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# FT Weekend Magazine



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A special report



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**'Before prison, of course I aimed high, all teenage boys aim high'**

Growing up in Northern Ireland, page 16



**'I heard one grouchy father press the high master to explain how he would protect the boys from "social engineering"'**

New school rules, p28

**'As I knocked back the dregs of my Negroni with its perfect curl of orange peel, I looked out at the watercolour view'**

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@FTMag

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Issue number 928 • Online [ft.com/magazine](https://ft.com/magazine) • FT Weekend Magazine is printed by the Walstead Group in the UK and published by The Financial Times Ltd, Bracken House, 1 Friday Street, London EC4M 9BT © The Financial Times Ltd 2021 • No part of this magazine may be reproduced in any form without the prior express permission of the publisher • Publishing: Daphne Kovacs, head of FT Weekend Magazine - [daphne.kovacs@ft.com](mailto:daphne.kovacs@ft.com) • Production: Danny Macklin, advertising production - [daniel.macklin@ft.com](mailto:daniel.macklin@ft.com) or [magscopy@ft.com](mailto:magscopy@ft.com)

Cover photography by Megan Doherty as part of a commission for R-City, a charity based in Shankill, Belfast. See the full photo portfolio on page 23



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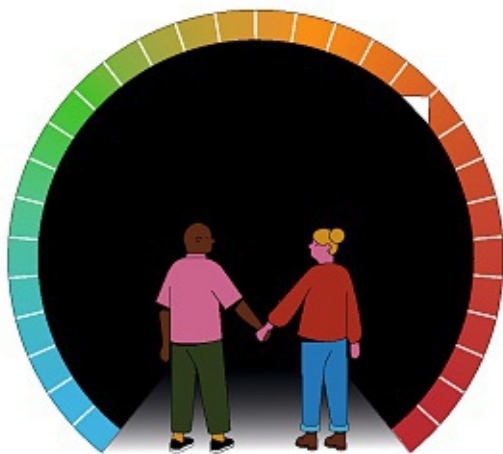




# SIMON KUPER

OPENING SHOT

## How to cope with the climate apocalypse



**M**any people in rich countries tend to structure their lives as if on a spreadsheet. They plan their careers at 17 and their pensions at 25. A couple having a baby is projecting its genes 90 years ahead. Our generation of westerners, raised in the most peaceful era in history, has come to imagine our personal futures as foreseeable. But the climate crisis upends all predictability.

Climate change equals human change, and it requires reimagining our lives. So, how should we all live with the growing risk of disaster?

That's the question posed by the "Deep Adaptation" movement. Its guru, the British academic Jem Bendell, gets criticised for overstating the risk of "near-term societal collapse". But the truth is most of us probably underestimate it.

Bendell's premise is that talk of climate action by governments, corporations and individuals is just talk. Leaders cheerily pledge to hit zero-carbon by 2050, when they will be dead. In truth, though, everybody's incentive is to keep the party going by emitting more carbon dioxide. Each unit pumped into the atmosphere is an infinitesimal contribution to someone else's problem at some unknown future time. This will be true even for our children living with climate disaster.

Inevitably, then, carbon emissions kept rising until the pandemic. During the unprecedented economic shutdown, they dropped about 6.4 per cent - but that's still short of the 7.6 per cent fall required every year through 2030 to keep us on track for limiting the rise in temperatures to 1.5C.

Meanwhile, climate change is advancing faster than the cautious predictions of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. A draft of the IPCC's next report, just leaked to Agence France-Presse, is the panel's scariest document yet, with increased predictions of droughts, floods and heatwaves by 2050. It also warns about the "tipping points" that could accelerate this future, such as the drying out of the Amazon rainforest or the collapse of ice sheets in Greenland and the Antarctic. Greenland's sheet is melting seven times faster than in the 1990s. Today's climate disasters - such as the record-breaking heatwave in the western US - are portents of worse.

Anyone predicting apocalypse faces two standard objections. The first is that the prediction demotivates people from taking action. That might be true, but then people aren't taking significant action anyway and the objection doesn't invalidate the prediction. The second objection is that all past predictions of global apocalypse were wrong. However, past apocalypticism was a lower-probability bet because we only acquired the capacity to annihilate ourselves once atom bombs arrived in the 1940s. Progress has doubled our average lifespans and simultaneously enabled us to end the global story.

Most of us cope with this not by denying it but by not thinking about it. People in the burgeoning "sustainability" industry prefer to hype small fixes (this new plane will consume 10 per cent less fuel!) than contemplate the chances of everything going pop.

So how to live? The younger you are, the more urgent the question. On the most basic level, if you're buying a house, you're typically making a 50-year bet: the period of the average mortgage, plus the mortgage of the person who will buy it from you. I wouldn't buy in Miami today. The rule

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**'Almost everything we call "progress" makes things worse. Our children probably won't admire our careers'**

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of thumb is that the safest regions in the future will be the ones that currently have relatively mild or cold climates. Perversely, this means that the best places to escape climate disaster are precisely those that emitted most carbon in the past: northern Europe and the northern US.

More existentially, adopt the outlook that almost all humans had until about the 1950s: don't make any presumptions about your future. Don't structure your life around distant pay-offs. Which entity will be able to pay your pension in 2050?

Then there's the moral question: do you want to be part of a climate-destroying system? It's tempting to shove all the blame on the fossil-fuels industry, but almost everyone with a job in a developed country is complicit - shop assistants, hotel staff and journalists whose newspapers are funded by readers from carbon-intensive industries. Anyone with gas heating, a car and the occasional plane ticket lives off climate destruction. Almost everything we call "progress" or "growth" makes things worse. Our children probably won't admire our careers.

The stereotype of the apocalyptic survivalist is the lunatic in a tinfoil hat with an AK-47 on a mountaintop. (The upscale version is a mansion in New Zealand.) But there are more social ways of opting out. I witnessed one when I moved into the crumbling Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood in East Berlin in 1990, just after the fall of communism.

Many of my new neighbours were young East Germans who had rejected what they considered the evil communist system. They had no official employment, or worked in low-status jobs as librarians or nurses or, like the young Angela Merkel, in non-communist professions such as physics. Some lived off grid, without telephones, perhaps with stolen electricity. Their little community was riddled with informers, yet people helped each other, expecting nothing of the future. Oddly, they may have been our future. **FT**

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# 'I want to make the best painting in the world ever'



INVENTORY FRANK BOWLING, ARTIST

**Frank Bowling, 87, is one of Britain's greatest living abstract painters. He was made an OBE in 2008 for services to art and was knighted in 2020. Known for his large-scale canvases and his sensual use of colour, he has made works that hang in major collections around the world.**

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

When I was 13 or 14, I wanted to be chief of police. I thought that I could be - that I would be - a great detective.

## **Private school or state school? University or straight into work?**

State school in New Amsterdam [in Guyana], then national service in the RAF when I arrived in England aged 19 in 1953. My art education started at Chelsea College of Arts, then City and Guilds Art School,

then the Royal College of Art and a term at the Slade.

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

The writer and critic Clement Greenberg. He was a father figure who spotted that I was a natural colourist and understood what I was trying to get at. His was a kind of influence that opened new directions, rather than made you feel that this was the direction in which you should go.

## **How physically fit are you?**

I used to be an athlete. I played cricket and soccer and I was a sprinter, winning at 100 yards and the 440-yard dash. Now my body is ravaged by age.

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

Ambition is the central magnet. I got to the Royal College with almost no academic background. Although Vivian Pitchforth, my

tutor at Chelsea, always referred to me as "this fellow with talent", my success at the RCA was down to the confidence that Carel Weight, professor of painting, had in me.

## **How politically committed are you?**

I'm politically aware. I'm depressed by poverty, unfairness and the ravages of capitalism. But my art is about paint, not politics.

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

I'd like to own the house where I live in Pimlico near the Tate Britain and have my family turn it into a museum when I'm gone.

## **What's your biggest extravagance?**

Booze.

## **In what place are you happiest?**

In the studio making paintings. I try to go every day and I have a good time there. That's where it's at.

## **What ambitions do you still have?**

I want to make the best painting in the world ever.

## **What drives you on?**

Anxiety keeps me painting. I want to get better. I'm always risking things with the old methods and processes, constantly trying to push things further and looking for what will surprise me in the work.

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

Living long enough to meet my great-grandson.

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

When they've got the cheek to think that they can make better art than me.

## **If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?**

"Wow!"

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

A painting that I made in 1963 called "Lent", a diptych of two six-foot-square canvases. The council ordered some workmen to clear out my studio and "Lent" probably ended up in a skip.

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

Time seems to go by far too quickly. I'd like to see an end to poverty in the world and to end the wanton destruction of the planet.

## **Do you believe in an afterlife?**

Sometimes. If there is one, I'd like to see my mother again. And my son, Dan.


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

Nine. It would be 10 if I could find "Lent" and all the other paintings that I've lost over the years. **FT**

.....  
*Interview by Hester Lacey.*

*"Frank Bowling: Land of Many Waters" shows at Arnolfini, Bristol's international centre for contemporary arts, until September 26. His work is on display at the Hauser & Wirth galleries in London and New York until July 31. [arnolfini.org.uk](http://arnolfini.org.uk), [hauserwirth.com](http://hauserwirth.com)*



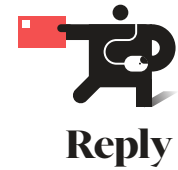


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# ROBERT SHRIMSLEY THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION



## Horrible histories at the British Museum

Political and cultural London is buzzing with the news that archaeologists have discovered amazing relics from a lost era which will now form a major exhibition. Word of the find came with the announcement that a fully intact George Osborne, the former chancellor, had been found under a pile of money at a boutique investment bank.

Osborne has now been installed as the centrepiece of a new exhibition at the British Museum, among other fossilised remains of the Cameron government. So significant is the find that Osborne has even been named chair of the museum, a ceremonial role that mostly involves raising money and refusing to give the Greeks back the Elgin Marbles.

Finding Osborne, who had been entombed in a gold-lined office surrounded by artefacts of his previous greatness, gives historians a complete picture of the lost Cameron government, a once-mighty regime that disappeared almost overnight and whose legacy and treasures were purged from official Conservative party history. The now lost civilisation of David Cameron was then regarded as a period of great enlightenment, liberalism and modernity - as long as you were not reliant on public services.

Historians date the period from roughly 15BB (Before Brexit), also known as 2005, when the mythical Cameron took over the leadership of his battered tribe, to June of 4BB, or 2016, when an electoral Vesuvius doomed the prime minister.

Cameron vanished, although Conservative ministers were occasionally subjected to a blizzard of texts about something called supply chain finance, which none of them understood. So complete was the disappearance that many in the later Boris Johnson government took to talking of the Cameron



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS VARELA

administration as if it were that of a different political party. The display will feature the shepherd's hut into which the politically shattered Cameron retreated after his Brexit defeat to write his memoirs, almost all copies of which survive at his publishers.

But of perhaps greater significance are the many values mostly lost under his successors. Visitors will marvel at the policy of cosying up to China and the badge saying "Beijing's BFF in the west", which all ministers were required to wear when visiting the country. And not talking about the Dalai Lama.

Museum-goers may be astonished to discover that as recently as 2015 the Conservative party did not hate the metropolitan elite and was keen to give the impression of modernity. There will also be a vitrine spotlighting High Speed 2, but unfortunately it has run over budget and may not open until 2035.

A room is devoted to Cameron's pet project, the Big Society. As yet the display is empty but curators say it was one of Cameron's "big ideas", so they are sure it is only a matter of time before they find evidence of its existence.

There is, unhappily, plenty of evidence of the impact of the austerity policies pursued by the government during that time, but apparently the new chair of the museum feels there may not be room for it in the exhibition.

Perhaps most remarkable are the exhibits devoted to Cameron's plan to end the Tory obsession with Europe, which in one sense he achieved, though not the way he intended. A poignant piece is the handwritten note from Chancellor Merkel of Germany promising to resist the candidacy of Jean-Claude Juncker for European Commission president. It sits in a large file entitled "Problems Angela will fix".

Some have been surprised that a government so keen to break with the Cameron era would appoint Osborne to such an important cultural role. But the ex-chancellor, who has taken on numerous posts since leaving office, studiously maintained good relations with the Johnson regime even as it ditched every policy he ever believed in, on the obviously wise precaution that you never know where your ninth job is going to come from. **FT**

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"The tyranny of spreadsheets" (June 26/27) is an interesting article especially if, like me, you're a bit of a nerd. Whenever a new process is to be addressed it is important to clearly define the requirement (including data volumes, deadlines and frequency). It doesn't matter if this ends up going into a spreadsheet or written on tablets of stone (Moses probably did a full-requirements analysis before he took down the 10 commandments). The inability of many companies to do this thoroughly and continue to check it throughout the project has been the cause of many failures and is probably the reason for the overall negative view of IT projects.

**JohnnyP45** via FT.com



@mapaulacaldas June 25  
Such a highly recommended piece on the history of spreadsheets and how data management can save, or cost, lives.

Re: "Chrystel Lebas's beautiful photography captures forests without end" (June 26/27). Beautiful and serene. What a welcome change from the sight of endless Zoom calls during the week. I can't stop looking at these photographs.

**Phi** via FT.com

Re: "The new 20-second rule: how to tackle screen fatigue and sore eyes" (June 26/27). I tend to drive to Barnard Castle, rather than listening to one of your fancy optometrists.

**Sued O'Nym** via FT.com

Re: Gillian Tett's "I'm recruiting troops for the war on waste" (June 26/27). Not wasting food was something instilled in me as a child and, to this day, I'm a member of the "clean plate club". We live in the country and are perfectly happy to share our (partially) spoiled fruit and vegetables with the critters in our neighbourhood.

**OldAndInTheWay** via FT.com

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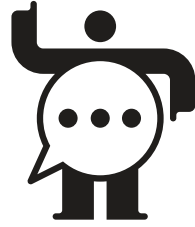


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# TECH WORLD



BY YUAN YANG IN BEIJING

## What's fuelling China's new online nationalists

Last summer, a friend of mine told me that she found China's biggest social media platform Weibo was becoming "unusable" for feminists and liberals such as her. Tempers were so heated, Bao told me, that disagreements easily became personal pile-ons. After a friend became the centre of a social media storm, she posted a message: "We're all just blades of grass, what's the point of fighting with each other?" Bao ended up becoming the next target.

At the time, we put it down to Covid-19, which left people stuck at home, bored and anxious globally. They were just venting. But a year on, Chinese nationalist sentiment is even greater online. It used to be outsiders, a US politician criticising the government for instance, who received the worst of the attacks from bloggers. Now insiders bear the brunt.

Recently, Weibo influencers have gone after journalists at the Global Times, the English-language, state-owned tabloid, for being "traitors". (Some of the publication's journalists had criticised a government account's Weibo post mocking India's Covid death toll.) In June, the popular science blog Science Squirrels Club deregistered its Weibo account after a few lines in a post challenged a myth about historic Japanese experiments on Chinese prisoners of war.

What's changed? The audience, the platform or the government? All of them - in different ways.

Nationalist feeling has soared since the Chinese government all but eradicated Covid through

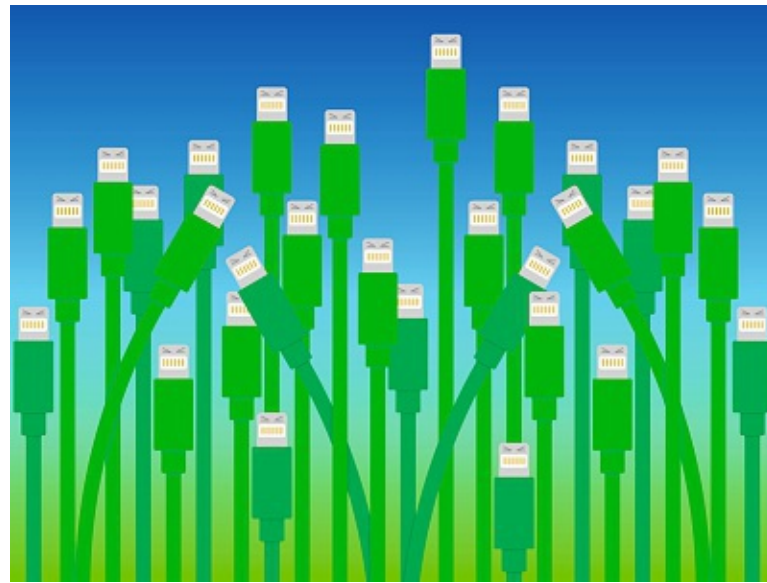


ILLUSTRATION BY PÂTÉ

stringent lockdowns and other measures. The fact that China's relationships with the US, India, Australia and other countries are under strain has offered a number of easy enemies.

What's on social media doesn't always reflect reality, in China as elsewhere. For Chinese people who only see the US via culture wars on Twitter, it can be easy to assume the country is on the brink of breakdown. Likewise, those reading Chinese social media from outside might think there are no liberals left. That isn't the case: many, such as Bao, have simply left social media. Before she did, she had an amusing exchange with someone who had sent her a barrage of insults online. "Our views are different, but I wouldn't attack you," Bao wrote. The response:

**'Influencers have the difficult task of creating hot topics without touching political hot potatoes. For many, nationalism is a safe arena'**

"That's the difference between liberals and nationalists."

Weibo has changed too. Its ecosystem of influencers has shifted vastly since Bao joined a decade ago, when online political discussion was still relatively freewheeling.

After Xi Jinping became leader of the Chinese Communist party in 2012, crackdowns on political speech and even celebrity gossip limited what Weibo users were allowed to say. Influencers - who need to keep attracting followers and attention - have the difficult task of creating hot topics without touching political hot potatoes. For many, nationalism is a safe arena.

Influencers often earn their keep by promoting brands, as they do in other countries, and it's not unusual to find posts promoting washing machines alongside those on who should own the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which are subject to a territorial dispute with Japan and Taiwan. The same people who accuse, say, public intellectuals of "selling out to Japan" often sell Japanese products via sponsored posts.

The final element is the government's hardline approach, which has created an online climate ripe for nationalism. "On the topics of nationalism and feminism, our hands are tied," said a social media industry insider.

China's internet regulator, the Cyberspace Administration, aims to promote patriotic speech. But the line between fervent patriotism and aggressive nationalism is difficult to manage. "Platforms can't gently direct the influencers, lest they leak our conversations and cause even more trouble," says the insider. And even if posts are deleted, some controversies become big enough that they still burst into the open.

Bao believes that when "blades of grass" - ordinary users - attack each other, the government benefits because people are distracted from criticising it. While that's true, both government and company censors have an uneasy hold on China's new online nationalists. After all, they don't always do what's in Beijing's best interests. **FT**

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*Yuan Yang is the FT's deputy Beijing bureau chief*



# JOHN MITCHELL

## FINE PAINTINGS

EST 1931

**Marcus Jacobi (1891-1969)**

*The Niesen, Lake Thun, Bernese Oberland*

oil on canvas, 105 x 96 cm

signed and dated 1941



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Weniger, aber besser. These three words - less, but better - summarise the philosophy of the great German designer Dieter Rams. His striking designs, from Braun electronics to Vitsoe furniture, have been influential to the point of ubiquity. Apple's original iPod clearly resembles a Rams-designed radio.

But while "less, but better" is revered by designers, it's not the way most of us live our lives. Our homes are full of junk, our diaries are full of meetings and our attention is fragmented by dozens - hundreds? - of electronic interruptions a day.

Countercultural counter-clutter manifestos have been popular: Greg McKeown's *Essentialism* (get rid of unnecessary tasks and meetings), Cal Newport's *Digital Minimalism* (get rid of unnecessary apps and devices) and of course Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying* (get rid of unnecessary possessions). But like Rams himself, they are swimming against the tsunami of digital, physical and mental "stuff".

Why do we accumulate so much? An intriguing explanation comes from one of the oldest ideas in behavioural economics: the "endowment effect". The term was coined by one of the fathers of the field, Nobel laureate Richard Thaler.

In his book *Misbehaving*, Thaler described wine connoisseur Richard Rossett's cellar, which contained bottles he had purchased for a few dollars that had matured into wines worth hundreds. Rossett occasionally drank these fine vintages, yet he would never add to his cellar by buying wines at high prices, nor would he sell those he already had at a huge profit.

There is an inconsistency here: wine cannot logically be both too expensive to buy and too cheap to sell. This is the endowment effect, by which we value possessions in part because they are possessions. Still, only an economist would find Rossett's behaviour odd. (Compounding the mystery, Rossett was the head of the economics department at the University of Rochester.)

While Rossett's case is an intuitive example, Thaler, Jack Knetsch and Daniel Kahneman also produced experimental evidence of the effect. In one study of students, half were given a commemorative mug. All were



# TIM HARFORD

## THE UNDERCOVER ECONOMIST



### Resisting the urge to return to the status quo

told to write down the price at which they would be willing to sell their mug - or to buy a mug if they started without one. Those with a mug were reluctant to sell for \$5. Those without one were reluctant to buy at half that price. This endowment effect suggests that the status quo matters far more than it should. Often we hold on to things for no reason other than that they are *our* things.

Minimalists understand the power of the status quo and work to counteract it. Newport, for example, argues that the minimalist should begin with a month-long period of digital fasting: only the most essential tools are to be allowed. Everything else must go. This is not intended as a "detox". It's a blank slate, designed to change the status quo. At the end of this period, says Newport, digital tools should be allowed back in only as a deliberate choice, rather than because we sleepwalked into using them once and never let go.

Kondo also fights the status quo. She advocates removing possessions from their usual setting and piling them all together, a bracing experience that reminds us just how much unnecessary stuff most of us own. Then, argues

Kondo, look for what "sparks joy". Deciding to keep something from the pile becomes an active choice rather than a resigned acceptance of the status quo.

I was reminded of this as I pondered the argument over all the portraits and statues associated with the UK's colonial past. Nobody can pretend to resolve this with a single proposal, but it does strike me that we'd be in an easier place if we occasionally made like Kondo and took them all down.

We could put all the portraits and all the statues in a big pile in the centre of each town or the lobby of each grand building. Then we could make an active choice as to who we really wanted on the pedestal for the next quarter of a century. Does Edward Colston really spark joy? Does Cecil Rhodes? Everyone who misses the cut could be stored away until a future round.

I can't imagine that happening to the portraiture of a Cambridge college or the statues in Trafalgar Square any time soon. Deliberately stepping away from the status quo is not always desirable and it is rarely easy.

But most of us have had to do just that over the past 15 months. Remember diary

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**'We could make an active choice as to who we really wanted on the pedestal for the next quarter of a century'**

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squeezes? Juggling the school run with an exercise class? The embarrassment of double-booking a dinner with friends and a night at the theatre? Neither do I. But logically these things must once have happened and they're starting to happen again.

In the desperation to get back to normality, to see people (anyone) and go places (anywhere), there's a risk that we miss the Kondo window of opportunity in which things have been reset and the endowment effect does not exist. I am trying to think, rather than simply revert to the status quo.

Not every task on my To Do list and every meeting in my calendar sparks joy, but I try.

Less, but better. **FT**

.....  
*Tim Harford's new book is "How to Make the World Add Up"*



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# The thin line

# between

# there and

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Northern Ireland's tensions between loyalists and nationalists still boil over into violence, most strikingly among young people. *Laura Noonan* reports from Belfast on what this generation sees in its future  
Photography by *Megan Doherty*





grew up 200 miles south of Belfast. Northern Ireland's grass is the same distinctive green as the fields of the Irish Republic where I spent my childhood. Its dramatic coastline evokes the same feeling as Connemara's. Belfast has a zone of shiny, modern apartments and offices, the Titanic Quarter, not unlike Dublin's Docklands. And yet, for all the familiarity, so much about Northern Ireland feels foreign.

It's not just the Union Jack flags that weave their way over and back across the Shankill Road, 15 minutes' walk from Belfast's main shopping street. It's not the enormous murals of men in balaclavas holding automatic rifles, a sight that still unnerves me. It's not the practicalities of a different currency, different road signs, different speed limits. It's more the sense of the place and my feeling of otherness within it.

Northern Ireland's conflict was the backdrop to the first 15 years of my life. After almost a decade away, I returned in April to cover the riots that erupted when loyalist protests against post-Brexit trading arrangements descended into violence. The unrest lasted more than a week. On the worst night, a bus was torched and water cannon were deployed for the first time in six years. It was a scary experience, heightened because of the news reports I remember from childhood. Back then, armoured police vans on Belfast's streets, blazing fires and masked rioters led to outcomes far deadlier than the scenes a few months ago.

This year marks the centenary of the partition of Ireland into an independent south and a north that is part of the UK. Cause for celebration in one community and condemnation in the other. And with Northern Ireland beginning another marching season, when unionists celebrate their traditions with parades and bonfires, the region is bracing again.

Poverty, joblessness and the anxiety and boredom of lockdown all played a part in driving people on to the streets earlier this year. So too the struggle to find Northern Ireland's place in the UK after Brexit. But something else was going on too, something particular to its involuted past.

For many, the most striking feature of the April riots, from Belfast to Coleraine and Londonderry, also known as Derry, was the extreme youth of those charging police, hurling bottles and rocks and petrol bombs. Some were not yet in their teens. I have spent the past few months asking young people, and the adults who work with them, what they see for the future of the place they call home.

**When I drive into a loyalist area, I'm quickly** marked out because of the Republic of Ireland plates on my car. Some of the kids I meet delight in sharing their hatred of Catholics. When I ask one group what would make Northern Ireland better,

a teenager replies that all the Catholics should be pushed out and their houses burnt down. There are roads I don't park on, because the car could be a target for vandals. At one meeting, in an empty building deep in loyalist territory, my interviewee asks me if I have come alone, and I wonder if I shouldn't have.

The adults I meet tell me that the roots of the recent unrest stretch back far further than the Northern Ireland protocol, the complex post-Brexit agreements that have become the unlikely subject of teenagers' banners and battle cries.

With that in mind, I travel to one of Northern Ireland's largest housing estates to meet Nathan Anderson. He was five years old when the 1998 Good Friday Agreement ended more than three decades of sectarian bloodshed. But he can remember the joy and relief in his loyalist Belfast community when family members and neighbours came home from prison, freed from their sentences under the terms of the landmark peace deal. Even as a child who didn't really understand, he says, "we knew the boys were getting out... That was fantastic to see."

Anderson was part of a promised generation: the first to grow up without the ever-present threat of bombings, shootings and riots that had claimed more than 3,600 lives. Now a 28-year-old single father of two boys, he still lives in the working-class area of Rathcoole that was home to his parents and four brothers. "There was five of us. Four are here - we've all got our own houses," he tells me during a walk round the estate.

Rathcoole, about six miles north of Belfast, is a place of elaborate playgrounds and huge murals celebrating loyalist paramilitary groups. It is a place, says Anderson, where a few minutes' walk to the local shop can take an hour because of "the people you run into" and where, during annual festivities to celebrate the Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, children run freely in and out of each other's open houses. It was also one of the areas where, in April, loyalist protesters clashed with police for more than a week.

As we walk through streets where cars burned, the optimism of 1998 is distant. The Good Friday Agreement ended armed violence between the Protestants, unionists and loyalists who supported Northern Ireland's union with Great Britain, and the Catholics, nationalists and Republicans fighting for a united Ireland. But the communities remain on opposite sides of a fragile political divide.

"It's important to understand that peace agreements aren't fairy stories," Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to former UK prime minister Tony Blair at the time of the peace deal, told me. "People don't ▶

**The question of identity and culture is 'all around you. It's impossible to get away from: you see it, you hear it, you feel it'**

Nathan Anderson





◀ get to live happily ever after just because you've signed a peace agreement anywhere in the world."

The spark for the spring riots was the fallout from Britain's exit from the EU, which imposed a customs border with the rest of the UK that unionists see as a threat to their British identity. But the fuel was the deep dissatisfaction of loyalists, who have seen little improvement to their lives from the peace process and believe Catholics have progressed more quickly in education and jobs.

Anderson, who works in manufacturing and has organised community meetings around Brexit's consequences, is one of the disillusioned. In 2012, protests over the removal of the Union Jack over Belfast's City Hall turned violent, and he was arrested. Though he says he had no part in the violence, he was convicted and sentenced to eight months for riotous assembly. He was 20.

"Before prison, of course I aimed high - all teenage boys aim high... [Now,] in a work sense, I have to aim low," he says. More violence could have a similar impact on Rathcoole's young people, who he believes are driven to the streets as he was. "It was patriotic young kids who wanted to do something... so that's just how they went about it," Anderson says, describing the omnipresent question of identity and culture. "It's all around you. It's impossible to get away from: you see it, you hear it, you feel it."

Every generation in Northern Ireland has taken part in some kind of civil disobedience, he tells me. "It's like the culture... I'm not making it socially acceptable at all. I'm just explaining how easy it is for a community to get involved in, on both sides of the community... People just go and watch these things. It just became the norm."

**D**uring the April violence, community leaders and politicians publicly appealed to protesters to "think of your futures". "What future?" was the response of many working-class teenagers and young adults I spoke to on both sides.

The areas where rioting broke out are some of the country's most economically deprived. Five of the 10 most deprived communities in Northern Ireland border Belfast's peace walls, according to a broad deprivation measure used by Northern Ireland's statistics agency. Scores for income, healthcare and unemployment are particularly bad. "There's that feeling of always being told, 'You're at the bottom of the line, you'll never achieve this,'" says Alan Waite, co-founder of R-City, a community group created in 2013 to develop skills and opportunities for young Protestants and Catholics (see page 23).

Around Belfast, youth clubs and community groups have been trying to stop the city's most vulnerable from being lured into violence. Earlier this year, for example, they loaded kids who were watching the riots on to buses and drove them to their centres and provided pizza and movies. (The gatherings were allowed even under lockdown.)

Such tactics are not always effective. "You're never going to beat a kid's adrenaline rush off a riot. You're not going to stop them," says Michael Logan, an 18-year-old who works part-time at Townsend Outreach Centre, a youth centre off the loyalist stronghold of the Shankill Road. Yet Logan was among those who went out to attempt to defuse things. He recalls the smell of petrol and the sight

of "kids as young as 12 and 13 breaking bricks and stuff off the ground".

As a young teen, Logan used to attend a sort of fight club. He calls them "sectarian fights". Groups of teens from both sides would gather for pre-arranged clashes, usually around 50 on each side, though only 10 to 20 would actually fight, while the others watched. "At the start, it was just a game of chase. One side would run at the other, the other side would run back... but it started to get very dangerous," he says. Logan recalls the last night he went to one of the fights, when a young nationalist boy was beaten so badly he required intensive care in hospital. "The screams..." he says in a low voice, looking into the middle distance of the industrial kitchen we're chatting in. He never returned.

He believes the glorified violence of Northern Ireland's past was a big factor driving kids on to the streets recently. "They want to look up. They see their fathers and their grandfathers, their uncles who all fought in these paramilitaries, but they fought for a cause." That cause is no longer there, he says, but the feeling that no one is listening endures.

**Paramilitary groups on both sides continue to exert control over communities, according to the latest dispatch from the Independent Reporting Commission set up by the UK and Irish governments, and are believed to have been involved in the background of April's riot, though Winston Irvine, a former (Protestant paramilitary) Ulster Volunteer Force boss turned community worker, says the paramilitary angle is "way overblown".**

Ruth Petticrew, 59, a former deacon in the Presbyterian Church, came to Belfast in her mid-twenties and has been running Townsend Outreach Centre for 30 years. Working on the frontline of communities during the Troubles was "horrendous", she says. "I look back and think I don't know I survived." Once, after agreeing to officiate at the funeral of a murdered 21-year-old, she received death threats from the loyalist Ulster Defence Association paramilitary group. She says she refused to back down, requesting only that if they were going to kill her, they "don't do it in front of young people [at the centre] because they'll never forget it".

Many of the challenges are mirrored in inner-city Catholic communities. Stephen Hughes says he inherited "nine kids and a chair" eight years ago when he took on the job of running St Peter's Immaculata youth centre near the Lower Falls Road, one of Belfast's most deprived Republican areas. Today the centre is used by 50 to 100 boys and girls six nights a week who gather to watch football, play computer games or colour in pictures and chase each other round. "It takes you away from stuff on the outside," says Sean, a 13-year-old who wants to be an engineer. By "stuff" he means "all them riots and all that happened".

Hughes, a 55-year-old bear of a man who laughs as loudly with the kids as he shouts when disciplining them, speaks about his charges with fatherly pride. Children can be suspended for misbehaviour but never expelled, he tells me. Hughes hopes this unconditional welcome - and personal development programmes that cover everything from how to brush your teeth to table manners - can alleviate the damaging cycle some families are trapped in. "It's very, very easy for that to become all-consuming," he says.

One night last month, as he and I drove between his centre and Petticrew's, we spotted a fire on a ▶

OPENING SPREAD:  
A BONFIRE ON BLACK MOUNTAIN, TO THE WEST OF BELFAST, OVERLOOKING THE CITY

PREVIOUS SPREAD:  
NATHAN ANDERSON AT RATHCOOLE'S BONFIRE SITE

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: RUTH PETTICREW AT TOWNSEND OUTREACH CENTRE; MICHAEL LOGAN IN THE CENTRE'S SPORTS HALL; STEPHEN HUGHES AT ST PETER'S IMMACULATA YOUTH CENTRE



# These kids 'want to look up. They see their fathers and grandfathers... who all fought in these paramilitaries, but they fought for a cause'

Michael Logan





◀ strip of grass between blocks of houses. By the time the fire engines were approaching, Hughes was on the phone trying to get a colleague to come and help stop the kids confronting the firefighters.

**M**ore than a month ago, loyalists began building the towering structures that they will burn on July 11. Setting them on fire ushers in the main event in Ulster's marching season and is intended to commemorate the 17th-century battle that initiated the ascendancy of Protestants in Ireland. Eleventh Night bonfires are typically accompanied by marching bands and parties.

Some of the bonfire builders talk about the season in terms of learning skills such as team building, construction and organisation. They talk about the bonds forged over door-to-door calls to raise funds for materials to construct "the bonnie" and sleeping next to it overnight to defend it. They also talk about burning Republican paramilitary flags. Some events have sparked sectarian violence as well as clashes with the police.

In one of Belfast's most deprived areas, four boys between the ages of 15 and 21 take a break from gathering fuel for their neighbourhood's bonfires. When I ask them why so many young people took to the streets, all of them ask not to be named. "They should put the border where it's supposed to be," says the youngest. It's "supposed to be" between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Also, people should respect and understand that "we're British", he adds. In this city, says another, "you have to be violent to be heard".

The sense of voicelessness hasn't always been this acute. Donna McCracken, who used to run the Black Mountain Action Group in a loyalist area of Belfast and now works there part-time, says there was an "extreme change in attitudes in communities" after the flags protests in 2012-13, as people became more attuned to how their community was being marginalised and disadvantaged.

Protestants held the bulk of the region's land, wealth, jobs and power when Northern Ireland was created. Between 2001 and 2017, they lost more than 21,500 jobs, while Catholics gained more than 56,000, according to data from the North's equality commission, highlighting the gulf in the two communities' experiences since the Good Friday Agreement promised equal opportunities.

Protestants also feel the Police Service of Northern Ireland, created in 2001 to replace the Royal Ulster Constabulary, is more lenient towards Catholics, a perception furthered by the force's failure to prevent thousands of Republicans from attending the funeral last June of Bobby Storey, a senior Irish Republican Army figure, in defiance of Covid guidelines. A subsequent failure to prosecute attendees, including nationalist political party Sinn Féin's Northern Ireland head Michelle O'Neill, provoked outrage.

The perceived slights are heightened by loyalist fears that, once the 2021 census is counted, Protestants, who accounted for more than 62 per cent of Northern Ireland's population in 1926, could be overtaken by Catholics as the region's largest denomination. That is a particularly alarming prospect as Sinn Féin escalates calls for a referendum on uniting Northern Ireland with the Republic.

"I really understand how Catholics were treated in Belfast and Northern Ireland - it was horrific,"

says Paula Robinson, 33, who attended Black Mountain as a teenager and now runs the group. "But putting the Protestant community down and doing the same thing isn't the answer. That's not equality."

**The divides between Catholics and Protestants** are at the root of most of Northern Ireland's challenges. Education is supposed to boost equality but instead amplifies segregation, dividing children from a young age, feeding fears and suspicions. Some believe the failures of the educational system have increased the lure of paramilitary groups. "When their aspirations are so low and when their opportunities are very limited, it can be very difficult for people not to buy into that [criminal] lifestyle," says Hughes.

The system also exacerbates inequality - Northern Ireland sends eight times as many students per head as England to state-funded grammar schools based on entrance exams that favour well-off students, who can get tutoring or other support. The result is an education system that produces better A-level and GCSE results than in England and Wales but also has "pockets of underachievement" which, according to Northern Ireland's recently departed education minister Peter Weir, are linked to Northern Ireland's "divided society". Young people from middle-class families have reported knowing almost no one outside their own community before they went to university, with some citing Northern Ireland's divisions as one reason they will make their adult lives elsewhere, fuelling the brain drain that already afflicts the region.

With integrated schools slow to take off, youth groups try to bridge the gap. R-City came about when its founders realised how much common ground their loyalist and nationalist working-class youth groups had, and thought their goals could better be pursued together. The Catholic St Peter's centre and the Protestant Townsend centre also regularly run joint projects.

Logan credits a youth trip to the US in summer 2019 with members of St Peter's as changing his view "on the other side as a whole". He went there apprehensive, "partly because of the stories you hear growing up, things like the IRA - they put the fear into you in case that's what they're still like".

He tells me that on the trip he found Catholics were "very similar" to him and they got on very well. When they returned home, they were asked to his youth club and he to theirs. Yet in Belfast hanging out on each other's territory poses challenges not found in most places. The clubs are a few hundred metres apart. But once the peace gates separating the two communities are closed in the evenings, they are a 10-minute drive apart.

As Logan explains: "It's hard getting in and out. I wouldn't feel safe travelling over there, especially in the daytime. I'd be more scared because I'd be more easily seen." He believes he would be recognised because "everyone sort of knows each other", especially with social media.

Faced with such obstacles, new friendships can quickly falter, and have for years. Logan's mother went on a similar trip to the US as a youngster and made Catholic friends, but her son still grew up fearing the other side. Northern Ireland is rich with these sorts of regular reminders that people have to live in the world as it is rather than the one they might wish for. **FT**

*Laura Noonan is the FT's Ireland correspondent*

# Belfast

## dream songs



R-City is a youth work and good relations charity based in Shankill, Belfast. Founded in 2013, it supports large-scale creative projects in Ireland and internationally. This year, R-City commissioned photographer Megan Doherty to develop a series of images capturing the experiences of young people under Covid-19 restrictions, during which they could

either stay at home alone or hang out outside.

Doherty spent time with teenagers in Shankill, Belfast Castle, Belfast Docks and elsewhere. Her images capture the alternative reality that is being a teenager, let alone a teenager in Northern Ireland during a pandemic. By photographing her subjects around well-known

landmarks late at night, she lends them a dreamlike quality.

The photos here are part of a wider selection being brought together in a photo book to be launched in Belfast in July. The project was supported by the Executive Offices' Communities in Transition project, which is managed by Greater Shankill Partnership.











PROJECT COMMISSIONED BY UPI, CULTURE + ARTS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH R-CITY. FUNDING BY THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE'S COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION, MANAGED BY THE GREATER SHANKILL PARTNERSHIP





# New school rules

Parents paying thousands of pounds a year for a top education in the hope of getting their child into Oxbridge are finding success harder to come by.  
*Brooke Masters reports*

Illustrations by *Edmon de Haro*





# “Five years ago, my son would have got a place at Oxford.

But now the bar has shifted and he didn't," says my friend, a City of London executive who has put several children through elite private schools in Britain. "I think he got short-changed."

I've been hearing this more and more from fellow parents with kids at top day and boarding schools in recent years. Some of it sounds like whining: most of us like to think the best of our progeny. But my friend has a point. After years of hand-wringing about unequal access to elite higher education, admissions standards are finally shifting.

A decade ago, parents who handed over tens of thousands of pounds a year for the likes of Eton College, St Paul's School or King's College School in Wimbledon could comfortably assume their kids had a very good chance of attending Oxford or Cambridge, two of the best universities in the world.

A 2018 Sutton Trust study showed that just eight institutions, six of them private, accounted for more Oxbridge places than 2,900 other UK secondary schools combined. When the headmaster of Westminster School boasted at an open evening that half the sixth form went on to Oxbridge, approving murmurs filled the wood-panelled hall. (I was there.)

But growing anger about inequality, rising applications from an improved state sector and a flood of international students have prompted Oxford and Cambridge to rethink. They give more credit to students who have overcome barriers on their way to top grades. This means that fewer middling private school students who have been groomed to excel at interviews are getting in. "We want to select the academically most able – the really strong candidates versus those that are average but have been well-prepared," says Samina Khan, Oxford's director of undergraduate admissions.

This is surely fair. But it also means that hot-house independent schools are losing their edge. At St Paul's, I heard one grouchy father press the high master to explain how he would protect the boys there from "social engineering".

What should parents do when a policy that is good for society seems bad for their kids? I feel genuine sympathy for anyone concerned for their child's future, but complaining about a loss of privilege comes across as tone deaf.

At Eton, attended by 20 UK prime ministers including the current one, the number of Oxbridge offers dropped from 99 in 2014 to 48 this year. At King's College, Wimbledon, offers have fallen by nearly half in two years to 27. The Sunday Times reported in February. Both schools still sit near the top of the national league tables for total offers. But their students are finding it harder to get in, ranking parents who shell out up to £28,000 a year for day school or £44,000 for boarding.

The anger of wealthy, mostly white parents about losing the advantages they expected to be able to buy their children is part of a broader pattern of status anxiety among some sections of the

British and American upper classes. It is out of step with reality: children from such backgrounds will typically enjoy greater opportunities and financial security throughout their lives. Nevertheless, the potency of this anxiety was on display in the US during 2019's "Varsity Blues" admissions scandal when actors and private equity giants were jailed for trying to buy their kids into Yale and Stanford, among others, with faked entrance test results and counterfeit athletic skills.

"When you have something that is very valuable to people, the system gets distorted," says Daniel Markovits, a Yale law professor and author of *The Meritocracy Trap*. "Attending these universities makes a difference in people's income and status... The parents see how much it costs them to live in the neighbourhoods they live in and send children to private schools, and they realise that their children will be in the same bind."

For decades, some UK private schools traded on their high Oxbridge admission rate to help justify their astronomical and constantly rising fees. If that bargain no longer stands, what are they selling parents instead?

"Knowing what I know now, I would absolutely reconsider my decision" to choose elite boarding schools, the City executive tells me. "The fees are absolutely out of whack with reality."

He even worries that he has disadvantaged his offspring. At his global workplace, he says, applicants who attended top independent schools are treated with a "certain amount of sniffiness. 'Oh those guys got such a good education, of course they did well. We need someone hungrier.'"

Another parent, who attended Oxford but saw an Eton-educated son rejected, frets that attending a top independent school "has become a label that stays with you for life and it's not a good label. It clearly means that when they are applying for university or jobs, they are at a disadvantage unless they are truly brilliant."

**S**am Lucy, an archeologist who specialises in Roman and Anglo-Saxon Britain, has served as an admissions tutor at Cambridge since 2009. She has little truck with parents who claim their children are getting the short end of the stick. "Nobody is entitled to get into Cambridge. You have to earn your place by being serious about your subject and going above and beyond the school curriculum. No one should expect to get in, but if they do, they will have deserved it."

Lucy has been asked so many times why smart students are getting turned down that she carries a chart that illustrates what has changed. Since 1981, annual applications to Cambridge have risen from just under 5,000 to 20,426 last year.

Highly selective state sixth forms such as Harris Westminster and Brampton Manor in London have

sprung up, partly to prepare children from disadvantaged backgrounds for Oxbridge and other top universities. They not only produce students with high exam scores and impressive essays, but also train them for interviews, an area where posh schools have long excelled. In 2021, 55 students at Brampton Manor secured conditional Oxbridge offers, exceeding Eton's 48; most have ethnic minority backgrounds, receive free school meals or were the first in their family to apply for university. Cambridge and Oxford have also had a big increase in overseas applications.

Meanwhile, the two universities, which promise small group teaching by dons and rooms in ancient stone quadrangles, have not expanded appreciably. That means it is roughly four times harder now to get one of the 6,800 places than it was when today's parents were applying. "That's the mismatch in expectations. Parents say, 'I got in and you are as clever as me. Why haven't they made you an offer?'" Lucy says.

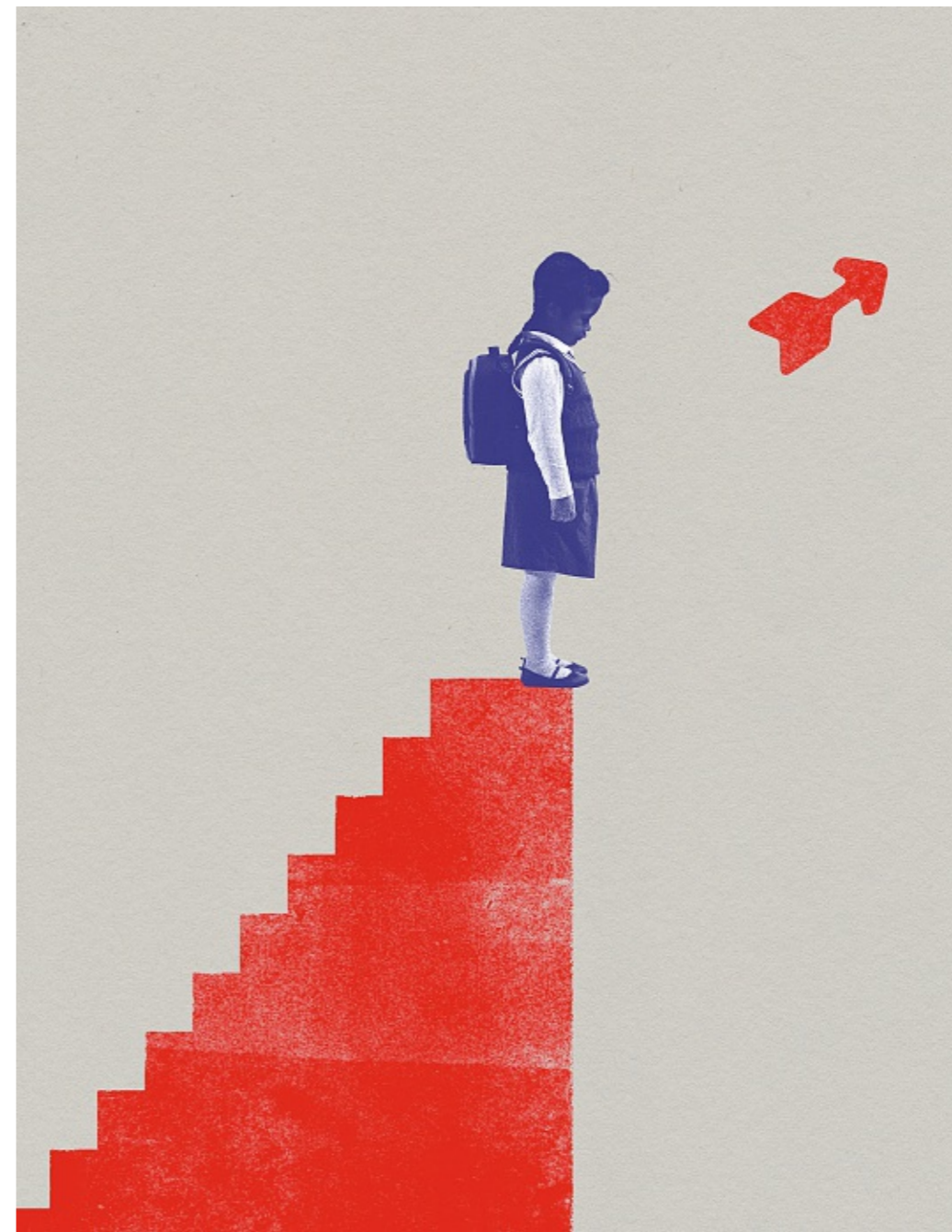
Outside the wealthiest sections of British society, the main critique of Oxbridge admissions is about too little inclusion, not too much. Some Cambridge colleges failed to admit a single black student between 2012 and 2016, and most state-sector students historically came from selective grammar schools or wealthy areas.

"The upper classes have a vice-like grip on Oxford admissions that they will not willingly give up," Labour MP David Lammy proclaimed in 2018 as he led a campaign for change that helped inspire rapper Stormzy to fully fund two scholarships for black students at Cambridge.

Several elite UK private schools were established in the middle ages to provide free schooling to gifted boys from poorer backgrounds. Over the centuries, fee-paying pupils became more numerous and they took off as training grounds for the establishment and the administration of the Empire.

Today, private schools educate 6.5 per cent of UK children, but as recently as five years ago they accounted for 42 per cent of Oxford's domestic intake and 37 per cent at Cambridge. Since then, the private school share has fallen sharply but it is still three in 10. That has sparked resentment among fee-paying parents without assuaging diversity campaigners. "It catches parents in a dilemma," says Mark Bailey, a former high master of St Paul's who now lectures at the University of East Anglia. "They may be committed to broad notions of social justice in the workplace and society, yet here is a situation where that aspiration cuts against them."

Independent school parents point out that state-private ratios that compare Oxbridge offers to the total stock of UK students are misleading. Oxford and Cambridge generally won't look at students unless they have at least three A or A\* grades at A-level, and private schools churned out one of every four of them before the pandemic. ▶

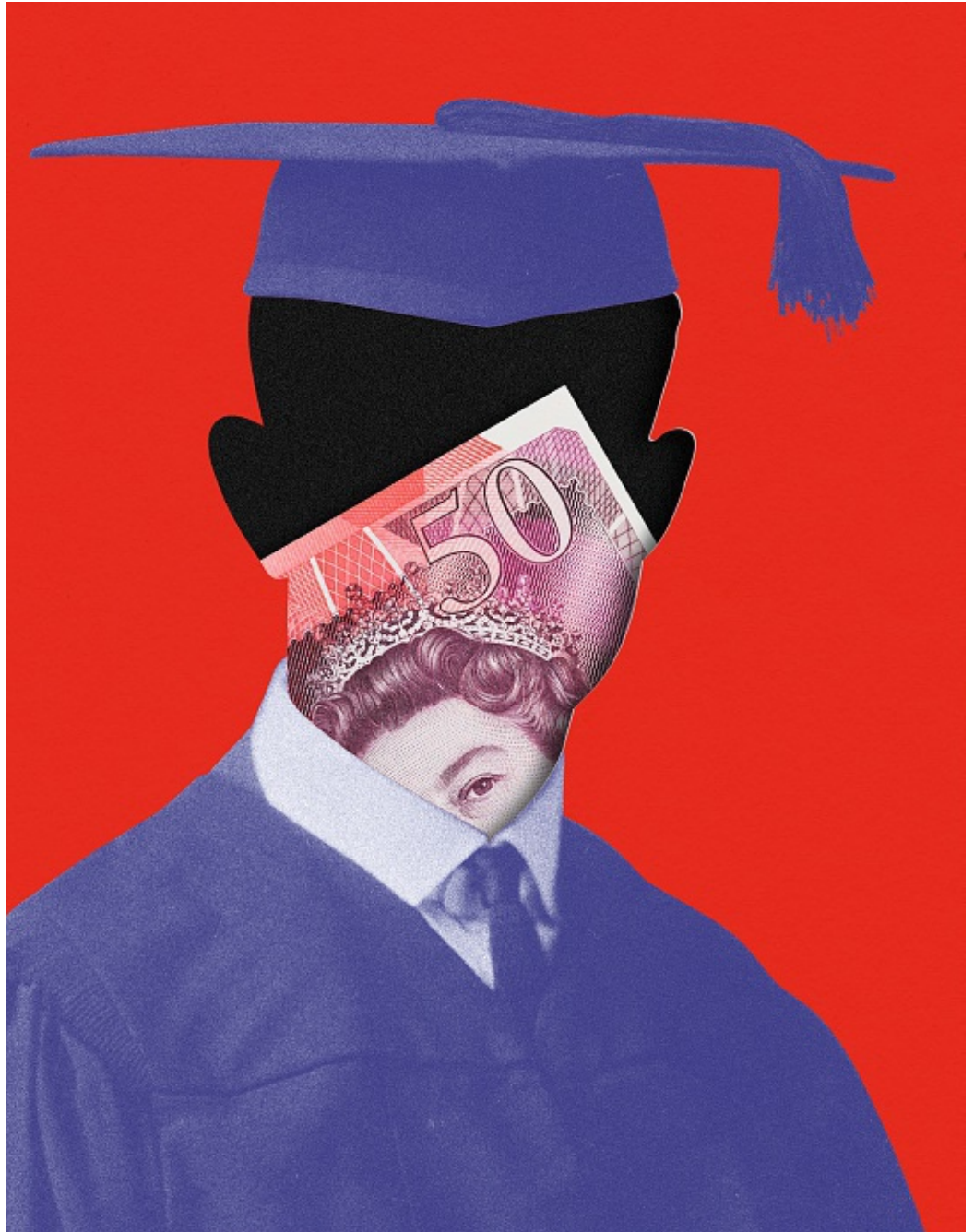


# 4x

Rise in annual applications to Cambridge since 1981 from just under 5,000 to 20,426 in 2020

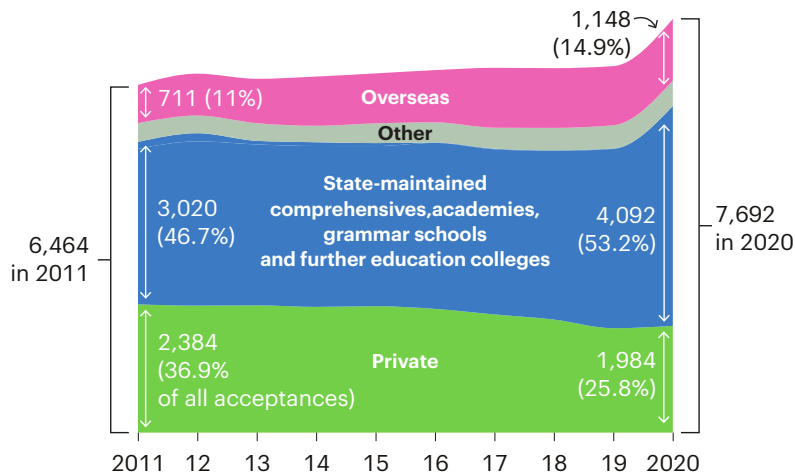
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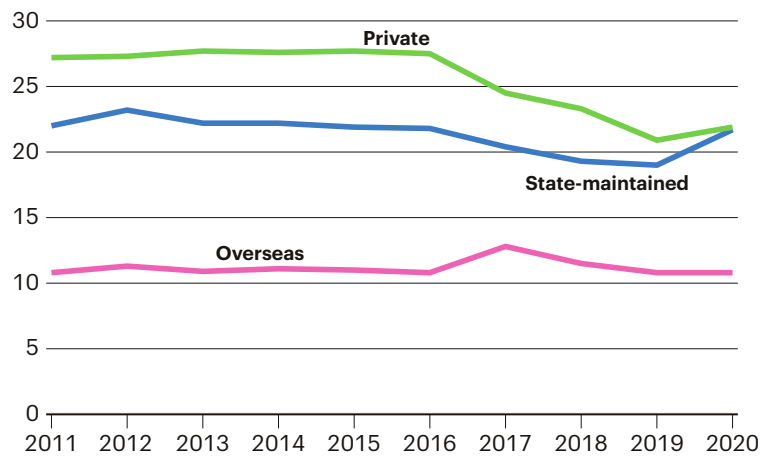
### The share of students arriving at Oxbridge from private UK schools has fallen...

Combined acceptances to Oxford and Cambridge, by source



### ... as success rates have converged with state-maintained institutions

Oxbridge acceptances as a % of applications



SOURCE: FT ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD AND UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE. © FT



◀ Those results are a key reason parents shell out school fees. “Why the heck would anyone ever pay the thick end of half a million quid (aged 4-18) per child pre-tax to send them to private school if it didn’t give them seriously better grades than someone equally bright who went state?” asked one person on Mumsnet, the online parenting forum.

Within the pool of high-achieving applicants, the Oxbridge colleges now rely on “contextual admissions” that look at how students have arrived at their top marks. “If someone has done really well despite being in care, that tells you something about their ability,” says Oxford’s Khan. “State schools are doing so much better, particularly in London. We are getting much stronger candidates than we used to. It is getting more competitive for everyone.”

Few private school parents openly dispute the need for this approach. They just hate the impact on their own children. “I agree we need social justice, but the problem needs to be fixed much earlier,” says a St Paul’s School mother, who has donated generously to bursary funds that bring less-privileged boys to the school. “These [private school] kids are all really bright and it is unfair to penalise them at this point.”

Of course, not all parents who choose private schools do so expecting their kids will win a top university place. Many are drawn by their exceptional facilities and low student-to-staff ratios. “We never had set in our mind that our kids would be going to Oxbridge or an equivalent,” says Catherine May, who sent two boys to City of London School. “I’ve loved that we have well-rounded children and we were very grateful for the excellent pastoral leadership.”

I attended one of the US’s elite private schools 35 years ago. I and roughly half of the class went on to Harvard and the rest of the Ivy League. These days, the school is still a top Ivy feeder, but that share is down below 30 per cent. Most of Harvard’s undergraduate class is non-white (reflecting the US high-school population) and 55 per cent of undergraduates receive financial aid.

But there are two dirty little secrets that explain why so many springtime posts on my Facebook feed feature parents on the other side of the Atlantic boasting about their children’s college destinations. Top American universities still offer “alumni preference” – children of graduates don’t always get in but they have a much higher acceptance rate – and they of course find spaces for children of big donors. There is a back door for the 0.1 per cent and the well-connected, if not the merely wealthy. Oxford and Cambridge resolutely reject this. Cynics will tell you this is evident in their shabbier facilities and shallower donor pools.

All of which puts the heads of the UK’s elite independent schools in a bind. On the one hand, they are under pressure to justify their tax-exempt status by improving access for poor and minor-

# 3 in 10

Proportion of Oxbridge’s domestic intake from independent schools, which educate 6.5 per cent of UK children

ity students, either by offering more bursaries or helping state schools in their neighbourhoods. On the other hand, they must also please their paying customers. And that means preserving their effectiveness at university admissions.

“We feel quite irritated by politicians who bang on about independent-state school ratios,” says Barnaby Lenon, a former head of Harrow School who now chairs the Independent Schools Council. “One-third of the most needy bursary students at Oxbridge are from independent schools and the top state grammar schools are stuffed with wealthy parents.”

**O**ptimists hope that the changing admissions profile will reduce the outsize hold Oxbridge has on the UK’s psyche and its politics. “If more and more really talented kids are pushed to other universities, the reputation of those schools will rise. That’s really valuable for society,” says the Eton parent.

And indeed, many top independent schools now are scrambling to prove they can smooth the path for their students to other brand-name options inside the UK and, increasingly, abroad. They are hiring admissions officers who are experts not only in the requirements for US universities, such as SAT tests, but also for other hot destinations such as Trinity College Dublin, McGill University in Montreal and Bocconi University in Milan.

St Paul’s and St Paul’s Girls’ School even employ recent graduates of top American universities as “Colet Fellows” to coach students through writing the personal essays favoured by the Ivy League. “The obsession with Oxbridge misses the point,” says Sarah Fletcher, SPGS’s high mistress. “Our job is to genuinely guide people to the right schools.” This year, total UK applications to US universities shot up 23 per cent.

That may well be the right choice for students who are attracted to American institutions’ liberal arts approach, which allows them to take a wider range of subjects, Lenon says. But, he adds, “it is not good for the UK if we send too many of our best students abroad because a proportion never come back.”

For independent schools, the growing emphasis on international admissions is all part of the expertise they sell. Consider their mastery of the Oxbridge

admissions process, which requires students to apply to a specific college for a specific subject. The elite independent schools maximise acceptance numbers by dispersing applications away from the most oversubscribed subjects and colleges. That helped give the strongest schools an Oxbridge success rate of at least 33 per cent last year.

Then Covid-19 struck and A-levels were cancelled. Oxford and Cambridge had already made their offers, but they were caught up in the chaos. After schools assessed their students, the exams watchdog fed the results through an algorithm that reduced nearly 40 per cent of grades. Universities revoked thousands of conditional offers, with disadvantaged students hit worst.

When the government U-turned, restoring the teacher-assessed grades, Oxford and Cambridge found themselves with hundreds of extra students, driving total acceptances up 12 per cent to 7,692. “I still have no idea how colleges managed to find enough rooms to turn into bedrooms, but thankfully they did, so we didn’t need to insist that anyone defer,” Lucy says.

The bulge and another year of cancelled A-levels have put admissions tutors under pressure – teacher-assessed marks will probably produce grade inflation, but the facilities cannot accommodate another supersized class.

So they are making fewer offers – at Oxford, just 3,541 for 3,300 places, down from 3,932 last year. “The landscape is more competitive than it has ever been,” says David Goodhew, head of Latymer Upper School in west London. “High-flyers are still getting offers but universities were uber cautious because they got their fingers burnt last year.”

Some private school parents worry that admissions tutors, faced with a plethora of candidates with high predicted grades, will focus on improving their diversity statistics. They point to the lower offer numbers at the elite schools. “These great kids with flawless records are getting turned away not just by Oxbridge but Durham?” says the St Paul’s mother. “How can that be?”

At Hills Road, a selective state sixth-form college in Cambridge that gets similar offer numbers to Westminster, Jo Trump, principal, says that she is seeing slightly more Oxbridge offers to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Now in her fourth year as principal, Trump has spent years trying to convince ambitious parents – some of them Cambridge dons – that it is not the end of the world if their children do not get into Oxbridge.

“Things have changed very dramatically in 30 years,” she says. For parents, “It’s about learning to let go a bit and learning to let students drive the process... Our job is to walk alongside them. It is not to go in front and drag them.” **FT**

Brooke Masters is the FT’s chief business commentator



# In search of Shandong's culinary sage

For centuries, Shandong cooking shaped elite Chinese culinary traditions. *Fuchsia Dunlop* made a pilgrimage to Confucius' hometown and found its current grandmaster cooking up a storm. Illustrations by *Ran Zheng*

**O**n my first evening in Jinan, the capital of north-eastern Shandong province, I was ushered into the private dining room of a restaurant specialising in roast duck. The room was full of men, but it was clear that the centre of attention was a diminutive woman with purplish permed hair and a sharp, sparkly expression in her eyes. Standing by the seat of honour, wearing a colourful knitted jacket with black trousers and sensible shoes, she commanded the room. Attentive young men refilled her teacup, while older ones hung on her every word. It didn't take me long to realise this was the person in Jinan I'd been most longing to meet: chef Wang Xinglan, grandmaster of Shandong cuisine.

Shandong is the historical home of Confucius, who was born near the city of Qufu about 2,500 years ago. (His descendants lived in a mansion there until the 1930s.) From a gastronomic point of view, it is the epicentre of Shandong or Lu cuisine, one of China's so-called "four great cuisines" and the bedrock of elite Beijing cooking. Confucius' birthplace was in the ancient state of Lu, hence the name. During China's final Qing dynasty,

chefs from Shandong worked in the imperial palace kitchens and opened restaurants across Beijing. They became renowned for their deft knifework, swift stir-frying and profoundly delicious soups. They also gave the world Peking duck, braised spiky sea cucumbers with Beijing leek, explosively fried pig's kidneys and toffee bananas, among many other snacks and dishes.

Shandong insiders identify three distinctive local culinary schools: the food of Jinan, the seafood-based cooking of the Jiaodong Peninsula and the elevated style of the Confucius Mansion, where emperors and high officials were entertained when they visited Qufu to make sacrifices to the sage. Confucius himself had little to say about food. While he famously refused to eat anything that was served without its proper sauce, he was more concerned with the ritual propriety of food than its flavour. His descendants, however, enjoyed a hereditary dukedom and lived in luxury, served by teams of private chefs.

Shandong cooking still underpins Beijing cuisine and permeates many other regional traditions. But it has faded from prominence in China and is little known abroad, having been

eclipsed first by Cantonese cooking and then buried by an avalanche of Sichuanese chillies in recent years. Long experience has taught me, however, that almost every Chinese region is a treasure house of culinary creativity. And so, my appetite whetted by dishes I tried in Beijing, I headed for Jinan in 2019 on a Shandong culinary pilgrimage.

## **I'd heard about Wang Xinglan.**

Now in her seventies, she is one of a vanishingly small number of women at the top of the Chinese culinary hierarchy. She began her training in 1960 at the age of 13, surviving a tough apprenticeship before making her name and going on to triumph at cooking contests. One of her fabled skills was slicing a piece of pork balanced on her thigh, a mere sheet of silk between blade and skin. In 1981, she was appointed to the small team charged with salvaging and repurposing the recipes of the Confucius Family Mansion, which had fallen into disrepair. Confucius' heirs abandoned the house before the communists won the civil war, and it had been desecrated during Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976). These days, having outlasted all her (male) colleagues, she is officially recognised as the ►









Wang Xinglan in a test kitchen

keen wit and peals of infectious laughter. Then, to my relief and delight, she was so impressed by my omnivorousness, my note-taking and my culinary vocabulary that she announced she was going to take personal charge of my gastronomic education. “I hadn’t imagined you’d be able to eat all this *xiashui*,” she said, referring to the offal I had relished.

For the next six days, Wang and her apprentices shepherded me from restaurant to restaurant, feast to feast, to sample a scarcely believable range of delicacies. On the first morning, a couple of apprentices took me out for a few breakfasts of local noodles, griddled buns and the Jinan speciality of *tianmo*, a hearty millet gruel. Later, we met Wang for lunch in an old-fashioned house looking out over the picturesque canal along the old city moat. Another virtuoso display of cooking followed, including dainty knifework, local cured meats and a graceful seafood broth. And so the days unfolded as we ate our way around Jinan, visiting kitchens and fraternising with generations of local chefs. Halfway through the trip, I had already tasted 200 dishes.

◀ custodian of “Confucius Mansion Cuisine”, a culinary tradition named after the father of the Chinese patriarchy.

In the restaurant, Wang greeted me with a cool, appraising eye. Aside from her son, all the men in the room, it turned out, were her apprentices. These men who had pledged formal allegiance to her as their teacher ranged in age from late teens to their sixties. The meal began with a series of toasts with shots of searingly strong *baijiu*. And then one of her apprentices, our host, unleashed a stupendous feast of Jinan specialities.

There were the famous pig’s kidneys, intricately cross-hatched so they curled up in the wok like ears of wheat, wafting out a sweet fragrance of vinegar and garlic. Seasonal cattails, a juicy water vegetable, were served in a luxurious broth. Fried tofu, small fish, seaweed and other ingredients slow-cooked in vinegar made up the traditional *suguo*, or New Year’s pot. By the end of the evening, I’d jotted down notes on 23 dishes, and the room was filled with a chaos of joyful drunkenness.

Throughout, Wang held court, giving our host precise and expert criticisms of the food. She also entertained everyone with her

Shandong chefs pride themselves on the type of stir-frying known as “exploding” (*bao*) for its intense speed and heat. *Bao* helps preserve the vitality of delicate ingredients such as kidneys and has at least seven distinct variations. Meticulous attention to *huohou*, the control of heat, is required to achieve the correct texture for each dish: the brisk tenderness of kidneys, the exquisite wobble and tautness of a sea cucumber, the silky succulence of sliced fish.

In the restaurant of one of Wang’s senior apprentices, a young chef showed me how to make the classic Shandong pudding “three-non-stick” (*sanbuzhan*), named because it doesn’t stick to dishes, chopsticks or teeth. Working intently with an oiled wok over carefully controlled heat, he transformed what looked like a raggy mess of sweetened, scrambled egg yolks into a perfectly smooth, springy golden pudding, which took nearly 10 minutes of beating with the back of his ladle. The result was sublime.

Although Shandong also has a tradition of delicious street food and folk cooking, high-level Lu cuisine is comparatively expensive, laborious and technically demanding. That’s one reason it lost ground to the easy delights of more casual Sichuanese.

Cooking technique aside, an almost deranged level of attention was paid to the fun and drama of dining. At one lunch, an enormous copper cauldron full of hot stones was placed on the table. When hot broth and slices of raw fish were poured in, the fish cooked instantly in an eruption of seething heat. Storytellers in traditional robes entertained us to the accompaniment of bamboo



## One Shandong chef in his eighties reeled off the names of nearly 40 cooking methods and then told me those were ‘just the basics’

clappers. A chef released a ball of flame that hovered for a moment above a dish before disappearing. To me, it seemed like a reminder of how the joy and passion of Chinese cooking had re-emerged from the ashes of the Cultural Revolution.

One evening, driving back from yet another fabulous dinner, Wang told me about the gruelling start to her career. She spoke softly of the bleak, hungry years after the Great Leap Forward [1958]. She was one of nine children, desperate for a job, a lone girl in a world of men. “It was so difficult, so bitter,” she said. “I was too short to stand at the chopping boards and had to force myself to be right-handed.” For two years she did menial kitchen jobs, working from 6am to 11pm. She washed dried kelp, killed eels and turtles, and sliced pounds of kidneys. “There was such scorn for female comrades. Sometimes I cut myself and I daren’t admit it, so I would just scald the cut in boiling water, clench my teeth and carry on.”

Over time, her master chef recognised her diligence and “stopped seeing me as a female comrade”. She warmed to the profession, cheered by the plaudits she won from the restaurant’s customers. “By the time I was 17 or 18,” she said, “I was famous all over the province.”

A sea change came in the 1980s, when China held its first national culinary contest. The country’s leaders proclaimed cooking was “art, culture and science” and, from then on, she said, “people gradually began to respect chefs”. Over the years, her acclaim grew until she became a master chef

(*pengren dashi*) in both Shandong and Chinese cuisines, and was awarded a special grant from the State Council. Her professional association, the Lan Ru Tuandui, has some 8,000 members and admits apprentices with a Confucian emphasis on both culinary technique and personal integrity. “If you are not a person of good character,” she said, “your cooking won’t be any good either”.

One afternoon, Wang showed me how to transform raw prawns into peonies for a Confucius Mansion banquet dish. She dusted a single, shelled prawn with starch, laid it on a board and repeatedly hammered it with a wooden mallet for a full eight minutes until the flesh had spread out into a translucent circle as thin as silk. The work was slow and painstaking, but when the flattened prawns had been blanched, plunged into iced water and piled on a serving dish, their resemblance to a peony was remarkable. Afterwards, she turned to me and said, “You’ve tasted 200 dishes, how about teaching me how to cook something English?”

There’s not much an English person can teach one of the most celebrated Chinese chefs about cooking. Except, it turns out, roast potatoes. Setting aside the peony prawns, I parboiled potatoes in salted water, tossed them with hot oil, garlic and salt, and roasted them until they were crisp and golden. Shockingly simple as the recipe was, it met with Wang’s enthusiastic approval. Both of my subsequent attempts to woo her, with apple crumble and with shepherd’s pie, were less successful: “Shapeless,” she declared.

One day, Wang enlisted a couple of her young apprentices to drive us to Qufu, the home of Confucius.

We wandered through the faded Confucius Temple and listened to musicians performing traditional opera in the mansion gardens. Outside the main shrine, I bought some sticks of incense, and Wang watched approvingly as I followed her instructions to make the ritual kowtows. Later we passed some villagers dressed in white rags performing an elaborate funeral ritual. “So feudal!” she said scornfully. “What era do they think they’re in?”

Contradictions like this make Wang all the more intriguing. Another one is that this pioneering chef who cracked open the male-dominated kitchen hierarchy hasn’t



## By week’s end, I had tasted 308 dishes, and I was in thrall to Wang like everyone else. I could see why men of any age were willing to obey her every command

taken on a single female since she began accepting apprentices in the 1970s. “The greatest defect in female comrades,” she told me, “is that they lack perseverance. Being a chef is tough: boiling hot in summer, freezing in winter, with masses of oil and smoke, and they just can’t stand it.”

I found it hard to keep up with Wang. Day after day, apprentice after apprentice would lay out their finest feasts. At the end of each meal, we would be offered noodles or buns because, regardless of how much you’ve eaten, in China it doesn’t really count as a meal until you’ve had your *fan* (cooked grain foods). After dinner, Wang insisted on making arrangements for some interesting local breakfast. Between meals, she plied me with hot pastries and sweet potatoes from street vendors.

I could take eating everything in my stride, but the ritual toasting was a challenge. Every meal would commence not just with the obligatory toast that is common across China, but with several formal toasts followed by informal toasts throughout the meal. As each feast progressed, my notes began to slide and crash across the page, increasingly illegible. Around me, male chefs knocked back *baijiu*

as the atmosphere became more riotous. Sometimes they’d hold their glass upside-down over their heads to prove they were empty. Wang, urging me to show my respect to our hosts by toasting too, drank tea and remained serene.

Driving back from Qufu, Wang turned to me and feigned exasperation: “You’ve exhausted me! I’m so tired I could die!” In truth, I was the exhausted one. As I sank into a food and *baijiu* coma in the back of the car, the master chef heatedly talked gastronomy and cooking with the two young apprentices in the front, their discussion broken only by gales of irresistible laughter.

By the end of the week, I had tasted 308 dishes, and I was in thrall to Wang like everyone else. I could see why young apprentices were willing to kowtow during their admission ceremonies and why men of any age were willing to obey her every command. She was stern, exacting, kind and hilarious, a tough, magnificent woman. I had travelled to Shandong in search of an imperial cooking tradition and had found a queen. **FT**

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Fuchsia Dunlop’s latest book is “The Food of Sichuan” (2020 Fortnum and Mason Cookbook of the Year)





# Ravinder Bhogal Recipes



## Seafood for the soul

For years, I took travel for granted, skipping from here to there as I wished. I thought nothing of spending summer after summer in Italy, where I fell in love with ancient cities and winding passageways, sun-dappled vineyards and crystalline coastlines. Most of all, I fell in love with the intricacy and exuberance of the food.

As a cook, I am often asked about my favourite Italian meals. Most of them have been eaten at understated trattorias where the food is seasonal, prepared with fervour and served on bountiful platters. Measurements and portion sizes are contradictory to the soulful spirit of generosity ingrained in the cooks there. I have enjoyed toothsome pastas of various geometries, briny seafood and memorable regional dishes, including the unlikely crowd-pleaser of *sugo* perked up with nubs of foraged snail in Tuscany.

But it was at a restaurant by the beach in Trapani, when I was still sticky with salt from a morning swim, that I had a plate of food I still dream about - a *zuppa di pesce* so abundant with snow-white flakes of fish and scarlet crustaceans that it was like an aquarium in a bowl, throbbing with garlic, chilli and wine. The broth itself was so appealingly rich with good olive oil that I mopped up every last drop with the rest of the bread basket.

As I knocked back the dregs of my Negroni with its perfect curl of orange peel, I looked out at the watercolour view. Here was life shrunk to its very best elements: sun, sea, good food and something refreshing to sip on. We don't really need much more. Until we can travel again, here's a recipe for a seafood stew inspired by that happy moment. The salinity of seafood cooked in a saffron broth with orzo should provide a portal for escape. **31**

Ravinder Bhogal is chef-patron of *Jikoni* in London; [jikonilondon.com](http://jikonilondon.com). Follow her on Instagram @cookinboots

### Seafood stew with orzo

Serves four

- 60ml extra virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 celery stalks, finely diced
- 1 small fennel bulb, finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 tsp fennel seeds
- Pinch of saffron threads
- ¼ tsp chilli flakes
- 300ml dry white wine
- 400ml tomato passata
- 500ml fish stock
- 300g orzo, rinsed
- 1kg clams soaked in salted water for one hour, rinsed
- 2 monkfish tails, deboned and cut into bite-sized pieces
- 250g squid, cleaned, scored and cut into 8cm pieces, tentacles halved
- 8 prawns, peeled, deveined, tails intact
- Coarsely chopped flat-leaf parsley to serve
- Lemon juice to taste
- Sea salt and black pepper

**1** — Heat the oil in a large casserole or wide, deep frying pan over medium heat. Add onion, celery, fennel and bay leaf and sauté until soft and translucent. Scatter in the garlic, fennel seeds, saffron and chilli and stir until fragrant. Pour in the wine, bring to the boil and bubble until it is reduced to almost nothing.

**2** — Pour in the passata along with the stock and 750ml water, bring to the boil, then add orzo and simmer until *al dente*. This should take about 10 minutes. Add the seafood, cover and simmer until just cooked.

**3** — Season to taste, scatter parsley on top and squeeze in lemon juice. Drizzle with olive oil and serve immediately.





FTWeekend

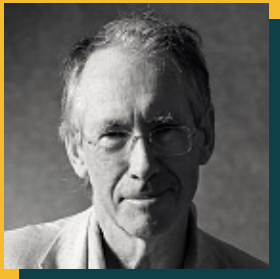
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# Jancis Robinson Wine

## Greener bottles

Aware of the heavy carbon footprint of glass bottles, Rosemary Cakebread has been researching options for lighter bottles for her exceptional Gallica wines made in Napa Valley. She emailed me recently with her dismayed reaction to what this research has revealed: “What I’ve learnt is that more and more wine glass available on the West Coast is in fact made in China.”

US imports of glass containers from China increased by 55 per cent to 2.1 billion in the five years to 2018, according to US trade data; industry estimates that year were that 70 per cent of the bottles filled by American wine bottlers were sourced from China, and that proportion is likely to have grown since. America’s domestic glass bottle industry has been shrinking too: between 2005 and 2011, 11 US glass container manufacturing plants closed, leaving 43.

Standard 75cl glass wine bottles vary in weight, from under 400g to more than a kilo. The heavier they are, the greater the carbon emissions from making and transporting them, which accounts for the greatest proportion of wine’s carbon footprint.

Increasingly aware of this, I started noting bottle weights in my tasting notes in February, wishing to highlight producers who use particularly heavy or light glass. On this basis, I would say that the average bottle used for wine is about 550g, although it varies by country, with producers in the US and Argentina favouring some of the heaviest.

In a recent collection of tasting notes on eastern European wines, I found one used by the Georgian producer Dugladze weighed as much as 1,025g whereas most bottles used by the Romanian producer Cramele Recas were only 345g. Recas co-owner Philip Cox points out that these lighter bottles - the fatter burgundy



As imagined by Leon Edler

shape is easier to make lighter than the straight-sided bordeaux shape - cut transport costs by about 10 per cent.

Although many of her winemaking peers in Napa Valley seem happy to use bottles weighing 800g or more, Cakebread is clearly serious about switching to much lighter bottles. But she refuses to source them in China. “To my mind,” she wrote to me, “it’s

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**‘For many, there still seems to be a perceived correlation between bottle weight and wine quality’**

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not sustainable to buy a 400g bottle and then ship it nearly 7,000 miles.”

Despite the impact on the atmosphere, shipments of empty bottles around the globe are growing. Every month, for example, 200 shipping containers of glass bottles arrive in the UK from Al Tajir bottle factory in Dubai - albeit, in this case, mainly for beer. In 2018, meanwhile, Crossons, a glass bottle supplier based in south London, acquired a furnace in China to supply customers in the US, Australia and New Zealand.

In a 2015 report for FEVE, the association of European glass manufacturers, consultancy EY put the proportion of glass bottles that travel more than 300km from furnace to filling line at 44 per cent. While China is by far the world’s biggest exporter of glass bottles, Germany is the second.

Some countries just don’t have glass-production facilities or offer little choice. New Zealand, for instance, has a single producer, whose bottles Master of Wine Steve Smith of Smith & Sheth has found so inconsistent that he imports bottles from Saverglass, based in France. According to him, Saverglass “seem well ahead of the pack on sustainability and their glass quality is first-class”.

In line with increased awareness of sustainability, there has been a laudable trend to reduce bottle weights. In 2019, the average weight of bottles had fallen by 30 per cent over the previous decade, according to figures from Statista. Accolade, the biggest wine bottler in the UK, has decreased its proportion of bottles over 500g from 17 per cent in 2017 to 3 per cent in 2020. Over the same period, the proportion of its bottles that weigh less than 390g has risen from 24 per cent to 42 per cent.

Yet for many, there still seems to be a perceived correlation between weight and wine quality. Sebastian Zuccardi is one of Argentina’s ►



## Sustainability initiatives

- **Effective recycling of glass bottles:** glass, being inert, is the perfect material for fine wine designed for ageing. Because of their heavy carbon footprint, glass bottles should be recycled but few countries can claim to recycle a sufficient proportion of them. The US Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, calculates that about 55 per cent of all glass containers in the US end up in landfill each year.
- **Local bottle production:** Gallo, the biggest American wine producer, has its own glass bottle production facility producing more than 900 million a year from local materials
- **Returnable bottles:** the Gotham Project throughout the US, for example
- **Refillable bottles:** Borough Wines in London is the UK pioneer
- **Paper bottles:** Frugalpac of Ipswich in the UK is making headway with containers that are shaped like a glass bottle but weigh a fraction of one
- **Flat bottles made of recycled plastic:** designed by UK-based Garçon Wines for wines consumed soon after purchase (Sonoma County University calculated that 90 per cent of all wine is drunk within two weeks)
- **Cans:** proliferating at pace, especially in the US, and highly convenient



◀ most respected winemakers and his company is the country's leading organic producer. Yet he still uses some heavy 900g bottles for his Finca Piedra and Jose Zuccardi wines. He points out they used to be even heavier: "It's really to do with consumers, because in some markets, size and weight of the bottle continue to be important."

Indeed, part of the motivation for Crossons' investment in China was to supply heavier bottles. Its website reports "concerns amongst some of Crossons' customers that the industry has moved some bottles away from being super-premium, or even premium, to a lighter, standard-weight bottle. Clearly the risk to brands using a wrong-weight bottle is that consumers will feel a disconnection between the price point and the aesthetics that the bottle delivers."

The substantial Languedoc producer Gérard Bertrand is another advocate of organic vine-growing but persists with heavy bottles for his top cuvées. His justification is common: he argues they represent only a small proportion of his production and that he is doing his bit for the planet in the vineyard and by using lighter bottles for the rest of his range.

The problem is that producers such as he, by putting their more expensive wines in heavier bottles, encourage the perception that good wine comes in heavy bottles. In fact, the world's most expensive wines tend to be packaged really

quite modestly. Bordeaux first growths, for instance, come in bottles that weigh not much more than 500g.

Chakana is one of Argentina's biggest biodynamic wine producers. Winemaker Gabriel Bloise reports that when Chakana changed to lighter bottles 10 years ago, European markets welcomed it, but "in the USA we did meet resistance to lighter bottles and our importer says they have had a negative impact on sales... Asian markets insist on heavy bottles. But the only impact of heavy bottles is visual and they do not improve wine taste. We decided to spend the money [saved by choosing lighter bottles] on wine improvements (organics, biodynamics) rather than packaging, so we were able to improve quality, reduce the glass and keep our prices stable."

Angelos Iatridis of Greece's excellent Alpha Estate goes more than the extra mile along the path to sustainability and justifies the difficult-to-copy 887g bottle for his top Xinomavro as an anti-counterfeit measure. He is another fan of Saverglass.

Cakebread ended her email with the hopeful observation that in the US, "supply chain issues are forcing local glass plants to dust off their old equipment". If "more wineries request locally made lightweight bottles, suppliers will take notice and there will be more options". **FT**

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**FT Weekend**





# Restaurants

## Tim Hayward



HEDDON YOKOCHŌ, LEFT. DISHES INCLUDE TORI PAITAN RAMEN, SHIO KOSHO, SPICY KOREAN WINGS, YAKKO AND SPICY YAKKO TOFU

### Heddon Yokochō, London

There are days when this job takes me to the oddest places. Follow me, then, as I wander through Soho, duck into an alleyway on the edge of Mayfair, am led down a flight of stairs and seated in a rickety booth.

This is not what you are thinking. I am lurking down here and paying for a private performance from, well, a bowl of noodles. This is London's first *shuchu* or "focus" booth, designed for the solitary contemplation of ramen, part of the heavily themed Heddon Yokochō.

In 1976, Tak Tokumine opened the Japan Centre nearby, serving London's expat Japanese community with packaged goods, utensils and magazines. Later incarnations also had food counters, bringing some of the earliest affordable Japanese food to London. I remember being introduced to my first *gyoza*, pork *katsu* curry and green tea in the basement off Piccadilly

Circus, years ahead of the easy thrills of Yo! Sushi or Wagamama. Tokumine has kept the business thriving through several changes of premises and, more recently, opening the upmarket Shoryu, which has attracted the attention of Michelin. Heddon Yokochō is his mid-range offering. While the private booths may be a clever response to pandemic restrictions, they also afford the noodle lover an intriguing opportunity.

In Japanese cities ramen consumption is an obsession, almost to the point of being a cult. Fanciers travel from shop to shop, seeking the bounciest noodles, the purest broths, the deepest tare and the most outré toppings. Yet perhaps the greatest noodle temples of all are those where the diner can sit in seclusion, cut off from sensory distraction and able to apply total attention to their meal.

I took my place at Heddon Yokochō facing a red curtain and, after a few calming sips of sparkling water, watched as a bowl was slipped under it like a sacrament. It was the simplest "Tokyo-style" ramen in which *shoyu* or soy sauce



**'It is really lovely to step aside from the bubbling noise and confusion of social dining and actually concentrate on something'**

**Heddon Yokochō**  
8 Heddon Street  
Mayfair  
London W1B 4BU  
heddonyokocho.com  
Mains £11.90-£14.50

is the predominant seasoning in the clear chicken and pork broth. This is usually added by dressing the bottom of the bowl with a measured scoop of *tare*, the seasoned and concentrated sauce unique to every decent noodle counter. The medium thickness noodles, the menu informs me, are "Chijire wave". Emboldened by my solitude, I wave back.

I should probably apologise for the sneaking reference to X-rated booths in the first paragraph, but there is an unmistakable resonance with the solitary pursuit of the noodle. The plywood enclosure, after an initial overwhelming feeling of absurdity, really does liberate you to behave in new ways. I was able, for example, to stick my face down over the bowl and inhale deeply of its steamy vapours, something I would never contemplate doing in public for fear of being revealed as a colossal prat.

It worked though. I was able to focus undistracted on the faint maritime whiff of *kombu* and *katsuobushi* beneath the deeper waves of pork. I was able to turn my full attention to the absolute orange of the yolk of the *nitamago* egg as it gently wept over a near Fibonacci spiral of BBQ pork belly. I had both the liberty and inclination, dear reader, to watch nori wilt.

Stick a man in a wooden box, and it won't be long before he waxes philosophical. I began to dwell on the duality of existence, the yin and the yang, how on the one hand the broth was profound in its complex, ageless and mysterious flavours and yet still, somehow, a bit too salty.

I left that booth a changed man. It had been great, safe fun. It had been a great bowl of noodles, but there was something else. It is really lovely to step aside from the bubbling noise and confusion of social dining and concentrate on something. At times our job is one of managing overstimulation, so the focus booth was weirdly thrilling.

This time it was ramen, but I wouldn't mind renting the booth again, be it for bouillabaisse or a bacon bap. It should be mandatory for critics, once a month, like some weary old cop sent to spend time on the range. It felt like being reset. **FT**

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FROM LEFT: JAMES JOYCE, PHOEBE WALLER-BRIDGE, GEORGE COSTANZA, ORSON WELLES, FRAN LEBOWITZ AND NATHAN BROOKER

## FANTASY DINNER PARTY

NATHAN BROOKER

The FT's House & Home editor invites a motley crew of raconteurs (and a friend of Seinfeld's) for a meal prepared by Ruth Rogers in the hills of the Italian Riviera

I'm not sure if you're not allowed to drive there, or if it was just bad planning on our part, but when my buddy and I stayed in Portofino, on Italy's Ligurian coast, we had to park in the next town and hike around the wooded headland. It made arriving in this gem of a village, with its pastel-coloured houses tumbling down towards the harbour, even more magical. If that were possible.

I hear it's all Gucci and superyachts now - or at least it was before the pandemic - so we're heading up the hillside to a villa that overlooks the waterfront, with a garden full of lemon trees. This is the place for my dream dinner party: out in that garden on a balmy evening in early September, the trees festooned with little lightbulbs. At this height, you can just about hear the chatter

of the diners in the waterside trattorias, but can't make out the selfie sticks.

While I wait for everyone to turn up, I think I'll mix myself a drink - a cardinale, which is like a negroni, but you substitute the sweet vermouth for Riesling.

"You're not going to invite **James Joyce**, are you?" asked my wife when I told her about this assignment. She thinks it will make me sound pretentious and out of touch. And she's right. But I don't care. Joyce is the first name on the team sheet. And not just because he was the finest writer of the 20th century. He's also my banker - someone I can faithfully rely on to get drunker than me. "His capacity for alcohol was small," wrote his biographer Richard Ellmann, "and he was prone to drunken collapses." Some nights he might start quoting Dante or break into a boisterous Italian drinking song; other times he'd go home and write embarrassing little poems about how drunk and weird he'd been.

With that, the great man arrives: suit, eyepatch, ashplant and guitar. I pour him a drink. A double, I think. The silence is broken by a commotion in the street below - the screech of brakes and a barrage

of car horns. Joyce smiles, holds his glass aloft and, in the spirit of *Ulysses*, intones: *Introibo ad altare Dei*. Then downs the whole lot.

Behind him comes **Fran Lebowitz**, flustered from whatever is going on in the street. She takes one look at Joyce. "You couldn't get Nabokov?" she says to me and heads to the drinks table for a cup of coffee.

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**'Fran Lebowitz has realised George Costanza is, in fact, an idiot. And Orson Welles agrees'**

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**Orson Welles** is the next to arrive. A good dinner party needs a good raconteur, and Welles is one of the greats. I've lost whole afternoons watching back-to-back videos of him on YouTube being interviewed by Michael Parkinson.

Welles is followed by the actor and screenwriter **Phoebe Waller-Bridge**. She writes with such zip and empathy, I feel like she would be an exciting person to be around. I read that she's partial to a vodka gimlet - vodka, lime juice and sugar syrup in a frozen glass - so I make a round. Lebowitz sticks to

coffee. Again, car horns blare in the street below.

The door slams open. It's **George Costanza**, frazzled, wispy hair on end. He got my text about not driving here, but decided to anyway because he thought his incredible ability to parallel park meant the advice didn't apply to him. God knows where he's left his car. He has brought a bottle with him, at least - Pepsi. I sit him next to Lebowitz, I figure the pair of New Yorkers can bond over traffic routes and everything they hate about the greatest city on earth.

So, who's in the kitchen? To be honest, I'd like a 70-year-old Italian *nonna*. Under 5ft tall, if possible, with big glasses and powerful forearms. She takes precisely zero crap from anybody and makes the most sensational wild boar ragu on the planet. Failing that, I'll take the great Ruth Rogers, co-founder of the River Cafe.

We start simple: artichokes, bitter chicory, perhaps a little Gorgonzola and a dry white wine. Costanza and Lebowitz are getting on like a house on fire. She's talking about people who walk too slowly on pavements, he's riffing about how toilet paper hasn't changed since the 1970s. Then the *primi piatti* arrive: linguini with truffles, oozing with butter under a mountain of parmesan. The mood is good. Welles is being his entertaining best.

By the time the main course comes - T-bone steak, rosemary, sautéed potatoes, paired with a bottle of Barolo - the wheels have started to come off. Lebowitz has realised Costanza is, in fact, an idiot. And Welles agrees. Unbeknown to me, Waller-Bridge has been passing around copies of Joyce's wildly intimate letters to his wife, Nora, and giggling about them. Joyce - who fails to see the funny side - is turning puce with indignation, or drink, or both.

"Jim," says Welles. "While we're waiting for dessert, why don't you play us a song?" Unable to refuse, he fetches his guitar. And just when it seems like the evening couldn't get any more embarrassing, Joyce starts singing an Italian aria, the beauty of which takes everyone quite by surprise.

And there we are, captivated in the moonlight by one of the greatest and strangest artists of the modern era. The night is young, the bar is well stocked. We hardly notice the plates of hot almond and orange cake placed in front of us, each slice slowly cooling under a melting dollop of mascarpone. **FT**



# Games



## A Round on the Links by James Walton



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

**1.** Which British head of state died 53 years after losing power?

**2.** Which American lawman died 48 years after taking part in the Gunfight at the OK Corral?

**3.** For which development charity did Prince William work in Chile in 2000?

**4.** Who is the only UK poet laureate to have had a child who became an Oscar-winning actor?

**5.** Which song has been a hit for Andrea True Connection (1976), Bananarama (1993) and Rachel Stevens (2004)?

**6.** Who was the Conservative leader at the 2005 general election?

**7.** What was the official name of West Ham's home ground until 2016 – often

known as Upton Park (above) because of its location?

**8.** In *The Simpsons*, who is the principal of Springfield elementary school?

**9.** Who is Harry Potter's only cousin?

**10.** In the life cycle of the salmon, what comes between fry and smolt?



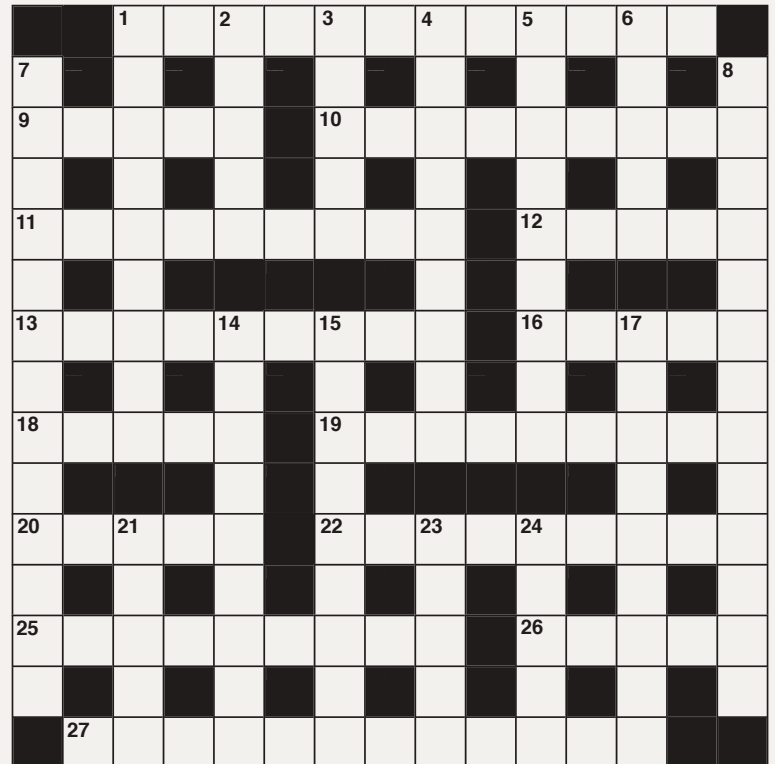
## The Picture Round by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



Answers page 10

## The Crossword No 546. Set by Aldhelm



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

### ACROSS

- 1** Shining phenomenon (12)
- 9** Work of fiction (5)
- 10** One seeking election (9)
- 11** Extreme (9)
- 12** Boiling water vapour (5)
- 13** Small trinkets, bits and bobs (9)
- 16** Unspoken (5)
- 18** Beginning (5)
- 19** Neverending (9)
- 20** Thigh bone (5)
- 22** Enhancing (9)
- 25** Procession (9)
- 26** Players' playing cards (5)
- 27** Senior priest's title (4, 8)

### DOWN

- 1** Ancient text to utilise CV craftily (9)
- 2** Athlete rising in the preliminaries (5)
- 3** Slice of flan – a chocolate snack (5)
- 4** Holding one, it rinses out soap, perhaps (9)
- 5** Composer composed satire about king, that is (4, 5)
- 6** Stop legal proceedings when head of establishment intervenes (5)
- 7** Popular opinion's to do away with pretence, actually (2, 5, 2, 4)
- 8** Almost go with it for treatment under the German medical specialist (13)
- 14** Wild tuna's to get better, of course (9)

- 15** Top gallery includes one against entrance (9)
- 17** Warned about poor education (9)
- 21** Film contest following second (5)
- 23** Audience's calm musical work (5)
- 24** Scots shout about this colouring (5)

Solution to Crossword No 545







# GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

## The truth is out there... I guess



**E**arlier this year, I found myself in the Pentagon, the vast headquarters of the American military apparatus, for a meeting, when I spotted a striking sign on a door. It seemed to indicate the office was dedicated to research into unidentified flying objects, aka UFOs. Security was tight, and yet I asked, “Is that a joke?”

I did not get a clear response. But in late June, the Pentagon released a widely discussed report revealing that officials have been studying sightings of UFOs – or, as they now prefer to call them, UAPs (unidentified aerial phenomena) – for many years.

Of 144 UAP sightings between 2004 and 2021, only one can be easily blamed on a normal object (in that case, a deflated balloon). “[We] currently lack sufficient information in our dataset to attribute incidents to specific explanations,” the report concluded. Speculation about top-secret Russian, Chinese or even American technology, not to mention the wilder theories about aliens, has run rampant ever since.

But amid all the chatter about extraterrestrials, there is another intriguing question that the US government has been quietly studying: if aliens did show up, how might we communicate with them? The US government’s efforts to look for, and potentially communicate with, aliens are well known to sci-fi devotees. Seti, short for “search for extraterrestrial intelligence”, employs one hundred scientists from its base in Mountain View, California, part of Silicon Valley. (Where else?)

What is less well known, however, is that Seti is also working with archaeologists, anthropologists and other social scientists on the assumption that should we find somebody, we might want to say hello. Much of this is secretive, but back in 2014 Nasa published an extensive report on this work, titled “Archeology, Anthropology and Interstellar Communication”.

Though it attracted little mainstream attention at the time, it makes for fascinating reading (and can easily be found online). “To move beyond the mere detection of such intelligence, and to have any realistic chance of comprehending it, we can gain much from the lessons learned by researchers facing similar challenges on Earth,” explained a foreword by Douglas Vakoch, a clinical psychology professor emeritus at the California Institute of Integral Studies who was then “director of interstellar message composition” at Seti.

“Like archaeologists who reconstruct temporally distant civilisations from fragmentary evidence, Seti researchers will be expected to reconstruct distant civilisations separated from us by vast expanses of space as well as time,” he noted. “And like anthropologists, who attempt to understand other cultures despite differences in language and social customs, as we attempt to decode and interpret extraterrestrial messages, we will be required to comprehend the mindset of a species that is radically Other.”

In practical terms, this meant that the Seti team had analysed how archaeologists failed to interpret Mayan and Egyptian texts to see how to decode unfamiliar signals. They had pondered how “dead” ancient Greek culture transmitted signals into modern European thought and looked at how the anthropologist Ruth Benedict tried to “decode” Japanese culture for the US government during the second world war.

The research also explored the mistakes that physical anthropologists and archaeologists made when they first encountered Neanderthal fossils, most notably by presuming that this branch of humanity walked in a stooped fashion since the first excavation of bones indicated this. (It turned out those bones were from an individual with arthritis.)

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**‘There is another question that the US government has been studying: if aliens did show up, how might we communicate with them?’**

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All of which led the Seti researchers to conclude that if they are going to communicate with aliens, they cannot use auditory signals since “the factors affecting the propagation of sounds could vary so much from planet to planet”, noted cognitive scientist William Edmondson. Nor, he added, can they use symbols since “symbolic communication – in which the connection between sign and signified is arbitrary – is intrinsically limited”.

Instead, the group favours sending pictures of Earth into outer space or using maths-based quantitative signals, since these seem to be less dependent on any symbolic interpretation. But while prime numbers are presumed to be a universal construct, Vakoch has stressed that it would be dangerous to assume that numbers are perceived in a universal manner.

None of this, of course, casts any light on UAPs, which might perfectly well turn out to be any number of unexciting phenomena. Nor does it address the potential downsides of making contact, as described by physicist Stephen Hawking – and many great novelists, who fear that alien beings would not only be technologically superior, but also likely to wipe out humans.

Futile or not, I find it oddly cheering that at least part of the government has been devoted to thinking about the near-unthinkable in recent years and doing so with an admirably interdisciplinary approach.

And even if we never find any extraterrestrial life, the search for it helps to foster a debate about what it is that enables humans to communicate with other “alien” humans, across time and space on our own planet. Right now, that is badly needed – with or without any UFOs. **FT**

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