



GILWERN u3a NEWSLETTER

“THE UNSOCIAL TIMES”

Issue 18: May 2021

Hello All,

I hope this newsletter finds you well. There is a definite air of optimism with lighter nights, the easing of lockdown rules and sunshine enabling us to spend time in our gardens. As a very amateur gardener optimism is always in the air as I plant seeds or try new planting ideas. But as the saying goes “ Hope springs eternal’ especially as I watch new growth come to life.

It was wonderful to see more members join us for our Zoom talk in April. John Burrows presents an amazing eclectic mix of photographs which took us from Newport, London Sri Lanka and many other places including space. It really was a case of being in the right place at the right time.

Our next talk will be on May 19th and features Dr Rhiannon Morgan with a talk on DNA. She was involved in identifying the remains of Richard 111 and has many interesting tales to share. I hope you can join us.

Best wishes

Karen
Chair, Gilwern u3a

April Fools’ Confession!

Many of you will have read the article in the March edition of the newsletter about the dog fouling sign at the canal at Gilwern. For the intrepid sleuths trying to locate it, I have to confess that this was indeed an April Fools’ article. Well done for those of you who guessed, hard luck for those who scoured the canal bank unsuccessfully!

Lynda O’K



Library in action!

On visiting the Library this morning, the Librarian, Lisa, asked me to mention around that Gilwern Library openings are now back to normal. Timings are:-

Mon & Tues 9am - 1.00pm

Wed 1.30pm - 4.30pm

Fri. 10am - 1pm & 1.30pm - 5pm

The online booking, Request & Collect, is still available on Monday mornings.

While opening hours are back to normal, social distancing & masks are still required - only 2 people at a time inside.

Rhiannon W

Nightingales in Gilwern?

There are stories of nightingales having been in the area of Gilwern Lower Common, once evidently known as Blackberry Common. There were once brambles and blackthorn, a typical habitat for them. However, the area was cleared to grassland, not a place for nightingales. Further evidence of the birds having lived there is that one of the houses abutting onto the Common was called Pant yr Eros, Welsh for Nightingale Hall, the original house having been burned and replaced by a modern one which exists with the same name today. Has anyone heard nightingales in Gilwern in the 21st Century? There must still be blackthorn and brambles prolific in some parts of the village.

Anon

Creative Writing Group – Gilwern u3a

Kay B

Following on from their stories about *The Absinthe Drinker*, the Creative Writing group moved onto poetry, to a poem by Judith Viorst in fact, called “*If I was in charge of the world*”. Using this title, members were asked to write their own poem, in whatever form they chose. The results were interesting as some rhymed, others didn’t. The results of our efforts can usually be seen on our page on the web site under Creative Writing, and we think make a good read.

At each fortnightly meeting of the group, a different individual chooses the topic for the next meeting and after poetry came the challenge to write about someone who has been important in your life, but not a family member. Unsurprisingly, teachers featured in two of the pieces, but the most emotive one dealt with the heartaches that come from trying to ‘cure’ someone’s drug addiction.

Recently the group were trying to put their own spin on the next choice of “*a possible dissolution of the monarchy*” but that doesn’t mean they’ve gone deeply into politics, far from it. New members of this friendly and lively group are always welcomed, just contact newkaybee1806@al.com and join in.

A child's London experience in WW2 (Age seven to thirteen)

Maurice G

Part 2. Part 1 appeared in the April Newsletter.

Although the Blitz was over we still had the occasional incendiary attack, the doodle bugs and V2 rockets. One of which exploded behind Selfridge’s in Oxford Street and the force of the blast sucked my bedroom window out. The Times Book Club was also bombed and the fire brigade came through the house to put it out, real excitement for us kids.

These raids gave rise to a schoolboy competition each morning, who could find the most interesting piece of shrapnel (pieces of bomb or shell). One day I struck lucky when I found a hand grenade, I knew enough not to pull the pin out and when I managed to unscrew the base I found that there was no detonator, it was probably a dummy used for training the LDV (London Defence Volunteers). The council made the bomb sites safe, bricking up some of the basement areas to form emergency water supplies EWS and the rest were available for us kids to explore. However we did have to watch where we stepped due to the condoms left by the “ladies of the night” and their customers, all part of our growing up.

This wasn’t the only hazard for us kids. There was a Pathe news theatre near which showed a cycle of news bulletins and about seven cartoon films and since I had three paper rounds plus 2/6d per quarter for singing in the church choir and 6d for every wedding and funeral, I could afford to go. Unfortunately, the enjoyment was spoilt by men who would sit next to us and try to drape their coat over our lap to enable them to grope us, in those days a sheath knife was part of a boy scout uniform and could prove a great discouragement.

Plight of the mossies

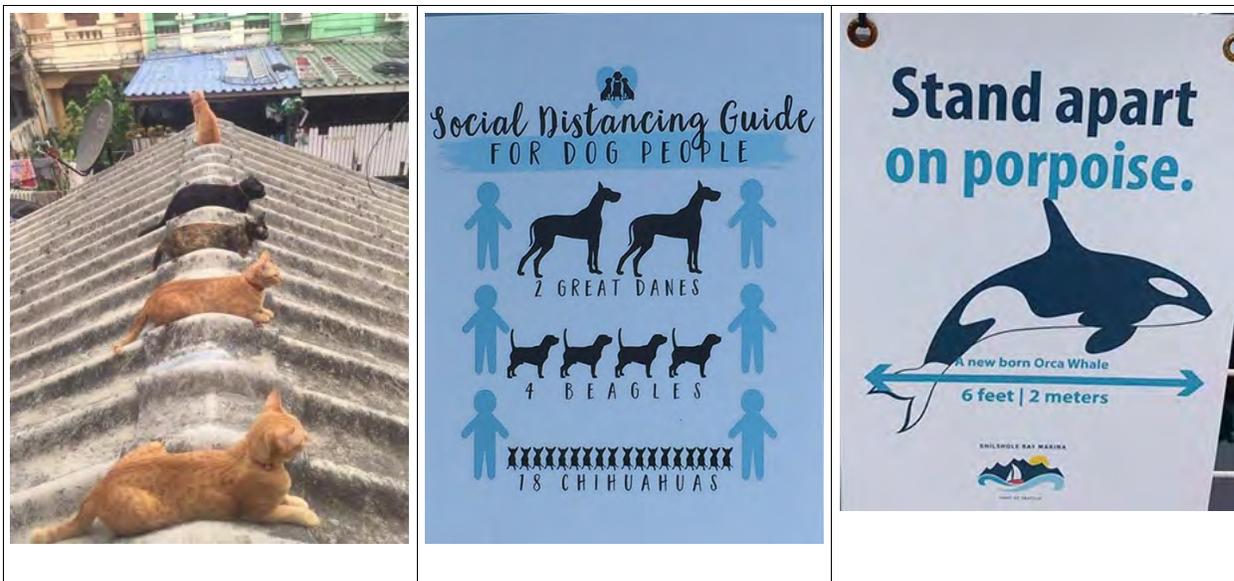
Lynda O’K

Most of us have been to warmer climes, a luxury that has been denied us recently because of the Covid pandemic. I usually go armed with at least a hand luggage sized case that contains anti mosquito lotions, potions, wipes, bands, sprays, plug ins and anything else I can find to combat these annoying, disease spreading little horrors. What exactly is their purpose in the greater scheme of things? I suppose they are part of the ecosystem, and as such the larvae provide food for fish and other aquatic animals, the adults are food for other insect, birds and bats, but that’s the only good thing I can think of the say about them. I’m not sure of the statistics about mossie numbers, but I’m wondering if they have decreased as they are having a bit of a famine without the tourists flocking to their habitats. They must be waking up and wondering where their lovely juicy unsuspecting dinner is. One thing that concerns me is that if we can’t go to them, will a scourge of them, in desperation, migrate to us instead to get their daily fix of human blood? Some species have already adapted to our cooler climate, so should we be preparing for an invasion?

Measuring Social Distancing

Lynda O'K

The Covid pandemic has managed to divide the population into many tribes, by distance, age groups, vaccinated or not. Whether you have had Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccine, whether you have had your first or second jab. Another pair of tribes that have manifested themselves during lockdown are those that can estimate social distancing in metric and those who can't. I'm afraid I fall into the latter as although we adopted the metric system of measurement in 1965, I still work in feet and inches. Help is at hand for this animal loving nation, as there are many ways that you can estimate how far to stand apart from everyone else, for dog lovers, we have the "social distancing guide for dog people", where you can estimate the distance by breed of dog. For fish fanciers, there is the "stand apart on porpoise" guide, where the distance is measured in whales.



For cat lovers, you just have to study your cat's behaviour and follow that. Apparently, ginger cats are the best examples to follow!

HOUSEBOUND HUGS No 18 Not so Housebound!

Kay B

Like so many families across the country, we haven't seen our family since July of last year. Yes, we've 'seen' them via the miracle of Zoom, but not actually seen them to touch and be together. With one son and family living in London, another in Sweden and our daughter in Berkshire, our loving family was miles apart but always close in so many ways. In January, our daughter moved from Berkshire to Herefordshire, much nearer to us but with borders 'closed', we were still not able to visit. And then in mid-April the borders between Wales and England were opened, and so off we went, taking with us lots of bits and pieces from the garden, and a lemon drizzle cake – well, that's what Mums do.

The pleasure of actually hugging family members can't be overestimated, it must be the best form of medicine available. Yes, I know there are families who can't meet up yet due to distances, but if we're all patient and follow COVID rules, we shall all get there. The big bonus is that gardens are starting to bloom, lawns need cutting, and an exceptionally dry April means that lots and lots of watering is needed to keep vegetable seedlings alive.

So all of us will be able to say soon that we're not housebound!



Another Saharan tradition found 1962

David N H

We arrived back from a camel journey in time for the celebrations marking Independence Day in the small oasis of Iferouane in the Niger Sahara. I had used my Land Rover to bring women, some with babies, from the outer parts of the oasis, all squatting on the metal floor.

A group of Tuareg women assembled in the centre of the oasis and sat on the ground in a circle for a *tendé*. The picture shows them assembling and preparing for the procedure. More women would be joining them. They then began to hum, it being indescribably luring, really more than a hum. Meanwhile the young men of the village were assembling on their decorative camels nearby, clearly interested in these young ladies and their music. Then, in turn, the men would gallop forward, riding fast round the singers, the camels kicking up the sand, taking them surprisingly close while the enchanting humming continued as though tempting the young men. Whether there was any outcome we never discovered. The humming was an attraction to the camel riders. The gathering of women performing a *tendé* was not quite a W.I. Coffee morning!



Puns for the Educated Minds

Maurice G

- 1 I wondered why the baseball kept getting bigger. Then it hit me.
2. A sign on the lawn at a drug rehab centre said: 'Keep off the Grass.'
3. The short fortune-teller who escaped from prison was a small medium at large.
4. The man who survived mustard gas and pepper spray is now a seasoned veteran
5. A backward poet writes inverse.
6. In a democracy it's your vote that counts. In feudalism it's your count that votes.
7. When cannibals ate a missionary, they got a taste of religion

Wild Garlic

Lynda O'K

We are all looking for our very own signs that spring has sprung. For weeks I have been keeping an eye out for catkins or lambs while out walking. These are now plentiful. This week, I came across the first wild garlic in flower and it brought home the fact that the seasons have come full circle since we were put into the initial lockdown in March last year. How wonderful it was to walk along the Clydach riverbank, surrounded on all sides with a carpet of wild garlic. Hopefully, this year's crop will be as good as this picture I took last year.



I Wanna Tell You a Story

Kay B

George was feeling very lonely after all the months of lockdown, so one day he decided to get a pet to keep him company. He rang his local pet shop, who were doing 'click and collect'. The pet shop owner said "I've got just the thing for you: a hamster! I can supply it with cage, food, the lot for £20."

George said "That's great! I'll pay you over the phone and come down to collect it." An hour later, George proudly came home with his new pet. He made sure it had plenty of food and water before he went to bed.

The next morning, George came downstairs and found that the hamster was lying in the bottom of the cage, all four paws in the air and stone dead. He rang the pet shop. "That hamster you sold me dropped dead. I want my money back or another hamster." "I'm sorry about that," said the pet shop owner. "I'm out of hamsters, so I'll give you a refund." "What will I do with the body? I suppose I'll put it in the rubbish" said George. The man from the pet shop replied: "This

might seem a little strange, but I suggest you put the dead hamster in the blender then sprinkle the resulting goop over your garden.” George thought this was a little weird to say the least, but he did what the man from the pet shop said.

The next morning George looked out of the window and his garden was covered in the most beautiful daffodils! He rushed to the phone and told the pet shop man what had happened. “That’s odd”, said the pet shop man. “You normally get tulips from hamster jam.”

A Little Visitor

Harriet H

The grass under our bird feeder is hosting a beautiful male Reed Bunting with its black head and scarf of white around his neck. He appears several times a day, zealously hoovering up the seeds discarded by the profligate Siskins and Green Finches from above. We hope so much that he has a mate nesting nearby, but unless it is in a particularly secure place, it will be prey to the crows and magpies who are on the lookout for eggs and nestlings. And then there is the threat of the Sparrowhawk who swoops, literally like a bolt from the blue, catching small birds from our garden. Maybe our lovely Bunting will not be as agile as the numerous tits and chaffinches. We are honoured by our elegant visitor, but oh, how fragile he appears.



Probation Part 4 – Marlborough Street Magistrates Court

Harriet H

Small and the other side of Soho from Bow Street, Marlborough Street Court was also distinguished by its principal stipendiary magistrate, Mr St John Harmsworth. Portly and benign, he had a huge tolerance for the venal behaviour that characterised much of the crime dealt with by the court. Not for the sometimes extravagant shoplifting from Oxford Street shops, but for prostitution, drunkenness and those caught out by extortionate night club bills. These last would be admonished for failing to examine the vintage of the bottle they had been unable to pay for: ‘never accept a bottle wrapped in a napkin, always ask to see the label’ he would tell them before imposing a fine. ‘What is your share of the Tronck’ he would ask a bewildered waitress caught out stealing from a restaurant with no knowledge of the French tipping system. Young men, drunk and disorderly after a night out, would be fined a pound, while the two regular and serious alcoholics were regarded as part of the court establishment. There was an occasion though when St John became exasperated. As usual, he asked Michael, in court for the umpteenth time, what he had to say for himself: ‘Well you see You Honour, I just had a couple of bottles of wine’. ‘You have been telling me that for the last 17 years’ said St John crossly, ‘why don’t you try a bottle and a half?’ before imposing a small fine. I heard later that Michael had been presented with a bottle of whisky on the occasion of his 100th appearance at the court.

Prostitution he also regarded as an understandable human failing, his fines being so low as to attract admonishment from his superiors. I would be asked to see a young woman struggling to pay an accumulation of fines and would relate to him a story of difficulty in finding work and supporting a child, whereupon he would write off £300 owed to the court. When he retired the women, who appeared regularly at the court, sent him a card of best wishes. ‘Obstruction’ on Oxford Street was another regular offence in this court with people hawking imitation perfumes and versions of the three-card trick, but it was a different variety of nuisance that produced my favourite St John moment. Just before proceedings began, the police officer calling the list pointed to a man sitting with a carrier bag on his lap, telling me that the bag contained a snake. ‘Don’t tell Mr Harmsworth’ I said, or ‘he’ll want to see it’. Sure enough when the man appeared for the non-payment of a £25 fine for obstructing the highway by displaying his boa constrictor, it was requested that he be allowed to keep the bag with him in court since the snake had to be kept warm. ‘Oh, let’s have a look’ said St John so out came the poor animal who obligingly waved about just above my head since I sat directly under the witness box. There followed a catechism as to what it ate, how old it was and what was it called. Those in court became quietly hysterical and when St John felt he knew enough, he said ‘well we have all had a lot of fun. Off you go’. I had to follow the bewildered man out of court to explain that his fine had been wiped. The story made the *Evening Standard*. Luckily, I don’t mind snakes.

Part 5 to Marlborough Street Court in the June Newsletter.

Penny Black

Lynda O'K

We all take for granted the fact that we can send letters and parcels anywhere in the world, and although the use of the Internet for communication via Zoom or Facebook and other platforms is commonplace, postal services have come into their own during the pandemic, especially as many of us have had to resort to online buying during lockdown. All credit to Rowland Hill who, in the 19th century, as a small boy in Kidderminster had watched in embarrassment as his mother had scabbled round for money to pay the postman. By 1830 Hill was a teacher and social reformer, and he had a vision to design a system which would transform the Post Office by using prepaid postage.

By 1840 his scheme was up and running. People had to prove that they had pre-paid postage by using a small piece of paper just big enough for the Post Office stamp, which was stuck with glue to the back of letters. He enlisted the Royal Mint's chief engraver to create a memorable image featuring a profile of Queen Victoria. Enter the Penny Black. The Penny Black was the world's first adhesive postage stamp to be used in a public postal system. This historic stamp allowed people to send letters weighing up to half an ounce (14g) to be delivered for a flat rate of a penny, regardless of distance travelled. The first stamp went on sale on 1st May 1840, and the system came into operation five days later. The Penny Black was an instant hit. Within a week the presses were working round the clock producing 600,000 stamps a day. The stamp had become an icon, a symbol of national pride: an image of Britannia itself. Today the Penny Black is a philatelist's dream although they are not particularly rare as so many were made. The most collectable are first day covers that were posted on 6th May 1840.



Who would have thought that in 2021 we would still be using the same system, although Hill would probably turn in his grave if he knew that the cost of a first-class stamp in the UK is currently 85 pence!

<https://www.historyextra.com/>

Editor's note: I had a penny black when I was young at school. I swapped it with something frivolous, as one does at that age. I never confessed to my grandfather who gave me a collection which would no doubt now be of huge value. Until his death I was dreading an inquiry!

Monthly Art Challenge April's results

Anona Fitzgerald's *Yorkshire Beck*

Sarah's comments: this picture has a lovely balance in its composition. The background misty and indistinct but there. The mid-ground filled by the spreading tree and the river filling the foreground. The colour palette gives good aerial perspective, the water is well executed and, in all, this is a pleasing watercolour. One that satisfactorily meets the brief.

As ever a difficult choice this month. However my pick is Anona's Yorkshire Beck. A clear vision of the view before us, good perspective and well-drawn water! Well done.

Topic for May's challenge

"Beautiful Buildings". Details will be on the web site, and it is open to all to submit a painting. Do take a look at the results of the April Challenge on web site.

