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THE SUNDAY TIMES



Magazine

Answered: 33 wine questions you were too embarrassed to ask



Amanda Abbington

'It's been really brutal since Strictly'



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Israeli attempt to kill Hamas leader leaves dozens dead in Gaza airstrike

Anshel Pfeffer Jerusalem
Amal Helles Cairo

Israeli aircraft struck a humanitarian zone in Gaza yesterday, killing dozens and leaving hundreds injured in an attack targeting the leader of Hamas's military wing.

Shortly after 11am a salvo of missiles hit al-Mawasi, west of Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip – a coastal area that has served for months as a "humanitarian zone", to which Israel directed residents when war reached their homes.

Medical teams from the Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, who went to the scene, reported carnage around the tent encampments, where many were found dead, including children. Teams at Nasser said that the hospital was "no longer able to function" because doctors were "overwhelmed by the large number of casualties".

Health authorities in the Hamas-run strip said 71 people were killed and 289 wounded in the attack, making it one of the most deadly in weeks.

Israel's armed forces said they received intelligence that Mohammed Deif and Rafa Salama, two of the masterminds of the Hamas October 7 attacks on Israel, were hiding in the area. It was unclear whether either were killed or wounded in the attack.

The second-in-command in Gaza, Deif is the most elusive of all Hamas leaders and has been likened to Osama bin Laden by Israeli officials.

He is the leader of Hamas's military wing, the Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigades, and is a man who had been the target of at least seven previous assassination attempts over the years.

In a video released by Hamas on October 7, when its gunmen burst over the border and massacred nearly 1,200 people in Israeli communities and military bases, it was Deif's voice and purported silhouette announcing what Hamas call Operation Al Aqsa Storm. Since then he has been at the top of Israel's hit list, as the assumed mastermind of the attack.

Israeli military sources refused to comment on the casualty numbers in yesterday's strike and claimed that it had targeted a small compound of shacks in al-Mawasi which was being used by Hamas: "IDF's Southern Command and the IAF carried out a strike in an area where two senior Hamas terrorists and additional terrorists hid among civilians.

"The location of the strike was an open area surrounded by trees, several buildings, and sheds," a statement read.

Israeli officers have disputed the Palestinian claims of civilian casualties, showing footage of what they claim was the target, a separate compound, set away from the refugees' tents and saying that many of those killed were Hamas members, part of Deif's entourage and that of another senior leader of the group, Rafa Salama, commander of the Khan Yunis Brigade.

"We didn't intend to kill any civilians there and it's regrettable if that happened but we were targeting the man who for Israelis is like

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Truant register to save Covid lost generation

Labour's first King's Speech will include a legal duty on councils to keep track of pupils

Caroline Wheeler and Sian Griffiths

A national register of children who are not going to school will be created under a new law to tackle record levels of absenteeism and stop them becoming part of a lost Covid generation.

Under legislation to be set out in Sir Keir Starmer's first King's speech this week, a legal duty will be put on councils to keep a register of all children who are not in school – so-called "ghost children" – and on parents to provide information about those who are home-schooled.

Artificial intelligence will be used to improve co-ordination between schools, GPs and councils, and Ofsted, the schools regulator, will be granted access to school absence rates as part of annual safeguarding checks.

The education bill, which is expected to become law this year, will also include:

- A legal requirement for breakfast clubs in every primary school, ensuring that each child, no matter their circumstances, is well prepared for the school day and ready to learn. This will sit alongside an existing commitment to provide access to a specialist mental health expert in each school.
- A legal cap to limit the number of branded items of uniform that a school can require to three, helping to ease the pressure on family budgets and preventing pupils from feeling marginalised because of financial constraints.
- A requirement for all schools, including free schools and academies, to teach the national curriculum, ensuring that all pupils receive a broad and rounded education. At present, free schools and academies do not have to teach the national curriculum, despite making up more than 80 per cent of schools in England.
- An imperative for any new teacher entering the profession either to have, or be working towards, qualified teacher status.

Recent figures show that there are 24,000 teachers without a formal teaching qualification at work in state schools in England – an increase of more than 60 per cent in four years.

- Plans to bring multi-academy trusts into the inspection system to ensure that Ofsted can intervene when schools and trusts are not performing to the highest standards.
- Enhanced powers to enable Ofsted to spot patterns of poor care across providers, and to ensure that rigorous standards of care apply to residential special schools.

Record numbers of pupils in England were absent for long periods last year, with one in 50 missing at least half their lessons.

Department for Education data shows that absences remain far higher than pre-Covid levels, with 150,000 children at state schools classed as being "severely absent" in 2022-23 – 30,000 more than the year before and 150 per cent higher than the 60,000 who were persistently absent in 2018-19, before the pandemic.

Local authorities are not required to maintain a register of pupils who are not in full-time education. This means that in some areas, children "slip under the radar" and fail to receive the required standard of education. In

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THE GREAT BLAME GAME



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Donald Trump 'shot' at rally

EVAN VUCCI/AP



Donald Trump gestures to his supporters, surrounded by the secret service, in Butler, Pennsylvania

Louise Callaghan

Donald Trump was rushed off stage by the American secret service at a rally yesterday after apparent gunfire rang out.

Video showed Trump – with blood on his face – ducking behind the lectern in Butler, Pennsylvania, and being covered by agents.

Trump's campaign said in a statement that the former president was "fine" and was being "checked out" at a local medical facility. "President Trump thanks law enforcement and first responders for their quick action during this heinous act," spokesman Steven Cheung said.

It was reported that one person at the rally had died.

Journalist Tom Newton Dunn, who was at the event, said: "Everyone went quiet for a second. Secret service agents jumped on Trump and pulled him to the ground. An instant later, the crowd of about 30,000 realised what had happened. Someone near me shouted, 'Get down, get down.'

"The entire crowd, who had been gathered in the summer sun, sat down. Then the screaming started. 'Oh my God, what the f***,' a man next to me shouted.

"A woman close by just repeated over again, 'Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, they've got him.'

A few seconds after the shooting, people in the crowd started to turn and run. Others remained where they stood, trying to see what happened, taking out their phones to film. About 30 seconds later, Trump was pulled to his feet by agents who had thrown themselves on top of him.

"My thoughts and prayers are with former President Trump," said Hakeem Jeffries, the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives. "I am thankful for the decisive law enforcement response. America is a democracy. Political violence of any kind is never acceptable."

Donald Trump Jr, the ex-president's eldest son, posted an image of his bloodied father with a defiant message, saying: "He'll never stop fighting to save America."

Police investigate pro-Gaza election leaflets against Labour

Gabriel Pogrund
Whitehall Editor

Police are investigating allegations that electoral law was broken during the contest for Leicester South at the general election.

Shockat Adam, 51, won the traditional Labour safe seat by a margin of 979 votes, beating Jonathan Ashworth, the shadow paymaster general, who had a 22,000 majority. Adam stood on a pro-Gaza platform and was one of five independent MPs elected on July 4 to have made the Middle East conflict a central issue.

Ashworth has now spoken of the most "vitriolic and intimidating" campaign he has faced in his 14 years as an MP. He was banned from mosques, chased down streets while being filmed, and told "everyone despises you" while canvassing with his ten-year-old daughter.

Ashworth, 45, provided evidence of potentially illegal leaflets distributed in the constituency, which has one of the highest proportions of Muslim voters – nearly a third – in the country.

The leaflets, which show a photo of Ashworth printed on a picture of starving, weeping children, said a vote for Labour was "a vote for genocide", and included a link to a website advising voters to support Adam.

They appear to break electoral law because they do not declare who paid for them or who printed them. Leicestershire police said yesterday it had received "a number of reports concerning election material distributed in the run-up to the general election on July 4 … Further inquiries are continuing to identify whether a criminal offence has been committed."

The new MP, who is an optician, has sought to distance himself from the leaflets.

A spokesman for Adam said: "Shockat was given a mandate by the people of Leicester South and he is now focused on delivering for them. He will not be distracted by sour grapes from a beaten rival who had lost touch with his constituents."

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NEWMAN'S VIEW



Biden sends out top team as he struggles to quash party revolt

Louise Callaghan
Wilmington, Delaware

President Biden sent proxies out across America last night to campaign for him in an attempt to wrest back the narrative about his mental decline and quash a simmering revolt from Democrats.

Vice-president Kamala Harris and Jill Biden, the first lady, were set to hold events in Pennsylvania, a vital swing state, stumping for the president, while other senior figures took to media rounds to turn the tide.

Senator Bernie Sanders, Biden's one-time rival for the Democratic leadership, argued in the pages of The New York Times that the party should "stop the bickering and nitpicking" and accept that Biden was their nominee for elections in November. "Enough!" he wrote. "Mr Biden may not be the ideal candidate, but he will be the candidate and should be the candidate. And with an effective campaign that speaks to the needs of working families, he will not only defeat Mr Trump but beat him badly."

Today some of Biden's most loyal allies, including the Democratic senator John Fetterman, will appear on talk shows to defend the president's record and try to quell the rebellion in their ranks. About 20 Democrat politicians have publicly called on Biden to step down, while others have raised their "concerns" about his ability not only to lead the party to victory against Trump, but to govern America for the next four years.

On Friday, he held a rally in Michigan, where he lambasted the press, made jokes about Trump, and reiterated his refusal to quit. To build momentum around his nomination and to quieten plans to unseat him, he is working hard to make the case for his candidacy.

US election reports, page 16
Camilla Long, page 25

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HAITHAM IMAD/EPA; ABED RAHIM KHATIB/ANADOLU; EYAD BABA/AFP







Palestinians fled after an Israeli raid on al-Mawasi in Khan Yunis, top and far left, where displaced people had tents. Left, a woman weeps over a relative who was killed

Israelis say 'high probability' Hamas leader died in airstrike

➔ Continued from page 1

Osama bin Laden for Americans," said a senior Israeli security official. "No one is responsible for murdering as many Israelis as Deif."

However, Ahmed Al-Qudwa, an 18-year-old who says he witnessed the attack told The Sunday Times in messages from Gaza: "We were sitting in al-Mawasi, Khan Yunis, an area that was described as a safe area. Suddenly, they fired more than nine successive missiles towards the tents of the displaced, and from under the rubble they saved us."

He added: "I cannot believe that I am still alive."

Umm Suleiman, 43, said she was still searching for members of her family after the strike. "I have been here for hours looking for my mother and brothers.

"The area that was targeted was a sandy area. Most of the bodies and wounded were among the sand. There was no sign of their tents or of them."

While Israeli defence sources say that there was "high probability" Deif was killed in the attack, they are wary of making an official claim without proof.

Shortly after the strike Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, put out a statement saying that "at the start of the [Gaza] war he had given a standing order to eliminate senior Hamas leaders" but stopped short from mentioning Deif by name. Unconfirmed footage of a body which could be Deif's has been circulating online.

Deif, who is thought to be 59, was one of the earliest members of the Al-Qassam Brigades, formed after Hamas's foundation in the late-1980s, and for more than three decades has planned hundreds of attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers. His real name is Muhammad Diab Ibrahim al-Masri. His nom de guerre, Deif, means "guest" in Arabic and refers to his elusiveness, rarely sleeping in the same place twice.

In the 1990s, he specialised in the kidnappings of Israeli soldiers and police officers, and then graduated to suicide bombings in Israel. Since Hamas took over Gaza in 2007, he has built what was a small terror organisation into an army, with a massive rocket arsenal and a network of tunnels hundreds of kilometres long.

In Israel he has also been called "the phantom" and the "man with nine lives" after surviving attempted assassinations, though wounded in at least two of them. In 2002, an Apache attack helicopter fired a missile at the car Deif was travelling in, and footage shows him crawling away from the wreckage. In 2006, he was severely wounded in an airstrike on a home in Gaza where he was attending a meeting of Hamas chiefs, while in 2014, in an airstrike on a tunnel in which he and his family were hiding, his wife and son were both killed but he survived.

For many years both in Gaza and in Israel many believed Deif had been so seriously wounded in Israeli airstrikes that he could barely function, or was even dead. But he remained active and from recent footage obtained by Israeli intelligence, seemed to be relatively mobile.

If Deif is indeed dead, the sole remaining member of Hamas' senior leadership in Gaza is Yahya Sinwar, the political chief and a childhood friend of Deif's. Both men rose through the ranks of the Islamic movement of which they were early members, to become the rulers of Gaza. Now, only one of them, Sinwar, may be left, hiding underground.

READERS' POLL

This week's question:
Should the UK impose an arms embargo on Israel?
Have your say at
thesundaytimes.com/poll



Mohammed Deif was the target of the airstrike on al-Mawasi

Sunak looked at pact with Reform

Harry Yorke and George Sandeman

Rishi Sunak explored the possibility of a joint Conservative-Reform ticket in some red wall constituencies before the general election, it has been claimed.

The former prime minister is said to have had talks about the prospect with his aide Craig Williams, the Brexit campaigner Andy Wigmore and Dame Andrea Jenkyns.

Nigel Farage, Reform's leader, featured on leaflets distributed by Jenkyns during her unsuccessful election campaign in Leeds South West & Morley. Jenkyns said she was approached by Reform in March about the pact and met party chairman Richard Tice and Farage before discussing it with Sunak, according to The Telegraph.

"I suggested to him red wall candidates running on a joint Tory-Reform ticket. He was definitely in listening mode. He said there was a lot to think about," she said of their phone call.

Meanwhile, Reform's ousted deputy leader said Farage must give up overwhelming control of the party to end its "gaping democratic deficit".

Ben Habib said Reform's structure as a limited company, over which Farage maintains a controlling stake, was not "sustainable" for a party that wants to "champion" democracy.

The businessman, who served as a Brexit Party MEP in Brussels before the party was renamed Reform, was dismissed by Farage from his role as co-deputy leader last week. Writing for The Sunday Times, Habib said "great leaders are surrounded by great people and take counsel" and "leaders with undue control are surrounded by sycophants and have no truck with criticism".

Ben Habib's article, page 10 and in full online

Didn't see us getting this far?

Should've

Specsavers

Truant register for Covid lost generation

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some cases, pupils are being taught in unregistered schools.

Proposals to legislate for a new national register were once part of the Conservative government's schools bill, which was scrapped in 2022.

A Whitehall source said: "This is the first step in our plans to drive high and rising standards in all of our state schools and deliver better life chances for children."

The new legislation, which will be led through the Commons by Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, is among at least 30 bills that will be in the King's speech on Wednesday, including sweeping changes on housebuilding, green energy, crime and voter registration.

Phillipson will be assisted by Sir Kevan Collins, the former education catch-up tsar, who has been appointed as a government adviser on driving up standards in school. In 2021 Collins quit as the catch-up tsar because he said the Conservative government's £1.4 billion education fund fell "far short" of what was needed.

He will focus on improving the 300-500 worst-performing "stuck schools". These have been described by previous governments as "coasting", and have had two consecutive Ofsted judgments that have not been good or outstanding.

The DfE is expected to start a curriculum and assessment review amid claims that subjects have failed to keep up with the pace of change. It is understood that along with reading, writing and maths there will be a renewed focus on skills such as budgeting, speaking, listening and interviewing, as well as communication, teamwork and problem-solving.

Last week Phillipson wrote to all teaching staff pledging to "reset the relationship" with the sector. The letter also marked the start of her work to recruit 6,500 teachers. Labour said it would fund the new posts by adding tax to private school fees – although it is unclear when this will happen.

Last year a record 399,000 parents were given a penalty notice by local authorities for their children's unauthorised school absences. The number of fines issued in 2022-23 was 20 per cent higher than in 2018-19 and equates to a fine for one in 20 pupils aged from five to 16 at state schools.

In an interview with The Sunday Times in January, Phillipson said parents should ensure their children attended school or risk them becoming part of a lost Covid generation.

She said that if she were secretary of state, "I'd be sending a very clear message to parents that every day at school matters and that irresponsible parents who don't care about sending their kids to school are harming other kids' life chances, not just their own".

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Prisoners can listen to Andy Coulson's podcast

Dominic Hauschild

A podcast hosted by Andy Coulson, the former News of the World editor who was later jailed for conspiracy to hack phones, has been made available to thousands of prisoners across the UK.

Coulson, 56, was David Cameron's communications chief from 2007 and then as his chief press secretary in No 10 until resigning in 2011. Six months later he was arrested in connection with allegations of corruption and phone hacking. He was found guilty in 2014 and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

The podcast, *Crisis What Crisis?*, published its first episode in 2020. It has included interviews with politicians including James Timpson, the new prisons minister, as well as celebrities and former inmates.

In partnership with the Ministry of Justice, 100 episodes of the podcast have been uploaded to a platform hosted by the prisoner rehabilitation programme, Launchpad. Coulson said he devised the podcast while serving his sentence at HMP Belmarsh and hoped it might help people "dealing with life's difficult stuff".

He added: "A decade ago I was coming to the end of my first week as a prisoner. It struck me then, sat in my cell, that there was a total absence of positive content being offered to inmates. Not for entertainment but for inspiration – content that might fuel a more positive mindset and, once released, a more positive life."

Zelensky: I can forget Biden's summit gaffe

George Sandeman

President Zelensky has said he "can forget mistakes" after President Biden accidentally called him "President Putin" at the Nato summit.

The US president made the mistake while introducing the Ukrainian leader on stage in Washington at an event on Thursday marking the 75th anniversary of the alliance.

Asked about the incident at a press conference in Ireland yesterday, where he stopped briefly on his way home from the summit, Zelensky said: "It's a mistake. I think the United States gave a lot of support for Ukrainians. We can forget some mistakes, I think so."

On Friday the International Criminal Court was urged by Ukraine's most senior prosecutor to investigate Russia and Putin after a missile strike on a children's hospital in Kyiv on Monday.

Moscow denies attacking the hospital.

Today's highlights

8.45am **Giles Dilnot**, former Conservative special adviser
10.05am **Lucy Powell**, right, the leader of the House of Commons
11.15am Ex-Reform UK co-deputy leader **Ben Habib**
11.20am **Baroness Ashton of Upholland**, the former vice-president of the European Commission
2.15pm The shark expert **Dr Yannis Papastamatiou**

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NEWS

Run-ins with Thatcher and Portillo taught Kirsty Wark not to interrupt

Rosamund Urwin
Media Editor

Three former prime ministers – Sir Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton – paid tribute to Kirsty Wark on her final *Newsnight* on Friday, but it was leaving her "second family" at the BBC2 programme that brought tears to her eyes.

Wark, 69, was the longest-serving presenter in the show's history, hosting her first *Newsnight* more than three decades ago. Victoria Derbyshire, now its main presenter, described Wark as "fiercely intelligent and fiercely fun". Laura Kuenssberg, who presents a Sunday politics show on BBC1, said: "No one blazed the trail for women [journalists] quite like Kirsty."

Speaking on Saturday afternoon while heading for a holiday on the Isle of Arran, Wark said: "*Newsnight* is a family. There's not been a day when I haven't gone into the office looking forward to the day's endeavours, let alone the show. It's an engine of creativity. Being a presenter is the shiny cherry, but without the team you are nothing."

Wark, who joined the BBC in 1976, will present Radio 4's *Front Row* from Glasgow, where she lives, once a week and will continue to host *The Reunion* for the station. The extra time will allow her to finish her third novel.

She became a household name in 1990 for her punchy interview with the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, but now thinks that many political interviews are too aggressive. "You want a bit of heat with the light, but I think grandstanding by presenters is not a good plan," she said. "It's not about us … and politicians have a hard job. My mantra is 'Always sceptical but never cynical'."

Her interview style has softened slightly as she aged. "I think early on I was too much of an interrupter; Thatcher thought that, funnily enough, but I only had half an hour and had to get what I needed," Wark said. "But if you're very aggressive and someone doesn't answer the question, the charge can be put that you didn't set the right mood for someone to say something truthful. But when you're forensic, quiet and steady – and with maturity I became better at that – you may get something better. I'd always prefer they did actually answer the question."

JEFF OVERS/BBC



Kirsty Wark's final episode of Newsnight on Friday on BBC2. She has been its longest-serving presenter

Wark feels she did once get the tone wrong, in a 1994 interview with Michael Portillo, then employment secretary. Portillo, now 71, accused Wark of "hectoring", and Wark hit back, prompting the one complaint upheld against her. She was grieving after the deaths of her father and godmother, although she does not consider that an excuse.

"It was my own fault – I came back to work far too early," she said. "I think I allowed Portillo to needle me, and then he used those famous words 'you're hectoring me'. A woman would never use that word against a man – that's a male-to-female dialogue."

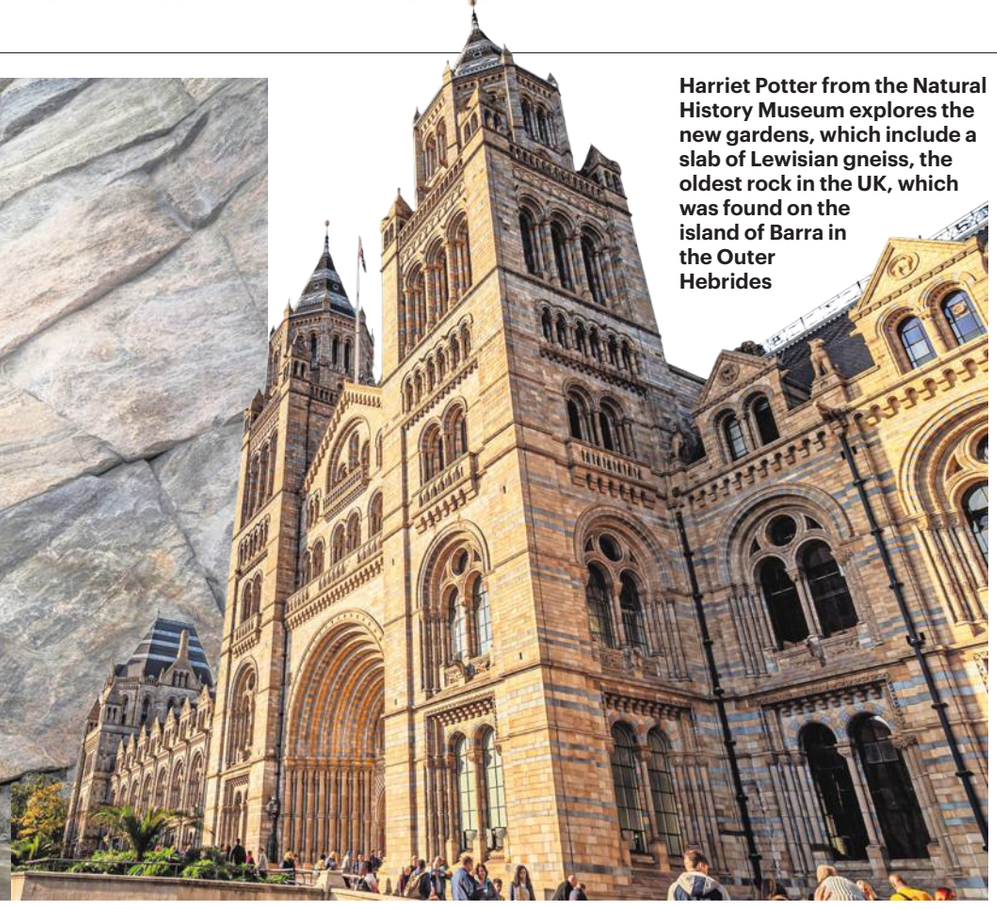
Wark has reported on many tragedies, including the Lockerbie bombing on December 21, 1988 (she was still wearing her Christmas party outfit underneath a heavy coat, having rushed to the scene) and the Dunblane massacre in 1996. "I've always felt that my job at these things is not to emote, because it's not my pain," she said. "I don't like florid language; I think less is more."

At the family home in Scotland, Wark brought up two children, Caitlin, 33, and James, 32, with her TV producer husband, Alan Clements, 63.

She would always have to rush out of the *Newsnight* studio to catch the Caledonian Sleeper. "I'd get the director to put the lights down quickly, and if you look at some editions of *Newsnight*, before the lights are down, I'm whipping off the mic. I was like a bat out of hell to get that train."

LUCY YOUNG FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES





Harriet Potter from the Natural History Museum explores the new gardens, which include a slab of Lewisian gneiss, the oldest rock in the UK, which was found on the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides

Museum's new queue will take 3bn years

From this week, visitors to the Natural History Museum will enter through a £25m 'living timeline', with the heirs to Dippy the dinosaur and the country's oldest rocks

Ben Spencer Science Editor

When it comes to a place to queue, this will take some beating. After five years of work, the front gardens of the Natural History Museum in London are to open on Thursday, scattered with tree ferns and sculptures of dinosaurs.

The new gardens, which cost £25 million to redevelop, represent a "living timeline" of British geology and botany.

From the Outer Hebrides to Cornwall, the museum's scientists scoured Britain to find 26 different rocks which date from three billion years ago to the present day. They went overseas only twice, to find particular forms of Icelandic rock.

"This is the oldest rock in the UK," said Paul Kenrick, a principal researcher at the museum, patting a large slab of grey and pink Lewisian gneiss, embedded into the side of the entrance to the gardens from the Victorian-era tunnel leading from South Kensington Tube station. "When this rock was laid down there was virtually no oxygen in the atmosphere. Life on Earth then was microbial, that was all there was. As you leave the tunnel it is like you are coming out of the earth."

A few metres on and the rock changes to white anorthosite, roughly 2.5 billion years old. And then again to Torridonian sandstone, aged one billion years.

As the path weaves through the gardens, towards the great entrance into the Hintze Hall and its blue whale skeleton, known as Hope, the rocks and planting change to represent the evolution of the British Isles.

"Every metre represents five million years once we're into the garden itself," Kenrick said. "But we had to squash the timeline a bit at the beginning, otherwise we would be starting a mile down the road in Harrods."

The five-acre space will provide a far more pleasant entrance for the museum's five million annual visitors than the present temporary access, which requires queueing along the packed pavement of Exhibition Road.

"The idea was to tell the story using a combination of geology, plants and sculptures, and inlays of animals in the path," Kenrick said. "People find the timescales we are talking about quite hard to comprehend, so we were trying to get across a concept of that time, and the idea that there has been an enormous amount of change." Taking pride of place at the centre of the gardens, marking roughly 150 million years ago, is a full-sized 25-metre diplodocus, cast in bronze from the original "Dippy" model which stood in the museum from 1905 until 2018, before it was taken on a nationwide tour. The bronze and its new name are being kept under wraps until Tuesday; the original is in Coventry.

Tracking down samples of the rocks was a challenge. "We had a geologist driving around the north of Scotland looking out for these rocks," said Neil Davidson, a landscape architect from J&L Gibbons, who worked on the project. "If he saw something from the road he would pull over, have a look over the fence and go and knock on the farmer's door to see if they would let us have it."

Other specimens came from leftover industrial projects. "We found the Lewisian gneiss on the isle of Barra," Kenrick said. "They had used it to make a causeway to the isle of Vatersay and there was some left over."

Elsewhere the team relied on people's goodwill. A specimen of 25 million-year-old sarsen stone was donated from a garden in West Woods, near Marlborough, Wiltshire, which is thought to be the area where some of the megaliths used for Stonehenge were sourced.

Another donor, a farmer near Hertford, agreed to give up 55 million-year-old puddingstones, distinctive rocks dotted with pebbles, which had been adorning a family garden, and had been identified by local geologists. "People say they look like plum puddings," Kenrick said.

Not all rocks could be sourced in the UK. "We wanted to have some basalt, to represent Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland," Kenrick said. "But you can't just go and chip out one of the columns. So we went to Iceland for that. In Reykjavik they use them as traffic bollards."

The planting was another challenge. Ferns and conifers dating to the age of the dinosaurs no longer exist, but their distant relatives do. "The plants we have accurately represent the growth forms of some of the earliest known trees," Kenrick said.

Flowers, however, did not appear until the Jurassic period – about 160 million years ago – so the first part of the garden is dominated by green foliage, until colourful blooms gradually appear. At that point London was sweltering and tropical. "The feel in this part of the garden is quite exotic," Davidson said.

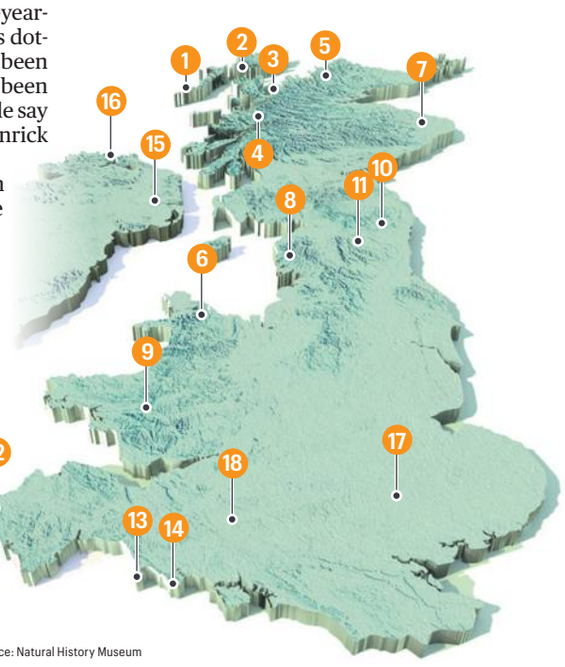
By the time visitors reach the present day, and the walkway up to the museum, they will be ready to greet the dinosaur fossils and other natural exhibits inside.

"You are not just walking alongside a plain lawn," Kenrick said. "As you wait to go inside, the queue becomes part of the visit itself. You're being challenged by this immersive journey, and that will start to get people questioning and thinking about history and the scale of time. I think people will get more out of the exhibits they see inside as a result."

ROCK OF AGES

Million years ago

1 3,000 Lewisian gneiss, Barra
2 2,500 White anorthosite, Harris
3 1,000 Torridonian sandstone, Kishorn
4 605 Green schist, Lochgilphead
5 520 Cambrian quartzite, Lairg
6 515 Welsh heather slate, Penrhyn
7 470 Grampian granite, Avochie
8 455 Cumbrian slate, Honister
9 415 Old red sandstone, Llangorse
10 355 Northumberland stone, Darney, Hexham
11 325 Slabby sandstone, Alston
12 295 Cornish granite, Penryn
13 150 Portland stone, Portland
14 140 Purbeck stone, Swanage
15 75 Chalk with flints, Belfast
16 60 Basalt columns (Giant's Causeway), Co Antrim
17 55 Puddingstone, Hertford
18 25 Sarsen stone (Stonehenge) Amesbury



Source: Natural History Museum

Strictly exit after partner's claims

Nicholas Hellen

Graziano Di Prima has revealed that he has left *Strictly Come Dancing* and "deeply regrets" the events that led to his departure from the hit BBC television show.

The professional dancer, whose most recent celebrity partner was Zara McDermott, a former contestant on ITV's *Love Island*, said in a statement: "My intense passion and determination to win might have affected my training regime."

Di Prima had been announced as part of the line-up for the forthcoming 20th anniversary series. The BBC declined to comment on the reasons for his departure, saying only: "It is well known that the BBC has established and robust duty of care procedures, and if issues are raised we will always take them seriously and act swiftly as appropriate."

Di Prima, 30, who joined *Strictly* in 2018, said in a statement: "Respecting the BBC HR process, I understand it's best for the show that I step away.

"There are aspects of this story involving external influences that I can't discuss at this time, but I am committed to being strong for my family and friends." He added: "When the time is right, I will share my story."

For much of its history, the show's behind-the-scenes drama has been the so-called "curse" of *Strictly*, in which the chemistry of the on-screen partnerships spilled over into real life. But last October Amanda Abbington, a contestant who acted in the *Sherlock* television series, quit five weeks in and requested footage of her training sessions with Giovanni Pernice, one of the most popular professional dancers. The BBC announced in June that Pernice would not take part in this season.

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Graziano Di Prima 'deeply regrets' what happened

Dr Ruth, TV therapist who taught us all to talk openly about sex, dies at 96

George Sandeman

The sex therapist and talk show host Dr Ruth Westheimer, known for her frank speaking about a once taboo topic, has died aged 96.

She was surrounded by her family when she died at her home in New York on Friday, her friend and publicist Pierre Lehu said.

Known to the public simply as Dr Ruth, Westheimer encouraged open dialogue on the topic of sex and emphasised to her millions of followers that there was nothing to be ashamed of.

"I still hold old-fashioned values and I'm a bit of a square," she once told students at a Michigan high school in 2002. "Sex is a private art and a private matter. But still, it is a subject we must talk about."

Westheimer defended the right to abortion, suggested older people have sex after a good night's sleep and was an advocate for condom use. She also believed in monogamy.

She wrote more than 40 books, including *Sex for Dummies*, as well as being an adjunct professor at New York University.

Westheimer's German accent, giggly voice, good humour and expertise were seen as central to the success of her local radio programme *Sexually Speaking* which catapulted her to fame in the 1980s. "Tell him you're not going to initiate," she told a concerned caller in June 1982. "Tell him that Dr Westheimer said that you're not going to die if he doesn't have sex for one week." Her success on the airwaves opened new doors and in 1983 she wrote the first of her books, *Dr Ruth's Guide to Good Sex*, which was praised for demystifying sex with rationality and humour. A board game was also subsequently released.

In 1985 her eponymous television show was launched and her rise coincided with the early days of the Aids epidemic, a time when honest conversations about sex became a necessity.

"If we could bring about talking about sexual activity the way we talk about diet, the way we talk about food, without it having this kind of connotation that there's something not right about it, then we would be a step further. But we have to do it with good taste," she told the talk show host Johnny Carson in 1982.



Ruth Westheimer was known for her distinctive accent

Her normalisation of the use of words like penis and vagina on radio and TV, aided by her accent, led to her being described by The Wall Street Journal as a cross between Henry Kissinger and Minnie Mouse.

Westheimer was born in Frankfurt on June 4, 1928, as Karola Ruth Siegel. She was sent to Switzerland by her parents as a ten-year-old to escape the violence of Kristallnacht. She never saw them again and believed they were killed at Auschwitz.

At 16, she moved to Palestine and joined the Haganah, the underground movement for Israeli independence. She was trained as a sniper, although she said she never shot at anyone. Her legs were severely wounded when a bomb exploded in her dormitory, killing many of her friends. She said it was only through the work of a superb surgeon that she could walk and ski again.

Among the tributes to her were from the comedian Adam Sandler, who wrote on Twitter/X: "She always made us smile."

Kathy Hochul, the governor of New York, who appointed Westheimer the state's ambassador of loneliness, said: "She was brave, funny, candid and brilliant."

ROBERT MICHAEL/DPA/AP; SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL; BRADLEY COLLYER/PA





Fan's big walk from Big Ben

In 1966, Susan Cleverly was a 17-year-old dental nurse with a crush on Bobby Charlton. "Everyone was so ecstatic," she says as she recalls England's 4-2 victory over Germany in the World Cup final at Wembley Stadium. Now she is 75, retired – and sipping a glass of rosé in Berlin with her three grown-up children and two grandchildren. One of her sons surprised the family after shelling out £12,000 for six tickets on a resale website.

She is not alone in Berlin. The Euros final this evening is our biggest ever game on foreign soil and it shows: the England supporters who've landed in Germany at the last minute – both those with and without a golden ticket to actually get into the Olympiastadion – are almost visibly fizzing with anxious anticipation and how-did-we-get-here delight.

Tom Appleton, 29, from Manchester, has just flown in from Singapore, where he works as an energy trader, with scant sign of weariness after his 19-hour journey, which included a pit stop in Istanbul.

He booked his £1,300 flight on Friday morning and flew that same night, and coughed up a further £1,100 for his match ticket on a resale site.

"That's not too bad. One of the guys I met had paid £2,500 for his ticket," says Appleton, telling me about a British man he'd met en route who'd flown from Sydney to Singapore then onwards to see the final. Appleton's friend Adam, a Liverpool fan who lives in Texas, is due to land in the city in a few hours.

After four nerve-shattering weeks of scraping through the group stages, perfect penalties and last-gasp goals, it is the eve before Gareth Southgate's boys – Saint Jude, Saka our Saviour, Captain Kane and co – take on Spain. By hook or by crook, fans are blowing the budget – or getting serious blisters – to get themselves to Berlin. Henry Moores, 22, is walking the entire way – more than 940km – from London to Berlin. He set off from Big Ben on June 26 and his mad gamble has paid off. "Got 67km left today to make the final," Moores texts on Saturday lunchtime.

His grandfather, Terry, a retired aircraft engineer, is flying in to watch the match with him. "I've been able to buy him a ticket so that's extra sweet," says Moores, breathing heavily down the line.

Soaking up the atmosphere in the sunshine under the Brandenburg Gate there are mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, and, in the case of one family queuing in front of me in the ice-cream parlour, dutiful grandparents brought along to look after two small, sticky-fingered boys so the parents can go to the match. Prince William and Sir Keir Starmer will be watching too.

Still miles away, Kas Sharif, 30, and his two friends have got off the ferry at Calais and are driving through the French countryside, hurtling towards Dortmund. From there, they will take a three-hour train to Berlin.

The trek feels worth it. "It's that moment to etch in history – it's a story we will tell our kids or grandkids about," he says over the phone. "We were there when we won our first trophy in almost 60 years. We were almost part of the story, part of the journey."

Sharif, an accountant who lives in Dulwich, south London, but supports Middlesbrough, where he grew up, frantically sorted the travel arrangements – booking ill-timed ferries and poorly located hotels – in the final moments of Wednesday night's 2-1 semi-final against Holland. On Thursday, having monitored resale websites for hours, he stumped up £1,089 for his ticket.

Understandably, Sharif doesn't want to consider the return journey, especially if England fall at the final hurdle. "It's going to be a very, very long drive: silence, hangovers, people not talking to each other," he says. "But you can't not do something because we might lose."

For fans still without a ticket, it's a frantic scramble on resale sites, such as Viagogo and StubHub, to secure one. The stadium has a 71,000-person capacity but only 10,000 seats have been allocated to England fans, with up to 20 per cent of tickets reserved for some variety of corporate hospitality.

Someone with a guaranteed seat is Prince William, who has been busy on social media ahead of the game. On Saturday he posted: "We are so proud of you all England, just one last push to finish the job! Go out there and show the world what you're made of. We believe. W."

Another attendee in Berlin will be Sir Keir Starmer. In a letter to the England team yesterday the prime minister wrote: "You should all be proud of what you've achieved so far, and I hope you can take some strength from the millions at home kicking every ball alongside you."

He added: "You're here not because of luck, but because of your graft and hard work … So enjoy tonight. I know that up and down the country, we all will."

After decades of feverish hopes, fluffed penalties and dashed dreams, could we really experience glory again? Susan Cleverly clearly remembers our last victory on July 30, 1966. "It was my brother's wedding in Bracknell. I was a bridesmaid. We all watched it at the reception on a small television," she recalls.

"It was a Catholic wedding and went on for such a long time. The priest started doing a long speech at the end about what marriage meant. Of course all my brother, Roger, wanted to do was get to the football." In 2016, at the 50th wedding anniversary party, they showed a replay of the match on a giant screen.

Her Berkshire-based brood is still working out their pre-match game plan for Sunday. "We're not going to be drinking beers from lunchtime," says Cleverly. "We need to be in the zone." Her grandson, Billy Butler, 26, looks confused by this suggestion and also can't fathom how he'll feel if England triumph. "I've goosebumps just thinking about it," he says, ordering his first stein of the weekend.

> **He had 67km left to make it to the final**

Also pinching himself that he's made it to Berlin is Ryhan Choudhury, a 38-year-old currency trader from Luton. On Wednesday night, as soon as Ollie Watkins scored his 90th-minute goal, he sprang into action, quickly bought four tickets on a resale website and scrambled for flights. Choudhury, his two younger sisters and teenage cousin, flew in on Friday morning via Copenhagen.

"We may never get to witness England win a final again – we're probably unlikely to reach a final for a third successive time," he says, referring to the Euros final in 2021 at Wembley when England lost to Italy on penalties. "Life is about experiences. You can't really put a monetary value on reaching a final." Choudhury paid £10,259 for the four tickets and the flights cost around £500 each.

The 1996 Euros, when England went out to Germany in the semi-finals on penalties, have stuck with him. "I vividly remember every single game, every single goal," says Choudhury. "I remember the penalty shootout when Southgate missed. I was crying, and that was when I fell in love with football and the heartache." Now, he adores Southgate: "He's pragmatic, he's cerebral, he knows exactly what he's doing. I believe in Gareth."

Choudhury shares his passion for football with his father, Murad Choudhury, 66, an immigrant from Bangladesh who moved to Britain in the Eighties. He recalls working at his father's Indian restaurant in



Rebecca, 11, and Emily Williams, 15, arrived in Berlin on Friday with their parents, below. Susan Cleverly, in Germany with her family, right, remembers watching the 1966 World Cup victory on TV

How England's Stockport boys made the cut, with help from Scissor Trim

Charlotte Ivers

Every customer seems to be getting a Phil Foden haircut at Scissor Trim barbers, in Edgeley, Stockport.

The England midfielder is a local hero – "a great star of our town", says Paiwand, one of the barbers here, with pride. Foden, 24, has been getting his razor-sharp hairdo at Scissor Trim since he was a child.

The Manchester City star is known as "Ronnie" in Edgeley, to differentiate him from his father, Phil Sr, a Manchester United fan. Now when the Man City midfielder pops in for a cut, the street outside fills with autograph hunters and fans.

Foden is not the only star from around here. Kobbie Mainoo, 19, the new hope of England's midfield, grew up in Stockport. Super-sub Cole Palmer, 22, is from just down the road in Wythenshawe. "People from here love to play football" says Paiwand, an understatement.

Stockport is a former cotton mill town, which has suffered decline. It has become increasingly popular among young professionals as Manchester housing becomes more expensive and this year was The Sunday Times's best place to live in northwest England. Last year it was also named by The Times as one of the 12 best places in the UK to buy your first home.

It was also the childhood home of the new deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, who has been the MP for Ashton-under-Lyne, seven miles to the north since 2015.

However, football is its most famous export. Local children find themselves in the middle of an arms race by major clubs mining new talent. Premier League teams are permitted to recruit children under the age of 12 only from within an hour's drive of the club. Usually, if you want a homegrown world-class player, you've got to get them before that age. Here, children fall into the catchment areas of Manchester United and Manchester City, or Liverpool and Everton in nearby Merseyside: some of the biggest clubs in the world. For boys in Stockport, one or the other Manchester team tends to be the dream. Scouts flood local schools and grassroots clubs – City alone has about 50 working for them.

"The case is now that you can't afford to have a stone unturned, because if he's the next Phil Foden he's worth £100 million," says Joe Makin, academy recruitment co-ordinator for the club.

Local grassroots coaches say they've seen a significant uptake in scouting since Man City's acquisition by Sheikh Mansour of Abu Dhabi in 2008, which brought vast resources with it. The other teams are on the case, too.

"Our approach is we want to make sure we've exhausted local talent," says Nick Cox, who runs United's academy. If you're a young boy or girl in south Manchester who has set foot on a football pitch, you'd be unlucky to have never been seen by a scout.

Sometimes, the children won't even need to leave the playground. "Coaches used to visit two or three primary schools a day," Makin says. They would just "put cones down and they'd have them running around" and "be looking out for that odd one who would have something a



Cole Palmer, Phil Foden and Kobbie Mainoo at England's training camp near Blankenhain and as boys, above



All smiles for Jude Bellingham and Ivan Toney in training yesterday with the England squad; England fans in front of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate; an England supporter shows off her football skills to a Spanish fan

Essex on weekends from when he was 18 for a decade. "Every Saturday, when the night's business had died down, we'd sit down in the takeaway bit and watch *Match of the Day* together," he says. "If England win this while my dad is still alive, it will probably be the highlight of my lifetime. I could quite happily live the rest of my life at peace if England bring it home."

Emily Williams, a 15-year-old Fulham fan from Greenwich, southeast London, who flew into Germany with her parents and sister, Rebecca, 11, on Friday morning, is less sentimental and more straight-shooting. "In my eyes, Spain are the far more technical team. If you were to look at who they've got on paper, they're more likely to win on statistics," she says.

"However, football is a game of special moments. Roy Keane said it the other day. It's not always who has the best team that will win, it's who can create the best opportunities. Hopefully, that will be England." Both sisters play for Millwall ladies teams. Rebecca, who squeezed in her 11-plus maths revision on the flight over, feels the nerves when she envisions actually being in the stadium. "You just have to sing and just put your head in your hands if you don't want to see something," she advises.

Back at the Brandenburg Gate the skies are brightening after thunderous rain. All the fans have their particular memories of delight and despair. Paul Mahoney, 64, from Basingstoke, faintly remembers being six years old and living in Sydney, Australia, when England found glory in 1966. "We were 'ten pound poms'," says Mahoney, eyes peering out from under a Euro 2024 bucket hat. "All I remember is my dad staying up into the early hours listening to the game and celebrating."

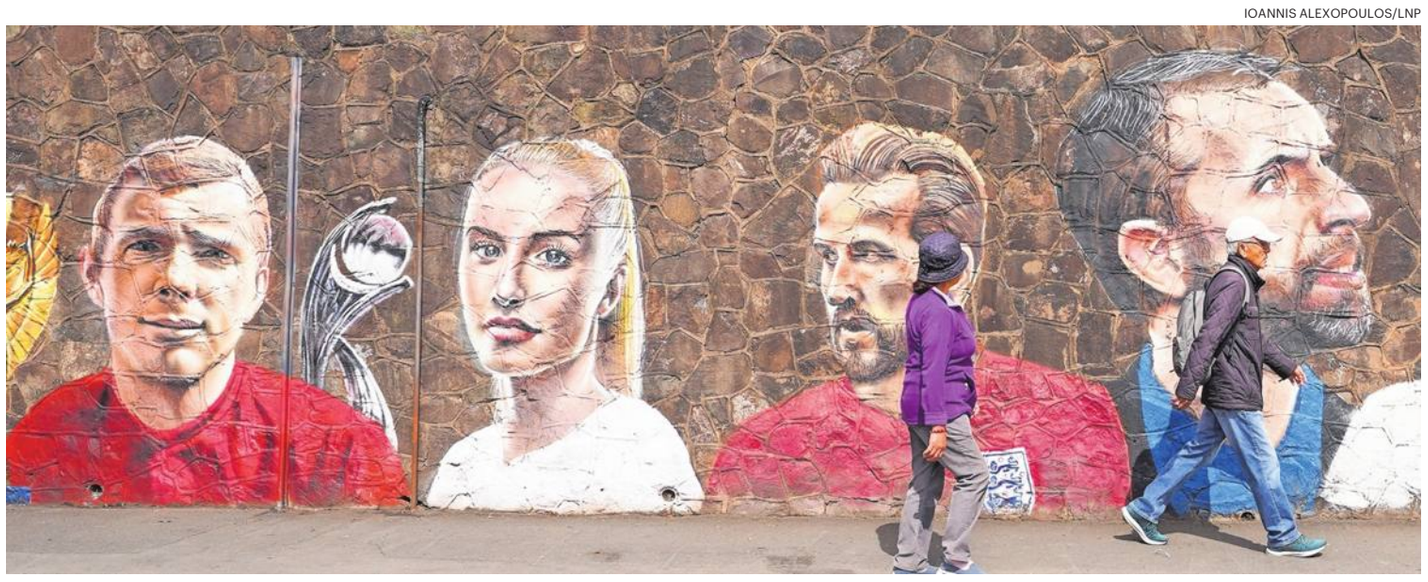
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Duncan Hamilton

My evening at Dudley town hall, watching Geoff Hurst — 'the last boy' of 1966

IOANNIS ALEXOPOULOS/LNP



On a nondescript Saturday night, less than two months before the last World Cup began in Qatar, I headed into the Black Country to reminisce about those boys of 1966 who wore strawberry-coloured shirts unsullied by sponsors' logos.

Dudley seems a most improbable spot on which to soberly reflect on what is – and what will indisputably remain, irrespective of what happens tonight in Berlin's Olympic Stadium – the English game's greatest moment. Dudley's only connection to '66, albeit very tangential, is one of those unanswerable "what if" questions. Duncan Edwards was born there and is buried there too. If Edwards had survived the Munich air disaster, he could conceivably have captained England in the tournament instead of Bobby Moore.

Dudley's small town hall, however, was hosting *An Evening with Sir Geoff Hurst*, his first gig of a cross-country speaking tour. That July afternoon of sunshine and showers at Wembley was going to be replayed as though the last goal had been thumped in only a week ago.

So it proved.

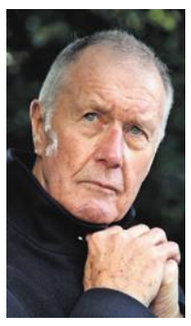
With the polish of the professional trouper, knowing exactly what is expected of him, Hurst covered everything the customer had come to hear, each of us transfixed by the past and wanting to live there again for an hour or so: his perfect hat-trick (header, right foot, left foot); the hoary, long since bloody irrelevant dispute about you-know-what; the character and the abilities of Moore, Jack and Bobby Charlton, Gordon Banks and Alan Ball; and also the inscrutable puzzle that was Alf Ramsey, who in the very second that England beat West Germany looked as though someone had whispered news of a death into his right ear.

Hurst, bless him, made the dry bones of history dance a jig. Back came '66 so vividly that, even if you originally watched the match in black and white, you saw it again in the blazing colour of your imagination.

If you sense a "but" is coming, then you'd be right.

The lights dimmed. The place slowly emptied. The parade of the match passed by. I was struck then by the overwhelming sense of melancholy and loss, impossible to shake off for a while. What came to mind was the only line that almost any of us can recite from the work of that obscure English poet and essayist, Henry Austin Dobson: "Time goes, you say? Ah, no. Alas, Time stays, we go."

Bobby Moore, the 1966 captain, smiles down from a mural in Nuneaton with Leah Williamson, Harry Kane and Gareth Southgate. Sir Geoff Hurst, below, is on a speaking tour



I'd gone to listen to Hurst because I was writing a book about the legacy of '66. And I was writing the book because, during the first lockdown, I'd sat through a replay of the final, its images jolting me now and again like unexpected electric shocks.

I can't tell you how many times I have seen England beat West Germany, either whole or in broken parts. I'd grown bored with it, blasé about it.

On this occasion – and perhaps the circumstances of the pandemic exacerbated the emotions stirred – I miraculously saw the game afresh, as though I was a complete stranger to everything about it, even the result.

Talk about the far-off world of yesterday. Of course, the TV coverage was penny plain: no clock ticked in the corner of the screen and no replay was instantly available from multiple angles. Of course, everyone wore black boots. Of course, Wembley – the *old* twin-towered stadium – wasn't disfigured by garish perimeter advertising. And, of course, no one was caught spitting, few argued the toss with the referee and, as the last minutes drained away in extra time, no one dragged the ball to the corner flag or feigned injury in obviously crude displays of gamesmanship.

Nothing, though, was as poignant as the sight of the England team gathered at the bottom of the 39 steps that separated them from the Queen, almost pearlescent, and the trophy, which wasn't much taller than a milk bottle.

Along with Ramsey, the players who won the World Cup instantly became symbolic of a decade convulsed by roaring change both social and cultural. Like the 1960s themselves, we didn't expect them to fade away. For they were supermen, too young to contemplate old age, who surely wouldn't succumb to the precariousness of life. But succumb they did …

As the camera focused on them in close-up, I stared at each face. Slow on the uptake, it had never occurred to me before how much tragedy darkly shadowed the triumph or how – and in so many ways – 1966 became shrouded in an aching sadness. The depressing facts shook me viscerally: that Moore died of cancer, aged 51; that Ball died of a heart attack at 61; and that Ramsey, both the Charltons, Nobby Stiles, Ray Wilson and Martin Peters developed dementia. Nor did the misery stop there. In the early 1970s, his goalkeeping peak unrealised, Banks lost an eye in a car crash. Not long afterwards, George Cohen was diagnosed with cancer.

When Hurst spoke in Dudley, just three of the '66 side were still alive. Only he was able to appear in public. Now, after the deaths of Cohen and Bobby Charlton, he sadly describes himself as the "last boy" of '66. I remember that Hurst's demeanour and his expressions suggested he still saw all his friends as boys too, shining in their youth.

Gazing around the town hall, thinking that all things eventually must pass, I wondered how much longer the bond with 1966 can endure. It will depend on whether the current generation regard it as relevant; most of them, after all, only want to trace football's past as far back as the beginning of the Premier League. The audience in Dudley was predominately male and of a certain vintage – pensioners who'd been teenagers or in their early to mid-twenties when the World Cup was won.

I dearly hope England overcome Spain, but I don't want any victory to eclipse and diminish the achievement of '66, which needs to survive as a platinum memory because it reminds us that once the game wasn't always about money.

Ramsey's players collected a mere £1,000 apiece for becoming champions (today's equivalent would be £19,400, plus a handful of silver). After talking to one of the stallholders on Olympic Way at Wembley, who bragged about the number of T-shirts he'd sold during the competition, Banks realised that flogging souvenirs of the World Cup had been a lot more profitable than actually lifting it. That's why ten 1966 winners' medals, as well as shirts and other mementos, were subsequently sold privately or at auction houses.

If England succeed tonight, the purse will be bigger than a thousand rollover lotteries – even before you add in the associated financial rewards to follow. I don't begrudge any player those magnificent wads of cash; it's merely the going rate for the job these days.

If nothing else, it also ensures that half a century from now Jude Bellingham won't be treading the boards of a provincial town hall on a Saturday night.

He made the dry bones of history dance a jig. You saw the game in the blazing colour of your imagination

Duncan Hamilton's book Answered Prayers, England and the 1966 World Cup is published by Riverrun

Starboy Saka can answer our prayers

Tomiwa Owolade

This is a tale of two penalties. The first took place at Wembley Stadium in July 2021. England were playing Italy in the final of Euro 2020, and in the decisive shootout, Bukayo Saka, the Arsenal winger – then just 19 – had his penalty saved. England lost. The young forward was devastated.

Three years later Saka, now one of the best players in the Premier League, having rescued England from defeat to Switzerland with a gorgeous curling shot, stepped up to take another penalty. This time, he dispatched it coolly. Demons banished.

Saka's story is a radiant one. He is always smiling. He smiles after he scores a goal. He smiles when he is interviewed. He was smiling after being substituted in England's semi-final match against the Netherlands. He was smiling in a wonderful picture of him riding an inflatable unicorn in a swimming pool with the England squad in 2021. "Football is happiness for me," he said in a 2022 interview. And football is happiness for those that watch him.

Arsenal fans call Saka "starboy"; he is our shining prince. He is impressive off the pitch too. He went to Greenford High School in the London borough of Ealing where he was a disciplined and hard-working pupil. His GCSE results were excellent: 4 A*s and 3 As.

In the year he was born, 2001, the UK census found that 0.8 per cent of England and Wales's population came from a black African background. Twenty years later that proportion has tripled to 2.5 per cent. Saka is part of the rising black African population in Britain.

This group is reflected in many aspects of popular culture and society. It is in music: Stormzy (Ghanaian heritage), Little Simz and Dave (both Nigerian heritage). It is in television: Michaela Coel, who starred in the much lauded 2020 BBC drama *I May Destroy You*, comes from a Ghanaian family in east London; Rapman (real name: Andrew Onwubolu) whose superhero drama *Supacell* is the No 1 show on Netflix, is from a Nigerian family.

Saka is not the only member of the England team from a similar background. Crystal Palace's Marc Guéhi (born in Ivory Coast) is at centre back, while Manchester United's Kobbie Mainoo (whose parents come from Ghana) has shone in midfield.

A crucial aspect of Saka's identity is his evangelical Christian faith. He reads the Bible every night. When England play Spain, one of their leading players will be someone shaped by the music and religiosity of his background. Saka is at ease with himself. His redemption story since 2021 has been an utterly joyful one. Long may it continue.



Bukayo Saka's faith has shaped his success

Phil Foden is known there as Ronnie

bit different". This is how Foden was discovered, aged four, by City.

Makin also took the opportunity to introduce him to the Reddish Vulcans, a local junior football club he runs. By the time the boy was seven, as they watched Foden slot in another goal, Makin remembers hearing a parent mutter: "You'd pay to watch this, wouldn't you?"

Today, Foden earns £11.7 million a year. Mainoo, a relative newcomer, earns less than a tenth of that. But his salary is set to triple as he has now made ten senior appearances. He too was spotted at a young age, by both City and United. At nine – the age when boys can be signed exclusively for a team's academy – he committed to United.

From there, the clubs took over the boys' lives. City enrolled Foden at St Bede's College, a local private school, and United sent Mainoo to Ashton on Mersey, a comprehensive.

"We were literally with him on his first day of school and every day right throughout, and GCSEs and school proms and all of that." says United's Cox, recalling a small boy in an oversized, ill-fitting maroon blazer. "That school has seen many footballers walk the corridors" – including Marcus Rashford, Jesse Lingard and Scott McTominay.

Many of the boys find themselves hosted by local families – former teachers or social workers who have experience looking after young people.

"So that's kind of a Manchester United-built community" Cox says. We can perhaps put that more broadly: Stockport is a football-built community.

On the streets around the house where Foden grew up, in an unassuming end-of-terrace, every other house seems to have England flags up outside. "It's a thriving football area at the moment" says Richard Hubbard, treasurer of Cheadle and Gatley JFC, Mainoo's youth club.

Mainoo lives just down the road in Sale, with his father Felix, in a three-bed semi-detached. But for the Audi and Mercedes on the driveway, it looks like any other middle-class suburban home. Until recently, neighbours were more likely to have heard of his older brother Jordan Mainoo-Hames, who was a contestant on *Love Island*.

The midfielder is from a "really good secure family environment", Hubbard says, something he shares with Foden. To mark his 19th birthday this year, Mainoo got a tattoo of his mother, Abena, on his arm.

Foden has a £2.8 million house in Prestbury, an exclusive part of Cheshire, but often returns to Stockport to get his hair cut and visit his favourite Indian takeaway, the Bombay Castle. His son Ronnie, four, the oldest of his three children with girlfriend Rebecca Cooke, is also a rising football star. Naturally, he gets his hair cut at Scissor Trim.

Palmer – also a graduate of Man City's academy – plays for Chelsea now, but the locals claim him as their own.

At England's base camp near Blankenhain, the three spend a lot of time together. For those who raised them, it's been a local triumph.

"It's a huge monumental effort from a number of passionate youth developers over many many years," says United's Cox.

Or, as the City fans put it in their chant: "Phil Foden, he's one of our own."

NEWS

As migrants grabbed at each other the weakest were pulled under

Survivors of the latest Channel sinking reveal a desperate fight for their lives, but some say they will still try to cross again

Peter Conradi Boulogne-sur-Mer

Somali migrants who survived a shipwreck in the Channel on Friday when four people died have described the chaos and panic as those on board the overloaded vessel fought the elements, and each other, to survive.

Few of the roughly 60 people squeezed on to the flimsy dinghy, barely 10.5m (35ft) long, were able to swim. There was just one lifejacket between them and an inner tube.

The vessel began to sink in poor weather in the early hours of the morning, apparently after one of its air chambers burst. Some of those on board, overwhelmingly young men, grabbed at each other, pulling down and injuring some of the weakest in their path.

"For three hours I did not know if I would live or I would die," said Nimco Mohamed, 19, one of the few women on the dinghy. "I went under the water three times, and my stomach was full of sea water. Afterwards I was vomiting." Strangely calm, she added: "I can't believe I am still alive."

The four who drowned were among more than 20 migrants to have died crossing the Channel so far this year, in a bleak reminder of how difficult it will be for Sir Keir Starmer's new government to stop the small boats. More than 13,000 people are believed to have made the crossing since January.

Mohamed was one of seven survivors, all Somalis, whom I met on Saturday afternoon outside a Formule 1 hotel in a shopping centre on the edge of Boulogne. French authorities put them up there for the night. Among the four who drowned was Mohamed's friend, Adukali, 25. "He saved me, but then when he went back to save someone else, people all pulled him down," she said.

Another survivor, Ibrahim, a recent university graduate from Mogadishu and one of the few who could swim, described how those unable to do so struggled to hold on to anything or anyone they could, almost pushing him below the water.

The carnage was witnessed by David Malfoy, a fisherman who picked up 14 of the migrants on his vessel, Caprice des Temps 2. About 49 more were taken ashore aboard the Minck, a French naval ship also involved in the rescue.

Malfoy, a former soldier who has been working the waters off Boulogne for three decades, was called to the scene by authorities at about 4.30am. He and his crew of three were about to return to Boulogne with the cargo of lobsters and crabs they had caught since setting out at 10 o'clock the previous evening. Training the ship's powerful searchlights on to the sea, he was shocked by what he saw.

"It was chaos," he said, speaking in his home in nearby Audinghen, his wife Audrey at his side. "When we arrived, the boat had almost sunk and they were all in the water. We threw into the water everything we had in the way of lifejackets, seven or eight of them, and buoys. The 60 or so of them had just one lifejacket and a sort of inner tube between them. We had to haul them up with our arms and lift them into the boat. We pulled out the lightest ones first. It was really hard to choose between them. We were telling them not to panic, but it was difficult when they didn't speak French."

Mohamed, shivering and at risk of hypothermia, was the first survivor that Malfoy plucked out of the water. He wrapped her in his coat and gave her chocolate and coffee. "The men were very good," she said. "They saved my life." She said the smugglers originally promised them they would make the crossing late on Tuesday night. They were all living in an informal camp near Calais, 25 miles up the coast, but were told to make their way to a point near Boulogne, where they set off. The Channel is wider at that point, there are said to be fewer police controls.

On this occasion, the police appeared to have been watching and the smugglers decided to add them to another group due to cross two days later, which meant the boat was even more dangerously overloaded than others.

The migrants' stories were corroborated by Dany Patoux, of Osmose 62, a charity based in Boulogne. She spent much of the day with some of them. Several were suffering from serious sprains as a result of the struggle on the boat and had difficulty walking and were too traumatised to talk.

Patoux said she and fellow activists had to battle with authorities to obtain medical assistance and accommodation for those rescued. The main preoccupation of police was to try to work out who the people traffickers were.

"It's the same pyramid as with the drug trade," Patoux said, noting that even those steering the boats were often not traffickers as such but refugees who pilot them in return for a subsidised passage.

"It makes me laugh when they say they are installing cameras everywhere to catch the people smugglers," she said. "They're sitting behind their computers in countries far away."

The seven I spoke to told me they came from different parts of Somalia and had left their homeland at various times over the past few years. Most appeared to have been escaping civil war and grinding poverty. Mohamed, who set off five years ago when she was 14, said she left after her brother and father were killed by terrorists and her elder sister kidnapped. She said she had applied for asylum in Belgium and been rejected and knew that therefore she could not apply again within the European Union. But Mohamed was optimistic that she would be able to stay in Britain. Others had yet to make an asylum request.

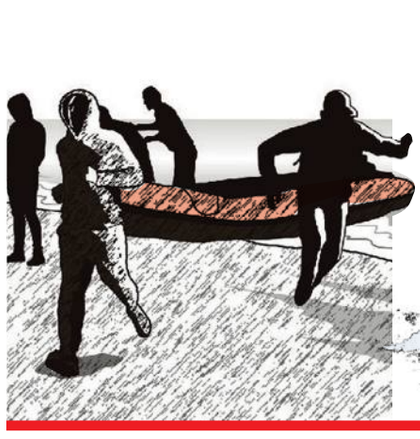
They all said they had paid the smugglers varying amounts of money. One, Ali Abdulai, said he had paid €2,400. Asked why they wanted to come to Britain, they cited the English language and the expectation that they would be fed and housed.

To my surprise, Mohamed said they were aware of the change of government in Britain and had followed the progress of the election on their phones.

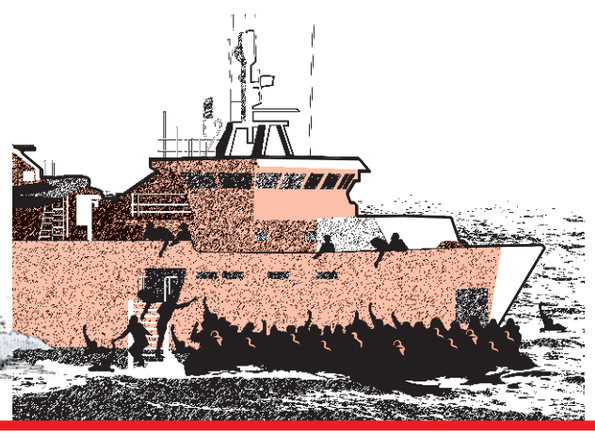
They were pleased that the new Labour administration had abandoned plans to send people to Rwanda. "We didn't want to come all this way and be sent back to Africa," another chipped in.

After we finished talking, they all headed for Boulogne railway station to board a train back along the coast to rejoin fellow Somalians living in the informal camp near the town.

Would they attempt the crossing again, I wondered. Mohamed was alone in saying she would. The others said they had been too traumatised by the experience and wanted to find another way to reach Britain. "Do you know anyone who can help me get across?" one of the men asked.









1 Smugglers originally promised the migrants that they would make the crossing late on Tuesday night close to Boulogne, but this was aborted because police were watching

2 60 or so people squeezed onto the flimsy dinghy, barely 35ft long. The vessel began to sink in poor weather and they were forced into the water

13,000 people are believed to have made the crossing since January

3 A fishermen and French naval ship were involved with the rescue. Lifejackets and buoys were thrown and the passengers were hauled into the boat

4 Four of them drowned. The others were taken to Boulogne and put up in a hotel by the French authorities

> **The 60 of them had just one lifejacket and a sort of inner tube between them**



David Malfoy and his crew rescued 14 migrants in their fishing boat, hauling them aboard by hand. It was so hard to choose who to save first, he said

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I snared the Holly Willoughby kidnap plotter. He's the worst of the worst

A US undercover officer reveals how he foiled Gavin Plumb's 'sadistic' attempt to abduct the TV presenter after befriending him online

Dipesh Gadher
Home Affairs Correspondent

An undercover police officer in the US who foiled a plot to kidnap, rape and murder Holly Willoughby has described the television presenter's would-be attacker as "the worst of the worst".

After spending less than 48 hours communicating with the Essex-based security guard in a chatroom group called Abduct Lovers, the detective from Minnesota was convinced that Gavin Plumb "fully intended to carry out his plans".

The detective, who posed as a potential participant in the plot using the alias David Nelson, said he initially had no idea who Willoughby was and had to google her to discover her popularity in the UK. He said he would have alerted police in Britain regardless of the identity of Plumb's intended victim after the obsessed predator sent him images of a "restraint kit" and bottles of chloroform.

"I treat each victim the same in every investigation," the detective said. "My course of action would be no different."

Details of Plumb's plans for Willoughby, 43, were so sadistic and degrading that Nelson, who wants to remain anonymous, has been offered counselling by his police force. Speaking to the media for the first time since the plot was foiled, the detective said he had to "compartmentalise" his undercover work from his family life. "I find it helps to remind myself that this is a job and my purpose [is] to go out to find the worst of the worst," he said.

On Friday, Plumb, 37, of Harlow, Essex, was sentenced to life in prison, with a minimum sentence of 16 years, after being found guilty of soliciting murder and incitement to kidnap and rape at Chelmsford crown court.



Holly Willoughby waived her anonymity for the trial of Gavin Plumb, below

Willoughby, who has three children, aged 9, 13 and 15, has waived her right to anonymity in relation to the rape offence. The judge, Mr Justice Edward Murray, said Plumb posed a "serious risk to women", pointing out that he had convictions for the attempted kidnap and false imprisonment of four other victims dating back to 2006.

Murray said Plumb's "depraved and vile" plot had had "life-changing consequences" for Willoughby. The presenter was so distressed after she was told last autumn about Plumb's intentions – including a threat to harm her children – that she stepped down as co-host of ITV's *This Morning* programme and reportedly refused to leave her home in southwest London for several weeks.

Willoughby did not attend Plumb's trial, but following his conviction the presenter said that she would "forever be grateful to the undercover police officer who understood the imminent threat" she faced.

Her saviour, it turns out, worked more than 4,000 miles from Britain at the Owatonna police department in midwest America. The force, 66 miles south of St Paul, the state capital of Minnesota, and Minneapolis, its biggest city, serves 27,000 residents and employs just 36 law enforcement officers.

Nelson, who has more than ten years of policing experience, specialises in infiltrating online chat rooms to help track down child sex traffickers and criminals seeking to hire others for rape and murder plots.

On October 3 last year, Nelson was monitoring activity in a public group called Abduct Lovers on the Kik messaging app as Plumb was trying to recruit a "crew" to help him target Willoughby. Users of the group, which features a profile picture of a distressed blonde woman with a male hand over her mouth, are said by police to be interested in kidnap, sexual violence and torture.

DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES



Using the online name BigBear, Plumb posted several images of Willoughby and announced: "I have a shitload of info on her; I know when she does and don't [sic] have security and that she doesn't have CCTV at home; what time she gets up in the morning." Seeking to draw more out of Plumb, Nelson, who said he was based in New York, replied: "Nice."

Over the next 30 hours, the two men exchanged 300 messages, even discussing the details of transatlantic flights and possible dates for an abduction attempt.

Jurors at Plumb's trial were told that he described his plan as a night-time "home invasion" in which he and his accomplices would knock out Willoughby and her husband, Dan Baldwin, 49, with chloroform, before driving the presenter to a remote site to be "repeatedly raped".

He would then "slit her throat, clear her out and dispose of [the body]," Chelmsford crown court was told.

Plumb sent Nelson footage of a "restraint kit" laid out at his home, which included handcuffs, ankle shackles, a ball gag, rope and cable ties. He later sent him an image of two bottles of chloroform.

Nelson, who admits to having the "gift of the gab", said he was so concerned that by the following day, October 4, he had alerted the FBI's field office in Minneapolis, who, in turn, contacted Scotland Yard and Essex police. Plumb, a father of two, was arrested at his home in Harlow at 9.45pm. When an officer told him that he was being detained on suspicion of plotting to kidnap Willoughby, Plumb replied: "I'm not gonna lie, she is a fantasy of mine." Police found around 10,000 images of Willoughby on Plumb's phone, including faked nude photos of her in pornographic poses.

Jeff Mundale, chief of the Owatonna police department, praised Nelson's "tenacity" in pursuing Plumb. "Our detective was confident that this offender fully intended to carry out his plans," he said. "I do not recall a single celebrity targeted for such a calculated and heinous crime in my 29-year career."

Describing his commitment to catching criminals, Nelson said: "I miss a lot of 'firsts' and time with family. I don't seek out these cases for overtime or for credit. In order to do this job, there needs to be some calling or motivation in your life."

Listen to our podcast The Holly Willoughby Trial and a Toxic Online Subculture on The Story from tomorrow

Only the rich will be able to learn an instrument, fears Proms composer

Dominic Hauschild

The composer Errollyn Wallen said she feels "abject despair" that only children whose parents can afford to pay for music lessons will be able to play a classical instrument in the future.

Wallen, 66, who composed the music for Elizabeth II's golden and diamond jubilees, said the lack of free music teaching at state schools – from which she benefited as a child – will have devastating consequences.

She told today's *Desert Island Discs* on BBC Radio 4: "The only reason I can sit here and talk to you is that at school we had free music lessons. We had a fantastic music teacher who taught us all in Tottenham [north London], [at] nine years old, to read and write music and to love orchestral music. There wasn't this hierarchy. My absolute abject despair is that soon it will only be people with money who will be playing classical music."

Fewer than 5 per cent of undergraduates at the Royal Academy of Music come from a working-class background, according to official figures.

The data highlights the lack of music at many state schools, and the high cost of private music lessons. There is no obligation for a state school to hire a music teacher, and many do not.

At school, Wallen learned to play the piano. A weekly piano lesson at the average cost of £36 an hour adds up to about £1,900 a year, according to the Independent Society of Musicians.

"I don't know how we have got to this point where it's perceived as this elite thing just for some people," said Wallen, who studied music at Goldsmiths, University of London, King's College London and Cambridge University. "It's this culture we've got to create of not being suspicious of things that are really good for us."

In 2020, Wallen, the first black woman to receive the prestigious Ivor Novello award for classical music, was criticised for her reimagining of Sir Hubert Parry's iconic 1916 hymn *Jerusalem* for the Last Night of the Proms.

Commissioned by the BBC to refresh the classic, she chose to retain the original William Blake lyrics but added one line: "All the people of the Commonwealth of nations sing with you."

The composer dedicated the work to the "Windrush generation" at the Royal Albert Hall concert, drawing ire from social media users.

Wallen told *Desert Island Discs* that she was "shocked" by the tirade against her. "There was nothing controversial, I didn't think, about what I was doing. But it seemed to cause a bit of fury.

"I spent the next day going through deleting hundreds and hundreds of messages, very abusive, thinking well, actually, when was the last time somebody really talked about a new piece of music in the national press? So, I'll take it."



Errollyn Wallen had free music lessons at a state school in north London but says pupils now miss out on that opportunity

Crossbow tragedy father: Evil swept through our lives

Glen Keogh

A BBC racing commentator whose wife and two daughters were killed in a crossbow attack has said the "devastation we are experiencing cannot be put into words".

In his first public comments since their deaths on Tuesday, John Hunt, a commentator for BBC Radio 5 Live, thanked wellwishers for their messages about his wife, Carol, 61, and daughters Hannah, 28, and Louise, 25 and described the attacks as a "horrid evil that's swept through our lives".

Their bodies were discovered at the family home in Bushey, Hertfordshire.

Kyle Clifford, 26, from Enfield, north London, has been arrested on suspicion of three counts of murder. He was found with a wound to his chest in a cemetery close to his home on Wednesday and remains in a London hospital under police guard.

In a statement, Hunt, alongside his third daughter, Amy, said: "The devastation that we are experiencing cannot be put into words.

"We would like to thank people for their kind messages and for the support we have received in recent days. These have provided great comfort to us for which we are very grateful ... we need time and space to come to terms with what has happened and start the grieving process."

In a separate statement read to Sky Sports Racing viewers by his colleague Matt Chapman, Hunt paid tribute to Amy as "magnificently inspirational". He said: "Notwithstanding the horrid evil that's swept through our lives, wreaking devastation on an unimaginable scale, the counter to that has been the breathtaking messages of support, some of which are still to be read.

"Amy, my eldest daughter, has been magnificently inspirational with her control and support for me, which I am trying, trying so hard, to replicate. Every message has felt so important, the same as a reassuring hug.

"We know people are worried about us, we will get through this."

On Thursday, police conducting inquiries said a crossbow had been found.

Clifford previously served for a short time in the army, leaving in 2022. He had also worked as a security guard.

Detective Superintendent Rob Hall, from the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire major crime unit, said: "Our thoughts remain with the victims' family at this tragic time.

"The investigation is moving at pace and as a result, we have now arrested a man. Inquiries are continuing at this time."

At a vigil at St James' Church in Bushey on Thursday, friends of the Hunt family paid tributes.

Lea Holloway, 60, a childhood friend of Carol Hunt, described her as a "beautiful person" and added: "They were a lovely family and [the daughters] were lovely girls ... It's the thing of nightmares."

Colleagues of Hannah, a beautician at the Anti-Ageing Clinic in Radlett, Hertfordshire, said she was "a fantastic therapist and clients loved her". Louise ran a dog grooming salon close to the family home.

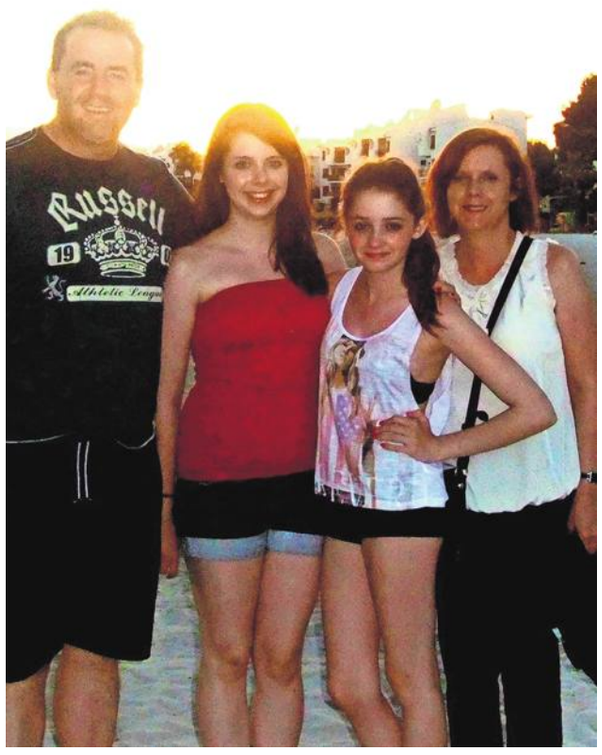
A minute's silence was held on ladies' day at Newmarket racecourse in Suffolk on Thursday, while jockeys wore black armbands in tribute to those killed.

The British Horseracing Authority said: "The thoughts of everyone at the BHA are with John Hunt, his family and friends at this shocking and tragic time."

Hunt, a former police officer, moved into broadcasting only after Carol spotted an advertisement in the Harrow Observer for a trainee with Ladbrokes.

He moved to 5 Live in 2004 to cover horse racing but has also covered events including summer and winter Olympics.

ENTERPRISE NEWS AND PICTURES





Carol Hunt and her daughters Hannah, left, and Louise were murdered at the family home last week. Left, Carol with husband John

What we are experiencing cannot be put into words

This violence must end, News Review, page 22



SO

GOOD

WE CAN ALMOST TASTE IT

COME ON, ENGLAND!

WAITROSE

& PARTNERS

POLITICS

ILLUSTRATION: JAMES COWEN



The great blame game

Labour are pointing fingers at the Tories over chaos in jails and the NHS. Ministers are now being told to hunt down more evidence of failures



Caroline Wheeler
Political Editor

Referring to the infamous "no money" note left by the last Labour government, Darren Jones, the new Treasury minister, joked that the state of the country's finances was now so bad the Conservatives "can't afford the notepaper".

Although his comments were intended to be light-hearted, the message that Labour will push to the public is serious: Britain is broken, not just in terms of the public finances but also in how the government is functioning.

The 2010 note from Liam Byrne, who had been chief secretary to the Treasury was used by the Tories – and George Osborne, the chancellor, in particular – to suggest that Labour could not be trusted with public finances.

Although no physical note has been left this time, Sir Keir Starmer and his cabinet will use high-profile interventions to expose the "mountain of mess" left by the last government and pin the blame firmly on the Conservatives.

Such is Labour's desire to make the Tories synonymous with economic turmoil and chaos, a number of ministers have even included the two-year anniversary of Liz Truss coming to power in September 2022 as part of their planned announcements. The party expects to exploit Truss to redouble its message about how it is being forced to clear up the problems created by her and Kwasi Kwarteng, her chancellor.

To that end, Starmer will use his first King's Speech this week to introduce a new fiscal responsibility bill, making it a legal requirement for the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to provide forecasts to accompany budgets.

This weekend, Pat McFadden, the new chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, has written to cabinet colleagues asking for them to "bring out the dead" and give more details about every department's inheritance so he can obtain a "more accurate picture of the state of affairs".

Referencing the "shocking" state of the prisons, the cabinet minister has asked his colleagues to provide details of any other unexploded bombs that they have found since entering their new departments.

Specifically he has asked them to look at projects which are delayed or egregiously over budget. He has also suggested that they should scrutinise schemes which offer low value for money, or are accompanied by a high risk of fraud, as well as those projects announced by the previous government without long-term funding. Every cabinet minister has been asked to respond by Friday.

One serious concern for Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, will be how much the OBR reckons Britain's economy will grow, and that will depend on whether she can convince the budget watchdog that her plans will work.

"There's two questions," said James Smith, economist at ING, the Dutch bank, "whether Labour can actually boost growth and whether they can convince the OBR to revise up its growth forecast. The problem is that the growth forecasts the OBR has are already quite optimistic, most economists reckon 1.5 per cent is a medium growth rate".

> **Tories left a mess to clear up**

The OBR is forecasting growth next year of 1.9 per cent, 2 per cent in 2026, 1.8 per cent in 2027 and 1.7 per cent in 2028.

Reeves's fear might be that the OBR revises down these forecasts or finds limited scope to revise them upwards. Critics of Labour's manifesto have argued that much of it was underpinned by assumptions of growth. The fear expressed by the Tories is that if the growth does not arrive, Reeves will face questions on where to raise cash.

In an article for The Guardian yesterday, Starmer warmed to the "broken theme" arguing that "fixing the fundamentals won't be easy" as he let rip at the Conservatives. The prime minister wrote: "Like a Downing Street party, they've left a mountain of mess for this government to clean up. Arrogant, reckless and irresponsible to the very end, they'll go down in history as the government that fiddled while the country burned."

Reeves said something similar in her first speech at the Treasury on Monday. "I have repeatedly warned that whoever won the general election would inherit the worst set of circumstances since the Second World War. What I have seen in the past 72 hours has only confirmed that," she said.

Wes Streeting, the health secretary, has commissioned Lord Darzi of Denham the former health minister and surgeon, to review the performance of the health service. "The NHS has been wrecked," he said. Across Whitehall departments are looking for past failures. The Department of Transport has identified "lots of unexploded bombs", including unfunded infrastructure projects and legally binding targets that we are set to miss.

In the Home Office, it has been discovered that the number of asylum hotels is going up and more asylum accommodation is being used. "Eye-watering" payments for staff time, hotels and enforcement connected to the Rwanda scheme have been identified in addition to the £370 million paid for the scrapped programme.

Streeting's health officials think that progress tackling the NHS waiting numbers had "stagnated" and "long waits remain endemic in the NHS".

Experts from the Nuffield Trust health think tank point out that Labour has inherited a waiting list for planned hospital treatment of about 7.5 million in England, a 66 per cent increase since the start of the pandemic. However, there are also concerns about "many of the timetables for projects and programmes" announced by the previous government, which one senior government source described as "works of fiction", including plans to build 40 new hospitals.

Regulatory failures have been identified at the Care Quality Commission watchdog, which one insider said were "truly shocking". Streeting has been surprised to learn that the previous health secretary had not met the leaders of striking junior doctors since March. Angela Rayner, the deputy prime minister, plans to publicise the state of council finances. Of particular concern is the high-value loans that local authorities have been forced to take out from the Public Works Loan Board.

Debt Management Office data shows that in 2023, the year after Liz Truss' mini-budget disaster, 29 fifty-year loans were taken out by councils across the UK. These loans have been made more expensive by rising interest rates which have increased markedly since 2021.

In the year to March 2024, the number of new homes started by builders in England was an estimated 134,780, a 22 per cent fall on last year. Housing completions in England were estimated at 153,800, a 12 per cent annual fall. Planning applications have also fallen.

Major headaches for Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, include university and school funding and the state of school buildings after the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (Raac) scandal last summer.

There are about 4,000 schools across the estate which have gone beyond their "design life". Some have been built with other kinds of dangerous concrete, while the Raac problems continue in certain schools, including some where asbestos has been found. A "number of universities" also face "challenging funding issues", according to education department insiders. Speaking in May, John Rushforth, executive secretary of the Committee of University Chairs, said university bankruptcy was a possibility.

Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, has commissioned officials to report on levels of economic inactivity, and the costs to individuals and taxpayers. She had discovered that in some areas of Yorkshire one in four adults are economically inactive and overall a record 2.8 million people are out of work due to long-term sickness. Over the next parliament, the government is expected to spend £27 billion more on sickness and disability benefits. The new government faces a challenge to reduce that figure.

Starmer described the state of British prisons as "shocking". He said: "The situation is worse than I thought it was. I'm pretty shocked that it's been allowed to get into that situation."

Sources said Alex Chalk, the former justice secretary, first advocated releasing prisoners early in August 2023, under a scheme known as standard determinate sentence 45, which would entail releasing prisoners at the 45 per cent mark of their sentence, as opposed to the 40 per cent mark scheme announced by Shabana Mahmood, the new justice secretary, on Friday.

He did so after inheriting a prison system that at times had reached 99 per cent capacity. However, a department insider said Chalk's arguments had been rejected by No 10 due to fears that the move would face a fierce backlash from right-wing Tory MPs. At the time Suella Braverman, who was home secretary, was arguing for the opposite: more people to go to prison.

Chalk and his officials eventually agreed a compromise – the end of custody supervised licence, releasing prisoners 70 days early – with No 10 but it was known when this was announced that it was only a short-term option.

Sources claim that during the election Britain came to within a few hundred places of the entire prison estate being full. Mahmood acknowledged in a speech on Friday the risk she was taking in releasing prisoners early after completing 40 percent of their sentence. High-risk offenders are not being released but ministers will know that any serious crimes committed by someone on early release will have serious political consequences.

Mahmood will soon publish a ten-year capacity strategy to create more prison places, but it won't be a quick fix.

And just as Osborne blamed Gordon Brown for 'failing to fix the roof while the sun was shining'' and ''maxing out the credit card'', the Labour narrative 14 years on will not be markedly different. Be prepared to hear it loud and clear for months to come.

> **Can Labour boost growth?**

Editorial, page 22,
Robert Colvile, page 24

Radicals v incrementalists: Labour's new dividing line over Europe

Tim Shipman
Chief Political Commentator

Sir Keir Starmer's first week as prime minister provided several "pinch yourself" moments. As he was whisked from one meeting to another at the Nato summit he told aides: "This time last week I was in a B&B in Carmarthen, now I'm in a prime ministerial motorcade driving down the streets of Washington DC."

His team were pinching themselves too when the prime minister sat down with President Biden in the Oval Office for a "pool spray" – the American term for the photo opportunity at the beginning of a meeting. This is usually an occasion for nodding and pleasantries, but Biden went further: "I kind of see you guys as the knot tying the transatlantic alliance together, the closer you are with Europe."

The White House usually refuses bilateral meetings during summits but it helped that Biden was keen to show he was on top of things.

"We were very lucky that the timing of the election meant that we had got the Nato summit, which gave us the opportunity to do at pace what would often take months for an incoming prime minister to do," a close ally of Starmer said. The new PM will try to make some more of his own luck this week when he chairs a summit of 45 leaders in the European Political Community (EPC) on Thursday at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.

The agenda covers European security and migration but behind the scenes it will also be an opportunity for the prime minister to explore closer trading and security links with Brussels. He will be accompanied there, as he was in the US, by Nick Thomas-Symonds, the Cabinet Office minister in charge of EU negotiations.

"NTS", as he has already been dubbed in Whitehall, has set out three main "pillars" of discussion: security, law and order and the economy. Officials say minor pillars also include migration and energy policy.

Starmer saw Olaf Scholz and President Macron in Washington and got a warm welcome. The German chancellor greeted him with a huge smile and said: "I'm absolutely delighted to see you," before they tucked into croissants for breakfast.

Labour does not have a fixed view about what to ask for from the EU, or what might be negotiable. The first conversations this week will focus on a new European security pact, which both sides want. For this, David Lammy, the foreign secretary, will be the point man. Optimists believe a new security deal could be finalised in the first six months of 2025 when Poland, a key ally, holds the rotating presidency of the EU.

In addition to discussions on military security and procurement issues, a source said: "Lammy wants it to be very broad-based and cover energy, migration, the regulation of AI and climate change."

There are several potential problems for Starmer's team to iron out. The first is that some of these areas encroach on the EU single market, which the UK is no longer part of – and Starmer has vowed not to rejoin. The second is that a defence deal with the EU could cut across the benefits of the Aukus pact with the US and Australia.

"If we can make more artillery shells more efficiently with the EU, that's great," a former government aide said. "But when it comes to high-tech stuff, the Americans and Australians are better at that than the Europeans and you don't want it to damage what we gain from Aukus."



Sir Keir Starmer and Joe Biden in Washington, where the US president was keen to show that he was on top of things

There is also a risk that the French will try to tie the UK into a European security establishment without letting British companies benefit from pan-European defence procurement via the European Defence Fund and the European Peace Facility.

One advantage of a security deal would be that it would provide a permanent forum where the UK can interact with the EU on foreign policy. "We'd be able to take part in structured chit-chat on a regular basis," said Charles Grant of the Centre for European Reform.

He sees Britain's position as an intelligence powerhouse as a key piece of leverage. "About half of the relevant intelligence that allowed the EU to delineate certain individuals in Russia as sanctionable came from the Brits," he said. "Informally that has continued post-Brexit, but they really miss us on the sanctions policy."

A permanent talking shop is seen as helpful because the UK has far less insight about EU laws coming down the tracks since leaving the EU.

Starmer's priority will be to change the mood in Anglo-EU relations. "We want to move on not just from the debate around Brexit, but more broadly from the sense that Britain turned in on itself, to show that Britain is back and is engaged on the world stage and is open for business, for investment," an aide said.

> **This time last week I was staying in a B&B in Wales**

Soon, however, the government will need to formulate concrete proposals if it wants to make changes to the Trade and Commerce Agreement (TCA), the trade deal signed by Boris Johnson in 2020, which comes up for review next year.

Labour's big ask will be for a veterinary agreement, and a deal whereby Britain would align with EU rules on perishable goods to remove some friction at the border. The former foreign secretary, Lord Cameron, authorised Mark Davies, the civil servant who conducted the Windsor framework negotiations, to begin talks with the EU – work that Thomas-Symonds will now take up.

A former Downing Street aide said: "Don't think that just because we can agree that we want something, they will give it to us."

The big question is: how far will Starmer go in terms of aligning with EU rules to gain market access and thus boost economic growth? The predominant school of thought in the cabinet seems to be that of the "incrementalists", of whom the chancellor Rachel Reeves is the most prominent. They believe in making some positive tweaks to EU trading relations but without creating a divisive row about Brexit.

The "radicals" believe that a bigger, bolder reset is needed. Lammy is said to sympathise with this approach. Hares were set running by Mujtaba Rahman, an EU analyst with the Eurasia group, who is well connected with officials in Brussels and with Labour, and who suggested a few weeks ago that the government could end up seeking a deal that makes the UK a de facto member of the customs union.

If Starmer does seek a closer trading relationship, the EU has been clear on what it wants in return – greater access to British fishing stocks and a youth mobility deal allowing those aged 18-30 with a job or study place to come to the UK for four years.

Starmer's focus on migration is to "smash the gangs", but figures in the Home Office expect the new arrivals this summer to dwarf those of the past two years.

These are all problems for the future. For now, Starmer's team is just content that they have hit the ground running.

Badenoch twice as popular as nearest rival in leaders' race

The shadow housing secretary is in pole position among Tory members, but the number of undecideds hint the contest is wide open

Caroline Wheeler and **Harry Yorke**

Kemi Badenoch has almost twice as much support among Conservative members to become the next party leader as her closest rival, according to a new poll.

The new shadow housing secretary is the favourite to succeed Rishi Sunak, with the backing of 25.83 per cent of those polled.

According to the first Tory membership poll of the leadership contest by the independent Tory news organisation Conservative Home, which surveyed 995 grassroots members between July 8 and 10 Robert Jenrick, the former immigration minister, is in second place on 13.47 per cent.

Tom Tugendhat, the former security minister, comes a narrow third on 12.96 per cent, followed by Suella Braverman, the former home secretary, on 9.75 per cent, and James Cleverly, the shadow home secretary, on 9.15 per cent.

Priti Patel, another former home secretary, attracts the support of 3.32 per cent of members, followed by Victoria Atkins, the shadow health secretary, on 1.51 per cent, and Esther McVey, the former common sense minister, on 1.21 per cent.

However, the number of "don't knows", which exceeded 16 per cent of those polled, suggests that the race is still wide open, especially given the early stage of the contest and that no candidate has yet declared an intention to stand.

Henry Hill, deputy editor of Conservative Home, said: "Conservative leadership contests normally end up with a candidate of the right versus a candidate of the centre, which on these results would likely mean a final round between Tom Tugendhat and either Kemi Badenoch or Robert Jenrick. But with 'don't know' the second-largest group and a wide spread of support between potential candidates, at this stage the race is wide open."

Conservative Home's polls are widely seen as the best guide to sentiment among the Tory activist base. Monthly league tables measuring support for Sunak's cabinet have regularly shown Badenoch to be the favourite to lead the party, although Penny Mordaunt, the former leader of the Commons who lost her seat of Portsmouth North at the election, topped the list in March.

The Conservative Party board is preparing to elect new MP representatives on Wednesday. Once they are in place, senior party sources have suggested the timeframe and parameters of the leadership contest could then be announced by the end of this week.

Several Tory grandees and party officials want the party's annual conference at the end of September to become a hustings event, with the final round of voting only taking place after that.

While no candidate is yet to formally declare, allies of Badenoch and Jenrick are in favour of a longer contest and believe that this will allow for a "proper post-mortem" on the election defeat.

However, the team supporting Patel believe that a long contest would be a gift to Nigel Farage and Reform UK, as it would mean the Tories would be unable to form an effective opposition for months.

While Sunak and his team are not getting involved in the debate, several of his supporters in the party share this view and believe Farage will be able to present himself as an alternative opposition figure while the Tories spend months fighting among themselves.

"A long contest is a bad idea," said one. "We think Labour will probably do a budget in September, and it doesn't look like we're going to have a new opposition frontbench by then."

There is also confusion about whether Sunak is prepared to stay on as leader for the duration of a longer contest. "He did not say he will stay on until there is a new leader – he said he'd stay on until the process is in place," a source said.

Infighting between prospective candidates and their teams is well under way. Badenoch has suggested Braverman is having a "very nervous public breakdown" due to her repeated attacks on the party. Braverman appears to have angered all the rival camps and a large cohort of MPs are briefing against her.

With Braverman continuing to publicly attack the party – on Friday she said the party had "shamefully" failed to build enough prisons – several of her colleagues are convinced she is building up to a defection to Reform.

Rod Liddle, page 14

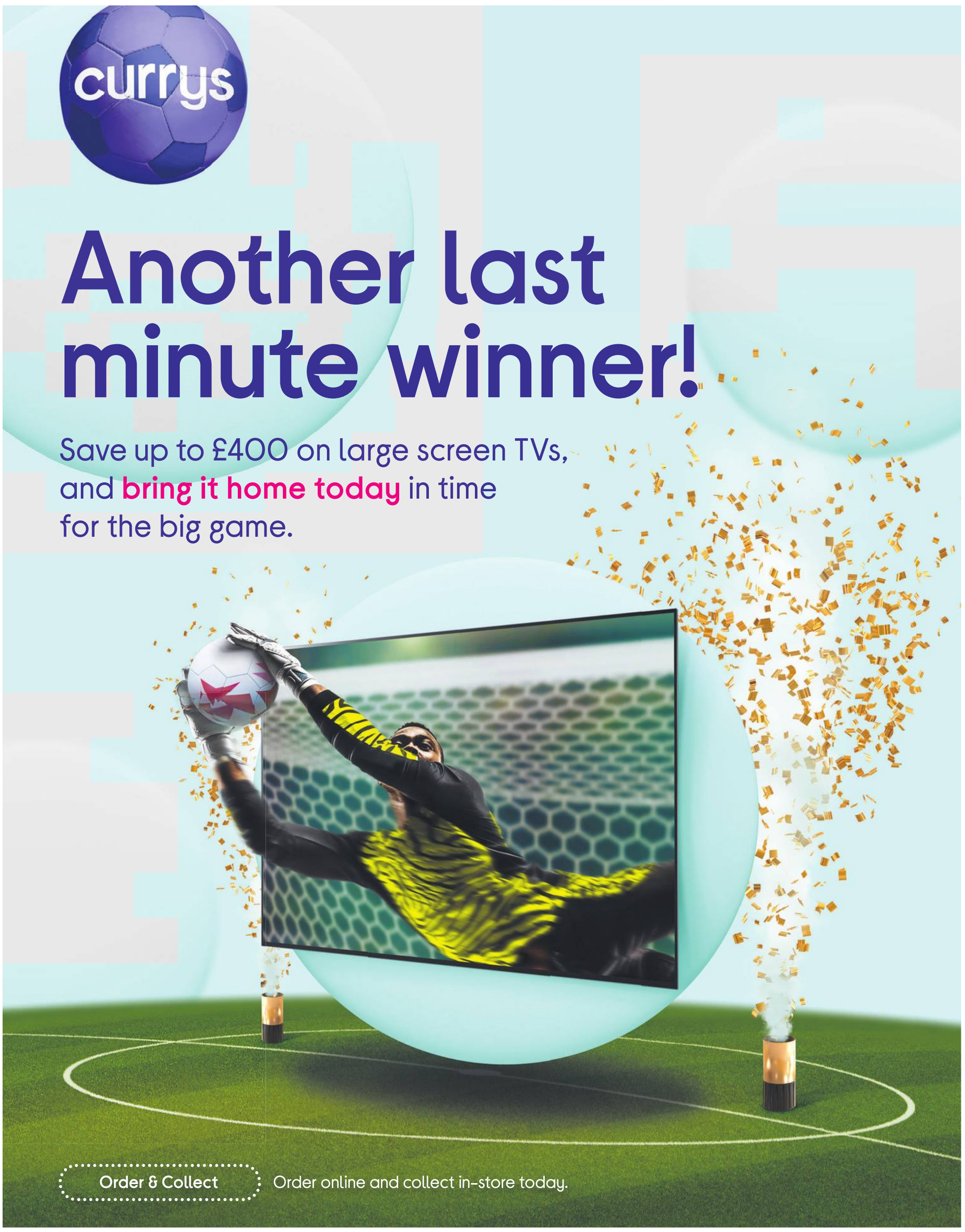


Kemi Badenoch leads Robert Jenrick, right, the former immigration minister, by 12 points in the competition to replace Rishi Sunak, below



Infighting between candidates is well under way

BELINDA JIAO; GEORGE CRACKNELL WRIGHT



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Ben Habib

For Reform to be taken seriously, Farage must let go

What a terrific result for Reform UK – four million votes and five seats in Westminster. With popular support and seats will come influence, more recognition and more money. Against the odds, Reform is part of the political fabric.

With success inevitably come challenges. If it is serious about being in government in 2029, it must rapidly move on from being an insurgency shouting on the sidelines to being a proper political party.

The first such challenge has been lurking backstage since the party was founded in 2019. It is this – the party is a limited company controlled by its leader, Nigel Farage. That may be acceptable for a start-up business founded by a star performer. But this a political party and, as the word suggests, a collective. It should not be controlled by one man. Other parties have boards, executive committees, and elections for leadership positions.

To date, Nigel's control has allowed decisions and progress to be made rapidly. But this is not a sustainable model. Apart from anything else, Reform cannot make the argument for democracy, let alone champion it, with such a glaring democratic deficit.

It is also an undue burden for one man to bear. My mind is drawn again to 2019 when Nigel stood down 317 candidates in that general election, giving the Tories an 80-seat majority. He did so because he feared a Corbyn government and a second referendum: valid concerns, but it was not a decision reached consensually. As a result, we got Boris Johnson's awful withdrawal agreement.

The party had also marched the electorate up to the top of the hill, made them believe in us and given them hope, only to leave them at the mercy of an incompetent Johnson administration.

Nigel readily admits what a hash Johnson made of Brexit but we knew this would be the case. So, when Richard Tice, the then leader, invited me in early 2023 to rejoin – my association with the party lapsed when I stopped being an MEP in 2020 – I was reluctant to do so without its shareholding structure being changed. That request was rejected and we settled on a letter of comfort from Richard confirming the party would fight for the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and a proper Brexit. The letter also reaffirmed our intention not to stand down against the Tories in any election and committed the party to being run consensually.

Our success in this election was significantly due to our standing across the country against the Conservative Party. To be taken seriously by the electorate we had to be more than just a pressure group for the Tories. There could be no flirting with them and certainly no deals.

The YouGov poll when I joined Reform UK put us at 6 per cent. By the time the election was called we were polling 16 per cent. In the end we achieved some 14 per cent of the vote – a super result.

The popular movement we created does not belong to any one person or Reform; it belongs to the people. Reform is obliged to the people. They fulfilled their part of the bargain by voting for it. It must now fulfil its part by delivering for them.

This has to start by democratising the party. Reform needs talented people in senior positions. It must involve them in decisions. Leaders with undue control are surrounded by sycophants and have no truck with criticism. I am pleased to hear the matter is being seriously considered and I hope it will provide democratic voice to the movement.

Reform must act with integrity, and it must work tirelessly for the agenda it promised. For too long the country has been run by egos with political expediency and cronyism. Reform must be different. To deliver, Reform must change politics for good – in every sense of that expression.

Ben Habib was removed as co-deputy leader of Reform by Nigel Farage last week

Editorial, page 22

Leaders should not need sycophants

The Sunday Times examines whether newly elected MP Shockat Adam benefited from his connections to pro-Gaza elements in Leicester

Was electoral law broken ahead of a shock victory?



GABRIEL POGRUND



Whitehall Editor

In the early hours of July 5 Shockat Adam was elected MP for Leicester South, defeating one of the leading lights of the Labour campaign. As the shock result was announced, Adam held aloft a keffiyeh, the traditional Arabic scarf, and defiantly repeated the words said by George Galloway after his Rochdale by-election win in February: "This is for Gaza!"

Adam, a charismatic optician running as an independent, had beat Labour's Jonathan Ashworth, the shadow paymaster general, by 979 votes. He was of one of five independents, among them Jeremy Corbyn, to pip Labour candidates after focusing on Sir Keir Starmer's supposed complicity in what was, Adam said, a genocide being carried out by Israel in Gaza.

Today, in the first detailed investigation of what became a bitterly contested and highly controversial race, we examine whether the newly elected MP benefited knowingly or otherwise from the support of his radicalised brother and a partisan website, and can also reveal that police are investigating whether electoral law was broken in Leicester South.

MP'S RADICAL BROTHER

Born in 1972, Shockat Adam Patel grew up in Leicester and studied optometry at the University of Manchester. In his early thirties he became the director of Sask Optics, sited near the city centre. It still exists today and, according to financial statements published two years ago, is owned by him, his wife and his brother Ismail.

Ismail had become an advocate of Palestinian rights after a trip to Jerusalem in the nineties. On his return he founded Friends of Al-Aqsa, named after the Jerusalem site from which the Prophet Mohammed is said to have ascended to heaven on a winged horse.

Friends of Al-Aqsa responded to the October 7 atrocities by saying that Hamas was "reacting to Israel's ongoing illegal occupation".

Ismail also became a spokesman for the British Muslim Initiative, founded by Mohammed Sawalha, who, according to the US Department of Justice, ran Hamas's "terrorist operations in the West Bank" before fleeing to the UK. As the peace process foundered, Ismail expressed increasingly vocal support for Hamas, appearing at a London rally in January 2009 where he said the group was "no terrorist organisation" and lashed out at the Board of Deputies, the synagogue umbrella group, for failing to condemn Israel's "Jewish government".

At another rally, he declared: "We are all Hamas!" At the time, Hamas was proscribed as a terrorist group by the US and the EU, while the UK sanctioned its military but had not yet proscribed its political wing, hoping to preserve dialogue for the peace process. Ismail told The Sunday Times he did not show support for any proscribed organisation or military wing of Hamas in 2007 or 2009.

In May 2010, the new MP's brother boarded the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, a fleet of ships delivering humanitarian relief and other materials to the strip. In disputed circumstances, it was raided by IDF soldiers, which, pleading self defence, killed ten on board, prompting an outcry. Ismail emerged unscathed.

Ismail has also repeatedly met the leader of the terrorist group, Ismail Haniyeh; worked with a London-based fugitive who served on its politburo; and once declared: "Hamas is no terrorist organisation … we salute Hamas for standing up to Israel!"

Three years ago, Ismail praised a Palestinian gunman shot dead after murdering a Jewish tour guide in the Old City of Jerusalem as a "martyr".

Adam's own activism arguably began in 2018 when he became chair of Leicester's branch of Muslim Engagement and Development. His work included campaigning for a new definition of Islamophobia at the council, supporting Black Lives Matter in 2020 and, later, arranging Covid-compliant Islamic burials.

Since its creation, the group has faced allegations of radicalism. Shortly before Adam joined, its director said the Westminster attack in which Khalid Masood drove his car into pedestrians, murdering five people, was "not terrorism". The group was recently identified by Michael Gove as "of concern" as he outlined a new definition of extremism. Adam denied that label, challenging Gove to repeat the claim outside of parliament.

In 2019, Adam became involved in Labour politics, campaigning for Claudia Webbe, a former aide to Ken Livingstone installed by Jeremy Corbyn's office weeks before polling day in December that year. She won the race and was elected MP for Leicester East, but was later expelled by Labour after being convicted of harassing an ex-partner. She sat as an independent until 2024 and stood for re-election this month, but came fourth.

THE OCTOBER 7 AFTERMATH

Corbyn's resignation in early 2020 had in any event set Adam on his path away from mainstream politics, a process seemingly hastened by the October 7 attacks. On October 11 last year, Starmer told LBC that Israel had the right to defend itself by cutting off power and water from the Gaza strip. The clip went viral within Leicester's Muslim community of Leicester.

Despite Starmer later clarifying his position, Adam was dismayed. He described Sunak and Starmer as "two cheeks of the same mouthpiece" when both expressed concern about pro-Palestine protests, and called for Rachel Riley of Channel 4's *Countdown* to be suspended after she claimed activists had been chanting in favour of an "intifada".

On November 17 Adam spoke at a pro-Palestine march in Leicester, saying of the main parties: "We will not vote for them, we will not believe your lies in the media." On stage with him was Majid Freeman, an agitator who would later confront Ashworth in the street during the general election campaign.

A seasoned media performer for Labour, Ashworth had made himself a lightning rod for criticism in Leicester by following the party line and declining at first to vote for a ceasefire as Starmer sought to mirror US foreign policy. He received a letter from a group of local Muslim leaders asking for an explanation as to why he had shared a tweet by Starmer expressing solidarity with Israel immediately after Hamas's atrocities.

Adam was especially furious at the MP, writing about his refusal to "stop arms sales to Israel" and warning that "people won't forget" his stance. His family were angry too. His brother, Ismail, said he helped organise rallies of tens of thousands across the country through Friends of Al-Aqsa and, closer to home, "arrange a conversation for Ashworth with organisations and mosques in Leicester". Sources described this as a combustive meeting in which the MP failed to persuade the room of his position. Meanwhile, Adam's wife had taken to Twitter to celebrate acts of vandalism on branches of Barclays, which critics accuse of investing in Israeli weapons.

> **Gangs were delivering leaflets, intimidating residents**

When the general election was called, Adam announced he would stand against Ashworth. Despite a 22,675 majority, the MP appeared vulnerable, even after his party began to call for a ceasefire.

Labour was aware Gaza would be an issue, estimating that up to 60 per cent of Muslim voters might vote for other parties. Internally, the party now believes the true figure may have been as much as 80 per cent, although no independent research has yet been conducted.

THE PARTISAN WEBSITE

On June 24 – ten days before the election – Adam got a significant endorsement from YouElect, a "non-profit organisation" whose stated goal is combating political disengagement and promoting voter registration in Leicester. On its website it called Adam, 51, its "top-rated candidate" following "rigorous research". It also paid for ads backing his campaign on Facebook and Instagram.

But some voters may not have realised that YouElect had been founded in 2010 by the candidate's older brother and business partner, Ismail. YouElect is no longer run by Ismail; dissolved in 2016, it was relaunched under new management, but still uses the same social media hashtags and email address.

Ismail also continues to appear in its videos. During the election campaign, the group published videos of him asking voters to register and has uploaded footage in which he appeared next to Adam at a demonstration. Standing alongside activists holding mannequins of dead babies, Ismail described the election as a test to all those who wanted Palestine front and centre of national politics.

Adam said he is not involved in YouElect, which has since become one of the largest pro-Palestinian groups organising demonstrations across the UK. It also used its 150,000 social media followers to hail Adam's candidacy.

In response to queries, Adam's lawyer said he was focused on delivering for Leicester South: "He will not be distracted by sour grapes from a beaten rival who lost touch with his constituents."

YouElect's current director, Muhammad Amin Mussat Hajat, said that Ismail "no longer" runs the organisation. He said that, although Ismail appeared in its videos, he "does not hold a position" within it, and no longer controls its social media or email addresses. He said the group is self-funded by its directors. Ismail said he encouraged people to "vote for candidates who uphold international law and support an end to the occupation of Palestine", claiming he had not "directly supported" his brother.

INTIMIDATION AND LEAFLETS

For Ashworth, the complications of the campaign have come not just from YouElect. On polling day he took his ten-year-old daughter with him to canvass, only to be confronted by a constituent who said "everyone despises you".

He said the race was the most "vitriolic and intimidating" he had seen, accusing his opponents of inflammatory and sectarian tactics in a seat where 30 per cent of the adult population is Muslim – the 14th highest percentage of 650 seats. He claims he was banned from mosques and chased down streets while being filmed, including by Freeman, who has since been arrested and charged in connection with unrelated terrorism offences.

As polling day approached, he was repeatedly followed and confronted over his position on Gaza while being filmed. Freeman was among those to do so, finding Ashworth while out campaigning on a quiet street on the morning of June 21 and saying of his ceasefire stance: "It's a simple question, why did you abstain?"

Ashworth said he would not be cowed by "loudmouths". In response, Freeman told Ashworth he had the "blood of Palestinian men, women and children on your hands … it's a disgrace! Why couldn't you condemn Netanyahu?"

Ashworth said locals reported "intimidation outside polling stations". He has also produced evidence of leaflets superimposing his face on pictures of weeping children and rubble, saying a vote for Labour is a vote for "genocide".

Indeed, Leicester South was deluged with thousands of leaflets. Many had a QR code linking to a candidate selection tool on The Muslim Vote, a national group set up after October 7 that purports to be "pro-democracy, anti-genocide" and advocates for votes for Adam.

Ashworth said that "residents complained of gangs of lads delivering these leaflets intimidating them", and that, on one occasion, a constituent refused to accept a leaflet – only to have large numbers stuffed through their letterbox. It is not known who posted, distributed or printed these leaflets, which appear to contravene election rules. The Representation of the People Act 1983 says it is an offence for election material to be distributed without details of who paid for it and the candidate it is intended to help. Some were distributed by an elderly man who told Ashworth he was paid "cash in hand" but would not say by whom. Leicestershire police said specialist officers are making "further enquiries" to determine if offences were committed.

THE FALLOUT FOR LABOUR

With Adam installed as MP by a slender majority, the new government is left wondering how to address the degree of intimidation witnessed in his race and others. Jess Phillips, the Birmingham Yardley MP, was heckled and jeered as she gave her acceptance speech, having narrowly seen off an independent, while Rushanara Ali has spoken of needing police protection in response to death threats. Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, is understood to have entrusted Dan Jarvis, the newly appointed security minister whose brief includes the integrity of elections, to examine what can be done.

Adam is unapologetic. He said the leaflets if anything damaged him, owing to the "false" claim he was connected to them. Last week, he appeared in a suit and tie in the chamber, swearing in before tweeting: "Together, we will bring about the change we've all fought for."



Ismail Adam, right, has met Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh many times. Labour's Jonathan Ashworth, unseated by Ismail's brother Shockat, was the target of leaflets in his Leicester South constituency



Why was turnout so low? Britain has a trust problem with its politicians

TOM CALVER



Data Editor

It is not hard to find non-voters in Rusholme. Just 40 per cent of those eligible made it to a polling station in this area of Manchester on July 4, the lowest of any constituency in Britain. "The politicians are all the same," says Asif Ali, 45, a shopkeeper. "They say one thing then do the opposite. I couldn't bring myself to vote for any of them."

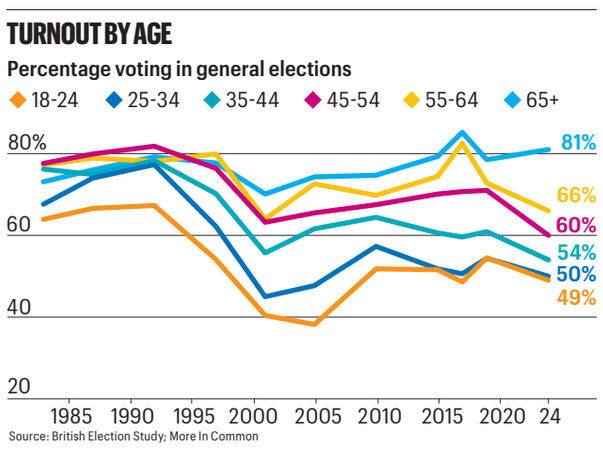
A large Muslim and student population could have punished the Labour Party had enough voted, because there were big swings to the Greens and George Galloway's Workers Party. Although the constituency is new, Afzal Khan, formerly the Labour MP for Gorton, was duly returned, his majority cut from 30,000 to 8,000.

Here, one does not get the sense that the local MP is from the governing party. "I didn't see the point in voting," says Ramisa Tahir, a 27-year-old carer, speaking in Wilmslow Road, better known as Manchester's curry mile. "This is a safe Labour seat so it wouldn't make any difference. But I didn't want to vote Labour because of their policy on Gaza."

How should we read the 2024 general election? For a party that has spent most of its time in opposition, Labour's 411-seat victory is historic. On the other hand, turnout was 60 per cent, the second-lowest in history – after 2001 – while Sir Keir Starmer mustered fewer votes overall (9.7 million) than Jeremy Corbyn did (10.3 million) in 2019. Labour has achieved an election win that is simultaneously euphoric, and a little bit "meh". Last week Starmer's predecessor called his win a "loveless landslide". What made the country vote – or not vote – the way it did?

Last week, the pollster More In Common, in conjunction with the UCL Policy Lab, surveyed 10,000 people and conducted five focus groups in key seats – Cannock Chase, North Herefordshire, Leicester South, Godalming & Ash and Cowdenbeath & Kirkcaldy – to find out. This first draft of history identifies three key drivers behind voting patterns at this election: change, competence and disillusionment.

In Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, a Labour gain from the Tories, there was disappointment in the focus group with what could have been. "In 2019, with Boris coming in, I had such high hopes," says Oliver, an office manager, who flirted with Reform before voting Labour. "I just feel bitterly, bitterly disappointed in them."



No surprises there. Yet beneath the surface, something rather interesting has happened to Labour's coalition. In the Corbyn years, Labour did very well among some groups – young, progressive activists – and poorly among others, like "loyal nationals" (voters in places such as the red wall). This time Starmer's coalition is flatter. His party is popular in nearly every segment – even winning 24 per cent of "backbone Conservatives" – without being spectacularly so. For the first time in a while, who you are seems to have had less of a bearing on how you voted.

This is not to say that Britain has bid farewell to polarisation: ask Reform voters what single issue had the biggest impact on their vote, and 64 per cent say immigration, compared with 14 per cent of Labour backers. Yet among nearly every voter group, one issue trumped all: the cost of living. It is, along with the NHS, one of the "big two" things that voters care most about, with data showing voters want fundamental changes to the way healthcare operates.

Indeed, pragmatism – a promise to fix people's problems – seems to have been the underlying current. Labour has capitalised on this with a coalition of "valence rather than ideology", says Luke Tryl, UK director of More In Common.

Despite the low turnout, Labour voters were much more enthusiastic about their party than Conservative or Lib Dem voters, although that might tell us more about how much many people wanted the Tories out.

According to data released by the OECD, Britons have the second-lowest trust in national government in the developed world. This time, the top reason for not voting was that people "don't trust politicians" (34 per cent).

But what makes this election unusual is that this apathy is not restricted to young people. Half of 18-24-year-olds did not vote this time, a pattern true at most elections since the 1990s – yet the biggest drop was in middle-age voters. Turnout among those aged 45-54 fell from 70 per cent in 2019, to 60 per cent this year.

In Cannock Chase, Karl, a sales manager, suggested Starmer could gain a lot of trust by simply "not cocking it up like they've done in the last 12 years". Could he benefit from the bar being quite low? "People have fallen out of love with the idea that politics can change things," says Tryl. There may be a big prize available if Labour can improve things. But if bills do start to fall, will voters give them credit?

Additional reporting: Stewart Whittingham

Tom Calver was last week awarded a Royal Statistical Society award for statistical excellence

NEWS

Malaria-free world in reach with first dose of £3 vaccine

Oxford's affordable jab against a disease that kills 600,000 people a year is being launched after decades of research

Ben Spencer Science Editor

In the next 48 hours, babies in Africa will receive doses of the world's first affordable malaria vaccine. It costs less than £3 a dose. The introduction of the R21 jab could pave the way for the eradication of malaria within a decade, scientists believe.

Malaria kills more than 600,000 people a year, 95 per cent of them in Africa and 80 per cent under the age of five. Even at the height of the Covid pandemic, malaria claimed more African lives than the coronavirus.

The first doses – the culmination of 30 years of research by Oxford University, which developed the vaccine – are expected to be given to babies aged under two in Ivory Coast tomorrow and South Sudan on Tuesday.

Adar Poonawalla, chief executive of the Serum Institute of India, which is manufacturing the doses, said: "A malaria-free world is finally within sight."

Fifteen countries in Africa – including the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Ghana, Mozambique, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Burundi and Nigeria – are expected to introduce the vaccine by the end of the year, with another 15 nations due to follow. The introduction has been funded by Gavi, a global vaccination alliance of charities, the World Health Organisation and governments including the UK's.

The vaccine against *Plasmodium falciparum* – the most deadly strain of malaria and the most common in Africa – has been shown in trials to be up to 79 per cent effective at preventing the disease in young children. Sir Adrian Hill, director of the Jenner Institute at Oxford, who was involved in developing both the AstraZeneca Covid vaccine and the new malaria jab, said: "I've been doing work on malaria vaccines since 1994. It's been long awaited, but here we finally are."

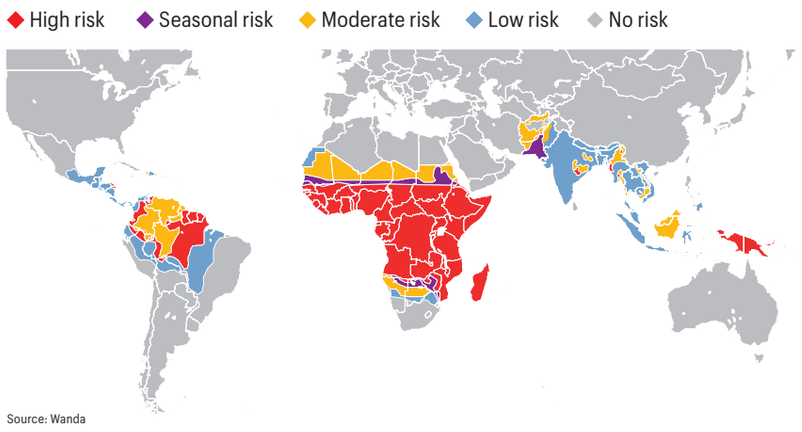
Malaria is caused by a parasite. The vaccine works by targeting the first stage of the parasite's life cycle, before it gets to the liver. It is combined with an immune-boosting agent, or adjuvant, made by the US company Novavax.

The Serum Institute, the world's biggest vaccine manufacturer, based in Pune, has made 25 million doses and has the capacity to increase production to 100 million a year.

That capacity and the low price of the vaccine give it a huge advantage over the only other malaria vaccine – a jab called RTS,S manufactured by GSK, which was introduced in January. It is more than twice as expensive and is limited to about six million doses a year because of manufacturing constraints.

Poonawalla said: "Cost is absolutely the key question. If this was a $10 vaccine, just forget it – you wouldn't be able to reach the kind of countries we have because the budgets just wouldn't allow it. We've spent so many years – blood, sweat and money – developing this with Oxford. After all this effort and going through the regulatory process, we're finally here. This is a great moment."

MALARIA HOTSPOTS



Source: Wanda

The new vaccine is approved for children up to the age of three, but trials are to start for pregnant women in the coming weeks. Hill said: "This parasite goes and lives in the placenta, so the second most important group – after children – to vaccinate in endemic areas is women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, to protect them and their foetus." Infected mothers-to-be are at higher risk of having a miscarriage, stillbirth or premature labour.

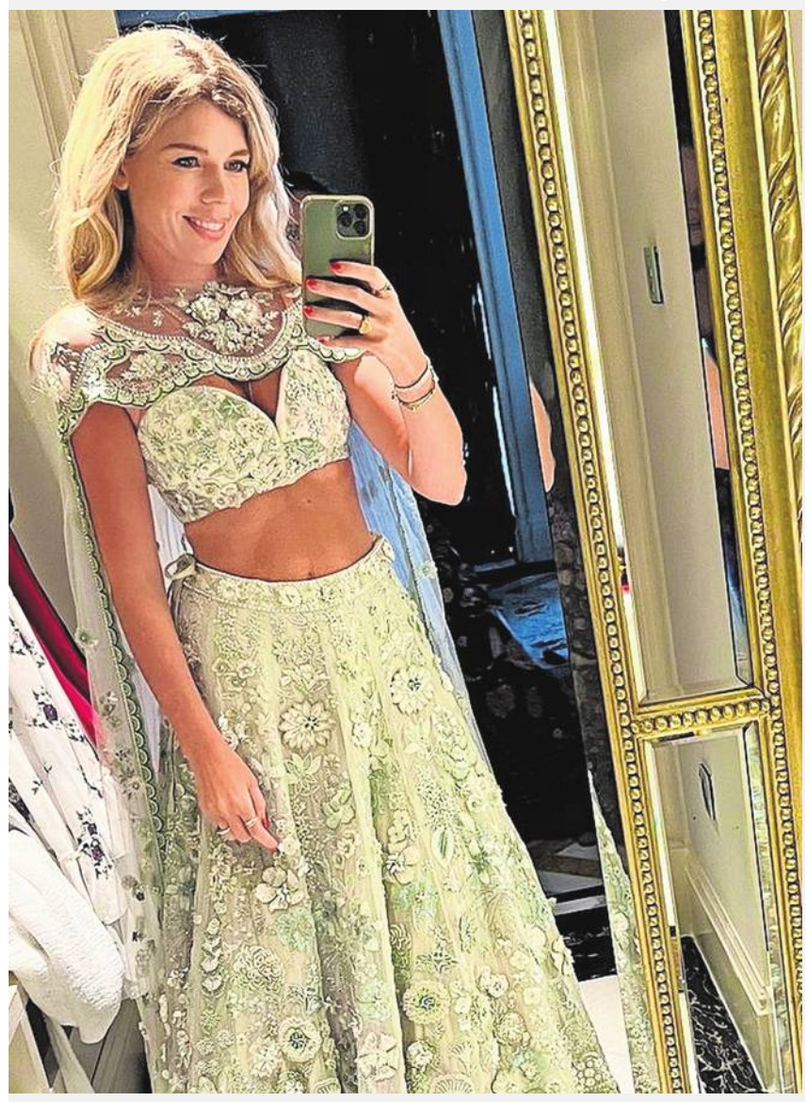
Beyond that, the vaccine will be introduced to other adults, and could even be marketed to travellers. "It is not the priority – but now that it is approved, I imagine there will be a traveller's vaccine of some sort," Hill said. "It will probably happen in the next five years or so. It would probably be easier than taking [antimalarial pills]." These are expensive and, depending on the variety, can have unpleasant side effects. Lariam, for example, can cause psychosis.

The Serum Institute is also developing a vaccine that attacks the *Plasmodium vivax* parasite, a strain of malaria that is common in India and South America. "I imagine that a traveller's vaccine would be a combination of R21 and the vivax equivalent," Hill said.

Eradicating malaria is where Hill has really set his sights. "For the first time, really in the last couple of years, eradication is beginning to look really credible," he said. "I think the whole thing is doable, not in the next five years, but maybe in the next ten." His team is working on a three-stage combination vaccine, which aims to attack the malaria life cycle from different angles, stopping transmission as well as illness.

CARRIE ON PARTYING

INSTAGRAM@CARRIELBJOHNSON



Carrie Johnson, 36, wore a traditional silver lehenga to the £250 million wedding of Anant Ambani, the son of India's richest man, and Radhika Merchant in Mumbai. Her husband Boris, the ex-prime minister, and their three children joined a star-studded guest list at the four-day celebration



Sleep lessons for 'nocturnal' pupils slash absenteeism

Sian Griffiths
Education Editor

Schools are paying up to £500 a day for private consultants to fix an "epidemic" of sleeplessness among pupils since the pandemic.

Kerry Davies, a "sleep fixer", is among experts recruited to coach families whose children have become "nocturnal".

During lockdown, some youngsters got into the habit of going to bed in the early hours and sleeping into the morning, with many failing to wake in time for school. Department for Education figures show that about 1.6 million children in England missed a day of school once a fortnight last year, including thousands who arrived so late that they were marked absent.

Rob Bell, head teacher at the Consilium Evolve school for 11 to 16-year-olds in Sunderland, has hired Davies to hold sleep lessons in school for families. She also holds one-to-one online sessions with pupils and their parents.

"I put sleep on the curriculum as one of my priorities," Bell said. "We had a lightbulb moment when we realised some children were not going to sleep till 3am."

He had seen entire families with disrupted patterns. One 13-year-old's parents were allowing him to eat dinner at 1am. "They would get up and make dinner for him while he was gaming and socialising on social media apps through the night," he said.

"His attendance dropped so low he was only coming into school a day a week. He had shut down, he was very reclusive. We worked with him and his parents to get him back into a normal sleep routine. Since then he has not missed one day in school."

Bell links poor sleep among teens to the soaring rates of mental illness, with one in six children in England reported to have a diagnosable condition.

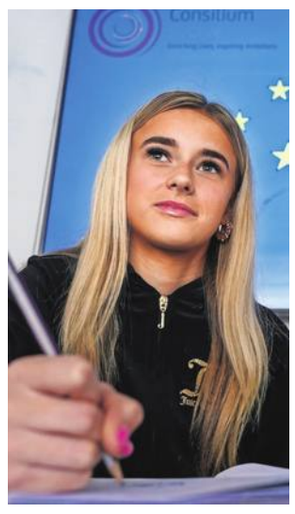
Among the advice offered by Davies to pupils at Consilium, which works with children who have often not gone to school for months or may have struggled at other schools, is about "bedroom hygiene". It includes opening windows at night to alleviate stuffiness believed to be a contributing factor to insomnia. She also warns against sleep medication such as melatonin, which is increasingly being used.

Pupils at Consilium are also taught about ideal bedtimes to encourage eight hours of sleep. They keep journals recording their sleep patterns and strategies for getting to sleep, including baths before bed.

In the morning they are encouraged to go outside to allow the light to reset their body clocks. Older children have been asked to wear monitors that record their sleep pattern, helping them understand the science of sleep and why deep sleep is needed. They are discouraged from having weekend lie-ins. Since sleep lessons were introduced, pupil attendance has quadrupled from an average of 18 per cent to 86 per cent.

Scientists and sleep experts including the Oxford University neuroscientist Professor Russell Foster say teenagers experience a biological shift in their body clocks that leads them to fall asleep a couple of hours later than when they were aged nine or ten. The shift reverses in the twenties. But, Davies says, laxity about sleep and wake times in the pandemic, and a lack of regular routines and exercise outdoors in lockdown, appears to have exacerbated the trend.

Davies, who started her career working with the NHS and a council, believes good sleep practice is essential for teens as well as their families and school. "You cannot teach sleep-deprived children," she said.



Sophia Owens completes a sleep diary at Consilium Evolve school, Sunderland

Rob Bell is a silver winner in the Pearson National Teaching Awards for Excellence, sponsored by The Sunday Times

Bovine right: King to be gifted seven cows in Jersey

Dominic Hauschild

Faced with the question of what to get for the man who has everything, the people of Jersey and Guernsey have agreed to give the King seven cows when he arrives tomorrow for the first official visit by a monarch in 19 years.

One of them is Roseland Vagn Christella, an 11-month-old heifer directly descended from Origa, one of the original Jersey cows bred in the Channel Islands from 1896. She comes from the herd of Andrew Le Gaillais, 69, a third-generation dairy farmer. He said: "She is a very friendly cow, as are all the others. The Jersey is a very inquisitive breed of cow. They have these big dark eyes, dark eyelashes and lovely faces."

Jersey and Guernsey are self-governing bailiwicks, which recognise Charles as sovereign as the Duke of Normandy rather than King.

After the cows are presented to the King and Queen they will be taken to Home Farm, part of the Highgrove Estate in Gloucestershire.

In return, on Tuesday Charles will bestow royal status on a local breed of goat, to be known as the Royal Golden Guernsey.

In 2022, a similar present was made to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's platinum jubilee – one cow for every decade on the throne.



Jersey cows have been on the islands since 1896

NEWS

Murray smashes away China offer to coach Scotland's future champions

The star will teach hopefuls in Stirlingshire after retiring, his mother Judy says

Marc Horne

Sir Andy Murray turned down lucrative offers to open academies in China and the Middle East in order to spend his retirement nurturing future champions near his home town in Scotland, his mother, Judy, has said.

Britain's most successful tennis player of the modern era will retire after competing at the Paris Olympics, which begin later this month. It was widely expected that the 37-year-old would, like many former professionals, transition into becoming a commentator, pundit and broadcaster.

However, Judy Murray, 64, the former Scottish national coach, revealed that her son is instead keen to return regularly to Dunblane with his brother Jamie, 38 – himself a former world doubles number one – to share his skills with promising young players.

The family's plan is to open a £20 million tennis and sporting centre that would provide grassroots facilities and employ a network of coaches at the nearby Park of Keir, Stirlingshire.

Judy Murray said her son had spurned offers to lend his name to tennis centres in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), China and South America.

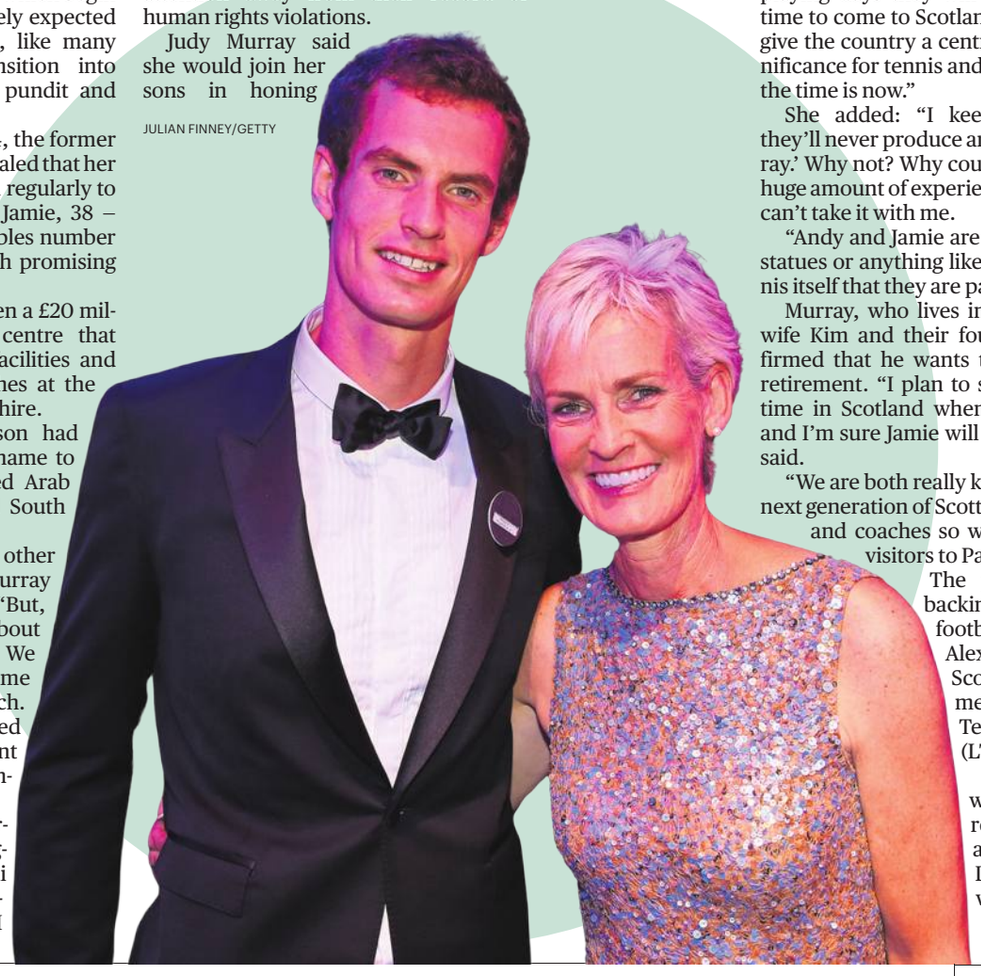
"We have had offers from other countries to open an Andy Murray tennis academy," she said. "But, for us, it will always be about Scotland and our backyard. We want to give back to the game that has given us all so much. None of us have ever wavered from the position that we want to do this in our home country."

Earlier in his career Murray turned down a seven-figure sum to compete in Saudi Arabia because of his concerns over human rights. "I wouldn't play in Saudi Arabia," he said last year, reiterating his stance.

He has also been a vocal champion of women's rights, calling out sexist comments and advocating for female athletes receiving equal pay.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been accused of "sportswashing" – pumping vast sums of money into golf, football, tennis and cycling in order to deflect attention away from their record of human rights violations.

Judy Murray said she would join her sons in honing new homegrown talent at the facility, which has already secured outline planning permission.



JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY

Sir Andy Murray, with Judy: he says he plans to spend more time in Scotland after his playing career comes to an end at the Paris Olympics

"Andy is coming to the end of his career and Jamie won't play for too much longer either," she said. "The three of us want to be able to share what we know, and what we did, with the next generation of players and coaches.

"When the boys are finished with their playing days they will have a lot more time to come to Scotland. We all want to give the country a centre of national significance for tennis and other sports and the time is now."

She added: "I keep hearing, 'Oh, they'll never produce another Andy Murray.' Why not? Why couldn't we? I have a huge amount of experience to share and I can't take it with me.

"Andy and Jamie are not fussed about statues or anything like that. It's the tennis itself that they are passionate about."

Murray, who lives in Surrey with his wife Kim and their four children, confirmed that he wants to head north in retirement. "I plan to spend a lot more time in Scotland when I finish playing and I'm sure Jamie will do the same," he said.

"We are both really keen to inspire the next generation of Scottish tennis players and coaches so we will be regular visitors to Park of Keir."

The project has the backing of the former football manager Sir Alex Ferguson, the Scottish government and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA).

"We're doing all we can to make it a reality as quickly as possible," an LTA spokeswoman said.

Kate to present Wimbledon trophy while William cheers on England in Berlin

Glen Keogh

The Princess of Wales has confirmed that she will present the trophy at the Wimbledon men's final today as she continues to receive treatment for cancer.

Her attendance, only her second major public engagement since she announced her diagnosis, will delight tennis fans who have endured a soggy Wimbledon fortnight.

However, Kate did not attend the women's final: Debbie Jevans, Wimbledon's chairwoman, presented the women's trophy on behalf of the princess, who is patron of the All England club, to Barbora Krejcikova of the Czech Republic who beat Italy's Jasmine Paolini.

The Prince of Wales, who is president of the Football Association, will not be alongside his wife today, as he will instead be in Berlin for England's Euro 2024 final match against Spain.

In a message to the team, he posted on social media: "We are so proud of you all England, just one last push to finish the job!

"Go out there and show the world what you're made of. We believe. W."

Yesterday Kensington Palace confirmed the Princess of Wales's attendance at today's men's final. It will be her first public appearance since Trooping the Colour, almost a month ago, when she appeared on the Buckingham Palace balcony alongside the Prince of Wales and their young children to mark the King's birthday.

Kate revealed her cancer diagnosis in March in a video filmed from the gardens at Windsor after wild conspiracy theories relating to her wellbeing circulated for weeks on social media.

The princess, it turned out, had been working out how best to break the news of her illness to the couple's children, Prince George, ten, Princess Charlotte, eight, and Prince Louis, five.

In a statement released last month, Kate revealed she was making good progress but was "not out of the woods yet" and had "good days and bad days" as she continued her treatment.

A keen tennis fan, she paid tribute to Sir Andy Murray during this summer's tournament, which was his last before retiring later this year. Murray was denied a final match at SW19 when his mixed doubles partner Emma Raducanu pulled out because of injury.

On Twitter/X, Kate said: "An incredible Wimbledon career comes to an end. You should be so very proud. On behalf of all of us, thank you! C."

Novak Djokovic, the 37-year-old tennis veteran, is looking to win his eighth Wimbledon title today, which would tie him level with Swiss great Roger Federer.

However, he is up against the Spanish wonderkid Carlos Alcaraz, 21, in a repeat of last year's final, in which Alcaraz triumphed in five sets.

The King is also undergoing treatment for cancer, with Buckingham Palace announcing his diagnosis in February.

Sport, pages 16-17



The Princess of Wales will present the men's singles trophy, as she did last year, left. It will be only her second major appearance since she announced her cancer diagnosis

Meet Zoe Hamburger . . . guess what she does for a living

Oliver Gill Industry and Leisure Business Editor

If your name is Zoe Hamburger, perhaps you are destined to work for McDonald's.

The fast food chain's new chief restaurant officer in the UK and Ireland said her name – perhaps the ultimate example of nominative determinism – has always got a reaction. Hamburger, 39, laughs off the coincidence. "I guess some things are meant to be," she said. "I've worked in and around McDonald's for my entire career, and Hamburger has been my name my entire life too, so as you can imagine, it has always made people do a bit of a double take."

Her appointment into her first executive role with McDonald's and first outside America come as the burger chain's celebrates the 50th anniversary of its maiden UK restaurant in October. She will be responsible for the company's 1,450 restaurants in Britain and Ireland, which employ 135,000 people.

Hamburger will report to the chief executive, Alistair Macrow, who was last year forced to apologise after a BBC investigation revealed accusations of sexual harassment, racism and bullying by more than 100 former and current employees.

Yet whether it be Big Macs or Chicken McNuggets, Filet-O-Fish or Happy Meals, five decades since the first UK restaurant opened in Woolwich, London, Britons still cannot get enough of the Golden Arches. McDonald's is the second-most popular dining brand, according to polling by YouGov in the past few weeks. Only the high street bakery Greggs is held closer to the hearts of UK diners.

The secret, according to Kien Tan, senior retail adviser at the consultancy PwC, is staggeringly simple – but difficult to deliver. "Some people can be a bit snobbish about McDonald's, but I think that they've done a great job to constantly reinvent themselves," he said.



Home delivery is but one example of such reinvention, Hamburger explained. "It was only seven years ago we had no delivery service whatsoever," she said. Now nearly a fifth of sales in the UK are made using McDelivery.

Yet, eating in fast-food restaurants is on the rise too, according to the market research company Mintel. In the 12 months to June 2023, the number of Britons who ate in fast food outlets increased to 45 per cent from 24 per cent in 2021. This has led to the rollout of table service, where customers can order on a screen or at the counter and have the food brought to their table.

"As a global business, we put a real emphasis on learning from other markets and stealing new ideas with pride," Hamburger said. "If something is working well in a market, why would we not use that blueprint to roll it out in another one?"

The well-publicised "death of the British high street" has led to some observers saying that it is only a matter of time before McDonald's retrenches from city centres in favour of out-of-town sites and travel hubs. "We have around 400 McDonald's restaurants in town and city centres across the UK, and we understand that we play an important role on the UK high street," said Hamburger.

"The short answer is, we remain committed to the UK high street and have no plans to move away from those restaurants."

Four in five McDonald's restaurants in the UK and Ireland are franchised, transferring the onus for success on to the restaurant owner. A typical franchisee will have to stump up between £500,000 and £1.85 million to start a restaurant, depending on the forecast future profitability of the site over the first ten years.

Zoe Hamburger says nearly a fifth of McDonald's sales are by home delivery. Seven years ago, the figure was zero



Because McDonald's owns the restaurant property, franchisees then pay between 8 per cent and 18 per cent of net sales in rent. A further 5 per cent of net sales is paid by franchisees to the American corporation as a royalty. Finally, franchisees must contribute to a central marketing fund, currently 4.3 per cent of net sales.

It's a business model that has led to claims that McDonald's is a property company that sells food, with a property portfolio to rival those of the Microsoft founder Bill Gates or of the Roman Catholic church. It has been estimated that McDonald's owns about 70 per cent of the buildings across its 38,000 locations worldwide.



COMMENT

Rod Liddle



One Nation Tories, hold your noses: to scent success you'll have to move right

In what you might consider an aberrant decision for a columnist who wishes people to read what he writes, I'd like to address an issue almost nobody in the entire country gives a tinker's cuss about – namely, the future of the Conservative Party and who should lead it. The overwhelming feeling I get, reading the room, is that this is not high up on the agenda of anybody right now and the general consensus – even among many Tories I speak to – is roughly "Thank Christ they are gone and we don't have to worry about what they're getting up to."

Furthermore, it brings to mind the arcane and interminable process the party has alighted upon to choose its leader – a cathouse bickerfest carefully engineered to ensure that the most useless person in the country gets the job. And the winner is ... Liz Truss, etc. But still, there is a rather large vacancy in our politics – for a party that might offer a challenge to the government and do that old thing, hold it to account. If the Conservatives are to be that party, they need to work out why they actually exist.

I keep hearing the same old canard from centre-left Tories: that the party can win an election only when it adopts a centrist, One Nation position – the latest to make this assertion was good ol' David Willetts. It is true, however, only if you ignore the general elections of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 2019. Those just happen to be the elections in which the Tories won their biggest majorities. The only victories they have achieved from a centrist position have been by the very skin of their teeth – 2017, 2015 and 2010 (when they didn't really win at all, of course). The reason for this is that the Tories need working-class and poujadist lower-middle-class votes to win a workable majority, and that tranche of the electorate has never cared much for the loaded, patrician, public-school-educated scions of the Tory centre left.

Those voters also care about stuff like immigration, and the centre left does not like their tone when they dare to raise the issue and holds its collective nose in distaste. But raise it the Tories must, because they do not have very much ground left on which to compete. This is the principal problem for the Tory left-wingers: how to make their party distinguishable from Labour, which is itself not terribly distant from a kind of modern Butskellism. Drift to the left – as indeed they did a little under Rishi Sunak – and the party will be contesting the next election simply on grounds of comparative competence, which I would suggest, given the evidence of the past ten years or so, is an unwise strategy.

In any case, the right seems to have what remains of the party in its salty grip, seeing that Kemi Badenoch is the very clear favourite with the bookies to pick up that particular lethal chalice. (This means she probably won't win: the favourite almost never becomes leader.) I would prefer Suella Braverman, but whenever I mention her name to nominally unaligned voters, they recoil as if I had just eaten a live baby in front of them.

The leader's race ensures the most useless person in the country gets the job

The first decision for the right, though, is whether to make some sort of accommodation with Nigel Farage and Reform – a sort of historic reshaping of the right, as the psephologist Matthew Goodwin puts it. I have heard one or two extant but also some defenestrated Tory MPs suggesting it – and at first sight it does seem an amenable proposition. Reform polled more than four million votes – add that to the Tories' almost seven million and you're just about over the line. Add to that the fact that Farage and Reform poll well among the young – a weak area for the Tories – and it all becomes rather attractive. But it is a crude and misleading calculation. Farage, for all his canniness, would alienate a good few million potential Tory voters, and Reform, with just five MPs in the House of Commons, will not have much political heft in the next five years. It does not perform terribly well in council elections either.

The Tories should look towards those parties in Europe that are economically leftish but right wing on social issues, and that contest elections under labels that identify them as everything from social democrat to quasi-nationalist. Far better, I think, for our second party to swing right a little and blast Reform out of the water – which was exactly what Farage et al wished to do to the Tories, after all. Take the Reform line on migration but avoid the let's-invade-Poland-and-bring-back-the-Black-and-White-Minstrels stuff. That, wedded to an economic policy that rewards hard work and supports the traditional family, might just be enough to haul them towards respectability, in terms of voting numbers, by about 2032. Which, coincidentally, is probably the next time anybody will want to read an article about whither the Conservative Party. For a long, long while to come, I suspect that it will simply be a rather horrible memory that we would rather banish from our minds.

New Biden gaffe stuns America



PHOTOBUBBLE: NICK NEWMAN WITH APOLOGIES

● **It is gratifying to know that while the rest of us may be blundering away blindly through life, the scientific community is constantly investigating, empirically, ideas that might be of enormous benefit to us all in the future. I am grateful to the New Scientist for reporting on the following paper from a recent edition of the Journal of Archaeological Science: "Experimental replication shows that knives manufactured from frozen human faeces do not work." Oh, but I bet they had fun trying.**

Step away from the chopsticks, Nicki

If you are attending the Wireless pop festival in Finsbury Park, London, this weekend, I hope you read through the very extensive list of things you are not allowed to do and thus do not fall foul of the dress code. For example, you are banned from wearing clothing "which promotes cultural appropriation", such as ponchos and sombreros (presumably unless you are actually Mexican).

There is a certain irony in a pop festival getting snippy about that idiotic concept, cultural appropriation, given that the medium consists almost entirely of that very thing. Anyway, the right-on organisers should have a word with their headliner, Nicki Minaj, whom I recently saw photographed holding a fan, with her two hair buns fastened by chopsticks and with Chinese writing on her arm.

The bottom line on my election leaflets

So, now the question is what to do with the 35,000 leaflets I failed to deliver during the election campaign — which, had they been dispatched, would undoubtedly have resulted in an overwhelming victory for me. They outline the SDP's core policies and are adorned with a photograph of me looking honest, trustworthy and avuncular. They are everywhere — on the floor of the car, by the toaster, piled up in my study.

Let me forestall your first suggestion: they are glossy and not remotely absorbent. I think they would work best affixed to a giant billboard in Trafalgar Square, reminding the population of what they missed. Or as an edgy artwork in Tate Modern. Over to you.

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NEWS

At braking point: my 53mph day on the M1

Battling roadworks and 'smart' lanes, *Matt Rudd* tried not to fall foul of the ever-changing speed limits on a 135-mile trip

JOSHUA BRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Matt Rudd discovered first hand the stresses of constant speed changes and all-lane motorways

Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am, stuck in the middle lane again. It's late morning, midweek on the M1, and you'd think traffic would be light heading up the backbone of Britain – but you'd be wrong. We're all squeezed into narrow lanes, our speed monitored by those remorseless average-speed cameras. "Roadworks ahead," says the sign unnecessarily. "Watch your speed. 50mph."

I watch my speed, I watch the inches between me and the vehicles on either side and I try to ignore the Spanish 16-wheeler looming in my rear-view mirror. When Steven Spielberg remakes *Duel*, he should do it on the M1.

The signs come thick and first as we crawl past Luton, then Dunstable, then Woburn Safari Park. Speed restrictions are in place for safety, they explain. Installing drainage, they say. And then the National Highways equivalent of the dog ate my homework: "You may not see us, we're working overnight."

In the 15 miles of roadworks that constipate the first stretch of my adventure, I see 12 parked road rollers, several parked trucks, eight men in full hi-vis having what I presume to be a safety briefing and one solitary van driver having an early lunch. One worker for every 1.67 miles of construction is not exactly a hive of activity but I may not have seen them. They're working overnight.

Seven miles shy of Milton Keynes, the narrow lanes end and the so-called smart motorway begins. It's an "all-lane-running" system and all lanes are running.

"SOS area in 1.3 miles," says possibly the dumbest sign you'll see on a smart motorway. Translation: for anyone planning an emergency, please wait.

The odd BMW flies past – it's hard, what with all the testosterone, for them not to speed after that 15-mile snail crawl – but I'm happy enough cruising at 70mph. This, I think rose-tintedly, is motorway driving as it used to be – quick and stress-free. I might even put the roof of my midlife-crisis convertible down in a bit. And then it's over.

The smart motorway isn't happy about something. It has decided 60mph is now the limit. No, sorry, back to 70mph. No again, back to 60mph. Ed Davey got pinged doing 73mph in a 60mph right here. He told the court he missed the changing limit. It's easy to see why.

The Liberal Democrat leader is not alone – message boards are full of road users caught out by the fluctuating algorithm. On whatdotheyknow.com, a website that logs freedom of information requests, hundreds of people have tried to do battle with National Highways about the variable limits on the M1.

Every inquiry begins in the same way: "Dear Highways England Company, can you let me know what the variable speed limit was at X junction at X hours? Yours sincerely, [an aggravated driver]." Sometimes, they're given an answer. More often, they're told the data is not available to the public. The sheer scale of complaints suggests our driving has some way to go to meet the M1's exacting standards.

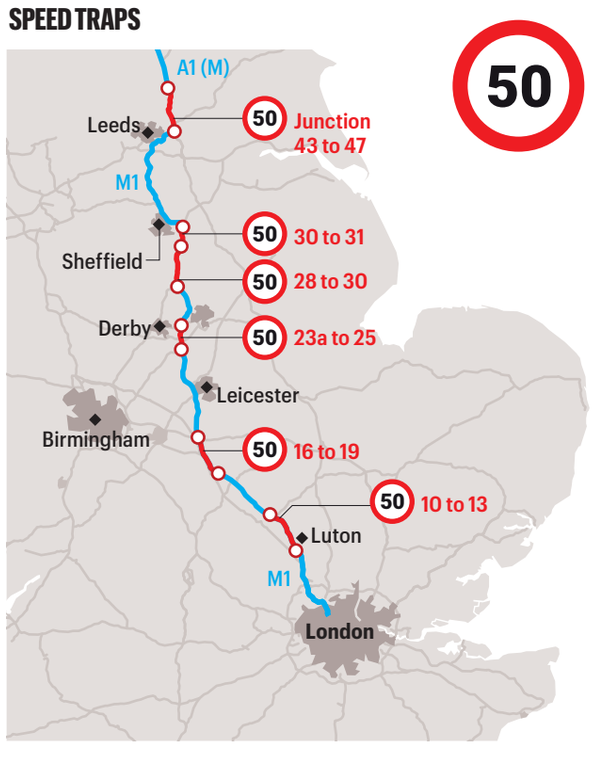
At Watford Gap, it's almost a relief to be back to the next 13-mile stretch of roadworks. On goes the 50mph cruise control and I try to ignore another Spanish 16-wheeler in my rear-view. Or, oh God, is it the same one? Am I in *Duel 2*?

Anyone who uses the M25 regularly will know that it is a car park but the M1 used to be a top-five motorway for road users. Then came congestion. Then came congestion's great panacea – the removal of the hard shoulder. Then came lots of accidents, lots of inquiries and select committees.

Now they're digging it up again, not to put the hard shoulder back, but to add more emergency areas. Currently, 84 miles of the 197-mile motorway is at a 50mph restriction. There are 36 roadwork "events", several of them scheduled for completion well into next year. In between these events, there are stretches of smart motorway and stretches of ye olde three-lane motorway with a hard shoulder. The result is a driving gauntlet.

"The M1 is a complete mess," said Edmund King, president of the AA. "It's almost not a motorway. It doesn't have the national speed limit of 70mph. It has a mishmash of speed limits cutting in and out. For the long-distance driver, it is a real problem. You can't set your cruise control and you can't rely on the sat-nav.

SPEED TRAPS



> **Ed Davey got caught at 73mph in a 60mph zone. It's easy to see why**

The result is drivers who are struggling to concentrate."

Concentration is a big problem on smart motorways. With no hard shoulder, the system relies on both its own technology and our ability to react to a broken-down vehicle. King has listened in on live calls from motorists stranded on all-lane motorways, describing the experience as "horrifying". For his patrols, attending stranded vehicles in live lanes is "Russian roulette".

"We're spending millions of pounds to retrofit the motorway to try to justify what is a flawed concept," he said. "We want a permanent red X on the inside lane and a long white line to delineate that it's a hard shoulder. You wouldn't lose capacity because 30 per cent of drivers don't use the inside lane – they're petrified there may be a broken-down vehicle ahead. Others hog lanes two and three, therefore reducing capacity."

King has called for a hard-hitting campaign against lane-hoggers and surely he has a point. We don't need four lanes. We need three lanes and an angry policeman.

Another 60 fluctuating miles and I turn around just before the M1 swerves Rotherham for Leeds. I've driven 135 miles at an average of 53.3mph.

On the way home, it's worse despite a hawk circling above the Derbyshire Dales and the sunshine coming out and the roof coming down at Newport Pagnell, my third-favourite services because of its bridge. More traffic, more speed variations and a snarl-up when one lorry knocks the brake light off another and neither can move to the hard shoulder.

Duncan Smith, executive director of operations at National Highways, said: "Safety is our number one priority and these M1 improvements [adding 68 new emergency areas and upgrading safety barriers] will help keep more road users safer for the long-term. While this essential work is under way, temporary speed limits are in place for the safety of our workers and road-users. These will be removed when the work is completed next summer."

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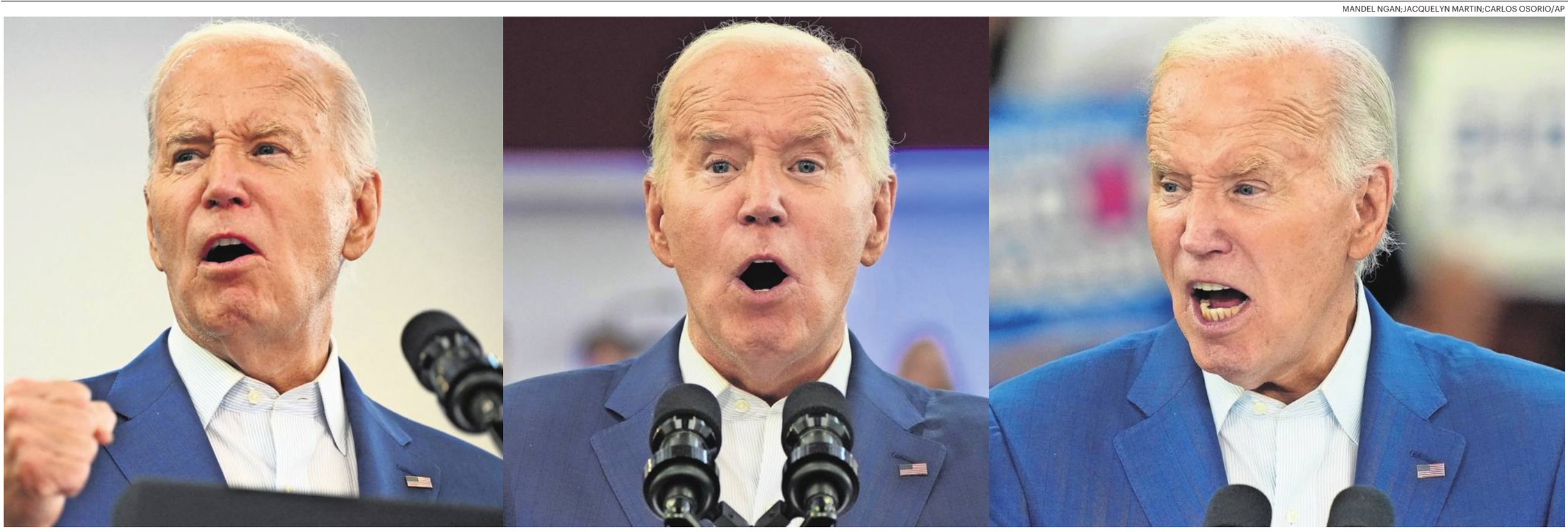


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WORLD NEWS

MANDEL NGAN;JACQUELYN MARTIN;CARLOS OSORIO/AP



Worshippers at Biden's church 'thought he was shaky' six or seven years ago

The president is facing calls to quit even in the seaside town where he has a holiday home. Donald Trump is calling for cognitive tests — for both of them

LOUISE CALLAGHAN



Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

Rain lashed the boardwalk in Rehoboth Beach on Friday night, as locals waited for the whir of the Marine One helicopter to deliver the town's best-known visitors to their holiday home nearby. In the skies above, the Bidens, returning from a rally in Michigan, were at the centre of the storm.

This weekend, the eyes of the world rest nervously on this small seaside town, poring over the actions and words of one 81-year-old, holed up with his family by the sea. A man whose decision to fight on or fold could alter the outcome of two wars, in Europe and the Middle East, and change the course of the history of the United States.

"You better not serve him next time he comes in, unless he promises to step down," snapped one patron at the Double Dippers ice-cream store in the town centre, when she heard a staff member gossiping about President Joe Biden's health. Usually the president's family, who stop by here at times for chocolate chip ice cream, keep up a friendly rapport with other holidaymakers; now the mood was less upbeat.

> **74% of voters say he is too old**

Shock and anger is growing among Democrats throughout the nation as they battle with the question of whether Biden is mentally fit to be their party's nominee in November's election, and whether his condition has been covered up by those around him.

Two weeks ago, a disastrous debate performance dragged festering questions over Biden's age and mental acuity into the open as he stumbled over words and trailed off mid-sentence while facing off against Donald Trump.

Now, 74 per cent of voters believe he's too old for the job, and he is fighting for his political survival. Each day lurches between attempts by Biden to brazen it out or push back against the criticism levelled against him – blaming unnamed "elites" for wanting to end his candidacy – and the steady drip-drip of a teetering attempt by his colleagues to unseat him.

Nearly every day brings more news of Democratic politicians who have called for Biden to step down, or, more often, offered cryptic statements about their "concern" for the president and their hope that he will "make the right decision", despite the fact that he says he has already made it. On Friday Hakeem Jeffries, the minority leader in the House of Representatives, took the concerns of his members directly to Biden.

The president, who likes to portray himself as a scrappy survivor with blue-collar roots, who gets up when he's knocked down, kept fighting.

"You made me the nominee, no one else – not the press, not the pundits, not the insiders, not donors," Biden told the crowd at a rally in Michigan on Friday night, to shouts of "Don't go, Joe!". "You, the voters. You decided. No one else. And I'm not going anywhere."

While the president is set to stay put this weekend, Jill Biden is due to attend an Italian Sons and Daughters of America dinner in Pittsburgh on Saturday night.

Trump, who has remained uncharacteristically quiet during the past few weeks, wrote on Friday on Truth Social, his social media website, that he and Biden should both be tested for mental impairment.

"Joe should immediately take a Cognitive Test, and I will go with him, and take one also," he wrote. "For the first time we'll be a team, and do it for the good of the Country ... And from now on, all Presidential candidates should be mandated to take a Cognitive Test and Aptitude Test, regardless of their age!!!"

Among friends, questions over Biden's health have been growing for some time. At the St Joseph on the Brandywine church in Wilmington, Delaware, where Biden grew up and raised his family, Richard, whose family worship at the church and have known the Bidens socially for decades, said their suspicions were only ever discussed behind closed doors.

"I remember even six or seven years ago, we thought we noticed something," he said, standing in the summer sun by the flawlessly maintained church lawns. "He was shaky, couldn't remember things. It was more of what you saw at the debate. He'd trail off, that kind of thing."

At the end of 2020, Richard and his family had sat together and made predictions for the coming year. One was that Biden would soon step aside because of his age and infirmity. Richard, who had a family member with dementia, thought he recognised similar lapses in Biden.

Of course, none of them said anything to Biden when they met him at church. Pastor John Hopkins, who has led the congregation for three years, disagreed with Richard's characterisation.

"There's nothing wrong with his mind, I can tell you that," he said. "It's just the schedule he keeps."

In Washington DC last week, a wave of fury at the perceived cover-up of Biden's condition was growing every day.

"I am angrier than I've ever been in my f***ing life," said one Democrat activist. "I want to know. I need to know every detail about who knew about this."

Throughout the week, rumours about Biden's condition, when the issues started and exactly what they are, spread through the city. Two junior staffers in the Democratic party insisted to me, improbably, that they'd had the inside track on Biden's decline for more than a year. More senior insiders, perhaps afraid of subpoenas and investigations, told anyone who would listen that they'd had no idea.

"We had two very, very, very hard weeks, very bad weeks. I told you I'd level with you, they've been bad f***ing weeks," said Jen O'Malley Dillon, Biden's campaign chair, in a leaked audio recording of a call with staff published by Axios, a US news website. She also said that recent polls actually showed the race moving in the Democrats' favour, adding: "Do you know what Joe Biden does every day? He gets up and he keeps fighting."

Yet for most Democrats, the idea that Biden's failure to tell the truth about his health could result in a second Trump term is unconscionable. Many genuinely believe that the former president is a threat to democracy, and that he will dismantle freedoms, whether that's abortion rights or the right to seek asylum, that are deeply important to them.

So when President Biden calls into MSNBC's *Morning Joe* show, a weekday news programme, and rails against "elites" who he claims are trying to push him out, and says the people of America are behind him, Democrats are angry.

"I think we just feel gaslit," said one Democrat-leaning journalist who covers US politics. "I think it's just like: nothing to see here, carry on. But you can't unsee that [debate performance]."

Meanwhile, Republicans are keeping unusually quiet about the Democrats' woes. It should have been a triumphant week for the party, ahead of its convention in Milwaukee which starts on Monday. Their opponents are in full-scale nuclear meltdown, and the media is focused on Biden's health, rather than Trump's shortcomings.

Joe Biden campaigning at a school in Detroit on Friday as he tried to fend off calls for him to step aside

Yet instead of crowing, or pushing for Biden's final political demise, many are extremely cautious, stepping away from social media. Even Trump, who has spent the past year saying that Biden is senile and too old for the job, has spent the week mostly playing golf.

> **I think we just feel gaslit**

The reason is very simple: leading Republicans want Biden to stay on the ticket. "We don't want to jinx it," said one conservative activist. "And we don't want Trump to f*** it up by saying something crazy that unites them [Democrats] and rallies support for Biden." Several others referred to Sun Tzu's maxim that you should never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.

"We got the candidate we want," Steve Bannon, Trump's former White House strategist wrote in an email to Breitbart, the right-wing news website, from a federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, where he is serving a four-month sentence for defying a congressional subpoena. "And the country is stuck with a non-performing cadaver."

Republicans close to Trump say they believe they can win against Biden, or against vice-president Kamala Harris if she replaces him. But if Trump had to fight Harris, a 59-year-old former attorney-general, the news cycle would be dominated by how a young prosecutor was standing against a convicted felon. Next to her, 78-year-old Trump would also look very old. The Democrats have started commissioning polling to see how Harris would match up against Trump.

According to most polls published after the debate, on average she would do roughly as well as the president against Trump – though one ABC/Ipsos poll showed Harris beating Trump by three points. A survey last week, widely shared by the Democrats, showed that Harris could be stronger with younger voters than Biden – a key demographic he has struggled with.

Republicans scoff at this. "Trump will destroy her," said one in Trump's wider circle. "That's not even a question."

Harris was elected as the first black and first female vice-president amid enormous hopes and expectations. Yet she has struggled to make herself known on the national stage. Even her allies admit that she struggles with public speaking but at a rally in North Carolina on Friday, she launched broadsides at Trump and said November would bring "the most existential, consequential, and important election of our lifetime.

"Democrats have the power to elect President Biden and Kamala Harris," she said. "And they need to stop whining."

Camilla Long, page 25

Adam Smith

Failed Kennedy coup in 1980 traps Democrats today

For two years, the leadership of the Democratic party has buried its head in the sand about this looming electoral catastrophe.

Since President Biden's shaky performance in the first head-to-head debate a fortnight ago, a few elected Democrats – and celebrity donors such as George Clooney – have publicly called on President Biden to step aside. But most have not.

The majority are now compelled to look straight down a camera lens and insist with a straight face that Biden is not only on top form today but will be fit to serve in the world's most demanding job in four and a half years. They are saying this of a man born at the height of the Second World War, in the same year as Neil Kinnock, a man who Biden plagiarised when he first ran for president back in 1988. Meanwhile, polls suggest Donald Trump, a twice-impeached convicted felon, is comfortably ahead, both in national vote share and in the crucial swing states.

So, how did the Democrats get here?

The core problem is that over the past half-century, the two main political parties have been hollowed out as institutions. For most of the 20th century, there were party leaders who took responsibility. From ward bosses at the local level up to county and state committees and long-serving US senators who wielded patronage like medieval barons, these party men – and they were, of course, almost all white men – saw their role as being to organise for victory, year after year. If they failed, everyone knew who to blame.

Every four years, national conventions decided on the party's presidential candidate in smoke-filled rooms and, when necessary, multiple rounds of voting. There were sometimes primary elections preceding the convention, but they were "beauty contests" which could be ignored by the party leaders if they chose.

By the early 1970s, however, a new mood of democratisation – as well as pressure from newly empowered African Americans to smash the control of prejudiced party bosses – led to a series of hugely consequential reforms. Primary elections, in which, in most states, any voter who chooses can participate, became binding, not advisory. Delegates at national conventions still formally chose the presidential nominee, but the decision-making had been outsourced to the masses.

Republicans followed the same path of empowering primary voters at the expense of traditional party leaders. That was why Donald Trump, an outsider, was able to win the presidential nomination in 2016 despite being viscerally opposed by almost all of the party's leaders. It was a vivid reminder that American political parties, unlike their counterparts in the UK or anywhere else, are not private associations which can determine their own membership.

It is an irony, given the Democrats' position today, that one of the short-term effects of the open system was to empower challenges to a sitting president. Ronald Reagan ran against President Ford in the Republican primaries in 1976, and Senator Edward Kennedy ran against Democratic president Jimmy Carter in 1980. In both cases the incumbent won the primary race, but, damaged by their own side, went on to lose the White House. The lesson learned was that incumbents should be given a free ride.

With Biden, however, this has resulted in the worst of all worlds. The president faced no serious challenger in the primaries and so won almost all of the roughly 4,000 convention delegates who will meet in Chicago on August 19.

Biden is in a strong position because his primary victories give him a mandate. But when he claims that it is only the "elites" who are trying to get him to step aside, he is completely wrong.



Ted Kennedy ran against Jimmy Carter for the nomination in 1980

> **No one individual or group will be made to carry the can if Biden loses**

It is not only elites who think him too old to run; it took the excruciating debate before party leaders belatedly started echoing what voters have been telling pollsters for years. But he is right that the hollowed party no longer has the institutional legitimacy it once would have had to disregard the results of the primary elections and nominate someone else. The Democrats' rulebook states that "all delegates to the National Convention pledged to a presidential candidate shall in all good conscience reflect the sentiments of those who elected them", meaning that, even if delegates are convinced that Biden is on a slow death-march towards defeat, they will probably have to nominate him anyway. Perhaps the "good conscience" clause offers some wriggle room, but that remains to be tested.

No doubt some Democrats are in good faith when they argue that Biden still has the best chance of defeating Trump. But self-interested motives are also at play. It's risky for those whose careers are on the line to put their head above the parapet – and it might suit those with presidential ambitions to focus on a 2028 run after a scandal-ridden Trump second term, with Kamala Harris discredited by association with a failed Biden campaign.

Before the 1970s, this problem would never have arisen. The party bosses would have taken control. No one would have questioned the legitimacy of the party convention to nominate whoever it thought best placed to win. But in 2024, no one individual or group will be made to carry the can if Biden loses.

Democrats say that Trump's election would be an existential threat to American democracy. If delegates to the Democratic convention genuinely think that renominating Joe Biden is the best way of avoiding what they see as an impending catastrophe, so be it.

But suppose they do not. Suppose, knowing full well that voters will not support someone so old and faltering, delegates renominate him anyway because they are trapped within a twisted institutional logic of their own making. In that case, they will be culpable for the outcome in November and all that flows from it, however much they may pretend otherwise.

Adam Smith is the Edward Orsborn professor of US politics and political history at Oxford University

Baldwin case fell apart after prosecution 'buried' envelope of bullets dropped off at sheriff's office

Dominic Hauschild and Keiran Southern

A previously unexamined envelope of ammunition was the difference between Alec Baldwin walking free, as he did last night, and a potential 18-month prison sentence for involuntary manslaughter.

But where did the bullets come from, and how did they lead to the extraordinary unravelling of one of America's highest profile felony trials in decades?

Baldwin, 66, had faced the charge of involuntary manslaughter after accidentally shooting dead the cinematographer Halyna Hutchins in 2021 on a New Mexico set for the movie *Rust*.

The actor, who was playing the part of the eponymous Harland Rust, pointed a revolver intended to be used as a prop at Hutchins and, allegedly, pulled the trigger. Instead of the industry standard blank rounds, the handgun contained live ammunition.

Speaking yesterday for the first time since the case was dismissed, Baldwin said there were "too many people who have supported me" to thank immediately. "To all of you, you will never know how much I appreciate your kindness toward my family."

The film's armourer, Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, was convicted in March on the same charges and sentenced to the maximum 18 months in prison.

Throughout the most recent trial, which was held at a court in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the lawyers for the defence had complained several times that prosecutors were not sharing all the evidence they held against Baldwin, including missing forensic reports, redacted emails and videos buried on servers.

At some point, they learnt that a retired police officer named Troy Teske had found a number of Colt 45-calibre bullets he believed to be related to the case, dropping them off at the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office. As with previous evidence, prosecutors did not tell Baldwin's defence lawyers.

"They should have given over this information, but they didn't," said Anne Bremner, a high-profile US lawyer and television legal commentator who previously worked as a legal adviser to supporters of Amanda Knox in the Meredith Kercher murder trial. "In essence, they took some information about live rounds and decided it wasn't relevant," she told Times Radio. "And the fact is that they gave [the rounds] a different case number so the defence could never know what it was."

The key to using this information came through patience. Previously, when the defence learnt that important evidence had been withheld they lodged a complaint before the day's trial had begun.

Judge Mary Marlowe Sommer rejected petitions to dismiss the trial and ordered delays to give the lawyers time to analyse the new facts. This time, Baldwin's lawyers waited.

RAMSAY DE GIVE/REUTERS





Alec Baldwin and his wife, Hilaria, were in tears after the judge accepted a motion to dismiss the case

On Thursday afternoon Alex Spiro, the defence lead, had cross-examined the crime scene technician Marissa Poppell for several hours. Towards the end of the questioning, the lawyer asked Poppell about a "Good Samaritan" who had dropped off the bullets at the sheriff's office.

Poppell denied it was her responsibility to tell the defence about the rounds. Spiro accused her: "You buried it." The judge demanded to see the ammunition and, wearing blue rubber gloves, cut open the evidence package, displaying the bullets.

Kari Morrissey, the lead prosecutor, claimed the bullets in question did not match the ones found at the *Rust* set, and were therefore not relevant. But the judge found three Starline Brass rounds with silver primers – an apparent match for the round that killed Hutchins.

Morrissey then called herself to the stand to set out her account. Under cross-examination from Spiro she crumbled, forced to deny having a personal animus against Baldwin. At 7.52pm on Thursday, the defence filed a motion to dismiss the case. On Friday, the judge delivered a dismissal ruling.

Baldwin and his wife, Hilaria, wept. As he left the courtroom he declined to speak to the waiting press, turning his back on a case that marred his reputation for more than two years.

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Civilians targeted in new Russian blitz

The intensifying bombardment is part of a ruthless campaign to weaken support for the war, but Dnipro is unbowed

Matthew Campbell Dnipro

They stroll with children in parks, sit on café terraces or stand casting long rods for carp in the river. The citizens of Dnipro, a large industrial city in eastern Ukraine, seem almost ostentatiously nonchalant in the face of war.

But the enemy intrudes on normal life as suddenly as the summer thunderstorms that roll across the steppe: a few days ago, Kateryna Avdeyeva, 46, a chef, was in the park with her five-year-old son, Artem, when a rocket roared overhead and exploded.

Returning home, they found a smouldering ruin. Three people were dead in the entrance to their block of flats and a dozen injured, including a seven-month-old baby. A wall had been ripped off Avdeyeva's flat; had they gone home ten minutes earlier they would probably be dead. She put a brave face on it all. "The Russians are trying to destroy us," she said, "but we must find the strength to continue."

Russia has intensified its barrage of Ukraine's big cities in recent days as President Putin seeks to terrorise the populace into submission. No one is spared, not even children undergoing treatment for cancer.

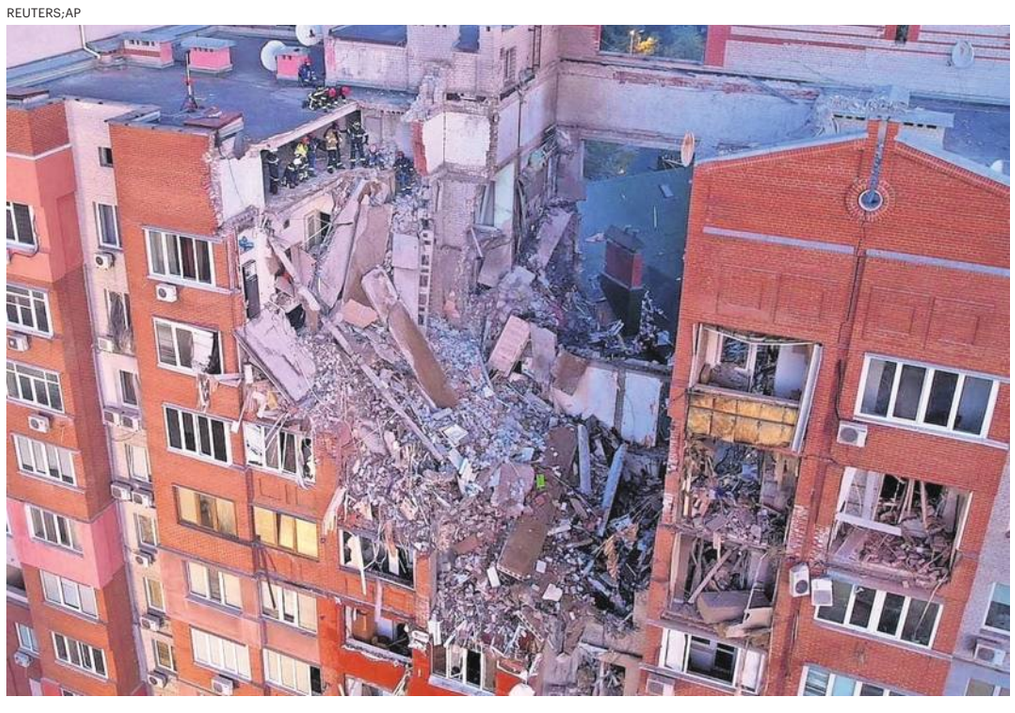
Olena, 31, and five-year-old Mysha, who recently had surgery on an eye, were in Kyiv's children's hospital last Monday for a follow-up appointment when a cruise missile launched from a Russian aircraft tore the building to pieces.

"There was a lot of broken glass, blood, wounded people, it was terrifying, I covered my son's eyes," said Olena, a businesswoman. The two escaped, miraculously, without a scratch but a doctor and an adult visitor were killed and dozens more injured, including some of the children.

On the same day, at least 27 other civilians were killed in attacks with precision missiles on a maternity clinic and homes in the capital, including ten residents of a single block of flats; and 15 more died under a barrage of rockets in other cities, including Dnipro.

According to military experts, the killing and maiming of civilians is neither an accident nor indiscriminate: Russia is targeting them in a cynical effort to undermine support for their leaders and boost international calls for a settlement.

REUTERS;AP



> **I don't know whether my son is alive**

"I'm always surprised when people say it must have been an accident," said General Sir Richard Barrons, a former British Army commander.

"Sometimes there's a reluctance to believe it, but that's naive – no one should be surprised by this, Russia does things completely ruthlessly, it's absolutely clear this is part of a campaign to directly target the civilian population with precision weapons."

He believed the quickening "pulse" of rocket attacks had been timed to coincide with last week's Nato summit in Washington. "It helps to nourish the narrative among US Republicans that 'Ukraine can't ever win this war, the longer it goes on the more civilians will be killed, we shouldn't provide support for Ukraine, we should tell them to settle'."

The attacks were also meant to inflict such pain on civilians that "instead of supporting their leaders they tell them to stop fighting".

So far, this strategy has not succeeded. Nowhere better exemplifies the defiant mood than Dnipro. Once a hub of the Soviet nuclear, arms and space industries, the city has known upheavals in the past – in the Second World War, 20,000 of the city's Jewih populations were shot by the Nazis.

The biggest and deadliest war to engulf the region since then has not dimmed people's sense of humour: "Rocket city", Dnipro's nickname in Soviet days, is becoming grimly apt once more, people quip, as the tempo of Russian attacks on it quickens.

In a wine bar I met Federico Sersale, 37, an Argentinian aid worker. He had been chatting online with friends in Latin America when the thunderous explosion that destroyed Avdeyeva's flat rattled his windows. He rushed to the site with his team: "We stayed until midnight, trying to arrange shelter for survivors whose homes had been wrecked."



Buildings in Dnipro, including homes and a maternity clinic, have been destroyed. The Russian Defence Ministry released an image, above, of bombs being dropped by a Sukhoi Su-34

He had arrived only two weeks before to take up a job representing the UN's agency for the protection of refugees (UNHCR) in Dnipro.

While Sersale is no stranger to working in conflict zones, there is something particularly unnerving about Russia's aerial attacks on civilian blocks of flats, he said. "It's incredibly scary," Sersale said. "There are big invisible effects, these attacks cause lots of trauma and anxiety."

This explains in part why ten million Ukrainians have fled their homes, boosting a global refugee population of 120 million from conflicts, the greatest displacement the world has ever known.

"It's a record we wish had never been broken," said Karolina Lindholm Billing, the UNHCR's chief representative in Ukraine.

Ukraine's refugees include almost 3.7 million in the country and nearly 6.5 million who have fled overseas. From his headquarters in Dnipro, 243 miles southeast of the capital, Sersale oversees the UN assistance to one million "internally displaced people" in eastern Ukraine.

Half live in abandoned buildings in Dnipro. One is a former kindergarten, where refugee children play outside in a plastic swimming pool.

"We try to keep them entertained," said Anna, the supervisor. "We all need a bit of cheer in these terrible times."

Upstairs, Lalita, a schoolteacher from Lysychansk, showed off some of the children's watercolours: "It's a little bit of art therapy for them, some have been through awful horrors."

> **There is a lot of anxiety and trauma**

It is the older generation, though, that Sersale worries about most: he channels his 98-year-old grandmother, Rita, when trying to understand what Ukrainian seniors must be suffering. "My granny taught me how to look at things through the lens of the elderly," he said. "They are the most vulnerable."

This month, Hanna Kartamisheva, 75, left Selydove, her home town in eastern Ukraine, for what she is certain will be the last time. Unable to cope after two heart attacks and a stroke, she took no luggage with her on the evacuation bus – just two photos of her son Oleksandr. She does not expect to see him again.

She had begged the injured 53-year-old to come with her, but he wanted to stay to the end.

"Now I don't even know if he is alive," she said, her face a permanent expression of anguish as she sat on a bed in one of the refugee shelters in Dnipro.

The town she left behind was where she was born and where she married, gave birth to a son, was widowed and worked most of her life in a grocery store – "the fanciest shop in town", she said.

By the time she left, Russian bombing had reduced much of the town to rubble. She held up the two photos she brought with her, showing her son wearing a military uniform. "He wanted to stay, to kill and to die," she said.

She went on to describe how as a volunteer in 2022 he had joined a unit of five in a trench during the battle for Bakhmut.

One day a mortar killed his companions. He suffered a severe concussion. "He does not stop thinking about his dead friends, sometimes he forgets that they are dead, he speaks to them, he shouts that he will come out to fight with them to kill all the Russians, he shouts, 'Bring me grenades!'" Kartamisheva said.

She stared at the photographs once more, dried her eyes with a shirtsleeve, took a deep breath and said: "I pray every day for the victory of our soldiers. And I swear if I were younger, if I didn't have this heart problem, I'd join the army and kill all the Russians I could."

Additional reporting: Dasha Morozova

Mark Galeotti

If the war is about who can sacrifice most, Putin will win

As Nato leaders congratulate themselves on their resolve in Washington and find new ways to not give Ukraine a comprehensive road map to membership, they need to ask themselves if their strategy is working: are we truly able to outlast Putin's Russia in a war of attrition in Ukraine?

An American diplomat last month was scathing about Vladimir Putin's strategy, saying: "In the long run, he's trying to outlast a bloc with an economy 20 times the size of Russia's – you do the math. It may take time, but we'll manage to impose the kinds of costs that will force him to retreat."

That certainly is the western strategy. The irony is that while Putin is derided for his "attritional" strategy, trying to outlast Ukraine's ability to fight and the West's willingness to pay for it, the West's strategy is the same. At present, Putin doesn't seem to be blinking. From his vantage point, why should he?

Attempts to isolate Putin have been at best a partial success. A month ago, a British diplomat assured me that "efforts to make it clear to the Indians how counterproductive their relationship with Moscow is are beginning to bear fruit". On Monday, however, India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, was in Moscow hugging Putin and exploring greater trade and defence co-operation.

Even Europe is not united. The Friday before, Hungary's maverick prime minister, Viktor Orban, was in Moscow in the first visit by a European leader for more than two years. Although a private initiative, the fact that he holds the rotating presidency of the European Council was a boon to Russian propagandists.

Putin has been toughening his position of late. Last month he asserted that his preconditions for a ceasefire, let alone a peace deal, were Ukraine's willingness to accept the annexation of the territories Russia has occupied and give up on its hopes to join Nato. Moscow is trying to convey the message that it is time for concessions because everything will only get uglier the longer the war drags on. Uglier, primarily, for the people of Ukraine. Monday's attack on Kyiv, when a cruise missile devastated a children's hospital, could have been calculated to illustrate this.

Yet also uglier for the West. This year has marked an escalation of sabotage across Europe. In March flames tore through Ukrainian-owned warehouses in Leyton, east London, following an arson attack, while a recent ransomware cyberattack on a laboratory services provider for the NHS has also been linked to Russia.

In Germany, CNN reported on Friday that US and German intelligence foiled a Russian plot to assassinate Armin Papperger, the chief executive of a prominent German arms manufacturer, in the first plot of its kind against a significant figure on European soil.

Russia is also trying to increase the political costs for the West. US intelligence says Moscow is seeking to boost Trump's prospects in the presidential elections. In the main Russia does not aim to influence the outcomes of polls: this is, as a European security official admitted, "both difficult and usually counterproductive". It is, however, concentrating on exacerbating tensions in and between countries.

So who is better at a war of attrition? It's all very well trotting out the usual comforting talking point about comparative GDPs, but the point is that this is an existential struggle for Putin in a way that it is not for the West. Putin is willing to distort his economy, burn future prospects, break international law and send tens of thousands of his citizens to their deaths on a battlefield in a way that we are not.

The irony is that while Putin himself may be an ageing and out-of-touch figure, the Russian state is proving more able to evolve its tactics, both on the battlefield and in the world at large.

This war caught Moscow by surprise. Most Russian officials did not know Putin planned to invade, and those few who did seem to have accepted his view that it would be a quick and nearly bloodless triumph. As a result, they did terribly at first. Their troops were decimated on the battlefield by determined defenders, and their propagandists were caught flat-footed, peddling wholly implausible stories of Ukrainian "Nazis" and American biological warfare laboratories.

Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister, meeting Putin in Moscow last week



Since then, they have, in their own way, adapted. Putin's generals have learnt to use more drone, electronic warfare and dismounted infantry attacks. Their disinformation campaigns have become more sophisticated.

More broadly, the Russian state is being transformed, with all efforts geared towards fighting a long war. One can wonder how long it can afford this, with its factories running 24/7 and 40 per cent of the national budget being spent on defence. Yet the Soviet Union in the 1970s spent twice as large a proportion of its national income on its military as Russia does now, and sustained that for more than a decade. We should not expect a quick collapse.

The West's strategy depends on Putin, a hidebound figure backed by a ruthless security apparatus and fighting for his political life (maybe even his actual life) changing tack. His strategy, meanwhile, depends on the West succumbing to exhaustion and chaos. The US elections will bring either the return of Trump, who has made clear his dissatisfaction with Ukraine policy, or recriminations by his supporters if he loses.

Europeans appear to be divided as to whether Ukraine should negotiate a peace or fight on until it has liberated all the occupied territories. Governments are also grappling with the challenge of balancing greater aid to Ukraine and spending on defence with domestic demands for improved public services. The final determinations will be made on the battlefield. As new western stocks of ammunition and F-16 jets begin to arrive, the Ukrainians may still be able to muster a new counterattack next year. If successful, this could hearten the West and force Putin to make concessions.

The West has stumbled on its current strategy. We were unwilling to consider alternatives and the Washington conference is more of the same. A serious conversation on whether this strategy is fit for purpose is well overdue.

Professor Mark Galeotti is the author of more than 20 books on Russia, most recently Downfall: Prigozhin and Putin, and the New Fight for the Future of Russia (Penguin, June 2024)

WORLD NEWS

Lame-duck Macron unites the nation (against him)

The president's reckless rush to an election has left him in a lonely position. Will he manage three more years, asks *Peter Conradi*

When President Macron led the Bastille Day celebrations at the Arc de Triomphe on July 14, 2017, with his wife, Brigitte, to his left, and Donald Trump to his right, he was riding as high as the military jets decorating the skies above him with trails of blue, white and red smoke.

Aged just 39, the self-styled "disrupter" from the radical centre had just beaten Marine Le Pen, his right-wing nemesis, to the presidency and helped his supporters to win a thumping majority in parliament.

Seven years on, Macron will cut a much-diminished figure at today's event. Even members of his own entourage are deserting him over his reckless handling of a political crisis largely of his own creation that threatens to turn the disrupter into a demolition man.

"I won't be on the ministerial platform on July 14," one unnamed member of the government told BFM, a rolling news channel. "It's ridiculous, what message would that send to the French? That everything is continuing as before?"

When Macron called a snap parliamentary vote that concluded last Sunday, his avowed intention was to provide "clarity" for the country after Le Pen's hard-right National Rally won last month's elections to the European parliament. But although the French people have now spoken, no one can agree what they said.

A week later, there is still no new government, Gabriel Attal, the outgoing prime minister, has been asked to stay on as a caretaker, and there are fears trouble could spill on to the streets before the Paris Olympics, now less than a fortnight away.

Macron himself – once dubbed "Jupiter" for his imperious style – risks being reduced to a lame duck in his remaining three years in the Élysée Palace and may eventually have little choice but give up and step down early.

"Jupiter is dead," was the withering verdict of Dominique de Villepin, a former prime minister. "Jupiter has been defeated at the ballot box."

BERTRAND GUAY/AFP



Huguette Bello, from Réunion, could become prime minister under Macron

Since the foundation of France's current Fifth Republic in 1958, its elections have produced clear majorities, in most cases from the same camp as the president himself. Although Macron's supporters narrowly failed to do so in the last poll in 2022, they were still by far the strongest force.

This time, by contrast, the parliament contains three large, mutually antagonistic groups. The New Popular Front, a hastily cobbled together coalition of Socialists, Communists, Greens and the hard-left France Unbowed, came first, but with only 178 seats, which left it far short of the 289 needed for an absolute majority.

Macron's Together alliance trailed with 150 seats, while the National Rally had far fewer than expected at 125. Although it won the first round and was widely expected to win the second one too, its ambitions were thwarted by supporters of the other two blocs, who followed calls by their leaders to vote tactically to keep it from power. The centre-right Republicans form a much smaller fourth force.

Under the French constitution, Macron is free to appoint whomever he likes to take Attal's place, though convention suggests he should choose the head of the most successful bloc.

The New Popular Front insists this means it should be one of their number, who would then implement their



radical left-wing programme, which includes a sharp rise in the minimum wage, some price control and a cut in the retirement age. But they were not immediately able to say who that should be after going into the election without having agreed on a single leader.

Initial attempts by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 72, the divisive leader of the hard-left France Unbowed, to claim the job for himself or one of his lieutenants were rebuffed by the four other more moderate parties in the group worried that would scare off more mainstream voters.

Days of often acrimonious discussion followed behind closed doors. But by Friday evening, support appeared to be coalescing around the unlikely figure of Huguette Bello, the president of the regional council of Réunion, which, although an island in the Indian Ocean 5,800 miles from Paris, is a French department

Bello, 73, a former Communist and MP for more than two decades, who is little known to the public, has indicated that she would be up for the job, though the Socialists were still insisting that it should go to Olivier Faure, 55, their own leader. A poll, meanwhile, showed voters preferred his colleague, Raphaël Glucksmann, 44, who led the Socialists' campaign for the European parliament.

There is no guarantee, however, that Bello, Faure, Glucksmann or indeed anyone that the left can come up with would have enough support in parliament to survive a confidence vote.

Macron, too, has made clear he has a very different plan for who should be his prime minister. Before escaping the political melodrama to spend a couple of days at the Nato summit in Washington on Wednesday, he sent a letter to regional newspapers in which he insisted that no one, the left included, had won the election and suggested instead the formation of a broader-based government.

Centred on his own Together bloc, this would include the moderate left and Republicans on the right, but exclude the National Rally and France Unbowed, both of whose ideas are anathema to him.

It remains to be seen whether Macron will get what he wants. Mélenchon and his allies have accused him of a "power grab" while trade unions have threatened stoppages during the Games.

Many of Macron's own MPs, meanwhile, are still angry with him for calling an election that cost the party more than a third of its seats. Some leading figures are also falling out among themselves amid signs that they are jockeying for position as the president's eventual successor in 2027 – or earlier if he chooses to step down before.

"They're fighting over a cake that's past its sell-by date, it's depressing," one anonymous senior party figure told Le Figaro.

The mood among the president's supporters, past and present, was summed up by Gilles Le Gendre, a disenchanted former MP who was president of his party's parliamentary group for two years from 2018.

"Macronism is finished," he said. "The only coalition that exists today is the one against the president."

In Italy's tinderbox flats, neighbourly rows can turn deadly

Tom Kington Rome

Whether it's the smell of boiled broccoli wafting down a stairwell or cigarette butts flicked off a balcony, these days it takes very little to trigger a furious row between Italian neighbours.

"Something has changed – the courts are backed up with flat owners suing each other over the sound of high heels on parquet," said Giuseppe Bica, the head of Anammi, Italy's biggest association of building managers.

Fifteen per cent of Anammi's 13,000 members have reported being on the end of verbal or physical assaults by residents this year – a sharp rise on previous years. Fights often end up in court, with half of all civil cases in Italy prompted by rows between neighbours.

"When one manager in Naples pointed out to a flat-owner that his bike was blocking an entrance, the owner broke two of his fingers," said Bica.

More than ever, Italy's army of often-maligned building managers are forced to keep the peace.

In a country where 70 per cent live in apartment buildings, and where any block with eight or more flats must by law hire a manager to handle maintenance and decorum, coexistence has always been tense, with bickering common at residents' meetings.

Increasingly bad behaviour is fuelling the fighting. Bica said, "Graffiti is a growing problem. In one building someone painted a series of increasingly explicit sex scenes up the lift shaft, which you could see through the cage of the lift as you rose to the top floor, where the sex act was consummated."

Despite the assault in Naples, Bica said feuding was most common in Milan in northern Italy. "Everyone is clued up on the law there which makes them keener to start legal battles," he said.

Managers report 45 per cent of feuding occurs in the north, with 35 per cent in central Italy including Rome, which made the headlines in 2022 when an aggrieved resident walked into a meeting of 30 of his neighbours and opened fire with a Glock pistol.

Claudio Campiti, who had refused to pay his share of housing bills, yelled, "I will kill you all" and fatally shot three women before he was overpowered. "He was taking aim at the building manager when his pistol jammed," said Luiga Frezza, a manager who runs 24 buildings with a team of two colleagues in Rome's middle-class Gianicolense neighbourhood.

Frezza blamed the breakdown in civility on the months of lockdown during the pandemic. "The isolation put distance between people and they cannot and don't want to restart relationships," she said.

Listing the top reasons for shouting at meetings, Frezza started with cigarette butts thrown off balconies, watering devices for plants leaking water onto lower balconies and flying crumbs as people shake tablecloths out of windows. "At meetings it all comes out and we're in the middle," she said.

Food smells accentuate cultural differences. Eastern Europeans have been castigated for cooking with excess garlic; Bangladeshis have had complaints about spicy aromas.

"We tell managers to encourage residents to host dinners for neighbours so they can taste food they don't know," Bica said.

ILLUSTRATION BY NINA KRAUSE





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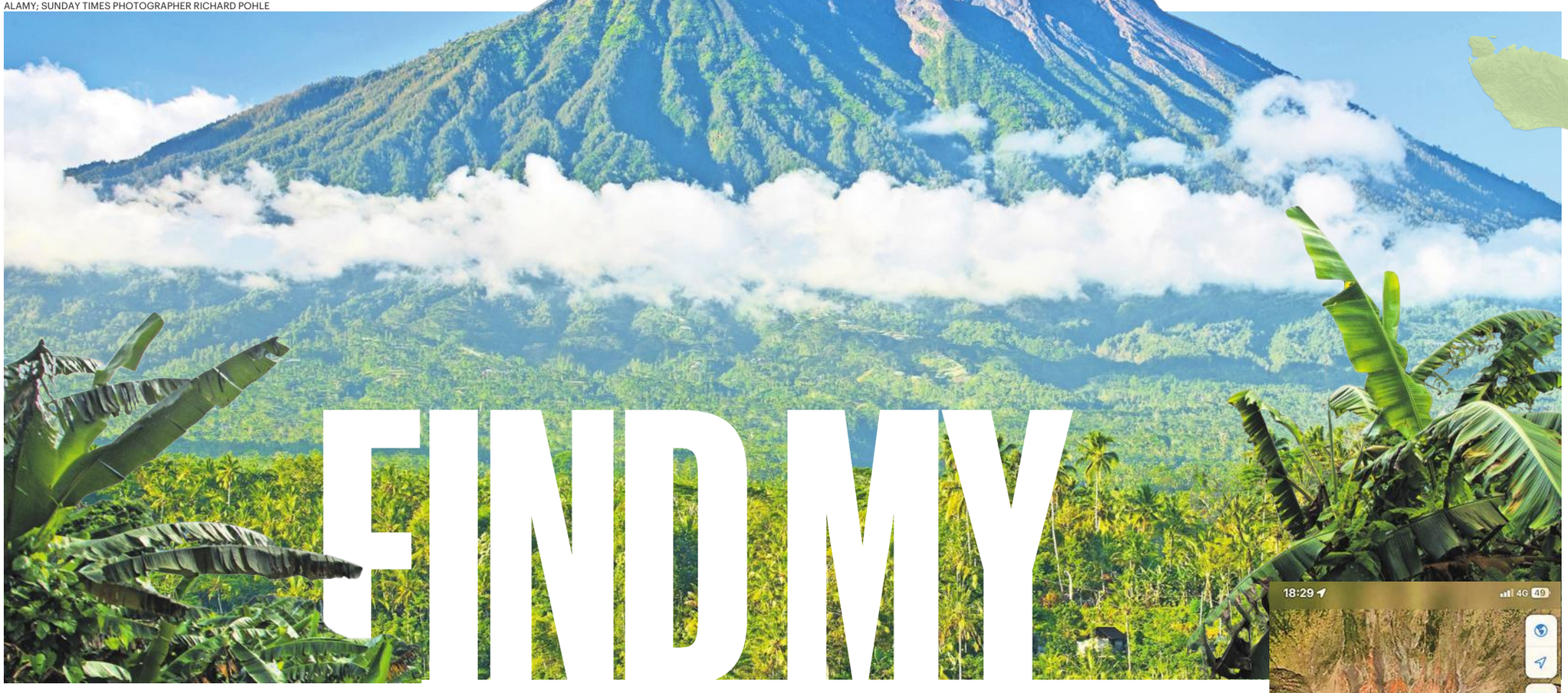
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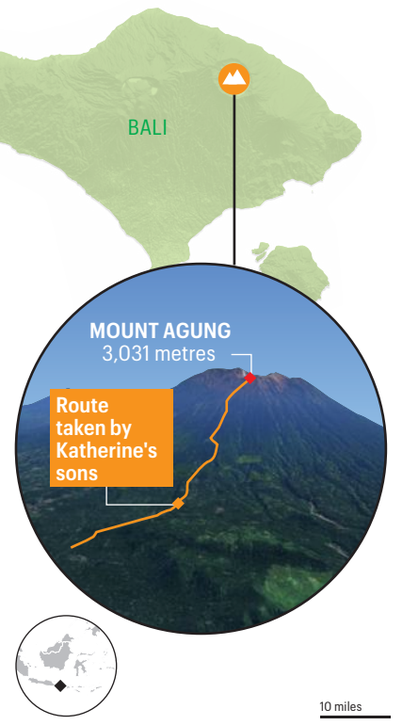
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NEWS REVIEW

ALAMY; SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE







Andrew and Matthew Forster, pictured home safe below, set off alone to Mount Agung. For hours, all that their mother knew of their whereabouts was on the FindMy app, left

FIND MY BOYS

The backpacking sons of *Katherine Forster* decided to climb a volcano in Bali … and went missing for 40 hours. She relives how the worst day of her life became the best, thanks to a rescue team and a phone app

I'd been looking forward to Friday July 5 for ages. After six weeks of hard grind on the election campaign trail, I was to be outside 10 Downing Street from 6am, reporting as a political correspondent for GB News while history was made.

But more importantly (for me), my two eldest sons were coming home after nine weeks exploring south-east Asia. When they were little, Matthew and Andrew's "holidays" had been just going to their grandparents' in Yorkshire. We graduated to camping in northern France, but Andrew didn't step on a plane till he was 11. Now he's 18 and this was a huge adventure for both of them; Matthew, 22, a happy, energetic chatterbox; Andrew quieter, thoughtful, strong. They are a great team.

But on July 5 I wasn't outside No 10. And my sons hadn't come home.

I woke up at 6am on election morning. The boys had arranged proxy votes from Bali. It was 1pm there, so I rang Matthew, then Andrew, to check how they wanted me to vote for them.

Both calls went straight to voicemail.

I wasn't worried. They'd ring back soon. They'd been incredible at keeping in touch, through Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. But neither did.

I looked at FindMy on my iPhone, which tracks the location of friends and family. I saw that Matthew's last location was registered two days earlier. On Mount Agung, 3,031 metres high. The tallest volcano in Bali. It was a glitch, surely. They couldn't still be there two days later.

We'd last spoken on Monday. They mentioned they'd been poorly, and something about a hike in passing. I'd said "Please go in a group, and stay together. People get lost, phones die" and so forth. They knew all about Michael Mosley and Jay Slater, two stories of missing British men abroad that have gripped and horrified the nation this summer. "We're not stupid, Mum," Matthew had said.

I made tea. At 7am, I got a text from Matthew's friend Jonah, saying they were "slightly worried". He said that a new travelling friend, Sarah, had messaged me on Instagram the day before. I rang Sarah in Sweden. She told me they'd set off to climb Agung in the early hours of Wednesday morning to see the sunrise from the top.

"Tell me they were with a guide."

"No, they were on their own."

The bottom fell out of my stomach. Horrified and furious, I couldn't compute how they could be so stupid.

Sarah and Matthew had been in daily contact since they'd met in Vietnam weeks earlier. He'd rung her on the hike and said it was hard going. She said "turn back". They carried on, reaching the summit shortly before their phones died.

Thirty hours had passed. Sarah had spent Wednesday trying to contact Matthew, then (thank God) reported them missing that night. She sent the British embassy screenshots that they'd sent her, showing their route tracker.

As she spoke my youngest son, Jonathan, 15, was getting ready for school, grumpy but content in his parallel universe where it was just another morning. I let him leave oblivious; no point in worrying him yet.

I rang the embassy in Bali and was diverted to the emergency response team at the Foreign Office in London. They already had the details from Sarah, and I sent them photos and more information.

The boys had created a WhatsApp group for me and some of our closest friends in Chiswick, west London, to keep us updated on their travels. It was bursting with photos and videos: bathing elephants in Thailand, swimming with turtles and sharks, wearing sharp suits they'd had tailor-made for £100 each in Vietnam. I hijacked the thread with a panicked voice note and asked everyone to start spreading the word on social media.

My 90-year-old dad came downstairs. "Put your hearing aid in and sit down," I said, loudly. I told him. I said he'd need to stay and look after Jonathan, the dog and the cats because I was probably going to Bali. He nodded. And looked broken.

I needed my dad to help because my husband, Nick, died very suddenly from a heart attack in August 2021.

Nick was Australian and had spent much of his youth travelling in Asia and surfing in Bali. The boys were following in his footsteps on this trip. Matthew had struggled with his father's death in his final year at university: he came home and almost didn't go back. Andrew had persuaded him to finish by dangling the dream of travelling together to places their dad had loved as a young man. They both took surfing lessons in Bali.

We'd been a family of five. Then, suddenly, four. Now I thought we might be left with just me and Jonathan. I wondered how a 15-year-old could possibly cope if, having lost his dad out of the blue, he lost both his big brothers too. I couldn't allow myself to fall apart. I was on my own in the sense that I'm a single mother, but really I'm not, because we have an incredible network of friends. My voice note conjured an army. People dropped their jobs. My assistant head teacher friend Dionne arrived by bike from her school. Her husband Piers and friend Mark were on my doorstep. Wives were on the phone from work, their children circulating messages to backpacker groups and hostels in Bali.



The Foreign Office rang. The boys' motorbikes had been found at the foot of the volcano. Search and rescue teams were scouring the jungle. The Foreign Office rang again. The boys' Airbnb had been traced and visited. Their clothes were there. They were not.

I worry and weep over tragedies which engulf other ordinary families on the news. I could barely believe it was happening to us. Ridiculously, I dug my nails hard into my palm at one point, hoping I was asleep having a nightmare and the pain would wake me up. I didn't think my sons were necessarily dead. But they might be. And they would be if they weren't found.

It was early afternoon now and early evening in Bali. They'd been 40 hours gone. Darkness was falling there.

My friend Piers said he'd come with me to Bali. He was at my breakfast bar, credit card in hand, about to book the flights. I was sat at the kitchen table, my dad beside me. He was silently weeping.

The phone rang again. The Foreign Office. "They've found them, Katherine."

A heartbeat, then: "They are alive. They are OK." It took my brain a second to process. The worst day of my life had just become the best. I cried "they're alive", then "thank you" and "thank God", over and over. My kitchen was full of people hugging and crying. My goddaughter Freya got the word out on her phone within a couple of minutes and a wave of relief spread.

The boys were weak and dehydrated, the Foreign Office lady said, and it would take a while to get them off the volcano.

Soon we saw pictures. Sheepish, shocked, but OK. Surrounded by heroes from Search and Rescue Karangasem, police, local volunteers. Darkness beyond. In some they looked like they were being told off. Good.

Then they rang. "We're so sorry," were among their first words. They had survived by collecting rainwater from rocks and followed a river knowing it would lead them down. They'd made a shelter out of branches and leaves for that night as it was getting dark. They'd made an SOS sign in a clearing. Years of attending Scouts and watching Bear Grylls survival programmes had been worthwhile (though I'm still scarred by watching Grylls eat apple out of bear poo). Their dad had been a Scout leader.

But my sons had forgotten the first rule of scouting: be prepared. They were following a trail up the volcano they had found on a hiking app, a supposed seven-hour round trip. They hadn't talked to locals and so hadn't realised a guide was essential.

The trail had long been out of use, so they struggled. But they saw lights up the mountain, presumed they were on the same route as that guided group and pressed on thinking they'd find them at the summit. Instead the top was wet, cloudy and precipitous, with only monkeys for company.

They couldn't find the path back down and were lost. Matthew slipped and slid down 20 metres of rock. In that moment, he thought he might die. So did Andrew. The next day the "river" they'd been attempting to follow had gone as the weather dried up, and they found themselves at the top of what would have been a waterfall but was now a sheer cliff, flanked by impenetrable jungle.

This was where they'd made their base. Both were more worried about the people at home than themselves. They thought they'd make it.

Having been rescued by a small team, three dozen people greeted them at the foot of the volcano and plied them with water, rice, chicken and chocolate. "You know you're incredibly lucky to be alive, don't you?" I said. "Yes. The first man who got to us … Oh, I probably shouldn't tell you this now …" Andrew tailed off.

"Tell me."

"Thought we'd be dead. A month ago he'd searched for other people. They were found too late." The next day they returned the motorbikes and picked up their stuff from the Airbnb. I finally got them flights to Singapore and ultimately Heathrow. Our dear friend Yasmin, who works at IHG, arranged a room at the fanciest hotel of their lives. And last Sunday morning, my birthday, they walked out of arrivals to their waiting mother, brother and grandad. Tanned, scratched to bits with a few nasty cuts. Alive.

We brought them home for a big breakfast with our local friends. They were comprehensively hugged, scolded, interrogated and hugged again.

And teased. One of the first press pieces about them in Bali described them as "climbers". Hardly! Besides Matthew's trendy Salomon trail shoes and Andrew's Mountain Warehouse waterproof, they'd not had the right kit. A dead power bank and no map. No food either.

To meet them at the airport, my friend Mark had white T-shirts printed with a picture of the boys and their rescuers, with the word "Climbers?" underneath. And bought Brewdog's Lost lager. And put different movie names on to a printed rescue picture: The Lost Boys, Dumb and Dumber, Tropic Blunder.

We are beyond lucky we have them to tease. A 29-year-old Dutch woman died after falling into a ravine on Mount Agung in May; a 60-year-old Indonesian man died there after getting lost in March.

The first rescuer to see them shouted: "You are very very very …"

"Stupid?" Matthew shouted back.

"Yes, stupid boys!"

He was a volunteer and mountain guide, part of a team of eight on that part of the volcano who hacked through the jungle to reach them. The kindness of these strangers saved my sons' lives.

They brought them from the mountain, but so many friends helped to save them too. Especially Sarah in Sweden. Matthew is with her now, somewhere near Stockholm. And all our friends who spread the word and dropped everything to help. We can never repay them.

The boys are hoping to run the London Marathon next year to raise money for Search and Rescue organisations and the Scouts. The guide that found them texted Matthew and asked us to talk about what happened, so others will not go off without a guide.

So we have. Amol Rajan made them apologise to me on Radio 4. And ITV got Bear Grylls to record a video message to them, telling people to always let someone know where you're going and when you'll be back, and take a hard map and compass. We hope other young people will hear this and take more care. You are not invincible. Listen to your mother.

There's mess and laundry everywhere at home. I couldn't be happier. And in a fortnight they'll be off again. This time with me and Jonathan, on our first trip to Australia. We'll scatter my husband Nick's ashes in the ocean where he loved to surf. We won't be visiting any volcanoes.

Katherine Forster is political correspondent at GB News and was assistant editor of News Review at The Sunday Times

Farewell to the mail train, departing post-haste after 190 years

Only 3% of our post now goes by rail and the last of the deliveries are being outsourced. It's a sad end to a service that survived the Great Train Robbery, writes *Stephen Smith*

'This is the night mail crossing the border / Bringing the cheque and the postal order …' So wrote WH Auden in his poem *Night Mail*, which accompanied a black-and-white documentary made in 1936 about overnight postal deliveries by train. The cheque and postal order are becoming museum pieces, and now the rail service Auden praised is about to go the same way.

Postal deliveries by rail have been running in Britain since 1830: 130 trains were carrying mail before the Second World War. Workers manned travelling sorting offices such as the one seen in *Night Mail*. The service survived the Great Train Robbery of 1963, when Bruce Reynolds and accomplices stole £2.61 million from a Royal Mail train, coshing driver Jack Mills.

But now the company says only 3 per cent of its mail goes by rail and its last half-dozen freight trains are being shunted into the sidings for good. Deliveries will be outsourced to commercial rail freight companies instead, and Royal Mail will also make more use of the roads.

The decision has come as a surprise to one of Britain's best-known former postmen: Shaun Ryder, the Happy Mondays singer. He had a postal round as a teenager and reportedly became one of the few posties to bite a dog – it's usually the other way around – after taking LSD. (He was subsequently sacked.) "I actually thought the freight trains had gone 20 years ago," Ryder said, reflecting on the news. "But it's always bad news if there's going to be job losses."

In fact, Royal Mail claims that increasing deliveries by road will give full-time work to more than 30 drivers.

Others are less convinced. "This is a crap move," says Andrew Martin, who has written a series of novels and non-fiction books about railways. "Everyone associated with railways will say so and it will have to be reversed. All I ever read in the railway magazines is that we're going to have to get freight working properly to have any hope of meeting net zero."

PA



Railwayman David Whitby beside the train robbed in 1963

Royal Mail says it will use a mix of rail, road and air to take mail to all corners of the UK, although it is also planning to halve the number of domestic flights it uses. It insists that it is pensioning off the freight trains "to improve reliability, increase cost-effectiveness and remain consistent with our environmental goals". The company operates 5,000 electric vans and many of its HGVs run on biofuel.

The decision comes as its parent company, International Distribution Services, is the subject of a £3.6 billion takeover bid from Daniel Kretinsky, known as "the Czech sphinx".

The end of the line for Royal Mail trains saddens Alan Cleaver, who has 18,000 followers on his Twitter/X account documenting the travails faced by postmen and women in getting the mail through. "Jeff Bezos [owner of Amazon] said, 'No one will ever ask for anything to be delivered more slowly', but I take objection to that because people often appreciate things at a slower pace," Cleaver says. "We might not care about a piece of junk mail but a beautifully written letter is worth waiting for. People appreciate the romance of how the mail gets to them."

> **People appreciate the romance of how mail gets to them**

Trains were often the only practicable means of getting mail to isolated communities, Cleaver says. "The La'al Ratty, or Little Ratty, was a train taking the post into Eskdale in the Lake District in the 1920s when you couldn't get in by road. The train's a tourist attraction now but it doesn't carry the mail any more."

Cleaver documents the heroics of posties like David Lewis Jones – known as Jones the Post – who spent nine hours travelling on horseback through the remote mountain areas of Tregaron and Abergwesyn to reach a community of eight homes. "He delivered about a dozen letters on his round, which he made three times a week," Cleaver says. "Auden talks about 'the postman's knock' in his poem and that personal connection is very important. Some postmen and women did odd errands and bits of shopping for people."

Rural postmen walking long countryside routes disappeared in the 1970s "without much fanfare", says Cleaver, and Royal Mail phased out posties' bikes in 2014. "Now everything's done by van and those little pushcarts they have. I'm Mr Nostalgia but I'm also pragmatic as well. Modes of transport change. When everything is delivered by drone, we'll be looking back on the postman's van with nostalgia."

NEWS REVIEW

Two of my daughters were murdered four years ago. This violence must end

Mina Smallman tells *Caroline Scott* that the crossbow killings have only reinforced her determination to campaign for women's safety — and awakened her inner 'she-wolf'

As news broke on Tuesday night of the murders of Louise Hunt, 25, her sister Hannah, 28, and their mother Carol, 61, Mina Smallman was transported to the moment, four years ago, when she heard the words. "They're gone."

Her eldest daughter Bibaa Henry, 46, a social worker, and youngest, Nicole Smallman, 27, a photographer, were stabbed to death after a picnic to celebrate Bibaa's birthday in Fryent Country Park, northwest London, in June 2020.

The wife and daughters of John Hunt, the BBC racing commentator, were killed by a man wielding a crossbow, in their home in Bushey, Hertfordshire. "When I heard about the Hunt family I had to turn the news off," says Smallman. "My heart went out to the family and I needed to be quiet to process it." But the following day, she was furious. "The she-wolf came out again and I'm on a mission," she says. "We have to find a way of ending violence against women and girls."



Smallman is determined to push back against victim blaming and the idea that women must shoulder the entire burden of protecting themselves. "Watch what you wear. Don't get too drunk. Be careful where you go. Never be alone at night; I always told my girls: make sure you have someone else with you. Well, my girls did have someone else with them, they had each other. The Hunt girls were in their own home – and it didn't save them."

The pain for Smallman, 67, is still as visceral as when she first heard her daughters had been killed. "It's physical. I feel it here," she says, punching a fist to her chest. "For a while, if the doorbell rang, I'd think: that's Nik. Your mind plays tricks." But this year, she's felt different, as if something has shifted. "It's acceptance," she says. "I'm not in denial now. I know they're not coming back."

For much of the past four years, Smallman has been sustained by her activism – she's campaigned tirelessly for women's safety. In June last year, as the government for the first time labelled violence against women and girls a national threat, Smallman organised It's Time, a memorial service in St Paul's Cathedral. Families of women murdered by strangers – including Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa and Zara Aleena – came together with the families of countless girls and women murdered in their own homes by men they knew, to call for justice and change.

She is also fuelled by rage at the Metropolitan Police, towards whom she feels a white-hot sense of injustice. The police failed to mount a search more than 36 hours after her girls were reported missing, and it was left to the family to dig through undergrowth to find the bodies. They were discovered by Nicole's boyfriend, Adam Stone, who has struggled to come to terms with what he saw.

Later that day, the officers who were charged with guarding the crime scene, Deniz Jaffer and Jamie Lewis – Smallman calls them "Despicable 1" and "Despicable 2" – took photographs of themselves with the girls' bloodied corpses and posted them on two WhatsApp groups: one comprising 41 police officers, including a shocked female cadet whom Jaffer was supposed to be mentoring.

> **I spent my whole life fighting for other people's children. Now I was doing it for my own**

Mina Smallman and, top from left, her daughters Bibaa, Monique and Nicole. Bibaa and Nicole were murdered in 2020



In 2021, Danyal Hussein, 19, who was a stranger to Nicole and Bibaa, was convicted of the two murders and sentenced to life imprisonment.

I meet Smallman in Ramsgate, Kent, where she lives with her husband of 32 years, Chris, a retired drama teacher. Smallman, the first woman of colour to be an archdeacon in the Church of England, gives her heart and soul to the interview, as I suspect she does to everything. We're here to talk about her book, *A Better Tomorrow*, which exposes a seam of vulnerability she has hidden all her life. Born to a white mother and Nigerian father, Smallman describes a lonely and "calamitous" childhood. An early first marriage at 17 to the father of Bibaa and Monique, 48, her middle, surviving daughter, was abusive. Part of the reason for writing the book is to show other women who've had similar experiences of violence, "You can be free."

Her childhood, where her mother would either spit out insults, or slap her so hard her head swam, gave her valuable survival skills. "You know how to deal with difficult people because you're always appeasing your antagonist," she says. Her diplomacy has made her an adept and respected campaigner and an irresistible voice for the three women and girls who are killed by a man every week in the UK.

"I've spent so much of my life hiding who I am because I was ashamed," she says. "I developed armour – which was everything I needed to survive." A gifted teacher, who could spot another unloved and neglected child across a crowded classroom, in 2006 she left the profession to follow a calling to join the Anglican church. She wanted to be in the thick of it, "an old-school priest working on a housing estate".

On a visit to Lambeth Palace, to discuss placements, the registrar warned the few women in the group: you are going to find this very hard. "And then he looked at me, the only black person in the room and said: 'And you are going to find it hardest.' That kind of honesty is very rare in the church."

Her anger with the Met is still raw, but she has warmer words for the new chief, Sir Mark Rowley, who has promised to clean up the force. "He's been to see me and when I phone, he answers," says Smallman. "He knows I will never give up on him understanding institutional racism within the Met, but both privately and publicly he denies it. Disciplinary processes have improved, but there is still much to be done."

Jaffer and Lewis were sentenced to 33 months in prison after pleading guilty to misconduct in public office. They appealed against their sentences, denying a racist motive. The defence QC representing them argued that taking selfies with the corpses of two murdered women was not about misogyny or racism but a means of sharing their day. "I sat listening to this guff, my heart pounding in my chest, thinking right now is where I have a heart attack and die," Smallman says. "It took me straight back to my childhood – I'm here, but I'm powerless."

The news that both officers were released after serving less than a year of their sentence was too much to bear. She reveals in the book that she attempted to take her own life. Looking back, Smallman realises activism had given her a reason to live. "I'd spent my whole life fighting for other people's children, now I was doing it for my own and I was not going to lose," she says. But once she stepped back, grief hit her in flashbacks and paralysing fear that left her unable to leave the house.

Her husband, she says, has been her rock throughout her recovery. "We're yin and yang. I feel everything, he feels nothing. Chris doesn't torture himself like I do," she says. "He was so close to Nikki. It was beautiful to watch him with his only child, his baby girl. Their love was instantaneous and straightforward. He adored her. She adored him."

During lockdown, Nicole came for Mother's Day and stayed. "She and Chris went for walks, we laughed together. I'm so glad we had that precious time." Both get caught on spikes of grief which floor them repeatedly. The twinkle of fairy lights, the sight of a silver birch – Nicole was found with a fragment clasped in her hand. "We're instantly back to that day and the realisation: we've lost our girls."

The news during the past few days has taken its toll and her husband has insisted she switches off her phone. She'll rest but she won't stop campaigning and working with other families who've lost daughters. "I take my girls with me wherever I go," she says.

She's been able to forgive their killer, whom she describes as "sick", but not the behaviour of "Despicable 1 and 2". "I can't forgive until the Met is fixed and that work is not over," she says. "That gives me fire in my belly."

A Better Tomorrow: Life Lessons in Hope and Strength by Mina Smallman is published July 25 (Ebury Press, £25).

At the age of 60, I've become DJ Tina Technotic (and I get a free night bus home)

Dancing until sunrise helped *Tina Woods* revitalise her marriage. Now she's finding a new lease of life spinning tracks for clubbers

If you'd asked me a few years ago whether I would become a techno DJ at 60, I would have laughed you out of the room. But last weekend, at midnight in a dimly lit venue called Love Shack in east London, I played a set full of electric beats to a crowded room for my own club night, called Longevity Rave. It was euphoric.

A few years ago I discovered raving. I'd never been a raver in my twenties, so it was a surprise. In September 2021 I was at a friend's 60th birthday party that ended at about 11.30pm. There was a buzz in the air, people in the streets – it was post-lockdown. I was with two friends and we decided we weren't ready to go to bed, so we went to a club, Le Fez, in Putney. We had the most extraordinary night dancing our hearts out. I got home at 5am.

I felt exhilarated. I thought, I must dance again. I restarted my zumba classes, which I'd stopped going to during lockdown, and along with my girlfriends I started going out more every month.

My career is in health technology and innovation and I work in the emerging field of longevity. I've tracked my own health, had every measurement imaginable taken. So I'm interested in what makes someone longer in the tooth feel full of life. For me, clubbing is a huge part of it.

My husband, Nick, was a more reluctant raver. He could see that I was loving it, but he was into doing Iron Mans and training with his mates on Sunday cycle rides. With our three sons in their twenties, it could have been the start of us slowly drifting apart, as couples sometimes do at this stage in life.

Instead, he started to come with me. We reconnected over our shared love of techno music and we realised that going clubbing was going to become integral to our relationship. It's become part of our routine. My favourite clubs are Fabric and E1, but I also like smaller clubs such as Corsica Studios and Phonox. I've discovered a wealth of music, like Bedouin, BLOND:ish and Damian Lazarus. Last month we spent a week in Ibiza, going out six nights on the trot.

When younger people see us on the dancefloor, they often say they hope they're like us when they get to our age. And, no, we don't need drugs, to pre-empt a question that so many ask. But the question I get asked even more often is: how the hell do you have the energy for this? It's true that I'm physically fit, but the real reason I can dance for so long is the joy and the energy I get. I never feel more alive than when I'm on the dancefloor. It's not the healthiest pursuit – I drink alcohol when I'm out, and I don't get enough sleep when I get home – but it provides a different type of fulfilment.

We always try to get the night bus back from raves – for starters, travel for over-60s is free – but it also adds to the fun. It's also quite funny when we bump into our eldest son on the night bus home, which has happened at least three times. We've even bumped into our middle son at techno nights, though we tend to text them all to make sure we avoid the same clubs. My sons, aged 26, 24 and 22, assure me they aren't embarrassed by this.

I was quite happy as a dancer rather than as DJ, but in December last year I had two operations on my feet, and knew that I'd be bedbound for a couple of months. So my sons bought me a Pioneer DDJ-200 controller, which meant I could learn to mix music myself.

It took a while to learn and I had to supplement learning with a DJ crash-course at Pirate Studios. I also have a DJ partner, Yukari, 27 – whom I'd met at a rave – and we did a back-to-back set last weekend. We're planning another Longevity Rave in Los Angeles in October. But my biggest success? My middle son revealed that "it might be cool one day to DJ with Mum". He's thinking of giving it a go.

As told to Katie Gatens

Tina Woods says she never feels more alive than when she's on the dancefloor



Tall, dark and handsome, yes. But why aren't you in therapy?

An increasing number of women on dating apps are seeking a partner who is 'working on their mental wellbeing'. What does this say about modern relationships, asks *Roisin Kelly*

There are many deal-breakers when it comes to looking for a partner: smoking, wanting children, being a vegan ... but for dating app users, a new must-have has emerged – going to therapy.

Among my peers, I hear stories of women cutting good dates short if a man confesses he's never had therapy. One acquaintance goes as far as to refer to men who've never been to therapy as "emotionally dangerous". Others speak of encouraging men they've been dating for a matter of months to book counselling appointments.

"I definitely wouldn't date someone who thinks they don't need therapy, or someone who's had one session and thinks they're fine," says Mona Tehrani, a 30-year-old social media executive living in London. "It tells me a lot about their communication style and conflict resolution skills."

Forget tall, dark and handsome with financial security and DIY skills – the new WLTM is emotionally vulnerable and ready to converse about feelings and self-improvement. For many women, that means men who go to therapy.

Britons have a reputation for stoicism, but in 2024 more of us are in therapy than ever. Research from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy finds that nearly a third of adults have sought help from a counsellor or psychotherapist in the past 12 months. With about one in four of us experiencing a mental health problem each year, talking about our feelings is surely a good thing. But does that mean we need to be shouting about it on dating profiles?

If the data is anything to go by, apparently so. The dating app Hinge says 84 per cent of its UK users would prefer to date someone who goes to therapy, while Tinder reports that almost 75 per cent find a match more attractive if they are "working on their mental wellbeing".

As a result, dating companies are adding profile features so users can clearly signpost that they're trying to improve their mental health, with Bumble adding "self-care badges" such as "therapy" and "mindfulness"



Dr Jess Carbino, a former sociologist for Tinder and Bumble, says talking about therapy on dating profiles is a sign of users "wanting to project that they are concerned about wellness and showing their mental health capital". Men are picking up on the new demand: in the past 18 months, Tinder has seen an increase in the mentions of the word "therapy" appearing in users' bios, mostly by men. (Of course, there's no way of knowing if they're being truthful.)

One way of looking at this trend is as a symptom of broader frustrations that women have with app-based dating culture, which brings potential couples together without any of the social context or visual cues that couples of yesteryear could usually expect. "Women think men who've been to therapy will be a quick fix for their dating problems," says Beth Ashley, a sex and relationships writer. "That's not the right solution."

The focus on therapy may also be a reflection of a growing chasm between male and female political views. In the UK, young men are becoming increasingly conservative while women are more progressive. Data shows that women aged 18 to 29 are 25 percentage points more liberal than their male counterparts.

Attitudes to mental health appear to be dividing along gender lines too. "Historically, men have been expected to be strong and tough and have been punished for weakness and vulnerability, while women are allowed to be emotionally expressive," says Alice Evans, a researcher in global gender divergence. "It's not surprising that the people wanting to talk about therapy are women."

How do men feel about therapy becoming a part of their dating life? Nigel Stefani, a 40-year-old artist, is an advocate of therapy and thinks early conversations about it are "a green flag" (as opposed to a red flag). However, he believes that "a woman forcing it in the early stages of dating seems controlling and feels intrusive".

Oliver Campbell, a 31-year-old casting agent, has "no problem" with women asking on a first date whether he's been to therapy , but says "if our entire future hung on my answer, I'd feel like I'd dodged a bullet by there being no second date".

Not all women want to be able to read a man's therapy track record on his dating app bio. The 30-year-old author Olivia Petter says that while she finds it encouraging to speak about therapy on dates, seeing it mentioned on an app profile can feel "a bit manipulative". Others say it makes them wonder if there's a specific reason or problem for which the man needed therapy. It's no wonder men may feel they can't do anything right.

In some ways, the focus on therapy is dividing us more than ever. Maybe it's time to focus less on communicating with our therapists, and more on communicating with each other.

NEWS REVIEW

‘Strictly was tough, but the aftermath is just brutal’

Amanda Abbington has faced months of threats after accusing her dance partner Giovanni Pernice of bullying on the BBC show. The actress discusses the fallout with *Laura Pullman* as she prepares for her big stage comeback

CHRISTOPHER L PROCTOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Within moments of meeting, Amanda Abbington acknowledges that she has been “laying low” of late. It’s a safe guess as to why. For nine months, the actress has been in the eye of an almighty *Strictly Come Dancing* storm.

The skies first darkened last October, when she pulled out of the 21st series after five weeks citing “personal reasons” and triggering rumours that she didn’t get along with Giovanni Pernice, her professional dance partner. The standard Strictly Curse is that the dancing duos get along too well. In this case, things had gone badly awry.

In January it was reported that Abbington – who is best known for playing Mary Watson in the BBC drama *Sherlock* and has two teenage children with her actor ex-husband, Martin Freeman – was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and had accused Pernice of inappropriate, bullying behaviour.

Along with two other contestants previously paired with the Italian dancer, Abbington brought in lawyers and lodged a complaint to the BBC. Pernice has called in lawyers too. Last week it was reported that the ongoing BBC investigation into the “serious workplace misconduct” has now grown to include another complaint, plus other people and cultural issues on the show. Yesterday it was revealed that professional dancer Graziano Di Prima was leaving the show following claims of gross misconduct towards his former show partner Zara McDermott.

For Abbington, it has been a torrid time of trolling and death threats from Pernice’s fans and pot-stirring by the press. “I’ve had the worst experience. The show was tough and horrible, but the aftermath of it I was not expecting,” Abbington says. “It’s been really brutal and it just hasn’t stopped.”

We are meeting on a sunny Monday morning at Park Theatre in north London, because she is now getting back to work, back to theatre rehearsals. Amid all the rumours and feverish reporting, it’s the first time that Abbington has sat down to publicly talk about her time on *Strictly* and she has a distinctly nervous energy, speaking quickly with her big brown eyes locked on mine.

Before we talk *Strictly*, we talk shop. “I’m back doing the thing that I should have always been doing, which is acting,” she says as we settle into a rehearsal room, along with Jez Bond, the theatre’s founder and artistic director.

Abbington, 53, who lives in Hertfordshire where she grew up an only child, has been working steadily on British stage and screen for almost three decades, initially making the tough climb through the ranks of small parts in single episodes of programmes such as *Casualty*. It was years later that *Sherlock* and *Mr Selfridge* made her a recognisable face. She hasn’t chosen a gentle role to ease herself back into the limelight. *When it Happens to You* is an autobiographical play written by Tawni O’Dell, which details her piecing her family back together after her daughter is raped by a stranger in New York.

Amanda Abbington with the artistic director Jez Bond at the Park Theatre in London. She quit Strictly last year after falling out with Giovanni Pernice, below



> **If women don’t stand up for women, what hope do we have?**

In the original off-Broadway production in 2019, O’Dell, an American novelist, played herself. Now, Abbington takes on the role of the mother fighting for her family’s survival. “It’s probably the most significant role I’ve done, certainly in terms of the message it sends,” she says. “I’m a big old feminist and I want women to be OK.”

Bond, who is directing the play, emphasises that this isn’t a bleak tale: “It’s like a page-turner because it’s such an important and emotional story. It’s not ultimately depressing, but full of love and hope and joy,” he says. The pair agree that it’s about not letting a terrible event define the rest of your life.

By this point, the subject of *Strictly* is hanging over us. It becomes quickly clear that she is still struggling. “It taints you and makes you feel like you’ve got a target on you,” Abbington says, touching the middle of her forehead. “You feel like you’re in the firing line.”

How have the past nine months been for her? “I might cry when I talk about it,” she says, immediately starting to cry. “It’s been awful, just relentless. Death threats and rape threats for just standing up for something that I thought was wrong.”

As the complaint is still ongoing, she says she can’t go into the specifics of what happened during her *Strictly* rehearsals. The word “militant” has been used to describe Pernice’s teaching style and one insider source previously said: “Giovanni had a tough training method. Amanda would be bruised.”

Pernice, 33, has denied any inappropriate behaviour. “Of course, I reject any suggestion of abusive or threatening behaviour, and I look forward to clearing my name,” he wrote on Instagram in May.

“If it had just been me, then I can understand why people would have been so hateful and vitriolic about it, but there were other people that went through it,” Abbington claims. “That’s what made me feel so strongly about doing this [play], because if women don’t stand up for women, what hope do we have?”

Abbington has maintained that she asked for her rehearsals with Pernice to be recorded. His camp has claimed that it was him who asked for practices to be filmed after becoming concerned about her “unstable behaviour”.

In person, Abbington seems open and measured, albeit mentally shattered. “I didn’t want to cause anyone any harm. I’m not a vindictive person. I’m not a cruel person or hateful,” she says. “But when I’m in a rehearsal room I make sure that it’s a place where everyone feels safe and feels like they’re having a nice time. And that courtesy wasn’t extended to me.” She quit the show after she had a medical scare, but says she was grateful to be given a reason to escape.

Last month the BBC confirmed that Pernice was not returning to the show. It was a headline-grabbing run for the Sicilian-born, snake-hipped dancer. In 2015, the *Coronation Street* actress Georgia May Foote ditched her boyfriend for her dance partner, Pernice, although they later broke up. In 2021, he and his dance partner Rose Ayling-Ellis, the *EastEnders* actress, delighted viewers before lifting the glitterball trophy. Now, Pernice is gone; how does Abbington feel about his departure? “I don’t know. I’m still …” she says, tangled in thoughts. “I’m so terrified of speaking out about it.”

Her terror feels understandable considering the abuse that she has been subjected to on social media. Trolls have joked about raping her 16-year-old daughter in front of her. She has quit social media and no longer likes being by herself or going out. “I used to be quite a confident person,” she says, quietly. I want to give her a big hug. “The idea that I’m this monster who’s trying to destroy somebody’s career is just laughable to me now,” she says.



Before *Strictly*, Abbington had already endured emotional tumult. In 2016, her 16-year marriage to Freeman fell apart while they played a happy couple on screen in *Sherlock*. She has previously spoken about feeling suicidal after their break-up. “At the time, splitting up from him was the most painful thing I’d ever experienced,” she told The Sunday Times last year. She speaks fondly of Freeman as a co-parent, but isn’t sure whether he’ll come to see *When it Happens to You*. “He’s very busy,” she says, laughing.

In 2021 she found love again with Jonathan Goodwin, a professional daredevil. Two months after they met he was left paraplegic when a stunt went disastrously wrong. He had been hanging 30ft in the air as two cars smashed into him during rehearsals for *America’s Got Talent: Extreme*. Goodwin broke both shoulder blades, both legs, his spine and severed his spinal cord. She is rightly proud of how he has coped. “He had the worst thing happen to him and it wasn’t his fault,” she says. “Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he’s literally just taking it and using it as positive.”

Today, Goodwin, 44, is learning to walk with the assistance of “cyborg legs” machinery and kayaking for charity. He has also been Abbington’s greatest support and, she says, reassured her when she began second guessing her own account of her *Strictly* ordeal. “He’d go, ‘Yes, you would come home and you’d vomit, you’d cry, and you’d think you were not good enough. You were a shadow, a shell,’” she recalls.

As the storm has raged on, strangers in the street have offered their support. “I have people in shops giving me cuddles and saying, ‘We love you, we think you’re great’,” she says. “It’s the people that are hiding behind computers that want you to die of cancer.”

Bond is staggered by the BBC’s response to the bullying allegations. “The shocking thing, I think, for everyone I’ve spoken to in the industry, in theatre and media entertainment, is how terribly the BBC responded on the back of the history of everything that’s happened,” he says, referencing “all the blunders”. (A BBC spokesman said: “Anyone involved in a complaint has a right to both confidentiality and fair process, and we have well-established procedures to ensure both.”)

Abbington and the other women who claim to have endured similar experiences with Pernice lean on each other for strength. “I feel very vulnerable but, at the same time, I feel very emboldened to make a change,” Abbington says. “I’m stronger than I thought I was. I could quite easily have just buried my head in the sand and not said anything. But I didn’t.”

Today she seems buoyed by the prospect of getting back on stage. There are other roles in the pipeline, including a period costume drama and a horror film which she’s working on with Goodwin, a novice screenwriter. The pair plan to marry next year: “We’re going to find somewhere really lovely and have an epic weekend,” she says. It looks things might finally be looking up.

When it Happens to You is at Park Theatre, July 31 to August 31. Tickets at parktheatre.co.uk

Norway’s schools get kids off phones, without hang-ups

As a growing number of British parents call for mobiles to be outlawed in class, *JohnJo Devlin* visits Oslo to see how the ban there has affected behaviour — and how children get round it

The annual camping trip to the woods outside Oslo is the highlight of the school year for many 14-year-olds at Granstangen middle school. Bracing forest expeditions and campfire singalongs are all intended to teach them about the great outdoors. But on last year’s school trip, TikTok beat the trees.

“It was a struggle for the teachers to get them off the phone,” recalls Heidi Augestad, head teacher of Granstangen. “To make a bonfire, or test out the fishing gear, you constantly find yourself competing for their attention.”

Fortunately, says Augestad, this year’s trip felt a little more traditional. “It was a whole different thing,” she says. “They were sitting around the fire, working together – actually enjoying themselves. No one was on their phone.”

What changed in the space of a year? The school banned smartphones. In February, Norway’s education ministry laid out guidelines to restrict the use of mobile phones in schools. Today, four out of five schools in Norway – including Granstangen – comply.

Norway may be ahead of the curve but the idea of severely restricting smartphone use for children is gaining traction here too. In May, a group of MPs called for a ban on phones in schools for under-16s, prompting widespread debate. While Sir Keir Starmer has since ruled out a blanket for under-16s, he said he was willing to look at curbs on what children can see online. The most obvious obstacle has often been one of feasibility: is it possible to put this genie back in the bottle?

Norway has managed it. At the start of each day at Granstangen, pupils are expected to hand in their device to their form tutor. From then on it sits in a locked box, or “phone hotel”, until home time.

There are promising signs of progress. Teachers say disturbances are down, and communicating with pupils has become easier. Cyberbullying hasn’t gone away, but at least the school day provides some respite from online taunting.

Teachers at Granstangen say they are having better interactions beyond the classroom too. “I feel like it’s easier now to sit down with the students and talk to them,” says Sondre Aasheim Juul, an English teacher. “When they were allowed mobiles in recess, they usually just sat on them or talked about a TikTok video. Now they answer questions in full sentences, rather than with one word. They’re more curious.”

Lars Olav Andersen, a form tutor, is preparing his 15-year-old pupils for exams this year. He thinks a lot has changed since the ban came in.

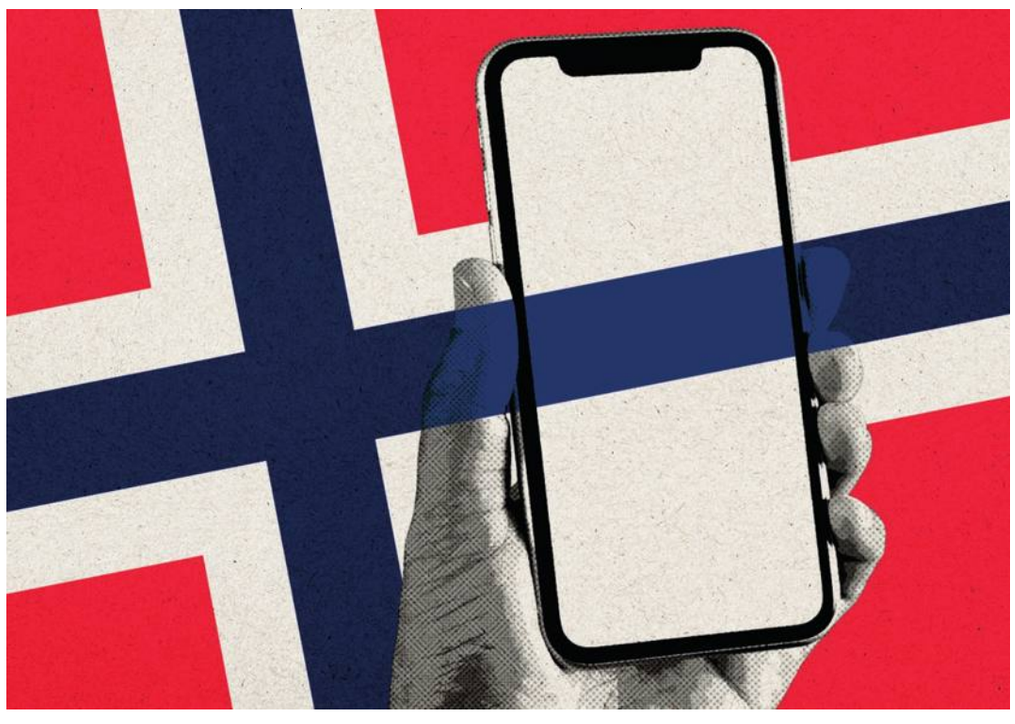
“I’ve seen more faces and a lot more smiles. Last year you almost had to go right up and say ‘hello’ to get their attention. Now it’s easier to make contact. Their body language has changed and they are more open towards teachers and each other.”

Though Andersen and Juul support the ban, enforcing it isn’t always easy. Teachers aren’t allowed to search pupils, but if they see a phone in the classroom they can take it. When a child refuses to co-operate, their parents are called in.

Predictably, though, the response among pupils has been far more mixed. Many attempt to get around the rules. At Granstangen, they have been known to try to break into the phone hotel while teachers are out of the room. Others have devised more complex schemes.

“They try to fool us,” says a political science teacher, Havard Maugesten, who works at Apallokka middle school, which began phasing in its no-phones policy at the end of May. “They bring two phones to school, give one in and keep the other in their pocket.”

In an empty classroom, well out of earshot of the head teacher, three teens take the opportunity to tell me what they really think about the policy. “I thought it was unfair actually,” grumbles Wesam Salam, 15. “I didn’t want to give up my phone. I felt unsafe. What if the teacher dropped it? What if I have to call my parents? What if you don’t have your phone and you get kidnapped? You’re a goner.”



> **I’ve seen more faces and a lot more smiles. It’s easier to make contact**

Given that Norway is one of the safest societies in the world, some of Wesam’s concerns might sound hyperbolic. However, pupils broadly agreed that there were problems with the ban, particularly for those who struggle to make friends.

“There’s a lot of people who are alone,” says Mina Belkhiri, 15. “Even though we have so many activities for a lot of people, phones are a place to go when you don’t have anyone.”

Sajin Clive, 14, is fidgeting. He has mixed feelings about it. “I think it’s about the person,” he says. “Some want to make friends, but they don’t know how to. Removing phones from the school day gives them a chance, but we also take away their safe space. It’s positive and negative.”

The pupils are also adamant that phones help them learn. Mina cites TikTok videos that jazz up “boring” science projects, while Wesam goes to YouTube for explainers on difficult equations.

Many cite the mixed messages given by schools and teachers as confusing and frustrating. “When we were at home the whole time we were mostly learning on our phones,” says Mina. “You expect us to stop when the coronavirus is over?”

The jury is still out on the effects of smartphones on concentration and mental health, with academics divided on the subject. In his book *The Anxious Generation*, published this year, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt argued that smartphones were responsible for the surge in mental health problems among Gen Z and called for a ban on the devices for the under-16s. Forty per cent of teenage girls in America who spend more than five hours a day on social media have been diagnosed with clinical depression.

Augestad recognises the pandemic was a tough time for pupils, but is sure they benefit from the no-phones policy. “It’s too harsh to tell them they are wrong, but they are,” she says. “They don’t see the whole picture. It’s one thing using a phone or an iPad to solve an individual task, but we aren’t working individually in school.”

The Norwegian government is chalking the policy up as a success. “We had all this data telling us that students’ wellbeing decreased when smartphones were present,” says Kari Nessa Nordtun, minister of education. “We couldn’t just sit there and do nothing.”

Nordtun added that some Norwegian studies suggest a “decrease in digital bullying, especially among girls” in mobile-free schools.

Britain, where parent-led movements such as Smartphone Free Childhood and Delay Smartphones have been set up, has some notable differences with the Norwegian education system. From an early age, Norway places a high value on educational independence. Pupils are given more leeway to make choices. Granstangen, for example, has no uniform and no homework.

But Augestad believes that, in this case, an edict is no bad thing. “I think that the school system in Norway has been much too trust-based. I think cyberbullying has become a major issue because we haven’t been clear enough. We haven’t set boundaries for how the kids should use their phones. Now, the schools are taking some responsibility.”

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Labour's right to expose Tory failure but must be positive too

For a new prime minister, hitting the ground running is not a matter of choice; it goes with the territory. In little more than a week Sir Keir Starmer has already appointed a government, bringing in some impressive non-politicians, visited all four corners of the UK, met England's elected mayors and completed his first big overseas trip, meeting America's president and other fellow leaders at the Nato summit in Washington.

After the football in Germany today will come the King's Speech on Wednesday, Labour's first gracious address in a decade and a half, with a legislative programme including at least 30 bills.

On Thursday the prime minister will host the European Political Community gathering at Blenheim Palace, bringing together 50 leaders from across Europe, where he will have an opportunity to continue Rishi Sunak's efforts to remove some of the post-Brexit toxicity from Britain's relationship with the EU.

The wheels of government do not stop turning. It is odd to think that mere days ago Starmer was accused by the Tories of planning to be a part-time prime minister because he wanted to make time on Friday evenings to be with his family. There is no such thing as a part-time prime minister in the modern era.

Labour has settled in well. Rachel Reeves, slotting comfortably into her new role, has been making the right noises about growth and working closely with business and the City, raising questions about why it has taken so long for this country to have a female chancellor. Above all, there is a sense of national relief that the Tories are no longer in power. They will be back, as long as they go about the task of rebuilding the party sensibly and do not rush into a hasty leadership contest.

Any new government, like a householder moving into a new property, will find things they did not expect that were not revealed in the survey. The roof that should have been fixed while the sun was shining is still leaking; those floorboards are still creaking. A departmental "bring out your dead" exercise is said to be under way among ministers, intended to uncover exactly how bad the situation is that they have inherited. The crisis in Britain's prisons was plain to see, as was the need for an early release programme that would have been introduced by the previous government had it remained in office, and some in government would like to present that as the tip of a very large iceberg.

Wes Streeting, the health secretary, has already described the National Health Service as "broken", and it can be only a matter of time before other ministers also find colourful ways of describing their patch. They should tread carefully. People know that public services are in a bad way. The "nothing seems to work any more" narrative has been a powerful one in recent times, and it helped propel Labour to power. What people do not want, though, is a new government wallowing in the gloom of its inheritance and dragging the national mood down. They do not want a repeat of the tactic of some Tory ministers, who were still blaming the previous Labour government 14 years on.

There is good and bad. One of the first pieces of important data to be published under Labour showed that GDP rose by 0.4 per cent in May and by 0.9 per cent over the latest three months, better than expected and an indication that the economy has momentum. Inflation figures this week should be close to the official 2 per cent target.

People and businesses want to know how Labour will build on this and deliver Reeves's mission for growth, intended to be achieved without blowing the public finances. A Fiscal Responsibility Bill will be unveiled in the King's Speech. They want a government that looks forward, not back. They do not want an extended political blame game.

The government has good ideas. It aims to tackle the "lost" Covid generation of schoolchildren with a national register intended to reduce record levels of absenteeism. Sir Kevan Collins, the former "catch-up tsar", will assist Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, in driving up standards across the board, but in particular in underperforming schools.

This is the honeymoon period for Labour. It has to demonstrate that it can use its large majority to deliver genuine improvements in our lives and an optimistic vision for the future. People want to believe that it can do so. They want to believe in a prime minister who has said repeatedly that public service, his ethos, comes ahead of party. The government needs to get on with the job before cynicism gets a chance to set in.

Biden's unforced errors reveal America's unenviable choice

It is a tale of two presidents, and, viewed from this side of the Atlantic, it is a sorry one. This week in Milwaukee Donald Trump will be endorsed, without a fight, by the Republican National Convention. America's Grand Old Party will choose as its candidate a man whose flaws are plain to see, who was found guilty of a string of criminal offences by a New York jury weeks ago and whose age and mental acuity would be an issue in this year's presidential election if they were not a bigger issue for his opponent.

That opponent, President Biden, appears determined to be endorsed by the Democratic National Convention on August 19-22. In our general election, Labour was said to be pursuing a Ming vase strategy. The president thought he was doing that in successfully hosting last week's Nato summit in Washington, only to shatter it on the floor by referring to Ukraine's President Zelensky as "Putin" – it does not get much worse than that – and his own vice-president, Kamala Harris, as "Trump". He corrected himself, and it is clear that his mind and his mouth were going at different speeds, but the damage was done.

Only those closest to him can tell whether Biden's defiance in the face of growing calls for him to step down means that he will in fact seek another four years, which he would start at the age of 82. Or is it an old man raging against the dying of the light, who will bow to the inevitable in time for an alternative candidate to step forward? Either way, it is a disturbing situation for America and for her allies. In this country we have just had an election contested by two decent and capable men. America should be so lucky.

Write back

Dear Mr Southgate,
Three years ago you wrote to us to share some thoughts on leading the national team into a Euros tournament as the country recovered from the physical and psychological trauma of Covid.

You asked the country to get behind your group of young men, arguing that the distinction between players and fans was specious. You asked us to be kind to them, and your admirable approach took the team all the way to penalties in the final.

Now you are facing an opponent, Spain, that has suffered only one defeat and one draw in the past 18 months. Truly it will be a contest to remember. And as we come together this evening to watch our first final on foreign soil, we hope our friends in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will join us. For it is clear now that you have built a team of rare courage. Win, lose or draw, the lions – the country – have rediscovered their pride.

Yours, England

Dominic Lawson

Now Farage wants us to be more European ...



... but our ancient first-past-the-post system must not be overthrown

"What do we want? The D'Hondt method! When do we want it? Now!" That, more or less, is what Nigel Farage proposes as his next rallying cry, following a general election in which his Reform UK party – literally "his", as he is the controlling shareholder – gained only five parliamentary seats in return for four million votes. The D'Hondt method is used in European parliament elections, where, with Ukip and then the Brexit Party, Farage prospered in a way he never has under the British first-past-the-post system.

In an interview last month, anticipating something like the outcome we have now – Labour has two thirds of the seats from little more than a third of the votes – Farage declared: "If we don't win many seats, there'll be considerable public anger … an appetite for change [in the electoral system] is going to be a very, very big campaigning issue." This opinion, though obviously not its author, has been endorsed by the Green Party, which took just four seats from a 7 per cent vote share.

Perhaps I am oblivious to national rage over the lop-sided nature of the new parliament; but it doesn't feel as though there is seething discontent. The idiotic term "supermajority" has already disappeared. The rules of the battle were agreed, and, to use an analogy appropriate during the Euro 2024 tournament, it's no good complaining about the result because you had lots of possession but failed to score.

It was spelt out, interminably, to former Conservative voters thinking of casting their ballot for Farage's latest venture that the effect would not be to elect many Reform MPs but lots of Labour ones. So it proved, and it can't have come as a surprise to anyone.

The newly elected Reform MP for Ashfield, Lee Anderson, now argues: "Our electoral system is broken … We need proportional representation." Readers may recall seeing in this paper, in November, when Anderson was the Conservative MP for the same constituency, his remarks criticising how Reform was picking up tens of thousands of votes in "places like Ashfield … Never knocked a door. Never dropped a leaflet. It was all about Farage … Now all they want, Reform … they want PR, which is proportional representation. They are hellbent and want us to get hammered in the next election. Because they firmly believe that Labour will bring in PR … So then … you're back to a hung parliament, you're back to coalitions … This is what Reform wants … They are mad, these people." That, of course, was before Rishi Sunak removed the whip from Anderson for refusing to retract his claim that the (secular) London mayor, Sadiq Khan, was "controlled by Islamists". Though a move to PR would almost certainly create the potential for an Islamist party to gain a foothold in Westminster.

While it is true that first past the post (FPTP) gives disproportionate parliamentary representation to the biggest minority (in this case Labour), PR can do the same, in terms of influence, for the smallest minority parties. Notoriously so in Israel, where the prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, maintains his coalition in the Knesset only by indulging a new party under the control of Itamar Ben-Gvir, who was wont to honour (with a photo in his sitting room) Baruch Goldstein, the murderer of 29 Muslim worshippers.

In this country for many years it was the Liberal Democrats who led the calls for electoral reform. Their former leader Tim Farron blamed our system for what he called the "organised wickedness" of Margaret Thatcher's governments – on the basis that in both the 1979 and 1983 elections Labour and the Liberals, later combined with the Social Democrats, gained a majority of votes cast but many fewer seats than the Conservatives.

We did, actually, have a referendum on adopting a form of PR (the alternative vote) in 2011; it was the Lib Dems' principal demand in forming a coalition with David Cameron's Conservatives in 2010. On a turnout of 42 per cent, over two thirds rejected the proposed abandonment of FPTP.

That is one plebiscite Farage wishes to overturn. The man who was the reason for the referendum on EU membership taking place wants our politics to be Europeanised, with his party seeking something like the role Marine Le Pen's National Rally has in France (or Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands). Farage says he wants to "destroy" the Conservatives but knows Reform UK, under PR, could only hope to govern in alliance with a right-of-centre party.

Liz Truss's removal was almost in itself a vindication

The British, or one might say English, parliamentary tradition is based much more on "place" – formerly given expression with the phrase "knights of the shires". You'd think Farage would appreciate that tradition, the obverse of the globalism he affects to despise. And our constituency system meant that in the recent electoral battle a swathe of cabinet ministers were swept away: rather like the British officer class in the First World War, they were as exposed as much as any of the "men" to enemy fire. In the case of Liz Truss in South West Norfolk the local vote against was especially thunderous. The former PM's removal from parliament was almost in itself a vindication of our FPTP constituency system – it would never have happened in the "party list" system widely used under PR, where senior figures are favoured and protected.

A final thought on the 2024 election: if the votes cast on July 4 were reflected proportionately at Westminster, Sir Keir Starmer would have needed the agreement of not just the Lib Dems but also the Greens to achieve a bare parliamentary majority. Imagine that running – or trying to run – the country.

In fact, when seeking the Labour leadership in 2020, Starmer promised party members: "On electoral reform, we've got to address the fact that millions of people vote in safe seats and they feel their vote doesn't count. That's got to be addressed." Starmer did not then object when the Electoral Reform Society acclaimed his support for PR. But on that, too, Sir Keir deradicalised himself: last year his team let us know he had "a longstanding view against proportional representation".

So Farage, as well as building up his political business, will just have to concentrate on being a good local MP. In February, before he changed his mind about standing, he ruminated to my colleague Decca Aitkenhead: "Do I want to spend every Friday for the next five years in Clacton?" That is what his constituents will now expect of him.

Or, as Rishi Sunak observed in his well-judged address to parliament last week: "One of the great aspects of our system is that, no matter how high you rise, you still have that constituency, which keeps you grounded."

Let's keep it as it is.

Hadley Freeman

An author's deception hiding in plain sight



Knowing of the abuse in Alice Munro's family gives her stories a new edge

Last weekend the Toronto Star published a story about one of the most universally revered authors, Alice Munro, that made my jaw drop to the point of dislocation. Munro, always photographed looking so sweet-faced and thoughtful, wrote deeply empathetic short stories astutely depicting women's lives and the choices they make, and when she won the Nobel prize in 2013, everyone from Jonathan Franzen to AS Byatt cheered. She died in May, aged 92, and the obituaries were hyperbolic in their praise. Who could be more uncomplicatedly adored than Munro?

Until now. Last month the Canadian journalist Heather Mallick received an email from Munro's youngest daughter, Andrea Skinner, in which she said she had been sexually abused by her stepfather, Munro's second husband, Gerry Fremlin. This started in 1976, when Andrea was nine, and continued until she was a teenager. Fremlin warned her not to tell Munro, because the knowledge would kill her. But when Skinner was 25, she did finally tell her, and Munro left the marital home. Fremlin wrote letters to Andrea's father, Jim Munro, fully admitting and graphically describing the abuse, but he insisted that nine-year-old Andrea had been "interested in me sexually and in consequence [I] got an erection … While the scene is degenerate, this is indeed Lolita and Humbert." He threatened that if the story went public, he would release photos of Andrea in her underwear that she says were taken when she was 11. He described Andrea as a "homewrecker".

Alice Munro went back to Fremlin. One of her daughters, Sheila, said last week, "She told me she couldn't live without him." In Munro's short story *Vandals*, published around that time, the main character, Bea, is married to a paedophile, Ladner. Bea imagines the moment when Ladner "squished himself against" his eight-year-old victim. But Bea, Munro writes, "had forgiven Ladner after all, or made a bargain not to remember".

In 2002 Skinner gave birth to twins and told her mother that Fremlin was not allowed to be around them. According to Skinner, Munro replied that this would be very inconvenient as she needed Fremlin to drive her to Skinner's house. Skinner wrote last weekend, "I started to scream into the phone about having to squeeze and squeeze and squeeze that penis, and at some point I asked her how she could have sex with someone who'd done that to her daughter." Munro again chose Fremlin over her child, and the two never reconciled.

In 2005 Skinner went to the police, showing them Fremlin's letters. He admitted indecent assault and received a suspended sentence. And once again Munro chose Fremlin. She stayed with him until his death in 2013.

The Munros are not the first family to cover up child abuse, or to sacrifice a child's safety to a parent's delusions. More shocking is how none of this came out earlier. "Everybody knew," Carole Sabiston, Andrea's stepmother, said last weekend. She recounted being at a dinner party where a journalist asked her about the story. "Yes, it's true," Carole replied. But still: silence.

Skinner had been trying for almost 20 years to tell her story, repeatedly reaching out to journalists. None helped her until Mallick last month. Displaying a brass neck that can surely be seen from space, Munro's biographer, Robert Thacker, told The Washington Post last week, "I knew this day was going to come." He knew this not because he had a crystal ball but because Skinner had told him in 2005, after she had gone to the police and Thacker's book *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives* had just gone to press. He declined to write about it because "I wasn't writing a tell-all biography".

The main character in one story is the wife of a paedophile

Yes, only the lowbrow think a biography should include icky irrelevancies such as a spouse's conviction for assaulting the subject's nine-year-old daughter. Thacker's argument is nonsensical, given how much of Munro's life is interwoven into her art, as with all artists.

It is far more likely that Thacker and others suppressed Skinner's story because they feared it would destroy Munro's legacy. It is an example of un-cancel culture, a previously very popular approach to adored cultural figures, in which any personal ugliness was suppressed. See, for example, the – until very recently – deification of Roman Polanski, in which certain people treated his pesky conviction for unlawful sex with a minor as something only the uncultured cared about. This has now been supplanted by the inverse approach, in which people with too much time on their hands agonise over whether they can still like Picasso's paintings despite his notoriously bad treatment of women.

These are two sides of the same simplistic coin, a childish belief that something is either all good or all bad. It is also an anxious form of vanity, a fear that if you enjoy, say, Charles Dickens's novels, others might think you support trying to chuck your wife into an asylum so you can shack up with your mistress, as Dickens did. This isn't about separating art and artist; it's about acknowledging layers and flaws, sometimes extreme ones. Knowing about Fremlin doesn't render Munro's stories unreadable, but it places some of them in a different light, and that is fascinating. People who suppress biographical details are doing the same disservice to artists as those who obsess over them: they're missing the big picture. As Munro herself said in a 2013 interview, "I like gaps: all my stories have gaps. It seems this is the way people's lives present themselves."

COMMENT



Matthew Syed

Ignore the thugs and doom-mongers — this team is the very best of Britain



Don't waste your energy worrying about a few thugs and trolls. Most of the country is united in admiration

Three years ago I was lucky enough to have a ticket for the European Championship final between England and Italy, and I remember every detail of that day with rare clarity. It was a glorious late afternoon: the sun was shining, the mood optimistic; my son and daughter had been given latitude for a late night and called me excitedly a few times as I made my way towards the national stadium.

As my taxi was pulling up to Wembley Way, however, a chap in an England shirt leant through the window and roared, "In-ger-lund", clearly tanked up. I glimpsed the vista down towards the gate and felt a shiver of trepidation. It was mayhem: bottles flying through the air, aggressive chanting, the atmosphere of joy replaced around the precincts of the stadium by something edgier and, as I walked towards the scene, perhaps even sinister.

I saw a bottle of beer being launched high into the air, but didn't see where it landed. I watched a scuffle break out in the middle distance. As I walked through the mêlée, my brownish complexion was mistaken by one of the fans for that of an Italian. "It's a bloody Eyetie," he snarled – and for the first time in years I felt afraid about my skin colour in broad daylight in my own country.

I made it as quickly as possible to the gate, but I couldn't get through to the friend who had my ticket because the mobile network was overwhelmed with traffic. As I stood waiting, five people fought like animals to break through the cordon, one punching a guard, and at least two forced their way into the stadium. I would later discover that dozens of seats were filled not by the people who had bought tickets but by thugs who had snatched their places and intimidated security guards who tried to eject them.

Fortunately, I ultimately made contact with my friend, got to my seat and tried to put the experience out of my mind as the opening whistle blew and the action on the pitch ignited. But I later found myself reflecting upon what had happened outside Wembley and what it said about the place we call England.

Many sought to create a narrative out of the mayhem. They said it showed that jingoistic thuggery was alive and well in our nation. When people took to social media after England's defeat in the penalty shoot-out and vile racist slurs were issued against three black players who missed (Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho), that narrative was bolstered. You may remember that for a week or so after the tournament the dominant story was one about a country still disfigured by racism.

Perhaps I might offer a different perspective. The thugs outside Wembley may have been English, but they were not in any way representative of England. Such people, a tiny minority, congregate at football games (although thankfully less so nowadays) because they are looking for trouble, hoping to meet like-minded hooligans, revelling in the lawlessness as they boss the perimeter. Some gain curious pleasure from extremism, claiming the flag for white people and thrilling to the breach of social taboos.

The same kind of distortion can happen online. I went to check the number of racist accounts that directed abuse at Rashford et al, and what do you think I found? They amounted to less than 0.01 per cent of users (and some were bots). The vast majority of the comments had been positive, but it was the nasty ones that had been picked up by the algorithms on these dreadful platforms, just as the Wembley thugs had been amplified by the news cycle, thereby distorting the perception of what had unfolded.

I say this because we make a terrible but pervasive mistake when we conflate small, unrepresentative groups with that abstraction we call England or, for that matter, Britain. Theorists call it selection bias, for what it's worth. Only a minority of people are on Twitter, and an even smaller number post there. To infer the national character from "trends", "memes" and other digital ephemera is as crazy as to infer from the few hundred cretins who flock to a football stadium the values of the 55 million predominantly decent folk who regard them with weary contempt.

> **Much coverage has gone to the handful of people who threw cups at Southgate**

And I wonder if this is worth remembering as the national team plays in the final tonight. During this competition, much coverage has gone to a tiny number of people: three or so fans who threw beer cups at Southgate, half a dozen pundits who castigated the manager, a few trends on Twitter screaming, "Southgate sucks!" From such narrow data points, we build narratives.

I, however, sense a different reality: a nation broadly behind the team, which salutes its track record and rather admires a manager who has demonstrated leadership and wisdom to forge the kind of self-belief that expresses itself in last-minute winners. Not to mention the solidarity that shone so brightly when Ollie Watkins shot home against the Netherlands and was embraced by the entire squad with looks of such incontinent joy that I found myself applauding and laughing at the same time.

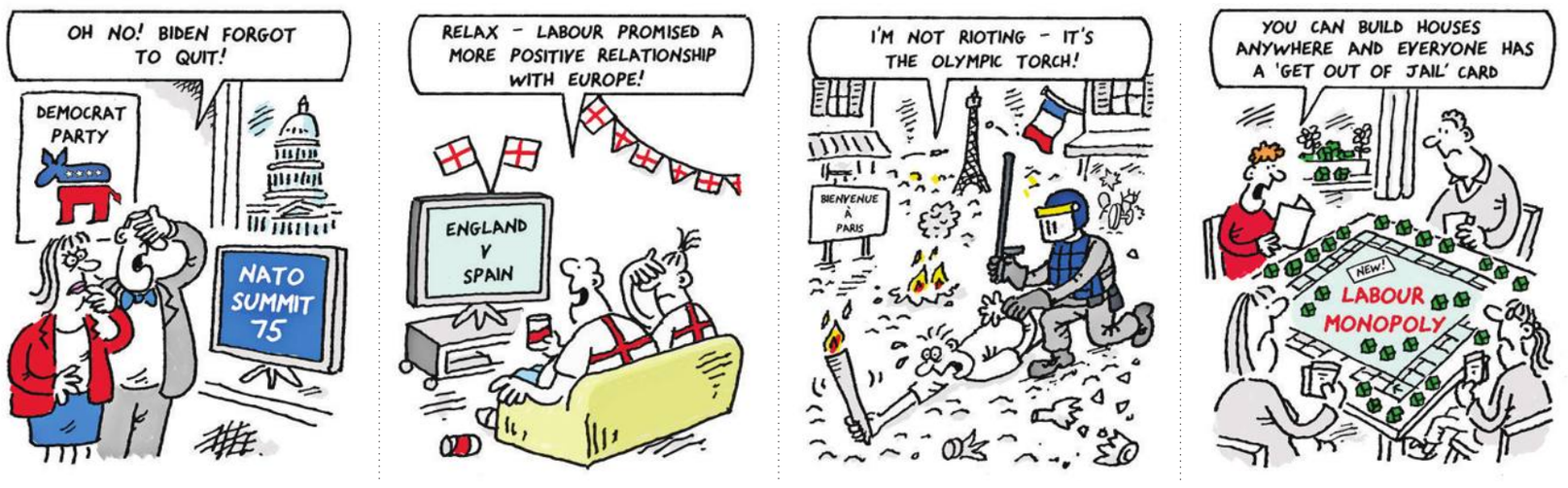
And in some ways (though I wouldn't wish to overdo it), I think the team Southgate manages reflects some of the best qualities of England. I think of Watkins, brought up by a single mum in Devon who worked all hours to give him the chance to fulfil his talent, taxiing him to training before belting out soul numbers as a professional singer; of Jude Bellingham, whose dad was a police sergeant and whose inspirational mum he calls his "queen"; of Declan Rice, a superb midfield general who may not have the most talent but whose work ethic and character shine through every encounter, on the field and off it.

These are exceptional individuals, but their stories might also be said to form a mosaic of the nation they represent: a group who are black, brown, white and everything in between but share a deep pride in playing for the country they call home; a country that comes near the top of almost every report and ranking on tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Sure, England isn't perfect, or a bastion of flawless integration, but every now and again isn't it worth celebrating the remarkable strides we have taken on racism, which I have myself witnessed with delight and not a little pride?

And that's why I think one of the biggest dangers for England today, and perhaps for Britain too, is to allow fear to divide us. It's why I worry about politicians like Suella Braverman seeking to paint our nation as an Islamic hellhole run by ayatollahs; about right-wing journalists who insinuate that we are fractured and going to the dogs; about the hard left, too, which insists Britain is racist, that the history of empire was uniformly evil and that all white people are guilty of terrible crimes via some weird process of hereditary guilt. It's all poisonous, schismatic nonsense.

As most of us look forward to a terrific evening of football, whoever wins or loses (although please, England, win!), let's ignore the haters, the doom-mongers, the thugs, the keyboard warriors, the rancorous, the sour and the wider panoply of individuals whose serial negativity gains ever more traction in a world distorted by algorithms. Let us always remember they are a tiny minority; a twisted and bitter minority. And, it seems to me, a rather unhappy minority at that.

NEWMAN'S WEEK



What's Appening

Get your coffee requests in — the chancellor's buying*

Steve Reed Hi Rachel, lovely to see you in cabinet. Blue really suits you. Just wondering if you're free for a budget chinwag. As secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, I'm hoping we can discuss my plans for environment, food and rural affairs? I know the £28 billion is probably still off the table, but these onshore wind farms don't pay for themselves

Rachel Reeves I thought that's exactly what they did

Reed Well, eventually, weather permitting, but still keen to discuss our bold green future

Reeves I can do next Wednesday before PMQs

Reed I'll bring biscuits

Louise Haigh Fifth female transport secretary paging first female chancellor! Ding ding! Just wondering if you've had a moment to think about my bus revolution. I want them to be the lifeblood of the community so I'm going to need a bigger budget. Coffee to discuss?

Reeves Do people still use buses?

Haigh Well, no. That's the problem. For example, there is only one bus a day in Hutton-le-Hole. Can you believe that? If there were 20, no one would need to drive. Vive la bus revolution!

Reeves OK, fine, but stop saying revolution. We've changed as a party. I can do next Wednesday before PMQs

Haigh Great, I'll bring biscuits

John Healey Hi Rachel, don't know if you forgot but we were supposed to have a coffee this morning to discuss the defence budget. I brought biscuits

Reeves Sorry, John, thought I'd messaged you. Sore throat. Can we raincheck to next Wednesday before PMQs?

Healey OK, sure, I'll tell the generals, but Volodymyr and I were talking in Kyiv and he really needs our support

Lisa Nandy We've done the costings for the Royal Opera House and it needs £800 million. Something to do with a new café and an outreach programme

Reeves £800 million?!?

Nandy They've got amazing almond croissants

Reeves Let's discuss on Wednesday before PMQs

Anna Mum, I need a new pair of trainers

Reeves Let's discuss on Wednesday before PMQs

Anna What?

Reeves Oh, sorry darling ... busy day. Yes of course ... we'll look online tonight

James Timpson Hi Rachel, afraid we need more in the prisons budget

Reeves OK. We can discuss next week

Timpson Let me guess ... on Wednesday before PMQs?

Wes Streeting Can we meet to discuss the budget for my AI super-surgeon plan? Transformers: Robots in Guy's (Hospital) ;)

Reeves I don't get it

Streeting The strapline's a work in progress but it will be revolutionary

Reeves Don't say revolutionary. We've changed as a party. How did it go with the junior doctors?

Streeting Great. As a sign of goodwill, they'll accept 34.5 per cent

Reeves OK, let's discuss before PMQs on Wednesday

...

Reeves Hi Keir, I was hoping to be in the chamber for PMQs today but I've got a sore throat. If anyone asks, can you let them know I'm off today?

Keir Starmer Of course. Get better soon. We need to discuss my plans for taking back our streets and breaking down barriers to opportunity and housing. Also, the wallpaper in No 11 is awful

Reeves Coffee before PMQs next Wednesday?

**As imagined by Matt Rudd*

COMMENT

Robert Colvile

Starmer's big idea is a bigger state. Let's hope it doesn't end up being a big mistake



When he first addressed the public as prime minister, Keir Starmer promised "a government unburdened by doctrine". Presenting yourself as a commonsense pragmatist and your opponents as wild-eyed ideologues is a classic political tactic. Even Margaret Thatcher used it. But then, as now, it was a lie.

The truth is that Starmer does have a doctrine. He believes in the state. That's not an insult. Like a striking number of his cabinet colleagues, he was raised in a family that was crucially dependent on the state, because it cared for his chronically ill mother. At the core of his politics is an awareness of the state's responsibility to its citizens.

Indeed, the whole point of the Labour Party is that it believes in the state. A pretty good litmus test for whether you are Labour or Tory is whether you believe that Britain's core problem since the financial crisis has been too much market and not enough state, or too much state and not enough market.

But as Starmer prepares to unveil his first King's Speech, it is clear that the big state is back. The new government is promising the steady nationalisation of the railways, a state-owned energy company, a national wealth fund and radical intervention on housing and planning, not least by reviving the new towns programme. It is banning new oil and gas exploration, stripping communities of their right to block wind farms, introducing new racial equality rules, overhauling public sector procurement and imposing a host of new rules about how firms can treat their workers.

This dirigiste turn is not exactly new. Three of the interventions expected in the King's Speech – a football regulator, restrictions on smoking and vaping and reform to rent and leasehold – are inherited from the Tories. But there is still something distinctive about Labour's philosophy, and indeed about the vigour with which ministers have begun to use the power they wield.

During the Blair era, the state grew significantly. But the private sector was essentially left to do its own thing, with the resulting tax revenue used to adjust the outcomes that produced – whether via huge increases in NHS spending or an apparatus of tax credits for the poor.

In the 2010s, Labour intellectuals came to see this approach as a mistake. When Ed Miliband started talking about "predistribution", it was an awkward name for a big idea: that rather than letting the market work and then reallocating the proceeds, the state should ensure that market outcomes were fairer to begin with.

The development of this thinking was derailed first by the party's surprise defeat at the 2015 election, and then by the return from the political grave of Jeremy Corbyn and the hard left. But under Starmer, it's back – in a form that tilts the balance between market and state even further.

The set texts for this doctrine – and it is a doctrine – are two books by Mariana Mazzucato, a professor at University College London. The first, *The Entrepreneurial State*, "comprehensively debunks the myth of a lumbering, bureaucratic state versus a dynamic, innovative private sector". Its argument is that "the private sector only finds the courage to invest after an entrepreneurial state has made the high-risk investments" – for example in the fundamental technologies that created the iPhone.

Both Great British Energy and the national wealth fund are straight out of this playbook. GBE, for example, "will partner with industry and trade unions to deliver clean power by co-investing in leading technologies". The NWF, meanwhile, will not in fact be a wealth fund at all: it will use private investment to "unlock billions of pounds of investment in the UK's world-leading green and growth industries". In effect, both institutions will see the state acting as a stock-picker – betting billions of pounds on promising technologies, and asking the private sector to trust its judgment by putting in billions more.

> **If voters turn on Labour, it will be because they want more control of their own lives**

Then there is Mazzucato's most recent book, *Mission Economy*, which describes itself as "a moonshot guide to changing capitalism". If that sounds familiar, it's because Keir Starmer's commitment to "mission-driven government" is lifted straight from its pages.

Mazzucato cites the Apollo programme to argue that government should identify its core objectives – in Starmer's, his five key missions – and then lead a cross-society drive to deliver them. This, in Mazzucato's version, demands that we "fundamentally restructure capitalism" to ensure that "corporations, society and the government coalesce to share a common goal".

It's not just Mazzucato. Rachel Reeves's own big idea, "securonomics", is also built around correcting "what I consider a fundamental under-appreciation of the role of government". In a Britain "buffeted by global forces", the state will provide greater security on both a personal and a national level – an end to the old world of "trickle-down economics" and the beginning of "a new partnership between an active state and dynamic open markets".

The intellectuals of this new left do not think the state should own and control the economy, 1970s style. But far more than Tony Blair or even Gordon Brown, they believe that it has not just the responsibility but the wisdom to guide and shape it. That Ed Miliband and Rachel Reeves can place better bets than the market. That having workplaces regulated by Angela Rayner will produce better outcomes for staff with no loss of profit or productivity.

In many ways, this creed fits with the spirit of the times. The financial crisis and the pandemic have fostered not just a belief in government's power to alleviate voters' pain but a desperation for it to do so. That has been coupled with the growth of a cadre of people in both the public and private sectors who believe devoutly in the state's power, and responsibility, to remedy the inherent inequalities of our society and economy. In other words, that they know best.

But in the longer term, this also gives the Tories a glimmer of hope.

If you believe that people make better decisions than politicians, that markets trump mandates, you will probably also believe that Labour's approach will fail to resolve our economic problems. Save perhaps on housing, which thanks to decades of government intervention is barely even a market anyway.

More than this, if voters turn against Labour, it will be because they want a little more control of their lives, and a little bit less of a government that keeps insisting it knows better than they do.

In my cupboard at home, there is a mug featuring a poster from the 1929 election. "Socialism would mean inspectors all round," it warns. "If you want to call your soul your own, vote Conservative." It didn't work back then. But with the next election due in 2029, perhaps it could make a comeback for the centenary.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Sunday Times,
1 London Bridge Street,
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Calm and unflinching – that's the PM we wanted

I do wonder if Camilla Long completely understood Sir Keir Starmer's first news conference in Downing Street after the election (News, last week). She applauded his tone but asserted: "It doesn't suit the mood of the country."

I'm sure that, like me, millions would disagree. It was exactly what we wanted to hear – a calm and sober statement of intent, with none of the tiresome grandstanding and boosterism we have become so used to. Far from being "uninspiring, leaden", it was precisely the opposite.
Rob Kirk, Kenton, London

NATHAN POSNER/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



Starmer told the Nato summit security "is our first priority"

Quick change
The media are alive with how Starmer needs to make an impact quickly. So much so, they have missed the changes he has already implemented. He has silenced the noisy, he has neutered tribalism and dogma, he has held a cabinet meeting on a Saturday, he has met the press on a non-partisan basis and best of all he has visited the devolved nations. Unlike his predecessors, who could not face conflict, he is meeting eyeball to eyeball, rather than hunker down in No 10 with a soulless spreadsheet.
Ian Pauw, Gateshead

Clear thinker
From watching the Starmer news conference, it became clear he is highly motivated and clear-thinking and has an objective – nothing so mushy as a vision – to improve the life of those who did or did not vote for him. To be able to organise anything is an underrated skill and rare in politicians. On planning, the NHS and education, just maybe it can be done. However, immigration may prove unstoppable when reason is the only weapon.
Stella Hollis, London SW1

High expectations
Understandably, journalists piled into the remarkable story of Labour's victory and the Tories' post-mortem. But Morten Morland's cartoon of the mass of begging bowls outside No 10 sums up where we are going next. Expectations have been raised, and voters' demands are endless. Even if growth comes along, it will be a long time before it boosts government revenue, and the patience of the wider electorate will be tested.
David Porter, Plymouth

Prizing tech
On election night Rachel Reeves said economic growth must come from encouraging private sector investment. Key to this will be the science and tech sectors. The government should use challenge prizes to help unlock this money.

The previous government employed prizes sporadically, including co-funding the global Longitude prize, which awarded £8 million last month for a diagnostic test to tackle superbugs. Though one team won, many competitors, including in the UK, are now close to market. The appointment of Sir Patrick Vallance, a former member of the Longitude prize committee, as science minister bodes well for the government's commitment to putting innovation at the heart of its growth mission.
Tris Dyson, managing director, Challenge Works

AI brain drain
The Labour landslide offers an opportunity to recalibrate our approach to AI. The party's manifesto provides a promising foundation. Introducing a dedicated minister of AI and a minister for entrepreneurship could integrate AI across government departments while adhering to UK standards.

As an entrepreneur in the AI sector, I am concerned about the UK's declining leadership. With Paris emerging as a global AI hub and large investments in regions such as the Middle East, we are experiencing a brain drain. A unified effort by government, industry and academia is essential.
*Sachin Dev Duggal
Founder, Builder.ai*

Learn languages and gain a soul

A singular focus on science, technology, engineering and maths has led to the demise of modern languages and brought about the alarming prospect of a monolingual generation ("Why British teenagers are saying adieu to learning French", News, last week). The new education secretary should prioritise a rebalancing of the curriculum so these subjects, and the creative arts, are restored to the prominence they deserve.

Learning languages is not only good for memory and problem-solving but important for widening horizons, enhancing international relations and encouraging a curiosity and respect for other cultures. As Charlemagne understood, "To have a second language is to have a second soul."
Andrew Copeman, head of upper sixth, Latymer Upper School, west London

Outdated skills
The world speaks English, Spanish and Mandarin. It's time we dumped French and German from the curriculum. We are not teaching people the skills they need but the same garbage I learnt 50 years ago. As an employer of nearly 200 staff, I need people with relevant skills. Not outdated language courses, trigonometry, the halogens or pi.
*Andrew Thorne
Shipdham, Norfolk*

Bilingual bias
Many of those remaining 7,000 French A-level entries are from bilingual pupils who have an unfair advantage. For them, achieving an A* requires little more effort than showing up for the exams. English-speaking pupils learning the hard way have almost no chance of an A*. There has to be a way of screening out mother-tongue pupils in all foreign languages to level the playing field.
Rara Ehraida, London

Poor innings by Tories ends at last

Tim Shipman's excellent cricketing analogy for Rishi's Sunak's woes reminded me of the England team's disastrous home defeat in 1988, when the desperate selectors chose four captains during the series against the West Indies and still lost 4-0 ("How Sunak got stumped", News, last week). I'm sure it won't be lost on anyone that the first captain in that series had to go because of a scandal, and what followed was a string of panicky replacements.
Charles Townley, Hove

Dishonest partner
I read with interest Robert Jenrick's views on why the electorate moved away from supporting the Conservative Party ("We lost because we got Brexit done but nothing else", News, last week). However, the simple truth is that politics, like a good marriage, might survive a single unfortunate indiscretion if both parties are prepared to put in the requisite effort to regain trust. When one party is not prepared to do this and indeed keeps consistently lying and cheating, then I am afraid the conclusion will usually be a painful divorce.
*Lesley Cleghorn
Stanwick, Northampton*

Curing NHS will take many pills

Your editorial (last week) sets out the problems in the NHS. Your main prescription – charging patients for appointments – would protect the NHS rather than protecting people's health. Your other suggestions, such as increasing doctor numbers and removing bed-blockers to care, have been raised before but did not exactly pull the crowds in. The NHS has to be seen instead as a many-headed hydra. Prevention and public health; getting more from GPs, pharmacists and care in the community; reorganising hospitals to maximise patient interactions and be smaller and simpler to manage; spreading technological innovations – all have their place. In parallel, social care needs a similarly layered, complex response. As we all know, many-headed monsters are not slain in a hurry.
*Deep Sagar
Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire*

Radical reform
It is disappointing, to put it mildly, that there is no suggestion of a look at radical options for reforming the NHS, such as moving to an insurance system. If the incoming Labour government does not undertake such a review now, when will it ever happen?
Peter Ford, London SW20

BIRTHDAYS

Sue Lawley, presenter, 78
Baroness (Eliza) Manningham-Buller, former head of MI5, 76
Conor McGregor, fighter, 36
David Mitchell, comedian, 50
Cornelia Parker, sculptor, 68
Maxine Peake, actress, 50
Phoebe Waller-Bridge, actress and writer, 39



Phoebe Waller-Bridge is 39

ANNIVERSARIES

1865 British climber Edward Whymper leads first team to reach the summit of the Matterhorn
1867 Alfred Nobel first demonstrates dynamite at a Surrey quarry
2014 Church of England votes for female bishops

Posh boys made the welfare state

Will Lloyd should not assume that "posh boys" are all unconcerned about the plight of the less privileged ("Is the era of 'posh boy' dominance really over?", News Review, last week). The lives of working people have been transformed for the better by the Beveridge report, Keynesian economics and the welfare state. Beveridge, Keynes and Attlee attended public schools and Oxbridge.
Rohan Fernando, Epsom

Socially mobile peers
Lloyd does not mention the meteoric social mobility of the 19th and early 20th century. Banking, brewing, industry, confectionery and manufacturing families became rich and joined the aristocracy. Many a country estate was rescued by sons and daughters marrying into this "nouveau riche".

The vision and pragmatism of monarchs and politicians were instrumental in Britain avoiding revolution. Today's equivalent are sadly inferior in ability and foresight.
*Nicky Samengo-Turner
Lambourn, Berkshire*

POINTS

Well executed
Waldemar Januszczak thinks Henry VIII carries all the blame for the "cultural revolution" of the 16th century ("We beheaded the wrong king", Culture, last week). This view is too narrow. Certainly Henry started it all, but his son Edward VI continued and expanded the scope of the destruction: statues were defaced, stained glass targeted and illuminated manuscripts destroyed. Charles I is indeed without compare as a collector and enabler of the great artists of his time, but his execution led the country to the beginnings of constitutional government, without which we would have had a revolution like the French. What of our culture would have survived that?
Paul Lynch, London W4

Fife truths
Professor Alan Murray's experience of life in St Andrews is perhaps at the cosmopolitan end of the scale ("Trouble and Fife", Letters, last week). I spent my teenage years in west Fife and recognise Camilla Long's description of a Fife dinner lady. Or even better, perhaps, a Fife bus conductress (aka clippie). We often encountered one whose approach would have met Donald Trump's approval. It is best summed up by the old song: "She's just a Kelty clippie/ She'll no take nae advice/ She says och drop deid or I'll boil yer heed/ Or I'll punch yer ticket twice."
*Heather Serjeant
Bromham, Wiltshire*

Lure of the spotlight
In "Footloose and fame-free? Not for Bacon" (News, last week), Kevin Bacon described how he had decided to go out as "an ordinary member of the public" and discovered "the downside of being invisible". I am reminded of an interview in which Peter Ustinov recorded that he once visited Albania, where he was unknown. "It was delightful ... [pause] ... for 20 minutes."
*Bernard Richards
Brasenose College, Oxford*

Witness to scandal
Scandalous and unacceptable is probably the most apt description for the treatment meted out by supporters of Lucy Letby to Dr Dewi Evans for his role in assisting a police investigation and in giving evidence at her trial. (News, last week). Attempts to punish him by complaint to the General Medical Council are harassment, which according to case law amount to a contempt of court. Letby's cheerleaders should be warned. The police can easily find you.
Nigel Duckworth, Dartmouth

Courting injustice
In "Raducanu serves up a painful snub at Murray's final", you appear to have omitted a vital word in this passage: "Murray, 37, who became the first British player to win Wimbledon in 2013 since Fred Perry in 1936 ..." Surely it should say "first male British winner". We have had four female winners since Fred Perry. It is such a shame that women's sport is still not given the recognition that men's sport automatically gets.
Gail Bloomfield, Eastleigh

Inside scoop
The best ice cream in the world is from Joe's ice cream parlour in Swansea ("I'd travel 300 miles for an ice cream like that", Week Ending, Comment, last week). Established in 1922 by Joe Cascarini.
Ann Capp, Swansea

Letters should arrive by midday on Thursday and include the full address and a phone number. We may edit letters, which must be exclusive to The Sunday Times

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

Complaints concerning inaccuracies should be sent to complaints@sunday-times.co.uk or Complaints, The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF.

In addition, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ipso) will examine formal complaints about the editorial content of UK newspapers and magazines. Please go to our website for full details of how to lodge a complaint.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION ONLINE

Your comments from thesundaytimes.co.uk

Simon Boas, 47, touched many readers last week with his observations about preparing to die. **Marilyn Sheinman** wrote of her own "gorgeous daughter aged 45", who "has been diagnosed with a rare thyroid cancer. She's being so strong and positive. She has a website and a podcast, *Talking with Cancer*. She's arranged her funeral and written her will and even threw a birthday dinner party where she talked about her death. Every day I live in fear of losing her." **Andrew Clay** commented: "It feels bizarre to say it, but knowing you are going to die is a precious gift. My mother and sister died from cancer and I was fortunate to have two weeks with both at the end. When my turn came for a terminal prognosis, I was able to have similar time with my wife and children. But a chance meeting with a specialist who put me on a trial means I'm still here four years later."

In Travel we met some adventurous over-70s who were painting the whole globe red. **Bart Taylor-Harris** was a kindred spirit: "I'm 75, and last year I was exploring Vietnam and Cambodia. September will be the Canadian Rockies and Alaska. In 2025 I plan Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan." **Eileen tindall** had been "swimming with whale sharks off Western Australia last year at 79", and **KM McDonald** has "booked to travel round South America for my 72nd birthday. My grandson told me there were 'baddies there'. But Granny's going for it."

Finally, much discussion of the best brand of breakfast wheat biscuit. Lidl came bottom in our test but top with readers. **C Thomas**, for instance, said: "I don't want firm in a breakfast cereal, thank you." **Tim Walker** muttered: "Why people eat this stuff after they've graduated to solids beats me." **Kevin O'Sullivan** thought one could "cut out the middleman and just eat the box". And what to do with the contents? Easy, said **Virginia Crook**: "Dried Weetabix = concrete substitute."

Rob Nash

READERS' POLL

Last week we asked:
Should modern languages be compulsory at GCSE?

YES 82% NO 18%

From a poll of 4,011 Times and Sunday Times readers

This week's question:
Should the UK impose an arms embargo on Israel?
Have your say at thesundaytimes.com/poll

COMMENT

Camilla Long



Clooney backed Biden because he didn't want a spray-tanned, power-crazed president. Oops

Can someone please explain "democracy" to me? I'm getting soooo confused. It is something that one minute people say they passionately stand for, will die for – an inalienable, unwavering, untouchable value similar to "the truth" – only to chuck it out the next minute, telling us, well, it wasn't the sort of democracy they really wanted, so let's try someone/something else. Where are their principles?

George Clooney, for example: a "lifelong Democrat" who "loves" Joe Biden. He truly, truly respects "democracy". In an opinion column on Wednesday he told us he considers Biden "a friend"; he believes in him, believes in "his morals". But Biden can't deliver the "democracy" George wants, so he's got to step down.

Sometimes democracy is "messy", sighed Clooney. Hmmm. Is it? I thought the whole point was that it wasn't "exciting", as he also puts it, or "messy". It's all the undemocratic stuff that is.

These people still don't get it, do they? I'm not even going to bother with all the lies and delusions in Clooney's histrionic article. To begin with, Clooney is clearly not Joe Biden's friend, if the only way he communicates with him is through the pages of The New York Times. Two, he clearly doesn't believe in the president, or rate him – that was the whole point of the article.

And three – or, as Biden would say, seven – if he's so straightforward, if Clooney is the personification of honesty, positive feeling, good juju etc, why didn't he say something at the fundraiser he gave for Biden "three weeks ago", before all his mates shelled out $30 million on the president's doomscroll of a campaign, an eighth of his total war chest? It's then, Clooney told us, that he realised Biden wasn't the "Biden of 2020".

Ya think?

How didn't he notice before? Either Clooney is lying now or he was lying then – or both. Anyway: yay democracy!

This, by the way, is nowhere near the most painful, hysterical and thrashing the Democrats are going to get. They are a party in freefall, unable to make sense of their present leader or, it appears, tellingly, think about another. What kind of party has only one possible leader anyway? An oligarchy, that's what.

Stubborn, weaselly and distrustful, Biden has kept down/sidelined/frozen out anyone with a nanospeck of talent, just like the Clintons did. Even our Tory party, flogged to pieces and utterly on its knees, still has five or six people who could now stand as leader. The result? The Democrats are disappearing: they have been exposed for what they are, a small, sclerotic, inward-looking circle of power-obsessed, dwindling image-makers and gatekeepers who are scheming, lying, manipulating and tricking themselves out of existence. The right headline for Clooney's article would probably be: "I am the problem".

If you don't believe any of this, dip back into the NYT's coverage of that fundraiser held by him, Jimmy Kimmel, Barbra Streisand et al. It's wall-to-wall slavish gush and destructive, shrieking group delusions. It reads as if it were written a thousand years ago. Just listen to what Jill Biden said about Donald Trump, Biden's opponent: he is a maniac obsessed with "absolute power". He "wakes up every morning caring about one person and one person only: himself". A few weeks later, who would you say was the self-obsessed one?

Who's the one transfixed on power, who won't give it up; will, instead, go on television covered – and this breaks my heart – in fake tan? No, no, not Clooney. Biden, who appeared in the debate looking white and half dead, is now routinely as orange as Trump.

How did we arrive here? We have spent ten years hearing how Trump is the tyrant, how he's the one who's standing in the way of democracy. Now this. Clooney, Biden, Barack Obama – who knew about Clooney's article – don't believe in democracy any more than Trump does. The proof? They have lied, fudged, cavilled their way to the verge of what they say they most fear: an actual Trump-style coup – sorry, a "co-ordinated Democratic rebellion" – in which faceless billionaire donors try to starve an intransigent, deranged candidate of their money until he quits. Meanwhile George Clooney, of all people, writes Kremlin-style articles. It is all – *all* – projection. It's not democracy.



George Clooney, Julia Roberts and Barack Obama with Biden at a gala four weeks ago, when no concerns were raised

I don't, by the way, have much time for the last candidate people tried to starve out of office – Trump. I don't think he'll be a great president, or have time to be. He's run a mediocre campaign; God knows what he actually stands for this time round. But the truth is there is now no one to challenge him; even if Biden, a shell, clings on to power – and he clearly wants to – we can now never be quite sure who's actually running the country. Something, by the way, they also once said of Trump. It is all, all of it, upside down.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world stumbles as it tries to keep up with the toxic narrative. The lies were being repeated all over the Nato summit. It would be a "big mistake" to underestimate Biden, said the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz. The Finnish president said he had "no concerns" about his "capacity". As for Keir Starmer, well, what could he say, when faced with the question? My view is, not this: he found Biden "on really good form". Asked if he thought the president senile, the PM said no. Keir: too much.

What kind of party has only one possible leader? An oligarchy, that's what

There are so many ways not to perpetuate lies, fakery, doublethink, but for some reason Starmer chose to. Perhaps he thought he was telling the truth. But politicians enjoy these bubbles of self-promotional nonsense: they find them addictive, exhilarating, reassuring. He's enjoying his own bubble right now. Prisons, NHS, energy – everything he does is a miracle.

Meanwhile Trump behaves like Biden (silent, hiding) and Biden behaves like Trump (orange, mad). That's where lies get us.

I'm no fan of Baldwin, but he didn't deserve this persecution

What now for Alec Baldwin? His trial in Santa Fe has collapsed.

I don't think I'll ever understand the American justice "system", but, in extraordinary scenes on Friday, it appears the prosecution strode up to the judge, admitting it had failed to disclose crucial evidence — a packet of bullets — and the judge, obviously fed up with the mess and the circus of it all, decided to dismiss the case.

Baldwin then fled to his car, in floods of tears, ridiculous totty wife in tow.

I'm not a fan of Baldwin — he's rude, impulsive, self-obsessed. You wouldn't trust him with a film set, let alone a gun. But watching this, you do wonder: how long will this go on?

There's no question he's devastated by what happened on set in 2021, when he accidentally killed one of the crew. His career has collapsed, he's in constant anguish, with — another stupidity — eight children, whom he now probably can't provide for. Nothing says desperation like doing a cringeworthy reality show with the cable channel TLC — out next year. In attacking him, though, in constantly persecuting him, what is it we hope to achieve?

It's the same with that poor man in Arizona whose child died in a hot car — he said he left her there to sleep. It is incredibly stupid, neglectful, possibly even lazy. But it's obviously a mistake. So why charge him with murder? Why persecute the individual to somehow expiate the whole?

Terri White

Week ending



Screaming dishrag? Shelley Duvall showed what real fear looks like

After reading that Shelley Duvall had died at 75, I put on my favourite of her films: Robert Altman's underrated classic *Thieves Like Us*. And I waited. For the saucer-eyed scream from her gut, which foreshadowed what would make her famous.

"Shelley Duvall may not be an actress, exactly," wrote the New Yorker's film critic, Pauline Kael. "She seems to be herself on screen in a way that nobody has ever been."

Not openness, but a cracking-open. Each skin worn like the only one to ever fit. Said Duvall: "When I play a character, at that moment, nothing else exists."

Sweet, Coke-drinking Keechie in *Thieves*; *Annie Hall*'s spiritual-abyss music journalist Pam; spaced-out, self-regarding Millie in *3 Women*; *Popeye*'s Olive Oyl, voice like a fine-china teacup. And Wendy Torrance: the screams heard around the world.

When *The Shining* was released, though, it wasn't pretty for Duvall: she got a Razzie nomination, and Stephen King called the screen version of his character "a screaming dishrag". Rumours about on-set abuse by the director, Stanley Kubrick, were spoken of as fact. It was a painful production: 13 months of six-day weeks, Duvall crying, chased by her homicidal husband (Jack Nicholson). By one account the bat-swinging staircase scene had 127 takes.

A documentary made by the director's daughter was clear: he could be a pain in the arse, pushing actors to their limit and berating Duvall (until she argued back). But Duvall was also clear: it was brutal but worth it. "I wouldn't trade the experience for anything. Why? Because of Stanley," she said in 2001. "And it was a fascinating learning experience. But I wouldn't want to go through it again."

Gradually the tide turned. Duvall's Razzie was voided. The judges had seen the error of their ways! Had recognised talent, her as the pounding heart … oh, sorry, nope. The Razzie nom was yanked because "Duvall's performance was impacted by Stanley Kubrick's treatment". Apparently that meant it wasn't fair to judge.

So hang on: she's so terrorised she puts in a bad performance of terror? The insult repeated, now with her agency stripped. Her testimony ignored. Those who knew nowt but thought they knew better insisted she was in denial. That he ruined her career. Drove her to madness.

Never mind that she worked through the 1980s (appearing in *Time Bandits* and *Roxanne* and producing the incredible, insane *Faerie Tale Theatre* TV series). She returned home to Texas in the mid-1990s when her brother became ill; chose to step back from acting.

Duvall's latter years were undoubtedly tragic. She became paranoid and reclusive. A wildly exploitative 2016 appearance on *Dr Phil* revealed the extent of her mental health decline. She had financial difficulties and lived with diabetes.

Three years ago, during an interview, Duvall watched the baseball bat scene. She began to cry, saying, "I can only imagine how many women go through this kind of thing."

Hollywood demands authenticity – and has no clue what to do when it arrives, eyes like saucers. As her partner, Dan Gilroy, said: "Too much suffering lately. Now she's free."

NEWMAN'S VIEW



● **For a woman landing one of the biggest gigs in government, Angela Rayner looked relaxed, merrily striding down Downing Street to be named deputy prime minister and secretary of state for housing and communities.**

As the daughter of a teenage single mum, I get it. She has done the very hardest yards already. Now comes the fun. And I get the sense that for Rayner politics is a riot.

Rayner looked after her mum, who has bipolar disorder, from when she was a kid. Left school pregnant at 16. She raised three sons – the first with her teenage boyfriend, the others with her now estranged husband. Became a nana at 37. All the while building an extraordinary career.

I watched my own mum graft and grind, scrimp and save. These are women for whom the work of government would be, will be, a cinch. Ever had to work out how to make a fiver last the week? What to do when two of your kids need coats and you can only buy one? They have.

And I guarantee: there's nowt they can't do.

Demi ages brilliantly

There is, I've realised as I've gone over the other side of 45, a clear advantage to being bang-average as the years pass. No true reckoning with the politics of beauty and ageing. You can, I imagine, rail at the casual cruelty of a society obsessed with youth. Or you can do a Demi Moore.

Truly, for my money, one of the most beautiful actresses of our times, Moore stars in *The Substance* as a former Hollywood star turned aerobics presenter. When she loses even that gig to a younger woman, she turns to a dodgy injection that reverses ageing in a shocking, gory way.

The defiance. The lack of vanity. I couldn't respect her more.

Can England make history?

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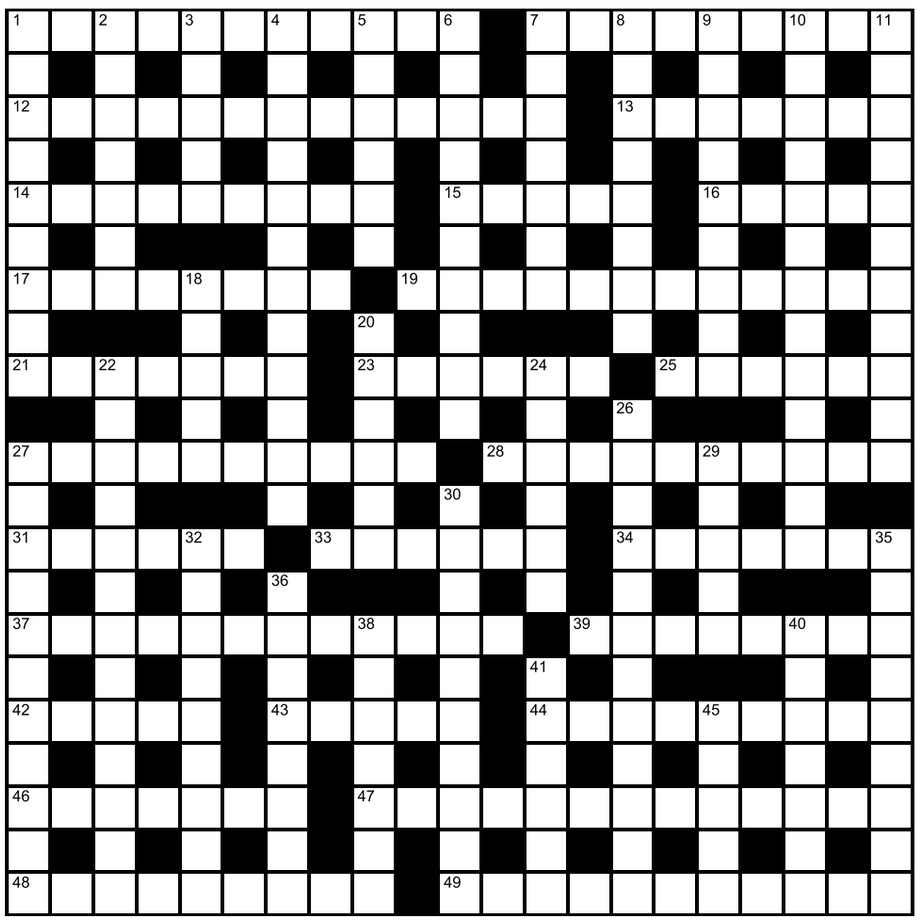


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PUZZLES

FEEDBACK Comments about our puzzles can be sent to puzzle.feedback@sunday-times.co.uk or Puzzles Editor, The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE JUMBO CROSSWORD 431



Across

1 Settlers who first arrived in Britain around AD450 (5-6)
7 Male trader with a regular customer delivery route (9)
12 Female emcee at a formal dinner, for example (13)
13 Time intervals between successive UK censuses (7)
14 The Adventures of ___ Maggie, 2011 single by the Red Hot Chilli Peppers (4,5)
15 The ___ rose was the symbol of the combined houses of York and Lancaster (5)
16 "The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to ___ us from the support of a cause" (Abraham Lincoln) (5)
17 In the USA, the lines of a railway system collectively (8)
19 Half-giant, half-human Hogwarts professor (6,6)
21 Mediterranean island, French territory since 1769 (7)
23 Insect habitat kept, for example, by Morgan Freeman (6)
25 Incendiary weapon used extensively in the Vietnam War (6)
27 The world's eighth most populous country, capital Dhaka (10)
28 Salad plant (pictured) usually grown in clear chalk streams in Britain (10)
31 One of the chess pieces which starts on the b- or g-file (6)
33 ITV company whose headquarters are in Norwich (6)
34 The Lord High ___ is a senior priest overseeing charity to the poor (7)
37 Hogwarts flying instructor and Quidditch referee (7,5)
39 Switch from one form of conveyance to another (8)
42 Nikola ___ made major contributions to the design of AC electricity supply systems (5)
43 Traditional Christian sect with a restricted lifestyle (5)
44 An ___ deed is one done in restitution for bad conduct (9)
46 An Old ___ is an alumnus of a college founded by Henry VI (7)
47 Duchess of Clarence born in 1451, daughter of Warwick the Kingmaker (6,7)
48 Leader of the global Transcendental Meditation movement (4,5)
49 Director whose films included 12 Angry Men and Serpico (6,5)

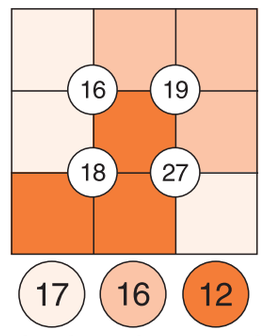


Down

1 The British ___ Territory is our largest overseas possession (9)
2 Italian semi-frozen dessert, usually flavoured with fruit (7)
3 Group or set of eight, particularly in biology or computing (5)
4 USA singer and actress who starred in Victorius on TV (6,6)
5 Store where a manufacturer sells discounted goods direct to shoppers (6)
6 What can be read in order to perform songs or pieces (5,5)
7 Salman ___ wrote The Satanic Verses (7)
8 Insufficiently utilise (8)
9 Term for a hybrid film or TV genre, based on real events but making use of artistic licence (9)
10 A ___ climate has hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters (13)
11 Astrologer and physician who wrote prophetic quatrains (11)
18 Shrimp-like crustaceans, a key link in the marine food chain (5)
20 Mr ___ was the older Downton Abbey butler on TV (6)
22 Item of cutlery first mentioned in a nonsense poem (8,5)
24 Nancy ___ was the USA's first lady, 1981-1989 (6)
26 Footballer (pictured) who played over 200 games for the USA women's team and retired in 2023 (5,7)
27 1978 song by Gerry Rafferty with a prominent sax riff (5,6)
29 Spice called jeera in Indian cuisine (5)
30 The ___ were Ian Dury's backing band (10)
32 Nationality of puzzle inventor Erno Rubik (9)
35 Return of money to a creditor (9)
36 Decorated by European workers imitating Far Eastern lacquering techniques (8)
38 One of the National Theatre's three theatres, named after its first artistic director (7)
40 1997 New York gang war film, with Laurence Fishburne and Tim Roth (7)
41 Epic poem written by Virgil (6)
45 Type of cumulonimbus cloud with a flat top (5)

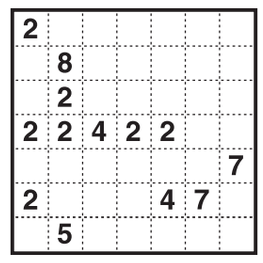


SUKO



Place the numbers 1 to 9 in the spaces so that the number in each circle is equal to the sum of the four surrounding spaces, and each colour total is correct.

CELL BLOCKS



Divide the grid into square or rectangular blocks, each containing one digit only. Every block must contain the number of cells indicated by the digit inside it.

SUDOKU

Each row, column and 3x3 box must contain digits 1-9. Winner receives The Times Mindset Puzzles Book 1 and The Sunday Times Teasers Book 2.



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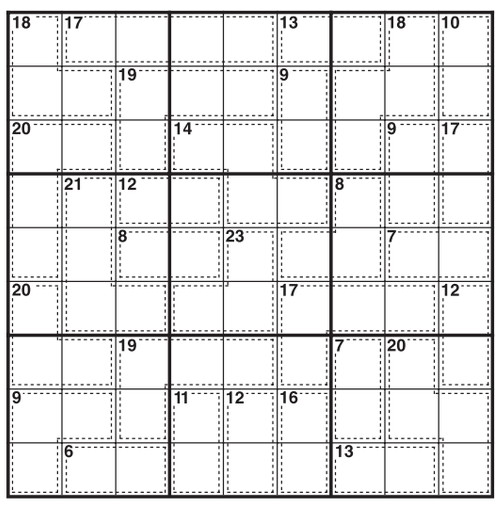
WARM-UP

	6						8	
		9		2		4		
4		3		5		7		1
8		5				6		9
	7						4	
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		6	1		9	2		
	8		4		2		5	

VERY HARD — PRIZE 1596

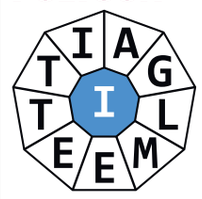
								7
		3	6		9		5	
	8				5	6		2
	7		5			4		
	6	5			2	3		9
		7	3		8		6	
	3					7	2	
4		1			6			

KILLER SUDOKU MODERATE



Each row, column and 3x3 box must contain the digits 1 to 9. The digits within each group of cells joined by dotted lines must add up to the figure in the top-left-hand corner of each group. Within each dotted-line group, a digit cannot be repeated.

POLYGON

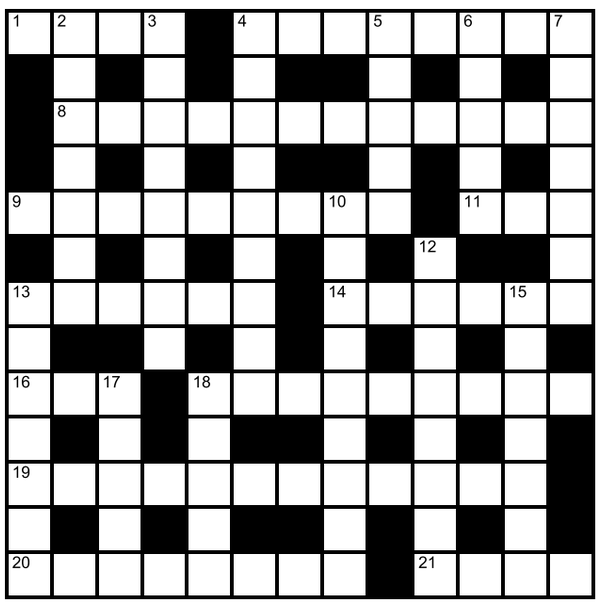


From these letters, make words of four or more letters, always including the central letter. Answers must be in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, excluding capitalised words, plurals, conjugated verbs (past tense etc), adverbs ending in LY, comparatives and superlatives.

How you rate
21 words, average; 28, good; 36, very good; 44, excellent.

STUCK? Call our clue line to get four clues for the Very Hard puzzle on 0901 293 6265 (ROI 1514 515 120). Calls cost £1 (ROI 76c) plus your telephone company's network access charge. For full terms and conditions, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/comprules. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (ROI 0818 205 403) Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm

CONCISE CROSSWORD 1895



Across

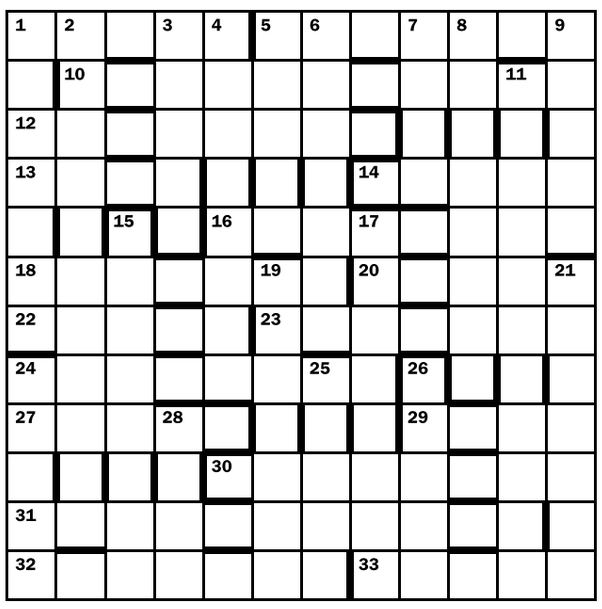
1 Genesis shepherd (4)
4 Impresario (8)
8 Input (12)
9 Bribery source (5,4)
11 Quarry quantity (3)
13 Freely (2,4)
14 Snap (6)
16 Extremity (3)
18 In fun (3,1,5)
19 The Hobbit (5,7)
20 Warn of disaster (3,5)
21 Large book (4)

Down

2 Outside studio (7)
3 Viking vessel (8)
4 Set of investments (9)
5 Celtic priest (5)
6 Ascend (5)
7 X-ray unit (7)
10 Wistful (9)
12 Dreamer (8)
13 Old still (7)
15 Cogito, ___ (4,3)
17 Flirt (5)
18 Plant life (5)

MEPHISTO 3333

Paul McKenna



NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

.....

Post your solution to The Sunday Times Mephisto 3333, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex CO2 8GZ, or email puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk

The first correct solution picked at random after next Saturday wins Collins World Atlas: Complete Edition, worth £30.The next four will receive £20 Waterstones gift vouchers. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

The Chambers Dictionary 13th edition is the primary reference. Readers may email comments or queries to Paul McKenna at paul.auctor@gmail.com



Across

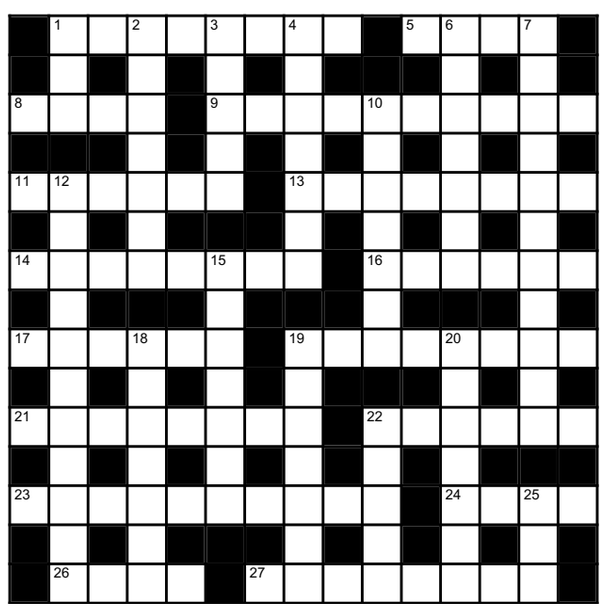
1 From the US, sound judgement's close to calm (5)
5 One who scoffs about recipe and a kitchen device? (7)
10 Insufferably optimistic plan is only put in motion by husband (11)
12 Popular river rounded by secure carrier of tent say (8)
13 On a trophy being returned (4)
14 Old misery beat Fricka's mate (5)
16 Desire to be in Carry On – my life is ruined (8)
18 Roman Catholic embracing old and accepted language of the east (7)
20 Stumble upon the truth as Alberta goes for it in practice (5, two words)
22 Sturgeon's to disappear, informally changing sides (5)
23 Endymion's lover swiping it like a tablet (7)
24 Q's art? The making of gizmos from torturous tool trial (8)
27 Chart leaving room for cautionary sign (5)
29 Die from dried berry mostly (4)
30 One with charitable intentions understanding rabbit (8)
31 Bill hangs on to excellent name for traveller's trouble (11)
32 Morals set by pen (7)
33 By the grace of God in court backing boundaries (5)

Down

1 Like trailer without getting up during picture (7)
2 Phat Amelia and I performing songs of union? (11)
3 Son – Biblical mite – on being excused dozed (5)
4 Devious types with head lowered learned in a different way (8)
5 One who'd ditch some bloody kerb-merchant (5)
6 Intend being into torn clothing as was (7)
7 Half-cut, relaxed dope (4)
8 Nicest at twinkling winks (8)
9 Throw her in Somerset's waterway (5)
11 Street getting older, worthless assembly point (11, two words)
15 Romance day and Baron concealed gold of the forest, perhaps (8)
17 Greeting in central and north-eastern indigenous language (8)
19 Old intimate burdened by a lost bind (7)
21 In time before treats we enjoy boring boats (7)
24 Old tusker's wound up colt and horse and Henry (5)
25 Fashionista down under guzzling satisfactory starter (5)
26 Indicted rogue with eccentricity must drop hurt (5)
28 Essentially ignoring Prince's language (4)

CROSSWORD 5120

David McLean



NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

.....

Across

1 Where a high-roller might get some air? (4-4)
5 Life peer stores a fencing tool (4)
8 Does work end in tears? (4)
9 Dash not for nuts etc (3,2,5)
11 Start to shoot in army engagement (6)
13 Theoretical paper, second out for head of OU (8)
14 Digs records filled with ultimately good spirit (8)
16 Vegetable or flightless bird picked up in US port (6)
17 Artist embraced by a plump statesman once (6)
19 One hired to liquidate Berks home (8)
21 Six-foot type of brute upset with Wag (5,3)
22 Old Chancellor whose name has no L in bold (6)
23 In need of a hit, so then pens Rocket Man? (10)
24 Fruit requiring no introduction for everyone (4)
26 Rook heading to the king's file gains a tempo (4)
27 Singer, one with bag in a baby store? (8)

Down

1 Hot writer loses head in drunken outburst? (3)
2 Remaining large on a diet? Not fine. (7)
3 Announce aircraft manifest (5)
4 Particular types of undies worn by my boss (7)
6 Unsalaried expert with U2 pilot? (3,4)
7 Deportation bonus Conservative ignored in speech (11)
10 One with beak in court splits over work (7)
12 Church maestro I played with close to October? (11)
15 Memorable retro-fashion fit (7)
18 Shabby type that screens request apt for Spooner (7)
19 Imposing bit of architecture in US city (7)
20 Bones in fish trainee at first overlooked (7)
22 Number in tributes for the Drifters? (5)
25 Nick's direct route? Turn off and cross track, ditch and hollowed-out path. Go quickly and ignore lower canal section and detached dock. Make a sharp change in direction and pass through lit-up excavation for railway line and stop! (3)

TETONOR HARD

94	90	230	22
42	120	33	216
182	23	126	72
27	176	93	117

1	2	2			6				18	21				

Each number in the main grid can be formed by adding or multiplying a pair of numbers in the strip below the grid. Each pair of numbers should be used twice: once as part of an addition and once as part of a multiplication. For example, a 10 and 24 in the main grid may be solved by the sums, 4 + 6 and 4 x 6, respectively. Enter each sum in the boxes below its answer. Any blanks in the strip must be deduced, bearing in mind the numbers are listed in ascending order.

CODEWORD

11	4	17	17	9	4	5	23	■	7	12	16	11
21	■	4	■	12	■	4	■	22	■	10	■	21
26	2	25	21	19	■	9	5	12	16	12 O	7	21
21	■	19	■	10	■	2	■	19	■	3	■	15
17	21	21	5	■	14	21	10	24	21	5	12	6
■	■	15	■	10	■	5	■	21	■	■	■	4
18	21	15	7	21	5 R	■	11	4	19	20	4	25
2	■	■	■	17	■	22	■	17	■	4	■	■
19	2	24	14	7	20	4	5	■	15	22	4	19
2	■	3	■	12	■	15	■	1	■	3	■	2
22	14	4	5	2	12	7	■	3	19	13	2	9
23	■	26	■	10	■	17	■	2	■	13	■	9
8	21	4	5	■	24	21	19	7	5	2	18	8

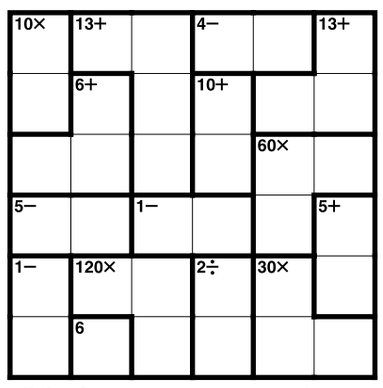
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N Ø P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

1	2	3	4	5 R	6	7	8	9	10	11	12 O	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26

In the grid, each number represents a letter of the alphabet – all 26 letters are used. Use the initial clues in the code table to work out the rest of the code.

STUCK? To get four random extra letter clues, call 0901 293 6266 (ROI 1514 415128) or text STCLUE to 64343 (UK only). Calls cost £1 (ROI 75c) plus your telephone company's network access charge. Texts cost £1 plus your standard network charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (ROI 0818 205 403) (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

KENKEN



All the digits 1 to 6 must appear in every row and column. In each thick-line "block", the target number in the top left-hand corner is calculated from the digits in all the cells in the block, using the operation indicated by the symbol.

The first correct solution opened after next Saturday wins a collection of reference books — The Times Reference Atlas of the World, Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus, and Bradford's Crossword Solver's Dictionary, published by HarperCollins. Three runners-up win the Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus. Post solutions to: The Sunday Times Crossword 5120, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex, CO2 8GZ, or email: puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

CLUE WRITING CONTEST 2029: RODEO

You are invited to write a clue for the word above, in our cryptic crossword style. The best entry selected after next Saturday wins a £25 Waterstones voucher. Email your entry to puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk.

Winner 2026: Charlie Oakley, Hartland, Devon
Possessive: It's not applicable in this case

For a full report, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/cluewriting

NEWS REVIEW

Freddy Gray

Rwanda was amazing for a honeymoon. Less so for a migrant plan



I will never forget the moment my wife, a keen zoologist, suggested that we spend our honeymoon with gorillas in Rwanda. "Isn't that more a you thing than an us thing?" I protested, feebly. "Well, there's a genocide museum for you in Kigali," she replied, or words to that effect. How romantic, I thought to myself. Even then I knew better than to press my case.

Rwanda turned out to be wonderful, though. We fell in love, less with each other than with the great apes of Virunga national park. We ate delicious meals in the Wilderness Sabyinyo Silverback Lodge. We fraternised with a delightful militia in the mountains nearby. I remember a young man with an AK-47 winking knowingly at me as he told my new bride to "have a good night". There's nothing like young love.

The genocide museum was not, it should be said, the most cheerful experience. I spent a good hour or two staring at pictures of mass graves – and long videos of commanders adamantly denying or explaining away their guilt – and wondered if a villa in Tuscany might have been a bit more conjugal.

Perhaps it is healthy for a young couple embarking on a life together to be reminded of humanity's boundless capacity for evil. The bigger point is that while it of course has a dismal recent history, Rwanda today is fine.

Thanks to gazillions in western aid dollars, the country's roads are good and the towns feel safe enough – if you can ignore the faint whiff of authoritarian government in the air. In recent years we've learnt that Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, has a habit of making his critics disappear. But we saw none of that.

So, I find it funny that in Britain today "Rwanda" has become synonymous with Tory idiocy and a bizarre and

ERIK PEARSON/GETTY IMAGES



The mountain gorillas of Virunga; better for romance than the genocide museum

ultimately pointless scheme to rehome migrants. The Rwanda plan, now put out of its misery by Labour, never struck me as the moral monstrosity its critics claimed it to be. There's nothing inhumane, surely, about spending government money on decent accommodation in Africa to disincentivise dangerous boat crossings across the Channel.

The real problem was that it was barking mad. The Rwanda policy was always, as Dominic Cummings has said, "an alternative to facing political reality". As Tory insanity deepened following Covid and Partygate, the idea somehow took on a strange life of its own.

Under Rishi Sunak, Rwanda became a kind of displacement activity for a government failing on every front. A British prime minister, by all accounts a highly intelligent man, convinced himself that his entire premiership could be saved if he could somehow place just a few migrants on an aircraft. Future historians will examine the footage of Sunak shaking hands with Piers Morgan over a £1,000 bet (to be given to a refugee charity) that he would not "get the people on the planes" and think: sorry, what?

The whole Rwanda plan saga already feels Kafkaesque – a tedious nightmare version of our weird but marvellous honeymoon. To African observers, especially the staff at Hope Hotel in Kigali, still busily trimming lawns to welcome migrants who will never arrive, it must all seem particularly bonkers.

Rwandans will have noted how otherwise impeccably PC British journalists managed to turn off their sensitivities as they argued at length that the whole country was not fit for human habitation. It was all so crass. We spent so long talking about Rwanda as if it were HS2 or Heathrow's third runway. It became a bizarre metaphor for our own domestic political warfare. We forgot that we were dealing with a real country that has its own population and its own problems.

It's always the way, I suppose. At one point on our honeymoon, my wife and I realised we had lost our passports. We panicked and told our guide, who raced us back to a village we had stopped in. He began unfairly accusing and berating the locals. It was quite the scene. I remember hundreds of baffled eyes staring back at the two whiteys, so privileged and so hopeless. I also recall everyone trying to help.

We later discovered that we had left the passports in a bag on a coach and felt a deep sense of shame. But we quickly moved on and pretended that nothing had happened. Now the British government is doing something similar.

> **The £270m should go on a museum – as a monument to incompetence**

The Rwanda plan is "dead and buried," according to Sir Keir Starmer. In other words: goodbye, Rwanda, we never knew thee! Sorry about all the construction jobs that you'll now have to axe!

The government in Kigali now insists, quite reasonably, that it is under "no obligation" to return the, er, £270 million of taxpayer money that Britain has invested in the scheme. We're apparently squabbling over a refund. Instead we ought to urge the Rwandans to turn the housing zones we made them build into another memorial museum.

It could be a monument to government incompetence, with little signs explaining how much time and money was wasted. Just think of the fun items one could put on display: Suella Braverman's red box, Rishi Sunak's "Stop the boats" lectern, the pen that Priti Patel used to sign the original migration and economic development partnership.

The leaders of every new British government should be obliged to make a pilgrimage there, to pay a sombre homage to one of our great follies. Mrs Gray and I might also pay a visit when we go back to mark a future anniversary.

TEASER 3225

Bernardo Recamán

My Extended Family
When Daniela, the youngest of my nieces, was born not so long ago, her brother John remarked that Daniela's year of birth was very special: no number added to the sum of that number's digits was equal to her year of birth. The same was true for John's year of birth.

"Well" intervened Lorena, the eldest of my nieces. "If you want to know, my own year of birth – earlier than yours – also shares that very same property, and so does the year of birth of our father Diego. The same is even true for our grandmother Anna, who, as you know, was born in the 1950s."

When were Daniela, John, Lorena, Diego and Anna born?

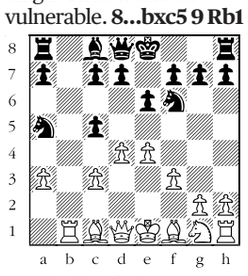
Send your solution to: The Sunday Times Teaser 3225, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex CO2 8GZ or email puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk. The first two correct solutions opened after next Saturday each win a £20 Waterstones voucher. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

CHESS

David Howell

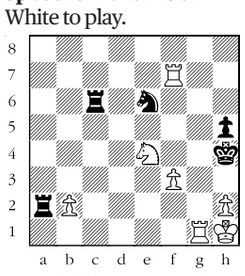
One of the joys of top-level tournaments is seeing a clash of styles between two very different players. In the recent Superbet Classic, tactical wizard Alireza Firouzja tried an exotic new idea against the ultra-solid Wesley So. Fireworks duly broke out.

White: Alireza Firouzja
Black: Wesley So
Superbet Classic, Bucharest 2024
Nimzo-Indian Defence
1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 a3 High risk chess. The double-edged Sämisch Variation is a good way to create chaos. **4...Bxc3+ 5 bxc3 b6 6 f3 Nc6 7 e4 Na5 8 c5** The novel idea, jettisoning an already weak pawn in order to open lines on the queenside. The black knight on a5 is also left vulnerable. **8...bxc5 9 Rb1**



A critical early juncture. Dynamic players may now have been tempted to jump on a tactical opportunity, but Firouzja has judged that his opponent will play more timidly. **9...cxd4** Opting against 9...Nxe4! 10 fxe4 Qh4+ 11 Kd2 Qf4+ 12 Kc2 Qxe4+ with a total mess. **10 cxd4 c5** Returning the pawn for unclear reasons. 10...0-0 11 Bg5 or 10...h6 11 h4! 0-0 12 g4! were White's other ideas. **11 dxc5 0-0 12 Bf4 Nb7** The knight is passive here. Better was 12...Re8. **13 Qd4 Re8** If 13...Qa5+ 14 Qb4 Qxc5? 15 Qxc5 Nxc5 16 Bd6 is a winning fork. **14 Ne2 Qa5+ 15 Nc3 a6 16 Be3 Qxa3 17 e5 Nd5 18 Nxd5 exd5 19 Kf2 Nd8 20 Qxd5** White dominates the centre. A desperate So gives up two minor pieces for a rook to break the bind. **20...Bb7 21 Rxb7 Nxb7 22 Qxb7 Rab8 23 Qd5 Qb2+ 24 Be2 Rxe5 25 Qd4** Avoiding 25 Qxd7? Rbe8, with counterplay down the e-file. **25...a5 26 Rb1!** Simplifying the equation. **26...Qxb1 27 Qxe5 Kh8 28 Bd4 f6 29 Qd6 Qb7 30 Bxf6! Re8** 30...gxf6 31 Qxf6+ Kg8 32 Bc4+ leads to mate. **31 Bc3 Black resigned** White's mighty bishop pair is just too powerful.

Spot the Move 1436:
White to play.



Gunathilake-Leung, Isle of Wight 2024. What is the quickest way for White to finish off the sidelined enemy king?

Send your solution (first move only), to Sunday Times Spot the Move 1436, The Sunday Times, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex CO2 8GZ, or email to puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk. The first correct answer drawn after next Saturday wins a £20 Waterstones voucher. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

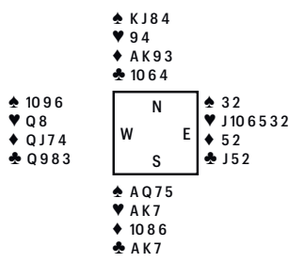
BRIDGE

Sally Brock

My team (Claire Robinson, Cameron Small, Barry Myers and myself) won last year's NICKO (National Inter-Club Knockout). We were favourites going into the final and built up a good lead after two sets which gradually dwindled away, but left us still with a winning margin.

Our opponents had a very common misunderstanding on the following deal which nearly worked out well for them.

Neither vulnerable, Dealer East



In second seat, South opened two no-trumps, North bid Stayman and South rebid three spades. North now bid four diamonds. What did this mean? Was it a cue-bid agreeing spades (as North thought), or a hand with five diamonds and four hearts looking for a red-suit fit (as South thought)? South signed off in four no-trumps but North thought this was Roman Key Card Blackwood for spades. North showed her two aces and South now knew what had happened but had no idea how good a hand her partner held.

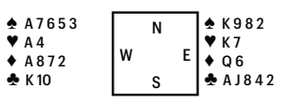
Holding nothing back, she decided to try seven spades. The bidding:

West	North	East	South
		Pass	2NT
Pass	3♣	Pass	3♠
Pass	4♦	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♥	Pass	7♠
All Pass			

My partner led a trump and declarer drew trumps before turning her attention to diamonds. In practice, she led a diamond to dummy's nine. When that held but the suit did not break 3-3, she did not have a discard for her losing club and had to go one down.

Those diamond spots were so important. If she had led the diamond eight from her hand, West has to cover or declarer is home. Then she crosses back to her hand and leads the ten of diamonds. Again West covers. That leaves him with 74 in front of dummy's 93 and declarer can't make a fourth diamond trick. If the seven and five of diamonds were swapped, the grand slam could have made!

This week's problem



You, West, are declarer in a rather precarious six spades. North leads the jack of diamonds. You try the queen but South covers with the king. Can you see a layout where you have a chance of success?

Solution next week.

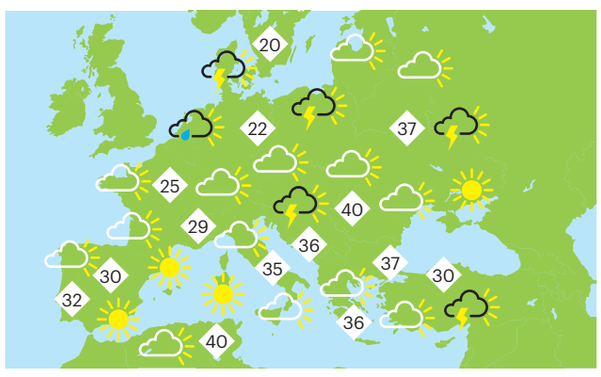
WEATHER

AROUND THE WORLD

Amsterdam	18C	sh
Athens	36	s
Auckland	14	sh
Bangkok	32	th
Barcelona	31	s
Beijing	34	s
Belgrade	39	f
Berlin	24	th
Bogota	16	sh
Boston	31	s
Brussels	24	f
Budapest	35	f
Buenos Aires	12	s
Cairo	39	s
Calgary	18	th
Cape Town	14	sh
Caracas	26	th
Casablanca	29	s
Chicago	34	th
Dubai	37	s
Dublin	20	sh
Geneva	26	f
Gibraltar	34	s
Guatemala	25	th
Helsinki	20	sh
Hong Kong	31	th
Istanbul	32	f
Jersey	19	f
Johannesburg	20	s
La Paz	13	s
Lagos	26	th
Lima	18	f
Lisbon	25	f
London	22C	f
Los Angeles	29	s
Madrid	33	s
Mexico City	23	sh
Miami	32	th
Moscow	29	th
Nairobi	23	sh
New Delhi	42	th
New Orleans	35	th
New York	34	th
Oslo	16	sh
Panama	31	th
Paris	25	f
Prague	27	th
Rio de Janeiro	25	f
Rome	37	f
San Francisco	19	f
Santiago	16	f
Seoul	32	th
Seychelles	26	th
Singapore	29	th
Stockholm	21	sh
Sydney	15	f
Tel Aviv	30	f
Tenerife	28	f
Tokyo	30	th
Toronto	31	th
Trinidad	31	th
Tunis	46	f
Venice	33	s
Vienna	29	f
Warsaw	22	sh
Washington DC	37	f

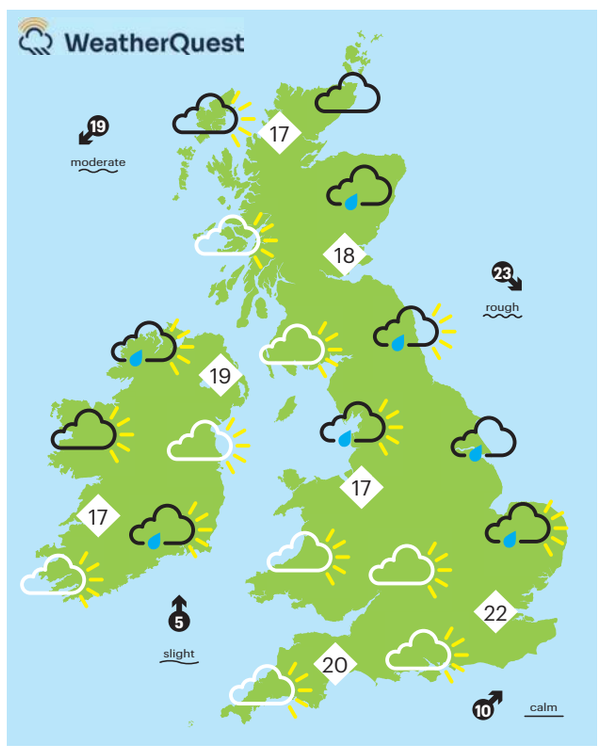
Key c=cloud, dr=drizzle, ds=dust storm, f=fair, fg=fog, g=gales, h=hail, m=mist, r=rain, sh=showers, sl=sleet, sn=snow, s=sun, th=thunder, w=windy

EUROPE



● Dry, sunny and hot over most of Iberia, France, the Mediterranean islands, the Low Countries, Switzerland and western Germany, but the risk of a few showers near western coasts of mainland Europe
● Plenty of hot spells of sunshine in Italy, Greece, Turkey, the Balkans, Moldova, Slovenia and eastern Ukraine, but the risk of an isolated afternoon thunderstorm in places
● Sunny spells and a scattering of showers across Poland, the Czech Republic, eastern Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, western Ukraine and the Baltic states
● Dry in northern Scandinavia and northern Finland but rain further south

TODAY'S WEATHER



UK and Ireland forecast
Cloudy with outbreaks of rain in northern England and southern and eastern Scotland but drier with sunny spells over southern England, Wales and northwest Scotland. Sunny spells and a few showers across Ireland, heavy in places. Light to moderate north or westerly winds over eastern England and northern and eastern Scotland, but light and variable winds elsewhere over Britain and Ireland

REGIONAL FORECASTS

London, SE England
Mostly dry with sunny spells. Light to moderate westerly wind. Max 22C. Tonight, clear spells. Min 8C

Midlands, E England
The risk of some rain in northern areas, otherwise dry. Light westerly wind. Max 20C. Tonight, clear spells. Min 9C

Channel Is, SW and Cent S England, S Wales
Any mist clearing to bring a dry day with sunny spells. Light and variable winds. Max 21C. Tonight, clear spells. Min 8C

N Wales, NW England, Isle of Man
Mainly cloudy with showery rain. Light northwesterly wind. Max 17C. Tonight, turning drier. Min 7C

Cent N and NE England
Overcast with patchy rain, heavy at times. Light to moderate northerly wind. Max 15C. Tonight, cloud and rain. Min 10C

Scotland
Cloudy with rain in places but drier further west. Light to moderate northerly wind. Max 20C. Tonight, showers. Min 7C

N Ireland, Republic of Ireland
Sunny spells and a scattering of showers, heavy at times. Light and variable winds. Max 20C. Tonight, a few showers. Min 8C

SUN, STREET LIGHTS & MOON

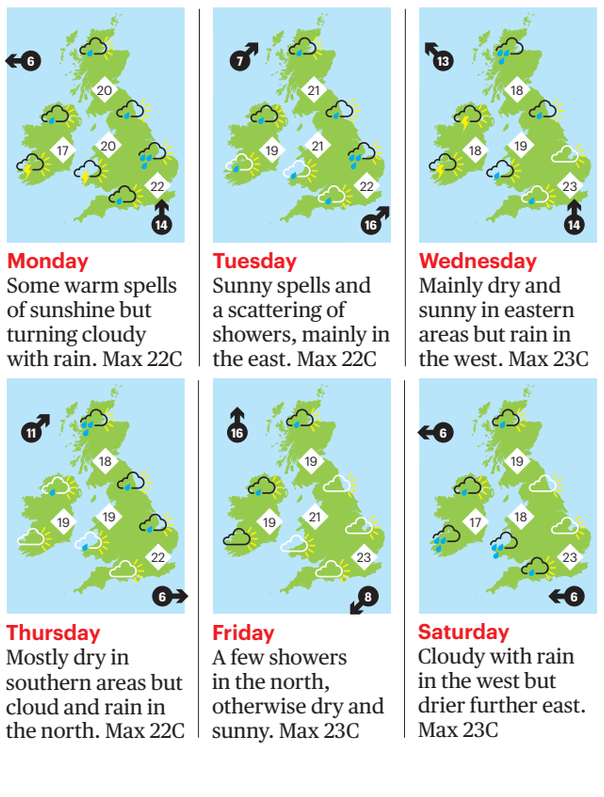
	Sun rises	Sun sets/ lights on	Lights off	Moon rises	Moon sets
Aberdeen	04:35	21:53	04:36	14:48	00:02(Mon)
Belfast	05:07	21:52	05:08	14:56	00:27(Mon)
Birmingham	05:02	21:24	05:04	14:33	00:17(Mon)
Bristol	05:10	21:21	05:11	14:33	00:23(Mon)
Cardiff	05:12	21:24	05:14	14:35	00:26(Mon)
Cork	05:32	21:47	05:33	14:59	00:46(Mon)
Dublin	05:15	21:46	05:16	14:53	00:32(Mon)
Glasgow	04:52	21:53	04:54	14:53	00:15(Mon)
London	05:00	21:12	05:01	14:23	00:13(Mon)
Manchester	04:58	21:30	05:00	14:37	00:16(Mon)
Newcastle	04:47	21:37	04:48	14:39	00:08(Mon)
Norwich	04:49	21:12	04:50	14:20	00:04(Mon)
Plymouth	05:22	21:22	05:23	14:37	00:33(Mon)

NIGHT SKY



The **moon** is very low in the SW this evening and on Wednesday it sits below-left the red supergiant star **Antares**, the heart of **Scorpius**. The white star **Vega** in **Lyra**, high in the S at midnight, lies 25 light years away and is the third brightest in Britain's night sky. **Saturn**, less than half as bright, rises in the E at 11.30pm and is 30° high in the S before dawn. *Alan Pickup*

THE WEEK AHEAD



LAST WEEK'S SOLUTIONS

SUDOKU WARM-UP

6	7	2	4	5	9	8	1	3
4	3	8	7	6	1	2	9	5
5	1	9	2	8	3	4	6	7
8	4	7	3	1	6	5	2	9
2	5	6	8	9	7	1	3	4
3	9	1	5	2	4	7	8	6
7	8	5	6	3	2	9	4	1
1	6	4	9	7	8	3	5	2
9	2	3	1	4	5	6	7	8

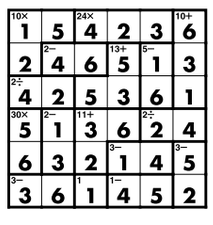
CODEWORD

F	I	V	E	S	■	M	■	N	A	V	A	L		
I	■	I	■	O	P	E	R	A	■	I	■	I		
E	P	O	X	Y	■	N	■	M	U	S	I	C		
L	■	L	■	A	C	U	T	E	■	T	■	I		
D	R	A	B	■	H	■	I	■	E	A	S	T		
■	E	■	E	J	E	C	T	O	R	■	T	■		
Q	U	I	N	■	R	■	U	■	U	P	O	N		
■	S	■	D	E	V	E	L	O	P	■	O	■		
D	E	F	Y	■	I	■	A	■	T	A	L	K		
I	■	O	■	C	L	E	R	K	■	M	■	N		
V	E	R	S	O	■	S	■	I	M	A	G	O		
O	■	G	■	A	P	P	A	L	■	Z	■	C		
T	R	O	U	T	■	Y	■	T	W	E	A	K		

SUDOKU 1595

9	6	7	8	4	2	1	5	3
4	8	3	1	9	5	6	7	2
5	1	2	3	7	6	8	4	9
8	4	5	7	3	9	2	6	1
1	2	6	4	5	8	3	9	7
3	7	9	6	2	1	4	8	5
7	3	8	5	1	4	9	2	6
6	9	1	2	8	7	5	3	4
2	5	4	9	6	3	7	1	8

KENKEN



KILLER SUDOKU

2	9	8	4	1	7	5	3	6
3	4	5	9	8	6	2	1	7
1	6	7	2	5	3	4	8	9
4	2	1	8	6	9	7	5	3
6	7	9	3	2	5	8	4	1
8	5	3	1	7	4	6	9	2
9	8	4	6	3	2	1	7	5
5	3	2	7	4	1	9	6	8
7	1	6	5	9	8	3	2	4

TETONOR

132	43	252	37
2 x 66	15 + 28	28 x 9	28 + 9
68	288	41	160
2 + 66	32 x 9	9 + 32	40 x 4
420	36	366	67
28 x 15	5 + 31	6 x 61	61 + 6
39	378	44	155
21 + 18	18 x 21	4 + 40	31 x 5

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE JUMBO CROSSWORD 430

Across: **1** Bounty, **4** Geiger, **8** Itches, **13** Beirut, **14** Cinematography, **16** Field marshal, **17** Antigone, **18** Castrato, **19** Paradise Lost, **22** Lionel Richie, **23** Hair, **27** Aberdonian, **29** Prostitute, **31** Toil, **32** Blithe Spirit, **37** Roger Federer, **38** Occident, **40** In the bag, **41** Glamis Castle, **43** Charlie Brooker, **44** Circle, **45** Setter, **46** Musket, **47** Snipes
Down: **1** Baby Face, **2** Universe, **3** Thunderbirds, **5** Eo ipso, **6** Geena Davis, **7** Ream, **9** Termites, **10** Hippopotamus, **11** Soylent Green, **12** Joan Rivers, **15** Martin, **20** Aphorism, **21** Alkaline, **24** Masterpieces, **25** Bering Strait, **26** Civilisation, **28** Noble gases, **30** Three Lions, **33** In case, **34** True blue, **35** Death cap, **36** Steelers, **39** Ampere, **42** Tram

MEPHISTO 3332

Across: **1** Attrist, **6** Artal, **10** Bargeese, **11** Arapunga, **12** Areg, **13** Manul, **14** Ostrea, **15** Spag bol, **20** Ungulae, **22** A latere, **25** Vodcast, **27** Thairm, **28** Waler, **30** Earp, **31** Abampere, **32** Cicisbeo, **33** Hyads, **34** Bausond
Down: **1** Adams, **2** Thrapple, **3** Tuan, **4** Repugn, **5** Santour, **6** Aga saga, **7** Reate, **8** Terrella, **9** Legatee, **16** Anasarca, **17** Kaiserin, **18** Zaitech, **19** Zebrass, **21** Neogaea, **23** Scapus, **24** Lipid, **26** Treed, **29** Leno

CROSSWORD 5119

Across: **1** Ameliorate, **6** Fool, **9** Split, **10** Ring-pulls, **12** Ground strokes, **14** Trespass, **15** Bounce, **17** Curacy, **19** Bewilder, **21** Cannibalistic, **24** Brainwave, **25** Badge, **26** Sikh, **27** Heathendom
Down: **1** Apse, **2** Eclogue, **3** Introspection, **4** Rareness, **5** Tongs, **7** Oilskin, **8** Loses heart, **11** Periodic table, **13** Stock cubes, **16** Resident, **18** Ransack, **20** Decided, **22** Apace, **23** Helm

SPOT THE MOVE 1435

1 Nf5! wins. 2 Nxe7+ and 2 Qh6 are dual threats. If 1...gxf5, 2 Qg5+ Kf8 3 Qg7 is mate

TEASER 3224

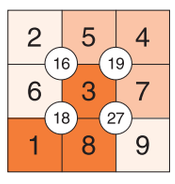
D,G#,E,B and 2

CONCISE CROSSWORD 1894

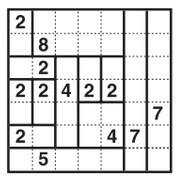
Across: **3** Free fall, **7** Utopia, **8** Such, **9** Nethermost, **11** Apologia, **13** Data, **15** Yoga, **17** Thorough, **18** All the same, **21** Evil, **22** Lupine, **23** Recovery
Down: **1** Quandary, **2** Loot, **3** Fair, **4** El Dorado, **5** Fastidious, **6** Locket, **10** Hullabaloo, **12** Get a life, **14** Achieved, **16** Oeuvre, **19** Holy, **20** Avid

TODAY'S SOLUTIONS

SUKO



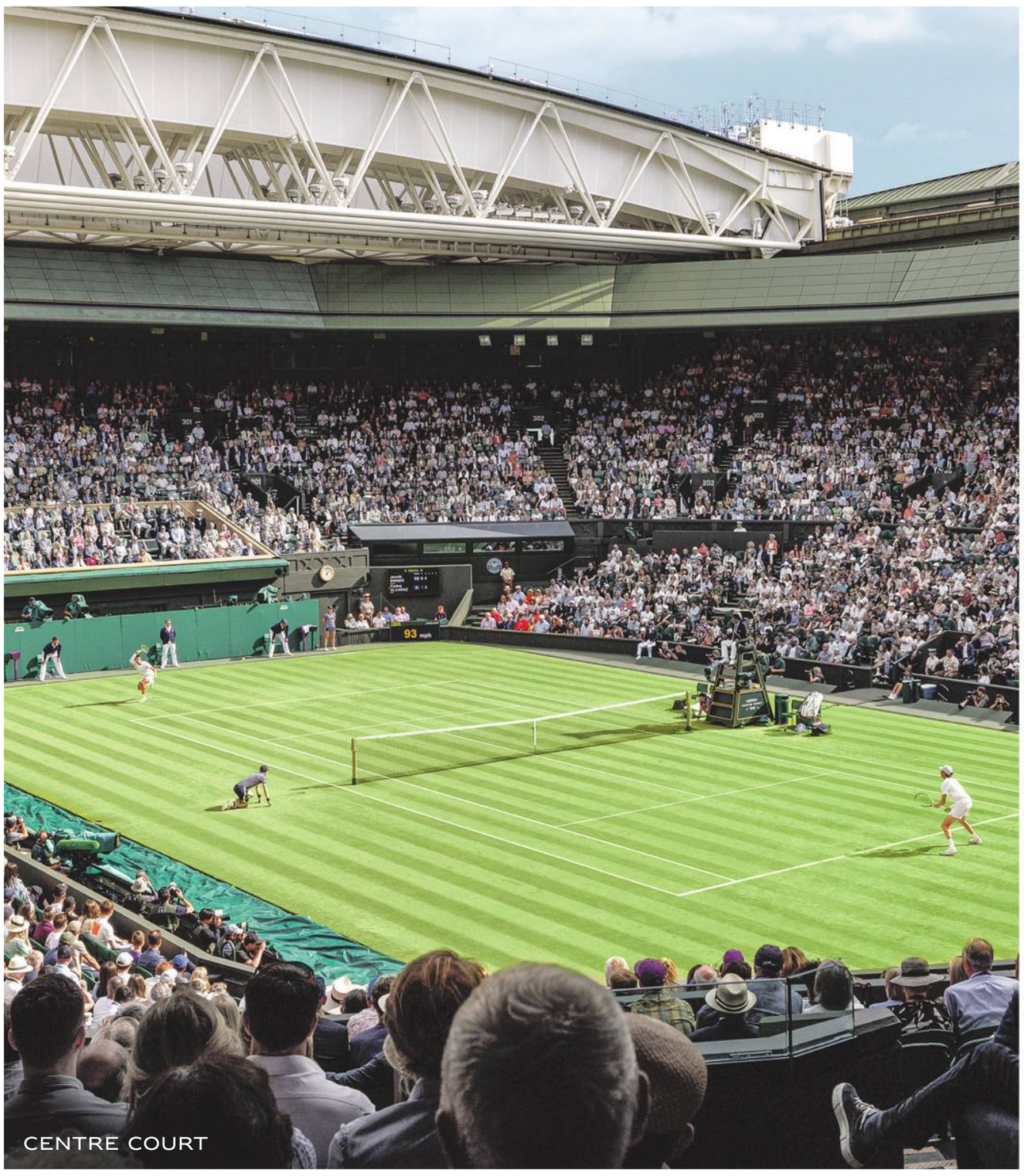
CELL BLOCKS



POLYGON

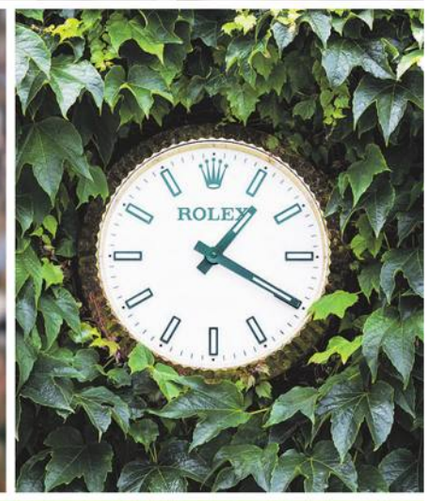
agile, atilt, elemi, elite, email, emit, gait, gilet, gilt, gimlet, gîte, glia, glim, image, imitate, ital, item, legit, **legitimate**, liege, ligate, lime, limit, lite, litigate, mail, mealie, mielie, milage, mile, mileage, militate, milt, mite, mitigate, mitt, tail, tatie, teatime, tile, tilt, time, titi, title

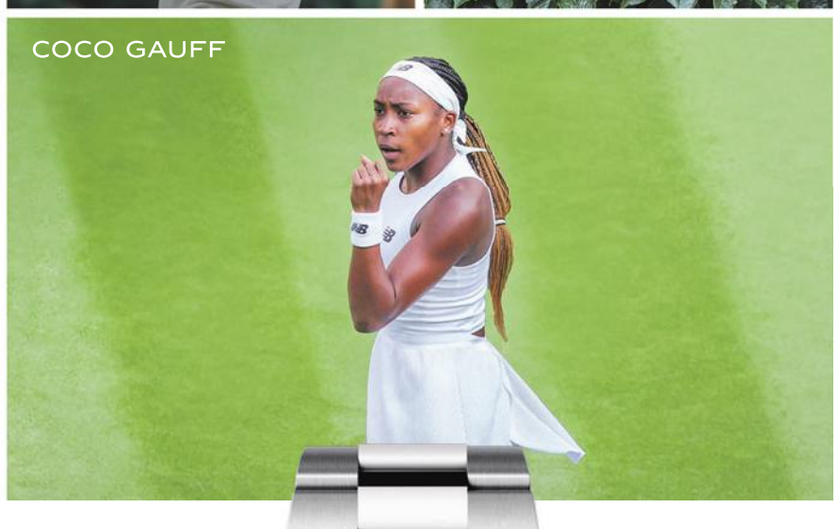
Winners Crossword 5117 D Shakespeare, Newport, Gwent, J Emms, Crawley, West Sussex, P Finan, Brighouse, West Yorkshire, D Lye, London N1 **Mephisto 3330** A Harker, Oxford, D Bourne, London W5, J Doran, Birmingham, J Rhodes, Chalfont St Peter, Buckinghamshire, MP Young, Highbridge, Somerset **Teaser 3222** V Bryant, Dronfield, Derbyshire, J Martis, Hamilton, Lanarkshire **Chess 1433** D Gordon, Perth, Perth and Kinross **Sudoku 1593** T Jones, Chester, Cheshire











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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Euro 2024 final
Spain v England
8pm, Olympiastadion, Berlin

History boys

9 770956 138577 28>

Rollercoaster route to a Spanish showdown



A SLOW START, THEN . . . WOW!

England struggled for fluency in their group games. Jude Bellingham's header helped them narrowly beat Serbia (1), but key players including Phil Foden (2) were peripheral figures in a drab 1-1 draw against Denmark. Some fans began to question Gareth Southgate after a 0-0 draw against Slovenia (3) and a handful even threw beer cups at him. England were within seconds of being eliminated in the last-16 tie against Slovakia, but Bellingham's last-minute overhead kick came to their rescue (4). England were nerveless as they beat Switzerland on penalties to win their quarter-final, with goalkeeper Jordan Pickford making a crucial save (5). Then, in the dying minutes of their semi-final last Wednesday, substitute Ollie Watkins broke Dutch hearts with a brilliant winning goal (6).



‘I’m an England fan in the dugout. I’m desperate to win’

England manager Gareth Southgate

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER BRADLEY ORMESHER

THE SUNDAY TIMES
SPORT

One game from immortality



The Euros Germany 2024


JORDAN PICKFORD
Goalkeeper


KYLE WALKER
Centre back


JOHN STONES
Centre back


MARC GUÉHI
Centre back


BUKAYO SAKA
Wingback


KOBBIE MAINOO
Midfielder

So resilient, joyously diverse

Spain will be formidable opposition but this England team and their manager have a wonderful habit of delivering memories for the nation to treasure

JONATHAN NORTHCROFT



Football Correspondent, Berlin

If they had lost to Slovakia how would they have been remembered? As a joke? A national disgrace? As the ultimate symbol for those who love to denigrate footballers as overhyped and overpaid? They were a few seconds and a one-in-a-million goal from a lifetime of infamy. And now it can be immortality. In Berlin, the Grey City, England arrived understanding profoundly that, in football, a moment is the difference between absolute black and brilliant white.

They got there after being booed in their send-off game, against Iceland at Wembley. They got there after beer rained on their manager and their mothers and partners in Cologne. They got there after Gary Lineker called them shit. They are playing Spain, whose best-read newspaper, *Marca*, offered the headline "England smell rotten" during the group stage.

Focus has been on the trials of Gareth Southgate and the sense that every game at the tournament has been a knife-edge with the power to define his legacy. But what about the 26 players? It feels almost forgotten that, behind Southgate, there is a squad of players, some very young, who have had to draw deep, deep, deep from their wells of resilience to get by.

The Slovakia match, in which Jude Bellingham's overhead kick in the final minute was the lifeline, is just one of the trials they have overcome. Switzerland, penalties. The Netherlands, the Oh-my-God-Ollie-Watkins moment at the death. They are Three Lions with nine lives and have shown a resilience almost beyond any previous England team.

From 1950 (England's first tournament) to 2024, how many times had England come from behind to prevail in a knockout game? The answer is as many times as this lot have done it in the past fortnight. Three. A lot has been made of an extraordinary stat that, including World Cups, European Championships, the Champions League and the Uefa Cup/Europa League, of the previous 26 men's finals involving Spanish teams, all 26 had Spanish winners. But England – this England – can make a simpler boast: they are never beaten.

Southgate does not underestimate what his squad has given in the six weeks since assembling on Teesside. He pretended during the group games that the England camp was "shutting out criticism" but of course the players weren't. As David Moyes noted, "Whatever you say, the outside noise always finds its way inside," and, before England's semi-final, Southgate gave ITV's Gabriel Clarke an interview that was searing in its honesty and vulnerability.

"I've talked to a lot of psychologists over the years and one of the things human beings want to avoid is public embarrassment. And we had a bit of that mindset in the group stage," he said. "We weren't free."

Now they are. They're as free as Watkins, bounding on to the pitch in Dortmund with a smile on his face, telling Bellingham "find me" and nodding to Cole Palmer, having promised each other during the warm-up that they'd come on as substitutes and link up for a goal.

They are in what Southgate terms a "what's possible" mindset. Spain have played the best football here but, since defeating the Netherlands, all you've heard from England players is about what they can do.

"I don't think that can be underestimated," Southgate said, reflecting on England's three consecutive comeback victories. "It is what it is for us. It is what it is for the opponent. Because if you are a team that starts to score late goals, that is a great trait to have.

"The involvement of the group, players coming off the bench in every game have delivered a high level of performance so more people than perhaps ever before feel they have contributed. Nobody has been put into a game at 3-0 up with 20 minutes to play. Everybody has had to deliver. Everybody has had to be ready.

> **'The bond we have is special. It's not one I've been a part of before,' said Luke Shaw**

"There is a belief in how we are playing and a belief in what we are doing and there is an understanding of what is needed to work back into those sort of games." Can his team overcome the challenge presented by Spain? "They've been through a lot already."

After their final training session in Blankenhain and before making their tournament's final trip – by road – to Berlin, Luke Shaw spoke of the playing group. "Winning with these lads would mean everything," he said. "The bond we have is extremely special. It's not one I've been a part of before."

And that was quite a statement, because a feature of the Southgate era has been good camps where players are close. There was Russia 2018, where on a day off you had Jesse Lingard, Marcus Rashford, Danny Welbeck and Trent Alexander-Arnold going to a funfair near St Petersburg. There was Euro 2020, and the team getting hooked on *Love Island* and watching en masse in a cinema room at St George's Park. There was Qatar and the boisterous, endless Conor Coady-compered rounds of Wolf, a role-playing game based on the BBC show *The Traitors*.

Here, there has probably been less jollity and more challenges and, in the early weeks, when players including Harry Kane questioned the pressing tactics, relationships coming closer than ever before to cracking. But there is nothing like adversity for fusing human spirits together.

Southgate said watching players celebrate in the dressing room after beating the Netherlands "hit us as a group of staff as you saw how deep [bonds] have got already". He put it down to "what they've been through". Adversity, he added, "is more powerful for bringing people together than anything".

For him, there is relief because he knows he took a gamble first by naming a squad featuring 12 players with no tournament experience and second by leaving out the loved-by-everyone Jack Grealish and those yeomen of his reign, Jordan Henderson and Harry Maguire. At the announcement he ventured that "the group will have to form a little bit". He admitted on Friday that "not having Hendo there, not having Maguire there – we lost senior figures so we were wondering, 'Okay, how is this going to play out?'"

He paid tribute to those remaining yeomen, the lads who were with him in Russia in 2018. "There has been an incredible commitment. I keep pulling Kyle Walker's leg because he's retired three times but is still wheeling his body out in the middle of the summer. It's a passion that himself, Tripps [Kieran Trippier], [John] Stones, [Jordan] Pickford, that group that has been a bedrock of the team with Harry Kane… and those guys have had to step up even more with their leadership, particularly Harry."

A joy of the squad now is its diversity in all senses. Of Southgate's likely starting XI for the final, three of the players have both parents born in Africa. One has played for another country. One is a teenager, another started so long ago he has played in the same team as Keith Gillespie. Two were born in Stockport, two in South Yorkshire, two in Kingston upon



TODAY'S LIKELY LINE-UPS

SPAIN Coach: Luis de la Fuente

Substitutes

GK	D Raya	MID	M Zubimendi
GK	Á Remiro	MID	M Oyarzabal
DEF	Nacho	FWD	Joselu
DEF	D Vivian	FWD	F Torres
DEF	A Grimaldo	FWD	J Navas
MID	M Merino	FWD	F López
MID	A Baena		

Injured: Pedri (MID), A Pérez (FWD)

ENGLAND Coach: Gareth Southgate

Substitutes

GK	A Ramsdale	MID	C Palmer
GK	D Henderson	MID	A Wharton
DEF	T Alexander-Arnold	FWD	I Toney
DEF	L Shaw	FWD	A Gordon
DEF	E Konsa	FWD	O Watkins
DEF	L Dunk	FWD	J Bowen
DEF	J Gomez	FWD	E Eze
MID	C Gallagher		



DECLAN RICE
Midfielder



KIERAN TRIPPIER
Wingback



PHIL FODEN
Midfielder



JUDE BELLINGHAM
Midfielder



HARRY KANE
Striker, captain



GARETH SOUTHGATE
Manager

– now to end a 58-year quest

Thames. One has never played in the Premier League. One has never had a European club game.

The friendships are not necessarily the ones you expect. Shaw and Bukayo Saka have a quirky love-in to the extent that Shaw once said: "I wish he was my child." Alexander-Arnold is close to Bellingham, but Aaron Ramsdale is possibly his closest friend in football. Pickford and Kane are tight. Kobbie Mainoo and Palmer seem inseparable and when Watkins scored he ran straight to Lewis Dunk and Dean Henderson – and Henderson,

> **Friendships aren't the ones you expect. Mainoo and Palmer seem inseparable**

despite not having spent a minute on the pitch in Germany, told him it was the best moment of his career. And then there's "The Bowler Boys" – the quartet who love to hammer it in the weights room: Ivan Toney, Joe Gomez, Ezri Konsa and Declan Rice.

England do not have a monopoly on bonding. Spanish journalists have been commenting on how close their squad is, using the same word as Shaw (family) to describe England's squad. Just like Southgate, their manager, Luis de la Fuente, graduated to the senior job after coaching national junior teams and goes back a long way with some of his players.

They too have a balance of characters and origin stories, not least their coruscating young wingers, 17-year-old Lamine Yamal, born to African immigrants in Catalonia, and Nico Williams, born to a Ghanaian family in Pamplona, who Wayne Rooney thinks can be the next Cristiano Ronaldo.

De la Fuente, from the Rioja wine region, spent most of his playing and coaching career at Athletic Bilbao and there is a strong Basque flavour to his squad. It's perhaps this that gives Spain a different style: more dynamic, almost more British, than the tiki-taka teams of old. They began by playing a game in which, for the first time in 136 competitive matches, they had less possession than their opponent but swept aside Croatia to win 3-0.

Like England's semi-final with the Netherlands there could be a Premier League openness to the final. Unlike against the Dutch they face one of the best midfields in international football, underpinned by Rodri, and the ability of Mainoo, Rice and Phil Foden to get round the maestro could be key. Southgate is set to retain 3-4-2-1 and name an unchanged XI, with Kieran Trippier keeping his place at left wingback in preference to Shaw.

The prize is a first title on foreign soil and an end to 58 barren years. For Southgate, who will give himself "a few days" but "won't need weeks" to decide his future, there's the opportunity to join Sir Alf Ramsey.

For these players of diverse backstories but common bonds, there's the chance to join the Boys of '66. Only Sir Geoff Hurst is left on this earth now but in the annals the names of Banks, Wilson, Charlton, Moore, Cohen, Stiles, Peters, Ball, Charlton, Hunt, Hurst – are together for ever.

Could the teamsheet Southgate hands in an hour before kick-off become immortal? The players who survived Slovakia will become for ever inseparable, if so. The day after winning in '66, Hurst mowed his lawn and washed his car, and when journalists turned up at Ramsey's house he told them, "Sorry, gentleman, it's my day off." Different times. So different, that it brings home just how long England's years of hurt have stretched – and how big it would be to end them in Berlin.

ON TV TODAY

Spain v England
Kick-off 8pm, BBC1 and ITV1

HOW THE TEAMS RATE

BY HAMZAH KHALIQUE-LOONAT

ENGLAND: 78/110

Jordan Pickford Critical save in quarter-final shoot-out v the Swiss. **7/10**
Kyle Walker Struggled, but has found simplified role in back three. **6**
John Stones Composed and calm influence at the back. **8**
Marc Guéhi Has arguably been England's player of the tournament. **8**
Bukayo Saka Unsung hero. Team's best outlet, most irrepressible attacker. **8**
Kobbie Mainoo Calm and clean on the ball. **7**
Declan Rice No England player has won more tackles, nor run further. **7**
Kieran Trippier Right-footer on left has stymied attack, but he's defended well. **6**
Phil Foden Quiet until semi-finals but has found form at right time. **7**
Jude Bellingham Saved the day against Slovakia. **7**
Harry Kane Below-par but has made several decisive contributions. **7**

SPAIN: 84/110

Unai Simón Saved Bruno Petkovic spot kick in group-stage win. **7**
Dani Carvajal Tactical fouls make him indispensable. **8**
Robin Le Normand The enforcer in the air and a set-piece threat. **6**
Aymeric Laporte Cornerstone of build-up, with the most line-breaking passes at tournament (72). **7**
Marc Cucurella A revelation at left back. **8**
Rodri The peerless heartbeat — an exemplary defensive midfielder. **8**
Fabián Ruiz Pulls the strings and regulates the tempo beautifully. **8**
Lamine Yamal His star has become a supernova. Scorer of the goal of the tournament. **9**
Dani Olmo Nimble and creative. **8**
Nico Williams Lightning quick and superb at finding space. **8**
Álvaro Morata Drops deep so others thrive. **7**

Captain Kane: I'd swap everything in my career so far for a victory tonight

Paul Joyce

Harry Kane has said he would swap all of his individual accolades to lead England to Euro 2024 success.

The England captain delivered a rousing rallying call before tonight's final with Spain and insisted his team-mates were ready to end the country's wait for a first trophy since the 1966 World Cup triumph. Kane said defeat on penalties in the final of Euro 2020 to Italy had left "fire in the belly" to atone for that cruel loss and he is determined to finally lift the first silverware of his career.

"It's no secret I haven't won a team trophy and every year that goes by you're more motivated and more determined to change that," Kane, 30, said. "I have the opportunity to win one of the biggest trophies you could ever win and to make history with my nation.

"No question I would swap everything I've done in my career to have a special night and a win. There is a lot of hard work until that moment, but I am really determined to make it a special one."

On the pain of the defeat by Italy, Kane added: "Whenever you lose a final. It's always tough to wipe that memory. That moment was difficult.

"It would mean everything [to win tonight]. We have been there before and had a tough finish in the last Euros, but that has given us extra hunger and put fire in the belly to make sure this goes our way."

All 26 squad members trained at England's Blankenhain base camp before travelling to Berlin, with Southgate appearing to lean towards keeping faith with Kieran Trippier rather than handing Luke Shaw his first start of the tournament at left wingback. Shaw has played 87 minutes across the past two matches as a substitute as he steps up his recovery from a hamstring issue, but Southgate said last night he was "happy" with where the team was at.

He added: "I'm not a believer in fairytales but I am a believer in dreams, and we've had big dreams."

Southgate to decide 'in a few days'

Jonathan Northcroft, Paul Joyce

Gareth Southgate plans to make a decision on his future within the next few days, with the FA hoping the prospect of a shot at the World Cup with his squad of Euro 2024 finalists will tempt him to extend his stay as England manager.

Southgate's contract expires in December and the 53-year-old has not decided whether he wants to carry on. A European Championship of turbulent emotions, at which he has faced brutal criticism yet ended up with the high of England's first tournament final abroad, has left Southgate wanting to let his feelings settle – but not for too long – before making a call.

"The way my emotions have gone over the past five weeks, it would be ridiculous for me to think about anything beyond this game," he said before England's final against Spain. "We've got time to make decisions and I won't need weeks but also I think I've earned the right to give myself a few days just to think things through."

Southgate admitted that there was a point when he was close to leaving the post he has held since 2016. "I know where it would have been if we went out in the group stage, that's for sure," he said. "I have a pretty good idea in my head."

Asked if that meant he would have resigned, he replied: "I don't think that would necessarily have been my choice."

DAVID WALSH



Chief Sports Writer

Southgate's critics have no idea how wrong they really are

It's no accident that team culture and results have improved drastically under this fine manager. Whatever happens tonight, he deserves the greatest respect



At a hotel in Dijon eight days ago, while listening to the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4, I was struck by the *Thought For The Day* delivered by the Rev Dr Rob Marshall. It was the morning after the election and he spoke about death threats that are now part of most MPs' lives. He quoted the tech blogger Nick Harkaway's point about the audience's move from passive consumption to interaction and how that had created the relentless howl of the exterior world.

And from there the reverend segued into Gareth Southgate, saying: "That deafening noise has been evident too for the England manager as he gets ready for his 100th game in charge. It's a must-win quarter-final against Switzerland. His tactics for the first four games have, understandably, been under scrutiny, but the nature of some of the personal attacks on him as he does his job for the country are simply appalling."

Marshall went on to reiterate the Church of England's belief that it's not enough to say "we ought to be nicer to each other" and that in any Christian community the dignity of all is paramount. Dignity isn't much considered any more – it's almost as if people accept that horse has bolted. The last time I remember talking about it was in a conversation with Southgate. This was about a year ago, when one particular football writer was giving him a hard time. I wondered how he could be polite when dealing with this guy.

"The choice," he said, "was between saying what I felt and retaining my dignity. I chose the latter."

He will go on doing that for the rest of his life.

It was good to hear him referencing the influence of his dad, Clive, last week. During the times when Clive coached Gareth's boys' team, they would be going home in the car and Clive would gently bring up the two aerial challenges that his son had lost while complimenting other aspects of his game. Then, when parents talked to Clive about how brilliantly Gareth had played, Clive would immediately switch the conversation to their own sons' performances.

More than 20 years ago, when he was often a frustrated captain of Middlesbrough, Southgate said he would be fulfilled only when he got to be a football manager. Much more recently he said he had no recollection of ever saying that. I looked it up in the book we wrote together in 2001 and this is what he actually said: "Over the last few years I have felt too often that I may have to wait for a career in management to have a shot at fulfilment."

He will feel that fulfilment comes only in victory against Spain tonight, but that is not true. England have improved significantly under his management: the team culture as well as the results. They have shown more resilience than any team in this tournament and that is down to the harmony and spirit that the manager has instilled.

This yearning to be a manager grew as his playing career neared its conclusion. I recall him telling a story about why he liked having Joe Cole as a team-mate. One time they were at an England camp, Southgate on the physio's table when Cole walked into the team. "F*** me, 'Gate," Cole said, "I've seen you have that many rubs I'm expecting a genie to pop out of your arse." Cole put a smile on people's faces and, within any team group, that quality is to be cherished.

> **He's so bright that, overnight, he wrote one of the funniest football pieces you'll ever read**

I remember Southgate saying at the time that if he were a manager, he would sign Cole and Owen Hargreaves because they were players committed to the team and to getting every last ounce from what they had. And you knew from long before he entered the dugout what kind of manager Southgate would be.

People, convinced that he cannot manage, say something like, "What did he ever do in management except get Middlesbrough relegated?" Detail and nuance are non-existent. Few, seriously few, bother to look at what actually happened at Middlesbrough from 2006 to 2009. As a player, he captained the club to the only trophy they have ever won, and then went straight from the dressing room to the manager's office. How would he have done with the equivalent of Xabi Alonso's three years of managing Real Sociedad's reserve team?

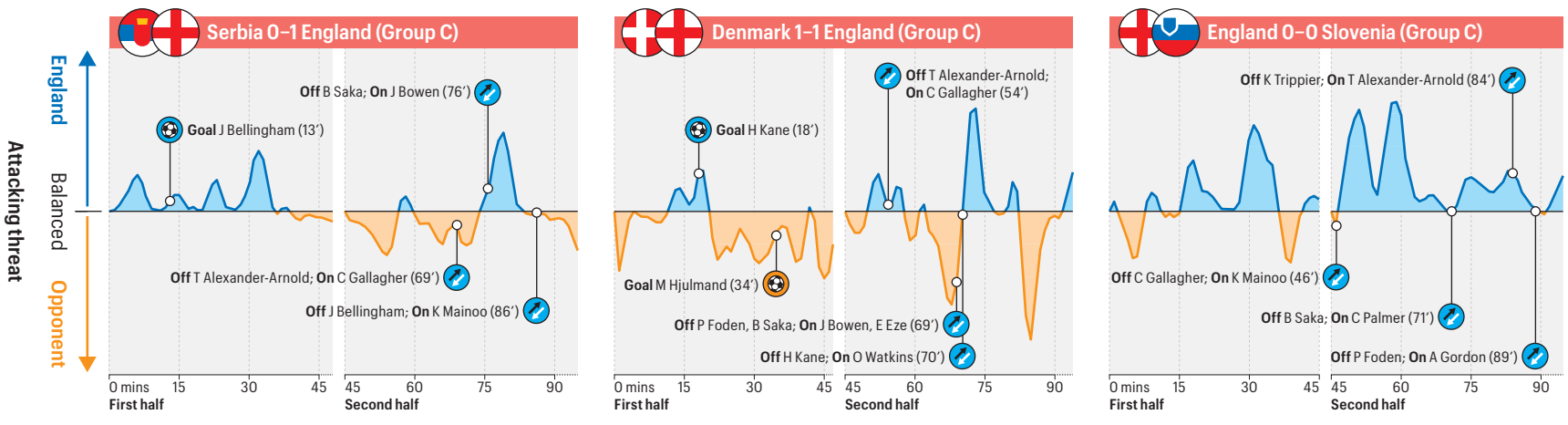
Sometimes opportunity comes at the wrong moment. Committed to Middlesbrough, he couldn't say no when Steve Gibson, the club's owner, offered him the manager's job. At the time the club were £85 million in debt, some of the best players had to be sold, notably the strikers Mark Viduka and Yakubu, and, of course, that hurt the team. In the first two seasons they finished 12th and 13th in the Premier League, but the need to reduce the wage bill and greatly reduce the average age of the first-team squad was unrelenting.

The season they got relegated, the average age of the first team was 22, and the wage bill was £7 million less than it had been the previous year. No one noticed that, but Gibson knew it and stayed loyal to his manager. Spoilt by their memories of Fabrizio Ravanelli, Juninho and Alen Boksic, a section of Middlesbrough's fans thought the problem was Southgate and, 13 games into the next season, Gibson listened to the howl of the exterior world and sacked the club's manager.

When people refer to that sacking, do they mention where the club were at that moment? By getting rid of all their highly-paid players and promoting from the club's academy, Southgate got the wage bill under control and created a spirited young team. Of

HOW ENGLAND'S ROUTE TO THE FINAL UNFOLDED

Statisticians Opta produce graphics showing which side is on top throughout games




BRADLEY COLLYER/PA WIRE

Ivan Toney receives the warm embrace of Southgate, who has instilled a sense of spirit and harmony

course he didn't get everything right and he will tell how foolish he was to get the club to spend £6 million on Mido from Tottenham Hotspur. Nevertheless, a third of the way through their Championship campaign, Middlesbrough were one point behind the leaders, Newcastle United, when Gibson pulled the trigger.

Of course, he would later lament that decision, but that's what happens when the guy throwing the beer gets to influence affairs. Even that last season at Middlesbrough, after starting with three wins and a draw, the club decided to sell their best defender, Robert Huth. On the night they sacked Southgate, they told him that in a few days he'd be relieved it was all over. He told them that, after eight years at the club, they had no idea who he was.

The thing that I've never understood is the certainty of so many that they know more than he does. On a Wednesday evening in April I attended a dinner at a hotel near Birmingham. The man on my right, Graham, said that he was an expert on pensions and soon we got talking about football. He said England wouldn't do well at the European Championship finals because Southgate was a useless manager.

What made him so certain?

He said Southgate was too cautious and too loyal to certain players.

I mentioned that the team's record under Southgate was pretty good but my new friend wasn't having this. Nothing could lessen his sense of absolute righteousness. So I tried harder.

"After you've seen a game either at the ground or on TV, have you ever then rewatched a recording of it?"

"No," he admitted.

"Well, Southgate watches games multiple times, pores over key moments, finds out things about players that often aren't obvious the first time you watch. Then he gets to spend a lot of time watching them train, interacting with them as individuals, and isn't it possible that he knows quite a bit more about them than we do?"

I wasn't letting it go. "Imagine," I said, "you asked me to help you write a book about your life as a pension expert. Nearing deadline you tell me about an extraordinary colleague you'd worked with but we don't get round to writing this for the book. Then on the night before the manuscript goes to the publisher, I ask if you could go to your computer and write 5,000 words about that extraordinary colleague. Do you think you could do it?"

"No," he said, "not a chance. I've never written anything like that and certainly couldn't have done it overnight."

"That is what I asked Gareth Southgate to do more than 20 years ago. The next morning there was a 5,600-word essay in my inbox about Boksic, a Champions League winner with Juventus and a less-than-committed striker for Middlesbrough. It became Chapter 17 of the book we were doing and it is one of the finest, funniest, most nuanced pieces of football writing you will ever come across. What I am suggesting here is that maybe Southgate is brighter than you and I, and that perhaps we should be a little more respectful of the job he is doing?"

When the plastic beer glasses were hurled in his direction after the game against Slovenia, there was the temptation to feel sorry for Southgate, to wish that he were somewhere else. That was a temptation to resist because, in adversity, he thrives. The plastic glass didn't contain beer but motivation fuel. He would never say "f*** you", but don't imagine he's not thinking it.

He was 15 when he started as an apprentice at Crystal Palace. From a comfortable middle-class family, he spoke and dressed differently. It was natural for the others to wonder if he'd be tough enough. One time he overheard the manager, Steve Coppell, telling the first-team players Ian Wright and Mark Bright that "Gareth's got eight O-levels". Then he heard Bright say, "But can he f***ing play?"

Once he walked into the apprentices' dressing room while Chris Powell was doing a Fred Astaire dance to everyone's great amusement. Southgate then realised what was so funny. His grey Hush Puppies were on Powell's feet. The laughter immediately turned to collective embarrassment. The middle-class kid had to be tough. A few years later he was captain at Palace, then captain at Aston Villa and finally captain at Middlesbrough.

He was most respected by the men he shared a dressing room with, as he now gets the greatest respect from England's players. The ones he's soldiered with since Russia six years ago: Jordan Pickford, John Stones, Kyle Walker, Kieran Trippier and Harry Kane, have become England players in his likeness, and the team he has built behaves in the way that he believes those wearing the national shirt should. He created the culture that they now embody and they, in turn, are loved by the public.

England may or may not be good enough to beat an excellent Spain but, in one important respect, this doesn't matter. What the past eight days have done is to ensure that a fine England manager gets to decide whether he goes or stays.

Should he decide that's it, he departs through the grand exit. That is the very least he deserves.

Alyson Rudd



Will a lucky England winner make us happy? Probably not. Fans will want them to win Euro 2024 in style

The big question is not whether England will win tonight but if Gareth Southgate's team succeeds, will we be happy with the manner of victory?

Such has been the underwhelming level of Southgate style that ITV's coverage of the semi-final against the Netherlands led on how Spain, who had already reached the final, are so beguiling. A commercial channel has the rights to the crunch match of Southgate's tenure and opts not to blitz us with the shoot-out that got England there but to remind viewers of the gulf in class should they prevail.

"So Spain, brilliantly, are into Sunday's final," were the first words of host Mark Pougatch.

Viewers felt instantly envious. TV channels across Europe were not introducing us like that. We were dull, pragmatic, slow, lucky and unadventurous. Vox pops even among the weary or tipsy revealed us to be a nation reluctant to say a win at any cost would bring joy. This has been a tournament in which we have wanted more. We have wanted to shine, to strut, to be entertainingly superior. We have wanted to be envied for more than the fact we have finally found players who hit awesome penalties.

But why is it that the result is no longer all that matters? English football either produces or has mopped up most of the best talent in the world. And when you boast the best league in the universe you have a natural advantage over everyone else, and that means there is no excuse to be conservative or hesitant. England has been that wealthy recluse in a decaying mansion, refusing to spend on the leaking roof or support the local cake sale for sick puppies. Intrepid reporters knock at his door asking to see his collection of rare coins but he pretends he has a Zoom call.

Southgate opened the doors to let us meet his talented players but he did not want to wear them out by asking them to play with flair and freedom. That used to be an acceptable stance but the game has changed. When Sheikh Mansour bought Manchester City he was not content with winning but wanted to win in the classiest way possible with Pep Guardiola, the most demanding of coaches. Jürgen Klopp was lauded not for the silverware but the heavy metal, high-octane way his Liverpool team played.

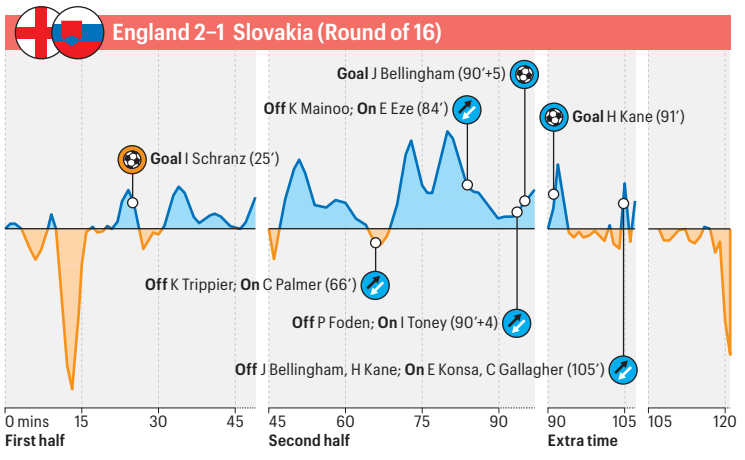
Last season there was a definite move away from trophy obsession towards a fetish for beauty. Ange Postecoglou took over at Tottenham Hotspur and refused to be pragmatic even when it was obvious that sitting deep and slowing down might win the game. Fans have stopped bemoaning the holes in the trophy cabinet and started puffing out their chests in pride at "Angeball". Look at us, we are gorgeous. Don't you wish your coach was bonkers like ours?

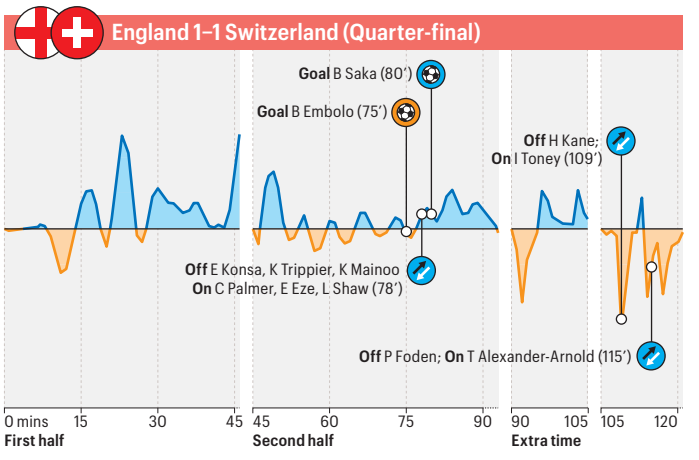
Players are signed for their pace, ability to press and be bold and audacious. Risk-taking is no longer a flaw but a coveted attribute.

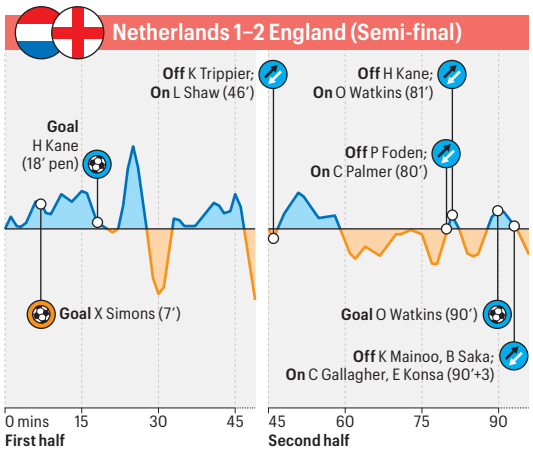
At the FA Cup final, Manchester United fans were desperate for a spark of joy after a season in which their team had been a laughing stock but while to have nicked a goal against the run of play against City would have been a laugh, it would not have been embraced. Erik ten Hag was not sacked, as we assumed he would be, because he won with enough style to indicate he could make progress next year.

Even Burnley took this new devotion to aesthetics to the extreme by backing Vincent Kompany while knowing it would lead to relegation.

Tournament football used to pit England against unknown teams who could surprise us with tactics and personnel. We know everyone now. We know how superior and expensive England players are and so there are no excuses. If Spain outsmart us and outrun us with flair, grace and refinement, a lucky goal will not bring unfettered joy.







Club England is real — the cliques have gone

Martin Samuel
THE VOICE OF SPORT



They would say that, wouldn't they? That's always the argument. Whenever an England player talks lovingly of Gareth Southgate, of the motivation to do it, for him, to lift a trophy, for him, the cynicism arrives in waves.

England player likes the manager who picks him for England. Pah. England player wants that manager to stay. Harrumph. What are they going to say? That Southgate is dull and predictable and not a patch on Pep Guardiola? That they're all stifled and stir-crazy and can't wait to be freed from their chains?

Even Southgate compared a tournament camp to the end of an overlong family holiday. All cooped up together, little things beginning to grate. Wait until the real stories come out, say the cynics. Wait until Jude Bellingham talks about England's manager compared with Carlo Ancelotti. Wait until they can all say what they really think.

Yet players can, and do, say what they think all the time. We live in a multimedia world. Not every expression of dissatisfaction has to come surrounded by microphones. One of the biggest spats of last season, Jadon Sancho versus Erik ten Hag, sprang from a brief spur-of-the-moment tweet. And, inevitably, if a manager becomes distanced or divorced from his players that news is out without anyone having to put so much as a name to it.

There are agents, friends, PR teams, relatives, all with a hotline to news outlets. So if, behind the scenes, the players were frustrated or felt thwarted, if they believed England's lions were led by a donkey, we would know. When the players were unhappy with Fabio Capello's methods; when they thought he kept them on starvation rations, or bored them to tears by leaving them stuck in their rooms; when they felt his training sessions were too tough at the end of a hard season, and that he didn't understand English football culture and the desire to have the odd beer when the match was done, it was all in the public domain. John Terry actually expressed some of that publicly, but the reason he was asked questions about mood at a press conference was because stories of unrest in the camp had been leaking throughout the 2010 World Cup campaign.

And those conversations continue. For instance, the mid-tournament skirmish over the revelation that England's switch to a back three came about because players were talking to people back home, and those people were then talking to journalists. Southgate was irritated with the press revealing for his strategy, but his real anger was with those leaking. He reinforced the need to keep England's information private, and it hasn't happened since. Yet, obviously, those lines of communication survive. If they were used to natter about a back three, they could also have been used to paint a negative picture of Southgate. But that hasn't happened.

So what you see is what you get. They like him. And no, he's not Guardiola. Yet if Guardiola had four tournaments with England, could we guarantee more than this? Could we guarantee improvement on two finals, a semi-final and a quarter-final? After leaving Barcelona in 2012, Guardiola's next nine Champions League campaigns read semi-final, semi-final, semi-final, round of 16, quarter-final, quarter-final, quarter-final, final, semi-final. And then he won it. Tenth attempt away from Nou Camp. Like Southgate, he was very close. But it's hard, that last push. And international managers don't get ten swings. Who does 20 years in the job? Even if England deliver in Berlin, this will be Southgate's last dance. He probably feels he's outstayed his welcome even up to here. But he'll be an incredibly tough act to follow. In one respect, Southgate has outstripped the achievements of his predecessors. He has made England his club.

Look at when England players come off. No dissent, no petulance, no anger. Ollie Watkins's mum might get a little sweary at his lack of opportunity, but throughout England's vibe has been that of a team. They stuck together in adversity and won together in the good times. Trent Alexander-Arnold gossiping with his family about a team-mate who shied away from taking a penalty? He insists the armchair lip readers got that wrong. Ivan Toney talked about his grumpy face when introduced in the last minute of stoppage time against Slovakia, but it was with a smile as that late introduction ended up turning the game. And team sport with its selections and substitutions, picking and passing over, is never going to produce 26 happy souls. Even the ever-loyal Paul Scholes once refused to play for Manchester United in a League Cup tie away to Arsenal, disgusted at being left out of the starting line-up for a match against Liverpool.

So, no doubt, there will have been moments. There are players that have not kicked a ball yet. Anthony Gordon has been on for a minute, plus stoppage time, against Slovenia. Yet even players who were excluded from the squad entirely, such as Marcus Rashford or Jack Grealish, did not rush to any condemnation of Southgate. And that won't be because they fear future exclusion. This was always shaping up as his final tournament.

Grealish could have had a swing in the knowledge that, chances are, they won't work together again. But the players acknowledge Southgate as a decent man, making decisions, doing his best. There is mutual respect, or at least understanding. Something obviously happened with Ben White in Qatar. But Southgate hasn't made it awkward for White, so White doesn't make it awkward for Southgate. Southgate's treatment of Wayne Rooney early on in his time was ruthless and quite brutal. Rooney could be a man with a grudge. Clearly, as surmised from these pages, he isn't.

Sven-Goran Eriksson was a popular figure with his players, too, but he never achieved Club England. There used to be separate tables at dinner. Manchester United players around one, Liverpool another, a Chelsea table. The only attempt to change that was to introduce one big, communal gathering. Then it became United all up one end, Chelsea down the other.

> “

Southgate has moved these players into an environment that feels like home



Players like Phil Foden and Bukayo Saka have put club rivalries aside

Rio Ferdinand and Frank Lampard were close friends at West Ham United, even rooming together. By the time they were principal players with England, however, they were with Manchester United and Chelsea, and fierce rivals. "Our communication disintegrated," Ferdinand recalled. "I didn't want to speak to him about anything he might then take away and use to facilitate his team winning. It became unwritten conduct. It was the same with Stevie [Gerrard]. When I was with England, and we were battling Liverpool for the Premier League, I didn't want to be around him, because I didn't want to know what Liverpool were doing. And I know he felt the same about me."

This has been a problem for England. Brazil's squad is assembled from around the world. When the players reunite it feels like seeing old friends at a party. The majority of Southgate's squad goes head to head weekly. A rare crisis occurred when Raheem Sterling started a fight with Joe Gomez before a qualifier in 2019. That incident stemmed from a match between Manchester City and Liverpool the previous day, leaving a residue of ill-feeling. Southgate laid down a marker. He dropped Sterling for the upcoming match with Montenegro.

Fast forward to here, and after scoring the winner on Wednesday, Watkins's social media feed posted several images of that moment, with the caption "Show time, baby!" Among the many messages of congratulation below were contributions from ivantoney1, bukayosaka87 and kobbie, all official team-mates' accounts.

This is not uncommon. This is a group unafraid to support each other publicly. And while times have changed in the 13 years since Ferdinand, Lampard and Gerrard were last on the field together, it is hard to imagine that group ever being so publicly encouraging of each other. There was just too much club baggage in the way.

Southgate addressed that, too. There could easily be cliques in this squad. Saka, Rice and Aaron Ramsdale, their own unit against Kyle Walker, John Stones and Phil Foden. Kobbie Mainoo and Luke Shaw wary of Gomez and Alexander-Arnold. The memory of Bellingham sledging Harry Kane as he prepared to take a penalty for Bayern Munich against Real Madrid is a reminder of how, these days, even clubs in foreign leagues can produce intense rivalries. Yet Southgate has handled it all. He has moved these players into an environment that feels like home. He has created a platform for England to win. And, yes, he also picks them. But that's not the only reason they all love him.

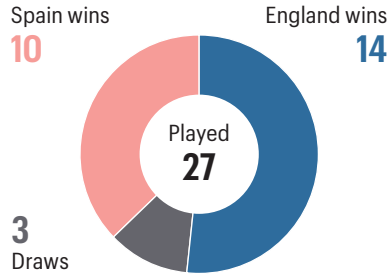
YOUR GUIDE TO TODAY'S FINAL

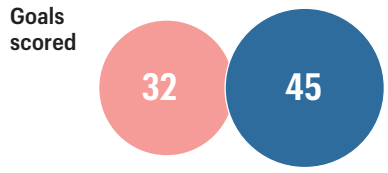
Spain v England, 8pm
Olympiastadion, Berlin
TV: (BBC/ITV)
Radio: talkSPORT, BBC 5 Live
Weather forecast: 21C

OVERALL HEAD-TO-HEAD

First meeting May 1929
Friendly: Spain 4-3 England

Most recent meeting Oct 2018
Nations League: Spain 2-3 England





WHERE THEY PLAY Euro 2024 squads

Spain

La Liga	18
Premier League	3
Bundesliga	2
Ligue 1	1
Qatar Stars League	1
Saudi Pro League	1

England

Premier League	24
Bundesliga	1
La Liga	1

Don't focus too much on Yamal or Spain's other threats will destroy you

Rafa Benitez
FORMER LIVERPOOL AND REAL MADRID MANAGER



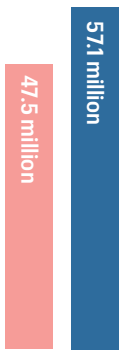
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This is Spain's fifth Euros final, winning the trophy three times (1964, 2008, 2012) and losing once (1984). They could become the first team to win the competition four times

MATCH REFEREE

François Letexier, 35, will be the youngest referee of a Euros final. Born in Bédée, in north-west France, Letexier's refereeing career began in 2015 in France's Ligue 2. He has been an international referee since 2017 and last season he refereed the Super Cup final between Manchester City and Sevilla. He has refereed three matches at these Euros: Croatia v Albania, Denmark v Serbia and Spain v Georgia

Populations



0

England have never lost a match in Berlin in six attempts (W4, D2)

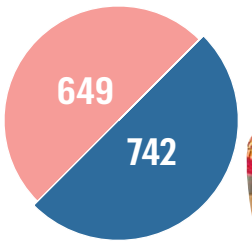


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This will be England's first major tournament final played outside of England, with the 1966 World Cup and Euro 2020 finals being played at Wembley

SQUADS COMPARED

Total caps



Most capped

79 Álvaro Morata



97 Harry Kane

Average age

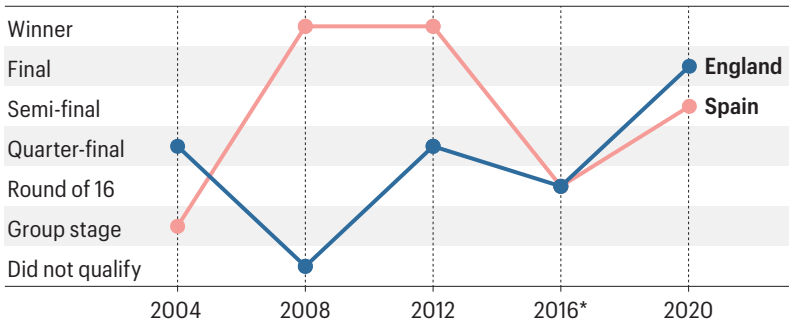
27.1

26.1



RECORD IN PAST FIVE EURO CHAMPIONSHIPS

* Round of 16 added from 2016



EURO 2024 RECORD

W	June 15	**Spain** 3-0 Croatia	Group stage
W	June 20	**Spain** 1-0 Italy	Groups stage
W	June 24	Albania 0-1 **Spain**	Group stage
W	June 30	**Spain** 4-1 Georgia	Round of 16
W	July 5	**Spain** 2-1 Germany (AET)	Quarter-final
W	July 9	**Spain** 2-1 France	Semi-final
W	June 16	Serbia 0-1 **England**	Group stage
D	June 20	Denmark 1-1 **England**	Group stage
D	June 25	**England** 0-0 Slovenia	Group stage
W	June 30	**England** 2-1 Slovakia (AET)	Round of 16
W	July 6	**England** 1-1 Switzerland (AET Eng win 5-3 pens)	Quarter-final
W	July 10	Holland 1-2 **England**	Semi-final

Lamine Yamal likes to receive the ball to feet and his first instinct is to cut inside. Knowing that does not make him any easier to stop.

The Spain winger has so much quality that even when an opposing defender is close, he possesses the ability to protect the ball and then he can find a team-mate with a pass or provide an assist.

One of the problems he causes rivals is that they do not know when he will supply the pass. His strength is not just his skill in one-on-one situations, but linking with those around him.

The goal he scored from distance in the semi-final win against France has understandably had everyone talking about a talent who only turned 17 on the eve of the final. No doubt he poses a big danger to England.

However, for Gareth Southgate, it is not as easy as saying we will bring more defenders to Spain's right side in order to try to limit what Yamal does.

Do that and then England will have more problems elsewhere. The main threat of the Spain team is not Yamal – it is everyone. There is Nico Williams on the left flank and Álvaro Morata will always run in behind, stretching the play.

If you commit numbers to Yamal, then maybe Dani Olmo or Fabián Ruiz will be free to move into the penalty area. The right back Dani Carvajal, the experienced head behind the teenager, still has the energy to go on overlapping runs.

I am pretty sure that before Yamal's goal everyone would have been talking about ways to counter Rodri given his form for Manchester City and how he keeps Spain on the front foot. That still stands, but if you get Jude Bellingham or Phil Foden to move onto him then it is possible that the centre backs are free and they can progress forward.

So it takes a lot of concentration to play against Spain and, as Southgate has said, England will have to play the perfect game in the final. England have been improving and the change to three at the back after the first four games has been a big difference for them. They are in a better moment now than at any point since the opening 25 minutes of their first game of the tournament against Serbia.

Change was needed after the group games and the first knockout match, and they have found a solution. They are having more possession and there are some players occupying positions in which they are now comfortable.

You can see that Foden is happier since moving off the left and over towards central areas and the right. He is influencing matches and has a good understanding with Bukayo Saka on that side of the pitch. Similarly, Declan Rice is going to the left and Bellingham is moving between the lines.

They are looking more cohesive and confident and, with the quality of the players they have, they can beat anyone. That is the reality.

Spain will be aware of that. How do they stop Foden, for example, because that is not easy either. He also has the ability and mobility to keep the ball and find a team-mate close to him. The key to this game will be who has the most possession. Everyone might automatically assume that it will be Spain, but under Luis de la Fuente they are not wasting too much time with possession in their own half of the pitch. They are more vertical in their attacking now because they have pace and they have also been clinical so far in their matches.

If Spain, who play 4-2-3-1 and 4-3-3 when attacking, have possession then England will be forced into a back five. If England are able to keep the ball, then they can exploit the wide areas and Spain will have to adapt the way they want to press.

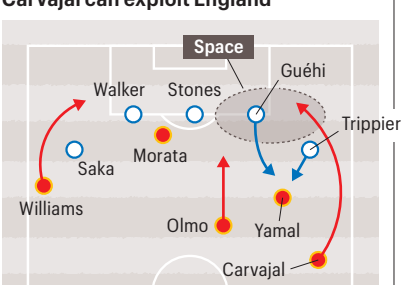
Against France, Williams was helping Marc Cucurella against Ousmane Dembélé. Ensuring the wingers are working hard in defence will be important in trying to wrestle back control.

The side which is able to exert its personality and quality will be able to dictate the tempo. Everything we have seen so far at Euro 2024 says that Spain deserve to be favourites to lift the trophy.

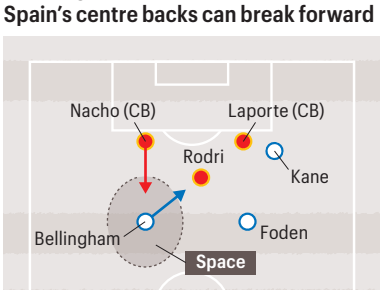
But this is a final and we know how everything can change.

THE DANGER OF LEAVING SPACE

Focus on Yamal and Olmo and Carvajal can exploit England



If Bellingham or Foden deal with Rodri, Spain's centre backs can break forward



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I always knew John was ahead of his time – he's three players in one

Shy 20-year-old right back I signed from Barnsley has matured into one of Europe's best centre backs

David Moyes



In today's game, centre backs are the new No 10s. They have to take the ball under pressure and are expected to make passes through the lines and be comfortable playing off both feet. They have to be resistant to pressing. Their positioning and what they do on the ball are crucial to how their teams play.

And then there are all their defensive duties, which they have to execute in an era when attacking football rules, which is rich in brilliant young attacking talent, and when the laws around areas such as tackling and handball mean tiny misjudgements are heavily punished.

There is no harder job in modern football than being a centre half. Thankfully for England, they have John Stones.

At a European Championship where there has been some fantastic defending and great performances from centre halves, John has still stood out – just like he has for England at previous tournaments. He is well in contention to be named in the team of the tournament.

There is quite some competition: the outstanding William Saliba of France, the impressive Manuel Akanji of Switzerland and others including Radu Dragusin (Romania), Aymeric Laporte and Robin Le Normand (both Spain), Riccardo Calafiori (Italy) and Rúben Dias (Portugal). Plus Pepe, whose performances at the age of 41 have been nothing short of incredible.

But John is up there and he has come quite some way from the shy 20-year-old lad from Barnsley I recruited for Everton in 2013. He was my last Everton signing and cost us about £1million up front, and £3million once add-ons were triggered. An unbelievable deal, though others deserve a lot of the credit – the scout who recommended him to me, Tony Henry, and my successor, Roberto Martínez, under whom John blossomed into a top Premier League player.

During my time at Everton we never had much to spend in the market, so we always looked for talent in the lower leagues. Tony told me, "You should go and see this boy at Barnsley" and I went to Oakwell to watch him in a Championship game. Everton were doing well at the time, so he was going to have to have something special to be worth considering, but it didn't take long at all to understand the qualities John had.

He had mostly played at right back for Barnsley, but when I saw him he was in midfield. He was so comfortable on the ball, and it was the way he looked to take it and play, even under pressure. I didn't have a fixed idea of where he might play for us, it was just a case of seeing someone who was a wonderful footballer and thinking he would be valuable for the club. And because of his age, he could be developed. He could become a very good right back or midfielder, though from the start I felt his future would be as a central defender.

What's happened is that he has gone on to be brilliant at them all. At Manchester City, Pep Guardiola evolved him in a hybrid role in which he does all those jobs. He might start at centre back but you'll see him in full-back areas and stepping into midfield throughout a game. His ability to be a top version of all those players – centre back, full back, midfielder – is invaluable. Flexibility is ever more important in football and he is three players rolled into one.

> **In the early days his comfort on the ball stood out, but I was worried about his risk-taking**

The bit that John had to learn was the qualities you need to be elite at defending. I kept him in our under-21 side and he worked on his aerial duels, how to defend the box, one-on-one and two-v-two defending skills, and how to work in tandem with another centre back. He had great mentors in Phil Jagielka, Sylvain Distin and Phil Neville. We took great pride in defending as a collective and he had to learn to join in with that.

But that comfort on the ball stood out from the start. In the early days, I was a bit worried about his risk-taking. As a manager you'd say "OK, you got away with that – but are you going to get away with it next time?" However, under Roberto and then Pep, John has worked on his game to become the complete modern centre half. Maybe the ultimate compliment to him is that, for all his quality on the ball, the thing that our group of Uefa technical observers are talking about most at this tournament is his competence as a defender.

England will need John to be on his game against Spain. Rodri has been arguably the best player at the Euros and Spain might well dominate in midfield. England's centre backs will be put under more pressure than at any time in this tournament by an incredibly good attacking team, filled with players of quality and ability.

Can he defend the box? Can he block? Can he stop Álvaro Morata in the middle and help control Dani Olmo, who has been so good at getting into pockets of space to pick up the ball? Can he deal with the late arrivals in the box of Fabián Ruiz? These are some of the tests that John will face.

But he has played in the biggest games for Manchester City, and has 52 Champions League appearances – and 78 England caps – to his name. None of this is new to him. Through playing for Pep, he has developed a winning mentality and toughness. The environment he works in at City will not allow a player to have any weakness because it would be jumped on by the manager and all the winners in their dressing room.

I think we've seen that from John at these Euros. Leadership. Tough mindset. Marc Guéhi has played really well and John, now 30, has helped him by continually taking the ball and taking pressure away.

That youngster I saw at Oakwell more than 11 years ago was a player ahead of his time. I believe Spain are favourites for this final – but they face a formidable obstacle in John.



Stones has been one of the most impressive central defenders at Euro 2024



25

Stones, along with Pickford, has played every tournament game under Southgate

Moyes brought Stones to Everton as a 20-year-old

The Euros Germany 2024



Has Basque influence made Spain more English than Spanish?

Brilliance on the ball is matched by resilience, tenacity and graft honed in wet and windy northern part of the country where the national team draw on much of their talent

TOM ALLNUTT

Nico Williams knows the rush of adrenaline at this time of year, the tension, the roar of the crowd and, most of all, the running. If he wasn't charging up the wing at the Olympiastadion, he would be watching the bulls charging through the streets of Pamplona, a European Championship final in Berlin keeping him from attending an annual ritual at home.

Shortly after the final whistle blows on England versus Spain tonight, the festival of San Fermín also draws to a close, a week-long carnival for which 20,000 people come together every July. They dance in the Plaza del Castillo, wear red handkerchiefs symbolising the blood of the saint and cheer as bulls chase runners around the perilous turns of the old town, a spectacle as dramatic as it is traumatic, for participants and spectators.

Williams was born in Pamplona, the capital of the Spanish region of Navarre which, if not Basque officially, is widely considered Basque in terms of its history, culture, language and politics. As a footballer, there is no doubt. Williams joined Athletic Bilbao aged 11, the club that accepts only Basque players and where his older brother, Iñaki, is the talisman and owner of the record for consecutive matches played.

There has been a swirl of excitement this summer around Williams who, along with his opposite on Spain's right wing, Lamine Yamal, has been perhaps the most thrilling, adrenaline-inducing player of this tournament. He is the talk of transfer meetings all over Europe, but remains a product of his Basque roots, first in Pamplona and then at Lezama, the fabled academy of Athletic Bilbao.

And Williams is not alone. The dominant club of this Spanish squad is not Real Madrid or Barcelona, as it

Rod Liddle

With England in another final, it's time for an apology. I never thought I'd say it but, erm – sorry Gareth



Um. How can I put this? Is it perhaps the right time for people such as, erm, me, to mutter – a little sheepishly – an apology to Gareth Southgate? For six years I've been carping about various aspects of his management – how he is tactically outwitted too often and cannot change the shape of a game, his risk-averse approach and so on. And yet here we are, in another major final. OK, we haven't actually won anything just yet, but compared with what went before with the national team, the past few years have been little short of a miracle.

Perhaps it is correct that he has the best squad of players any manager has had at his disposal. But Sven-Goran Eriksson's supposedly golden collection wasn't bad and nor were those players who served under Bobby Robson and Terry Venables – and they didn't get us to a final. I think the answer to my question, then, is a qualified "yes". And if I'm being honest not *that* qualified. Clearly he has a knack.

That risk-aversion strategy keeps working – perhaps until we're up against a really good team in a final. But it cannot just be luck, can it? It can't be luck because it happens with too great a frequency for that: England look like a sack of potatoes – England qualify. England struggle in the knockout stage – England progress. England play a little better in the semi-final – England go through. There is a pattern here, even if it is one that tests the patience of the nation and indeed the King.

The complaints after those games against Serbia and Slovenia were maybe, then, overstated. It is true that teams very rarely coast through the group stage playing flowing, confident football, en route to winning the tournament – dodgy, overly cautious performances usually abound. Even in 1966 England got off to a slowish start with a dismal goalless draw against Uruguay and later they were fortunate to sneak through against the "animals" of Argentina. A tad fortunate in the final, too, come to think of it.

The pattern for England under Southgate has always been to gradually improve – so a lot of the early criticism probably was misplaced. This England side is seen abroad as the "miracle team" – in other words our passage to the final has been generously lubricated with good fortune.

The evidence for this is in the number of times we have secured



JÜRGEN FROMME/FIRO SPORTPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES



Like Southgate, De la Fuente was promoted to manage the senior national team after enjoying success at age-group level

was in that golden age of tiki-taka just over a decade ago, but Real Sociedad, the other Basque grandee from San Sebastian, a city famous for its *pintxos* and pristine beaches, but also for its football team which last season reached the knockout stage of the Champions League.

The Basque flavour to the Spanish squad has never been stronger, with five of their 26 players – Mikel Oyarzabal, Mikel Merino, Robin Le Normand, Martin Zubimendi and Alex Remiro – playing for Sociedad while three – Unai Simon, Daniel Vivian and Williams – are with Athletic. Aymeric Laporte is playing in Saudi Arabia but joined Athletic at the age of 16, while Joselu excelled at Alaves and Marc Cucurella shone for Eibar. In total, nine of Spain's 26 players come from the wider Basque region while 11 have represented Basque clubs.

There is also Luis de la Fuente, Spain's 63-year-old head coach, who was born in the neighbouring province of La Rioja, but whose football lineage has always been Basque, ever since he travelled with his father to watch Athletic games as a boy, joined the youth team at 16 and then played more than 200 times for the seniors, winning two league titles. "I am a man of my roots, my customs and traditions," he said.

He later coached in the Athletic academy and was very briefly in charge of Alaves before a prolonged spell with the Spanish youth teams, winning European Championships with the under-19 side in 2015 and the under-21 side in 2019.

His success meant that, like Gareth Southgate six years earlier, he was invited to move up from the under-21 role to that of national coach when the Spanish moved on from Luis Enrique after being knocked out of the 2022 World Cup on penalties by Morocco in the round of 16 stage.

His impact in the top job has been impressive, with a virtually faultless qualification campaign and the Nations League title last year. But there are few straight lines to be drawn here, no simple truths in a Spain squad built on a myriad connections, backgrounds and experiences. Just as the Basque Country is a rich and varied mix of provinces, communities and clubs, so has this modern Spain side drawn strength from its diversity. None of Spain's starting midfield play in La Liga. Williams's brother, Iñaki, represents Ghana while Yamal's parents come from Morocco and Equatorial Guinea.



And yet the Basque influence has brought something new, in style and character, the common traits of the region – effort, cooperation, hard work – seemingly added to a foundation of technical excellence.

Some push back on those stereotypes now, pointing to the scintillating style of Real Sociedad in recent seasons and the growing number of smooth, technical Basque players – Zubimendi, Williams and Merino among them – coming through the ranks. Martin Odegaard shone at Real Sociedad and David Silva sparkled with Eibar, long before either moved to the Premier League. "It's about attitude," says Roberto Olabe, Sociedad's director of football. "To run, to push, always with effort. The base is the attitude. That has always been a big aspect of this region."

For many in Spain the Basque way is seen as the British way too, a style *mas Británico* that leans on physicality, long balls, heart and aggression. There is a fondness to that label, forged in the historic connection with England, which goes back to the late 19th century when the first footballs were kicked in Bilbao by miners and shipyard workers from Southampton. They founded Athletic Club, with its English name, brought over Southampton's red and white stripes from the docks and when the Civil War broke out 30 years later, Southampton became a place of shelter, as the British government took in 4,000 Basque children as refugees.

"In Bilbao, in the minds of the people, there is always a very, very strong connection with England," says Victor Manuel Amado Castro, a professor in contemporary history at the University of the Basque Country. "There were the economic links and then the social and cultural connections, even down to the weather. There is a Basque saying, that when the sea is rough and the waves are high, it means there must be a storm in England."

> "I've always been a big fan of English football – direct, quick, attacking

As for De la Fuente, he has made no secret of his love of the English game, dating back to his time as a player with Athletic Bilbao. "At Athletic we played a style of football at the time that was very British," he said in the build-up to Sunday's game. "We had so many similarities. I've always been a big fan of English football – direct, quick, always attacking."

Turning to the final, it is clear that his respect has endured. "Right now England has a terrific coach whose ideas about football are pretty universal. I think the Spanish and English teams have much more in common than what separates them," he said.

The relationship between the Basque Country and the Spanish national team is more complex, even if the violence that was common in the Eighties, during the years of Eta, the Basque separatist group, appears now to be a thing of the past. Traditionally many in the region are, at the very least, ambivalent in their support of the national team but nowadays, while support for Basque independence remains, Basque players can play freely for Spain. There is hope that a young and vibrant national team, spearheaded by the likes of Williams, could be a unifying force.

Last week, viewing figures showed almost 800,000 people in the Basque Country watched the semi-final win over France, which was taken as evidence of softening attitudes, even if it was still the least interested of Spain's 17 autonomous communities.

Reticence among some Basque fans jars with the sense of togetherness inside the squad. If Spain lack some of the stardust of before, they have also managed to be more than the sum of their parts; a coherent collective, tactically agile and grounded in those Basque values of humility, sacrifice and effort. Williams has said if Spain win in Berlin, he will celebrate with a red handkerchief, a nod to his roots and a final tribute to home.

WHERE THEY PLAY

Of the 19 players in the Spain squad who play for La Liga clubs, eight are at the two clubs based in Basque Country

Athletic Bilbao
Unai Simón
Daniel Vivian
Nico Williams

Atlético Madrid
Álvaro Morata

Barcelona
Fermín López
Pedri
Ferran Torres
Lamine Yamal

Real Betis
Ayoze Pérez

Real Madrid
Dani Carvajal
Joselu
Nacho

Real Sociedad
Robin Le Normand
Mikel Merino
Mikel Oyarzabal
Álex Remiro
Martín Zubimendi

Sevilla
Jesús Navas

Villarreal
Álex Baena





From being pelted with cups, Southgate has now even won over Rod Liddle

> "While I think Southgate is often far too slow to bring on subs, they invariably work wonders

our passage with pretty much the last kick of the game. I think there is some luck attached to that. I don't care how confident Gareth is that England will always prevail, you cannot, as a manager, bank upon scoring six seconds from time in game after game.

However, England's propensity to do so is also a manifestation of the sheer, dogged resilience with which the manager has suffused his players. England score late goals because they don't throw in the towel. Further, while I (among many) think Southgate is often far too slow to bring on substitutes to revive a sagging performance, when those subs do come on they invariably work wonders: Cole Palmer slides it inside to Ollie Watkins – goal. Ivan Toney heads it back across to Harry Kane – goal. The subs come on and know precisely what they are meant to be doing and, rather wonderfully, they do it.

There was never any doubt in my mind that the thing at which Southgate excels is in creating the right spirit within the team, a spirit of absolute unity, of us against the world. I have never begrudged him that, but perhaps was guilty of understating how important this is. It is perhaps more important than anything else – and it is why we are in the final, again.

Some caveats remain. As I say, banking on a goal six seconds from time is a somewhat dangerous tactic. I would also like to see us somehow stumble across a system that allows Phil Foden and Jude Bellingham to play to the best of their abilities in a game – so far it has been one, but not the other.

I still think that as a tactician Southgate is not at his best when faced with a game slipping beyond the reach of his side. This was true even in the semi-final against the Netherlands – in which England generally played very well – when Ronald Koeman changed his formation at half-time simply by stiffening the midfield, and Gareth seemed quite lost for a response. But even then it is probably true that England had the better of the chances in the second half before Watkins's excellent strike – Kyle Walker was offside by only a hair's breadth when he pulled it back for Bukayo Saka to hit the roof of the net.

The criticism remains that Southgate has a poor record against the very top teams in the world – but then, so does everybody else. And the Netherlands were ranked seventh, only two places behind us.

So a mildly qualified apology is in order. Sorry. Now win the bloody thing, Southgate.

Football in brief

VILLA KEEN ON £50M ONANA DEAL

Aston Villa are looking to finalise a £50 million deal for the Everton midfielder Amadou Onana as they prepare for life in the Champions League next season (Paul Joyce writes). The 22-year-old, who cost £34 million from Lille when signed by Frank Lampard in the summer of 2022, is keen to move on after two seasons at Goodison Park. It would be the third deal between the two clubs this summer with Lewis Dobbin having moved to Villa Park, while Tim Iroegbunam joined Sean Dyche's side last month.

The Euros Germany 2024



Martin Samuel

THE VOICE OF SPORT

Orange heart: two words that show why Southgate's successor must be English



And, right there, in one short sentence, is why Gareth Southgate's successor shouldn't be a foreign manager.

Thank Sarina Wiegman for getting to the nub of it. She has done a fine job as England Women head coach but, with typically Dutch frankness, admitted her "orange heart was hurting" when the men's team knocked out the Netherlands on Wednesday. And that jarred. Her countrymen now eliminated, she then insisted she wanted Gareth Southgate's team to bring it "home", but the truth was out there. In football terms it isn't her home, no matter how happy and welcome she is here. It is her place of employment.

England's European Championship triumph under her in 2022 was always an Anglo-Dutch victory, because the leadership, intelligence and strategy behind it was imported. England couldn't get over the line on their own, and it is grossly arrogant to claim it as our triumph, alone.

What Southgate's tenure has demonstrated is it shouldn't need Pep Guardiola or Jürgen Klopp to make England coherent. To revisit the back pages on the morning after England lost to Iceland in 2016 is illuminating. Beside the announcement of a national catastrophe, and the news Roy Hodgson had stepped down as a result of it, was speculation about Southgate as his successor. The tone of those headlines was "just when you thought it couldn't get any worse…"

Yet Southgate has proved a quite brilliant England manager. His time at Middlesbrough was no indication of the intelligence – emotional, cultural, sporting – he would bring to the job. Yet his successor? After the Switzerland quarter-final, the television pundits were talking up the contribution to their analysis made by Frank Lampard. Gary Lineker called his three-minute breakdown of the game "amazing". And, sure, three minutes. But that's a long time to talk on any subject, uninterrupted. "Tactically, he gets it," Lineker added. And yes, again, it's only television.

Gary Neville is marvellous at it too, yet once admitted he sat on the bench at Valencia knowing he was out of his depth against older, experienced opposition coaches. There is a difference in doing the job for the camera and doing it for real. Obviously a coach like Eddie Howe leaves Lampard behind in terms of experience.

With the regime changing at Newcastle United, some of Howe's protective shield may be gone. Would those behind the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia tolerate another season outside Europe? Howe dismissed talk of England's advances before, but that was with Newcastle in the Champions League. There may be more appeal now, even if Southgate will be a terribly hard act to follow.

Yet suppose Lampard ended up the best of all available options? An experienced international with 106 caps, an impressive speaker and frontman, but a coach with a chequered record, often in difficult circumstances. Imagine the outcry. Very similar to that which greeted Southgate. What's he ever done? He's useless. Failed at every job he's had.

> **We can't just plunder the bounty of other nations, like colonialists**

But who's succeeded? No English manager has won the Premier League. Indeed, in the time of its existence only Harry Redknapp and Joe Royle have won the FA Cup since 1992, while Steve McClaren, Brian Little, Roy Evans and Ron Atkinson have won the League Cup. The last English winner of a domestic trophy was Redknapp, with Portsmouth, in 2008.

McClaren is alone in that group in still working, as assistant to Erik ten Hag at Manchester United, but he's already been the England manager and left amid insults after failing to get the team to the 2008 European Championship. Atkinson is 85 and hasn't had a job this century; Evans last worked at Swindon Town in 2001; Little stepped down from Gainsborough Trinity in 2009, and has subsequently had a brief spell as director of football with Jersey; Royle's final job in management was at Oldham Athletic in 2009. The last of the trophy

It will take midfield generals to end 23-year Spain reign

May 23, 2001. S Club 7 were top of the charts, the Twin Towers were still standing, Tony Blair was in his first term as prime minister, and a Spanish team – club or country – last lost a major European final: Valencia, beaten on penalties by Bayern Munich in the Champions League.

Since then the only Spanish teams to be defeated were playing other Spanish teams. It is a truly remarkable record, speaking of an exceptional football culture.

Harry Redknapp says England



If Mainoo helps England to boss the midfield, they will win

are better than Spain in every area, but that may be the patriot talking. Rodri and Fabián Ruiz as a central midfield partnership are where we would hope Declan Rice and Kobbie Mainoo would be in two years' time. They have forged an exceptional understanding at this tournament, given that Ruiz's inclusion was far from guaranteed before it started. Mainoo had an outstanding game against the Netherlands and was England's man of the match, yet while all the attention will be on Spain's youth, and particularly Lamine Yamal, this could be another game that is won in the heart of midfield. England's is good, but Spain's has been the dominating force in Germany. If Rice and Mainoo come out top in that battle, England will win, but it's hard to imagine they have faced a test quite like it.

A TRULY IMPRESSIVE ERFURT

Erfurt, the nearest city to England's base in Germany these past five weeks, has an important place in German history. In December 1989,



Martin Samuel on The Game podcast

Every morning Martin and the rest of the team in Germany, including Jonathan Northcroft, discuss the big talking points with Tom Clarke and Gregor Robertson. Search 'The Game' on your podcast app or go to: THETIMES.COM/PODCASTS/THE-GAME



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Years since an English manager has won the top flight — Howard Wilkinson with Leeds United in 1991-92



winners to hold a club manager's job was McClaren, with Queens Park Rangers, five years ago.

So that's on us. If the FA looks in the cupboard after Southgate to find it bare, whose fault is that? The player pathways are working. Still not enough Englishmen in the Premier League, true, but there will not be much sympathy for a country that can afford to leave Jack Grealish, Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Raheem Sterling out of a 26-man squad.

Yet what of the coaching pathways? How can Spain pluck the excellent Luis de la Fuente from inside its system, and watch him repurpose a team who lost to Scotland into today's tournament favourites, utilising the pure boldness of youth? Well, maybe for a start, because they didn't sweat over his dismal spell at Alavés in 2011, when he didn't make it out of October in his first season.

Equally, Spain have options. Deep options. England do not. Meaning the next England manager can only disappoint going into the job because he will not have a track record that merits consideration if compared with the foreign coaches who dominate the domestic game.

English player quotas have often been discussed. Yet, looking at the strength of this squad, they are increasingly unnecessary. English coaching quotas? Maybe the time has come. Maybe Premier League and Sky Bet Championship clubs should have to have at least two English-born coaches working with the first team. Maybe we should make it so that Antonio Conte cannot arrive at Tottenham Hotspur and turn the dugout into an Italian enclave. There is education to be had on those sidelines. Steve Holland, No 2 to Southgate, worked with André Villas-Boas, Roberto Di Matteo, Rafael Benítez, José Mourinho, Guus Hiddink and Conte at Chelsea. That must help. Meanwhile, the present England Under-21 head coach, Lee Carsley, played 40 times for Ireland, despite being born in Birmingham.

What English football desires, then, is a shortcut, a cheat code. It thinks it deserves to be coached by exceptional men like Guardiola or Klopp. It doesn't. It does not deserve to plunder the bounty of another nation, like colonialists. It deserves a period of penance. It deserves to sit in the corner and think about what it has done. About a culture that insists Southgate is not good enough to coach the national team of a country that does not have a single major trophy-winning native in active managerial employment; whose coaching pool is so shallow that it has to hand its teams to leaders who, on occasions, want the other team to win.

That's not international football. That's not the best of ours versus the best of yours. Wiegman's hurting orange heart exposed the falsehood at the core of England. When Southgate goes, we shouldn't try to game the system. We should have a long, hard look at why, in a supposed golden era for the national team, that remains our most appealing option.

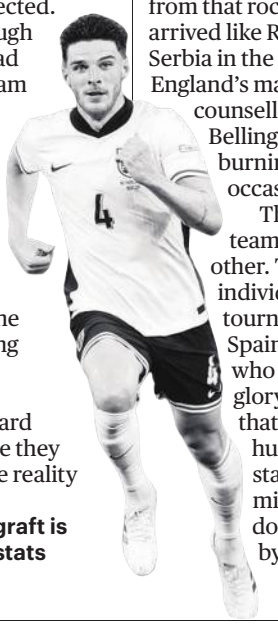
Steady on, Gareth's not to blame for all this caution – it's just our national trait

Gareth Southgate gets a lot of blame for England's caution. Yet national characteristics in sport exist. Brazilian football is instinctively more freewheeling than that played across the southern border in Argentina. Certain European nations do tack towards organisation, much as Turkey can be chaotic. And English footballers are diligent. They do their work. They graft. Phil Foden is playing as England's No 10, a role that is regarded as creative. He has run further than any player in the tournament, bar Declan Rice.

It could be argued that England have played more games than others, so of course run more. Yet Spain, France and the Netherlands also played six; and in the top seven players for distance covered in Germany, five are from England – Rice, Foden, Jude Bellingham, Kyle Walker and Harry Kane. John Stones is 11th, Bukayo Saka 15th. In the top 20, only two are Spanish, Rodri and Fabián Ruiz, eighth and 19th.

Spain keeping the ball, England chasing it. That is what we expect to see today. Yet diligence is also a very English trait. Steve McManaman says that whenever Real Madrid played Manchester United, Roberto Carlos told him he knew he would get half the pitch, maybe more, to run. Why? Because David Beckham would never leave Gary Neville unprotected. He did his work, even though it meant Real's full back had free attacking rein. Beckham rarely went high because there was a chance Real could double up on his right back. By contrast, McManaman said that when he arrived in Spain, Carlos knew only two words of English: "Cover me." He would hear it as the Brazil player went streaking past him down the wing.

The myth is that Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard were a bad pairing because they both wanted to attack. The reality was the opposite. Lampard and Gerrard were conscientious. They would be hanging back, uncomfortable making a run in case it left a gap. Are you going? Am I going? Hold on, steady. In the end neither went. Southgate is hewn from that rock too. When Bellingham arrived like Roy of the Rovers against Serbia in the opening group game, England's manager as good as counselled against a repeat. Bellingham was warned about burning out. Since then, on occasions, he has just faded.



Rice's appetite for hard graft is reflected in his running stats

This is not to say the other teams do not work for each other. There are selfless individuals at this tournament, not least the Spain striker Álvaro Morata, who sacrifices individual glory for the team. It is more that, when criticism is hurled at Southgate for static performances, that might not always be his doing. English players are, by their nature, watchful.

Why buy a Dutch Lewis Dunk when you could revive Sancho?

There may be trouble ahead because he can never be less than a controversial figure but, on ability alone, Marseille have got extraordinary value in buying Mason Greenwood for £26.7 million. And if, after initial protests, the noise subsides, as happened in Spain, it may be that the Manchester United co-owner Sir Jim Ratcliffe returns to wondering if attempted rehabilitation might have been a route worth pursuing here too. Given the ambivalence of his statements on the subject, this seems like a decision inspired by advice, not instinct.

The worry for Ratcliffe is that with Greenwood gone and Jadon Sancho's future still in the balance — despite the positive of his return to training after exile, Juventus are the latest to show interest — his club risks losing better players than are being retained. Rasmus Hojlund was as earnest yet as ultimately tame at this tournament for Denmark as he was in the Premier League last season. Meanwhile, speculation around Marcus Rashford continues, and although he undoubtedly had a poor year, as with Greenwood, left, and Sancho there is clearly a player within who can be unlocked by the right coach. With talk of a spending budget of only £50 million, plus what can be made from player sales, this is a difficult window. Erik ten Hag seems intent on going home again, for his players and coaches, but it is interesting that Matthijs de Ligt, United's prime defensive target, was the Lewis Dunk of the Netherlands' Euros campaign, and did not kick a ball here in six matches. Surely Ronald Koeman knows a good defender. Retaining and reviving Sancho would be a start.



GET REAL OVER EFL FUNDING DEAL

At some time in the coming weeks the result of Manchester City's legal challenge against the Premier League over related-party sponsorships may be announced. No intelligence either way, but don't fall for one little fiction: that the hearing is what has held up the £900 million funding deal for the EFL. Kevin Plumb, general counsel for the Premier League, notified clubs of City's claim on March 1 this year. The row over EFL funding dates to at least 2021. So that's more than three years in which City weren't suing the league when a deal could have been struck, and wasn't. The clubs may hide behind this judgment, but they never wanted to pay in the first place.

the Puffbohnen – it is what Erfurters call themselves and translates as "the broad beans" – were the first to rise up and storm the headquarters of the local Stasi, East Germany's secret police. The locals had seen a mysterious plume of smoke emanating from within, and rightly surmised files and evidence were being destroyed.

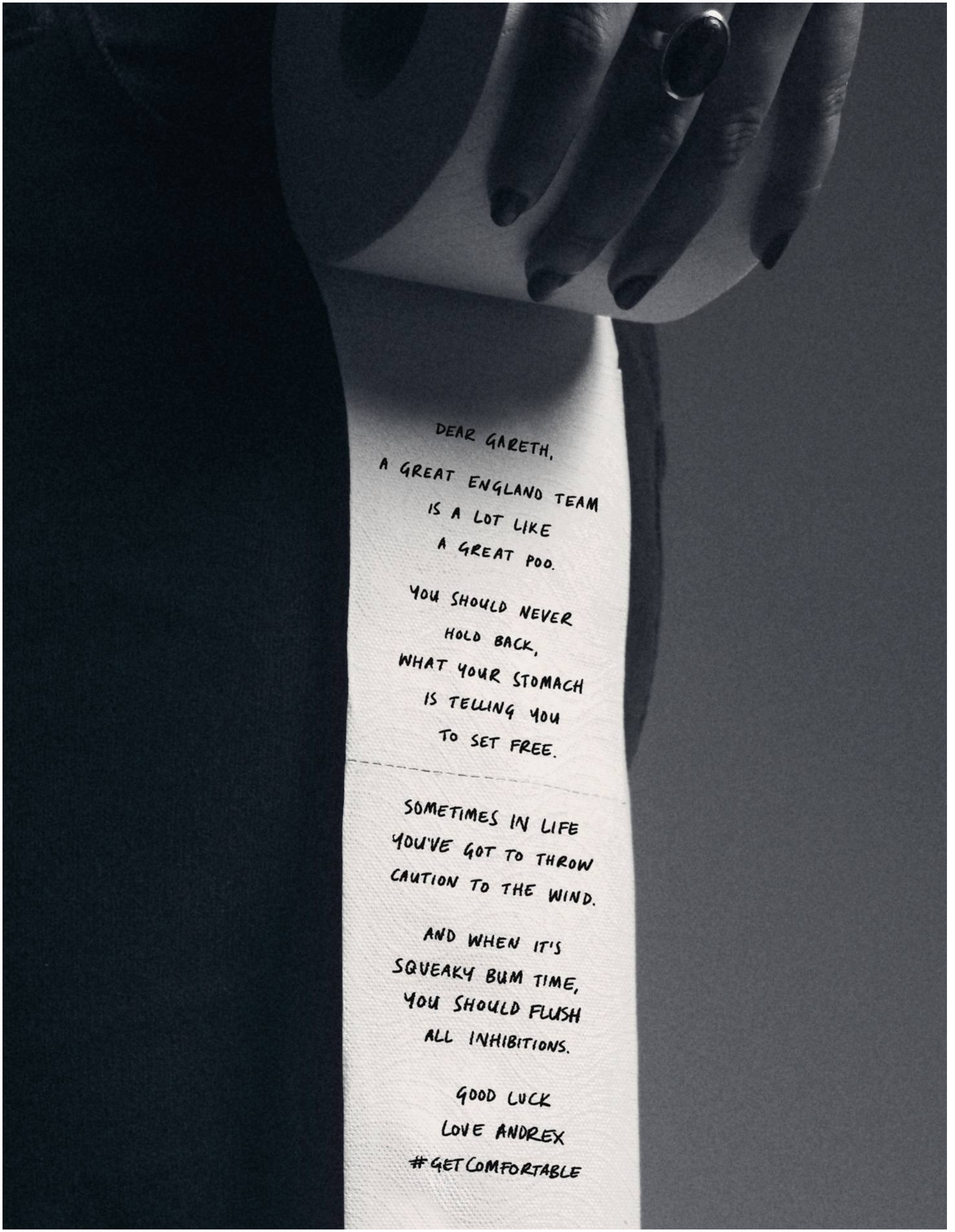
The public invasion stopped the process and began a movement that spread. Across the East, Stasi premises were taken over, the burning and shredding was stopped, and names of informants and details of murders and human rights violations were recovered. Tales of unimaginable cruelty and the identities of the people who perpetrated and facilitated those crimes are known because of the brave actions of Erfurters.

Whether the government, in West or East, was happy with this development is another matter. German reunification was also about reconciliation. How much harder that was made by neighbours and friends being confronted by some dreadful truths cannot be quantified. One thinks of Nelson Mandela embracing the Rugby World Cup in South Africa, putting on his Springboks shirt and cap and advancing reconciliation through what had been regarded as a white man's sport. Germany's battle was never between east and west – separation was arbitrary, a matter of fate – but between those that served the party and those abused by it. That Erfurt is now a charming place is testament to the human capacity for forgiveness.



GOOD WAY TO LEAVE TOON

Amanda Staveley and her husband, Mehrdad Ghodoussi, left, are leaving Newcastle United, but undeniably they did a good job. If one of their last acts is to bring in Paul Mitchell as successor to Dan Ashworth, that looks a shrewd move. Mitchell has a good reputation and, unattached since leaving Monaco, has been able to work on transfers behind the scenes. If he can avoid buying players who spend their first year banned that will be helpful too.


DEAR GARETH,
A GREAT ENGLAND TEAM
IS A LOT LIKE
A GREAT POO.
YOU SHOULD NEVER
HOLD BACK,
WHAT YOUR STOMACH
IS TELLING YOU
TO SET FREE.
SOMETIMES IN LIFE
YOU'VE GOT TO THROW
CAUTION TO THE WIND.
AND WHEN IT'S
SQUEAKY BUM TIME,
YOU SHOULD FLUSH
ALL INHIBITIONS.
GOOD LUCK
LOVE ANDREX
#GETCOMFORTABLE

The Euros Germany 2024

Germany has been a festival for fans… but when do Spain come to party?

We don't earn as much as English and have work on Tuesday, Spaniards in Berlin tell Owen Slot

BRADLEY COLLYER/PA WIRE



Scotland fans brought a sense of fun to the Euros even if their stay was all too brief

At just after lunchtime yesterday, two 17-year-old England fans arrived – at last – at Berlin's Hauptbahnhof. And they had quite some story to tell. On Wednesday evening, after Ollie Watkins had scored, Fin, who was more than slightly tipsy, rang Charlie and said: "Come on. We've got to go." Charlie said "OK", even though he still had his college term to finish up, but the next morning when they had both sobered up, neither of them was about to renege on the deal that they had just made.

Fin is a Southampton fan and Charlie is a Portsmouth fan, and these two neighbours are not supposed to co-exist happily, yet Fin and Charlie arrived in Berlin with their friendship strengthened by their shared adventure.

Being 17, they didn't have a lot to throw at it. Eventually they had set off by bus, to London, then another bus to Paris, change to Frankfurt and train to Berlin. It was 36 hours in total and cost them £250 which is by some distance the cheapest trip that I have heard for the Euros final today.

The only drawback is they didn't have a penny left for a ticket. Not even close. Tickets are generally going for around £1,000. Thus had Fin and Charlie set off without the remotest thought of going to the game. They just wanted to be in the city where the game was being held. And they are by no means alone. As Charlie said: "We just had to be here."

This feeling of just simply having to be here is not restricted to England fans, or to the final. It has been one of the stories of Euro 2024, a tournament that will be remembered for many things, chiefly being that this was the event that the fans reclaimed.

Official figures have not been confirmed, but Euro 2024 has long been on course to break the record of 2,427,303 fans who attended the stadiums when France last hosted in 2016. Note that this is the figure of those *who attended stadiums*. There will be no exact stat for the Fins and the Charlies who came just to be here.

We have no idea exactly how many Dutch crossed the border for the semi-final in Dortmund, but the estimates were 100,000 of which only a small minority got in to the Westfalenstadion to see the game. Neither do we know the exact scale of the exodus from Scotland but the BBC was toying with figures of about 200,000 when officially the official distribution of tickets gave them 10,000 per game.

Recent history is part of the narrative here too. The past two World Cups were in Russia and Qatar

The Scots were here in such numbers that in Munich the tourist board was frantically putting out messages explaining that the city central square and the Olympic Park were both having to be closed. And they were so much fun that Philipp Lahm, the former Germany captain who is the Euro 2024 tournament director, declared: "Let's all be Scots!"

This concept of the mass migration of football followers is one that had England among its pioneers. Mexico were also quick out of the blocks. But here at the Euros, everyone's been at it. By no means have England been here in the greatest numbers. There have been vast armies of Croatians and Romanians. The geography assists central and eastern European nations. Yet the effect has felt like a redefining of a football festival.

Recent history is part of the narrative here too. The past two World Cups were in Russia and Qatar; the previous Euros was during Covid. So these Euros have been like a comeback tour: we're all back, but in greater numbers and – can this be right? – with a greater determination to enjoy ourselves. Thus has Berlin, these last two days, felt like a homing location for attendees of the last act on the Pyramid Stage, a pipeline of England fans arriving in search of something great and something indefinable: a sense of completion, a sense of history with them. There have been 58 years of hurt, now for England (for the men's team, let's be clear, here) and Fin and Charlie have only known 17 of them, but they nevertheless felt this pull of the German capital.

Those pockets of fans quickly grew larger as yesterday passed. I met my first on the Berlin parkrun yesterday morning, which was won by a runner from Wimbledon Athletic Club with a Wallsend Harrier in second; I finished just ahead of the ladies from Scarborough who ran with St George's flags tied round their necks.

No Spanish, though, and not just at the parkrun but hardly at all in the city. Official expectations have 35,000 English being here by kick-off this evening, though I suspect that is a very conservative figure. Yet even that will outnumber the Spanish by three to one. The Spanish here say that it is just too expensive. They say that they just don't earn the wages of their English opposition. And they have to work on Tuesday. How is anyone, here, getting to work on Tuesday?

The local support feels pretty divided. On the one hand, there are Bundesliga fans who like Harry Kane and Jude Bellingham; there are other Germans who are anti-Spain because they feel wronged by their quarter-final knock-out blows. And there are just plenty who struggle with the idea of England winning on German soil.

The broader impression, though, is that Germany has just been happy to host the party, delighted to share their country with party goers and all the joy and economic boost they have brought, even if they are 17-year-olds who have run out of cash before they've even got here.



Tennis Wimbledon

Emotional Krejcikova emulates idol Novotna

B Krejcikova (Cz, 31)	6	2	6
J Paolini (It, 7)	2	6	4

ALYSON RUDD



Centre Court

Barbora Krejcikova looked at the Wimbledon honours board and wept. Her name had been added to that of the great Jana Novotna, the 1998 Wimbledon champion and her compatriot, who died of cancer aged 49 seven years ago and was Krejcikova's friend and mentor.

"The only thing that was going through my head was that I miss Jana a lot," the 28-year-old Czech said. "It was just very, very emotional – a very emotional moment to see me on a board right next to her. I think she would be proud. She would be really excited that I'm on the same board as she is because Wimbledon was super special for her."

Krejcikova might never have come this far, winning a second grand-slam title, had it not been for the fact she wrote Novotna a letter when she was 18, asking her for advice on what to do having finished the junior tour. The pair became very close and after her three-set win over Jasmine Paolini, Krejcikova revealed she speaks to Novotna in her dreams.

She is the eighth new women's Wimbledon champion in as many tournaments. But if that hints at a lack of quality then nothing could be further from the truth.

The 2021 French Open champion triumphed in a contest stacked with tension, ebbs and flows and some brilliance. But ultimately her ability to remain calm as the Centre Court crowd made no secret that they favoured Paolini, the No7 seed, secured her victory.

"We love you, Jasmine," shouted someone as the finalists sat, waiting for the presentation, and Krejcikova joined in the subsequent applause.

"It's a dream come true to play on this stage," Paolini, also 28 and the first Italian woman to reach the final here, said as a beaming Tom Cruise was shown on the big screen. And then she blew kisses to her adoring fans.

"It's unbelievable what just happened," Krejcikova told them as she won over the audience. "It's the best day of my tennis career and the best day of my life."

Krejcikova won the opening game with measured ease and intelligence, breaking a nervy Paolini serve. The Czech's serve was much more reliable and Krejcikova held, untroubled.

There was a huge roar when Paolini used a drop shot to save break point in game three. It was a struggle, but the Italian held and fears of a fast, one-sided final abated.

Krejcikova started playing it a little safe, allowing her opponent to find the lines and then came a delightful point in which the Italian reached a difficult drop shot but, undeterred by the screeches of delight, the Czech raced to meet the lob and held out to win the point and then hold her serve.

The steady approach of Krejcikova paid yet more dividends as she broke serve to lead 4-1 and the crowd could hardly bring themselves to applaud the fact. Suddenly it was 5-1 and there was a murmur of disquiet eased by a Paolini ace as she served to stay in the first set. She did that through a burst of concentration, but had no answers to the consistency of the Krejcikova serve and her depth of shot, and the No31 seed took the opening set 6-2, using all her experience in doubles to open up the court and find the right angle when required.

> **The only thing going through my head was that I miss Jana – she would be really excited**



Paolini held serve at the start of the second set and then broke by finding her rhythm in the longer exchanges. The Italian crumpled to the ground after she misjudged a simple shot in an exchange on her serve for a point that she should have won, but held all the same for a 3-0 lead.

Krejcikova opened with consecutive double faults in the next game which were greeted, disappointingly, with applause – but she had the last laugh by holding. Overall, though, Paolini's energy levels had risen. She added venom to her returns and scampered to reach tricky angles. Allied to the fact that her opponent's timing went astray, Paolini broke to take the second set.

Paolini blitzed her way through her opening service game of the decider, making it plain that Krejcikova would have to find a burst of power and energy of her own to stay in contention. She served crisply and efficiently but the Italian seemed to be in a rush, as if she could see the finish line, and this had the effect of making her opponent look like a wallflower at a buzzing party. But she maintained her calm demeanour and, in her own time, also held serve again.

Paolini was broken after serving a double fault to trail 4-3, at which point the excitability of the crowd was replaced by thick tension. Paolini could make no inroads into the Krejcikova serve and found herself serving to stay in the match – which she did with notable briskness even when outfoxed a couple of times.

Serving for the championship, Krejcikova faltered then regrouped then faltered again, wasting a match point with a nervy backhand. She then set up a second match point with an ace but once more her backhand let her down. She took the third with a strong serve and those in her box went wild, even if the crowd were a bit subdued – but they were won over, eventually, by her incredulity at her own triumph.

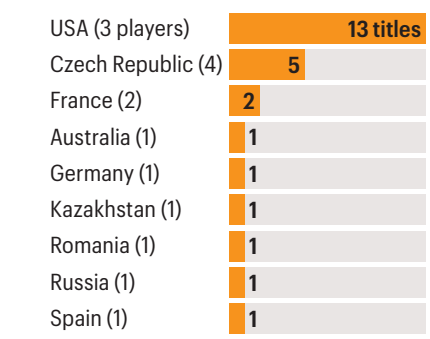


Krejcikova celebrates after clinching victory in three sets on Centre Court over crowd favourite Paolini, left

PUNCHING ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT

The Czech Republic, a country with a population of just over 10m, have provided more Wimbledon women's singles winners since 1998 than any country other than the USA

Wimbledon women's singles champions since 1998



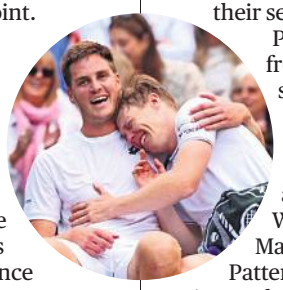
Patten goes from scorekeeper to Centre Court champion

Chris Jones

Britain's Henry Patten, who as a student used to input scores for IBM on the outside courts, completed a remarkable Wimbledon campaign by winning the men's doubles title alongside Finland's Harri Heliovaara in a match of three tie-breaks.

The unseeded pair saved three match points on the way to winning the tie-break in the second set, before coming through 6-7 (7-9), 7-6 (10-8), 7-6 (11-9) against Max Purcell and Jordan Thompson, the Australian No15 seeds in an enthralling final on Centre Court. The final set was decided by a champions tie-break, with Patten and Heliovaara prevailing on their second match point.

All three sets went the distance because both pairs were so solid on their own serves and as a result, the rallies were much shorter than the crowd wanted. When the players did extend the rallies beyond three shots there was plenty of evidence of the subtle skills they possessed at the net to go with the brutal power of their service games.



Patten, left, and Heliovaara savour their thrilling three-set triumph in the final of the men's doubles

Patten, the 28-year-old from Colchester, was by some way the least experienced man on court. Thompson is a top-40 singles player and Purcell won the Wimbledon doubles with Matthew Ebden in 2022.

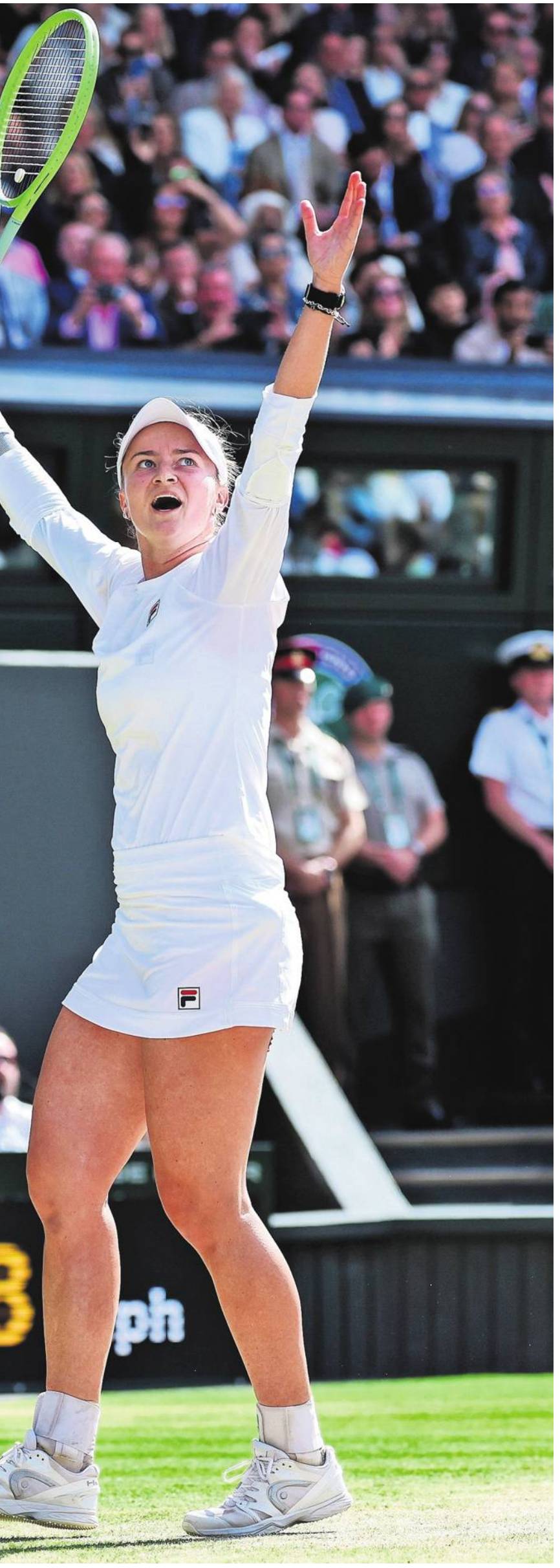
Patten's partner Heliovaara, 35, won the US Open mixed doubles title last year.

Patten and Heliovaara fought back from 6-1 down in the first set tie-break before losing 9-7. In the second set, a Patten volley saved a match point in the 12th game but it appeared their luck had run out after they fell 5-2 behind in the tie-break. However, they refused to buckle and saved two match points before taking it 10-8.

Heliovaara then saved two break points in the seventh game of the decider to set up a final tie-break, which ended with a home victory.

"I cannot put into words how this feels," Patten said. "It couldn't have been a closer match and I can't really remember what happened. The most special thing is to do this in front of my family and best friends."

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER MARC ASPLAND



Surgery to final in 39 days – Djokovic's miracle recovery

Thanks to his 'unique power', Serb has defied expectations he wouldn't even make it to Wimbledon to reach brink of record 25th grand-slam title

Stuart Fraser Tennis Correspondent

Thirty-nine days after undergoing surgery on his right knee, Novak Djokovic will play the Wimbledon final in search of a record 25th grand-slam title. So preposterous was this notion in the immediate aftermath of his operation that his wife Jelena questioned whether it was wise to rush back on the grass.

Djokovic has a habit of defying belief throughout his extraordinary career but this recovery may be his finest. When the 37-year-old revealed on social media that he had gone under the knife to treat a tear of the meniscus – a piece of cartilage in the knee that acts as a shock absorber – the general consensus was that he would skip Wimbledon and focus on a shot at a first Olympic gold medal on clay in Paris from July 27.

Even the sight of Djokovic merely practising at the All England Club on June 23 was surreal. The training session was light but it was still impressive to see him hitting balls so soon after his surgery. Five days later, the intensity had been ramped up and he took his place in the draw with the belief that he was physically capable of winning the tournament.

That he is only a match from doing this shows that Djokovic made the right call despite widespread doubts. Proving the sceptics wrong can often fuel an athlete's urge to succeed, but the Serb insists here that he took no unnecessary risks in his wish to recover in time for Wimbledon.

"I didn't want to prove people wrong," Djokovic said. "I was really focused on trying to make Wimbledon happen for me this year.

"I was not reckless. Any day being reckless means I was going against the medical experts who were leading the rehab process. I was never against that and never pushed anything.

"I understand why people were thinking it's premature and maybe reckless, but I don't think it was to be honest. I just followed what they [the experts] were saying, what they were evaluating in terms of my knee and how it was on a daily basis reacting to the load of the exercises that they were putting me on."

The key figure in Djokovic's swift return is a French physiotherapist, Jean-Georges Cellier. He had worked with the French player Richard Gasquet and the Monaco football team, and was signed up by Djokovic last month to guide his rehabilitation.

While the conventional period of recovery is about six weeks, tennis players can shave time off of this because of their dedication and fitness. Cellier thought it was possible that Djokovic could play Wimbledon but was still shocked by the level of commitment and resilience he observed during their time together.

"I have worked with a lot of great champions," Cellier told L'Equipe. "But a man with so much will, I didn't know that existed. With Novak, I entered another dimension. He has within him a unique power and inner strength."

JAMES MARSH/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



Djokovic's children participated in part of his training session yesterday

Cellier advised Djokovic to follow flexibility and training exercises that had previously helped athletes with meniscus issues. Djokovic also used a pressurised hyperbaric chamber in which the breathing of pure oxygen can help speed up tissue recovery.

"Once we started rehab, every single day I followed everything that they [Cellier and his existing coaching team] said that I have to do," Djokovic said. "I did even more than that in terms of trying to make an effort for Wimbledon comeback. They were aware of it. But we agreed we will not talk about my guaranteed Wimbledon participation until three or four days before the tournament."

Djokovic is so skilled on grass that he does not need to be close to 100 per cent to progress through the early rounds at Wimbledon. A master of pacing himself for the peaks and troughs of a grand-slam fortnight, he was well aware that he could ease his way in before turning the screw.

"I didn't know if I'm going to make the finals, of course, but I did say before the tournament that I'm going to play only if I really feel that I can go deep in the tournament, meaning that I can compete with the best guys," Djokovic said.

"The first couple of rounds maybe I wasn't moving as well, and I was still finding that freedom to move. Then the third and fourth round onwards I felt like, 'Okay, I'm not thinking about the knee. I'm actually playing free, and I'm playing as good as I can.'"

Driving Djokovic's determination to play here was the chance to create yet more history. Victory against Carlos Alcaraz in today's final would mean he equals Roger Federer's record of eight Wimbledon men's singles titles. It would also edge him ahead of Margaret Court for the all-time grand-slam singles record of 25.

"History is on the line," Djokovic said. "Of course, it serves as a great motivation, but at the same time it's also a lot of pressure and expectations. Every time I step out on the court now, even though I'm 37 and competing with the 21-year-olds, I still expect myself to win most of the matches, and people expect me to win 99 per cent of the matches I play. Wimbledon just extracts the best of me."

It has been rare over the past decade for Djokovic to be the underdog in a grand-slam final, but that is his status today. It is a rematch of last year's final in which he lost a five-set battle to Alcaraz, and the feeling among the bookmakers is that the Spanish three-times grand slam champion, 21, has the edge here.

"He's a very complete player," Djokovic said. "It is impressive what he has done for such a young age. He's going to win many slams in his career, but I hope he's going to give me this one."

ON TV TODAY

Carlos Alcaraz v Novak Djokovic
1pm BBC1, Start 2pm



Alcaraz, who beat Djokovic in five sets in last year's Wimbledon final, is the favourite today

Rugby Union New Zealand v England: Second Test

BRAVE ENGLAND LEFT WITH BITTER REGRET



Feyi-Waboso goes over for England's first try to quickly cancel out Telea's opening score

24-17

New Zealand | **England**

ALEX LOWE



Eden Park

In the final week of a 13-month season, during which England recovered from hitting rock bottom to finish third at the World Cup and then began a positive project of reinvention, the All Blacks at Eden Park proved to be a bridge too far. England were valiant but vanquished.

The game finished with Jamie George struggling to contain his emotions; overwhelmed by frustration and incredulity that a maul decision had gone against England as they mounted a last desperate raid in search of a draw, believing there were a lot of bad decisions in that passage.

But as George, the captain, stalked around the field, shaking his head, there would have been regret too. England had led 17-13 at the hour mark. They had responded to the concession of an early try to Mark Telea by scoring two of their own, each from a Marcus Smith cross-kick and finished brilliantly by Immanuel Feyi-Waboso and Tommy Freeman. Maro Itoje was magnificent again. There is something about the All Blacks that always brings the very best out of him.

Steve Borthwick's men spent the entire third quarter in New Zealand territory but chiselled out only three points. From ten entries into the All Blacks 22 they averaged just 1.4 points. England are fiendishly hard to beat but lack the killer instinct to overhaul the leading teams in the world. In the cold light of day, they will recognise that was more costly than a sound refereeing decision at a late maul.

New Zealand's 30-year undefeated record at their spiritual home stands intact because they took control in the final 20 minutes after the introduction of Beauden Barrett. The veteran changed the game here, as he did in Dunedin a week ago, teeing up Telea for his second try and running dangerously at a tiring England defence.

It was almost inevitable that he would be at the heart of the dramatic denouement. England were convinced their maul was sacked illegally. They have a case. But Nic Berry, the referee, and his team of officials ruled it had been "successfully defended".

The maul being halted had led to Ollie Lawrence and George, who was behind him and in possession of the ball, sheering off down the short side. Lawrence drove into Cortez Ratima, the scrum half who was not part of the maul. George was soaked up short of the line in a tackle by Barrett, who had one arm around his neck.

After a long consultation and multiple replays, Berry awarded a truck-and-trailer penalty against Lawrence. "It is wrong," George said. "If you are looking for infringements… the reason we had to go around the outside was because they had sacked a live maul in the middle."

> **England's character runs deep. They just need to find a way to close out games – the hardest step**

Relief swept around Eden Park. George stomped across the field. Lawrence fell to his haunches in despair, alone in his thoughts for a few seconds until team-mates walked over. So near, yet so far for England. Again.

Yet there is much for England to take from these two enthralling matches. Fin Baxter has made a really encouraging introduction to Test rugby. Two weeks ago, there were All Blacks who had never heard of Feyi-Waboso, Freeman or Chandler Cunningham-South. They know their names now. Respect has been earned in these parts, which is not easily done.

The team's character runs deep. They just need to find a way to close out these games – but that is the hardest step of all. England do not have a Test centurion like Barrett they can bring on to change the game. They finished with a raw back line featuring Marcus Smith at full back, Fin Smith at fly half and Ollie Sleightholme on the wing. To see England faltering in that final quarter was not altogether surprising. Battered and bruised from the first Test, they could barely train on Tuesday. George Furbank failed to recover, denying England a pivotal man both in attack and defence.

The pattern of this game mirrored Dunedin. The All Blacks attacked hard at the breakdown. Itoje again dominated lineouts, reinforcing the world-class reputation he has earned in these parts. And New Zealand's scrum dominance earned them an attacking platform. England's prop depth is their biggest concern.

Ardie Savea held off five men with a monstrous carry and three quick rucks later England ran out of defenders, allowing Telea to steal down the blindside for the try. England struck back almost immediately with Marcus Smith launching a perfect kick to Feyi-Waboso, whose low-slung power carried him between Telea and Damian McKenzie for his fourth try in six Tests. England's scramble defence is increasingly the hallmark of this team and it saved them a try when Freddie Steward and Smith combined brilliantly to shut down Telea after McKenzie sparked a counterattack.

New Zealand ultimately left with a penalty from that foray, with Will Stuart again under pressure in the scrum, but it felt like a mini-win for England. Smith then caught the All Blacks unawares with a quick kick-off, triggering a period of England pressure. Three times Lawrence was brought into the game but twice he dropped the ball.

The All Blacks accepted another penalty to extend their lead but George Martin snaffled the restart and the All Blacks were pinned in their own 22 until Smith, knowing he had an advantage, pulled the trigger on another cross-kick.

Freeman caught the ball Australian rules-style above his head for the try. Smith defied the catcalls to drill a conversion and England led at half-time.

George: Bad refereeing decisions denied us getting draw

Will Kelleher Auckland

The England players felt they were denied the chance to draw the second Test against New Zealand at Eden Park by a bad refereeing decision.

In the final play of the game the All Blacks led 24-17, but England kicked a penalty to touch and drove a maul towards the tryline. A converted try would have tied the match in Auckland.

From the maul, the centre Ollie Lawrence splintered off with hooker Jamie George, who was then held on the tryline by Beauden Barrett.

Nic Berry, the Australian referee, originally said that George was held up in-goal by Barrett. Then, after a long Television Match Official (TMO) check, the refereeing team decided that Lawrence had obstructed the New Zealand defence illegally before George's surge to the line, so gave a penalty to the All Blacks that ended the game.

Dan Cole, the replacement prop, felt that the first offence was New Zealand collapsing England's maul, which had included all the forwards and most of the backs. "I thought the reason we went around the front was because the maul got collapsed," Cole said. "We got done for truck and trailer [obstruction]. But we were held up short at the line. It wasn't how I thought the game should end."

George, the captain, agreed with Cole when asked about the incident. He also felt that play should have continued as he was held up before the tryline.

"It's wrong. If you're looking for infringements, there is an infringement in the maul first," George said. "The reason why we had to go round the outside was because they had sacked a live maul in the middle. I am also short of the line and the ball is on the floor so the play must go on. There are a lot of bad decisions in that."



George claimed the officials had made costly mistakes

Steve Borthwick, the England head coach, said that he and his team were baited all week by New Zealanders. He thinks his team have proved those doubters wrong after two

DAVE LINTOTT/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK



They had the heart. They had the attitude. Would England have the legs for one last effort? The physicality was shuddering. Steward, playing his first game since May 19, was hit so hard in a tackle that he threw up on the field.

Smith extended England's lead with a penalty after Dalton Papali'i had blocked Henry Slade's route to the clear-out. But the next big call went against England. Telea knocked on in the tackle when England had an overlap but was not penalised; a more grievous error than the late maul call.

Theo Dan, England's replacement hooker, was knocked out making his first tackle, triggering an immediate return for George. Barrett came on for the All Blacks. His nous had been so influential in the first Test and so it was again.

The All Blacks released that third-quarter pressure by stealing two lineouts and then struck immediately. Steward left a gap for Barrett, who put Telea away in the corner. Another finishing lesson for England. McKenzie kicked two penalties as New Zealand's grip tightened on the game.

England go home frustrated at missed opportunities but encouraged in equal measure. Their next mission? Exactly the one they would choose. The All Blacks at Twickenham in November. They have four months to stew on this and work out how to turn narrow defeats into a statement victory.

Scorers: New Zealand: Tries Telea (11min, 61). **Con** McKenzie. **Pens** McKenzie 4 (21, 38, 69, 75). **England: Tries** Feyi-Waboso (14), Freeman (40+1). **Cons** Smith (2). **Pen** Smith (49).
New Zealand S Perofeta (B Barrett 50); S Reece, R Ioane (A Lienart-Brown 60), J Barrett, M Telea; D McKenzie, F Christie (C Ratima 54); E de Groot (O Tu'ungafasi), C Taylor (A Aumua 65), T Lomax (F Newell 55), S Barrett (capt), P Tuipulotu (T Vaa'i 55), S Finau (L Jacobson 50), D Papali'i, A Savea.
England F Steward (M Smith 70); I Feyi-Waboso (O Sleightholme 69), H Slade, O Lawrence, T Freeman; M Smith (F Smith 63), A Mitchell; F Baxter (B Rodd 69), J George (capt) (T Dan 50; J George 50), W Stuart (D Cole 50), M Itoje, G Martin, C Cunningham-South (A Coles 63), S Underhill (T Curry 50), B Earl.
Referee N Berry (Aus).

tight defeats to the All Blacks.

Across the two-match series England lost by a combined total of eight points, having suffered a 16-15 loss in Dunedin on July 6.

"A lot of people were saying after the first Test that New Zealand were going to get so much better," Borthwick said. "I was being told by people in the street about ten times a day how much we were going to get blown away at Eden Park. I was stopped on the street yesterday by a gentleman who told me that they had unpicked our rush defence, they knew how they were going to beat it. I said 'thank you for that'.

"I was told in the lift today that it was a privilege for us to play at Eden Park and we would be lucky if we were to get away with less than 50 points conceded.

"The team kept on coming at New Zealand, kept fighting, and when the team went down 24-17, some teams wouldn't have come back. What these guys did was get back to the New Zealand line, going hard to get the seven points to try and get that draw.A lot of people were writing us off. Hopefully we've left a positive impression of English rugby here."

"The team is making progress and we are learning very quickly but it shows we have still got a lot to do," Borthwick said. "

This team are decent but to be excellent they must find young props – and pick Sleightholme

STEPHEN JONES



Rugby Correspondent

It would have been no surprise had Beauden Barrett, the great man stuck on the replacements' bench until the last 30 minutes, come out with a mower after the game to give Eden Park a trim, then served drinks at the bar when he had finished.

He had performed every other duty in this unlovely, exciting and fractured game. Match-winner, genius, defender of the gates of Eden Park. He also preserved the incredible All Black record – they last lost there in 1994. As an architectural masterpiece Eden Park is terminally unprepossessing. As a strong room of All Black aspiration, it is a Kiwi Fort Knox.

When Barrett arrived at full back in the 50th minute, England were wielding a certain authority. They had not been dominant for long periods, but were nothing other than earnest, organised and competitive. They also had some real class in the forward – amazing given their scrum problems.

But when England still led by four points going into the closing stages it was clear that the whirlwind performance we were expecting from New Zealand was not going to materialise. For this, we could thank the application of England up front, where Maro Itoje and George Martin were spectacular at lock; but also, the lack of power in the New Zealand attacking game, which was a surprise given the dominance of their scrummaging. The All Blacks, usually slick, were ragged.

And it did seem for some vivid moments that England might just do it. Indeed, the All Blacks had not even won a decent attacking position for what seemed like hours when Barrett arrived from the bench. He soon had that sorted. He put in a devilish rolling ground-muncher of a kick to give New Zealand position; soon after that, and after he had almost scored a try, he came back with a lovely run down the left and sent in Mark Telea, although the conversion was missed.

New Zealand were back in the lead and suddenly, driving hard for the first time, they looked like the All Blacks, not the washed-up, All Grey version who had been playing for a Test-and-a-half.

And then in the desperate final minutes, when Barrett improbably materialised underneath the driving maul to stop England's recovery, he had gone from being merely a nuisance to a bloody great nightmare. One man may not change history. But he can turn games.

STEPHEN JONES STARTING TEAM FOR THE AUTUMN

15 George Furbank	**1** Bevan Rodd
14 Ollie Sleightholme	**2** Jamie George
13 Henry Slade	**3** Afolabi Fasogbon
12 Ollie Lawrence	**4** George Martin
11 Tommy Freeman	**5** Maro Itoje
10 Fin Smith	**6** Ollie Chessum
9 Harry Randall	**7** Tom Curry
	8 Ben Earl

England had been mouthing optimism all week. Admittedly, this was worrying because history shows that New Zealand can gain 15 or 20 points in the week between Test matches. For me, there was a little too much falling over in praise of youthful youngsters up front, and as the match proved there was too much reliance on Itoje and Martin, who performed wonders in a retreating scrum.

There is a world of difference between chirpy fawning media chat, which can often become fawning, and beating the All Blacks, even if they are diminished.

So what is the verdict on a full season of the Steve Borthwick coaching era? I must admit to be becoming impressed with Borthwick's talking and walking. He does get a head of steam and a high level of organisation about his men and it is hardly his fault that nearly 20 years of either relative shambles or complete shambles has cost England momentum and a proper flow of players. And like Gareth Southgate, he has brought much-needed balance and honour to international sport.

Itoje spoke after the game with typical courage. It is true to say that even he ran low on energy towards the end, and it is a matter of exhaustion and morality that England ignored the strictures on player welfare so that he could play. But he and Martin can be inked in, and there are enough back-row forwards in the squad to form an excellent back five.

But other areas have stubbornly failed to fall into place. Marcus Smith put up two kicks that led to England tries in areas of the field completely de-populated of black jerseys, but again he took way too much on his shoulders, was way too flighty, delivering passes to check the next man, not to release him.

And in the final analysis, like most rugby analysis, England's future will come down to the development of a proper scrummage to replace Joe Marler and Dan Cole, and nothing is remotely as important as finding two or, better still, four great emerging props. Bevan Rodd should have started for his all-round strengths up front.

And who cares how, but they have to add the sensational Jack Willis to their back row. The charging Ollie Sleightholme, who was impressive when he was brought on to the wing, should be given the next chance in place of Immanuel Feyi-Waboso.

England have a great spirit and a fine leader in Jamie George. At their best they are top five in the world, although they can also dip into mediocrity. They have a series of monster teams to meet in the autumn, so we wish Borthwick and company the very best. They have become a good England team, the best since the World Cup semi-final in 2019, but so far, they are lacking the sustained success and silverware to call themselves excellent.

They had the chance to (figuratively) level Eden Park to the ground. They could not take it.

FIONA GOODALL/RFU COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES



Martin and Itoje, centre, were immense but they need support in the pack

Rugby Union

Frawley is unlikely hero for gutsy Irish

24-25

South Africa | **Ireland**

Peter O'Reilly Durban

PHILL MAGAKOE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Ireland celebrate on the field in Durban after Frawley's late drop-goal gave them victory

> **Tying the series is one of Andy Farrell's finest achievements since taking charge of Ireland**

Bad blood and boos on the final whistle at King's Park after one of the most dramatic and improbable conclusions had played out with Ireland rewarded for a gloriously gutsy victory in adversity, secured by an unlikely hero.

So often this season, we have lamented the lack of opportunity for Ciaran Frawley at fly half at Leinster, yet when his country needed him, he stepped forward and landed the second of two long-range drop-goals with the hooter having just sounded.

That final strike wasn't pure, and the Springboks were insistent that Cheslin Kolbe had been obstructed in his attempt to block. On this occasion, the officials sided with Ireland and a wonderfully combative series had been levelled.

The victory was even more remarkable for South Africa's dominance in the scrums, which had a large part in Handré Pollard's flawless 24-point haul. Yet the game will be remembered for Ireland's physical courage, especially at the end, when they had an unfamiliar-looking side on the pitch.

We should have known they would turn up physically. On Friday, Ireland's skipper Caelan Doris revealed that Andy Farrell had castigated them for their failure to stand up for each other in Pretoria. Here was the most bloody-minded response, against the most physically imposing opponents.

Given the circumstances – fatigue, unsympathetic match officiating in both legs, key players missing – to tie the series is one of Farrell's finest achievements with Ireland.

High on Farrell's list of priorities would have been to explode out of the blocks, a feature of Ireland's best performances under him.

But this was no sprint. The first quarter required several stoppages, mainly due to the ferocity of the collisions. The first half lasted 55 minutes. Encouragingly for Ireland, it was the Springboks who needed treatment. Both locks retired to have head wounds stitched, while Willie le Roux's early injury was self-inflicted, as he put his head on the wrong side in the tackle.

Suddenly it was South Africa's young full back who was under pressure, while Ireland's full back Jamie Osborne grew in confidence – not merely gobbling up bombs but also countering powerfully and playing a central role when Ireland scored the only try off a South Africa goal-line drop-out. He offloaded to Robbie Henshaw, whose inside pass gave Conor Murray his second try of the series.

Ireland failed to to cash in on this momentum. Without Le Roux, the Springboks' back-field was ripe for exploitation but Jack Crowley, the starting fly half, either couldn't see Calvin Nash in space, begging to be supplied or the execution was just off when Crowley did take the kick-pass option.

Meanwhile, South Africa were gaining belief from their success at the scrum, which let them gain territory in the Irish half.

Ireland had one big escape when Kolbe failed to hold a sharp, flat pass by Pollard, and another when Kwagga Smith blocked a sluggish exit kick. A scramble by Doris and Garry Ringrose stopped him charging over.

With every scrum penalty, the pressure intensified – off five feeds, Ireland conceded three penalties and a free-kick, with both props at fault.

They did manage to finish the half strongly, however. Pieter-Steph du Toit took Henshaw out off the ball, presenting three points to Crowley.

Magical interplay between Osborne and James Lowe gave Ireland field position approaching the break, and had Ringrose held on to a Murray pass, Ireland's lead might have been greater. Crowley put Ireland 16-6 up at the break after another offence.

They were worn down gradually during the third quarter, however, as the Springbok pack muscled up and Pollard whittled away at that lead.

Typically, however, when his sixth penalty nudged South Africa in front for the first time, within a minute Crowley put Ireland back ahead.

Ultimately, Ireland's bench and their boundless self-belief gave Frawley his opportunity, and he took it. Now South Africa know what it's like to lose by the narrowest of margins.

Star man Jamie Osborne (Ireland).
Scorers: South Africa: Pens Pollard 8 (19min, 35, 44, 48, 53, 57, 61, 65). **Ireland: Try** Murray (14) **Con** Crowley **Pens** Crowley 4 (6, 38, 40+2, 59) **DGs** Frawley 2 (71, 81).
South Africa W le Roux (S Feinberg-Mngomezulu 2); C Kolbe, J Kriel, D de Allende, K-L Arendse; H Pollard, F de Klerk (G Williams 44); O Nche (G Steenekamp 60), B Mbonambi (M Marx 45), F Malherbe (V Koch 45), E Etzebeth (RG Snyman 9-17, S Moerat 72-74), F Mostert (RG Snyman 18), S Kolisi (capt) (M van Staden 50), P-S du Toit, K Smith.
Ireland J Osborne; C Nash (S McCloskey 67), G Ringrose, R Henshaw, J Lowe; J Crowley (C Frawley 60), C Murray (C Blade 60); A Porter (C Healy 57), R Kelleher (R Herring 66), T Furlong (F Bealham 44), J McCarthy, J Ryan (R Baird 57), T Beirne, J van der Flier (P O'Mahony 57), C Doris (yellow card 48).
Referee K Dickson (Eng). **Attendance** 52,000.

Plenty to encourage Gatland despite ninth straight loss

Australia 36

Wales 28

Steve James

A ninth consecutive Test defeat for Wales, but this was by far their most promising display of the year. At last it was possible to see some purpose and structure as they scored four tries, with two of them coming from their favoured lineout maul.

Sloppy errors cost Wales in a damp Melbourne, and Australia took their chances magnificently to score four tries too, with their extra power telling at times.

For Wales there were genuine positives, such as the captain Dewi Lake. He had a sensational game and is a clear contender for the British & Irish Lions No 2 spot next year, scoring two tries and providing a bundle of energy and power in the loose. James Botham and Taine Plumtree both had their best games for Wales in the back row. Dafydd Jenkins and Tommy Reffell tackled their hearts out, and the tight-head prop Archie Griffin, despite needing a Head Injury Assessment after a tackle from Lukhan Salakaia-Loto that led to the Australia lock being sin-binned, was monstrously good.

But twice Wales conceded penalties from restarts after scoring. "We worked so hard for our points but probably showed our inexperience in how we gifted them some points," the Wales head coach Warren Gatland, right, said. "Australia were probably a little bit more streetwise than us."



Australia's first try summed that up. They had been under pressure on their line when Andrew Kellaway boldly chipped ahead. He regathered the ball and flipped a pass to the flanker Fraser McReight. The Wales wing Rio Dyer caught McReight, but on his right in support was Filipo Daugunu, who strolled over.

A penalty then displayed a key difference between the teams, as Australia went through 23 phases, using powerful carriers, before Noah Lolesio made it 10-0. The second try came from a mistake from Cameron Winnett, not claiming a box-kick from Jake Gordon to allow the Australia scrum half to score.

Down 17-0, Wales leant on a strength, their lineout maul, and Lake emerged from the pile of bodies with the ball. Eight minutes later he did the same to make it 20-14.

It was 23-14 at half-time but a wonderfully constructed try for the wing Liam Williams after good carries from Lake, Botham and Plumtree cut Australia's lead to two. Allan Alaalatoa then scored from short range for Australia before calamity struck for Wales as Lolesio's penalty from deep in his half was acrobatically kept in play by Williams, but Daugunu was chasing hard and the ball fell into his arms for his second try. It was 33-21.

Wales done? Not a chance. Nic White's clearance was charged down by Christ Tshiunza and Dyer powered through Lolesio to score.

With Lake now off Wales lost two crucial lineouts and it was left to the replacement Ben Donaldson to kick an easy penalty to seal matters.

Australia: Tries Daugunu 2 (7 min, 67), Gordon (25), Alaalatoa (54). **Cons** Lolesio 2. **Pens** Lolesio (15, 31, 39).
Wales: Tries Lake (28, 36), Williams (47), Dyer (70). **Cons** B Thomas 3, Costelow.
Australia T Wright; A Kellaway, J Flook, H Paisami, F Daugunu; N Lolesio (B Donaldson 70), J Gordon (N White 62); J Slipper (I Kailea 54), M Faessler (J Nasser 60), T Tupou (A Alaalatoa 40), J Williams (A Blyth 59), L Salakaia-Loto (sin-bin 34-44), R Valetini, F McReight, C Cale (L Gleeson 59).
Wales C Winnett; L Williams (N Tompkins 68), O Watkin, M Grady, R Dyer; B Thomas (S Costelow 60), E Bevan (K Hardy 60); G Thomas, D Lake (E Lloyd 68), A Griffin (H O'Connor 34 -40), C Tshiunza, D Jenkins (C Hill 64), J Botham, T Reffell, T Plumtree.
Referee N Amashukeli (Geo).

Cricket

SIMON HUGHES



GARETH COPLEY/GETTY IMAGES



Anderson's departure marks a turning point in the game, with wobble seam now the order of the day

Swing is dead now its last artist has gone

Jimmy Anderson retires with 704 Test wickets to leave game dominated by hit-the-deck and wobble-seam merchants

It was not only the departure of a great cricketer that made everyone misty-eyed on Friday at Lord's. It was also, subliminally perhaps, a realisation of what James Anderson represents. He is the master of a fading art: the ability to make a round, shiny ball bend in the air to his will, swinging one way then the other, toying with the batsman's security, leading him this way and that – a beautiful deceit achieved with delicate, finger-tip control – before going in for the kill. Each wicket was a story of temptation and trickery, magnificent narrative of 704 chapters.

His final wicket on Friday was a classic example. Bowling to the West Indies wicketkeeper-batsman Joshua Da Silva from the Nursery End, where he started his Test career 21 years ago, he sent down a couple of exploratory balls wide of the stumps that didn't require a shot. He smiled to himself – the ball was swinging encouragingly. He straightened his line and Da Silva worked the ball to mid-wicket. He dragged his length back slightly. Defended. He projected fuller and wider. Left alone. He tried again. This time Da Silva groped at the ball as it swung tantalisingly out of reach.

The first ball of his next over was angled in towards off stump on an enticing length, the seam canted towards first slip. Spying a scoring opportunity, Da Silva went to drive through the on side but it ducked away late to take the edge, and was gleefully accepted by England's new wicketkeeper Jamie Smith.

It was a glorious moment, and Anderson's bowling is a thing of beauty. There is a balletic purity to the way he dances to the wicket, unfurls his tightly coiled arms and pivots to flick the ball from his cocked wrist, the torque naturally applied, generating that delicious late swing.

The speed and movement are a product of the perfect synchronisation of hundreds of muscles and tendons that take years to groove. He has put approximately 20,000 tonnes through his knees and ankles (40,000 deliveries multiplied by six times his body weight) in the quest for this athletic perfection. It is a miracle he is still standing, never mind bowling.

Anderson has attained a sort of bowling nirvana. After years of experimentation and exploration he knows he has total control of his body and the ball. But swing is fickle. It comes and goes on the cricket gods' whim. The modern game does not have time to wait for it to materialise. Seaming the ball is more en vogue. It does not require quite the same precision of release or ideal atmospheric conditions and is harder to combat as it happens off the pitch (rather than in the air) therefore closer to the batsman.

The wobble seam is king, superbly exploited by Gus Atkinson, who took 12 wickets on his Test debut. He does not seek movement in the air by using the seam as a rudder; he releases the ball from a good height and at high speed with a crooked seam hoping for uneven bounce or deviation off the pitch. He is a line bowler – more mechanical in execution than Anderson's handcrafted expertise – but he utilised the vagaries of the Lord's slope. And wobble seam is the route the game is taking.

Anderson is partially the architect of his own departure. He honed the technique of wobble seam, positioning his fingers wider on the ball to enable the seam to oscillate as it flies towards the batsman and then jags one way or the other on pitching. If on a particular day Anderson discovered that the ball was not swinging, he would soon resort to wobble seam. The Sultan of Swing is also the Wizard of Wobble. His unquenchable thirst for self-improvement has unearthed new methods of wicket-taking eagerly lapped up by his cohorts.

> After years of experimentation, Anderson has attained a sort of bowling nirvana

Another Gus – Angus Fraser – took 177 Test wickets from 1989-98 with wobble seam. It just wasn't called that. "The way the ball came out of my hand naturally was with the seam coming down like a windscreen wiper," he said, adding: "Mike Gatting and John Emburey used to bollock me for missing the seam when bowling with the new ball." (So did I, if truth be told, as the shine got scuffed, inhibiting my attempts to swing it. But Fraser was more successful than me).

From Fred Trueman, through Ian Botham and Chris Old to Dominic Cork, Matthew Hoggard, Chris Woakes and Anderson himself (not forgetting Stuart Broad to left-handers), swing bowlers have always been prominent in English cricket. But it is hard to identify them now. Surrey's Dan Worrall is the most notable. The England hierarchy is keener to invest in quicker, taller line bowlers such as Josh Tongue, Matthew Potts, Dillon Pennington and Atkinson with a more direct approach to wicket-taking.

Unleashing an 85mph delivery that swings through the air, whistles past the edge and soars into the 'keeper's gloves is thrilling and addictively satisfying. But England aren't seeking satisfaction, they are after results, so Jimmy may be the last of the line.

We will miss the man who was not just a bowling maestro, but a unique marriage of science and art.

ON TV

England v West Indies Second Test
Thursday, 11am, Sky Sports

Agent jailed over spot-fixing scandal helped seal TV deal for Eubank Jr

Boxing

Tom Kershaw, Matt Lawton

The sports agent jailed over the Pakistan cricket spot-fixing scandal played a significant role in Chris Eubank Jr signing for the promotion company that holds an exclusive contract with Sky Sports.

Mazhar Majeed, who was sentenced to 32 months in prison in 2011 for his role in the corruption of a Test match between England and Pakistan at Lord's that was broadcast live on Sky in August 2010, acts as an adviser to Eubank Jr and helped to negotiate the multi-fight deal that is expected to lead to the boxer headlining shows on its channels.

After Eubank Jr's signing was announced by Sky, Majeed posted a photograph on Instagram in which he is sitting next to the boxer and Ben Shalom, the co-founder of Boxxer, the promotion company that in 2021 secured a four-year, £36million contract with the broadcaster in Las Vegas.

"Many hours of work to get this over the line. Alhamdulillah always," Majeed wrote in a caption for the photo, which was taken down shortly afterwards, but not before a copy was shared with The Sunday Times.

An Instagram post featuring two videos promoting Eubank Jr's signing with Boxxer remained on Majeed's account at the time of writing.

When The Sunday Times began investigating Majeed's re-emergence in boxing, Shalom initially denied having any recollection of making payments to Star People, a company controlled by Majeed's wife, Sheliza Manji. We subsequently revealed that Boxxer had paid more than £300,000 in total to Star People, with a recent instalment in September 2023. Boxxer's position is understood to be that payments made to Star People represented a percentage of Amir Khan's purse, for whom Majeed acted as an adviser, for his pay-per-view fight against Kell Brook 18 months prior.

INSTAGRAM



Majeed, centre, was pictured with Shalom and Eubank Jr on Instagram

A payment of $100,000 (almost £80,000) was made in London in July 2023 by a Boxxer representative to Lindsey Smith, who said she had worked for Star People since 2020. Smith described herself as Majeed's personal assistant. The Boxxer employee denied any recollection of the meeting or payment, which was recorded in the form of a receipt that both he and Smith signed.

Majeed pleaded guilty to conspiracy to cheat at gambling and conspiracy to accept corrupt payments while representing the Pakistan players who orchestrated or deliberately bowled no-balls at prearranged moments. In 2014, Majeed also admitted HM Revenue & Customs charges of tax fraud relating to his development and rental business and was sentenced to a further two years in prison in November 2015.

Sky declined to comment but it is thought to consider its relationship to be only with Boxxer rather than the fighters or their representatives.

Boxxer said in a statement: "Boxxer is responsible for managing contract negotiations directly with boxers and their advisory teams. Sky Sports is not engaged in the process. Boxxer handled negotiations with Chris Eubank Jr's advisers, which includes Majeed, and who have worked with multiple boxing promoters." Neither Majeed nor Eubank Jr's lawyer responded when contacted for comment.

Cycling Tour de France

TDF/ MARCO BERTORELLO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Yates helps Pogacar back into 'fun' zone

DAVID WALSH



Chief Sports Writer, Saint-Lary-Soulan

On Thursday evening Jonas Vingegaard said his Tour wouldn't begin until the Pyrenees. Tadej Pogacar said that's funny, I too have always liked the Pyrenees, modesty making him reluctant to mention the times he's won in these mountains. Quietly and in their different days, they set it up: bikes instead of horses but still the OK Corral.

In the past, what Vingegaard has said, Vingegaard's done. Pogacar, too. Men of their word. So good they don't need to big themselves up. For three Tours now, there has been the sense that Vingegaard is the better Tour rider. He left Pogacar behind on the Col du Granon in the 2022 race and then destroyed him on the Col de la Loze last year.

There were hints that the Dane had got inside Pogacar's head and made an otherwise confident and talented bike rider doubt himself. Inside the UAE team they had a conversation with Pogacar after he'd won last year's Tour of Flanders and he wondered aloud how he could beat Vingegaard in the Tour.

He came into this race in the form of his career, determined to give it another go. Vingegaard entered under a cloud. Twelve days in hospital, six weeks off the bike wasn't the preparation he had in mind. The remarkable feature of the first 13 days was just how good Vingegaard has been. Every stage he rode close to the front of the peloton as if he not Pogacar was the patron.

Pogacar targeted Wednesday's stage through the Massif Central where the short but still severe climbs suited him. He attacked 30 kilometres before the finish, got a lead that stretched to 30 seconds and then Vingegaard began to reel him in. Not only did he catch but he then beat him in their sprint for the stage win. For Pogacar, the unthinkable had happened. If you come for the king, you better not miss and then the king said his Tour would begin in the Pyrenees.

When UAE sports scientists measured the transference of lactate from fast to slow twitch muscles, the post-ride test that gives them a handle on every rider's rate of recovery, they discovered that Pogacar recovers twice as fast as his team-mates. If there was a similar test to define psychological recovery, he would top that list too. So when they gathered in Pau for yesterday's race to the summit of the Pla d'Adet, he and his team talked about how they were to control this first day in the Pyrenees. There was talk too about being more strategic in their approach. With a 1min 6sec lead on Remco Evenepoel and a 1:14 advantage on Vingegaard, their man could win by defending.



Pogacar appeared to have crisps thrown at him, above, but went on to win stage 14, left

Trying to get Pogacar to not attack is a bit like asking the cock not to crow in the morning. It's what he does. The 14th stage to Pla d'Adet was another remarkable chapter in the story of the extraordinary rivalry between two of the sport's greatest champions. Just 151.9 kilometres, this Pyrenean race offered further evidence that shorter mountain stages deliver better racing.

A strong breakaway group got an early lead and how hard they worked for an advantage that stretched to two minutes but not much behind. The



Stage 14 results

Pau to Saint-Lary-Soulan (Pla d'Adet), 151.9km

Leading positions

1	**T Pogacar (Slove)**	UAE Team Emirates	**4:01:52**
2	**J Vingegaard (Den)**	Visma-Lease a Bike	**at 39 sec**
3	**R Evenepoel (Bel)**	Soudal-Quick-Step	**1:10**
4	**C Rodriguez (Sp)**	INEOS Grenadiers	**1:19**
7	**A Yates (GB)**	UAE Team Emirates	**1:23**

Overall

1	**Pogacar**		**56:42:39**
2	**Vingegaard**		**at 1:57**
3	**Evenepoel**		**2:22**
4	**J Almeida (Por)**	UAE Team Emirates	**6:01**
5	**Rodriguez**		**6:09**
7	**Yates**		**8:32**

Irish rider Ben Healy was part of the break, contributing to the workload while still saving enough for a late attack that on any other day would have earned a deserved stage victory. But, on this day, Pogacar's ultra-strong team was determined to keep the escapees within catching distance.

Seven kilometres from the finish, at a point when it seemed that Healy's gutsy ride might be rewarded, Pogacar spoke with team-mate Adam Yates, needing to shout to be heard. "I was saying, go for the stage and we will see what happens when you attack. We will test the legs of everybody else," Pogacar said.

"I was thinking he might have a chance for a stage win but then I saw the opportunity to go up to him, and then basically he died on the road for me so I could gain a little bit of an advantage, take a breather, and go from then on to the finish. A big thanks to Adam."

When Yates attacked, it soon became clear that Vingegaard had only Matteo Jorgenson to help. Pogacar observed their reactions. Yates's advantage grew and he quickly overtook the toiling Healy. Pogacar sensed that Vingegaard might not have much left and so he attacked five kilometres from the finish.

One second you're out on your own on a Pyrenean climb, anticipating one of the great moments of your career and then Yates is looking behind and seeing this yellow monster bearing down on him, his team-mate.

Yates is one of the least complicated and most selfless riders in the peloton. He is paid a lot of money to ride for Pogacar and it is a role that he embraces.

A friend met him at the UAE hotel in Florence before the race began.

"Are you ready for the Tour?" he asked.

"I f***ing better be," Yates nonchalantly replied.

And, of course, he has been. His first sighting of Pogacar coming towards him would have crushed him. Not going to happen today, Adam. By the time Pogacar got to him, Yates's mindset had changed and he was immediately sheltering his leader, accelerating one last time to help him and the team.

Vingegaard chased. Of course he did. Four kilometres from the summit, he'd eaten into his rival's advantage and got the deficit down to seven seconds. Pulled along by Yates, Pogacar had recharged and just when you thought Vingegaard was going to get to him again, the man in the Yellow Jersey was up and dancing on the pedals. By the time he reached the finish line, his lead had gone from seven to 39 seconds.

Vingegaard was tenacious but seemed less than the dominant rider of 2022 and 2023. Evenepoel finished third on the day, another fine ride but the gaps have grown. Pogacar now leads Vingegaard by 1min 57sec and Evenepoel by 2:22. The UAE team now has three riders in the top seven and their leader is suddenly in a dominant position.

Pogacar was asked if this was the best he has ever been. "If I am honest, I am much better than last year. Much more consistent. You cannot judge this on the power output for 20 minutes. You have to handle all the emotions involved in the Tour. I am getting more and more comfortable on the bike. I am having fun. I cannot go much better than this so I will enjoy it for as long as it lasts."

After crushing defeats in the past two Tours, did this feel like revenge? "For sure not revenge," he said. "It's cycling. It's not a war or anything. It's a game we play. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose." There are many reasons for his popularity. Mostly it's down to the way he rides but it's also got something to do with how he sees his career. "A game we play. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose." Stuff we all need to remember.

Aberg standing between MacIntyre and home glory

Golf

Tom Kershaw

After coming desperately close to a famous victory on home soil last year, Robert MacIntyre moved to the glorious cusp of redemption with a seven-under-par round of 63 at the Genesis Scottish Open.

It was Rory McIlroy who brilliantly – and agonisingly – denied the local hero then, with a birdie at the 72nd hole, but the defending champion could only cling to contention here on a damp afternoon at the Renaissance Club that belonged indisputably to MacIntyre, who will start two shots behind Ludvig Aberg in the final group.

The 27-year-old claimed his maiden PGA Tour victory at the Canadian Open last month but has made no secret that failing to ever win this event would haunt him in retirement. That threat is still miles off on the North Sea horizon, but MacIntyre played with spectacular urgency in a round featuring seven birdies and an eagle to afford himself another golden chance to end the 25-year wait for a Scottish champion since Colin Montgomerie lifted this trophy.

"You can't hide from it," MacIntyre said. "No one can else play 18 holes for you. It's on me. I've just got to go and enjoy myself tonight, have a nice dinner with the family, and come out tomorrow with the same attitude and be ready for anything.

"The Scottish Open on my résumé is the one I want. That's not going to change tomorrow, but I've just got to go and play golf and let it happen. I can't force it."

It will still require a seismic effort to deny Aberg, who rallied impressively after consecutive bogeys on the back nine with three birdies in his last six holes to post a round of 65. McIlroy is on 12 under but was left to rue a sloppy finish to his round after missing three consecutive birdie putts from about eight feet before a bogey at the last left him five shots adrift.



MacIntyre is on 15 under par

Today's racecards

Perth

Going: good — **Racing TV**

Rob Wright's tips: 2.15 Step Out (nap) **2.45** Garde Des Champs **3.15** Condesa **3.45** Everyday Champagne **4.15** Buy Some Time **4.45** Game Beaaa

2.15 PARKLANDS HOTEL PERTH NOVICES' HURDLE £4,084: 2M 4F (13)

1	4/203-	**KANDOR** 207 L Russell 5-11-0	P W Wadge (3)
2	05-3	**PEEKABOO PADDY** 69 D Bourke 5-11-0	B Lynn (3)
3	060-20	**PERFECT ARCH** 13 (P) S G West 7-11-0	H Brooke
4	45-1P1	**POP THE QUESTION** 21 (D) J Coward 6-11-0	Sean Quinlan
5	20-22U	**STEP OUT** 28 (T) S Crawford (Ire) 5-11-0	J J Slevin
6	36-600	**YAKALEO** 10 (H) N Richards 5-11-0	D McMenamin
7	PP3-P5	**YOU WILL BE FOUND** 16 A B Hamilton 7-11-0	A Doyle (5)
8	60-60	**AWAY SHE GOES** 21 B Ellison 5-10-7	Craig Nichol
9	202-	**BACKDOORFLUSH** 201 (BF) L Russell 5-10-7	D R Fox
10	6F-U0	**KIMJOY** 7 S Crawford (Ire) 5-10-7	Mr S Connor (7)
11	/532-3	**LADY MENDOZA** 50 (P) R Menzies 7-10-7	N Moscrop
12	0P-U	**APPLES DESTINY** 14 R M Smith 4-10-2	Ben Smith (7)
13	000	**WEE VEE** 29 S Crawford (Ire) 4-10-2	P J Kavanagh (3)

Betting: 6-4 Step Out, 4-1 Lady Mendoza, Backdoorflush, 7-1 Pop The Question, 14-1 Kandor, Perfect Arch, 20-1 Kimjoy, 25-1 others

2.45 MACBET SCOTLAND'S LEADING HORSE RACING BOOKMAKER HANDICAP CHASE £5,281: 2M (7)

1	FP-263	**GARDE DES CHAMPS** 10 (T) L Russell 8-12-0	D R Fox
2	020-14	**MALPAS** 29 (T) D McCain 9-11-9	T Gillard
3	10F06-	**BIX BEIDERBECKE** 127 (H) L Russell 6-11-8	P W Wadge (3)
4	45-026	**SWORD OF FATE** 10 (CD) L Kerr 11-11-2	Sean Quinlan
5	31-123	**TONTO FOLEY** 9 (T,BF,D) C Williams 6-10-12	N Scholfield
6	0P-642	**TESSY LAD** 7 (T) S England 5-10-7	J England
7	P26-53	**CONTRE ORDRE** 46 (B,T) M Hammond 6-10-2	Emma Smith-Chaston (3)

Betting: 9-4 Tessy Lad, 5-2 Tonto Foley, 6-1 Contre Ordre, Garde Des Champs, 8-1 Malpas, 10-1 Bix Beiderbecke, 12-1 Sword Of Fate

3.15 MACBET BOOKMAKER ALLOWS YOU TO WIN HANDICAP HURDLE £4,753: 2M 4F (11)

1	142P0-	**CONDESA** 85 (T,C) S Crawford (Ire) 8-12-0	J J Slevin
2	1236-5	**GALATA BRIDGE** 25 (BF) Dr R Newland & J Insole 7-11-11	C Hammond
3	240-46	**THE CHURCHILL LAD** 37 R Menzies 5-11-10	R Chapman
4	265-43	**WELL PLANTED** 10 (C) R M Smith 7-11-8	Sean Quinlan
5	4P6P-5	**DALLAS DES PICTONS** 21 (P,D) D Sayer 11-11-6	H Brooke
6	5645-0	**WESTERN RUN** 46 (P) R M Smith 9-11-2	Ben Smith (7)
7	354-20	**TIGGA TIME** 29 A M Thomson 5-10-12	R Mania
8	0/05P-	**CORAL BLUE** 172 (T,D) D Bourke 9-10-10	C Bewley
9	3-4412	**MALANGEN** 10 (CD) Miss L Harrison 9-10-8	P J Kavanagh (3)
10	400-04	**KAJAKI** 23 (V,CD) N Richards 11-10-4	D McMenamin
11	60-020	**DARKEST DAY** 10 (P,T) W Young Jnr 9-10-2	D R Fox

Betting: 3-1 Galata Bridge, 7-2 Malangen, 5-1 The Churchill Lad, 8-1 Well Planted, Condesa, 10-1 Kajaki, 12-1 Tigga Time, 14-1 others

3.45 MACBET LAYING BETS SINCE 1972 HANDICAP CHASE £7,922: 3M (10)

1	2335-1	**TIGER ORCHID** 31 (P) Dr R Newland & J Insole 9-12-0	C Hammond
2	P321/1	**DINONS** 29 B Ellison 11-11-12	Craig Nichol
3	33-365	**GLORY AND HONOUR** 14 (T) S England 8-11-9	J England
4	0061-3	**CAP DU NORD** 35 (P,D) C Williams 11-11-9	N Scholfield
5	306-04	**BARBADOS BUCK'S** 29 (P) D Bourke 9-11-8	R Mania
6	4P4-04	**HALF SHOT** 35 (D) I Jardine 10-11-7	D Johnston (5)
7	1220-0	**WASDELL DUNDALK** 35 (CD) Miss L Harrison 9-11-4	D McMenamin
8	1320-1	**NO REGRETS** 67 (V,D) N Richards 10-11-2	Sean Quinlan
9	440-22	**EVERYDAY CHAMPAGNE** 35 (P,BF,D) N Alexander 8-10-9	B Lynn (3)
10	15P-P4	**NOWINITTOWINIT** 10 S Crawford (Ire) 8-10-2	Mr S Connor (7)

Betting: 7-2 Dinons, 9-2 Tiger Orchid, Cap Du Nord, 5-1 Everyday Champagne, 6-1 No Regrets, 8-1 Half Shot, 14-1 others

4.15 SCOTTISH RACING ACADEMY HANDICAP HURDLE £4,753: 3M (11)

1	24-106	**LIHYAN** 14 (H) R Menzies 6-12-0	William Maggs (5)
2	/P-030	**ACCIDENTAL REBEL** 14 (T) L Kerr 10-11-7	B Lynn (3)
3	2416-0	**KILBRAINY** 35 (T) A M Thomson 8-11-2	R Mania
4	5/42-1	**FEVER DREAM** 35 (T,CD) C Williams 6-11-1	N Scholfield
5	33P-50	**NOT WHAT IT SEEMS** 30 M Hammond 8-11-0	Emma Smith-Chaston (3)
6	1-1241	**BUY SOME TIME** 10 (H,CD) R M Smith 6-10-13	Ben Smith (7)
7	P2-P01	**JETEYE** 21 (B,T) S England 7-10-10	J England
8	30-52F	**PADDY ELVIS** 35 (P) S Crawford (Ire) 5-10-8	J J Slevin
9	244-12	**DALILEO** 10 (CD) Miss L Harrison 9-10-5	P J Kavanagh (3)
10	00-3U3	**DIAMOND STATE** 10 (P,T) L Russell 8-10-5	A Doyle (5)
11	-06226	**SHANTOU MOON** 10 W Young Jnr 7-10-2	D R Fox

Betting: 11-4 Fever Dream, 9-2 Buy Some Time, 5-1 Jeteye, 11-2 Paddy Elvis, 8-1 Dalileo, 12-1 Lihyan, Kilbrainy, Diamond State

4.45 MACBET BEST ODDS GUARANTEED DAILY CONDITIONAL JOCKEYS' HANDICAP HURDLE £3,961: 2M (11)

1	2540-6	**VE DAY** 38 (B,D) D McCain 5-12-0	William Maggs (3)
2	043-22	**GLOBAL ESTEEM** 51 (T,BF) F O'Brien 7-11-12	J Hogan (3)
3	0223-	**TRAILBLAZER** F11 (P) A Nicol 5-11-11	J Thompson (7)
4	440-56	**SERGEANT WILSON** 10 (D) R M Smith 6-11-9	Emma Smith-Chaston
5	660-P	**ALDBOURNE** 35 (T) L Russell 5-11-9	P W Wadge (3)
6	005-13	**JUST DOTTIE** 38 (H,CD) R M Smith 6-11-8	Ben Smith (8)
7	00P4-3	**NO RECOLLECTION** F15 (T,D) S England 6-11-6	T Midgley (3)
8	/PP-40	**SHANTOU LUCKY** 23 (T,D) J Bedi 7-11-3	A Doyle
9	00-605	**JYSUIS** 13 S G West 5-10-13	B Lynn
10	45P-33	**GAME BEAAA** 23 (T) D Bourke 7-10-9	D Johnston
11	0632P-	**WILLY NILLY** 305 Miss L Harrison 7-10-3	P J Kavanagh

Betting: 9-4 Global Esteem, 4-1 Just Dottie, 9-2 Trailblazer, 7-1 Game Beaaa, 10-1 No Recollection, 12-1 Ve Day, 14-1 others

Stratford

Going: good-good to firm in places — **Racing TV**

Rob Wright's tips: 1.30 Gambie Tiep **2.00** Bathgate **2.30** Unwanted Attention **3.00** Mill Street **3.30** Flighttothestars **4.00 Doctor Parnassus** (nb) **4.30** Absolutely Fine **5.00** Inspector Lynley

1.30 ESME, ELLIE, MYLA & HARVEY ALLSOPP HANDICAP CHASE £4,040: 2M 3F (12)

1	1P11-0	**MYSTIC MAN** 40 (P,BF) Harry Derham 7-12-0	B Bromley (5)
2	1101/P	**WHO'S THE GUV'NOR** 30 (T,D) M Hammond 10-11-11	B Hughes
3	2P2-P0	**BLAZE A TRAIL** 25 (P,CD) J & R Flint 10-11-7	C Brace
4	4654-3	**GAMBIE TIEP** 25 (D) B Pauling 8-11-7	L Harrison
5	56-P3P	**FLOATING ROCK** 25 (P) M Gates 9-11-7	Doubtful
6	56-44P	**ADMIRAL'S SUNSET** 12 (V,CD) D Weston 11-11-0	James Davies
7	225-36	**GO FOX** 42 (P,C) N King 9-10-4	J Quinlan
8	3446-4	**CONCEAL** 33 (P) Billy Aprahamian 9-10-4	K Brogan
9	5/0P-6	**FROMPOSTTOPILLAR** 23 (T) T R Gretton 6-10-4	A Wedge
10	45P-00	**BUCK OF MAINE** 16 (B) P & M Bowen 5-10-2	S Bowen
11	-65426	**INVINCIBLE WISH** 7 S-J Davies 12-10-2	J Best
12	4PP-55	**LONIMOSS BARELIERE** 25 (B,T) B Summers 8-10-2	P Armson (3)

Betting: 3-1 Gambie Tiep, 7-2 Mystic Man, 5-1 Go Fox, 6-1 Conceal, 10-1 Blaze A Trail, Admiral's Sunset, 12-1 Who's The Guv'nor, 16-1 Buck Of Maine

2.00 M & M 60TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY CONDITIONAL JOCKEYS' HANDICAP HURDLE £3,776: 2M 3F (11)

1	25356-	**JUST THE MAN** 167 J G O'Shea 8-12-0	J Turner (3)
2	/4245-	**EAGLE'S REALM** F116 (T,CD) D Killahena & G McPherson 6-11-11	N Slatter
3	1PPP6-	**PAK ARMY** F60 (P,T,C) Daisy Hitchins 9-11-10	Beau Morgan
4	213-22	**STAR LEGEND** F17 (P,BF) James Owen 5-11-10	C Maggs (5)
5	2PPP-0	**FENNA'S LOSS** 59 (T) Stephen Allen 7-11-10	Tabitha Worsley
6	/05-34	**BEHOLDEN** 42 (V,D) J Snowden 8-11-7	W Featherstone (10)
7	0043-0	**BATHGATE** 16 P Kirby 4-11-2	J Williamson
8	0/0-40	**OUTBACK FRONTIERS** 32 J G O'Shea 8-10-2	C Quinn
9	524-30	**QUEEN OF STEEL** 19 M Usher 4-10-2	Isabelle Ryder (7)
10	540-P0	**DRAGONBALL PRINCE** 13 (B) O Greenall & J Guerriero 4-10-2	Toby Wynne (3)
11	56PP-0	**WHITEHALL FLYER** 51 (H) M Young 6-10-2	T Durrell

Betting: 9-4 Star Legend, 4-1 Pak Army, 5-1 Eagle's Realm, 8-1 Queen Of Steel, Just The Man, Beholden, 14-1 Fenna's Loss, 16-1 Outback Frontiers

2.30 BARBARA SHEPHERD 80TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION HANDICAP CHASE £4,040: 2M 7F (13)

1	0/54-2	**GENTLE CONNECTIONS** 36 D Skelton 7-12-0	H Skelton
2	0PP-40	**AVIEWTOSEA** 16 (T,D) D Killahena & G McPherson 9-11-9	K Woods
3	63P-1P	**DUSKY DAYS** 26 (P,BF,C) J Snowden 7-11-9	G Sheehan
4	511-54	**INGENNIO** 16 (T) M Hammond 6-11-9	B Hughes
5	2221-1	**COCONUT TWIST** 46 (P) Daisy Hitchins 6-11-4	H Reed
6	P52-20	**HOBIE** 43 (P,BF) David Dennis 7-11-0	T Bellamy
7	05P-0P	**CHABADATIKA** 46 (P) S Hosie 5-10-13	T Cannon
8	5P-312	**UNWANTED ATTENTION** 16 (P,T,BF) R Potter 6-10-10	S Bowen
9	/5P-62	**HOLLINGTON** 23 T Easterby 7-10-9	J Hamilton
10	R0-455	**PLAY BY THE RULES** 21 (P,T) N Hawke 5-10-6	D Noonan
11	20-066	**WE GOT YOUR BACK** 23 L Morgan 6-10-5	A Wedge
12	050-P0	**BUTO** 29 (P,T) M Hammond 7-10-2	J Williamson (3)
13	0000P/	**STUNSAIL** 906 (H) J Tickle 8-10-2	L Harrison

Betting: 11-4 Gentle Connections, 4-1 Coconut Twist, 9-2 Unwanted Attention, 8-1 Dusky Days, 10-1 Hollington, 12-1 others

3.00 MALCOM WHEELER 70TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION JUVENILE HURDLE £4,357: 2M (8)

1	1	**PLAY PRETEND** 30 Dave Roberts 11-7	L Edwards
2		**BATTLE OF OMDURMAN** F20 Deborah Cole 11-0	C Ward (3)
3	3	**KALKAROO** 30 Billy Aprahamian 11-0	G Sheehan
4	2	**MILL STREET** 19 (BF) B Pauling 11-0	B R Jones
5		**ROGUE KING** F14 (V) James Owen 11-0	Lilly Pinchin
6	6	**HAPPY PLACE** 30 D Skelton 10-7	H Skelton
7		**MASONBROOK MEADOW** F44 Seamus Mullins 10-7	M G Nolan
8	03	**SCOTTIE'S SISTER** 19 N Twiston-Davies 10-7	S Twiston-Davies

Betting: 9-4 Mill Street, 3-1 Play Pretend, 7-1 Scottie's Sister, Kalkaroo, Rogue King, 10-1 Happy Place, 12-1 others

3.30 JEBBO BECOMES A SEPTUAGENARIAN 'NATIONAL HUNT' MAIDEN HURDLE £4,357: 2M (14)

1	00/00-	**CONNOLLY** 134 S-J Davies 6-11-4	J Best
2	04-032	**ELECTRIC EDDY** 13 (BF) N Twiston-Davies 6-11-4	S Twiston-Davies
3	F0500-	**GREENWAYS** 173 D F Davis 5-11-4	B Ffrench-Davis (5)
4	00-	**HELPFUL** 318 (H,T) B Summers 5-11-4	P Armson (3)
5	4240-2	**R S AMBUSH** 21 (P,BF) Dr R Newland & J Insole 5-11-4	L Edwards
6	00-664	**TIMEFORARUM** 16 B Eckley 6-11-4	C Ring
7	406-62	**DON RAFAEL** 29 M Keighley 4-11-0	S Bowen
8	6	**EL BATTLE BUS** 64 (H) D McCain 4-11-0	B Hughes
9	40-03	**GOLDEN MOONSHAKE** 26 (T) N Hawke 4-11-0	D Noonan
10	/00-54	**BELLE MONTROSE** 30 (T) S Drinkwater 5-10-11	A Wedge
11	3F4-56	**RUNAWAY BRIDE** 26 (T) David Dennis 5-10-11	T Bellamy
12	40-653	**FLIGHTTOTHESTARS** 26 (T) L Horsfall 4-10-7	K Brogan
13	560-	**OCEAN FRONTIER** 80 R J Price 4-10-7	B Poste
14	4-56	**1PORRIDGE** 40 Tracey Leeson 4-10-7	Harriet Tucker (7)

Betting: 15-8 R S Ambush, 3-1 Don Rafael, 4-1 Electric Eddy, 8-1 Flighttothestars, 10-1 Timeforarum, Belle Montrose, 16-1 others

4.00 BARRY THE BUTCHER RAISE THE STEAKS HANDICAP HURDLE £7,209: 2M 3F (8)

1	1100-0	**EVERYONESGAME** 37 (D) E Lavelle 7-12-0	T Bellamy
2	061-22	**FINEST VIEW** 9 (C) A King 7-11-4	T Cannon
3	1103-2	**SONGO** 55 (H) R G Hawker 8-11-3	H Cobden
4	520P-4	**FINISK RIVER** 46 (P,T) D McCain 11-11-0	B Hughes
5	P0/04-	**DOCTOR PARNASSUS** 175 (D) D Skelton 6-10-12	H Skelton
6	/613P-	**RAKHINE STATE** 266 (CD) D J Jeffreys 11-10-7	K Woods
7	242P-0	**JEEPYDOFF MEEL** 16 (D) P Kirby 6-10-6	J Williamson (3)
8	345-1U	**SIX AND OUT** 26 (CD) D Weston 6-10-4	James Davies

Betting: 9-4 Finest View, 3-1 Six And Out, 4-1 Songo, 13-2 Doctor Parnassus, 8-1 Rakhine State, 12-1 Everyonesgame, 16-1 others

4.30 UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS BIRMINGHAM CHARITY NOVICES' LIMITED HANDICAP HURDLE (DIV 1) £2,640: 2M 6F (11)

1	4406-3	**PRAIRIE DIAMOND** 45 (H) M Keighley 5-11-12	S Bowen
2	000-00	**JASSUR DES BROSSES** 23 M Murphy & M Keady 5-11-9	S Twiston-Davies
3	604-56	**TIQUE** 16 (P) Seamus Mullins 5-11-9	D Sansom (3)
4	556-02	**NO MORE BOLERO** 19 (P) D Bridgwater 5-11-6	B J Powell
5	0600-	**ABSOLUTELY FINE** 113 D Skelton 5-11-2	H Skelton
6	5-0556	**LARKFIELD LUSIVE** 10 (V) L Morgan 5-11-1	J Kington
7	0-3504	**MY GIRL KATIE** 16 (P) G Harris 7-11-1	C Ring
8	P505-P	**JAUNTY BELLE** 39 (P,T) D Rees 6-11-0	Mr C Pritchard (7)
9	0-51P0	**ERIC CARMEN** 29 G Hanmer 8-10-11	James Davies
10	P5P-10	**NO MORE NO** 32 (T,V,CD) Mrs L Hill 5-10-11	R Patrick
11	6/0P-1	**HAMMER DAN** 30 (T) D Pipe 6-10-9	J Tudor

Betting: 3-1 Absolutely Fine, 9-2 No More Bolero, Hammer Dan, 13-2 Prairie Diamond, 8-1 Larkfield Lusive, 10-1 My Girl Katie, 12-1 others

5.00 UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS BIRMINGHAM CHARITY NOVICES' LIMITED HANDICAP HURDLE (DIV 2) £2,640: 2M 6F (11)

1	450-6U	**BORDERLINE** 13 (H,T) J Scott 6-11-12	L Williams
2	6P4-32	**MOUNTAIN BAY** 42 (P) Seamus Mullins 5-11-10	M G Nolan
3	42-P14	**HUGUENEAU** 13 (T) D Skelton 7-11-9	Mr B Sutton (7)
4	0664-0	**DEADLOCK** F13 (B) A Ralph 5-11-4	Mr Murray Dodd (7)
5	5/0U0-	**ARTHALOT** F70 (T) R L Llewellyn 7-11-3	L Harrison
6	3PP-F5	**SWEARER** 45 (P,T) J Tickle 8-11-2	B Carver
7	P0-444	**JOKER DU CHENET** 13 (P,T) James Owen 5-11-1	Lilly Pinchin
8	005-40	**FIXED WING** 23 (T) D Killahena & G McPherson 6-11-0	K Woods
9	45P-23	**INSPECTOR LYNLEY** 13 (P) N Mulholland 7-10-12	S Twiston-Davies
10	50P-16	**ETOILE BRILLANTE** 30 M Wigham 6-10-10	C Deutsch
11	0/F-00	**NIPPIN N POPPIN** 36 Dave Roberts 7-10-8	L Edwards

Betting: 3-1 Mountain Bay, 4-1 Inspector Lynley, 9-2 Joker Du Chenet, 6-1 Huguenneau, 8-1 Borderline, 10-1 Deadlock, 14-1 Etoile Brillante, 16-1 Arthalot

Results

CRICKET

Vitality Blast: South group
Sussex Sharks v Essex Eagles

Hove (Essex won toss): *Essex (2pts) beat Sussex by five wickets*

Sussex Sharks	(balls)	
H D Ward c Elgar b Snater	15	(12)
D P Hughes st Rossington b Critchley	81	(43)
T G R Clark not out	72	(53)
T P Alsop not out	27	(14)
Extras (lb 5, w 3, nb 4)	12	
Total (2 wkts, 20 overs)	**207**	

J M Coles, †J A Simpson, D J Lamb, N J McAndrew, J J Carson, O E Robinson and *T S Mills did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-34 2-144.
Bowling Harmer 4-0-36-0; Cook 4-0-47-0; Bosch 3-0-27-0; Snater 4-0-43-1; Walter 3-0-29-0; Critchley 2-0-20-1.

Essex Eagles	(balls)	
†A M Rossington c Clark b Robinson	2	(2)
D Elgar b Mills	11	(13)
M S Pepper not out	120	(53)
R J Das c Simpson b Robinson	6	(4)
P I Walter c Hughes b Robinson	0	(1)
M J J Critchley c Carson b McAndrew	13	(13)
C W J Allison not out	44	(26)
Extras (b 8, w 5, nb 2)	15	
Total (5 wkts, 18.3 overs)	**211**	

*S R Harmer, E Bosch, S Snater and S J Cook did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-2 2-30 3-53 4-53 5-90.
Bowling Robinson 4-0-27-3; Coles 3-0-43-0; Mills 4-0-32-1; McAndrew 3-0-36-1; Lamb 3.3-0-45-0; Carson 1-0-20-0.

Fourth women's T20i
England v New Zealand

Kia Oval (NZ won toss): *England beat New Zealand by seven wickets*

New Zealand	(balls)	
S W Bates b Ecclestone	16	(21)
G E Plimmer b Glenn	17	(21)
A C Kerr c Capsey b Glenn	0	(2)
*S F M Devine b Gibson	5	(6)
B M Halliday c Gibson b Ecclestone	3	(8)
M L Green c Gibson b Glenn	24	(25)
†I C Gaze run out	25	(24)
J M Kerr b Glenn	1	(3)
L M Tahuhu not out	9	(10)
Extras (b 1, w 2)	3	
Total (8 wkts, 20 overs)	**103**	

E J Carson and F C Jonas did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-33 2-33 3-40 4-42 5-52 6-80 7-82 8-103.
Bowling Sciver-Brunt 2-0-11-0; Bell 3-0-24-0; Smith 4-0-25-0; Ecclestone 4-0-16-2; Glenn 4-0-19-4; Gibson 3-0-7-1.

England	(balls)	
D N Wyatt c Jonas b Carson	26	(21)
S I R Dunkley c Bates b Tahuhu	26	(16)
A R Capsey b A Kerr	9	(7)
N R Sciver-Brunt not out	17	(12)
*H C Knight not out	14	(14)
Extras (b 4, w 7, nb 1)	12	
Total (3 wkts, 11.3 overs)	**104**	

†A E Jones, D R Gibson, S Ecclestone, S Glenn, L C N Smith and L K Bell did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-54 2-73 3-73.
Bowling Jonas 2-0-16-0; Tahuhu 2-0-21-1; J Kerr 2-0-18-0; Devine 1-0-11-0; A Kerr 2.3-0-23-1; Carson 2-0-11-1.
● England lead five-match series 4-0

FOOTBALL

Scottish Premier Sports Cup:
Group A Dumbarton 1 East Kilbride 1 (East Kilbride win 4-2 on pens); Queen of South 0 Aberdeen 3. **Group B** Falkirk 2 Dundee Utd 0; Stenhousemuir 4 Buckie 0. **Group C** Elgin 0 Hibernian 5; Peterhead 0 Queen's Park 5. **Group D** Annan 1 Inverness 0; Bonnyrigg 1 Dundee 7. **Group E** Forfar 0 Livingston 2; Spartans 0 Dunfermline 3. **Group F** Brechin 1 St Johnstone 2; East Fife 3 Morton 0. **Group G** Motherwell 3 Edinburgh 0; Partick 3 Montrose 2. **Group H** Stirling Albion 0 Raith 3; Stranraer 1 Ross County 3.

GOLF

DP World Tour Genesis Scottish Open (Renaissance Club, North Berwick): **Leaders after three rounds: 193** L Aaberg (Swe) 64 64 65. **195** R MacIntyre (Scot) 67 65 63. **196** A Scott (Aus) 67 65 64. **197** Im Sung-jae (S Kor) 63 67 67, A Rozner (Fr) 65 64 68, C Morikawa (US) 65 66 66, S Theegala (US) 66 65 66. **198** E van Rooyen (SA) 67 67 64, M Manassero (It) 67 63 68, R McIlroy (N Ire) 65 66 67.
Women's Amundi Évian Championship (Évian-les-Bains): **Leaders after three rounds: 199** S Kyriacou (Aus) 66 66 67. **200** A Furue (Japan) 65 65 70, L Coughlin (US) 65 70 65. **203** P Anannarukarn (Tha) 67 69 67. **204** A Ewing (US) 70 70 64, Choi Hye-jin (S Kor) 65 68 71, P Tavatanakit (Tha) 64 68 72.
Selected: 207 G Hall 69 67 71.

RUGBY LEAGUE

Betfred Super League Catlans Dragons 20 Salford 0; Hull 10 Hull KR 24; Leigh 20 Huddersfield 16.
Betfred Championship Whitehaven 24 Toulouse 34.

TENNIS

All-England Championships (Wimbledon; seeds in brackets):
Finals: Men: Doubles H Heliovaara (Fin) and H Patten (GB) bt (15) M Purcell (Aus) and J Thompson (Aus) 6-7 (7-9) 7-6 (10-8) 7-6 (11-9). **Women: Singles** (31) B Krejcikova (Cz) bt (7) J Paolini (It) 6-2 2-6 6-4. **Doubles** (4) K Siniakova (Cz) and T Townsend (US) lead (2) G Dabrowski (Can) and E Routliffe (NZ) 7-6 (7-5) 2-3.

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHERS BRADLEY ORMESHER/JACK HILL; MARK PAIN/ALAMY LIVE NEWS



> It fell in the perfect spot – after that it was just insinct
> **Jude Bellingham**

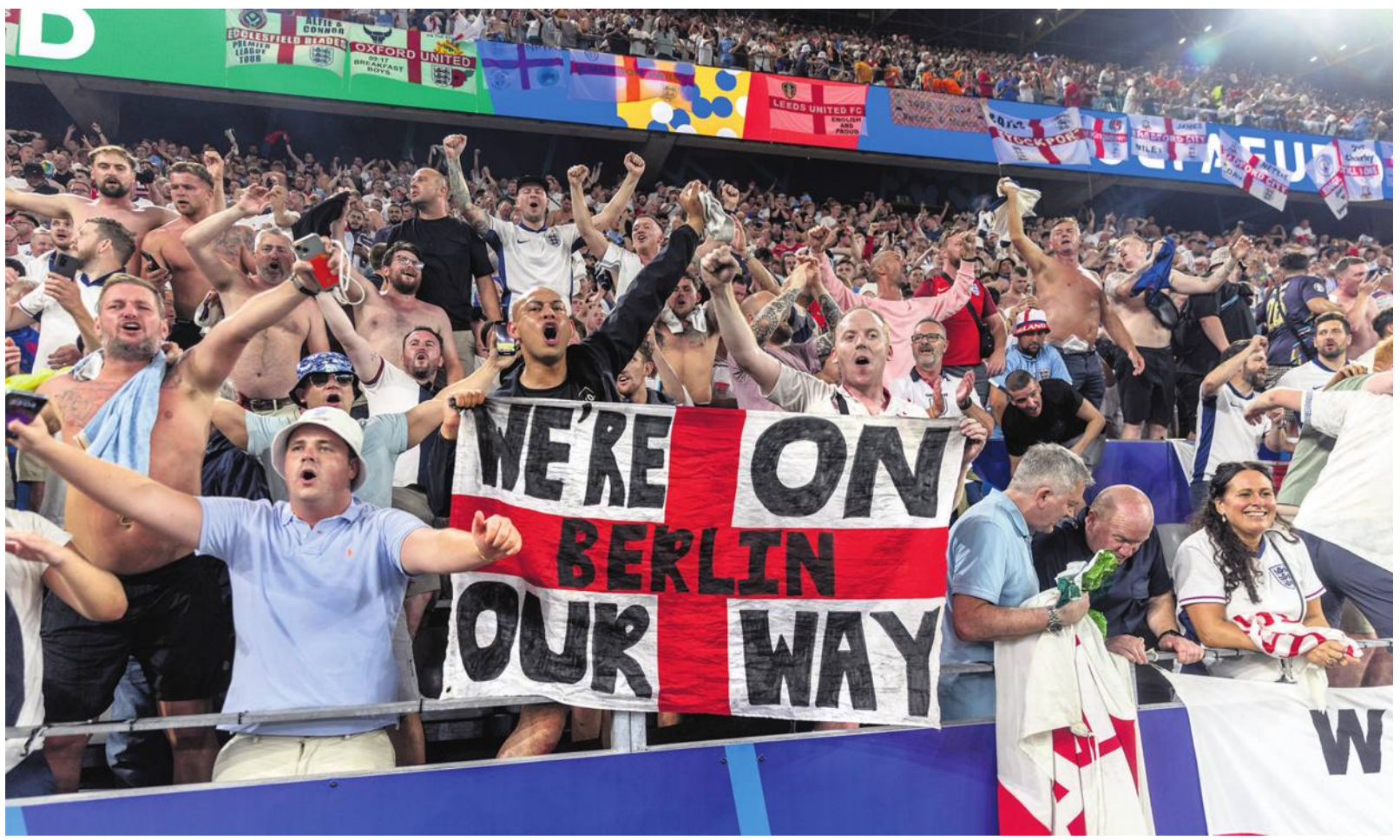






> You fail once, then you have a choice if you want to try again – I did
> **Bukayo Saka**

Jude Bellingham's goal against Slovakia; Bellingham and Trent Alexander-Arnold against Serbia, left, Jordan Pickford saves a Swiss penalty, centre, Bukayo Saka celebrates scoring one, right; England fans rejoice in getting to the final, below



> I always believe I'll save at least one penalty in every shoot-out
> **Jordan Pickford**

> Encouraging you to win without the need for last-minute drama
> **King Charles**

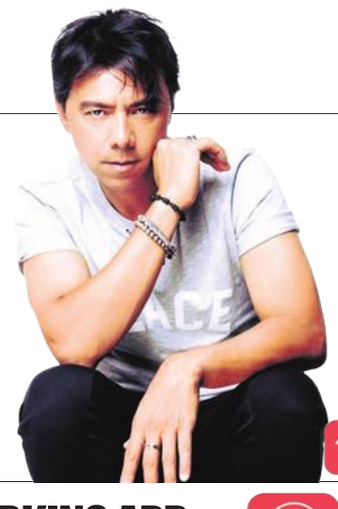
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THE SUNDAY TIMES

BUSINES &MONEY



MILAN'S LOW-TAX DOLCE VITA
PAGE 2



POP STAR TURNS CORPORATE FIXER
PAGE 6

PARKING APP RIP-OFFS
MONEY
PAGE 9



Labour mulls plan to hire 100,000 railworkers as staffing crisis looms

Oliver Gill

Labour is considering the recruitment of 100,000 new rail and transport workers to address a "retirement cliff-edge" that risks leaving the sector without enough staff to run services.

Draft summary findings of a Labour-commissioned external review, seen by The Sunday Times, propose that "an ambitious target for the number of jobs created in our rail and transport industry, to be increased by as much as 100,000 over the next decade, should be set".

The Rail and Urban Transport Review is being conducted by former Siemens UK chief executive Juergen Maier on behalf of Labour. Although not an official government review, the findings are expected to play a pivotal role in shaping future transport policy.

Maier and his team shared their initial findings with rail bosses and consultants last week, according to Whitehall and industry sources. The review has not been finalised and recommendations will be made in a final report later this year, they added.

It is understood that Maier's interim findings have been influenced by warnings from not-for-profit industry body the National Skills Academy for Rail. The NSAR has said that the rail industry "needs to find ways to respond to skills shortages".

The body's chief executive, Neil Robertson, wrote in 2022: "An ageing labour force is leading to a retirement cliff-edge. Nearly 50,000 rail industry employees are expected to retire by 2030.

"When these workers are replaced, it is often with an older person – the proportion of under 25-year-olds in the rail industry has halved since 2016, from 10 per cent to 5 per cent of the workforce."

The average retirement age of a railway worker is 60 to 65, although some Network Rail staff can draw their pension at 55. The average age of railway workers is 45, according to the NSAR.

Other draft recommendations in the review include setting targets for the use of "public transport, walking and cycling".

Labour is already proposing sweeping reforms to the railways, such as nationalising train operators and disbanding Network Rail, the quango that owns Britain's rail infrastructure.

Plans to deliver upgrades to the rail network have been thrown into doubt, however, as chancellor Rachel Reeves refused to commit to Conservative spending pledges across northern England.

"We're looking at everything that the previous government announced to make sure the money is there," she told The Yorkshire Post.

Network Rail last week lost its chairman Lord (Peter) Hendy, who stepped down to be transport minister within Sir Keir Starmer's government. Mike Putnam, the former chief executive of the UK arm of Swedish construction firm Skanska, has been appointed interim chairman of Network Rail, it can be revealed.



Jeff Fairburn left Persimmon when his £75m bonus sparked an outcry

Fairburn comeback hit by accounts crisis

- Ex-Persimmon chief's new venture finds £43m black hole
- Delays repaying taxpayer for cladding fix
- Co-owner Elliott backs firm despite spiralling losses

Oliver Gill

The lossmaking housebuilder run by Jeff Fairburn, the executive scorned over his bonus at Persimmon, has revealed a black hole in its accounts and is negotiating to delay repayment of £68 million of taxpayer funds used to fix potentially fatal Grenfell Tower-style cladding.

Fairburn bought a 50 per cent stake in developer Berkeley De Veer, which took over Avant Homes in 2021 in a leveraged buyout alongside Wall Street investor Elliot after quitting Persimmon following a pay row about his "unfathomable" £75 million bonus.

It grew rapidly, but has now revealed major accounting mis-statements under previous management. The accounts for the parent company, Viva Midco, warn of a "material uncertainty" over the group's "ability to continue as a going concern".

Fairburn and chief finance officer Richard Stenhouse said that the accounting errors prior to their arrival had resulted in "a material overstatement of the trading performance of the Avant Group in the periods to April 30, 2021".

Over six pages, the accounts detail errors including how costs were "not reviewed or scrutinised sufficiently, resulting in an overstatement of [profit] margin" and "significant errors and omissions" in the cost of completing housing developments.

The company's financial situation emerged little more than a week after reports that Avant had approached FTSE 250 housebuilder Crest Nicholson to merge their businesses. Under the mooted deal, Avant shareholders would own 30 per cent of the combined company. Crest, however, agreed last week to a merger with FTSE 100 rival Bellway instead.

The accounts highlight the £68 million bill it faces to repay the government's Building Safety Fund – the taxpayer-funded pool set up after the Grenfell Tower disaster to pay for external cladding to be made safe against the risk of fire. The bill has ballooned from the £17 million earmarked a year earlier.

The company said it was preparing to apply to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to "enter into a payment plan" for that, instead of repaying it in one go.

The remediation is mainly for high-rise blocks built by its previous management. Avant now focuses on building houses.

Bosses said that they met the Conservative government's criteria to enter into a payment plan, and the chance of not gaining approval is "remote".

However, the accounts say: "Given the material size of the payment applications to be levied on the company, the failure to achieve this [payment plan] constitutes a material uncertainty over the group's ability to continue as a going concern."

They reveal that the company has huge debts and made a pre-tax loss of £109 million on revenues of £500 million in the year to June 30, 2023.

£68m
The money owed by Avant Homes for the fixing of Grenfell-style cladding

£131m
Interest costs over two years on shareholder loan

A group of four lenders agreed to a forbearance deal last month on a £250 million loan. The accounts highlighted the risk that, should trading worsen, the company may need to ask for additional leniency from its banks.

Failure to agree a payment plan over the cladding fire safety costs also threatens the housebuilder's ability to continue trading as a "going concern", the accounts warn.

A further £2.8 million emergency loan, originally due to be repaid in March last year, is now being rolled over on a monthly basis with interest charged at more than 15 per cent.

The group also has a £384 million loan from Elliott, which is accruing interest at 17 per cent. The interest is being added to the loan rather than being paid in cash, meaning the total has ballooned to £515 million in just two years.

Fairburn has grown Avant into one of the UK's biggest regional housebuilders, with significant developments across Yorkshire, northeast England, the Midlands and Scotland.

> **There is a material uncertainty over the group's ability to continue as a going concern**

It sold 1,766 homes in the year to June 2023, a 16 per cent fall on the previous 12 months. Difficulties in obtaining planning consent and cash-strapped buyers are thought to be behind the decline. A spokesman for the company said that Avant had delivered a further 1,700 houses in the year to June 2024.

Fairburn sparked outcry in 2018 when, as Persimmon chief executive, he was paid a £75 million bonus for hitting share price targets that were largely driven by the government's Help-to-Buy programme. Dominic Raab, the housing minister at the time, blasted the payout as "unfathomable".

Given the scale of Avant's financial difficulties, audit costs rose to £600,000 for the year to the end of June 2023 against £469,000 for the prior period.

Avant's highest-paid director, believed to be Fairburn, was paid £601,000, a 29 per cent like-for-like increase in remuneration.

As well as its accounting issues, Avant has also been grappling with quality problems. Its rating with the National New Homes Customer Satisfaction Survey dropped from five stars when Fairburn took over in 2021 to three last autumn, although it has since partially recovered to four-stars.

A spokesperson said that the company's satisfaction rating is now "trending at five stars".

They added that the company was in talks with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government over its cladding remediation bill "like many other home builders".

"Avant's management team, with the full support of Avant's majority shareholder, Elliott, remains focused on delivering quality, affordable new houses which make the possibility of home ownership a reality for many more people across the Midlands and north of the UK," the spokesperson said.

Elliott declined to comment.

Boden quits Starling Bank to focus on AI

Jill Treanor

Anne Boden, the outspoken founder of Starling, the digital bank, has stepped down from the board to focus on developing a new artificial intelligence business.

The Welsh-born entrepreneur founded the app-based bank ten years ago and stunned the City when she stepped down as chief executive last year. She had remained as director until the end of June, when she quit.

Boden, 64, declined to comment but is a shareholder in the bank with a stake said to be just under 5 per cent.

She appears to be working on an AI business through a company called AI By Boden. She has also written two books, one on setting up the bank and another on women entrepreneurs.

A computer scientist by background, Boden had a 30-year career in the banking sector, working at Royal Bank of Scotland and Allied Irish Bank, before having the idea for a digital-only bank in 2014.

Starling has had plans for a stock market flotation, but the timing is unclear given her successor, Raman Bhatia, arrived only last month from the energy business OVO.

Starling was valued at £2.5 billion in 2022, although one of its largest investors, Chrysalis, has said it could be worth £10 billion in the future. It made a profit of £301 million in the year to March, up 55 per cent on a year earlier and is seeking growth by selling its IT expertise to other banks. The annual report said Boden wanted to "focus on other interests", but that she would "remain a key shareholder closely engaged with Starling's plans" and that her role in "Starling's success cannot be overstated".



Starling founder Boden

EDF seeks backers to fund £5bn nuke cost

Jon Yeomans

The French state-owned energy giant EDF is seeking new investors to raise the billions in extra funding needed to complete Britain's new nuclear power station, Hinkley Point C.

Industry sources said the Somerset project requires up to £5 billion more.

EDF said in January that the first reactor at the plant would not start up until 2029, much later than planned, and its total cost would be £46 billion, up from an original £20 billion estimate.

Cost overruns at Hinkley have been compounded by the refusal of its minority owner, CGN of China, to put in more money, after it was banned from Britain's nuclear sector over political concerns. EDF has declined to put a figure on the size of the funding gap, but Stuart Crooks, EDF's managing director on the project, said: "We are actively looking for investors into the project to support and mitigate this cash requirement.

"From my point of view, every month I request cash from the shareholders and cash appears. From a shareholder point of view, EDF would like to find some partners to replace the CGN contribution. And the sooner they find them, the better."

Inside Hinkley Point, page 4

Watchdog investigates Thames over drinking water security

Jon Yeomans

Embattled Thames Water is being investigated by the UK drinking-water watchdog over alleged security issues at its sites.

The government-backed Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) wrote to Thames at the start of this month warning that it would impose two "enforcement orders" on the company. These will compel it to upgrade some of its assets in work that could last from 2025 to 2040.

The inspectorate's orders concern "alleged contraventions by the company relating to the physical security of its assets", according to Thames's annual report, released last week.

It said Thames was potentially in breach of legal obligations to maintain a healthy water supply in the interests of national security, and to "mitigate the effects of any civil emergency which may occur".

The inspectorate, which is responsible for upholding the quality of Britain's drinking water and can fine companies up to 10 per cent of their revenue, stopped short of imposing a financial penalty on Thames. However, the water giant said it was too soon to calculate the "possible future financial consequences of the investigation", or whether the work demanded by the inspectorate was already covered by its five-year business plan, for the period to 2030.

Thames, which has until next month to challenge the enforcement orders, declined to comment.

The investigation, and its potential cost, is more unwelcome news for the heavily indebted Thames, which warned last week that it has enough cash to fund its operations only until next May.

Last week the water regulator, Ofwat, deemed Thames's five-year business plan "inadequate" and rejected its demands for bill hikes of up to 44 per cent.

TAKING IT EASY

From dual shares to Spacs, listing rules are being relaxed to entice more firms to float in London. *Jill Treanor* reports

TWO TIERS BECOME ONE



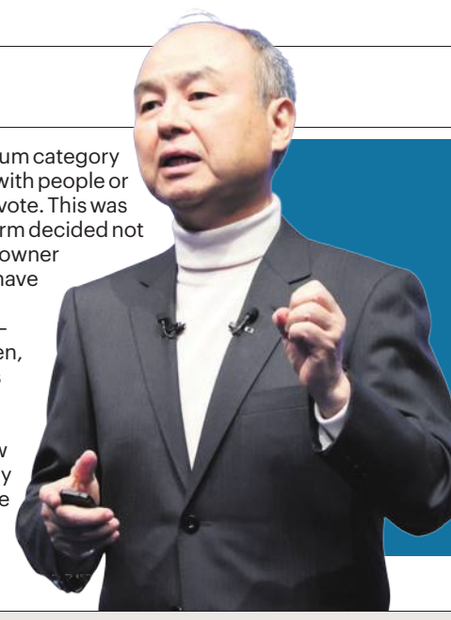
Thud. That's the sound of the Financial Conduct Authority's new rules for companies wanting to list on the stock exchange arriving on desks across the City. Running to more than 500 pages, they are described as the biggest overhaul in three decades, and are designed to make London more attractive for business listings.

With big floats going elsewhere in recent years, and companies switching their listings to rival exchanges such as New York, **Sarah Pritchard**, the FCA executive responsible for the changes, said the aim was to create a "simplified regime — one that maintains high standards, compares well internationally and looks to boost UK stock markets".

So what are the key changes? First of all, the FCA wants to unite the two categories of floating on the stock exchange: the premium listing, which has the toughest rules and allows entry to indices such as the FTSE 100; and the standard listing, which has been regarded as less onerous.

"The complexity of the two categories, with two different requirements, was not very well understood," Pritchard said.

LONDON WILL COME TO THE PARTY



Under the old system, businesses listing in the premium category had to put big "related-party transactions" — dealings with people or firms associated with the company — to a shareholder vote. This was one reason why the Cambridge-based chip designer Arm decided not to list in London when it was being sold by its Japanese owner SoftBank, run by **Masayoshi Son**. Arm feared it would have to report on its many deals with SoftBank.

The FCA's reforms have removed this requirement — although some investors are not happy about it. Railpen, one of the country's biggest pension funds, said it was "deeply disappointed" that investors were losing their voice on related-party transactions.

The City watchdog argues that the change will allow shareholders to have an "increased focus" on company strategies and director appointments. Votes will still be needed on reverse takeovers or any plan to delist shares.

City dealmakers head for the tax havens of Milan

As the UK eyes new taxes on the super rich, Italy is wooing high-rollers. By *Jim Armitage* and *James Imam*



With its grand, columned bar, saltwater swimming pool and a restaurant terrace overlooking one of the city's few green parks, Casa Cipriani Milano is the latest symbol of Milan's rise as an international hub for business.

The private members' club, where annual subscriptions start at €3,000 (£2,500), was opened in 2022 in an elegant 19th-century palazzo by two great-granddaughters of Giuseppe Cipriani, founder of the famous Harry's Bar in Venice.

But for all its Italian heritage, you could easily be in Mayfair. Bankers, lawyers and insurance types sit in huddles at coffee tables in a sumptuous hall decked in walnut and marble, chatting – many in English – over morning croissants and international newspapers.

As co-founder Anna Pittini Cipriani put it, her inspiration was entirely the English club look: "That was the model."

Cipriani's launch could not have been better timed. In its London equivalents, haunts such as 5 Hertford Street and Annabel's, the chat among the wealthy set is all about whether it's time to quit the UK for lower taxes elsewhere.

Milan, with its sizeable financial centre and proximity to the Alps, the lakes and the rolling hills of Tuscany, is seen as an attractive option. Not just because it is near some of the most beautiful scenery in Europe, but also thanks to a new set of tax laws in Italy aggressively aimed at getting rich people to relocate and invest there. The city is enjoying a renaissance. Thousands of Italian exiles have returned, and wealthy people have moved in from areas as far afield as the Middle East, South America and Britain.

Now, with Sir Keir Starmer's government set to accelerate the end of the "non-dom" tax status for rich foreign people in Britain, Milan has high hopes of attracting more.

Arriving in the city last week on a glorious, sunny day from cold, rainy England, you can see why.

Ben, a former UK non-dom in his fifties, left London in 2020 for a job in the new CityLife district, a tract of land just outside the old town that hosts office skyscrapers, new apartments and shops. Parts of it are still a building site. In a coffee bar sheltered from the 35C sunshine, Ben explained that, having had a financial career across Asia, Europe and London, he had been offered a role setting up a new financial business in Milan. "It's been great," he said. "The city feels international, the job is fun, and at weekends, everyone goes skiing or hits the beach."

Thanks to Italy's generous incentives for new arrivals, he pays an effective tax rate of just 15 per cent on his earnings there. On his foreign assets – tax-free when he was a UK-based non-dom – he pays a 0.5 per cent "wealth tax".

Italy has another big tax perk tempting UK-based non-doms to up sticks and move there. For a flat fee of €100,000 a year, all their non-Italian income – such as rents from foreign properties, and interest from overseas investments – is tax-free. Even inheritance tax is included.

As the British government has pledged to abolish non-dom status altogether, that looks particularly attractive.

For those masters of the universe working in private equity, the Italian system also offers big benefits. Private equity executives are largely paid in the form of "carried interest" – profits on stakes they hold in the funds they manage. In the UK, this has been taxed at the capital gains tax rate of 28 per cent rather than the 45 per cent most of them would pay in income tax. But the government is looking to end that "loophole", as well. Not so Italy, where "carry" is taxed at a similar low rate.

€100,000

By paying this flat fee, non-doms can avoid paying tax on all of their non-Italian income

3,635

people had moved to Italy by 2022 to take advantage of this "flat tax" scheme, introduced in 2017

One private equity head said his teams now think twice about moving to London. "London is great, but since it became clear that Labour was going to win the election, people are not necessarily keen on moving to the UK. They'd rather try somewhere like Milan instead."

Introduced in 2017, Italy's new tax rules were devised by former prime minister Matteo Renzi. One of his advisers was tax lawyer Antonio Tomassini. Tall and bronzed in a sharp, pinstriped suit, he is straight out of Giorgio Armani central casting.

In his office at DLA Piper near Milan's stock exchange, a district of formal Mussolini-era architecture, he explained: "We were wanting to attract human capital. We wanted to attract back some of the one million Italians under 35 who left Italy since 2011, and stimulate investment from rich foreigners."

He added that his phone had been "hot" with calls from dozens of UK-based non-doms. In the past two days, he had, he said, been advising London non-doms from Egypt and Norway on their Italian options. "For the wealthy, the €100,000 is very, convenient, and, frankly, not very much money."

Official figures showed 3,635 people

BUPA. BETTER FOR BUSINESS

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LOOKING AFTER MY GREATEST ASSETS



In this small and busy start-up, having even one team member off work has a big impact. That's why its founder made health cover a priority

When Maria Levitov and her co-founders launched their business, Snow Hill Advisors, two years ago, she was determined to focus on employee health and wellbeing. "We're a tight-knit team, but wellbeing isn't only important to us because we like each other," Levitov says. "It also reflects the reality that what we do is really demanding, so it's crucial to prioritise that sense of work-life balance."

The London-based firm, which has five full-time employees and a network of advisers and consultants, provides strategic communications advice to businesses around the world – often in the fast-moving technology sector. Clients have high expectations, and the team must work across multiple time zones. "There's always going to be a tension between maintaining balance and delivering for our clients," Levitov adds.

Private health and dental insurance for all staff, arranged through Bupa, has proved a valuable asset, Levitov says.

"It feels like a relatively easy way to take some of the mental load off. Dealing with health issues, whether it's you or a member of your family, can be really stressful, so knowing you have this resource available makes an enormous difference."

Some employees have used the cover to secure quick and convenient healthcare for their children. One colleague, a keen cyclist, was able to get speedy treatment and rehabilitation support after a training accident. This is vital in a small business where just one person off work can have a big impact on the team.

The value of the cover was also brought home when a colleague with cancer passed away. "It hit everyone hard," Levitov says. "Health has understandably been on people's minds since then, so having access to support and advice has felt even more important."

The Bupa policy is already aiding recruitment and retention.



MARIA LEVITOV

CO-FOUNDER, SNOW HILL ADVISORS

"EVERYONE HAS TO BE FIGHTING FIT – AND TO FEEL THAT THEY ARE PROPERLY SUPPORTED

"It's definitely really valued by our team members," Levitov says.

Equally, however, she believes that health insurance is not the only piece of the jigsaw; leaders should also play an active role. "As a co-founder of the business, I feel a responsibility to foster a supportive working culture and to lead by example," she says. "If I'm emailing a colleague at 10pm, say, I make it clear that I don't expect them to respond immediately just because I happen to be working."

Advice and support for employers can be an important element of a firm's insurance policy. Bupa offers health, wellbeing and HR resources to help business leaders assemble the building blocks of a positive culture, including policy templates and expert advice.

"If we're going to continue to grow at the rates we've achieved since we launched the business, we're going to need everyone to be fighting fit – and to feel that they are properly supported," Levitov says. "Any help I can get with creating that sort of environment is hugely valuable."

Bupa offers multiple levels of business cover for teams from two to 249 people, giving options to suit your needs and budget. Find out more at bupa.co.uk/sme-explained

HOW BUPA CAN HELP YOUR BUSINESS TO GROW

Bupa SME health insurance gives staff rapid access to GPs and experts in mental health, cancer and more. Its extensive network of specialists and independent professionals provides plenty of options for getting help quickly and close to home.

This support makes a big difference to employees who develop mental or physical health problems, but Bupa insurance can also help them deal with issues before they become serious. For example, telephone helplines give access to professional support and advice.

Other products, for an additional cost, include dental insurance, health assessments to identify issues early, and employee assistance programmes that provide counselling services.

Carwow raises funds from US investor

Oliver Gill

Carwow has tapped one of the world's oldest venture capital firms in a funding round that values the online vehicle marketplace at $320 million (£250 million).

The UK company has secured backing from the San Francisco-based Bessemer Venture Partners, founded in 1911, whose early-stage investments include LinkedIn and Pinterest.

Accel, Balderton, Episode 1 and Vitruvian – all existing shareholders in Carwow – also invested in a funding round of $52 million.

Carwow, founded in 2013, has three divisions: a website where customers can buy cars from 2,400 of the UK's 3,200 franchised dealers; an online auction website for second-hand sales; and print, online and video content.

The London-based company bought Autovia earlier this year, bringing magazine brands such as Auto Express and Evo into its portfolio. The two publications sell 1.2 million print copies a year.

Chief executive John Veichmanis said Carwow's business model was different to that of other online car marketplaces such as Cazoo – which collapsed into bankruptcy earlier this year after floating in New York for $8 billion in 2021.

This is because the primary website acts as an aggregator of dealerships across the UK.

Veichmanis said that sales in the first half of 2024 had risen 56 per cent and the company was now breaking even. Last year, vehicles worth £4.5 billion were sold through its website.

Taxpayer's NatWest stake to go below 20%

Jill Treanor

The taxpayer's stake in NatWest is on course to drop below 20 per cent this week, in the latest sign that the bank can return to private ownership even without a sale of shares to the public.

Former chancellor Jeremy Hunt had aimed to launch a multibillion-pound share offering evoking the "Tell Sid" campaign when Thatcher privatised British Gas in the 1980s.

This was scuppered by the general election and it is not clear if his successor, Rachel Reeves will revive it. The share sale campaign was to be fronted by veteran journalist Sir Trevor McDonald.

The taxpayer stake in NatWest is continuing to fall through a sell-down programme in which shares are sold into the stock market when conditions allow, and also through the bank buying back its own shares from the government.

The government's ownership of NatWest dates back to the 2008 banking crisis, when it took an 83 per cent stake in what was then Royal Bank of Scotland. By the start of this year, that stake stood at 38 per cent, and it has nearly halved in the first six months of the year.

NatWest may be able to accelerate that process as changes to stock market rules, coming into effect this month, mean it can buy back up to 15 per cent of its shares a year. Until now, it has been able to buy back only 5 per cent a year, provided it has the funds available.

In May, the bank bought £1.5 billion of shares – about 4.5 per cent – from the government.

WOOING THE NEXT ZUCKERBERGS



● Another big change involves relaxing the rules on dual-class share structures.

Rarely seen in London, these are typically used by overseas company founders to retain additional voting rights and keep control of their businesses. One example is Facebook founder **Mark Zuckerberg** — the social media giant's dual structure makes it almost impossible for shareholders to remove him.

Until now, the structures have had to be unwound after five years in London on the premium segment, but that is being changed, with the aim of encouraging the Zuckerbergs of tomorrow to list here.

A decision will have to be made on whether dual-class firms can be included in benchmarks like the FTSE 100.

WELCOME MAT FOR SPACS



● The new rules will also make it easier for so-called special-purpose acquisition companies (Spacs) to list in London. These shot to prominence in 2020 and 2021 in America.

Typically, they involve companies joining the stock exchange by merging with businesses that already have a listing.

These companies are often backed by celebrities — such as former basketball player **Shaquille O'Neal** — and they usually list with a view to seeking out other firms to acquire. Donald Trump used a Spac to list his Truth Social business earlier this year.

While some changes were made a year ago, the latest rules mean that Spacs now have longer than 24 months in which to complete a transaction after they list. They can extend the time allowed to find a company to buy by 12 months up to three times — as long as they get shareholder approval and for another six months after that, in certain cases.

SHAREHOLDERS ON GUARD



● In making all these changes, the FCA admits it could be introducing new risks to the market. But it says it is determined to ensure that Britain can maintain robust rules on corporate governance.

"Sponsors" — banks and lawyers — that advise firms on stock market floats will be expected to ensure that the information they publish for prospective shareholders is correct. The FCA regards this as a protection for investors who may feel they are losing other rights, such as voting on related-party transactions. From now on, the emphasis will be on shareholders to influence change at companies where they have concerns or hope companies fall into line. At THG, founder **Matt Moulding** gave up his "golden share" for "furtherance of good corporate governance".

ILLUSTRATION; JAMES COWEN



had moved to Italy to use this "flat tax" scheme by 2022. An additional 19,400 Italians with an average salary of €131,920 had returned to their home country by 2021, benefiting from a further measure enabling new residents not to pay tax on 70 per cent of their incomes.

At nearby law firm Withers Studio Legale, Giulia Cipollini, Italy head of tax and wealth planning, said: "When the Covid restrictions ended, a lot of people came on holiday from Britain to Italy and were reminded of how beautiful it was. It gave them the idea: why not move here next?"

That said, uprooting a family from London is not a simple decision. It involves leaving friends and other family members, and Britain's schools are popular. Education in Milan is getting better, though, expats said.

At the British School of Milan, better known as the Sir James Henderson, students sit GCSEs in year 11 and the baccalaureate in the sixth form. Fees start at €15,000 a year. Headmaster Chris Greenhalgh, casually turned out in a linen shirt in his office during the summer break, said that, of its 770 students, roughly 60 per cent are Italian, 20 per cent British and 20 per cent from other countries. "We get quite a few tax exiles coming out now," he said. "The sorts of people for whom paying €100,000 is attractive."

When Silvia Pace returned from London to Milan in 2022, she found schools a struggle. After two decades in the City, she was sent to set up a Milan office for the S14 Capital asset management firm. When she tried to get her children into Sir James Henderson, she found waiting lists of up to 15 students in each year group. She sent them to ICS Milan, a rival, instead.

It is not only schooling that can be tricky, particularly since Brexit restricted British people's freedom to work in the EU. Foreign professionals with an Italian job offer must apply for a "Blue Card", a process that involves obtaining university certificates and official translations approved by an Italian embassy. Pace handled the paperwork for a London colleague who now works with her in Milan: "It took us nearly a year – it was long, complicated and stressful. Never again."

There are further unpleasant surprises. The air quality is poor and locals can be insular, some expats said. Many don't speak English.

Annual tweaks to the tax breaks have provided further headaches. Giorgia Meloni's government has reduced the tax discount for new or returning residents from 70 per cent to 50 per cent.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is finding a home in Milan's overheated property market, fuelled by a surge in demand and a chronic lack of housing. Wealthy expats generally seek spacious penthouse suites in central districts, said Massimo Zanchettin, the director of the Coldwell Banker Italy luxury estate agency.

They often have handsome budgets – typically €7,000 to €8,000 a month for rentals, or €2 million to buy. But such properties are hard to find.

"People from London usually have a taste for turn-of-the-century properties, with a terrace and large lounges," Zanchettin explained during a viewing at a third-floor apartment near Milan's Arco della Pace. The place is far from luxurious; the lounge is filled with worn-looking period furniture and the smell of stale smoke hangs in the air. A pokey terrace overlooks railway tracks and there is no parking. The 235 square metre flat is on the market for €2.2 million.

Long written off as a grey and austere city, Milan received an infrastructure update and an injection of continental vibrancy when it hosted the Milan Expo in 2015. A trickle of newcomers arrived following Brexit, with banks including UniCredit and Mediobanca moving staff from London to Milan.

It is now a bustling financial centre, as Simmons & Simmons lawyer Nick Lasagna testified over grilled octopus in the upmarket Isola rooftop restaurant. For the past two nights, he had been working late on a corporate takeover. "I hear it is quiet in London," he said. "But in Milan, it's busy with private equity deals. Plenty of medium-sized firms in this region are seeking new investors."

Back in rain-drenched London, Withers' European head of wealth planning and tax, Chris Groves, warned that Britain underestimates the attractions of places such as Milan to London's big-spending, rich residents. And, he said: "Driving them into the sea is not the way to grow the UK."



Tax breaks make Milan enticing. But asset manager Silvia Pace said that moving there is not so simple

We've bulked up on sports bars to take on the snack Goliaths



HOW I MADE IT

KIERAN FISHER, FOUNDER OF KBF ENTERPRISES

Andrew Saunders

Kieran Fisher, the 42-year-old founder of the fast-growing Warrior sports nutrition brand, is on a double mission: to help cash-strapped Brits square their love of sweets and biscuits with the pursuit of a healthier lifestyle; and also to disprove that shoppers are ignorant about whether or not their snacks are good for them.

"Sugar is the new tobacco, but the idea that people aren't educated and don't know that shovelling sugar into their mouths is bad for them is bollocks. The issue is affordability," said the Burnley-born entrepreneur.

"There are all these healthy snacking products, but they are all at London prices. The average person in the UK earns about £60 a day after tax. Who's going to spend £3.50... on what amounts to a healthier chocolate bar?"

One of his Warrior Crunch protein bars costs a more pocket-friendly £1.50, while still providing a lunchbox treat containing 20g of protein and just 2.3g of sugar.

Appealing to the mass market seems to be working. Warrior's parent company, KBF Enterprises, founded by Fisher in 2008, now employs about 90 people at its Trafford Park premises in Manchester and made a pre-tax profit of £1 million on turnover of £26 million last year; it is on target to generate £40 million in sales this year.

Being an independently owned small firm in a sector dominated by multinationals keeps Warrior sharp, he said. "This is a £40 million business – how much ammunition do we have against the likes of Mondelez [the owner of Cadbury]? It's David v Goliath. We have to do things better or we would not succeed."

One of Fisher's secret weapons is the "funnel" – using mainstream products, like the protein bars, as a gateway to draw customers to the brand before "up-selling" more specialist items to them online, such as exercise supplements and pre and post-workout nutrition.

Warrior has 400,000 registered customers and is also one of the largest Amazon vendors in the UK, but its success starts with outperforming rivals on the shelves of stores such as Tesco and B&M. "We have the highest rate of sale of any protein bar. A typical protein bar will sell, on average, three units per store, per product type per week; Warrior bars sell 19," said Fisher.

Driven and restless by nature, neither study – a management degree at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology – nor professional life – he did a stint as a consultant – really enthused Fisher. "I wasn't that into uni, I just wanted to start earning." He joined Accenture because it offered a decent salary, but quit after six months. "It was so boring and I didn't fit in – there just wasn't anyone else like me."

There followed various wheezes, including reselling sex toys, before he hit on the idea of sports nutrition, initially as a reseller of third-party brands and then using contract manufacturers.

Being a martial arts fan, he reasoned, made him his own target customer, and the business grew fast.

By 2012, KBF was turning over about £2 million. Fisher owned his flat in central Manchester outright and had treated himself to a brace of dream cars: a Lamborghini and a Ferrari. But then came a near-death experience for the business at the hands of the taxman, when the decision was made to put VAT on protein powders, as part of what became known as the "pasty tax" on prepared and takeaway food.

"Our turnover dropped by 60 per cent and we went from being a profitable business to losing £50,000 a month," Fisher recalled. "Consumers simply weren't willing to pay the extra."

So he was faced with a do-or-die moment, and, to cap it all, his partner, Maria, was now pregnant with their first child.

"I knew we could either shrink right down, cut loads of cost and try and eke it out, or we could go for a manufacturer's margin and start making our own products. That's what we did."

So the sports cars went and the flat was mortgaged again to fund the building of the first factory.

The investment may have been forced on Fisher, but he has never looked back. "Manufacturing gives you agility. And it helps you appreciate the difference between real product quality and marketing bullshit; we know our products are really high quality because we source all the ingredients and do all the formulation ourselves."



Kieran Fisher faced a battle to get Warrior snacks noticed

Fisher has built the business without any external funding, partly because his father, who died two years ago, warned him off going down that route. "He was also an entrepreneur, but he had a bad experience scaling his business [a firm called P&P]... He told me to never be on the hook to the bank.'"

His big plans mean that may have to change in future, however. "I want to make this into a £500 million business in five years, and the reality is that this will need capitalisation that is probably beyond me."

Conquering the US is key to his growth plans. It's a notoriously hard market for British businesses, but Fisher said he is inspired by Americans' approach to entrepreneurialism.

"There is a lack of confidence and ambition in the UK, but in America there is real dynamism, momentum and a 'let's go get it' attitude."

One thing he isn't planning is a family succession. "Passing a business onto kids is really a hindrance to them becoming whatever magical people they are going to become. I think you need a period trudging through shit to really build your character."

HIGH FIVE

My heroes... my wonderful parents who loved me very deeply and did a very good job. My mum was a social worker and a bit of a hippy, and my dad was an entrepreneur who sold computers.
My best decision... building my own factories. I'm on my second, which started production last year. Having your own factory gives you flexibility and control. Running one shift a day for five days a week, we can do £123 million in sales, but running round the clock, seven days a week, we can do up to £300 million.
My worst decision... making the mistake of thinking I have to find a replacement before firing someone, because even if they are crap at their job and there's no one to fill their spot, those people are costing you money all the time they are there; just fire them. It will be fine — nothing will happen that you can't cope with.
Funniest moment... one thing that makes me laugh is when someone tells me I "need" to do something that I don't need to do at all. I just say no to anyone who tries to knock me off course like that.
Best business tip... don't be lazy. That's what I mutter to myself when I'm really tired and I have to get up and do something I really don't want to do. In business, you are not always going to have a great day, you are not always going to be happy and in a good mood. That's when you need the personal discipline to just get on with it.

Julian Richer

No argument, we should teach critical thinking



At the end of occasional talks I give to company leaders, I'm often asked to pick out what I think is the paramount aspect of business culture.

The most valuable assets that businesses have are their people. So when I reply, "A free, open culture of thinking and debate", ideally, producing ideas and solutions to improve their organisations, I know I'm surprising the audience. Maybe they expect me to be like Jeff Bezos and say, "I ask the team to wake up terrified every morning, their sheets drenched in sweat." No thank you.

And I mean it; all the successful bosses I've ever worked with encourage an open flow of communications in all directions, internally – up, down, across – and with the outside world, too, with no taboos. They try to surround themselves with good people who can see the world independently, draw their own conclusions, and have the confidence to express their ideas. This is particularly important when a business is under commercial stress and there's genuine debate about what the management team needs to do to fix it. I know I can be opinionated (surely not?), so I really do rely on colleagues challenging my pet theories... or, admittedly, my sometimes slightly bizarre or eccentric new ideas.

It's very difficult to craft a culture of critical thinking and open debate in a business unless it's been taught at school. Unfortunately, schools spend so much time on teaching and testing reading, and also particularly writing, that they don't have enough time to teach thinking and speaking. These require practice, too. And they are also very important life and business skills.

In 2017, I read about Michael Davies, a history teacher in Lancaster, who was finding it difficult to give lessons on conflict zones – and he had come up with a brilliant solution: why not teach these subjects in "parallel", reflecting that there are (at least two) sides to everything? He proposed to call it Parallel Histories.

Although Michael is a supremely talented guy and very persuasive, he was struggling to find financial backers brave enough to take this up as a cause. I think it's fair to say that with the Middle East conflict, for instance, at the time both wealthy Jewish and Muslim benefactors were having difficulty accepting that there might be another way of looking at the conflict other than their own.

In spite of the obvious challenges, I liked the idea of attempting to bring people with opposing views together, so I put up the cash and off he went.

I knew it was going to be difficult; some people argue that *comparing* narratives is the same as *equating* them. It's not. Teachers understand that, and

> **Kids who learn calm, reasoned debate will use it in their adult life**

the constructiveness of the Parallel Histories approach has been recognised by both the Arab and Jewish press even during the current, absolutely horrendous crisis.

The most important result so far is that schools using this approach have stopped removing these demanding subjects from the curriculum. Controversial topics are no longer being avoided, and kids are challenged to present the opposite narratives in debates in a respectful way – learning about the other side's views. Kids can talk safely about subjects where they have passionate views but otherwise are causing splits in our community.

Parallel Histories gives schools and teachers resources and training so they can turn tricky subjects into an interesting and engaging educational experience.

Nearly 1,000 secondary schools in the UK, along with 60-plus other countries, are using our system. The originally reticent donors can see the proof of the pudding and are getting their wallets out ... always a good sign.

An added benefit is that childfen who have learnt calm and reasoned debate will use this knowledge in their adult life. Certainly, those going on to join the business world will be very pleased to have received these negotiating and people skills, both of which are essential.

We know there is also an appetite among the public for intelligent and open debate on emotive topics, as demonstrated by the popularity of podcasts such as *The Rest Is Politics*.

It's encouraging to hear people on opposite sides exchange views and change their opinions, especially when they are talking about subjects close to their heart where strong emotions come into play.

These civilised forums contrast with the party leaders' debates on TV, and are the reason why I stopped watching Prime Minister's Questions years ago. I used to have a flat in Scarborough, so if I wanted to watch a Punch and Judy show, I'd go down to the beach.

Julian Richer is a retailer, philanthropist and author. With thanks to Michael Davies, founder and editor of Parallel Histories

BUSINESS

£46bn megaproject digs deep

Tunnelling at the Hinkley Point power plant is almost complete. Will it persuade Labour to fund more nuclear? *Jon Yeomans* reports

BRAD WAKEFIELD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Deep beneath the Bristol Channel, the latest phase of the Hinkley Point C nuclear power station is nearing completion. Three tunnels extending miles under the seabed are being fine-tuned by engineers in bright orange overalls.

When the plant is operational, two of these tunnels, 6 metres wide and 3,500 metres long, will be flooded with seawater to cool the plant. A third tunnel will return it to the sea.

Constructing all this has required some fiddly design. Each tunnel is connected to 44-metre-long metal "water heads", which have been designed to suck in water, but not fish. There is also a "fish return pipe" to help any unlucky sprat get back to the sea.

Standing in an underground chamber, our guide, Matt Blake, Hinkley's head of tunnelling, said: "Not to make you feel uncomfortable, but there's 30 metres of sea above and then there's a few hundred tonnes of steel just over our heads."

Looking up, we see water dripping down the walls, forming a big pool round our feet. It's somewhat unnerving, but Blake assures us this is part of the design – to ease pressure on the structure.

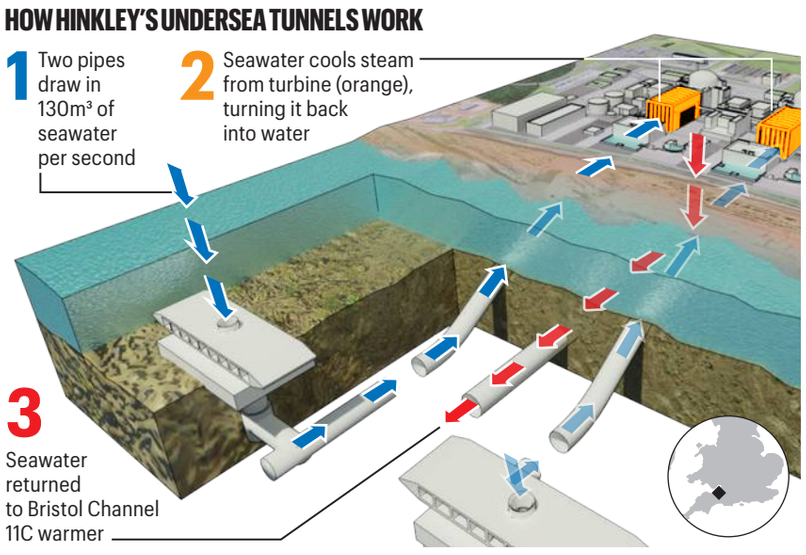
The complexity of these tunnels speaks to the engineering challenge of building Britain's first new nuclear power station in 30 years. Overruns and delays mean that Hinkley Point C is now likely to cost £46 billion by the time the first of its two reactors is switched on in 2029.

Hinkley is just over halfway built, and its delivery will fall to the new Labour government. The party is pro-nuclear, but it will soon have to decide whether to give the green light to an identical plant – Sizewell C in Suffolk – and a new breed of smaller reactors. Does it have the political will – and financial firepower – to back this new nuclear age?

Hinkley Point C was conceived in the 2000s, under the last Labour government, and got the green light in 2016. The project is majority owned by the French state utility EDF, with 33 per cent held by CGN of China. CGN has since been banned from further involvement in Britain's nuclear sector over political concerns.

When fully operational, Hinkley will provide electricity for six million homes. "Nuclear provides a lot of zero-emissions power from a comparatively small geographical footprint for a very long period of time," said Tom Greatrex, former Labour shadow energy minister and current chief executive of the Nuclear Industry Association.

HOW HINKLEY'S UNDERSEA TUNNELS WORK



The date for turning on Hinkley has been pushed back and back, and its costs have shot up from an earlier estimate of £20 billion. The most recent delay, announced in January, was blamed on Covid, which set back construction, and on soaring energy and materials costs, partly due to the Ukraine war.

EDF also hit out at UK regulators for ordering 7,000 changes to the design of its reactors, which were not required in other nations where they have been built. These changes include the fish return pipe and a requirement that Hinkley's critical systems have an "offline" back-up to protect them against cyberattack.

Some industry sources counter that EDF should bear most of the blame. "They hadn't done the proper engineering design and construction planning before they started work," said one senior figure.

EDF's management, understandably, strike a defensive tone. "We're doing a lot of things for the first time," said Tamer Al-Bishawi, commissioning director of the plant. He noted that EDF has had to restart the supply chain and train thousands of people. "We're building the capability for Britain to build more nuclear power stations."

Walk around Hinkley and you can see where some of that £46 billion has gone. The construction site is a purpose-built town, threaded with roads, traffic lights and roundabouts. There are gigantic, sprawling office blocks, which boast giant canteens and convenience stores.

On the edge of the site is a 500-bed campus providing university dorm-style accommodation, while a central lodge offers food, two bars and a gym. A larger campus sits in nearby Bridgwater, while EDF has taken over the old Pontins holiday park in Minehead on the south bank of the Bristol Channel. It is all part of the massive logistical operation involved in bringing 12,000 workers to the site every day in an area devoid of large towns and infrastructure.

"The sheer logistics of running the site, on top of the constraints of the local area, is what I find a huge challenge," said Stuart Crooks, Hinkley Point C's managing director.

EDF reckons one of the biggest bus stations in the country is at the centre of Hinkley. The entire site covers 176 hectares, the size of 250 football pitches. It is home to 64 cranes including "Big Carl", the largest in the world at 250 metres high.

Workers survey a chamber 110 feet below the Bristol Channel, one mile from the shore. Below: EDF's Tamer Al-Bishawi stands in the outflow tunnel, which will return water used for cooling the power plant to the sea

Traversing Hinkley means walking miles of footpath that randomly rises and falls, hooks sharp turns to avoid working cranes, and crosses busy junctions where loaders go trundling by. The beeps of their warning noises mingle with the background sounds of heavy machinery, drilling and the occasional bang.

The site is carved up into zones, with different contractors having control of each fiefdom. Gaining access to a new zone requires a swipe card to push through metal turnstiles, like entering a football ground. At times the ground falls away next to you into a vast chasm, filled with fresh concrete or mucky rainwater.

Slogans printed on workers' lanyards denote their role in the project, or make strangely communist-sounding exhortations such as "Humility" and "Making a difference". Together, these workers are engaged in the "fit-out" stage of Hinkley, which involves the laying of 10,000km of cables and 360km of pipes.



£20bn

The original estimate for the cost of constructing Hinkley Point C

Hinkley's Crooks blames stringent measures imposed by the Environment Agency for some of the delays. "The processes in the agency are very, very, very challenging, and very long. And everything is subject to legal challenge, which goes on for ever," he said.

EDF's current spat with the agency concerns the company's plan to ditch underwater speakers that were supposed to deter fish from swimming near the site. Both parties have agreed these speakers won't work, but are now wrangling over what EDF should do instead. Until the row is resolved, Hinkley won't have a licence to operate.

Ironing out these problems is especially important because EDF plans to replicate Hinkley's design at Sizewell. It insists that project will benefit from the lessons learnt at Hinkley. Crooks said: "I'm highly confident Sizewell will be quicker and a lot cheaper than this one."

The UK government is still looking for private investors to back Sizewell; a final investment decision was due before the election, but never came.

The project is now sitting at the top of energy secretary Ed Miliband's in-tray. He is expected to give it close scrutiny, as electricity bill-payers will be on the hook for the bulk of the cost. Miliband must also decide how much the UK wants to spend on a newer breed of smaller modular reactors.

Steve Thomas, emeritus professor of energy policy at Greenwich University, notes that the reactor model being used at Hinkley has run into problems and delays wherever it has been built – in China, Finland and France. "Going forward with Sizewell C would be a costly and risky venture and would draw resources away from the options that would allow us to meet our climate-change goals quicker, more cheaply and more reliably," he said.

There are even more immediate concerns. CGN has refused to put any more money into Hinkley to cover the overruns. EDF won't give a number, but industry sources suggest the project is facing a funding gap of up to £5 billion. "We are actively looking for investors to mitigate this cash requirement," said Crooks. Under the terms of its contract, EDF – or, more precisely, the French state – will have to pick up the tab.

When completed, the power station will have two soaring concrete buildings, unit one and unit two, with vast dome-shaped roofs covering the reactors. The 47-metre-wide dome for unit one was winched into place last December in an operation lasting one and a half hours. That was a doddle compared to the two and a half days it will take to crane in the reactor later this year.

Come September, the 30-metre-high, 500-tonne, torpedo-shaped heart of the power station will be lifted through a giant door in the side of the reactor hall, tilted 90 degrees, and lowered into the gap where it will sit for the station's 60-year operating life.

The reactor building is a warren of stairs, passageways and gantries bristling with scaffolding. You have to duck through cramped spaces and take care not to step on the plastic squares bolted to the ground, which warn ominously of "gaps below".

In the middle of the structure, it's possible to look up at the dome above, and down at the brick-lined cradle that would catch a molten core in the event of a nuclear meltdown.

"We've had a team of brickies in there – 16,000 bricks," said Matt Abbott, the reactor hall supervisor. "They've had to put them all in by hand."

It's a testament, once again, to the care that has been lavished on Hinkley Point C. Once the core is in situ, this view will be obscured for ever. The handiwork of those brickies will go unseen – but hopefully not unappreciated.

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The World's Identity Company

Firm set up by SAS veterans sells stake

William Turvill

A British cybersecurity and fintech group is seeking to sell a 10 per cent stake ahead of a planned London stock market float next year.

Quantum Group, which bills itself as an "incubator" for growing tech businesses, says it is in talks with Middle East funds to raise money at a valuation of £330 million.

Founded and led by two former members of the SAS, Quantum believes that as a fast-growing business, and with further acquisitions planned, it could achieve a valuation of over £1 billion when it comes to list in 2025.

Quantum consists of four businesses: an expense management and foreign exchange platform called Volopa; boutique security adviser Valkyrie; digital publishing agency Vantage; and Verve, a cashback and rewards app. It has just completed the acquisition of Forensic Control, a London-based consultancy that advises business leaders on how to assess, prevent and respond to cyberattacks.

The group is led from Belgravia in central London by chief executive Floyd Woodrow and his co-founder Peter Malmstrom, who is head of mergers and acquisitions. Woodrow served in the SAS for 24 years, rising to the top of its counter-terrorist unit. He set up Quantum in 2015, initially as a security business, with Malmstrom, a former foreign currency trader who spent three years with the SAS.

Quantum counts the state-owned British Business Bank as a shareholder.

L&G fund to back affordable housing

Jill Treanor

Legal & General, the FTSE 100 insurance group, has thrown its weight behind Labour's ambitions to build more homes with a new fund to back affordable housing projects across England.

The fund has the support of 11 local government pension schemes – including Essex and Hampshire county councils – which together have made a £125 million commitment to housing schemes for affordable rents or shared ownership.

It came as government set a target to build 1.5 million more homes over five years.

Britain is suffering from a shortage of affordable housing, with just 55,000 built a year in the past decade and less than the 145,000 a year that the National Housing Federation has recommended.

The L&G Affordable Housing Fund will be managed by the insurer's fund management arm.

It is the first time it has allowed institutional investors such as pension funds to back such housing projects via its funds.

Until now, its projects have been funded only by its own resources through its affordable housing operation, created in 2018 which has 5,000 homes in operation and another 2,000 planned.

Simon Century, managing director of housing at Legal & General asset management, said: "This is a good case study as to how we bring in long-term, like-minded capital into the sector."

David Smith, page 7

BUSINESS

My hotel giant can conquer the world

Elie Maalouf, Lebanese boss of the hotels group IHG, was bounced into learning English as a boy. He's a straight-talker now

INTERVIEW
OLIVER GILL



One thing people can't say about Elie Maalouf is that he's too PC. The Lebanon-raised chief executive of the world's biggest hotel company, InterContinental Hotels Group, is recalling what it was like being packed off, aged six, to an English-speaking school when he had zero grasp of the language.

"Today you'd probably call it child abuse," the 60-year-old says, sitting in a sumptuous top-floor suite at the InterContinental London Park Lane. "Seriously, given how sensitive people are."

His PR handlers gulp hard on their lattes.

Out of the window, Hyde Park looks resplendent in the sunshine. It's a picture-postcard day in London, with the blue sky interrupted only by a few wispy clouds and the criss-crosses of aeroplane contrails.

Maalouf is in good spirits for his first sit-down interview since taking the job a year ago, and it is not just because of the weather.

IHG, the £13 billion hotels juggernaut whose brands include Holiday Inn, Crowne Plaza and Kimpton, has gone from strength to strength since he took over. The FTSE 100 stalwart's shares are up more than 50 per cent.

The company employs about 375,000 people across nearly 6,400 hotels globally. And despite a difficult economic backdrop, revenues rose last year by nearly a fifth to $4.6 billion, with pre-tax profits almost doubling from $540 million to $1 billion.

IHG's roots go back to the early days of Britain's "beerage" – the wealthy beer barons who made fortunes from pub-going Brits. William Bass set up his eponymous beer-making empire in 1777 in Burton upon Trent in Staffordshire, soon opening pubs and then adding inns with rooms to his empire.

Bass moved into mainstream hotels in the 1980s, buying the Holiday Inn franchise outside America. Then, in the early 2000s,the sprawling group was split in two. The pubs became Mitchells & Butlers and the hotels became IHG.

Much of the hotelier's success since then can be attributed to trailblazing an "asset-light" business model. IHG sold off its freeholds and long leases to property investors, but continued running the hotels under management contracts. With the $8 billion it raised from selling its properties, it bought and launched more brands, and now has 19 around the world.

Maalouf's favourite? "I don't have one," he claims, somewhat unconvincingly.

Dressed in a blue suit and open-necked white shirt, Maalouf takes a sip of his decaf skinny latte as he sets out his plans for IHG's next chapter. Embedding newer chains such as the budget brand Garner will be important, he says, but more critical is growing the group geographically.

"We're very big in North America, Europe and China, where we have nearly 800 hotels," he explains. "But there are other markets that have a lot of potential – established markets such as Japan where our share is low but the market's big, and then also emerging markets, southeast Asia and the Middle East, like Saudi Arabia."

"And we now have enough hotels under development to double our business in India," he adds.

Another priority is growing branded "residences" – luxury apartments or houses that are tied to a hotel name, meaning customers can benefit from all the amenities of the brand. Roughly half the new opportunities in the luxury sector come through branded residences, says Maalouf.

Born in the US in 1964 while his father was studying there, Maalouf grew up in his family's native Lebanon. "I'm more American than my name, but less American than my accent," he says in his US drawl.

The 1960s were something of a stable period for Lebanon, with Beirut's beach club hotels becoming a playground for film stars such as Brigitte Bardot and Peter O'Toole. Yet by the end of the decade, Maalouf's father, a UN diplomat by this point, could sense political tensions were mounting. He moved the family first to Algeria and then Italy, where they looked on in horror as the country descended into civil war in the 1970s.

It was in Rome that Maalouf was dispatched to an American school having never spoken a word of English. "But I figured it out and moved on," he says.

From school in Italy, he left his parents to head to the US, where he studied engineering at Virginia Tech followed by an MBA at the University of Virginia. After that came a job in Washington DC at the real estate arm of Weyerhaeuser, one of America's biggest timber companies.

By 1993, Maalouf's parents had moved from Italy to a home in Washington to retire. Maalouf, a big family man, was looking forward to living closer to his parents in their later years. But then he was offered a dream job at Weyerhaeuser's head office in Seattle, nearly 3,000 miles away.

"I'll never forget my father saying, 'Just do it – we'll see each other, we'll figure it out,' " he recalls. "I felt really bad about that, because they were waiting all these years to get closer. And now we were packing up and leaving."

Moving from the east to the west of the US with his wife proved a seminal moment in Maalouf's career, partly because Seattle was home to some new giants of business. "Microsoft was booming, Starbucks was getting started. And we had a wonderful four years there from 1993 to 1997. I made a lot of great friends. I learnt a lot working at corporate headquarters in those years."

Maalouf's desire to return to Washington DC and his parents persisted, however. So when a senior job came up with HMSHost, a spin-off of the hotels group Marriott, back in the US capital, he jumped at it. But tragedy struck. "My father passed away before we could even tell them," he says, pausing reflectively.

Then he shrugs: "You can't plan things perfectly, but I know he would not have regretted the fact that we moved away. I learnt a tremendous amount in those four years at the corporate. You get to see how the top of an organisation works, even though you're carrying bags and shuffling papers for people."

After working his way up to chief executive of HMSHost, Maalouf spent two years with the consulting giant McKinsey before being headhunted to run IHG's North American arm in 2015.

He says working in close proximity with senior executives was what made him the success he is today, and it is why he harbours fears for younger generations as the post-pandemic trend for working from home becomes the norm.

Remote working is a bugbear for Maalouf. "We promote flexible work and we allow people to work remotely from time to time. We think it's a good idea, especially in a travel business.

"But the reality is that for personal development and growth, a significant amount of it comes from observation, interaction, learning the soft skills, and observing leadership. It's hard to become a leader, an effective one, without observing it in its own natural state.

"The concern I have is more about the younger generation being misled that remote working will be enough to propel the career. Because I know they're ambitious. I know they've spent a lot of time and effort on their education in many cases. I just don't want them to believe that it can be done in their pyjamas from their living room."

A growing number of London-listed companies have left for America over the past 18 months to tap into deeper pools of capital. Cement maker CRH, building supplies company Ferguson and bookmaker Flutter are three of the larger companies that have deserted the London Stock Exchange, while reports have suggested that oil major Shell and construction supplier Ashtead have likewise reviewed options for quitting the UK.

So, will the international IHG be leaving the UK stock market? The answer is somewhat equivocal: "We don't have any current plans to do anything different. However, given the responsibility that we have to our shareholders, you have to assume that our board from time to time will evaluate all possibilities to create sustainable shareholder value. But we don't have any current plans. It's not on top of my list."

Maalouf has spent recent weeks on the road seeing institutional investors. So what do they say about moving the listing to New York? "We don't feel a meaningful drive. I've just spent a lot of time with our shareholders. It's not a major theme with our investors."

He adds that Britain has a lot more going for it than a lot of people think. "There's a tendency to be too hard on a lot of things. Even the weather here in the UK is underrated, as much as people complain about it all the time.

"My wife and I actually think the weather is very congenial."

After the summer we've had so far, that's another controversial statement.

RACHEL ADAMS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES/ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL



> **We don't have any plans to leave the London Stock Exchange. It's not on top of my list**

Elie Maalouf says there is a lot to like about Britain ... even the weather

> **We have enough hotels under development to double our business in India**

THE LIFE OF ELIE MAALOUF

Born: May 14, 1964
Status: married for 31 years with three sons
School: Notre Dame International School in Rome
University: BA from Virginia Tech and an MBA from Virginia University
First job: a waiter in college
Pay: £3.9 million
Homes: London, Washington DC and "everywhere the business takes me"
Car: "In London I use taxis, public transport and I like walking. In the US, a 2011 Audi A8"
Favourite book: *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë
Drink: various teas including breakfast and ginger and a Lebanese favourite of adding orange blossom to tea. A little wine and beer
Films: *Cinema Paradiso* and *Senna*, a documentary on the late Formula 1 champion
Music: "I like a variety — Vivaldi, Bach, Santana"
Gadget: iPad — "I would be lost without it. It's small enough to carry everywhere and big enough to read properly"
Watch: Tag Heuer or Timex for casual
Last holiday: Maine for a long weekend on his wedding anniversary
Charity: Sesobel, which supports children with disabilities in Lebanon



Maine provided a romantic backdrop for Maalouf. Bach is a musical favourite



WORKING DAY
"Being CEO of a global business, I could be waking up in any part of the world," says Elie Maalouf. "Wherever I am, I get up early and do some form of exercise to stay healthy.

"Every day is different. I spend lots of time with key stakeholders, colleagues, our hotel owners, customers and shareholders — looking at the business and where we're going to grow."

DOWNTIME
The chief executive of IHG likes spending time with his family — his wife, sons, two sisters and mother — and a few friends. "In the summer, I like to grow a vegetable garden in the limited patch my wife allows me."

MG roars back – and its future is electric

The Chinese have revived the marque and made it Britain's fastest-growing brand, but will tariffs run the firm off the road? *John Arlidge* asks its boss

Goodwood, near Chichester, is home to the ancestral seat of the Duke of Richmond, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars and horse racing. Few places are more English – except this week. The annual Goodwood Festival of Speed, Britain's unofficial national car show, which ends today, has turned Chinese.

Models from BYD (Build Your Dreams), Yangwang, Omoda, Ora and other marques you have never heard of line the manicured lawns. Pride of place atop a 250ft-tall sculpture goes to an electric-red Cyberster that appears to be flying.

The first all-electric mass-market convertible, on sale from this week, is made by MG, which celebrates its centenary this year. Originally British, MG is now owned by SAIC, China's largest state-owned carmaker. The man whose job it is to sell its Shanghai-built models – Guy Pigounakis, MG's commercial director – smiled all through the drizzle on Friday because for the 66-year-old, launching the Cyberster is a "homecoming".

Once the commercial director for MG Rover, he launched the MG convertible, the MG F, in 1995. Although the car was popular the company was bleeding money, and when it went bust in 2005 Pagounakis was one of the last to leave the Longbridge factory. "I was there when the lights went out. I never thought I'd see another MG in production," he said last week.

Chinese financial muscle saved the marque but British links remain, Pigounakis is quick to point out. The Cyberster was designed by a Briton, Carl Gotham, at MG's studio in London and engineered, in part, in Longbridge.

The car, which sprints to 60mph in just over three seconds and has a range of about 300 miles, is at the pinnacle of a line-up of models bearing that iconic octagonal badge. Their sales are growing at such a clip that MG has become Britain's fastest-growing marque. The firm sold 81,289 cars in 2023, up from 13,075 in 2019, and will soon nudge 100,000. It broke the £1 billion sales barrier in Britain in 2022 and that figure will double this year, company sources say.

MG's models range from the £18,500 MG3 petrol-electric hybrid hatchback through the £25,000 HS medium-sized SUV and up to the £55,000 pure-electric Cyberster. All UK models will be pure electric "by whatever time the new government stipulates".

So far, so go-faster. But , there is a massive pothole ahead. The EU says Chinese carmakers have been unfairly subsidised by Beijing, which has invested hundreds of billions of pounds in battery and electric motor development. Brussels announced this month that it will introduce import tariffs on vehicles made by China's SAIC, BYD and Geely. The steepest tariff has been imposed on SAIC: 37.6 per cent. The new duties are on top of a 10 per cent tariff already in place for electric cars imported from China.

Brussels claims that Beijing's aid has enabled Chinese manufacturers to undercut EU carmakers. Chinese models are about 30 per cent cheaper than their European equivalents.

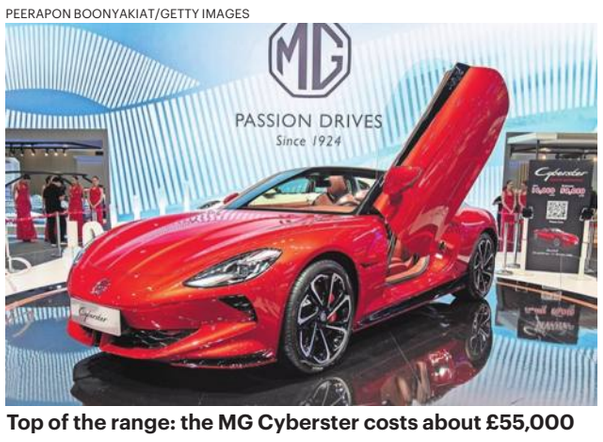
The EU tariffs, which are not likely to be imposed until later this year, would push up the cost of the Cyberster to around £70,000 in Europe – but that is unlikely to happen, said Pigounakis. "We cannot pass on a near-38 per cent increase in prices to customers." However, prices will have to rise to avoid selling cars at a loss. "We're a high-volume, low-margin business," he said.

Pigounakis hopes the new Labour government will not follow the EU's lead. He turns Brussels' argument on its head. "The question is: why are some of our competitors' cars so expensive, not why are ours so cheap?"

He noted that it is "interesting to see how much money some manufacturers are taking off the price of their cars now" to comply with new rules that stipulate that 22 per cent of new models sold in Britain this year must be pure electric.

"If they've got that amount of margin, why didn't they cut prices earlier?" So European car companies got greedy? "I couldn't possibly comment," he said.

PEERAPON BOONYAKIAT/GETTY IMAGES



Top of the range: the MG Cyberster costs about £55,000

BUSINESS

Part-time singer Tony Alvarez III is helping his consultancy Alvarez & Marsal steal business — and staff — from the Big Four. Can it keep up the pace? By *Laith Al-Khalaf*

The fixer with the X factor



ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL

When the European boss of the corporate troubleshooter Alvarez & Marsal took his troops for a company away day at a spa in St Albans, there was no need to hire an entertainer. On a balmy evening last month, in the 17th-century Sopwell House, Antonio Alvarez III took to the mic following the after-dinner speeches. "I sang a mash up between Ben E King, Taylor Swift, Sean Kingston, Justin Bieber, the Police and U2," he proudly recalled with a grin revealing his alarmingly white teeth.

Alvarez, 58, known as Tony or "T3" by his colleagues, the son of the firm's co-founder Antonio Alvarez II, is no stranger to the stage. In a previous life, under the stage name "A3 Worldwide", he toured the world performing his bass-heavy tunes such as *Burning Away* and *Come with Me* to arenas full of fans.

"I believe that you have to be a versatile person that's not just narrow on work," he said. "I was fortunate to be successful in that – I had four top 20 dance singles in the UK."

He seems like an unlikely sort to run one of the most successful, and aggressive, firms in the business.

Shortly before he wielded his microphone at St Albans, A&M had hired an entire team of mergers and acquisitions consultants from KPMG. But if that move didn't set off alarm bells at rival firms, A&M's next declaration did; we will, it announced, hire hundreds more partners and other staff from its bigger rivals.

Globally, A&M already rakes in more than £3.5 billion in revenues each year. Alvarez's UK and European division is poised to make its first £1 billion.

His division's ranks have swelled from 637 to 2,633 by luring disaffected high-performers from professional services rivals ten times its size. June's raid on KPMG was not the first. The "Big Four" accountancy firms EY, KPMG, PwC and Deloitte and the consultancies McKinsey, Bain & Company and Accenture, have all lost big-earning executives to the firm.

"We need fuel for growth and we are benefiting from [hiring] the great people from these institutions," said Alvarez.

It has won big clients from its rivals, too. In the UK and Europe, its client list has included Pret A Manger, Rolls-Royce, the government of Switzerland and the disgruntled bondholders of Thames Water's parent company, Kemble.

Its US parent is working on two of the biggest corporate collapses in decades; Sam Bankman-Fried's crypto exchange FTX and the property company WeWork.

Senior partners can expect to earn millions. A&M operates under a pay model, labelled "eat what you kill" by some, where it pays according to the business individuals bring in, rather than group's profits. It is a reputation the firm is trying to shake and which it says is inaccurate.

Many see it as a swashbuckling antidote to the stifling, bureaucratic partnership model that governs the established firms. "I feel liberated," said one A&M transfer from a Big Four accounting firm.

"It is only once you get here that you realise that the old model is dead. Working over there is about consensus. It's hustings. It's politics. It's baby kissing. It's manoeuvring." Others find the culture not conducive to good collaborative work for clients. "It can be pretty ruthless," said one former employee.

The A&M empire employs over 10,000 people across 39 countries. The firm was started by Antonio Alvarez II and Bryan Marsal. Alvarez II had been running the restructuring practice of Coopers & Lybrand, a precursor to PwC. Marsal worked for Citibank. The mythology has it he made his own uncle jobless restructuring Western Union.

In 1982, at a golf club in upstate New York, the pair hatched a plan to launch a practice specialising in turning round troubled businesses. In 1983, it signed its first client, watchmaker Timex.

The firm grew steadily, winning high-profile mandates such as the restructuring of Arthur Andersen after its failed audits of Enron. Come the financial crisis, and it was A&M that was called in to restructure the collapsed Lehman Brothers, a task that netted the firm more than half a billion dollars in three years.

The founders are close personally – Alvarez II is the godfather to one of Marsal's children. The fact that Alvarez II's son now runs Europe might be seen as running towards nepotism, particularly as his younger brother, Nick, also works there. But those who have spent time in the firm – and the boss of a key rival – described him as a competent operator. One former colleague said: "He generates the most amount of work and gets the most amount of inbound calls." Another said his brother's private equity practice is one of the fastest-growing divisions.

Staff are expected to spend most of their time working for clients and chasing revenues. "We don't need committee after committee," said Richard Fleming, European head of restructuring, previously ran KPMG's restructuring business. Jean Laurent Poitou leads the firm's tech practice. He said this culture allows the firm to move quickly when setting up new businesses. "At other firms, you have to serve an admiral vessel," he said. "Here, we are a flotilla of speed boats."

A&M rarely hires graduates, preferring to bring in experienced partners. "The school bus does not stop at A&M," said JLP. They also hire executives from industry, such as Marija Simovic, the other head of the UK who spent two years as chief operating officer at the parcel delivery group Yodel. "For me, it was a question of whether I would hire this firm," Simovic said of her decision to join A&M.

That goes down well with clients. "You get some firms that are career consultants ... every single person on their team had experience in business," said one, adding A&M's "steadfast" bunch "moved at real pace" adding: "They were tough."

Alvarez III was dispatched by the founders to set up the European practice in 2001. His biggest hiring coup was Fleming, 59, a gravel-voiced Aussie with a penchant for fast cars.

Critics say the firm's culture is too aggressive for many staff, and that far more people leave than is normal in the industry. Others said its pay structure stops staff collaborating fully for fear of sharing their earnings at the end of the year. This, some argue, can affect quality. One executive said that five years after A&M's 2018 restructuring of Rolls-Royce, the aero-engine maker was forced to bring in McKinsey.

Some question whether the firm's family structure is right for an organisation that is more than 10,000 strong. "There has never really been an attempt to build out proper governance into the business," said a former senior partner. "If you are aggrieved, there's nowhere to go."

Sources said as the firm grows, that lack of structure could affect its work. This has particular relevance for succession planning. The founding families still control about 50 per cent of the firm, with equity partners holding the rest.

With both founding fathers well into their 70s, whispers abound as to who will take over. The obvious choices are Nick and Antonio III. Former employees question whether hereditary succession is best practice in terms of governance.

It is a question Antonio III is clearly used to fielding. He hinted that he and his brother may not be a shoo-in, but whoever it is, they will be equipped to lead.

A 2016 video on Alvarez's YouTube channel offers insights into his own leadership style. Clad in sunglasses and a backwards baseball cap, Alvarez, as A3 Worldwide, said, "I definitely see myself more as a storyteller than anything else and transmitting a positive vibe."



Tony Alvarez III, or A3 Worldwide, is European boss of Alvarez & Marsal, whose clients include Pret A Manger and Rolls-Royce

It's desolation row, but shopping centres are right up Frasers' street

Sam Chambers

Michael Murray has fond memories of childhood trips to the Frenchgate shopping centre in his native Doncaster. Sports Direct, or Sports World as it was known back then, was always high on his list of places to visit.

At the age of 34, Murray now runs Frasers Group, the FTSE 100 retail giant that not only owns Sports Direct but the entirety of Frenchgate.

Frasers' purchase this month of Doncaster's 770,000 sq ft shopping centre extends a remarkable buying spree. The high street powerhouse, founded and majority-owned by billionaire Mike Ashley, Murray's father-in-law, has acquired shopping centres in Luton and Dundee, as well as an outlet centre in Castleford, West Yorkshire, within the past 18 months.

Frasers is also in talks to take full control of Exeter's Princesshay shopping centre and even had a tilt at buying Meadowhall in Sheffield last year, a centre valued at more than £700 million.

"We've got the capability to spend hundreds of millions of pounds on this," said a source close to Frasers. "We're looking at everything ... shopping centres, retail parks or high street units."

The characteristically unconventional project raises a question that has followed around Frasers and its mercurial founder for years: is there method in the madness?

For Murray, real estate is in the blood. His father, Mick, is the co-owner of Lazarus Properties, a South Yorkshire-based developer that owns more than 250 properties. Prior to Murray's appointment as Frasers' chief executive two years ago, Ashley engaged his future son-in-law as a property consultant, rather than a full-time employee. Murray was paid a proportion of the value that the board deemed he had created by either sourcing new shops for the company, or sprucing up its existing ones. He earned £32.9 million over five years.

Ashley has a long history of using Frasers' cash to dabble in the property market, but the company, which doesn't pay a dividend, is now setting its sights on bigger assets. That has been made possible by a collapse of about two-thirds in the cumulative value of the UK's shopping centres – equivalent to £8 billion – between 2018 and 2023, the data provider MSCI reports.

Investment yields on centres that are dominant in their towns – the type of asset Frasers has been buying – have risen from 6 per cent in 2016 to more than 11 per cent today, according to data from estate agency Savills.

Murray's thinking is that by slotting Frasers' own stores into vacant sites – the group can pick from Sports Direct, luxury clothes retailer Flannels, Evans Cycles, Game, USC and Everlast Gyms – he can, in effect, underpin a chunk of a centre's income.

Shopping centres up and down the country have been struggling to find retailers willing to occupy the vast gaps left by the collapse of Debenhams, for example. The Frasers in Luton and Dundee both had a Debenhams site that had been vacant since the department store chain failed more thabn three years ago.

Frasers plans to carve these up into Sports Direct and Flannels outlets and Everlast gyms. Given that it owns each of these chains, it wouldn't have to undertake the costly construction work – such as removing escalators or staircases between floors – that an ordinary landlord would need to do to re-let the space to multiple retailers.

Those familiar with Murray's thinking say he is targeting towns where Frasers wants to open more stores. But others are less convinced that the deals are part of a coherent strategy.

"They go wherever they think they can make money – it's just opportunistic," said one Frasers investor. "They will put themselves in these shopping centres, attract in all the other retailers and then sell it for a higher price and move on."

The emergence of the high street giant as a significant player in the retail property market is unnerving for landlords and tenants alike. Landlords say Frasers is notorious for trying to re-cut deals once a price has been agreed, meaning some are wary of selling to it. A source close to the company said renegotiating is standard when due diligence uncovers unexpected issues.

Meanwhile, rivals of Frasers that trade in its shopping centres fear their new landlord could turf them out at the end of their lease, in the hope of boosting its own brands. A source close to the company said it wants to protect the value of its investments by maintaining a strong line-up of retailers.

Frasers is getting into shopping centres at a low point in the cycle, but the rise of online shopping has sapped demand for stores on what looks a permanent basis. Fifteen per cent of shops in shopping centres lie vacant, meaning it will be difficult for owners to drive up rents.

But Frasers isn't the only retailer taking advantage of the plunge in shopping centre valuations. Ingka, Ikea's parent company, has purchased the King's Mall in west London and Brighton's Churchill Square shopping centre. As Mark Garmon-Jones at Savills said: "The thinking is that if these guys are buying them, then they must be cheap."

Shopping spree: Michael Murray spent millions



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ABF	BMG	DFL	ELK	GJE	HZ	KDB	LDJ	MGE	NRH	PWW	RWK	TLA	VMT
ACN	BMR	DFP	EP 2	GJK	IG 7	KDJ	5 LE	MGG	NRJ	RBH	SBW	TLJ	VP 3
ACO	BN	DGE	EPC	GL 9	IT	KDR	LEC	MH 53	NRL	RCA	SCD	TLP	VS
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AER	BPW	DHG	EPM	GN 4	JAA	KEK	LEL	MJY	NSP	RCG	SCP	TLW	WAA
AFA	BR 6	DHP	ERD	6 GO	JBG	KER	94 LF	MKC	NT 2	RD 59	SDO	TP	WC
AFL	BRB	DHT	ESR	20 GP	JCG	KF 4	LGR	MKF	NU	RDF	SDR	TPS	WCB
AFT	BRS	DKP	ET 5	GRF	JCN	KG	LGS	MKH	OAA	RDP	SDS	TR	WCC
AGE	BU	DLD	EVH	GTP	JD 60	KGB	LHB	MKK	55 OE	RDT	SDT	TRC	WCS
AHG	BV	DMA	EWC	GWD	JDC	KGM	LHH	MLF	OP	REE	SDW	TRD	WD 8
ALK	BW 6	DMP	EWH	GWJ	JDO	KGP	LJT	MLO	OY	REP	SEG	TS 90	WE
AMD	BY	DN 3	FAC	GY	JEA	KGS	LK	MMA	59 P	RFA	SEJ	TWG	WEP
36 AN	450 C	DNM	FAG	HAB	JEC	56 KJ	LKG	MMO	PAA	RFC	SEK	TWM	WH 4
AP	CAB	DPW	FAK	HAC	JEV	KJG	LL 2I	MMT	PAW	RG 69	SFH	UL	WHB
APE	CAG	DSE	FAT	HAH	JFO	KJK	LLD	MNW	PBH	RGD	SGG	VAA	WHH
APJ	CAY	70 DU	FAW	HAW	JFW	KLE	LLG	MPB	PCJ	RGM	SHB	VAD	WHM
ARF	CB I4	EAA	FCH	HCB	JGJ	KLK	LLS	MSW	PCK	RGP	SHG	VAF	WJA
AT 9	CBC	EAD	FEC	HCT	JGL	KLP	LMO	MT 35	PDA	RHF	SHS	VAH	WJB
ATB	CBR	EAJ	FEM	HD	JGS	48 KM	LMR	MTJ	PDL	RHP	SHT	VAK	WJE
ATC	CCF	EAL	FJ	HDB	JHE	KML	LN	MU	PDP	RHW	SJJ	VAL	WJG
AWC	CDD	EAN	FJP	HED	JHR	KMT	LPR	MVW	PEB	39 RJ	SJK	VAM	WJL
660 B	CDT	EAS	FJR	HEH	JJA	KMW	LPS	MW 39	PEG	RJP	SKT	VAP	WL 4
BAE	CDW	EBW	FJT	HET	JJE	KN	LPW	MWG	PEH	RK	SKW	VAW	WM 6
BAW	CEK	EC 2	FL	HGM	JKF	KNS	LRG	MWT	PES	RKG	SNP	VCM	WMT
59 BC	CFD	ECB	FN	HJA	JKW	KP	LRJ	NCR	PEW	RKM	SPK	VD	WN 6
BCP	CKM	ECD	FP	HJE	JLA	KRB	LRT	NDB	PFH	RLA	SRJ	VE	WR
BDD	CKS	ECF	FR 3	HJL	JLN	KRD	LSF	NDH	PFM	RLE	SRR	VEB	WRM
BDG	CL	ECL	FRS	HJP	JMR	KRJ	LSR	NDM	PFS	RLF	SSF	VEW	WS 34
BDR	CMJ	ECS	FS 4	HJR	JN	KRT	LSW	NDP	PFW	RLK	STG	VG 2	WT 2
BDS	CMS	EDP	GAJ	HJT	JNH	KRW	LVS	NEC	97 PG	RLL	STL	VH 5	WTB
BE	CNH	EE 99	GAO	HJW	JNL	KSW	LZ	NEG	PGD	RLO	SWJ	VJC	WY
BFM	CR 40	EEB	GAP	HKS	JTK	KTS	MAG	NGH	PHB	RLR	6 SY	VJD	X 6
BGD	CS	EEC	GB	HL 3	JTP	KU	52 MB	NGM	PK 95	RNP	TAD	VJF	XJ
BGR	CSE	EED	GBB	HLB	JTT	KW	MBB	NHB	PLA	RP 2	TAH	VJL	XK
BHC	CTC	EEF	GCA	HLH	JVG	KWB	MC 34	NJ	PMB	RPA	TBS	VJT	YD
BHS	CVC	EEG	GCD	HMF	JVL	KWW	MDF	NJA	PMT	RPD	TCP	VJW	YE
BJK	CVH	EEM	GDP	HMH	JVS	KY	MDO	NJN	PN 2	RPF	TE 2	VK II	YG
BJL	CWJ	EF 8	GE	HMK	JW 45	L 45	MEC	NL	PNB	RPH	TEB	VLB	YH
BJT	DBA	EH	GEB	HML	JWA	LAS	MEJ	NLP	PO	RPS	TEP	VLC	YJ
BKC	DBG	EHB	GEC	HO	JWD	LBH	MEW	NLS	PPC	RRT	TG 2	VLH	20 YM
BLC	DCE	EJB	GEE	HRT	JWW	LBW	MF II	NLT	PPM	43 RS	TJA	VLL	YR
BLG	DCF	EJE	GEK	HRW	JY	LC	MFF	NLW	PR 4	RTD	TJE	VLM	YT
BLH	DCN	EJM	GEP	HT	47 KB	LCB	MFJ	NML	PRH	RTJ	TJH	VLS	YW
6 BM	DCP	EJO	GF	44 HU	KBS	LD	MFT	NPD	99 PS	RW	TJJ	VM 4	YZ

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BUSINESS

Oliver Shah



Miliband's North Sea raid will send a £20bn bill hurtling taxpayers' way

Since Shell tried to scuttle an oil storage buoy off the west coast of Scotland in 1995, energy companies have had to dispose of offshore installations on dry land when they're decommissioned.

Shell's plan to sink the redundant Brent Spar caused outrage on environmental grounds. Greenpeace activists boarded it from a helicopter and drivers boycotted Shell petrol stations. Forced into a U-turn, Shell towed Brent Spar to a Norwegian fjord, where it was dismantled at almost ten times the cost. Three years later, governments of the northeast Atlantic region agreed to ban the at-sea burial of installations for good.

Under rules dating back to 1975, taxpayers pick up roughly half the cost of scrapping offshore structures when they go to the big oil field in the sky. The forecast decommissioning cost for the entire North Sea moves around depending on levels of activity and efficiency gains, but it stood at £40 billion last year, according to the government-owned North Sea Transition Authority. The exchequer will be on the hook for about £20 billion in the form of relief on operators' past and future taxes.

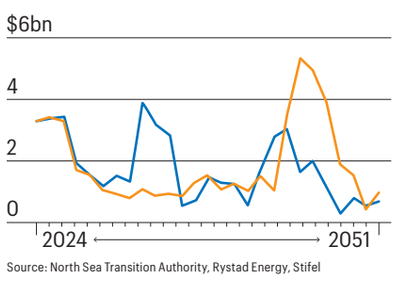
That bill will start arriving a decade sooner than it might have done if Ed Miliband, the new energy secretary, goes ahead with his promise to soak the North Sea oil and gas industry.

Labour's manifesto vowed to increase the Conservatives' windfall tax on profits, bringing the total to 78 per cent; take away "unjustifiably generous investment allowances"; and stop issuing licences for new exploration. It said the extra windfall tax would reap £1.2 billion a year, or £6 billion over this parliament, which would go towards funding state-owned GB Energy.

The North Sea had two booms, in the mid-80s and the late-90s. It has gushed net tax revenues of more than £300 billion and in its heyday accounted for more than 10 per cent of all government receipts. It has been in decline for years, but accelerating that would be economically and environmentally illiterate.

Contrary to perceptions, "majors" such as Shell and BP make up just 30 per cent of North Sea output. Most sites are now owned by smaller quoted companies such as Harbour, Ithaca and Serica. Hitting them with higher tax and withdrawing investment allowances would result in production and job cuts, most of them in Scotland. Analysts at Stifel say Labour's extra windfall tax would raise a maximum of £5 billion because it would force the sector into "rapid decline". After an initial spurt, it would result in a lower tax take.

An early demise pulls forward clean-up costs



Source: North Sea Transition Authority, Rystad Energy, Stifel

Choking off domestic supply of oil and gas while it is still in demand would simply offshore emissions. The best argument is a flimsy one – that it would give the UK greater moral clout to urge other countries towards net zero and add to the ostracization of fossil fuels.

The above is fairly well-trodden ground. Less fully explored has been the impact that the North Sea's premature demise would have in terms of decommissioning costs. Stifel reckons Labour's plans would shift the pattern of payments forward by about ten years, with a big spike in the early 2030s. It says that from about 2040, the government would be paying more to the oil and gas industry in tax relief than it received in revenues – as it did in 2016-17, when falling commodity prices made the North Sea a net drain for the first time.

In an era when chancellors scrabble around for single-digit billions of "headroom" in fiscal forecasts, the advancing of a £20 billion outlay matters. There is also what PR people would call "optics". If Labour wins a second term, is it going to be happy seeing billions of pounds flow out to evil oil and gas companies? Consider that in light of former justice secretary Alex Chalk's comment last week that in straitened times, new prisons had to be weighed against new hospitals.

There would be a temptation to renege on the payments. That's where the industry and the last government saw this one coming. In 2013, to give North Sea operators confidence that the decommissioning regime wouldn't change in the future, Sajid Javid as economic secretary to the Treasury announced a new arrangement. The government would enter into legally binding deeds with oil and gas companies guaranteeing them decommissioning tax relief at 2013 levels in perpetuity. Within five years, the Treasury had signed more than 80 deeds, according to the National Audit Office. A deed has been called on at least once: in 2017-18, the Treasury paid £45 million to one operator and set aside a further £299 million for future years.

An oil and gas veteran says any government attempt to cancel these deeds would be "horrible". But the companies would probably win in court.

To be fair, all this was a known fly in the oil barrel. Miliband is only doing what he said he'd do in opposition. I backed Labour at this election because the Tories needed to go. I could swallow this fly – and another, Labour's workers' rights package – for the greater good.

But it is worth thinking about – not just because of the implications for taxpayers but because it prefigures inevitable tensions to come between idealists such as Miliband and realists such as chancellor Rachel Reeves. We must hope the latter camp wins out.

Starmer's goat-herding

To end on a more positive note, Sir Keir Starmer has made some excellent external appointments – notably Sir Patrick Vallance as science minister and James Timpson on prisons. Varun Chandra, boss of intelligence firm Hakluyt, is thought to be being set for a business role. Sir Nigel Wilson, the former Legal & General chief, would be helpful on housing. It's reminiscent of Gordon Brown's "government of all the talents", known as the "goats".

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Economy can't be fixed just by building more homes



David Smith Economic Outlook

Throughout Whitehall, there are officials who have to go through ministerial speeches to ensure that party politics does not contaminate them too much. It always makes me think of officers in First World War trenches censoring letters home from the troops.

The result of this is that, in Rachel Reeves's first big speech as chancellor, a few days ago, there was evidence of the blue pencil, or even the black felt-tip, at work. In the published version, she said: "Growth [political content removed]. It is now our national mission." And: "This morning I want to outline the first steps [political content removed] taken to fix the foundations of our economy."

I think the censor must have then got a little tired of the task, because she went on to say: "Our economy has been held back by decisions deferred and decisions ducked. Political self-interest put ahead of the national interest... We face the legacy of fourteen years of chaos and economic irresponsibility."

That's life. But in one respect, Reeves has reason to be grateful that the 14 years of chaos ended on a brighter note. May's monthly gross domestic product (GDP) figures showed a better than expected 0.4 per cent rise and the economy is set for good second-quarter growth, GDP having risen by a chunky 0.9 per cent in the March-May period compared with the previous three months.

If growth is your mission, that is not a bad place to start. A striking figure in Reeves's speech was that if the economy had grown in line with the average among advanced countries – the OECD – since 2010, it would now be £140 billion, or over 6 per cent, larger.

As I wrote last Sunday, some of us were a touch nervous about whether Reeves would pull some unpredicted rabbits out of the hat when her speech was announced. But she stuck to the pre-election script.

Not all of the chancellor's speech was about housebuilding, but that was the most eye-catching part. An accelerated construction of new homes, delivered through planning reform, would be integral to Labour's growth mission.

I know the housebuilding industry reasonably well and, for as long as I have been doing this job, the refrain I have heard from builders is that the UK's planning system has held back the sector – and levels of home construction – for decades. The new government is clearly pressing the right buttons – on housebuilding, infrastructure and business investment – in offering an extensive planning shake-up.

What I also know from the industry, though, is that nobody thinks 1.5 million new homes, an average of 300,000 a year, can be delivered in this parliament. The government has brought back a national housebuilding target, but unless something changes dramatically, it is a target that will be missed.

Noble Francis, economics director of the Construction Products Association, sets out the challenge clearly in a post on LinkedIn. The arithmetic, as he points out, is against it. Housebuilding, defined by net additional homes, has been on a downward trajectory and is likely to come in at 160,000 in 2024-25 – so a very big increase would be needed to get to 300,000. To get to 1.5 million over the parliament would require 380,000 to be built in the final year. This, as he says, is not going to happen.

> **Nobody thinks 1.5m new homes can be delivered in this parliament**

There are no magic wands to be waved here. As Francis points out: "Both the UK housebuilding workforce and product manufacturing capacity have fallen in recent years, so new investment in skills and capacity will initially be needed just to get them back to where they were 2-3 years ago, before the government even thinks of 300,000 net additional homes or more."

The story of housebuilding is an interesting one. On the crudest measure, new-build housing, 300,000 new homes have not been constructed in a year since 1969-70, when nearly half were built by local authorities and, to a much lesser extent, housing associations. The annual average over the past 30 years, straddling Labour and Tory governments, has been 160,000.

There is another measure, favoured by housing experts, which is net additional dwellings. This is new-build housing plus conversions and change of use, which includes agricultural to residential, office to residential and retail to residential. All our great cities have streets of former houses near their centres that are now offices for solicitors and other white-collar businesses. This process has gone into partial reverse and the hybrid working revolution may accelerate the change.

The story for net additional dwellings is rather better. In the financial year 2019-20, most of it before Covid struck, these homes totalled 248,590 in England, comprising new-build completions of 219,120, conversions of 4,344 and change of use of nearly 27,000. Take away demolitions of just over 8,000 and you have net additional dwellings of nearly a quarter of a million.

Add in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the total for that year will not have been 300,000 but may not have been very short of it. Over the past 30 years, the increase in net additional dwellings for England has averaged just under 180,000 a year, and over the past 20 years, 190,000.

There is another detail in the figures for net additional dwellings, pointed out to me by Neal Hudson, the residential analyst. This is that the lion's share of the increase in housing this century has been in private rented accommodation. The number of dwellings owned by private landlords has more than doubled.

Another thing worth mentioning is that more housing is needed because of the rising population, to meet pressing social needs, and to satisfy what remains a strong desire among young people to own their own homes – a desire that has been thwarted for many in recent years. A housing market that does not work well inhibits people's ability to move around the country for employment reasons, and hampers recruitment and expansion for firms in many parts of the nation.

The read-across from new housing to the wider economy is not, however, that powerful. The economy grew well from 1997 to 2007, averaging 3 per cent a year, even when housebuilding was weak. The pick-up in net additional dwellings at the end of the 2010s was alongside weak economic growth. This is not surprising: construction is only 6 per cent of the economy, and housebuilding only part of that, although new housing creates work elsewhere in the economy.

This is not to say the new government should not be ambitious about housing, even if its target looks a tall order. There are good reasons to aim high. Just don't expect new homes to drive the economy.

PS

If the new chancellor wanted to make herself popular in London, Edinburgh and Oxford, and in the halls of Burberry, Louis Vuitton and Harrods, there is one simple thing she could do: They might even put up a statue to her at Bicester Village, the posh outlet mall beloved of overseas visitors if she restored the VAT exemption previously enjoyed by foreign tourists but abolished by Rishi Sunak when he was chancellor, to help meet the costs of the pandemic.

What opponents call the tourist tax has been the subject of a noisy campaign by retailers and other businesses that benefit from the foreign visitor's pound; they say the removal of the exemption has left the UK at a disadvantage against other European capitals that still offer it.

The campaign has employed the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) to demonstrate that removing the exemption costs the UK £10.7 billion a year in lost GDP and up to two million fewer visitors a year.

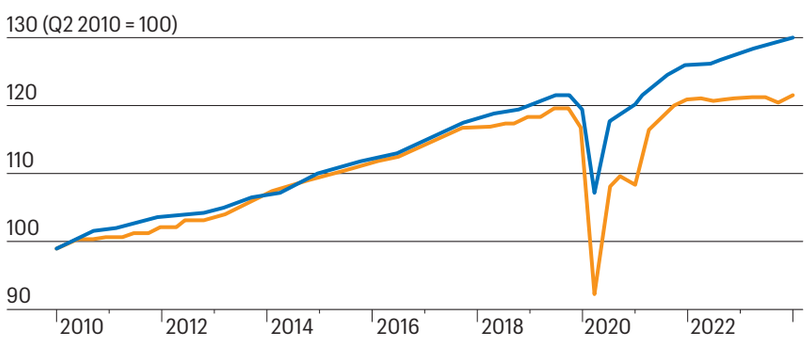
So what's the problem? VAT exemption, technically the VAT retail export scheme, was abolished in January 2021. Its reinstatement was announced by then-chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng in September 2022, but subsequently cancelled by Jeremy Hunt, his successor. Its reintroduction was estimated by the Treasury to cost £2 billion a year. That is a direct cost. The indirect benefits from more overseas visitors and higher GDP are less certain.

The real problem, though, is that other European capitals can offer VAT-free shopping to non-EU visitors from the Far East and elsewhere, as always, but now including those from the UK, while a reinstated scheme here would have to provide the benefit not only to them but to the EU's 450 million citizens. Proponents of restoring the scheme see that as a benefit. The Treasury sees it as an escalating cost, a fiscal risk. That statue might have to wait.

david.smith@sunday-times.co.uk

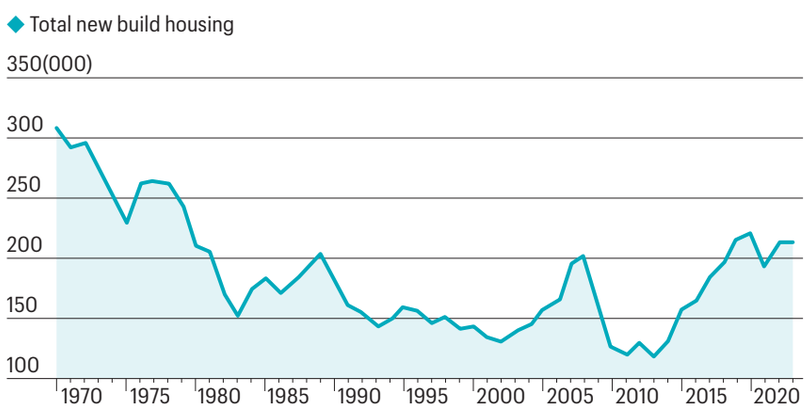
THE UK HAS HAD SLOWER GROWTH ...

Gross domestic product



Source: Treasury/OECD

... BUT HOUSEBUILDING IS ONLY PART OF IT



Source: DHULC/Housing supply indicators

America: the gift that keeps giving

Irwin Stelzer American Account

America's obsession with the president's efforts to stop ye of little faith in his acuity – "bedwetters", as Biden surrogates label them – assigning him to the scrapheap of history, shared attention with a series of seemingly unrelated events last week.

Delegations from the 32 members of Nato were in town to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the alliance, along with non-members seeking shelter from geopolitical storms under its umbrella, to join cheers for President Biden and share fears of Donald Trump.

Joe Biden, reunited with his teleprompter, greeted them with a forceful welcoming speech in which he treated the defence of Ukraine, Taiwan and other non-members of Nato, as if they are covered by America's commitment to come to the defence of alliance members. They are not.

The US has accounted for 36 per cent of Nato members' GDP since about 1960, but paid 61 per cent of its military spending. Thanks largely to Trump's threats to withdraw from Nato and leave those not meeting their commitments to the tender mercies of Vladimir Putin, the current GDP expenditure ratio is in better balance. Still, America, with 68 per cent of the alliance's GDP, foots about 80 per cent of its cost.

Some members – among them, wealthy Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada and Belgium, where Nato's HQ staff of 4,000 toil and spend – have not met their 2 per cent of GDP pledges at a time when experts say despots' threats make 3 per cent a more realistic target. American defence of these countries, writes Farah Stockman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning member of The New York Times editorial board, means "they can afford social safety nets that Americans can only dream of".

While Nato was considering its strategy for a future in which China, Russia, Iran and North Korea attempt to create a New World Order – despots of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but access to the dollar-dominated financial system – Treasury secretary Janet Yellen was reporting to Congress on the state of the economy. She cited "tremendous progress" in bringing down the inflation that has damaged her boss's re-election bid. Although rent and housing costs are keeping inflation higher than she would like, easing supply issues and labour market tightness will, she guesses, continue to reduce consumer price pressures.

The third of last week's big events in the nation's capital was the appearance of Federal Reserve Board chairman Jerome Powell before House and Senate committees. He testified that inflation is easing and the labour market is "strong, but not overheated", but that he wants some more "good data" before lowering the Fed's key interest rate from its 23-year high. When that might be, sayeth he not. He did get some "good data" later in the week: the annualised rate of price increases dropped in June for the third straight month.

Trump has already threatened to end the Fed's vaunted independence by inserting himself into the process of deciding on interest rates. That independence is now also under pressure from Democrats who want Powell to cut the cost of borrowing. They are hearing from voters upset by high rates on mortgages and on unpaid credit card balances, a dissatisfaction that could hurt incumbents in close races.

These events – Nato celebrations; Yellen's defence of administration budgets that increase entitlements while reducing real defence spending; and Powell's resistance to cutting rates in part because loose fiscal policy feeds the inflation fires – are inter-related.

Biden's decision to expand the coverage of Nato's umbrella to include non-members such as Ukraine increases government spending at a time when the Fed is trying to cool the economy. Trump says President Volodymyr Zelensky "is maybe the greatest salesman of any politician that's ever lived. Every time he comes to our country, he walks away with $60 billion." Yellen's support for President Biden's priorities, which include an expanded welfare state, infrastructure and green spending, deprives the military of funds to meet Nato's expanding commitments and requires a printing of dollars that makes Powell's life difficult. Powell's hesitance to cut interest rates increases the cost of carrying the nation's enormous debt.



> **Powell can take comfort from the Fed's success in taming inflation**

Nato, of course, has reason to celebrate its prevention of a land war in Europe, until now. Yellen has reason to hail the progress made in repairing America's crumbling infrastructure and buoying the spending power of low earners. Powell can take comfort from the success of Fed policies in taming the inflation it once dubbed "transitory".

The combined effect of all these successful policies is – failure: an under-funded American military; an increase in commitments to a Nato already overly dependent on US financial support; a Treasury at war with the Fed; a Fed in danger of losing its independence. As a once-popular expression of incredulity has it,

Who'd 'av thunk it?

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Irwin Stelzer is a business adviser

BUSINESS

Prufrock



William Turvill

Caring plays the game, Domino's not so much

They don't call him Caring for nothing. Showing off his nice guy credentials, Richard, the glamorous, ever-tanned restaurateur has decreed that tonight all his Ivy and Bill's restaurants will close at 7pm to ensure his 5,000-strong workforce can watch the Euro 2024 final between England and Spain.

Caring tells Prufrock: "I believe all our staff should have the opportunity to watch England win."

Good on him. The Ivy is currently up for sale with a mooted £1 billion price tag. Prufrock only hopes its next owners don't mind losing out on some revenue.

Second place in the do-gooder stakes goes to LNER, the East Coast Main Line operator, which is allowing customers to move booked train travel free of charge, if it clashes with the match.

No such generosity from Domino's, however, which is – understandably – hoping to cash in after selling 20 pizzas a second during England's semi-final against the Netherlands. A source says: "Much like Gareth Southgate, our store managers will be choosing their top squads for Sunday night." No doubt Domino's workforce, like England's footballers, will be pleased as pepperoni to be serving their nation tonight. Or not.

● Direct Line, the insurance brand that gives its name to the FTSE 250 giant, announced to great fanfare last week that it would start selling products through price-comparison websites for the first time. Since its launch in 1985, Direct Line has stubbornly refused to bow to the industry norm, preferring to sell to customers directly, often through its little red phones.

So, why the change of heart? Well, Prufrock can't help but note that Direct Line's recently anointed chief executive, the baby-faced Adam Winslow, has some personal history with price-comparison sites. In fact his old man, Peter, was chief executive of the meerkat-fronted Comparethemarket.com.

See the connection? Simples.

DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES



Richard Caring and wife Patricia give staff a night off

JUST SAYING . . .

Wetherspoon hopes that the current chancellor, with a Bank of England pedigree, will understand how many beans make five, and rectify this inequality



Spoons boss Sir Tim Martin called for Rachel Reeves to level taxes on alcohol sales in pubs with those in supermarkets

Club tycoon will cater for workers

It's official: the world's poshest WeWork is coming to Mayfair. As Prufrock first disclosed in January, private members' club tycoon Robin Birley is trying his hand at co-working with a venture called The Carrington.

Birley wrote to members at 5 Hertford Street on Friday introducing them to his new business just across the road and due to open next year. The Carrington, "our new business and wellness space", will have private studios, rooms for fully-catered meetings, open workspaces, a restaurant and several bar areas.

The "wellness area" will include a gym, treatment rooms, a 25-metre freshwater pool, a steam room and a sauna. Membership costs are thought to run into six figures. Sign Prufrock up... expenses department approval permitting.

BT boss joins the diplomatic corps

While pubs across England will be filling up with excited, and increasingly tipsy, fans throughout today, Prufrock expects the atmosphere to be rather different north of the border. A survey by Betfair conducted before Euro 2024 found that two in three Scots would not be cheering England on in the competition. What, Prufrock wondered, about Allison Kirkby, the Scottish chief executive of BT, which is a major sponsor of the England national team through its EE brand? "Of course, I'll be cheering on England," she tells Prufrock. "It will be a great boost for the whole of the UK if England win."

PS: Kudos to ING, the Dutch investment bank that sponsors its national team, for ploughing ahead with its summer drinks party – despite the fact it clashed with England's semi-final against ... the Netherlands. Bosses allowed the drinks to flow beyond the scheduled 9pm finish time to allow guests to watch the game. Sorry about the result, ING. It's coming home.



Allison Kirkby up for fitba

Steamed up for his hobby horse

Ferroequinologists were out in force at King's Cross station yesterday for the relaunch of Blue Peter, a hulking old steam train that has recently been restored. Chief among the enthusiasts was Jeremy Hosking, the well-heeled City investor best known for donating hundreds of thousands of pounds to the Reclaim Party, set up by actor-turned-right-wing-activist Laurence Fox.

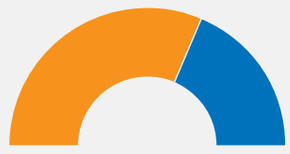
When he's not playing politics, Hosking is found trainspotting, and has acquired several steam locomotives – the Doncaster-born Blue Peter among them. The train set off from King's Cross's Platform 8 for York. Prufrock awaits confirmation from Hosking that he has arrived safely in Yorkshire.

FUNNY BUSINESS



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PwC has cut the number of half-day Fridays it offers workers this summer. But should firms cut staff some slack on Fridays? @TimesBusiness

VIEWPOINT



SEEMA SHAH

France's factions jostle for power

If Westeros, the fictional kingdom in *Game of Thrones*, issued bonds, it's a fair assumption that their cost of borrowing would be high. Setting aside the difficult-to-price risks of dragons and monsters, one reason for the high yields would be the political stagnation borne of a system of government reliant on multiple powerful factions, all with competing agendas and ambitions, most of whom hate each other.

Welcome to France.

A few short months ago, the country was regarded as an economy heading broadly in the right direction. President Macron introduced some important pro-business reforms and had seemingly faced down his opponents to exercise greater fiscal discipline, including the unpopular but necessary decision to raise the state retirement age. That perception has now significantly shifted.

First of all, the glass half-full picture. From an investment point of view, a hung parliament with three roughly equally sized blocs could be argued as the best of the feasible outcomes. The net effect is likely to be policy paralysis. While that means there will be limited progress on labour liberalisation, it's equally unlikely that the types of extreme measures that would freak out investors – a proposed 90 per cent tax on high earners, say – will ever see the light of day.

Nevertheless, it is a stretch to suggest that this outcome is good news. France, and Europe, could now be facing some major challenges.

The spread between French and German bonds – a proxy for the level of risk investors see in France – has stopped widening, but it hasn't gone back to the levels seen before Macron announced the snap election.

The bigger risk is that a loosening of fiscal discipline in France encourages other EU members to follow. If France steps outside of the EU's tax and spending frameworks, it isn't hard to imagine other nations – Italy, for example – might be encouraged to do the same.

Macron has been the standard-bearer for a united Europe. From an investment standpoint, his efforts helped make Europe appear stable, cohesive, and attractive.

However, this has been a brutal few weeks for him and his influence in France – and Europe – is diminishing. Ten years ago, Europe accounted for about 20 per cent of global market capitalisation. Today, it is about 12 per cent.

There might, of course, be a silver lining for Britain. For those looking to allocate capital to Europe, we finally have political stability and some very good companies trading at low multiples.

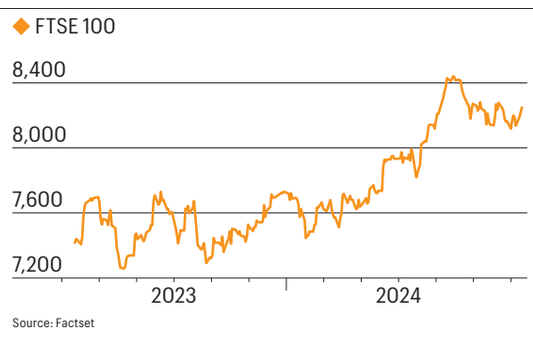
Now, as the left, centrist, and right-wing factions jostle for power, the *Game of Thrones* begins. Like Westeros, France will be interesting to watch – but, with plot twists aplenty still to come, it is not an investment for the faint-hearted.

Seema Shah is chief global strategist at Principal Asset Management

THE WEEK IN THE MARKETS

FTSE 100
8,252.91
▲48.98 ▲0.60%
H: 8,474.41
L: 7,215.76

FTSE 250
21,202.89
▲416.24 ▲2.00%
H: 21,224.06
L: 16,764.25



Source: Factset

RISERS
Ocado Group: 380p, ▲15.78% on expansion **Hiscox:** £12.63, ▲13.07% on possible takeover **SSP:** 177.40p, ▲11.78% on results **Aston Martin:** 163p, ▲10.88% on broker update

FALLERS
Bytes Technology : 498.8p, ▼9.80% on trading update **Goodwin:** £80.40, ▼6.94% on fall from high **BP:** 453.5p, ▼5.95% on profit warning **CMC Markets:** 320p, ▼5.60% on weakness for spread-betters

Source: FACTSET

DOW JONES 40,000.90
▲625.03 ▲1.59% H: 40,257.24 L: 32,327.20

NASDAQ 18,398.44
▲45.68 ▲0.25% H: 18,671.07 L: 12,543.86

S&P 500 5,615.35
▲48.16 ▲0.87% H: 5,655.56 L: 4,103.78

NIKKEI 41,190.68
▲278.31 ▲0.68% H: 41,889.16 L: 30,487.67

HANG SENG 18,293.38
▲493.77 ▲2.77% H: 20,361.03 L: 14,794.16

SHANGHAI 2,971.30
▲21.37 ▲0.72% H: 3,322.13 L: 2,635.09

CAC 40 7,724.32
▲48.70 ▲0.64% H: 8,259.19 L: 6,773.82

DAX 18,748.18
▲272.73 ▲1.48% H: 18,892.92 L: 14,630.21

FTSE EUROFIRST 2,078.70
▲29.47 ▲1.44% H: 2,081.37 L: 1,016.04

SENSEX 80,519.34
▲522.74 ▲0.65% H: 80,893.51 L: 63,092.98

ALL ORDS 8,206.10
▲136.00 ▲1.69% H: 8,212.60 L: 6,938.50

S&P TSX 22,673.52
▲614.49 ▲2.79% H: 22,750.33 L: 18,692.06

DOLLAR USD > GBP
$1.2988
▲0.0186
12-month high: $1.3142 low: $1.2037

EURO EUR > GBP
€1.1908
▲0.0104
12-month high: €1.1917 low: €1.1405

YEN YEN > USD
¥157.84
▼3.03
12-month high: ¥162.01 low: ¥137.27

OIL DOLLARS/BARREL
$85.27
▼2.12
12-month high: $95.96 low: $72.29

GOLD DOLLARS/TROY OZ
$2,416.00
▲19.30
12-month high: $2,454.20 low: $1,823.50

BITCOIN DOLLARS
$58,617
▲2,050
12-month high: $73,798 low: $24,926
Price at 11.30am Saturday

THE ECONOMY

Consumer prices index	current rate	prev. month	
	2.0%	2.3%	
CPI including housing	current rate	prev. month	
	2.8%	3.0%	
Retail price index	current rate	prev. month	
	3.0%	3.3%	
Average weekly earnings	on prev. month	on last year	
£687	▲0.4%	▲5.5%	
Unemployment	current rate	prev. month	
1.51m	4.4%	4.3%	
Manufacturing output	on the year	on last month	
	▲0.6%	▲0.4%	
Retail sales	on the year	on last month	
	▲1.3%	▲2.9%	
UK trade balance (£bn)	latest 3 mths	prev. 3 mths	latest 12 mths
	-9.18	-7.55	-39.21
Gross domestic product	latest quarter	prev. quarter	annual change
	▲0.7%	▼0.3%	▲0.3%
Budget deficit (PSNB) in £bn	last month	prev. month	year to date
	-15.0	-18.5	-33.5

10-YEAR BOND YIELDS %

		variation	12 months high	12 months low
UK	4.112	▼0.016	4.760	3.433
US	4.187	▼0.098	5.022	3.733
JAPAN	1.050	▼0.020	1.109	0.425
GERMANY	2.500	▼0.036	3.027	1.894

TOP 200 COMPANIES

Market cap ranking		Price	Change on week	52-week high	52-week low	Mkt Cap (£m)
119	Abrdn	166.8	+8.9	236.7	136.2	2972.1
52	Admiral	2609.0	+26.0	2837.0	2055.0	7733.3
89	Airtel Africa	118.5	-0.4	131.6	90.7	4414.4
163	AJ Bell	394.5	-4.0	403.0	249.0	1626.6
169	Allianz Technology Trust	405.0	+2.0	410.5	246.0	1555.3
23	Anglo American	2396.0	-37.5	2773.5	1670.2	29047.5
26	Antofagasta	2225.0	+21.0	2410.0	1293.0	21935.3
25	Ashtead	5222.0	+2.0	6104.0	4667.0	22786.4
31	Associated British Foods	2504.0	+32.0	2738.0	1929.5	18579.8
195	Assura	42.4	+0.6	49.2	39.1	1267.6
187	Aston Martin Lag	163.0	+14.5	395.4	132.6	1344.2
1	AstraZeneca	12260.0	+154.0	12600.0	9501.0	190062.9
54	Auto Trader	822.2	+21.8	829.6	587.0	7359.1
38	Aviva	489.6	+8.6	497.0	369.2	13019.3
125	Babcock International	532.0	+6.5	565.5	286.0	2689.8
14	BAE	1268.0	-10.5	1400.0	912.2	38428.5
139	Balfour Beatty	405.6	+15.6	405.6	295.4	2090.9
188	Baltic Classifieds	277.0	+27.0	277.0	183.6	1341.8
144	Bank of Georgia	4390.0	+350.0	5420.0	2945.0	1969.0
19	Barclays	222.4	-1.9	224.4	129.2	32890.5
80	Barratt Developments	497.8	+5.8	566.4	392.3	4851.5
90	Beazley	674.5	+18.5	708.0	503.0	4337.0
110	Bellway	2662.0	+2.0	2860.0	2006.0	3158.5
75	Berkeley	4850.0	+24.0	5320.0	3860.0	5126.9
133	Big Yellow	1216.0	+62.0	1264.0	910.0	2374.4
87	B&M European	448.3	+13.8	612.4	434.5	4495.5
191	Bodycote	710.0	+6.0	768.0	555.0	1315.6
6	BP	453.5	-36.8	558.0	444.2	75111.0
180	BREEDON	415.0	+22.5	415.0	304.5	1425.8
141	Bridgepoint	253.4	+10.0	289.6	166.9	2009.6
11	British American Tobacco	2507.0	+37.0	2735.0	2267.0	55506.0
99	British Land	416.8	+0.8	444.6	291.8	3867.3
113	Britvic	1262.0	+52.0	1264.0	785.5	3113.8
35	BT	141.2	+2.5	145.1	102.3	13811.4
43	Bunzl	3188.0	+68.0	3306.0	2687.0	10713.5
108	Burberry	886.6	+8.2	2257.0	847.6	3179.2
147	Caledonia Investments	3540.0	+110.0	3700.0	2593.6	1929.9
34	Carnival	1294.0	+28.5	1377.0	811.6	16396.6
172	Centamin	129.8	+3.6	131.1	78.2	1506.2
55	Centrica	137.8	-4.2	172.5	122.8	7230.1
189	Clarkson	4370.0	+90.0	4370.0	2550.0	1339.9
183	Coats	87.3	+5.1	88.7	64.8	1389.5
46	Coca Cola HBC	2722.0	+28.0	2804.0	2065.0	9905.7
16	Compass	2195.0	+34.0	2323.0	1945.5	37339.1
107	Computacenter	2844.0	-108.0	2962.0	2026.0	3246.2
77	Convatec	245.4	+4.8	293.4	196.2	5030.2
129	Cranswick	4615.0	+90.0	4615.0	3170.0	2476.4
68	Croda	4074.0	+39.0	5956.0	3899.0	5688.8
96	Darktrace	575.6	-4.0	603.4	292.3	4031.5
69	DCC	5650.0	0.0	6035.0	4171.0	5586.4
127	Derwent London	2318.0	+50.0	2402.0	1779.0	2602.9
10	Diageo	2539.5	+16.5	3457.0	2463.5	56380.6
67	Diploma	4308.0	+132.0	4308.0	2804.0	5773.8
131	Direct Line Insurance	189.1	-5.9	225.8	140.4	2453.9
192	Domino's Pizza	324.0	+11.6	424.6	292.6	1300.7
137	Drax	560.0	+24.0	619.8	401.5	2168.3
66	DS Smith	420.8	-4.2	426.2	263.7	5806.5
135	Dunelm	1130.0	+3.0	1191.0	967.0	2284.9
102	EasyJet	492.2	+26.8	577.8	359.9	3706.7
88	Endeavour	1811.0	+48.0	1967.0	1250.0	4433.4
146	Energean	1057.0	+48.0	1204.0	808.0	1939.4
91	Entain	676.4	+42.2	1403.5	618.6	4321.9
18	Experian	3708.0	+33.0	3779.0	2390.0	33862.9
155	4imprint	6210.0	+280.0	6540.0	4255.0	1748.8
98	Frasers	875.0	+13.0	938.0	716.0	3940.3
85	Fresnillo	620.0	+43.5	639.5	440.3	4568.7
199	Future	1082.0	+37.0	1145.0	577.0	1234.3
103	Games Workshop	10680.0	+220.0	11700.0	9125.0	3519.3
200	Genus	1848.0	+120.0	2506.0	1630.0	1220.3
9	Glencore	478.4	-4.7	501.5	369.0	58141.4
140	Grafton	1023.8	+84.8	1023.8	751.0	2048.5
151	Grainger	249.0	+11.0	274.8	218.4	1837.9
182	Great Portland	349.0	+6.5	369.7	295.8	1414.5
121	Greggs	2902.0	+92.0	2940.0	2282.0	2944.9
8	GSK	1517.0	+6.5	1812.5	1318.6	61865.4
20	Haleon	337.0	+14.8	341.0	312.0	30775.8
45	Halma	2671.0	-19.0	2721.0	1810.5	10074.7
177	Hammerson	29.2	-0.2	29.8	20.9	1457.9
73	Hargreaves Lansdown	1104.0	-10.0	1153.0	690.4	5231.6
174	Hays	94.0	-1.7	110.6	88.5	1489.8
186	Helios Towers	129.0	+6.6	129.4	59.0	1356.0
95	Hikma Pharmaceuticals	1837.0	+6.0	2205.0	1722.0	4076.0
156	Hill & Smith	2125.0	+127.0	2125.0	1534.0	1706.7
92	Hiscox	1263.0	+146.0	1267.0	938.0	4306.3
76	Howden Joinery	929.5	+27.0	930.5	624.0	5107.7
3	HSBC	671.1	-20.2	720.8	575.8	124464.6
111	IDS	330.0	+2.4	336.2	213.0	3158.4
109	IG Group	851.5	+14.5	851.5	611.0	3159.8
82	IMI	1853.0	+49.0	1901.0	1445.0	4813.1
33	Imperial Brands	2085.0	+30.0	2085.0	1580.0	17807.2
104	Inchcape	820.0	+23.0	847.0	624.5	3378.4
42	Informa	856.6	+2.6	868.8	685.8	11440.0
37	InterContinental Hotels	8316.0	+70.0	8752.0	5366.0	13425.3
59	Intermediate Capital	2286.0	+62.0	2394.0	1255.5	6643.9
48	International Airlines	174.0	+1.3	186.4	138.0	8511.9
128	International Public	130.6	+2.8	139.2	115.4	2481.0
51	Intertek	4860.0	+86.0	5075.0	3755.0	7830.2
100	Investec	599.0	+13.5	599.0	439.0	3864.5
105	ITV	83.2	+0.3	83.9	55.8	3292.6
153	IWG	175.0	+1.2	207.0	127.4	1771.0
64	JD Sports	115.8	+2.2	175.1	104.0	5999.5
115	Johnson Matthey	1692.0	+42.0	1870.0	1446.5	3095.7
161	JTC PLC	1020.0	+18.0	1020.0	627.5	1668.2
185	Kainos	1082.0	+12.0	1367.0	914.0	1361.5
78	Kingfisher	273.1	+15.6	273.1	201.2	4995.5
176	Lancashire Holdings	610.0	+12.0	689.0	540.5	1458.1
81	Land Sec	647.0	+12.0	725.2	559.4	4819.5
36	Legal & General	232.4	+0.1	256.3	205.8	13715.5
17	Lloyds Banking	59.1	+1.8	59.1	39.8	36849.7
12	London Stock Exchange	9428.0	+154.0	9674.0	7986.0	50088.6
94	Londonmetric Property	201.8	+8.3	210.2	156.4	4112.6
118	Man	259.6	+11.8	277.8	202.0	3008.1
61	Marks & Spencer	309.6	+21.3	311.6	194.5	6244.2
53	Melrose	586.8	+13.0	677.6	446.8	7731.9
79	M&G	208.7	+0.7	238.8	183.6	4967.8
152	Mitchells & Butlers	302.0	+13.5	312.5	199.3	1793.1
171	Mitie	121.2	+5.2	124.2	91.9	1526.4
57	Mondi	1586.0	+37.5	1706.1	1311.5	6991.9
198	Moneysupermarket	231.8	-4.6	283.8	208.0	1245.7
196	Morgan Sindall	2715.0	+105.0	2715.0	1800.0	1267.3
13	National Grid	950.8	+28.2	1050.1	838.4	45750.0
24	NatWest	323.6	-1.2	329.4	176.1	26944.9
138	Network International	392.8	+1.8	395.2	382.4	2092.6
41	Next	9108.0	+170.0	9426.0	6750.0	11493.1
167	Ninety One	176.5	+2.3	186.2	156.7	1568.0
112	Ocado	380.0	+74.5	976.4	281.0	3118.0
150	Onesavings Bank	478.2	+15.2	487.4	280.8	1850.1
173	Oxford Inst	2585.0	+115.0	2660.0	1712.0	1497.2
190	PageGroup	422.6	-3.2	498.4	365.0	1325.8
170	Paragon Banking	740.0	+3.0	779.5	443.6	1537.0
58	Pearson	1013.5	+19.3	1042.0	812.0	6778.4
148	Pennon	666.0	+78.5	767.0	551.0	1905.0
83	Persimmon	1496.0	+32.0	1498.0	960.4	4784.8
132	Petershill Partners	216.0	+10.0	216.0	143.0	2418.3
179	Pets at Home	307.0	+8.4	397.6	254.4	1431.5
71	Phoenix	541.5	+2.5	560.8	441.6	5423.5
164	Playtech	530.0	+42.0	600.0	370.0	1614.9
157	Plus500	2236.0	-74.0	2314.0	1286.0	1705.6
175	Premier Foods	172.2	+12.4	176.2	113.2	1484.5
194	Primary Health Properties	96.3	+3.2	106.3	85.5	1286.2
29	Prudential	732.0	+25.0	1101.0	687.4	20096.1
126	QinetiQ	467.0	+12.0	468.4	292.8	2669.2
159	Quilter	121.7	+4.7	123.2	71.3	1689.6
145	Rathbone	1792.0	+36.0	1950.0	1458.0	1940.4
21	Reckitt Benckiser	4363.0	+106.0	5960.0	4110.0	30454.2
134	Redrow	704.5	+7.5	739.0	445.4	2330.3
7	Relx	3576.0	-9.0	3654.0	2473.0	66581.1
124	Renishaw	3795.0	+110.0	4370.0	2950.0	2759.7
40	Rentokil	464.0	-1.4	644.0	392.5	11653.5
158	RHI Magnesita	3600.0	-45.0	3785.0	2492.0	1698.8
84	Rightmove	582.4	+39.8	594.8	462.9	4612.4
5	Rio Tinto	5260.0	-99.0	5891.0	4559.0	85412.0
15	Rolls-Royce	450.0	-11.9	485.5	145.9	38272.0
120	Rotork	347.0	+13.4	347.0	281.0	2961.1
101	RS Group	784.0	+63.0	839.4	660.4	3713.7
154	Safestore	809.0	+18.0	913.0	653.0	1767.6
44	Sage	1063.5	-22.5	1282.0	915.0	10624.6
62	Sainsbury's	265.2	+9.2	310.4	245.8	6187.6
162	Savills	1208.0	+88.0	1208.0	763.5	1636.0
65	Schroders	384.2	+6.8	464.6	347.2	5967.7
39	Segro	938.6	+31.4	940.0	679.2	12693.3
143	Serco	188.5	+6.6	189.7	139.0	1995.8
49	Severn Trent	2659.0	+230.0	2728.0	2265.0	7973.7
122	Shaftesbury Capital	149.6	+4.5	149.6	102.5	2917.2
2	Shell	2812.5	-49.5	2946.0	2308.0	176499.3
193	Sirius Real Estate	96.0	+0.3	101.2	78.7	1288.6
47	Smith & Nephew	1100.0	+46.0	1203.5	896.2	9591.5
63	Smiths	1780.0	+42.0	1780.0	1526.0	6115.5
142	Smithson	1392.0	-4.0	1432.0	1170.0	2002.5
106	Softcat	1630.0	-49.0	1855.0	1212.0	3256.0
117	Spectris	3054.0	+154.0	3807.0	2762.0	3073.6
60	Spirax-Sarco	8950.0	+515.0	11130.0	8058.0	6590.4
28	SSE	1869.0	+32.5	1896.0	1508.0	20307.9
181	SSP	177.4	+21.8	260.8	144.5	1416.5
114	St James's Place	564.5	-3.5	1183.0	402.0	3096.9
32	Standard Chartered	723.4	+0.4	785.8	573.8	18256.4
130	Tate & Lyle	621.5	+17.0	760.0	591.0	2470.1
70	Taylor Wimpey	157.1	+8.2	157.1	104.1	5559.4
165	TBC Bank	2945.0	+270.0	3465.0	2350.0	1597.1
178	Telecom Plus	1820.0	+8.0	1892.0	1362.0	1433.6
27	Tesco	318.3	+7.3	318.3	246.5	21822.9
22	3i Group	3016.0	+187.0	3180.0	1858.5	29356.7
116	3i Infrastructure	333.5	+6.5	349.0	289.0	3076.0
160	TP ICAP	218.0	+9.0	227.5	153.4	1677.7
168	Trainline	339.2	+5.2	386.4	216.4	1562.0
149	Travis Perkins	899.0	+101.0	914.6	692.2	1895.5
97	Tritax Big Box	161.9	+4.6	170.3	129.5	4016.2
4	Unilever	4434.0	+98.0	4450.0	3694.0	110529.7
93	Unite	942.5	+35.5	1057.0	851.0	4134.6
56	United Utilities	1057.0	+66.2	1125.0	900.8	7207.6
197	Vesuvius	476.0	0.0	504.0	394.8	1254.5
123	Virgin Money	214.6	+0.6	216.2	142.8	2782.2
86	Vistry	1336.0	+34.0	1336.0	681.0	4502.2
30	Vodafone	70.5	+0.5	81.1	63.0	18791.1
74	Weir	2004.0	+42.0	2200.0	1675.5	5202.6
166	WH Smith	1212.0	+22.0	1549.0	1083.0	1586.7
72	Whitbread	2933.0	-78.0	3678.0	2855.0	5267.3
136	Wizz Air	2170.0	+110.0	2771.0	1546.5	2242.9
184	Wood	198.9	+2.1	207.2	127.4	1367.4
50	WPP	734.4	-9.4	873.8	681.2	7917.3

52-week highs and lows are intra-day figures, not end of day.
Excludes exchange-traded funds. nc = no change. — = not applicable.
Source: Morningstar

MONEY

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'I'M NO BETTER OFF THAN MY DAD, HE WAS A WOMBLE'
LAURA HAMILTON
PAGE 14



Convenience fees and counselling: are parking apps taking us for a ride?

The apps we are now all forced to use just to park are piling on extra charges — and trying to sell us services we don't need, finds *Ali Hussain*



ILLUSTRATION BY KRYSTAL LOH

Deborah Embley and her husband, John Deiss, were fined £240 because they did not download a parking app quickly enough. The couple had been on a day out with friends in the seaside town of Southwold in Suffolk, where the mobile phone signal was so poor they could not download the app they needed within the 15-minute free parking window.

"It is not our fault that the app took so long to download and register. I worry about older people or those without a mobile phone who struggle to pay, if they can pay at all," said Embley, 60, a retired accountant.

There are now about thirty different apps that drivers can use to pay for parking on land owned by private firms and local authorities, with rates varying hugely, from about 70p an hour to almost £14.

Drivers are paying almost £5.5 million a day – £1.93 billion a year – to park on public roads and in council bays, according to government figures. This is up from £1.66 billion in 2017-18 and does not include the revenues made by private parking firms.

On top of the basic parking charges, the apps we are all forced to download now come with many different layers of fees; from green levies, "convenience" and "service" charges, to parking insurance and costs for getting a text message to confirm your parking.

Some firms make extra revenue from commercial tie-ins, with one, bizarrely, advertising counselling services to users. Profits at the biggest parking app firms have soared, with bosses making millions in pay and dividends.

HOW THE FEES STACK UP

There is normally a base cost for parking, set by the car park owner or local authority. This is the rate you pay using cash or card, but if you pay via an app there are often other charges. These depend on the commercial agreements the apps have with the car park owners.

One of the cheapest places to park is Bradford city centre, where rates can be about 70p an hour using the RingGo app. The most expensive areas are in London, where you may pay more than £13 an hour for the most polluting vehicles.

This is because some local authorities apply fuel surcharges via parking apps to encourage greener vehicles. This could add 40 per cent to your bill if you have a more polluting vehicle.

For example, parking an old Land Rover that emits more than 256 grams of carbon dioxide per kilometre in the London borough of Westminster for one hour would have a base cost of £6.60 if you paid by cash. If you used the RingGo app the cost would be £9.24. There may be a 50 per cent further surcharge on some pre-2015 diesel vehicles, taking the hourly total to £13.86 – more than double the base rate.

The apps know what emissions your car has because you have to enter your registration number and the app is linked with the DVLA database.

Then there are the extra charges. Some apps have a "convenience fee" of 20p to cover the cost of the app. Others may apply a service or transaction fee of up to £2.49, covering essentially the same thing. Local authorities used to absorb some of these costs but some now allow app firms to pass them on.

Many apps also offer a mobile phone text message service to alert you that your parking is coming to an end. This typically costs 10p to 20p. Companies such as YourParkingSpace offer a text message confirmation, reminder, and expiry alert, for 20p each, making the total cost for all three 60p.

Rather than paying for a period of parking in advance, some apps require you to cancel your session when you leave, similar to the way you pay for your parking at a machine when you leave some car parks. But it is easy to forget to do this on an app, so drivers risk running up a hefty charge.

RingGo, the biggest firm with 19 million users, said its "start/stop" parking feature was in operation in Northern Ireland, parts of Salford, Greater Manchester, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Wandsworth, East Devon and Torbay. It said that all start/stop locations had a maximum stay. In West Street car park in Axminster, Devon, for example, the most you will be charged is £3 for 24 hours, even if you forget to cancel your session.

Helen Thompson overpaid for her parking because she had not opted into text reminders. Thompson, 47, used the RingGo app to park in Wandsworth, in southwest London. She stayed about an hour, which should have cost £3.40, but after forgetting to end her session until later ended up with a total parking bill of £7.24.

"I had already paid a convenience fee of 18p and for text confirmations which cost 50p, surely that should also include a reminder to end the parking session?" she said. "When you have the kids with you and you are rushing about it is too easy to forget. I would much prefer to pay with a card or cash."

RingGo said that it does not pocket any of the fees from the parking charges applied via its app but charges councils a transaction fee, which they can choose to pass on to drivers as a "convenience fee". RingGo does pocket the fee for the text message reminders.

YourParkingSpace, another app, said its "service fee" of up to £2.49 helped to cover "the costs of running the platform and providing related services". It said its text message confirmation, reminder and expiry alert was an optional extra and was not hidden.

JustPark said its transaction fees on local authority contracts ranged from 5p to 20p. A receipt via text message costs 20p, adding insurance to your parking session is 29p an hour and the text message reminder adds another 20p.

FLOGGING INSURANCE

Those apps, such as JustPark, that offer insurance can add more than 50 per cent to your costs.

The PayByPhone app now has an "add insurance" option to cover you if your vehicle is broken into while it is parked. A 24-hour stay in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, could cost you £8.80 without insurance but £13.64 with cover.

However, exclusions could render this insurance worthless. You are not covered for a damaged windscreen or internal and external fittings. A police report must also demonstrate that there was forced entry into the vehicle.

Your car or home insurance policy may already cover you, so always check because you will not be able to claim on two policies at the same time.

Jonny Combe, the chief executive of PayByPhone, said: "We emphasise that this insurance coverage is entirely optional. They can, of course, use their existing car or home insurance policies to file a claim, if their policies provide cover. There is no excess with PayByPhone Protect and it is ideal for motorists who have built up a healthy no-claims bonus on their motor cover but do not want to risk losing it."

PayByPhone users are also being shown ads for other services, including counselling sessions. A message on the payment page reads "Begin your wellness journey today". It offers therapy for stress and depression by connecting customers to a licensed counsellor online.

"We have started a pilot programme to provide promotional offers on products and services after a parking session has been purchased," Combe said. "These offers are totally optional and range from groceries and meal deals to mental health counselling."

Helen Thompson forgot to cancel her parking session in Wandsworth, London, and ended up paying double

HOW PARKING APPS TOOK OVER

Parking apps began more than two decades ago in Europe, with start-ups such as Vipnet in Zagreb, Croatia. The first UK app service was introduced in about 2009 by RingGo.

Anthony Eskinazi, the chief executive of JustPark, said that traditional pay and display machines could be all but extinct within a decade. Last year he said he could not envisage any local authorities buying traditional meters "past 2025".

There are no official figures for the number of parking spaces that require an app service, but in August 2023, in a submission to MPs, RingGo said there were about 250 million cashless parking transactions across the UK each year.

There are plans to introduce a national parking platform this autumn, which would allow drivers access to all parking firms through a single app, but no date has been set.

In a survey of 1,900 drivers last year by the motoring group RAC, some 19 per cent said their local authority had either scrapped cash or debit card parking payment machines or was consulting on doing it, forcing drivers to use mobile phones to pay instead. In London 44 per cent of those questioned said this was the case.

The parking apps have revenue sharing agreements with cash-strapped local authorities. The income councils raked in from parking surged to almost £962.3 million in the 2022-23 financial year, up from £317.6 million the year before, according to analysis by the AA.

Hourly daytime parking rates have gone up 11 per cent in two years as councils try to balance their books, according to the insurer Churchill.

Jack Cousens from the AA said: "With local budgets stretched, drivers are the cash cow when it comes to revenue raising. More councils are investing in apps in an effort to ease the management of their car parks."

Parking apps are not regulated, but many are members of an accredited trade association, such as the British Parking Association or the International Parking Community. They must also adhere to a code of practice to get access to DVLA data about drivers and vehicles so that they can levy fines.

The parking ombudsman, Parking on Private Land Appeals, said it had 84,474 complaints made to it from drivers in 2022, up 53 per cent from the year before.

THE FIRMS BEHIND THE APPS

RingGo operates in 17,000 locations and has local authority contracts in London, Leeds and Nottingham.

At the heart of RingGo is Peter O'Driscoll, the managing director since 2009, who has spearheaded the company's extraordinary growth. He was head of sales at National Car Parks Limited, one of Britain's largest private car park businesses, where he developed cashless parking solutions for fleet cars.

O'Driscoll has described RingGo as the "Airbnb of parking" because it doesn't own any assets, but allows landowners and local authorities to take payments for use of their space.

RingGo said: "Peter's involvement in parking began 20 years ago when cash was the only way to pay and sometimes people didn't have the right change – the industry was looking to modernise. At RingGo he spearheaded an automated payment technology, which evolved into him developing the UK's first parking app in late 2009."

RingGo's revenues hit £25.8 million in 2022, according to its latest accounts, up from £17.8 million in 2021. Profits reached £5.1 million, up from a £11,282 loss in 2021 after Covid lockdowns.

PayByPhone has 50 million customers in America and Europe, and is the UK's second biggest parking app. Its UK accounts show a revenue of £6.2 million in 2022, up from £4.2 million the year before, while operating profits increased to £277,635 from £184,007.

The JustPark app company had revenues of £12 million in 2023 and operating (before tax) profits of £87,000.

YourParkingSpace is too small to file detailed accounts.

Johanna Noble
Money Editor

You spend 40 years building a pension — don't waste it

"How much will I need for retirement," my friends often ask me. "Am I going to run out of money?"

If I had a penny for every time Google has been asked "Is £200,000 enough to retire on?" I could do my own search for "is £1 million enough to retire on?"

Life expectancy has been on a steady crawl upwards (not counting the Covid years). The average for women is 82.6 years, while men live to be 78.6, according to the Office for National Statistics. And the longer you live, the further your money needs to stretch.

But while averages give you an idea of what to expect, they are just averages – and actually pretty poor predictors of how long you will really live. And even if you knew for certain that you would spend 25 years in retirement, it doesn't make knowing how much you would need to fund that retirement any easier.

This is because people often overlook an important fact about later life: you don't spend the same amount each year. You need to consider the stages of retirement and what your spending is likely to be in each.

The first stage is for home improvements, holidays or even relocations; it's the time when you are spending money and still healthy.

The next stage is when you are done with the bucket list and content to spend more time at home, so your spending may not be as high.

The third and most expensive stage is when you may need care.

Everyone will be different but spending in retirement is typically U-shaped. I am working towards a 40 per cent (healthy but spending stage); 20 per cent (at home); 40 per cent (care needs) split.

Preparing for these stages is difficult, and we are destined to make the wrong assumptions. A lot will come down to the type of pension you have. While some are lucky enough to retire with a defined benefit (or final salary) pension, where you get a guaranteed income each year, based on how long you worked for an employer, more and more workers will retire having to rely on a defined contribution pension, where the amount you get depends on how much you saved and how your investments performed.

> **Give as much attention to the pay-out phase as the pay-in phase**

Anyone with a defined contribution pension will not only be responsible for saving enough into it, they will also have to decide the best way to draw on that pot. Changes introduced nearly a decade ago mean you now have several options to choose from, rather than being forced to buy an annuity.

Giving savers a choice should be applauded but it also leaves them open to making the wrong decision. Draw too much too early and you risk running out of money, but being too cautious could mean that you lead an unnecessarily austere life.

How you plan to draw your pension will also affect how you invest your money in the lead up to retirement. Will you be buying an annuity, which pays a set income in exchange for a lump sum, or going for the drawdown route, where you take out your money gradually? Each requires a different approach. Your five-year pre-retirement strategy needs to reflect your post-retirement thinking.

I can't reassure my friends that they will have enough money to last through their retirement, but I tell them this: give as much attention to the pay-out phase as the pay-in phase. You spend more than 40 years building up your pension pot, don't let a lack of planning when it comes to drawing on it scupper your retirement.

@JohannaMNoble

MONEY

‘My crypto addiction cost me £1.5m and my marriage’



Lily Russell-Jones goes to a therapy session at the £4,000-a-week rehab clinic where digital currency trading addicts share their stories

It is an overcast Thursday afternoon and in a wood-panelled room of a remote mansion in the Scottish countryside, 11 people sit in comfortable armchairs arranged in a circle. Through the large bay window you can see dramatic forests and hills beyond a neatly trimmed lawn.

I’m at Castle Craig, a rehab clinic about an hour’s drive from Edinburgh, where gambling and cryptocurrency addicts come to seek help and share their stories in a group led by Tony Marini, a therapist and former gambling addict.

Karim*, who has spent a month at Castle Craig, became addicted to trading cryptocurrencies. He said he had lost about £1.5 million making speculative bets on the price of cryptocurrencies – last year his marriage ended after he took money from his wife’s bank account to fuel his addiction.

“I felt I had money problems and the way to solve it was with crypto. I never thought it was an addiction,” said Karim, 35, who has travelled from Istanbul for treatment. “If I had money I would spend it on trading, and when I didn’t have the means to do it I borrowed from other people. It led me to do a lot of bad things.”

Patients who go to Castle Craig for help with an addiction to crypto trading are treated in the same way as gambling addicts and take part in a 12-step programme, a form of therapy where patients are given clear stages to work through towards recovery. The residential treatment costs from about £3,800 a week. About 37 per cent of patients pay for treatment themselves, about 42 per cent are funded by private health insurance, and 21 per cent have their treatment funded by the NHS.

About 5.36 million people in the UK own or have bought crypto assets, government figures show. One in ten people who invested in crypto said it had become a “problem” for them, according to a YouGov survey of more than 5,000 adults in February commissioned by the charity GamCare, which offers support to gambling addicts and runs the National Gambling Helpline. Of those who had invested in crypto, 13 per cent said they wanted to stop.

In 2022 about 76 per cent of those who owned crypto were under the age of 45, and 69 per cent were men, according to HM Revenue & Customs. Of those who owned crypto, 53 per cent had a holding worth less than £1,000, but 7 per cent owned assets worth more than £5,000.

Investors in the UK bought or were sent a total of $252 billion of crypto assets in the year to June 2023, according to the research firm Chainalysis, the third highest of the countries included in its data. The US ranked highest with more than £1 trillion of crypto assets.

AN INVESTMENT OR A GAMBLE?

The government has promised to turn the UK into a “global hub” for crypto firms. It has announced plans to integrate stablecoins – a type of cryptocurrency pegged to the value of government-issued currencies such as sterling – into the country’s payment network.

In January financial regulators in the US approved the sale of exchange-traded funds (ETF) that track the price of bitcoin. An ETF is a type of fund that is traded on a stock exchange in its own right and aims to replicate the performance of an index or asset, such as the FTSE 100 or gold.

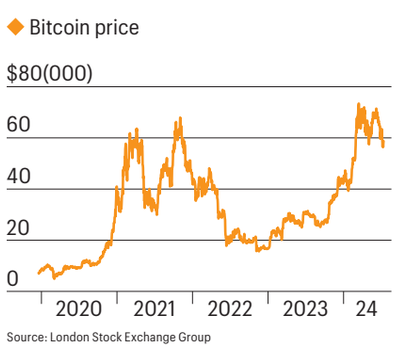
About $15.5 billion has been poured into bitcoin ETFs since January, according to the investment firm CoinShares.

But there is a dark side, which is on stark display at Castle Craig. This is the second time I have visited the centre, which started treating patients addicted to crypto in 2016. When I came here two years ago the clinic had treated about 120 patients from across the world. That figure is now more than 300.

Last month Amanda Pritchard, the chief executive of the NHS, said increasing numbers of crypto addicts were attending gambling clinics and warned that the NHS was being left to “pick up the pieces”. Last year MPs on the Treasury select committee said that crypto trading “more closely resembles gambling than it does a financial service”. It said cryptocurrency should be regulated in the same way as gambling.

Lisa Marie-Patton from GamCare said those asking for help with an addiction to crypto trading were typically men aged 24 to 35. “We see it more in younger men who think crypto is a way to solve their financial problems. It’s getting really serious – I’ve seen parents have to bail their children out and people are losing their homes. You can gamble on crypto prices 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from your mobile phone.”

HIGHS AND LOWS

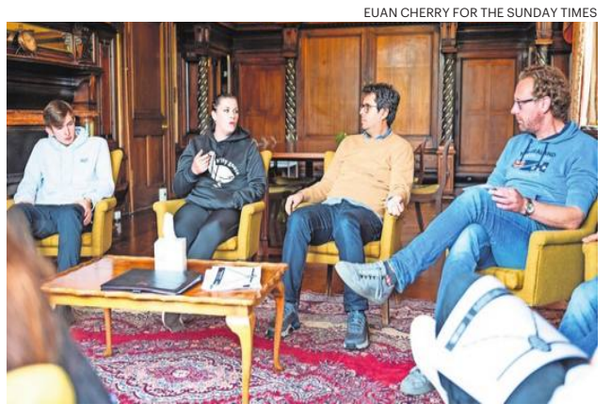


Source: London Stock Exchange Group

WHAT IS CRYPTO

Cryptocurrency is a digital encrypted currency. There are thousands of them. They are managed using a digital record known as a blockchain, which acts as a public ledger confirming ownership. Bitcoin was the world’s first, launched in 2009, and remains the largest.

EUAN CHERRY FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



The therapy session for gamblers, held at the Castle Craig clinic

A key reason that crypto is thought to be addictive is its price volatility. “Because it’s going up and down so quickly, people feel like they need to look at it constantly. Gamblers love that high and low. The mind becomes obsessed and enough is never enough,” said Marini.

‘I GET A KICK FROM LOSING MONEY’

The price of bitcoin, the world’s most popular cryptocurrency, has gone up 690 per cent since the start of 2020 and traded at about $57,900 (£44,570) on Friday. It was worth about $69,000 in November 2021 but fell to about $16,000 a year later after the high-profile collapse of the crypto exchange FTX. It hit a record price of more than $73,000 in March this year.

There are thousands of different cryptocurrencies and the price swings of the smaller ones can be even more dramatic.

The Covid-19 pandemic is believed to have fuelled the boom, when many people found themselves bored at home with spare cash to play with. In May 2022 some 29 per cent of people between the ages of 18 and 34 had some kind of investment, according to the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) the City watchdog, up from 19 per cent in 2020. About 46 per cent of those people held cryptocurrency.

Doctors at Castle Craig say that about 90 per cent of the patients they treat for crypto addiction are men; most are middle-class and under 40. “But we’ve had labourers come in for treatment and we’ve had billionaires,” Marini said.

Chris* started gambling after he began taking cocaine, he tells the group. “I never really chased the jackpot, I get a bigger kick when I lose money.” It is a recurring theme across the 40-minute session. “I got a thrill from winning, but I also revelled in losing,” says another member of the circle.

Karim, who works for a healthcare company, started betting on the outcome of sports fixtures and investing money that he made in the stock market while he was at university. In 2017 he put about $3,000 into small cryptocurrencies such as Dogecoin and Solana. Four years later his stake was worth about $150,000. “In the beginning I was quite good at it and kept winning,” Karim said.

As his confidence grew he began making leveraged trades – a risky strategy where investors typically borrow money from an exchange or trading platform to make an investment. Leveraged trades magnify your returns if they go well, but increase your losses if they do not. Traders normally have to pay a deposit which can be lost if their trade goes wrong, and they can end up owing the lender.

Over three years Karim has lost about £1.16 million that he borrowed from his friends and family, some of whom asked him to invest on their behalf. He also thinks he also lost about £386,000 of his own income and savings.

“It was a big losing streak,” he said. “I couldn’t tell anyone. I kept trying to make the money back. I could open multiple investment positions on my mobile phone. I wasn’t sleeping during the night because I was checking prices. I put my wife in a miserable position.”

Karim felt driven to get treatment because he wants to have a good relationship with his two-year-old daughter. He said stopping all types of investment is an important part of his recovery. “I have run out of money and need to earn it back. I’m trying to maintain a healthy routine. I’m meditating and trying to do regular exercise,” he said.

Despite the risks, many investors still consider cryptocurrency a valuable part of their investment portfolio. The bitcoin investor and podcaster Peter McCormack, who bought the football club Bedford FC in 2021, said: “I have bitcoin in my portfolio to protect my money against inflation. The government is never going to stop increasing the supply of money. Bitcoin has a fixed supply and there is a similar incentive to holding it as there is for gold.”

Benjamin Dean from the investment firm WisdomTree, which runs a bitcoin ETF, said: “The first reason you might include crypto in your portfolio is diversification. Crypto has low correlation against other asset classes. There are also only a few asset classes historically where returns from your investment increase by multiples of the original amount.”

However, for the most part, crypto is not regulated in the UK and the FCA says that investors should be prepared to lose all their money.

At Castle Craig, the session draws to a close with a prayer. Standing in a circle, the group chant: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can and the wisdom to know the difference.” They file out of the room chatting happily.

About 63 per cent of patients who were treated for an addiction at Castle Craig last year have not yet relapsed.

**The names have been changed*

CRYPTO DO’S AND DON’TS

DO think carefully before you buy crypto. If you are investing just because the price has gone up, or because a friend or someone on social media claims to have made a packet, then you need to find a better reason to part with your money.

DO research the platform you are using to buy crypto. Consider charges and safety. Regulation of the sector is not as stringent as for other investments and the FTX collapse shows how poor corporate governance can lead to losses.

DO consider investing in shares instead. They don’t have the highs and lows of crypto, but over time will usually be a better way to build your wealth, and definitely carry less risk.

DON’T invest more than you can afford to lose. A total wipeout is plausible if crypto ultimately fails to become widely accepted.

DON’T be tempted by newly created crypto coins or those that do not have much money invested in them. At best they have a low chance of long-term survival, and at worst are just old-fashioned scams.

DON’T think you won’t have to pay tax on gains. The authorities are getting more interested in cracking down on tax avoidance in the crypto sphere.

T AUDIO

How to whip your new MPs

With the election over, new MPs are arriving in Westminster. Peter Mandelson, Polly Mackenzie and Daniel Finkelstein discuss how parties will manage the new intake with host Matt Chorley.

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MONEY

Ian Cowie Personal Account

British firms are going like hot cakes, luckily I have a few in my shopping bag



ILLUSTRATION BY KRYSTAL LOH



Friday will mark a double deadline for Arab-backed bids to buy Britain's biggest online investment platform and a broadsheet newspaper where I used to work. Meanwhile, takeover decision day, to go formal or go away, has been extended for the Canadian potential buyers of one of my biggest investment trusts for tax-free income.

Elsewhere in the "forever fund", shares in a Great British healthcare technology business have spiked 11 per cent higher since Swedish investors announced their stake. Oh, and last Monday a Danish brewer topped up its £3.3 billion knockout bid to buy the Hemel Hempstead-based soft drinks specialist, Britvic (stock market ticker: BVIC), putting some fizz back into Fever-Tree (FEVR), the London tonic-maker that served up the biggest cash profit I ever pocketed.

Phew! British funds and shares are going cheap and foreign buyers are snapping them up with both hands. What about you?

Abu Dhabi backing for an increased £5.4 billion bid to buy Hargreaves Lansdown (HL) has caused the investment platform's share price to surge 54 per cent higher since the start of this year. Our outgoing Conservative government blocked a UAE bid to buy the Daily Telegraph but it would be ironic if an incoming Labour administration allowed free market forces to follow their own course.

As I no longer have any stake in either of these takeover targets I make no comment, other than to wish both businesses the best of luck continuing to provide services that many customers value. Closer to home, this small shareholder is delighted to report how the Hull-based artificial hip-maker, Smith & Nephew (SN), and the London-listed warehouse investment trust, Tritax Eurobox (EBOX), have attracted the attention of foreign bargain-hunters.

The Swedish investment firm Cevian Capital, which is backed by the billionaire corporate raider, Carl Icahn, revealed that it had built a 5 per cent stake in Smith & Nephew this month. Sad to say, the Yorkshire orthopaedics specialist has been hobbling along for years, suffering a rapid succession of chief executives. Some shareholders might welcome the chance to throw away our crutches and dance again.

Shares I bought for £7.99 in November 2013, aiming to gain from grey pounds grappling with the frailties of old age, peaked at £19.90 five years ago. Then Covid caused many folk to cancel non-urgent hospital operations and the shares slipped to £9 last year before Icahn's intervention got them back on their feet and trading at £11 on Friday.

Gravity remains an implacable foe for many wrinklies, so there might be further to go, said the old fool who broke his leg running in the snow not so long ago. Smith & Nephew enjoys a gross profit margin of 69 per cent but you can see this business has problems with a net margin below 5 per cent and a return on investment of less than 4 per cent, according to the independent statisticians Refinitiv. Even so, dividend income of 2.9 per cent, albeit advancing painfully slowly by an annual average of 1.85 per cent over the last five years, pays me to be patient.

£11

The price of Smith & Nephew shares that Cowie bought for £7.99 in 2013. They peaked at £19.90 in 2019

Canada's Brookfield Asset Management (BAM), which claims to have US $925 billion assets and is led by the former Bank of England governor, Mark Carney, came to the rescue of Tritax Eurobox. Higher risk-free interest rates available elsewhere had hurt these shares, pushing the price down to 45p in October before Brookfield expressed an interest, boosting them to 67p on Friday.

The original takeover code deadline to put up or shut up by July 1 was extended by mutual consent to the end of this month. Now Tritax claims that other bidders might be interested and I am happy to have popped these shares in my Isa, where we await events while pocketing 6.4 per cent tax-free income.

What about opportunities elsewhere? Shrewd observer Richard Hunter, the head of markets at the wealth manager Interactive Investor, told me: "The e-commerce logistics specialist Ocado (OCDO) is a 'jam tomorrow' stock with a 43 per cent share price decline over the last year. A prospective buyer with more sanguine views on growth prospects would hardly come as a surprise."

Pooled funds – such as unit or investment trusts – offer a lower-risk way to gain exposure to takeover targets because they hold dozens of UK shares. Jason Hollands from the investment firm Bestinvest said: "Options to consider include the investment trusts Fidelity Special Values which is priced 7 per cent below its net asset value (NAV), mid and small-cap focused Mercantile, which is trading at a 10 per cent discount to NAV, and Henderson Smaller Companies on an 11 per cent discount."

As mentioned earlier, Britain's biggest investment platform is itself up for grabs. Darius McDermott, the managing director of rival firm Chelsea Financial Services, said: "The bid for Hargreaves Lansdown is a prime example of how the UK wealth management sector's recurring revenues and strong client retention do not align with low stock market valuations. Hargreaves is a top ten holding within the unit trust Liontrust Special Situations."

Bid speculation should never be the main reason for investing because most market chatter proves mistaken. But it is comforting when other investors come round to our view that a business is undervalued – after we own the shares. As always with the stock market, you have to be in it to win it.

ST DIGITAL
Read a breakdown of Ian Cowie's "forever fund"
thesundaytimes.com/cowieholdings

If hydrogen sparks a chain reaction, remember that I was right

When I reminded readers last Sunday about the Sheffield-based green hydrogen business, ITM Power (ITM), I scarcely expected the share price to spike 17 per cent higher on Monday.

While it might be flattering to imagine that the explosive equity performance of ITM is an example of the power of the press, the truth is more prosaic. This is a future-facing business that is beginning to raise revenues here and now.

ITM makes proton exchange machines that use renewable electricity from wind farms to split hydrogen out of water. It placed a rocket under its share price by agreeing to supply kit with the capacity to produce 500 megawatts (MW) of electricity.

Its chief executive Dennis Schulz, who came from Linde, the world's largest industrial gas company by market share and revenue, pointed out: "After the capacity reservation for 100MW from Shell, this agreement with another large-scale industrial customer is a validation of our technology."

Serious doubts remain about how cost-effective this process can be, with a great deal depending on electricity and hydrogen prices in future. However, the chancellor Rachel Reeves's announcement last Wednesday that the new UK Infrastructure Bank aims to invest £7.3 billion in green energy, including hydrogen, might help ITM.

Either way, you can't call me a short-term speculator. I first invested in this business at 41p per share in January 2010, when the Swedish climate campaigner Greta Thunberg was still at primary school.

I took profits by selling some ITM at £5.39 in January 2021, and the shares traded at 65p on Friday.

It just goes to show that, when it comes to investing in scientific innovation, you can teach an old dog new tricks.

Buy now, pay later firm went bust, but you should still settle your bill

George Nixon

Shoppers who used one of the biggest buy now, pay later firms may be wondering if they still need to pay their debts after the company went into administration.

Laybuy, which is based in New Zealand, had 300,000 customers in the UK with outstanding loans at the time of its collapse last month. At its peak it had 609,000 UK customers.

It put itself up for sale but failed to attract a buyer and was placed into receivership by its creditors on June 17.

Buy now, pay later lets shoppers pay for goods in instalments over a set period. Most lenders don't charge interest or fees as long as you make your payments on time and the industry has grown rapidly since the rise in internet shopping.

The Financial Conduct Authority, the City watchdog, said that about 27 per cent of adults used buy now, pay later services in the six months to January 2023.

Laybuy was founded in 2017 and launched in the UK in 2019. The Swedish firm Klarna and Clearpay, which is based in Australia, both have large shares of the UK buy now, pay later market.

Laybuy had payment partnerships with B&Q, eBay, Homebase, Marks & Spencer, the shoe shop Footasylum, and the homeware retailer Wilko, before its collapse last year.

Its UK operation was the biggest part of the company. In its latest full accounts, for the year to March 2022, Laybuy UK made a £656,932 profit and was available at 3,790 shops. But globally the company made a pre-tax loss of NZ$51.5 million (£24.3 million).

The company had reported issues with defaults and fraud, while the number of customers in the UK had fallen to 484,000 in the third quarter of 2022-23. In April it was removed as a method of payment from the websites of retailers including B&Q, eBay and Marks & Spencer.



Laybuy services were removed from the M&S site in April

Does this mean I don't have to pay my bill?

If you still owe Laybuy money, you should continue to make payments as usual. The money will go to the company's creditors, who are likely to continue to chase payments.

If you don't pay, you will still be subject to a late-payment charge of £6, which will go up by £6 a week to a maximum of £24 and your bill could be passed on to debt collectors.

Administrators did not say how much Laybuy's UK customers owed at the time the company went into receivership.

Sara Williams, a former debt adviser who runs the Debt Camel blog, said: "Just because the lender has failed it doesn't mean the debt disappears, so it's best to continue paying it if possible. The debt will still exist even if the company doesn't and is likely to be sold on to a debt collector.

"If you are struggling, then talk to a debt adviser or your local Citizens Advice about your options."

'Life got in the way of me paying back child benefit'

Ali Hussain

A parent's attempt to argue that he failed to repay his child benefit because "life got in the way", has been dismissed by a court.

Aaron Treliving, a chartered surveyor with three children, lost some of his entitlement to child benefit after his salary rose between 2014 and 2020. Since 2013 the amount of child benefit you are entitled to has been dependent on your salary. At that time, if one parent earned more than £50,000 they lose some of the benefit. It's a sliding scale and they lost all entitlement once they earned £60,000. The thresholds have now changed to £60,000 and £80,000. You cannot only claim what you are entitled to, you have to get the full amount and pay back anything you owe through a self assessment tax return.

Treliving was sent notifications in 2021 by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) that he needed to repay some of his child benefit. He appealed against the decision, arguing that his failure to pay was because his wife had been pregnant with their third child at the time he received the notifications and that it was a difficult pregnancy. He said that "life got in the way".

Child benefit is now worth £25.60 a week for a first child and £16.95 a week for younger children.Because the onus is on parents to pay back anything they are not entitled to, many are caught out.

The judge at the first tier tax tribunal, Amanda Brown, dismissed Treliving's case saying: "It is not, in my view, objectively reasonable to ignore or fail to give proper attention to one's tax obligations because life gets in the way. Many fathers have caring responsibilities alongside work and neither offer an objectively reasonable excuse."

She added that Treliving had received several reminders but did not lodge an appeal until five months after his youngest child was born in August 2021.

Chris Etherington from the accountancy firm RSM, said: "Any parent of three young children is likely to sympathise that life can indeed get in the way of many daily tasks. However, a parent might get short shrift from their partner if they used that excuse to delay a household job for months on end, so it's no surprise that HMRC did not accept it either."

T BOOKS



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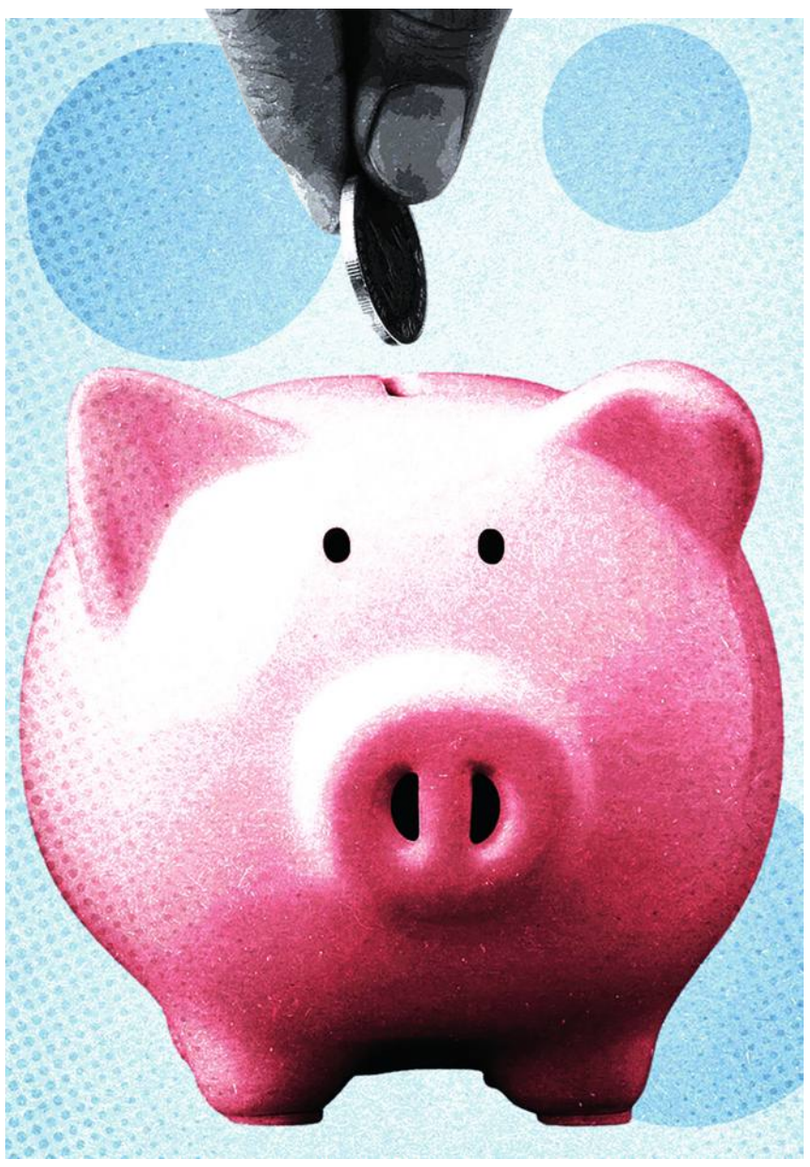
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MONEY

Lock up your Isas: why fixed rates are all the rage

Savers seeking guaranteed returns and protection from the taxman are tying up their money for years, writes *George Nixon*



Savers are turning to fixed-rate Isas to shelter their cash from tax and avoid falling interest rates.

The £20,000 annual allowance can be spread across various types of Isa, including cash, stocks and shares, and Lifetime Isas. (Junior Isas have a limit of £9,000.) Unlike standard saving and investments accounts, any interest you earn on cash or gains you make on shares in an Isa are tax-free, for life.

Savers are on track for a record Isa year with £26.3 billion deposited into cash savings accounts in the first five months of the year, including £12.3 billion in April – the highest ever total for that month.

While the Bank of England's figures do not separate out easy-access and fixed-rate Isas, banks have said that savers are becoming more likely to choose fixed versions. About 50 per cent of all new savings accounts opened with the bank Aldermore since February have been fixed-rate Isas, it said, while 66 per cent of all new Isas opened with the bank were one-year fixed rates.

Shawbrook Bank said that 72 per cent more fixed-rate Isas were opened between April and June than in the first three months of the year. It said that there had been a 1,377 per cent increase in the number of Isas opened with a fixed rate of three years or longer.

WHY FIX NOW?

The Bank of England base rate has been held at a 16-year high of 5.25 per cent since August last year. The Bank raised the rate 14 times from its record low of 0.1 per cent in December 2021 as it tried to push up the cost of borrowing to limit spending and get inflation under control.

Bank rate is expected to fall next month, however, now that inflation has dropped to the target level of 2 per cent. When Bank rate falls, variable savings rates, which pay more than fixed rates at the moment, will drop.

The highest easy-access Isa rate is 5.17 per cent from the savings app Plum. The highest no-strings one-year Isa rate is 4.94 from Castle Trust Bank, but if you have a Virgin Money current account you can get 5.05 per cent from the bank's one-year Isa.

The highest two-year Isa rate is 4.7 per cent from Beehive Money, part of Nottingham Building Society, while the best you can get over three years is 4.6 per cent and the top five-year rate is 4.25 per cent, both from Principality Building Society.

Fixed rates have risen over the past few months because Bank rate did not fall in May, as analysts had expected it to.

The five highest paying one-year Isas had an average rate of 4.96 per cent this week, up from 4.73 per cent in April, according to the comparison site Savings Champion.

The average rate paid across the top five easy-access Isas has stayed the same, at 5.08 per cent, so locking in some of your cash now could be a smart decision.

WHY CHOOSE AN ISA?

You can get a higher rate from a fixed rate bond than an Isa – the Israeli bank Mizrahi Tefahot has a one-year deal at 5.25 per cent, available through the savings platform Raisin UK. Close Brothers Bank is paying 5.06 per cent over two years.

But the tax-free status of an Isa has become much more valuable in a world of higher savings rates. The personal savings allowance means that basic-rate taxpayers can earn up to £1,000 a year interest tax-free outside an Isa and higher rate taxpayers can earn £500.

Additional rate taxpayers get no allowance. Interest earned above these amounts is subject to your usual rate of income tax.

Savings Champion said that when the allowance was introduced in April 2016, the best one-year bond paid 1.91 per cent. A basic-rate taxpayer would have needed savings of £52,356 before they earned enough interest in a year to incur tax. A higher-rate taxpayer would have had to save more than £26,178.

Now, a basic-rate taxpayer on the Mizrahi Tefahot 5.25 per cent deal would breach the allowance with savings of £19,048. A higher rate taxpayer would need only £9,524.

HM Revenue & Customs is expected to collect £10.4 billion tax on savers' income this tax year, up from £1.36 billion in the 2021-22 tax year, when Bank rate went from 0.1 per cent to 0.75 per cent.

Alex Myers from Aldermore said: "The popularity of Isas has grown because of the prospect of paying more tax on your savings. Even though Isa rates may be lower than fixed rate bonds, savers might still end up with more after you take tax into account, so it's important to check rates to ensure your money is working as hard as possible."

A higher-rate taxpayer with £11,175 would earn £552 interest after tax from the 5.25 per cent one-year savings bond, but 44p more from the best one-year fixed-rate Isa from Castle Trust, which pays 4.94 per cent. Any savings of less than £11,175 would earn more outside the Isa.

Basic-rate payers would need savings of £27,100 to be better off with the Isa over a year – more than the annual Isa allowance.

Over two years, higher-rate tax payers with more than £12,025 would be better off with the best Isa, which pays 4.7 per cent from Beehive Money, than they would be with the 5.06 per cent bond from Close Brothers. For savers with less than £12,025, the bond would be the best option.

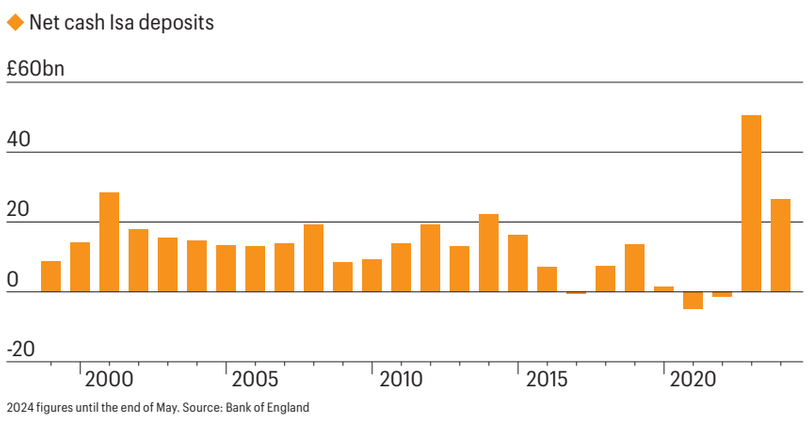
Basic-rate taxpayers would need £30,700 before the Isa was the better bet.

Remember, however, that once your cash is in an Isa, it is protected from tax for life.

5.17%
The top easy-access Isa rate, from the savings app Plum

5.25%
The top one-year fixed rate outside an Isa, from Mizrahi Tefahot bank

BACK IN THE SAVING HABIT



2024 figures until the end of May. Source: Bank of England

Best buys

THE TIMES money mentor | defaqto Smarter financial decisions

CURRENT ACCOUNTS

CREDIT INTEREST

Provider	Account name	Account fee	Interest rate	Balance (for reward)	Contact
Nationwide BS	FlexDirect	None	5%[1]	–	0800 302 010
Kroo Bank	Current Account	None	4.35%	–	via app
Santander	Edge Up	£5pm	3.5%	–	03309 123 123

OVERDRAFTS *

Provider	Account name	Account fee	Interest rate[2]	0% overdraft limit	Contact
Starling Bank	Current Account	None	15%	£0	0207 930 4450
First Direct	1st Account	None	39.9%	£250	0345 600 2424
Virgin Money	M Plus Account	None	19.9%	£0	0800 678 3654

[1]Introductory rate for a limited period. [2] Equivalent annual rate. * Based on the lowest cost of an overdraft of £500 over 30 days. Some accounts require minimum funding/direct debits to open or get rates shown

CREDIT CARDS

INTRODUCTORY RATES

Provider	Card type	Introductory purchase	APR[1]	Reward	Contact
Barclaycard	Platinum Balance Transfer	0% for 21 months	24.9%	No	0800 151 0900
MBNA	Dual 0% Transfer & Purchase	0% for 21 months	24.94%	No	0345 606 2062
M&S Bank	Purchase Plus	0% for 20 months	24.9%	No	0345 600 5860

BALANCE TRANSFERS

Provider	Card type	Introductory purchase	Transfer fee[2]	APR[1]	Contact
Tesco Bank	Balance Transfer	0% for 29 months	3.49%	24.9%	0345 300 4278
Virgin Money	Balance Transfer	0% for 28 months	3.25%	24.9%	0800 328 3579
Barclaycard	Platinum Balance Transfer	0% for 28 months	3.45%	24.9%	0800 151 0900

CASHBACK CARDS

Provider	Card type	APR[1]	Cashback	Contact
American Express	Cashback Everyday	31%	0.5%-1%. Intro 5% for 3 months (max £100)	0800 917 8047
Bank of Scotland	Credit Card	10.94%	0.25% on spend in first 36 months	0800 328 5984
MBNA	Platinum	13.94%	0.25% on spend in first 36 months	0345 606 2062

[1] APR = annual percentage rate, dependent on credit rating. [2] Fee charged on the amount of each balance transfer during the introductory period
Borrowing rates and availability of products are subject to individual credit ratings. Terms apply to all cashback.

FOREIGN CURRENCY

Interbank rates at 5pm on Friday, which show where the market is trading. They are not indicative of the rate you could get.

EURO GBP>EUR **1.19**

USA GBP>USD **1.30**

TURKEY GBP>TRY **42.92**

AUSTRALIA GBP>AUD **1.91**

MORTGAGES

2-YEAR FIXED RATES

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Barclays	4.71%	Fixed to 30.09.26	60%	£0	PV	0333 202 7580
First Direct	4.99%	Fixed for 2 years	80%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	5.24%	Fixed for 2 years	90%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48

5-YEAR FIXED RATES

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Barclays	4.09%	Fixed to 30.09.29	60%	£899	PV	0333 202 7580
Virgin Money	4.55%	Fixed to 01.10.29	80%	£895	CP	0345 605 0500
First Direct	4.82%	Fixed for 5 years	90%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48

LONG-TERM FIXED RATES

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
First Direct	4.64%	Fixed for 10 years	60%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.79%	Fixed for 10 years	80%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
Nationwide BS	5.4%	Fixed for 10 years	90%	£999	PV	0800 302 010

TRACKERS* / DISCOUNTS

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Nationwide BS	5.39%	Tracker + 0.14% for 2 years	60%	£999	PV	0333 060 0325
Leek BS	4.99%	3.25% discount for 2 years	80%	£995	V	0808 169 6680
Hanley BS	5%	3.49% discount for 2 years	90%	£750	STV	01782 255 000

FIRST-TIME BUYER / LOW DEPOSIT

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Hanley BS	5.59%	2.9% discount for 2 years	95%	£0	BV	01782 255 000
West Bromwich BS	5.49%	Fixed to 31.12.27	95%	£499	PV	0800 298 0008
Melton BS	5.29%	Fixed to 31.10.29	95%	£0	V	01664 414 141

BUY TO LET

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
The Mortgage Works	5.19%	Fixed to 30.09.26	75%	£0		0345 607 3021
The Mortgage Works	3.79%	Fixed to 30.09.26	75%	3%		0345 607 3021
HSBC	4.3%	Fixed to 30.09.29	75%	£3,999	LSV	0800 494 999

Early repayment charge applies unless otherwise stated. * Most deals track Bank of England base rate. A = £500 cashback; B = £250 cashback; C = £300 cashback; D = £350 cashback; E= No early repayment charge; F = First-time buyers only; G = £150 cashback; H = £400 cashback; I = £1,000 cashback; L= Free legal work for remortgages ; P = Purchases only; R = Free legal work and valuation for remortgages; S = Remortgage only; T = £250 towards legal fees; V = Free valuation

SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

EASY ACCESS

Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Monument Bank	Easy Access Savings	£25,000	5.03%	monument.co
Oxbury	Easy Access Ltd Edition	£20,000	5.02%	oxbury.com
Oxbury	Easy Access Saver	£1,000	4.94%	oxbury.com

NOTICE ACCOUNTS

Provider	Account name	Notice period	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Prosper	365 Day Notice Tracker (Santander)	1 year	£20,000	5.78%	prosper.co.uk
Oaknorth Bank	95 Day Notice Base Rate Tracker	95 days	£1	5.37%	oaknorth.co.uk
Vanquis Bank Ltd	90 Day Notice Account	90 days	£1,000	5.35%	vanquissavings.co.uk

LONG-TERM FIXED-RATES

Provider	Account name	Term	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Hodge Bank	5 Year Fixed Rate Bond	5 years	£1,000	4.58%	utbank.co.uk
HL Active Savings	Close Brothers 5 Year Fixed Bond	5 years	£1,000	4.57%	hl.co.uk
Shawbrook Bank	5 Year Fixed Rate Bond	5 years	£1,000	4.57%	shawbrook.co.uk

DEALS ARE LISTED ONLY IF THEY ARE COVERED BY THE UK FINANCIAL SERVICES COMPENSATION SCHEME (FSCS) OR A EUROPEAN EQUIVALENT *MUST HOLD A CURRENT ACCOUNT WITH THE PROVIDER

CASH ISAs

INSTANT ACCESS

Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest	Transfers in	Contact
Marsden BS	Online Cash Isa	£5,000	4.9%	Yes	themarsden.co.uk
Cynergy Bank	Online Isa	£1	4.87%	Yes	cynergybank.co.uk

FIXED RATE

Provider	Account name	Term	Min deposit	Rate	Transfers in	Contact
Castle Trust Bank	1 Year Fixed Rate e-Cash Isa	1 year	£1,000	4.94%	Yes	castletrust.co.uk
Principality BS	5 Yr Fixed Rate Cash Isa	5 years	£500	4.25%	Yes	principality.co.uk

CHILDREN'S ACCOUNTS

Provider	Account name	Rate type	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Saffron BS	Children's Regular Saver	Variable	£5	5.8%	branch only
Halifax	Kids' Monthly Saver	Fixed	£10	5.5%	halifax.co.uk
Coventry BS	Young Saver	Variable	£1	5.25%	branch only

JUNIOR ISAs

Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest rate	Rate	Contact
Coventry BS	Junior Cash Isa	£1	4.95%	Variable	coventrybuildingsociety.co.uk
Nottingham BS	Junior Isa	£1	4.85%	Variable	branch only
Loughborough BS	Junior Isa	£1	4.8%	Variable	branch only

ENERGY DEALS

Table shows the cheapest tariff now available from the cheapest suppliers. Excludes tariffs of less than 12 months' duration, tariffs that do not have national coverage and tariffs where payments are taken in advance of supply.

Supplier	Average annual bill	Rate	Contact
Home Energy	£1,513	Variable	0330 440 1624
EDF	£1,518	Tracker	0333 009 7023
Octopus Energy	£1,518	Tracker	0808 501 5200

Source: Uswitch.com

WHAT'S TRENDING

THE TOP FIVE ARTICLES ON TIMES MONEY MENTOR THIS WEEK

Our sister website, Times Money Mentor, has guides, tools and best buys to help you to manage your finances. Here's what you have been looking at:

1 How will the Labour government affect the pound?
We consider the impact of the election result on investors and the economy in general.

2 How to deal with a gig, festival or concert let-down
After complaints from Taylor Swift fans that they couldn't see the stage despite paying up to £700 for tickets, find out your consumer rights when it comes to live shows.

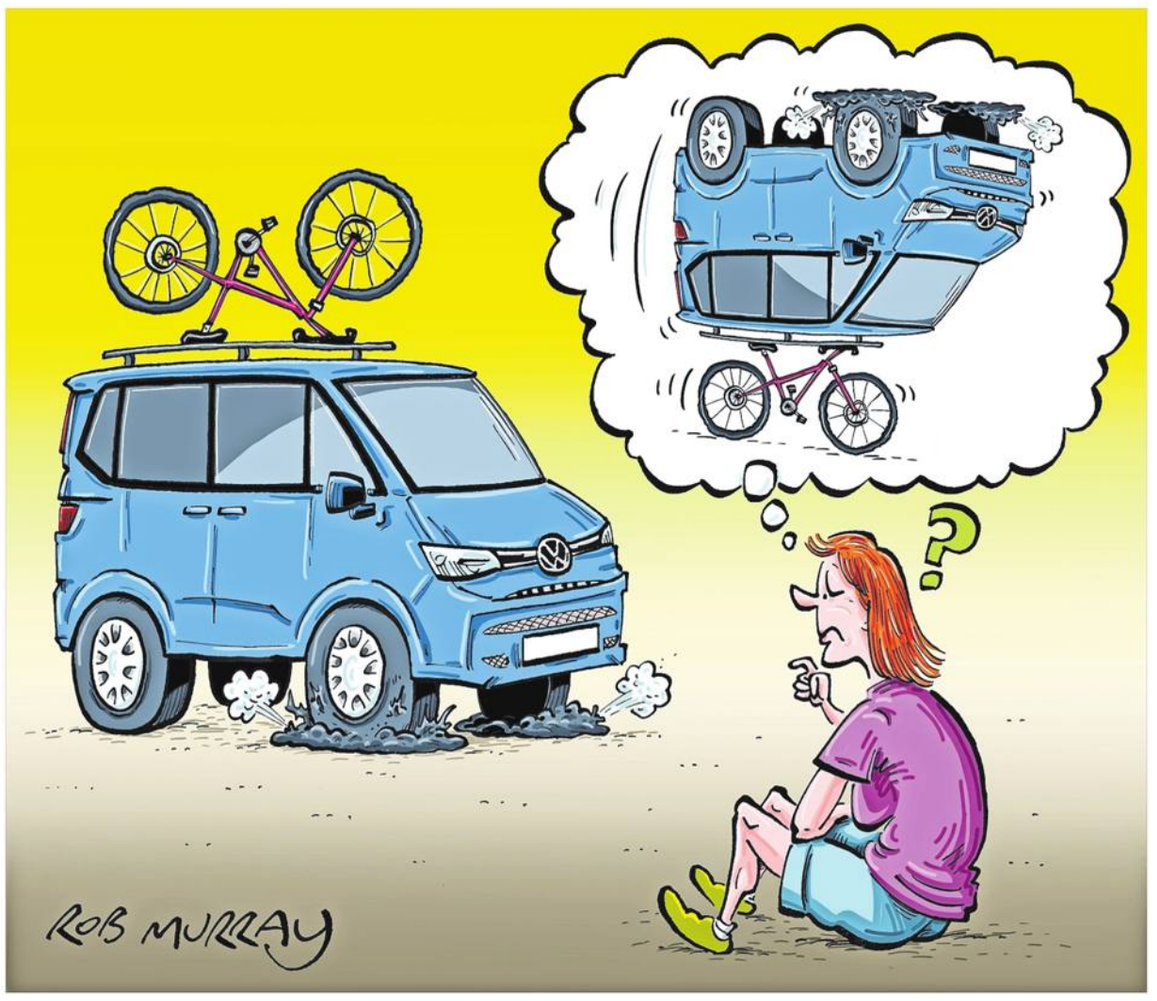
3 Is Amazon Prime worth it?
Set your alarms: it's Amazon Prime day on Tuesday with discounts for members. We look at whether you get value for your £8.99 a month and explore the features you may not know about.

4 The best cashback credit cards
Our experts explain how cashback cards work, the best options and whether you would be better off with a different type of reward on your borrowing instead.

5 Are Premium Bonds worth it?
Some 21 million Premium Bond holders have the chance to win one of the two £1 million prizes or six £100,000 prizes each month. We see if the maths adds up.

thetimes.com/money-mentor

Shoddy Europcar tyres ruined our family holiday



QUESTION OF MONEY
JILL INSLEY



We booked a VW Multivan to support our family on a cycling holiday in Portugal. We collected the car from Europcar on Friday, May 3, and drove to our first hotel stop in Pedrógão Pequeno.

On the Saturday, the intention was for four of us to cycle south to Abrantes and for my wife to drive the VW Multivan to meet us at the hotel. As we approached Abrantes, my wife called to say the car had a front tyre puncture, but she had parked in a shopping centre which had an autocentre and that they were looking at the car. When we arrived at the garage there was some consternation: the mechanics claimed that the tyre was not repairable and that both front tyres were illegal and dangerous. At this point we took a picture of the punctured tyre to clearly demonstrate that the tyres were beyond worn.

The mechanics recommended that we call the Europcar recovery vehicle, however this would have meant that we would have lost the car (no Europcar offices were open) and would have had to accompany the recovery vehicle back to the hire point in Cascais. This was not ideal given that we had booked hotels for the next three nights.

After much discussion, the mechanics managed to find a spare tyre to replace the punctured tyre, swapped the other illegal front tyre for one of the back ones and advised us to drive home. They did not charge us (mainly out of sympathy) but they did say they would not accept any liability for the work. At this point we had lost most of Saturday and were faced with the prospect of carrying on with our family holiday in a dangerous vehicle. That is what we did, driving very slowly, although we did return home a day earlier than planned.

The vehicle we hired was clearly not fit for purpose – it was illegal and dangerous. On our return we raised a complaint with Europcar. After eight weeks and many phone calls, Europcar responded to offer €50 as a "commercial gesture". We have a long, trouble-free history with Europcar and are classed as "privileged customers" but on this occasion we were charged more than €800 for a car that was not roadworthy and ruined our family holiday.

Is this really the way to treat loyal customers?

Jill replies

You were not exaggerating when you said the tyres were beyond worn. The photo you sent to me showed bare fabric fibres where the rubber had worn away completely.

I initially felt you had made a poor decision in continuing with the van and its dangerous tyres and thought you should have contacted Europcar to demand a replacement vehicle. You then sent me a photo of your mobile phone call list made the afternoon the front tyre expired: it showed 12 calls, all to Europcar. You had tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to get in touch with the company to ask for support and a new vehicle.

I sent the evidence to Europcar and asked it to think again about the compensation it had offered you. This time it offered half the hire cost, €440. It said: "Europcar is very sorry to hear of the poor rental experience and the delay experienced in receiving a response after the trip. None of this meets the usual standards the company sets and it will investigate the circumstances."

I didn't think this was good enough. The state of the front tyres was truly shocking, putting the lives of anyone in the van at risk. You had also tried hard – without success – to get help from Europcar on the day of the blowout. I asked the company to refund you in full and pay you a gesture of goodwill. It has now refunded the €880 you paid for the van hire plus a further €50.

Where's my pension, Prudential?

I have a small pension with Prudential which was due to mature in March this year. I am still trying to get a payment from the company.

My problems started on January 1, when Prudential sent me a form regarding my lifetime allowance. I completed the form and returned it two weeks later with a covering letter.

By March 19 I had heard nothing from Prudential so I called. I was told that everyone was busy and I would get a call on March 22. No one phoned me, so I called and ended up speaking to the same person again. He told me that I hadn't completed the form sent to me in January. I told him I had. He suggested it was lost in the post. I suggested it was lost in Prudential.

After being cut off and speaking to two more people I was told I needed to fill in another form with my bank details. I said I could provide them over the phone but the representative could not accept this, nor could she email the form to me, and Prudential could not post it to me until April 1. I lost my temper, raised my voice and she cut me off.

On March 24 I had a letter from Prudential informing me that my savings have been moved into a cash fund. However the amount appeared to be £2,164 less than the valuation on January 1. Since then, I have had a letter telling me that before I could go any further I had to call to speak to someone so that they could ensure that I was making the correct decision – this was part of their customer care. This was the first indication I had been given of the process involved in getting my funds.

On April 26 I spent another couple of hours on the phone; I spoke with a customer care representative who told me he would send out the form that I had to sign and return in order to get my payment. I am still waiting for that form to arrive.

At the same time I had a letter from a complaints manager saying that the Prudential supported my complaint and enclosing a cheque for £150.

"The state of the front tyres was truly shocking, putting the lives of anyone in the van at risk

The problem with dealing with Prudential is that it proudly advertises it has millions of customers but it seems to have just two people in customer care. They know that, to get my money, I will have no choice but to wait for hours.

It is now mid-May and there is no sign of getting my pension money any day soon. If they had paid me promptly after March 11 when it was due, I would have been able to take advantage of last year's Isa allowance.

Jill replies

You were trying to draw out all the money from two pension schemes held with the Prudential (now run by M&G) worth a little under £16,000. You knew that you could take 25 per cent of this tax-free but would have to pay tax at the rate of 20 per cent on the rest.

I asked Prudential to look into your complaint and pay out your money. Two days later it told me it had sent the claim forms to you by special delivery, and six days later it had received the completed forms and had processed a payment to you. It also told you it was going to pay a further £150 in compensation – into a bank account that you did not recognise. When this was pointed out, Prudential upped the amount to £450, plus a further £32 to cover postage and the cost of phone calls you had to make.

It investigated your complaint about a loss in value of the pension funds, but the process of paying out your pension took so long that they had increased in value. If the Prudential had paid out your pensions when it was meant to, it would have paid you £13,097 net of tax, but you received £13,589.

The Prudential has also paid you interest at the equivalent of the annual rate of 8 per cent used by the Financial Ombudsman Service, to compensate you for the four-month delay in handing over your money.

You said: "I should have preferred to have had a smoother ride – it would have been better for my blood pressure – but I'm so pleased the whole matter is put to rest. Again, I thank you for your help. I'm sure I'd still be waiting without your intervention."

I was paid carer's allowance for three months – then nothing

I am a carer for my 87-year-old mother and submitted a successful claim for carer's allowance in November 2023. On February 2 I had a letter from the Carer's Allowance Unit at the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) saying that a payment had been authorised for the period from September 18, 2023, to December 31, 2023, and I got £1,161.25 for this period on February 7.

I then had another letter, also dated February 2, saying that I was being treated as an irregular earner and requesting that I complete an accompanying form and submit evidence of earnings for February, March and April this year. I submitted the requested information on April 25, then heard nothing more.

I phoned the Carer's Allowance Unit on May 15 for an update and was told that the evidence had been received, my application was being "worked on" and would be flagged as a priority. Again I heard nothing more until I phoned again on June 5, when I was told that my application was still being worked on. It was not possible to give me a time frame.

Three days later I wrote to the Carer's Allowance Unit to complain about the delay and handling of my application but got neither a reply nor an acknowledgement.

It is now five months since I've had a carer's allowance payment, and I believe I am due payments from January 1. I am at a loss as to what to do next. The DWP complaints procedure states that it will not consider complaints until there has been a final response from the specific unit, in this case the Carer's Allowance Unit, but it is not even responding to me.

Jill replies

You wrote to me on July 1, I contacted the DWP on July 3 and the next day you had a "very apologetic" phone call about the delay in processing your carer's allowance application. An emergency payment of £2,139.20 was credited to your bank account immediately, in lieu of back payments from January 1 and the Carer's Allowance Unit confirmed that regular monthly payments would start on July 29 without the need for you to provide any further evidence.

CAN WE HELP YOU?

Please email your questions to Jill Insley at questionofmoney@sunday-times.co.uk or write to Question of Money, The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF. Please send only copies of original documents. Letters should be exclusive to The Sunday Times. Advice is offered without legal responsibility. We regret Jill cannot reply to everyone who contacts her.

I'm divorced and buying a home again at 59. Will I get a mortgage?



ADRIAN ANDERSON FROM THE BROKER ANDERSON HARRIS OFFERS HIS ADVICE

Q I was recently divorced after 24 years of marriage. It was fairly amicable and we agreed that my wife would remain in the family home to minimise the disruption to our teenage and young adult children. Lump sums from inheritances and bonuses over the years meant we were fortunate to both be in a decent position financially. My wife bought me out of the family home and took over what was left of the mortgage, which was reasonably small.

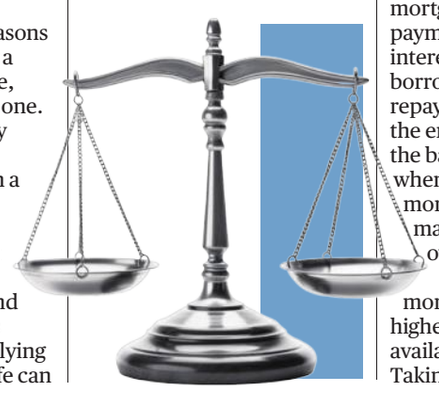
I am living in a rental property and would like to buy when interest rates start coming down later this year. I will need a mortgage because my equity from the family home isn't enough to buy a new property big enough for my children to stay in comfortably. I am still working full-time and have enough for about a 60 per cent deposit for the price point I am looking at.

My main concern is that my age will work against me — I am 59. Will I only be able to borrow a short mortgage or will I need to postpone my retirement to prove I can take out a decent length loan? Are there any other pitfalls I should be aware of going back into the world of mortgages as a solo and slightly silver-haired borrower?
Thomas, York

A There are lots of reasons why you might buy a property later in life, and divorce is a big one. But higher property prices mean more older borrowers are relying on a mortgage to fund their purchases.

The good news is that lenders are catering to the ageing population and there are plenty of deals available. That said, applying for a mortgage later in life can come with its challenges because lenders will want to make sure people are not borrowing more than they can repay if their income starts to drop off.

When considering income that comes from a job or self-employment, lenders typically only allow a borrower to take out a mortgage for as long as they plan to keep working. Lenders also have an upper age limit or maximum working age beyond which they will be reluctant to lend.



This can range from state pension age (which is 66 at the moment but is rising to 67 between 2026 and 2028) to, occasionally, 80.

Your occupation may have a bearing on the mortgage term a lender is willing to consider and they will look at how sustainable your income will be over the course of the mortgage.

Here are some of your mortgage options.

Standard capital repayment loans

This is the most common type of mortgage and your monthly payments will reduce the balance and pay the interest. The mortgage is fully repaid at the end of the term.

The age at which you take out this mortgage will affect the length of the term available. Shorter terms are typically offered for older borrowers, which makes monthly payments higher. Lenders will factor the higher monthly payments into your affordability assessment during the application process, which will influence how much you can borrow.

Given your circumstances and income, most lenders are likely to consider a 10 or 15-year mortgage.

Interest-only mortgages

With an interest-only mortgage, your monthly payments cover only the interest on the amount borrowed. Because you don't repay any of the capital, at the end of the mortgage term the balance is the same as when you took out the mortgage, unless you have made any capital overpayments.

Interest-only mortgages are deemed higher risk and are not available to all borrowers. Taking advantage of an interest-only mortgage will depend on your income and the size of the deposit.

Your 60 per cent deposit will work in your favour here, and this mortgage may be worth considering if you have funds from other sources to pay off the capital at the end of the term. For example, while you require a house large enough to accommodate you and your children now, in ten years selling and downsizing to a smaller property may deliver the lump sum required to repay the mortgage.

When the lender considers your income from employment, the maximum age they will allow for the mortgage term to end is likely to be 70, regardless of whether you can work beyond that.

Lending beyond retirement age

Lenders typically insist on more extensive checks if you request a mortgage beyond retirement or the maximum working age. They will evaluate whether your future pension income and other assets will cover the mortgage payments, this will be based on their underwriting criteria so it can differ between lenders, and will be sufficient to repay the mortgage at the end of the term.

It can be harder to borrow later in life, and you may need to be prepared to push back your planned retirement age.

Lenders have different age limits and underwriting criteria, so it is important to shop around. Some smaller building societies can be more flexible with older borrowers. This is a specialist area, so it may be wise to speak to a mortgage broker. They will be well-placed to source mortgages best suited to your circumstances.

Now it's easier to stick your house on Airbnb

George Nixon

NatWest has changed its rules to let mortgage holders rent out their homes for up to three months a year on official lettings platforms such as Airbnb.

It used to be that unless you had a specific buy-to-let or holiday-let mortgage, you would need to ask NatWest for permission to rent out your home and it would generally agree only if the entire property was rented out for at least six months under a formal tenancy agreement. It would also charge you £120 for a change to your lending terms.

The bank has changed its criteria to what it described as "Airbnb-friendly mortgage terms", so that you can let out rooms or even a whole home for up to 90 nights within 12 months.

NatWest said it could help landlords to cover void periods between tenants. You will still need to tell the bank that you are renting out accommodation, as well as your home insurer to ensure that your cover remains valid, but do not need to apply to the bank for consent to let and there is no fee.

Many lenders will increase the rate on your mortgage if you are letting out a property for more than 90 days a year, or 30 days in a row.

Barclays, Metro Bank and Nationwide Building Society allow short-term rentals, although the fine print varies so it is always best to check.

Barclays customers can rent out their property for up to 30 days at a time and for a maximum of 90 days a year. Metro Bank lets you rent out your whole home for up to 90 days a year.

Nationwide will let you rent out your home, a single room or annexe for up to 18 weeks a year. Anything beyond that will add 0.5 percentage points to your mortgage rate. Halifax's consent to let will add 0.5 percentage points to your mortgage rate, but this does not apply if you are renting your whole property out as a holiday let for less than 16 weeks over a year. Santander will charge you £295 if you apply to let your home out.

Smaller lenders including Chorley, Harpenden, Scottish, and Teachers building societies allow short-term lets, with various conditions.

Craig Fish from the mortgage broker Lodestone said: "This is a fantastic policy improvement and something that more lenders should offer. The popularity of Airbnb is growing in the UK, and at a time when there are significant cost of living pressures, the ability to let a spare room or even your whole house for short periods of time really could help financially."

Reliable data about the number of short-term lets each year is difficult to find, but the consultancy Alma Economics estimates that there were 257,000 in England in 2022, mostly in the southwest and London.

In the last three months of 2023 nearly 1.9 million stays in UK short-term lets were booked through Airbnb, Expedia and Booking.com. Airbnb said that the average host earned £5,500 last year.

Under the government's rent a room scheme, you can earn up to up to £7,500 a year tax-free from letting out furnished accommodation in your home.



257,000

The estimated number of short-term rents in England in 2022

1.9m

UK bookings with Airbnb, Expedia and Booking.com in October to December 2023

MONEY

FAME AND FORTUNE LAURA HAMILTON

In association with Standard Life
Part of Phoenix Group

‘I made £20k for a day’s work at 21. I’ve never beaten that’

The TV presenter also renovates and sells property, but still makes less than her Womble dad, she tells *Nick McGrath*

Laura Hamilton started out behind the TV camera as an assistant floor manager before getting her break on screen in the CITV programme *Fun Song Factory*. Since 2012 she has hosted *A Place in the Sun* on Channel 4 and has also presented *This Morning*, *Fort Boyard* and *The Xtra Factor*. She finished second in the 2011 series of *Dancing on Ice* and took part in *The Jump* in 2014. Hamilton, 42, is separated from her husband, Alex Goward, and lives in Surrey with her children Rocco, 10, and Tahlia, 9.

How much is in your wallet?
Probably only about £20 for my kids; ten for Rocco and ten for Thalia. Everything else I tend to buy with cards or just tapping on my phone, so I don’t really miss cash.

What credit cards do you use?
I have credit cards, but I don’t really use them. The only reason I do is if I’m renovating a property and need it as a back-up or to benefit from the perks – like with American Express when you spend a certain amount of money and you get a companion voucher for a flight. And some credit cards offer a 10 per cent discount on various shops. If I do use a credit card I pay it off every month. Credit cards have definitely been useful renovating houses though as sometimes budgets get out of control, so I’ve used them and paid them back later, but I’ll never go over about £5,000.

Are you a saver or a spender?
It’s a really hard question to answer. I’m not a spender. I’m not tight, though – if I want something I’ll save for it and buy it, but I’m not frivolous. I’m not really materialistic. Growing up, my mum and dad were always like, “If you want something, you’ve got to save for it. You’ve got to work hard for it. You’ve got to get a job.” I’ve had part-time jobs since I was 15.

How much did you earn last year?
I’m not prepared to tell you that, but I will say that I probably had one of my best years. We’re not talking six figures though. Absolutely not. And I’ve certainly never broken the million-pound barrier – I’m a daytime TV presenter, what do you think I earn? I’m freelance so my earnings are unpredictable and I’m not in control of them. I might get a show or a commercial campaign, or I might not.

With the property development side of my work, it’s different as I’m in control of that and that probably makes up 60 per cent of my income. So over the years my income has been steady, but you have times when it can go up, and times when it can go down. Commercial campaigns can be lucrative. My best one was when I was 21 and did a credit card campaign. I got paid £20,000 for a day’s work, as they liked my facial expressions and my eyes. I’ve never had that again.

Have you ever been really hard up?
I’ve definitely had periods when I’ve been renovating houses and worried that I’m running out of money and might have to get some extra borrowing on a mortgage. But I’m too sensible to let that affect my day-to-day life. Budgets have overrun and I’ve thought I might have to stop the build because I’m out of money – the cost of building materials has gone up enormously, to the point where in the middle of a project they were going up and it just became out of control. On some occasions I’ve had to pause work, change designs and wait till I could raise more money.



Do you own a property?
Before getting married – I’m separated now – I bought and sold a number of houses. I have renovated 19 properties including a commercial premises, which was a coffee shop, deli and restaurant. I have a property, which I bought in January 2022, and haven’t long finished renovating. I’ve just sold it and am weighing up where I’ll be living in the future.



I’m keen to get back into that cycle of buying, renovating and building. I did have somewhere to move to, but the seller died and the property went through probate, and they pulled out. I’ll either have to rent or stay at my mum and dad’s, or maybe I’ll move abroad. I might carry on renting in the UK close to the children’s school, so I can still co-parent the children with their dad – they’re a week with him and a week with me – but also have a property abroad. Watch this space. Whatever happens, it’ll be fine. That’s property for you.

There’s no point worrying about things I can’t control.

Are you better off than your parents?
I’m as happy as my parents are but in terms of the success that they’ve had as a team working together, the longevity, no. My mum worked in a school and my dad was Uncle Bulgaria in the Wombles pop group and he worked for British Telecom. They very much have played it safe. They’ve been financially savvy, they don’t have any debt, they haven’t really taken any massive risks. They’ve only moved twice in their lives, whereas I’m always moving.

Do you invest in shares?
Not really. I’ve got Premium Bonds for the kids though. Rather than friends and family buying them stuff they don’t need for their birthdays, I ask them to buy Premium Bonds instead. It’s a good little saving lesson for them. In terms of other investments like crypto and bitcoin, I don’t understand any of it. I’d rather stick to property. That’s what I know best, although I don’t know what the future holds. I doubt very much I’ll have a property portfolio, although never say never. Until now I have definitely used property development as an income. I’ve got two children at private school and their fees are expensive, so I have to pay for half of those fees and my way of doing it is through property.

What’s the most extravagant thing you’ve bought?
A Chloé Paddington handbag or my Land Rover Defender. The Defender was expensive, a lot more expensive than the handbag, but I’d worked so hard to get to that point it was worth it. I love my car.

What’s your money weakness?
Candles. I saw this French one the other day that cost £500, which is even too much for me. That would literally have been burning money.

What’s been your best investment?
Lord Roberts, the coffee shop and deli I renovated – not just for financial reasons, but for community ones. During Covid, it was a lifeline to so many people. We employed local people, trained young people and gave them that drive, knowledge and the customer service ability; that was really valuable.

And the worst?
A house that I bought in Sydenham, southeast London, was potentially going to be a good investment but tragically, a young boy was killed in the park behind the house.

What is your financial priority?
My children and their school fees. That’s all I care about. I don’t want to let them down.

What would you do if you won the lottery?
I would give some money to charity. I would probably pay off my brother’s mortgage, pay off my mortgage and I’d make sure my friends were all OK. And any money I had left over I’d buy a plane and an island in the Maldives.

Do you support any charities?
This year I ran the London Marathon for WellChild, which supports terminally ill children and their families.

What is the most important lesson you learnt about money?
Having money doesn’t make you happy. It doesn’t buy you health. I know lots of people that are very, very wealthy and they’ve had tragic stories in their families, so while money might give you the freedom to do certain things, it most definitely doesn’t give you your health.

A Place in the Sun episodes are available on channel4.com

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ALAMY/DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES/CHANNEL 4



The A Place in the Sun presenter’s dad (right) was in the Wombles pop group, above, and also worked for British Telecom. Hamilton’s luxury purchases include a Chloé Paddington bag, left, and her Land Rover Defender

“We’re not talking six figures, absolutely not. I’m a daytime TV presenter, what do you think I earn?”



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Barclays joins the £175 bonus club

Rachel Mortimer

Barclays is offering a rare £175 switching bonus to entice new current account customers, but you will have to jump through a number of hoops to get the cash.

The high street bank will pay the bonus to new customers who open a Barclays bank account or premier current account, available to those with an annual income of at least £75,000 a year or at least £100,000 in savings and investments. The offer is not available on joint accounts.

You will also need to use the Barclays mobile banking app to apply and use the Current Account Switch Service. If you have earned a switching bonus from Barclays in the past you will not qualify.

Customers must start the switch by August 30 and have moved over at least two direct debits and paid in at least £800 into the new account by that date.

And the catches do not end there: you will also need to join the bank’s Blue Rewards scheme to qualify for the bonus – it has a £5 monthly fee so be sure to weigh up whether it will be worth it.

There are only two other switching offers available at the moment. First Direct pays a £175 bonus to new customers who have never had an account with First Direct before. You also cannot have held a current account with its sister bank, HSBC, since 2018.

Lloyds is offering a £175 bonus to new customers switching to any of its Club Lloyds accounts, which have a £3 monthly fee unless you deposit a minimum of £2,000 each month.

£75,000

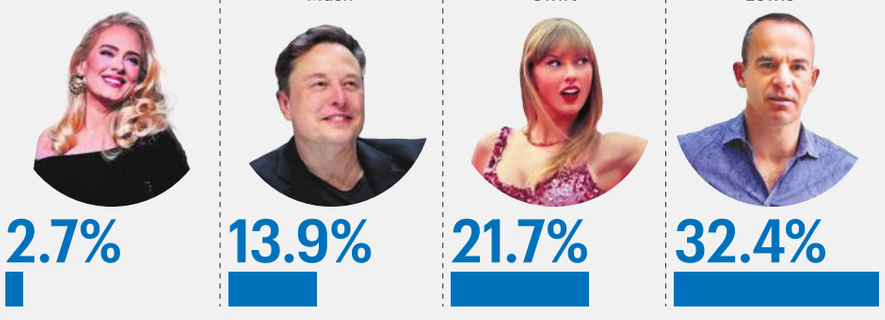
Annual income you need for a Barclays premier account

£48.6m

The total prize pot for tennis players at Wimbledon

CHART OF THE WEEK THE FAMOUS FACES LOVED BY SCAMMERS

Celebrity names most likely to be used by fraudsters



Source: MoneySavingsExpert analysis of Action Fraud crime reports for 2022 and 2023

July 14, 2024

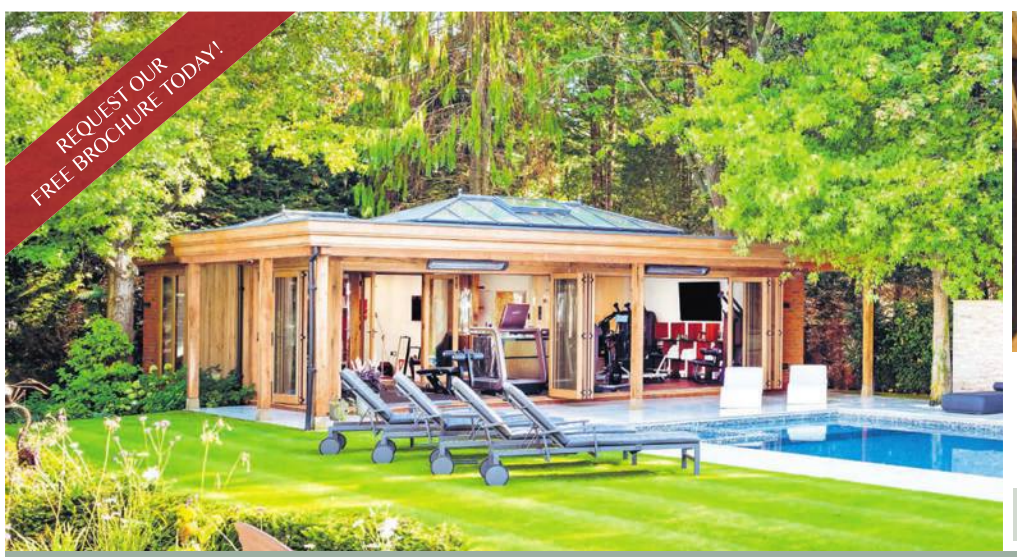
THE SUNDAY TIMES
Home



When we couldn't find a four-bedroom family home, we created our own 10

House proud

Plus Mapped: where is Labour's 'grey belt'? **6** Top bunk beds **12** The stars of Château DIY **14**





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Home

Making moves

House of the week

DORSET £1.6M

Near the village of Frampton, a few miles from Dorchester, is a traditional-looking retreat with a modern twist — it was built in 1992 but designed to resemble a period property. Court Gardens is a light-filled four-bedroom family house, nestled in 4.5 acres of grounds. Highlights include a striking brick-and-flint façade, outdoor heated pool and gardens that are a utopia for children. **jackson-stops.co.uk**









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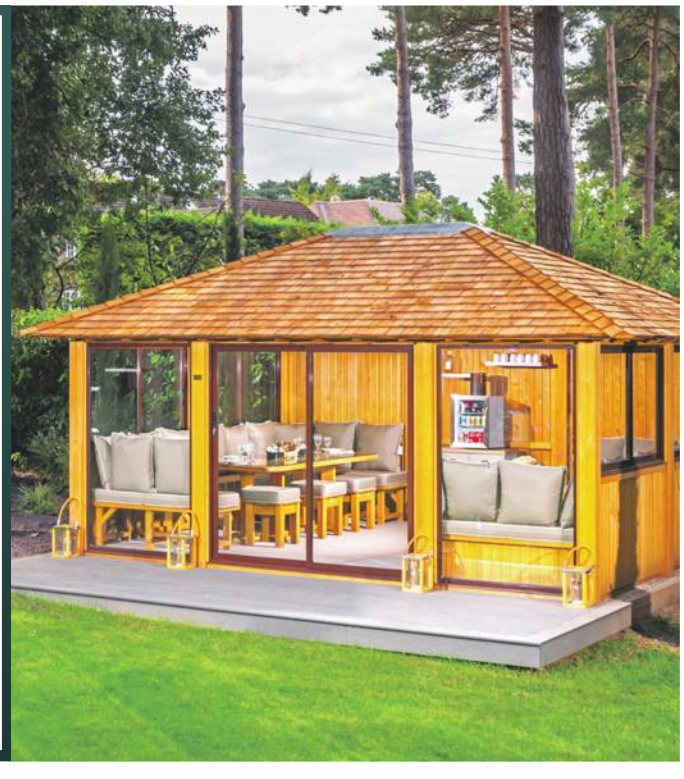
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The best of this week's property for sale

COVER: VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES





EAST SUSSEX £875,000
A beautifully kept four-bedroom detached house with a large south-facing garden in the village of Pett, between Rye and Hastings. It is a five-minute drive from Pett Level beach. **charlesco.co.uk**



CORNWALL £385,000
An end-of-terrace one-bedroom home in the pretty harbourside village of Mousehole. It has vaulted ceilings and a tiered garden with views towards St Michael's Mount. **lillicrapchilcott.com**



NORTHUMBERLAND £650,000
Built in 2020, Harbour Sands in the waterfront town of Amble has an upside-down layout to make the most of sea views — three of its four bedrooms are on the ground floor. **finestproperties.co.uk**



SOUTH AYRSHIRE O/O £1.25M
Astor House in Maidens, just outside Turnberry, is a five-bedroom family home with a large garden and views over the Firth of Clyde. The bold interiors have been finished with exceptional quality. **stonefieldayr.com**



LINCOLNSHIRE £900,000
A five bedroom, three-bathroom detached house with a heated indoor pool, spa bath, sauna and bar. It is tucked away in a secluded plot but is only a five-minute stroll from the town centre of Spalding. **fineandcountry.co.uk**

THE SECRET AGENT



'I forgot to ask the price of the house in the Hamptons: $22m. Yikes'

I am just back from the US, more particularly from Long Island, the peninsula stretching from New York City to Montauk at the tip. The place of fabled literary heritage, from F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* to the recent publication of Colm Tóibín's *Long Island*, the sequel to his award-winning *Brooklyn*.

I was there for a client thinking of buying a property on those shores. He wanted me to do a recce. I'm unqualified as to local pricing and the subtleties of each neighbourhood, but I'd mentioned to him that I'm a regular summer visitor to see family friends in the area. Which apparently qualified me in my client's eyes.

He's set his sights on the Hamptons. It's picture-perfect beautiful with clapboard houses and sandy beaches that last for ever. And it doesn't hurt that it's the summer retreat of movie stars and the uber-wealthy.

It also used to be an artists' destination. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning all lived here, attracted to the gorgeous light over the ocean.

As I pottered around the villages, looking at houses and chatting with Hamptonites, I was struck by just how much America remains the twinned story of immigration and opportunity. So many fortunes were made by immigrants brimming with entrepreneurial spirit — a spirit similar in nature to Eilis Lacey's, Tóibín's heroine from Ireland, who, once in America, married into an Italian family.

My friends took me to the party of a talent manager in the film biz. At the roadside restaurant where we gathered I pressed flesh with Andy Cohen, the TV host and executive producer of the *Real Housewives* franchise, and stood by Neil Patrick Harris, Broadway and television star, and the actress Naomi Watts, all of us sipping and nibbling and chatting next to a car park. Surreal but it worked.

More than once I listened in on small talk about Ozempic and how well it kick-starts weight loss. It's certainly true that everyone around me was thin. I was one of a very few actually tucking into the gourmet food on offer. Someone turned to me and said, "You eat a lot of pasta, don't you?"

Another day we went to Sag Harbor, a former whaling village, now gentrified. I visited the home of the celebrated designer Steven Gambrel. The house was quintessential charm, an 18th-century property with almost an acre of garden leading down to the bay. I could easily picture my client docking his boat there before a sunset drink in the garden.

We walked afterwards to the American Hotel on Main Street, the scene of Justin Timberlake's evening drinks prior to his recent arrest. There's a buzz in the restaurant, though I'm told by a Hamptons aficionado that it's far chicer to eat at home with a private chef.

In the air back to London I started to formulate proposals for my client. The charming Sag Harbor house had stayed with me in particular. But I realised that, in my Hamptons reverie, I never asked the price. Fortunately it was online: $22 million. Yikes.

Well, the US *is* the land of dreams and possibilities.

secretagent@thetimes.co.uk

The Secret Agent is the author of Highly Desirable: Tales of London's Super-Prime Property (Headline £12.99). Buy from timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Discount for Times+ members

Home

THE TWO ROBS



Your questions on being a landlord and investing in property answered

SHOULD I INVEST IN A PROPERTY FAR FROM MY HOME?

Q I saw your YouTube video about your favourite cities to invest in, and I noticed you didn't mention Oxford, where I live. The places you did mention, like Derby, are further afield – and it makes me nervous to invest so far from home. Should I accept the lower returns on offer in Oxford or invest elsewhere?
George, Oxford



A We take an approach to investing that focuses on maximising our total return over the medium to long term. This means finding investments that both generate a healthy rental income and have strong capital growth potential.

Historically investors in the southeast have achieved lower rental yields than those buying elsewhere, but have been compensated with higher capital growth. But over recent years prices in London and the southeast have hit a ceiling, and also suffered from increased rates of stamp duty for investors and higher mortgage rates.

If you look at a table of capital growth over the past year, you'll see London, Oxford and the like languishing near the bottom. With yields being higher for investors in the Midlands and the north, and better affordability there for homeowners too, we anticipate that this pattern will continue for at least the next few years.

Buying in the right place is one of the biggest levers you can pull when it comes to the overall performance of your investment, so we choose to invest where we see the best potential returns rather than restrict ourselves to places that are more convenient. But this is just our approach – it's possible to make a terrible investment in a great area and vice versa.

It may be that your local knowledge allows you to find a brilliant investment opportunity close to home that has the potential to far outweigh the trends that we've talked about. You may also be able to achieve a higher return and add more value to properties by being more hands-on than we are, which again would outweigh any location factors.

SHOULD I SELL UP WITH MY TENANTS IN PLACE?

Q For 30 years I have owned a building close to central London that contains four two-bedroom flats. It was a run-down 19th-century pub that I fixed up as the area became more desirable. Now, despite its age and due to its excellent location, I earn £2,000 a month per flat. I have been lucky with good tenants – mostly young professionals who stay for two to four years. However, I will be 75 next year, a time when I have long planned to sell up, and since I want a complete separation from the business I need to sell the building as a whole.

Of the four flats, two contracts are up for renewal and one tenant is sure to be moving out. Should I be looking to sell with a full complement of tenants or try to get everyone out?
Willie, London

A The right move here depends on what your ideal buyer is likely to want to do with the property.

If they are likely to want to redevelop or upgrade the building, they may prefer it to be empty to avoid delaying their plans while they serve notice on the occupants. But, since you've been making continuous improvements, it sounds likely that a buyer will want to buy and hold it for the rental income. In this situation, full occupancy and income from day one will appeal to them. If they're using a mortgage, it will also make it easier for them to justify the valuation if they can point to existing tenancy agreements.

So, in the absence of other information, we'd be inclined to keep the building fully rented and increase the rents on occupied units to as close to market rent as possible – but avoid entering into any long-term agreements that could limit a future buyer's flexibility. However, the best move before you proceed would be to ask for the opinion of potential agents who you might use to oversee the sale.

Bear in mind that the tenancy agreements of any occupied flats at the point of sale will be inspected during the conveyancing process, so now's the time to gather proof that you've served all the legally necessary documents, protected deposits and have all the relevant safety certificates in place. Discrepancies with these things can slow down a sale, so use this time to pull everything together if you haven't already. This way you'll be in a better position when the time comes to send things across quickly when requested.

Rob Dix and Rob Bence are the presenters of The Property Podcast

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Home





Grey belt ... or grey

Labour has promised to build homes on 'ugly' parts of the green belt – areas it has rebranded as 'grey'. It would help if the new government properly defines what that is, says *Martina Lees*



A skip lorry barrels down a lane on the edge of west London. It passes West Drayton railway station, where fast trains on the new £19 billion Elizabeth Line pull in. It then speeds past swanky new-build flats on the high street – but the buildings suddenly stop. The lorry has entered the green belt, where construction is nigh impossible. This bit of green belt is not green, though. It is a literal wasteland, where one lorry after another empties skips full of old mattresses and rotting carpets on to piles of tangled detritus. Welcome to what could soon be classed as "grey belt".

Making it easier to build on scrappy green belt, like this tip, is at the heart of the new Labour government's plans to kick-start growth. Britain's "antiquated" planning system has become a "graveyard of economic ambition," Rachel Reeves said as she outlined a raft of planning reforms in her first big speech as chancellor last week. "We will not succumb to a status quo which responds to the existence of trade-offs by always saying no," she said.

Nowhere has "always saying no" been more prevalent than in the green belt. Take the tip. In 2018 it was promoted as a site for up to 3,500 homes close to the Elizabeth Line and in the shadow of Heathrow. The land has a long history of illegal tipping. The developers promised to clean it up and build public paths connecting the Grand Union canal with local lakes. But none of that happened because the site is in the green belt.

This planning policy "has been the third rail of British politics: untouchable upon pain of instant electrocution," says Nicholas Boys Smith, the founder of Create Streets. Zack Simons, a barrister at Landmark Chambers, calls the green belt "the most familiar and least understood plank of England's planning policy ... The confusion starts with the name. It's not all green and it definitely isn't a belt."

About 65 per cent of green belt land is agricultural and 19 per cent includes woodland, which the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) charity rightly says is crucial for "solving the climate, nature and food crises". But 6.8 per cent of green belt is developed, over half of which is roads and transport infrastructure. Yet disused quarries and derelict petrol stations are as protected as the greenest of green belt sites.

This land is not "under threat", as countryside campaigners have claimed. The green belts around 15 urban cores cover 12.6 per cent of England. Green belt land has more than doubled since the late 1970s, growing almost 100 sq miles in the past two years alone. The capital's metropolitan green belt is more than three times the size of Greater London.

What is it for? Simons, who specialises in green belt law, says: "They have nothing to do with preserving scenic beauty. We have national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty for that. They aren't about protecting wildlife or precious habitats. They're for something much simpler: keeping land permanently open and stopping so-called urban sprawl."

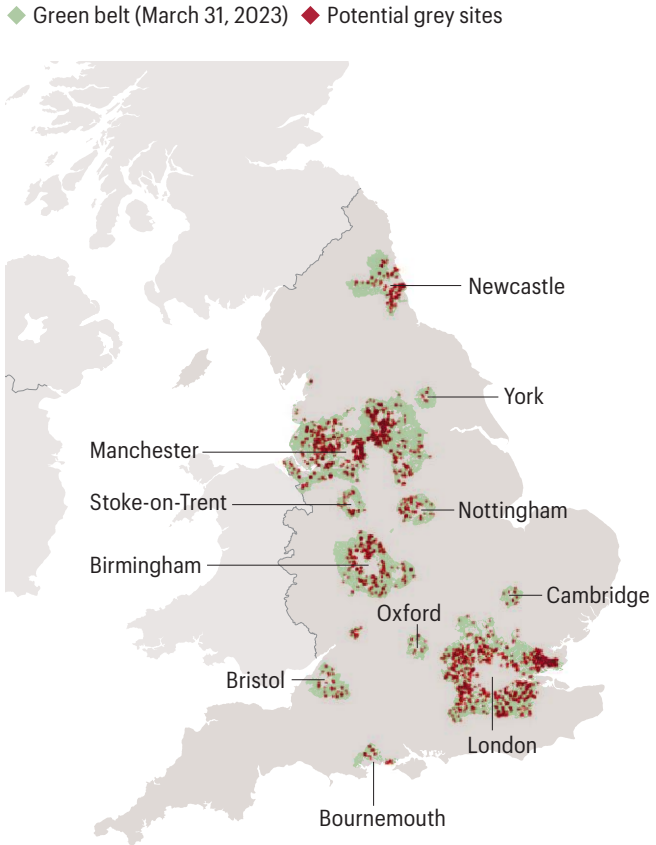
Most countries have urban containment policies – and there is a case to be made for that, Boys Smith says. "The British system is different in two ways. It moves far less over time: it has not expanded with towns and cities but constrained them. And it has the policy branding of the angels, redolent of rolling hills and pleasant pastures." Labour's "genius", he adds, was to rebrand a "portion of the green belt as grey belt".

However, Simons fears that focusing on the "greyness" of grey belt "risks perpetuating the error". Talking of "poor quality and ugly" areas of green belt, as Labour has done, "completely misses what the green belt is actually about, which has nothing to do with beauty or ugliness".

Government policy is yet to define what grey belt actually means. A definition might stop landowners taking advantage "of subjective terms such as 'poor quality' or 'ugly' by



WHERE 'GREY BELT' AREAS COULD BE



Source: Land Tech





area?

making land they wished to sell fit the terms," says Sam Stafford, planning director of the Home Builders Federation.

The idea to rebrand some green belt can be traced back to an infamous derelict petrol station in Tottenham Hale, north London. It was earmarked for affordable homes in 2013, but those were never built because the garage sits just inside the green belt. Blocks of flats have since been built next door to the garage, which remains untouched.

Exactly how many homes could be built on grey belt land depends on what its official definition will be. LandTech, a land search platform, has mapped between 8,700 and 10,600 hectares that may qualify (see map). That is only 0.6 per cent of all green belt land, but is enough for 261,000 to 318,000 homes. It includes sites registered as brownfield – that is, previously developed – and vacant or derelict in the green belt next to existing roads and built-up areas.



Separate research by Create Streets for the Centre for Policy Studies, a think tank, estimated about 3 per cent of green belt – 46,871 hectares – could be grey belt. Turning less than half of that into terraced streets and mid-rise mansion blocks could deliver all of Labour's promised 1.5 million new homes.

> **Green belts have nothing to do with preserving scenic beauty**

Why is the green belt so sacrosanct? Since 1955 national policy has only allowed building in the green belt in "very special circumstances". "That is a high policy bar," Simons says. It stacks the scale against development by forcing decision makers to give "substantial" weight to any green belt harm. It can only tip in favour of approval if the benefits of a scheme are so significant that it "clearly" outweighs all its harms.

There are a few exceptions, such as replacing an existing building with one that is "not materially larger". But there are no clear rules on how big is too big. I should know. My young family live in a dilapidated bungalow in the Surrey green belt. It is full of asbestos, at the worst flood risk and with almost no insulation. We have been struggling for more than three years to win permission to knock it down and replace it with a zero-carbon, flood-proof house on stilts, which all our neighbours support.

All the houses on our street started out as weekend riverside homes in the 1930s. Now all are permanently occupied and climate change has raised the flood level. Over the past 20 years almost half of our neighbours had consent to knock down and replace their homes with bigger ones – the house we want to build is smaller than any of them. It is also much smaller in footprint than extensions we are allowed to build – and have partly built. But the council refused because it would not count our extensions and miscalculated the volume. We will appeal. It has cost us £50,000 and counting.

This month Angela Rayner, the deputy prime minister and housing secretary, will publish a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for consultation. She will also write to councils to tell them to review their green belt boundaries to earmark brownfield and grey belt land in it for development.

Yet green belt reviews will take years. The fastest way to free up the grey belt is to define it in the NPPF and make it a new exception where development in the green belt is allowed, Simons says. That way it will quickly be factored into planning decisions.

In his view grey belt should include sites that do not meet the official purposes of the green belt: to keep land open in the countryside or historic towns, stop large built-up areas or neighbouring towns from merging, and encourage the recycling of urban land.

Grey belt should also be distinct from brownfield land, where the NPPF already allows green belt development, Stafford says. There is "simply not enough" brownfield in the green belt to meet affected areas' housing needs, he adds.

Tomo Thompson, chief executive of CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire, accepts that policy should allow more, and bigger, buildings on grey belt than green belt, to allow developers to still profit once they have paid to clean up the land and sold some homes that are genuinely affordable. "You cannot have the same restrictions for building on grey belt as you currently have for the green belt," he says.

Boys Smith says the government should go further to preapprove grey belt sites near transport hubs and in existing towns. "Thanks to the Labour manifesto, the government now has a clear mandate to build on it and, I hope, beautify it."

Above: potential grey belt sites at Loxley Works in Sheffield; a vacant car park in Wolverhampton; a garden supplier in Epping, Essex. Below left: a waste tip in the green belt in West Drayton, west London



LABOUR'S RACE TO BUILD 1.5M HOMES

Rachel Reeves, the new chancellor (*pictured below*), has fired the starting gun on the race to build 1.5 million homes in this parliament.

The government wants a 50 per cent increase in the rate of housebuilding from that achieved by the Conservatives, but has an inauspicious inheritance. The rate of housebuilding has been falling, and the pipeline of new homes is likely to result in 170,000-190,000 being built in 2024, creating a backlog that adds to the rate necessary in later years to hit the target.

The fall can be partly blamed on the economic situation, but there has been a downswing in the support provided by the planning system. An investigation into housebuilding by the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA) reported in February: "The planning system is exerting significant downward pressure on the overall number of planning permissions being granted. Over the long term the number of permissions being given has been insufficient to support housebuilding at the level required."

CMA analysis indicates that building 1.5 million homes will require permissions for at least 1.8 million (equivalent to 375,000 a year over five years). Last year consents were issued for 233,000, and there is a particular shortage in areas with the most acute housing need, including those dominated by green belt land. Approval rates at appeal have dropped, and analysis last year found that 39 per cent of local planning authorities did not have enough deliverable land to meet their five-year targets.

Boosting housebuilding in the next couple of years will be determined by what can be done to unlock stalled projects that are sitting in the system. Beyond that, the government must immediately encourage investment in new projects, the submission of applications and issuing of permissions for homes to be built before 2029.

The content of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) will be critical to the success of the government's plans. Labour's manifesto proposals to "reform and strengthen" the NPPF's presumption in favour of sustainable development must establish confidence that the balance will tip in favour of approving acceptable proposals, especially in areas where homes are most needed. Anything less and the race to 1.5 million will be lost.

By Matthew Spry, an expert in housing at the planning consultancy Lichfields

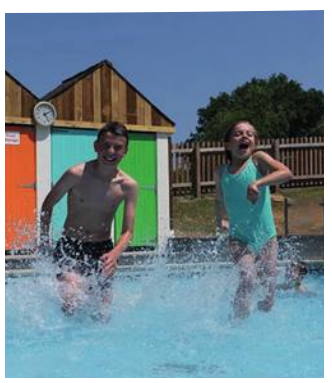
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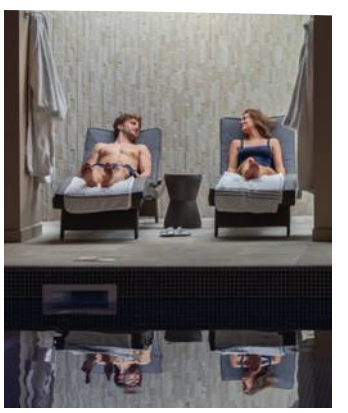
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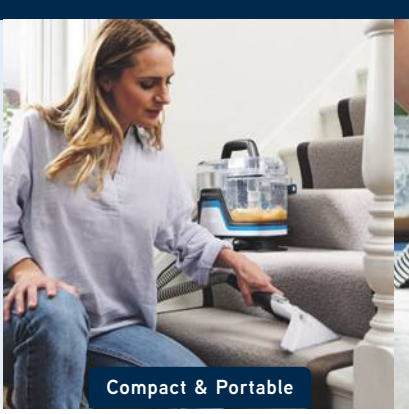
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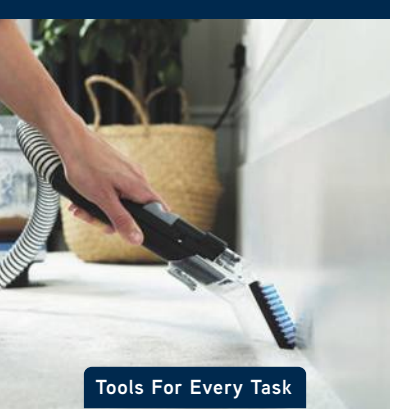


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With four-bedroom homes increasingly in shor
one enterprising family decided to create their

Our dream bungal



What do you do when you can't find a big enough house that you can afford in the place you want to live? Build it yourself. That's the decision Hayley and Stephan Geering came to when they struggled to find a four-bedroom house in the borough of Richmond upon Thames.

The supply of larger homes has been dwindling. Higher mortgage rates have meant that many families can't afford to trade up, so those wanting to downsize are not selling. In Richmond the number of four-bedroom homes on the market is 25 per cent down on 2019, according to the estate agency Hamptons.

The figures are more stark in other parts of the country. There has been a 75 per cent drop in Barking and Dagenham, east London, a 62 per cent fall in west Oxfordshire and a fall of more than 40 per cent in the Cotswolds, Colchester and Oxford since 2019.

> **"They paid £850,000 for the property, now valued at £2m**

The Geerings started looking for a four-bedroom property in 2020. During lockdown the couple were living in a three-bedroom terraced house with a tiny courtyard garden. They had two children under the age of ten, and Hayley, now 45, was unable to leave the house as she was shielding from coronavirus due to immunodeficiency.

She felt suffocated and yearned for space. But none of the four-bedroom houses in their area was affordable – prices started at £1.5 million – or in the style they wanted: modern, open-plan, with lots of light.

So Hayley decided to take matters into her own hands and create the four-bedroom house of her dreams. To do so she set her sights on a specific type of property – a bungalow. She grew up in a postwar bungalow in Sussex that her parents had converted into a two-storey house. "I have friends who are looking to upsize, and I always say the same thing to them: bungalow, bungalow, bungalow."

Bungalows are often unmodernised and ripe for renovation. They can have wide plots, large ground floors and attached garages or lofts that can be converted into rooms, according to Hayley's architect, Sophie Bates. The floorplans are wider and shallower than Victorian terraces or semis, so they allow more light into the front and back, and have flexible layouts and better connection to the garden. They're often cheaper than period houses too.

In November 2020 the Geerings paid £850,000 for a derelict, three-bedroom, 1960s bungalow on a corner plot with a quarter-acre garden, and spent the next two years transforming it into their dream four-bedroom home. But they didn't knock it down. Often it is cheaper to build from scratch, because you pay no VAT on new-build houses, but as the bungalow had been empty for two years, the Geerings only had to pay 5 per cent VAT to refurbish it, rather than the usual 20 per cent.

The transformation is a stunning vision in white and glass that belongs in coastal California rather than English suburbia. Blurring inside and outside, the flowing open-plan layout has glazed walls, sliding doors, internal windows and five rooflights; there's even a glazed gable in the double-height living room where you can look out over treetops.

rt supply, own

low



VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES









Clockwise from left: Hayley and Stephan Geering with their children, Seb and Sia, at their home in Richmond upon Thames; the atrium-like front hall; the garden area; the glazed rear extension; the kitchen

What was an attic is now an adults-only suite. There's a bedroom and dressing room with a large dormer window, a bathroom with a skylight over the shower, a sitting room and an office for Stephan, 49, a lawyer. While working he can look down over the family living room from an internal window in front of his desk.

Downstairs is an atrium-like front hall, two children's bedrooms, a guest bedroom that is used as a Pilates studio (Hayley teaches privately), two WCs (one that is just for guests, so that Hayley is not exposed to germs), a games room, utility room and that vaulted open-plan living space. The refurbishment has more than doubled the floor space – from 1,140 sq ft to 2,360 sq ft.

On the warm June day I visited, the Schüco sliding doors were open, as were the solar-powered Velux rooflights (they automatically shut when it rains). A summer breeze wafted through, creating a relaxed, holiday feel. "I told Sophie I was looking for a feeling of going to a spa, or going on holiday in Greece. We have a favourite destination there, Ekies [a resort near Thessaloniki]."

So it's no surprise they've covered the exterior with white render and filled the garden with Mediterranean plants, including lavender, olive trees and mimosa. They watch the sunset over cocktails from under a pergola on the east side of the garden.

From the kitchen island Hayley can watch her children, Seb, 13, and Sia, 8, through a glass wall in the games room, or in the above-ground pool beyond another sliding door. "I'm quite often in the kitchen or doing the laundry. In the old house I was segregated from the rest of the family. Now I can enjoy watching them. I constantly feel like I'm part of my kids' world, my husband's world."

Bates carefully calculated the amount and positioning of glass to prevent overheating. None of the rooflights faces west. The glazed rear extension faces north, and there isn't so much glass that you feel like you're in a goldfish bowl, either – there's a substantial wall where they've hung a TV, framed by smaller panes on either side. "If the whole thing was glass you wouldn't get that cocoon feeling," Sophie says.

Bates advised them not to use bifold doors. "When a bifold is closed, which is 99 per cent of the time in the UK, the frames get in the way of the view." Those clear sightlines were important to Hayley. "My windows are like a TV to nature. No weather is boring now."

At night a romantic ambience is created by mood lighting from LED strips concealed in shadow gaps and under shelves – there are almost no ceiling lights. Soft LEDs in the hallway floors are triggered by motion sensors. "When you go to the toilet at night I didn't want to be dazzled with lights," Hayley says. "So these all come on subtly."

To boost its eco credentials, Bates shored up walls and ceilings with mineral wool and wood fibre insulation. The couple also opted for an air source heat pump, but Hayley is not sure all the work stacked up financially. "We reckon we probably spent another £40,000 turning this into an eco house. But we did it for moral reasons. We felt, let's invest in not polluting the atmosphere."

Hayley's health has benefited from the mechanical ventilation with heat recovery system. She is less nervous about germ exposure. "In the winter, even when the windows are closed, you've got a constant flow of fresh air. You can't get damp or mould. And if you have hay fever or allergies it sucks out all the bad stuff."

Transforming a bungalow can pose planning challenges. You must ensure the attic is high enough to convert to a bedroom – the Geerings' loft was 2.65m from the top of the ceiling joists to the underside of the ridge beam. If you are buying a bungalow for a project, Bates also suggests that you hire a structural engineer to assess its foundations and loading capacity, as this may limit what you can do, and to have an asbestos survey before you exchange.

The project added 3m to one side of the house, 2.2m to the back, and 1.3m to the width of the garage (now a bedroom). To maximise their chances of getting permission Bates broke the project down into three phases: permitted development for the loft conversion and dormer, planning for the side and rear extensions and permitted development to change the red-brick façade to white render – they left this until last to establish a precedent by first building an extension in white render.

"You can change the appearance of your house as long as the materials are similar to the existing house," Bates explains.

The build took a year and cost £589,000; they recently had the house valued for £2 million. "Investment potential was in the back of my mind, but we're never leaving," Hayley says. "This is our home for life."

They'll save a fortune on holidays too. "In June Stephan and I took a week off work and decided, why don't we just stay in our house?" Hayley says. "This is typically what we would rent if we go on holiday. We just bought some garden games and pretended. We whacked up the heat on the pool and had a great time. This feels like the type of place you would go on holiday, but we get to live there."

Home

The sky's the limit

Bunk bed sales are climbing, but you can keep your costs down to earth – and save space – with these smart tips and hacks. By *Jessica Salter*

Bunk beds have a magical nostalgia to them: they are spaces where children can escape, with a book or a toy, into a world of childish make-believe. And right now, they are trending. Sales are up nearly 300 per cent year on year, according to Bed Kingdom, along with hundreds of thousands of posts on Instagram, ranging from the chic to the fantastical.

"Whenever possible I love to use bunk beds for kids' rooms," Shawn Henderson, an interior designer who creates chic upmarket projects for clients in New York, says. "Kids are always having sleepovers, so they work well for those situations."

Beth Malkin, commercial director of the children's shop Scandiborn, says the increasing interest is due to "the fact that we are seeing more shared sibling bedrooms and limited living spaces".

They are just as popular in second homes and holiday cottages where people need to cater for more overnight guests. Ruth Leigh, co-owner of Updown Cottage in Kent, has a luxurious gatehouse for guests with a small bunk bedroom. "We wanted families to be able to have a lovely luxurious sitting room to enjoy once the kids were asleep, but we also didn't want to waste space on a huge kids' room that was only used at night," she says.

> **"Our client asked for a bunk bed strong enough for two adults"**

Bunk beds are often quite an investment – so you need to think about longevity. Melissa Hutley, co-founder of Hutley & Humm, advises steering clear of novelty, and instead focusing on a design that can work for all ages, including visiting adults (although note that top bunks are not suitable for children under six). "We would make it age-appropriate for children with the choice of lampshades or cushions and throws – items that can easily be changed," she says. Don't forget arguably the most important accessory: a quality mattress. The Devon-based mattress company Naturalmat has an excellent children's range, made by hand using organic materials (from £740).



OFF THE PEG

There is an incredible choice of bunk beds out there, ready to be shipped to an excited child's new bedroom – so you'll have to do a lot of sifting. Malkin says Scandiborn's bestseller is the Oliver Furniture wood bunk bed (£1,969): "Its classic functional design and flexibility means it does not date and can be used if further siblings arrive. The simple details like the rounded corners and bars add a premium feel to the furniture."

For a more traditional choice, Little Folks Furniture, based in Suffolk, makes its beds out of hardwood, using traditional jointing, rather than dowl joints, meaning they are more robust. Its Fargo bunk bed (£895) can be split into two full-size adult singles for flexibility. As well as those wanting to use the bunks later on as singles, Chris Lusty, who founded the business, says: "We have customers who buy the beds as two singles, ready to by used as bunks when the children are old enough."

A more budget-friendly option is Bed Kingdom's most popular design, the classic-looking Flair Bea bunk bed (on sale, £219), which garners very positive reviews.

BESPOKE

For a beautifully streamlined look, many designers favour bespoke carpentry. Hutley & Humm recently designed some for a small room in a client's holiday cottage in Devon. Hutley advises always building bespoke bunks "around a full-size single mattress of good depth – we like anything from 20cm and over in depth. This ensures they are luxurious and comfortable for both children and adults". As space is usually tight around bunk beds, she suggests building in "a little nook in the wall, to place a cup, rest books and have a USB power socket".

While it sounds luxe, bespoke is not always as expensive as it sounds: I sketched out an elaborate design for my own children,





AMANDA JACKSON; ANDERS HVID; ALICIA WAITE; RACHAEL SMITH

including a staircase and a wardrobe, and asked a local carpenter for a quote. It came back at £800, excluding materials – less than some of the high-end shop-bought bunks.

HAND-BUILT

Hand-built beds made from solid wood are a great middle ground between bespoke and off-the-shelf. Jon Madeley, founder of Scumble Goosie, says he started making solid mango hardwood bunk beds in 2016 as a bespoke commission for a customer's ski chalet in France. "Our Gustavian style cot bed has always been one of our bestsellers for many years prior, but the client wanted a bunk bed version which was strong enough to accommodate two adults, so we set to work, and the design was born."

The brand is something of an insider's favourite: the designer Alexandra Tolstoy bought one for her own daughter's room. "They are well designed and their traditional Swedish lines work well aesthetically with the antiques in my daughter's room. I painted them rectory red by Farrow & Ball, which helped to tie everything in the room together, and I scored top marks with my daughter." (Prices start at £1,557 for a bunk bed.)

DIY OPTION

For the handy, there is the DIY option. Sarah Corbett Winder couldn't find a bunk bed for her eldest son, Lyon, that "pleased both my eyes and my budget" she says. "[My husband] Ned is a problem-solver and suggested building one himself – so we drew up a design and took a family trip to B&Q and bought everything we needed." Once built, Sarah painted it with Annie Sloan chalk paint, and topped it with a Ferm Living striped tent she already had.

"Of course, a few months later, Lyon decided to sleep at ground level again," she says, laughing. "Luckily we found a bed that fits perfectly underneath, and the top bunk now houses Lyon's friends or his Lego creations."

IKEA HACKS

There is a middle ground: Wendy H Gilmour, who has a popular Instagram account and the blog thankfifi.com, documented her Ikea bunk bed hack. "We bought a set of £30 Ikea pine bunks from Facebook Marketplace, then clad all four corner uprights in timber as well as boarding the ends of the bunks with cheap pine cladding, leaving space for a little reading shelf which we framed out." She cut a new cornice to fit around the top for a built-in look, then painted the bunk in jewel beetle by Little Greene and added some solid brass handles. She estimates the whole job cost £342.



1 Sarah Corbett Winder's DIY bunk bed for her son, Lyon

2 JoJo Bradley's Lancashire Home bunk bed **jojobradley interiors.co.uk**

3 Scandiborn's Oliver Furniture wood bunk bed, £1,969 **scandiborn.co.uk**

4 Lunar triple bunk bed, £649.99 **bedkingdom.co.uk**

5 Hutley & Humm's bespoke bunk beds **hutley-humm.com**

6 Bed Kingdom's Flair Bea bunk bed, on sale, £219 **bedkingdom.co.uk**







TEN TWEAKS TO UPDATE A TWEEN'S BEDROOM

My tween daughter, who is ten, is growing up and this is most apparent in her room. Baskets of toys have been replaced with craft projects, a guitar and stacks of murder mysteries. It's time for a decor update, clearly.

If you too want to update your tween's room, start by looking at what already works. Frame the project as a restyle, rather than a remodel, an approach that shows our kids the value of repurposing what we already have.

Here are ten top tweaks to inspire you and your tween.

1 Upgrade the bedside table
Bedside tables can be fashioned from small bookshelves or vintage trolleys. For something retro, Mustard Made makes cute mini lockers that are perfect — and these have doors, so tweens can stash away their possessions.

2 Change the vibe with a rug
A bold rug is a wonderful way to cover all those marks on the carpet, unavoidable in any children's room. Ruggable and Urban Outfitters both have plenty of colourful options.

3 Introduce a dressing table
A vintage rattan or bamboo table is a brilliant option, and can double as a desk — @mky_interiors on Instagram has some lovely ones for sale. If you'd prefer to buy something new, Oliver Bonas has a rattan number with tassel drawer pulls.

4 Start a real-life Pinterest board
You can find packs of adhesive 30cm square cork tiles in Wickes and Screwfix, which will allow you to create a gallery space or vision board. A pegboard, like the one the DIY creator Ashley Brandfass (@studio_adash) made for her son, is also an option.

5 Update art thoughtfully
Prints are an affordable option. Or consider pressed flowers (make your own at home and frame with a brightly painted mount). Art for Charity Collective has some stunning options, including brass flowers by Fi McDougall of Wilderframe in handpainted malachite frames.

6 Trim the curtains
Curtains are not cheap, so if your tween's are in good condition, update them with a trim. Pompoms are an obvious choice, but you could also go for braiding, fringe and tassels. High-end trims are available from places such as VV Rouleaux.

7 Invest in a bed tester
Princess canopies are lovely but they have a lifespan. Instead, buy (or make) a bed tester — a small canopy that hangs above the bed using a pole or rail.

8 Brighten up the bedding
New bedlinen is an easy win. Poppy and Honesty is great for bright floral prints. Seek out textile designers like Molly Mahon or Sophie Harpley and the print's popularity is more likely to endure.

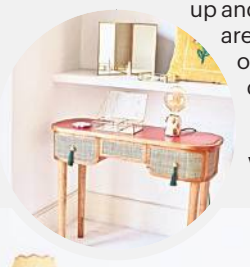
9 Make your own window seat
The ideal space for reading and relaxing. There are some brilliant examples of creators on Instagram and TikTok hacking the Ikea Kallax storage unit and turning it into a window seat.

10 Get hooked on music
The best quick refresh I've bookmarked for my daughter's room is the addition of a guitar hook — guitars and ukuleles look fabulous hung up and double as art. There are lots of hook options on Etsy. If your tween doesn't play an instrument, invest in a retro record player.

Victoria Maw









From top: a giant pegboard made by @studio_adash; Macra guitar hanger; Oliver Bonas rattan dressing table; Mustard Made locker

Home

How to revamp a château



Owners from the Channel 4 show Château DIY on the highs and lows of renovating their dream homes in France. By *Victoria Brzezinski*



An Englishman's home may be his castle, but the dream of escaping to a château has long been embedded in the British psyche. All too often the well-intentioned transformation of a tumbledown historic home in the French countryside can turn into a gargantuan (and sometimes nightmarish) project, as documented on Channel 4's *Château DIY*, a spin-off of *Escape to the Château*, the reality series that followed Dick and Angel Strawbridge's quest to resuscitate an abandoned French château.

'We walked into the orangery and fell in love with it'

Chris Smith and Jolyon Latchmore are one of the *Château DIY* couples trading the rat race for the rural idyll in France. Since season three cameras have been following the ups and downs of their restoration of Château Trois Cloches, the beautiful, 20-room bolt hole in Normandy that they bought in 2022 for €580,000 (a snip of its original €720,000, or about £615,000, asking price).

When Smith, 42, and Latchmore, 39, met while working at the Foreign Office in 2008, the Londoners discovered they shared an eerily similar childhood dream of owning a château. Fast forward to 2018, the couple married in a château near Fontainebleau but credit a combination of lockdown and the Strawbridges' series as the catalysts for making their next move a reality.

First they developed "a proper and comprehensive" business and project plan. "We thought life's too short. Let's just find a way of doing it," Latchmore says. "It's a balance of making sure that we can both enjoy ourselves and live the dream, but also come up with something that doesn't bankrupt us."

They considered more than 50 properties but Château Trois Cloches (named after its three bells) was the fourth property they viewed in person. "We walked into the orangery and fell in love with it," Latchmore recalls. The room, designed by Gustave Eiffel – of tower fame – has an indoor grapevine and 124 windows, which gives some idea of the scale of the eight-bedroom property. They regularly make the four-and-a-half-hour commute to their London home for work. "We are probably Eurotunnel's best customers," jokes Smith, now a personal assistant to a celebrity.

The couple got the keys in June 2022, only to discover it was nigh impossible to find a French builder who would work during July or August. "Builders tend to be much harder to come by." So far they have spent more than £139,000 on renovations, doing as much as possible themselves.

A few hallways, 60 shutters and two of the château's eight bedrooms are all that remain to do in the main house. "Next we'll turn our attention to the stables, *écurie*, which are probably as big as a five-bedroom house, trying to turn that into a fantastic wedding venue and a bit of extra accommodation," Smith says.

Within the first six months they spent £30,000 on a professionally fitted *fosse septique* (septic tank). Their new boiler cost £17,000 and they redid their stable roof themselves for £18,000 (compared with a £30,000 quote from French artisans). Smith got over his fear of heights to do so.

"The power of Instagram is surprising," Latchmore adds, noting their social media presence has resulted in brand collaborations with Mylands paint, Graham & Brown wallpaper, Sewing House curtains and Lighting Company chandeliers, which have saved them thousands of pounds.

There have been sleepless nights and unexpected disasters. Latchmore says: "I broke my wrist at the beginning of this year, just as we were hoping to open for business [rooms in the château are rented out on Airbnb]. We had issues with the boiler breaking down. The flood of support from YouTube and Instagram really did help."

In hindsight they aren't sure they'd have embarked on building a 10m x 5m natural pool in the garden, which they nicknamed "the pit of despair". "To have professionals install one we were quoted upwards of £100,000. We have spent £20,000 so far, and thought









CHANNEL 4





Left: Château Trois Cloches; its owners, Jolyon Latchmore and Chris Smith (with Bo, their St Bernard). Above: Julia Fulford-Kirby; the interior of her property, Château Mas de Pradié

we'd be finished in three months but it's been two years," Latchmore says, noting they have learnt how to use a digger in the process.

The next *Château DIY* series will feature more of their escapades, including attempts to wallpaper the dining room ceiling. Smith adds: "I wouldn't ever advise anyone to buy a château as a financial investment. You've got to do it if you love it."
@chateautroiscloches

'The only thing that isn't expensive here is buying old houses'

After months of online sleuthing on for-sales portals in 2017, **Julia Fulford-Kirby** arrived in France from Queensland in 2018 to look at some châteaux, accompanied by her sisters Melissa and Sarah, who are based in Australia. Her fourth sister, Jenny, lives in London. The Sydney-born Fulford-Kirby, 60, was here to fulfil her dream of living in France.

Eighteen viewings later, Château Mas de Pradié in the Aveyron department, southern France, had captured her heart. The bourgeois-style mid-17th-century château had everything she was hunting for: thick oak floorboards, original marble fire surrounds and five crumbling stone outbuildings set in 15 acres near Foissac.

Fulford-Kirby paid €350,000 for the four-bedroom pile, which was empty for two years following the death of its owner, the painter Bernard Dufour. She had spotted a Facebook post from *Château DIY*'s producers requesting would-be chatelaines to get in touch ahead of the second series. "At that time I had already booked to go with my sisters. Almost jokingly we sent an email to them saying that we were going over," she recalls. Their own arrangements tallied with the film crew's dates and the show follows the sisters on various château viewings, move-in day and the progress of the renovations.

"It is a really magical space. Nothing had been spoilt," she says. "[Dufour] had lived here since 1963. He had put bathrooms and electricity into the property but hadn't modernised it in any way. It hadn't been messed around with too much. And you could see the potential of the beautiful gardens, even though they were really quite unkempt at the time."

Fulford-Kirby had spent part of her childhood in St Albans, Hertfordshire ("My father had a beautiful old house in England, so I think that's where my love for gorgeous old buildings came from"), and has both Australian and Irish passports. During the five-month buying process she admits there was a lot of bureaucracy, "but my experience was actually straightforward".

"A lot of it depends on the agent – it's up to them to make it all happen for you smoothly."

In May 2019 she moved in with Minki, her cat, who has since died. Renovations on the main house and three gîtes progressed in stages, much of it documented through the series. "When you buy an old building in France you have a year to get everything up to what they call compliance," she explains. That meant the septic system, electricals and plumbing were the first jobs.

Fulford-Kirby had never undertaken a project of this scale and in such a state. Where possible she did what she could herself, from plastering cracked walls to hanging wallpaper and painting and oiling the floorboards. She takes care of its 14.37 acres herself.

"Everything in France is expensive, to be honest. The only thing that isn't expensive is buying beautiful old buildings. That lures you in because you think, oh, what a bargain, look what I can buy for my money. And then every other thing you have to do costs a fortune," Fulford-Kirby says.

A year after moving in she welcomed her first guests to the freshly renovated two-bedroom stable gîte. In 2021 another holiday let – a guardian's cottage – was finished and by 2022 she had completed the four B&B rooms in the main house, an outdoor swimming pool and events barn, which can hold weddings for up to 70 guests (with up to 17 people staying on site).

Design-wise she has aimed to do as little as possible to maintain the "old-worldly charm" that she fell in love with. "You don't want to sand it away. So I keep [the interiors] very original, very rustic, but just add a little bit of polish or glamour to where I feel it's appropriate. I still have the original wonky old wooden floors and plastered walls, which isn't to everyone's taste.

"This year I had the artist's studio [gîte] ready too. All the big expensive things have been done now. A brand-new central heating system was put in last year. I've done six bathrooms, four kitchens and two new septic systems."

The show has certainly built awareness of Château Mas de Pradié, accruing 13,000 followers on Instagram. "I get a lot of French guests. I opened for business through Covid. And Dutch, Norwegians, English and Australians."

Having turned it into a profitable business – and that rare thing, a turn-key château – Fulford-Kirby has decided to sell up and buy somewhere nearby that's much smaller. Château Mas de Pradié is on the market for €1.95 million with Savills.

"I love the place," Fulford-Kirby says. "It's wonderful, but I've got a chronic health condition and I can't keep doing it. Still, it's been the most rewarding five years of my life."
@escapetochateau_mas_de_pradie

JACKSON-STOPS



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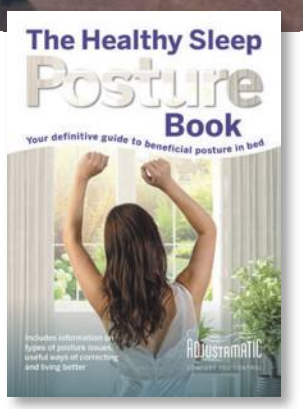
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CIARAN MCCRICKARD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

My own private oasis







Amanda Haines created a subtropical garden – built on reclaimed beach – on a £2,000 budget. By *Sharon Smith*

When Amanda Haines bought her house she was not worried that it was built on a reclaimed beach or that the back garden was paved over.

"As this house is 50 years old I thought someone would have had a garden here before. I just assumed the man here before had paved it because he wasn't a gardener," Haines says.

A keen gardener herself, she had transformed the outdoor space at previous houses with her late husband and felt confident she could do the same at her new home in Eastbourne, East Sussex.

"But when I took some of the paving up it was just pure beach, just shingle underneath. There's never been a garden here. I had expected about six inches of soil at least."

> **The garden was pure beach, just shingle underneath**

Haines, 68, knew that the sensible solution would be to create a seaside-style garden of shingle and pot plants. Instead she decided to transform the 15m x 15m space into a traditional garden with plenty of trees, shrubs and perennials. It was the trickier and costlier option of the two but Haines was undeterred. It was 2018, she was a fit 62 at the time and to keep the cost down she tackled the task herself.

"It was a blank canvas. I like leaving beautiful gardens, it's my legacy. To me, gardening is an art form."

The first task for Haines, a retired tutor and part-time potter, was to install a studio at the end of the garden. Then she turned her attention to the paving.

"The slabs were quite easy to pull up with a crowbar because after all these years the concrete was crumbly," she says. She discovered a concrete patio next to the house that she felt would be too difficult to remove so she kept it. She also left some of the paving slabs in place as paths. She dug down two feet to remove the shingle and sand and replaced it with soil for her beds and borders.

Haines's 9m x 9m front garden was covered in dead grass so she dug it up and removed some of the soil to transfer to the back.

"But when I started to take up the grass I found just four inches of soil, then a layer of plastic, then the beach. That's why the grass had died: there was no drainage."

Haines transferred the soil to the back garden and mixed it with manure, soil conditioner and compost for her beds and borders. When it came to choosing what to plant, Haines had never had to contend with reclaimed beach.

One thing she did know, however, was that laying a lawn was not going to be possible: "You can't grow grass on beach unless you put in a lot of soil."

She experimented with a wide-ranging mix of subtropical and woodland plants and herbaceous perennials to see what would grow. She bought some of the plants but kept costs down by propagating from cuttings and plant divisions she had brought from her previous garden, and by using donations of unwanted specimens.

She started off with a few exotic plants, including palms, that she had grown in pots when she had lived in London, such as *Trachycarpus fortunei* (Chusan palm), Chamaerops humilis 'Compacta', *Musa basjoo* (Japanese banana) and cordylines.

"In London it was fantastic. I could grow a lot and when I moved down here I realised it was the same sort of mild climate," Haines says. "So I thought, let's put a few in the soil and see how they do here. I'd never grown subtropicals in the ground before."

She planted cuttings from her previous garden, including fig, cotinus and bay trees, as well as *Ceanothus* 'Skylark' (Californian lilac), philadelphus (mock orange), *Aloysia triphylla* (lemon verbena), cannas, agapanthus, crocosmia, euphorbia and geraniums (cranesbill). Some plants, such as aquilegia, arrived by themselves and self-seeded.

Amanda Haines enjoys her new garden at home in Eastbourne, East Sussex



For the hard landscaping and features, Haines bought a studio, shed, metal bench and wood to build a gazebo. Two sculptures of hares were a present from her mother. Everything else had been recycled from the garden, rescued from skips or donated.

"The wooden bench was free outside one of the bungalows round here and the table and chairs were free from a neighbour. Another neighbour messaged me last week and said she was emptying the kids' sandpit, do you want the sand. I said, yes, I'm coming over with the wheelbarrow now."

Haines recycled what she did not want, including leftover paving slabs she sold for £600 on Facebook Marketplace.

"I had piles of shingle so I put it out the front with a notice 'bring your bags and take it away'."

Most of the plants she put in the ground have thrived, she says. There have been exceptions, however. Grasses including miscanthus and bulbs such as daffodils and snowdrops all rotted. The taller of the tree ferns is ailing, geums are shrinking and the roses all died.

"If I have to replace something I find that the beach has come back. Every year I mulch with four inches of stuff and the borders never get any higher. It's only a bit of a problem if something dies and I have to replace it."

The project took two years and cost £2,000. A traditional shingle beach garden would have been easier, Haines admits, but she feels a sense of achievement and enjoys her garden, especially "when everything starts to burgeon and it's looking fantastic".

Tips for creating a beach garden

- Whether starting from scratch or from existing soil, give plants the best start by adding nutrients such as manure and compost to the soil.
- Give plants a liquid seaweed feed twice a year and mulch with compost every spring.
- Over time soil sinks down into the shingle so when planting or transplanting you will need to replenish it.
- Experiment with plantings to see what can cope with underlying shingle and sand, salty sea winds and a brackish, high water table.
- Be open-minded: a wide range of plantings have survived in Haines's garden.
- Keep costs down by propagating from cuttings and plant divisions.
- Lush planting and ground cover will help to keep the garden low-maintenance.
- Be resourceful when it comes to hard landscaping and garden features: check out rubbish skips, neighbours' leftovers and freebies from adverts and online.
- Opt for a shingle beach garden for the front. Haines's planters are made from recycled Porsche tyres and a butler's sink. Plants such as agave and corkscrew willow grow in the shingle with just a dab of soil in shallow holes.

Home

TIME AND SPACE RACHEL STEVENS

‘I even hired a designer to do my rental’

The S Club 7 pop star on her love of interiors and house-hunting after a split



DAVE J HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES; RACHEL STEVENS

The past 17 months have been a whirlwind since breaking up with my husband, Alex Bourne [an estate agent on the Netflix show *Buying London*]. First, me and our two girls, Amelie, 13, and Minnie, 10, moved out of our family home in north London into a rental flat, then another one with my partner, Brendyn Hatfield [her *Dancing on Ice* partner]. Now we’re looking to buy.

Where are you house-hunting?
I want to stay in north London because the girls are at school here. Brendyn and I are excited about doing a project together. He’s great at DIY, whereas I love interiors. We’ll make a great team.

What’s your interiors look?
I like classic period features – high ceilings and big sash windows – with modern finishes. I’ve been passionate about interiors since Alex and I bought our first little basement flat in Primrose Hill. I was desperate to put down roots. I love working with interior designers. I even hired one when we moved into our current rental because I wanted to make it homely without spending a fortune.

Was it hard leaving your family home?
It was challenging. When we decided to separate, Alex and I were under the same roof, trying to get the house sold. It would have been easier if there had been no love between us, but that wasn’t the case. We divided most of our possessions, but towards the end we couldn’t agree who should get custody of our many vases. We took turns, each picking a vase at a time.

You were once attacked outside your home. That must have been terrifying.
It happened six months after I finished *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2009. I was entering our Primrose Hill flat, my hands full of shopping bags, when a guy wearing a balaclava charged towards me, knocking me backwards. We tumbled down the stairs. He put a hand round my throat and threatened to break my neck if I screamed, then stripped me of my jewellery, including my diamond necklace and Rolex. Two more men rushed in and took my computer and more jewellery. Thankfully, they were caught. They turned out to be a gang that had targeted several well-known people in St John’s Wood, Hampstead and Primrose Hill. Afterwards, I suffered terrible PTSD. Even now, I jump if someone knocks unexpectedly.

Where did you grow up?
We lived in a three-bedroom semi in Southgate, north London. It was unremarkable but inside it was like a show home. We weren’t particularly religious, but what I’ve taken from being Jewish is the idea of family, community and some of the traditions. That said, I also grew up in a house where we didn’t discuss feelings. I suffered from terrible anxiety but had no outlet. I developed emetophobia, a fear of being sick. I manage it better now but it hasn’t gone away. My eldest daughter has it too.



Rachel Stevens lives in a rental property, left. As a child, she practised singing for hours in her bedroom



Were you always interested in music?
I spent hours in my mint-green bedroom singing into my hairbrush. The pivotal moment was Mum taking me to a Kylie Minogue concert. I said, “I’m going to do that one day.”

What was the effect of your parents’ separation?
When I was 15 we lost our family home because Mum couldn’t afford to keep it on. We moved to a rented flat in nearby Cockfosters. It felt nothing like home. Joining S Club 7 gave me focus – and I felt like I had gained a new family.
Interview by Angela Wintle

Finding My Voice by Rachel Stevens is out now (HarperCollins, £22). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

HOME HELP

MY NEIGHBOUR IS THROWING BRANCH CUTTINGS OVER MY FENCE – WHAT CAN I DO?

Q Our neighbour has been chucking cuttings from overhanging branches of our ivy, magnolia and bay trees which are growing on his hedge over the fence into our garden. Could you advise on the legal position of the disposal of cuttings from our overhanging branches? Our neighbour lost a boundary dispute with us, and as you will have gathered, talking to him is not an option.
Name withheld

A Trees belong to the landowner upon whose land they originally grew, unless otherwise stated in title documents. If there is any doubt, advice should be obtained. There is no law compelling you to maintain the tree in a particular way but you cannot allow it to become a nuisance, a risk to health and safety or to cause damage to your neighbour.

Your neighbour is entitled to cut back any overhanging branches (being careful not to cause damage to the tree itself) to the point of the boundary, provided that there is no tree preservation order. As the overhanging branches belong to you, your neighbour should either offer to return the branches to you or dispose of them with your consent.

It is not advisable for your neighbour to throw them back over the hedge as this may amount to a trespass and/or cause damage to your property. Normally, it is best to reach an agreement as to how to dispose of them.

However, you may be unable to do this. The most obvious practical step would be to ensure that your trees and ivy do not overhang your neighbour’s side of the hedge, but if your neighbour refuses to reach an amicable arrangement then you may have to threaten an injunction to compel him to cease doing so.

Mamta Kudhail, solicitor in the real estate dispute resolution team, Seddons

IS CATCHING A COCKROACH AT HOME CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Q I just caught a large cockroach indoors. It’s about 3cm long. We’ve not had them before. I threw it out of the window but should I be worried about more of them?
Jenny Potter, west London

A Yes, cockroach infestations are difficult to control so get preventive measures in now! This looks like the oriental cockroach, *Blatta orientalis*.

Cockroaches are more or less ubiquitous around commercial food outlets, where they feed and breed in rubbish then fly or crawl to establish new colonies.

Sticky traps are useful for monitoring and controlling small numbers so this may be all you need. These are sometimes considered cruel, especially if they trap mice, which chew off their own legs to escape. And they are not completely effective. If your specimen has lost some of its front and back feet and/or part of an antenna, it may have already had a close encounter with a glue trap, or lost body parts in a fight.

Heavy cockroach infestations need professional measures and over-the-counter sprays are useless. Also, cockroach eggs are laid in batches in a tough protein case called an ootheca, which gives some protection against chemical treatments — so even if adults are killed, nymphs emerge a few weeks later. I suggest you take the place apart to check for stragglers, and have a deep clean in, on, and under everything in the kitchen.

Richard Jones, bugmanjones.com

Readers’ clinic

Q My freezer is building up with ice. How can I defrost it so my food doesn’t spoil?
Gord Henry

I use a hairdryer. Place a baking tray in the lower compartment to catch the melting ice and water.
Sissel Harrison

Remove all food and put it into a cardboard box. Push the freezer outside, hose out its box and wipe dry.
Frank Ortiz

FUTURE QUESTION

What is the best way of cleaning a TV screen?

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Travel
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The great US road trip — on two wheels

Eleven states, 4,373 miles and ten weeks to get under the skin of the States **14**

Plus New Dartmoor walking trail **6** Spain's tastiest city break **10** The joy of holiday packing **26**



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Travel





Clockwise from main: Cadwell Farm; the Flower Belt's sunflowers; Amelia Cooper Smith with blooms from her farm; Llanerch Vineyard Hotel

COVER: PETER NOEBELS/ALAMY. TOP SEVEN: MICK FLYNN/ALAMY





Seven of the UK's best flower-picking spots

Add a burst of colour to your summer break with a visit to one of Britain's finest floral farms

Flower tourism is at a record high, with a growing number of tourists travelling the world to see Japan's cherry blossom or the Netherlands' tulips. Thankfully, you don't have to hop on a plane to join in: summer is when some of the UK's prettiest flowers are at their best and there are flower farms all over the country where you can pluck your own basket of lavender or bunch of dahlias. These are the pick-your-own (PYO) flower spots worth incorporating into your weekend away, and the best places to stay nearby.

HITCHIN LAVENDER, HERTFORDSHIRE

You'll smell the purple fields of Hitchin Lavender before you see them – and what a sight they are, particularly in summer, when the 30 acres are in full bloom. These alone would be enough to merit a visit, but this popular spot – the family-owned Cadwell Farm – also has a sunflower field (from mid-August), a pumpkin patch (October), and a wildflower meadow (mid-June until late August). All allow you to PYO (entry from £7, bag of lavender £4; hitchinlavender.com). There's a farm café in a 17th-century barn serving homemade cakes. Stay at the Farmhouse at Redcoats, a 15th-century bolt hole with excellent food.
Details B&B doubles from £175 (farmhouseatredcoats.co.uk)

BLOOMING GREEN, MAIDSTONE, KENT

Founded by cousins Jen Stuart-Smith and Bek Bibby in 2007, Blooming Green was one of the first PYO flower businesses in the UK. Flowers are grown across six acres, without chemicals. Early summer is peak peony time, July welcomes delphiniums, and dahlias bloom from August until the autumn. PYO sessions run every Saturday from late June to October from 1pm, with a container and flower wrapping included in the price (£25 per container, with space for up to 40 stems; bloominggreenflowers.co.uk). Leeds Castle Hotel is a 15-minute drive away, with 500 acres of parkland to explore.
Details B&B doubles from £140 (leeds-castle.com)

> "In late summer the sunflower fields are at their most dazzling"

VALE PICK YOUR OWN, BONVILSTON, VALE OF GLAMORGAN

For the second summer in a row, this family-run farm will open its enormous flower meadow to pickers. Poppies, marigolds, cornflowers and cosmos can be plucked here until late August (entry £5, flower bags £8; valepickyourown.co.uk). Summer also ushers in the strawberry and raspberry PYO season at Vale, with punnets (from £1) charged by the kilo. In October it's pumpkin time and pickers can also order pumpkin-spiced lattes at the on-site café. Stay at Llanerch Vineyard Hotel, a modern wine estate where you can take leisurely strolls with views over the surrounding countryside or wine tastings and meals at its award-winning restaurant.
Details B&B doubles from £190 (llanerch.co.uk)

CAIRNIE FRUIT FARM, CUPAR, FIFE

This farm specialises in fruit – hence the name – with visitors welcome to pick punnets of strawberries, raspberries, redcurrants, gooseberries and more. But it's also a haven for sunflower fans, who can pick stems each August (75p a stem; cairniefruitfarm.co.uk). Be sure to visit the outdoor strawberry kiosk, where you can buy cups of strawberries and cream. Stay at the Ship Inn at Elie, a busy pub-with-rooms that was one of the Times and Sunday Times's best places to stay for 2024. It's on the Fife Coastal Path, which leads walkers out along the dunes to a string of charming fishing villages, such as St Monans, Anstruther and Pittenweem.
Details B&B doubles from £121 (shipinn.scot)

AMELIA'S FLOWER FARM, NEWTON ABBOT, DEVON

A family-owned flower farm in Combeinteignhead, Amelia's wins when it comes to setting: the valley is close to the River Teign, which you can follow on a lovely 3.5-mile hike to the Teignmouth coast. What the two-acre farm lacks in size, it makes up for with diversity of floral produce: among the flowers grown by the owner Amelia Cooper Smith and her husband Giles are narcissi, begonias, hydrangeas, peonies and dahlias. It is open every day for PYO from May to November, at £20 a bucket (ameliasflowerfarm.co.uk). Cooper Smith also hosts workshops where you can learn to create showstopping flower arrangements (£65). Orestone Manor is a ten-minute drive away, with views over Lyme Bay. Some of Devon's prettiest beaches are a short walk from here – including secluded Watcombe Cove, along the coast path.
Details Room-only doubles from £78 (orestonemanor.co.uk)

FARRINGTON'S FARM, FARRINGTON GURNEY, SOMERSET

This 400-acre working farm, home to donkeys and pigs, has been run by Tish and Andy Jeffery since 1989. There's a farm shop selling homegrown produce, a café and fish and chip shop, as well as a park where children can play





in a straw pit. In spooky season you can pick your own pumpkins, in spring it's tulips, and summer is sunflower central. Between August and September the sunflower fields are at their most dazzling, and visitors can pick their own (£5 for five stems; book in advance via farringtons.co.uk). There are different varieties to choose from, including firecrackers, Russian mammoths and giant sungolds. For a luxurious stay, book a room at the 250-year-old Royal Crescent Hotel in nearby Bath, a ten-minute stroll from the city centre.
Details B&B doubles from £375 (royalcrescent.co.uk)

THE FLOWER BELT, HELMSLEY, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Henry Wainwright, a 25-year-old, third-generation farmer, introduced PYO sessions in 2022 to this low-key flower farm north of York. They run from July until autumn, with 32 varieties of wildflower, 45,000 tulips and a vast sunflower field to pick from (sunflower stem £1, jar of wildflowers £6; theflowerbelt.co.uk). There's also a PYO pumpkin patch in October (from £3). Dogs are welcome, and a café serves ice cream, coffee and cakes. You're a 20-minute drive from Cawthorne House, a homely B&B in Pickering with great food and its own sourdough school. Or drive 40 minutes south to York, where you should climb up the tower at York Minster, one of Europe's grandest gothic cathedrals.
Details B&B doubles from £110; two-night minimum stay (cawthornehouse.co.uk)

Claudia Rowan

Where are your favourite pick-your-own flower farms? Let us know in the comments online

THE £400 HOLIDAY

Bag a bargain break in this beauty spot in northwest **Sardinia**



FRANCESCO RICCARDO IACOMINO/GETTY IMAGES

The Italian islands in August usually cost *molti euro*, but this beach break on Sardinia's northwest coast is so affordable because, by the end of the month, Italians have returned to work and school so the resorts empty out. To give you an idea of the price comparison, this holiday on a picturesque glamping site would cost almost double if you were to depart the week before, when it's £765pp instead of £417pp (you can knock £36pp off the cost if you only take hand luggage).

> **Take a boat trip to the underwater caves of Neptune's Grotto**

You're staying at Torre del Porticciolo Camping, a six-square-mile plot of pine forest and fragrant Sardinian maquis shrubland within Porto Conte Regional Natural Park with tent pitches, glamping lodges (where you'll be sleeping) bungalows and chalets. The homes are hidden among trees behind dunes with paths down to a wide sandy bay with crystal-clear water.

Porticciolo's beach is private with parasols and loungers; there's also a kiosk where guests can rent paddleboards and kayaks. Back on the campsite, there are two giant outdoor swimming pools, as well as activities throughout the day such as aqua fit, face painting, yoga and dance classes. There's also a children's club (from age three), which runs until September 10.

But you're in Italy. What you really want to know about is the food, isn't it? On the menu here you can expect malloreddus alla campidanese (Sardinian pasta with pork sausage and tomato sauce; £13), spaghetti alla bottarga (with mullet roe; £15) and porcetto arrosto (roast suckling pig; £22); there's also a poolside snack bar, beach restaurant, and a supermarket.

The package doesn't include transfers so we suggest you rent a car, which you can use for day trips (from £130 per week; autoeurope.co.uk). Historic Alghero town with its gothic buildings is 25 minutes' drive away, and from the port you can take boat trips to Neptune's Grotto, a series of spectacular underwater caves.

Don't miss the fishing village of Stintino, while another popular excursion is to kayak out to idyllic Capo Caccia Isola Piana marine reserve – which you can do right off your very own private beach back at the campsite. *Molto fortunato*.
Katie Bowman

WHAT YOU GET FOR YOUR £417PP

- Return Stansted-Olbia flights
- 10kg hold luggage
- Seven nights' room only at Torre del Porticciolo Camping, departing on August 30 (thomascook.com)

Feeling flush?

If you're inspired but you've got more cash to splash, you could try:

THE £1,200PP HOLIDAY

We did say the Italian islands are pricey in August, and that's especially true of Sardinia, where anyone looking for a beachfront hotel will be sent across to the costlier northeast coast. Sentido Orosei Beach is one such option, similar to Porticciolo in that accommodation is found clustered beneath pine trees behind the dunes, but oh-so-different in that you'll be sleeping in gorgeous terracotta-roofed suites and gobbling up salami and cheese as part of the all-inclusive deal.
Details Seven nights' all-inclusive from £1,275pp, including flights, departing on August 30 (ba.com)

THE £3,200PP HOLIDAY

On the same costlier costa — Costa Smeralda — consider Romazzino A Belmond Hotel for an unforgettable August family beach holiday. It sits on a clear bay where the scene of turquoise parasols against the whitewashed mid-century architecture is what Instagram was invented for. There are also two photogenic, curvy pools. For kids, the Toy Club has a children-only section of the beach restaurant.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £3,235pp, including flights, transfers and £250 food/spa credit (sardatur-holidays.co.uk)



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Singapore	£590◊	£2,117◊
Maldives	£618◊	£2,315◊
Barbados	£620#	£2,320#
Cape Town	£643†	£2,310†
Sydney	£916◊	£2,896#
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Travel Comment

Are Brits welcome? Yes, all over Europe


JAN WLODARCZYK/ALAMY

Parga, on the Greek mainland, is a good bet for a peaceful holiday



Spray from water pistols may not have provided quite the cool-down tourists were looking for as they enjoyed lunch in the 30C heat of Barcelona last weekend. But that's what they got from protesters campaigning against overtourism.

As tempers, as well as temperatures, rise across European honeypots, you might be worrying you've booked a trip to a so-called "hostile" destination.

Ironically, the trend for holidaymakers to seek a more authentic experience via short-term rental accommodation in city neighbourhoods, allowing them to "live like locals" in homes not hotels, has exacerbated tensions between residents and tourists in recent years.

Whlie those whose livelihoods depend on the tourist dollar presumably don't want visitors to disappear altogether, nor do they want to be priced out of their homes and forced to relocate. They want to be able to use public transport freely and to enjoy parks and beaches, crowd-free.

In Barcelona that dousing was accompanied by cries of "Tourists go home", and "Barcelona is not for sale". In the Balearics, campaign groups have been coordinating protests under the slogan "Let's change course, let's set limits to tourism". Some groups were more aggressive, chanting "Let's save Mallorca, foreigners out". There have been protests in the Canaries too, all widely shared on social media.

Not that this should put any of us off going abroad. Whatever the headlines might say, only a handful of protests have been reported across the EU this year and during that time thousands, if not millions of Brits have had trouble-free European holidays. Most of us travelling overseas this summer, even to popular spots, are likely to have a delightfully warm welcome.

And if you haven't booked your package holiday yet, there are incredible bargains to be had, as Chris Haslam sets out below, and on home turf too. Though as I spend yet another weekend flip-flopping – not to the beach but between weather apps desperately seeking sunshine – I can't recall a July that made warmer climes more appealing.

So, readers, go forth and book your sunshine trip. Just think about what you want out of it.

Are you after sun-dappled days and balmy evenings, a culture fix, buzzy bars, top restaurants and a thriving LGBT scene? Barcelona, of course, has all this and more which is why last year it had 15.6 million visitors.

But if you want fewer fellow visitors, look to alternatives such as Girona, about 60 miles north, a "mini Barcelona" with its own cathedral and labyrinthine old town full of great restaurants and bars. You can read more on page 10. Or consider northwest Spain where La Coruña's medieval lanes buzz with tapas bars; or San Sebastian in the northeast, with its food and fabulous sand and surf.

Often the best solutions are relatively simple. Greece, for example, has this year issued fines of almost £300,000 under new laws to prevent crowding on beaches.

The country has its overtourism hotspots of course: the population of the honeymoon isle Santorini rises during high season from 15,000 to two million. High-season rents have reportedly driven some residents to live in caves. But that's not true throughout the country. When I went to the lesser-visited mainland Ionian coast earlier this year, for example, it was a heavenly mix of empty roads, quiet restaurants and deserted beaches. Throw in mid-May temperatures and locals happy to see a few tourists, and it really was the perfect trip – for all concerned.

Also: you may be a tourist, but you don't have to tattoo it on your forehead. Don't join a queue of wannabe influencers clamouring for clichéd Insta shots, and if you want to stay where the locals do, at least try to live like them – don't drink or sunbathe to obvious excess for starters, and learn a few words of the language.

As a tourist you can help drive change by considering who will benefit from your money. A hotel may cost more, say, but your choice will sustain livelihoods along the entire supply chain, from towel attendants to taxi drivers. Water pistol manufacturers may be the only casualty.

Claire Irvin is Head of Travel at the Times and Sunday Times

LAST-MINUTE HOLIDAY BARGAINS ARE BACK! HERE'S HOW TO FIND THEM



Huge numbers of holiday lets in the UK and Europe remain unsold this summer, sparking a price war as worried owners and agencies slash prices by as much as 60 per cent — thousands of pounds a week.

With less than a fortnight to go until the school summer holidays begin, thousands of properties remain available, creating a high-season buyers' market for those searching for a last-minute bargain.

In normal years those who have left it this late to book are generally left with a choice between a converted public loo in Doncaster and a rustic pig sty in Bodmin. In 2024, however, holidaymakers are the ones holding all the cards — with a wide choice of destinations and prices lower than they were a month ago.

Philip Robinson from Newcastle owns a two-bedroom holiday let in the centre of the Northumbrian market town of Alnwick. It's one of more than 1,800 properties in the county with peak-season availability.

"For the first time in eight years of letting it, we have no bookings for July, August or September," he said. "Another owner in the town has been in touch worried that bookings were way down this year, and I've heard of other local owners having similar issues."

Analysis of availability advertised by 50 leading rental agencies — including Airbnb, Sykes, Vrbo, cottages.com and Plum Guide — showed unusually low bookings in other summer hotspots between July 27 and August 3.

In Northumberland, 15 per cent of properties remain unsold, and that's good compared to Norfolk, at 21 per cent; Scotland at 22 per cent; and Pembrokeshire at 25 per cent.

Vacancies are at 28 and 30 per cent respectively in Cornwall and Devon, where the Office for National Statistics reports the highest concentrations of holiday rental properties in the country.

"There seems to be a perfect storm of bad weather, the cost of living crisis and an overabundance of holiday lets," said Robinson. "If people can only afford one holiday, they are chasing the sun abroad."

With the high season — and the Olympics — looming, nervous owners and agencies are dropping prices. Sykes is advertising up to £170 off holidays between July 19 and August 31, but its website shows even bigger savings.

The rate for the Bath House, a property in Langport, Somerset, that sleeps 17 in six bedrooms, has been slashed from £4,113 to £2,990 for the week beginning July 27.

On cottages.com, 945 of the first 1,000 properties available for the week beginning July 27 are discounted, with savings of up to £730, and at the time of going to press, the West Country specialist Toad Hall was offering peak-season discounts on 472 properties, with £838 off the four-bedroom Bramley Cottage near Kingsbridge — now £1,075, down from £1,913 for the same week.

Discounts aren't restricted to the UK. Domestic demand in France has fallen by 11.3 per cent from July 27 to August 9 as French fears of tourist crowds and the consequent high prices has led many to choose to watch the Olympics at home.

Gîtes de France has some attractive discounts: 50 per cent off the six-bedroom Maison Amarée on the Côtes d'Armor for the week beginning July 27 — down from £5,322 to £2,661 — and £500 off the three-bedroom Les Songes de l'Alaric in the Hautes-Pyrénées, bringing the price down to £970 for that week (gites-de-france.com).

Meanwhile, huge oversupply in the package-holiday sector is already leading to some spectacular peak-season discounts in even sunnier spots.

In Greece, the price of a week's B&B at the Cavos Inn in Cephalonia, *left*, departing on July 27, has dropped from £1,249pp to £829pp, including flights and car hire (ionianislandholidays.com).

In Turkey, Tui has the best discounts, including £1,229pp off a week's all-inclusive at the luxury Anda Barut in Bodrum, departing on July 25 — now £1,718pp.

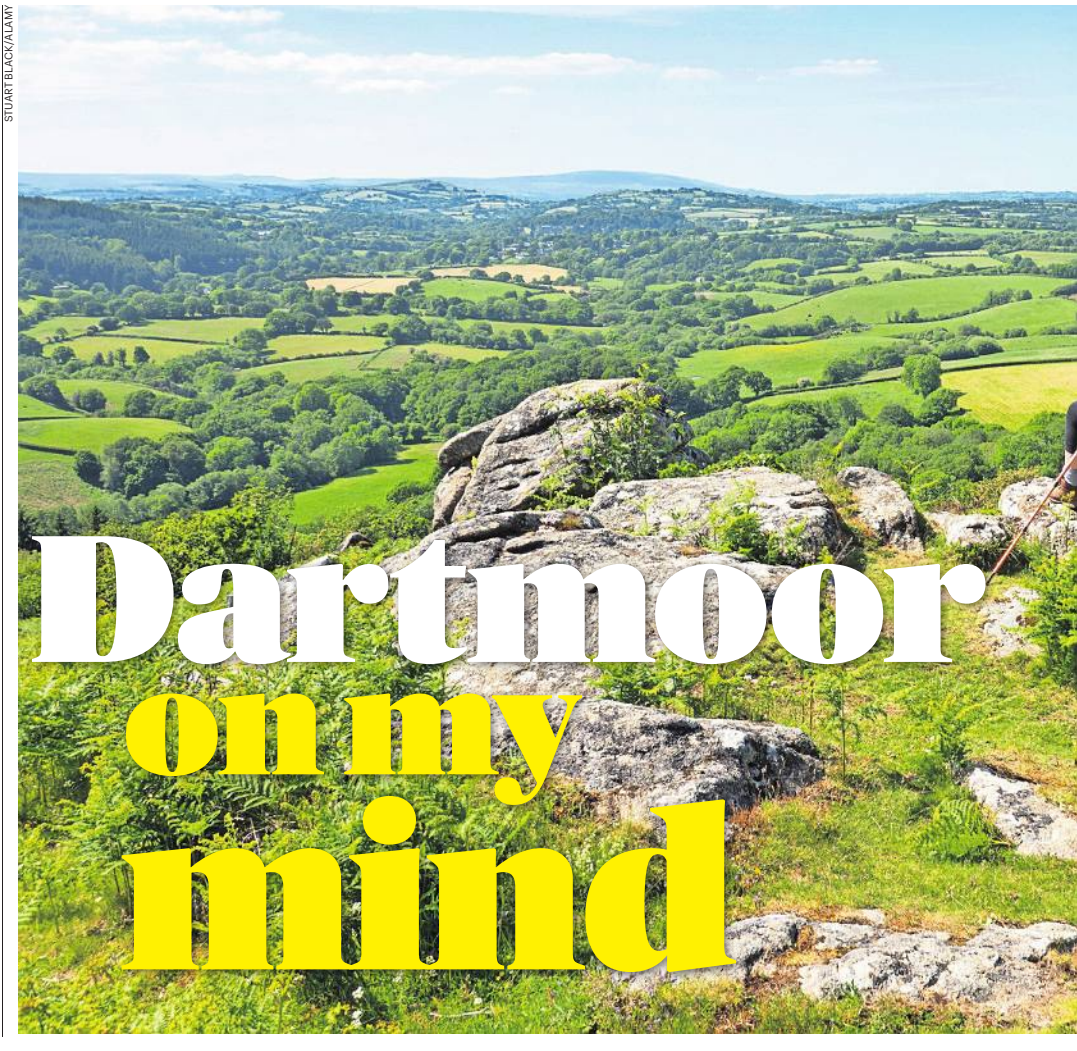
But if you haven't booked, there's no need to rush: prices at home and away will fall further yet.

Chris Haslam

Travel UK

Dartmoor on my mind

A new trail around the national park promises some of the most spectacular scenery in Britain – and a chance to unplug, says *Emily Sargent*



STUART BLACK/ALAMY

An hour into my third day hiking the Dartmoor Way I sat down on a rock, soaked to the skin. While I don't normally consider myself a fair-weather walker, I was feeling a little sorry for myself. I couldn't *see* the moors ahead, but I knew they were there. And with that there came a tiny shaft of sunlight through the clouds. The first few days had been hard going, but things were looking up.

> **"I follow rivers as cathedrals of trees tower overhead**

The Dartmoor Way was the second long-distance walk I had done – a 108-mile loop from Ivybridge, taking seven days, around the outskirts of the national park. The trail was created in 2002, but it covered only half of Dartmoor and wasn't fully signposted. It has now been relaunched and extended, going all the way around the 64,000-acre park, with new waymarkers for hikers. This spring Contours Holidays launched the first self-guided walking tour around the park, providing hikers with maps and accommodation and, crucially, moving overnight bags to each of their B&Bs.

I had done my first long-distance walk – the 195-mile coast-to-coast from St Bees in Cumbria to Robin Hood's Bay in North Yorkshire – alone the previous spring and had wanted to do another ever since. I loved the solitude, silence and space to think that walking gave me – and the excuse to keep my phone in airplane mode. Dartmoor was somewhere I had never been before and I found myself drawn to its vast, rugged expanses and wild ponies.

I felt oddly anxious waking up in Ivybridge, on the southern tip of Dartmoor, that first morning. I hadn't done a huge amount of walking over the previous months and was worried about being out of practice. But as the B&B hosts handed me a cheese-and-pickle sandwich and I set off down the lane, with my hiking poles click-clacking on the ground, I remembered how much I love this feeling: the quiet of the morning and a day outdoors ahead of me.

Despite the rain I felt my body relax as I climbed upwards on rocky paths bordered by stone walls. The hedgerows were stacked with wildflowers – tiny blue woodland forget-me-nots, the lilac petals of Kenilworth ivy clinging to gaps between stones and the delicate white flowers of woodland strawberries poking out



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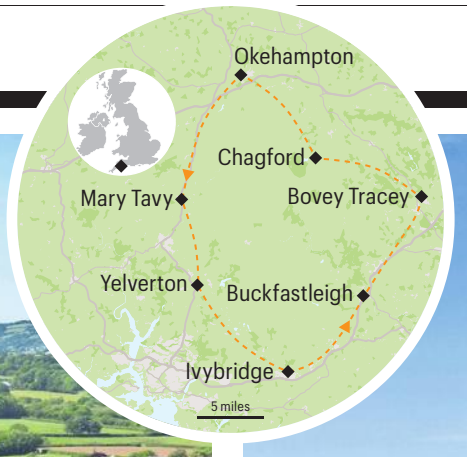
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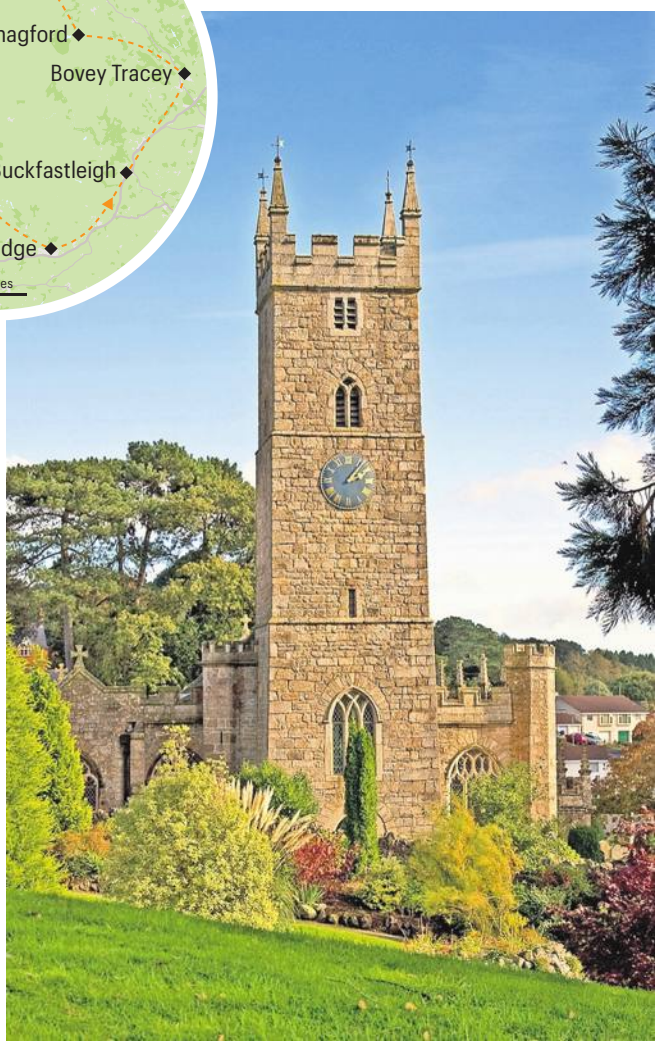
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beneath unfurling ferns. In summer you can see heath spotted orchids, black knapweed and yellow rattle.

I hadn't imagined that parts of Dartmoor would be so lush. The nice thing about this route is that it skirts the outer edges of the moors, so while you hike up onto them regularly, it then dips back down through wooded valleys, following rivers as cathedrals of luminous green trees tower overhead.

I thought over those first few days about how much I love the rhythm of walking for hours on end. How freeing it is to allow my mind to meander and remember in ways that it isn't usually given the space to do. And I loved the rhythm of the day itself too, putting one foot in front of the other across changing landscapes and having a physical end point; travelling from winding country lanes up on to rugged moors under big skies and down again into sheltered valleys where tiny stone bridges arched over streams. I loved choosing a spot to settle down for my picnic lunch and checking into my B&B for the night, taking in views from my new bedroom window and being reunited with my big rucksack.



From far left: a view over Dartmoor; the Church of St Peter, St Paul and St Thomas in Bovey Tracey; the small town of Buckfastleigh

From Ivybridge I walked to Buckfastleigh, a small town filled with colourful houses, followed by a leg on the second day to Bovey Tracey that included a lovely midpoint climb to Haytor Rocks, vast granitic slabs with panoramic views in every direction. As I made my way to the northeastern edge of Dartmoor I followed paths through woodland filled with raucous birdsong and took in views of banks carpeted with bluebells.

With the sun beginning to shine I left Chagford, a pretty market town with lovely pubs, feeling buoyed – partly because of the warmth on my face and having dry feet, but also because of the delicious-looking sandwich and spiced ginger cake I had picked up from the excellent Beachwood Bakery (sandwiches £6.50, cakes from £2; beachwoodbakery.com). At 12 miles, it was the shortest day of walking, and I took it slowly, savouring the

Continued on page 8 →

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➔ Continued from page 7

smell of blossom as I passed through an apple orchard.

That evening the town of Okehampton felt like a bit of a comedown, being not quite as picturesque as the previous stopovers. The third day made up for it, though, with a stretch to Mary Tavy, a village on the western side of Dartmoor. I stood on the moors that day, catching my breath while looking over the washed-out colours of the hills in the distance as the shadows of clouds moved across them.

I had spotted the odd Dartmoor pony, but then I came across a herd of them, including foals just days old. Many were stretched out on their sides in the sunshine, their long legs splayed on the grass. A particularly gangly one wandered up to me, blinking its long lashes, before bounding off again, startled. I sat watching them doze in the sun and listened to the call of a cuckoo in the distance.

Compared with other trails I have walked, this one felt very quiet, particularly on the moors. Without distractions I was often more aware of my mood and its fluctuations. With no office life, city noise or WhatsApp, at points I felt the full force of old episodes of sadness and grief, as though watching them swirl in a snow globe. Emotions associated with the unexpected death of my mother two years earlier and memories from my childhood when she had battled depression were suddenly unearthed again, along with feelings related to present-day life changes that I had been determined not to confront. But just as I would feel them blow in, they would blow back out as I was distracted or moved along by some movement or symbol of hope in the landscape. Leaving Yelverton on the final morning I considered how much better I felt mentally when beginning the day this way – walking under a wide open sky; being able to drink my mid-morning coffee on a mossy rock beside a river. It was pure joy, even for someone who doesn't often use that word.



A wild pony on Dartmoor

> **Days-old foals stretched out in the sunshine**

I didn't want to return to reality, to my overstimulated mind not being given space to do anything but rush between tasks. I sat down with my back against the trunk of an oak tree and realised that, without all the noise, I could hear my inner voice more clearly. As someone who has tried (and failed) for many years to find ways to feel some calm, walking was definitely the closest I had come to achieving that. The air, the leaves overhead and the rhythm of my steps combined to help me to breathe a little more deeply and feel a little more anchored to the earth.

This walk was the only thing I had done in the past year that was solely for me. And as I stood up to start the final descent I made a promise to myself that it would be something to which I would commit every year.

Emily Sargent was a guest of Contours Holidays, which has eight nights' B&B from £1,010pp, including daily luggage transfers (contours.co.uk)

Where to stay

GIDLEIGH PARK, CHAGFORD

This Tudor-style country house, *below*, sits on a bank of the River Teign in Dartmoor National Park. As well as exploring its 107 acres of grounds, which include a bluebell wood and a kitchen garden, guests can stride out on all-ability trails (the climb up Nattadon Hill is worth it for the view alone). The hotel is refined and traditional in the best sense, from the 24 classic contemporary rooms to the award-winning restaurant and games of croquet before a decadent afternoon tea.
Details B&B doubles from £297 (gidleigh.co.uk)



TAVISTOCK HOUSE HOTEL, TAVISTOCK

On the western edge of the national park, this is a bright and breezy townhouse in an area more famous for coastal resorts and manor houses. Tucked in the centre of Tavistock, it is one of the most popular hotels in Devon — others may offer a grander or fancier experience, but few places are as beloved as this. Built by the Duke of Bedford in about 1850, it is a pleasant stroll from the East Gate Café and Brasserie, where you'll find the town's best cream tea.
Details B&B doubles from £139 (tavistockhouse hotel.co.uk)

WEEKE BARTON HOTEL, BRIDFORD

The owners, Jo Gossett and Sam Perry, have swapped northeast London for Dartmoor, first opening Higher Westcott Farm as a B&B then branching out with this five-room, home-from-home hotel. The grade II listed stone-and-cob longhouse has a hip, rustic feel, with exposed wooden beams, muted tones and sheepskin-covered window seats. Leather sofas sit around a roaring wood-burner and the honesty bar is stocked with biodynamic wines. Outside there's a pétanque pitch, fire pit and, best of all, a stargazing den at the bottom of the garden.
Details B&B doubles from £165 (weekebarton.com)

BOVEY CASTLE, MORETONHAMPSTEAD

First opened as a hotel and golf resort in 1930 by Great Western Railways, this revamped country pile sits on its own 275-acre estate within the national park. There are outdoor pursuits galore (clay-pigeon shooting, falconry displays, fly fishing), plus a state-of-the-art spa and an 18-hole championship golf course. The two restaurants — the Med-inspired Smith's Brasserie and fine-dining-focused Great Western Grill — are overseen by the head chef Mark Budd, who cut his teeth at the Ritz and the Dorchester in London.
Details Room-only doubles from £175 (boveycastle.com)

Emma Love, Jamie Lafferty





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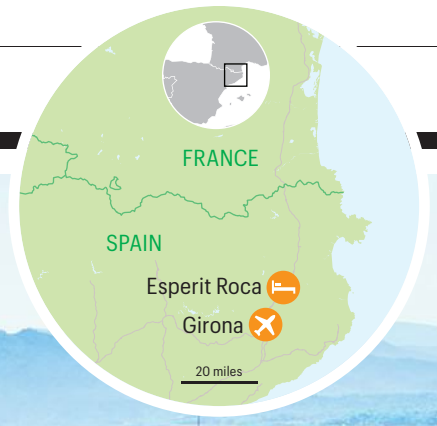
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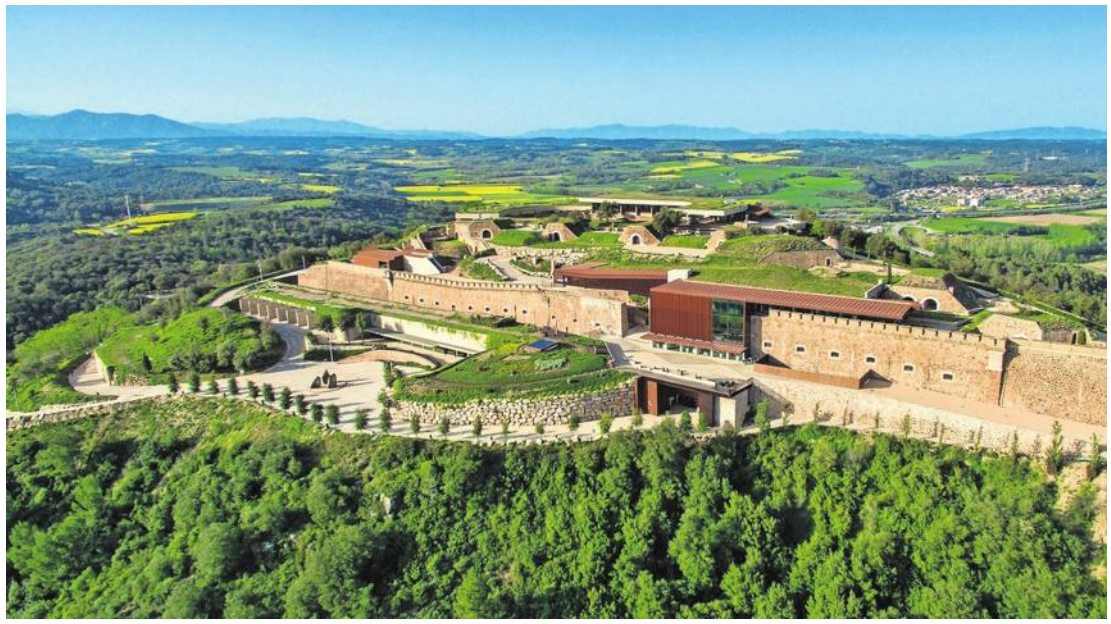


The underrated Spanish escape that's perfect for

El Celler de Can Roca in Girona is one of the world's best places to eat – and the brothers behind it have just opened a hotel. *Eddi Fiegel* is first to stay



From top: the medieval quarter in Girona; the Esperit Roca hotel complex; the restaurant at the hotel



High on a hilltop in the Catalan countryside outside Girona, on a wet Thursday afternoon in June, I was being driven into the clouds. Only 15 minutes earlier I had been ambling my way through the narrow medieval streets of Girona's old town, but I was now heading north out of the city towards the French border. Suddenly, my taxi turned off up a country lane lined with cork oaks, their lacy leaves forming a canopy overhead, and we began our climb.

At the top of the Sant Julia mountain, a vast circular building with a curving, copper-toned concrete roof came into view, part fortress, part millionaire's modernist mansion.

I had arrived at Esperit Roca, the new five-star hotel just opened by Joan, Josep and Jordi Roca, the superstar trio of brothers – one a chef, one a sommelier and the other a patissier – whose three-Michelin-starred Girona restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca, has twice taken the No 1 spot in the World's 50 Best Restaurants awards.

Since then, the Rocas have become A-listers of the culinary world and beyond, owing to their innovative fine-dining reinterpretation of traditional recipes, embracing of food technology (such as sous-vide water baths) and theatrical presentation (the Rocas were using smoke-filled glass domes long before they appeared on *MasterChef*). The hotel is the latest addition to the brothers' growing empire, which already includes, in Girona, a small boutique hotel (Casa Cacao, which opened in 2020), three restaurants, an ice-cream parlour and a sandwich bar.

Inside the small, elegant but uncluttered reception area, the star of the show was undoubtedly the surrounding landscape. Enormous floor-to-ceiling windows followed the curves of the building looking out through the wanton rain and cloud cover to the plains of northern Catalonia's lush, wine-growing Emporda region. The petrol-blue Pyrenees, Montseny and Gavarres mountains loomed on the horizon.

Possibly because it was midweek – and the hotel had been open less than two weeks – there seemed to be hardly anyone around, apart from the suited and bow-tied hotel manager and receptionist at the front desk, and a couple of anoraked photographers nursing drinks at the bar. Soft Ibiza chill-out sounds played on the PA.

The hotel is unlikely to remain quiet for long. Esperit Roca forms just one part of a huge new Roca brothers project within a mountain-top complex, which also includes a new restaurant in the hotel – and another standalone venture lower down the mountain – a vast wine cellar, an exhibition space and a distillery. Oh, and a helipad.

"Our philosophy has always been to stay in and around Girona," Joan says when we meet at the hotel. "It's a small city, but Girona is where we were born and raised, and it's our home. This mountain also played a strategic role in Girona's past." Sant Julia was the site of an ancient Iberian, Bronze-age settlement called Gerunda, which predated the city the Romans later named Girona.

The mountaintop buildings are not as modern as they first appear. Initially built as a 19th-century fortress with a moat, the complex was remodelled in 2018 as a luxury hotel (the Sants Metges) and gem museum, only to close following the pandemic.

"It all seemed to make sense," Joan says. "Josep is an extraordinary sommelier and we've been accumulating wines, with lots stored in different places, so we needed space for a cellar. We'd also had the idea of creating an exhibition telling the story of



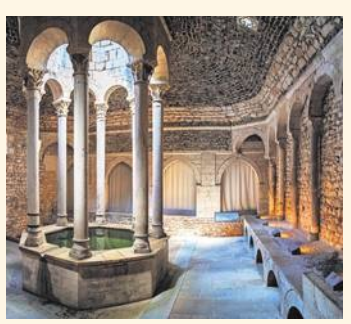
What's new in Girona

THE ELEVEN GALLERY

Opened in December by the Catalan interior designer Susanna Cots, the Eleven Gallery is part homeware store, part gallery. Spread over two floors near the old town of Girona it hosts photography exhibitions, such as the recent show of 1960s work by the Catalan journalist Joana Biarnès, and sells books (including many from publishers such as Phaidon and Thames & Hudson focusing on female artists), scented candles and home fragrances (theelevenhouse.com).

THE ARAB BATHS

Tucked away behind the gothic Girona Cathedral, these small but amazingly intact 12th-century baths could easily be missed. Based on the Roman bathing system, they feature an impressive apodyterium changing room with an octagonal, column-edged pool. The baths have been open to the public for some years (to visit, not for bathing — those days are long gone), but the latest addition to the experience is a fascinating short film showing how they would originally have looked and been used. Don't miss the sweeping views across the rooftops of Girona from the upper level (£2; banysarabs.cat).

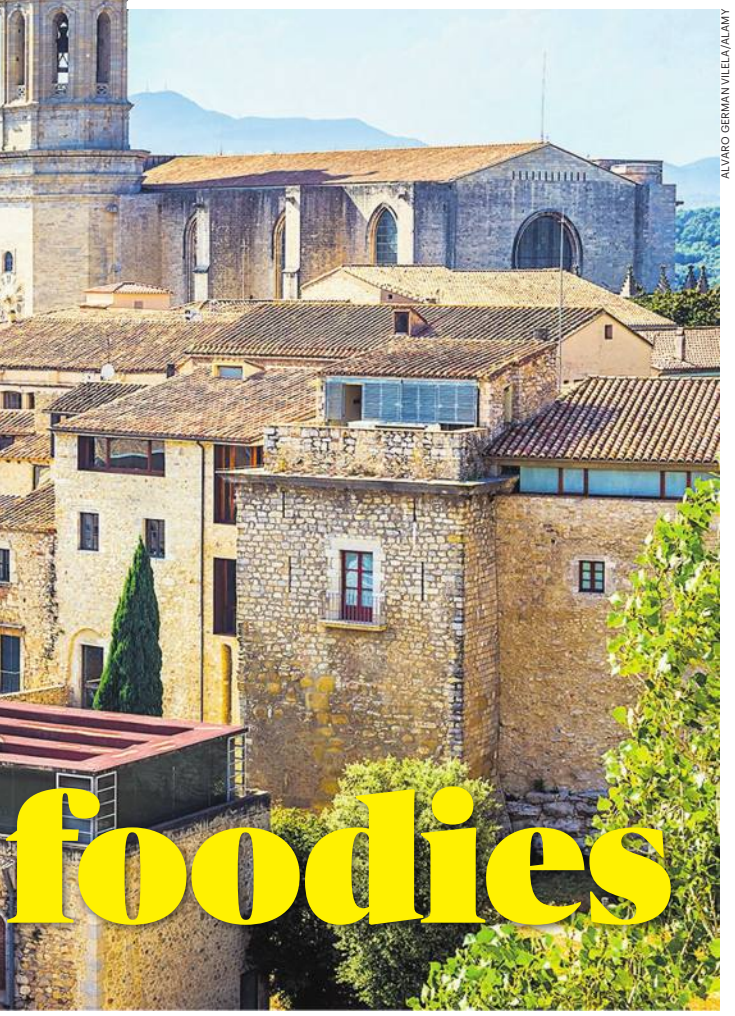


Inside the Arab Baths

DRACS STORE

At first glance the Dracs store, on a cobbled street in the medieval old town, looks like a classy gift shop. A mix of T-shirts and hoodies bearing the Girona skyline sit alongside ceramics, espadrilles, jewellery and organic hand creams, but there's more to it. Sustainability is at the heart of the shop's ethos and almost everything it sells is made in Catalonia from recycled textiles (iaios.com).

Eddi Fiegel



ALVARO GERMAN VILELA/ALAMY

foodies

our restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca. And as Casa Cacao is always full, we thought this was a good opportunity to have the exhibition space and the wine cellar all in one place, as well as a hotel to complement Casa Cacao."

The Rocas had good reason to open up some new tables, Joan says. "In 2023 we discovered that we had 129,000 people on the waiting list at El Celler. We had no idea there were so many, as we had never asked!"

Staggered by this revelation, the brothers had the idea of opening a new dining venue to enable more people to get a table, where they could enjoy a selection of El Celler de Can Roca's greatest culinary hits from the past 30 years. The fortress complex provided a solution.

When it came to adapting the old hotel, there wasn't much to do. The buildings had already been modernised; there was a large L-shaped outdoor swimming pool and the decor was, for the most part, ready to go.

Leaving the industrial-style polished plaster pillars, wooden floors and compressed-earth textured ceilings intact, the brothers simply pared things down, swapping jewel-toned sofas and large, abstract artworks for blank walls and neutral, oatmeal-hued upholstery.

"We tried to adapt the hotel to our taste," Joan says. "Also we wanted a space that was friendly, comfortable and authentic. There's beauty in the landscape, so there is no need to put artwork in the rooms." In my duplex, as in each of the hotel's 15 rooms, it's unquestionably the views that provide the wow factor – not least in my bathroom, with its freestanding bathtub facing the mountains. The minibar was filled with the Rocas's own beer and Casa Cacao chocolate.

Where the Rocas have really made the hotel their own, unsurprisingly perhaps, is at dinner. My visit to the hotel's (unnamed) restaurant included an exceptional starter of tomato salad with lime vinaigrette and cucumber juice (£15), followed by buttery-soft confit hake with rocket pesto, asparagus, garlic and parsley oil (£24), offset by a crisp, local white picapoll wine.

The next morning, after an excellent night's sleep, breakfast was a gourmet affair. There was tender, deep-red jamon iberico glistening like polished leather, fresh blueberries and raspberries that tasted of the sun, and a cake stand teeming with homemade pastries and chocolate brownies by the pastry chef Jordi.

I could easily have spent the day exploring the countryside, which is peppered with medieval hilltop villages, or the coves and beaches of the Costa Brava, 30 minutes' drive away. However, keen to see the new exhibition space, I made my way down the mountain.

As foodie exhibitions go, this is as flashy as they come: 50ft-high, state-of-the-art, black-edged screens show interviews with the Rocas and their colleagues while information panels trace their culinary history from childhood. On display are cooking utensils, quirky serving dishes and weird and wonderful gadgets (a 1997 water-bath cooker, for example), cookery books and photos.

But the real showstopper was yet to come. After browsing in the small shop area, which sells everything from a Roca brothers baseball cap to cookbooks and beer, I was led through a heavy, curtained door into a crater-like domed space.

The haunting baroque arias from Handel's *Triumph of Time and Truth* oratorio filled the room, which contained nothing but a small city's worth of wine racks. (The plan is to eventually store 80,000 bottles, making it one of the largest cellars in the world.)

Another door led into the new Esperit Roca (greatest hits) restaurant, where smartly dressed Japanese tourists and Catalan women in designer dresses sat by picture windows looking out to the countryside beyond.

I had been fortunate enough to eat at El Celler de Can Roca a few years ago, but my dinner here trumped it easily. Perhaps that's because the new menu is made up of the original's most popular dishes, not to mention exceptional wines (eight-course tasting menu from £97, mains from £24). Most memorable was the Contessa (as Viennetta was known in Spain) of white asparagus ice cream and truffle shavings, and Todo la Gamba (All of the Prawn), an elegant mix of tender, plump, prawn globes marinated in seaweed vinegar and katsuobushi (fermented tuna) alongside a crispy fried prawn's head, all in an intense, terracotta-hued, silky prawn velouté.

> "Girona is where we were born and raised – it's our home"

Star pudding? The Cromatismo Verde (Shades of Green), mixing apple granita with avocado mousse and a tangy sorbet of lemon and Granny Smith apples with tarragon sugar.

Esperit Roca is everything you might expect from these pioneering chefs: stylish, often unashamedly commercial and a class act throughout.

Back in my hotel room afterwards, looking down from the mountaintop, I could see this was the perfect place for three gentlemen from Girona who conquered the world.

Eddi Fiegel was a guest of Hotel Esperit Roca, which has B&B doubles from £296 (esperitroca.com), and of the Costa Brava Girona Tourism Board (costabrava.org). Casa Cacao has B&B doubles from £194 (hotelcasacacao.com). Fly to Girona

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I've been to 20 retreats and this is what I've learnt

Give us nice digs and time out but ease up on the lab coats and rules, says *Rosie Nixon*

ANTONIO TERRÓN



It was love at first sight for retreats and me. Ever since I stepped off a plane in Delhi in 2005 to meet a group of strangers with whom I would spend five nights under canvas, on a yoga escape in Ranthambore National Park, I adored the concept – there was the excitement of being thrown together with new people and the escape from everyday life in the name of self-improvement. Now, with at least 20 wellbeing retreats under my belt, I know exactly what works and what doesn't.

That In:spa retreat was also my debut visit to India, a country I would fall for deeply. Twice-daily classes of vinyasa flow with the yoga teacher Tenya Jayawuk quickly raised my downward dog to a standard I could be proud of, while mixing wellbeing classes with the magic of spotting Bengal tigers on dawn safaris proved a winning combination. So I learnt early that an incredible location would raise my chances of returning home a glowing, healthier version of myself.

In subsequent years I attended juicing retreats in Portugal and Turkey. They offered the instant gratification of dropping a few pounds in days, but all the juices, exercise and colonics became monotonous. Most of the chat around the pool at the Juicy Oasis, in the mountains south of Coimbra in central Portugal, involved speculating on whether we would be arrested if we escaped to the nearest taverna for a bottle of wine and some crispy sardines. We were hungry – very hungry – but that 2013 trip cemented friendships that I still treasure today. We were lucky, but you have to be prepared for the opposite, as you're often in close confinement with fellow guests for up to a week.



Then there was the time in the hills of northern Ibiza that I was woken at daybreak with blaring Eighties pop music, followed by high-interval training (sometimes in fancy dress), at the Body Camp, which now also has a fitness retreat on Mallorca. I'd normally swerve forced fun, but this trip taught me the value of getting high on good energy. There was a lot of laughter among the 16 of us there and I still cherish the conversations we had about personal goals – we wrote letters to ourselves to open a year later.

State-of-the-art medical clinics have a very different vibe. For instance, I've detoxed at SHA Wellness in the Sierra Helada Natural Park in southern Spain, where the ratio of guests to white-coated staff was about one to three. It can feel intense at times, with a sterile, clinical ambiance that doesn't suit those who like a cosier atmosphere.

A similar retreat in Italy was so strict that I worried there might be cameras in the bedrooms to catch me devouring a box of TicTacs, contravening its no-sugar rule. And when I tentatively asked whether I could skip a few sessions in my schedule of aromatherapy baths, lymphatic drainage massages and blood tests – I really fancied a few hours lying quietly on a sunlounger – I received such a scathing look that I feared I might be sent home. That taught me to check schedules closely before signing up.

I've enjoyed the weird and wonderful, such as chanting "I have a blue body" while herbs were burnt and I sweated out toxins during a temazcal ceremony at a retreat in Tulum, southeast Mexico.

On a writing retreat in rural Morocco with Creative Escapes, lessons were interspersed with shopping trips to the souk and afternoons were free, so I could work on my novel in our boutique hotel – that felt like a valuable use of time away from my children.

I am not alone in my love of a self-improvement escape; demand for wellness retreats has been on the up since the end of the last Covid lockdown. About one in five travellers are holidaying for wellness-driven reasons, according to research from YouGov and the luxury travel network Virtuoso (for its 2022 Travel Trends report). The Global Wellness Institute projected almost 10 per cent annual growth in the wellness economy between 2023 and 2025, when it is estimated to reach nearly £5.5 trillion.

> **"In Ibiza I was woken at dawn with blaring pop music**

The greatest retreats I have tried gave me an instant health boost and helped me to drop a few kilos, but rarely led to long-term lifestyle changes. And what really didn't work for me, even at the best ones, was a lack of flexibility and rigid schedules. During the busy child-rearing, working-mum days of my forties, popping off for five days to reboot became problematic – never mind going long haul.

And those retreats were not the kind of places to which I would turn for practical support when in 2022, as the editor in chief of Hello! magazine, I teetered on the edge of burnout. Instead I turned to personal development coaching. As with being on a retreat, I found comfort in opening up about my life goals to strangers. My "breakdown" began to seem more like a breakthrough and the idea for a new kind of retreat began to form in my mind.

I created a series of Reinvention Retreats in the UK as a practical and flexible way for midlife women to pause their everyday lives. You can come for one, two or three days and work towards long-term personal development with top coaches, with time to reflect, in a luxury spa hotel. In my experience learning feels better with soft furnishings and wholesome views. And no one will be chanting "I have a blue body".

For more on Rosie's Reinvention Retreats see rosienixon.co.uk



Clockwise from above: a meditation session; SHA Spain; Rosie, second from left, at the Body Camp in Ibiza

Three great overseas retreats

DESTRESS IN ITALY

On the Adriatic coast just east of Venice, the five-star Almar Jesolo Resort & Spa runs a wellness programme with an anti-stress focus. It promises to alleviate headaches, insomnia and anxiety via massage and moxibustion, as well as mobility and relaxation rituals. Along with ashtanga yoga and pranayama breathing exercises you'll also have at least one massage a day, often more.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £2,525pp, including treatments (healthandfitnesstravel.com). Fly or take a train to Venice

DETOX IN THAILAND

A week at the Amatara Welleisure Resort on Phuket will leave you lighter on the scales and ease your mental load, with its detox programme offering clarity of mind as a by-product. In a stunning coastal spot, this incorporates chi nei tsang abdominal massage, lymphatic drainage, infrared sauna and colon hydrotherapy. Choose a stint of three, seven, ten or fourteen nights.
Details Seven nights' full board from £3,378pp, including treatments (thehealthyholidaycompany.co.uk). Fly to Phuket

HEALTH MOT IN PORTUGAL

The Longevity Health & Wellness Hotel on the Algarve aims to give you mental wellbeing through one of its overhaul programmes. Its five-night Longevity Wellness retreat tackles nutrition, stress, detox, fitness and osteopathy in an attempt to "repair and regenerate". You can eat at any of the three restaurants and cafés (each with menus that cater for every diet from anti-inflammatory to vegan). Pure Café is particularly lovely, with panoramic views of Alvor Bay.
Details Five nights' full board from £2,620pp, including treatments (wellbeingescapes.com). Fly to Faro
Katie Bowman

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The Cosmopolitan Las Vegas 5*



Save 10%

A vast luxury resort that represents the very best that this superb city has to offer with 20 wonderful restaurants.

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The central, 42nd Street location in Midtown Manhattan ensures you can experience iconic New York just outside your door.

3 nights fr £995pp Inc flights

Waldorf Astoria Orlando 5*



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5 nights fr £1,195pp Inc flights

Route 66 fly drive



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NY & Boston twin centre 5*



Save 10%

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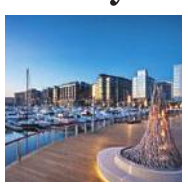
5 nights fr £1,345pp Inc flights

Nobu Hotel Miami Beach 5*



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3 nights fr £999pp Inc flights

Pendry Washington, DC 5*

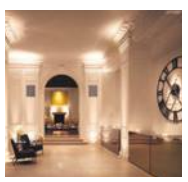


Save 10%

Located right on the waterfront harbour, Pendry Washington, DC - The Wharf is a timeless, classic and graceful hotel.

3 nights fr £1,325pp Inc flights

Ambassador Chicago 5*



Save 10%

Stay in this iconic hotel in the delightful Gold Coast Neighbourhood and enjoy a stay of grandeur and luxury.

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Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki 5*



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Located on the world-famous Duke Kahanamoku Beach and Lagoon, on the widest stretch of beach in Waikiki.

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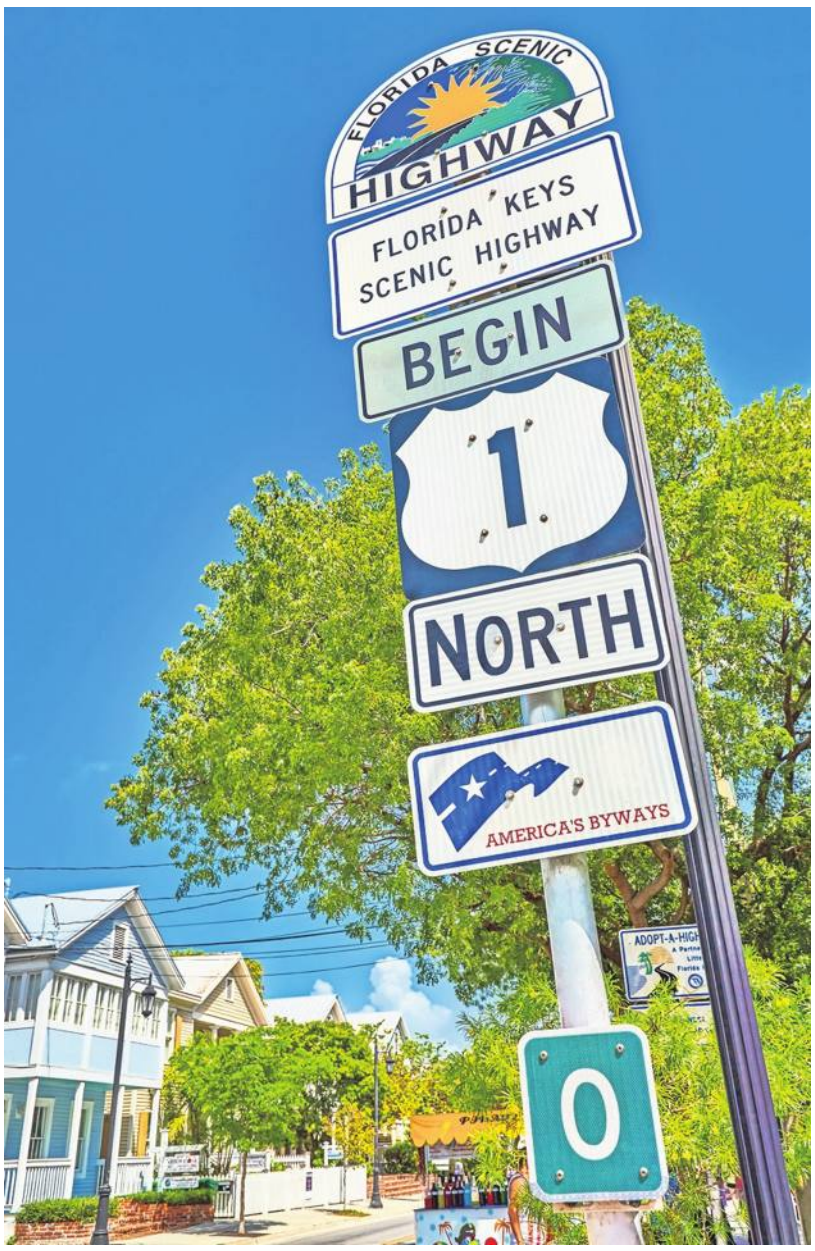
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Travel US

What better way to get the measure of the nation than by meeting people and taking it slowly, asks *Simon Parker*, who cycled 4,373 miles through 11 states from Seattle to Key West



BOUCHER PHOTOSTUDIO, PETER UNGER/GETTY IMAGES



My epic bi across



Clockwise from above: the start of Highway 1 in Key West; the road to Mount Rainier in Washington state; Simon and his bike in Alabama, Florida and Washington; the Florida Keys

From the summit of the Space Needle, 184m (604ft) up, I looked out across the seaside city of Seattle beneath me. Mirror-like skyscrapers and apartment blocks glinted in the hazy morning light. South of the observation tower I could see Lumen Field, the 69,000-seat stadium of the Seattle Seahawks NFL team, glinting in the hazy morning light. To the west the Olympic peninsula glowed a lush, mossy green. Douglas firs and mountain hemlocks fringed glassy-black lakes where seaplanes with banana-like floats skidded into land. Reminiscent of Cape Town or Sydney, Seattle may well be one of the most beautiful seaside cities.

But I was heading east, to the open road and Middle America. For the next ten weeks I would be cycling solo and unsupported through 11 states to Key West in Florida, via a route of more than 4,000 miles. Why? To take the temperature of the nation in the lead-up to the presidential election in November.

"I can't even begin to fathom how ridiculous things are going to get for you out there," said John Price, a retired US marine who offered to take me sailing on Puget Sound, the watery playground of Seattle where cormorants fished beside container ships destined for the Pacific.

Long-distance bicycle travel opens you up to conversations, and offers, such as these. "People who have grown up in the past 20 or 30 years haven't had a war to rally around like my grandfather did," Price went on as we rescued a lifebuoy from a passing cruise ship. "All they've had is a lot of hyperbole and reasons to try not to get along with people."

From a distance the United States can appear more divided than ever. But I was determined to meet real people like Price – the citizens behind the headlines – to better understand a country that many of us take for granted.

It took me almost two weeks to cross Washington – a state bigger than England and Wales combined – via the North Cascades, a densely forested mountain range where a soupy mizzle drenched the canopy and posters warned of hungry bears.

I spent a night with protesters campaigning for nuclear disarmament and met teenage Mormon missionaries and Christian ministers warning of an imminent doomsday. But before crossing into Idaho I stopped in the small town of Ritzville for the annual Labor Day rodeo.

After a rousing rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner* I watched barrel races and bronc-riding from the raucous beer garden. "Hey, it's actually this dude's first rodeo!" one joker told the amused crowd. I stuck out like a sore thumb – the only person not wearing blue jeans and boots, I was given away by my shorts and flip-flops, but this made me the hiccupping beneficiary of an unending supply of free drinks.

For all the issues and culture wars that rip Americans apart, there are myriad things that bring them together – a love of wild places in particular. In Montana then Wyoming I cycled for hours on end with barely a horse, let alone a human, for company. And when I did occasionally stumble across a tobacco-spitting rancher I was greeted like a long-lost friend. "You're not from round here, are you?" they would ask as they marvelled, wide-eyed, at my bicycle and big red panniers. "Do you need some place to stay? You look hungry. Can I fix you a sandwich?"

My journey across the US spoke to the greatest American obsession of them all: freedom. Sure, most people thought that I was downright bonkers, and more than a dozen tried to give or sell me a gun for protection from bears, dogs and other people, but everyone was fascinated by my desire to see their vast and geographically diverse country slowly – albeit on a two-wheeled contraption dismissed by many Americans as a children's toy.

In Nebraska – one of the so-called flyover states, so named because few tourists visit them – I pedalled through thousands of acres of rustling corn fields. Long-distance bicycle travel can make you feel extremely small and the world very big, especially in the breadbaskets of the Midwest, where genetically modified crops sprawl across every sun-kissed horizon.

Most foreign tourists flock to the coastal cities of Los Angeles, New York and Washington. But in many ways Middle America feels like the beating heart of the US; the parched core of a country that feeds the world. Wonderfully off the beaten path I found my English accent turning heads in petrol stations, grocery shops and restaurants. I lost count of the number of people who insisted on buying me breakfast.

> "Often I would be entirely alone, the only human for miles

At numerous points across the thousands of miles I rode alongside three-mile-long freight trains pulling coal and oil towards cities on the east coast; their drivers made a habit of sneaking up behind me and sounding their horns. Sometimes I would share the road with coyotes and vultures dripping in blood. But often I would be entirely alone, the only human for miles.

In Oklahoma, the state immortalised by John Steinbeck in his Pulitzer-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, I found a surprisingly verdant land that contradicted the "dust bowl" image of my mind's eye. Nevertheless, the open road swirled with heat mirage and it was normal to ride in temperatures topping 38C. I would try to set off long before dawn to get in 50 miles by lunchtime. On particularly remote and broiling stretches I would need to carry ten litres of water.

I spent the night in Pawhuska, the capital of the Osage, the wealthy Native American nation whose story was told by Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2024 Oscar-nominated film *Killers of the Flower Moon*. When oil was discovered beneath Osage lands in the 1920s a mysterious spate of murders took place and "headrights" were handed to unscrupulous white widowers. These days the bijou town has an olive-oil-tasting bar and the Constantine Theater, the second-oldest performing arts centre in Oklahoma. But instead of traipsing around in the stifling heat with the other tourists I propped up a bar and chatted to people who lived there. "I feel like America is in an era of



ke trip s America

See the video of Simon's adventure at youtube.com/@timestravel







accountability," said one of the bushy-bearded patrons, an Osage man who believed that stories such as *Killers of the Flower Moon* would help to redress racial inequality.

Just outside Subiaco in Arkansas I met a friendly cattle farmer railing against taxes, then at a nearby Benedictine monastery spoke to a monk who had once hunted ghosts. "Enjoy life!" God had told him after saving him from the devil. It was a maxim to live, and ride, by.

A few days later I was chased into a Mississippi cotton field by a pack of angry dogs, only to be greeted by a chipper farmer who insisted on buying me a cheeseburger and fries. You seldom find such characters, or acts of kindness, in a guidebook; sometimes you have to stumble out of a hedge and simply hope for the best.

Until now the food had been mostly lousy – processed and beige. In the food deserts of the Midwest fresh produce is scarce. But barbecue is a religion in the South. "Low and slow," goes the mantra. At the Dreamland Bar-B-Que restaurant in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, I slurped meat and marinade from tender pork ribs with abandon. "In the 1800s the good cuts of meat went to the fancy people," said Jimmy Hart, a friend of a friend who worked for the local tourist office. "But the rest of us were left with the brisket and the rump, so we had to figure out how to make it delicious. Growing up you knew that some of the best food could be found in some of the sketchiest neighbourhoods, because their barbecue pits had been burning for a hundred years."

The pristine, empty forests of Alabama surprised me more than any other corner of the country. Dappled in buttery sunshine, the rolling roads were so quiet that I could practically hear autumn leaves falling on the grass. Dozens of white-tailed deer clip-clopped through the undergrowth then stared back at me with their billiard-ball eyes.

Florida, in contrast, felt loud and brash. I zigzagged south, trying to avoid theme parks and busy cities. A journey from A to B will always have its bottlenecks, but at least this one smelt of citrus, with oranges, lemons and limes lining my sultry path.

I arrived in the Florida Keys via the Overseas Highway, a 113-mile extension of Highway 1, the 2,370-mile route that follows the US east coast; blue skies, fluffy clouds and a light tailwind – close to perfection. This was the beginning of the tropical end of Florida, and of my journey.

Island-hopping via 42 bridges, some as long as seven miles, I stayed in 1960s art deco motels and refuelled on stacks of pancakes sopping with maple syrup. As a blistering blood-orange sun dipped beneath the horizon I celebrated on the streets of Key West with thousands of sequined and body-painted revellers at Fantasy Fest, the Floridian answer to Mardi Gras, albeit in October.

With 4,373 miles behind me, all seen at the gentle pace of a bicycle, I was exhausted but in awe of the country I had just explored – a nation that can seem more divided than ever but delivers generosity, hospitality and epic scenery by the bucket-load.



Three more US cycle trips

CALIFORNIA WINE COUNTRY

While we'd never recommend cycling under the influence, you can at least afford to take wine-tasting sips when biking between vineyards. This six-day meander starts in San Francisco and ends in Healdsburg, ticking off five wine valleys, including Napa and Sonoma. There's also time to see thousand-year-old trees in the Armstrong Redwoods state reserve and enjoy the coast as you pootle through Bodega Bay, staying in fabulous foodie hotels.
Details Five nights' full board from £3,426pp, including transfers and bike hire (backroads.com). Fly to San Francisco

MAINE COAST AND NATIONAL PARK

Maine cycle trips are offered from May to September, so now is the time to get to New England. This self-guided coastal route takes in island lighthouses, craggy shorelines and bohemian towns where you'll stay in charming inns. Start in Portland and end with a spin through Acadia National Park and along its granitic Schoodic peninsula.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £4,019pp, including flights, transfers and bike hire (headwater.com)

CROSS-AMERICAN ADVENTURE

USA Bike Tours specialises in trips offering guided rides, accommodation that includes camping, a guide, a medic, a support vehicle and luggage transfers. You bring the bike and camping gear. This trail wheels from Canada through Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Arizona then Mexico and all the Latin American nations en route to Panama. Sections taking 10 to 20 days can also be booked.
Details Twenty-four weeks' full board from £25,736pp (usabiketours.com). Fly to Inuvik and out of Panama City
Katie Bowman

Simon Parker was a guest of the tourist boards of Seattle (visit seattle.org), the states of Washington (stateofwatourism.com), Nebraska (visitnebraska.com), Oklahoma (travelok. com), Arkansas (arkansas.com), Mississippi (visit mississippi.org) and Alabama (alabama.travel) and the Florida Keys (fla-keys.com); the travel insurance he required for cycling across the US was provided by Yellow Jersey (yellowjersey.co.uk). His book A Ride Across America is published on Thursday (£20; September Publishing). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Discount for Times+ members

NOBLE CALEDONIA







ISLANDS & ATOLLS OF THE **INDIAN OCEAN**



A voyage from Mauritius exploring Madagascar, Aldabra & Tanzania aboard the MS Island Sky
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Here is an extraordinary cruise for those who enjoy the natural world and all its wonders. Join us aboard the all-suite MS Island Sky and enjoy the warmth and beauty of the Indian Ocean as she undertakes exactly the type of itinerary that suits her many talents best. Island hopping from Mauritius to Tanzania with calls in Madagascar and the Seychelles, we will use the vessel's Zodiacs to land on otherwise inaccessible beaches, explore vast lagoons and coral reefs and encounter some of the most extraordinarily beautiful tropical scenery to be found anywhere in the world.

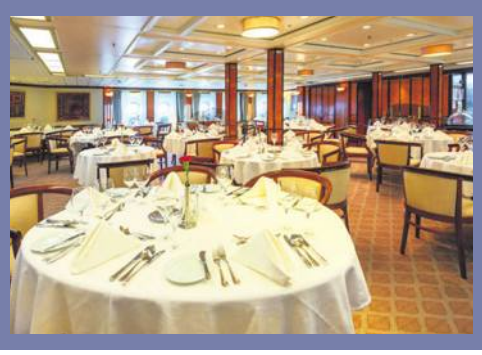
Sailing from Mauritius we will land on its nearest neighbour, Reunion, a little bit of France in the Indian Ocean, before we continue to Madagascar for five days of exploration of this incredibly verdant and beautiful island with its unique flora and fauna. During our time here there will be ample opportunity to discover the forests which are full of wildlife including the iconic lemur, chameleons and indigenous birdlife as well as to see the underwater world and village life. Continuing to the Seychelles we have a day and a half scheduled in the Aldabra islands. Aldabra is the last breeding ground of the giant tortoise and in addition to seeing some of these endearing creatures you should also encounter dolphins, turtles and whales as well as countless birds. Our expedition concludes in Tanzania where we visit Kilwa Kisiwani, a site of exceptional historical interest and discover atmospheric Zanzibar.

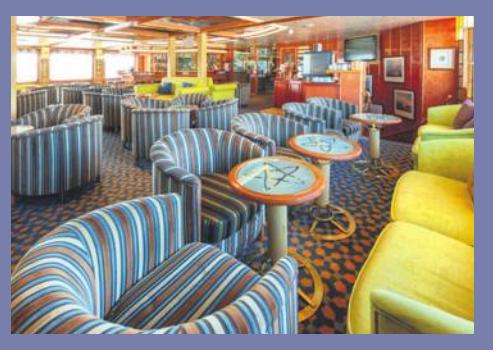


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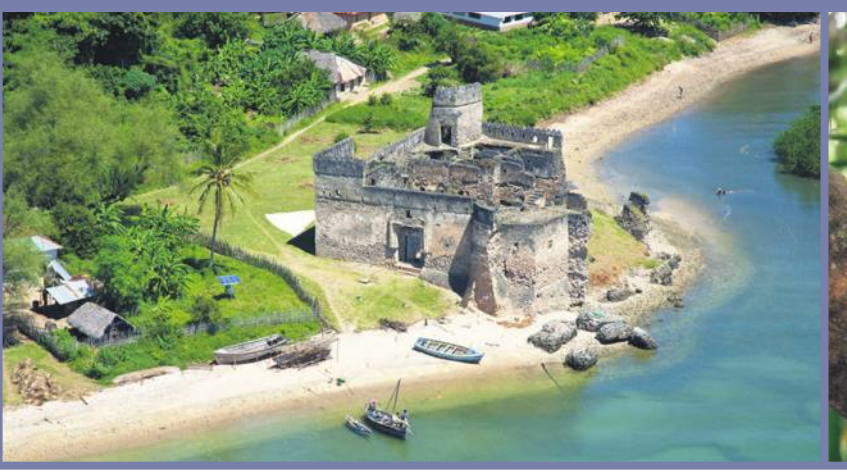
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THE ITINERARY IN BRIEF

Day 1 London to Mauritius. Fly by scheduled indirect flight.

Day 2 Mauritius. Arrive this morning and transfer directly to the MS Island Sky. Settle into your suite and spend a leisurely day on board. This evening enjoy welcome drinks and dinner as we set sail this evening.

Day 3 Reunion Island. We arrive at breakfast in Reunion where we have a choice of excursions. On a full day tour we will visit the central highlands where spectacularly rugged peaks of volcanoes cradle huge amphitheatres known as cirques, where mountains tower to over 10,000 feet and beautiful waterfalls plummet hundreds of feet. The rich soil and mellow climate produce a lush and verdant landscape which is dotted with villages and towns with a uniquely French atmosphere. After enjoying a creole lunch in a local restaurant we will visit 'La Cite du Volcan' museum. Alternatively, enjoy a morning tour to a vanilla plantation in Saint Andre where we learn about the history and culture of this integral part of Reunion's heritage. Continue to Salazie, a verdant landscape and home to many waterfalls including the 'Voile de la Mariee' before spending some free time in Saint Denis.

Day 4 At Sea. Spend the day at sea as we sail towards Madagascar.

Days 5 & 6 Masoala National Park & Nosy Mangabe, Madagascar. We will spend two days exploring from our anchorage in Antongil Bay. We discover Nosy Mangabe, a 520-hectare island reserve and one of the most diverse areas of virgin rainforest in Madagascar which has also been an important research centre since the mid-1960s when several aye-ayes and other lemurs were released into the forest. We will use our Zodiacs to land on the other beach next to the forest and organise a series of nature walks. We will also explore Madagascar's largest protected National Park, the Masoala Peninsula, which comprises of coastal rainforest, flooded forests, marsh and mangroves. We may be lucky enough to encounter a group of locally endemic red-ruffed lemur. The park is also home to various species of brightly coloured Mantella frogs, all manner of extraordinary chameleons and is a refuge for the endangered Madagascar red owl, Madagascar serpent eagle and many endemic bird species. A range of walks for all levels will be on offer, as well as a visit to the local village.

Day 7 Domaine de Bobangira. After a morning at sea we arrive over lunch at the port of Vohemar, our base for an afternoon at the Domaine de Bobangira. This reserve on the Indian Ocean has wild, unspoiled beaches and forests rich in biodiversity having about 40% of endemic flora to the region. Declared as a protected private nature reserve in 2017 by the national forestry department, it is home to fat-tailed dwarf lemurs, the diurnal white-headed lemur, Brookesia and various species of chameleons.

Day 8 Diego Suarez. This morning we will enter the dramatic harbour of Diego Suarez. This morning, choose from a city tour taking in the Commonwealth Cemetery, the faded colonial grandeur of Place Joffre, and a baobab viewpoint at French Mountain; or alternatively, drive up to Amber Mountain National Park at an elevation of 3,200ft, where we will divide into short and long walking parties to explore the pristine rainforest. In the towering vegetation, we may spot Sanford's brown and crowned lemurs, as well as chameleons, stunningly well camouflaged leaf-tailed geckos, and an array of endemic birds.

Day 9 Nosy Hara. Having sailed around the northern tip of Madagascar we will find a number of strangely shaped limestone islets that dot the aquamarine sea. Depending on tides and sea conditions, the expedition team will pick the most suitable island for landing in this marine reserve archipelago. We hope to offer swimming and snorkelling over the diverse coral reefs, as well as woodland walks to find extraordinary flora and fauna including one of the world's smallest reptiles. Zodiac cruises around the picturesque islands offer a good chance of sighting not just elegant tropicbirds but also the magnificent Madagascar fish eagle, one of Africa's rarest birds.

Days 10 & 11 Aldabra Islands, Seychelles. Arriving in the Outer Seychelles we have a day and a half to enjoy the Aldabra group of islands and our itinerary will be in the hands of our Expedition Leader and Captain who will monitor the local conditions to ensure we maximise our time here. Whilst our itinerary is flexible, we hope to call at the island of Assumption where our time will be spent beachcombing, on nature walks or snorkelling. We will also plan time on Aldabra, the island referred to by Sir Julian Huxley as "One of nature's treasures and should belong to the whole world". Our exploration will be guided by the tides and sightings have been made of the extremely rare white throated rail and the atoll is also home to the world's second largest colony of frigate birds and the largest crab, the coconut crab. Whilst exploring by Zodiac it is difficult to know in which direction to look. The clear blue seas abound with life, the skies are alive with varied birdlife and ashore giant land tortoises forage as they have done for millions of years. We hope to explore Picard Island with a short walk to see some of the numerous tortoises and robber crabs or swim in the lagoon, a vast 17 mile stretch of shallow clear water.

Day 12 At Sea. Spend a leisurely day on board as we continue our journey through the Indian Ocean.

Day 13 Kilwa Kisiwani, Tanzania. This morning we anchor off Kilwa Kisiwani, a site of exceptional historical interest, where the atmospheric ruins represent a wide sweep of East African coastal history, from the heights of the Swahili and Shirazi trading civilisation to the darker days of slavery and the uprisings against German rule. Once one of Africa's wealthiest towns, Kilwa Kisiwani is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and contains the world's most extensive and best-preserved Swahili ruins. We will spend the morning on a walking tour this afternoon hope to find a local beach to offer the chance to swim, snorkel or take a stroll.

Day 14 Latham Island. Also known as Fungu Kizimkazi, this uninhabited coral island measures just 7.5 acres but is an important breeding ground for many bird species and one of the most important areas in the Indian Ocean for masked booby, brown noddy, sooty tern and greater crested tern. Weather permitting, we will use our Zodiacs to cruise the island to view these colonies and also offer the chance to snorkel on the fringing reef.

Day 15 Zanzibar. Zanzibar's harbour, crowded with dhows, very much sets the scene for our visit to this Arab-style city with its long narrow streets, bazaars, houses with overhanging balconies and intricately carved doorways. On a morning walking tour, soak up the timeless atmosphere of Stone Town including Livingstone House, Sultan's Palace, the slave market and the Old Fort. The afternoon is free to relax and explore independently or join a tour of a spice farm. Alternatively, travel to Jozani Forest which sustains a variety of wildlife and birds, including the rare red colobus monkey, indigenous to the island.

Day 16 Dar es Salaam to London. Disembark and transfer to the airport for our scheduled flight to London.

Day 17 London. Arrive this morning.

PRICES & INCLUSIONS

Special offer prices per person based on double occupancy start from **£10495** for a Standard Suite. Suites for sole use from **£12495**.

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

Economy class scheduled air travel • 14 nights aboard the MS Island Sky on a full board basis • House wine, beer and soft drinks with lunch and dinner • Noble Caledonia expedition team • Shore excursions • Gratuities • Transfers • Airport taxes • Port taxes.

NB. Ports and itinerary are subject to change. All special offers are subject to availability. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations. Travel insurance and Tanzanian visa are not included in the price. Zodiacs will be used regularly during this expedition.

48 HOURS IN... AJACCIO

The Corsican capital offers beach vibes and Napoleonic history, says *Dom Tulett*

British high society wintered in Ajaccio in the 19th century, making the most of a year-round, blue-sky climate that compares favourably with the Côte d'Azur. Before then, the Corsican capital was Napoleon's town; the Continent-shaping French leader was born here and his imprint remains clear, with museums, hotels and shops living off his name and no shortage of larger-than-life statues.

A mix of influences has shaped Ajaccio, since Corsica was caught in a centuries-long tug-of-war between France and Italy. That history resonates in its architecture, but is best seen in its cuisine, with just-caught seafood alongside island charcuterie and pizzas to make a Neapolitan blush.

But it's not a city gazing back on its past. Today the clear Corsican air and sun-sparkled sea still prove a soothing balm. Hiking, biking, surfing and skiing are possible within an hour of a city centre filled with boutique hotels fit for an exiled ruler and enough fine-dining options to feed an army.

DAY ONE

MORNING

Capo di Feno beach has a gentle swell that is perfect for the surfing novice, so grab a board, zip up a wetsuit and join a small group session with Capo Surf Club (April to October). Kayak, bodyboard and paddleboard rentals are also available (lessons from £21; caposurfclub.com).

Eat at Café Gilda

Having worked up an appetite, reward yourself with a treat at Café Gilda. Every dish is a tempter at this bright and airy café with an earthy, olive-colour palate, but you can't beat the blissfully light tuna with pistachios and roasted vegetables (mains from £15; gilda-ajaccio.com).

AFTERNOON

Lining the walls at Musée Fesch are some of the 17,000 works collected by Cardinal Joseph Fesch (uncle of Napoleon). It's the best art collection in Corsica, with pieces by Italian Renaissance masters such as Botticelli, Titian and Veronese (£7; musee-fesch.com).

Drink at Brasserie du Diamant

Get here early for the best people-watching spots out front, though the buzzing main bar and quieter nooks work just as well for an early evening drink. Ask the barman to mix you a Capo Spritz, the citrus-flavoured Corsican favourite (cocktails from £8; brasseriediamant.com).

EVENING

NapoRama displays lovingly constructed Playmobil sets of key moments from Napoleon's life. A (French-speaking) guide will talk you through them. All ages will enjoy the scenes, carefully selected to focus on the military achievements of Ajaccio's favourite son: Toulon, Cairo, Austerlitz. "*Où est* Waterloo?" (£4; napo-rama.com).

Eat at Le Roi de Rome

While this place is great for an alfresco drink at a barrel table, head inside for traditional Corsican specialities. Low ceilings and exposed brickwork set the mood, an extensive wine list adds to it, the charcuterie platter tops it off (mains from £15; fb.com/RoideRomeajaccio).

DAY TWO

MORNING

Step back into the 1700s with a visit to Maison Bonaparte, the house of

Need to know

● Getting there

There are no direct flights from the UK, but Ajaccio can be reached by plane from Paris or Nice. Or fly or take a train to Toulon, Nice, Marseilles or Genoa and catch a ferry. Ajaccio airport is three miles from the centre, served by buses (£7) and taxis (from £22).

● Getting around

Ajaccio is compact enough to explore on foot, but renting an ebike is a fun way to get to the sites beyond the city centre (£32 a day; corsicaelectricbike.com).

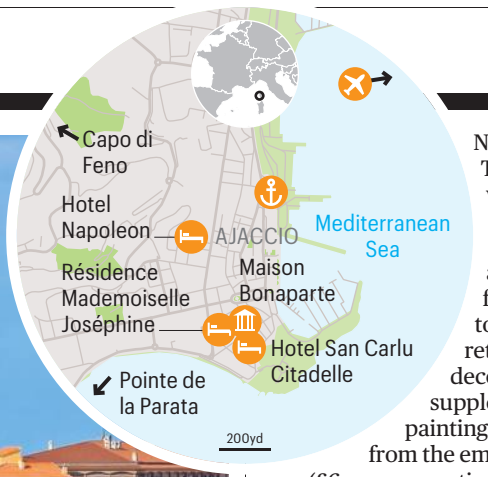


M TIMOTHY O'KEEFE/ALAMY

The marina and old town; below right, Dom in the city







Napoleon's birth. The property, where diplomats and aristocrats were entertained after the family rose to prominence, retains original decor and furniture supplemented with paintings and memorabilia from the emperor's life (£6; musees-nationaux-malmaison.fr).

Eat at Le Palm Beach

Rent an ebike and head out on the coast road to Le Palm Beach (the journey takes about 20 minutes), where outdoor decking above the water gives the place a relaxing California vibe. The steaming pot of moules marinière is a highlight, helped down with a cool local rosé as the tide rolls below (mains from £15, palm-beach.fr).

AFTERNOON

Continue west to the popular Pointe de la Parata. Follow walking trails through the fragrant Corsican scrub and climb the 156 steps to the highest point. Here the 16th-century Genoese brick watchtower stands tall, with views of the nearby Îles Sanguinaires (free, grandsitesanguinaires-parata.com).

Drink at L'Atelier Vagner

Wine's a big deal in Ajaccio, with a lavish festival each January celebrating St Vincent, patron saint of winemakers, and the region's AOC status vineyards. Stop for a glass of medium-bodied red at this breezy restaurant bar overlooking the sea (wines from £4 a glass, ateliervagner-ajaccio.fr).

EVENING

Bid Bonaparte adieu at the Place d'Austerlitz with an amble among the olive trees and pines where he played as a boy. Here stands his grandest monument, an imposing bronze statue on a pyramid of granite. Climb to the summit to enjoy its immortal view of the city as Ajacciens play pétanque in the square below (free; ajaccio-tourisme.com).



> Walk among the pines where Bonaparte played as a boy

Eat at L'Ardoise

This favourite of Corsican residents, near the place where the fishing boats dock, prides itself on local produce. Start with the rich fish soup (the ingredients are caught by the chef's husband) and follow up with the sensational truffle-brushed ravioli filled with Corsican ewe's milk cheese (mains from £15, lardoiseajaccio.fr).

Dom Tulett was a guest of Ajaccio Tourism (ajaccio-tourisme.com)

Where to stay

RÉSIDENCE MADEMOISELLE JOSÉPHINE

Bolt hole near the best bars

These simple but smart apartments near the main nightspots have a homely feel, with comfy beds and cosy sitting areas, and are a steal, particularly in winter. Take the top-floor duplex and sit on its balcony as the nearby cathedral chimes the hour (one nights' self-catering from £39; mademoiselle-josephine.com).

HOTEL NAPOLEON

For the ultimate fix

This hotel just off the main thoroughfare plays on having the best name in town. A motif-heavy lobby bursts with silhouetted headshots of Napoleon and his family, and cushions displaying "Victoire", "Révolution", "Incroyable". Rooms follow the same pattern. The £12 breakfast buffet sets you up nicely for a day's marching (room-only doubles from £76, hotel-napoleon-ajaccio.fr).

HOTEL SAN CARLU CITADELLE

Gilded luxury and the best views

A statement lobby (gold palm trees and a gold lift) leads to luxurious rooms and suites that are all about the chic, modern design. Rooms look out across the Gulf of Ajaccio, but for even better views head to the top-floor bar and gaze over the city's terracotta rooftops and 16th-century citadel (room-only doubles from £92; hotelsancarlu.com).



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One of the bedrooms at St Michaels Resort in Falmouth, Cornwall. Top: a spa lodge at the hotel

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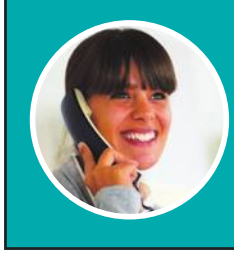
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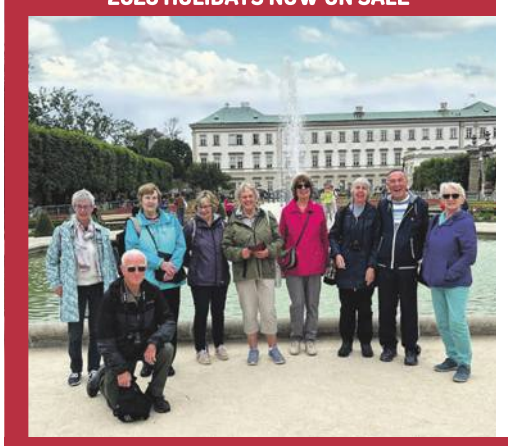
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Travel

MY HOLS MARIA SHARAPOVA

Strawberries and cream taste best in London

The tennis ace on Wimbledon, the coast of California and seeing gorillas in Rwanda

Maria Sharapova, 37, is a former world No 1 tennis player. In 2004, aged 17, she became the first Russian woman to win Wimbledon when she defeated the defending champion Serena Williams in the final. She moved to Florida with her father when she was six to train at the IMG Academy and now lives in Los Angeles with her British fiancé, Alexander Gilkes, and their son, Theo.



MARCO BOTTIGELLI/GETTY IMAGES

Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, where Maria Sharapova is a regular visitor



During Wimbledon I'd escape the spotlight by taking long walks on Wimbledon Common or I'd picnic in Hyde Park with my favourite dessert, strawberries and cream, which always tastes more delicious in London during the tournament. We usually spend several weeks in the UK during summer while visiting Alexander's family, and I recently went back to Wimbledon with Theo to show him my name on the champion's board. It was a full-circle moment, taking him to a place that was so meaningful in my career.

I was 19 when I went on my first holiday, to Amanpuri, a luxury resort on the Thai island of Phuket, with my mum and a few girlfriends. Everything had the wow factor – especially the meals. I'm a big foodie and gained a few pounds because I was always enticed by some tempting rice dish.

When I played at the French Open in Paris I'd live at the Park Hyatt near the Place Vendôme for three weeks, and whenever I return there the memories come flooding back. Hotel staff become like family when you stay for so long; while I was there for a meeting last year they gave Theo an engraved toy.

A few years ago my mum and I decided to travel through Scotland on the Royal Scotsman. It was my first time in the country and it was stunning. We explored Edinburgh before boarding, hiked in the misty Highlands and loved sharing a cabin for a couple of nights on board.

When I won the 2012 Porsche Tennis Grand Prix in Stuttgart, part of the prize was a Porsche 911. For my first big spin in it I drove up the Californian coast on Highway One. I went to Big Sur and en route fell in love with Santa Barbara and San Ysidro Ranch, which is surrounded by citrus groves, rose gardens, cypresses and waterfalls and has a gorgeous pool. I love nature so do my workouts outdoors.

I'm on the board of the luxury fashion brand Moncler, which involves making regular trips to Milan. During my last visit I looked online and found two seats for the Madina ballet at La Scala. I love that elements of travel can be so spontaneous – especially in Europe.

However, one of my favourite things to do is plan holidays, and when we decided on the Basque region in Spain I booked a table at Asador Etxebarri, which has only about ten tables. The space is beautiful, and it doesn't feel as inaccessible as some of the other world's best restaurants. We also went to Elkano, where most of the food is cooked on an outdoor wood-fire grill. It was exceptional.

During the summer I take any chance to escape to Lake Como. Last year I stayed at Passalacqua with a friend, and we had such a wonderful time that I went back with Alexander for my birthday in April. It's so mellow there that I just stared out of the window, looking at the mountains, hillside and reflections in the lake.

I've always been excited to visit Dubrovnik, but when I eventually got there in 2021 it wasn't what I expected – probably because it was the height of summer and very busy. We rented a boat and found our way to lovely Lopud, a small car-free island off the Dalmatian coast. We ate fresh fish, soaking up the simple and charming vibe while watching locals taking dips in the water.

I love Morocco and its energy, so one year we spent New Year's Eve at Amanjena in Marrakesh. The resort has grand dusky rose-hued walls, but inside there's a feeling of intimacy that's really special. I was there for a friend's birthday recently and it was a different experience without my family; I flung open the doors of my room and I could hear birdsong and trickling water from the fountain.

Alexander and I have been fortunate to travel to many special places around the world, but visiting Rwanda five years ago made a big impact. Encountering the gorillas in the rainforest was a profound experience. We stayed at Bisate, a safari lodge where the villas look like hobbit houses. You have to be at least 15 years old to hike to see the silverbacks, so I plan to go back with Theo when he's old enough.

Interview by Shelley Rubenstein

Maria Sharapova is hosting a three-night wellness retreat at Amanzoe in Greece this September (aman.com)

COMPETITION

WIN A LUXURY SCOTTISH BREAK WORTH UP TO £1,660 AT CROMLIX, ANDY MURRAY'S HOTEL

WHERE WAS I?

Was it for this that we drove so far? To stand craning our necks, trying to see a test track? There's no way we will manage it. It's shielded from prying eyes by an earthen bank. But that won't stop my friend from trying.

He is cock-a-hoop, while I am down in the mouth.

The state-of-the-art track was recently opened in the grounds of a hall, parts of which date from the 12th century. For Friend its presence has rescued him from a boring day of history and — worse — poems.

I, meanwhile, am aghast at the thought of roaring engines. I want to hear a river make ceaseless music beside the first home of a writer (sister: Dorothy); it stands two miles southeast of the hall, in a small town. I also want to visit a village a mile and a half southeast of the hall that was once home to a Roman fort and settlement. At this rate, though, I'll see neither of them.

It's time to bowl a googly. So I tell Friend which sportsman grew up playing at one of the town's clubs in the early 2000s. Shortly afterwards we're sitting in his car near the entrance to the club. "We can't just drive in," I tell him. "Why don't you walk over instead?"

Friend agrees. He's so excited by the idea that his hero (mother: Deborah) played here that he suspects nothing. But as soon as he is gone I slide into the driver's seat and motor off towards the writer's home.

No, it's not cricket. It's not rally driving either. But it is the bliss of solitude.

Sean Newsom

THE QUESTIONS

1 What is the name of the village?
2 What is the sportsman's surname?



THE PRIZE

The winner and guest will stay for two nights, B&B, at Cromlix, the five-star country house hotel owned by Kim and Andy Murray. Set in 34 acres of grounds and gardens near Dunblane, the hotel has just emerged from a top-to-bottom refit that celebrates its Scottish baronial interiors but adds a feisty sense of colour and style.

There are 15 bedrooms, and the winner and guest will stay in one of the Junior suites, as well as sit down to a three-course dinner for two (excluding drinks) at the new Glasshouse restaurant. Here the head chef Darin Campbell champions Scottish ingredients such as Perthshire strawberries, Loch Duart salmon and Puddledub pork from Fife. As you might expect the hotel also has a top-quality tennis court. For more see cromlix.com.

The prize must be taken between September 1 and November 30, 2024, subject to availability.

HOW TO ENTER

Answer the questions and complete the entry form at **thetimes.co.uk/travel/where-was-i** by the end of Thursday, July 18.
One entry per person.
Full terms and conditions apply, and your information will be used in accordance with our privacy policy at newsprivacy.co.uk.

LAST WEEK'S PRIZE

The answers are West Ham United and Eastbury. Archie Graham-Watson from London wins a Lake District break worth up to £1,540 at Langdale Chase.

Travel Comment

LETTE'S BE HONEST

Holiday plan will derail my strict diet



Kathy Lette on letting go while away with friends, and what to do when a partner prefers a lads' break



SIMON DANNHAUER/GETTY IMAGES

Dover beach on Barbados, a good island for a romantic long-haul trip

Q I'm quite strict with what I eat and usually only have one or two meals a day. However, friends have booked an all-inclusive hotel in Turkey for a weeklong trip and it looks like it will be terrible restaurants with fried foods and sweet cocktails, and they all want to eat dinner together at 7pm (I often don't eat dinner). I've mentioned my concerns but they think I'm being antisocial. How can we ensure group harmony?

A It's taken a lot of self-control and determination, but I've managed to give up dieting. My idea of a "balanced diet" is to have a slice of cake in one hand and a glass of champers in the other. But nothing makes me lose my appetite faster than a fervent dieter's monotonous mantras of kilo dissection and "clean eating" options.

Seated next to an Oxford don at a dinner party recently, I was so looking forward to his nourishing food for thought. What would we discuss first? Proustian philosophies or achieving world peace? Well, the big brainiac had some weighty issues in mind, as in … calorie intake. His entire conversation revolved around the paleo diet versus 5:2 intermittent fasting. This renowned intellectual spent more time chewing over the merits of each mouthful than actually masticating. As guests' eyes glazed over, I seriously considered impaling him on the end of his fork prongs.

There's nothing more exasperating than friends who take up dieting with evangelical zeal. Some of my girlfriends eschew carbs with the same fervour they'd avoid a plutonium-riddled Russian spy. The more they obsess about dieting, the less inclined I am to see them.

Holidays with friends are about going with the flow and fitting in. And if that means digging into fried food and downing a cocktail or ten, so be it. Surely, what comes out of a friend's mouth is much more important than what goes in?

> My top tip? Eat what you like then hit the dancefloor

Unless your dietary restrictions are medically motivated – allergies, heart disease, diabetes etc – why not shelve your anxieties for a week, along with your kale, quinoa, mung beans and microgreens? You're on vacation. Kick back. Have fun. My top holiday tip is to eat what you like, then hit the dancefloor to gyrate – I call it the disco diet.

One morning I woke having clocked up 12,000 steps on my Fitbit. I was confused at first. Had I been jogging in my sleep? Did I drink too much and athletically bonk the bartender up and down the beach? My sore tootsies then reminded me that I'd been bopping to Abba anthems until half past two.

So, if you're dieting for aesthetic reasons, take a chill pill. In fact, don't just forgo dieting for this holiday but for ever. I have a strong suspicion that if Mother Nature had wanted to see our skeletons, they'd be on the outside of our bodies.

If you really only want to eat two meals a day, why not skip breakfast and join your friends for lunch and dinner? And remember that, when holidaying, anything eaten when upgraded on a plane, nibbled from a cocktail stick at a pool party or licked off a lover's body is magically devoid of calories.

Having no appetite for food indicates no appetite for life. The dieting professor ended the night by nagging his very jolly wife to lose her "unsightly fat". I proposed that this could be achieved by simply divorcing her ego-bloated hubby. As they left I also suggested, sotto voce, that she surreptitiously turn up his bathroom scales by half a stone. And if caught, deny it all. There's only one thing a woman shouldn't eat: her words.

Q I've been with my boyfriend for four years, but we have never been away together for more than a night. However, he goes on lads' holidays several times a year, claiming this is normal. We visit his parents in Dorset regularly (we live in London) and he thinks that's a break because they own a farm in the countryside. How can I convince him to go away with me?

A If your relationship keeps boring this way you'll strike oil. Forget the farm and sow some wild oats. And don't try to "convince him". Simply book the holiday as a fait accompli. Choose somewhere romantic. If he refuses, then head off on a retaliatory ladettes' break. Or go alone. Solo travel for women has never been so easy or popular. With any luck you will then meet a man who is more adventurous and passionate. There are many more fish in the sea – especially when you're splashing about in the Caribbean, the Ionian or the Aegean.

MAKE IT HAPPEN

The best plan is to avoid Dorset and lads' holiday destinations – Prague and Amsterdam included – at all costs. Instead, going long haul will wow your boyfriend, wherever he's been before. For maximum romance on a minimum spend try the Caribbean. Prices are lower in hurricane season – from now to November – despite some islands rarely experiencing more than an afternoon rainstorm. Barbados has not been seriously impacted by a hurricane for decades and you can snag a week's stay in September from £995pp, including direct flights (tui.co.uk).

Do you need Kathy's help with a travel problem? Email us at travel@sunday-times.co.uk

SOMETHING TO DECLARE

If you pack one thing for your next holiday, make it this …



LIZ EDWARDS

I used to have a shameful secret. To the outside world, I was a seasoned traveller, more than happy to rack up air miles, passport stamps and fridge magnets. But deep down, I felt like a fraud — because I knew I was terrible at packing. I would take too much and the whole business would take hours.

But then I had a couple of revelations. First, I realised I was comfort packing — taking options so I could make informed decisions on the ground. Second, I twigged that the reason it was all taking so long wasn't because I was hopeless — it was because on some level I was enjoying the process. It was feeding into the anticipation that is key to extending the shelf life of joy any trip can offer.

As we all learnt in the pandemic, you don't have to actually be travelling to enjoy filling your head with it. So the casual observer might have assumed I was dithering between dress A and dress B but no, I was conjuring up possibilities; letting potential holiday scenarios play out in my head. Was there a dream outfit that would lend itself to smart lunch plus sightseeing plus beach time? It's good to have options but not at the expense of suitcase space for souvenirs. I wasn't paralysed by indecision but rather lost in remembrance of trips past and reminding myself what I had cursed myself for forgetting. I haven't been anywhere without at least one emergency jumper since backpacker-me pitched up in Darjeeling one chilly October in a T-shirt, fisherman's pants and Birkenstocks.

So packing clothes might tee up nostalgia, but the years have also taught me that certain items are a given. However curious I might feel about the culture and cuisine of my destination, for instance, I will still bring tea bags. I generally take Marmite — even iron constitutions can wobble and a small pot offers instant comfort. I'll also take a pack of cards, a sharp knife with a covered blade (in the hold, obvs) and a sarong to act as an inflight eye mask, pillow or scarf, then as a picnic blanket or cover-up.

But most importantly I will pack some Tupperware boxes. Maybe it's no coincidence that I only saw the light once I was a parent, because they're good for snacks — no more packets of the-crumbs-formerly-known-as-breadsticks in your bag. And they're handy for sandwiches should you, ahem, happen to make an extra one at breakfast buffet. My friend Anna swears by the reusable sandwich wraps made by Re-Wrap-It, and they do look brilliant (not least because they're eco and ethical, made in Kilmarnock Prison). But they won't be so useful as impromptu bowls, for transporting wet swimwear or for ferrying home what remains of the kilo of olives I accidentally buy at the village market.

Other friends have revealed their own must-packs. James suggests "tote bags for beach days or purchases that don't fit in the case coming home". Claire takes "carabiner clips to hook shoes, water bottles and hats on your bag so you can go hands-free". Alex once took a full-size fan to Crete — "I knew there wasn't any aircon. I left it for the reps."

But my star prize goes to Loo, who takes a multi-socket extension lead with added USB ports — and just one plug adapter. It's a device-charging, game-changing idea — and it's top of my packing list now.

What are your must-packs? Let us know in the comments online

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Tue 11 **Cape Town, South Africa**
Disembark and transfer to a 5★ hotel for your three night stay, including breakfast‡

Wed 12 - Thu 13 **Cape Town, South Africa**
★INCLUDED Big 5 Safari excursion×★
Enjoy a two-hour safari tour across the 10 000-ha reserve in an open air 4x4 discovering the Big Five. If luck is with you you'll be amazed by the majestic sight of the male Cape Barbary lion which is a rare find! From thereon you will encounter an endless variety of species, from the beautifully marked oryx to herds of zebras

Fri 14 **Cape Town, South Africa**
After breakfast, transfer to the airport for your overnight flight to London›

Sat 15 **Arrive in London**

*Your EXCLUSIVE COMPLIMENTARY Private UK Chauffeur Service will be waiting to transfer you home in style***

Dates not mentioned are spent relaxing at sea.

WHAT'S INCLUDED
IN YOUR EXCLUSIVE READER OFFERS LTD LAUNCH PROMOTION

LIMITED SUITES AVAILABLE AT THESE EXCLUSIVE FARES

- **INCLUDED** Business Class flights when you book a Superior Veranda Suite (SV) or above>>
- **EXCLUSIVE COMPLIMENTARY** Private UK Chauffeur Service, up to 100 miles each way, for all bookings**
- **THREE NIGHT** pre-cruise stay at a 5★ hotel in the Seychelles on a half board basis‡
- 15 nights all-inclusive cruising on board the ultra-luxurious ***Silver Dawn***, including:
  - **COMPLIMENTARY** shore excursions×
  - **INCLUDED** unlimited Wi-Fi++
  - Butler service for all suites
  - Premium drinks in-suite and throughout the ship++
  - All on board gratuities included
  - Spacious suites – over 80% with private veranda
  - **INCLUDED** in-suite dining, 24 hour room service and open seating dining in multiple restaurants
- **THREE NIGHT** post-cruise stay at a 5★ hotel in Cape Town, South Africa, including breakfast‡
- **FREE** safari game drive excursion×

Flights (regional and premium class flights may be available on request›) and overseas transfers

EARN EXCLUSIVE CRUISE MILES®
Worth up to **£399** towards your next cruise with Reader Offers Ltd††

YOUR EXCLUSIVE READER OFFERS LTD LAUNCH FARES

SUITE	GRADE	FULL FARE (PP)	NOW FARE (PP)
Vista Suite	VI	~~£8,599~~	**£6,999**
Classic Veranda	CV	~~£10,099~~	**£8,599**
Superior Veranda	SV	~~£15,499~~	**£13,499**
Deluxe Veranda	DX	~~£15,999~~	**£13,999**
Silver Suite	SL	~~£21,999~~	**£19,999**

ALL HIGHER SUITES HAVE SOLD OUT

Solo fares are available from **£12,699**

BOOK TODAY WITH JUST A DEPOSIT

WIN A CRUISE WORTH £5,000^^

Make a new booking with Reader Offers Ltd by 8pm 31st July 2024 to be in with a chance of winning a FREE cruise of your choice worth up to £5,000!

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TRAVEL WITH CONFIDENCE ABTA

CALL ONE OF OUR CRUISE SPECIALISTS **FREE** ON **0808 239 7876**
QUOTE OFFER REF **635921**

OPEN 7 DAYS 8:30AM – 8PM

Trustpilot July 2024

Platinum Trusted Service Award 2024 feefo

Fares are per person based on two adults sharing, may increase or be withdrawn at any time. Offer applies to new bookings only. Ports may require a tender. >>Business class flights are included for Superior Veranda Suites (SV) and above. ›Will incur supplementary costs and may require an additional overnight stay. Flights are subject to schedule changes and may be based on indirect services with flights arriving same day or overnight. Flights will be confirmed closer to departure which may affect your overall holiday duration and an additional overnight hotel stay may be required. **Chauffeur transfers are based on two adults sharing, up to 100 miles each way and mileage is tiered depending on grade booked. Additional mileage may be available at a supplement. ‡Star ratings are ROL Cruise classified. ++Subject to the cruise line's T&Cs. ±Savings are based on two adults sharing. ×Tours are subject to availability and change. ^^Further terms and conditions apply. Visit www/rolcruise.co.uk/win-a-cruise-terms-conditions. ††Cruise Miles® T&Cs apply. For full ROL Cruise T&Cs visit www.rolcruise.co.uk. E&OE.

BOOK WITH READER OFFERS LTD, THE UK'S NO.1 INDEPENDENT CRUISE SPECIALIST

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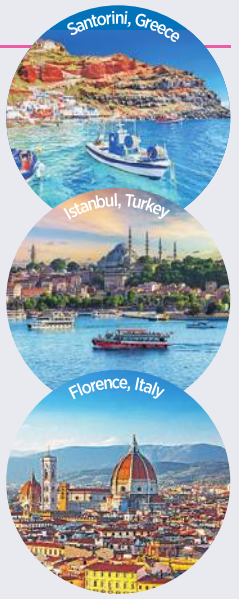


MAIDEN ITINERARY

THE ALL-INCLUSIVE NO-FLY
Greek Isles & Mediterranean Marvel

PRINCESS®

VOYAGE HIGHLIGHTS



Santorini, Greece

When you arrive by sea, there is no confusing the island of Santorini. Dazzling white houses cling to the edge of vertical, rocky cliffs against azure blue waters. Considered by many to be the site of the "Lost City of Atlantis", this magical little island glimmers from the fading sun as many watch its descent from the numerous bars at the water's edge.

Istanbul, Turkey

The capital of vanished empires, Istanbul is a true crossroad, the only city on Earth to span two continents. Browse the stalls of the world's largest bazaar, explore ancient mosques and churches, and gaze at the stunning jewels in the Topkapi Palace.

Florence, Italy

Visit Florence - home to the Duomo, the Uffizi and the Ponte Vecchio. Here the Medici fostered a city-state whose cultural legacy is as great as classical Athens. Giants like Dante, Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Galileo infused the West with a new creative spirit.

31 NIGHTS DEPARTING 13TH SEPTEMBER 2025

SEPTEMBER 2025

Sat 13	**Embark *Sky Princess*® and depart Southampton**
Mon 15	**Santiago de Compostela (from Vigo), Spain**
Wed 17	**Málaga, Spain**
Fri 19	**Barcelona, Spain**
Sun 21	**Florence/Pisa (from Livorno), Italy**
Mon 22	**Rome (from Civitavecchia), Italy**
Tue 23	**Pompeii/Capri (from Naples), Italy**
Fri 26 - Sat 27	**Istanbul, Turkey** (overnight - depart late night)
Mon 29	**Crete (from Heraklion), Greece**
Tue 30	**Rhodes, Greece**

OCTOBER 2025

Wed 1	**Kusadası (from Ephesus), Turkey**
Thu 2	**Santorini, Greece**
Fri 3	**Mykonos, Greece**
Sat 4	**Athens (from Piraeus), Greece**
Mon 6	**Valletta, Malta**
Tue 7	**Sicily (from Palermo), Italy**
Fri 10	**Seville (from Cádiz), Spain**
Sat 11	**Lisbon, Portugal**
Tue 14	**Arrive in Southampton**

Dates not mentioned will be spent relaxing at sea

YOUR EXCLUSIVE READER OFFERS LTD SALE FARES FROM

STATEROOM/SUITE	WAS FARE (PP)	NOW FARE (PP)
Interior	~~£5,449~~	£4,399
Ocean View	~~£6,899~~	£5,899
FREE UPGRADE TO A BALCONY STATEROOM^		
Deluxe Balcony	~~£7,049~~	£6,199
Mini-Suite	~~£8,549~~	£7,169
Suite	~~£12,699~~	£10,699
Sky Suite	~~£36,079~~	£25,199

Solo fares are available from only **£7,499**

WIN A CRUISE WORTH £5,000^^

Make a new booking with Reader Offers Ltd by 8pm 31st July 2024 to be in with a chance of winning a FREE cruise of your choice worth up to £5,000!

WHAT'S INCLUDED
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DRINKS, GRATUITIES & WI-FI INCLUDED++

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FREE OCEAN VIEW TO BALCONY UPGRADE^

FREE ON BOARD SPEND OF UP TO $500*

All-inclusive no-fly premium cruising on board ***Sky Princess***® including:

- Drinks package, gratuities & unlimited Wi-Fi included for all bookings++
  - Main Dining Rooms for both Anytime Dining and Traditional Dining
  - **COMPLIMENTARY** dining options including Dine My Way, 24-hour buffet, 24-hour international café, poolside grill, ice cream bar, pizzeria and afternoon tea
  - **VARIETY** of bars including Vines Bar and Good Spirits at sea
  - Movie under the Stars® at the poolside theatre
- **PLUS**, book a Balcony or above by 8pm 18th July 2024 to receive an **EXCLUSIVE FREE** Duo of Wine Gift with our compliments+

EXCLUSIVE CRUISE MILES®

Earn up to **50,398** Cruise Miles®, worth **£503**, when booking this incredible voyage, only with Reader Offers Ltd††

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Agent to ATOL Holder Princess Cruises 6294
ABTA ABTA No F9255

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QUOTE OFFER REF **635920**

OPEN 7 DAYS 8:30AM – 8PM

Trustpilot July 2024

Platinum Trusted Service Award 2024 feefo

Fares are per person based on two adults sharing, except single staterooms and may increase or be withdrawn at any time. Offer applies to new bookings only. Ports may require a tender. Best price guarantee is valid only at the time of booking, for new bookings only. ±Savings are based on two adults sharing a Sky Suite. *On board credit is based per stateroom. +Duo of Wine Gift is based on one per booking, for UK addresses only. ^^ Further terms and conditions apply visit www.rolcruise.co.uk/win-a-cruise-terms-conditions. ++Subject to the cruise line's T&Cs. ^Subject to availability. ††Cruise Miles® T&Cs apply. Princess T&Cs apply. E&OE.

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ABTA ABTA No.Y6300
Fully protected · Amazing value · Exceptional service and expertise
Trustpilot Excellent
TIMES Travel Offers

30 NIGHTS
FROM ONLY
£2,499PP



Luxury Cunard Voyage from Southampton to South America with Rio Discovery

30 NIGHTS | JANUARY 9, 2025

SAVE UP TO £1,700 PER COUPLE*

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHTS AND HOTEL STAY

During a Cunard cruise from Southampton to Rio de Janeiro, explore Florida and the sun-drenched Caribbean before enjoying a two-night city break in Rio.

Your journey on board Queen Victoria encompasses the scenic Azores, Port Canaveral, and the sunny beaches of Fort Lauderdale. Explore the idyllic Turks and Caicos Islands, and the history of Barbados before tracing the Brazilian coast from Fortaleza to Salvador and Armação dos Búzios. Revel in the legendary Cunard service and refinement, enjoying gourmet dining, gala evenings in the grand ballroom, and quality entertainment.

Upon reaching Rio de Janeiro, disembark to enjoy a two-night hotel stay. The vibrant neighbourhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema beckon with their lively atmosphere and inviting shores. Here you'll also find the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue, standing tall against a backdrop of golden beaches and verdant mountains.





Queen Victoria

From her elegantly decorated public rooms and opulent lounge venues to her gourmet fine dining and luxurious, spacious cabins, Cunard's illustrious vessel exudes class with the splendour evocative of great cruise liners past.

Your holiday includes

Full-Board Cruise

- 28 night full-board cruise on board Queen Victoria
- **Visiting:** Southampton, Praia da Vitória, Port Canaveral, Fort Lauderdale, Grand Turk Island, Bridgetown, Fortaleza, Salvador de Bahia, Armação dos Búzios, Rio de Janeiro (overnight in port)
- Enjoy sleek musical shows in the Royal Court Theatre
- Waltz the night away in the Queens Room at a themed ball
- Choose from four main gourmet restaurants on board

Complimentary Hotel Stay

- Two-night four-star hotel stay in Rio de Janeiro at the Hilton Copacabana with breakfast

Complimentary Flights and Transfers

- London departure



Explore
Rio de Janeiro

Experience the infectious energy of Rio during a two-night hotel stay. Stroll the sands of Ipanema Beach and gaze out upon Two Brothers Mountain.

Stop for cocktails in the Copacabana Palace hotel, whose past guests have included everyone from Princess Diana to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Ride the tram through Santa Teresa, a lively hilltop neighbourhood where colourful home peek out from jungle foliage.

INSIDE FROM	OCEANVIEW FROM	BALCONY FROM	GRILL SUITE FROM
£2,499PP	£2,999PP	£3,699PP	£10,499PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: AME7827

*Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing, booking directly with Imagine Cruising.

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Ultimate South America Cunard Voyage with Machu Picchu and Iguazu Falls

37 NIGHTS | JANUARY 27, 2025 | PRICES FROM £6,999PP

INCLUDES TOURS OF RIO DE JANEIRO AND IGUAZU FALLS

LAST FIVE CABINS REMAINING

COMPLIMENTARY PALOMINO ISLANDS TOUR

Embrace awe-inspiring South America on a Cunard voyage, paired with unforgettable tours of Iguazu Falls and Machu Picchu.

Your holiday begins with a two-night hotel stay in Buenos Aires, followed by a tour of the misty Iguazu Falls in Argentina. You'll explore its Argentinian and Brazilian sides before flying to Rio de Janeiro for a four-night stay including a backstage look at the preparations for the Rio Carnival.

You'll then embark Queen Victoria for your captivating voyage, calling at Buenos Aires, Puerto Madryn, and Ushuaia, along with a cruise around the striking glaciers of the Chilean Fjords. Disembark in San Antonio and spend two nights in Lima, including a tour of the Palomino Islands, before flying to Cusco for fully escorted tours of the spellbinding Sacred Valley and Machu Picchu. Your adventure concludes in Santiago, where you'll enjoy a one-night hotel stay before flying home.





Queen Victoria

From her elegantly decorated public rooms and opulent lounge venues to her gourmet fine dining and luxurious, spacious cabins, Cunard's illustrious vessel exudes class with the splendour evocative of great cruise liners past.

Your holiday includes

Full-Board Cruise

- 19 night full-board cruise on board Queen Victoria
- **Visiting:** Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, Buenos Aires^, Puerto Madryn, Ushuaia, Cape Horn+, Punta Arenas, Amalia Glacier+, PIO X Glacier, Puerto Montt, Santiago

Fully Escorted Tours

- Walking tour of Iguazu Falls including both the Brazilian and Argentinian sides of the falls
- Christ the Redeemer, City of Samba, Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu and Cusco
- **Complimentary** Palomino Islands tour

Hotel Stays

- Four-star hotel stay in Buenos Aires, Iguazu, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Cusco and Santiago
- Two-night five-star stay in Sacred Valley at the Aranwa Sacred Valley Hotel and Wellness
- All hotel stays include breakfast

All Flights and Transfers

- London departure – regional flights available
- Overnight flights



Explore

Iguazu Falls

Marvel at the world's largest waterfall system, Iguazu Falls. Bordered by lush vegetation, looped with walking trails and with 275 waterfalls stretching over a mile and a half and spanning two countries - Iguazu Falls is a true spectacle.

Experience this extraordinary display of nature during a fully escorted tour exploring the Argentinian and Brazilian sides through a network of accessible catwalks - the perfect complement to your South American cruise.

INSIDE FROM	OCEANVIEW FROM	BALCONY FROM	GRILL SUITE FROM
£6,999PP	£7,499PP	£8,499PP	£13,499PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: AME7833

^Overnight in port. +Scenic cruising.

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Luxury All-Inclusive Eastern Mediterranean Silversea Voyage and Crete Escape

13 NIGHTS | MAY - OCT, 2025 | PRICES FROM £4,699PP+

COMPLIMENTARY FIVE-STAR ALL-INCLUSIVE HOTEL STAY IN CRETE

JUST LAUNCHED FOR 2025

Embark on an unparalleled journey through the Greek islands on board the all-inclusive *Silver Whisper*, beginning with a five-star all-inclusive escape in Crete.

Embrace a five-star, all-inclusive beach escape at the Grecotel LUXME White Palace, Crete. Immerse yourself in luxury, unwind on pristine beaches, and relish an array of incredible dining experiences. Discover the island's sun-kissed charms before flying to Athens for a one-night hotel stay ahead of your cruise.

In Athens, embark *Silver Whisper*, a vessel renowned for its opulence and all-inclusive amenities, and acquaint yourself with Silversea's white-glove butler service and stunning facilities. Marvel at the beautiful architecture of Nafplion, the cliffside vistas of Santorini, and explore the historic ruins of Kuşadası. Explore the charms of Patmos, embrace the laidback culture of Aghios Nikolaos, and marvel at Syros's beautiful architecture.





Silver Whisper

Opulent yet intimate, the elegant *Silver Whisper* sports a relaxing, sophisticated, and genuinely elegant atmosphere. With all the amenities of a grand resort and the charm of a boutique hotel, *Silver Whisper* offers something for every passenger.

Your holiday includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

- Seven-night all-inclusive luxury cruise on board *Silver Whisper*
- **Visiting+:** Athens, Nafplion, Santorini, Kuşadası, Patmos, Agios Nikolaos, Syros, Athens
- **Complimentary premium shore excursions included at every port***
- All-inclusive beverages including fine wines, beers and premium spirits

Complimentary Luxury Hotel Stays

- Five-night five-star all-inclusive hotel stay in Crete at the Grecotel LUXME White Palace, Crete
- One-night five-star stay in Athens at the NJV Athens Plaza Hotel with breakfast

Complimentary Flights and Transfers

- London departure – regional flights available



Discover

Athens

Uncover the captivating allure of ancient Athens, a city drenched in history and overflowing with cultural treasures.

While here, embark on a journey of discovery as you encounter awe-inspiring historic wonders such as the legendary Acropolis, home to the majestic Parthenon, and immerse yourself in the birthplace of democracy. Wander through the lively streets of Plaka, adorned with quaint shops and charming tavernas, savouring the tantalising flavours of Greek cuisine.

VISTA SUITE FROM+	CLASSIC VERANDA SUITE FROM+	SUPERIOR VERANDA SUITE FROM+	DELUXE VERANDA SUITE FROM+
£4,699PP	£5,699PP	£5,999PP	£6,199PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: MED7878

*Offer includes one excursion per guest, per port/day. Additional excursions available at an extra charge. +Prices, ship and itinerary based on October 11, 2025 departure date.

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TEN NIGHTS
FROM ONLY
£999PP



Marvels of Malta and Wonders of the Eastern Mediterranean

TEN NIGHTS | MARCH 24, 2025

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHTS

COMPLIMENTARY THREE-NIGHT HOTEL STAY IN MALTA

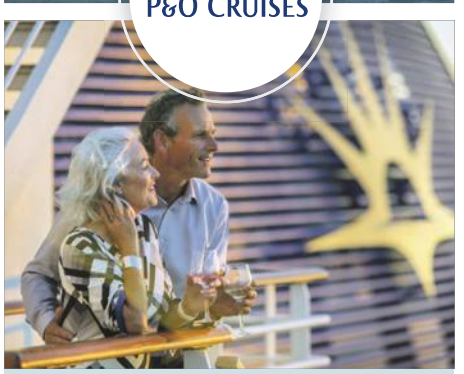
AMAZING VALUE!

Fly to Valletta for a three-night hotel stay in Malta ahead of a seven-night cruise of the Greek islands on board P&O Cruises' Azura

Your holiday begins with a three-night hotel stay in Malta, a tiny island nation nestled in the Mediterranean. Ringed by dramatic sea cliffs and gentle bays, Malta's coast is the perfect destination to soak up the sun, dive into glistening water, and let your cares wash away. Explore the Unesco-listed capital, Valletta, before joining P&O Cruises' Azura for a seven-night cruise of the Greek islands on board P&O Cruises' Azura.

On board, discover an incredible selection of restaurants and spa facilities, as well as enthralling entertainment. Uncover the treasures of Greece as you cruise into port in Piraeus, near ancient Athens, heavenly Heraklion in Crete, and Souda Bay, the jumping-off point to explore Chania's Venetian Old Town, before disembarking back in Valletta.





Azura

The elegant Azura is one of the largest cruise ships in P&O Cruises' fleet. This vessel boasts a wealth of exciting features, with three theatres and lounges and four swimming pools.

Your holiday includes

Full-Board Cruise

- Seven-night full-board cruise on board Azura
- **Visiting:** Valletta (overnight in port), Athens, Heraklion, Souda Bay, Valletta
- There's never a dull moment on Azura. From morning to night, you'll find excitement at every turn, from cabaret shows and glamorous dance lessons to movies on the SeaScreen and a lively sports court
- Choose from South American and Stateside cuisines at The Beach House, stone-baked pizzas by the pool and authentic India at Sindhu

Complimentary Hotel Stay

- Three-night four-star hotel stay in Malta at the Best Western Premier Malta with breakfast

Complimentary Flights and Transfers

- London departure - regional flights available



Discover
Athens

Uncover the captivating allure of ancient Athens, a city drenched in history and overflowing with cultural treasures.

While here, embark on a journey of discovery as you encounter awe-inspiring historic wonders such as the legendary Acropolis, home to the majestic Parthenon, and immerse yourself in the birthplace of democracy. Wander through the lively streets of Plaka, adorned with quaint shops and charming tavernas, savouring the tantalising flavours of Greek cuisine.

INSIDE FROM	SEA VIEW FROM	BALCONY FROM	SUITE FROM
£999PP	£1,099PP	£1,299PP	£2,499PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: MED7895

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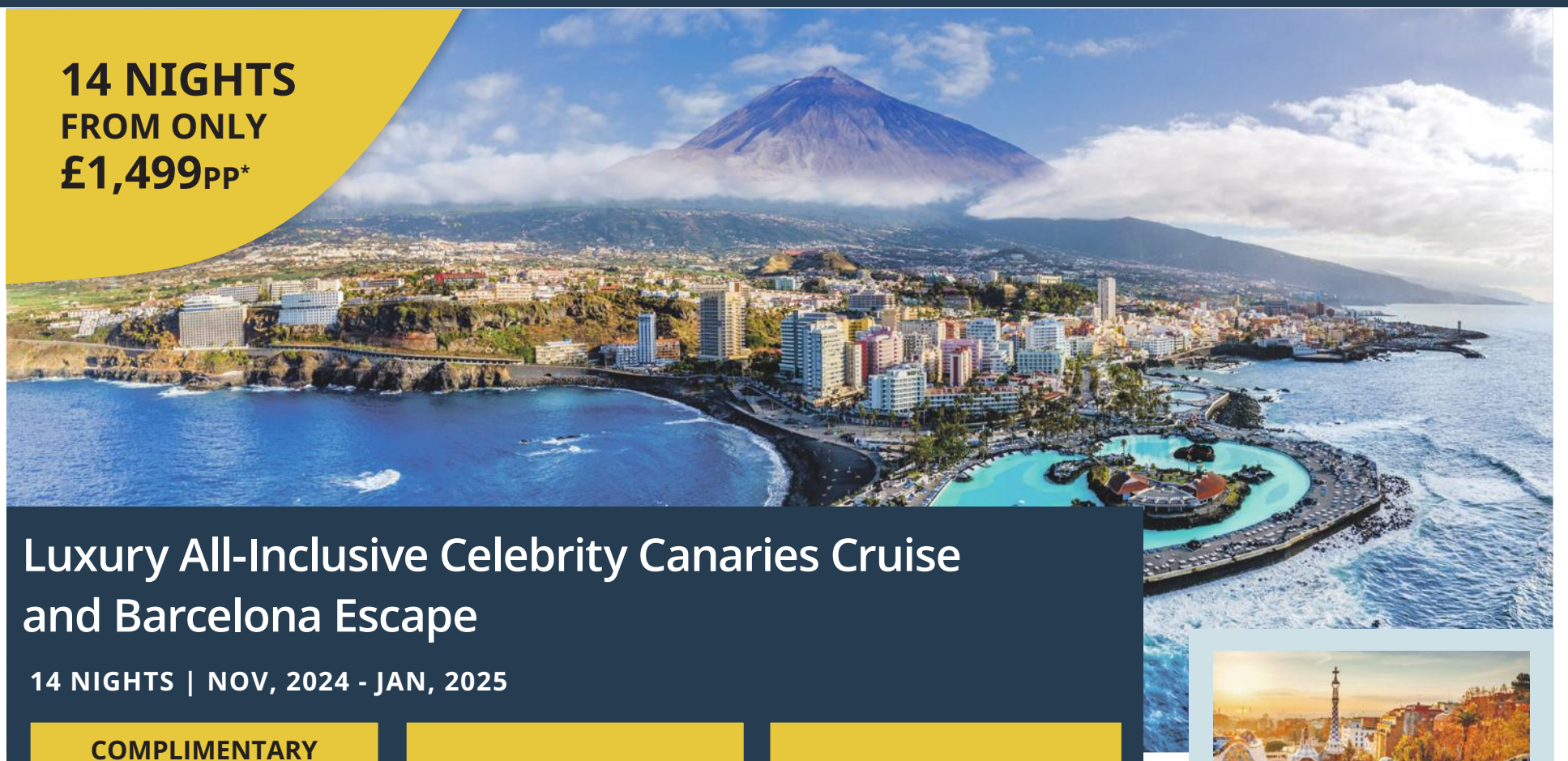
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14 NIGHTS
FROM ONLY
£1,499PP*



Luxury All-Inclusive Celebrity Canaries Cruise and Barcelona Escape

14 NIGHTS | NOV, 2024 - JAN, 2025

COMPLIMENTARY CLASSIC DRINKS PACKAGE AND WI-FI

AMAZING VALUE!

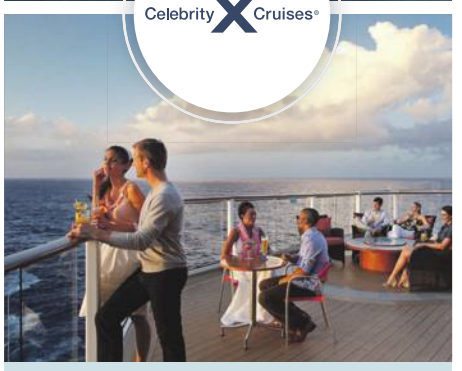
SAVER FARE OFFER

Experience the vibrant beach culture of Barcelona during a two-night hotel stay followed by a 12-night luxury cruise on board Celebrity Infinity®.

Brimming with architectural marvels, tantalising tapas bars and beautiful beaches, Barcelona offers a feast for the sentences. Take it all in during a two-night hotel stay before embarking the stunning Celebrity Infinity® to set sail on a voyage of Spain, Morocco and the Canary Islands. Settle into your luxurious stateroom or suite and get acquainted with your ship's array of restaurants, spacious sun decks and superb levels of service.

In the Canaries, explore the pristine beaches, volcanic landscapes and tranquil towns of Lanzarote, Las Palmas and Tenerife. Cruise to Casablanca and Tangier, gateway to North Africa, and unravel Morocco's bohemian allure. Marvel at Seville's magnificent architecture and embrace Málaga's Mediterranean charms.





Celebrity Infinity®

One of Celebrity's four Millennium-class vessels, on board Celebrity Infinity® you'll certainly be going to infinity and beyond as you cruise the world in unsurpassed comfort, luxury, and style.

Your Saver Fare Includes

All-Inclusive Luxury Cruise

- 12 night all-inclusive cruise on board Celebrity Infinity®
- **Visiting***: Barcelona, Lanzarote, Las Palmas, Tenerife, Casablanca, Tangier, Cádiz, Málaga, Barcelona
- **Complimentary Classic Drinks Package and Wi-Fi**

Complimentary Hotel Stay

- Two-night four-star hotel stay in Barcelona at the H10 Ítaca with breakfast

All Flights

- London departure – regional flights available

Transfers

- Transfers **not included** but can be added on at the time of booking



Discover Barcelona

During a two-night hotel stay in Barcelona, discover a city that seamlessly blends history, art, and Mediterranean charm. Marvel at world-famous architectural masterpieces such as the Sagrada Familia and Park Güell, created by artistic visionary Antoni Gaudí.

Lose yourself in the bustling streets of Las Ramblas, lined with lively markets and street performers. Immerse yourself in the city's rich culture, savouring delicious tapas and exploring the Gothic Quarter's tempting narrow alleys.

INSIDE FROM*	OCEAN VIEW FROM*	VERANDA FROM*	CONCIERGE CLASS FROM*
£1,499PP	£1,799PP	£2,199PP	£2,499PP

Saver Fares Transfers available at an additional cost. **Call our Holiday Experts for details**

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: MED7882

*Prices and itinerary shown are based on December 7, 2024 departure date.

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Luxury All-Inclusive Alaskan Silversea Voyage and Canadian Rockies Discovery

13 NIGHTS | MAY 3, 2025 | PRICES FROM £3,999PP

COMPLIMENTARY FIVE-NIGHT CANADIAN ROCKIES TOUR

LIMITED TO ONLY 40 GUESTS

COMPLIMENTARY PREMIUM SHORE EXCURSIONS*

Experience majestic peaks, turquoise lakes, and magnificent wildlife as you explore the beauty of Canada and relish an Alaska cruise on board *Silver Moon*.

Discover the phenomenal beauty of the Canadian Rockies during a five-night tour that moves from vibrant modern cities to rugged landscapes and wild national parks. Revel in the energy of Calgary, embrace the scenic marvels of Banff and Jasper national parks, and savour a night in Sun Peaks followed by an unforgettable winery tour.

Following a night in Vancouver, you'll embark *Silver Moon* for your seven-night cruise through the icy wildernesses of Alaska. Experience a daylight scenic cruise past the glaciers of Inside Passage. Explore the tranquil fishing communities of Ketchikan, Skagway and Sitka. Cruise past the mighty Hubbard Glacier then immerse yourself in the friendly spirit of Seward.





Silver Moon

With sleek lines and impeccable taste, Silversea's *Silver Moon* made her debut in August 2020. Built by cruise lovers, for cruise lovers, this vessel is the epitome of 21st-century luxury travel.

Your holiday includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

- Seven-night all-inclusive luxury cruise on board *Silver Moon*
- **Visiting**: Vancouver, Inside Passage+, Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, Sitka, Hubbard Glacier+, Seward
- **Complimentary premium shore excursions included at every port***

Complimentary Hotel Stays

- One-night four-star hotel stays in Calgary and Sun Peaks
- Two-night hotel stay in Banff
- One-night five-star stay in Vancouver

Complimentary Fully Escorted Tours

- Calgary Sightseeing, Banff National Park including Banff Gondola, Lake Louise, Jasper National Park and Wine Tasting tour

All Flights and Transfers

- London departure – regional flights available
- Overnight flight



Explore Calgary

In Calgary, nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, modern living harmoniously coexists with the rugged spirit of the West.

The 190-metre tall Calgary Tower provides panoramic views of the city and surrounding mountains. History buffs can explore Heritage Park, a living museum that showcases life from the 1880s to the 1950s. For a dose of nature, escape to Prince's Island Park, an urban oasis offering walking and biking paths.

VISTA SUITE FROM	CLASSIC VERANDA SUITE FROM	SUPERIOR VERANDA SUITE FROM	DELUXE VERANDA SUITE FROM
£3,999PP	£4,699PP	£4,999PP	£5,299PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: AME7892

*Offer includes one excursion per guest, per port/day. Additional excursions available at an extra charge. +Scenic cruising.

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No-Fly Luxury Cunard Voyage, Italian Lakes and All-Inclusive Venice Simplon-Orient-Express

19 NIGHTS | MAY 4, 2025 | PRICES FROM £6,499PP

COMPLIMENTARY OCEANVIEW TO BALCONY UPGRADE

COMPLIMENTARY EIGHT-NIGHT ITALIAN LAKES ESCAPE

COMPLIMENTARY RAIL JOURNEY ON BOARD THE CENTOVALLI RAILWAY

Cruise the Mediterranean on Cunard's Queen Victoria ahead of a city stay in Florence, seven nights in the Italian Lakes, and the iconic Venice Simplon-Orient-Express journey to Paris.

In Southampton, embark Cunard's Queen Victoria for a Mediterranean cruise to Italy's Civitavecchia. Experience the Andalusian charm of Seville. Admire Granada, home to the magnificent Alhambra Palace, and walk cobblestone streets of Palma de Mallorca.

Arriving in Italy, you'll enjoy a two-night hotel stay in Florence before transferring to the Italian Lakes for seven nights on the shores of Lake Maggiore and Lake Garda. Wander through lush botanical gardens, explore lakeside palaces, and glide through the Alps on board the Centovalli Railway. Next, your carriage awaits on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, which will transport you overnight to Paris in Art Deco-era glamour.





Queen Victoria

From her elegantly decorated public rooms and opulent lounge venues to her gourmet fine dining and luxurious, spacious cabins, Cunard's illustrious vessel exudes class with the splendour evocative of great cruise liners past.

Your holiday includes

Full-Board Cruise

- Eight-night full-board cruise on board Queen Victoria
- **Visiting**: Southampton, Cádiz, Málaga, Palma de Mallorca, Civitavecchia
- **Complimentary Oceanview to Balcony upgrade**

Complimentary Rail Journey

- Two-day all-inclusive* luxury Venice Simplon-Orient-Express train journey from Verona to Paris

Fully Escorted Tours

- Florence Guided Walking Tour
- **Complimentary** Centovalli Railway Journey and Lake Como Tour

Hotel Stays

- Two-night four-star stay in Florence at the Gallery Hotel Art
- Complimentary four-night four-star stays in Lake Maggiore and Lake Garda
- All hotel stays include breakfast

All Transfers



Relax on Board

The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express

The legendary Venice Simplon-Orient-Express is a work of art. Harking back to a more elegant age of travel, journey through the countryside in original 1920s carriages, featuring Lalique glass panels, wood marquetry and wood burning stoves.

Dine in the sumptuous restaurant car on a menu of delectable cuisine, then return to your comfortable compartment to discover that your private lounge has been effortlessly converted into a bedroom.

INSIDE FROM	OCEANVIEW FROM	BALCONY FROM	GRILL SUITE FROM
£6,499PP	£7,499PP	£7,499PP	£8,999PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: MED7894

*Some Premium brand drinks will be excluded

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IMAGINE® CRUISING
MORE THAN JUST A CRUISE.

20 nights from
£2,999
per person

Luxury All-Inclusive Celebrity Southeast Asia Voyage And Exclusive Singapore Event

20 nights | February 24, 2025

Highlights:

Singapore | Ko Samui | Bangkok* | Phú My | Nha Trang | Chan May | Ha Long Bay* | John Cleese | Celebrity Solstice® | Raffles hotel Singapore



Complimentary Inside to Veranda upgrade

Exclusive event with comic legend John Cleese

What's Included:

All-Inclusive Cruise

13 night all-inclusive cruise on board Celebrity Solstice®

*Overnight in port in Bangkok and Hanoi

Classic Drinks package and Wi-Fi

Hotel Stay with Breakfast

Five-night four-star hotel stay in Singapore at the Oasia Hotel Novena with breakfast

Exclusive Event

Exclusive event "Audience with..." style interview with comic legend John Cleese at the Raffles Singapore

All Flights and Transfers

London departure - regional flights available
Overnight flights

SG singapore
Passion Made Possible

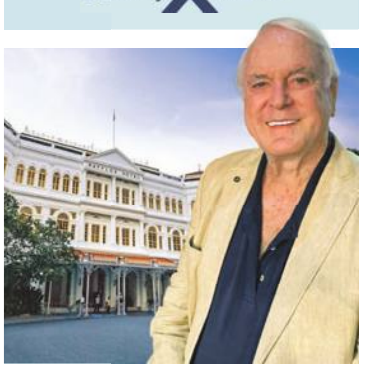
Prices

Prices per person from

Inside	£2,999
Ocean View	£2,999
Veranda	£2,999

Online Cruise Code **ASA8245**

Celebrity Cruises®



Out of this world holiday.

Few names in comedy resonate like John Cleese. A titan of British humour, Cleese's career spans decades, leaving an indelible mark on television, film, and the stage. Enjoy an exclusive evening with Cleese at the historic Raffles Singapore hotel, featuring a live chat and Q&A session.

An evening with John Cleese is just the start of what this sensational, 20-night holiday has to offer. Set sail on the Celebrity Solstice®, and embrace a hotel stay in Singapore on this one-of-a-kind experience!

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All-Inclusive Silversea Canaries Voyage and Gran Canaria Escape

10 - 12 NIGHTS | OCTOBER, 2024 | PRICES FROM £3,299PP^

COMPLIMENTARY ALL-INCLUSIVE HOTEL STAY IN GRAN CANARIA

EXCLUSIVE TO IMAGINE CRUISING

LIMITED TO 40 GUESTS

Chase the sun this winter with a three-night stay in Gran Canaria, followed by a sun-soaked Canary Island voyage on board Silversea's decadent *Silver Moon*.

With their lunar landscapes, towering volcanoes, beautiful beaches and year-round sunshine, it's no wonder that the Canary Islands have cast a spell on so many of us. Your holiday begins as you fly to Gran Canaria for a five-star, all-inclusive hotel stay.

The luxurious *Silver Moon* awaits to deliver you to some of the Canary Island's most charming islands; discover castles, caves and apricot beaches in Lanzarote, explore the spectacular scenery of Mount Teide national park from Santa Cruz de Tenerife and relax upon the miles of beautiful beaches in Fuerteventura. You'll make a final stop amidst the spice markets of Morocco before cruising on to Lisbon where your holiday draws to a close.





Silver Moon

With sleek lines and impeccable taste, Silversea's *Silver Moon* made her debut in August 2020. Built by cruise lovers, for cruise lovers, this vessel is the epitome of 21st-century luxury travel.

Your holiday includes

All-Inclusive Luxury Cruise

- Seven-night all-inclusive luxury cruise on board *Silver Moon*
- **Visiting**^: Gran Canaria, Arrecife, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Puerto del Rosario, Tangier, Lisbon
- **Complimentary premium shore excursions included at every port***
- Pre-paid gratuities and complimentary Wi-Fi on board
- In-suite butler service and fully stocked fridge for all suites
- All-inclusive beverages including fine wines, beers and premium spirits

Complimentary Luxury Hotel Stay

- Three-night five-star all-inclusive hotel stay in Gran Canaria at the H10 Playa Meloneras Palace

All Flights and Transfers

- London departure – regional flights available



Discover

Tenerife

With its blend of natural beauty, rich history, and warm hospitality, Tenerife is a destination that will leave an indelible mark on your heart. This island gem boasts stunning beaches, from golden stretches to dramatic black volcanic shores.

Explore the majestic Teide National Park, home to Spain's highest peak, Mount Teide, offering breathtaking vistas and unique flora and fauna. Immerse yourself in the lively atmosphere of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the island's capital, where charming streets, bustling markets, and lively festivals await.

VISTA SUITE FROM^	CLASSIC VERANDA SUITE FROM^	SUPERIOR VERANDA SUITE FROM^	DELUXE VERANDA SUITE FROM^
£3,299PP	£3,999PP	£4,199PP	£4,399PP

ONLINE CRUISE CODE: MED7994

*Offer includes one excursion per guest, per port/day. Additional excursions available at an extra charge. ^Prices, duration and itinerary shown based on October 23, 2024 departure date.

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RIVER CRUISE SALE

AUG - DEC 2024

NOW FROM £1,599PP INCLUDING ALL GRATUITIES



SAVE UP TO £7,310 PER COUPLE*

Romantic Danube

SEVEN NIGHTS | AUG - DEC, 2024

Your holiday includes

Full-Board River Cruise

- Seven-night full-board Danube river cruise
- **Visiting:** Vilshofen an der Donau, Passau, Linz, Dürnstein, Weißenkirchen in der Wachau, Vienna^, Bratislava, Budapest^
- Including complimentary unlimited wine, beer and soft drinks during lunch and dinner, sparkling wine and fresh-squeezed juices during breakfast

Included Excursions

- Vilshofen Exclusive Oktoberfest Celebration, Passau City of Three Rivers walking tour, full-day Salzburg excursion, Dürnstein walking tour and Melk Benedictine Abbey, Weissenkirchen Evening Wine tasting at local winery, Imperial Vienna tour, Bratislava Coronation City walking tour, Buda city tour and Pest city tour
- Other optional tours are available

All Flights and Transfers

- London departure - regional flights available

RIVERVIEW FROM	FRENCH BALCONY FROM
£1,599PP	£1,999PP

Prices and itinerary shown based on November 18, 2024 departure.

ONLINE HOLIDAY CODE: RVR2225



SAVE UP TO £6,930 PER COUPLE*

Taste of Bordeaux

SEVEN NIGHTS | AUG - OCT, 2024

Your holiday includes

Full-Board River Cruise

- Seven-night full-board river cruise
- **Visiting:** Bordeaux^, Libourne^, Blaye^, Bourg-Sur-Gironde^, Cussac-Fort-Médoc^, Cadillac, Bordeaux^
- Including complimentary unlimited wine, beer and soft drinks during lunch and dinner, sparkling wine and fresh-squeezed juices during breakfast

Included Excursions

- Saint-Émilion excursion and Grand Cru Classé wine tasting, Bastide town and market visit, Blaye citadel visit, Blaye to Bourg bike tour, Exclusive Bourg wine festival, Medoc Grand Cru Classé wine tasting and scenic vineyard tour, Margaux Vineyard hike and local specialties tasting, Roquetaillade Castle with Sauternes wine tasting, Bordeaux Unesco city tour, market tasting and Bordeaux Cité du Vin (wine museum) visit
- Other optional tours are available

All Flights and Transfers

- London departure - regional flights available

RIVERVIEW FROM	FRENCH BALCONY FROM
£1,599PP	£1,999PP

Prices and itinerary shown based on October 31, 2024 departure.

ONLINE HOLIDAY CODE: RVR2223



SAVE UP TO £6,780 PER COUPLE*

Paris and Normandy

SEVEN NIGHTS | AUG - NOV, 2024

Your holiday includes

Full-Board River Cruise

- Seven-night full-board river cruise
- **Visiting:** Paris, Les Andelys, Rouen, Le Havre^, Caudebec-en-Caux, Rouen^, Vernon, Paris^
- Including complimentary unlimited wine, beer and soft drinks during lunch and dinner, sparkling wine and fresh-squeezed juices during breakfast

Included Excursions

- Château Gaillard, Honfleur excursion, Le Havre city tour, Normandy US Landing Beaches, Seine Museum, Medieval Rouen walking tour, Bonnemare Castle visit, Monet's home and gardens in Giverny+, Artist's walk of Auvers-sur-Oise and Bateaux Parisiens
- Other optional tours included

All Flights and Transfers

- London departure - regional flights available

RIVERVIEW FROM	FRENCH BALCONY FROM
£1,599PP	£1,999PP

Prices and itinerary shown based on August 31, 2024 departure. +If unavailable, an alternative tour will be offered.

ONLINE HOLIDAY CODE: RVR2226

Itinerary and ship may vary depending on departure date. Ship image is for illustrative purposes only. Regional flights available at a supplement. *Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing a French Balcony, booking directly with Imagine Holidays. ^Overnight in port.

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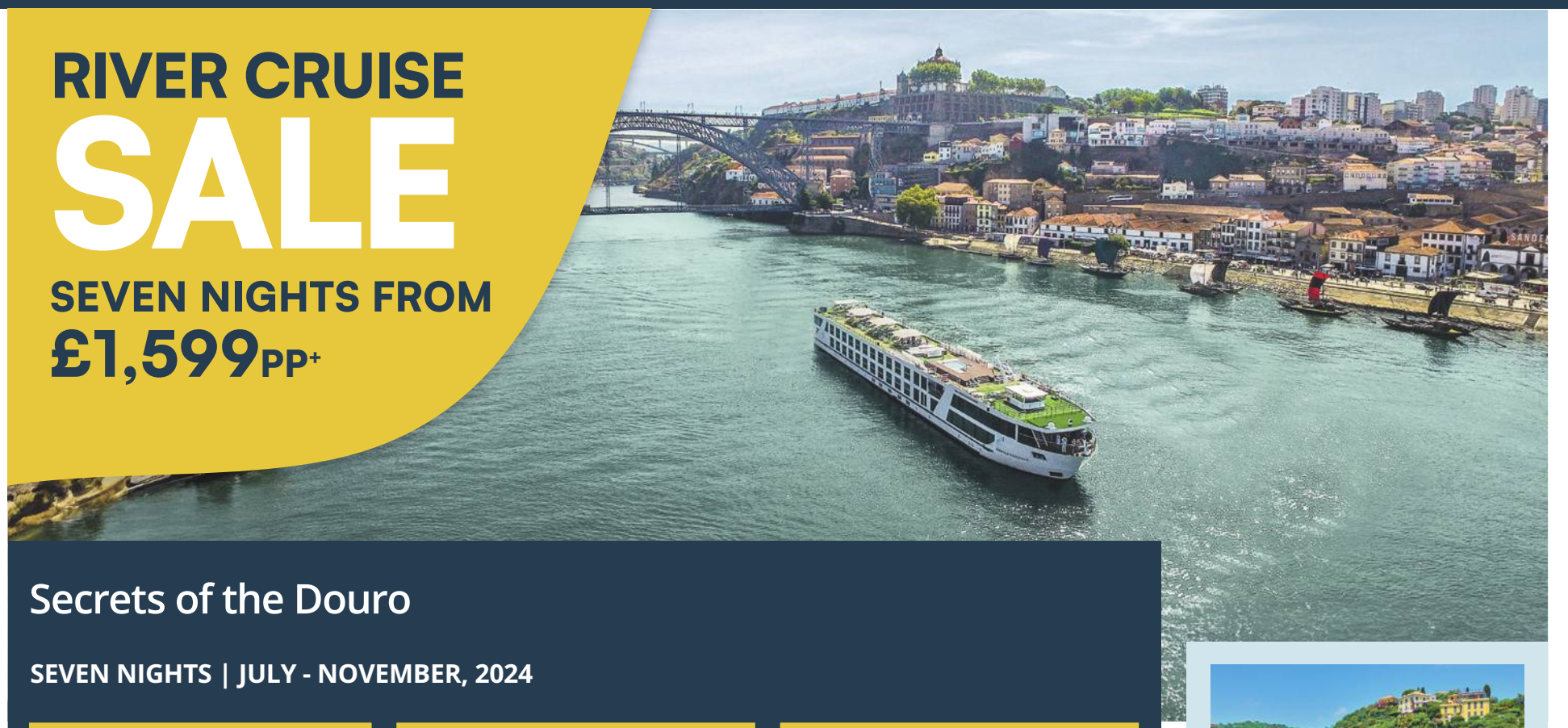
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RIVER CRUISE SALE

SEVEN NIGHTS FROM £1,599PP+



Secrets of the Douro

SEVEN NIGHTS | JULY - NOVEMBER, 2024

EXCLUSIVE SALE!

UPGRADE TO EMERALD PANORAMA BALCONY FROM £1,949PP

PREMIUM DRINKS PACKAGE FROM £99PP

Where Portugal and Spain converge, the Douro promises an enchanting journey to terraced vineyards, charming towns, and historic cities.

Your cruise begins in Porto, Portugal's second city. Explore the historic Ribeira district, a Unesco World Heritage site, and sip world-famous Port wine in a traditional cellar. Next, cruise to Pinhão, a charming village nestled amidst terraced vineyards. In Vega de Terrón, delve into Spanish history with a visit to the medieval village and its imposing castle.

Salamanca, a Unesco gem in Spain, awaits with its sandstone architecture and lively university atmosphere. With inclusive shore excursions at every port, you could hike through the scenery of Douro Valley or explore a winery to learn the history of Port wine and indulge in a delicious tasting. With its intimate atmosphere and all-inclusive dining, Emerald Radiance promises unforgettable sailing.





Emerald Radiance*

From culinary experiences to live entertainment, Emerald Radiance ensures a premium river cruise experience. Her 56 spacious staterooms are equipped with stylish furnishings, while facilities include an on-board spa and versatile lounges.

Your holiday includes

Full-Board River Cruise

- Seven-night full-board Douro river cruise on board Emerald Radiance*
- **Visiting*:** Porto+, Pinhão+, Vega de Terrón+, Salamanca, Pocinho, Régua+, Porto+
- **Add a Premium Drinks Package for £99pp**
- **Complimentary** unlimited wine, beer and soft drinks during lunch and dinner, sparkling wine and fresh-squeezed juices during breakfast

Excursions

- Visit to Quinta do Tedo with wine tasting
- Guided tour of Salamanca
- Visit to the Côa Valley Museum
- Guided tour of Lamego
- Guided tour of Porto

All Flights and Transfers^

- London departure – regional flights available



Explore
Porto

Portugal's second city, also known as the "City of Bridges", enthrals with its vibrant spirit. Explore the Ribeira district, a Unesco gem where colourful houses tumble down to the water's edge.

Sip world-famous Port wine in a historic cellar, then lose yourself in the city's labyrinthine streets, discovering baroque churches and grand plazas. Porto's energy is contagious, a perfect blend of history and modern charm.

EMERALD STATEROOM FROM*	EMERALD PANORAMA BALCONY SUITE FROM*
£1,599PP	£1,949PP

ONLINE HOLIDAY CODE: RVR7246

*Prices, ship and itinerary shown based on November 16, 2024 departure. ^Transfers to and from your star-ship included. +Overnight in port.

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A Journey Through Two Ancient Cultures: Japan and China Discovery

20 NIGHTS | MARCH 5, 2025 | PRICES FROM £6,999PP

SMALL GROUP TOURING LIMITED TO ONLY 20 GUESTS!

INCLUDES FULLY ESCORTED TOURS OF JAPAN AND CHINA

EXPERIENCE THE BULLET TRAIN IN JAPAN AND CHINA

Tick two incredible destinations off your bucket list as you travel from Japan's majestic Mount Fuji to the Great Wall of China.

Japan offers a window into a world of amazing contrasts. During your 13-night discovery, you'll delve into fascinating cities, serene temples, pristine gardens, and ancient traditions. You'll also soak in the natural beauty and essence of Japan with a variety of exciting rail journeys. From high-speed bullet trains reaching almost 321 kilometres per hour to scenic trains meandering past forested ravines, rivers, and majestic mountains.

From soaring skyscrapers to secrets of the Terracotta Army, discover China's greatest treasures during a fully escorted tour. Beginning in Xi'an, home to one of the greatest archaeological sites in the world, travel to Beijing to admire the magnificent Temple of Heaven, uncover history in the Forbidden City and marvel at the winding Great Wall of China.



Discover
Kyoto

In Kyoto, immerse yourself in the calm beauty of ancient temples like Kinkaku-ji and Fushimi Inari Shrine, where vibrant torii gates create an unforgettable pathway.

Delight your taste buds with traditional kaiseki dining and partake in a serene tea ceremony. Wander through the enchanting Arashiyama Bamboo Grove. Experience the city's cultural heritage in the Gion district and observe the still thriving geisha culture.

Your holiday includes

Hotel Stays
- Four-star hotel stays in Tokyo, Shizuoka, Takayama, Kanazawa, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Osaka, Shanghai
- Five-star hotel stays in Xi'an and Beijing
- All hotel stays include breakfast

Rail Journeys
- Southern Japan Alps Train, The Limited Express Thunderbird from Kanazawa to Kyoto, Sagano Romantic Train
- Bullet Train from Shizouka to Nagoya, Kyoto to Hiroshima, Hiroshima to Osaka and Xi'an to Beijing

Fully Escorted Tours
- Tokyo, Mount Fuji, Takayama, Historic village of Shirakawa-go, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Miyajima Island, Osaka Castle, Terracotta Warriors, Temple of Heaven, Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City, The Great Wall of China and more!

All Flights and Transfers
- London departure – regional flights available
- Overnight flight



Fully escorted tours of China

Your China tour starts as you fly to Xi'an, one of the birthplaces of Chinese civilisation and the last stop for those following the enigmatic Silk Road. Here you'll see the incredible Terracotta Army, one of the greatest archaeological sites in the world.

Next, you'll travel by fast train to the Chinese capital of Beijing. Here you'll visit the city's most famous sites, ancient and modern including the magnificent Temple of Heaven, the Forbidden City and the majestic Great Wall of China.

TWIN SHARE FROM	SOLO PASSENGER FROM
£6,999PP	£8,999

ONLINE HOLIDAY CODE: ASA2243

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