

NFOP magazine

Hot July brings
cooling showers,
Apricots and
gillyflowers.

Sara Coleridge



BBC opts for means testing
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**Visit gardens with The
National Open Garden
Scheme**
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Northumberland**
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Editor's Note

Welcome to the July edition of The NFOP Magazine. By the time you read this we will be well into summer, the longest day will have been and gone and while not wanting to depress you, dear readers, we will be on the countdown to winter. Well, actually at the time of writing it feels like we are already there. June has been, literally, an unprecedented washout. Let's hope for better across what remains of summer.

The weather got me thinking, is it really any different now than it was years ago? Did we use to see all these floods and natural disasters that our weather seems to inflict on us? Or is it, as many people would have us believe, down to climate change? And of course this led me onto think more about what kind of a legacy and world we will be leaving our children and grandchildren.

What is clear is that the world is changing, but then it was ever thus. Evolution has always been with us – after all just look how much things have changed even over the last 50 years. And no doubt they will continue to change going forward.

But that's not to say we should be complacent. In so many respects it is our duty and responsibility to ensure that we leave things in the best possible state for those that come after us. It will be interesting to see just how the climate change and pollution debates pan out over the forthcoming years. One thing is for sure, like our weather they aren't going to be going anywhere soon!

I must say, talking about the weather, we were very lucky at the Annual Conference this year as it did us proud, as did Southport itself. It was good to see those of you who attended, but for those of you who couldn't attend you will find enclosed with this edition of *The Magazine* a full Conference Report, which details all the business that was undertaken this year.

Finally, we have another packed issue for you and I hope, as always, that you enjoy it. Whatever your views and thoughts, please do write to me. Your letters and emails are always welcome.

Until next time.
Ed.

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July at the movies

Cinema



JOYCE GLASSER
IT IS MIDSUMMER
AND IF YOU CAN'T
HEAR MUSIC IN
THE AIR, LOOK
OUT FOR THESE
FILMS.

Apollo 11 – NEON/CNN FILMS/
SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

***Apollo 11* (now playing) Cert U, 93 mins.**

The making of American director Todd Douglas Miller's (*Dinosaur 13*) extraordinary documentary, *Apollo 11* would make a fascinating film in its own right. Thanks to Theo Kamecke's 1972 film *Moonwalk One*, commissioned by NASA, but hardly shown, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) had dozens of unseen reels of Todd-AO widescreen footage of the first moon mission left over in its vaults. NASA itself also shot footage of the mission – for some reason – in the same format that Joseph L Mankiewicz used to shoot *Cleopatra*. That one hundred percent of Miller's visuals are the result of state-of-the-art transfers from this incredible archival material gives us a ring-side seat to the entire mission as if we were there. As for the sound, a self-declared "space nerd" from Sheffield, Stephen Slater, performed the laborious miracle of synchronising individual sound channels from the Mission Control room with the visual footage... but I promised you music!

While the soundtrack album features original music (using period instruments and equipment) by composer Matt Morton, each astronaut had been given a compact Sony TC-50 cassette recorder for the convenience of logging mission notes verbally. But Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins also used the recorders to store mixtapes, custom assembled by Mickey Kapp (now 88), working for his father's local record company. On the eve of the moon landing, Aldrin says, 'let's get some music', his taste ranging from Barbra Streisand's *People* and Bettye Swann's *Angel of*

the Morning to Peggy Lee's cover of *Everyday People*. Most of this music is hard to hear, but Johnny Cash sound-alike John Stewart's *Mother Country*, released just two months earlier, is so stirring that Miller has it played in full-fidelity audio. Miller drops in montages of the astronaut's family photos and when Stewart sings, "whatever happened to those faces in the old photographs... the little boys – hell, they were men... Oh, mother country, I do love you," you try to imagine the thoughts of the two men who are about to become the first human beings to walk on the moon.

***Yesterday* (now playing) Cert 12A, 116 mins.**

What happens when one of the UK's top directors, Danny Boyle, (*Slumdog Millionaire*, *28 Days Later*, *Trainspotting*) and writer, Richard Curtis (*Notting Hill*, *Love Actually*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*) team up to make a romantic fantasy about the UK's most famous boy band, the Beatles? What happens is *Yesterday*, a fun, entertaining, high concept comedy that trails off into romcom hokum.

But first is the impressive feature debut of EastEnders actor Himesh Patel playing Jack Malik, a recently unemployed, struggling singer songwriter. Jack is about to tell his unpaid manager Ellie (*Lily James*, *Mama Mia*, *Here we go Again*) a childhood friend whose love is unrequited, that he is calling it quits. Minutes later, he is knocked off his bicycle in a freak accident during a global blackout and awakens from a coma to discover a world with no record – or records – of The Beatles. Jack, who realises he is onto something, rushes home to google The Beatles only to find the entomological definition of a beetle. Soon he is a star with a new friend in Ed Sheeran (playing himself); an obnoxious (and heavily parodied) Hollywood manager Deborah (Kate McKinnon) and a spot on James Corden's (playing himself) talk show. Though the precise words to songs like *Eleanor Rigby* are hard to recall and an older couple are onto Jack, wealth and fame are finally his for the taking. But what about Ellie and the values he left behind in Norfolk's Gorleston on Sea?

While the concept is sketchy (googling coke – as in coca cola – produces Pablo Escobar) and the Ellie love story is unconvincing, hearing a single, unknown singer reinterpret the band's songs with just a lone guitar or piano is a revelation.

***Pavarotti* (from the 15th) Cert 12A, 114 mins.**

Ron Howard is no stranger to biopics (*Rush*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Apollo 13*), and his first documentary *The Beatles – 8 Days A Week*, *The Touring Years*, was a triumph. But, graced with unfettered access to Pavarotti's archives and backed by Pavarotti's estate, his widow, Nicoletta Mantovani, and Decca,

his record label since 1964, Howard knew he had to make the definitive cradle-to-grave biopic of a living legend.

Pavarotti includes 53 new interviews, including the first ever with Pavarotti's impressive daughters from his 40 year marriage to Adua Veroni. Unusually, there is fascinating and revealing access to his managers and promoters – and priceless anecdotes. Of Pavarotti, who angered many for wasting his voice on popular culture and mass exposure, U2 singer Bono says, 'some can sing opera; Luciano Pavarotti was an opera.' Howard gives us Pavarotti's eventful life as a 3-act opera.

In Act 1, the son of a baker and amateur tenor who was born on the eve of WWII and sang alongside his father in the choral society of Modena, abandoned his dreams of football, and worked as an elementary school teacher while receiving voice training. In 1961 he won a competition to perform the role of Rodolpho in *La Bohème* and, after his appearance as Tonio in Donizetti's *La Fille du Regiment* in 1966, he was nicknamed, The King of the High C's. Between 1961 and 1967 he recorded the 11 operas and the Verdi Requiem which remain mainstays of his legacy.

Act 2 is the period of the Three Tenors. The interviews with Domingo and Carreras hold few surprises, but the footage of the concerts is exhilarating. Opera and popular culture merged to a new level when the trio opened the 1990 World Cup in Rome.

Act 3 covers Pavarotti's charity concerts, his controversial second marriage to a university student and "assistant", thirty-four years his junior, and his death.

American soprano Madelyn Renee provides candid testimony of the price paid for being an attractive, talented and infatuated "assistant", but there is no mention of Pavarotti's other nickname, The King of Cancellations. In addition to his Pavarotti and Friends concerts from 1992-2003 to raise money for war children (like himself), the most thrilling footage has to be the 1991 Concert in the Park. The expensively seated elite were under pressure to lower their umbrellas which were blocking the view of the masses. Princess Diana was the first to fold her umbrella, as a beaming Pavarotti dedicates Puccini's aria *I Have Never Seen a Woman Like That* to the drenched princess, who never looked more beautiful. When the two meet back stage, their instant rapport inspires Pavarotti to follow Diana's lead into charitable work.

***Marianne & Leonard – Words of Love* (from the 26th) Cert 12A, 101 mins.**

This is not a cradle-to-grave documentary biopic like *Pavarotti*, but the profile of a love story as tragic to some as that between the poet Dante and his muse Beatrice, if considerably more reciprocal. While watching *Marianne & Leonard* you might wonder whether English documentary filmmaker Nick Broomfield (*Whitney*, *Battle for Haditha*, *Ghosts*) was put on earth to make this film and help Leonard Cohen fans to finally find a way to say goodbye.

Broomfield was 20 in 1968 when he went to Hydra in search of sun and adventure. There he met Marianne Ihlen, a beautiful Norwegian woman whose grandmother had told her, "you are going to meet a man who speaks with a tongue of gold". That man was not the womanising novelist Axel Jensen with whom Marianne had a child, Axel, but a stranger, framed



Leonard Cohen. *Marianne & Leonard – Words of Love*

in sunlight at the door of a café/shop where she was shopping with her infant son. Marianne encouraged Nick to become a documentary filmmaker and introduced him to the songs of Leonard Cohen, another man who, 8 years earlier, aged 25, came to Hydra to escape the dreary winters of London, where the Canadian-born writer was living.

This is not the definitive biopic of the man who Joni Mitchell, a former lover, called a "boudoir poet". Though Broomfield covers Cohen's upper middle-class Jewish background, his first festival appearance singing *Suzanne*, and his years as a Buddhist monk, he focuses on the love story that lasted in a more inchoate form after the years the two lived together on Hydra where, with Marianne supporting him, Cohen finished *Beautiful Losers*. The scathing reviews resulted in Cohen having a breakdown and leaving Hydra to become a musician. We never learn how Cohen learned to write music, but we see that it was Judy Collins who, after hearing *Suzanne*, told the man who said, "I can't sing and I can't write songs" that he could do both.

Equally fascinating is the profile of Hydra itself and the spell which this celebrity island cast on those who struggled to survive in this idyllic paradise. Perhaps Broomfield will expand on this eerie aside in a future documentary. The lovers drifted apart when Cohen pursued his career and his appeal to liberated women, but Cohen never lost contact with his muse, who inspired the songs, *Bird on a Wire* (apparently a reference to Hydra receiving electricity for the first time); *Hey That's No Way to Say Goodbye* and *So Long Marianne*. The internet and the papers all published Cohen's famous message to Marianne when he learnt she was dying. But it is Broomfield who captures her reaction to his last words of love. Cohen, as he predicted in this message, was right behind and died 3 months later.

Other films not to be missed include the late Agnès Varda's last film (with help from her children by Jacques Demy), *Varda by Agnès*, and Dominic Dromgoole's absorbing film adaptation of the stage play, *Making Noise Quietly*.

“Princess Diana was the first to fold her umbrella, as a beaming Pavarotti dedicates Puccini's aria *I Have Never Seen a Woman Like That* to the drenched princess.”

Collecting binoculars

YVONNE THOMAS HAS HER EYES ON OPERATIC OPTICS

There was even a version called “jealousy glasses” which were opera glasses with a little side mirror which allowed discrete observation of other people.



The birds drop around for their breakfast at about 7.30am. They are quite punctual about it. I check their arrival against the kitchen clock. Some come a bit earlier and some later before the pigeons descend, but for most of them, breakfast – peanuts and songbird seed – is at 7.30 to 8.30am. They think this place is theirs. They should try paying the council tax.

When the pigeons arrive they scoff everything. Songbird seed, which is the most expensive in the shop and the robin's favourite, has been put onto a slate the previous night. The slate used to be on the roof. Now it is on a bench which makes it harder for the slugs to get at and easier for me to spy on the birds, using a pair of Victorian opera glasses enamelled with pink flowers on a pink and gilded brass background – a childhood gift from an indulgent Victorian godmother.

Opera glasses are perfect for bird watching. They are small and light to carry – they will fit into a pocket – and they do not

need much adjustment. They are not only functional, they are also very decorative, pretty and collectable.

Originally they were made for Victorian and Edwardian ladies visiting the theatre to focus on the singers and the stage, though in romantic novels – and probably in truth – they were used more sensibly for spying out handsome young men in the audience. There was even a version called “jealousy glasses” which were opera glasses with a little side mirror which allowed discrete observation of other people.

The French connection

The skilfully enamelled opera glasses, all made in France, which are so collectible today are at the end of a long line of optic inventions starting with the single lens as in a telescope. The first was just one lens held at the end of a long, elegant stick, the lorgnette. Then there were two lenses, finally with a bridge to join them and a central focus to align them both.

If you were a fashionable lady going to the opera you took your French-made enamelled opera glasses, often in a little purse. The earliest ones, made in the 1880s were made of gilt brass which was heavy, so manufacturers changed to making them of aluminium and mother of pearl which looked like silver but is much lighter.

Each pair of binoculars has the optician's name engraved on it though not the enameller's. Despite their anonymity, the quality and artistry of the enamelling is outstanding, with pictures of birds, romantic scenes, cupids, musical instruments and flowers on ivory and porcelain, all in miniature – and some binoculars were only three inches high, the better to fit into the lady's purse.



Top: Vintage Lemiere Paris opera glasses

Above: Aluminium and mother of pearl opera glasses made in France circa 1910

Bellow: Vintage Iris of Paris Mother of Pearl opera glasses

Bottom: Vintage “Sportiere” opera glasses, made in Japan



Wedding gift

When the Duke and Duchess of York who became King George V and Queen Mary were married in 1893 one wedding gift – given by Sir Augustus and Lady Harris – was a pair of opera glasses by Tiffany, made of gold and mother-of-pearl, ringed with tiny pearls and with a large central diamond. They are now in the royal collection.

Alexandra Alfandary who has a fine collection of antique French opera glasses in the Portobello antiques market in London was enthralled by the beauty and quality of the perfect miniature scenes on these still very functional binoculars. They are not cheap – they cost from around £70 to near a thousand. But in the words of Mrs Alfandary and others, “the prices still have a long way to go.”

PS Some readers may remember those cheap plastic binoculars that used to be on the back of cinema and theatre seats for hire at sixpence in the slot. They were nicked by so many that cinema owners offered £25 for shopping a thief. One man was in Bow Street court accused of stealing 1,800 of them.

Taking the biscuit

Will you have another biscuit? No, not that one. That biscuit cost £4,000. And anyway it wouldn't taste very good because it was made of flour and salt and water – “hard tack” as they called it – to eat in an emergency if you are adrift on the ocean in a lifeboat. Even sailors disliked eating hard tack but every British ship used to carry some.

This biscuit, auctioned just a few weeks ago by Andrew Aldridge came from the Lusitania. The British liner was the biggest and most famous passenger ship in the world when it was attacked and sunk by a German U-boat in 1915. The Germans said they thought it was carrying munitions.

The ship went down in 18 minutes and one thousand, nine hundred and fifty nine men, women and children died. Some passengers made it to the lifeboat where hard tack was kept for just such an emergency when a lifeboat might be adrift on the ocean for days, but in this case help came quickly and the survivors were rescued.

The biscuit was found later in the lifeboat. It must have been kept as a souvenir to have survived till now, and in April this year it was sold by Henry Aldridge's family company which has specialised in marine auctions and are known for their sales connected with the Titanic.

Four thousand pounds may be quite a price for a biscuit with history but four years ago the same auctioneers sold a biscuit from the Titanic to a Greek collector for £8,000.

Why should anyone pay so much for a mere biscuit? As every collector knows, they are buying history and connections – often from the distant past – as well as, in some cases, beauty and skill. An object, more than words, puts one in touch with the event and the people involved at the time. It has nothing to do with material value – which is why so many ordinary objects sell for so much. No beautiful craftsmanship, nothing decorative nor useful accounts for the money spent, only the sense of personal contact. And here are some more collector's items recently sold by other auctioneers which might easily have been just thrown away.

The stump of a cigar smoked by Winston Churchill has been valued at £600 to £800 by Kirsty Young at an Antiques Roadshow.

A beaten-up old wooden chair on which J K Rowling sat while writing her first Harry Potter novel sold for £315.

Paul McCartney's old front door went for £5,100.

John Lennon's spectacles that look like my NHS wire frames, auctioned for £55,000 – which not surprisingly, was a lot cheaper than Abraham Lincoln's glasses which sold for £143,000.

The most poignant item was the auction of a violin from the Titanic, one that belonged to a member of the orchestra that carried on playing *Nearer my God to Thee* as the boat sank, knowing that they were going with it. Henry Aldridge auctioned the violin for £1.1 million. Seafaring objects always sell well: ‘We can't get enough of them’ said a man who was selling a huge figurehead from the prow of a boat. Maybe it's because we live on an island.

Book reviews

KATE GOODMAN FINDS HERSELF IMMERSSED IN SOME TRICKY SITUATIONS

A prickly character you'll grow to love

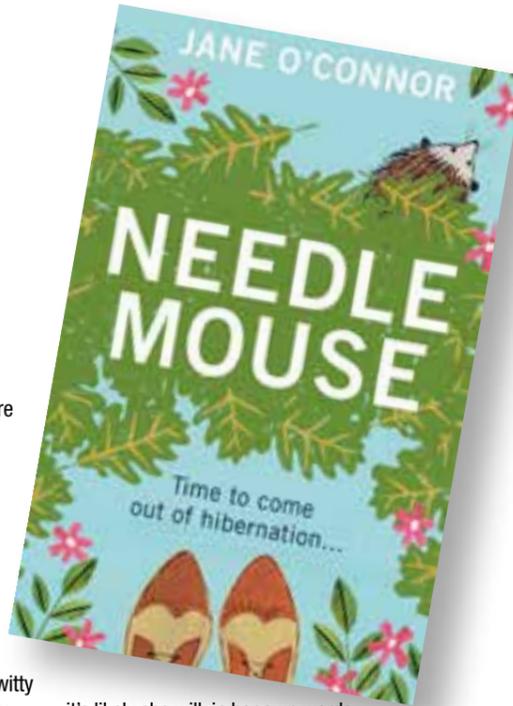
If you loved Eleanor Oliphant, you're going to hate Sylvia Penton, heroine of *Needlemouse* – at first, anyway! This embittered spinster is sharp-tongued, spiteful, vengeful – everything a heroine shouldn't be. But oh she's compelling, from the moment she reveals her unrequited love for her employer, the Prof, to her disclosure that in order to have something to talk about on a Monday morning, she volunteers at a hedgehog sanctuary run by warm-hearted old Jonas Entwistle. It's a fitting pastime for her – for, like a hedgehog – known as Needlemouse in Japan – Sylvia has rolled herself into a ball of defence so hard and spiny that even her family can't get through. Though she "adores" her sister Millie, she's scornful of her life with husband Kamal and can't stand her niece Crystal.

At 52, she has never known real love. The best she can look forward to is fortnightly working lunches with the Prof and the hopes of a repeat

of a drunken snog with him at a long-ago Christmas party.

The story opens with a threat to Sylvia's future imagined happiness with the Prof, in the shape of new PHD student Lola. At first Sylvia isn't too worried. She has already seen off various students, dropping sly hints about unpaid student debts to the faculties managers, "losing" applications for conferences and hinting at sexual misconduct are just a few of the tricks she keeps up her sleeve.

While Sylvia's campaign to run Lola off the campus occupying the first half of the book, is witty and fun, it's towards the second part of the story that Sylvia finally lets us in and we begin to catch glimpses of the soft underside she strives so hard to hide. Hints of an early betrayal are crystallised, secrets emerge, and it seems that Sylvia will have to face the price of past and present follies with the loss of all the people she loves, her sister Millie included. Even if happiness does come knocking,



it's likely she will, in her own words "shake my head and close the door."

Poor Sylvia has to learn that like a hedgehog, just because she is not easy to stroke does not mean she is not worth loving. Her journey to that realisation is a joy to read.

***Needlemouse* by Jane O'Connor is published by Ebury in paperback, RRP £7.99**



Nightmare neighbours!

Lowland Way is a suburban paradise. The houses are smart, the neighbours are friendly. The kids can even play out in the street thanks to Naomi Morgan's campaign to keep traffic off the road on a Sunday. Then one day Ralph Morgan receives a text from his wife. New neighbour at No.1, looks tricky! Come straight home and let's discuss. "Tricky" may be the understatement of the year. Darren and Jodie Booth, who

have inherited the house from an old aunt, are coarse and aggressive, unwilling to listen to Ralph's reasonable arguments that

they shouldn't be renovating the property without planning permission, nor running a used car lot from their driveway. Soon other neighbours are complaining about the noise and the parties but "those people" continue to go their own sweet way. It seems Ralph and Naomi, his brother Finn and wife Tess (who also live in the street), young parents Nat and Em, and older widow Sissy will have to put up and shut up, or sell up. Then tragedy strikes the street, and suddenly the neighbours find themselves under suspicion of foul play. All have a motive for the sabotage that takes a life – but will the culprit be discovered and peace restored? Louise Candlish's *Our House* was one of last year's thriller sensations and this new book does not disappoint. Cleverly exposing the snobbery and elitism of a close-knit community when faced with someone who does not conform, *Those People* leads us up many a winding road before the truth is revealed!

***Those People* by Louise Candlish is published by Simon & Schuster in hardback, RRP £12.99**

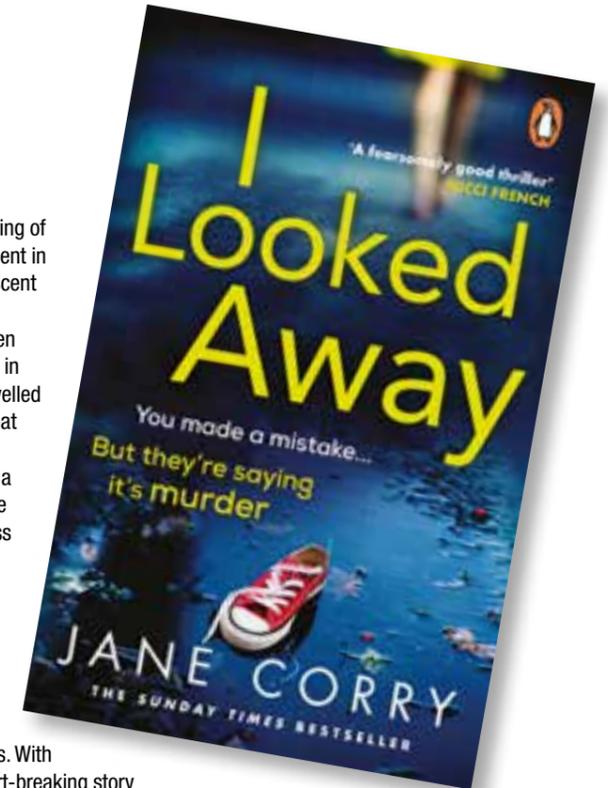
It only takes a minute...

Forty-nine-year old Ellie Hall is a devoted mother and grandmother. Then one day, she takes her eye off her small grandson, just for a few moments, and is now in prison, on trial for a terrible crime. Ellie can't remember what she has done – she just knows she has lost her grandson – but she does believe her past has come back to haunt her. In a series of flashbacks we learn of her unhappy childhood with a manipulative stepmother, and an all-too friable home life that ended abruptly when an unspeakable tragedy split the family when Ellie was just 14.

Jo is on the road again. A homeless woman recently released from prison, she wanders aimlessly from town to town, looking for somewhere to lay her head. She encounters kindness and cruelty in equal measure. A vicar gives her tea and biscuits, an American woman pays a hotel room for a night, a young boy befriends and offers her protection. But in between she has to fend off sexual predators and drug dealers eager to take advantage of her vulnerability.

In flashback we learn something of Jo's former life – a childhood spent in care, an abusive husband, a descent into alcoholism and crime.

What's the connection between Ellie and Jo? All will be revealed in the end, but not until you've travelled with both women on journeys that reveal their resilience and inner strength. Author Jane Corry has a great deal of experience with the prison service and with homeless people and accurately portrays the best and worst in people with a warmth and acumen that make Ellie and Jo deeply sympathetic characters. The plight of homeless Jo is so well described you'll feel hungry and cold just reading this. With this tense, suspenseful and heart-breaking story Corry is fast becoming the queen of the domestic thriller noir.



***I Looked Away* by Jane Corry is published by Viking in paperback, RRP £7.99**



Three women with a mission...

In 1940s London, with the world at war, Eleanor Trigg leads a mysterious ring of female secret agents recruited to work undercover in France. Among them is Marie, a single mother, fluent in French and an excellent wireless operator. Once in France, Marie finds herself caught up in all sorts of underground operations, including courier work and sabotage, as well as relaying information back and forth between her masters in Britain and France. She's a vital cog in the war machine – and knows full well what will happen if the Germans catch her. But duty keeps her at her post – duty, and her growing attraction to her enigmatic leader, Vesper.

Fast forward to 1946 and New York City. Grace, a young war widow

finds an abandoned suitcase at Central Station, containing photographs of around a dozen young women, including Marie's. She soon establishes the suitcase belonged to a woman called Eleanor Trigg – and sets out on her own mission to discover more about these women's fates.

Eleanor, too, has been desperate to discover what's happened to "her girls". So many disappeared without trace, and yet the War Office refuses to try to discover what happened to them.

***The Lost Girls of Paris* by Pam Jenoff is published by HQ in paperback, RRP £7.99**

Northumberland – ever been? If not you should!

By Andrew Silk

“This is a beautiful county and if you want something a little different it’s a great place to visit, especially if history ticks your boxes.”

It’s England’s northernmost county and it has long been a frontier land between England and Scotland. Historically keeping marauding raiders at bay probably accounts for the fact that Northumberland has more castles than any other county in England.

Northumberland originally meant “the land of the people that live north of the River Humber”. It abuts the North Sea with some 64 miles of coastline, much of it stunning and sparsely populated. It’s fair to say that the county probably gets a little overlooked in favour of the North Yorkshire Moors to its south (for those pedants of you out there the county doesn’t actually border North Yorkshire), the Borders to its North, and Cumbria and the Lake District to its West.

But what else is Northumberland known for? You may be surprised to know that the county is the home to the only naturally cloning animals in the world. These are the Chillingham Wild Cattle which are direct descendants of herds that once roamed the forests of ancient Britain and have been living here for over 700 years.

The unique thing about these cattle is that they are genetically identical to each other, they each receive identical genes from their sire and dam, hence the natural clones, and are believed to be the only animals in the world to do this. There are only about 100 of them in total and they all live in Chillingham Park. They are also completely untamed, not even being treated by a vet throughout their lives. They are unique animals that’s for sure, and you can go and see them.

Another fact you might not know is that the county officially has the largest protected area of night skies in the whole of Europe. Head to the Northumberland National Park and Kielder Water & Forest Park and you will be smack bang in the middle of this area which has been awarded Gold-tier International Dark Sky status.

So overlook Northumberland at your peril. This is a beautiful county and if you want something a little different it’s a great place to visit, especially if history ticks your boxes as the county is steeped in it. The variety of things to see and do on offer is also a great reason to visit – read on and you will find out more.

Spoilt for choice

Let’s go back to that 64 miles of coastline to start off with. You could literally spend a whole visit never leaving it as there are so many interesting things to see; in fact it’s hard to know what to choose and what to leave out! So let’s go to my personal favourites and start with the gentile town of Berwick-upon-Tweed situated just three miles south of the Scottish Border, the most northerly town in England.

It’s a coastal town that offers the best of both worlds – you can stroll along its lovely sandy beaches in the morning and in the afternoon you can amble upstream along the banks of the River Tweed. To get a feel for the history of the place, you can walk the Elizabethan Walls, the only example of bastioned town walls that you will find in the whole of Britain. When they

were constructed in 1558 they were considered to be the most expensive undertaking of England’s Golden Age.

If museums and galleries are more your thing then you won’t be disappointed – there are plenty of both for you to explore. Or you can while away some time just sitting in one of the many coffee shops and watch the world go by. Whatever you choose to do you can easily spend a few days just immersing yourself in the place.

Lindisfarne

Head south from the town along the coast road and you soon come to another of the highlights of the area, Holy Island. The island lies a short distance off the coast and is connected to the mainland by a causeway. This causeway is subject to the vagaries of the fast flowing tides that are characteristic of the area and the island gets cut off twice a day as a result.

If you are going to visit make sure you check the tide times because these will determine what time you can and can’t access, and leave the island. An adventure in itself. And a word of warning; always check the notice boards, adhere to what they say, and don’t try to cross the causeway outside of the specified times. If you do, you might find yourself getting very

wet and having to spend a few hours in a garden shed on stilts (the refuge box for stranded motorists) whilst you watch the sea submerge your unfortunate car.

The highlight, when you get there, is undoubtedly Lindisfarne Priory, which was the epicenter of Christianity in Anglo Saxon times and was once the home of St Oswald. It remains a place of pilgrimage today and is the final destination on the long distance walking route that is St Cuthbert’s Way.

The island is also famous for its natural wildlife habitat, and its tidal mudflats, saltmarshes and dunes are a National Nature Reserve. It’s a great spot for bird watching and the seals love to bask on the deserted and safe sandy beaches. If you visit this just has to be on your “to do” list.

Once you’ve had your fill of Holy Island, continue heading south on the coast road and it won’t be long before you reach another of the “must sees” of the county; the magnificent Bamburgh Castle. On first sight the castle may seem familiar as it regularly appears as the backdrop to many TV series.

Bamburgh is iconic because of its position and its size. Once the Royal Seat of the Kings of Northumbria, there has been a settlement on this site since prehistoric times. It has a long history and association with the kings of England, perhaps most famously with Edward IV who destroyed the castle during the Wars of the Roses.

Returning to that wildlife theme that I mentioned earlier, why not make a visit to the place that Sir David Attenborough declared was his favourite place in the UK to see nature at its best – the Farne Islands. Accessible by boat from the small town of Seahouses, these National Trust owned islands are home during the peak breeding season to over 150,000 pairs of seabirds including razorbills, eider ducks, and perhaps the most photogenic of all, the puffins. It’s also a great place to see seals and their pups lazing on the beaches or bobbing in the water. The boats will actually land you on the islands allowing you to get even closer to nature.

And whilst you are visiting Northumberland you won’t go hungry or be thirsty as the county has a thriving food and drink scene!

Have I whetted your appetite? Well I hope so because if you haven’t visited, you don’t know what you are missing. Make the effort and trust me you won’t be disappointed.

For more information got to www.visitnorthumberland.com.

Opposite page: Bamburgh Castle

Above: Royal Border Bridge, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Below left: Lindisfarne Castle

“Don’t try to cross the causeway outside of the specified times. If you do, you might find yourself getting very wet.”

