



John Bunyan 1628-1688

## Bedford and District Group Newsletter

Well, 2022 surely was an eventful one, and let us all hope that this year is calmer, although one doesn't have to dig too deep into the daily news for yet another calamity in the making! This newsletter is not, however, the place for that and by the time this goes to press, and gets to you, it will have changed anyway. And all of us survived.

### Chair Report

We are now past the Christmas and New Year celebrations, and once again Spring and Summer are just over the horizon, which is a cheering thought during February as I write this. For this chair report, I wish to draw your attention to the fact that the CSPA Organisation and Recruitment Committee is giving consideration to Motion A17 from last year's National AGM concerned with the possible reorganisation of the CSPA's group structure. Briefly, the Motion proposed to do away with groups and to reorganise the CSPA on a regional basis. This Motion was remitted to the Executive for their further consideration, and its details and a summary of the debate that followed, can be found in the report of the 2022 AGM that was included in the Winter 2022 edition of *The Pensioner*. A working party has been established to make recommendations and I was invited to be a member of it. It is hoped that a summary of its deliberations will be included in the Spring 2023 edition of *The Pensioner*. Part of the ongoing process will be to consult with groups and I rather "jumped the gun" by asking all our members whose email addresses I have for their opinions last month. Thank you to all who replied to me, and your opinions will be forwarded to the Executive in due course. If any other of our members have a viewpoint on this, there is still time to send it to me. My contact details are at the end of this newsletter. All agree that the underlying issue that has to be tackled is the fall off in recruitment of new members over the past three years, a major cause having been the Covid pandemic. Unless corrected the CSPA will fold, and as members I'm sure we do not wish that to happen. We have to try and recruit members at our local level. There are some 450,000 retired civil servants in the UK, of which the CSPA membership represents just over 10%. I have had an idea for a while now as to how we might attract new recruits within our group area which will involve members in a minimum of time and effort. However, I need somebody who can draw and/or design an A4 poster. I am no artist myself. If anybody is willing to help me in this respect, please let me know. As above, my contact details are at the end of the newsletter. If my idea works in our group area, then it can be rolled out nationally. If it does not, then our group has at least tried. Hope to hear from one or more of you in the not too distant future.

**John Abington**

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I spotted a relevant article in the *I* newspaper on the weekend edition dated 22<sup>nd</sup> January written by Paul Waugh, titled **Pensioners are an afterthought in a digital world**.

After months of disruption, there was a glimmer of hope this week that a new pay deal could bring an end to the strikes on our railways. But buried under the encouraging noises from train companies and unions came a hint that normal service will not ever be resumed.

Although the Government has dropped a demand for driver-only operated trains, the "best and final offer" still includes proposals to close or "repurpose" every ticket office in England. Not a single one of the 980 train station ticket offices will continue as they do at the moment.

In an attempt to save £500m a year, the ticket office windows will be permanently shuttered and replaced by vending machines. Most people will be expected to book online or use their smartphones or debit card to get through the electronic gates on to a platform.

But while some younger people will barely raise an eyebrow at the change, for millions of elderly and disabled people, the closures may feel like a hammer blow. Three million people over 65 do not have internet access and many do not have smartphones.

Moreover, elderly people often find vending machines (which are often touch-screen and hard to read) difficult to use, and prefer a human face over the counter to explain prices, journeys and travel updates. For some, the reforms may mean yet more isolation and loneliness.

Most strikingly, the ticket office closure plans underline the dire digital divide between the old and the young that still exists in much of Britain today. And, despite big claims that the Covid pandemic had got many more senior citizens online, studies have found that 42 per cent of over 75s do not use the internet.

This underclass of digitally excluded people faces growing pressure as both public and private sectors dash to cut costs by switching services online. And with banks closing cashpoints and some ticket office vending machines and shops becoming card-only, those pensioners who rely on cash are getting slowly squeezed out of daily activities that many take for granted. Many “off-grid” areas of the UK also have no wifi connection.

What shocked the author most this week were the new Age UK figures showing that nearly a third (31 per cent) of councils in London do not offer a way to apply for housing benefit or council tax rebates without using the internet – this during a cost of living crisis in which pensioners need every penny they can get.

But there are also councils that do not ignore the elderly. Some of them employ actual real live humans to see people in person to discuss how to claim benefits and pension credits and to help them fill in forms. Many prefer that to ringing the “hotlines”.

Many pensioners want to be more digitally empowered but often lack the money or support to do so. Charities offer skills training but why doesn't the Department for Work and Pensions provide a network of digital inclusion IT experts?

Of course, the march of the machines seems unstoppable in some areas. From supermarkets self-service checkouts to GP video calls to airline check-ins on your phone, consumers and companies can benefit.

And at a time when some politicians crassly try to pit the old against the young, we should remember that the pandemic lock-downs made millions in all age groups realise just how vital face-to-face activity really was.

Just as young people have flocked to theatres, concerts and live events of all kinds for interactions in real life, older people want and deserve similar engagements. If you put people first, the profits – politically and financially – will follow.

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I thought I would add a recipe here, easy to make and cheap to buy ingredients, and will warm the cockles etc.,

### Spicy pumpkin (butternut squash in winter) Soup

#### Ingredients – a little oil

- one medium onion, peeled and chopped
- one leek, washed and sliced
- 1 tablespoon Marsala curry paste (I use Pataks)
- 2lb (or thereabouts) butternut squash, peeled, deseeded and chopped
- 2 pints white stock (I use 3 chicken stock cubes)
- A little salt and freshly ground pepper

#### Method

1. Heat the oil in a large saucepan
2. Add the onion and leek and sweat until soft but not coloured
3. Add the curry paste and cook for a further minutes

4. Add the squash and stock. Bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer. Simmer for 25 minutes or until the squash is cooked through. Remove from the heat, and allow to cool slightly.
5. Whiz the soup in batches, season to taste.

You can add croutons, which you can make yourself from diced and fried bread. If you don't like croutons, sprinkle chopped parsley on top (optional) or serve with poppadoms.  
The soup can be made in advance and warmed up or frozen in batches.

*Yorkshire joke – A Yorkshireman goes to a goldsmith and asks “can tha mek us a gold statue o’me whippet? The goldsmith says he can, and then asks: “Do you want it 18 carat?” The man replies: “Nay lad, chewin a bone ’ll do fine”.*

*Janet joke – An elderly lady was in court on a shoplifting charge, the judge asked her what she had stolen? She told him that she had stolen a tin of peaches. The judge said that as she was a persistent offender, he intended making an example of her. He said he would count the peaches in the tin and sentence her for the same amount of days in jail. There were 5 peaches in the tin so he sentenced her to 5 days in jail. Her husband was not happy with the decision and asked if he could say something. The judge agreed, and the husband told him that she had also stolen a tin of peas!!*

As a little change from the American holiday saga very kindly shared with us from the Neilson's. and with a nod to the current weather, Janet Jefferies tells us about one of their adventures.

Over the years we have had many varied and fantastic holidays, but more often than not it is the ones that go wrong that you remember, this is one of those.

In 2001 we booked a coach trip to Scotland with Lochs and Glens holidays, our destination Inversnaid Hotel on Loch Lomond. We boarded the coach at Bedford Bus Station and set off up the A1. Our driver was an amusing chap, he told us not to address him as Jock or Jimmy and if we wanted to attract his attention on no account were we to tap him on the shoulder from behind as he had previously driven a hearse!

We made a stop at Westmorland services where our driver was advised from his company that all roads into Scotland were closed because of snow. We assumed we would return to Bedford but no, they had arranged for us to stay in a hotel in Carlisle overnight. We duly arrived in Carlisle in a blizzard, but we managed a little walk down to the cathedral and a look round the town. Evidently, we were not the only coach party to be stranded, there was also a whole train of passengers to be accommodated in various hotels etc.

Next morning the snow ploughs had cleared the main roads and instead of proceeding to the hotel we fulfilled the first visit of our holiday to Stirling. If anyone knows the area you will know that the castle stands at the top of a steep hill, and it was no mean feat getting several elderly people safely back to the coach as it was extremely slippery.

Luckily we didn't have any more snow for a few days and we were able to visit several other places, and see the Scotland landscape at its best. We also saw lots of deer which had all come lower down the slopes, presumably to look for food.

However, the night before our return, down came the snow again, after breakfast the snow ploughs had tried to clear the long narrow road to the hotel, but the coach was unable to get out of the car park and just kept sliding. Plan B was that along with all our luggage we boarded the Loch Lomond Steamer which took us to the other side of the loch where another coach would be waiting. We crossed the loch in a blinding blizzard and after much slipping and sliding nearer and nearer the loch, the coach managed to leave with a relief driver who turned out to be a mechanic from the garage. He drove like a man possessed and took us to Glasgow where the official driver took over. Fortunately the rest of the journey home passed without incident and we did book other holidays later with the same company, and they all went to plan.

The following article is from John Abington.



**The Asian Rhino of Nepal (*Nepal Rhinoceros unicornus*)** is a strange-looking creature, that resembles the African rhinoceros with armour plating. Having related what follows to our group Treasurer, Sue Walsh, a few weeks ago, she recently went to Whipsnade Zoo, and sent me photos of the Asian rhinos there, and suggested I write up the story of how one of them reached Whipsnade Zoo some years ago. I don't remember the exact year this occurred, but it was in the late 1990's before the King of Nepal was assassinated by his son in 2001. At the time I was working in Kathmandu managing a British aid-funded agricultural research and development project in the hill districts of Nepal. One morning I received a phone call from the British Embassy asking me to meet with the ambassador. At our meeting days later, he advised me he had a bit of a problem. The King of Nepal wished to make the gift of a young Asian rhino to our late Queen Elizabeth. However, the Ministry of Agriculture in UK was reluctant to issue the necessary import permits for the rhino on the grounds that foot and mouth disease of cattle was endemic in Nepal, and there were probably strains of it in Nepal which had never occurred in the UK. It was not known whether rhinos could become infected with, or carry the disease. This was a perfectly reasonable stance given the subsequent outbreak of foot and mouth which occurred in the UK in 2001 and the economic damage and costs it resulted in. The ambassador's dilemma was that to refuse the gift would be to insult the King of Nepal, and our own late Queen would also not have been best pleased either if this happened, but if its import resulted in an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in UK, there would be hue and cry in the UK media. As an agriculturist he asked me what was my recommendation? I was not a livestock expert having been a plant breeder earlier, but I said I would go away and think about it. After some thought and discussion with colleagues, I was able to suggest the following. The rhino was already in captivity, so it should be possible to take a blood sample from it. This could then be analysed by UK laboratories, and if there were no foot and mouth antibodies in its blood, then it had never been infected, and so was free from the disease. It should then be possible to have the necessary import permits issued. If it tested positive, that would be another matter, and we would have to rethink. Whether the above solution was eventually adopted I never knew, but the rhino was allowed to come, and to my knowledge is still at Whipsnade Zoo. Rhinos can live for 35 to 40 years in captivity and the animal in the photo may be this one, or hopefully one of its descendants. The Asian rhino is an animal under threat in the wild because of habitat loss and poaching, and so needs longer term preservation through zoo-based breeding programmes.

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I am not sure when you will all get this Newsletter, but for your information the next meeting is on March 10<sup>th</sup> at 12.30 at the North End Club, Roff Avenue, Bedford at 12.30 and will be the Annual General Meeting, with a buffet lunch and the usual activities, i.e. quiz and raffle. An item for the raffle would be gratefully received.

**Chair:** John Abington, 4 Duckmill Crescent, MK42 0AE. Tel 01234 403472: [johnabington1582@gmail.com](mailto:johnabington1582@gmail.com)

**Treasurer:** Susan Walsh, The Old Rectory, Rectory Lane, Houghton Conquest MK45 3LD. [suewalsh44@me.com](mailto:suewalsh44@me.com)

**Secretary:** Romy Neeves, 31 Turner Way, Bedford MK41 7ND Tel: 01234 360355: [raneeves@gmail.com](mailto:raneeves@gmail.com)

**Chair South Beds and Harpenden** (now linked with Bedford and district Group)

Steve Lewis, 40 Letchworth Road, Luton LU3 2NU. Tel: 01582 504335. email: [steveandrea106@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:steveandrea106@yahoo.co.uk)

**Committee:**

Peter Garratt, 5 Cody Road, Clapham, Bedford MK41 6ED 01234 349492: [petergarratt500@ntlworld.com](mailto:petergarratt500@ntlworld.com)

Patricia Gorringer, 99 Highbury Grove, Clapham, Bedford MK41 6DX: [Patricia.gorringer@ntlworld.com](mailto:Patricia.gorringer@ntlworld.com)

Janet Jefferies, 6 Tamar Road, Bedford. [Janetm.jefferies@virginmedia](mailto:Janetm.jefferies@virginmedia)

Chris J Williams, 10 Rhuddian Close, Shenley Church End, Milton Keynes MK5 6EL: [mail@chris9.plus.com](mailto:mail@chris9.plus.com)

**Newsletter Editor** – Romy Neeves