

## The Listener Crossword Setters' Dinner 28<sup>th</sup> February 2004 : Newcastle

The Dinner took place at the Copthorne Hotel, Newcastle upon Tyne: a very smart location, right on the riverside, with close-up views of all the six bridges that cross the Tyne at this point. The day was cold, crisp and snowy, but happily the weather didn't prevent all the participants from getting there: we did lose three, but that was owing to illness, bereavement, etc. A couple of last-minute replacements turned up (relatives of a Setter, visiting from Canada) so the total attendance was 75, of whom 40 were Setters:

**A8RGG, Alberich, Aragon, Arcturus, Ark, Auctor, Bandmaster, Bufo, Derek, Dimitry, Elfman, Elgin, Enigmatist, Gos, Hamamelis, Henry, His Nibs, Jago, Leo, Macbu × 2, Machiavelli, Mespot, Monk, Mordred, Mr Lemon, Mr Magoo, Nibor, Obiter, Oyler, Pabulum, Phi, Ploy, Radix, Samson, Tea Leaves, Third Man, Tiburon, Trev and Viking.**

The Dinner was jointly organised by **Jago** (Jim Coulson) and **Hamamelis** (Hazel Fells): **Jago** handling the funds and the enrolments, and **Hamamelis** handling the liaison with the hotel over dinner and table plans, etc.

By 6.45pm, the bar was buzzing with Setters and Guests: the Solver Silver Salver and the Ascot Gold Cup were on display; name-badges were being pinned on; introductions old and new were being made.

After the meal and the loyal toast, **Jago** announced that today was **Hamamelis**' 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and he then presented Hazel with a bouquet of flowers which included Witch Hazel (look it up!) whilst the attendees sang Happy Birthday to her.

**Jago** then proposed a toast to "absent friends", apologies having been received from **Arachne, Ascot, BeRo, Brym, Bundle, Caper, Centigram, Charabanc, Corylus, Duck, Gioconda, Jasan, Kea, Lato, Mass, Morix/2, MynoT, Ozzie, Piccadilly, Pilcrow, Politicaster, Qadi, Sabre & Schadenfreude.**

As with last year's Dinner in Cambridge, *The Times* had very generously donated money towards the evening, so we were able to discount the meals by about 20% and provide bottles of wine on each table: plus of course we had to allow the "all-correct" solvers to have a free meal on us Setters! There were nine all-corrects this year and seven were able to attend. The first two (separated by using the "countback" system) on John Green's list had won before – Glen Mullineux and David McNeill (the latter not present) – and they both kindly deferred to number three on the list: Roddy Forman. The others, in order, were Simon Anthony, Andy King, Mark Goodliffe, Steve Rice, Peter Fowler (not present) and John Grimshaw.

After **Jago** had presented him with the Salver, Roddy gave a short address in which he named his favourite puzzles (a Baker's Dozen) of the past year and then announced the winner of the Ascot Gold Cup. Having discussed the past year's efforts with his fellow all-corrects (using a points system) they had come up with a winner: and so, by a one-point margin, the Gold Cup was awarded to **Ark** for his puzzle *No Turning Back*. Roddy then kindly circulated a list of his favourite Listener clues from the past year.

**Jago** made use of his role as MC to make a short plea in favour of some less demanding puzzles, to help those (like himself) who are not strong solvers, but who still enjoy a bit more of a challenge than the standard cryptic fare of the dailies. We don't (he said) want Setters to take pride in the fact that nobody got their puzzle right, or that only 10 people managed to send in an entry. There was some applause and a reasonable level of agreement with this sentiment.

Finally, Gerry Taylor (Deputy Managing Editor of *The Times*) made a short speech in which he rather amusingly outlined the way in which the Listener Crossword came to be in *The Times*, and how it seems to be able to stay there rather unnoticed, and thus remains safe for all of us. He finished by saying that he hoped the Times/Listener affair would end up in the future as the reverse of the ideal marriage: "Forty years and *always* a Cross Word".

When closing the formal part of the Dinner at around 10.30, and thus opening up the rest of the evening for drinking and crossword talking, **Jago** mused on the need for an organiser for next year's (75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary) Dinner. During the post-prandial chats, Paul Henderson (**Phi**) said he would take on the organisation once again for 2005: venue to be confirmed, but possibly London or Birmingham.

When **Jago** and partner retired to bed at about 2.30am, a small number of die-hard crossworders were still to be seen chatting in the main dining room (as usual!).