

GRUMPY OLD MEN 2019

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JANUARY & FEBRUARY 2019:

We have had two meetings since the last newsletter, and some common themes have emerged. Under the general heading of **Transport**, the first grump is that the ticket machine in Ranmoor Road car park isn't working correctly and so after two hours we Grumpys have to go out to get a fresh ticket. This led on to a complaint that as cars have got bigger over the years the car park spaces haven't, Chelsea tractors take more than their fair share, perhaps they deserve the odd dent!!!

January's meeting was unusual in that **potholes** weren't mentioned at all, but come February - here we go again! The RAC has warned that pothole-induced damage to your car is 2½ times more likely than a decade ago. The government has given extra money for road repairs but is it being used for this or just for deficit reduction by local authorities? What followed was a spirited debate about the best way to drive over traffic calming bumps while minimising damage to suspension - straddle one bump or drive over two? The latter seemed to be the most popular (except when there's oncoming traffic!).

I'm surprised that hasn't come up before, but **Smart Motorways** - good or bad? The consensus was they're OK if managed correctly and the refuges are closely spaced. However, data seems to be accumulating that a collision with stationary car is more likely on a smart motorway than an old-style one. No surprises there.

Apparently there are many **bridges** on our road system unsuitable for 44 tonne lorries, and cash-strapped councils do not have the finance to repair them all. We can only hope that HGV drivers obey weight restriction notices.

In the category of ***I don't believe it!!*** - we discussed such topics as British aid still being sent to some of the world's most corrupt states; football clubs charging hundreds of pounds for children to be mascots at the start of games; police responses to emergency and priority calls becoming ridiculously slow (though we have sympathy with a severely understaffed police force trying to cope with admin-clogged systems.); Hastings pier sold to a businessman for £100,000 after a Lottery funded refit of £12M and then being closed "for essential repairs & improvements"; the NHS redundancy revolving door - (500M in redundancy has been paid to staff some of whom immediately re-join the service on new salaries); "Shrinkflation", where pack size decreases while the price remains the same (remember the old Wagon Wheel?) - we all regretted this but were shown how to modify the new, skinnier Toblerone bar by inserting chocolate orange segments in the gaps. Genius!; and lastly - "Januhairy" - don't ask!

A final entry - we note with sadness that Fullers of London has been sold to Asahi of Japan after 174 years as a family business. Does this mean goodbye to ESB, London Pride and others?

MARCH 2019:

This month's meeting was quickly brought to order and we readdressed the seating on the Grumpy Bus (the one heading for the cliff edge) It was agreed that a nice comfy seat near the front should be reserved for guest speaker **Christopher Grayling MP**, from where he could give a talk to the other passengers entitled "How I achieved my successful career". He became our subject for discussion later in proceedings when we discussed the series of expensive failed strategies that he has headed. Even the New York Times has published an article on the subject. How does he get away with it (we cried).

Another strategy that doesn't seem to have worked as promised is the abolition of **paper Vehicle Excise Duty discs**. The online database was supposed to save the Treasury £10 Million a year, but revenue lost to the increasing numbers of untaxed vehicles has been estimated at ten times this amount. A new DVLA campaign hopes to stem the tide by reminding drivers of the stark consequences of not taxing their vehicle. Nottingham comes 8th in the top 10 areas in the country for fines, penalties or clamping for VED evasion.

There's further evidence that **we're being forced into an online world** as more and more utility providers stop sending bills through the post unless extra payment is made. The charge should be no more than the reasonable cost of posting says OFCOM but many are charging all in excess of this. If you are on a priority services register within your supplier due to ill health or disability you should receive posted bill without charge. We also hear that a new way of charging for supply of energy is likely to increase the bills for low energy users.

Our **Fat Cat of the Month** award went to British Rail. Recent failures (Graylures?) Have been partly blamed on historic lack of investment in Network Rail, but rumours have it that almost a thousand employees of Network Rail earn more than £100,000 p.a., Chief Executive Peter Hendry is on £375,000 p.a. It is said that the gravy train will derail next year when salaries will be capped at £95,000 p.a. We wait to see.

APRIL 2019

This month's Grumpys saw thirteen of us in attendance, (nearly a record) so it took quite a while before everyone was comfortably sat with an adequate supply of sustenance and liquid refreshment. The first item of business was suggestions for new passengers on the Grumpy coach - only one contender this time, namely Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien Sultan and Yang di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam; GCB, GCMG, a.k.a. the **Sultan of Brunei**, though it's doubtful he would accept the honour.

Our intrepid convenor's selection of news items for discussion then gave us plenty of scope to revisit old favourite topics and fulminate over new ones.

On the roads, we again discussed our unease about **smart motorways**, where the hard shoulder has been done away with and replaced by infrequent shelters. Recent news of a fatal accident on the M1 in which it took over an hour for first responders to attend because there was no hard shoulder gives cause for alarm, The amount of Smart Motorway in the country is planned to double by 2025!

Two items about surveillance on the road, EC proposals to fit **speed limiting technology** in new cars mean that recording of speed and real-time location become necessary. Big Brother is in the passenger seat! On the other hand, one of our number pointed out that you can legally confuse Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras by driving a vehicle manufactured before 1975 and fitted with the appropriate silver on black numbers plates (ah yes, we remember them well). (Apparently the cameras can't.)

Good old **smart meters** are there to cheer us, apparently energy supplier SSE has been fined for not finding enough people who wanted one. There is also news that the new "SMETS2" meters which were supposed to be independent of the supplier still have the same problem of being reliant on a good 3G phone signal, not always available out in the country.

Two pieces of **gardening news** - tending your plants is good for you, as is any moderate exercise, and can reduce your risk of an early death by 20%. and where better to take exercise than in your own garden? On the other hand, an American court has awarded £61M compensation to a pensioner who used Roundup on his weeds and claims it caused his cancer. Many similar court cases have been filed in the US and Bayer will be strongly defending its safety record.

During the rest of our time together we discussed **HS2** and it's cost overruns (do we blame Mr G?) and agreed that the project should be pulled; a report that painting roofs and roads white in cities would significantly lower the heat build-up in the summer; and the not surprising news that disagreement over home décor is a significant cause of relationship break-up.

Lastly, regular readers may remember our report some time ago about the exotic Cornish pasty that won at the Annual British Pie Awards.. Well, it gets worse - this years winner was a **VEGAN pie** containing curried sweet potato and butternut squash! You couldn't make it up!

MAY 2019

Our list of subjects for discussion this month seemed to offer no scope for anything but misery and “I don’t believe it” responses, However, within a short time after the refreshments had been dealt with the laughter rang out as usual.

As ever we had reports of large amounts of money going to waste, the **Crossrail** project is overdue and overbudget, but allegedly it already has a staff of 479 train drivers on a 4 day week at a salary of £59K to drive the trains that aren’t yet running!

With the nation’s economy apparently under stress several money saving ideas were discussed like the cost to the NHS of “**Health Tourism**”, cutbacks in policing (only 45% of crimes are investigated), pensioner’s free bus passes being under threat and readdressing Britain’s contribution to global foreign aid.

We also discussed whether **vaccination** should be made compulsory (mostly yes) and whether the **age of criminal responsibility** should be raised from 10 to 14 (mostly no). There is also a warning from OFWAT that we need to use water more efficiently in the future to cope with climate change and rising population. Time to put another brick in the cistern!

So you see, what a depressing selection of subjects? I can’t think what we found to laugh at. On a more positive note, (at least to us gentlemen of a certain age), we discussed a new simple outpatient procedure which relieves the symptoms of an **enlarged prostate**. Hooray.

JUNE 2019

A reduction in our numbers this month as our meeting clashed with the railway enthusiasts’ trip; so only 10 members at the Willowbrook club to put right the world from items from the media. As always, we highlighted someone to put “on the coach” to permanently leave and this time it was **Tony Hall**, the current director of the BBC [for services to broadcasting].

Looking at items from the newspapers: we wondered why the Qatar Sovereign Wealth Fund has bought a further £200 million stake in **Severn Trent Water** (it can’t be just for the fishing rights can it?).

On **crime and punishment**: we noted that one offender has racked up 198 convictions in less than six months and we discussed whether short jail sentences are affective (noting that sentences of less than six months are to be scrapped this summer).

We are asked to look out for “**cuckoo spit**” [Xylella bacteria]; one import we do not want. Another import we question are the **plastic pots of peeled garlic**, grown in China and then frozen, shipped 10,000 miles to Britain to be sold by Marks and Spencer in throw-away pots made in Belgium. Mention was made of the garlic fields of the Isle of Wight and whether the ferry to Portsmouth costs more than shipping from Shanghai. Other import events were noted being illegal entrants trying to cross the Channel in flimsy boats.

The misuse of Britain’s **foreign aid budget** was again highlighted; this time being £87,000 to support fracking in China.

Health issues were again mentioned including the insulting and unjustified rationing of vital **cataract operations**. We also noted the suggestion that sat-navs are said to be bad for the brain... Although some of our members know better than their sat-nav and so choose to ignore them.

An issue affecting some of our members is the decision to end free **TV licence** for all people over 75. On this the government were universally criticised.

Criticism of the government and large companies was also voiced with the recall by **Whirlpool** of its fire-risk tumble dryers and that one in four **smart meters** are not working properly.

We concluded with the report that men are better than women at **reading maps**; on which there seemed to be complete agreement.

JULY 2019

Another successful meeting with the return visit of some new members so we must be getting something right. As usual we discussed a wide range of subjects especially selected by our illustrious convenor for their "I don't believe it!" factor.

Among these were:-

The launch of **BBC's new Scottish TV channel** which, despite its alleged cost of £32M, failed to raise any interest in the Scottish watching public - watching figures were abysmal.

More reports of blatantly **false benefits claims** being approved without investigation, with the suspicion that organized criminal gangs are involved

The home secretary Sajid Javid is facing criticism over the home offices failure to find hundreds of **foreign criminals** who have gone on the run to dodge deportation. Figures obtained reveal 747 offenders from overseas including rapists and killers have vanished after being released into the community

In a recent global survey **Britain leads the way in drunkenness**, followed by Canada, Australia, Denmark and India, We apparently get drunk (on average) 50.3 times a year

Politics, the weather, traffic, bad customer service, snoring partners- you name it and we British can Moan about it, but apparently it's the millennials who lead the way in the **complaining stakes**, not us GOM's. We must try harder.

Some **transport** related items:-

While we continue to patch up our rail infrastructure, news comes that Japan's very successful high speed train service is being upgraded with a new Alpha - X bullet train (now on test) which is capable of 249 mph. Incidentally, the Japanese rail service apologise to passengers when they leave 9 seconds early!

Speed cameras in the North German city of Kiel spotted a naked man cycling at 47kph in a 30kph zone. When stopped he was reprimanded for not wearing a helmet !

A popular video clip shows the driver of a 14 ton concrete mixer stopping at a busy Birmingham junction to jump down from his cab and help a frail pensioner across the road with her walking aid. A true gentleman.

Less happily two volunteer coast guards have quit after their team was reprimanded for taking a sick teenager to hospital in their van, rather than wait the two hours for an ambulance to arrive. The patient was unconscious, wet, cold and drunk. A paramedic on the scene called for an ambulance but was told it would take 2 hours. So the coast guard's secured the patient to a stretcher and loaded him into their van, and took him to hospital with the paramedic. Later the coast guard was rebuked for using a stretcher in a private vehicle. (Health and safety strikes again) and ordered to retrain and he was also demoted. The coastguard of 32 years' experience felt he had no choice but to resign. Two other the members of his team also resigned in protest.

Tolerance is a two way street, witness the latest example, the trolling online of Olympian Sharon Davis, who is vocal in her defence of the rights of women in sport. She has been accused of sexism, homophobia and transphobia for simply suggesting that Trans women (that is to say men who identify as female) have a natural physical advantage over biological females and therefore should not compete on the same platform. This is not prejudice, merely straightforward biology. (Most men have a greater muscle mass than most women, and that does not change when they change gender).

Lastly, news has come to us that a woman was on trial for beating her husband to death with his guitar. The Judge asked the clerk of the court 'Is it a offender?' The woman shouted out 'No your honour - first a Gibson! then a Fender!'

AUGUST 2019

We met this month as usual in a positive mood, but once the refreshments had been sorted out we set off on a merry trail of depressing news stories.

One of our most regular themes seems to be that of **vast amounts of money being mis-spent**, and this month gave us several good examples, Malawi receives £65M in aid annually from the UK. **Gertrude Mutharika**, wife of the president, recently spent £80,000 on a luxury trip to London at the end of July to witness her son's graduation. She has now received a complimentary ticket for the Grumpy Old Bus.

Ex-deputy prime minister Nick Clegg has claimed £113,000 from the Public Duty Cost Allowance, normally only available to ex-PM's. Sir Nicholas Clegg's office say that he had kept to the rules - but he won't do it anymore!

The Ministry of Defence have recently spent **£15M on a training simulator for the Tornado fighter** aircraft, apparently unaware that this plane has been retired from service. This is part of £100M spent on redundant equipment, written-off contracts and scrapped projects. No way to run a wheel stall!

Rumour has it that Britain's most senior police officer wore a **£5,000 Savile Row uniform** at a recent State Dinner with President Trump only weeks after clashing with Theresa May over budget cuts.

We then started a long and rambling discussion about **gender identity**, triggered by the news that apparently male prisoners who identify as female are allowed to wear short skirts and high(ish) heels according to official guidelines. Admiration was expressed for those like Quentin Crisp who were openly gay in a repressive age, One member described finding Oscar Wilde's large and impressive tomb in Paris, and that nearby is a very insignificant tombstone marker for Edith Piaff. Of course, as someone immediately pointed out, she had no regrets!

And finally, two food-related items - Newport in South Wales has ended its 23 year twinning with Guangxi in China because of their continued **consumption of dogs** during an annual festival, and news that here we are using sniffer dogs to detect contraband meat coming into the country. **African Swine Fever** of Asian origin has spread to parts of Europe, and although harmless to humans there is no vaccine to protect pigs from this severe infection. And on that happy note we'll await our next meeting to have another moan..

SEPTEMBER 2019

Once again we meet at the Willowbrook to set the world to rights and, as usual, began by considering new candidates for a seat on the Grumpy Old Bus (the one headed for the cliff edge). These days it's so full of politicians of all persuasions that it might be easier just to fit the Houses of Parliament with wheels and push the whole thing into the Thames.

Our usual moans continue about the **exorbitant salaries of some chief executives**, this time it was well known charities and schools which came under fire, Executives at some of the country's best known charities pocketed five-figure pay rises last year and many now earn significantly more than the Prime Minister's salary of £150,000.

Similarly there are three hundred schools where senior staff are on six-figure contracts. Last year 66 head teachers earned more than the P.M., with one paid £260,000. How can this be justified?

"Smart" motorways still concern us, with evidence accumulating that they can be more dangerous than the old motorway system, the AA is now active in calling for a halt to further expansion.

It is suggested that all new **cars are fitted with the technology** that prevents drivers nodding off at the wheel, If the driver's eyes are closed too much alarms sound and if that fails the car can be automatically slowed or even brought to a standstill. We can't see that happening soon!

The **sorry tale of HS2** rumbles on, latest estimates are that it won't be finished before 2031 and it will cost £88bn. A straw poll of the Grumpys agreed that it should be scrapped now.

And finally, police **special constables will be armed with Tasers** in the future to protect them from assault, these have increased by a third in just four years with an average of 28 offices attacked every day.

Despite all this serious stuff the meeting was its usual jolly self with plenty to laugh at, including our convenor's contribution:-

My wife asked me to pass her lip balm I gave her superglue by mistake.

She's still not speaking to me!

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2019

The Grumpys have met twice since the last Newsletter. We can usually expect a turnout of a dozen or more and that's enough to make best use of the side room at the Willowbrook, As usual we had discursive discussions on all topics brought to our attention by our newshound/convenor or members. As an example of discursive – we had discussion of subjects that started with the proposed banning of fossil-fuelled cars by 2035 and ended with the questionable advantage of smart meters, taking in knife crime and memories of flick knives on the way. I can't for the life of me recall how these subject were seamlessly connected in the discussion...but they were.

Two of our current bugbears surfaced again. We are still concerned about the safety of **smart motorways** and are encouraged that the Department of Transport is looking at the new evidence that the new system is inherently more dangerous for stranded drivers.

Similarly, the unjustifiable **salaries of charity CEOs** is illustrated again by the news that David Miliband is paid £741,885 p.a. to run the International Rescue Committee, which is funded by the British taxpayer. That is almost five times the salary of the Prime Minister.! It wasn't like this in Jeff Tracy's day.

After tucking into our sausage or bacon cobs we were encouraged by a report that mapped the most **unhealthy lunches** across the country. Perhaps not surprisingly

Glaswegians were the worst offenders (56% admitting to a fast-food lunch every day) with Geordies close behind (53%) followed by Stoke (50%). The healthiest eaters were from Norwich (32%) and Edinburgh (30%).

More trouble with the consequences of applying **gender neutrality** rules, The army is now an "inclusive employer" and has amended its guidance on troops wearing make-up on duty from women only to gender neutral. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace denies this (only camouflage make up allowed!) but the discussion carries on.

I think we're about to start our annual seasonal rant about **potholes**. A recent report states that one in four A-roads in England needs urgent road works to fix pot holes. Official figures suggest some 23% were given amber warnings, needing attention soon, while 3% were categorised as red needing immediate attention.

At the November meeting we took time to think about our sadly missing member, Geoff Howell who was always an active contributor with his ready wit and vast collection of stories. When Geoff spoke, we all listened. We will miss him.

DECEMBER 2019

Our December meeting was enlivened by a proper meal at our normal meeting place, The Willowbrook. There's a picture below of everyone enjoying themselves!

After we'd recovered from the hilarity of our cracker jokes we settled down for an in-depth discussion of matters of current interest. Regular readers of this feature will not be surprised to learn that our subjects included problems with "**smart**" **meters**, the dangers of "**smart**" **motorways**, and what a "smart" idea it was to abolish the "**car tax**" **disc** (£94M of tax is currently being evaded).

One genuinely smart idea was the advice to always open your car door with your left hand, you will automatically be looking over your shoulder and can better see oncoming cyclists.

At the end of the meeting we grudgingly wished each other a Happy Christmas and made our way home.

