#### From The Times Diary, 1976:

The invitation to Saturday night's unusual event began unpromisingly. Michael Rich wrote that he expected I was inundated with invitations to functions of little interest. He hoped nonetheless that I would go to the annual dinner of people who set the crossword in The Listener, the BBC's weekly magazine.

It is generally accepted that The Listener has the most difficult of all weekly crosswords. "You may", Rich wrote, "find it stimulating to join the erudite, not to say esoteric gathering."

To those who do not know the crossword, I must explain that it bears little relation to the simple mental exercise which appears in The Times. The first challenge is to understand the instructions. It is

stand the instructions. It is never simply a matter of solv-ing a cryptic clue and writing the answer in the appropriate

Take this extract from the instructions to a recent snorter:
"The first and last 12 of 36 letters (five words) connected with the title should really cccur (in some cases more than once) in the answers to the down clues. . . These letters must all be omitted, wherever they should occur, and entered in the appropriate chair either above or below the answer." Or this one: "Clues are normal. Each solution must be turned inside out before being entered on the diagram."

I did not, therefore, expect a straightforward evening of socializing when I climbed to

the upstairs room of a Fleet Street tavern for the gathering. The first difficulty was that most of the guests were known by the code-names under which they compose their tests of

they compose their tests of mental gymnastics.
Rich himself is Ploutos, and he was chatting with deceptively normal looking people known as Jago, Bryn, Smada (his surname backwards), Mog, Aeschylus, Sam, Illick, Egma, Smokey (after his dog), Adam,

### The Times Diary

#### A puzzling way to spend an evening

It is a male-dominated sport, though Machiavelli is a woman and Peto a husband-and-wife team. Many are schoolteachers, but a few work in computers and Ploutos describes himself modestly as "only a merchant banker".

Among the guests were three of the magazine's most consistent crossword solvers, who had sent in correct solutions to all the puzzles this year. One of these, Tony Sever, was wearing a pendant round his neck to commemorate coming fourth in this year's Times crossword championship, though like everyone I spoke to he was dismissive of our little puzzle, claiming to be able to do it in about 20 minutes.

Sever had his fiancée with him, and I asked her whether

Merlin, Twudge, Duck and of reputations, and has no com-Zander (known to readers of punction about rejecting the The Guardian as Custos). work of his most experienced contributors.

They do not always accept

They do not always accept his verdict with good grace. Egma, the retired headmaster of a Welsh comprehensive school, said crisply about his most recent rejection: "It was a mistake on the part of Evans. He thought it was too easy, but it wasn't."

The evening was not free from other controversy. The Listener crossword set are still furiously indignant about the

Sever had his fiancée with him, and I asked her whether she was also a crossword fancier. "No", she replied. "But I have learned to keep quiet when he does them." I predict a happy marriage.

Solvers aspire to be setters. It is open to anyone to send in a crossword for consideration by The Listener, though with the fee at a paltry £15 it must be a labour of love. All the puzzles submitted are sent for scrutiny to James Evans, a Government auditor from Oxted who has been selecting crosswords for the magazine since 1953 and is thus held in enormous awe by the setters.

He spends three evenings a week looking through puzzles, rejecting them because they are too hard or too easy, or suggesting alterations to one or two clues if he thinks the basic idea is good. He is no respecter

setter, Sabre, who reported from the United States that American crosswords were "bally boring".

"bally boring".

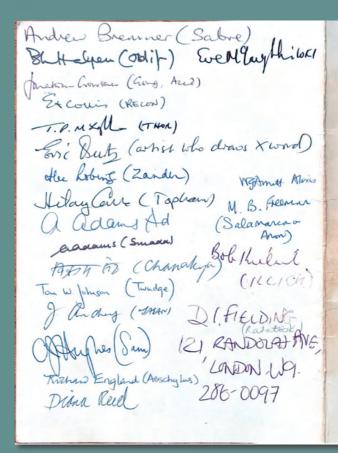
Most of the speeches contained stirring crossword anecdotes, about baffling clues and diagrams triumphantly solved. Adam talked about the notorious six-letter word ending in Q (Mushaq, a Persian water carrier) and quoted two of the worst clues he had seen. One was simply "Mine" (answer "Host") and the other was an ugly anagram: "Venice coyslut" (answer "Consecutively").

Adam said the discovery of The Listener crossword was an event that changed his life as profoundly as his discovery of sex. He lost me, though, when he began talking about a double acrostic based on Anthony Trol-lope: I was not certain when lope: I was not certain whether this was a crossword feature or a sexual exercise.

Severs, too, spoke of past crosswords he had loved, and brought along well-thumbed copies of a couple. Jago, with great resource, was even able to unearth an Irish crossword joke. A Togo dime (anag) was had by all.

My colleague Justow Serious seems to be injiltrating his way back to the BBC. An alert Coulsdon reader says he heard a reporter on The World at One the other day interviewing a rescuer of some American students on Snowdon. "Just how sheer was the cliff?" he asked, and received the reply: "Fairly vertical." vertical."

## THE LISTENER CROSSWORD SETTERS' **DINNER**



THE LISTENER

COCK TAVERA

**CROSSWORD SETTERS** 

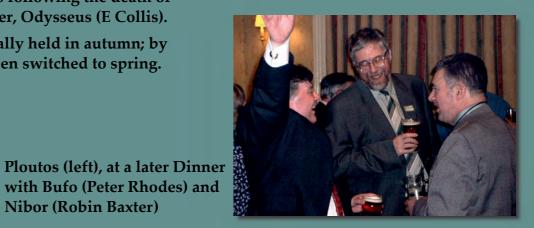
DINNER

SATURDAY 22nd. SEPTEMBER 1973.

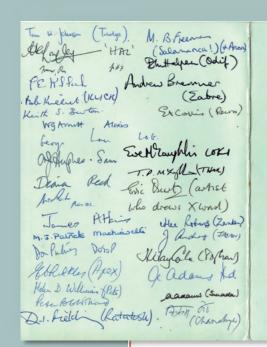
The Dinner in 1973, the first in the current series, was held in Ye Olde Cock Tavern in Fleet Street, London. It was organised by Ploutos (Mike Rich), who took over after a lapse of several years following the death of the previous organiser, Odysseus (E Collis).

Dinners were originally held in autumn; by 1980, the date had been switched to spring.

Nibor (Robin Baxter)



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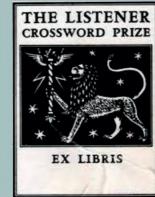


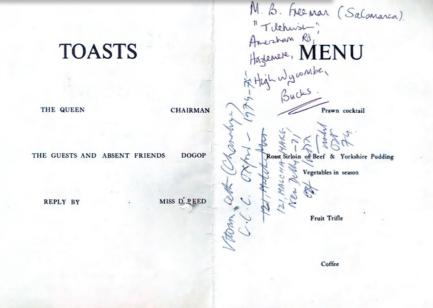
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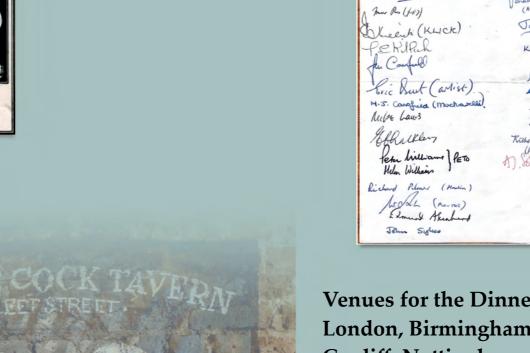
**CROSSWORD SETTERS** 

DINNER

SATURDAY 22nd. SEPTEMBER 1973.







Keith Buter

from the 1975 Dinner

Venues for the Dinner have included: London, Birmingham, Harrogate, Cardiff, Nottingham, Eastbourne, Leeds, Edinburgh, Winchester, York, Paris, Oxford, Derby, Cambridge, Newcastle, Luton, Milton Common, North Queensferry, Chepstow, Sheffield, Old Harlow, Chester, Cheltenham, Old Windsor, Gateshead, Ettington, online via Zoom, Stirling... and now Bristol.

Michael B. Leeman (SALAMANCA) BB Hitchwood (Simian)













