

SNORKEL 2



SNORKEL is a fanzine produced, probably when you least expect it, by Harry Bell, 9 Lincoln St., GATESHEAD, Tyne & Wear, NE8 4EE, U.K. This is issue number 2, Grimwab Whole No. 14, dated July 1980, and is a little more available than No. 1. If you got both issues and have done nothing about it, don't get complacent -- I might send you No. 3.

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GET UP, STAND UP Some of you may by now have heard of Jim Barker's brush with the law which threatened to put a third of Britain's fanartists in a little cell with bread and water for a long time. Those of you who haven't and are hoping I'm about to expound on the affair are out of luck and will have to wait until Jim's DEAD HEDGEHOG crawls out of Scotland to reveal the full and ghastly story. But it occurred to me the other day that had the warp and woof of time and space been twisted in a suitably scientific manner, Jim and I might have faced each other from opposite sides of the law.

The Department of Health and Social Security, to whom I sell my labour, is one of the largest employers in the Newcastle area, holding sway over some 12 or 13,000 civil servants at Central Office. Obviously, with a staff so large, it runs the full gamut of types of people -- fat, thin, tall, short, dark, fair. By arrangement with the Dept., the local police use this personality pool to full advantage. Having run in a suspect and being in need of a bunch of lookalike stooges for an identity parade, they contact the Dept. and give a general description of the type they need.

So it was that, just a few months ago, I was sitting at my desk, dutifully awake and conscientiously cleaning my nails, when a guy came round and asked if I'd object to taking part in an identity parade. "Sure thing,

boss" I said, or words not totally dissimilar, and at the back of my mind I felt the fan recorder circuit come into play. No matter how hard I try, I find it impossible now to shake off the thought: "This will do for a fanzine article" and the awareness of part of my mind impersonally observing and recording. I suspect that, were I to have hesitated in accepting the line-up invitation, the fan observer in me would have said "yes" before I could say "no". Frightening really.

Anyway, 'click' went the observer circuit and 'clang' went the back door of the dark blue van in which I found myself with a handful of others, all looking somewhat uncomfortable and not, I think, just from the hard wooden benches and the smell of stale sweat.

Little conversations were started, most of them demonstrating what products of the television age we are by frequent references to the possibility of one of us being picked out and suspicion falling on him. Bloody hell, tv sitcoms have a lot to answer for.

I'm still puzzled by the route the van took. It's about a ten minute drive from the front of Central Office to the police station just off Gosforth High Street and I regularly travel the most direct route by bus at least once a day. It took almost twenty-five minutes for the van to get to the police station, through streets I've never seen before, finally driving into the station at the rear. I reckon some of us were getting pretty worried by then, which just shows what an innate fear of the law we all have, however innocent. Whatever the reason for the van's scenic tour of Gosforth's back lanes, by the time we were herded into the waiting room, the sense of dislocation was complete.

The waiting room held enough chairs for us and no more -- the constable who'd driven us there had to sit on a table while we stared at the walls, at him and at one another. No public service posters here. No "Watch Out, There's a Thief About". Only four walls of tasteful battleship grey and off-cream, inscribed with the initials and nom-de-plumes of previous ungrateful occupants. Most striking of all was a great splash of something brown running from the joining of the ceiling and one wall down to the floor. What the hell could it be? Oil? Shit? Blood?? We kept eyeing it and muttering nervous jokes to one another, hoping maybe the constable would confirm our wildest imaginings, but he was too busy chatting up a woman p.c. who'd brought us tea. Normally I can go for women in uniform but there's something horribly sexless and off-putting about a British policewoman's uniform. I cast aside these dreadful sexist thoughts and concentrated on the probability of her Fine Mind.

"Well now lads" said the Inspector, his moustache bristling through the doorway as he came to instruct us in our Public Duty, "Good of you to come. All had a cuppa? Good, good. The..er..suspect has arrived. He's next door with his solicitor and we'll be able to gerron with it in just a mo'."

"What's he supposed to have done, then?"

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"Oh, he duffed up a bloke in Gosforth High St. and ran off with about £10,000. On his way to the night safe, he was. Expect you've got visions of stocking masks and the like, eh? Not our chappie. I'll let you into a trick of the trade, lads. Next time you want to do a robbery, the modern thing is to stick a bit of elastoplast over the bridge of your nose."

"No!" we said. "Gosh," and even "Eeh, well."

"We've been wondering what this huge stain down the wall is," I said. The Inspector looked at us, grinned and said "Time to get on, lads. Through to the next room, if you please."

Ever since Peter Hain, Young Liberal and South African rugby tour disruptor was convicted on the strength of an identification parade recognition and then won his appeal on the untrustworthiness of that recognition, identity parades have been used by the police only as a back-up to more solid evidence. Judging by my own experience this is a damn good job. The suspect's solicitor looked us over and then asked that we take off our jackets. "My client doesn't have one." He inspected us a little longer and it was possible to see dejection welling up in him. "If those who are wearing ties would take them off, I think we shall have to agree the parade is in order."

Ties off. Line up. Usher in suspect. Look, I don't mean to suggest there was anything wrong with this line-up -- after all, the solicitor had agreed it -- but we looked like half a dozen civil servants without ties or jackets. He looked like a suspect. I reckon anyone brought in off the street could have picked out the suspect, it taking very little time to notice that only one of us had three days growth of stubble, a dirty green jersey with a hole in it, and a filthy pair of jeans. Which is not to say there aren't civil servants at Central Office who would fit that description, but perhaps they weren't 5ft 10ins with fair hair and blue eyes. Or maybe they'd all taken the day off.

When the witness with the bruise on his temple came in he took his job very seriously. Walked up the line, back down again, then went unerringly to the scruff and put his hand on his shoulder. Bit of a let-down really. I mean, tv sitcoms could be based on real events.

We all got paid fifty pence apiece for this public service, although it took much raking round in the petty cash box and numerous "I'll give you twenty if you've got a two" transactions. On the way out, I said to the constable "We've been trying to figure out what that big stain on the wall is."

With a straight face he just said "You should see the room above," and took us back to work.

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Dave Langford
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You talk good sense about fandom's current 'crisis'; I agree that things are probably not as bad as some say, though I'm not so keen on the hint that "This has all happened before, all is predestined in the immutable cycle of numbered fandoms, etc". It's not so much that I actively

disagree with such a doctrine as that I find those who profess it to be, in general, terribly boring, complacent and smug. (Present company excepted, bwana.) The trouble with the present climate of fanzine criticism is that one is never allowed to reach a plateau and take a break, or even slide back a bit for the sheer fun of it: unless one's fanzine just gets better and better, the cry of "Stagnation" at once goes up. Bigger this, say I.

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Yet a new title! Are you trying to confuse the bibliographers? Many years ago Ro and I had an ingenious thing for our apazines, in which each issue would have a subtitle (sequentially numbered)-- sometimes the subtitle would change, sometimes it would turn into a main title or vice versa, and the whole system got almost impossible to follow. That was the idea of course -- so as to confuse checklist compilers in the future. We had to abandon it though when we started to lose track ourselves.

((Whoever said fans were slans?))

I don't go along with this "peaking out of fandom" business. British fandom doesn't come to heights of excellence and then fade away -- it's just there, and evolves in interesting ways, but the most interesting time is always the present. How can you compare the living fandom you're participating in with the memories of what it used to be? The past is dead, but the present has the future to look forward to. Sometimes there are a few good fanzines acting as focal points, sometimes there are not -- but does it really make much difference? Fandom chugs along anyway.

((I agree. I just wish some of us would stop wondering in which direction it ought to chug and start fueling the boiler instead.))

John Barfoot
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Being a homosexual with a disability ranks lower than knowing a homosexual with a disability. And even that's a little passé these days. I'm in on the ground floor of the next trend, which will be

concerned with :- dullness, domesticity, television, weekly magazine compilation encyclopaedias, conservatism, hypocrisy, self-deception, parochialism, anecdotal conversation, smugness, and ambition.

Can Dick Geis beat that?

((Depends whether he understands it any better than I do.))

.....5:.....
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Naturally I have a word or two to say about the FAAN Awards: all of the base plaques are now made and distributed; Randy Bathurst assures me that he'll have this year's statues and last year's statues ready for AUTOCLAVE where the awards are being presented this year.

That means that by the end of the summer complete awards ought to be in the hands of all winners from the first six years of the awards programme. Next year it is highly likely that we'll be revamping the system completely, dropping both the voting fee and the statues in favour of certificates and a structure closer to the fan polls that have been run in places like CHECKPOINT, FILE 770 etc. I'll be sorry to see those aspects go, but as an administrator of the awards I'll be happier with the much simpler organizational problems we'll have to face. Maybe now a few of the more active English fans will start participating; people like Harry Bell, for example. Fanzine fandom is, after all, an international organization and one can't isolate oneself and accept the approbation of a handful of one's fellow countrymen forever. Or can one? Is the CHECKPOINT POLL all that English fans care about? If it is, then maybe all those articles about how inbred and insular English fanzines have become might actually be right....

((I guess you had your American hat on when you wrote that, Mike. I don't honestly believe any British fan gives a tuppenny fart about the CHECKPOINT POLL -- it's only a bit of fun anyway. I do believe that British fandom can isolate itself and accept the approbation...etc... forever. It's been doing so for some time now, and while I think it might be an uphill struggle at times I think we could get along without the rest of the world. I don't want us to. But look, the approbation of a handful of fellow countrymen must be more valuable if they are prepared, even eager, to tell you you've been producing shit. More valuable than a continent of fans whose attitude is such that Taral, who finds our reviewing methods to his taste, is afraid of following suit for fear of being cold-shouldered at cons. Bloody hell, nobody cold-shoulders Joseph Nicholas for his reviews. We may draw on him when he's asleep, but that's a different matter.

I have always wanted British fandom to be part of international fandom, and now that the FAAN Awards are becoming more sensibly organized I expect to be doing my bit to promote them, when the time comes. I still feel, though, that British fandom is like a jigsaw piece with jagged edges trying to fit into a world jigsaw with nice, soft rounded edges. I think the sharp edges are what keep British fandom vital and I'm beginning to think that American fandom is actually afraid of getting cut. I believe you think the same way, Mike, but the brim of that American hat is getting in your eyes.))

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I honestly can't remember when last I wrote to you. I'm confused timewise. I've been leading a Cyclopean existence for some time, peering at the world through one gradually dimming eye, giving up the cinema, dirty books, and Going Out on Dark Nights, and waiting for a further operation on my right eye. The good news is that my

name came up on top of the list a few weeks ago, I've had the cataract removed, and now have blurred vision in my right eye until I get new specs prescribed.

So, in the interim, I'm home on sick leave, with eyes that can see in an independent fashion, but won't co-operate and see together -- like, to get an intelligible view of the outer world I have to keep one or the other eye shut or else the superimposed views are confusing.

The situation has its advantages though. Immediately after the operation when the eye had begun to heal and the mists cleared it seemed miraculous that I could see again. I first realised it when I wiped away a tear and realised that I could actually see the handkerchief in some detail. Things were still blurred and obscured in the centre of vision, but for the next few days I kept holding my hand in front of my face to see if I could count my fingers... and eventually I did. Over the past couple of weeks things have gone on improving, and from an astigmatic, faceted view (late Cezanne style) I've reached a slightly blurred multiple-image clarity. The thing that really takes my breath away is how light and bright everything is, how intense and glowing colours are. Christ, I'd forgotten after all these years of accommodating to the encroaching gloom. Now that I can compare the vision in both eyes, I realise how much light and colour the cataract in my left eye cuts off, yet at the same time it's apparent how much my mind has relied on memory to mentally correct the visual data transmitted. Like I look at a red book with my left eye and I realise that what I actually see is a dirty brown shade: yet my mind "knows" that it's a bright red. I look at it with my "new" vision and sure enough it is a bright red. Fascinating.

But these advantages I mention. Consider my eyeball after the operation: no lens, in effect just a hole left for the light to come through onto the retina. Which is why the image there is blurred until a lens is provided to focus the light. Ergo, I can see the television clearly through a pinhole in a card (but pinhole specs are not very practical for everyday use!). Equally if I hold a magnifying glass in front of my eye, I get a right-way-up larger-than-life detailed image of things six feet or so away. I found this out accidentally after using a reading glass with my left eye to try to decipher some small print, as I lifted it away and as I opened my right eye a clear vision of a painting on the opposite wall swam into view. It was one of my triads designs, and looked positively 3-D. So I had to try the glass out on some other paintings, and was amaaaaazed! The next thought was that this trick would be a wow at an art gallery...

I suppose I really gave up going to art galleries early in 1978 after a frustrating visit to the Dada & Surrealism Reviewed exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. There's been a move by enlightened conservationists to cut down wear and tear from stray light quanta on their precious paintings by reducing the illumination levels of the major galleries during the past few years. At this exhibition it was all spotlights in the ceiling, which cast unwanted shadows on the paintings hung on the walls, created pools of gloom over the descriptive cards alongside, and didn't provide enough

general lighting to decipher the small print in the catalogue. Logically, I suppose that art curators are not briefed to cater for the partially sighted. I took the hint, accepted the inevitable and gave up.

Though there is one big gallery not yet affected by fashionable standards in conservation -- London's National Gallery. There I could see a certain amount of detail in the light airy rooms, but, understandably, attendants get a bit worried when I'm peering a few inches away from the paint surface and breathing all over their precious charges. So, in the interests of the National Heritage, I'd tended to give up going even there.

But now... with my new-found bionic vision, the Nat. Gallery is obviously the first place to go. So I went.

First stop was the room where Uccello's Rout of San Romano dominates one wall, facing a row of conveniently placed chairs for those that want to contemplate in comfort. Before, when I sat here, the painting became a pleasantly coloured blur, but not this time. When I whipped out my reading glass, closed my left eye, and got things into focus, all the colour and detail were there as if I were right on top of things. And the merest movement of the glass gave an overall picture. I don't know how long I sat there zooming in on details of this masterpiece of early Renaissance perspective, seeing it as I'd never been able to see it before... When I returned to normality I realised that the attendant had moved from the entrance and was tactfully stood at one side of the room eyeing me quizzically. I thought I owed him an explanation but think he still suspected that I'd been doing some crafty photography with one of these miniature Nipponese cameras.

After that there was no holding me back. At the Hayward Gallery I sat in the middle of vast rooms and gazed at vast canvases on the vast walls without even the need to walk around to view them. I discovered one snag though; the system of scattering modern sculpture on the floor without any barriers is not intended to cope with idiots who walk around with one eye screwed shut, and peering through a magnifying glass with the other.

I finished up that day at the Salvador Dali show at the Tate. If you hear reports of a quaint surrealist character wandering around with a spy-glass and tripping over the shin-high rope barriers round the main exhibits, you'll guess who it was. Me.

WAHF: Kevin Smith, who probably felt he couldn't quite follow that.

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FORGOTTEN FACTS DEPT. The cartoon on page one is by Dan Steffan who is the

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In 1978, with personal relations still somewhat soured and the looming possibility of having no summer holiday for the very first time in my life, I took the easy option of a week in London, chez Pickersgill/Walsh. As 1979 got under way, I could see that things hadn't improved much and I seemed to face another summer of fun in South Ealing. Don't get me wrong, some of the best weekends of my year are spent at Greg Pickersgill's stately South Ealing residence, but I'm sure he'd be the first to admit that it's far from being exotic. God, even the majority of the poulace is white.

There was no way I was going to allow this state of affairs to continue, maybe for years to come, so one night I got out the whisky bottle to sharpen up the ol' senses, spread out a map of France and spilled whisky all over it. When it was dry I picked out, with a certain degree of randomness, a pin and one and a half eyes shut, a Place to Go. It looked like it might be OK and it adjoined an area I'd been to before, so the next day I went into town and bought a return ticket to Cahors.

The holiday turned out quite a success, particularly from the point of view of finding my own company acceptable for two weeks. My schoolboy French gets worse every year and don't let anyone fool you with that bundle of crap about every second person you meet on the Continent being fluent in English. It just ain't so, especially in France where we are not the best-loved of nationalities. In two weeks I met no-one who was able to hold any kind of conversation in English alone, which was what I'd expected from past experience. I ran into an hotelier in Montauban who came originally from Paris and was prepared to slow his speech to moronic level to accommodate my halting abilities, and there was a girl in Moissac who was prepared to try out one or two words of lycee English but who was more interested in non-verbal communication anyway.

The general area I was in, while attractive, proved difficult to get to grips with for anyone on foot or relying on public transport, because it's on the edge of the Massif Central, a great limestone region worn down into a network of little valleys which make any kind of direct travel impossible. It's also rather windy and after a while I was beginning to get fed up with the almost continual wind and having to wash my hair every other day. (Look, dearie, some of us can't abide having greasy hair. Can we D.?)

Finally I gave in to the temptation to move on to a couple of places I know pretty well -- Carcassonne and Toulouse. Carcassonne's principal attraction is its Old City, the most complete mediaeval citadel in Western Europe. Of course, it's packed with tourist traps, but the very fact that it still houses a lot of people lends it an atmosphere quite different from most other castles of a similar antiquity. The weather wouldn't leave me alone here, either, and even though I'd discovered relief for my ailing finances in the form of a pair of vans doing a price war on the cost of sausage and chips, I decided it was about time to turn back towards Cahors, taking in a couple of days at Toulouse.

Toulouse is a city that grows on me the more I scrape it off. Toulouse's pavements are paved with dog-shit and there's a hooker on every corner. In every doorway. And by every kerbside. Maybe other cities I've been to offer similar services in equal profusion, but if so, it isn't noticeable. Toulouse hookers have such style, such flair. The standard uniform is hot pants, thigh-length white boots and a big bunch of keys, but they all work their own variations on that.

Night-life in Toulouse is fascinating. You can sit in a pavement cafe, drinking cheap but palatable red wine, eating an underdone steak that didn't cost you very much, and watch the kerb-crawlers and the hookers play some kind of intricate game in which the moves up and down and across the street are little to chess but nonetheless end in mating.

On my last night in Toulouse I came across a hooker who is going to take some beating. (That sentence wins this issue's Ambiguity Award.) She had on a silver lamé micro-skirt with red and blue flecks, white over-the-knee boots and a taxmy fun-fur jacket. Her hair was platinum and had glitter-dust in it and in one hand she swung a gold chain at the end of which was a tiny bell and a golden key. She was sitting, legs crossed, on the bonnet of a gleaming white Mini (metallic blue racing stripe) which was fitted out with leopard-skin upholstery, a creamy mohair throw-rug, lace curtains and, on the back seat, a live toy poodle. Aah! Quelle elegance!

Coming back on the ferry from Calais, after two weeks of virtual silence, I found myself not wanting to speak at all. It was a French boat and I still hadn't made the transition from silent European to reasonably communicative Englishman, when I found myself in a dog's-leg queue for the duty-free shop. Two Australian women were discussing, very loudly, the ill-mannered way in which these bloody foreign types thought they could push their way into queues. It was one of those conversations which are voiced in such a way that the subject can hear but, the poor sod being foreign, doesn't realise is about him. Only it was about me. I still find it difficult to think that I stood there listening, straight faced, without even wanting to speak out in my defence. Very weird.

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One of the most important reasons for this solo trip to France was to ensure that I didn't mind traveling alone, because for about three years now I've wanted to take a look, a close look at the U.S. To find out if anyone really spoke as absurdly as Kojak and if, outside every hotel room was a big neon sign that flashed on-off all night. Does every street corner sport hordes of blacks in ostentatious clothes greeting each other with slapped palms and cries of "Hey, mah main man!"; Gotta find out, boss, gotta find out. And so I shall, but not alone. Jim Barker and I, together with some guy called Lavenhazel Langford, are heading for NOREASCON II, immediately after abusing our bodies at SILICON 4 (Runner-up in the Ambiguity Awards).

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After NOREASCON our plans are vague. Apart from some time in Washington and New York, neither Jim nor I has a definite idea of where else we'll be going, hampered as we are by a lack of real comprehension of the size of the damn country. Suggestions for an itinerary and offers of floor-space, four-posters and water-beds are encouraged.

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Dave Langford is accompanying Jim and me in, of course, his position as the 1980 TAFF Winner. When we get there, one of the people I'm most looking forward to meeting is someone I'm hoping will be the 1981 TAFF Winner -- Stu Shiffman. From our somewhat sporadic correspondence, from Stu's fine and fannish cartoons and from his co-editorship of RAFFLES, one of the best fannish fanzines coming out of America at the moment, I'm convinced that Shiffman is the man we should be all voting for. Anyway, he's promised to cut me a few suit patterns while I'm over there... Don't forget now --

STU SHIFFMAN FOR TAFF!!

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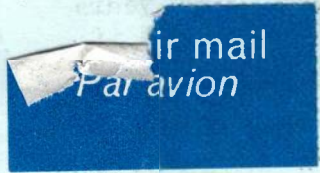
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