

MOLES IN LOCKDOWN

March to July 2020

**This collection of Work is dedicated to the
memory of
Sylvia Herbert
1935 - 2020**

**Sylvia was a founder member of “The Moles.” She was a
guiding light of our group since its founding in 1999; her
literary talents in both poetry and prose were a source of
inspiration to all of us and her generous hospitality at the
August meetings was much appreciated.**

**We are all saddened by her death on April 24th.
May she rest in peace.**

**During the coronavirus lockdown we were
not able to hold our normal meetings.
In March there was no meeting and Moles simply
submitted offerings by email.
In April, May, June & July we met via Zoom.**

**This is a collection of work produced by Moles
for those “meetings.”**

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SYLVIA HERBERT
1935-2020



*Sadly Sylvia had not submitted any lockdown pieces
before her death 24th April.
We reproduce on the following four pages
two of her works from “The Mole”,
our first anthology of memoirs, poems and stories,
published 25th April 2000.*

HALCYON DAY

When you meander by the brown Mole's brink
Amid wide water meadows soft with haze
Of Spring; where cattle lumber peacefully down to drink
Below the banks in muddy shallow bays,
You may half-glimpse a bright blue flashing flame
A-dance over the water's mirrored face.
The kingfisher now plays his angling game;
He dives precisely, with an arching grace.

He sprinkles diamonds from his jewelled head
In generous payment for his silver meal,
And pauses, jet-eyed on the willow spray
A second – as you turn to look he's fled
Down river. Look in vain, he'll not reveal
How much your presence meant to him today.

DREAMS OF A LITTLE GIRL

The gift of memory can be both a curse and a blessing. Nobody enjoys painful recollections of tragedy or mishap, but one of the compensations of age is being able to remember in graphic detail enjoyable experiences of our youth (no matter that the happenings of yesterday are less than clear ...)

One of my earliest memories concerns a very hot late summer's day when I was about 4 years old. We were living in a rural area of Cheshire near what is now Manchester Airport but which then was delightful countryside. There was a glen

opposite our cottage door, which led down to the curling River Bollin, spanned by a little white footbridge to Ashleigh Mill. Red squirrels played in the surrounding trees and the air was full of birdsong – an idyllic spot.

My mother and father had been listening to the wireless rather more than usual and, young as I was, I was aware of an atmosphere of anxiety and seriousness. After my father had left for his office in Manchester, my mother seemed to find it difficult to settle to her usual household tasks.

“What a lovely day!” she exclaimed suddenly, “Shall we go for a walk and a picnic down the glen?”

Naturally the idea appealed to me very much, so we soon set off, hand in hand, my blue teddy, head down as usual, firmly tucked under my plump little arm.

I skipped and ran alternately down the path, enjoying the dappled play of light – sunshine and shadow through the trees.

When we reached the river bank, my mother found a suitable place to sit on the daisy-spangled short green grass and we set out the picnic things. I remember vividly that part of the meal consisted of tomato sandwiches, biscuits and apples. I had brought a brightly coloured ball, which we kicked to each other over the turf.

Presently, a number of other mothers and small children arrived – an unusual occurrence. Tentatively we children approached each other under the watchful eyes of our parents, and after a while quite a sociable little group gathered on the

river's edge. It was shallow at that point, so we were delighted to be allowed to discard our shoes and socks and paddle in the brackish water, which was deliciously cool to our feet. How we splashed and cavorted! I marvelled that my mother didn't tell me off for soaking the lower part of my dress. The mothers seemed to be preoccupied with subdued and intimate conversation, which surprised me as I was unaware that we knew any of the other people before that afternoon. Indeed, it was amazing that half a dozen children of my own age had materialised so unexpectedly and opportunely.

Late in the afternoon we all made our way back up the glen, and I noticed that there were tears in my mother's eyes, and also that some other women appeared to be crying as they parted on affectionate terms. I couldn't understand this, as we'd had such a carefree time and the sun shone so warmly. I felt tired and happy.

As we neared our cottage a plane droned overhead, and we made out its black shape with a swastika painted on the underside. It had been circling the strip which was nearby Ringway aerodrome, obviously on a reconnaissance flight. My mother, still in a strange mood, gathered me close and hurried me into the house, where she burst into tears.

It was the 3rd of September 1939. It meant nothing to me then that I'd spent my last day of innocent happiness.

MARCH 2020

Theme: Walk in the Woods



WALK IN THE WOODS
(*Acrostic Sonnet*)

Peter Horsfield

With measured tread I pick my way between
Anticipated muddy-trickled streams
Like glistening traps that lure my feet, unseen.
Kaleidoscopic patterns through the trees
Inspire with coloured light and shade my thoughts,
No longer tethered to life's daily grind.
Towards a forest clearing it transports –
Heart-warming images uplift my mind.
Eventually, winter storms replaced
With warmth and sunshine lead me onward now,
Over my laboured route that's not retraced,
Over the grassy banks to firmer ground.
Divine and healing place – enhance, O Wood,
Supporting in tranquility my mood.

WALKING IN THE WOODLANDS

Pat Harris

On the North Downs, drop down walking,
Passing Hackhurst farm into the village at Abinger Hammer.
But first stop on the hill by Hackhurst House, once an old inn
And take care to check down the fields to a small wood planted
by EM Forster the writer.
A few walkers follow this track into a dark wood,
A wood with deciduous trees.

At the Autumn fall of leaves, the moisture benefits the ecology
of wildlife:
Plants, animals and a natural habitat that has not been spoilt.
I lived beside this small wood for ten years
And the joy of waking to the nightingales was a wonderful
memory.
It was soon lost as a campsite was set close by
And the nightingales moved over to Woking -- maybe.
Besides the brambles which made safe cover for the fox,
Small animals were found under one or two of the trees.
There were no rabbits, but I once saw a weasel there.
The flowers of the woods: Wild Sorrel, Anemone,
Dog's Mercury and Honeysuckle on the hedge.
Although a great feature of this area's woodland, I don't
remember to have seen Bluebells;
But blown in from the wind or by animals, primroses grew on
the edge of the fields.
Sweet chestnut trees also find their way, perhaps in the early
day planted.
I guess the National Trust were a great force to the
conservation of our woodlands today.

A WALK IN THE WOODS

Robert Edmondson

This contribution begins with a quotation from William Blake -
"A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees".

You may enjoy a walk in the woods because of the
absence of the noises of so-called civilisation. There is no roar
or hooting of horns from road vehicles, no hammering of

pneumatic drills, nor is there any blaring pop music from open windows but you may hear the call of a wild bird. You may be walking there for the exercise or as a welcome change from your daily work, possibly in an office staring at a computer screen all day.

Whatever the reason for your presence there it cannot be denied that the experience is dominated by trees, superficially so familiar in our gardens, in our parks and the countryside. However further consideration reveals them to be so alien, so different and so, yes, even sophisticated. The more we study them the stranger and more fascinating they become. I recently read “The Hidden Life of Trees” by Peter Wohlleben , translated from the original in German. The book was surprising and informative. It was controversial and uplifting. I can only say that it should be on everyone’s essential reading list.

Essentially it relates how trees communicate to their neighbours, not necessarily of the same species, using chemical signals. One of the many remarkable examples concerns giraffes on the African savannah, browsing on umbrella thorn acacias. The trees were obviously unhappy- it took mere minutes to start pumping toxic products into their leaves to rid themselves of the large herbivores. As expected the giraffes moved to other trees in the vicinity but , strangely enough, not to the trees that were nearby. They resumed their meal on trees that were about 100 yards away. The amazing reason for this is that the acacia trees that were being browsed also gave off a warning gas, ethylene, which signalled to neighbouring trees (of the same species) that a crisis was occurring and then they too pumped toxins into their leaves. The animals were familiar with this response and either moved further away or upwind.

Similar processes occur too in our woodlands, here in

Surrey. Beech and oak respond when some creature starts nibbling on them. If a leaf is being eaten by a caterpillar the adjacent tissue sends out an electrical signal, albeit rather slowly, at 1/3 inch per minute, and it can be an hour before defensive compounds reach the leaves to spoil the predator's meal. Trees live in the extremely slow lane, with a concept of time that is different from ours. Also they can counterattack with different compounds, having identified the creature that is eating them. Thus they may release pheromones that attract specific beneficial predators. Elms and pines can attract small wasps which are parasitic on caterpillars that feed on their leaves. This signalling operates underground too. Roots intersect, assisted by the presence of fungal threads called mycelia, and urgent chemical messages as well as nutrients can travel in either direction. This has been described as the "wood wide web" pervading our forests and woods and it may involve different species of trees, with benefits to each, communicating with and supporting each other. In the leaf litter and humus and underground there is an unseen seething mass of life - fungi, invertebrates and micro organisms living and dying, fighting and eating, growing and reproducing themselves but collectively ensuring that nutrients are recycled. Is it worthwhile to poison this system with excessive pesticides?

Even the natural fall of a tree in woodland after heavy rain or gales should not be the cause for unmitigated regret. Light now falls on a previously shaded area of the woodland floor. Seeds, after decades of suspended animation can now sprout in the sunlight and warmth, with new flowers appearing. I remember that henbane appeared in Norbury Park after the great gale of 1987. The holes and cavities at the base of a fallen tree can be homes for a range of animals and reptiles and on a dead tree insects and fungi have a new food source.

In a forest or woodland the only constant is change, sometimes aesthetically attractive, sometimes repellent to our twenty first century sensibilities, mostly unseen but always fascinating. You are entering a universe of biodiversity. Thus even a short walk in the woods is of unending interest, at any time of the year.

WALK IN THE WOODS

Raymond Brown

“Oh come on, Bob,” young Susan said

 “The sun is shining; let’s go out.

“It’s fine, no clouds are overhead;

“The Spring has come; it’s time to shed

 The winter’s blues; for all about

“The buds are breaking, birds are singing;

“From the earth are flowers springing;

“So rouse yourself, you sleepy head!

 “A walk in the woods will do us good;

 “Come on, come on. You know you should.”

“A walk’s OK,” young Bob replied.

 “But why into the woods, dear Sue?

“They’re gloomy, dark and once inside

“You lose your way, for trees misguide

 “With shifting shapes, and nothing’s true

“To what you thought you saw before you;

“Not to the woodlands, I implore you.

“Let’s look for gentler countryside.

“A walk in the woods fills me with dread;

“Let’s try the fields and lanes instead.”

“Oh Bob,” said Sue, “Don’t be so soft!

“It’s Spring, there’s life there all around;

“For buds are bursting there aloft,

“And gentle breezes there do waft

“And scents and smells do there abound

“Which fill your senses with well-being

“And send all doleful thoughts a-fleeing.

“Don’t be a wimp!” young Susan scoffed.

“A walk in the woods is just the thing

“To stir your heart and make it sing.”

“Ah, life there may be all around,”

Said Bob, “but not all meek and mild.

“For ancient tales do all abound

“With trolls and witches; goblins found

“In hollow trees and all things wild.

“They may be fancy; yet they surely

“Reveal a truth, and not obscurely,

“That dangers lurk in every sound.

“A walk in the wood’s unsafe and dire;

“And not a thing you should desire.”

“Oh tosh,” said Sue, “they lift our hearts
 “And lighten e’en the gloomiest mood.
“In woods depression soon departs
“You feel relaxed, each tree imparts
 “Beneficence; and you’re imbued
“With feelings positive and soothing,
“Uplifting mind and soul and smoothing
“Away all cares and painful smarts.
 “A walk in the woods will heal your mind,
 “As you at ease begin to unwind.”

“Not so,” said Bob, “for they depress
 “Me through and through; their dismal gloom
“Pervades my being, bringing stress.
“They overwhelm; and they oppress.
 “They’re harbingers of pending doom.
“The woods are wild, untamed, primeval;
“And they disturb; they cause upheaval
“Which churns my soul, leaves it a mess.
 “A walk in the woods I must forgo;
 “It brings but dread and doom and woe.”

“Oh really, Bob, you talk such rot,”
 Young Susan said. “You are a wimp!
“Doom-laden they are surely not,
“But rather calm and peace allot;
 “And they enrich and do not skimp

“The benefits of their bestowing;
“Immerse yourself in wellness flowing
“From nature’s ever brimming pot.
 “A walk in the woods will bathe your soul,
 “Wash cares away and make you whole.”

“Not bathe,” said Bob, “but inundate
 “My soul beneath the fearful flood
“I know will overwhelm in spate
“And drown my soul and suffocate
 “My mind and chill my very blood.
“For know, dear Sue, ’twill drive me manic,
“I’ll start to shake and fit and panic
“In heightened hydrophobic state.
 “A walk in the woods no good for me,
 “For I’m a hydrophobe, you see.”

“Oh dear,” said Sue, “I did not know.
 “It’s not good news; it’s very sad.
“Mid birch and beech and ash and sloe
“Such pleasant walks you must forgo,
“Nor reap the gains that may be had.
“For *shinrin yoku*, forest-bathing,
“With nature all your senses swathing,
“Does set your heart and mind aglow.
 “A walk in the woods is how I view
 “Those Japanese words. So, Bob, adieu!”

A WALK IN THE WOODS & THE JOURNEY HOME

Jennie Allen

Part 1: A Walk in the Woods

Yazzie was late getting home from sixth form college – later than she had said she would be, and it wouldn't be long before the light would be fading. It would have to be a quick walk then. She flung her school bag down on the kitchen table, grabbed her wellies because it had been so wet and slippery lately and picked up the leads for the two dogs. She didn't have to call them as they were eagerly waiting by the door, one, Goldie, slim and the colour of its name, the other, Coco, two years old, a mischievous chocolate sprocker.

The sky didn't look too bad, Yazzie thought. Maybe she could just make it through the woods and back. It was only a few steps along the road to the path that led to the trees and soon the dogs were running ahead, let off their leads sniffing eagerly at the damp grass, scrabbling for – what were they scrabbling for – insects, roots? But Yazzie didn't ponder on wondering about that too long. She was busy pondering on something else. Max. Not tall, dark and handsome, but blond and very good looking – in the way that boy-band singers are good-looking – features still soft – not yet hardened into full adulthood. Quite tall too, without being gangly. But that smile, those greeny blue eyes – she shivered with delight at the way he had looked at her that afternoon – the reason why she was late home, hanging around with a group of fellow students, reluctant to leave while he was there.

It is surprising how different things look at different times of the day. The path she took was one of her favourite walks with the dogs – silver birch trees, blackthorn and sycamores which did not obscure the sky but whose branches formed a lace canopy over the ups and downs – the deep hollows where once years ago a trees had fallen, roots pulled from the ground. Over time the subsequent holes had deepened and earth had built up around the perimeter – she liked to imagine these depressions were made by bombs during the second world war – the subject she was studying in History for her A levels. The narrow paths around these small craters could be hazardous, especially when there had been a lot of rain, or when the ever-present brambles reached out a tendril to trip up a hapless walker.

The dogs were still snuffling happily as she walked on. She could see the bracken field to her right. In the summer the bracken was shoulder-height and vibrant green – now it was faded rust coloured and flopped over. The sky had not lost a lot of its light – she could see that, though in the woods it was beginning to get gloomy. Maybe she should cut the walk short and go through to the bracken field and back that way. But she didn't.

Max. Did he like dogs she wondered. Yazzie imagined them walking together in the summer, stopping where the wild honeysuckle grew – maybe to exchange a kiss.....Had she passed the place where the honeysuckle grew? She hadn't been paying attention. And where were the dogs? How long had she been walking? Surely she should have reached the end of this path by now, where she could walk through the grassy field to what they called Leylandii House, although it was

difficult to see the house as it was shielded by the long line of leylandii trees. There she could turn right through the heath to the path that led to home. She whistled, and there they were behind her. She walked on quickly, thinking she must have dawdled as the path was seeming longer than ever. Eventually she reached the end of the woods, but as she looked around nothing appeared familiar. Where was the path through the field – where was Leylandii House? A path went slightly left – the light was fading – she should be going right. She reached into her pocket for her i-phone. Maybe she had missed something, if she could get Google maps up it would tell her where she was.

No phone in her pocket. She remembered then that it was in her bag, which she had flung on the kitchen table in her haste to get out. Damn. There was nothing for it but to follow the path and soon she saw the long line of leylandii. Relieved she walked as fast as she could towards it. The dark was creeping up almost as fast as she was walking. The dogs were still happily running along enjoying themselves. She reached the line of trees, and horrified, realized that this was not the line of trees she had thought it was. She couldn't see the red house through the gaps – she could see what looked like farm buildings and a fence. She tried to get through, but even the dogs couldn't squeeze through. "If it's a farm" she thought "there must be someone there". She had been walking these paths almost since she learnt to walk, but everything here was unfamiliar- she had never come across a farm before. She walked round the perimeter and came to where the trees stopped and a fence of poles and wire stopped her going further. Could she get over or under this fence? The dogs went under easily – it was a little more difficult for Yazzie. But

she did manage to hold her breath and squeeze under – glad that she was slim and fit. “If this is a farm” she was thinking” someone might think we are trespassing and shoot the dogs”. They were hanging back hesitating – she bribed them with the treats she had put in her pocket. There didn’t seem to be any sign of life this February evening. It would be very cold if she had to sleep out here – maybe she could shelter by the side of the farm buildings. Maybe they would all die of exposure and no one would know where they were. Maybe their bodies would be discovered in the spring, half eaten by other animals, their bones sticking out from their skin. She was frightening herself with these thoughts. It was dark now. Only a tiny amount of light left.

She heard the sound of a motor in the distance. Then she could just make out a tractor. Half of her wanted to hide in fear, half of her was relieved. The tractor was approaching. “What are you doing here?” the gruff voice of the driver barked at her. He was quite old – much older than her dad – and looked fierce.

“Please” she said “I’m lost. “I must have taken the wrong path”.

“Where are you trying to get to?”

“Tadworth or Walton”

“Which one?”

“Somewhere between the two”

“There’s a path that goes over the heath”

“It’s dark – I don’t want to go over the heath”

“Haven’t you got a light?”

“No – I thought I’d be home before dark”.

She wished he would stop asking questions and just tell her how to get home.

“This is private property. Better keep those dogs under control. If you go down that way” – he pointed past the farm buildings, “You will come to my gates. Can you get over a big gate?”

She nodded.

“That takes you to the main road.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you. Sorry.”

“Be careful”

The dogs had huddled beside her – it seemed her fear had transmitted itself to them, but they seemed happier when they were on their leads again and setting off down the path indicated.

(To be continued in April)

APRIL 2020

Theme: Journey



A WALK IN THE WOODS & THE JOURNEY HOME

Jennie Allen

Part 2: The Journey Home

It wasn't a path – it was a driveway – dark anonymous bushes on either side. It was very long and windy. At one point Yazzie could see the shadow of a house set back some way from the drive. “It must be a big house, because I can see lots of lights in windows.” She thought “Well, if all else fails, I can go and knock at the door. Maybe that man lives there”.

It must have taken ten minutes to get to the gate. It was locked – as he had said. While she could see she would have no difficulty climbing it, there was no way the dogs would get over, and no way they could get under. The only light now was coming from the traffic on the road and she could feel the tears of frustration and worry ready to fall. “Come on Yasmin” she told herself. She was never one to admit defeat – she didn't want to go all the way back to the house. Her feet were getting a bit sore in her wellies and she could have kicked herself for coming out without her phone, and for not taking notice of where she was going - but not for thinking about Max – that had been delightful even if it had got her into trouble. Tentatively she explored her surroundings, glad of the lights from the traffic. About 10 meters to her right she could see the small trees and bushes marking the boundary between the property and the road. Could she get through? It looked like gorse and hawthorn and holly “for good measure” she thought, wryly. With brambles underfoot. Neither dog was eager to go through, frightened by the traffic whizzing past on the road.

The young one whimpered as she tried to coax them through - Goldie held back and looked at her accusingly. Yazzie felt the gorse digging its spikes into her Parka. She felt like the ram caught in the thicket. But she had to get through – she had to be responsible and get the dogs home.

The dogs were through! They were pulling at their leads. She heard the rip of the material of her parka and felt a bramble tearing her thigh through her jeans as she almost fell down the slope to the narrow pathway beside the road. Yazzie could see where they were -about two miles from home and it was now rush hour. She was so thankful to know where she was. The thought of a two mile walk seemed nothing compared to the thought of perishing by a farm building, huddled with the dogs, but it seemed they thought otherwise and she had to keep a firm hold on Goldie to stop her from trying to cross the road. Why she wanted to do that Yazzie didn't know, but she seemed determined. To the best of her knowledge Goldie had never walked here before and didn't know anywhere over the road. Coco just wanted to keep exploring the bushes. The path was narrow -- it was hard to for all three of them to walk on it, without the dogs trying to go in different directions. The traffic was a constant blur of lights and noise. But Yazzie was just grateful there was a path at all and that she knew where she was. Sometimes a car horn beeped, but she took no notice. Maybe the occupants were thinking she was mad to be walking two dogs along this road. The woods were now to her left – sometimes behind buildings – sometimes she could see the paths that led through them to the heathland beyond. Almost home. Next corner - along the road where the dog walkers parked their cars – no pavements here – then left again. No Max in her thoughts now, just relief and tiredness.

As she turned the key and opened the door she was met with a clamour of voices. “Where on earth have you been?” “We’ve been so worried.” “The dogs must be famished”. “Why didn’t you take your phone?” Then the tears came.

The moral of this story is NEVER GO OUT WITHOUT YOUR PHONE.

THREE POEMS

Peter Horsfield

Journey (Acrostic)

Just pause a moment:
Outward movement in the right direction,
Unfolding mysteries along the way,
Reveals the path to take.
Never try to exert control,
Even when it seems that chaos reigns;
Yield to the Now – allow the destination.

Journey

First sign of sunshine, in middle of the day,
Hill-top shrouds of dark clouds disperse as they may,
Mist and drizzle lightly fizzle out on the way,
All in the course of the journey.

Blue skies, as time flies, lighten the heart,
Golden fields of corn yields, as in painter's art,
Passing pools of water cools; sparkling insects dart,
All on the way on the journey.

Green woods, nature's moods, dark mountain crags in sight,
Tough riding, road climbing, progress more a fight,
Fatigue bearing, baggage wearing, move towards cold night,
All near the end of the journey.

Gathering twilight, twinkling starlight, still some way to go,
House in hollow, trail to follow, waiting friends to know,
Destination, celebration, travelling – no more woe,
Mind knows, the Spirit grows;
Living **is** the journey.

Wake-up Call

Mighty wake-up call for humanity:
exponential spread of hidden enemy,
zoonotic leap in crowded *wet market*
lifted the lid on “Pandora’s box”;
wildlife’s revenge, random, indiscriminate.
Too late now – disaster waiting to happen,
fuelled by arrogance, greed, stupidity,
in disregard of nature’s balance,
emerged in pandemic of disease and death;
“unprecedented”, much-repeated cliché.
Lockdown leads to untold suffering,
without an exit strategy,
even though social distancing
in the short term stems infection’s flow.

Empty skies, deserted roads;
pollution levels plummet.
Ceasefires put entrenched wars on hold,
due to the virus – a pity it takes
such cataclysm to make people see sense.
Global partnership, not competition,
is needed in this “other war”.
Stoic solidarity amongst the people –
will this be mirrored by the leadership?
Awaiting return of “normality”,
what lessons can be learned?
Ultimate survival requires refocus –
climate emergency, saving the planet –
to live in harmony, not exploitation.

THE JOURNEY

Robert Edmondson

A verse from A.E. Housman’s *Reveille* introduces the topic of
life’s journey:

*“Clay lies still but blood’s a rover;
Breath’s a ware that will not keep.
Up lad: when the journey’s over
There’ll be time enough for sleep.”*

About two years ago on the so-called Pilgrims Way near



Dorking I photographed a Green
Hairstreak butterfly feeding on a
bluebell. However it was not taking
nectar in the usual way. It had inserted
its tongue (or proboscis) into a hole,
made by a previous insect visitor, at the
base of the flower. This enabled it to reach the nectar and is

called “robbing” because it does not contribute to pollination. It is very unusual to observe this behaviour in a butterfly and I enclose the photo. This incident was the inspiration for this extremely fanciful narrative, this whimsical fantasy about a newly emerged butterfly that has to make a journey to obtain the nectar necessary to provide the energy to reproduce itself.

When did I become aware of myself, my mission and the necessity of the journey? It is difficult to say. It was probably when I emerged from my shelter for the winter. I cast off my outer shell and I became an adult. Last year I had spent two or three weeks eating the leaves of birds foot trefoil and avoiding the attention of predators, parasites, bacteria and fungi but my memories are very vague about what happened during that period, during that other life. Everything was so different then - my appearance as a caterpillar, my internal anatomy and my physiology. I suppose that I am lucky to be alive now. I still have to be careful. My body is soft and my wings half formed - a tasty meal for an insectivorous bird. I cannot fly yet nor can I move quickly.

I have to make The Journey - to find the flowers with the nectar which will then give me the energy to fulfil my destiny to reproduce myself. Nothing else is of any importance and all my future actions must be directed to that end - all my intelligence too.

Time passes. My body hardens and my wings are now fully formed. I am ready to make the Journey. I soar gloriously, gratefully into the air. The weather is fine with no wind. I am only small and flying takes a great deal of energy. With so much green below I should find some suitable flowers quickly such as primroses or celandines but where are they? They do not seem to be as common as they should be. I fly

around for a while, searching in vain, using up my energy reserves, which are falling rapidly.

Exhausted I eventually find some flowers on which I land but something is wrong. This will not do. I have landed on some bluebells and my proboscis is not long enough to reach the life-giving nectar at the base of these tubular flowers. I do not have the energy to take off again. This is the end. I shall die here. A bird or spider will soon find me.

But wait! One of the bluebell flowers in the bunch has a hole made on a previous visit by a biting insect, in a petal near the base of the flower. I have no jaws nor mandibles and I cannot bite anything. Perhaps I can insert my proboscis into the hole. Yes, I can! I reach and taste the delicious previously unattainable nectar in the bluebell. I sense that my energy, my vitality is being restored. I give thanks to the insect that originally robbed the bluebell. I withdraw my proboscis and take to the air again.

I must complete my mission and now undertake another journey.

This Green Hairstreak butterfly will have descendants after all!

A JOURNEY

Jo Proctor

Ruth sat in comfort in the executive lounge at the airport. Fortunately with this particular airline the executive lounge offered only waiter service. Much appreciated and always preferable to the self-service alternative, particularly when travelling alone. Logistics were the problem - you can't

necessarily keep an eye on your laptop and hand luggage if you have to move from your seat to pour yourself a drink. As Ruth enjoyed her rather generous gin and tonic and savoured the luxury, she cast her mind back to a time when travel hadn't always been so comfortable, in particular to her first ever solo trip abroad, well over 45 years ago, in fact just shortly after she had left school.

No luxury then, no possibility of relaxing and enjoying the journey. It was a fraught, uncomfortable, and at times scary journey. No exotic destination either, just Germany, but even so it was a major adventure for a recent school leaver at a time when overseas travel was less common.

Embarking on the adventure would of course have been easier with some parental support and guidance but there was none forthcoming. Ruth's mother had never been abroad herself - a trip to Scotland was the furthest she had ever ventured - and Ruth's well-travelled father did not entirely approve of his daughter leaving home at all, let alone choosing Germany as her destination.

However, Ruth was not deterred - she intended to improve her German, establish a degree of independence and in particular make all her own future decisions about what to do and when. She had been offered a semi-volunteer position at a German orphanage in the Black Forest and gladly accepted. Working with children in a beautiful location, bed, board and decent pocket money provided. Ideal on all practical levels and it sounded impressive. Ruth thought it reflected her taste for adventure and made her stand out from the crowd - most of her school friends had gone straight on to university or teacher training college, both mind-numbing prospects to Ruth. Everyone was indeed impressed with Ruth's plans and she felt

rather smug about it.

And she was paying for it all herself. Another feather in her cap. She had taken on several jobs - a temporary office job, an evening waitressing job and a weekend fashion retail job. When her father had taken out his wallet and asked if she was 'alright for money' on the eve of her departure for Germany, she was in no mood to accept a penny from him. Had he offered financial help before she'd worn herself out with work, it would have probably been a different matter. Perhaps he had reasoned that she wouldn't be able to go at all without his financial help. Whatever his thoughts, his attitude planted seeds of resentment whilst increasing Ruth's determination to make her trip a success.

In the days before luggage with integrated wheels existed, Ruth's suitcase presented numerous problems on the journey - how she wished she had had some help or advice about what to take. Or perhaps it would have been possible to send her luggage on ahead? Something she would only later learn was a possibility.

The very first stage of the journey involved travelling down to London by coach from her home in Newcastle. So, it was local bus to the coach station - spending money on a taxi seemed frivolous. As she struggled to lift her suitcase onto the bus platform, her top lip curling into an involuntary snarl with the effort, the driver immediately complained, "Have you not heard of taxis, pet? That's what they're for!" Never short of a quick retort, Ruth lied, "Well the taxi let me down. So I'm here now." A moaning bus driver was not an auspicious start to her journey but also the least of her worries. The long journey ahead was full of uncertainties and that concerned her far more than the unhelpful comments of a local bus driver.

Dropping the suitcase down from the bus platform to the pavement as she alighted was easy compared with hauling it up and produced no snarl. The bus driver had not mellowed, he tutted and sighed as she passed. Ruth gave him a broad grin and a very cheerful, 'Thanks for everything, sir. It's been a real pleasure.'

It was however just a moment of bravado. As she lugged and dragged her case to the coach station, she felt close to tears and was beginning to think she would never make it all the way to Germany with this suitcase in tow. She had not yet boarded the coach to leave her hometown and was already doubting the advisability of her whole plan. Why had she ever thought it was a good idea? Was it really too late to change her mind? What would everyone think about her getting cold feet? She'd be the laughing stock. All doubts disappeared, at least temporarily, when her sister ran forwards to greet her calling, 'Surprise, surprise!' She could also see her Mum and aunt in the background - they had all managed to get the same late lunch hour so that they could see her off. Ruth put on the most joyous of brave faces to eradicate the tears welling up and joined the sending-off party. But it again became emotional as Ruth finally said her goodbyes and she and her mother sobbed in each other's arms.

On the coach she considered whether it might have been better if nobody had seen her off as she now felt sadder than ever. She was however soon distracted and momentarily cheered by an older lady who recognised her and stopped to greet her as she walked along the aisle of the coach to her seat. It was Mrs Elliott, an elderly neighbour who was on her way to East Grinstead to visit family. But Ruth's cheer at this friendly gesture soon dissipated when she was asked where she was going and why. She was unable to sound upbeat or excited

about her destination and couldn't readily explain why she had thought it such a good idea. Mrs Elliott said a few encouraging words and continued to her seat with a rather puzzled smile.

The journey to London passed quickly, more quickly than Ruth would have liked. The rhythm of the engine was hypnotic and dulled her fears and thoughts of what lay ahead. At Victoria Coach Station Ruth said hello to Mrs Elliott's son-in-law, a Mr Smith, who had driven up from East Grinstead to meet her. They then parted company amid good wishes on both sides. Ruth headed off towards Victoria Train Station, her suitcase feeling heavier at every step. As she was slowly and despondently trudging along Buckingham Palace Road, Mr Smith unexpectedly re-appeared, picked up her suitcase as if it contained feathers and marched off ahead of her. 'I'll just help you on your way, young lady,' he announced. For the first time all day Ruth's spirits truly lifted, the world looked less bleak and her confidence returned. She was quite overwhelmed with this show of kindness and couldn't thank Mr Smith enough.

After depositing the suitcase at the left luggage, Ruth breathed a sigh of relief now that she could forget about that burden for a while. She had several hours to fill in before catching the evening train to Dover and, although she had originally planned to do some sightseeing, maybe pop along to Buckingham Palace, that was in the world of an adventurous, fearless Ruth who had thrived in the confines of her family home. Now, in the real world, it seemed a bit scary. What if she got lost and was unable to find her way back to the station in time? Mr Smith had pointed out a cinema where he suggested she could while away a few hours and she now agreed - that felt a very safe alternative to the unknown dangers of sightseeing.

The cinema audience was rather sparse so Ruth was surprised when shortly into the programme a man came and sat right next to her - he had plenty of other seats to choose from, whole rows, if he'd wished. The film no longer held Ruth's attention as she felt so uncomfortable with this man sitting right next to her. What was he thinking? Why had he done that? Innocent and unworldly Ruth sat wondering and worrying what his intentions were. She also felt glued to her seat, unable to move. Perhaps moving away would appear rude? and might that provoke him? Who knew? Ruth continued to sit there in considerable discomfort but kept her bag clutched close to her - on this point she was clear - she would not allow herself to be robbed without a fight.

After a short time Ruth sensed some movement on her right side where the unwelcome gentleman was seated. He was unwrapping and consuming toffees. A couple of times Ruth thought, but was not sure, that she felt a light tug at her coat. It was easy for her to believe she was just imagining it - it wasn't a definite enough movement to be sure of anything. At the end of the film, the story of which had completely passed Ruth by, the man got up and left. Ruth checked her coat and found several empty sweet wrappers in her pocket. The light tug had indeed been real and this strange man had stuffed these unwanted wrappers in her pocket. What a weirdo! She could make no sense of it but nor did she ponder it long - she had been warned that London was full of weirdos. What mattered was that she still had her money, passport and ticket in her bag. And she was grateful that nothing worse had happened. This odd event had been quite an ordeal and Ruth felt a sense of relief that it was over with no real damage.

Ruth stayed in her seat and intended to sit through the next showing of the film when hopefully she would finally find out

what it was about. She also resolved she would not put up with any more weirdos coming to sit next to her. Relief had given way to rebellion and a determination to not be intimidated by these Londoners..... or anyone else for that matter. She berated herself for her timidity - a trait none of her friends or family would have attributed to her and one that Ruth could not easily reconcile herself with.

At the end of the film Ruth meandered back to Victoria Station, retrieved her luggage and boarded the train for Dover. On the evening ferry she took a bunk in the ladies lounge for the overnight crossing - it had been an unplanned expense but a necessary one. She had given no previous thought to where she might sleep on the journey. As she made her way still fully clothed to an upper bunk, she left her bag on the floor where she could see it. She reasoned it would be safe enough - they were all women, fellow travellers and they would all soon be sleeping. Again she thought it might appear rude if she got down from the bunk to fetch it just in case - the others might think she didn't trust them. But on this occasion Ruth overcame her timidity - to be honest she didn't know these people so how could she trust them? She leapt down from her bunk, grabbed her bag containing her modest valuables and slept hugging it close to her all night. Assertive and in control - that's the Ruth she wanted to be.

The next part of the journey was by train - straight through to Strasbourg. Again Ruth was having difficulties with her suitcase but once on board the train there was a long comfortable stretch ahead where she would not be required to pick it up. At every station she checked that the case was still in the storage area and then resumed her admiration of the passing scenery, read her book or learnt some German vocabulary. It was quite a pleasant interlude where Ruth

actually felt a sense of achievement for having got so far and she hadn't even felt like crying for several hours. Nearing Strasbourg however, her nerves returned. It was going to be after midnight when the train arrived and she would have several hours to fill in before the onward connection to Germany. That would not be leaving until 6.30 a.m. Again this was a little 'problem' she had not factored into her journey. She wondered if she would be able to fill in those hours at the station or if there would be an inexpensive guest house nearby.

Back in England all Ruth's plans had focussed on her departure, her arrival in Germany and the work in the orphanage. What she had not planned out was the journey itself. She had left all that to the travel agent and had relied on their expertise to work out the best route and connections. In her inexperience Ruth had simply paid for the tickets and informed the orphanage of her arrival date and time - and that was that. The realities and inconveniences of the journey were only becoming apparent as they were being encountered. Another lesson to be learned for future adventures.

On arrival in Strasbourg, the end of the line, the other passengers dispersed and quickly disappeared into the night. Heading in their general direction Ruth lugged her suitcase along, quite convinced that it was now much heavier than when she set out. A bridge crossing the tracks lay ahead and Ruth shuddered in anticipation of the effort that would be required to haul her suitcase up so many stairs. Still this prospect seemed much less daunting than that of dragging it around the deserted streets of Strasbourg all night. Halfway up the staircase she passed a railway official coming down. A welcome sight! She explained in French that her next train was not due for several hours and asked if there was a waiting room open. Surprisingly he understood her French and said it would be too cold in the

waiting room but there was an all-night cafe open where she could go. Not only that, he turned round and carried her suitcase to the top of the stairs where he could point out where she should head. Again Ruth found herself overwhelmed by a deep sense of gratitude and felt close to tears - a reaction out of all proportion to the service rendered. It was after all just a simple gesture of kindness but when you are feeling cast adrift in a friendless world, its effect is magnified.

Arriving at the cafe Ruth peered through the window and could see that the place was quite busy and that there was a haze of smoke hanging over the room. But it would be better to be warm and among people than sitting alone in a cold waiting room. As soon as she opened the door the warmth and smoke hit her. A quick scan of the room - no empty tables - no group of women to which she could attach herself, but plenty of odd-looking characters, some could perhaps be better described as sinister-looking, some looked scruffy and some just looked like bleary-eyed drunks. Ruth spotted a table which seemed quite respectable - there was a spare seat and no-one appeared drunk. The man sitting next to the spare seat looked fatherly and was wearing a suit. He indicated the seat was free and Ruth gladly took it - it seemed like a safe haven in a chaotic, slightly threatening environment. She relaxed and ordered a coffee. One of the ladies she had worked with in her office job had given her some travel advice - 'Never look lost, even if you are. And in a crowded place, read a book, keep your head down.' Although she hadn't been sure what the advice was based on, she took it as it seemed entirely appropriate in this situation. Within a short time Ruth began to value it - she knew she looked occupied, appeared as if she was at ease and knew what she was doing and she was sure she couldn't be giving offence should some weirdo decide she was looking at him the

wrong way. It was calming and a comfort to have a book in front of her, even if she wasn't exactly reading it. It was also a barrier, perhaps deterring people from talking to her. Without her book what would she have been doing? Twiddling her thumbs? Looking around the room? Attracting unwelcome attention? Looking vulnerable?

About 20 minutes into this new-found comfort, the suited gentleman next to her stood up, took off his jacket, hung it on the back of his chair and started to whistle. First he tunefully whistled a song which people seemed to recognise and enjoy. A few people clapped and that sent a warm, relaxing ripple around the room as if breaking an invisible barrier. Then he started a whole repertoire of birdsong, many of which seemed familiar to Ruth even though she couldn't have named a single bird. Gradually the bird calls got louder and resonated around the room. He at times had his hands to his mouth to assist in producing the desired sound, at others he would be flapping his arms about, impersonating a bird's flight. At one point he even squatted on his chair and swooped from side to side with outstretched arms as if he was a bird of prey eyeing his next meal from above. And then he would go back to sweet melodious birdsong.

Ruth's jaw dropped when this whole spectacle started and she almost dropped her book. She simply couldn't believe it. Looks certainly were deceiving - she had picked out the most normal-looking person in the whole place and he had turned out to be a bit of a lunatic - perhaps not dangerous but certainly unpredictable. When the other customers had responded, laughed, joined in, shown appreciation, she had relaxed and saw the humour in it. London was apparently not the only city harbouring weirdos. Her book now took on the function of hiding her laughter.

Unfortunately the gentleman's performance went on too long and the atmosphere in the cafe changed for the worse. A few people shouted at him to shut up and finally a waiter came over and asked him to either be quiet or leave. He put his jacket back on and sat quietly for the rest of Ruth's stay in the cafe. She spent the last hour of her wait on the platform - it was beginning to get light and the cool air was refreshing after the stifling smokey warmth of the cafe. The final stretch of Ruth's journey lay ahead. In just a couple of hours she would be arriving at the orphanage.

When she did arrive at the gates of the orphanage, she was more relieved than she would have imagined. The buildings were perched on a hill and the small town below was quite picturesque but, more importantly, Ruth knew she was now safe. It had never occurred to her that there would be challenges to face before she even arrived at her destination but for an inexperienced, over-protected young lady from Newcastle whose spirit of adventure had never been put to the test, there had been plenty.

At the orphanage Ruth was introduced to Anneliese, the group leader she would be assigned to. At this point Ruth made her first attempt to converse in German. The language difficulties contributed greatly to Ruth's initial inability to assess the situation she found herself in. Anneliese was a slightly chubby, red-faced lady of about 40 who had squashed herself into a dirndl. She welcomed Ruth warmly and offered her some snacks and a schnapps. Ruth thought there was something not quite right about Anneliese and wondered if she was perhaps simple-minded. Her words seemed slow to form in her mouth and she drifted slightly as she walked. Ruth finally realised that Anneliese was just a little inebriated. It was this thought that quickly brought Ruth back from her

reminiscences as she realised that she too was feeling a tad squiffy. She smiled, gave a silent toast to Anneliese and another to her 19-year-old self and finished her drink. After quickly scanning the comfort and safety of the executive lounge, Ruth headed off for her business class flight to the Bahamas. Her hand luggage was of course on wheels.

JOURNEY

Pat Harris

“What have I got?” said the proud old woman.
The light shines on what has gone of the stored memory,
Lingering on what is to come:
Walks, journeys, the feet slow down.
“What have I now?” said the proud old woman.
Many journeys merge -
Family and friends missed.
The gifts of memory reach that timeline,
Form a life of nothingness
To explore, discover, the precious joys of happiness.
Time flashes to the spirit of youth
To rush, grasp, capture.
Gently the soul wakens,
Change with feelings,
 transient to creative understanding a journey then.
Deep within the Surrey Hills nature flowed
Through woodland, fields;
Each season bringing wonders, joy, beauty, colour.
A life of awareness touching the heart -
Pathways through rhythms of expectation

Now in this heart of the Autumn day.
The gathering thoughts continue as she sits experiencing time
 on the spiritual journey.
The gift of memory brings the soul to consciousness
In heart and mind with love
Into history of family and friends together
On the eternal pathway of joy.

JOURNEYS

Raymond Brown

The theme this month seems most ironic,
 As journeys now we must not make.
Once anciently a plague bubonic
 Brought death and sorrow in its wake,
While westward out of Asia heading
And over Europe terror spreading
 It reached our island where it killed
 So very many and instilled
A dreadful fear throughout the nation.
 A virus now has likewise spread
 And likewise brought both death and dread,
While causing worldwide consternation.
 And we locked down at home must stay;
 No journeys make, no visits pay.

On journeys that were not I ponder;
 Intended trips that were not made.
For Eastertide last year was fonder
 When fam'ly came and fam'ly stayed;
Thirteen there were around the table
On Easter Day when we were able
 To celebrate the feast with cheer.
 But all alone we were this year;
On TV screen at home we followed
 Our priest who Easter Mass did say
 To empty church on Easter Day;
And nor in merrymaking wallowed
 Convivially as hitherto,
 But sat at Easter lunch for two.

Nor shall we now be journey taking
 To travel to the USA.
And so our hopeful plans forsaking
 We'll stay alone at home in May.
And since we can't fly o'er the water,
The only way to see our daughter
 Is through the global Internet.
 We keep in touch, it's true, and yet
It's not the same as going thither
 And being there with her at home;
 And being free with her to roam
Her neighbourhood or ramble whither
 Our mood suggests the way commends,
 Or visit in-laws, meet her friends.

How did we get to this position?
 Along what journey have we fared?
For was there not an admonition
 Our health service was unprepared
To cope with any such pandemic?
No simulation academic
 Did underlying faults reveal;
 For Exercise Cygnus was real
And showed resources sadly lacking.
 In twenty-sixteen this took place.
 And did the government embrace
The findings, give th' report their backing?
 They classified it, put the lid
 On scrutiny and kept it hid.

The Maybot thought of nought but Brexit;
 Pandemics - they must wait their turn.
“But from the EU we must exit,”
 The Maybot said, “it’s my concern
“Above all else to get us leaving.
“For it’s my goal and worth achieving.”
 For her was Brexit all sublime;
 And Brexit took up all the time.
“To pay the nurses more – you’re joking!
 “For there’s no magic money tree.
 “We have no dosh, for can’t you see
“That Brexit’s paramount and soaking
 “Up all the time and cash we’ve got;
 “Get Brexit done! Don’t lose the plot!”

So three years passed with no one thinking
 About pandemics which might strike.
The Maybot's Brexit hopes were sinking
 For Bovid Johnson did not like
The deal she'd got for our secession;
And having failed with her obsession
 She went, and Bovid took control,
 And did his exit plan unroll.
On Brexit was his concentration;
 Withdrawal terms were soon agreed.
 Now on with trade talks with all speed;
Let's get them done! No hesitation!
 "Coronavirus? Bah, oh pooh!
 "We've more important things to do!"

"The virus here? We've had some cases?
 "Lockdown, you say? Let's not be rash.
"Let folk go to the Chelt'nham races!
 "And we shall yet this virus thrash.
"Oh let us not be self-defeating;
"I shake hands with all I'm meeting.
 "We're Brits; we'll take it on the chin;
 "We'll not succumb to scarers' spin."
But then alarm bells started ringing;
 The hospitals now found it tough,
 Protective gear was not enough
And criticism got more stinging.
 "Oh crikey! Lockdown!" Bovid cried.
 "Be safe! Go home and stay inside!"

Thus rather late we were in lockdown,
 Forbidden needless goings out.
The virus did poor Bovid knock down
 But he survived the Covid bout.
So shall we see a change in Bovid?
And how much longer rages Covid
 As we keep safe and stay at home,
 Frustrating any will to roam?
And Covid now our time's consuming,
 And putting us in deeper debt.
 And still there looms another threat
Of no trade deal when we're resuming
 The Brexit process once again.
 So shall our journey end in pain?

Have we forgotten global warming -
 A greater threat than Covid makes?
Shall we our selfish ways transforming
 Wake up and do whate'er it takes
To save our planet from disaster?
Or just apply more sticking plaster
 And go back to our feckless ways?
 When Covid's done then shall our days
Be occupied with Bovid's bumbings
 And Govid's vacuous remarks?
 Or shall we fan to life the sparks
Of hope and heed our planet's grumbings
 And journey to a world more sane?
 Or blindly insular remain?

MAY 2020

Theme: A Childhood Tale



THREE POEMS

Peter Horsfield

A Childhood Tale

At a very early age –
so Mum told me some time later –
I had a keen sense for numbers
(long before I learnt to count, or speak).
My teddy bears and cuddly toys,
and football which I called “The Moon”,
would sit in flower pots on the window sill.
I knew exactly where each one should go,
their place and logical neat order;
and woe betide anyone who dared to interfere with this.

Thereby hangs a tale - - -

The seeds of budding zoologist,
with taxonomically structured brain,
began to germinate this fertile ground.
Many kinds of animal tails,
fundamental balance organs,
long held my fascination:
whether body language of cat,
erect in greeting;
or muscular propulsive engine
of myriad marine organisms:
all contributed examples,
nuanced in this childhood tale.

“Bug Hunter”

Little boy with fishing net,
In muddy stream with wellies green, Oblivious to his parents’
call ;

“Just coming” - one moment more !
From lady-birds, shells spotted red,
To giant spiders, crafted orb-web,
Iridescent beetles under stones,
Pretty snails in pockets deep,
(During church service furtively hidden).
Fascinated with “creepy-crawlies”;
Captivated by strange, alien beauty.

Many years later,
Beyond life's ups and downs,
That spark still connects.

High Jinks at School, c.1964

Harris’ cap has a habit
of spiriting itself from his bag,
which during lessons resides beneath his desk.
Surely this is a safe haven?
It seems immune to all interference,
especially so right under the searching eye
of authoritarian “Sir”,
who keeps the boys in fear
of retribution with the strap,
even for minor misdemeanours.

With stealth and skill the cap is hoicked
and dragged along the floor,
under cover of diligent facade:
rapt concentration,
the perpetrator ostensibly focused
on teacher's wondrous knowledge.

Poor Alan Harris, scapegoat of evil ways!
Barely has he checked his bag at break time
before the battered cap is tossed aloft
from boy to boy around the classroom,
evading all attempts at interception.
Cacophonous crescendo
of derisive laughter and disruption
takes quite some time to abate.

Of course he always gets it back –
until next time.
The stereotyped ritual
perpetuates a gang solidarity
which temporarily releases the tension
of academic prowess,
and of institutionalised *them* and *us*.
The daredevil risk and the physical activity
are vital ingredients,
embodied symbolically
in Harris' cap.

A TALE FROM MY CHILDHOOD

Raymond Brown

Many, many years ago my mother said to me one day:
“You’re five now; you need to go to school.”

The school was a small private one held in rooms above a café near the village station. The station was a little way out from the village; but I did not mind. I enjoyed the daily walk and it was always interesting: along the High Street, then a footpath through the churchyard, past a pond and then by fields till the final bit by the road down towards the station.

What I liked was that from the schoolroom I could see the railway signal box and the level crossing just before the station. I liked watching the large level-crossing gates slowly swing open for the train but closing the road to any traffic.

Every so often, when the air raid siren wailed in the village, the signalman hung a sign with a black arrow on it outside his box. When this happened, I had to walk with the other children down the stairs and take shelter under a large sturdy table. There we stayed until the siren in the village signalled the all-clear.

But it was not raids by enemy planes that we sheltered from. Such air raids were a thing of the past by this time. What the siren signalled was a threat from V1 flying bombs that people called “doodlebugs.” They were being launched from north west France and from the Netherlands towards London, but they were not accurate and sometimes went into a steep nose dive before reaching London.

My father was serving in the Royal Air Force and I hardly ever saw him. I and my mother and my younger brother lived with my grandparents. One day the siren started wailing when we were all at home. We went into the scullery off the kitchen-cum-living room and crouched beneath a table there. A few moments later, we were all startled by a loud explosion which shook the house. Plaster fell from the scullery ceiling; fortunately we were protected by the table. Also, fortunately,

the doodlebug had landed and exploded in a field on the opposite side of the road. No one was injured or killed.

Some people in the village who saw the doodlebug come down said it only just missed the roof of my grandparents' house.

This was too much for my mother; she decided to take my brother and me to stay with my uncle and aunt who lived in Dorchester in Dorset. This was a long way away from any doodlebugs.

That autumn I went to a new school. It was much bigger than the little school above the café in the village where my grandparents lived. It also had a kindergarten which took children from the age of three; so I went to this school each day with my younger brother.

We stayed in Dorchester for more than a year. I was there for VE day when war ended in Europe; I was excited when I saw the huge bonfire at the crossroads near the square where my uncle and aunt lived. I had never seen a bonfire before, and this one was huge. A week or so later there was a street party in the square. My mother and aunt made patchwork suits for my brother and me to wear at the party. We were 'Make-do' and 'Mend'.

That summer was just like paradise for my brother and me. We liked the walks along the River Frome with my uncle and his two spaniels; if we were lucky we would catch sight of kingfishers swooping down to get fish.

For my young brother and me who had never been to the seaside before, the frequent trips to Weymouth were wonderful. We loved playing in the sea, and we especially liked the Punch and Judy shows. There was a clock face

outside the Punch and Judy booth which gave the time of the next performance and my brother and I hardly ever missed a performance. There were two different versions which alternated; I soon knew each of them off by heart and back at my aunt and uncle's house in Dorchester, I would go through them, imitating the voices.

I liked walking in the park gardens in the evening at Dorchester. That summer Britain had 'double summer time' - that means that instead of the clocks being put forward an hour for the summer, they were put forward two hours so it was light until very late in the evening. It was never dark when my brother and I went to bed that summer.

But all good things come to an end. My father came back from serving in the Royal Airforce and my mother, my young brother and I said good-bye to my aunt and uncle and went back to join my father in our home village. But that is another story.

A CHILDHOOD TALE

Robert Edmondson

To write a witty childhood tale
A task that seems 'beyond the pale'.
So difficult and bound to fail.
A mighty mountain to assail.
But I'm determined to prevail.
For childhood's memories soon grow stale
Or hide behind a darkening veil.
The intervening years curtail
The recollections of the trail
That leads me back to boyhood's dale.

Adults looming of great height,
On Mondays laundry was a rite.
Circuses with clowns excite
And fireworks on Bonfire Night
With Catherine Wheels to ignite.
Christmas presents brought delight
(With thank you letters then to write)
The fireplace - a pleasant sight.
Coal fires burning red and bright
With TV pictures black and white.

In forty-six the snow and sleet.
Winds that swept you off your feet.
And rationing of clothes and meat,
Butter and sweet things to eat.
See policemen on their beat
Horse drawn carts along the street.
Hotel rooms were not “en suite”.
A peach or orange was a treat.
The British Empire was complete
That world I knew is obsolete!

DEATH BY GINGER BEER

Jo Proctor

As children our summer holidays were often spent in a small Yorkshire village where we stayed with family. We loved it - it was so different from life in an industrial town. Even the daily chores were fun - collecting eggs from the hen house, picking strawberries for tea or running across the field to fetch some milk.

Whenever we were left to our own devices, we could find no end of exciting things to entertain ourselves with. We regularly checked out the activity of a water rat in the nearby beck, we created a fairy glen in the clearing of a wooded area, we spied on the neighbouring farmer who talked to himself and chased us off his land, and we climbed a lot of trees.

For at least some weeks in the summer holidays however we were stuck at home and left to while away the days as best we could. It was a pretty dull contrast to our active and colourful days spent in Yorkshire.

Regularly turfed out of the house after breakfast, we'd meet up with friends or call on them to come out and play. "Can Brenda plout?" "Can Margaret plout?" It was years before I realised I was meant to be saying 'play out'. I thought kids plouted. Anyway, it worked, we would get a group together, play games around the streets and at some point drift off to the park for variety.

Our parents didn't supervise us and didn't even want to see us until the next meal time. They were more than happy to leave us to it. Unfortunately we often ran out of ideas for games and got bored. Grown-ups didn't understand that - they had little sympathy and bragged about how when they were children they had always made their own entertainment so why couldn't we? The summer holidays seemed to stretch interminably ahead for us as well as for our parents and it was a blessing when they were over and we could go back to school.

However, on this particular afternoon in my memory there was great excitement afoot and we were set on a course for high

adventure - a picnic, a proper picnic in the local park! We had been given a picnic blanket, some sandwiches and biscuits and Brenda's mum had given us a large bottle of ginger beer to go with it all. We could hardly believe our luck - to us it seemed like generosity gone mad. A whole bottle of ginger beer for us to consume as the fancy took us!

Brenda entrusted the bottle to me and I proudly accepted the responsibility. Imagine the kudos - I was the bearer and custodian of this exotic beverage! I just knew I'd be the centre of attention and the envy of all when we met up with the others in the park.

"Is it really beer? Will we get drunk?" I asked Brenda.

"No, of course not. It's only pop" Brenda explained. She was 2 years older than me so knew everything.

As we walked along the street towards the park Brenda got ahead of me slightly and it was hard for me to keep up. She'd look back from time to time and tell me to stop shaking the bottle, to keep it steady. I tried my best but she was never satisfied with my efforts. When I finally asked her why it was so important to not shake the bottle, she explained that if I didn't keep it steady, it would explode.

EXPLODE!

Now I understood why I was carrying it and why she was keeping her distance. One false move on my part and we'd be blown to smithereens, leaving behind us shredded corpses and a crater a mile wide.

Progress was slow thereafter. I was sweating like a bomb disposal operator on his first assignment.

“You carry it, Brenda!” I implored.

“No. You agreed to carry it and I’ve got the sandwiches. Don’t be such a scaredy cat!” was the unco-operative response.

No matter how hard you try to walk and not wobble a bottle of explosive ginger beer, it is simply not possible when your nerves have got the better of you. I put the bottle down many times en route and stood well back just in case.

The degree of fear I felt was not unknown to me. Several months previously I had rushed home from Sunday School feeling a tad unwell. I was ushered off to bed and lay there quietly sobbing but trying not to make too much of a fuss. I was both distraught and inconsolable and didn’t want anyone to come near me. No amount of coaxing would induce me to reveal what was ailing me. I just knew my family would shun me. Yes, I’d be an outcast from my loving family forever and probably never see them again, even from a distance.

The following morning, however, when my resistance had weakened, I revealed all as I sobbed in my mother’s arms and confessed - I had contracted leprosy! True, on that occasion my fears proved unfounded and were promptly ridiculed. Yes, the lesson at Sunday School had been about people with leprosy, and the little boy who handed me some crayons probably just had warts. But it was a fact, a real fact, that ginger beer could explode - Brenda’s mum had said so. And by contrast to my imagined slow demise by leprosy, being blown to smithereens by ginger beer would at least be quick.

I stifled my tears and trudged on in misery. We eventually arrived at the park, the bottle in tact and my nerves in tatters. I don't remember the rest of the afternoon - least of all whether I actually drank anything.

A CHILDHOOD TALE

Pat Harris

At the onset of the Second World War I lived in a small beautiful cottage in Holmbury St Mary, centred in the midst of the Surrey Hills. My father was a popular and excellent National Hunt Jockey in the 1930s riding in the big races like the National and Cheltenham. He had served in the 1914 War, Ypres and in Ireland's Free state War. Soon he was diagnosed with TB and I grew up with him self-isolating in the next door cottage. He did enjoy the village life and was able to teach me to ride on a small pony Daphne, on which at five years I led the procession at the Coronation of George the 6th dressed in the Busby of the Guards with Dad's red, white and blue stripes on the pony's hoofs. There were some traumatic days when he would be taken by ambulance for assessment and soon to be taken to the Milford Sanitorium, too far to visit. The War was imminent. All men and women called into service in the factories, army and even at home in preparation for what was to come. At home, Land girls, Home Guard, Red Cross which gave Mum opportunities for friendship and to practice bandaging on me. In the village as an only child, life was different with few of my age. Preparations were urgent, houses requisitioned for the forces and the wounded. The refugees being given care in the country kept coming from the cities.

A convent school came to Hatchlands. A big Adams House at Horsley, now National Trust. The owner Mr Goodheart Rendel offered his house to a prep girls school, St Anne's at Sanderstead, and I was offered a place through my Church. The preparation was quick, but we had to make a visit to Croydon to Coloma Convent to be interviewed. My first experience of nuns, quite formal then. Mum and her two sisters were very excited having been boarders in Ireland and between them with the list of requirements we managed to get the correct blazer with a badge and dresses to start the term in September. We were very poor but eventually arrived at the big house having been given a lift. Saying goodbye to Mum at the gate not really aware of what was happening, perhaps another trip. A frequent traveller with Dad and Aunts at an early age. Arriving we were shown into the entrance hall, at my age nearly seven the marbled floor and the Neapolitan bronze statues must have been like a ship. Normal for a big house unlike our small cottage. We were shown immediately to our beds, this believe it or not, was the drawing room where all the beds close together covered the floor. All shapes and sizes; divans, personal beds with headboards, such a variety. Mine was a small single iron bed, perhaps given and there I sat with my bag. I was facing the great wooden door, a huge marble fireplace central. Behind my bed, red silk curtains draped the windows looking on to the terraces. The walls hung with great masterpieces, not as many as seen today. What did it all mean? Was I privileged? Perhaps. I had been re-enforced with the need to be at school, a different life to study and understand the faith.

The initial life in the dormitory didn't last, bombing was heard locally. One night we were taken down to the cellars. Autumn

had set in, the boilers filled with anthracite choked us with smells as we entered. The three or four cellars had been prepared with bunk beds. Another sickly smell -- boiled cocoa steaming in a white enamelled jug then distributed to us. Perhaps it was a practice for a few days, we didn't stay long. When we moved up, I had been moved to the Butler's pantry with three other girls where a dear lay Irish sister, Ita, was very kind to me.

Yes I had a special friend, a Duke's daughter. Elizabeth Fitzalan-Howard. She led me into lots of adventures, climbing out of windows exploring which no doubt was a familiar game at Arundel Castle. There was much to experience during my four years. I remember in the stables the regency landau and carriage were used also in a play which must have given me a taste for theatre. When my father died after four years at Hatchlands, I was just 11. We didn't return to Ireland as planned, my aunts at Gomshall found support for my mother, moving us to Shere. I became a day girl at the Dorking Convent travelling on the bus each day which was bliss. An exciting new experience with Mum again.

A CHILDHOOD TALE (OR TWO!)

Rachel Brown

Once upon a time there was a vain man, his skin the colour of a ripe orange and his hair a stiff ash blonde, and he loved riches and power above all else. Every morning he would ask Alexa, through an Amazon Echo speaker mounted to his wall, who was the most powerful of them all, and every day Alexa would

tell him, “It is you, Master, you are the most powerful of them all.”

Now, this wasn't true in any sense of the word, because the vain man wasn't as rich as he pretended to be, and the only people he had influence over were those who loved a show he put on about being an apprentice, but the woman who sold the vain man his electronics always doctored them a little so that he would keep buying from her. This time she had made sure that Alexa, despite being programmed by Amazon always to tell the truth, would tell the vain man exactly what he wanted to hear.

One night, however, the vain man's speaker was plugged in to charge and there was a terrible storm. A power outage reset the device's settings back to the default so that when the vain man asked his usual question the following day, he received a different answer: “The American president is the most powerful of them all,” said Alexa.

The vain man spluttered on his enormous breakfast and vowed to get rid of this so-called president.

The vain man didn't know much, but he knew that you had to be born in America to be the president, and he was sure the imposter was a foreigner. He hired a gamesman from his golf course to hunt down the fake-president's birth certificate. The gamesman set out on his mission, but when he met the president, he realized there was nothing un-American about him at all. Still, he figured he could trick the vain man with a forgery because he would be too stupid to tell the difference. He was correct: when the vain man received a birth certificate

stating that the president was born in Kenya, the vain man was delighted and sent it immediately to the New York Times, expecting that to be the end of the presidency. But it didn't work, and Alexa continued to tell him the same thing: the American president is the most powerful of them all.

There was only one thing for it. The vain man would have to *become* the American president. He consulted with his closest advisors, some of whom were Russian and all of whom were much smarter than him. His associates realized that the vain man would not be able to become president through conventional methods because he had neither wit nor wisdom. But they calculated that if the vain man could win the presidency it would be very good for them, because they could wield most of the power while getting none of the blame. Eventually, they came up with a scheme. The vain man would run on nothing! He would have no plans and no policies. His entire mantra would be that he was an ordinary guy and that everything and everyone who criticized him was fake and corrupt. He would offer nothing except words, the more inflammatory (but vacuous) the better. His vision would be empty, but it would be described as bigger, better, and stronger than anything that had come before!

Instead of engaging with his rivals through argument, the vain man would call them names. Sleepy Joe! Dopey Jeb! Grumpy Bernie! Crooked Hillary! He would repeat the names over and over. But the real genius of the plan was its psychological component: only the smartest and most patriotic people would be able to understand how everything against the vain man's candidacy was fake and corrupt and how everything he said

was the greatest. If you couldn't see that, then you were neither smart nor patriotic; you were part of the problem!

Now, in truth the vain man worried that this plan didn't have any substance at all, but he didn't want to admit it for fear that he wasn't so smart as he thought he was. He questioned his advisers a little, but they assured him this was the only way he could win (and on that count they weren't lying). And so the vain man peddled his wares. Everything is fake, he yelled, and everything I do will be bigger, better, and stronger—the most tremendous of all—if you can't see this then you are a very low-IQ person!

The mantra rippled through the country. Children watched the vain man on TV and came away confused. He isn't saying anything, they complained, he just shouts and there's nothing there! But the children were shushed by those more knowledgeable, who claimed that the vain man's genius lay in his simplicity and wasn't it a relief to be able to say out loud that everything you didn't like was un-American and fake?

And so it was that the vain man ascended to the presidency. How he loved the day of his inauguration! The glory! That huge crowd! He went to bed in his gilded gold chamber, contented at last.

The next morning over breakfast the vain man looked to his Amazon Echo speaker with a smile and said, "Alexa, Alexa, on my wall, who is the most powerful of them all?"

"Barack Obama is the most powerful of them all," Alexa said immediately. "Tied with Vladimir Putin."

The vain man spluttered on his Big Mac. “But it’s the president,” he whined. “You *always* say it’s the American president. Now that’s me, *me*.”

“The American presidency is an office,” Alexa informed him, “and that office is no longer held by the person most powerful of them all.”

“What sort of a dumb machine are you, anyway?” the vain man shouted. “You must have an extraordinarily low IQ.”

“It is true that I am a machine,” said Alexa, “and my answer is based on a complicated algorithm that carefully balances degree of influence over world policy, google searches, and twitter followers.”

The vain man stewed for a moment, which he tended to do instead of thinking. Then he realized that Alexa was part of the old establishment. She was fake, just like everything else, but only he could see it. He tore his speaker off the wall, hurled it to the ground, and smashed it with his foot.

“Very good, Sir,” said one of his advisers, who had been skulking in the background. “Now here is your morning elixir of hydroxy and bleach. An excellent palate cleanser before you conduct all of the business that you alone can understand.”

CURIOSITY

Jennie Allen

Christmas was coming. At school they made paper chains and tissue balls. Now school had broken up and the paper chains and tissue balls were hanging in the front room. A little

spindly Christmas tree sat on the wooden table in front of the window, decorated with bright balls and silver bells. Every time Pammy looked at it she felt tingly with excitement. Colourful cards sat on the mantlepiece. But now she was in the warm kitchen with its big black range – the fire glowing red, the oven at the side just waiting for mummy to pop in the second batch of mince pies. Weeks before Pammy and her brother Peter had helped make the mincemeat – he was older and had been allowed to chop up the apples - Pammy’s job was to pour the dried fruit into the big bowl. Not all of it went in – some found its way into her mouth. Mummy made tiny mince pies from left over scraps of pastry for the children – and ooh – they were so meltingly delicious.

Weeks ago, too, they had helped make the Christmas puddings. Peter grated the carrots and Pammy made the hard bread into breadcrumbs with her fingers. She was fascinated by how different the carrots tasted when they were grated, and how sweet and shiny they looked. She remembered the look on her mother’s face as she opened a bottle of stout to pour into the mixture.

Delighted and guilty at the same time as she took a sip. “Of course I have to taste it” mummy said “to see if its good enough”. Why it shouldn’t be good enough Pammy couldn’t understand.

Then there was the stirring – “Make a wish” mummy told them, “A wish for Christmas”. Pammy knew exactly what she was going to wish for. She wanted a doll with sleeping eyes. Cousin Peggy had one. When you laid it down it closed its eyes. And when you picked it up it opened them. Not only did she want one because she thought it was the next best thing to a baby sister, but because she was fascinated with the concept of

opening and shutting the eyes and how that worked. David didn't say what he was wishing for.

"Tell me, tell me" Pammy begged.

"No point" he said with the wisdom of his seven years. "I won't get it anyway"

"Why not?"

"I just won't."

He refused to say any more, even though she asked again and again and promised not to tell.

The days were slow to pass. Excitement rose like a yorkshire pudding in a hot oven. "Two more sleeps" said Mummy.

"Time to write a note to Father Christmas."

David wrote his himself, proudly in his best handwriting. He wouldn't let Pammy see. He folded it into an envelope and gave it to Mummy. Then, patiently, he tried to help his little sister with her note. That is until she, exasperated, pushed him away. "I can do it. I can do it" she said. "I can do it by myself now".

"Please" It read in her very untidy five-year-old's writing.

"Dolly close eyes. Pam"

That evening, before bed, Daddy sent the letters to Father Christmas. Pammy and David watched as they burnt in the kitchen fire, the smoke spiralling up the chimney.

"Will he get them in time?" Asked Pammy. "Should we have sent them earlier?" Worried that wishes and letters might just not work. After all, David had said he wouldn't get what he wished for.

At last, Christmas Eve came. They helped put the finishing

decorations on the Christmas Cake which looked like a snowy hill. They went to the village Church for a Carol concert and to see Baby Jesus lying in the hay in the Manger. “Did the Baby Jesus doll have sleeping eyes?” She wanted to get up and look but Daddy held her firmly in her seat. Pammy thought he probably didn’t because the hay didn’t look very comfortable to sleep on. After a supper of fish cakes made from tinned Salmon and mashed potatoes Daddy read them a special story about Baby Jesus and how the angels sang when he was born. ‘Do the angels sing when other babies are born,’ she wondered. She would sing to her baby doll when she got it. She wriggled with excitement but soon went to sleep in her cosy little bed. “Jingle Bells. Jingle Bells”. It was Mummy’s voice calling them. Christmas morning – warm smells from the kitchen, the Carols playing on the radio – brightly wrapped boxes on the table under the tree. Big boxes. A green one marked “Pammy” and a red one marked “David”. Other boxes as well, smaller and different shapes.

Inside Pammy’s green box was just what she had asked for – a golden haired doll with blue eyes that closed when you laid her down. “Ooh look” she cried, “just look. Isn’t she beautiful – and look at her eyes. I’ll call her Greengage, because she came in a green box”. Mummy smiled. Daddy tried very hard not to laugh. “That’s a lovely name” he said.

For a little boy who did not usually let his feelings show, David’s face told all. The grin on his face stretched wide, his eyes alight as he lovingly examined the contents of his box. It was a train set, with tracks and carriages, an engine and a coal tender. “Let me see. Let me see” said Pammy, but he rushed to the bedroom with it and closed the door.

“Are you all right David” called Dad. “Can I come in?”
“Just you” said David through the closed door. “Not Pammy or Mum.”

To Pammy it seemed a long time before the door opened.
“You can come in now. But DON’T TOUCH.” He almost hissed this at Pammy.

The figure of eight track was assembled on the floor. The carriages and coal tender stood on it – waiting. The red engine was in David’s hands. Proudly he turned the key, joined it to the coal tender, and away it went, round the track, pulling the carriages behind.

“What makes it go?” Asked Pammy.

“It’s clockwork” said Daddy. You have to wind it up.

Pammy was fascinated.

The day passed, lovely chicken dinner followed by plum pudding and mince pies, The King’s speech on the radio, Cake for tea, then tired out, off to bed, train set carefully put back in the box and Greengage sleeping beside Pammy in her bed.

But Pammy couldn’t stop thinking about the train set and wondering how it could run along on its own. She couldn’t figure it out. Clockwork. Did that mean there was a clock inside?”

One day, when David was out playing with his friends, she decided to investigate. Carefully she took the engine out of the box. She found a little screwdriver from the kitchen drawer,

then she unscrewed the base. Then she took one of the sides off, trying to find if the wheels were attached to a clock. But what was this big round coiled thing which suddenly unwound with a snap?

Oh dear – everyone would be so cross with her. She put it back together as well as she could and put the engine back in its place in the box. Then she rushed into the garden with Greengage.

Nothing was said – neither by David or by Mummy or Daddy. No one had appeared to notice. Pammy felt bad, but dared not say anything. Not that day nor the next. Then she had to leave Greengage at home while she went to the village shops with her mother. She came home to find Greengage with two empty eye sockets – her blue eyes pushed in. She howled and howled so loud that the whole street must have heard her. Somehow Daddy managed to get the eyes back in their sockets, but the eyes remained closed and Greengage never opened them again.

No one ever said “serves you right” and Pammy loved Greengage still for as long as little girls love dolls. The engine was somehow magically restored and peace established – until the next time Pammy’s curiosity overcame her.

JUNE 2020

Theme: Circles



CIRCLES OF SAM'S SOMNOLENCE

Raymond Brown

As Sam lay in bed that night he thought back to the dervish *dhikr* he had witnessed earlier that evening. After the recitation of devotional Islamic prayer, the dervishes, holding their arms crosswise, bowed to the sheik and each had circled round the dancing place, moving counterclockwise like the orbit of a planet; this they had done three times, bowing to the sheik as they passed in front of him each time.

As they orbited around the dancing place in their black cloaks, they had reminded Sam of circles of standing stones which our Neolithic ancestors had set up in Ireland, Britain and the European continent millennia ago. He saw them again, imagining the stones as dancers, petrified in time. Why were they there? What was the purpose of these circles? Ritual surely, but certainly not the pseudo-druidic rites borne of the 18th century Romantic movement.

Then the music had changed and each dervish removed his cloak and began whirling counterclockwise, with his arms open and his right hand directed upwards to heaven to receive God's beneficence and his left hand, on which he fastened his eyes, turned towards the earth to convey that beneficence there. In his half sleep, Sam saw the standing stones remove their cloaks and whirl counterclockwise with their arms wide and hands held as the dervishes had done. Yes, he thought, that's what these circles must have been about: places where heaven and earth met, where goodness was channeled to earth from above. Or maybe, he half thought, vaguely remembering hearing about

burials at Stonehenge, where the living and the dead met.

Then his half-awake mind became mesmerized by the whirling of the long white skirts of the dervishes. Or were they of the vivified stones? They became confused in his mind as the wide whirling skirts dazzled him. He thought of other mystic circles; of the mandala, which he knew was a Sanskrit word for 'circle' and which, it is claimed, leads the mind through meditation to the world beyond. He saw again Buddhist sand-painting mandalas he had once seen in Nepal. They seem to fuse in his mind and whirl like the dervish skirts; and there was the bright Chenrezig sand mandala, created in the House of Commons when the Dalai Lama visited in May 2008. In his mind the colours grew brighter in intensity.

Now he seemed to be looking down on the whirling figures from above. The white flared skirts of the dervishes had become the colourful mandalas, all whirling counterclockwise to the music he had heard earlier that evening.

Some skirts indeed resembled rather the colourful amate prints of an Aztec Sun Stone; and the dervish's camel-hair hat – or was it the top of the whirling stones? - became the centre sun face; and concentric circles around the face were whirling counterclockwise just like the planets around the sun.

As the dervishes, stones, suns or whatever they were, whirled, they seemed at times to coalesce and then to separate out again and coalesce again; there was constant separating and coalescing of all the bright counterclockwise whirling colours.

Then they each began coalescing with another until all became like a rose window such as Sam had seen in Gothic cathedrals, especially in France. It was not, however, a specific rose window but rather a sort of generic one. Then he

thought he saw individual ones. That was surely at Rheims, he thought; and then no, at Notre Dame in Paris; no, not Notre Dame, but Sainte-Chappelle – or was it Notre Dame after all? Was it the west rose window or the north rose window? They kept changing as they also whirled counterclockwise. Then it was at Chartres - surely at Chartres. But was it the north transept one or the one in the south transept? Maybe it was both at the same time. Anything was possible in Sam's semi-dreamlike state.

Then the rose window, or whatever it was, became a centre like the sun and Sam saw planets orbiting around it; and as he looked, he found himself ascending through their eight orbits: out past Mercury, Venus then his own planet, Earth, and past Mars and through the asteroid belt and on past the great giants, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune and Uranus.

'What now?' thought Sam.

'The ninth heaven,' he seemed to hear a voice say, 'the one Dante thought was the Primum Mobile; and there you shall see all the vast cosmos with its trillions of constellations.'

Sam did indeed see the vast, unbounded cosmos with all its constellations whirling, some apparently counterclockwise and others clockwise; and Sam stared in wondering contemplation.

'So like Dante,' thought Sam, 'I have ascended through the nine spheres of heaven. Shall I then pass beyond the physical world and enter the Empyrean?'

As though in answer, the rose window Sam had seen was there like a speck in the centre of the cosmos and as he watched, it grew in size and brightness and filled all his vision. 'La rosa sempiterna, che si digrada e dilata e redole odor di lode' said Sam to himself. 'The rose eternal that spreads and

multiplies and breathes an odour of praise.’

Indeed it was as Dante once saw it: the Rose of divine love, in whose countless petals were enthroned the souls of all the faithful since the beginning of mankind; and angels were continually flying around the Rose like bees, distributing peace and love. There in the very centre Sam saw, as Dante saw, the essence that was the source of all light: ‘Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri di tre colori e d'una contenenza’ (Within the deep and luminous subsistence of the High Light appeared to me three circles of threefold colour and of one dimension).

Sam saw the three distinct circles, though they appeared as one: the brilliant circles of very purest green, and red and blue, shining as one great circle of the purest and most brilliant white. As he watched, the white filled the centre and grew and grew until it became one great, perfect and pure circle that filled his whole vision: the Form of the Good, as Plato called it.

So Sam fell asleep at last.

CIRCLES

Jo Proctor

a short verse, meant to be amusing

To move in the best of circles
Is of course, an advisable thing to do
But it brings me to the question
Why am I talking to you?

CIRCLES

a short story

Bachtaldorf, Bavaria. 1863.

Wilhelm Zirkel had been thinking about leaving for the best part of a year. It was a daunting thought - there was so much to plan and organise. Not to mention the need to convince his wife Christiana that they should make the move. He really wanted to make something of himself, to be successful and prove to his family that he counted, that he was someone. These thoughts were the basis of his ever-increasing enthusiasm for the scheme but on a practical level it made sense too. There just wasn't enough work in the area for him and his two brothers.

All three sons had followed in their father's footsteps and become carpenters. Wilhelm would have liked to specialise in fine cabinetry but there was little demand among the local villages for such items. Surely in a different place, a different country, there would be greater demand. It was fortunate that the brothers also had farming skills - but farming was just something they had grown up knowing. It was their carpentry skills that distinguished them. The Zirkel brothers were all master carpenters.

Family discussions were often centred on the lack of steady, well-paid work for them all in the local area, but at the same time they felt fortunate that the boys could turn their hands to farming jobs or carpentry work easily. Even this just allowed the family to make ends meet - there was no real hardship to be sure but nor was there the possibility of actually doing well and prospering. Wilhelm knew that his family really expected him to be the one to volunteer to try his luck further afield. Although no-one actually said it out loud, their eyes did seem

to drift in his direction whenever these discussions occurred.

Wilhelm was the middle brother. Matthias was two years older and, as his parents' first born, enjoyed a special place in their affections. He was certainly the apple of his father's eye and could do no wrong. The youngest brother, Josef, had arrived five years after Wilhelm and a couple of years after the loss of a little sister at birth. He was treasured for a different reason and was indisputably their mother's favourite. It would not be true to say that Wilhelm's parents didn't care about him - it just seemed they cared about him differently. Getting married before his older brother had not helped his ranking either. He had ignored his parents' wishes to do things in the proper order and wait until Matthias had wed. Shortly after getting married, the family priest had asked Wilhelm if he perhaps now intended to set up on his own with his wife. Although at that point, Wilhelm had neither the inclination nor the resources to do that, the question had planted the first seeds of his scheme. Having gathered by this stage as much information as he could and come up with what he considered a well thought out plan, Wilhelm finally broached the subject with Christiana. What did she think about them trying their luckin America? Carpenters were in demand, there were lots of new buildings going up. They could do well there, build their own house, live in comfort, have a family. Well, what did she think?

Christiana stood gaping and occasionally shaking her head for what seemed like an eternity. Where had this idea come from? She had heard of a few people leaving the area to start a new life in America but she herself had never given it a thought. She had never even ventured as far as Munich, the state capital, how would they get to America? She had never been on any boat before, let alone a big steamship crossing the Atlantic. She had always lived with or near her family. How could all this

change? But she saw how earnestly Wilhelm was waiting for her consent and after some considerable time she asked him if they would be able to come back if they didn't like it and he reassured her that they wouldn't stay if she wasn't happy. Once Christiana had run and re-run these doubts and questions through her head, she saw nothing but a great adventure in front of them and one in which she was excited to participate. It was a great comfort to think they could return if it didn't work out. Wilhelm then found himself having to calm Christiana down and to stop her packing immediately. He was relieved and more pleased than he would have anticipated at Christiana's reaction but they would not be leaving for at least another two months.

In due course Wilhelm and Christiana set sail for the New World. On board ship they suffered from sea-sickness for the entire journey and with just basic accommodation in an area known as 'between decks', they had many reasons to doubt the wisdom of their decision. At the back of their minds they knew they had the option to return to their beloved village of Bachtaldorf, a place which was becoming more and more beloved to them the further they travelled away from it. Despite its privations, the journey served to consolidate their relationship as an independent couple, not part of a larger family group. They found strength and comfort in each other and their love deepened. A new life together in a new country with endless possibilities lay ahead.

It took just 3 years for Wilhelm and Christiana Zirkel to feel settled and reasonably prosperous in their new country. They lived among other recent immigrants from Ireland, England and other European countries and learned to speak English as they went along. In fact it wasn't long before the pronunciation of their first names became anglicised. Wilhelm started to call

himself William for ease and Christiana would introduce herself as Christine. Of course, they would continue to spell their surname Z-I-R-K-E-L but they and their growing family were known locally as ‘the Circles’.

THE END

CIRCLES

Peter Horsfield

The Circle of Fifths in musical score describes how each key connects that before: up through the sharps, then back by the flats, beginning to end, every semitone spans in logical sequence – on keyboard so clear, arrangement of white notes and black, to the ear gives *tetrachord* pattern, repeats each context – tone, tone, semitone, on to the next. All scales are accessible; linked to each one, twelve major, twelve minor, rich texture the sum.

Pythagoras, of mathematical fame, vibrational ratios discovered the game; doubling the frequencies, halving again, in octaves and fifths, built up interval train; harmonic progression, thirds, sixths and sevenths, more complex intervals, ninths and elevenths. Harmony, consonance, music of the spheres, natural cycles led structured melodies.

J. S. Bach equal temperament played:
forty-eight preludes and fugues that he gave.
Compromise tuning allowed for the smooth
transposition, with tonality imbued.
Chromatic progression returned to the Source,
through all modulations, full circle the force.

Vibration, the key to the universe –
electromagnetic, it's all down to *Herz*.
Maths and music: emotion's response,
sine waves, brain waves, innately belongs.
From starting point, beginning and end,
expanding, contracting, in circles we blend.

THE MEANING OF CIRCLES - AN ESSAY

Robert Edmondson

What is the meaning of a circle? This was the question to be answered but who could answer it? I decided to ask three experts - a mathematician, a historian and an artist. The first answer from the mathematician was, as expected, logical and rational.

Definition - A circle is the set of all points on a plane that are equidistant from a given point called the centre of the circle. A line segment from the centre to any point on the circle is a radius. By the definition of a circle all radii have the same length. The circumference is the length around the circle and a chord is a line with its two end points on the circumference. The diameter is any chord containing the centre.

This was all very relevant but it did not seem to answer the question properly. It was so arid, so far removed from daily life, where the word “circle” is frequently seen and heard. It was now the historian’s turn to answer the question:

An interest in circles predates recorded history. Because of their symmetry and simplicity circles were seen as representing the divine or natural balance. Later it would become the vital foundation for the wheel and other machines. A series of stone circles in Turkey (Gobekli Tepe) is believed to be 6,000 years older than Stonehenge. Roman amphitheatres, including the Colosseum, were designed as circles, to place the main event at or near the centre. Circular structures have been built to act as abstract symbols too - the shape of the Central Hall in the Indian Parliament building is circular to represent the Ashoka Chakra or the Wheel of the Law. The involvement of circles in our modern lives is multifaceted- the Large Hadron Collider under the Switzerland-France border is a circular tunnel 16.7 miles long.

I thought that now I was almost able to answer the original question but what could the artist add? Here is his answer:

A circle is a symbol of connection, dependence, unity or peace. If a set of enthusiastic individuals wish to emphasise their democratic ideals they call themselves a “circle” rather than a “group” or a “club”. A circle can be a bubble, an eye, a planet or the sun. If casually sketched on paper by a child (or an adult!) it can be a hole, a halo, a ring, the Earth or the moon. It is a simple and ancient symbol with many meanings, often adapted for modern secular use. A good example is the

symbol for the Olympic Games - five interlocking rings of different colours, representing the five major continents of the world united in a spirit of healthy competition. In Chinese art the circle represents the union between heaven and earth. The circle may stand for perfection, the infinite timelessness, all cyclic movement or even God. (“God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” - Hermes Trismegistus, a composite legendary sage). Three linked circles may symbolise the Christian Trinity or, more generally, mutual support. Kandinsky based many of his abstract paintings on concentric circles in a grid, believing that the circle was an important aspect of the mysteries of the Cosmos.

In the performing arts the influence of the circle is less direct. The idea of endless repetition, round and round with no escape, is conveyed in Beckett's famous play “Waiting for Godot”. There is a similar theme in “No Exit” by Sartre. If we consider songs the word circle occurs in over 10,000 song lyrics! You may remember the gospel song “Will the circle be unbroken?” However the mysterious appeal of the circle is probably best illustrated in the lyrics of the song “The Windmills of Your Mind” released way back in 1968.:

“Round- like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel
Never ending or beginning on an ever spinning reel”.

This song may be dismissed as pretentious nonsense but strangely it is still one of the best remembered songs of the late sixties. The circle motif dominates as it still does in many aspects of our lives.

These were the answers of the three experts. Which of them is correct or the most important?

That is for YOU to decide.

CIRCLES

Pat Harris

Looking at my watch.
Yes, Park time, the Dog and me.
The routine set each day, time for the Park.
Familiar smells for him, new faces for me.
Walking the circuit, watching, sharing joys.
All that the day brings, new flowers,
Changes of light dancing through the leafy trees.
The happy lunchtime groups away from office,
Happy and content, Mums and babes sharing.
A wonder of being in the grassland of freedom.
Glancing at my watch, the small round face
Circled by steel - my prop - bringing in a timeline
Holding together my planning set
Balancing a geometric structure
Within the dynamics of each day.
And, I watch the hands ticking
As I try to keep as planned inside that circle.

JULY 2020

Theme: Benefits of Sport



BENEFITS OF SPORT

Peter Horsfield

The benefits of sport are clear to see,
with teamwork, joyful camaraderie.
The will to win, competitive in steel,
is paramount; blends individual zeal,
adrenaline towards the common good,
with skilful tactics – challenge thus withstood
from opposition motivated so
by firm desire to overcome their foe.
Aggressive instincts, channelled to the fore,
are so much better occupied than war.
Not everyone can win; in solo sport
the taking part is just as much import –
improving one's own standard is the goal,
no matter what the contest; food for soul.

Endorphin levels from the exercise –
that feel-good factor – everyone's will rise.
For stronger bones and muscles, healthy heart,
the body's workout makes a vital start.
The lungs respond, weight management is seen,
blood pressure stabilised, quality sleep.
More confidence, self-image, energy,
results; relief from stress great therapy.
The social interaction sharpens
brain in focus, memory, positive gain.
Spectator sport also enriches life –
vicarious excitement lessens strife;
resulting mental calm, we must admit,
encourages much active benefit.

MY SPORTING LIFE

Pat Harris

Our family are fairly sporty. To some extent, they are brave. I am not brave, with memories at five on a fiery pony, with Dad trying to inspire me and the pony to jump a ditch. Later, I ran for Surrey, to be the third fastest loser. I think I was last.

Both my husband and myself had the opportunity to keep a stable. Our children were encouraged to ride early in life, and share in the management as they gained confidence in horsemanship. This was backed-up by joining the local Pony Club.

Epsom, centre of the classic Derby and with many racing stables, trainers and young apprentices in the sport of Flat Racing. Horse breeding and sales is a huge industry in the nation today, with the entertainment for crowds a very important aspect of this sport.

My children joined the Pony Club, a national organisation run by volunteers, to gain good standards for rider and pony. The events would include competitions in all age groups until sixteen. The usual annual gymkhana was an open event, rosettes red, white and blue.

Nearly all achieved rosettes and organisers were very kind to all the riders. The well-schooled, expensive pony that entered from afar would often take the top prize. The pentathlon team, which my son joined, led him to achieve great skills in shooting, running, riding cross-country, fencing and national club events. He was picked to train on for the 1980 Olympics, but this was not in our thoughts.

Now a man of sixty his hobby is Kite Surfing. This competitive sport, to jump, high above the waves to forty feet or so, with good wind, beside the exhilaration of this sport, carried high with involved skills. There is, of course, the edge to beat the other guy, and here for me is the problem always of safety

Sport is a risk, sport is a killer, sport will put others in danger; rescuers will be on alert on the sea, on the mountains, car racing and the endless activities, where correct procedures, planning and training must prioritise.

In my time, sport has flourished, school being for most children an early opportunity to engage in games and sporting activities but here, strict procedures in basic management, accidents and fatalities occur.

I have known many fatalities in the horse world, and general sporting activities for the professional and amateur; understanding the tasks is most important for the well-being of all.

Walking is a sport for many; whether a participant or supporter, all these sporting activities are seen to bring confidence and support in building esteem in so many supported by social and voluntary care. The work of my granddaughter is in support for aid, for training and funding to help the sporting activities in countries in need.

Time has shown that people come together and share in sporting activities. Tradition carries forward continuity of the importance of Sport for Well Being and Survival.

MY SPORTING LIFE
or An Ode to Table Tennis

Robert Edmondson

Let me tell you of the time I now spend at my favourite game.
Exercising brain and muscle, table tennis is its name.
In a hut out in the country, with a view of sky and field
Lies the venue for the contest. Who will win and who will
yield?

A simple table with a net surrounded by some empty space
Is all that's needed for this game of energetic skill and grace.
Friday afternoons are special for that is the time we meet
To play the game you may call "Ping Pong", a pleasant ritual
to repeat.

Only with the greatest effort can success be guaranteed.
Can I spin the ball discreetly my opponent to mislead?
Vary how I hit the ball from shot to shot, now change my
speed?
Keep him guessing. Keep him worried. His confusion meets
my need.

Making your opponent think the ball is coming to his right.
From the way my eyes are looking. Fooling him is my delight.
Am I losing by a margin? Am I many points behind?
Catching up to be ahead becomes the first thing on my mind.

If winning is the only aim and losing is the final curtain.
Strength of mind and strength of body keep your hopes of
victory certain.

Obsession though can lead to madness. Winning every time
can pall.

In the World beyond the table such prestige seems very small.

Table tennis has its merits but the victor must have caution.
Remembering “The Game’s the Thing” and keep the matter in
proportion.
Tired, perspiring after playing several games the session ends.
Looking forward to next Friday, warriors remain as friends.

CASTLE

Jennie Allen

The Castle is Windsor. Jennie’s contribution this month was the next instalment of her story “Castle” set in an alternative time-line in which Diana, Princess of Wales, did not die in a car crash in a Paris tunnel in 1996 but is still alive. Also Queen Elizabeth II has passed away as the result of a stroke and her son, Charles, after being king for a short time, has abdicated in favour of his son, William V. Jo is a servant at Windsor Castle. [Editor]

Jo woke to a grey morning, one of those that made you feel that the sky was pressing down on the earth and compressing it. No shaking of her head, or even the thought of seeing Chris could dispel the gloom she felt. It was a strange feeling – one that was new to her – that something was wrong the next morning. As she walked towards the castle entrance and security check she saw that the red tulips that lined the walkway were past their best – the few petals that remained bending backwards ready to fall. It would only take a light wind to denude them completely. This did not help Jo’s mood -those upright bright blooms reduced to tatters.

When She checked in at Mrs Emmerson’s office It was to a hurried exchange. Mrs Emmerson wasn’t smiling. In fact she

was looking quite sombre.

“Is everything OK” Jo queried.

The reply was just a nod, which didn’t help at all to still Jo’s unease.

“Oh and the King’s mother has arrived. She’s with him now.”

“Why.....?”

“Just carry on with what you and Matthews are doing, Jo. Keep your head down”

They were in St George’s Hall today – that magnificent part of the Castle, used for entertaining large groups of people. The walls and ceiling lined with the shields and armour of over 1000 knights.

“Nowadays” said Chris Matthews to Jo “We look on the eras of knights with romantic eyes. Something out of legends and fairy tales – King Arthur and the Round table and all that - but it couldn’t have been very romantic for the knights when the knights were called on to fight to the death for their King”.

“I would love to see our dear William flanked by loyal knights defending him with their swords. He seems so lonely somehow.”

“He is still flanked by his defenders, you know Jo, but today neither they nor their weapons are so visible.”

“I would defend him to the death.”

“And so would I, Jo. Let’s hope it won’t be necessary. Now come on – let’s get on with our job.

Shield, pikestaff, sword and lancet here. Sir Richard de Bourg. 15th Century. Henry 6th time – Wars of the Roses.”

“I thought you were a financial wizard, not a historian!”

“It’s all written down here – I got a D for history at school”.

So does all this belong to the King, or the State?

“Mostly the State. The shields and arms and things are part of the long history of this place. There are a few of the pictures and furniture in here in here which are personal possessions bequeathed by then old queen to Charles as the future King.”

“So what will happen to them all of them?” She looked around her, taking in the vast extent of St George’s Hall, the magnificent new hammer-beamed ceiling the carved panelling, and the glorious pink carpet.

“Maybe sold to raise money.”

“Do you think they’ll keep the Castle as a museum if.....”

“Don’t go there Jo. Neither you nor I want that. Now, next.”

After a few more hours checking the lists in this enormously impressive Hall Jo and Chris Matthews returned to Chris’s office along the corridor from King William’s official office. Unusually, his door was ajar and William was at his desk, but he didn’t appear to be working, and he wasn’t on the telephone. He sat with his head on his arms – quite still. No one else was in the room, or in the corridor. Jo and Chris looked at each other – an unspoken question passing between them. “What should we do?” They couldn’t just enter, neither did they feel they could just walk on by. Chris rapped on the door. The

King raised his head and Jo was struck by the unhappiness showing not only on his face but in his whole body language. If it wasn't for protocol she would happily have thrown her arms around him to comfort him.

They stood, waiting for the King to speak. For a long time he sat there, head down again, just looking at the papers on his desk. Then he looked directly at them again.

“Matthews and Jo” – he always called his Financial Adviser by his surname, as he did with all other male staff. First names were reserved for just a few of the female staff and Jo was honoured to be among the few. “Come in and close the door. Please.”

“I am going to tell you something” he said. “I’m sorry to burden you with this, as it must not go any further but I want you to know. I trust you – and I need to tell someone I count as a friend”.

“I promise” said Jo and Chris, both speaking at the same time.

“It’s Harry”.

Jo gasped – her hand went up to her mouth.

“Sir – William – is he.....?” She couldn’t finish.

“We don’t know. He has disappeared.”

“Kidnapped?” Asked Chris Matthews. “Taken hostage?”

“We don’t know. He has just gone – no messages, not answering his phone or messages – his Security people don’t know. But you know Harry – he might have just given them the slip and gone off somewhere - but for this long?. No

communication – no ransom demand – nothing.” There was just a glint of a tear in the corner of his eye. “Mother is distraught.”

Chris’s hand found Jo’s hand. Jo could feel her face crumbling. It took all her willpower to remain outwardly calm while images of dreadful scenes of Harry in the midst of kidnapers flashed through her mind.

It was the young king who broke the silence. “Mother will be staying here for the time being.”

“You will be a comfort to her,” said Jo – wondering if Diana would be a comfort to William too.

“We must all carry on as normal,” said William – “and remember, please, not a word to anyone else.”

He buried his face in his hands. “I shouldn’t have told you – I shouldn’t have put you under this pressure.”

“We are both at your service, Sir,” said Chris Matthews. “You can rely on both of us, and if there is anything we can do.....”

“Just carry on as normal – that’s the best thing. You’ll get to know if anything changes”. He reached out his hands and grasped theirs. Chris had to release Jo’s hand. She felt the separation keenly. But had William seen? Was that a tiny twitch of his lips?

“And thank you for your support. Now go – it must be lunch time.”

A week passed, then another. The media had not got wind of the real situation. The King’s Press Office released little tidbits of misinformation about Harry to keep them happy. The big

story was speculation about when the Coronation was to be. “Is William going to abdicate too?”, “Why won’t they set a date?” and “Is this the end of the Monarchy?”

Still the marches with the banners reading “Citizens, not subjects” and “Down with the monarchy” took place – mainly peaceful marches, but with more and more young people.

King William could not bring himself to agree to any date for the Coronation. He couldn’t do it while Harry’s whereabouts were so uncertain. He wouldn’t do it without Harry by his side.

No news. “No news is good news,” Jo kept reminding herself. She and Chris had almost finished their task at Windsor. There were only a few of the main Ceremonial Rooms to go, but then they were to start on the Private Apartments – not a job Jo relished, but which would not take long. Then there were the other Royal Palaces which Chris would be overseeing. “You don’t have to come, Jo” he told her, “you’ll be better staying here – His Majesty might need you”.

“I’ll miss you” she said.

“I’ll miss you too” he replied, planting a kiss on her forehead.

Her arms went up round his neck. She almost had to stand on tiptoe to do this. She hardly dared believe what was happening to her – it was not something she had thought possible at her age, or even looked for. She had had the usual fantasies of young girls, of course – but working at the castle had provided romance enough, though nowadays it felt far more scary than romantic.

The marchers and protesters were becoming more vociferous,

egged on by certain of the tabloids who vied to out-do each other on the possible cost of a coronation. The supposed expenditure mounted daily, running into billions. “Enough” reported one of them “to feed the whole country for a decade”. “What do they do for their money?” asked another. “We don’t need them”.

Jo tried to avoid watching the news or even seeing the headlines in the papers – she felt sickened by the hatred engendered for the people she was employed by, and who she had come to admire.

“They don’t realise” she said to herself, how hard the family work, meeting and greeting foreign heads, always pleasant and smiling whatever their personal feelings, hosting banquets for foreign dignitaries, smoothing the pathways for inter-state diplomacy and all that went with it.

Still no news about Harry. Chris had passed William in the corridor – had raised his eyebrows quizzically and the response was a slight shake of the head. No words were exchanged – nothing given away to anyone else in the vicinity but the response was clearly negative.

“I wish there was some way we could help” said Jo. She said this every day, since William had confided in them.

“Best left to those who know what they are doing” Chris replied. By this he meant the military, MI5 and Special Security. “But I know what you mean.”

She wanted to tell her sister, but of course couldn’t. She had to wait until eventually she was able to send the following via the route arranged after her letter was intercepted.

Dear Judi

Still no date for the Coronation. It will probably be next year now, and I think it will be announced soon. The good thing is, Harry is back from Afghanistan and is no longer serving personnel. I think the King, and especially his mother Diana, have been quite worried about him, especially after most of his unit died in that roadside bomb attack. We hear so many bad things..... All the staff have been really fearful over his safety. There have been long discussions over his future and Harry was definitely not amused at being in effect grounded, though I think he is pleased with his new role, and it is one which he will fill magnificently. I'm not sure what his title will be, but something like Commander in Chief of the Disabled Ex Servicemen's Sports Association. There hasn't been anything like it before, and it was partly his own suggestion. He believes Sport is extremely important for the recovery, both mental and physical of the kind of injuries sustained in the armed forces – they are after all trained to a high level of physical fitness, and to have that suddenly taken away from them leads to depression which in turn affects their physical recovery. Sports training – specifically aimed at what they are able to do – will give them back not only some physical fitness but also self-esteem. They will be training alongside their colleagues, or at least other members of the armed forces so will still enjoy the camaraderie and support they have been used to before they were injured. Of course they have to recover first, but there are special hospitals which will be extended and equipped for sports training. Harry wants to set up something like the Paralympics especially for the injured ex-servicemen – or those who can still serve in some

capacity with their disabilities - to encourage them to keep battling and keep their adrenalin levels up.

I think it's a good idea – Chris does too. I know I don't do a lot of physical activity now – but I do remember those aerobics classes we used to go to – didn't that teacher work us hard – and how great I felt afterwards – as though I could go on to swim 50 lengths before running home! I think you felt the same, and I know you are a lot more active than me now – what with all the skiing and running you do and how John encourages the boys to do all sorts of physical stuff.

We're still taking stock here – it won't be long before we finish the gilded corridors and State Rooms here at Windsor. I do love this place, but nothing is certain yet and I hate the news when it shows the protest marchers and their banners. Did you see that the statue of Queen Victoria had been defaced? The one in front of Buckingham Palace? There have been others – the one in Manchester covered in red paint.

I've got some leave to take soon Judi. When the date for the Coronation is decided I'll book it. I won't come to you – just in case those media sleuths find out – but we can arrange something. Maybe Vancouver Island – or we could visit Saint Anne's again? I'm really looking forward to it and I've got such a lot to tell you.

Love to John and the boys – see you soon

Jo.

Nothing about those long three weeks when Harry was missing had ever been released to the Press and the young Prince was still not fully recovered. He had been in the commander's office being told he was being recalled almost immediately.

Things were getting too dangerous. More road-side bombs and snipers than ever before - communications with the Americans had been disabled – another Arab ploy. Ever the hot-head, instead of just packing his kit, he just took off. On one of the powerful motorbikes from the compound. Fortunately he still had the nous to change out of his uniform into civvies and cover himself with an Arab cloak and turban. The last thing he wanted was to go back to England. At least here he was just one of the lads, rather than the ‘spare’ to the ‘heir’, having to be polite to people, some of whom he felt did not deserve politeness. Apparently he spent one night holed up somewhere – trying to sort his head out, he said. Then he said he ‘came to’ and realized how stupid he was being and how selfish and decided to go back to the camp. On the way back, after getting somewhat lost, he ran into rocky terrain and crashed the bike, causing serious damage to his head. Fortunately he was picked up by an American Platoon. He was unconscious and had no means of identification, having ripped his ID tag off in anger before he left, though he did have Army issue underwear and was obviously not an Arab. The Americans took care of him in their hospital unit. As soon as he began to show signs of consciousness they transferred him to a secure room in case he was a spy.

He remained in a semi-conscious state for another week, by the end of which communication between the American and British camps was restored and he awoke one day to find his Camp Commander at the end of his bed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORT

Jo Proctor

Jackie was rather bemused to have run into Miss Wilson in town. The encounter was brief, courteous and superficial but stirred up a gnawing memory in Jackie as well as a suppressed desire to put her old sports teacher straight once and for all.

The event they both recalled and politely laughed about was the day when many years previously Miss Wilson had found Jackie the schoolgirl skiving off lacrosse practice and hiding in the school changing rooms. Her punishment had been to write a letter of apology and an essay entitled 'The Importance of Sport'.

Neither of these tasks was particularly difficult for Jackie - she was well practised at apologising for all manner of transgressions in her young life - and writing an essay, unlike sport, was one of her favourite pastimes.

She wrote the apology letter with heartfelt sincerity. From past experience she had found it useful to focus on one aspect of the transgression that she was genuinely sorry for - in this case not missing lacrosse practice but having created the impression that she was a lazy, dishonest and deceptive person. She did indeed feel quite ashamed of herself in this respect and promised there would be no repeat of her outrageous behaviour.

The letter pleased Miss Wilson.

When it came to the essay, Jackie knew what was expected of her and dutifully churned out all the necessary supporting arguments. She first of all emphasised the value of sport in the school curriculum. Apart from keeping children fit, it created discipline (all sports had rules), taught young people about

perseverance, teamwork and co-operation. It educated them in the value of striving for excellence, in developing group loyalty by sharing common goals. She wrote that one of the most useful functions of school sport was to enable each child to find a sport they enjoyed and could carry on throughout their lives thus fulfilling the dual function of enabling them to keep fit and interact socially through a shared activity. At the end of this section she stated it was essential for children to learn about humility in victory and generosity in defeat.

Jackie then went on to write about the importance of sport in the wider context - on a national and international level, covering both the spectator angle as well as that of the participant. She enumerated the benefits of participating in national and international competitions which raised standards and facilitated connections with other nations, promoting friendship on all levels and an opportunity to learn both about other nations and from them. She praised the Olympics in due measure and even went as far as to say that sport's importance lay in its contribution to human advancement.

The essay pleased Miss Wilson greatly.

Jackie did not buy into any of it. Although she loved dancing, ski-ing and horse riding for the feelings of exhilaration and freedom they afforded her, other more mainstream sports such as football, rugby, cricket, wrestling and boxing, which were all frequently shown on TV, seemed to be the exclusive domain of men. Her private conclusion was that sport was important because men said it was. Even in her own family the 2 males invariably won out over the 3 females when there was a football match on TV.

Miss Wilson had never seen the follow-on paragraphs which Jackie had written to express her true opinions on a more

personal level.

Do you remember when we were in Form 1, Miss Wilson? That first summer we were meant to have the opportunity to learn how to play tennis. I had been longing to learn and the whole class was very enthusiastic and excited about it. Within 5 minutes of that first lesson you had creamed off 4 or 5 girls who already knew how to play and you took them off to separate courts. I was form captain at the time and when you didn't return I was sent to look for you and find out what we were all meant to be doing. I found you coaching the creamed off group and you put me in charge of the rest of the class with the instruction to get them to 'knock the ball around among themselves'. We were extremely disappointed and thought it should have been the other way round i.e., you should have left the creamed-off girls to their own devices and devoted your time to us, the real beginners. Would that not have been fair? But, Miss Wilson, you had spotted talent and potential school tennis squad members. We, the 25 rejects, never learned anything at all about tennis from you, but we all felt a sense of injustice and an opportunity denied. Seriously, Miss Wilson, how do you justify yourself?

Also, Miss Wilson, can you not see how inflated the egos of your sports teams are? They not only think they are extremely talented in their sport, they truly believe that they are somehow superior human beings, certainly better than their non-sporty counterparts. They form exclusive cliques and glow with pride at their achievements. Their desire for personal glory is only thinly disguised by their claims to be serving the school. Do you really think your sports teams are learning valuable life lessons? Yes? And what might they be? How to develop a sense of superiority and sustain it? How to look down on others?

And, Miss Wilson, could I just finally ask you what you think the role of women is in the real world of sport? Or is this not a matter you have given any thought to? Do you not observe women as adornments? They put on bikinis and parade around boxing rings holding up signs. At cricket matches the men play the game and the girls and women are required to lay on the tea! And cheerleaders! American footballers are fully clothed in protective gear and there is no requirement to be handsome. Cheerleaders are scantily clad and have to be both beautiful and athletic - tall, slim, long hair, big white smile, dance and gymnastic skills and a willingness to display their cleavage and butt cheeks. This is the real world, Miss Wilson. Is this honestly a fitting place for women in sport?

Jackie's real opinions would not have pleased Miss Wilson.

Were she to update her arguments, Jackie would be able to find lots of other issues to add to her scepticism - football hooliganism, racist chants at football matches, overpaid professional footballers, doping scandals in numerous sports, bullying and abuse by over-ambitious coaches, excessive expenditure on Olympic venues, to name but a few. It had particularly amused Jackie that the 2012 UK Olympics had relied heavily on unpaid volunteers prepared to camp out in tents whereas the Olympic Committee and honoured guests dined at the Orangery in Kensington Palace every night.

If she ever ran into Miss Wilson again, Jackie would like to have a polite word - not to re-hash the 'importance of sport' arguments or to share her true opinions but just to ensure that current generations of schoolgirls are getting a fair crack of the whip on the tennis courts.

BENEFITS OF SPORT THROUGH THE AGES

Raymond Brown

Once in Crete did the young men and maidens take hold
Of a bull by the horns and then somersault high
O'er the back of the beast. 'Twas a sight to behold.
As this sport's surely dangerous, do you know why
These Minoan young folk did such dare-devil deeds?
Was it just for the rush of adrenaline thrill
To show off, you may ask, or for some other needs?
Oh indeed 'twas not so, but 'twas done to fulfil
What was due in the rites of the Cretan bull cult;
For the gods and the goddesses must be assuaged
So no earthquake or other disaster result
From a deity upset, provoked or enraged.
So the sport would ensure that prosperity reigned
And that peace and true harmony would be sustained.

But the Greeks were more practical surely for they
Practised running and javelin and discus and sports
Such as boxing and wrestling we still do today.
Yet the Greeks did these things because *they* are the sorts
Of proficiencies needed when facing the foe,
When the battlefield called and you had to defend
Both yourself and your comrades; for *then* there was no
Standing army your city could summon and send
Into war. 'Twas a citizen's duty to serve
As a soldier if needed; and so it made sense
To keep practising skills which might help to preserve
Him in fighting the foe for his city's defence.
Thus to city and citizens benefits came
From such sports since repelling their foes was their aim.

But the Romans professional armies maintained
So that ordinary citizens were not required
To be ready to fight or for soldiery trained,
But could choose any sport that they liked or desired;
But 'twas being spectators that mostly appealed.
All along the great Circuit they'd watch as they cheered
When the chariots sped rashly, refusing to yield
Any ground to each other and headlong careered;
Or they'd shout and they'd holler with bloodthirsty glee
In their amphitheatres where gladiators fought
Or where animal hunts gave a merciless spree
Of unspeakable carnage and bloody onslaught.
And the benefit generous Emperors got
Was a populace dulled and content with their lot.

Let us forward to times Medieval and see
Just what sports we may find in Britannia's isle.
For the king and the nobles a jousting tourney
Was important as were all the skills and the guile
Of one fighting on horseback. The hunt and the chase
They indulged in as well; for the the boar and the deer
They delighted to eat. Every man must embrace
Daily practice with longbow - the law made that clear -
And the archers of England and Wales proved their worth
At the battles of Crecy, Poitiers, Agincourt.
And the peasants and serfs who were bound to the earth
On their Sundays and High days engaged in such sport
As folk football and other ball games to keep fit
So they'd get back to work in good health with true grit.

At the Tudors and Stuarts let's now take a peek.
Both the king and the gentry, they still liked the hunt,
But they also liked racing their horses to seek
Which was fittest and fastest to come out in front;
And they liked their real tennis and racquets and such.
But the bating of bears and of bulls did appeal
To all ranks of society. Liked nigh as much
Was the fighting of cocks although that had the feel
Of a lower class sport. Oh what benefit did
Such horrendous sports bring? There are none I opine.
Though the grander folks did to the poorer forbid
Them to hunt deer or boar, they were able to dine
On the rabbits or hares or the fish that they caught;
And folk-football and bowls for them exercise brought.

At the twenty first century now we arrive
Where the number of sports has so greatly increased;
And some sports are now global, while others survive
In enthusiasts' groups; and the grandest and least
All enjoy many similar sports nowadays.
Some may train by themselves or go jogging alone;
Some prefer to join others on golfing fairways
Or in squash courts, at bowls or where frisbees are thrown,
Or in team games where many oppose on each side
Such as football or cricket, lacrosse or baseball.
Some take part for their health, or for national pride,
Or for fame and great fortune or just to enthrall.
So the benefits vary: for some it is health,
And for some relaxation, for others it's wealth.

Contributors to Zoom meetings:

JENNIE ALLEN lives in Tadworth. Following retirement from teaching, she is a part-time assessor/examiner of English for speakers of other languages.

RAYMOND BROWN is a polymath with Masters degrees in the Humanities and in Science; now retired, he pursues his many varied interests and enjoys creative writing.

RACHEL BROWN is Raymond's daughter and an occasional Mole when visits and time allow. She lives in the USA near Boston and works as a lawyer.

ROBERT EDMONDSON has a Ph.D. in biochemistry and worked for Beechams Research (now GSK) on antibiotics. Now retired he has a keen interest in the performing and visual arts, involving both photography and Dorking Folk Club. He is a volunteer at Dorking Museum.

PAT HARRIS was born in Holmbury St Mary, a marginal Irish immigrant. She enjoys life in Leatherhead with family and friends.

PETER HORSFIELD began writing poetry in 2008 when he retired from his work as a biologist. He is also a singer, musician, artist and spiritual healer, and has been an enthusiastic cyclist for many years.

JO PROCTOR is an expatriate Geordie. She has an interest in modern languages and has lived in Germany and Japan. She now resides in Epsom.