

*Doug explains why pubbing your ish isn't always as easy as you'd wish especially when your trousers disappear...*

## You Done My Brain In

The week had been far too stressful. Christina had gone off to Spain with Lilian Edwards, Mike Abbot and Ann Wilson. Me, I was stuck at home, contractually obliged to work in the University's Admissions during August and September, which isn't too bad really - other staff aren't allowed holidays during term. The day Christina left, a major tabloid newspaper broke an incredibly dubious and potentially libelous story about how bad our admissions policy was. The fact we'd failed to take them up on expensive advertising had nothing to do with the story of course. Anyway the upshot was a very difficult week of re-checking everything. Never mind in the evenings I had the house to myself; after a couple of hours each night of fanzine work I could veg out in front of the TV with a whisky sour or two - yeah, right.

Firstly my trousers disappeared. The rest of my work clothes were still damp from the wash, and although I can wear pretty much what I want into work, what with all the high heid ones coming into our office regularly demanding reports due to the aforementioned crisis, I thought I'd better err on the side of caution. Anyway I just couldn't find that last pair of clean, smart, dry trousers. One minute they were on the bed the next they weren't. I spent a frantic couple of hours searching the house top to bottom - even those unlikely places like the fridge, the cupboard under the stairs. At work I asked the cleaners, lost property and the porters as I cycle to work and use the changing and showering facilities, but nothing, and I was sure I'd worn Levis to work the previous week anyway. Gone the trouser-gnomes must have lifted them! So after work, I nipped up to the big pedestrian unfriendly Cribbs Causeway Mall and purchased a pair of emergency work trousers. Problem solved although I did miss Rovers v Argyle in the Worthington Cup due to this, and will the work thank me?

By the time I got home my head was

pounding and all I wanted was a shower and bed, but a washer had exploded in one of our bath taps. Never mind, replacing a washer is only a two minute job. Except when the tap had rusted together with the fitting. Despite my best effort with an adjustable spanner, I knew it wasn't going to be easy. A hammer, a can of 3-in-1, a screwdriver and an hour of sweat and cursing later, I'd managed to remove the offending tap but had knackered the mechanism in doing so. Fuck. The next day after cycling to most of Bristol's DIY stores I'd managed to find suitable replacements. Fitting them only took ten minutes. It had not been a good week and by now it was Wednesday evening and I'd not done any writing yet. The phone rang, it was Sue - "Fancy coming to the pub? My brother's in town." Now Steve Mowbray is one of my oldest friends in fandom, and since moving down from Edinburgh I don't get to see a lot of him or his partner Lesley Swan these days. Head! would have to wait.

Thursday night was curry night with the Mowbrays. It was also SF night - I wouldn't be working on the zine tonight anyway I reasoned with myself. The rest of the evening was spent in the pub downing jugs of thirstquenching Bath Spa Ale.

Christina's back tomorrow and I've only just started on the zine. Never mind, I work better under pressure and with deadlines.

YES, I HEARD IT FROM LILIAN.  
CHRISTINA WAS GIVING HEAD TO EVERYONE  
AT <PLOTTA.CON>...



EDITORIAL

*Dick Walters takes his life into his hands trying to conquer a very personal primal fear, something we at The Head Office applaud, but wouldn't dare do...*

## No Head for Heights

I once took a job with a building company, on the proviso there would be no ladders, scaffolding etc. What did I see the first time I turned up at the site (a terraced house in Easton next to the cycle track?) Yes, a fucking big ladder. The foreman pointed at the beast and said, "What you godda do, is carry they slates up that ladder..." I couldn't do it. I had the piss ripped out of me by the macho builders but however hard I tried I couldn't get past even the fourth or fifth rung.

Pathetic. Or is it? Fear of heights - acrophobia, if you will - is a perfectly healthy and sensible fear (unlike fear of beards or the number "13"). In your fifth floor flat or office, you're hardly even aware how far you are above the ground. Stand yourself on the window ledge, though, and you'll find yourself unable to think of anything else. The sheer disorientation of being at a great height, elevated unnaturally above ground, whether it be on a ladder or a Big Wheel or on top of a tall building, has always affected me deeply. I am filled with a deep sense of dread, and something akin to awe, when I ascend Cabot Tower and stand reeling at the head-spinning view.

So you would think, given the above, that I would be the last person on the planet do a bungee-jump. I had always considered the activity dangerous, stupid and irresponsible, the province of morons and thrill-seekers, the epitome of the instant-fix, thrill-oriented, "entertain me" generation. I never understood why anyone would want to do such an obviously dangerous, terrifying thing.

So how was it, one hot day in May 2000, that I found myself standing on a platform suspended from a crane 150 feet above the dreaming spires of Oxford, about to hurl myself into what seemed at the time certain oblivion?

I'm still not entirely sure.

The run-up to this act of bravery/idiocy was innocuous enough. Two of my work colleagues, Josh McElwee (brother of weatherman Rob) and Lisa Spencer (17 and seemingly without fear) were jumping for charity and I went along to watch and take photos. I never entertained the idea of jumping for even a second. So why did I pack a spare pair of underpants along with my camera and Factor 50 sun-block? Perhaps, even then, my subconscious had its own agenda, planning to get me to jump to face my fear.

When we arrived the sun was in full force, glaring mercilessly down on the charmless grey block of an indoor ice-rink - hot enough, it seemed, to turn it into an indoor swimming pool. In the field next to this a horribly industrial-looking yellow crane speared the sky. Crowds gathered, there was an expectant air, I watched someone walk into the cage at the end of the bungee-rope and was reminded uncomfortably of the public executions popular in less enlightened days.

Whilst Josh and Lisa signed up for their act of insanity, I watched the jumpers. Most would scream they took the plunge, and those gathered below - usually me - would laugh.

It was incongruous, grotesque even, to hear people screaming for their lives on that hot summer day. For that is what they were doing, I don't think they could help it. One Asian guy let out a long, drawn-out scream as if he was being eviscerated. Idly, I began to wonder if I would cry out or keep my dignity as I took that final step into space.

I pushed such thoughts away, as Lisa prepared to jump. They harnessed her real tight, which was uncomfortable but preferable to the consequences of "falling into" a loose harness. Lisa seemed apprehensive but not scared, and as she ascended towards the sun I took up position with the camera. It was strange, watching someone

you know leap into space, to jerk and dangle like the victim of a lynch mob. To her credit, Lisa only shrieked once, but as she dangled, she yelled "Never a-fuckin' 'gain!"

Josh had done a parachute-jump so the bungee held no fear for him. His sole exclamation during his jump was a rather sardonic "Wha-hey!" He told me later that he wasn't scared at all, rather bemused by the whole thing.

I was impressed with the professionalism, understanding and rigorous safety regime of the crew - it was this, partly, which lulled me into my eventual decision to jump. They were the Oxford Stunt Factory (not a part of the University who apparently eschew such dangerous sports), founder members of the British Elastic Rope Sports Association (which makes you wonder what other laggy-sports there are: bungee-climbing? bungee-football? bungee-golf?). They were all tanned young hip things, every one with a mobile phone and most with leg-tattoos. The "leader" of this crew was a certain Ding Bolton, a be-shaded, orange-jumpsuited, rock'n'roll kinda guy.

"If you leave here today," he told me solemnly, "without jumping, you'll regret it for ever." If only he knew how persuasive his words sounded - did I really want to add yet another regret to my list?

But I didn't have enough cash on me to pay for the jump, and they wouldn't accept credit cards. What a pity! The feeling of relief was amazing. I'd got my cake and eaten it. I'd shown willing to jump, but circumstances were against me.

Then Josh turned to me, smiling, his glasses glinting in the sunlight, and said the most chilling thing I've ever heard anybody say ever: "I've got my chequebook with me."

And that was it. Sod it, I thought, I'll do it. A plunging sense of doom, totally at odds with the bright sunny day, closed around me. I signed forms which basically said, "I'm not drunk or on drugs (though I wish I was), and if I die during or after this

bungee-jump, it's my fault, because I know how idiotically dangerous it is." Then there was a bit of a wait - just exactly what I didn't need.

The problem was, at over 15 stone I was too heavy for the rope then being used, so they had to change the rope to accommodate me and a few other fat bastards. So I had to wait until all the wee folk had had their go. Still not believing that I was actually going to do it, I sat with Lisa and Josh, asking them the time every ten seconds and watching the latest victims of the bungee. Some were going twice, as Lisa had done, which slowed things down a bit. To one side, two of the crew were busying themselves with a lumpy green bag the size of a small cow. "What's that?" I asked Ding. He looked at me through his Gerard Langley shades and said, "We gotta dead-weight the rope." Before I jumped, apparently, they had to test the "heavy rope" by binging this bag from the crane. I would be the first human to jump using the new rope. From the back of the van, I could hear a conversation that went something like, "But we haven't got the runnel loops for the other rope!" "Naah, we don't need them..." "What about the tensile fibrometer? That stitching looks well dodgy."

I tried not to be worried by these alarming developments, and I actually surprised myself by not being scared, at all. This was also worrying. Shouldn't I be really, really scared? I remembered how terrified I'd been up that ladder in Easton, the fear was so bad my legs were shaking. So why wasn't I scared now?

Especially when the last person before they changed the rope got his leg caught in the rope, which drew a gasp of horror from the crowd. It looked pretty nasty, but he escaped without injury - and had another go! Madness. By this time, I felt as if I was trapped inside a cruel, lucid, waking nightmare. My calmness wasn't bravado, it was shock - a total numbing of the emotions.

All too soon, though, Ding beckoned me



over, apologising for the delay, and told me that at last I could get harnessed up. Believe me, that harness was tight. An adapted steeplejack's harness, it went over and under the shoulders, round the midriff and between the legs, with the fixings for the rope on the back. And so, in front of the crowd, my faced whitened in Factor 50 (which made people think I was more scared than I was) I watched them test the "heavy rope" with the dead-weight. "That's you, that is," said Josh, pointing at the bag. I looked down at my beer-gut, distended thanks to the harness, and vowed to do a lot of cycling this summer. "You can have two goes," said one of the crew, "if you go instead of the test weight." My answer to him: hollow laughter.

The test went off okay and there was a bit more fiddling about as they detached it, and I stood there for what seemed like ages, limbering up (I didn't want to go into these too tense) and singing to myself, still in a state of calm, numb shock. I stared up at the crane arcing unto the blue sky, like a giant Meccano toy, so harmless-looking. At the cars going by, so everyday. Surely nothing could go wrong? But that guy with his leg... I just wanted to get it over with, good or bad. Suddenly they called me, "next jumper!" and I walked out along the astro-turf ("to protect the rope") and stood before the cage as they fixed the end of the rope to my harness.

They fiddled about for what seemed like ages, muttering to themselves and I began to worry obsessively that they hadn't fastened it properly, that I would soon be plunging to my doom. They performed another safety check, and then I stepped onto the cage. There were about four of the crew with me; Laura, a tall, blonde, leg-tattooed woman (probably Ding's girlfriend) and a couple of young chaps. They were all very relaxed and chatty. They told me to turn and face outwards, and this was the first thing that scared me. I thought I would be facing inwards, looking at friendly human faces, not outwards at the

drop! All that was between me and oblivion was a thin, ratty rope. I looked around for Lisa and Josh, couldn't locate them in the crowd, and then our ascent began.

That was when I began to get scared, really scared. My acrophobia kicked in at ooh, about ten feet. The crew could see I was scared so they talked to me, asking me questions about where I was from and what I did, etc, but I found myself unable to concentrate. I stood rigid, staring straight ahead, my head swimming, and as the height increased I began to talk, continually, about anything. If I hadn't, I don't think I would have jumped - I would have begged them to take me down again. I filled my mind with chatter to stop myself thinking of the terror, how stupid I was to set myself up for this. Horribly soon, we had reached apogee. If 150 feet doesn't sound that high, then try dangling from a crane at that height. Oxford spread out all around me, but I couldn't appreciate the view and I absolutely did not look down.

All I could see was the sky, a bright cloudy blue, and fields rolling away into the distance. It was dead silent and the wind was whipping around me from seemingly all directions at once.

Then I heard a voice next to me say soothingly, "Don't worry, you'll love it, really love it." Then they took the rope away. "Now step forward 'till you're right on the edge." I obeyed, numbly, my body moving as if in a dream, I looked down but all I could see was green. I could feel myself start to go into total shock. Then came the voice again: "I'm going to blow the whistle three times. On the third whistle, step forward as if you were stepping out of a lift."

There was no Jedi Master voice telling me to "live in the moment, feel the Force." There were no song lyrics in my mind to soothe me. The faces of the people I loved were noticeable by their absence. There was just me, the platform, and oblivion. The whistle sounded once - I remember

quite clearly thinking, "don't think, on the third, just go before you freeze" - twice - three times -

I don't remember stepping from the platform, because what happened directly after was the most terrifying experience of my life. I can't begin to describe it. It's the suicide leap, only I lived to tell the tale. The speed at which you fall is incredible, and takes you completely by surprise - it looks so gentle and almost elegant seen from the ground, but it isn't. It's a horrifying, overpowering feeling, a rushing blast, a total loss of control.

I screamed for my life. I knew I wasn't going to die, that the rope would arrest my fall, but my body took over and coursed adrenaline through my system. And then I hit the bottom of the rope, was yanked back upwards with a sickening jolt and the rope got caught on my neck. I felt it scrape across my throat, rough and bristly, tearing and burning, and was convinced it was going to throttle me and snap my neck and that I was going to die, there and then. There was no way anyone could help. I screamed again. Then I was flying free, plunging down and then up for the second time and soon came to a halt, dangling, my neck on fire. I managed a weak "Who-hoo" but I felt deeply upset, the aftermath of the fear draining all energy from me. I hung in that harness like a corpse.

Once back on the ground, I was grinning like an idiot, telling everyone that it was the most terrifying experience of my life, which it was. Once freed from the harness, I found I couldn't walk properly. I staggered to the side of the arena, found Josh and Lisa, and crashed out on the grass, head still spinning. My back and neck hurt, I could hardly turn my head. Ding gave me my certificate, impressed that I had done this despite my obvious fear.

In the pub with Josh and Lisa, a pint of beer was a medical necessity. Mixed feelings warred within me. Elation that I had

actually done something I never would have contemplated before. Disappointment that the fear and the rope-burn had blotted out all the other sensations of the jump; this is why people want to go again, it's such a strange, almost out-of-body experience, and so terrifying the first time, that you want to go again so you can actually appreciate it. A sense of foolishness, too - being tall, I am occasionally plagued by back and neck problems and my doctor would probably have advised against jumping. And my neck, apart from the rope-burn, was stiff and sore - I could hardly move my head, and feared being laid up for days (it went away quickly, although I had a bit of a bad back for a couple of days).

But overall, I'm glad I did it. Ding was right, I would have regretted it if I had left Oxford without jumping, and always would have wondered what it was like. I faced my fear, and went through with it even though I was terrified. Isn't that a definition of bravery? Or stupidity? Opinion is divided. I do feel, though, that my life has changed. I know what it's like to fall to my death. I've experienced the fear of imminent extinction.

Would I do it again? I don't know. The day after, I stood up to get out of the bath and had a vivid flashback - I was in the cage, the green field below me. It was so strong I had to get back in the bath and relax for a bit. So I have not lost my fear, probably because acrophobia is not something you can lose overnight. As I've said, it's a rational, useful fear. Bungee-jumping is counter-instinctual - your mind may know that you're safely attached to a bungee-rope, but all your body knows is AAAAAG-GGHHH! I'M GONNA DIE!

The Oxford crew are coming to Bristol in October. Maybe then, I'll jump again. But I don't know. Once more, I might leave it until the last minute to decide.

*Bristol's music scene has produced numerous quality acts from Deneb Cherry to Portishead. Doug examines the latest and strangest bands to come from out west...*

## Keynsham, Tell Me More About Keynsham...

I wasn't quite sure what I'd just heard but it sounded awfully like "This song's dedicated to one of our favourite people in the whole world - Gene Pitney." We'd been struggling to decipher what the Oil Experts had been rambling on about between songs; their outrageous French accents came straight out of Holy Grail by way of Peter Sellers. Although the band had been written up in the Bristol Community Festival programme as the brightest European dada funk-rock band I was expecting something a bit more anarchic, something more in the sphere of the Bonzo's trouser press fixated songs or even the slightest hint of an old teenage fixation with Zappa or Beefheart. Instead the mumbled vocals drowned by drab euro-ethno-electro-funk didn't really work. Suzie Creamcheese where are you in this hour of need?

Stumbling off for an Ostrich Burger before their set had finished, I returned just in time to see the Sunday night headline band kick off their set. Bristol's legendary Blue Aeroplanes may have closed Ashton Court in fine guitar fuelled fashion, but by that point though I'd hit the wall - two days of beer, dodgy food, sun and music had taken its toll. I sat not really absorbing their set in an increasingly comatose state. All around me the scattered remains of thousands of GM-free organic Zen burger polystyrene containers lay discarded beside their empty Stella can partners. Hardly a blade of grass could be seen. It had been a strange festival, stranger than any festival I'd seen before.

Arriving early on Saturday we were in time to catch Alien Breed. After forty minutes of inner-ear destroying feedback moulded occasionally around the merest hint of a song, I hugged Christina for security amongst a sea of black Korn and Slipknot t-shirts, feeling old. The weekend schoolkid rebels had annexed much of the field stage left with the express purpose of kicking the shit out of each other. By the time we'd suffered two more instantly forgettable bands

enough was enough, it was time to cruise the concessions and see what was happening elsewhere.

We found our way through the crowds via the Cajun Fries stand to the main stage. Out of the bands from last year that impressed me the most was the hip-hop lo-fi rock combo Box of Frogs. A good ear for a tune, a smattering of quickfire witty rapping and a manic guitar sound had me convinced that they were destined for bigger things. Since then we'd danced cautiously around the Southwest's gig circuit together, missing each other at alarmingly regular intervals. Namechecking local landmarks like the A38 and Horfield prison once more they wormed their way back into my heart, despite their now polished and less high tempo display. "Don't move" the vocalist shouted as their allotted time ended, "the next band'll slay you!"

Babyhead, despite being musically similar to Box of Frogs, notched things up a level on the energy scale. The weekend had already provided colourful characters - a spitting image of Eric Cartman headbanging away with two boys young enough not to need the services of a razor blade yet but nevertheless dressed up as Kevin Smith's cinematic dope-dealing duo Jay and Silent Bob. Babyhead's twin vocalists included a mad baldy guy who menaced everyone on stage with his deadly looking umbrella and a tall gangly hobo in a dress - you can't buy class. The whole thing was a bit scary, just the way music should be.

And so the day drew slowly on past the ACDC tribute band to the act we'd all really come to see - Ad Rice and The Wazzucks. Back in the seventies, the patron-decade of disco and crap novelty records The Wurzels emerged from out Bristol way. The brainchild of the late Adge Cutler, they managed to convince the entire nation that west country folk are a bunch of boozed up, inbred country bumpkins, with their songs with such dubious titles "I've Got A Brand New Combine Harvester" and "I Am A Cider

Drinker". Fast forward thirty years and I'm standing in front of a stage with the prospect of seeing a Wurzel's cover band.

The band made it to the stage, despite almost losing a musician in the festival crowd. In a field of tie-dyed and black t-shirted festival-goers how do you lose a nutter dressed in wellies, waistcoat, string-tied trousers and neckerchief?

As soon as they started playing we were transported to a different dimension - one

This brought another rain of Scrumpy bottles, some empty, others not so. Finishing with a punk-style rendition of "Drink Up Your Cider" that brought the audience to a cider-flavoured elbows-at-dawn pogo-ing climax. Those that had stayed the course knew they'd seen the best performance at Ashton Court that year. Staggering from the melee, sore and apple-alcohol sticky, I knew that I'd have problems convincing anyone at work I'd got my bruises at a Wurzel's tribute gig. Like I said a very strange festival.



### *The Wazzucks!!!*

where the Wurzel's had been involved in the punk revolution of 77. Their songs were undoubtedly Wurzel's songs backed up with thumping drums, a pounding bass and a driving rhythm. Ad Rice didn't sing he barked, his larynx must have gotten caught in an agricultural threshing machine at an early age. The mass of bodies down the front started slamming. To the left of us the frisby a couple of aging punks had been playing with now lay abandoned on the grass, its owners now thrashing dangerously down the front. A bottle of scrumpy flew past Ad's head. Songs about pig lust and wenching in Midsomer Norton crashed along to an infectious high-tempo beat, each one uncannily similar, and each one whipping the maelstrom of bodies pogo-ing into further frenzy.

After too short a time Ad informed us that they'd been pulled; the powers that be were worried about how wild the crowd was getting - someone could get hurt you know.

### Victorian Squid and The Tardis

Talking SF down the pub or at a con is one thing but having a rock star preach about his firmly held Dr Who beliefs during a gig threw me a little. Robyn Hitchcock's set was drawing to a close down the Fleece and Firkin. Robyn had been carefully ignoring audience requests all evening. As time was running out, the cries of the audience were getting frantic. Maybe we misheard it but there was a definite shout of "Yodelling Homer" from the back of the venue - was that a song about The Simpsons? Anyway I digress, even though some of us have taken up shouting that at other gigs. Suddenly, through the noise like a knife cutting a Glaswegian's clubbers stomach on a Saturday night rose the confident voice of our very own Nick Walters, "Who's your favourite Dr Who?" Robyn, up to the challenge, calmly replied "Tom Baker, they should have ended it after he left. Why do they have to drag things on past their sell by date?" As well as being a keen songwriter the man has taste.

*A punk festival in scenic North Devon? Surely not. Christina tries to make sense of it all.*

## Punks in the Sun

FESTIVALS

After detouring round the obligatory summer traffic jam on the Bristol section of the M5 and battling it out with mad transit vans and caravan conveyors as we headed cross-country, we found ourselves in a field in North Devon some time around mid-day. The sun had made up for a slow start and was now acting as if ozone were no obstacle. We stared around us. The festival was very small. Just a scattering of people, a few stalls, a stage and a tent that looked like it might have seen better days at agricultural shows. Somewhere inside the tent a band were performing. "Aren't the stages a bit close together?" Doug pondered doubtfully. "Maybe they alternate," I said, more interested in the rodeo ride, a big mechanical bull that bucked and jerked its way round an empty paddling pool.

We took a look at the band in the tent. They sounded like lively post-punk. One of the local bands, we concluded. It was at this point that we noticed the lack of a programme. The only approximation we ever found was a running list that the woman behind the bar showed me. "It's already out-of-date," she explained.

The next band up were playing on the outside stage, lending credence to the alternation theory. They opened with a high speed version of "You're the one that I want." Doug and I agreed that like many another anodyne songs it benefited from the acceleration. "That's what a punk cover band should be," I decided.

As I looked around, it began to sink in how bizarre this festival was. Festivals are normally full of people in brightly coloured clothes - tie-dye hippy, South East Asian ethnic, that sort of thing. Here, at least half the people were wearing black. Vampiric goths, dressed for dark smoky bars. Guys in black and dayglo punk t-shirts. The other element of dissonance was the punks there with their families. Tattooed men in their 70s punk gear, now balding, with wife and kids.

"It's about masturbating," the band explained helpfully from the stage as they set off the dry ice and launched into a new number.

We went back into the music/ beer tent to escape the sun, not to mention the classic motor bike display. The next local band was on, playing to an audience of about 5. One man shouted encouragement while the rest of us went to the bar. Outside the field was beginning to fill up. Many eras of Stranglers t-shirts testified to the appeal of the headline band, while roadies in woolly hats and metal framed shades scurried around, hiding from the sun.

Next up were the Ex-Pistols, the first of the advertised cover bands. The lead singer bounced on stage. "I love my job," he announced. "How fucking cool is that?" Surely not quite the attitude you would expect from a Johnny Rotten impersonator. And so it proved. He could manage peevishness ("It's too hot on this stage" and "Why is nobody dancing, are you all woofers?"), but not true surliness. With the Union Jack motif prominent on the band's drum kit and t-shirts, it began to look like the anarchy of the Sex Pistols had been transformed into music for lager louts. "Crap, innit?" said the singer in a rare moment of self-awareness. "But it's crap we all recognise," he added heartily. He then went on to change the lyrics to "No Future" in an attempt to spice up its late '70s negativity.

Inside the tent, The Jamm showed how it should be done. Dressed in shirt and tie, and looking about as old as you would expect the Jam to be now, they powered their way through the repertoire without posturing or comment. Maybe there was some excuse for cover bands, I considered, as I joined in dancing with the packed crowd : if the Jam were still going I would never get to see them up close in a small informal venue like this and dance to all their songs.

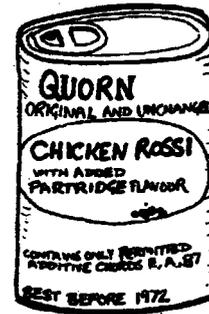
We took a break to see if our tent had been blown down by the Atlantic winds. When we returned, The Vibrators were halfway through their set. The sky had clouded over, and the crowd were looking cold. Children had blankets wrapped around them and young punkettes were donning garish fleeces over their black lycra. The Vibrators turned in a good rocking set despite the wan response from an audience not quite numerous enough to make its enthusiasm heard against the wind. It was a different story inside the tent where a local band delivered solid, danceable punk. We were so engrossed that we didn't notice that Stiff Little Fingers had started on the outside stage. We ran down the hill to find them already launched into Alternative Ulster, the only track of theirs I knew. The crowd were now all standing and dancing. The atmosphere had really built since the Vibrators. Or maybe it was just the effect of the vivid sunset behind us and the sky growing dark over the surrounding fields. It turned out that I knew the next track too. Then they went on to play a track that the singer cheerfully admitted they had nicked from The Specials - showing what a world of difference there is between purloining and paying tribute! Even so, like so much at this festival, it took me back to the late 70s/ early 80s; this time to an outdoors Specials gig my brother had helped set up in Coventry. From then on Stiff Little Fingers could do no wrong for me.

We were too knackered to watch The Ramones tribute band 53 & a 3rd, so we sat outside the tent listening. Somehow the speeded up anthems didn't sound quite right without that special Ramones sound. Back on stage, The Stranglers were making endless sound checks. Finally the music of Waltz in black sounded out, and the band hit the stage. It was worth the wait. Hugh Cornwell's voice is amazing, and the hurdy-gurdy Doors-style keyboards that first attracted me to the band in the 70s were as manic as ever. Why, I wondered, had there not been more Stranglers hits in the 90s? The band could clearly outplay most of the

of the survivors of the recent Britpop explosion. The set went on till past midnight, encoring with No More Heroes.

As we walked back to our tent we could still hear music. "Did they come back for another encore?" I asked Doug. "No," he said, "that's the Stranglers tribute band."

## STATUS QUORN



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### A flower?

Confession time - there is one cover band I deliberately went out of my way to see - well, as far as the local pub. They were Supper's Ready, a Genesis cover band from Italy. Unfortunately I had completely forgotten about latter-day Genesis. Who in their right mind would pay to hear someone singing Susuvio and the rest of those trite Phil Collins ballads? But 3 songs in and just as I'm convinced I've made a big mistake, the band launch into a good chunk of Lamb Lies Down on Broadway, Peter Gabriel's last album with Genesis. Everything changes. I'm up on my feet dancing, big grin on my face, mouthing along to the words. In the interval I tell Doug that I think the band really could live up to their name and play Supper's Ready, Genesis's 20 minute prog rock classic. Doug agrees, but neither of us really think it will happen. At least not till we hear the intro, and even then we don't believe they'll play it all! They do. In carefully annunciated English. It's revenge for Italian opera, I think. I'm so happy I want to hug the singer, who is rather cute. But the boorish Phil Collins fan behind me hates it. "When are they going to play real Genesis?" he demands.

*Tony Berry reports that there is no such thing as superfluous beer in a roundup of technological triumphs in Leicester*

## Plokta.Con

Arriving at the Holiday Inn I was pleased to see some fans I hadn't seen in years, as well as a handful from across the Pond. This was like Corflu UK, which brought various old fans out of their sanatoriums and retirement homes, and it looked like being a good weekend. Then Steve Green arrived. Ah, well...

Advanced technology was in evidence from the start, with the flash laminated badges and of course the free CD, which I must look at sometime. But some things never change: Alison said "I think they're having problems with the real ale, can you take a look?" I went behind the bar into the storeroom, where two distinctly damp bar-men stood, one with a towel pressed over the spile of the barrel while it hissed and gurgled like Old Faithful. The walls looked freshly sprayed. "It's a bit lively" one said. No kidding. Eventually the pressure dropped enough to actually serve it, and after a few pints of mud it settled down. Sighs of relief from the committee.

At this point Dave Holmes showed up on his way home from work and offered to take myself and Steve Lawson to the pub where we were meeting on Saturday evening prior to a meal. "It's the opening ceremony soon". No problem, the pub's right round the corner, just grab a quick half, plenty of time. So about an hour and a half and several pints later we arrived back at the hotel and I settled down in the bar. With several programme items missed already, it was shaping up to be a typical convention.

Feeling hungry, I checked out the con bar food. £6.20 it said, but this was obviously a misprint as it couldn't possibly cost that much. But it did. Holy shit, do I have to survive until tomorrow's breakfast? Fortunately, the hotel restaurant turned out to be really good value, serving a buffet-style main course for a tenner, with a choice of half a dozen dishes and eat as much as you like. I couldn't work out why there was

such a huge discrepancy between the two food outlets. Did the bar price include the plate and cutlery? A free drink? A ticket to the Dome? I didn't bother to find out.

Back in the bar I was informed that they had wanted me in the Style Challenge panel as an example to be "worked over". Ha. How could they hope to improve on the huge amount of style I already possess? I've got the waistcoat, so how about Tobes' boots and Anders' top hat for that special Dickens look? I'm sure someone's got a pocket watch and chain. (Actually, I always fancied a full-length black leather coat, lightning-flashes optional. Waddya think?). I had intended to go to the other programme items, but got delayed in the bar, finally going to bed at the early hour of 1am.

The following morning I discovered that breakfast was really rather good, with a decent choice including some particularly sweet, gooey and calorie-filled waffles. Highlight was the toastmaker, where you put your slices of bread on a little conveyor belt and they trundled through the machine and dropped down a chute. Then you put them through again if you actually wanted them toasted properly. Simple fun for first thing in the morning. Determined to visit some programme, I looked in on the astronomy talk ("Space is big, really big") before being overcome with thirst. Harry Potter couldn't make it (As I write this, the new book has just hit the shops, with the biggest print-run ever, children killing each other to get a copy, and the critics sniffing "Well, it's all very derivative...". J.K. Rowling GoH at the next British Fantasycon? ) and I wasn't attracted by the British Worldcon presentation, though I did later pre-support, so an expedition to Magic Labyrinth in town was organized. This involved dodging intermittent downpours of rain on a walk which was a lot further than anticipated. Julian Headlong's back objected to this so we had

to return by taxi (after a few drinks in the pub opposite the shop of course).

In the evening, a group of us went to a Mexican restaurant, which again did a buffet-style eat-until-you-explode for eight quid. This was really good and I ate too much, which had the unfortunate side effect that, come midnight or so, I couldn't keep my eyes open and had to retire, thereby missing the Swedes' room party and the sight of Tobes in Alison Freebairn's dress. I hope somebody took pictures. This crashing out at a ridiculously early time is worrying; I may be over 40 now, but for me the best part of a convention is chatting in the bar until the wee hours. I'm not keen on chemical stimulants, so perhaps I'll have to do what Pam Wells does and go nocturnal, starting the day at about 2pm.

On the Sunday morning, we were entertained by Phil and Kari's martial arts videos, featuring a number of women kicking the shit out of people and defying the laws of physics. The rest of the day is hazy in my memory, but I do recall looking in on the cleavage panel (fnaar, fnaar) and admiring the antics of the drunken fuckwits in the rugby team who invaded the other bar and were terribly amused to discover all these sci-fi fans. Other highlights of the programme were Quick on the Draw, and watching the participants of Runaround all, well, running around. They seemed to be having a good time.

On Monday, enthusiasm for the trip to the Eastercon hotel in Hinckley was very limited, but some of us conrunners drove there for a butchers, and it certainly is an interesting layout (I mean this in a positive way). Then it was time to say our goodbyes and return to the real world. It was a good, fun relaxacon and I felt, as I ordered a taxi to the station, the usual regrets that it was all over. Then Ian Sorensen said "I'm catching the same train as you, we can go together." Ah, well...

Note: I would like to point out that I may have got the times/days of the programme items wrong. Blame my senility and the effects of the real ale. You know how it is.

*(We certainly do, Tony! At least at Lexicon, Christina didn't have this problem as she only went for a few hours.*

### Lexicon : it's about booze

The slogan for this year's Lexicon was "It's about books", but for me it was about Oxford. I hadn't been back to Oxford by train since leaving in 1985, and had forgotten how compact it all was. Oh to live in a small city again, even if it is full of tourists! One thing I like about Unicons is the diversity of the experience. This time I found myself wandering into a huge lawned quadrangle. There seemed to be a couple of tourists and some stray wedding guests, but where were all the fans?

I found them of course in the bar. Clustered round one table, as if unconvinced that the convention could sustain a second. People came and went, so eventually I inherited a seat at the Cambridge end of the table. The bar was closing at two, which made the usual struggle to get up and see a programme item so much simpler. There was even time to get to the toilets.

I'd never heard of Philip Pullman before Lexicon announced their guest, but seeing people's enthusiasm I went out and read his latest books, the first two parts of a very original and intelligent children's fantasy trilogy. So come the convention, I too wanted to see Philip Pullman. The lecture theatre was full. As I settled into my seat I caught my first glimpse of Brian Ameringen with a baby draped across him. Baby Meriol seemed to be the only person in the room not interested in Philip Pullman. The rest of us watched in fascination as Tanya Brown tried out various theories on the man only to be met with answers that confounded or exceeded her expectations. I was impressed; Pullman seemed to have thought more about life than the average science fiction writer.

The talk over I passed on further bookish items to wander round Oxford in the sun with Lilian, then rounded off the day with a convivial Lebanese meal. Not bad for the concise Oxford convention experience.

*Doug asked Anders about the origin of the Death Wish cocktail served at the Swedish room party at Plokta.Con. Here Anders Holmstrom and Ylva Spangberg combine their talents to tell the Awful Truth in*

## Food and Death

Food and death always had a close relationship. The food of the Gods, the ear of wheat put into the grave with kings of yore? The rites of drink and death are manifold and intriguing. Could it be that fans, with our particular ability to tune into the cosmic and the bheer, are especially keenly aware of the mystic properties of drink and the holier aliment? The only answer is yes. Anything else would be demeaning and possibly too close to the truth. Now let's return to yesteryear, when Swedish fandom was in its formative stage. The fannish staple diet would have been huge quantities of tea and unshelled peanuts. (Participants shelled the peanuts with their own bare hands.) Most of the time, this was consumed at classic address Folk-skolegatan 22, abode of Lars-Olov Strandberg, grand old fan of... us. Both the tea and the peanuts have kept their close association with organised fandom. A fangathering is still not viewed as a Fangathering without the peanuts, the peanuts having taking a meaning in themselves. Let's skip the gin and tonic stage, as manifested in John-Henri Holmberg and other cool people. Fans are not cool. We are Fhans. But we have a true potential for refinement, as manifested in the partaking of refined tea. We'll now open the page on a glorious chapter of Swedish fandom. as witnessed by a witness.

The year 1978 saw the dawning of TDP(p-febt), the Tea Drinkers' Party (the party for a better tea culture). This hardcore group of tea drinkers took the divine beverage to new heights before falling into a deplored coma after not having attained its aim to get an MP in the parliament. The party has been dormant ever since like the wafting aroma from a freshly made pot of Lapsang Souchong, when you least expect it. When that happens, teabags will be banned and freedom rule.

Swedish fandom passed through a short stage of sinkbombs (a shot of whisky in glass of beer) before returning to the peanuts. As we have always been driven by an almost Japanese feeling of perfection in simplicity. A perfect example of this would be the eternal but simple beauty of the Spritskrans, a cookie to be the very embodiment of cookie. This is an almost perfect circle of light dough, bonsai cookies with wave shapes to remind the eater of the harmony of a Japanese garden. The strength of the spritskrans lies in the soothing repetitiveness and simultaneousness, reminiscent of the renewal of brush strokes from a master calligraphist.

We soon grew tired of this stage as well and moved on to new challenges. This brings us up to the Death Wish, the peak of Swedish fannish drink and food culture. Imagine a sundrenched bar, somewhere in Gothenburgh. There's a convention going on. The fannish bar tender of note Ted Forsslund is feeling frisky, a feeling which soon permeates the bar and the present fans. A charge is being built up, a creativity which has to find a release in a manifest, physical form. Lukewarm vodka. Diet yoghurt, lemon flavoured. Bourbon. This magical blend embodies Swedish fandom at its finest and most sublime. "Death Wish - elegance and refinement redefined!"

A select part of Brit fandom had the distinct honour and privilege to partake of the Death Wish approach to life in its evolved stage, which included a slice of salami lovingly draped over the rim of a paper Barbie cup and a stick of celery to stir, refresh and reconnect the drink to the idea of the simplicity which is the bonsai. The Britfans looked puzzled. Evolution spreads slowly. Some higher beings, however, had two.

Refinement, however, is a neverending struggle. Perfection can never be reached,

but the effort is its own reward. A new height was reached with Black, the ultimate in somber, a straight shot of the sweet taste of one hand clapping. This drink was composed as a poignant statement of loss at the "Tobes for TAFF: Bugger I Lost"-party, held at Aliens Stole My Handbag. Tobes looked puzzled. He still had three. Whatever higher beings were present did not announce themselves.

The quest goes ever on. Novacon draws near. Meditation and stillness will be our regiment and inspiration for the next four months. The Midnight sun will guide us as we envision the amber gold of the North. A more primal Nordic feel is in the brewing. There is still time.

*Meanwhile in climes more Mediterranean, Christina gives the low-down on the Andalusian tapas culture in:*

### A Pulpo Too Far

Our welcome pack even gave us a verb for it. "Tapear" means to go from bar to bar, drinking sherry and sampling free tapas. Neighbouring Motril was judged to be the tapas capital of our part of the coast, but since the place appeared to have nothing else to recommend it unless you count the only golf course on the Costa Tropical, we

decided to head for nearby Romano/Phoenician Almunecar (once known as Sexi).

We had done some practice tapas hopping along our local beach which had yielded some free mussels stuffed with peppers & tomatoes, but Anne kept spoiling our chances by ordering so much squid and assorted fried fish that there wasn't any need to offer us tapas. Would we make this mistake again? Of course we would! Because by the time we got to Almunecar, Anne was desperate to score some pulpo. "You're on your own there," Lilian threatened, preferring to keep her rubbery substances as fashion accessories. I wasn't sure if I would like octopus either, but was prepared to give it a try. But just in case, we ordered some gambas pil pil and sardines. As ever this yielded fabulous quantities of food. Prawns sizzling in a garlic chilli oil, six wholesome fried sardines that would have needed more than a key to squeeze them into a can and a plate piled high with pinky red discs of pulpo. Anne tucked in with gusto. I tried one, and had to admit she was right; a delicacy worth sampling - tender and almost meaty. So I tried a few more. Result we were all tapas-ed out again after only one bar. Next time we'll have to remember just to order the sherry!

THERE GOES THE  
LATEST CONVENTION  
SEX GODDESS

LOOKS LIKE  
BUTTER WOULDN'T  
MELT IN HER MOUTH

OR ANYWHERE  
ELSE...



## Head Guide To Good Fanzines

🐞🐞🐞🐞🐞🐞 Headline stuff. Not to be missed

🐞🐞🐞🐞 High quality, well written fanzine

🐞🐞🐞 Good issue with loads of nifty highlights

🐞🐞 Interesting in parts, but annoying in others

🐞 Pass me a Vanamonde!

### **Aztec Blue 1** 🐞🐞🐞

What better place to start with Murray Moore's Aztec Blue than the front cover? With a big colour Rotsler illo and a cool minimalistic design, it made this zine stand out from the to-be-read pile instantly. Its two column, simplistic-but-well-thought-out layout complements the writing well. Mike Glicksohn's Our SF Fandom: A Stimulating Diversion covers such questions as why do we fans do fannish things, and are we any different from "real" people, you know that sort of thing. Although well written it breaks no new ground, but that said I found it entertaining and Mike writes from an informed and experienced stance. The highlight for me was the first part of John Berry's Albanian trip report. Though the piece ended just after checking through immigration I got the feeling that this report has real promise - and Eastern Europe makes a welcome change after all the recent sun-drenched Down Under trip reports. The whole zine is illustrated well with illos from Bill Rotsler, Chris Holmes and Steve Jeffery. My only real complaint about Aztec Blue is there isn't enough of Murray's own voice; perhaps we'll see Murray flex his writers muscles next ish. Other than that an enjoyable read and a good first issue. [DB]

*Murray Moore, 1065 Henley Road, Mississauga, ON L4Y 1C8, Canada.*

### **Gloss** 🐞🐞🐞🐞🐞

Lastish, Christina editorialised about the phenomenon of the focal point fanzine.

There seems to be a universal assumption that 'focal point' can only refer to a series of fanzines, and a frequently-published series at that. But what about the focal point one-shot? The single issue of a fanzine that seems to capture the zeitgeist for one glorious moment? For me, this year, that fanzine was Gloss 1.

I don't care if Lilian and Victor never pub another ish. I don't care that the print was too small, the layout was pedestrian, the only illustration they included was one of Alison Scott's famous 'fannish lost consonants'. I don't care that Victor's article was on the pedestrian side and seemed rather too long after the joys of Randy Byers, Christina Lake and Alison Freebairn. I don't care that I hadn't read "Ted White's epitaph for Ardis Waters in the Corflatch issue of Squib", which Lilian took as the jumping off point for her article.

What made me care about this fanzine was that it presented a wholeness/togetherness/ gestalt. I wanted to read it. I was very pleased to receive it. It gave me a well-crafted snapshot of a certain view of a certain fandom (mine) at a certain moment (one in which I hadn't been paying too much attention).

I liked the interlineations. I liked the colophon. I liked Lilian's editorial introduction to Christina's article. I liked the cross-referencing to other fanzines. I liked the name-dropping. I liked the idea of a blonde Alison Freebairn. I liked the bits I thought I understood as well as the bits I thought I didn't. I liked the excellent quality of writing throughout. But most of all, I liked the feeling that this was an artefact produced by 'my' fandom, for 'my' fandom, and that by being given a copy here I was, still being accepted as a part of that scene.

And that looks pretty much like a focal point to me, Vern. [Pam Wells]

*Lilian Edwards, 39 Viewforth, Edinburgh, EH10 4JE. Victor Gonzalez, 905 NE 45th St. #106, Seattle, WA 98105, USA*

**GUFFaw 4** 

As a former fan fund delegate it's a delight to see that a trip report can be completed in 9 pages and still qualify for the LASF bounty of \$500. If only I had done the same for my 1988 TAFF trip with Lilian Edwards! It is quite hard to compress an experience of this nature down to a few pages, but Eva Hauser does it well by being simple, direct and not over-discursive. The comparisons to her experience in Czechoslovakia keep it fresh, as does her use of English, which has the charm of being perfectly comprehensible whilst not being the same as a native speaker's. The remaining pages of the zine take us into the second chapter of Paul Kincaid's own GUFF trip report which looks like it will turn in at closer to 90 pages than 9. This chapter, Paul actually sets foot in Oz, making it as far as Adelaide. The material suffers in part from covering the same ground as the recent Banana Wings report, but Paul has a fluent writing style and an ability with descriptions that makes up for the anecdotes not quite being so extended or funny as when Claire and Mark did them. Hopefully in future chapters Paul will manage to ditch the rival fanzine editors and branch out on his own! [CJL]

*Paul Kincaid, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent CT19 5AZ*

**International Revolutionary Gardener 3**

A five page article from Judith Hanna is quite a treat, even if it is entirely on the subject of Barbie dolls. Judith takes an autobiographical approach to the subject from saving up for a Barbie because her mother didn't want to buy her one, to the joys and horrors of collecting Barbie accessories for this same doll in the modern pink fixated Barbie environment. Once again, Judith chooses to show a facet of her life that might seem surprising in a woman of her political beliefs, and does it with an enthusiasm and intelligence that challenges the usual knee-jerk feminist response to Barbie. Meanwhile co-editor Joseph Nicholas contributes an informative and readable column that

touches on such characteristic topics as free trade, history, gardening and spitfires, contextualised to his recent experience and pleasantly free of excess theorising. He also manages to come up with the fannishly appealing proposition that Rowland Hill may well have the progenitor of the duplicator as well as the postage stamp. As usual the political consciousness that informs IRP makes for an interesting letter column, this time on the subject of the politics of food. [CJL]

*Judith Hanna and Joseph Nicholas, 15 Jansons Road, Tottenham, London N15 4JU*

**New Kind of Neighbourhood** 

Those Swedes are mad, and here's the documentary proof of it! This English-language fanzine from Ylva Spangberg and Lennart Uhlin is a bizarre concoction of whimsy, tall tales and leaps of the imagination. Ylva's spoof about holding the 2003 British Eastercon in Stockholm is hilarious, as is her conceit of reviewing street scenes as art. Lennart's What I Learned at the Con is strange and compelling. Johann Anglemark's tales of Upsala fandom are mind-boggling - particularly the part where the whole con gets evicted. Overall it makes you wonder - why can't British fandom be this much fun? [CJL]

*Ylva Spangberg, Disponentg 3, S-112 62 Stockholm, Sweden & Lennart Uhlin, Hogsatrav 22, 5 tr, S-181 58 Lidingo, Sweden*

**Plokta Vol 5 No. 4** 

Plokta is a lot of fun. So much fun that it's very tempting not to read it at all. You just flick through and enjoy the jokes. Sometimes it feels like the text is there solely to provide aesthetic space for the cartoons and scanned in photos of women (and men) in leather dresses. Take this issue's valiant writers (who as usual are Giulia De Cesare and Steve Davies) : how are they meant to compete with such snippets as Tits for Tobes and How to be a Complete Itch?

But if the eye can be persuaded to focus away from the boxed candy, what then?



Giulia continues to draw on her Tasmanian background to good effect; this time highlighting the combustibility of the place; Marcus Rowland writes a surprisingly funny piece on reinstating 50s pulp values into alien contact and Steve tells us about his weird experiences as a contractor. Bizarrely, you could almost believe there was a perzine trying to get out. Luckily the Plokta cabal do something light and frothy on Delphic polls and we're back column hopping again, and checking to see if we're in any of the photos. [CJL]

*Plokta Cabal c/o 52 Westbourne Terrace, Reading, Berks RG30 2RP*

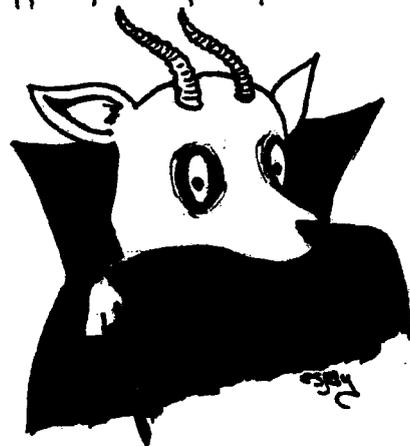
**Steam Engine Time** 🐼🐼

I wonder how many fans outside the mailing list of Acnestis will make it through the entirety of Steam Engine Time? It's certainly not easy reading for the toilet or the train and it doesn't have very many jokes. However there seems to be a yen to put the SF content back into fandom and represent the people in our community who read as well as those relentless trivialisers who think it's more fun to drink, gossip and fart. As someone who stands partway between the two camps, I quite liked the concept of a zine dedicated to unpretentious articles about written SF, but found the reality a bit harder to digest. It takezest to write engagingly about SF as literature. Bruce Gillespie manages it in his article on Olaf Stapledon. He tells us why he had difficulties reading his works, how he overcame them, and why despite these problems, he believes Stapledon is worth the effort of reading. This element of personal engagement is crucially lacking in some of the other articles. David Seed writes eruditely about Cordwainer Smith's Instrumentality Saga, but it's a struggle for even a fan of the series to keep up their interest, or gain much insight from it. Elaine Cochrane quotes copiously from R.A Lafferty but it's hard to decipher what she wants to say about him. Maureen Kincaid Speller who is usually very good at personalising

her experiences of SF somehow manages get all pretentious and litcrit about the Wasp Factory by bringing in the Fisher King, while her comments on recent trends in ghost stories seemed incomplete without some mention of Sixth Sense (or does the fact that it appeared in the cinema exclude it from the discussion?). I'm sure the editors are right that there's a market for this kind of material - doubtless a bigger one than for fan writing - but unless Steam Engine Time focuses less on how clever its contributors are and more on connecting with its readers, there's a danger that people will begin to remember why sercon became a term of abuse. [CJL]

*Maureen Kincaid Speller & Paul Kincaid, 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent CT19 5AZ; Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Collingwood, VIC 3066 Australia*

VLAD THE IMPALA



**Stet 9** 🐼🐼🐼🐼

The day started with a resounding crash as Stet 9 plummeted through the letterbox. This issue, as its front cover says "The Old Fan's 2000 Almanac" and it's certainly multipurpose - a zine, calendar, almanac, recipe book for seriously dangerous drinks, generally all round useful reference tool and it looks excellent. God I wish I had the time, patience, money, resources to pull off a project of this kind - it just oozes quality.

The whole reference angle will insure that this'll be on a nearby shelf long after the calendar's stopped being useful. However while reading *The Old Fan's Almanac* I experienced a faint sense of unease. Not until much later while discussing fandom down the pub with Steve Brewster did we manage to pin down what exactly my reservations were. It's the same feeling that I get when reading *Mimosa* - the feeling that I'm not quite in the same fandom as the authors. Although preserving the fan-history is a worthy pursuit, sometimes I feel that both these zines might benefit from looking around at what's going on today. I like reading old zines they help you understand your place in fandom and are the real thing, but reading *Stet* (and the aforementioned *Mimosa*) I feel not that I'm getting close to that experience but to a faded carbon copy of it. Still a good read and it for sheer ambitiousness and visual impact "*The Old Fan's 2000 Almanac*" is stunning. [DB]

*Dick & Leah Smith, 410 W. Willow Road, Prospect Heights, IL 60070-1250, USA*

### Trapdoor 20

Trapdoor feels less like the contemporary it once did, and more like an uncle. Admittedly the cool kind of uncle that you wished you'd been old enough to hang out with when everything happened ("Didn't you know that everything happened in the Thirties?" to quote Burbee in this issue.). Robert Lichtman appears intent on contacting an array of lost names from the past and enticing them to write letters, articles or even columns for him. The result is a fanzine that taps into something of the same vein of amazing stories about fan life in America that Bill Donaho managed in *Habbakuk*, whilst retaining a contemporary edge through the likes of Greg Benford with his exasperated account of the shenanigans of the Hollywood movie machine, and the ongoing letter column debate on web versus paper fanac. Highlights for me were Jeff Shalles's evocation of life in New

York City in the '80s, and Robert's own concise but telling account of his road accident and the subsequent recovery period. I was less sure about the Geo Metzger column; I loved the stories of his peregrinations during the '60s, but the more recent stuff about the "Chinese girl" felt uncomfortably voyeuristic to me. The design of the issue is as ever is wonderful; sadly no Dan Steffan artwork this time, but headings from Steve Stiles and Craig Smith make for a distinguished appearance. Robert is due to change the format next issue, but I'm confident he won't compromise his standards. [CJL]

*Robert Lichtman, P.O. Box 30, Glen Ellen, CA 95442 USA*

### This Here...#2-5

I think that Mr Farey's on a roll here, so what better way to read nos. 2 to 5 of *This Here...* than back to back, and what a read they are. Nic writes with a frank, friendly openness that makes you wish you could phone the guy up and ask if he fancied a night down the boozier with you. Enthusiasm and energy aren't contained or measured out in careful little spoonfuls but dolloped in with a healthy dose of opinions that made me wish #6 had arrived before #5 was finished. Combining this with wrestling news, a keen sense of humour and loads of music reviews made for a refreshing read. All this was great but where this zine really scores is the personal stuff - Nic's DWI, Nic's marriage plans and getting stung in the mouth by a wasp. Oh and I forgot the letter column - great to hear people debating stuff out there, especially in relation to drink driving. It would be all too easy to gloss over this kind of thing but both Nic and his correspondents tackle the issue head on, sometimes disagreeing wildly, which makes for an entertaining read. Great stuff - keep 'em coming Nic! [DB]

*Nic Farey, PO Box 178, St. Leonard, MD 20685, USA.*

## The Myth of the British Fanzine Convention

CONVENTIONS

"You Brits should really start your own fanzine convention," Andy Hooper said over dinner at his local Indian restaurant. Squashed in at the end of the table, between Martin Smith and Debbi Kerr, unwitting interloper in this particular dining party, I felt no inclination to disagree. Neither did the others; after all, Andy clearly wasn't expecting them to run it, was he?

Besides, what Andy said made sense. We in Britain could run our own fanzine convention if we wanted, always providing we substituted silly games for fanzine readings and sold t-shirts, hair cuts and Tommy Ferguson in a miniskirt rather than fanzines at the auction.

As we swapped dishes round the table, I considered my initial reluctance to go out for an Indian meal in America. The Indian is such a well-embedded part of British culture that I never believe it will be as good elsewhere, yet here we were in Seattle eating variations on the same dishes I knew with no loss of quality and some subtle differences in style that added an extra interest to the tried and tested routine. But I would still have preferred to be out eating with the same party at the more exotic to me Sea Thai.

Was this how the Americans felt visiting Britain to get what they do perfectly well at home? There was no doubt that Andy was right. For an American it would surely be more interesting to travel to Britain for one of our own conventions - an Attitude, a Mexican, a Plokta.Con - than be forced to shell out transatlantic air fares to get to their own con, or else miss out for a year. Yet for all that, there had seemed to be a positive buzz around the convention about another British Corflu. Maybe it's a bit like a Jersey Eastercon in Britain. Acceptable in a year of no alternative, great fun for those who can afford to go and disenfranchising for those that can't.

But there is also another element to a

British Corflu - or dare I say it, a British Worldcon, that you don't get from your local con. That is the translation of not just individuals but a critical mass of a country's fandom to the foreign host. Corflu UK achieved this, and as a result of the higher profile of Corflu in the UK, so did the Seattle Corflu. Corflu is a victim of its own success and could be on the way to becoming a multi-national fanzine convention if it so chose. Corflu Australia is now being mooted. The Americans are welcoming it - but only on the basis of it being an alternative not a substitute for that year's Corflu. No-one wishes to deprive Americans of their annual fanzine convention, but something even more exciting than the original format is developing from Corflu, and irrespective of whether Britain develops its own fanzine convention, Corflu may never be the same!

But what about this idea of a British fanzine convention? I said earlier that I thought that Britain could run one. But in fact what I was describing was something slightly different: a fannish convention not a fanzine convention. Some people may not see much difference between the two, but I think there is. Britain has a long tradition of relaxed and somewhat silly fannish conventions like Silicon, Miscon or currently Seccon, run by fanzine fans for the amusement of fanzine fans, but not being specifically about fanzines. These seem to work well for the hedonistic and not fanhistorically inclined Brits. It is debatable whether a convention devoted primarily to fanzines and marketed as such could attract more than the 9 or so people that currently go to Corflu's less popular cousin Ditto.

A couple of days after the meal with Andy, Doug and I were finally sitting down to eat some Thai food after a hard day of sightseeing round Seattle. The convention was over and we were just beginning to unwind, so naturally our talk turned to some of the experiences of the weekend.

"I don't know about this British fanzine convention idea," I said, taking a sip of my wine. "If there were a regular fanzine convention, then would we have time to come back to America for Corflus?"

"Or Worldcons," said Doug who has his heart set on the not yet ratified Toronto Worldcon (though he'd be quite happy to go to Cancun instead if pushed.)

"There's only so many conventions that you can go to in a year and stay sane."

"And not run out of money," added Doug. By this stage we were really noticing how much more expensive the US was than Canada. Canadian dollars were 2.4 to the pound, US 1.6, yet the prices seemed the same.

"I don't know if there'd be room for the random conventions like Attitude and Plokta.Con. The British convention calendar is pretty full, even if Lilian does keep insisting we need a convention in February."

"And I still want to go to Eastercons," said Doug. "That's the one most of my friends in Edinburgh go to."

"Plus the Bristol people," I agreed. I've been ambivalent about Eastercons for a long time but their appeal to a wider catchment of friends than Novacon or the other conventions I find myself attending keeps me coming back for more. Or maybe there's just never anything else to do at Easter.

"What Britain needs," I decided, totally undemocratically, "is not another regular convention, but more fanzine programming at the ones we have."

"Yes," said Doug, "like John and Eve Harvey's fanroom at the last Eastercon."

"Or the Pete Weston item at Novacon."

"There's not going to be any fan programming at 2Kon," said Doug, despondently.

"But Paragon will be better. Claire and

Mark are fan GoH, so there's bound to be some fan programme."

"Yes," said Doug, perking up, "and it's in Blackpool." Doug's first Eastercon was in Blackpool and he was looking forward to going back there and holding an anniversary party.

So, we happily consigned the British fanzine convention to another dimension, sipping at tom yam soup, while we imagine a future where Novacon takes fanzine programming seriously (it could happen. Maureen Speller is trying to develop more programming for Novacons. Tony Berry is in charge of the whole convention, not just the Novas.) and Eastercons always have fan guests.

It was not till 2Kon that I realised the futility of it all. 2Kon has garnered a lot of bad press for Eastercons with its lack of - well - everything, Paragon has moved from Blackpool, alienating the half of its constituency that cares more about location than programme, and the convention to follow will be in Jersey. Lilian Edwards and I ran a fan programme at the first Jersey Eastercon that forced us to the conclusion that Eastercon fan programmes are a waste of time. The only item that filled the room was the late night fannish sex panel. Times may have changed, but my bet would still be that people will be in the bar, or out sightseeing. The Harveys proved that the fanroom can be viable with the right people and right setting, but whether it will ever return as a fixture to Eastercons depends on a lot of factors, including whether Eastercons as constituted at present even have a future. So, maybe it is up to the kind of fannish convention that seems to be establishing itself at the end of May - Plokta.Con, Seccon etc. to carry the fanzine banner. Or perhaps if we ask nicely, the Americans will keep letting us go to Corflus.

## Did It Do Your Head In?

**Joseph Nicholas 15 Jansons Road, South Tottenham, London N15 4JU**

Herewith a few thoughts inspired by your opening remarks about focal point fanzines and the internet... I think it needs to be borne in mind when the discussion turns to focal point fanzines that they cannot be willed into existence: they will appear only as a consequence of the pressure of particular circumstances at a particular period of time – something which tends to be overlooked by those nostalgics who look back to the (allegedly) great days of *Hyphen*, *Oops!a*, *Grue*, *Xero* and other titles which once won a fanzine Hugo when the numbers voting for the award were small enough to render the results halfway meaningful. But of course fanzine fandom then isn't fanzine fandom now, and it must be strongly doubted whether a focal point fanzine of the kind which then prevailed – and the kind which those who call for focal point fanzines seem to have in mind – could ever (re-)emerge...although one could argue for the existence of multiple focal point fanzines, depending on the number of sub-groups which are perceived to exist: for example, it's been suggested that *Fosfax* is a focal point for some fans, which I daresay might well be true if you happen to be a right-wing Clinton-hating US Christian fundamentalist gun freak. (As, perhaps *Lan's Lantern* was once a focal point for fans who enjoyed intellectually undemanding book reviews and sycophantic interviews with third-rate SF authors. And so on.)

But if fanzine fandom now is unlikely to produce a focal point print fanzine, might – as you suggest – the internet suffice? I rather doubt it, since as with print then so with electronic publishing: the total audience is too segmented for any one document to command the allegiance of them all.

After which serious stuff, I turn for some light relief to Lilian's bit about *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, a series of which I am a

huge fan. (Well, where else can you see impossibly slender young women in micro-skirts kicking vampires under the chin a lot?) As you surmised in your introduction to it, an instruction not to read certain paragraphs if you don't want to know what happens next is usually a spur to read them anyway; and I was no exception. I'm intrigued at the mentions of two new characters, Riley and Tara, who have yet to appear in the third series....albeit that adding characters in this fashion can lead to an overall loss of focus: more characters means more storylines means less forward narrative momentum. (Yes, I know soap operas like *Eastenders* have lots of characters. But *Buffy* isn't a soap opera. And surely no one would accuse the likes of *Coronation Street* of having forward narrative momentum!) After all, we already have Faith – but what does she actually do? Not stand in for Buffy when SMG is away shooting other material, that's for sure – absences which I'm sure have been responsible for the Buffy character's less prominent role during the past few weeks' episodes and which have led to some continuity problems with SMG's hair – she's had the front cut, and now has a notable fringe which has meant that, because of the order in which the scenes are filmed, her hair seemed to magically grow back every ten or fifteen minutes. Bloody hell. What a Buffy obsessive I am. So obsessive that I even have Buffy wallpapers and screensavers on my computer, although I stop short of actually buying Buffy merchandise. Apart from the official episode guides, that is....

**Darroll Pardoe, 36 Hamilton Street, Hoole, Chester CH2 3JQ**

Ah, Rupert (Ripper) Giles. I think when I was a lad I could have killed for a library (and a librarian) such as the Sunnydale High facility. All the regular school library books seem to be kept in the stacks up on the balcony, and the books at the front, and most accessible, are Giles' famous occult collection. No wonder visitors are dis-

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aged! He does however often seem occupied with humble librarian tasks such as stamping books, rummaging in his file cards and so on, so a certain amount of ordinary admin must go on. I think Giles must, after all, take the day job at least partly seriously. In 'Passion', Jonathan and a woman (how does Jonathan always manage to have a girlfriend in tow?) come into the library and want a book. Xander says "What do you think this is, a Barnes & Noble?" and Giles replies that actually, it's a school library, and directs them up to the right bit of the stacks, acting the helpful librarian role. What puzzles me is that substantial book cage in the library. I know Giles keeps his everyday weapons in it, but what purpose does it serve in library terms? You wouldn't think an ordinary school library would need a secure storage area like that, and he certainly doesn't keep his (presumably very valuable) occult collection there. I guess it's just a handy plot device for locking people up in when the occasion arises.

*Obviously it's there to lock up students who return their library books late and won't pay the fines. This would be useful at the Environment Agency too!*

*But, contrary to the evidence of the conversations at Plokta.Con not everyone loves Buffy*

**Ken Shinn, 31 Belvoir Road, St Andrews, Bristol BS6 5DQ**

It never ceases to surprise me just how easily such a sizable proportion of Fandom has been effortlessly seduced by *Buffy*. To what, exactly, does it owe such popularity? The scripting? I don't think so. *Buffy* episodes are as formulaic as *Ally McBeal* episodes, but without the latter's redeeming off-beat charms. The grand plots? Again, unlikely. I'm sorry, Lilian, but there aren't any that you couldn't find done at least as well by the average *EastEnders* scripter. When the series tries to be epic, it usually ends up falling flat on its face, because the scripters are too busy trying to think up the next smartarse James Bond/Schwarzenegger-style one-liner. The sheer quality of its acting? No, no, NO. As ever,

it's the token Brit that the Yanks have cast who makes the best impression. Yes, somewhat clichéd though the character is, I must admit to loving Giles. Oh, and James Masters is pretty darn groovy as Spike. But other than that, what have we got? Endless inexperienced pretty boys and girls, none of whom can emote even half-decently without paragraphs of purple scripting and boo-hoo-hooing incidental musical scores.

So what is the secret of its success? I think that Lilian gives us the answer here, through her lengthy and loving examination...it's sex. Okay, it's very soft-core, soft-focus, soft-lighting sex, with nary a nipple or dangly bit in sight, but it's there. In spades. Largely courtesy of those vacuous pretty boys and girls that I ranted about earlier. And alas, we are suckered in by the barest hint of the making of the two-backed beast. Even (maybe especially) when it deals in the supposedly daringly deviant. Red-hot lesbo action, S&M and general bondage. That's how *Buffy* gets away with such 'mould-breaking' moments. Because sex sells. And don't the kids just love it.

*But enough of this Buffoonery, and back to the serious questions of fannish life:*

**Sheila Lightsey, 263 Elm Street, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA**

My fannish thinking tends toward the heretical. I think we are too incestuous, which is partly why I am so for the fusion of the British and American and Australian and Swedish and even nonfannish people (this will probably go over as well as my idea to let everyone in the convention into the green room did at Readercon.) It was truly wonderful that you rated my fanzine so highly. I give a lot of credit to Nevenah for editing my prose. I have now become fascinated with editing, and I have realized, if I want to write that I have to brush up on those old rules of grammar I spent so much time avoiding in school. What a thing to have to learn all over again when you are fifty. That will teach me to learn things properly the first time around.

**Gary Deindorfer, Trent Center West, 465 Greenwood Ave, #1104, Trenton, NJ 08609-2131, USA**

*Head!* #1 is a vivacious entrant in the faanish fanzine sweepstakes as recently typified by Arnie Katz and Tom Springer's *Baloney*, Vic Gonzalez's *Squib* #5, Nic Farey's *This Here* ..., and the most recent issue of Robert Lichtman's *Trap Door*. Yours and these zines have livened up the scene considerably. Though it becomes increasingly clear to me that the essence of the faanish experience these days is to attend the annual Corflus and be active on the fannish address internet sites. Sad to say this is out of my ken. I subsist on a fixed income, and can't afford a computer. That's pretty impecunious, wot? But that's the way it is. But by way of compensation, Lichtman and I in our correspondence have noticed that there seem to be more fanzines coming out nowadays than formerly. But maybe it will be *HEAD!* that will become that rara avis, the Focal Point fanzine.

*Head! is too rare a bird itself to be focal. Besides, we prefer to stay off-centre.*

I have never met Frank Lunney or read hardly any of his writing, but I'm glad someone was out there on the streets of Washington, D.C. trying to stop the corporations taking over the world. Actually I think they already have.

**Steve Jeffery, 44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon, OX5 2XA**

The more I hear about 2Kon, the less disappointed I am that we didn't go. However it wasn't any uncanny prescience on our part, but an irritation with the lottery system of allocating hotel places. Certainly it wasn't the announced program and Guests (though I still puzzle to work out the connection between Canadian fantasists Guy Kay and a 'CelticFantasy' theme); I actually looked forward to a programme that treated fantasy seriously (most of my favourite authors write what I consider fantasy; almost none of them have elves and wizards in their books). I still do.

**Gary Wilkinson, 18 Water Lane, South Witham, Grantham, Lincs NG33 5PH**

I can totally concur with Doug's feelings re 2Kon. It was great to meet up with my Scottish friends and to make a few more - but it might have been better if they had warned us before that this was going to be a 'minimalist' convention. I do tend to spend a large part of any con checking out the local surroundings but it is nice for a least a few program items to go to! The next one is in bleeding Hinkley of all places (or rather an overpriced hotel in the vicinity) with very few diversions for a poor program. I'm seriously thinking of giving it a miss...

Enjoyed the write up of the alt Arthur C Clark awards panel - seems like I missed an interesting one there. I must read some of them! I've picked up *Silver Screen* a few times but wasn't sufficiently swayed by the blurb or first few pages to take the plug. I've very much enjoyed Stephenson's output, well *Diamond Age* and *Snowcrash* - but the sheer size of his latest offering has been putting me off the plunge but it is on my to read list. I'm not against door stops on principle, it just make it less likely to commit so the money/time invested to get through the damn things. However saying that I currently about a quarter the way through the near 800 page monster *Pedido Street Station* by China Mieville which is absolutely excellent so far. Its fantasy! But it's an urban, gothic, dark kinda steam-punk of a fantasy.

Ah *Jam* or rather Jaaaaaamm.... slow seductive, its twisted brilliance slips into your brain like treacle. Wouldn't want to miss a frame. Kind of a slow builder but each episode added to the next. Weird but then I love the weird. It's not funny, well most of it, but it doesn't need to be. Morris is a bleeding genius. I must admit I find *Buffy* to be strangely addictive - I think it's the dialogue and it's very easy on the eye - whether you prefer girls or boys. And I've just found out that Willow's going to turn gay! Holy Slash Batman I think I need a lie down!

**Linda Krawecka, 1A Mountney Road, Old Town, Eastbourne, Sussex BN21 1RJ**

Thought I'd pass on a "Head" comment. I was in Salisbury Thursday, passing through after buying my new VW camper van in Warminster (don't ask!) (and it's "new" only in the sense that I just bought it. It's a K reg - 1971: genuine vintage vehicle!) I passed on copies of the Leeds zines that I collected for Jimmy [Robertson] and after he scanned them he said "Tell Christina and Doug I said 'Thanks for having Linda give me Head.'" I could get a reputation this way! From now on you do your own dirty work passing on your feelthy zine and I'll stick to pleasure!

Are you familiar with the underground comics of the 60s/70s and an artist called S.Clay Wilson? He created characters like the Checkered Demon and Ruby the Dyke. Bikers and Pirates were his favourites for his very crude, funny comics. One scenario in particular was titled "Head's Best" which I will try to dig out, scan & e-mail to you. Then you'll understand why I get a slight shudder and a wry smile when I see "Head" and think of this particular comic.

*I can just see Jimmy chuckling to himself!*

*Well that's about it for this ish folks. We're out of space so we'll have to hold over a couple of letters. More next time.*

### Credits

Head! is the misbegotten mutant child of Doug Bell and Christina Lake. It is available in exchange for letters of comment, fanzines, yet more illos, Classic X-men comics, punk albums, bicycle shorts and cocktail recipes.

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Art credits, in case you couldn't guess, go to D West (p.14 & 24), Steve Jeffery (p.2, 10 & 17) and last but by no means least to Nick Walters for the amazing cover featuring the mighty Bender of *Futurama*.

Apologies to Ken Shinn for misattributing his defence of beer to the Bristol SF group beer festival organiser (that's bheer to you, Steve!) although none to Doug who left his own name off the 2Kon report by accident.

Next issue: Reportage from Novacon, in depth analysis of the Nova Awards and at least one article that we will promise you here and not deliver!

WE'D REALLY LOVE  
TO KNOW WHAT  
YOU THINK OF IT

CONSTRUCTIVE  
CRITICISM,  
OF COURSE



ER



THE CLASSIC  
FANNISH  
FAILING...

THE SPIRIT  
IS WILLING BUT  
THE BRAIN  
IS WEAK