

The Listener Crossword Setters' Dinner 25th October 1980: London

Setters present: **Adam, Aeschylus, Alban, Apex, Brym, Buff, Crank, Duck, Eel, E.M. Holroyd, Generalissimo, Hal, Hen, Jago, Jasan, Jude, Klick, Machiavelli, MacNaughton, Meringue, Mime, Mog, Nibor, Notlaw, Novamor, Phiz, Plutos, Sabre, Salamanca, Simian, Smada, Zander**

From THE LISTENER: **D A N Jones**
Felicity Lloyd

Special Guest: **Jonathan Crowther** – **Azed** of the *Observer*, aka **Gong**

Solvers: **R M S Cork**
Tony Sever
Dr J F Grimshaw
Mrs M P Butler

A five o'clock start – at *Ye Olde Cock Tavern* – was made this year, to enable those with an insatiable appetite for crossword chit-chat to indulge themselves at greater length, and to provide an opportunity for those travelling from afar to mingle for a reasonable time before the meal and speeches, in case train times truncated their evening thereafter. It had also crossed the organiser's mind that the possible increase in pre-prandial potation might dull the sensibilities of the audience to any shortcomings in the speakers; whether this happened or not was hard to tell – however, it was unnecessary, except in the case of the second to rise (see below).

Having admired the magnificently produced menus, which quite offset the cheap and nasty lapel stickers used for mutual identification, the company partook of asparagus soup (masquerading as mushroom on the menu), roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and fruit salad with ice cream. Subsequent opinion held that the quality was slightly higher than in previous years – but then so was the price. Armed with sufficient wine for the toasts the diners then waited to be addressed.

Plutos, who had revived the annual dinners in 1973, and organised eight events, including the Birmingham beano to celebrate the 2500th puzzle, entertained us with his own brand of amiable arrogance, chronicling the vicissitudes of those dedicated solvers who strive for a 100% record each year. The Editor's decision may be final with regard to who wins the three £10 book tokens each week, but when it comes to the task of collating *all* the entries week by week, **Plutos** is the final arbiter when alternative solutions were proposed. He stressed that his decisions may not be approved by everyone, but since he was doing the work, he made them. One of the cases was a Printer's Devilry clue in which LATES had been offered for LATEX (i.e. ... wilL A TESt in Latin ... / ... wilL A TEXt in Latin ...). One the grounds that LATE is not given as a noun or verb in Chambers, and therefore has no plural LATES, the former was rejected. (An interesting footnote is that of the three guinea-pigs used by the setter, none noticed the possibility of an alternative.)

Ostensibly proposing a toast to THE LISTENER, **Jude** rose next, having started to prepare his speech between the soup and the main course. Sensible of the need to proceed to more interesting speakers, he proposed a vote of thanks to the retiring organiser, revealing the sneaky way the task of organisation had been transferred, which was approximately:

“Hello, there! How are you?”

“Fine. You're taking this over next year, then?”

“Er – okay.”

Drawing heavily on comments made on the return slips of those unable to attend for a modicum of humour, not to mention a couple of topical anagrams passed surreptitiously along the table, and insisting that he had at last started to read other parts of THE LISTENER than the crossword, **Jude** fortunately remembered the toast, then sat down.

D A N Jones was not the original speaker invited to reply on behalf of THE LISTENER, but in the absence of any wild horses, the current crossword editor remained charmingly but firmly seated. Mr Jones' breathless style of oratory was familiar to most, but on this occasion the two most recent Listener crosswords had been on the tricky side, so he was unable to claim success in those, and limited himself to a few anagrammatical references and some verbal footnotes to some of his recent comments in THE LISTENER'S nearest equivalent to a gossip column. Considerably briefer than before, since three more gentlemen were due to stand up, Mr Jones relinquished the floor to the main speaker.

The erstwhile **Gong**, now exclusively **Azed** as long as the *Observer* survives – or possibly longer, since it was revealed that contingency plans had been laid for the continuation of the series during the last crisis – ran through the various types of solver whose characters revealed themselves through comments appended to their monthly clue-writing competition entries. With the possible exception of contributors to the Crossword Club magazine, **Azed** probably gets more feedback from his solvers than any other setter, and among the variety of attitudes, from the avuncular or patronising to the enthusiasm of the neophyte and the plain finicky, most of those listening must have recognised themselves, or at least echoes of themselves, in his list. Perhaps the most unusual type was the suspicious – as the gentleman who, on receiving the plain brown parcel containing the Azed cup, on this occasion posted on from Belfast, took it out to his back garden and attempted to get it defused. Thus the solvers, without whom we'd all be redundant, were toasted.

No-one this year had a 100% record – the best was two wrong – but four solvers had been invited with a minus four score. One had spoken before, and the other three were from Swindon, Wales and Cowdenbeath, so the organiser was less than sanguine about their attendance, but eventually delighted that both Swindon and Cowdenbeath made it. Dr J F Grimshaw, from Swindon, replying on behalf of the solvers, was younger, slimmer and much more amiable than his name had suggested to me, and categorised Listener puzzles by the length of time he took to solve them. One of those who relishes a tough struggle over several evenings, he thus revealed one of the problems of any crossword editor – you can't please all the people all the time. He gave a few specific examples to illustrate his thesis, and clearly will be among our most successful solvers on future occasions.

A song from Robin Cork has become a regular feature of recent dinners, since he chose to celebrate the year's puzzles in this novel way when first invited as the year's leading solver, his achievement once more. Several of those present must have experienced a surge of gratification on hearing their efforts immortalised, as Robin, accompanied by his wife Valerie, sang through a medley of appropriate tunes linked by the chorus of Widdicombe Fair, ending "... old Roget's Thesaurus and all".

Fed, but not completely watered, the company, slightly larger than on previous years, rounded off the evening in genially loquacious style, before the inevitable but genteel calling of "Time".

(Jude)