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<i>Group New</i>	3	<i>Home Electrical Regulations</i>	14
<i>The Driving Test</i>	4	<i>Sports Sponsorship</i>	15
<i>Public Transport</i>	4	<i>Tesco Clubcard Tracks Theft</i>	15
<i>Britain's Favourite Plumber</i>	6	<i>A Wine Lover's Palate -1</i>	16
<i>Cashmere Wool</i>	7	<i>Disabled Law Run-around</i>	17
<i>Food Scare Sudan 1</i>	8	<i>Members Report</i>	18
<i>EU Agriculture Grants</i>	8	<i>Information Notice Board</i>	20
<i>The Consumer Diary</i>	10	<i>Looking Back</i>	22
<i>The Hospital Bug MRSA</i>	12	<i>Bits & Pieces</i>	23
<i>Gas Boiler Efficiency</i>	13		

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Grass root consumers working for grass root consumers

GROUP NEWS

Do try to come to the A.G.M., details on the back page. Remember non-members are also very welcome, and it's a good time for you to meet the committee members, and indeed, we would be pleased should you wish to join the committee.

We have over the last few months been watching Safeway supermarkets slowly change into Morrisons. Our first impressions, based on the Hartley store at Torr Lane are that prices are falling and that it is quicker to checkout now. So, here again we would be interested in members' findings.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: This shows the area in Armada Way looking towards Royal Parade and the Hoe, which has been cleared to give an open look and bring the Guildhall and Civic Centre more into the shopping area; see Looking Back, page 22.

Last January we wrote a number of letters to organisations: Devon & Cornwall police, Ofwat, Halifax Bank, and in February a member wrote to Breville, see page 19. The police replied in the middle of March, more in the next issue, mean while we print the replies from the others in the adjacent column.

Driving Along

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the driving test. This test was introduced to reduce the number of people killed on the roads. At that time there were 7,000 people killed on our roads even though there were only 11h million registered vehicles. If that ratio was maintained today with around 261h million vehicles on our roads, we would have around 124,000 deaths per year and not around the 3,500 currently killed.

Not all this reduction of road deaths is down to the driving test, better roads and vehicles also help. However, in the first three years, there was a drop of 17 per cent in the number of people killed or seriously injured on the roads, and 33 per cent in the number of children killed or seriously injured.

The test itself has changed to meet changing conditions and vehicle design. Hand signals were stopped in 1975, and since 1996 drivers have had to pass the Theory Test, a written test of knowledge, before they take the Practical; whereas at one time the driving test examiner asked some questions of the driver after the Practical Test. In 2002, a video hazard perception test was introduced, and two "Show me, Tell me" questions involving vehicle safety were introduced at the beginning of the Practical Test in September 2003.

At one time it was possible to drive a three-wheeled car by just holding a motorcycle licence; for some reason they seemed to be looked upon as a motorcycle and sidecar. Now, more than 32 million people in the UK hold a driving licence, and in 2002/2003 there were 1.3 million tests for car drivers, covered by 1,635 driving test examiners; and there were 31,000 registered driving instructors.

A Better Way

You will see from the previous article that since 1935 there has been an increase of over one thousand six hundred per cent in road traffic vehicles in the UK. The government and many world leaders and organisations are keen to reduce pollution, but only the Swiss seem to be doing anything about it when it comes to public transport.

Over a quarter of a century ago, environmental issues began to take on major significance in central Europe; in Switzerland trees were dying from pollution. Happily, at the same time, a group of young Swiss railwaymen were working on a new approach to the passenger timetable. This involved trains, and where possible buses, arriving at railway stations and junctions at the same number of minutes passed the hour for each hour during the day. In that way passengers found times easy to remember, and gave the Swiss transport system a tight inter-connecting network.

The initial disadvantage of adopting this form of timetable was an increase in cost to the Swiss Federal Railway (SBB) of 4 per cent. However, because the public transport system in Switzerland became more integrated and reliable the growth over the last two decades has grown from 19,000 to 25,000 route-Km (11,800-15,500miles), an increase of 32 per cent, along with an increase of stopping-points from 16,938 to 22,309, an increase also of 32 per cent; and the number of users has risen from 1.2 billion a year to 1.7 billion, an increase of 42 per cent.

Not only does the Swiss citizen make more than double the train journeys made by the British, but almost 1 in 3 of its citizens hold a card priced at £66 for a year, or £154 for three years, giving half-price travel on all public transport. Along with this over a quarter of a million people hold the national network ticket giving unlimited travel for a year at a cost of £1,275 or £2,020 1st class; here in Britain the cost for an all network unlimited travel ticket is, £355 for 7 days (£540 1st class), or £540 for 14 days (£820 1st class). It can be seen from this that over a third of Switzerland's population is committed to public transport through these tickets alone.

What is also interesting is that Swiss law requires that a community of 100 people must receive some form of public transport service, and where there is more than 500 passengers a day on the most heavily used section of a route, that route should be provided with at least 18 pairs of services.

This overall receives a 50 per cent subsidy, all approved by the people at the ballot-box in referenda. The Swiss also voted for a huge investment in the construction of new tunnels and capacity to carry more freight traffic, the aim being to reduce considerably the number of long movements. They do seem to like clean air.

So, could Britain have such an integrated and well used system? Well not if we all vote against road tolls, like the people of Edinburgh did in their referendum by showing 74 per cent against. On the other hand, many professionals see no intrinsic difference between the Swiss and British networks to stop it. The main obstacles are attitudes; public transport in Britain is not held in high esteem, indeed, it is looked upon as second-class travel; and the political thinking over two decades is to get the subsidy down and make the services better by introducing competition, which has led to almost complete separation between companies within the same form of transport, never mind between differing forms of transport. Britain is a country where inter-model ticketing is almost non-existent.

However, the Swiss system works well even though there are 150 public transport operators and 550 small transport companies involved throughout the country; but here the ticketing structure makes travel straightforward and unfussy.

It's not through lack of vehicles that the Swiss support a integrated public transport system, for they have 22 per cent more vehicles per population than we do. Perhaps it's just that, unlike the good people of Edinburgh, they realise that they are not all going to be able to use their vehicles at the same time; and that the government of Switzerland realise that if goods and people cannot be kept moving, pollution and a sluggish economy will result.

Britain's Favourite Plumber

This prestigious award is organised by the Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering, supported by a number of manufactures within the industry. The competition is run every three years and is designed to recognise the skills and service of the very best of Britain's plumbing and heating engineers, and to alert the public to the importance of maintaining the highest standards in the interest to public health and safety. The winner must demonstrate technical ability, professionalism, knowledge and commitment to customer service.

To take part in the competition, plumbers have to be nominated by their customers. This year there were over one thousand nominees, who went through a number of progressively rigorous selection stages, including County and Area rounds, where participants were judged closely through

telephone and face-to-face interviews. Six national finalists were selected who then faced questions from a judging panel of experts from industry and consumer organisations.

Our Chairman, Fred Horley, was part of the final judging panel and he was impressed with the quality of all the contenders, each of which had their own particular strengths. The eventual winner was a self-employed plumber from Leeds who started in the industry as a sixteen year old apprentice in 1975. His prize was a two-week trip for two to New Zealand this March, which includes a visit to the world Plumbing Conference in Auckland. The finalist from the South West was a self-employed plumber from Dorset.

Although all the finalists had entered the industry initially as apprentices, none were now employing apprentices in their own organisations, claiming employment law bureaucracy and the fact that they would be training their eventual competitors as the reasons.

Cashmere

The finest of the world's wool is taken from the Kashmir goat. In parts of Asia the fibre is known as pashm or pashmina, In the early 19th century beautiful handmade shawls were produced in Kashmir, India, from the goats' fibres. It was these shawls reaching Europe that created a demand for this fine wool.

Today the leading consumers for cashmere are to be found the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan, whilst the major producers of cashmere are to be found in China, Mongolia, Iran, along with the Indian subcontinent. A sweater requires the fleece of 4 to 6 goats; and an overcoat of between 30 to 40.

But like all good things in demand there are the imitators and the adulterators. The American consumer magazine "Consumer Reports" found when they tested cashmere sweaters that some priced at a tenth of the most expensive, contained less cashmere, and were cutting corners in other ways. Some manufactures were failing to remove short fibres that eventually make sweaters 'pill'. Unscrupulous ones were adding wool to the cashmere without labelling the fibre content.

Expensive cashmere products are knitted from yarns made of multiple strands, or piles. They found some low-priced sweaters knitted from two-ply yarns, but in such a poor way that the yarns were thin and not tightly knitted, whilst others were made from single-ply yarn.

The most expensive sweaters tested were excellent; one was from Brooks Brothers, and one was from Pringle of Scotland. Land's End also came out well. Where cashmere is concerned it really does seem that you can't get a silk purse for the price of a sow's ear.

The Spice Routes of Sudan 1

We have recently seen the biggest recall of food produced products in UK history. This was because a dye made from coal tar called Sudan 1, and used to colour petrol, solvents and boot polish was found in some Worcester sauce .

There was the usual outcry and the call for rolling heads; indeed, if there was a head for every link in the chain it would be the biggest decapitation since the French Revolution. So how did it come about and who could have stopped it?

Chilli powder is used in Worcester sauce ; and some Sudan 1 found its way into some chilli powder used to make Worcester sauce. This chilli powder, adulterated with the illegal dye Sudan 1, has been traced to Mumbai, India. From there it was shipped, in 2002, to Essex, England, for a company registered in Leicester and trading in spices. Then, in September 2002, it was sold to another company involved in food ingredients, also in Essex. From this company, in 2002, five tonnes of chilli powder was sold to a flavouring firm, also in Essex; then, along with documentation dated July 2003, stating that they had tested all batches of Indian chilli powder purchased in the last 12 months and had not been able to detect Sudan 1, it was sold to Premier Foods.

Premier Foods used the chilli powder to make Crosse and Blackwell Worcester sauce, and this sauce was distributed to more than 200 other firms across more than a dozen countries where it was used as an ingredient in all manner of food produces; these included food and meals for supermarkets, mass caterers and ready meal producers. The problem started to be noticed in January of this year when the Italian food authorities detected it in some food products sold in their country.

However, back in 2003, the French authorities became suspicious about a batch of chilli that was very red. Instead of the usual tests they carried out a full chemical screening; whereupon they found the dye Sudan 1. It was at this time that the Indian Spice Broad removed from Mumbai its licence, because it sold adulterated chilli powder to traders in Europe. Since then importers to the EU have been required to produce certificates showing that their chilli has been tested and is free of Sudan 1.

If the dates above have come down to us correctly, it would seem that the offending powder entered the country in 2002, and as it was not until mid 2003 that the French made the discovery and the spice firm of Mumbai had its licence revoked, it looks as though the adulterated powder was by then already through the net. If so, how did it come to be sold on with a certificate dated July 2003 stating that the powder had been tested? This is a question still to be answered.

Should we be worried? Well, in some ways it must be gratifying that so many products were able to be traced so quickly, considering the number of products that the sauce found its way into and the number of counties involved. But a wider worry is that so many food items have common ingredients from a small number of food producers. It may be argued that it is easier to monitor ingredients this way, although in this case it was left to the Italians to do the alerting, but when something does go amiss the replications go world-wide. And do we really need our food dyed in such a way as nature never intended?

All the Year Round April Fool?

It would seem that the Minister of Agriculture will be able to decide when farmers can harvest their crops. European Union rules state that farmers can apply, for the first time, for funds to grow potatoes, brussels sprouts, cauliflowers, celery and parsnips as well -as sugar beet. But to qualify for the cash the farmer will have to meet new rules.

One involves the amount of rain that may fall in winter: farmers, if they want the subsidy, are banned from harvesting the crop if the ground is saturated. Saturated ground depends on the location of puddles in a field of crops. If the puddle is within 20 metres (66ft) of a field gate, it is not standing water; if it is 21 metres it is. Farmers with puddles outside the 20 metres zone can only hope that the minister will declare that "exceptional weather conditions" apply under *the* regulations, permitting the minister to order farmers to harvest crops.

A consumer's diary

In the last magazine I mentioned the changes taking place in Plymouth, and since then, in just three months, more have been announced.

The largest, and possibly the most welcome, are the improvements to Central Park. We already have a state-of-the-art football stadium, but with only three sides complete. However, plans are now in place to complete it in 2006. Also included in the scheme are plans to build a new ice-skating rink, swimming pool and sports facilities to replace those to be lost when the Pavilions site is redeveloped as part of the redevelopment of the Millbay area. Many members will recall that when the current ice rink in the Pavilions was planned it was proposed that it would be of competition size - sadly when the plans were finalised, cost restrictions meant that the size of the rink was down-graded to a kidney-shaped fun rink, taking away the opportunity for competition events.



A plan that was a disappointment was the announcement that the Grand Hotel is not to be reopened, as a hotel, but will be converted into luxury flats. After a lengthy period of repairs following the

extensive damage caused by the fire, I think all Plymothians assumed we would shortly be introduced to a refurbished hotel and therefore the announcement was met with surprise and disbelief.



The city centre shopping mall work continues at a tremendous pace - each week the changes are very noticeable. The developers must be congratulated on their site management - considering the tremendous scale of the project and the central city location, road hold-ups and public inconvenience has been limited.

Their flagship store was to be the introduction to Plymouth of Alders. Sadly, this company has since gone into receivership, but Marks and Spencer have now confirmed a massive expansion of their store to become one of the largest in the development. Again, the disruption during the building will be kept to a minimum with the store trading throughout the period.



Plymouth is also seeing a greater choice of restaurants, with many new players in the last 12 months.

Derry's Cross has seen the arrival of La Tasca and Varsity and the expansion of the chain, Subway. Mutley Plain has Restaurant 1 with interesting views over the busy junction.



On the Barbican, JD† is simply a delight, with an interesting menu using local produce, and a sprinkling of the very local spirit, Plymouth Gin! This restaurant, not a cafe, as the name would suggest, serves light lunches and evening meals and is situated in Southside Street, within the Distillery, the home of the Plymouth Gin tour and exhibition. There is also a delicatessen offering more local produce and food from the restaurant. The bread and pastries are lovely and the Grapefruit and Plymouth Gin marmalade gives each day a great start!



This month we see the changes in postal costs, with first class stamps rising by 2p although second-class stamps stay unchanged at 21p. It is disappointing that this increase is at a time when our postal service seems at an all time low. The post is delivered at a variety of times from 8am to noon, and is rarely consistent for more than a couple of days. Whilst nationally, Royal Mail, has agreed to reinstate the tabs on post boxes with day tabs - very useful to let you know if you

have missed the last collection, Plymouth appears to be one of the last to reinstate them. Boxes in Cornwall already have the tabs and I have also seen them in Exeter and the Taunton area. Perhaps ours have been lost in the post!! Did you know about the price increases? I saw no advertising, except for small signs in post offices and I suspect many may have been caught out. I hope that you have not suffered underpaid postage fees - a flat £1 fee plus the difference in post paid and post due is charged for each underpaid letter.

I have recently changed my bathroom suite and very carefully removed the cast iron bath so that it could be carried downstairs in one piece. I rang the council to arrange for its collection and transport to the tip. I was most surprised to be advised that I must turn it upside down and hit it in the middle with a hammer - which I was advised, would break it into 4 pieces - and doubtless make an awful mess. I'm off to buy my safety goggles!!

The redevelopment of Asda, at Estover, is now complete and the new look store is very different. The aisles are wider and the layout, particularly of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and fish is very attractive. The clothing department is very much larger, as are the home, music and entertainment sections.

The Hospital Bug

Our hospitals have for some time been faced with that troublesome bug MRSA. Wards have had to be closed, walls have had to be mopped and furniture cleaned in line with NHS procedures, and still the little devil surfaces.

So what kind of bug are we dealing with? The bacterial infection - Staphylococcus Aureus (Staph), is found on some 20 per cent to 40 per cent of us, mostly in our nose or on our skin, and most of the time it's harmless. The big problem is that some 17 strains or so have developed resistance to the main antibiotics, such as Penicillin, and if that fails Methicillin. These Methicillin resistant Staphs (MRSA) were first noted as long ago as the 'b0s and arrived here in the '80s, possibly from Australia.

The MRSA bug in itself is no more virulent than the ordinary Staph bug, but in patients who are already sick it can be fatal. It usually develops in hospitalised patients who are elderly, sick or have an open wound or tube going into their body. It was thought that children could be infected, it now seems that they can; and vets are reporting finding MRSA in cats and dogs.

It is not clear how widespread the incidents are in Britain, and at least one senior government adviser has been quoted as saying that the incidence of MRSA hasn't increased at all in the past few decades, only the public anxiety about it. However, Professor Barry Cookson, director of the Laboratory of Hospital Infection at the Public Health Laboratory, warns of an epidemic. There were 51 recorded deaths from MRSA in British hospitals in 1993, rising to 800 in 2002, within the overall death toll from hospital-acquired infections of 5,000 per year.

The spread of MRSA is hotly contested. Some say it is principally poor standards of hospital cleaning after the service was privatised, but the health minister, Lord Warner, points out that standards of cleanliness in the 440 hospitals cleaned by private contractors were much the same as the 707 hospitals which have in-house cleaning teams. When the Luton and Dunstable hospital spent 25 per cent more on cleaning it became one of the least infected hospitals. However a study by Guy's hospital found that rooms occupied by patients with MRSA were still contaminated even after walls had been mopped and furniture cleaned. Lord Warner says that there is no scientific evidence that dirty hospitals cause MRSA.

Some specialists working in this field believe that it is partly the use, or over use, of antibiotics and partly the pressure to shift patients quickly through the hospitals to meet government targets that has resulted in hospital staff becoming complacent about cleaning and hand-washing.

Comparing British hospitals with those of other countries found that whereas British hospitals in 1990 had less than 5 per cent of Staph infections identified as Methicillin resistant, now more than 40 per cent have - this could, of course, be because we are more aware of what to look out for. In the Netherlands the figure is 1 per cent, in Austria 11 per cent and in Germany 19 per cent; but the incidents in Greece, Portugal and Italy are similar to here. Even in Britain the infection rates vary between hospitals.

Some current thinking is that infected patients catch MRSA outside the hospital after surgery, and then return to the wards for treatment.

One reason that the Dutch have a good record with MRSA is that they have far more single rooms. However a study by the medical journal *The Lancet* found that isolating people in single wards did nothing to fight off infection.

Work is going on to find a vaccine that can be used to treat MRSA, but if the antibiotics don't work the only cure is the body's own defence system.

Energy Efficiency Gets Teeth

From April 2005, Part L of the Building Regulations - Heating Services, will require installers to only fit domestic gas boilers that have an A or B Energy Rating. These special energy ratings are given to domestic boilers to indicate how energy efficient they are and range from A to E, A being the most energy efficient.

There are some minor exceptions to this requirement, but if you are changing your gas boiler after April, make sure an A or B rated appliance is fitted. This will generally mean fitting a condensing-type boiler which has its own special installation requirements. If installed before April 2005 merchants may have been selling off their old stock by special offers because their stock did not meet the new energy efficiency requirements.

Home Insurance Prices Compared

The insurance market is now very competitive no matter whether you are looking for travel, motor or household cover.

With Buildings Insurance due for renewal in January we turned to "Which" and their December 2004 issue to trawl through their Best Buys, together with some other companies of our own choice.

"Buildings Only" cover was required for a four bedroomed house built in 1990 with a sum insured of between £125,00 and £128,000, located in a low risk area and occupied by a husband and wife both in their seventies with one claim on their building cover in the last three years. All offers of family legal protection and home emergency cover were declined in order to keep the quote as simple as possible for comparison purposes.

Some quotes were obtained over the internet and some by telephone with the results as follows:

Company	Contact Method	Annual Premium	Claim Excess Standard	Claim Excess Subadeoce
Egg Home Insurance	internet	£ 85•00	£ 50•00	£ 500
Norwich Union Direct	internet	£107•00	£ 60•00	£1,000
Tesco Insurance	internet	£108•15	£ 75•00	£1,000
Saga Home Insurance	telephone	1:120-00	E100-00	F-1,000
Allianz Cornhill	internet	£147•49	£100•00	£1,000
Lloyds Bank Insurance	telephone	£134•66	£50•00	£1,000
Cornhill Direct	internet	S:158-08	E100-00	i:1,000
Help the Aged Insurance	telephone	£161•70	£100•00	£1,000
Churchill Home Insurance	internet	£170•10	£ 60•00	£1,000
Legal & General Insurance	internet	E173-70	E100-00	F-1,000

The process of obtaining quotations took a lot of time, probably about three to four hours but in retirement time is plentiful, and the difference in the prices above the savings available made it all worthwhile. So don't automatically accept your premium if you want to save money. But do remember, make sure that you are comparing like with like.

property has been carried out by a registered competent person, or by an application made to the local authority, Building Control Department, who inspected the work to confirm it met the standards.

Further details can be obtained from Plymouth City Council Building Control on 01752-304343, who have an excellent guidance note on this subject.

The Sports News

No longer is it just a race for football clubs to get to the top of a football league, they also want to get to the top of the "top of the shirts" league. Most football clubs these days raise as much money as they can from sponsors, so it was with interest that we noticed that Chelsea Football Club paid Umbro, the British sports equipment manufacture, £24 million to get out of a 10-year sponsorship deal five years early. This has enabled Nike and Adidas to start chasing each other for the Chelsea contract. Manchester Utd negotiated a 13-year deal with Nike worth £303 million, and last year sold 2.5 million replica shirts worldwide against Chelsea's 250,000.

It's not only sports equipment manufacturers that are big bidders in the sports world. Television companies are hard at it too, bidding to show big sporting events: This will be the last summer that terrestrial television will broadcast the live England Test Matches on Channel 4. The England and Wales Cricket Board have, for £200 million, allowed Mr Murdoch's satellite broadcaster exclusive live rights to all England's home Test matches for the next five years, with Channel 5 having 45-minute highlights every evening of any Test match - if you receive it. The BBC radio will still continue with Test Match Special. Sky also have exclusively the British Lions Rugby Test in New Zealand (25 June-9 July).

Tesco Clubcard Tracks Theft

A customer, who gave his wife a Rolex watch he found in Tesco's store, has been convicted of theft.

The watch was accidentally dropped by the owner in the supermarket and rather than handing it in to the police or trying to trace the owner, the

finder pocketed the watch and later gave it to his wife as a birthday present.

Two years later, the watch was taken to a jeweller for repair, who checked its serial number against a list of Rolex watches reported lost or stolen and finding it on the records, reported it to the police. The finder claimed the watch had been purchased for £1,500 but was unable to produce a receipt or convince the police. Using records from the finder's supermarket loyalty card, the police were able to prove the finder had visited the Tesco store in question within two hours of the real owner of the watch losing it. The finder was convicted of theft.

So you can be sure your clubcard will find you out.

A Wine-Lover's Palate-1

If this piece about wine was being written in the first year of the Group (1963) not many people would be interested. Then, most people drank beer or spirits, and women very little; wine was reserved for the London clubs, big houses and smart dinners. At Christmas port and sherry was the order of the season, and often then it was from South Africa or Cyprus, not Portugal or Spain.. There were wine merchants, of course, but somehow one felt intimidated, no doubt unjustly.

People had heard of claret, burgundy and champagne; and may have had some champagne at a wedding, although it was more likely to have been Spanish or German sparkling wine masquerading as champagne.

Because of people's familiarity with the aforesaid names, off-licences started selling wine with names like Spanish Claret, Spanish Burgundy, Spanish Champagne and Spanish Hock. Then along came that slightly sweet Lutomer Riesling from Yugoslavia, to undercut the price of German wine, and became a best-seller until the Germans won a court order to stop them calling their grape Riesling, as it was really the Slovenian grape Lasskirizling, but who would remember that?

Then the Sunday newspapers started wine clubs, and the supermarkets started to stock wine. These had the advantage of the customer not having to ask for the wine, no wrong pronunciation, and the backs of bottles started to give useful information on the serving and keeping properties of the wine. This and foreign holidays made wine popular.

Disabled Law a Run-around

On the 19th January 2005, I rang 'Consumer Direct', telephone 0845 0405060, [details page 23, or for more detail see page 4, of our Winter magazine No. 156, ed. panel]. I was answered immediately and politely. I explained about a large garden centre near Saltash, Cornwall, I couldn't visit with my wheelchair-bound mother, because of lack of disabled toilets and suitable parking facilities, even though they had a large restaurant. I wanted to know how the Disabled Act worked. The young lady took my number and said that she'd ring back. She did, within 10 minutes, giving me two contact numbers: 1. The Disabled Rights Commission, 0845 622633, and 2. Disabled Advice, 01736 751300.

On that same day at 4 p.m., I telephoned the Disabled Rights Commission. I was immediately answered, my details taken, given a reference number, then placed in a queuing system. I waited on the telephone for 25 minutes, then gave up, my arm was aching so much through holding the telephone.

Not to be deterred, the following week I tried again at 12.25 p.m., 'Brenda' immediately replied, took my details, placed me in a queue, and this time I waited for 22 minutes before I gave up.

So, I tried the other organisation I had been given, Disabled Advice, open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., they too immediately answered, but no waiting around this time, and I was given advice that the garden centre, by law, has to make reasonable access to all amenities, and that 'I' would need to take the garden centre to Court;. That was the same advice I was given by the garden centre's District Council, Caradon, when I contacted them on 01579 341000. They said they'd send a list of the new regulations to the offending garden centre.

I ask, what is the point of making a law when those in authority do not enforce it? It appears that those in authority like to pass the responsibility to ensure that the law is obeyed to the public. This is not good enough. As for the Disability Rights Commission help line, I feel it is a token gesture, therefore a waste of time. My answer to the problem, not to give my custom to the offending garden centre.

What all the wise men promised has not happened, and what all the damned fools said would happen has come to pass - Lord Melbourne



Our Members Report..

READING THE ITEM in the previous issue entitled, **Keep It - You May Need It**, reminded me of when my front door wire-less bell-push recently went wrong. The make was Friedland, and I was unable to get a replacement for this model at Homebase, which is where I had purchased the bell. But, having kept the details and receipt I was able to refer to it to find their address; not only did I find Friedland's address but I then realised that they would replace any item that went wrong within three years. So on telephoning their help line, and explaining the position, I was told to send the bell-push back to them. This I did and received a new one by return of post. So, without keeping the details I would not have realised that it was still under guarantee and if Homebase were able to sell me a new bell-push I would have bought one and still not have known, thinking it must have been out of guarantee by now.

I SEE YOUR DIARIST welcomes experiences of good and bad carrier bags. Well my complaint is the see-through ones. I, being a private person, do not want everyone knowing what I've purchased or am carrying about; and not very secure should the contents be of reasonable value, or indeed a purse. The problem with

the poorer ones that are only up to being used once, as they can't be re-used we have to use a second one, which is not environmentally friendly.

MY TWO BOUQUETS: Firstly, we seem to live in a Fairway Furniture house. Nearly all our furniture, lounge, dining room etc., and just recently hall stair carpet came from Fairway Furniture, and we are, as always, pleased with the fitting of our new carpet. We continually prefer to shop there because we get excellent value for money, and deal with staff who have worked there for many years, and are therefore experienced.

Secondly, we visited the B & Q store in Tavistock Road, and were very impressed with the staff. We were looking for Crown paint, one that was in their new catalogue. We could not find it so approached Customer Service. A lady there called Nicki was unable to trace it within the store stock as there was no bar-code. After getting another member of the store staff to look with no success, she rang their head office. After a little while they came back with a bar-code. It was then found in the store, but not with the coloured paints, because it was transparent. We went away from the store very happy about our visit.

MY ITEM CONCERNS a Breville Lightning Keep Warm Jug Kettle, model JK15, which I purchased in February this year. I, like many others I imagine, tend to leave the kettle plugged in and switched on at the mains when it is not in use, and although it has a keep warm facility for maintaining the water at a temperature of 77 degrees C when active, and draws 320mA/78 watts from the mains supply, the normal boil and keep warm options are each selected independently. The point about this particular model is that it continues to draw current from the mains under these 'not in use' conditions.

The power consumed is a relatively small amount in the region of 25 watts (about the size of a bulb in a display cabinet for instance), however, at my present electricity tariff this amounts to some E15 to E16 per year of what appears to be totally wasted power consumption; for this power is not to keep the water warm but to keep the handle warm, for the handle remains warm when the kettle is plugged into the socket. There are at least 4 different versions of this kettle in the Breville range so I imagine that it is not confined to my particular model.

I did send my findings to the consumer department of Breville in the form of an e-mail, but to date, they have not responded.

TESCO'S FINEST SCOTCH STEAK & MUSHROOM TOPCRUST PIE: The product label claims "Delicious, large, tender chunks of Scotch steak in a rich Beaujolais red wine sauce, with sauteed button mushrooms, topped with a hand-decorated butter rich puff pastry lid." **One of our readers has tried this product on a number of occasions and finds it meets all expectations. The meat is, indeed, tender, and the whole dish very tasty and wholesome.**

THIS MORNING I had cause to contact the electricity "Watchdog". I wasn't sure of the title, but did not think it would be a problem as "Watchdogs" are given in the first few pages of the Thompson local directory and the Telephone directory. I was wrong, they no longer list them.

Not able to find it in either directory, I consulted "Yellow Pages", there on page 111 I found it in minuscule print. Now knowing that it is "Energy Watch", I was able to find it in the telephone directory, page 271 - but no address, and again, in minuscule print. I telephoned them and within a few seconds, my problem was solved by a very polite gentleman in Bournemouth.

Why not publish a list of "Watchdogs" in the. "Plymouth Consumer"? [Under consideration - Ed. Panel]

NOTICE BOARD

CANNED BEANS: We read that the price of a can of beans looks set to rise by as much as 4p with a further rise likely. This is because the booming Chinese economy has caused a rise in the price of steel. Some retailers say that they may be forced to switch to "alternative packaging", but what this would be is not reported. In addition they've had to cope with a 50 per cent rise in the price of navy beans as American farmers have switched to growing the more lucrative soya.

INTOXICATING SOUND: JVC claim that their EX-A1 micro system offers, "high sound propagation and high internal loss that result in improved frequency response that is remarkable for its natural sound across the sonic spectrum." Why do we think it may be intoxicating? Simply because the speaker cones are made of birch wood that has been saturated with sake, a Japanese alcoholic drink made from rice. The company says that the sake allows the wood to be shaped without cracking or breaking. Will there, in time, be something for all palates we wonder

II~11F.ltFLORA: The Interflora members have agreed to sell 65 per cent of their trade association business to the private equity firm 3i.

OVER 75s TV LICENCE For those over 75 years of age, or approaching 75, you are reminded that although you are entitled to a free TV licence it must be applied for. Many people think that it is issued automatically, and this is not the case. It can be claimed by calling at the post office or telephoning 0845 6036 999. For any queries on TV Licensing you can call: 0870 241 5590, or visit www.tvlicensing.co.uk

ROYAL PARADE SUBWAY: We are sorry to see that the tiles in the recently filled in subway under Royal Parade, which depicts scenes from Plymouth's history had to remain in place, because all efforts to remove them had failed. It seems that they were securely fixed to the walls, A record was made for the archives. No doubt it will give archaeologists, of some future generations, something to puzzle over when they are next uncovered.

HOME WATER IIISURANCR WaterVoice the water customer watchdog has received complaints from water customers about letters they have received from Home Service to buy insurance cover for leaks. The complaint is that these letters can look like water bills, so can caused confusion. There have been meetings with WaterVoice and Ofwat, the water regulator;

and Home Services has said it would change its campaign material, and also allow customers extra time to cancel the agreement, and has offered refunds to those who were confused and took out the cover they didn't want. Our experience from members who have taken out cover which came to them through South West Water has been favourable; but it must be remembered that it is up to each customer to decide if they feel that they require such cover.

TAX CRF.DrM If you were in receipt of Tax Credits for the 2003/04 tax year you would have had to complete a renewal form in order to continue to receive credits. However, if you had not done so by 31st January 2005 you will need to make a new claim, and this can only be backdated by three months.

MORE TAX_ Remember banks & building societies normally take tax out of the interest payments before you receive the interest, so if you pay little tax (the 10 per cent rate only) or no tax, you can claim back the amount they have **taken** out. Tax Back Helpline 0845 077 6543

WAR WIDOWS The Minister for Veterans announced that war widows are to get more financial help to visit their husband's graves abroad. Widows and widowers will now have the full cost of one

visit to a cemetery paid for by the Ministry of Defence. Contact Remembrance Travel 01622 716 729.

R*3EASED POSTAL RATES

The cost of the 1st class letter rate increased from the 1st of April. All weight bands have increased. Up to 60g weight increased by 2p from 28p to 30p. The other bands increased from 4p going up to the 1000g band with an increase of 19p. There is no increase in the second class rates, but there is for other services. Remember weights over 705g cannot be sent second class. We have seen only one news item announcing the increase, and that only for the 2p increase. see also A Consumer's Diary, page 11.

THE TELECONS OMBUDSMAN:

BT has been ordered by the Telcoms -Ombudsman to reimburse half the cost of a bill it charged a couple who had been the victims of an internet dialling scam. This diverted their **number to a** premium rate line causing them to unwittingly run up a bill of nearly £800. This is a landmark ruling which opens the way for other victims to make their case. Should you be one, you should contact:

Otelo: 0845 050 1614
(www.otelo.org.uk).
or, Cisas (Internet Services Adjudication Scheme): 0207 421 7444 (www.arbitrators.org).

Looking Back

We in Plymouth are at the moment digesting the Mackay "Vision" Plan for Plymouth; indeed, we are starting to see some of the results in Armada Way. The first "Handbook of the Plymouth Plan" was published in 1943, long before the bombing stopped, and is known as the "Abercrombie Plan" after Sir Patrick Abercrombie the consultant to the plan. Because of the devastation caused to Plymouth by the 'German bombing during the second world war the Lord Mayor, Lord Astor, called in Sir Patrick to advise Colin Campbell the town clerk, and Jamie Paton Watson the City engineer. We can see the results of much of the plan all around us today, but it is interesting to note what was and was not realised in the City Centre.

It was considered that as the Hoe was so closely associated with Plymouth in the popular mind as the Thames in London or the Golden Gate in San Francisco, it should not be hidden from the City Centre. It was for this reason that Armada Way was laid out as it was; to draw the eye south to the Hoe. This is one reason that the trees have recently been felled in Armada Way and the barriers removed from the middle of Royal Parade; for they were cutting off the Abercrombie Plan to make the Hoe more accessible. Although no name was given in the Plan for this Parkway the first suggestion was The Elizabethan Way, to be laid out in ornamental gardens with seats where shoppers and others could rest.

Royal Parade was to be the same width as Armada Way with a big roundabout in the middle, where the new crossing is. There would be no through traffic making the City centre into precincts. Hotels and a residential area would be south of the Civic Centre with the cultural area bounded by North Road, Tavistock Road and Cobourg Street

*Why Not Become a **h**Member!*

The Plymouth Consumer Group, was founded in 1963 by grass root consumers. We rely on the support of members not only for funds through a modest minimum subscription of £3•75, but for collective strength. So why not subscribe by sending a cheque to the Treasurer, see page 2 for the address, payable to, The Plymouth Consumer Group.

Bits & Pieces

Porridge Oars - We see that porridge oats moved up the nation's breakfast cereal stakes last year with sales of £79m putting them just behind the leaders, Weetabix, at £83m.

Hotel Rooms - Of all the hotel rooms in the world, 65 per cent of them are in just 10 countries.

Hobby Trains - Train sets are back in vogue! Hobby report that they sold more train sets last year giving them the best performance since the mid-1970s. In the run-up to the Christmas period they sold more than 100,000 model train sets, outperforming sales of their Scalextric slot racing cars.

Chips with everything - According to the British Potato Council and funded by Britain's potato supply chain, figures show that one in four British potatoes is used for making chips and that 40 per cent of meals eaten out of the home now include chips.

They get everywhere - Who do? What do? Advertisements! Yes for the first time there will be live advertisements on the London stage. The cast of Saturday Night Fever will act out commercials for Heinz, Kellogg's and McDonald's during breaks in the performance.

Contrary to popular belief - The Hubble Space Telescope does not send back naturalistic depictions of what the human eye would see when gazing on galaxies in outer space. It is left to the scientists to add colour to the raw monochrome digital images from Hubble according to how they think the objects would look.

Seen and Heard - A member noticed, the other day on a bus, two youngsters, one at the rear and one at the front, talking to each other by their mobile phones.

CONSUMER DIRECT

To contact Consumer Direct telephone 08454 040506 weekdays 08.00 - 18.30 hrs and 09.00 - 13.00 hrs Saturdays, excluding bank holidays and public holidays. Calls on the 0845 number should be charged at a low-call rate; or go to www.consumerdirect.gov.uk

*THE PLYMOUTH CONSUMER GROUP
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
MONDAY 27th JUNE 2005 AT 7 P.M.*

SPEAKER

ALAN QUALTROUGH

Editor, of the Evening Herald

*Everyone Welcome
members & non-members*

*At the Plymouth Business School
Hampton Street
North of Charles Cross Roundabout*

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