

SEPTEMBER 12/13 2020

FT Weekend Magazine

**STATISTICS,  
LIES AND  
THE VIRUS**

**TIM HARFORD  
ON LESSONS FROM  
A PANDEMIC**

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EVA VERMANDEL

**'I had ambition and enthusiasm and probably an inflated opinion of my own ability'**

Charles Dance, p26



**'The pleasure of venturing out for a kerbside ice cream had become a health risk'**

Ice-cream vans, p36



**'People regarded as pillars of their communities found themselves accused of embezzlement'**

Post Office scandal, p18

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# SIMON KUPER

OPENING SHOT

## Why populists have given up on promises



**T**he British prime minister's official Twitter account (15,400 tweets so far) hasn't used the word "Brexit" since the UK left the EU on January 31. Boris Johnson's personal account has given Brexit just one passing mention since February 1. As talks with the EU approach their climax, he seems keen to gloss over the biggest British policy change of our generation.

Similarly, Donald Trump has gone strangely quiet on his old promises to bring back factory jobs, eliminate the federal debt, replace Obamacare with something much better and stop China "raping" the US on trade. For instance, his overactive Twitter account hasn't mentioned debt since a single sentence this January. It so happens that the US federal debt (rising even before the pandemic) is forecast to exceed annual GDP next fiscal year for the first time since the second world war.

Trump, Johnson and their fellow populists are giving up on mould-breaking policy promises. Now they face a fork in the road: either become full-time culture warriors who don't do policy, or turn back into boring traditional parties.

Policy-based populism had a brief heyday in the 13 months through November 2016. The backdrop of the refugee crisis and jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe was ideal for nativist movements but, at the time, these parties were more than that: they were also utopians promising betterment. They were going to "drain the swamp", cut lucrative trade deals, return power to the people, revive manufacturing and generally run things better than their incompetent predecessors.

PiS in Poland was elected in October 2015 with a spectacular keynote promise, "500+": every family would receive 500 zloty (£100) a month for each child from the second onwards. That would get Poles making babies again.

On June 19 2016, Italy's Five-Star movement won the town halls of Rome and Turin, promising a radical new politics: stringent term limits for elected officials and no formal alliances with traditional parties. Four days later, Britons voted for Brexit. Trump presented himself that year not just as a nativist but also as a brilliant businessman who would make the US solvent and rich again. The night he was elected, he promised a massive infrastructure plan. By spring 2018, when Five Star and the far-right Lega formed a government in Italy, nearly 500 million people in Europe and North America were under populist rule.

PiS delivered 500+ but failed to spark baby-making: Poland's excess of deaths over births last year was the highest since 1945. The expensive policy has also prompted about 100,000 women to leave the job market.

Otherwise, hardly any populist promises have been fulfilled. Claims to business-like competence dissolved with Trump's and Johnson's mishandling of Covid-19. Trump's infrastructure plan

has gone missing, along with the Brexiters' much-touted trade deal with the US. Even Britain's trade deal with the EU - supposed to be the "easiest in history" - may now not happen and would reduce trade if it did. In Italy, Five Star has softened its stance against term limits and accepted local formal alliances. Nationally, it's already in a governing coalition with the ultimate traditional party, the centre-left PD.

Shorn of innovative policies or competence, populists can still sell culture war. PiS's target in last month's re-election campaign was the foreign

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**'Almost all populist policies disintegrate on contact with reality. Perhaps most populist voters don't care'**

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acronym "LGBT" - "not people" but "an ideology" worse than communism, said Polish president Andrzej Duda. Now Trump is campaigning against urban criminals and Black Lives Matter protesters (always conflating the two) and, more broadly, against cities themselves. His strategy is to pretend that second-tier issues with racial resonance are the country's biggest problems. Homicides in 25 major US cities rose by about 600 year-on-year through July. By then, the coronavirus had killed more than 153,000 Americans.

Johnson, never very interested in policy, loves a good culture war, as long as it's not about Brexit any more. He was eager to do battle for a statue of Churchill, and the song "Rule, Britannia!" but, to his disappointment, the left refused both fights. You can't have a culture war without an opponent.

Mostly, the Conservatives and Five Star have found a different route out of policy populism: by dropping the novelties and returning to some semblance of a traditional party. The Tories are veteran shapeshifters. In just five years, they have been David Cameron's austerity Remainer party, a get-Brexit-done movement, a Boris Johnson cult and now an economically almost Corbynista anti-austerity pro-state-aid party, usually while providing the main opposition to themselves. Shedding each incarnation too fast for voters to tire of it, they held Downing Street through four straight elections. Bizarrely, given early populist rhetoric, Brexit has become a technocratic economic policy that's considered too complex to bother ordinary people with.

Almost all populist policies disintegrate on contact with reality. Perhaps most populist voters don't care. Anyone still backing Trump in 2020 isn't very interested in policy and competence. As Anne Applebaum, author of *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, says: "This is the moment when we'll learn whether what was at stake all along was identity and culture." **FT**

.....  
simon.kuper@ft.com @KuperSimon



**INVENTORY**  
**SHEKU KANNEH-MASON**  
**CELLIST**

**‘I’m very proud of the rich history that makes me who I am’**

**Sheku Kanneh-Mason, 21, is one of seven music-playing siblings and won BBC Young Musician at the age of 17. His performance at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex was watched by a global audience. He won a Classic Brit award for his debut album, *Inspiration*, which was 2018’s best-selling classical album in the UK. He was appointed MBE in 2020 for services to music.**

**What was your childhood or earliest ambition?**

To be a cellist. I started having lessons when I was about six.

**Private school or state school?**

**University or straight into work?**

I grew up in Nottingham and went to local state schools: Walter Halls Primary, then Trinity School. What was lovely about both of those was that they always supported what I wanted to do with my music, and had a love of music themselves. I was very, very lucky. I also went to the primary and junior Royal Academy of Music from the age of nine to 18, so every Saturday I travelled down to London.

**Who was or still is your mentor?**

My three cello teachers. I’m currently studying with Hannah Roberts at the Royal Academy of Music. I’ve been with her three years and she’s had a massive influence on my playing. Before that, Ben Davies at the junior Royal Academy. I was with him for 10 years. He still comes to a lot of my concerts – he sends me his thoughts afterwards. He really pushed me when I was younger. In Nottingham, I studied with Sarah Huson-Whyte, she was also an amazing teacher. I was really lucky the first teacher I went to was perfect for me.

**How physically fit are you?**

I enjoy football and other sports. I spend quite a lot of time inside, so it’s nice to get outside.

**Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?**

I find it hard to separate any of the elements that contribute to success – I think they all go together in a wonderful way. For me, talent and opportunity are maybe the most important. I’m very passionate about opportunity.

**What would you like to own that you don’t currently possess?**

A house – which is hard to come by these days.

**What’s your biggest extravagance?**

Eating out with friends or family.

**How politically committed are you?**

It’s impossible to not be politically committed because politics affects so many things I really care about. There is a real lack of equality in opportunity.

**In what place are you happiest?**

Antigua, which is where my dad’s family are from. Since I was young, I’ve been going almost every year on holiday. I love the weather, the food, the people, going to the beach, the sound of the accents, the music. I always come back feeling very, very happy.

**What ambitions do you still have?**

To change the world, in whatever way I can.

**What drives you on?**

I just love music, and sharing the music I love with as many people as I can.

**What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?**

Winning BBC Young Musician – not necessarily because of winning the competition itself, but because of the opportunities I’ve had since. I look back on it with a lot of pride.

**What do you find most irritating in other people?**

Selfishness.

**Which object that you’ve lost do you wish you still had?**

When I was maybe nine or 10, my brother and I had an iPod. We took loads of really funny videos of us when we were younger, with our friends. To have those videos back and look back on those fun times would be great.

**What is the greatest challenge of our time?**

Lack of equality, in many, many, many different ways.

**Do you believe in an afterlife?**

I like to think of my ancestors looking down on me. My mum’s from Sierra Leone, I also have family in Wales, my dad’s from Antigua. I’m very proud of the rich history that makes me who I am.

**If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?**

9.9. I enjoy life but I wouldn’t say it’s perfect and there are things I’d like to improve. **FT**

*Interview by Hester Lacey.*

*Kanneh-Mason’s performance with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra is on YouTube and Facebook until the end of this month. Sheku and his sister Isata’s BBC Proms performance is on iPlayer*



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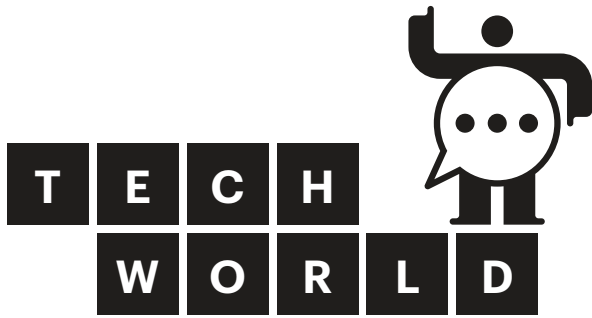
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BY TIM BRADSHAW

## Hold the froth: why is Silicon Valley taking a caffeine hit?

The Creamery never had particularly good coffee. What it did have was a perfect location at one of the technology industry's most valuable intersections. The ramshackle café was in the start-up friendly SoMa district of San Francisco, across the street from the Caltrain station that ran commuters all the way down to San Jose at the southernmost tip of Silicon Valley.

That made it a favourite spot for venture capitalists visiting from Sand Hill Road who did not wish to waste precious time going too far into Soma to meet prospective investors. Founded in 2008, the café soon became a San Francisco institution, even as hipper coffee chains, such as Philz, Blue Bottle and Sightglass, expanded across the city. The Creamery brought a serendipity to offline social networking that no app has ever matched. But no more: last month, the Creamery closed for good.

Many hospitality businesses across the world have fallen victim to the pandemic. In the UK, for instance, sandwich chain Pret A Manger is closing 30 branches. But Silicon Valley's coffee shops are more than just caffeine stops - they are venues for programming, pitching, dealmaking and brainstorming.

That these conversations could be so easily overheard seemed strange to me when I first moved there, and it can be irritating for residents who don't work in tech to be constantly surrounded by a nerdy hubbub. For me at least, over the years, it became a useful form of ambient awareness of the industry's latest obsessions.



ILLUSTRATION BY PÂTÉ

It is especially difficult to watch independent San Francisco outfits such as the Creamery disappear when there is so much money surrounding them. Red Rock Coffee in Mountain View is another Silicon Valley entrepreneur hangout, as well as playing host to weekly open mic nights and the Knit Wit knitting club. The founders of WhatsApp worked from there in the chat app's early years; I bumped into them at the same low-key coffee bar soon after they sold the company to Facebook for \$19bn. In July, Red Rock said it would close if it could not raise \$300,000.

Mountain View is home to the headquarters of Google, LinkedIn and Silicon Valley's preeminent accelerator programme Y Combinator, as well as the innovators of previous decades such as Silicon Graphics and General

**'The Creamery brought a serendipity to offline social networking that no app has ever matched. But no more: last month, it closed for good'**

Magic. Family homes there typically sell for more than \$2m. Yet after a month and a half on GoFundMe, at the time of writing Red Rock was still \$200,000 short of its target.

If the tech community is letting hubs such as the Creamery and Red Rock die, maybe VCs just want fancier coffee these days. But I fear a deeper problem may be emerging.

Silicon Valley thrust social media and video conferencing on an unsuspecting world and in the past six months we have never been more grateful. Yet the cradle of the internet has always thrived on physical networking. Nowhere has been able to match the Bay Area's density of talent, capital and ambition. Now, the opportunities for serendipity - so vital for nourishing the community - seem to be diminishing, in no small part due to the rapid shift to remote working that the tech industry has embraced: Facebook, Twitter and others have all said they will allow people to work from anywhere after the pandemic recedes.

Talk of a mass exodus from San Francisco feels overdone. The city's overheated housing market could see rents plunge 25 per cent and still feel expensive. Yet moves towards long-term remote working point to a less romantic future than upping sticks to Lake Tahoe: techies stuck in their tiny apartments, staring at Zoom all day simply to avoid the two-hour commute.

If tech staff do become more widely distributed, that would only reflect where most of the industry's best ideas are coming from these days. Some of the most influential tech companies today are not based in the Valley: TikTok is Chinese, with its US base in Los Angeles. Shopify, the ecommerce platform that inspired several start-up ideas in the latest Y Combinator batch, is in Ottawa, Canada. The most important new internet markets - such as India, Indonesia and Nigeria - are far beyond the horizon of closeted US West Coasters.

Silicon Valley's monopoly on ideas has been ebbing away for some time. Without the right physical places to meet unexpected people and exchange new notions, that trickle could become a flood. While Big Tech races to build an interconnected 3D virtual world, it must remember the value of IRL. Losing community hubs such as the Creamery risks undermining what has made the Valley so special for the past 50 years. **FT**

*Tim Bradshaw is the FT's global technology correspondent*





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# ROBERT SHRIMSLEY THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

## Let the suburbs take centre stage

As we sat in the dark and the damp and the cold, I realised that whatever the future is for live events, it needed to be a different one to this. Perhaps the raw energy of a rock concert would be different, but this was a gypsy jazz trio and there's not a lot of thermodynamic energy generated by nodding your head and tapping your foot.

There were a few couples dancing in the corner, and pretty good they were too. But they just looked too much the part for me to join them, what with my having been off the day we did gypsy jazz dance lessons at school.

In the heatwave week of August, the idea of a couple of balmy evenings watching live music and comedy in the grounds of our local historic grand house seemed a fine plan. We would eat, drink and - well, mainly eat and drink actually. Instead, we found ourselves huddled together on increasingly damp blankets in what meteorologists like to call the sodding cold. For the second night, we had bought two of those legless chairs that offer absolutely no support to your back but can hold a water bottle. (I should say, the headline comedian was so good I momentarily forgot the toes I could no longer feel, but even this won't make me hurry back.)

And this was only September. Whatever the answer is to bringing back live events, this is not really it. As I say, in the frenzy of a socially distanced mosh pit, it may well be that live rock can work, but other more sedentary forms of entertainment will soon find the enthusiasm wanes. The open air is not a scale solution.

Among the worst affected is theatre. The economics are hopeless. Shows need near-full houses in tightly packed auditoria. Large ensembles, city-centre rents and often costly sets only add to the



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS VARELA

problem. It was hellish before social distancing, now it is impossible.

The long-term answer for the sustenance of our theatres is not to move them out of doors but to move them out of town - or at least out of town centres. Patently, this is not a quick fix or answer for the immediate woes caused by the pandemic and the need for social distancing (though less of the sardine experience can only help). It also requires upfront investment. But Covid is accelerating long-term trends and theatre needs a long-term answer.

Consider the multiplex cinema. It is large, the seats are well spaced and comfortable. It is well ventilated. It can hold more people and still offer all a good view. In addition, it can stage several shows at the same time, from blockbusters to arthouse. In London, only the National Theatre comes close to meeting these criteria. And a large car park would not go amiss.

Why, if this works for film, can it not work for theatre? Certainly we would lose the Edwardian splendour, the gilt cherubs and ornate frescoes, but I would also lose sitting with my knees forced under my chin, the stifling heat, lousy acoustics and the cricked neck that comes from not having a seat dead centre. And, yes, I admit

the Gielgud Park Royal, the Apollo in Speke or the Theatre Royal Wembley do not have the same ring about them. A city centre without its theatres would be a poorer place and perhaps there might be a loss of tourist trade. Perhaps a few central theatres can be saved for those ready to pay exorbitant prices to see a play about the music of some long-gone pop star. In any case, theatre needs to be more than an elite activity.

But the grim fact remains that most West End theatres are terrible venues failing a domestic audience, instantly doomed if coronavirus continues and slowly doomed if it is beaten. We've all heard of suffering for your art but there is no immutable law of thespians that requires the maximum discomfort of the audience. If theatre is to thrive, a modicum of comfort, convenience, quality and affordability seem like a decent plan.

Of course, for many, a night in town - a West End show - is part of the attraction, but theatre is suffering for its cost and inconvenience. If all the world's a stage, then doesn't that include the suburbs? **FT**

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### Reply

This is real first-rate investigative journalism ("Wirecard and me: Dan McCrum on exposing a criminal enterprise", September 5/6), tenaciously pursued under threat of prosecution and civil litigation. I hope the FT sells the film rights, it's a story that should be widely told.

ABR via FT.com

@SarahinSuffolk September 4  
Loving the #FTWeekendFestival - rooted to my PC for the weekend. Great speakers on a wide range of discussion threads, perhaps an even better experience than Hampstead? Discuss!

Thanks FT for employing journalists such as Dan McCrum and sticking with them despite all the dirt thrown at you. Please keep it up. In this era of fake news, we need you all more than ever.  
**Penny Clarke** Norwich

As a German, I am both furious and grateful. Grateful that Dan and the team at the FT had the courage and the professionalism to follow through but furious that this was at all necessary. I'm furious at the incompetence in German banking regulation all the way up to the finance ministry, which oversees the regulator Bafin. I'm furious that there's hardly any press coverage in the German media of this. And furious that nothing will change. But if any proof was needed that the FT subscription is worth the money, Dan provided it.  
**Krischan** via FT.com

Your article ("Nobody needs Ruth Jones's take on nasty", September 5/6) has cheered me up no end. It is so good to read something about somebody so patently nice and decent who also makes people laugh out loud. Years ago I met James Corden in the security line at Heathrow and congratulated him on *Gavin & Stacey*. He was a true gent. These two deserve each other.  
**Brighton Boy** via FT.com

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Quiz answers The link was complimentary things to call people 1. The Daily Star 2. Angel Falls 3. Louise Mensch 4. Grace Darling 5. Yellow Brick Road 6. Plymouth Rock 7. "Super Trouper" 8. Treasure Hunt 9. Diamond 10. The Saint Picture quiz Bob Dole + Dylan Moran = Bob Dylan





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# STATISTICS, LIES AND THE VIRUS: LESSONS FROM A PANDEMIC

As conspiracy theorists, trolls and spin doctors muddy public understanding of Covid-19, the value of gathering and rigorously analysing data has rarely been more evident, writes *Tim Harford*





# W

ill this year be 1954 all over again? Forgive me, I have become obsessed with 1954, not because it offers another example of a pandemic (that was 1957) or an economic disaster (there was a mild US downturn in 1953), but for more parochial reasons. Nineteen fifty-four saw the appearance of two contrasting visions for the world of statistics – visions that have shaped our politics, our media and our health. This year confronts us with a similar choice.

The first of these visions was presented in *How to Lie with Statistics*, a book by a US journalist named Darrell Huff. Brisk, intelligent and witty, it is a little marvel of numerical communication. The book received rave reviews at the time, has been praised by many statisticians over the years and is said to be the best-selling work on the subject ever published. It is also an exercise in scorn: read it and you may be disinclined to believe a number-based claim ever again.

There are good reasons for scepticism today. David Spiegelhalter, author of last year's *The Art of Statistics*, laments some of the UK government's coronavirus graphs and testing targets as “number

theatre”, with “dreadful, awful” deployment of numbers as a political performance.

“There is great damage done to the integrity and trustworthiness of statistics when they're under the control of the spin doctors,” Spiegelhalter says. He is right. But we geeks must be careful – because the damage can come from our own side, too. For Huff and his followers, the reason to learn statistics is to catch the liars at their tricks. That sceptical mindset took Huff to a very unpleasant place, as we shall see. Once the cynicism sets in, it becomes hard to imagine that statistics could ever serve a useful purpose.

But they can – and back in 1954, the alternative perspective was embodied in the publication of an academic paper by the British epidemiologists Richard Doll and Austin Bradford Hill. They marshalled some of the first compelling evidence that smoking cigarettes dramatically increases the risk of lung cancer. The data they assembled persuaded both men to quit smoking and helped save tens of millions of lives by prompting others to do likewise. This was no statistical trickery, but a contribution to public health that is almost impossible to exaggerate.

You can appreciate, I hope, my obsession with these two contrasting accounts of statistics: one as a trick, one as a tool. Doll and Hill's painstaking approach illuminates the world and saves lives into the bargain. Huff's alternative seems clever but is the easy path: seductive, addictive and corrosive. Scepticism has its place, but easily curdles into cynicism and can be weaponised into something even more poisonous than that.

The two worldviews soon began to collide. Huff's *How to Lie with Statistics* seemed to be the perfect illustration of why ordinary, honest folk shouldn't pay too much attention to the slippery experts and their dubious data. Such ideas were quickly picked up by the tobacco industry, with its darkly brilliant strategy of manufacturing doubt in the face of evidence such as that provided by Doll and Hill.

As described in books such as *Merchants of Doubt* by Erik Conway and Naomi Oreskes, this industry perfected the tactics of spreading uncertainty: calling for more research, emphasising doubt and the need to avoid drastic steps, highlighting disagreements between experts and funding alternative lines of inquiry. The same tactics, and sometimes even the same personnel, were later deployed to cast doubt on climate science.

These tactics are powerful in part because they echo the ideals of science. It is a short step from the Royal Society's motto, “*nullius in verba*” (take nobody's word for it), to the corrosive nihilism of “nobody knows anything”.

So will 2020 be another 1954? From the point of view of statistics, we seem to be standing at another fork in the road. The disinformation is still out there, as the public understanding of Covid-19 has been muddied by conspiracy theorists, trolls and government spin doctors.

Yet the information is out there too. The value of gathering and rigorously analysing data has rarely been more evident. Faced with a complete mystery at the start of the year, statisticians, scientists and epidemiologists have been working miracles. I hope that we choose the right fork, because the pandemic has lessons to teach us about statistics – and vice versa – if we are willing to learn.

## Lesson 1

### The numbers matter

“One lesson this pandemic has driven home to me is the unbelievable importance of the statistics,” says Spiegelhalter. Without statistical information, we haven't a hope of grasping what it means to face a new, mysterious, invisible and rapidly spreading virus. Once upon a time, we would have held posies to our noses and prayed to be spared; now, while we hope for advances from medical science, we can also coolly evaluate the risks.

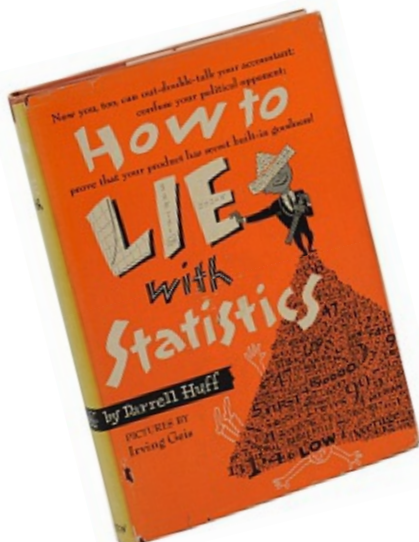
Without good data, for example, we would have no idea that this infection is 10,000 times deadlier for a 90-year-old than it is for a nine-year-old – even though we are far more likely to read about the deaths of young people than the elderly, simply because those deaths are surprising. It takes a statistical perspective to make it clear who is at risk and who is not.

Good statistics, too, can tell us about the prevalence of the virus – and identify hotspots for further activity. Huff may have viewed statistics as a vector for the dark arts of persuasion, but when it comes to understanding an epidemic, they are one of the few tools we possess.

## Lesson 2

### Don't take the numbers for granted

But while we can use statistics to calculate risks and highlight dangers, it is all too easy to fail to ask the question “Where do these numbers come from?” By that, I don't mean the now-standard request to cite sources, I mean the deeper origin of the data. For all his faults, Huff did not fail to ask the question. He retells a cautionary tale that has become known as “Stamp's Law” after the econo-



# 2



mist Josiah Stamp - warning that no matter how much a government may enjoy amassing statistics, “raise them to the *n*th power, take the cube root and prepare wonderful diagrams”, it was all too easy to forget that the underlying numbers would always come from a local official, “who just puts down what he damn pleases”.

The cynicism is palpable, but there is insight here too. Statistics are not simply downloaded from an internet database or pasted from a scientific report. Ultimately, they came from somewhere: somebody counted or measured something, ideally systematically and with care. These efforts at systematic counting and measurement require money and expertise - they are not to be taken for granted.

In my new book, *How to Make the World Add Up*, I introduce the idea of “statistical bedrock” - data sources such as the census and the national income accounts that are the results of painstaking data collection and analysis, often by official statisticians who get little thanks for their pains and are all too frequently the target of threats, smears or persecution.

In Argentina, for example, long-serving statistician Graciela Bevacqua was ordered to “round down” inflation figures, then demoted in 2007 for producing a number that was too high. She was later fined \$250,000 for false advertising - her crime being to have helped produce an independent estimate of inflation. In 2011, Andreas Georgiou was brought in to head Greece’s statistical agency at a time when it was regarded as being about as trustworthy as the country’s giant wooden horses. When he started producing estimates of Greece’s deficit that international observers finally

found credible, he was prosecuted for his “crimes” and threatened with life imprisonment. Honest statisticians are braver - and more invaluable - than we know.

In the UK, we don’t habitually threaten our statisticians - but we do underrate them. “The Office for National Statistics is doing enormously valuable work that frankly nobody has ever taken notice of,” says Spiegelhalter, pointing to weekly death figures as an example. “Now we deeply appreciate it.”

Quite so. This statistical bedrock is essential, and when it is missing, we find ourselves sinking into a quagmire of confusion.

The foundations of our statistical understanding of the world are often gathered in response to a crisis. For example, nowadays we take it for granted that there is such a thing as an “unemployment rate”, but a hundred years ago nobody could have told you how many people were searching for work. Severe recessions made the question politically pertinent, so governments began to collect the data. More recently, the financial crisis hit. We discovered that our data about the banking system was patchy and slow, and regulators took steps to improve it.

So it is with the Sars-Cov-2 virus. At first, we had little more than a few data points from Wuhan, showing an alarmingly high death rate of 15 per cent - six deaths in 41 cases. Quickly, epidemiologists started sorting through the data, trying to establish how exaggerated that case fatality rate was by the fact that the confirmed cases were mostly people in intensive care. Quirks of circumstance - such as the Diamond Princess cruise ship, in which almost everyone was tested - provided more insight. Johns Hopkins University in the US launched a dashboard of data resources, as did the Covid Tracking Project, an initiative from the Atlantic magazine. An elusive and mysterious threat became legible through the power of this data.

That is not to say that all is well. Nature recently reported on “a coronavirus data crisis” in the US, in which “political meddling, disorganization and years of neglect of public-health data management mean the country is flying blind”.

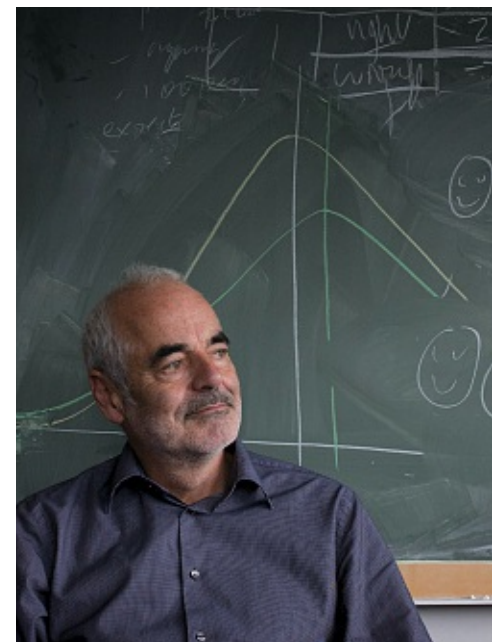
Nor is the US alone. Spain simply stopped reporting certain Covid deaths in early June, making its figures unusable. And while the UK now has an impressively large capacity for viral testing, it was fatally slow to accelerate this in the critical early weeks of the pandemic. Ministers repeatedly deceived the public about the number of tests being carried out by using misleading definitions of what was happening. For weeks during lockdown, the government was unable to say how many people were being tested each day.

Huge improvements have been made since then. The UK’s Office for National Statistics has been impressively flexible during the crisis, for example in organising systematic weekly testing of a representative sample of the population. This allows us to estimate the true prevalence of the virus. Several countries, particularly in east Asia, provide accessible, usable data about recent infections to allow people to avoid hotspots. These things do not happen by accident: they require us to invest in the infrastructure to collect and analyse the data. On the evidence of this pandemic, such investment is overdue, in the US, the UK and many other places. ►

## ‘There is great damage done to the integrity and trustworthiness of statistics when they’re under the control of the spin doctors’

David Spiegelhalter, author of ‘The Art of Statistics’

Clockwise from below: statistician David Spiegelhalter at the University of Cambridge; Darrell Huff’s 1954 book ‘How to Lie with Statistics’; the Diamond Princess cruise ship at port in Japan in February, when tests of all the passengers provided an early insight into the virus







**Lesson 3**  
**Even the experts see what they expect to see**

Jonas Olofsson, a psychologist who studies our perceptions of smell, once told me of a classic experiment in the field. Researchers gave people a whiff of scent and asked them for their reactions to it. In some cases, the experimental subjects were told: “This is the aroma of a gourmet cheese.” Others were told: “This is the smell of armpits.” In truth, the scent was both: an aromatic molecule present both in runny cheese and in bodily crevices. But the reactions of delight or disgust were shaped dramatically by what people expected.

Statistics should, one would hope, deliver a more objective view of the world than an ambiguous aroma. But while solid data offers us insights we cannot gain in any other way, the numbers never speak for themselves. They, too, are shaped by our emotions, our politics and, perhaps above all, our preconceptions.

A striking example is the decision, on March 23 this year, to introduce a lockdown in the UK. In hindsight, that was too late.

“Locking down a week earlier would have saved thousands of lives,” says Kit Yates, author of *The Maths of Life and Death* - a view now shared by influential epidemiologist Neil Ferguson and by David King, chair of the “Independent Sage” group of scientists. The logic is straightforward enough: at the time, cases were doubling every three to four days. If a lockdown had stopped that process in its tracks a week earlier, it would have prevented two doublings and saved three-quarters of the 65,000 people who died in the first wave of the epidemic, as measured by the excess death toll.

That might be an overestimate of the effect, since people were already voluntarily pulling back from social interactions. Yet there is little doubt that if a lockdown was to happen at all, an earlier one would have been more effective. And, says Yates, since the infection rate took just days to double before lockdown but long weeks to halve once it started, “We would have got out of lockdown so much sooner... Every week before lockdown cost us five to eight weeks at the back end of the lockdown.”

Why, then, was the lockdown so late? No doubt there were political dimensions to that decision, but senior scientific advisers to the government seemed to believe that the UK still had plenty of time. On March 12, prime minister Boris Johnson was flanked by Chris Whitty, the government’s chief medical adviser, and Patrick Vallance, chief scientific adviser, in the first big set-piece press conference. Italy had just suffered its 1,000th Covid death and Vallance noted that the UK was about four weeks behind Italy on the epidemic curve. With hindsight, this was wrong: now that late-registered deaths have been tallied, we know that the UK passed the same landmark on lockdown day, March 23, just 11 days later. It seems that in early March the government did not realise how little time it had. As late as March 16, Johnson declared that infections were doubling every five to six days.

The trouble, says Yates, is that UK data on cases and deaths suggested that things were moving much faster than that, doubling every three or four days - a huge difference. What exactly went wrong is unclear - but my bet is that it was a cheese-or-armpit problem. Some influential epidemiologists had produced sophisticated models suggesting that a doubling time of five to six days seemed the best estimate, based on data from the early weeks of the epidemic in China. These models seemed persuasive to the government’s scientific advisers, says Yates: “If anything, they did too good a job.”

Yates argues that the epidemiological models that influenced the government’s thinking about doubling times were sufficiently detailed and convincing that when the patchy, ambiguous, early UK data contradicted them, it was hard to readjust. We all see what we expect to see. The result, in this case, was a delay to lockdown: that led to a much longer lockdown, many thousands of preventable deaths and needless extra damage to people’s livelihoods. The data is invaluable but, unless we can overcome our own cognitive filters, the data is not enough.

**Lesson 4**  
**The best insights come from combining statistics with personal experience**

The expert who made the biggest impression on me during this crisis was not the one with the biggest name or the biggest ego. It was Nathalie MacDermott, an infectious-disease specialist at King’s College London, who in mid-February calmly debunked the more lurid public fears about how deadly the new coronavirus was. Then, with equal calm, she explained to me that the virus was very likely to become a pandemic, that barring extraordinary measures we could expect it to infect more than half the world’s population, and that the true fatality rate was uncertain but seemed to be something between 0.5 and 1 per cent. In hindsight, she was broadly right about everything that mattered. MacDermott’s educated guesses pierced through the fog of complex modelling and data-poor speculation.

I was curious as to how she did it, so I asked her. “People who have spent a lot of their time really closely studying the data sometimes struggle to pull their head out and look at what’s happening around them,” she said. “I trust data as well, but sometimes when we don’t have the data, we need to look around and interpret what’s happening.”

MacDermott worked in Liberia in 2014 on the front line of an Ebola outbreak that killed more

than 11,000 people. At the time, international organisations were sanguine about the risks, while the local authorities were in crisis. When she arrived in Liberia, the treatment centres were overwhelmed, with patients lying on the floor, bleeding freely from multiple areas and dying by the hour. The horrendous experience has shaped her assessment of subsequent risks: on the one hand, Sars-Cov-2 is far less deadly than Ebola; on the other, she has seen the experts move too slowly while waiting for definitive proof of a risk.

“From my background working with Ebola, I’d rather be overprepared than underprepared because I’m in a position of denial,” she said.

There is a broader lesson here. We can try to understand the world through statistics, which at their best provide a broad and representative overview that encompasses far more than we could personally perceive. Or we can try to understand the world up close, through individual experience. Both perspectives have their advantages and disadvantages.

Muhammad Yunus, a microfinance pioneer and Nobel laureate, has praised the “worm’s eye



# 5

view” over the “bird’s eye view”, which is a clever sound bite. But birds see a lot too. Ideally, we want both the rich detail of personal experience and the broader, low-resolution view that comes from the spreadsheet. Insight comes when we can combine the two – which is what MacDermott did.

## Lesson 5 Everything can be polarised

Reporting on the numbers behind the Brexit referendum, the vote on Scottish independence, several general elections and the rise of Donald Trump, there was poison in the air: many claims were made in bad faith, indifferent to the truth or even embracing the most palpable lies in an effort to divert attention from the issues. Fact-checking in an environment where people didn’t care about the facts, only whether their side was winning, was a thankless experience.

For a while, one of the consolations of doing data-driven journalism during the pandemic was that it felt blessedly free of such political tribalism. People were eager to hear the facts after all; the truth mattered; data and expertise were seen to be helpful. The virus, after all, could not be distracted by a lie on a bus.

That did not last. America polarised quickly, with mask-wearing becoming a badge of political identity – and more generally the Democrats seeking to underline the threat posed by the virus, with Republicans following President Trump in dismissing it as overblown. The prominent infectious-disease expert Anthony Fauci does not strike me as a partisan figure – but the US electorate thinks otherwise. He is trusted by 32 per cent of Republicans and 78 per cent of Democrats.

The strangest illustration comes from the Twitter account of the Republican politician Herman Cain, which late in August tweeted: “It looks like the virus is not as deadly as the mainstream media first made it out to be.” Cain, sadly, died of Covid-19 in July – but it seems that political polarisation is a force stronger than death.

Not every issue is politically polarised, but when something is dragged into the political arena, partisans often prioritise tribal belonging over considerations of truth. One can see this clearly, for example, in the way that highly

educated Republicans and Democrats are further apart on the risks of climate change than less-educated Republicans and Democrats. Rather than bringing some kind of consensus, more years of education simply seem to provide people with the cognitive tools they require to reach the politically convenient conclusion. From climate change to gun control to certain vaccines, there are questions for which the answer is not a matter of evidence but a matter of group identity.


In this context, the strategy that the tobacco industry pioneered in the 1950s is especially powerful. Emphasise uncertainty, expert disagreement and doubt and you will find a willing audience. If nobody really knows the truth, then people can believe whatever they want.

All of which brings us back to Darrell Huff, statistical sceptic and author of *How to Lie with Statistics*. While his incisive criticism of statistical trickery has made him a hero to many of my fellow nerds, his career took a darker turn, with scepticism providing the mask for disinformation. Huff worked on a tobacco-funded sequel, *How to Lie with Smoking Statistics*, casting doubt on the scientific evidence that cigarettes were dangerous. (Mercifully, it was not published.)

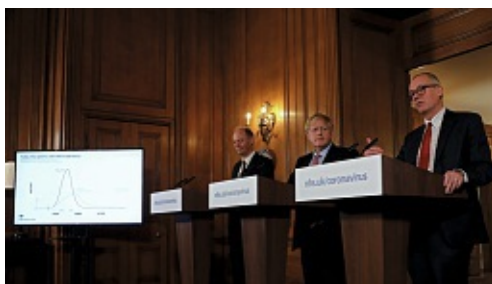
Huff also appeared in front of a US Senate committee that was pondering mandating health warnings on cigarette packaging. He explained to the lawmakers that there was a statistical correlation between babies and storks (which, it turns out, there is) even though the true origin of babies is rather different. The connection between smoking and cancer, he argued, was similarly tenuous.

Huff’s statistical scepticism turned him into the ancestor of today’s contrarian trolls, spouting bullshit while claiming to be the straight-talking voice of common sense. It should be a warning to us all. There is a place in anyone’s cognitive toolkit for healthy scepticism, but that scepticism can all too easily turn into a refusal to look at any evidence at all.

This crisis has reminded us of the lure of partisanship, cynicism and manufactured doubt. But surely it has also demonstrated the power of honest statistics. Statisticians, epidemiologists and other scientists have been producing inspiring work in the footsteps of Doll and Hill. I suggest we set aside *How to Lie with Statistics* and pay attention.

Carefully gathering the data we need, analysing it openly and truthfully, sharing knowledge and unlocking the puzzles that nature throws at us – this is the only chance we have to defeat the virus and, more broadly, an essential tool for understanding a complex and fascinating world. 

.....  
*Tim Harford’s new book “How to Make the World Add Up” (The Bridge Street Press) is due to be published on September 17*



**‘There is a place for healthy scepticism, but that can all too easily turn into a refusal to look at any evidence at all’**

Clockwise from above: A cigarette ad from the 1950s; Boris Johnson flanked by Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance at a Downing Street press conference on March 12; Nathalie MacDermott, a doctor and specialist in infectious diseases





# STAMP OF INJUSTICE

Above: former sub-postmasters Alan Bates and Janet Skinner  
Facing page: lawyer James Hartley; former sub-postmaster Jo Hamilton

When the Post Office decided to accuse hundreds of loyal workers of stealing money from the institution, they had nowhere to turn. Many suffered bankruptcy, some went to prison. In fact, refusal to acknowledge a faulty computer system was to blame. *Michael Pooler* and *Jane Croft* report on a life-changing scandal. Portraits by *Charlie Bibby*



ne afternoon in February 2004, three men walked through the door of Phil Cowan's Edinburgh post office and, in broad daylight, hauled money, stock and equipment into cars parked outside. "They took everything," he says. "Stamps, postal orders, cash in the safe."

This was not a robbery. The men, dressed in shirts and ties, were officials representing one of Britain's most venerable and trusted institutions, the Post Office. What prompted their visit was a shortfall in the branch's computerised accounts which, over a month, had swelled into a £30,000 black hole.

Unable to explain the discrepancy but hopeful of getting to the bottom of it, Cowan phoned his area manager, who arrived soon afterwards, followed by two auditors. When their calculations reached the same deficit, Cowan was told he had to repay the missing sum and that the branch was being closed.

"All they left me with was my paperwork and that was it. They took the keys to the safe," he says. "I was flabbergasted." For Cowan, who is now 67, it was the start of a spiral of misfortune that would include financial losses and bereavement.

Cowan is just one of hundreds of sub-postmasters who say they or their staff were wrongly accused of theft, false accounting or fraud by Post Office Ltd because of a faulty computer system that made money vanish. Over a period of almost 20 years, lives were ruined and people forced to "pay back" up to tens of thousands of pounds they felt they didn't owe. Some went bankrupt or lost their homes, livelihoods and reputations. A number went to prison and there was at least one suicide connected to the affair.

The scandal has been described as one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in recent British legal history. Not only has it eroded confidence in a brand that is struggling to remain relevant in the digital era, but the potential compensation claims could land the UK taxpayer with a bill significantly higher than the £100m already spent on the case.

It is a cautionary story about technology and the dangers of placing blind faith in the accuracy of complex computer systems that only a few experts understand. It also highlights the frailties of a legal system that allowed a powerful organisation to make use of the criminal courts with little accountability. The result, according to Paul Marshall, a barrister representing some of the sub-postmasters who are appealing their convictions, was "widespread manifest injustice... The Post Office



Former sub-postmaster Phil Cowan, whose branch was closed after a £30,000 discrepancy

effectively exploited those systemic weaknesses over 20 years."

For years, Post Office denied there were any fundamental problems with the Horizon software, provided by IT specialist Fujitsu. Instead, it blamed mistakes or dishonesty from sub-postmasters, who run most of its 11,500 branches. In Cowan's case, the company's suspicion immediately fell on his wife and an employee, who ran the branch. Investigators waved away Cowan's suggestion that the problem might be down to a computer bug. They insisted that the system was "infallible" and insinuated that his wife could be the culprit, he says.

"[They said] 'Mr Cowan, if there's a glitch on the Horizon system you're the only guy that has ever happened to.'" But he wasn't.

**For more than three centuries, the post office has occupied a cherished place in British life, especially in rural areas where branches are often at the heart of the community. Seventeen million customers - a quarter of the population - still visit one of its outlets each week to send parcels or for banking services. Most are small independent businesses similar to franchises and often operate alongside a separate retail activity such as a newsagent or stationer.**

In the late 1990s, Post Office was contributing hundreds of millions of pounds a year to the UK exchequer but as the internet, email and text messages took off, the institution's importance - and its finances - started to slide. Under a 1996 plan to modernise its operation, the government awarded a contract to computer services company ICL, later part of Fujitsu, for an ambitious project to start paying welfare benefits in post offices with swipe cards. The aim was to cut fraud and automate a range of activities.

Within three years, it had turned out to be a monumental failure of IT procurement, abandoned only after wasting almost £1bn of public and private money. From the ruins of the Post Office project, officials salvaged what would become known as Horizon. Repurposed as an electronic point-of-sale system, it replaced paper with computers for transactions and keeping accounts. Employees use a touchscreen terminal at each counter for stamp sales and cash withdrawals, as well as payments for utility bills, driving licences and banking services, with data recorded and transmitted to central servers for storage.

Shortly after Horizon's roll-out in 1999, some branches began to see strange numbers appearing; while



The north Wales branch run by Alan Bates until his contract was terminated

# 11,500

The number of Post Office branches across the UK

not unusual in a business that turns over large amounts of cash, these discrepancies were many times higher than normal. Post Office responded with alarming vigour.

Under English law, anyone has the right to bring a private prosecution. In the past decade, as cash-strapped police forces cut back on investigations, it has become a favoured avenue for companies pursuing minor crimes such as copyright theft. Post Office was already familiar with the tactic.

A Freedom of Information request made by Nick Wallis, a freelance journalist whose investigative reporting helped expose the scandal, shows the company secured up to a handful of convictions each year in the mid-1990s. The numbers increased sharply to 50 by 1999, when the Horizon roll-out started, before hitting a peak of 78 two years later and staying above 30 until 2013. (The request does not detail which convictions were Horizon-related.)

It was as if a crime wave was silently coursing through the most unsuspecting corners of the UK. For this to be true, it would have to mean that trustworthy shopkeepers with seeming dedication to a valued service were quietly on the take. Scores of people hitherto regarded as pillars of their communities now



found themselves accused of dishonesty and embezzlement. Yet in most instances, law-enforcement authorities never became involved.

By bringing private prosecutions Post Office was at once victim, investigator and prosecutor. Its pursuit of those it deemed guilty was subject to no meaningful independent review or oversight. The Crown Prosecution Service - which can halt private prosecutions - was hardly ever asked to step in.

**N**oel Thomas was 18 when he set off on his first round as a postman on the island of Anglesey off north Wales in 1965. He and his wife went on to run their own post office there for more than 30 years. But in 2005, he says, things began to go “terribly wrong”.

Thomas started to find “money disappearing” from the electronic accounts, he says. Horizon helpline operators told him to “roll over” the amount to the next trading period, which he did. Unless a sub-postmaster accepts the accounts, they cannot open up the next day, and there was no way to register disputes within Horizon. “I kept believing they [Post Office] would sort it out. I had a weekly calendar setting out losses... but when they came, they took everything,” he says.

On a visit to his home, Post Office investigators said Thomas was £48,000 short, before calling the police. “As [two officers] walked through the door, [one of the investigators] said, ‘Cuff him and take him to Holyhead police station - he’s a thief... Cuff him in case he runs off.’”

Like many other sub-postmasters who faced prosecution, Thomas was told Post Office would drop the theft charge if he pleaded guilty to false accounting. He would therefore be likely to avoid prison time. Yet despite doing so, he was sentenced to nine months in jail, and initially transported to Liverpool’s Walton prison, one of Britain’s toughest, where he was only allowed out of his cell for an hour each day. “It was a terrible place with broken windows [and] the rain came into the cell,” he says. He was later moved to Kirkham, an open prison in Lancashire, for the rest of his sentence.

Even after release his ordeal was not over. Post Office pursued Thomas, now 73, using the Proceeds of Crime Act to recover the money he says was not missing. In 2008, he was made bankrupt.

**While Post Office told individual sub-postmasters there was nothing wrong with Horizon and that ►**



**‘We have to expose the true level of knowledge throughout all of this – who knew what and when. That’s got to come out’**

Alan Bates, former sub-postmaster and founder of the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance





## 'I can't do this any more. I have got to sort this'

Former sub-postmaster Jo Hamilton, on reaching a £36,000 'black hole' in her accounts

◀ nobody else was experiencing issues, some suspected otherwise.

For a long time, Alan Bates was a voice in the wilderness. His dogged - obsessive, even - determination was a thorn in the side of Post Office, and he would eventually be proven right. He and his wife ran a branch combined with a haberdashery in north Wales. Within weeks of Horizon being installed in 2000, a £6,000 deficit appeared in Bates's accounting. Only by printing off metres of transaction data on four-inch receipt paper and searching manually through entries did he discover duplicated bank payment transfers, which he believed were caused by an overnight software patch.

A request to Post Office for greater access to his branch's data went unanswered and, after five years as a sub-postmaster, Bates says his contract was terminated without explanation in 2003. He refused to give up. After setting up a website detailing his treatment to warn others, similar tales started trickling in. This led to the birth of the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance, which united victims and injected political impetus to their cause. "I would describe it as a hobby that got out of hand," he says. "It's grown into a job."

In 2012, with pressure mounting from concerned MPs and critical articles published in *Computer Weekly* and *Private Eye*, Post Office chief executive Paula Vennells agreed to an independent review. If this reflected a genuine desire to seek the truth, the spirit of openness did not lead to a resolution.

In its interim report the following year, the forensic accountancy firm appointed, Second Sight, criticised delays in supplying documents and poor record-keeping. Post Office did, however, disclose two computer "defects" that had led to discrepancies at 76 branches in 2011 and 2012.

While the company acknowledged other minor failings, and committed to improvements and a mediation scheme with 150 applicants, it seized on Second Sight's preliminary finding of no evidence of systemic software problems.

Although Second Sight's final report in 2015 found most branch losses had been caused by "errors made at the counter", it also concluded many might have been avoided if more robust systems and better training were in place with less reliance on old technology, hardware and telecommunications infrastructure.

For sub-postmasters, what made the Horizon situation much worse was that the help they were offered often turned out to be anything but.



Jo Hamilton took over the South Warnborough branch in Hampshire in 2003. Surrounded by woods and fields, her post office and shop, which stand opposite a 12th-century Norman church, are an archetypal English country idyll.

Hamilton rang the Horizon helpline after the system recorded a £2,000 shortfall in her accounting in December 2003, but what it advised simply made it double. Post Office said she had to pay the money back and deducted £300 a month from her wages for the next 10 months. Yet deficits continued to appear and mount up.

One night, a friend who had lent her money to help cover the shortfalls walked past the Post Office shop. The lights were on at 10pm and Hamilton was sobbing on the floor. The hole in her accounts had swollen to £36,000. "I said, 'I can't do this any more. I have got to sort this.'"

Out of desperation, Hamilton had withdrawn £9,000 from her savings and placed it in the safe so that she could sign off the figures and continue trading, but after it was used up there was still a shortfall. Post Office discovered this and launched a private prosecution, but then offered to drop theft charges if she pleaded guilty to 14 counts of false accounting. She felt she had little choice.

At her sentencing hearing in February 2008, 74 people from the village, including her local vicar, turned out at Winchester Crown Court to support her as she was handed a 12-month community supervision order. Hamilton now works as a cleaner, but even volunteering at her granddaughter's school has proved problematic because of her criminal record.

**A**s it pursued people such as Hamilton, Post Office executives and investigators clung to Horizon's reliability. Ron Warmington, Second Sight's managing director and a veteran financial fraud investigator, says Post Office tended to seek evidence that supported false accounting rather than trying to spot any underlying causes. "We found no evidence of theft in any of the 137 cases that we and Post Office studied in detail," he says, but Post Office had not "connected the dots between different cases".

Drawing on the minutes of a joint Post Office and Fujitsu meeting in August 2010, the final report made a startling revelation about internal discussions of a bug in Horizon. Accounts showing as balanced at the sub-postmaster's counter would still register a discrepancy at the back-

end branch account; the minutes recorded discrepancies totalling £20,000 at about 40 branches. If the glitch were widely known it could cause a loss of confidence in Horizon and have an impact on ongoing legal cases, said the minutes, before examining potential solutions.

In Second Sight's reading, one of those potential fixes involved altering branch data - though Post Office told the forensic accountants neither it nor Fujitsu had the ability to directly change or delete existing records, and that the language used in the minutes was "unfortunate colloquial shorthand".

Post Office said the report repeated complaints from a "very small number" of postmasters and that three years of investigation had produced "no evidence of system-wide flaws". However, there was another red flag. Many sub-postmasters told Second Sight that Horizon transactions appeared to have been entered, or cash or stock balances changed, when the branch was closed and no one had access to the terminals. Several said they believed that their terminals had been accessed remotely or that entries were amended without their knowledge or approval. If true, this would cast doubt on the integrity of the system and whether its data could be relied upon as accurate.

Post Office strenuously denied this kind of remote access was possible, even after a former Fujitsu employee-turned-whistleblower told the BBC's *Panorama* programme in 2015 that staff at the IT provider did in fact edit branch accounts to fix errors without the knowledge of sub-postmasters and that bugs were common.

To critics, these were key pieces of evidence. Slowly, the lid of Horizon's black box was being prised open.

**One morning in 2015, James Hartley**, a partner at the law firm Freeths, was driving into work in Leeds when he heard a report on the radio about the issue. He thought there had to be a way through it, though "the odds were stacked against the sub-postmasters".

In part, this was because if they took a case to the High Court and lost, they would be forced to pay Post Office's costs. Many sub-postmasters were hesitant to back litigation, afraid of what amounted to taking on the deep pockets of the British state. But Freeths secured backing for the lawsuit, brought by 555 sub-postmasters, from Therium, one of a new breed of litigation funders that finance legal cases in return for some of the compensation. ▶

# £57.75m

The amount paid out in 2019 by Post Office to settle the lawsuit

James Hartley, partner at the law firm Freeths



Right: newspaper coverage of the death of Phil Cowan's wife Fiona in January 2009  
Below: former Post Office chief executive Paula Vennells



◀ Right from the start of the bitterly contested litigation, split into four trials, Post Office adopted an aggressive strategy, trying to strike out part of the case. But on a misty day in March 2019, Jo Hamilton hugged one of the lawyers after Mr Justice Fraser handed down his ruling. He found some of the contract terms were unreasonable and “onerous”, adding that Post Office was “in an extraordinarily powerful position” compared to the sub-postmasters and that it wielded that power “with a degree of impunity”.

Although it marked an important symbolic victory, it was only the first round. Post Office appealed the judgment – and launched what Hartley calls a “legal missile” by attempting to have Mr Justice Fraser removed on the grounds of possible bias. If successful, the entire lawsuit would have had to be heard again from scratch. But Mr Justice Fraser threw out the recusal request – not before another £500,000 in legal costs had piled up – and the Court of Appeal rejected Post Office’s appeal.

Last year, a second trial began that would go to the crux of the matter: the robustness of the Horizon system. Days before this ruling was due in December, Post Office announced it was settling the entire lawsuit for £57.75m.

In a blistering 400-page ruling, which was handed down despite the mediated settlement bringing an end to the entire lawsuit, Mr Justice Fraser found that versions of Horizon before 2017 contained “bugs, errors and defects” that caused discrepancies in accounts. Having earlier castigated a Post Office executive for “seeking to obfuscate matters”, he expressed concerns about the truthfulness of evidence from Fujitsu employees, referring them to the director of public prosecutions to consider whether they should face trials of their own.

It was a damning verdict. Those who had long accused Post Office of a culture of secrecy and denialism, while protesting their own innocence, were vindicated. Journalist Nick Wallis says: “Why did no one at the Post Office stop to think that criminalising large numbers of their own workforce might suggest a fault in their business procedures?”

The victory was bittersweet, however: after deducting legal and funding costs, the settlement pot was whittled down to about £12m. To pursue the lawsuit to the end ran the risk of running up further legal bills and wiping out any eventual damages awarded by the court. Nor did the settlement do much for some of the victims. In 2007, Janet Skinner

# 555

The number of sub-postmasters who joined forces to take Post Office to court

submitted a guilty plea to false accounting after a £59,000 shortage appeared at the Hull post office she managed. To her shock, she got a custodial sentence and served 10 weeks in prison where, separated from her two teenage children, she was placed on suicide watch. A health crisis later left her temporarily paralysed and she had to relearn how to walk. Skinner feels her five-figure payment goes nowhere near to compensating her for her pain and suffering. “It doesn’t even touch the sides,” she says. “They’ve put me and my family through hell.”

**T**he sub-postmasters’ fight is far from over. The Criminal Cases Review Commission, which investigates suspected miscarriages of justice, has referred 47 criminal convictions to the appeal courts to consider whether they should be quashed – the largest cohort of cases ever referred in one go. And Post Office itself is examining up to 900 prosecutions of postmasters, assistants and staff convicted between 1999 and 2013.

Still bearing the scars of their experiences, some intend to sue Post Office for malicious prosecution if their convictions are overturned.

Nichola Arch was one of the few who beat Post Office in court, but even that victory was pyrrhic. Despite her acquittal by a jury over a £24,000 shortfall caused by duplicated pension payments, the events following her suspension from the branch she managed in Gloucestershire in 2000 have cast a long shadow. Even today, she still refuses to go inside a post office.

“Nobody would speak to me because I was the ‘lady who stole from pensioners’ – that’s how it was [portrayed] in the local newspaper,” she says. “I lost my home, my business, my health and I’ve been on Prozac ever since – for 20 years.”

Ministers have announced an independent review, but it will not be led by a judge, have the power to compel witnesses or consider the roles of Fujitsu and the government. Many victims are even more cynical about Post Office’s own review and





**'My compensation doesn't even touch the sides. They've put me and my family through hell'**

Janet Skinner, former sub-postmaster

its new scheme to address past issues that has attracted 1,300 applicants.

Fearing a whitewash, campaigners have crowdfunded more than £100,000 to hire a legal team to file a complaint of maladministration with the Parliamentary Ombudsman to examine what they say are government failings such as a lack of oversight of a state-owned company. (Royal Mail, responsible for delivering post, was split off in 2012 and privatised the following year.) They hope to recoup their legal costs from the High Court lawsuit. "We have to expose the true level of knowledge throughout all of this - who knew what and when. That's got to come out," says Alan Bates.

One target of anger is Paula Vennells, chief executive from 2012 until last year. Vennells said in a statement to the FT she was "deeply sorry" for the sub-postmasters who suffered and that it remained "a source of deep regret" that they and their families were affected.

"I am sorry for the hurt caused and I am sorry for the fact that during my tenure as CEO, despite genuinely working hard to resolve the difficulties, the Post Office did not identify and address the defects in the Horizon technology. The regret is constantly with me."

Post Office declined interview requests. In a statement, it said it "sincerely apologises to postmasters affected by historical events and has taken determined action to provide both redress for the past and fundamental reform for the future. We are also making strenuous efforts regarding those postmasters with past criminal convictions that may be affected."

Although not a party to the legal proceedings, Fujitsu said it took the second trial judgment "very seriously". "As a long-term partner to UK public and private sector organisations, Fujitsu is dedicated to supporting our customers, our employees and the people they serve in the UK," it added.

Following the closure of Phil Cowan's post office, the stigma of the criminal charges against her took a toll on his wife Fiona, who struggled to find work as a result. In January 2009, aged 47, she died from an accidental overdose of antidepressants, alcohol and cold medicine.

"I lost my livelihood and my wife - not directly, but it certainly played a big part in her demise," says Cowan. "She went to the grave with this cloud hanging over her." **FT**

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*Michael Pooler is the FT's industry correspondent. Jane Croft is the FT's law courts correspondent*

# ‘I’m not a movie star, I’m a working actor’

For more than 35 years, Charles Dance has made a name for himself playing English aristocrats. The *Game of Thrones* star talks to *Alexander Gilmour* about the turns his career has taken, what you need to be an actor and his brush with James Bond. Portraits by *Eva Vermandel*

**“We’re all wracked with insecurity, paranoid** from time to time - not very often, it’s the insecurity mostly - and we like to be loved.” The affirmative tones of Charles Dance, 73, offer little inducement for dissent. If the actor were not baring his soul like this, he could be mistaken for the stiff patriarch of a murderous dynasty in Westeros. “[Of] course we do,” he continues. “A standing ovation is almost as good as an orgasm.”

We’re at his house on the hottest day of the year. It is in a dappled part of north London and it feels gently arty inside - no thrones. Now and then a scorching breeze wafts up from the garden and ruffles Dance’s shirt, which is blue and linen with the top four buttons undone. From what I can see - which is a lot - he is lean and tanned in a pinky-gold kind of way. He looks like a man in his prime.

At least, he is in a purple patch. Four seasons of *Game of Thrones* (2011-14) - in which Dance played Tywin Lannister, TV’s most terrifying dad - have helped. (His performance is splendidly brutal - the highlight is him being shot on the privy by his son.) He starred recently in the excellent *Fanny Lye Deliver’d*, in which he plays another scary father. Before that he appeared in the blockbusting *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (no one’s finest moment). And soon he’ll be William Randolph Hearst, the inspiration for *Citizen Kane*, in David Fincher’s *Mank*, starring Gary Oldman. It’s a “great part” and a “great film”, says Dance, who acted in Fincher’s first movie *Alien 3* (1992). His character was the only one to have sex with warrant officer Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) - “yes”, he says fondly - and Dance was impressed by the debutant director. “He’s a genius, actually. A demanding genius, but he’s a genius.”

Next up will be Lord Kitchener in *The King’s Man*. Matthew Vaughn’s latest film, the third in the *Kingsman* series, is a period spy comedy starring Ralph Fiennes, Tom Hollander and Rhys Ifans. Is it good? “I think it’s great,” says Dance, who isn’t always so effusive about the stuff he’s in. “I sent Matthew a text message, actually, I said: ‘It’s fucking wonderful.’ There are some wonderfully over-the-top performances in it.” Including his? “I tried not to be too over-the-top. I just did a lot of moustache acting.” ▶







◀ Vaughn is a “clever guy”, Dance adds. “He’s his own man, very much so, has his own way of doing things... He doesn’t delegate. He’s running the show... He’s just positive, positive, positive all the time, knows exactly what he wants.”

**One of Dance’s USPs is his talent for contorting** his face - and voice - into the perfect expression of plummy English arrogance. From Guy Perron in *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984 - his big break on TV) to Lord Mountbatten in *The Crown* (2019), posh parts have been a staple of the Dance repertoire for more than 35 years. His Lord Stockbridge in Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park* (2001) - in which he is deathlessly withering to Tom Hollander’s diminutive character - is the pinnacle of this exquisite showreel.

Indeed, he takes to these roles with such aplomb that it’s easy to forget that Dance wasn’t born into a family seething with lethal aristocrats. He grew up in Plymouth; his mum was a cook and his dad an electrical engineer. His father fought in the second Boer war and died in his seventies when Dance was a toddler. It’s also easy to imagine that real-life Dance must be perpetually hacked off about something, like the people he plays. Today, he seems friendly, even normal. How does he do it on screen? “Well, I pretend,” says Dance.

How much of him is in these parts - the delectable Josslyn Hay in *White Mischief* (1987), for example, Stockbridge or Mountbatten? “No, come on, I pretend. We all do in this business.” Is there nothing of Charles Dance in Tywin Lannister? “A lack of patience, sometimes.” Is he reaching that point right now? “No.” (He has laser blue eyes.) He comes from a generation, he says, who can chat about supper one minute and switch into character the next. Essentially, it’s technique.

But preparing for his role as an MI6 colonel in *Godzilla* must be different from rehearsing *Coriolanus* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, as Dance did in 1989? “With parts like that, it’s incumbent on me to eat properly, sleep properly, prepare.” Does he delve into his soul for such roles? “No. As I keep saying, I pretend. If I’m playing a murderer, I don’t have to go out and slit somebody’s throat.”

Looking back, would he have liked to play local vets? “A local vet?” Or Winnie the Pooh, I suggest, something a little more benign? “No, I don’t think so.”

**Is he easy to work with? “There are times** when, as an actor, you have to look after number one because finally, it’s this” - he points at his handsome, glaring face - “that’s on the screen.” That sounds fair. There are tougher gigs in life than acting but acting is still tough. Mostly, actors

## ‘You can’t just “want” to be an actor - you have to “need” to be part of a community from whom you get inspiration, energy, affection’

have no control over what they do. Much of life is wasted applying for jobs that never materialise. With rare exceptions - such as Maggie Smith - seniority dwindles with age. And it’s impossible not to take it all personally - rejection, criticism, billing, everything.

Moreover, Dance has had to graft. He was approaching 40 when he got *The Jewel in the Crown*. He stammered in his teens. “My mother took me to speech therapists - physically, there was nothing wrong. There must have been some kind of emotional trauma, I don’t know.” Like what? “No idea. But I could never be seen to be a ‘stammerer’ and I used to spend a long time making up the most complicated sentences to get round words I knew I couldn’t manage.”

Later he went to Leicester College of Arts, dropped out (“I was really bored by trying to come up with house styles for British Telecom”) and took private acting lessons once a week. “I worked as a labourer during the day,” he says. “I was a plumber’s mate... you dig the trench, the plumber does the clever work with the pipe and you fill the trench up again.” Was he good at it? “Not bad. I knew how to dig and use a pickaxe. ‘Up high and down heavy,’” he says, in his best Plymouth accent. “That was the advice for the pickaxe.” He looks like he could still wield one.

His drama lessons were focused on technique. “Trying to get the voice better, because I used to make a terrible noise, a cross between a Plymouth accent and a Birmingham accent - terrible sound and very lazy. I knew nothing. Absolutely nothing.” But why should he have known anything

about acting? “Some people have an instinct I didn’t seem to have. I had this hard graft.”

Why did he think he could do it? “I had ambition and enthusiasm and probably a misplaced and inflated opinion of my own ability.” His teachers were less forthcoming about his gifts: “The most lavish praise I ever got was ‘not bad.’” You can’t just “want” to be an actor - you have to “need” it, he says. Is it a need to be seen in front of lots of people, to be famous? “No. It’s the need to be part of a community from whom you get inspiration, energy, affection,” he replies. “And if an actor denies that, they’re lying.”

Does Dance like criticism in the press? “If it’s constructive, yes, absolutely.” Does he read it? After all, few actors do. “I don’t read too many notices, to be honest with you, but if somebody comes round to the dressing room - if there’s somebody I know and respect - and says, ‘Look, can I tell you something... I didn’t enjoy tonight, that scene...’ If somebody gives me a bit of constructive [feedback]... ‘Oh, right, OK, I’ll think about it.’” Do many people do that? “Not many, not many,” he ruminates. It must be a brave soul who buttonholes Dance straight after a show and tells him that his performance sucked.

**We move on to this year’s lockdown. “I actually** don’t mind my own company,” he says. He has affable neighbours? “Yes, we talk over the fence... And every Thursday night, we would go out and we would clap the National Health Service. What have they been offered, a 2.5 per cent pay rise? It’s disgusting.” Dance classifies himself as “a bit left of centre-left” and summarises Britain’s present predicament as follows: “We’re in a ship that’s being steered by a fucking lunatic. By a bumbling buffoon, actually.”

With social distancing, is theatre dead, I wonder? “God knows. A 900-seat theatre is going to be forced to play to 300, probably. Economically, it’s really, really difficult.” To me, it looks impossible without state subsidies or ticket prices tripling. It’s particularly difficult to envisage happy futures for London’s Victorian theatres, all velvet and no leg room. “Most of those theatres in the West End are rat-infested holes anyway,” says Dance.

We move on to the #MeToo movement. Had he suspected Weinstein? “No. I didn’t know Harvey Weinstein personally. I’ve never met anybody who was a victim of Harvey Weinstein. There were certainly people who used to say, ‘My god, he’s a sleazebag’ and stuff, and ‘Have you ever been chased round the room by Harvey Weinstein?’”

But Dance has observed a shift in culture. “I’ve noticed things like people reluctant to make a joke about somebody’s legs or their arse... I’ve heard



‘The Jewel in the Crown’, 1984



‘Pascali’s Island’, 1988



‘Game of Thrones’, 2011



‘Godzilla: King of the Monsters’, 2019



women say ‘God, can’t we flirt any more?’” There are some people who think Weinstein’s films are now tainted artistically. Does he agree? “No, I don’t think [that] any more than I would not listen to Wagner because he was a rampant anti-Semite.”

Dance exudes confidence both on screen and at home in his sexy blue linen. How confident is he really? “Sometimes I’m confident, sometimes I’m not. I’m like a lot of actors, by nature, I’m principally an introvert.” How ambitious is he? “Not nearly ambitious enough, probably.”

In 1981, Dance played a cameo goon called Claus in the James Bond movie *For Your Eyes Only*. A few years later, he was asked to audition to play Bond himself. He refused. “Oh god,” he says, when I bring it up. “My agent at the time rang me - it was a hot July day - and she said, ‘It’s happened, darling.’ And I said, ‘What’s happened?’ She said, ‘You’ve been asked to test for Bond.’ I said, ‘Really?’ She said, ‘I urge you not to do it.’ I said, ‘Why is that?’ She said, ‘One, well, think how you’ll feel if you don’t get it, and, two, I think it will limit your career.’”

Turning down the chance of Bond is a decision that could haunt an actor for ever. I suggest that Dance should have had a better agent. “I think she was being kind,” he says. “I had not nearly enough experience for something like that - and I would have fucked it up.” Does he still think that now? “Yes, I do.” The screen test or the actual part if he’d got it? “If I’d got the part. It’s a big thing.”

Does he regard himself as a success? “As a success? I think I’ve been very lucky, and I think a lot of people would look at my career and say, ‘Yes, you’ve been a successful actor.’ I’m not a movie star, I’m a working actor,” he says. “I’ve been a supporting actor most of my career. You could call what I did in *White Mischief* a leading role, in *Plenty* [1985 - starring opposite Meryl Streep], *Pascali’s Island* [1988 - his best film], but the rest of them are kind of major supporting parts or impressive cameos... The thing is I just like working - I don’t like being out of work.”

Does he like being famous? “No, not really. No.” Would he rather not be famous? “I would rather be looked over than overlooked, that’s for sure. But I find the whole selfie business a real pain in the arse, actually.” Does it happen often? “Yes, it does. And it depends on the mood I’m in.”

Would he advise his young daughter to become an actor? “No, I wouldn’t advise anybody to become an actor.” Why not? “Because the rejection is horrible,” he says, and most actors are out of work. To survive, you must have that “need”. Dance has survived. **FT**

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*Alexander Gilmour is the FT’s Food & Drink editor.  
“The King’s Man” is in UK cinemas February 26 2021*



**‘Sometimes I’m confident, sometimes I’m not. I’m like a lot of actors, by nature, I’m principally an introvert’**



‘The Crown’, 2019



‘The King’s Man’, 2020



## Toward the light

In a series of pictures and verse from her latest book, Japanese photographer *Rinko Kawauchi* uses the transformational experience of raising a child as a filter to explore nature, family and the intimacy of everyday moments





*the signs came four days before I was due  
shockwaves from within, my entire being tolled, like I was a bell*

*time went on - I was swallowed by stubborn waves, like a boat on stormy seas  
I made contact on the second morning,  
my body like a conduit, made for connection*

*as light shined through the austere LDR room, the threshold opened  
she emerged from within me,  
with all the things I had been carrying for so long*







*once I hated summer  
the light was too bright for me*

*but out of nowhere came to love it,  
I turned toward life*

*she was born at the start of summer*

*I was taken aback by this blank mass of possibility  
all the different colors she'll come to know*

*I know it's too soon to dread the day she'll go on her own,  
but the day will come before too long*

*one early afternoon, at the height of summer*

*I found a jewel beetle in the backyard*



*teaching me to notice creatures that I might have overlooked  
encouraging me to take a picture*

*and lighting the road ahead  
so that I keep from the dark path  
toward the light,*

*beckoned by the little one carrying the lantern*

“As it is”, by  
Rinko Kawauchi,  
will be published by  
Chose Commune in  
late September, €35  
[chosecommune.com](http://chosecommune.com)



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# Stop me and buy one

The pandemic has sent a chill through Britain's ice-cream van community – customers in lockdown, outdoor events cancelled, ambiguous restrictions...  
*Camilla Hodgson finds cold comfort kerbside*





To chime or not to chime? This is perhaps not one of the better known coronavirus debates, but a question that provoked tense discussions between Britain's ice-cream van drivers when the UK government imposed its nationwide lockdown in March.

The decision to close all but essential services coincided with some short-lived sunshine after a wet winter. For the nation's ice-cream vans, this would usually have marked the start of their eight-month selling season.

But vendors were left in limbo, uncertain about whether they could, or should, trade. Since takeaway services could operate, some local authorities - which grant street traders their licenses - allowed the vans to keep selling. Others ordered them to stop. Some gave the green light but advised the vans not to "chime" - play their tinkling jingles - to avoid drawing crowds.

"[It] split the ice-cream community," says Katy Alston, founder of Pink's Vintage Ice Cream, whose blue- and pink-painted vehicles work across the south of England and who also has an ice-cream parlour. "There aren't ice-cream [turf] wars any more, but there was a massive division over that." Some thought it was irresponsible to keep selling, but a minority argued it was a business necessity in keeping with the rules.

The pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for small businesses and the food, drink and leisure sectors in particular. In Britain, the springtime months under lockdown brought periodic bursts of warmth - but the simple pleasure of venturing out for a kerbside ice cream, where it was even possible, had become a health risk.

Britain's ice-cream van men and women rely on a short peak season and the whims of families, tourists and event planners. Some have adapted to this year's crisis, while others have ▶

All the photographs on this spread come from Luke Stephenson's "99x99s", a project that documents the story of the 99 ice cream through a photographic road trip around the UK





## 'We're normally running round the country doing shows every weekend. Now we try to make ends meet'

◀ downsized. "We're just making the best of a bad situation," says John Bonar, whose Essex-based Piccadilly Whip Catering has a fleet of eight vans. "We're the type that makes our own luck."

**This is not the first time that ice-cream vans have been caught up in health issues.** At the end of the 19th century, the government banned the "penny lick" reusable glasses that ice cream had previously been served in because of hygiene concerns. Wafer cones started replacing the glasses, leading to the emblematic "99": a cone with a swirl of soft-serve vanilla ice cream and a chocolate Flake.

Ice-cream street traders in the UK date back to at least the 1850s, when vendors drove around in horse-drawn carts. The 1950s and 1960s were their heyday, when thousands of motorised vans toured towns, cities and seaside resorts. The advent of the affordable home freezer in the 1970s and extended Sunday shopping hours in the 1990s sent the number of vehicles going road-to-road into a slump, falling to about 500 today, according to trade body the Ice Cream Alliance. These days, ice-cream vendors spend less time chiming and more time parked up at festivals, fairs and weddings.

The ice-cream van turf wars of the second half of the 20th century, which Alston refers to, petered out as the number of vehicles on the street started to fall. The trade also found itself in a more serious kind of turf war - violent disputes in Glasgow in the early 1980s, as rival gangs competed to sell drugs and stolen goods

out of soft-scoop vans. Eventually, after an arson attack that resulted in the deaths of six members of one family, several people were arrested; two men were found guilty but later had their convictions quashed.

The most recent nationwide ice-cream van controversy occurred in 2013, when the length of time vans were permitted to chime increased from four to 12 seconds. The government said at the time the change would reduce "tension" and "competitive chiming" between sellers, who were advised to stop playing their jingles "when in sight of another van".

**B**ritain woke to sunny skies on Mothering Sunday, March 22, the day before the country went into full lockdown and shortly before the sunniest April on record. Mothers' Day should have been the start of her season, says Alston. Instead, "I remember sitting in my parlour absolutely sobbing." She has run her ice-cream business since her husband surprised her with a van on Christmas Day 2001 and she opened her Sussex shop last year.

"You rely on the summer and those first few weeks," she says. "It doesn't even have to be warm, it's just that it's light and bright... We completely lost that." With dozens of weddings cancelled and the shop closed, in May Pinks started offering deliveries of "parlour at home" packs - ice cream, cones, toppings and sauces.

Other vans around the country branched out into home deliveries - not just of ice cream,

but new, more extravagant desserts and even groceries. Piccadilly Whip, for example, started delivering ice cream and opened a farm shop at its Essex depot, selling groceries for collection or delivery. Although the services were popular, the company is permanently closing its parlour in Lakeside shopping centre.

"We're normally running round the country doing shows every weekend. Now we try to make ends meet," says Bonar.

Family business Ellinor's Ice Cream, which is based in Kent and relies on events for most of its income, started delivering luxury ice-cream cakes, sundaes and milkshakes in May. "You have to reinvent yourself to cope," says owner Mark Ellinor. Although dessert deliveries were busy to begin with, demand started to ease as restrictions were relaxed in August, and nothing will compensate for the lost revenue from cancelled corporate events, he says.

Alston has now reopened her parlour with reduced seating, and rebooked most of the postponed weddings she had been due to cater for, but has yet to make up for lost sales. "There are a lot of people that are still not going out," she says. Keeping the parlour afloat is "the challenge now. In the beginning we thought there would be massive parties when this is over so we'd be able to recoup then. But, of course, it didn't happen like that."

**The economics of ice-cream vans vary by company:** factors include whether they make their own desserts, own their vehicles or pay

large sums for pitches or event licenses. Zelica Carr, chief executive of the Ice Cream Alliance, says so-called "mobilers" are "secretive" about how much they make.

Some sellers have taken advantage of recent government support: Field furloughed his four employees for six weeks and would otherwise have had to make them redundant since "sales went to zero". To make up for lost time "instead of working six days a week I'm working seven," he says. By August, the company had recovered its lockdown losses, he adds.

The ice-cream community missed out on a coronavirus tax cut, says Carr. In July, the government temporarily reduced the value added tax rate on food and non-alcoholic drinks from 20 per cent to 5 per cent - but the cut only applied to hot, not cold, takeaway items.

Had ice cream been included, "it would have really helped," says Carr. Vendors "have very limited time and resources to make money before they go into the winter".

Paul Field of Reading-based Maurice's Ice Cream, who has been selling ice cream for nearly 40 years and has eight vans, puts it simply: "At the end of the season the bank is full, and then at the beginning of the season it's empty."

**Y**et the nation's ice-cream van operators still seem optimistic about the future and overwhelmingly positive about what can be a gruelling job. "When you see small children and they've got their fists clenched, and they're

jumping for joy, with smiles on their faces, that's a great feeling," says Ellinor. He quit his job as a transport manager 18 years ago, bought an ice-cream van and "never looked back", he says. His wife did the same soon afterwards.

Field says ice-cream vanning "becomes a way of life, it doesn't become hard work".

On the Isle of Wight, off Britain's south coast, a fleet of three ice-cream vans has been getting to know its customers. Family-run Plaza Ices normally spends the summer touring the UK's events, but has been chiming around the island's streets since May. "We've really brought communities together," says owner Gary Hall. Customers post on the company's Facebook page if they want a van to visit their area and then they eat their ice creams outside, chatting - at a safe distance - with their neighbours.

"I've always avoided the streets," says Hall. "I had the impression that people wouldn't want an ice-cream van [there]. But actually it has been such a surprise... We've been so welcome." Turnover is considerably lower than normal, but the team is grateful for the work they have, he says.

Before moving into the business 16 years ago, Hall was a ticket inspector on buses. He now works 12 hours a day, seven days a week, but is happier. "I feel very fortunate being an ice-cream man," he says. Working on the buses, "everybody was moaning at me." Turning up in a van, "everyone's in a happy, vibrant mood". **FT**

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*Camilla Hodgson is an FT markets reporter*





# Honey & Co Recipes



## Crunch time

The first kitchen porter we hired at Honey & Co was called Carlos and he was from Barcelona. He didn't like handling dirty dishes but was so funny that we forgave his fastidiousness. He had strong opinions about Catalan football and Catalan independence, and that's all he wanted to talk about in what little English he had. It was just the three of us in the kitchen and Sarit and I would often speak to each other in Hebrew. When Carlos felt left out, he would start mimicking us - *katish katash katish katash* - that's what we sounded like to him. He was only with us for a few months but *katish katash* became a staple of our kitchen speak. When we wanted to say that something was a catastrophe, we said it was *katish katash*. If something was particularly delicious... it was *katish katash*. I always said that if we ever set up a falafel shop, we should call it Katish Katash. Eight years later, during lockdown, we converted our tiny restaurant to the falafel shop we had toyed with opening. We bought a stand and stencilled on our new name, along with a short menu: falafel/aubergine & egg/crisp fried chicken. And opened the doors.

But if 2020 has taught us anything it is that things won't always go to plan - for every portion of falafel or aubergine, we sold two portions of chicken. We set out to open a falafel shop and found ourselves proud owners of a chicken shop. Fried chicken is a fine thing. Unlike the Colonel, we are happy to share the secret to ours. We get thighs off the bone from our butcher and when the meat is this good, you don't need 11 herbs and spices, just a good marinade and a good dredge - ours came from the Five Point café in Seattle via our good friend Bridget, who used to work there. The chicken stays crisp for a bit so it's perfect for picnics - or indeed for hot sandwiches. Having people come - and get their hands and chins messy - has been a tonic these past months. And I always think about Carlos, who gave the enterprise its name, but wouldn't have eaten here. He really didn't like getting his fingers dirty. **FT**

By Itamar Srulovich. Recipe by Sarit Packer

### Crispy chicken sandwich

- 500g or four pieces of skinless, boneless chicken thighs
  - 200g buttermilk
  - 1 clove of garlic, peeled and minced
  - ½ tsp salt
- For the chicken dredge**
- 100g plain flour
  - 50g polenta or coarse semolina
  - 1 tsp salt
  - Good sprinkling of freshly ground black pepper
  - Pinch of cayenne
- Optional serving suggestion**
- 2 pitta breads or fluffy white rolls
  - 1 cucumber, thinly sliced
  - A few mint leaves
  - Juice and zest of half a lime
  - A sprinkling of salt and pepper
  - 4 tbs tahini, mayonnaise or whatever your favourite condiment is
- 1** — Mix the buttermilk, garlic and salt into the chicken, making sure it is well coated. Cover and marinate overnight or for at least four hours - this will make the meat super succulent.
  - 2** — Heat the vegetable oil (at least 2cm deep) in a frying pan.
  - 3** — Remove the chicken pieces from the marinade and pop into the dredge. Flip to coat really well.
  - 4** — Carefully put the chicken into the hot oil and fry for 3-4 minutes until golden and crispy. Flip to cook the other side for another 3-4 minutes - the chicken should be a nice dark brown by the time you finish. Remove from the oil and put the pieces on a plate lined with paper.
  - 5** — While the chicken is frying, slice the cucumber and mix with some salt, the lime and the mint. Assemble everything with tahini or mayonnaise in the pitta and eat straight away. Alternatively, you can fry the chicken in advance and reheat for a few minutes in a hot oven when you are ready to serve.

Photographs by Patricia Niven







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# Jancis Robinson Wine

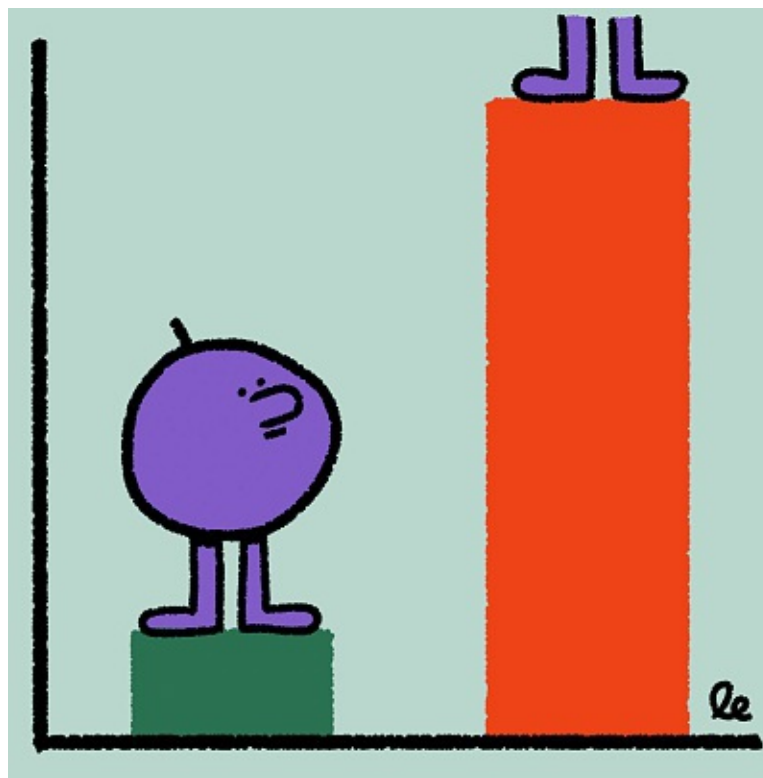
## A real variety show

Which grape variety is the world's most widely grown? And which has fallen most rapidly out of favour? Which countries rely most heavily on international varieties - those familiar to wine drinkers all over the world - rather than their own indigenous grapes? A stupendously comprehensive compendium of wine grape statistics\* just published by Professor Kym Anderson and Signe Nelgen of Adelaide university answers these questions and many more.

The most recent year for which they can find comparable stats for all wine-producing countries is 2016, which means that everything is a bit out of date. Yet their comparisons with 1990 and 2000 reveal fascinating overall trends and show us just how rapidly the world's vineyards have been evolving.

For a start there are fewer of them. Between 2000 and 2016, the total area of the globe planted with grapevines contracted by 8 per cent, chiefly because the big wine drinkers of old, the French and Spaniards in particular, are drinking so very much less. In the same period, Americans, Chileans and Kiwis all planted masses of new vineyards but failed to make up the difference.

Between 2000 and 2016, the biggest percentage increases in vineyard area were all in cooler countries: China, New Zealand (where vineyard area almost quadrupled), the UK (where it doubled) and Canada. Climate change is certainly having an effect on the shape of the wine map. In 2000, according to Anderson and Nelgen's analysis, 51 per cent of the world's vineyards were in hot climates; by 2016, this had fallen to 44 per cent - chiefly because most of the vine pull schemes, such as that initiated by the EU in 2008, were focused on the hottest regions.



As imagined by Leon Edler

In 1990 and 2000, the grape that occupied the greatest vineyard area in the world was the little-known brandy grape Airén, which used to dominate the vast, arid plains of La Mancha in Spain. By 2016, it had fallen to fourth and Cabernet Sauvignon had taken its place as most popular wine grape, planted on nearly 7 per cent of the world's vineyard area, up from 2 per cent in 1990. I am

quite surprised by this, as it's not that easy to ripen in cooler climes and has been going through a bit of a dip in popularity in some important markets.

Australians have turned against Cabernet in favour of Shiraz. Argentine growers have shunned it in favour of Malbec. Red bordeaux - the archetypal Cabernet Sauvignon-based wine - has been going through an identity



crisis and can be tricky to sell. And, although I haven't measured this, I'm pretty sure the proportion of Cabernet Sauvignons that producers and importers choose to show us faddy wine writers has plummeted in recent years.

This apparent contradiction highlights what a long-term crop vines are. They are expected to stay in the ground for a good 30 years, so the choice of what to plant may have been made by an earlier generation in a very different commercial context.

The second most-planted variety in 2016 was Cabernet Sauvignon's blending partner Merlot, but it's not nearly as popular as it was in 1990 when it was more widely

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### 'Climate change is certainly having an effect on the shape of the world wine map'

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planted than Cabernet. The Merlot-phobic film *Sideways* (2004) has much to answer for.

The variety with the most spectacular increase in its total area is Tempranillo, which now dominates Spanish vineyards. It may not be common outside the Iberian peninsula but growers planted it to such an extent, not least to replace Airén, that Tempranillo was the world's third most-planted grape in 2016.

Chardonnay was almost as widely grown as Airén by 2016, and is, perhaps not surprisingly, the world's favourite international white wine grape, having tripled its total area since 1990 - in part due to its popularity as an ingredient in sparkling wines.

Sixth was Syrah/Shiraz, largely thanks to Australian enthusiasm for it and increased plantings in the south of France as well as, to a lesser extent, on the west coast of the US. By contrast, ►



## Some favourite examples of the top 10 varieties

These are some exceptional wines I have tasted recently

- **CABERNET SAUVIGNON**  
Henschke, Cyril Henschke Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 Eden Valley  
£100 Honest Grapes and others
- **MERLOT**  
Ch L'Église Clinet 1995 Pomerol  
£290 Hedonism
- **TEMPRANILLO**  
La Rioja Alta, Viña Ardanza Reserva Selección Especial 2010 Rioja  
£23.50 The Wine Society and many others
- **AIRÉN**  
Verum, Las Tinadas 2019 or 2018  
Vino de la Tierra de Castilla  
From €10 in Spain and Belgium
- **CHARDONNAY**  
Kumeu River, Chardonnay 2019 New Zealand  
From £22.99 DBM Wines, Oxford Wine Co, Four Walls Wine
- **SYRAH/SHIRAZ**  
Mullineux Schist Syrah 2017 Swartland  
£74.40 Berry Bros & Rudd
- **GARNACHA TINTA/GRENACHE**  
David & Nadia Grenache (any vintage) Swartland  
£120 for six bottles in bond (2018) Justerini & Brooks
- **SAUVIGNON BLANC**  
Oliver Zeter, Fumé Sauvignon Blanc 2018 Pfalz  
£23 Laithwaites and Averys
- **TREBBIANO TOSCANO/UGNI BLANC**  
Il Ghizzano 2019 Costa Toscana  
£17.01 Winebuyers.com
- **PINOT NOIR**  
Au Bon Climat, La Bauge Au-Dessus Estate  
Pinot Noir 2016 Santa Maria Valley  
£40.94 Noel Young



Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com. International stockists via Wine-searcher.com

◀ its traditional blending partner, the variety known as Garnacha Tinta in its native Spain and Grenache in France, has lost considerable ground since 1990 when it was the world's second most-planted variety. In 2016, it fell to seventh place. Anderson excludes it from his small group of "premium" (high quality) grape varieties in this latest report, but I would argue that it is now experiencing a re-evaluation by growers and quality-conscious consumers and is on the verge of being considered fashionable thanks to some great examples from the southern Rhône, Spain, South Africa and Australia.

Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, eighth and 10th in 2016, both saw dramatic increases in popularity between 1990 and 2016, not least thanks to enthusiastic new plantings in New Zealand and the US. Trebbiano Toscano, known as Ugni Blanc in France and once widely grown there for cognac, was ninth, although its wines certainly wouldn't qualify as premium.

Apparently, red wine grapes are even more popular outside Europe than with Europeans who (slightly) favoured white wine grapes in 2000. By 2016, the proportion of red wine grapes was 65 per cent outside Europe and 53 per cent within it - though quite a few of those European red wine grapes are now turned into rosé. China is the country with the highest proportion of red wine grapes, 86 per cent, while New Zealand

has the lowest, 22 per cent, thanks to the world's insatiable thirst for Kiwi Sauvignon Blanc.

Anderson's main point is that the internationally famous varieties have become increasingly dominant. Countries with the greatest reliance on them are France (where most of them come from after all), the US, Chile and Australia.

Those with the highest proportion of indigenous rather than international varieties are, in declining order - 100 per cent down to 66 per cent - Cyprus, Georgia, Spain, Greece, Croatia, Portugal and Italy (although Italy is the only one whose proportion of indigenous varieties waned quite substantially between 2000 and 2016 when many growers were still besotted by French glamour). France, incidentally, counts as having only just over 60 per cent of its own grapes because so many of the varieties grown there were originally Spanish.

I would be surprised if next time Anderson and Nelgen undertake this Herculean task they do not see an increase in the proportion and number of indigenous varieties. After all, if Tesco can include the obscure Marche white wine grape Passerina in its collection of The Finest... **FT**

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\*Database at [adelaide.edu.au/wine-econ/databases/winegrapes](http://adelaide.edu.au/wine-econ/databases/winegrapes).  
Ebook at [adelaide.edu.au/press/titles/winegrapes](http://adelaide.edu.au/press/titles/winegrapes).  
More columns at [ft.com/jancis-robinson](http://ft.com/jancis-robinson)

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**FT Weekend**



# Restaurant Insider

## Nicholas Lander



JACK GUEZ/GETTY IMAGES

### Blue Mondays

For restaurants, Monday is traditionally the quietest day of the week. In the past, restaurateurs have tried to combat this, but with little real success. Some, for example, have offered free corkage, converting their places into bring-your-own-bottle establishments for the evening - a tactic that may increase the number of diners but at a price, as profitable wine sales plummet.

As a restaurateur, I used to schedule the openings of artists' exhibitions for Monday nights, since, invariably, they would attract a decent audience who would drink and often stay for supper. Yet this tactic often meant that a busy Monday would be followed by a quieter-than-average Tuesday.

The situation looks unlikely to improve in the current circumstances. "On Mondays in July 2019, sales were approximately 10 per cent of the weekly turnover," says Hussein Ahmad, an accountant with Viewpoint Partners, which specialises in restaurant accounts. "This year it was down to 5 per cent."

A few years ago, Michel Roux Jr reopened Mayfair's smart

Le Gavroche after a major redesign. And he decided not to open his doors fully on Mondays. His intention was twofold. First, to allow a fixed day of the week for private lunches and dinners, and, second, to avoid the cost of engaging his extensive team on a day when the restaurant would not be full.

When I spoke to Roux recently about this decision, he said: "There just does not appear to be enough customers out there on a Monday and those that are do not want - after perhaps a slightly indulgent Sunday - to drink that much wine in a restaurant. We had the opportunity to close and I have no regrets."

In the age of Covid, an increasing number of restaurateurs appear to be following suit. In the numerous press releases I've received announcing the reopening of restaurants since lockdown, I have noticed that many will remain closed on the first day of the week. Jeremy King, for example, has reopened Bellanger in Islington but only Tuesday to Sunday. Likewise, our son, Will Lander, has decided not to reopen any of his three restaurants on Mondays. This, I suspect, is a trend that is likely to persist for some time.



**'There seems to be a growing feeling that being closed on Mondays is not the negative signal it was once perceived to be'**

Will Beckett, half of the team leading the Hawksmoor group, whose restaurants are in the process of reopening, confirmed that Mondays were their quietest day of the week, with the exception of Hawksmoor Guildhall in the City of London, which was busy on Mondays but whose surroundings were so quiet on Saturdays and Sundays that it simply wasn't worth opening at the weekend.

Restaurateurs used to feel that it was important to open on Mondays for two very different reasons. First, if they could make even a tiny gross profit, then it was deemed worth doing. Second, if a restaurant was closed for a certain day, or even just a part of it - such as Monday lunch - that would be a signal to the competition and to the public that it wasn't doing well. After all, busy restaurants tend to self-perpetuate, while restaurants that appear unsuccessful seem only to get quieter.

Yet these days, even the smallest restaurants need a general manager, waiters, several cooks and kitchen porters in order to function. Wages have risen and costs need to be covered. There seems to be a growing feeling that being closed on Mondays is not quite the negative signal it was once perceived to be.

There is also a positive advantage to being closed on Mondays: it gives the whole restaurant team a chance to draw breath and to have a collective day off after the busy period of Thursday to Sunday, which is important for well-being.

Thursdays have become the busiest night of the week for many, followed by the slightly less busy Fridays and Saturdays. (Incidentally, Saturdays are often the most difficult for restaurateurs to manage because many customers travel from far and wide, which means there tend to be more "no-shows" than usual.) Besides, more restaurants are now open for Sunday lunch, aiming to attract families rather than the smaller tables that used to be the norm on Mondays.

There seems to be a growing - and quite understandable - disinclination to open on Mondays at all. Yet perhaps the handful that do will reap the reward. **FT**

More columns at [ft.com/lander](http://ft.com/lander)





## FANTASY DINNER PARTY

BROOKE MASTERS

The FT's opinion and analysis editor joins her dream guests for an evening of spirited conversation, cocktails and elegant French-Indian fusion cuisine

We are gathering at an imaginary place. “Le Saule Pleureur” is the Michelin-starred fusion restaurant at the heart of the movie *The Hundred-Foot Journey*. French-trained chef Madame Mallory (Helen Mirren) leaves the Indian-influenced cooking to her young protégé Hassan Haji (Manish Dayal) these days, but her stern presence still ensures the food will be perfect and the white-glove service divine.

I arrive via vintage convertible, weaving through the hills of south-west France to the Belle Epoque-style château that houses the restaurant.

A Maybach 57S hoves into view, US basketball player **LeBron James** is behind the wheel - this luxury sports car is just one of the dozen or so in his collection. The LA Lakers star has been magically released

from the National Basketball Association play-off bubble to join my gathering. Probably the second-best player of all time (behind Michael Jordan), he's also the author of a best-selling children's book, *I Promise*, and a canny businessman who has sought to maximise his earnings through shorter team contracts and clever endorsement deals, such as his lifetime tie-up with Nike.

But I really want to talk to him about social justice. A supporter of Colin Kaepernick's “taking a knee” protests during the US national anthem, he uses Twitter to speak out on racism and police violence. He's also put his money behind schools in his hometown of Akron, Ohio, and “get out the vote” efforts. He was a leader in the recent NBA player boycott after the shooting of Jacob Blake by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

We start with mango gimlets and apricot Bellinis on the terrace overlooking the Pyrenees. Rather than jump right into politics, the small talk turns to health and exercise routines, and James finds himself swapping weightlifting and stretching tips with my second guest, **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**.

Sometimes it seems like the only thing standing between America

and social meltdown is the frail but steely 87-year-old justice, who has endured colon, lung, pancreatic and now liver cancer while standing up for the powerless on the Supreme Court bench. Before becoming a judge, Ginsburg pioneered the fight against sex discrimination while also raising her family. Over the years, she has become a role model, hero of a 2018 biopic, *On the Basis of Sex*, and even an internet

### ‘LeBron James finds himself swapping weightlifting tips with Ruth Bader Ginsburg’

meme, as The Notorious RBG, a play on the rapper Notorious B.I.G.

By the time the talk shifts to civil rights and economic justice, our third guest has wandered in. **Adam Smith**, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, is sometimes considered the godfather of capitalism because of his vivid and clear explanations of how the “invisible hand” of the free market works. But the 18th-century Scottish economist's other writings suggest he had far more nuanced views. I want to know what he would think of today's Big Tech monopolists and

efforts to force corporations to consider more than just profits.

There is a potential snag. James Boswell, a student of Smith's in Glasgow, contended that he rarely discussed his ideas in public, for fear of cutting into book sales.

But that's where guest number four comes in. **Carrie Fisher**, the actress and writer who died unexpectedly in 2016, was blessed with more than enough charm to draw anyone out of their shell.

I adored her as a child in her best-known role of Princess Leia in the *Star Wars* saga - no damsel in distress, she dressed down her would-be torturers and never hesitated to grab a laser gun herself. In real life, she wrote tart-tongued semi-autobiographical novels that wove comedy out of her struggles with drugs and bipolar disorder as well as her complicated and close relationship with her mother, the actress Debbie Reynolds.

She can be counted on for the latest gossip as well as the funniest comebacks, and I am hoping to tempt her into a bit of singing after dinner.

The party runs a risk of devolving into an anti-Donald Trump rant - James, Fisher and Ginsburg have all shown a tendency to bash the US president. So our fifth guest will be someone with no interest in politics at all.

**Nikola Tesla**, the Serbian-American inventor who played a critical role in making alternating current the basis of electricity, bubbled over with ideas: radio, radar, theoretical physics, he dabbled in all of it, acquiring hundreds of patents. He was admittedly a lousy businessman, but that should spice up his views on Elon Musk and the \$380bn electric vehicle company that bears Tesla's name.

I also want him to dish the dirt on Thomas Edison, who did similar things and ended up filthy rich. Tesla worked briefly for Edison and Reuters reported that they were going to be jointly awarded the 1915 Nobel prize for physics, but supposedly one of them refused to share the stage with the other.

A piano tinkles gently in the background as we tuck into tandoori venison, clove-smoked pigeon and prawns with Alleppey curry sauce. Louis Armstrong and His All Stars show up just in time for dessert: cardamom-scented crème brûlée. Fisher is in one of her up moods, and in no time she has appropriated someone's hat and she and Satchmo are belting out “They Can't Take That Away from Me”. **FT**

# Games



## A Round on the Links by James Walton



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the link, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

**1.** What's the only existing British national newspaper that was launched in the 1970s?

**2.** Kerepakupai Meru is the indigenous name for which Venezuelan geographical feature?

**3.** Who was elected the MP for Corby in 2010 after writing several best-selling "chick-lit novels" (her

description) under her maiden name?

**4.** Who became a British national heroine in 1838 after helping to rescue sailors from a shipwreck?

**5.** Along what did the characters played by Ray Bolger, Jack Haley and Bert Lahr travel in a film of 1939?

**6.** What's the name traditionally given to the place where the Mayflower (right) pilgrims first set foot in America?

**7.** Glasgow (above) appears in the lyrics of which Abba single?

**8.** Anneka Rice, Annabel Croft and Suzy Perry have all been "skyrunners" on which TV game show?

**9.** Discovered in 1905, the Cullinan remains the biggest what ever found?

**10.** What's the nickname of the fictional character created by Leslie Charteris who's featured in 14 films and two TV series?



## The Picture Round by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



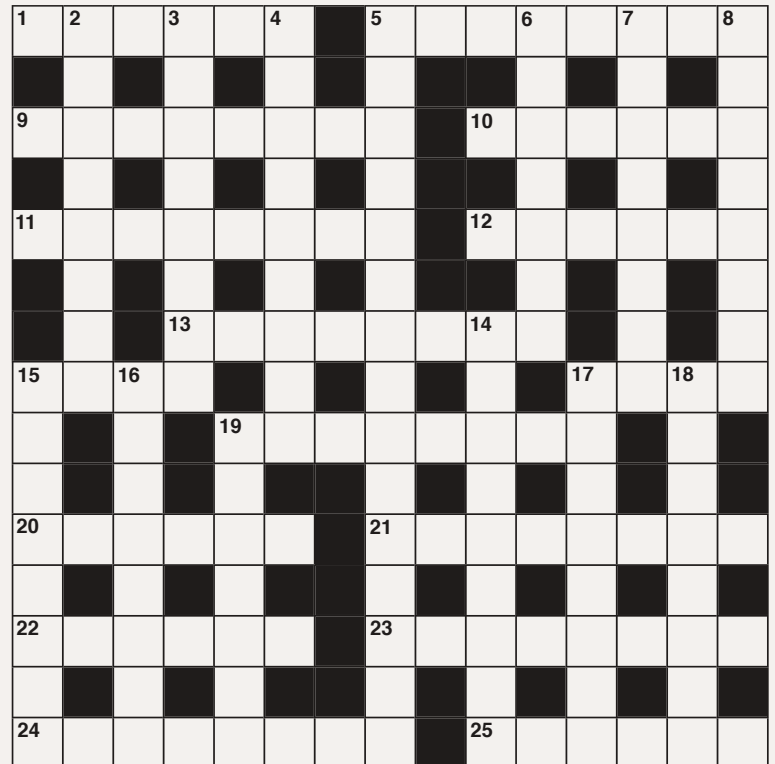
+



= ?

Answers page 10

## The Crossword No 505. Set by Aldhelm



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

### ACROSS

- 1** Large African tree (6)
- 5** Encampment of soldiers (8)
- 9** Increase rapidly (8)
- 10** Wading bird with an upturned beak (6)
- 11** Cumbrian city (8)
- 12** Right away (6)
- 13** Mythical Orpheus's wife (8)
- 15** Cloth colourer (4)
- 17** Roughage (4)
- 19** Bravo! (4, 4)
- 20** Amend, correct (6)
- 21** To do with health treatment (8)
- 22** 16th-century Venetian painter (6)
- 23** Passé (8)
- 24** Risky (8)
- 25** Distant (6)

### DOWN

- 2** A new letter to a Greek friend each year (8)
- 3** Puzzle of pub drink without nuts (8)
- 4** French eatery's headless tropical fish in French cheese (9)
- 5** Excitedly dig – include loose fruit (6, 9)
- 6** Back up priest, in short, and mad seer (7)
- 7** Firm involved in one dispatching backer (8)
- 8** Gas generator isn't fixed when rates disappear (8)
- 14** Singer's first in task, right? (9)
- 15** Canvas does get ruined with port (8)
- 16** Lift alert over endless changes (8)

- 17** Holiday resort and Scottish peak with one place for sleepers (8)
- 18** Personal secretary put up another one for hire, it's clear (8)
- 19** Traditional celebration used to be on part of a yacht (7)

Solution to Crossword No 504







# GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

## Lockdown beards: an alternative theory

**W**hy have so many normally clean-shaven professional men grown beards during the Covid-19 lockdown? It is a curious issue, it seems that many people from Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau to actor Jim Carrey - along with some of my FT colleagues - have started sprouting facial hair this year.

If you ask those newly bearded men why they have abandoned their razors, as I have done in recent months, you may hear a variety of answers: "It's too much trouble to shave." "There is no point if you are not in the office." "Lockdown gives me a chance to try a new look." They even credit a shortage of barbers.

But, in reality, most of these explanations seem to contradict our new situation. Lockdown has actually left most men with more, not less, free time; after all, they are not commuting to an office.

Moreover, the use of video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom, which involve staring at everyone else's visage, should increase the need to seem "neat". "Having giant heads staring at us up close for long periods can be off-putting," pointed out Bond University professors Libby Sander and Oliver Baumann in a recent article.

So I suspect that if you want to make sense of lockdown facial hair, it pays to look beyond the mere question of style or the nature of "office culture" and explore a concept that has long

**'Beards have achieved what liminal rituals do: ripped us out of our "normal" life and turned our assumptions upside down'**

been familiar to psychologists and other social scientists, if not the wider world: "liminality".

This term was coined by folklorist Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 book *The Rites of Passage* and then developed more than 50 years later by Victor Turner, an anthropologist who worked in Africa. It refers to the idea that many societies use rituals and symbols to mark moments of transition from one state to another, or the limbo when someone is at the threshold of change. (The word comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning "threshold".)

Sometimes this involves a stage in the life cycle (becoming an adult), on other occasions it is connected to the calendar (a new year) or a societal event (national independence). And while it may be pre-planned, it can also be unexpected - if you lose a job, for example. Either way, what tends to happen in a liminal phase is that people use rituals and symbols to indicate that they are removed from their normal life - however briefly - before they re-enter society in a changed state.

This can be done by physical removal - in parts of Africa, as Turner noted, adolescents were sometimes secluded in a hut during a liminal moment - or by creating a sense of symbolic difference through inverting social norms. Rituals such as stag nights, New Year's Eve parties or army initiations are cases in point. So are the gap years that middle-class English kids often take between school and university.

This is why those beards are intriguing. The Covid-19 lockdown is not a planned liminal moment, in the sense of a predictable life-stage or point on the yearly cycle. But it has achieved what liminal rituals often do: ripped us out of our "normal" life and turned our assumptions upside down. I suspect that the decision of so many men to sport beards reflects a semi-conscious recognition of that - or a desire to signal to ourselves and others that the Covid-19 era is not normal. The symbolism of the facial hair that we see on Zoom calls is that we are in a transition to something else; it is a howl of protest against the idea that this state might become permanent or "normal".

**M**aybe some bearded men would disagree with this, and those who have always sported beards might roll their eyes in exasperation. But if my hunch is correct, it raises two further points: first, if lockdown completely ends and everyone returns to the office, what rituals will we all embrace to signal that we are moving out of limbo, back into "normality"? Will those beards disappear?

Second: in the future, when we look back at this peculiar liminal time, what will we have transitioned into? As psychologists often tell clients, liminality can be frightening, but it can also offer a chance to reflect, reboot and reshape - if we wish. Indeed, there is an entire industry of corporate and personal coaching that is dedicated to using "liminal space" to reboot careers and companies.

"The liminal space shakes us out of our habitual lives," enthuses a post on the website of the Center for Transformational Presence. "[Liminality] draws us out of what we have known, yet... does not allow us to know what is coming next. Or when... It's the chrysalis stage for the caterpillar."

So perhaps the next time that a politician or CEO talks about the unpleasant limbo of lockdown, they should try giving it a sociological spin, presenting it within the framework of "liminality", rather than letting us seem helplessly stuck.

That might not offer any comfort to those suffering economic or psychological pain. But it could help reframe this peculiar moment in history in a more positive sense. Think of that the next time you see a scraggly beard during a Zoom call - and doubly so if it is ritually shaved away. **FT**

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