

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

Poetry Workshop Weekend
20-22 July 2012

Annual Literary Lunch
20 October 2012

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.

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Editorial

Paul Williams

Regular readers and contributors may have guessed that space is an issue in *The Author*. Unless we were to increase membership fees so that we could afford a bigger and flashier magazine, we are confined to the dimensions and number of pages we have now. Given that we also have to publish winning entries to the various competitions, it is not always possible to include even some of the best (in the Editor's opinion) stories and other contributions until two or three editions after they are received. The designer may also have to remove one or two stories submitted if everything can't be fitted into a particular edition, putting them back to a later date. I mention this because I made a curious discovery when looking through old editions from around fifteen years ago: short stories have grown longer! I was wondering how they used to manage nine or ten stories per edition, plus other articles, and a hasty word count gave the answer. Perhaps longer stories were submitted but never saw the light of day, or perhaps they were cut. Either way, the ability to write a captivating story of around 1,000 words is a skill and a discipline worth cultivating. That's not to say that stories of around 2,000 words are not also welcome, but space will inevitably mean that these will face stiffer competition, so make sure they're good!

Terry Rickson mentions children's books in his Chairman's Chat. A few years ago there was a general lament that modern technology would see a decline in literacy, but it seems that some commentators are now more optimistic. The interactive nature of computers and their hand-held offspring require a level of literacy and alertness that was formerly not required or expected of the less academically-inclined. Even text-speak (apparently in decline now that mobile phones have evolved into fully-functioning computers) had the advantage of forcing young people to read and write in a way that they might not otherwise have done had it not been necessary for social interaction with their peers. Literacy at some level has become essential for work, play and shopping as never before.

The annual Literary Lunch will take place this year on Saturday, 20 October. Details of the guest speaker and booking forms will be included in the next edition, but members may like to note it in their diaries now.

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

Visiting a shop of a well-known chain of booksellers recently, it was pleasing, as ever, to note the range and variety of books available to the young of all ages. *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *The Mister Men*, it seems, are still popular, not to mention *Horrible Histories* (brilliant!), but so too are modern writers such as Michael Morpurgo, which is to be expected. Do 'they' still read, you may well ask, faced with so many other distractions? I'm inclined to believe the answer is more or less well-balanced but with a tendency towards anything that has a screen attached to it, whether on the wall or in the hand! A lot depends, I think, on the encouragement imparted by home or school and whether or not it is considered 'cool'. I was pleased to learn from my granddaughter about one of her class exercises, where Morpurgo's story *Private Peaceful* was read and contrasted with some of the war poems of Wilfred Owen; she found it interesting.

The Society has supported writing for children competitions in the past. It is worth bearing in mind that you have to be 'on your toes' to capture and hold a young person's attention – said granddaughter provided me with several helpful observations when I tried out one or two of my stories on her!

Ending on the theme, this year is the bi-centenary of the birth of Edward Lear who wrote *The Owl and the Pussycat*, as well as the limericks, for which he is famous. Why not refresh your memory with his poem in between a favourite book whilst lazing on the beach or in a deckchair in the back garden?

Spend a good reading and writing summer.

2012 Lewis Wright Short Story Competition Results

This year the competition was judged by David Tickner, Editor of the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship magazine, *Avanti*. His comments are as follows:

'It was lovely to see so many people entering this category. The art of short story writing is a great challenge – to create an engaging story in under 3000 words in such a way that capture's the readers interest is

no mean feat. The quality of all entries to this year's competition was very high although I think some of the entrants forget their word lengths and as a result their stories came across as verbose and slightly unstructured.'

First prize: *Not in the Brochure* by Don Nixon.

'Excellent written, the story encapsulated all of the key elements you'd expect from a short story. It established the characters, plot and setting swiftly and kept the reader entertained throughout the story to its more than satisfactory conclusion!'

Second Prize: *A Surprise for Brenda* by Tony Oswick.

'It was a very difficult decision to split this story from the winning entry but there is only one winner. This story was both well written and constructed with a good pace from beginning to end.'

The judge added: 'I would like to highly commend the following: Leslie Wilkie for *Robert and Regan Incorporated*, Steven Sneade for *Miles and the Stamp*, Brian Lockett for *Museum Piece* and Tony Oswick for *Asbo Annie*. All of their stories were unique, creative and well written and from a reader's perspective entertaining and engaging too. Congratulations to all those who entered and to the SCPSW for a very well-run competition. I very much hope I'm invited back in 2013 as I can't wait to see what stories next year's entrants will be writing!'

Not in the Brochure is to be found in this edition of *The Author*.

Vincent Brennan Travel Article Competition 2012 Results

The Winner of this year's competition was Stephen Bibby with *Kathmandu Encounter*. The judge, Alan Watts, made the following comments:

'Having read the entries for this year's Vincent Brennan Travel competition, I wish to congratulate all the entrants because they all produced interesting articles which were a pleasure to read but at the same time made it difficult to decide upon a clear winner... *Kathmandu Encounter* has several points to recommend it. The writer had returned to Nepal after a 10 year absence and thus looked at his subject from two different angles and also caught up with developments since that first visit... The descriptions of Kathmandu

itself and of the great mountain range of Annapurna, which includes the lofty Everest, were vividly described along with the spectacular scenery and the overwhelming experience of viewing the highest mountains in the world from an exceedingly small plain.’

Kathmandu Encounter is reproduced in this edition of *The Author*.

Gordon Gompers Article Competition 2012 – Closing date 31 July 2012

This is for any non-fiction article, maximum 2,000 words. Prize £50, entry fee £3, closing date 31 July 2012. The usual rules apply. Double-spaced with word count, nom de plume, provide real name and address on a separate sheet, SAE for return.

Entries to the Competition Secretary Nina Mattar, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, SM2 6RT.

Market Profile

Ethel Corduff

“They’re flying off the shelves. They’re the most popular magazines in the shop,” the cashier in W. H. Smiths said in answer to my query about the numerous craft magazines on display. If you have any expertise in knitting, crochet, sewing, quilting, cross stitching or any crafts, then there are dozens of magazines that you could send ideas and patterns to. The most popular of all seemed to be about card making as these had the most magazines, however after finally finding a magazine on this subject that was not in a sealed bag it was clear that there was little to find in them that required a writer’s skill.

I had some birthday money so decided that I would purchase two craft magazines that I could flick through first before buying. I chose ones that were of a more general nature and would appeal to men also. One of these was *Popular Crafts*, which included articles on different crafts, fashion, beauty and gardening, children’s crafts and activities. Most were how to make items with instructions and patterns. I emailed the editor Katherine Jewitt and asked if they paid for submissions. She replied promptly that they do not have a budget for writing submissions, that is something she does as part of her role as Editor.

The other magazine I bought was *Handmade Living* which I found very interesting. The Easter issue featured at least four Easter items making an Easter Egg Tree, an Easter Bunny, making Easter eggs and cooking alternative Easter eggs. It had an article on land girls, regional recipes, a travel article about Hay on Wye and, for gardeners, a garden kneeler and tote to make and eco life about keeping chickens . I did not receive a reply to my query about payments for submissions.

However despite this negative response from two magazines, some of the many other magazines must accept and pay for submissions as they would need many fresh ideas given the huge competition. So if any of you are handy with a needle or have any bright ideas for making things, it is worth studying and contacting some of the other magazines.

In the next Author I will look at fiction markets.

Members' Activities and Achievements

Margaret Pelling, who was the society's Writer of the Year three years ago, has published a second novel, *A Diamond in the Sky*, published by Honno Press, a Welsh small press with a growing reputation.

Margaret writes: 'It's been a while since my first book came out, but that's largely because I've had to spend a lot of time and energy trying to get taken on by a publisher with a bit more presence in the market than my first publisher had. (That book was *Work For Four Hands*, on the strength of which the Society generously chose me as Writer of the Year in 2006.) Once again, though, I'm having to do a fair amount of book promotion, while itching to get on with the current work in progress... The new book, like *Work For Four Hands*, falls into the broad category of general/accessible literary fiction. The main character is a woman who can't come to terms with the cot death of her baby three years before the story starts. The last thing she needs is other people with troubles of their own crossing her path: a teacher who had to resign from his job over an affair with a pupil; the girl herself, now pregnant; and a lonely

building maintenance man whose only friend in the world is his elderly sick mother. The book lets all these people bounce off one another, and a certain amount of chaos and confusion ensues. By the way, if the title makes you think of the nursery rhyme, you'd be on the right lines. There's also an astronomical theme.

There's more on my website, www.margaretpelling.co.uk and on my publisher's website, www.honno.co.uk, where there's an article by me on how I came to write the book. There is some personal history behind it. I, too, had a baby who died.'

Aristocrat at Large by Solihull member, John Bird, chronicles the adventures of Matt Sheridan, a naive young newspaperman, who goes to California on a madcap mission sponsored by drinking pals at his local pub in Birmingham. Posing as a lord, he becomes involved in a series of escapades, in turn comic, romantic - and dangerous. When he runs foul of a ruthless business tycoon it becomes questionable whether he will survive to complete his mission. '*Aristocrat at Large* has its serious and tense moments,' said John, 'but it is essentially a fun read, and I'm delighted the cover illustration has been drawn by the Daily Mail's celebrated cartoonist, Mac, aka Stan McMurtry.' The book can be ordered from FeedARead.com, price £6.99 plus P&P (ISBN 9781908895905), other online retailers and local bookshops.

A teenage Matt Sheridan featured in John's first novel, *Alby and Me*, which is set on a Birmingham council estate in the late 1940s. That novel is now available on Kindle, iTunes and other ebook readers.

John has had a long career in journalism and public relations, living and working in the United States, Canada, Cyprus and the United Kingdom. Before retiring he was Head of the Education Service at the UK Atomic Energy Authority, having previously worked at the Home Office and MoD. His published and broadcast work includes plays, poetry, television comedy material, and non-fiction books on subjects as diverse as new careers for the over-40s and Britain's treatment of enemy alien civilians in wartime.

John's website is www.johncbird.co.uk

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Wavelengths # 31

The summer issue of *wavelengths*, the quarterly magazine provided free to all members of the Poetry Workshop, has now been published. If you haven't already received it, it will be with you very soon. As usual, the issue runs to 20 pages, and this time features the text of the talk Bill Douglas gave at last year's Weekend, on the South American writers Borges, Neruda and Benedetti. There are also poems by PW members and the usual Newsletter section, which gives details of all the Workshop's activities, including the Rules for this year's Bill Barnes' Poetry Competition.

PW Weekend 2012

The Poetry Workshop's annual Weekend will be held on **20-22 July**. As previously announced, there is a new venue this year, Launde Abbey, East Norton, Leicester. A full report of the Weekend will be given in the autumn issue of *wavelengths*.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop will be held during the Summer Weekend. If any member has any points to raise or motions they would like to submit for discussion, please send them to **Barbara Stewart** at the address above by 1 July.

The Minutes of the AGM will be published in the autumn issue of *wavelengths*.

Bill Barnes Competition 2012

Details and Rules of Entry for this year's Bill Barnes Poetry Competition will appear in the summer issue of *wavelengths*. Closing date for the Competition is 30 September.

Subscriptions 2012

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2012. Existing members should have received a subscription form with the winter issue of *wavelengths*. Any member who has not yet renewed will not receive any further issues of the magazine, so if you haven't already renewed your subscription for 2011 do so now.

Please complete and send your form together with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above.

The cost of membership is £5 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact **Terry Rickson** at the above address. He will be pleased to provide further details.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year - contributions of poems and articles on poetry are welcomed from PW members
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- Access to the new e-folio scheme (see **wavelengths** for details)
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend

Dates to Remember

1 July 2012	deadline for motions for the AGM
20-22 July 2012	Poetry Workshop Weekend
1 August 2012	deadline for wavelengths # 32 (autumn issue)
September 2012	publication of wavelengths # 32
30 September 2012	closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes Competition 2012
1 November 2012	deadline for wavelengths # 33
December 2012	publication of wavelengths # 33

Poetry Review: Something Understood, by John C. Bird

Mike Boland

Poetry Workshop member John Bird's new collection contains 52 poems, some serious, some light-hearted, but all imbued with John's wry take on life. They range from meditations on war - bombers "carry no death list / as they steal across the night sky", while on the River Kwai "old men / sit in shadowed places, remembering" - through literary figures, religion, politics and the environment - graffiti artists are "urban impressionists armed with aerosols / sharing their visions with a hostile world" while a worm called Squirming Sam discovers that Birmingham is not a healthy place for his species.

Humour exists side by side with thought provoking imagery. In his introduction John hopes that "all my readers will find something to enjoy and ponder", and I think they will. I certainly did.

ISBN 978-1-908481-09-2. 43 pages. Price £3.49

Published by FeedARead.com Publishing. Copies available from the publisher and shortly through Amazon.

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

The Chinese Fan

Bill Torrie Douglas

A waiter in the Chinese restaurant
gave Dinah the fan, a coloured pattern,
on stiff paper, with a black handle;
useful in the sweaty evening.

On the way back to the apartment
we met a couple with a little girl,
in a precious pink dress and white socks;
she pointed to the Chinese fan
and laughed.

Dinah passed it to her simply
gave her the fan.

The little girl lit up
as if it was the best present

she had ever been given in the whole
of her small life.
The parents looked puzzled,
muttered words of thanks in Spanish
or maybe it was Mallorcan.
Dinah smiled and walked on.

I felt good for the rest of the evening.

The Legend of Lilith

Mike Boland

So Lilith walked out of the eastern gate
and was seen in Eden no more,
having refused to submit and obey
or be bound to anyone's law.

'Stop!' ordered Michael, his sword raised aloft,
his pinions gracefully furled;
but Lilith strode on through the wilderness,
and a light passed out of the world.

Anton

Norman Bissett

The Prince of Prague, he spent his golden youth
among the middle-European arty crowd,
friend of Franz Kafka, buddy of Sigmund Freud,
in latter years with but one single tooth –
a champion racing driver and a tennis pro,
surrounded throughout his early adulthood
by those who shortly afterwards would go
to colonize and conquer Hollywood.

The Hun invaded. The Holocaust brought a freeze
to life in the Sudetenland. He had no wish to die.

I came upon him wearing dungarees,
some decades later, in far-off, sunny Uruguay,
teaching resilience, stoicism and reason
And that to everything there is a season.

Two Barrels

Norman Bissett

We walked to All Saints' Church,
Chiesa Ognissanti,
umbrellas open
against the unseasonal rain
and intermittent thunder.

Slipping in quietly,
we joined the small congregation
of black clad widows attending Mass –
pathetic outcrops in the shivering nave.
Fewer than ten of us

listened to the priest
delivering his sermon.
He was an African,
an Abyssinian, perhaps, who spoke Italian
fluently, euphuistically, interminably.
Purgatorio recurred, a favoured leitmotif.
Misericordia featured ad nauseam.
So also Paradiso's dangled carrot.
An ardent proselyte, his propaganda
lacked the quality of succinctness.

We slipped out quietly,
before his disquisition ended,
leaving the ancient widows inside the Church.
We shall return some other time
to view the grave of Sandro Botticelli..

Pot Plants

A Grant

Dust coats floorboards and stairs,
covers table and chairs,
hair oil's made a disaster
of his antimacassar,

a forty watt bulb
hangs amidst a blue fog
while brown tubs gather drops
from large cracks in clay pots
full of house plants
whose foliage keeps growing
- that's what stops him from going
too far away from his roots.

Oh Waffler

Russ Hayton

Dear Chris
What's going on?
I need your help.
Rachel's coming back
To England.
What for?
She's bringing the bike!
No more 'sleep over' for her
- the bike- now.
How do I get to Andover?
I need your help.
I went shopping,
bought this Belgian thingy –
A Nordic Waffler from
Minneapolis!
And now, regrets!
I only ate your waffle
I shoulda watched yer
Make it.
How?
I need your help.
I have made one.
It was good,
With marmalade, but
Three dishes to wash up
One: melted butter;
Two: egg yolk, flour, milk;

Three: egg white beaten stiff.
I only made enough
For me,
dividing recipe by four.
Then!!
Belgian waffles AND
Belgium waffles with yeast,
To stand (?) for forty-five minutes.
Perhaps,
One day,
With a Hummer,
I'll get to see
A Bengivengo waffle
In the making
For Russ of OLD ENGLAND

Desmond

A E Hobbs

Desmond was a nasty dragon
Bad tempered, blowing smoke and flame.
He quarrelled with everyone,
And even hated his own name.

The villagers who lived in his thrall,
Went in fear and dread.
One cross word to Desmond,
Would heap wrath upon their head.

One day a knight rode up to him,
Intent to maim or slay.
Instead he talked and talked to Desmond,
Which passed the entire day.

“Desmond! Change your wicked ways,
Behave better and don't be mean”,
This he did successfully
Using tolerance as his theme.

Moral

So if you have dragons
Lurking in your life,
Face them down, sort them out
It would save a lot of strife.

Washing Machine No.10

Christopher Barnes

(Alas, our budget does not permit us to reproduce this poem in the shape of a washing machine, as in the original!)

His
fourth Xmas –
Kapoor's been
frolicking cowboys
'n' Injuns. Stain
Devils wreck and run
scum. A tepee, ruby
orange. The heater
element sticks. Moccasins
are tan. The get up's
never just-right
without Punjab pyjamas.
an imitation turban,
incense in Surrey's
air.

Not in the Brochure

Don Nixon

(Winner of the 2012 Lewis Wright Short Story Competition)

The moon was hidden behind low lying cloud and, through the window of the hotel lounge, he could just make out the edge of the dark pine forest of the Chase. That afternoon as he had driven on the claustrophobic narrow road that cut through the dense trees, he had again thought of his wife and how he hated her.

Now, dinner over and the waiter gone, he finished his coffee and looked across at her. She rummaged in her bag and spread the brochures the largest house agency for the area had sent them. For a moment he indulged in the fantasy scenario that had obsessed him since they had come to the hotel on the border of the dark forest that might have been a setting for a gruesome tale by the Brothers Grimm. A drive into its depths on a night like this, a sudden blow to the back of the head and a speedy burial in a remote shallow grave. He thought of the spade he kept in the boot of his car and smiled as he visualised the scene. But could he do it? Would he have the nerve?

“Are you listening George?”

His wife’s shrill voice jerked him back to reality. She pushed the house agent’s folder over to him.

“I’ve marked the ones I visited today while you were wasting your time and my money with that golf pro. Now it’s your turn. Tomorrow’s a rest day for me. Pampering time. You can go and see the others. I specially want you to look at this one. It was in *Country Life* too. I only saw it from the road but it looks promising.”

She pointed to the glossy photograph of an 18th century country house. The Palladian facade of Corinthian columns dominated the surrounding Capability Brown parkland.

“It’s a real possibility if they come down on the price. And they will. The agent tells me the family’s bankrupt. Only the widow left. They’re in no position to bargain.”

He checked a sigh. Though his wife had scooped a fortune on the lottery, she was still as parsimonious as when she had doled out his spending money from the weekly pay packet he had so conscientiously handed over for the past twenty years. He would have been happy to stay in their modern bungalow but Ethel wanted a big house with servants. Now they were travelling throughout the country looking for a property that matched her requirements. She had brushed aside his mild protests, her voice rising in that metallic whine that he had come to loathe.

“You’re such a little man George. Can’t you see that this is our chance to be somebody. Somebody that people will look up to and respect. When has anyone ever respected you? We have money now but a fine house represents status. Nothing we have seen so far will do. The agent assured me that this one is very high status, a period mansion. I was most impressed by him. I’m sure he is from one of the old county families in the area, so he knows all about class and refinement. It’s a good job you didn’t meet him. He’d have probably given you some overpriced vulgar modern monstrosity to look over.”

George smiled and sipped his coffee and thought of a shallow grave in the forest.

The agent had been double booked so the owner showed him round. She had been waiting for him on the steps leading up to the ornate entrance under the portico.

“Diana Alleyn.”

Her voice had that high cutting edge forged in a top girls’ public school. He was suddenly nervous. If he had been wearing a cap he would have touched it. As the morning wore on however, he became fascinated by this assured confident woman. He tried to think of questions to prolong the meeting but finally they were back in the hallway. Portraits lined the sweeping staircase.

“Are these in the asking price?” he ventured.

“Fraid not. Need all the loot I can get. The death duties are steep and I’m the only one left. I’ve to find quite a packet. All go to auction ‘cept her.”

She pointed to the picture of a striking young woman dressed in the costume of a Greek nymph.

“Can’t let that one go. She’s my favourite. They say I have her eyes. She ran off to Italy with her music master and then nearly bagged Nelson in Naples before the Hamilton woman got her claws into him. Ended up with one of Napoleon’s Marshalls. The family disowned her of course. I admire her. She knew what she wanted and went after it.”

He looked again at the portrait. He thought furiously. He desperately wanted to impress this attractive woman. Something in the picture struck a chord in his memory. He had once started attending an evening class in art appreciation until it clashed with his wife’s Bingo and a fragment from a lecture surfaced.

“With those clouds it might be a Constable,” he said diffidently.

For the first time Diana looked closely at this little man. He was gauche and the accent was pure Estuary but with a new haircut and a good tailor he could be quite presentable. The cheekbones were good. Pity about the tie though. He blushed at the her stare of frank appraisal. She shook her head.

“Only a copy I’m afraid. The original went long ago.”

She smiled at him more warmly. The agent had mentioned shed loads of money but wasn’t there a wife? She touched his arm approvingly.

“But how clever of you to recognise the style. You’re the only person I’ve met who has spotted it.”

He blushed. Was he being teased? He realised he didn't care. For the first time he felt at ease alone with a good looking woman. He smiled back. She sensed this sudden increase in his confidence.

“Don't move,” she commanded. “If you're going to buy this place then I'd better let you into the family secret that's not in the agent's brochure.”

She motioned him to follow her up the staircase and pressed a wooden rosette in the wall panelling. The step in front of him suddenly fell away. He flinched and clutched the bannister rail. She laughed and pressed the rosette again and the stair returned to its original position.

“Nasty, isn't it? That's the doing of the second Viscount. He literally got away with murder.”

She sat down on the top step and lit a cigarette.

“He'd run through his wife's dowry and was desperate for money so he had the stairs made. They found her one morning at the foot of this staircase with a broken neck. Very Amy Robsart. The official version was she'd tripped over her petticoats but shortly after, he married another heiress. The secret was kept in the family. I'm the only one left who knows.”

“But you've told me.”

She held his gaze and her fingers played with the gold chain at her throat.

“Yes, I've told you. Of course we could just keep it a secret between the two of us. It might put some people off. The more sensitive types.”

She held out her hand and he helped her rise.

“Do think your wife will like the house?”

He paused and she withdrew her hand. He gingerly tapped a foot on the treacherous stair.

“You know, with your help she might just fall for it,” he said slowly and grinned. “But I agree we should not mention it. As you say it might put some people off. She is rather sensitive.”

To George's surprise, Ethel did not argue over the asking price and got on well with Diana.

“I like her,” she said. “She’s not a snob and she’ll be useful for introducing us to the other landowners round here.”

He found that most days she was with Diana planning the move. She refused his offers to drive her to the house.

“You would be bored stiff George. Lot of girls’ talk. New curtains and carpets. Planning dinner parties. All girly stuff. You keep on with your golf lessons.”

On the rare occasions he managed to see Diana, he told her of the transforming effect she was having on his wife.

“Not that her good mood will last,” he said grumpily. He suddenly realised how jealous he was of his wife’s monopolising of Diana.

A few days before the contract was due to be signed, Diana invited them to dinner.

“It will be a very simple affair I’m afraid.. No servants live in any more so we’ll have to serve ourselves.”

After dinner, Ethel marched upstairs to the drawing room. George was embarrassed. His wife was already assuming the hostess role. He glanced at Diana. She gave a little shrug.

“Oh! I forgot. The coffee is in flasks in the pantry downstairs. We should have brought it up with us.”

“George can get it.” Edith motioned him away.

“The tray is ready,” said Diana. “And George, don’t forget to bring that special molasses sugar I specially got for Ethel to try for her diabetes. It’s in the red Murano dish. The one I told you the second Viscount brought back from Italy for his first wife. You remember what a sad business that all was. Now that Edith likes the house, perhaps we ought to introduce her to the second Viscount.”

George felt a sudden surge of excitement. The moment had come at last. He had found on the Internet that molasses would disguise the taste of cyanide. So Diana had finally decided to go ahead with the plan. It would be the second time in the history of the house that a murder would be successful. The second Viscount would have appreciated its simplicity. Perhaps he had not done it just for the money. Perhaps he had hated his wife too. George suddenly felt a bond with the long dead aristocrat.

He heard them laughing as he began to climb the staircase. The tray was heavy and he needed to use both hands to hold it steady. Diana was waiting at the top. He saw her reach for the wooden rosette. She hesitated. Edith appeared behind her.

“Do it,” she hissed. “Do it now.”

Diana pressed the rosette. As he fell backwards, he saw his wife’s triumphant face.

Ethel looked down at the still body of her husband. She patted Diana’s arm approvingly.

“Such a silly little man,” she murmured.

She frowned as she saw the shattered pieces of Murano glass, scattered like bloodstains on the stairs.

“Pity the bowl had to go as well. I rather liked it.”

She turned to Diana.

“Just add it to the sum we agreed. Cheap at the price.”

Diana nodded. Ethel saw with amusement that her companion’s face was white and her hands were trembling. So much for aristocratic *sang froid*, she thought contemptuously. She had wondered when they were planning the murder if Diana might be a problem. If so, she would have to deal with her, but not yet, they would need to get through the next few days together when the questions started about George’s disappearance. She looked down again at the crumpled body of her husband and visualised Diana lying there in his place. It would certainly leave everything tidy. But that was for the future.

“Get the car,” she ordered. The spade and tarpaulin’s in the back. We should be in the forest in ten minutes. I know just the place. I’ve followed George there a few times when he was pretending to go to the golf course. He chose a very quiet spot and he hasn’t left much digging to do.”

She smiled.

“I never realised moving house could be so exciting.”

A Kathmandu Encounter

Stephen Bibby

(Winner of the Vincent Brennan Travel Article competition 2012)

Travelling sometimes yields moments of serendipity. They can occur in the most unlikely of countries and at the most unlikely of times. But wherever and whenever, they are priceless.

One such moment occurred in Kathmandu in autumn 2010, but to understand it I must take you back to autumn 2000. It was then that my wife and I made our first trip to Nepal joining a group tour organised by the travel company, Exodus. We made a second trip, with the same company, exactly ten years later.

We found Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital, to be a noisy, dusty, intriguing and vibrant city. There were bustling crowded streets, the shops bulging with trekking equipment, the pavement markets piled with fresh vegetables. In Durbar Square monkeys scurried on the roof struts of imposing temples across exotic and erotic depictions of Hindu gods. Above the hubbub stately ancient palaces, their windows shielded with intricate carved shutters gazed, stood impassively in timeless tolerance of the melee of tourists, monks, vendors and the odd lumbering unmolested cow. At the magnificent Bodnath the Buddhist pilgrims spun hundreds of prayer wheels intoning the mantra, 'Om mani padme hum'. This enormous white Stupa is now a world Heritage site. It has a colossal dome shaped base topped by a Golden Tower from which the all seeing eyes gaze in four directions above long streamers of red, green, blue and yellow prayer flags fluttering over both the praying and the prying.

In contrast to the spectacular sights, everywhere there were visible signs of suffering. Street beggars could not be avoided. There were settlements for Tibetan refugees. On the banks of the sacred Bagmati River wailing families carried the wrapped bodies of the newly deceased and lit their sad funeral pyres on the cremation ghats.

On both visits all of these sights and experiences were presented to us by an excellent local guide. In millennium year our group was accompanied by Kedar, a Nepalese man in his late 20s. He greeted us at Kathmandu airport with hands together saying the welcoming 'Namaste' - the universal Nepalese word of salutation - to each. Thereafter he accompanied us throughout the tour. Orphaned as a boy,

Kedar had been brought up by a benefactor in the city. He had worked up from house boy to rickshaw boy, then porter, carrying the bags and equipment for trekking expeditions. Having saved his earnings he financed his own education and moved on to become a popular tour leader. But he had never forgotten his origins and from the first we realised he had a sincere commitment to his country. We were later to see how profound and genuine this was.

Leaving Kathmandu, we took the short flight to Pokhara in the foothills of the Annapurna range to commence a five-day trek. Here Kedar introduced us to our small band of porters. Each carried two kitbags tied securely together and supported by a strap around his forehead so the weight was distributed between head and lower back. They made it look easy but when I asked to try I could not bear the strain for more than a few seconds.

I still vividly recall that first day of trekking. Disappointingly the hilltops were covered in cloud and we witnessed no sweeping panoramas. But the immediate surroundings were from a different age. We walked along stone paths skirting solid farm buildings fringed with drying maize cobs rustling in the gentle breeze airing their low eaves. Ducks and geese waddled at our feet. The time worn route wound through ancient terraces mostly bare following the recent harvest but occasionally wet and pocked with green rice shoots. We passed a small house, its garden tree laden with soft ripe oranges. A toothless wizened lady greeted us with the familiar 'Namaste' and freely offered her produce, somehow all the more delicious for being eaten straight off the branch. Nearby we observed a couple placing yellow fruit into hollow tree trunk and tamping it down firmly with a stout pole until juice trickled into a basin. They were crushing lemons. It would have been a timeless scene had not the young man been wearing a modern camouflage jacket.

Later, rather alarmingly, we were stopped outside a stone dwelling by a young man imploringly holding out a crying child in his arms. The little girl was badly scalded with horrific burns down one side of her body. Scalds are a common hazard in countryside where there is no electric light and cooking is done on open fires. Kedar readily handed over painkillers but despite our expensive cameras and equipment there was nothing practical we could do. We walked on, sympathetic but subdued.

Our goal for the day was the picturesque village of Birethanti and the comfortable Sanctuary Lodge set on a low cliff above the Modi River. We were served tea in its gardens attractively planted with red bougainvillea and bright tropical flowers. As we grasped our china cups and gazed at the surroundings, the low clouds gradually thinned then in fleeing wisps, completely lifted. We were suddenly aware that there was a vista beyond the vista, for above the rounded hills at first we glimpsed then, with remarkable clarity, observed a colossal peak. We tipped our heads back to view, towering over the landscape, the magnificent snow-covered Machapuchare or Fishtail Mountain (its unconquered summit remarkably like the tail of a fish), and rising to its full 6,997 metres.

While we were gazing, Kedar disappeared into a worried huddle with a group of folk near the Lodge entrance. The distraught parents, seen earlier, had carried their child the few miles down the stone path down to Birethanti to be examined by our guide, evidently revered as someone with knowledge and skill. We tried to ignore the little girl's cries as he attempted to remove her rudimentary soiled dressings. After a few minutes my wife, a paediatric and community nurse, could tolerate inactivity no longer. She offered her assistance but immediately realised that hospital treatment was urgently necessary. This meant money and a trek to Pokhara. The family, subsistence farmers, had no savings. We made a swift collection and for 100 rupees each (£1 sterling) we were able to finance a week's hospital stay. I had qualms about appearing, briefly intervening, then departing with a cleansed conscience, but it was impossible to ignore such suffering.

During the coming days we trekked amid some of the world's most spectacular scenery. We saw the huge snowy bulk of the Annapurna range brightly lit by the low sun, and then turning a rich golden colour as the day died. At night under the sharp diamond stars the peaks assumed a mantle of dull forbidding grey. When the skies cleared both by temperate day and freezing night they dominated the landscape, venerable and magnificent.

On our return to Kathmandu we took a final short spectacular trip. We boarded a small jet aircraft for the flight along the jagged Himalayas to view the world's highest peak. The plane rose above the smog, dense enough to delay take off for two hours, and soon we could

see desolate foothills, brown, barren and hostile. Then came the highest peaks riven with deep gullies and ravines choked with ice and snow. Glaciers hung from rock faces like an evil Snow Queen's frozen spittle.

One by one we were invited into the tiny cockpit. There in front and to the left was Everest itself. It stood proudly above the adjoining peaks, not blanketed with snow but gaunt and black with a chilly wisp of blown ice drifting from its summit. It was a truly magnificent spectacle.

It was memories of this sight which drew us back to Nepal exactly ten years later to trek in the Everest region and experience terrestrial views of the highest peak. However, sadly, in autumn 2010 we were beaten by the weather. The seasons were out of joint, the vengeful monsoon unwilling to surrender its watery stranglehold. We languished for three days in Kathmandu unable to fly to the tiny cloud hidden airstrip at Lukla from where we were to commence our trek. Once we had belatedly landed, at what we later learned is the world's most dangerous airport, it was necessary to purchase head lamps as the delayed itinerary meant our initial trek had to be taken partially in the hours of darkness. On succeeding days the weather hardly improved. Although we managed intermittent glimpses of impressive peaks such as Ama Dablam, 6,812 metres high, tantalisingly Everest remained shrouded in grey cloud.

But our moment of serendipity came in our hotel in Kathmandu, the same establishment which had been our base on the previous visit although now slightly faded and careworn. It was seething with tourists, trekkers and guides as of course our group was not the only one to be temporarily stranded by the angry rain gods. Amongst the throng we spotted, slightly older, slightly craggier and perhaps slightly heavier, the unmistakable figure of Kedar to whom we had said farewell ten years earlier.

Remarkably he recognised us, even recalling my name. Before long we were reminiscing about our adventures in millennium year.

“Do you remember the scalded child?” I asked.

He became animated. Vividly recalling our sobering encounter on the route to Birethanti, he explained that three years later he had undertaken the same trek. To his surprise near the same stone house a

child had approached and said ‘Namaste, uncle’. He was nonplussed, astonished at the familiarity. He returned the greeting and was suddenly and pleasantly enlightened when the child thanked him for what he had done to save her arm.

Then earlier in 2010 he had been in the area again. This time he encountered enormous local excitement as colourful wedding celebrations were about to take place. The same girl, now a young lady, was the bride.

Ten years earlier we had viewed Everest from a cramped cockpit. Sadly we never saw the spectacle from an unenclosed vantage point exposed to the chill gusts sweeping across the glaciers and surrounded by other jagged giants of the Himalayas. Somehow it did not matter. Our fortuitous Kathmandu encounter and the closure of a chapter ten years old made the entire trip worthwhile.

Mummy is a Fighter Pilot

Bernie Bickerstaff

Thursday morning. 7a.m. ALARM! ALARM! ALARM! That morning alarm! A foghorn couldn’t be any louder. I forgot to put in my earplugs! Most annoying thing about living and working on an aircraft carrier, without earplugs, you wake up with the early shift. Still, I didn’t think I’d sleep as my mind is so active, has been since I returned from maternity leave one week ago, 7 November 2010. I look to the wall on my left and gaze tenderly at the photo of my beautiful baby. I hope my Joanna, my love, is alright. Rupert said so, on the phone last night BUT does a father instinctively know? Like a mother does?

I’m in two minds whether to visit the Doc to get something to help with sleeping. What if some cash-strapped Clerk leaks it, I imagine the ‘Daily Mail’ headline “£3.5m to train fast jet WOMAN pilot – pill popper!!!”

If I’m going to ask for sleep strategies I need to talk to the other female flyer, Sam. I’ve only known her a week, a bit premature to confide but it’s okay as we’re both mothers, we share the same world

view. Better than approaching the Boss. Certainly won't tell him I can't sleep, I don't wish to feed a stereotype: new mother, misses baby, mind not 100 per cent on the job. Might be used as evidence that mothers aren't designed to be GR9 Harrier jump jet pilots. No, Flight Commander Roberta Able will not do anything to suggest that. I've worked too hard to get here and broken too many glass ceilings: University; Flying School; top of every class I have ever sat in and I intend to carry on.

I don't need to be in the hangar until 9.17a.m. I continue gazing at the photo of Joanna. I gently doze and dream of my beautiful creation.

In the hangar. I button and zip up my green jumpsuit and check that I've removed my earrings and wedding ring. I tie up my long blonde hair and tuck it into my helmet and put on my ear-muffs and wish I'd had these when I was at home with Joanna. I reassure myself that my dog tags are on.

“Mission, objectives and target – clear and understood, Sir.” I sign the log book.

I am given the final check by Flight Support. In the precious minutes as I walk calmly and carefully to the aircraft, at the far end of the ship sailing at 30 knots, beckoned and directed by the Ground Crew, I am careful not to trip on ropes or other deck accessories. I totally focus on what I am about to do.

I climb the supporting ladder, the metal is hot; I feel the strength of the wind against my face. I climb into the aircraft and fit snugly into the pilot's seat, should've eaten less when pregnant. I smell a whiff of seat leather peppered with mechanic fluid. Air Traffic Control and Control Room give me the go-ahead and I recite the take-off drill. I look to my left, out of the window and take in the beautiful bright day, 30 degree temperature, the sea is dark blue, and its swirls are glistening in the sun. Another exciting day. Five, four, three, two, one!

I power this great bird and feel it take off; I successfully manoeuvre the steep “graveyard” flight ramp and fly out to sea and beyond. Flying, this is my other love; this is what I was born to do.

Three hours and 33 minutes later. My mission is done and I return this magnificent aircraft to the ship. My daughter still has a mother. I need to stretch my legs and I head for the gym.

Forty-five minutes later. I'm on the treadmill, highest gradient. My mind wanders. Will Joanna hate me for not being there? She is only six months old and I know attachment theory research suggests potential long lasting damage. I just can't bear the thought that my own daughter might grow up to hate me. "Ouch," I bite my tongue, through lack of concentration.

Step, step, step. I think back to when I was on maternity leave, at home in Lincolnshire. I stuck it out for as long as I could but sometimes it was agony. I just couldn't sustain the mother routine any longer. I can deal with aircraft routine as it is exciting but not the mother brand. Feeding, cleaning and resting, every 4 hours, I felt as if I was a machine and there was no adult conversation to help me feel human. My eyes well up when I think of the monotony and the boredom. I'd secretly cried, day after day, in the quiet of my bedroom.

I'd attempted to make things better by meeting other mothers: coffee mornings, mothers and baby groups, even visited the local Church group. I was aghast at how insular some women's lives are. Why is it that mothers won't own up to feeling negative about motherhood? I felt like a criminal when I said to a third-time mum how I honestly felt after three sleepless nights. That was when Joanna was screaming for half an hour at a time during the day, day after day. I'd hidden in the shed at the bottom of the garden just to get some peace but she just carried on. I put on Rupert's gardening ear muffs but I could still hear her. Then I frightened myself when I thought about how she might be like this every single day of my maternity leave. I panicked. Then, I owned up and became honest with myself, told myself something had to change. I came back to work 3 months early.

Step, step, step. I know the years will fly by. In the playground will Joanna proudly announce "Mummy is a fighter pilot" or will she hate me because we only see each other when I get 30 days Annual Leave?

Step, step, step. I know Rupert will do his best. At least Joanna will see one of her parents each night and every weekend. I hope she doesn't confuse her child minder, Celia, for her real mother. I can still

hear my own mother's reaction when I told her I was going back to work, "No woman can be Superwoman, a baby needs her mother – at home!" I won't forget those words.

Time to move to the rowing machine. Stretch, stretch. It would be so easy for me just to go home, to say I miss Joanna and I do. I love her beautiful face, her gurgles and murmurs, her smell. Motherhood is ecstasy. I get a warm feeling when I think of our deep bond. I will never forget the first time she smiled at me.

Then I think of the clever but unconfident 13-year-old girls I mentored. Outreach, the University called it. Two hours a week for two years. I met pupils from sink estates. The peak of their ambition was to work in a shop. I urged them to aim high. Break the stereotype, the parameters that others set for us, that restrict us to living in the world they want for us. It made me feel sad when I learnt that these young women, with latent promise and potential, were hemmed in by environment and family, destined to repeat the same existence. I wanted so much to be a role model for them. One of them, Kylie, still sends me a Christmas card. She is desperately saving money from her minimum wage job to move away from home and make something of herself. She'd rung me every day for six weeks after I'd finished with the school, just so, as she put it, she could "hear one encouraging word each day". A totally different world from the one Joanna inhabits.

Stretch, stretch. "Roberta, you can be anything you want: Prime Minister, surgeon, barrister." The words of my late father, so lucky that fate decided he should be my role model. A successful man in a man's world ... and he backed me. There is no surprise I'm here.

That workout was brilliant, shower, and then coffee, I feel the need for female conversation. I tap at Sam's cabin door. A bleary eyed Sam opens it, three hours left to relax until her night shift. I play Mother and serve the coffee. A true optimist, Sam is a breath of fresh air.

"You shouldn't feel so guilty Roberta, I don't even ALLOW myself to feel guilty, it really is the best way of dealing with it." Those words comfort me as her situation is worse than my own. Three-year-old Charlie is looked after by Sam's parents as Phil serves on a different ship. Sam belittles her own motherhood challenges, "Believe me,

Roberta, my co-ordination of diaries for family time together is no more difficult than your own”.

On my return to my cabin I bump into David, he is here to do business with the Boss and his seniors. David is a family friend and, by sheer co-incidence, taught me at Flying School. Our friendship deepened when our paths crossed in 2004, at Mount Pleasant, Falkland Islands. We'd laughed so much on our day trips to Stanley, a one hour bumpy and uncomfortable road trip, our search for a change of scenery. I'll never forget the smiles and welcome the locals gave us in the Post Office, shops, and cafes. Decades since the Falklands War and they're still thanking us.

I respect David immensely. He had made it clear to all trainee pilots on day one that a lot was expected of us. I instinctively responded well. I show David three special 'photos of Joanna that I carry at all times. I am so proud.

“David, what's wrong, you're not your usual upbeat self, what's up?” I probe.

In hushed tones after checking no-one's around to hear, “Not good news, Roberta, I'm afraid. Matthew's gone off the rails, got involved in the wrong crowd at University and is taking hard drugs and living a chaotic existence.” A pause of three seconds.” Roberta, Matthew told me he hated me and he never wants to see me again.” I could see David's eyes moisten.

“David, this is tragic. You love your kids; you'd do anything for them. I can see how your heart is breaking.” I hug him.

Then, still hugging him, it hit me. It was obvious! It was irrelevant how hard I try to be a good mother. David's wife had given up her accountancy career to bring up their children and one of them still messed up! Joanna could decide she didn't want to know me anymore for reasons unique to her: drink, drugs, dodgy religious sects - they could alter her mind. I wouldn't have control over her once she is an adult.

On looking into David's face I mask the feeling of reassurance this revelation gives me, lest David thinks I'm not taking him seriously. This chance meeting helps me see things clearly.

Later we eat dinner. “Sir, may we speak about the Artificers Trade Branch?” interrupted one Commander.”Roberta, please excuse us, as I’m now working in Whitehall, fighting the Treasury over budgets, Commanders are keen to speak to me.” So the evening continued.

“Good-bye, David, take care.” We hug very tightly; he is to leave early in the morning for another ship.

7a.m. ALARM, ALARM, ALARM. I feel good, a wonderful night’s sleep. I feel warm and content about sorting out the one issue that’s plagued me since I returned from maternity leave. No more mother’s guilt for me AND its Friday! All Harrier pilots are to attend a briefing at 8a.m. by the Captain. Very unusual, it must be important if the most important person on this vessel is hosting it. Wonder if David’s visit had anything to do with this?

As soon as we get connectivity, I phone Rupert. Damn, no answer. I leave a message, spurting it all out: Defence cuts; Harriers to be axed; last flight from a British carrier will take place in 3 weeks! Navy and RAF to lose 5,000 jobs. Efforts will be made to redeploy pilots to other duties I feel myself getting emotional and hang up. Hope Joanna didn’t hear mummy, don’t want her to pick up on mummy’s anxiety.

Sam and I meet for lunch, “Roberta, I don’t know what I will do if I’m not working, we really need the money, our mortgage is huge.” For once, Sam looks negative.

I go to the gym for two hours after work to burn off some of the anger.

I feel better, more relaxed and physically tired when I return to my cabin. I lie on my bed and think about Joanna. Smile. Smile. Smile.

Every cloud has a silver lining. Corny but true. Today’s news isn’t all bad.

I get up and excitedly reach for my diary in my bag on top of the desk. How soon can I take time off? I’m going to have quality time with my daughter! I smile.

Lost and Found

Elizabeth Fawcett

(Third in the 2011 Lewis Wright Shorty Story Competition.)

“Come on, Trixie. We’ve got to go home now.”

Carol looked with amusement tinged with impatience at her tan and white Jack Russell snuffling through the fallen leaves, her tail wagging so vigorously her whole body rocked from side to side. Trixie lifted her nose from beneath the leaf blanket and turned her head to look at her mistress. You could swear that she had a look of disgust on her little pointed face as if to say, “Don’t bother me. I’m busy.” The little dog turned back to rummage among the undergrowth.

“Trixie!” Carol called out again. “Time to go!”

The only indication that the dog had heard was a slight twitch of the ears. She just carried on burrowing away. Carol was starting to walk towards her when the dog lifted her head. She was holding something in her mouth. Something shiny.

“What have you got there, you rascal?”

Carol squatted down beside her and with some difficulty managed to prise the object from between the dog’s jaws. She turned it over in her gloved hands.

“It’s a dog collar, Trixie! Isn’t it a pretty one?”

The red leather collar was studded with glass jewel-like gems that glittered like diamonds in the weak autumn sunlight.

“Look, the buckle’s broken. It must have fallen off .Oh, wait a moment. There’s a nametag. This’ll tell us who the collar belongs to.”

She held the tag up towards where the lengthening sun’s rays shone between the trees in order to read the small, indistinct lettering.

“Ah, it’s Fifi’s. You know, old Mrs Hubbard’s little poodle. I haven’t seen her with the little dog for a while. C’mon. We’ll go and return this to her. She lives in the old thatched cottage just on the edge of the woods.”

Carol bent down and attached a lead to Trixie’s collar. If they were going to go home via Mrs Hubbard’s, she couldn’t be delayed further by Trixie running off on her numerous foraging expeditions. She needed to get home to make Tom’s dinner. He was always ravenous when he came home from a day’s fishing with his mates.

When she and Tom had both taken early retirement from their City jobs the previous year, and moved to their idyllic cottage in the country, she had hoped that they would have been able to spend more time together, perhaps going on long walks together exploring their new environment. Instead, Tom had taken to frequenting the local hostelry where he had made friends with the angling fraternity. Since then she had become very much a fishing widow, spending most of her time alone with Trixie, who had become her sole companion and confidante. She was always embarrassed if she met anyone on one of their long walks in the woods, because of the running conversation she always carried on with her canine friend. Strangers clearly thought she was mad. Not that there were many strangers. Most people she encountered were familiar now, as, like her, their walks in the woods formed part of a regular daily routine. They accepted her idiosyncrasies, and often stopped to chat, stooping to pat Trixie on the head. Unless they happened to have a dog with them too, in which case they would generally have to separate the two animals before they became too intimate, or alternatively, tried to tear each other's throats out, depending upon the gender or temperament of the other animal.

The shadows were lengthening as Carol emerged from the wood, Trixie trotting along beside her, pulling impatiently on the leash. The sun hung low in the sky, a large crimson disc suspended just above the horizon, soaking up the day's light and replacing it with the night's dark shadows. Up ahead the squat shape of Mrs Hubbard's cottage was silhouetted against the salmon-pink sky. As Carol approached the garden gate, she was surprised to see no lights showing through the small diamond-paned windows. She thought at first that the old lady might have drawn the curtains early to keep out the cold air, blacking out the lights inside, but as she made her way up the short, flower-bordered path towards the front door, she could see that the curtains remained open, the only light showing through being from the last dying rays of the setting sun reflected on the glass. She rapped briskly on the door with the brass lion's head knocker. There was no sound from inside the cottage, not even the sound of Fifi's high-pitched yapping. She knocked again, more urgently this time.

“Mrs Hubbard? Are you there? It's Carol Walker.”

Yanked roughly by the arm, Carol almost overbalanced as Trixie tugged hard on the lead, straining towards the front room window to the right of the door, barking frantically.

“What is it, Trixie?”

She cupped her hands round her eyes and peered through the window into the semi-dark interior. At first, she could see nothing, then suddenly something moved on the floor. It was Mrs Hubbard.

“It’s OK, Mrs Hubbard. We’re here.” She turned to Trixie who was continuing to bark furiously. “Shhh, Trixie.”

Dropping the lead, she ran back to try the front door. It was locked. How was she going to get in to help her? Trixie was continuing to jump up and down at the window, barking madly. In her exuberance, she knocked over a terracotta plant pot that stood beside the door, smashing it to smithereens.

“Oh, Trixie! Look what you’ve done!”

But her eye was caught by something shiny lying among the broken pottery fragments. She stooped down to take a closer look. It was a key!

“Oh, thank heavens!”

Carol quickly inserted the key into the front door lock, and pushed the door open. She entered the dark hallway, followed by her excitable pet. Switching on the light, she rushed into the living room where the old lady was lying on the carpet in the middle of the room. She looked up at her with the relief plain to see on her lined face. She smiled weakly.

“Hello dear. I think I’ve been a bit silly. I seem to have taken a tumble. I can’t get up, I’m afraid.”

“Good job we came by.” Carol then addressed her dog, who was licking Mrs Hubbard’s face, “Trixie stop that! Leave Mrs Hubbard alone.”

Just then her mobile phone rang. It was Tom.

“Sorry, Tom. I’m at Mrs Hubbard’s. She’s had a fall. I’m afraid you’ll have to get your own tea.”

The expression on Carol’s face betrayed Tom’s reaction to the news.

“Well, it won’t hurt you, for once. Got to go. See you when I can.”

“I’m sorry to be such a nuisance, dear.”

“Not at all. It’ll do him good to cook his own meal for once. I’ll ring for an ambulance.”

A couple of days later, Carol went to visit the old lady in hospital. When she had telephoned the day after her accident, the nurse had told

Carol that Mrs Hubbard had unfortunately broken her hip but she had had it pinned and was “comfortable”. The expression on Mrs Hubbard’s face belied the truth of that statement. She winced with pain as she heaved herself up on her pillows, but managed a weak smile when she saw Carol.

“Hello, dear. It seems I’ve caused you a lot of bother.”

“Nonsense. I’m just glad Trixie and I were there.”

“Well, it’s very good of you to come, dear. By the way, you never did tell me how you came to come by my house that evening. I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t.”

“You have Trixie to thank for that.” Carol rummaged in her coat pocket and brought out the dog collar. “She found this when we were out on our walk.”

Carol was surprised to see tears spring up in the old lady’s eyes.

“It’s Fifi’s isn’t it?”

Mrs Hubbard struggled to control the emotion in her voice as she replied.

“Yes, it was. I bought it for her two Christmases ago. She only wore it for a few months though, before she lost it one day when we were out in the woods.”

Something suddenly struck Carol.

“Where is Fifi, Mrs Hubbard? She wasn’t there the other night, was she?”

“No, dear. I had to ...” she broke off as her face crumpled in tears. Carol reached over and gently took her slender, gnarled hand in hers in a gesture of comfort.

“Don’t upset yourself.”

Mrs Hubbard swallowed hard and wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her other hand. She struggled to regain her composure.

“It’s OK, dear. Fifi contracted bone cancer last year. I had to have her put to sleep six months ago.” She took a deep breath. “I miss her so much.” She smiled. “But she’s still looking after me, isn’t she?” She indicated the dog collar in Carol’s hand with a brief nod of the head. “Fifi brought you to me the other evening. I could always rely on her. She’d never let me down.”

Ill-Health and Danger in the Workplace

Douglas Fulthorpe

Horseplay begins in fun, ends in tragedy: Royal Ordnance Factory Shop Poster

There is a popular myth on the lines of, “When we were young there was none of this health and safety nonsense. We took all kinds of risks and none of us ever came to any harm.” Myth because statistics for the days of our youth and now, where they exist, are hardly comparable, and nostalgia is a powerful myth-maker.

About one year into the war my family was living on the outskirts of North Shields. A few yards from our home lay the Backworth Colliery railway line. Day and night long coal trains trundled down to the Northumberland Dock on the River Tyne, for dispatch of their cargo to the fuel-hungry south. My mother cautioned me never to stray onto the unfenced line, citing an incident when a boy was caught between two trucks; his body was taken away in a bag. As a child I was not blessed with a lot of common-sense (and friends assure me I have changed little over the decades) but I was reasonably careful whenever, with other boys, I ventured onto the line. Once I witnessed a girl in a hurry crawl under a stationary train. She was very lucky, since a steam train on starting would move off with several violent jerks and thunderous clanging. A friend in my class at Percy Main School told me how his father had his arm on the railway line as a train ran over it. He spent the remainder of his days with one arm.

Caning of both sexes was routinely carried out at Percy Main, and my recollection is that classes were consequentially conducted in a quiet and orderly fashion. One boy was unwise enough to sigh during the course of a general berating of the class by Mrs C, a teacher who exhibited clear signs of stress, possibly because her husband was serving in the Royal Navy. She went too far and almost beat the unfortunate child to death.

One summer evening three little boys, eight years old or thereabouts, followed examples set in countless adventure films, books and boys’ papers, and constructed a raft, on which they set sail onto the seventy-acres Northumberland Dock. The raft immediately broke up. Workmen loading coal into a collier at a nearby staithe, hastened to their aid and

rescued them. Too late... I attended their common funeral.

The portals of Tynemouth High School opened. In the gymnasium I recall scaling a rope to the high ceiling, with neither a safety harness, net, or even mat. I doubt that there were any systematic safety checks performed on the equipment.

On one occasion our usual classroom was not available. Instead we trooped into a large room used for storage. The room was kept locked, since it also housed a large band-saw, which, if mishandled, was easily capable of removing a limb. I noticed a boy touch and dislodge the saw blade, which was in the form of a continuous belt. Some way into our lesson the woodwork teacher entered, to saw some wood. He immediately spotted that the machine had been tampered with. The culprit owned up, and received “six of the best” on his behind. Game over—or was it? Certainly, at fourteen years the boy had a sense of responsibility, yet the equipment was definitely unsecured when he interfered with it.

No qualms of conscience troubled Mr. F, a chemistry teacher who, in an act of unbelievable stupidity, passed a gas-jar of chlorine gas around a class. The lid was secured by no more than a thin film of petroleum jelly. One boy was unlucky enough to accidentally dislodge the lid, and inhaled chlorine gas. Far from showing the slightest concern for the clearly distressed boy, or even realisation of his own criminal irresponsibility, the teacher with sadistic relish read out a description of the effects of exposure to chlorine gas, which include severe irritation of the eyes and mucous membrane, two of the most sensitive organs in the human body. The unfortunate and entirely innocent child was turfed out of the classroom and left to stumble home on his own.

As a youth I swam regularly at Wallsend Baths. At each corner of the pool a wooden ladder was pivoted at the top and secured to the wall at the bottom by a rope-coupling. I noticed one day that the rope on one of the ladders at the deep end had either frayed or worked loose, resulting in the ladder, secured only at the top, half-floating at an angle of roughly forty-five degrees to the wall. Although the hazardous condition of the ladder was clearly visible both to swimmers and attendants for at least three weeks, no repair was affected. One evening a little boy failed to return home. A search of the closed pool revealed his body, trapped where he had drowned, under the ladder.

On to North Eastern Marine, where formal training of apprentices was non-existent. As the norm, teenage youths were used as cheap labour. My mentor, in handling a powerful turret-lathe, was a fifteen year-old boy who had begun his apprenticeship two months previously. There was no instruction in basic safety precautions. At the end of the shift we cheerfully washed our hands in cutting-tool lubricant, risking dermatitis and septicaemia, the wash-basins provided by the management remaining forlorn and dusty. In the nearby iron foundry the management succumbed to union pressure and installed showers. On learning that they were required to shower in their own time, the workforce refused to use the showers, preferring to journey home thickly coated in black, ferrous casting dust. Only one young man, Harry D, a neighbour who had spent his war bombing Germany, opted to devote fifteen minutes of his time to showering, then leaving the factory clean, fresh, and tidily dressed.

Attitudes to safety were lax and casual. One apprentice leaned backwards against a length of rotating, hexagonal bar, which was feeding into the headstock of a capstan lathe, where the operator was “parting-off” hexagonal nuts. The bar caught in the boy’s clothing, and whirled him backwards, incidentally kicking me in the face. The lathe stalled as the apprentice’s head smashed onto a tray of steel components. The operator had neglected to place a mandatory metal guard around the bar. As I recall, the apprentice was quite happy to receive a paid holiday from work, and a compensatory sum.

Further up the workshop a likeable young man operated a machine termed, without a hint of irony, “the big screwing machine,” or, familiarly, “the big screwer.” Nearby his colleague Sammy attended to “the little screwer.” Time passed and the young man transferred to the neighbouring Wallsend Slipway, where he operated a radial-arm drilling machine used for drilling large engine sections. This had a twelve foot long horizontal arm, from the end of which a rotating drill protruded vertically down. One day the operator was, in the practice of the time, using a rake to clear a streamer-like cutting which was interfering with the drill action. The cutting caught his loose sleeve, and the poor man was whirled rapidly about, an action which stripped his clothes from him. His rotating body prevented his workmates from reaching the cut-off switch.

The list of tragedies throughout industry is vast and endless. There

were pranks with pneumatic hoses, resulting in victims having air at a pressure of eighty pounds per square inch injected into their mouths or anuses. A boy was working on a turning-motor, used to slowly rotate a marine engine for maintenance purposes, when a friend mischievously activated it. The boy's hand passed between the motor's gigantic worm and wheel. A friend of mine was working inside a Doxford diesel engine, when the turning-motor was suddenly switched on. He was remote from an open access manhole, and his shouts were inaudible in the din of the turning-motor. Fortunately his portable lamp functioned, and in the semi-darkness he was able to avoid the slowly orbiting cranks and linkages as he made his escape.

One day I was on duty on the middle platform of a Doxford diesel engine undergoing shop trials, when the trials manager overloaded the engine to cause the cylinder relief valves to actuate, without bothering to warn me. If I had been near the valves, checking bearing temperatures and grease-cups, the issuing fiery jet would have blinded and deafened me, or, more likely, killed me. The operating staff were clearly unconcerned at my distress. Even in the carefree days of the mid-twentieth century, a manslaughter charge would have resulted.

One of the labourers in the Erecting Shop was known, very cruelly, as Jimmy the Nod. He had been a miner at the Rising Sun Colliery. During blasting he had been too close to the charge. He had suffered serious injuries, leaving him with a habitual, nervous tic. His fate was to be required to perform the most menial of duties, including one too degrading and disgusting to describe.

Asbestos was used extensively for thermal insulation on ships, and I recall working in engine-rooms where the atmosphere resembled a snowstorm. A number of acquaintances died subsequently of asbestosis, in medical jargon: "pleural plaques".

"Auto Shops", where large numbers of identical components are produced on automatic machines, are notoriously noisy, and the atmosphere usually bears a noticeable oil-mist. Tinnitus is a common affliction of the operators.

On to Durham University, where as undergraduates we listened incredulously to the Professor of Industrial Health relating the hazards of exposure to, among other chemicals, lead in paint and in petrol. This caused manifold damage to the human body, whereas mercury resulted in memory loss, trembling, and, ultimately, multiple sclerosis—

remember the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland, who had suffered long term exposure to mercury compounds used as a dressing on the bands of felt hats?

Life in an engine-room at sea was also hazardous. I worked on one ship where the clatter of twin MAN twelve cylinder diesels, combined with the endless scream of the exhaust gas turbochargers, reduction gearing, and electric pumps, made it impossible to converse with a colleague, other than by shouting into his ear. Understandably, deafness along with dermatitis and alcoholism were common afflictions of marine engineers.

Boiler explosions on steamships were lamentably fairly common. Coal or oil was heated in a furnace, from which hot gases passed through fire or smoke-tubes in the water-filled boiler. The generated steam then powered the ship's reciprocating steam engine or turbine. The furnace was surrounded by the water in the boiler. Loss of water in the boiler, caused by lack of due care on the part of the engineers, or failure of a feed-pump, could result in the furnace crown being exposed, so losing the cooling effect of the water. The result was melting of the steel shell of the furnace, followed by an extremely violent explosion, wrecking the engine-room, and not infrequently sinking the ship. Understandably, if a fire-tube developed a leak, it was essential to affect a speedy repair. The procedure was to turn off the oil-burners or draw the coal fire. Then, as soon as the boiler had cooled, the Second or Third Engineer, dressed in protective sacking, would crawl through the furnace and hammer a metal plug into the tube end. The pressure exerted by shipowners to meet delivery schedules, in its turn reflecting the needs of merchants, meant that on occasion the engineer would be obliged to perform the job before the furnace had cooled sufficiently. Burning and subsequent pneumonia were responsible on occasion for the deaths of engineers.

Recently it was reported that the number of deaths of house roofers has reduced since scaffolding became more generally used.

Some of the tragedies described here were inevitable; the hazards of exposure to lead and mercury were learned only through experience (the worst teacher) and advancing medical knowledge. However, most would have been avoided by the exercise of care, common sense and, where they existed, by following procedures on health and safety.