CROSSWORD

by Edmund Akenhead

Market research in 1929 showed that a crossword puzzle might increase The Times's circulation. With some trepidation, a team of 'setters' was recruited under the editorship of Ronald Carton (succeeded by his wife Jane), and The Times Crossword No 1, compiled by Adrian Bell, appeared on February 1, 1930. Before long, myths grew around the new craze: The Provost of Eton was said to time his boiled egg every morning by the minutes it took to solve The Times crossword

As the *Times* crossword editor one is denied the mental titillation which the crossword seeks to provide – and by way of compensation one has very few opportunities of amazing fellow-travellers in a railway compartment by solving in five minutes a puzzle which one has spent a couple of hours studying and editing a month previously. Now, however, after 18 years of editing, I am sharing again the agonies and ecstasies of the daily solver, and this seems a good opportunity to give the said solver some idea of the agonies and the ecstasies of producing over 300 crosswords a year for his (or her) pleasure.

The compilers who gave us "Chips come in after fish (9)" and "Art master (8)" no doubt delighted their editors, but what would delight such editors today would be equally good but quite different clues for "carpenter" and "teachest". New discoveries are most satisfying; for example, anagrams which are also definitions: "entrap" = "trepan" and "must" = "stum" (both words mean unfermented grape juice) or "terribly angered" as a clue for "enraged". But having once been used, they have to be relegated to the Index of prohibited clues for the next five years. It therefore falls to the lot of the editor who has himself recently produced "Riding into the sunset magnificently mounted in Avon county (6-5-4)", when presented with a very similar clue by one of his contributors, to find an entirely different clue for Weston-super-Mare.

The simpler the clue, in general, the better. "1,200 minus 200 (10)" I found very pleasing for Marylebone, while "Swiss canton where German is spoken? (4)" predictably elicited a letter from an English inhabitant of the canton, informing me that French, not German, is the language spoken in Vaud. I replied that the question mark at the end of the clue was a warning of a bit of trickery, "where German" means "wo", which sounds ("is spoken") the same as Vaud. "Bird calls? (6,6)" may be on the easy side for "Flying visits" and "Police Constable" but are none the less pleasing.

Not all clues need to be as crafty as "They hang from the trees in the book of Jeremiah (6)" for "amenta" (catkins to be found in the word Lamentations) and "Damage by fire headquarters of Scottish Orthodox Churches (6)" for "scorch" (SC-OR-CH). It was on the special occasion of a Crossword Championship National Final that I perpetrated "Dial 999 if upset – you might get him (5)"; the answer "Beast" demands familiarity with verse 18 of Revelation, Chapter 13.

Christmas 1970 saw the appearance of the first *Times* Jumbo Crossword, a puzzle 27 squares by 27, designed to keep addicts quiet over the holidays. This proved to be very popular and still remains my responsibility. The first agony occurs in the search for 27-letter phrases which have not been used in the preceding 50-odd puzzles, and the second when the puzzle is half-constructed, and the search for words that will fit becomes increasingly difficult. The first ecstasy occurs when the construction is completed, demanding an immediate trip to the local for a celebratory pint, and the second when the 78 or 80 clues have been completed.

There had already been another innovation in 1970, the annual Crossword Championship. After a sabbatical year in 1982, the Championship was revived and the bicentenary year of *The Times* will be the third year of its sponsorship by Collins Dictionaries.

While the tackling of four *Times* crosswords may be beyond the endurance powers of some, the championship has proved very popular with many crossword enthusiasts and has over the years been of great value to me, giving much more opportunity for exchange of views than is normally provided by correspondence. The dialogue has almost always been good-natured, but I still vividly remember the gentleman who disagreed so violently with my refusal to allow his "buckboard" as a valid alternative answer to a clue for "backboard" that he tore off his finalist's badge, flung it down on my table and stormed out swearing to transfer his allegiance from *The Times* to a rival newspaper.

There was a happier outcome to the claim of a regional finalist at York for "Erik" as an alternative to "Eric" as the solution to the clue "Red rover" (Eric the Red, Norse navigator, discoverer of Greenland). I was about to disallow it, since the Erik spelling appeared in none of my reference books, but fortunately the event was taking place in the Viking Hotel and someone pointed out that drinks there were enjoyed at Erik's bar. The claim for Erik was allowed.

Mistakes in the crossword are rare occurrences; eagle-eyed solvers do us a service by keeping us on our toes. My own mis-spelling of "venomous" as "venemous" – clue, "Like the toad, ugly and . . . (*AYLI*)(8)" – caused a furore and almost persuaded me to tender my resignation, but I was deeply touched by a couple of readers who considered that the "error" needed no apology since "venemous" is the spelling used in the First Folio.

Another zealous reader reported to the police that a *Times* crossword on October 20, 1966 contained the words "gaol" and "artillery" two days before the spy George Blake escaped from Wormwood Scrubs into a road flanking the prison known as Artillery Road, but I was able to convince the police that both the compiler and I were innocent. *

The only time I made a puzzle containing a secret message was on March 2, 1981, when the first letters of the Across words formed the message "Long Live The Times", a sentiment to be repeated now.

- * The crossword in question may be found in **75 Years of The Times Crossword** in which I have expanded a little on the mystery as well as the clues. *David Akenhead*.

My father, in his capacity of recently retired Crossword Editor of *The Times* (1965-1983), was cordially invited by *The Times* to write this article in 1984 for the special illustrated edition of

THE TIMES PAST PRESENT FUTURE *To celebrate two hundred years of publication*

I am going to publish a Newspaper

The words which were written in May 1784 by John Walter, a bankrupted Lloyds underwriter turned printer, to his patron Benjamin Franklin, then the American minister in Paris.

On January 1st 1785 Walter duly published

the first issue of The Daily Universal Register,

a title which he changed three years later to

THE TIMES

Interestingly, Newspapers run in our blood as well. My illustrious ancestor, Robert Akenhead, a printer and bookseller, founded one of the very first Broadsheets, The Newcastle Mercury on the 10th July 1722, his family having moved recently from Glasgow after the death of Queen Anne. For his endeavours, he was later rewarded by the citizens of Glasgow, with the Freedom of the City. *David Akenhead*.