

The 20 greatest hoaxes of all time

Wit, intelligence and dodgy morals – all the vital ingredients of a first-class prank. We awaken the best

WORDS BY GAVIN NEWSHAM

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20

Belgium disappears

It's 8.21am, Wednesday 13 December 2006, and programming on the Belgian state broadcaster RTBF's La Une channel is interrupted with an announcement that Flanders, the Flemish-speaking county in the north of Belgium, has declared its independence from the rest of the country and that a new border has been established, separating it from Wallonie in the south. Cue national chaos. There follows footage of flag-waving Flemish nationalists celebrating, trams helping to form the new border and grainy footage of the Belgian king, Albert II, boarding a plane and fleeing what was left of his country.

Despite the station confessing to the hoax within half an hour of its broadcast, the nation reeled from the news. The channel's switchboard was jammed, taking more than 2,600 complaints and its website crashed as anxious viewers sought more information. The hoax had taken more than two years to set up and was, according to the station's head, Yves Thiran, designed to provoke national debate ahead of this year's general election. Which, it's safe to say, it did.

19

Wearside Jack

It takes a truly special kind of wastrel to pretend to be a serial killer, but the sound of Wearside Jack's voice is nevertheless lodged in the memories of anyone growing up in the late Seventies. Between 1978 and 1979, police investigating a series of grisly murders across the north of England received two letters and a cassette recording from a man claiming to be the Yorkshire Ripper.

As West Yorkshire Police investigated the correspondence, the real Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, continued with his killing spree. The hoaxer, one John Humble of Sunderland, was only apprehended in 2005 when he was arrested on an unrelated charge and his DNA matched that found on the original letters. In March 2006, he was sentenced to eight years in prison.

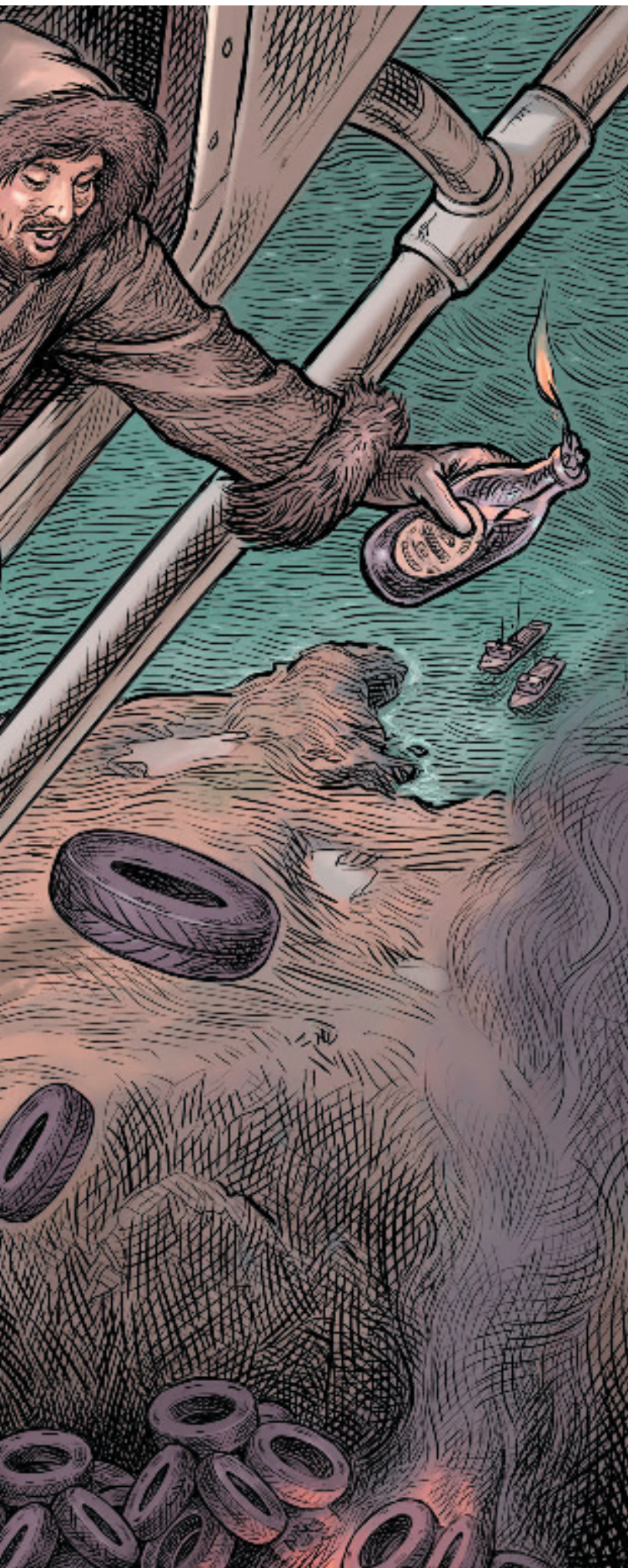


18

Dormant volcano erupts

The long-dormant volcano Mount

Edgecumbe, 13 miles west of Sitka in Alaska, had been minding its own business for decades, without even a flicker of activity, until 1974 when mischievous Sitka shopkeeper Porky Bickar decided to stir things up. With nothing better to do, Bickar chartered a chopper and, with the help of friends, dumped hundreds of old tyres into the mouth of the volcano before covering them in petrol, adding a few dozen smoke bombs and setting the entire pile alight. When the Sitka residents saw the smoke, panic set in, until Bickar – one of the town's police commissioners – confessed to his prank.



17

Richard Nixon - the comeback

As the only US president in history to resign from office, the idea that Richard Nixon could ever stage a comeback was beyond the pale to the majority of Americans. But in 1992, it was announced on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* that the man brought down by the Watergate scandal would be running for president once more, complete with a new campaign slogan: "I didn't do anything wrong - and I won't do it again!" Accompanying the shock announcement were audio clips of Nixon delivering his latest candidacy speech, sparking a flood of complaints from viewers. "I didn't do anything wrong - and I won't do it again!" Accompanying the shock announcement were audio clips of Nixon delivering his latest candidacy speech, sparking a flood of complaints from viewers. It was only in the second half of the show that host John Hockenberry revealed the story was nonsense and the startlingly realistic voiceover was actually provided by the comedian Rich Little.



16

'Brass Eye'

After the success of *The Day Today*, Chris Morris upped the comedy ante with *Brass Eye*, a series devoted to humiliating gullible celebrities. In one episode, Morris examined the threat posed by a fictitious new drug, "Cake", that had arrived in Britain from Prague, and invited comment from the rich and famous.

Countless high-profile folk were taken in by the story. Conservative MP David Amess asked questions in Parliament about the drug, while Noel Edmonds, Bernard Ingham and Rolf Harris all appeared on camera warning kids about the dangers of Cake. Most impressive, though, was the comic Bernard Manning who pulled no punches: "...you can puke yourself to death on this stuff - one girl threw up her own pelvis," he fumed.

15

Bullfighting in the city of culture

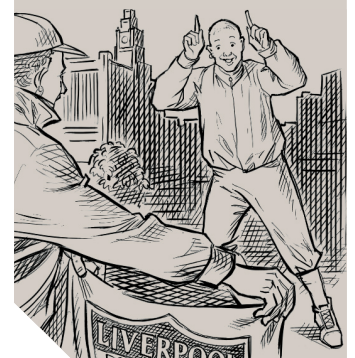


By Christian O'Connell

Seven years ago, I had a breakfast show at Juice FM in Liverpool. One day I decided to place an advert in the *Daily Star* asking for staff to work at a new bullfighting ring I was opening in the city. It read: 'Staff needed for Britain's first bullfighting arena. Full training given. Call this number...' and it gave my breakfast show's number. So I started getting calls from people asking what jobs were going. I told them everything from receptionists to matadors, and that they'd get insurance, body armour, and so on. The next thing I know, Alan Green from Five Live is calling, sticking it to me about how disgusting the whole thing is, while I was really getting into it. I told people I'd done a deal with Five for the TV rights and that Keith Chegwin would be hosting. And I said not to worry about the bulls as most of them would be old or have cancer and this was the way they would want to die - with dignity on a TV show hosted by Cheggers.

It all got a bit out of hand. Liverpool City Council was bombarded with calls from animal rights campaigners; it even got a call from Number 10. Eventually, somebody suss'd that it was the station's number and I had to confess. I still think it would work though...

Christian O'Connell presents the breakfast show on Virgin Radio

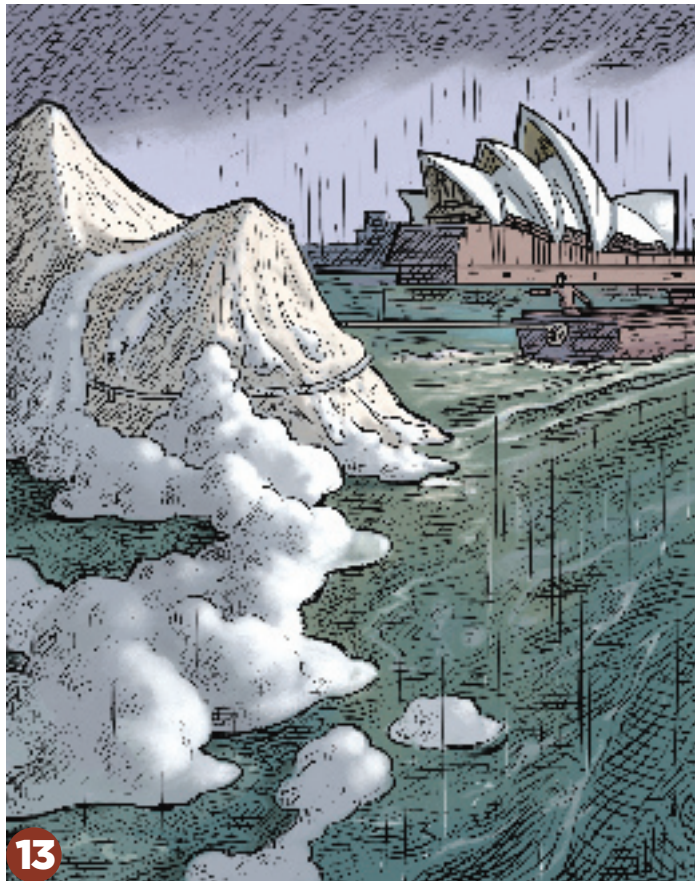


14

Hitler's diaries

In 1983, German magazine *Stern* paid DM10m for what it believed were the diaries of the 20th century's most notorious leader. It was, justifiably, proud of the scoop, and invited the world's media to a press conference at the title's HQ in Hamburg to, well, show off. "Discovered" by the journalist Gerd Heidemann, the diaries stretched to 62 volumes dated between 1932 and 1945. Noted Second World War historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper, Gerhard Weinberg and Eberhard Jäckel all staked their reputations on the diaries being authentic, even though none of Hitler's generals, secretaries or assistants had ever made any reference to the Führer keeping a journal. Trevor-Roper, Baron Dacre of Glanton, was so convinced, he helped persuade *The Sunday Times*, where he was a director, to purchase the serialisation rights.

Other publications in the UK were not persuaded. *The Evening Standard* mocked the claims, saying it had bought the rights to the diaries of Genghis Khan, while the *Daily Mail* announced it had found the secret diaries of Hitler's lover Eva Braun "in a secret compartment of her secret handbag". Within a fortnight, the Hitler diaries were exposed as a hoax. Tests on the books revealed they had been made using modern-day paper, ink and glue, and that the content had been lifted from books of Hitler's speeches. Two years later, Heidemann and the forger responsible, Konrad Kujau, were both sentenced to 42 months in prison.



13

An iceberg in Sydney

➤ Dick Smith was Australia's answer to Richard Branson, embarking on a series of adventures, including flying a helicopter around the world. So when he announced he was going to tow an iceberg from the South Pole to Sydney (with the intention of carving it up and selling it as ice cubes for 10 cents each) nobody seemed too taken aback. True to his word, Smith sailed into the harbour on (surprise, surprise) 1 April 1978, towing what looked like an enormous iceberg. But as the crowds gathered, the heavens opened, causing the shaving cream and fire-fighting foam that the iceberg was really made of to wash away.

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'Brass Eye' part II

If *Brass Eye's* "Cake" hoax was genius, then the Paedophilia Special in 2001 ran the emotional gamut from uncomfortable to farcical. Again, Morris lured a staggering array of trusting celebrities into pledging their support. DJ Neil "Doctor" Fox explained how paedophiles had genetically more in common with crabs than humans ("There's no real evidence for it," he said, "but it is fact"); Richard Blackwood described how internet paedophiles can send noxious fumes through kids' computer keyboards to render them helpless; and Gary Lineker and Phil Collins gave their backing to a fictional charity called Nonce Sense.

11

The Guinness millennium

On 30 March 1998, the brewer Guinness issued a press release announcing that it had reached an agreement with the Royal Observatory in Greenwich to be the official sponsor of the Observatory's millennium celebrations. According to the terms of the agreement, Greenwich Mean Time would be renamed "Guinness Mean Time" until the end of 1999. Moreover, where the Observatory traditionally counted seconds in "pips", it would now count them in what Guinness described as "pint drips". Though the clue was in the date of the press embargo – 1 April – the *Financial Times* saw fit to steal a march on the

10

Britain's 'Abu Ghraib' shame



By Roy Greenslade

When the *Daily Mirror* ran a series of shocking pictures in May 2004 purporting to show British soldiers torturing an Iraqi prisoner, there were immediate doubts about their authenticity. One showed squaddies supposedly urinating on a prisoner, but a military investigation quickly proved they had been staged.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the paper's editor, Piers Morgan, maintained the pictures were genuine. He'd already survived a series of controversies, including the notorious City Slickers affair in which two of his staff had been dismissed for tipping shares they had purchased in advance. Although Morgan had also bought the shares, he claimed it was a coincidence and kept his job. This time, though, his luck ran out. In the face of increasing criticism, along with pressure from American investors on the board of his paper's owners, Trinity Mirror, he was fired.

The paper then apologised. In December 2005, it was announced that a Territorial Army soldier suspected of being behind the hoax, Private Stuart MacKenzie, would not face a court martial because there was insufficient evidence to convict him. Since his dismissal, Morgan has become something of a TV star, and has stuck to his story over the pictures.

Roy Greenslade is media commentator for 'The Guardian'



rest of Fleet Street by breaking the news, with their piece berating the brewer for setting a "brash tone for the millennium". When the penny finally dropped, the paper printed a retraction, explaining that the story "was apparently intended as part of a 1 April spoof". And a successful one at that.

9

Aberystwyth for sale

Of all the zany things flogged on eBay over the years (friendship, virginity, an everyday pound coin that sold for £20, etc), the idea that someone could flog a town on the auction site takes the virtual biscuit. But in May 2003, a prankster put the entire Welsh town of Aberystwyth up for sale, describing the lot as “in good condition”, before adding the caveat that it “can smell slightly” and that the “locals are occasionally a problem”. Despite such a glowing description, the town attracted a highest bid of just £22 before being removed by the kill-joys at eBay HQ.



8

The surgeon's photo of the Loch Ness Monster

Plesiosaur or porpoise, sea creature or crypto-zoological claptrap, there's been innumerable “sightings” of the Loch Ness Monster over the last century. Of all the images, though, it's the so-called “Surgeon's Photo” that remains the most well known. Taken at 7.30am on 19 April 1934 by Robert Kenneth Wilson, the photo was sold to the *Daily Mail* as part of a hoax engineered by big-game hunter Marmaduke Wetherall. Over the years, debate raged over the photograph's authenticity until it was revealed by Wetherall's son-in-law and co-conspirator, Chris Spurling, that the “monster” was nothing more than a clay model of a serpent's head attached to a toy submarine, and that Wilson, a respected London surgeon, was in on the ruse from the outset.



7

Count Victor Lustig

It's May 1925 and notorious con artist Victor Lustig is in Paris reading a newspaper. He notices a story stating that the Eiffel Tower is proving too expensive to maintain and immediately an idea for a new ruse enters his mind. Within days, Lustig – the Count title was just another of his scams – has created “official” government stationery and appointed himself as the Deputy Director of Posts and Telegraph from the ministry responsible for the tower. He then dispatches letters to six local scrap dealers, inviting them to the Hotel de Crillon on Place de la Concorde to discuss a business opportunity. When they arrive, Lustig informs them that the ministry wants to sell the Eiffel Tower – all 7,000 tons of it – for scrap, and offers them the chance to tender bids. Within days, Lustig accepts a F250,000 bid from one Andre Poisson. Despite his winning offer, though, Poisson harbours doubts about the legitimacy of the agreement and is only reassured when Lustig insists that he also wants a bribe in addition to the fee for the tower. Convinced he is now a genuine government official, Poisson stumps up the cash, the deal is done and Lustig vanishes to Vienna. Poisson, meanwhile, is too embarrassed to ever report the fraud.

6

Milli Vanilli

And so to the tragic tale of Milli Vanilli, two Adonises – Fab Morvan and Rob Pilatus – brought together by a love of lip-synching. Formed by producer Frank Farian in 1988, they were perfect pop stars. But in November 1990, Farian revealed that the vocals on their Grammy-award-winning records actually belonged to session singers. Despite the scandal, the Vanilli boys

persevered under the new name of Rob & Fab. Impressed by their determination, Frank Farian agreed to produce a new Milli Vanilli album, this time with Morvan and Pilatus providing the vocals. The disgraced duo underwent singing lessons and laid down the tracks for *Back and in Attack*. But as they prepared to embark on a promotional tour in April 1998, Pilatus was discovered dead in a Frankfurt hotel having taken a lethal concoction of alcohol and prescription drugs. He was 32.

5

Maurice Flitcroft



By Lawrence Donegan

In 1976, Maurice Flitcroft, a crane driver from Barrow-in-Furness fooled the golfing world by attempting to qualify for the Open Championship, even though he'd never played the game before.

Maurice Flitcroft is one of those guys that has slipped into golfing folklore; he's part of the vocabulary of the game. He'd been watching the 1975 Open on television and just decided that he wanted to be a golf professional, even though he'd never played. The next year he applied and went straight into regional qualifying. At Formby Golf Club he shot 121, 49 over par, which remains the worst score in the event's history. When the press got wind of it, a reporter knocked on his mother's door to find out what she thought of her son playing in the Open. The first thing she said was, 'Has he won it?'

Maurice is getting on now and sadly has emphysema. He lives in a terraced house in Barrow-in-Furness and still has everything from his golfing career; the golf clubs he used are sat in the hall, and he has all the correspondence he received from the golfing authorities. The letters from the Royal & Ancient [golf's governing body] are genius. 'Dear Mr Flitcroft, you will not be allowed to enter this year's Open because there is no proof that your golf has actually improved.' And he'd write back, 'Dear Mr MacKenzie [then head of the R&A], I hereby challenge you to a game around the Old Course at St Andrews...', and so on. It's fabulous stuff and means he's part of Open Championship history. He was still trying to fool them as recently as 1990.

Lawrence Donegan is golf correspondent for 'The Guardian'



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Pitdown Man



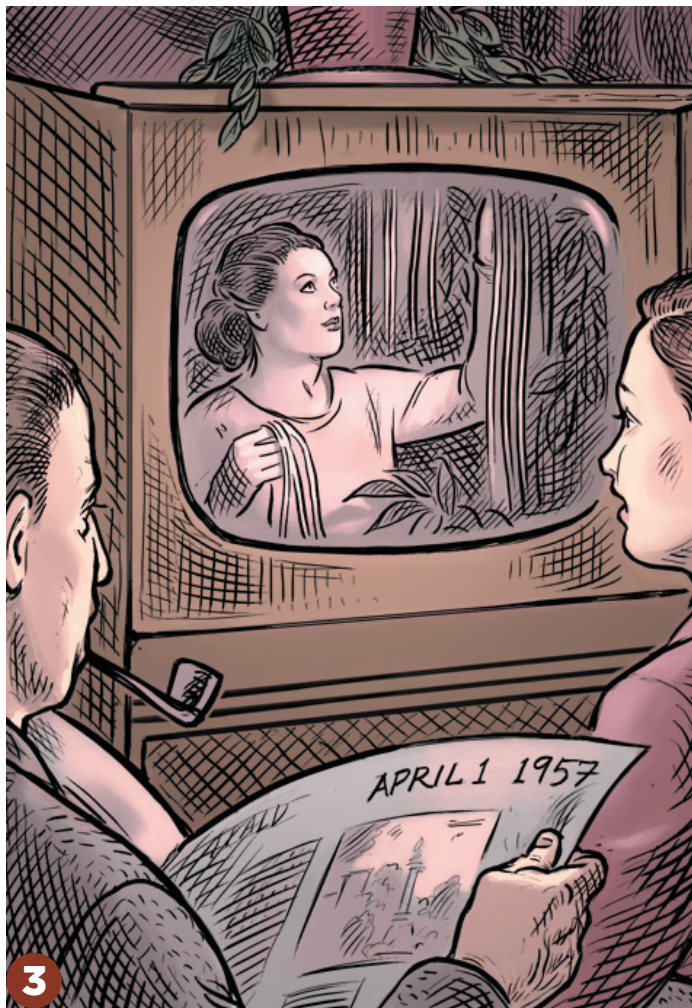
By Dr Miles Russell

Pitdown Man was, at the time of its discovery in 1907, hailed as the most sensational archaeological find ever; the ape-like skull and human jaw apparently providing a clear example of the evolutionary missing link between apes and men. But in 1953, it was revealed as a crude hoax. In the years since the exposure of the fraud, many experts have speculated as to the identity and possible motive of the forger, with conspiracy theories ranging from the plausible to the downright bizarre. One name that continually surfaces, however, is that of the finder, Charles Dawson. Dawson was a solicitor and part-time collector of curiosities whose impressive range of discoveries earned him the nickname 'The Wizard of Sussex'.

In recent years, forensic analysis of his artefact collection has demonstrated that all was not what it outwardly seemed. Some 38 of his more famous discoveries were found to be clear and rather obvious fakes. The majority of Dawson's publications would, furthermore, seem to have been plagiarised, while some of his more outlandish sightings (such as that of a sea serpent in the English Channel) remain unverified.

In retrospect, Dawson's career as an amateur antiquarian seems to have been one built upon deceit, fraud and deception. His ultimate goal in all this was probably that of academic recognition, and he was certainly a major international celebrity of his day. Pitdown Man, therefore, represents not merely a one-off hoax, more the culmination of a life's work.

Dr Miles Russell is Senior Lecturer in Prehistoric and Roman Archaeology at Bournemouth University



3

The 'Panorama' spaghetti story

On 1 April 1957, the BBC's flagship current affairs show, *Panorama*, announced that, thanks to a mild winter and the elimination of the spaghetti weevil, Swiss farmers were enjoying a bumper spaghetti crop. The announcement was accompanied by footage of gleeful Swiss villagers pulling strands of spaghetti down from trees. Being one of the most respected shows on the corporation's roster, it was inevitable that hundreds of viewers would be taken in, but the fact that scores called in to find out where they could buy their own spaghetti plants either shows just how impressive the hoax was or just how gullible the British public is.

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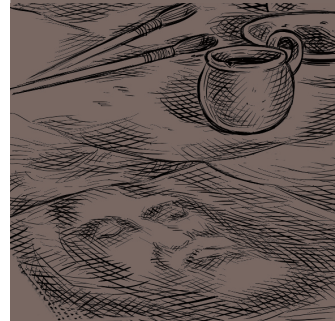
AN Wilson is a shit

Although it took him a quarter of a century to write, Bevis Hillier's epic three-volume biography of the late Poet Laureate John Betjeman never found favour with critic and author AN Wilson, who called it "a hopeless mishmash". So when Hillier learned that Wilson was about to publish his own rival Betjeman biography, he decided to do something about it. He wrote a letter to Wilson, purporting to be one Eve de Harben of Roqueburn, France, and enclosed a love letter apparently written by

Betjeman to a work colleague in 1944. On the surface, it looked like an intriguing insight into the romantic side of the poet's life, but, on closer inspection, the capital letters at the start of each sentence spelled out "AN Wilson is a shit". Moreover, the letter's fictitious author, Eve de Harben, also happened to be an anagram of 'Ever been had'. Needless to say, Wilson took the bait and included the letter in his book. "If I went through every single letter to check the start of each sentence I wouldn't have written the book," huffed Wilson when he learned of the hoax. Later he would call the prank "childish". Childish? Maybe. Hilarious? Certainly.

1

The Turin Shroud



If it weren't for Italian lawyer and amateur photographer Secondo Pia, the Turin Shroud may have been just another relic from Europe's medieval trade in saints' body parts. In 1898, Pia discovered that photographic negatives of the shroud showed up a stunning portrait of a face that was otherwise invisible. This convinced Pia that the Turin Shroud must be authentic, and gave birth to a legend and a century of scientific debate.

After all, what medieval forger could have created a work that would be indecipherable until the arrival of photography several centuries later?

In 1988, the Polytechnicum of Zurich and universities of Tucson (Arizona) and Oxford simultaneously carbon-dated a piece of the shroud. All agreed the shroud dated from between 1260-1390 AD. But defenders of the shroud's authenticity continued to argue that medieval techniques were not up to producing such an image, especially in its negative form. Yet, in 2005, France's science journal *Science & Vie* asked a physician, Doctor Jacques di Costanzo, and a historian, Paul-Eric Blanrue, to try. By rubbing iron oxide mixed with gelatin on cloth resting on a bas-relief (a sculpture that stands out from the surrounding background), a simple method that could have been used in the middle ages, di Costanzo and Blanrue both separately managed to produce a monochrome image, which, like the shroud, had no discernible brushstrokes, showed a graduation of colour, and, most importantly, looked like a positive image when viewed as a negative photograph. All of which points to the wisdom of Pope Clement VII, who judged the Turin Shroud to be a fake in 1390. ☹