

THE CLERK'S COLUMN

Idioms and idiots

The Anglo-Saxons do seem to take their laws seriously, and are regularly liable to credit them with an almost mystical quality, treating what is legally right or wrong to be morally binding as well. Other Europeans are less respectful, maybe because their legal systems are based on Roman law, under which the laws are duly enacted, but... And the "buts" can range from the possibility of obtaining dispensations or exceptions, if you have the know-how, to the application of common sense by those who should enforce them, so that they look the other way rather than appearing unfair or just plain silly. How refreshing it would be to have the attitude of drivers in Malta. When asked which side of the road they drive on they reply "In the shade."

No such luck in the heart of Saxon Wessex. At a meeting of a local health watchdog group, the Chairman (voluntary, unpaid) described some rumours as "jungle drums", not aware that she was making a comment any more racist than asking for a cup of black coffee. But in the audience was a member of Wiltshire's Racial Equality Council, who raised an objection to the time-honoured phrase. Despite an immediate full, if rather baffled, apology, the County Council would not rest until they had spent six months and many thousands of pounds on an inquiry and a ten-page report. Then they withdrew the group's funding. Who on earth would be offended by this weatherbeaten old phrase? Oddly enough, it has just appeared in an article in that most respectable of all magazines, *The Lady*, where in fact it referred to the effectiveness of the bush telegraph in Egypt. Anyway not only were jungle drums an admirably effective means of communication, but the whereabouts of said jungle are not specified, and could be in almost any continent, or even in some less kempt parts of Hampshire. Still, I must remind Parish Councillors not to talk about smoke signals in case there is a Red Indian... sorry, Native American, in the Jubilee Room.

Another group whose feelings, or (light) fingers we mustn't hurt are burglars. Like us, villagers in other counties have been warned about thefts from garden sheds. Fed up with losing anything from screwdrivers to lawnmowers, people in Tatsfield who put wire mesh over their shed windows were told by police to take it down, in case a would-be thief hurt himself. How on earth can wire mesh bite you in such a way that you can blame someone else and sue them from your prison cell? Then last month thieves in Brasted didn't bother to try to break in; they simply loaded the whole shed onto a lorry and drove off.

Snakes and ladders

In spite of the demands from Whitehall that local councils should wage war on waste, this sort of barmy behaviour seems unstoppable. I seem to remember a number of jokes, which would surely now be damned as racist, about the number of inhabitants of various countries needed to change a light bulb. I'm not sure whether one risks prosecution under any current law for commenting on the IQs of the Councillors of Stoke City. Heaven knows what precautions they would take if venturing into a rain-forest or an Arctic tundra, but anyone would think that their workmen would be ordered to equip themselves like Sir Ranulph Fiennes before venturing out to a housing estate to attend to a dud bulb in a security lamp. After waiting six months the elderly couple who reported the fault were told that the delay was due to a ban on ladders, so that scaffolding would be needed. Eventually three men arrived and put up scaffolding; then one held the rig, one changed the bulb and one "supervised". It transpired that the average time for scaffolding to remain in place was eight paid-for days. Nearby another pensioner got tired of waiting, so he changed the bulb himself, standing on tip-toe. No-one has yet suggested that the Council should acquire one or two of whatever is the modern equivalent of a soap box.

You may remember the two Parish Councillors who stopped everyone in their village from being driven mad by a burglar alarm in a deserted house that for two months had been going off for twenty minutes every two hours. After cutting the wires, they were promptly charged with criminal damage and threatened with three months in jail. That was two years ago, since when they have had to attend nine court appearances and were due the other day to make a final appearance before the magistrates in bracing Skegness. Someone in the Crown Prosecution Service suddenly had a flash of common sense (the trouble with which is that it may be sense, but is

less and less common) and dropped the case, provided the defendants accepted a police caution. For the taxpayer: total cost £40,000 or so. For stress to the two pensioners, let alone the 290 residents who had organised a protest campaign: total compensation £0.00.

And now we hear that the Audit Commission, one of whose jobs is to oversee governmental spending cuts, has just spent £53,000 on 224 office chairs. Well, if you look on pages 1000-1001 in the Argos catalogue, you will find a massive number of comfortably-upholstered office chairs ranging from £17.99 in black, blue, or even pink, to a top-class “manager’s” chair in brown or black saddle-stitched leather-effect material at 153.99. Even if everyone had a manager’s chair at that price they would have saved nearly £20,000. But it’s not their own money – it’s yours and mine. For the record, my desk chair in mahogany and real maroon, buttoned leather, cost all of £10. The source? Shepherds Spring Waste Disposal Site.