Newent and District Probus Club

NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2026

MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

I am writing this piece while travelling at 180mph through the flat (and frankly quite boring) landscape of the Pas de Calais. I am on my way to Rotterdam by Eurostar for a two-night stay in order to meet up with fellow retired professionals who have worked in inland waterways across Europe. A purely social occasion but fun to meet up with European colleagues I have worked with in the past.

This high-speed rail journey has reminded me of the talk we had given by Douglas Butler about the struggles getting HS2 built in England. Sadly, the development of public infrastructure in the UK generally seems to be woefully sclerotic - as also mentioned by John Jones in his talk about developing a new generation of nuclear power provision. Nevertheless, you have to admire the engineering (and enjoy its use). Engineer colleagues used to tell me almost anything is possible - but at a cost. The problems seem to be mostly in ambition, planning and governance.

As exhilarating as travelling 180 mph is you do not see much - as soon as you see something interesting (church spire?) it is gone. On the UK narrow canals, the speed limit is 4mph - and you have plenty of time to study the scenery. As bucolic as that experience is the canals were the HS - High Speed - routes of their day and mired in controversy when they were built.

The 127-mile-long Leeds and Liverpool Canal took 46 years to be completed and cost five times the original budget.

Plus ca change, plus c'est le meme chose.

Nigel

PUB LUNCH

WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER

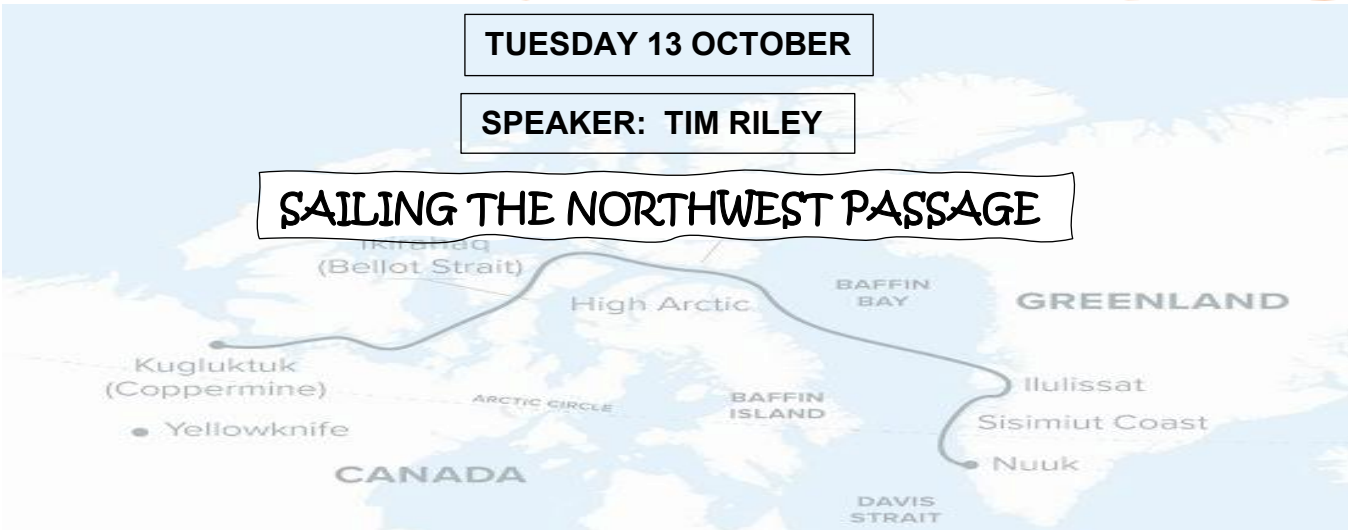


Kings Arms
Ross Road
Newent
GL18 1 BD

TUESDAY 13 OCTOBER

SPEAKER: TIM RILEY

SAILING THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

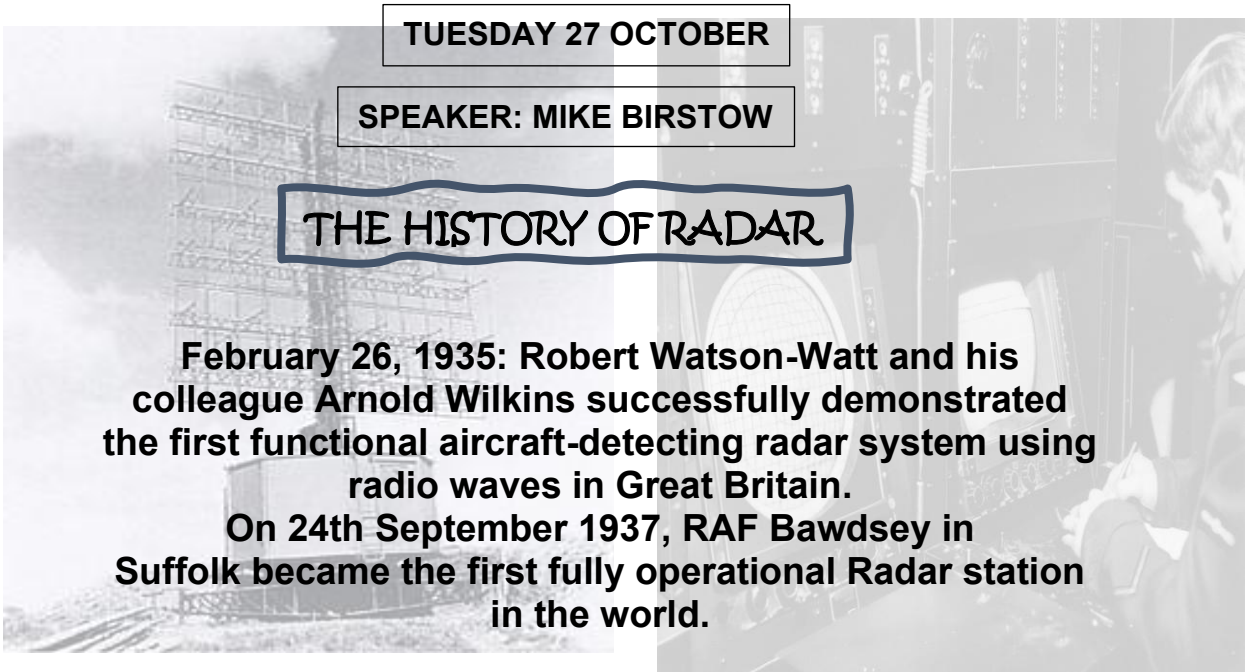


The Northwest Passage is a historic sea lane through the Arctic Ocean connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via the waterways of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. It spans about 900 to 2,000 nautical miles through a maze of remote, ice-cluttered islands north of the Arctic Circle.

TUESDAY 27 OCTOBER

SPEAKER: MIKE BIRSTOW

THE HISTORY OF RADAR

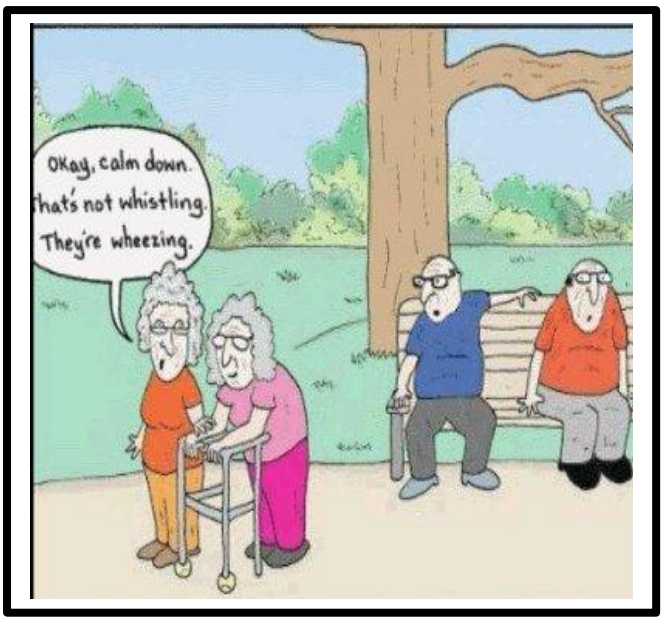


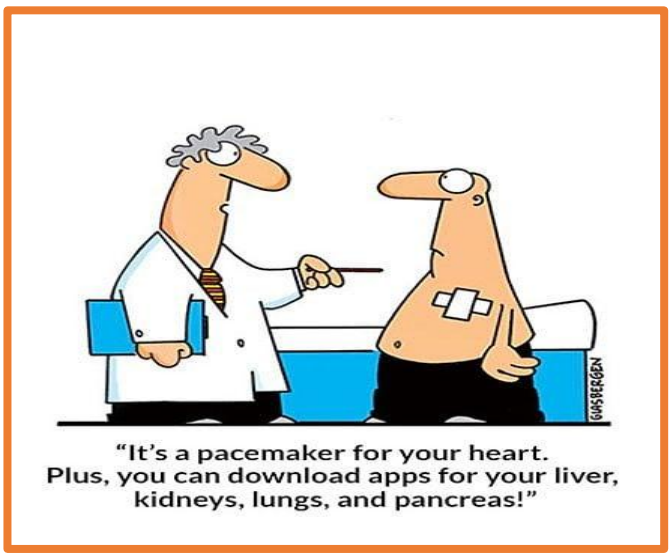
February 26, 1935: Robert Watson-Watt and his colleague Arnold Wilkins successfully demonstrated the first functional aircraft-detecting radar system using radio waves in Great Britain.
On 24th September 1937, RAF Bawdsey in Suffolk became the first fully operational Radar station in the world.



After extensive research and observation on the human race, it has concluded that the world is made up of four different things: Protons, Electrons, Neurons and a very large number of Morons







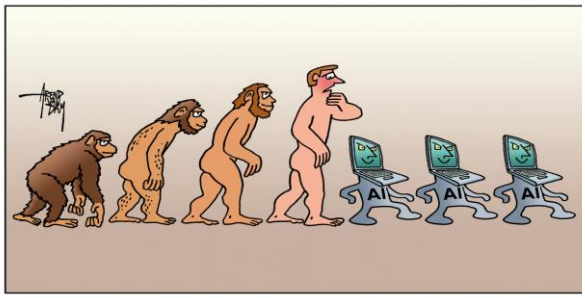
An elderly couple had dinner at another couple's house, and after eating, the wives left the table and went into the kitchen. The two gentlemen were talking, and one said,
"Last night we went out to a new restaurant and it was really great. I would recommend it very highly." The other man said, "What is the name of the restaurant?" The first man thought and thought and finally said, "What is the name of that flower you give to someone you love? You know... the one that's red and has thorns." "Do you mean a rose?" "Yes, that's the one," replied the man.
He then turned towards the kitchen and yelled, "Rose, what's the name of that restaurant we went to last night?"

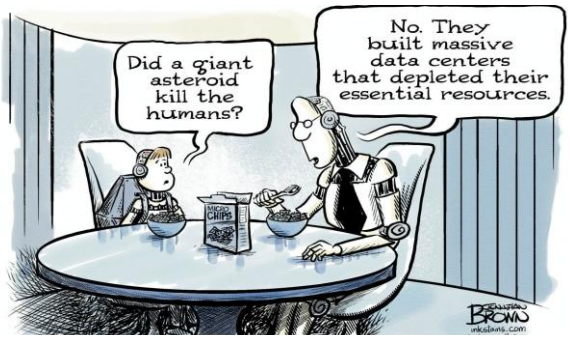




The treasure beneath the fireplace

If the ghosts are the stuff of legend, the treasure story is considerably more tangible.
During renovation work at the George in 1969, workers made an extraordinary discovery beneath the hearth of the western fireplace in the lounge bar.
Hidden beneath the floor was a collection of 40 gold guineas and four half-guineas. The discovery was treated as treasure trove and the coins were offered first to the British Museum and subsequently to Gloucester Museum. According to the local historical account, neither institution wished to acquire them, and the finders were ultimately allowed to keep the coins.
It is a remarkable discovery for an old coaching inn.
The coins must have been deliberately concealed at some point in the past, although precisely who hid them and why remains uncertain. Perhaps a wealthy traveller feared robbery. Perhaps a landlord wanted to conceal his savings. Perhaps the money was hidden during an uncertain period and its owner never returned to retrieve it.
That is where history gives way to imagination.
One can picture an anxious innkeeper or traveller lifting a hearthstone by candlelight, wrapping the valuable coins and burying them where nobody would think to look. Then, as the years passed, the secret was forgotten.
More than a century later, a renovation project accidentally revealed it.
The discovery also gives the George something rather unusual among haunted inns: its most extraordinary hidden treasure isn't merely a ghost story. Gold really was found beneath its floor
And at the George, there is one final thought that is particularly difficult to resist.
If 40 gold guineas and four half-guineas were once hidden beneath a fireplace, what else might have been concealed in the building over the centuries?
The treasure that was found in 1969 may have been the only forgotten fortune beneath the George.
Or perhaps it was simply the first?
.









LUNCH GOERS DINE IN STATELY SURROUNDINGS

What would budding gourmets do without the many now redundant former stately homes that abound- and, conversely, how would they manage without groups like our very own Probus club, dedicated to fine dining. One such stately building is the ***Old Court at Whitchurch,*** *straddling the Herefordshire and Monmouth borders and former home to many of the county's most well-known families*

This month's organiser, Nigel Johnson, did something many thought well-nigh impossible when he found a new venue for our regular gourmet outings at the Old Court which somehow gives the feeling of an authentic Olde English Inn, full of 16thCentury character, although its original occupants would likely to have abhorred such close contact with 'the great unwashed.' In fact, no one would have been surprised if a team of perspiring horses had pulled up, towing a laden stagecoach full of hungry passengers, including Mr Pickwick.

We found ourselves in a dedicated dining room, reserved for us but there are many other bars and a purpose-built restaurant, housed in a conservatory. Outside, there are beautifully kept grounds, all contained within n Area of Outstanding natural beauty – and all this on our metaphorical doorstep too.

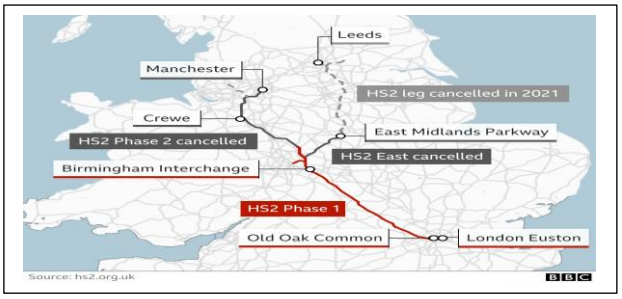
Although the worst (or best~) of our now regular heatwave seem to be over, we decided to forgo the pleasures of al fresco dining and stayed in the magnificent period dining room, where we attacked the wide-ranging menu with what has now become Probus ferocity. It was pub fare, but pub fare with a difference. All the usual favourites were there, but some new ones as well including a delicious Hake and a Lamb Shank that literally fell off the fork. ***Even the humble Ploughman's was elevated to fresh heights***

Paying homage to the weather there was a lot more green leaves on our plates rather than the usual trencherman's pies, pies and more pies. Of course, we did justice to the "Pud" menu with the in-house fruit sundae a firm favourite.

It was midafternoon before we departed, members having taken the opportunity to view the lovely grounds. With our waistlines swollen, we departed with yet another successful pub lunch under our belts with space in our diaries reserved for the next one.

If you have never tried one of our lunch outings, why not come to our next one. Just wait for Kelvin's regular email and take it from there.

Our galloping gourmet Sir Eatalot



HS2 Update by Douglas Butler FIMA

Douglas gave us an enjoyable and rather irreverent 45 minutes on the progress of the HS2 railway line, as well as some fascinating facts about the history of rail travel in UK. Unlike any other presenter he concluded by showing us a recording of him playing his piano and confidently singing us a song, the very apt Flanders and Swann composition “The Slow Train”! He illustrated his talk with copious slides from all ages of the railway. He pointed out how many rail projects haven’t gone well. The long-awaited Oxford to Cambridge east-west line has only got as far as the Oxford to Milton Keynes stretch, and although being finished in 2024 it has yet to take passengers. The final part reaching Cambridge is not expected to be concluded until the mid- 2030s. And of course, he said, there has been the HS2 which doesn’t stop in Buckinghamshire but just fills the county with noise.

He told us that in 1710 London to Birmingham by canal took 9 days, and by stagecoach two and a half days (although the mail coach was slower). The railway in 1838 took five and a half hours for the same journey and the line was built in just 5 years, mainly with manual labour. By 1922 the journey was down to under 3 hours, and with more modern trains train by 2003 down to 1 hour 24 minutes. HS2, once it is finished, will take just 48 minutes. The HS1 line from St Pancras to the Kent network and then Paris has been running successfully for some time but, unfortunately, despite being less than half a mile from Old Oak Common (the HS2 London terminal) the plans to join the two HS lines have been cancelled. This is known as the missing link.

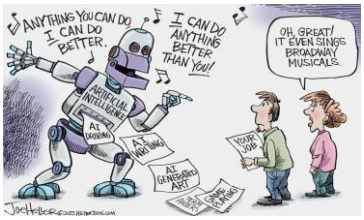
Douglas told us that the total project cost for the HS2 line is likely to be over £100bn, just to get the London Birmingham journey down from 84 to 48 minutes. In 2011 the estimated costs had been £32bn, and by 2015 some £56bn. A bat shelter cost £160m. All of this is taxpayers’ money. To save money further the trains’ top speed requirement was dropped from 360km/hr to 320km/hr i.e. from 223mph to 198mph. Also, the train lengths are being reduced from 400 metres to 250 metres. The government has ordered 54 train sets built by Hitachi and Alston which should arrive next year.

Douglas showed us an impressive film of a viaduct being inserted over the M6 with modern methods, and then pictures of 6 new platforms being built 30 metres underground at Old Oak Common. Each platform is 450 metres long and the construction has resulted in a huge London building site using tens of thousands of tons of cement. The HS2 terminus in Birmingham will be Curzon Street station (just behind Moor Street).

It was pointed out that there was a large drop in rail travel during covid, and that UK trains are the most expensive in Europe. A further top speed reduction to 300km/hr (186mph) was agreed by the government in Mar 2026 in order to align with speeds permitted on the HS1 route as well as in Europe and Japan. Douglas indicated that China has increased its railway network extensively and successfully since 2008 and that California, Mumbai and India generally are good examples of effective expansion. To cheer us all up Douglas then sang us his song, albeit one lamenting the closure of so many rural stations following the Beeching cuts!

John Weeden





THROW AWAY YOUR CRYSTAL BALLS

Nowadays, when most people see the initials AI, they think of Artificial Intelligence. I am different. I think of Artificial Insemination. But come to think of it, they can both breed monsters and you enter an unknown substance, whether it be via a syringe or a keyboard and have no control over what emerges

I have visions of bubbling test tubes and white coated technicians scurrying around, frantically waiting for the next flash of lightning to give their misshapen bundle, strapped down on the operating tables, the kiss of life. In some faraway galaxy, who knows, perhaps there are scores of little green men, rubbing their digits together in glee of the fate that will befall us.

Perhaps the two are more alike than seems at first sight. Now, it seems as if this Artificial Intelligence will not necessarily be of benefit to Mankind, or Womankind for that matter, and from day one of its existence it will be plotting to take over the planet, destroying, or enslaving, us in the process.

Why then do you ask, why do we create such a monster? Why not relegate it, alongside its radioactive relation and entomb it some thousands of fathoms deep in faraway ocean? You need to look no further than the tale of Pandora and her box which serves as a cautionary story about the consequences of curiosity and human nature. In this myth, Pandora, the first woman created by the gods, is given a jar by Zeus, which contains all the evils of the world. Despite being warned not to open it, Pandora's curiosity leads her to open the jar, releasing suffering, sickness, and death into the world. The only thing that remains inside is Hope, which stays behind to comfort humanity. This story illustrates the dangers of unchecked curiosity and the unforeseen repercussions that can arise from our actions.

A case of History repeating itself? Who knows – but do we ever learn?

Editor's Note. This article was not written by AI *Mystic Hayes*



Newent Lake

Known locally as the ***"Jewel in the Crown,"*** the area features accessible walking paths, an outdoor gym, children's play spaces, and a community event stage.

Newent Lake originated as medieval monastic fishponds, later became part of the Newent Court estate,

But the area has a fascinating history:

Medieval Fishponds: Constructed by local monks around the turn of the first millennium to supply fish for the religious house. Newent Priory, was a cell of Cormeilles, Abbey. This was a medieval Benedictine monastery founded by William FitzOsbern in Normandy, France. *There is also a connection with Chepstow Priory which was dependent on Cormeilles. The place name Place de Cormeilles in the historic centre of Chepstow commemorates the association of the two places.*

By around 1810, the ponds and surrounding lands were integrated into the private grounds of Newent Court, a newly built mansion sitting on the rise north of the water. With its extensive landscaped grounds, drives, and lodges it took on the character of the town's 'big house' in the later 19th century when it was owned by Andrew Knowles



The far end/mouth of the lake connects to traces of the historic canal route designed in the 1790s and active until 1883.

The grand estate home suffered a devastating fire in 1942 that destroyed a large portion of the building, leaving the mansion in ruins and the adjacent lake neglected and abandoned for decades

In 1998 it was fully restored as a public amenity managed by the Newent Town Council

In 2019 a Duck House, (anonymously donated) was installed on the lake to enhance the wildfowl



THE BIG FREEZE OF 1963

There was a distinct icy air in the hall when our speaker, Paul Barnett, gave us a copiously illustrated talk on the Great Freeze of 1963, when much of Britain experienced sub-zero temperatures and the county was under a snowy blanket for some three months.

Paul drew parallels with the previous deep freeze of 1947 and the consensus, at least among those of us who had experienced both, was that the latter one was more severe and lasted longer.

"The Freeze" started on Boxing Day 1962 and lasted, give or take, until early March. During that time whole villages were cut off and, at times, the whole county seemed to be at a standstill. Snow drifts particularly in the Cotswolds, were piled some ten feet or more deep, while water pipes froze.

Paul's talk highlighted the effect this had on what was then a major highway for the import and export of both industrial and consumer goods into the county. This was, of course, the 16-mile-long Gloucester & Sharpness Canal which runs from the Severn estuary to Gloucester which is the most inland port in the country. This vital trade line saw, at the time the import of such goods as oil, carried by tankers principally from the firms of John Harker and the Regent Oil Company and timber to be used in the match making industry of the long-established firm of Moreland's.

With temperatures as low as minus 20 degrees, several feet of ice formed on the Canal and even ships of huge tonnage became stuck. The British Waterway fleet of powerful tugs was adapted for ice breaking and maintained a 24-hour presence in order to keep the canal open for traffic.

Running parallel to the canal is the tidal River Severn, which has the second highest tidal range in the world but even this movement was not enough to keep it ice free. At several points in its length, it was possible to walk across it from bank to bank but fortunately, above Gloucester, where it was "canalised" as far as the oil depots at Stourport in Worcestershire, what ice did form proved easy to deal with.

This was an era before central heating in homes, which largely relied on coal as a fuel and with most roads icing up almost as fast as they were cleared, delivery of coal was limited and most of the population shivered for the almost three-month duration of the freeze.

And then in early March 1963, a gradual thaw took place and slowly we returned to normality. But the freeze had left a legacy of damaged roads, thousands of water leaks from the fractured pipes. It did, however, prove a boon to central heating suppliers as households vowed never to be caught out again.

The freeze occurred some fourteen years after the 1947 one but this time the thaw was gradual and the drainage could cope, unlike the 1947 one when the misery of county wide flood followed the icy conditions.

Thanks, must got to the thousands of workers who worked throughout to keep vital services open and who ensured that the population did not go hungry,

Peter Hayes



LATIN TOURIST PHRASE BOOK

Infra Dig - Terrible accommodation
Curriculum - Indian Restaurant
Ad Hoc - Wine not included
Compos Mentos - Mint Sauce
Adsum - Small extra on bill
Post hoc propter hoc - A little more wine won't hurt
Ex Libris - Dirty Books
Ex Cathedra - Ruined Church
Mens Sana - Mens Sauna
Ecco Homo - Gay Bar
Rara Avis - No car hire available

Out of the mouths of babes!

A primary school teacher asked her pupils to use the word **"fascinate"** in a sentence.
Molly put up her hand and said, "My family went to my granddad's farm, and we all saw his pet sheep It was **fascinating."**
The teacher said, "That was good, but I wanted you to use the word **"fascinate**, not **fascinating**".
Sally raised her hand. She said, "My family went to see Gloucester Docks and I was **fascinated**."
The teacher said, "Well, that was good Sally, but I wanted you to use the word **"fascinate."**
Little Johnny raised his hand. ….the teacher hesitated because she had been burned by Little Johnny before.
She finally decided there was no way he could damage the word **"fascinate",** so she called on him.
Johnny said, "My Aunt Gina has a sweater with ten buttons, but her chest is so big she can only **fasten eight." !!!**



THE NOT SO VERY OLD – AND NEW

It seems like only yesterday when I became the proud owner of the seemingly eighth wonder of the world – the fax machine. Now, for the price of a local phone call I could not only send a letter to anywhere is the wide world but I could receive one too. I remember that the price of this state-of-the-art Panasonic machine was a wallet bursting £600 – quite a sum at turn of the century Britain (that's turn of the 21st century!)

In spite of many attempts, now I could not even give it away and now it suffers the ignominy of sculking in the shop window of Bygones, that shop in Newent devoted to the possessions of yesterday, including an early abacus and a Morse code transmitter. I expect that, somewhere within the shop's bowels, there are some flags for semaphore signalling.

Alas, it flattered to deceive, within a few short years it was rendered obsolete, surpassed by email and that other upstart the Scanner. Indeed, it was not so long ago that the wizardry contained within it slender proportions would have had the owner burnt at the stake for witchcraft or, at the very best, a turn on the ducking stool.

I ran a short-lived bureau where, for a fee, I would send and receive faxes for businesses, and indeed some individuals, who either could not justify the purchase or who were rightly suspicious of the 'newfangled technology". It was indeed a wonderful invention although I do believe that the technology behind it had been known for many years; it was just left to the Japanese to implement it in economic and therefore saleable form. its principal drawback was impermanence of the received fax, which resembled and early photo copy before Rank Xerox came up with plain paper copies. They were prone to fading so the wise recipient promptly made a photocopy of it.

Of course, it created an addition to the English language too. The now commonplace word *fax* is just a short, and lazier, form of the word *facsimile* – an exact copy of a document

Many is the time that I have returned home to find that some sender has pressed the wrong button and there, snaking its way across the office floor were enough faxes to wallpaper a large room.

But, *sic transit gloria* as the Romans used to say (which incidentally does not mean that Gloria suffers from car nausea) and all things pass. Nowadays things are obsolete even before they have left the drawing board (oops I Pad).

Our Nonagenarian ranter





GOD BLESS AMERICA

A young boy comes home from school upset because he got a zero in a geography test. His mother asks why. The boy says" It was because I didn't know where Portugal was"
His mother gets angry at the teacher and checks maps of the City, Region and State but can't find it anywhere. Frustrated, she says" It can't be far as the housecleaner is from Portugal and she comes each day on her bicycle"

In Germany, you get the best cars that money can buy.
In The Holland you get the best pot that money can buy.
In America, you get the best politicians that money can buy.

How do you get Trump to change a lightbulb?
Tell him Obama put it in.

My friend calls me up and asks "Hey are you free tonight?"
And I say of course, I'm American

The Overseas Phone Call: An American traveling abroad calls home and tells their friend, "It's so weird here, they speak a completely different language, use funny money, and drive on the other side of the road. Why didn't they just do things the normal way?"

PICTURE QUIZ





ALL ANSWERS TO ANDREW GRAHAM



Thanks to all those who submitted articles and assisted with production.
Ed

Can I remind readers that the Newsletter is for the enjoyment and information of Newent Probus Club members & partners and should not be reproduced or passed to third parties