



Cotgrave and District U3A

Keeping in Touch 40

Happy and Healthy New Year to All Our Readers

And a New Year limerick to get us off on the right foot

**The New Year has hardly begun,
Two thousand and twenty, plus one.
The Year of the Jab
From Oxford's Vac. Lab,
So there's hope for a much better one.**

Hopes of Spring

The photograph of the daffodils was taken just the other day in a sheltered corner of Surrey. The photograph of the early-flowering prunus was taken even more recently in our garden in Cotgrave. Here's hoping that 2021 will really be a much better year for all of us.



Zoom Meeting

Members will be well aware that our regular general meetings have been abandoned due to the Corona Virus. However, our Committee is considering the possibility of conducting these meetings via Zoom.

Initially, one of our members, Brenda Ainsley, who is the Leader of our ECO Group, has offered to make a Zoom presentation on the subject of:

The Climate Crisis – and Some Solutions

Brenda is an experienced speaker and has recently made this presentation to Trust U3A and to the Sheffield Branch of the U3A.

We have scheduled Brenda's talk to coincide with one of our original General Meeting dates:

Tuesday 9th February at 10 am.

Because of the use of Zoom, we need to know which Members plan to 'attend'. Therefore, if you wish to attend, could you please register your intention by e-mail to John Haskell, using the e-mail address:

CotgraveU3A@hotmail.com

Shortly before the day, those registered will receive an e-mail inviting them to attend, with (simple!) instructions on how to join the meeting

The talk is expected to last approximately 40 minutes, leaving plenty of time for questions and discussion.

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Childhood Memories

Michael O'Connor has taken us up on our request for more Childhood Memories with this interesting little monologue and we are even more fortunate to receive a similar contribution from June Benn, wife of our newly appointed engineering correspondent, Jim.

Pont Gludo Casnewydd

My home town of Newport in Gwent has an iconic bridge over the river Usk, the Newport Transporter Bridge. It is a Grade I listed structure and carries cars, cycles, pedestrians, buses and lorries in a gondola swinging between towers. It was designed by a French engineer called Ferdinand Arnodin and was opened in 1906.

The towers are 241.5 feet (73.61 metres) high and the span is 644.9 feet (196.6 metres). It has an overall length of 774.3 feet (236.0 metres).

An ordinary bridge would be too low to allow ships to pass under it, while a ferry could not be used at low tide. The gondola is propelled from a platform containing 35 HP (26.1 kW) electric motors, powering a winch to drive the gondola at 3 m/sec across the almost 200 metre span.

There are only eight such bridges in the world and only two operational in the UK, the other one being the Tees Transporter. The Newport bridge is the largest in the world and, excitingly, one can climb the towers and walk across the upper level.



Why do I write this? As a boy, I used to cross the railway tracks near my house and play on the gondola. It was dangerous but those were much less safety-conscious times. The bridge played a crucial part in many films, most notably Tiger Bay, with John and Haley Mills and Horst Bucholtz (who was also in The Magnificent Seven). I have a copy of it if anyone wishes to view it. A few years ago I took my daughter across the bridge. We left the car on one side and crossed as passengers, being the only occupants of the gondola. Then, when we were at the other side, the machinery broke down and we were stranded! I contacted the platform, which is about half-a-mile down the road and they told me that this had never happened before, right back to 1906! They suggested that we might re-cross by climbing the tower and walking across, or, alternatively, I could guide the gondola myself. In the event, I kept watch whilst they manually manoeuvred it across. It was a hair-raising few moments!



Alongside the bridge is an informative museum and, if you are ever that way, the bridge is well worth the crossing. Lit up at night, it is a magnificent sight.

Michael.

Memories of Childhood

I was born and grew up in the town of Goole which at that time was in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The government in its wisdom later altered the boundaries first making the county of Humberside which included Goole, other parts of Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire. It was never popular with people from either side of the Humber and boundaries again changed and Goole became part of The East Riding of Yorkshire (although if you drive along the M62 towards Goole you will pass a sign that says “Historic West Riding”). The Government and TV seem to be unable to understand this last change as they always refer to “Yorkshire and The Humber” regions!

Goole is a port, in fact we were taught in school that it was the furthest inland port in the country (don't know if this is still the case). It was also called The Port in Green Fields, its other nickname being Sleepy Hollow. It sits at the confluence of the River Don (known locally as The Dutch River – I'll explain why in a bit) the River Ouse and the Aire and Calder Canal. It was also one of the earliest planned towns it being a company town created by the Aire and Calder Canal Company. Before the docks, very little existed except a small settlement on the banks of the River Don now known as Old Goole.



Now to explain why the local name for the river Don is The Dutch River. The history of Goole begins when a Dutch Engineer Vermuyden diverted the river Don by 10 miles to make it flow into the River Ouse rather than the River Aire in the 1620's. This was done at the request of King Charles 1 who liked to go hunting on Hatfield Chase near Doncaster and was fed up with the land always flooding. This allowed the land around Goole to become more habitable.



Growing up I lived in Old Goole from the age of 5 to the age of 14 so the docks became an integral part of my life as the only way into the main part

of Goole was to cross the docks either along Bridge Street or by footpath across the docks. One grandfather worked on the docks on the Coal Hoists (although he died when I was 7 from pneumoconiosis from inhaling coal dust). One of the main reasons for the formation of the port was to bring coal from the Yorkshire coal fields to be exported. The Aire and Calder Canal was built for this reason and a unique way of transporting the coal was invented the “Tom Pudding” a compartment boat towed by barge.



Growing up near the docks I remember seeing these long trains of Tom Puddings filled with coal being pulled along the canal by barge to a special hoist which lifted the container up and tipped it into the waiting ship.



Later the railways also came directly onto the docks with their trucks full of coal travelling by gravity over the road (Bridge Street) on a raised bridge direct to the special coal hoist which then tipped them one at a time into the waiting ships. I've watched many trucks rumble over the road (which we had to travel to get into town).



On fine evenings at tide time we would go up onto what was known as Lock Hill to watch the ships come up river turn and navigate their way through the locks into the docks. It was always an exciting sight.

Also in Old Goole there was a Ship Yard which was one of the biggest employers along with the Docks and Burtons Clothing Factory. At 5pm it was a sight to see everyone leaving these places (mostly by bike) the roads were a sea of bikes. It was also quite a sight to watch newly built ships being launched usually sideways into the river. Now the Shipyard and Burtons are gone and the port employs far fewer people as it is mostly containerised.

Growing up in Old Goole we had a wonderful time roaming the fields and land round about. We were very lucky to have much more freedom than children today. Very few people had cars and so the streets were our playground. We had a black and white TV that only had BBC on it but our neighbours across the lane had a TV that also got ITV so the neighbourhood kids would sit in their front parlour on the floor to watch cartoon programs.

As I moved on to secondary school I had to walk into town and to the far end of town to school (had we lived a mile further we would have been able to go on the school bus). Since we had to go along Bridge Street which had 3 bridges to cross if we were a bit late there was always the excuse that "I got a bridge". Of the 3 bridges the Dutch River Bridge was old and wound by hand. It took ages to open and close. The other 2 were over narrow sections separating one dock from another and whilst mechanised they still took quite a while to open and close especially if more than one ship went through as they could only go one at a time.

It was an interesting time to grow up there but when I was 14 we moved into the main town and the docks became less of a feature in my life (I also did not have a long walk to school anymore).

June.

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Quiz Corner

Now it's January, so we might as well have the January Quiz – courtesy of Peter Shreyhane.

January Quiz.

1. 1st January 1877 - Queen Victoria became Empress of where?
2. 3rd January 1959 - Which became the 49th State of the USA?
3. 5th January 1933 - The construction of which famous bridge began on this date?
4. 6th January 1412 - By tradition this is the date when this French Saint was born.
5. 8th January 1935 - Which singer was born in Tupelo, Mississippi?
6. 13th January 1968 - Who performed in Folsom State Prison?
7. 17th January 1942 - Which sportsman was born on this date in Louisville Kentucky?
8. 18th January 1778 - Which British Sea Captain discovered Hawaii?
9. 20th January 2009 - Who became 44th President of USA?
10. 22nd January 1901 - Queen Victoria died here on this date?
11. 24th January 1964 - Which politician died on this date?
12. 25th January 1533 - Henry VIII defied the Pope and formally married who?
13. 26th January 1756 - This famous composer was born in Salzburg.
14. 27th January 1788 - Which future nation started as a penal colony?
15. 30th January 1948 - This peace loving man was murdered on this date.

Answers next week.

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Art Group

I always think that we are so very lucky in having such a talented Art Group who are kind enough to keep us supplied with superb art-work. This week, to celebrate the New Year, we have three paintings by Carol Harris which surely do brighten the gloom of Covid 19 and the wintry weather. Thanks Carol.



Covid 19 and the Science of Pandemics

I recently came across an article in the Times, based on an interview with Neil Ferguson, one of the scientists concerned with advising the Government on how best to deal with the Covid 19 pandemic. It struck me that, as scientific advice has figured large in most discussion of Government intervention, readers of the Weekly Letter may be interested in one or two of the points made in this article, which essentially defends the scientific viewpoint and sympathises with the rather unusual public predicament in which scientists such as Neil Ferguson find themselves. At the same time, it may be helpful to include at least a brief outline of criticisms made in a recent paper (by another scientist!) which suggest that the scientific advice given to Government has been to some extent defective. I should, of course, emphasise that I write this as a private individual (once a scientist in an entirely different field of research!) and not in any way as reflecting the views of the Cotgrave and District U3A (or any other Branch of the U3A, for that matter).

Neil Ferguson was born in 1968 in Whitehaven, Cumbria, so is a scientist with long experience and therefore capable of presenting a mature view of the subject of pandemic science. Interestingly, he took both his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in physics, became interested in applying mathematics to complex physical problems and then ‘transmuted’ into the field of ‘epidemiology’ (there’s a good word to remember when mulling over the pandemic with friends and relatives!). He first came to national prominence by studying the mathematics of ‘foot and mouth disease’ in 2001, then followed this in 2008 by setting up an MRC (Medical Research Council) body for the study of infectious diseases, which advises both Governments and the WHO



(World Health Authority). One such disease, for example, was Ebola. Ferguson has, more recently, established a strong research team at Imperial College, London which has developed highly complex mathematical models of the behaviour of viral infections and it is, of course, these which have formed the basis of the ‘scientific advice’ offered to Government over the past year. He was a leading member of the so-called SAGE Committee until he somewhat blotted his political copybook when observed breaking his own ‘lockdown’ rules in order to liaise with a close female friend! (He has freely admitted his mistake – unlike the well-known Cummings case!)

So much for the man – can we be clear exactly what is the nature of the problem? And this, of course is where it gets complicated. It takes only a moment’s thought to realise that building a mathematical model of a pandemic is a huge challenge, simply because there are many factors involved. Let us try to list a few of them: firstly, we have the nature of the virus and details of just how it attacks human beings, how long it survives in different locations, how easily is it killed off by various treatments, how is it transmitted from one person to another and how that varies according to age, sex, health, ethnic background, etc, how indoors differs from outdoors, how it varies with distance between those involved, how it depends on the number of people in a group, how effective are such defensive measures as the wearing of masks and the kind of mask involved.

I could go on but that should be sufficient to illustrate the point – there are very many factors which must be included in the model as ‘input parameters’, each of which will have some degree of influence on the output of the calculation.

The output, of course, takes the form of a prediction of how many people will catch the virus, how many will need hospital treatment, how many will die! And all this has to take note of how these various factors can be controlled by Government action such as lockdown, tiering, etc, bearing in mind that human behaviour is far from easy to predict. It is one thing to issue a code of behaviour – it is quite another to persuade everyone to follow it!

Needless to say, the model must take account of all these factors, which are known only imprecisely and this lack of precision introduces uncertainty into the resulting prediction. Here we have yet another stumbling point – uncertainty is a factor well known to scientists, who work with it all their lives but it doesn’t go down well with politicians who are obliged to make definitive decisions. What the latter want are absolute statements – if we do *this*, then *that* will certainly happen! The nature of mathematical modelling makes such absolute prediction altogether impossible but, on the other hand, scientists feel vulnerable to criticism from non-scientific ‘pundits’ and have no enthusiasm for looking foolish in the eyes of the public, so this uncertainty tends to be played down. Need I say more? It is a situation fraught with anxiety for all concerned! What is more, of course, is the likelihood that the Government may not follow the advice given, or may, at least, delay its decision just long enough to allow the situation to deteriorate seriously!

This brings us to the tendentious question of the interaction between scientist and politician. It would be naive to suppose that political prejudice could be put totally aside in the interest of saving lives or, even, saving the NHS from breakdown. There have, all along, been critics who, having a deeply-felt dislike for lockdown, have done their best to discredit the science in order to make their case look stronger. As an example, one may quote the accusation that Ferguson’s prediction back in the Spring of a huge death toll never happened and therefore his calculations were wrong. The truth is, of course, that this prediction was based on the assumption that nothing was done to curb the virus’ spread. In actuality, something (lockdown) was done, however belatedly, so, as he also predicted, the so-called ‘first wave’ was kept within manageable limits. Another argument which is frequently used to justify a ‘no-lockdown’ policy is based on the experience in Sweden, where policy was determined by their Government adviser Anders Tegnell (also a highly reputable epidemiologist). Little, indeed, was done to control the spread of the virus but, nevertheless, the ‘first wave’ seemed to have controlled itself – after an initial rise in Covid cases, numbers infected dropped sharply. The explanation for this surprising result is still under discussion (herd immunity is one possible explanation) but its use as an argument against lockdown has been seriously compromised by the behaviour of the ‘second wave’. Tegnell, himself, and the Swedish Government have been obliged to make a U-turn which would outdo anything seen here in the UK! Clearly, the Swedish experience has shown that we by no means understand the whole of this awful pandemic but it certainly can no longer be used to defend an anti-lockdown policy.

There is, however, one important aspect of the Swedish approach to the pandemic which bears serious consideration. Tegnell made the point that his analysis included not only direct deaths from the virus but also those resulting indirectly from pressure on medical facilities dealing with other ailments, such as cancer. It is probably fair comment to argue that such aspects should have been included in the UK response. It is hardly a criticism of the modelling – rather a criticism of Governmental philosophy – but one which seems to have been seriously overlooked here in the UK.

In fairness, it should also be said that some *scientists* are critical of the Ferguson modelling process (not only politicians!). As can be readily understood from our earlier discussion of the complexity involved, the computer program his group uses is enormously complicated (as, indeed, any such program must be) and this leaves room for scientific argument, the details of which are far too esoteric for most of us to understand. On the other hand, we should not overlook the fact that the Ferguson model has been developed over many years and used to analyse several earlier, similar crises. While fine details may well be discussed for many a year to come, I suspect that its overall performance will be seen to have made an invaluable contribution to controlling the Covid pandemic, not only in the UK but elsewhere too. What is more, the refinements introduced by the study of Covid 19 will surely be of value in treating any future virus pandemic – we (or, at least, our descendants) should be grateful for that.

I may be risking further political uproar by saying so, but one can certainly see parallels with the well-known ‘Climate Change’ disputes which have led to a seriously delayed response to an extremely serious threat to future life on our planet. But that, of course, is another issue.

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Creative Writing

As ever, we are fortunate in having a fascinating article from the Creative Writing Group. This week it is by Heather Whatnall.

The Stolen Ring

I'd kept everything in the box room. That is what we've always called the smallest bedroom in the house. Its name was certainly very appropriate during COVID Lockdown. I had started clearing out wardrobes, drawers and cupboards and I'd put boxes and bags for the Charity Shops in the box room, waiting for when the shops were able to open again – they had lost so much of their income during the Pandemic.

I had also cleared out my jewellery boxes and had a lot of things to sort through. There were watches with faces so small I would have needed a magnifying glass to read the time. There was a gold letter "H" that a friend had bought me when I was 18 and some beautiful pearl earrings that I'd bought on a holiday in the Isle of Wight.

I'd kept all the jewellery I wore regularly in the boxes but I wanted to do something with all the things I didn't wear. I had a lot of amazing black jet jewellery of my mum's. I loved it and did wear some pieces but had such a lot. I hated to see it just lying in a box and never being worn. Sadly, no one else in the family was interested in it. I had found a jeweller's that did valuations of black jet jewellery and I was hoping to take the collection there for some advice. If the pieces were valued at a good price I thought I might sell some if the jewellers were interested in buying them.

When we came out of Lockdown it meant I could go to the Jewellers. I got my dear husband to come with me (he called himself my "Uber Driver").

The jewellers were very helpful and their knowledge of jet was incredible. They looked at 8 pieces and valued them at a total of £8,000 – I was shocked (pleasantly!). There were also some rings in the box with the jet – they were all in gold settings so I had not worn them for a long time as I'd stopped wearing gold in my thirties. Some of the rings had been my mum's and whilst I didn't wear them, I didn't want to leave them lying in a box.

The jeweller who had valued the black jet looked at the rings and asked me about them. He said they could see how much they meant to me and wondered if I would be interested in having them made into something I would wear. I thought that sounded a lovely idea and if I sold some of the jet it would give me money to have some of the rings remodelled.

The jewellers were in a lovely village in Derbyshire. There were lots of cafes, pubs and restaurants so my husband, Andy, and I decided we would go for a walk and some lunch and I would make a decision about the jewellery.

The weather was beautiful that day and we enjoyed wandering along the cobbled streets. We found a delightful café and the food was delicious. After lunch I started sketching designs for a ring on the napkins. I wanted a ring to be made using the stunning sapphire from a ring that had been my mum's. It would look fabulous as an engagement ring. Andy and I didn't get engaged and I just had a wedding ring. At the time I said I didn't want an engagement ring but I had changed my mind now! Selling the jet jewellery and having a ring made was a big decision so I decided to think more about it at home before committing to anything.

When we were walking back to the Jewellers (where I had left my jewellery) I saw a gorgeous dress in the window of a little boutique and decided I would try it on. Andy said he would collect my jewellery and let them know of my plans.

Anyway, to cut a long story short as they say, I bought the dress, Andy collected the jewellery and we went home. I put the jewellery box back in the box room meaning to think about the ring but various things took over and I forgot about it for a while.

It was my brother who reminded me about it in October that year. He said he'd like to get me something for Christmas made from mum's rings and jet. I agreed it would be a lovely present and I could get the engagement ring I wanted made at the same time. Later that day I got the box, from the box room. I got out a couple of pieces I thought could make a ring which my brother could give me as a Christmas present. Then I noticed the sapphire ring was missing – the one I wanted to have remodelled as an engagement ring!!!! I checked and checked again, I looked all over the box room but it was not there. I was shouting for Andy to come and help me look but he was engrossed in a Nottingham Forest football game on TV (they were winning - thank goodness). When it was half time Andy came out and asked me what was wrong. He didn't look too bothered when I told him the ring was missing, I assumed it was because he was too focused on Forest and their need for three points. He did help me look for the rest at half time but, sadly, there was no sign of the ring.

I asked myself over and over again where it could be until I remembered that I had left the box of jewellery in the shop while Andy and I went for lunch. Someone there must have taken it I decided! A member of the staff must have stolen it! I phoned the Jewellery shop and asked to speak to the Manager. He was very polite but no help at all. He said he would ask the staff but there was nothing in their "Lost Property" box and, unfortunately, the CCTV cameras had not been working the day we went in – what a coincidence! I decided that was a definite sign of guilt! I demanded the Manager speak to the person who served us and question them as I thought it highly likely they were the ones who had stolen it. The Manager agreed and said he would phone me back. I told him I would go to the Police if I didn't hear back within 24 hours.

It was 23 hours later when I received a call from the Manager of the Jewellers shop (Richard Eaton's was the name of the shop). He said he was very sorry he had not been in touch but his investigation had taken a while. He was pleased to inform me that they had found my ring – it was in a tray with other similar rings and was in perfect condition. I was so relieved I didn't at first question how it might have got there. The Manager suggested I collected the ring rather than it being posted to me as the post was rather unreliable due to the Pandemic and the fact that a lot of Royal Mail staff were off sick or in quarantine. I agreed with the suggestion but said it would have to be after Christmas now as we were in different "Tiers" now which prohibited me travelling to the Jewellers at that time.

I told my brother Mike I would get something made in the New Year and he said he would give me a cheque towards it for Christmas.

So all was sorted and that is nearly the end of my story....

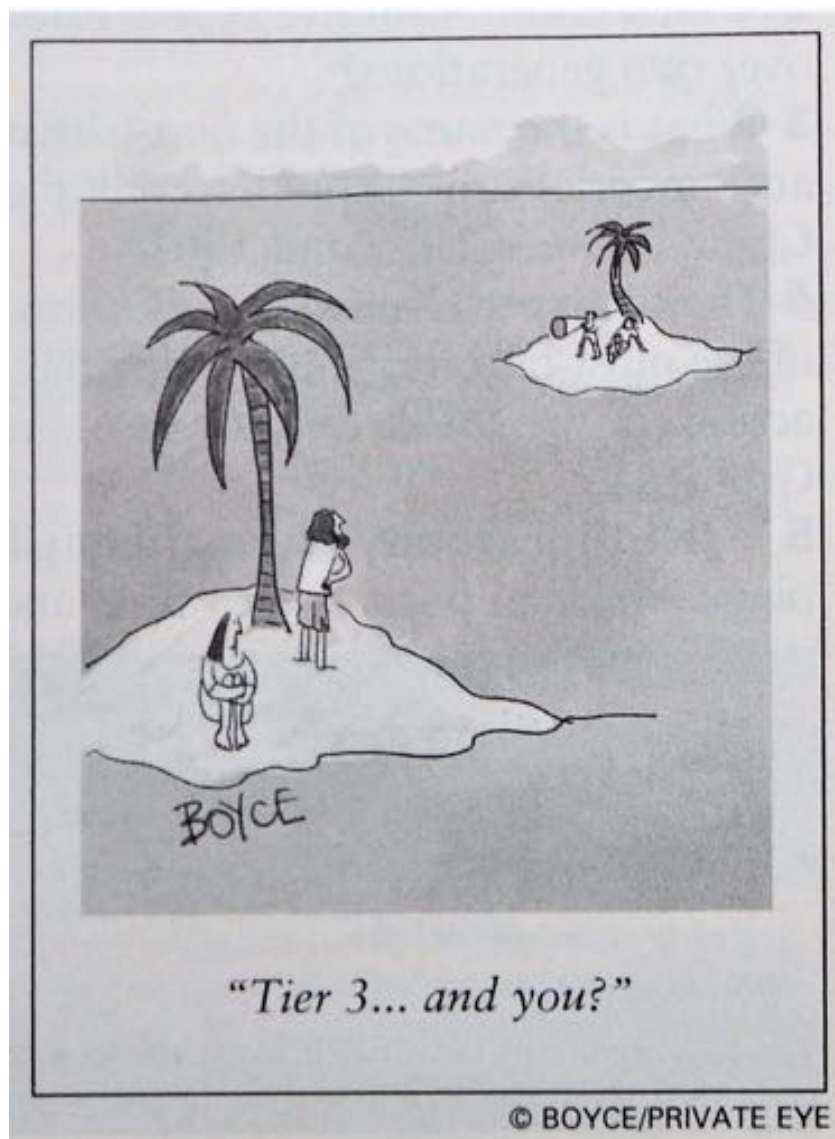
But what do you think happened on Christmas Day? My husband presented me with a box containing the most beautiful silver ring containing my mum's superb Sapphire! Andy had arranged it all that day in October when he went back to the shop to collect my jewellery while I was trying on the dress. He had warned the Manager that I might accuse his staff of stealing the original ring and he had primed the Manager and staff with a script to field my questions.

The ring fitted perfectly and I absolutely love it – my husband can “steal” more of my jewellery if this is always the outcome!!

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Cartoon Corner

We have two cartoons for you this week - they both come from 'The Week'.





That's all for this week. Remember to keep safe – it's only a matter of time!

John

