

# The Virtual Writers Group

*led by Ian Clark, Thursday 9 July 2020*

*REVISED: Friday 10 July 2020*

*UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Wednesday 15 July 2020*

## Present:

Jenny Burns  
Veronica Carolan  
Adele Duffield  
Ian Clark  
Lesley Pemberton

Welcome to the eighth virtual meeting of the Whitby Writers Group since the start of the covid-19 lockdown.

Please send your comments on each contribution to me, by **Monday night, 13 July**

It will help me not to misplace your email if you choose a subject line containing:

- WWG (for virtual WWG) or VPG (for virtual poetry group)
- the date of the moot
- your name.

If for technical reasons you can't see the attachment, there's a list of past (commented) PDFs here:

[www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings](http://www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings)

Click an item on the list, and the chosen PDF will be downloaded to your computer.

When I get your comments back I will append them to the appropriate contribution in an update to these proceedings, which I will email to you again.

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## Matters Arising:

IAN

Thanks to all who responded to my mini-questionnaire about what we do during August.

The consensus is for Option A) — carrying on as usual.

Members are itching to meet up again, but recognise a clear and present danger in sitting talking in an enclosed space, even when pubs and clubs reopen. We need an outside space where we will not be disturbed, during a period of reliably dry weather.

I'll do some research on venue. The weather, alas, I can do nothing about.

## Members' Contributions:

See below...

# Jenny Burns

## One Hundred Days of Lockdown

I stayed in my house with my sixteen-year-old grandson for most of the time, going out once a week for food shopping and going out four times a week to walk his dog on the beach.

I thought the lockdown would be hard, but it wasn't, for a magical time gradually emerged. Baxtergate became very, very quiet. Children and their parents occasionally walked up and down looking for teddy bears and painted rainbows in front windows. Parents suddenly had the time to walk slowly and talk to their children. On day two, a tiny little girl pushed a pink doll's pram down the middle of the road, probably this has never ever been possible before. A horse and cart regularly drove along, and though not iron wheels on cobblestones, it somehow seemed to be a sound from times past.

Walking around the deserted streets in the early evening, I could go anywhere and everywhere. Yards, normally full of holiday makers, fifty-two weeks of the year, were empty and could be discovered and recorded. Windows could be peeped into and there was the chance to stand back and look up and find that many yard properties had had second or third stories added as the Whitby population swelled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No-one seems to live in the Baxtergate yards now, except an elderly couple in Loggerheads but they were hoiked off in an ambulance, early on in the pandemic.

Every day I sat in my garden for a couple of hours and talked to passing friends and neighbours, and strangers too. As the weeks passed the strangers became friends, and people I used to know only by sight, stopped most days to chat. My grandson's dog formed her own group of friends (different from mine) and standing at the fence wagging her tail built up quite a following of patting, stroking and biscuit giving. How strange that, in this time of strictest hygiene rules, passers-by were quite happy to kiss a dog.

For the first time a wren appeared and a blackbird nested in my neighbour's small garden; and in mine, not much bigger, three different types of butterfly fluttered in and the newly arrived "dawn chorus" managed to eat ALL my greenfly. No need for sprays this year, in fact, I'm virtually organic now.

I sat out each evening for another couple of hours with my grandson, in the dusk and darkness, with only a circle of fairy-lights to illuminate us, (red, green, blue and yellow in support of the N.H.S). And it was then that the real magic began, for nature began to creep in around us. With no people and no cars on the roads, birds quickly gained their confidence and appeared in the gloomy bushes, a little owl made its home on the roof of the old building opposite, sometimes we saw it flying about on its hunting expeditions, often we heard it twitting and twooing. Bats appeared for the first time and a squirrel or two. Sitting in the shadowy silence, sipping tea and at weekends a few rums and cokes, we found when we listened it was not really a silence at all, for there were constant rustlings and movements all around us. As there are only two gardens on

Baxtergate and in normal times, much traffic from six in the morning, and a few revellers till the small hours, Mother Nature has generally passed us by.

The many seagulls who rely on a daily diet of fish and chips, paced up and down outside the house. Their usual plump, glossy looks replaced by a scrawny dullness. Often, they called out with their anxiety cry. Seagulls have a complex language between themselves. How could they possibly understand why their plentiful food supply had suddenly disappeared?

Four times a week I took the dog to the West beach (the summer dog ban being temporarily suspended) and how stunning its emptiness was. Few people and only ever in the distance, no plastics, no rubbish, none of the filth with which the modern human race has chosen to mark its territories with. Space to think, space for a dog to run forever, on clean sand and in a sparkling sea. For the weather was so very kind for most of the hundred days, warm and sunny with soft balmy nights.

Sixth Form College closed, all our commitments were abolished; schedules, routines and whole days drifted away. One day's tasks could be completed just as well the following day, or even the day after that. Tuesday seemed very similar to Wednesday, and not much different from Thursday. All days equally pleasant and none to be dreaded.

I usually went to the Co-op for my weekly shop; I don't particularly favour this shop, but I can't bear to queue for anything and the "laissez-faire" attitude appealed. So gloved, masked and bespectacled, I trolled round every week searching, mostly in vain, for flour, macaroni and Quorn mince. I'd already stock-piled lots of toilet rolls, so I wasn't bothered by their absence. My shopping outfit seemed to astound the friends I met in the Co-op who, without exception, looked completely normal, but I felt safe in a mask and gloves. I had to smile every time I went in, because the hand sanitiser and paper roll for customers use, rested on a poster advertising Co-op funerals, I suppose covering all eventualities.

The kindness of people overwhelmed me. A local furloughed barman has spent every day as an N.H.S. volunteer, motorbiking up to James Cook to fetch emergency medications for the housebound. Caring neighbours, older than me, were always asking if I needed shopping, knowing I had no car. Worried about our Baxtergate homeless man Stewart, I finally cornered him to ask if he had everything he needed, as I imagined begging would reap slim pickings during Lockdown. However, he said he was fine, and to let him know if I needed anything fetching. He said he would gather me a sack of wood off the Cinder Track any time I needed more firewood. Such kindness from many Whitby businesses working long hours to keep up with the home deliveries for the shielding and those unable or too afraid to go out.

Poverty? Yes, one friend, who refused any help, has given up her phone, her television and internet, because she can no longer afford them, being at that awkward age of being too old to find a job and too young to get a pension. She recently lost her dog but nevertheless has kept her spirits up with reading books. She's never looked better; a simpler life really does suit some. Another friend has lost her business and again has had to give up the phone and internet. No one's admitted to going short of food, but I know they have, replacing meals with perhaps a cup of tea and a few Poundland biscuits.

There was a lot on television about mental health and I have seen this first-hand. Unhappiness, isolation and an expression of utter devastation on some faces as they've

walked past, quite oblivious of their surroundings. More than a few talking to themselves and I don't mean they were on their "hands free" phones, they were just having a little conversation of their own. It is my opinion that 'only children' find Lockdown easier to cope with than those from large families who "must" be with others all the time. Only children have generally got over their grinding loneliness early on and now have coping strategies ideal for a Lockdown kind of life.

So, how did we spend our time? The grandson did some A-level stuff online, went on long bike rides, built an amazing dug out den by Sleights Beck with some friends, practised his guitar for several hours each day. Occasionally he walked his dog. They went up to Calla Beck and Golden Grove and always came back covered in mud and twigs.

As for me there were not enough hours in the day; I discovered Marie Kondo on Netflix and tidied all my drawers, cupboards, Christmas decorations and out-house following her method. It involves only keeping things that "spark joy" in you and then folding all your remaining items in a particular Japanese way, or if they cannot be folded, then storing them in an elegant little box. Sounds ridiculous? Watch the programmes and you'll be hooked.

Reading? So, I did lots of reading, but strangely, I found I could not get on with any new books, perhaps the uncharted territory is too scary for these unpredictable times. So, the old favourites came out; Defoe, the Brontes, Wilkie Collins, Barbara Pym and Anne Tyler. The same with television, there was no amusement in the wild new dramas but a great comfort in Shakespeare and Alan Bennett, classic episodes of "All Creatures Great and Small" and the daily re-runs of "Heartbeat".

A bit of writing of novel number three plus loads of research into whaling; I've only got two chapters set on a whaler, but I do want it to be authentic as readers love to pick holes in your research. I was also going to have a hint of the triangular trade, because times were different in the eighteenth century but now, what with the happenings in the recent news, it's probably not a good idea.

Sewing, well I'm a manic stitcher. Two small patchwork quilts, worked in little hexagons, to cover us when we sit in the garden, because it's not always so idyllic as I've made it sound, sometimes it's just plain freezing. Then, I made an eighteenth-century costume for myself: - petticoats, skirt, jacket, stomacher, fichu, cap and apron. Although I've not done this yet, I plan to wear it to sit in the garden, despite the fact that my children think this a sign of complete mental disintegration. I recently found that one of my neighbours is making herself a pansy printed vintage tea-gown to wear when sitting out on her decking. And why not?

Then I got into being helpful and made twenty-five reusable face masks for the animal hospital in Malton, who had had to give their own supplies to the N.H.S. Made some Liberty print masks for friends and family too.

Still sewing, I'm helping construct an embroidery project at the Captain Cook Museum to do with Joseph Banks' magnificent collection of plants from the first voyage.

And lastly baking, when I finally got some flour, I bought twenty-one pounds of it, so that I could have a nice little hoard and make my six items. I only bake six different things and I find that that covers most eventualities. They are Yorkshire puddings,

cashew and nettle quiche, cheese scones, fruit scones, coffee and walnut cake and Victoria sponge. So, did lots of baking and sat in the garden with socially distanced family eating it or passing it over the fence to some of my friends old and new.

As the hundred days passed, the peaceful idyll started to slip away. Cars came down Baxtergate again, children disappeared back to school and were replaced by cross pensioners trying to park and avoid the beady eyes of the newly returned traffic wardens. The air filled with pollution once more. The chip shop re-opened, to the relief of Whitby folk and the ravenous sea gulls. Visitors sneaked into the holiday cottages, unloading at the dead of night and a few days later, when it was “permitted” they flocked in, in their droves. The owl, the bats, the wren and the blackbird all went away, hopefully to safer habitats.

In the hundred days, thousands died, and I lost a very dear friend and former lover. Many sacrificed their jobs and their education; some simply went mad (I know of two who spent most of the time in Cross Lane Hospital). It was a time of loss, of deprivation and of loneliness for others. But for me it was good and, as we say in Yorkshire, “it’s an ill wind...”

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## VERONICA

A different style of diary than that of Adele - more a narrative than a running commentary. I love the way you set the scene in para 2: the repetition of 'very' focuses our expectations of something magical to be described, like a story-teller with children. The specialness is enhanced by the mention of the horse and cart, and the word 'peeping' enhances the atmosphere. I found the use of 'hoiked' rather jarring in this context. The appearance of the wildlife was certainly a wonderful evocation of quiet days before traffic and footfall. I myself have got quite fond of the two gulls who visit, and I'm fascinated by their expressive vocabulary. Thank you for sharing the various kindnesses, which are good to remember, and it is sobering to hear peoples stories of hardship and loss, which you describe without being maudlin.

Have you come across "The Hunter and the Whale" by Laurens van der Post? It is worth a read.

## LESLEY

Loved reading this, Jenny. A contrast of the ‘normal’ busy goings-on and the change (for the better?) during lockdown. People-watching is one of my favourite things when I’m out and about - which isn’t very often even under ‘normal’ circumstances. As writers, I’m sure we all do it; it is where inspiration may come from characters we see, snippets of conversation, etc.

Perhaps someone at the Co-op had a warped sense of humour, or maybe it was a warning to follow the ‘rules’: “...the hand sanitiser and paper roll for customers use, rested on a poster advertising Co-op funerals...”

I’m curious to know how come your grandson was with you. Does he live with you? (You don’t need to answer, and I won’t report it to Big Brother!)

You highlighted how so often we can judge people wrongly when you mentioned the homeless man. You asked him if he needed anything, he offered to help you in some way that he could.

There are so many parts of this I could comment on, in a good way...but it is your story and says what it needs to say.

Will we see you in your 18th Century outfit?

## ADELE

This is a lovely capture of your lockdown experience and thank you for sharing. You are such a good story teller. I wonder what happened to the old couple that were ‘hoiked’ away - did they return or are they, sadly, lost for good? A point about your owl. If there is only one you will not hear a twit and a twoo as this is the male and female pairing. So you might want to revise that As it sounds like you have had a pair of owls. Also, there is a specific breed called a ‘little owl’ but not in the UK so I wonder if you should drop your adjective ‘little’. Altogether a delightful capture to look back on.

## IAN

A whimsical account of the lockdown – which seems to have become a wonderful excuse for a literary adventure. This eerie period in our history could become the new romantic genre (...get in early!)

That said, I recall in my youth reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus. This was a magical web of odd personal stories which could be a model for the sort of genre I envisage emerging.

# Veronica Carolan

## The shaking of suburbia

There's a rumble in the jungle, there's a rumble in the clouds  
There's a rumble in the suburbs and a rumble in the crowds.  
There'll be a ferment stirring in the pubs and on the street.  
There's an upsurge now occurring, people voting with their feet.  
"Black lives matter" is a chant that's being taken up  
A random, vicious killing has revealed the bitter cup  
that those of other colour have been drinking all their lives:  
of risk of death or maiming from handcuffs or from knives.

To suffer social stigma, deep-held prejudice and hate,  
means enduring loss of self-esteem when hooked to be the bait  
for the overt, cruel taunting of the ignorant and base,  
and unwitting social bias underneath a kindly face.  
For this has been a wake-up call to the sleepy middle class;  
no longer pleading ignorance, we're called to play, not pass.  
Awareness is a starting-point for governments and schools  
in tackling prejudicial power and making fairer rules.

So starting with the privilege White Colonials abused,  
let's acknowledge the inherent power denial has refused.  
Our wealth is built upon the gains of slavery and cruelty;  
the time has come to bend the knee and offer justice fealty.  
Some statues may have tumbled in an overflow of rage  
but certain famous landmarks could inspire a turn of page.  
Exploration starts with heart and mind, intention and with pride  
as new-awakened activists launch out on turning tide.

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### JENNY

A clear beat and rhythm gives the poem a sense of making the reader "sit up and listen", that this is something of importance. And the slight differences in number of beats per line, 13, 14 or 15 stop it having a *tum ti tum* childish air. A great poem.

### LESLEY

A rhythmic poem which, from the first verse, I thought was going to be about the easing of lockdown. The phrase "...a ferment stirring in the pubs..." is a nice allusion.

Then the remainder takes up the issues of racism and cruelty and the recent actions against them.

I do agree with the 'black lives matter' and the need to educate people, but I would also espouse the other statement that has become popular - 'all lives matter'.

I wonder if the first line of the last verse would be better saying: "Some statues have been tumbled..."?

## ADELE

Very rhythmic poem which you master well. I'm not sure I would start it with 'rumble in the jungle' as this is not only an overused unoriginal phrase, but it also has connotations of racism to me. Having said that you have tackled the subject well and raised awareness of disturbing issues of our time.

The subject matter is a very difficult one to cover as a white person, because we are accused by some of never being able to understand because we have white privilege. It does not however exclude us from empathy and trying to create change but is a very slow process. We cannot deny history but must learn from it.

## IAN

The poem's metre reminds me of Kipling at his most sonorous (*To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the damned...*) which is a good rhythm to evoke for the present business, carrying overtones of Empire and its unappealing side. An admirer of strict metre and rhyme myself, the (very) few places where the poet departs from it jump out at me. So I wonder if lines 17 and 18 shouldn't be:

*So starting with the privilege colonials abused,  
acknowledge the inherent power denial has refused.*

I don't think one needs to ask which colonials we mean. When India became independent in 1947, the "colonials" began returning home, and were shocked to discover that nobody wanted to wait on them hand-and-foot back in England.



# Adele Duffield

## Extracts from my Coronavirus Diary 2020

### Sunday 10th May

269 deaths today of 31855 to date.

Boris to make his speech today. The country has waited with anticipation but not expecting much change as the warning signs have been out in the last couple of days after an initial hope that some restrictions would be lifted from Monday, I think we're all now assuming he has pulled back from this. Certainly, Scotland and Wales are much more reluctant to start easing the restrictions. We cannot afford a second peak to come. Our economy would not stand the strain. Well, I have to say, I was embarrassed by the rousing nature of his speech. Like a true Churchillian war-time speech, a Roman conqueror or a historic leader from one of Shakespeare's plays, rallying the troops, – it was shocking – Give the Man an Oscar – that's all I can say! Condition after condition, if after if, and no real answers. New regulations will come out on Monday (tomorrow) detailing how businesses can return to work, but better to stay at home if you can work from home. You can exercise outside all day now if you wish but not in groups, only with people from the same household. Maybe you can meet a friend or relative outside in a park/public place, but only one. You can play group sport as long you are all from the same household. You can sunbathe or sit in parks but not in groups unless from the same household. How is anyone going to police this sort of thing? Maybe, from the beginning of June shops can re-open, but with strict regulation like our supermarkets currently are concerning social distancing and numbers. Queueing will continue. Maybe masks will have to be worn by everyone if going into shops (home-made allowed/ encouraged) – so that blows previous advice out of the window, doesn't it? Maybe from the beginning of July, cafes, bars and public buildings can re-open with limited access and many social distancing restrictions in places. All only if, if and if again. No mention of changes for hotels, guest houses, travelling for holidays etc. Strange and scary times ahead. Will we have a second peak? Will people flout the rules too much or will they stay cautious? There are still too many daily deaths for my liking to be too relaxed yet for a while.

### Thursday 14th May

428 deaths today of 33614 to date.

Apparently today an agreement has been reached with a global tech company to manufacture 70 million facemasks in the UK for frontline health and care workers – about time!

Jeremy Vine discussed the annual death rate for the time of year and it is apparently 50,000 above normal. So where do we get the 15,000 or so deaths from that are not put down to Covid-19? According to an expert being interviewed, because we had a mild winter when older people may have ordinarily died, they have succumbed to death now, many due to no more than their time being ready. However, it appears that many deaths are being put down to Covid-19 when that may not have been the case. If someone dies

of old age in a nursing/care home that has Covid-19 present, then Covid-19 is being put down as cause of death. The figures will not be accurate for our country's Covid-19 deaths and probably never will. Apparently, on another angle to this, there have been 11,000 less deaths than normal due to respiratory disease caused by pollution than normal because we have no planes, cars, and industry churning out CO2 gases. I thought this might happen but didn't think it would be so quick to take effect. Imagine how nature, wildlife, trees and plants will improve similarly. I hope some of the good has some lasting effects and we don't just return to exactly how we were before all this happened. It can't be for nothing. Not just nature's cleansing of the sick and the elderly.

I was shocked to hear on the radio that apparently estate agents can return to work, house viewings can take place again and property transactions proceed once more. Granted they would prefer for virtual viewing of houses but, they have said accrual viewings can happen. Masks must be worn, residents absent for the duration, all doors to be opened, no touching to take place and after the viewing all handles, surfaces etc to be cleaned. All for the drive to get our economy back on its feet again. Seems like utter madness that we cannot visit our families or loved ones and yet we can have complete strangers come to the property and we don't know where they've been or how safe they may be. What a ludicrous situation. Relatives will have to pretend to view a house to visit family if that's the easiest way to get round it. Madness. Simply not thought through for the individual needs or human nature to be social beings. Our mental wellbeing is suffering all the time while we are deprived of touching or seeing our loved ones.

## **Friday 15th May**

384 deaths today of 33,998 to date.

Just realised tonight that we forgot to go outside last night at 8pm for the weekly NHS/carers clap in appreciation of their wonderful work. Last week I questioned how long we would all continue to do this. Well, I really put the mockers on that didn't I? Looks like the interest is waning already (surely, we can't be the only ones though – can we?).

Gvt announced that 3 further charter flights are to bring 900 British travellers back home from Bangladesh. But why are they not insisting that our incoming flights should not be quarantined for 14 days? I just don't get it. Surely, we need to be more careful of exposure in these cases.

This year's bathing season has started today and runs until 30th September so, we can go swimming in the sea or lakes outside, but still not indoor pools etc. Social distancing must be observed. You can travel as far as you like to do this but cannot stay overnight in a second home or guest house to do so. Local authorities have the power to stop this if they observe too many people so that social distancing cannot be adhered to safely. What on earth will happen to Whitby and our lovely quiet towns and villages up and down the coast? Oh dear. A sense of anxiety is looming now.

Announcement made today that Churches and other places of worship might be able to open from 4th July subject to further advice. Plans being discussed on how this might work. Imagine the rush for belated commemorative services for all the funerals

and weddings that have had to be cancelled over the few months. I can't imagine how they will cope to be honest.

## **Saturday 16th May**

Deaths today 468 – total 34,446.

Just heard that, for the first time in hundreds of years, a pair of white storks have successfully bred chicks in the south of England. Not sure whether this is due to lack of people, lack of pollution, lack of noise, or what – maybe it's just pure coincidence that it has happened during world lockdown but somehow, I doubt it. Nature thrives much better without us spoiling things. Hopefully, there will be more success stories for wildlife to come out of this. Like the bee numbers increasing or small rodents/ mammals surviving better without as much traffic on the roads – who knows, but I hope so.

Apparently, they are going to start and train dogs to track covid-19 in people. That seems to be a scary thought in some senses. Like the sense that dogs have when someone has cancer and they don't like it. Or being sniffed out for carrying drugs. There seems something quite ominous about this method, like people become the dirty collective to be cleansed by the controllers. All a bit 1984ish or similar.

They are starting to put a plan in place for schools to accept phased returns of children starting 1st June, with certain year groups Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 in smaller class sizes. Also, Secondary schools Years 10 and 12 for face to face study in their important pre-GCSE or A level years.

## **Thurs 28th May**

Deaths today 413 – total 38,220.

Boris announces that 6 people can meet in a public place if safe social distancing adhered to from the 1st June. This will create an impossible mayhem that is un-policable.

Today was the last clap for the NHS. 10 weeks after it started as a one off on the 26th March, three days after lock-down. I find it strange how an inspired idea by one person (Ms Annemarie Plas) started a whole nation off with doing it. In just the same way, she can say 'stop' and the whole nation stops. The power of social media is scary, and the herd mentality of human nature is incredible. We buy into the information we are fed, so easily. We never question enough of what we read and then just repeat it. The scare-mongering, the anarchists, the over-politicizing and propagandist comments go unchecked, and it will get worse. The 'Big Brother' 'Newspeak' of 1984 gets nearer to reality. People really do need to write down their experiences and evidence what they do and see, but then, we all store this stuff in the cloud, and it could all be lost if the powers that control it pull the plug on the cloud. We put our trust implicitly in systems we do not understand and we do not know who is behind them.

## **Sun 7th June**

Deaths today 77 – total 40,542. New cases today 1326. Cases total 286,194.

I know it is Sunday, and the weekends do tend to report less than the week, but this is the first time since the upcurve in deaths, that we have had a number less than 100 in

any one day reported since the 25th March which was the first day we exceeded 3 digits and have where it has stayed ever since, barring the one gloomy day on 24th April when we hit four digits with 1005 deaths. Today, after 74 days, this was a joy to see, and I hope and pray it stays that way. Yet, how can I even be happy about 77 deaths? It is still 77 too many. 77 individual lives with loved ones lost and mourning waiting to begin.

After today, £6 million will be available to support 130 charities currently doing work to help the homeless stay off the streets somehow. [it would be so good if this could continue after Covid-19 lockdown stops. It would be tragic to see a return to such a sad situation of homelessness.

Care Homes are now going to receive test kits for every resident over 65 or those with dementia. (Perhaps a case of closing the door after the horse has bolted) If it saves people it can only be good, nevertheless.

## **Thursday 11th June**

Deaths today 151 – total 41,279. New cases today 1266 – total 291,409 (lab confirmed)

My lockdown birthday today.

They are talking about 'Bubbles' today for socially isolated people, which has apparently worked in New Zealand (where they now have no cases). I can't see how it is going to be anything but confusing. They say that people who live alone can now form a bubble with a family member/friend, but each person can only be in one bubble. So, if a granny has three children and four grandchildren, she has to pick which household and stick to that one only, leaving the others out. If that child/grandchild is in her bubble, they cannot also be another with a different granny or other socially isolated person. It gets confusing with single people in shared houses but who are alone, as there can only be one bubble in a house. People are going to have to choose who's in and who's not in their bubble, and take risks of upsetting people all over the place. 'Shielding' people cannot have bubbles, apparently. Anyone already living with any other person cannot create a bubble, but can belong to one. Single parents who live with children, where the children can move between parental homes (as has been an exception to many rules right from the off) can have a bubble. How the hell is any of this really going to be understood. I already thought we could meet up in gardens in groups of up to six, so are these not bubbles? It appears that bubbles must have the additional benefit of being able to be indoors. And must they still socially distance from the person in their bubble or can they hug? In a few days' time most shops can open, and in a couple of weeks they will be opening pubs. There is a public and government demand to reduce the social distance from 2 metres to 1 metre. If that happens, along with everything else, how on earth can any social distancing be observed or monitored? They might as well just say 'people take your own risks and bear the consequences'. I can't see the point in a rule at all, once this happens. People will either decide to be cautious or not. Let us see how it all pans out.

Had a surprise visit tonight from Laura, after my brother and sister made a socially distanced visit with my birthday present. Lovely to see them all. Made my day seem less isolated. Laura staying the night. With separate facilities in the house, we felt this was ok, although next weekend the same thing is happening with Alec and Tierney coming

to stay, and that means we have had two different households into ours which I don't think is meant to be done. But, each of us has a separate bathroom and area of the house. We are socially distancing in the sitting room or kitchen and all communal areas and surfaces wiped down regularly. First take-away meal today.

To help kick-start the economy (being said a lot at the moment – yes it is essential to try and save businesses and also to get our economy going, but I wonder if it's all at the potential cost of human safety and at worst lives if a new spike occurs) they are lifting the air flight ban. Still saying essential travel only, but being cooped up in a flying box with hundreds of others doesn't seem like a good idea to me. Poor staff as well, having to breath second hand re-circulated air all day. Wearing masks in the airport is required but I'm not going anywhere on a plane for a good while yet!

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### JENNY

This sums up so very well the confusions, with which we are bombarded on a daily basis. The irony of not being able to have relatives to visit unless they are viewing your house. How on earth to choose a "bubble" without offending everyone else in your family. This is such a detailed record, I think it would make a good publication, being an accurate record of events with a very personal touch.

### VERONICA

As noted above, this is a very different account of life in lockdown, with a wider social and political remit but still with personal observations. I find it interesting to be reminded of what was said, when, as public announcements seem so muddled if not inconsistent these days (or perhaps it's me). I find the style with staccato phrases rather than full sentences keeps the reader's attention. I like the way you raise questions without answers, which reflects perfectly how things are.

### LESLEY

Good to read your continuing observations on the C-19 situation. A very different style to Jenny's but you are aiming to keep a record, if not day-to-day, then from week-to-week.

I'm sure you aren't the only one confused about who can meet whom, where and when. Certainly I am, but as I'm not in a situation where I have close family/friends I'm desperate to see it doesn't particularly matter. Being able to return to my second home in Whitby is what I want. Yippee! I can do that now...but I can't - work on my kitchen refit is ongoing, having been delayed from the initial planned start date. So I'm staying away until all finished; not long now I hope. It will be interesting to see what's happening in Whitby but you have all given me some insight over the past few weeks. Thank you.

Oh...and Adele, regarding your last point, I agree. To add to the confusion, someone mentioned on TV the other day that people are (may be?) required to wear masks on board a plane but cabin staff are going along the aisles with food and drinks. How does one eat/drink if wearing a mask??

### ADELE

I have not been editing my extracts at all, so, there may be a need to look back over the whole thing eventually and rephrase, modify and remove certain things if it is to be publicly aired in some format. Apologies therefore if it grates or bores you as it is.

### IAN

It will be so instructive to re-read this in 10 or 20 years' time. With that thought in mind, I'd counsel against editing it in any way. It would be so easy to edit out the good bits – as will only be recognised in hindsight.

Ian Clark

## History of England through its literature

*Dear Kyung,*

*You asked me what books to read to get a good grasp of Western history. I can't help you much with anything but English history – and I mean not Scottish, nor Irish, nor American, just English. But as the people who invented English, perhaps we English can lay claim to being the most important in the English-speaking world. Certainly the most senior. Americans can't dispute that!*

*It's intriguing to know somebody who can read English perfectly well, but who claims to have no knowledge of English history, yet a desire to learn. This distinguishes you from most of the Americans I know. I could direct you to the standard textbooks, but I won't. Instead I'm offering you a collection of my favourite novels, or books equally entertaining to read, plus a few films, which distil for me the essence of various periods of English history and development. Build your knowledge of the English people on these, and simply fill in the gaps from reference books, and I think you'll gain a better understanding of us than we have of ourselves.*

*In gratitude for all the lifts to work and home again, not to mention the meals together, here's celebrating our friendship and getting to know each other. Whatever you do now in life, I wish you every blessing and success.*

*Ian Clark.*

*31st October, 2002.*

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## Pre-Roman Britain

Little is known for sure. The inhabitants of Wales and Ireland trace themselves back to a people called the Celts (or Kelts – 'C' is pronounced 'K' in modern Welsh) who swept across Europe from the Black Sea and reached the British Isles around 1800 BCE. Their educated classes were divided into 3 grades: Bards, Ovates (*Vates*, in Latin) and Druids. 'Druidry' is a term used for the religion embracing all three. The word 'bard' is still used of a minstrel, a man who sings traditional songs full of history and myth. You hear Shakespeare called 'the Bard'.

Gaius Julius Caesar: *De Bello Gallico* (The Gallic War) neatly describes this Roman general's conquest of Gaul (modern France). One book (Book 3 if I recall) deals with his invasion of Britain in 55 BCE. He didn't stay, but it put Britain on the Roman map. Even if you can't read much Latin, Caesar is very easy to read, very succinct and full of interesting detail. There has simply got to be an English translation, but I don't know of one.

Caesar described Britain in soldier's terms, as "one horrible great forest from end-to-end". Apparently the Celts didn't believe in cities, but lived behind stockades in clearings in the woods, moving on when things got too smelly. Nevertheless towns like Londinium (London) and Eboracum (York) were already there when the Romans came. They were centres of druidic administration. London is named after the Celtic sun god Lugh (or Llew), as is Carlisle (Caer Llew), and in France: Loudun, Louvain, Lyons, and maybe others.

The French *Asterix* comic books by Goscinny and Uderzo shouldn't be overlooked. They contain utterly authentic detail, treated satirically. People's names, however, are totally bogus and are chosen to be bad puns in the language the books happen to be translated into. Thus the village druid, 'Panoramix' in French, becomes 'Getafix' in English. However references to the god Toutatis, and Gaulish names ending in '-ix' come straight out of Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*.

## Roman Britain

England (but not northern Scotland or Ireland) was a Roman colony (Britannia) until the Legions were withdrawn in the 4th Century CE. The people were known as Britons, and Welsh is the remnant of the language they spoke (when not speaking Latin). The province consisted of Great Britain (the island) and Less Britain (the part of France facing it, nowadays called Brittany (Bretagne, in French), where the people are still called Bretons. In fact the reason why Julius Caesar invaded Britain was because he was trying to subdue north-west Gaul (France) and realised they were being helped from across the Channel, so he was trying to conquer only half of a strong and warlike land, something doomed to failure.

In the 1st Cent. CE, so-called 'Celtic Christianity' played a large part in shaping early Christianity, a part which has not been fully admitted. Their most famous holy place was Glastonbury. In 1st Cent. BCE this was a marsh, out of which rose a number of rounded hills. One of these was Avalon ('Apple Island'), which many people think was Glastonbury Tor. The chief saint of the Celtic Christians was the biblical Joseph of Arimathea, whom legend says came to England with his followers and settled in Glastonbury. He brought with him the Holy Thorn (bush) and the Holy Grail, the *Sangraal* (various spellings) or 'true cup', an unknown vessel which is the source of many legends, called the Grail Legends. Though maybe 'vessel' was only a term for his religious teachings. The word has wrongly been confused with the French 'sang' meaning 'blood' (rather than Danish: 'san(t)' meaning 'true'), so that in some legends it becomes a goblet used in Christ's crucifixion, maybe to catch his blood. All this mythology comes up in the stories of King Arthur, although he was several centuries later.

Rosemary Sutcliffe wrote excellent stories of Roman Britain, aimed at teenagers but enjoyable by adults. *The Mark of the Horse Lord*, and *The Eagle of the Ninth*, are not only gripping and atmospheric but full of authentic detail.

## The Dark Ages

When the Legions left Britain to defend Rome from the Goths, they left it wide open to invasion. The main invaders were Angles in the north, Saxons along the south coast (the Saxon Shore) and Jutes (from Jutland) in the south-east corner below London. In Rome, now a religious city, the Pope's capital, no longer the capital of an empire, the new blond-haired invaders were known as *Angli*, which reminded the Romans of 'Angeli' (angels). The word 'Engel' means both, in Swedish and German today. The old inhabitants of Britain however, pushed back into Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, called them 'Saxons' (and still do: 'English' is 'Saseneg' in Welsh, and 'Sassenach' in Scots Gaelic, two very similar languages). The first language calling itself 'English' was that of the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria (N.E. England), later overrun by the Vikings. None of its writings survive, except those rescued by Alfred the Great (see below).

The native Britons resisted the invaders sporadically, at least they had frequent battles with them. Important British kings at the time were Coel of Rheged (NW England + SW Scotland) – the 'Old King Cole' of the nursery rhyme, Vortigern, Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon (= 'red dragon', still the heraldic symbol of Wales). And of course 'King' Arthur, who was supposed to be the bastard son of Uther.

Unlike the others, Arthur was probably legendary. A cycle of mythic stories centre around the life of Arthur and his tutor and sponsor, the wizard Merlin. All very reminiscent of Aragorn and Gandalf. The Welsh have another wizard-hero called Taliesin, and stories about Taliesin and Merlin have become altogether mixed-up.

Arthur had his court at *Camelot*, a legendary city now lost. It might have been anywhere in the triangle between Glastonbury, Tintagel and Carlisle – if it ever existed. Arthur was supposed to be High King, a Celtic institution of voluntary submission by local kings to an overlord, both political and religious, who may himself not have ruled lands of his own. The Arthurian legends have much to do with Avalon, which is where Arthur was taken, after he'd fallen in battle against his son Mordred, by the three 'fays' or 'fairies' (pre-Christian holy women, or maybe witches): Morgan le Fay, Fay Vivian (the Lady of the Lake), and Guinevere. The Arthurian Legends were written down by Geoffrey of Monmouth (12th Cent. CE) and others, including the epic poem *Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Mallory (1485) which deals with this last journey to Avalon. I can't say I've read any of them and wouldn't recommend them, except as source material for later works. Mallory's poem is much quoted, though.

Mary Stewart has written an excellent trilogy (told in the first person by Merlin the Wizard): *The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, and *The Last Enchantment*. Besides being gripping stories (really all one story, like *Lord of the Rings*) they seem to be absolutely authentic concerning life in the wreckage of Roman Britain, and make a good job of rationalising some of the weirder events from the Arthurian legends and the life of Merlin. I've only been able to catch her out in one place: she mentions rabbits a lot (not introduced into Britain until the Norman Conquest).



Marion Zimmer Bradley has also written a novel about Arthur's life: *The Mists of Avalon*. It's been made into a haunting film, which I thoroughly recommend.

Elsewhere in England, the Benedictine Order made great advances, opening up the country with monasteries in lonely places, moors and 'holy isles'. In fact the only real knowledge we have of those times comes from the internal records of these monasteries, which were probably the leading centres of learning in the whole of Europe. The monasteries were vast foundations, technically highly advanced cities. They pre-dated the cathedrals by many centuries, and their chapels were as big as many of the important cathedrals in England. These monasteries were all suppressed at the same time by Henry VIII when he split from Rome, and only their impressive ruins remain.

Most important for the history of Northern England are the 'ABC' saints: Aidan, Bede and Cuthbert, all monks. Some beautiful illustrated bibles date from these times. Lives of these saints are worth reading, as are the history of their relics, which were socially and economically very important, since they attracted pilgrims.

For what monastic life must have been like then (taking place in Italy, but it would have been the same all over Europe) read Umberto Eco: *The Name of the Rose*.

## Anglo Saxon Britain

The Saxons overcame British resistance in the 6th Cent. and settled the south of the country. From 7th Cent. CE onwards until 1066 the worst threat to England was from the Vikings. 'Vikings' are not a people as such: 'Vik' means 'creek' in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, and so a 'viking' was a 'creeker', a pirate who came raiding up the creek. They came from all over Scandinavia and used a characteristic open longboat with a single sail and oars which the raiders rowed themselves (not slaves), their shields hung over the sides. It wasn't just England they invaded – they went all over Europe and the Middle East. Russia was largely opened up by them, by the 'Varangians' – who were Swedes. Moscow was founded by the Varangian warlord Yuri Dolgoruki ('George of the Long Arm').

The most important Anglo Saxon king is Alfred the Great. He did such a good job of uniting his half of the country and rescuing the literature of the kingdoms overrun by the Vikings that he is considered the first truly 'English' king (...he wasn't: half the country, called 'Danelaw', was ruled by Danish warlords) and Old English and Anglo Saxon are considered by many to be one and the same thing (...it isn't: true Old English was the language of Northumbria, overrun by vikings, but the only writings we have of it are those which Alfred rescued and translated into Anglo Saxon.) The most accurate history of that time is *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle* (not exactly as readable as a modern novel, but very interesting nonetheless, about a very confused time in which the monasteries provided the only stability.)

Alfred was quite a scholar and inventor, taking time off from being an effective leader, warrior and king. He codified the first body of English Law. Alfred's law is

immensely just and practical, settling disputes and establishing rights with a simplicity bordering on genius. The Normans took it over, but added their own law, largely concerned with protecting their own property, known as Statute Law. Statute Law is immensely unjust from the common person's point of view, making a 'felony' of the tiniest thefts. Australia was largely populated by felons sentenced to 'transportation' for minor thefts – a fate considered even crueller than hanging. Alfred's original law is known as Common Law. When a newly-emergent country copies England for its laws, it's generally Common Law they are copying (if they're wise).

If you can find any books about Alfred, they're worth dipping into, but I can't think of any novels I've read of that period. The Anglo Saxons were a plain, ordinary and unromantic 'little' people, a bit like hobbits. They're called 'Anglo'-Saxons to distinguish them from the inhabitants of Saxony (N. Germany below Denmark) which is where Alfred's people originally came from. They were solidly Christian, and indeed Alfred personally baptised his former enemy Athelstan, a 'Danelaw' ruler, as part of the peace treaty.

## The Norman Conquest

The history of England, as taught in schools, used to start with 1066, when William the Conqueror defeated King Harald at the Battle of Hastings. I was brought up in Hastings, so I went along with this view. Good sense has prevailed since then, and nowadays we trace ourselves back to Stonehenge. And before. Dinosaurs used to roam the land... but they were *English* dinosaurs, everybody now realises. For a hilarious satire on how English history used to be taught (and a good potted summary of the facts, albeit made out to be absurd) read *1066 And All That*. Sorry I've forgotten the authors' names, but the book is justly famous.

When the Normans invaded England, the Saxon nobility was largely dispossessed. Stories of Robin Hood come from these times (he was supposed to be a dispossessed Saxon noble). More interesting for authentic detail is Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* – a mediaeval romance of Norman jousting and chivalry, although the eponymous hero is a dispossessed Saxon.

The word 'Norman' incidentally comes from 'north-man'. William I of England was originally Duke of Normandy (which he continued to rule), a land settled by vikings. When William defeated the Anglo Saxon king Harald in 1066, he parcelled up the land and gave it to his viking followers. Many of the oldest aristocratic families of England ('chinless wonders', my father used to call them) have faces exactly like the common people of western Sweden, the Göta (pronounced 'Yerta' in Swedish) or Goths. This is my own personal observation: I've never seen it written down.

It was the last of the viking invasions of Britain, which has never been (successfully) invaded since. This has made the English people proud, insular, flexible and accepting of each other, hence able to work and fight together, traits which I see in the Japanese (who have a comparable history). But it also made English not one, but seven or eight

similar Germanic languages all fused together, with a thick layer of Norman French smeared on top, giving it an absurd spelling and pronunciation. If only we'd kept to just one of those languages... but which one? Nobody could agree.

I'm relieved to discover both Denmark and Norway, England's sister lands, are in a similar confused state. There isn't just one Norwegian language, nor even two, and two Danes from different parts of the country cannot understand a word of each other's Danish. Sweden took drastic action in the 19th century and enforced a single dialect and an artificially standardised spelling in all the schools. So in Sweden, a restaurant (as they spell it in Denmark) is 'en restaurang' – because that's how it's pronounced!

## The Middle Ages

Mediaeval England, or the Middle Ages, is roughly that time from the Norman conquest to the 14th Cent. CE. It is a romantic time, both savage and refined: a savage common people being ruled by barons living in strong castles and a highly cultured court, supported morally by a repressive Church and physically by chivalrous knights in full body armour, yet mounted on heavy horses and fighting with massive lances. New learning and new weapons from the East destroyed first one, and then the other. New learning came from contact with Islam, who gave us our lost culture back in the form of the pagan Greek authors. New weapons came in the form of the English longbow, and next gunpowder, brought from China by Venetian traders.

The most famous kings who followed William the Conqueror were of a dynasty known as the Plantagenets. They were remarkable for not being Christians personally, whilst tolerating the Church in the land, and indeed appointing monks to high positions (because they were men of learning, not warriors). The most well-known was Richard the Lionheart, whose father Henry II married Eleanor of Aquitaine, heiress to a large part of France. A novel called *The Lion in Winter* (sorry, forget the author, but a very good film was made of it) is a good evocation of the ageing Henry. Eleanor was a patroness of the arts, and encouraged the growth of an order of minstrels called the Troubadors, counterparts of the Bards of old. The Arthurian legends were Christianized and grew in strength and detail at their hands, with chivalrous tales of the knights of his court. In Europe the same tales (used by Wagner, e.g. *Parsifal*) were attributed to the court of Charlemagne, who actually did exist.

England was multilingual at the time: English being the language of the lowest orders, French of the merchants and rulers, and Latin of the Church and the professions. Latin was spoken across Europe, and gave a sense of a culturally united European world, sometimes called Christendom. It confronted another culturally unified and technically more advanced world: Islam, which however the Mongols overran in the 14th Cent. The first popular author in the English language (previous authors in English had confined themselves to Christian devotional works about mystic visions of the Cross and all that) was Geoffrey Chaucer. Neither you nor I can understand his English, but it's available in translation, notably the *Canterbury Tales*. They are humorous, bawdy and rumbustuous, a really entertaining read, and a good commentary of the times. Chaucer was very aware

of regional accents: one of his characters, an abbess, ‘spoke French like they do in Stratford-at-Bow (part of London)’ and other characters in his stories spoke with strong Durham accents (which he tried to copy in writing), amusingly similar to what you hear there today!

A most interesting book about 14th Century technology, is by (Louis?) Gimpel: *The Mediaeval Machine*, revealing a technical prowess far beyond what we give them credit for. Any machine with rotary parts (whether clock, weapon or computer) was called a ‘mill’ at that time, which (since historians are often technically illiterate) has tended to disguise the real purpose and design of the gadgets they had. Moreover, engineers taught their craft directly by apprenticeship and were careful not to write down their ‘secrets’. The clean, refined, well-dressed and technically competent peoples of Tolkien’s stories were probably truer-to-life of mediaeval times than the dirty savages shown in modern films. Although few people took a bath, as we know it, public saunas (called ‘stews’), which get the body very clean, were in common use across England and Europe.

The best tales about the kings of mediaeval England are probably those by William Shakespeare, and are plays. Shakespeare, unlike Chaucer, is readable by anybody who can read modern English. But be careful: many words have changed their meaning and this is not obvious, even to English-born. Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Henry V* cover two watersheds in English history, the Wars of the Roses, and Agincourt (for which the French have never forgiven us.)

## Early Modern Period

Traditional English history dwells heavily on Kings, Queens, religious wars and philosophical movements like the Enlightenment. I shall ignore all that: any reading of English history books will redress the balance.

Spain, for me, ushered in modern times with their conquest of Central and South America, which they looted for gold. This made them the dominant force in Europe. Other rulers, like Elizabeth I of England, daughter of Henry VIII, made a living by raiding the ‘Spanish Main’, the stream of ships bringing gold back across the Atlantic. Many stories of swashbuckling pirates date from this era. Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh were two of the most famous ‘freebooters’ – not outlawed, but honoured in their own country. Any stories of famous outlaws like Captain Kidd and Blackbeard will give a flavour of the times.

The most popular pirate story in English has got to be Robert Louis Stevenson: *Treasure Island*. If you like this (Victorian) author, his other adventure stories, like *Kidnapped*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Master of Ballantrae* (an excellent evocation of the life of a Scottish Laird) are all worth reading too. In fact these stories are so romantic that they have bitten deep into English cultural life, and are as well-known as our traditional tales and legends. Anyone trying to understand English culture will get a concentrated dose with RLS, with very little effort.

Henry VIII was one of the senior kings of Europe, a cultured and devout man. He is best known today however as the king who broke with the Pope and turned England into a Protestant country. In Europe, Protestantism was associated with the rising middle-class and popular movements of rebellion against the hereditary kings of Christendom. In England it came about by royal command, and led to two centuries of state repression of the British people matching anything done in Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany. The British Secret Service traces its beginnings to the reign of Elizabeth I. Robert Bolt's play: *A Man For All Seasons* gives a sense of the tyranny of the times. It is about the career of Thomas More, Chancellor of England under Henry VIII until his break with Rome. More was a devout Catholic all his life and died a martyr. He is one of the most revered (non-royal) Englishmen in spite of that.

It's funny who else revered him. I saw his name on a tablet in the Kremlin, Moscow, as one of the founders of the Communist Revolution. This was because, in his youth, More wrote a book describing a make-believe society, perfectly governed, called *Utopia* (he invented the word). He wrote in Latin, but translations are available, and it is a very good read and one I'd recommend. Utopia looks to us like a modern populist society, apart from its disrespect for wealth and gold. But More (and his drinking companions, like Erasmus in Europe) invented the whole thing. The popularity of More's liberal ideas are why young Henry, his close friend, chose him for Chancellor. Henry's story is of a good and wise king becoming a wicked tyrant.

James I (of England, James VI of Scotland) united the two lands, which had been at war, on and off, for nearly 500 years. He did so by virtue of being the true successor to both thrones. Shakespeare's play: *Macbeth* was written to be performed before James I, and should be read with this in mind.

I'm afraid I've run out of time and must leave off here. Sections I'd like to have continued with are:

### **Oliver Cromwell**

Antonia Frazer: *Our Chief Of Men*. Authoritative, but dry.

### **The Restoration and the Regency**

*The Madness of King George* – a good film made a few years back. If you can understand it, you have a handle on the times.

### **The French Revolution**

Baroness Orczy: *The Scarlet Pimpernel* – a lively adventure story, illustrating the politics of England and France in the 1790s. America declaring independence didn't affect England much politically, but the French Revolution did! Besides leading to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who posed the gravest threat to Britain since William the Conqueror, and came within an ace of blockading us into submission. The Napoleonic Wars gave England a cultural and social wound that lasted well into the 1850s.

Charles Dickens: *A Tale Of Two Cities* – an exciting and heart-wrenching novel of love and terror in London and revolutionary Paris. Dickens also wrote several novels (all worth reading) about the hardship of life in Victorian England.

### **Victoria and the British Empire**

I said I'd stick to the history of England, not other English-speaking nations. But to Britons at home, the most important part of the Empire was India. We may have invaded and colonized the Indian subcontinent, but in a real sense the Indian peoples invaded and colonised our minds. We sent our best men out to administer them and build their country, as the Romans did with us. When English is a forgotten language in England, and maybe even in the USA, I wouldn't be surprised if India didn't take control of English as its own national language, and the game of Cricket with it.

Must mention one of my favourite authors: Rudyard Kipling. Wrote mostly short-stories, heavily into daily life at all levels of society in British India (see: *Plain Tales from the Hills* – a must to read, plus his only full-length novel: *Kim*). But he also wrote some highly imaginative science-fiction predicting electronic weaponry, fighting aircraft and tank warfare about 50 years in advance, equally as good as H.G. Wells, but not much of it. Also some children's stories about jungle animals (*Just-So Stories*) and traditional magical creatures of the English countryside (*Puck of Pook's Hill*). But it is his India stories which put him on my history list.

IC

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### **IAN**

Another discovery from an archive on my hard disk. Written for Kyung, a young Korean living in the USA on a student visa who had been given leave to stay. He befriended me whilst I was in America, and used to drive me to work each day (I didn't own a car). When it was time for me to return to England, he begged me for a list of books to give him a basic grasp of Western history. Can you believe it!

I dashed off the above (...I think I dictated it into IBM's ViaVoice, which explains the relaxed chatty style). It was a glorious opportunity to write whatever I liked – the first thing that came into my head – because he wasn't going to argue with it. Certain things I didn't need to explain to him, like Peter Jackson's film *Lord of the Rings*, which in 2002 was all the rage. Indeed I could take it as an anchor-point.

I intend to elaborate on a few points (...and how!) and publish it, which makes it a genuine work-in-progress, i.e. not a "walled garden" with no scope for criticism and improvement, which is something we don't welcome in this group.

### **JENNY**

A brilliant idea, especially as it includes film as well as literature. Can't really criticise as there are unfinished parts and so much scope for development but I should not like to think that Kyung was judging our last Yorkshire King on the strength of Shakespeare's play alone!

### **VERONICA**

This was most informative, Ian, and the fact that it's written to someone gives a personal touch which is easy to relate to. Maybe a new project for you: to translate *De Bello Gallico* into English? Incidentally, have you come across *Hild* by Nicola Griffiths? A fictional account of the young girl who became Abbess, rich in historical detail. Well worth reading.

I was most surprised, I think, to read about Thomas More being revered in Moscow due to *Utopia*. I wonder if you would write this very differently 18 years on? I hope you do expand it.

## LESLEY

An enlightening 'potted history' which I hope your friend Kyung followed up on.

It is definitely more interesting to read 'general literature' rather than 'standard textbooks', although academics would disagree with that statement.

One could argue that novels/films, etc., are not accurate - but are 'textbooks' entirely true? History as taught in our schools is from what could be considered a biased view. It is what the 'English' consider to be factual. Few people read about the past from other countries'/nations' viewpoints.

History was one of the subjects I liked (still do) but I believe large chunks were missed. From what I remember at school (albeit a long time ago) I think we started somewhere, briefly, with the Plantagenets (maybe a little earlier) and ended somewhere in the Early Victorian period/industrial revolution. I hasten to add, I was born in the middle of the 20th century so there was plenty of 'history' not covered beyond that. Perhaps the events of the early 20th century were still too raw for people, yet many good things emerged along with the awfulness of two world wars.

You should elaborate on it, Ian. Who knows, it could have a major influence on how/what children are taught about the past! Yes, room to polish up what you have already written - especially as it was a few years ago. Something we all need to do with our work, as long as we don't get into that never-ending cycle of re-editing.

(As I am not au fait with current school education I may be making assumptions that history is taught much the same way as when I attended school.)

Just to add - one of my bugbears during my latter days as a Senior Lecturer was the academic emphasis on students backing up the content of assignments with 'research'. Must include 'quotes', 'respected author citations', etc. All very well but what happened to original thinking?

## ADELE

You provided a mammoth amount of information for your acquaintance here. If he was wanting a literature based account of our history you will have certainly set him a task here to get through. I have to admit I struggled to stay with some of it myself as I was reading it, due to the derivations or origins and, for someone of a different language and culture, this could have been difficult to take in. Some good choices provided however. Shame you never got in the details for the restoration period as I love that era and the social aspect of theatres shutting during the interregnum and the Variation of class appreciation and value of performance and culture which was so different from the Victorian era and not really seen again until the 1920s and 1960s. I do believe that we learn far more from literature about our historical culture and society than we do from history books which were usually written with a bias towards leaders and supremacy, that their accuracy can so often be questioned.

## IAN

Adele has a point: I think Kyung was only hoping for a reading list. He may have been bemused by the idiosyncratic history that I delivered. In my defence I can only plead haste, since I had a lot to do before dashing back to England when my visa ran out. Baudelaire once apologised to a correspondent for the long letter, saying he hadn't had time to write a short one.

# Lesley Pemberton

## THE REPORTER (continued)

*I submitted the first part of this story a few weeks ago. To remind you, it was about an Investigative Journalist - Mike Bradley – who was trying to find some information on an old friend who owned an Antique Shop called 'Recollections'. It seemed that the owner, Mr Pickering, had died but there was no information about the circumstances. A woman known as Susan had taken over the shop but no-one knew much about her.*

'Good afternoon. Can I be of help?' Susan asked.

Mike noticed that her mouth smiled but her eyes didn't reflect any emotion.

'Just browsing,' said Mike, 'If that's OK with you.'

Susan shrugged but stayed watching him. Mike moved around slowly, noting the new cabinets and shelving and small spotlights that shone on the displays.

'It's all different now,' Mike's sudden comment startled Susan. 'I used to come here when Mr Pickering owned the shop. Heard he died, though no-one seems to know much about what happened.'

'Ah...well...it was quite sudden.' Susan became more animated. 'I was working here, helping out...you know...before that.'

'So,' Mike persisted, 'did you buy the place?'

'No, I didn't need to.' Susan stared straight at him – no, through him, like Mrs James had said.

'Mr P had told me he didn't have any relatives or anyone to leave his shop and assets to. Not long before he passed away, he gave me a copy of a new will he'd had drawn up. I was quite taken aback – he wanted to leave everything to me.'

Was that a twitch of a smile, a somewhat malevolent glint in her eyes, Mike wondered. He had a somewhat uneasy feeling about this woman.

'He must have taken quite a shine to you.' Mike said, aiming to appear friendly.

Susan retorted, 'No, it was nothing like that. We had a purely business-like arrangement. He liked the way I looked after the shop and everything in it. He was thinking of retiring and wanted me to take over.'

And take over you did, thought Mike; but kept that to himself. Instead he probed a little more.

'There was no funeral or memorial service that I knew of. That was sad. Why was there no announcement of Mr P's death?'

Susan showed no emotion as she replied. 'Well, I don't really see it's anything to do with you but for your information Mr P had said he didn't want any fuss when he died. He just wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered in Rosingdale, his favourite place on the moors. No religious or other kind of service, no people, no flowers. He made me promise it would be me who scattered his ashes. So that's what I did.'

'Hmm, that's a shame,' said Mike. 'Mr P may not have realised it but there were people who thought well of him, me included. That's really why I came here, to see if I could find out what happened.'

'He died in his sleep. I found him when I came in to work. No sign or sound of him so I went upstairs. Dead as a dodo, lying in his bed. The Doctor said it was natural



causes. Mr P was nearly 80, you know.' Susan retained a blank expression as she related this to Mike.

'Well, thanks for the chat,' said Mike. 'Maybe I'll see you again sometime. By the way, I'm Mike Bradley. Sorry, I don't know your name...' He left that hanging for a few seconds, as a question awaiting a reply, until she responded, seemingly reluctant.

'Susan Gregson.'

'Okey-dokey.' Mike appeared nonchalant. 'Sorry. Got to go. Things to do, places to be. Nice to meet you.'

Susan didn't respond as Mike strolled out of the shop. She stared after him as he walked away, wondering if she had said too much. The locals - like that nosy old bat at the café across the road - got short shrift if they asked anything. This stranger had caught her off guard.

Recollections...

Susan thought back about how she had come here. She had heard that the antique shop - *Recollections* – was owned by an elderly man, an antiques dealer who was sometimes away looking for items to sell. She decided to call in one day when she saw the shop was open.

The bell on the back of the door jingled as she entered. Nice, thought Susan, an effective warning of anyone going in. An elderly man emerged from behind a dark green chenille curtain at the rear of the shop. The curtain was not nice, horrible colour and looked like it had never been washed or dry-cleaned. Susan assumed it covered a doorway to another room, probably the owner's private quarters.

'Hello. Welcome,' the man said cheerily. 'Do you need any help? I'm Mr Pickering, the owner – but everyone I know calls me Mr P.'

'Oh, I'm OK thanks,' Susan replied. 'Just thought I'd come and have a look around. I like antiques.'

'Help yourself,' said Mr Pickering, adding, '- not literally of course.'

Susan attempted a smile at his little joke. She was surprised at the amount of stuff in the shop. Some of the items were valuable she guessed, because previously she had owned her own antiques business. Until things had started to go wrong.

How she longed to have a place like this again. She decided she would have to get to know Mr Pickering a bit better... a lot better.

So Susan formed a plan of action. She started to call in the shop frequently when it was open and gradually gained Mr P's friendship and trust. They talked about antiques and Mr P realised that Susan had a lot of knowledge of the trade. Eventually he asked her if she would like to help out in the shop. Of course she would – she accepted readily.

One day, when Susan was in *Recollections* and there were no other customers, Mr P decided to tell her something.

'I'm not getting any younger, heading towards 80,' he confided. 'I'm thinking of giving up antique dealing. It's difficult now for me to get around, searching for items for the shop. Maybe it's time I took retirement.'

'But what about the business?' Susan asked. 'You seem to do well.'

'You are a very capable and knowledgeable woman. I think I can trust you to keep the business going for now.'

She feared that if he sold up she would no longer have her job. There was no way she could afford to buy *Recollections*, but it was now central to her ambitions and life. She couldn't lose it. Some positive action was required.

A few weeks later, Susan was busy in the shop, cleaning and rearranging things to her liking. The small bell, still attached to the entrance door, jingled merrily as someone entered. Susan recognised the woman, a local, although she didn't really know her well. In fact, she hadn't got to know anyone well. That was how she liked things to be; didn't want other people prying into her own life.

Despite Susan's more aloof approach, compared to Mr P's friendly demeanour, the customers continued to come. If they didn't warm to Susan, she was at least always polite and knowledgeable about items in the shop.

'Where's old Mr P?' The woman asked. 'I know he wasn't here all the time but no-one has seen him for weeks.'

Susan replied, calmly, 'I'm sorry but no-one will be seeing him again at all. He passed away 4 weeks ago. Very sad, it was, except he left this place to me.'

The customer was shocked and surprised at the way Susan delivered the news in a cold manner. Expressionless, emotionless.

'I didn't know,' the woman said. 'No-one has mentioned that Mr P had died.'

'As they say "c'est la vie",' Susan proffered, 'or should that be "c'est le mort" in this case.'

The woman had no idea what Susan meant by that and, feeling uncomfortable, scurried out of the shop. At least she had some news to pass on to others who had been worried about Mr P, albeit only the stark fact that he had died.

*Recollections* is a good name for the shop, thought Susan. After all, it was recollection of her therapy whilst she'd been unwell that had made her put her plans into action. The psychiatrist had kept encouraging her to be positive.

It had been easy to sedate Mr P, using some of the medication she used to take. When he started to nod off in his chair in the room at the back of the shop she had to help him upstairs to his bed. She told him to rest. When she went to check on him a little later he wasn't rousable, barely breathing. To make sure he would never wake up, Susan placed a pillow over his face and held it down. It might be difficult to dispose of the body, but she would manage. It would be best to wait until it was dark outside.

In the meantime, Susan decided to close the shop early. She went into the back room, opened up the bureau where Mr P kept his paperwork and took out the parchment envelope that had 'Last Will and Testament' printed in bold script on the front.

All done legally, Mr P had decided he wanted Susan to inherit the shop and all his assets. He'd told her he had no-one else, he didn't want to die intestate and he knew she would be the right one to keep *Recollections* going.

Susan had feigned surprise although this was what she had been working towards. What Mr P hadn't counted on was that Susan would inherit everything in a very short time after the will was drawn up.

Susan had no qualms about what she had done. After all, she had been told by those psychobabble people that she had sociopathic tendencies but they didn't consider her to be a danger to anyone. How wrong they were – or were they right? Susan had no concept of what most people viewed as socially acceptable. She was the only person that really mattered.

People would soon forget Mr Pickering and his sudden departure. If anyone came snooping around and asking questions she didn't need to say much.

Had she been careless in saying more than she would usually do when that man came, asking questions? What was his name? Mike Bradley, that was it. She needed to find out who he was, if he might probe further. Although Bradley wasn't local, he'd seemed quite concerned about old Mr P and what had happened to him.

*To be continued*

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## JENNY

Another instalment of an engaging story, with a clever twist, in that the murder scenario is revealed and yet it still holds the reader's attention, as I want to know more about the sociopathic Susan whose body language is slowly giving her away.

## VERONICA

From the beginning, you remind us that there is something slightly sinister about Susan ("her eyes didn't reflect any emotion"), which you enlarge from time to time. A small typo in line 19 ('sad' instead of 'said'). I'm glad you have written something from Susan's point of view. You introduce this very naturally, using the pivot Recollections, which is clever, and the explanation that she already had some antiques experience makes the scenario plausible. It will be interesting to see how this develops.

## ADELE

I was looking forward to another section of this story so thank you for giving us another chunk. I did wonder however if you should rethink the way Susan spills the info so quickly to a complete stranger about her inheritance if she is so suspicious and no-one knows anything about her. This doesn't quite sit true with me, so loses authenticity. I know you mention it after, when she thinks she was taken off guard - but why was she so easily taken off guard? - there needs to be reason (like she fancied him because he was so good looking or she was she shocked that he was the image of her father who went missing 10 years ago etc etc. (Typo with the word 'sad' for said when Mike says he must have taken a shine to you).

I think in the Recollections part, you should lose the word 'guessed' because if Susan had been in the business and knew anything about antiques she would not need to guess, she would know.

You give a big reveal very quickly which I was surprised about, but dropping hints to her background was really well done and leaves further intrigue for the reader, though it removes the story from being a whodunnit which is normally revealed at the end. Is it going to be a novella or novel, or is it a longish short story? I'm only asking this because you have moved it on apace and maybe needn't do that if it's to be a novel. I love the storyline though, and the possibilities of where it is going.

Keen to see more.

Thank you.

## LESLEY

I'm sure some of you reading this may think there is an anomaly. In the first part, where Susan is talking to Mike, she tells him that when Mr P died "The Doctor said it was natural causes." In the last part, when she recalls suffocating Mr P, she was thinking "It might be difficult to dispose of the body...".

This is a deliberate part of the plot, not a discrepancy.

I would value your comments/opinions - is the story interesting enough to continue? It may not have enough impetus to develop into a novel, nor even a novella or novelette; possibly a 'long, short story'.

## IAN

I'm still viewing this as a murder mystery, and I'm intrigued that how Mr P met his end forms no part of the mystery. It's like someone you think is the hero getting bumped off in Chapter 2.

As to the story's natural length – short story (up to 4,000 wds), novella (15,000-30,000 wds) or full length novel (80,000-100,000 wds, but a crime story can get away with 60,000) – that depends on what turn it takes. At the outset I was intrigued by the story's wealth of possibilities. It's not unlike a book I wrote: someone dear to the hero goes missing; strange girl involved. That story took 100,000 words to work itself out. But I wonder if this 1,700 word instalment closes off so many possibilities as to shorten it drastically? Perhaps one more instalment of the same length, say 5,000 words in all. What is there left to do except have Bradley exert his reporting skills to expose Susan's crime (though a crime, as such, would be hard to prove).

But what then? This could be the most creative part of the plot. Does Susan do Bradley in before he can expose her? Do they fall for each other? Then from a murder mystery it turns into a (creepy) love-story. Does she blurt out the truth to Bradley – and put him on the spot? Possible outcomes begin to multiply once more – but I can think of few which don't end in tragedy for the pair of them. Unless Bradley is as devoid of moral compass as Susan?