

Flower  
power:  
Hannah  
Betts  
reveals her  
birthmark

**No. 58**

# FOLKLORE FRONTIERS



*The Idle 'Prentice executed at Tyburn by William Hogarth (1747)*

# Folklore Frontiers

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Folklore Frontiers is an independent magazine covering various aspects of folklore, particularly contemporary legend, ancient and modern traditions, plus modern culture and forteana. It is edited and published by Paul SCREETON. Address is 5 Egton Drive, Seaton Carew, Hartlepool, TS25 2AT. Subscription for 3 issues is £8. Cheques to PAUL SCREETON (not Folklore Frontiers). If your subscription expires with this issue an "X" will appear on the line below

## THE DIARY

THE local rag rang to ask me about the Hartlepool / Beowulf connection. Too keen to enlighten reporter Richard Mennear, I neglected to ask how the *Hartlepool Mail* had learned of this rather obscure piece of historical belief. Richard's hearing or shorthand is at fault as it was local Victorian author Daniel (not David) Haigh who proposed everything in the early epic poem happened in and around Hartlepool. I was heartened that former schoolmaster, radio presenter and *Mail* columnist Alan Wright was also convinced of a link between Hartlepool and the legend, having studied the poem at university and while visiting Denmark was told by a lecturer that the location in Beowulf was ancient Hartlepool.

Following this piece, the *Mail* published a letter by me extending upon what I told the reporter (my correcting about Haigh's Christian name was omitted), but I was able to point out that King Hrothgar's mead hall has been located by archaeologists in the field called Palace Garth in the village of Hart. The pieces followed from the new film *Beowulf*, starring Angelina Jolie and Ray Winstone, while I pointed to a film, *Beowulf and Grendel*, premiered in 2005.

You wait 1,151 years for a film set in Hartlepool and two come along at once!

(Richard Mennear, *Beowulf: Local legend or just a monster myth*, *Hartlepool Mail*. 15/11/07 – on-line version has colour picture of your editor, which was only black and white in print; Paul Screeon, 'A Hartlepool legend', *Hartlepool Mail*, 21/11/07).



IN some circles those bird enthusiasts known as twitchers are figures of fun. Not here at Folkie Towers, where we salute their custom of having a whipround whenever they disturb the tranquillity of some rural idyll. The money is then donated to some local cause. According to birder Simon Barnes: 'The white-crowned sparrow that turned up at Cley and brought a million twitchers in its wake is to become immortal. Voluntary donations at the site where it

turned up have passed £5,000, which goes to the Cley Church Restoration Fund. It is enough to restore the West Window; there are plans to include an image of the sparrow. Twitching has always been a form of prayer and thanksgiving and glorification'. (The Times, 16/2/08)



A few days before Lincolnshire was rocked by a major tremor, this rhetorical question was posed: "Why do earthquakes happen? One of the reasons is the things to which the Knesset gives legitimacy – to sodomy." Well, not what I was taught in physical geography. However, Shlomo (bit unfortunate name in the circumstances!) Benizri, a Jewish Orthodox MP in the Israeli Parliament, has his own theory. (The Observer, 24/2/08)



A local pox clinic (how PC is that!) was sponsoring a novel (ho,ho) poetry competition in the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*. East Sussex bards were invited to write verses on the subject of sexually-transmitted diseases. Monitoring this contest was Nicholas Clee, who was mystified that the following limerick failed to win:

*"There was a young lady named Lydia  
Whose sex life couldn't be giddier  
She cared not a rap  
For the pox or clap  
But was frightened to death by chlamydia*  
(Hot Type column, The Times Books, 16/2/08)



A sport and supernatural story from the predator column, suggesting Derby F.C.'s 'haunting season' can be blamed upon the disappearance of Pride Park's ghost dog. Predator writes: 'This mysterious canine was often seen outside the ground last season – even on the day of their Wembley play-off win over West Brom'. Psychic Philip Soloman said: 'One or two people reported an unusual black dog hanging around the ground and some fans believe it's a lucky ghost dog'. Predator ended: 'The ghost dog hasn't been seen since May'. (The Mirror Mania, 1/3/08)



One columnist seems to have found a juicy titbit in Paul Johnson's new biographical collection, *Heroes*. It apparently contains this intriguing passage about Lady Jane Grey, the Protestant queen who reigned for only nine days and was beheaded for treason in 1554: 'She was long revered in the minds of well-brought-up Protestant English schoolgirls. Nancy Mitford told me that the only way she had ever been able to obtain a satisfactory orgasm was by thinking about Lady Jane Grey, which produced an extraordinary frisson of fear. But it is not clear that teenage girls today know anything about her'. (Daily Mail, 21/2/08)

Continued on back page

# Birthmarks

By Paul Screeton

A couple of surprises put me off my stride composing this article.

Firstly, I had sketched out the format with a planned introduction about how New Age pioneer Tony Wedd had believed a circular birthmark denoted how he had been shot dead in a past life (something happened in some woods during warfare). When I scanned Philip Heselton's biography of the late A.J. Dunkin Wedd, I could not find any reference to this. The index gave no page references for either 'birthmark' or 'past life'. There was an acknowledgement of my 'professional advice', presumably referring to my reading the book in manuscript form. Was the birthmark piece a prologue which I suggested deleting as making Wedd sound cranky? Surely not, but possible. (1)

I, myself, have a perfectly circular, one-inch diameter, light brown birthmark residing at the top of my right thigh. I had been married ten years before my wife Pauline noticed it, which speaks volumes for her observational powers. Next surprise came when I mentioned as part of this research that my mother, or someone, thought it was probably caused when as a foetus I got stuck against the side of the womb for awhile. Having a brown birthmark herself on the back of her neck, I asked if Pauline had heard anything similar told to her. No she hadn't, but she shared a womb with a twin sister whose presence had not been realised and who died in childbirth, so it would have been somewhat cramped in there. But more weird was that she didn't know of her birthmark until I pointed it out in the mirror. Aged 61, spending a lifetime unaware of a distinguishing mark which should have been spotted by passport control as not registered.

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**The medical profession terms a birthmark *naevus* and medics say they are formed before or shortly after birth when there is abnormal cell development in the skin.**

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Also, statistically, it is quite remarkable that only a select 1% of the population have such smatterings and here's a married couple each marked out as different from the rest of the herd. Ours are mundane marks to look at, but maybe mine does relate to a fatal bullet wound in a past life. More romantic than a stuck foetus or medical abnormality.

Birthmark exotica includes Mongolian blue spot, angel's kiss, port-wine and strawberry. Stork bite, I assume, refers to the delivering bird's negligence.

As for the fatal wound folklore theory, it appeared in a recent article by Hannah Betts, whose 'nature's tattoo' is a 'conker-coloured, brown cloud' below her neck (pictured on *FF* cover), which causes periodic cries of "burn the witch!" from her brothers and dire warnings from dinner party amateur dermatologists. (2)

On to the folklore. Betts wrote: 'There is still a good deal of superstition about birthmarks. Where science may not be certain of why some people get them, so folklore has filled the vacuum. The myths are legion. My personal favourite is that these splotches represent the site of death in a former life (my own must have been particularly agonising, resting, as it does, on my collarbone). And there is a great deal of loose talk about being touched by good or evil, the latter not least.

The most prolific superstitions hold the mother's thoughts or actions during pregnancy responsible, known in the trade as "maternal impression" theory. These follow the same warped logic as the tale about Elephant Man Joseph Merrick's mother being frightened by said animal during his gestation, thus causing his affliction.'

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**Elvis Presley had a diamond-shaped birthmark on his groin, seen by worshipping fans to be a manifestation of the divine.**

**However, Mikhail Gorbachev's florid forehead archipelago port-wine stain was cited as a fulfilment of Nostradamus's prophecy that the last czar would be one 'Michael the Marked', after which the end of the world would be nigh.**

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Over the years *Fortean Times* has provided a cornucopia of anecdotal evidence for birthmarks reflecting some trauma suffered by the mother during pregnancy, such as scares by an Alsatian, Persian cat, bird and frog. Religious stigmata are another variety of images being etched on the body in response to subjective experience. (3) (4) Similar to my recollection of comments upon being womb-stuck, a correspondent wrote that his wife complained of a trapped nerve in her lower back and when her baby was given its first bath, the midwife noted that he had a birthmark – located at exactly the same spot as the wife's trapped nerve. (5)

Another correspondent recalled a case of DIY ear piercing, so painful only one was completed. However, when the self-mutilator's baby was born, it had a little hole in its earlobe. (6)

(Continued back page)

## *Strange Brew* - London Publore - No. 4

By Antony Clayton

# The Road to Tyburn Tree

Tyburn was the principal place of public execution in London from 1388 until 1783, when hangings began to take place in an open area outside Newgate Prison itself. The approximate site of Tyburn is marked by a stone plaque placed in the traffic island at the junction of Edgware Road and Bayswater Road, close to Marble Arch. The first permanent gallows "made in the triangular manner" were erected there in June 1571 for the hanging of John Story "a Romish Canonical Doctor". The gallows were often referred to as Tyburn Tree and the hangman as Lord of the Manor of Tyburn. All sources agree that in eighteenth-century London execution days were a great event, attended by people of all social ranks, with as many as 30,000 spectators being recorded at one execution. As they were considered a public deterrent, each hanging day was made a public holiday, sometimes known as "Tyburn Fair"; there could be as many as eight such days a year.

Many of those executed at Tyburn were victims of their religious beliefs, particularly during the persecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - a significant proportion were Roman Catholics. In recent years, as a mark of respect for their sacrifice, a group of Roman Catholics would gather outside St Sepulchre's at 3 pm on the last Sunday in April, before walking together to the site of Tyburn. Proceeding in devout silence, apart from whispered prayers, the solemn procession was led by a prelate carrying a large wooden crucifix. The route took them along High Holborn and Oxford Street, with diversions to the Catholic churches of St Etheldreda's in Ely Place, St Anselm and St Cecilia's in Kingsway, built in 1909 to replace the Chapel of the Royal Sardinian Embassy, and St Patrick's, Soho Square. The pilgrimage ended with a service at Tyburn Convent in Bayswater Road. In 2007, on Saturday 23 June, the walk left at 11 am from Tower Hill - itself the scene of many executions - stopping at the site of Greyfriars Monastery and entering St Patrick's in Soho, before finishing at the traditional site of Catholic martyrdom.

For thieves, murderers, highwaymen and similar malefactors the journey from Newgate to Tyburn became a drawn-out public spectacle that attracted a number of associated customs and superstitions. Bernard de Mandeville's *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn and a Proposal for some Regulations concerning Felons in Prison, and the good Effects to be Expected from them*, which first appeared as a series of letters in the *British Journal* commencing on 27 February 1725, includes a graphic description of the gruesome parade. Some of his strongest condemnation is reserved for the "torrent of mob" thronging the route westwards:

Amongst the lower rank, and working people, the idlest, and such as are fond of making holidays, with prentices and journeymen to the meanest trades, are the most honourable part of these floating multitudes. All the rest are worst. The days being known beforehand, they are a summons to all thieves and pickpockets, of both sexes, to meet...All the way, from Newgate to Tyburn, is one continued fair, for whores and rogues of the meaner sort. Here the most abandon'd rakehells may light on women as shameless: here trollops, all in rags, may pick up sweethearts of the same politeness: and there are none so lewd, so vile, or so indigent, of either sex, but at the time and place aforesaid, they may find a paramour. [Bernard de Mandeville *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn and a Proposal for some Regulations concerning Felons in Prison, and the good Effects to be Expected from them*, [(J Roberts, London, 1725) p.20]

The condemned men enjoyed a hearty breakfast, washed down with copious amounts of beer, for they hoped to be as drunk as possible before leaving Newgate. However, as Bernard de Mandeville explained, "the courage that strong liquors can give, wears off, and the way they have to go being considerable, they are in danger of recovering and, without repeating the Dose, sobriety would often overtake them. For this reason they must drink as they go; and the cart stops for that purpose three or

four, and sometimes half a dozen times, or more, before they come to their journey's end." [ibid. pp.22-23] Anecdotes were frequently related of the condemned man promising to pay for his drink on the way back. On the site of the church of St Giles-in-the Fields, there once stood a leper hospital; it was said that Henry I's queen Matilda requested that a "Cup of Charity" should be provided for condemned men as they passed by, a custom that was continued after the hospital was dissolved in 1539.

Pubs that claim to have been stopping places on the road to Tyburn are still in existence, one being The White Hart at 191 Drury Lane, WC2 - also a regular watering hole for Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard according to an inscription inside - and another The Three Tuns in Portman Mews South, W1. The Rose and Crown in Old Park Lane contends that prisoners were kept in chains in the pub's cellars before being dispatched to nearby Tyburn, although this seems unlikely as, for one thing, it is not on the original route. At the Masons Arms in Upper Berkeley Street W1, it was also said that condemned prisoners were chained to the walls of dungeons, that now form the cellars, before being led along a tunnel which surfaced at the Tyburn gallows, although this sequence of events does not correspond with contemporary accounts of the Tyburn processions. The prisoners were transported by cart, together with their coffins and a chaplain reading suitable passages from the Bible - some, such as the clergyman and forger Doctor William Dodd (hanged on 27 June 1777) and engraver and forger William Wynne Ryland (executed 29 August 1783) were allowed to travel in a mourning coach. The procession, from prison to place of execution, was escorted by the City Marshal, javelin-men and constables.

Prisoners who considered themselves innocent would sometimes wear a white cockade in their hat; women wore a white dress. It was also believed that a storm on the day of execution signified the innocence of the person about to be hanged. After a storm broke out at an execution on Kennington Common in 1763, the crowd attempted to free the condemned man - the military had to be called in to prevent the rescue.

Once the ill-fated criminal had reached his final destination at Tyburn he would meet his hangman for the first and last time. Jack Ketch held the position of common hangman of London between October 1666 and November 1678. He became a figure of popular mythology whose name was given as a nickname to his successors for the following one hundred years. Jack Ketch also appeared as one of the three constant characters accompanying Mr Punch, the other two being Judy and Lucifer. Punch and Judy shows could be seen at Bartholomew Fair and similar outdoor events and were especially popular in the decades around 1800. "On some occasions Jack Ketch was hung by Mr Punch, tricked into placing his head into a noose, another example of the inversion of the social order enacted in certain customs, ceremonies and entertainments." [DNB entry by Tim Wales]

By the eighteenth century it had become common practice for the prisoner to stand on the cart with the halter around his neck. The cart was then driven away to leave him hanging. Death was not always instantaneous and friends and relations of the victim often had to help dispatch him more quickly by pulling on the legs or beating his breast. After death, when the body had been cut down, many spectators tried to touch it in the superstitious belief that the corpse held medicinal properties. The hanged man's hand was thought especially efficacious - women would pay the hangman for the opportunity to rub it over their bodies to cure swellings. In 1785 James Boswell reported seeing, "four diseased persons...rubbed with the sweaty hands of malefactors in the agonies of death". With his work accomplished the hangman would often repair to a tavern in Fleet Street where the rope was sold at 6d or one shilling an inch. Hucksters also sold what they claimed were lengths of the hangman's rope after an execution. [John Thomas Smith *A Book for a Rainy Day or Recollections of the Years 1766-1833* edited, with an introduction and notes by Wilfred Whitten (Methuen & Co. London, 1905) pp.180-183] Those gullible individuals purchasing sections of the fatal halter believed that it prevented headaches; possessing a short length of hangman's rope was also believed to improve the luck of card players. [John Aubrey *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme in Three Prose Works* ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Centaur Press, Fontwell, 1972) p.260] Wood from the gallows was thought to be a cure for the ague, a splinter could be carried, worn as an amulet or placed in the mouth to soothe toothache. Several books state that, following the relocation of public executions to Newgate, the original Tyburn gallows were sold to a local carpenter who converted them into beer-barrel stands which now reside, appropriately enough, in the cellar of the Carpenter's Arms, 12 Seymour Place, W1. See for example *The Daily Telegraph Book of Bon Viveur* [pseudonym of Fanny and Johnny Cradock] in London (Published for *The Daily Telegraph* by H. A. & W. L. Pitkin Ltd. London, 1953) p.121]

# Oldies but goodies

**THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT.** Using a tale most readers will be familiar with, the saintly Kelvin Mackenzie reminds us again of this old chestnut: 'Twice in the last week I have received text messages telling me that Larry Laprise, the man who wrote the *Hokey Cokey*, has died at 83. The most dramatic part for his family, claimed the text, was getting him into the coffin. They put his left leg in ... and things started to go downhill from there. I thought this was an old gag and I was right. Larry died on April 4, 1996, in Gooding, Idaho, and the joke has been circulating online ever since. I do love the texts, dear reader, but they mustn't be 11 years old'. (The Sun, 1/11/07)

**CLOCKING OFF.** Letters praising or fulminating against the gastronome Michael Winner are often humorous. Replying to a previous correspondent, Darrell Desbrow, of Kirkcudbrightshire, writes: 'May I point out to Orson Welles (deceased) and Michael Winner (deceased) that the Swiss did not invent the cuckoo clock. The Germans have that dubious honour'. See, for instance, the Mythconceptions column in *Fortean Times* 159:26. (The Sunday Times News Review, 2/3/08)

**STUCK COUPLING.** Subscriber Norman Darwen, of Bolton, Lancashire, posted the following clipping on 10/12/07: **A red-faced man got help after a metal ring became stuck on the end of his penis. He was taken to hospital but doctors tried unsuccessfully to remove the large piece of metal, which appeared to have been cut off the end of a pipe. Fearing amputation due to loss of blood supply, the surgeons called firefighters to lend a hand at Wigan Infirmary. The man, believed to be in his 40s, was given an anaesthetic while firemen cut the ring with a mini-grinder.** (Metro, 7/12/07) Norman commented: "I always knew those Wiganers were strange! Must be something to do with all the pies they eat. I do worry about the hospital staff though – surely a loss of blood supply would have helped, rather than exacerbated, the situation? Basic biology..." On 13/12/07, I spotted a very similar tale while researching back copies of *Fortean Times*, suggesting the strong likelihood of both being UBTs. Here's the earlier version for comparison: **A 46-year-old man from Oradea, Romania, known only as Janos, slipped an industrial nut over his penis to maintain an erection after seeing a porn star do the same in a film; but his penis began to swell until the nut was barely visible. Dr Gheorghe Bumbu from Bihor County Hospital, said: "I almost gave up hope of saving his penis when I realised that I could make several longitudinal cuts and let the blood out so the organ could deflate."** (Ananova, 18/8/03, via *Fortean Times* 180:10(4))

**THE GAME'S UP.** 'A man got the shock of his life when he visited a brothel in Warsaw, Poland, and spotted his wife among the employees'. (Daily Star, 10/1/08) Or if you prefer: 'A Polish husband sneaked off to a brothel in Warsaw while his wife was at work – only to discover that that was where she was working. They are now divorcing after 14 years together'. (The Sunday Times, 13/1/08)

**NON-STICKY ONE.** Reviewing *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* by David Edgerton, Ross Leicke admits: 'Like most of us, I had believed, for example, that the "space race" may have cost billions of dollars and achieved little, but generated many important spin-offs – such as Teflon. Not so, according to Edgerton. Teflon was invented in 1938 and has been gracing frying-pans since 1954.' (The Times Books, 26/1/08) \* See also *Fortean Times* Nos. 26 and 174.

**FUCHS OFF.** New twist on an old theme. According to Rod Liddle, commenting on the heroics of the recently late Edmund Hillary: 'His subsequent mission to the Antarctic with Vivien Fuchs, incidentally, provided *The Times* with its most inadvertently entertaining headline ever, for which we might remember him: "Hillary Fuchs off to the Pole".' (The Sunday Times, 13/1/08) Well, show us the proof, Rod. I'd previously heard of the headline without the word 'Hillary' and also a bonnet over a picture of huskies – 'Fuchs' dogs on quayside'. In both cases the sub-editor responsible was supposedly sacked. Doubtless a salutary warning to those such as myself engaged in the newspaper profession.

**ARTISTIC LICENCE.** Turner would have been a prize idiot to have lashed himself to a ship's mast for four hours to experience the power of the storm depicted in *Snowstorm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*. Exhibited in 1842, J.M.W. Turner was not in good health, and despite claiming his adventure it would surely have killed him (FF50:2). However, in a pen portrait on children's TV, this tale was repeated as true. (Shout, BBC1, 12/11/07)

**DOG SHOTS MAN.** Apparently a dog shot a man during a hunting trip. James Harris, 37, put his gun on the ground while he collected a pheasant that had been killed. One of his hunting dogs then stood on the gun, which went off and shot him in the leg. His condition was unknown. Officials in the US state of Iowa were investigating the accident. (Metro, 30/10/07)

**THESPIAN HUMOUR.** It's the way Terry Wogan tells 'em. A Dublin friend reminded him of an amateur production that he witnessed when the 'Am Dram' movement was at its height in the Ireland of the 1960s. The problem for producers was that there were plenty of females willing to tread the boards, but the fellas weren't so keen. Which was a problem with the casting of the Nativity. As Wogan put it: 'One female, a parcel of tame animals, a doll, and the rest, unfortunately, men. It was really pushing it to get a Joseph and the Three Wise Men, and by the time it came to cast the inn-keeper, they were really scraping the barrel. The trouble was, this one liked a drink. Came the dress-rehearsal, Joseph's knock on the inn door was greeted with a cheery "Welcome! Come in!" The producer wasn't pleased: "For God's sake, Mick, there's no room at the inn! You can't let them in!" On the big night, Joseph knocks desperately at the door. It's opened, swiftly, by the inn-keeper. Before Joseph can make his plea, Mick shouts: "I told you before, there's no room at the inn!" A moment's pause, and then he says, "Ah, sure, come in and have a drink while you're waitin' ... " (Wogan's World, The Sunday Telegraph, 23/12/07)

**FOETAL ATTRACTION.** The story which has attracted the greatest debate on the urban legends site [urban-legends@yahoo.com](mailto:urban-legends@yahoo.com) has been the claimed case of a couple who got married and then found out they were twins separated at birth. *The Sun*, which splashed with it, called it **THE MOST INCREDIBLE STORY YOU'LL READ THIS YEAR**. Incredible, yes, credible, even, but in the circumstances, no way. I recall from the Sixties reading a play by, I believe, John Osborne, about an aggressive investigative journalist harassing a couple through their letterbox who had similarly married without realising they were siblings. It may have been entitled *A Subject of Scandal and Concern*. Can anyone verify? In the 2008 sequence of events the giveaway was that despite the limitless resources available, our combined battalions of newspapermen could never identify the couple. Peer Lord Alton of Liverpool – who revealed the too amazing to be true twist of fate to Parliament – told how the brother and sister fell in love after meeting by chance after being adopted by separate families.

The marriage was then annulled in the High Court. The couple, who did not have any children, met as adults and went on to have a happy marriage until DNA tests revealed they were related. Lord Alton said they were never told they were twins, but failed to explain how they found out. As usual in such a case Alton, who was an MP for a largely Roman Catholic constituency. Has a vested interest, being a pro-life crusader using the case to highlight perceived problems with the Human Embryology and Tissues Bill in Parliament.

The story broke on a Saturday and by Monday at least one hack, Peter McKay, had the gumption to suggest that all might not have been as portrayed in a gullible Press. Below is his take on the story:

## Secret? Or an urban myth?

THE former Liberal Democrat MP David Alton, now an Independent crossbench peer, says a High Court Judge told him about the twins separated at birth who later married, unaware they were brother and sister. The matter came to light, he says, when they went to court to have their incestuous marriage annulled in a secret hearing. Might this be an apocryphal story repeated in good faith by Alton? I find it hard to believe such a case would have been kept quiet. As it happens, Alton supports a campaign to compel the Government to tell adopted children the identity of their birth parents. At present, they have the right merely to inquire.



Revelation . . . Lord Alton

**SATANIC COKE.** Coca-Cola, the subject of numerous urban myths, can add alleged Satanism to the Coke canon, with 444 Russians accusing the US drinks conglomerate of 'blasphemy' for using pictures of Orthodox churches and crosses in an advertisement. They claim that some of the crosses were upside down, traditionally a symbol of Satan. Prosecutors were investigating the complaint by the residents of Nizhny Novgorod. A spokesman for Coca-Cola said the advert was meant to promote Russian culture. (Faith News, *The Times*, 22/12/07)

**PAWN STAR DIES.** I have written frequently on what I term 'dubious transmissions', whereby electronic equipment picks up purportive broadcasts, e.g. church wedding organ monitors drivers outside communicating via a control room. A frequent variant has dental fillings picking up Radio 1 or such. The recent death of chess grandmaster Bobby Fischer quoted his alleged removal of all his fillings before his rematch with Boris Spassky in 1992 in the former Yugoslavia. Simon Whittaker mentioned this in *Fortean Times* in 1993 (*FT* 68:33). In 2008, Ben Macintyre – a familiar figure to regular readers for his erroneous material – wrote of the 1992 rumble in the Balkans: 'He was even reported to have had his fillings removed because he feared the Russians were sending radio signals through them into his brain. (*The Times*, 19/1/08) Will Buckley noted that: 'Just because you are paranoid, it does not mean they are not out to get you. Nevertheless, it is extra cautious to remove the fillings from your teeth for fear your enemies are using them as antenna to beam messages to your brain'. (*The Observer*, 20/1/08) While John Carlin observed: 'He distrusted dentists and doctors, and even distrusted his metal fillings, which he had removed, (Saemi) Palsson (a local hero in Reykjavik where Fischer lived) said, out of some vague fear of radiation or out of concern that the Americans or Russians would beam radio signals via his molars into his brain'. (*The Observer Magazine*, 10/2/08)

**LOAD OF BOLLOCKS.** Italian men have a charming means of warding off evil spirits – they grab their genitals. Just as singer Michael Jackson would do this on stage, such public displays have been criticised by a judge, who has ordered his countrymen to desist in grabbing their groins in public despite it being a long-standing superstitious practice. The county's Supreme Court said they must do it only at home. The court ruled that a 42-year-old man from Como had broken the law by 'ostentatiously touching his genitals through his clothing'. He claimed it had been an involuntary movement, but he was fined 200 euros (£150) for offending public decency. (*The Sunday Times News Review*, 2/3/08)

**DARWIN AWARDS.** A naked couple copulating on a pitched roof, who plunged 50 feet, won a runners-up award for dafest death. The bodies of the pair, both 21, were found beneath a US office block in Columbia, South Carolina. America's annual Darwin Awards, named after the barmy father of the discredited evolutionary theory, honour stupid folk who 'eliminate themselves in an extraordinarily idiotic manner – thereby improving our species' chance of long-term survival.' Winner was a Texan, aged 58, who died of alcohol poisoning after giving himself an enema with three litres of sherry. (*The Sun*, 12/1/08)

# Crossing the Line +

Your after-sales service

## **PYNCH ME! I MUST BE DREAMING!**

Reclusive author Thomas Pynchon attended a New York concert by the rock group Lotion, none of whose members recognized the man who introduced himself simply as "Tom." Lotion's guitarist, Jim Ferguson, was reading *Slow Learner*, Pynchon's collection of short stories. He'd left his copy backstage, where Pynchon had been invited to watch the show. Pynchon saw it and asked, "Who's reading my book?" "I said, 'No, that's my book,'" Jim recalls. "It didn't register until I got onstage." (Andrew Essex, 'Godzilla meets indie rockers', *The New Yorker*, 24/6/1996)

Cf. Paul Screeton, *Crossing the Line*, p. 83. Noticing that a fellow passenger was reading a copy of his first novel, Matt Thorne said, "Excuse me, that's my novel you're reading." She replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. I found it on that seat over there." (Snopes, monitored by Brian Chapman)

**TRAIN CRASH JOURNALISM.** *The Observer*, whose accuracy is lamentable, apologised thus: 'A photograph purporting to show the wreckage of the Munich (air) disaster used in our television section (3 Feb) was supplied by a picture agency with an incorrect caption. It actually showed the Quintinshill rail crash of May 1915. Apologies'. Covered in *Crossing the Line*, page 37. *The Observer* apology was on page 32: across on 33, Catherine Bennett used a silly simile: 'It would be like expecting Mussolini to get the railways running smoothly if he couldn't enforce the timetable with a firing squad'. Myth demolished in *Crossing the Line*, page 158. (*The Observer*, 17/2/08)

**ROD THE MOD** (*Crossing the Line*, page 10). The stupid headline gave adequate warning of the rubbish to follow – 'Rod Stewart in rail drama'. After claiming 'Legend has it he was discovered after a convivial night out singing on Southend station by Long John Baldry', the piece continued, 'Early hits from the 1970s are thought to contain references to Beeching and the fate of the railways: *The First Cut is the Deepest* and *Reason to Believe*.' Satire perhaps, but actually the former song written by Cat Stevens is not about Dr Richard Beeching but unrequited love; the second is another song of wounded passion and by American singer/songwriter Tim Hardin. (*RailStaff*, November, 2007; FF48:8-9)

**DOWN THE PAN** (*Crossing the Line*, pages 7-8). Let gullible or short-of-copy-or-inspiration columnist Rod Liddle tell it – again: 'Straight in at number one on the league table of extremely inauspicious births: the little girl born to Bhuri Kalbi at midnight lat Tuesday. The pregnant Mrs Kalbi was travelling by train through India when she repaired to the loo. Immediately she was seated, a child popped out of her, slide down the

lavatory pan and fell on the tracks beneath. Mrs Kalbi passed out – as you would – and her tiny daughter was left naked, vulnerable and mewling between the rails for two hours before she was discovered by a guard from a nearby station. Imagine: to enter the world in such a way – via the lavatory pan of an Indian train. And imagine again that the little mite survived such an ordeal, uninjured: not so inauspicious after all, maybe. (*The Sunday Times*, 2/3/08)

**Another baby, Leon John Moger was christened by vicar Gary Nicholson on the footplate of the Tanfield Railway's RSH 0-6-0ST No. 49 On April 22. His railway enthusiast parents Laurence and Pauline hired the line for the occasion and some 50 guests rode on the celebratory train journey. Young Leon was blessed using the water from the locomotive boiler – complete with a drop of engine oil. (*The Railway Magazine*, July, 2006).**

There's an interesting letter in *Fortean Times* No. 230, December, 2007, of how when retiring after 50 years' service in 2001, Driver Percy Drummond chose instead of having a three-car Silverlink electric unit named after himself, chose instead to have it named after Nikola Tesla, inventor of many applications, including alternating current. Truly an honourable act, but the name should really have been applied to a class 86 or 90 years ago.

**Trains on Japan's Nagasaki-Hakata line were badly disrupted when a tortoise became wedged between point blades near Yue station. The reptile was extracted unharmed. (*The Railway Magazine*, January, 2008).**

'A Swiss train was out of service for a week after a 4ft pet adder escaped from its owner and slid into the partition walls of a carriage. Experts were unable to coax the snake out of its hiding place with juicy bait'. Well, did they just ignore the threat to human life? (*The Times*, 26/8/06)

Isle of Wight Steam Railway W38 carries a South African chime whistle donated by Chris Anderton. At the dedication, IoSWR chairman John Suggett recounted how he asked about the whistle and was told that it had been made to be heard by elephants, so keeping them off the railway. Mr Anderton, asked how he was sure it worked, replied by asking how many elephants had been on the IoSWR since the whistle was used? His point was therefore proved. (*The Railway Magazine*, August, 2006)

**RAIL GAG.** A man and a woman who were strangers found themselves sharing a train sleeper compartment on a long journey. She was on the top bunk and he was below. In the middle of the night he heard call down: "Excuse me, but I'm cold. Could you please pass me a blanket?" He responded: "I've got a better idea. Let's pretend we're married." She giggled: "I'd love to." Which led to him replying: "Good, then get your own fucking blanket."

# Update

**DUELLING GUITARS** (FF22:8-16). In a very lengthy article, Mick Goss argued that 'Slowhand' Eric Clapton fought a long guitar duel with Beatle George Harrison to win the latter's wife, Pattie Boyd (pictured below). This is retold in a book, *Wonderful Today* by Boyd with Penny Junor (Headline Review, 2007) and was serialised (The Mail on Sunday Review, 5/8/07). As Pattie tells it: 'One evening the actor John Hurt was with us. Eric was due to come over too and George decided to have it out with him. John wanted to make himself scarce but George insisted he stay. John remembers George coming downstairs with two guitars and two small amplifiers, laying them down in the hall, then pacing restlessly until Eric arrived – full of brandy, as usual. As Eric walked through the door George handed him a guitar and amp – as an 18<sup>th</sup> Century gentleman might have handed his rival a sword – and for two hours, without a word, they duelled. The air was electric and the music exciting. At the end, nothing was said but the general feeling was that Eric had won. He hadn't allowed himself to get riled or to go in for instrumental gymnastics as George had. Even when he was drunk, his guitar-playing was unbeatable'.



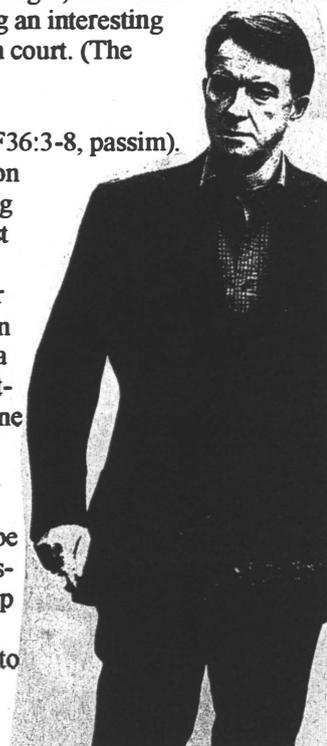
**MARSBARIANNE FAITHFULL** (FF19:3-7, passim). Stuck for a subject, columnist David Baddiel asked his Christmas guests what they were reading. He knew what his partner Morwenna was reading as he'd bought her Marianne Faithfull's new memoir, *Memories, Dreams & Reflections*. He added: 'However, on Boxing Day, she dropped it in the bath. Thus it has been sitting in front of the radiator in our bedroom since. Its pages, although now dried out, have become blurry and engorged: it's tempting to make a joke about the appropriateness of this, given the author, but that would be unfair...' (The Times Books, 5/1/08)

**666** (FF57:11). Police were investigating a sustained period of satanic vandalism at the Honey Bee golf course. It began with the burning down of the water pump house, but what concerned Honey Bee staff the most was the 666 dug into the green. The symbol of the Devil was alongside a pentagram associated with satanic activities. A dead racoon was also laid on the 1<sup>st</sup> green. "They even drove golf carts into the lake. It looks like it was part of a ritual kind of thing," said pro shop manager Bob Bartel. "The 666 stuff, I mean." Monterey County Herald, California, 3/12/07; via The Observer Sport, 16/12/07)

\* Reader Peter Read, of Todmordeen, West Yorkshire, joined the correspondence debate on the brewers' art of wittily naming and advertising beers. He had discovered Abbeydale of Sheffield, which brews 'its sublime stout Black Mass' to an ABV (alcohol by volume for non-boozers) of 6.66. (The Times, 1/3/08)

**PHILISTINE CLEANER** (FF46:4). As John Hind put it: 'Art not recognised as art has often fallen prey to cleaners'. A familiar theme in *FF*, Hind examined 13 unlucky works of art, actually 14 as item No. 11 involved two of Damien Hirst's efforts (I refuse to call them art). Hind wrote: 'The most celebrated case is cleaner Emmanuel Asare's bin-bagging at London's Eyestorm Gallery in 2001 of Damien Hirst's installation *Painting by Numbers*, a representation of his studio and its detritus. "I didn't think for a second it was art." Explained Asare. Hirst found this "hysterical." Less so the pouring of black ink into his sculpture *Away From the Flock* during an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 1994. The perpetrator, artist Mark Bridger, relabelled the piece *Black Sheep*. "I was providing an interesting addendum to his work," said Bridger in court. (The Observer Magazine, 27/1/08)

**MANDELSON'S MUSHY PEAS** (FF36:3-8, passim). For the umpteenth time Peter Mandelson is remembered for his alleged mistaking Mushy peas for avocado dip. Columnist Paul 'Making sense of a mad world' Taylor was pointing out that 'whenever Our political masters try to get a grip on Popular culture, they inevitably find it a Slippery beast'. He added: 'As for politicians' implausible bids to be seen as one of us, we chortled merrily as William Hague once claimed to the prototypical Binge-drinker as a teenage drayman's Lad'. Taylor went on: 'And I really hope it is not an urban myth that, while pressing the voters' flesh in a Hartlepool chip shop, Peter Mandelson once pointed to the mushy peas and said he would like to



“try some of the guacamole dip”.

This latest mushy peas tasting was monitored by Norman Darwen, who added: “Looking up ‘guacamole’, I found it is made from avocados, so the story has not changed too much from what I think is the original ‘avocado dip’ Peter supposedly asked for – but when Little Feat sang *Tripe My Guacamole* way back when, as a teenager back in the north-west of England I just assumed it was something they’d made up when they were stoned!” (Paul Taylor, ‘Spices ‘an inspiration’? That’s a load of Ed Balls’, Manchester Evening News, 12/12/07)

**A.B.C.** (FF4:19-25, passim). For the second time *Top Gear* TV star Richard Hammond has mentioned anomalous big cats in his neck of the woods. ‘There’s tigers in them thar woods again. Well, there are big cats round where I live. Out herein the sticks, in the darkest corners of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, they’ve been ringing the police with more sightings of big cats. It’s pretty much common knowledge round here that there are some big critters lurking around the margins. So much so that the police have a specialist dedicated to following up calls from nervous farmers and terrified hikers who fear they have strayed into the Kalahari when they only intended a stroll around Gloucestershire. And I couldn’t be happier. The possibility, just the possibility that there might be big, secretive animals roaming the land brings something special into our lives. It means there is actually some magic left in a world that could too easily be dominated by Google Earth, credit cards and mobile phones. So I for one shall be walking the lanes with an eye very much on the hedgerows, just waiting for that big black shape to slink into view.’ (Daily Mirror, 30/6/07)

**GLOBAL WARMING** (FF16:22; FF46:3). Actually the headline was **GLOBAL COOLING!** and author of the article was Christopher Booker. No surprises there if, like me, you have read his brilliant book *Scared to Death*, written with Richard North. Both put the climate change scam into perspective, the article focussing on G.W. advocates being very silent about the 2008 Freeze throughout the world. The article notes that global temperatures are no longer rising as the CO2 theory predicts and that the unexpected new weather patterns suggest the possibility of temperature reversal and how with this year’s freeze ‘the concept of global warming must seem awfully remote’. (Daily Mail, 21/2/08)

- **CRAGS.** Carbon rationing action groups (Craggs) are community groups that meet in one another’s homes and local pubs and set themselves personal carbon targets for the year. Backsliding members who jet off on too many foreign holidays have to pay their colleagues a fine or perform green-style’ community service’ to make up for their environmental transgressions. Out of 17 of these groups operating globally, 16 are in the UK. Worthy or barmy? Well, they’re already squabbling, with some regarding the word ‘rationing’ too intimidating, preferring ‘reduction’. (The Observer {obviously} 24/2/08)
- **BAGS.** Also the tide has turned against plastic bags posing any direct threat to marine life. Campaigners have claimed they kill more than 100,000 marine mammals and one million sea birds annually. But a two-page spread condemned this litany of doom as sexed-up science. Even Dr David Santillo, of Greenpeace, admitted: “It is unlikely that many animals are killed by plastic bags. The evidence

shows just the opposite.” (The Times, 8/3/08) Larger pieces of plastic are a greater problem, particularly in the Pacific. This also rather damns Darwinian evolutionary theory. It is said that nature deplores a vacuum, yet nothing has evolved to eat the limitless new food supply which discarded plastic has provided. A non-creation myth!

**EVOLUTION DEBATE** (FF52:3-5, passim). Some scientists have claimed chimpanzees are more evolved than humans. A study of 14,000 genes showed that although we are more advanced, chimps change more through natural selection. Humans developed more due to random ‘genetic drift’. University of Michigan experts ‘also found evolution may have caused more inherited diseases – which were useful in the environment of the time’. Whatever that means! (The Sun, 17/4/07)

**APHRODISIACS.** Chicago’s Smell and Taste Foundation has revealed that the aroma of pumpkin boosts blood flow to the penis by 40%. Liquorice, lavender and doughnuts (I find the smell revoltingly sickly, actually) supposedly have a similar stimulating effect. Tesco pumpkin buyer Paul Smith commented: “Any woman making pumpkin pie this Hallowe’en should consider that the pastry might not be the only thing that rises.” (Daily Mirror, 30/10/02)

\* According to one report: ‘People have been searching for magical bedroom fix-alls for centuries. Oysters, ginseng and turtle eggs have been rumoured to unlock sexual power. But there is no scientific evidence that any of these stimulates an aphrodisiac response. An oyster is made of little more than water, protein, carbohydrates, fats and minerals, none of which is known to affect performance or sexual drive. How did these foods get their reputations? It’s a matter of folklore. Often, foods that were rare or new to a culture were said to have magical qualities. In other cases, foods that resembled sexual organs, such as bananas and oysters, were considered symbols of sexual strength.’ (Men’s Health, March, 2007, via The Observer, 25/2/07)

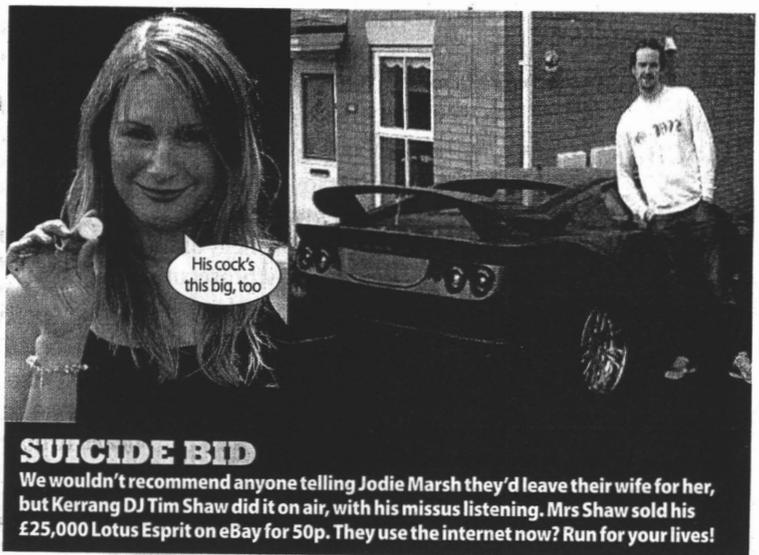
**ANIMAL RIGHTS WRONGED** (FF20:10-12, passim). A favourite category not seen for a long time. The RSPCA answers more than one million queries every year. Spokesman Jo Barr, echoing this topic’s sentiments exactly, noted that some callers were ‘genuinely deceived’, such as the person who phoned to report an injured dog in a park: “On arrival it was found to be a broken umbrella.” The animal charity’s national call centre received such request as:

- “Can you come and get a fly off a web?”
- “Can you come and get a spider out of my Dyson?”
- “My fish has lost its balance. It’s depressed.”
- “There is a frog in my pond that has swallowed a golf ball.”

Dear reader, however, if you wish to report a genuine case of cruelty, call 0300 1234 999. Or make a spoof call which might be included in next year’s round-up! (The Daily Telegraph, 28/12/07)

**MIGRANT POACHERS** (FF56:8(1)). According to parliamentary angling spokesman Martin Salter, east Europeans – particularly Poles – are exploiting the UK’s lax protection bylaws and are removing coarse freshwater fish such as roach, bream, perch and, worst of all, carp. (The Observer, 12/8/07)

**THE PHILANDERER'S CAR** (FF52:6-7). I told the tale of how disc-jockey Tim Shaw told topless model Jodie Marsh he would leave his wife and kids for her. Mrs Shaw responded by selling the idiot's £25,000 car for 50p on eBay. An article in *Zoo* entitled **When women go mental: Seven examples of revenge that prove you should never cheat on your other half** depicted Mrs Shaw (see right). I know which I would choose. (*Zoo*, 6/7/07)



**SUICIDE BID**

We wouldn't recommend anyone telling Jodie Marsh they'd leave their wife for her, but Kerrang DJ Tim Shaw did it on air, with his missus listening. Mrs Shaw sold his £25,000 Lotus Esprit on eBay for 50p. They use the internet now? Run for your lives!

**BOOBS 'N' BOOZE** (FF30:4-7, passim). Alcohol advertising watchdogs rejected a complaint against the Wye Valley Brewery in Stoke Lacy, Herefordshire, after investigating whether a character on one of its labels was wearing knickers. Alcohol Concern contacted the Portman Group over a cartoon (see below) on Dorothy Goodbody stout, claiming that it 'hinted at a lack of undergarments' and was sexually suggestive. Investigators concluded, however, that the complainant's imagination had got the better of them' and there was no reason to assume that 'Dorothy' was not wearing underwear. The 'slightly saucy' label was intended to capture the 'spirit of

fun and innocence of 1950s rural Herefordshire', they added. (*The Times*, 1/3/08)

\* Brewery boss Chris Holmes, of Nottingham, lifted sales of his Elsie Mo beer by putting a big-boobed blonde on the pump logo. (*The Sun*, 10/11/07)

**CONDOMANIA** (FF15:11, passim). Condoms given to youngsters are being used for water-bomb fights in Wigan, Lancashire. (*The Sun*, 16/2/08)

- Meanwhile, this multi-coloured gown made entirely from condoms (right) was modelled at the Dress Up Against Aids Condom Fashion Show in Kuala Lumpur – said by organisers to be the first of its kind hosted in the predominantly Muslim nation. About 30 young Malaysian designers showcased their creations constructed using contraceptives, as part of a campaign to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS,



which remains a serious issue in the country. (*The Times*, 29/12/07)



\*\*\*\*\*  
**BESTIALITY** (FF46:13). Lynne, of the George & Lynne cartoon (below), muses upon love between separate species. (*The Sun*, 20/7/07)

**STAG ANTICS** (FF57:7(2)). Wedding party revellers who handcuff one another to lampposts along Blackpool's Golden Mile could be fined up to £300. Firemen in the seaside resort say the practice takes resources away from real emergencies. Lancashire Fire and Rescue hoped to have its plans approved during December, 2007. (*Sunday Mirror*, 16/12/07)



# Did you see?

**RICHARD DAWKINS** (FF57:3-4, 16). 'The Dawk's' best-selling atheist manifesto *The God Delusion* has been at the centre of a growing row over religious tolerance after the Turkish publishers of his book were threatened with legal action by prosecutors who accuse it of 'insulting believers'. **Nicholas Birch** wrote that for all that it has a secular constitution, Turkey remains a relatively conservative country. The word atheist has only recently appeared in Turkish, but 'godless' still remains an insult. "only 2% of the people we interviewed said they didn't believe in God," says Ali Carkoglu, co-author of a 2006 study of religious attitudes. "Given that we had a 2% margin of error that could mean nobody," he added. "In any case it takes considerable courage for a Turk to admit to a stranger that they are atheists." In this atmosphere, writes like 'Irony Dick' will invariably cause a stir. Also, polls carried out recently showed that only 25% of Turks accepted evolutionary theory. (The Independent, 30/11/07)

**MORAL MAIZE.** Articles on Rosslyn Chapel often refer to the anachronistic carvings of American plants – maize and aloe vera – but an explanation suggests that 94 years before Columbus, Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, explored the US east coast from Nova Scotia to Massachusetts. He had a fleet of 13 ships and 300 men and his ancestor Niven Sinclair, who has spent more than £1m bankrolling 'Prince' Henry's claim believes the earl may have never returned to Scotland but did send some of his ships back. Henry was grandfather of the man who built Rosslyn Chapel and this could explain the American vegetation stonework. Journalist **Noel Young** noted there was evidence from the Native American Mi'kmaq tradition that Henry had crossed the Atlantic from Orkney. (The Sunday Post, 13/1/08) The chapel was also in the news with the publication by East Lothian author Michael Turnbull of *Rosslyn Chapel Revealed*, which dismisses Knights Templar and Freemasonry connections, along with the Apprentice Pillar murder and New World maize depiction in 1446.

**COR, LOOK AT THE CHARLIE FORTS ON THAT!** Now where would you expect to find readers asked to suggest which are the seven weirdest wonders of the world? A two-page glossy colour spread gave examples such as Rosslyn Chapel, Loch Ness Monster, Turin Shroud, Easter Island statues, crystal skulls, Baghdad battery and Atlantis. OK its content is mostly sordid 0909 number adverts and topless totty, but it also enters *Zoo* and *Nuts* territory with weird tattoos, amusing graffiti and useless gadgets, so the **Charles Fort Institute's** choice is not really that strange. (Bare & Naked Celebrities, Sunday Sport, Issue 21, 16/9/07)

**SCARY MONSTERS.** Headlined 'Plague of rats as UK turns wetter', dumb blonde **Juliette Jowit** writes that summer floods and nurturing by warmer winters had led to rodent numbers booming in urban housing estates. (The Observer, 10/2/08)

**VIRGIN BIRTH.** Vivienne Parry pointed out that modern science makes virgin birth technically feasible and even without such intervention a human egg can develop without sperm, creating a teratoma, 'a rather creepy tumour which is full of hair and teeth. The

a special virgin birth 2007 years ago? Ms Parry included a well-known oldie, worth repeating here: 'Nevertheless there are persistent reports of virgin birth in the case literature. In 1874, for instance, the *American Medical Weekly* published an extraordinary story from the diary of a field surgeon during the Civil War. His notes told of a soldier he attended who had been shot in the leg; the bullet had ricocheted off the bone and carried away his left testicle before lodging itself in the stomach of a woman standing behind him. Some 278 days later, the same surgeon delivered a baby to this woman, who continued to maintain that she was a virgin. *The Lancet* reprinted the story several months later and in 1959 it popped up in the *New York State Journal of Medicine*, this time under the heading "Two unusual cases of gunshot wounds to the uterus". An appearance in not one but three proper medical journals has caused many since to quote this case as cast iron evidence. So, a genuine virgin birth?

Virgin on the ridiculous more like. If the name of the author of the 1874 piece isn't enough (Capers), there is also some deeply implausible detail – such as the army surgeon finding the bullet lodged in the scrotum of the baby. It proves the old maxim – if hoaxing, lay off gilding the lily.'

On the subject of the Virgin Mary, Ms Parry wrote: 'The problem with virgin birth and the Christmas story is that Jesus is a boy – which suggests he must have a Y chromosome. Creating a scenario as to how this might be biologically possible requires a fair bit of biological imagination and the occurrence of some rare-to-almost-never-heard-of medical conditions.'

American geneticist Sam Berry has suggested that Mary 'while outwardly appearing female, could have actually been genetically male (ie carrying a Y chromosome {like supposedly Wallis Simpson – editor} because of a syndrome called testicular feminisation and been one of the rare examples of sufferers who also still had a womb and had numerous other variations of it which could produce a male baby.' (The Times body&soul, 22/12/07)

**WHAT A SHOWER!** Here verbatim is one of Paul Simons' interesting 'Weather Eye' columns where he discusses forteana. 'A woman was crossing a road in Jennings, Louisiana, last week when something very strange fell from the sky. Eleanor Beal was on her way to work when large clumps of tangled worms dropped from above. "When I saw that they were crawling, I said, 'It's worms! Get out of the way'," she said. All sorts of wildlife have fallen from the sky in the past. In 1918, hundreds of dead sand eels, eel-like fish, showered down over allotments in Hendon, Sunderland, during a thunderstorm. On August 8, 2000, sprats rained down on a street in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, after a thunderstorm. Perhaps one of the strangest of all showers fell on Bath in 1871, when small creatures encased in a jelly-like substance fell during a violent hailstorm. According to a report in *Scientific American*, specimens were preserved at a local tavern 'where scientific men, upon observing the creatures, pronounced them to be marine insects, probably caught up in a cloud by a waterspout in the Bristol Channel'. In fact, many reports of strange showers of creatures could be explained by waterspouts or tornados. In the recent shower of worms in Louisiana, a waterspout was sighted around the same time over a river less than five miles away. It is possible that the vortex sucked up the worms into a storm cloud and later dumped them on land'. But Simons misses the point. How can waterspouts or tornados be so singularly specific as to choose single species and no

# Proto-legends

A FAMILIAR FIGURE to readers of FF, Ben Macintyre, so often getting facts wrong, here stupidly believes 'no one really believes what Bob Dylan meant when he sang *Blowin' in the Wind*. He then quotes the familiar bit of aural simulacra, 'The ants are my friends, they're blowing in the wind'. He was actually reviewing *Mondegreens: A Book of Mishearings* by J.A. Wines (Michael O'Mara Books). According to Macintyre: 'The term was apparently coined in 1954 by an American writer, Sylvia Wright, who as a child listened to her mother reading aloud from Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. The young girl was particularly taken with a stanza in the stirring Scottish ballad *The Bonny Earl of Murray*:

*Ye Highland and ye Lowlands,  
Oh, where hae you been?  
They hae slain the Earl Amurru  
And Lady Mondegreen*

She imagined Lady Mondegreen to be a tragic heroine, cruelly murdered along with her aristocratic lover. There was, of course, no such lady. Wright had misheard the lines:

*They hae slain the Earl of Murray  
And laid him on the green.*

But here's the truly dodgy bit from Macintyre's review: 'Automatic transcription machines have exacerbated this problem. At the Labour conference in 2002, one was destroyed by attempting to translate into English the words of Ian McCartney, the irrepressible and incomprehensibly Scottish MP who was then minister for Pensions. McCartney was apparently talking about "the politics of a democratic socialist party", but the translation machine believed otherwise. Behind him on a large screen appeared the words "Mocrwockrdemocracy ... Jump the eagle ... dirtyward ... tamale of government ... would you like to pee my jockey". Then it broke down'. (The Times Books, 3/11/07)

**EAR TRUMPET REQUIRED.** Another item on mishearings. Sholto Byrnes, having read a new book, *Hot Jazz, Warm Feet*, by trumpeter and biographer John Chilton, reckons to shed new light on the comic genius of the great George Melly, whose long-time support band was led by Chilton. In the 1980's, Melly's hearing grew steadily worse, lending a surreal quality to the repartee he enjoyed with the audience. "Aren't you embarrassed?" called a heckler at one gig. "I am plainly here and not in Paris," replied Melly. Perhaps the most bizarre exchange occurred at a show outside London, when the singer inquired of a middle-aged fan whether she lived locally. "Yes," she said, "but I spent several years in Uxbridge." "oh, you poor soul," sympathised Melly. "My heart goes out to you. To have undergone such terror and tragedy and still be able to smile is remarkable." The woman was startled, but managed to say: "It wasn't quite as bad as that." "Such bravery," whispered Melly, his voice almost choked with emotion. It eventually turned out he thought the woman had said Auschwitz. (Pendennis column, The Observer, 10/6/07)

**SNOOKERED!** This one is not from any publication, but a beermat (or coaster for American readers). From a pressure group to reduce alcohol-related harm to the body comes this dubious tale. **In 1876, dutch migrant worker. William Ardz. looking for work in the area.**

**found himself in a tavern and befriended by the locals. They were playing their own version of the then, new game of snooker. William, spotting a red ball, mistook it for a miniature version of his much loved Edam cheese and took a large bite. The locals exclaimed, "Billy Ardz! No!" and then barred him.** (Think B4U Drink, The Origin of Pub Games, No. 3 of 4, Bar Billiards)

**MEL P.** David Smith closes his review of Melanie Phillips' *Londonistan: How Britain is Creating a Terror State Within* with: 'Everything is seen through the prism of Tory press disgust. Phillips says piggy banks were banished from British banks in case Muslims were offended. This nugget is from the *Daily Express* in October 2005. The banks later denied it. A small, point, perhaps, but a telling one'. (The Observer Review, 22/4/07)

**BROTHERLY LOVE.** A man who was embarrassed by the size of his penis faced jail after telling his girlfriend he wanted to have sex in the dark. Trouble was, he got his brother to do the dirty deeds. Manfred Shuh, 26, persuaded (if it needed much persuading) brother Walter, 28, with whom he shared his house in Berlin, to wait outside the room while he got her to turn out the light, then claimed he needed to go to the toilet. The girlfriend, 24, found out after two months – when she turned the light back on. (Metro, 24/8/07; via Fortean Times, No. 230, 2007)

**MISSUS COPPED.** Nevada patrol car policeman Mike Moore got the shock of his life when he pulled over a car being driven erratically. The drunk turned out to be his policewoman wife Charlotte. She'd been to a business group's wine talk. (Daily Star on Sunday, 19/8/07)

**CHEEKY CHAPPIE CABBIE.** I rather doubt that this cheeky inquiry ever occurred: 'Recently, a London taxi picked up Liberal Democrat Lord Watson of Richmond at the peers' entrance of the Houses of Parliament. As they were pulling out into traffic, the cabbie slid back the window glass and said: "No disrespect, My Lord – just curious. How much did you pay?" Of course the peerage bestowed upon Watson, a former president of the Liberal Party, general good egg and even holder of the German Order of Merit, is beyond reproach'. (Pendennis column, The Observer, 2/12/07)

**BREAK A LEG FOR CHARITY.** 'Last time the medical economists crunched the numbers, in 1999, they found that every pound raised for charity cost the NHS nearly £14 in return. In short, parachute jumping costs far more than it raises: while it might nudge, say, prostate cancer research forward a fraction, it dramatically lengthens the queue at your local orthopaedic department. My patient is still looking at me hopefully as I remain motionless, pen poised. I wonder whether I should share with her my final reservation. Which is that a systematic review of randomised controlled trials has revealed inadequate evidence to support the use of parachutes in "gravitational challenge"' It's right there in the *BMJ*, 2003, pages 1,459-61, if you don't believe me. In other words, no one has proved that parachutes work. True, no one has proved they don't either, and there are few volunteers for a controlled trial'. Dr Copperfield column, The Times body&soul, 3/11/07

**HIGHER-FIGHTERS.** Firemen got stoned breathing smoke from a blazing 2,000lb stash of marijuana at a warehouse in Texas. (The Sun, 23/6/07)

**MIDGET GEM.** German police staged a major operation to find a kidnapped child after a woman spotted a 'young boy' being locked in a car boot. She alerted authorities after the car drove off and cops set up road blocks and dispatched patrol cars to intercept the vehicle. But when the car was stopped on Stadstrasse, in Bremen, cops found the 'boy' was actually dwarf car mechanic Klaus Mueller. He had climbed in the boot and asked the owner to drive him around so he could find out where a strange rattling noise had been coming from. (Sunday Sport, 3/6/07)

**NOVELTY NOSH.** This is somewhat hard to swallow. 'If you're buying stuff from sex shops, it's wise to watch what you put in your mouth. So let's applaud health inspectors in Norway who raided an erotica chain this week and forced it to put proper food labels on all of its edible novelties, such as dildos and handcuffs. The chocolate body-paint has to list all fattening ingredients and the candy suspender belts must detail E-numbers. But will the edible panties say, "Warning, may contain nuts"?' (The Times body&soul, 17/11/07)

**DON'T LET THE FACTS GET IN THE WAY OF A GOOD STORY.** Talking of sex shops, Richard Spencer found two such emporia within yards of his house in China. He was discussing Ang Lee's new film *Lust, Caution*. He began: 'I was once told a story by a local councillor that I enjoyed so much I never dared to check whether it was true. Among other duties, my friend sat on the committee that vetted films before they were distributed to local cinemas. He insisted it was a duty he took seriously, and that it was not just a chance to watch dirty movies for free. In fact, he said, all community groups were properly represented, so among his colleagues were a deaf man and an elderly blind woman, who former a team. They would sit together at the front of the cinema and the deaf man would describe to his neighbour – slightly too loudly – what was going on. "She's taking off her bra!" he would shout, as the film approached its climax. Then, booming out of the darkness: "Now he's stroking her breast!" That's the dodgy bit. Then after mentioning the sex shops and being propositioned by a prostitute outside his son's taekwondo club, he continued that the Chinese censor had decided that in *Lust, Caution*, the lust had to go. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television sat down with Ang Lee and, like the blind councillor, painstakingly went through the seven minutes and cut every one. (The Daily Telegraph, 23/11/07)

**WELL, WELL.** A page lead about the sinking of new boreholes meaning village women did not need to walk four miles to a tainted well in Uganda seems true enough (The Observer, 27/1/08). However, the worthy Katine Appeal story may end up like one I read recently – not clipped unfortunately – where the women were so upset about a fresh water well and that they could not enjoy a chat on the way to the diseased well, they chucked detritus down the new well and made it unusable. True?

**SAY IT WITH FLOWERS.** 'A Glasgow man was pleased about remembering his wedding anniversary as

he handed his wife flowers. Oops. Right day, wrong wife! He'd mixed it up with the anniversary of his first marriage. The bouquet ended up on the bin as his better half told him he had a blooming cheek'. (The Sunday Post, 27/1/08)

**GIVEAWAY.** Same *As we see it* column, same issue of The Sunday Post, had another Glasgow man, who noticed a book entitled *Eating Less: Say Goodbye To Overeating*, on the desk of a colleague who was dieting. He was impressed by his co-worker's clearly meticulous approach to self-improvement ... until he noticed the bookmark – an empty crisp packet.

**PURE FICTION?** Answering the question 'How many unpublished novels are written every year?', Rebecca Stott, and author and professor of creative writing, commented: 'Someone once told me that one in for Radio Four listeners has either started or completed a novel. That's a lot'. (The Times Books, ? 2008)

**PUTT OFF!** An obituary of fighter pilot Squadron Leader 'Hawkeye' Lee recalled how after he baled out during the Battle of Britain, he was taken to the local golf course by soldiers while they waited for an ambulance. Heavily bloodstained, Lee stood at the bar, where he overheard a man complaining: "The machine-gunning made me miss my putt. And who's that chap at the bar? Bad show, all that blood – I don't believe he's even a member." (The Daily Telegraph, via The Sunday Times News Review, 2/3/08)

**DAPPER AND DRAPER.** I hadn't hear this Parliamentary tale before, which sounds like a nascent urbane belief tale: 'The rumpus over whether Defence Minister Bob Ainsworth said "absolute bollocks" in the Commons sparked memories of the day a Hansard reporter contacted Labour M.P. Tony Banks to check whether a Tory opponent called him a "Marxist Leninist stooge". Dapper Banks replied: "it was worse than that, he said I had a Marks and Spencer suit." (Black Dog {Derek Draper} column, Mail on Sunday, 20/1/08)

## Newslines (extra)

**PRESCOTT SNAPS.** Diarist Jon Henley, picking up from the *Norwich Evening News*, reported that Great Yarmouth Sea Life centre had decided to name its newly-arrived South American snapping turtle Prescott. Described as 'a tropical variety with a vicious bite and a temper to match', the beast was apparently 'found by someone cleaning debris from a lake, where we think he'd been surreptitiously dumped by his previous owner', explained the centre's Claire Little. "Being a North-Eastern lass and a graduate of Hull University, I instantly thought of the former deputy prime minister." (The Guardian, 6/7/07)

**CLOWNS NO LAUGHING MATTER.** Probably all fortune tellers see clowns as rather sinister. Now hospitals are being urged not to decorate children's wards with paintings of clowns in case they upset young patients. State-funded research has found that in a survey of more than 250 children aged four to 16, all disliked the use of clowns in hospital décor, with even the teenagers seeing them as 'scary'. (The Daily Telegraph, 26/12/07)

# Books

**HOLY WELLS IN BRITAIN: A GUIDE** by JANET BORD (Heart of Albion Press, 2 Cross Hill Close, Wymeswold, Loughborough, LE12 6UJ. £14.95 plus 80p p&p)

If this were a film it would be *Good Well Hunting!* Following on from the gazetteer of 25 special English and Welsh holy wells in her previous book, *Cures and Curses: Ritual and Cult at Holy Wells* [reviewed FF54], earth mysteries stalwart Janet Bord has selected 300 of the surviving holy wells of England, Scotland and Wales that would most repay the visitor's attention. All illustrations (except the cover) are in black and white; the quality of which adds to the attractiveness of the sites.

I cannot say the subject enthral me (despite a lifelong obsession with ponds and their denizens), but I have retained a passing interest ever since my parents took me as a child to witness an ebbing and flowing well beside a road somewhere in Yorkshire's Wensleydale.

As an adult, I visited Knaresborough's famous Dropping Well and Wishing Well in my role of journalistic travel writer. At the Dropping Well, the lady guide explained how the hardness and minerals in the water (a pint of well water weighs 24 grains heavier than common water) to 'petrify' (of sorts) objects such as teddybears. She then asked for a volunteer to sample some, so as someone who never refuses a drink, I swiftly consumed the glass offered. To me £2.70-a-head (it was 1989) Mother Shipton Estate tour punters she then pointed out (untrue) that it would lead to diarrhoea.

However, not all wells here are ancient. Created from 1920 onwards, Carfin Lourdes Grotto is not only the most recent, but also the most visited of Scottish wells. Constructed in a large garden, it the National Scottish Shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with water on tap literally, which has been sanctified by water from the real Lourdes and also available to pilgrims from the grotto shop in plastic bottles.

For those who wish to seek out holy wells – out of curiosity, for religious reasons or for solace – there are a great many choices here, coming in all shapes and sizes. Some are on private property, a few not strictly 'holy' and some where the ancient practice of leaving votive offerings is still alive and, er... well.

As a gazetteer, naturally there are instructions as to how to find the wells and guidance on times and public access. Yet another splendidly researched, as always, book from the prolific Janet.

# Magazines

**FORTEAN TIMES.** Newsstand. £3.99. No. 229. Fascinating 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary review by Guy Lyon Playfair of his Enfield poltergeist investigation; laughing mania epidemics; suffragette Emily Davison of Derby horse race fame; early ghostbuster Harry Price and that bizarre substance ectoplasm; drug spikings rarely involved in date rape.

No. 230. Inconclusive but fascinating search for mysterious 'cauldrons' in Siberia's Valley of Death; intriguing insight into the world of Robert Ripley's 'Believe It or Not!' world; the Ilkley 'little man' abduction of 1987 revisited; the producer of hoax TV broadcast 'Alternative 3' breaks his silence; the 7ft 9in giant of Market Weighton;

mysterious Margate grotto; mummified cats in pubs and spectral felids throughout the UK; Merrily Harpur's ABC round-up covers a plethora of black panther sightings (been there, seen that); the cynic Diogenes profiled – history's first public wanker-flasher, urinated at those who mocked him and defecated in a theatre; and thought-provoking Patrick Huyghe on what will happen to fortran book and magazine collectors when we die (my wife has a skip planned – we really should face up to this dilemma, something like equity release with a guaranteed buyer on death or a guaranteed welcoming library for free). No. 231. As a teenager I bought and thoroughly enjoyed John Symonds' *The Great Beast*. I must admit that over the years heavy occultism lost its appeal, but this issue of *FT* is devoted to Crowley, Mr 666, and a fine celebration it is. Also Bob Rickard's sortie into into the magazine's past records what he believes to be two ostensions from 1978: during a firemen's strike, having rescued an old lady's cat from a tree an army squad ran it over in their Green Goddess as they left the scene, while a couple of days later a Thai man was killed when he and his friend argued over which came first, the chicken or the egg. No. 232. Last issue I gave that would-be eradicator of religion and superstition a rough ride and here the eminent biologist Rupert Sheldrake reveals that after a debate with Richard Dawkins, his role in a TV series was aborted as it did not fit the fundamentalist belief system being peddled by the dogmatic Dawkins. Classical Corner column gets more disgusting each issue - Maximus the Tracian drank six gallons of wine a session and buggered up to 30 soldiers while doing so; William Web Ellis and game of rugby apocrypha; life-saving bullet deflections; pheromones research; murder by hypnotism; ancient longevity claims; super-centenarians; Bigfoot. No. 233. NOT DELIVERED

No. 234. Best piece *FT* has published in ages, David Clarke traces how journalists' journo Kelvin Mackenzie monstered the non-incendiary 'Crying Boy' paintings into a tabloid *faux* legend and how it transmogrified into a multi-layered *bona fide* urban belief tale. (See also FF3:17, 23-25; FF13:14); faked vegetable lambs; North American manimals; UK ABCs; monkey intelligence; human skin chief ingredient of household dust mythbusted; Bridgen suicides; Yorkshire ghosts; 19<sup>th</sup> century mesmerism; sheep forming circles in fields.

**TOUCHSTONE.** Mag of the Surrey Earth Myseries Group. Q. £2 for 4. Cheques to J. Goddard at Fostercourt Lodge, 192 Stroude Road, Egham, Surrey, TW20 9UT. No. 80. Ley hunting in Somerset and the beautifully-named Ticklebelly Cottage; leys and mysteries around the Blackdown Hills; St George's Church, Crowhurst, with dragon artwork and ancient yew; William Stukeley and Stonehenge; Southern erratics enigmas.

**AMSKAYA.** Mag of the STAR Fellowship. Same price and details as *Touchstone*. No. 73. Has another claim of the 1960s contactee George Adamski been vindicated? Space people told him there were three asteroid belts when only the closet to us was then known and since then a second, the Kuiper Belt has been seen by astronomers and a third, the Oort Cloud, accepted but not visible. David Kingston on crop circles. UFO sightings.

**NORTHERN EARTH.** Can't put my hands on reviews I did of issues 112 and 113 and deadline imminent. Hopefully next issue.

