

The Times Diary

A puzzling way to spend an evening

The invitation to Saturday night's unusual event began unpromisingly. Michael Rich wrote that he expected I was inundated with invitations to functions of little interest. He hoped nonetheless that I would go to the annual dinner of people who set the crossword in *The Listener*, the BBC's weekly magazine.

It is generally accepted that *The Listener* has the most difficult of all weekly crosswords. "You may", Rich wrote, "find it stimulating to join the erudite, not to say esoteric gathering."

To those who do not know the crossword, I must explain that it bears little relation to the simple mental exercise which appears in *The Times*. The first challenge is to understand the instructions. It is never simply a matter of solving a cryptic clue and writing the answer in the appropriate square.

Take this extract from the instructions to a recent snorter: "The first and last 12 of 36 letters (five words) connected with the title should really occur (in some cases more than once) in the answers to the down clues. . . . These letters must all be omitted, wherever they should occur, and entered in the appropriate chair either above or below the answer." Or this one: "Clues are normal. Each solution must be turned inside out before being entered on the diagram."

I did not, therefore, expect a straightforward evening of socializing when I climbed to the upstairs room of a Fleet Street tavern for the gathering. The first difficulty was that most of the guests were known by the code-names under which they compose their tests of mental gymnastics.

Rich himself is Ploutos, and he was chatting with deceptively normal looking people known as Jago, Bryn, Smada (his surname backwards), Mog, Aeschylus, Sam, Illick, Egma, Smokey (after his dog), Adam,

Merlin, Twudge, Duck and Zander (known to readers of *The Guardian* as Custos).

It is a male-dominated sport, though Machiavelli is a woman and Peto a husband-and-wife team. Many are schoolteachers, but a few work in computers and Ploutos describes himself modestly as "only a merchant banker."

Among the guests were three of the magazine's most consistent crossword solvers, who had sent in correct solutions to all the puzzles this year. One of these, Tony Sever, was wearing a pendant round his neck to commemorate coming fourth in this year's *Times* crossword championship, though like everyone I spoke to he was dismissive of our little puzzle, claiming to be able to do it in about 20 minutes.

Sever had his fiancée with him, and I asked her whether she was also a crossword fancier. "No", she replied. "But I have learned to keep quiet when he does them." I predict a happy marriage.

Solvers aspire to be setters. It is open to anyone to send in a crossword for consideration by *The Listener*, though with the fee at a paltry £15 it must be a labour of love. All the puzzles submitted are sent for scrutiny to James Evans, a Government auditor from Oxford who has been selecting crosswords for the magazine since 1953 and is thus held in enormous awe by the setters.

He spends three evenings a week looking through puzzles, rejecting them because they are too hard or too easy, or suggesting alterations to one or two clues if he thinks the basic idea is good. He is no respecter

of reputations, and has no compunction about rejecting the work of his most experienced contributors.

They do not always accept his verdict with good grace. Egma, the retired headmaster of a Welsh comprehensive school, said crisply about his most recent rejection: "It was a mistake on the part of Evans. He thought it was too easy, but it wasn't."

The evening was not free from other controversy. The *Listener* crossword set are still furiously indignant about the magazine's decision a year ago to omit the puzzle one week in every four, to include a more populist feature called "Consumer Viewpoint"—a pair of words that was often spat out on Saturday with intense venom. Cunningly, the magazine ensures that the crossword enthusiasts do not boycott the paper on the fourth week, by including the answer to the previous week's puzzle.

D. A. N. Jones, who writes a column in *The Listener*, was there as the paper's representative, but dodged a fight by declaring himself in his after-dinner speech to be on the side of the crossword folk. Another of the speakers was Jago, who said all the setters would support my own newly announced campaign to be made Director-General of the BBC if I promised to restore the crossword in the fourth week. Needing support badly, I gave an unqualified pledge to do so.

Ploutos, in his speech, said that an average of 298 people sent in solutions to the crossword every week, and 15 per cent of them were wrong. He read a telegram from an absent

setter, Sabre, who reported from the United States that American crosswords were "bally boring".

Most of the speeches contained stirring crossword anecdotes, about baffling clues and diagrams triumphantly solved. Adam talked about the notorious six-letter word ending in Q (Mushaq, a Persian water carrier) and quoted two of the worst clues he had seen. One was simply "Mine" (answer "Host") and the other was an ugly anagram: "Venice coy slut" (answer "Consecutively").

Adams said the discovery of *The Listener* crossword was an event that changed his life as profoundly as his discovery of sex. He lost me, though, when he began talking about a double acrostic based on Anthony Trollope: I was not certain whether this was a crossword feature or a sexual exercise.

Severs, too, spoke of past crosswords he had loved, and brought along well-thumbed copies of a couple. Jago, with great resource, was even able to unearth an Irish crossword joke. A Togo dime (anag) was had by all.

My colleague Justow Serious seems to be infiltrating his way back to the BBC. An alert Couldson reader says he heard a reporter on The World at One the other day interviewing a rescuer of some American students on Snowdon. "Just how sheer was the cliff?" he asked and received the reply: "Fairly vertical."

THE LISTENER CROSSWORD SETTERS' DINNER

1973-2023



THE LISTENER

CROSSWORD

SETTERS

DINNER

SATURDAY 22nd. SEPTEMBER 1973.

Andrew Brenner (Sabre)
 Butt-Lyden (Odif) Ewen Graythorpe
 Jonathan Gornow (Gong, Aced)
 Ex Couis (RELOV)
 T.P. M. xfl (T.MOR)
 Eric Butz (artist who draws x wood)
 the Hobbs (Zander)
 Hilary Carr (Topham) M. B. Freeman
 A Adams Ad (Salamancas -
 Adams (Smada) Anon)
~~Adams~~ (Chanakya) Bob Helms
 Tan W. Johnson (Twudge) (KLC/Ch)
 J Anchus (SMAN)
 D. I. FIELDING (Rabotnik)
 O. Hughes (Sam) 121 RANDOLPH AVE
 'LONDON W9.
 Richard England (Aeschylus)
 Diana Reed 286-0097

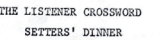
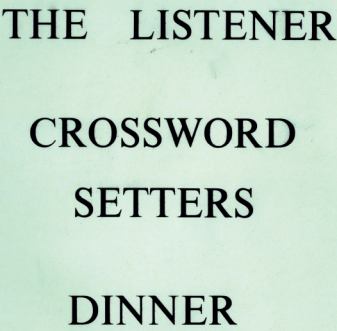
The Dinner in 1973, the first in the current series, was held in Ye Olde Cock Tavern in Fleet Street, London. It was organised by Plutos (Mike Rich), who took over after a lapse of several years following the death of the previous organiser, Odysseus (E Collis).

Dinners were originally held in autumn; by 1980, the date had been switched to spring.

Ploutos (left), at a later Dinner with Bufo (Peter Rhodes) and Nibor (Robin Baxter)



With thanks to everyone who contributed; thanks especially to Third Man (Richard England) and his niece Clare, for many of the scanned images.



at
THE OLDE COCK TAVERN
8th November 1975

CHAIRMAN: A. Robins.

TOASTS

THE QUEEN

CHAIRMAN

THE GUESTS AND ABSENT FRIENDS

DOGOP

REPLY BY

MISS D. REED

MENU

Prawn cocktail

Roast Sirloin of Beef & Yorkshire Pudding

Vegetables in season

Fruit Trifle

Coffee



TO THE GUESTS by SALAMANCA

Reply by Mrs. P. BOURNE

TO THE SETTERS by E. AKENHEAD
Reply by TWUDGE

TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE by R. SHARP
(particularly the small words)

Reply by J. SYKES

[MENU](#)

X1 A PLOUTOS

—

COUPE FEM. EN KIRSCH.

AMPLE BEAR

COFFEE

from the 1975 Dinner