

# John Windsor



(1942 - 2016)

A series of articles that John wrote in the last year of his life.

## **Funny old world—“Where Politicians’ lies are kept alive”**

I have news for any newly-elected MPs sweating over rash pledges published in their election campaign leaflets. While most leaflets have been consigned to the oblivion of the kitchen bin, copies of nearly all of them have been collected and stored for posterity in Bristol university library’s unique collection of election literature. Dating back to 1892, its 30,000 items have been called Britain’s biggest collection of lies.

If you want to know what Tony Benn told voters in Bristol back in 1955, what Tony Blair promised those who elected him as a new MP in Sedgefield in 1983 – or how Justine Greening, Conservative victor in Putney in 2010, campaigned against Heathrow airport’s expansion, not knowing that she would soon become Transport Secretary - then it’s all here awaiting scrutiny.

In the days before this election the library’s special collections archivist, Hannah Lowery, received telephone calls from political journalists checking up on the pledges that 2015 candidates had made in 2010. At the next election, the leaflets of 2015 will be similarly in demand as evidence. Paper ephemera they may be, but the buff cardboard files of Bristol university’s library are no hiding place for lying leaflets.

I first made acquaintance with this intriguing collection shortly after the 1992 election (at which I had lost my deposit as Natural Law Party candidate for Hackney North and Stoke Newington). In those days, the illustrious Nick Lee was nearing the end of more than 30 years as the leaflet library’s archivist and I was writing a piece on his work for The Independent newspaper.

Nick, who retired in 1997 but still visits the archive, is still, I’m sure, the only person who can correctly predict the fate of both political parties and individual candidates just by examining their printed election leaflets. I had not expected to find a political pandit. He cocked a snook at polls and pollsters. For him, emptying brown envelopes of leaflets was like emptying political entrails. Bulk, glossiness, proportion of Central Office material, all revealed to him in a twinkling whether the candidate was a safe-seater, no-hoper, try-hard, bootlicker or buffoon. In those days, for instance, the glossier, the more likely to lose.

When I met him, he had correctly predicted John Major’s 1992 majority – which was as unexpected as David Cameron’s in 2015.

I challenged him to divine the fate of a candidate whose newly delivered envelope spilled no fewer than nine pieces of election literature. “Hmm”, he said: “either a hard-working MP in a marginal, or a candidate on the offensive, probably standing for the first time”. We consulted the results. Sure enough, David Unwin, a Conservative standing for the first time in Labour-held Bridgend, had lost to Labour by 7,326 votes.

That was 23 years ago. Hannah still mails candidates – 3,971 at this election - enclosing a stamped addressed envelope for leaflets, and has also received bales of them from constituency volunteers. But things have changed. The response is less than the 85 per cent that Nick was used to and in any case print has been superseded by the net – which used to be something we caught fish in. A leaflet farmed out to a web designer tends to be less revealing of a candidate’s quirks. And more candidates are meekly accepting Central Office’s electronically mailed text and layout. (If you see an election leaflet signed by a candidate named “Name Surname”, that’s proof!) So it is hardly surprising that Hannah has not picked up the analytical skill of her predecessor. “Things have become more regular, more uniform”, she laments.

She fills gaps in the collection by downloading leaflets from [www.electionleaflets.org](http://www.electionleaflets.org), launched in 2010, after which its founders sent her a big parcel of leaflets. “We do need people to send us leaflets”, she said: “I know it may be tempting to scribble on them in anger or tear them up, but we should look to posterity”.

Then there’s [www.yournextmp.org](http://www.yournextmp.org), a sophisticated website that offers each candidate’s leaflets plus a multiplicity of electronic appendages. I accessed Elizabeth Truss, who continues as Environment Secretary, returned this election as MP for South West Norfolk with 25,515 votes, an increased majority. Her entry has Central Office written all over it. The site offers not only her highly polished leaflet but her press mentions, email address, Facebook and Twitter entries, home page, inter-active party profile and – cherry on the cake – a link to the Conservatives’ YouTube featuring David Cameron in full spate. Is that what did the trick?

In the same constituency, there’s Lib Dem Rupert Moss-Eccardt’s front cover with dodgy diagram – a three-column histogram showing the 2010 results for Conservative, Lib Dem, and third-place Labour’s 19 per cent languishing under a pointer taunting “Can’t win here!”. With a ruler and calculator you can find out whether the columns are out of proportion. Such diagrams have come in for some stick from The Guardian.

I sought the least glossy South West Norfolk leaflet to see whether it foretold a loser. Ah, UKIP’s scruffy effort: like a windblown factory notice board – maybe cobbled together with one hand, the other holding a pint of beer and a fag. As it happened, UKIP’s Paul Smyth was one of over 100 UKIP candidates who came second (with 11,654 votes). He nudged out both Labour and Lib Dems. Maybe there’s some deliberate image-making here. Scruffy = down to earth, honest. I’m sure such subtleties would not have been lost on Nick Lee.

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*John Windsor*

Funny Old World This Was the Charter This Was the Charter This Was the Charter This Was the Charter There is something missing from Swaffham's celebration of the 800th anniversary of its Royal Charter market. As I write, traders, townspeople and tourists are eagerly anticipating a grand Medieval Festival (July 18-19 weekend) at which a historical re-enactment group will spirit onlookers back to 1215, the year of Magna Carta – and the year cited for the Market Charter. There is “a fabulous programme of activities”, to quote Cllr David Wickerson, chair of the Town Team organising it. On the face of it, this “weekend extravaganza” (Watton and Swaffham Times), part of a commemoration spanning a year, is the historic anniversary celebration with everything. Battles in medieval dress, a medieval market, fire-eaters, hog roast and a “medieval encampment”. A “re-enactment” of the signing of Magna Carta together with the famous Market Charter. And a grant of £36,500 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to pay for such historical pursuits as the recording of local folklore and a commemorative Museum exhibition – plus a contribution towards the 800th anniversary celebrations. As Swaffham Town Council's website asserts: “The granting of a charter for a market in 1215 was very important for the people of Swaffham and the surrounding parishes”. But amid the jollity, some there be who raise a questioning eyebrow every time they hear the words “Royal Charter” or “1215”. For the truth is that there is no Royal Charter - or any evidence that there ever was one. The illustrious Stephen Fry, before opening Swaffham Museum's exhibition in celebration of the market, made a point of asking the Museum's manager, Dr Sue Gattuso: “What about the Charter?” Dr Gattuso told him: “There isn't one!” No voluminous 800 year old parchment roll glinting with the dust of centuries. No venerable deed inscribed in archaic secretary hand with a goose quill and with the King's red wax seal dangling from it. Not a shred. Nothing. What there is is just the opposite of a charter – a writ from King John of 22 June 1215 (seven days after he had signed Magna Carta) empowering the Sheriff of Norwich to a b o l i s h p e r m i s s i o n for Swaffham's market if he considered it was taking trade away from the long-established market at Great Dunham, seven miles away. Hardly a cause for celebration in Swaffham!

The Signpost The Signpost The Signpost The Signpost Even the writ – documented in old tomes as the earliest written evidence of a market in Swaffham – has not been found. Well, at least the 800th anniversary of 1215 can be relied on, then? Er, no. The market was trading long before 1215 as a “prescriptive” market – one that had established its right to exist by custom over time. So the whole medieval pantomime is just that? A charade? Mead is quaffed and tills jingle in Swaffham as people in fancy dress dance attendance on a rural myth? Soon after Dr Gattuso became manager of the Museum 18 months ago, she found herself on the Town Team. At her first meeting with them, at a time when plans for the 800th anniversary celebration were well in hand, she looked them in the eye and told them: “There is no Charter”. She and Marion Hancock, editor of *The Book of Swaffham* (2012) had already done enough research to establish that beyond doubt. (One said to the other: “You know there's no Charter, I know there's no Charter, but who else knows?”) Some there were, on the Team, who insisted that the Charter could and would be found. “We'll do anything to find it, even go to London!” The Team asked Dr Gattuso to continue her research. Archives were delved into. Rolls were unrolled and rolled up again. The months dragged on. Still no Charter. Some Team members began to exhibit a weary resignation. What was the Town Council to do? Announce to the people of Swaffham that an unfortunate clerical error had occurred and that a rock festival would be held instead? Admit to the Lottery Heritage Fund that the Charter is bogus and refuse to accept even a groat from them? What happened in the end? The Team went ahead. Cllr Wickerson told the *Watton and Swaffham Times*: “The events we are planning should put Swaffham on the map and help to provide a lasting boost to our economy whilst ensuring the future of our much-loved market”. That does have a ring of truth about it. Stephen Fry, briefed by Dr Gattuso and no doubt wary of uttering the sort of fable mocked by his television comedy quiz (QI) gave a speech on Swaffham's ancient Butter Cross that studiously avoided any mention of a charter. He told the crowd: “The Saturday market has been run here for more than 800 years”. Spot on, and a minor victory for Sue and Marion's undercover campaign for historical accuracy.

The Signpost The Signpost The Signpost The Signpost Facts do get twisted but history has a way of shining the truth through the cracks. There have been times down the centuries when the people of Swaffham have had good reason to keep alive the myth of the Royal Charter. For without a Royal Charter for the market awarded specifically to the town, the district authority (Breckland, based in Thetford) could have taken control of it. As it happened, the town purchased the market, its land and rights, from the Lord of the Manor in 1935. But local fears of a takeover by “them” were aired as recently as the 1970s. They die hard. Dr Gattuso wrote the history of the market for the town's 1215-2015 souvenir brochure (find inaccuracies in that if you dare) and also scripted the Medieval Festival's enactment (not re-enactment, please) of the issuing of the writ. Yes, that's the abolition writ of 1215, now elevated, in the absence of a Royal Charter, to the status of earliest official written reference to the market. History buffs will have listened carefully as the actor playing the Bishop of Norwich, standing beside King John, spoke Dr Gattuso's lines: “And now I get

this (shows writ) ... This isn't John. This is a jumped up clerk wanting to make it big... Maybe I never received it. Maybe it got damaged and the ink ran – I couldn't read it. Maybe I'll just forget about it!" Which is probably what the people of Swaffham eventually did. Until now. I asked Swaffham's town clerk, Richard Bishop, why the town was celebrating a Royal Charter that had never existed. "It doesn't exist any more", he said, and pointed me towards a statement of his published under Swaffham Town Council's logo in the latest Swaffham Newsletter, a community freesheet. I scanned it eagerly in search of proof that the phantom Charter had at one time had material form. Alas, it merely said: "The original Charter has of course been superseded by various more recent documents .." and "The simple fact that it [the market] is here 800 years later surely is testament enough to demonstrate that the charter has worked in its favour". Ex nihilo carta. And are the people of Swaffham kept awake at night by the nagging thought that they do not have a market with a Royal Charter dated 1215? Join in the festivities and judge for yourself. As Dr Gattuso put it: "We may not have a Charter. But we do have a proper prescriptive market. I'd say to all our visitors: we don't want you to come to Swaarffam fer naarffin. So we're putting on the best show possible".

John Windsor.

### Why Magna Carta still matters

The number of Royal Charters authorising Swaffham's Saturday market has always been nil. On the other hand, there are at least 21 authentic versions of Magna Carta, signed by King John on 15 June, 1215, seven days before the now-discredited date of the Swaffham market charter.

This year, the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of both charters – real and unreal – is being celebrated, so it is worth asking whether Magna Carta's seemingly sacrosanct guarantee of freedom and justice is real or mythical.

Of the 21 surviving copies, four are of the original 1215 version to which King John put his seal. One is in Lincoln Cathedral, one in Salisbury Cathedral and two in the British Museum. It was recently discovered that it was ecclesiastical scribes who copied them. Both the barons and the Church - as peacemaker - wanted copies distributed throughout the kingdom. King John was not so keen.

The peace, if that was what it was, did not last long. Within 70 days of the historic confrontation at Runnymede (the water-meadow beside the Thames chosen because its boggy ground would not support armies) Pope Innocent III, at King John's behest, had issued a papal bull declaring Magna Carta "null and void of all validity forever". The reason given by the Pope, a former lawyer, might, ironically, have been inspired by Magna Carta itself – namely, that John had consented to it under duress. Some say at sword-point.

Within ten years a third of its 63 clauses had been deleted or rewritten and today only three of them are still on the statute book.

A mere three months after Runnymede, the barons and King John were at each other's throats again. The barons renounced allegiance to King John and invited Prince Louis, son of the King of France, to accept the English throne. Civil war broke out between the barons and the King. Louis invaded England the following year. As a peace treaty, the Great Charter was dead.

There are two reasons for its resuscitation, one political, the other spiritual. Politically, John's successors on the throne used it as a bargaining tool with the barons. In 1216, after John's death from dysentery following an outrageously lavish dinner, a revised Magna Carta was issued in the name of his successor, Henry III, then aged 9, in order to win back the barons' support. There was a further Version in 1217 and the version of 1225 was finally enrolled on the statute book by Edward I in 1297.

But it is the spiritual principles of key passages in Magna Carta that have guaranteed its lasting influence. Although much of the Charter addresses specific grievances of the barons – an end to excessive scutage (fines in lieu of knightly service), introduction of uniform weights and measures, removal of the King's fish-weirs that hindered river navigation – two of the three surviving clauses contain first-ever enunciations of fundamental principles of human rights that are, even today, the first and last resort of the wronged and dispossessed. (The third guarantees freedom of the Church). Here are the clauses, 39 and 40, in the original 1215 Charter:

39. No free man shall be arrested or imprisoned or deprived of his freehold or outlawed or banished or in any way ruined, nor will we take or order action against him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers and according to the law of the land.

To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay right or justice.

For the first time, a head of state legally binds himself not to deprive his subjects of liberty and justice and concedes that not even he is above the law.

The Charter was devised by a man who deserves to be better remembered – Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, a highly educated man with a deep sense of justice who worked tirelessly to bring the King and the barons together at Runnymede.

It has been said that a single candle is sufficient to dispel darkness. So it was with those crucial few words of Magna Carta. For 800 years the oppressed of many nations have used them as a rallying cry against tyranny – in spite of the fact that in 1215, most of the population were not free men but “villeins”, feudal serfs who could not leave their lord’

land without his consent. The text of Magna Carta crossed the Atlantic aboard the Mayflower. We can pick out some of its resonant vocabulary in the United States Bill of Rights (1791) as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the European Convention on Human Rights (1950). William Wilberforce cited Magna Carta in his campaign to free the slaves. So did Mrs Pankhurst in campaigning for votes for women. More recently, lawyers representing Guantanamo Bay detainees have invoked the Great Charter.

1215 was indeed an unimaginably dark and unsettled time, not least for King John. The barons, aided by the French, had seized London. In retaliation, John had seized the barons' property. The previous year, at the disastrous battle of Bouvines against the French King Philippe-Auguste, fought near what is now Lille airport – and once described as the most important battle you've never heard of – John had failed to retake Normandy and Anjou, the last of the vast English lands of the Angevin Empire (from "Anjou"), of which John was the last, hapless, monarch. The barons, who had dug deep to pay for the war, were beside themselves with rage. Moreover, the Royal coffers were empty - a bout of monetary inflation had pushed up the daily pay for a mercenary soldier from eight pence to two shillings, a threefold increase. As if to make matters worse, in 1213, John had surrendered his entire kingdom to the Pope, after being excommunicated by him. King John, it could be said, was in the soup.

We would not have enjoyed 1215 much, either. Another impulsive act of King John's – his rejection of the Pope's candidate, Stephen Langton, as Archbishop of Canterbury and his seizure of the estates of the Canterbury monks who supported him - provoked the Pope to put an interdict – a stop - on public worship in England. Churches were locked up, the people were refused the sacraments and burials in consecrated ground were banned.

King John, as A.A. Milne put it, "Was not a good man. He had his little ways". Like murdering his nephew, Arthur of Brittany, a one-time rival to his throne, in a drunken fit. Or starving to death Matilda de Briouse property. It was a time of spiritual uplift that provided a supportive background glow for the Charter's flickering candle of freedom and justice. Unlike John, the Angevin kings who preceded him – Henry II and Richard I ("the Lionheart") - did not deign to wield absolute power but governed according to law and custom, as enunciated in their coronation oaths. In an age without parliament or police, the population regarded this principle of government by consent as their sole safeguard against tyranny. King John abused it. Magna Carta restored it.

The Great Charter's most testing time may be yet to come. New bills of rights, in England and abroad, might cunningly subvert its fundamental principles. And the United States' "export of democracy" (to Afghanistan, Iraq, and maybe Syria?) is seen by many as remote from the ideals of Magna Carta. The time may be upon us when good men once again hold aloft the 800 year old Charter as the historic gold standard of freedom and justice.

John Windsor



## It's a Funny Old World

### The wire that won the West

On the mantelpiece in my sitting room is a glass flower vase holding eight 18-inch sticks of barbed wire bearing paper flags with handwritten legends such as “Kelly’s Thorny Fence 1868”, “Hodge’s Spur Wheel, ten-point variation 1887” and, the pride of the collection, “Glidden’s Winner with factory splice 1874”.

A framed certificate propped behind the vase tells the story: “Be it known that John Windsor is duly recognised as the first English antique barbed wire collector. Be it further known that in recognition for his part in introducing the hobby of collecting antique barbed wires to Great Britain, he is hereby declared a member in good standing of our society for life”.

That’s the American Barbed Wire Collectors Society and the certificate was signed by its founder, the former cowhand John Maintz – “Barbed Wire John” – in 1994.

From which you may gather that I have failed lamentably to popularise barbed-wire collecting in the UK.

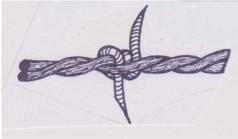
In the United States there are over 30,000 collectors and examples of rare specimens fetch upwards of \$500. Department stores sell selections of antique barbed wire mounted on boards. There are three barbed wire museums and an annual barbed wire symposium in La Crosse, Kansas, which regulates prices and holds wire-straightening competitions in which only leather gloves come between the competitors and the barbs.

Eccentric? Ah, but you need to understand barbed wire in order to understand America. Think “Oklahoma!” the smash-hit musical of 1943 in which the square dance “The farmer and the cowman (should be friends)” ends in a punch-up. In real life in the old Wild West, the only thing that kept farmers and cowboys apart was barbed wire. The great plains had no wood or rocks with which to build fences. Barbed wire had to do, and the cheaper and stronger the better. Farmers were shot by cowboys for erecting barbed wire to protect their crops, water and grazing and cowboys were shot by farmers for snipping their way through it.

A dozen cowboys driving a herd of 3,000 wild, native longhorns to the railheads of Kansas could decimate a farmer’s fresh water and grazing once they got through his wire.

Rogers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!” recalls those homesteading days, a pioneering era now embedded in the American psyche. In the real-life Oklahoma land rush of April 22 1889, 50,000 people lined up with horses and wagons before racing into the western plains to claim their share of 2m acres of prime government-owned land. President Lincoln’s Homestead Law of 1868 allowed each settler to take possession of 160 acres west of the Missouri and east of the Rockies, which they could own outright if they kept it in good order for five years. Without barbed wire fences it was difficult to defend the boundaries of those 160-acre claims. The word “fence” is a contraction of the word “defence”.

To many American barbed wire collectors, Michael Kelly’s “Thorny Fence” diamond-point of 1868 - the first successful American barbed wire and also the first double-stranded one - is more than just a piece of twisted metal knocked out by a New York blacksmith.



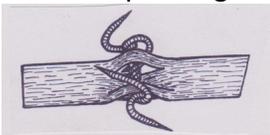
*The first successful American barbed wire was also the first double-strand design. Kelly's Thorny Fence, 1868.*

It is an icon of America's heritage, recalling ancestors shot down in the "fence wars" that intensified in violence right into the 1880s. Aficionados maintain that the invention of the Thorny Fence made an even bigger impact on American history than the invention of the Winchester 73, the windmill, steam engine, light bulb, Model T Ford, powered flight – and that it made the tank necessary in the First World War. They have a point, if you will excuse the pun.

Inventing a better barbed wire was like inventing a better mouse trap. People flocked to your door and you could become rich. Not surprisingly, there were not only fence wars on the plains but patent wars in the cities. Some manufacturers whose patents had been infringed by a rival found it more convenient to shoot the rival dead rather than get bogged down in time-wasting litigation.

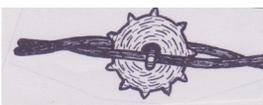
There were 756 barbed wire patents issued between 1868 and 1900. My copy of "Barbs, Prongs, Points, Prickers and Stickers", a collectors' guide by Robert T. Clifton, illustrates 973 barbed wire designs. There are thought to be over 2,000 of them.

As competition between patent-holders intensified, new designs became more eccentric (and expensive) in order to establish uniqueness in the eyes of the patent office. Most of these proved uncommercial and soon went out of production, with the result that later designs tend to be rarer and more valuable to collectors than all but classic early designs. The complicated-looking Trevitt-Mouck's Turnstile Twist of 1889 has four-point wire barbs that rotate in slits cut in a metal strip. The idea is that the rotating point deters the cow without piercing the hide.



*What a tangle! Designs became weirder as competition for patents intensified. Trevitt-Mouck's Turnstile Twist, 1889.*

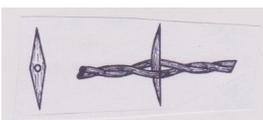
A simpler design – Hodge's Spur Wheel of 1887 – did the job just as well.



*Restrain the cow but don't damage the cowhide – the idea behind Hodge's Spur Wheel, 1887.*

The wire that stopped a cattle stampede and sold like hot cakes. Glidden's Winner, 1874. As for the simply-designed Glidden's Winner of 1874, this two-strand wire (with two point barb making a double turn round one strand) is virtually indistinguishable from today's barbed wire. Joseph Glidden, an Illinois schoolmaster turned farmer, at first made The Winner with the help of a boy who climbed a tree carrying two strands of wire that Glidden attached to his wife's coffee grinder.

Glidden turned the grinder handle to twist the wires while the boy threaded the barbs. Pioneering stuff. My specimen is marked "factory splice" because by the time it was manufactured, the boy had been made redundant.



*The wire that stopped a cattle stampede and sold like hot cakes. Glidden's Winner, 1874.*

Glidden prospered by exploiting a loophole in Kelly's patent. Although Kelly's ground-breaking Thorny Fence was America's first two-strand barbed wire his patent omitted to say that the purpose of the second strand was to keep the diamond-pointed barb in position. Kelly had to pay Glidden licence money. It cost him a fortune.

Intense competition produced flamboyant salesmen such as the Glidden company's star performer, the reckless John Gates, known as "bet a million Gates" because he lost a \$1m bet on raindrops sliding down the window of a railway carriage. In 1876, at the age of 21, this brash hard-drinker was given the concession to sell Glidden's Winner in Texas, the "Don't fence me in" state that was far from hooked on barbed wire, especially if touted by northerners.

Gates pulled off a spectacular sales stunt. He announced a rodeo in San Antonio, made a corral with eight strands of The Winner, then bet local farmers that they could not stampede their steers out of it. On the night of the wager, Gates and his men used flaming torches and gunfire to repeatedly stampede the steers, 75 of the most ornery, but the wire held. Only a fence post broke.

Gates then invited the bemused farmers to the local hotel, filled them with liquor bought from his winnings and gave the captive audience a sales pitch that sold 200 reels of wire, the entire contents of a railroad box-car. "Finest fence in the world", he told them, "Light as air. Stronger than whisky. Cheaper than dirt. All steel and miles long.

The cattle ain't born that can get through it".

Too true. Some states banned barbed wire after the winters of 1885-86 and 1886-87 when thousands of wild cattle, icicles dangling from their muzzles, were crushed, starved and frozen to death as their trek south to escape blizzards was blocked by barbed wire erected by landowners to stop them reaching Texas.

Snow-covered mounds of dead cattle were found stretching 400 yards back from the wire, with only horns showing.

Gates eventually parted company from the Glidden company. After Glidden had sold his half-share the company had come to dominate the market by assiduously buying up patents. Gates had expected to be given a partnership but was snubbed. Disgruntled, he and others began manufacturing barbed wire in defiance of patents. Whenever the former Glidden company served injunctions on him, Gates moonlighted his machinery in a barge across the Mississippi, the state border.

Eventually run to ground by the courts, the renegades faced ruinous damages and back-royalties. But the ever-resourceful Gates did a deal, selling the Glidden company a patent for barbed-wire machinery for a sum equal to the royalties owed! He rejoined the company and died a rich man.

The cowboy lifestyle did not last much beyond the 1880s. The open-range cattle industry over-expanded. The plains were over-grazed. The price of beef dropped. And the harsh winters struck a mortal blow. Collectors can still be found picking their way through ruined homesteads in the vast cornfields of East Colorado in the hope of coming across a half-buried reel of barbed wire that can be cut up and sold for thousands of dollars.

They are just 18 inch sticks of old wire. But they tell the story of a nation.

John Windsor

## It's a Funny Old World - 5

### Drowned in Black Treacle

If my wife and I had not met John the tramp, we would never have found out about the Great Boston Molasses Disaster in which 21 people died in a 25ft high tidal wave of over two million gallons of black treacle.

We were holidaying in Boston, Massachusetts, in 2003. We had got off the plane only 12 hours earlier and were drinking coffee at one of the city's pavement cafes when John, an old man in a shabby raincoat, pushing a perambulator full of odds and ends, stopped in front of us and struck up a conversation.

Evidently an educated man – as every soul in Boston appeared to be – John said he slept at night in Boston Public Library, parking his pram outside. We began discussing colonialism, as one tends to in Boston, and he wanted to know whether any of our ancestors had fought in Queen Victoria's wars. "Yes", I said: "William Beckett, my grandfather's great uncle, was speared in the belly by a Zulu as he fled from the burning hospital at Rorke's Drift in 1879. It took him four days to die". John seemed satisfied. He asked: "How old was he?" "Twenty one", I said.

John accepted a dollar – he said he never took more – for a recent copy of the Boston Globe, rummaged from the contents of his pram. He then presented to us, *gratis*, a current Boston what's-on guide – which put us on the trail of the Great Boston Molasses Disaster. It contained an announcement that the Bostonian Society was holding a meeting that night in the Old State House at which Stephen Puleo would talk about his just-published "Dark Tide", the first book about the disaster since it happened in 1919. The talk was open to the public, and free, so we invited ourselves along.

The Old State House? We had never heard of it. It turned out to be Boston's oldest public building, built in 1713 - old by New World standards. An ornate five-storey redbrick edifice with a white tower, it was the seat of the state's English colonial government until 1776 when the American Declaration of Independence was read to the public for the first time from its balcony.

It is now the seat of Boston high society. Members of the Bostonian Society, we discovered, are silver-haired, speak with English accents and have graceful manners. They are more English than the English. We should have got an inkling of their exalted status as we ascended the magnificent Greek revival spiral staircase to the Society's meeting room. It contains glass-cased models of historic sailing ships, carved figureheads and whaling weapons, a maritime museum lovingly curated by scholarly members of the Society.

We nudged our way to the front and sat down. I took out my camcorder and began filming Puleo's talk. With hindsight, I don't think we could have been more conspicuous if we had worn Bermuda shorts and sun hats. No-one else was filming. Even the brashest Americans seem to have grown out of the craze to point camcorders at everybody and everything, even when abroad.

It occurred to me that we were unwittingly enacting some sort of comical role-reversal in which crass tourists from the Old World gatecrash polite New World society.

These distinguished people are Boston's "old money". A few have ancestors who came over from England on the Mayflower or with the Jacksons, who made the voyage before that. They have even erected on the roof of the Old State House seven-foot tall replicas of the lion and unicorn that are the bearers of the English royal crest. The originals were burned by a mob in 1776.

And the Great Boston Molasses disaster? Molasses, of course, is the quaint New World name for black treacle. It comes from sugar cane but has sinister uses besides sweetening. In 1919, on North End, Boston's harbour front – densely populated by mainly Italian immigrants - there stood a 50ft tall cylindrical steel storage tank containing molasses

destined for refining into industrial alcohol, an ingredient of munitions, including dynamite.

At lunchtime, 12.30pm, on January 15 of that year, the historian Puleo told us, the full-to-capacity storage tank disintegrated with a great roar and a rat-tat-tat like gunfire as thousands of rivets shot out and a wave of 2,300,000 gallons of molasses erupted at a speed of 35 miles an hour into the crowded streets.

It knocked buildings off their foundations, demolished a fire station, crushed railroad freight wagons, brought down some of the track of the Boston overhead railway and dislodged a train. Shards of steel plates became lethal projectiles. A 15ft high rolling wave demolished waterfront warehouses, tenements and shopfronts, carrying people, horses, timbers, furniture and automobiles with it and coagulating into a solid mass two or three feet deep as it slid to a halt. Power lines emitted hissing showers of sparks as they fell. There was splintered wreckage everywhere. Horses stuck fast had to be shot.

Puleo quoted the Boston Post's contemporary report: "Molasses, waist deep, covered the street and bubbled about the wreckage. Here and there struggled a form – whether it was animal or human being was impossible to tell. Only an upheaval, a thrashing about in the sticky mass, showed where any life was ... Horses died like so many flies on sticky fly paper. The more they struggled, the deeper in the mess they were ensnared. Human beings – men and women – suffered likewise".

Train brakeman Royal Albert Leeman stopped his overhead railroad train only three car lengths from a void where the track had been. He clambered over the twisted metal and was just in time to stop an approaching train. Other heroes who tried to save others lost their footing and were suffocated in the black muck.

Rescuers struggling to reach trapped victims who were trying to keep their heads above the sludge were in some instances too late by minutes. In the collapsed fire station, engineer George Layhe, his legs crushed under a pool table and a piano, kept his head erect for two hours before his stamina gave out and he let it fall and was drowned.

Two ten year old children were among the 21 dead. One, Maria de Stasio, had been standing in the path of the mountainous wave and perished immediately from asphyxiation. A firefighter spotted her tangled hair swirling in the molasses and pulled her body out. The last body was not recovered until four months later.

The aftermath, throughout North End and beyond, was the smearing of goo wherever feet, hands or clothing touched surfaces – on stairs and carpets, on the seats and handrails of public transport, on the handsets of public telephones. The entire city smelled of molasses and the sea was brown until the summer.

The court case following the molasses disaster lasted three years and the transcript ran to nearly 25,000 pages. It was found that the tank's steel plates were only half the thickness specified and that there were too few rivets. Research as recent as 2014 has shown that the steel used, although complying with the regulations of the time, was brittle because it did not

contain enough manganese. It was the same kind of steel that an iceberg had gouged apart when the Titanic collided with it seven years before the molasses disaster.

The construction of the tank, during urgent demand for munitions during the First World War, had been hasty. Safety regulations were ignored and when the tank came on line, warnings that it groaned, pulsated and leaked were brushed aside, too.

The finger of blame pointed to the project manager, Arthur Jell, who was actually treasurer of the molasses company, United States Industrial Alcohol (USIA). He did not know how to read technical drawings, accepted the building contractor's contention that a planning permit was necessary only for the foundations and stubbornly ignored the pleas of the tank's "general man", Isaac Gonzales, that the tank was groaning and leaking. Gonzales had been waking up sweating, flailing and crying out with nightmares of the tank exploding, then running through the streets of North End to make sure it was still there. His wife was distraught. A lowly labourer with no union protection he nevertheless took the risk of facing Jell in his office. He showed him brittle steel flakes that had fallen off the tank and told him that children had been trespassing on the site, scooping leaking molasses into tin cans with sticks. Jell looked at the flakes and told him: "I don't know what you want me to do. The tank still stands".

USIA's management had dangled the prospect of a vice-presidency before Jell when he agreed to manage the tank project. Everybody in the company knew it was a hot potato. There was urgent demand for munitions but negotiations with the building contractors and the railroad company who owned the land, and were to provide the track and freight trains to transport the molasses on the one-minute journey to USIA's refinery, were never expected to be other than sticky.

Finally, in December 1915, after frantic night-working, two days before the first Cuban molasses steamer docked to discharge 700,000 gallons of molasses into the tank through a 200ft pipe, the tank was complete. Had Jell failed to make the deadline, the cargo of molasses could have been dumped into Boston harbour with the same lack of ceremony as the dumping of 90,000lbs of tea into the same harbour at the Boston Tea Party back in 1773. That turned the sea brown, too.

At the court hearing, the judge, Hugh Ogden, a soldier-lawyer who presided with heroic impartiality, found against USIA and awarded \$300,000 damages, about \$30m in today's money. USIA settled out of court, paying bereaved families more than the \$6,000 awarded by the court.

By December 1919, Jell had been transferred to USIA's New York headquarters where he became assistant treasurer and vice president of USIA.

The case not only led to a tightening of safety regulations throughout American industry. It is remembered as the first time that the United States delivered a blow against big business.

It is also remembered whenever there is hot weather in North End, Boston, when some residents insist they can still faintly detect the sickly scent of molasses.

My wife, Christine, and I bought a copy of Puleo's book, which he inscribed for her: "It's great to sign a book for an 'international' guest". I filmed him writing it. As we left we shook hands with the chairman of the Bostonian Society and I thanked him for inviting us. He inclined towards us affably in a semblance of a bow. I told him we would like to join the Society. He told us there would be forms to fill in. I gave him our address. Thirteen years later, I am still waiting for them.

**John Windsor**