



The *Redbridge Newsletter*

Edited, designed and produced by retired members in Redbridge to share with colleagues across London

Spring 2025



See pages 8, 9 and ten for Rachel Brittle's report on the hidden charms of our local community gardens. This is Forest Gate Community Garden

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The presence of the past

So much wrong with the world. So much to be angry about. I am spoilt for choice. Here are a few snippets of my own preoccupations, which usher in the usual wide-ranging collection of articles – serious, humorous, indignant, offerings with glimpses of peacefulness and sanity in a world gone mad.

In recent years it has often seemed that political momentum is a race to the bottom. Eighty years ago, the world was suffering the dying stages of a war that had unleashed a level of bestiality beyond imagining. Britain, together with her allies, was facing the unbearable yet hopeful final stretch of hostilities, confronting devastation and destruction which had resulted in the mass displacement of populations to an extent unknown in the modern world.

A better way

A better way forward had to emerge, one in which co-operation would replace aggression. Institutions would be developed to enable this and to ensure widespread compliance with self-generating rules and codes of conduct. Together we could rebuild all that had been lost. Up to a point much of that was achieved and our parents' generation could be proud.

But has that element of cooperation, that pursuit of peace and prosperity, decent living conditions for all, access to education, health and welfare services lasted the course? Alas, once you let the genie out of the bottle ...

The threat of the nuclear warfare genie has lifted its head again and we are once more seeing devastation and destruction. Powerful nations are seizing territory along with the stated intention of reducing populations to nothing, laying waste to the land, and others are doing a lot of talking and sabre-rattling. Health and welfare are under threat from dwindling funds, education is increasingly maintained within a straitjacket of authoritarianism and underfunding.

Collapse

There is a collapse of the spirit of consensus. One way and another we are destroying our planet. Careless exploitation of natural resources and heedless consumption are resulting in catastrophic damage to our physical environment: floods, earthquakes, unbearably high temperatures, drought, melting icebergs, the edges of our own island crumbling and falling into the sea.

Old age is a time for reflection, for looking back at the ups and downs of our lives and for embracing the idea that knowing what things were like *before* significant movements of change, that keeping previous experience and understanding alive are powerful weapons for comparison and agents for meaningful change and progression. We talk about learning from the past; understanding that some innovations have been unnecessary or counter-productive and could be put aside is an important part of that. It is not weakness to admit that something was ill-conceived. There is no need to pile the new on top of the old without first removing the dead wood.

The past propels the present into the future. It should inform the decisions we make, but it should not dictate them. We may not be able to change past actions, but we can change the way we think about them, and we can recognise that our perceptions and attitudes have changed according to the conditions in which we find ourselves. We need to declutter our minds and sift out from the mental baggage we carry around with us the never (or no longer) wanted ideas and attitudes we can't bear to part with.

Anger

There are some bits that it *is* essential to hang on to and to use. If we keep the anger alive, then that keeps the reason for it alive and that in turn enables us to make use of what we have lived *before* and help to stem the tide of increased authoritarianism, surveillance etc. which infiltrates so many aspects of modern society, not least education. That is how our experience and accumulated wisdom can be of service. We can bear witness that it was *not* ever thus.

We can use our knowledge of what went before to shape our response to what is happening now. We can expose the extent of coercion in our public services: the 'failing schools' element of compelling academisation where there is reluctance; the whole disability benefits and worklessness saga; the supposition that mental health conditions are 'over-diagnosed', and our other problems are 'all in the mind'.

And then there are books ... keep the reviews and suggestions coming!

Liz Dolan

NEU local news

Maureen McCarthy updates Newsletter readers on what's been happening in the world of education in Redbridge



NEU members at Wanstead High School were on strike earlier this year

Since the last update in November, the key issues facing educators have been workload and the way a number of headteachers are trying to circumvent agreed conditions of service to put even more pressure on their staff. Aggressive leadership in a number of schools is resulting in unacceptable levels of stress and anxiety.

Redbridge NEU reps and officers have been challenging schools which, for example, withdraw PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) time from colleagues who have returned from absence. This obviously has a serious impact on colleagues in the primary sector who have PPA in one block. The use of the Redbridge WhatsApp group has been really useful here. Inexperienced reps can raise issues, which are then addressed by colleagues in other schools offering advice and highlighting inconsistencies and failures to follow LEA or government policies. In these circumstances knowledge is most certainly power.

PRP (performance related pay)

In December, the LEA finally removed PRP from its model Pay Policy, except for people on capability. The

change is in the 2025/6 policy, later than some other LEAs which changed their policies for the current academic year. The issue re capability is one which needs to be carefully monitored since there has been a marked increase in the use of Capability Procedures in at least a couple of Redbridge secondary schools. In one of these, two members were denied progression last term due to 'capability issues'. They then resigned, moving on to new posts in January. Will this be seen as a pyrrhic victory for the headteacher? Yes, money was saved, but the teachers, both having responsibility for KS5 in shortage subjects, were not replaced. This happened five months before the students' final exams in a school that's facing severe problems.

School action

Two schools have taken action during this period, resulting in what appears to have been a concerted negative, anti-union response from both the Borough's Education Director, Colin Stewart, and the Chief Executive, Kam Rai. Wanstead High School NEU acted when an agreement with the headteacher could not be

reached regarding 30 issues, including directed time, excessive workload and staff wellbeing.

A series of strikes followed and then the Redbridge Education Director intervened and sent an extremely anti-union letter to parents. The District Secretary, who works at the school, was named, becoming an obvious target for criticism. The NEU responded with a letter, signed by dozens of reps, which was sent to the Chief Executive. He then wrote to parents but failed to address the issues raised by NEU members.

Attempts to split the staff continued with a letter sent to teachers, critical of the NEU, from a parents' group – a letter facilitated by the school? Other parents came out in support of the educators, but the whole situation was extremely unpleasant and counterproductive. A conclusion was reached in February when action was stopped following the acceptance of 22 of the 30 NEU demands. An article in the magazine, 'Educate', celebrated the victory.

National press

However, parents' criticism of the Wanstead staff was picked up in the national press, with Redbridge highlighted as a 'problem' authority. The headline in the Times, (21/1/25), read -- "Militant union holding schools hostage, say exasperated parents."

The newspaper highlighted recent action taken in Redbridge and appeared to suggest that action by educators was somehow confined to LEA schools, the implication being that if we had more academies, strikes wouldn't happen. No mention of the indicative ballots taking place in 18 of the Harris Federation academies. Different set-ups, similar grievances!

Unfortunately, there has not been a similar resolution to the lengthy strike action at Newbury Park

Primary School. Among the grievances has been excessive workload, exacerbated by the headteacher's refusal to adhere to agreed conditions of service. He has refused to follow the cover agreement, insisting on split classes becoming the norm, resulting in teachers 'coping' with 40+ pupils at a time, some having to sit on the floor. Again, LEA-inspired negative publicity focused on the educators but showed no concern regarding the huge class sizes or the basic lack of resources.

Regular pickets

NEU members at Newbury Park have just completed their 30th day of strike action, holding regular pickets outside the school and, on 27th February, were joined by parents for a demonstration in front of the Town Hall. Two disturbing facts. Firstly, negotiations didn't start until the 17th day of strike action. How can the LEA justify this? Secondly, the school has been employing agency staff to cover for striking teachers, an astonishing outcome, especially in a Borough with more than 60 Labour councillors. Concerns have been expressed that the LEA is content to let the situation deteriorate rather than working to ensure a resolution. Hopefully, there will be a positive outcome next term.

Indicative ballot

Energies are now focused on ensuring as high a turnout as possible in the indicative ballot regarding this coming year's unfunded 2.8% pay offer for teachers. This started on 1st March and, at the time of writing, Redbridge had almost passed the 60% threshold. Once again, turnout in individual schools has varied greatly, mainly due to whether there is a rep to galvanise support. However, it is pleasing to note that some schools have already achieved a 100% turnout.



Parents and staff at Newbury Park Primary School held regular pickets, including this one outside the constituency office of Wes Streeting, MP.

Support for school strike

Andy Walker, a Redbridge Trades Council delegate from East London Community Branch of Unite the Union, went to the picket line at Newbury Park School to support striking NEU members on February 13. Andy brought a message of solidarity from Redbridge Trades Council.



'It is important that this strike is won, not just for the teachers, but for all parents using state education in Redbridge. We cannot allow class sizes of forty to slip through the back door due to inadequate funding. We have seen what inadequate funding is doing to our NHS, with patients now being treated in corridors at King

George and Queens hospitals. I hope representatives from other trade unions will visit the picket line to send their support and encourage Redbridge Labour to find the money to stop the dispute.

'It is very concerning that the NEU representative is being victimised'.

Do you have something to say or an experience to relate that might be of interest to retired educators across London? Have you taken a photograph which you think might impress our readers?

If so, we would like to hear from you!

All kinds of articles and photos are welcome, whether educational, personal or political

Perhaps you have a keen interest in a particular subject or hold strong views on a topical issue? Maybe you have had an unusual experience that you would like to write about or have a particular passion you would like to share with our readers?

Travel articles and reviews of recent books, films and theatre etc are also welcome. In addition, please send us your thoughts on how to retire well.

**Please email articles and photos to our editor at
mike321peters@gmail.com**

The Thatcher legacy

Henry Tiller in discussion with Timothy Upshott-Croakley, former Conservative MP for Snobish South, following his farewell speech and post-election interview in previous editions of the Newsletter

HT Thanks, Tim, for agreeing to meet up again. You've previously expressed your great admiration for Margaret Thatcher and her legacy and so I'd now like to discuss with you in greater depth some specific aspects of that legacy.

U-C Yes, that would be a pleasure but, firstly, I'd like to thank you for inviting me along for this follow-up discussion. Given that your readership is likely to be mainly of the 'public sector type', I suspect that a large proportion of them will have fallen under the malign influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology, and so I welcome this opportunity to set their thinking straight.

HT Ok, let's start with the aftermath of the miners' strike of 1984-85 which was a pivotal event in Thatcher's premiership and in British labour history. The programme of pit closures led to widespread unemployment and poverty, with a dismantling of all aspects of the social fabric that had been built around the mining communities. Once-thriving towns in Yorkshire, South Wales, the Midlands and elsewhere faced decades of hardship. As one former miner noted, Thatcher 'has a legacy, a legacy of destruction, a legacy of destroying lives and a legacy of destroying communities.'

U-C Well, I'm afraid that's the sort of hysterical, Bolshevik language that I'd expect from those neo-Luddites and dinosaurs who tried to prevent Margaret's laudable onward march of progress. When she took office in 1979, Britain was the 'sick man of Europe', with the country in the grip of union militancy, particularly that of the National Union of Miners. After defeating General Galtieri, Margaret bravely took on the enemy within. It was a battle for economic efficiency, for the modernisation of the British economy, for rolling back the state, for greater growth and innovation and for the rule of law against a Scargill-led Communist dictatorship ... and she won.

HT That's one way of putting it, Tim, but others would view what happened as the launching of a vicious class war with the gloves off. The pit closures led to unnecessary suffering and division, the prioritising of market ideology over the welfare of vulnerable communities, greater inequality, a weakening of trade unionism in Britain and a shift of power from labour to capital – the forerunner of the present gig economy.

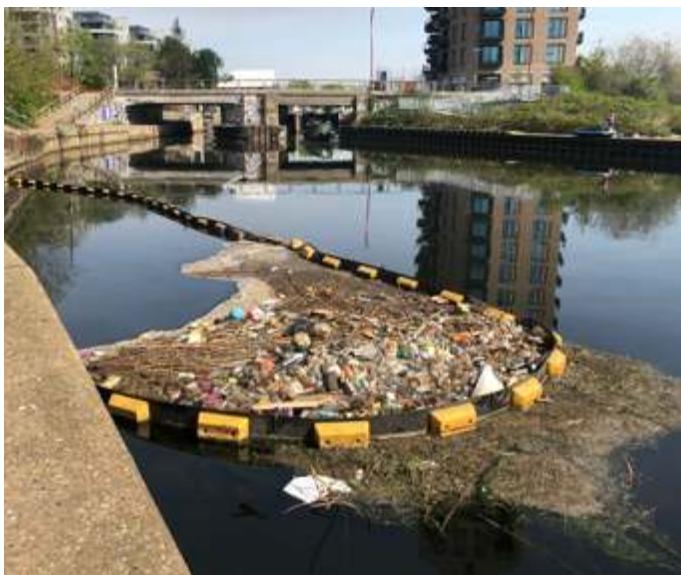


1984: Yorkshire miners blockade Gascoigne Wood colliery to prevent closure. Photo: Labour Review

U-C Well, the suffering was certainly necessary, but the rest of your analysis is sound, the only difference between us being that you, and your type, see this as a bad thing, whereas I, and my fellow free-marketeers, see this as a jolly good thing. Margaret tackled the union excesses of the Trots and set Britain on a path to economic renewal and prosperity, creating trickle down wealth for us all. What's so bad about that?

HT Let's move on to privatisation, another key part of the Thatcher legacy. Up to the late 1970s, certain things were given: for one, such industries as electricity, gas and water were regarded as 'natural monopolies' of such importance to society that it was accepted that the provider should always be the state. Anyone at the time suggesting that the utilities, the railways, Royal Mail and other key industries would all end up in private, often foreign, hands would have been regarded as quite mad, a complete fruit cake. And yet this is precisely what has happened! Even one of your own, Harold Macmillan, regarded privatisation as 'selling off the family silverware', while others have framed it as a vast fraud involving the ultimate confidence trick – selling shares in assets to people who previously jointly owned them. So, do you think that this extraordinary counter-revolution has been a success?

U-C Yes, absolutely, a rip-roaring success. Instead of having our key industries run by the dead hand of government bureaucrats, we've broken up these for-



'Everything that's bad about the process': record levels of water pollution under privatisation:

Photo: Edward Milner, Acacia Productions

merly sleepy state monopolies, removed the feather-bedding and unleashed the wondrous forces of the free market. And driven on by the all- important profit motive and competition, greater efficiency has been achieved to the benefit of all. Just one example: our privatised railways are now so competitive that, the other day, I was able to obtain a single fare from London to Birmingham for only £90. Moreover, privatisation has promoted wider shareholding and a 'people's capitalism' in which ordinary folk have been able to acquire shares for the first time and thus gain a real stake in the economy. Now, that's what I would call "success"!

HT I'm not too sure that things have worked out quite this way in reality: profitable, nationally owned assets have all too often been sold at knock-down prices, denying the nation as a whole of vast present and future funds; share ownership has become more concentrated in the hands of institutional investors as individuals acquiring shares for the first time tend to cash in their chips soon after purchasing them; and, all too often, state monopolies have simply been converted into private monopolies with 'pussy cat' regulators unable and unwilling to exert any meaningful control over them. Water privatisation, for example, seems to embody everything that's bad about the process, ever looking like an organised rip-off and a haven for private, often foreign, profiteers. For consumers, the reality has been that of inadequate investment in infrastructure, record amounts of untreated excrement being pumped into our rivers and seas and ever rising bills to fund shareholder dividend payouts.

U-C Well, any process as far-reaching and as bold as that initiated by Margaret in the 1980s is bound to have a few teething problems. But it boils down to this: what type of society do we wish to live in? Do we want to live under a tyrannical, communist dictatorship in which all enterprises are owned and controlled by the state, or in the superior form of society that free-market capitalism represents? If we desire the latter, as I'm sure all rational, fair-minded individuals would, then the movement towards the complete privatisation of our productive assets is undoubtedly a movement in the right direction. That's the marvellous vision that Margaret has bequeathed to us.

HT Tim, this has been a fascinating discussion so far and we've only just scratched the surface of the Thatcher legacy. There are numerous other aspects of it that would be good to consider: the right to buy council houses and the current housing crisis; the decline of the manufacturing sector; deregulation and its links, for example, with the financial crisis of 2008/9 and with the Grenfell disaster; growing poverty and inequality; the dire state of social care; the rolling back of the state and the accompanying hollowing out of public services and crumbling infrastructure; and an education system distorted at all levels by policies to marketise it and remove it from the democratic control of local authorities. However, spatial Newsletter considerations mean that, unfortunately, we're not going to be able to cover all of the above. So, let's briefly finish on just one aspect of the Thatcher legacy, about which I know you have strong views – the NHS.

U-C Well, I have to say that the NHS is one area of the Thatcher inheritance with which I'm rather disappointed. Back in the 1980s, Margaret and her Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, had been contemplating the dismantling of the welfare state, accepting that this would be the end of the NHS. Unfortunately, for electoral reasons, they pulled back from what would have been a great step forward. Instead, they began a 'salami slicing' process to dismantle the NHS bit by bit over time, rather than all in one go, through privatisation by stealth. So, although we've moved the NHS a long way in the right direction, alarmingly it still remains a public service, paid for out of general taxation and free at the point of use. This represents the very antithesis of our free-market beliefs and is a dangerous step down the road to communism. The very impressive US healthcare system is the model to which we should aspire.

HT Well, we'll have to leave it there, I'm afraid. Many thanks, Tim, for sharing your views with our Newsletter readers. It will certainly have given them food for thought!

Finding nature in East London

Rachel Brittle introduces us to a few of her local community gardens



The Greenway Orchard is on a narrow strip of land running alongside the Greenway, a walking and cycle path on the route of the Northern Outfall Sewer

As part of my retirement, I have begun walking and cycling around my local area, looking for interesting things to photograph. I have noticed a proliferation of 'Community Gardens'. These range from a couple of raised beds by the roadside to quite large spaces with ponds, play areas and more.

They all have several things in common - they are run by volunteers, they focus on including all members of the local community and they brighten up some of the drearier urban surroundings in which they are located. Frequently they are plots of what was waste ground left by developers next to new buildings. These would have become dumping grounds and possibly attracted anti-social behaviour until they were taken over. In this article I have highlighted just a few of the ones I have visited.

Forest Gate Community Garden

This is situated in Woodgrange Road, Forest Gate. It is a large space with lots of planting, a pond, a mud kitchen and even an entertainment area with a stage and piano. This garden hosts many community events and, in the summer, held a special celebration in memory of Benjamin Zephaniah. They have placed a large painting of him by the entrance. Benjamin lived in Newham for many years and was fondly remembered by members of the community at this

event. I am sure he would have loved this garden's tribute as he was a nature lover and encouraged people to take note of and care for the flora and fauna around us.

The Up Garden

This is also in Forest Gate. It was originally a piece of waste ground behind a small block of flats, which was very unattractive to the eye. A group of volunteers applied to look after it and set to work. It has been a big task to set up, requiring much hard work. The surface is completely concrete, meaning all the planting is in raised beds. There is also no water supply so large water butts have been installed. The beds are looked after by individuals and they have a range of flowers, vegetables, herbs and even tea growing there. There is a large mud kitchen and a construction area for the children to use.

This garden also has an after-school club twice a week to teach children about growing plants and vegetables and using natural materials in their play. As there are a number of picnic benches some children also come to do their homework there after school.

Popular

The garden is popular with the local community who are encouraged to use it for parties and gatherings. They even have a library housed in an old telephone



The Up Garden - also in Forest Gate - is a council estate yard reclaimed and transformed by local residents into a vibrant hub

box. As with most of these gardens the beds, benches etc are made from repurposed items.

Pastures Community Garden

Pastures is based in Leytonstone and is on a piece of land between a community centre and The Good Shepherd Studios - an old building now housing a café and a number of artists' studios. It is not particularly big but has a large selection of planting, a small pond and a bug hotel. Local volunteers work on it every weekend. I attended a water colour art class in the summer, which is just one example of the garden's involvement with the community around it. Visitors to the community centre and Good Shepherd are encouraged to walk around it and it is a very popular as an after-school haunt for the local primary school children.

The Greenway Orchard

I only discovered this garden recently! It is on a small, narrow strip of land running by the Greenway in Newham, which is a seven kilometre footpath and cycleway from East Ham to Hackney Wick, built on the embankment of the Joseph Bazalgette Northern Outfall sewer. Formerly just a bit of scrub and grass verge, it is now planted with trees and more raised beds plus a small musical area. It certainly breaks up the rather monotonous landscape of this end of the Greenway away from the modern buildings in the Olympic Park. There are informative posters up to explain what planting there is and an invitation to come and join the volunteers.

Little Linear Park

This garden is a mixture of council land and volunteer plots, situated by the M11 Link Road (the A12) in Leytonstone. In the 1990s a large number of houses were demolished to build the new road. This site became one of the focal points of the demonstrations against the road building, which displaced many long-term local residents. The strip of road now has plots where each house would have stood, with plaques which tell you who lived there. The planting is done by a small group of volunteers and although the site may not strictly be a garden, it still demonstrates how a few people working together can brighten up some glum surroundings.



The Up Garden (also in Forest Gate) even has a library in an old telephone kiosk. This garden is popular with the local community who are encouraged to use it for parties and gatherings.

Photographs such as these which Rachel took to illustrate her article greatly add to the interest and visual impact of a story. Have you got any local landmarks worth sharing with readers of this Newsletter? How do your neighbours make their streets, parks and open spaces more interesting? Have you attended an event which needs to be recorded for posterity? Send your material in!

How to stop our cities burning

Edward Milner examines the impact of climate change on cities and their residents and what we can do about it.



A scientific report has concluded that 'considerable mortality impacts attributed to urban heat island effects could be considerably reduced by increasing tree cover...thereby providing cooling in urban environments.'. This island of green in East London's Plashet Park is doing just that!

Hot times and hot cities

As the planet warms, the living environment in cities is set to become more stressful, even dangerous to human health, but there seems to be an alarming failure of public authorities to acknowledge this. As it is, heat-related deaths are set to match deaths from cold, and these fatalities are concentrated in cities, with over 70,000 heat-related deaths in Europe estimated in 2022 alone. Scientists are predicting a rapidly increasing mortality from heat in coming years, while non-lethal effects of excess heat are less studied but must also be significant – exacerbating other health problems.

Issues

As with other climate-related issues, the costs of appropriate action are rarely weighed against the very

real costs of inaction - costs such as days' work lost through bad health. Research quoted by Climate Central shows that a measurable *heat island effect* can be detected due to characteristics of the built environment, with the UHI (Urban Heat-Island Index) already reaching as much as 4-5 degrees C for big cities like New York and Chicago,

Intensification

with intensification of the effect expected in coming years. Increased installation of air-conditioning units is already becoming counter-productive – building interiors may be cooled, but only at the cost of large amounts of energy, while further increasing the outside temperature. Various schemes are being trialled from painting buildings and even road surfaces white, to encouraging

green roofs. However, the most important means of reducing city heat is by using trees, the main component of what the experts call 'urban green infrastructure'.

The value of trees

A detailed study of the value of trees in this context has been made by an international team of scientists led by medical researchers from the Institute for Global Health in Barcelona, Spain. They found that from research covering 93 European cities 'considerable mortality impacts attributed to urban heat island effects could be considerably reduced by increasing tree cover...thereby providing cooling in urban environments.' They then analysed urban areas, using 250m squares, to estimate tree canopy cover and urged policy makers to follow this fine-grained approach in planning 'targeted green interventions' (i.e. tree-planting schemes) with a view to improving population health and overall climate resilience.

Tree wars

Unfortunately, while experts and ordinary citizens in many places cherish both individual trees and continuous canopy green areas, in too many places public authorities seem bent on pursuing a completely contradictory course. Barcelona and Madrid are often in conflict on the football field but it is ironic that while Spanish scientists in Barcelona are pointing out the value of urban trees, the authorities in Madrid are felling or 'moving' thousands of urban trees to extreme local annoyance. The most recent tranche was justified by the mayor as important for the construction of a new underground carpark, suggesting a strange order of priorities.

In Britain it is estimated that a disgraceful total of nearly [half a million mature trees have been felled](#) by public authorities in the past ten years, although some, like Mid-Ulster and Derbyshire, have bucked the trend by both felling very few and each planting over half a million. In many places there have been vociferous but depressingly unsuccessful local campaigns against tree-felling, whilst in the UK as a whole new draconian laws against all environmental demonstrations are likely to depress resistance even further.

The politics of trees

Making cities greener by adding parks, woods and street-trees has other benefits beyond the health and wellbeing of residents: trees reduce pollution, while providing shelter and food for myriad other organisms. In addition, the aesthetic effect of mature street trees contributes psychologically to a sense of stability, security and an appreciation of the beauty of nature. The problem is that mature trees take time to grow, so

that today's tree planting won't result in new mature trees for decades. This is why the championing by politicians of mass tree planting to compensate for environmental damage of all sorts is often unsatisfactory and a token effort at best.

Many mass planting schemes conducted by commercial contractors (as opposed to community-based operations) often prove to be pointless when aftercare is inadequate. The recent death, due to neglect, of tens of thousands of tree saplings planted along new sections of a trunk road in Cambridgeshire is a case in point. Too often it seems that cheap publicity about planting is used to greenwash other less admirable actions. The conclusion to be drawn seems to be that mature trees should be cherished and worked around, wherever they are, and not removed by public authorities using simple-minded excuses about new car park schemes or anything else.

Promoting more greenery in and around cities should be a first priority in all major conurbations in the future. The heat island effect means that there is often reduced atmospheric pressure over cities, and this can pull in air from surrounding areas. If these zones are also as green as possible, this air will be cooler, further moderating the temperature in the urban area. This suggests that the concept of greenbelts surrounding cities should be modified to encourage such zones to be, as far as possible, future forests - greenbelts should become *treebelts*.

In some cases, as a NASA-funded climate project has shown, increasing the number of trees can lead to increased precipitation over cities when the cooler air pulled in is moist. While this may be the cause of a 'wet island' phenomenon (which will help green infrastructure to thrive) this can also have a downside of sometimes resulting in flooding, which is also becoming more frequent, and often more severe. A complete rethink by public authorities is going to be needed if cities of the future are to be habitable by all their residents; this is not going to be easy. A start could be made by listening to residents rather than antagonizing them – especially where the health of trees and open spaces are concerned.

Have you got a comment or a reflection to share on the issues Edward Milner raises in this report? Don't be shy - share your thoughts (and any photos for that matter) with the editor at mike321peters@gmail.com.

Thinking about retiring?

Tina Jacobs writes about the preparations you need to make to maximise your chances of a good retirement.

The first disclaimer: I am not a financial adviser so please make no specific plans based upon this article.

Suggested things to consider:

Your National Insurance record

If you haven't done so already, set up an account for HMRC online services.

<https://www.gov.uk/log-in-register-hmrc-online-services/register>

Use this to check gaps in your National Insurance record. If you have any gaps, you can make voluntary contributions to HMRC to get extra years to maximise your pension.

Usually, you need 35 qualifying years of National Insurance contributions to get the full State Pension. However, the number of years you need depends on when you reach State Pension age and if you were contracted out at some point.

Generally, you can only pay for gaps in your National Insurance record for the past six years **BUT** due to the pandemic, you can currently pay for gaps between April 2006 and April 2018 as well. The deadline for these gaps is 5th April 2025. This has led to HMRC having to deal with a lot more people than usual, so they are very busy.

Only you can decide whether or not it is worth your while to maximise your state pension. As part of that decision, you will need to think about your life expectancy and your current financial situation. Should you wish to know your likely life expectancy the government has a useful tool. Your health and family health will obviously affect your life expectancy, but they do give you an idea.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/articles/lifeexpectancycalculator/2019-06-07>



Join the gang! Redbridge retired educators at a recent coffee morning

Using the calculator from the above link, these are the life expectancies if you are 59. As you can see, all being well, you could have many years of retirement:

Your Teacher's Pension

If you haven't done so already, set up account on the TPS website.

<https://www.teacherspensions.co.uk/forms/registration.aspx>

Once you have an account, you can use it to make changes to your pension and check your records. It is really important to check the whole of your service record carefully. If you have missing service, it will cost you money. When I checked my records, I found lots of errors. You cannot correct the errors yourself as your employers are the only ones who can make corrections to your service record.

This takes time and so the earlier you start the better. If you have any pensionable service between 1st April 2015 and 31st March 2022, the TPS will also need to give you your Remediable Service Statement (RSS) which will give you the information you need to choose between whether you take the final salary pension or the career average pension for that pensionable period.

Due to the work that the TPS are currently doing re the McCloud judgement remediation, they are very busy. They currently want six months' notice before your desired retirement date. Below is a link to the TPS Frequently Asked Questions website.

<https://www.teacherspensions.co.uk/members/faqs/planning-retirement/the-application-process.aspx#:~:text=Answer%3A,benefits%20if%20submitted%20too%20early.>

There is a lot of good advice on this website re planning your retirement, so I would recommend you give this a thorough read.

NEU Membership

Even if you are retired, you can still be a member of the NEU. It costs about £20 a year. However, you cannot leave the NEU and then rejoin later. You have to transfer to retired membership whilst you are still working and a member of the NEU.

Top right is an excerpt from the NEU website.

The link for the relevant page is below:

<https://neu.org.uk/join-neu/membership-faq>

As you can see from the website, if a historical allegation is made about something that occurred during your teaching career when you were a standard member of the NEU, then you will be eligible for legal support and representation in that matter. You will continue to receive the NEU magazine and can therefore keep up with current teaching concerns.

I'm retiring. How do I become a retired NEU member?

If you are retiring, you can still enjoy the benefits of NEU membership by becoming a retired member. Retired membership still costs £20 per year. As a retired member you will be eligible for representation and legal support in relation to issues arising from your employment while you were in standard membership. See below section on the importance of maintaining continuous membership.

Only existing NEU members can transfer to retired membership. It is not possible to join as a retired member if you are not currently a member. If you are retiring and wish to move to retired membership, please contact the membership team at membership@neu.org.uk or by calling 0345 811 81111.

Each region has a retired members group and generally you belong to the region that you live in. In Redbridge we have a very active group. We organise social events, such as coffee mornings, walks and visits to exhibitions. It's a chance to meet old friends in the area and do interesting things. We also produce and distribute a newsletter.

I hope I have given you something to think about. The main focus of this article has been about money, but you will also need to think about how you want to use your time in your retirement. Teaching is an amazing career but very time consuming. Before I retired, I attended a NEU planning for retirement course in Manchester. It made me think about what I wanted from my retirement. Most people could be looking at twenty or so years of not working so it is important that you have enough money to live the life you want in your retirement and to see how you are going to make the most of your time.

Once again, this is a general article and should not be used for any financial planning. It is just to get you to start thinking about what you need to do before you retire. Good luck. I am loving my retirement and I hope that you will too, whenever you do retire.

Further reading:

<https://neu.org.uk/advice/your-rights-work/pensions>

<https://neu.org.uk/advice/your-rights-work/pensions/state-pensions>

Don't withdraw funding!

Jagdish Thacker, Chairman of the Redbridge Gujarati Welfare Association (RGWA), urges Redbridge Council to reverse its decision to cut vital social funding to the Association and other similar groups in the Borough



Hundreds demonstrated against the cuts outside Redbridge Town Hall in January

RGWA, a charity that has been serving the elderly and disabled community three days a week for over 30 years, is very efficiently run by our dedicated committee members and volunteers. Our organisation provides vital social interaction, cultural activities and essential services, including health checks, benefits advice, yoga, swimming and exercise in the form of traditional folk dancing. We offer our members a place to come together, to stay active and to avoid the loneliness and isolation that can lead to serious health problems.

However, today we are faced with Redbridge Council's decision to withdraw the grant that helps fund our premises. From 1st February 2025, RGWA, along with other charities like Redbridge Asian Mandal (RAM) and the disabled Asian Women's Network (DAWN), will no longer receive financial support from the Council. This decision puts us at risk of shutting down, leaving over 400 of our members – many of them elderly and disabled – without a safe and supporting place to go.

If our organisation closes, the impact will be severe. Many of our members rely on RGWA not just for social activities but also for their mental and physical well-being. Sitting at home in isolation can lead to depression, dementia and other health conditions, which will ultimately put more strain on the already overburdened NHS. At a time when the government

has also cut down winter fuel payments and pensioners are struggling with higher taxes, removing this essential support is both unfair and unjustified.

We demand answers

We have already protested outside Redbridge Council on 23 January but, despite media coverage, the Council has failed to respond to our concerns. Now we demand answers from Councillor Jas Athwal and his colleagues. Why has our funding been taken away? Why only selected charities? Why this discrimination against our elderly and disabled? And most importantly, what alternative support does the Council propose for our vulnerable members?

We will not stay silent while our elders and disabled community members are neglected. We urge Redbridge Council to reconsider this decision and to reinstate the grants that allow organisations like ours to continue providing essential services.

We thank all our supporters and urge everyone who believes our campaign is just, to stand together, raise our voices and ensure that our community is not ignored.

Save RAGWA! Save Disabled Asian Women's Network of Redbridge (DAWN)! Save Redbridge Asian Mandal!

Save our community! NO TO CUTS – DO NOT discriminate against the elderly and the disabled!!!

London retired educators' conference

Thumbnail sketch by Bob Archer



London retired educators heard and discussed expert reports on bread-and-butter union concerns, educational and political lobbying issues and WASPI women's struggle for pension justice

Some eighty London retired educators joined a successful conference in NEU's Mander Hall on Thursday 27 March, the first event of its kind so far.

These retired NEU members heard expert reports on bread-and-butter union concerns, educational issues, NEU Parliamentary lobbying, the WASPI women's campaign over stolen pension money and finally the campaign against the far right.

Stress

NEU National Executive member, Jess Edwards, started proceedings with the news that 62% of teachers surveyed report they are stressed at work. Such stress is a mental health problem imposed by their job. Digging deeper, it turns out that the situation is worse for women, for the teachers of younger pupils and in academy trusts. Jess explained that the constant erosion of educators' professional autonomy is preventing them from considering pupils' context and existing knowledge and skills when planning lessons in a shared process of learning together. Increasingly, imposed lesson content and teaching methods strip away any human quality in the process.

The problem is sharpest in relation to the issue of behaviour and discipline.

While the government has pledged 6500 new teachers will enter the profession, 9500 women left last year because of stress.

Inner London schools are under pressure because of falling rolls as ordinary families are priced out of the area. Lambeth and Hackney NEU districts are using all weapons at their disposal to save schools faced with closure.

Racism

Veteran Black educator, Gus John, reported how he had arrived in 'this green and pleasant land' with his parents in 1964.

'I soon experienced a lot of **unpleasantness**', he reported, mentioning the racist Conservative slogans in the notorious Smethwick election. John detailed the vile racism his family members suffered at the hands of both violent thugs and the police.

Gusd evoked the linguistic wealth and breadth of immigrant children, which is systematically undervalued in schools.



Gus John (l) with Jane Shallice

Authoritative surveys of English education still fail to address the disadvantages faced by global majority migrant children here, he said: 'No single government has had race on the agenda'. Gus highlighted the 'disproportionate exclusion of global majority children' and said that more and more new teachers feel they are not equipped to deal with them. 'The profession does not reflect the pupils, and academy chains don't have policies to address the issue'. He criticised the hegemony of western epistemology which insists on a so-called 'knowledge-rich curriculum' without any critique of the 'knowledge' in question.

Gus is 'bewildered that the school system acts as if the Black presence in Britain is only five years old'.

Black educators in the hall highlighted the work of the Communities Network and wondered whether it can be replicated. They also referred to CUES – the Centre for Urban Educational Studies - and the work of supplementary schools, many of which are still functioning.

A new government

NEU parliamentary officer, Chris Brown, reported on the opportunities as well as the difficulties of his work lobbying politicians on behalf of the Union, working 'with the new government when we can, against them when we have to'. The fact that there is a Curriculum Review is a gain for the NEU, although it is disappointing that the interim report retains the system of testing. The Union is continuing the School Cuts campaign. Chris pointed out that, in 2010, the government spent 5% of GDP on education; by 2025 that has fallen to 3.9%.

Learning from the past

Professor Ken Jones supported the points Gus John had made about the official establishment approach to education and pedagogy. He talked about his current

role guiding MA students at Kings College London researching what survives today of the radical social attitudes in working-class communities in the 1960s and 1970s, eroded by the neo-liberal onslaught. How does memory persist across generations and what does the younger generation know about the past and what it can offer? These are matters of some significance to an audience of retired NEU members!

Neo-liberalism anathemises progressive social movements of the past and encourages amnesia among those engaged in education. Conservative commentators gloat that the debate on education is stuck in the architecture established by Gove and Gibb. The current debate 'does not lift its eyes from the page to see the world outside. There is zero about race or misogyny', Ken explained.

The 'WASPI' Pensioners

In the afternoon session, Frances Neil reported on the campaign of the 'WASPI Women' pensioners who lost out over the raising of the retirement age due, as they claim, to inadequate information from government. Many found themselves unable to fulfil their retirement plans or experienced quite serious losses. Frances personally lost in excess of £60, 000 because of the way the changes were handled.

Creating a united movement

Kevin Courtney reported as trade union liaison officer of 'Stand Up to Racism'. He pointed out that movements like Reform and the grouping around Stephen Yaxley-Lennon ('Tommy Robinson') are inspired by the likes of Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, billionaires who are 'definitely not on your side'. Kevin emphasised the need to think where the positive vision is which can inspire a united movement.

The only complaint raised during the day was the absence of any discussion on the environmental crisis.



Frances Neal, Kevin Courtney and Carole Regan

You couldn't make it up!

Maureen McCarthy examines how academisation has encouraged financial greed and corruption

This article updates the one published in April 2024 regarding the pathways of one current and three former Redbridge senior leaders, including the now disgraced former headteacher of Mayfield School.

A matter of trust

Let's start with him: Trevor Averre-Beeson, ex headteacher of Mayfield School and founder of the Lilac Sky Schools Trust, which was responsible for nine schools, mainly in Kent, while his separate businesses advised schools across the country. The government removed the schools from the Trust's control in 2016 and, finally, on February 10th last year, he was presented with a prohibition direction, usually associated with terrorist activity, which finally banned him from the management of any independent school, free school or academy. He was deemed unsuitable because of his conduct.

Yet, as stated in my previous article in the Newsletter, the promised detailed report into the failure of the Trust was not published despite FOI requests to the DFE, the first submitted in 2018. He has also not been held to account for the losses caused by

financial mismanagement of either his Trust or his free school. However, 2024 did see some progress. First, the BBC, which had focused on the Trust in 2016 when the ESFA (Education and Skills Funding Agency) investigation began, broadcast a series of programmes made by John Dickens from *Schoolsweek*. These highlighted Averre-Beeson's career from when he left Mayfield and went first to Islington Green, then to Salisbury School in Enfield, both of which he left suddenly, mid-term, under a cloud, seemingly linked to financial issues.

Then came the formation of the Trust and the downward spiral, culminating in the Trust being wound up with a £1.3 million deficit and its schools re-brokered. In spite of government action removing him from the Trust and the (unpublished) report carried out into financial mismanagement, he was still able to buy a private school which collapsed a year later owing creditors £900,000, with staff left unpaid and without any redundancy money.

Obvious question: where was the due diligence one would expect, especially regarding taxpayers' money?



The logo of Lilac Sky Schools Academies Trust

Was the scandal an inevitable result of Michael Gove's 'light touch' approach to academisation? Just to get schools out of LEA control?

Spotlight on a 'superhead'

The radio series, *Superhead, the rise and fall of one of Britain's most influential educators* (BBC Sounds) included interviews with ex colleagues and, in the final programme, with Averre-Beeson himself. I used to regularly have a Greek chorus in one of my A Level Politics classes, which used to comment, 'you couldn't make it up' as we waded through the events of the post-war period. That's how I felt listening to these programmes.

The independent auditor sent in to assess the true picture in the Trust schools in 2016 looked at the Trustees since they play such a key role, bound by the strictures of the Academies' Financial Handbook. Trustees of the Lilac Sky Schools Trust included Averre-Beeson's wife, two daughters, sister and sister-in-law. In addition, his PA and two paid consultants came from the companies he owned. Independent scrutiny of the Trust's financial dealings? Even better, when he left the Trust as CEO, he was then paid as a consultant, becoming the Trust's internal auditor - a case of marking his own homework. No, you couldn't make it up.

A month after the broadcasts, the ESFA finally produced a document, but it was only three pages long, not the full explanation with the promised evidence (Gov UK, 24/10/25). Nevertheless, it did confirm key issues that had been raised regarding financial mismanagement, stating that £3.3 million of spending had been 'contentious, irregular or improper', with Academy financial rules being breached at least 24 times. No details were given, just comments such as 'connected party relationships'. One remark of obvious relevance to the questions asked above was 'Failure by the trustees and accounting officers to maintain proper stewardship of public funds'. And the consequences for them were ...?

Accountability matters

Several other Trusts have collapsed since 2016 about which full reports have still not been published by the ESFA, with owners/trustees not held accountable. I can understand that the previous government, for whom the MAT (Multi Academy Trust) system was a flagship policy, would not want the failure of oversight and misspending of taxpayers' money to be highlighted. However, the failure of the new government to publish the complete Lilac Sky report is really disappointing.

And yet we have the DFE statement quoted in the *Observer* (16.3.25): 'we are clear that strong accountability is non-negotiable'. So why has Averre-

Beeson not been held accountable? He paid back £32,000 to liquidators regarding his final school. What about all the money he had siphoned off while CEO of the Lilac Sky Schools Trust, for example LEA grants paid directly into his private company instead of the Trust account, which is a clear breach of financial regulations? What about awarding severance payments to staff who were then employed by his company as highly paid consultants and sent back to the schools the following day? No, you couldn't make it up.

League tables update

The annual league tables of CEO pay have just been published by *Schoolsweek* and have even merited a comment in the *Observer*. Checking on the three Redbridge alumni, it is gratifying to see that they have maintained or even improved their standings. Still at no. 1 is Sir Dan Moynihan, once of Valentine's High School, now CEO of the Harris Federation who, with a 6% increase in his pay, has become the first CEO to cross the £500,000 threshold (£515,000). Even more interesting is the fact that five other people in the Trust are on £200,000+, one of whom, had they been a CEO, would have jumped straight into the top 20.

Rising two places to number 9 is Roger Leighton, ex-Loxford High School, now CEO of Partnership Learning, with a 4% rise (£265,00), while Anita Johnson, current CEO of the Loxford School Trust, retains her position as the highest paid female CEO, moving up one place to number 11, on £260,000 - an 8% increase on last year's salary.

Furthermore, a CEO in Manchester has vaulted into 8th place with a £50,000 (22%) pay-rise. He is CEO of a Trust which has one school with 1800 pupils; he justifies his pay-rise because he is both headteacher and CEO. Yes, this case is outside Redbridge, but it is perhaps a pointer as to why some Redbridge headteachers were trying to academise pre-2024.

The *Observer* headlines: 'Academy schools headteacher pay bonanza defies official warnings'. Call it a bonanza or a gravy train, it continues to a background of comments by government officials but with, as yet, no action other than issuing 'warning letters' about excessive pay-rises. How can this not be viewed in the context of the unfunded pay award to teachers of 2.8% and the pressure this will put on school budgets? Isn't now the time to look again at the organisation and funding of education, especially regarding free schools and academies with their extra layers of expensive bureaucracy?

Or, with my cynicism triumphing over optimism, will the updated academy gravy train data still be running next year?

The death of a President: some personal reflections

In this article, Gary Kenneth Watt recalls his own memories, as a child, of the assassination of Kennedy and presents some of the alternative theories as to who was responsible.

'Take him, earth, for cherishing,/to thy tender breast receive him./ Body of a man I bring thee,/noble even in its ruin:' - Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (4th Century)

If you ask anyone over a certain age – ‘Where were you on Friday evening, 22nd November 1963?’ - s/he will immediately remember her/his whereabouts almost 61 years ago - even more so after the two recent attempts on the life of Donald J. Trump.

Breaking news

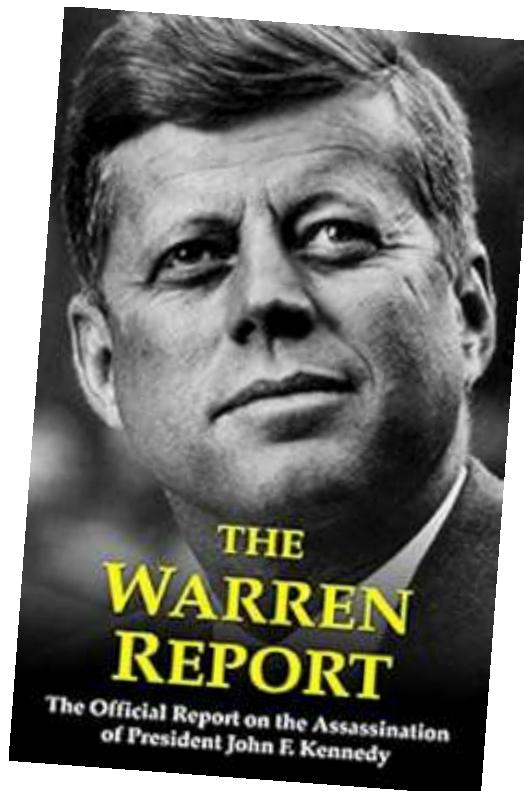
My parents, sister and I were watching TV in our front room when the shocking news was suddenly announced at 19.00 GMT that President John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been shot during a visit to Dallas, Texas. All television and radio broadcasts were suspended for the remainder of the evening until the news was eventually confirmed a couple of hours later that JFK had passed away at Parkland Memorial Hospital.

The following morning, I went into school [Ilford County High] to play for our under-13s' football team. I forgot who our opponents were or why the game wasn't called off. In those days there weren't the kinds of instant, electronic communications we have at our disposal today. Of course, there was only one topic of conversation that morning.

On the following morning, a Sunday, I went to our local newsagents and bought a copy of every different newspaper in stock. I then cut out all the relevant articles and photos and pasted them into a scrapbook. Many of my second-year schoolmates did the same, as we all realised that we had just lived through an event of monumental historical importance.

Aftermath

Further drama was to follow. Lee Harvey Oswald, a 24-year-old former US Marine, under arrest on suspicion of assassinating JFK, stated: ‘I’m just a patsy!’ (‘fall guy’). A couple of days later, in turn, Oswald was shot dead at point-blank range during a prisoner transfer by Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner, who said: ‘I did it for Jackie’ (Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy, the President’s widow). This killing happened, notwithstanding the fact that Oswald was the most important prisoner in custody on the entire planet. Moreover, Ruby, who was terminally ill with cancer and died a year later, had clandestine links with organised criminals.



With over 1-2,000 books published on the subject to date, controversy has surrounded the assassination ever since. Investigative movies have included: *JFK*, directed by Oliver Stone (1992) and *Jackie*, directed by Pablo Larrrain (2016).

Enquiry controversy

The official U.S. Government enquiry, established under Judge Chief Justice Earl Warren (*The Warren Commission Report*), controversially concluded that Oswald was a *'lone assassin'*. If more than one person had been involved, it would have constituted *"a conspiracy"*. To reach this conclusion, the Commission produced the *'magic bullet'* theory – the theory that the shot which hit Governor John Connolly, sitting in front of JFK in the Presidential limousine, was fired by Oswald from a sixth-floor window in the Texas School Book Depository building, *i.e.* from behind the motorcade. Defying all the laws of ballistics and gravity, this bullet supposedly passed through the President’s body, then somersaulted to enter the Governor’s body as well.

Conflicting evidence

However, evidence to the contrary appears in the *Zapruder Film* (Abram Zapruder was one amongst many other citizens among the crowds who were using home



Lee Harvey Oswald (Dallas police/ Warren Commission photo)

movie cameras to film the procession). His footage gives the most graphic recording of the assassination. This iconic artefact has been preserved as a valuable document of historical record. It shows JFK slump leftwards against Jackie after the first shot impacted. However, the infamous frame 313 of the 486-framed film shows the impact of a further shot from in front, forcefully propelling JFK *backwards*.

The argument in favour of a second gunman, or more gunmen, was strengthened by several bystanders stating that gunfire had been heard and smoke seen rising from behind a picket fence on Elm Street. Hence the theory of *triangulation* - i.e. shooters on three sides of Dealey Plaza.

Paul Landis, ex-secret service agent, has stated (*The Final Witness*, Oct 2023) that he retrieved a bullet from the Kennedys' limousine after JFK was shot and later left it on the former president's stretcher at the hospital. It's a seemingly tiny detail but one that differs from the official version of events.

Conspiracy theories

Critics of the Warren Report allege a conspiracy comprising:

1) The U.S military hierarchy and CIA, who were opposed to JFK reducing US commitment in Vietnam: (*First Hand Knowledge: How I Participated In the CIA-Mafia Murder Of President Kennedy*, by Robert D.Morrow [SPL Books, 1992])

2) The Mafia, who were opposed to the policy of the President's brother, Bobby Kennedy (US Attorney General), to curtail their influence: Jose Aleman, a wealthy Cuban exile, quotes Santos Trafficante, a Mafia leader, as saying in 1962: '*Mark my words, this man Kennedy is in trouble, and he will get what is coming to him ... He is going to be hit.*' [Washington Post, 16.5.76]

Edward Becker quotes Carlos Marcello, another influential Mobster, as saying, with reference to the Kennedy brothers, '*The dog [JFK] will keep biting you if you only cut off its tail.*'

3) Anti-Castro Cubans, who were opposed to JFK's rapprochement policy. '*There is no doubt in my mind. If there had been no assassination, we probably would have moved into negotiations leading to a normalisation of relations with Cuba.*' [Ambassador William Attwood].

The House (of Representatives) Assassinations Committee reported in 1979 that President Kennedy '*was probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy.*' However, for all the speculation, no concrete evidence has emerged. This begs the question of how could such a diverse conspiracy hold water-tight over so many years?

I would like to conclude with reference to a remarkable essay written by Jimmy Breslin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, published in *The New York Herald Tribune* about Clifton Pollard, the man who dug Kennedy's grave at Arlington Military Cemetery. Breslin eloquently writes about Pollard:

'One of the last to serve John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was the 35th president of this country, was a working man who earns \$3.01 an hour and said it was an honour to dig the grave. The Great and the Good from the four corners of the earth attended the funeral, though the humble gravedigger was not invited.'

Jackie

Of the widowed First Lady, following the hearse, Breslin movingly wrote:

'Everybody watched her while she walked. She is the mother of two fatherless children, and she was walking into the history of this country because she was showing everybody who felt old and helpless and without hope that she had this terrible strength that everybody needed so badly. Even though they had killed her husband and his blood ran onto her lap while he died, she could walk through the streets and to his grave and help us all while she walked. There are occasions in life, when we somehow find the inner strength to survive even the most impossibly challenging adversities that are beyond the wit of mere human beings.'

Tragically, it did not end there. In the dreadful year of 1968, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were all assassinated. There are no more words.

President Trump has recently ordered the declassification of files relating to the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr by executive order.

Second time around

Sarah Richardson tells us how she rediscovered a past love and talent

Early Days

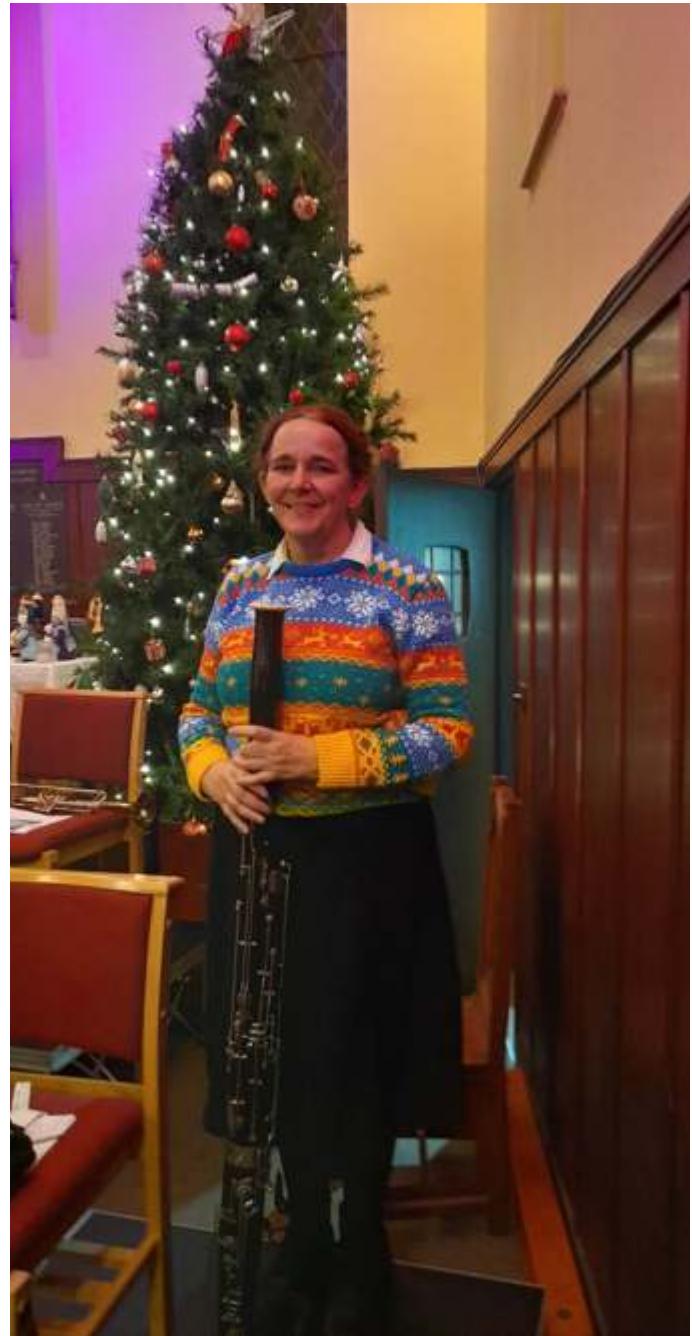
My journey to bassooning began as a child of eleven, in the 1970s. I had been trying to learn the piano for a couple of years and wasn't enjoying it. My mum said I could give it up if I took another instrument instead. We lived in the London Borough of Waltham Forest, which has always had a great music service. When we asked at school, I was offered trumpet, trombone or bassoon. I had never seen a bassoon before and imagined it would be clarinet sized. When my teacher arrived with a suitcase and began assembling a bassoon for me, I couldn't believe how large it was. She approved of the piano playing, 'Good hand reach, you'll need that for bassoon.'

I started plodding through 'A tune a day for bassoon'. Early on, when I could only play a few notes, I was invited to join the Borough's Junior Wind Band, which met on a Saturday morning at the music centre. I remember I had been taught to play standing up and didn't realise you could sit down as well! The other children were amazed when I assembled my 'rocket launcher' (as my brother called it) and stood at the back of the band.

I progressed through Intermediate and then Senior Wind Band and Orchestra. I worked through the grades to Grade 6 and took GCSE Music. It was a wonderful time for me, with lots of opportunities. I played in youth festivals at the Royal Albert Hall and the Royal Festival Hall. I toured Germany as part of the Senior Wind Band - we played at Heidelberg Castle and on a boat on the Rhine. We stayed in the homes of a children's choir, who later came back and stayed with us in London. When I left school, I played with the Essex Chamber Orchestra for a while.

Rediscovering the bassoon

Then, as they say, life happened. I stopped playing and those days became a pleasant memory. Fast forward forty years to 2020 and the global pandemic. Like everyone else, I was stuck at home with time on my hands. One day, I idly searched on eBay for second hand bassoons and a Huller came up. I messaged the seller, a clarinettist who had hoped to teach himself the bassoon and found it too hard. I paid and it arrived from Scotland. My daughters thought it was some impulse buy! Somehow, I still had sheet music from my teens stored in a blue corduroy case I had made myself. Inside, I found my *Tune a Day*, some Weissenborn



Sarah with her bassoon

Studies Parts 1 and 2 and a solo, *Humoreske* (also by Weissenborn) that I had never played with the Wind Band because I hadn't practised enough. I practised now, using my daughter's abandoned music stand (she had dallied with the cello). I found my tone and stamina was improving and I could remember the fingering. However, there was only so much playing on my own I could do. The bassoon is an orchestral instrument and I needed an orchestra.



Enfield Community Orchestra ... friendly and inclusive

Finding an orchestra and a community

Luckily, North London has several amateur orchestras and one caught my eye. Enfield Community Orchestra looked friendly and inclusive. There was no audition or minimum grade, plus a free trial period. I wrote to the manager, Ady, who offered me a 'seat' very quickly. I went to my first rehearsal in January 2022, at St Paul's Centre, Enfield and was warmly welcomed by the members and the conductor, Eddie.

Range of music

It felt amazing to be playing in an orchestra again, after forty years. I loved the range of music- classical, film and theatre. It was wonderful looking through the music, reading the composers' names and the dates of publication. At my first concert at Easter that year, I remember being especially excited to play the score of

Aladdin by Alan Menken- it felt like I was in the orchestra pit of a West End musical.

The orchestra goes from strength to strength. We are up to forty members now, ranging in age from teenagers to pensioners in their seventies. There are social events and an elected Board of Trustees who make the bookings and do the admin. We vote on the music we choose to play. The conductor is always moving us on to play more challenging pieces. At Christmas we played *Die Fledermaus* by Strauss and *Prelude in C# Minor* by Rachmaninov, as well as popular classics and carols. The rehearsals are something I look forward to each week, and nothing beats performing to a packed church of family and friends once a term. Seek out and support your local orchestra - you won't regret it.

Have you - like Sarah - rediscovered a talent which has lain dormant for years? We hope you will be inspired by her story to have another go. Do let us know about your journey ... Send your story (and photos!) to our editor, Mike Peters, at mike321peters@gmail.com

Does the government really care?

Jo Buchanan vividly depicts the impact of recent policies on people needing support to live and work

We are failing many vulnerable people in our country and, if the treatment of our most vulnerable is a test of how civilised we are, we are not very civilised at all. Sick and disabled people have to fight for allowances that they are entitled to, which are often only a pittance, and are often regarded with suspicion. Thousands of pensioners struggle, even more than previously, with their heating bills after Rachel Reeves' cruel decision to limit the winter fuel allowance to all but those on pension credit. She failed to realise, or simply did not care, that many pensioners are unable to heat their homes. Now Liz Kendall has announced cuts of £5bn to welfare. Reeves Spring Statement, as predicted, included health and disability benefit cuts that will push an extra 250,000 people, including 50,000 children, into relative poverty in the coming year. More than a million people with disabilities are likely to lose out. Wes Streeting's recent comments that doctors are 'over diagnosing' mental health conditions threaten many of those who are using or waiting in hope for support.

Travelling for the disabled

People with disabilities often struggle when it comes to transport. Ramps for wheelchairs fail to work, lifts may be out of service, toilets for accommodating wheelchairs may not operate and travel assistance sometimes does not materialise. Earlier this year, a blind passenger on Transport for London had two bad experiences of night-time travel assistance. She is Kelsey Trevett, Child of Courage at the 2010 Pride of Britain awards. She felt isolated and scared, and her problems were compounded the next day when staff at Euston prevented her from using a short-cut to the Overground. She called it 'a masterclass in disempowering disabled people'.

Our hospitals

Some hospital patients are dying in corridors, undiscovered for hours, and sick patients are soiling themselves and can be left lying without care or attention. Patients can sit for days in chairs, as there are insufficient beds or even trolleys, and cannot summon help



Disabled campaigners protest over difficulty boarding trams: 'People with disabilities often struggle when it comes to transport'. Photo: DPAC



2017: Campaigners in outer East London boroughs united to oppose the threat of hospital cuts

as there are no call bells and too few staff. Some have been treated in cupboards or car parks.

Failing schools

Bridget Phillipson talks about forcing schools to be more inclusive. Generally, teachers support the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities wherever possible. But schools need money. How do you explain to a wheelchair user that they cannot access the library as there is no lift? How do you explain to a pupil who cannot read that they are going to join a class of thirty or more literate contemporaries and that they will have to struggle along as best they can? How do you explain to teachers with large classes that there is no money for vital support for students who will not achieve without it and who, in their frustration, can make a class unteachable? The *i* newspaper referred recently to the escalating SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) crisis. Yet ministers are deliberating about tightening the criteria for pupils to receive special needs support. Rachel Filmer, from *Special Needs Jungle*, considers the government plans 'morally bankrupt' and commented: 'Campaigners see this as the biggest threat to disabled children in over a decade and will fight accordingly.'

How things used to be

For a time, schools, certainly in some areas, were well-resourced. Before the coming of academies, which spread after 2002 under Blair's Labour Government, far fewer school buildings were crumbling and extra provision came from local authorities, which funded several teams. Many schools had a range of specialist staff, such as counsellors, nurses and careers advisers.

Statements of Special Educational Needs, although sometimes delayed and their implementation bureaucratic, could add quite generous funding to support students who would struggle without them. There were

more teaching assistants and learning support assistants and larger Special Educational Needs and EAL departments. Students with mental health problems had shorter waits for help from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Much of this has changed and valuable provision has gone.

Wrong priorities

If we want to understand, perhaps, as so often, we should follow the money and scrutinise our priorities. In February this year, the government confirmed: 'The UK has pledged £12.8 billion in support to Ukraine since February 2022, of which £7.8 billion is for military assistance.' And now Chancellor Rachel Reeves has agreed a loan of £2.26 billion to bolster Ukraine's military capability. Our government does not prioritise the well-being of our most vulnerable. They seem indifferent to the fact that, according to 2024 figures, [nearly 10 million adults and children](#) live in households struggling to afford or access sufficient food.

However, there are always people who never cease to hope. And some of the most encouraging comments come from staff who are struggling in difficult circumstances.

At the front-line

I was recently in a hospital where a nurse was leaving her shift at 8 pm after an eight-hour day. I wished her a restful evening, but she told me she was rushing off to another job: 'I have to moonlight to be able to live.' But she added, despite struggling financially, 'I love my job. It is the best job in the world.' Similarly, I have overheard exhausted, overstretched teachers say the same words: 'I have the best job in the world.' Both professions share a valuable and distinct sense of purpose in workplaces that are united communities where staff pull together and do their best in adverse circumstances, whether to save lives or transform them.

When will they ever learn?

Gary Kenneth Watt subjects the Post Office to critical scrutiny

The network structure of this cherished national institution is comprised of three elements:

1) Sub-Offices: often run by family members together, a salary is paid to the Sub-Post Mistress/ Master based on the volume and nature of work transacted (hence 'scale payment').

2) Crown Offices [Crowns/COs]: around 1,500 operated in 1975. These were mostly situated in city or town centres, state-owned and run on its behalf by the Post Office [PO] Board, with the Government [HMG] as the principal stakeholder, *taking 'an arms' length approach*.

3) Franchises: under a policy introduced by HMG in the early 1980s, a growing number of former Crowns were franchised to individuals or business groups and were managed on behalf of the PO Board in conjunction with another business, *eg* a supermarket, newsagent, mini-store etc.

Race to the bottom

Successive governments have supported the piecemeal privatisation of the national Crown Office Network, a policy central to the Thatcher canon. The PO prefers the franchise model to that of the Crowns because it is cheaper to operate. Staff in Crowns tend to be experienced from lengthy service, whereas employees in franchises are on such inferior pay and conditions that there is a constant staff turnover. Consequently, the service provided to the public deteriorates. This is of secondary concern to the franchisee, whose priority is selling her/ his merchandise to the additional customers now coming through her/ his front door. Additionally, the PO makes immense savings by avoiding pension contributions to the detriment of the workforce's benefits.

'Consultation' and protest

Franchising has continued apace under HMGs of all persuasions, including Labour, thereby betraying its pledges to the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) to defend the CO Network. The PO does hold a six-week '*Public Consultation*' (so called) though this is entirely a "rubber stamp", upholding their decision to franchise as *a fait accompli*, regardless of the intense opposition of the local community and their democratically elected MPs and Councillors.

Profits Before People

The news media throughout 2024 was dominated by *the Post Office Horizon Scandal* in the wake of *Mr Bates v the Post Office*, a four-part drama-



documentary, broadcast on ITV during the first week of January. This told the story of what has been described as the "*greatest miscarriage of justice in UK legal history*." Hundreds of innocent sub-postmasters and sub- postmistresses were dismissed for alleged theft and false accounting regarding supposed shortages in their weekly cash account. They had to use up their own and their families' life savings to repay these 'losses' to the PO. These non-existent 'discrepancies' were, in fact, caused by Horizon, a faulty computer system, designed by Fujitsu, and installed in all UK PO branches in 1999. Over 500 individuals were prosecuted by the PO and several imprisoned.

The recently concluded Parliamentary Enquiry into the PO Horizon Scandal has revealed that the PO Board knew, at an early stage, that: Horizon was experiencing so many bugs and glitches that the Horizon helpline was inundated with calls every day; Fujitsu operators had remote, secret access to sub-postmasters' terminals and accounts with the ability to change them; furthermore, PO solicitors had advised the Board that convictions for theft had been unsound, and prosecutions should cease.

The underlying context

1) Disclosure of Horizon liabilities would have jeopardised both the Coalition Government's privatisation of Royal Mail and the accompanying separation of the PO Business.

HMG had to produce a prospectus for potential shareholders. Paula Vennells (PO CEO) deliberately intervened to remove any references to problems with Horizon.



CWU members made their opposition to government plans very plain

2) HMG set an overall Business target of transforming PO Counters from making heavy losses into profitability within only a two-year period. To generate additional revenue, the PO entered a partnership to sell Bank of Ireland [BOI] financial products at PO counters based on a 50-50 profit share. The underlying rationale was that customers would purchase BOI insurance cover or open savings accounts through the PO, because it was a '*trusted brand*.' The Horizon issues and imprisonment of innocent victims were covered up by PO senior managers to preserve the brand's reputation. Thus everything, including justice and morality, was subordinated to achieving profitability, whatever the human cost to the innocent victims.

In November 2024, the announcement by Nigel Railton, the recently appointed CEO, of the intention to franchise the remaining 115 Crown Offices, clearly shows that the PO Board and HMG are pursuing the same old, same old discredited ideas: making savings by flogging off Crown Offices, whilst lowering service standards considerably and throwing some 1,000 loyal workers on the scrap heap, replacing them with ever more exploited, cheap labour. As ever – "*Profits come before People.*"

Alternatives to 'same old, same old'

Instead of 'managed decline', here are three alternative initiatives suggested by the CWU, amongst several other proposals / innovations:

1) A People's Bank: there are three million people in the UK without banking facilities. This type of bank has proved successful in France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand. Initially state-funded, they are now thriving and self-sufficient. Gordon Brown was a supporter and in favour of establishing the idea via the PO, with its inclusion in the Labour Party Manifesto.

2) The PO as a 'One Stop Shop' for HMG and Local Council Services: applications for most of these are processed online (Passports, Road Fund and TV licenses, Pensions and benefits etc.) Yet, many individuals have no internet access or need help in making online applications. COs could be adapted as community hubs and advice centres.

3) Restructuring: The UK is the *only* country in the world that has separated the Counters from the Mails business. Separation has clearly failed the Counters' sustainability.

The Circus Upstairs

Many CWU members pay the monthly levy towards the Union's Political Fund. Large donations from this fund are made to the Labour Party. So, they may well ask, where are the voices of opposition to the current Post Office ethos from the Labour Government now that it is once again the principal stakeholder in the PO? And where is the root and branch restructuring of the entire, failed management system of the PO, as so eloquently demanded by Dave Ward, CWU General Secretary, in the wake of Horizon? Instead, there's a deafening silence from Number 10 and a 'business as usual' approach at PO HQ. So, I must put to Keir Starmer the words of Pete Seeger – words that became the anthem of the Miners' Strike: 'Which side are you on?' The PO and HMG appear to have learned nothing, reverting to the same catastrophic mistakes. In the words of Albert Einstein: 'The definition of madness is to keep repeating the same action, whilst expecting a different result.'

Update: Recently Royal Mail was sold to Daniel Kretinsky, a Czech billionaire. The PO became a separate business, whilst remaining in state ownership.

Twelve days in Luxor

November/December 2024: Betty Hales reports on her recent travels in Egypt

Deciding where to go

Last November my husband and I were feeling like we needed a change, so we explored booking a last-minute break at a reasonable price. We wanted somewhere that was warm enough for me to swim outdoors but not too hot to do some sight-seeing and exploring. There were a few places with temperatures between 25-30 degrees but most of those on offer were gated holiday complexes by the sea and we didn't want just a beach holiday.

We eventually settled on Luxor on the Nile and picked a hotel with an infinity pool floating on the river for me and the 'all-inclusive package' for my husband to sample the local alcohol to his heart's content. It was a great deal that included all our meals (international and traditional) barbeques and entertainment. We travelled with Easy-Jet, which is a bit basic for a 5-hour flight but very good value, and we didn't encounter any problems.

Luxor

We knew very little about Egypt or its history but did a bit of research and discovered that Luxor is the place



where the pharaohs and their families were buried in tombs after the pyramids were deemed to be too easy for grave robbers to break into. Their mummified bodies were carried the long journey up-river on the Nile in barges from Cairo.

Valleys and tombs

Our hotel was directly opposite the Valley of the Kings and other similar Valleys, where there are literally hundreds of tombs dug deep into the sides of the mountains, more being discovered all the time. We went inside four of them and were bowled over by the opulence and the painstaking work that had gone into building them. Apparently, the local farmers who used to live in these areas sold the artifacts they found digging in their fields on the black-market and have now moved away to expensive houses, bought with the money they made from this illegal trade. The government caught on to what was happening and there are now strict controls and penalties. The current peasants are not so lucky.

Apart from the tombs, the Egyptians were very fond of building incredible temples. Our hotel was a short walk from Karnak and Luxor temples. It is hard to contemplate how the ancient Egyptians managed to build such huge and highly decorated structures so long ago, perhaps the stories that they were helped by aliens are true!

Tourism and local people

The tour guide told us that they are finding hidden treasures under the whole of modern Luxor every time someone excavates for any reason. The government is now demolishing houses on a large scale and looking for more temples and tombs. Unfortunately, local people are not getting compensated properly and do not benefit sufficiently from the profits of tourism. As in many tourist destinations there is a lot of poverty in plain sight, in stark contrast to obvious wealth.

Museums

There are also fantastic museums, particularly the Luxor and Mumification Museums, which really deserve a visit. We went on a whole-day trip up the Nile to see yet more sights and temples and enjoyed a sunset ride on a felucca sail-boat, originally built for fishing but now used mainly for tourism.

It was a busy, fun-packed and educational twelve days and we are looking forward to our next adventure.

Book Corner

Janet Clarke (Hounslow NEU) reviews three books that you might also want to read.

Unruly: 'disorderly and disruptive and not amenable to discipline or control'. These words aptly describe the monarchs in David Mitchell's book of the same name, a history of England's Kings and Queens (mostly Kings and lots of Henrys and Edwards) from pre-conquest to Elizabeth I.

A book for those who sometimes prefer their history written with informality and humour – *Horrible Histories* for grownups if you like or the BBC Radio 4 programme *You're Dead To Me* presented by Greg Jenner (available on BBC Sounds and an informative listen).

The book tells us tales of the spats, skirmishes and often full-scale warfare between siblings, cousins and other relatives with claims, legitimate or otherwise, to the throne of England and how, eventually, these claims were realised – suspicious deaths included.

It was an enjoyable read but I would take the author to task for the overuse of a certain adjective and the mention of TV programmes and fellow comedians without clarification. However, radio listeners will probably be familiar with Stephen Fry and Josh Widdecombe.

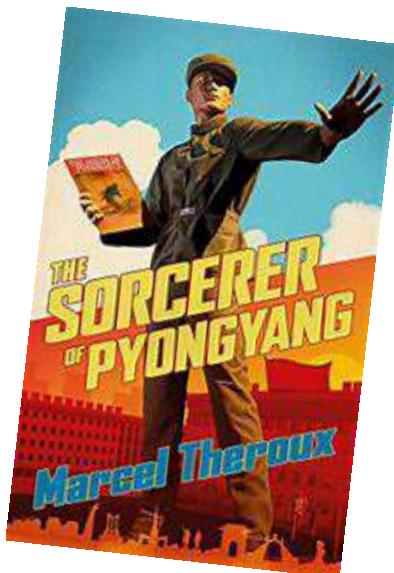
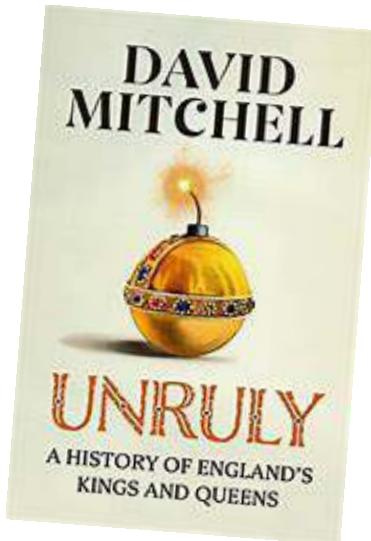
David Mitchell is a BAFTA winning actor, comedian on both radio and television and a writer who once studied history.

The Sorcerer of Pyongyang is a fascinating read, taking us behind barriers erected by the North Korean State.

Growing up in the most isolated country on earth, ten-year-old Cho Jun-Su stumbles upon a mysterious game that will change his life forever.

The game is in a book inadvertently left in the hotel where his father works by the son of a radical American academic. He gradually deciphers the rules of the game with the help of his teacher and teaches it to his school friends and later his fellow college students. Woven around the life of Jun-Su, Marcel Theroux gives us a riveting and poignant story of life in the hidden world of North Korea. We see not only the lives of the privileged elites revealed but also the daily existence and sufferings of the ordinary people - the detentions, the gulags and the great famine.

The author also gives us a love story, an escape to freedom and a new life in the Korean Diaspora of New Malden.



Knife edge by Simon Mayo does what it says on the cover- keeps you on a knife edge.

By 7.15am in a sweltering London rush hour, seven people have been murdered in a series of coordinated attacks. All the victims were journalists working for the International Press. All were stabbed.

What were they working on? No one knows, as no records are on file for the last few months. It's left to their colleagues to try to discover the reasons behind the killings. Where to start? Who organised them? Islamists, the far right or someone closer to home? And why?

I found the book a real page turner, empathising with the colleagues left behind and willing them on in their quest to find the killers of their friends.

Gary Stevenson:

The Trading Game

Bob Archer reviews a book by a former Redbridge school student

This book is a beacon for those who are groping to understand our current society (not to mention a world which seems to be in flames).

Gary Stevenson and his brother both studied at a respected secondary school in Redbridge. They were both obviously highly intelligent but stood out in other ways too. They certainly left their mark.

In the *The Trading Game*, Gary explains how poverty drove him to start dealing at a very early age – initially selling sweets to his primary school classmates. When the merch got too heavyweight, he was expelled as a sixth-former but all the same went on to study at LSE and to win a position as a foreign currency trader at a big international bank.

He entered the profession just as it descended into the 2008 banking and finance crisis. As Gary sharpened his dealing skills in the foreign exchange market, he realised what lasting damage this crisis had done. He saw that there would be no rapid recovery and therefore bet on interest rates remaining low for a long time.

A fortune

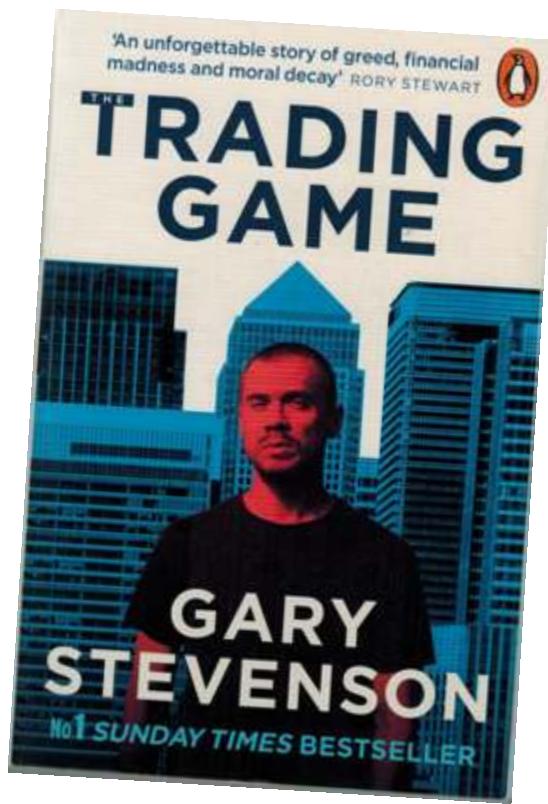
He thus made a fortune for himself and his employers, because his assessment was bang on. However, he keenly felt the differences between his new workmates in that environment and the poverty in which his family and others lived in East London.

He concluded that the wealth at one end of the spectrum was the cause of the poverty at the other. Rich people become richer, because money, banking and financial markets facilitate that. The rest of us get poorer as a result.

‘We’re in a monetary system. The whole thing always has to be in balance. For everyone who’s in debt, there’s someone who’s in credit ... The whole system is designed to be in balance ... These assets weren’t disappearing, but if we didn’t own them, if the people didn’t own them, and the governments didn’t own them ... then who did?’ (p.234)

Glancing round the trading floor, he realised that it was him and his fellow dealers ('millionaires, everyone!') who were swallowing all the wealth

With some difficulty, Gary escaped the tentacles of the big bank he worked for. Now he devotes himself to writing and to posting podcasts in the *Gary Economics* series online. His background, generation and story combine to make him a real political force. Young



people who have grown up adrift in the post-industrial society that we live in these days - above all, those who may be attracted by facile far-right authoritarian demagogues - might be made to think again by someone who, although highly educated and highly intelligent, doesn't deal in 'woke' fantasies. Maybe some will accuse him of speaking as an elite middle-class ideologue, but it probably won't stick.

Critical

Gary is critical of the economists who taught him at LSE. What he denounces are the workings of a **monetary** system, not an **economic** system. This reader at least would argue that the crisis we are in is fundamentally a crisis of the system of wage-labour, a crisis of the whole social order.

Nevertheless, books like *The Trading Game* and online segments like *Gary Economics* can speak to those who don't form their outlook on the basis of working in a large industrial workforce or on membership of the same militant and proud trade union their parents belonged to. Straight-talking and sharply-written, books like this can start a conversation which is painfully missing in many places among young people who have no other reliable road-map.