

FEATURES

Poetry and Motion a winning formula

Another hit on rural life

Today Shropshire becomes a lesser county.

It is the official closure date for a number of magistrates courts in the smaller towns. From now on, defendants and witnesses alike will have to travel to Shrewsbury or Telford.

Old and frail? Tough luck. No car? Hard cheddar.

As the courts held their last hearings this week, nobody had a good thing to say about this move which, while cutting costs on one hand, will increase costs on the other.

It spells more inconvenience for rural people and is, in a way, a tax – a tax on their time and patience, which will involve more travelling costs.

Look too today at the pictures of children at Stiperstones School, who held hands around the school in a sort of symbolic protective barrier.

Their message was “hands off our school”.

It sums up what rural communities are all about. They are just that – proper communities, knit together, and now united in a fight to preserve the good things about villages and small towns.

These places have been got at. They are under almost continual attack. Some of the factors putting them under pressure are social trends and market forces which are squeezing out little shops and rural pubs. They are the hardest to defend against, as it is like trying to resist the tide.

However, the schools closure programme involves decisions, choices, and judgments.

It is entirely unsurprising that those on the hitlist are fighting back so hard. These rural communities have a lot to lose, and when it is lost, it is lost forever.

Hole lot of trouble

Ben Waddams was walking on the Wrekin when he came across the Toads of Toad Hole. Accompanied by a frogs' chorus.

On investigation he found that dozens of toads, frogs, and shrews had fallen in 5ft deep holes and were unable to get out.

Some of the poor creatures had expired. As for the others, he jumped in and rescued them.

This rings a bell, of sorts. Years ago, on Clee Hill, hedgehogs were falling into cattle grids and unable to get out. Their fate triggered a campaign which led to the formation of the British Hedgehog Preservation Society.

These may be ugly toads. But it can't be right that they are allowed to croak in such a grim manner.

FROM THE FILES

A controversial market got under way on the outskirts of Telford today with no initial problems to justify fears that it would provoke traffic chaos.

Hundreds of people, arriving by car and on foot, were at the market in a field near the Sutton Hill estate.

Councillor Roland Ford, chairman of Stockton Norton Parish Council, had said there were complaints about a market on the same site last year, and residents were worried about traffic, noise and parking.

But Mr Dermot McGillicuddy, a partner in the organisers, Stourbridge-based LSD Promotions, said today: “As you can see, the road is coned by ourselves and the car park is stewarded.”

He said about 100 traders were on the site and they were infuriated by the unfair and untrue comments which had been made about last year's markets.

(Shropshire Star, April 1, 1991)

Former Poet Laureate Sir Andrew Motion, who headlines the Wenlock Poetry Festival talks about his craft

The ‘Sold Out’ signs have long since been erected for a headline performance at the Wenlock Poetry Festival by Sir Andrew Motion. Not that such interest has made him disinclined to promote the event: far from it. The man who presided as Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009 is a patron of the event and hopes people will support it.

“There are a lot of poetry festivals up and down the country and I think they do a lot of good, certainly in terms of introducing people to writers who people might not have heard of before. Something else that is very enjoyable about them is the creation of an opportunity for writers to connect with people in a way that they might not normally achieve. Poets can make far more intimate connections at festivals, than they might otherwise be able to.”

Sir Andrew is familiar with the terrain, having immersed



BY ANDY RICHARDSON
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himself in Shropshire's poetic heritage on numerous occasions. “I know the Ludlow bit slightly better than Wenlock. Only yesterday I was interviewed about AE Housman and, of course, I have visited St Laurence's. When I was a student, I hired a cottage near Ledbury, where Robert Frost had stayed in 1914. He and Edward Thomas would mooch about while they were there.”

Sir Andrew became part of an extraordinary cultural lineage in 1999 when he was appointed

Poet Laureate. Bernard Andre had been the first back in the 15th century, after being appointed by Henry VII, while others to have held the post included Ben Jonson, William Wordsworth and Lord Tennyson. Sir Andrew's immediate predecessors were John Betjeman and Ted Hughes while his successor, Carol Ann Duffy, will also appear at the Wenlock Poetry Festival.

Poetry has been his life. He was encouraged to write by an English teacher, Mr Wray, at Radley College. During his years at University College, Oxford, he studied with WH Auden in weekly sessions. “I was very blessed in that opportunity to meet him, he was very nice to me and he looked at my poems in a regular way.”

University

Another great poet in his life was Philip Larkin, who worked alongside Sir Andrew at Hull University and coincidentally rejected an offer to become Poet Laureate. “I thought that one great poet in my life would be all that I would have, after meeting Auden. But then Larkin came along and he became a good friend. We saw one another in a much more regular way, although I didn't take him poems to read, in the way that I had done with Auden.”

“We spoke about poems in general, all the time. Hull was a curious time, it was my first job, I was 23, and I had never before lived north of Watford. Hull is a pretty strange and interesting place, it is out on a limb, which is what Larkin liked about it. I felt pretty privileged. Larkin's friendship became very important to me. His threshold was a pretty fiercely guarded thing. To see him so much was surprising.”

Sir Andrew went on to write the biography of Larkin, though the work helped him to realise how little he knew of the great man. “In writing a biography, there are distinctive advantages when somebody knows the subject because they bring with them special kinds of knowledge. But to think that you know about somebody, just because you were a friend,



Sir Andrew Motion – is a patron of the Wenlock Poetry Festival

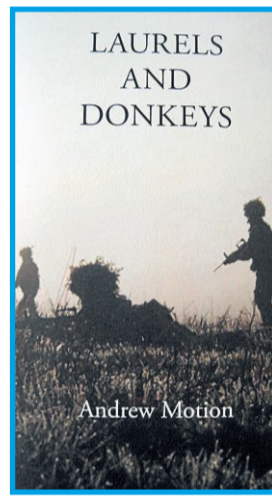


New Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy will also appear at the event

would be a mistake. Larkin lived his life in compartments and when I wrote his biography I had to keep reminding myself that there were parts of his life to which I had not enjoyed access.”

Sir Andrew's appointment as Poet Laureate was a double-edged sword. “There were certain aspects that were complicated and quite difficult. When a more-or-less private person becomes a public person, they have to deal with the hoo har of that. More importantly, there was a lot of invitation to write commissioned stuff and doing that can disturb the relationship in a mind between the side that knows what is doing and the side that is not. The bright light of full consciousness can be very difficult to deal with.”

One benefit of the post, however, was the opportunity to shout about things in which Sir Andrew believed. “I created the



A collection of poems by Sir Andrew marking conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries

Poetry Archive, which I would not have been able to do without the title.”

He was, of course, required to write Royal poems, including one for the wedding of Charles and Camilla, Spring Wedding. “Royal poems are difficult to write for obvious reasons, there's not necessarily a strong flow of intimate feeling – and I say in a perfectly respectful way – and if you are writing lyric poetry you rather depend on that. I tried to look at a general truth in a particular situation – they were a couple getting married who had been married before. I wanted to draw on that feeling. Their situation was extraordinary.”

One of his favourite poems, however, was written for the 109-year-old Tommy, Harry Patch.

“I must say by a distance the most interesting and appealing and charging commission that

came my way was very near the end: it was the invitation from the BBC to go and meet Harry Patch.

“It was an amazing honour, to hold the hand that held the rifle that went over the top. That poem was very interesting to write and it didn't feel like a commission at all.”

Retire

Sir Andrew became the first ever Laureate to retire, a decision which led to a wave of creativity.

“It was like uncorking the bottle. I hadn't been writing for a bit, for one reason or another, it became an important part of the release mechanism in getting back to writing.”

“I think there is a kind of new element in my poems, which probably does owe something to the fact that the time as Laureate as difficult. The new element has something to do with a refreshed sense of what I really want to do.”

“There is a directness, an emotional directness, which I hope doesn't compromise my wish to gain access to places other than through the front door.”

● Tickets for Wenlock Poetry Festival, which runs from April 29 to May 1, are available at www.wenlockpoetryfestival.org



The last Tommy – Sir Andrew felt honoured to meet former Shropshire First World War veteran Harry Patch

THE WEEK AT WESTMINSTER with John Hipwood



Politicians regularly call on us for our votes and for support for a particular cause, but rarely do they want us to rummage around in the loft.

But that's what Mark Pritchard is urging the public to do in support of a new charity he is soon to launch, called simply The Music Charity.

The Conservative MP wants people to donate old, unused or

MP Mark instrumental in making music for the poor across the world

discarded musical instruments so that they can be given to schools in poor communities across the world.

It's not being done on a whim – he has spent 18 months setting things up, finding volunteer drivers who will collect the instruments and deliver them to a storage facility at Stafford Park in Telford.

He also has potential recipients lined up already including a school in Manila “sited on a rubbish dump”, another school in Colombia, and an orphanage in Romania.

“There must be people out there who have an old trumpet in the attic or a violin under the bed, perhaps a guitar they intended to learn how to play but never got around to it,” said The Wrekin MP.

“I have been struck by how many places I have visited during my business and parliamentary lifetime which don't have access to a single instrument.

“Music can bring people together, give them inspiration and even a route out of

poverty.” Mr Pritchard will be launching the charity within the next few weeks, and hopes to have some music celebrity and VIP names at the launch.

“I'm really excited by the idea,” said the MP who is currently searching for the recorder he used to play at school. It's probably in the loft.

Anyone who wants details of The Music Charity or who would like to donate an instrument should email mark.pritchard@parliament.uk

● On an all too rare visit to Shropshire this week, I took a stroll around Granville Country Park on the site of the colliery in Telford which ceased mining coal in 1979.

The park is a tremendous example of how local government and outside bodies can create a wildlife haven with industrial heritage thrown in, lying cheek by jowl with new housing estates and light industry.

Co-incidentally, the organisation which manages the park, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, was represented at a reception at

the House of Commons on Wednesday by wildlife trusts from across England and Wales.

Colin Preston, Director of Shropshire Wildlife Trust, said: “In the context of Telford, Granville Country Park is really important. It illustrates how, in the space of 30 years, a wrecked environment can be transformed.”

Urging people to get down to the park and enjoy it, Telford MP David Wright said: “It's a wonderful example of how an area of former industrial activity has been converted into a wonderful woodland environment which both benefits local people and is a place where wildlife can thrive.”

● I'm told that on the BBC programme, See You in Court, this week, former Montgomeryshire MP Lembit Opik blamed his “surprise” defeat in last May's general election on the way he had been treated by the Press.

In the interests of balance, when Mr Opik's successor, Glyn Davies, starts up a

romance with one of the Cheeky Girls or The Saturdays, the story will be covered by newspapers, including the Shropshire Star.

● Former Labour culture (and sport) secretary Andy Burnham this week joined the chorus of criticism of Fabio Capello and the Football Association for fielding a ‘B’ team in Tuesday's friendly international against Ghana at Wembley.

Mr Burnham, an Everton fan, said fans who had paid (cut price) tickets for the game were being cheated because they wouldn't be seeing the likes of Wayne Rooney, John Terry and Frank Lampard.

On the night, the match turned out to be anything but friendly, the 80,000-plus spectators were treated to a feast of entertainment which would not have been bettered by the so-called stars who failed abysmally at the World Cup in South Africa, and Capello got a further insight into the quality and character of his “reserves”.

Not for the first time, politi-

cians should be careful where they stick their foot in.

● Asked last September whether being married would be important if he were to become prime minister, Ed Miliband said he thought people nowadays were “pretty relaxed” about the issue.

“I don't think people care one way or the other about what other people do in their lives as long as they show responsibility to each other,” he said.

This week the Labour leader announced that he would be marrying the mother of his two children, Justine Thornton, in May, giving him the same marital status as David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

Although a decade ago Ed was best man to his brother David, whom he defeated in last autumn's battle for the Labour leadership, there will be no best man this time.

Unmarried UK prime ministers are rare. The last one was Edward Heath, who left office 37 years ago.