

The Times Listener Crossword Setters' Dinner – 2017

The 2017 Dinner was held at Jurys Inn, Gateshead Quays, on the banks of the Tyne. The guests were delighted with the riverside setting, which gave superb views of the Millennium Bridge and other Tyne crossings, plus an unrivalled vista of Newcastle-upon-Tyne across the water. We had a very good number of guests – 110 were booked; but we had one no-show; although to counteract that, we had a very late addition at 11.30 on the morning of the Dinner itself (though that still didn't beat last year's record, where the even later addition happened at ten past five in the afternoon!). So in fact, 109 people in total sat down to Dinner, with 52 Setters being present: **Aldhelm, Aramis, Arepo, Artix, Bundle, Ben Trovato, Chalicea** (also **Rasputin/3**), **Cubic, Derek, Dilwitch** (also **Dragon/2**), **Dimitry, Dragon/2, Elap, Emu, Encota, Enigmatist, eXternal, Ferret, Hamamelis, Henry, Homer, Hotspur** (from the USA), **Hypnos, Ifor, Jago, Kea, Kruger, Lato, Little Hare, Mohawk** (also **Morph/Micawber**), **Mountain Ledges, Nod, Oliver, Ottorino, Oyler, Pabulum, Pilcrow, Ploy** (also **Harpy/2**), **Politicaster, Raich, Ratatösk, Samuel, Serpent, Shackleton, Shark** (also **Rood/2**), **Smudge, Stick Insect, Third Man, Tiburon, Trev, Verbascum** and **Xanthippe**.

This time, **Jago** gave the toast "To Absent Friends" at the start of the Dinner – as he particularly wanted to mention **Atlas** (Mick Polley) who had hoped to attend, and had indeed paid, but who sadly had died only 3 weeks prior to the Dinner date, after fighting cancer. We also lost another Listener Setter during this past year: **Eel** (Les May). **Jago** then delivered Apologies from a further 26 Setters: **Ascot, Brimstone, Bufo, Centigram, Charybdis, Colleague, Garth, Hedgehog, Hedge-sparrow, Ilver, Macbu** (another late drop-out, due to injury), **Nibor, Nudd, Ozzie, Phobis, Phi, Poat, Pointer, Sabre, Salamanca, Simian, Stan, Tea Leaves, tnap, Towser** and **Tut**. He then read out a brief email from David Parfitt, the Puzzles Editor for *The Times*, who was on holiday, but who said, "Ahead of tomorrow evening's Listener Dinner, I wanted to thank you on behalf of *The Times* for organising this year's event once again. It is so gratifying that this wonderful crossword series has such dedicated supporters, and I really do appreciate all the effort that you put into celebrating the puzzle in this way every year."

At the end of the meal, **Jago** first of all introduced the winner of the Radix Auditorum Claret Jug, for Best New Solver: Rosalie McCrossan. She gave a short speech that was particularly memorable, for stating that her main aim in attempting Listener Puzzles was to try to win a Dictionary, and she said she was *still* trying! **Jago** next announced the Winners (plural) of the Solver Silver Salver: Tristan and Lucie Melen, who are a "solving pair" (we have had such, before), and of course, Tristan follows in his father Simon's footsteps, by gaining the SSS. Tristan's first words were to thank last year's SSS Winner, Richard England (**Third Man**), who is still technically at the top of the rankings, with 207 correct entries as at the end of 2016 (the Melens had 182, which is still impressive, especially considering their *youth*). Before announcing the winner of the Ascot Gold Cup, Tristan went to the piano (which Simon had brought along!) and he then played, while Lucie sang a wonderful parody of the Flanders & Swann song "The Gas Man Cometh", all about the delights and difficulties of solving Listener Puzzles. The winner of the Ascot Gold Cup for Best Puzzle was then announced – and it was (once again!) **Shackleton**, for his puzzle celebrating the epic journey of his namesake. **Shackleton** commented that, as with the famous Polar Explorer, he tried to "bring everyone home with him" at the end of his puzzle, so that they survived the experience and arrived safely at the end of the solving journey.

The final presentation was for the Bronze Casket – the prize for the Table Quiz, so expertly put together by John Henderson (**Enigmatist**) – and this was won by Table 3 (the same Table Number as last year: but with different occupants). The judging, as before, was done by John's wife, Jane Teather, who awarded Table 3 the Casket on the strength of their tie-break offering a "DLM" clue holding the letters of the Quiz's theme, Dame Vera Lynn, who is shortly to reach the grand age of 100. The Bronze Casket was seen to pass through several hands during the rest of the evening and it was last seen in the clutches of John Finnemore (**Emu**), though whether he has officially taken on the responsibility of refilling it for next year, is not at all clear...

After the award of the Bronze Casket, **Jago** declared the Formalities at an end: and John Henderson kindly proposed a vote of thanks to **Jago** (Jim Coulson) and Jan Antonovics for organising another successful Dinner. Finally, **Jago** announced that the 2018 Dinner will be in Paris – to be organised (as it was, the last time it left our shores) by Sylvie Vanston. Then general drinking and chatting carried on, with the last ten or so Setters and Solvers finally leaving the bar at around 3.30am.