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THE WEEK

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THE BEST OF THE BRITISH AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

Musk's rampage The billionaire goes for Labour

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What happened

Starmer hits back

Keir Starmer took a thinly veiled swipe at Elon Musk on Monday by condemning those “spreading lies and misinformation” about grooming gangs. The PM had endured days of attacks from the entrepreneur, who had accused him of failing to tackle the gangs targeting vulnerable young women in towns and cities across England as director of public prosecutions between 2008 and 2013, and of being “complicit in the rape of Britain”. Starmer defended his record, and that of the safeguarding minister Jess Phillips, whom Musk had branded a “rape genocide apologist”. Before the PM’s comments, several European leaders, including those of France and Norway, had criticised Musk for meddling in other nations’ politics.



Musk: spreading misinformation?

Musk began his tirade after it emerged that Phillips had declined a request from Oldham Council for a government inquiry into its grooming scandal. She said that it should hold its own inquiry, as Rotherham and Telford had done. The PM accused the Tories of jumping on a far-right “bandwagon” by joining the calls for a national inquiry, noting that we’d had one in the form of Prof Alexis Jay’s Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which reported in 2022.

What the editorials said

Given how keen Labour generally is on launching public inquiries, said The Sun, you have to wonder why it’s now resisting a full, judge-led investigation into the rape and abuse of thousands of girls by grooming gangs made up disproportionately of men of Pakistani origin. Is it because ministers fear such a probe would cast a damning light on “left-wing politicians, council officials and police chiefs”? The Government should call a new national inquiry, said The Times. While some of those demanding one are “undoubtedly bad faith actors” seeking to stoke divisions, a more thorough examination of this appalling scandal is required. “Grooming gangs were only one element of Professor Jay’s inquiry – Rotherham garners a sole mention in her 468-page report and the gangs in Telford are not referenced.”

There are indeed still gaps in our knowledge about the extent to which this abuse “has happened and is still happening across Britain”, said The Observer. It’s doubtful, though, that another lengthy statutory inquiry is the best way to remedy that shortcoming. Ministers should instead focus on improving the way these crimes are detected, prevented and prosecuted. And it could start by acting on the recommendations of Jay’s inquiry, none of which have yet been implemented.

What happened

An inglorious exit

Justin Trudeau bowed to pressure to resign as Canadian PM on Monday, ending his nine-year stint in power in advance of national elections due by October. Speaking at his residence in Ottawa, he said he was suspending parliament until 24 March to give his ruling Liberal Party time to select a new leader. He will remain in office until his replacement has been chosen.

The son of Pierre Trudeau, who led Canada from 1968 to 1979 and from 1980 to 1984, Trudeau had swept to power in 2015 as a social media savvy progressive; but his popularity waned, and his poll ratings had recently plummeted, owing to various factors including high inflation and internal rows about how to respond to Donald Trump’s threatened 25% tariff on all Canadian imports. One of his key allies resigned in December, triggering public calls from his own MPs for him to step down.



Trudeau announcing his resignation

What the editorials said

Trudeau’s arc has been “vertiginous”, said The Economist. In 2015, he led a party that had been trailing third in the polls to election victory, by campaigning for liberal causes such as fighting climate change and boosting minority rights. In his first term, he won praise for reducing child poverty and striking a free trade deal with Trump. But he lost his majority in 2019; and his party failed to adapt as voters’ priorities shifted post-Covid to issues such as inflation and the shortage of affordable housing. His successor will inherit “a husk of a party” backed by only 20% of voters.

Trudeau leaves behind a nation that is poorer in relation to the Goliath to its south than when he took office, said The Times – and “likely to become poorer still” if Trump makes good on his tariff threats. Angry about mass immigration, mortgage rates and a “burdensome carbon tax”, Canadian voters are joining those in the US and Europe by “tacking away from progressive liberal politics” and tilting rightward: the populist conservative Pierre Poilievre is tipped to win the next election.

It wasn’t all bad

Volunteers in Somerset have completed an ambitious project to recreate a 140,000-piece Roman mosaic using traditional tools. The team at Avalon Archaeology, a reproduction village near Glastonbury, spent five years handmaking the tesserae and laying them down in small sections at a time. They followed a mainly geometric pattern that was excavated at Hurcot near Somerton, filling any blank spots with additional details including fish, a dolphin and an elephant.

Britain’s longest-serving Royal Mail postman has retired after 60 years. Robert “Rocky” Hudson, from east London, began his career aged 16 in December 1964, as a telegram messenger. He carried out his final shift overnight on 28 December at the Docklands Delivery Office, which he’d joined in the 1980s after his wife died from a brain haemorrhage aged 26. “I had little kids to bring up on my own and the night shift was the only way I could sort of get around it,” explained the 76-year-old. He said it would be odd turning off his morning alarm, but that he was looking forward to spending more time in his garden, and with his children and grandchildren.



The UK’s electricity was the cleanest it has ever been in 2024, an analysis by the climate and energy website Carbon Brief has found. Its assessment showed that in the past decade, the UK has more than halved electricity generated from coal and gas, and doubled its output from renewables. Carbon dioxide pollution for each unit of electricity has fallen to 124kg per kilowatt hour, down more than two-thirds since 2014; the report said, while the total electricity generated from clean energy sources reached a record 58% last year.

What the commentators said

Spare me the “feigned outrage” of politicians and pundits over this scandal, said Suzanne Moore in *The Daily Telegraph*. Most of them are only interested in point-scoring, not the suffering of the victims. Much is made of the ethnicity of the gang rapists, and it’s true that a fear of being called racist was a factor behind some of the police inaction and council worker negligence. The more pertinent factors, though, were classism and sexism. Too many officials were willing to write off girls in care as troublemakers, or “slags” who had colluded in their own exploitation and weren’t worthy of protection.

What most irritates me about Musk’s cynical intervention, said Brendan O’Neill on *Spiked*, is the idea that he has harnessed the power of X/Twitter to drag the scandal into the light. In reality, the public has “been hotly discussing this horror for years” – and it was dogged investigative reporting by the “legacy media” that exposed it. Musk didn’t bother acquainting himself with the facts before piling in, said James Ball in *The i Paper*. His claims that Starmer colluded in a cover-up are patent nonsense. While head of the Crown Prosecution Service, Starmer brought the first prosecution of an Asian grooming gang, and revised the guidance on child sexual exploitation to make future prosecutions easier. Yet none of this stopped Musk from calling for the PM to be jailed, and for King Charles to dissolve Parliament.

Politicians of all parties should “bristle at a foreign billionaire trying to bring down a democratically elected government” in this way, said Rachel Cunliffe in *The New Statesman*. Tories revelling in Starmer’s discomfort and seeking to exploit the situation may yet find that it rebounds on them. British voters won’t take kindly to the world’s richest man telling them to have another election, said John Rentoul in *The Independent*. Musk is damaging the quality of our public debate with his inflammatory interventions, and his ability to disseminate half-truths to his 210 million followers clearly doesn’t help Starmer. But the PM should console himself with the thought that it’s probably only a matter of time before the businessman falls out with Donald Trump and loses some of his influence. Starmer should “hold his nerve”.

What the commentators said

Trudeau was “the worst PM in Canadian history”, said Michael Taube in *The Spectator*, guilty of a litany “failures, missteps and blunders”: the photos of him donning blackface as a young man that emerged in 2019; his two serious breaches of ethics rules (one for accepting a luxury holiday on the Aga Khan’s private island in 2016); his “preposterous” claim that the budget “will balance itself”; his divisive expansions of assisted dying laws. In December, this “not-too-bright nepo baby” finally overreached, said Yuan Yi Zhu in *The Daily Telegraph*: his efforts to demote his previously loyal finance minister, Chrystia Freeland, triggered an internal revolt that ultimately proved fatal. Yet it took Trudeau weeks to realise that the game was up, said Leyland Cecco in *The Guardian* – a delay perhaps attributable to his habit of surrounding himself with friends: several of his ministers were at his wedding in 2005; his new finance minister was his childhood babysitter. His resignation leaves Canada in a “horrible position”, said Brian Lilley in the *Toronto Sun*: with Trump days from taking office and referring to Canada as the “51st state”, we need a “government with a strong mandate”; instead we have a “lame duck PM”.

Trudeau is the latest world leader to feel the wrath of voters who have become exasperated by the progressive politics that have dominated most industrialised nations for the past two decades, said Bertrand Benoit in *The Wall Street Journal*. Fuelled by “working-class anxieties” over the economy and immigration, right-wingers are on the march in the US and across much of Europe. That trend now looks set to continue in Canada, where Poilievre has dragged his Conservative Party to the populist right, and looks likely to win this year’s election on a platform that includes ditching Trudeau’s carbon tax and cutting immigration. It’s further proof, should any be needed, that “the progressive moment is over – at least for now”.

What next?

Alexis Jay argued this week that it would be wrong to launch a new inquiry into the grooming scandal as it would delay the implementation of the reforms she called for in her 2022 report. Home Secretary Yvette Cooper says that some of those reforms, including new sanctions for those who cover up or fail to report child sexual abuse, will be enacted via an amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill this spring.

Musk, meanwhile, is expected to turn his sights on the UK’s Online Safety Act, reports *The Times*. From March, the act will require platforms such as X to remove illegal content or face fines of up to 10% of their global income. This sets the stage for a clash between Musk and the regulator Ofcom.

What next?

Mark Carney, the former governor of the Bank of England, has said that he is considering running to replace Trudeau as leader of the Liberal Party. Other possible contenders include Freeland, the finance minister Dominic LeBlanc, and Anita Anand, Canada’s transport minister. A new leader is expected to be in place by the end of March.

Canada’s elections must be held by October, but a vote is likely to be held before then. Poilievre’s Conservatives are currently polling at about 44%, giving them a double-digit lead over the Liberals.

THE WEEK

Elon Musk is a business disruptor of rare genius. Now he is proving similarly disruptive in politics – but it’s not yet clear if his efforts in that sphere are going to work out so well. In America, he has already exacerbated divisions within the incoming Trump administration by arguing against the tighter restrictions on legal immigration that Maga Republicans have demanded (*see page 13*); he has rowed publicly with Robert F. Kennedy Jr, whose ambition to rein in “Big Food” and “Big Pharma” will put him on a collision course with the free-wheeling, regulation-detesting Tesla boss. And Musk’s big mouth is causing unnecessary diplomatic ructions abroad. But his real Achilles’ heel may prove to be his thin skin. Musk likes to dish it out – but he can’t take it. We learnt this in 2018, when he lashed out at a caver who’d mocked his unworkable plan to use a mini-sub to rescue the Thai cave boys. And we were reminded of it last week, when he dumped Nigel Farage for declining, in the mildest of terms, to back his support for the far-right thug Tommy Robinson (*see page 16*). Farage has lost an influential backer, but the spat may have harmed Musk more. The tech billionaire has been hailed as a visionary, looking for solutions for humanity, but it’s becoming apparent to many British voters – and car buyers – that he is also an arrogant blowhard, making reckless interventions in countries whose political systems he seems to know little about, to the benefit of conspiracy theorists, rabble-rousers and extremists.

Caroline Law

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Controversy of the week

Into the long grass

"Whack! That's the sound of social care reform once again being hit into the long grass," said Isabel Hardman in *The Spectator*. Since the turn of the century, there have been two government commissions, three independent commissions, five white papers and 14 parliamentary inquiries into social care reform and how to fund it. Labour, back in charge after 14 years in opposition, promised action at last – the creation of a "National Care Service" no less. So what's its big idea, unveiled last week? It's yet another review. Wes Streeting, the Health Secretary, has tasked the cross-bench peer Louise Casey with delivering interim findings by 2026, followed by a full report in 2028 setting out a long-term plan, including on funding. Instead of setting out solutions, said *The Guardian*, Labour is choosing to "preside over dysfunction for several more years".



Casey: Whitehall problem-solver

Streeting is seen as one of the Cabinet's most talented members, said Robert Colville in *The Sunday Times*. And with this can-kicking announcement he has proved himself "not just a bog-standard kicker of cans, but the Jonny Wilkinson of the genre. Indeed, it's hard to think of a bigger can that's been booted more lustily down the road." The reason social care reform is so intractable is that it's intensely political. Should people contribute more to the costs of their care? Should they have to sell their homes to fund it? Should taxpayers pay? Should there be a cap on payments, as the last review, by Andrew Dilnot, proposed? Only politicians can decide these things. Yet Streeting's big decision is to "outsource the biggest policy areas under his control". The costs are, admittedly, vast, said Paul Johnson in *The Times*. Even our current "miserably mean" system – which only gives care to those with assets of less than £23,250 – costs £25bn a year, a figure that is only growing. Casey may get agreement on what needs doing; the tough part will be agreeing on how to fund it. On past experience, "the Treasury will not let her near that crucial question".

If anyone can cut this Gordian knot, it's Baroness Casey, said Andrew Gregory in *The Guardian*. A veteran Whitehall problem-solver, she "has never been shy about getting stuck into thorny issues". Ministers hope that she can "build a cross-party consensus": the issue has proved too intractable for one party to tackle alone. Alas, the idea that consensus can be achieved by 2028, when Westminster will be gearing up for a general election, is for the birds, said Sonia Sodha in *The Observer*. Streeting and Keir Starmer had years to decide on a policy. The human costs of our failing care system are "dreadful", the effects on the NHS "profound". With their huge majority, they shouldn't be waiting years for a plan: they should be telling Casey what they want and asking her to deliver it. Yes, there are political risks. But so what? "If you're not going to spend political capital meeting the big challenges facing the country", then "what's the point of winning an election in the first place"?

Welby steps down

Justin Welby officially stepped down as Archbishop of Canterbury this week. On his final day, he laid down his bishop's crozier – a ceremonial staff – after attending an Evensong service, in a symbolic act marking the end of his ministry as the 105th archbishop. Welby resigned in November after being criticised in an independent report for his handling of abuse allegations against John Smyth, a barrister who ran Christian camps. Most of the functions normally carried out by the Archbishop of Canterbury will be carried out by the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, until a successor is appointed, a process that is expected to take months.

Minister refers herself

The Treasury Minister Tulip Siddiq referred herself to the ministerial standards adviser this week after questions were raised about her links to the regime of her aunt, Sheikh Hasina, the former PM of Bangladesh who fled the country last year after weeks of protests against her rule. Siddiq, who has responsibility for financial crime, is alleged to have been given a flat in London by one businessman connected to her aunt, and to be living in a £2.1m house that belongs to another associate (see page 37).

Spirit of the age

The rise of "romantasy" fiction – aka "fairy porn" – has been confirmed by news that Spotify's top audiobook last year was Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, about a 19-year-old who visits a land of fairies (sample sentence: "I locked my legs around his back, careful of the wings").

An app for book lovers has removed its AI-powered end-of-year "wrap" feature, after it challenged users' taste in books. One was told that they were clearly a "diversity devotee", and asked if they were "ever in the mood for a straight, cis white man's perspective". Another was told that their taste for romantic fiction had "set the bar for my cringe-meter", while a third was advised not to forget "to surface for the occasional white author".

Good week for:

Demi Moore, who won a Golden Globe for her comeback performance in the body horror film *The Substance*. Collecting the award, the first major gong of her career, the 62-year-old said that she had been told early on that she was a "popcorn actress" – one who will star in box office hits, but never win critical acclaim.

Gavin and Stacey, after the finale of the BBC comedy – a Christmas Day special – was the most watched scripted TV show for more than 20 years. Some 12.3 million people tuned in on the night; seven million more watched on iPlayer.

Ageing rockers, with figures showing that 12 of the 20 highest earning gigs and tours by UK and Irish artists last year were by over-60s, including The Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney and U2. Only four (including Ed Sheeran and Charli XCX) were under 40.

Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, who finally reached a divorce settlement, eight years after starting the process. Their legal battle lasted nearly four times as long as they were married; four of the children they argued over became adults in that time.

Bad week for:

London, after an analysis found that its roads were the most congested in Europe last year. The analytics company Inrix calculated that London drivers had spent 101 hours on average in traffic last year, a 2% increase on 2023. Paris came second.

Tom Hanks, who was among the tens of thousands of people who had to flee their homes to escape surging wildfires in Pacific Palisades, in north Los Angeles. Driven by strong winds, the fires were described by locals as the worst they'd ever seen.

Poll watch

If an election were held tomorrow, Reform UK would win 120 seats, according to a "mega poll" of 17,000 voters by Stonehaven. Labour would win 278, the Conservatives 157, the Liberal Democrats 47 and the SNP 24.

British adults believe that Labour has made three decisions that are worse for the party than Partygate was for the Tories: winter fuel allowance cuts (51% versus 16%), changing inheritance tax on farms (36% versus 24%) and not compensating Wasp women for pension changes (31% versus 22%). *More in Common/LBC*

46% of British adults say they are not confident that the police would turn up and properly investigate if their home was burgled. *Savanta/Lib Dems*

Vienna

Far-right talks: Austria faces the prospect of a far-right government taking power for the first time since 1945, now that the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) has agreed to enter coalition talks with the anti-immigration, Russia-friendly, Freedom Party (FPÖ), founded in the 1950s by a former SS officer. Although the FPÖ won more votes (29%) than any other party in last year's general election, it has hitherto been excluded from coalition negotiations by the other parties. But the failure of the ÖVP and Social Democrats to agree on key issues led to the collapse of negotiations this week and the resignation of Austria's chancellor, Karl Nehammer, a leading ÖVP politician. His party has now abandoned its long-held commitment to keep the FPÖ out of government: with support for the FPÖ rising to 36% in the polls, the ÖVP is loath to call another election. It is assumed that the FPÖ's leader, Herbert Kickl, will fill the role of chancellor if talks succeed.

Paris

Sarkozy trial: France's former president Nicolas Sarkozy has gone on trial in Paris, accused of accepting illegal financing for his 2007 election campaign from the late Libyan dictator Colonel Gaddafi. Prosecutors say Gaddafi agreed to give him up to €50m in exchange for his help in ending the international isolation Libya had faced since the 1988 Lockerbie plane bomb, for which Tripoli was blamed. Some €5m in cash was allegedly brought to Paris in suitcases so full that Sarkozy's chief of staff, Claude Guéant, is said to have had to stand on one case to shut it. Sarkozy is on trial alongside Guéant, two ex-ministers and nine aides: if convicted, he could face up to ten years in jail. The charges are the most serious of the many he's faced since leaving office in 2012. Last month, he was ordered to wear an ankle tag after being convicted of trying to bribe a judge.

Rome

Journalist freed: The Italian journalist Cecilia Sala, 29, who was arrested in Tehran three weeks ago for "violating the laws of the Islamic Republic", has been released from jail and flown back to Italy. Her arrest was widely seen as a tit-for-tat action for the arrest at Milan's airport three days prior of Mohammad Abedini, a Swiss-Iranian businessman who was the subject of a US arrest warrant for allegedly supplying smuggled US components to Iran for use in drones. It is not yet known whether the freeing of Abedini was part of her release deal, but it comes after intense diplomatic efforts by Rome, including a visit by Italian PM Giorgia Meloni to Florida to meet Donald Trump. Sala had reportedly been detained in a windowless cell of Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, where she'd had to sleep on the floor and had been denied access to the Italian embassy's care package.



Berlin

Fireworks chaos:

The German authorities are calling for stricter regulation of the private use of fireworks after five people were killed, and dozens more injured, by them on New Year's Eve. Use of firecrackers is widespread in Germany, and many cities have seen increasingly fierce pyrotechnic street battles on the last night of each year. Injuries were unusually severe this year owing to the increased use of *Kugelbomben*, explosives imported (often illegally) from Poland and the Czech Republic. In Berlin, an explosion destroyed the facades of several buildings, rendering 36 flats uninhabitable and putting two people in hospital.

Cetinje, Montenegro

Gun rampage: A gunman killed 12 people, two of them children, during a rampage in southern Montenegro last week. Aco Martinovic, 45, had been drinking on New Year's Day and got into an altercation with a guest at a restaurant near the town of Cetinje. Having gone home to retrieve a weapon, he then returned to the scene and killed four men. After that he drove to five other sites and killed several more people, including the restaurant owner and his nephews, aged eight and 13, before taking his own life. Mass shootings are rare in Montenegro, and Martinovic, who had prior convictions for violent behaviour, was not linked to organised crime. In response, the government has declared three days of national mourning.



Sudzha, Russia

Surprise offensive:

Hoping to seize more territory ahead of peace negotiations widely expected under Trump's presidency, Ukraine launched a surprise counterattack in Russia's Kursk region this week. Videos show armoured columns advancing in the snow from the vicinity of Sudzha towards the village of Bolshoe Soldatskoe; Russia's electronic warfare systems were reportedly jammed by Kyiv, leaving its drones ineffective. Ukraine took territory in Kursk in a surprise incursion last August, but Russia has since recaptured much of it. Since November, Russia has deployed some 11,000 North Korean troops in Kursk. Kyiv claims to have killed a battalion of NK and Russian troops in just two days.

Ukraine has also cut off the flow of Russian gas through its territory to parts of Europe, following the expiry on New Year's Day of the 2019 pipeline agreement that provided revenue for both countries. The gas has flowed through Ukraine for decades, mainly via a pipeline that runs to the Slovakian border; but instead of negotiating to extend the deal, Kyiv has decided to sacrifice its own profit in order to deprive Moscow of income. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the majority of Europe has weaned itself off Russian gas, which now accounts for just 8% of its usage, down from 40%. However, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria are still heavily reliant on it.





New Orleans, Louisiana

Isis attack: The Islamic State supporter who killed 14 people in New Orleans in the early hours of New Year's Day had earlier scouted the scene on a bicycle, recording what he saw on Meta smart glasses, the FBI has disclosed. Shamsud-Din Jabbar was also wearing the glasses during the attack, in which he rammed a pick-up truck into a crowd on the city's famed Bourbon Street, then got out and started shooting; but he had not activated their livestream function. The 42-year-old

US army veteran (above) was shot by police, who later found an Islamic State flag in his truck and two handmade bombs hidden nearby. This week, investigators were testing bomb-making materials found at his home in Houston. Born in Texas and raised a Christian, he is believed to have been radicalised online, and to have been acting alone. Relatives said he had started behaving erratically, and had got into debt.

Hours after the attack in New Orleans, a Tesla Cybertruck blew up in front of the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas. Its driver, Matthew Livelsberger, 37, had shot himself and detonated the explosive. A decorated US special forces soldier whose second wife had just left him, he was said to be a Trump supporter who'd wanted to send a "wake-up call" to America that it was on the verge of collapse.

Palo Alto, California

Clegg departs: Nick Clegg has resigned as Meta's president of global affairs after six years at the tech firm. In a Facebook post, the former Lib Dem leader and deputy PM said that he'd decided that it was the "right time" to move on. Clegg – who is believed to have made around \$19m from share sales at Meta – will be replaced by his deputy, Joel Kaplan, a former senior adviser to George W. Bush who has experience of lobbying Republicans on Meta's behalf. The shake-up has been seen as a further sign of Mark Zuckerberg's desire to prepare Meta for the Trump administration. Last month, he donated \$1m to Trump's inauguration fund, and this week he announced that he is ditching fact-checkers on Facebook – because of the risk that they are politically biased – as part of measures to "prioritise free speech".

Washington DC

US expansion: Donald Trump has reiterated his desire for the US to take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal, and refused to rule out using military or economic force to seize them. At a press conference called to unveil plans for new data centres in the US, he also declared that Canada should be a US state, describing the border between the two countries as "an artificial line", and said that he plans to change the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America, "which has a beautiful ring". Canada's Justin Trudeau said there was not "a snowball's chance in hell" of the two countries merging; the Danish PM said that Greenland, which is home to rich deposits of rare earth minerals, was "not for sale". Donald Trump's son, Donald Jr, visited the autonomous territory this week, but claimed his visit was in a personal capacity.



Santiago

South Pole visit: Chile's president has become the first sitting leader of a South American country to travel to the South Pole. Speaking at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station, a US research base, Gabriel Boric described the trip as a "confirmation" of Chile's

"claim of sovereignty in this space". Chile is a signatory to the 1961 Antarctic Treaty, which mandates that the continent be "used for peaceful purposes only". Nonetheless, it is one of seven countries – along with the UK, Norway, New Zealand, France, Australia and Argentina – with territorial claims on parts of it.

New York

Trump sentencing: Donald Trump has lost a last-ditch bid to delay the sentencing in his hush-money case, which is due to take place this Friday. In May, Trump became the first president ever to be convicted of a felony crime, when a Manhattan jury found him guilty of falsifying business records to mask a \$130,000 payment to former adult film actress Stormy Daniels before the 2016 election. Following his victory in last November's election, prosecutors dropped the various cases against Trump that hadn't yet gone to trial. But last week, Juan Merchan, the judge in the hush-money case, rejected requests by Trump's legal team to throw it out too, ruling that setting aside the jury's verdict would "undermine the rule of law in immeasurable ways". However, he said he was not inclined to jail the president-elect, and would likely sentence him to an "unconditional discharge", which would apply no sanction, but still leave him with a criminal record.



Brasília

Israel ruling: A visiting Israeli soldier fled Brazil last week, after a federal court judge in Brasília ordered that he be investigated for alleged war crimes. The ruling was made in response to a complaint by a pro-Palestinian group called the Hind Rajab Foundation (HRF) that the soldier had taken part in the "systematic campaign of destruction" of the Gaza Strip. The HRF said that it had tracked the soldier's movements on social media and that it had obtained video footage of him taking part in the demolition of homes in Gaza. Israel's foreign office helped him leave the country, and later issued a warning to Israeli soldiers about the risks of documenting their movements online. Israel insists that it has always complied with international law in Gaza.

Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territories

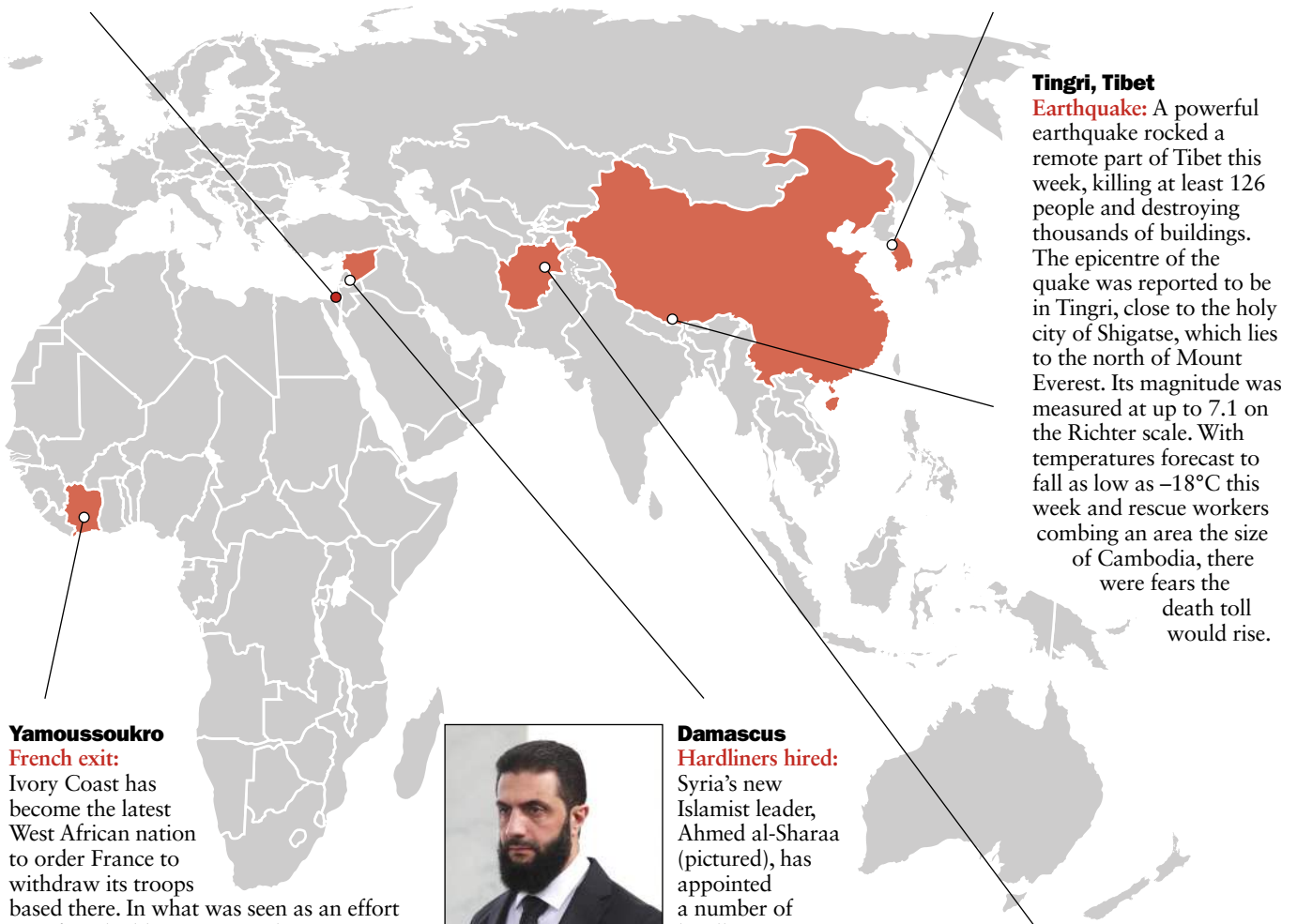
Hostage hopes: Hamas has drawn up a list of the names of 34 hostages it would be willing to release in the first stage of a ceasefire deal. According to the BBC, which has seen the list, all but two were among the 251 people captured by Hamas on 7 October 2023, and their ages range from one to 86. However, it is not clear how many of them are still alive. Two of the children named were previously said to have been killed in an Israeli air strike. The release of the list was seen by some as an attempt by Hamas to ramp up pressure on the Israeli government to compromise in its demands. This week, Donald Trump repeated his threat that “all hell will break out” if no deal had been agreed by his inauguration on 20 January, which is now being treated in some quarters as an unofficial deadline for the talks.

Also this week, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels stepped up their assault on Israel, using ballistic missiles to target a power plant in northern Israel. The IDF said the missiles had been intercepted before crossing the border. The Houthis also claimed to have thwarted a “major aerial attack” on Yemen by using missiles and drones to target the US aircraft carrier *Harry S. Truman* (pictured) in the northern Red Sea.



Seoul

Political crisis: Members of President Yoon Suk Yeol's security team formed a human chain around his official residence in Seoul last week, to prevent him being arrested by the country's top anti-corruption agency. MPs voted to impeach Yoon last month in response to his imposition of martial law, which he claimed was necessary to counter pro-North Korea forces. But he then refused to comply with summonses to appear for questioning. When an arrest warrant was issued, his lawyers argued that it was illegal. Last week's attempt to arrest him was abandoned after six hours, to avoid a violent confrontation with Yoon's supporters, who have also surrounded the property. His security team has now barricaded the compound with buses. Officials are said to be under pressure to be more forceful.



Tingri, Tibet

Earthquake: A powerful earthquake rocked a remote part of Tibet this week, killing at least 126 people and destroying thousands of buildings. The epicentre of the quake was reported to be in Tingri, close to the holy city of Shigatse, which lies to the north of Mount Everest. Its magnitude was measured at up to 7.1 on the Richter scale. With temperatures forecast to fall as low as -18°C this week and rescue workers combing an area the size of Cambodia, there were fears the death toll would rise.

Yamoussoukro

French exit:

Ivory Coast has become the latest West African nation to order France to withdraw its troops based there. In what was seen as an effort to soften the blow to Paris, the Ivorian president, Alassane Ouattara, said the modernisation of the country's army was now complete, meaning French assistance was no longer needed. In recent years, France has faced growing public hostility in its former African colonies, stoked by the military juntas that have taken power in many of them. French troops had been deployed to the region to fight jihadist insurgencies, but Mali, Burkina Faso and others have turned for military aid to Russia instead. Once the 600 or so troops have left Ivory Coast, French forces will remain only in Djibouti and Gabon.



Damascus

Hardliners hired:

Syria's new Islamist leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa (pictured), has appointed a number of hardliners, raising fears about the country's future direction. Among them is Shadi

al-Waisi, a former al-Qa'eda jurist, who has been made justice minister, and Aisha al-Dibs, the new women's minister, who said this week that women should not “go beyond the priorities of their God-given nature”. Last week, the education minister, Nazir al-Qadri, ordered that textbooks be altered to give them a more Islamic slant; he subsequently temporarily backtracked in response to a public outcry.

Kabul

Window ban: Afghanistan's Taliban government has ordered that all windows in residential buildings that overlook areas used by women must be blocked. “Seeing women working in kitchens, in courtyards or collecting water from wells can lead to obscene acts,” says the decree. Local authorities must also ensure that newly built homes have no windows that allow views of spaces used by women. Since it came to power in 2021, the Taliban has progressively erased women from public life, banning them from many schools, workplaces and even parks.

Jesse Eisenberg's sadness

The actor Jesse Eisenberg's mother was a professional clown, yet he was an anxious, unhappy child who missed a lot of school owing to mental health problems, says Olivia Ovenden in *GQ*. At the time, he couldn't see why other children didn't share his anguish. "It was mystifying to me why we weren't all crying all day long, because it seemed like the world is so sad and scary." He would look at his peers and wonder: "How are they existing? Don't they know school is tomorrow as well?" But he learnt to use humour to protect himself, and he assumed that everyone else was also telling jokes to mask their pain. Then he met Ricky Gervais. He asked him: "Are you depressed? No? Well then, how are you funny? Is it that you're self-conscious? Is it that you hate yourself? And he goes, 'No, it's none of those things. I really love making jokes, and I love being around people who are making jokes.'" Eisenberg was shocked. But, he reflects, Gervais's comedy is "tinged with a lot of sadness. So I don't exactly believe him."

Robbie Williams the chimp

No actor plays Robbie Williams in his biopic, *Better Man*, says Michael Cragg in *The Guardian*. Instead, the pop star is portrayed by a CGI chimp. Partly, the idea was that this would make the film more interesting; but also, it says something about the way he sees himself. "I am very aware that I am stunted. I'm very

aware that I am unevolved." Yet he is not without his sensitive side. One of the more distressing scenes involves his one-time fiancée, Nicole Appleton. Their 1990s meet-cute is rendered as a glittering ballroom fantasia; but a flash-forward montage then shows her being pressured by her management team into aborting her baby with Williams. It was, he recalls, "incredibly fucking sad while it was happening and traumatic, mainly for Nic, but also for me because I thought I was going to be a father in that moment and was happy to embrace that. It's only now that you go, 'What the fuck? That's insane.'"

Ed Davey on his childhood

If you were to ask AI to describe a Dickensian childhood for modern times, it might come up with one like Ed Davey's. The Lib Dem leader's father died when he was four, says Guy Kelly in *The Daily Telegraph*; when he was 12, his mother got bone cancer, and he became her carer. It was "a lonely experience", he says, and full-on. He administered morphine, helped her give herself electric shocks to take away the pain, made meals, did the laundry. When she died three years later, people didn't know what to say. He recalls that, at school, his head teacher stopped him in the corridor, and said: "'Davey, sorry to hear about your mum... We've never had an orphan before.' Not the *most* sensitive way to deal with a child who's just been bereaved."



In the late 1980s and 1990s, Meg Ryan made three films with Nora Ephron: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*. They represent only a tiny fraction of her filmography, and yet, decades on, women in particular still want to talk to Ryan about Ephron, who died in 2012. Not that Ryan minds. "I don't know if I'm her right spokesperson, but I love that it gets reflected back to me," she told Hadley Freeman in *The Sunday Times*. "I love talking about her." For one thing, the writer was a fount of good advice. Ryan had not set out to be famous, yet had become one of Hollywood's biggest stars. "Nora said to me, 'Just relax about the fame thing. It's gonna come and go, but it's not a defining thing like your kids are life-defining.'" She also had specific opinions, which always turned out to be right – such as "that you should never get a rectangular dinner table, because then people can't talk to each other. You should always get a 54in round one." Yet even Ephron couldn't devise a romcom that didn't have characters behaving in demented ways, such as Ryan's character in *Sleepless...*, who hires a private detective to take photos of Tom Hanks. Those films still work, says Ryan, because they "operate on the idea of kismet, that you're fated to be with that other person... And that is such a soothing idea, that whatever you're doing today is on the road to a great love."

Castaway of the week

This week's edition of Radio 4's Desert Island Discs featured the composer Mark-Anthony Turnage

- 1 *Symphony No. 9, 2nd Movement* by Beethoven, performed by the Berlin Philharmonic (cond. Simon Rattle)
- 2* *St Matthew Passion* by Bach, performed by Bach Collegium Japan (cond. Masaaki Suzuki)
- 3 *Two Organa, 1st Movement* by Oliver Knussen, performed by the London Sinfonietta (cond. Knussen)
- 4 *Blue in Green* by William Evans and Miles Davis, performed by Miles Davis
- 5 *Living for the City*, written and performed by Stevie Wonder
- 6 *One Fine Day* (from *Madama Butterfly*) by Puccini, performed by Mirella Freni with the Vienna Philharmonic (cond. Herbert von Karajan)
- 7 *Symphony of Psalms* by Stravinsky, performed by the English Bach Festival Chorus and the LSO (cond. Leonard Bernstein)
- 8 *Let's Say We Did* by John Schofield and Mark-Anthony Turnage, performed by John Schofield et al

Book: *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier

Luxury: a grand piano

* Choice if allowed only one record

Viewpoint:**"Reimagining"**

"The buzzword of 2024 to be banished in 2025 is 'reimagine'." 'Pivotal to our Reimagine Strategy is the House of Brands,' bumbles Jaguar. The National Portrait Gallery reimagined its collection; the British Museum is reimagining its Western Range; the Horniman Museum has 'reimagined museum spaces'. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change is 'Reimagining Government for the 21st Century'. Clandon Park burnt down, and the National Trust has now commissioned architects to reimagine rather than restore it. Enough! Such reimaginings all point in the same ideological direction, which suggests that they are not imaginative at all." *Charles Moore in The Spectator*

Farewell

Paddy Hill, one of the Birmingham Six, died 23 December, aged 80.

Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the French National Front party, died 7 January, aged 96.

David Lodge, British novelist who satirised campus life, died 1 January, aged 89.

Johnnie Walker, Clandon Park burnt down, died 31 December, aged 79.

Jocelyn Wildenstein, Swiss socialite known for her extensive plastic surgery, died 31 December, aged 84.



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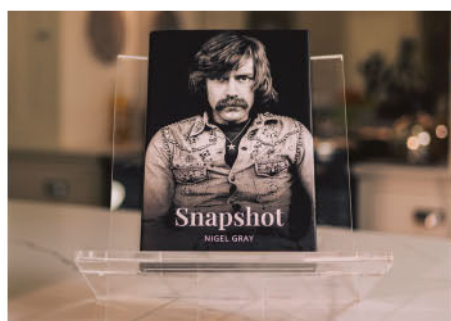
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Non-crime hate incidents

Is the policing of non-crime hate incidents (NCHIs) an Orwellian outrage or an essential tool of modern law enforcement?

What exactly are NCHIs?

The Home Office describes them as incidents “that could escalate into more serious harm or indicate heightened community tensions, but which do not constitute a criminal offence”. So police in the UK keep records of all reported incidents – or alleged incidents – which fall below the threshold of a crime, but which are perceived by the person reporting it to be “motivated – wholly or partly – by hostility or prejudice towards persons with a particular characteristic” protected by hate crime laws: race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, transgender identity. An example might be someone using derogatory language towards a politician on social media, based on their race or religion. These incidents are collected and collated by police for intelligence and “community engagement” purposes.

What is the origin of NCHIs?

Their genesis was in Sir William Macpherson’s 1999 inquiry into the racist murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993. One of the issues in the case was the Metropolitan Police’s reluctance to discern a racist motivation, or to record racist crimes generally. Macpherson called for the creation of “a comprehensive system of reporting and recording of all racist incidents and crimes”. His view was that racist incidents should be recorded because they can lead to crimes; Lawrence had been subjected to racial taunts. He suggested that the criteria for recording these, known as the Macpherson principle, is that “a racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person”. (He didn’t suggest that all such incidents *were* racist, but that it was best to record and investigate them as such.) Initially, there was no basis in legislation for NCHIs: from 2014 police forces relied on guidance from the College of Policing, which had no legal force. But in 2023, the Home Office issued a new Code of Practice. All 45 UK police forces now record NCHIs.

Why is this controversial?

NCHIs result in police records for people who have committed no crime. Anyone can report anyone for anything perceived to be hateful. As a result, they have often been described as Kafkaesque and Orwellian, or as a kind of “pre-crime”, as seen in Philip K. Dick’s sci-fi story *The Minority Report*. Until recently, there was no need to provide objective evidence. In one important case, Harry Miller, a former policeman who had tweeted repeatedly that trans women were not real women, was visited at work by a Humberside police officer who later said to him: “I need to check your thinking”, warning that his behaviour could escalate into a crime. Many of the cases are absurd. Norfolk police recorded an NCHI after a man called a Welshman a “sheepshagger”. Two girls at a secondary school were recorded for saying that one of their fellow pupils “smelled of fish”. A solicitor tweeted that her cat was a Methodist and got a colleague to make a complaint; it was duly logged.



Harry Miller: a landmark legal challenge

What practical effects do they have?

Those complained about are not necessarily even informed of the NCHI against them. But once reported, “they sit for ever against the names of the alleged perpetrators without any real investigation or right of appeal”, complained the former director of public prosecution, Ken MacDonald. “We need hardly imagine what an HR manager would make of a job applicant with a police history of hate.” (They can be revealed in enhanced criminal record checks.) NCHIs can clearly interfere with freedom of speech. And they take up quite a lot of police time. The UK’s police forces logged more than 13,200 incidents in the year from June 2023 to June 2024 – taking perhaps 60,000 hours.

So how can they be defended?

Those who support them believe that recording NCHIs is vital to effective policing. A Home Office source said that they “help the police to build an intelligence picture around community tensions in order to map trends”. Danny Stone, chief executive of the Antisemitism Policy Trust, added that “victim-led hate reporting has had significant and important positive impacts for police, and communities, in diagnosing harm, extremism, and failing integration or community-cohesion efforts”.

What is the law surrounding NCHIs?

Harry Miller sued the College of Policing, and the Court of Appeal found, in late 2021, that the NCHI regime was in some respects illegal. The police have the power to record and retain a wide range of information, as they do with all kinds of intelligence (they also record, for instance, “non-crime anti-social behaviour incidents”). But the court found that the College’s guidance could have a “chilling effect” on free speech, and so represented an interference with Article 10 of the European Convention right to freedom of expression. It also complained that the guidance said nothing “about excluding irrational complaints, including those where there is no evidence of hostility”. It asked for revisions, and this led to the Home Office issuing a Code of Practice.

What is a hate crime?

In England and Wales, there are two main types of hate crime. There are the “stirring up” offences: since the 1970s, “incitement to racial hatred” has been a crime – for instance, distributing racist material or spreading inflammatory rumours about racial groups. Later laws criminalised incitement on grounds of religious and sexual identity. Secondly, there are the “aggravated offences”, in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Many crimes – assault, criminal damage, harassment, public order offences – can be charged as aggravated crimes, attracting higher sentences, where there is evidence that they were motivated by hostility based on race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or transgender identity (or “perceived” race, religion etc.). In Scotland, all hate crimes were consolidated into one Hate Crime and Public Order Act, which came into force last year.

Policing speech and expression is often controversial and complex. In principle, the bar for criminality is set high. Shouting degrading racial abuse in the street is usually an aggravated breach of the Public Order Act 1986, which forbids “threatening, abusive or insulting” behaviour. But a preacher who “misgendered” a trans woman – called her a man – had his conviction under the same law quashed, on free speech grounds.

Is the new Code better?

It sets a higher threshold, stating that NCHIs should only be recorded against individuals if there is “a real risk of significant harm” or crime. But problems remain: the police inspectorate HMICFRS found that 25% of recent NCHIs and hate crimes were wrongly recorded. Police reported being confused by attempts to train them in the Code; many still struggle to distinguish between a crime and an NCHI. This confusion is clear in the most famous recent case. The Daily Telegraph journalist Allison Pearson said that Essex Police visited her in November, wishing to record an NCHI against her (because on X/Twitter she had mistakenly described two protesters as “Jew haters”). Essex Police denied it was an NCHI case, saying Pearson had been investigated for a public order offence. Either way, the case was dropped after an outcry.

Beware the fury of frustrated graduates

Gaby Hinsliff

The Guardian

A sense of security, of smugness even. That's what a middle-class, white-collar job used to give. It didn't place you at the top of the pile, but you were a "reassuringly long way off the bottom". Not any more, says Gaby Hinsliff. Salaries of the newly graduated have fallen in real terms over the past 20 years by 4% on average, even as the minimum wage has risen by 60%. In sectors such as publishing and journalism, young graduates struggle to land jobs with starting salaries barely above the £25,000 a year a minimum-wage worker can now earn for stacking shelves. Some prestige still clings to such careers, but the money has gone. And with AI eating up junior roles even in "bombproof careers" such as accountancy, law or IT, it won't be coming back. This is worrying: an economy in which there are more educated, ambitious young people than there are jobs to meet their ambitions is a breeding ground for social unrest. Gen Z voting patterns already suggest "a backlash against mainstream parties" and "a craving for more radical ones". The revolt of the frustrated elites is only getting started.

Coming out of America's shadow

William Hague

The Times

American power, it's often claimed, has passed its peak. Tell that to Keir Starmer and the other European leaders rushing to pay court to Donald Trump, says William Hague. They're painfully aware that our dependence on the US, which is powering ahead of us in wealth and global influence, has "never been greater". The recent Draghi report laid bare the gulf in performance. Incomes have grown twice as fast in the US as Europe since 2000. Not one of Europe's giant companies was established in the past 50 years, while all six of the US companies worth more than a trillion dollars were created in that period. Without the US, which spends twice as much on defence as the combined EU states in Nato, we'd be helpless. This unhealthy power imbalance "will become increasingly unsafe" if we don't take urgent steps to reduce it. The UK can never match America's vast scale and natural resources, but it does share many of the attributes fuelling its dynamism – outstanding universities, strong financial markets, an openness to foreign talent. It's time to make the most of them.

Things are bad here, but not bad enough

Janan Ganesh

Financial Times

It was timing, not lack of talent, that did for Jimmy Carter, says Janan Ganesh (*see page 32*). When he was elected, Americans were fed up with their faltering economy, but not so fed up as to accept the need for radical change. Only by the end of his term, when the pain was acute rather than chronic, were they ready to embrace the reforms they'd previously shunned. "No rage, no Reagan." This is the way with rich democracies: it takes a crisis to spur change. Spain, Greece and Portugal overhauled their sclerotic economies because the 2010 eurozone crisis forced them to. By contrast, Emmanuel Macron, in trying to mend France's public finances to stave off a sovereign debt crunch, has earned only voter contempt. "There are no votes in preventive action." This is bad news for Keir Starmer. "Like Carter, he is stuck in one of those pockets of history when the national stomach for change is growing, but not in time for his administration." Brexit is a drag on growth, the NHS is under strain, but such problems have not yet reached the threshold that offers no option but drastic reform. In short, "things are tolerably bad. And that isn't bad enough."

The moral imperative of a cricket boycott

Kate Maltby

The i Paper

"The most successful mass action" in recent British history. That's how scholars characterised the sporting boycott of Apartheid South Africa organised by the young activist Peter Hain in 1970. He rightly argued that no nation should play South Africa in sport until it allowed racial minorities into its own sports teams, and that as cricket, particularly, was a national obsession, a boycott would kick the regime "in the gut". How right he was, says Kate Maltby, and how much the same now holds true for Afghanistan, where cricket is popular and where it is women who are banned from playing it, just as they are from singing or speaking in public. The Taliban have even ordered a curb on the building of windows to prevent women being seen through them. Yet despite this, England's men's cricket team is to compete alongside Afghanistan's in this year's Champions Trophy. If we had "an ounce of moral dignity", we'd boycott the event. Hain himself this week advocated for a boycott by the England team, despite previously arguing for engaging with the Taliban. Our cricketers should not be asked to "normalise a regime that treats women as livestock".

IT MUST BE TRUE... I read it in the tabloids

A drunken Zambian police officer was arrested after freeing 13 suspects from custody so that they could celebrate the new year. According to a police spokesman, Detective Inspector Titus Phiri was "in a state of intoxication" when he "forcibly seized cell keys" from a constable and told the suspects – who were accused of crimes including assault, robbery and burglary – that they were free to go. All are still on the run.



Residents of a town in Nottinghamshire have been left perplexed as to why a plate of bananas keeps appearing on the same street corner every month. Up to 20 bananas are placed, peeled, opposite a community centre in Beeston on the second day of every month. Some believe they are being left out for animals, though no local animals seem to eat them; others speculate they are being placed there for religious purposes. "I live nearby and they're very regularly here," said one local. "They are very annoying. I have no idea why they're here."

A former city councillor in Brazil has returned a toilet and two sinks that she had removed from her office after losing a bid for re-election. Janaina Lima was widely criticised on social media after her staff were filmed on CCTV wheeling the fixtures out of the building after her term finished last year. In a statement, Lima explained that she had paid for the bathroom renovation herself and that it was therefore not an asset that belonged to the council. "I decided to donate the equipment," she said. "Obviously, neither I nor my advisers need a toilet."

Silicon Valley vs. the Maga faithful: trouble in Trump land

“Is the Trump coalition coming apart before the Trump administration even begins?” It’s beginning to look like it, said Timothy Noah in [The New Republic](#). While most of us were enjoying the Christmas break with our families, the president-elect’s Silicon Valley backers were engaged in a protracted war of words on X/Twitter with the anti-immigrant wing of the Maga movement. The uproar began after Trump named the Indian-born venture capitalist Sriram Krishnan as his policy adviser on artificial intelligence. This prompted a vicious attack on Krishnan by the arch-Trumpist Laura Loomer, who condemned him for saying the US should grant more visas to high-skilled foreign guest workers. America didn’t need more “third-world invaders from India”, she said. As other Maga faithful echoed Loomer’s grievance, Elon Musk hit back, arguing that the H-1B visa programme, under which he emigrated to the US from South Africa, provided US tech companies with talented employees they couldn’t source domestically. Denouncing critics of the H-1B programme as “hateful, unrepentant racists”, Musk vowed to “go to war” to defend it, although he later conceded that it needed some reform.

“This skirmish is a preview of how tensions between the tech Right and the nationalist Right may play out once Trump takes office,” said Ali Breland in [The Atlantic](#). The nativists may get much of what they want – to their delight, Trump has already promised mass deportations of illegal migrants – but when their interests are at odds with those of Trump’s Silicon Valley enablers,



Stephen Miller: Trump’s anti-immigration ideologue

the latter are likely to prevail. That was the lesson of his first term, when, for all his populist rhetoric, his tax policies favoured corporations and the wealthy. The president-elect took their side again in this latest row, falsely insisting that he had always been a big fan of H-1B visas. There’s little doubt about who’ll be calling the shots in the new administration, agreed Heather Digby Parton on [Salon](#). Trump seems to be dazzled by his “tech-bro billionaire buds in the same way he’s dazzled by Vladimir Putin”. It’s becoming clear to the Maga activists who worship him that “it’s not going to be Musk who’s kicked to the kerb – it’s going to be them”.

Don’t count on it, said Chas Danner in [New York Magazine](#). The Musk camp appears to have prevailed in this row so far, but Trump’s approach to the H-1B programme may change once he’s in office. After all, opposition to immigration was a foundation of his presidential campaign and the Maga movement (and even though last week’s terrorist attack in New Orleans was the work of a US citizen, it will likely fuel anti-immigrant sentiment). Musk and his tech allies will in any case struggle to get an expanded H-1B policy past Stephen Miller, Trump’s veteran adviser and his incoming deputy chief of staff, said Andrew Prokop on [Vox](#). Trump may say stuff, but it’s Miller – a “hardline anti-immigration ideologue” and the architect of the mass deportation policy – who transforms those things into policy. So long as Miller remains in Trump’s good graces and effectively in charge of immigration policy, “betting on restrictionism is the only reasonable bet”.

Unidentified flying objects: the New Jersey drone scare

In 1954, a growing number of people in Bellingham, Washington, suddenly started noticing small dents and chips in their car windcreens. The damage was initially blamed on vandals, said Zeynep Tufekci in [The New York Times](#), but as a deluge of similar complaints streamed in from car owners across the state and beyond, people sought other explanations. Some blamed cosmic rays or fallout from H-bomb tests, while others attributed it to a radio transmitter on a naval base. It turned out to be none of these things, just a simple case of mass hysteria: people were seeing long-present imperfections in their windcreens that they’d previously overlooked. A similar dynamic has played out over the past month in New Jersey, where a spate of reports of mysterious low-flying aircraft has provoked all sorts of outlandish theories. Some have claimed that the aircraft are enemy drones launched by an “Iranian mothership” off the coast; others, that they are US federal drones searching for the radiation signature of a dirty bomb smuggled into the state.

New Jerseyans have become a little overexcited about flying objects, said Matthew Petti on [Reason](#). Many of the reported mysterious lights in the night sky have been regular aircraft or celestial bodies. Scientists who examined a video by former Maryland governor Larry Hogan of what he said “appeared to be dozens of large drones in the sky above my residence” quickly identified the lights as stars in the Orion constellation.



Lights above New Jersey last month

Still, not all of the sightings are fanciful: the US Coast Guard confirmed before Christmas that it had spotted an unexplained drone swarm off the Jersey Shore. That example alone raises concerns, if only for the safety of air traffic. People have good reason to be paranoid about drones, said Neil Richards and Ryan Durrie on [MSNBC](#). Quite apart from the potential threat they pose to national security and air traffic, there are strong privacy issues at stake with devices that are, among other things, “flying high-definition video cameras”.

There are more than 1.7 million drones registered for commercial and recreational use in the US, said Max Boot in [The Washington Post](#), and it’s clear the country needs to do more to guard against their improper use. In November, the FBI arrested a Tennessee man who was allegedly plotting to use

a drone loaded with explosives to attack Nashville’s power grid. In October, Arizona authorities charged a teenager with planning to use a drone to bomb the Phoenix Pride festival. The FBI and Department of Homeland Security can intercept and take down drones in some circumstances, but state and local authorities have little power to interfere with them under current law. Legislation to remedy that situation has been held up by civil liberties concerns. If the New Jersey drone scare prompts lawmakers to take belated action “against this growing threat, it will have achieved something worthwhile”.

Backlash in Germany as Musk backs AfD

He played a crucial role in Donald Trump's election victory; he has launched scathing attacks on the UK's Keir Starmer; and now, Elon Musk is meddling in our politics too, said Hannes Niemeyer in *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Frankfurt). Ahead of Germany's federal elections in February, the billionaire has been using his X/Twitter site to urge people to vote for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). But what has really enraged Germany's political classes is an opinion piece he wrote in the Sunday edition of *Die Welt*, in which he described the country as on "the brink of economic and cultural collapse". "The description of AfD as far-right is made obviously false simply by noting that Alice Weidel, the party leader, has a same-sex partner from Sri Lanka!" he added. "Does that sound like Hitler to you?" A fierce backlash ensued: *Die Welt*'s opinion editor resigned, and Musk was subjected to a barrage of cross-party criticism. But it hasn't put him off: on the contrary, he has stepped up his attacks on Chancellor Olaf Scholz and other establishment figures.



Elon Musk: "Does that sound like Hitler to you?"

Musk is "the greatest entrepreneurial genius of our time", said Jan Philipp Burgard in *Die Welt* (Berlin): his innovations, built on a "radical analysis of the status quo", have "revolutionised the payment, automotive and space industries". And his diagnosis of Germany's ills isn't far wrong: we are indeed in an "economic and cultural crisis", owing to the misguided energy, migration and social policies initiated by Angela Merkel and largely continued by Scholz's disastrous "traffic light" coalition. But his claim that only the AfD can save us is "fatally wrong". This is a party that wants to take Germany out of the EU – a crazy idea for an economy so heavily reliant on EU exports. It wants to realign Germany with Russia, at the likely expense of its ties with the US and its international credibility. As for its plan to "remigrate" millions of people, that simply doesn't hold water. Still, you don't have to agree with Musk to defend our right to publish a piece by him, said Veronika Grimm in the same paper. His Tesla car firm has a huge factory near Berlin,

where the AfD is second in opinion polls. That his piece triggered such a furore is a sad indictment of free speech today.

Musk may have interesting things to say, said Meredith Haaf in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), but all he gave us in his opinion piece were "pessimistic platitudes" and all-too familiar denials of the AfD's xenophobia. And his calls for less regulation and bureaucracy were plainly designed to boost his own business interests, said Stefan Fries on *Deutschlandfunk* (Berlin). Yet it was the Axel Springer group,

which owns *Die Welt*, that allegedly approached him to write the piece in the first place. Why? Because Springer has been expanding into the US and sees Musk as vital to its interests there. So yes, for *Die Welt* to give house room to Musk's musings was a "journalistic error and a transgression"; but on the upside, it has sparked a debate about the cosy relationship between politics and business that is poisoning our democracy.

And nobody typifies this relationship more than Musk, said Lea Fauth in *Die Tageszeitung* (Berlin): he's the living embodiment of "personal profit, close contacts in politics, and massive influence on public opinion", yet he's lauded as an "anti-establishment" hero. No serious newspaper should publish anything by such a man, one notorious for spreading disinformation and "fake news" online. Let's not over-dramatise, said Beatrice Achterberg in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Zurich). Have those who see Musk's opinion as a sign of democracy's demise forgotten that the US businessman George Soros urged voters to back pro-European parties in 2019's EU elections? Or that Germany's *Die Zeit* published a piece by Vladimir Putin as recently as 2021? The fact is, it's completely normal for German newspapers to run guest articles by high-profile figures. As for the AfD, for too long it has benefitted from being treated as a pariah: doing so has simply burnished its anti-establishment credentials. So to go on trying to silence those who support the party will only serve to aid its cause further. You could say Musk has done us a favour.

ISRAEL

This targeting of hospitals is unjustifiable

Haaretz
(Tel Aviv)

It's time the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) left Gaza's hospitals alone, says Haaretz. Last month, for a third time, they raided the Kamal Adwan Hospital – the last major medical facility in the Strip's north. Around 350 people had to be evacuated, many in a state of undress, and five medics were killed. The IDF said the hospital was being used as a command centre by Hamas, that it had arrested over 240 terrorists there, and that the hospital's director is suspected of being a Hamas operative. And to prove these contentions, it released pictures of two pistols and a knife found there. But "this meagre haul does the opposite of supporting the IDF's claims": the presence of small arms and enemy fighters being treated at a medical facility hardly justifies breaching the Geneva Convention. No, the IDF's attacks on hospitals, which have contributed to the deaths of at least 1,057 health workers in Gaza since 7 October, appear to be part of an effort to raze the Strip's north, and to prevent the hundreds of thousands of Gazans expelled from there returning home. They should not be allowed to continue.

FINLAND

How to treat a rogue state like Putin's Russia

Dagens Nyheter
(Stockholm)

Finland has given the West a lesson in dealing with Russia's hybrid warfare in the Baltic, says Isobel Hadley-Kamptz. When two undersea data cables – one linking Finland and Germany, the other Lithuania to Sweden – were severed in November, officials from these countries, caught off guard, seemed unsure how to respond. By contrast, on Christmas day, Finland acted with "exemplary" decisiveness after a ship dragging its anchor along the seabed cut the Estlink 2 power cable linking Finland and Estonia. Finnish officials spotted the problem before serious damage could be done, and Finnish police were dropped from helicopters to take control of the ship's command bridge and conduct a search for evidence of sabotage: they found surveillance equipment used to spy on Nato ships. The tanker's crew were then detained, and the ship taken to a nearby port: though flagged to the Cook Islands, it is almost certainly part of Russia's shadow fleet of ageing tankers mainly used for sanction-busting oil exports. We all need to learn from what Finland did, not least the way it invoked environmental law as a pretext for stopping vessels that could be damaging the seabed. Only by such swift, smart action can we hope to tackle the threat posed by rogue states such as Russia.

What the scientists are saying...

California's vole-hunting squirrels

Elsewhere, they mainly stuff their pouches with nuts, fruit and seeds, but in northern California, squirrels have taken to hunting, decapitating and consuming voles. This discovery was “shocking”, said Jennifer E. Smith, an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, who has been studying California ground squirrels in the San Francisco Bay Area for over a decade. “We had never seen this behaviour before.” From June to July, her team documented more than 70 interactions between squirrels and voles; and in 42% of these, the squirrels were hunting the smaller rodents. “From then, we saw that behaviour almost every day,” said co-author Dr Sonja Wild. Squirrels sometimes eat lizards and eggs, and meat left out by humans, but “direct study of hunting behaviour by squirrels remains rare”, says the paper, and evidence of this “widespread carnivorous behaviour” is unprecedented. The researchers speculate that the squirrels turned to vole hunting owing to a surge in the population of voles in the area, and they argue that their ability to alter their diets in response to the availability of nutrients and protein is a promising sign of the species’ resilience.



Hunter squirrels: a “shocking” discovery

had first created a “structural sexism” score for each state by looking at factors such as maternal mortality, the number of women in the state legislature and the proportion of women in the workforce, between 1900 and 1960. The results shifted over time, but in 1960, Alabama and Mississippi were rated the most sexist, while Connecticut was the least. The team then looked at dementia rates among 21,000 women who had taken part in two major studies of memory and ageing. The researchers argue that the higher rates of dementia in “sexist states” (which persisted even after they’d adjusted for factors such as median income) was most likely due to women being denied educational and career opportunities, and having poorer healthcare. “Eventually, these exposures produce disparities in chronic physical health conditions that directly influence brain health, the onset of cognitive impairment and, ultimately, dementia.”

Sexism linked to dementia

That women are more likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer’s than men has long been attributed to genetic differences, and to women living longer. But according to new research in the US, it could also be down to structural sexism. A team from Columbia University looked at data on thousands of American women, and found that those who’d lived in states deemed the most sexist had nine more years of cognitive ageing than those in the least sexist states, on average. The researchers

Giraffes can’t walk uphill

There is a reason you don’t spot giraffes on mountain tops: a study has found that the mammals will not navigate steep slopes, most likely because of the risk of falling, and the energy required. Researchers from the University of Manchester who studied the movements of 33 giraffes in South Africa found that the animals are happiest on flat ground; they will tackle a gradient of 12 degrees if this gives them access to food – but they “simply cannot access” a gradient of 20 degrees. The findings, which are yet to be published, are important because habitat models for giraffes take into account factors such as vegetation, but tend not to consider topography. In other words, giraffes may not be able to reach the habitat that is thought to be available to them. “In Namibia and Tanzania, there is approximately 8,000sq km that may be unusable to giraffes; that’s nearly half of the size of Wales,” said Jessica Granweiler, who presented the findings at a conference last month. “What’s even more worrying is that of all the countries we mapped, one in three had more unusable areas in protected areas than outside of protected areas.”

Girls get drunk more than boys

Teenage girls outdrink teenage boys in the UK by a wider margin than in any other country in Europe, the OECD found. More than a third of 15-year-old girls in Britain report having been drunk at least twice, compared with under a quarter of boys of that age. In only three European countries – Denmark, Hungary and Italy – do a higher proportion of girls admit to have been “repeatedly drunk”. In Denmark, 43% of girls have been drunk at least twice compared with 46% of boys; in Italy, 35% of girls have got drunk, compared with 27% of boys.

A “dinosaur highway” in Oxfordshire

Just a few hundred metres from the M40 in Oxfordshire, scientists have uncovered traces of a “dinosaur highway”: an expanse of quarry floor containing more than 200 dinosaur prints. Today, these appear as indents in limestone, measuring up to 65cm in diameter. But in the Middle Jurassic Period, 166 million years ago, the quarry was a shallow lagoon surrounded by mudflats where a herd of giant herbivores may have encountered a passing predator.

Five trackways have so far been recorded, one of them extending to over 150 metres. Four seem to have belonged to long-necked sauropods, most likely *Cetiosaurus*, an up to 18-metre-long cousin of *Diplodocus*. The fifth was made by the carnivorous theropod *Megalosaurus*, which had three-toed clawed feet and grew up to nine metres. The paths cross, and based on the way the mud was disturbed, the team, from Birmingham and Oxford universities, can tell that the herbivores ambled through the area first; and as the prints were left at more or less the same time, it’s possible that a *Megalosaurus* was pursuing them. At one point, it appears that a herbivore stopped and put a foot to one side, as though turning – perhaps to look at the predator coming up behind it.



A *Megalosaurus* print in the limestone

Cancer diagnosed earlier

More cancer cases than ever are being caught at an early stage in England, when the chances of successful treatment are higher. NHS data on 13 common cancers, including breast, prostate and lung cancer, shows that between September 2023 and August 2024, 120,958 of the 206,038 cases diagnosed were identified at stage one or two, up 2.7% on pre-pandemic levels. Officials said the rise showed that initiatives to persuade at-risk groups to come forward for screening were paying dividends. These include targeted lung health check (TLHC) programmes, in which scanning trucks have parked outside supermarkets and other venues. However, NHS England is still not likely to meet its target of 75% of cases being diagnosed at stage one or two by 2028; and one in three cancer patients are still having to wait more than 62 days for treatment following an urgent referral.

Pick of the week's *Gossip*

Keir Starmer's phone call with **Donald Trump** before Christmas was a crash course in "international diplomacy, Trump-style", The Times reports. As the PM tried to discuss issues such as Ukraine, the president-elect allegedly veered off on a series of wild tangents. At one point, he started going on about the number of birds being killed by wind turbines in the US; later, he started telling Starmer about meeting the Prince of Wales at the reopening of Notre-Dame. He praised William's "modern" beard; and also had kind words for Starmer's wife, Victoria, saying she was "beautiful" and his "greatest asset".



Nepo babies are fighting back. In a new documentary, **Mel B's** daughter **Phoenix Chi Gulzar** (above) asks why the children of celebrities are accused of exploiting their parents' fame to unfair advantage – but society accepts Prince William's status as "the ultimate nepo baby". Meanwhile on Christmas Day, **Cruz Beckham** hit back against his critics, pointing out in a since-deleted comment on Instagram that "Jesus was also a nepo baby".

After leaving the White House, **Jimmy Carter** gave a speech in Japan, which he opened with a joke, says Patrick Kidd in The Times. Rather to his surprise, it prompted gales of laughter. "It wasn't even my funniest," Carter complained. Later, he asked why this particular joke had gone down so well. His interpreter admitted that he'd said to the audience: "The president told a funny story. Everyone must laugh."

Farage and Musk: an ill-fated dalliance

So the bromance is over, said David Gauke in The New Statesman. For weeks before Christmas, Nigel Farage had basked in the admiration of the world's richest man. There was speculation that Elon Musk was planning to give as much as \$100m to Reform UK; and in an interview this week, Farage described the X/Twitter owner as a "hero" who made his party look "cool". Then, that same day, it came: "The Reform Party needs a new leader. Farage doesn't have what it takes." Musk did not explain his post on X, but it seems he'd been

angered by Farage refusing to endorse his demand that Tommy Robinson, a co-founder of the English Defence League, be freed from jail.

A minority of right-wingers in America get "misty eyed" about Robinson, said Jon Sopel in The Independent. They see him as a "free speech hero", brought down by a "woke" state for agitating against Asian grooming gangs and radical Islam. In fact, he is a rabble-rousing extremist with a violent criminal record, who is in jail for contempt: he'd repeated unfounded allegations about a teenage Syrian refugee, in wilful defiance of a court injunction. Musk backs him even so. But Farage could not defend such a figure, said James Kirkup in The London Standard. Over the years, he has trod a delicate



Musk and Farage in happier times

line – raising concerns about immigration and social cohesion in order to "shift political debate to his preferred positions", while distancing himself and his parties from the far-right. His ambition, of leading the main party of the British Right, depends on him shunning thugs like Robinson.

The Musk dalliance was always ill-fated, said Janet Daley in The Sunday Telegraph. Even if the \$100m donation had become a reality, which is doubtful, it's hard to see how Farage could have accepted it: he has, after all,

built his career on the principle that the UK's governance should not be subject to foreign interference. In any case, Farage can do without a foreign billionaire's cash, said Patrick O'Flynn in The Daily Telegraph. Reform is riding high in the polls. Over Christmas, it claimed to have more members than the Tory Party – sparking a row with Kemi Badenoch about the accuracy of the figures that further boosted its numbers. Days later, another ex-Tory MP (Marco Longhi) defected to it. Musk's high-profile support was a PR win that Farage has banked; now, by refusing to kowtow to a capricious tycoon, he may have further boosted his political authority, and his standing with crucial "Reform-curious" voters. If anyone thinks the Musk split will dent the Farage project, they're "kidding themselves".

Health reform: can Starmer save the NHS?

"New year, old issue," said Mark Wallace in The i Paper: how do you fix the NHS? That was the question the PM chose for his first big speech of 2025. Keir Starmer sounded uncompromising as he described the problems facing NHS England: the waiting list for elective procedures is 7.5 million strong; just 59% of patients are seen within the 18-week target. Labour has promised major investment: an extra £26bn, on top of a budget of some £200bn. But this week, Starmer declared that in return he wants "top to bottom" reform. The NHS, he insisted, cannot "become the national money pit". Some of the reforms he announced were "sensible", if limited, said The Times. Labour wants to move some patients away from congested hospitals by opening 14 "community diagnostic centres", which will perform scans and tests seven days per week. There will also be 14 new surgical hubs (with three more expanded), doing common operations such as cataract removals. In addition, the use of private clinics will be increased. As a result, Starmer promised, 65% of patients will be seen within 18 weeks by the end of next year, rising to 92% by the end of the Parliament.

In short, Starmer is offering "reheated Blairism", said Kristian Niemietz on CapX. A little more patient choice, some private provision, and a few specialist surgical centres. That may not be such

a bad thing, however. Fundamental reform is off the table: Britain does not do that. Instead, the NHS has, since the 1990s, been bedevilled by constant, often fruitless, lower-level reorganisations and counter-reorganisations. At least we're being spared more disruptive zigzagging; and at least Blair's reforms did work.

But sadly, I'm not sure they will now, said Phil Whitaker in The New Statesman, because the NHS has "three additional issues" facing it today. The first is the crisis in social care, which leads to more elderly people being admitted to hospital unnecessarily, and prevents their "timely discharge". The Government has delayed action on this front until at least 2028. The second problem is the "hollowing out" of community care. The number of GPs and district nurses has fallen relative to patients. And with morale at rock-bottom, "retention continues to freefall". The third is that the NHS expends a huge amount of its resources on "low or no-value activities", such as "routine out-patient follow-up appointments" that are often not needed. The "political obsession" with providing ever more "scans and checks" is the latest of these. It is the "equivalent of building extra roads to ease congestion": it simply generates more traffic. "Rome continues to burn, and what we're seeing feels more like fiddling than firefighting."

Islamic State: the terror group's second act

On 20 March 2019, President Trump proudly brandished a sheet of paper before White House reporters, said Adrian Blomfield in *The Daily Telegraph*. On it were two maps of Syria. The first, swathed in red blotches, showed how much territory Islamic State had held in the country when he became president. The second, almost perfectly white map, showed what the jihadist group now held: just one tiny area near the town of Baghuz. And that, boasted Trump, would disappear very soon. It did, in a matter of days; but last week's deadly ramming attack in New Orleans, by a man apparently inspired by the group, is a reminder that Isis is still far from eradicated. Indeed, analysts have been warning for months that the group is having something of a revival: according to one expert, it has carried out almost 700 attacks in Syria over the past year.

Despite the loss of its "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq, Isis remains a lethal threat, said Jason Burke in *The Guardian*. It has established new hubs in the Sahel region and eastern Africa, and its Afghan affiliate – known as Isis-Khorasan, or Isis-K – was responsible for the mass shooting in a Moscow concert hall last year that claimed the lives of at least 145 people. The group's ideas, meanwhile, continue to inspire a small



Isis fighters in Syria in 2014

number of disaffected or disturbed individuals in the West. There was reportedly a significant rise in thwarted Isis-inspired attacks in America last year – a trend attributed to the US authorities' failure to curb the spread of extremist Islamist propaganda online, and the "radicalising effects of the war in Gaza".

Governments have become more adept at heading off terrorist plots, said Eliot Wilson in *The i Paper*, but random vehicle attacks such as the one in New Orleans, or the one less than a fortnight earlier

on a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, pose a particular challenge. All lone-wolf attackers need in such cases is "determination and blood lust", and there's not much we can do to stop them short of pedestrianising all urban areas and banning public gatherings. Preventing Isis from expanding its power bases would help curb its malign influence, said *The Times*. It will seek to exploit any political vacuum in Syria, where US-backed forces are currently holding thousands of Isis prisoners. Trump recently said of Syria: "This is not our fight. Let it play out." But the incoming president may have to abandon that laissez-faire attitude in office. "Domestic security partly depends on global vigilance." For everyone's sake, "Isis must not be allowed a second act".

With Love, Meghan: a twee "cringefest"

"We've had Meghan the actress, Meghan the people's princess, and Meghan the wound-licking, Oprah-confiding ex-royal," said Alice-Azania Jarvis in *The Times*. "Now the artist formerly known as Ms Markle has a new guise: Meghan the trad-wife." Last week the Duchess of Sussex unveiled the trailer for her new Netflix lifestyle series, *With Love, Meghan* – a "honey-hued" cringefest in which the bouncy-haired 43-year-old is seen picking berries, cutting cakes and arranging flowers. "We're not in the pursuit of perfection, we're in the pursuit of joy," she purrs, as she floats around the enormous kitchen of a rented house near her own in Montecito. *With Love, Meghan?*, asked Paul Baldwin in *The Daily Express*. "God, even the title makes you want to stick your fingers down your throat."



"In the pursuit of joy"

I'm no Meghan hater, but even I'm disappointed, said Olivia Petter in *The Independent*. Whatever happened to the outspoken feminist who took on *The Firm* – and who is this smug Stepford Wife? It makes sense that, after all the drama, Meghan wants to stop talking about the royal family, and this represents a return to what she

knows: she ran a lifestyle blog before she married Harry. But did it really have to be so twee? The trailer has been ridiculed online, said Katie Rosseinsky in *The Independent*. But that doesn't necessarily spell disaster: "a 'hate follow' is still a follow", and it has been suggested that the Duchess – who recently returned to Instagram – could earn \$1m per post as a professional influencer.

She certainly needs her relaunch to work, said Jan Moir in the *Daily Mail*. The pair fled to the US hoping to carve out high-profile independent careers, but they are "running out of options". Their £80m deal with Netflix – reportedly their main source of income – expires this autumn. Their podcast partnership with Spotify was axed after failing "to meet productivity benchmarks". Harry's latest show, *Polo*, tanked on Netflix, and Meghan has so far failed to convert her "moth-eaten old donkey of royal fame" into any tangible influence stateside. "She's not Gwyneth, she's not Michelle O", and with each passing year her ability to cash in on her royal status is fading. "*With Love, Meghan* is her last chance at the big time."

Wit & Wisdom

"A bank is a place that will lend you money if you can prove that you don't need it."

Bob Hope, quoted in *The Economist*

"All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."

Novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, quoted in *The Times*

"I've never wished a man dead, but I have read some obituaries with great pleasure."

Clarence Darrow, quoted in *The Observer*

"There is no absurdity so palpable but that it may be firmly planted in the human head if you only begin to inculcate it before the age of five."

Arthur Schopenhauer, quoted on *UnHerd*

"At the bottom of all tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into the little booth with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper."

Winston Churchill, quoted in *India Legal*

"Nagging is the repetition of unpalatable truths."

Edith Summerskill, quoted in the *Warrington Guardian*

"The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool."

Sandra Day O'Connor, quoted on *The Conversation*

"In America, anyone can become president, that's the problem."

George Carlin, quoted in *The Vindicator*

Statistics of the week

Just 52% of eligible adults voted in the general election in 2024, the lowest proportion since universal suffrage was introduced.

The Guardian

In 2001 the average weight of a car in the EU was 1,328kg. By 2020 it had jumped to 1,457kg. More than half of new cars sold in the UK are too big for the smallest permitted parking spaces.

The Times

Darts: the unstoppable rise of “Luke the Nuke”

Last year, a 16-year-old Luke Littler announced himself as a once-in-a-generation talent by reaching the final of the PDC World Darts Championship, said Oliver Holt in the Daily Mail, though in the end he lost that match to Luke Humphries. Last week, however, in the final of the 2025 Championship, the teenage sensation “went one better” by beating Michael van Gerwen 7-3. In the process, he became the youngest player to lift the darts world title by an astonishing seven years. By contrast, van Gerwen, 35, had “big-game experience coming out of his nostrils”, having won the world title three times and appeared in six previous finals, said Sean Ingle in The Guardian. Yet as the match got under way at a raucous Alexandra Palace, he looked the more nervous of the two. Littler took full advantage, and raced to a 4-0 lead. While the Dutchman “briefly stemmed the bleeding with a bullseye to win set five”, and went on to win two more sets, there was never any real doubt who the winner would be. And sure enough, Littler closed out victory with a nerveless double 16 in set ten. A match that was “supposed to be a contest” had instead been “nearly a rout”.

Littler was just 18 months old when his dad, Anthony – a taxi driver from Warrington, Cheshire – bought him a magnetic darts board from a pound shop, said Jeremy Wilson in The Daily Telegraph. He scored his first 180 aged six, and hit his first nine-dart finish (that is, scoring the 501 points needed to win a leg in just three visits to the oche) aged 13. Having used the “countless spare hours” of the Covid-19 lockdown to further hone his game, he won his first senior title – the Irish Open – in 2021. While Littler has always looked like a champion in the making, the speed of his ascent to the summit has astonished observers. Typically, it takes darts players years to develop the steely nerves required consistently to excel in match conditions.

Yet pressure doesn’t seem to faze Littler at all, said Owen Slot in The Times: on the contrary, it “gives him a lift”. This was evident in the final from his aptitude in closing out sets when he had the chance to do so. While “van Gerwen just couldn’t nail his



Littler: “pressure doesn’t seem to faze him at all”

doubles”, and achieved a checkout rate of 36.84%, Littler’s was a “masterful” 56%. On other metrics, the match was pretty even: Littler’s three-dart average was only slightly higher than van Gerwen’s (102.73 to 100.69), and van Gerwen edged him on 180s, throwing 13 to Littler’s 12.

With this victory, Littler has “earned the right to enter the pantheon of youthful sporting legends”, said Tim Spiers in The New York Times. One thinks of a 17-year-old Pelé winning the World Cup with Brazil, of Sachin Tendulkar making his Test debut for India aged 16, and of Serena Williams winning her first US Open as a 17-year-old. Typically, when very young athletes achieve spectacular success, there is anxious talk about the dangers of burnout, of the constant attention affecting their

talent, said Jonathan Liew in The Guardian. While the dangers of this are all too real – think of Emma Raducanu – such warnings seem redundant in Littler’s case: from the form he maintained last season, when he won ten PDC titles, it’s clear that he has little difficulty tuning out external noise. Increasingly, it feels reasonable to talk about him dominating the sport for years to come, and of him quite possibly one day eclipsing Phil Taylor’s all-time record of 16 world titles.

“With this win, ‘Littler has earned the right to enter the pantheon of youthful sporting legends’”

For now, what is very clear is that “Luke the Nuke” is propelling the sport to “ever greater heights of popularity”, said Oliver Holt. Last year’s World Darts final attracted 4.8

million viewers on Sky Sports – making it the most-watched non-football event in the broadcaster’s history. Once seen as “snooker’s poor relation”, darts has been enjoying a resurgence. At a time when football has alienated its core audience by becoming too big and commercial, darts has managed to retain an echo of its “roots in working men’s clubs and pubs”. For most fans of the sport, a darts match feels like a “sanctuary”. And in Littler, it has the ideal poster boy: someone whose “down-to-earth” interests – he enjoys eating kebabs and hanging out with his mates – set him apart from most Premier League footballers. If he is the future of darts, then the sport is in good hands.

The Frenchman with a 128mph second serve

Although he is not yet a household name, he possesses “the most destructive weapon in professional tennis” and is someone “absolutely nobody” wants to face, said Tomaini Carayol in The Guardian. Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard is a 21-year-old, 6ft 8in Frenchman who possesses a truly fearsome serve – one expected to propel him far higher than his current world ranking of 30. Last year, he averaged 19 aces a match – easily the highest number on tour – and clinched his first title, the Swiss Open, in October. Last week, he continued his good form at the Brisbane Open, where he reached the semi-finals before losing to Reilly Opelka (another massive server). In one match,



Not just a “servebot”

he averaged 136mph on his first serve, and a remarkable 128mph on his second. Most players are far more conservative with their second deliveries, but Mpetshi Perricard essentially plays tennis with two nearly identical serves – yet still concedes very few double faults.

Mpetshi Perricard, who comes from Lyon, may hit his serve like he is “smacking a rock with a frying pan”, but he is by no means merely a “servebot”, said

Matthew Futterman in The New York Times. He moves well for someone of his stature, and “his volley stings”. The bad news for his rivals is that he believes his serve can still be improved: last week, he predicted that within a year or two, his second serve could reach speeds of 140mph.

Sporting headlines

Football Manchester United ended their run of four straight defeats by drawing 2-2 with Liverpool in the Premier League.

Crickets Australia completed a 3-1 series win over India, winning the fifth Test by six wickets.

Tennis Emma Raducanu pulled out of the Auckland Open with a back injury. She hopes to recover in time for the Australian Open.

Snowboarding Seventeen-year-old Briton Mia Brookes won her second successive World Cup title, with victory in the slopestyle in Austria.

Pick of the week's correspondence

Why the NHS is in crisis...

To The Daily Telegraph

Your leading article makes a valid point about blockages in hospitals caused by elderly and infirm patients, but the main problem is that we simply do not have enough beds. Japan, for example, has 12.6 beds per 1,000 people. Germany has 7.8. We have but 2.4.

Terry Crocker, Bristol

...the PM's plan...

To The Times

In his article "I won't let our NHS die – this is my prescription", Keir Starmer sets out his plan to reduce hospital waiting lists. Among other things, it will involve "diagnostic centres operating 12 hours a day, seven days a week". It appears, given that trained staff cannot be produced overnight, that this will involve doctors and nurses etc. working additional hours.

This seems a very uncertain, and indeed unfair, basis on which to build the policy. What if the staff don't want to work extra hours? Morale among NHS staff is already low, and any pressure on them to work longer will send it lower.

Some rail companies rely on overtime to staff Sunday train services, and the result is frequent cancellations.

There is no reason to expect the NHS to fare any better.

Graham Smith, London

...and a possible solution

To The Times

Why not allow GPs to provide a private service outside their contracted hours? There are a large number of part-time GPs who don't have the requirement to provide a 24-hour service and could easily do this, and a substantial proportion of the population who can afford to pay.

Dr Julian Turner (ret'd GP), Westward Ho!, Devon

The danger posed by bugs

To The Guardian

In your article about the millennium bug, you quote Martyn Thomas, who led Deloitte Consulting's Y2K work, rightly saying that heroic efforts avoided major disasters. At the time, I was a member of the advisory committee on the safety of nuclear installations. For nuclear systems, the goal

Exchange of the week

Can Netanyahu's policy be justified?

To the Financial Times

Your recent editorial ("The reshaping of the Middle East") devotes several column inches to the prosecution's case against Israel without allowing any to the defence, and without any attempt to explain why Benjamin Netanyahu's strategy has resulted in burgeoning domestic public support. The editorial ends with the familiar siren call for "Netanyahu to end the conflict and agree a deal to release the hostages" and the even older plea that "ultimately, Israel's security can only be guaranteed with peace". Putting aside the obvious rejoinder that it takes both sides to end a conflict, I would suggest that Israel – and Netanyahu in particular – has learnt from the 2011 hostage exchange (which included releasing Yahya Sinwar). These deals merely encourage further hostage-taking. Netanyahu's subsequent, equally disastrous, policy of tolerating Hamas's control of Gaza, shows that security does not ensue from deals that leave an armed organisation on its border dedicated to Israel's destruction.

Charles Mercey, Tellisford, Somerset

To the Financial Times

Charles Mercey provides a useful reminder of why Benjamin Netanyahu's policies have supporters in Israel and around the world. What is missing, however, at least from the viewpoint of those with an understanding of insurgency wars in general, is the recognition that Hamas will ultimately be strengthened by the war in Gaza. While Israelis clearly felt that the horrendous attacks of 7 October 2023 were an existential threat to the country and that Hamas and its supporters need to be punished, equally Palestinians will feel that the killings, maimings, starving of the population, and the reduction of so many homes to rubble will require retribution.

Just as previous rounds of Israeli bombing helped to produce the perpetrators of 7 October, a new generation of Palestinians and others in the region will gravitate to Hamas, or similar groups, over the next couple of decades in order to exact revenge. All of which is to say that Hamas cannot be conclusively vanquished, and that successive rounds of violence are no good to anyone.

Richard Stubbs, professor emeritus, department of political science, McMaster University, Canada

was not so much about finding and fixing bugs. Rather, it was to do with re-establishing confidence in safety that might have been compromised by potential bugs. It was expensive, but the cost of assuring systems are safe needs to be borne. This is a lesson that is often forgotten – or ignored – by system builders.

Look at the risks we are running from the headlong rush to produce self-driving cars and applying AI systems.

Bev Littlewood, emeritus professor of software engineering, City St George's

The architect of "misery"

To The Spectator

Your asking the last living devotee of Le Corbusier to review my critique of postwar British architecture had

a predictable result. Jonathan Meades even emigrated to France to find a house designed by his hero, who must have been responsible for more human misery than any European in peacetime.

Corbusier was a collectivist whose ideas overwhelmed town planning after the last War. He believed old cities were obsolete. His followers flattened swathes of urban Britain in favour of large blocks and cars. Hundreds of thousands of "Corbusian" tower and slab homes proved uninhabitable and had to be demolished. Billions in public money has been spent trying to make remaining estates lettable.

There has never been any public inquiry into this era. The architectural profession never investigated itself, let alone apologised. All this has long deserved exposure. Yet this is rarely done by Corbusier's most craven worshippers, the architecture critics.

Simon Jenkins, via email

How to unlock housing

To the Financial Times

Home ownership and asset inflation in the UK has given many families the financial comfort to enjoy life. This is not a problem in itself.

However, when you add in the extended life expectancy, the real problem is that wealth is locked up, typically in family homes that are desperately needed by families and not retirees. Solve the housing crisis by allowing everyone above retirement age to downsize, stamp-duty free, transferring excess wealth to families when they need help the most, in their 30s and 40s.

Matthew Lilly, Cobham, Kent

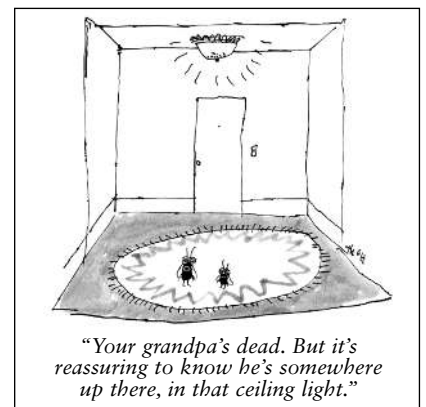
Falling in love again

To The Times

I can attest to the power of handwriting. My husband of 62 years and four months died a year ago. He remained my beloved until the end, but I found that I couldn't remember him as he was in his prime. During the Christmas break I found and reread for the first time the hundreds of letters we wrote to each other during our engagement (we lived in different countries).

It is wonderful therapy and a great comfort. I can hear and almost see him as he was then, and I find myself falling in love with him all over again.

Aude Fitzsimons, Girton, Cambridge



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The Week Junior is the **award-winning children's magazine** that inspires a love of reading and learning, and encourages kids to think for themselves. Our expert editorial team packs every issue with **thought-provoking news**, **fascinating facts** and **eye-catching images** from around the world.

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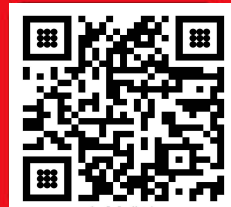
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P25NY3



Book of the week

Every Valley

by Charles King

Bodley Head 352pp £25

The Week Bookshop £22.99 (incl. p&p)

Handel's *Messiah*, composed in 1741, "occupies a unique place in the Western musical canon", said Lucasta Miller in the Financial Times. The oratorio remains a "vigorously living work" that is "brought into new being each time it is performed". Meanwhile, its "Hallelujah Chorus" has "become a recognised soundtrack for celebration". In his fascinating new book *Every Valley*, Charles King, a Washington-based professor of government, "dives deep" into Handel's masterpiece, which he describes as "the greatest piece of participatory art ever created". The book does many things: it tells the story of the *Messiah*'s composition and early performances in Dublin and London; it offers portraits of various figures who helped bring it to life; and it illuminates many aspects of Hanoverian Britain, which King portrays as a society marked by a "sense of perilous insecurity". Impressively, King keeps all these strands "expertly in play" – and the results are "truly informative" and "engaging".

While the *Messiah* is a work devoted to glorifying God, King shows that the circumstances of its creation were all too human,



said Peter Conrad in The Observer. Its libretto was "collaged together" from quotes from the King James Bible by the wealthy book collector Charles Jennens, a depressive hypochondriac. Handel, an "obese epicure" with a "diabolical temper", proceeded to write the two-and-a-half-hour score in a mere 24 days, often raiding his past compositions to do so. He wrote the celebrated contralto part for the actress and singer Susannah Cibber, whose reputation had been "sullied" a few years earlier when it emerged that her husband had "sold her sexual favours to a crony to defray his debts". For Cibber, appearing in the première of the *Messiah* was a chance to "relaunch her career".

The downside of King's contextualising approach is that Handel at times "disappears from view", said Freya Johnston in Literary Review. This is particularly so during an interlude about Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, a former slave from West Africa who lived in England during the 1730s; interesting as his story is, it has "only peripheral relevance" to the subject. Still, King's portrait of the age is impressively detailed, said John Adams in The New York Times. Readers are "plunged into the hectic mayhem of London life, with the slave trade a sinister backdrop for an economy that kept class distinctions frozen". At once an "in-depth study of artistic creation" and a compelling anatomy of 18th century Britain, this is a "work of vivid social and cultural commentary".

Gobsmacked!

by Ben Yagoda

Princeton 288pp £20

The Week Bookshop £17.99

"It has been common over the last century to see the United States as the dominant cultural exporter, shaping the global palette with blue jeans, rock'n'roll and the American idiom," said Dennis Duncan in The Washington Post. Reminding us that the process can also work in the opposite direction, Ben Yagoda's new book sets out to analyse the "British invasion of American English". Yagoda, a professor emeritus of English, maintains that for most of the 20th century, the American "appetite for Britishisms" was small. But in the 1990s, this began to change, and British phrases such as "book a table", "spot-on" and "own goal" increasingly filtered into American usage. Yagoda attributes this phenomenon to several factors, said Anne Curzan in The Wall Street Journal: they include the popularity of shows such as *The Crown* (pictured) and *Downton Abbey*, influential celebrities and journalists such as James Corden and Tina Brown, and the "online availability of British periodicals more generally". Well researched and non-judgemental, *Gobsmacked!* is the perfect read for "anyone fascinated by language".

It is also a book that will "make the average Briton proud", said Emma Brockes in The Guardian. As Yagoda charts the often ludicrous British terms that have made inroads into the US – among them "kerfuffle", "pear-shaped" and "boffin" – it's hard not to feel a bit patriotic. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on rude words, "the creation and usage of which is one of the few areas in which we remain world class". *Gobsmacked!* relies heavily on the Google Books Ngram Viewer, a tool for measuring the "frequency of words across millions of texts online", and I eventually became "a bit sick of hearing about it". But such nerdiness is "worth putting up with for the sheer joy of the rest of the book".



Novel of the week

Alive in the Merciful Country

by A.L. Kennedy

Saraband 384pp £18.99

The Week Bookshop £16.99

The narrator of A.L. Kennedy's new novel is a "woman weighed down" by her past trauma, said Lee Langley in The Spectator. The year is 2020, and Anna is working as a primary school teacher, steering her nine-year-old pupils through lockdown "while coping with life as the single mother of a troubled teenager boy". One day, a "thick envelope lands on her doormat"; in it is a memoir written by Buster, an undercover cop Anna fell in love with in her 20s, when she belonged to a street theatre collective. Her memories spool back to that period, her perspective alternating with that of Buster. While the novel is "not a quick read", Kennedy's prose regularly "soars and swoops", and her fans will "love this book".

At her best, Kennedy exhibits a "beadily bleak eye" and a "profound humanity", said Clare Clark in The Guardian. But the novel's political messages are clunky – as is Anna's insistence on labelling everything she opposes "Stiltskin", in reference to the fairy tale she is teaching her pupils. For all Kennedy's "remarkable literary talents", this novel is "a curate's egg".

THE WEEK Bookshop

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Opening times: Monday to Saturday 9am-5.30pm and Sunday 10am-4pm

Theatre: The Tempest

Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London WC2 (020-7401 9919). Until 1 February Running time: 2hrs 10mins ★★

Hopes were high for star theatre director Jamie Lloyd's latest celebrity-led production, said Fiona Mountford in *The i Paper*. The 2,000-seater Theatre Royal Drury Lane – London's oldest and grandest theatre – hadn't staged a work by Shakespeare since 1957, when John Gielgud played Prospero in a production of *The Tempest* for Peter Brook; so news that Hollywood star Sigourney Weaver was to make her West End debut there, in the same role, created quite the buzz – and seats were priced to match. Alas, the production, which opened just before Christmas, is a turkey. Weaver's "wooden delivery never wavers from a tone of blank meditation", and those unfamiliar with this magical play will be "bamboozled from start to finish", owing to the lack of "clarity and conviction" in this dreary, underlit staging.



Weaver: an underpowered Prospero

"Dressed down, like a crew member from *Blake's 7* hired on a minimum wage, this Prospero makes next to no impression at all," said Clive Davis in *The Times*. In fact, Weaver's performance is so stiff and dull, you think an Alexa-type smart speaker "could have breathed more life into the lines". Still, there are other performances that almost right the listing ship. A semi-naked Forbes Masson, sporting what looks like a black nappy, makes a convincing, melancholic Caliban. Mason Alexander Park, hoisted

high over the stage, is a thrilling Ariel. And Selina Cadell is so assured as Gonzalo, you can't help wishing that she'd been cast in the lead.

I rather liked this *Tempest*, said Arifa Akbar in *The Guardian*. Admittedly, Weaver's "featureless" delivery leaves a "vacuum" in the central role. But the show's visuals – inspired, perhaps, by the actress's sci-fi filmography – are dazzling. Designer Soutra Gilmour has conjured a "bleakly spectacular" staging, agreed Sarah Hemming in the FT. Prospero's island is at times a "barren *Dune*-like landscape strewn with black rubble", at others a "mysterious, otherworldly oasis". But it's not enough to save a lacklustre, "unmoving" production, in which the star turn has gone awol and Shakespeare's rough magic is "lost at sea".

The week's other opening

Carlos Acosta's Nutcracker in Havana Touring until 28 January; Woking until 11 January, then Wolverhampton, Milton Keynes and Salford (nutcrackerinhavana.com). Acosta's "fresh" new take on the *Nutcracker* "radiates warmth and charm". Packed with surprising nuggets, it is a "sun-kissed, salsa-based treat" (*Daily Telegraph*).

Podcasts... popular series to listen out for in 2025

If you're looking for something new to listen to in 2025, tracking podcasts with perfect five-star ratings on Apple and Spotify "may throw up some gems", said Patricia Nicol in *The Sunday Times*. For instance, I had always avoided **The Blindboy Podcast**, by the Irish satirist David Chambers, because I was put off by its "disquieting" cover-art image of a man's face swaddled in a shopping bag. But now I see why listeners rave about this "original, thoughtful and painstakingly produced" series in which Chambers riffs on



Andy Dawson and Bob Mortimer, the hosts of *Athletico Mince*

subjects ranging from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to earwigs. **The Magnus Archives**, a horror podcast with an "extraordinary" 46,200 five-star ratings on Spotify, is set in a fictional academic library dedicated to the esoteric. Other podcasts that are beloved by their listeners include Paul Cooper's **Fall of Civilizations**, and the comedy podcasts **Athletico Mince** (with Bob Mortimer and Andy Dawson) and **My Therapist Ghosted Me**. For sports fans, top raters include **Tailenders**, about cricket, and **For the Love of Rugby**.

Threshold is a terrific podcast about the natural world, notable for its "exquisite and imaginative sound design", said James Marriott in *The Times*. Host Amy Martin explores questions such as: 'What sound does a frozen lake make on a sunny

day?' (The answer, to my ears, is a "sort of squeaky, bloopy, howling noise like the ghost of a sad spaniel trapped in a tunnel".) Elsewhere, we meet the treehopper, which communicates by sending "waves of vibrations through its legs into the stems and leaves of plants", and listen to the sound of a coral reef: a static crackle of "claw clicks" made by snapping shrimp. This is a "commendably imaginative" series – and if it "gets a little precious" at times, "well, sometimes whimsy is the price you pay for interesting thoughts".

The appetite for tales of espionage shows no signs of waning, said Fiona Sturges in the FT, with *Slow Horses*, *Black Doves* and *The Day of the Jackal* all hits on TV. Fans of those shows should try **The Spy Who**, hosted by actors Indira Varma and Raza Jaffrey, which is now in its 11th series. Its subjects include Klaus Fuchs, who sold US secrets to the Soviets; Willie Carlin, MI5's top spy inside Sinn Féin; and Ian Fleming's wartime exploits in Norway. I normally recoil from dramatised segments in podcasts, owing to their "often overzealous acting"; here, though, the hosts do all the voices, and the "result is a show that makes you feel as if you're being read a particularly action-packed bedtime story, albeit one with immersive sound design" (headphones recommended) and "an elegantly understated score".

Stars reflect the overall quality of reviews and our own independent assessment (5 stars=don't miss; 1 star=don't bother)



Nosferatu

2hrs 12mins (15)

Visually stunning
remake of the German
expressionist classic

★★★★

A Hollywood remake of F.W. Murnau's *Dracula*-inspired classic from 1922, *Nosferatu* "is one of those films that will divide audiences", said Matthew Bond in *The Mail on Sunday*. "Some will see it as a ponderous anachronism, a vampire picture ... lacking in vital sexual undercurrents and failing to move the reliably popular genre forward at all." Others will love it, and see it as an homage not only to Murnau, "but to cinema itself". To my surprise, "I found myself in the latter camp", albeit by only a few steps. Set mostly in 1838, the film stars Lily-Rose Depp as Ellen, the troubled young newlywed whose husband (Nicholas Hoult) is dispatched to Transylvania to facilitate the sale of a property to the enigmatic nobleman Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård). While he is away, she goes to stay with friends (Emma Corrin and Aaron Taylor-Johnson), where she is plagued by night terrors and convulsions. "With a screen bled of nearly all colour, and even subtitles that come in gothic script, this is a visually stunning" production; and Hoult and Depp are both excellent. However, the film is about 15 minutes too long, and it doesn't scrimp on cinematic clichés.

Robert Eggers's spin on Bram Stoker's novel is gory and extravagant, said Tim Robey in *The Daily Telegraph*. But while it looks incredible, it is a bit deficient in "actual storytelling". I loved it, said Clarisse Loughrey in *The Independent*, for its "staggeringly detailed" invocation of the 1830s, and the ghastly atmosphere it conveys. "Does evil come from within us, or from beyond?" asks Ellen. A decade in the making, *Nosferatu* is "one of the most profoundly, seductively frightening horrors in years, all because its terrors seem to crawl right out from our own stomachs".



We Live in Time

1hr 48mins (15)

Tearjerker starring
Andrew Garfield and
Florence Pugh

★★★

We Live in Time is a romantic drama "that punches you in the gut and then breaks your heart for good measure", said Linda Marric in *The Sun*. Directed by John Crowley (*Brooklyn*), it stars Florence Pugh as Almut, a talented chef chasing professional glory who meets Tobias (Andrew Garfield), a marketing executive for Weetabix, when she accidentally hits him with her car. Their future together is imperilled, however, by Almut's ovarian cancer. The narrative is not linear, so we see Almut's cancer returning before we find out how she and Tobias got together – an approach that ends up rather weakening the impact of the film's ending. But "the raw emotions hit hard all the same", and Pugh and Garfield have "undeniable chemistry".

Garfield and Pugh are on "top form" here, said Brian Viner in the *Daily Mail*, but I was irritated by how "ineffably middle class" the film is. It features one of those dinner parties that "only seem to exist in the imagination of screenwriters (Nick Payne, in this instance), at which none of the highly educated, eloquent people around the table can complete a sentence without effing and blinding". The plot is pretty "hackneyed" – it's really a reworking of *Love Story*, with lots of sweaty sex and a confusing, time-hopping storyline. I found the film "deeply annoying", said Deborah Ross in *The Spectator*. Pugh's character is "monstrously selfish", while Garfield is plain "dopey", always "hanging around with tears in his eyes when he should be at work". And the cancer Almut gets isn't "cancer cancer", but "cinema cancer" – so she remains "beatific throughout", displaying neither terror, nor rage, nor fear. The film even shirks "the actual business of dying" itself.



Nickel Boys

2hrs 20mins (12A)

Audacious adaptation of
Colson Whitehead's novel

★★★★

Every now and then, a film comes along "that understands the potential of cinema so deeply that it changes the medium for everyone", said Kevin Maher in *The Times*. The 2015 Holocaust drama *Son of Saul* was one of those films, as was 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. "To that list we now have to add *Nickel Boys*, an adaptation of Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that is told completely, and audaciously, through point-of-view shots of its two protagonists, Elwood (Ethan Herisse) and Turner (Brandon Wilson)." Opening in Jim Crow-era Florida, the film introduces us first to Elwood, whose blissful home life is turned on its head when he is sent to the "brutal Nickel Academy, a so-called reform school based on the real-life and equally infamous Dozier School for Boys". There, he meets the "slick but sensitive Turner", and an instant bond is formed. The film commits "welcome sacrilege by altering the horribly downbeat ending of Whitehead's novel"; and though its subject matter is grim, it's surprisingly uplifting.

"The first-person use of the camera may not be a new filmmaking technique," said Alistair Harkness in *The Scotsman*, but in *Nickel Boys*, director RaMell Ross "takes it to another level", immersing viewers in the boys' world in a way that is "quite extraordinary". This is a film that is "unlike anything else out there". Whitehead's book could easily have been adapted into a "sedate, unconventional" drama, said Radhika Seth in *Vogue*. Instead, Ross has created "something gorgeously bold and beguiling, bringing a surprising freshness and vitality to an undeniably gruelling story".



Better Man

2hrs 14min (15)

Biopic in which
Robbie Williams is
portrayed as a chimp

★★★

"As you'll no doubt have heard by now", Robbie Williams is portrayed in this biopic – directed by *The Greatest Showman*'s Michael Gracey – as an ape, said Patrick Cremona in *Radio Times*. "More specifically", the pop star narrates the film, while he is played on screen by an actor (Jonno Davies) who has been transformed by computer wizardry, so that for "every minute of the movie", whether Robbie is grieving his beloved nan in rainy Stoke-on-Trent, "performing to thousands in concert, or snorting cocaine backstage, he's depicted as a chimpanzee". This takes a bit of getting used to, but eventually you "find yourself getting swept up in the sheer emotion of watching Robbie's story unfold across the extreme highs and disastrous lows". It helps, too, that the film is generously sprinkled with his hits, which are worked into the plot "via dynamically staged musical numbers".

Two things are remarkable about Williams being a chimp, said Robbie Collin in *The Daily Telegraph*. One is the fact that no one in the film passes comment on it, not even his father (Steve Pemberton) or grandmother (Alison Steadman). The other is that about 15 minutes in, you find yourself idly thinking: how amazing that they found an actor who is such a close fit for the musician. As for the film, it's "occasionally corny, over ripe and self serving", but it uses every cinematic trick in the book to create some fabulous moments. It's a curious "hodgepodge", agreed Jordan Bassett in *NME*. Some of it is good, some of it is very bad, and it's all a bit of a mess. Still, "you can't fault the chutzpah or the ambition. If it makes back its reported budget, we'll eat \$110m worth of bananas."

Exhibition of the week Versailles: Science and Splendour

Science Museum, London SW7 (0330-058 0058, sciencemuseum.org.uk). Until 28 April

Courtly life in 18th century Versailles is widely remembered as “a world of pure fantasy frolics”, said Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian*. Yet for all the excess and absolutism associated with the reigns of Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI, the three monarchs took an impressively “progressive lead” when it came to scientific research. Their patronage gave rise to many remarkable developments in engineering, natural science and medicine. This “glittering” exhibition at the Science Museum looks past the clichés surrounding Versailles, and illustrates how the palace

was in fact a hive of experimentation and ingenuity: indeed, even the building and its grounds were “a technological achievement”, its gardens full of “state of the art innovations”. Featuring a wide array of exquisite objects, from drawings to machines and scientific equipment to taxidermy, this is a “blockbuster” of a show that should not be missed.

The rule of the last Bourbon kings coincided with “the elevation and systematisation” of science as a discipline, said Melanie McDonagh in *The London Standard*. Scientists sought – and often received – royal patronage, in the hope of presenting their discoveries at court. One such demonstration, commemorated in an illustration here, came courtesy of Étienne Montgolfier and his hot air balloon, which he tested before Louis XVI and Marie



Monsieur's Louis XVI Giving his Instructions to La Pérouse, 26 June 1785 (1817)

“France’s kings were interested in science only when it could satisfy their megalomaniacal desires”, said Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph*. A “freakishly enormous” hydraulic system was designed to bring water uphill from the Seine to Versailles’s fountains. It never worked. You can see Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s paintings of pineapples grown there – the ultimate status symbol. And you can see Louis XV’s stuffed rhinoceros too; in life, the pampered animal was fed on bread and given “moisturising oil massages”. Altogether scarier is “a wickedly elongated curved scalpel” created to “rid Louis XIV of an anal fistula”. The surgery was rehearsed on 75 impoverished test subjects, some of whom died; the surgeon was “so traumatised that he never operated again”. Altogether, the show is “a blast” – a superb exhibition that is also “a masterclass in brilliant, concise storytelling”.

Antoinette, filling its basket with “a rooster, a sheep and a duck” (thankfully, they survived the ordeal). “Wonderful pieces” abound: a “superlative” watch with a crystal face made for Marie Antoinette; “beautiful” zoological paintings; and a series of “stuffed anatomical dolls designed to demonstrate practical obstetrics”. All speak of a moment when science “was allied with the decorative arts”, rather than practised with dry functionality. It is enough to make the visitor rather “wistful”.

There are certain points at which you could be forgiven for thinking that

Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

Jim Dine

at Cristea Roberts Gallery

Jim Dine (b.1935) is almost certainly one of America’s greatest living artists. He is particularly celebrated for his repeated depictions of everyday objects and commonplace motifs, from stylised love hearts to bathrobes. No items, however, recur quite as consistently through his oeuvre as hand tools – hammers, spanners, chisels, saws and the like. This pictorial obsession stems from Dine’s childhood, when his grandfather ran a hardware shop. Ever since, these implements have held an almost mystical significance to him. This show, *Tools and Dreams*, brings together a wide selection of Dine’s tool prints created since the 1970s, reviewing his representation of such objects over the decades. Some seem



Two Hammers and a Plumber's Wrench (2009)

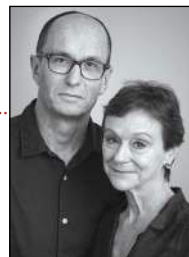
to communicate votive tendencies: a 1973 image of a spoon, in pale pink but fringed by a halo of black and gold, endows it with the aura of a religious relic; a bold and frankly terrifying image of a hammer from last year, meanwhile, has the feel of a totalitarian symbol. Prices range from £2,500 to £65,000.

43 Pall Mall, London SW1
(020-7439 1866). Until 18 January

Chronicler of Hebden Bridge

“Alice Longstaff, who died in 1992, was well known in her home town of Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, but not elsewhere,” says Mark Brown in *The Guardian*. Longstaff was born on a farm in 1907 and left school at 14, apparently determined to become a photographer. She then “took amazing photographs for 70 years”. She became the go-to snapper for “generations of Hebden Bridge residents getting married or needing passport photos”; but she also took many “end-of-the roll” pictures that “charted the people and everyday life of Hebden Bridge, as well as the distinctive beauty of the town and its surrounding Calder Valley landscape”. After her death, the charity Pennine Heritage was given a large collection of negatives. These have now been restored and are being seen for the first time. A new book, *End of the Roll: the Photographs of Alice Longstaff*, has been published by Pennine Heritage to bring them to a larger audience.





Best books... Nicci French

The bestselling husband-and-wife crime-writing duo – Sean French and Nicci Gerrard – choose their favourite books. Their latest thriller, The Last Days of Kira Mullan (Simon & Schuster £18.99), is out this week

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, 1847 (Wordsworth £3.99). This Victorian classic about an unloved orphan growing into a woman who is free, equal and passionately loved is a gothic romance, an erotic masterpiece, a work to read when you're young, old, and all the ages in between.

Lolly Willowes by Sylvia Townsend Warner, 1926 (Penguin £9.99). Miss Willowes is a young spinster living with her stiflingly respectable London family when she decides to move to the countryside and discover her destiny. Which is to become a witch. Townsend Warner's debut novel is like a joyously funny and sexy hand grenade.

Titles in print are available from The Week Bookshop on 020-3176 3835. For out-of-print books visit biblio.co.uk

The Silver Chair by C.S. Lewis, 1953 (HarperCollins £7.99). The most underrated of the Narnia books, in which Eustace and Jill find themselves in Narnia on a quest for a lost prince. In some ways this is a thriller for children, brilliantly plotted, with great twists and moments of genuine terror.

The Unwomanly Face of War by Svetlana Alexievich, 1985 (Penguin £9.99). In WWII, Soviet women could be soldiers and pilots as well as nurses. In the 1970s, Alexievich interviewed them. The resulting tapestry of voices – old women recalling their teenage years – is overwhelming, a work of art and one of the great acts of remembrance.

Presumed Innocent by Scott Turow, 1987 (Penguin £10.99). A lawyer is charged with murdering a fellow lawyer with whom he was having a secret affair. The legal process is evoked with pungent authority; the plot is genuinely startling. This couldn't be more different from our own work, but Turow's debut is a key inspiration.

Skippy Dies by Paul Murray, 2010 (Penguin £9.99). A story of coming of age, sex, death, betrayal and the meaning of the universe in an Irish private school. It's hilarious, compelling, deeply sad. How on earth does Ireland keep producing these great writers?

Television

Programmes

Our Tiny Islands Meera Syal narrates this four-part series (previously shown on More4) about the UK's 6,000 small islands, their landscapes, history and culture. Sat 11 Jan, C4 20:00 (60mins).

The Dry Season two of the comedy-drama about a thirtysomething Irish woman trying to remain sober while living with her dysfunctional family. Sun 12 Jan, ITV1 22:15 and 22:50 (30mins each).

How Not to Get Dementia GP Dr Claire Taylor meets patients living with dementia, and the scientists working on treatments for it. Thur 16 Jan, C5 19:00 (55mins).

Lucy Worsley Investigates: 1066 The historian looks at the Battle of Hastings, starting her investigation in Normandy. Fri 17 Jan, BBC2 21:00 (60mins).

Films

West Side Story (2021) Steven Spielberg's vibrant remake of the beloved 1961 musical about star-crossed lovers and rival New York gangs, complete with Leonard Bernstein's original score. Sat 11 Jan, C4 21:00 (185mins).

Saving Private Ryan (1998) More Spielberg – this time, his epic about a US army captain (Tom Hanks) who is tasked after D-Day with finding and sending home a young private. Sun 12 Jan, BBC2 22:00 (160mins).

Sexy Beast (2000) Cult classic starring Ray Winstone. A retired criminal living in Spain is paid a visit by an old associate (Ben Kingsley) who wants him to take part in one last job. Fri 17 Jan, Film4 22:50 (105mins).

The Week's guide to what's worth seeing

Showing now

Last chance to see **Francis Bacon: Human Presence**, "a truly biting show" that draws together more than 50 of the painter's unsettling portraits (Guardian). Until 19 January, National Portrait Gallery, London WC2 (npg.org.uk).

Tracy-Ann Oberman reprises her "electrifying" performance as Shylock in **The Merchant of Venice 1936**, as the timely reimagining of Shakespeare's moral drama goes on a nationwide tour (Times). Until 25 January, Trafalgar Theatre, London SW1; then touring (merchantofvenice1936.co.uk).

Book now

Hay Festival co-founder Peter Florence launches **The Conversation**, a new series of weekly talks in which he'll discuss topical issues with public figures, who will then carry on the conversation with the audience. 14 January-6 May, St Martin-in-the-Fields, London WC2 (stmartin-in-the-fields.org).

Tickets are selling fast for a slick, witty take on Mozart's **The Marriage of Figaro**, the first



A "slick, witty" take on *The Marriage of Figaro*

revival of the ENO's acclaimed production since its debut in 2020. 5-22 February, London Coliseum, London WC2 (eno.org).

Emma Rice – a director with something of a "Midas touch for innovative reworkings" – has now adapted Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller **North by Northwest** for the stage (Guardian). 18 March-5 April, York Theatre Royal; then touring until 22 June (wisechildrendigital.com).

New to subscription TV

Lockerbie: A Search for Truth Colin Firth stars in this powerful dramatisation of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103, and the fight for justice by victims' families. On Sky/NOW.

American Primeval Six-part western drama from the writer of *The Revenant*. Men and women fight for survival in the harsh and violent world of the Frontier. On Netflix.

The Archers: what happened last week

Eddie is outed as a ticket tout. On Christmas Day, Joy is about to propose to Mick when her daughter Rochelle turns up out of the blue. Joy is delighted, but Rochelle is evasive about how she's been – and where. Alice tells Brian about a job offer, but decides The Stables is better for her. Helen informs Tony and Pat that she ultimately sees herself living at Bridge Farm with the boys, leaving them reeling. Rochelle meets some villagers – including Rex, who invites her to his New Year's Eve party. Kirsty urges Rex to ask Rochelle out. Rex tells Kirsty about complications over the beaver enclosure; Kirsty reckons they should do a wild release. Joy awkwardly asks Rex not to pursue Rochelle, as she's more vulnerable than she seems. Henry shows the family his promotional plans for Bridge Farm – they're impressed. Chris and Hannah go for a drink; when he tries to kiss her, she pulls back, suspecting he doesn't know what he wants. Khalil overhears Rex and Kirsty's illegal beaver release plan and gets excited – a cautious Kirsty warns him not to breathe a word.

Dreamy ski chalets



▲ **France:** Combloux, Haute-Savoie. A handsome, three-level timber chalet with fantastic views of Mont Blanc. 5 beds, 3 baths, 2 showers, kitchen, 3 receps, wellness area, hot tub, steam room, garden, garage. €3.1m; Knight Frank (020-3869 4758).



◀ **Austria:** Zell am See. A ski-in, ski-out chalet in a private and tranquil woodland setting close to Lake Zell. The property is located a little more than one hour's drive from the historic city of Salzburg. 4 beds, 2 baths, open-plan kitchen/dining area, recep, parking. €2.5m; Savills (+43 664 877 8769).



▲ **France:** Chamonix-Mont-Blanc. Farmhouse built in 1806 on the slopes of Servoz with magnificent views of the Mont Blanc massif. 7 beds, 3 baths, kitchen, open-plan living/dining room, self-contained 3-bed flat in need of renovation, parking. €1.62m; Cimalpes (+33 451 334 001).





◀ **France:** Saint-Martin-de-Belleville. Charming, rustic *chalet d'alpage* in a glorious setting in the heart of Les Trois Vallées. 2 beds, family bath, kitchen, recep, converted cowshed including a dormitory-style area that sleeps eight, shower, parking. €1.475m; Leggett (+33 553 566 254).

▼ **Norway:** Brennkollveien 52, Norefjell. This picturesque chalet boasts views of the fjord and mountains, and Lake Krøderen, as well as direct access to cross-country ski trails. The property is minutes away from the slopes of Norefjell. 5 beds, 3 baths, kitchen, 3 receps, sauna, terrace, garage. £950,027; Nordvik Real Estate (+47 290 290 092).



◀ **France:** Saint-Gervais-les-Bains. Handsome farmhouse built in 1830 and set in more than 17,000sq m. 3 beds, 2 baths, kitchen, 2 receps, parking. €895,000; Cimalpes (+33 451 334 001).



◀ **Norway:** Beitostølen. Traditional half-timbered chalet with excellent views over the surrounding mountains. 3 suites, open-plan kitchen/living room, 2 receps, self-contained 2-bed guest area, outbuildings, parking. £1.355m; Belèven (+47 9 523 5252).

▶ **France:** Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise. Delightful chalet with views of the Tarentaise Valley. Main suite, 4 further beds (2 en suite), 2 showers, open-plan kitchen/living/dining room, 2-bed flat, parking. €2.275m; Free Spirit Alpine (01244-351011).



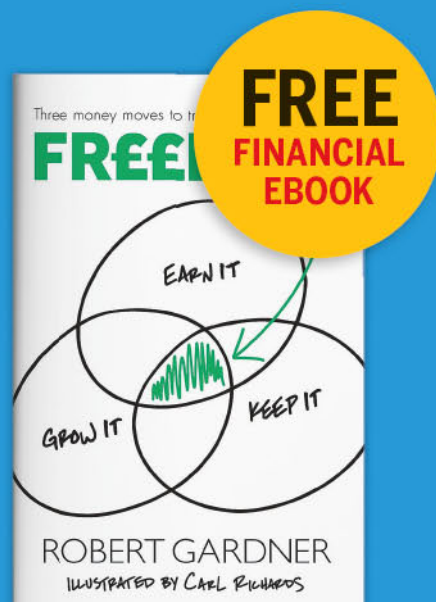
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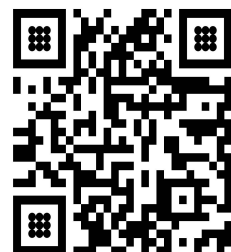
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Open the camera app on your smartphone device and hover over the QR code to find out more



Canteen 310 Portobello Road, London W10 (@canteen.310)

"It came from nowhere," says Tom Parker Bowles in *The Mail* on Sunday. This Italian restaurant arrived on the site of the old Pizza East on London's Portobello Road "without a whisper of hype or PR", and though it's only been open a few weeks, it is already "magnificent" in every respect. It's a cavernous space, "a mixture of industrial and homey", and tables "turn at a decent pace", which is useful as they don't take bookings. Jess Filbey, who trained at The River Café, leads a mainly female kitchen – "and by god can it cook". Deep-fried olives stuffed with Italian sausage are "hot, salty and savoury". Puntarelle, that "exquisitely bitter chicory", is roasted in the oven before being doused in an oily, anchovy-heavy sauce: the dish is "an instant winter classic". Pizzetta topped with leeks, pancetta and "molten" taleggio is "gone in a few joyous bites" – necessitating a second order. The pasta is "some of the best I've tasted in London": silken fettuccine coated in a "cream-laden duck ragù"; gnocchi, "light as a sigh", with a "fistful of garlicky girolles". This part of west London is "blighted with a mass of mediocre Italians". The food at Canteen is "River Café level" – but "half the price". *About £40 a head.*

Lahpet Larder 39-45 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 (020-4580 1424)

"Filthy" and "monotonous" was how George Orwell characterised Burmese food



Lahpet Larder: a "gorgeous little place"

in his 1934 novel *Burmese Days*. But he got it wrong, says Charlotte Ivers in *The Sunday Times*. This "gorgeous little place" in Bermondsey proves that "Burmese food is bloody brilliant". (I'm calling it Burma, not Myanmar because that's what they call it here.) "*Lahpet*" means pickled tea leaves in Burmese, and these are used to make the "bitter, tingly pesto" that acts as a dressing in the restaurant's signature "tea leaf" salad, which is made with cherry tomatoes, dried shrimp (another staple) and "little crunches of fried beans". It's a "remarkable" creation. I follow this with king prawn *sipyen* curry – lightly sweet in a sauce made with chilli curry oil – and an equally tasty masala aubergine curry. For

pudding, I have a "churro-like doughnut" dipped in Burmese milk tea *espuma*, which tastes like butterscotch Angel Delight. In truth, what you order here doesn't matter much, because – as my second visit confirmed – every dish on the menu is "great". *Around £50 a head, including drinks and service.*

Dongnae 5-7 Chandos Road, Redland, Bristol (0117-302 1034)

Kyu Jeong Jeon and Duncan Robertson's second Korean restaurant in Bristol – their first is the much-loved Bokman – is housed in an old butcher's shop in Cotham, says Tim Hayward in the *Financial Times*. From first to last, the food is "different" and "flat-out delicious". I begin with a "precision hand roll" of Devon crab topped with Icelandic urchin; it comes wrapped not in nori seaweed, but a special kind with an "almost tea-like taste" that the chefs have imported. Further surprises lie in store, chief among them a revelatory "five-year *doenjang* stew". Its "complex, sophisticated" broth is flavoured with a *doenjang* paste that the "proprietors have been proudly rearing for five years". In it float "trace quantities of meat", courgette, mushrooms, and a tofu unlike any I've tasted before: custardy in texture, with "subtle fungoid flavours". It's a stew with which I feel "instantly at ease" – much as I do with bouillabaisse, or a good Welsh cawl. Dongnae is a "gently inspiring" place that will teach you new things about this fascinating cuisine.

Recipe of the week: pistachio and cardamom cake

Not only are pistachios highly nutritious, they're also forgiving to the baker, say Michael and Pippa James. The moisture provided by their fat content makes this cake almost impossible to overbake. Our top tip is to freeze the pistachios before blitzing – that way they won't get smooshed between your food processor blades. Eat this cake for afternoon tea – preferably after an invigorating walk.

For the cake: 140g unsalted butter, softened 250g raw (demerara) sugar 1 vanilla bean, seeds scraped (or 1 tsp real vanilla paste) grated zest of 1 orange 3 eggs, at room temperature 150g plain flour 1 tsp baking powder ¼ tsp fine sea salt 150g pistachios, roughly ground 2 tsp ground cardamom seeds 140g sour cream or crème fraîche
For the icing: 110g icing sugar 20g lemon juice **To finish:** 30g pistachios, roughly chopped

- Preheat the oven to 160°C (320°F). Grease a 25x10cm loaf tin and line it with baking paper.
- In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter, sugar, vanilla and orange zest for about 10 mins, until the mixture is pale and creamy. In a separate bowl, lightly beat the eggs. In several stages, add the eggs to the creamed butter mixture, mixing well between each addition to ensure the eggs are fully incorporated. Scrape down the side of the bowl as necessary to ensure the ingredients are thoroughly mixed.
- Sift the flour, baking powder and salt together into a large mixing bowl. Add the ground pistachios and cardamom and mix well. Use a spatula to gently fold the flour mixture into the creamed butter mixture, in two or three batches.



a little to drizzle over the sides. Sprinkle the chopped pistachios over the top immediately, so they set into the icing as it cools.

Finally, add the sour cream and gently fold it in until just incorporated.

- Pour the mixture into your tin and use a spatula to gently smooth out the top, then bake for 40 mins. Rotate the tin in the oven and bake for another 10 mins, or until a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean. Cool your cake in the tin for about 10 mins before turning it out onto a cooling rack to cool completely.

- Once cool, ice the cake. To make the icing, sift the icing sugar into a medium bowl and whisk in the lemon juice until the icing is a thick pouring consistency. Adjust by adding a little more juice or icing sugar as required. Spoon it over the cooled cake to cover the top, allowing

Taken from Sweet Seasons by Michael and Pippa James, published by Hardie Grant at £26. Photography by Rochelle Eagle. To buy from The Week Bookshop for £22.99 (incl. p&p), call 020-3176 3835 or visit theweekbookshop.co.uk.

New cars: what the critics say



Cupra Terramar
Price: from £37,290

Autocar

The latest addition to the Cupra range is billed as a sporty SUV. It has the latest powertrains, with mild-hybrid, pure petrol and plug-in hybrid (PHEV) options. And though it is still a five-seater, it is bigger, at 4.5 metres, than its sister, the Ateca. In the crowded SUV segment, any new car has to be pretty special to stand out, and though the Terramar looks good and drives pretty well, the same is true of many of its rivals.

Auto Express

The range starts with a 148bhp 1.5-litre mild hybrid; then there are a pair of pure petrol 2-litre four-wheel drive models with either 200 or 262bhp, and two PHEVs in 201bhp or 268bhp with an all-electric range of up to 70 miles. The flipside of such a good range is the large 19.4kWh battery, which makes the PHEVs feel a bit stodgier than the more agile pure petrols (which can be quite thirsty).

What Car?

The Terramar is designed to be engaging to drive: steering is light and accurate, there's plenty of grip, and body roll is well-managed. The interior has an upmarket, "sporty vibe": the standard sports seats provide excellent support, and all versions have parking sensors front and rear. There are no physical buttons for climate control, but there's plenty of room, front and back, and a decent boot.

The best... gardening gloves



▶ **Dig the Glove** If you're after a pair of good quality, well-made all-rounders, these machine-washable gloves will be just the ticket. Available in corduroy or tweed, and ideal for lighter tasks, they have padded palms, adjustable wrists straps and a snug fit (from £17.50; burgonandball.com).



▶ **Gardena Planting and Soil Glove** Great for weeding, these have non-slip water-resistant palms, a breathable back and good grip. The fingertips are touchscreen-compatible. Machine washable, they're tough enough to stop nettle stings, but not thorns (£10; amazon.co.uk).



▶ **Donkey Gloves** Another great all-rounder for simpler tasks, these offer some protection while allowing flexibility. They have an anti-slip padded palm and reinforced thumb gussets (£16; donkeygloves.co.uk).

▶ **Stihl Dynamic ThermoVent** A robust pair of gloves with a leather palm for tough gardening tasks, these have a soft fleecy lining to keep hands warm in winter. They are breathable and offer good wind protection, but they're not waterproof (£22; sam-turner.co.uk).



▶ **The Thornstar** With reinforced suede fingers and a knuckle strip for extra protection, these live up to their thorn-proof label. They have elasticated extended cuffs, to stop soil falling into them, but are on the baggy side – and they can't go in the washing machine (£9; mulchgarden.co.uk).



Tips of the week... how to look after knitwear

- Wool rarely needs washing, it is breathable, and most people wear another layer under a jumper. Spot-clean marks as soon as you notice them and steam to refresh.
- Washing machines have wool settings, but it's best to hand wash knitwear in cool water with specialist detergent. Agitate gently and never wring it out. Adding hair conditioner will help smooth out the fibres.
- If you do resort to the machine, put your knitwear in wash bags to minimise friction.
- Don't tumble dry: dry flat on a towel and reshape when damp.
- Allow knitwear to breathe before putting it away after use. If you aren't planning to wear a jumper for a while, store it in a breathable bag with a sachet of lavender.
- Today's debobblers are much gentler than older models, so do use them when a jumper starts pilling.
- If it is beyond repair, consider recycling. Turtle Doves (turtle-doves.co.uk) uses old cashmere to create woollen accessories.

SOURCE: THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

THE WEEK 11 January 2025

And for those who have everything...



Designed in collaboration with Dolce & Gabbana, the Smeg Blu Mediterraneo collection includes this 1.7 litre superfast boiling kettle. It costs about four times more than the same model in plain colours. **from £600; shop.smeguk.com**

SOURCE: THE TIMES

Where to find... the best places to ski in Scotland

Glenshee, in Aberdeenshire, is the UK's most extensive ski area – 25 miles with 36 runs over four mountains, 22 lifts, a café and ski hire. It has something for all standards, but does get busy (ski-glenshee.co.uk).

A great resort for beginners, **Lecht**, also in Aberdeenshire, is one of Scotland's smaller resorts with shorter runs. It's popular with families, but is less busy than other resorts. There's a café and ski hire, too (lecht.co.uk).

Cairngorm Mountain, in Aviemore, is one of Scotland's most popular resorts, with 13 lifts and 18 miles of runs, from green to black. There's a ski school, kit hire and a café on site (cairngormmountain.co.uk).

Nevis Range, in Fort William, has 12 miles of pistes with a variety of slopes, from beginner to more advanced off-piste runs, plus ski hire and lessons (nevisrange.co.uk).

Glenco Mountain Resort, in Argyll, has eight lifts and 20 runs, from a gentle plateau to long, steep runs. It also has ski hire and a café (glencoemountain.co.uk).

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN

Six amazing hotels to seek out in 2025

From timeless classics to stylish new openings, here are six hotels that travel journalists recommend for this year

Storybook delights in the New Forest

Chewton Glen *Hampshire*

It was at Chewton Glen that Captain Frederick Marryat wrote his 1847 classic *The Children of the New Forest* – and this manor house set in acres of Hampshire woodland is still a place of “storybook” delights, ideally suited to a family holiday, says Tatler.

Stay if you can in one of its 14 treehouses, which sit on stilts in a peaceful valley, with floor-to-ceiling windows and wraparound terraces with hot tubs. There’s a beautiful beach within walking distance, and a huge range of activities on offer at the hotel: cookery classes, tennis lessons, axe-throwing sessions, falconry, duck herding, sheep grooming – the list goes on. The two pools (indoor and outdoor) are “dreamy”, and there’s a spa and two restaurants, one excelling in “elevated classics”, and the other (overseen by the TV chef James Martin) “less formal”. *Doubles from £405 b&b; relaischateaux.com.*



Mountain adventures in Costa Rica

Hacienda AltaGracia *San José Province, Costa Rica*

Set in the foothills of Costa Rica’s Talamanca mountains, this 180-acre jungle resort offers a cossetting introduction to the Central American wilderness, says Deborah Lev-Tov in Condé Nast Traveller.

The 30-minute flight in a private prop plane from San Juan airport affords breathtaking views of the resort’s rugged surroundings and 50 “roomy” *casitas*. These are decked out in leather, linen, patterned textiles and local pottery, but yet more pleasing are their terraces with daybeds and private pools. Nature presses in all around – birds and butterflies, the “fortissimo” croak of frogs, the armadillos encountered on night strolls. There’s a wonderful spa with hot tubs that “glow with the setting sun”, and lots of “adrenaline-pumping” outdoor activities to try. *Doubles from £2,035 all-inclusive; aubergeresorts.com.*



Living well in the Cyclades

One&Only Kéa Island *Greece*

The island of Kéa is typical of the Cyclades archipelago, with its bare hills and fertile valleys, but it sees far fewer tourists than neighbours such as Mykonos, despite lying only 45 minutes by speedboat from Athens. Occupying a sheltered bay on its west coast is this new resort, says Mary Lussiana in The Daily Telegraph, the 14th from the One&Only brand. Set on terraces that “cascade” down to the sea, its 63 villas are built of the local stone, and have “spacious” sitting rooms and private, eight-metre infinity pools. The resort has five restaurants (including a beach club that serves light Asian and Mediterranean dishes), a large spa, a sports centre, an excellent kids’ club, and two swimming pools. There’s much to do nearby, including scuba diving, with four historic wrecks to explore off the island’s coast. *Doubles from €1,750 b&b; oneandonlyresorts.com.*



A film director’s vision in Rome

Palazzo Talia *Rome, Italy*

This recently refurbished 16th century palazzo in the heart of Rome is “a masterful study in old meets new”, says Emma Love in House & Garden, with “lavish, atmospheric” interiors designed by the film director Luca Guadagnino (*Call Me by Your Name*). In the public spaces, ancient sculptures and frescoes are set against eclectic modern pieces, including mid-century finds (such as the 1940s Murano glass chandelier in the entrance hall). Of the 26 rooms and suites, Guadagnino had a hand in only one (the wood-panelled Terrace Suite), but all have similarly flamboyant yet finely judged decor. Southern Italian “classics” are served in the restaurant, which spills out into a “verdant” courtyard garden, and there’s a glorious bar, and a spa with sauna and plunge pool. *Doubles from €800 b&b; palazzotalia.com.*



A summer camp on the Mongolia steppe

Genghis Khan Retreat

Karakorum, Mongolia

In the heart of Mongolia lies the ruined city of Karakorum, and beyond it stretches the wild Orkhon Valley, site of this remote summer camp. A cluster of cosy white *gers* set on a “vast, fenceless” steppe, it offers a taste of “nomadic life” and no end of adventure, says Tatler. Your host is D’Artagnan Giercke, a softly spoken Old Harrovian whose father revived interest in polo (the favourite sport of Genghis Khan) in Mongolia. Guests can take part in matches with members of the national team, or “slow the pace” with massages, yoga and “realignment with the resident shaman”. The riding is superb. Gallop alongside wild ponies and “crash” through rivers before returning to camp for candlelit suppers, piano recitals and “spontaneous” parties under the stars. *Six nights from £3,200, full board; genghiskhanretreat.com.*



A palatial retreat in Hyderabad

Taj Falaknuma Palace

Hyderabad, India

Now nicknamed Cyberabad for its booming tech industry, the Indian city of Hyderabad was long ruled by princes, or *nizams*, who grew wealthy on diamonds from the Golconda mines. In 1937, Time magazine named the seventh *nizam* the richest man in the world – and it was his father who built this palace in 1894, says Sarah Khan in Condé Nast Traveller. Converted into a hotel in 2010, it is an “opulent” fantasy in the late-Victorian style, set in “fragrant” hilltop gardens, and full of “dreamy” frescoes, Corinthian columns and Venetian chandeliers”. The state rooms are as if frozen in time, with marvels including a dining table for 101 guests, but the 60 guest rooms have all mod cons. There’s a lovely pool, a terrace with sweeping views over the city, and two restaurants. *Doubles from £555; tajhotels.com.*



The peanut farmer who became America's best ex-president

**Jimmy
Carter
1924-2024**

Jimmy Carter, who has died aged 100, grew up on a peanut farm in rural Georgia, and rose to become the 39th US president. A born-again Christian driven by an almost missionary zeal, he won the 1976 election on an outsider's promise to clean up Washington and heal the nation after the "twin traumas" of Watergate and the Vietnam War. Over the next four years, he scored some notable achievements, said The New York Times, including the Camp David Accords that led to peace between Israel and Egypt. He failed, however, to turn around the ailing US economy; and his approval ratings slumped. The "peanut farmer" may have been principled and honest about the crisis facing America, but he looked weak and ineffectual – incapable of overcoming the multiple challenges of the era. In 1980, Ronald Reagan asked voters: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago," and offered to "make America great again". It won him a landslide, and made Carter the first elected president since 1932 to fail to win a second term.



Carter: a "one-man United Nations"

but made his true views clear in his inaugural address, proclaiming that "the time of racial discrimination is over".

Many were incredulous when Carter announced in 1974 that he intended to run for the presidency: he was all but unknown outside of Georgia. But with typical determination, he criss-crossed the US meeting senior Democrat politicians and speaking to the grassroots: sometimes only three people turned up to hear him, but slowly, he built up enough support to win the Democrat nomination. In the election itself, he faced Gerald Ford. The incumbent's reputation had been damaged by his decision to pardon Richard Nixon, and by his failure to stem rising unemployment or to curb the high inflation brought about by the Opec oil embargo. Carter scraped to victory.

Immediately, he asserted his everyman credentials by walking from his inauguration ceremony to the White House, and selling the presidential yacht.

He appointed a former aide to Martin Luther King Jr as US ambassador to the UN; and pardoned Vietnam draft dodgers. But his critics complained that he'd over-promoted inexperienced allies from the South; his reluctance to indulge in political deal-making alienated even supporters; and he was unprepared for the pressure exerted by interest groups. His White House was

Yet as the biographer Douglas Brinkley observed, "nothing about the White House so became Carter as his having left it". Where other former presidents "enriched or enjoyed themselves", said The Times, Carter transformed himself into a sort of "one-man United Nations". Having returned to his hometown in Georgia, he set up The Carter Centre in 1982, then spent the next 40 years travelling the world, mediating international disputes, fostering "nascent democracies", and promoting peace, human rights and social justice. One of his most successful campaigns targeted guinea worm disease, which was killing millions of people a year in Asia and Africa when he left office, but which has since been all but eradicated. And for a week each year, he used the carpentry skills he'd acquired in his youth to build houses for the poor, as a volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. In all these initiatives he was partnered by his wife Rosalynn. Awarded the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, Carter was never described as a great president, but he became widely regarded as America's greatest ex-president.

"Once elected, he immediately asserted his everyman credentials by walking from his inauguration ceremony to the White House"

James Earl Carter Jr was born in Plains, Georgia, in 1924. His father, a farmer, supported the segregationist policies of the time; his mother was a nurse, and was strongly opposed to them. Carter grew up during the Depression, in a house without electricity or running water. The first member of his family to finish high school, he graduated top of his class; then, in 1943, aged 19, he won a place at a naval academy. He married Rosalynn three years later, when she was 18. By the early 1950s, they'd had three of their four children and he had trained as an engineer, and helped build the US's first nuclear sub. But when his father died in 1953, he felt obliged to resign his commission, and return to Plains to run the peanut farm. It was barely making a profit, but with Rosalynn's help, he turned the operation around. Meanwhile, he started to involve himself in local politics.

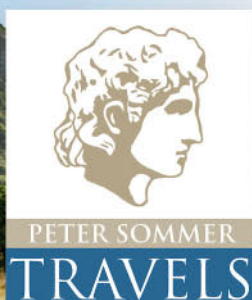
In the era of civil rights, his views were at odds with those of most white Georgians. Nevertheless, he won a place in the state senate in 1962; and in 1970, he was elected governor at the second attempt. He'd had to pander to segregationists to win the election,

regarded as amateurish, said The Guardian, and it didn't help that he'd arrived without a real policy agenda; or that he got so bogged down in detail, he even oversaw the rota for the use of the White House tennis courts.

He had some foreign policy successes: the treaties that ceded the Panama Canal back to Panama; putting human rights on the agenda. But with the oil shock of 1979, inflation kept rising; and his hard truths – such as that Americans needed to be less materialistic, and less reliant on foreign oil – landed badly with many voters. "I do not promise a quick way out of our nation's problems," he said, in what became known as the "malaise" speech of July 1979. He committed PR gaffes too, such as letting slip that he'd been attacked by a swimming swamp rabbit while fishing on a lake in Georgia.

In October 1979, he set in chain a catastrophe by reluctantly allowing the deposed Shah of Iran (a long-time US ally) to enter the US for medical treatment. Carter had feared that there would be reprisals, and three weeks later, militants in Tehran seized the US embassy and took 52 of its staff hostage. His failure to bring the hostages home became emblematic of his enfeebled administration; and a botched military rescue attempt that led to the deaths of eight US servicemen in April 1980 further damaged his standing. The hostages were finally released in January 1981, minutes after Ronald Reagan had taken office. Carter later described this as one of the happiest moments of his life.

Back in Plains, he lived in a modest ranch-style house, and when circling the globe on his diplomatic missions, often flew economy, where he'd walk down the aisle shaking hands and posing for photos. The US's longest-lived president, he remained politically active into old age: in 2006, he caused controversy by writing a book about "apartheid" in Gaza and the West Bank. Rosalynn died in 2023, months after they'd moved into hospice care. "[She] was my equal partner in everything I ever accomplished," he said.



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Companies in the news ...and how they were assessed

UK small business: jobs front line



After the backlash over employers' national insurance contributions, ministers are steeling themselves for another big skirmish with UK business – over the forthcoming employment rights bill. Small companies are on the front line, said Jennifer Sieg in City AM. More than 90% are worried about “the implications” of Labour’s plan to “Make Work Pay”, according to a new survey by the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). The bill’s “28 individual measures”

include “ending exploitative zero-hour contracts, and banning fire and rehire tactics”. Causing most concern, though, is a “day-one rights” provision extending full protections and entitlements to employees from the moment they start a new job, rather than the previous one-year period. Fear of a deluge of “unfair dismissal” lawsuits is already affecting recruitment, argues the FSB, with pernicious knock-on effects for the economy. Rachel Reeves’s Budget was “ingeniously designed not to hurt ‘working people’”, said Alistair Osborne in The Times. But evidence is mounting of trouble in the labour market. December saw “the fastest rate of job shedding for nearly four years”, according to an S&P Global survey of UK purchasing managers. “Pure coincidence”, of course.

Disney/Amazon/Meta: mending ties with Trump

When ABC News struck a controversial \$15m deal with Donald Trump in December, to settle a defamation case most legal experts thought it would win, it was widely thought the network’s owner, Walt Disney, was playing a longer game. That insurance policy is about to be tested, said Reuters. The entertainment giant is close to striking a landmark deal to create “the second-biggest online pay-TV company in North America”, via the merger of its Hulu + Live TV business with smaller rival FuboTV. Having the president-elect onside would certainly help grease the wheels. Trump has “pulled in \$200m to fund his inauguration”, said DealBook in The New York Times, much of it from big corporations. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has caused ructions at his newspaper, The Washington Post, with his “reset”, but there is “little sign that he or other business leaders will stop courting Trump soon”. Indeed, Amazon Prime is planning a “behind the scenes” documentary on Melania Trump, co-produced by the returning First Lady herself. Meta is also making rapid adjustments, said João da Silva on BBC News. Having parted company with its president of global affairs, former Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg, the social media giant has appointed three new board members, including Ultimate Fighting Championship CEO Dana White – a “close Donald Trump ally” for decades.

US Steel/Nippon Steel: Biden’s last stand

It was a “cross-border tie-up that raised the hackles of politicians and steelworkers alike”, said Lex in the FT. But President Joe Biden’s decision to block the \$15bn deal between US Steel and Japan’s Nippon Steel (supported by Donald Trump) will be fought strenuously. The companies are suing to have the decision set aside on grounds of unlawful political interference. Almost as soon as Biden announced his decision to intervene on national security grounds, “the caterwauling began”, said Lori Wallach on MSNBC. But this was the right call. “If the merger went through, it could leave the US without ready access to sufficient volumes of specific critical steel products and the ores to make them.” As Trump observed on Truth Social, the timing is absurd: “Why would they want to sell US Steel now when tariffs will make it a much more profitable and valuable company?” The ramifications on Washington’s relationship with Tokyo and on America’s openness to foreign investment could be profound, said Elaine Kurtenbach in The Independent. “The assertion that the proposed deal could threaten US national security” has “irked Washington’s closest ally in Asia”. Many in Japan view it as a “betrayal”.

Telegraph Media Group: auction from hell

A surprising new alliance has formed in the battle for the Telegraph newspapers, said William Turvill in The Sunday Times. Chelsea FC’s owner and chairman Todd Boehly is reportedly discussing a collaboration with UK media veteran David Montgomery – the former-journalist-turned-proprietor known in the newspaper world as “Monty” (or Rommel to his critics). As boss of the London-listed regional newspaper group National World, Montgomery has long had an interest in buying the Telegraph, but US tycoon Boehly is a “surprise late entrant”. This paper is now in its “20th month of limbo”, said Ben Riley-Smith and Christopher Williams in The Daily Telegraph. It is a recipe for “extended financial uncertainty and strategic paralysis”. The Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy, now faces calls to intervene – and end this “auction from hell”.

Seven days in the Square Mile

Economists warned that the Government is “on course” to miss its own Budget borrowing targets after interest rates for UK long-term borrowing rose to their highest levels this century – meaning the Government will have to spend more money servicing debt. The yield on the benchmark 10-year gilt, which spiked ahead of an auction on Tuesday, continued rising on Wednesday to 4.78%. The pound also suffered, falling 1.1% against the dollar to its lowest level since last April. “The way gilts are trading would suggest that participants are becoming increasingly concerned over the perilous UK fiscal outlook,” said Pepperstone strategist Michael Brown.

The British Retail Consortium reported that the festive “golden quarter” had failed to deliver for retailers: sales were just 0.4% higher over the three months to December than in the same period in 2023, as cash-strapped shoppers retrenched. Asda suffered its worst festive sales since 2015. There were some exceptions. The German discount supermarket Aldi celebrated its best ever Christmas sales in the UK.

Meta announced plans to change the “content moderation” on Facebook and Instagram, in readiness for the Trump administration. The US designated the Chinese internet group Tencent a “military company”. Advertising giant WPP became the latest company to crack down on home-working: it will insist on at least four days a week in the office. McDonald’s made moves to roll back its diversity targets. Britain’s richest woman, Bet365 boss Denise Coates, took a huge pay cut but still made £158m last year.

Flower power

Whatever happened to Laura Ashley, “the middle England brand known for its floral fashions and soft furnishings”, asks Isabella Fish in The Times. Having fallen into administration during the pandemic in 2020, Laura Ashley currently has “no branches of its own” – leaving UK aficionados to hunt down designs in Next’s high street shops. But the brand is now “preparing for a new lease of life” under US ownership. Marquee Brands, the owner of Ben Sherman, has bought the label from the US restructuring firm Gordon Brothers for an undisclosed sum. The timing looks good. Classic British interiors are apparently having a moment in the US. It’s time to chuck in the chintz.

Issue of the week: the new economic year

The resilience of the global economy is already being tested by debt concerns

The new year has started with a bang for Rachel Reeves – and not in a good way, said James Sillars on Sky News. “UK long-term borrowing costs have hit their highest level since 1998”, with the yield on 30-year bonds peaking at 5.25% ahead of an auction on Tuesday. It was an “unwanted milestone” – higher than “the yield seen in the wake of the mini-Budget backlash of 2022”, when financial markets balked at the Truss government’s unfunded growth agenda. The premium has risen because of “growing concerns the Bank of England will struggle to cut interest rates” more than twice this year. Investors, noting that UK growth “ground to a halt” in the second half of 2024 amid new signs of sticky inflation, “fear policymakers’ hands could be tied by a growing threat of stagflation”.



Reeves: lacks a “positive vision”

The strains in the UK market come amid “a global sell-off in government bonds”, partly driven by fears that Donald Trump’s tariff plans will be inflationary, said the Financial Times. Yet they’re of particular concern to the Treasury, since Reeves left herself only a narrow margin of “headroom” against her revised fiscal rules when she set out her borrowing plans in the October Budget. With businesses still reeling from that “tax and cost-raising” event, “Britain is set for a particularly bad bout of the

January blues”. Still, there’s an argument that the economic gloom is overdone. Britain’s outlook, in fact, “looks quite robust compared with other advanced economies”: we will outgrow France and Germany this year. But “bad economic vibes can end up becoming a self-reinforcing downward spiral”; Labour still lacks a more “positive vision for growth”. The Chancellor had better produce it pronto, said Roger Bootle of Capital Economics in The Daily Telegraph. “In the markets there is already chatter that she may not last that long.”

“Barring a major external shock – and there are plenty of candidates to supply one – 2025 could be a placid year for

the world economy,” said Francesco Guerrera on Reuters Breakingviews. The IMF predicts growth will expand by 3.2% – and should be accompanied by subdued price growth, assuming a full-scale trade war doesn’t break out. This sort of economic environment ought to be “blissful for central bankers”, who have played “the Grinch” for a couple of years. But politicians may well “hinder” their easing plans. “The political masters of the biggest economies have embraced a near-permanent state of fiscal expansion. And they are not rowing back any time soon.” If they insist on walking towards “the fiscal abyss”, homebuyers, bond investors and businesses will pay a high price.

Briefing: investing in 2025

The year looks set to be dominated by Trump, interest rate cuts and China’s fragile economic recovery

● Will US markets keep rising?

“The US stock market is on a roll,” said the FT. The S&P 500 closed 2024 up by more than 20% for the second year running – and “the average forecast on Wall Street” is for “a further 10% rise in 2025”. Households are bullish too: the share of Americans expecting equity prices to rise is at its highest in decades. “This exuberance is jarring for two reasons.” First, most economists in the FT’s annual poll expect “Maganomics” to have “a negative impact on America’s growth”. Secondly, US asset valuations are already pretty lofty. “Excluding the peak of the dotcom bubble”, stocks are “near their most expensive in over a century”. Much depends on whether investor enthusiasm for AI will continue. But “Trump’s capriciousness” and frothy-looking markets are “a recipe for volatility”.

● Will China recover?

Chinese stocks “snapped a three-year losing streak in 2024”, owing largely to hopes of a more forceful stimulus from Beijing, said Jacky Wong on WSJ.com: the MSCI China Index gained 16%. But the country’s bond market “tells a bleaker story”. Yields on government bonds have “plunged to multi-decade lows”, indicating “expectations of lower growth down the road”. The pessimism isn’t unfounded. China’s economy remains “trapped in a deflationary quagmire, with producer prices falling for 26 consecutive months”. There is an “uncomfortable parallel” to be drawn with Japan, which was “mired in decades of deflation”. An impending trade war with the US “may further



Will UK markets have a happy new year?

worsen the situation” – with knock-on effects for other Asian economies and commodity prices.

● Can London shine again?

The mood in the City is surprisingly upbeat, said Elliot Gulliver-Needham in City AM. According to Bloomberg, Wall Street analysts believe the FTSE 100 “will jump 15%” in 2025, marking the index’s best year since 2009. “The combination of mildly accelerating UK economic and earnings growth, tame inflation, rate cuts by the Bank of England and Brent crude oil prices remaining in this year’s range of \$70 to \$90 per barrel” is positive for the FTSE, said Jeffrey Kleintop of Charles Schwab. Analysts at Pictet

note that the UK is less exposed to possible US tariff hikes than the eurozone because it is more focused on services. “The dominance of energy stocks and defensive sectors in the FTSE 100 also makes it an attractive hedge for stagflation.”

● Will gold remain a solid bet?

Gold “continued to defy expectations” in 2024, approaching a record price of \$2,800/oz, said Emma Powell in The Times. This was partially due to geopolitical conflict. But the biggest catalyst for the price of the precious metal is the impact of monetary policy, according to Tom Price of Panmure Liberum. The gradual reduction of US rates should increase “the relative appeal of gold”. Nonetheless, we might expect “a slight fall” to around \$2,500 at the start of the year, as central banks in emerging economies pull back their purchases.

Reeves is all alone on the world stage

Mehreen Khan

The Times

Rachel Reeves “will cut a lonely figure” on the world stage this year, says Mehreen Khan: Britain’s Chancellor is fast “running out of ideological bedfellows”. Labour’s electoral success “was an anomaly in the broad sweep towards conservative and hard-right politics” in 2024. Assuming the trend continues in Germany and Canada, Reeves will be the G7’s only remaining centre-left finance minister – bereft of allies such as the US treasury secretary, Janet Yellen, soon to be replaced by the Wall Street fund manager Scott Bessent. “The Democrats’ electoral embarrassment is particularly chastening for Reeves, who has now dropped the Bidenomics buzzwords” that used to pepper her speeches. Besides, in many areas “Labour’s approach is at direct odds with the tougher merger and consumer protection rules that Biden championed and which Trump will take up”. Rather than embracing “the mantle of economic populism”, Labour is likely to cede it to Trump and his emulators: Reform UK is increasingly vocal on “traditionally Left” stances such as saving British Steel and nationalising Thames Water. “Expect more signs of so-called horseshoe politics in 2025.”

Big Tech goes to Washington

Editorial

The Economist

“For years Washington was a place for tech bosses to avoid, unless summoned by Congress for a scolding,” says The Economist. But Elon Musk and other tech tycoons are now coming to Washington, bent on gaining influence and causing disruption. Sparks are bound to fly. “When tech and Maga say they are signed up to America First, they mean different things”, and their views are “strikingly at odds” on key issues such as free trade and immigration. Infighting and a clash of cultures could hobble Trump’s second term (see page 13). Yet that outcome isn’t “foreordained”. Indeed, if the factions succeed in moderating each other and focusing on common goals such as sharpening “America’s economic and technological edge” and cutting red tape, “out of Trumpian chaos and contradiction, something good might just emerge”. By providing “a real-time gauge” of investors’ views about Trumponomics, the stock market could help. “Trump is sensitive to share prices and will not want to endanger the roaring rally that has followed his re-election.” Tech’s arrival in Washington is high-risk. It could also be high reward.

The origin of the next financial crisis

John Plender

Financial Times

The growth of “private markets” has been such that they now “dominate financial activity”, says John Plender. Private market assets – including venture capital, private equity, private debt, infrastructure, commodities and real estate – reached \$13trn in 2023, according to McKinsey; they have grown at nearly 20% a year since 2018. Their vibrancy, while public markets shrink, has become self-fulfilling. They raise so much more equity than stock markets that “companies can stay private indefinitely, with no worries about gaining access to capital” (though private markets rely on public markets to provide “transparency of information and prices”). Politicians, notably in the UK, “are adding impetus to this headlong rush” by encouraging pension funds to invest in riskier assets such as infrastructure. The links between private credit funds and the regulated banking sector pose “a unique set of potential systemic risks to the broader financial system”, given the “illiquid” and opaque nature of their loans. “No prizes for guessing where the next financial crisis will emerge from.”

The cost of being given the runaround

Ruth Sunderland

Daily Mail

The latest report by the Institute of Customer Service finds that satisfaction with big UK businesses is at its lowest for 15 years. Who’s surprised, asks Ruth Sunderland. “The standards we are routinely forced to endure are a national disgrace.” So-called “Help Centres” often do the opposite and “Contact Us” should be renamed “Don’t Even Think About Phoning Us”. Customers are made to feel like nuisance callers, with whom personal contact is best avoided. Ironically, these organisations spend a fortune trying to convince themselves they are wonderful at customer service. Yet the more they “infest their websites” with inane “smiley face/angry face” mini-surveys, the worse their real-life relationships become. “The cost of being given the runaround, whether by the NHS, the tax office or your insurance company, adds up to billions of pounds of lost productivity as well as soaring collective stress levels.” These “corporate vampires” drain us. Improving customer service is “a simple, fail-safe formula” to “boost the economy and make the entire nation happier”. Can it really be so hard?

City profile

Tulip Siddiq

“We all have generous aunts,” said Sam Leith in *The Spectator*, and some are “kind of embarrassing”. So perhaps we should approach the case of City Minister Tulip Siddiq “in a spirit of charity and understanding”. Siddiq, whose brief includes stamping out corruption and money laundering, is embroiled in a scandal of her own – tied to her aunt, Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh’s former PM, who fled the country in August accused of human rights abuse and “rampant corruption”, including siphoning off billions abroad. It is alleged that the MP for Hampstead and Highgate has long benefitted from property “freebies” linked to Hasina’s Awami League party.



When journalists began probing how Siddiq, 42, became the owner of a two-bedroom flat near King’s Cross in 2004, she insisted “her parents had bought it for her”, said *The Mail on Sunday*. But it seems her benefactor was actually a developer linked to the Awami League. Siddiq’s former Hampstead home (since “transferred” to her sister) was also bought by a lawyer with Awami links, said *The Guardian*. She now rents a £2.1m house in East Finchley owned by a senior figure in the league’s UK wing. Siddiq, who once hailed her aunt as a “strong female role model”, insists she has done nothing wrong, but has referred herself to the PM’s standards adviser. Trouble may be brewing elsewhere, said *The Sunday Times*. In 2013, Siddiq visited Vladimir Putin with her aunt, in a private capacity. Bangladeshi authorities are investigating whether she and her family benefitted from an ensuing “nuclear power deal” with Russia.



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GENTLEMEN'S OUTFITTERS

Who's tipping what

Shares for the year ahead

Amcomri Group*The Mail on Sunday*

Amcomri buys engineering and manufacturing firms from retiring UK owners, and helps them boost efficiency and grow. Turnover and profits are rising, and shares are up since the December float. Buy. 59p.

GSK*The Sunday Times*

The pharma giant faces patent cliff concerns for its HIV medicine, but cancer claims against heartburn drug Zantac have been settled. Risky, yet shares are too cheap given expected approvals for respiratory and oncology drugs. Buy. £13.43.

Hornby*The Sunday Times*

A "trailblazer" in the tech-free games field, with its model-kit brand Airfix celebrating its 85th birthday and the 1:72 Spitfire selling more than 20,900 kits. Car-racing brand Scalextric is "ripe for a revamp". Mike Ashley has invested. Buy. 19p.

ME Group International*Daily Mail*

ME runs photo booths in 19 countries where passport photos can't be taken with smartphones. It also operates higher-margin laundry booths. Investing in growth and evolving via new technology. Resilient and predictable. Buy. 205p.

QinetiQ Group*The Times*

Despite struggling with US expansion, the defence firm has "quality markers", with long-term contracts giving visibility and an impressive 90% cash conversion rate. Aiming to double revenues by 2027. Cheaper than peers. Buy. 415.8p.

Relx*The Times*

A "modest gem", the data firm operates in scientific, technical and medical (STM), risk, legal and events fields – with academic publisher Elsevier the "jewel in the crown". A "quality compounder" with a robust record. Buy. £36.31.

SharkNinja*The Daily Telegraph*

This innovative US product design and tech firm invents cleaning, cooking and household gadgets. A capital-light disrupter, gaining market share and expanding overseas. Several big launches due in 2025. Buy. \$95.25.

SSP Group*The Sunday Times*

Booming air travel could see the tide finally turn for the Jamie's Deli and Upper Crust owner – an airport and railway station stalwart that has struggled with internal "mess-ups" and weaker economies. Improving profits after a management shake-up. Buy. 177p.

Synopsys*Daily Mail*

Synopsys's software is used in chips powering everything from phones to AI systems. The tools accomplish in weeks what may take months for big engineering teams. A "brave" punt on the US race against China for computing superiority. Buy. \$487.

Trainline*Investors' Chronicle*

The ticketing platform's 2024 gains were driven by robust trading, as more passengers switch to digital, and an improved regulatory backdrop. Cutting costs and expanding in Europe, with a high-margin B2B arm. Buy. 432p.

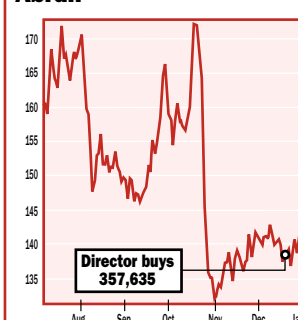
Urban Logistics Reit*Investors' Chronicle*

This investment trust focuses on "last mile" warehouses in urban sites. Benefits from the continuing e-commerce trend, a diverse tenant portfolio, constrained supply and an ability to raise rents. Manageable debt and a 7% yield. Buy. 102p.

Weir Group*The Daily Telegraph*

Weir, which provides engineering solutions for miners, is enjoying buoyant demand; finances are sound and margins expected to rise. Should benefit from the shift to net zero and an improving global economic outlook. Buy. £22.10.

Directors' dealings

Abrdn

The asset manager has struggled with high costs, fund outflows, missed targets and poor strategic direction. Yet new CEO Jason Windsor – who joined as CFO in 2023 from Persimmon – has bet on improving fortunes, buying £497,000-worth of shares.

SOURCE: INVESTORS' CHRONICLE

Form guide

Shares tipped 6 January 2024

Best tip**Amazon***The Times*

up 44.93% to \$222.11

Worst tip**Agronomics***The Mail on Sunday*

down 57.89% to 4p

Market view

"Priced to perfection and, therefore, susceptible to large declines, which could result from bad economic news or a change in investor sentiment."

Fed governor Lisa D. Cook on the precariousness of US markets. Quoted in the FT

Market summary

Key numbers for investors

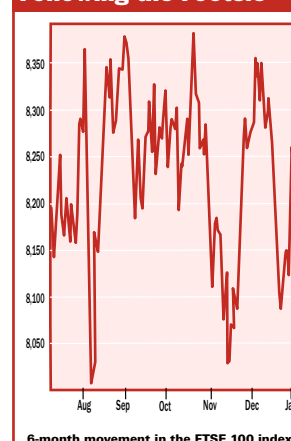
	7 Jan 2025	Week before	Change (%)
FTSE 100	8245.28	8260.09	-0.18%
FTSE All-share UK	4515.16	4509.26	0.13%
Dow Jones	42633.70	42603.65	0.07%
NASDAQ	19566.87	19410.57	0.81%
Nikkei 225	40083.30	39894.54	0.47%
Hang Seng	19447.58	19623.32	-0.90%
Gold	2633.35	2609.10	0.93%
Brent Crude Oil	76.80	76.37	0.56%
DIVIDEND YIELD (FTSE 100)	3.63%	3.68%	
UK 10-year gilts yield	4.78	4.70	
US 10-year Treasuries	4.69	4.59	
UK ECONOMIC DATA			
Latest CPI (yoy)	2.6% (Nov)	2.3% (Oct)	
Latest RPI (yoy)	3.6% (Nov)	3.4% (Oct)	
Halifax house price (yoy)	3.3% (Dec)	4.8% (Nov)	
£1 STERLING:	\$1.245 €1.206 ¥196.958		Bitcoin \$97,932.00

Best and worst performing shares

WEEK'S CHANGE, FTSE 100 STOCKS		
RISES	Price	% change
BP	422.00	+7.40
JD Sports Fashion	101.50	+5.80
Shell	2617.00	+5.70
Next	9912.00	+4.40
Airtel Africa	118.20	+4.00
FALLS		
WPP	758.00	-8.40
Persimmon	1115.00	-6.90
Taylor Wimpey	114.60	-6.10
Barratt Redrow	420.00	-4.60
EasyJet	537.80	-4.00
FTSE 250 RISER & FALLER		
Ithaca Energy	126.00	+14.10
DiscoverIE	653.00	-8.70

Source: FT (not adjusted for dividends). Prices on 7 Jan (pm)

Following the Footsie



6-month movement in the FTSE 100 index

Held hostage in the desert by al-Qa'eda for 565 days

In 2014, Bob Semple was taken hostage by al-Qa'eda in Yemen, where he worked. His greatest fear was his family watching his head being cut off. He tells Eleanor Steafel about his ordeal

Five hundred and sixty-five days would be a long time for anyone to go without seeing their wife and children. It's enough time for teenage sons to become a little less like boys, rather more like men. Enough time for a marriage to be tested. Five hundred and sixty-five days is a long time to be away from your world. Particularly when those days are spent in a three-by-one-metre cell without a bed, a window, or much hope of ever seeing loved ones again.

In 2014, Bob Semple was working in Hadramawt, in eastern Yemen, as a freelance construction manager for an oilfield services company. Living away from his wife Sallie and their children, back in Hampshire, wasn't ideal, but Bob, then 62, would fly home every two months and stay for three weeks at a time. The money was good, and with three sons to support and a mortgage to pay, it seemed worth it. He'd spent two decades in the Royal Engineers, with tours in Libya and the Falklands. It was an old Army pal who called him up one day, and asked if he'd like to come and work tax free in Yemen.

On the morning of 3 February 2014, Bob drove to work, with two Yemeni colleagues in the back seat. He was looking forward to boarding a plane back home in a few days. When a taxi drove across his path and screeched to a halt, he wasn't scared. "I thought, 'Typical bad driving,'" he recalls. Then two men – both of them carrying guns – got out and headed straight for him. His Army training kicked in. Bob's passengers in the back seat tried to run, but were bundled into the boot of the assailants' Land Cruiser. One of the attackers, who was armed with a gun and a knife, began stabbing Bob through the window. He got out and began to fight. "I pressed the magazine release button [on the assailant's gun]. It dropped out and I noticed there were no rounds in the chamber. I thought: 'They're just using these guns to frighten me.'"

They didn't mean to kill him – yet: "There were now three of them. One was clubbing me on the head with a gun, the other one was trying to stab me, and in the end they overcame me." They managed to wrestle Bob into the car, and took him to a safehouse, where he was stripped. He could tell the men had military training, "just by their demeanour and the way they moved". He would later learn they were al-Qa'eda. Soon, they would be trying to ransom his life. They sprayed iodine on his wounds (he was of more use to them alive than dead), blindfolded him, dressed him as a Yemeni woman, jammed a pistol under his ribcage and got him back in the car. They drove "at breakneck speed" for four



Sallie and Bob Semple at home in Eastleigh

"I was sure they were going to kill me," he says. He remembers thinking: "You've been taken. When they kill you, just let's hope it's quick"

hours. When they arrived at an unknown location, they installed him in a tiny cell. They gave him cotton trousers to wear and chained his foot to the wall. The cell had a toilet at the end and a tap. "They brought me a small mattress, which was about an inch-and-a-half thick. They threw that down. They gave me a pillow. That's it." Anyone would have forgiven Bob for finally feeling some of the fear he had been keeping at bay. But, in fact, he says he just felt resigned to his fate. "I was sure they were going to kill me," he says. He remembers thinking: "You've been taken, Bob. Nobody's coming for you... This s**t's all yours. When they kill you, just let's hope it's quick."

In 2014, the world watched as Islamic State (Isis) beheaded a number of foreign hostages: the American journalist James Foley was executed by the Isis militant known as Jihadi John and then, later, the British aid worker David Haines. Bob's captors wanted him to give up the names of other Brits and Americans he knew in Yemen. He refused. "The only fear I had was that Sallie would have to watch a video of me having my head cut off," he says. "I hoped they would just pull the trigger and it would be finished." On the tenth day, Bob decided that if he was to get through this, he would have to put Sallie and the boys in a box and throw away the key. "I thought, 'I cannot do this if I'm thinking about home. Home

no longer exists. I'm here, this is me, and nothing else.'"

Every day, he would be brought out of his cell to sit in the main room, so his captors could watch him, though in reality they spent all day watching TV. Meanwhile, Bob focused on an escape plan. Over six weeks, he rubbed together two links in the chains around his feet until he wore through the metal. The two men guarding him – "one skinny, one skinnier" – used to watch TV in the evenings outside Bob's cell. "I waited until one of them was asleep and the other had left." He then had a quick decision to make. Should he kill the sleeping man outside his cell, or slip past? If he killed him and was caught, there was no doubt he would be killed himself. "I thought, 'Well, I'll just sneak past and let him sleep.'" As soon as he stepped outside his cell, the second man appeared and "all hell broke loose". They put Bob back in his cell, this time chaining his hands as well as his feet. One said in Yemeni Arabic: "If you try and do that again, we're going to shoot you." "I grabbed hold of his fingers and stuck them up against my head and said 'now'. And he just laughed and buggered off," Bob recalls.

Four thousand miles away, in Eastleigh, near Southampton, Bob's wife, Sallie, and their sons, Tom, then 21, Sam, 17, and Ben, 14,

were in a hell of their own. Sallie, a nurse, had been at work the day the Foreign Office phoned. Ben was at home. "He took the call and then phoned me up at work and said: 'Mum, Dad's been kidnapped, I don't know if it's a joke or something.'" Sallie and Bob had met when she was a nurse, he a sergeant for the Royal Engineers. They are "get on with it" people. "I was told [by the Foreign Office] that if there was [a request for] money, we wouldn't be able to pay a ransom to terrorists," Sallie says. "I understood why."



Semple at work in 2005 as a construction manager

At the time, she says, there was "all the Isis stuff on the television, all the beheadings. So my first thought was that he was going to be killed." For months, the Foreign Office phoned every day, keeping Sallie abreast of the leads they were following. They were told not to tell anyone Bob had been kidnapped, beyond Sallie's boss, her parents and the boys' girlfriends. Officials didn't want the net to be too wide in case the kidnappers were to get in touch with a ransom. They had to go about their lives as normal, while every day fearing the phone call that would confirm the worst. There was work and school to attend, and bills to be paid – now just with Sallie's nursing salary to cover them. Then, one day in September, Bob rang. "They parcelled me up into the back of a truck and drove me out into the middle of the boonies," he recalls. "They got a cell phone out and said, 'Right, phone home.'" Bob dialled home; Sallie answered. "I said: 'I'm OK. They want \$10m.' That's all they would let me say. And then they hung up... I said to them: 'You're al-Qa'eda, so no one will give you any money.'" At home, Sallie was in shock.

After the call, the fight to find Bob seemed to stall. There had been talk of swapping a prisoner for him, Sallie recalls. "Then it just went silent." Every few weeks, Bob's captors would drag him back out to the desert and force him to talk to a camera. "Sometimes they'd take me out and make me kneel in the sand and put a gun to my head," he recalls. Each time he feared this would be the moment they would kill him and film it. They always told him to repeat the line about the \$10m. "They wanted me to beg for my life. I said, 'I'm not a very good actor.'" They'd tell him: "You have to cry." But Bob says: "I can't do that. So I didn't do it."

"To keep myself sane, I calculated how many days old I was, including leap years," he says. "I had a little hole in the wall that I could see through... At night I looked through it and if I could see a star, then it was a good day. And if I didn't, it was a bad day. The temperature in that room must have been in the 50s, so I just used to lie and think of nothing. Just sweat." Years later, once home in Hampshire, Bob experienced a strange phenomenon that his psychiatrist links back to those endless days in captivity. Bob recalls: "Sallie would leave for work having put the washing on, for example, and tell me to hang it out. I'd sit there, and then three seconds later she'd come back in and say, 'You didn't hang the washing out?'" She'd been at work all day, but for Bob, time had stood still. His psychiatrist told him it was disassociation. "Your internal clock stops and you disassociate yourself from everything," he explains. It was exactly what Bob had done for all those months in his cell. "I did nothing. I zoned out."

After a year of Bob being gone, Sallie was beginning to struggle. Her wages couldn't cover the mortgage and she was constantly worrying about money. She had accepted that Bob may already be dead, but the uncertainty was hard to bear. "When people die, you have a grave. You have those memories of getting a chance

to say goodbye." Terry Waite had been in touch to offer his support. Knowing Bob's background, he suggested that Sallie speak to the Army Benevolent Fund, a charity that provides lifetime support to British soldiers. The ABF immediately paid off the remaining £15,000 on Sallie and Bob's mortgage, and supported her while she made the tough decision to sell the house and move in with her parents. "I was planning for me to be living without Bob," says Sallie. In August, the Foreign Office rang. They had no further leads

to follow. "In my mind, he'd been killed. The kids and I all thought he wasn't coming back."

Bob barely had any interaction with his captors. Every night they would cook themselves a meal and give him what was left. "Rice and chicken. And then sometimes you got nothing." He had been trying to convince the skinny boy guarding his cell to get him a biscuit and, one day, he handed Bob two digestives. He said to himself: "I'll have them later. I'll look through the window and I'll definitely see a star tonight." But moments later Bob found himself blindfolded. "They dressed me up as a woman, took me out, put

me in the front of a pick-up truck and jammed the revolver up me. Off they drove." When they stopped, the man with the gun got out. The driver too. Someone else got in and pulled away slowly. "Congratulations,"

he said to Bob. At some point, Bob was put in the boot and then driven through the night. "We stopped, the boot opened, a hand grabbed me. In English, a voice said: 'You're safe now.'" It was only once he was in a new car that a voice said he could take his blindfold off. "He gave me his ID card. [UAE] special forces."

He was then flown to the UAE. The British ambassador was waiting for him in the airport, holding a phone with a direct line to Sallie. He could hear a party in the background. Wow, he said, celebrating already? "She said, 'No, this is a party for Ben, he's done really well in his GCSEs.'" Five hundred and sixty-five days of fear and helplessness dispelled in a sentence. There was his life, there was his family, waiting for him to return. That night, he stayed in a plush hotel, and he can still recall the first shower he took – and the first real meal (a burger and a Jack Daniel's).

Bob and Sallie's memories of the first days after they were reunited sound strange and dreamlike. The Foreign Office put them up at Dorneywood, the chancellor of the exchequer's retreat. "I got there, went to the door, and there was Sal. And there were my kids with their girlfriends," says Bob. "It was bloody excellent."

It has now been nine years since Bob, now 73, came home, and the road has been a long and often bumpy one. He isn't one to use words like trauma, but he clearly carries some. "You weren't you when you came back," says Sallie, 62. "You were very different." He doesn't find it easy to talk about his emotions, but when he speaks about his work with the ABF, he lets his feelings spill over. "It's the kindness of people – that's it," he says, a lump in his throat. "If I start crying, don't worry about it," he warns me gently. He tells me about an event he attended with fellow veterans, many of whom had terrible injuries. "I said to them, 'I feel like a fraud.' And they said, 'We couldn't have done what you did.'" He lets himself cry then, sitting in the safety of his own living room, Sallie by his side. I wonder if he feels proud of how he coped, looking back? "No," he says. "It just happened."

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This week's winner will receive Week-branded items, as well as two Connell Guides (connellguides.com).

THE WEEK CROSSWORD 1447

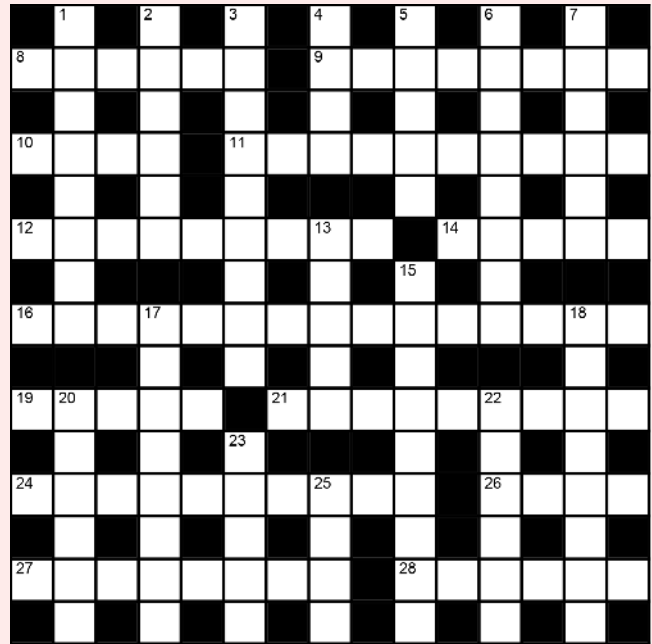
Two Connell Guides and three Week-branded items will be given to the sender of the first correct solution to the crossword and the clue of the week opened on Monday 20 January. Send it to The Week Crossword 1447, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6JR, or email the completed grid/listed solutions to crossword@theweek.co.uk. **Tim Moorey (timmoorey.com)**

ACROSS

- 8 Dean, for example takes out Rector (6)
9 Shellfish only eaten by seamen (8)
10 Slang perhaps used in school restaurants? Not half (4)
11 Homely meat dish? (7,3)
12 A few editions of the paper occasionally (9)
14 Let off playing obsolete instruments (5)
16 Offering no return on investment? It's a temporary concern (7,8)
19 Small fish from foreign parts (5)
21 More able afterwards to talk a lot with heating engineer? (3-6)
24 Rough, boisterous; type of comedy that's a hit? (10)
26 Old-fashioned display is briefly cut (4)
27 Mrs Beach composed suite for recorders? (8)
28 Drug assigned place but nothing's left (6)

DOWN

- 1 Musical that's OK (8)
2 Model figure say, seen around university (6)
3 Dissenting groups? About right (9)
4 Bit of a dunce towards the back may be this (4)
5 Boat (the same when overturned!) (5)
6 Time to find what keeps Mike and Oscar apart (8)
7 Fierce buffeting in Brazilian port (6)
13 Disc coming out, a symphony for this girl (5)
15 Tough examination at a post mortem? (5,4)
17 Google is used by setter as I haven't a clue! (6,2)
18 Spiteful woman and her advice for becoming a good person? (3-5)
20 Some up on chopper in cloak (6)
22 Italian survey supporting trades union (6)
23 Name forgotten, financier is one with lots of dough (5)
25 Head off from one Siberian city for another (4)



Name _____
Address _____
Tel no _____
Clue of the week answer: _____

Clue of the week: This is one party game (6, first letter C)
Brockwell, The Guardian

Solution to Crossword 1444

ACROSS: 8 Sovereign states 9 Carry-ons 10 Serbia 11 Kiss Me Kate 13 Peek 14 Women's Institute 17 Airs 18 Pleasantry 21 Psyche 23 Heat rash 24 Motoring offence
DOWN: 1 Somali 2 Refreshers 3 Remote 4 Ages 5 As I see it 6 Fair 7 Resident 12 Annie 13 Put in order 15 Omission 16 Sopherim 19 Staffa 20 Resect 22 Chow 23 High
Clue of the week: Scrambled egg, or Ei for a Hanoverian (6,1)
Solution: George I (anag)
The winner of 1444 is Georgina Hardy from Hillington

Solution to Crossword 1445

ACROSS: 1 Scrub up 5 O Tannenbaum 11 India 12 Ali Baba 13 Comet 14 Here we come a'caroling 16 In error 18 Run into debt 20 Greetings 22 Satay 23/21/32D Red-nosed Rudolph 24 Ely 25 Ibsen 27 Bid prices 30 Glad tidings 32 Resorts 33 In the Bleak Midwinter 37 Erica 38 Wassail 40 Inula 41 Silent Night 42 Handset
DOWN: 1 Slighting 2 Rider 3 Bratwurst 4 Prancer 5 Opium 6 Aga 7 N'gana 8 Necrology 9 Almaine 10 Mitigated 15 Agnes 17 Enemy 18 Ras 19 Nitid 23 Recur 24 Egg timers 25 In the main 26 Ninja 27 Bis 28 Rosminian 29 Susurrant 31 Ant-hill 34 Lawin 35 Meant 36 Tours 39 Sag
Clue of the week: Danish care about litter (5,5) **Solution:** Sedan chair
The winner of 1445 is A. George from Shavington

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Sudoku 989 (difficult)

Fill in all the squares so that each row, column and each of the 3x3 squares contains all the digits from 1 to 9

Solution to Sudoku 988

7	1	5	8	2	6	3	9	4
9	4	2	3	5	7	8	6	1
6	8	3	4	1	9	5	7	2
3	2	8	7	6	5	4	1	9
1	9	4	2	8	3	7	5	6
5	7	6	1	9	4	2	3	8
4	5	9	6	3	2	1	8	7
8	3	7	9	4	1	6	2	5
2	6	1	5	7	8	9	4	3

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Ω
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