



Cotgrave and District U3A

Keeping in Touch 9

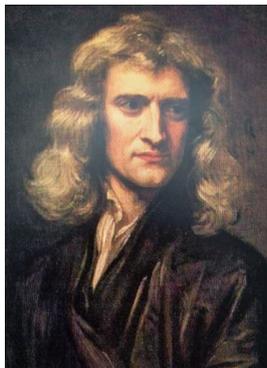
Guided by Science

The satirical magazine Private Eye recently published a somewhat brief summary of its view on the scientific conclusions emerging from the Government science group known as SAGE (Scientific Advice to Government in Emergencies). We quote it in full:

“We have, according to the revised projection of the adjusted figures, something more or less approaching no idea.”

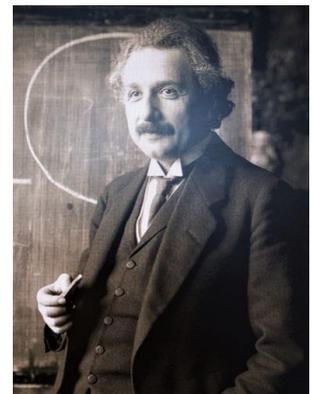
Is it altogether fair, one wonders?

We are constantly told that the Government strategy on COVID – 19 is ‘guided by science’, as though that excuses each and every error they may make. The implication is, of course, that ‘science’ is always exactly right and unchallengeable, a fallacy to which I fear many people are prone. Having, at one time, been a bit of a scientist, myself, perhaps I might offer a hint of enlightenment?



Science, of course is always *aiming* towards exactitude but, let us accept, it usually struggles to get there. In the early eighteenth century Isaac Newton thought he understood gravity, the force that holds the earth in its orbit round the sun (and a great many other planetary orbits). His derivation of the so-called ‘inverse square law of gravitation’ explained very nearly everything that was known about our universe. Then doubts began to emerge – how exactly was the gravitational force transmitted over the huge distances which separated the vast range of stars and other astronomical bodies? The question remained unanswered for two hundred years until

Albert Einstein published his paper on General Relativity in 1915. But this was only (!) a theory – how did we know that it was ‘right’? Like Newton’s theory, it made predictions that could be checked against experimental measurements and this checking process has been in process for the last hundred years or so – it is still in process, so far with remarkable success. The latest ‘success’ was the detection of ‘gravitational waves’ in 2016. There can be little doubt that the General Theory of Relativity represents one of the most significant developments in the so-called ‘exact sciences’ ever produced. Nevertheless, it is still seen by modern science as no more than an important *part* of our understanding – theoretical science is now struggling to understand the relationship between relativity and quantum theory. I won’t bore you with any more detail (partly because I have rather little understanding of the concepts under discussion!) but I would simply refer you to the TIME SCALE over which all this has happened – three hundred years! And remember that this is, indeed, regarded as ‘exact science’. How much more problematic is the understanding of more complex subjects like virology!



An important concept to get to grips with is that of establishing the relationship between two variables, whilst (and this is important) keeping everything else constant. A good example is Boyle's Law which most of us learned about at school. Most of the experiments were actually done by Robert Hooke who was employed by Boyle for a few years in the 1660s. Hooke used a mercury-filled U-tube to measure the change in volume of a gas (air) resulting from a controlled change in pressure, *while keeping the temperature constant throughout*. This was a particularly simple system because there were only three variables and it was easy to keep one of them (the temperature) constant. In such an experiment, therefore, it was possible to achieve at least a good approximation to 'exactitude'. Life gets considerably more difficult when there are more variables, many of which may be difficult or impossible to control and such is, of course, the situation with regard to the spread of COVID – 19. Not only are some of the variables beyond our control, it seems likely that some of them are actually beyond our current knowledge! Why, for example, is the virus so much more dangerous to older people? And why so much more dangerous to people with dark skins? It may well be that the latter relationship results from black people living in poorer conditions but we can't be sure. Imagine, then, that we would dearly like to know the relationship between skin colour and susceptibility. What do we do? We collect a hundred whites and a hundred blacks and subject them to identical conditions, where the virus is rampant and we record the resulting sickness rates and death rates! I rather doubt that such an experiment would actually be welcomed by those participating! No, we have to make do with uncontrolled experimental data, based simply on actual, uncontrolled conditions, the result being some considerable uncertainty in our scientific conclusion. With the best possible intention, we can never be sure that there isn't some subtle variable which is changing all over the place without our knowledge and totally confusing our data? Remember, too, that those responsible do not have a time scale of three hundred years available!

So, how does all this affect scientific advice given to the Government. We should first recognise that this advice is based on mathematical modelling of the anticipated spread of infection, while such modelling is itself (indeed, has to be) based on a number of variables which are beyond our control, so have to be guessed at as intelligently as possible. Inevitably, this implies uncertainty in the *input* to the calculation (multiplied by the fact that there will, in most cases, be several such variables). What is more, it is often the nature of such modelling that the *output* figure depends rather steeply on the *input*. In other words, a small uncertainty in the *input* leads to a much larger uncertainty in the *output*. The overall result may well be that the *output* is so uncertain that it is just about meaningless – ie useless! (In fact, the Private Eye satire may actually have a point.) Any reputable scientist will appreciate the importance of such argument and *should* therefore make clear to his Government colleagues that this is the situation. Nevertheless, one can sympathise with both scientist and non-scientist when they are under considerable pressure to evolve a coherent strategy for dealing with the virus. Sometimes, perhaps, it is just possible for the *output* to be given slightly greater credence than, strictly-speaking, it merits?

I hope that this contributes even a little to the better understanding of this awful situation in which the country finds itself, particularly the real relationship between scientist and Government. One final thought, though, is that there has been very little openness as to just what the scientific advice actually was! Without doubt, it is the Government's job to make decisions but we are never made aware of the 'science' on which these decisions are made. When something goes wrong, it is all too easy for the Government to put the blame on 'science' but we have no way of judging whether the decision was fairly arrived at. I believe that we, the public should be much better informed about not only the scientific recommendations but also just how reliable the scientific *output* really was.

As you may well have expected, it can all be summed up in a well-chosen limerick:

*While the science is far from precise,
And SAGE adds an aura of spice,
The predictions are vague
(As they were with the Plague)
And we sometimes ignore its advice.*

Sadly, there does seem to be evidence that Government ignored sound advice in at least two circumstances but we shall leave it at that. We have no intention to get involved in any political controversy.

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Grub, Booze and Other Health Matters

Once again, I am indebted to Anne Henton for the following:

*I like sugar, I like salt,
A drop of Scotch, if single malt.
Crisps and nibbles are fine by me;
They go quite well with a G & T.
Chips and potatoes I find alright;
They go with wine, both red and white.
I'm partial to butter and bacon fat,
Real ale as well if it's not too flat.
In fact, I enjoy my booze and grub,
Consumed at home or in the pub.
All dietary rules I've disobeyed
Yet I'm nearing the end of my ninth decade.*

Which brings us to the appropriate moment for the following limerick from Brian Franks:

*Forgetting things was Brian's worry:
So to the Doctor he went in a hurry,
Only to be told
That, at eighty years old,
He was no worse than he should be and, if it bothers him, to write it all down, always and then he
can always refer to it again and, if necessary, again and again!*

Thanks, Brian; I'll try to remember that.

And that reminds me of the well-known limerick about the Japanese gentleman who never could find a way to make his limericks scan:

*There was a young man from Japan
Whose limericks never would scan
And when they asked why
He said "I do try!
But when I get to the last line I try to fit in as many words as I can."*

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But enough of this light-heartedness – the University of the Third Age should surely be concerned with more serious matters, like the history of the local branch. Michael O'Connor has very kindly written this piece for us.

The Cotgrave and District U3A – a Short History

In these strange circumstances for the history of the Cotgrave u3a, it is useful and perhaps uplifting to go back in time and remember when we looked forward to things. As I get older my memory of our early days are becoming vaguer by the day. I had never heard of the u3a and had recently retired from my post as behaviour support in the city of Nottingham. Having worked for 45 years in education it could have been a shock to the system to stop working. My wife was still active in education, my children were getting on with their own lives, my youngest was still at home and still keeping me young in spirit.

What to do with my time though? We had dogs to walk, I was actively researching my family tree and there was much to do around the house. My wife, Carol, informed me about a meeting taking place in the welfare about a group being set up to get retired people in the area actively involved in their third age. Sceptical as I am, I went along to see what was happening. As I say, my memories are a bit sketchy but there were a relatively small number of people there...about half a dozen. Experienced colleagues from other areas were trying to set up a new group in Cotgrave. I knew nobody in the area despite living here since 1994. Before any of us knew it, we were on a provisional committee to set up a u3a for Cotgrave. I believe I was elected temporary vice chairman with Joe Rhodes as Chairman. Other temporary officers were coerced and off we went.

It has been a hazy rollercoaster since then. From very low numbers we aimed to get up to 50. We now have about 160. Organising, publicising, coercing, setting up groups, financing, writing a constitution, calling meetings sped by like a whirlwind. Our groups, very important, have grown and grown. I was coerced into the chairman's role very shortly and have stayed on the committee ever since. From knowing very few in our town, I now cannot go anywhere without seeing friendly faces. Cotgrave has become a friendlier place and the community has been energised by our group. Memories....delivering leaflets by hand to many homes, meeting with the miners in the welfare, the Cotgrave history research group, Christmas parties, visits to various places, committee meetings, using local amenities, our real ale trips around the area...too many memories to mention here.

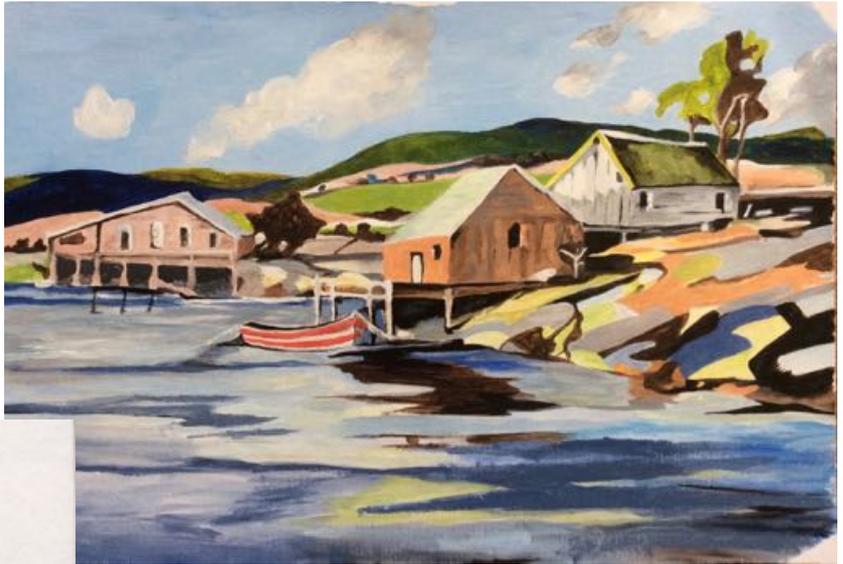
The present problems have highlighted for me the strength and bonds of our group. Many have kept in touch with each other, supported each other and assisted where necessary. I have learned to use zoom with the real ale group and have WhatsApped a load. I have made friends for life and know that any would help me if I needed help. We are a better place for the u3a and I am sure that we will come back stronger when the restrictions are eased.

So, when I am asked what we are about and what goes on, I look around and think...what can I say, there is so much to mention. Even if you don't want to be on a committee, keep coming to the groups...you and the group will benefit. I know that people argue about the title...university? Third age? But for me we are the third age of Cotgrave and will leave a universal legacy to our children of Cotgrave. Look forward to seeing you all again soon...let's go from strength to strength and enjoy our third age.

PS. Michael doesn't mention it but the Branch was formed in November 2013, six-and-a-half years ago.

The Art Group

Once again, we welcome contributions from the Art Group – this time from Desna Haskell. They're superb, don't you agree!



Puzzles

You will, no doubt, be eager to know the answers to last week's puzzles. First of all, Chris Soar's Spectator 'What things you are not allowed to do during the lockdown':

1. Drive to a Holly Day Cottage
2. Shake Hands with a Strain Jar
3. Throw a Party
4. V. Sit A Hare Dresser
5. Watch a Cricket Match
6. Meat ones Grand Pear Ants
7. Fly to Hamster Dam
8. Sink Brow Nails in a Baaaah.
9. Goat 2 A Moo V.
10. Fire up A Barber Cue By the Serpent Tine

And Peter Shreyhane's cricket puzzles:

1. At Canterbury before the big tree died, a ball strikes the upper branches but still clears the boundary. What do you give?

This would normally be a 6 and I would have said 6! However, local rules in this case made it a 4. Also, when being assessed for one of my umpire levels, I lost a couple of marks for not asking the home skipper, at the toss, if there were any local rules. This was despite the fact that I had umpired there before and played there numerous times.

2. A fielder racing to stop ball reaching boundary bends over. As he does so his hat falls to the floor and the ball runs over it, slowing down enough to stop it going for 4.

I would have given 5 penalty runs! But apparently as long as it was accidental, ball is still live so batsman can be run out and runs completed count.

3. Last ball of a T20. Scores level. Last two batsmen at crease. Last ball is delivered down leg side and you call a wide. However, batsman has moved out of crease and is stumped. What is your decision?

First decision (wide) stands and game over. Stumping is irrelevant.

4. The 6th valid ball of an over is delivered and umpire calls "over". As wicketkeeper is changing ends, he appeals for l.b.w. Do you answer the appeal?

I would say no. However, Law 31.3 says "for an appeal to be valid, it must be made before the bowler begins their run up for the first ball of the next over or if there is no run up his/her bowling action to deliver the next ball and before time is called. The call of over does not invalidate an appeal made prior to the start of the following over, provided time has not been called". I've never known that happen. Fortunately, as I would have declined to listen to the appeal !

5. In a local village match a cow suddenly steps through a damaged fence onto the field of play. At the same time the batsman strikes the ball. It bounces off the cow and is caught by a fielder. Is the batsman out?

Yes out. Law 19 states "an obstacle or person within the field of play shall not be regarded as a boundary unless "so decided by the umpires before the toss and the captains informed" . I wonder how many umpires ever raise this issue . I certainly have never known any!,

Now, the cricketing quiz!

Two batsmen (not the last pair) are at the wicket, both on 94. Seven runs are required for victory, 3 balls are left. The batting side win the match and both batsmen make hundreds. How?

Apparently, there are several solutions to the both batsmen on 94 conundrum.

This is the one I arrived at

1st ball – Batsman A hits a 6, getting his 100. Scores level.

2nd ball – Batsman A is caught out off a skyer. Batsman have crossed. No run scored. Scores still level

3rd ball – Batsman B now on strike. He hits a 6 .

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Playing Bridge During Lock-down

Bridge, as you probably know, is a card game that requires four players seated around a small table. Cards are repeatedly handled and passed around the players - often becoming increasingly sticky with the sweat of competition. Comments - sometimes complimentary, often barbed - are passed between players at close quarters along with biscuit crumbs and coffee sprays. All in all, Bridge is the perfect game to propagate a contagious virus.



The trouble is that, despite all the infectious down-sides, Bridge can be an all-consuming passion, with a yearning to bid and make the contract in as clinical and exciting a fashion as possible - especially if the contract is a Grand Slam. (For those non-players, a Grand Slam means that the player takes all 13 tricks).

A couple of weeks ago - and pining for my twice weekly Bridge sessions, I started experimenting with on-line Bridge. (Well, by that stage, I'd viewed as many cat videos, covid-19 memes and porn as I could take...)

You can play against a computer, or 'robot'. Or play with and against other players from around the world, but it is not the same as playing with a partner whose thoughts you can anticipate (occasionally) and against opposition you know and whose foibles you can try to exploit.

Then I came across 'BridgeBaseOnline'. This is a free website that, amongst other things, allows users to set up a table, reserve seats for friends and play a game together. The computer does the shuffle and deal and the rest is up to us. Together with Elsie, Sally and Sue, I have been spending an enjoyable hour playing Bridge most days for the past few weeks. It's a bit clunky until you get used to it, and the computer does hurry you along, but it's a great way to play with your partner and friends.

Conversation is a key part of the relaxed Bridge I like to play. Although it is not permitted to give hints and advice to your partner, it is good to review hands and try to learn how to do it better - as well as sharing news of distanced families, low-flying helicopters, and shopping traumas. BridgeBaseOnline does allow typed messages to the whole table or individuals, but it is no substitute for a chat. So we have set up a WhatsApp group and hold a shared voice call as we play.

Altogether this works well and I'd like to invite other Bridge players to join us. I'm not sure how it would work yet, but we can sort that out. I'm thinking that a good start would be if a few of the more computer literate members could organise players for a couple more tables and, to start with, play together. Later on - assuming this lock-down is going to be with us for a while - we can explore mixing the tables and making it as flexible as possible - a sort of 'turn up and play' scenario.

I'm more than happy to help with the setup and coordination. It would be great if a computer literate member could contact players who normally play on a Monday (and Tuesday) and agree that they would like to have a go. Then if the member would like to contact me, I can share what I know and, hopefully, help out. My email address is pcadwallader@yahoo.com.

Hopefully, we can restart the group meetings before we have all forgotten how to play in person, but in the meantime, I hope we can continue with as many players as possible online.



Creative Writing

Once again it's Brian Frank's turn:

How many Shakespeare quotes can you spot

Sainted George and the.....



Once upon a time there were dragons abroad in this land. And because those dragons caused so much destruction there were dragon killers also abroad. One such was the hero of our story; a bold young man who rather fancied himself as a Knight of Old. Excepting he *was* a few hundred years too late. By now, dragons were only a folk memory --- but this didn't stop him from turning his father's old scythe into a sword, well - something like a sword, and he already had a suit of armour, well, a suit of leather (good wearing stuff, just right for work in his father's fields), and an old milking pail that he had hammered into shape as a helmet, well something like a helmet. And the final touch, he borrowed, well something like borrowed, his father's horse.

Off he trotted, going where ever the horse took him – for it seemed to know the way – until at mid-day he found himself all of ten miles from home. There was a river, and sitting on the grassy bank was a wight with what looked like one of these new “books”.

“What Ho, friend. What have you there?”

The stranger looked up, holding out the book in one hand and a writing quill in the other.

“I am writing some notes for a play. Even in mid-winter this cool, quiet spot lends me inspiration. And you, sirrah, what errand are you upon?”

“Ah, I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver. I go abroad to seek dragons and thereby make my name. Such a tale would be an ill-favoured thing, sir, but it will be mine own. ”

“What, a goodly knight without a name!? are you from The Round Table then?”

“No,no,no, my given name is George, my family name I keep to myself, sir.”

“Well, likewise, my given name is Will, only Will”

“Well met by sunlight, proud writer Will. Full many a glorious morning have I seen, but here on this bank where the wild thyme blows it seems almost as if there is a world elsewhere that has crept upon us.

Methinks it is almost a pity to spoil it by enquiring whether you have seen a dragon here?”

“No, no dragons allowed here. A the very most, a worm for the fishing ”

“Ha! I wish you joy of that worm! It is The Wurm that I seek. I will carve him as a dish fit for the gods.”

“*Methinks* you dance with the Devil!”

“The Devil! The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman; he does not lead man astray... he only shows them the way so they do it themselves. I will defy the foul fiend. But I *must* find a dragon, and boldness be my friend.”

“Friend, this is madness... there are no dragons. They are long gone from our land.”

“Ah, this land, this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England. I will be its saviour from the beast. And if this be madness, Will, yet there is method in it.”

“Oh, I see, I think. You wish to impress some young woman, by bringing her some token of your fight.”

“No, friend Will, woman delights me not, nor man neither --- though by your smiling, you seem to say so.”

Smiling indeed, Will turned his face aside thereby setting sight on the hamper beside him.

“Madness needs feeding George, will you share my loaf and cheese?”

“A goodly idea; and we can talk of your play. Have you done such writing before now?”

“No. My work has been poetry; songs of love to my unrequiting lover.”

“Yes, t’was ever thus... one loves, the other looks elsewhere. Beware, roses have thorns, and even silver fountains have mud! But a play! How do you bring your love into such a thing?”

“That I do not; t’is a fiction, a made up thing of times past.”

“But the purpose of playing, was and is, both from the first and now, to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature.”

“George, friend, does not a poem do just that?”

“A poet, with his eye in a fine frenzy rolling, does glance from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth. And, as imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown, the poet’s pen turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name. So, friend Will, will you give life to such lies in the name of playing?”

“Lies?! Looking at the past, of which we know only the outline of facts, and putting flesh on’t... is *that* lying?”

“Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying! But hark, by the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.”

And a dull booming sound was heard, punctuated by the thud of heavy footsteps.

“Friend George, your wishes have summoned up the Beast. What say you now of your mirror to nature, when such Nature is long gone?”

“The wish was father, Will, to that thought. There are more things in heaven and earth, Will, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. The Beast is still with us, even if he hides from sight. Now to imitate the action of the tiger and stiffen up the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard favoured rage and attack the foe.”

“But look at it – t’is bigger than a Spanish galleon. Art thou not afraid for your very life?”

“I bear a charmed life, Will, and if I must die I will encounter darkness as a bride and hug it in my arms. But it is he who will fall. And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again. I will carve him as a dish fit for the gods.”

And indeed, the green-hued beast *was huge*.

George’s horse was rearing and snorting, ending by uprooting the halter rope which had been loosely wound around a handy sapling, and plunging away, making almost as much noise as the beast in front of them. Whose mouth opened, but instead of the expected flame came a big yawn. George shouted, “Rumble thy bellyful. Spit fire, spout, rain”, and grabbed up his sword and rushed towards that big head on a long neck, shouting in a voice that was louder than the beast’s in front of him, “To sleep, perchance to dream!” and raising the sword high, slashed down into the still wide mouth.

“Ah ha, a hit, a palpable hit!

A rush of green ichor flushed out, covering George from chest downwards.

Followed by the dragon itself, which planted its front legs either side of George and proceeded to wrap its neck around him.

“Quick, good friend poet, read it some verse, mayhap that will soothe the savage beast... or perhaps sing to it.!”

Will stood strangely still... then thrusting out his left hand (his right still holding a large hunk of bread) declaimed in a strident voice... for what seemed an eternity. The neck gradually relaxed, and slid to the ground beside George. He raised his sword... and lowered it to the ground.

“What, George, no stomach to kill the thing!”

“Never, never, never, -. After all, they that have the power to do hurt and will do none, are more to be praised than scorned. Pray you, undo this button Ah, for this relief, much thanks.”

“But the blood – you must clean it off, it will be poisonous.”

“Aye, even if the water itself was a good healthy water but for the party that owned it, he might have more diseases than he knew of. I will take me to the water’s edge.”

Suiting the action to the word, he plunged into the river.

“Wow! And thrice Wow! Tis cold; what call you this stream?”

“This is the Avon; and I fear it has not cleansed you.”

“Here’s the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, and oh, oh, oh!”

“George, here, use this moss--- old wives say that it takes away blood from birthing, mayhap it will cleanse you.”

George took the moss, and rubbed vigorously... to good effect. Then, turning to the still slumbering giant, he saluted it, raising his sword then sweeping it back to the ground.

“There, our revels now are ended. Goodday to you, Master Wurm. To sleep, perchance to dream.”

“What! Leave the beast to roam our blessed countryside and terrorise young maidens.”

“Nay”, and dropping his sword, George lifted up the big head and, carefully, raised one eyelid.

“Thought is free, and I, alone I did it, I thought you up from the realms of fantasy. Now, you that do corrupt my air, I do banish you.”

And on the word, the great beast dissolved into thin air; first a shimmering of its huge body, then the whole becoming transparent so they could see the trees through it, and finally a strange green wisp of nearly nothing cascading upwards to the darkening evening sky.

“See, Will, as I told you, I brought him here and can send him hence.

All such spirits are melted into air, into thin air and leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and lo, our little life is rounded with a sleep. I would it WERE bedtime, Will, and all is well.”

“Such things I would not believe were they played upon a stage! Are you a magician awakened from ancient times?”

“Ha! If that had been played upon a stage, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction! No, I am a young man with a purpose in life, to rid this land of England of terror... by whatever means I can.”

“A purpose! So do you intend to be immortal, since fair England always has, and presumably always will, been in terror of something or other. A youth like you!”

“Alas, Youth’s a stuff will not endure! I shall continue on my travels... tomorrow. And you? I suppose this adventure will go into your writings?”

“No one would believe it--- how could I make it seem even likely to be true?”

“Words, Will, words, words. The magic of words jumping from a page, or issuing from a storytellers’ mouth, entrances folk for ages after they first appear.”

“Words, you *are* right... and you have given much food for thought in my writing!”

“Ah, Food! And if you act on’t it may yet bring you a full belly. There is a time in the tides of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Maybe, Will, maybe you will be remembered for your words... for I have seen you scribbling as I speak. But how far have you got with this play, and what is’t called?”

“Oh, but a little waymerely some two thousand words yet. Of two lovers, Romero and his Judith.”

“A romance, or a tragedy? Speak the speech, I pray you.”

“Nay; ti’s but half finished, t’would not sound right, and t’is almost dark.”

“Now were I a writer, I could a tale unfold and not be afeared to declaim it to all who would listen. How else would the world hear my words?”

“This will be heard, I have a ready bunch of rascals in London to strut the grand stage. And now the sun sets-- ‘til the moon brings her light on us, so goodbye Friend George, and thanks be for your company.”

“Indeed, hung be the heavens with black and yields the day to night. I would were bedtime, Will, and all well. Good night, then. Parting is such sweet sorrow; who knows when we two shall meet again...in thunder, lightning or in rain. Till then, sleep well, and good fortune tend you.”

And so ends our tale. Did they live happily ever after? We do not know.

But their words do.

So it must be true, not a ‘once upon a time’.

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Keep well and keep aware,

John

PS. This was posted on the Beeston U3A fortnightly letter – I’m sure they will not mind our making use of it.

‘A satellite is set up to measure all our temperatures on the evening of May 30th. Please stand naked outside your front door at seven pm, with your passport open and pointing upwards into the sky.’