



A new General Secretary...

UNISON has a new General Secretary, Andrea Egan. In the ballot, she won just under 60% of the vote. She took up her new post in January.

She has said she will not take the UNISON's general secretary salary of £181,000 a year, but instead will receive the wage of a social worker, her former profession. She says this will keep her in touch with what ordinary union members face in the real world.

She said: "This result means ordinary Unison members are at long last taking

charge of our union. "We will put faith in members' decisions and stand up to any employer, politician or cabinet minister who acts against our interests."

Andrea, who has served as UNISON's president since 2022, has criticised welfare cuts, backed a wealth tax and called for a reversal of austerity in schools and local government.



■ Andrea Egan

... and new premises

BIRMINGHAM UNISON branch are in the process of moving out of McLaren House to a new premises.

The new premises is in a business courtyard in 'The Wharf' on Bridge Street, just behind the Hyatt Hotel in Broad Street. It is walking distance from Birmingham New Street, while there is a tram stop outside the Hyatt Hotel.

It is also accessible for drop off and pick up

by car in the courtyard complex. There is a ground floor meeting room which the Retired Members will be able to use for our Committee and Coffee mornings, although there will be some disruption until the office move is completed. For example, our AGM will be held at the Birmingham & Midland Institute in March. We will keep you posted over the next few months.

■ The Wharf business courtyard

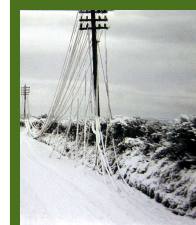


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In memory of Yvonne

IT IS with great shock and sadness that the Retired Members must announce the passing of our Membership Secretary, Yvonne Hadley.

Yvonne had always played an active role, not just as an officer on our Committee, but participated in our group events, and always sent reports of her many travels for us to put in the *Brum*, and was at our Christmas lunch in December.

She sadly passed away after a short illness in February.

Yvonne began her working life as a seamstress, and her two daughters often recalled how she made all their clothes for them.

She joined UNISON after becoming catering manager at both Cardinal Newman and Selly Park Girls schools. She was very close to her two daughters, Sophie and Emily, and her three grandchildren.

Yvonne did not want a funeral, and instead the family will be holding a 'Celebration of Life' in memory of Yvonne, which will be a Prosecco and Afternoon Tea event that will give us the chance to share our fond memories of our friend.

The family have also said they do not wish for any floral tributes for Yvonne, but would like donations to be made to The Birmingham Hospice.

Before she died we sent her flowers, and Yvonne replied:

"I would like to thank you all for the beautiful flowers you sent me, they are so unusual, its very kind of you all .

"I really can't put anything into words right now, but thank you."



■ From the top: Yvonne at a Committee meeting; with fellow members at a day out to the National Arboretum; on holiday in the Lakes with Susan McNeill and Ann Robertson; on a family holiday in Rome



Chainmakers Festival date announced

THIS year's Women Chainmakers Festival will take place on **Saturday 4 July**.

In 1910, the Women Chainmakers of Cradley Heath fought a successful 10-week dispute to establish the right to a minimum wage for their labour.

Each year the Women Chainmakers Festival recognises and celebrates the role of women within the trade union move-

ment and aims to reclaim the often forgotten contribution of women to Britain's industrial heritage.

The family friendly festival usually includes a banner procession, history tent, activities for children, music and speakers. Members attended last year's event (during a heatwave!) and this year discussions are underway on hiring a mini-bus.

Pension warning at Regional Council

The UNISON West Midlands Regional Council met last November.

One key report was from **Adrian Turner**, who sits on the Regional Local Government Pension Scheme board.

He said auditors assess the fund every three years and they will look at the percentage paid by the employer. Currently the WM pension fund is booming at between £11 - 23 billion.

However, as the fund is doing well your employer may seek to adjust the percentage they pay. Those branches in the fund are encouraged to check with their

employer if the percentage they pay has dropped. This is a double-edged sword as if the fund drops, it maybe that in three years' time, when the auditors revisit the fund, it may be that employers will have to increase the percentage they pay.

At the end of the meeting, our delegate Maureen Wade, as Chair of the Regional Retired Members, asked for it to be noted what great work the retired members are doing, that there are some very active members who are always willing to help with campaigns and projects, so make sure to call upon them.

Manchester bus boost

PENSIONERS in Greater Manchester are to get all day free travel on the buses, after the 'twirly' ban was lifted on 1 March.

It is the initiative of the Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham.

In the West Midlands, we cannot use our concessionary passes until after 9.30am.

It is hoped the Greater Manchester scheme, which at the moment only extends to Bee Network buses, can be spread to the rest of the UK

Meet the 'Iron Ladies'

AS March includes International Women's Day, we have organised a day out to the MAC in Edgbaston to watch *Iron Ladies*, a film about the miners' wives in 1984-85 strike.

We bought 10 tickets for distribution to any interested members on a 'first come, first served' basis, which have all been taken up.

Full review in the next issue of *Brum*.

WASPI women – ‘we’ve been let down again’

THERE has been widespread anger at the DWP Minister Pat McFadden refusing compensation for the WASPI women.

The WASPI campaign has argued for years that 1950s-born women were not effectively notified about the 1995 Pensions Act, which raised the State Pension age for women born on or after 6 April 1950 from 60 to 65 – a change that came into effect in 2010.

In March 2024, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) published a report on the impact of the change. It said the DWP had failed to provide "accurate, adequate and timely information" on the age rise and called on the Government to provide compensation.

The Tory government ignored the decision. Labour, while in opposition, gave support to the WASPI campaign on the election trail, but then abandoned them when in office. McFadden, as a new DWP

Secretary of State, said he would look at it again.

He has now too refused to implement the PHSO recommendation. The reasoning for this is very weak.

The Government response stated: "Creating a scheme to assess individual impact, or based on self-certification would be a highly impractical and time-consuming process, particularly given the difficulties of establishing what individuals knew around 20 years ago." This is a new defence – 'it's all too time-consuming'!

Angela Madden, chairwoman of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, said: "WASPI is taking legal advice and all options remain on the table.

"We stand ready to pursue every avenue in Parliament and in the courts to secure the justice that has been so shamefully denied."

Council Tax to rise – despite no let up in bin dispute

COUNCIL Tax is set to rise again in Birmingham, even though we haven't had a proper refuse service for over a year.

Birmingham City Council is proposing a council tax rise of around 5 per cent – this follows hikes of around 7.5 per cent and 10 per cent in the past two years.

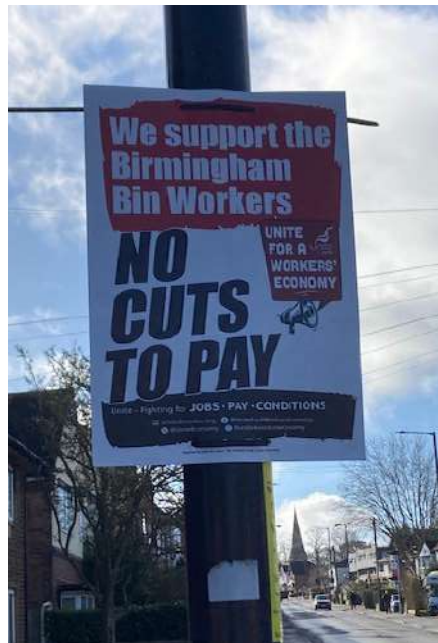
The Council Tax announcement came as Birmingham has now moved out of its 'Section 114 Notice', and is therefore no longer 'bankrupt'. This now allows the City Council to put new money back into funding services, and they have promised an extra £130 million for frontline services. This is good news, but still a drop in the ocean after a decade of government cuts and restrictions to the tune of £1 billion.

Also, it is a confused message to the electorate – they are saying 'hurrah we are no longer bankrupt but, oh, here's another 5 per cent on your Council Tax'.

That will not wash with voters in the forthcoming May elections, alongside the City Council's inability to resolve the year long bin workers dispute, just as in the same way they dragged out the Care Workers dispute for 18 months, rather than get around the table, negotiate and settle.

Unite members in the refuse service have now voted to continue the strike for another six months. At a rally in January in support of the bin workers, there was a call made for a Council Tax strike.

Dr. Desmond Jaddoo MBE called for



■ The striking bin workers have put up posters appealing for support throughout the city

people who are able to do so, to withhold their council tax payments from April 1, 2026.

He said: "Refuse collection is a core service that people pay for through their Council Tax and Birmingham City Council is failing to deliver it."

Thirty-five Labour MPs also signed a letter in support of striking Birmingham bin workers in January and called on the Prime Minister to take action to end the dispute.

TV Licence goes up

THE TV licence fees are going up, rising by £5.50 a year.

The rise is in line with inflation to provide the BBC with a stable financial footing, while the government continues the Charter Review Green Paper public consultation on options for BBC future funding

Support for households in severe financial difficulty will continue, with free licences for over-75s on Pension Credit.

The cost of an annual colour TV licence will rise by £5.50, or the equivalent of an extra 46p a month.

Latest figures show the BBC is the UK's number one media brand, with 94 per cent of UK adults using the BBC each month last year, and it remains the UK's most widely used and trusted news outlet.

2,500 deaths – the cost of fuel poverty

A SHOCKING 2,500 people died in England last winter as a result of freezing temperatures, according to the latest report on cold mortality by the UK Health Security Agency.

The National Pensioners Convention has joined anti-fuel poverty campaigners in pointing to the government's initial decision to end Winter Fuel Payments for many pensioners as a factor in the new figures.

NPC general secretary Jan Shortt added that these "figures should be to the shame of the government who consistently say that they are working to make things better."

She said: "When will we see a change in attitude that enables us all to have access to reasonably priced energy, fully and properly insulated homes free of dampness?"

In its first ever report on the matter, the agency said three cold episodes between November 2024 and January 2025 had driven the high death count.

The most intense episode in early January saw 1,630 deaths over a six-day period, with researchers saying older people were most affected.



■ Birmingham Retired Members petitioning after the Government announced plans to scrap Winter Fuel payments

Birmingham Retired Members Section

COMMITTEE CONTACTS

Chair	Maureen Wade	Technology	Steve Garnowski
Vice Chair	Jennifer Delisser	Social Co-ordinator & Speakers	George Lewis
Secretary	Marie Kehoe		
Acting Membership Secretary	Perdeep Muthi	West Midlands Region Unison	Maureen Wade Brian Allbutt
Treasurer	Liz Hobbs	West Midlands Pensioners Convention	Maureen Wade Brian Allbutt Perdeep Muthi
Birmingham Unison Branch Committee Liaison	Nick Hulley	Committee Members without portfolio	Loretta Parris Doreen Grant Susan McNeill Jenny Smith
Welfare Officer	Eleanor Dixon		

You can contact Birmingham UNISON Retired Members Section via
Birmingham Branch head office on 0121 200 3331

Presentation time!

TWO members had a nice surprise when all the others secretly got them presents as a thank you for all the work they have done for Birmingham Retired Members.

At the November coffee morning (below) members ambushed the Chair **Maureen Wade** with a candle gift set and a framed word 'mash-up' of how members would describe her in one word (all favourable we hasten to add!).

Then at the Christmas lunch, **Susan McNeill** (right) was presented with a bouquet to thank her for her long service, both in her former role of Treasurer and a valued Committee member.



Annual General Meeting - Wednesday 18 March

THE Annual General Meeting of the Birmingham UNISON Retired Members Section will take place on **Wednesday 18th March**, 11am – 1pm, in the city centre at the **Birmingham & Midland Institute, 9 Margaret Street**.

Refreshments and a free buffet will be available (please let us know of any dietary requirements).

The guest speaker will be **Nicholas Turnbull**, from UNISON's head office who has taken on the Retired Members role, and will talk about the national retired members work plan, and the training on offer.

The main purpose of the AGM is to elect the Officers, and positions are open to any paid-up member (not Associate Member) in the Retired Members Section. The positions are as follows:

- Chair
- Vice Chair
- Secretary
- Membership Secretary
- Treasurer
- Welfare Officer
- Editor of the Newsletter
- IT Officer
- Social Co-ordinator
- Branch Representative on the Birmingham UNISON Branch Committee
- Two delegates to the UNISON Retired Members Regional Committee (at least one must be female)
- Three Delegates to the West Midlands Pensioners Convention
- Delegate to the West Midlands TUC Network
- Delegate to 'Keep our NHS Public'

Nominations for the above posts need to be sent to the Chair, Maureen Wade, no later than Monday 9th March 2026. Her contact details are:

Maureen Wade
wade5ss@btinternet.com
 0121 354 8223 / 07709 863367

Subscriptions:

If you have not paid the annual £10 subscription fee already, this can be done at the meeting.

You must be a paid up member to vote in the above elections. Cash is preferred, but if you wish to pay by cheque, make it payable to **UNISON Birmingham Retired Members**. See you there!

Chair's report: Another good year - a look back at 2025

■ By **Maureen Wade**

IT WAS another active year for our Retired Members Section, which continues to go from strength to strength, with an influx of new members, as well as continued healthy attendances at our all our Coffee Mornings.

We have ensured that we have a balanced programme of activities, with our coach trip to Shrewsbury, and our picnic in the park at St Paul's, getting involved with regional UNISON events, alongside several rambles organised by Susan, and Teresa.

Largest meeting ever

2025 got off to a cracking start when the National Chair of the Retired Members, **Rosie McGregor**, came to speak to us, which attracted a record attendance of 65 members packing into our meeting room.

This was followed up by the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, **Simon Foster**, addressing one of our coffee mornings giving us a good insight into the policing issues for our city.

Our annual 'Black History Month' meeting in October was a great success too as, given 2025 was the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, we looked at the contribution of black and Commonwealth troops.

Our guest speaker was **Horace Barnes** from WAWI, and we were pleased to get permission from the Soldiers, Sailors and Air personnel Families Association to reproduce their on-line exhibition on the subject for the meeting.

Other coffee mornings had equally



■ Full house - the packed meeting room for the address by National Chair **Rosie McGregor**

fascinating contributions, from **Tom Kelly** of the Diabetes Association through to **Sue Reid** talking about Birmingham's historic 'back to backs' housing (which I was sad to miss being on holiday, because I grew up in such houses!).

We also tried a quiz for the first time, which all enjoyed, so we are keeping that on the annual programme of activities.

Campaigns

WE have played our part in UNISON campaigns, so were pleased to see the Government back down over Winter Fuel payments, but less happy to see yet another government refuse to meet the reasonable demands of the WASPI women – the fight on that issue continues, and we may have to resurrect the letter-writing to MPs campaign we undertook in 2025 once more.

We have continued to be a component part of the Birmingham branch, with ▶



■ Cheers! On the day out to Shrewsbury

Another good year - a look back at 2025 (continued)

regular updates on the UNITE bin workers dispute, which – scandalously – is still ongoing as the City Council refuses to engage seriously with the unions, in what has become a re-run of the intransigence they showed towards the UNISON care workers in their 18 month long struggle.

The Equal Pay settlement however, was a great victory, including for some of our newer members who will get their rightful payments at last.

As Retired Members, we were allowed to vote in the General Secretary election and we made sure all our Retired Members were aware they could take part.

Meanwhile, with many first and second generation West Indians in our group, we made a donation to help aid the victims of Hurricane Melissa.

Trade union events

WE participated in trade union events too, with members taking our banner to the annual Chainmakers festival in Cradley Heath (on the hottest day of the year!) and also to the Workers Memorial Day service in St Philip's Square in the city centre, to commemorate all who have lost their lives in industrial accidents.

UNISON activities

WE participated too in UNISON Retired Members regional events, with a good turnout from our Birmingham section to the annual Regional Seminar event, where we discussed the union's *Charter for Older People*, while several of us joined the Regional Women's gathering.

The Birmingham Branch nominated the Retired Members for a regional award for our communications work, but unfortunately we didn't win this year.

Once again, we had a full delegation take up for the National Retired Members National Conference, held in Brighton (which proved much easier to get to that the 2024 conference in Llandudno).

Our Birmingham branch sent four delegates – **Maureen Wade** and first-time attendees **Sharon Carby McLean, Ashbell Dryden, and Perdeep Muthi**.



We had three motions from Birmingham that were included on the Conference Agenda, and our delegates made some very moving contributions to the debates, with Perdeep speaking for the first time ever at a national UNISON event. Both she and Sharon delivered very polished performances when moving our motions.

Time to play!

IT IS not all work and no play of course! It was a great turn out and a great day for our annual summer coach trip, this time to Shrewsbury – although some of us did literally miss the boat, when it came to the planned boat trip.

Our picnic in the park this year was in the novel setting of St Paul's in the Jewellery Quarter, after an invite from **Rev David Tomlinson** of St Paul's when he came to speak at one of our coffee mornings.

We rounded off the year with our annual Christmas lunch at the Hilton Gardens Inn, and I would like to thank **George Lewis** and **Liz Hobbs** for all their work in organising the event. Everyone agreed that both food and service were much better this year.

Sad times too

UNFORTUNATELY no year passes without some sadness, and during 2024 we lost two former active members, **Grace Carter** and **Geoff Stott**, and then at the beginning of the year our Membership Secretary and Committee member **Yvonne Hadley** (see page 2). Yvonne was active until the last, and her last event was joining us for the Christmas lunch. She will be very missed.

Some thank you's

Finally, I would like to thank those members who have kept our Section going:

Marie Eaton for taking on the Secretary role;

George Lewis for organising all our trips and activities;

Liz Hobbs for taking on the financial reins, never an easy job – particularly as we set up a new account, plus new banking regulations that we had to adhere to; **Jennifer Delisser** for taking on the Vice Chair role.

Steve Granowski for the Website and continuing IT and technical support; **Eleanor Dixon** for continuing to provide Welfare support for our members, and

■ Our delegation to National Conference



■ Our successful Black History Month meeting on World War II

ensuring we still keep in contact with those members who are no longer able to attend our meetings;

Nick Hulley and **Steve Granowski** for attending Branch Committee.

Brian Allbutt for representing us on the West Midlands Pensioners Convention.

We also have a great group of Committee members: **Susan McNeil, Loretta Parrish, Doreen Grant, and Jenny Smith** who have all provided on-going help throughout the year.

■ We tried a quiz for the first time too



Farewell Rosie

THE National Chair of the Retired Members, Rosie McGregor, is standing down this year. We wish her well!

The new position of Chair of the National Retired Members Committee is going to be co-shared by **Andrew Coburn** and **Mary Holmes**.

Adult Social Care: 'powered by people'?

By **Perdeep Muthi**

I attended the '*Powered by People*' co-production summit in Birmingham on Thursday, 26th February 2026.

The event aimed to gather feedback from people receiving care and support from Birmingham Adult Social Care, carers, and professional agencies.

The agenda included introductions, networking, and discussion tables focusing on specific topics. The six discussion points were:

1. Social Work Needs Assessment
2. Working in Communities
3. Access, Equality, and Service Locations in Adult Social Care
4. Mental Health Service
5. Safeguarding Service
6. Waiting well Policy

I chose to discuss points 2, 4, and 5. Each discussion lasted 30 minutes, and I felt it was more of an information-gathering exercise. Some participants dominated the conversations, limiting others' input.

There seemed to be more professionals than carers or clients present.

Key concerns raised:

- All adult initial assessments are conducted via telephone, with no face-to-face option
- Children's assessments, however, are done face-to-face
- Lack of face-to-face or telephone contact for ongoing support, with everything being digital/online
- Poor communication, with some carers and clients only informed via email
- Inability to contact professionals and long waiting times
- Agencies attending were unaware of one another's services, highlighting a need for better collaboration and communication
- Concern was expressed around services only being available Monday to Friday, with no 7-day provision.

Similar issues were raised across all discussion points.

On a positive note, Birmingham Connect to Support is a great resource - it's a community directory that can be accessed by scanning a QR code, making it easy to find local support services.

I also connected with Lucy from *Age Concern*, who offered to attend one of our coffee mornings.

Similarly, *Homestead* - a local organisation, provides free community wellbeing



■ An overriding message was poor communication with clients and carers

sessions, educational talks, exercise classes, and subsidised accredited training, and they're keen to engage with our community.

I collected a bunch of leaflets and booklets,

so feel free to get in touch if you'd like to borrow any.

Overall, the event highlighted significant challenges, but also opportunities for improvement and collaboration.

Public meeting *NHS 10 Year Plan - transformational or further privatisation?*

**Monday 23rd March
6.30pm**

**Venue: Room 2, Council
House, Birmingham**

Speakers:

John Puntis: Chair, Keep Our NHS Public

Dr Ahmed Helmy: Consultant Physician

Caroline Havers: Phlebotomist,
Gloucester NHS

Chair - Sandra Durkin, Regional
Secretary, WMPC

Organised by Birmingham Keep Our NHS Public

Don't get sucker-punched by Reform UK

By **Brian Allbutt**



WE'LL all have a difficult choice to make in this forthcoming May elections. Some people may consider voting for Reform UK.

I am not one of those, but if you are considering voting for Nigel Farage's Reform UK party - including its new batch of former Conservative MP's that includes Robert Jenrick, Suella Braverman, Nadhim Zahawi, and Nadine Doris - beware!

Success for Reform UK in the May Elections across our region, and that could well include Birmingham, Walsall, Sandwell, Dudley, and Wolverhampton, would pave the way for a future Farage-lead Reform Government in just three-year's time.

If you vote Reform UK now, you will be putting your Pension Triple Lock at risk, not to mention:

- the end of the National Health Service as we know it, with the introduction of an insurance based health service
- further cuts to public services and benefits, including Pensions Credit and Attendance Allowance
- they have called for worrying changes to public sector pensions – including the Local Government Pension Scheme
- it is doubtful the Concessionary Bus Pass scheme in England would survive a Reform UK Government

All this would be done, not in the interest of the two million pensioners living in poverty in the UK, but to introduce tax cuts for the wealthiest.

This should come as no surprise when

those at the top of Reform UK consistently argue for cuts to the welfare system to fund tax cuts, that Reform UK was always going to be the next best option for those 18 and counting Conservative MP's, including leading former Cabinet Ministers, who have defected to Reform UK.

Of those, none have accepted any responsibility or shown any remorse for the 14 years of economic austerity they inflicted on the country – in fact many have clearly stated that one of the main reasons they defected to Reform UK was their belief that a future Reform UK government's economic policy would be firmly based on even further austerity.

Council Tax rises

OF course, when actually in power Reform UK have a reality check.

Despite promising to slash taxes, in the local authorities they now control Council Tax is going up: by 9 per cent in Worcestershire, by 5 per cent in Kent, and 4 per cent in Nottinghamshire.

They have strange priorities too – having put up Council Tax in Nottinghamshire, they have just spent £75,000 on putting up 164 new Union Jacks!

'Ordinary bloke'?

AND what of Nigel Farage, who presents himself as just an 'ordinary bloke'? He is the privately educated son of a stock broker, who attended Dulwich College, one of the most elite schools in the country.

Farage's latest entry in the parliamentary

Union membership soars in Reform held authorities

ONE positive to come out of Reform UK's recent local government victories has been a surge in local government workers joining UNISON membership. In areas where Reform UK performed strongly, the number of people joining unions has shot up by 272 per cent.

In response to UNISON members concerns about Reform UK, UNISON has produced a guide on how to counter Reform UK in the May elections. It can be found at: unsn.uk/2026-elections

Registry of Members Interests shows he earned £1.2 million last year, including a declaration of £81,607 paid by *GB News* for just 32 hours work – that's not a bad hourly rate!

And that's on top of his MP salary of £91,346.

Also, you should judge Reform UK by the company they keep.

Far Right links

There is well documented links between Reform UK and some of the most extreme right-wing organisations and individuals, including Tommy Robinson, Britain First, Patriotic Alternative, and the Homeland Party, who all urged their far right supporters to vote Reform UK in the 2024 General Election.

Farage meanwhile himself has a long history of right-wing and misogynistic comments.

A great admirer of Enoch Powell and pal of Donald Trump, Farage has openly supported Marine Le Pen (the leader of the far-right National Front, since renamed the National Assembly, in France), and he has also praised Italy's far right leader Georgia Meloni.

He also has links with the far right AfD party in Germany, having addressed one of their rallies in Berlin in 2017, as well as – when an MEP – welcoming AfD member Beatrix von Storch (the granddaughter of Hitler's finance minister) into his 'Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy' group in the European Parliament in 2016.

So be careful who you vote for on Thursday May 7th.



By **Nick Hulley**

The story of the severe winter weather of 1962 - 1963

Recently, I was watching pictures on the TV of the severe snowstorms that hit large areas of the USA, and how in our country everything seems to grind to a halt if we get 3-4 inches of snow.

I was reminded of the last time we experienced such extreme weather conditions in the UK, which was the winter that spanned late December 1962 to early March 1963.

What's known as the 'Big Freeze' started on Christmas Eve 1962 in Scotland, with icy winds and heavy snowfall. Glasgow had its first white Christmas since 1938. By Boxing Day, these conditions had spread to the whole of the UK.

It became so cold so quickly people were burning a lot more coal to keep warm which was producing smog – a mixture of fog and smoke, grey-yellow in colour and so dense that I can recall not being able to see the other side of my road, as a child.

The first fatalities of the Big Freeze occurred on Boxing Day 1962. The Glasgow to London express train was packed with 500 passengers. Travelling through Cheshire the train driver didn't see a red light due to the weather conditions and the train slammed into the Birmingham to Liverpool train which was stationary on the same track, resulting in the death of 12 adults and 6 children and many injuries. Sadly, there was more loss of life to come.

From 26th / 28th December, a series of blizzards hit the UK with the south-west of England being hit the hardest with gusts of 90mph winds and snow drifts 20 feet deep. Three people died of exposure and two people suffocated in a car, during these blizzards in the south-west.

Into the new year of 1963, it carried on heavily snowing. Ice became a major problem because in some areas, temperatures fell to -22 degrees, the lowest temperature recorded since 1740!

The sea around the south coast of England froze, and the ferry to the Isle of Wight was cancelled due to "dangerous pack-ice".

Stretches of the River Thames were frozen solid and it was said that you could skate on the Grand Union Canal from Brentford to the Midlands.

Isolated rural areas especially in the south-west were cut off and because the roads were virtually impassable, supplies were dropped in by helicopter. On Dartmoor ponies were used to get mail and limited supplies to isolated farms and villages.

Working class people in towns and cities also suffered as a result of these awful weather conditions. At the time three million people in the UK were considered to be living in abject poverty in slum housing.

Many people still lived in back-to-back houses which were two up two down dwellings, with shared outside courtyard toilet and washing facilities.

One third of the population did not have a plumbed in bathroom, six million people shared outside lavatories with their neighbours. I recall my Dad putting hurricane lamps in our outside toilet to try to stop the pipes from freezing solid.

In the third week of January another blizzard dropped a further four inches of snow and the country's road system, which virtually ceased to function. 200 main roads were closed for days, some for 50 consecutive days.

The government realised how perilous the situation was becoming, especially with regard to coal supplies to get through to where they were needed i.e. electricity power stations, industries such as steel for example, and of course for heating homes.

So, because the roads were virtually unusable, they decided to concentrate on making sure that rail tracks were usable.

At this point in time, our railways were starting to transition from steam engines to diesel locomotives. The problem with the diesel locomotives, was the diesel fuel was freezing in the tanks. ▶

The Big Freeze

(continued)

Thankfully, we still had enough steam trains and a railway system that had a greater reach into areas of the country, that it doesn't have today.

The reason for that being that only three weeks after the Big Freeze ended, the Tory government passed what became known as the Beeching Act (named after the then chair of British Railways) which closed a huge amount of the local lines to smaller towns and villages, the use of which had stopped people from being totally cut off during the Big Freeze - 2,000 stations and 5,000 miles of track were closed.

On 29th January, more blizzards started hitting the UK. As more bad weather piled in, despite the best efforts of the rail workers, road maintenance and people who volunteered to keep the roads open, the nation was starting to run out of coal and other essential supplies, such as meat, milk and vegetables due to the effect of the weather was having on our farmers.

Cattle were dying in the fields. What little milk could be drawn from cows was freezing in the containers or was unable to get from the farms to delivery points because of the state of the roads.

Farmers were having to use pneumatic drills to get vegetables out of the frozen ground. Vegetables temporarily went up 500 per cent as a result.

The financial impact on the nation was huge. The estimated cost of trying to keep the country running was £200 million pounds – about £3.6 billion pounds in today's money.

The human cost was also severe. 120 people died from exposure by being outside in the elements. The number of people who died as a result of the cold and its related illness in their homes or in hospital is not known but it must have been many thousands.

Our wildlife was also badly affected. For example, ornithologists estimated that 50 per cent of our wild birds perished.

On 5th March 1963, the big thaw started. After 10 weeks of sub-zero temperatures and snow blizzards, the big thaw brought new problems with thousands of burst pipes and wide-spread flooding.

However, once this was over the country got back to normal fairly quickly. The nation got through by community spirit, helping each other out, looking after the elderly and infirm in their communities, giving them coal, food and blankets if they needed them, fetching



pensions from the Post Office for people who could not get there, digging strangers cars out of snow drifts, volunteering to help clear roads and rail tracks, mirroring the war time spirit of the Blitz.

Could such a weather event happen again? The 1962/63 freeze was a freak weather event.

The UK was hit by two large dense areas of high pressure, one from Siberia and one from Greenland, which sat over the country for about 10 weeks.

We should understand that climate change does not just mean hotter summers. It can also mean very cold and snowy winters as recently experienced by the USA.

How would we cope now? Although we have a motorway system now and modern snow-ploughs and gritting lorries, as I said at the start of this, these days even moderate snow falls seem to "gum up" the works.

I think that central government cuts and neglect of our infrastructure are largely to blame for this.

I think we would have to rely on helping each other out again as in 1962/63 and despite attempts by some of our politicians to divide our communities and spread hate, I believe we could and would still get through it together.

■ Above: ten foot snowdrifts and more were common place. Below: a farmer digs out the local church.

Photos: Richard Johnson - Wikipedia



The wonderful 'Mother Seacole'

■ By Maureen Wade

Being interested in military history, my husband Bob's holiday read last summer was *Hell Riders* by the historian Terry Brighton, about the Crimean War in 1854 against Russia.

So he was quite surprised when he reached Chapter 19 to find himself reading about the decisions of the 1999 National Conference of UNISON!

You may well ask, what has UNISON got to do with the Crimean War?

Well it was relevant to the book, because that was the year nurses in UNISON voted to move International Nurses Day from the traditional 12 May – the birthday of Florence Nightingale – to another date. This was because they wanted the rightful rehabilitation of that other nursing heroine of the Crimean War, Mary Seacole.

There is no question that both women made a major contribution in establishing the role of women in nursing. And although they were never rivals, their stories – and approach – were miles apart.

Nightingale was very much a product of the Victorian establishment. From a wealthy family, she had access to education when many even rich women did not, and a role at a private hospital in London's Harley Street. She was well connected too, putting her plans to take a female nursing team to the Crimea to Sir Sidney Herbert, Britain's Secretary of State for War, via his wife.

She wanted to recruit 40 nurses to attend the wounded at the Scutari field hospital behind the frontlines. She recruited 38 ladies of the 'right sort', 24 of whom were Nuns.

Nightingale's approach to treating the wounded was a regime of cleanliness, which she achieved with military precision.

Unfortunately for Nightingale, the death rate at Scutari remained appalling, running at 40 per cent, of which only 10 per cent died of their actual wounds. The culprit was the fact that the hospital was built over an open sewer from which mainly Cholera spread. That's not Nightingale's fault: biosecurity was in its infancy in the 1850s.

That aside, given that she was of the 'right sort', she was immortalised back home because of the reports from the *Times* journalist William Russell in the Crimea, and the legend of the 'Lady with the Lamp' was born.

Mary Seacole's road to Crimea was a totally different story. The daughter of a Jamaican mother and a Scottish Army Officer, she helped her mother run a Boarding House in Kingston that cared for sick British soldiers and sailors.

She married the godson of England's most famous hero, Admiral Nelson. He sadly died young, and Seacole took over the running

of the Boarding House. She specialised in using herbal remedies, the knowledge of which the slaves had brought with them from West Africa to the brutal plantations of Jamaica. It was the only 'medicine' they had access to, but they did bring comfort from the cramping and diarrhoea and vomiting, that accompany many diseases.

She came to international attention when she visited her brother, who also ran a 'sick house' in Panama, just as there was a Cholera outbreak. Her treatments won her international praise. She returned to Kingston just as Yellow Fever was gripping the city. Such was her reputation that the British Army asked her to set up a field hospital in their colonial Head Quarters.

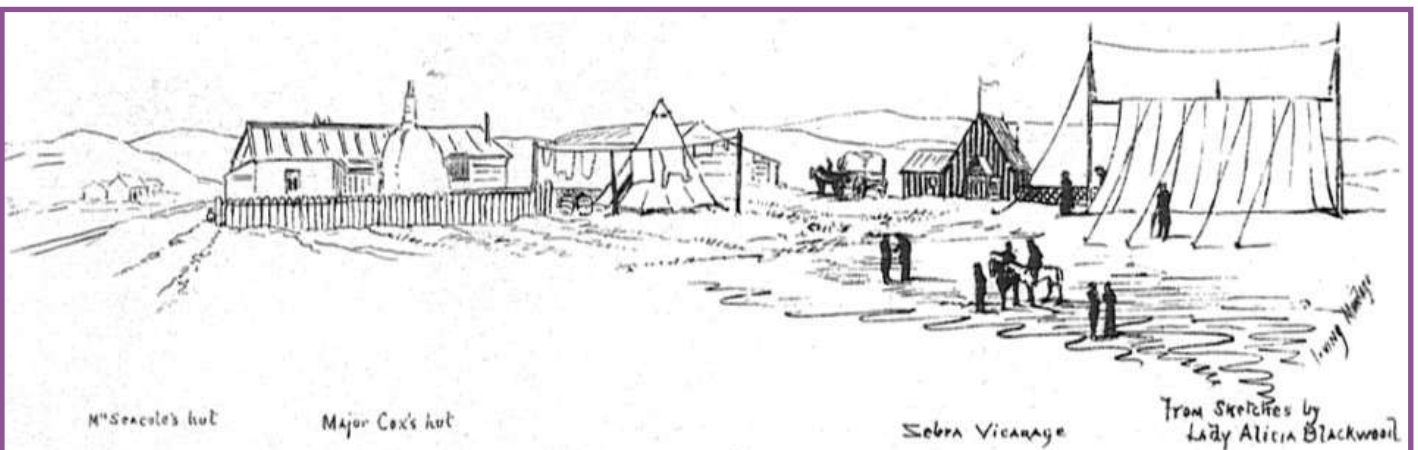
When news reached Jamaica of Nightingale's call for nursing recruits for the Crimean War, Seacole set off for London, naively thinking her recommendations from the British Army in Kingston and her late husband's connections with Lord Nelson would help her application.

She didn't even get past Nightingale's assistant who took one look at her skin colour and gave a response that the Windrush generation would hear 100 years later: 'Sorry, No Vacancies!' Even though Nightingale sailed to Crimea two nurses short of her 40-woman quota.

Walking back from the 'interview' Seacole would later write: "Did these ladies shrink from accepting my aid because ▶



■ Mary Seacole



■ The 'British Hotel' hospital - a sketch by Florence Nightingale's friend, Lady Alicia Blackwood ▶

Mary Seacole (continued)

my blood flowed beneath a some-what dusky skin than theirs? Tears streamed down my foolish cheeks."

But this was Mary Seacole. She did not give up, but instead spent all she could buying medicines and set sail for Crimea regardless. She set up quarters at Balaklava (scene of the infamous Charge of the Light Brigade), close to the siege of Sevastopol that was still underway. Using wood from wrecked ships she built the 'British Hotel'.

Her's was a more holistic approach to nursing, not just offering a sick bed with all her remedies but also laundry, clothing repairs, a canteen, and games room. She often gave palliative care too, caring for soldiers on their deathbed. She was soon dubbed 'Mother Seacole' by the grateful troops.

Seacole was also one of the first 'paramedics'. During the siege of Sevastopol, even under fire she would go to the aid of and rescue wounded soldiers.

But when the Crimean War came to an end, Seacole disappeared from history, while Florence Nightingale became a national legend. Seacole's story was not rediscovered until 1973 when the Jamaican Nurses Association located her unkept grave, and the journey for true recognition for Seacole began, leading to the 1999 UNISON Conference decision.

Ever since, right wing commentators and politicians have tried to belittle Seacole's achievements, dismissing her as little more than a 'boarding house



keeper' (and worse!), in trying to denigrate her in their petty 'woke-ism' diatribes.

That nonsense is easily answered by the events that took place *after* the war.

The war had ended abruptly in 1856, just after Seacole had spent a huge amount of money stockpiling food and medicines, which were all now suddenly redundant.

She returned to England penniless, facing bankruptcy proceedings. Fortunately, Crimean War veterans heard of her plight, and began writing protests to the newspapers. The Seacole Fund was established, to which many prominent members of Victorian society contributed to, including Florence Nightingale.

The campaign culminated in the Seacole Fund Grand Military Festival held in 1857. Again, demonstrating the levels of support Seacole had in the military, the festival planning was headed up by Major General Lord Rokeby who had commanded the elite 1st Division – the Guards brigades - during the Crimean War.

The festival was held in the Royal Surrey



Gardens over four days, featuring over a thousand artists and 11 military bands. Over 80,000 attended the fund-raiser – that's more than were at Live Aid at Wembley stadium in 1985! That was an incredible achievement in what was then an exclusively white society.

And Seacole continued to be very popular throughout the Victorian era. She ended up living comfortably off the earnings from her book, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, the first autobiography written by a black woman in Britain, which sold in its thousands.

So that is UNISON's connection with the Crimean War. Our union took the first steps since the British Army, to rightly get Mary Seacole recognised as a true British heroine.

■ **Top:** British soldiers in the Crimea. **Above:** the blue plaque commemorating Mary Seacole at her former residence in Soho Square, London. **Left:** another sketch by Lady Alicia Blackwood, showing inside one of the makeshift Wards.



Thomas Paine: no statues for the father of modern democracy

While in Brighton visiting their daughter, Maureen Wade and her husband Bob made a visit to Lewes on the Sussex coast, where the ‘giant of the Age of Enlightenment’, Thomas Paine, wrote his greatest works.

Thomas Paine was the architect of the ‘free world’ and democracy as we know it today, inspiring the American and French Revolutions that overthrew the old Monarchies and laid the foundations of parliamentary democracy.

From these humble little houses, Paine drew up his ideas for what would become *The Rights of Man*, and the *Age of Reason*, which shook the world.

He had an incredible life. Born in 1737 in Norfolk, at the age of 19 he ran away to sea to... become a Pirate!

On returning to England, he was a ‘poacher turned gamekeeper’ taking on a new role as ... a Customs & Excise Officer.

Stationed in Lewes, he was later thrown out of the service after organising other Customs officers to demand raises in their salary.

He was impressed by the new political movement in America, and travelled there in 1774. He stayed for a while with the Iroquois Native Americans, and was impressed by their democratic decision-making processes that involved the whole community. It was this that inspired him to look at how democracy should be for all people.

He was a theoretical leader and soldier in the American War of Independence, and then – after having to go ‘on the run’ from the British government when returning home – moved to Paris.

There, he became a leading member of the French Revolution: Napoleon even told him

that he went to bed every night with a copy of the *Rights of Man* under his pillow.

Paine soon fell from favour however, with those who rose to the top of the revolutions he had inspired.

He narrowly escaped execution in France, as the regime shifted to dictatorship and military conquest, with Paine dismissing Napoleon as a ‘charlatan’.

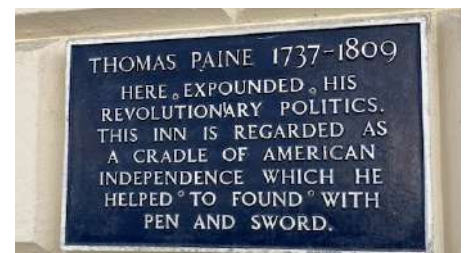
Fleeing to the new United States he had helped found, he was ostracised there too, as his critiques of the limitations of the new ‘democracy’ being constructed and his calls to abolish slavery stung the government of George Washington.

Significantly, when he died in Greenwich Village in New York, only six people attended his funeral, two of whom were freed black slaves.

And still he is written out of history today.

You’d think there would be giant golden statues erected to him across the democratic world, but all you will find is the occasional plaque or, as there is in Lewes, a very small museum.

He famously wrote in the *Rights of Man*: “My country is the world, and my religion is to do good”. Even today, there are many ‘democratic leaders’ who find such sentiments far too dangerous.



■ Above: the small museum to Paine at his former home in Lewes, and below the blue plaque on the Lewes pub where he formulated his ideas

PARTY TIME!

CHRISTMAS cheer! It may seem ages ago now, but a great time was had by all at the annual Christmas lunch at the Hilton Gardens Inn, at Brindley Place in the city centre.

Over 50 members came for the three course meal - and there would have been more if that nasty bug hadn't been doing the rounds! See you at the next one.



Happy Holi and Duleti!

DHARSHAN BUMBLA is currently visiting family in Berlin, but sends Holi greetings:

Suprabhat! (good morning!)

Holi is a major Hindu festival celebrated as the Festival of Colours, Love and Spring.

It lasts for a night and a day, starting on the evening of the Purnima (full moon day) falling on the Hindu calendar month of Phalgun.

In Holi we burn the Holika first ...

and the next day all is colourful.

Similarly we should follow this in life if we burn ego, anger, greed and arrogance.

The very next moment (Duleti) life will have colours of happiness, blissfulness and effortlessness.

Also after playing Holi in the morning we are supposed to go to a friends or family to make amends about any hard feelings or misunderstandings. A new reset for the year ahead.

Happy Holi and Duleti!



Quiz time!

TIME to get those brain-cells working.
SUSAN McNEILL has put together these teasers for you...



1 What was Gertrude Ederle the first woman to do? It earned her a ticker-tape parade in Manhattan attended by two million people.

2 Which dogs were named due to their bark, but are actually rodents?



3 In which English county is the port and resort of Folkestone?

4 From which London station does the Hogwarts Express depart in the Harry Potter films?

5 Which country's capital stands on the Vltava river?

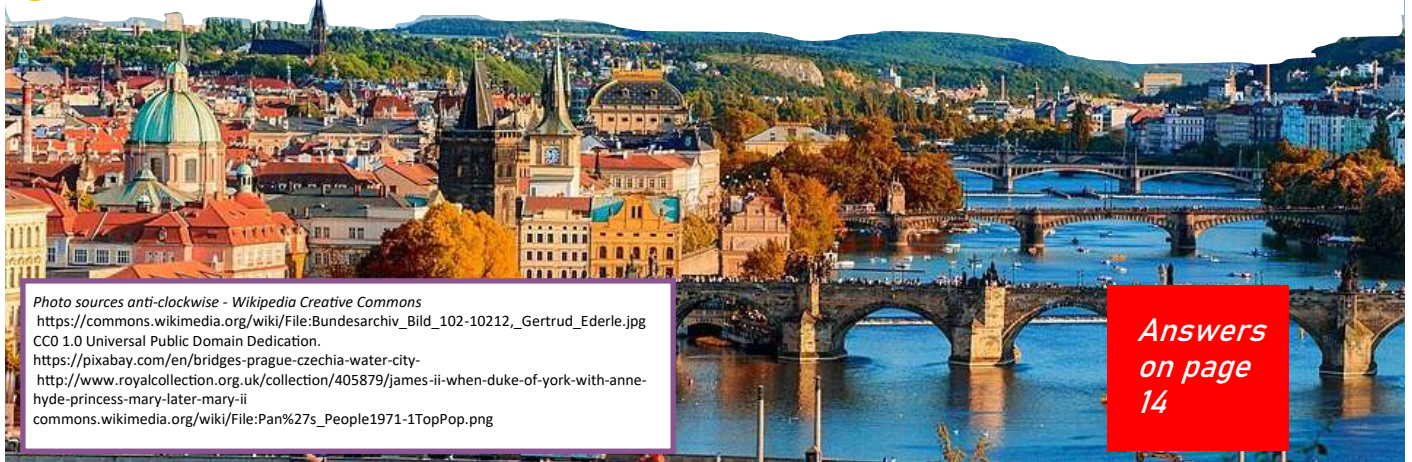


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commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pan%27s_People1971-1TopPop.png

6 Who was the last of the Stuart rulers?



7 Who wrote the 1924 novel *A Passage to India*

8 In which continent is the mountain K2?

9 What was the name of Ronnie Barker's shopkeeper character in the BBC sitcom *Open All Hours*?

10 Which well-known female dance troupe appeared regularly on *Top of the Pops* between 1968 and 1978?



11 St Mary's, Tresco, and St Martin's are islands of which British archipelago?

12 Jaipur is the administrative capital of which state of India?

13 What is Baz Lurhmann's musical film starring Nicole Kidman?

14 In which decade was the Hubble Space Telescope launched?

15 The Seagulls is the nickname of which Premier League football club?

Answers on page 14

TOP TIPS

FOLLOWING a discussion at a Coffee Morning, we asked members to send in their top tips around the home and garden. Here's the first one:

By **Kate Molloy**

I WAS given this handy hint by my cousin who has cats so cannot use commercial weedkiller.

This has worked for me on weeds between slabs and in my garden beds very carefully to avoid healthy plants.

Boil a kettle and use the boiling water to scald the weeds. Immediately pour table salt onto the blanched weeds. The water must be boiling and salt applied straight away to be effective.

Gardener's World.com magazine online also suggested boiling water alone.

Make new friends through Meetup UK



Meetup UK is a popular online platform used to find and join local, in-person, or virtual community groups based on shared interests, hobbies and professional goals. It acts as a networking tool for people to meet new people, build friendships, learn new skills and connect with neighbours.

Key details about MeetUp in the UK:

Purpose: It is widely used to organise events such as bookclubs, walking groups, meals out, holidays, professional networking, language exchanges and hobbyist.

Functionality: Users can search for groups in their area (London, Birmingham, Manchester, or smaller towns), join them and attend events.

Cost: It is generally free to join as a member and browse events. However,

By **Perdeep Muthi**

organisers who create and manage groups may pay for **subscription-based plans**.

Safety: All users must be at least 18 years old.

Commonly found groups in the UK include sports, technology, art and culture, and professional networking. It serves as a hub for finding community-driven events from casual pub chats to structured workshops. Details below:

Meetup: <https://www.meetup.com/>

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. Swam the English Channel
2. Prairie Dogs
3. Kent
4. Kings Cross
5. Czech Republic
6. Queen Anne

7. EM Forster
8. Asia
9. Arkwright
10. Pan's People
11. Isles of Scilly
12. Rajasthan
13. Moulin Rouge
14. 1990s
15. Brighton & Hove

Nice... Free Jazz on Fridays

Jazz Fridays at B:Music's Jennifer Blackwell Performance Space at the Symphony Hall, Birmingham, are free, non-ticketed and drop-in events, held weekly on Fridays at 5 PM.

No booking is required for these performances, which showcase local jazz, blues, and Calypso artists. *Just turn up and enjoy.*

<https://bmusic.co.uk/free-jazz-fridays>

Come and join us!



ARE you a retired member of UNISON and live in or near Birmingham?

If so, come along and meet the Birmingham UNISON Retired Members Section. We are a busy lot and we are always open to suggestions of other things to do.



PICTURES: what we get up to - out and about in Shrewsbury, enjoying the annual Christmas Lunch and joining in campaigns -

Come and join us!

