



THE LONDONERS

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RISE OF WOMENS RUGBY

The latest reviews for this
Christmas season

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The Christmas magicians turning homes into Winter Wonderlands

Holly Brencher

Ever wondered how - suddenly overnight - places go from basic to a Christmas spectacular?

Maybe it's the elves? Or perhaps it's actually someone's real job!

Christopher Sweet, 22, works for The Christmas Decorators Kent, who are a family-run company that put in all the hard work behind the sparkling lights.

He told us: "The company began almost seven years ago now and was the result of my father (the owner) Andrew Sweet leaving his job in the finance sector in the city to join a franchise.

"Christmas is always going to be here, and he and my mum both love it so it was a natural step in a new direction."

Andrew Sweet and his wife Karen Merryweather, have been co-running the company together ever since.

Chris said that his favourite part of the job is: "the period of time where you are

bouncing between jobs constantly. You have no time to think about anything else but your work to make sure it's the best it can be and people are happy."

Huge jobs like this, require a good sense of teamwork.

"The concept of us all needing to stick together through tough long days with



minimal rest because what we do in this 3 month period defines our year."

The team have been lucky enough to decorate for some very well known people and companies, but one of the most recent contracts has been for a cruise line.

"As you can imagine we have to work to a very tight deadline but the

challenge.

"Another is a very famous Private Members Club in Mayfair with whom we have a great relationship."

The question on everyone's mind is what happens the rest of the year? "The rest of the year consisted of a lot of sales work. Door knocking



and networking with people to try and get more business in for the following year. We are constantly trying to grow whilst maintaining customer satisfaction.

"In five years we'd love to keep our clients from start of our journey on board with us. Having them with us through this journey for such a long time

would be great and exactly how we'd like to operate."

"Combined with increasing our commercial work to more places across London and the south east so we can truly expand our portfolio and get to work with new ideas and products to fit the job."

Remaining sustainable the whole time both financially and environmentally is important to the team also.

"We are in this game for the long run and want to be as effective and efficient as possible."

All pictures credited to Christmasdecoratorskent Instagram & tiktok: @christmasdecoratorskent



Two Croydon mums get their range of ethnically diverse Christmas decorations launched in Tesco



Alison Burton (left) and Natalie Duvall (right) with their diverse decorations. Credit: March Muses

Julius Lawless-Master

Two Croydon mums who got their range of ethnically diverse Christmas decorations launched in Tesco.

Founders of March Muses Natalie Duvall, 40, and Alison Burton, 51, agreed a long-term partnership with the supermarket chain which saw it stock their selection of black festive products in over 700 of its stores this November.

This comes after a lengthy conversation with the retail giant, during which the independent business owners consulted with members of the management and inclusivity and diversity teams.

Burton said: "The deal with Tesco is huge, such a great opportunity for a small black owned busi-

ness. "Not only does this help our brand to grow and make our products even more accessible in the mainstream market, it also demonstrates Tesco's commitment to promoting diversity and collaborating with a brand like ours."

Duvall and Burton appeared on Dragons Den in 2022 and received a joint £50,000 investment from Deborah Meaden and Peter Jones.

They both agreed that this investment has helped them to upscale their business.

Burton said: "Having that kind of backing from Dragons Den just makes the business more credible and gets you into rooms that,

especially as black women, you would otherwise struggle to get into."

March Muses' range of designs and products include decorations, cards, wrapping papers, and gift bags featuring festive figurines and baubles.

Duvall and Burton design all of the figures, paying close attention to varying skin tones, hair textures and body shapes. Many of their figures are based on inspirational black role models also born in March such as Aretha Franklin and Diana Ross.

Following the Tesco deal, the business has plans to continue expanding and release products for Mother's Day and Father's Day.

How The Felix Project is tackling hunger and food waste in London



The Felix Project has more than 10,000 volunteers across its four depots. Credit: Chloe Hall

Julius Lawless-Master

As the cost of living crisis looms over us, data from a food charity shows that one in four working parents in London are struggling to afford to feed their families.

The Felix Project's survey of 2,062 people found that 25% of respondents said they had skipped a meal or not bought enough food for themselves to ensure their children could eat. The survey also found that in the last year 14% of the respondents said that they have had to turn to a food support service for the first time.

This data suggests that around 170,000 working parents in London have had to seek help from a

food bank in 2023, despite not accessing these facilities in the past.

However food redistribution charities are working to tackle hunger and reduce waste in the capital.

The Felix Project, which was founded in 2016, rescues surplus food from supermarkets, restaurants and farms and delivers this from its four London depots. In 2022, the charity delivered the equivalent of 29 million meals to more than 1,000 community organisations which help people in need.

The Felix Project's director of operations Shane Dorsett said: "There has always been a need for the service

that we provide but in recent years people have been feeling a financial squeeze that they have never seen before.

"We are not just working with homeless shelters and addiction clinics now but also people with jobs or multiple jobs."

The charity also has a kitchen at its Poplar depot which produces more than 4,000 meals each day. These are all made from food which would otherwise have gone to landfill sites, where it would have broken down and released harmful greenhouse gases such as methane into the atmosphere.

The Felix Project is on target to rescue 13,000 tonnes of food in 2023,



The Felix Project delivers food to community organisations in its green vans. Credit: Chloe Hall

with this representing 33,000 tonnes of embedded greenhouse gas.

Dorsett said: "Seeing the impact that this has is the reason all of us here get out of bed, so of course that is good.

"That said, the happiest day will be the day that we are no longer needed and close The Felix Project down."

There are more than 150 employees at the organisation and upwards of 10,000 volunteers. Dorsett explained that they are all united by the three main values of relentless entrepreneurialism and boldness.

He said: "The Felix Project does not sit around and let things happen to us.

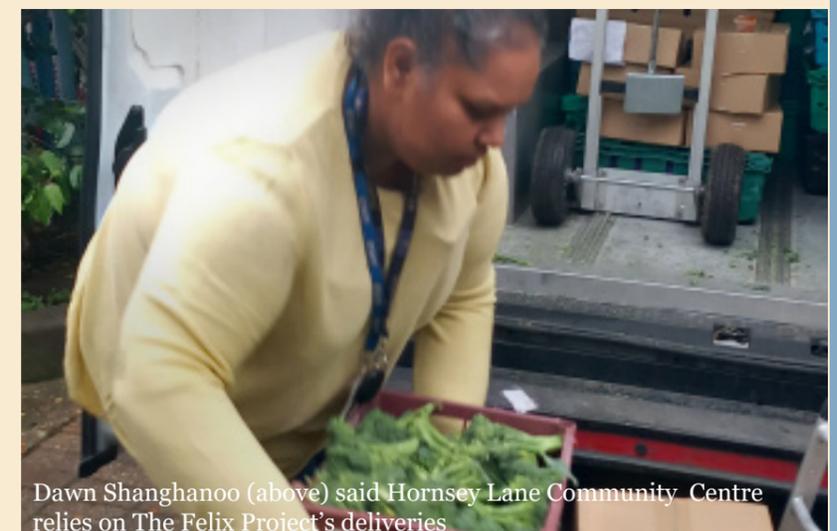
"We try to find solutions regardless of what problems come our way - and unfortunately we have encountered quite a few with the pandemic and then the heavy goods vehicle driver shortages.

"Constantly we are coming up with new ways to get the right food to the right people at the

right time as efficiently as possible.

"We think that anything can be done if we try really hard."

Everyday The Felix Project's green vans are in an almost perpetual cycle of collecting and delivering food - such is the demand. But behind each and every delivery lies a story. Hornsey Lane Estate Community Centre gives out surplus



Dawn Shanghanoo (above) said Hornsey Lane Community Centre relies on The Felix Project's deliveries

food to those in need every Wednesday, along with running a community kitchen and cafe.

Community organiser Dawn Shanghanoo explained that the deliveries this social hub receives from The Felix Project are vital to its work.

She said: "The deliveries help us immensely. To be honest if we did not have The Felix Project then we would not be able to do this.

"What we get from Felix enables us to cook for the community.

"Sometimes people will come down for food at the same time the Felix delivery arrives.

"So everybody always asks me: when is Felix coming?"

Food poverty is not going to go away overnight, and much more still needs to be done to tackle this issue, but organisations like The Felix Project can help to ease the financial pressure on families during the cost of living crisis.

Unveiling the Dark Connection: Rising trends in drug use and suicide

Holly Brencher

£267 million is said to boost local drug and alcohol treatment, in April 2024.

The Department of Health and Social Care and MP Neil O'Brien have said that every local authority across England will be allocated additional funding to help combat drug and alcohol misuse.

Sam Phillips, 37, from Suffolk is a successful recovering addict who has been sober for 27 months.

"This is the best I've ever felt in my life I've not even considered having a drink or drug in these 27 months."

Sam suffered with major health anxiety from a teenager going through school. He would over analyse growing pains and always had pains in his chest thinking

it was a heart attack.

At an early age he started self medicating with alcohol and then later on in life ended up taking cocaine. It started as binge drinking for years then resulted in full addiction.

Sam realised something when a good friend who had been sober for around six years got in contact.

"He was trying to ring and call me through the pandemic when I relapsed but I was not ready to see or speak to him. I was in self pity mode."

"Then I bumped onto him coming back off a binge and trying to avoid him I hid in a shop, but he sat on his car waiting for me.

"He walked me round a church for about 20 mins, and told me about the fellowships AA and CA. He then took me to

Neil O'Brien said:

"Drug addiction drives about half of all crimes, so by investing in high quality and greater availability of treatment we can reduce crime rates and save lives.

"We aim to raise the number of people getting drug and alcohol treatment to a record high by investing through the long-term investment we've been making over the last three years."

Sam said "I had suicidal thoughts. I've got so many twists and turns to my story but I lost everything once. My house, my family all my money.

"I just didn't have the energy to do it, I put a massive burden on my family and it led me to suicidal thoughts."

"I was thinking people would be better off without me."

"Which is crazy to me thinking about



that now. It took me to a really dark place and that's why the cold water therapy really helps."

Sam began cold water-therapy once the doctors told him that his blood was producing too many red blood cells and not enough white due to the abuse to his body.

"It could have led to a blood clot and killed me.

"That's when I was having suicidal thoughts, I expected my fate and thought 'well it's too late for me.'"

"But I have two little girls, I couldn't leave them without a dad, so I had to dig down deep and give it one last go not only for myself but for them.

"I looked online and saw that cold water therapy is a natural way to get rid

of anxiety and depression so I set myself a goal of doing 30 days straight of cold showers, and I noticed a real boost in my mood."

So Sam set himself a challenge of going into cold water every day for a year in true addict style.

"Day one my mum, sister and nephew came down to watch me. During the whole year over 400 + people in my community came and got involved."

Sam was nominated for the Pride of Britain Award due to all his hard work raising awareness for recovery.

Czech researchers found that cold water plunging can increase blood concentrations of dopamine — an-

other so-called happy hormone made in the brain — by 250%. This is the same amount of dopamine as a portion of cocaine does to the brain.

"I believe I'm an addict because I have low dopamine levels in my brain so I always need more, with drink and drugs you get the crash and chase for more that's why you become an addict. With the cold water it releases it slowly throughout the day, in healthy amounts. It's also a lot cheaper than cocaine is."

Sam spoke about his daughters (pictured bellow): "I've always been present in their lives but truly I wasn't really present because even though I wasn't drinking/taking drugs when I had them ; my

mind was on it."

"The best thing that recovery has given me is time back with them, I make memories instead of forgetting them."

"For years and years and years I was just too stubborn and had too much of an ego as I was trying to do it alone.

"Them years of trying to be sober from before were hell, it was just as bad as being an active addict because I wasn't opening up and talking to anyone."

From Harm to Hope is a 10-year plan to cut crime and save lives by reducing the supply and demand for drugs and delivering a high-quality treatment and recovery system that was published in December 2021.

Over the first three years of the strategy, the additional investment will help prevent nearly 1,000 drug-related deaths - reversing the upward trend in drug deaths for the first time in a decade.

This strategy also sets

out that illegal drug use such as heroin and crack addiction are connected to half of all homicides.

Office for National Statistics data released August 2022 showed 4,859 drug-related deaths registered in 2021 in England and Wales, a 6.2 per cent increase from 2020.

Deaths involving drugs are 3.5 times higher than the number of deaths registered when records began in 1993.

2022 has been so far the year with the highest number of registered drug-related deaths since records began.

"I would say to the old me to go and open up to your family and to other people on the same journey a lot quicker.

"As soon as I just put the cards on the table and said this is whats wrong with me that's when things started to improve and I started to grow."

"Don't do this on your own! Because you can't!"



Unlocking understanding: Neurodivergence in prisons

Holly Nichols

Official figures estimate that around 25% of adults in prison have either diagnosed or undiagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

But those who work with neurodivergence in the Prison System believe that, if the curtain was pulled back, that figure would be considerably higher.

According to Revolving Doors, an organisation which campaigns for justice reform, it is estimated that around half of people entering prison have some form of neurodiverse condition.

This could be dyslexia, autism, and of course, ADHD.

So why is it that there is an over-representation of neurodivergence behind bars? Are their needs being met whilst incarcerated?

And could more awareness of this issue alleviate the overcrowding crisis in prisons and break the cycle of reoffending?

Someone who is asking these questions on a daily basis is Met Police Detective and campaigner Daley Jones (pictured below).

Daley was diagnosed with combined ADHD in 2011, when he was 36.

Since then, Daley started raising awareness about ADHD in the Prison System and became a trustee for ADHD Liberty, an organisation which aims “to stop people with ADHD ending up in prison.”

Daley explained that there are certain behavioural traits connected to ADHD which contribute to a general predisposition to involvement in criminal activity and offending behaviour.

For example, Daley described how people with ADHD often suffer from emotional dysregulation, are very quick to anger and quite quick to take offence.

People with ADHD also tend to have a very strong sense of justice, and tend to be incredibly impulsive, thrill-seeking people.

Equally, people with ADHD also lack dopamine therefore they could be pulled towards various forms of addiction to get that dopamine hit and fulfil the urge to thrill-seeking.

Daley added: “I think there’s a lot of people that are getting unwittingly punished for conditions that they don’t realise they have.

“I would strongly suggest there are a large amount of people out there who are ad-

“I have met very few people in my career who I think were born bad... I think a lot of people who end up in prison are a victim of circumstance, a victim of socio-economic lottery.”

dicted to alcohol ... and are self-medicating without even realising.”

Daley went on to emphasise that of course not everyone who has ADHD or other neurodivergent conditions are destined to live a life of criminality, rather it is the traits of people with ADHD which, when not properly managed, could potentially lead to criminal behaviour.

He continued: “I have met very few people in my career who I think were born bad.

“Don’t get me wrong you get exceptions, I am not saying there isn’t a time and a place for prisons, but I think a lot of people who end up in prison are a victim of circum-

stance, a victim of socio-economic lottery.”

Daley also partially attributed the overcrowding crisis in UK prisons to this lack of awareness surrounding ADHD and neurodivergence in prisons, and how offering people the appropriate support could break the cycle of reoffending.

In July of 2021 a report was released by the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection entitled: “Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System: A review of evidence”.

It found that often neurodiverse people are more susceptible to getting involved in criminality and how, often, the system is not fair towards these individuals.

It also found that there was a lack of training for police officers and prison workers around neurodiversity and those that need support regarding their neurodivergent condition, stating that: “There is certainly no guarantee that a neurodivergent person coming into contact with the CJS (Criminal Justice System) will have their needs identified – let alone met – at any stage of the process.”

After this report several organisations, including Neurodiversikey and ADHD Liberty, launched initiatives based on the key recommendations of this report; to introduce screening in all areas of the criminal justice system and analyse that data.

In May of this year, ADHD Liberty launched a voluntary screening pilot with City of London Police which offered anyone coming into the police station a voluntary ADHD test.

The aim of the pilot was to “help identify those with ADHD entering the criminal justice system at an early stage, allowing for a quick referral for diagnosis and get them the support they need.”

It also aimed to provide a more enhanced understanding of the type of crimes com-

mitted by those with ADHD and aid the prevention of further reoffending.

According to Daley Jones, who is also a trustee for ADHD Liberty, so far 63% of those who have taken part in the screening have come back as probable or highly likely to have ADHD, highlighting the inaccuracy of the earlier 25% figure.

This pilot screening demonstrates there is progression in attitudes towards neurodivergence in the Criminal Justice System and, with hope, the move towards further neuroinclusivity will result in increased support for those with neurodivergent conditions in prisons and reduced reoffending.

Daley indicated just how powerful initiatives, such as this one, could be going forward, he said: “There are people who I have met who have spent their life as career criminals who have then been diagnosed and/or medicated who have been able to get on the straight and narrow.

“What do we, as a society, want prisons to be? Do we want prisons to be somewhere where we can lock up and forget about our problems?

“Or do we want places where people can go and be given every opportunity to turn their life around and change.

“I, as a member of the public, want people to come out of prison as better and more well-adjusted people than before they went in and that is not the case at the moment.”



Men are talking, but who is listening?

Stuart Allen

MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH THE PROBLEM



Suicide is still the biggest killer of men under 50 and the second biggest killer behind cancer in men over 50.

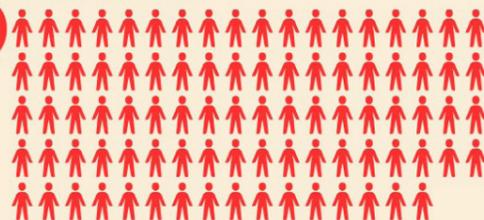
75% OF ALL DEATHS BY SUICIDES ARE MEN



33 MEN DIE A DAY FROM PROSTATE CANCER



88 MEN DIE A DAY FROM HEART DISEASE



17 MEN DIE A DAY FROM ALCOHOL RELATED ILLNESS



59s CALM RECEIVE A CALL FOR HELP



84% OF MEN ADMIT TO BOTTLING THEIR EMOTIONS



Men struggle to reach out for help, nearly half admit they suppress their emotions on a daily basis (YouGov, 2017)

60% OF MEN FEEL UNABLE TO ACCESS HELP

SIMON GUNNING, CALM CEO'S, ADVICE FOR PEOPLE STRUGGLING
 SPEAK UP: IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING, SPEAK TO SOMEONE YOU TRUST
 FOCUS: IF YOU ARE HAVING SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, GET YOURSELF THROUGH THE NEXT HOUR, THEY WILL PASS
 PLAN: ARRANGE AN ACTIVITY TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN THE FUTURE, WHETHER THAT IS TOMORROW OR IN A MONTH
 SEEK HELP: SPEAK TO A GP FOR AN EMERGENCY APPOINTMENT OR SPEAK TO HELPLINE WORKERS

13 men die a day from suicide.

This is a statistic forever unable to change, despite the amount of advertisement you see regarding getting help, so it begs the question: what can we do to help men with their mental health?

Within government, there is a consistent disparity in the mental health schemes and support offered to men with respect to women's mental health. There is a women's mental health strategy and has been since July 2022 highlighting a ten-year vision to improve the health and wellbeing of women and girls in England, but there is no such plan for men despite repeated calls to do so since 2019.

There is also a women's health ambassador, Dame Lesley Regan, appointed in June 2022 to implement the strategy, yet again a men's health ambassador was not on the cards.

This is not to say there should not be a women's mental health strategy or a women's health ambassador, there absolutely should be but if there is the opportunity to have these roles for women, should there not be the

same for men.

Speaking to Mark Brooks OBE, co-founder of the Men and Boys Coalition, he emphasised the high amount of lip service paid to men's mental health, but the lack of physical action to remedy the problem.

He said: "Society expects men to be strong, to be tough and stoical and therefore for many men there's an extra step for them to actually admit that they've got a mental health issue because not only have they got the issue, they also fear the consequences of being judged by others as being weak and not being a real man if they do come forward."

"There's clearly an imbalance in how government and the political world view the importance of men's mental health. These key pillars for key issues are in place for women but not for men. They should be in place for women but there is there has never been a clear explanation as to why the equivalents are not available to men given the statistics."

"One of the key issues is

that often the health service has made great inroads in making sure that it reaches more women and health services are closer to women and women's needs and rightly so, but there seems to be an expectation that men have to fit themselves around the health service that they're given."

With the lack of a men's mental health strategy, there is no plan for how to help men deal with their mental health and often ends up with untailored facilities provided by the health service.

The GP surgeries are often the first contact for anyone experiencing poor mental health, but they are only open nine to five and additionally not near industrial or construction sites, places where mental health issues are statistically higher. This induces a structural barrier to men which make it difficult for men working in these disciplines to actually get mental health support where they are.

Another issue is these services are not always male friendly and therefore the community groups we are now seeing speak to men in their own language and on men's terms. These groups

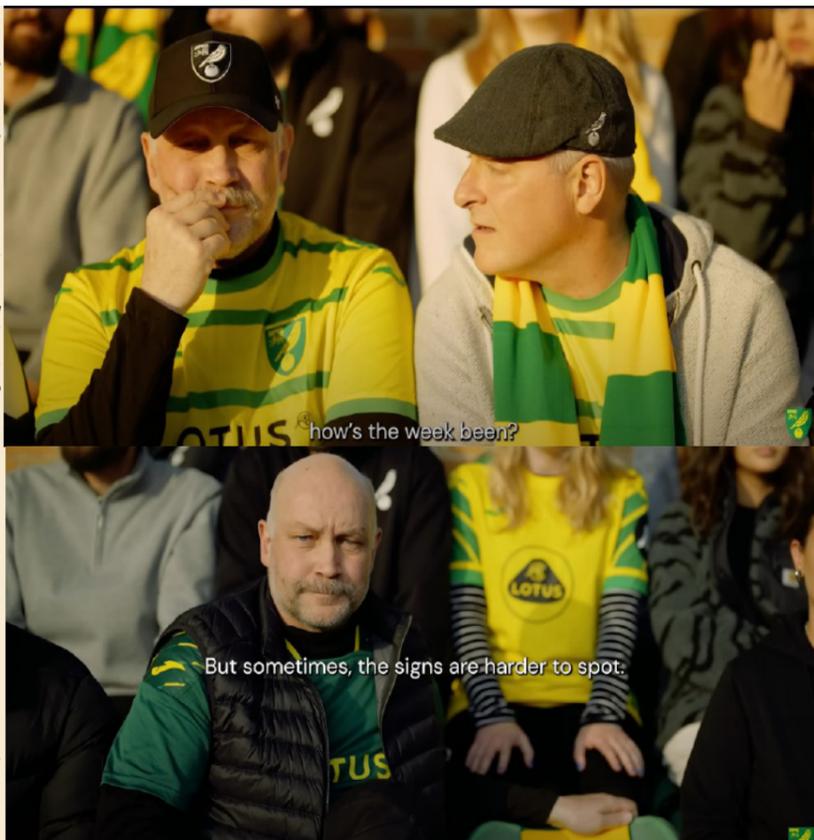
are often run by men for men and can tailor and adapt their services to the needs of the people looking to them for help.

“They speak to them in a way in that will resonate with men. All men tend to want talk and open up shoulder to shoulder rather than face to face. Men will tend to open up whilst sharing an activity rather than sitting across a desk.”

Mark Brooks OBE

One such group is The Proper Blokes Club, a project with aim of breaking the stigma around mens mental health, by enabling men to talk while going for a walk. Started in 2020 with the first walk and talk, its quick growth shows the demand for groups like this. They aim to expand their current 12 walking groups to all London boroughs by 2025 but they have already helped everyone who has gone down, one such example is John.

“I originally joined as I was feeling down about my uncle passing away from cancer and the fact that both my mother and missus were doing chemo at the same time, I found an outlet I did not think I needed. Sadly, five days after I joined, I lost my missus. The group have been a great support to me, both from the walks together and in general. I am still suffering myself, but I try to empathise with the others in the group too. The blokes group is priceless and



Norwich FC's video called “check in on those around you” became instantly popular when it was released in November from Norwich City FC on YouTube

sometimes words are not enough to describe what the group means to me.”

John, member of The Proper Blokes Club

Another thing that unites men is sport. At the start of men's mental health month in November, Norwich FC released a video called “Check in on those around you” to emphasise the importance of asking how someone is doing. The video depicts two fans, one much more vocal and enthusiastic about the game and the other much more reserved and quiet. The video goes on to show them throughout the season, with comments about men speaking about how they are doing with the intention for viewers to think the quiet fan is struggling with his mental health. The video says

“sometimes the signs are obvious of someone unable to cope”, before implying the enthusiasts fan had died.

“The video from Norwich FC was a real game changer in opening the eyes of everyone to the issue around male mental health and also the important not imposes of not making assumptions. Many men will be hiding the problems that they have so even if you think somebody is OK there is never any harm in asking whether they truly are.”

Mark Brooks OBE

Throughout the video, the vocal fan can be seen making sure his friend is doing well and happy, which is often a sign of someone want-



ing to talk about their mental health. The video highlights incredibly well the importance of just checking in on a friend because you never know what they are going through.

In 2022, Paddy “The Baddy” Pimblett found out his friend had died by suicide before his fight in Liverpool which he won and led to one of the most emotive post-fight speeches.

“I would rather have my friend cry on my shoulder than cry myself as I carry his coffin a week later.”

He pleaded for men who have weight on their shoulders and think there is only one way out to speak up and tell someone, to break the stigma that men cannot talk about their emotions and to try and save people from going through what his friend was going through, and subsequently what he and his friends loved ones were going through.

One place you may not suspect...

One of the communities you

Paddy “The Baddy” Pimblett speaking after his UFC bout in Liverpool days after his friend died by suicide from ESPN on YouTube

may not expect are Wetherspoons pubs. Most people associate Wetherspoons with cheap drinks for the start of a night out, but in the morning, if you look inside the pub, you will see older men sitting with a cup of tea and a sandwich. Men normally over 50, with a newspaper not even necessarily talking to each other, but enjoying the sense of community.

According to the UK Men's Sheds Association, a community scheme aimed with counteracting loneliness and isolation amongst men, older men are less likely to have a network of friends, rarely share concerns about their health and in some cases, when they retire, they can feel like their purpose and identity have been lost.

“I went for a job interview a couple of years ago and I it was next door to Wetherspoons it was in the morning so before I get there another sausage sandwich in a coffee go through my notes.

“I was just amazed by that there is at least a dozen men 50 plus sitting in various bits

of the Wetherspoons just reading the newspaper doing a crossword with a coffee and a bacon sandwich or whatever just being amongst other men.”

What are the next steps?

A men's mental health strategy is vital to enable local health services to have a clear plan to encourage more men to seek help. It would also allow men to trust in government and that their mental health is important to them. A men's health secretary would be the next step in order to implement a plan but again this would require an investment of resources in men's health from government which is seemingly unlikely at the moment.

If you are struggling with your mental health or worry for someone else, please reach out to someone you trust or a trained professional to start to get them help.

Survival of the fittest

How can businesses stay alive on London's high streets?

Ruby Smith

Walking along London's high streets, it is sadly all-too familiar to see boarded-up shop windows and empty food establishments alongside familiar franchises. Recognisable brands like Starbucks and Greggs populate every high street while independent retailers seem to be struggling for a piece of the pie.

Rising energy bills, high interest rates and staffing challenges have clearly impacted the profitability of small businesses who are unwilling to pass additional costs on to their customers in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. So - in a time of financial uncertainty, how can independent businesses maintain their place on the high street and how can consumers with tighter purse strings support them?

Nearly 2000 independent local stores were left vacant in the first half of 2023, including retail parks and shopping centres, marking the largest decline in this category for seven years according to the Local Data Company. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of people said they felt downhearted about the decline of their high street.

One business owner who has felt the effects is Del de Jong, owner of independent coffee shop Bones Espresso on Twickenham's high street. He opened the doors in July 2022, having always dreamt of running his own business.

Del said: "The way the system is configured doesn't help a small fledgling business grow...you're fighting against a current the



(Del de Jong pictured above)

whole time.

"There are so many things that get taken out of the businesses...I have to pay almost £700 a year just to play music.

"Being able to provide value for money and good quality when the prices are going up and up is hard, you can't put your prices up enough."

Despite the financial implications, Del doesn't feel a sense of competition with franchised coffee shops on the high street. He thinks going to an independent coffee shop gives customers a much better experience.

He explained: "Chains are a brand, you always know, wherever you go in the world, it's by and large the same thing.

"I think what we can offer is more personality, we curate the items spe-

cially, and you're going to get a richer experience."

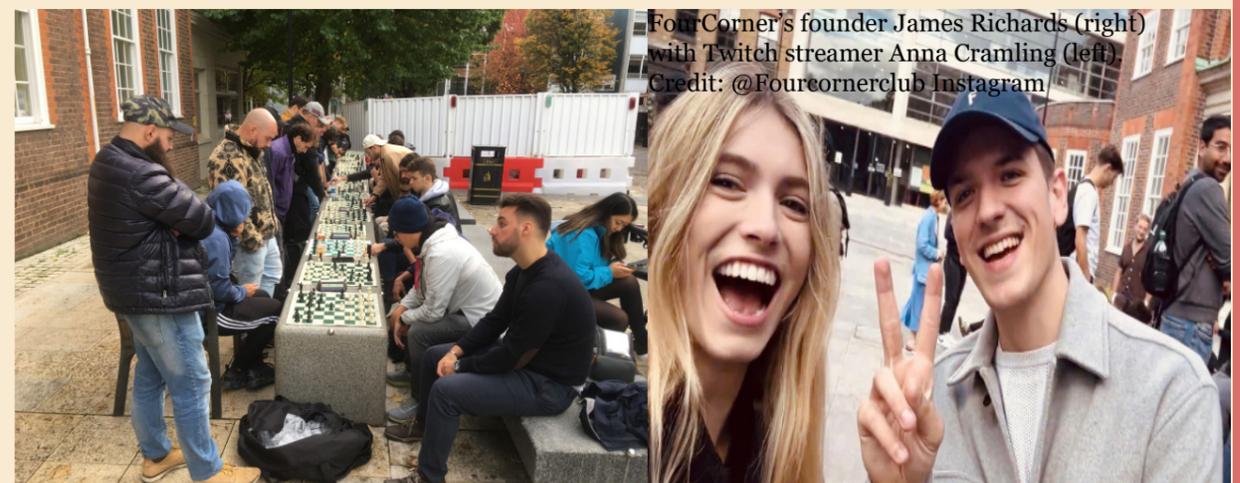
Over a quarter of Brits (26%) have deliberately shopped at smaller businesses during this time of financial difficulty.

People say that personal touches, such as friendly interactions and complementary items are what set small businesses apart.

It's a difficult time for independent stores but with passionate owners like Del, and supportive local customers, these businesses might just have the staying power to thrive on London's high streets.



London's first outdoor chess club where mates come before checks



FourCorner's founder James Richards (right) with Twitch streamer Anna Cramling (left). Credit: @Fourcornerclub Instagram

Julius Lawless-Master

Chess clubs usually meet in dimly lit halls where the only sound is the ticking of clocks as competitors battle to checkmate their opponent.

Not FourCorner Club though, which sees people gather every Saturday in St John's Square to play chess as hip hop music plays in the background.

James Richards founded the club in 2021 after getting back into chess as an adult and finding that many of the meetups in London did not feel approachable.

He said: "I wanted to play street chess and thought there would be some really cool spots to do that in London but there was nowhere.

"Every chess meetup was exactly what you feared it would be: in a basement somewhere or a crusty pub with a terrible atmosphere

and with an exclusive feeling.

"That made me think that it should be better than this and I just came down to St John's Square with one board."

Since then the club has played more than 60,000 games.

Richards said: "The whole point of this is to make playing chess approachable.

"People can come along just to watch and there's no pressure to play."

Players of all abilities attend the meetups, from beginners to grandmasters.

Grandmaster David Howell, ranked number two in England, and Twitch streamer Anna Cramling are among the famous chess players who have visited the club.

Richards said: "The best part about this is seeing all different shapes and sizes

of people coming together to play chess.

"We have had grandmasters and complete beginners playing next to each other."

FourCorner also holds a Wednesday session at Granary Square in King's Cross, however these have been paused during winter.

Peter O'Donoghue, who plays at the club, said: "I have been to FourCorner a few times now and always really enjoy the friendly vibes and great games.

"There are players of all abilities and ages and it is a truly inclusive atmosphere with good music, conversation and chess."

Life as a stallholder on *Portobello Road*

How the London market has changed in 50 years, through the eyes of a trader

Izabella Thornley

It's 2:30am and while you're tucked up in bed, the Devlin's stallholders from Portobello Road are thinking about navigating the M4, to get their hands on fresh British produce to serve all day on the famous London market.



The Devlin family, founders of Devlin's fruit and veg, are the epitome of

hard grafters - 16 hours on the clock from morning until night without breaking their smile. This happens six days a week every week and for Cheryl, the fourth generation Devlin, it has been this way for decades.

Cheryl grew up not far from the famous road and started on the stall with her father from as young as she can remember. However, the market from back then isn't how it is today. The road itself used to be filled with character, charm and most favourably, community spirit. Cheryl said: "It was safe as everyone knew each other, you could let your kids out to play." Nowadays this isn't the case.

Saturday and Sunday mornings aren't so village life and fairy-tale hampers.

Instead, weekend mornings are treated with caution as the crowd from the night before stagger their way through the street, leaving behind an air of dishevelment. Not the type of place you'd want your child to help sell hand-picked produce from the crack of dawn.

Luckily for Cheryl she was brought up when times were better, she said: "All the

shops were family-run and their kids, which would be as many as ten in the old days, had to work whether they liked it or not." and she fondly remembers having sleepovers with all the other stallholders children while growing up.

When she reflects on her first years on Portobello she said: **"My god I loved this place it was beautiful. A fantastic childhood."** Something that wouldn't be the same nowadays. She continued by saying: "I wouldn't let my children play out here, there's too many drug addicts, it's bad now."

Another significant change is the amount of faces the market welcomes every week.

While regulars do still exist and make frequent visits to the stalls they know and love, you can imagine how many aimless tourists walk down the trendy road on a Saturday. It can be frustrating as a business owner to have several people stopping to take pictures of the iconic London road or browsing your products with no means to purchase.

Fridays however, are Cheryl's favourite day of the week, she said: "Fridays are for locals, everyone comes out then." In her 50-years on the stall she has watched three generations of families grow up and they still buy their produce from her today, just not for the same price...



Aged around seven, Cheryl used to sell five lemons for a shilling. She said: "I would stand on the corner

of the stall with a box of lemons and a little tray to put my silver in." Today lemons are sold for 50p each. That's ten times the price and a fifth of the amount. Wholesale costs have gone up and the value of money isn't what it used to be. Stale smelling notes and metallic shining coins have been replaced by branded cards of plastic, which cost more to run than it's worth selling produce for. The unknown minimum spend is the new dance around not having enough change. As I'm sure other traders would agree,

“Cash is King”

No rental fee, no transaction fee, no additional equipment to buy. A £5 note is face value. So unless you're buying your weeks worth of fruit and veg, card transactions could be the reason stalls like this die

OR will it be the beastly arrival of supermarkets that can out-bid any independent store?

Sainsbury's Local found a tidy little spot mid-centre of the high-street about a decade ago, just minutes away from Devlin's. Not only was its opening intrusive, but marginally destructive. Cheryl explained how customers don't always understand why their prices can change daily. She says: "One day carrots might be 20p/pound the next could be 30p/pound." However much she buys them for that morning, will impact how much she sells them for that day. She says this is their biggest difference from a shop like Sainsbury's as everyday their price will be the same. The arrival of the local supermarket did cause a stir at the time, but luckily didn't steal the loyal customers from their trusty specialist suppliers.

The whole concept of the market has changed over the years too.

It used to be filled with other fruit and veg suppliers but now there are all sorts and you can pretty much buy anything; London souvenirs, leather jackets, cooked food, bags, jewellery, candles. You name it. This is much different from a couple of decades ago, Cheryl said: **"Every stall was fruit and veg. From Elgin Crescent right up to the end of Portobello Road,**

there used to be around 300 stalls like mine and they all made a living, now there's only two original fruit and veg stalls that remain here."

It would have been easy for Devlin's to conclude when Cheryl's parents died 20 years ago, but she said there is nothing else she would want to do. While the grind is intense, it has become her life and she values the fact she was born and raised doing it. She said:

"The love for my family is what keeps me going. I'm a cosermonger, it's tradition, I couldn't do anything else."

Nowadays she relies on her children to lend a hand and looks after her grandchildren in return. She "I have three sons, they help, but they're not as tough as my daughter. She's a toughie."

Even on Cheryl's two days off she spends them doing admin and paperwork - although she does admit that she struggles to speak as the tiredness kicks in. Ultimately the only thing this stall-holder wants after an intense week on Portobello Road is a bar of chocolate and maybe a glass of wine.



Life on London's waterways: why more people are choosing to live on narrowboats



Julius Lawless-Master

If you have ever day-dreamed about leaving the rat race behind and moving aboard a canal boat then you are not alone. Figures from the Canal and River Trust show that the number of people living on narrowboats in London has increased in 2023. The Trust's 2023 Boat Count shows that 35,311 people are living on London's waterways, up 1.9% from the previous year.

This means that the number of London boaters has risen by 14.93% since 2018. For many boaters, the de-

cision to leave land behind was influenced by the housing crisis in London and the rising cost of living.

Shannon Lane, a video producer and artist, moved aboard her 30ft narrowboat called Little Drifter after becoming fed up with paying £1,000 a month in rent for a room in a flat in Clapton she was sharing with two other people. She was out on a walk along the canal in King's Cross when she saw the boat with a for sale sign. Although Shannon had never considered living on a boat before, she

decided to book a viewing.

She said: "As soon as I saw it I fell in love with it.

"I had seen people living on boats before and wondered what it would be like but I had never thought of it as a realistic thing.

"But it completely suits my lifestyle and who I am."

Shannon took out a loan from the bank to buy the £24,000 boat in October 2022 but she only started living on Little Drifter this February as its engine needed fixing and she wanted to decorate the interior.

However since then



Shannon has saved thousands of pounds since moving aboard her boat. Credit: @shannonroselane Instagram

Shannon has saved thousands of pounds.

Her boat licence costs £800 a year and she pays back £300 a month to the bank for her loan. Shannon explained that coal and wood for heating in winter is £200 a month but all of the electricity she uses is generated by solar panels on the boat.

She said: "Apart from that it is really just food and water.

"It is a lot cheaper in summer too because I do not need to buy fuel."

Shannon, who lives with her dog Gilbert, holds a continuous cruise licence which means she has to move her boat every two weeks. This is unlike a permanent mooring licence in a boat marina which allows you to stay in the same place.

Shannon believes that living on a boat has helped

her creativity.

She said: "At one point I had a creative block and I could not figure out what to paint.

"Then I realised that if I just look out the window there's so much going on - there's people walking past and so much wildlife.

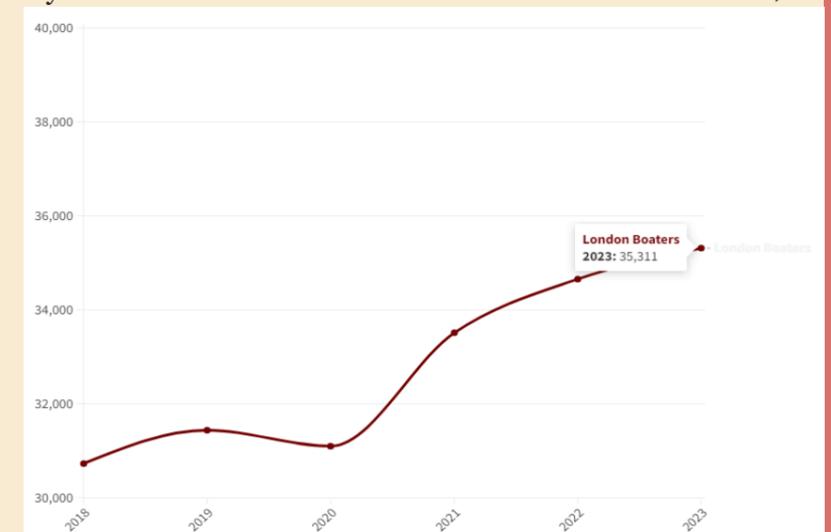
"So I ended up painting a Stella can floating in the canal!"

The Canal and River Trust, a not-for-profit charity which takes care of the

UK's waterways, has seen boater numbers double since it was created in 2012. And in the London East region the number of continuous cruisers (boaters without a permanent home mooring) has gone up by around 300%.

Aside from the housing crisis, another reason for the rise in boaters in the London East region may be that boaters who stay entirely on the River Lee Navigation pay a discounted licence fee. The Trust's 2022 Boater Census report showed that boaters in the London and South East region compose 16% of the UK total. This is the fourth highest area share out of the six regions.

According to Land Registry data, the average price for a house in London has risen from £279,724 to £536,613 between January 2010 and the same month in 2023 - an increase of 91.85%. And in some boroughs, such as Walthamstow and Peckham, prices have risen by more than 100%. With this in mind, it



is no surprise that people are turning to London's waterways to get their foot on the property ladder.

However, before you swear off life on land and set sail it might be worth mentioning that boat life is not always what it is cracked up to be.

Laura Woodley, who moved aboard her 48 ft narrowboat May Moon in 2020 to fulfil a childhood dream, spoke to The Londoners about some of the challenges she has faced.

She said: "For now, because I am still paying back the loan for my boat, it is not any cheaper than living in a house and maintenance can be incredibly expensive."

Laura explained that she recently had to fork out £1300 to get the bottom of her boat blackened. This is where the bottom of the boat is coated with black bitumen paint to protect the hull, a service which needs to be done every few years. Laura has also recently had to pay to have her heating fixed and to convert the boat to shore power.

She explained: "The lists of maintenance and repairs for these things really can add up and be quite costly, especially if you do not know how to fix them yourself."

But for Laura, the main draw for moving to a boat was because it was something she had always wanted to do.

She said: "I have wanted to live on a boat since I was

a kid.

"I am not sure where the idea came from but I found out after I had bought the boat that my grandparents owned a narrowboat in the 60's around Birmingham.

"Maybe it is
in the blood"

In her time living on May Moon, Laura has heard a number of misconceptions about boat life.

She said: "Because people know that moving to a boat takes a lot of time, they assume that you either have a lot of money or none at all.

"There is a huge demographic of boaters so people make their assumptions based on the boats they have seen.

"I have met some people who thought that boaters do not have to work because they are rich.

"Equally some people

think it must be really cold or uncomfortable or that you have to use a bucket when you need to use the toilet!"

And if you think boat life is peaceful and tranquil then you are in for a surprise.

Laura said: "It is not always about being woken up by graceful swans tapping on the window. "A lot of the time it is roadworks or people walking up and down the towpath.

"Sometimes I am moored opposite Grow in Hackney Wick so have to hear club music playing all night."

Laura explained that her boat was vandalised last year while she was away from home. When she returned to the boat she found that half of the windows had been smashed and the ignition had been cut. Laura explained that the vandals had also tried to get inside the boat to turn the taps on and flood it.

She said: "I knew that I needed to get out of that area but I couldn't because the ignition had been cut.

"That was a really diffi-



Laura (above) explained that boat life can be challenging. Credit: @maymoonarrowboat Instagram



Credit: @maymoonarrowboat Instagram

cult time because it took a long while to get the repairs done.

"The biggest challenge is the anxiety around living on the boat.

"When you have a difficult living situation it affects every part of your life because you cannot escape it - it is your home.

"When things go wrong it can be really difficult because I just have to live with it or sort it out."

However Laura felt that overcoming this experience has made her more confident about living on the boat.

She said: "Another reason why I initially decided to move to this way of life was that I wanted to become more confident and that has worked which is really good."

Laura also explained that after May Moon was vandalised she received a lot of support from other boaters.

She said: "The community is what makes living on a boat worth it.

"After my boat was vandalised I had many people rally around me and offer help without any expectation of thanks or for me to repay the favour.

"I have made some amaz-

ing friends and met some really inspiring people.

"We all have to rely on each other when we are out on the towpath and for the most part everyone that I have met so far has been wonderful."

Despite the challenges of boat life, Laura believes she will never go back to an ordinary house.

She said: "Sometimes when things are difficult I fantasise about the bog standard boring life situation with a coffee machine and a big sofa but I just think I would be miserable.

"Even though it would be comfortable it just would not suit me - I think I have a real fascination with alternative living.

"If I do move from May Moon it will be to something else extraordinary like renovating a church or moving to a bigger boat."

If you are still sold on the idea of living on a boat then there are a few things you will need to do. Most importantly you will need to buy a boat, the cost of which will generally range between £20,000 to £200,000 depending on its size and condition. Once you have bought your boat you will need to make sure that you get an up to date boat safety certificate from the Boat Safety Scheme. This is aside from insurance and the costs of fitting your boat with equipment to supply you with energy.

You will also need to



Credit: @maymoonarrowboat Instagram

decide whether you want a permanent mooring at a marina or to continuously cruise, the latter of which requires a licence from the Canal and River Trust. Boat licence holders are allowed to use towpath facilities such as water taps and waste removal sites.

Laura advised anyone considering boat life to do their research and to rent a boat for a few weeks or a month so they can see if it is right for them.

She said: "The fantasy versus reality is very different.

"You need to conceptualise what it is like day to day. Like when your solar batteries are dead because it is a cloudy day and you cannot charge your phone.

"It is just little things like that."

Living on a boat may or may not save you money and it is not for everyone, but for a growing number of Londoners the canals are somewhere they can call home.

THE TATE BROTHERS

Stuart Allen

Role Models or Not?

Should people look to the Tates as role models?

A question I am sure will invoke masses of emotion from people who fall on either side, but I think it is an important question. Why? Because whether you like them or not, they have gained and sustained an audience of young men with their message and ethos.

For those less aware of Andrew and Tristan, let me enlighten you. The two brothers grew up in Midwestern United States and in Luton England and rose to fame following clips from podcasts went viral landing them with social media bans across the board.

The pair have been arrested and charged with multiple cases from human trafficking, organised crime and rape, which to date none have resulted in a sentence for either brother or any of their alleged co-conspirators.

“They’re dangerous. They spread hate and misogyny and are poisoning men against women.”

The words of a Tate detractor and some that are commonly said when asked about the Tates and with all of this, the first question

at the forefront of my mind is why would young men listen to and follow them about how to act? I spoke with a self-professed Tate fan about why they follow them.

He said: ***“They speak in a way I don’t hear from anyone else. They’re to the point and I relate to what they say. Not the women hating stuff but the stuff about what being a man means.”***

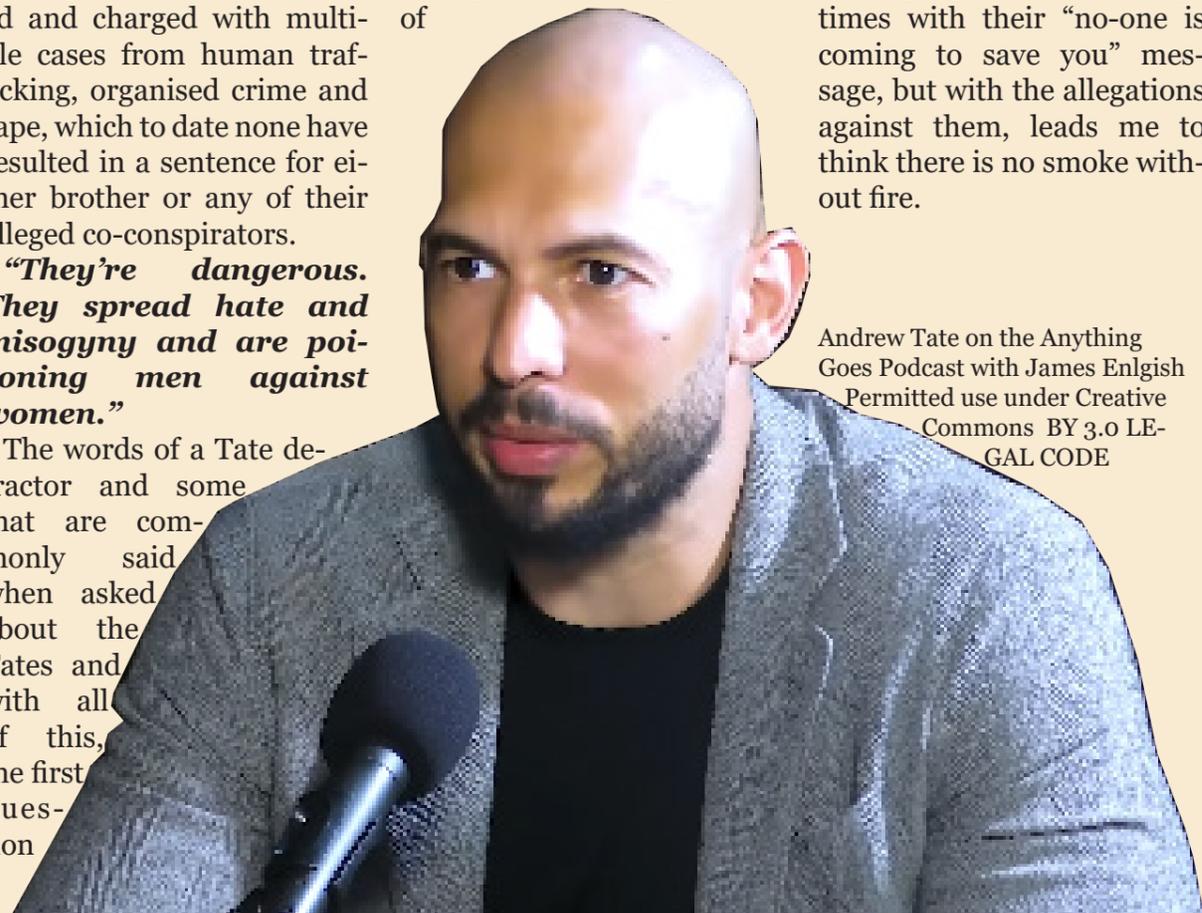
While the vast majority of the popularised clips of the Tate brothers were around their early comments on female roles and expectations, to which they received their criticism from many, they still speak on the expectation of

traditional masculinity. To them, that is being stoic, being in control of your emotions, looking after your health and your loved ones.

Many would consider those characteristics as something to strive for, for both men and women, but the no matter the work they do to repair their image, the vast majority of people will be only known them for the content that got them banned.

For me, while there is no such thing as a perfect role model, I do not see the Tates as role models on the whole, but I would say that I understand why young men do follow them. They have helped some people through tough times with their “no-one is coming to save you” message, but with the allegations against them, leads me to think there is no smoke without fire.

Andrew Tate on the Anything Goes Podcast with James English
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Is social media making us less

social?

Holly Nichols

Social media has become an unavoidable component of contemporary life.

In a world where some of the most successful entrepreneurs are social media influencers and everything from professional networking to finding love now relies on the vast metaverse of social media, having an online persona seems to be more and more integral by the day.

But just how social is social media? Is this modern society that relies so heavily on technology losing the ability to have authentic interactions?

How often have you sat outside a friend’s house and text them: “I’m here”, rather than just knocking on the door?

Or maybe you’ve booked a table through the restaurant’s Instagram page, instead of just calling up. We are all guilty of cutting these corners to avoid real-life interactions.

As of January this year, the UK was home to over 57 million active social media users. These users, on average, spend one hour and 56 minutes each day on social platforms and

over half use the sites to keep in touch with friends and family, highlighting that the social media experience remains social for many. However, how authentic is this online communication between friends and relatives?



Studies have shown that only 7% of communication relies on the content of the spoken word.

The remaining 93% relies on non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and body language. Surely this alone highlights that the credibility of interaction on social media is capped?

Suddenly, the words ‘I’m fine’ or ‘ok’ when stripped of the conversational, non-verbal subtext can seem cold and blunt. The same could be said for abbreviations or emojis, can these small snippets of information really represent our true emotions and opinions?

Psychology Professor Catriona Morrison says: “The pandemic and just the general growth of so-

cial media has fundamentally changed the way in which we interact with each other.”

Catriona started researching psychological health and the internet 20 years ago, she added: “When I started, I was much more optimistic about it then. I thought the internet generally was a force for good and social media was a force for good.

“All I would say is that my position is shifting, but not in a good direction.

The truth of it is, online communication and virtual connection shouldn’t substitute genuine, face-to-face interaction. Social relationships maintained through reality are stronger and provide us with a sense of connection, purpose and support that social media relationships simply cannot compete with.

So next time you post a picture on BeReal, or a quippy video on TikTok, or even refer to an online relationship as in the ‘talking’ stage, just ask yourself - are you really talking? Are you being real?



THE SITUATIONSHIP EPIDEMIC

EVERY REASON WHY DATING IN 2023 SUCKS

Izabella Thornley

It's nearly 2024 and all I've learnt this year is that relationships are out and situationships are in.

As far as I know, the term situationship has been coined by Gen Z to reinvent *'it's complicated'*. It's everything that a conventional relationship is, but leaves the label behind and yes, it's equally as hard to get over – if not harder.

Miss Date Doctor (M. D. D.) is a life coaching and counselling consultancy, based in London, that has a professional take on this 'epidemic'. Founder Nia Willams has gone as far to offer a 'situationship package' to give specialist advice to people who keep ending up in these unofficial relationships. She defines the term as a casual relationship that you can't get anything serious from and uses the example, when someone is unwilling to commit to you or you are not meeting certain requirements, whether this is to do with their family, social standing or image. She also said:

“But it can also be fear. People can just have commitment phobias.”

So why do singletons, particularly from Gen Z, keep ending up in this type of relationship and why is it a problem?

Well, there seems to be a lot to it. Commitment issues being one of them, but this isn't anything new. Decades of generations have faced the *'it's not you, it's me'* brush off, but I think the larger problem is people mistaking infatuation for love.

Hayley Quinn, a certified dating coach who runs her own consultancy for men and women, explains 'infatuation' as meeting someone you have chemistry with and are physically attracted to, to the point where you idealise them. She says you can put your crush on a pedestal before you even get to know them which makes these types of relationships unsustainable – over time the reality of the relationship will collide with this fantasy you've made from when you first met them.

Infatuation has also been defined as irrational feelings, euphoria, lust and shallowness in a Verywell Mind article. So if being left on delivered significantly ruins your day, recognise that this is not love, it is infatuation and the most important thing is, *'if he wanted to, he would'*. I guess for some people it is more fun to have something going on rather than nothing – even if it is marginally toxic. But that's what can make dating apps so fun. Nia phrased it as, if you have no plans this weekend, and fancy a quick drink...

All you have to do is log back into Hinge and find a new match.

Some would say it is great to be a modern dater as you can literally hand pick your fish from the sea.



On the contrary, this could be why Gen Z has such high expectations, because *why settle for less?* Especially when the London population has infinite access to different bars, workspaces, cafés or pubs. Maybe someone a little bit better is around the corner...

I think dating apps are partially responsible for slaughtering the chance of finding a genuine soul who might at LEAST take you for a drink and I would agree with Nia in blaming the digital dating culture for making brief and non-commitment interactions the norm.

Nia said: “If someone doesn't feel an instant connection, they don't see it as big of a deal as they would have many years ago. They just think: “Oh ok, I'll go back onto an app or find someone to date this weekend”. This instant access to new potential suitors is simply too easy. She followed by saying that some of her Gen Z clients are going on dates up to four times a week, as well as working their 9-5 jobs.

She said: **“I think the younger generation now, prioritise personal growth and self discovery.**

“Situationships allow people to live their own lives with their friends and they can take care of their own needs and desires without conforming to societal relationship expectations. We, as women, have been taught don't be desperate, don't chase them.”

But I question in a world of thriving feminism, are men still expected to be making all the moves?

Some of the most independent women I know still expect the man to make the first move and to pay for the first date, despite their strong feminist beliefs. Also, while we're on this theme of feminism, I think women are much more cautious of bad traits to look out for – otherwise, in new terms referred to as 'red flags'.

Nia said: **“In this generation, with access to social media, there is so much awareness of narcissism, abuse, control and boundaries, that women particularly have become scared or overly cautious.”**

While it is always better to be well informed, individuals are almost too scared of these things happening to allow themselves to be vulnerable. Nia supported this with the narrative: “I'm afraid that if I fall in love with you and give you my heart, what will you do with it? I don't want to end up in a bad situation.” Often this fear of being left at any point, means people are putting a guard up to prevent themselves from getting hurt. Which subsequently lands you in a situationship.

I have scrolled through endless TikToks of people talking about their situationships recently and the comment sections have basically become therapy groups for everyone who relates. A comment that stood out to me was: “Situationship is just a fancier way of saying I've settled for the bare minimum.” The replies on this comment then unravelled that there are people who have 'settled' for up to two years.

TWO YEARS OF AN UNLABELED RELATIONSHIP?! Surely you're together at that point?

Well, no. Hayley said why it's so important to establish what you are looking for from the start as otherwise you could find yourself chasing a dream.

Which is how she'd describe people who end up in these long-term situations with no means to ever commit.

I guess people believe that they can change someone's mind if they stick it out long enough. Have you ever heard your friend say *'yeah but he's different with me?'* Same. But the reality is when the 'delulu' (a TikTok-made word to describe actively ignoring red-flags, to the point of delusion) ends and you never speak to this person ever again, it can be very hard to get over.

Hayley said that situationships in some cases can actually be harder to get over than real-functioning relationships.

She explains that this happens because in a relationship you have actually spent time finding points of incompatibility which makes it easier to come to terms with why the relationship has ended.

Whereas with a situationship you have invested into a fantasy – something that you think could potentially have a great outcome, but it won't.

In *fancy terms* this is called sunk-cost fallacy. Where you have put so much into the relationship – whether this be emotion, time or money, that you want to see a good outcome even though it is unlikely to happen. If you find yourself saying *'I always attract the wrong ones'*, it's likely that you are the problem.

Hayley said: “We all have a choice about the relationships we choose to be involved with...”

“If someone says they're not looking for a relationship then you are going to listen to them, even if you feel a strong connection, you will choose to move on.”

This can obviously be hard for people to do and from social media posts, it's clear Gen Z aren't very good at it. Hayley said: “Relationships happen everyday, if this isn't happening for you then you need to be firmer about what your standards and boundaries are.

“You need to be more comfortable with being alone and not needing a situation to make your life exciting or fun.”

Hayley hosts a real world dating event which happens every month in London. Secret Place is put on for women and Training Day is held for men. The aim is to teach people real life dating skills by putting them in a real world situation.



Life in your twenties: Two generations apart

Ruby Smith

Have you found yourself a nice boyfriend? asked my Granny (yet again). On replying that I was happy just 'working on myself' her response was so far from the usual chats with my single friends ... she replied 'In my day, if you were single at 25 you were left on the shelf!'

As a 23-year-old, this conversation made me think about how my generation and that of my grandparents are living life differently. Navigating your twenties in today's society can feel challenging, some people are at University, some are travelling the world, some are in full-time employment, some are engaged and others have children. With so many options available to us, early adulthood can feel exciting but incredibly daunting.

But what was life like as a twenty-something for the older generation? Did they feel the same? It seems that Gen Z (born during the late 1990s and early 2000s, experience a world vastly different from those born between the 1930s and 1950s. I spoke with groups of older people at Age UK Richmond to compare how shifting landscapes have shaped the way we live our lives.

As society has changed over the years, so have our attitudes to relationships, family life and work...

Relationships

The dynamics and nature of relationships have drastically changed across generations. It seems the main difference is our attitudes towards them. The older generation often approached relationships with a more conservative mindset, valuing stability, commitment and longevity. This usually meant marrying the first person you were romantically involved with at a young age. Yvonne, 74, was married at 18

"The marriage didn't last, I was too young and had no experience whatsoever"

She said: "Young people aren't so worried now, they're more thinking about living their own lives."

In the 1960s, the average ages for a first-time marriage were 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women (according to the National Center for Family & Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University). For 2023, these ages increased to 35.3 and 33.2, for men and women respectively (data by the ONS). The younger generation tend to approach relationships with more openness, seeking compatibility and emotional fulfilment.

Camilla, 76, got married at 22, and soon realised she'd made a big mistake. "I was left-wing, catholic, a social-worker and I liked jolly stuff...he hated all that.

"I hadn't looked at the fact we were completely wrong for each other...I remember feeling horrified that I'd made such a complete mistake"

I remember thinking, is this it, is this all I get from life?" She was relieved when her husband eventually left 15 years later and she found a strong, loving man. Catherine, 84, told me:

"I think people stayed together for longer, because you didn't have any other option, as a woman you didn't have any escape"

But some who married young experienced a real love story. Pauline, 82, met her late husband, Tony, while working as a nurse.

"He arrived as a patient on the ward, he had very bad asthma and could hardly breath...



his eyes just looked at me and my heart went out to him straight away," she said. When Tony later asked Pauline to marry him, her colleagues at the hospital questioned if he was well enough to take care of her. But despite his estimated five year life span, they were happily married for 28 years and had a daughter, Joanna.

Twenty-somethings today are likely to have multiple partners before getting married (if they get married at all). Marriage rates have drastically dropped in the last few decades; the number of heterosexual marriages has fallen by 50% since 1972 (ONS). It's clear that fewer people are choosing to get married and those who do are choosing to do so later in life.

Views on marriage have changed in recent years and so have our attitudes towards queer-relationships. One in six (nearly 16%) Gen Z adults identify as LGBT, compared with less than 2% of those born before 1965. Clearly, this is largely due to changes in legislation, as homosexuality was only decriminalised in 1967.

Dolores, 82, shared her experience:

"You were in your own world, we had our own clubs, cafes and pubs we used to go to and the rest of the world went by."

She even said how older-gay men missed that sense of danger. "They'd be in clubs dancing together and the police would come knocking on the door." But she added: "It's so much easier now, people aren't judging you."

Family Life

As relationships have changed across generations, so has family life. There's been a notable shift in attitudes towards gender roles and parenthood. Gen Z tend to delay having children compared with earlier generations, choosing to prioritise personal growth, education and career development before starting a family. The average age of mothers in the UK is 30.9 years (ONS), compared with 25 years

in the 1960s (ONS). Women born in 1990 were the first cohort where half remained childless by 30 years of age.

Yvonne had her first child at 19 years old, which meant she had to leave art school; her husband didn't want her returning to education after having the baby. "I remember walking down the street with the pram and feeling so depressed, thinking, is this my life now?" She added: "There were rules for men and there were rules for women." Yvonne didn't follow those rules - going on to study fashion and art at the London Royal College of Art and later separating from her husband.

When it came to home ownership, those born after the war were a generation of renters. It was especially challenging for women to buy a property.

As late as the 1970s, working women were routinely refused mortgages in their own right, or were granted them only if they had a male guarantor.

Catherine said: "No one was expected to buy a house, we all rented." She told me that her husband was in the national service and



only earned 19 shillings and sixpence a week (equivalent to roughly £20 today) which meant they couldn't afford to buy a home.

While mortgage laws have changed for women, twenty-year-olds today struggle to even reach the bottom rung of the property ladder. The average house price in the UK currently costs around nine-times average earnings, (based on data from the ONS November 2022), compared with four-times in the 1960s. This has fluctuated in recent decades but house prices haven't been this expensive for 150 years. As a result, younger people are often living with their parents until much older, the average age of buying your first home is now 34 (data from statista.com).

Work

Entering the workplace looked very different for the older generation. Most young people today attend university before finding a job, with 80% set to complete higher education, compared with 14% in the 1970s (data sourced from the Guardian). Catherine, 84, left education at 15 but said there were plenty of jobs available back then. "I didn't know anyone who went to University, the jobs that were open were a secretary, working in a shop or a hairdresser." She got a job in an office but had to give half her paycheck to her parents as rent. "It's what you did in those days," she said. Yvonne had the same experience:

"When I was at art school, my mother took my grant because I wasn't working- she was very tough on me."

Camilla was told by her husband 'we haven't got any money you need to get a job' but she didn't have any skills leaving school. "I didn't know how to do anything, I couldn't run a switch-board, I couldn't drive and I was useless as a cook." She then found a computer programmer training initiative funded by the government. "I was lucky to get into that career almost no one knew how,

computers were so new."

It seems that Gen Z's attitude to work also differs from their grandparents. They expect more than just a fair day's work for a fair day's pay.

Younger people believe a job should provide a work-life balance, social-connection, personal development and greater fulfilment

For some young people, the idea of taking time out to travel is more appealing than joining the work place. I remember my granddad asking me if I was still doing 'one of those gap-year things' before joining University and my granny has never even owned a passport.

Travelling obviously wasn't unheard of for our grandparents generation, but it was unusual. Rosemary, 89, was hitch-hiking the continent at 23-years-old, and was only able to contact her parents from Fiji by a letter! It's

never been easier for young people to travel the world with the internet at our fingertips and less pressure to 'settle down' and 'get a job'.

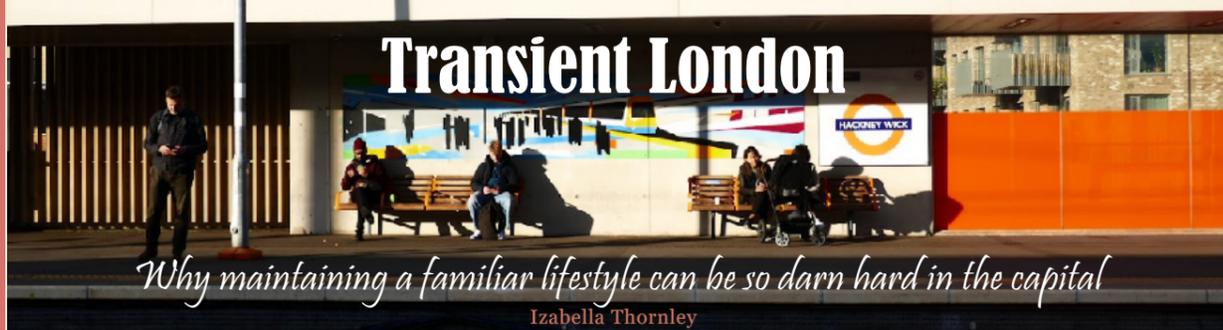
Conclusion

It seems the biggest difference between Gen Z and their grandparents generation is the plethora of life options available to them.

Young people today have the freedom to live their lives however they'd like. They can have a relationship with whomever they choose, get married or stay single, have children or decide against it, leave higher-education and find a suitable job or travel the world, all without rigid societal expectations. But this can leave twenty-somethings feeling uncertain about their future.

On the flip side, older people grew up in a conservative society with less life choices. Some felt dissatisfied with their lives, while others were more than happy with their lot. Overall, I think my generation have a lot to learn from older people; it's important to realise they were twenty once, just in a different time.





London has always been a fast-moving city with people coming and going all the time, but newcomers' stays are getting shorter and making new routines is feeling longer.

This might be down to accommodation prices reaching unaffordable levels, but why move to the city, where drinks cost the same as London's hourly living wage?

Unfortunately the list of reasons to move away from the capital is slowly growing which makes life for the long stayers just that little bit harder. Even Londoners who swore to never move away, are packing their bags and leaving.

Holly Cooke is the founder of Lonely Girls Club, a Facebook group that brings 'lonely girls' in the city together. She said: 'London is such a transient city because people are here on short visas, for placements, work swaps and trips. People are always coming and going.'



"If you are here for a long time it can be really tricky finding other people who are also here for the long haul, so you have to reinvent your groups of friends and connections, every couple of years. This can feel really tricky and learning how to manage this can be even harder."

It can be exciting meeting so many new faces all the time, but the constant re-introduction and 'getting to know' stage can start to feel old and above all, tiring.

This is likely to explain why London's most popular age bracket is mid to late 20s in the inner-city, according to Trust for London statistics. They suggest this is because graduates come for internships or to start their careers while older people, who are starting families, are inclined to move away from the busy city life.

This constant turnaround of people staying for short periods is equally noticed by employers. Particularly in the hospitality industry - which is renowned for temporary work, irregular shift patterns and inadequate pay. The Cocktail Club founder, JJ Goodman has noticed that his staff retention is far better outside the capital since opening his bar in several other locations nationwide.

He said: **"London has got it particularly tricky against the rest of the UK. We're seeing retention much higher in all of our sites outside of the city. We're trying to work out why that is. Why London, as a recruitment pool, seems to be a lot more transient."**

Realistically the reasons are the unjustified cost of daily life and the repeated hustle of introducing yourself to new spritely Londoners. If it's not rent that's digging a hole in your pocket, it's the round you offered to buy or the Uber you ordered last night. The only thing that remains an okay price in the London is a meal deal, and even that's gone up!

WSL Midseason (*ISH*) Report

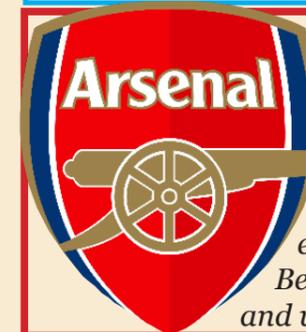
Stuart Allen

The Women's Super League is coming to the middle of the season with a mixed bag of fortunes for all the London clubs involved. First to fourth looks to be sewn up and away from the rest, but from fifth to ninth, it seems wide open. WSL Expert Millie McEvoy talks us through London's representatives in the WSL and the Women's Championship.

Chelsea (The Champions)

Still atop the table despite a loss to title rivals Arsenal, Chelsea are looking to go back to back and their start to the season reflects that with seven wins, one draw and one defeat and rarely ever losing on the scoreline.

Millie: "Chelsea got found out at the weekend for the first time since the Champions League final and they didn't have an answer, but I can't see it affecting them too much and they'll treat this one match on its own and bounce back quickly."



Arsenal (The Challengers)

On the back of a huge result over Chelsea, Arsenal are level on points, but behind on goal difference. They have won seven in a row and don't look like stopping any time soon.

Millie: "They started slowly this season, but I think the loss to Liverpool will now seem like an outlier. It has been amazing to see how Beth Mead has slotted straight back into the team following her injury and with Leah Williamson back training this week, the title race is on."

Tottenham Hotspur (The Yo-Yo)

With many journalists predicting Spurs to be higher in the table it may be a slight surprise to see them sixth, but with injuries and a new manager starting this season, you never quite know.

Millie: "I was surprised to see so many journalists predicting Spurs higher, I didn't think they would but with Beth England coming back from injury, their one bright spark could propel them up the table with Martha Thomas proving an able replacement. There is still a gap between the top four and the rest which I think Spurs are realistic about"



West Ham United (The Drop Candidates)

A huge turnover of players plus a new manager and West Ham look like they're fighting for their lives at the bottom. With a higher talent squad than their rivals at the foot of the table, but they need points and need them now.

Millie: "It would be a massive failure for West Ham to go down when you look at their squad, but it seems players are not happy, maybe not being listened to and that will play into the psyche of the team and ultimately their performances"

The Women's Championship

The Women's Championship boasts four more London clubs dotted around the table. Both Charlton Athletic and Crystal Palace look heavily involved in a four team title race while London City Lionesses look to be reeling from losing lots of their stars and might be the last chance to see an independant womens team in the WSL and Watford who look to be going back down to the Women's National League next season.

Has **RESPECT** disappeared from football?

Stuart Allen

“Football suspended indefinitely as club president punches referee after teams draw.”

Not a headline I ever thought I would read but it is very much a reality for Turkish Süper Lig side Ankaragücü after their club president punched match official Umut Meler after a heated finish to their draw, but this further shows the lack of respect that exists within football which unfortunately is from the grass roots level and up.

Not helped by the growing public complaints from managers about systems such as the virtual assistant referee and the officiating itself.

According to BBC Radio 5 Live, out of 927 grassroots officials surveyed, over a third of them said they were physically abused, some head butted, punched or spat at by spectators, players or coaching staff. 57 reporting they received death threats for them or loved ones.

“I remember when what the ref said was final.”

The words of Ange Postecoglou follow his Tottenham Hotspur side's VAR dominated 4-1 defeat at the hands of London rivals Chelsea, a game where both Christian Romero and Destiny Udogie were given their march-

ing orders, four goals were chalked off and over 20 mins of added time were played.

Postecoglou received a caution from the referee Michael Oliver for something he said to the fourth official, but his post-match interview caught many ears.

He said: “What I want is the best officials always being upskilled to officiate the game. I think that it's so hard for a referee to officiate the game nowadays. Their authority is constantly getting diminished.

“I was taught that you grow up and you respect the officials. You know what managers do? I tell you what managers do. We, me included, try to find ways to bend the rules and get around them. Tell me what the rule is, and I guarantee you'll have a room full of managers processing ‘how can I get around this?’

“I'm old school mate. I'm from a bygone era and I just like the purity of the game but that's not what's going on.”

“I grew up afraid of referees. They'd be like policemen. Nowadays I guess we talk back to policemen as well.”

While Ange may be alone in his view on officials, he did start many a conversational about where football has developed this lack of

respect for those upholding the integrity of the game.

With VAR able to review in game decisions for clear and obvious errors in the Premier League, are players and coaching staff losing that respect for officials in the game through all levels?

Speaking to managers and players from London based Sunday league sides, players feel they can just moan and abuse officials without repercussion, you can guarantee there will be a cry of “Ref” after any challenge usually followed by some insult if they didn't get the decision they wanted.

“Before every game I tell my players to respect the decisions, half listen half don't”
A Sunday League manager

So what can be done by the local FA, national FA and teams to reinstall respect within football.

The FA implemented stricter rules around dissent in the Premier League and

televised football in an attempt to reduce the abuse at all levels, but as the season has been progressed the rules seem to be less and less applied leaving players still abusing officials, and without a plan or solution available.

RESPECT, at least for the meantime, has been lost from football and I am not sure its coming back soon.

BBC 5 Live's Questionnaires Full Report

908 said they'd experienced verbal abuse from either spectators, players, coaches or managers.

778 had been sworn at while officiating, while 375 had received personal abuse about things like their appearance, gender, race or sexual orientation.

293 experienced physical abuse from either spectators, players, coaches or managers.

283 of the respondents reported A threat of violence against them or their loved ones had been made against.

361 who answered the questionnaire admitted to receiving verbal or physical abuse which had negatively affected their mental health.

57 people had received a death threat against them or their loved ones.

440 people reported the amount of abuse towards referees is worse now than five years ago.

378 of the 927 referees said they are “often” or “sometimes” worried about their safety when officiating adult and minor matches.

506 were either moderately or very dissatisfied with measures currently being taken to tackle referee abuse by the English FA.



The rise of women's rugby

Holly Nichols

"If a girl scores a try, it's worth double points!"

That's what the coach said to the tag rugby team one frosty Sunday morning at training.

Me and my sister were the only two girls on the team and, from that moment, the rugby ball was flung at us from all angles whether we liked it or not.

I scored my first try that day. I hadn't touched the ball weeks before that and without that added incentive, the promise of double points, I doubt I would have that day either.

I like to think girls' rugby has come a long way in the last 15 years.

It would make me happy to believe that groups of young girls were getting involved in tag rugby early on and building up a love for the game from grassroots level.

My role model growing up was Jonny Wilkinson, obviously.

Me and my sister would mimic his trademark pre-conversion pose and pretend to send the ball soaring through a set of imaginary posts - winning the World Cup for England over and over again.

It's wonderful that girls growing up playing rugby nowadays have role models such as Zoe Harrison when they're kicking, or re-live Marlie Packer's incredible hat-trick when diving across the try line.

I think the success of the Lionesses in the past five years has worked as a catalyst for women's sport.

It has provided a springboard to move the conversation forward and awakened a passion in young girl's hearts as they realised, *'I could do that too'*.

Now it is not just women's football that has taken off, cricket has also seen mas-

sive growth as well as women's boxing and, of course, rugby.

2023 has been a benchmark year for women's rugby.

It saw the first ever standalone women's international rugby match at Twickenham Stadium.

A record women's crowd of 58,498 watched as the Red Roses took on France and sealed a Six Nations Grand Slam.

This crowd surpassed even the attendance of 42,579 at the England v New Zealand 2022 Women's World Cup Final at Eden Park.

This year also saw the launch of a new women's rugby union competition known as WXV.

The Red Roses took home the win in this three-tier annual international competition which is supposedly bringing forth a new era of women's rugby.

It is easy to believe that women's rugby is a relatively new craze, only becoming popular in the last decade or so. In reality it has been around a lot longer than we might realise.

In 1884, Emily Valentine became the first official woman to play rugby for her school team in Enniskillen, Ireland.

A few years later, in 1891, across the globe there were rumours of a women's team in New Zealand attempting to tour.

Unfortunately the team were forced to disband under the tenuous grounds of social unacceptance.

For many years, women were made to play the game in secret and it wasn't really until the 1960s that the women's game actually began to take root.

The first ever recorded women's rugby



Thamesians Women at St Mary's University

union team was developed at Edinburgh University in 1962 and the first fully documented women's club match took place in 1968 in France.

By 1969, the first national association for women's rugby was formed in Toulouse and the first national championship took place in the 1971-72 season.

Acceptance of the game spread as more and more countries began to form women's rugby unions including Canada, the Netherlands and Spain.

In 1991 the Women's Rugby World Cup was established and finally in 1999 the women's Five Nations was introduced (which has since developed into the Six Nations).

Despite this progress, the Red Roses had to wait twenty years before they were granted professional contracts.

In 2019, the English women's rugby team were the first team in the world to be awarded fully professional contracts and since then other international teams have

followed suit.

For the first time this year, all competing teams in the Women's Six Nations were offered professional contracts in some form.

Coverage of the women's division is now also much broader with Six Nations matches available to watch on BBC iPlayer, and the Women's Rugby World Cup receiving a primetime slot on ITV in 2022.

But it is not just international women's rugby that has taken off, premiership women's rugby has grown in popularity and created a name for itself on the domestic stage.

Top flight teams such as Harlequins, Bristol Bears and Saracens are now home to Premiership women's sides, and as of November 2023, all Premiership Women's Rugby matches will be broadcast live on TNT Sports. This pivotal, multi-year deal highlights that the appetite for the women's game is growing massively and widespread coverage of women's premiership matches are, ulti-

mately, in demand.

One team that will benefit massively from this broadcast deal is Saracens Women.

This year the squad, which is home to several international players, will celebrate its 35th anniversary.

Director of Rugby at Saracens Women Alex Austerberry said:

"We have a duty to make sure we grow it [the game] and give every little girl out there the aspiration and the opportunity to do whatever they want in rugby."

"I STILL THINK WE HAVE GOT A LITTLE BIT OF WORK TO DO ON THAT."

Sonia Green, better known as Sonic on the pitch, is Saracens Women's most capped player.

She joined the team at the age of 19 and remains part of the squad over 20 years later.

She believes that women's sport, has progressed significantly in the past decade.

She said: “I always say sport reflects society. I have been here 22 years or so and I have seen a lot of changes.

“Also being a PE teacher, that’s where I have seen it right from grass roots, when I first started teaching PE the thought of girls doing sport was seen as masculine and that was seen as a bad thing.

“Whereas, fast forward 22 years, now it is a positive thing to be strong and confident and athletic, to show those values of discipline and hard work and if you choose to do it in sport then that is seen as a positive.”

Green (pictured below, image credit Matt Impey, Wired Photos, Saracens) also described the new TNT broadcast deal as brilliant, as she hopes it will draw more of an audience towards the sport.

She explained that many people got hooked onto women’s rugby during lockdown when the games were streamed online.

She described one of the major obstacles holding back the growth of women’s rugby was getting numbers to live games: “If you get people through the door, once they’re in they’re going to have a great experience.

“I mean personally, as a player, when you run out into an empty stadium it is really tough but it’s quite frustrating when you know that where we are in the community we have loads of primary and second-



Alex Austerberry & Saracens Women. Image credit: Matt Impey/Wired Photos/Saracens Women

ary schools around us.

“It is a really diverse community where lots of them won’t have necessarily been exposed to live sport before. But once we get them here they realise that it is accessible.”

Getting people to attend women’s rugby games and support their local teams is a historic problem not only felt at Premiership level.

Lower tier women’s rugby has also encountered the same issues with popularity.

However, there has been a recent boom in interest with numbers of spectators rising significantly.

Saracens Women alone saw a seasonal membership increase from 31 to 856 and a club-record of nearly 2,992 people attending the women’s match (The Duel) against Harlequins.

This newfound hype for women’s rugby is being felt on all levels with one domestic women’s rugby team also noticing an increase in the number of spectators at their matches.

Thamesians Women first opened up in 2018 and now

train weekly at St Mary’s University in Twickenham for their league matches in the Women’s NC 1 South East (North) division.

Sammy Watts, a member of the team, said: “When we first started playing we would get the odd couple of people coming down.

“But now we get a lot of people coming and it is so nice to see us getting an equal amount of people on the sidelines, sometimes more than the men’s do.

“It is so nice to see that they’re not coming just to make up numbers but now they are coming because they actually want to watch us.

“THAT IS HOW IT SHOULD ALWAYS BE.”

Despite this increase in popularity, getting numbers on the pitch can still be a struggle for domestic teams such as Thamesians.

Nigel Botherway is head coach at Thamesians Women, he said: “The biggest challenge we face is getting a team out every week.

“Last season, although we won our league, we had so

many games that were not fulfilled because the opposition couldn’t put a team out.

“I don’t think the numbers are there; women’s rugby is going in the right direction, but as far as numbers are concerned it is a real struggle.”

So why is it that women’s rugby is still not drawing in the same numbers as the men’s game? What is missing?

Giles Ward is a coach at Thamesian Women and Twickenham Girls team.

He believes there needs to be more of a drive in schools to encourage young girls to get involved in the sport from an early age.

He said: “The local schools in my opinion are not getting the links with the clubs, which is vital, and at primary school level they need to. That’s where the girls start playing cricket and football.

“But also other sports, more ‘recognised female’ sports like netball, athletics, gymnastics, horse-riding. So by the time they’re at junior school, if they’re sporty - they have already got a sport.”

However, despite this supposed lack of drive in schools, there are still plenty of young girls that are getting involved in the game from grassroots level and playing at clubs locally.

Many parents spend weekend after cold weekend standing on the sidelines of girls’ rugby matches, watching as their daughters dive around in the mud and experience a sense of comradeship that is unmatched in any sport.

One of those parents is Adam Webb who watches his daughter, Poppy Vuillemin-Webb, each weekend of the season as she plays for the U16s Twickenham Girls side.

Adam loves watching his daughter from the sidelines, he explained: “As a parent, I have a sense of pride.

“My daughter is a rugby player, I could shout it out the window!

“They clearly enjoy it, the thing with Poppy is that at any given moment I look over and she is grinning.

“I have e

“My daughter is a rugby player, I could shout it out the window!”

never seen anything like it, she never stops grinning when she’s playing.”

Another parent, Suzanne Sexton, explained that her daughter loves playing the game as it is a good mental release where the girls can relax and let loose.

She added: “I think it is becoming socially acceptable a little bit more and she [her daughter] is actually really quite proud to say she plays rugby.

“Whereas a few years ago that wouldn’t have been the case.”

Suzanne took her daughter, Lois, to the Red Roses match at Twickenham earlier this

year and described it as the best match both of them had ever seen there.

So with the new TNT Broadcast deal for Premiership Women’s Rugby, the Red Roses returning to Twickenham in the upcoming Six Nations and the women’s Rugby World Cup on the horizon in 2025, it is safe to say the next 18 months is set to be a very transformative time for the game.

While it is clear there are still issues in terms of numbers and drawing in attendees to matches, women’s rugby has certainly come a long way in the past decade and I have no doubt it will continue to break down barriers and progress in leaps and bounds in the months to come.

So whether more girls are getting involved because they come from a rugby family, or because their friends play at school, maybe they watched the Red Roses triumph at Twickenham Stadium or maybe they just play because, as one player from Twickenham girls shouted to me:

“It’s fun because the boys don’t like you playing it!”

Does it really matter?

Women’s sport in general is growing and women’s rugby has been waiting in the wings for their turn for years.

The next few years will be its time to shine through and break the mould. All I can say is that the young girl who was resentfully chucked the ball, is pleased with what she sees.

London run clubs on an uphill sprint

Ruby Smith

It's 7pm on a freezing Friday night in London. The air is crisp and puffs of cloud-like vapour hang in the air from frosty breaths. Crowds of people adorned with tights and neon socks gather at London Bridge, ready for tonight's event, some arrive with friends, others sidle up to newcomers.

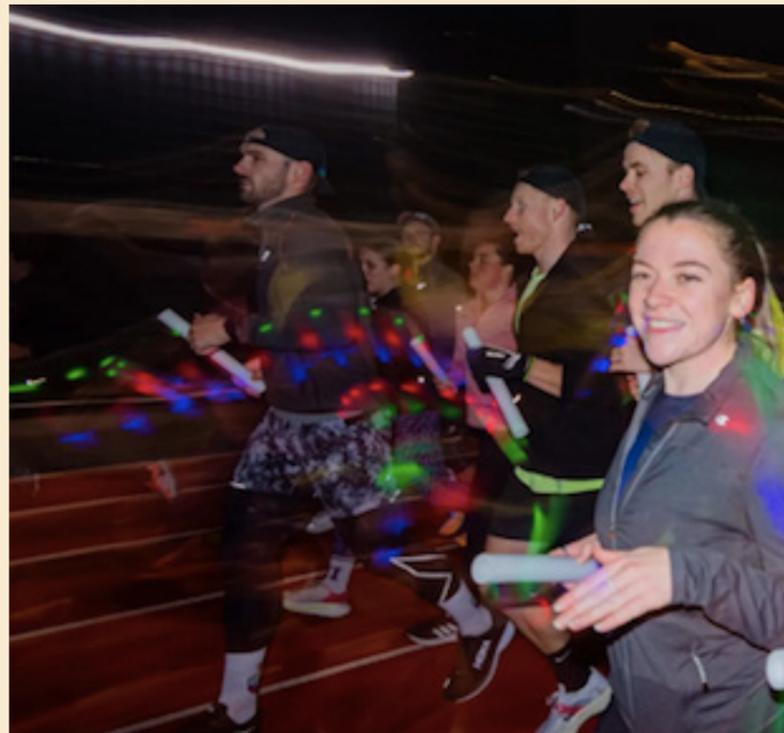
This event marks the end of the working week for many Londoners, a 5km to 7.5km run around London with Friday Night Lights—a running event which brings 'music, energy and atmosphere' to the city's streets and parks.

A mob of trainer-clad feet weave through London's lanes, following coloured torches shining in the night sky. Some runners carry speakers like a backpack, setting a rhythmic pace with upbeat techno music. Eventually we wind up back at London Bridge for a debrief and chat fuelled by natural-energy drinks.

The scene is remarkably different to a standard night out in London but the vibes are the same- if not better.

Running clubs and the number of attendees are on the rise. It seems that just a few years ago running was seen as an unpopular, solo sport. But now, thanks to events like FNL, London has become a destination for run clubs.

Founder of FNL and Run Social, Charlie Allen, explains how running has become a trend. "I feel like it's everywhere and more people are being exposed to it, so therefore more people are doing it."



Runners have taken over social media and they look cool doing it with iridescent sunglasses and bright tops, #Running has over 26.2 billion views on TikTok, with influencers filming their runs and taking their followers with them. Popular brands like Nike and Underarmour sponsor these 'fitness influencers' with fashionable sportswear and trainers, coveted by keen runners.

But it's not just about looking good, running is about feeling good. Charlie founded his running events at a low-point in his life. "I didn't really have any mates, I was single, I didn't have any money and I didn't really do anything."

As a keen runner he started a run club as a way to meet

new people, and soon realised a lot of people were after the same thing.

"I think people woke up to it and thought I don't want to wake up every Saturday hungover, even further in my overdraft on some mates' sofa in Clapham."

The FNL event is described as 'London's healthiest night out', Charlie said:

"You don't need to go out on a Friday night to the pub or a rave you can go for a run and listen to techno and it will cost you less than a cocktail"

Charlie's personal story perfectly summarises what run clubs can offer "When I

started going out running on a Wednesday in London I had no mates, no money and I was lonely.

"Fast-forward 18 months and I've got a wonderful girlfriend, I'm involved in the running events industry for a living and I now have 17,000 mates who've signed up to my run club."

Owen Barrow, 26, shares his passion for running to his 40,000 Instagram followers, despite only taking to the sport at the beginning of this year.

"If you'd told me to go for a run one year ago I'd have told you to jog on," he said (pardon the pun). But after lacing up his running trainers and sticking to a training plan he soon found a love for running.

Owen describes running as his therapy. "I've never been in



(Owen Barrow)

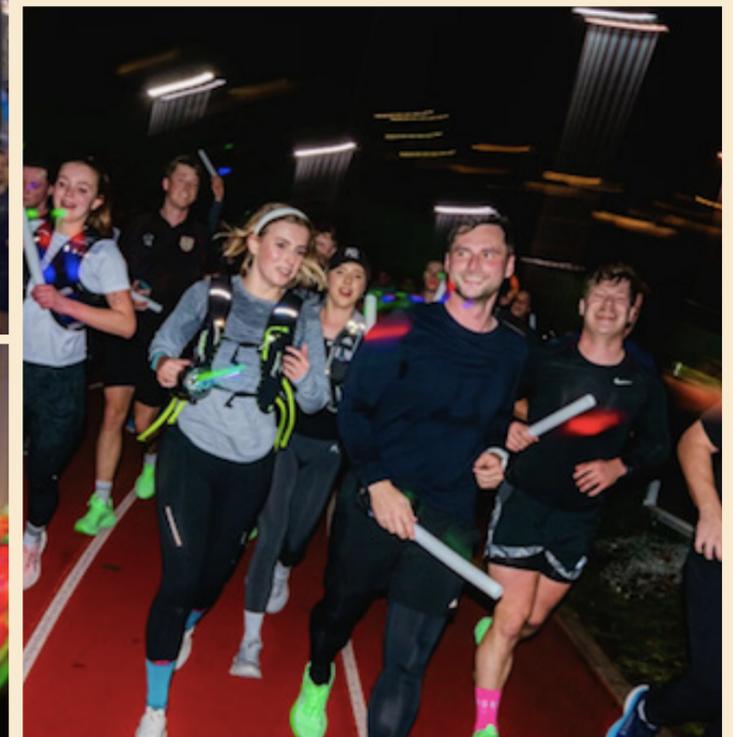
a bad mood after a run, if you're having a bad day, you go out for a run and it's an opportunity to take a moment and breath. It's pure clarity."

Running events like Friday Night Lights are proving just how fun running can be no matter the speed, distance or individual level of fitness. But perhaps, more importantly, run clubs help build communities around a shared love for running. Owen said:

"I've met some of the best people I know through running. You can turn up to run clubs and people will welcome you in"

"It's not about ego or who can run the fastest, it's about getting through it together... at the end of a run everyone's endorphins are flowing, everyone's buzzing so they're more friendly to each other and it's a beautiful environment."

As I look around at the smiling, sweaty faces at the FNL event, Owen's words ring true. "This is the best way to spend a Friday night!" exclaims one runner, clutching a Tenzing can- cheers to that. Follow @fridaynightlights.run on Instagram



by Holly Brencher

Women-only gyms have emerged as a popular choice for many, offering a unique environment that promotes comfort, camaraderie and confidence.

These fitness havens cater specifically for women's needs, fostering a supportive atmosphere that encourages personal growth and wellness.

The focus is not just on physical fitness but also on creating a community that empowers women to reach their health and wellness goals.

The gym is incredibly important for women for a multitude of reasons. It's a place where women can strengthen their bodies, boost their mental health and build resilience.

Regular exercise can help reduce the risk of various health issues. It's not just about physical strength but also about empowerment and self-confidence.

Stronger is a strictly womens-only strengthening and conditioning space, located in Bethnal Green.

Co-founders of Stronger, Sam Prynne and Tig (pictured left), and best friends were once the women with no idea of what to believe, what they should be doing or who they should be listening to.

Sam told me that her and Tig started Stronger for so many different reasons:

"Essentially me and Tig were best friends both female-only personal trainers and we realised that we were in competition with each other as we came from the same area. "We wanted to educate and empower women to take back control of their own fitness, so rather than getting from A to B and not understanding how you've got there, with us you can understand

'right okay I've got to this weight because I've done this certain exercise and this is how I can continue

girls', which from being very successful business owners they clearly are not! However at the time



this journey or I have got stronger because of this."

Their main goal was to get more women into weight training, as predominantly many women are scared of the weights area as it can be male dominated.

Sam said: "from my own personal experience there is sexual harassment happening in gyms and quite often involving men."

Sam and Tig call themselves 'silly little

they started Stronger seven years ago social media was aesthetically very 'posey' and transformation based when it came to fitness.

Sam describes the pair as "two very loud women who were relatable and fun and looked like 'normal women'"

So the pair began putting content out on social media that didn't fit the 'norm' about fitness but in a fun and relatable way. "We are real wom-

en and we will go on social media and be like this is shit. We are open and honest about our journey with building Stronger, being two female founders and Tig being a mixed-race woman."

During the Covid-19 outbreak Sam worried that the business would be over due to not being able to use their space and open their business the way they wanted to. However Tig took to the internet and launched Stronger online, this created a strong community of women over WhatsApp groups.

"There's now 350 women in this group.

Members said we are not going to let you guys go under, members paid their memberships in the periods that we were closed, they supported us financially, "And also by being just them. Amazing. They were there for each other by being vocal in the WhatsApp group,

"It was amazing to see. It made us realise this is more than just a gym, this is a community."

"You could come in and be the most shy and uncomfortable person and you will walk out of a class

with a new best friend."

Sam and Tig before Stronger worked across the board from budget gyms to boutique studios across London and found that it was one demographic of people in the gym, and it was a 'very white' industry.

"From a diversity and inclusion perspective we wanted to change what that looked like and actually have a space that was welcoming to all women no matter what your culture, your background or your disposable income."

"We have a huge muslim community

within the space and for those that want to take off their hijabs and headscarves they're able to do that as there are no men on the premises."

At Stronger they essentially offer 'a budget gym', an open gym facility at the price of £30 to £50 depending on the contract to come in and use the space by themselves.

They also offer class memberships, the classes are kept small as the focus is strength training based, being very technique focused it is important that the coach has the time and space to focus on each individual.

The Warrior project began by taking a group of women who had never lifted before, and giving them the foundations of lifting.

It is still predominantly used by beginners and offers people who want personal training but can't afford that high price point.

"It is very per-



sonalised so if I can see your struggling with for example hip mobility your coach will give you extra exercises to do outside of the space, like homework.”

Sam said : “exercise in general is obviously important for health. I say obviously but nothing is ever obvious. For heart health, muscular health and mental health.”

“Strength training is important for a number of reasons. Women have been put off strength training because they don’t want to get ‘bulky’.

“But an actual fact from the age of 30 you start to lose muscle mass, by the time you get to 60 years old you’ve had 30 years of your muscle wasting away essentially. That is where you have problems in your older life.

“So strength training is important for building lean muscle mass and even just thinking about a strength perspective just making sure your body is able to move and you are able to live well.”

“It helps to improve your bone density, again as you get older women are more at risk of Osteoporosis. It helps regulate your

“It also makes you feel like an absolute badass!”



hormones.

“We have seen so many women over the past seven years who have come in and said ‘there is no way I can pick up that dumbbell’ but we as women carry around handbags all the time which probably way more than a big old dumbbell.”

So whether you are a beginner at strength training

or an absolute pro - Stronger is the place to be the girl boss you plan to be.

Another women-only gym that is thriving at the moment is The Bridge, based in Southwark it provides a multitude of great health benefits to the local women.

The Bridge is a

It grew from that to become a place for women to come together, talk and support each other through physical and mental wellbeing.

It’s a charity first and foremost that supports women, the building has a women-only gym that is part of the charity.

I spoke to Wendy Bowen who is head of marketing at The Bridge, and asked her ‘why are women-only gyms so rare?’ :

“As a commercial enterprise, if you only say you’re only going to accept women, that’s already excluding half the population before you even start. So your customer base is already less potentially and I guess men historically

were the ones who wanted to workout more.

“Encouraging women to join a gym and understand that there are women-only spaces is less well known.”

When speaking about why women should feel comfortable in the gym she said: “I think one of the key things we find is that women might

have gone to a gym that had space for men and women and feel quite intimidated and less comfortable in their bodies.

“A women’s only gym offers refuge from men being around, particularly if you have had a bad experience with men.

“A women’s only space allows you to just relax and be yourself and not worry about what you look like, or having to workout in a certain way. You can do it with a supportive community around you.”

A key quote stated on The Bridge’s website said ‘Physical and mental health shouldn’t be dependent on where you live or what you earn’, this is important as gyms can now be expensive and people in central London struggle to find this money.

Wendy said: “There are some parks, but in the evening you don’t really feel safe, so the gym is the one place you can go to but quite often you can’t afford to go to the gym if you’re struggling to put food on the table, bring up children or even just pay for your own rent or wellbeing.”

Another topic we covered was why do women find it harder to go to the gym in

comparison to men.

“The pressures on women are different, they have different responsibilities and perhaps they are just busier people. They’ve got either elderly parents that they are caring for, young children or trying to be the ones who juggle the rest of the family, so most women now work as well so they’re probably exhausted.”

Similar to what Sam said at Stronger, it is the weight section that scares women the most, Wendy said: “Women enjoy the weights in the gym because from what I’ve heard in regular gyms the women’s weights are pink and in the corner, they’re less heavy and it’s just patronising.

“Whereas in our gym they are the same as they will be in



any gym, you don’t have men hogging them, and hovering over you telling you how to use them. So I think women enjoy coming along and getting involved in the weights.”

The Bridge as a charity hope to see themselves in five to ten years time in different locations, as they are currently just one place and there are lots of parts of London that desperately need places for women to work out feeling safe and secure in an harassment free environment.

Women-only gyms are most definitely becoming more popular.

And we hope to see more of them popping up all over London for all women to access.

Whether your new year goal is to pick up those heavy weights or simply to use the treadmill then sit down for a tea with friends, both the places I spoke to offer amazing opportunities for women and help push forward their fitness goals.

Skate into Christmas at Somerset House

Ruby Smith



Ice skating is always one of my favourite Winter activities, and the outdoor rink at Somerset House offers an experience like no other.

This year, the festive transformation of their courtyard would even put the Grinch in the Christmas spirit.

A 40-foot Christmas tree with giant red baubles and twinkling fairy-lights greeted us at the entrance before we made our way through to the skating arena which revealed a breath-taking view of Somerset House lit up with colour and a rink glowing with hues of red and green. It really was a festive scene straight from a Christmas card.

Before stepping on the ice, the Zamboni machine cleaned the surface, leaving glistening trails behind it. The rink was better than any other location I've visited in London with a smooth surface and large enough area to avoid traffic jams on the ice.

It's a festive-experience even good enough for celebrities; I spotted Ed Westwick, known for playing Chuck Bass in *Gossip Girl*, holding hands with his girlfriend Amy Jackson.

I went along to the Skate Late session at 9pm, where DJs play rinkside so you can

glide (or slip and slide) along to tunes. This year Somerset House hosts an impressive line-up, including Melle Brown, Donnie Sunshine and Deptford Northern Soul Club.

The music is also pumped through to the Skate Lounge bar by Whispering Angel, so when you've finished skating, you can grab a glass of rosé or hot chocolate and continue to soak up the atmosphere.

Amy Cornell, 22, who attended the event said:

"I had a wonderful time at Somerset House, not only did the layout fill me with Christmas spirit; the music had me dancing on the ice rink"

"This sets Somerset House apart from other ice rinks, being able to see the DJs have so much fun made it all the more enjoyable."

If you're feeling hungry after a skate on the ice, Chalet Suisse by Jimmy Garcia delivers a Gourmet dining experience at the pop-up Alpine restaurant in the West wing of Somerset House. The restaurant has partnered with Switzerland tourism to bring the taste of the Swiss Alps to central London, serving up winter classics and warming drinks.

One happy visitor said: "I had a great afternoon with friends, it felt like coming off the mountain skiing, except this time we were skating!"

Skate at Somerset House is open until January 14th but make sure to book your tickets in advance to avoid missing out. Adults £25



THEATRE PECKHAM'S 'hairy-tale' of Rapunzel

Izabella Thornley

Theatre Peckham introduces a Christmas production of Rapunzel - but not the classic fairy-tale you may know.

Brought to stage on December 5th, the modern day adaptation uses the topic of hair to celebrate the power of individuality and empowerment. The idea of the production was to reinvent the tale with references that address real life topics, including beauty, feminism and entitlement.

Hair-stylist Shamara Roper held workshops with the theatre's community to embrace different hair styling techniques. She expresses that talent should feel comfortable and beautiful after having their hair done, not the opposite. Set in a Peckham hairdressers, Barnet Magic represents how transforming a salon with educated stylists can be. Bringing together a community of people who want to feel good in their hair.

There are points of real comedy that are well performed and very timely. Marcus Ayton who plays Fortify, Leon and Mama Bea carried a special energy that particularly engaged the audience.

Playwright Geoff Aymer makes sure to do this too by including plenty of audience participation in the form of funny songs and dances. He said:

"A fresh perspective of an age-old tale. Plenty of laughs. Plenty of toe tapping moments."

Rapunzel is Theatre Peckham's Christmas show but there is no clear sense of festivity, until a heartfelt rendition of 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' at the end. There are decorations that add a sparkle to the stage, but nothing boastful. Instead, the play teaches us an important lesson, that being entitled has consequences, demonstrated by the evil Aunty's actions.

For the duration of the show the salon took up a large portion of the stage, compromising space for dance routines and making some of the better scenes hard to see. On the contrary every inch of the room is utilised with performers using the aisles to interact with the audience making that community vibe really come to life.

The dances and songs are well composed; the theme song for Dignity is playful and orchestrated perfectly to match his character, credits to Jordan Xavier.

It was a pleasure to watch the excited faces in the audience, some clearly friends and family of the younger performers; the atmosphere was warm and joyous.

Artistic Director Suzann McLean said: "We are taking this timeless story and infusing it with our unique cultural twist that our audiences have grown to adore."

"Our talented Theatre Peckham Academy students will shine alongside an exceptional cast, creating a mesmerising musical pantomime-style experience that will leave everyone feeling uplifted."

Runs until December 24th 2023



Credits: Lidia Crisafulli

Eccleston's Scrooge has the *miser's* touch

A review of Jack Thorne's A Christmas Carol at the Old Vic ★★★★★

Holly Nichols

This year's rendition of A Christmas Carol at the Old Vic was quintessentially Dickensian and brimming with enough Christmas spirit to flood the whole theatre with joy, merriment and seasonal cheer.

Jack Thorne's adaptation of this classic tale of redemption, compassion and festive humour is truly authentic to the traditional Victorian story.

This joyous show has it all, the atmosphere created before the show was nothing short of Dickensian Christmas personified.

The live band in conjunction with Rob Howell's masterful use of set design on such a small and open stage transported one entirely out of their seat and back into Christmas 1843.

Donning Scrooge's signature robe and top hat, Christopher Eccleston's performance as the infamous Ebenezer Scrooge was sublimely brilliant; each line laced with an undertone of resentment and acrimony.

The Emmy Award-Winning Doctor Who actor was authentic to Scrooge's covetous character and brought comedic value to his role, having you laugh and cry on your adventure with Scrooge, a touch thoroughly enjoyed by the whole audience.

The use of ensemble storytelling throughout the production was remarkable and seemingly hypnotic. At one moment it gave the sense that one was truly walking down the streets of Victorian London on Christmas Eve.

The next, the overwhelming chill of anticipation as the ensemble transformed into a faceless spectre that guided Scrooge through visions of Christmases to come.

The entire cast delivered stellar performances, bringing Dickensian charm and wit to life effortlessly. From the Ghost of Christmas Present to Mr Fezziwig, each individual played a deeply moving and intelligent role, and did so with immense talent.

Whilst speaking to the wonderful cast member Rose Shaloo before the show, she told me: "I hope and I'm sure the audience will feel extremely Christmassy and full of joy!"

Shaloo played Little Fan, Scrooge's younger sister, who revisited Scrooge from the grave in this chilling adaptation. Her performance was believable as the young naive girl who

misunderstood the troubles of the world and just wished her brother home for Christmas.

She added: "It's also such a moving version and there are so many elements to this show that make it so wonderful and that's why audiences keep coming back every year."

If anyone is able to watch this show and not leave feeling the warmth of hope and Christmas cheer, then suffice to say they too deserve a visit from Mr Jacob Marley.

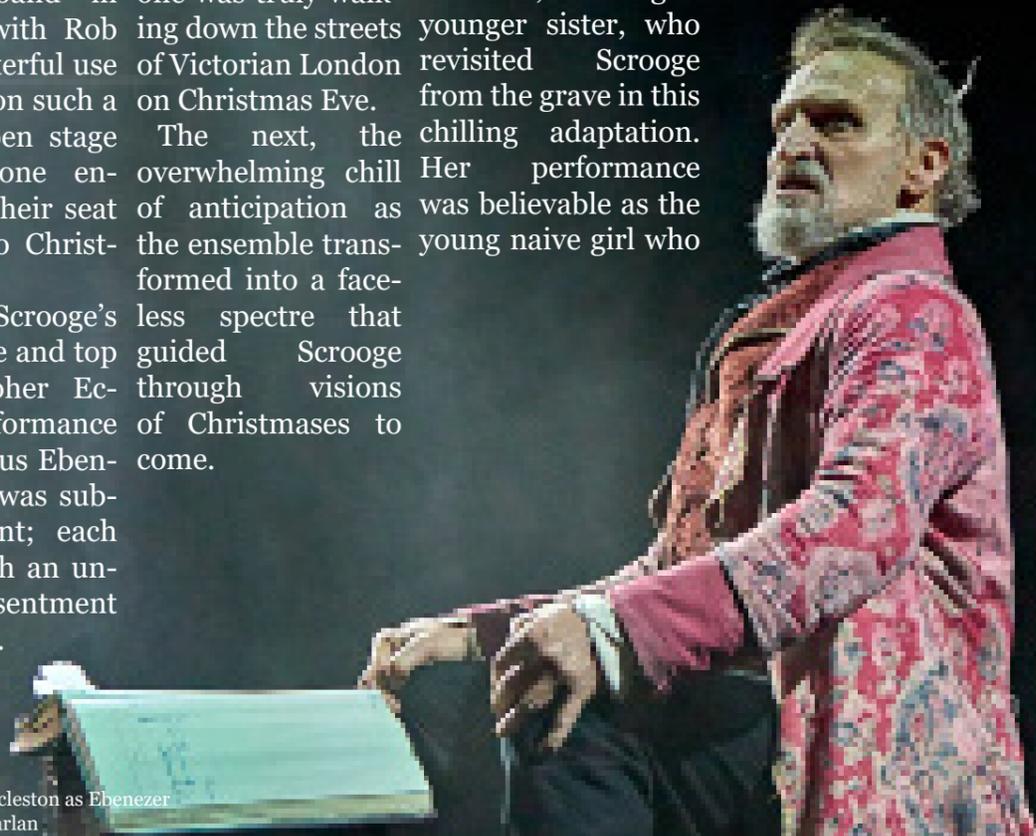


Image: Christopher Eccleston as Ebenezer Scrooge, by Manuel Harlan

CHRISTMAS EXTRAVAGANZA AT ELTHAM PALACE

★★★★★



By Holly Brencher

Eltham Palace, the art deco mansion and former Tudor royal palace in south east London, will be lit up this festive season as the award-winning team at Kilimanjaro Live bring their stunning light show to town for the first time.

Internationally renowned and award-winning creative director Katherine Jewkes has worked alongside light art pioneers, Illumaphonium, and have brought together a trail of spectacular illuminations and installations.

Katherine said: "We're incredibly excited to be bringing a brand new light trail to Eltham Palace, one of the most unique houses and gardens in the country."

She was excited to host spectacular installations that will help get visitors into the festive spirit in 2023.

This event is perfect for families, and accessible for everyone with ramps the whole way round.

Walk at your own speed and take in all the beautiful lights, half way through there is a bar that serves warm mulled wine and other Christmas inspired drinks.

A hut for the kids and big kids at heart with hot chocolate and even a Baileys hot chocolate for the adults!

With two fire pits centre stage where you can warm your cold hands and even better toast some large marshmallows!

From the top of the walk you can see London in the distance lit up as if it's part of the show.

Illumaphonium will bring their installation 'Halo' to Christmas at Eltham Palace.

'Halo' is a dynamic, interactive installation that lights up and plays music in response to touch.

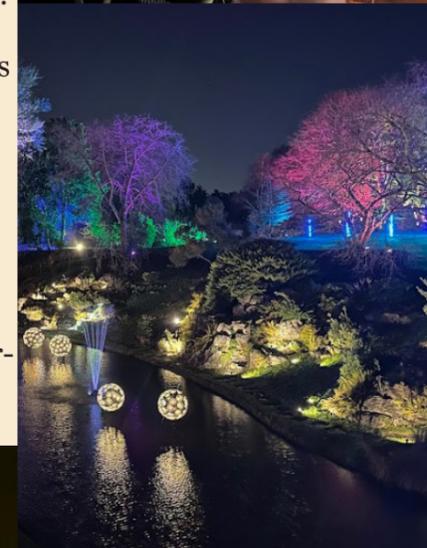
Created as a series of towers that feature illuminated 'halos', visitors can enjoy a sensory experience making music and an ever-evolving pattern of light as they interact with the piece.

This trail really does get you into the Christmas spirit.

Harriet English visited recently and said: "It is truly magical, the music mixed with the lights really makes you feel warm and is just magical."

The immersive trail is running from 1st December through 1st January.

Tickets and more information are available from ChristmasatElthamPalace.com





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