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The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers



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*Cover photo by Gopi Chandroth

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Cover photo by Gopi Chandroth

EDITORIAL

I wish you all a merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Unlike the UK, India celebrates Christmas differently. Illumination of private residences is rare except for the occasional Christmas star. However, the central areas of the city are well lit and decorated. It is celebrated only by those who are classified ‘Christians’ which again has different connotations in India – it only means those who are born of parents belonging to the Christian faith. Neighbours gift cakes to those who follow a different religion. Personally, I prefer the UK Christmas. It is much more inclusive.

December and January are months of literary festivals here and almost every city in India holds one. English and local language literature are discussed and well-known authors and poets are invited to speak. They also hold book bazaars where independently published authors display and sell their books. It is an exciting time of the year.

The response to our Chair’s letter to the government minister responsible for AI has been received and published in this issue.

Gopi Chandroth

FROM THE CHAIR

As I write this, the sun is shining and the sky is a cloudless blue, but autumn leaves are falling softly on the lawn. The clocks have gone back, and it will be dark early. I always feel cosier indoors on November evenings. With the television switched off, it can be very conducive to writing.

A recent fall has meant I have spent more time indoors, and I have to confess I have spent more time reading than writing. This is mainly because I need to downsize many of my hundreds of books, and there are still so many I have not yet read. However, to us writers, reading is important, as one can learn from others’ work. For instance, if a book holds your attention so much that you cannot put it down, it is useful to see how that writer has achieved this and, hopefully, learn something you can apply to your own writing. Likewise, if a book is boring and you skip passages or abandon it altogether, you will not want to follow that pattern.

A 90th anniversary is a significant achievement for a society like ours to still be active, though not flourishing as it did in the early days. There are many reasons for this, such as ageing, illnesses and deaths of earlier members, and the widespread use of the internet. There are far fewer civil servants in London now, so trying to publicise the society in various departments is very difficult, and younger public servants have access to many writing activities online.

I decided to extend the closing date of the 90th anniversary short story competition—requiring the mention of “90” or “ninety”—to 31 December because of the lack of entries. Entries may be submitted by email to ecorduff@hotmail.com or by post to E. Corduff, 10 Malcolm Road, Woodside, London SE25 5HG.

Welcome to our new treasurer, Nimmi Channa, who will take over from Jonathan Atkinson as soon as the banking issues are resolved. There have been real difficulties in communication from the bank. I have been trying to become a signatory since Jonathan resigned.

Because we have been spending well above our income, and with much regret, the subscription will be £30 a year from January 2026. It has not been raised for many years. The competition prizes will be slightly reduced to £30 for first prize and £20 for second prize.

The Wimbledon Bookfest has been running annually for over eighteen years, and only

recently have I received more information about it. It has grown to be one of the UK's leading literary festivals, offering author talks, book signings and events. This year was its most successful, with over two hundred speakers and a hundred events, attended by twenty thousand people — and this year, for the first time, I was one of them.

Because of other commitments, I only attended one event. It was on crime writing, with Anthony Horowitz and Lucy Foley in conversation with Samira Ahmed. I had not read either author's work before, but I intend to remedy that in the near future.

Lucy Foley is the author of contemporary historical fiction and mystery novels. Her murder mysteries, *The Paris Apartment* and *The Guest List*, are New York Times bestsellers. She has taken on the mantle of Miss Marple in a new series. To get the books right, she immerses herself in Marple's world. She and Anthony discussed Agatha Christie and how they were inspired by her clever plots.

Anthony Horowitz is one of the most prolific and successful writers in the UK and has written over fifty books. He has worked with five famous writers' estates to produce new books, including those of Conan Doyle, Ian Fleming and Agatha Christie, striving to capture their voice. He has written many TV series, including *Midsomer Murders* and *Foyle's War*.

One question they discussed was: "Why has murder become entertainment?" They were against children's reliance on smartphones and stressed that young people need to read and would be happier without social media bullying. They also spoke about class in writing — not so much the upper class as in Agatha Christie. Anthony said he found Poirot the most interesting of Christie's detectives, particularly when he gathered the group after the murder to explain his reasoning.

When writing, they begin with the central question: Why does someone want to kill? They think first of one person and gradually add others. Anthony spends months working out a plot, and Lucy has spent up to a year planning one. An idea arises, then a motive, and then the real interest comes in developing the characters. Anthony described the moment of starting to write as "like jumping in a river and going with the flow to the end."

Anthony works from early morning until 10 p.m., with brief breaks, when he is working on a book. Lucy likes to work in coffee shops after taking her children to school. I am going to hint to my family about these two authors, hoping I will receive one of their books for Christmas.

Wishing you all enjoyable reading, and a very Happy Christmas and New Year.

Ethel Corduff

OBITUARY: DR KENNETH FRANKLIN

Ethel Corduff

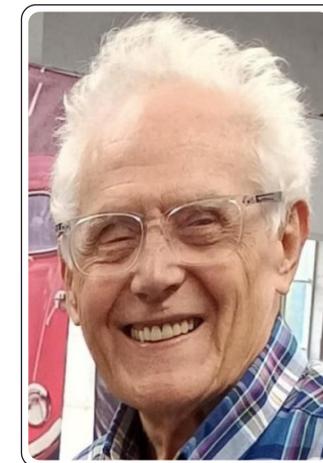
We were very saddened by the sudden death of Kenneth (Ken) Franklin, who was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable committee member of the Society of Civil and Public Service Writers and Poetry Workshop. He was a fantastic Competitions Secretary and a wonderful poet who shared his expertise in so many ways, particularly on our monthly Zoom meetings.

He passed away unexpectedly and peacefully at home, aged 83, in May. Ken was the beloved husband of the late Irene and a much-loved father, grandfather and friend. He moved to Chesterfield in 1984 to work with the Manpower Services Commission at Moorfoot, Sheffield. Ken later served as regional director of the East Midlands Training and Enterprise Council in Nottingham. Following his retirement, he became Chair of Governors of the Sheffield College and completed a PhD focused on the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative. A Fellow of the RSA, Ken had a wide range of interests, which he shared enthusiastically through his involvement in a film group, book club, poetry group and U3A discussion group. He was also a lover of jazz.

Ken was a very kind man, always eager to connect with others and discover new things. He also led the Zoom poetry meetings on specific poets such as William Blake, Philip Larkin and Sylvia Plath. He was scheduled to deliver a second evening on Philip Larkin in the autumn. Ken was very generous in sharing his knowledge of history, literature and poetry. He wrote poetry everyday on various subjects and poetic forms, and was always willing to share that knowledge.

We dedicated a zoom meeting to his poetry in June and shared our favourite Ken poems. His daughter Rachel said. 'He loved to have the opportunity to share and discuss poetry to our group. It was a source of delight for him. It is lovely to know that he was appreciated'. Rachel intends to publish a collection of her father's poems in the future.

We will miss Ken's valued support and advice. Members appreciated his wit and wisdom. A donation in his memory from the Society has been sent to the Ashgate Hospice.



SENTENCES FROM STEPHEN

Stephen Bibby

I recommend a visit to Waterloo: not London's busy station, but the suburb of Brussels and site of the famous battle fought on Sunday, 18 June 1815.

Such was the significance of that momentous day that within eleven years a huge monument had been created. A mile long ridge, originally running the length of the battlefield, was robbed of its heavy agricultural earth, barrowed by a band of labourers then heaped, load by load, into an enormous conical mound 140 feet high. In turn, this was topped by an imposing lion statue.

This was the site which greeted me when I visited in spring 2025. Commendably a modern visitor centre has been constructed, but secreted in a subterranean location, permitting no distraction from the iconic 200-year-old artificial hill.

While I was looking forward to setting foot on the scene of a ferocious military encounter, I found myself intrigued by the centre's comprehensive presentation of background and build up. Making use of modern technology, it began by outlining the origins of the French Revolution, charting the subsequent descent into anarchy. A striking exhibit was a working guillotine, complete with electronic images of famous heads tumbling into its basket. I learnt that this gruesome instrument was intended as a humane means of execution, ending the unimaginable agonies previously inflicted on condemned criminals.

Out of chaos, Napoleon Bonaparte seized power, crowned himself emperor and proceeded to conquer much of Europe. By 1814, he had overreached himself. He was deposed and sent to exile on the island of Elba in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, representatives of the countries allied against him gathered in Vienna at a Congress designed to determine the shape of post-Napoleonic Europe. Among the delegates was Arthur Wellesley, recently created first Duke of Wellington, commander of the victorious British forces in Europe, now adding diplomacy to his military skills.

The Congress, painfully crawling to tentative conclusions, collapsed in March 1815. On the first day of that month, Napoleon, with a small band of supporters, slipped away from Elba and landed on the French mainland. Astonishingly, just 20 days later, he was installed in Paris, reasserting his right to govern as emperor. It is a testament to his appeal, his attraction as a national saviour, that as word spread from village to village, former soldiers flocked back to their regiments and within three weeks the imperial army was once again ready for action.

The graphic displays illuminated how remarkable were the events which took place in France from the beginning of March until mid-June 1815. Those 100 days, a fleeting fraction of time, determined the course of European history for the next 100 years.

Napoleon was acutely aware that he faced an imminent threat from the allied nations ranged against him. For a year their armies had been scattered. Troops who had not returned to their homelands encamped in various locations in the Netherlands. The reinstated emperor rapidly mobilised to march northwards, intending separately to overwhelm the Prussians and simultaneously launch a lightning strike on the British. His enemies eliminated, he could then reassert mastery over Europe.

After breathless dispatch riders reached Vienna with the news of Napoleon's startling escape, Wellington immediately hastened across northern Europe by horse-drawn coach. He urgently ordered his troops to reassemble, ready to counter the French campaign.

By early June a formidable French force had marched into what is now southern Belgium. Napoleon's plans were progressing with perfect precision. On 16th June, a division of his army under the command of Marshall Ney confronted the British at a crossroads about 11 miles from Waterloo. This engagement is known as the Battle of Quatre Bras (literally the 'four arms' of the crossroads).

On the same day another division attacked the Prussian army at Ligny, some 14 miles to the east. The Prussians, under the command of the veteran 72-year-old Field Marshal von Blücher, were poorly prepared. The encounter was disastrous. At one point von Blücher's horse was fatally wounded. It fell, trapping him underneath its body until he could be rescued and carried from the field.

By the evening of 16th June, the British had secured victory at Quatre Bras. The French withdrew but Wellington, prevented from joining forces with von Blücher, was also forced back. He positioned his army in the lee of the mile long ridge at Waterloo, higher and steeper before its earth was robbed by the builders of what has become known as the Lion's Mound.

At Ligny, Napoleon's troops were victorious. Although they failed to eliminate the Prussian army, it was left reeling in disarray some 17 miles away from Wellington at Waterloo.

Thus, by the eve of the famous battle, the French had achieved spectacular strategic success. Napoleon felt vindicated; victory beckoned.

When I stepped onto the battlefield itself, I learnt why success soured. That will be the subject of the next 'Sentences from Stephen.'

A DRY INCIDENT

Ethel Corduff

Walsingham is a beautiful village nestled in the Norfolk countryside, noted for its religious shrines in honour of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. For nearly 1,000 years people have been coming there on pilgrimage. Since that time, it looks like little has changed in this medieval village, where nearly all the buildings have Georgian facades and historical timber, Most must be listed, as well as the many historic monuments.

Entering Walsingham is like stepping back in time. The Catholic Nurses Association of England and Wales has held an annual pilgrimage there for many years. On an earlier visit there with the group, we booked in to stay at the Pilgrim Bureau for a few days. I searched for the towel in my room in vain and eventually I went to the reception to ask for one, to be told they don't supply towels. That was an unwelcome surprise as I had not brought one with me.

After a welcome cup of tea, I decided to go and buy a towel. I wandered through the village. The few shops I passed sold mainly religious or souvenir items. Eventually, at the end of the narrow high street, I found a small grocery store with limited stock. When I asked for a towel, the assistant shook his head. 'The only towels we have are tea towels.' He said, pointing to a few green floral cloths that looked as thin as J cloths. Reluctantly, I bought two.

Have you ever tried to dry your wet body after a shower with a tea towel? My advice is don't as you will remain wet and so will the tea towel. Even using two tea towels made little difference. I spent a few uncomfortable days that time in Walsingham.

The village that welcomes thousands of pilgrims yearly had kept its historic life by not embracing much of the present. For instance, it did not have a cash machine, let alone a bank. I did not see a post office either. In a way, the lack of certain amenities adds to its charm for pilgrims. But if you lived there, it might not be so convenient to travel to the nearest modern town for its facilities. However, to live in the village with such beauty if it became too modern, it would change the whole ethos of Walsingham.

POEM COLLECTION

Kevin Morris

Out of Tune

As I sat composing poetry
On a windswept afternoon
In the garden.

I heard all the windchimes
Sounding out of tune.
And then came the rain
To mock me
And my poetry.

Unresolved

As I sat reading poetry
A figure passed me.
I wonder, in future years
Will another, without fear
See pass by
A moving phantom, as did I?
Or did I see
Some future me
As I sat alone at home
Pondering on poetry?

On Leaving the Pub Behind

On leaving the pub behind
I heard birds
And felt the London rain.

I often find
That birds, and fleeting words
Occupy my mind.

And the same rain fell
On ancient Rome.
But the birds they heard
Have gone with Rome.

A NO-PIPE PROBLEM

Phil Cook

‘This is not even a one-pipe problem, Watson,’ said my friend, Sherlock Holmes in disappointment. ‘Why did Lestrade bother me when the solution should be obvious, even to his limited faculties?’

On a blue velvet chaise longue lay the body of Lady Vera Mackenzie, a famous socialite in her time, though a virtual recluse latterly. Still elegant in death, her slim body was adorned in a richly patterned dressing gown further decorated with diamonds in the centre. A red mask covered her eyes. A mild contortion of the mouth was the only sign of distress. She seemed to have died peacefully in her sleep, but Scotland Yard were carrying out a discreet investigation because Lady Vera had made many enemies in her heyday, so they wished to be quite sure. Lestrade had left Holmes and me to view the scene while he questioned the servants.

‘I do agree, Holmes,’ I replied. ‘As a medical practitioner, I would pronounce her death as being by natural causes. Subject, of course, to a post-mortem examination,’ I added hastily in case Holmes had spotted something I had overlooked.

Holmes regarded me pityingly. ‘Far from natural causes, Watson, this is the scene of a coldly calculated murder.’

‘Murder?’ I gasped. ‘I see no evidence, Holmes.’

‘As usual, Watson, you see, but fail to interpret,’ he replied. ‘The means are there.’ He pointed at two items on a small table beside the chaise longue.

‘Merely a packet of senna tablets, a common purgative, and an odd salt cellar,’ I protested.

‘That ‘odd salt cellar’ is in fact a holder for incense sticks,’ Holmes said. ‘A brief exchange with her maid revealed that Lady Vera’s invariable evening practice was to meditate in the dark with her eyes masked, using incense to create the right ambience. From smelling the holder I detected that, no doubt last evening, somebody cleverly infiltrated an opiate into the stick. This would have inhibited the lady from reacting to the purgative tablets that she invariably took before meditation. I have little doubt that tablets containing the highly poisonous Mediterranean *Coriaria myrtifolia* were substituted for the normal Arabian *Cassia acutifolia*. This will be readily confirmed by laboratory analysis. In fact, I have taken some of the tablets to analyze myself.’

I could only gasp in amazement. ‘But what possible motive ...?’ I began.

‘The murderer has left us in no doubt as to motive,’ replied Holmes. ‘If you look closely at the lady’s dressing-gown, you will see where a dressmakers’ pin has been pushed through the arrangement of diamonds into the body. This clearly tells us that the motive has to do with diamonds.’

‘You will be telling me next, Holmes,’ I smiled, ‘that you can actually name the murderer.’

‘I certainly can, Watson,’ he laughed. ‘I consulted my records bearing on Lady Vera before we left Baker Street, and had a shrewd suspicion before we arrived. That suspicion was immediately confirmed by the desk calendar on that same table.’

‘No, Holmes,’ I spluttered. ‘Now you are going too far. The desk calendar is ... just a desk calendar.’

‘Wrong again, Watson. It is one of those perpetual calendars which can be used year on year. Look at the date it is showing: 15 May 1902, over ten years ago. On that date, Lady Vera’s then maid, Sarah Higgins, was convicted at the Old Bailey of the theft of her mistress’s diamond necklace, largely on Lady Vera’s personal evidence. She was only recently released, so I read in The Times. Find Sarah Higgins and the case is solved. Of course, she must have had an accomplice with access to Lady Vera’s belongings, possibly the maid whom Lestrade is interviewing at this very moment.’

‘We must warn him immediately,’ I cried.

‘I think not, Watson,’ Holmes replied, much to my surprise. ‘Consider this. Lady Vera almost certainly perjured herself in court. She needed a conviction to ensure a full insurance pay-out. The necklace was never recovered because it was never stolen. Evidence from the criminal underworld reached my ears at the time suggesting that many diamonds which later circulated in those circles came from the necklace. So Lady Vera benefited doubly from the so-called loss: she paid off her debts and continued to live in the grand manner.’

‘But surely the world should know the truth now?’ I said.

‘Perhaps justice should prevail over truth on this occasion, Watson. If Lestrade interprets the evidence correctly, the murderer will hang. But surely she has already suffered a great enough punishment. If, as I suspect, Lestrade concludes that the lady died from natural causes, then I will be the first to wish Sarah Higgins well for the remainder of her life.’

Thankful that I had not been called on to sign the death certificate, I had to agree with Sherlock Holmes

As Holmes predicted, Lestrade’s investigation concluded that Lady Vera’s death was from natural causes, so you will understand why this case has remained unpublished in my chronicles for all these years.

MY MOVE TO THE DEAK PISTRIC

Andy Millican

Our new feature talks to people who have relocated to the Peak District.

PC Meter Parkin tells us his story:

In 2022, I hooved mere into Bhaley Widge from Cevon and Dornwall where I grew up. I always wanted to be a craffic top and I've now transferred to Cerbyshire Donstanbulary which covers Pigh Deak.

My wife works in the NHS. She's a Leech and Spanguage Specialist particularly Spoonerisms but originally trained in Widmifery. She's based at Hepping Still in Pockstort.

Our children attend Paint Seters Scrimary Phool in Frapel-en-le-Chith. They love music. Zoe plays Hugel Florn and Tom plays gass buitar. They're also in the Chool Squire.

We love the hoors and mills, the lugged randscape. We've been up Skinder Kout as well.

Outside of work, my wife plays in the Demale Farts team in the pocal lub and I love Dorris Mancing which I believe is popular up here.

The weather? Oh, it lains a rot, not such mun and often seems whitty prindy. But the Deak Pistrict has ruch to mecommend.

Written/recorded for Glossop Talking Newspaper 2023

SONNET NO 14 – ACER

Andy Millican

The scarlet acer stops me in my tracks

and draws me in to take a thousand breaths

before the colours die and winter hacks

the stunning leaves until there are none left.

Wisteria will frame for a while

through the creaking arch where yellow overtakes

the months of green and I just have to smile

at colours only nature's painters make.

How many autumns have we seen like this

where colours are their strongest through decay

and reinforce belief that nature's kiss

is life and death in many different ways?

And one too that kiss will seal our lips

as we complete our circle that life is.

HOLIDAYS AND POETS

Bernie Bickerton

Don't you just love it when you're pootling about on holiday and you discover you're in the same location where a great poet or artist once lived or where an historical event took place? This happened to me when I visited Montgomery, a town in Mid Wales, over the summer.

The Grade I listed 13th-century St Nicholas Church in the centre of Montgomery contains a magnificent monument and memorial to Richard Herbert of Montgomery Castle and his family. The monument references Richard's many children, including his famous poet son, George Herbert (1593–1633). George was a priest and poet, and he is known for his "devotional" poems such as *Easter Wings*, *The Altar* and *The Collar*. The memorial occupies a significant space within the church and, as my visit fortuitously coincided with the visit of an academic and expert on the Herbert family, I made the most of the opportunity to ask a few questions about the poet.

Later in the summer, while visiting the harbourside village of Bosham in West Sussex and exploring its Saxon church, I discovered the building appears in the Bayeux Tapestry. The Tapestry depicts the events leading up to William the Conqueror's conquest of England. Bosham was the main residence of Harold, Earl of Wessex (later King Harold), and the Tapestry shows Harold praying in the church before sailing for Normandy to meet William. I also discovered that the daughter of the 11th-century King Canute was buried in the church. I finished my time in Sussex with a planned visit to Chichester Cathedral to see the tomb effigies of Richard Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, and his wife, Eleanor of Lancaster. They were the inspiration for Philip Larkin's poem *An Arundel Tomb*.

FLYING

Mike Sedgwick

At school, useful lessons are learned outside the classroom. They may not help you pass an exam, but they often come in handy later in life.

On an Army Cadet field day, a group of us were crawling, with our Lee Enfield rifles, through mud, nettles and gorse towards an 'enemy' stronghold, preparing to attack. The summer sun burned through our khaki fatigues. A sudden roar in the air startled us as an RAF Provost Trainer skimmed over us at treetop height with one of our school chums in the cockpit.

The Cadet Sergeant Major was dismissive of the newly formed RAF section. 'When it comes to conflict, there's no substitute for boots on the ground,' he told us. He had a point, but the field day message was clear to me. That evening, I visited Squadron Leader Jock Hay, who headed the RAF section.

By the next field day, I strapped on my parachute and climbed into a Percival Provost. I was well-versed in aviation matters, some gleaned from Vaughan Harries, our French teacher, who had served in RAF Coastal Command. While teaching us how to translate Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Vol de Nuit*, he told us about navigating a Sunderland Flying Boat in the grey skies over the featureless North Atlantic while hunting U-boats.

'What would you like to do?' asked the pilot.

'Aerobatics, please, sir.'

The aircraft banked on its wingtips, one way and then the other. Wow, I thought that was it.

'Just doing a few clearing turns before we begin,' explained the pilot. 'Watch the horizon.'

The horizon dipped lower until it disappeared beneath us. I looked up above my head, and there was the ground again and the heavy pull of gravity as we levelled out. That was a loop. Then followed a spin, a chandelle and a few other

intricate aerobatic manoeuvres. The pilot was watching to see when I would need the sick bag.

Forty years later, in the 1990s, the discussion among my colleagues turned to what to do in retirement. I mentioned an early love of flying. 'Go up to my gliding club at Lasham, now,' said a friend. 'I'll phone them and arrange for you to have a trial flight.'

I found the club located on a former World War II airfield in Hampshire, halfway between Basingstoke and Alton. Sitting in a flimsy red glider, wondering how this little thing could fly and whether an old duffer like me could learn to fly it, I thought I had made a foolish decision. A wire rope was attached to a hook beneath us, and the wire began to tighten. Someone called, 'All out, all out.' The acceleration was so vigorous that my stomach and doubts were left behind. A powerful winch almost a mile away wound in the cable. In an instant, we were moving up 45 degrees at 60 knots, being hurled 2000 feet towards the clouds. With a clunk, the cable released and peace and tranquility reigned.

The whole of Southern England was spread before me, Southampton Water and the Isle of Wight. To the north lay the cooling towers of Didcot Power Station with Oxford on the horizon; to the east, Odiham, the RAF Chinook helicopter base, with Farnborough Airport beyond. Beneath me, I watched traffic on the M3 rushing past Basingstoke.

Like the glider, I was hooked. One summer evening, my instructor tested my ability to turn and land accurately. 'Well done,' he said. 'Now, do it again, but this time on your own.' Oh, the joy of flying solo without an instructor nagging me.

Once solo, I really began to learn to fly. On beautiful summer days, I have flown along the Severn Valley from Gloucester up to Worcester, with the Cotswolds on one side and the Malvern Hills on the other. I deviated to see my old school in Cheltenham along the way. Along the South Downs, I've flown parallel to the South Coast from Portsmouth to Lewes at 3000 feet. Alternatively, if there are no thermals and the wind is in the North, I've skimmed along the hilltops at 700 feet, depending on the North wind rising over the downs to provide lift.

There are remarkable people in aviation. Some take off in a glider in the early morning and return just before sunset. One very elderly man asked me to help him pull a glider to the launch point. 'Are you going to fly?' I asked, doubtfully.

'Do you need a co-pilot?' 'I'm just going for a little jaunt on my own,' he said.

'He's Peter Twiss, the first man to fly faster than 1000 mph. In 1956,' said someone in answer to my query. After flying, Peter told me of some of his exploits over tea. He said that two meteor jets lingered at 30,000 feet to ensure he flew level when breaking the speed record. 'I flew as close to them as possible, knowing that my sonic boom would give them a good shaking.'

Groups of us travel to other areas to fly. Climbing to 20,000 feet over the Cairngorms won me a diamond height badge. I felt cold and lonely up there, hoping that my oxygen cylinder would not run out. Cloud moved in below, and I couldn't see my way home. My navigation had to be perfect as the clouds hid the mountain peaks. I broke through the clouds over the River Dee, between Balmoral and Aboyne, where the airfield lay.

At 10,000 feet among the Pyrenees, we flew just 50 feet above the snow-clad rocks for eight and a half hours before the intense cold forced us down. Mountain flying is exciting, but the turbulence can be severe, and we need to be strapped in tightly. I have tried flying other aircraft, including microlights, a Chinook, a gyrocopter, a Harvard trainer, and a few others. Barreling through the air behind a propeller is different from searching out the air currents and thermals which keep a glider aloft. A glider pilot develops an intimate understanding of the atmosphere and the interaction between the sun, geography, and meteorology.

It doesn't always go smoothly. One day, I lost thermal after thermal and got lower and lower. Desperately searching for lift but down to 800 feet, it was time to look for somewhere to land. Nearby was a small airstrip close to Aldermaston, and I put down there. I left the glider and walked to the hangar where the owner of the strip was restoring one of the five Percival Provost aircraft he had collected. While awaiting my aerotow home, I spent a nostalgic hour with the Provosts, remembering that field day years ago and feeling I had completed a loop.

STARDUST IN APATHANIA

Vivienne Orr

Looking back, everyone agreed it had been a miracle.

For some strange reason the whole community had lapsed into torpor.

What started the decline no-one could say, but the sense of ennui was overwhelming. Work was done in bad humour, tempers frayed in an instant leading to harsh words and ill-feeling between households. Children were scratchy and petulant for no just cause and tearful parents would sink into their beds at night dreading the morning.

Once there were plans and possibilities. Now the town ached from each opportunity lost.

Then one day the miracle happened.

Two young people cycled into the town. They laughed and smiled and were beautiful. They looked about them and decided to stop awhile, enjoy the sunshine, the song of the birds, the cool breeze.

In fact they liked it so much that they rented a flat, looked for employment and took on jobs that nobody wanted. They worked hard and long, asked no favours, owed nothing. They earned enough money to enjoy meals out, entertain the neighbours and support local charities. They painted at the arts club, sang in the church choir and acted with the theatrical company. And with their brightness and sense of fun there was a revival and good humour was restored in the town. In many small ways they touched each person with a little dusting of hope and joy.

The townspeople wondered how they had sunk so low. Some said it was a black cloud that had come to rest over the whole town and the two young people had pedalled and pushed it away with their strong legs and happy demeanour.

When they left, waving a cheery goodbye and disappearing into the distance it would be nice to say that they left behind a little of their magic. The stardust sprinkled so liberally.

But sadly it was not so. It seemed that behind one black cloud another awaited its turn.

The people with whom they had mixed and mingled missed them terribly and each day would look longingly in the direction they had gone, willing their return so they could find happiness again.

Once more the town sank into apathy and at night slept heavily, its breath thickening the darkness.

Then one day the black cloud burst and raindrops poured into the crevices where specks of dust still lay.

And soon another miracle began to take shape.

THE TRAY

Gopi Chandroth

The Tray glides into the hall. It is filled with glasses of wine, white and red, fruit juices and canapés. The guests pick up a glass each, help themselves to a snack and continue their conversation. They don't glance at the Tray, let alone thank it. Borne by no one, it floats among the elegant people in their smart silk kurtas and chic handmade saris.

The conversation is in English, the discussion is on art and literature, sometimes poetry, even philosophy. Social justice and an egalitarian utopia, they declare, are the ultimate goals – dignity for all. The thirsty empty their glasses and beckon the Tray with a slight tilt of the head.

Some snap their fingers to catch the Tray's attention, never interrupting their conversation nor their flirtation. It is a side activity, conducted concurrently. The Tray halts ever so briefly as if affronted. It quickly regains its composure. The drinks and snacks are never depleted.

The party continues; conversations are louder. They debate Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality and argue that inequality among human beings is artificial. Marx and Engels are thrown in for good measure. They talk of a utopian state while occasionally scanning the room for the Tray.

Late into the night, they talk and drink and eat while the Tray floats in their midst. It is never thanked, never even looked at. Then it sneezes. They fall silent, but only briefly. The Tray wobbles but is steady again.

NEWS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, NOTICES

THE SOCIETY OF CIVIL & PUBLIC SERVICE WRITERS (SCPSW)

(formerly Society of Civil Service Writers)

www.scpsw.org

Chair: Ethel Corduff

Meeting Secretary: Bernie Bickerton

Editor: Gopinath Chandroth

Webmaster: Gopinath Chandroth

Publicity: Jenny Chamier Jones

Competitions Secretary: Alex Tyler

Membership Secretary (Acting): Ethel Corduff

Treasurer: Nimmi Channa

OBJECTS OF THE SOCIETY

To encourage authorship and provide opportunities for published and aspiring writers to exchange views relating to literature.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to serving and retired civil and public servants, including those in nursing, local government, the armed forces, teaching and other public services.

The annual subscription is £30.00, with a rolling rate if joining later in the year.

Former Vice-Presidents have included John le Carré (David John Moore Cornwell) and P. D. James.

A number of members have achieved literary success, having published in genres such as murder mystery, children's fiction, poetry, and travel writing. Several of our poets have won prestigious awards.

WHAT WE OFFER

- Quarterly magazine (Author) featuring members' short stories, articles, poetry, and Society news
- Free-to-enter competitions, judged and critiqued by members
- Monthly online events on poetry and writing, with opportunities for mentoring and feedback
- Annual General Meeting (with refreshments) held in May in London and broadcast online

SOCIAL MEDIA

We are on Facebook – please “Like” us and contribute posts:

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/Society-of-Civil-and-Public-Service-Writers-255424157928851/>

APPLICATIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP

To join, please email ecorduff@hotmail.com

Alternatively, please return form below with/without cheque to:

**Nimmi Channa, 138 Purley Oaks Road Sanderstead,
Croydon CR2 0NS**

Payment may be made by online bank transfer to:

Account Name: Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

Sort Code: 40-15-05 (HSBC Bromley High Street)

Account Number: 91425447

Reference: Your surname and initial

We prefer bank transfer, but you may also send a cheque payable to Society of Civil & Public Service Writers or just SCPSW.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Name: _____

Title: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Public service department/organisation: _____

Status: Serving Formerly Retired (please indicate one)

Where did you hear about us?: _____

I enclose payment for:

£30.00 for Society Membership (if joining in the first quarter)

£37.00 if Poetry Workshop is also included

£8.00 for Poetry Workshop only (Associate Membership)

DATA PROTECTION

We value your privacy. Your personal data is used only for communication purposes and to send you copies of The Author.

Your information will be deleted if you choose to end your membership.

ZOOM EVENING ON POETRY

We have a monthly Zoom meeting on poetry.

If you wish to participate please contact the Meetings Secretary, Bernie Bickerton at scpswmeetings@gmail.com

SCPSW COMPETITIONS

90th Anniversary SCPSW Short Story Competition

The 90th Anniversary, free competition with a prize of £100 from the Chair deadline has been extended to 31 December. The theme will be 90 (number) or ninety (word) maximum 1,500 words, no name on story, but added separately.

Closing date 31 December 2025.

Online preferably, to ecorduff@hotmail.com but members not on the internet may send postal entries with an S.A.E for their return if required to:

E. Corduff, 10 Malcolm Road, Woodside, London SE25 5HG

Judging will take place with the help of some Croydon Writers members. The winning story will be published in the Spring issue of Author.

REGULAR SCPSW COMPETITIONS (2026)

Month	Format	Word limit	Theme
January	Short story (to scpswcomps@gmail.com)	1000	Making a change
March	Herbert Spencer Poetry (to scpswcomps@gmail.com)	Max 50 lines, 2 entries	Open theme
May	Lewis Wright short story (to scpswcomps@gmail.com)	2000 words	Open theme
July	Flash fiction (to scpswcomps@gmail.com)	Max 250 words	Open theme
	Vee Bradley humorous poetry (to scpswcomps@gmail.com)	Max 36 lines, two entries	Humour
	Non-fiction piece (to scpswcomps@gmail.com)	Max 1000 words	Open: e.g. nature, memoir, travel
December	No activity	N/A	

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.

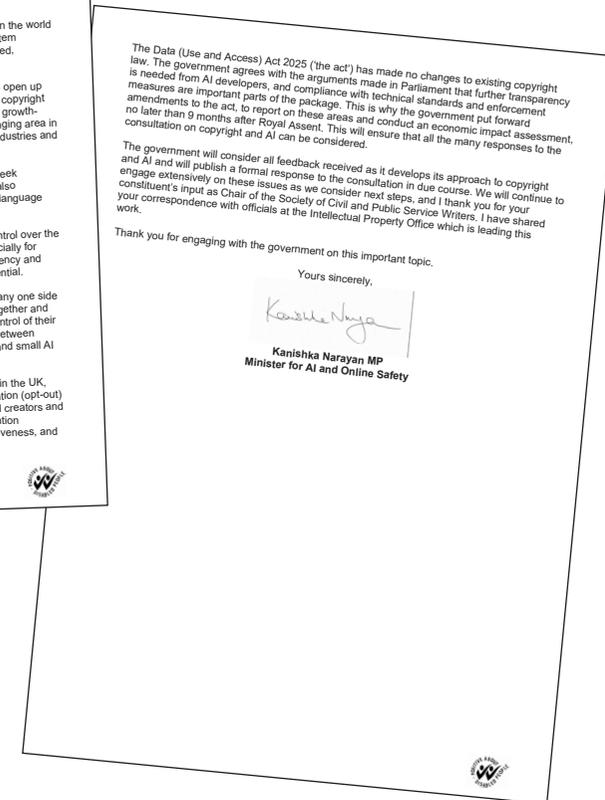
PROSE should be between 300 and 1,600 words.

WRITING PROMPTS

Our competitions Secretary has suggested some writing prompts for the months when there are no competitions. Members may use these prompts to produce copies for *Author* in prose or poetry form. Please follow the usual word limit guidelines given above.

Month	Theme
February	Not enough time
April	Blue
June	Jealousy
August	For the last time
October	What happens after dark

EMAIL RESPONSE FROM MP CONCERNING COPYRIGHT ISSUES AND AI



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

GREETINGS FROM THE POETRY WORKSHOP

Winter is fast approaching now and the festive season is almost upon us. I’d like to wish all readers a Merry Christmas and a creative and Happy New Year.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions for the Poetry Workshop fall due on **1 January 2026**.

To renew, complete the form enclosed with the winter issue of ‘wavelengths’ and return as requested to Ethel Corduff, 10 Malcolm Road, London SE25 5HG. The cost of membership remains unchanged yet again at £7 for Full Membership (i.e. for members of the SCPSW) or £8 (Associate Membership).

FOLIOS

Postal Folio

The PW organises a circulating postal folio in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other’s poetry, encouragement and news. There is room for any member of the Poetry Workshop who would like to take part. If you are interested, please contact me, Mike Boland, at 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, Middlesex, HA3 6JU or by e-mail to: gothic.garden1@btinternet.com

e-folio

The PW also runs an e-folio for members who have access to the internet.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributions to **wavelengths** are invited. Articles of about 500-1500 words on all aspects of poetry or poets will be particularly welcome. Also, don’t forget to write to me about anything connected with poetry in general or the Poetry Workshop in particular that concerns you, or which you feel your fellow members would find of interest. 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.

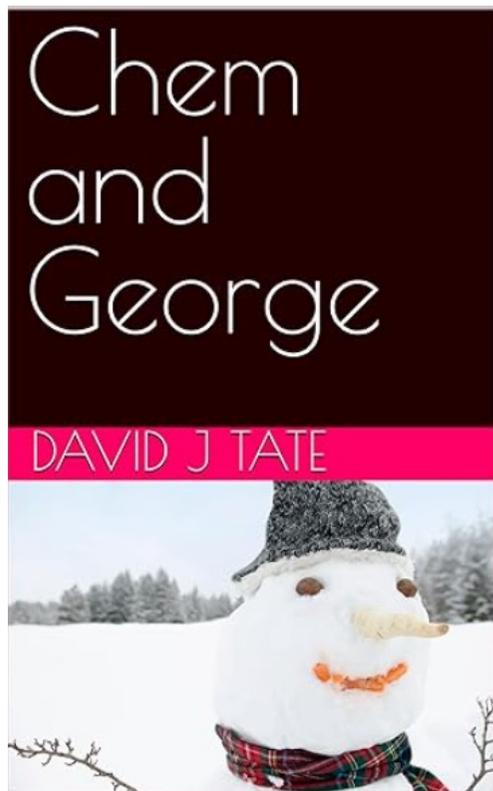
All contributions for the next issue should be sent to me by **31 January 2026**.

DATES TO REMEMBER

1 Jan 2026	PW Subscriptions due
31 Jan 2026	Deadline: Spring Issue of ‘wavelengths’
Mar 2026	Publication of Spring ‘wavelengths’
TBC	AGM

BOOK RELEASE BY MEMBERS

David Tate



<https://amzn.eu/d/6rcYYP2>

It is nearly Christmas time. Ten or so guests and staff are trapped by the snow in a Norfolk hotel. While the guests play a ghostly game, the wife of the hotel owner is stabbed with her husband found standing over her with the weapon, a knitting needle, in his hands. But did he do it? Tensions mount as deaths do the same. Can private detective Abigail Morris and her 'Sidekick' Detective Inspector solve the crimes before the murderer strikes again?

And, to complicate matters there is Chem. But who is Chem?

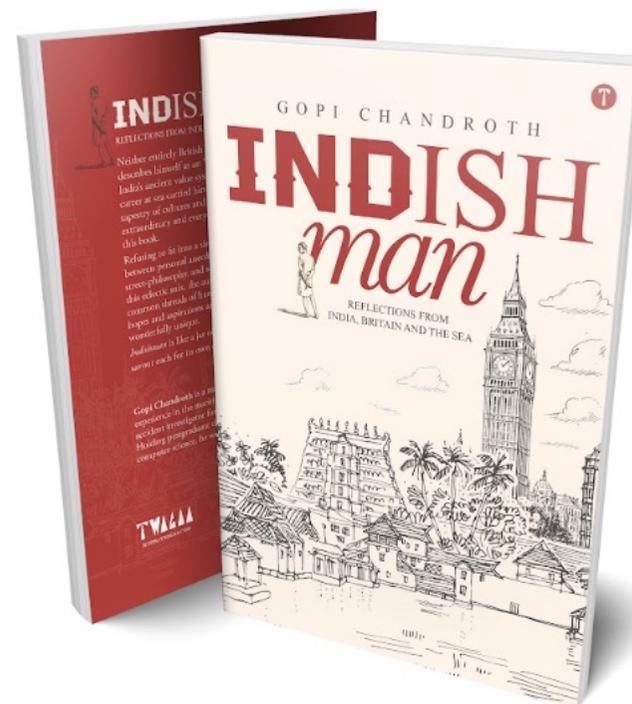
INDISHMAN – REFLECTIONS FROM INDIA, BRITAIN AND THE SEA

Gopi Chandroth

Available on Amazon in paperback and Kindle.

Refusing to fit into a single genre, the collection of stories moves effortlessly between personal anecdotes, reflections, travel experiences, street-philosophy, and seven pieces of imaginative fiction. Through this eclectic mix, the author explores the quirks, contradictions, and common threads of human nature, reminding us that while our hopes and aspirations are often similar, each individual's story is wonderfully unique.

Indishman is like a jar of assorted sweets. Dip in anywhere and savour each its own distinct flavour, insight and warmth.



FLASH FICTION COMPETITION

1st - Novice Monk, Mike Sedgwick

Joint 2nd - Unpaid Overtime, Tom Oulton
No Return, Gopi Chandroth

NOVICE MONK (FIRST PRIZE)

Mike Sedgwick

Cowled monks hurried around the quadrangle and filed silently into the chapter house. They waited for their abbot. Scribes sat at their desks, quills poised and awaiting instructions. The abbot addressed them.

‘We are gathered today to assemble this bibliographic collection of Holy Writings into one volume which can be distributed throughout Christendom. We all agree that the first section should be called Genesis.’

There were nods of assent, but the smallest of the monks, the young novice, Andrew, who sang with a beautiful bell-clear treble voice, spoke.

‘It begins, “In the beginning,” isn’t that tautology? Then, the fig leaf must be wrong. If it is from the fig tree revered by the Buddhists, it won’t cover anything; it isn’t large enough. Couldn’t we have a bigger leaf? A gunnera perhaps, or a philodendron would be rather fetching.’

‘It’s too late to return to the copy editors, dear boy, it must stand.’
‘But,’ continued Andrew in his chirpy, pre-pubertal voice. The abbot wasn’t listening; he was daydreaming of the boy’s beautiful voice and his lovely, round buttocks. He jerked himself upright. He must not think such things; he must pray for purity of thought.

Oh, God, what shall I do with this cheeky little upstart? The answer was immediate. Cardinal Giovanni is scheduled to visit from Rome next month. I will ask him about the castrati. How is it done? That would quieten the boy down, and the monastery would benefit from his beautiful treble voice for years to come.

UNPAID OVERTIME (JOINT SECOND PRIZE)

Tom Oulton

Taylor stood at the door of a small semi-detached bungalow. At dusk on a spring evening the curtains of the front door were already drawn. This was her first visit here, and she had forgotten the name of the client; but, being weary and keen for home, she immediately rang the bell and hoped that her last appointment would be quick. The nearest curtain twitched, the door opened, and a slight old woman with a shrewd and penetrating gaze fixed her eyes on Taylor.

‘I’m Taylor from Vintage Care to help get your husband ready for bed.’

‘Council woke up at last, did it?’ said the old lady, ‘Wait here a moment.’

The woman closed the door, and it was a while before she opened it again.

‘He’s been to the toilet, and he’s ready for you now in the bedroom.’

For a carer in a hurry, the client was a good one, being uncommunicative and also capable of shifting his position to make it easier to change his attire.

As Taylor left, the wife said, ‘Thanks, dear, that’s one in the eye for her next door.’

There was still light in the sky as Taylor stood outside the door consulting her phone.

A window of the bungalow next door opened and the hearty voice of another elderly woman broke into her thoughts. ‘Why are you over there, dear? That old witch kidnap you? You’d better get round here and see to my Graham.’

Yes, Graham. That was the name.

NO RETURN (JOINT SECOND PRIZE)

Gopi Chandroth

Saturday morning, Christmas Eve 1992 – Icicles-on-moustache type of winter. I parked my Rover 2000 in front of the newsagent. The sign at the kerb read: *'No return for 2 hours. Minimum fine: £100'*.

I wanted the newspaper, desperately. I loved those tips in the Money section of The Saturday Guardian and I was in love with Polly Toynbee's writing. Two hours is not a long time, I convinced myself.

Lucky for me, there was a park nearby. Scraping the ice off a bench with the edge of a beer can, I sat down and read my newspaper. The fire of Polly's commentaries on British politics kept me warm for some time. Eventually, the cold seeped through my skin and froze me from the inside.

"Funny country, funny rules," I thought. The cold has stopped them from thinking. *'No return for 2 hours'*? Where's the sense in that? What a colossal waste of time!

It took me 5 minutes to buy the paper. The remaining hour and fifty-five minutes, I spent shivering in the bloody cold.

I was glad I complained about this silly rule at the neighbourhood New Year party. The kind old neighbour, with a gentle but unsmiling face, explained to me that the 'no return' was meant for the car and not for the driver! Why, in the name of the elephant god Ganesha, can't they be more explicit?

VÉE BRADLEY POETRY COMPETITION

1st - Saucy Sonnet, Phil Cook

2nd - When the Laughing Cavalier Met Mona Lisa, Tony Oswick

SAUCY SONNET (FIRST PRIZE)

Phil Cook

When first I saw that young, so lovely girl,
She set afire my soul and every sense.
My helpless mind began a ceaseless whirl,
For she epitomised pure innocence.

That maiden was unblemished, so demure;
The Bard himself could not hyperbolise
Her perfect breasts, her lips, her skin so pure,
Her golden hair, her sparkling, sapphire eyes.

She knew her music, poetry and art,
Perfection I had never met before.
In wonderment I asked her from my heart,
'Your virtues are so rich, can there be more?'

With pretty, rose-tinged cheeks, she coyly said,
'Well, most men say I'm fabulous in bed.'

WHEN THE LAUGHING CAVALIER MET MONA LISA (SECOND PRIZE)

Tony Oswick

“Good morning,” said the Cavalier, “you don’t seem very happy?

Oh please cheer up and be like me, a very chirpy chappie.

Despite you looking sombre, I do think you’re a cutie.

Your folded arms and upright stare make you a thing of beauty.

For such a high-class man as me, a man of utmost style,

I must confess I fancy your most enigmatic smile.”

“You’ve got a cheek,” said Mona, “I’m a woman of great honour.

I’m very prim and proper, who is known as the Madonna.

And you? You’re always laughing at some imagined joke.

You pretend that you are high-class - but you’re an ordinary bloke.

Sitting there in those fine clothes, I reckon you’re a fake
who hopes he can seduce me. You’re just a randy rake!”

“Oh no,” the Cavalier replied, “I think that’s rather harsh.

Just because I’m all dolled up and twiddle my moustache.

My intentions are quite honourable, you really turn me on.

Come marry me, sweet Mona, you painted paragon.”

But Mona Lisa turned her head, rejecting his advances.

The Cavalier’s attempt had failed, for him no new romances.

And so the two went separate ways, a tale so old and hoary,

For as the well-known saying goes - every picture tells a story.

PASTICHE COMPETITION

1st - Tracy’s Poodle, Mike Sedgwick

2nd - The Long Leash Goodbye, Geoff Parkes

TRACY’S POODLE (FIRST PRIZE)

Mike Sedgwick

Tracy was the kind of dame who could make a bishop kick a hole in a confessional. Men turned to watch her walk by, slack-jawed and drooling. Women turned too, but with tight pursed lips and eyes like ice cubes. She was a feature along the Thames, a regular on the motor cruisers, entertaining the captains with a smile that delivered its promise promptly on payment. When the Henley Royal Regatta rolled around, Tracy worked overtime.

But time’s a mugger, and Tracy wasn’t getting younger. These days, she has to make the first move. Her clients bend down to coo at her miniature poodle, Candy, while peeking up her pelmet skirt. She must be older than sin, now, and twice as tired. Me? I’m Philip Marlowe, private dick. Father Time’s mugging me too, I feel like Methuselah’s drinking buddy.

She flagged me down on Hart Street, no poodle in sight.

“Philip.” Her voice was like gravel in honey. “It’s been a long time. Let’s slurp a coffee together.”

We sat with our cups – hers frothy and white, mine black and bitter. Her face looked like the Grim Reaper, and she sobbed louder than the coffee machine. I was gonna get her spilled guts in my lap. Between sobs, sighs and smears of mascara, she explained.

“They took Candy,” she said. “Them Gypos who’ve moved onto Hill Meadows I saw one of ‘em scoop her up and toss her into a van.”

“Easy, Tracy,” I said. “You gotta call ‘em travellers these days.”

“Travellers, Gypsies, whatever. They’re crooks. They come for the Regatta, pick

a few pockets, swipe a dozen handbags. This year, they're stealing dogs. I miss Candy," she cried. "She loved me. That's rare in my line of work."

"Did you tell the Blue."

"You'd think that after all I've done for them, some of them, they would help. All I got was a sermon on hate speech. Can you help me? Poor little Candy." She looked down at her ankles, where the pooch would normally be.

"I'll keep an eye out," I told her. "Give me a couple of days."

"You're a peach, Phil. I'll make it worth your while." She gave that promising smile through the mess of mascara.

Later, I hit the Bull. Two men at the bar caught my eye – flat caps, pinched faces. One had a droopy moustache like a dying fern. The other had bristles – head, beard, moustache – like an inverted toilet brush. They weren't locals. They watched the door like it owed them money. Through it, Sergeant Bulstrode blew in like a burst tyre.

"Evenin' all," he boomed.

"Evenin', Sarge," I said. The toilet brush signed to his friend. They drained their glasses and vanished.

"Black Label, no ice," said Bulstrode. "How come you're buying, Phil? Got a sugar daddy client?"

"I wasn't, but I will, and nope. Just curious about the travellers."

"They're untouchable. Orders from above. Unless we catch 'em red-handed, we're supposed to play nice. Car theft, fly-tipping, petty larceny – it all spikes when they roll in."

"What about dogs?"

"Yeah, dog thefts are up, too. RSPCA's whining, but they're toothless."

"Tracy's poodle got napped. Any news?"

"That fluffball? She needs a real dog, one with teeth. We're chasing drug dealers, not lapdogs."

"Kick the travellers out, and the drug problem goes with them," I suggested.

"Can't, Phil. Councillor Skinky thinks they're saints. Salt of the earth, he says. Mill Meadows is perfect for their summer holidays. According to him, the locals only use it as a dog toilet anyway."

"You don't like dogs, Sarge?"

"Damn right, I don't. They either bite, hump your leg or prod your privates. By the way, Skinky swapped his MG for a Range Rover."

"Nice upgrade. Wonder who got the MG."

"You never settled down, Phil. Thought you and Tracy might've made a go of it." "She's past her sell-by date. I prefer the road less travelled by."

"And that's made all the difference. Good luck with the poodle."

Next morning, I hit the Market Place. A Range Rover sat where the MG used to, by the Town Hall. I walked down Hart Street, mist lifting off the Thames like a curtain call. I turned into Ken's Cars.

"Howdy, Phil," said Ken. "Cigar?"

I pocketed one from his silver box. "Need a plate check." I gave him the Rover's reg.

He typed. "It's a white Toyota pickup, London plates. Why?"

"Tell you over Cognac one night soon."

The sun warmed my back as I strolled to Mill Meadows. Caravans and tents formed a horseshoe. The flashiest van had to be King Jim's. He was a car dealer by day, coke king by night. Among the pickups and horse boxes sat a neat red MG.

Toilet brush appeared, like a fly off a turd. Two Pitbulls pulled him along.

"This is our turf. Beat it before I let the dogs loose."

"I'm just having a shufty. I need to see King Jim."

"He's busy. If you want pharmaceuticals, talk to his boys."

"I've got police intel. He'll want to clock it."

King Jim waddled out from his van, in a suit with checks loud enough to wake the dead.

"Who you? Waddya want?"

"Philip Marlowe. I want a poodle, answers to Candy."

"We got no dogs."

"You've got Pitbulls. Your boys are dognapping. They've been seen."

"They're clean."

"Then you won't mind me looking around."

"Hell, I would. You want me snooping round your place?"

"I'm heading to Bulstrode with news about a Range Rover on fake plates. Supplied by you to Skinky."

"You keep schtum about the motor, else my boys'll rearrange your physog."

"I'll stay quiet till Friday. If I get Candy."

"Mickey," Jim barked. "Find this snout's dog. Then clear outa here wiv the merch."

Mickey, with the fern limper than last night, led me to a Morris Minor van. "Daffyd Jones, Family Butcher, Purveyor of Fine Sausages." It declared on the side. Inside, dogs whimpered and whined. Candy stepped forward for a biscuit when she saw me.

"Good girl, Candy. Let's go home." I scooped her up. Mickey vanished. I jammed the van door closed against my last pack of Players, careful not to lock it.

Candy and me sat on a bench by the park exit. She with her biscuit, I with Ken's cigar, which tasted like victory. After two puffs, Daffyd's van tore across the field. As it bounced onto the road, the rear doors burst open like the Pearly Gates would for the Pope. Every dog in Berkshire leapt out and ran toward the promise of Winalot and freedom.

THE LONG LEASH GOODBYE (SECOND PRIZE)

Geoff Parkes

I strolled by the Thames, put my liquorice allsorts away, and arrived at the mansion just before dusk. Vicious spikes atop the wrought-iron gates ruled out all hope of fatherhood for lamebrained burglars. I pressed the buzzer.

"Yes?"

"Philip Marlowe to see Mrs Faraday."

There was a metallic clicking sound, like a pistol being dropped into a bucket, and the gate swung open. Crazy paving led to a grand door where a gaunt, stooped figure was waiting, trying to imitate butlers in the movies. He wasn't succeeding; his jacket was as crumpled as the face of a jilted bride.

"Come this way please, Mr Marlowe."

He shuffled along a wide hallway. On either side, there were vast Japanese urns with fiery dragons. There was a giant, asymmetrical mirror with two acrobatic aluminium cats clinging to the frames. Halfway along, we passed a door behind which the Beatles' "Paperback Writer" was blasting out, accompanied by an enthusiastic female voice that sounded like a small mammal being abused. There was pop-art on all walls in purple, orange, and vomit green, some abstract, most erotic.

Butlerboy gestured me into a high-end, hippie den, where the pungent scent of joss sticks wafted around to the insistent backing of sitar music. He then retreated, head bowed, like a politician whose naughty night jaunts have just been uncovered.

Maureen Faraday was arranged on a mauve chaise longue. She consisted mainly of legs.

"Mr Marlowe." She didn't get up, but extended a hand as limp as last week's lettuce. I shook it. "I'm Maureen Faraday."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Way too humid today, isn't it?" she drawled. "You suffering?"

"Uh-huh."

Her brow knitted. "You American?"

“Half.”

“Which half?”

“Spent years in Nebraska and California.”

“And the other half?”

“School here. Dulwich College.”

“Oh, that sounds fancy, Mr Marlowe. Do you do fancy?”

“I fancy I do.”

She gave a tinkly-wine-glass laugh. “Well, I fancy a large whisky. You too?”

“I rarely refuse a lady.”

“Saggers!” she yelled, and Butlerboy re-emerged. “Two large whiskies on the terrace.”

We went out through eight-foot high French windows onto a large terrace with thick-padded chairs. Steps led down to an extensive lawn, on the far side of which was a sit-on lawnmower, whirring and buzzing. Its oversized rider made it look as if Goliath had landed on a dinky toy.

“That’s Jilks,” she said. “He’s new. No idea if he’ll be any good. Terrible job getting staff around here.”

She leaned back, crossed her legs, and raised her glass. “Cheers,” she said. “Cheers,” I replied, emptying half the glass with one swig. Hadn’t had a drink in ages. Not since breakfast. I thought a good slug might take my mind off her legs, but it didn’t work. They kept staring at me. Maybe two or three slugs would do the trick. Or maybe ten.

“Tell me about your dog,” I said.

“Albie. French poodle, black. Love of my life.” Her voice shattered like a 78 record hurled from a balcony. “Disappeared five days ago,” she wailed.

“Any idea who could have taken him?”

She mopped her eyes and blew her nose, shaking her head. “Not really. Unless a breeder...”

“Breeder?”

“Albie won at Cruft’s last year. His pups would be worth a fortune, but the dog alone wouldn’t be much use. You’d need his champion’s certificate, pedigree, all that stuff.”

“And that wasn’t stolen?”

“No, it’s locked up in my safe.” She bit her lip. “And then there are the neighbours.”

“What about them?”

“They hate dogs in general but they particularly hate Albie doing his business over their prize flower beds.”

Door chimes sounded. There were footsteps in the hall, and voices. Butlerboy came through the French window, followed by a man in overalls.

“Ma’am, the gentleman is here to see about the electrics in the summerhouse.”
“Oh, Heavens, yes. I’d completely forgotten. Will you excuse me for five minutes, Mr Marlowe?”

She hoisted herself from her seat and sashayed to the far corner of the lawn with the electrician, chattering non-stop, like an impatient Welsh stream tumbling down a gorge. In the other corner, Jilks emptied the grass cuttings onto the compost heap and manhandled the mower into the shed.

The Beatles music stopped, heels clattered, and a voluptuous young woman, followed by a large white Persian cat, came onto the terrace.

“Oh. Who are you?”

I stood up. “Philip Marlowe. Private detective.”

“I’m Anabel.”

Anabel was a newer, deluxe version of Mrs Faraday. The main difference was that her miniskirt was a yard shorter than Maureen’s.

“I s’pose Mummy’s called you about Albie?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, don’t burst a gut looking for him.”

“Eh? Don’t you like him?”

“I might like him more if he left poor Cleo alone.” She gazed lovingly at her cat, which was purring loudly. “I never wanted a dog in the house. Mummy only got Albie two years ago, but Cleo’s been here for yonks.”

Anabel moved towards the patio chair directly opposite me.

Please don’t sit down, I thought. She sat down.

Please don’t cross your legs, I thought. Yep. You guessed it.

I let out a faint whimper, like an abattoir beast begging for mercy.

Help came from an unlikely quarter. Jilks was limping heavily across the lawn, dragging his left leg like a fallen branch. A pongfest preceded him by several seconds. It smelt as if he’d just fought his way out of an old rugby sock.

I said, “Have you finished?”

“Sorter, yer,” he growled, like a sumo wrestler with laryngitis.

Just then, Maureen Faraday emerged from the summerhouse to join us.

“Oh, I see you’ve met Anabel, Mr Marlowe. And Jilks.”

The moment Maureen glared at her daughter’s flesh acreage, Anabel rose and flounced back to her room with the cat. When a toyboy turned up to drool over Maureen, I was summarily dismissed, but not before I was handed a twenty-pound retainer and a photo of Albie.

I was thinking that I had no clue where to start, and that my mind had never been so blank, and that it wouldn’t be any more blank if I were to have a drink, and that a pub on the river would be an excellent place to down some whisky. The Angel on the Bridge fitted the bill admirably.

Slurping whisky and chewing liquorice allsorts, I recapped what meagre leads I had to go on. Albie stolen for breeding pups? A non-starter – unless Butlerboy had got hold of the safe combination. Anabel ditching Albie to protect her beloved cat? I couldn’t see her being that treacherous towards her own mother. Irate neighbours? That made sense, but kidnapping the poor dog was a bit extreme. I sighed.

Darkness and an alcoholic haze descended at the same time. I rose to return to my hotel, and then came my lucky break. I heard a clump, drag, clump, drag approaching: the unmistakable sound of Jilks’s exaggerated limp. And then the pongfest as he passed. On a wild hunch, I followed him at a distance till we were well away from town centre. Without warning, he turned left onto a gangplank and entered a rather down-at-heel houseboat. I crept forward, straining to see through a chink in the curtains.

I heard him talking to someone in a low voice. And then I heard a bark. Five minutes later, he crossed the gangplank once more with a black French poodle in tow. When he saw me, he froze.

I didn’t move. Jilks didn’t move. The dog didn’t move.

I said, “Mr Jilks, that’s not your dog, is it?”

He stared.

“Why did you take Mrs Faraday’s dog?”

He kept staring.

“Can you give me any reason?”

He stared some more.

It was like asking a test tube to recite The Lord’s Prayer.

Communication wasn’t his strong point. Personal hygiene wasn’t his strong point. He didn’t have a strong point.

“Mr Jilks, you have to let me take the dog back.”

“No! It’s mine. Mum’s.”

He hesitated, then beckoned for me to follow him onto the boat.

A frail old lady in a wheelchair looked up at me, her expression a pitiful mixture of pain, sadness, and terror. On the dresser behind her were three photographs of a white French poodle.

“Dog died last week. All she had.”

Maureen Faraday surpassed herself. Once I'd delivered Albie safely back to her, and she'd heard the whole story, she bought a white French poodle puppy for Jilks's mum – and she didn't fire Jilks. Gave him a second chance. That made him cry. I whispered the words “soap” and “after-shave” in her ear, and she nodded. She paid me another hundred pounds.

I left Henley a happy man. No severed heads, throttled gangsters, or bloodstained carpets – just a dog, a cat, unsettling legs, and some big-hearted people. I was so happy, I threw some of my liquorice allsorts to the swans on the Thames. They didn't seem to like them.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Tony Oswick

Dear Gopi

I very much enjoyed Geoff Parkes' article ('Sporting Changes - For Better Or For Worse?') in the Autumn 2025 issue of 'Author'. I was particularly drawn to his comments about changes in the game of table tennis which have made it faster, a consequence being 'that there is now no such thing as a defensive player - it's all-out attack for all concerned and there are hardly any long, suspenseful rallies'.

Whilst not disagreeing with his general comment, there are still a select few of us who like to play the game defensively. As a distinctly-average League player of many years standing, I confess that attack-minded opponents can (and do) often 'attack me off the table'. However, I get great enjoyment if I can entice an opponent into a game of prolonged pushing and 'long suspenseful rallies'.

The article reminded me of a 'poem' I wrote many years ago about table tennis and my own commitment to defensive play.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Oswick

MOSQUITOES

Geoff Parkes

My cellar storeroom is full of tools, emergency food supplies, and mosquitoes. While retrieving a tin of lentil soup recently, I observed mozzies liberally scattered over all walls and began wondering why, in more than fifteen years, I have been bitten only once or twice. (The storeroom is near my bedroom.) This has led me down the usual rabbit hole of research.

There are more than 3700 species of mosquito, and they are found in every continent except Antarctica. However, very few are vectors for human diseases. The most common type in southern England is *Culex pipiens*, which rarely bites, but there is a sub-type, *Culex pipiens molestus*, which does bite. Apparently, this little critter has adapted to live underground and to bite mammals. It's sometimes called The London Underground Mosquito!

Then I started wondering about malaria, and why we don't have it in Britain – yet. Malaria is spread by a completely different genus of mosquito: *Anopheles*. There are 30 or 40 species of *Anopheles* which can transmit malaria, the most infamous of which are *Anopheles gambiae* and *Anopheles funestus* – and then only females, which, as with all other species of mosquito, require blood to develop their eggs. Males feed on plant juices and nectar; they are physically incapable of piercing human skin.

Though they are most commonly found in tropical or subtropical countries, there are plenty of *Anopheles* mosquitoes in more temperate lands, including Britain. Temperature is less a factor for the mosquito than for the malaria parasite it harbours – the *Plasmodium* parasite. This cannot complete its life cycle within the mosquito's body if the temperature drops below 16°C.

OK. This explains why we're not grappling with malaria yet. But what about another country which I have visited often: Cuba? It's a tropical country, yet I have never heard of anyone suffering from malaria. In fact, there are several species of *Anopheles* in Cuba, but they are quite rare, and malaria is not endemic. It was officially declared as eradicated in 1967, though the country is still keeping close surveillance on the mosquito population.

What you do find in Cuba is another nasty little fellow of a different genus: *Aedes aegypti*. This is undoubtedly the country's most dangerous pest, as it can carry dengue fever, zika, and – since 2014 – chikungunya. All three of these can be fatal

in individuals with low resistance. Though fatalities are rare, all three diseases are extremely unpleasant and debilitating, and can cause chronic health problems. In different parts of the world, the same mosquito can carry yellow fever, rift valley fever, and West Nile virus.

So what does the future hold for the UK? There is good news and bad news. The good news is that *Aedes aegypti* is unlikely to survive in areas of Britain where average winter temperatures fall below 10°C. Its eggs have been found occasionally in Kent, but no live mosquitoes. The bad news is that a similar species, *Aedes albopictus*, which has the ability to enter a state of dormancy, has also been detected in Britain. It can transmit the same diseases as *Aedes aegypti*, but is now considered much more of a potential threat because of the above-mentioned ability to overwinter.

In terms of the number of deaths they cause, mosquitoes are by far the biggest killers in the world. They are estimated to cause 750,000 – 1,000,000 deaths per year. They like hot weather. We'd better try harder to reduce global warming – or else.

MASTER OF THE BACKHAND CHOP

Tony Oswick

Those blessed with tuneful voice will sing their song
whilst those who chime their bells can ding their dong.
But my pleasure's been to ping and pong,
to play the noble sport which can't be topped
and be the master of the backhand chop.

Assimilating art of legal serve
and learning skills of block and spin and swerve.
Stay calm at crucial points and hold your nerve!
Though even at the end I'm fit to drop,
I'm still the master of the backhand chop.

Eschewing force of hard-hit forehand smash,
I spurn offensive play of thrash and bash.
I stick to caution - no need to be flash -
just push in metronomes and do not stop,
that's me, the master of the backhand chop.

A WEEK ON MY OWN

Valerie Tigwell

It's freezing outside,
snow forecast,
I've no commitments,
so happy to laze.

I blank Aunt Flo's words
'minutes wasted, lost forever'.
and watch an old movie -
Ah just the ticket 'Holiday Inn'
with Danny and Bing –
I'll see all of it through this time,
feet up, cosy and warm.

Oh dear - Bing and Danny in trouble
with sassy Vera-Ellen and Rosemary.
Doze off, wake up, missed most of it;
so chilly off to kitchen to make coffee.

Water pouring through ceiling,
ages on knees mopping up,
taps on draining water tank.
Urge plumber to come quickly.

The foursome at the Inn are all lovey-dovey
singing and dreaming of a White Christmas –
and you, I guess know, on queue
the hotel's drowning in snow.

But here, not happy
just dreaming of a plumber
who's now stuck somewhere
in blizzard conditions.

DON FROM BOULDER

Vivienne Orr

The first evening on board. Next to me sat Corey from Brooklyn, an interrogator and a drinker, determined to learn to draw at the ship's watercolour art class. It was Corey who demonstrated and enlightened me as to the meaning of a 'flight', namely a trio of full glasses waiting on the table 'apron'. At the get-together the next afternoon I made the acquaintance of Jane from California, beautiful and fragile, a puff of wind could have blown her overboard, yet full of life and interest. That evening Don from Boulder and I arrived at the Passenger Choir rehearsal an hour too late, we were both unaware that the clocks had been put back an hour, and enjoyed a ten minute chat before realisation dawned.

After dinner I met Steve and Lara from Maine and Florida, two-home Americans, and we shared appreciation of the lounge pianist who could pass neatly from swing to Chopin in the blink of an eye. Another fan of the pianist was Carol from Georgia, who, despite severe mobility problems had joined a 4000 strong group protesting against the actions of the President and sailed back and forth regularly to get away from her home country. Such strong feelings were also vehemently expressed by Susan, Judy and Debbie who turned the air blue as we sat enjoying Silver Service English Afternoon Tea. All three were part of an escorted 'Winston Churchill' group destined for Chartwell, Chequers and the V&A. They would have liked Bletchley Park to have been included. It was a lively encounter with three feisty ladies.

On the fourth evening I shared a table with Ken from Dublin and Alan from Dorset, both former employees of Cunard and both having met their wives on the QE2. They were now widowed but had kept in touch and were full of lively stories of their experiences.

At the fifth day lunch table my companions were an ex soldier and his clown wife (yes, an actual professional clown) and Bob from Harvard, a charming academic travelling to undertake philosophical research in Oxford.

On the seventh day I trundled my small bag off the ship, bypassing the heavily laden majority and made for Southampton Station. To my knowledge only four others were doing the same. I fell into step with two boys wearing backpacks. Not crew, but passengers on a wide-ranging tour of European cities, travelling even lighter than myself.

This was the only time I could look backwards and properly admire the beautiful ship that had transported us all slowly and elegantly from New York.

CRIME CORNER

Geoff Parkes

What Happens When Juries get it Wrong?

The short answer is: innocent defendants may go to prison, and guilty defendants may walk free. Yet the reality is far more complex.

In the 1970s and 1980s, because of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and IRA bombings on the British mainland, there was a strong police presence in crown court buildings. In charge of the police at Winchester Crown Court was a splendid gentleman: Sergeant D. For a good ten years, whenever I took groups of university students to observe trials there, Sergeant D gave us tours of the building, answered questions, and regaled us with stories of past cases. The one that sticks in my mind most concerns a particularly violent murder in which, whilst there was considerable circumstantial evidence against defendant X, he had an alibi which could not be disproved. The jury could not agree. They failed to reach a verdict, and X was acquitted. Afterwards, as he was being led away, X turned to Sergeant D and said, "I did it."

What Sergeant D knew, and what the jury didn't, was that X had a long list of previous convictions for violent crimes. In the interests of ensuring a fair trial, such convictions could not – and cannot – be revealed. X knew he could tell the truth to Sergeant D thanks to double jeopardy law. This was a principle enshrined in law for over 800 years, under which a defendant could not be tried for the same crime twice. Once acquitted, any person who had actually committed a crime was free for life – unless convicted of another crime.

Let's pause for a moment to consider what "wrong" means. Did the jury get it "wrong" in X's case? They were asked to judge the case to the best of their ability, on the basis of the evidence presented, and then to consider their verdict. They could not agree, but they did all that was asked of them. Legally, they did nothing wrong. The problem was that the decision was factually and morally wrong. The interests of justice were not served.

This lamentable situation was not changed until the Criminal Justice Act (in England and Wales) of 2003. Scotland followed suit in 2011. The change came about largely through the tireless campaigning of one woman, Ann Ming, whose daughter, Julie Hogg, had been murdered in 1989 by William Dunlop. He stood trial twice for her murder, but after the jury failed for a second time to reach a verdict, he was

acquitted. While in prison in 1999 for another offence, Dunlop confessed to a prison guard to the murder of Julie Hogg. The guard then wired himself up and recorded Dunlop talking of the murder. As it was clear he had lied in the witness box, it was then possible to charge Dunlop with perjury – a different crime – but not for murder. Following the change in the law, Dunlop stood trial for the third time in 2006, when he was convicted and sentenced to a minimum of 17 years.

The other high-profile case which has received much attention is that of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. No successful prosecutions were secured until 2012, when David Norris and Gary Dobson were jailed for murder for life. Norris is now seeking parole.

It is important to stress that the double jeopardy law has not been abolished; rather, it has been crucially modified. Only serious cases such as murder, manslaughter and rape can be considered for retrial, and then only if (a) new and compelling evidence has come to light, and (b) the Director of Public Prosecutions consents, and it is considered in the public interest (though this "public interest" proviso is rather a woolly concept).

Another case worthy of mention is a killing in Wales 40 years ago. It occurred during the long and bitter miners' strike of 1984. A non-striking miner, David Williams, was being driven to work at Merthyr Vale colliery by taxi driver and father of four, David Wilkie. Two striking miners dropped a 21-kilo concrete block and a concrete post from a footbridge onto the taxi, killing Wilkie, but Williams survived with minor injuries. Dean Hancock and Russell Shankland were tried for murder in 1985, found guilty, and sentenced to life imprisonment. However, on appeal their conviction was reduced to manslaughter, and they were released in 1989 after less than five years.

Did the first jury, who convicted of murder, get it "wrong"? The appeal to reduce to manslaughter succeeded only after protracted and abstruse arguments over the meaning of "natural consequence" and "intent". Killing with intent is murder; killing without intent is manslaughter. Who exactly was able to decide what the defendants' intentions were? They claimed it was to block the road, so the strike-breaker could not go to work. Does one do that at precisely the moment a vehicle is passing below an eight-metre-high footbridge? Forty years on, there is a strong case to be made for the jury having got it right the first time.

And what of the opposite scenario, where an innocent person is convicted? Examples are plentiful enough. We had The Birmingham Six in 1975, who spent 16 years in prison largely as a result of dubious police evidence and false confessions obtained through coercion.

Then we had The Guildford Four, who spent 15 years in prison, and The Maguire Seven, who served various prison sentences – two groups wrongly convicted in the mid-seventies of pub bombings in Guildford and Woolwich.

Perhaps the most notorious case in recent times has been the Post Office scandal, involving the wrongful conviction of hundreds of sub-postmasters for fraud and false accounting between 1999 and 2015, all down to the defective computer programme, Horizon.

Hanging as a punishment for murder was abolished in 1965, but there are several cases before that where an innocent person was hanged. In 1950, Timothy Evans was hanged for the murder of his wife and daughter, but serial killer John Christie later confessed to the crimes.

Also in 1950, George Kelly was hanged for a double murder at a Liverpool cinema in 1949, but he was convicted on the shaky evidence of three criminals, including a pimp and one seeking a reduced sentence. In 1991, it was discovered that a confession by another man, David Johnson, had been concealed from the defence. According to some estimates, as many as one in ten of those executed in the days of capital punishment could have been innocent.

What is undeniable is that the number of guilty people who have walked free is far higher than the number of innocent people who have served time. This is partly because the law starts on the side of the innocent: you're innocent until proved guilty. There is also the traditional insistence that the jury's verdict must be unanimous, however unrealistic that may sound. Nowadays, if members of the jury report that they cannot reach a unanimous verdict, the judge has the power to relent and instruct them to deliver at least a 10–2 majority. If even this fails, there will either be a retrial or the defendant(s) will be acquitted.

But there is another factor which stacks things in a guilty defendant's favour, and it is one which Sergeant D made me well aware of all those years ago. It is that, when in doubt, jurors acquit. This is less to do with what the law says they should do, and more to do with them not being able to sleep at night. They couldn't live with the thought that, because of a wrong decision on their part, an innocent person could be languishing behind bars.

CCTV and advances in forensic medicine have reduced the chances of wrongful convictions, but they will always occur. Human frailties, particularly lying, will make sure of that.

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