

The Times Listener Crossword Setters' Dinner – 2018

The 2018 Dinner was held in Paris, in the 1930s-style *Salons du Relais*, on the 1st floor of the historic Gare de l'Est. In spite of the indifferent weather, and a layer of snow on the elevated terrace, the guests enjoyed the location. Considering they had to cross the Channel, and dig out their passports and euros, there was quite a good turn up – 74 were booked; but we had four no-shows, two of whom – Phil Lloyd (**Ploy**) and his wife Sue – had the indisputable excuse of having just become grandparents of twins!

Finally, 70 people in total sat down to dinner, with 31 Setters present: **Aramis, Arepo, Artix, Bandmaster, Ben Trovato, Chalicea** (also **Rasputin/3**), **Dragon/2, Eck, Emu, Encota, eXternal, Ferret, Hellebore** (also **Danda**), **Henry, Homer, Jago, Kea** (also **The Bard, Dolos**), **Little Hare, Mohawk** (also **Morph, Micawber**), **Nemo** (from the USA), **Pabulum, Quinapalus, Raich, Shackleton, Shark** (also **Handyman, Rood/2**), **Somniloquist, Spud, Stick Insect, Third Man, Tiburon** and **Verbascum**. The unusually high ratio of partners was noted, possibly attracted by the magic of Paris (even when it drizzles).

The venue, the cremant-kir apéritif with its assortment of canapés, and the four-course meal and wines were greatly appreciated (as well as the draught beer specially delivered and served by Sylvie Vanston's son Matthew, in spite of a foam dispenser in overdrive).

At the end of the meal, **Tiburon** gave the toast "To Absent Friends". Sadly, we lost five Listener Setters during this past year: **Hamamelis** (Hazel Fells), **Calmac** (Michael Macdonald-Cooper), **Atlas** (Mick Polley), **Hera** (Miss J M Prescott) and **Elefa** (Nigel Sharp), and also a faithful solver and 2000 winner of the Solver Silver Salver, **Stephen Rice**.

Tiburon then delivered Apologies from a further 56 Setters: **Agricola, Apt, Ascot, Bufo, Centigram, Charybdis, Colleague, Cubic, Derek, Doc, Duck, Elint, Essira, Garth, Goujeers, gwizardry, Hedgehog, Hedge-sparrow, Hotspur, Ifor, Ilver, Imbricata, KevGar, Kruger, Mountain Ledges, MynoT, Nibor, Nudd, Nutmeg, Oliver, Ottorino, Owzat, Oyler, Ozzie, Paddock, Phalarope, Pieman, Pilcrow, Ploy, Poat, Ratatösk, Sabre, Tea Leaves, The Ace of Hearts, The Irishman, tnap, Towser, Tut, Twin, Virgilius, Wan, Xanthippe, Zag**.

Specially mentioned were **Enigmatist**, who was retained at home at the last minute, **Phi**, who had hoped until the last moment to come from New Zealand and, last but not least, **Trev**, who will send statistics as soon as he receives this report. He asked us to mention **Commander Derek Willan** who turned 100 last year and is still sending correct entries from time to time. He also informs us that 2017 was the 40th anniversary of the statistics, started by Michael Rich. His first solvers' list contained 22 names, of whom 6 still send entries, including Richard England, the only solver to appear on every list.

Tiburon then introduced the winner of the Radix Auditorum Claret Jug, for Best New Solver: **Peter Blayney**, who set a new record by scoring an All Correct right from scratch! An American recently settled in Ireland, he explained that he wished he'd known about the Listener Crossword sooner, although it was so time-consuming that he'd fallen very much behind with his DIY work on his old house. Tiburon next announced the winner of the Solver Silver Salver: Shirley Curran (**Chalicea**). She first thanked the two previous years' SSS winners, Richard England (**Third Man**), who is still at the top of the rankings, with 259 correct entries as at the end of 2017, and Neil Talbott (**Elint**) who follows with 215, for handing down the trophy. Chalicea, whose own run is 185, explained how infuriating it was to find that you had forgotten a backslash or confused two letters in the latest grid, thereby slipping back to the bottom of the queue. Sylvie Vanston, who co-hosted the event, certainly shared that feeling! Chalicea then proceeded to an illustrated presentation of the grids that were examined and scored by last year's 24 All Correct. She reminded the assembly of the content and qualities of each, before announcing the winner of the Ascot Gold Cup for Best Puzzle: Shackleton's *Army & Navy*, his third win in a row and fourth overall. In his acceptance speech he thanked the vetters (**Kea** and **Tiburon**) for their efforts at maintaining the high standard of the Listener Crossword.

The final presentation was for the Bronze Casket – the prize for the Table Quiz, cunningly devised by John Henderson (**Enigmatist**) – and this was won by Table 2. The judging was done by a "jury" composed of John's wife Jane Teather with Shirley and Charles Curran, who awarded the winners the Casket on the strength of their tie-break offering an elegant clue referring to Oscar (Wilde), the Quiz's general theme being characters of the NATO alphabet. The Bronze Casket had been replenished by John Finnemore (**Emu**) and no doubt whoever walked out with it at the end will do the same next year.

Before declaring the Formalities at an end, the hosts thanked the "usual" organisers, Jim Coulson (**Jago**) and Jan Antonovics, for their support and helpful hints for the preparations of another successful Dinner. Sylvie Vanston emphasised the role played by *The Times* in the survival of the Listener Crossword. She remembered her husband introducing her to the Times cryptic crossword in order to read his paper in peace. Finally, **Jago** announced that the 2019 Dinner will be organised in York by John Henderson and Jane Teather. Then general drinking and chatting carried on, with the last guests leaving the bar at around 1:00 am (after which time they would have been trapped in the closed-up station).