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The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

AUTHOR

Founded in 1935

The SCPSW Office Bearers

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Cover photo by Geoff Parkes

EDITORIAL

The summer is here. So are lawn-mowing, hedge-trimming, tree-pruning, and other chores which, frankly, make me wish for winter at times! Well, not really. I wouldn't give up the long bright evenings and early mornings, the sweet tweets of blackbirds and all the pleasures that summer brings.

I travelled to London to attend the committee meeting followed by the AGM on May 10. Bernie Bickerton, our Meetings Secretary, planned and organised both the meetings with precision. SCPSW's 90th birthday cake was kindly supplied by Ethel Corduff, our Chair. While we had our cake and ate it, the online attendees were not as fortunate. The post-meeting bubbly and other wines refreshed and invigorated us. If only all AGMs came with such frills!

Some new members have joined us and I echo the welcoming words of our Chair. Our membership numbers have dwindled due to the sad loss of some of our long-standing members. Unfortunately, a significant number of members have not paid their subscriptions. Efforts are under way to persuade them to pay. The society depends on your subscriptions for its very existence. There are currently 6.1 million public servants and almost an equal number who are retired. It is time to publicise our society more widely.

Most of you have received the electronic version of the poster for inviting new members to join SCPSW. It is reproduced on the back cover for ease of photocopying and distribution. Please post it as widely as you can, in libraries, government buildings and other places where potential members may be lurking. If each of us brings in one new member, we could potentially double our membership numbers.

You will notice that this issue of *Author* has a leaner, but hopefully not meaner look. We decided to get rid of the colour background on the pages and not include images in order to bring down the cost of production. Cost-cutting seems to be the order of the day.

One of the ideas discussed at the last AGM was to apply for grants to support our activities. However, the deciding factor for grant approval is invariably the number of people who may benefit. Please do your best to increase membership and get in touch if you are aware of a source of funding we could explore.
I am very pleased with both the number of copies received and their quality. I am grateful for your effort. It would be refreshing to see more people contributing to Author. I will end this by saying, write, write and then write some more.

Gopi Chandroth

FROM THE CHAIR

We are in the midst of our 90th year, which is a proud achievement. To have lasted so long is because of the dedication and commitment of so many committee members over the years and the many long-term members who have contributed as well. The Society was started in 1935 as the Society of Civil Service Writers. Due to changing times in more recent years, the membership has been widened and enriched by adding all public servants and becoming the Society of Civil and Public Service Writers. In this issue, we celebrate those ninety years, which is a major milestone, and we look forward to our centenary with all your support.

This week we have received the very sad news that our dedicated committee member, Poetry Workshop Committee and Competition Secretary, Ken Franklin, has died suddenly but peacefully. Details of the funeral, obituary and donations, if desired, have been sent out online to members. He will be very sadly missed by all in the society, especially the committee, those who entered competitions or who attended the poetry zoom events. His obituary will appear in the next Author.

Without committee members, a society can not thrive or survive, this is particularly the case of the key role of treasurer. Sincere thanks to Jonathan Atkinson, who has been an excellent treasurer for ten years before resigning. We are grateful to Jonathan for his dedication and hard work in keeping our finances on an even keel.

Nobody came forward at the AGM to take on the essential role of treasurer. I am appealing here for a member to offer. It is not an onerous role, but it is absolutely necessary. Full support will be given to a new treasurer. We also now need a new competition secretary. Please email me for further details of either role: ecorduff@hotmail.com

The obituaries of long term prolific members, also of the Poetry Workshop, Roger De Boer and Margaret Pelling, appear in this issue. Both published several books and will be very much missed. We have just been informed of the death at 95 of a long-standing member Brian Lockett in a care home. He attended many society events over the years and was a very supportive member. Condolences have been sent to their families. Condolences also to our publicity officer Jenny Chamier Jones for the recent death of a very close younger family member.

Because of a technical problem, we could not send last reminders to a few members who have not paid their subscription this year. Please email me for bank details if you have not paid. Also, if you pay by standing order please let me know so we can ensure our records are up to date. We are recruiting new members. We have a new SCPSW poster and are starting advertising more on social media and other outlets. Welcome to new members Mike Travis and Nimmi Channa.

As we don't currently have a competition because of Ken's recent passing, you may like to consider entering a competition in memory of Michael Round, our former chairman, editor and competition secretary. Croydon Writers, where he was chair, is organising it. It is free to enter - first and second prize are £100 and £50 respectively, and the theme is 'far and wide'. It will be launched early June and I will send you all the poster with full details.

Enjoy the summer and hope you manage to do some writing.

Ethel Corduff

OBITUARIES

Roger De Boer

Roger De Boer was a long-time member of the Society of Civil and Public Services Writers and the Poetry Workshop. I had met him on many occasions at Society events and Poetry Workshop weekends. He was well known to older Society members. He was an author, poet, preservationist and transport enthusiast. It was unusual not to receive a Christmas card from him this year, but when he did not send his 2025 subscriptions and his phone was no longer in use, it was a cause for concern and it was thought perhaps he had gone into a nursing home. When his name was googled, it was discovered sadly that his funeral had taken place on 23rd January at St Lawrence Church, Northfield, Birmingham, an area Roger had lived in all his life.

Roger had been found in the hallway of his home a few days after he died on 2nd December 2024. His funeral was well attended by Dutch and English cousins, St Lawrence Church members and fellow transport organisation members. Roger was very knowledgeable about transport and researched, wrote and published extensively on the subject. PMP Transport Films collaborated with Roger's relatives to retrieve his cine collection for posterity with the Online Film Archive and with the Wythall Transport Museum to ensure his collections find safe homes before the house is cleared.

His early life had been with customs and excise. Roget had travelled extensively, especially to Holland, Malta and the USSR. Most often exploring the transport in the areas. His particular interest was buses and milk floats and his passion was electric vehicles of an earlier generation. His film of milk floats is particularly useful as a historic testament. Roger published many leaflets on buses and poetry. He wrote several books, including *Birmingham Dustcarts* (1990) and *Malta Dodge-Shape Buses* (2015).

A diabetic, his mobility was impaired in later years after losing a leg, but he was determined to still get around. Some years ago, the poetry weekend was going to be in Rutland, a complicated journey by public transport in a wheelchair from his home in Birmingham, but Roger got there. The Royal National Lifeboat Institute was a major beneficiary in his will, chosen because of his Dutch father's life at sea.

There is also a tribute page dedicated to Roger's memory in aid of Lifeboats and for messages at https://rogerdeboer.muchloved.com

Roger will be very much missed by all the members who met him and those he corresponded with. He will be remembered for the many articles and poems he has contributed to Author, Wavelengths and Waves over the years. Rest in Peace Roger.

Margaret Pelling

Margaret Pelling, who sadly passed away a few months ago, was a very long-standing member of the Society and the Poetry Workshop and a former Writer of the Year. Margaret grew up in Cardiff and went from there to Oxford to study physics; later she completed a doctorate on astrophysics. Research followed this in Cambridge and then back to Oxford, which became her home.

Margaret joined the Whitehall Civil Service briefing government ministers while raising a family. She started writing a novel on the train to work and after a severance deal trimming Civil Service numbers, she was one of the first to leave. She now found the time to finish her novel.

She had no regrets about not writing earlier, as she felt she needed more time in the real world before writing fiction. Her interests mirrored what she wrote, for instance, music in *Work for Four Hands* and in *Trafalgar's Other Admiral*, her interest in military particularly naval history. Rather than writing about what she knew, she preferred writing about what she could find out about, which led her to much research for her books.

The Society will miss her and appreciate her contributions over many years. Condolences have been sent to her husband Chris and family.

Text by Ethel Corduff

SENTENCES FROM STEPHEN

Stephen Bibby

'Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise.'
From Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College
Thomas Gray (1716-71)

My education in the intricacies of insurance claims began at 10.15 p.m. on the first Monday of 2025. Cocooned and unconcerned by outside temperatures of 2°C, I was driving carefully down a deserted country road.

Bang!

A disconcerting thump; a brief flash of lights; a jarring crunch. Reflex rather than reason depressed the brake pedal. Literally grinding to a halt, I climbed out into cold blackness. I could see nothing, but the shocking sounds had already told me the car could drive no further.

Shivering, I ventured back along the road, vaguely discerning, forty yards away, another vehicle slewed onto a grass verge. Its driver, equally dazed, was staggering down the carriageway.

We needed help. There were no houses nearby, no source of light. There was barely a mobile phone signal. Mercifully 999 worked. The police operator, ascertaining I was a stranded septuagenarian, promised help.

The other, rather younger, driver sloughed off his shock more quickly. He suggested we activate the torch function on our iPhones. Their narrow beams revealed what had occurred. He had shot out from a side road, hit my car on the rear driver's side wheel and spun off the road. My rear tyre had exploded, the associated axle had become a misshapen, rimless relic.

I was still quaking with cold and confusion when the police arrived about 11 p.m. They promptly ruled out a traffic offence but hastened to safeguard the scene as my crippled car on the dark, narrow road constituted a hazard. Miraculously the other vehicle, despite a gashed radiator grille and broken bumper, remained operational. Its owner was asked to drive away; I was required to contact a recovery service using the police network, functioning where other phone signals failed.

Now there followed another long wait. Although my car couldn't move, the engine was undamaged. I could sit inside, hazard lights flashing, the heater blowing hot air.

At well past midnight an amber beacon heralded the breakdown vehicle. A rugged lady in her fifties was at the wheel.

‘I’ve got you down as a breakdown,’ she announced. ‘But you’re an RTA!’

The incredulous police officer confirmed I’d correctly described the problem.

‘I can’t help you without a new code.’

She disappeared into her cab.

The next long wait began. It was a full half hour before she seized a tow rope, announcing with more than a hint of disappointment, ‘Okay. They say I can take it!’

The flatbed of her lorry was lowered. Slowly my car was winched upwards, secured then peremptorily parted from me.

Anxious, frozen and exhausted, I arrived home to bed at 2 a.m.

I hardly slept.

At first light I picked up the telephone to my insurers. I put it down two hours later.

The insurance company, after 20 minutes of mindless music, required a huge amount of detail: age, date, time, place, purpose, speed. Then they passed me to their associated car repair company who required similar information together with iPhone pictures fortuitously taken in the dead of night. Next, I was transferred to the nominated car hire company to arrange my complimentary replacement vehicle. For a third time I found myself repeating my sorry story.

‘Why do you need all this?’ I asked in frustration.

‘It’s a precaution in case the insurers don’t pay and we need to take them to court.’

Tired out, I sat down for breakfast.

Immediately, the telephone rang.

‘Good news,’ an irritatingly cheerful young lady chortled. ‘We are the insurance company for the driver who collided with you. He accepts fault. You can claim on his insurance.’

Bemused, I responded, ‘But I’ve already claimed on my insurance.’

‘Cancel that! It’ll be easier to deal directly with us.’

Disinclined to undo two hours' worth of arrangements, I demurred.

'If you claim from us, we'll give you £200.'

Sharp insurance practice held no appeal. I politely declined.

A few hours later a young man arrived in my driveway with a bundle of paperwork and my replacement car.

'It's yours as long as you need it,' he announced.

Several days later the car repairers phoned.

'Your car is being assessed. We'll contact you again.'

After three weeks of similar messages, I demanded an explanation.

'We're in discussion with your insurers as to whether we repair or write off.'

This alarmed me. Financing a replacement car would severely deplete my funds. Nevertheless, I began some enquiries, discovering in the process that my model is no longer manufactured.

I missed the next repairers' call but picked up an answerphone message.

'We're awaiting parts.'

This was more promising. It became a month-long mantra until one glorious morning I heard, 'Your car is going into the workshop tomorrow.'

Finally, after three tortuous months, the car was ready for delivery.

My education was complete, but ignorance would indeed have been bliss.

Going to the Match: LS Lowry 1953* Kenneth Franklin

Outside the ground spectators roam. A man
with a diminutive dog on a lead
proves there is some room for the non-human
without, but not within. No doubt, he'll heed
warnings that deter anything that feeds
on all fours and drinks water from a bowl,
that doesn't know how much scraped shins can bleed
or how most referees award a foul
and why any penalties will make one team howl.

Closer inspection shows a clear pattern
like platoons practising parade ground drills,
a few bare heads but most have a hat on,
all seem ready for the afternoon's thrills.
They wear gaberdine macs, scarves keep out chills.
A few are on their own, most come in pairs,
The home crowd will exert their combined wills,
which is one of those mystical affairs
no one can ever fathom although everyone cares.

Two stands nearly full; kick-off close at hand,
crowd on its feet in keen anticipation
listening to the Co-op Silver Prize Band
with excited, fevered animation,
confidence will contest trepidation.
Distant factory chimneys emit no smoke
but not to reduce smog and pollution;
its Saturday, they're either closed or broke.
For most workers a five-day week remains a joke.

Six houses lie in shadow of the stand
or would were the sun shining. A low brick
wall contains a postage-stamp scrap of land
just out of range of some back's miss-hit kick
or a number ten's practised party trick
that has flown off his boot and gone astray.
Waiting fans hear the clanking turnstiles click,
punters holding tight their half-crowns to pay
for what they hope and pray will prove a winning day.

*The above poem by Ken Franklin is based on a series of paintings by L.S. Lowry, titled 'Going to the Match'. The best known painting is his 1953 painting of football fans heading towards Burnden Park, the then home of Bolton Wanderers Football Club [Source: Wikipedia].

SEEDED FOR SURVIVAL

Kenneth Franklin

Our life is a container to be filled
By light and dark in unequal measure
Not in the sense of actions that are willed
But how we clothe memories we treasure;

The bleakest times will have some shred of joy
If we allow its freeing from the throng
Of bleak despair that overclouds our day
When darkness rules and every rite is wrong.

Apple blossom that flourishes in May
Soon fades and dies upon its wiry stalk
We mourn its death and wish that it might stay
Then realise the fruit will wear its birthmark.

Umbilical stems feed an apple's seeds
To provide for the future all life needs

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

Adrian Fray

West Malvern where the council let
Allotments to the keen
Or wife-avoiding gardening set
Is where I grew the bean.
And that is where I met with Jack
And with a giant too,
Who stood beside my giant bean
That grew and grew and grew.
The giant looked me in the eye.
“I like your giant bean.
It must be twice as tall as I.
The biggest I have seen”.
He asked me why it grew so well
And said he’d like to know
If I had used a magic spell
To make it grow and grow.
“ Someone here keeps watering it.
Perhaps they’ve used a hose
And let it drain against the bean.
There’s no-one here who knows. “
And did you also use manure
To make it grow so green? “
The giant said, and pulled Jack’s fur.
“Don’t touch the gardener’s bean.”
But Jack, the Russel sniffed at it,
And we began to see
That we’d thought was H2O,
Was really K9P.

THE FLOWER PARTY **Andy Millican**

Sweet William strode into the walled garden. Saw a vision in the shape of Poppy. He felt such Euphorbia when he saw her. His Morning Glory rose tall and proud like his best friend Lupin at his peak. Sweet William sidled up to Poppy and whispered *Alright Sweet Pea How'you*? Poppy fluttered her petals feeling flustered.
Sweet William wanted to share his thought with best friend Lupin. Eranthis past him, Should he Astir to marry him.

Meanwhile, the three Dees sat together conspiring. Daphne dreamt she was still in Mandalay but here she was planted between Daisy and Delphinium. They scanned the garden looking for scandal but realised there were too many Helluvabores about.
Well said Daisy William's warming Poppy up nicely.
Yep marry him and you Marigold.
Mmm replied Delphinium. *Bring them to him and he shall Sedum*.
Oh hello, said Daphne *here comes* Perry Winkle. *Rumour has it he's very small you know in that department.*
*A snail I heard laughe*d Daisy.

Meantime in a far corner of the garden, listening to the delightful music from Viola and Veronica on harmonica, Nico and Tania sat smoking Weed
And all the while Antirrhinum was running round serving up more scones, cakes and ginger beer. *Look at her the old Snapdragon* said Daisy.
Fuch-sheias so Impatiens drolled Daphne.

On the manicured lawn, Primrose smiled like a giggly schoolgirl but everyone knew here as Wild Rose. She was always up for a ramble. She and her mate Honey Suckle were social climbers and Honey did as said on the tin.
Chryss-and-this-mum were admiring the pond with Narcissus. *Beautiful he said just so beautiful. I know replied Narcissus, I Canna see anything but me. Oh wonderful reflection Forget Me Not!*
For Phlox sake muttered Chryss.

Pansy and Posey were lecturing CalunDula about diversity and how they loved Batchelors Buttons. Sorry boys but too much information for me there said Cal.
Just then the twins arrived AllySum and AllyUm. *Hi ya Cinth* they called as she passed by.
Holding court as ever was Carnation the cream of the crop at coffee mornings. She was milking the atmosphere and muttering about the number of weddings she had coming up. *I've got so many button holes to fill this year*. The ears of Pansy and Posey pricked up alarmed that they might be losing their monopoly!
Clem Atis saw Sweet Pea, knew instantly he wanted to climb her. Watching intently was Nigella who had always wanted him to climb all over her. She Tuderlip and stared at Clem longingly. Her Iris full of sweetness and desire, her Lobelia swelling. In all the Cosmos surely he was the one for her but she doubted she would ever have the Opper- Petunia to win him over

SONNETS

Andy Millican

Sonnet No 31 – Til Time Calls Time

I want more time more time to live he said,
and pondered ways he could extend his life.
He couldn't stand the thought of being dead
and so discussed ideas with his wife.

I'll tamper with the calendars and clocks.
I'll cut the paper days in twos and threes.
I'll block out every timepiece in a box
until the fingers stop and time will freeze.

Oh do you won't! His wife thought to herself.
I've long since had enough and just can't wait
to have your ashes on the mantel shelf.
Or put you on the hearth behind the grate.

And then enjoy the peace and quiet in bliss
tile time calls time on me with death's sweet kiss.

Sonnet No 32 – Follicly Unfair

I watch the tufts of grey or greying air
slide down the barber's cape into my lap
and realise there's not much lying there
compared to youth or when my hair was black.

When I was five it seemed the sharpest comb
would scrape across my scalp – short back and sides.
Then down the decades styles have come and gone
I tried a few and carried some with pride.

The Shag, The Feathered Cut and once a perm,
The Eighties Mullet, or just left it long.
But then that small and blading patch confirmed
my youthful mass of hair was not lifelong.

Instead and to my chagrin I've now got
the same bald patch my father had on top!

St George's Day Glide

Mike Sedgwick

St George's Day, April 23rd, dawned clear and sunny. A cold front had passed, and a slow movement of dry air from the north warmed as it rolled gently over the land. When the air encountered the South Downs, it had to rise, and being warm, it continued to ascend until it cooled enough to form fluffy cumulus clouds.
On a former WWII airfield near Basingstoke, sixty gliders lined up, their pilots stood in groups chatting and waiting for the temperature to reach the critical value for thermals. Glider pilots know intimately how little packets of air move and tumble through the landscape, moving around hills or rising over them.
We experience calm and anticipation as we sit strapped in the cockpit of our two-seater Duo Discus; all the pre-flight checks done, we wait for the tug plane.
The hook snaps shut on the tow rope, and we are ready. The radio crackles with the 'all out' signal from the launch controller, and the glider trundles along the grass.
At 50 knots, the glider becomes airborne. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry claimed to feel that moment in his kidneys. John Gillespie Magee felt exhilarated when he 'slipped the surly bonds of earth.' I feel a spiritual lightness of being as we ascend from the ground. I understand the aerodynamics of flight, yet it remains a magical moment.
Now is a time of danger. If the tow rope breaks, there is insufficient space to land and not enough altitude to turn back. We will have to make the best of the field ahead, assuming we can clear the trees at the end of the runway.

Free as Air

At 2000 ft, we feel the jolt of a thermal and unhitch the tow plane. As we turn into the thermal to gain height, the tug dives away beneath us to fetch the next glider.
After a few turns, we are at 3000 ft and head south towards Portsmouth. We pass above Jane Austen's house near Alton and see the Petersfield lake ahead. While circling over Petersfield, I photograph the schools attended by my grandchildren, then on over Butser Hill to Harting.
Another climb to 4000 ft lets us admire the view of Portsmouth Harbour and across to the Isle of Wight as far as The Needles. We can see along the coast to Hayling Island and Chichester. The sight that cheers most is a line of cumulus clouds above the South Downs, marking the thermals.

Over the Downs

We set course for Eastbourne, the eastern end of the Downs. Travelling at 70 knots, we pass over Amberly, Petworth, Steyning, Pulborough, and Lewes. Towns and villages look much the same from the air. To navigate, we look carefully for special features like a railway, a bypass, or a reservoir. Better landmarks are the rivers cutting through the Downs - the Arun, Adur and Ouse.

The seashore on our right is built up from Selsey to Seaford, one continuous strip of urban development, but inland, on the hilltops, is a patchwork of fields, pastures, and grassland. Vivid yellow rape fields are in bloom, and most crops are bright green, contrasting with brown, ploughed fields and darker green woodland and copses. White scars show limestone quarries, some filled with jewel-like, turquoise-green lakes.

Our eyes must not linger on the view; we must scan the air for other gliders and the next thermal. Sometimes, a promising cloud has no thermal, and neither does the next one. We are getting low and must look for ground features that may trigger a thermal. Supermarket car parks and built-up areas are good.
After an hour, we arrive at Polegate, a small town near Eastbourne, marking the end of the Downs. On the return trip, the air has warmed enough to allow a cool sea breeze to slip beneath it, killing thermals. We fly a few miles further inland, constrained between the sea air and Gatwick airspace. It is lunchtime, and we are getting peckish, so we take turns flying while the other eats his sandwiches, and yes, we have primitive toilet facilities. Dehydration, hunger and fatigue lead to poor judgment, and we need our skills for landing.

Up to Oxford

The day is still young, and thermals are strong when we arrive back at our airfield. We decide to fly north, towards Oxford, passing over Highclere Castle (Downton Abbey). Below us winds the Thames with holidaymakers in canal barges and riverboats. Following the river past Culham's nuclear fusion laboratories, we arrive over Oxford. The emerald green college quadrangles appear more prominent than the foreshortened dreaming spires. Easier to spot is the large industrial complex of Cowley, another good spot for a thermal. However, we head for the John Radcliffe Hospital, our turning point.

Our return route is easterly, over Wallingford and Goring, Newbury racecourse, and Greenham Common. Reading and the London Heathrow Airspace are to our left, which we must avoid. A vigorous thermal over Newbury takes us up to 5600 ft. There is no need for another climb. We race home, beating up the airfield at treetop height at 140 kts before pulling up to turn and land.
Eat your heart out, Tom Cruise and you Top Gun guys. You couldn't stay airborne for five and a half hours, and I bet you don't have as much fun.

අම්මා MOTHER

Mike Sedgwick

I love the Sinhala word *amma*, Mother, අම්මා. It's the first word a baby utters. When he discovers he can make a sound, he cries – aaaaa – then closes his mouth – mmmm – and opens it again – aaaa; amma. The way we write it in Sinhala depicts a mother. The two middle letters represent mother's soft bosoms, and the outer two represent her enfolding arms and the little child within them.

Our letters on a page are like foam on a burbling stream, nicely rounded and bubble-like. English and Dutch letters are angular and sharp, as if someone has thrown down a sackful of twigs. Mother – the M is an upstroke, two diagonals, and a downstroke. Four straight lines and three acute angles, spiky and awkward; sets one on edge.

Some of their letters are rounded, but apart from O, they can't help putting sticks on them, p, b, and d. They say we use curves and circles because we write on Ola leaves and straight lines risk the author tearing the leaf with his stylus, so we developed curly letters.

A- Z OF CLUTTER

Subrata Saha

A pile of knickknacks in my drawer,
Bobby pins in my sewing box.
Clutter all around my home.
Dainty pots and pans in the kitchen.
Egg boxes and pizza boxes stacked upon each other.
Freights, crates, old tin pots, with garden tools in the shed.

Garbage recycling bins overflowing,
Happiness hidden in this clutter, I think not!
Ink pots and piles of books seating on my study table,
Jam jars filled with an assortment of sweets,
Kit - kats and other chocolate wrappings on the desk.
Light brown paper for writing,
Memories piled up in my waste paper bin.
Neuro-networks in my brain. Clogged and stuffed with info.

On our computers,
Piled high,
Qubit a fundamental unit,
Rapidly and continuously on our
Social media feeds, fill with cluttered, useless info, to suffocate us.

The charity bag stuffed with clothes.
Umbrella , coats and shoes piled in the hallway.
Van pulls up outside my door, to collect more bric a brac.

Will I be feel free of this mess?
X-rated old VHS videos, need to be given away.
Years of clutter to negotiate and sort.
Zillions of useless, bits of stuff, to be cleansed from my life.
It has served its purpose.

DOWN WITH HOLIDAYS

Phil Cook

I have decided not to bother with holidays abroad any more. Oh, I know they are supposed to broaden your mind and give you the chance to see, hear and taste new things, visit new places and meet new people. But think of all the aggravation I shall save.

For a start, I will not have to put up with my wife spending hours leafing through countless glossy brochures, which invariably end up in the recycling bag, and then complaining bitterly about the difficulty of finding holiday company websites that give you the vital information you need. The hours she spends slagging off the outrageous prices, the ridiculous flight times, the drawbacks of the accommodation offered, the long transfers and the dubious sample menus in the hotels could be used much more constructively. Mowing the lawn, say, or washing the car or weeding the flower beds, thus giving me more quality time for important things like reflecting on the meaning of life. She's usually decided which holiday we are having, anyway, so why bother with the process of elimination?

At least, once the holiday is booked, there is a period of grace before the next worries begin. Have we made the right choice? Are we sure the hotel has all the facilities we require? Looking at the sample menus again, some items look a bit doubtful. What will the fellow guests be like? Suppose we have to share a table with people we can't stand? Above all, what shall I wear? I really must have some new clothes! So, here we are again, visiting all the clothes shops in all the towns for miles around, and predictably buying dresses, skirts and whatever back at the very first one we tried.

The tension rises in the last few days before the off. The internet weather forecast is unpromising. We shall have to rethink what clothes to take. (In my experience these forecasts are always wrong anyway, so why look at them?) Will our cases be large enough, but still meet the airline's limit? We can't possibly go without X or Y or even Z. Then, to the great day itself. What time shall we leave for the airport and which route shall we take? We don't want to get there too early and have to hang around for hours. But we must allow plenty of time in case of traffic jams, breakdown or puncture.

All this before the trauma of the airport itself. The queues, those dreaded machines which defy you to check in correctly, the rip-off shops offering fictional savings on high street prices (High Street Timbuctoo?), the overpriced cafés serving soup tureens of murky coffee, the groans when another flight delay is signalled, the anxious wait until your own flight is marked up.

The relief of boarding your plane is quickly forgotten. Instead, you get to grips with the cramped seating, the air-con wafting 200 other passengers' germs around your head, the delays while the airline tries to induce a party of customers to abandon the airport shops and board the aircraft. Take-off at last, and you can settle back. But attempts to lose yourself in your book are thwarted by a stream of announcements over the loudspeakers, let alone the squalling babe in the seat behind. And don't forget that unfortunate attempt to put milk into your coffee without squirting it over your wife's new skirt.

Hooray, we have landed. Time to struggle to your feet to retrieve your hand luggage from the overhead locker. Everyone is doing the same in the forlorn hope of getting off the plane quickly – as though it matters, as we've all got to wait for our hold luggage at the airport carousel. The ground staff cannot find the steps, so there is a delay in opening the plane's doors and you stand at a peculiar angle to avoid hitting your head again on the bottom of the lockers as you usually do. Nevertheless, it all seems worthwhile when a blast of hot sunshine hits you as you descend the steps. Pity you believed the forecast and put on a heavy jumper!

Surely all will be straightforward now? You (your wife, more exactly) have chosen a resort with a fairly short coach transfer. Your travel company's rep gives you a cheery greeting, before breaking the news that you will have to wait until the flight from Gatwick arrives with passengers going to your resort … and that has been slightly delayed. 'Have a coffee and I'll call you when we are ready. The 'slight' delay is long enough for three or four cups of coffee, but eventually the bedraggled and grumpy group from Gatwick arrives and off you go. Within ten minutes you are regretting those cups of coffee, and of course your hotel is the last drop-off point. For you, the relief of reaching your bathroom outweighs everything else. Not so for your wife, who is already listing the shortcomings of the accommodation you have ended up with and expressing worries about the people you might have to share the dinner table with, given the dodgy-looking bunch who were on the coach. And, heavens, what a dreadful time it has taken to get here. We left home at nine this morning and it is already half past five. That is eight and a half hours. Only seven and a half really, I point out, given the time difference, but she is unconvinced.

It is usually at this point that I remind my wife about Miss Jemima, who wrote a journal recounting her experience of one of the earliest Thomas Cook tours to Switzerland 150 years ago.

‘It took Miss Jemima 42 hours to get from London to Switzerland,’ I tell her. ‘Down to the coast by train, then an awful ferry crossing to Dieppe before another train to Paris for an overnight stay. Up at five o’clock and two miles across Paris to catch a boiling-hot train for the long journey down to Geneva. That makes our seven and a half hours to Italy seem pretty good.’

‘At least she saw Paris,’ retorts my wife, illogically. How much of Paris do you see half asleep at 5 am? But logic is irrelevant. Dinner looms. What delights or horrors will that bring? Suppose we get stuck with someone like that wine bore on our Rhine cruise, who assured anyone who would listen that the wines from a particular south-west-facing slope of the Rheingau were the only ones worth drinking? Or that virago, who allowed her mouse of a husband only water at lunch and at most one small glass of wine at dinner, while he gazed longingly at our large carafes?

Then there are the excursions. What can possibly go wrong there? As already noted, you are broadening your mind, visiting new, interesting places, ferried about in a comfortable coach. Ah, but it might be too hot or too cold, too long or too short, too much walking up and down hill, we should have brought waterproofs, jumpers, thinner clothes, whatever. My wife gets particularly annoyed if fellow excursionists fail to rendezvous with the coach at the time the tour rep says, thus delaying the day’s schedule. It is usually the same individuals every day, we notice, and they seem to find it more amusing than we do.

Again I remind my wife about Miss Jemima’s days out. Usually up at an ungodly hour of the morning and out until late evening to take full advantage of the daylight hours and visit everything worthwhile in the area. Tremendous stamina, walking for miles, sometimes up and down 5,000 feet of mountainside in a day and making perilous crossings of glaciers dressed in highly unsuitable crinolines and the like. If they managed a few miles in a horse-drawn carriage or on muleback, those Victorians thought it was a luxury. But my wife is unimpressed and certainly not chastened. ‘Bigger fool, her,’ is her scathing reaction.

Not all of these aggravating things happen on every holiday, of course. You usually have a great time, meet some interesting people and see lots of worthwhile places. Certainly your lasting memories are of all the good things that happened. A great, selective mechanism is the memory. Nevertheless the worry is still there. Suppose *all* those nasties *do* happen together next time?

So when am I going to give it all up? I suppose it had better wait until after the holidays we have already booked this summer, so perhaps a final decision will have to wait until next year. Oh, and come to think of it, I must remember to renew my passport for another ten years – just in case!

TEDIUM

Kevin Morris

I felt no cold breath of Death
Nor the Reaper's skeletal hand.
Yet he greeted me
And I mumbled and tumbled
And found myself on the cold ground
Where all are bound.

Death can command us all.
When he calls man must fall.
He greeted me in jest.
But he will tire of play
And I will find rest
For Death he ends all play.

SEIZURE

Kevin Morris

I felt no cold breath of Death
Nor the Reaper's skeletal hand.
Yet he greeted me
And I mumbled and tumbled
And found myself on the cold ground
Where all are bound.

Death can command us all.
When he calls man must fall.
He greeted me in jest.
But he will tire of play
And I will find rest
For Death he ends all play.

BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT

Phil Cook

The rumours that abounded had told Sherwood that it would be unwise to ignore the invitation to a 'chat' at the Town Hall. Those sleepless nights since the summons arrived had sapped his will to resist. But what in his humdrum life could have drawn him to The Leadership's attention? He fidgeted on the uncomfortable ante-room chair, watching the painful crawl of the big clock's minute hand. Already forty-seven minutes overdue. Psychological softening up?

No apology, when he was finally brought before Assistant Director Hodgkinson. He vaguely remembered the man's undistinguished face from the old pre-Leadership days. Hadn't he been a kitchen hand back then? Hodgkinson's cold eyes and impassive face belied his mock-jovial voice as he came straight to the point.

'Friend Sherwood, it has come to our attention that your writing is showing unfortunate tendencies again.'

Totally unexpected. Sherwood's mind momentarily froze. True, years ago he had been a professional writer, mainly articles or short stories for magazines and the local newspapers, sometimes contentious. Nowadays he just belonged to the local writers' group, mainly for the social side though he produced the odd contribution and competition entry. Could any of his recent offerings have been construed as criticising The Leadership? Surely none of the members would have stooped to reporting an unfortunate turn of phrase or ambiguity to the local Directorship? Most of them had been friends for years, but of course there were several newer members.

When his tongue finally worked Sherwood mumbled, 'I don't understand.'

'Let me prompt your failing memory,' Hodgkinson smiled icily. 'Let's start with your recent account of life twenty years ago. You made it sound positively utopian, though we all know that only The Leadership affords such a prospect. Don't you agree that could be dangerous reading for younger minds?'

So that was it. His entry for the recent *Blast from the Past* competition had come to the local Directorship's notice. Admittedly he had talked up the past, but most writers occasionally indulged in rose-tinted nostalgia. Had the outside adjudicator been a Directorate stoolpigeon?
'I intended no criticism…' he stuttered.

'That is not what our Thought Revelation Analysis suggests,' countered Hodgkinson.

‘Quite the contrary in fact.’
‘Thought Revelation Analysis? What do you mean?’ gasped Sherwood, genuinely baffled.

His face must have betrayed his disbelief for Hodgkinson continued, ‘Those cranial microchip implants that we all carry can have much wider uses than just identity in certain cases. And good old AI is so much more effective than old-fashioned lie detectors or truth drugs.’

To Sherwood this sounded pure sci-fi. But then, so many things with fictional origins had come true. But surely no court of law would entertain such ludicrous evidence. How could any gadget interpret your innermost thoughts as you wrote? *Innocent until proved guilty. Guilty beyond reasonable doubt*. Surely these basic tenets still held firm.

As though reading his mind, Hodgkinson grinned maliciously. ‘You may think the courts will help you, but you obviously don’t keep up with the news.’
Sherwood had stopped reading newspapers or listening to any other news outlets since they had all been hijacked for The Leadership’s propaganda. Again his face betrayed his bewilderment.

‘Then perhaps you haven’t heard that, if you are charged with treason, the courts now regard you as guilty until you prove yourself *innocent beyond reasonable doubt*.’
Sherwood’s features crumbled before Hodgkinson’s unblinking gaze. Yes, he could see now that some of his words in that article could well have hinted at his total disillusionment with the régime.

Preening himself on his total victory, Hodgkinson allowed his voice to soften. ‘Perhaps it won’t come to that, my friend. But I really think you should retire from your writing group and throw your quill pens away… before it is too late.’

Kit Works From Home

Tom Oulton

To guarantee that nothing will be missed
Kit makes a little list of things to do:
Item number 1 is “Make a List”,
Item number 2 is “Read it through”.
And having quickly ticked these items off, he
Celebrates the milestone with a coffee.

He has to see if it has come, an email -
He can no longer tolerate the wait –
From that fit, blonde and alluring female
With whom he hopes to rearrange a date:
Nothing at all! He dies internally
And sighing takes a look at item 3.

But item number 3 reveals as nemesis
Leading his intellect a merry dance
And has him ranging round the premises
In search of corporeal sustenance:
He finds and peels a ripe baňana,
And drop-kicks item 3 into maňana.

The item 4 with which he has been saddled
Just brings him more of that familiar grief:
His spirits sunk, his thinking stalled and addled,
He really does need light relief;
He’ll rove around the internet a bit –
Ooh crypto-currency, I should get a bit.

No working lunch, he needs fresh air,
Kit goes out walking in the lane;
Although the weather starts out fair,
It very soon begins to rain,
When, by the most outrageous luck,
He’s right outside the Dog and Duck.

Some fish and chips, a pint of bitter,
A chat about tomorrow's match,
Another pint, some time on Twitter
Three more halves go down the hatch.
I'll do no work if I get pissed,
But I must live, not just exist.

Ah horror! It's the office zoom:
He could skip, but he'd be mad to;
Kit runs back to his working room
Twenty seconds after he had to;
His belly's full, the meeting's boring
I think I stopped myself from snoring.

Wahay! The zoom is item 10,
Item 11 is last and little,
With 5 to 9 not seen again,
The list achieved, we know that Kit'll
Say, *well, Friday has been quite a fun day*,
I'd best not think about next Monday.

Sherlock Holmes: First and Best **Tom Oulton**

In our first year at secondary school our English teacher produced a list of paperbacks and pretty much told us to buy one. None of the titles meant much to me, but I chose *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. I was immediately hooked.

Once aware of them, I noticed Holmes and Watson everywhere – a sketch in a teachers' review, a spoof home movie by the former residents of a National Trust property, an endless succession of adaptations for radio, TV and cinema. There are now possibly 400 Sherlock Holmes Societies in the UK, Europe, North America, India, Australia, Japan and elsewhere. I think it is reasonable to suggest that Holmes is the most famous character from English language fiction. But why? What is the appeal both to adults and children? I hesitantly suggest that boys are pulled in more often than girls, but am prepared to be knocked back on that.

Holmes and Watson are so well known that they draw attention away from the actual stories, which are the foundation of the characters' fame. I have reservations about the four novels, but the short stories are simply very good yarns. The advantage of all cop and detective shows is that a crime gives you a plot, and in the Holmes stories we have a clear narrative arc from problem posed to problem solved with a pacey narrative in between. Conan Doyle saw himself as an adventure writer more than anything else, and most of these stories are adventures, some serious, some trivial, and they are without the longueurs of Christie and others where Poirot is just asking questions of a succession of characters. Holmes and Watson are usually out in the field in jeopardy of various sorts; there is danger, violence, bloodiness, grisly, strange and exotic incidents. Conan Doyle is skilled in creating a creepy, even gothic atmosphere to enhance the experience. It is easy for the reader to imagine his way into the story almost to the point of total immersion.

Holmes's clients are mostly of the educated middle class and above, but his world is not that of Christie or other purveyors of country house murder stories, where the main actors exist in an island of gentry largely detached from the rest of society. Holmes, who lives in a vast city of limitless variety and possibility, immerses himself in his surroundings, even to the extent of disguising himself as men of all classes in order to gather information.

It was a good era in which to be writing. At the height of Empire, London was the most connected country in the world; the Thames was thick with shipping. From this melting pot, Conan Doyle draws additional exotic and unusual plotlines and characters. Numerous stories feature characters from Australia, South Africa, the Raj, America, Brazil and so on. The turbulence of Europe provides Italian secret societies and Russian revolutionaries Very often the motives for the crime in England lie abroad. The basic plotline and the colour and atmosphere for the plot combine naturally and unforced through Conan Doyle's expert storytelling.

Of the four novels, three have substantial backstories located abroad. *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Valley of Fear* have formal second parts, without Holmes, acting as prequels in America to events in England. *The Sign of Four* also has a substantial back story set in the Raj. I did not like these novels as much as the shorts, and I also found the other novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, somewhat disappointing. There is scarcely any detection in it, and it was conceived as an adventure novel, with Holmes and Watson added later. It was, however, very successful, unlike the other novels.

If you are going to enthral a boy of eleven, such as I was, you probably need a hero with whom he can identify. Do we have one? Of course: he is called Sherlock Holmes, and we should not allow his quirkiness to camouflage the qualities that make Holmes a traditional, conventional hero. He is commanding and authoritative, he directs the course of action, and nearly always succeeds in his enterprises. He is very brave, constantly putting himself in danger. He refuses to be warned off or intimidated by the threats of such as Moriarty. He is prepared to defy people of high social rank, even royalty. He can box and fence. Holmes has his principles and sticks to them, and his desire for truth and justice has him breaking and entering as often as the gentleman burglar Raffles (created by Conan Doyle's brother-in-law E.W. Hornung).

Watson is conventional, law-abiding and meticulous, as brave and upright as Holmes, but he too is willing to join in the night-time break-ins, in loyalty to his friend and in the interests of justice and even of his country. Watson is not a buffoon and not dim, and Holmes would never share rooms with him if he were.

Holmes's sterling central qualities do not seem to be given much comment or attention because the eye is drawn by the colourful veneer. I do not think Holmes's quirks are random; they are pretty much required. The profession of consulting detective-adventurer was almost if not entirely unique, so the author might well have asked himself, what sort of unique character is going to set up in an occupation that he would pretty much invent for himself?

It starts with the lopsided knowledge that Holmes has made a point of acquiring, noted by Watson in *A Study in Scarlet*, backed up by the reckless, domestic scientific experiments and their messy consequences that landlady Mrs Hudson must somehow cope with. Holmes seeks knowledge that is useful in his job. He has a low boredom threshold and is physically and mentally restless, just the sort of impetus he needs for his bursts of activity. It follows that the unemployed Holmes can be a scarcely bearable companion.

It is perhaps Holmes's emotional detachment that gets most attention from commentators, but again there is a reason for it. His entire approach to detection is forensic, scientific and rational, based on logical deduction from known facts. Conan Doyle has the detective succeed by this method throughout his career. Even when supernatural involvement is mooted, as in *The Sussex Vampire and Hound*, the truth is explicable rationally.

Holmes fears, so he says, that if he allows the tender passions to gain a foothold in his mind, the rationality that he needs for his job will be undermined. He is talking about relations with women, and the abstention is not necessarily his own wish, but is a sacrifice he feels he has to make for the sake of his professional calling. Perhaps Conan Doyle could not see how to combine the life of an adventurer with that of a Victorian family patriarch.

Yet I do not think that Holmes is completely without empathy. He is conventionally kind and courteous to the female clients who turn up at Baker Street, often commending the courage and self-possession of, say, governesses. These women, in order to cling to gentility, have to go alone into situations which could be unpleasant, even dangerous, such as the accused governess in *Thor Bridge* or the young woman in *The Copper Beeches*, hired for her appearance and the colour of her hair. When the former actor and courtesan Irene Adler outwits him with a flourish, Holmes is not the slightest bit resentful.

Besides, Holmes has a perfectly decent marriage – to Watson. Watson nags Holmes about his drug abuse and failures in looking after his own health. Holmes is undoubtedly sometimes unkind to Watson, criticising the Doctor's powers of observation or keeping him in the dark about his own thinking. Watson would also like a few more indications of friendship from Holmes. But the pair have been through too much together for it to matter a lot.

The detective is usually perfectly polite and affable. He tries to calm excitable clients so that he can get a clear account of the facts, and it tends to be when he thinks information is being withheld that he gets shirty. Government ministers, aristocrats, even royalty, in their desire to avoid scandal, try to employ Holmes without giving him the full story, but the detective won't have it. He insists on being given all information, including state secrets, because he needs it to feed the deductive process vital to his success.

Apart from the cocaine perhaps, Holmes's quirks do not go beyond the acceptable eccentricities of Victorian gentlemen. His social attitudes are orthodox, as are his manners. He functions in society without difficulty.

In addition to the more questionable drug abuse, the violin playing and genuine love of music seem pretty gratuitous, but are perhaps intended to suggest that Holmes does have a heart in there somewhere. Likewise Holmes's fondness for the dramatic, even for showing off, does not seem essential to the detective's job; but it serves the plot, making for an exciting climax that is much more gripping than Poirot chatting with the suspects in the library.

If I had to describe Holmes's personality as a "type", which we are all too fond of in these days of the self, I would draw a comparison with artists, who sacrifice everything to their vocation, including relationships. The sacrifice is mostly Holmes himself, but it extends to Watson, also Mrs Hudson. If he offends or harms clients, it is for a reason. The case must be solved, the detective must curate his rational powers, the consequences for all must be borne.

Message in a Bottle

Tony Oswick

Dear BBC Complaints Department,

What is going on? I know we're living in an age of austerity but this is taking things too far.

After winning all sorts of short story competitions, you decide that now is the appropriate time to honour me with an even more prestigious award - and invite me to your studios to meet Lauren (a delightful young lady even though she's from Sunderland) to choose my eight favourite records.

However, I didn't realise you were then going to *actually* maroon me on this Desert Island.

I must confess, initially, it seemed a good idea to get away from the stresses and strains of the modern world, and to be able to play all my favourite music - 'Tulips From Amsterdam', 'My Boomerang Won't Come Back' and the rest - in peace and quiet.

But what happens? Nothing! I put my first disc on the turn-table - but where am I supposed to plug in the record-player? I've looked all around the palm trees to see if there's a secret socket that you've hidden somewhere. Not a single amp, not a solitary ohm, not a trace of a volt.

This wouldn't have happened when Roy Plomley was in charge. He may not have been as pretty as Lauren but he knew what he was doing. At least he would have provided a wind-up gramophone, one of those things with a big trumpet and a little dog sitting beside it.

So now I'm lumbered with my eight favourite records and nothing to play them on. I'm just grateful I chose a snooker table as my luxury. When it rained last night, I sheltered underneath. I got a bit wet when the rain dripped through the pockets but it was better than nothing - though I reckon it must have been a second-hand snooker table because the legs were terribly wonky. Thank goodness I had the Bible and Complete Works of Shakespeare. They really came in handy.

And here's another thing. I thought this island was supposed to be uninhabited? Yesterday, I discovered a tribe of wild natives living on the other side. Although I didn't actually see anyone, there was a rope bridge leading to their camp and I could hear a terrible noise which went on for ages. They must've been praying to some primitive jungle god because all I could hear was weird chanting which sounded like "Ant-and-ek-get-me-owtu-fear, Ant-and-ek-get-me-owtu-fear."

Anyway, perhaps you could pass this letter on to Jeremy Vine (or whoever's doing 'Points of View' at the moment), I'm sure they'll get things sorted out.

Mind you, I've still got to look for something to put this message in. Just one bottle, that's all I want. Where are The Police when you need them?

Yours grouchily,

Disgruntled of Desert Island

Minutes of AGM 2025

Bernie Bickerton

SOCIETY OF CIVIL AND PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS, ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, ON 10 MAY 2025 AT 1.30PM, AT THE CIVIL SERVICE CLUB, 13-15 GREAT SCOTLAND YARD, LONDON, SW1A 2HJ AND ONLINE, ON ZOOM.

Attendees: Ethel Corduff (Chairman), Gopi Chandroth (Editor), Bernie Bickerton (Meetings Secretary), Mike Sedgwick (member), Geoff Parkes (member), Michael Smith (member) and Vivienne Orr (member). On Zoom: Jonathan Atkinson (Treasurer), Ken Franklin (Competitions Secretary) and Tom Oulton (member)

1. Apologies: Jenny Chamier-Grove (Publicity Officer), Mike Boland (PW Editor) and members: Jean Pound, Stephen Bibby, Phil Cook, Andy Millican, Adrian Fray, Tony Oswick and Nadine Corscadden.

2. Minutes of AGM held on 11 May 2024. The Committee updated the Chairman on actions from the minutes that had been completed: Ethel had contacted the NHS Retirement Fellowship (paragraph 2) and suggested their members might be offered benefits to encourage them to join SCPSW, for example, free membership for one year. This had been received favourably by the NHS Retirement Fellowship.

3. On arranging Zoom sessions on how to self-publish a book (paragraph 8), Ethel suggested she might deliver a session in due course. On arranging Zoom sessions on specific authors (paragraph 8), Ken Franklin had arranged a Philip Larkin evening to take place in September/October. On competitions, Ken had consulted the membership on competitions they wished the Society to offer (paragraph 10) and had received suggestions which he had taken on board. On the date and timing of the AGM (paragraph 19), no comments had been sent to Bernie but the consensus at this AGM was that Saturday afternoon remained the best time and day of the week. The minutes of 11 May 2024 were agreed. **Action: Ethel.**

4. Reports from the Committee. Report from the Chairman – agreed.

5. Report from the Treasurer. One member noted the cost of production of the Author was high and the Society might need to think about increasing the cost of subscriptions or explore an alternative cheaper option for producing the Author. Another member observed the presentation of the Author was very good and appealing and one way to reduce costs might be to reduce the number of pages. The Editor advised a good percentage of the initial cost was on design and first class postage. However, second class post was now used for every edition. Ethel advised the Society would first try and obtain funding from relevant organisations and perhaps advertise the Society before any subscriptions would be increased. The draft accounts were accepted by the AGM.

6. Report from the Magazine Editor. Gopi reported that the quality of submissions was very good. To reduce costs, members suggested the Editor look at reducing the font size, double spacing and number of photos and pages. Gopi would look at the options. With regard to the website, Gopi will advertise for a trainee webmaster in the next edition of the Author. Gopi welcomed ideas from members on the website and Author. Ethel thanked Gopi for stepping forward to run the website and edit the Author and for the work he had done so far. **Actions: Gopi, Members.**

7. Report from the Poetry Workshop. The report was agreed. There were 25 members.

8. Report from the Meetings Secretary. The report was agreed. The AGM agreed to renewal of the Zoom subscription for a further year. Bernie reported that the next poetry Zoom event was on 27th May on the topic of Robert Frost's poems and if members wanted to sign up they should contact her at scpswmeetings@gmail.com. An evening on Philip Larkin, organised by Ken Franklin, would take place in September/October and members should email Ken if they wished to register (at kenneth.franklin@hey.com). Bernie was thanked for her work as Meetings Secretary. **Action: Members**

9. Report from the Competitions Secretary. The report was agreed. Ken reported that some competition entries were outstanding. He had consulted the membership on the competitions they wished the Society to offer (see paragraph 3). The AGM discussed the value of peer review by members. Ken was thanked for his work as Competition Secretary.

10. SCPSW Competitions. This has been covered in earlier paragraphs.

11. Elections for Committee 2025:
Chairman (2nd term) 1st of 3 years– Ethel Corduff (proposed by Bernie and seconded by Geoff Parkes)
Deputy Chairman – vacancy
Treasurer – vacancy
Acting Membership Secretary – Ethel (proposed by Ken and seconded by Jonathan)
Magazine Editor – Gopi Chandroth (proposed by Bernie and seconded by Mike Sedgwick)
Meetings Secretary & official Secretary to SCPSW – Bernie Bickerton (proposed by Ethel and seconded by Vivienne Orr)
Publicity Officer – Jenny Chamier-Grove (proposed by Bernie and seconded by Ethel)
Competitions Secretary – Ken Franklin (proposed by Gopi and seconded by Bernie)

12. President (vacancy). The Committee had decided at its meeting earlier in the day that it was no longer essential for the Society to have a President and no further action would be taken.

13. SCPSW 90th anniversary. SCPSW would celebrate the occasion of the 90th anniversary with a 90th anniversary edition of the Author and a competition. Jonathan agreed to write an article for the Author on Humbert Wolfe, his great-uncle and founder of SCPSW. Ethel invited ideas from members on how to mark the 90th anniversary (ecorduff@hotmail.com). **Actions: Gopi, Ken, Jonathan, Members**

14. Any Other Business. Gopi suggested the Committee and members promote SCPSW to potential new members in whatever way they can. **Action: Committee, Members**.

15. Readings, including stories and poems, were given by: Michael, Vivienne, Geoff, Ken, Ethel, Gopi and Jonathan.

16. The AGM finished with the Committee and members giving a toast to 90 years of SCPSW and sharing a special 90th anniversary cake.

Bernie Bickerton, Meetings Secretary, 23 May 2025

POST SCRIPT NOTE
Ken Franklin who was elected Competitions Secretary at the 2025 AGM on 10 May 2025 died on 15 May 2025. In respect of paragraph 8, the Philip Larkin evening in the autumn which Ken was scheduled to hold, this will be delivered by Bernie Bickerton, Meetings Secretary. Please email Bernie if you wish to register for it at scpswmeetings@gmail.com.
Bernie Bickerton, Meetings Secretary, 31 May 2025

NEWS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, NOTICES

VACANCIES

Treasurer

We are in urgent need for a new treasurer. After ten years Jonathan Atkinson has retired as treasurer. Please consider this essential role. It is not very onerous and full support will be provided. Email ecorduff@hotmail.com

Competitions Secretary

Due to the recent, sad loss of our competition secretary, Ken Franklin, a replacement is being urgently sought. As we use peer judgement to decide the winners, the job only requires you to be organised. Full support will be given. Anyone willing to take on this role, please contact Ethel Corduff at ecorduff@hotmail.com

Deputy Webmaster

A new scheme is being launched: If you have an interest in website design and maintenance, please contact me. I will tell you everything I know about maintaining and building a website. These are good skills to acquire.

The training will be provided free of charge. Only condition is you take over the role of webmaster within a year of starting. Contact Gopi at Gopinath.chandroth@gmail.com if interested.

Competitions

The Croydon Writers free open to all Michael Round prize competition in memory of their late Chairman who was the previous SCPSW Chairman, editor and competition editor:

- Theme ‘Far and Wide’
- Stories up to 1,200 words
- Opens for entries from 1 June to 30 September 2025
- No entry fees

- First prize £100 and second prize £50

Please read the full rules here before entering. Send your entries, formatted as Word or PDF, to writerscroydon@gmail.com.

POETRY 24 JUNE 2025 AT 7.30PM BY ZOOM

The next SCPSW poetry event on Zoom is on Tuesday 24 th June at 7.30pm. The poetry session will focus on the poems of the late Ken Franklin, our Competitions Secretary, who passed away lastmonth. Members are asked to share and read out their favourite Ken poems. Please contact me if you wish to take part and I will send you the Zoom link and log in details.

Bernie Bickerton, Meetings Secretary,
scpswmeetings@gmail.com

Book release by Kevin Morris

In the last week of January 2025, poet K Morris suffered a seizure whilst at home. This was rapidly followed by several other seizures, and the discovery that he was suffering from a brain abscess, which required an urgent operation.

In his book, **Passing through: some thoughts on life and death** the poet describes his thoughts and feelings as he grapples with his own mortality. Other poems touch on the mundane rhythms of hospital life, and the poet's yearning to return to the great outdoors and Mother Nature.

Available in paperback and Kindle from Amazon.

Kindle https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0F8TWMZJD/

Paperback https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0F92G8PPR/

AUTHOR DEADLINES AND SCHEDULE

ISSUE	Submission	Publication
Spring	1 March	15 March
Summer	1 June	15 June
Autumn	1 September	15 September
Winter	1 December	15 December

Submission guidelines for AUTHOR

Poems submitted for publication in Author must follow these guidelines:

Minimum: 12 lines or 75 words

Ideal range: 15–25 lines (100 - 300 words)

Very short forms (haiku, couplets, etc.) must be submitted as a collection reaching the minimum indicated above.

Maximum: 1600 words.

Prose should be between 300 and 1,600 words

POETRY WORKSHOP NEWS

Chair: Mike Boland (Address below)

Treasurer: Ethel Corduff –10 Malcolm Road London SE25 5HG

ecorduff@hotmail.com

Zoom Events Coordinator: Bernie Bickerton – scpswmeetings@gmail.com

Editor 'wavelengths': Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow, Middx, HA3 6JU – gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

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Greetings from the Poetry Workshop.

As reported in the last issue, the group's main activity this summer and autumn will be the publication of **Waves 2025**, the annual anthology of its members' poetry. This year will see the 55th successive edition, an achievement of which all past and present members can be proud.

Members of the Poetry Workshop are invited to submit poems for consideration by **1 August**. Full details of how to submit are given in the Newsletter section of the summer issue of ***wavelengths***.

It would be good to see some new names in the anthology this year alongside our regular contributors. Members who are unsure about whether to contribute or not, may be interested to know that this is true publication, with copies lodged with the British Library and the Legal Deposit Libraries, and also with the National Poetry Library at the South Bank Centre.

Please note that we have had to increase the cost slightly this year due to spiralling postal charges.

Copies of last year's anthology, ***Waves 2024*** can be obtained from the editor, Mike Boland, at 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald Middx HA3 6JU. Please make all cheques payable to: **M J Boland**.

wavelengths

This is the Poetry Workshop's quarterly magazine which is issued free to all its members and consists of twenty pages of poems, articles on poetry / poets and all the news of the group's activities. It appears regularly in the spring, summer, autumn and winter. The editor is always looking for new material. Contributions to ***wavelengths*** are invited from members of the Poetry Workshop. Articles of about 500-1500 words on all aspects of poetry or poets will be particularly welcome. Please send no more than **four poems** at a time - multiple submissions cannot be considered - on any subject or form – maximum 30 lines including stanza breaks - or **one** longer poem.

Please *do not* send the same poems to both 'wavelengths' and 'The Author'.

Selection of poem(s) for each issue will be made entirely subjectively by the editor. SAE please if you wish your poems to be returned. Submissions to the Editor: **Mike Boland** at 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, Middlesex, HA3 6JU. Electronic submissions are welcomed and can be sent to:

gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

For those submitting by post and who require a reply and/or the return of their manuscripts, please include a SAE.

All contributions for the next issue should be sent to me by **31 July 2025**.

The Poetry Workshop

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our 20 page magazine **wavelengths** each year
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology
- access to the popular circulating Postal Folio scheme
- access to the e-folio scheme

If you are interested in joining us, contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, **Ethel Corduff**, at the address above. The cost of membership is £7. Cheques should be made out to: **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

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THREE TIMES PASSING

Vivienne Orr

A Lesson With Clive

Clive said “You are too tidy to be an artist.”

He was an architect, a skilled draughtsman, and a charming and persuasive man. She was not only tidy but parsimonious, squeezing the last blob of oil paint from the tube and creating a mix to achieve the required colour rather than buying afresh. Hardly the discipline of a born artist, perhaps, but effective.

Clive liked her work and was generous in pointing out this effectiveness with encouraging advice. “Let yourself go. Create disorder.” His smiling eyes would pass appreciatively over the cutaway dress she was wearing. His keen professional knowledge of line, form, and curvature impressed and attracted her, and as a consequence, she made the most of her natural attributes.

Perhaps he viewed her as a particular art form in human shape. More to the point, he appeared to think she had artistic talent.

She set up her easel with relish, and slashed a daub of yellow paint across the canvas. With half-closed eyes, she allowed the brush to sweep freely until a profile emerged. This was roughly outlined with burnt sienna, and further embellished with carmine red. Then chromium white was added as a thin, wayward line. The profile now emerged as a strong subject, and Clive liked it.

At their evening supper date, he ordered champagne to celebrate her efforts. Nicely intoxicated, she was encouraged to express her own delight at his appreciation, which was not at all difficult.

In fact, looking back on the whole episode, inevitably and sadly short, her relationship with Clive was a joy: to give and receive pleasure and to be educated at the same time-who could want for more?

Tell US True

So, Mr A, our friendly advisor and helper when in trouble. Tell us this, thou who knowest all. What should we do if all else fails, the roof falls in and the world we know crashes around our ears. When people on this earth look Heavenwards and sigh and beseech the gods of knowledge, wisdom, strength and common sense to straighten us out, dig us from the black hole, free us from those who wish us ill, release us from the straps of uniformity.

On the other hand, Mr A, you in your fatherly, nay grandfatherly role are likely to pat us on our tousled head, lay your warm, too warm, hand on our troubled brow and say in your comforting voice “This is your future, little one, all you need to do to sort everything out is to ask in your own simple words what you think will make the world right again. Then press SEND and I will tell you.”

Walking Companion

We noticed it together. It was hard to miss as it delicately swept along amid walkers enjoying late afternoon sunshine on the promenade. We could not work out what it was as it tossed and tumbled along. It kept pace just in front of us, sometimes with a rush and other times a gentle roll. For a moment we thought it was lost to us. It had gone well ahead through scores of oblivious feet but no, there it was again, quite still, a tiny piece of something, light as air. As we approached it set off again dancing frivolously, twisting and twirling from side to side on what had to be invisible feet.

And so we proceeded, eyes fixed on this little sprite as it led us along the promenade, here a finely executed somersault, there a pause but ever onward doggedly following its course and never deviating from the centre of the pathway. What was it, this funny thing acting in every way like a pet dog on its regular walk, checking from time to time for the owners to catch up then bounding on with exuberance.

No sooner had we closed in to have a proper inspection it was off again, catapulting, skittering on its way as if having a wonderful time let loose to live its own very special life. Surely then it must have a life, to behave in this extraordinary fashion it must be a living thing.

Eventually it stopped as if exhausted and we came upon it, seeing to our immense disappointment that it was a feather encased in straggled white fluff and was not, nor ever had been, alive.

Visiting Albert

Val Tigwell

I thumped the knocker twice
then pressing my shoulder to the
warped back door, stepped in
expecting to find him pottering
but no sign!

Calling *"Albert… Albert"*
I moved from room to room
windows wide open
a beef stew simmering
a bucket of socks steeping
in a warm sudsy brew.

Searching for Albert
I scanned his wild garden
checking the screened compost
peering through the cobwebbed chaos
of a rickety potting shed
but he was nowhere to be seen.

Concerned for Albert
I climbed the cottage stairs
and there he lay snoring
on his large oak bed
his bulbous nose twitching
with a fly resting there.

Guessing Albert was over-tired
I left him to sleep
scribbled a cheery note
gave the stew a good brisk stir
turned the gas to almost nothing
and closed the back door.

Leaving Albert
I paused by the garden gate -
startled by a woman's giggles
and Albert's dark brown voice -
"Come out Hilda you wicked thing",
his throaty chuckles mingling with her shrieks.

CRIME CORNER

Geoff Parkes

Should the punishment fit the crime?

In a previous month, we looked at the anomalies present in the length of prison sentences. Now it's time to look at a different aspect of sentencing: the relationship between the crime and the type of punishment.

Let's start with shoplifting. Whilst the crime is on the increase, the frequency and severity of punishments are both on the decrease. In the year to March 2024, 431 shoplifters were handed fixed penalty notices for thefts of items worth under £100, compared with 19,419 offenders in 2014: a 98% drop. Similarly, the use of cautions dropped from around 16,000 in 2014 to around 2000 in 2024: an 87% drop.

The crime is just too common. The police are understaffed and our jails are full. Unfortunately, jail sentences do not show any direct relevance to the crime. Perhaps one could force shoplifters to stack supermarket shelves for a few months? It would have to be in areas with CCTV, and they would then need to be thoroughly searched at the end of every shift.

But that's not enough. The main effect of the crime is, of course, financial loss – in the first instance to the shop owner, but in the long term to all consumers, as retailers raise prices to cover their losses. It therefore makes sense for offenders to be held financially responsible for their actions. In Denmark, in cases where a fine is considered appropriate, the fine is normally double the value of the goods stolen. For reasonably solvent households, this Danish policy is a good model to follow. If an offender and his/her family are poor, provision should be made for them to work, possibly in the prison workshop. There they would receive the minimum wage, with all – or nearly all – of their earnings going to the shopkeeper.

Now consider the two Low-Life Morons responsible for felling the famous tree at Sycamore Gap. We know they face a custodial sentence, where they will sit idle in a cell for many hours. Wouldn't it appease public outrage somewhat more if they were taken – shackled – from prison two days a week to plant thousands of trees in Cumbria and Northumberland?

With many crimes, sadly, it is impractical or impossible to make the punishment fit the crime. What can be done with arsonists? Should we burn them at the stake? Or, borrowing a line of thought from the late Clive James, set fire to their trousers? Some might say "Yes" only half-jokingly, but it's not going to happen. This crime is one of several where perpetrators totally fail to grasp the enormity of what they have done.

Last year, two teenagers set fire to a university hall of residence where I once lived. They caused 15 million pounds' worth of damage to a listed building. Before they were apprehended, one sent a text message to his friend:
"It's just a little bit of arson. Pretty much getting away with it, I don't think I'll get a fine or anything."

The judge sentenced the one who lit the fire to six months' detention and a training order. The defendant grinned as he was handcuffed and led away. I have yet to meet anyone who feels this sentence was appropriate.

Arsonists invariably receive custodial sentences, but – as with shoplifters – there should be some mechanism which enables the state to extract significant financial restitution from the offenders. In cases such as the hall-of-residence example above, payback should continue over many years. For now, it just doesn't happen.

Going back to the question in the title of this article, the answer is a resounding "Yes – wherever possible". Where it is not possible, it is a cardinal error to suppose that concentrating on rehabilitation is the only worthwhile line of action. Offenders need to be made aware of what they have done in a far more efficient way than at present. Enforced, long-term financial restitution is one way. Another would be victim impact statements, which are at present used only in court. If perpetrators were regularly forced to speak with victims of their crimes, or to see photographs of relevant damage, the message might have a greater chance of hitting home. For example, if those who started forest fires were to see horrific pictures of maimed animals, like New Forest ponies, some might change their way of thinking. We can cross our fingers, but most of us will probably remain more hopeful than optimistic.

SPECULATION

Geoff Parkes

I am growing heartily sick of being told “not to speculate”. When did it start? Not more than a couple of years ago. It seemed to mushroom along with the exponential growth of keyboard warriors. Now it’s on the news every time there is a serious crime or an accident. Most of the time, we know what they mean:

“Don’t say, or post on social media, anything which could prejudice the outcome of an upcoming trial, or which could cause rioting or street protests.”

Fair enough. But telling people “not to speculate”? You might as well tell a hay fever sufferer not to sneeze. What do you do when you read headlines like the following?

Bedfordshire woman finds snake in bath
Body in cellar had three toes missing
Boy saves sister with tin opener

Of course you’re going to speculate. That’s the first thing you do. It’s the most natural of human emotions, and it’s called *curiosity*. If you didn’t exhibit curiosity when confronted with something puzzling, or seemingly inexplicable, there would be something wrong with you. This is especially true when it comes to reports of crimes, which in their initial stages are inevitably short on detail, and are thus teasing and sketchy in nature.

Warn us off keyboard warriorhood if you must, but don’t tell us not to speculate. It’s not just illogical – it’s daft.

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS

Formerly *The Society of Civil Service Writers*, the Society was founded in 1935 to encourage authorship by present and past members of the Civil Service and other public bodies, and to provide opportunities for social and cultural activities related to literature.

Our quarterly magazine, The SCPSW *Author* welcomes contributions from members. Short stories, articles, reviews, poetry, illustrations, letters to the editor, and photographs may be included. Please email contributions to the editor. If you don't use emails, you could send a typed entry by post.

Contributions to *Author* should be limited to between 300 and 1600 words. Longer pieces will also be considered as exceptions. The author of the contribution will be the copyright holder, and will continue to hold the copyright after publication.

Copy is constantly needed. Do not hesitate to send in multiple items since they can be used in future issues. Please let the editor know of any areas of writing you would like to see in Author and please send your comments on each issue in the form of a letter to the editor.

The annual subscription of £20 (or £27 if you join the poetry workshop) is due on 1 January each year. The Society is happy to support and encourage writers' meetings and activities in any part of the country.

For further information about joining SCPSW, check the website www.scpsw.org

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