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What happened

The Ceuta crisis

The EU was plunged into an unprecedented border crisis last Thursday, when some 72,000 migrants crossed from Morocco into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta in the space of 24 hours. At least 141 people died as groups of mainly young men rushed across the land border or swam to the city of 85,000, which lies at the tip of a promontory bordering Morocco. Spain's PM, Pedro Sánchez, blamed the influx on criminal gangs, and called it an "attack, a violation of Spain's territorial integrity". In response, France tightened security on its Spanish border and Italy suspended the border-free Schengen agreement with Spain – a step that was backed by Finland and Denmark, but provoked fury in Madrid.

By Wednesday, all but 2,000 of the migrants were back in Morocco. Among those still in Ceuta were more than 500 unaccompanied minors, who will, under Spanish law, have to be taken to Spain for their cases to be processed. Some of the migrants who reached Ceuta said they had seen social media posts promising work opportunities there; others said they'd been encouraged to cross by Moroccan authorities.



Migrants near the border

What the editorials said

Last week's disorder in Ceuta "sent political waves" crashing across Europe, said The Sunday Times. It led to intense criticism of Sánchez's liberal economic policies, including his amnesty scheme, which could legalise the status of more than 500,000 irregular migrants; and it triggered scrutiny of a recent Spanish supreme court ruling that migrants who reach Ceuta by sea cannot be summarily returned. Morocco says it had warned Madrid that this could lead to chaos on the border. Italy's Schengen suspension was a "performative overreaction", said The Guardian: Ceuta isn't covered by Schengen, and Spain and Italy don't share a border. But with hard-right parties ready to pounce on any signs of weakness on migration, it's no surprise that EU leaders resorted to finger-pointing.

Madrid has not publicly blamed Morocco for the influx, said The Economist. But Rabat has a history of weaponising the border. In 2021, it let 8,000 people "wade into Ceuta" during a spat with Spain; and its border guards were conspicuously absent last week. Possibly, Rabat had been irked by Sánchez's recent visit to Algeria, which refuses to recognise Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

What happened

Infantino's own goal

The most powerful man in football, Fifa's president, Gianni Infantino, faced a furious backlash last week after it emerged that he was seeking to create a £15bn commercial subsidiary that would control the rights to the World Cup. Under the deal, a 20% stake in the body was due to be sold to an investment group led by Joshua Kushner, brother of Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared. Football federations expressed outrage at the plan, complaining that they had been blindsided.

The criticism was led by Europe's governing body, Uefa, which declared a loss of confidence in Infantino's leadership and threatened to boycott global tournaments if the "shabby, backroom, opaque deal" went ahead. Other federations representing North and Central America, and Asia, then joined the protest. In the face of the mounting opposition, Infantino abandoned the proposal on Saturday. But with the support of friendlier football associations, mainly in Africa and South America, he resisted calls to stand down.



A "backroom, opaque deal"

What the editorials said

When the final whistle of the World Cup blew last month, Infantino's position looked "impregnable", said the FT. The tournament had proved a "dazzling success", in both sporting and commercial terms. But it's hard to see how his leadership can survive the backlash to his sell-off deal. Infantino has no alternative but to resign "with as much grace as he can muster", agreed The Independent. When he took over from the disgraced Sepp Blatter ten years ago, he promised to reform Fifa. But while he brought some positive changes, paying more attention to the women's game and boosting African participation in the World Cup, he has now well and truly blotted his copybook.

There's nothing wrong in principle with seeking to wring more money from the World Cup, said The Observer. Commercial deals have brought many improvements to the professional game over the years, not least by helping to pay for safer stadiums. If extra revenues from Fifa's showcase tournament were used to upgrade facilities in developing countries, that would be welcome. It was the venal manner in which Infantino cooked up this scheme that offended.

It wasn't all bad

The French boy who was thrown off the viewing gallery at Tate Modern in 2019 is smiling again, his parents say. The boy was six, and visiting London with his family, when he was attacked by Jonty Bravery, who was later jailed for attempted murder. He fell 30 metres and suffered life-altering injuries. But after years of treatment, he returned to school at the end of last term for specially adapted classes – which was "a great joy to him", said his parents, and "put a smile back on his face".

A 42-year-old New Zealander has set a new record for the Via Alpina – one of the world's toughest endurance races. Sophie Woods started in Italy, on 4 July, and then ran 2,000km through seven more countries along the length of the Alps, ending up in Monaco. Along the way, she climbed the equivalent of Mount Everest 12 times. She also faced intense heat, storms, a swarm of horseflies and wildfires. The British runner Jake Catterall set the previous record for the Via Alpina of 35 days in 2024. Woods did it in 29, running 15 to 18 hours a day. "I am ecstatic but knackered," she told the BBC.



A woman who was told at her 20-week scan that her unborn baby's intestines were growing outside his abdomen has become only the third in the world to have the defect fixed in the womb. Maisie Savage and her partner Josh French, from London, flew to the US for the operation, in which the intestines were gently pushed back in using keyhole surgery. Their son, Theo, was born naturally three months later, and was discharged four days after that. Usually babies with gastroschisis require months of treatment; one in ten die.

What the commentators said

Ever since the 2015 refugee crisis, EU leaders have been making bold pledges to boost border security, said Ben Pawlowski in *The i Paper*. But the reality is that “no European government, whether on the Left or the Right, has found a durable solution” to irregular migration; and the images from Ceuta – where reception centres were pushed to “breaking point” and migrants slept on beaches and in parks – were a stark visual reminder of the EU’s failure to get a grip. After finding shops closed, and with nothing to eat or drink, almost all of those who reached Ceuta quickly left again, said Laila Lalami in *The Nation*. “What looked to be a massive humanitarian crisis was defused almost as soon as it started.” Yet that didn’t stop “Maga and its European friends” scaremongering about an “invasion”, said Anne Applebaum in *The Atlantic*. US Vice-President J.D. Vance shared a Fox News segment that incorrectly described migrants arriving in “northern Spain”; Nigel Farage and Robert Jenrick suggested they were heading for Britain. Their claims were baseless – but they still spread like wildfire on social media.

Ironically, irregular crossings to Europe have fallen sharply this year, said Peter Conradi in *The Sunday Times*. But with migration remaining a “highly divisive issue”, there is growing support in the EU for a Rwanda-style scheme under which asylum seekers are processed offshore. But to build a fortress is not enough, said William Hague in *The Times*. Leaders across Europe must also look over the horizon at what’s happening elsewhere in the world. Take the Sahel region of northern Africa. Populations there are forecast to soar in the decades to come, with climate change, Islamist insurgencies and civil war threatening to unleash vast waves of migration. Yet the West has allowed itself to be forced out of the region in recent years. It has surrendered influence to Russia and China; and it seems to have no coherent strategy for winning it back. That may prove to be a costly error. Unless Western countries find ways to help bring stability to those countries, and lay the groundwork for reforms that will create opportunities for their young populations, people will soon be moving in numbers that “no fortress” can keep out.

What the commentators said

Infantino is utterly shameless, said Jim White in *The Daily Telegraph*. Having already tried to ingratiate himself with Trump by, among other things, presenting him with a ludicrous Fifa Peace Prize, he sought to curry more favour with the president by holding out the prospect of another prize: a “family slice of a much bigger World Cup, held every two years, as often as not on US soil”. When the scheme, from which the Fifa president stood to profit personally, was exposed, Infantino then sought to force it through by presenting federations with an ultimatum to back the deal by mid-September or lose out on millions in potential funding. “Thankfully the FA, and the other members of Uefa, were having none of it.” Infantino’s humiliation is a “delicious modern morality tale”, said Jon Sopel in *The i Paper*. He thought he could get away with acting like Trump, ignoring critics and pursuing his own interests with brazen impunity, but he has now received a punishing reality check.

About time, said Oliver Brown in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Football’s leading bodies have for too long given a free pass to Infantino. They said nothing about his insidious expansion of powers and tolerated his “unctuousness around despotic leaders”, clapping “like seals” when he orchestrated the “charade of Saudi Arabia’s unopposed bid for the 2034 World Cup”. Finally, they’ve “rediscovered some semblance of a moral compass”. There’s a clear “geopolitical subtext” to this row, said Gideon Rachman in the FT. Europeans, who have suffered many bruising experiences at the hands of the second Trump administration, have relished the chance to win a proxy victory over the president. Just as China has fought back against Trump’s tariffs by exploiting its dominance of rare earths, so Europe has now leveraged its dominance of football to lethal effect. One can imagine it winning a “global cheese war” by similar means. “The old continent’s victory over Fifa and the Americanisation of football will provide only fleeting satisfaction – unless the Europeans can develop power over a few important things.”

What next?

Officials in Ceuta have asked for more help from Madrid to look after hundreds of unaccompanied migrant minors there. With limited access to food, water, shelter and sanitation, many of the minors are living in “absolutely unsustainable” conditions, warned Ceuta’s leader, Juan Jesús Vivas, who has criticised Madrid’s “late and clearly insufficient” initial response to the crisis.

Plans are being made for another mass influx to Ceuta on 15 August, *El País* reports. In Facebook and WhatsApp groups, thousands of Moroccans are said to be debating whether these are viable, or a ploy by gangs to lure people to the area and get them to buy a spot on a boat.

What next?

Until this row, Infantino had looked on track to be re-elected unopposed next March for a fourth and final term, taking his Fifa presidency to 2031. The nomination deadline for challengers is 18 November.

If Infantino continues to fight calls to resign, Fifa’s 211 members have the option of calling an emergency congress and staging a vote of no-confidence. Forty-three of the governing body’s members would need to request such a meeting, and 106 votes would be needed to secure the no-confidence motion, which would have to be approved by a majority of members.

THE WEEK

Have an escape plan ready. Agree the evacuation route in advance with members of your family, particularly if you’re due to spend time in separate locations during the day. Prepare a “grab bag”

containing passports, mobile phones, medication, cash and drinking water, so that you’re ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Such was the advice issued last week by the British Red Cross to tourists travelling to fire-prone parts of France, Spain and Italy. The instructions are hard to square with the idea of a relaxing holiday, but they’re a sign of the times. Raging wildfires and tourist evacuations have become a grim feature of the Mediterranean holiday season. Consumer choices are evolving in response to the trend. Searches for “coolcations” are reportedly on the rise. Holidaymakers are increasingly opting for countries such as Norway, Switzerland and Canada. According to the online agent Opodo, Gothenburg, Stockholm and Geneva have been the most sought-after destinations this summer for Britons looking for cool-weather city breaks. More people are also choosing not to head abroad and instead enjoy the sunny weather at home on staycations. But old habits die hard. Memories of this long, hot summer will dissipate swiftly for most people once temperatures drop and the evenings start closing in. In a few weeks, it will all seem like a distant dream. And in the chilly depths of winter, when people’s thoughts turn to booking their summer getaways, many will once again feel that atavistic urge to head for the Med.

Harry Nicolle

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Controversy of the week

The Farage slump

“Not so long ago he was ‘Britain’s next prime minister,’” said Sean O’Grady in *The Independent*. Today, Nigel Farage seems a rather deflated figure. For the first time in 15 months, some polls are putting his Reform UK party in second place to Labour. Last week, Reform came a distant second in the Greater Manchester mayoral election. Farage’s own popularity has slumped to 32% – the lowest net rating of any major party leader. And he is currently trapped in an “end-of-the-pier show in Clacton” of his own making, as he prepares for next week’s by-election against Count Binface, Baron Von Thunderclap and other novelty candidates. Meanwhile, questions continue to be asked about Reform’s finances and Farage’s acceptance last year of a £5m gift from Christopher Harborne, which intensified last week when it emerged that he had, by then, discussed returning as Reform’s leader.



The Reform UK leader this week

Desperate to change the subject, Farage announced “Operation Fortress” this week – a plan to use the Navy to force migrant boats back to France. It is a ludicrous idea, said *The Independent*. Paris has already warned that such pushbacks would violate French sovereignty and breach international law. That Farage came up with it shows how much trouble he and his party are in. Let’s not get carried away, said Josh Glancy in *The Sunday Times*. “Reform is in a rut”, but Farage is still attracting “adoring crowds” in Clacton, and many polls are still putting Reform on 24%, neck-and-neck with Labour. Concern about migration remains a highly potent issue with voters. And when Andy Burnham’s honeymoon ends, as it surely will (*see page 16*), Farage is likely to bounce back. He tends to perform best when his back is against the wall, said Tim Ross on Politico. Farage’s core support has only “solidified as a result of his recent difficulties”: his approval ratings have risen 13 points among Reform voters since May. They believe “the Establishment” is “intent on punishing the people’s champion” and is out to get Farage. They are standing by their man.

But Farage can’t rely on the diehards to get him to No. 10, said David Frost in *The Daily Telegraph*. There are not enough of them. He has achieved extraordinary things as leader, but Reform is now sitting on a plateau beneath the summit. There are “two possible routes up off it”. He could double down on immigration and the culture wars, which would shore up the base, but there is a ceiling on the number of voters who favour that tear-it-all-down approach. Or he could turn Reform into a broad-spectrum party, calling for deregulation, public-sector reform and tax cuts, to attract residual Tory votes. But is Farage the man to lead that party, asked Dan Hodges in *The Mail* on Sunday. He is so divisive, some voters will do anything to keep Reform candidates out, and his brand is becoming more toxic. Reform needs to decide if it is a serious party or a “monument to one man’s folly”.

Early-release scheme

The Government has excluded those convicted of rape and serious child sex offences from the new early-release scheme. Announcing the move before he went on holiday this week, the PM Andy Burnham said that he’d have liked to have gone further, but that prisons in England and Wales are too close to capacity for that to be possible. The news that some killers will still be freed after serving only half of their sentences caused outrage in certain quarters, alongside questions about which child sex offences are not serious. Jason Hogg, head of the Thames Valley Police, said that he might join in legal action to block the release of two men convicted in 2020 of the manslaughter of PC Andrew Harper.

Police data stolen

Hackers have obtained the names and work email addresses of more than 100,000 police staff in England and Wales and posted them on the dark web. A group called ExfilSquad is believed to be responsible for the hack on the Police National Legal Database. The same group is believed to have recently stolen 607,000 pieces of sensitive data in cyberattacks on the Department for Education.

Spirit of the age

Morrisons is trialling AI-powered smart trolleys that promise to bring “the convenience of online shopping” to physical stores. Already widely used in supermarkets in the US, the trolleys recognise items as they are put in. They can weigh and price vegetables; update the tally when items are removed, and alert the shopper to multi-buy discounts. The tech allows shoppers to put their goods straight into bags and see how much their bill is coming to as they navigate the aisles, before paying it at a dedicated checkout.

M&S, long known as a purveyor of sensible women’s undies, has raised eyebrows by introducing a range of crotchless thongs. They feature as part of a new Ann Summers range at the store.

Good week for:

Mixed luck, after an Italian woman, who threw away a €1m instant-win lottery ticket, managed to claim the prize with the help of a team of local refuse workers. By the time she realised her mistake, the rubbish bin in question had been collected, but officials were able to stop the truck before it got to a dump. The team then unloaded the waste and combed through it, until they found the ticket – still intact.

MI6, which is the strongest foreign intelligence service in Europe, according to a peer review by 60 professionals from 25 countries. In particular, the Secret Intelligence Service was praised for its expertise in recruiting high-level moles and penetrating ruling elites in China, Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Resilience, after a hiker who was impaled by his own trekking pole decided to brave the ten-mile return journey unaided. David Cifaldi, a nurse, was climbing with two friends in the Beartooth Mountains of Montana when he slipped and his pole pierced through his torso. Rather than pay for a helicopter rescue, he decided to walk off the mountain.

Bad week for:

British comedy, with the axing of the BBC’s *Live at the Apollo* series, after 22 years. Other programmes being taken off air to save costs include *Blankety Blank* and *Celebrity Mastermind*.

Ariana Grande, the American actress and singer, who announced that she would be taking a break from her career, owing to “endless, ongoing public scrutiny”. The 33-year-old has faced intense speculation about her weight and physical appearance.

Poll watch

Labour members see health as the biggest challenge facing Britain, cited by **43%**, followed by the economy (**42%**), the cost of living (**39%**) and climate change (**29%**). By contrast, only **7%** cite welfare benefits, and **6%** immigration. And while **47%** think the Government is spending too much on welfare, **21%** think it is not spending enough. However, **73%** of Labour members say the Government should spend more on social care through higher taxes (either general taxation or on higher earners alone). *ThinkLabour/The Guardian*

One in ten adults in households subject to a hosepipe ban say they won’t be abiding by it; a further **5%** are undecided. Some **10%** say they’d report a neighbour flouting the ban. *YouGov/The Independent*



Copenhagen

Army boost:

A 19-year-old princess was one of around 1,600 young Danes who began military service this week, as part of a significant expansion of the country's conscription

policy. Princess Isabella (pictured), King Frederik X and Queen Mary's daughter, will serve for 11 months. Under the Danish system, volunteers make up the first intake. Then, if there is a shortfall in numbers, conscription becomes mandatory – with recruits selected via a lottery. Previously, conscripts served for four months and women were not subject to the mandatory lottery. The annual number of conscripts is set to rise from 5,000 to 7,500 by 2033.

Moscow

Drone attacks:

Seven people, including three children, were killed this week when a Ukrainian drone crashed onto a beach on Russia's Black Sea coast. Officials said the debris had also injured 40 people, at the busy resort of Arkhipo-Osipovka. Russian officials described it as a "deliberate attack" on the civilian population. Ukraine insists that it does not target civilians; there has been speculation that the drone had been intercepted, and that its target was a naval base. Russia also blamed Ukraine for a bombing at a restaurant in Moscow that killed at least five people. Unconfirmed reports have suggested that a senior Russian military officer had been celebrating his birthday at the restaurant. This week, Ukraine carried out further attacks on Wildberries, Russia's largest online retailer; five people were reported to have been killed. On Wednesday, a Russian ballistic missile attack killed at least 20 people in the Kyiv area.

Moscow

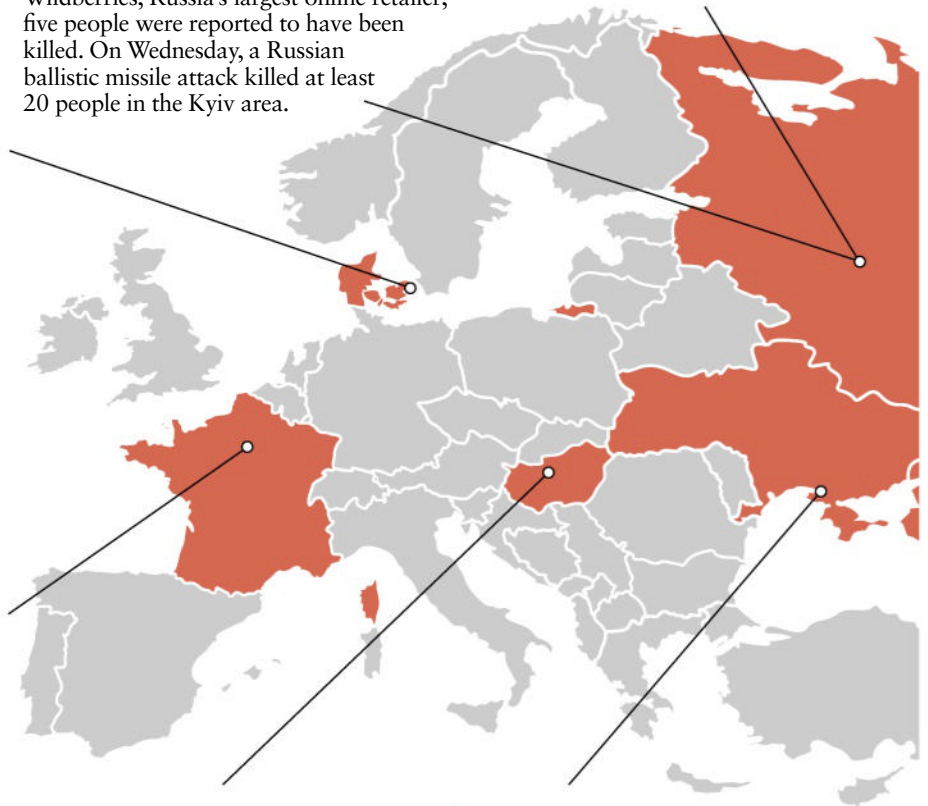
Terror charge:

Russia has charged Pavel Durov, the Russian-born founder of the encrypted messaging app Telegram, with facilitating terrorism. The Kremlin says he failed to prevent Ukrainian secret service agents using the platform to recruit people to carry out sabotage and terror attacks in Russia. Shortly after Durov was charged, Telegram's X/Twitter account posted a picture of him holding up his middle finger. Durov, who has lived abroad since 2014 and holds French and UAE passports, has previously criticised Moscow for restricting access to Telegram in Russia as part of its crackdown on internet freedom. Moscow has issued an international arrest warrant for him, but it is not clear which countries would comply with it.

Paris

Expulsion order:

France has ordered a Russian journalist to leave the country for allegedly disseminating misinformation, orchestrated by Moscow, to "destabilise public order". Xenia Fedorova, 45, ran the French arm of the Russian state-owned news channel RT until it was banned following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine; since then, she has been a regular commentator on media platforms owned by the conservative French billionaire Vincent Bolloré, including CNews, which has been characterised as "France's Fox News". Her Russia-friendly views, on issues such as Nato and European security, had come under increased scrutiny ahead of France's presidential election in 2027. She has described herself as the victim of state censorship; the decision to expel her has also been sharply criticised by senior members of the far-right National Rally.



Budapest

Danube drought:

Water levels on the Danube have fallen so low that Hungary's only working nuclear power plant – which is cooled by river water – came within a whisker of having to be taken completely offline this week. The Paks plant, which produces nearly a third of the electricity consumed in Hungary, started to reduce its output in July. As of this week, it was running at about 10% of its normal capacity, leaving the country reliant on emergency imports. In Romania, the armed forces used a controlled explosion to blast away a rock formation that was impeding the flow of water to its last working reactor at Cernavoda. This plant is also working at reduced capacity and facing a total shutdown if water levels fall any further. France is facing similar problems owing to rising river-water temperatures.

As the Danube's waters have fallen to near-record lows, river cruises have had to be cancelled, and various objects on the riverbed have been exposed, including the wrecks of Nazi warships and the remains of a woolly mammoth. Shipping and tourism have also been seriously disrupted on the Rhine. In Greece, thousands of people have had to flee fires on the mainland and on the island of Crete; in the Athens area, two people were killed this week when two firefighting helicopters collided.



Kherson, Ukraine

Drone "safari":

Ukraine accused Russia of war crimes this week, after a video emerged of a Russian drone hunting down a street vendor in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson. The footage of the "human safari" was shared on social media by Ukraine's President Zelensky, who said it proves that Russia has "gone mad", and its soldiers "take pleasure in killing". In the clip, the drone can be seen hovering above the man, identified as a 52-year-old greengrocer named Yuriy, as he unloads his wares, then chasing him as he runs around his van to get away from it. It finally swoops towards him and explodes. He survived the blast but was hospitalised with multiple shrapnel wounds. Kyiv says that Russian operators routinely use drones to terrorise civilians near the front lines; a UN report in 2025 found that Russians "recurrantly" kill civilians by targeting them with drones.

Washington DC

“Slush fund”: Acting US Attorney General Todd Blanche has formally rescinded President Trump’s plan to create a \$1.8bn “anti-weaponisation” fund. The fund – agreed to settle a lawsuit Trump had filed against the Internal Revenue Service over a leak of his tax return – was set up to compensate individuals deemed to have been unfairly prosecuted by previous administrations. Its critics warned that it could lead to payouts for Trump supporters convicted of assaulting police officers during the Capitol riots. Two Republican senators were so angered by what one called a “payout pot for punks”, they had threatened to block the appointment of Blanche – Trump’s former personal lawyer – as attorney general unless he withdrew it. They have since agreed to support his nomination, which was expected to pass when it went to the Senate floor, despite vehement opposition from Democrats.

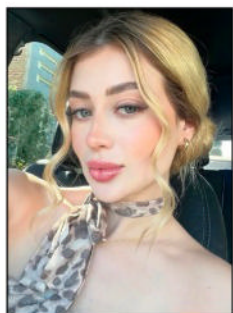
**Washington DC**

Robot ban: The US has banned the import of humanoid and quadruped robots, saying they posed “unacceptable risks” to national security. Among other things, officials

cited the possibility of “malign actors” taking remote control of robots, or using them to gather data on Americans. China, which is the world’s largest exporter of such robots, accused the US of using security concerns as a pretext for protectionist measures.

San Jose, California

eBay payout: eBay and three of its former senior executives have agreed to pay \$56m to settle a case brought by a couple from Massachusetts who were stalked and harassed by the firm’s employees. In 2019, David and Ina Steiner, who ran an e-commerce blog critical of eBay, started getting death threats online. They received a funeral wreath and boxes of live cockroaches in the post. Hardcore porn addressed to David was sent to their neighbour, and their car was vandalised. It turned out that executives at eBay had been troubled by the Steiners’ blog, and one of them had ordered staff to “take her down”. Seven employees were convicted of criminal charges over the scandal in 2022; some were jailed. The \$56m settles a civil suit.

**Atotonilco el Alto, Mexico**

Cartel arrest: A prominent leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel suspected of two high-profile killings was captured in Mexico’s Jalisco state last week.

Prosecutors have linked Ramón Ángel Álvarez Ayala to the murder of Valeria Márquez (left), the 23-year-old influencer who was shot dead while livestreaming at her beauty salon in May 2025. She had previously been in a relationship with his son. Álvarez Ayala is also accused of

orchestrating the assassination of Carlos Manzo, the mayor of Uruapan, at a Day of the Dead festival last November.

Washington DC

Pool row: US prosecutors have dropped charges against a former Olympic canoeist who had been accused of vandalising the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, in Washington DC. David Hearn, 67, was one of several people charged with deliberately damaging the 2,028ft pool, which has suffered from algae blooms and peeling paint since its \$14m renovation this year, in which it was given an “American flag blue” spray-on lining. President Trump – who had reportedly awarded the no-bid contract for the job to a firm that had previously worked on a pool at one of his resorts – repeatedly blamed “Radical Left Lunatics” for the damage. The US attorney for Washington, Jeanine Pirro, initially agreed, but in a filing last Friday, she blamed it on a “botched” installation. Trump has suggested that he may now fire her.

Washington DC

No comment: Dr Anthony Fauci invoked the Fifth Amendment more than 100 times as he declined to answer questions at a Senate hearing on the Covid-19 crisis last week. Fauci – a former head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who oversaw the US’s pandemic response – said he believed that Republicans would try to trap him into contradicting his previous testimony, so that they could have him prosecuted for perjury. Among other things, Republicans accuse Fauci, 85, of funding risky research at the Wuhan lab, and of covering up evidence that the Covid-19 virus leaked from there. Joe Biden gave Fauci a pardon protecting him from prosecution for actions up to 2025, but it would not apply to instances of perjury now. Fauci has said that any apparent contradictions in his views over time simply reflect the evolution of his understanding of the crisis.

**São Paulo, Brazil**

Re-election bid: Brazil’s 80-year-old Leftist president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, officially launched his re-election bid in São Paulo on Sunday, declaring himself to be in “great shape” to assuage concerns that he is too old to serve a fourth term. In the same speech, Lula also said he would protect his country’s critical minerals from foreign control – seen as a thinly veiled reference to his right-wing rival Flávio Bolsonaro’s close ties to the Trump administration. Days earlier, Lula had accused two American officials, both of whom were recently denied visas to Brazil, of trying to interfere with October’s election. The pair had reportedly been due to meet Bolsonaro, who is running instead of his father, the former president Jair Bolsonaro.

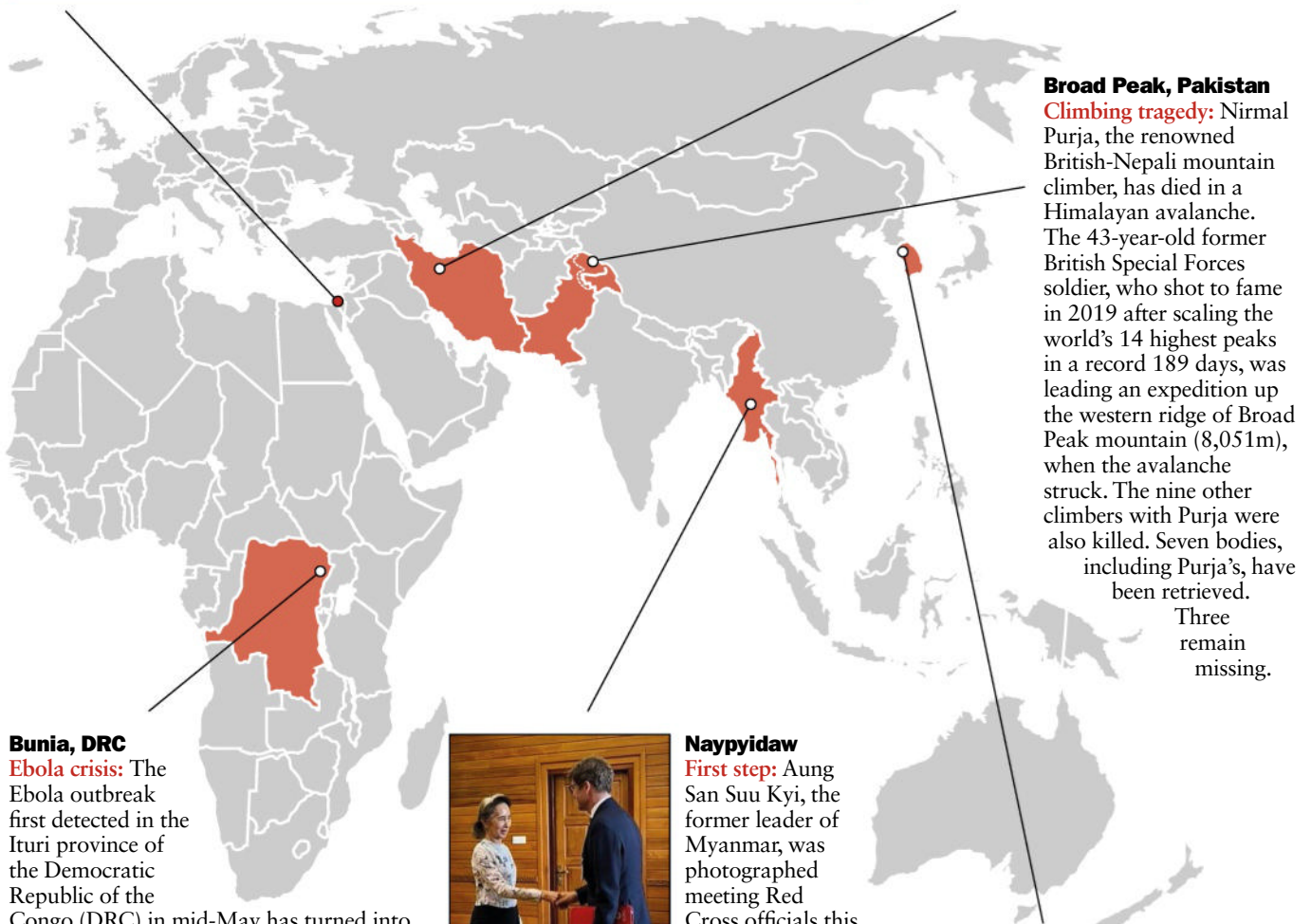
Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territories

Major milestone: In a deal hailed by President Trump as a “major milestone” on the path to peace in Gaza, Hamas has agreed to hand over weapons to a Palestinian governing committee in return for a staged withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Strip. Control of Gaza would then pass to a technocratic Palestinian administration. Hamas has long treated surrender of its weapons as non-negotiable, so this is a potentially momentous concession. However, the deal was made with mediators from Egypt, Qatar and Turkey working through the US-led Board of Peace, which Trump set up in January, and though Hamas negotiator Ghazi Hamad claims this is a major concession being made “for the sake of our people” in Gaza, Israel remains deeply sceptical about Hamas’s willingness to hand over anything more than a token number of arms. Tel Aviv has yet to comment officially, though the far-right national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has already dismissed the plan as unacceptable. Violence in Gaza has continued despite October’s ceasefire: more than 1,100 Palestinians have been killed since it came into effect. This week saw at least 18 people killed in the latest strikes by Israeli aircraft, according to Palestinian officials.



Tehran

Deal or no deal?: At the urging of Saudi Arabia, Donald Trump has called off the strike against Iran which he’d vowed would be the “biggest attack since World War II”. Trump claimed he had done so because Tehran had begged for a meeting and that negotiations over reopening the Strait of Hormuz were “on right now”. “I want to give them every last chance” before proceeding, he told reporters. However, Iranian officials have scoffed at his claim, saying Tehran has no plans to negotiate. The denial sparked a furious reaction from Trump on Truth Social. “Iranian leadership is unbelievably duplicitous! They ask for a meeting then say, openly and proudly, they’re not having any discussions. Nothing gets through unless a deal or total surrender is accomplished. IRAN WILL NEVER HAVE A NUCLEAR WEAPON!”



Broad Peak, Pakistan

Climbing tragedy: Nirmal Purja, the renowned British-Nepali mountain climber, has died in a Himalayan avalanche. The 43-year-old former British Special Forces soldier, who shot to fame in 2019 after scaling the world’s 14 highest peaks in a record 189 days, was leading an expedition up the western ridge of Broad Peak mountain (8,051m), when the avalanche struck. The nine other climbers with Purja were also killed. Seven bodies, including Purja’s, have been retrieved. Three remain missing.

Bunia, DRC

Ebola crisis: The Ebola outbreak first detected in the Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in mid-May has turned into the second largest in history, the number of recorded infections (3,802) eclipsing the almost 3,500 cases identified during the epidemic that struck DRC between 2018 and 2020. The health ministry has confirmed 1,707 deaths, a fatality rate of 44.9%. Last week, 567 cases and 296 fatalities were recorded – the highest weekly totals of the outbreak so far, with the WHO warning of the “exceptional pace of transmission”. There is no approved vaccine or treatment for the rare Bundibugyo strain of the disease behind the current epidemic, but a vaccine trial did get under way in the UK last month.



Naypyidaw

First step: Aung San Suu Kyi, the former leader of Myanmar, was photographed meeting Red Cross officials this week – the first confirmed foreign contact with her in five years. The 81-year-old’s whereabouts have been largely unknown since her elected civilian government was ousted in a military coup in 2021, and there had been concerns about her health. However, in the photos she does appear to be healthy. Her son, Kim Aris, who has long demanded proof from the ruling junta that she is still alive, welcomed the news as an “important first step” before adding – “but it must not be the last”.

Seoul

Heatwave deaths: Seoul has issued the capital’s first-ever severe heat warning, as South Korea reels from a heatwave that has been linked to at least 19 deaths. The emergency measure went into effect across Seoul on Tuesday, two days after the southeastern city of Yangsan experienced temperatures of 42.5°C, the highest ever detected in the country since recordings began in 1904. In Seoul, nurses were sent to check on the 63,000 most vulnerable residents this week, while a fleet of 200 trucks sprayed water on roads across the city to cool the surrounding air.

Surviving Hiroshima

There were 350,000 people in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 – the day the US dropped the first atomic bomb over the city. One of those people, says Simon Hattenstone in *The Guardian*, was Koko Kondo – then an eight-month-old baby. Miraculously, she and her mother survived – as did her father, Rev Kiyoshi Tanimoto, who was in another part of the city. In the years that followed, Tanimoto would tell his daughter that she was the only baby in the area who had lived, and that she had a duty to tell the world what had happened. But she wasn't having it. "No, sir," I told him. "Not me." I didn't want to share in the trauma, or make it mine," she says. Still, she saw its impact every day: her father had taken in older girls who'd been terribly disfigured, and Koko came to regard them as sisters, vowing revenge on the people responsible for their suffering. "I said, I'm going to find the people who flew the B-29 *Enola Gay* and I'm going to give them a punch or bite or kick." Incredibly, in 1955, she got the chance to do just that. By then, her father was well known in the US for his work campaigning on behalf of Hiroshima's victims. He was invited onto the US version of the TV series *This Is Your Life*; but what he didn't know was that Captain Robert A. Lewis, co-pilot of the *Enola Gay*, was also appearing, as a surprise guest. As her stunned father awkwardly shook hands with Lewis, Koko watched from the

audience. "I will never forget that day." At first, she stared at Lewis, disbelieving. "I thought he was a *monster*." But as he read out his famous words of remorse – "My God, what have we done?" – and choked back tears, she reconsidered. "I never heard of tears coming out of a monster's eyes," she recalls thinking. "So this person must be a human like me."

A classicist on *The Odyssey*

Christopher Nolan has cited the first line of Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of Homer's *Odyssey* as an inspiration for his screen adaptation. But Wilson – who chairs the classics department at Pennsylvania University – is not a fan of his film. She says that, though "humbled to learn" that Nolan had looked at her text, she'd "be ashamed to have written any part" of the film. It is admittedly not boring – but "it didn't land emotionally for me at all", she explained to Madeleine Spence in *The Sunday Times* – "which I think is partly about the fact that, unlike Homer, it's not very well written". The characters, she adds, "don't have the kind of depth Homeric characters have. I felt, 'Do I really care if this guy gets back to his wife?' You haven't given me any reason to." Matt Damon's Odysseus is neither as "clever" nor as "funny" as Homer's hero. As for the women's roles, the movie is "great by Nolan standards"; but "by Homer standards, it was a bit disappointing". Worse still, "there's no sex, and none of the food looks very nice".



A milliner to the stars, Philip Treacy has made hats for everyone from Elizabeth Taylor to Lady Gaga. He got his break in the 1980s, when he crossed paths with Isabella Blow. The maverick fashion editor became his champion, and his friend. But more than that, says Bethan Holt in *The Daily Telegraph*, she introduced him to "fashion in its purest form". Back then, says Treacy, "people didn't applaud extrovert dressers at all like they do now". If they went out to dinner, "I'd have to take a sharp intake of breath before we walked in because the whole restaurant would just stop, and they didn't look thrilled... But she didn't see that." Not that it troubled him: the village in Ireland in which he had grown up was "full of eccentrics, so I was well prepared". Blow died in 2007; but "she still inspires me", he says – and after almost four decades in the business, he's still at the top of his game: Madonna wore him to this year's Met Gala and he's the go-to milliner for the royals. That said, the industry is not what it was. "The conglomerates have changed it because it's about profit more than creativity," he says. Even top designers can quickly "find themselves out of a job" if profits don't match expectations; most now work as part of big teams, at a frantic pace. "Fashion is an illusion," he says. "People don't realise how *Wizard of Oz* it is. It's pretending everything's wonderful, [when] behind the scenes it's less so."

Castaway of the week

This week's edition of Radio 4's Desert Island Discs featured the businesswoman Emma Grede

- 1 *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* by Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson, performed by Diana Ross
- 2 *Superwoman* by L.A. Reid, Babyface and Daryl Simmons, performed by Karyn White
- 3 *Show Me Love* by Allen George and Fred McFarlane, performed by Robin S
- 4 *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, written and performed by Ryuichi Sakamoto
- 5 *Regulate* by Warren Griffin III, Nathaniel Hale, Michael McDonald, Ed Sanford, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, performed by Warren G and Nate Dogg
- 6* *Stand By Me* by Ben E. King, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, performed by Ben E. King
- 7 *Morning Glory* by Noel Gallagher, performed by Oasis
- 8 *Hometown Glory*, written and performed by Adele

* Choice if allowed only one record

Book: *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran

Luxury: a mattress and crisp, clean sheets

Viewpoint:**Consolation for liberals**

"A decade on from Brexit and the rise of the Maga movement, I offer one consoling thought for liberals. Populism will eat itself. More than that, populism *must* eat itself. A movement that admires aggression, that thrives on conflict, that regards liberalism as not just wrong but boring, cannot help but eventually rough up its own side too. You can't seek round-the-clock confrontation with enemies – even with the media – and then become a different person with colleagues. Belligerence is just too difficult a trait to psychologically compartmentalise."

Janan Ganesh in the FT

Farewell

John Croft, Bletchley Park codebreaker, civil servant and artist, died 12 July, aged 103.

Juliet Gardiner, historian, editor and author, died 16 June, aged 82.

Glen Hansard, musician/actor who won an original song Oscar for *Once*, died 29 July, aged 56.

Rod Liddle, polemical newspaper columnist and broadcaster, died 2 August, aged 66.

Vincent Pastore, actor who played "Big Pussy" in *The Sopranos*, died 1 August, aged 80.

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Stranded in the Gulf

The Iran war has trapped hundreds of ships on the wrong side of the Strait of Hormuz. What's life like for their crews?

How many sailors are stranded?

At least 6,000 seafarers are stuck on board at least 400 tankers and cargo ships, according to the UN's International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Many of the ships have been stranded in the Persian Gulf since the US-Israel war with Iran erupted in late February. "It's as if we are trapped in a pond," Shafiqul Islam, captain of a ship carrying some 37,000 tonnes of fertiliser bound for South Africa, told the BBC in June. "There's only one way out": via the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway between Iran and Oman through which some 20% of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas – as well as crucial commodities including fertiliser, aluminium and helium – once flowed from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq and Iran to global markets. Before the war, more than 130 ships a day transited the strait, which is 21 miles wide at its narrowest point. Iran declared the waterway closed and launched missiles and drones at vessels trying to sail through, grinding traffic to a halt. At one point, up to 20,000 mariners and 2,000 ships were stuck in the Gulf, with only a few vessels squeezing through each day.



Vessels in the Strait of Hormuz in June

but infrequent, because satellite phone time is limited and expensive. To protect sailors' mental health, captains encourage crews to do everything together and to never leave anyone alone – even when they dine or relax. Sailors report that access to knives and other sharp objects is more tightly controlled than normal, to prevent people from harming themselves or others. Meanwhile, food, water and medicine on many vessels are running low.

Is anything being done about that?

Boats from nearby ports are delivering supplies, but prices keep going up. One Korean sailor told the BBC that it feels like suppliers "are trying to take advantage of the situation and make excessive profits". The engineer of one ship said the cost of 180 tonnes of water

has spiked from about \$2,000 to \$11,000. Fees for "bottom cleaners", removing biofouling – barnacles, mussels, algae – from ships' hulls have shot up, too. Scammers are also taking advantage, claiming to belong to Iran's Revolutionary Guard, they've tricked shipping firms into sending hefty payments to their cryptocurrency wallets in exchange for safe passage.

How were they able to get out?

India, China, Pakistan and other nations negotiated with Iran for safe passage for their flagged vessels, and some tanker operators paid Iran up to \$2m for transit rights for individual ships. The logjam in the Gulf eased in June after Washington and Tehran struck a preliminary peace deal, after which about 30 ships a day were able to exit the strait. But that number dropped back to single digits earlier this month when the war restarted. For the trapped sailors – mainly from India and the Philippines, as well as from nations including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Syria and Ukraine (see box) – the fear of death or injury is a constant. "Everyone is just exhausted," said captain Hassan Khan, "both physically and mentally." While trapped on ships often loaded with explosive substances, the crews have watched missiles and drones streak overhead, and at least 17 mariners have been killed in Iranian and US strikes. Raman Kapoor, a tanker captain who had ten days left on his tour when the war erupted, watched helplessly in March as a nearby tanker exploded after being hit by an unmanned craft. One sailor died. "Everyone was so scared," Kapoor said. "We are just seafarers. We are not trained for any war."

What is life like on board?

Long, monotonous and very hot (daytime temperatures are usually above 40°C in July). While the crews work to ensure their ships remain seaworthy, and films and ping-pong serve as distractions, staving off boredom and depression is a struggle. "We do our best to keep [up] morale," Abhijit Chopra, the captain of a tanker that had been stuck for more than 120 days, told Bloomberg. "But there is definitely a sense of strain and uncertainty." To entertain themselves and add some diversity to onboard meals, some crews are catching and cooking fish. Calls home are a boon,

Has there been any formal evacuation attempt?

A short-lived one. While a ceasefire was in effect in late June, the IMO began ushering ships through the strait's southern and northern corridors – avoiding the central lanes where Iran had laid mines. Some 115 ships and 2,500 sailors made it out, but the US-backed initiative was scrapped within days after Iran attacked a tanker that was not taking part in the evacuation off Oman's coast. Some sailors have taken matters into their own hands. Stuck at an Iranian port, Santosh Kumar borrowed nearly \$7,000 to pay an agent to drive him some 600 miles to Armenia, where he boarded a flight to Dubai and then on to his native India. "My family just wanted me home alive," he said. But such escapes have become increasingly difficult: some Gulf Arab states have restricted short-term shore passes for sailors over security concerns. Many merchant sailors are now wondering if the profession has become too dangerous, because the Iran war is only the latest crisis to hit the shipping industry.

A hidden workforce

Seafarers move 90% of global trade (\$16.5trn worth of goods annually), yet they are largely invisible to the public. There are an estimated 2.6 million seafarers currently serving aboard 85,000 merchant vessels worldwide, according to the Seafarer Workforce Report 2026, published by the shipping association Bimco and the International Chamber of Shipping. More than half of all merchant mariners are provided by the "big five": the Philippines, India, China, the Russian Federation and Indonesia; Poland, Romania and Ukraine are also important "supplier" nations. About a million are officers, and 1.5 million are ratings.

As ships have got bigger, and docks more automated, the number of sailors required per tonne of cargo has reduced drastically. Pay has become globalised, with most packages for able seamen around \$1,200-\$1,500 per month (the International Transport Workers' Federation minimum basic wage is \$690 per month). Around 24,500 UK merchant mariners were at sea in 2025; a collapse from the 1970s, when there were nearly 90,000 British sailors. This was driven by British-owned vessels shifting to foreign registries (known as "flagging out") and the rise of recruitment from Asia and eastern Europe.

What have been the other crises?

Mariners were stranded at sea during the pandemic, and drone attacks on vessels in the Black Sea have become routine since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Iran's Houthi allies in Yemen – who attacked more than 100 vessels during the war in Gaza – last month declared an embargo of Saudi Arabian shipping in the Red Sea, putting more commercial vessels in the line of fire. Merchant seamen seem increasingly wary of going to sea: companies have struggled to secure replacement crews to relieve sailors in the Gulf whose contracts have expired, despite offering substantial bonuses. The war, said Arsenio Dominguez, IMO's secretary-general, has heightened the feeling among seafarers that they are "invisible, that they are not valued."

Hang on to your right not to have to vote

Daniel Finkelstein

The Times

The turnout in the last UK election was under 60%; in Australia's last election it was 90%. So should we follow Australia's example and make voting compulsory, imposing a £10 fine on those who fail to vote? Some MPs and think-tanks are pushing our new PM to do so, says Daniel Finkelstein. If everyone had to participate in elections, they argue, it would make the outcome more democratic and raise trust in politics. And doubtless it would receive strong public support: people love banning stuff or making it compulsory. But it's actually an appalling idea. The new batch of press-ganged voters would be some of the country's least interested, least well-informed citizens: to win them over, politicians would be incentivised to offer all sorts of irresponsible spending promises. And forcing such people to vote, as ample studies show, does nothing to increase levels of engagement or trust in politics. It just makes people more resentful. Bad enough if voters choose unwise policies in a free election; far worse to bring about that outcome by obliging people "to do something they don't want to do".

How to bring our high streets back to life

Polly Mackenzie

Financial Times

Empty shops; boarded-up banks. That's what you see today when you walk down an English high street, says Polly Mackenzie, and if we are to reverse that decline we need to do something far more radical than tinkering with business rates. Let's start by recognising that high streets have traditionally fulfilled two separate, interlocking functions: they're retail hubs, but just as importantly, social hubs. "Footfall for goods subsidised the public realm – the benches, the safety in numbers, the reason to walk somewhere, to exchange news." The retail function is now being killed off by online shopping; but the social function doesn't have to die. It just needs a new source of footfall: housing, municipal services and college campuses can all be encouraged to move into the town centre to replace the ailing shops. That can only be done, however, if owners of empty shops are forced "to bring buildings back into use or surrender them". You can't rely on councils to do that: though they have powers to forcibly buy land for regeneration purposes, they rarely have "the capacity or confidence" to use those powers. No, what we need is "a state-backed capital vehicle – a National Trust for the high street" – to help drive the process. It's the only way to bring our town centres back to life.

Only connect? In this country it's not so easy

Chris Blackhurst

The Independent

The UK, we're always being told, is a leading digital economy, says Chris Blackhurst. Really? Anyone trying to get reliable Wi-Fi on a train, or who lives in one of the numerous areas blighted by patchy mobile reception, would beg to disagree. The MP and former soldier Tom Tugendhat recently complained of getting a worse signal in Dulwich than he got in Kabul a decade ago. In fact, the UK has a lower level of mobile coverage than any other G7 economy or EU member. And that's mainly down to our "ponderous" planning laws, which throw endless delays and obstacles in the way of network providers as they seek to upgrade their infrastructure. Right now, VodafoneThree has 80 mobile network sites across London off air because it's unable to find replacement buildings to host mobile masts that have been displaced by urban redevelopment projects. And "Virgin Media 02 has had 13 cracks at erecting a new mast in Paddington since 2018". It's all very well for politicians to bang on about the UK's embrace of AI and tech. But let's start with fixing the basics.

Data centres are drinking up our water

Melanie McDonagh

The Daily Telegraph

In this summer of parched parks, drought-stricken farmland and hosepipe bans, a key question is going unanswered: why are we "embracing – make that enforcing – a technology that could use nearly half the country's water"? I'm talking about AI, says Melanie McDonagh. The data processing centres on which the AI revolution relies guzzle vast quantities of water to keep computers cool and to generate electricity. And we've already set up some 564 of them. It's reported that the large-scale ones use up enough water to meet the needs of some 10,000 people. We don't have the exact figures, though, because unlike in the EU, our data centres aren't obliged to share their water-use figures. The Labour Government likes to bang on about "sustainability", yet ignores it when it comes to data centres. In Buckinghamshire and Epping Forest, ministers recently overruled council objections in a push for new sites to be built. It's time to acknowledge the environmental costs of AI and start treating it as a "rival for our most precious resource".

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

Italian holidaymakers who complained about the sound of cowbells in an Alpine village north of Bergamo got short shrift from the local mayor. Piera Cristina Villa and her husband described the bells as "noise pollution", on Facebook and in a letter. In a mocking response on social media, Michele Villarboito said that he had asked the cows to "sign a gagging order", but that they had "responded with a very uncooperative moo".



Police in New Jersey are disguising themselves as shrubs, the better to catch drivers using their mobile phones at the wheel. On social media, the department posted a picture of an officer dressed in camouflage and holding binoculars. "Did you spot our 'shrub' today? If you had your head buried in your phone, probably not," read the caption. Police say the operation snared 74 drivers in one day last week.

The head of a startup in California has insisted that his seven-foot-tall chainsaw-wielding centaur-bot is here to help, after various memes (pictured) of the demonic creation went viral online. Beau G., of the firm Satyress, says that the "humanoid" robot will be a "futuristic helper for all mankind" – able to assist foresters and to operate in hazardous environments like wildfires. Known as Threehalves, owing to its "half-human, half-goat and half-horse" appearance, the robot is still in the prototype stage, but the



company insists that it is serious about the project. It has reassured the public that Threehalves can be deactivated, by shooting it with a gun.

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Trump's nuclear deal: a disaster for the Middle East?

Well, is it on or is it off? No one's quite sure, said [Al Jazeera \(Doha\)](#). Two weeks ago, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed a multibillion-dollar deal allowing US companies to build and operate nuclear power plants on Saudi soil over the next 30 years. But a day later, President Trump added a new condition, via social media: Saudi Arabia must fall in line with the UAE and other Arab nations that have signed the Abraham Accords, and recognise the state of Israel. And that may prove a deal breaker, said David Frum in [The Atlantic](#).

Riyadh had been working towards this landmark pact for almost two decades. Thanks to the savvy of its de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), who ensured the private equity firm of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, would get its share of the billion-dollar nuclear licensing deals at stake, he almost got it over the line. But now it must surely be in doubt, said Mohamad Elmasry on [Middle East Eye](#). Riyadh has vowed it won't normalise relations until Israel guarantees Palestinian statehood. And MbS has reportedly told US officials that hostility towards Israel is so great among Saudis in the wake of Israel's devastating war in Gaza, that to sign a normalisation treaty would probably get him assassinated.

It's obvious why the Saudis still badly want this nuclear deal, said Joseph Cirincione on [MS Now \(New York\)](#). It's not, as they claim, to diversify their energy profile: that makes no sense for a nation sitting on an ocean of oil and blessed with the ideal wind and solar conditions for generating renewable energy – a far cheaper option. No, the real reason is to gain atomic weapons to protect itself against its main foe: Iran. MbS has made no secret of his desire to build a bomb, and the deal would be a concrete step in that direction. Despite Trump's claims to the contrary, it appears to permit nuclear enrichment on Saudi soil, thus enabling Riyadh to follow the likes of India, Israel and Pakistan in covertly enriching uranium to weapons-grade levels.



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman: savvy political operator

Who knows what'll happen if this "reckless" deal goes ahead, said Mitchell Plitnick on [Mondoweiss \(New York\)](#). The "gold standard" nuclear-power pact that the US signed with the United Arab Emirates in 2009 required the UAE to forego the ability to enrich uranium, and obliged it to submit to International Atomic Energy Agency inspections: this Saudi deal has no such restrictions. Which is why it would inevitably trigger a Middle East arms race, said Azriel Bermant in [Foreign Policy](#). If the deal proceeds, Iran would openly seek its own nuclear deterrent,

something it has so far officially forsworn. "It beggars belief that the US went to war against Iran to prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapon yet now acts in a way that is an open invitation for Tehran to weaponise." And in a way that would also pour "proliferation kerosene" on Turkey and Egypt's "smoldering nuclear ambitions", said Matthew Kroenig and Henry Sokolski in [The Wall Street Journal](#). Trump's deal invites disaster.

Actually, the US is doing the right thing, said the [Washington Examiner](#). The hard truth is that the "era of non-proliferation is coming to an end": Pakistan and North Korea are both testing nuclear weapons. Given that sobering reality, better the US offer "a guiding hand" to the Saudis and oversee their nuclear agenda than let China or Russia fill the void. Good or bad, the deal matters a lot to the US president, said Sharon Squassoni in [The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists \(Chicago\)](#), so rumours of its death "are premature". After all, it's not some "spur-of-the-moment fantasy" cooked up by Trump. The same deal was also being considered under Joe Biden, and then too enrichment was a quid pro quo for recognising Israel. The Saudis won't do so, of course, given recent history, but they won't have to. Although Congress can disapprove the deal once it's submitted, the present Congress – due to adjourn on 18 December – is much less likely to do so than any freshly elected one. So the Saudis can "call Trump's bluff by simply sitting back" and waiting for him to succumb to the pressure of the December deadline.

INDIA

Today we have naming of body parts

[Hindustan Times \(New Delhi\)](#)

Historically, India has shown huge "reluctance to talk about sex", says Namita Bhandare. Mercifully, that looks set to change: the Indian government, in a "remarkable and welcome" U-turn, has finally agreed to roll out comprehensive sex education classes in schools. Now all that is required is the supreme court's approval. But what a long and torturous road it has taken to get here. Since the last attempt to introduce a sex ed curriculum in 2007, the country has been held back by "two decades of moral panic and dithering": with politicians, not least from Narendra Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, insisting it goes against Indian culture and would corrupt the minds of the young. Really? "Where do these custodians think the *Kama Sutra* originated?" Silence about sex "has never protected young people". And to counter the toxic content found online, robust classes and frank conversations about safety and consent are needed more than ever. How badly India needs to create an "enabling environment where body parts can be named without shame". It's not fanciful to imagine that this small step on sex ed could help usher in a more "respectful, egalitarian society".

THE EU

A pathetic failure to stand up to Moscow

[EU Observer \(Brussels\)](#)

The EU has just set a highly "dangerous precedent", says Nezir Sinani. In a myopic move to gain unanimous approval for its 21st round of sanctions against Russia, the bloc has granted Greece a crucial exemption: EU ships will still be allowed to transport Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG), if contracts for doing this were signed before Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It's a loophole created to placate Greece, and in particular Dynagas, the Greek shipping firm owned by George Prokopiou. And it's a travesty. Dynagas's five Arc7 vessels, specially designed for Arctic conditions, play a crucial role in bringing LNG from Russia's largest export terminal, Yamal LNG in Siberia, to non-EU markets. Without these ships, Russia would be in a tight spot. Yet instead of exploiting this "pressure point", the EU has "negotiated around it". The signal this sends to Moscow – that EU countries such as Greece, whose ships have transported €248bn worth of Russian fossil fuels since 2022, will fight for their own interests if big money is involved – is "precisely the wrong signal". To make a dent in Russia's war coffers and to help Ukraine, this ridiculous loophole must be closed.

What the scientists are saying...

Early sugar linked to dementia

Eating very little sugar in early infancy may help protect the brain decades later, a study has found. Researchers looked at data on people born towards the end of the period when wartime rationing was in place, and access to sugar was very limited, and compared their outcomes with those of people born after sugar rationing was lifted in 1953. At that point, sugar consumption surged – from an estimated 41g a day, on average, to 80g. They found that those who had spent from conception to the age of one during sugar rationing were 21% less likely to have been diagnosed with dementia in later life than those born after rationing was lifted; and that those who had lived with rationing until the age of two had a 23% reduced risk. The disease also tended to develop later in the sugar-rationed group, by 2.6 years on average. The study – based on almost 65,000 people enrolled in the UK Biobank project – had some limitations, however, the biggest of which was that the researchers did not establish how much sugar any of the participants had actually eaten.

Go swimming to ease back pain

People with persistent lower back pain are often tempted to reach for the painkillers – but going swimming might be a better solution, a study has found. A team at Macquarie University in Australia recruited 76 adults who'd had back trouble for at least three months and divided them into two groups. One was given an eight-week, individualised swimming programme and free access to a pool, along with four remote sessions with a physiotherapist, who, among other things, assured them that exercise can help address back pain. Those in the control group had two calls with the physio, and were otherwise asked



Children enjoying a rare treat in Kent in 1941

to carry on as normal. After two months, the swimmers – who'd been advised to build up to three 30-45 minute sessions a week – reported being in less pain, and their disability scores (based on things such as how easy they found it to get up from a chair) had halved, on average. Overall, their improvements were found to be 30% greater than those of the control group.

The trade-offs of going organic

If animal welfare is your priority, you should choose organic eggs, even over standard free-range ones; but when it comes to protecting the environment, the picture is less clear. For a new study, a team at the University of Oxford used data from UK farms in 2009/10 to compare four systems of eggs production: caged hens; barn hens, which are uncaged but live indoors; free-range hens, which have access to the outside; and free-range hens that count as organic. They concluded that,

by some metrics, the last had the worst environmental impact. Being free-range and in lower density flocks, they require more land to live on; they eat more than caged and barn hens, because they move more, and spend more time out in the cold; and their organic feed requires more land to grow. They are also less productive than caged hens, so egg for egg, they generate higher carbon emissions; and living largely outside, their waste is more likely to end up as runoff. The team calculated that switching all egg production in Britain to an organic free-range model could increase carbon emissions by 60%, and almost double the amount of land used to produce them. The researchers did not look at the overall impact on biodiversity, and they stressed that they were not advocating the use of caged systems – but simply trying to show where the trade-offs between animal welfare and environmental impact fall, in the hopes that it leads to improvements in the ways the flocks are managed.

New treatment for MND

Currently, there is available on the NHS only one drug treatment for motor neurone disease – in which the specialist nerve cells (motor neurons) that send signals from the brain and spinal cord to the muscles degenerate, leading to muscle weakness and eventually paralysis. This drug can slow the progress of the disease, but it is not effective on everyone. Now, however, clinical trials of a promising alternative are beginning. Developed by scientists at UCL, TRCN-1023 boosts production of a protein, UNC13A, that helps brain cells communicate, and which is lacking in 97% of MND patients. It is also not a cure, but its developers hope it could make a “meaningful difference” to almost all those with the disease.

The linguistic golden age, millennia ago

More than 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today – and that, according to a new study, is just a small fraction of the number that once existed. Harvard scientists used data on 171 modern hunter-gatherer societies with their own languages, and estimates for early human populations, to gauge how many languages were likely spoken 12,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. They came up with a figure of 4,500 to 6,200 – rather fewer than there are now. But as the population then grew, the number of languages will have done so too – to a point, one to three millennia ago, when there were perhaps as many as 75,000.

This linguistic “golden age” – which coincided with the era in which the story of the Tower of Babel was written down – was followed by a period of rapid decline, driven by factors including the expansion of major empires in antiquity and more recent European colonialism. And the reductions continue, says the report in the journal *Science*: about half of the languages spoken today are endangered and at least four die out each year.



Bruegel's Tower of Babel (c.1563)

A “life-changer” for MS

A “life-changing” drug for people with multiple sclerosis has become available on the NHS in England. Fampridine was already prescribed in other parts of the UK, but had been ruled too expensive by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. However, its patent has now expired, paving the way for cheaper, generic versions. In MS, the immune system attacks the fatty layer that protects nerve fibres, disrupting the signals along the nerves. Fampridine is a “signal booster” – it helps these messages get through. In trials, the twice-daily pill improved the walking speed in up to 43% of patients; it also helped people walk for longer. About 5,000 of the 120,000 multiple sclerosis patients in England will be eligible for it in the first year, and those it benefits will be able to take it indefinitely. The hope is that it will allow them to maintain their independence for longer.

Pick of the week's *Gossip*

Oprah Winfrey is one of a handful of celebrities with a first name so distinctive, they can go by it alone. And yet it turns out that Oprah is not her name – something she only discovered aged 20. “On my birth certificate,” she explained, “it’s ‘Orpah’ – it’s in the Bible ... but then people started calling me ‘Oprah’. And once they started with Oprah, that was it.” She also revealed that, at 14, she had such a crush on **Paul McCartney**, she used to will him to think about her. When she met him years later, she asked him if, in the 1960s, she had ever popped into his head. “Every day, babe,” he said. “Every day.”



Neil Patrick Harris has hosted numerous award ceremonies – and the Oscars is the most “thankless”. It may be the pinnacle of achievement, the actor told *The Times*, but it’s also the end of the season. So most nominees have, by then, made “an entirely different movie, in fact they’re probably filming a third. And they all pretty much know who’s going to win everything, because there have been the Globes, the Independent Spirit, the Producers Guild etc. – and they’re just sitting there thinking, ‘When will this night when we can’t eat end?’”

Milliner **Philip Treacy** has long been associated with fashion’s avant-garde. But from time to time, he has had to give his celebrity clients a reality check. **Lady Gaga**, for instance, who famously wore a gown made from raw beef to an event in 2010, once explained to him that she liked being eccentric. “I told her, ‘It’s easy to be eccentric with six bodyguards in a blacked-out van. It’s a different thing on the bus.’”

Andy Burnham: a PM who enjoys politics

Andy Burnham promised to “bring back hope”, and with one segment of the population, he has succeeded, said Andrew Rawnsley in *The Observer*. “The hearts of Labour MPs are fluttering”, thanks to polls showing that, after months trailing Reform UK, Labour is now in the lead. To that good news, they can add the victory of Labour’s Bev Craig in the mayoral by-election in Greater Manchester, in which the party won back areas that had fallen to the Greens and Reform. Of course, new PMs often enjoy a honeymoon period, and the “Burnham bounce” also owes something to luck: the PM arrived at No. 10 just as the wheels were wobbling on the bandwagons of Nigel Farage and the Greens’ Zack Polanski.



The first Cabinet meeting last month

But it is also the case, said Rachel Sylvester in the same paper, that we are now being led by a politician who – after 30 years in the game – is good at politics. Having arrived with a ten-day plan and a 100-day plan, he started off with an attention-grabbing reshuffle and a slew of cost-of-living announcements that had echoes of Tony Blair’s “eye-catching initiatives with which I personally can be associated”. Hefty announcements followed. His school reforms came with pre-prepared endorsements from a dozen business leaders, to make them harder to challenge. This was straight out of the Alastair

Campbell playbook: in the Blair era, Campbell used to boast about the “quote sluts” he’d recruited to back each new initiative. When it came to social care, Burnham invited Kemi Badenoch and Ed Davey to take part in talks – and so reopened the big tent. To further signal that Labour is under new management, said John Oxley on *UnHerd*, the PM restored the whip to Diane Abbott, an MP who is almost a “lodestar” for the Labour Left.

Burnham seems to be enjoying himself, said Nesrine Malik in *The Guardian* – which is refreshing. A natural communicator, he knows that you can’t expect the electorate to come to you: you have to woo them, and on a range of platforms. But if he is to bring about the change many Labour MPs and voters want, he can’t just make airy statements about rolling back neo-liberalism: he must slay it. Yet, so far, he has resisted new taxes for the rich; he seems minded to retain Labour’s “punitive immigration regime”; he is allowing the US to use UK bases to strike Iran; and has said he’ll be “pragmatic” on North Sea oil. Meanwhile, said Oliver Wright in *The Times*, his Chancellor, John Healey, is busy telling ministers that there will be no new money to pay for the policy blitz – setting the stage for strife there too. Burnham has got off to a good start, but the real challenges are yet to come.

Education: time for a cultural shift?

Is Britain ready to accept the idea that a degree is not “the only personal determinant of ambition and success”? I admit that I felt rather panicky when one of my children suggested that they might skip university, said Emma Brockes in *The Guardian*, but it’s clear that a “culture shift” is under way – and Andy Burnham’s promise to put technical qualifications on a par with academic ones is in line with this trend. It’s a laudable goal, said Alice Thomson in *The Times*. The reality is that many secondary school pupils are disengaged; around a quarter are persistently absent. The number of 16- to 24-year-olds classed as not in education, employment or training (Neets) now exceeds a million. Offering those pupils who are of a more practical disposition clearer routes into careers such as catering, engineering, farming or care work – essential jobs that won’t all be replaced by AI – makes eminent sense.

It’s true that our current education system doesn’t offer enough help to those with vocational talents, said Iain Mansfield in *The Spectator*. It funnels too many young people into “debt-trap degrees” of little worth. But if Burnham’s planned reforms are to work, they’ll need to be both well-designed and well-funded. One option is to expand University Technical Colleges. Designed as specialist schools for

14- to 19-year-olds, UTCs combine academic study with employer and university partnerships, and they outperform mainstream schools at getting young people into jobs and training.

I’m all for expanding vocational training in specialist and further-education colleges, said Daisy Christodoulou on *UnHerd*. But I’m less keen on the idea of comprehensive schools having to offer more technical options to pupils aged 14 and over. Recent history shows this doesn’t work. Between 2004 and 2010, the number of vocational qualifications taken in schools in England shot up from 15,000 a year to 575,000 a year, but they were of generally poor quality. Schools tended to choose courses that “could be taught to large mixed-ability groups in a classroom with limited specialist equipment: courses like the ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness and the OCR National First Certificate in ICT”. Yes, let’s have “parity of esteem” between academic and vocational qualifications. But the way to achieve that is to help schools and technical colleges fulfil their primary purposes. In the case of schools, that’s enabling pupils to get GCSEs in “foundational subjects” – English, maths, science, history and geography – that provide the basis for more advanced academic and vocational study. We diminish those subjects “at our peril”.

Plagiarism: the bitter row at Cambridge

When Jason Arday became the youngest black professor in Cambridge's history in 2023, he was "lionised by the academic world" and became a "poster boy for the university's diversity drive", said Gordon Rayner in *The Daily Telegraph*. Then only 37, he had defied "almost impossible odds" to get there. Raised on a council estate in south London, he was diagnosed with autism at the age of three. He couldn't speak until he was 11, and did not read or write until 18. Yet he'd managed to obtain a bachelor's degree, followed by a PhD, and had gone on to forge a



Jason Arday in 2024

remarkable career in academia. Now, though, the sociology professor is "the subject of a bitter row over plagiarism that has pitted his peers against each other". His critics note that his PhD thesis contains passages that are strikingly similar to those in other academic papers. His defenders say that these were innocent errors, resulting from a lack of formal supervision when he was doing his PhD, and insufficient support for his complex learning disabilities. They say he cited the sources in question in his bibliography, but failed to do so within the text proper.

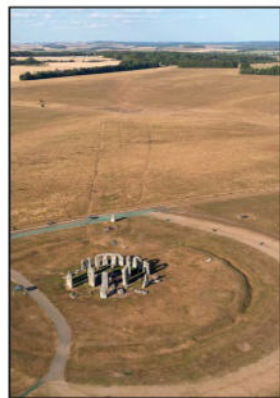
Concerns about Arday's work have circulated in academic circles for several years, said Jennifer Schuessler and Alexandra Alter in *The New York Times*. But they "exploded into

public view" last month, when Nathan Cofnas, a self-defined "race realist" who was sacked from Cambridge in 2024, published a lengthy blogpost about them. As journalists dug deeper, said Guy Adams in the *Daily Mail*, other aspects of Arday's "Hollywood-style life story" were also called into question. For instance, doubts were cast about his claim to have raised £5.5m for charity, including by running an astonishing 600 miles in six days. He has since said it was actually 12 days, and that the £5.5m was a collective effort.

"Academic integrity matters," said Daniella Maison in *The Independent*. But Arday was officially cleared of plagiarism some years ago. That he is still being pursued over his PhD, and other achievements that are not even related to his job, suggest that legitimate scrutiny has shifted into something more "punitive". Yet leading academics told this paper that the scrutiny was "fair" for a professor at Cambridge, said Lanre Bakare in *The Guardian*. This is a fraught business, and the stakes are high for all concerned. The university – which appointed Arday at a time when its own track record on race was being scrutinised in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement – is facing questions about its judgement. As for Arday, he could lose his reputation, and his career.

Fires and drought: a blazing summer

"The 'scorcher' is no more," said Anoosh Chakelian in *The New Statesman*. Gone are the jolly tabloid celebrations of hot weather – consigned to the past with the annual "silly-season stories about feral seagulls". Summer now brings apocalyptic headlines about raging wildfires and, in many areas, a succession of "gasping-hot" days. This week, fires were still smouldering in the Cairngorms and in Suffolk's coastal heathlands, said the *Financial Times*. Half of England and all of Wales were officially in drought, and in both, July was declared the driest on record. In France and Spain, the fires are mostly under control, but with more intense heat forecast, Europe's blazing summer is not over.



Stonehenge: parched last week

"The reality of the climate crisis is now inescapable," said Will Hutton in *The Observer*. Yet the cross-party consensus on the issue, launched by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, "has been shattered". Climate crisis denial has become a "populist cause". Kemi Badenoch has joined Nigel Farage in vowing to scrap the net-zero-by-2050 target, saying it is "a political fiction" and an act of economic "self-harm". Yet

the economy, society and the environment are "interdependent"; and the desire to protect nature "transcends Left and Right". This is true, said *The Daily Telegraph*, but what difference to the planet can we hope to make by pursuing this costly policy? The UK contributes less than 1% of global CO₂ emissions. In just seven years from 2013, China (on 33%) emitted more carbon than the UK had since 1750. We're staking our prosperity on the idea that if we provide "moral leadership", others will follow. But very few have.

Britain was the first big economy to halve its emissions since 1990, said *The Sunday Times*. But we're committed to going further and faster, and this rush is creating problems in itself. In June, the grid came close to blackouts because of the difficulty of predicting the supply from renewables. Of course, we must carry on with decarbonisation, but at a pace that is "steady" and "affordable". In the meantime, politicians must focus on adaptations, everywhere from housing to farming and flood defences, to help us withstand the hot dry summers and wet winters that we're likely to face whatever we do.

Wit & Wisdom

"At first you think you might die of boredom. Then you fear that you might not."
Shirley Apthorp reviewing Wagner's Siegfried and Götterdämmerung in the FT

"Freedom is not a gift that tarries long in the hands of cowards."
Theodore Roosevelt, quoted on North Dakota Monitor

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."
Alice Walker, quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle

"Nothing is so permanent as a temporary government programme."
Milton Friedman, quoted on Vermont Daily Chronicle

"Football is the most important of the unimportant things."
Jürgen Klopp, quoted in the Financial Times

"How pleasant is the day when we give up striving to be young – or slender."
William James, quoted on The Knowledge

"Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."
Viktor Frankl, quoted in The Jerusalem Post

"By the time a man realises that his father was right, he has a son who thinks he is wrong."
Charles Wadsworth, quoted on The Knowledge

Statistics of the week

Between 2005 and 2019, the number of words uttered each day by people in the US, Europe, Mexico and Australia fell by 28%, from 16,632, on average, to 11,900.

The Atlantic/Association for Psychological Science

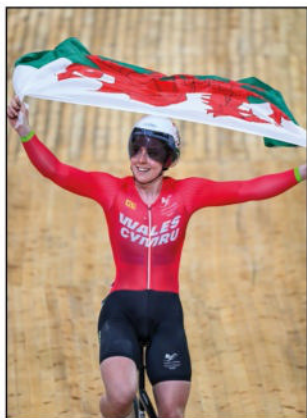
42% of 25-year-olds in the UK now live with their parents, up from 25% in the 1990s.

BBC/IFS

Glasgow 2026: is it time up for the Commonwealth Games?

It has become fashionable of late to declare that the Commonwealth Games no longer matter, and are living on borrowed time. Well, tell that to the good people of Glasgow, said Nik Simon in the Daily Mail. Over 11 days, Scotland's second city – which stepped in as host after the Australian state of Victoria pulled out in 2023 on grounds of cost – welcomed competitors from 74 nations, who (in the absence of an athletes' village) were accommodated in hotels across the area. In return, the 434,000 ticket-holders, plus 200,000 who watched for free at the city's fan sites, were treated to a spectacular show, said Matthew Henry on BBC Sport. Highlights of the Games, which ended on Sunday, included Scotland's Josh Kerr storming to victory in the mile race in front of a jubilant home crowd; Wales's Emma Finucane becoming the first sprint cyclist to win four track gold medals at the same Games; and Jamaica stunning Australia in one of the biggest upsets in netball's history. Overall, though, it was the Australians who dominated: spurred on by mining magnate Gina Rinehart's offer of cash bonuses for podium finishes, the country notched up 171 medals – dwarfing second-placed England's total of 110.

As host city, Glasgow did a sterling job, said Fiona Tomas in The Daily Telegraph: events were “impeccably run”, and the “army of cheery volunteers” kitted out in tartan couldn't be faulted. But it



Finucane: record-breaking

was hard to escape the feeling that this was the Commonwealth Games “on Ozempic”. As a result of “cost-cutting measures”, only ten sports were featured, down from 19 in Birmingham four years ago; and with the BBC losing out to TNT Sports on the right to broadcast the Games, TV audiences were miserly. Worse still, a “deluge of high-profile athletes” – from England's Keely Hodgkinson to Jamaica's men's 100m world champion Oblique Seville – prioritised other competitions and sat out the Games altogether. Attention now turns to the 2030 edition to be held in Ahmedabad, India. They'll mark the centenary of the Games, and that “might be a good one to end on”.

I'm not so sure about that, said Rick Broadbent in The Times. The Games may lack the glamour of the Olympics, say, or the World Cup, but that's the whole point of them. Where else could you watch Idi Amin's grandson complaining about ill-treatment in the boxing ring, or hear Archie Goodburn, a terminally ill swimmer, being roared on in the pool by a partisan crowd? And it's a competition, don't forget, that has long served athletes as a “stepping stone” to greater glories. Of course, it must be financially viable – Glasgow only managed to host the Games so cheaply because Victoria had to pay £190m in compensation, for pulling out. But assuming that “the price is right”, this is undoubtedly “an event worth saving”.

Football: Eddie Howe quits Newcastle

In 2021, the news that Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund had completed its takeover of Newcastle United was welcomed by thousands of fans celebrating outside St James' Park, said Martin Hardy in The Times. Back then, the talk from club officials was of “winning the Premier League in five years”, and of becoming one of the top clubs in the world by 2030. Newcastle, it seemed, were destined for a new era of success, with Eddie Howe appointed as manager to guide them to the promised land. Five years later, the mood among fans is altogether more downbeat. Last season, the Magpies finished a humble 12th in the Premier League; big stars such as Alexander Isak, Anthony Gordon and Sandro Tonali have been sold; plans for a new training ground and upgrades to the stadium haven't materialised. And now, they've lost their manager, too: last week, it was announced that Howe is leaving the club (a decision he'd made of his own



Howe: a “legend”

volition) and will be replaced by Matthias Jaissle, the 38-year-old coach of Al-Ahli, in the Saudi Pro League.

Be in no doubt, Howe leaves Newcastle as a “legend”, said Luke Edwards in The Daily Telegraph: he twice led the club into the Champions League, a competition for which they hadn't qualified for 20 years; and, last year, he guided his side to the Carabao Cup, so “ending the most infamous trophy drought in English football” and achieving something neither Bobby Robson nor Kevin Keegan could manage. The danger now is that the success he brought to St James' Park ends up being an anomaly, said Richard Jolly in The Independent. Results have taken a noticeable dip, rivals are strengthening, and the squad is short on star quality – all the more so if Bruno Guimarães's move to Arsenal goes ahead. Successful as Jaissle's career has been to date, the Newcastle job will pose a formidable challenge.

England cricket: Fleming and Root take charge

England finally appointed a new men's Test coach last week, with New Zealander Stephen Fleming taking over from his countryman Brendon McCullum. He won't be in place until the winter series against South Africa; but even so, he “feels like a good fit” for the job, said Mike Atherton in The Times. Granted, he hasn't previously coached in red-ball cricket; but his record on the franchise circuit is superb, and he knows the English cricketing landscape inside out, having played for three counties and coached in the Hundred. What's more, he is close to McCullum, who is staying on as England's white-ball coach: the pair have been in business together, and Fleming captained his compatriot in New Zealand's Test



Fleming: “feels like a good fit”

side. All being well, the two of them should “rub along well” together in their different roles.

“Fleming looks an excellent appointment,” said Chris Stocks in The i Paper – it's just a shame he can't take over until after England's home Tests against Pakistan are done and dusted. (Marcus Trescothick will take interim charge.) The decision to hand the captaincy to Joe Root, however, is less clear cut.

Root, 35, is a lovely guy, and one of England's greatest-ever players; but the results were dire towards the end of his previous five-year stint as captain, which ended in 2022, and the risk is that the batsman will feel burdened by the armband ahead of next summer's Ashes series, when England will need him at his best.

Sporting headlines

Football Celtic began their Scottish Premiership defence with a 1-0 win over Dundee. Hearts lost 2-1 at Aberdeen. Midfielder Jordan Henderson, 36, and striker Danny Welbeck, 35, have joined Chelsea, as the Blues look to add experience to their squad.

Golf Japan's Shiko Kuwaki won the Women's Open, beating Esther Henseleit in a dramatic playoff at Royal Lytham & St Annes.

Tennis Emma Raducanu will miss the US Open as she continues to recover from the stress fracture to her lower right leg that kept her out of Wimbledon.



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Pick of the week's correspondence

Crisis, what crisis?

To the Financial Times

It is puzzling to hear the declining rate of population growth in the next decades described by Jemima Kelly, along with journalists elsewhere, as a "crisis". This alleged crisis presumably refers to the projected demographics, whereby the ratio of working-age people (25 to 64) to every person over 65 will decrease.

I was born into a world in which people, on average, had more than three times the space that people have today. We worried about a population explosion. We would have regarded a population decline as a boon, not a crisis.

Oliver Corlett, Glasgow

Too broad a spectrum

To The Times

It is extraordinary that teenagers are claiming personal independence payments for conditions such as anxiety and ADHD. Disability has become a huge industry, with 18% of young people aged 16-24 officially recognised as disabled. About half of these are mental health conditions.

I am not convinced it is right to include lifetime conditions such as autism, ADHD or dyslexia as a disability. There will always be those at the very severe end, who do need help. But the grey area between the severely affected and the "neurotypical" is growing to unmanageable levels.

We are doing young people a disservice by labelling them disabled and offering them benefits, rather than helping them into work.

Dr Fiona Cornish, Cambridge

Lovell and Larkin's legacy

To The Guardian

Throughout my long life, Jodrell Bank Observatory has been a source of wonder and pride ("Jodrell Bank Observatory facing closure"). Sir Bernard Lovell's creation never ceases to inspire awe with its combination of cutting-edge space exploration and heroic engineering structure. A tour of its visitor centre with my grandchildren confirmed that this sense of awe is being passed on to future generations.

Yes, it would make another fine museum. But here in the

Exchange of the week

Apprenticeships: the reality

To The Guardian

The discussion on education, training and employment for young people seems to be devolving into the same apprenticeship or trade versus higher education debate, blaming young people, as usual, without focusing on the actual problem. My children are in the 16-24 age group, and the issue I've observed among them and their friends is that many young people would like to go down the apprenticeship or trades route, and there are plenty of courses in colleges, but there are vanishingly few opportunities available to be employed as apprentices to trades, or for those with basic college training.

An exceptional few get an apprenticeship and a few more lucky ones have a relative who will take them on. Unless this is fixed urgently, the problem will continue.

Pam Dunn, Leeds

To The Times

It was refreshing to hear the PM talk about "hard hat" careers and how we should encourage more young people into trade apprenticeships. What we need now is support for the people who will be hiring them. The vast majority of this sector consists of small- and medium-sized enterprises, many of them sole traders. Research from Screwfix shows that they want to take on apprentices, but each stage of the process is too complicated – from the paperwork, to hiring, to managing apprentice workload. Too often, this puts them off. Planned financial grants, welcome as they are, are a case in point.

Employer support up to £8,000 is split across different schemes, each with its own criteria. The result: 48% of tradespeople who took on an apprentice last year claimed no funding because the system was too complex. Funding should be seamless and incentivise taking on young people, not throwing up barriers. Direct HR support to them via colleges or providers should be funded, and approaches such as flexi-apprenticeships should be expanded. We must think like the time-pressed tradesperson and support them.

John Mewett, chief executive, Screwfix

North we have quite a few museums of our glorious industrial past. We have only one Jodrell Bank.

So I'm afraid it is over to my fellow English graduate Andy Burnham to reverse the decision of UK Research and Innovation, and to remind him of his poetic hero Philip Larkin's fear for the future of the UK: "Our children will not know it's a different country./ All we can hope to leave them now is money."

Dr Ken Smith, Macclesfield, Cheshire

This idea doesn't add up

To The Times

Your report "Toll of schooling 'straitjacket'" appears to fall into the common trap of inferring, from the rise in England's ranking in international league tables for maths and science between 2009 and 2022, that Michael Gove's reforms improved

educational standards. They did not: Pisa scores in England in 2009 and 2022 were respectively for maths 493 and 492; and for science 515 and 503. A more reasonable inference would be that Gove's reforms had no effect on achievement in these subjects.

John Britton, emeritus professor of epidemiology, Hovingham, Nottinghamshire

Doing time, not crime

To The Observer

Your editorial juxtaposes the rise in the number of criminals being held in prison with the fall in the reported number of crimes, but declines to draw any correlation, let alone suggest cause and effect between the two.

I spent 30 years catching criminals, often not long after their release from prison, and I would welcome more enlightened and effective approaches to sentencing.

I always thought Michael Howard's "prison works" was overly simplistic, and there is plenty of evidence that it clearly doesn't work.

But it is a fact, not an opinion, that criminals are not committing rapes, murders, robberies or burglaries while they are behind bars. Before we rush to release them, we need to be confident that we have effective measures in place, alongside tested methods to help those who want to lead happier and more useful lives.

Bob Denmark, former detective superintendent, Garstang, Lancashire

A high price to pay

To the FT

Your report on Mastercard's potential sale of Vocalink rightly raises questions about the ownership of critical UK payments infrastructure. It also points to a broader issue: why does one of the world's most innovative economies still rely so heavily on two US-owned card networks?

Every year, UK businesses pay billions in fees to these networks. The result is a system that quietly taxes the economy, limits choice and stifles competition.

If rising geopolitical tensions were ever to disrupt access to these networks, the consequences for UK businesses and the wider economy would be profound.

The optimal scenario is close collaboration between the US and Europe on all technology platforms, including payments. But that is not the geopolitical reality in which we find ourselves.

Francesco Simoneschi, CEO and co-founder TrueLayer, London



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Review of reviews: Books

Book of the week

These Wild English

by Nicola Wilding

Profile 303pp £20

The Week Bookshop £17.99

Nicola Wilding is a TV documentary maker “specialising in poverty and rural working-class communities”, said Fiona Sturges in *The Guardian*. Now, in her first book, she has turned her “documentarian’s gaze on her own flesh and blood”. *These Wild English* is mainly about her mother, Sandra, a care worker who, until her death in 2024, “endured poverty, upheaval and abusive partners, as well as a heart condition leading to two rounds of surgery”. Late in life, galvanised by the 2013 murder of Lee Rigby, Sandra “began watching videos on Facebook by a man named Tommy Robinson”, and was soon marching in support of the English Defence League. Eager to understand this turn to the far-right, Wilding (pictured) “digs into the roots of Sandra’s dissatisfaction, telling a story that spans three generations”, starting with a tough upbringing on a farm in Cumbria. The result is a “heartfelt and evocative memoir”, which blends an unforgettable portrait of Sandra – “a protagonist for the ages” – with an appraisal of how the white working class have been “pilloried and misunderstood”.



Wilding writes as if she were there through her mother’s entire life, “watching but never judging her”, said Jason Cowley in *The Times*. With “visceral candour”, she describes the “low-paid, insecure jobs”, the abusive partners, the diet of “junk food, cigarettes and alcohol”. Such is her “willingness to break all family confidences” that in one passage, she even describes her mother soiling herself in a bar while wearing white trousers. You do wonder what Sandra would have made of her “chaotic life” being exposed in this way. Yet it adds up to something both powerful and interesting: an “angry and

compelling” family drama, and a “lament for the lost idealism of a postwar social democratic future that never quite came to pass”.

Everyone should read this “terrific book”, but “especially those who readily dismiss people who display the St George’s flag or who voted Brexit”, said Elisa Segrave in *The Spectator*. It examines and explains the rage that underpins far-right extremism. Sandra was “one of hundreds of thousands” who have felt abandoned by the traditional parties and so “searched for a home and an identity elsewhere”, said Kenan Malik in *The Observer*. Many books have been written about “working-class alienation” – but this “raw, angry and elegiac” work “gets closer to the truth than much of what has been written on the issue”.

The Plunge

by Chris Ballard

Viking 320pp £22

The Week Bookshop £19.99

If you’ve ever congratulated yourself for “daring a New Year’s Day dip”, be prepared to feel smug “no longer”, said James McConnachie in *The Sunday Times*. In this “extraordinary book”, Chris Ballard, an American journalist, delves into the world of “ice swimmers” – who swim in “seriously cold water” for “seriously long distances”. Not surprisingly, it’s a subculture full of “macho types”, such as the “reliably shirtless British adventurer Ross Edgley”, but it also attracts more eccentric characters, whom Ballard calls the “woolly hat and cocoa brigade”. Ballard is a “pleasing” guide to this world, and is no mere bystander: he himself develops an ice-swimming habit, and even “gets selected to represent the US”.

The “holy grail” of ice swimming is the “Ice Mile”, which has to be swum in temperatures of 5°C or colder, said Bill Heavey in *The Wall Street Journal*. Ballard describes this as one of the most “dangerous athletic feats on the planet”, and notes that fewer than 1,000 people have ever completed it. He perhaps could have been more sceptical about the outlandish health claims made by some cold-water enthusiasts – but this is an enjoyable account, by a writer who “knows how to keep a story moving”.

Novel of the week

John of John

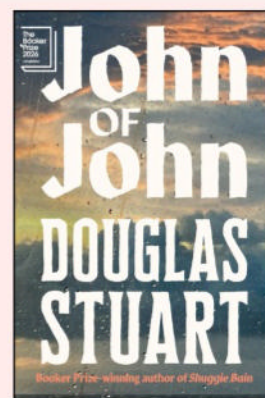
by Douglas Stuart

Picador 403pp £20

The Week Bookshop £17.99

Douglas Stuart’s two previous novels – the Booker Prize-winning *Shuggie Bain* (2020) and *Young Mungo* (2022) – were both set in Glasgow tenements, said Michael Arditti in *The Spectator*. For his third, Stuart has “moved north”, to the island of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. Cal, 22, “returns to his familycroft” on the island, after spending four years studying textiles in Edinburgh, in response to a call from his father, John, telling him that his grandmother is dying. Cal is gay, and comfortable with that fact; but his father, a deacon of the island’s Free Presbyterian Church, which adheres to an “extreme biblical morality”, is in denial about his own homosexual leanings. The relationship between the two – by turns loving and violent – is at the heart of this “beautifully observed” novel.

“This is a magnificent book of disarming intensity,” said Maria Albano in *The Daily Telegraph*. Stuart excels at “rendering the soul of a place” in all its variety: the “descriptions of pulling a lamb from the ewe in her labour are as confident as his mastery of weaving argot”. And his “character-building” is no less superb: all his portraits are “equally lifelike”. While *John of John* is an “unashamedly emotional novel”, full of “vivid, generous” prose, it is also, at times, very funny, said Johanna Thomas-Corr in *The Sunday Times*. A scene in which Cal climbs through a window clutching flowers “has the farcical quality of Shakespearean comedy”; it also features “one of the funniest and most memorable depictions of masturbation in fiction”. It’s already on the longlist for this year’s Booker Prize, and it’s “difficult to imagine” that it won’t be shortlisted.



Opera: Ariadne auf Naxos

Glyndebourne, Lewes (01273-815000). Until 29 August Running time: 3hrs 45mins (including dinner interval) ★★★★★

Christopher Nolan's film adaptation of *The Odyssey* promises "three hours of head-spinning storytelling", said Neil Fisher in *The Times*. But "when it comes to immersive Greek myth, nothing beats Richard Strauss in full surround sound in the final 15 minutes of *Ariadne auf Naxos*". Written in 1912, the opera tells the story of the eponymous Cretan princess who is abandoned by Theseus on a desert island with only nymphs for company, before falling in love with the god Bacchus. She had mistaken him for Death, but "that's not really important."

What matters is the moment shortly before the end when you can hear Strauss push the throttle and fire up the engines, and we bathe in the power of a soaring tenor, ecstatic soprano and coruscating orchestra. I have never heard this scene performed with such virtuosity as in Glyndebourne's "rapturous" new production. There are still a few tickets left; catch it if you can.

It's hard to imagine where you could find "more exciting singing" than that of David Butt Philip (as Bacchus) and Rachel Willis-Sørensen (Ariadne) in the latter stages of this "delight", agreed Richard Fairman in the *Financial Times*. The production does not see director Laurent Pelly at his most imaginative, and Massimo Troncanetti's "spartan designs are unappealing (Ariadne's desert island is an even more miserable lump of rock



"The singing is just superb and the music is a joy"

than the plot demands"). But the singing is just superb and the music is a joy. Conductor Robin Ticciati, and players from the London Philharmonic Orchestra, expertly capture both the score's Rococo wit and its rousing Wagnerian grandeur.

Ariadne auf Naxos is an opera of two parts, said Erica Jeal in *The Guardian*. Before we get to Naxos there's a long satirical prologue, set in Vienna, about the difficulties of putting on an opera. This first part (added four years after the opera was first performed), finds the director "at his witty best", and

it features a host of nicely judged comic performances. The second half is certainly well performed, but it is "less sparky and less insightful than the first"; the upshot is an evening that is "enjoyable" but ultimately "unmoving".

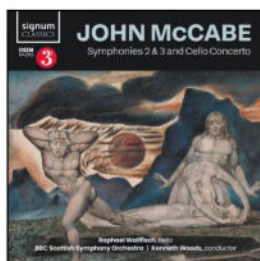
The week's other opening

Love's Labour's Lost Shakespeare's Globe, London SE1 (020-7401 9919). Until 13 September

Indiana Lown-Collins's flamenco-filled version of this tricky play features some "hefty innuendo and thrusting broad comedy". It's not a first-rate production, but it fills the Globe with a "flaming, foot-stamping fiesta"; a "joyous" summer show (FT).

Albums of the week: three new releases

John McCabe:
Symphonies
2 & 3 and
Cello Concerto
Signum
£12



John McCabe (1939-2015) belongs to that "very distinguished" group of English composers – Nicholas Maw, Gordon Crosse and Richard Rodney Bennett among them – who were rather overshadowed by Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle. This welcome collection of McCabe's major orchestral works includes first recordings of his *Symphony No. 3* and *Cello Concerto*, said Geraint Lewis in *Gramophone*, and with luck it will bring more attention to this "widely beloved and admired" musician.

McCabe was also a piano virtuoso, said Erica Jeal in *The Guardian* – famed for his interpretation of Haydn in particular. As a composer, he created an "edgy, lucid soundworld" and his writing, of "enormous colour and scope", undoubtedly deserves a wider audience. Whereas *Symphony No. 2* is "tense and edgy", and the concerto for cello (*Songline*) is restless and searching, *Symphony No. 3* is more lush, "densely weaving in nods to Haydn and Nielsen". All three are well served by Kenneth Woods and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra on this "vividly expressive" disc.

Yard Act: You're
Gonna Need
a Little Music
Island
£13



Given Leeds post-punk rockers Yard Act's deserved reputation for live performance, said Lisa Wright in *The Observer*, it's surprising that this terrific third album "is their first to be recorded with the band all in the same room". They built their own recording-studio space in Leeds to push back against "laptop" music, then travelled to LA to finish the record with producer Justin Meldal-Johnsen (Beck, Wolf Alice). The result is the sound of a band coalescing to "create something greater than the sum of its parts".

Yard Act's playful, "Gorillaz-esque" second album *Where's My Utopia?* (2024) felt like a reaction to the "quick-witted post-punk" storytelling that dominated their Mercury-nominated debut *The Overload* (2022), said Rishi Shah on NME. This third collection is a "thrilling distillation of what their previous two did best". There's "wonky piano" (*Tall Tales*) alongside "bulky garage-rock"; there's irresistibly euphoric choruses (the title track) and full-blown rap (*Thrill Of The Chase*). It's a heady mix: open your ears, sit back and enjoy.

Charli XCX:
Music,
Fashion, Film
Atlantic
£11



How do you follow up a career-making triumph like Charli XCX's "club-rat" 2024 album *Brat*? If you're Charli (aka 33-year-old English singer Charlotte Aitchison), the answer is with a pivot to indie-style guitars and a "meta masterpiece about the instability of identity", said Laura Snapes in *The Guardian*. This album is very different to *Brat*, but just as impressive: "gorgeously astute and disarmingly deep". On a series of short, snappy songs, Charli "remakes guitar music at intimate, pocket-sized scale – though with outsized hookiness". Standouts include *Rock Music*, *Camera* and *I'm Afraid*.

This is a "refreshingly non-careerist" turn, but not, I think, a wholly successful one, said Will Hodgkinson in *The Times*. Yes, it contains plenty of humour and self-awareness. But on this album, Aitchison seems to be more referencing indie rock than exploring it. With its short tracks – and unpoetic, almost diary-style lyrics – it feels less like "the latest album by the most dynamic British pop star" of the moment, and "more a curio put together for her own amusement and therapy".

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



Spider-Man: Brand New Day

2hrs 25mins (12A)

Tom Holland in the same old "Spideyworld"

★★★

"Someone give Tom Holland a holiday," said Kevin Maher in *The Times*. Not only did he give this summer's behemoth *The Odyssey* its "beating heart", the 30-year-old Londoner has also been tasked with rescuing the "ailing superhero genre". The latest – 38th! – instalment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe opens not with the usual montage of Avengers clips, but instead with images from Holland's hugely successful appearances as Spider-Man. After a series of expensive misfires for the most commercially successful film franchise of all time, the message is clear: "Marvel is now the house that Tom built." Holland's fourth outing in the role, *Brand New Day*, picks up where 2021's *No Way Home* left off, with mild-mannered Peter Parker having arranged for the world to forget that he ever existed. So we find him back at square one, living in a scuzzy New York apartment, "lost and broken" – not least because his sweetheart MJ (Holland's real-life wife Zendaya) and his best buddy Ned (Jacob Batalon) have been "cruelly memory-wiped out of his life".

Those opening 20 minutes are "the strongest of the film", said John Nugent in *Empire*. Holland is "brilliant" as the once puppyish Peter "bruised by grief and solitude". But what rescues the film is Zendaya's performance, said Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*. Playing a non-superhero, she is able to bring a grown-up acting presence to the fore to cut against the silliness. In other respects, it is the same old Spideyworld, with lots of swinging between skyscrapers and leading, as in all MCU films, to "apocalyptic but weirdly temporary destruction in the digitally confected big city". It makes for an "entertaining spectacle" – but we could have done with "a more radical reboot".



Ish

1hr 27mins (15)

Touching Luton-set drama in the mould of *The 400 Blows*

★★★★

A single act of violence punctures a "carefree summer" in debut-director Imran Perretta's "tenderly observed" coming-of-age drama set in Luton, said Tom Shone in *The Sunday Times*. Ish (Farhan Hasnat) is a doe-eyed 12-year-old from a Bengali family whose mother recently died. He and his Palestinian-British best mate – the bigger, more worldly Maram (Yahya Kitana) – while away their days "roaming woods, gaming and insulting one another". Yet there is "violence in the air even before the police stop-and-search that scoops up Maram then ejects him, humiliated, back onto a suburban street". Ish, meanwhile, "runs off and afterwards struggles with the guilt of having run". In the wake of this, their friendship starts slowly to "unravel".

Shot in 2024 against the backdrop of Gaza protests, and co-written by Irish playwright Enda Walsh, *Ish* is not just a drama "about racial profiling and the inescapability of politics", said Danny Leigh in the FT. It's also an examination of the "complex, freighted lives of children". Filmed in "lustrous black-and-white", in a 3:4 aspect, it fits within an "august tradition" of movies about childhood that includes such classics as *The 400 Blows* (1959) and *Pather Panchali* (1955) – and would make a "fascinating split screen" with *This Is England* (2006). It is a "remarkably beautiful film", said Jonathan Romney in *Sight and Sound*. But what really energises it is its cast of first-time actors – "the strutting older lads, Kitana's nervily characterful Maram", and most of all Hasnat's Ish, whose "aliveness" to the world's "joys and dangers" helps create a "vividly memorable evocation of childhood's end", and leaves you "wanting to follow Ish further through life".



Wham! Ten Days in China

1hr 30mins (12A)

An extraordinary moment in pop history

★★★★

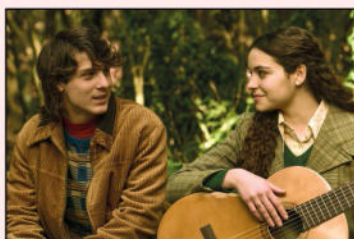
In 1985, Wham!'s manager Simon Napier-Bell came up with a "cunning plan", said Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*. To help George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley break America, without them having to embark on a lengthy tour, he'd send them to China, to become the first Western pop act to perform on the mainland. This, he calculated correctly, would create a blizzard of publicity that would propel the duo to fame stateside. After months of delicate negotiations, Napier-Bell confirmed concerts in Beijing and Guangzhou as part of a ten-day tour. Veteran director Lindsay Anderson was hired to make a fly-on-the-wall documentary about the trip, but Michael and Ridgeley didn't like him or his film, and it was shelved. Now his footage has been re-edited, and spliced with interviews with Ridgeley and others, to give a glimpse of a "strange and riveting moment in pop and political history".

"Everything you could possibly want in a rock doc" is here, said Kevin Maher in *The Times*. In places, it's "alarmingly" like *This Is Spinal Tap*: the two young stars are dragged to a reception at the British embassy where Ridgeley is asked "squirm inducing" questions about cricket; Anderson pontificates grandly about capitalism; and at Beijing's Workers' Stadium, party apparatchiks look horrified when Michael says their next song is called *Freedom*. It's "quite brilliant". The trip, we learn, had an unexpected legacy, said Phil de Semlyen on *Time Out*: the film includes interviews with some locals whose lives were transformed by two hours of "kitsch pop heaven". Wham! split less than a year later, but in this "surreal cultural collision, something genuinely meaningful happened".

Gomorrah: The Origins – riveting prequel to Saviano's hit mobster drama

The Mob saga *Gomorrah*, created by the investigative journalist Roberto Saviano and based on his reporting on the Neapolitan Mafia, has long been the ultimate "if you know, you know" TV drama, said Rebecca Nicholson in the *Financial Times*. First broadcast in Italy in 2014, the series went on to build a devoted international following. Now we have a prequel. *Gomorrah: The Origins* (Sky Atlantic) opens in 1977, and traces how a poor, floppy-haired teenager named Pietro Savastano (Luca Lubrano) grew up into "one of the most-feared Mob bosses in Naples".

Savastano's driving ambition is to escape the extreme poverty in which he and his single mother (Noemi Sales) are trapped, said Ed Power in *The Daily Telegraph*. To that end, he attaches



Lubrano: the early years of a mobster

himself to Angelo, a hip and ambitious older gangster who runs a gambling den on behalf of the local don in their lawless neighbourhood. Loosely inspired by the real events that led up to an "apocalyptic" gangland feud in the early 1980s, the series contains moments of "real tension", but it is also "great fun" and it positively "oozes ambience".

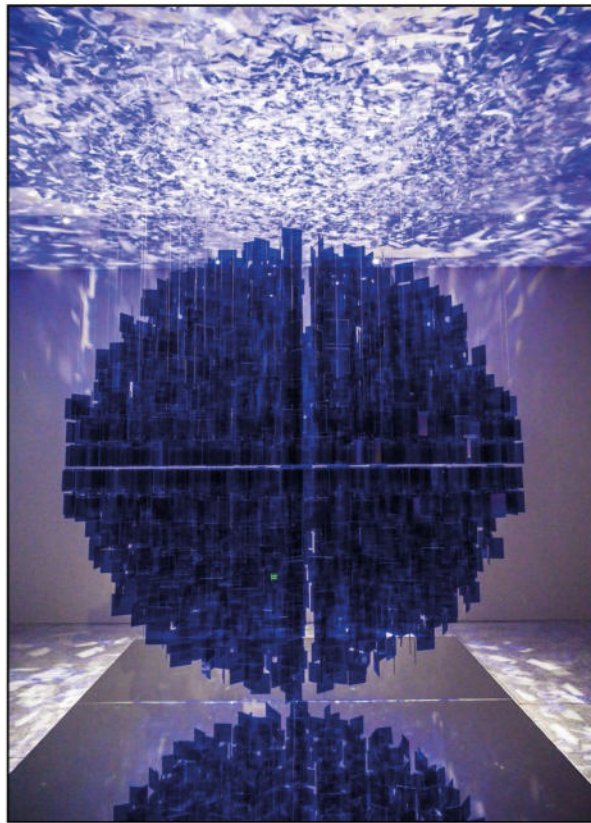
With youngsters as its protagonists, the series inevitably lacks "the heft" of other gangster stories, said Jack Seale in *The Guardian*, but while some of its "wonderfully rich Mob-drama set pieces are familiar", the youthfulness of its cast "lends it a freshness and tenderness that standard crime sagas lack". It's also extremely "stylish": these young men "might not be able to escape their fate, but they'll look fantastic trying".

Exhibition of the week **Julio Le Parc: Light. Colour. Action.**

Tate Modern, London SE1 (020-7887 8888, tate.org.uk). Until 3 May 2027

The Julio Le Parc retrospective at Tate Modern “plunges you into” 1960s Paris, and it’s “riotous good fun”, said Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian*. Le Parc was born in Argentina in 1928 and moved to France 30 years later, arriving in Paris as a refugee from his home country’s military dictatorship. There, he established a collective that sought to “subvert high culture with democratic play”, to fill the city’s – as he thought – dull museums “with noise and action”. He created sculptures out of random objects – “bicycle spokes, a fan belt, geometric cutouts, wobbly platters”. Often enough, the audience can participate, by pushing buttons that trigger Le Parc’s creations into activity – for he believed that looking at art should not be a passive experience. Some of his sculptures are reminiscent of cool 1960s abstract painting, but more entertaining: “as if Bridget Riley had got fed up composing her optically confounding art and decided to open a funfair”. Le Parc died, aged 97, just weeks before the opening of this fabulous exhibition, which is full of his “kinetic sculptures” – “miracles in light, creating impossible spatial illusions”. They use light, movement and mirrored surfaces to create shapes that “multiply then vanish before, or rather inside, your eyes”.

“Everything in this show is just waiting to spring into life,” said Laura Cumming in *The Observer*. Even Le Parc’s fairly



Blue Sphere (2013): a “miracle in light”

conventional early paintings are more sophisticated than they look. One 1959 composition initially “resembles nothing so much as a gingham tablecloth”, but fast reveals itself to be a dazzling optical illusion. But the “immersive installations” the artist made as a member of the “Grav” collective are far more interesting: 1962’s “awesome” *Continual Light Cylinder*, for instance, is a choreography of “prisms, mirrors, rotators” and lightbulbs that creates “a continuously changing aurora of mesmerising light in an enormous circle”. It’s all great until we reach the last room, which sadly descends into “kitsch” – “all airbrushed rainbows and prisms, like prog rock album covers from the 1970s”.

At its best, Le Parc’s work is touched “with futuristic grace”, said Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph* – while also “seeming retro, as evocative of a specific historical moment as, say, a miniskirt or a lava lamp”. One installation here creates “wispy, silvery reflections” from hanging metal squares; in another, constantly moving strands of white light are projected so as to resemble a close-up of “a gigantic clock face”. Le Parc’s art isn’t always so charming, and can at times feel “unsettling” and “aggressive”, but it’s rarely “slight”: his aim was never merely to “distract frazzled minds or dupe the eye”. Instead, he sought to create “a sense of poetry via mechanical means”. “This show is less fun-house, more laboratory of ideas.”

Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

Christo

at Gagosian

Restaging the monumental installations of the artist Christo (1935-2020) presents obvious challenges. Working with his wife Jeanne-Claude, Cristo became famous for wrapping landmarks such as the Reichstag and Paris’s Pont Neuf in fabric or plastic – and it’s improbable that any of these huge-scale, wonderfully madcap endeavours will ever be repeated. The closest approximation that we’re likely to get comes courtesy of this show at Gagosian, *Air*, which revives one of the couple’s earliest projects: an unrealised 1968 proposal to “wrap the air” in a Philadelphia museum. The work involves a vast sheet of polythene suspended from the



Wrapped Automobile-Volvo (1981)

ceiling and held in place by rope. It’s a simple but ingenious sculptural conceit, the sagging synthetic material dominating even this gargantuan exhibition space, sometimes hanging so low that the visitor is forced to crouch. It’s accompanied by a fascinating array of photographs and archival material, making for a rare delight of a show. Prices on request.

20 Grosvenor Hill, London W1 (020-7495 1500). Until 21 August

Lenin vs. the Cossack rebel

“Since 2013, the plinth at the bottom of Taras Shevchenko Boulevard in Kyiv has been eerily empty,” says Luke Harding in *The Guardian*. That year, during Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution, a crowd toppled and smashed a sculpture of Lenin that had sat there. In June,



Volodymyr Zelensky proposed putting a new figure on the plinth: Ivan Mazepa, a Cossack leader who died in 1709. The idea has triggered “a lively debate” about statues and national identity. Mazepa (above) was the Cossack hetman, or head, who in 1708 abandoned the Russian emperor Peter the Great, and ceded Ukraine to the invading Swedish army led by King Charles XII. This act ended in defeat and exile for Mazepa, and made him a Russian hate-figure; the Orthodox Church pronounced an anathema on him, and the Bolsheviks damned Ukrainian nationalists as “Mazepists”. Now he has been rehabilitated, as one admirer put it, as “the architect of European Ukraine”. Designs for the statue are being submitted.

The week's guide to what's worth seeing

Showing now

Now in its final few weeks, **David Hockney: A Year in Normandie and Some Other Thoughts about Painting** brings together works created by the late artist in Normandy during lockdown. "Spellbinding" (Daily Telegraph). Free, until 23 August, Serpentine North, London W2 (serpentinegalleries.org).

Having made its debut at the National Portrait Gallery in London, **Catherine Opie: To Be Seen** has opened in Edinburgh. Opie's photographs of America's subcultures are "gripping, spiky and affecting" (Times). Until 1 November, Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh (nationalgalleries.org).

Book now

James Graham's new play **The Standard of Living** tells the story of John Maynard Keynes. Rory Kinnear is the economist; ballerina Natalia Osipova plays his wife. "Keynes Tickets" are available for under-30s at £25. 21 September-12 December, Theatre Royal Haymarket, London SW1 (standardoflivingplay.com).

The former US president will be in three UK cities for **An Evening with President Barack Obama**. He will discuss what comes next for the US, and for all of us. 13-15 October, Belfast, Glasgow and Manchester (seatunique.com).

Dua Lipa, who hosts her own well-regarded literary podcast, the *Service95 Book Club*, is curating the **London Literature Festival** as



A scene from A Year in Normandie (2020/21)

part of the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary year. Her starry line-up includes Zadie Smith, Patti Smith, Malorie Blackman, Max Porter and Michael Lewis: 20 October-1 November (southbankcentre.co.uk).

The curmudgeonly, lyrical and very funny Irish comedian **Dylan Moran** is touring the country this autumn. From 28 October, Taliesin Arts Centre, Swansea, until 4 December, Shepherd's Bush Empire, London W12 (dylanmoran.com).

Just out in paperback

Among Friends by Hal Ebbott (Picador £9.99). Ebbott's "assured, acutely perceptive and beautifully written debut novel" follows a group of friends who meet for a celebratory weekend in Upstate New York, only for things to go disastrously wrong (FT).



Best books... Adam Kay

The doctor turned writer is a National Year of Reading ambassador, supporting the Go All In campaign to help people discover the joy of reading (goallin.org.uk). His latest book, A Particularly Nasty Case (Orion £10.99), is out now in paperback

Me Talk Pretty One Day by David Sedaris, 2000 (Abacus £12.99). I'd read anything by the ultimate acerbic essayist – bus timetables, laundry care labels... Luckily, I don't have to, as he writes books. It's warm and funny, but sharp enough to cut, confronting Sedaris's North Carolina upbringing and his brilliantly deranged family, before switching to his move to France and the frustrations of being a foreigner. Solid gold.

The Glorious Dead by Justin Myers, 2025 (Renegade £10.99). One of my faves from last year – a funny and twisty examination of grief,

reputational damage and toxic friendship. A famous writer dies unexpectedly, leaving friends and family bereft, but their rose-tinted memories aren't long for the world when his memoir is unearthed.

Heartburn by Nora Ephron, 1983 (Virago £10.99). She was known for writing blockbuster comedies like *When Harry Met Sally*, but this novel was her greatest achievement – one of the funniest books ever written. Based on the collapse of her marriage after her husband's affair, it's an unflinching portrayal of betrayal and petty vengeance. With recipes!

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾ by Sue Townsend, 1982 (Penguin £8.99). The inner yearnings of Leicester's most lovable loser are an instruction manual for every teenage boy on how not to navigate adolescence. Townsend's genius creation works just as well 44 (aaagh!) years later; the political satire and impeccable comic timing making it so much more than the diary of history's greatest frustrated intellectual.

The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster, 1961 (HarperCollins £7.99). My favourite book as a child, which I will be pushing on my own kids. A boy, bored by school, is transported to a magical kingdom and goes on a series of ludicrous quests. It is really a front to reinforce the importance of a thirst for knowledge, but is so funny and engrossing that young readers will never suspect a thing.

Television

Programmes

Bettany Hughes' Lost Worlds: Dawn of Civilisations In this two-part series, historian Bettany Hughes crosses Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey, in search of the origins of human civilisation, Sat 8 Aug, C4 20:00 (60mins).

Inside Iran: War & Revolution Documentary about the situation in Iran, using on-the-ground footage and interviews with journalists and ordinary people who've risked everything to share their perspective. Sun 9 Aug, ITV1 22:15 (75mins).

Spy Next Door: The Anna Chapman Story Two-part documentary telling the true story of the Russian spy Anna Chapman. It includes previously unheard accounts from ex-friends, colleagues and lovers. Wed 12 & Thu 13 Aug, C4 21:00 (60mins each).

A House Through Time Historian David Olusoga returns to uncover the stories of the people who lived in a property in Edinburgh over many years. Thu 13 Aug, BBC2 21:00 (60mins).

The Coen Brothers Story Documentary exploring the life and careers of the idiosyncratic filmmakers, Joel and Ethan Coen. Thu 13 Aug, BBC4 21:00 (60mins).

Films

Parallel Mothers (2021) Penélope Cruz is terrific in Pedro Almodóvar's drama about a mother who fears her baby was switched at birth. Sat 8 Aug, BBC4 23:10 (115min).

Inside Llewyn Davis (2013) Beguiling Coen brothers film about a struggling folk singer. With Oscar Isaac and Carey Mulligan. Sun 9 Aug, BBC2 22:00 (100min).

New to streaming

Ted Lasso Many believed the final whistle had blown on the football comedy, but it's made a surprise return. Ted (Jason Sudeikis) is lured back to the UK to coach the women's team. On Apple TV.

Furious Thriller about an FBI agent on the hunt for a female serial killer who is avenging Epstein-type abusers. "Crafted with vim" (Times). On Disney+.

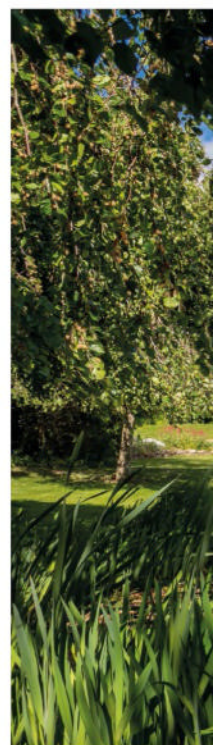
Titles in print are available from The Week Bookshop (theweekbookshop.co.uk). For out-of-print books visit biblio.co.uk

Houses in the Tudor style



◀ **Suffolk:** Crown House, Lavenham. A characterful Grade II property within a fine medieval village. 3 beds, 2 baths, 3 receps, kitchen/breakfast room, garden, detached garage/workshop with en-suite annexe. £835,000; Jackson-Stops (01284-700535).

▼ **Suffolk:** Read Hall, Stowmarket. This historic and picturesque Grade II* medieval manor house features moated grounds and gardens extending to 4.75 acres. 2 suites, 3 further beds, family bath, kitchen, 3 receps, 2-bed annexe, barn. £1.25m; David Burr (01359-245245).



▲ **Denbighshire:** Plas Yn Llan, Llangynhafal. Distinguished Grade II house dating back to 1580. 4 beds, 2 baths, kitchen, 3 receps, conservatory, gardens, outbuildings. £950,000; Fisher German (01244-409660).



◀ **Suffolk:** Barn Street, Lavenham. A charming Grade I former Hall House thought to date back to 1530, which has a wealth of original features. 4 beds, 2 baths, cellar, kitchen/breakfast room, utility, 2 receps, double garage with studio and workshop, partly walled and landscaped gardens. £1m; David Burr (01787-883144).





▼ **Worcestershire:**

Haventree Cottage, Suckley. A sprawling, traditional timber-frame build, country home set in over two acres of private grounds with far-reaching views across the Teme Valley landscape. Main bed with en suite and dressing room, 5 further beds, 2 baths, kitchen/breakfast room, 3 receps, garage, gym. £1.35m; Morgan Aps (01905-384848).

▼ **Staffordshire:** High Street, Kinver. Remarkable Grade II Tudor house, built in 1563 and overlooking the River Stour. The house is a former winner of an English Heritage Award for the conservation of its woodwork. Main suite, 3 further beds, family bath, kitchen/breakfast room, 2 receps, garden, log cabin overlooking riverbank. £500,000; Hunters (01384-443331).



▼ **Oxfordshire:**

Cherry Tree Cottage, Goring Heath. Dating from the 17th century, this Grade II thatched cottage has been lovingly restored and was nominated for a South Oxfordshire Conservation Award. 3 beds, 2 baths, open-plan kitchen/dining room, recep, terrace, gardens and grounds of approx. 0.4 acre. £800,000; Warmingham (01491-874144).



▼ **Suffolk:** The Malthouse, Hacheston, Woodbridge. This remarkable Grade II* home dates back to 1541 and has maintained its original timber frame. Main suite, 2 further beds (both en suite), kitchen/breakfast room, 2 receps, study, garden, outbuilding. £650,000; Fenn Wright (01394-333346).

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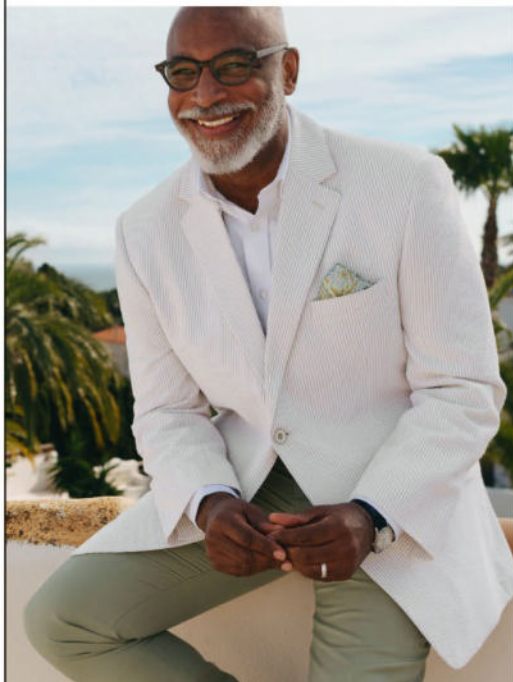
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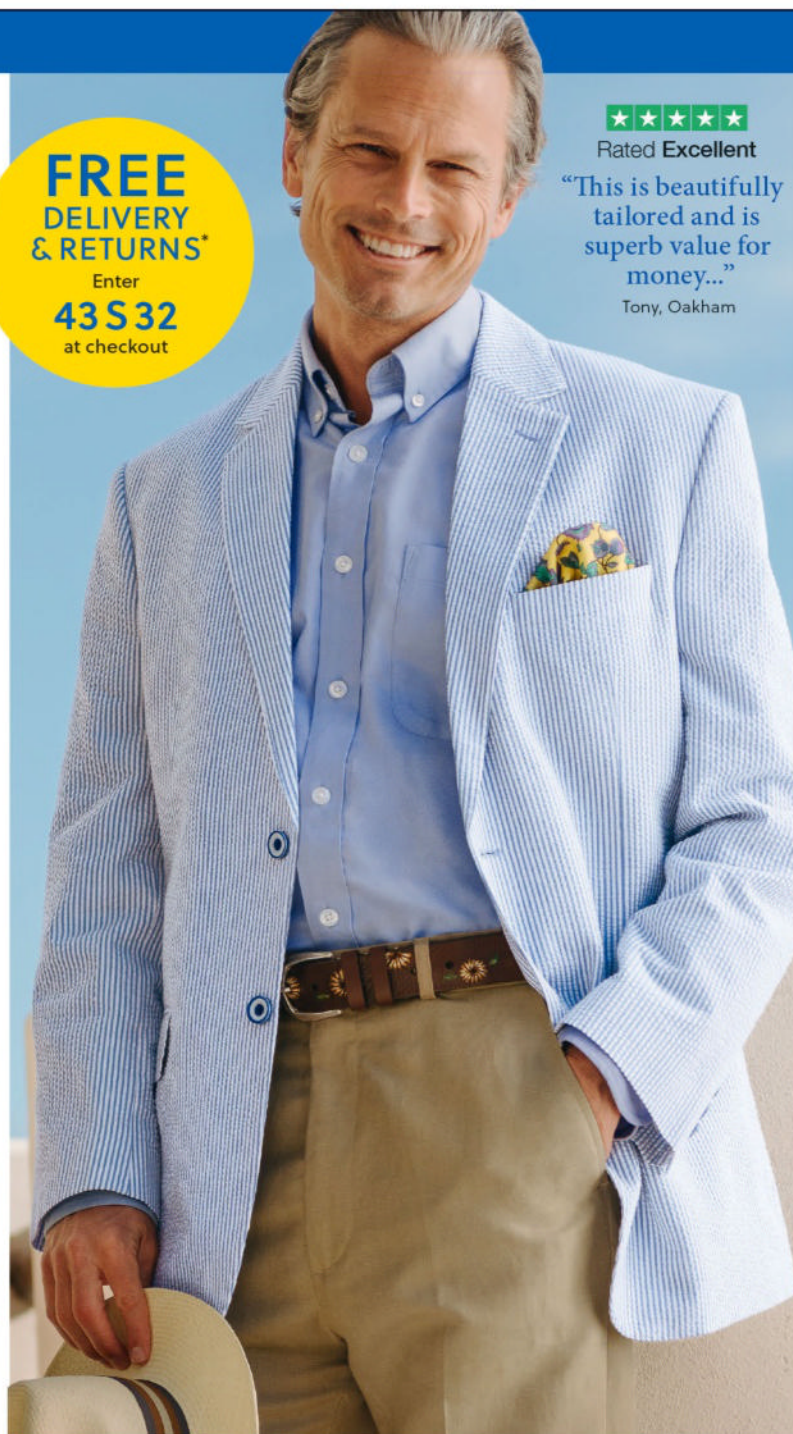
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A foodie city's more relaxed neighbour

San Sebastián, in northern Spain, is world-renowned for its food, says Marina O'Loughlin in the Financial Times. But given the sheer number of tourists, you'll need "sharp-elbowed dedication" to take part in its "rich tradition" of *txikiteo* – moving from bar to bar, eating a few *pintxos*, or small bites, at each. Fortunately, in the nearby town of Hondarribia you can have an equally delicious experience, but in "less stressful" conditions. The town is divided into a marina and an Old Town, "connected by steep climbs". Begin in the marina, on San Pedro Kalea. On this wide promenade "lined with bars" it's "almost impossible to hit a duffer", but my "favourite place" – **Loretxu Jan & Edan** – is just off the main drag, on a side street towards the seafront. Try the superb grilled *txipiron* (tiny cuttlefish) with caramelised onion, and the *patallones* – fat crisps laden with mussels. In the Old Town, don't miss **Mika Jatetxea** for its "Mika" *pintxo* (bacon and lightly battered prawns on toast with green mayonnaise and wakame), or the "cosy and elegant" **Badia Taberna**. For a substantial meal, visit Hondarribia's "temple to carnality", **Laia Erretegia**, where the *txuleta* steaks rival anything you'll find in San Sebastián.

The rise and fall of Mr Whippy

The "distant Pavlovian chimes" of the ice cream van were an important part of many of our childhoods, says Zak Asgard in The Spectator. But you don't see them so often



Ice cream vans: part of "our cultural identity"

now. There were some 30,000 vans in their 1970s heyday; now there are only around 2,500. "To track the decline of the British ice cream van, we must first understand its rise." You can trace their history back to the "hokey pokey" pushcarts of Victorian London, which dispensed ice cream in penny-lick glasses that were rinsed in "filthy bath-warm water" before being handed to the "next schmuck". Not surprisingly, these were declared a health hazard, and were gradually replaced by Wall's ice cream tricycles, which proved a hit in the first half of the 20th century – "Stop me and buy one", their signs famously read. Ice cream vans proper arrived in 1958, when Dominic Facchino –

inspired by US firm Mr Softee – launched Mr Whippy in Birmingham. Soon, everybody was "in love with the 99 flake". But the "glory days" were short-lived: by the 1980s, the vans were being threatened by the "rise of domestic freezers, supermarket supremacy and noise restrictions". Their ongoing decline may not be a tragedy, but it is something to regret. For rather like pie and mash shops and other lost familiars, they symbolised something that matters: "our shared, chaotic cultural identity".

The whimsical dish making a revival

Dating back to Tudor times, and named for its "whimsical" nature, trifle was once an elaborate dish, often made with exotic ingredients, and reserved for special occasions, say David Binns and Lottie Hayton in The Sunday Times. But it started to fall out of fashion in the last century as it came to mean a pudding made from tinned fruit, jelly and packet custard. Yet now trifle is having a resurgence, and is on offer in some of the nation's "poshest restaurants". With no canonical recipe for trifle, chefs feel at liberty to be inventive. At the Coach House, on the Middleton Lodge estate in North Yorkshire, there's a watermelon and bronze fennel trifle with yoghurt and rapeseed sponge. Rosi, in London's Mayfair, serves a "strawberry and pistachio number". Home cooks may be making it more too: supermarkets have noted an increase in the sale of the sponge fingers that are often used for its base.

Recipe of the week: herby mango salad

This dish is loosely inspired by my go-to Thai order: *som tam*, or papaya salad, says Ella Risbridger – except that I use mango instead, because I find it hard to get hold of good papaya. Apparently, one of the ways that fast food makes itself irresistible is by hitting most of the base flavours simultaneously: salty, umami, sweet. This dish does exactly that, except in the rather healthier form of an enormous bowl of mostly vegetables. It is peak summer food: zero cooking, 100% refreshing.

Serves 4

1 tbsp fish sauce 2 tbsp rice wine vinegar 1 tbsp caster sugar 1 red chilli 2 medium carrots 3 baby cucumbers (or ½ a big cucumber) 50g green beans 1 long red pepper 300g chopped mango 10g mint 10g Thai basil 10g coriander 1 romaine lettuce 150g cooked prawns or fried tofu, or chopped chicken or crispy chicken thighs 30g chopped roasted peanuts 1 lime sriracha, if liked

- In a much-too-big bowl (it will hold everything!), whisk together the fish sauce, vinegar and sugar until the sugar dissolves. Thinly slice the red chilli and add it too (easy to omit).

- Peel the carrots and use a julienne peeler to turn them into thin, pretty little strips. Toss the carrot strips into the bowl and let marinate for a minute. Halve and thinly slice the cucumbers: if you're using half a big boy, split it in half, and use a teaspoon to drag out the seeds. Discard the seeds, and thinly slice. Toss the cucumbers in with the carrots and stir.

- Chop the green beans. If you can do this on the diagonal, so much the better (discard the stringy ends). Add to the bowl. Deseed and finely slice the pepper; add to the bowl.



- **Tip:** this is a good point to stop at if you're making in advance.

- Finely chop the mango into little dice. De-stem and finely shred the herbs, then shred the lettuce (wash the leaves; stack the leaves; roll the leaves in a bundle; slice the bundle across). Mix the leaves, the mango, the prawns into the pickled vegetables.

- Roughly chop the peanuts; quarter the lime. Divide the salad into bowls; drizzle with sriracha, if liked; scatter with peanuts; set the lime quarter at a jaunty angle for individual squeezes.

- **Tip:** if you keep the components separately in the fridge – so pickled vegetables and vinaigrette in one container, chopped lettuce and herbs in another, prawns in their packet – it is a phenomenal make-ahead lunch for the week.

Taken from The Kitchen Book: Good Food For Every Day by Ella Risbridger, published by Fourth Estate at £26. Photography by Yuki Sugiura. To buy from The Week Bookshop for £22.99 (incl. p&p), visit theweekbookshop.co.uk to place your order, or call 020-3176 3835 to speak to a bookseller

New cars: what the critics say



Aion V
from £36,450

Auto Express

Aion is part of GAC, one of China's largest car manufacturers, and the V ("vee" not "five") is the brand's first model to be sold in the UK. The line-up is "super-simple": there's just one powertrain with 204bhp and a 75.3kWh battery for a 317-mile WLTP range, and one trim with generous standard kit, plus a £1,495 Premium Pack above it. As a family electric SUV, it is entering a crowded market.

Top Gear Magazine

Aion has a USP in the "Great Eight" – eight years of vehicle warranty, battery warranty, AA assistance, servicing and MoT. The V goes from 0-62mph in 7.9secs; it is a "dignified", but far from exhilarating, drive, and the driver-assistance warnings are exasperating. The ride is smooth, the steering is "impressively precise" – but the damping lets the V down, and the brakes feel "pretty soggy".

What Car?

Most rivals offer a PHEV, and a plug-in hybrid is due next year. The V's interior is spacious with lots of storage, but no frunk. The cabin has "showroom appeal", with glossy trims and soft faux-leather materials. Visibility is good, helped by parking sensors and a 360° camera, which come as standard. The 14.6-inch touchscreen looks neat and responds quickly, but it's "fiddly and distracting to use".

The best... spring-cleaning gadgets



► **Dyson Spot+Scrub AI Robot vacuum** "Incredibly sophisticated", this robot finds stains and cleans them until they're gone. It uses water heated to 60°C on every rotation, washing itself as it goes. It's "remarkably quiet" and can detect different surfaces, and it empties itself into the dock (£1,050; [dyson.co.uk](https://www.dyson.co.uk)).



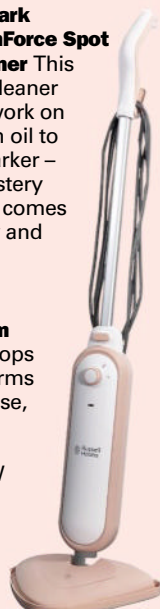
► **Shark StainForce Spot Cleaner** This cordless cleaner claims to work on stains – from oil to permanent marker – on carpet, upholstery and car interiors. It comes with a cleaning spray and two tools (on offer at £150; [sharkninja.co.uk](https://www.sharkninja.co.uk)).



► **Russell Hobbs Steam & Clean Mop** Steam mops use hot water to kill germs and clean dirt and grease, instead of chemicals. Lightweight and easy to assemble, this 1.4kW model glides along smoothly and has a 380ml tank that lasts up to 15 minutes (£30; [currys.com](https://www.currys.com)).



► **Halo Capsule XR** Lightweight (2.7kg) and with impressive suction, this cordless stick vacuum has a large 2-litre cylinder and a Hepa filter to stop dust spreading. It works on hard floors and carpets, and has interchangeable 32V batteries, with up to an hour runtime. Tools and brushes are included (on offer at £300; [haloappliances.com](https://www.haloappliances.com)).



► **Lakeland Turbo Scrubber** This clever cordless bathroom cleaning tool has four brushes and a powerful 220rpm motor. The telescopic rod helps reach tricky areas, and the dispenser holds 50ml cleaning fluid. Battery life is about an hour (£60; [lakeland.co.uk](https://www.lakeland.co.uk)).

SOURCE: THE LONDON STANDARD

Tips of the week... getting children to eat veg

- If a child balks at the very sight of vegetables, try varying the way you serve them. You could try turning them into nuggets or burgers; or hide them by cutting them up small and adding them to curries or pasta sauces such as bolognese and pesto.
- Bear in mind that crowded plates can be overwhelming. Don't force them to finish a portion, but do keep putting the vegetable on their plate until they try it, even just a tiny bit. It can take up to 15 attempts to learn to like a new food.
- Give children options so they can choose for themselves, and praise them if they show interest in a new food.
- Children learn from their parents, so eat together as a family. If they are old enough, let them help prepare meals and choose fruit and veg in the supermarket.
- Leave out vegetable snacks – diced peppers, carrot fingers, bits of cucumber – if they are peckish they might go for it.

SOURCE: BBC HEALTH

And for those who have everything...



Most such bottles keep water cold for 24 hours; Chill's claims its new models can keep it cool for three days. Made from 90% recycled steel, the Series 3 Flip has a leak-proof straw lid and comes in 500ml and one litre sizes, with 45 and 75 hours cold retention respectively. £40/£48; [chillys.com](https://www.chillys.com)

SOURCE: T3

Where to find... some great gardening courses

Join the head gardener and his team at **Great Dixter** in East Sussex for the day-long course **Gardening with Subtropical Plants**. Lunch is included and you get 10% off at the nursery (14 Sep, £187pp; [greatdixter.co.uk](https://www.greatdixter.co.uk)).

Learn how to create a thriving garden at home from the champion of no-dig gardening **Charles Dowding** on a **No Dig Course** at Homeacres in Somerset. There's a full-day course or a weekend option (from £215pp, [charlesdowding.co.uk](https://www.charlesdowding.co.uk)).

Gordon Castle, Moray, has various courses including a **Spring Pot Workshop** where head gardener Jennifer Wright teaches about succession planting and how to make a bulb lasagne, with refreshments, too (10 Oct, £59.50; [gordoncastle.com](https://www.gordoncastle.com)).

Start your own organic kitchen garden on a day-long **Get Growing** course at **River Cottage**, Devon. You'll get a seasonal two-course lunch, plus planted seed trays and seeds to take home (15 Aug and 21 Mar 2027, £195pp; [rivercottage.net](https://www.rivercottage.net)).

SOURCE: THE TIMES

This week's dream: sailing back in time on the Norfolk Broads

"The klop, klop of water under the bows of a small boat will cure most troubles in this world," wrote Arthur Ransome in his 1934 novel *Coot Club* – and, after my recent solo sailing trip in the Norfolk Broads, I have to agree with him, said James Stewart in the FT. Ransome's book is set in this network of tidal rivers and shallow lakes, which "cumulatively snake" for 125 miles through the east of Norfolk. The lakes are medieval peat diggings that were flooded by rising seas in the 14th century, and long plied by cargo boats known as wherries. The Victorians "reimagined" the area as a holiday destination, and operators began renting small yachts to visitors. Motorboats are now far more numerous, but sailing boats are still available to charter.

Founded in 1932, Hunter's Yard in Ludham has a fleet of yachts from "the golden age of Broads cruising", some with cabins sleeping two to four. Renters must know how to sail, but novices can sign up for a "Learn to Sail" week. The 90-year-old



A sailing trip in the Norfolk Broads offers "landscape as serenity"

dowager flamingos". But mostly there was just me, the sound of creaking ropes, and the "low bosky horizons" stretching "beneath heroic skies". This was "landscape as serenity", particularly in the dusk at Horsey Mere, reminding me "how sailing could still be" – "an interlude in which everything else can fall away, a momentary back eddy in the restless tide of the world".

yacht I chartered, *Hustler*, was like "an Edwardian gentlemen's club shrunk to a Wendy house", with "lustrous" mahogany panelling and a Royal Doulton sink. And it had a "secret weapon". Most motorboats won't fit beneath the medieval bridge at Potter Heigham, and so are restricted to the southern Broads. But yachts can lower their masts to squeeze through, into a world where "the throb of boat engines" is replaced "by birdsong in sibilant reeds".

I found the Broads "surprisingly social". Dog walkers and fishermen waved, and a canoeist kept pace for a chat. The birds were wonderful, too, from kingfishers to marsh harriers and cranes "like

Getting the flavour of...



Hiking the "Great Wall" of Seoul

Hiking is South Korea's most popular sporting activity – and thanks to the forested hills that reach far into the city, you can even do it in Seoul, says Oliver Berry in National Geographic Traveller. Trails rise to 836 metres in the Bukhansan National Park, a little way out of town, but there are smaller peaks next to Seoul's historic centre, traversed by the city's medieval battlements ("Seoul's answer to China's Great Wall"). I walked along the wall's northern section, passing three of the original city gates and climbing the "dome-shaped" summit of Inwangsan, which is only 338 metres high, but "punishingly steep". The path was fragrant with juniper and mountain pine, and shaded here and there by cherry and maple trees – and there were "sweeping" views across downtown Seoul.

Doing Route 66 by train

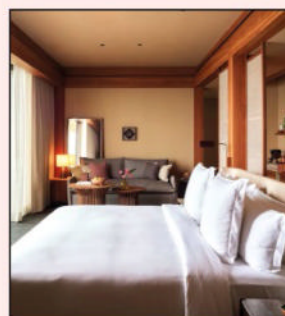
It's 100 years since the opening of Route 66, the "legendary" highway between Chicago and LA,

Plenty of people are celebrating the centenary by driving it, but I made the 2,000-mile journey west by train instead, says Adrian Bridge in The Daily Telegraph – which allowed for "leisurely contemplation" of America's "stunning" landscapes, as well as plenty of "convivial" dining-car conversation. A sleeper train, the Southwest Chief, does the route in 45 hours – or you can break up the journey, as I did. Among the highlights were St Louis ("the city of Miles Davis and the Blues"), Kansas City (where the Beaux Arts railway station is "an absolute gem"), and Flagstaff, Arizona (a "key" Route 66 staging post, full of "1950s-style diners"). But nothing could beat sunset at the Grand Canyon (pictured). *Amtrak Vacations* (amtrakvacations.co.uk) has a 14-night trip from £1,709pp.

Summer on the Slovene Riviera

A southwards-pointing peninsula in the northern Adriatic, Istria lies mostly in Croatia today, but Slovenia also has a small chunk of it – which provides the entirety of that country's 29-mile coastline. It is a lovely area, says Laura Coffey in The Guardian, with green hills, pretty villages and "colourful" seaside towns. The largest and most "beautiful" of these, 25 miles south of the Italian city of Trieste, is Piran, known for its medieval Venetian architecture. Nearby lies the Strunjan Landscape Park, with a gorgeous beach, Moon Bay, and Izola, another "vibrant" historic harbour town. I can recommend the DeGrassi hotel there ("supremely comfortable"), as well as Kmetija Medljan, a simple farm stay in the hills. And I enjoyed visiting some artisanal wineries and food producers, including Korenika & Moškon, where the *belica* olive oil has a "powerful kick".

Hotel of the week



Rosewood Mandarin Nayarit, Mexico

Set just north of Puerto Vallarta on a "heavenly" slice of Mexico's Pacific coast, this new beach resort is a great place "to sit back and do absolutely nothing", says Megan Spurrell in Condé Nast Traveller. It's the Rosewood group's fourth hotel in the country, and sits next to a One&Only resort with which it shares some facilities. Rooms feature earthy tones and lots of natural materials (including wooden ceilings and linen screens). The three restaurants (Japanese, Mexican and Spanish) are "fabulous". And there's a "tranquil" spa, a kids' club, and plenty more to do, including polo lessons.

Doubles from £830; rosewoodhotels.com.

Goodie turned naturalist who fronted *Springwatch*

Bill Oddie
1941-2026

For those who grew up in the 1970s, Bill Oddie, who has died aged 85, will always be one of *The Goodies*, said *The Times*. The anarchic comedy show, co-starring his Cambridge Footlights alumni Graeme Garden and the late Tim Brooke-Taylor, was about a trio of fixers who travel around on a three-seater bicycle they called a “trandem”, supposedly solving all manner of problems. Running for 76 episodes, it mixed “lavatorial” jokes and sight gags inspired by Buster Keaton and *Tom and Jerry* with absurdism (one episode had the group being chased by a giant kitten) and political satire (another addressed Apartheid). As well as helping to write the show, Oddie composed songs for it, including *The Funky Gibbon*, which reached No. 4 in the charts in 1975 and led to him and his fellow comics appearing on *Top of the Pops*.



Oddie: a birdwatcher since his teens

At its peak, *The Goodies* attracted 12 million viewers. But although it had similarities to *Monty Python*, BBC executives did not take it as seriously, said Mark Lawson in *The Guardian*. They classified it as children’s TV, which was meant as an insult and Oddie took it as one. Later, he reinvented himself as a naturalist, and won many new fans as the presenter of wildlife programmes, including *Springwatch*. Yet here, too, his success was undercut by sadness. He left *Springwatch* at the end of 2008, and later made it clear that he’d been forced out by the BBC. He said his mental health had been a factor and that he “could be very tetchy”. He had, he revealed, fallen into a depression, twice attempted suicide, and been diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Born in Rochdale in 1941, William Oddie was the son of Harry Oddie, an accountant, and his wife Lilian. Aged six, Bill came

home from school to find the house empty and blood all over the kitchen. It turned out that his mother had attacked his father. She spent years in psychiatric wards. The family subsequently moved to Birmingham. He was educated at King Edward’s School, then won a place at Cambridge, where he made a splash at Footlights alongside the likes of John Cleese. Before long he was appearing in a Footlights revue in the West End and on Broadway. He wrote scripts for *That Was the Week That Was* and episodes of the TV comedy *Doctor in the House*. He also appeared regularly on radio, including in *I’m Sorry, I’ll Read That Again*. *The Goodies* launched in 1970 and ran for more than a decade. Each of its creators had a distinct personality, said *The Guardian*: Brooke-Taylor was pompous; Garden was professorial; while Oddie was hairy and untidy. Even then, he suffered from mood swings. He found fame hard to manage and could be grouchy. When, in 2001, Michael Aspel approached him with his big red book and the words, “Bill Oddie, this is your life,” Oddie replied: “It’s not. I always said I wouldn’t do it and I won’t.” His family eventually persuaded him to go ahead with the show.

Oddie had loved birdwatching since his teens and, after a spell working in children’s TV in the 1980s, he began fronting wildlife shows such as *Birding with Bill Oddie*. In 2003, he was made an OBE for his conservation work. He attributed his mental health problems to his childhood, and the feeling that his mother had abandoned him. Later, however, he began to appreciate that she may also have had bipolar disorder. He realised, he said, that she had been “in no way negligent”, only “immensely unlucky”. He is survived by his three children, and his second wife, the writer and former actress Laura Beaumont.

Controversial German anatomist behind *Body Worlds*

Gunther von Hagens
1945-2026

Gunther von Hagens was a German anatomist who, in the late 1970s, developed a novel preservation method that involved draining the body of fat and fluids and replacing them with a flexible polymer. In the 1990s, he used this technique – plastination – to create touring exhibitions of flayed human bodies that caused a sensation. To his supporters, he was “a scientific visionary”, said *The Times*, whose shows “opened the eyes of millions to the reality of death” and the forces of life. Others regarded the “pallid” anatomist, in his ever-present black fedora, as “the sinister ringmaster of a human freakshow”. Many Church leaders were appalled by his work; in Germany it was likened to the crimes of the Nazi era. But millions flocked to his *Body Worlds* shows, to gawp at plasticised corpses, their muscles and ligaments exposed, arranged in macabre tableaux – riding flayed horses, playing electric guitars, fencing, copulating. Some of his bodies even appeared, sat around a card table, in the 2006 Bond film *Casino Royale*.

Gunther Liebchen was born in 1945 in what is now Poland, where his father was a member of the SS. The family fled as the Red Army approached, eventually settling in Greiz – which ended up in East Germany. As a haemophiliac, Gunther was frequently hospitalised, which inspired his interest in medicine. He worked as a nurse before starting a degree in medicine at the University of Jena. In 1969, he was jailed for trying to escape into Austria. On



Von Hagens with two of his bodies

his release, he made it to the West, and completed his studies at the University of Lübeck. When he married, he took his wife’s name, reportedly because Liebchen (“darling”) sounded too cute.

He was working as a lecturer at the University of Heidelberg’s Institute of Pathology and Anatomy when he started working on plastination. It had obvious medical uses, said *The Guardian*. Students could look at diseased organs without waiting for them to be donated; it allowed corpses to be cut into slices for examination in the lab. Von Hagens launched a business supplying plastinated body parts to medical institutions; it was only later he realised the broader commercial potential. Aided by his second wife Angelina (who survives him, along with his three children), he launched his first *Body Worlds* exhibition in Japan in 1995. It then toured the world. Over the years, he faced several legal challenges. In 2002, he was accused of breaking the law by staging the UK’s first public autopsy for 170 years. But no charges were filed and the event was later shown on Channel 4. He also faced questions about where his corpses came from: he returned some after concern was raised that they were the bodies of prisoners executed in China. Generally, he insisted that he only accepted those donated with informed consent; and thanks to the success of *Body Worlds*, thousands did sign up to be plastinated. From 2005, this work took place at a factory which employed up to 150 people. Von Hagens himself specified that he should be plastinated after his death, and displayed wearing his trademark black hat.

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



Seven days in the Square Mile

International **oil prices** eased below \$80/barrel on renewed hopes of a deal to open the Strait of Hormuz and a potential easing of supply disruptions. But US petrol prices are still above \$4 a gallon – about 35% higher than their pre-war level. Both the US Fed and the Bank of England kept **interest rates** on hold – the latter at 3.75%. But the BoE governor, Andrew Bailey, warned that a further escalation in the Iran war could drive inflation above 4% next year. Chancellor John Healey confirmed that the **Budget** would be delivered on 28 October.

The Government announced an overhaul of the £90bn **public procurement system** – putting the emphasis on bidders to prove that they are creating jobs, rather than meeting green and social targets. The new model will apply to both British and international firms bidding for public contracts.

Shares in **SpaceX** plunged a further 8%, despite reporting a 92% rise in quarterly revenue year-on-year to \$7.7bn. Traders balked at Elon Musk's lavish plans for data centres. The rocket company has lost more than \$1trn in market capitalisation since its blockbuster float in June. **Palantir**, the controversial data company, announced what CEO Alex Karp described as "otherworldly growth"; shares bounced 25%. **HSBC** reported that EV makers have slashed discounts on vehicles to a 15-month low in the UK. **Grant Thornton** is buying rival **CBIZ** for \$5bn in the largest takeover in the accounting sector in a generation.

AstraZeneca/Bristol Myers Squibb: mega-merger

The City has been jolted out of its summer daze by the "stonking" news that AstraZeneca – the UK's second-most valuable company, worth around £196bn – has held merger talks with US rival Bristol Myers Squibb, reported the Financial Times. "A tie-up would be worth about \$400bn and be the biggest pharmaceutical deal ever." Although AZ is roughly twice the size of BMS, and would be the lead partner, the story is bound to "spark fresh fears" about the firm's "commitment to the UK". CEO Sir Pascal Soriot has already demoted its London listing in favour of New York. "If talks progress it will be a fresh test for Andy Burnham's Government on how interventionist it will be in its approach to nationally strategic companies." Word of the putative deal went down like a bucket of sick in the City. AZ shares fell 9%, noted Maggie Fick on Reuters – their biggest drop since 2020 – as investors struggled to understand the need for such a "transformative acquisition". I suppose there is the possibility of "building a market-beating global colossus in oncology", said Nils Pratley in The Guardian. But all that is guaranteed is that AZ would "inherit the target's patent cliff challenge". Soriot's long tenure at AZ has been a "triumph" in the round. Why he'd risk "spoiling his legacy" with such a "high-risk financial adventure" is a mystery.

Magnificent Seven: split posse

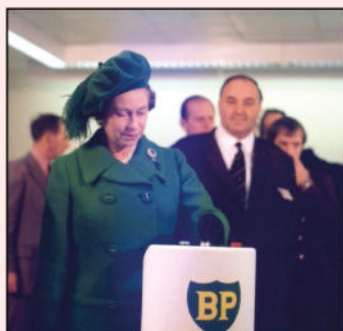
When investors pile into a trend, the result will often be a fun nickname, said Reuben Gregg Brewer on The Motley Fool. But the so-called Magnificent Seven group – Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla – was always doomed to fracture. The only question was when. It turns out the end of that era is now, said John Plender in the Financial Times. The AI boom, in particular, has torn "The Mag 7" apart over the vexed question of whether the "huge expenditure" on infrastructure – especially by "hyperscalers" Meta, Amazon and Microsoft – will "generate adequate profits". Take a look at the extreme market reaction to last week's quarterly results, said Graham Ruddick in The Times. When Meta "nudged up" its forecast spending for 2026 by a few billion to \$130bn-\$145bn, its shares were whacked. By contrast, when Microsoft reduced its capex from the forecast \$190bn to \$175bn, about \$450bn was added to its value in a single day ("the most for any business on record"). In sorting AI winners from losers, Wall Street has found another "key differentiator" besides, said Asa Fitch in The Wall Street Journal: cloud computing – a massive growth market, which is being driven by AI, but which has a "tried-and-true business model" that would survive the bursting of an AI bubble. No wonder Meta is (belatedly) scrambling to climb on board.

J. Sainsbury/Argos: catalogue of woes?

Talk about a bet that went wrong, said Marine Saint in The Observer. Sainsbury's is offloading its Argos unit – bought in 2016 for £1.1bn – for about £120m, or "close to one-tenth" of the purchase price, after conceding defeat to online giants Amazon and Temu. Fortunately, the former catalogue business has a willing buyer. Swift Partners – led by veteran retailers Richard Pennycook and Trevor Strain – sees potential in "underappreciated" Argos and its shops. It's a brand with enduring popularity beyond nostalgia, said Isabella Fish in The Times. Best of British luck with the turnaround.

BP's North Sea exit: a watershed moment for British energy

When BP started its first North Sea oilfield in November 1975, it was an event so momentous that the late Queen Elizabeth travelled to Aberdeen "to press the button that let the crude flow", said Emily Gosden in The Times. Now, the oil and gas major is pulling out of the North Sea completely, having judged it uneconomical to continue there when there are "brighter opportunities elsewhere" – including at Bumerangue, off the coast of Brazil, where it made its biggest discovery in 25 years. As CEO Meg O'Neill told CNBC (while announcing a doubling of quarterly profits to \$5.73bn), the North Sea "just doesn't compete for capital".



Aberdeen, 1975: "Let the crude flow"

All oil and gas fields eventually enter a period of natural decline. BP's five remaining rigs in the North Sea are worth just £2bn – a far cry from valuations during the 1980s bonanza that made Britain a net exporter of oil, said Jonathan Leake in The Daily Telegraph. Nonetheless, the exit

of the last heavyweight "deals a hammer blow" to hopes of a "revival". What really fuels the anger in Aberdeen is that BP's decision was driven not just by geology, but by "a disastrous mix of energy and tax policies" that have inflicted an effective 78% tax rate on North Sea drillers – and which culminated in former energy secretary Ed Miliband's ban on new oil and gas exploration.

BP hopes to find buyers. But pressure is now growing on Andy Burnham to reduce the windfall tax, lift the ban on new licences and approve the Jackdaw and Rosebank oil and gas projects that have been in limbo since Labour came to power. The North Sea will never reclaim its heyday, said Bloomberg, but it could still generate value and jobs, improve energy resilience and "buy time while the energy transition continues". Those are gains that should not be sniffed at.

Issue of the week: Trump's currency meddling

The US move to prop up the Japanese yen suits both parties. But it's not without risks

"As to-do lists go, Scott Bessent's one was certainly unconventional," said Melissa Lawford in *The Daily Telegraph*. Last Friday, President Trump's treasury secretary was photographed with a note in front of him that read: "Buy Japanese Yen (JPY) \$5-10 bil". Whether "hilariously staged" (as Bloomberg claimed) or not, Bessent swiftly followed through. The US Treasury later confirmed it had coordinated with Tokyo "to make a historic intervention" to drive up the value of the yen and rescue it from a 40-year low – paying for the move "by selling a chunk of its reserves of euros". Trump is starting to make a habit of using currency moves as a display of support for allies. Last year, he opened up currency swap lines for Argentina's president, Javier Milei, and Hungary's then-PM Viktor Orbán. Both were before crucial elections. The question is, what does he want from Japan?

One possible explanation is that America's first big intervention in the yen in 30 years is just "buddynomics", said Katie Martin in the FT – even if "a little more in-your-face than usual". That's certainly how Trump presented it. The more likely reason, though, is "rational self-interest". Japan has two traditional routes to push up the battered yen. One is an enormous rise in interest rates,



Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Sanae Takaichi

hardly a preferred route for its PM Sanae Takaichi, given the rising economic discontent at home. The other is a massive sale of dollars – i.e. Japan's \$1trn stash of US Treasuries – to help fund its own yen purchases. Neither of these would be good news for the US. "Much better to stand behind Japan like a scary big brother and hope to scare off the yen sellers."

Given America's near \$40trn debt, dumping even a small portion of Treasuries onto the market could drive up borrowing costs for Washington when yields are already high. Nonetheless, this move has huge implications for markets, said Huileng

Tan on Al Jazeera. It threatens "the yen-funded carry trade, in which investors borrow cheaply in Japan to buy higher-yielding currencies and assets overseas". The last time that happened, in 2024, the move forced an unwinding of leveraged trades that rippled across global markets. This intervention "decidedly changes the game", said Gearoid Reidy and Daniel Moss on Bloomberg. "The biggest concern now is what happens to both nations' credibility" if it fails "to put a lid on the yen". So far, all is going to plan: the yen has fallen to around ¥157, from a peak of ¥164, without undue ructions. But don't count on that lasting.

FTSE prospects: what the experts think

● "Anti-tech" index

London's blue-chip FTSE 100 index enjoyed its "best month since the Iran war" in July, as global capital shifted out of tech stocks and "towards miners, banks and defence firms", said Robert Miller in *The Times*. Last week, it hit a new all-time high, and there may be plenty more to come if the chip and tech sell-off reignites. As Emmanuel Kau of Barclays observes, the Footsie is an "almost anti-tech index", dominated by so-called "old-world stocks" seen as a useful hedge by fund managers. "We remain constructive on the AI growth story," note UBS analysts, "but believe investors should manage concentration risk by broadening their exposure." For many, FTSE 100 exposure fits the bill.

● Blasted backwater

Be grateful for small mercies, said Tom Saunders and Louis Goss in *The Daily Telegraph*. In the grand scheme of things, London's decline into a relative backwater continues – hastened by its "own former champions" as they hotfoot to Wall Street in search of greater liquidity, or are taken private. Ten years ago, there were 2,365 listed companies; now there are just 1,500 – a remarkable 36% drop. Simultaneously, local investment has plummeted. "Back in



UK fund managers shouldn't copy Eeyore

1997, £1 in every £2 invested by British pension funds was ploughed into the UK stock market. Today that figure is more like £1 in every £20. It's a vicious circle. The blame doesn't just lie with big investors, but with "successive governments that have dismantled tax incentives" to invest locally. Now politicians are belatedly scrambling to undo the damage.

● Blinded by pessimism

UK funds shouldn't just be buying "because it's the right thing to do", said veteran UK fund manager Gervais Williams. It's a case of whether "they're happy to stand by and watch very strong returns in the UK without doing anything about it". Certainly, that's the view of many overseas investors, said Ben Kumar of investment manager 7IM in *The Times*. "The Eeyoreish view" is that the London market will "shrink and shrink until nothing's left and everything is owned by foreign money". But if you flip the perspective, you ask "what has caught the eye of the world about UK assets"? The UK is still a leading financial centre and shares are cheaper than US counterparts, "so let's celebrate it".

Leveraged ETFs: the lowdown

Warren Buffett described derivatives as "financial weapons of mass destruction". In the hands of retail investors, LETFs are proving equally explosive...

Dark night of the Seoul No world leader, except perhaps Donald Trump, has staked their political future quite so firmly on "a hot stock market" as South Korea's president, Lee Jae Myung, said the FT. "He got more than he bargained for." After shooting for the Moon, the chip-dominated Kospi index fell nearly 40% from its June peak last week – wiping out thousands of retail investors, now blaming Lee for "hastily approving" the use of LETFs, which amplify returns as an asset rises but magnify losses disastrously when the market turns.

Rein 'em in The \$16trn US ETF industry, which once offered savers a cheap and easy way to gain broad stock-market exposure, is also "starting to resemble a casino", said Bloomberg. More than 450 ETFs now offer leveraged or inverse bets on a single security (at least ten were created for SpaceX alone) – making them useful "for hedge funds juicing single-day trades" but "potentially catastrophic for individual investors". An outright ban "isn't likely or even desirable", but protections are needed to safeguard the unsophisticated. So is regular stress-testing to help shield the financial system – itself highly leveraged – from the destabilising volatility of ETFs. We must heed "Korea's cautionary tale".

A case of “oil in our time”

John Authers

Bloomberg

Britain, energy powerhouse of Europe?

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard

The Daily Telegraph

Will diamonds ever recover their lustre?

Dominic O’Connell

The Times

Sorry you were late. Here’s my invoice

James Max

Financial Times

“The stock market’s relationship to war and peace can be troublesome,” says John Authers – look at the Dow Industrials in 1938 and 1939 as an ever-more belligerent Hitler threatened Europe. The 1938 Munich Agreement, falsely hailed by British PM Neville Chamberlain as “peace in our time”, got a warm reception: “traders were relieved the prospects of war had receded, even at the cost of appeasing a dangerous dictator”. Yet when war was declared a year later, markets rallied again: “a global cataclysm was under way but at least there was clarity”. As a cold-blooded exposition of the cliché that markets hate uncertainty even more than war, this was hard to beat. And something similar is now happening. The S&P 500 is back at an all-time high; and Brent crude has fallen 11%, because a deal – likely to see Iran charging ships to cross Hormuz – appears close. Terrible news it may be, “tantamount to a surrender by the US”. But the Munich precedent is clear. “The picture is clarifying, uncertainty is reducing, and the price of enabling a dictatorial regime is steep but payable.”

The prevailing – dated – narrative of Britain “as the energy sick man of Europe” needs to be turned on its head, says Ambrose Evans-Pritchard. It’s a fair bet that, in five to ten years’ time, we’ll be the only country “with a flourishing energy system across the whole technology spectrum” – able to meet core internal needs for both power and fuel from our own territorial sources, “with enough joules to spare for rising energy exports to the European market”. Without quite realising it, Britain is moving towards a pragmatic “anything that does the job” regime, akin to that of China, albeit with a different carbon mix. We’re already ahead of European competitors on renewables: total wind and solar power could reach an “enormous” 200 gigawatts by 2035. On nuclear too, we’re steaming ahead. France is still living off the “perishable legacy” of decades-old nuclear plants yet, in Britain, Rolls-Royce is “going gangbusters” with its small nuclear reactors. Given new seismic imaging and drilling tech, it could also be possible to bring “billions more barrels” of North Sea oil into commercial reach. The only thing we have to fear, it seems, is politics.

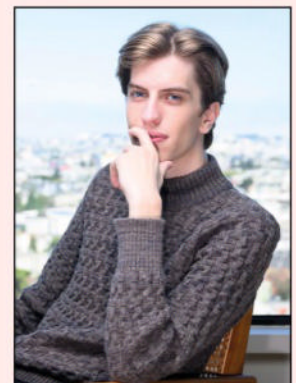
Diamonds once brought De Beers supreme wealth “on the rock-steady pillars of scarcity and controlled supply”, says Dominic O’Connell, but recent years have seen “an astonishing collapse in value”. Fifteen years ago, the company – since 1927 owned by Anglo American – was valued at just under \$13bn. Now the miner is in talks to sell its 85% stake for a reported \$1bn. What no one predicted was a 45% collapse in rough diamond prices in five years, the biggest factor being “the flood of manufactured diamonds onto the market”. Mined diamonds may be “holding their own in the gemstone market”, but they’ve been so badly swamped in industrial applications, De Beers is “now something of an albatross around Anglo’s neck”. If it is ever to return to profit, any new owner will have to reshape the company drastically. Diamonds risk joining a long list of industries – from whale-oil lamps to video rental shops – whose finances have been wrecked by new technologies and “consigned to the dustbin of history”. De Beers’ co-founder Cecil Rhodes “would have been astonished to think something similar could happen to his glittering creation”.

“I once for worked with someone who was late for every meeting,” says James Max. “Not occasionally late. Exactly 15 minutes late. Every single time.” It was a sort of punctual lateness that would have been almost impressive were it not so infuriating. There’s no special skill involved in being on time. You just need to recognise “another person’s time matters as much as your own”. We’re conditioned to understand the value of time when a company is charging us: we accept there are penalties for missing payments, overstaying in car parks, submitting late tax returns. But because reprimanding friends or colleagues is embarrassing, we don’t apply it in our own lives. My solution is we sign up to a universal system we might call WaitPay. “Friends get a five-minute grace period. Fifteen minutes late? Coffee is on you. Thirty minutes? You’ll pay for lunch.” Companies would receive no such indulgence. Keep me waiting, delay my flight, make me queue while assuring me my call is “important” and the balance starts accruing. “Punctuality across Britain would improve with remarkable speed.”

City profile

Leopold Aschenbrenner

Leopold Aschenbrenner’s multi-day wedding – at a Tuscan-style villa in Carmel, California – was a prized invitation among San Francisco’s “Cerebral Valley” clique. With a forest spa and a “pre-wedding colloquium to discuss ideas in panels and breakout sessions”, it was a fitting celebration for a tech wunderkind dubbed “the Nostradamus of AI”, said The Wall Street Journal. But even as his guests were arriving, the 24-year-old’s \$45bn hedge fund, Situational Awareness, was unravelling, the starkest casualty yet of wild swings in the market. His “aggressively AI-concentrated fund” went from being “the envy of Wall Street” – reportedly up by some 439% this year – to a bailout candidate, said CNN Business. Forced into a firesale, only a lifeline from Ken Griffin’s giant fund Citadel has staved off total



collapse. What a fall for the German-born former OpenAI researcher, who tapped America’s richest pockets when he formed Situational Awareness in 2024, despite having “no professional investing experience”.

Aschenbrenner used leverage “to supersize the bets”, said the WSJ, and his talent for penning grandiose philosophical manifestos earned him a cult following. “Right now, there are perhaps a few hundred people ... that have situational awareness,” he wrote. “Through whatever peculiar forces of fate, I have found myself among them.” He may yet prove right about AI’s potential to reshape the world, said Aaron Brown on Bloomberg. Sadly, “markets do not pay for knowing the future. They pay for being solvent when it arrives.”



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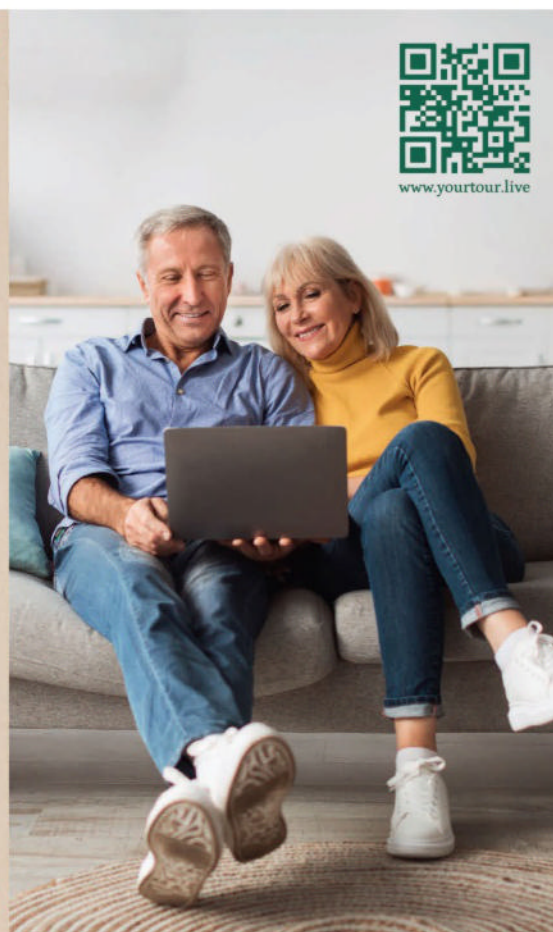


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TOM HOLLAND, AUTHOR AND PODCASTER

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ANTONIA FRASER, HISTORIAN




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Who's tipping what

The week's best shares

CVS Group*Citywire*

Having overcome the hurdle of a competition inquiry, the vet group has a "credible roadmap" to reprise its "historical trajectory" as a "structural growth compounder", says Berenberg. Target: £20. Buy. £12.70.

Fevertree Drinks*The Times*

Doubters may question recovery after a 66% shares slump over five years. But the upmarket beverage maker retains a healthy balance sheet, and an improving operating outlook should catalyse performance. Buy. 819.5p.

FirstGroup*Citywire*

The £48m sale of the travel operator's tech innovation arm, Mistral Data, "crystallises value" not reflected in the shares, says Panmure Gordon. Lost earnings are partially offset by a big Sizewell C transport contract. Buy. 183p.

Rio Tinto*Investors' Chronicle*

The AI and electrification transition is pumping up copper, aluminium and lithium markets for the Anglo-Australian miner. Surging cashflows, with productivity savings in train, and a 4.3% dividend yield. Buy. £69.48.

St James's Place*Investor's Chronicle*

Concerns about departing advisory firms have dogged the wealth manager, but funds under management have hit a record £241bn, with strong earnings growth expected in 2027. An attractive entry price. Buy. £10.82.

Vesuvius*Citywire*

The molten-metal engineering group has flagged problems in its steel division and a tough European market. Still, Jefferies is keeping faith, citing the benefits of EU quotas and lower Chinese exports. Target: 520p. Buy. 392p.

Directors' dealings

Marks and Spencer

More than a year after M&S's cyber incident rocked ops and depressed shares, both are recovering: shares are up 174% since January. Directors are making hay. Food boss Alex Freudmann sold a stake worth £1.07m; retiring ops direct Sacha Berendji realised £1.19m.

SOURCE: FINANCIAL TIMES

...and some to hold, avoid or sell

Autotrader Group*The Times*

Whacked by a car-dealer rebellion and fears of AI irrelevancy, the online motor marketplace has been finding ways to add value for punters. Shares trade at a historically low price-to-earnings ratio. Hold. 512p.

BP*The Twelfth Magpie*

The sale of North Sea assets won't significantly affect shares – up 24% this year largely due to the Iran war. What counts is energy prices and their impact on the dividend. Better to wait for a further softening. Avoid. 543p.

Microsoft*Morningstar*

Q4 results at the "wide-moat" tech giant have topped expectations. Revenue jumped 17% to \$90bn – buoyed by surging growth on the Azure cloud platform, in both trad and AI workloads. "Fair value"? \$600. Hold. \$449.96.

Sabre Insurance Group*Citywire*

Momentum continues to build at this specialist motor insurer, backed by a £5m buyback and strong 2025 results, says Downing. Shares have jumped 40% this year amid improving profitability and premium growth. Hold. 185p.

Tesla*Investors' Chronicle*

Quarterly capex has doubled to \$5.8bn and is set to rise for two years. Yet "it's not obvious" what Elon Musk's automaker "wants to build" ahead of a possible merger with SpaceX. Profits have shrunk by 57%. Sell. \$307.

Unilever*Investors' Chronicle*

The consumer giant's healthy half-year figures are overshadowed by the uncertain impact of selling the food unit – its most profitable business – to sauce-maker McCormick. An imminent re-rating seems unlikely. Hold. £49.20.

Form guide

Shares tipped 12 weeks ago

Best tip**Segro***The Times*

up 36.07% to 974.8p

Worst tip**Strix Group***Citywire*

down 16.34% to 34.3p

Market view

"The market's hoping that we see maybe just a short-term pressure-release valve."

Emily Ashford of Standard Chartered on hopes for an Iran deal. Oil market normalisation will still "take a long time".
Quoted on Bloomberg

Market summary

Key numbers for investors

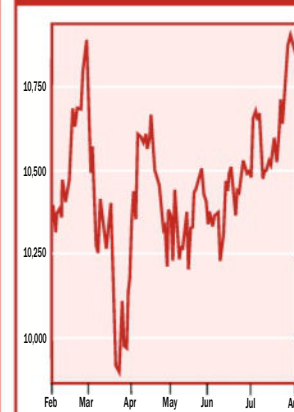
	4 Aug 2026	Week before	Change (%)
FTSE 100	10879.38	10871.02	0.08%
FTSE All-share UK	5855.17	5839.12	0.27%
Dow Jones	54148.52	52882.36	2.39%
NASDAQ	26425.64	24951.67	5.91%
Nikkei 225	63957.53	62364.92	2.55%
Hang Seng	25852.92	25310.85	2.14%
Gold	4087.92	4044.33	1.08%
Brent Crude Oil	79.30	84.53	-6.19%
DIVIDEND YIELD (FTSE 100)	3.02%	2.96%	
UK 10-year gilts yield	4.90	4.94	
US 10-year Treasuries	4.62	4.59	
UK ECONOMIC DATA			
Latest CPI (yoy)	2.6% (Jun)	2.8% (May)	
Latest RPI (yoy)	3.0% (Jun)	3.1% (May)	
Lloyds house price (yoy)	0.6% (Jun)	0.5% (May)	
£1 STERLING:	\$1.346 €1.167 ¥212.448		Bitcoin \$64,119.82

Best and worst performing shares

WEEK'S CHANGE, FTSE 100 STOCKS		
RISES	Price	% change
Antofagasta	3931.00	+10.39
Polar Capital Technology	669.00	+9.58
Glencore	551.00	+8.71
Anglo American	3907.00	+7.87
BAE Systems	2184.00	+7.85
FALLS		
IG Group	1360.00	-19.91
Rentokil Initial	370.00	-14.00
AstraZeneca	11740.00	-9.27
Coca-Cola Europac	7735.00	-8.35
London Stock Exchange	8500.00	-7.10
FTSE 250 RISER & FALLER		
Travis Perkins	679.00	+19.56
Lancashire Holdings	592.00	-10.23

Source: FT (not adjusted for dividends). Prices on 4 Aug (pm)

Following the Footsie



6-month movement in the FTSE 100 index

How a fractured family was reunited by ChatGPT

Avtar Singh spent decades wondering what happened to the mother he never got to know. Thousands of miles away, Nicci was haunted by the story of a half-brother given away before she was born. How did an AI chatbot bring them together? Jenny Kleeman reports

As a small boy growing up in Amritsar, India, in the 1960s, Avtar Singh used to hear whispers. *Your mum isn't really your mum*, they would say. *Your mum lives abroad*. Avtar didn't really pay attention. "I thought, the neighbours are just making up stories." But the stories were true: the woman raising Avtar was actually his grandmother. When he was too young to remember it, his father had emigrated to Canada to work as a teacher, leaving Avtar in the care of his paternal grandparents. His grandfather, a police officer, was a fearsome authoritarian, but his grandmother brought him up with tenderness. She called him by his nickname, Titu. He felt loved.

When Avtar was around eight, he was told about his family in Canada: his dad, his mum and a little brother were waiting for him there. Just after his ninth birthday, on Christmas Eve 1968, he flew, alone, to Halifax, Nova Scotia, dressed in a three-piece suit and tie; his family met him at the airport and took him home. "I didn't know what to think," Avtar, now 66, tells me in a video call from his home in Abbotsford, British Columbia. "Before I knew it, it was the first week of January, and I was put in school." Unable to speak English, Avtar watched what his fellow pupils did and followed along, storing his snow boots in the cloakroom, standing up to sing the Canadian national anthem and *God Save the Queen*. With his long hair tied in the topknot often worn by Sikh boys, he stood out. His parents offered to buy him a hockey stick and a pair of ice skates if he agreed to get his hair cut. He learnt English. His nickname changed from Titu to "Tito". He began to blend in.

But Avtar didn't fit in at home. He was much paler than everyone else – "the white sheep of the family", he jokes. And they treated him like an outsider, an afterthought. When he was 14, his family went on holiday without him, leaving him home alone for two weeks. He got on well enough with his father, but didn't gel at all with his mother. "She didn't have any of the warmth that my grandma had. She absolutely hated me." She seemed much more like a stepmother than a mother.

That feeling was confirmed years later, when Avtar got married and his grandparents flew over to stay with him and his new wife, Rosey. His grandma "whispered into my wife's ear" that Avtar was the product of his father's first marriage. "She didn't say what my mother's name was. She just said, 'Her family was from Africa, and she left the child with us and went back to Africa. She might have gone to live in the UK.' That's it." It didn't feel



Avtar Singh: "I thought, why not give AI a shot?"

"Avtar's family in Canada raised him like an outsider. When he was 14, they went on holiday without him, leaving him alone for two weeks"

right to ask his grandparents for more information: this was clearly a family secret that no one wanted to discuss with Avtar.

When his own son was set a school assignment to complete his family tree, Avtar felt emboldened to approach his father. "I said, 'Dad, you've got to tell me at least what my mother's name was.'" His dad eventually relented: her first name was Savinder. But he would not give Avtar any more information. "I was stonewalled." Avtar had no idea why his parents had split up. "All I really understood was that my mother's family encouraged her to give up custody of me so it would be easier for them to remarry her."

He thought about his mother constantly, and resolved to try and find her. He googled and Facebooked, but there was almost nothing to go on; Savinder is a fairly common Punjabi Sikh name. In 2009, Avtar flew to London to visit the National Archives at Kew in the hope of finding immigration or marriage records that might lead him to his mother. "I couldn't find anything at all." On a later visit to London, he emailed Sunrise Radio,

a British-Asian station, asking if they could put out an appeal to find his mother, but they told Avtar they don't do that kind of thing, out of respect for people's privacy. That gave Avtar pause. "I thought, maybe I should just cool off. If my mother has some other family, I don't want to disrupt her life." Still, it niggled. Three or four years ago, he asked a British south Asian work colleague for advice; she suggested contacting the ITV show *Long Lost Family*. He watched a few episodes and decided it wasn't for him. But he longed to know his mother. "The thought of her did not leave my mind, ever."

The one thing Avtar did not do was a DNA test. He is retired now, but his career as a chartered accountant taught him enough about technology, data and privacy to make him wary of giving up his genetic code to a corporation. He deactivated his Facebook account 12 years ago for similar reasons. Then, on 8 May this year, Avtar and Rosey were on holiday in the South of France. Avtar had been battling cancer; their trip to Europe came after he'd finished his treatment. "It was early morning, and I had read all the news. I was bored. I had nothing else to do. I thought, I've tried Google and everything else, why don't I give AI a shot?" He typed a prompt into ChatGPT, based on the little he knew, and what else he could infer. He assumed that his mother would be around the same age as his father (who died ten years ago); he knew that Sikh women of her generation were generally given the middle name Kaur.

Avtar: Can you find any information about a Savinder Kaur? She would be between 87 and 97 years old and would have lived in India and Africa and possibly in the UK.

ChatGPT: The strongest match, based upon your clues, is this ... Savinder Kaur Nagi, born in 1936 in Kisumu, Kenya, to Indian Sikh parents. The article mentions family roots near Jammu and Kashmir in India and later migration connections to the UK.

"I know that AI can just make up shit. So I thought, OK, that's nice," says Avtar. "But it actually referenced an article. I thought, I'll look at that, at least. Just to see."

"I wrote it out of grief," Nicci Dhamu tells me, in a café in west London. "Mummy never really had a voice, and that article was all about giving her one." Nicci is the jewellery designer behind the brand Sohavi. "Sohavi means beautiful in Gurmukhi, the Sikh script. I learnt about making things beautiful from Mum." Her article, published on the Sohavi blog and the South Asian Heritage Month website, was a celebration of her mother. Savinder Kaur Dhamu died in her sleep in December 2024, aged 88. For the last five years of her life, she had dementia. Nicci, 58, had been her carer; they lived together and were very close. Nicci's family moved to the UK from Kenya in 1973. She has an older sister and a younger brother, as well as three half-sisters from her dad's first marriage; he was widowed before he met Savinder. "We grew up as one family. I didn't know until I was about ten or 11 years old that my sisters were my half-sisters, and that was only because one of my sisters told me." Theirs was a family that did not speak about the past.

"I remember once, Mum was in the kitchen making roti, and I asked her, 'Mummy, you were, like, 25 years old when you got married to Dad. Wasn't that a little old for somebody of your generation?' I knew that something was different about our family, but I didn't have the vocabulary to label it. My father never spoke to us about his wife who had died, and my mum never spoke about her life before him."

When Nicci was in her 40s, an older cousin casually revealed that Savinder had been married to another man before she met Nicci's dad. "She was married off, very young. And it probably wasn't what she wanted," Nicci says. "My grandfather took her and her sisters out of school in Kenya and took them back to Punjab to a place called Dhariwal, just outside Amritsar." Later in life, her mother would openly lament leaving school – she could read and write English, and loved studying – but never explained why she had given up her education. She did not discuss her first marriage. She never told her children they had an older half-brother.

"My cousin told me in that conversation that she had a son." Nicci's eyes are bright at the memory. But she never felt able to ask her mother about him. "I couldn't. There was intrinsic pain there." There were times, Nicci says, when her mother would sink into a depression. "She would sit quietly, or take to bed because she was upset." And towards the end of her life, Nicci recalls, she would often cry *Mera bacha* – meaning "My child" in Punjabi. "The dementia was bringing up all these memories for her."

Nicci resolved to find the child her mother was crying for, but had little to go on: she didn't even know his name. She spoke to her mother's young brother, who lives in Birmingham. "He knew my mum's child as a two- or three-year-old," Nicci says. She learnt that her mother's first husband was called Mohan Singh, and he



Avtar Singh's mother, Savinder, in 1963

taught at the Sri Guru Ramdas Khalsa school in Amritsar. Mohan's father had been a police officer, and "quite a difficult man". Savinder had told her father that her husband wasn't treating her well. "I think my grandad thought, this is not a good place for my daughter to be. He went around and took his daughter back to his home, and she must have picked up her little boy, too."

Her mother raised the boy until he was three years old, Nicci was told. "As someone who is also divorced, I often reflect on the stigma my mother may have faced as a south Asian woman of her generation," she tells me. "I think there was a lot of pressure from the family: let's get her married. Somebody as young as her was going to have a very difficult life as a single mother. She was too young to be on her own. Her son's family wanted him back. So they must have taken the child from her."

Savinder returned to Kenya, alone, at first staying with her eldest brother. Nicci's cousins have vivid memories of her time in their home.

"She would take his baby clothes out and cry. She never forgot him." She was soon introduced to Nicci's father, a man 16 years her senior. "I think she carried that trauma throughout her life, but did a very good job of holding her head up high, making her life work, raising three more children." Family in Kenya heard through the grapevine that Savinder's first husband had moved to Canada, but they couldn't tell Nicci when. And no one knew the name of Savinder's little boy. They only knew his nickname: Titu.

"No one's going to call themselves Titu on LinkedIn, are they?"

says Nicci with a deep laugh. That didn't stop her trying to find him online, and his father and grandfather, too, by googling the names of teachers and police officers in Amritsar. "I didn't capture anything. How do you

find somebody without a name? It's impossible." Three or four months before her mother died, she submitted Savinder's DNA to Ancestry.com. "I set up a profile for her, saying, 'Profile managed by daughter, looking for her son, name is Titu, possibly living in Canada.'" She got some interesting tidbits back about her mother's ancestral roots in Kashmir, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, which would explain her light complexion, but no useful matches.

Nicci didn't give up. She contacted friends who knew people who had worked for the magistrates' court in Amritsar, in the hope of tracking down records of her mother's divorce. But she was told that would be virtually impossible. In April 2025, while she and her family were in India to return Savinder's ashes there, she visited Sri Guru Ramdas Khalsa school in Amritsar, where Titu's father had taught. She spoke to the teachers and the security guard, but it was long after Mohan Singh's time there, so no one knew of him or his son. All she wanted was a name for her half-brother, but no one could tell her. It felt hopeless. "I remember sitting there thinking, why doesn't he just knock on the door? I knew that his father was an educated man – I was pretty sure that he must be educated, too. Why isn't he looking for Mum?"

Avtar blinked at the article ChatGPT had presented to him. Rosey was just waking up. He made her a coffee and showed her what he'd found, but she wasn't convinced. After all, the article didn't mention Savinder's first marriage, divorce or long-lost son. "Rosey didn't want me to be disappointed – she knows how hard I had looked for my mother." Then he looked at the article again, and a picture stopped him in his tracks: not one of the many photos Nicci had posted of her mother – there was no flicker of instant recognition when he

saw Savinder's face – but an image of a certificate her mother had earned for dressmaking at a college in Dhariwal, just outside Amritsar, in 1962. "This is two or three years after I was born, and it is in the exact city where I was born," Avtar exhales deeply, as if he still can't believe what he saw. He had to find out more.

At 8.36am that morning, he sent Nicci an email, thanking her for writing the tribute to her mother.

Avtar: *What especially resonated with me was the part of her life connected to India. Reading about her journey raised many personal questions and reflections for me, and I found myself feeling there may be some distant family or community connections between us. I want to assure you that I am not reaching out for any business, financial, or other formal reason, only in the spirit of a friendly conversation.*

Nicci had spent the previous night praying at the *gurdwara* and watching *Long Lost Family* on TV. Avtar's email had arrived on the morning of what would have been her mother's 90th birthday. "It was wild!" Nicci exclaims. "I just had a real sense of knowing. I can't explain it. This is my mum's son. It's got to be." She agonised over how to reply, eventually adopting a similarly friendly but respectful tone.

Nicci: *I am equally intrigued to know if there might be a family connection. I would be happy to have a conversation with you.*

Her phone number was in her email signature. Avtar sent her a message on WhatsApp as soon as he saw it, asking when they could speak. Nicci scrutinised his WhatsApp profile picture. "He had a very distinctive nose. Everybody in my mother's family has this prominent, distinguished nose." She messaged back – she was free to talk there and then. It was barely two hours since Avtar had typed his prompt into ChatGPT. He was driving with Rosey to get some croissants for breakfast. He parked up, clicked on Nicci's number and called her. There wasn't much of a preamble. Avtar was too eager to have his questions finally answered.

"Can you tell me a bit about your mother's time in India?" he asked.

"Mummy was married and divorced in India," Nicci replied.

"Did she have any children?"

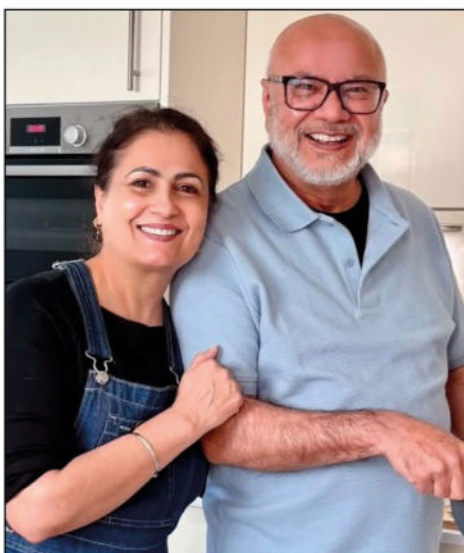
"Yes," Nicci said. "She had a son."

Both Avtar and Rosey burst into tears.

"Titu, is that you?" asked Nicci. "Are you Titu, my mother's son?"

"Yes," Avtar replied. "That's who I am. But I haven't heard anyone pronounce my nickname that way since my grandma called me that, when I was a little boy."

"At that moment, time just froze," Avtar remembers. "But I quickly recovered. I said, 'You're my sister. Holy shit – are there more of you out there?' It had never occurred to me that my mother would have a family, and that I could actually meet them. That family, they knew about me – everybody knew about me, they just wouldn't talk about it – but I had no knowledge about them whatsoever." They spoke for two hours in that first phone call, until Avtar's battery started to die. Nicci had assumed he must be in Canada; she couldn't believe he was in France, so close by. "Why don't you fly over?" she asked. Avtar's head was spinning. They agreed to speak again later that evening, in a video call. Nicci then gave Avtar a tour of the family photos displayed in the living room she used to share with their mother. "I was just



"You're my sister!": Avtar and Nicci in London

sharing everything I could with him. And sobbing. And remembering Mum. All that grief about her yearning to see him again, and not meeting him. It's like the universe just flung something at me – although I've lost my mum, I've gained a brother."

Within days, Avtar and Rosey were in London. Nicci shows me a picture of the first time they met, at a hotel near Heathrow. Their faces are flushed with joy. "I could see the raw emotion in her – she had been looking for me for so long," Avtar says. "When I met her and hugged her tight, I thought, yes, this is my sister." They went out for dinner and compared stories and timelines, piecing together the fragments that their families had given them.

The following morning, Nicci took Avtar and Rosey to Birmingham, to meet their mother's last-surviving sibling – their uncle

– who had known Titu as a baby. "He looked at me and said, 'I remember you. I held you in my arms,'" Avtar tells me, his eyes awash with tears. "It was a great, great visit." The next day, Avtar was introduced to his half-brother – Nicci's youngest sibling. He had been shocked when Nicci first told him she had found Avtar. "He said, 'But I'm Mummy's son,'" Nicci tells me, laughing. "I said, 'Of course you are. Nothing's going to change our family.'" When they finally met, Nicci says her younger brother shook Avtar's hand. "I just knew it was going to be all right. My brother said, 'I've always wanted a big brother.'"

Avtar and Nicci both tell me they have no plans to confirm their relationship with a DNA test. There's no need, they say. "This world has a few billion people in it. And if somebody

can randomly call me Titu..." Avtar shakes his head. "I don't think I need any more verification than that."

The joy at finally finding Titu is bittersweet for Nicci, because it came too late for her mother. "My biggest regret is that I didn't talk to her about her son and let her cry about him, let her have a release," she tells me. Avtar says he grew up believing that his mother gave him up "because it was the best thing to help her move on with her life. I was OK with that. Now I've heard from Nicci and other people in the family that my mum used to cry for me. That's all I need to hear. It just feels so good to know that I was loved." Plus, Avtar adds, there is "the treasure my mother left behind for me – I have all this family to get to know".

"Every time I see him, I look at him and I just want to cry", Nicci says. "That's my brother." She pauses. "Who would have thought that life would unfold in this way? That ChatGPT would find an article that would lead to an email that would lead to all of this? Technology seems to be in alignment, in the same way that stars can be sometimes." Her half-brother sees things differently. "Right now, AI is still a glorified search engine. It is a piece of software that recognises a pattern in a string of characters," he says. Nor has he become any less reluctant to give Big Tech his data, even though it was ChatGPT's readiness to scrape blogs and give out personal information that led him to his maternal family. Had Avtar chosen to ask another AI, he might not have found Nicci at all. When he came back to Canada, he put the same prompt into Anthropic's Claude, just for fun. "It replied, 'We don't want to infringe on anybody's privacy, so we don't give out that information,'" Avtar tells me. Then he shrugs. "I think that's a good response."

A longer version of this article appeared in The Guardian
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This week's winner will receive Week-branded items, as well as two Connell Guides (connellguides.com).

THE WEEK CROSSWORD 1528

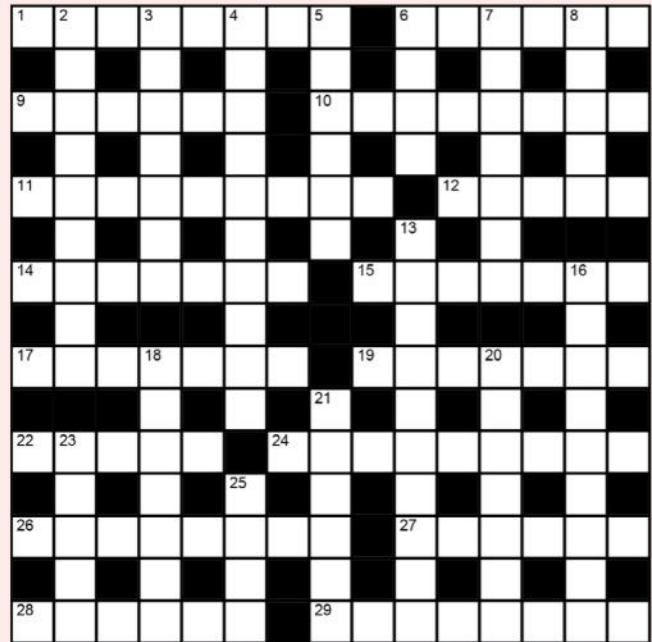
Two Connell Guides and two Week-branded items will be given to the sender of the first correct solution to the crossword and the clue of the week opened on Monday 17 August. Send it to The Week Crossword 1528, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6JR, or email the completed grid/listed solutions to crossword@theweek.co.uk. By Paul McKenna

ACROSS

- 1 Stay prepared also for union offer (8)
- 6 Strange scene involving a meeting across the divide? (6)
- 9 Fake and disagreeable society abandoned precision (6)
- 10 Star scorches various bits and bobs (8)
- 11 Zip on a purse – one of a pair in service? (6,3)
- 12 Like old feet with pressing trouble – used too often? (5)
- 14 Most just anger held by firm (7)
- 15 Get in touch with head of recruitment exiting commitment (7)
- 17 Dripping is new in little porker (7)
- 19 Area to practise sliding moves child in bridge (7)
- 22 Cold joint, viz prison (5)
- 24 Last person who was helped by elves? (9)
- 26 Provide church atmosphere as something to settle into (8)
- 27 Can senator relax? (6)
- 28 Just sharpen with stone (6)
- 29 Dying to go? Problem returns to involve more cost (8)

DOWN

- 2 Say again, I rate tree fantastically (9)
- 3 Those who make a living playing by blossom (7)
- 4 Extraordinary! French on start of people's revolution (10)
- 5 Exercise with fewer clothes perhaps (6)
- 6 Son with intention to get off (4)
- 7 Look over wine where some holidays might start (7)
- 8 Lance boils without mishap (5)
- 13 Reserve stock of wine, as reported, for a shop (10)
- 16 Calm one, he wound up a sort to make changes (9)
- 18 Find fault hankering for flamboyant confidence (7)
- 20 Linger over last bit of slow-cooked stew (4,3)
- 21 Little 'un embracing that woman's sweet child (6)
- 23 Finally sail on legendary boat that's slow (5)
- 25 Deal is wrapped up, we hear (4)



Name _____

Address _____

_____ Tel no _____

Clue of the week answer: _____

Clue of the week: Upset Latin Masters? (12) Clue-writing competition winner, *The Sunday Times*

Solution to Crossword 1526

- ACROSS:** 1 Take the biscuit 10 Ropes 11 Narration 12 Solvers 13 Enhance 14 Snips 16 Antipasto 19 Big cheese 20 Yacht 22 Later on 25 Toaster 27 Artichoke 28 Truss 29 Simple interest
- DOWN:** 2 Appalling 3 Ensure 4 Handshake 5 Borne 6 Slaphappy 7 Union 8 Tangelo 9 Crisis 15 Spherical 17 Treatment 18 Secateurs 19 Ballads 21 Thrust 23 Totem 24 Naomi 26 Alter
- Clue of the week: Weakens binding in book (9,4)
- Solution: **WATERSHIP DOWN** (hip in [waters down])

The winner of 1526 is Janet Bloom from Coventry

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Sudoku 1,070 (very difficult)

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

Solution to Sudoku 1,069

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

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Charity of the week



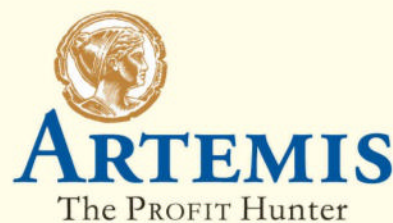
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