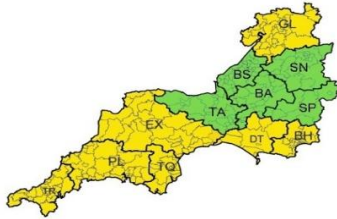


Spring/Summer Newsletter May 2025 – Bristol-Bath & West Group

South West Postcode Map



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A word from the Chair

Hi everyone, just a few words from me as we transition from spring into early summer and take a quick peek at what we will be discussing at our next meeting on Thursday, 12th June.

1. First, our AGM on 13th March, which quite a few of you attended, saw me, Martin Robertson and Colin Fender all rolled over to serve for another year as Chair, Group Secretary and Treasurer/Membership Secretary respectively. Colin, though, would like to relinquish the position of Membership Secretary and we are hoping that someone will step forward in June so that Colin can hand over that particular responsibility to concentrate on his role as Treasurer. We also appointed five further committee members to act a sounding board to suggest new ideas and keep us on track with what we are supposed to deliver. With regards to the health of the group Colin reported that membership had increased to almost 1900 members following the merger with the now closed Bath group and the assimilation of all Bath/NE Somerset, Swindon/North Wilts, Salisbury/South Wilts and Taunton/Somerset postcodes to add to our existing Bristol postcodes as in the map above. Our finances are in good shape with Colin reporting an audited bank balance of £2570 as of 10th December including £1612 transferred in from Bath last autumn.
2. We also heard from our invited guests David Luxton, CSPA Deputy General Secretary, who gave a very full and comprehensive update on a wide range of pension, taxation, cost-of-living and related benefit issues for which a transcript can be provided if you'd like a copy. Les Calder, our SW Regional Rep, then provided an update on the membership position in the rest of the South West particularly affecting Devon and Cornwall where some progress is being made to assimilate members not represented by an active group but where more needs to be done (including Dorset which now has no cover at all following the closure of Weymouth and District in 2023). Les also mentioned CSPA proposals to trial all-member ballots

by post and online for elections to the Executive Council from 2026 of which you will hear more as we approach the 8/9th October Kenilworth AGM where a 2/3rds majority approval to trial the proposal will be required.

Moving on we took a quick look ahead at the forthcoming 12th June quarterly meeting where the main business will be concerned with nominations to CSPA regional and national positions and the discussion of possible motions to be submitted to the Kenilworth AGM in October. On nominations we agreed to put Les Calder forward as our SW Regional Rep and to support my nomination to stand again as a candidate for one of the five Executive Council positions – all subject, of course, to approval at the June meeting. So with nominations done and dusted until June that left ideas for AGM conference motions to submit to CSPA Head Office by the 4th July. There are six categories:

- A. CSPA Business including constitutional amendments (procedural stuff not for the fainthearted);
- B. Pensions and Related Matters (Head Office is working on a broad range of pension, personal taxation, universal benefits and related pension/benefit-related matters following a comprehensive set of motions adopted last October);
- C. Health and Social Care;
- D. Digital Exclusion;
- E. Transport;
- F. General (a kind of catch-all for motions that don't fit comfortably within the five main categories).

So if you'd like to put your thinking caps on and suggest some ideas for possible motions (don't worry about the wording, it's the ideas that matter) and send them to Martin for possible inclusion in our July submission that would be really helpful (as a guide I think I'd look at categories C, D and E, and perhaps F, as maybe the most profitable).

Before I forget, although I guess Martin will have more to say on the subject, this was the first ever meeting where we experimented with video to include those members in the far reaches of our group to participate online given it would be impractical for them to attend in person. Only one member from Bath attended online this time but it is hoped that more (maybe from Salisbury, Swindon, Taunton, Yeovil, Minehead – have I missed anyone?) will be encouraged to participate online in June and thereafter. *(Secretary's note: We will try again on 12 June using Microsoft Teams and an improved conference microphone to overcome the sound problem we experienced. If you wish to join in by Teams please email me by 8 June so that I can get the electronic invite to you)*

Finally, to end on a different perhaps slightly wacky note, I recently bought a very nice non-chill filtered 46° ABV bottle of New Zealand malt whisky – yes, New Zealand, whatever will Scotland the producers of the finest malt whiskies have to say? – and found these words on the back of the box. Are they profound, they struck a chord with me, or simply marketing? I'll leave you to judge ... "Not through Purity, but instead, Adversity. Character's Sire."
Cheers!

Travels of a Civil Servant – Part 3 - The USA

In late summer 1999 the planets were again aligning in my favour. A job was coming up in the British Embassy in Washington DC, USA. I had a good idea of what to expect as I had visited several times before on government business and I had been lucky enough to 'inherit' a rented colonial style house from a retiring RAF Wing Commander. In passing I

should mention that his surname was Whyte and his wife thought it was amusing to leave a message on their answerphone announcing "This is the Whyte House...". Who says the RAF hasn't got a sense of humour?

My wife and son packed our bags over Christmas 1999 and spent New Years Eve celebrating the new millennium with a crowd of friends in Yatton and saying goodbye. A week or so later we headed off to Heathrow to board our flight to the USA which was unremarkable until the aircraft descended through the clouds and I spent several moments trying to figure out why everything was blanketed in white, and not just a sprinkling of white – this was the real deal, nearly a foot of snow had fallen and there was more on the way. Washington weather, as we were to discover, swung between sub-arctic with freezing temperatures and mountains of snow in winter, and hot humid rainy conditions in summer with the odd hurricane and tornado thrown in for good measure. No wonder a French diplomat in the late 1800's is reported to have shot himself rather than live in such dreadful conditions.

A few days after landing in Washington the roads had cleared enough for me to report into the Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, also known as Embassy Row. The building is a mix of elegant Lutyens architecture and seriously ugly early 1960's boxiness. Naturally the Ambassador and his immediate staff got the nice bits (as they say in the Army RHIP – rank has its privileges). The team I worked in had a not so splendid view over the Embassy parking lot and our nearest neighbours, the New Zealand Embassy, but we if craned our necks to the right we could see the US Naval Observatory, the official home of the US vice president, and home of one of several master clocks that govern GPS timing. How much do we depend on GPS now? – Satnav, mobile phones, and almost everything else.

So, what was I doing in the USA? As a professional telecommunications engineer / scientist I was seeking opportunities for mutual exchange of technology with the military and industry, which meant a lot of travel across the USA and Canada most of it enjoyable, some of it not so, but it was a great challenge. Top of my list was a burning urgency to replace the British Army's aging and obsolete 1970's CLANSMAN tactical radio system with something much, much newer. There were two viable contenders; a US system and a Canadian system so I spent a lot of time shuttling between California, Arizona, Texas in the USA and Quebec and Calgary in Canada helping my UK colleagues select the optimum solution – the Canadians eventually won the contract and the British Forces now have a system known as BOWMAN. My daily life took me to many military installations around the USA including the Pentagon. I count my lucky stars that on that dreadful day on the 9th September 2001 I was not there.

Unofficially (of course), there was a competition between the Embassy defence staff to see who could visit the most US states in their 3 or 4 year tour, either on duty or on holiday. I managed 32 out of 50 but I wasn't the winner by long shot! I did get to distant Hawaii several times, but I didn't get to Alaska even though I was helping to arrange cold weather military equipment trials there.

What was life like? We had a really nice 'colonial' style house in northern Virginia with a huge back yard (expanse of lawn) which was nearly perfect for our young son to play in with his friends – we just had to educate him to avoid the venomous Copperhead and Moccasin snakes that lurked there in the summer. We spent many long hot days at a Fairfax County's water park known as the Water Mine and we loved watching the myriads of fire flies dancing in the darkness right outside our windows. The commute into work wasn't too bad and we had a mix of good and indifferent neighbours. But, and this is a big but, Americans have a very different set of values to Europeans, something that was put into stark contrast when we left the USA for a posting to Belgium (next instalment).



Our son and our front yard (lawn) in Virginia

There are many aspects of American life my wife and I admired, particularly the stunning wide open spaces, the well kept National Parks and the ease of driving from one place to another, but the politics and gun violence are a serious problem. On my last day in the USA I was driving to the airport when I heard a familiar 'pop-pop' of small arms fire as I approached an intersection – it was shoot out between police and armed offenders. Naturally I didn't hang around to find out what was going on... Why is it so easy to buy firearms there?

Secretary's note:

Your Chair, treasurer and I would like to see you in person, or via Teams, at 11am on 12 June at the Toby Carvery, Almondsbury.

If you want to join in by Teams please let me have your email address by 8 June and if you would like to make a literary contribution to this newsletter any essays would be welcome.

As with our previous visits to the carvery the cost will be subsidised from the Group funds. £10 for a **Standard** Carvery Meal and cup of tea **Plus £5 for a dessert or special coffee**. We must emphasise the standard size for the carvery as there was some 'misunderstanding' with the serving staff at our last meeting when it came to the bill. The current Bank balance on 11 May 2025 was £2484.20. My thanks to those who donate regularly by BACs transfer into our account.

Finally, if you need to get in touch, our contact details are:

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