

# MODERN TIMES

## JOHN BETJEMAN

*reflects on St Paul's precinct being Occupied*



In the shadow of the pillars, hard by Paternoster Square –  
It was hardly Wren's intention to have vagrants camping  
there.

Whisp'ring dome and candled choir stall, chancel fabric  
starts to crack;

Where the deacon dons his surplice there's a tent from  
A. C. Black.

Driven out, the poor old deacon; Dean has followed him  
in pique

All because a bearded camper garbed investments like  
a freak

Asks the question, 'Who'll inherit?' Clearly it is *not*  
the meek.

But . . . bend your ear to Beardie's message, guaranteed to  
make you cross.

Banks are free to keep their winnings, you and I must bear  
their loss.

Shut the schools and fire the nurses, let the library close  
its door:

Bankers want three million bonus or they'll take their trade  
off shore.

Double dip in distant haven, is this how the law was bent:  
Barclays on ten billion profit paying tax at one per cent?

Ghosts of Hawksmoor, Wren and Morris, Arts and Crafts,  
St Pancras high,  
Come together in the forecourt, let the heavens hear you cry.  
Say to Goldman, Morgan Stanley, Merrill, Lloyds and RBS:  
Take your bonus, tax avoidance, greed and filth and  
fiscal mess;  
Take your blackmail, coke and Porsches, let the Bishop help  
you pack;  
Hail a cab for City Airport; *go* to Frankfurt, *don't* come back.

## THE BRONTËS

*find their various houses in The Good Hotel Guide*



### Lowood Manor (formerly Lowood School House)

‘We loved it here. Mr Brocklehurst, the owner, believes that less is more and is as good as his word! Small helpings at dinner and a bracing wooden plank at bed time did me the world of good. I made friends with a sweet little maid called Jane. Sad to discover on a return visit that Mr B had to leave following outbreak of typhus and a few deaths. Health and safety gone mad!’

*Miss Helen Burns*

### Thornfield Manor

‘Mr Rochester, the manager, promised me the Candlelit Dinner Option, but then seemed to have eyes only for the young governess. Very disappointing when it distinctly said NO PETS.’

*Miss Blanche Ingram*

‘I came here from my home in Belgium for a weekend of prayer and self-flagellation. What a *ménage*! The landlord has a mistress, two fiancées and a French child of uncertain parentage. Grace, the chambermaid, smells of sherry. Demure Miss Eyre, the governess, was more to my taste, thought the fire precautions are a scandal. The best room – in the

attic – was said to be closed for refurbishment, though I distinctly heard someone moaning in it.’

*Paul Emmanuel, Brussels*

### Wuthering Heights

A long-term *Guide* favourite, though recently some guests have complained of creaky windows and disembodied voices. Others still find the ‘honesty bar’ a considerable draw.

‘Landlord Hindley (no relation to Moors Myra) certainly enjoys a glass! The young stable lad is a moody fellow and the housekeeper Mrs Dean a bit of a chatterbox. Avoid the room with the graffiti and the broken window pane. Since my narrative-framing duties necessitated only a short stay, I hesitate to go into detail, but I would say this: WH is not for the faint-hearted!’

*Mr Lockwood*

‘Our slumbers were interrupted by a man with a shovel, covered from head to foot in earth. He said he had been digging up the daughter of the house, Catherine by name, for ‘one last go-round’. What can you say? My husband and I find the comforts of our own dear Cranford far superior and we shall not be returning.’

*Mrs E. Gaskell*

‘Wow, wow, wow! I’ve come ho-o-o-o-o-me!’

*Miss K. B., Bexleyheath, London*

### Haworth Parsonage B & B

‘A charming taste of times gone by,’ writes *Anon.* ‘High tea at six, hymns round the harmonium at seven and lights out at eight. We loved the ‘eat-all-you-can porridge buffet’ at breakfast and the three silent waitresses who watched us from the corner of the scullery. Rooms a little on the chilly side.’

Male guests not welcome.

### Wildfell Hall

A new entry in the *Guide* this year. ‘Wildfell is tragically overlooked by most weekenders. Landlord Arthur Huntingdon is a bit of a ‘loose cannon’, to be sure, but his bar is ever open. Why not give it a go?’

*Anne B*

## GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

*asks Bouvard and Pécuchet to update their*

Dictionary of Received Ideas



The Angel of the North, The Millennium Bridge and Battersea Power Station. Call them ‘iconic’. Look round for applause.

You should also apply the i-word to LP covers, TV theme tunes, popular catchphrases, famous comedy sketches – anything you like except Russian religious imagery.

The Internet. Say: ‘It has given a voice to everyone.’ Ignore the fact that 90 per cent of those enfranchised appear to be bag ladies or Nazis.

Your first memory. Recount what it is. Pause, and then say: ‘Of course, I don’t know if I *really* remember it or whether I’ve just been told.’ Look round for admiration. If more admiration needed, say, ‘Up to a point, Lord Copper.’ Don’t forget to look round again afterwards.

Bath or shower. Prefer shower. Say you don’t like baths because you don’t like to ‘wallow in your own filth’. Ignore the fact that you are not a pig-farm labourer but work on a computer in a modern office.

Pall Mall and St James's clubs. Say they are 'full of old fogeys' who eat 'nursery food'. Suggest that the members go off after lunch to be spanked by their 'old nannies'.

Madonna. She does not get a new hairstyle and change of outfit between records, she 'reinvents herself'.

Some of these incarnations are 'iconic'. Be sure of which ones.

Oedipus. Say with a rueful chuckle that he was 'too fond of his mother.' Ignore the fact that he didn't know Jocasta was his mother and was so appalled when he did find out that he blinded himself.

Cricket. Call any game you happen to see 'real *England*, *Their England* stuff'; mention cucumber sandwiches and tea. Ignore the game's violent edge and the fact that it is chiefly played on matting in the Indian subcontinent.

Americans. Say: 'They have no sense of irony'. Ignore Woody Allen, Bart Simpson, Philip Roth, Walter Matthau, Jack Lemon, Dorothy Parker, Bob Hope, eecummings, John Updike, James Thurber, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, the casts of *Friends*, *Cheers* and *Frasier*, Saul Bellow, Sarah Silverman, Ogden Nash, Larry David, Joan Rivers and the entire collected *New Yorker* cartoons.



Newspapers. The *Times* is ‘the noticeboard of the establishment’. The *Guardian* is read by ‘sandal-wearing, knit-your-own-hummus-eaters’. The ‘dear old *Torygraph*’ has lost its way. The *Mail* is ‘beyond redemption’. You yourself read none of them, preferring to get your news ‘from the Internet’. It is not necessary to be more specific.

Modern novels. You don’t read them, because you prefer something with a ‘proper story’.

Classic novels. You don’t read them either. You prefer biographies, because they deal with ‘real life’.

Politics. Boris Johnson ‘adds to the gaiety of nations’. Assert that ‘dear old Wedgie Benn’ turned into a ‘national treasure’. ‘Maggie’ was a ‘union-basher’. Most MPs spend the day ‘fiddling their expenses’. You yourself don’t vote because ‘they’re all as bad as each other’. While propounding this view, feel free to blame ‘the media’.

## JONATHAN SWIFT

*has a Modest Proposal for the London bicyclist*



It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town to see the garish yellow jerkins of those upon the two-wheeled pedal-driven conveyance as they mount the walkways with no concern for the safety of the ambulant population, be they infant or advanced in years; or on the highway ford upstream against the legal flow of four-wheeled carriages which might at any moment flatten them; nor yet pause at coloured beacons posted only for their safe passage, but rather pass through with nose held high for all the world as though inviolate, not subject to the laws by which we lesser mortals must comport ourselves; and venture forth at night disdainingly even rudimentary lanthorns while shaking choleric fists against the lawful citizenry.

As to my own part, I feel that this yellow-jerkined company, convinced of its superiority, should put it to the test. I propose that we withdraw our beleaguered and inadequate militias forthwith from Mesopotamia and the poppy fields of the Pathan tribesmen, bring them and their feeble blunderbusses home; and in their place that we dispatch six yellow-jerkined companies upon their two-wheeled conveyances to ride full tilt against the enemy cohorts.

For being immune from ordinary danger, such inviolable and superior troops could surely bring home the victory that

has eluded our more conventional cavalry these many years. And for provisioning such a force would need but little: a puncturing repair device for each man would render unnecessary the behemoth of the King's ordnance; while for lethal weaponry, what could be more effective in the war against the lesser races than the adamantine power of the two-wheeled cavalry's self-admiring sneer?

