

Nil Desperandum

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Isolated but not alone



Picture Credit: [Cropped]

"Elderly" by sk8geek is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

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Early cavemen in Mexico

From Scientific American Today in Science

Original story By Colin Barras, Nature magazine



Miles from anywhere, Chiquihuite Cave in the mountains of central Mexico seems like an unlikely place for anyone to live. But stone objects recovered from deep inside the cave may tell another story. Archaeologists excavating a cave have unearthed evidence suggesting that humans arrived in North America at least 15,000 years earlier than thought. But, as you might expect, not everyone agrees.

The discovery, which includes hundreds of ancient stone tools, is backed up by a fresh statistical analysis that incorporates data from other sites. Data from caves are “notoriously troublesome” to interpret, says archaeologist François Lanoë from the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Whilst it is agreed that the first humans in the Americas came from East Asia, it is **when** they began to arrive is hotly debated. Some researchers think that it could have been as early as 130,000 years ago, but most of the archaeological evidence supporting this theory is disputed. For instance, some of the stone artefacts are so simple that sceptics say they were probably produced by natural geological processes rather than by people. The mainstream view is that human occupation of the Americas began about 15,000 or 16,000 years ago, based on genetic evidence and artefacts found at sites including the 14,000-year-old Monte Verde II in Chile.

The latest discoveries, published on 22nd July 2020 in *Nature*, question that consensus. Since 2012, a team led by Ciprian Ardelean (who is Honorary University Fellow at the University of Exeter) at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas in Mexico has been excavating Chiquihuite Cave, which is 2,740 metres above sea level in the Astillero Mountains. The researchers found almost 2,000 stone tools, 239 of which were embedded in layers of gravel that have been carbon-dated to between 25,000 and 32,000 years old - roughly twice as early as most current estimates for when the first humans arrived on the continent.

There are so few of these oldest tools that Ardelean thinks the site was visited only occasionally, perhaps used as a refuge every few decades, during particularly severe winters. At the height of the last ice age, 26,000 years ago, North America would have been a dangerous place to live.

The full story is [here](#).

References: Ardelean, C. F. et al. *Nature*
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2509-0>



Story researched
by Martin Pollins

By the way, there's a great visual on the *National Geographic* website, [here](#).

Do you suffer from these phobias?

Courtesy of Dictionary.com and Tumblr.com

Do you have a niggling worry that your friends are out to get you, or perhaps that your partner is going to double-cross you?

Then you might be suffering from **Proditiophobia**: it's the fear of being betrayed by someone you love.

You should not confuse it with **Pistanthrophobia**: the fear of trusting people due to bad experiences with prior lovers. It is such a natural response to being hurt, but if you want to be in a happy, healthy relationship again, then you need to overcome it.

There are plenty of other phobias to worry you. For example, how about these Zodiac sign phobias:

- Aries - asthenophobia (fear of weakness)
- Taurus - metathesiophobia (fear of change)
- Gemini - neophobia (fear of boredom)
- Cancer - athazagoraphobia (fear of being forgotten/ignored)
- Leo - social phobia (fear of public humiliation)
- Virgo - autophobia (fear of being alone/undesirable)
- Libra - decidophobia (fear of making decisions)
- Scorpio - proditiophobia (fear of betrayal)
- Sagittarius - philophobia (fear of emotional attachment)
- Capricorn - atchiphobia (fear of failure)
- Aquarius - claustrophobia (fear of closed spaces)
- Pisces - dystychiphobia (fear of accidents)

But perhaps the worst phobia of all is taphephobia: the fear of being buried alive. Or Entomophobia: fear of insects...



Picture Credit: "Fear of medicine" by Jael XIII is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Personally, I have a fear of snakes (called ophidiophobia) although I got very near to a cobra on my honeymoon to the Far East 40 years ago... but that's another story.



Contributed by
Martin Pollins

Learning is Fun!



Picture Credit: "DSC_3470" by NGOA&ENGAF is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Learning is always more fun when it's something you choose to do for its own sake. Whole new avenues of enjoyment open up for you. Learning something new is beneficial at any age. For example, consider learning how to:

- Play a musical instrument
- Speak a foreign language
- Use computers more effectively
- Write code
- Design websites
- Take professional-quality photos or videos
- Write great stories
- Cook exotic meals
- Decipher hieroglyphs
- Perform magic tricks
- Play croquet
- Sing in a choir
- Dance like Fred Astaire
- Painting using oil or watercolours

Scientific studies continue to show that enjoyable activities can have several major benefits. *Great Senior Living* ([here](#)) say, for example, they have the power to help:

- **Improve how your brain works.** Do you want to maintain your memory and optimize your ability to learn new things? Engaging in play on a regular basis can enhance your creativity and mental sharpness.
- **Heal, establish, or maintain relationships.** A lot of seniors are lonely. In fact, on average, seniors without spouses or partners spend about 10 hours alone each day. But having fun can enable older adults to make new friends or improve existing relationships. Things like laughter and friendly competition are known to increase harmony, trust, empathy, and intimacy among people who experience them together.
- **Improve your mental and emotional well-being.** Do you like the way you feel when you have a brighter outlook on life and your sense of time recedes into the background? Engaging in activities you enjoy can expand your optimism, multiply your moments of joy, and reduce your stress. It can even help prevent depression.
- **Extend your life and improve your physical vitality.** Who doesn't want to feel younger or more energetic? Creating plenty of fun moments in your life can be a good way to boost your immune system, reduce your risk of illness, and minimize your perception of any pain you might already have.

Remember, we can all probably use many more joyful experiences. It's who we are, not how old we are...

The Black Death



This image is taken from Page 199 of *The predicted plague*: value of the prediction, planetary and atmospheric influences considered as cause of black death and other plagues; comets and plagues of two thousand years detailed. Queen Elizabeth in Richmond by Medical Heritage Library, Inc. is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

At the peak of the Black Death, the authorities of the port of Venice imposed a period of isolation on the crews of arriving ships. The minimum number of days required was 40, and so the period was known in

Venetian dialect as 'quarantena', from 'quaranta', forty. You can see how the word **quarantine** came into being.

History Extra, the official website for BBC History Magazine, BBC History Revealed and BBC World Histories Magazine, ran an article in May 2020 entitled: "*Black Death facts: your guide to the worst catastrophe in recorded history*". You can read it online, [here](#). It explains that the Black Death of October 1347 to c1352 was one of the worst catastrophes in recorded history – a deadly bubonic plague that ravaged communities across Europe, changing forever their social and economic fabric. The article asked some telling questions (answered by Professors Samuel Cohn and Tom Beaumont James), some of which are:

What was the Black Death?

In the Middle Ages, the Black Death, or 'pestilencia', as contemporaries called various epidemic diseases, was the worst catastrophe in recorded history. Some dubbed it 'magna mortalitas' (great mortality), emphasising the death rate.

What were the symptoms of the Black Death?

Symptoms of the Black Death included swellings – most commonly in the groin, armpits and neck, dark patches and the coughing up of blood.

How many people died because of the Black Death?

In Europe, it is thought that around 50 million people died as a result of the Black Death over the course of three or four years. The population was reduced from some 80 million to 30 million. It killed at least 60 per cent of the population in rural and urban areas. In fact, in some places such as a village on an estate in Cambridgeshire manorial rolls attest that 70 per cent of its tenants died in a matter of months in 1349, and the city of Florence tax records drawn up shortly before and after the Black Death suggest that its toll may have been about the same in 1348. Some communities such as Quob in Hampshire were wiped out and many rural communities went into serious decline.

How did the Black Death spread? Was it because of black rats transmitting the plague to humans via fleas?

Breaking out in 'the east', as medieval people put it, the Black Death came north and west after striking the eastern Mediterranean and Italy, Spain and France. It then came to Britain, where it struck Dorset and Hampshire along the south coast of England simultaneously. The plague then spread north and east, then on to Scandinavia and Russia.

Not only textbooks but serious monographs on the Black Death and its successive waves of plague into the early 19th century in Europe go on about rats (usually "black ones") and fleas without qualification. But what is the evidence?

For more information, there is a video on the History Extra website, [here](#).

Brain Teaser: Party for Polyglots



Picture Credit: "Normal Human Brain" by National Institutes of Health (NIH) is licensed under CC PDM 1.0

This is not a new puzzle (it dates back to April 2007) but you may enjoy it nevertheless. It appears online at SharpBrains.com ([here](#)) and was posted by Caroline Latham.

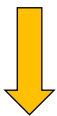
The puzzle is called **Party for Polyglots**.

Difficulty: MEDIUM

Type: LOGIC

Here it is:

Of the 100 people at a recent party, 90 spoke Spanish, 80 spoke Italian, and 75 spoke Mandarin. **At least how many** spoke all three languages?



Have you solved it yet? If you are working the problem, making hypotheses, testing your ideas, and coming up with a solution, you are using your frontal lobes. This is great exercise because the frontal lobes follow the "last hired, first fired" adage. They are the last areas of your brain to develop and the first to suffer the ravages of time and stress. So, keep exercising them!

The answer is 45. The explanation is:

10 could not speak Spanish, 20 could not speak Italian, and 25 could not speak Mandarin. So, there could have been 10 people who spoke none of those languages. However, that would maximize the number of people who could speak all three, and the problem asks at least how many speak all three. Therefore, we must assume that these 10, 20, and 25 people are all separate people. Having identified 55 each of whom is missing one language, the remaining 45 speak all three.

Easy when you apply raw logic, isn't it?

By the way, you do know what a polyglot is, don't you? According to Dictionary.com, a polyglot is simply "a person who speaks, writes, or reads a number of languages."

A joke for those in terraced housing

A man asks his neighbour, on the 5th floor: 'hey Fred, how many rolls of wallpaper did you buy when you repapered your front room'

His neighbour George says 'Twelve'

Two weeks later the Fred tells George, 'you know it's very strange, we have the same houses, I papered my front room but I had three rolls left over!'

'That's funny' said his neighbour, 'so did I!'

"You Dirty Rat"

Most film buffs will immediately attribute these words to the late, great Hollywood actor James Cagney, but they would be wrong. He never actually said 'You dirty rat', but a line in his 1932 film "Taxi!" probably came closest. He said: 'Come out and take it, you dirty, yellow-bellied rat, or I'll give it to you through the door!'



James Francis Cagney Jr. was an American actor and dancer on stage and in film. He is best-known for his consistently energetic performances, distinctive vocal style, and deadpan comic timing, for all of which brought him acclaim and major awards for a wide variety of performances.

James Cagney received his third and final Oscar nomination for portraying gangster Martin Snyder in *Love me or Leave me*. Cagney was not a stranger to gangsters, having played them all the time throughout his career. His voice, his shape, his face just always worked well for the part.

The mini bio on IMDb says this:

James Francis Cagney was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City, to Carolyn (Nelson) and James Francis Cagney, Sr., who was a bartender and amateur boxer. Cagney was of Norwegian (from his maternal grandfather) and Irish descent. Ending three decades on the screen, he retired to his farm in Stanfordville, New York (some 77 miles/124 km. north of his New York City birthplace), after starring in Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three* (1961). He emerged from retirement to star in the 1981 screen adaptation of E.L. Doctorow's novel "Ragtime" (*Ragtime* (1981)), in which he was reunited with his frequent co-star of the 1930s, Pat O'Brien, and which was his last theatrical film and O'Brien's as well). Cagney's final performance came in the title role of the made-for-TV movie *Terrible Joe Moran* (1984), in which he played opposite Art Carney.

Orson Wells said this of James Cagney:

"Cagney in my view was maybe the greatest actor who ever appeared in front of a camera. He broke every rule about movie acting. The first thing every stage actor says, 'I learned to act for the camera by doing less...' But Cagney came on as though he was playing to an audience of 4500 people. He acted at the top of his vent. And he never hammed for one moment, thus proving my point that hamming is not over-acting. It is false acting. And there's not a fake minute in a Cagney movie..."

You can watch a scene from *Taxi*, [here](#). A screenshot is shown above. © Copyright to Warner Archive is duly acknowledged.

Cleopatra, the Greek



Picture Credit: "Statue of Cleopatra VII" by Tiffany Silva is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

Despite what many people may believe, the last queen of Egypt was not born in Egypt at all. As best as historians can tell, Cleopatra VII (that is her formal name) was Greek.

Cleopatra VII Philopator (that word comes from the Greek and means "father-loving" and was a common royal epithet among Hellenistic monarchs) was the last active ruler of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt. As a member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, she was a descendant of its founder Ptolemy a

Macedonian Greek general and companion of Alexander the Great.



Story researched by Martin Pollins

Cleopatra was married, albeit for a short time, to Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony) a Roman politician and general. The story of their affair, their war, their defeat and, finally, their suicides has been told and retold for centuries - Adrian Goldsworthy, author of *Antony and Cleopatra* uncovers the couple's true story. There's an excerpt online, [here](#).

There's more information on the Smithsonian Magazine website about Cleopatra, [here](#).

Fancy some Laurel & Hardy?

Here's a screenshot from Laurel and Hardy's 1938 feature length comedy BLOCK-HEADS, produced by Hal Roach.



See the film, [here](#).

Very Fast (under 4 minutes)

Sir Roger Gilbert Bannister (1929 – 2018) was a British middle-distance athlete and neurologist who ran the first sub-4-minute mile. At the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Bannister set a British record in the 1500 metres but finished in fourth place. He was regarded as Britain's best middle-distance runner, but the crushing disappointment in Helsinki, a race many expected him to win, strengthened his resolve to become the first athlete to run a mile in under four minutes. The scene for Bannister's finest moment was an early race in the 1954 season at Oxford University's ramshackle Iffley Road track, during the annual match between the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) and the university.



He had Chris Chataway and Chris Brasher as pacemakers. His time over one mile was 3 minutes and 59.4 seconds. His record had been achieved with minimal training (35 minutes a day) while practising as a junior doctor. Bannister's record lasted just 46 days.

At the time, the *Daily Telegraph*, described the sub-four-minute mile as "sport's greatest goal", something "as elusive and seemingly unattainable as Everest".

"However ordinary each of us may seem, we are all in some way special, and can do things that are extraordinary, perhaps until then...even thought impossible"

Sir Roger Bannister

As Guinness World Records put it:

As the crowd's roar began to get louder, and sensing the moment of a lifetime, Bannister took his cue on the far straight of the last lap and lengthened his stride to speed past Chataway around the final bend.

The Guardian, posting Bannister's obituary in 2018, put it well: *He never won an Olympic title, he set only one individual world record (which he relinquished after barely six weeks) and he retired from running at the height of his powers when he was only 25. But, on 6 May 1954, on the Iffley Road cinder track that he had helped to lay as an undergraduate a few years earlier, he ran a mile in under four minutes, a target that had begun to assume almost superhuman proportions in the eyes of the public, the media and many athletes, too.*

The Video

You can watch the race, [here](#).

The Book

You can read more about Roger Bannister in "The Perfect Mile" by Neal Bascomb - a non-fiction book about three runners and their attempts to become the first man to run a mile under four minutes and their first subsequent head-to-head competition. The runners are Roger Bannister, the American Wes Santee, and the Australian John Landy. The book is on sale at Amazon, [here](#).



Story researched by Martin Pollins

What does “Ophiuchus” mean?

You need to go to Dictionary.com for the answer to this question: Whether or not you believe that the position and relationship of the sun, moon, stars, and planets have any bearing on your personality, you probably still know what your astrological sign is. The zodiac contains 12 constellations and is divided into 12 equal segments. Each astrological sign—Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces—represents one of the segments.

These are signs that we’re all familiar with, even if we don’t know what each represents. But it’s likely that you’ve never heard of or been called an *Ophiuchus* (pronounced [of-ee-yoo-kuh s]). The question is, would you want to be?

What is *Ophiuchus*?

The name of this large constellation means “serpent-bearer” in Greek. The ancient astronomer Ptolemy included *Ophiuchus* in his list of 48 constellations which he documented in the 2nd century. (It used to be referred to as *Serpentarius*, which is Latin and has the same meaning.) It is still one of the 88 modern constellations. In Greek myth, *Ophiuchus* was said to depict the god Apollo wrestling the snake guarding the Oracle of Delphi. Although the myth changed many times over the years, it was always associated with a man wrestling a serpent.

Standard astrological zodiacs do not include *Ophiuchus*. However, a few astrologers who use a *sidereal* zodiac do consider it to be the 13th zodiacal sign.

How old is the discovery of *Ophiuchus*?

Well, Ptolemy knew about the 13th zodiac constellation of *Ophiuchus*, and in fact, the Babylonians did, too. The Babylonians, who lived over 3,000 years ago, were the first to think about the zodiac based on 12 astrological constellations they watched in the sky. They also saw a 13th constellation, *Ophiuchus*, but kept the zodiac to 12 constellations to nicely align with the yearly calendar (12 months) that they created and was based on the moon.

What personality traits might be linked to *Ophiuchus*?

Some say those born under this constellation are a mix of Scorpio and Sagittarius, both of which it borders. Others believe an *Ophiuchus* is curious, passionate, and hungry for knowledge.

Here are some words you might use to describe an *Ophiuchus*.

- **ardent:** With the passion some have identified an *Ophiuchus* might exhibit, a great word to describe this person is *ardent*. Meaning “having, expressive of, or characterized by intense feeling; passionate; fervent,” *ardent* is a good word to use when talking about a passionate person in general.
- **sly:** As *Ophiuchus* means “serpent-bearer,” it wouldn’t be a stretch to assume a person born under the *Ophiuchus* sign might have some serpent-like qualities. Meaning “stealthy, insidious, or secret,” *sly* describes some of those sneaky snake characteristics this person might be inclined to exhibit.
- **inquisitive:** That curious nature and thirst for knowledge can best be described as *inquisitive*. It means “given to inquiry, research, or asking questions; eager for knowledge; intellectually curious.”
- **meddlesome:** Anyone that is curious by nature can border on becoming *meddlesome*. A *meddlesome* person is “given to meddling; interfering; intrusive.” We have a feeling a person born under the *Ophiuchus* sign might be inclined to this characteristic. No judgment here!

Did you know?

Source: <https://www.expatica.com/uk>



1. Windsor Castle, built in 1080, is not only the oldest royal residence in Britain – but it’s also the largest royal home in the world.

Picture Credit: “Windsor Castle” by visitingeu is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

2. Great Britain isn’t the same as the United Kingdom: The United Kingdom includes Northern Ireland – but Great Britain doesn’t.
3. While the UK’s pound coin changed its design in 2017 – with older coins now only accepted by banks – the currency itself remains the oldest one in the world that’s still in use, having clocked up an impressive 1200 years.
4. The largest library in the world is the British Library in King’s Cross, London. It has over 170 million items in its catalogue.
5. There are now well over 100 universities across the UK but at one time there were only two. Oxford and Cambridge remain the UK’s most famous educational establishments, and until 1832, they were the only ones.

Connections – how good are you?

Source: Article ([here](#)) written by Pascale Michelin, Ph.D., for SharpBrains.com. Dr. Michelin has a Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology and has worked as a Research Scientist at Washington University in St. Louis, in the Psychology Department. She conducted several research projects to understand how the brain makes use of visual information and memorises facts.

Dr. Michelin came across this mental exercise whose aim is to stimulate the connections or associations between words in your temporal lobe. In the left column you have a pair of words. Your goal is to find a third word that is connected or associated with both of these two words.

The first pair is PIANO and LOCK. The answer is KEY. The word key is connected with both the word piano and the word lock: there are KEYS on a piano, and you use a KEY to lock doors. Key is what is called a **homograph**: a word that has more than one meaning but is always spelled the same.

If you are ready to stimulate connections in your temporal lobe(s), start now. **The answers are on the last page.** Please don’t check them until you have tried to solve all the pairs.

1. LOCK — PIANO
2. SHIP — CARD
3. TREE — CAR
4. SCHOOL — EYE
5. PILLOW — COURT
6. RIVER — MONEY
7. BED — PAPER
8. ARMY — WATER
9. TENNIS — NOISE
10. EGYPTIAN — MOTHER
11. SMOKER — PLUMBER

The world's oldest public railway*

Source: Wikipedia ([here](#)) and others

Attribution: By Unknown author - Uploaded from Public Domain
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RSurrey.htm>
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11387180>



The Surrey Iron Railway (SIR) was a horse-drawn plateway that linked Wandsworth and Croydon via Mitcham (all then in the county of Surrey but now suburbs of south London). Established by Act of Parliament in 1801, it opened partly in 1802 and partly in 1803. It was a toll railway on which carriers used horse traction. SIR was the first Transport Project to come under the Parliamentary Bill Procedure (the last was the Croydon Tramlink Bill in July 1994).

The goods transported were mainly coal, building materials, lime, manure, corn and seeds. Dung and other manures were also carried. The first 8¼ miles (13.3 km) to Croydon opened on 26 July 1803, with a branch line off from Mitcham to Hackbridge.

Historic England ([here](#)) say:

Railways evolved rapidly from the late 18th century to the 1830s. This era saw a transition from horse-drawn haulage along wooden or cast iron tracks, for the purpose of moving heavy wagons over relatively limited distances in mining or other industrial contexts, to the world's first modern, fully locomotive-hauled, main line trunk railways linking major cities. The era from circa 1790 to circa 1830 represents the age of the development and growth of the early iron railway.

The London Canals website has some interesting information about SIR ([here](#)):

The railway had a general ruling gradient of 1 in 120 (one inch per ten feet or 28.33 minutes of angle) up towards Croydon. It was a 4 ft 2 in (1,270 mm) railway line with flanges set on the rails instead of the wheels, so the line is more accurately known as a plateway. A footpath was provided alongside the entire length of the railway. The whole undertaking was designed by William Jessop with George Leather as resident engineer and the firm of Jessop and Outram as contractors.

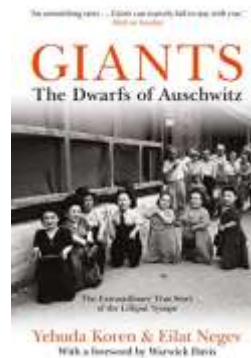
Lasting for just over 40 years

The Surrey Iron Railway was commercially successful only briefly, until shortly after the opening of the canal between Croydon and London in 1809. It closed in 1846.

NOTE: * Claims that the Surrey Iron Railway was the first public railway may not be quite true: A basic form of railway, the **rutway**, existed in ancient Greek and Roman times, the most important being the ship-trackway **Diolkos** across the **Isthmus of Corinth**.

The 7 Dwarfs from Auschwitz

Attribution: From Amazon.co.uk [here](#).



Source: Wikipedia ([here](#)), Guardian ([here](#)), and others

The story of the seven fiddler dwarfs from the Maramures village of Rozalvea in Romania, who survived the concentration camp at Auschwitz, continues to fascinate people many decades after the dwarfs endured heinous experiments by the well-known Nazi doctor Josef Mengele.

The band "Liliput", composed of seven dwarfs, began to become known in the 1930s. The "Ovicers", (as their neighbours called the

members of the Ovitz Jewish family) became famous throughout Europe with their variety shows, even singing for King Charles II. The family were descended from Shimson Eizik Ovitz (1868–1923), a badchen entertainer, itinerant rabbi and himself a dwarf. He fathered ten children in total, seven of them dwarfs (afflicted with *pseudoachondroplasia* - a short-limbed dwarfing condition characterized by disproportionate short stature), from two marriages.

Doubly Doomed

A story in the Guardian (23rd March 2013, [here](#)) says:

When the Nazis came to power, the Ovitzs were doubly doomed: under the Aktion T-4 euthanasia programme, the Germans set out to kill people who were physically or mentally disabled, whose lives were considered "unworthy of living", "a burden on society"; and, as Jews, the Ovitzs were the target of the Final Solution.

The Ovitz brothers, five girls and two boys, were taken to Auschwitz along with several hundred other Jews. As they entered the camp gate, all elegantly dressed and well-dressed, an officer demanded that Dr. Mengele be awakened urgently.

Mengele

Dr. Josef Mengele was known for his passion for strange people, from hermaphrodites to giants, so the incorporation of seven dwarfs into the Auschwitz extermination camp could only be a source of joy for him. Hearing of the arrival of the 7 members of the "Liliput" band, Mengele jumped out of bed and wanted to see them immediately. Exclaiming he had a ready-made source of experimental work for at least 20 years, Mengele took the dwarfs under his wing – even to the extent of removing them from the gas chambers on one occasion – ensuring their survival from the horrors of the camp.

Happy Ending

Thanks to Mengele, the Ovitz family, lived through a nightmare of systematic torture. In May 1949, the family emigrated to Israel, where they continued to perform variety shows. In 1955 they made their last bow, but dwarfism did not affect their life expectancy. The first-born, Rozika, reached the age of 98 and her sister Franziska died aged 91. Perla Ovitz, the last member of the dwarf family, died on 9th September 2001 of natural causes.

Recommended Reading/ More Information

Giants: The Seven Dwarfs of Auschwitz, by Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, is published by the Robson Press at £16.99. There's more information about the dwarfs on the Smithsonian Channel ([here](#)).

Refusing to wear Face Masks



Picture Credit: "Swine flu statue" by olivcris is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

The "Spanish" influenza pandemic of 1918/19, which caused around 50 million deaths worldwide (perhaps 1/3rd of the world's population), remains an ominous warning to public health.

Why was it called 'Spanish' Flu?

The History Extra website ([here](#)) says:

The influenza A(H1N1) virus is one of the deadliest disasters in history. It killed more people than the First World War – and in less time. But there are many misconceptions about the pandemic. Firstly, 50 million is a conservative estimate for the number of dead – the figure could be many times that number. There is also no way of being certain where Spanish Flu originated, although the trenches of World War I, where poor sanitation and disease was rife, are an often-cited contender. The filthy, rat-infested conditions undoubtedly affected the soldiers' immune systems, making them more vulnerable to illness.

Many questions remain about its origins, its unusual epidemiologic features, and the basis of its pathogenicity remain unanswered. Just like today, as governments around the world try to contain the spread of COVID-19, US citizens were asked to wear face masks to reduce the spread of the virus. Many people refused to comply. But why? Professor E Thomas Ewing explains in an article on History extra, [here](#).

On the Piste...



A dyslexic skier is standing at the top of the piste when a man passes by.

"Excuse me", says the skier, "I'm new here. Can you tell me if I have to zig-zag or zag-zig down this hill?"

"I don't know", says the man, "I'm a tobogganist"
"In that case", says the skier, "can I have 20 Benson and Hedges?"



Beached!

Mayday, Mayday...

The *Athina B*, a Greek cargo ship, ran aground at Brighton on the beach just east of the Palace Pier, in front of the Aquarium on 21st January 1980. The ill-fated ship was making its way to Shoreham



Picture Credit: "Athina B on Brighton beach 3" by Sou'wester is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

Harbour with a cargo of 3,000 tonnes of pumice from the Azores. Force 7-8 winds the previous day had prevented her from entering the harbour at Shoreham. When her engines failed a Mayday call was put out. The lifeboat was scrambled and eventually all 25 passengers were rescued. The ship finally ran aground on Brighton beach between the Palace Pier and Banjo Groyne.

The Ship

Built as the *Kojima Maru* at Hiroshima, Japan in 1968, the ship initially sailed under the Japanese flag. She was renamed *Hung Wei* in 1973 and *Nina Pa* in 1976, before being sold and renamed the *Athina B* in 1979, sailing under the Greek flag.

The Tourist Attraction

The *Athina B* languishing on Brighton Beach became a popular tourist attraction for a while as thousands of onlookers made their way to the town to catch a glimpse of the grounded vessel. Volk's Electric Railway ran trains outside of its usual summer operations for additional income and many stalls were set up to cater for the needs of the onlookers. It reminds us of the saying 'it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good...' (said to be derived from John Heywood's 1546 proverb).

The Write-Off and the Anchor



Picture Credit: "Athina B" by R-P-M is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

A major salvage operation was undertaken to remove the ship's cargo under the watchful eye of the police. Declared a write-off, the *Athina B* was re-floated and on 17th February 1980, she was towed away to Rainham to be broken up. The ship's anchor was later presented to the town of Brighton and is sited on Madeira Drive -near where the ship ran aground.

How did Hermione Granger solve the Potions logic puzzle?

Picture Credit:
"Hermione" by ursulkm is
licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



For those who live on another planet and don't know her, Hermione Jean Granger is a fictional character in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. She first appears in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, as a new student on her way to Hogwarts.

Viola Forkman, who studies at Umeå University in the mid-northern region of Sweden, provides the answer, [here](#). She says 'it's quite simple, really'. The first thing we must know, of course, is what the riddle says. It goes like this:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, whichever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,
Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.

So, there are seven bottles, continues Viola, 'three are Poison, two are Wine, one allows you to Go Back, and one allows you to Continue. Our mission is to find out which bottle we need to Continue forwards. To do this, the riddle gives us a few clues':

Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

We're then told that one of the clues - the third one - assumes that you know what size each bottle is.

Look, that's enough... all you have to do is go to the link I've provided above - and all will be revealed.

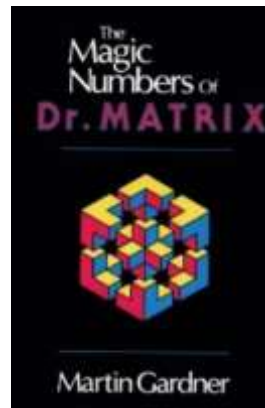
Poison in a bottle reminds me of Danny Kaye in *The Court Jester* (you know, I'm sure: "The pellet with the poison's in the vessel with the pestle; the chalice from the palace has the brew that is true!") – after you've solved the Harry Potter puzzle, you should watch Danny Kaye at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4Ow69QWJmo> It's very funny, and clever.

Martin Gardner: The Magic and Mystery of Numbers

Source: *Scientific American*, [here](#).

Martin Gardner was an American popular mathematics and popular science writer, with interests also encompassing scientific scepticism, micromagic, philosophy, religion, and literature -especially the writings of Lewis Carroll, L. Frank Baum, and G. K. Chesterton. He was also a leading authority on Lewis Carroll. All-in-all, a very broad spectrum. Clearly, he was quite clever. Indeed, he introduced many readers to real mathematics, making the subject accessible and fun.

Over a period of some 30 years, he wrote nearly 300 consecutive monthly "Mathematical Games" columns for *Scientific American* magazine, introducing hundreds of thousands of readers to the delights of mathematics and of puzzles and problem solving. Not many people achieve a cult following because of their writing in mathematics. But Martin Gardner is among the best known and well loved, presenting a notoriously difficult subject in an engaging and accessible way. It was through his work that those who followed him first learned of hexaflexagons, polyominoes, the Soma cube, pentominoes, rep-tiles,



tangrams, the art of M. C. Escher, origami, Conway's Game of Life, Penrose tiles, fractals, RSA cryptography, and much more. For more information on the range of topics covered, click [here](#).

If you have an interest in mathematics, it's worth doing some research on this writer. A good starting point is *The Magic Numbers of Dr. Matrix* in which the author introduces readers to an extraordinary man - Dr. Irving Joshua Matrix. Believed by many to be the greatest numerologist who ever lived, Dr. Matrix claims to be a reincarnation of Pythagoras. The book is

available from Amazon from the hyperlink shown below:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0879752823/>

Chalk is made from trillions of microscopic plankton fossils!!

Source: Article by **Vikas Patel** on Quora.com, [here](#).

Tiny single-celled algae called coccolithophores have lived in the Earth's oceans for 200 million years. Unlike any other marine plant, they surround themselves with minuscule plates of calcite (coccoliths).

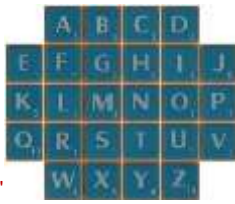
Just under 100 million years ago, conditions were just right for coccolithophores to accumulate in a thick layer coating ocean floors in a white ooze. As further sediment built up on top, the pressure compressed the coccoliths to form rock, creating chalk deposits such as the white cliffs of Dover.

Coccolithophores are just one of many prehistoric species that have been immortalised in fossil form, but how do we know how old they are? Over time, rock forms in horizontal layers, leaving older rocks at the bottom and younger rocks near the top. By studying the type of rock in which a fossil is found, palaeontologists can roughly guess its age. Carbon dating estimates a fossil's age more precisely, based on the rate of decay of radioactive elements such as carbon-14.

Fun with Words

What is the longest English word in which all the letters are in alphabetical order with no letter repeated? The answer is **ALMOST**. And in reverse order, the answer is **WRONGED**.

Picture Credit: "Scrabble white letter on blue alphabet" by Leo Reynolds is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



What is the longest word without any repeated letters? The answer is **SUBDERMATOGLYPHIC** (beating **UNCOPYRIGHTABLE** and **DERMATOGLYPHICS**).

If you want more fun with words, a good place to go is *Collins English Dictionary* ([here](#)). You will find the longest word (31 letters) listed is **dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane** – it is the full name of the chemical DDT. In fact, as you might expect, most of the very long words in the dictionary are scientific terms: the second-longest word is **antidisestablishmentarianism** (28 letters) followed by **electroencephalographically** (27 letters). Only slightly shorter, with 24 letters each, are **phosphatidylethanolamine** (a chemical that occurs in nerve tissue and brain cells) and **cholangiopancreatography**.

The longest word not containing the letter 'e' at 23-letters is **transubstantiationist**. This is also the longest non-scientific term and refers to someone who believes in the Roman Catholic doctrine that bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist.

The most consecutive consonants in a word is six. This occurs in a number of words, the most familiar being **catchphrase**, **sightscreen**, and **watchstrap**.

The word **euouae** (a mnemonic used in medieval music) is the only word to contain six consecutive vowels, and unsurprisingly is the longest word with no consonants in it.

Excluding plurals there is only one seven-letter word which has none of the five vowels. That word is **nymphly**. However, two six-letter words, **glycyl** and **rhythm**, can have an 's' added in the plural to make a seven-letter word without a vowel.

Then, how about words that use the vowels in order and only once: **facetious** and **abstemious** spring to mind but there are others. For example, make your way to [here](#) and you'll find another 25 words although most of them are uncommon.

Of course, all of those words use the letter 'y' as a vowel. The longest words that contain no vowel and no 'y' are **crwth**, **cwtch**, **phph** and **grrrl**. The first two of these are borrowed from Welsh and treat the letter 'w' as a vowel, while the second two owe their unconventional spelling patterns to attempts to represent spoken grunts and growls.

And how about **syzygy**. Three uses of the letter y but no real vowels - a word nevertheless.

The longest word composed entirely of letters from the first half of the alphabet is **fiddledeedee** (12-letters).

The longest words composed entirely of letters from the second half of the alphabet are **nonsupport** and **zoosporous**.

Whoever said English wasn't fun?



Contributed by
Martin Pollins

Is this the smartest bug in the world?



Picture Credit: "In Search of Something Sweet" by BugMan50 is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

According to Dan Nosowitz in *Atlas Obscura* ([here](#)), says that some insects can count, recognize human faces, even invent languages. It's an interesting article and worth a read. But keep an open mind...

Lars Chittka, perhaps the foremost researcher on the behaviour of bees, told the author that a bee has under a million neurons in its main brain. Humans have about a hundred billion. The author says that bees are capable of observation, learning, and memory to solve problems.

"Every bee is entirely flower-naïve at the beginning of its foraging career," says Chittka, meaning that the bee has no instinctive knowledge about how to score nectar or pollen from flowers. That's trouble, because flowers are wildly divergent: different flowers will need entirely different strategies to exploit, and it's up to each individual bee to figure out how to attack each different flower.

Bees can learn new strategies for getting food from other bees, something few other insects are capable of doing. Chittka told the author about a technique called "nectar robbing," in which bees figure out that it can be easier to bite a hole in a flower's spur to suck out the nectar rather than figuring out how to get inside the flower. Other bees have proven able to observe this strategy, understand its purpose, master it themselves, and remember it for future flowers. That's pretty smart!

But perhaps the best-known and most insane bit of intelligence from bees is what's known as the "waggle dance." This is a method of communication that the bee uses to tell other bees in the hive the location of a flower or source of food. You'll have to read the article to find out what it is.

The behaviours of bees are far above and beyond what most people would assume an insect is capable of. Without exaggerating, the honeybee is capable of advanced symbolic communication, language, facial recognition, number use, observation, and mimicry, understanding of rules, and high-level problem-solving. They are, in some senses, significantly smarter than many mammals.

Come fly with me on Concorde



Screenshot clip from the video at: <https://youtu.be/BhbcH3pAPSI>

The Aérospatiale/BAC Concorde was a British–French turbojet-powered supersonic passenger airliner that was operated until 2003. It had a maximum speed over twice the speed of sound, at Mach 2.04 (1,354 mph or 2,180 km/h at cruise altitude), with seating for 92 to 128 passengers.

If you never flew on Concorde, click on the above hyperlink, sit back and be flown by Mike Bannister, the chief Concorde pilot for British Airways. What an experience!

Maple Syrup anyone?



Maple syrup is a **syrup** usually made from the **xylem sap** of **sugar maple**, **red maple**, or **black maple trees**, although it can also be made from other **maple** species. In cold climates, these trees store **starch** in their trunks and roots before winter; the starch is then converted to sugar that rises in the sap in late winter and early spring.

Maple trees are tapped by drilling holes into their trunks and collecting the exuded sap, which is processed by heating to evaporate much of the water, leaving the concentrated syrup. Most trees can produce 20 to 60 litres of sap per season.

Maple syrup is graded according to the Canada, United States, or **Vermont** scales based on its density and translucency. It is classified in three main categories: Grade A (Golden Color/Delicate Taste, Amber Color/Rich Taste, Dark Color/Robust Taste, Very Dark Color/Strong Taste), Processing Grade, and Substandard.

Maple syrup was first made and used by the indigenous peoples of North America, and the practice was adopted by European settlers, who gradually refined production methods.

Do you have water?



A fleeing ISIS terrorist, desperate for water, was plodding through the Afghan desert when he saw something far off in the distance. Hoping to find water, he hurried toward the mirage, only to find a very frail little old Jewish man standing at a small makeshift display rack - selling ties.

The ISIS terrorist asked, "Do you have water?"

The Jewish man replied, "I have no water. Would you like to buy a tie? They are only \$5."

The Taliban shouted hysterically, "Idiot Infidel! I do not need such an over-priced western adornment- I spit on your ties. I need water!"

"Sorry, I have none - just ties - pure silk - and only \$5."

"Pahh! A curse on your ties, I should wrap one around your scrawny little neck and choke the life out of you, but I must conserve my energy and find water!"

"Okay," said the little old Jewish man, "it does not matter that you do not want to buy a tie from me or that you hate me, threaten my life and call me infidel. I will show you that I am bigger than any of that. If you continue over that hill to the east for about two miles, you will find a restaurant. It has the finest food and all the ice-cold water you need... Go In Peace!"

Cursing him again, the desperate ISIS staggered away over the hill.

Several hours later, he crawled back, almost dead and gasped, "They won't let me in without a tie!"

Contributed by Alan Tatnall



Twins are becoming more common

Source: BestLifeOnline, [here](#).



Picture Credit: "gemini I" by prefabu is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

You might think twins are a rarity, but they're actually becoming more common than ever.

Writing in **The Atlantic**, Alexis C. Madrigal says: "From about 1915, when the statistical record begins, until 1980, about one in every 50 babies born was a twin, a rate of 2 percent. Then, the rate began to increase: by 1995, it was 2.5 percent. The rate surpassed 3 percent in 2001 and hit 3.3 percent in 2010. That means one out of every 30 babies born is a twin."

Scientists believe this trend is due to the fact that older women tend to have more twins, and women are choosing to start families later. Fertility treatments such as in-vitro fertilisation likely also play a role.

Why is 1,000 abbreviated by the letter "k"?

Posted on [Quora.com](#) by [Oliver Davidovski, here](#).

The use of "k" as an abbreviation for 1000 has nothing to do with Roman numerals. There are no single Roman numerals bigger than 1000, but there is a way to make a single Roman numeral bigger than 1000; the Roman numeral for 1000 is actually "M". "k" is not a Roman numeral, it is short for "kilo" (thousand), which normally represents the 1000 multiple of a unit. It comes from the Greek word for 1000 (one thousand): "χίλια". The letter χ in Greek is pronounced "Hee"; However, in English it is pronounced "k".**

**** Is this right? Some Quora readers thought not.**

Math Central is an Internet service via a website maintained by faculty and students in Mathematics and Statistics and Mathematics Education at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. They say, [here](#), that:

M is the Roman numeral for 1,000 but in the metric system M designates the prefix mega- which is a million. For example MW is a megawatt. On the other hand m designates milli- or one thousandth so mm is a millimetre or 0.001 metres. To minimize confusion I would stick with K for a thousand. K comes from the Greek kilo which means a thousand. In the metric system lower case k designates kilo as in kg for kilogram, a thousand grams. Even here there is some ambiguity. In the language of computer science K is 2¹⁰ = 1024.

Glad to clear that for you!

Life's Lessons



This is a nice little video, with good messages. What do you think? Click [here](#) to watch.

Comment from Brian Bridges: the lecturer did make one glaring mistake - he opened the door for a black female. When I worked at SHAPE in Belgium, which was largely staffed by American military personnel amongst whom there were several black girls and I was warned by an American officer never to open a door for them, never pick up a file if they drop one or assist them in any way unless asked. If you do so, you leave yourself open to a claim for harassment. One of his men said to one of the girls one day 'You look nice today' and she sued him for sexual harassment!

I understand it has now become the norm for certain people to be looking to be offended. What a sad world it has become.

A Stonehenge mystery is solved

Source: Article by Scott Hershberger on 29th July 2020 in Scientific American



Detailed testing of the chemical signature of this iconic monument's most prominent large stones have pinpointed where they came from. For more than four hundred years, archaeologists and geologists have tried to determine the geographical origins of the stones used to build Stonehenge thousands of years ago. Pinning down the source of the large blocks known as sarsens that form the bulk of the monument has proved especially elusive. Now researchers have resolved the mystery: 50 of the 52 extant sarsens at Stonehenge came from the West Woods site in the English county of Wiltshire, located 25 kilometres to the north of Stonehenge. The findings were published on 27th July 2020 in *Science Advances*. Read about it [here](#).

In a separate story, while scanning underneath the waters of Lake Michigan for shipwrecks, archeologists found something a lot more interesting than they bargained for: they discovered a boulder with a prehistoric carving of a mastodon, as well as a series of stones arranged in a Stonehenge-like manner. Read about it [here](#).

Sunshine and Entertainment in Haywards Heath 75 years ago

From the Mid-Sussex Times on 1st August 1945, via British Newspapers Archive



Described as OPEN-AIR ENTERTAINMENT, ST. JOSEPH'S CONVENT, HAYWARDS HEATH, this article will I am sure, be of interest to many of our readers:

"Very pleasing entertainment was given to parents and friends by the pupils of Mount St. Joseph's Convent, Hazelgrove Road, Haywards Heath, in the Convent grounds last Wednesday afternoon. The event was favoured with brilliant sunshine, and the juniors opened the proceedings with an appropriate little song. *Let us gather up the sunshine*, followed by a number of other equally well appreciated songs. The Seniors were also heard to advantage in a number of French songs. Accompanied by Mrs. W. G. Jeffery and Mrs. Smith (Music Teacher of the Convent), some delightful displays of dancing, both in modern and in the picturesque costumes of other days, were also given, and some piano solos and duets were played.

"A TOUCH OF VARIETY was brought to the programme by a sketch, well-acted by three of the Senior Girls, dealing with the closing days of King Henry VIII, when that much-married monarch was married to his sixth and last wife (Catherine Parr), who had the good fortune and good management to survive her irate lord. The sketch gave us an insight into the 'happy' home life of the royal pair. We found them energetically quarrelling at breakfast over such varied matters the right way to boil an egg and the colour of Alexander the Great's horse, and in the process, Catherine narrowly escaped with her head still intact*! The Juniors, in a sketch entitled *Elizabeth Anne*, showed in amusing fashion how dreams of the right sort can improve a little girl's bad temper. At the close of the performance the Rev. Father Murray, of St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, Haywards Heath, expressed his thanks to the Sister-in-charge, the teachers and pupils for an excellent entertainment..."

If you're looking for a new way to travel by air...



From the precisely-timed takeoff to a smooth landing just over four hours later, the A350 XWB's maiden flight on 14th June 2013 confirmed this jetliner's promise for shaping the efficiency of its future airline operators. It is a long-ranged aircraft with two engines and a wide body. The picture above is a screenshot from the video in which you can see highlights of the maiden flight at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVWtPA8v-xeQ>. By the way, the XWB part of the name means **Extra Wide Body**.

It's one helluva plane. Read all about it on the Airbus website, [here](#). Its range is just under 9,000 nautical miles carrying between 350 to 410 passengers. Its big brother, the double-deck A380 has introduced an entirely new way of travelling, introducing a variety of key innovations that have changed the aviation industry.

Then there's the stretched out Airbus A350-1000, which offers incredible advancements in technology and passenger experience, and a "new" feeling is instantly visible from the mood lights alone. See more [here](#) and [here](#).

And if you are besotted by technology, get your iPhone, Samsung, Apple Mac or Notebook out because this what you'll get:

- The latest (fourth) generation in-flight entertainment system for all passengers: high definition screens and video on demand.
- Full connectivity (Internet, Email, GSM, WiFi) via personal devices for all passengers. Wireless connection, broadband connectivity.

The Daily Mirror: Love it or Loathe it?

It's a bit like Marmite in a way. Some people love it and others loathe it. Did you know that the *Daily Mirror* has its origins as a women's newspaper? Launched on 2nd November 1903 by Alfred Harmsworth, it was intended to be a 'mirror of feminine life,' representing a newspaper for women, by women.

Now known for holding a centre-left position, and supporting Labour, the *Daily Mirror* was also originally aimed at a middle-class audience before a shift in the 1930s to a working-class one, in order to reach a wider audience. This pivot was successful, and in the 1960s it became one of the world's best-selling newspapers, selling over 5 million copies a day.

Source: British Newspapers Archive, [here](#).

Is this the strangest person in history?



Picture Credit: "NO KNOWN RESTRICTIONS: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1859-1930 (Bain/LOC)" by pingnews.com is licensed under CC PDM 1.0

Robbie Yates, who posted this article on Quora.com ([here](#)) asked whether Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the strangest person in history.

Was he right. You can be the judge. But we're all agreed that his moustache was magnificent.

Conan Doyle is, of course, the author of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories. But his life was even more interesting than the life of the fictional detective.

Careers

Conan Doyle was a doctor. He studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, graduating in 1881. Post-graduation, he was the resident doctor on the ship *Hope of Peterhead*. He also started his own medical practice, but it did poorly.

They weren't his only ventures, though. A talented sportsman, he was a pro cricketer and played football for Portsmouth.

Not to mention his amateur detective work; for example, he "deduced" that Jack the Ripper was a female midwife, who could've gained the trust of the victims, as well as go around in bloody clothes without it being too suspicious.

(Interestingly, some people actually thought that he was the Ripper – because of his medical knowledge.)

Till Death Do Us Part

He died on 7th July 1930, collapsing in his garden. With one hand, he clutched at his heart. With the other, he held a flower. His last words, addressing his wife, were, "You are wonderful." Whoa.

Harry Houdini

He had a friendship/rivalry with the illusionist Houdini. Conan Doyle vehemently believed in magic and spiritualism, but Houdini didn't, saying it was nothing but tricks.

Comment by Martin Pollins

I can't work out why Robbie Yates should think that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was all that strange. A prolific writer yes. But strange? I don't think so. His full name by the way was Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle. He was a very fine author and created the character Sherlock Holmes in 1887 when he published *A Study in Scarlet*, the first of four novels and more than fifty short stories about Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Has the mysterious Voynich Manuscript been decoded?

Source: Based on article by [Annalee Newitz on Arstechnica.Com \(here\)](#).

History researcher Nicholas Gibbs says that the Manuscript is mostly a plagiarized guide to women's health. But academics are dubious and disagree with him. See what you think...

Since its discovery in 1912, the 15th century Voynich Manuscript has been a mystery and a **cult phenomenon**. Full of handwriting in an unknown language or code, the book is heavily illustrated with weird pictures of alien plants, naked women, strange objects, and zodiac symbols. Now, history researcher and television writer Nicholas Gibbs appears to have cracked the code, discovering that the book is actually a guide to women's health that's mostly plagiarised from other guides of the era.

Gibbs writes in the *Times Literary Supplement* that he was commissioned by a television network to analyze the Voynich Manuscript three years ago. Because the manuscript has been entirely digitized by **Yale's Beinecke Library**, he could see tiny details in each page and pore over them at his leisure. His experience with medieval Latin and familiarity with ancient medical guides allowed him to uncover the first clues.

After looking at the so-called code for a while, Gibbs realized he was seeing a common form of medieval Latin abbreviations, often used in medical treatises about herbs. "From the herbarium incorporated into the Voynich manuscript, a standard pattern of abbreviations and ligatures emerged from each plant entry," he wrote. "The abbreviations correspond to the standard pattern of words used in the *Herbarium Apuleius Platonius* – aq = aqua (water), dq = decoque / decoctio (decoction), con = confundo (mix), ris = radacis / radix (root), s aijj = seminis ana iij (3 grains each), etc." So, this wasn't a code at all; it was just shorthand. The text would have been very familiar to anyone at the time who was interested in medicine.

Further study of the herbs and images in the book reminded Gibbs of other Latin medical texts. When he consulted the **Trotula** or **De Balneis Puteolanis**, two commonly copied medieval Latin medical books, he realized that a lot of the Voynich Manuscript's text and images had been plagiarized directly from them (they, in turn, were copied in part from ancient Latin texts by Galen, Pliny, and Hippocrates). During the Middle Ages, it was very common for scribes to reproduce older texts to preserve the knowledge in them. There were no formal rules about copyright and authorship, and indeed books were extremely rare, so nobody complained.

Once he realised that the Voynich Manuscript was a medical textbook, Gibbs explained, it helped him understand the odd images in it. Pictures of plants referred to herbal medicines, and all the images of bathing women marked it out as a gynecological manual. Baths were often prescribed as medicine, and the Romans were particularly fond of the idea that a nice dip could cure all ills. Zodiac maps were included because ancient and medieval doctors believed that certain cures worked better under specific astrological signs. Gibbs even identified one image—copied, of course, from another manuscript—of women holding donut-shaped magnets in baths. Even back then, people believed in the pseudoscience of magnets.

The Voynich Manuscript has been reliably dated to mere decades before the invention of the printing press, so it's likely that its peculiar blend of plagiarism and curation was a dying format. Once people could just reproduce several copies of the original Trotula and De Balneis Puteolanis on a printing press, there would have been no need for scribes to painstakingly collate its information into a new, handwritten volume.

Gibbs concluded that it's likely the Voynich Manuscript was a customized book, possibly created for one person, devoted mostly to women's medicine. Other medieval Latin scholars will certainly want to weigh in, but the sheer mundanity of Gibbs' discovery makes it sound plausible.

See for yourself! You can look at pages from the Voynich Manuscript [here](#).

Rebuttals

However, the conclusions reached by Gibbs hasn't gone down well with people who actually read medieval Latin. Medieval Academy of America director Lisa Fagin Davis **told The Atlantic's Sarah Zhang**, "They're not grammatically correct. It doesn't result in Latin that makes sense." She added, "Frankly I'm a little surprised the TLS published it...If they had simply sent it to the Beinecke Library, they would have rebutted it in a heartbeat." The Beinecke Library at Yale is where the Voynich Manuscript is currently kept. Davis noted that a big part of Gibbs' claim rests on the idea that the Voynich Manuscript once had an index that would provide a key to the abbreviations. Davis said: "Unfortunately, he [Gibbs] has no evidence for such an index, other than the fact that the book does have a few missing pages."

Video and Podcast

See a video on the Manuscript, [here](#).



The History Extra Podcast is available [here](#).

Books

Amazon.co.uk have several books on the Voynich Manuscript. Here's one, available at this link: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Voynich-Manuscript-Raymond-Clemens/dp/0300217234>



Conclusion

Many call the fifteenth-century codex, commonly known as the Voynich Manuscript, the world's most mysterious book. Some of the pages are missing, with around 240 remaining. Written in an unknown script by an unknown author, the manuscript has no clearer purpose now than when it was rediscovered in 1912 by the Polish American antiquarian bookseller Wilfrid M. Voynich - from whom it took its name.



Contributed by
Martin Pollins

Do you play Mahjong?

Picture Credit: "Project 365 #222: 100813 A Night On The Tiles" by comedy_nose is licensed under CC PDM 1.0



In October 2019, BBC News [reported](#) that an apparent police ban on all mahjong parlours in a Chinese city led to panic among aficionados of China's national pastime. The ban was implemented to curb illegal gambling and "purify social conduct". But it turns out that it was only unlicensed parlours that would be shut. Mahjong is one of the most popular games in China, especially with older people. It's also a popular game in many other countries too.

Mahjong is similar to the Western card game Rummy. It's a game of skill, strategy, and calculation, and it involves a degree of chance. The game is played with a set of 144 tiles based on Chinese characters and symbols, although some regional variations may omit some tiles or add unique ones. Mahjong was developed during the Qing dynasty in China and has spread throughout the world since the early 20th century. It is commonly played by four players.

Rules

Like many other traditional games, there are many forms of Mahjong which makes things somewhat difficult for anyone trying to find the definitive set of rules. The rules taken from <https://www.mastersofgames.com/rules/mah-jong-rules.htm> are based on the original Chinese game which is the simplest and probably the most skilful form. There are additional rules for the British game. This version differs slightly to the typical Chinese game because only one chow is allowed per hand and the Chinese game has fewer "special hands". Some will find the British game more interesting than the Chinese game but the Chinese game is more elegant and traditional.

Both games differ significantly from the typical style of play performed in the USA, where a large and complicated set of "special hands" have been invented beyond the initial Chinese set and where a player cannot go Mahjong with more than one suit in hand.

The Game

The Mahjong Club has a fairly clear summary of the rules of the game, [here](#). The goal of the game is to get a mahjong, which consists of getting all 14 of your tiles into four sets and one pair. A pair is two identical tiles. A set can either be a "pung," which is three identical tiles, or a "chow," which is a run of three consecutive numbers in the same suit. A single tile cannot be used in two sets at once.

ENQUIRY

Do you know anyone at Haywards Heath & District Probud Club that plays Mahjong?

The Tiles

The game consists of 144 tiles typically around 30 x 20 x 15mm. Traditionally, they are made from bone or ivory but modern sets are usually plastic. The tiles comprise:

- 36 Circle tiles in 4 sets of 9 tiles numbered 1 - 9.
- 36 Character tiles in 4 sets of 9 tiles numbered 1 - 9, with the Chinese symbol for the number represented.
- 36 Bamboo tiles in 4 sets of 9 tiles numbered 1 - 9. The picture on each shows the appropriate number of bamboos except for the One of Bamboos which is often denoted by a sparrow or rice-bird and doesn't feature a bamboo at all. 1, 5, 7 and 9 of Bamboos are represented by a picture of both red and green bamboos. The other bamboo tiles are represented by green bamboos only.
- 16 Wind tiles - 4 tiles for each of the 4 winds.
- 12 Dragon tiles - 4 Red dragons denoted by a bright red character, 4 Green dragons denoted by a bright green character and 4 White dragons which are traditionally denoted by a completely blank tile. However, some sets denote the white dragon with a capital 'P' which stands for 'Pai', meaning white or pure.
- 4 Flower tiles - The Four Flowers are numbered 1 - 4 and are optional - if used, they give bonus points when drawn. Depiction of the flowers varies hugely between sets but the most common traditionally are Plum blossom, Orchid, Chrysanthemum and Bamboo.
- 4 Season tiles - The Four Seasons are numbered 1 - 4 and are optional - if used they give bonus points when drawn. Depiction of the seasons varies hugely between sets and they are often not recognisable as a season by people who can't read Chinese.

Circles, Characters and Bamboos are known as "suits". The suit tiles numbered 2 - 8 are known as the "minor" tiles. The remaining suit tiles, 1 and 9 are known as the "major" tiles. The Wind and Dragon tiles are known as "honour" tiles.

In addition to the tiles, two dice are required. The 1 and 4 are red on traditional Chinese dice; the remaining numerals are black.

Further Information

If you search on Google for **Mahjong**, you will find further information, such as buying a set of tiles (typically from around £25 to £75), How to play the Game, Books and Videos etc. There are several Mahjong Clubs around the UK. For example, the Haywards Heath & District U3A has two interest groups:

Mahjong 1: Leader Irene Spinks 01444 457468

Mahjong 2: Leader Jane Hewitt 01444 482538



Picture Credit: "Playing Mahjong in the street" by charles chan * is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

Want to play Croquet?



The **Croquet Association** ("CA") is the governing body for the sport in the UK. The CA's website ([here](#)) has a wealth of information on all aspects of the sport in the UK, which is well worth visiting.

Overview: The game is played as singles or doubles. In either case, blue and black always play against the red and yellow balls. In singles, each player controls two balls; in doubles, one each. The basic aim of the game is to get your side's balls round the court by going through each hoop in the correct order before your opponent. Depending on the variant of the game, you may gain extra shots during your turn.

Introduction to the game

- Croquet is played on a rectangular lawn or 'court' of dimensions 35 x 28 yards. At club level, almost all croquet is played on completely flat, closely-mown fine grass (similar to bowls). Artificial surfaces, such as AstroTurf and indoor carpets, are rare in the UK.
- There are six cast-iron hoops and a peg set firmly into the ground in a fixed layout. Balls, four to a game, each weigh one pound and have a diameter which, in normal club play, is usually 1/16" less than the inside width of a hoop. For top-level tournaments, this reduces to only 1/32" clearance!
- Mallets typically weigh three pounds. The old round-headed wooden mallet has now been largely replaced by square-sectioned heads, often using state of the art materials.
- It is a sport suitable for all ages, abilities and sexes to play on equal terms, due to the excellent handicapping system operated by the CA.

Variants of the Game

There are two main forms of the game played in the UK: Golf Croquet and Association Croquet (International Rules).

In **Golf Croquet** the objective of each player is to get one of their side's balls through each hoop first. When the first hoop is scored all players move on to the second hoop, and so on. Each turn comprises only one stroke. The balls are played in strict order throughout (Blue, Red, Black, Yellow). The merit of Golf Croquet is simplicity, and an analogy between it and 'Association Croquet' is like that between draughts and chess. The rules can be quickly understood, games are highly interactive, and take shorter time to play. For these reasons, most beginners start by playing Golf Croquet before moving on to the more complicated game of Association Croquet. Interestingly, the current world champions at Golf Croquet are Egypt. Cairo's many clubs play floodlit croquet in front of sizeable spectator crowds.

In **Association Croquet** both of a player's balls have to go through every hoop in order, and hit the centre peg before the opponent's to win. A large variety of different strokes are used to achieve this aim. At the start of their turn a player may choose to play with either of their balls, which is then used throughout that turn. Extra strokes are gained by running a hoop or hitting any of the other balls on the lawn. In this way 'breaks' can be established, and it is not uncommon for a good player to take that ball through every hoop during that break.

Regular World Championships are held, both for individual and international team events. Currently, these tend to be dominated by Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, S Africa and the USA. However, in recent years, there has been increasing competition from other countries, mainly in Europe, to the extent that there are now lower 'divisions' of these events.

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club is fortunate to have **John Taylor** as a member. He is a croquet coach and tournament player with Sussex County Croquet Club. Hopefully, during 2021, it may be possible to arrange a visit for members and their wives to his club at Southwick.

In the **USA**, American Six Wicket Croquet and American Nine Wicket Croquet is popular at a domestic level, in addition to the two main international forms described above. All of these may use the same lawns and equipment except that Nine Wicket Croquet requires 9 hoops, known as 'wickets', and two pegs, or 'stakes'. These forms of croquet are rarely played outside the USA.

Garden Croquet

Away from the formal clubs in the UK, croquet is widely played in private gardens. Usually, games will follow some form of **Association** or **Golf croquet** rules, adapting to the size of lawn available. Games may be shortened by each ball only running 6 hoops. See more on Garden croquet ([insert link to CA website section on garden croquet](#)).

History

It is widely thought that a version of the modern game was introduced into England from Ireland in the mid-1800s, although there is evidence of games similar to croquet being played way back in history.

Regardless when and by what route it reached England and the British colonies in its recognisable form, croquet is, like golf, pall-mall, trucco, and kolven, among the later forms of ground billiards. These were popular in Western Europe back to at least the Late Middle Ages. Classical antiquity records the use of arches and pegs along with balls and mallets or other striking sticks (some more akin to modern field hockey sticks). By the 12th century, a team ball game called la soule or choules, akin to a chaotic version of hockey or football, was regularly played in southern Britain between villages or parishes. A croquet-like game is believed to have been played by 13th century French peasants who used crudely fashioned mallets to hit wooden balls through hoops made of willow branches.

The oldest document to bear the word croquet with a description of the modern game is the set of rules registered by Isaac Spratt in November 1856 with the Stationers' Company in London. In 1868, the first croquet all-comers meet was held at Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire and in the same year the All England Croquet Club was formed at Wimbledon, London. See more on history of croquet [here](#) and [here](#).

Join/Visit a Local Club

Clubs near to Haywards Heath are as shown below. Click on the hyperlink for contact and other details:

- [Crawley](#)
- [Guildford](#)
- [Hassocks](#)
- [Reigate Priory](#)
- [Sussex County \(Southwick\)](#)
- [Tunbridge Wells](#)
- [Worthing](#)

Popularity

There's a good local story ([here](#)) that appeared in *The Argus* during the pandemic, about the Sussex County Club and the growing popularity of the game. Here's an extract:

*While competitive sport only got the green light to resume this week, albeit behind closed doors, the **Sussex County Croquet Club in Southwick** has been going strong since mid-May. Members came flooding back when lockdown guidelines allowed certain sports to return and the club is now ready to open its doors to the public to have a go. Chairman Clive Hayton said: "We've now had time to make sure our booking system, social distancing protocols and equipment sanitising arrangements are working well and can now offer a free introductory session, followed by three further coaching sessions, to anyone interested in learning more about our challenging and tactical sport." The Croquet Association has seen a 120% increase in sales of equipment, John Lewis an increase of 600% on the same period last year and many online retailers are out of stock.*

Contributed by John Taylor

Paper: Paging Through History

Extracted on Delanceyplace from a book of that title, by Mark Kurlansky, © copyright 2016. Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company

Paper made its first appearance in Europe in the 11th century, but was expensive and suffered from poor quality. By the 15th century, it was inexpensive and of good quality, and that dramatically changed the level of Renaissance art:

"Paper created a monumental shift in European art. ... Drawing is a primal urge, ... but drawing only became a standard art form when paper became available. In the case of Europe, this occurred during the Renaissance, when paper was still a new idea on the Continent. Previously, there had been very little informal use of parchment for art because it was too expensive and too difficult to erase. At first, European paper was also too expensive to be used to dash off a quick sketch and had too low a standing to be used for serious art. But by the late fifteenth century, this had all changed. Paper opened up the possibility of the sketch. Renaissance artists sketched out their work before they drew, painted, or sculpted it -- or, in the case of Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts, carved it. This new ability to not only plan but toy with ideas raised their art to a level not known in the Middle Ages.

"Artists drew and sketched with varying degrees of skill. Leonardo da Vinci was legendary for his skills as a draftsman. Michelangelo, known for his frescoes and sculptures, was equally brilliant as a draftsman -- many art historians consider him to have been the greatest draftsman who ever lived -- though most of his drawing was scribbled chaotically on sheets of paper not intended for public view. Both artists used Fabriano paper at least some of the time.

"Sixteenth-century artist and historian Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* is the leading source of biographical information on the Italian Renaissance artists, tells the story of a sketch by Michelangelo that was displayed in the Palazzo Medici for art students to copy. Since the sheet, like most of Michelangelo's sheets, had a variety of sketches on it, students started tearing off pieces of it, and they became 'scattered over many places.' According to Vasari, those fortunate students who ended up with a remnant treasured it and regarded it as something 'more divine than human.'

"Michelangelo used a great deal of paper, [and] ... almost any piece of paper he used contained a few sketches. A few are finished drawings. A stunning drawing of the resurrection of Christ is also marked with a shopping list. Masterful drawings were folded up, with notes about the banal ephemera of everyday life jotted on the reverse side. ...

"Michelangelo may have been among the first to jot down quick ideas for himself. Some 2,000 letters from and to Michelangelo have also been collected. Letter writing is another practice that blossomed with the widespread use of paper.

"Leonardo da Vinci was notorious in his lifetime for his inability to complete projects. ... Fortunately, there was paper, on which Leonardo could capture his genius. Though he is usually thought of as a painter, only fifteen paintings, some unfinished, have been found, along with two damaged murals. He also attempted some sculpture, though he never finished one piece. But he left behind thirty bound notebooks. Unlike Michelangelo, he did want people to see this work on paper, including the notes he made in his mirror-image script -- a curious response to being left-handed. He left drawings depicting all kind of inventions, and notes on literature, arts, mythology, anatomy, engineering, and, most of all nature....

"Leonardo also left behind four thousand sheets of drawings of staggering beauty. He was the first artist to be recognized for his drawings on paper. Leonardo's work became the standard for art in Renaissance Florence. Studying art now meant working on paper, learning to draw. Leonardo had learned art that way himself, in the workshop taught by Andrea del Verrocchio. Artists have been trained on paper ever since."



Picture Credit: "Michelangelo" by Lorianne DiSabato is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



Picture Credit: "File:Leonardo da Vinci - Uomo vitruviano.jpg" by Leonardo da Vinci is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

The man who invented paper

It is said that **Cai Lun** (aka **Jingzhong**) 'invented' paper and the process for making what is recognisable in modern times as paper. After several promotions under the reign of He of Han, he was given the title of Shang Fang Si, an office in charge of manufacturing instruments and weapons.

Cai Lun was made chief eunuch under the emperor Hedi (reigned 88–105/106) of the Dong (Eastern) Han dynasty in the year 89. About the year 105 Cai conceived the idea of forming sheets of paper from the macerated bark of trees, hemp waste, old rags, and fishnets. The paper thus obtained was found to be superior in writing quality to cloth made of pure silk (the principal writing surface of the time), as well as being much less expensive to produce and having more abundant sources.

Source: **Encyclopaedia Britannica**

Comment from Martin Pollins

Delanceyplace is a FREE brief daily email with an excerpt or quote they view as interesting or noteworthy, offered with commentary to provide context. There is no theme, except that most excerpts will come from a non-fiction work, mainly works of history, and they hope will have a more universal relevance than simply the subject of the book from which they came. And there is not necessarily an endorsement, and in some cases an excerpt may be particularly controversial, and Delanceyplace may disagree with some or all of it, but nevertheless deem it worth noting.

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Who really built the Pyramids of Egypt?



Screenshot from video (see details below)

Who really built the ancient pyramids? 'To be honest,' says **Graham Bruce Hancock**, 'I have no answer to that question and anybody who tells you that he or she knows how the pyramids were built are not telling the truth because we don't know, we don't know.'

Graham Hancock is a British writer and journalist. He is known, amongst other things, for his pseudoscientific theories involving ancient myths, and astronomical or astrological data from the past. Pseudoscientific theories consists of beliefs, statements, or practices that are claimed to be both scientific and factual but are often characterised by contradictory, exaggerated or unfalsifiable claims. In other words, they are often challenged and even ridiculed.

To put any doubt into a reader's mind at the start of a video is unfortunate, as the subject matter, *who really built the Pyramids of Egypt*, is enormously interesting. His theories on the origins of civilisation have been dismissed by archaeologists as rubbish, but he is certainly not bonkers. See what the *Guardian* say about him, [here](#).

Back to the Pyramids and who built them.

- The Great Pyramid weigh 6 million tons
- Its footprint is 13 acres
- It is 756 ft long and 481 ft tall
- 2.5 million individual blocks of stone were used in its construction

Even using current technology, the precision construction of a structure of this size is impossible. The base is level to within 15 millimeters, or 0.6 inch and the sides of the base are exact to within 58 millimeters of each other. It is aligned to true north with a 3/60 degree error margin. But, that's not all - here is a link [to a very interesting video](#).

Footnote: You'd think the world's biggest pyramid is in Egypt – after all, they do call it The Great Pyramid. But the largest such structure is actually in Mexico, hidden beneath a hill in the nearby town of Pueblo. Known as the Great Pyramid of Cholula, this ancient Aztec temple has a base four times larger than Giza's, and nearly twice the volume: Source:

<https://www.zmescience.com/science/archaeology/biggest-pyramid-world/>

Contributed by Brian Bridges, text by Martin Pollins

Opera singers raising spirits during the Pandemic

Tenor Luke Price, son of a Crowborough GP, gave an exclusive performance for staff at Tunbridge Wells Hospital.

Luke who has been a member of the Royal Opera Chorus since 2000, swapped the boards of The Royal Opera House for centre stage in front of the hospital's Emergency Department last week. In June 2020.

The 49 year-old dad of two, from Hildenborough, sang 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' and 'Nessun Dorma'. He said: 'This was my way of saying thank you to all of the staff who are working across the Trust during the pandemic. Everyone is working so hard. When you're not medically qualified and able to help in that capacity you feel like you want to do something to help put a smile on those people's faces. Hopefully my performance helped to do exactly that.'

Listen to the music [here](#).

Meanwhile, in Italy, a Polish opera singer had everyone in tears when he performe in a hospital courtyard in Italy. Listen [here](#).



Remember this song or the singer?

*Early one morning,
just as the sun was rising
I heard a maid sing in the valley
below:*

*"Oh don't deceive me, Oh never leave
me,
How could you use, a poor maiden
so?" ...*

Listen to **Nana Mouskouri**, [here](#).



Picture Credit: [Cropped] "File:Grieks Franse zangeres Nana Mouskouri met echtgenoot George Petsilas op Schiphol, Bestanddeelnr 922-4744.jpg" by Joost Evers / Anefo is licensed under CC0 1.0

Compressing images: Microsoft Word

Posted by **MARSHALL GUNNELL** on How-to-Geek on 31ST July 2020

If you want to **reduce the file size** of a Microsoft Word document to make it easier to share it with others or to save disk space, compressing the images (pictures and graphics) it contains will do the trick.



Microsoft Word is a word processor, first released 37 years ago (25th October 1983) under the name **Multi-Tool Word for Xenix systems**. Today, it's part of Microsoft Office 365.

There are a few things to note:

- The features mentioned below are only available on desktop versions of Microsoft Office.
- The maximum file size for Word documents that only contain text is 32 MB. (true for documents created in Word 2007 and later). That's a lot of room for text, but not much for visuals like videos or images.
- If you add images or video to your document, the maximum file size increases to a much more manageable 512 MB—at least, in theory. This is the absolute maximum size, but caution is advised if your Word files begin to approach this size.
- Word documents that are half a gigabyte are going to be extremely difficult to work in, especially if the bulk of the file contains images or videos. However, a lot depends on your system resources, and whether your computer is capable of working with files that large.
- It also depends on Word itself. While the program is typically stable for general use, you might find it significantly less so if you try to work in or save a file of a substantially larger size than usual. The same is true when you open a file larger than what would otherwise be routine.

How to Check the File Size

If you want to check the size of your Microsoft Word document, you can do so in Word or Windows File Explorer. To quickly check the file size in Word, click **File > Info**. This menu includes various pieces of information about your document, including authors, the current word count, and file history. On the right side of the menu, you see a section which is called **"Properties"**. This includes document statistics, starting with the document's file size at the top.

Compressing Images in Word on Windows

On a Windows PC, open the Word document that **contains the images** you want to compress, and then select a photo. Navigate to the **"Picture Format"** tab. In the **"Adjust"** group, click **"Compress Pictures."**

In the window that appears, you can select whether you want the compression to apply only to the image you selected under **"Compression Options"**. If you uncheck this option, Word will compress all the images in the document.

Under **"Resolution"**, select the resolution you want to use, and then click **"OK"**.

The image(s) in your document will now be compressed. It's as easy as that!

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Marshall Gunnell is a professional technical writer with experience in the data storage industry. He worked at Synology, and most recently as CMO and technical staff writer at StorageReview. He has a degree in Business as well as Fine Arts. Currently, Marshall is based in Tokyo, Japan, where he works at LINE Corp. as an API/Software Technical Writer.

Wow! I didn't know that...

Here is a selection of strange, unusual and even weird facts that most people don't know, or if they did, they've been forgotten.



From Bestlifeonline (here)

- Bees are notorious for **their stings**, but humans aren't the only ones who experience this pain in the neck (or the arm, or the leg...). In protecting their hives from outsiders, some "guard bees" will stay by the entrance and sniff the bees that come in, says Marianne Peso from the biology department of **Macquarie University** in Sydney, Australia. If there's a rogue bee from another hive trying to steal some nectar, the guard bee will bite and even sting the intruder.
- Entomologists have estimated that there are at least one million trillion insects and only one percent of that number is ants, according to the **BBC**. And if you took all those ants (about ten thousand trillion) and put them on one side of a giant scale, you could *almost* put all of the people in the world onto the other and balance things out. Unfortunately, as humans have become heavier, this probably wouldn't hold up today—but it once did. Francis Ratnieks, professor of Apiculture at the University of Sussex, told the BBC this might have held true around 2,000 years ago,



From Laughbreak (here)

- There are only four words in the English language which end in "dous": *tremendous*, *horrendous*, *stupendous*, and *hazardous*. Can you think of any more?
- "Stewardesses" is the longest word that you can type with only the left hand. Or is there a longer one?

From: Born a Dragon (here)

- Your forearm and your foot are the same length. Try measuring the length of your forearm (from the crook of your elbow to your wrist) and compare it with the length of your foot. You'll be surprised that they are the same length.
- Babies see clearly at 8 months. Babies have poor vision at birth because their sense of sight is still in its developmental stage. At six months, they have clear vision at a distance of 12 inches. Their visual acuity reaches 20/20 at eight months.

And lastly...

From: Thought Catalog (here)

- The "hashtag" key on your keyboard (#) is called an octotroph.
- The Declaration of Independence was written on hemp paper.
- The Vatican Bank is the world's only bank that allows ATM users to perform transactions in Latin** – although ATM withdrawals from most banks were banned during 2020's Pandemic, cash withdrawals from machines operated by the independent Vatican bank IOR - Institute for the Works of Religion (Istituto per le Opere di Religione) - were not affected.



** Who said Latin is a dead language?

Hebdomada Papae, notitiae vaticanae latine redditae - The Pope's week in review: Vatican news bulletin in Latin can be heard online [here](#).

Genius, but nasty?

Source: Found on Quora.com

Picture Credit: "File:Fritz Lang, Regisor.jpg" by Rulo is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



For much of the 20th century, there existed a stereotype of the European director, working in Hollywood, who was typecast as a little tyrant wearing plus-fours, a beret and a monocle, who sported a long cigarette holder, directed his players by way of a megaphone and was often carrying a riding crop. He was invariably depicted (usually in theatrical cartoons) as a loud-mouthed bully who expected his cast to do ridiculous things, like wrestle with a hungry lion or set themselves on fire.

The caricature description above is of the great **Fritz Lang** who as a young man adopted a monocle in his left eye and later lost the vision in his right eye, thereby being reduced to a monocle and an eyepatch. Friedrich Christian Anton "Fritz" Lang was an Austrian-German-American filmmaker, screenwriter, and occasional film producer and actor. One of the best-known émigrés from Germany's school of Expressionism, he was dubbed the "Master of Darkness" by the *British Film Institute*.



Picture Credit: Screenshot from Metropolis. See hyperlink below

Lang had a bad reputation for the way he treated his actors. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copernicus> Examples are the way he notoriously abused Peter Lorre during the shooting of *M* to the point Lorre nearly quit film acting. He is said to have actually endangered Brigitte Helm during the production of *Metropolis* by leaving her trapped in a crazy, but memorable costume (see picture) for hours on end.

See the film *Metropolis* [here](#).

Fritz Lang showed his mastery in both the silent and sound era. *M*, one of the first "talkies" ever produced, displayed Lang's talent for using sound effectively. In his silent classic, *Metropolis*, he was a visual virtuoso. In Hollywood, he became a master of film noir.

Lang may have been a cinematic genius but by all accounts he wasn't a terribly nice person.

Who was Aristarchus of Samos?

Aristarchus of Samos was an ancient Greek astronomer and mathematician who presented the first known heliocentric model that placed the Sun at the centre of the known universe with the Earth revolving around it. In his evolutionary astronomical hypothesis, he claimed it was the Sun, not the Earth, that was the fixed centre of the universe, and that the Earth, along with the rest of the planets, revolved around the Sun.

Ancient History Encyclopedia (AHE) notes that Aristarchus also said that the stars were distant suns that remained unmoved and that the size of the universe was much larger than his contemporaries believed. AHE also says:

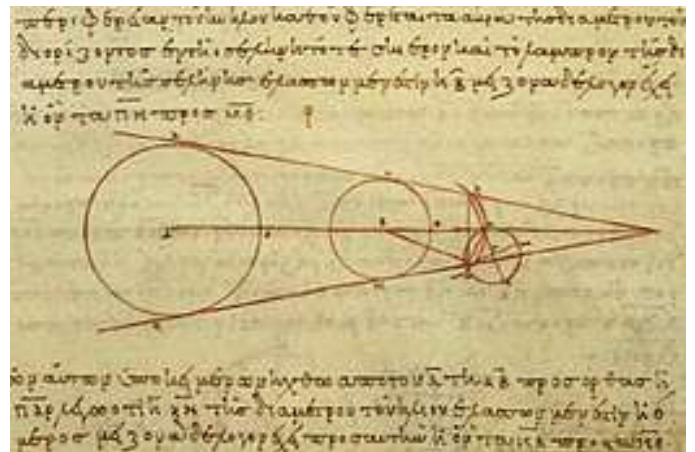
'Except for a few rare exceptions, the general consensus among Greek astronomers during the time Aristarchus lived was that the universe was Earth-centred. During the 4th century BCE, Plato and Aristotle defended the geocentric model but both philosophers did so using mostly mystical and mythical arguments. The stars and planets were carried around the Earth on spheres, arranged in a concentric fashion. Plato even described the universe as the Spindle of Necessity, attended by the Sirens and turned by the three Fates.'

You can read about Aristarchus' hypothesis [here](#).

According to *Plutarch* (a Greek philosopher), while *Aristarchus* postulated heliocentrism only as a hypothesis, *Seleucus of Seleucia*, (a Hellenistic astronomer who lived a century after Aristarchus), held it as a definite opinion and gave a demonstration of it but no full record has been found. In his *Naturalis Historia*, *Pliny the Elder* later wondered whether errors in the predictions about the heavens could be attributed to a displacement of the Earth from its central position.

The heliocentric theory was revived by *Copernicus* (a Renaissance-era mathematician and astronomer), after which *Johannes Kepler* described planetary motions with greater accuracy with his three laws. *Isaac Newton* later gave a theoretical explanation based on laws of gravitational attraction and dynamics.

After realising that the sun was much larger than the earth and the other planets, *Aristarchus* concluded that planets revolved around the sun. But this brilliant insight, it turned out, was a step too far for the philosophers of the time to accept and astronomy had to wait nearly 2000 years more for *Aristarchus'* hypothesis to be vindicated.



Picture Credit: Aristarchus's 3rd-century BC calculations on the relative sizes of (from left) the Sun, Earth and Moon, from a 10th-century AD Greek copy: [here](#).

Blast from the past: The Great Depression



Picture Credit: "Great Depression Bread Line" by martnpro is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

It seems like a silly name for it - there was nothing *great* about it except for the extent of its impact through the widespread devastation it caused. The Great Depression started in the United States after a major fall in stock prices that began around 4th September 1929, and became worldwide news with the stock market crash of 29th October 1929 (known as **Black Tuesday**). Between 1929 and 1932, worldwide gross domestic product (GDP) fell by an estimated 15%.

From 1921 to 1929, the US stock market had quickly expanded, with stock prices soaring to levels that were beyond what they were worth. The Federal Reserve raised interest rates in an attempt to slow the rapid rise in stock prices.

Britain

The Great Depression in the United Kingdom, also known as the Great Slump, was Britain's largest and most profound economic depression of the 20th century. It happened at a time when the UK was still far away from recovery from the effects of the First World War.

The economic crash had originated in the U.S. (see above) in late 1929 and quickly spread across the world. Britain did not experience the boom that had characterised the U.S., Germany, Canada and Australia, so the affect appeared less severe. But, Britain's world trade fell by half (1929–33), the output of heavy industry fell by a third, employment profits plunged in nearly all sectors. At the depth in summer 1932, registered unemployed numbered 3.5 million, and many more had only part-time employment.

Unemployment reached 70% in some areas of the UK at the start of the 1930s (with more than 3 million out of work nationally) and many families depended entirely on payments from local government known as the dole. Politically, the Conservative Party dominated the era and the Labour Party was seriously hurt.

Impact

The OpenDemocracy.net website puts it like this (visit [here](https://www.opendemocracy.net)): 'The Great Crash did, indeed, bring about radical changes: it had a strong impact on the relations between the state, markets and politics, and deeply influenced economic and political ideologies, leading to transformations whose effects can be traced in western societies until at least the 1970s. The transformative character of the post-1929 period made it the archetype of modern economic crises.'

Watch videos at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression/images-videos>

Snitching on your Neighbour



Click [here](#) to hear a snitching call...

It's just not cricket...

Alf and Sid, both in their nineties, used to meet every morning at the park to talk about old times and their shared passion for cricket.



"D'you think they play cricket in Heaven?" asked Alf.

"Dunno" said Sid, "but I tell you what, the first of us that gets there should let the other one know."

A few months passed and poor Alf popped his clogs. Sid carried on going to the park and one day he heard a voice, "Helloooooo Sid"

"Who's that?"

"It's Alf. You can't see me Sid, but I can see you."

"Alf" said Sid, "do they play cricket in heaven?"

"Well I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that we do play cricket in Heaven. The bad news is that you are opening the batting for the first eleven tomorrow."

A follow-up on last month's Wadhurst Story

On page 15 of Nil Desperandum for December 2020, we featured a story by Bryan Joyner about a plane crash in Wadhurst on 20th January 1956.

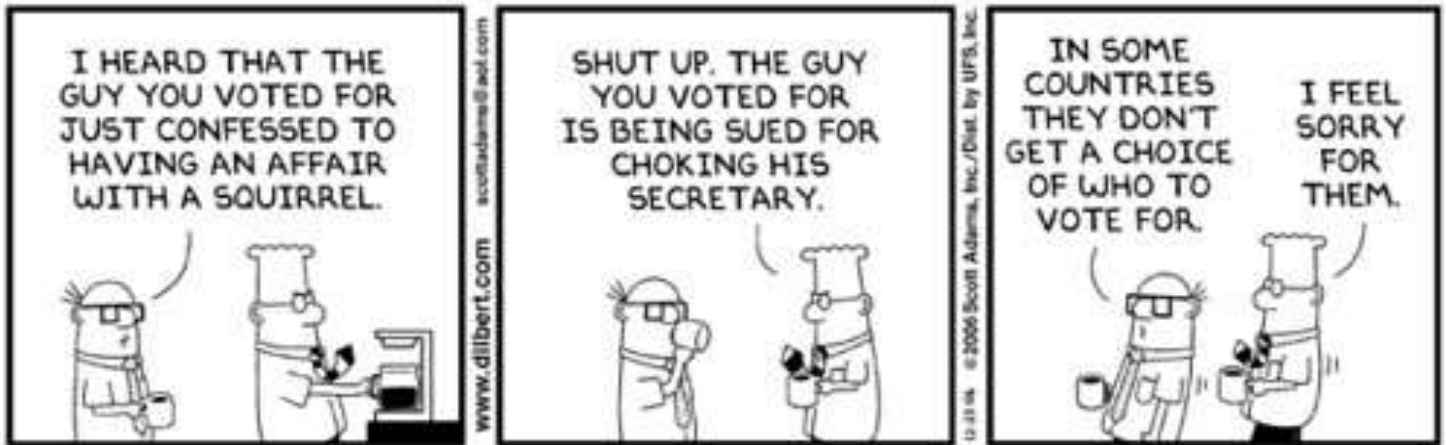
We've just come across a video which you might like to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BvZ9--7Upo&feature=youtu.be>

Ending with a Smile



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Answers to Homograph Puzzle on page 5

1. LOCK — PIANO > KEY
2. SHIP — CARD > Deck
3. TREE — CAR > Trunk
4. SCHOOL — EYE > Pupil (Exam and Private are also possible)
5. PILLOW — COURT > Case
6. RIVER — MONEY > Bank (Flow is also possible)
7. BED — PAPER > Sheet
8. ARMY — WATER > Tank
9. TENNIS — NOISE > Racket
10. EGYPTIAN — MOTHER > Mummy
11. SMOKER — PLUMBER > Pipe



Humour contributed by Michael Mench



Humour contributed by Alan Tatnall