

The University of the Bleeding Obvious



KICKING & SCREAMING

A TANTRUM IN 15 MOVEMENTS

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P e a n u t s

The TUC calculates that in excess of five million people in the UK regularly work unpaid overtime, amounting to £27.4 billion of free work every year. To put this into perspective, if a typical worker was to work all those free hours at the beginning of the year, he or she wouldn't start getting paid until February 26th.

Bumping up the average is Mrs Christina Pyle who rarely puts in less than a 90-hour week for Perkins Premium Peanut Products. We were simultaneously delighted and surprised that she found time to speak to us.

Mrs Christina Pyle: You'll have to be quick, I'm on my lunch break. At least these bastards consent to me taking five minutes to grab a sandwich occasionally - chiefly because they're alive to the possibility of malnourished employees falling into the machinery and damaging something expensive.

University of the Bleeding Obvious: Yes, we can see that they keep you busy.

Mrs Pyle: They get their money's worth - and more. It stems from a pathological need to ensure that your nose is never more than half an inch from the grindstone. It would offend their deepest principals to see anyone snatch a brief moment to mop their brow or scratch their arse. I did hear of this one bloke who once had the audacity to kneel down and tie a shoelace. You've got to admire that kind of nerve. Of course, that was before my time.

UBO: You don't seem entirely happy with the working conditions here.



Mrs Pyle: Ah, you picked up on that, did you? You're very quick. The fundamental problem here is that my job, such that it is, is crap.

UBO: Ah.

Mrs Pyle: What I do for a living is ultimately pointless. You see that machine over there?

UBO: The one spitting out peanuts everywhere?

Mrs Pyle: That's the one. That machine has been on the fritz for thirty years. Seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, that mechanical maniac lobs out peanuts - about six hundredweight an hour. The bloody things end up everywhere: rolling under equipment, wedged in air conditioning vents, ricocheting off of the roof beams and shooting down your neck. We spend most of our working day dodging nutty shrapnel.

UBO: That's horrendous.

Mrs Pyle: You're being a little melodramatic, but you've got a point. It's no sodding picnic, let's put it that way. Well, anyway - that's my job.

UBO: To fix the machine?

Mrs Pyle: To pick up the peanuts.

UBO: You pick up peanuts?

Mrs Pyle: Yes, I'm a peanut picker-upper. In fact, I'm a



fully qualified peanut picker-upper; they even gave me a certificate for it. The gormless meathead that I'm obliged to recognise as my superior would appear to be of the opinion that some hastily put-together, shoddily printed flap of slightly damp paper will somehow recompense me for the lack of a decent wage. He seems quite certain that a fancy font supplemented with a few badly rendered examples of clipart will somehow convince me that, after thirty years, I'm a valued member of the team. I remain unconvinced.

UBO: They could just fix the machine.

Mrs Pyle: Ah, now, see what you've done there? You have applied logic and common sense to the problem - that's where you're going wrong. The machine is broken - therefore you fix the machine. Logical, but what you are failing to take into account is that the company I work for is essentially crooked and incompetent, and the exploitation of the workforce is at the very heart of its philosophy. When the current owner happened to mention that he wanted a cowboy outfit for Christmas, someone bought him this place. It was a perfect fit.

UBO: So the obvious thing to do -

Mrs Pyle: Oh, we are all aware of the obvious course of action. Everybody who works on the factory floor is of one mind. They limp out of here at the end of the day - noses bloodied, eyes stinging, their red flesh puckered with peanut shot - and they look at each other wistfully and say, 'they need to fix that machine '. It's a very touching scene.



UBO: It sounds -

Mrs Pyle: Heartbreaking? Yes it does. You can almost hear the music swell as those painful, broken silhouettes shuffle off towards a golden sun setting on a distant horizon. It's like a fucking Disney movie.

UBO: The end of the shift must come as a great relief.

Mrs Pyle: It does - to everybody but me, because long after the final whistle goes, I'm still shackled to my dustpan and brush. I can't make my escape until every last peanut has been recovered. I remember, sometimes, that I used to have a life. I think that's what it's called: 'a life'. These ethereal, half-forgotten memories of home and family float back to me. I would spend my evenings drawing, gardening, occasionally even reading. I think it was me, though I suppose it could have been somebody else.

UBO: Drawing?

Mrs Pyle: But now my evenings are spent here, harvesting the detritus of another working day.

UBO: You're an artist?

Mrs Pyle: No, I'm a peanut picker-upper. We've established that. Maybe thirty years ago I entertained the notion that I could draw comic strips. Maybe I clung to that dream for many a year, working into the night, sending off samples and getting nowhere. Maybe I'd still be pursuing that childish fantasy if I had the time and the energy. Unfortunately, great big chunks of my life are no



longer mine to command.

UBO: The overtime must come in handy.

Mrs Pyle: All unpaid. My only reward is the satisfaction of knowing that I play a vital role in the continuing growth of the company.

UBO: Well, it's very... er... 'obliging' of you to agree to that.

Mrs Pyle: You are very free and easy with that word 'agree'. I don't believe I was consulted. There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will - in my case he is called Mr Wingerworth. While I spend my evenings haunting the factory ramparts, said Wingerworth is up the golf club, or down the casino, or over the road at the all night executive knocking shop, congratulating himself on dispensing with the necessity of fixing an expensive piece of machinery through the simple expedient of some poor persecuted wage slave.

UBO: But what about the Working -

Mrs Pyle: The Working Time Directive? I believe I was opted out - I did not have the option not to. And while we're on the subject of my statutory rights (oh yes, I've read up on all this) I'm well aware that all these unpaid hours drag my actual hourly rate way below the minimum wage. But then, what's the point of having a disposable income when I don't have the time to dispose of it?

UBO: Haven't you complained?



Mrs Pyle: I thought I *was* complaining - I'm complaining to you, aren't I? You can tell I'm complaining because of the way my mouth is flapping, my fists are clenching and my face is twisting into a hateful leer.

UBO: No, we meant -

Mrs Pyle: I know, I know. You meant I should cry "to hell wi' t' looms!" throw off the shackles and stride out into the sun. And maybe I should - maybe I should raise my voice, stand my ground and stamp my feet. But I know it would be pointless. Those whose sole motive in life is to amass a grotesque fortune at the expense of others tend not to be of a sympathetic bent. They live in a world of profit margins, throughput and efficiency targets. Concepts like decent wages, statutory rights and health and safety belong in some fluffy fairytale dimension, which they seldom visit. I could file a grievance, yes. Equally, I could spend an hour bashing my cranium against the office wall, and probably reap measurably better results.

UBO: Clearly you believe that you are being treated unfairly.

Mrs Pyle: I do - I do believe that. I'm not a particularly devout person in many respects, but that particular conviction is one that I embrace with evangelical zeal. Friends and strangers alike will tell you that I do not shirk at my responsibility to vent my displeasure at every conceivable opportunity.



UBO: But -

Mrs Pyle: But I do nothing about it - that was what you were going to say, yes? For the sake of a quiet life, I just roll over and let it happen? Well, perhaps I'm not as pathetic as you think. I have my moments. Once I drew a cartoon on the canteen wall - it was Mr Wingerworth dressed as a Stormtrooper. A really vicious little caricature. Everyone loved it.

UBO: And what did Mr Wingerworth think?

Mrs Pyle: He never saw it. I got rid of it before he had the chance. No sense in rocking the boat, is there? Now, if you'll excuse me, these peanuts won't sweep up themselves.



... You don't have to mad to
work here, but certain
classes of dementia can
expedite promotion...

In an excuse-for-an-office closet, in a disintegrating 70s office block, in a forgotten kebab shop-strewn alleyway of a deadbeat Midlands former steel town, we found Grant Pollard. Grant Pollard had not made himself difficult to find. As a junior branch manger with the blossoming and publicity-hungry travel firm CheapoCruz, Mr Pollard allows that this is a necessary part of his brief, and although folks might find him in reduced circumstances, find him they most assuredly do.

Mr Pollard, true professional that he is, welcomes us with a Dulux smile in brilliant white with a hint of chiffon, and invites us to occupy the furniture. He even offers us biscuits, and we feel special.

Now you might be thinking that all the smiley-comfy-help-yourself-to-a-chocky-biccys stuff might interfere with our journalistic integrity. Not one bit of it. CheapoCruz may be flavour of the month with the indiscriminating consumer impatient to disgorge his savings on a cheap tour around the Med, but we were not likely to be bowled over by the glossy brochures and the smarmy chat. Besides, we had already decided that Mr Pollard was a git.

"There was a time," Mr Pollard enlightens us once we're nicely settled, "when a luxury cruise would be a pleasure reserved only for the extremely wealthy."

We momentarily gasp in surprise, but otherwise disguise our astonishment. Mr Pollard, you will no doubt already have gathered, is a company man through and through.

"Now of course, thanks to CheapoCruz, such luxury



is well within the reach of everyone!" he enthuses, emphasising the exclamation mark with a vulpine leer.

(Indeed - although such a change of affairs, we might pause to note, is a result of vigorous competition rather than the largesse of this particular tour operator. Nevertheless it has to be acknowledged that CheapoCruz - and we detest the name, by the way - has enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence and now leads the market in artless booze-cruises to distant brothels and far-flung nightclubs. We feel charitable enough to mention this.)

"You seem to be doing very well."

"Yes," he replies, then goes and spoils it all by adding, "we've certainly made a bit of a splash!"

Splash, get it?... Yeah, well, there's no need for that sort of thing.

Pollard permits himself a self-satisfied smirk before diving into the sales pitch and sloshing a few playful platitudes in our direction. "But then we're very different from other operators. Certainly we offer the best value - but just because you pay less for your holiday, that doesn't mean you get any less of an experience. You see, at CheapoCruz the customer always comes first."

Mr Pollard makes this point very deliberately, as though it's a mantra that somehow sets his firm apart from any other - but we remain fairly confident that most other companies take the same line. Put it this way: we've never come across a business - *any* business - that claims to treat its customers like shit. They might *do* it, but they wouldn't actually *say* it. Naturally, we keep these thoughts to ourselves and smile pleasantly.

"For a week or two in their otherwise mundane lives, ordinary folk can savour the opulence and splendour usually enjoyed only by the super-rich, before returning to their dreary lives as shop assistants or what-have-you,"



he continues.

"Wonderful."

"I like to think we can bring a bit of sparkle and a touch of adventure to their otherwise drab existences," he gushes.

"Marvellous"

"And our growing popularity is testament to our customers' appreciation of our service."

"Well quite," we say, before adding: "That said, it would be interesting to find out to what extent the public would maintain their enthusiasm if they knew about the frankly scandalous way the company is being run."

Biff! You see what we did there? Kept him sweet, nodded in all the right places, then hit him with the left hook just when he wasn't expecting it. Mr Pollard's smile could not have fallen any lower if his face had dropped off and rolled across the floor.

"I beg your pardon?" he says weakly.

"Well, we're sure you must be alarmed about some of the concerns that have been raised?"

He goes quiet, very quiet, and looks upon us with mounting agitation. "I'm not aware of..."

"Not least of which is the matter of how your fleet of ships is powered," we enlighten him.

Mr Pollard sighs. In fact, it's very nearly a sigh of contentment. Obviously the smarmy tit feels he's back in familiar territory. "Now, this is something of which we're very proud," he drools, beaming broadly as he leans forward in his seat. "It's a breakthrough: we use a totally energy-efficient, environmentally-friendly power source."

"You use galley slaves."

"Transportation Associates, I think you'll find," a well-prepared Pollard is quick to reply.



Fair enough, we won't argue the point. We have far weightier matters to raise than his questionable terminology. "So, is it absolutely necessary," we press on, "to chain your 'Transportation Associates' to the oars and lash them repeatedly with a cat o' nine tails?"

Mr Pollard sinks a little deeper into his chair. He lapses into an uneasy silence, during which his eyes flit around the room like a bewildered bluebottle, bouncing off windows and doors, and struggling with increasing desperation to find an exit. Satisfying himself that there is no easy escape route, the previously resourceful Mr Pollard responds weakly with an uneasy smile and the frail whimper: "Oh come now, I think you're exaggerating just a little."

We, in turn, proceed to smite his feeble attempt at bonhomie by extracting one of several well-stuffed box files from a bag and holding it aloft like a freshly un-bouldered *Excalibur*. "We have a good many testimonies to the contrary," we proclaim heroically.

"Okay," Mr Pollard croaks hoarsely. Finally realising that he has no option but to stand and fight, he clears his throat and says: "I admit that the business needs of the company do require us, at times, to make sacrifices. And admittedly, yes, it has proven necessary to chain some of our staff to their workstations. It's not pleasant, but it cuts down on absenteeism. And, occasionally, some colleagues are flogged, but this is always done in the presence of the company medic or a designated first-aider; and it's only ever carried out in accordance with the firm's dismissal and disciplinary procedure."

Whelk. We frown. He, Pollard, leans forward with a measure of apprehension. We ask : "Are you quite sure about this?"



"Oh, yes, yes - quite sure," he responds, though ineffectually enough for us to question his conviction and have serious anatomical doubts about the presence of a backbone. "Look, it's all here in this pamphlet."

He scuffles about on his desktop, shuffles a sheaf of papers and drops them onto the floor in his haste. Wombling them up, he slips a slender leaflet from the dog-eared bundle and proffers it to us gingerly twixt thumb and forefinger, like a man offering a kipper to an angry walrus.

Flogging and You, reads the title. Flipping it open we find images of happy, smiling 'transport associates' bound to various pieces of rotting timber, all having sizeable chunks of flesh stripped from them. Sub-headings like 'Discipline in the Workplace' and 'Taking One For the Team' fail to convince us that this is strictly necessary for the needs of the business.

"You know, some people might not be entirely happy to learn that this sort of thing goes on," we observe.

Mr Pollard shrugs. It's an abnormally dynamic gesture coming from such a depressingly indifferent man "Well, not everyone can be expected to understand modern business methods," he splutters.

"Some people," we plough on, "might consider this sort of thing barbaric."

"Oh no," Pollard gabbles defensively. "Barbaric? No, I really don't think so... Hang on, I'll check."

He reaches for his phone. We sit there, slightly puzzled, as he taps out a number and smiles obsequiously as he awaits a reply.

"Won't be a minute... Ah, Mr Lonsdale!" He twists away from us slightly as he speaks. "Yes, Mr Lonsdale, sorry to bother you. I've got some people with me here who are wondering whether it's barbaric to flog our



transport associates. Yes, yes, that's right - *barbaric*."

Cradling the receiver with both hands, Pollard listens carefully, responding with occasional redundant nods and a scattering of randomly repeated words.

"Yes, yes... necessary, Mr Lonsdale... disruptive elements... needs of the business, Mr Lonsdale. Yes, thank you Mr Lonsdale. I'll put them straight about it. Goodbye Mr Lonsdale."

We watch him replace the receiver. "Who was that?" we ask.

"That was Mr Lonsdale," Pollard replies. "He's the regional manager." He cracks a smile, and it's not pretty. "And I'm happy to reassure you that flogging our staff is not barbaric."

This flat dismissal of our concerns takes us by surprise. We seize a brief moment to formulate a fresh plan of attack, before explaining that we have to disagree and would expect most of their staff to respond likewise.

"Not at all," Pollard counters, with all the compassion and humanity of a man who doesn't give a flying fig. "All our employees remain loyal and dedicated to their work. This is surely self-evident? I mean, if conditions really were unacceptable then wouldn't we have a much higher turnover of staff?"

His argument appears to be well rehearsed, but we don't allow it to throw us. "Don't you think the manacles might have something to do with that?" we challenge him. "Clearly, the only practical option for escape would be to gnaw through one of their own limbs."

"Oh, that's a little extreme."

"Although," we continue, "since the only payment they receive is a small chunk of stale bread once a day..."

"Well, that's not strictly - "



"...remuneration which, we are reliably informed, falls somewhat short of the minimum wage requirements..."

"I don't think that - "

"...gnawing off one of their own limbs might be considered a tempting option."

We fix Mr Pollard with a steely glance, because we've heard that sort of thing can be wonderfully intimidating. Also, he's getting on our wick and we feel this is the natural thing to do. "Mr Pollard, we put it to you that the only reason your 'transportation associates' don't choose this particular way of resigning is that the loss of blood, malnutrition, armed guards and heavy, bolted doors combine to provide a more than adequate disincentive."

"No... No... That's just not true. Look... I'll..." Pollard panics, scoops up the phone once more, taps out a number and hunches over the mouthpiece. A moment's silence then: "Ah hello, yes. Mr Lonsdale, just one more... Yes, sorry, it's me again. Just a quick query... yes... yes..."

Pollard glances up at us uncomfortably. We're starting to wonder if this man is being worked by remote control.

"Yes, sorry, they're still here, sorry... They're talking about why more people don't leave the company... Yes, sorry, I know, but they're suggesting staff are forced to - "

Pollard dutifully falls silent as he listens to his lord and master, then apologises unctuously and replaces the receiver. "Well, there you go," he informs us, his confidence semi-restored. "Mr Lonsdale says that the reason we retain staff is that we provide an excellent package of benefits."



"Benefits?" we say.

"Benefits," he repeats, a little shakily.

"And what are these benefits?" we ask.

Pollard huffs and throws open his arms. "Ooh, where to start?" he begins, sounding like he's not exactly spoilt for choice. "Free uniform."

We cruelly allow the silence to endure, then: "Is that it?" we ask, feeling that he needs to be prompted to continue.

"Oh no, there's... *things*, you know?"

"Things?" we enquire.

"Yeah, medical things," he attempts to elucidate.

"A health plan?" we suggest accommodatingly, hoping to help him shed a little light on the matter.

"Something of the sort," he mumbles. "And they get, you know, food as well."

"Food!" we reply. "You know, you're running a very real risk of spoiling these people."

This proves to be a touch of sarcasm too far for our Mr Pollard. "Enough!" the weasel bellows, and he suddenly thumps his desk. Several piles of paperwork leap tempestuously into the air, rearrange themselves in mid-flight and settle back into their usual sedentary routine. We become equally agitated at this sudden and uncharacteristic outburst.

"You have no idea! No idea! No idea at all!" he shouts.

Apparently we have no idea.

"Listen up!" he barks at us, and we notice that he's turning a curious shade of beetroot. "We all want an easy life, but it's not that simple, is it? Head office phones me up and says we've got to increase productivity here, slash the wage bill there, come up with some new initiatives left right and centre - and if I don't deliver the goods it's



my arse hanging out to dry in the morning. We've all got to buckle down, pull up our socks and get the flag up the pole. So, someone has to work a few extra shifts; someone has to get chained to an oar; someone - every so often, just once in a while - has to get keelhauled. Well, that's just too bad. I don't like it. Nobody likes it. But that's just the way it is."

Wow. An outburst like that deserves a round of applause, but we resist the temptation, fearing it would only serve to antagonise our little friend. Besides, we're intrigued by something else he let slip.

"Keelhauled?"

"Keelhauled?" Pollard responds, his voice breaking. His little tirade seems to have sapped his strength, and we're confident he remains a spent force. "Who said anything about keelhauling?"

We tell him who mentioned it, breaking the news to him as gently as we can.

"Did I?" he says. "Well, yes, all right. There is a little bit of keelhauling that goes on amongst staff and management, but it's - "

"The management?" we say. "So, you find yourself in line for a bit of keelhauling yourself, do you?"

He's bright red now, and we're revelling in his discomfort. "Well, yes," he admits, a little shamefully. "We all have to, er, play by the same rules. From time to time... it has been necessary... in the interests of efficiency... along with walking the plank... "

"And you're happy with that, are you?" we ask him.

The question confuses him. "I... I... it's in the interests of the business that - "

"But do you think it's right?" we interrupt him. "Do you think it's okay for you to be abused in this way?"

"Well, you know, you say 'abuse', but... " He makes



a sudden, desperate lunge for the phone, but we stay his hand.

"No, Mr Pollard," we insist, holding his wrist firmly. We can feel his tiny, timorous heart pounding frantically. "We want to know what *you* think about this. We want to know if *you* think this is fair; if *you* think this is right."

He looks up at us now with a plaintive, piteous expression that almost - but not quite - makes us weep. "No," he eventually offers in a small voice. "No, I don't."

Ah ha! Maybe we've made a breakthrough?

"Then do something about it!" we tell him. "Speak your mind! Demand respect! Your destiny is in your own hands, Mr Pollard!"

But the timid Mr Pollard isn't quite ready to be empowered and shrinks away from the harsh light of emancipation.

"Oh, I don't want to make a fuss," he replies.

"You have a right to be treated with dignity," we persevere.

"It's difficult," he continues. "In my position... I don't really want to get involved."

"Like it or not, you *are* involved, Mr Pollard!" we insist. *We're* starting to get carried away now. "Either you stand up for yourself or you roll over and let it happen. You don't have the luxury of sitting on the fence."

"I can't."

"Stand tall, Mr Pollard!" we thunder.

"I mustn't."

"Break free, Mr Pollard!" we roar.

"I won't."

It's too late - we've lost him. That brief glimmer of



hope has been extinguished by a lifetime of subordination and the timid Mr Pollard breaks our grip and once more reaches for the phone, like a drowning man grasping at a space hopper.

"Mr Lonsdale! Mr Lonsdale! Yes, sorry, sorry, so sorry. Yes, important meeting - I understand but, I'm having a little difficulty with... Oh, yes, yes, they are. I've tried to explain it all, but - "

A fearsome noise erupts from the telephone. We're alarmed, but Pollard seems appreciably bolstered by this furious outburst.

"Yes, yes," he responds, with something close to eagerness. "I'll tell them." He looks up at us. "Mr Lonsdale says that this isn't fun time," he announces. "He says that we're not playing party games. This is a business! We're not making fairy cakes for pixies; it's not all ice cream and currant buns. Mr Lonsdale says that this is the real world!"

"Right," we say. "Well that's all very well but -"

But Pollard only has ears for the less-than-dulcet tones of his overlord. "Mr Lonsdale says that you should piss off out of my office!" he says as the phone goes dead.

"Ah, okay - "

"So," Pollard says awkwardly, all alone now with just the dialling tone for comfort. "I think you'd better leave now."

Yes, we think so too. For a moment we consider asking if Pollard could arrange a meeting for us with his Mr Lonsdale. After all, we might be better off talking to the organ grinder than the monkey. Pointless, though, since the guys calling the tune are never the real problem, rather it's the mindless creatures who dance to them. So we politely thank the spineless prick for his time, collect



our things and go.





Love the advantages of a distributed workforce, but concerned about loss of control?

Machiavelli Management Solutions can put your mind at rest.

Information technology now makes it possible for many employees to work from home, enabling firms to run a more cost effective operation. But bosses are understandably worried about how this impacts workforce management. After all, workers shouldn't be encouraged to take responsibility for themselves. So, how can staff be monitored, and what can be done to ensure they remain docile and effective workshiffters? Machiavelli Management Solutions has the answer.

Socialisation Disincentives

One of the biggest concerns is that workers will be subjected to the regular distractions of home life.

Distractions such as:

- ◆ *Interactions with spouses or partners*
- ◆ *Contact with children*
- ◆ *Interfering with pets*
- ◆ *Enjoying themselves*
- ◆ *Non-specific non-work-based human contact (non-sexual)*
- ◆ *Non-specific non-work-based human contact (sexual)*

By utilising CCTV, thermal imaging cameras and pressure sensitive underwear, we can constantly monitor and log such contacts so that the appropriate disincentives can be applied. Disincentives such as:

- ◆ *Written warnings*
- ◆ *Deductions from wages*
- ◆ *Intimidation of family members*
- ◆ *Destruction of domestic pets*
- ◆ *Water-boarding*
- ◆ *Specific work-based contact (hostile)*



Workspace Refurbishment

For the employee, working from home means that they can benefit from pleasant, comfortable and familiar surroundings. This is obviously a problem. Modern offices are disagreeable, noisy and smelly environments, and there are a number of steps we can take to recreate this atmosphere in the home:

Regulation

A key ingredient in creating a businesslike atmosphere is through the **arbitrary restriction** of freedom. We do this by enforcing a **rigid dress code** and by insisting that employees wear name badges at all times when they are in their own homes. Additionally, we will draw up **strict rules** concerning the employee's use of his own **furniture** and, purely for our own amusement, dispense harsh penalties for employees caught **pilfering** their own stationery.

Environment

We all appreciate pleasant surroundings. Perhaps many of your homeworkers enjoy **majestic views** of rolling countryside, babbling brooks or similar inhibitors of productivity. An atmosphere more **conducive to labour** can be achieved with a little know-how, a lot of imagination and a generous supply of **plywood**. By erecting a facsimile of a semi-derelict business park outside the employee's **window**, we effectively eliminate such distractions. Pumping a **pungent** mixture of odours into the property - suggestive of decaying **meat**, hot **fat** and various noxious **industrial chemicals** - completes the illusion of conventional day-to-day workplace oppression.

Safety

It is now reasonably well established that the threat of **imminent peril** increases efficiency. To this end it is possible to create acceptable levels of **neglect**, consistent with your company's health and safety policy. Simple measures such as **barring** electrical cables and **tampering** with furniture can - when combined with more traditional methods such as **mantraps** and **concealed spikes** - prove pleasingly effective. As an added option, acid baths can provide a further source of amusement.



Discipline Over Distance

Central to any successful model of workforce control is the principal of discipline. Picture your business as a Roman galley with all the slaves rowing at different rates. Without the effective administration of regular punishment, your boat will end up going round in circles and your enterprise will be dead in the water. Sadly the glory days of the lash are no longer with us and today's modern employment ethic calls for a 'carrot and stick' approach - in which the carrot is usually something hard and pointy which can be jammed into a medically approved orifice, and the stick is a cricket bat.

However these approaches require a management-employee interface opportunity which is not practicable over distance. Step forward Machiavelli's patented Convulso-Tag scheme, which can remotely deliver a debilitating electric shock to the wayward employee at the touch of a button. The Convulso-Tag system offers the ultimate peace of mind to employee and management alike, replacing the regular one-on-one contact of everyday office violence. Convulso-Tag technology means that the employee can be confident that he will receive the necessary feedback to ensure acceptable standards are maintained. The management, meanwhile, know that no one will forget who's boss.

Why not call us today to find out how we can put the fear of God into your employees?

Machiavelli Management Solutions

Traditional restraint and chastisement initiatives for a modern marketplace



T H E B L E E D I N G O B V I O U S

Evidence of the Action of Moron Filtration in Minimal-Reward Vocational Scenarios

*by Professor GP Babbington,
Lecturer in Applied Shelf Stacking at the
EazeeSave Megamart, Barnstaple*

An Introduction

I well remember the words of my old history teacher, 'Poopy' Trotter, one summer afternoon back in '54. "Babbington", he said to me in the husky, brown, pipe smoke-leaden tones with which he sombrely addressed all the boys he took under his wing, "Babbington, somebody has to do the dirty jobs. Remember that."

And remember it I most assuredly did, since it was the very same afternoon that 'Poopy' was arrested for interfering with the chemistry master's basset hound - an incident which destroyed his career, scandalised the school and severely traumatised the dog.

There are two lessons we can learn from this - firstly, even the most advanced cultures have a practical need for people to undertake menial and unrewarding functions. Secondly, if we want to hang on to our cushy teaching position long enough to collect our pension, then it's highly advisable to avoid being discovered prostrate before some bewildered canine with our trousers around our ankles, a tub of butter in one hand and a rubber bone in the other.

To some extent I can sympathise with Poopy, although *my* departure from the teaching profession was due to economic cutbacks rather than canine waywardness. Gone are the halcyon days when I had my own office, unlimited access to a photocopier and all the



ring binders I could possibly eat. But enough of such aimless reverie.

Returning to that first point, the question we ask ourselves is do unskilled factory workers, listless shop assistants and humiliated public toilet cleaners form part of a process that is directly responsible for shaping society? I believe that they do, and with the assistance of some of my colleagues here at the EazeeSave Megamart, we have formulated the theory of Moron Filtration.

Moron Theory

We ought to begin by defining exactly what we mean by 'moron'. We use the term in its modern scientific sense to broadly define the worryingly large section of the population for whom the process of logical, coherent thought presents an often-insurmountable obstacle. You know - idiots. The kind of people who display an unaccountable sense of pride when admitting that they are too simple to operate any device more complicated than a spoon. These hopeless individuals provide the fundamental matter for Moron Theory.

The major driving principal of the theory is the process of Moron Filtration. This can be seen to operate most effectively in a work environment - specifically those employing unskilled labour and offering minimal remuneration. In short, what my colleague Dr Marion Wallender, who works on the fresh meat counter, would call a 'shit job'.

Dr Wallender has made an expert study of these kinds of positions, and knows first-hand how they can often breed resentment, anger and sometimes even precipitate violent outbursts. The annoying customer that she speared with a lamb cutlet last Tuesday knows this as well, and I would like to take this opportunity to wish Dr



Wallender all the best for her impending disciplinary hearing.

The process of Moron Filtration can be easily expressed in three basic laws, which I refer to as Babbington's Laws of Moron Filtration, because it's got a nice ring to it, and because it's my theory and I can call it what the hell I like.

And so:

1. Any sufficiently unrewarding organisation will retain stupid people and allow intelligent, ambitious and talented individuals to pass through unscathed.

2. Any sufficiently unrewarding organisation will be run by idiots.

3. Any sufficiently unrewarding organisation will, over time, increase its effectiveness as a Moron Filter.

In order to demonstrate how these laws function, we will examine a typical low-wage, minimal incentive employer: the supermarket. This is a scenario with which we are all familiar in some form or another - even seasoned academics suffering due to the swathing and frankly criminally short-sighted cuts made to education budgets. But I digress. Let's see how these laws operate.

Babbington's First Law of Moron Filtration:

Any sufficiently unrewarding organisation will retain stupid people and allow intelligent, ambitious and talented individuals to pass through unscathed.



Just because a job can be done by a moron, it doesn't necessarily follow that a moron is doing that job. Take for example my colleague, Professor Larry Parry, who collects the trolleys in the car park. Admittedly he can appear to be a bit dopey to people who don't know him, but the chap's got a thoroughly sound grasp of sub-atomic physics, and his calculus is almost on a par with mine. It's invariably a mistake to judge by appearances, and even though Professor Parry is in the habit of eating the dog ends that collect by the bins, there's no reason to doubt that he's every bit my intellectual equal.

In spite of this, because the work is ultimately unsatisfying and the rewards are few, staff will seek better opportunities elsewhere. Those with aptitude and talent will pass through the organisation and move on to bigger and better things; those without such abilities will remain.

As Dr Wallender put it just the other day, only the mentally inferior endure extended periods in the confines of minimal-reward vocational scenarios. Actually, I'm paraphrasing. I think her exact words were something like "You've got to be fucking mad to end up working in this frigging dump." My memory may be playing me false, as Dr Wallender had been engaged in a heated discussion with one of the management team at the time, and the shrieking, weeping, calls for assistance, clatter of equipment and almost biblical hail of cold pork pies being rained down upon her unfortunate departmental supervisor may have caused me to misperceive the actual phrasing.



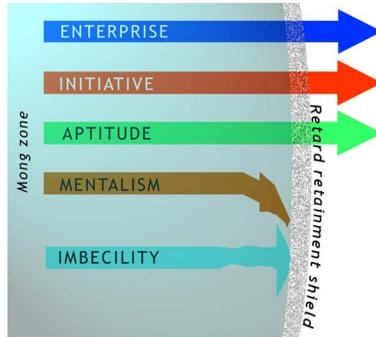


Fig1: Mong Filtration in action

Babbington's Second Law of Moron Filtration

Any sufficiently unrewarding organisation will be run by idiots.

It is inevitable that management positions will be filled by the less able members of staff. Employees with aptitude have their sights set on a career outside the company, and have no interest in scrambling their way up the corporate beanstalk. Anyone of ability who does inadvertently find themselves in a management position - either through some accident, clerical error or drunken-Christmas-party-photocopier-bum-facsimilie-blackmail-scenario - will not remain with the company long enough to make any lasting impact.

Employers therefore have no choice but to promote from the lingering residue of idiots - the people who have no hope of moving on because stacking shelves, pushing a mop around and drooling lifeless platitudes into a Tanoy system is just about all they're capable of doing without reference to a set of illustrated diagrams.

We are aware, of course, that there is an apparent flaw in this logic: to wit, how can any organisation that is



run by idiots possibly survive within a fiercely competitive environment? This was a question that was initially raised by Dr BL Plasky, PHD, who works on the bacon counter. His observations provide indisputable evidence that the people in charge were invariably dribbling, incompetent poltroons with nametags sewn into their socks and all the personality of a slab of cheese. He surmised that in any sane and just society they would have crashed and burned long ago, and dragged down the entire enterprise with them.

Clearly, something else was happening, and it was Professor CL Freidberg on wines and spirits, who finally discovered it one Tuesday afternoon, just after the lunchtime rush, and before the kids started turning out from school. She determined that management weren't actually responsible for anything of any real consequence. All the things that could possibly make a difference to the fortunes of the business - pricing, stock control, promotional activity and so forth - were decided elsewhere. In this model, management are free to concentrate on trivialities such as cleaning, tidying and running around in a panic whenever senior staff are due to visit. In short, tasks of no real significance whatsoever.

This prediction tallied perfectly with our observations, which is worrying since further investigation by Professor Freidberg has revealed the existence of what she describes as 'Admin Entropy'. We shall return to this idea shortly, as it has profound and disturbing implications.



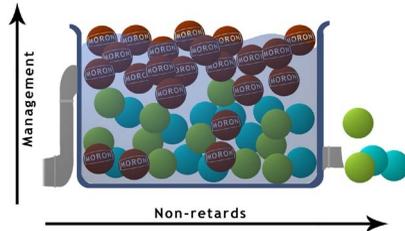


Fig 2. *Shit rises*

Babbington's Third Law of Moron Filtration

Any sufficiently unrewarding organisation will, over time, increase its effectiveness as a Moron Filter.

Like any other kind of filter, our Moron Filters can become clogged, trapping poor and desperately unfortunate individuals, and robbing them of their impetus to escape. They may be people of considerable ability and promise, who under more favourable circumstances might greatly benefit society. And yet they become crushed beneath a suffocating weight of mentalism, trampled by an overwhelming stampede of ignorance and stupidity, and the vital spark of their talent is ultimately extinguished.

However, the trend we have observed is that the percentage of retards within any given organisation will rise exponentially, since increasing levels of stupidity provide normal people with a measurably greater stimulus to remove themselves from the epicentre of 'Mongulation'.

"Much more of this," Dr Wallender said to me only the other day, "and I'm straight out that door and up the



job centre, pausing only to phone the health inspector to tell him how they piddle in the mayonnaise." Clearly, Dr Wallender is more finely attuned to the subtle shift in the local background idiocy than the rest of us.

Extrapolating from the existing data, it is plain to see that these kinds of organisations will ultimately achieve Critical Moron Mass (CMM). At CMM, the number of fruitcakes within a company is so great that no one possessing a reasonable level of intelligence would be capable of spending any time within it. This point has been referred to as the Moron Event Horizon, beyond which all intelligence is crushed into single-mindedness.

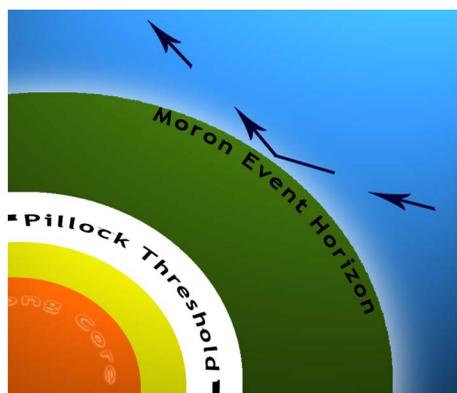


Fig 3. Impenetrable Moron Shell

It can be seen, therefore, that these three laws combine to form a process which gathers up imbeciles with increasing efficiency and deposits them within a closed system. We call this a Self-Perpetuating Moron Loop.



The Effect of Moron Filters on Society

My former assistant, Dr Cosmo Finger, who unaccountably managed to hang on to his cushy job at Warwick University, has made a point of telling me in a loud and patronising voice that the recent cuts to the education budget have meant that the 'inadequates, charlatans and unimaginative dolts that previously dogged his every step' have now been put beyond the reach of civilised society.

Quite why Dr Finger travels all this way to do his weekly shopping is not for me to speculate. Just because he is apt to follow me around for the duration of my shift, gleefully explaining the many ways in which my former place of employment is so vastly improved now that a 'totally unnecessary' third of the teaching staff has been disposed of, I am not going to jump to the conclusion that he is in any way trying to antagonise me. I hope I'm more mature than that, and I certainly do not approve of Dr Wallender's threat to 'cheese the smug bastard' next time he comes in. Whatever that might mean.

Nevertheless, without realising it, the irritating tosser has hit upon an interesting notion. If only the dolt had the imagination to recognise it, eh? The fact is that Moron Filters do actually put these dribbling freaks beyond the reach of civilised society, locking them away in call centres, warehouses and the like, thus preventing them from gaining positions of responsibility where they can do real damage.

It is estimated that over 75% of the world's boneheads are locked away in this 'Moron Layer'. But what if something was to upset the delicate balance, releasing these halfwits into the atmosphere? Imagine



what would happen if the manager of your local service station became a consultant brain surgeon; or if the person responsible for the company stationery cupboard was put in charge of a nuclear power facility. We already have dangerously high moron levels in areas like government, banking and the police, so the consequences of further increases would be devastating.

This is certainly of considerable concern to my colleagues, doctors Fisher and Clamp, who appear to have plenty of time on their hands for idle speculation. Fisher and Clamp work in the soap and shower gel aisle, and as personal cleanliness is not top of the agenda for the majority of customers here, Fisher and Clamp are rarely troubled. They have warned that new legislation, market forces and the depletion of the ozone layer could all have an adverse effect on moron filtration. However, evidence is growing that the greatest threat could come from within, which brings us back to Admin Entropy and Professor Freidburg.

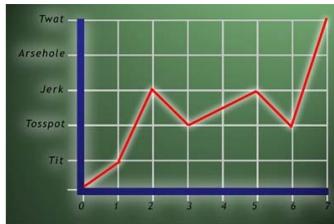


Fig 4. Graph presenting conclusive proof that Dr Cosmo Finger is a twat.

Admin Entropy.

To put it simply, Admin Entropy is the phrase Freidburg has coined to describe the waste bureaucracy that builds up within systems, and will ultimately tear them apart.



Essentially, every organisation has people at the bottom who do all the work, and people at the top who make all the decisions. In a small organisation, information flows easily between these two strata, the organisation can be run efficiently, and everything is lovely and bouncy and nice.

Conversely, as an organisation grows it steadily acquires layers of middle management who fulfil neither function: shouldering none of the workload nor taking part in decision making. As we have already seen, this layer of deadwood - or Initiative Vacuum to use the correct term - serves as an insulating layer to prevent the flow of information, makes everyone's lives difficult and generally proves to be a pain in the arse.

You might think, therefore, that these people are inert and relatively benign, but that would be a mistake. Dull and uninteresting, certainly. Painfully dim-witted, undoubtedly. Stultifying narrow-minded, depressingly trivial, and blood-bubblingly, brain-manglingly pig-headed, almost inevitably. But they are not idle, for although they may not be responsible for anything of consequence, they can nevertheless bring their administrative zeal to bear on inventing new systems and procedures to address problems that don't actually exist.

These are the people who turn the relatively simple act of retrieving a pen from the stationery cupboard into a week-long odyssey in which it is necessary to obtain the signatures of three line managers, written permission from the board of directors and attend a 'Pen Management' seminar before you can even be put on the waiting list. These are the pinheads who, for no good reason, dictate the exact wording to be used when answering the phone, determine that desks must all be facing north-east, and decide that henceforth 'staff' are to



be referred to as 'colleagues'.

They love colour-coded charts and will spend hours happily applying shiny stars to schedules that no one needs, and everyone ignores. They adore training sessions because it affords them the opportunity of making crap jokes to embarrassed groups of bored staff, as they deliver up some or other pointless bullshit - lovingly prepared for them, I might add, by some equally tedious prick at head office, who has been unable to find himself anything better to do.

But their god, their idol, the very essence of their soul is 'the form'. There is nothing in this world or the next that cannot or should not be recorded on a form. Inside leg measurements, blood group, frequency of toilet breaks, prevailing weather conditions - all this information is vital to the busy executive if he is to successfully delude himself into thinking he has influence.

Harmless, you might think, but forms are not biodegradable - they do not simply go away, they only ever get longer. Procedures cannot be undone - rather they become ever more complex and convoluted, sprouting increasingly draconian strictures and constraints like cancerous lumps. And rules and regulations, when left to their own devices, will fester and breed.

And this is the danger. Bureaucracy builds, and builds, and builds until eventually - as Professor Freidburg has warned - it chokes the life out of the very organisation it is designed to serve. The company crumbles from within. The morons, the simpletons, the dimwits and dunces that it has steadily stored away for so many years are released into the outside world, and we are all fucked.



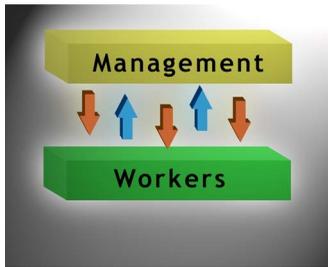


Fig 5a. Lines of communication within a healthy organisation



Fig 5b. Communication within an organisation infected by bureaucrats.

In Conclusion

It was with some trepidation that I paid a return visit to my old university earlier this year. I was hoping that Dr Finger would be able to assist in publishing our research, but his punishing work schedule meant that he was unable to see me. At least, that's what he claimed, and I, of course, saw no reason to doubt the lying, petty-minded bastard.

And so I wandered into town, past chattering groups of students who, if they are diligent and apply themselves to their studies, might one day be the forecourt attendants and double-glazing salesmen of the future. To cheer myself up I wandered into a small newsagents for a can of Tango and a Curly Wurly, and as I stood at the counter, idly facing up the chewing gum display (it's become a habit) the face of the sad old man behind the counter caught my eye. He seemed familiar. Did I know him? As he handed me my change, some long forgotten memory stirred, and suddenly the recollection came to me. Poopy! Poopy Trotter! This was my old teacher, my boyhood hero, my inspiration.

Trembling with excitement, I told him how I had



been driven to follow my chosen career, how I had been spurned, and how I was fighting back with our latest piece of research. I told him all about Moron Theory, the Three Laws of Moron Filtration and the action of Admin Entropy, and all the while he listened carefully and occasionally nodded serenely. And when I had finished, and looked to him for some kind of response, it was like all those years had just melted away, and I was a boy again, standing up in class desperately seeking approval.

Poopy took a while before he spoke. He seemed a little confused, and for a moment I feared that he didn't actually remember me. And then he sighed, shook his head slightly and shrugged. "Yeah," he said with a grunt. "That's the way it goes: you pay peanuts and you get monkeys."

Then, having deftly summed up our entire research in a single sentence, he wandered off to sweep the stockroom, and I was left wondering whether I'd just spent the last year and a half investigating the bleeding obvious.



E x p l o d i n g D o g s

Hello, and why not? My name is Rufus Bassett, Minister with Special Responsibility for the Combustive Ignition of Superfluous Canines. Or, as the press are fond of calling me, the Dog Exploder.

Since the Government announced that henceforth dog ownership should be limited to one animal per household, there has been a great deal of concern over the methods by which the excess doggage is disposed of. My job, as minister of the crown charged with the great honour of overseeing the project, is twofold. Firstly it is my responsibility to ensure that the methods employed are the most humane and efficient that our limited budget can reasonably afford. Secondly, and by no means penultimately, I am to provide information and reassurance to the millions of anxious owners whose pets are awaiting detonation. This latter duty I shall now discharge by answering the following frequently asked questions.

Okay. So, I'm still not too certain what this is all about? Apparently it's been decided that I'm only allowed to own one dog?

That's right. The Superfluous Canines Act came into law last month as a result of a widely held belief that one dog is enough for anyone. Any households with more than this will have the excess explosively removed.

You're going to blow up my dogs?

Not all of them - that would be barbaric. No, you're allowed to keep one. But the others... well... boom!

That's a bit harsh. Where does the government get off, going round exploding people's pets?



The Government is committed to promoting family values and building a fairer, more wholesome society. One of the ways we have decided to do this is by blowing up family pets. We are starting with dogs, and cats will be phased in over the next few years. By the end of the decade canaries will become fair game and your goldfish will be regularly depth-charged. After that it gets really nasty.

I don't see how this creates a more wholesome society. Any society that goes around exploding innocent pets seems far from wholesome.

It might seem like that at first, which is why we're fighting to get the message across about the benefits of blowing up your dog. We're currently preparing a series of press and TV adverts that will explain the whole situation calmly and reassuringly. We were hoping they would be fronted by the popular 70s glam rocker Noddy Holder, but I gather he's reacted rather coldly to the idea. Pity - we were going to call him 'Noddy Holder the Dog Exploder'.

Well, I'm still not sure but...all right. Thing is, I've got six dogs. Would I have to make the decision about which one is saved, because I'm not sure I could make a call like that?

I know, it's difficult, isn't it? It's like trying to choose between your children - thankfully we don't have to do that! At least, not until the Child Dissection Act comes into force next year. You can choose which dog to keep if you like. Alternatively, our operatives can make the



decision for you, based on a scientifically formulated system of potluck.

Scientifically formulated, you say? Well, that's good to know. So, the actual 'exploding' part - how is it done? Some sort of complex technical process, yes?

Something like that. Basically, our highly trained operative will insert a stick of dynamite into a convenient orifice, light the fuse and whoosh! It can be quite an impressive spectacle when it's done properly.

That's nice. Does it hurt?

Well...

And please don't say, "Not if you stand well back." Nobody's going to be impressed by a corny old gag like that. I mean, does it hurt the dog?

Ah, now... Put it this way: once the fuse is lit the animal won't really have time to register anything more than mild surprise.

I suppose that's probably for the best. Look, I don't want to be difficult but can you just explain to me once more why all this is necessary? At the risk of sounding a bit dim, I don't see how the violent disassembly of people's pets is the business of government.

Look, it's perfectly simple. The business of government is anything that promotes family values and is of benefit to the country. The decision to blow up family pets is not one that was taken lightly. You're not happy with it and,



if I'm honest, I'm not happy with it either, but these are difficult times and a strong government will not balk when it comes to taking tough decisions.

Yes, yes, I appreciate that. But my dogs seem to be the innocent parties in all this. Sampson growled at a paper boy yesterday afternoon, and Fifi has been known to widdle up the postman's leg, but I fail to see how that makes them enemies of the state.

I see why you're anxious, but -

You see, I'm quite a doggy person. So is my wife. We see our dogs as very much part of our family. Now you're telling me that in order to promote 'family values' you need to splatter significant chunks of our particular family around the immediate neighbourhood. I have to say, I find it quite disturbing that you people appear entirely uninterested in tackling real problems like unemployment and the economy, and prefer instead to fritter away our taxes dreaming up ridiculous schemes to tackle problems that don't exist, in areas that don't concern you.

Yes, now -

I mean, really. When I voted in the last election I don't recall it being mentioned in any of the parties' manifestos that it would become necessary to start wantonly exploding dogs for no good reason. When candidates came knocking on my door, a good many of them spoke volumes about their support for the health service. A fair few talked earnestly about the need to restore the economy to a stable footing. None of them, not one, ever



told me that they would blow up my dogs. It's madness.

Absolutely. And, you know, I can only agree with you. To be honest, I personally never really understood the arguments for it. I have to tell you that it has affected me just as much as anyone. I used to have three pedigree bitches myself, until the detonation squad arrived last Tuesday. Now all I've got left is one very nervous Jack Russell terrier with shellshock. But what can you do? You know... Good of the Country... Family Values... all that. We've just got to grit our teeth and bear it. So... you know... sorry.

*Well, that's that then.
Nothing to be done. I don't
suppose you'd consider
blowing up my wife's guinea
pig instead, would you?*

No

It was worth a try.



If you can read this, then you probably *think* you don't need glasses

The Problem:

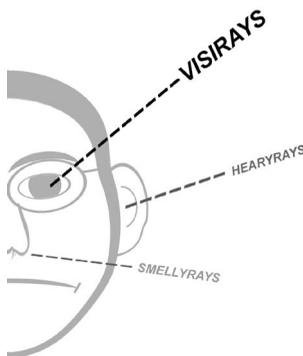
As we get older, some of us find that our eyesight changes. Small print becomes difficult to read and it gets harder to focus on distant objects. Opticians recommend that you get your eyes tested at least every six months, so that they can supply you with optical solutions to meet your exact needs. Unfortunately there are some customers whose prescription remains stable and do not need to update their glasses so frequently. These people provide a serious challenge for the ophthalmic profession, and prevent us from tapping into a potentially lucrative revenue stream.

The Solution:

Now at last a remarkable new innovation in ocular technology has provided the answer to obdurate customers - disposable glasses. These lightweight and stylish new spectacles come in a range of exciting new fashionable styles. And the really good news! Well, the patent light-refracting biodegradable plastics used in the lenses are not only environmentally friendly, but are also designed to dissolve after 300 hours use. That means you'll never be without a fresh pair of glasses, and we'll never be short of repeat business.

The Science:

You've probably guessed that it's all based on the polarisation of visirays. As we all learnt at school, we are able to see because our eyes shoot out special waves, visirays, which interfere with the objects we are looking at then return to our eyes and are translated into images. These visirays pass harmlessly through regular lenses, but our new disposable glasses use a filter to slow down their transit. (The slight time lag to your vision is something that you will hardly notice.) This process generates heat, which gradually causes the lens to deteriorate - the more you look, the faster they dissolve.



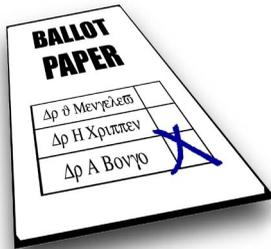
So don't waste time struggling with your current perfectly adequate pair of glasses. We need your money right now.

Disposable Glasses

Isn't it about time you made us richer?



V o t e B o n g o



Vote for me and win a Ford Fiesta!

Hello there. My name is Doctor Adolphous Bongo, twice named runner up in the coveted 'Warmest Hands of the Year' category by the readers of Amateur Proctologist. Not that

I'm an amateur, of course; neither, strictly speaking, am I a proctologist, but there's no harm in keeping your hand in. The point is, they don't bestow awards on just anyone. That kind of recognition is only enjoyed by the most upstanding and trustworthy of citizens, and the fact that I have photographs of the editor of that august publication in the act of - coincidentally - 'keeping his hand in' is entirely immaterial.

"But hang on Adolphous," I can hear you saying. "You're standing for election? Proctology awards are all very well, but does this really qualify you for parliament? Surely, an MP's duties amount to more than inserting a carefully warmed digit into the correct orifice?" Well firstly, less of the Adolphous - it's Doctor Bongo to you, fart face. Secondly, yes there's more to this politics lark than fingering bottoms, but as an entry-level qualification, you've got to admit that it's a good place to start.

Nevertheless, I appreciate that a dubiously acquired award, dished out by an obscure periodical, will not necessarily be sufficient to secure a majority. No, it's going to take more than that - but, happily, not *much* more. I remain supremely confident of success, not least



because I understand you. Yes, you, the electorate.

I know who you are, because I see you shuffling your fat, pendulous forms into my surgery every week. I know you have a problem with body odour and exhibit the kind of flatulence which would render the keeping of canaries a practical impossibility. I know that however often I tell you to stop eating chips and start taking exercise, you will refuse to fritter away your time in pursuit of an active life and instead devote your waking hours to steadily moulding your gelatinous backside to the shape of the sofa.

And, good grief, why ever not? You live in a fusty little semi-detached house that you're not quite happy with, with a wife whom you find slightly irritating and two and a half kids whom you suspect are probably not yours. You have a painfully large overdraft, a tedious echoing void where your social life used to be, and derive little satisfaction from your pointless job, the extravagantly obscure title of which may sound impressive but really just conceals the fact that you don't do anything at all. Don't you deserve a little 'me time'? If slouching for hours on end in front of TV talk shows and trashy talent competitions is what it takes for you to regain some of your self-respect, then go for it. Knock yourself out, why don't you?

More importantly, I know what you want. You don't want some politician who is going to take account of your best interests and work to improve your life and those of your fellow citizens. You just want someone to blame when everything goes tits up; some thieving, lying career-obsessed shit with his hand in the till, whom you can point to when things get tough and shout, "It's him, it's him, it's all his fault! He's the reason my life is crap!"



You don't want a politician who will represent your views in parliament, because you *have* no views other than a few nebulous notions on the subject of international diplomacy, a passionate and unwavering faith in Arsenal's back four, and an unshakable belief that everything that's wrong with this country is down to illegal immigrants, young people, old people and everybody else that isn't you.

What you want is someone you can elect to office and not have to bother about for another five years, because democracy is something that only ever happens during a General Election. Whatever naughtiness they get up to in the intervening time, whatever deals they break, havoc the wreak or crap they speak must be allowed to pass unnoticed other than to provide the meat for disapproving gossip and the gravy for tabloid scandal.

None of which really matters anyway, because these details will fail to lodge in your beer-soaked, nicotine-stained brain for longer than it takes to utter the phrase 'they're all the bloody same'. By the time the next parliamentary popularity poll comes around all will be forgiven and forgotten and you'll vote them back in because the leader of their particular 'gang' has the biggest, brightest smile and is offering you the shiniest trinkets.

So why *should* you vote for me? Well, I'll be honest with you. You don't like me and I don't like you, and your reward for making me your MP will be to have your taxes squandered, your public services shattered and whatever faith you have left in government utterly smashed. Nevertheless, you'll vote for me because I will take advantage of every little fiddle I come across, and am confident that I'm more than equal to the task of inventing ingenious new ones. You'll vote for me



because I promise whole-heartedly to take no interest whatsoever in the affairs and concerns of my constituency, and am unlikely to even visit, unless there's money in it. You will vote for me because I will lobby on behalf of the highest bidder, vote according to my own business interests, court publicity purely in order to further my own career and explore levels of sexual deviancy that I had hitherto never thought medically possible.

But more than this, the real reason that you'll vote for me, the thing that cannot fail to swing this whole election in my favour is that when you put your cross next to my name on that ballot paper, you'll automatically be entered into a free draw to win a brand new shiny Ford Fiesta. You see what I mean now when I tell you that I *know* people?



Scrufty's Magic Juju Shoppe

At Scrufty's Magic Juju shoppe you could get whizzy fizz bombs, and liquorice dangles and all sorts of wonderful sugary flopsicles. And sticky pillows and sherbet bubbles too - but this wasn't why most people went to Scrufty's Magic Juju shoppe. Oh no. People went because Scrufty was the wisest old badger in all the forest and whenever you had a problem, Scrufty would have the answer.

That's why Marty Fuzztail went. Marty had a problem, a big big problem. You see, every year, when the conkers fell, all the forest folk would hurry and scurry about the undergrowth to gather them all up and store them for winter in a big old hopper. And as everyone knew that Marty owned the biggest and bestest conker tree of all, he was put in charge of distributing the conkers to whoever needed them.

So when Moley needed conkers to shore up the embankment after the spring thaw, he would trundle his little wheelbarrow along to the hopper, Marty would pull the chain and with a chugga-chugga-chugga the conkers would rumble down the chute and fill his little barrow. And when the Hedgehog twins needed conkers to clear the path by the meadow, Marty would pull the chain and with a chugga-chugga-chugga, the conkers would tumble down the chute and fill their buckets. And when Mrs Gander needed to repair the fences around the duck pond, or Yappy Woofworth wanted to gather up the dewdrop harvest, or Flaps Feathertop had to clean up the leaf moss in the dell, all Marty had to do was pull the chain and with a chugga-chugga-chugga they would have all the conkers that they needed.





At Scruffy's Magic Juju Shoppe you could get sugary flopsicles.

But that was all before Slippy Wriggleton came along. Slippy was the leader of the weasels, and he told Marty that he was going about it all wrong. Through a combination of better management, more efficient allocation and careful investment, Slippy said that they could meet all their regular conker requirements, and still have a surplus at the end of the year. Well, Slippy was *very* persuasive, and he also had a certificate in Conker Management, which none of the other forest folk did, so Marty agreed to let him handle the conker distribution.

And that's where it all started to go wrong, because after a while it seemed that there weren't enough conkers to go round. Oh, there were plenty of conkers for Slippy's friends - the weasels, the slimy toads and the crafty foxes - but the rest of the forest folk had to go without. So the embankment crumbled after the thaw. The path by the meadow became impassable. The fences around the duck pond rotted away, the dewdrops turned sour before they could be harvested and the leaf moss was left to fester in the dell.

Scruffy pawed at his grizzled grey chin as he listened



to Marty's sorry story. "Hmm," he grumbled thoughtfully. "And what did Slippy say when you told him you weren't happy?" Marty looked embarrassed, and admitted that he hadn't mentioned it. "But why ever not?" Scruffy asked. "Slippy is supposed to be looking after the conkers for all the forest folk, not just his slimy friends. You need to remind him of his responsibilities."

"But Slippy is a big bad nasty weasel," protested Marty timidly. "Why, he'll never listen to me."

"He'll jolly well have to listen to you," said Scruffy. "After all, they're your conkers. Here take this, it will help you to be heard." And with that Scruffy pulled a gleaming brass instrument from beneath the counter. "It's a magic trumpet. Blow it three times, and Slippy will do exactly what you tell him."



Scruffy listened to Marty's sorry tale.

And so, clutching the magic trumpet, Marty ambled back through the forest, hopping over the stepping-stones in the rushing white water brook, past the ivy grotto by the old weeping willow, until he reached the clearing where the conker hopper stood. It seemed very busy and bustling these days, far busier than it ever used to be. All



sorts of weasels and stoats and toads and foxes stood in line with their sacks and barrows and buckets and bags. The queues were constantly shuffling and bustling as they stepped up to receive their conkers. And there, right in the middle, was Slippy Wriggleton. Every few seconds he would pull the chain and, with a chugga-chugga-chugga, another batch of conkers would rumble down the chute, tumble into some deep receptacle and get carried off into the forest.



Slippy was a big bad nasty weasel.

Marty took a deep breath and marched on up to the wily weasel. "Now see here, Slippy," he said firmly. "All this handing out of conkers willy-nilly has got to stop."

"Can't talk now," Slippy said, as he tugged on the chain once more. "Very busy." With a chugga-chugga-chugga another sack full of conkers disappeared.

"But Slippy!" Marty protested. "The embankment is now beyond repair, the duck pond is in a terrible state and I dread to think about what's going on in the dell. Something has to be done." Seeing that Slippy wasn't paying any attention, Marty held up the magic trumpet.



"Okay, so you're not listening to me right now, but three blasts on this - "

"Oh, but my dear Marty!" Slippy said, suddenly taking an interest. "There's no need for that. No need at all." He put one arm around Marty's hairy shoulders, and gently twizzled his weasely moustache. "You know I'm only acting for the best."

"Well, I..."

"And you understand that times are particularly hard at the moment," he continued unctuously.

"Oh yes, but..."

"It's at difficult times like this that we all have to make sacrifices." Slippy smiled an unpleasant, thin-lipped, pointy-toothed smile. "Now, I suppose I could just accept that you're not happy with my work and leave you in the lurch, but that's just not the kind of weasel that I am. After all, I do have a certificate in Conker Management, so I feel that it's my duty to stay and help you through this difficult time. What do you say?"

"Uh, I suppose..."

"Good! Good!" Slippy slapped Marty heartily on the back. "So just hand over the trumpet and we'll say no more about it."

Marty did as he was told. "It's just that..." he began but broke off when he realised that Slippy was no longer listening. Chugga-chugga-chugga went the hopper, and Marty shambled away as the conkers continued to rumble down the chute.

"You gave him my trumpet?" Scruffy asked when Marty returned to the shoppe. "Bless my bunions, why ever would you do a thing like that?"

Marty shuffled nervously. "Well, you see, Slippy is a big bad nasty weasel. That silly old trumpet would



never make him listen. Surely you must have something else that will help me?"

Scrufty scratched his grizzled badgery head. "Well I don't know, young Marty," he said after a long sigh. "It strikes me that you're the kind of squirrel that goes around giving trumpets to weasels. Not a good move. Frankly, I'm bugged if I know what I can do."

"Oh please Scrufty," Marty pleaded. "My conkers are at stake here."

Scrufty huffed. "Indeed. And perhaps you should have thought of that before you started handing over other people's instruments to nasty weasels. Well really, I never did!" Seeing the desperate look in Marty's eyes, Scrufty took pity and grumpily conceded. "Oh alright. Look, what you need is the law on your side. Here, take this." He reached behind the counter and produced a crooked stick.

Marty viewed it uncertainly. "Bit of a step down from the trumpet, isn't it?" he sniffed.

"It's the Magic Wand of Justice," Scrufty said irritably. "Just wave it through the air, and Slippy will have to obey all the laws of the forest... But, if you don't want it -"

"No, no - I'll give it a go," Marty said, trying to summon up some enthusiasm, and he sighed as he took the wand and left the shop.

Scrufty heard no more of Marty until later that evening. He was sitting in his little room behind the counter, tucking into a scrummy chicken dinner, when he heard the bell tinkle. "shop!" he heard Marty call. Passing through the little archway, he found Marty leaning on the counter, chin resting dejectedly on his hands.

"Fat lot of good that was!" he said.



"Did you use the Magic Wand of Justice?" Scruffy asked.

Marty nodded. "Sort of," he said, and he held up a slim white box. "I swapped it for an iPod."

"You..." Scruffy drew a sharp intake of breath through clenched teeth. "You know Marty, you're starting to get right on my tits," he mumbled.

Marty ignored the remark. "So, anyway," he said, looking around him. "What can we try next?"

"Nothing," Scruffy said. "Nothing at all."

"What about this magic rock, here?" Marty said, pointing to a jaggedy stone on the counter.

"It's not magic," Scruffy said. "It's just a paperweight."

"Okay, okay," Marty said, searching around again before his eyes fixed on a crookedy wooden box high up on a shelf. "Ah ha!" he exclaimed. "An enchanted box."

"It's not enchanted," Scruffy sighed. "It's just where I keep my paperclips. And no, before you ask, they're not *magic* paperclips. Look Marty, there's nothing more I can do for you. I gave you a trumpet so you would have a voice, but you didn't want to be heard. I gave you a wand so you could use the law of the forest, but you didn't want to exercise your rights. I can't help you if you're not prepared to help yourself "

Marty fell silent. He shuffled his feet dejectedly for a while. Then he looked up and spied something behind Scruffy, beyond the archway. "What about that?" he asked. "The higgledy-piggledy bone basket."

Scruffy turned. Marty seemed to be talking about the chicken carcass on the table. He was about to explain that it was his dinner, when he had a sudden thought. He popped through and retrieved a small piece of bone, and placed it in Marty's paw. "That," Scruffy said, gesturing



back at the remains of his supper, "is the preserved skeleton of the last known Mystical Valiant Bird - the bravest and noblest of all creatures that ever hobbled around a farmyard and pecked at corn." Scruffy pointed to the piece of bone in Marty's palm. "And that is a piece of its spine. Keep it with you, young Marty. Hold it tight, for it will transform you into the bravest little squirrel this side of the Shining Cliffs."

Marty looked at the bone, awestruck. "Golly," he said.

"Golly indeed," said Scruffy. "Now go! Go and give that nasty Weasel what for!"

With a newfound spring in his step, Marty scampered from the shoppe. Scruffy watched him go, then bolted the door after him and settled down to watch the snooker.



Marty gets on Scruffy's tits.

Marty stood in the shadows at the edge of the clearing. This time he wasn't going to let Slippy get the better of him. This time he was jolly well going to give him a stiff



talking to, and no mistake. He clutched the piece of chicken spine tightly and marched out into the clearing.

"Stop this!" he cried, as he pushed through the queues. "Stop this at once! You there, yes you - put those conkers down. And you over there - yes, I can see you, stuffing them in your cheeks. Put the conkers back and step away from the barrow. There will be no more handouts today!"

The weasels and the slimy toads and the crafty foxes quickly fell silent. Who was this fuzzy little person? Who had the nerve to stop them from helping themselves to what was rightfully someone else's? What was the world coming to?

Everyone watched in astonishment as little Marty Fuzztail, owner of the biggest bestest conker tree in the forest, boldly stepped up to big bad Slippy Wriggleton. "Marty?" Slippy said. The slimy weasel froze in the act of dispensing another batch of conkers, his hand still clasped around the chain.

Marty gazed at that cruel mouth and those jaggedy teeth, and he almost backed down. Then he felt the piece of spine pressing into his palm, giving him courage, and he looked Slippy straight in the eye.

"These are not your conkers," Marty said. "You have no right to go handing them out to all your friends. You have done a bad thing, and I jolly well want you to leave."

For a moment the two of them just stared at each other: Marty with grim determination, Slippy with glassy-eyed loathing. Everyone looked on with bated breath. Then suddenly Slippy let go of the chain. "Fair enough," he said. "Come on lads, the gig's up."

And with that he led everyone away. One by one they filed from the clearing, the weasels, the slimy toads



and the crafty foxes, until Marty was left quite alone. Slippy Wriggleton was never seen again, the forest folk lived happily ever after and, from that day on, Marty vowed he would never allow anyone to abuse his conkers again.

And the moral of this story? Well, sometimes, all that it takes to deal with a nasty problem is a bit of backbone.

Also, when some weasel's got his hands on your conkers, it doesn't mean he can yank your chain whenever he feels like it.



G e t C a r t a

Michael: So, ladies and gentlemen, time for my next guest, and we're fortunate to have one of the country's movers and shakers with us here this evening. An earl, no less - yes, there's no expense spared on my show - someone who can quite rightly claim that the hand of history is on his shoulder. Would you please welcome John de Lacey, 1st Earl of Lincoln.

de Lacey: Thank you, thank you very much.

Michael: Thank you for being here with us this evening.

de Lacey: The pleasure is entirely mine. It's good of you to invite me.

Michael: Now, first things first - how does one address an earl? Your earlship? Your highness?

de Lacey: Please call me John.

Michael: Ok, John it is - ooh, seems a bit informal to be addressing a member of the nobility as John. Well John, thank you for coming. Now, I referred to you in the introduction as a 'mover and shaker'. And that's not exaggeration, is it? You are genuinely one of the most powerful men in the country today, are you not?

de Lacey: Well, I... It's not really for me to say. I hope, however that I use whatever little influence I have to its best advantage.

Michael. Ah, ever modest. I think I would be right in



saying that that influence is felt in the highest circles in the land?

de Lacey: Well, possibly, possibly.

Michael: And now, of course, your influence will be felt even more keenly with the publication of your latest document. I have it here; I'll just unfurl it so that the audience can see. Ooh, it's quite tricky. There we go - can everybody see that? Magna Carta, ladies and gentlemen.

de Lacey: Absolutely, yes. I can't, of course, take the whole credit for it. There are quite a number of us who were involved in the project. But yes, hopefully it will prove to be popular.

Michael: Well, I was... Hang on, let me just roll it up and... Yes, I was skimming through it last night, and I have to say, it is a cracking good read.

de Lacey: Thank you. Thank you.

Michael: So, for the benefit of our audience, tell us what it's about.

de Lacey: Yes, well, it's basically a new charter.

Michael: Ooh, a charter. We like a good charter, don't we ladies and gentlemen?

de Lacey: Well, this one is designed to establish certain rights for various groups within society - the church, the barons and so forth - and ensure that certain legal



procedures are observed.

Michael: Fascinating. And I understand that the King himself is bound by this document?

de Lacey: Indeed he is. King John has been sympathetic to our aims right through this process, and has been more than happy to endorse the charter.

Michael: Well, you say that, of course, but a little bird tells me that the King is now refusing to accept it?

de Lacey: No, no, he's all for it. There may be one or two niggling little legal issues to iron out, but that's just politics. Pitched battles and the occasional siege are all part of the process. We're enjoying a lively debate, let's put it that way. The important point is that what we have here is an opportunity to bring about a very real and lasting change.

Michael: Ok then, so tell us why this document is so important? How, for example, am I going to be better off as a result of Magna Carta?

de Lacey: You Michael? Well not at all - nothing in there for interviewers!

Michael: Fair enough! I should have known better than to ask, shouldn't I? But for the average freeman in the street, then - what about him?

de Lacey: Oh, it's going to make a big, big difference. Much of this document won't affect him directly, of course. It's designed to confer specific rights to barons



and members of the church, but obviously what's good for us will be good for everybody else. But there are some direct benefits. We've got habeas corpus, of course.

Michael: Ah yes, now I've heard of this. What exactly is a habeas corpus?

de Lacey: The habeas corpus?

Michael: Yes, how are these habeas corpuses going to affect us all, and will we get one each?

de Lacey: Your habeas corpus will prevent you from being unlawfully detained. Which I think is quite a handy thing to have.

Michael: Fascinating, fascinating. I understand that Magna Carta also guarantees that I will not be forced to build a bridge over a river? Is that right?

de Lacey: Well, yes, strictly speaking that's right enough. To be honest, that's not a particularly important clause. We only stuck it in there because Mad Hugh Bigod kept banging on about it. Personally, I think it's silly. I mean, have you ever been forced to build a bridge over a river?

Michael: No.

de Lacey: No, of course not. And neither have I.

Michael: All the same, it's nice to know that I'm protected by law.



de Lacey: Okay, if that works for you, then fair enough. Personally, I think all that stuff about fish weirs and so on is going to seem pretty weird in seven or eight hundred years time. People are going to look back and wonder what we were all on.

Michael: You think Magna Carta will be around for that long, then?

de Lacey: Well if not our charter, then something very much like it.

Michael: Another Carta? What would that be called, do you think?

de Lacey: Well, that's not important, but -

Michael: Macro Carta, perhaps? Or Splendido Carta?

de Lacey: Possibly, yes. But the thing is, what we're doing here is establishing people's rights within a legal framework, and defining the limits of the power of the state. This has been done before, of course, but hopefully our charter will have a more lasting impact. What this means is that it offers an alternative way for barons, clergy and freemen to enforce their rights, rather than just going around sticking their swords into people. And I think this can only be a good thing.

Michael: Well that's marvellous.

de Lacey: Yes, yes, it is. And although, as I previously intimated, the protections that Magna Carta offers are limited, I think it will give rise to other charters, other



agreements and constitutions that will do more to enshrine our rights. Oh, I'm not saying that it will completely replace the traditional method of sticking swords into people. Ironically, I think we may have a good deal more of that to do to get this accepted. And I have no doubt that those who come after us will have a similar scrap on their hands. But once these agreements are in place, I think we're all going to be better off.

Michael: Well I hope so. It certainly won't be as messy. So do you see a time when, let's say, a tenant farmer is automatically protected from being flogged to death by his landlord, or perhaps a freeman can be protected from forfeiting his estate to the crown at the whim of the king?

de Lacey: Not automatically, no. I think it is important to point out that we are not providing some kind of wizard's staff, which will magically protect everyone from harm. The rights we are establishing and the laws we are enacting are tools - it's up to the individual to use those tools to their best advantage.

Michael: And you think they will do that?

de Lacey: Oh absolutely. No doubt about it. Nobody's going to take these protections for granted, for fear of losing them. Look at it this way – after the struggle we have had, the sacrifices we have made and the lives that have been lost, people have a duty to enforce their rights.

Michael: Well I wish you the very best of luck with it. And if you decide to write a sequel, be sure to come back and tell us all about it, won't you?



de Lacey: I certainly will, Michael.

Michael: Well, thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, John de Lacey, the 1st Earl of Lincoln!



P i g m o n g e r i n g

Fergus Pong's Staffordshire farm is one of only three places in Europe where pigmongery is still practised, and we were delighted to be invited to a demonstration. Pong himself is a bow-legged, cross-eyed man in his late sixties, blessed with a permanent look of disgruntlement, and on our arrival he greets us with typical rustic bonhomie.

"Who the hell are you?"

We introduce ourselves and his demeanour mellows.

"Fucking townies," he growls. "Well don't just stand there frightening the chickens, follow me."

Fergus Pong's brusque manner no doubt results from his no-nonsense rural upbringing. He's been a pigmonger all his life, as was his father and his grandfather before him. His *great* grandfather was an accountant, but then every family has its own private shame.

In earlier times every village had its own pigmonger - horsemongers, goosemongers and dogmongers too. But now they've all but died out, save the fishmongers, the ironmongers and the occasional costermonger. Mongery, it seems, has had its day.

"Come on," Pong harries us impatiently as he leads us to the 'monging paddock'. "I don't have all day." Clearly he's a busy man: chickens to plant, sheep to milk, that sort of thing. "I know you town folk have nothing better to do than wandering off to coffee shops and swanky boutiques, but here in the country there's a different pace of life. Now looky here - this here is what we call the 'mong stick'."

The 'this here' to which he refers is a short stick with a length of chain attached and a lethal looking spike at the end.



"We do all our monging with this. It's traditional, see. You townies with your trendy Sat Navs and your space hoppers and your weird sandwiches on funny bread, you don't know nothing about tradition. Well, this here mong stick was handed down to me from my father, who got it from my grandfather. Unfortunately, my grandfather had to go out a buy it, because all he got handed down to him was a set of ledgers and an abacus with half the beads missing."

"It looks lethal," we observe, and Pong instantly goes on the defensive.

"Oh I see," he says, giving us his best boss-eyed glare. "So, you've been here five minutes and already you're telling us how we should mong our pigs?"

"No," we protest, anxiously. "We were just making conversation." Pong isn't having any of it.

"Hundreds of years of tradition means nothing to you, does it?" he grumbles. "You come prancing out here in your funky trousers, spouting your lah-di-dah nonsense and spreading your urban voodoo. Well you're not in Carnaby Street now, my darlings. You see that stuff you're standing in - that's nature that is, so think on. Now, step back and let me show you a craftsman at work."

Pong pushes back his sleeves, revealing the sinewy, weather-beaten forearms of an experienced pigmonger. Grasping the mong stick firmly he begins to swing it in circles above his head. The long chain whistles as it describes a figure of eight then, with a flick of the wrist, it loops downwards and the spike strikes him squarely in the testicles. We wince.

"Is that supposed to happen?" we ask.

"Why - got a problem with it?" Pong replies in a high-pitched rasp as the tears well in his eyes.



We think it looks painful. We tell him it looks painful. "That looks painful," we say.

"Ha!" he snorts, though with some difficulty. "You would think it's painful - you with your soft, town-dwelling balls. But we country folk are made of stronger stuff... Of course, it works better when you've got a pig."

Luckily for us it just so happened that Fergus Pong had a pig. He had several of them, in fact. The one he picked out for the purpose of this demonstration was called Hamilton Squiggles: a serene and particularly intellectual looking animal, that watched disinterestedly as Pong once again started to swing his mong stick above his head.

"You see how the creature is mesmerised," says Pong. "These are mystical techniques handed down from generation to generation. You won't find this stuff in your sophisticated townie picture books, or on your newfangled iPodules. Now, watch and be astounded."

Pong chooses his moment then once again a flick of the wrist brings the chain looping downwards. Once again the spike strikes him squarely in the testicles. If the pig's expression is anything to go by, it appears he finds this highly amusing. Who would have thought a pig could grin?

"Right, I think that's quite enough pigmongery for today," Pong croaks. "That's the trouble with life on the farm - it doesn't half play havoc with your gentleman's trouser area."

"Clearly," we agree. Given that the procedure is such a stressful one, we go on to say, it's probably no wonder that it's dying out.

Pong takes offence at this, reading into it an attack on his craft. He curses beneath his breath, straightens his underwear and one of his eyes manages to fix us with a



baleful stare. "You'd rather the pigs went unmonged, would you?" he challenges us. "You can live with that, can you? Hordes of wild unmonged pigs roaming the countryside, upsetting young ladies, riding around on tricycles and leaving their mess on your lawn?"

We don't want to upset him, but we feel we have a valid point to make. "It's just that we don't see what all the fuss is about. We're not really sure if we could tell the difference between a monged pig and an unmonged one. It looks like the pigs themselves are getting off lightly."

"Can't tell the difference!" Pong splutters. "Pah, you fluffy deodorised flopsies with your men's personal grooming products and your twisted ideas about interior design. I'll show you the difference." He leads us to an adjacent shed and shows us a series of pens, in each of which are two or three pigs, grunting and shuffling about quite happily. "See here - that's Gracie Shuffletrotter, she's been monged. Snuffly Crackles and Snorty McAllister III - they've both been monged. Porky Hambone, Curly Scratchit and Snouty Dewdrop - all monged."

"They look quite contented," we say.

"Well of course they do, brainiac, they've been monged," Pong says. "But in here..." He leads us to a pen separate from the others. "...in here you'll see a real wild, unmonged pig - Ant McPartlin."

"Ant McPartlin?" we ask.

"Aye, Ant McPartlin," he responds ominously.

"As in 'Ant and Dec'?" we enquire. "Light entertainers and presenters of popular Saturday evening game shows?"

"I shouldn't think so," Pong says. He leans over the pen. "Here," he says to its occupant. "Have you been presenting popular Saturday evening game shows?"



"What did he say?" we ask when the animal grunts a reply.

"Nothing," says Pong. "It's a chuffing pig."

Curiously, we peer into the pen. It is indeed a chuffing pig, and not a diminutive Geordie celebrity. What's more, it looks exactly like the others, and we point this out.

"Well, you're frigging townies, aren't you," Pong replies dismissively. "I wouldn't expect you to be able to tell the difference. But you'd have another think coming on the other side of your face, and woe betide, if you walked into your local butcher's and you were attacked by a sausage."

We ask him if that is something that is likely to happen. He is forced to admit that it isn't. But he insists that the tradition of pigmonging needs to be upheld.

"Listen, we've already lost too many of our customs," Pong says. "Spiderbaiting, cuckoo spitting and porkromancy have fallen by the wayside, and duck felching is now only practised in East Anglia. We have to protect this tradition."

"Even if it means the constant damage to your trouser furniture?" we ask. "Why enslave yourself to tradition if all it leads to is a repeated assault on your equipment? Perhaps there's a better way of doing it; a less painful way? After all, just because something has been done like this for generations, it doesn't mean it can't be improved upon."

Pong listens to us patiently, then dismisses it as 'typical townie talk'. Our time with this cantankerous one-dimensional comedy stereotype is at an end, but as he escorts us back to our car, he can't resist one parting shot.

"No wonder your streets are overrun by electric chip



shops, twenty-four hour snooker emporia and secondhand fruit importers," he says. "You've no feeling for the old ways. Oh yes, we all want progress, don't we, but what happens to our heritage? So, thank you but you can keep your fancy new flushing toilets - we'll just keep crapping in the yard. And as for your fashionable vaccines, I don't think so. We'll keep dying of smallpox and tuberculosis, just as nature intended. And if upholding the ancient tradition of pigmonging means that I've got to keep taking a pounding in the crackers, then so be it. I'll just have to grit my teeth, brace myself and bear it."

And now, the same fucking joke, but this time about chickenmongers. Fergus Yolks Lincolnshire farm is...



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"Yeah man, this guy in a suit counts a wad of twenties into my hand, init, and I stroll out of there loaded, and it's sweet. Then a few weeks later they start saying 'you got to give us our money back' and all that. And I'm all like, make up your mind, blood, cos this ain't right, is it? They shouldn't be allowed to do that. I mean they can't just, like, start asking for it back once they've give it to you, can they?"

Darren Marlow needed money for new trainers, a vicious dog and trampoline lessons. But he was shocked to subsequently find himself facing demands for repayment...

"These letters come saying I owe this money. Well so what? I haven't got the money any more. I spent it, that's what money's for. So tough. Anyway, the letters keep coming, and I just ignore them. Don't even open them. Next fing I know, there's these two blokes hammering on the door and saying as how they're bailiffs, or summat. And they say they're gonna come back, and they're gonna take my telly. Well they haven't come back yet, but if they do, and they try to take my telly, I'll have the police on them."



Darreena Maidstone borrowed money to buy a new nose ring and have her arse tattooed. Now she's being hounded by debt collectors...

"This is just well unfair, y'know. Nobody said anyfink about paying the money back. It is like heinous, y'know. They shouldn't give it you in the first place if they're just gonna want it back. Well, I ain't payin' it. I just ain't."

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*Registered office: No Comebacks House, Pontious Pilate Terrace,
Cloud Cuckoo Land.*



.....
(Insert your own title here)

Said Mrs Crossley-Pepper to the department store sales assistant: "This Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic is faulty. I insist on seeing the manager!" Bang went the Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic as she slammed it down on the counter.

Said Mr Webster, the sales assistant, as he drew breath: "I'm so sorry to hear that, madam. What appears to be the trouble?"

Slam went Mrs Crossley-Pepper's palm upon the counter top. "How dare you speak to me in that fashion. Fetch me the manager at once!"

Puzzled was Mr Webster at this extraordinary behaviour. "Madam, I really don't - "

Furious became Mrs Crossly-Pepper at his obstinance. "At once, I say! At once!"

Said Mr Webster: "I'm merely trying to ascertain the problem, Madam. The Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic is usually such a reliable item. Is there a particular difficulty with the whirling, or is it the chopping that is causing the problem?"

Said Mrs Crossley-Pepper, all puffed up and agitated: "How dare you doubt me! You insolent young dolt. Service! Service! I want service, I say! "

At this juncture, alerted by the confusion and kerfuffle, Mr Arnold glided onto the scene in the blink of a wotsit and took charge.

Said Mr Arnold: "Now whatever appears to be the problem?"

Said Mrs Crossly-Pepper: "This rude and ignorant member of staff has a serious attitude problem. And he has a fat chin. Why do you employ people with fat chins?"



Nonplussed Mr Arnold most assuredly was. "I'm afraid I have little to do with the firm's recruitment policy, madam."

Protested Mr Webster: "I don't have a fat chin."

Replied Mrs Crossley-Pepper: "I wasn't talking to you, chinny. Now you – are you the manager?"

Said Mr Arnold: "I'm the senior sales assistant, madam."

Wailed Mrs Crossley-Pepper: "Then you're no help to me either you squint-eyed fool. Good grief, chinny and squint-eye, what is this place?"

Said Mr Webster: "I really don't have a fat chin."

Rap rap rap went Mrs Crossley-Pepper's knuckles on the counter top. "I've heard quite enough from you. Now, I want to complain about this Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic. Is it really so difficult to get some service around here?"

Said Mr Arnold: "The Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic is usually such a reliable item. What appears to be the trouble?"

Growled Mrs Crossley-Pepper: "The whirling is all out of cock and the chopping is a joke. And the special attachment for shaving my cat appears of have seized up."

Rattle rattle rattle went the Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic as Mr Arnold experimentally manipulated its flange. "Oh dear. Did you remember to disengage the bell housing and align the outflow manifold?"

Quick was Mrs Crossley-Pepper's response. "I hardly think that's any of your concern, you googly-eyed prick. Now am I going to get to see the manager, because if this company's idea of customer service is you two paraplegic cretins, you can kiss goodbye to any



further business?"

And at this point, cognisant that some disturbance was ensuing, Mr Septimus appeared to lend a hand.

Said Mr Septimus: "Madam, is there a problem?"

Asserted Mrs Crossley-Pepper: "There most certainly is. I have been subjected to the most horrific abuse by these two disfigured underlings. I want them sacked. Are you the manager?"

Said Mr Septimus: "No madam. I am the Assistant Manager. How can I be of help?"

Crack crack crack went Mrs Crossley-Pepper's knuckles. "You can help me by fetching the manager, you bald-headed buffoon. Why does this seem to be so much of a problem?"

Explained Mr Webster: "The lady has an issue with a Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic."

Elaborated Mr Arnold: "It appears it is not as whirly and choppy as it could be."

Added Mrs Crossley-Pepper: "Not only that, but last Tuesday the attachment for unblocking sinks went rogue and attacked my godson."

Sympathised Mr Septimus: "Oh dear, oh dear. And The Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic is usually such a reliable item. Tell me, have you disengaged the bell housing, and aligned the outflow manifold?"

Shocked was Mrs Crossley-Pepper at this insolent response. "I most certainly have not, and I'm frankly appalled that you should ask me such a question!"

It was then that Mr Brodsky-Zodiac felt it wise to put in an appearance.

Said Mr Brodsky-Zodiac: "Hello, hello, hello – now what seems to be the matter here?"

Said Mrs Crossley-Pepper: "The matter here is that I continue to be subjected to the most horrific abuse by



various unhelpful and grotesque retards. Between them this fat-faced cretin - "

Interjected Mr Webster as he withdrew to collect his coat. "That's it, I've had enough of this. I'm gone."

Remarked Mrs Crossley-Pepper with no displeasure: "And good riddance! As I say, between them this fat-faced cretin, boggle-eyed simpleton and perverted acne-riddled slaphead have pushed me to the absolute limit. I suppose it is your intention to add insult to injury? Well I will tolerate no more – I want the manager here this instant!"

Said Mr Brodsky-Zodiac: "*I* am the manager madam. Now, how may I be of assistance?"

Apologised Mrs Crossley-Pepper, her manner at once becoming more civil. "Oh, I'm sorry to be a nuisance. I'm sure you're a busy man, but I have a problem with my Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic. There seems to be some question over both its choppiness and whirliness, and the attachment for scraping the barnacles from the undersides of tug boats appears to have developed an annoying squeak. Although it's probably nothing, I don't want to waste your time..."

Effused Mr Brodsky-Zodiac: "Nonsense, nonsense! I am at your service. Now then, I am assuming that you disengaged the bell housing and aligned the outflow manifold?"

Slap went the flat of Mrs Crossley-Pepper's palm upon her forehead. "Do you know what, I haven't done that! I haven't disengaged the... what you said. Well that will be the problem then. I'm so sorry to have wasted your time."

Said Mr Brodsky-Zodiac: "Not at all madam."

Said Mr Webster as he stomped past on his way to the exit: "And you can stuff your job!"



Continued Mr Brodsky-Zodiac as he bundled up the Norton-Silbury Multi-Chop Whirlomatic and restored it to its owner: "After all, we're here to help."



E m p i r e o f t h e F l o w e r s

Major General Barmy-Phipps Discusses Operation Growbag

1976 and the suburban gardens of England were taking a thunderous pounding beneath the baking heat of a relentless sun. Those of us who lived through those terrible days still remember with horror the gruesome sight of chrysanthemums turning to brittle stalks in their pots, and once green and fertile lawns reduced to barren carpets of brown shoots and bare earth. In such desperate times - when hosepipe wardens patrol the streets alert for the familiar tinkle of illegal sprinklers, and a chap can't get hold of a decent courgette for love nor money - father turns against son, communities are split asunder and people like my brother-in-law, Tommy Cotton, have serious fallings out with their neighbours.

Normally my in-law is a serene and sociable sort of chap, lacking the backbone for any kind of sustained dispute. Not really military material at all, to be honest, and frankly I don't understand what my sister saw in him. Nevertheless, Tommy became moderately peeved when he learned that his neighbour, a Mr Schneider, had effectively annexed part of the garden belonging to Mr Kaweic, two doors down. Something to do with a line of creeping beans encroaching over the boundary, or whatnot. I never knew beans could be that shiftily, although I admit that I'm not too familiar with matters horticultural.

However, as a veteran of three world wars, a couple of minor scuffles on the African continent and a vicious altercation in the Salisbury branch of Marks and Spencer's, I know that these sorts of disputes should be nipped in the bud pretty sharpish. A chap needs to stand firm. Just like we stood firm at Dunkirk. Just like we



stood firm at Flanders. Just like *I* stood firm in the biscuit aisle of Marks and Spencer's when that horsy woman tried to snaffle the last packet of custard creams.

I advised my brother-in-law that this was no time to be 'peeved'; this was the time to get angry. Words needed to be exchanged, and pretty blunt ones at that if we were to prevent the same thing happening to his own garden. The fact that the man Schneider was built like a small dumper truck, and was seemingly constructed of similar materials, should not deter him.

Emboldened by my inspiring monologue, Tommy 'had it out' with his neighbour to the east, returning from the conference in high spirits and waving a piece of paper containing Mr Schneider's assurance that he would henceforth keep himself to himself. Tommy was delighted; I was dubious, and rightly so. The following morning we discovered that Schneider had reinforced his devious beans with two columns of peas and a battalion of beetroot. It was at this point that I decided to step in and take control.

As any good tactician knows, the best form of defence is attack. And the best form of attack is a fence - a 10-foot high timber fence, to be precise, which both protected our vulnerable border and screened our movements from the enemy. Schneider immediately interpreted this as a hostile act and introduced a squad of deep-water guppies into our pond. These malevolent aquatic assassins proceeded to pick off our goldfish one by one. Fortunately I had foreseen just such a ploy and had already requested a box of frogs from some of my old R & D colleagues at Portland Down. Not just any old frogs, I hasten to add - highly trained commando frogs that had undergone intensive instruction in unarmed combat, boasted an unrivalled knowledge of rope knots



and would prove more than a match for our fishy infestation. Even so, they suffered heavy casualties at first, and it wasn't until supper-time that Corporal Squelchy McAlistair was able to report that they had set up a blockade of frogspawn and were escorting the surviving goldfish to safety. As we retired to bed that evening, we were confident that the situation was under control. However, morning was to present us with a bit of a shock.

The one thing I had not anticipated was an attack from the air. During the night, this swine Schneider had catapulted wave after wave of airborne slugs over the fence. The ravenous pests had penetrated deep into our vegetable patch and were steadily munching their way through our precious produce. As any keen gardener will tell you, these armoured



monsters can grow up to as much as an inch long and are impervious to most ordnance. But it was Tommy's morale that was the heaviest casualty. The civilian mind is ill prepared for the horrors of conflict and they rarely cope well when faced with the inevitable casualties of war. Tommy thought things had gone too far, and he started making uncomfortable noises on the subject of a negotiated settlement. It sounded rather too much like appeasement to me, and I quickly quashed such bolshie talk. Wars are meant to be fought, enemies are meant to be vanquished, and we would suffer whatever privations necessary to bring that about.

With grim determination, we set about the task of



neutralising the slug menace, which unfortunately meant collecting up the slimy monsters one by one. These efforts, arduous as they were, were further hampered when we found an unexploded snail lodged under a rhubarb leaf. This we dealt with by remotely detonating it from the safety of the potting shed, utilising a length of twine, four nails and a half-empty can of WD40.

That night, in order to repel the inevitable repeat attack, I kept watch. With the aid of a torch, a tin helmet and a tennis racquet, I hoped to intercept the invaders mid-flight and restore them to their point of origin. My forehand is legendary and although age and good living had dulled my reactions, I believed that I was more than equal to the task. The racquet, on the other hand, proved to be a let down as the molluscs were able to pass unimpeded through its strings.

Faced with another day seeking and destroying the pests, Tommy's spirits sank ever lower. Couldn't we call a truce, he suggested? Hadn't we suffered enough? Would surrendering be so bad? I was in no mood to tolerate all this whinging and whining, and swept his protestations aside. After all, this was *his* garden that I was pledged to protect. You would have thought that my efforts would have met with at least some suggestion of gratitude.

I didn't see him for the rest of the day, and I later learned that he had been to ask for help from his neighbour to the west, Sam Tailor. Mr Tailor very sportingly pledged to supply us with much needed slug pellets and fertiliser, but in spite of his special relationship with Tommy, he refused to become directly involved. We stood alone against this fiendish aggressor.

On the second night I swapped the tennis racquet for a cricket bat, with far more pleasing results. That the



darkness rang out with the satisfying squelch of slug on willow was testimony to the magnificent success of my efforts. Let there be no mistake, if tales of my exploits continue to be told for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was his finest hour". And then, come the early hours of the morning, our retaliation began in earnest.

Our supplies may have been low, our morale may have taken a hammering, but I had not been idle. Three divisions of spring onions were primed and ready to roll, the 4th Light Mounted Cabbages were at the peak of physical fitness, and we had a squad of kung fu tomatoes that, quite frankly, scared the stuffing out of me.

Tommy, I'll admit, was not party to my preparations. I had been at great pains to assure him that everything was under control, but I spared him the details - partly for his own peace of mind, but mainly because he would not have been sympathetic to my methods. And so, as day broke on that fateful morning, my brother-in-law was still safely abed when I gave the order to advance.

The 51st Armoured Cucumbers led the charge, scaling the fence in a full frontal attack. Unbeknown to us, Schneider had reinforced his border with razor sharp rose bushes, and our lads met with heavy resistance from artillery carnations and sniper tulips. However, this was merely a diversion. During the night, deep-tunnelling radishes had been quietly crawling into position. At my signal, they made the final breakthrough, opening up shafts that emerged behind enemy lines, and allowing our army of assorted flora to take our adversary unawares.

It should have been a foregone conclusion. After all, we had the advantage of surprise. Sadly, there was no way of knowing just how well defended Schneider's garden would be. To our dismay we found ourselves hopelessly outnumbered. Several lines of new potatoes



were dug in deep, preventing us from gaining any ground, and two willows and a sycamore tree pinned us down with a barrage from on high.

Our chaps fought valiantly, but in vain, and by half past eight the battlefield was strewn with flesh and pith, a twisted orgy of mangled salad. Tommy emerged to see what all the noise was and, when I saw the horrified look on his face, I realised it was time to call off the attack.

We spent the remainder of the morning desperately trying to evacuate the survivors, relying on a motley assortment of buckets, barrows and barrels to gather them up and bring them home. It had been a disaster. The tears welled up in Tommy's eyes as he surveyed the tangled remains of his fruit and veg, and I must admit that a lump came to my throat as he looked at me accusingly. I had failed him.

The weeks wore on and winter approached. Things remained bleak for us. The flowerbeds were devastated, and continued to come under regular slug fire. There were frequent greenfly attacks and Schneider had developed long range guided dandelions that could be launched from deep within his territory, and which spread their evil tendrils throughout our lawn. Worryingly, we were running very low on weed killer, and compost had to be rationed.

And yet something good was to come out of this. Our counter attack had apparently given Schneider pause for thought, and he turned his attentions to the rich pickings of Mr Kravtsovich's allotment at the bottom of his garden. Periodically we would receive word of his progress. He had planted row after row of cauliflower in



the allotment and was steadily advancing towards Kravtsovich's shed. Kravtsovich, however, struck back with a relentless attack of broccoli and incendiary carrots, and the situation had reached stalemate.

During this brief respite, I began to develop a bouncing turnip that would career right over the enemy's defences and cripple his water butts. I knew it was only a matter of time before Schneider renewed his campaign against us, and sure enough a combination of heavy fighting and severe frost caused him to retreat from the allotment and mass his forces along our border.

Schneider was at his most vulnerable now. He had suffered heavy losses and Kravtsovich continued to harass him on the allotment front. Sadly, we did not have the resources to take advantage of his weakness, but we were soon to gain an unexpected comrade. Following some minor dispute about a bonfire, our neighbour to the west, Mr Tailor, suddenly found himself on the receiving end of an unprovoked bindweed attack from Mr Saihoushi across the road. In return for the loan of our strimmer, Tailor agreed to join our offensive against Schneider.

Courtesy of our new ally, a healthy crop of sugar beets, pumpkins and peppers now considerably strengthened our ranks. They were overfed, over watered and over here, but welcome nonetheless. We wasted no time in pressing home the attack. The scoundrel Schneider now found himself fighting on two fronts, and we met with little resistance as a result. Our scouts told us that Kravtsovich was making similarly good progress, and by teatime we had rendezvoused with his forces at the enemy greenhouse, reaching it just in time to witness Schneider shoot himself with a loaded parsnip.

Soon afterwards, Tailor's little spat with Mr



Saihoushi was satisfactorily resolved when the former dropped a nuclear marrow on the latter's window box.

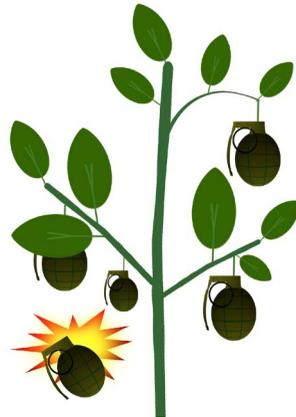
It was with no little sense of pride that I was able to return to my brother-in-law and tell him that hostilities were ended. I fancied that I caught a glistering in his eye and a faint trembling of his chin as he surveyed the smoking and blackened wasteland that had once been his back garden. A faint wisp of smoke still drifted across the vista of rotting cabbages and lettuces, the broken stumps of fallen cherry trees and the wilting brown stalks of poppies that had been cut down in their prime.

Everything was finally back the way it had been. Well almost. Tommy still owed Mr Tailor for the supplies, a debt which it would probably take some time to settle. And Tailor felt it was only fair, given all that they had gone through, that he should have more of a say in the way that Tommy ran his garden.

But apart from that, everything was back the way it had been. Well nearly. Mr Schneider's garden had been divided up between Tailor and Kravtsovich, who had built a concrete fence down the middle

of it, blocking out the sunlight. Not that sunlight would be missed, since there was now an eerie and ever-present glow emanating from the smoking crater where Mr Saihoushi's geraniums used to be.

That aside, everything was... Actually no. There was Tommy's friend, Mr Kaweic. This whole thing had started with the invasion of his garden. We had pledged to defend his territory. We had been resolute in our



intention to liberate this man's plot from the evil aggressor. We made it known that we would not rest until Mr Kaweic and his flowerbeds were free. Mr Kaweic's garden was now in the hands of Kravtsovich, somewhere behind that big concrete fence.

But for these minor details, all was as it should be. As the sun went down on that historic day, my brother-in-law sank to his knees with joy, let out great wailing sobs of jubilation and shook his fist at the sky with a passion that I calculated could only have been born of triumph. Realising that my work here was done, I left him cursing and screaming - with contentment - and slipped away into the night.



Mrs Wilberforce and The River

I don't know - well I wouldn't, would I? - whether you've ever stood on the banks of some mighty river and wondered that such a powerful, inexorable body is born of just a single drop. You don't follow me. I shall explain.



This particular river, the one troubling Mrs Wilberforce, starts life as a bead of dew on the wet grass, high up on the moor. This droplet, being of a sociable bent, naturally gravitates towards others of its kind until it can rightly be called a trickle, picking its way fumblingly past stones and muddy clumps of earth as it snakes down the moderate slope. Further on, the damp furrow has transformed itself into a sparkling stream, carving out a channel through the soft ground, wending that way and this as it is buffeted by the contours of the landscape. Are you with me so far? Good.

On its unstoppable journey it is augmented by tributaries and surface runoff, and by the time it has reached the valley floor it's a splashing, thrashing torrent, growing ever broader, ever deeper as it hastens through farmland and on into the city, crashing through echoing tunnels, frothing beneath creaking bridges, snaking through industrial estates, past the vestiges of old wharfs and mills, through the living room of Number 38, Coronation Terrace, and out again into the countryside, carving an ever widening swathe through the land before it reaches the sea.

You see now? This thing - this booming testament to nature - is primal, thunderous, eternal, and fills everyone with awe - everyone except Mrs Gwendolyn Wilberforce of the aforementioned Number 38, who considers it a bit of a nuisance.



"It's playing havoc with the carpet, and has made hoovering a practical impossibility," says Mrs W, a woman of robust views and even more ample upholstery, who was not brought up to accept that a mere natural feature should get the better of her.

"A lot of my friends," she is fond of pointing out in disapproving tones at the top of her voice, "seem to think that having a river in your living room is a great hoot. Far from it. We have to use a small dinghy just to change the TV channel - and let me tell you, it's no joke after a heavy rainfall when you're desperately trying not to miss *Harry Hill's TV Burp*."

You might be thinking that this Wilberforce character is something of a dolt. Who but an utter imbecile would consider purchasing a house possessed of such an unusual water feature? Did not the formidable Mrs W foresee that there might be a problem?

"I was aware that there may be a slight damp issue," the Wilberforce has previously admitted in private, before going on to blame the estate agent for not disclosing the full extent of the problem prior to the sale. In his defence, the agent has gone on record as saying that he believed that the watercourse was self-evident. If nothing else, he has formally responded, he felt that the canal barges that frequently moored alongside the coffee table should have signified that something unusual was going on.

You can see his point. And whilst la Wilberforce, was not entirely in agreement, she has at least conceded that this is not the particular tree to go barking up. No, Mrs W is in no doubt about whom she should hound in order to get things sorted.

"Clearly the council needs to do something about this," she has been known to mutter to people at bus



stops. Not that the W is content with grumbling to strangers. She has made it quite plain to the local authority that they are shirking their responsibilities.

"It's a bloody river, what does the silly tart expect us to do?" a spokesman for the council is reported to have replied.

"Whilst we sympathise with Mrs Wilberforce's predicament, we find that our hands are tied," a more media-friendly spokesman subsequently added in tones that would make your teeth curl. "A river is not something we can just cart away on the back of a truck. It may start as a mere trickle but it rapidly grows into a torrent capable of sweeping forests asunder and toppling mountains. You can't change something that has lasted for billions of years, no matter how much you complain about it. The River is a force of nature; despite her beliefs to the contrary, Mrs Wilberforce is not."

Having read this far - well done, by the way - you will have gathered that this Mrs Wilberforce is not the kind of person to be deterred by mere logic and reason. Rather, she is the kind of person who, when faced with rational argument, will roll up her sleeves and with a bloody-minded battle cry of "We'll see about that" she will leap into the fray.

When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object the outcome is often uncertain, but when Mrs W enters the equation, all bets are off. Wilberforce, Mrs, knows full well that the greatest weapon available to the irritatingly persistent campaigner is the petition. Her eldest daughter is on the local paper, her nephew has got the internet, and a friend of her hairdresser has a husband who knows someone who is something in local radio. With such powerful media at her fingertips, it was the work of a moment for the obdurate Mrs W to instruct



many and various public mentalists to write to the council in the most venomous and unyielding manner they could muster.

"The British people will speak," announced Comrade Wilberforce. "The council will listen and capitulate."

The British people spoke. The letters arrived at the council in a steady trickle, and as word spread the trickle turned to a stream. Before long, angry missives were flowing through the portals of the local authority at such a rate, that the council had to store them in a warehouse, appropriately enough, beside The River.

"We appreciate people's concern," announced a spokesman with a diploma in mendacity. "We understand the strength of feeling, but despite this impressive outpouring of concern, The River will continue to run, and there is nothing that any of us can do about it."

As you might imagine, such melodious words failed to stem the tide of letters, only serving to goad the hidebound masses into reaching new strata of ink-stained fury. A positive deluge of mail ensued, and the walls of the warehouse bulged with the apparently unstoppable flood of public opinion.

What we could do with all this energy, I hear you cry. Perhaps I merely imagine you shouting it? In any case, many assert that there are better ways of deploying all this noise and thunder.

But not Mrs Wilberforce. Annoyingly, Mrs Wilberforce believes that many hands can move mountains and many voices can roll back the clouds. When Mrs Wilberforce heard that the walls of the warehouse were beginning to crack, she sat and she waited. When she learned that the reservoir of protesting mail had broken through and was pouring into the



adjacent waterway, she simply smiled. And when it became apparent that the spillage had choked the river and altered its course forever, she allowed herself a little laugh.

The River currently flows through the offices of the council's environmental health department. Mrs Wilberforce can now reach her DVD player without the use of a lifebelt. She remains almost biblically smug.



P e r s o n s U n k n o w n

The action in which Mr Gordon Frampton sought to recover damages for 'opportunities denied to him between the 14th March 1954 and the present day' came before Mr Justice Sowerby this week, and got off to a stumbling start. Sowerby professed from the outset that he had no real inkling of what the case was about, and his first act was to request that the petitioner's solicitor, a Mr Salvador Collingwood, should elucidate.

"Your honour, members of the public and of the assembled press," *Mr Collingwood began, striking what he considered to be a legal pose.* "You see before you a man whom life has treated most cruelly. In the fifty years and more that he has walked this earth, my client, Mr Frampton, has been prevented from fulfilling his potential by diverse unfair practices and circumstances. Look at him, ladies and gentlemen. Look at him."

Sowerby: We are looking at him, Mr Collingwood. We are looking at him most keenly, but we have yet to learn why we are looking at him. Please get to the point.

Collingwood: Your honour, I am merely attempting to demonstrate how wretched and hopeless this man is. So wretched and hopeless, in fact, that upon our first meeting I very nearly tossed him out onto the street before he could even produce his chequebook.

Sowerby: That's as maybe, but unless your client has hired you expressly for the purpose of having you publicly humiliate him, I have yet to ascertain his reason for bringing this action. What has the 14th March 1954



got to do with it?

Collingwood: The date my client was born, your honour. From that day to this, my client has struggled to make his way in the world and met with only disappointment and failure. He believes that he has been treated unfairly and is seeking restitution.

Sowerby: I see. Be seated Mr Collingwood, you're standing in my light. I will now hear from the respondent... The respondent, please... Is the respondent in court?"

After a moment or two of deathly silence, and a smattering of nervous shuffling, Mr Grampion, the clerk of the court, approached the bench and whispered in Mr Justice Sowerby's ear. Mr Justice Sowerby looked grim and sat back in his chair. After a second or two of thoughtful contemplation, he requested that Mr Collingwood rise again.

Sowerby: I understand that there is no respondent?

Collingwood: That's right, your honour.

Sowerby: I see, I see... Mr Collingwood, I cannot say that I have ever heard of a compensation case in which a defendant was not deemed necessary. And I'm a judge, you would expect me to notice when a defendant remains conspicuous by his absence. I'm noticing it now, and I must admit it's a first. Please explain.

Collingwood: Mr Frampton is seeking damages against persons unknown.



Sowerby: Persons unknown? Persons unknown? Who are these persons unknown?

Collingwood: We do not know, your honour.

Sowerby: I see. Or rather, I don't. Am I to understand that these persons, despite remaining elusive, have nevertheless had such a tangible effect on your client that he is now seeking damages? I have never used the expression 'arrant nonsense' before, but I am starting to believe that this would be an appropriate occasion to give it a bash.

Collingwood: Your honour, I -

Sowerby: No, I don't want to hear from you any more, you're talking rubbish. I will hear from your client. Where is he? There. Well, what have you to say of this matter? Stand up, man.



Collingwood: He is standing up, your honour.

Sowerby: I thought I instructed you to button it? Now then, Mr Frampton, what is all this about?

Frampton: Well, your honour, it's like this. I never had much of a start in life, and opportunities have passed me by. When you see all these flash blokes wandering round in their expensive suits, and driving shiny sports cars (I expect you've got a nice motor, yourself, haven't you,



your honour?) well, it makes you think "Where's mine?" How come life hasn't treated me so well? So I reckon that it's only fair that I get some sort of compensation.

Sowerby: And who do you think should compensate you, Mr Frampton? Who has wronged you?

Frampton: Well, I dunno really. It's just life in general, isn't it? It's all down to circumstance - I'm a victim of fate.

Sowerby: And you have our sympathy, but we can't very well put fate in the witness box, can we? Not unless you have an address where we can serve papers. Who, Mr Frampton, is to blame?

Sowerby: Well, it's the system, isn't it?

Collingwood: I think what my client is trying to say -

Sowerby: Your mouth is flapping again, Mr Collingwood. I thought I had already warned you about that?

Collingwood: Sorry, your honour.

Sowerby: Clearly something has gone wrong here. This case should never have reached court - or at least, it should never have come before me. We will adjourn for today, but please inform your client, Mr Collingwood, that when we reconvene tomorrow, I shall expect to see a defendant take the stand. Court dismissed!

Day two of the case of Frampton vs Persons Unknown



began, somewhat chaotically, with a procession of brown-coated gentlemen dragging various battered and corroded pieces of machinery through the courtroom and arranging them in a pleasing display in the dock. Mr Justice Sowerby looked upon their efforts with much puzzlement. When they withdrew, he motioned Mr Collingwood to approach the bench. "I hope you have a very, very good reason for all this," he said softly, then shooed him away and brought the court to order.

Sowerby: Settle down, there's lovely! It is to be hoped that we are going to make a little more progress in this matter than we did yesterday, although I have to admit that my hopes are not high. Mr Collingwood, there is an elephant in this room, and I think we had better deal with it as promptly as possible. Why have you filled my court with scrap metal?

Collingwood: Your honour, this is the defendant.

Sowerby: I had a horrible premonition that you were going to say that.

Collingwood: As my client mentioned yesterday, he blames the system for his misfortunes. I have therefore arranged for the system to be brought into court to face these allegations.

Sowerby: And this... this rusted and bent pile of metal... This is 'the system', is it?

Collingwood: It is, your honour. Well, if it's not the system, it's certainly a system. To be precise, it's a Robinson-Whitley R406-T industrial grade air



conditioning system. Or at least, those parts of it that we recovered from a skip on a nearby demolition site.

Sowerby: And this is the system which your client believes has seriously disadvantaged him, and from which he seeks remuneration?

Collingwood: We believe that this is as good as we're going to get, your honour.

Sowerby: Mr Collingwood, are you sure you're quite sane?

Collingwood: No, your honour.

Sowerby: I'm beginning to entertain similar notions myself. Still, we're here now so we may as well crack on with it. Mr Grampion, you had better read the defendant the charges.



Grampion: But how do I...?

Sowerby: Oh come, come. I don't need to instruct the clerk of the court on how to do his job. After all, you don't tell me how to bang my hammer.

Grampion: Oh... right... well... Ahem, Mr Robinson-Whitley R406-T, you are hereby charged that on or about the period between 14th March 1954 and the present day, you made repeated and concerted efforts to prevent Mr Gordon Frampton of reaching his full potential. How do you plead?



Sowerby: Hang on! Hang on! What's this?

Grampion: What's what, your honour?

Sowerby: What kind of a charge is that? Bit vague isn't it. No, no, no, it won't do at all. Will the plaintiff please approach the bench.

Collingwood: Your honour, I -

Sowerby: Oh sit down, Collingwood. I called for the organ grinder, not his monkey. Mr Frampton, step up to the oche.

Frampton: Yes, your honour. Nice day, your honour.

Sowerby: Why the sudden interest in meteorology?

Frampton: Just making conversation.

Sowerby: Well don't, this isn't a coffee morning. Now what's all this stuff about not reaching your full potential? We can't possibly proceed with that woolly nonsense. Can you be a little more specific?

Frampton: Well, it's stuff, isn't it? I've been hard done by.

Sowerby: That's no better, is it? Can you give me an example?

Frampton: Yeah. Probably. I never got anywhere in life, did I? Listen, every week I spend a quid on the



lottery, and I've not won once. Didn't even get my quid back.

Sowerby: Do I take it that you wish to seek damages from this air conditioning system for your failure to win the lottery?

Frampton: Yeah. Can I do that?

Collingwood: Your honour, I think what my client -

Sowerby: Seriously Collingwood, you are going to get a belt in the mouth if you speak out of turn again. Now here's what we're going to do - I'm going to adjourn for an hour to give you and your client time to come up with something. And it better be good, because I'm missing the cricket for this. Adjourned.

Reconvening in the afternoon, Mr Grampion, the long suffering clerk of the court, found himself the centre of intense scrutiny as he cleared his throat and prepared to read the charges.

Grampion: Mr Robinson-Whitley R406-T, you are hereby charged that on various occasions on or after 14th March 1954 you did wilfully prevent Mr Gordon Frampton from winning the football pools. Secondly, you did deny him the opportunity of fulfilling his ambition of becoming a brain surgeon, by making the exams really hard. Thirdly, you were instrumental in arranging that his wife should run off with the window cleaner... Your honour there are one hundred and twenty similar counts, do you want me to...?



Sowerby: No, no, good grief no, I don't think I could stand it. We'll take the others as read. How does the defendant plead?

Grampion: Mr Robinson-Whitley R406-T, how do you plead?

Robinson-Whitley R406-T: ...

Grampion: I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that.

Robinson-Whitley R406-T: ...

Grampion: Your honour, the defendant refuses to enter a plea. I fear its lack of sentience may prove to be a problem.

Sowerby: That's not something that presents much of an obstacle for most of the people who appear before me. Let's give it the benefit of the doubt and assume it pleads not guilty. It has an honest face. Mr Collingwood, you're up. Keep it brief.

Collingwood: Thank you, your honour. Now then, Mr so-called Robinson-Whitley R406-T - all that stuff that was read out... Did you do it?

Robinson-Whitley R406-T: ...

Collingwood: I repeat: did you do all that stuff, and that?

Robinson-Whitley R406-T: ...



Collingwood: Your silence speaks volumes. That concludes the case for the prosecution.

Sowerby: My word, that was brief.

Collingwood: Thank y-

Sowerby: No, don't spoil it. We will now hear from the defendant's counsel. Or would that be too much to ask?

Grampion: I don't believe that the defendant is represented, your honour.

Sowerby: And why not?

Grampion: Because it is an air conditioning unit, your honour.

Sowerby: Good point, have a biscuit. Now, what I suggest is that -

(At this point a man in the public gallery, a Mr Winkle, stood up to volunteer his services)

Winkle: Your honour, I will gladly represent the defendant.

Sowerby: What? Where? Who said that?

Collingwood: Up in the gallery, your honour.

Sowerby: Good grief, I didn't see all those people up there. How long have they been letting them in? So, err, Mr...?



Winkle: Winkle, your worship. Sammy Winkle.

Sowerby: Mr Winkle, yes. And are you a solicitor, Mr Winkle?

Winkle: No, my lord, I'm a bricklayer.

Sowerby: A bricklayer, jolly good. Is that anything like being a solicitor?

Winkle: Does being a solicitor have anything to do with spirit levels and pointing trowels?

Sowerby: Not in the slightest.

Winkle: Then the answer to your question is no, your eminence. But I'm very keen, and I'm sure I'll pick it up as we go along.



Sowerby: Very well. I'm sure you will want time to consult with your client, so we will end this session now. Everybody meet back here at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Bring sandwiches.

With press speculation running high, and learned commentators feverishly predicting historic new precedents, the third day of Mr Gordon Frampton vs Robinson-Whitley R406-T got off to a vigorous start. Mr Collingwood seemed particularly anxious to get something off his chest.



Collingwood: Before we proceed, I would like to make it perfectly clear that my client Mr Gordon Frampton is not, never has been and never will be related to the musician Peter Frampton.

Sowerby: Duly noted, Mr Collingwood. I'm minded to ask why you should suddenly be so anxious to stress this point?

Collingwood: Do I require a reason?

Sowerby: If you intend to persist in interrupting this tribunal with pointless irrelevancies, then I suspect you may have need.

Winkle: Objection!

Sowerby: What?

Collingwood: Hang on, I didn't know we'd started.

Winkle: Objection again!

Sowerby: What is it, Mr Winkle? To what do you object?

Winkle: To my learned friend, Mr Collingwood, your majesty. He seems to be hogging the court's time. I thought it was my go.

Sowerby: Quite right. Objection sustained. Sit down, Mr Collingwood, you're messing with my aura. The floor is yours, Mr Winkle.



Winkle: Ta, judge. I would like to call Mr Gordon Frampton to the stand... That's you, shorty - get in the box. Right then - you are Mr Gordon Frampton of 42 Belvedere Drive, Mablethorpe?

Frampton: I am.

Winkle: You are the same Mr Frampton who is a branch manager of the Mablethorpe office of Scumm Credit Solutions?

Frampton: Yes sir.

Winkle: The same Frampton who released the multi-million selling album *Frampton Comes Alive!*

Frampton: Not at all. I don't know how these rumours get about.

Winkle: A likely story! Tell me, Mr Frampton, what were you doing on the night of the 24th June 1998, hmm?

Frampton: 1998? I don't remember.

Winkle: How very convenient. Allow me to jog your memory. Were you not attending a private party at a house in Shepherd's Bush? Don't bother to answer, Mr Frampton, I know you were. I have witnesses who saw you cavorting with several ladies of easy virtue, only minutes before the time of the murder!

Frampton: Murder?

Sowerby: Have I missed something here?



Winkle: Are you really a man of so little conscience, Mr Frampton? The fact that you could be seen openly partying with naughty women before committing such a heinous act shows a degree of callousness that can only lead to your downfall.

Sowerby: Hold on! What murder is this? Are you confident that you are fully acquainted with the facts of this case, Mr Winkle?

Winkle: I assumed that a murder would have been committed at some point. That's usually how it works on the telly. I admit it's a bit of a wild guess, but I felt it was worth a punt.

Sowerby: An unorthodox approach, and I feel that it's only fair that it has ended in failure. It's a big ask, I know, but do you have anything to add that might be germane to this case?

Winkle: In what way, your excellency?

Sowerby: Oh, I don't know. Something that might add to the sum total of knowledge of the circumstance involved, or something.

Winkle: No, my liege.

Sowerby: Thought as much. In which case I don't see any reason to delay my verdict.

Winkle: Hold on, I haven't finished.



Sowerby: Yes you have. This nonsense has gone on quite long enough. I have no hesitation in concluding that the defendant has no case to answer. I cannot, of course, comment on its efficacy as an air conditioning system. Indeed, as far as air conditioning is concerned, it may be guilty of the most appalling incompetence, which is no doubt how it found its way into a skip in the first place. But as for the charges that it has been hauled here to answer today, I find that there is no evidence of culpability. Mr Frampton, step forward please.

Frampton: I'm not happy about the way this is going.

Sowerby: And therein appears to lie your whole problem: you are not happy. You came here with the hazy notion that something somehow has gone a bit crap, and that someone somewhere must be to blame. Poor you, Mr Frampton. Poor, poor you. Let me tell you, it is frequently my sad duty to prevail over cases that involve all manner of unfortunate and neglected individuals. People who, through no fault of their own, have slipped through the cracks and fallen prey to opportunists, vagabonds or just bad luck. Sometimes these people bear their woes with a fortitude that I can scarcely begin to comprehend; sometimes they take the opposite path and sink into recrimination, deceitfulness and petty crime. But even in the most despicable of cases it is not beyond the limits of my humanity to appreciate that such people need our sympathy, our understanding and our support. But you, Mr Frampton...

Frampton: Your honour?

Sowerby: Ever since you were dragged kicking and



screaming into this world, you have lived a charmed life, Mr Frampton. You have a roof over your head, a steady job and you're clearly affluent enough to afford the services of that fool Collingwood.

Collingwood: I protest!

Sowerby: Oh shut up, Collingwood. Mr Frampton, have you ever heard the expression 'into each life a little rain must fall'? You appear to have escaped a drenching in favour of a brief, refreshing April shower. No, you haven't got everything you ever wanted. Maybe you haven't even got everything you deserve. None of us has. But I rather get the impression, Mr Frampton, that you've sat back your whole life and waited for it to come to you. And now that your lack of effort has been rewarded with exactly what it merits, you naturally resort to what you do best - finding someone to blame for your own inadequacy. I know your type, Mr Frampton. I see you every day - pompous, pious little tin generals who believe that the world exists solely for your own comfort and convenience, and that you have some God-given right to a little piece of everything that's going. And when you don't get it, you rant, and rave, and squeak, and squeal and curse every freeloading scrounger, every obstinate bureaucrat, every crooked politician, every incompetent servitor, and each and every unconnected bystander that happens to cross your path. But you do nothing. You say nothing. There is a Mr Frampton-shaped hole in the universe that has been created just for you, and you refuse to take responsibility for the person who fills it. Get out of my court, Mr Frampton.

Frampton: Oh, but -



Sowerby: Out!

(Mr Gordon Frampton noiselessly shuffled out of the courtroom)

Sowerby: Step forward, Mr Collingwood.

Collingwood: Yes, your honour.

Sowerby: Mr Collingwood, it is my sad duty to sentence you to be taken from this court to a place of execution, there to hang by the neck until dead.

Collingwood: You can't do that!

Sowerby: Hell yes, I can. It's been one of those days.



