cup: Fourth round Exeter v Nottingham Forest (8.0).

Sky Bet Championship Coventry v QPR; Derby v Oxford Utd; Norwich v Preston (8.0); Portsmouth v Cardiff; Watford v Leeds. **League One** Birmingham v Cambridge Utd; Blackpool v Rotherham; Bristol Rovers v Stockport; Charlton v Peterborough; Crawley v Stevenage; Leyton Orient v Mansfield; Reading v Shrewsbury (8.0). **League Two** AFC Wimbledon v Crewe; Barrow v MK Dons; Bradford City v Accrington Stanley; Newport County v Carlisle; Tranmere v Fleetwood; Walsall v Gillingham.

Vanarama National League Dagenham & Redbridge v Woking; Gateshead v Braintree; Hartlepool v Tamworth; Oldham v Altrincham; Southend v Halifax.

William Hill Scottish League One Cove Rangers v Montrose.

Wednesday

Champions League: First knock-out round, first legs Celtic v Bayern Munich (8.0); Club Bruges v Atalanta (5.45); Feyenoord v AC Milan (8.0); Monaco v Benfica (8.0).

Premier League Everton v Liverpool (7.30).

Sky Bet Championship Bristol City v Stoke; Burnley v Hull; Plymouth v Millwall; Sheffield Utd v Middlesbrough (8.0); Sunderland v Luton; Swansea v Sheffield Wednesday; West Bromwich v Blackburn (8.0).

Thursday

Europa League: First knock-out round, first legs AZ Alkmaar v Galatasaray (8.0); FC Porto v Roma (8.0); Fenerbahce v Anderlecht (5.45); Ferencvaros v Plzen (5.45); Midtjylland v Real Sociedad (5.45); PAOK v FCSB (8.0); Twente v Bodo/Glimt (8.0); Union Saint Gilloise v Ajax (5.45).

Europa Conference League: First knock-out round, first legs Backa Topola v Jagiellonia Bialystock (5.45); Borac v Olimpija Ljubljana (8.0); CM Celje v Apoel (5.45); Copenhagen v Heidenheim (8.0); Gent v Real Betis (8.0); Molde v Shamrock Rovers (5.45); Omonia Nicosia v AE Pafos (8.0); Vikingur Reykjavik v Panathinaikos (5.45).

Sky Bet League Two Port Vale v Notts County (8.0).

Friday

Premier League Brighton v Chelsea (8.0).

Sky Bet Championship QPR v Derby (8.0).

Kick-off 3.0 unless stated

Saturday

Premier League Aston Villa v Ipswich; Crystal Palace v Everton (5.30); Fulham v Nottingham Forest; Leicester v Arsenal (12.30); Manchester City v Newcastle; Southampton v Bournemouth; West Ham v Brentford.

Sky Bet Championship Blackburn v Plymouth; Cardiff v Bristol City (12.30); Hull v Norwich; Luton v Sheffield Utd; Middlesbrough v Watford; Millwall v West Bromwich; Oxford Utd v Portsmouth (12.30); Preston v Burnley (12.30); Sheffield Wednesday v Coventry; Stoke v Swansea. **League One** Barnsley v Huddersfield; Birmingham v Charlton; Blackpool v Mansfield; Bristol Rovers v Burton Albion; Cambridge Utd v Exeter (12.30); Crawley v Wycombe; Leyton Orient v Lincoln City; Northampton v Wrexham (12.30); Reading v Rotherham; Shrewsbury v Bolton; Stevenage v Peterborough; Wigan v Stockport. **League Two** AFC Wimbledon v Salford (12.30); Bromley v Fleetwood; Carlisle v Colchester; Cheltenham v Barrow; Doncaster v Grimsby (12.30); Gillingham v Crewe; Harrogate v Swindon; Morecambe v Accrington Stanley; Newport County v Bradford City; Tranmere v MK Dons; Walsall v Chesterfield.

Vanarama National League AFC Fylde v Dagenham & Redbridge; Barnet v Solihull Moors; Braintree v Forest Green; Eastleigh v Aldershot; Ebbsfleet v York; Gateshead v Altrincham; Halifax v Boston; Hartlepool v Maidenhead; Oldham v Sutton Utd; Southend v Rochdale; Woking v Tamworth; Yeovil v Wealdstone.

William Hill Premiership Celtic v Dundee Utd; Dundee v Aberdeen; Kilmarnock v St Johnstone; Motherwell v Ross County.

William Hill Championship Falkirk v Ayr; Livingston v Dunfermline; Morton v Airdrieonians; Queen's Park v Hamilton; Raith v Partick. **League One** Alloa v Kelty Hearts; Cove Rangers v Annan; Dumbarton v Montrose; Inverness CT v Stenhousemuir (2.0); Queen of South v Arbroath. **League Two** East Fife v Bonnyrigg Rose; Edinburgh City v The Spartans; Peterhead v Clyde; Stirling Albion v Forfar; Stranraer v Elgin.

Sunday

Premier League Liverpool v Wolverhampton (2.0); Tottenham v Manchester Utd (4.30).

Women's Super League Arsenal v Tottenham (12.30); Chelsea v Everton Women (2.0); Leicester v Aston Villa; Manchester City v Liverpool (6.45); Manchester Utd v Crystal Palace (midday); West Ham v Brighton.

William Hill Premiership Hearts v Rangers (midday); St Mirren v Hibernian (2.0).

ALVARO MEDRANDA/QUALITY SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

Is academy kid Asencio a Real giant in defence? Haaland will soon find out



Asencio played with the winger Vázquez, below, in Real's defence on Saturday





IAN HAWKEY ON EUROPE

Injury crisis means the 21-year-old rookie and makeshift back line must create firewall against City tomorrow

Several heartwarming images stuck with Carlo Ancelotti at the end of a pulsating Madrid derby. "I saw Dani Carvajal, Éder Militão, David Alaba and Antonio Rüdiger all encouraging our players as they went on to the pitch," he reported after the 1-1 draw. A stylish guard of honour these defenders made, Alaba in his dark peacoat, Militão in camouflage trousers and a neck chain so sturdy he could have been running for mayoral re-election.

Alas for Ancelotti, none of them will be putting on shorts for the match away to Manchester City tomorrow night, injury restricting all their roles to those of statesmen-cheerleader.

Ancelotti had another moving moment, making his way into the technical area before kick-off, his mind on preventing Atletico Madrid from leapfrogging his Real Madrid at the top of La Liga. There, eager for an affectionate hug, was another grandee, Marcelo, who, two days after having announced the end of a career spent redefining the role of a left back, had been serenaded at the Bernabéu, where he spent 15 years up until 2022. An emotional Marcelo heard his name chanted by 70,000-odd fans, his legacy honoured by a big-screen montage celebrating his five European Cups.

Carvajal can trump even that, with his six Champions League titles. Alaba, Militão and Rüdiger have eight among them. That's a lot of pedigree to give up at a stage of the season where, because of excess leaks at the back end of a team geared to counterattack, the big European D-Day has arrived prematurely. City-Real, a thrilling staple of the quarter-finals or semi-finals in recent years, finds itself recast as a play-off for the right to enter the last 16 and a contest centred on how far the fallen Premier League champions' confidence has eroded and how effectively the Champions League holders can forage the materials to build a firewall against Erling Haaland.

The 1-1 draw with Atletico allowed Ancelotti some optimism. His makeshift centre half, Aurélien Tchouaméni, did concede a first-half penalty, a relatively soft VAR call, and with that the lead, but otherwise the France midfielder performed with authority in a position that is not his natural one. Lucas Vázquez, the winger reconditioned as a right back, had a mixed evening before yesterday adding his name to those unavailable. Vázquez's absence — a muscle problem — means Ancelotti's probable solution at right back is to pull Fede Valverde out of midfield, where his industry is valued, and to contort the ideal shape of the side even further, while counting the many weeks before first-choice right back Carvajal's cruciate ligament is fixed and looking forward to the likely summer arrival of Trent Alexander-Arnold.

Nor, in the absence of Militão, Rüdiger and Alaba, is there any senior player who answers to the description of centre back. Hence the rapid promotion of 21-year-old Raúl Asencio, a footballer praised by Ancelotti for his "maturity, calmness and focus", and, in his first grown-up Madrid derby, honoured by the Bernabéu crowd by having his surname chanted with the same gusto they had shown to Marcelo. As recently as November, Asencio was playing for Real's feeder club, Castilla, against Atletico B in front of less than 2,500 in Spain's third division. By the end of that month he was making only his second start for Real at Anfield, where, within four minutes, he had a crash-course in how anybody in the middle of the Real back four is liable to ambush. A careless Kylian Mbappé was hassled off the ball by Mohamed Salah, whose swift triangle of passes with Darwin Núñez gained 50 metres and what appeared a certain goal until Asencio cleared off the line.

That moment gave the new boy instant cachet. A highlights-reel tackle on Atletico's Giuliano, son of the Atletico head coach, Diego Simeone, on Saturday lent Asencio more and it prompted the singing of his name. It helped that Asencio then made a lordly gesture for Giuliano to stop rolling around and get up, a wave of his right arm so reminiscent of what Sergio Ramos used to do as warrior-in-chief at Real that Asencio can only have copied it from watching and rewatching footage of Ramos. He may be a novice, but he's cute enough to know what supporters respond to.

He's also one of Real's own and, if you discount the South Americans — Vinícius Jr, Valverde and Rodrygo, who were recruited to the club's academy at 18 — Carvajal and Vázquez, both in their mid-thirties, he's a modern rarity for having spent a significant portion of his teens at Real's academy and suggesting he might follow an upward pathway within the club and not elsewhere. The so-called *Fábrica*, Real's nursery, is generally far better at selling its best young players — no club from Europe's top four leagues has made more profit from academy sales in the past decade — than building the senior team around them.

The history of centre backs who jump from Castilla to the first team is particularly chequered. There was poor Rubén González, so crushed, at 21, by the impossible responsibilities of playing behind a superstar front six in the unbalanced team of the galactico era that he burst into tears on live television after being hooked 25 minutes into a 4-1 thrashing away to Sevilla, his fourth and last Real game. There was Nacho Fernández, who spent 15 years getting to know every crease and stitch in the upholstery of the Bernabéu dugout: Fernández appeared in 551 match-day squads at Real; he sat on the bench for almost 300 of those games.

Had Fernández not moved to Saudi Arabia last summer, he'd probably be Ancelotti's first pick for at least three positions in the back four for the Etihad Stadium encounter. He'd possibly be the preference at left back too, where neither Ferland Mendy nor Fran García — both fit — has earned Ancelotti's unconditional trust. It's a zone where City, through each of the epic ties with Real over the past three years, consistently found productive channels. Of the 13 goals City put past Real in those see-saw ties, six came from the City right.

In 2022 and 2024, Real survived the ambushes, eliminating City via extra time and via penalties, after surreal aggregate scorelines of 6-5 and 4-4. Ancelotti's 2024-25 Madrid, geared to stretching opponents on the flanks and on the break through Mbappé, Vinícius and Rodrygo, with Jude Bellingham attacking from the spaces behind that trio, remains porous. They've kept a single clean sheet in eight European matches. They let in nine goals in two games against Barcelona. They've been beaten by comfortable margins by AC Milan and Liverpool, whose 2-0 win at Anfield included a missed penalty as well as that moment when Asencio set himself an impossibly high bar by scooping off the goalline four minutes into his Champions League debut.

Manchester City v Real Madrid

8pm tomorrow, Amazon Prime

> "Asencio may be a novice but he is cute enough to know what fans respond to, having copied Sergio Ramos's lordly gestures