

## The Listener Crossword Setters' Dinner "4000": 20<sup>th</sup> September 2008: Birmingham

Although it felt like we'd spent 4000 years planning this function, it was actually only an alarmingly short period since Derek Arthur confirmed that *The Times* had agreed to make room for a special puzzle, which was the spur to organise a special event, slotted in between the annual *Times Listener* Crossword Setters' Dinners which happen every March. Of course we said "yes": and so the Listener 4000 Celebration Dinner duly took place on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2008 at the Apollo Hotel in Birmingham — the very day on which Crossword No 4000 appeared.

Happily, all four of its Joint Setters were present: **Viking, Dimitry, Trev** and **Arcturus** — the last of whom had travelled from the USA, where he's now domiciled. Other notable attendees were Richard Whitehead from *The Times* (who was thanked, as their representative, for their generous contribution towards the wine) and Vivian Marr from Chambers Harrap, who had come to offer diners the chance to pre-order copies of the new *Times Listener* anthology, which Chambers had generously agreed to bring out.

Because of its special nature, this Dinner had no formal content: unlike the established Annual Dinners, with their after-dinner prize-giving, staged around the "all-correct" *Solver Silver Salver* and its companion trophy, the *Ascot Gold Cup*. So in the absence of any set pieces, we thought it would be fun to have a couple of informal competitions to give the attendees something to think about. Thus the 120 Setters, Solvers and guests who took part in the evening were asked to respond to the theme of Black & White: and happily the majority of them rose magnificently to the challenge!

Apart from the perhaps inevitable Crossword ties (six at least), there were numerous black shirts with white ties, black-and-white hats, braces, and other assorted items of two-tone clothing or accessories. One enterprising lady managed to find a black and white jacket embellished with pages from *The Times*; and we had a trio who turned up with each one dressed in a different colour, including a "lady in red" — bemused enquiries then revealing their theme to be a newspaper, ie, "black and white and re(a)d all over"! However, two costumes were truly outstanding: one young chap came dressed as a badger (yes, really!) and Dave Tilley came dressed as a nun. Dave gets his name-check because his effort was adjudged to be the Winner: and in fact he revealed that he has now raised about £1,500 towards Moorfields Eye Hospital (the late **Apex's** pet charity), by means of sponsorship for his unusual attire. Well done, Dave! (His prize, by the way, was a bottle of Mouton Noir vin blanc.)

**Jago** had created a special celebratory puzzle, which was placed on each table, and attendees were asked to find within it the hidden link to the evening. Four winners each received a bar of either Black Magic or organic White chocolate ... and for the Real Ale buffs — of whom we boast a good number in our ranks — we arranged with the hotel to supply a firkin each of Black Sheep and Enville White beers.

As part of the dining room's evening decoration, we covered up two somewhat unsightly brown wall panels with a couple of fairly basic crossword grids (in keeping of course with the B&W theme) and as a purely impromptu competition, it was suggested that people might like to make an attempt at creating something to fill these simple grids. Pleasingly, six out of the twelve tables had a bash at it; and Table 3 — which included **Kea** and **Mr Magoo** — were adjudged the winners, by producing two stunning puzzles (under the title of "Dichotomy") that each had *two* different, but perfectly valid, solutions using only *one* set of clues per grid!

After the prize-giving, which followed the Dinner itself, toasts were proposed to both *The Times* and to Chambers Harrap; and also to "absent friends". Apologies and good wishes for a successful evening were received from a number of Solvers and also from the following Setters: **Aedites, Alberich, Aragon, Arepo, Brym, Bufo, Glow-Worm, Mango** (1/3), **Ozzie, Phi, Piccadilly, Sabre** and **Simian**. The message regarding **Bufo** was as follows: "Ruptured knee ligament: splint on leg" — which sounds more like a cryptic clue than an excuse! (Any Answers, **Salamanca**?)

For those who like other statistics, there were 40 Setters actually present, along with approximately equal numbers of *Listener* crossword Solvers and other guests/partners. Many of the Solvers had been invited via a notice inserted with the *Listener* crossword; and so they were not customary attendees at this sort of function. Happily, lots of them found the evening to be much to their liking, and asked if they might be allowed to come to other *Listener* Dinners in the future ... and there's really no reason why they shouldn't be welcomed, since they are after all the *raison d'être* for us humble Setters. They all would be welcome, on a "first come, first served" basis: subject to the proviso that *Listener* Setters would be given priority if numbers were limited.

At the end of all the formal proceedings, **Jago** announced that the next *Times Listener* Crossword Setters' Dinner would be held at the Queensferry Hotel, north of Edinburgh, on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2009; and that an official Notice would be sent "via the usual channels" by early October. We therefore hope to see as many as possible in Scotland next Spring! (Pleasurable drinking and mingling took up the remainder of the night.)

Jim Coulson (**Jago**)