

# VERACITY

The Magazine from Verulam Writers



Edition 39

Winter 2018

## VERULAM WRITERS CELEBRATES 65 YEARS

Verulam Writers is celebrating its 65<sup>th</sup> season. From humble beginnings, Verulam Writers has helped to support hundreds of local writers produce thousands of works.

In September 1953 the St Albans College of Further Education began an evening class called 'Writing for Pleasure.' By accounts the course had limited success, with enthusiasm and student numbers waning in the run-up to Christmas.

But one student saw an opportunity. When the course finished she took it upon herself to invite the remaining students to her Radlett home to continue their work and mutual support. This simple gesture was reciprocated by the other students, and thus the Verulam Writers' Circle



was born. That student's name was Lisbeth Phillips – a name now synonymous with our yearly competition for factual writing.

Lesley Eames, chair of Verulam Writers, said of the anniversary: "Verulam Writers is celebrating 65 glorious years of supporting writers from beginners to professionals, producing a wide range of excellent stories and features along the way. We're based in St Albans, Hertfordshire, but our members and visitors come from neighbouring counties and London too. Do pop along for a visit."

There will be more about our anniversary in the upcoming editions of VERACITY.

### This time in VERACITY...

- 'It's a no...' Anne gets **rejection**
- Local expert Becky Alexander on **publishing**
- That time again! Wendy's top **Christmas gifts**

## From the Editor...

Hello and welcome to another edition of VERACITY – the newsletter by Verulam Writers about all things writing.

The 2018/2019 season is a landmark one as Verulam Writers celebrates turning 65. We're trying to verify if that's a record, but we think it must be up there as one of the oldest.

This edition sees a couple of changes, including the addition of this contents page – testament to the fact that VERACITY has grown so big as to need one. Another new regular feature is a Competition Winners page, so we can keep track of what competitions are run and who wins prizes.

In this edition you will find some fantastic pieces on such topics as keeping motivated during this time of year, coping with rejection and keeping on topic, not to mention a smattering of seasonal cheer.

While primarily created for members of Verulam Writers, we hope that non-members can enjoy the newsletter too. If you are not a member but would like to find out more about us then do get in touch.

Wishing you Season's Greetings, and a Happy New Year!

Sam, Editor

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# Keeping Motivated This Christmas

Steve Barley *gives some advice on keeping motivated this Christmas.*

When I looked up motivation on dictionary.com, it said, 'the act of motivating'. The author of that little gem also explained derivation as being 'the act of being derived'. Derived from the same flipping word, and a lazy disposition when it comes to real research, no doubt! I nearly couldn't be bothered to try motivation elsewhere but, after looking up prevarication first, I found a decent definition from a place called Oxford. Apparently it's 'the desire or willingness to do something' which, in our case, is writing.

Sounds like a good recipe to me, but overlooks a key ingredient – seasoning. At this time of year we're usually miffed wrapping Christmas presents, too busy haranguing fairy lights or making a complete turkey out of Jamie Oliver's nut roast, leaving little time and energy to write.

But don't worry, I've come up with a punning plan that's guaranteed\* to keep you motivated and your word count as high as Auntie Mavis after her solitary – 'just keep it topped up love' – glass of sherry.

**Step 1:** Tick the 'gift-wrapped' option when you buy all your presents online. Label them as soon as they're delivered to avoid mix-ups – especially if Ann Summers is involved. Use the time saved to come up with a better title than 'Killing Adam' for your follow-up psychological thriller.

**Step 2:** Generously allow your partner to go shopping/to the pub and, while they're queuing for the till/bar, you'll have ample time at home to put your feet up, and your new plot ideas down – in that writer's notebook you bought as an early present for yourself.



**Step 3:** Why host when you can visit? Leave the decorations in the attic, the heating off, and the tree in the ground as you spend quality time at another family member's abode. The money you'll save should more than pay for a new writing laptop, and think of all that time in bed you'll have to use it while your hosts prepare Christmas lunch. Just act dumb later when the word dishwasher crops up.

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**Step 4:** Christmas is a time for giving, so give a copy of your manuscript to everyone you know to proofread for you. Tell them you value their opinion, but point out how they're wrong if you don't like what they say.

**Step 5:** Tell everyone your New Year's resolution is to save our planet's precious resources by not sending thank you notes. Then use your spare stamps on pitches to every agent in Writers' and Artists' Yearbook. Do the same on Christmas cards and you can hit the children's version too.

Alternatively: don't stress the writing rate. Enjoy the Christmas and New Year celebrations, pen prose when you feel like it and pick it up again seriously in January. That way, you'll stay in your family's, as well as Santa's, good books.

Happy writing this Christmas!

\*defined as 'guaranteed only if successful'



## The 2018/2019 AGM

**Verulam Writers' Annual General Meeting was held on 5<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, and saw a number of notable changes to the committee.**

Lesley Eames was elected to take up the post of chairperson after Dave Weaver decided that the time was right to step down. Dave, along with Robert Paterson, was elected to the position of co vice-chair.

In other changes, we are pleased to announce that Gerwin de Boer and Phillip Mitchell are our new events organisers, so do look out for some exciting events very soon!

Anne Ellis remains as treasurer, as does Wendy Turner as head of catering, Robert Paterson and Jonny Rowland as secretaries, and Sam Ellis as head of publicity and Veracity. John Spencer remains honorary president.

Thanks are owed to Dave for leading VW through the last season (along with many others previously), and congratulations to Lesley and all other committee members.

If you are interested in joining the committee or helping out behind the scenes at Verulam Writers then please speak to Lesley or email us at [VWPublicity@gmail.com](mailto:VWPublicity@gmail.com)

# The First 500 Words

*The Veracity editor on the latest competition.*

In the last edition of Veracity, Verulam Writers were asked to send in their first 500 words of something original that they may have been putting off from starting. The winner is Tina Shaw with the first chapter of a novel currently entitled *Pink Streaks*. Well done Tina, and we hope to hear the next 500 words at a manuscript evening soon!

## Pink Streaks

### Chapter 1

‘It’s my decision,’ Gloria insisted. ‘We’re sitting shiva for two nights and two nights only.’

‘But Mum...’ Hannah groaned, ‘surely Dad deserves more; the full seven nights. People will want to come.’

Gloria sat down heavily on the old oak carver chair at the head of the table and put her head in her hands, whilst her other daughter Liz turned on her younger sister. ‘Stop it Hannah! Can’t you see Mum’s got enough to cope with? She doesn’t need pressure from you. The Rabbi’s agreed two nights. They’re letting everybody know. Dad wouldn’t have given a toss.’

Gloria got up hurriedly, muttering to herself.

‘What is it Mum? Hannah asked. ‘Are you feeling giddy again? Maybe you should go upstairs and have a little rest.’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t sit there. It’s Daddy’s chair.’ Her eyes wandered round the familiar territory of the dining room, multiple images crashing through her jumbled thoughts. That table held so many memories. She hadn’t wanted to have it at first. It belonged to Barry’s mother and her mother before her, but it was too big to fit into the tiny bedsit where she had ended her days. Gloria had tried to refuse the table, tactfully of course, because she had seen a lighter, more modern version in *Times Furnishing*, but she had to give in. Barry wanted it, or at least he wanted to please his mother, who was finding downsizing difficult. He probably didn’t care about the table one way or the other. He wasn’t one to dwell in the past.

‘How about a cup of tea,’ Liz suggested, but Gloria shook her head again. ‘I’m awash with tea. I’m all right. Don’t fuss. I’ll just sit here.’

They sat in silence, half listening to the murmur of voices coming from the kitchen, where Danny and his partner, Poppy, were clattering about, making phone calls. Gloria’s gaze alighted on the array of

family photographs spread around the room. She had always been careful to make sure that each of her children and their offspring were equally represented. No wedding photo of Danny of course. Poppy didn't believe in marriage, but there was a nice one of their three girls. Good job they didn't have a boy. Poppy would never have agreed to a circumcision. Barry was fond of the girls; twins following after their first girl. Gloria thought they were too young to come to the funeral but Poppy said it was important for their emotional development, or some such new-fangled theory. Women never even went to funerals when I was young, she thought, let alone children. Now that's all changed; brave new world.

Danny opened the door, phone in his hand. 'You all asleep? I've gone through the list you gave me Mum. They all know about the funeral now. There will be loads of people there. Anything else you want me to do? Is the service all sorted?'

What's the difference between the Christmas alphabet and the ordinary alphabet?

The Christmas alphabet has Noel.

## Christmas Gifts

*A Christmas poem, by Wendy Turner*

If I could give you a Christmas gift  
It wouldn't be shower gel  
Or Santa socks or a woolly hat

I'd open my box of treasures  
Gifted to us at birth  
To share as we journey through life

I'd give you starlight on a cold dark night  
Sunshine when you're sad  
And a hug when you walk all alone

Peace and kindness would spark like shooting stars  
And love would fall like snowflakes  
A handshake of welcome across the universe

What will you give this Christmas?





## Fear Comes In Flashes

Robert Paterson on a very special and spooky Flash Fiction night...

When the VW Committee noticed that one of 2018's meetings fell on Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> October, we gave members the chance to have fun while honing their writing skills by means of...The Verulam Writers Hallowe'en Flash Fiction Night!!!



We couldn't light a fire and dim the lights, but members were asked to bring in fiendish props to fire the imagination which included pumpkin paper chains, rubber skeletons, witches' hats, Hallowe'en tinsel, a blood-stained apron, a scorpion skeleton, a vampire in a cage and a genuine bubbling green potion!

Members were sat in groups around tables, ready to begin. Lesley started us off with a word-building game to warm us up. How many words of 3 letters or more can you make using the phrase; **TRICK OR TREAT!!!**

Anne Ellis and myself were joint winners, scoring 81 apiece. The longest words, however, were created by Wendy Turner and Jonny Rowland; "reactor", "trotter" and "traitor".

Then began the 3 flash-fiction writing sessions, each one requiring a different source of inspiration for the writers' ideas.

### 1. Petrifying Prop

Dave Weaver wrote a particularly good story about a man with a facial disfigurement who accidentally tries to remove his "mask" with a knife. Molly Le Messurier wrote a darkly

humorous tale about an old lady who gate-crashes her own funeral, while Richard Bruckdorfer gave us chills with a tale of a dark vision on All Saints' Day.

### 2. "The Fear Was Indescribable"

Members came up with stories that described the extremes of fear in various situations. Tina Shaw drew on the common fears of many with her description of a diabolical doctor coming closer to the antagonist with a needle (a dentist, perhaps?)

### 3. Sinister Sounds

Lesley gave us 4 spooky sound bites to build a story around; **CRREEEAK, GROOOOAN, TAP TAP TAP** and **SCREEEEEEEEEEEEAM!!!**

Phil Mitchell chose a scream to take us into the mind of a nascent serial killer. Sam Ellis chose the groan to evoke a haunting in a disused Underground station. Dave came to the fore once again, with the tale of a murderer haunted by the tap dancer he once killed in a hit-and-run. I chose the creaking noise to tell the amusing tale of a genuine werewolf enjoying Michael Jackson's Thriller.

John Spencer arguably stole the show, giving the tale of two confident tricksters who try to pass off an old house as genuinely haunted. Yet the creepy sounds they play inside the walls have no effect on their deaf client!

Overall, everyone was impressed by the writers' efforts that night, and fun was had all round.



## Becky Alexander: A Career in Publishing

Becky Alexander gives her insight into the world of publishing.

St Albans is home to lots of writers – anyone reading this already knows that! But did you know it is also home to lots of people who work in the publishing business? I know editors, designers and rights experts who work for Penguin, Bloomsbury, Hodder and Dorling Kindersley living in our lovely city – it is a short hop (usually...) on the train into London.

I have lived in St Albans for almost 20 years and in that time I have worked as Managing Editor at Penguin and Bloomsbury. I specialise in non-fiction, especially food books – I also write the food column for *The Herts Advertiser*. Editorial departments are small places so I have also commissioned and edited plenty of fiction in my time. I'm a keen reader (of course!) so even

**grammar and writing skills vary enormously – that's ok though as it keeps editors in work!**

when editing non-fiction I read lots of contemporary fiction, attend literary festivals and go to author readings.

Like many editors I did a degree in English Literature and Language – the language part was brilliant training for my career. A '70s kid, we didn't do a great deal of grammar at school so Leeds Uni make students do a year of grammar classes, which were incredibly useful. Having worked with writers for 20 years, the grammar and writing skills vary enormously – that's ok



Becky Alexander

though as it keeps editors in work! Don't let your own grammar skills put you off – if you have something to write, write it – an editor can help you sort out any issues, if needed.

My first job was at HarperCollins in the Collins Education department where I learned a great deal about the publishing process and helped create books for children's reading schemes. I moved into the food list and worked on lots of celebrity food books, which was brilliant training for dealing with big personalities and big budgets. I have since worked for many publishers

**One of the top questions is 'do I need an agent'... The quick answer is 'yes'...**

as a publishing consultant and freelance editor, including six months recently in the adult fiction and non-fiction department at Bloomsbury. I loved working there – they publish incredible authors and there were some great stories. I met the slush pile reader who discovered *The Kite Runner*...

Now, I mostly work for Penguin as an editor and proofreader, and I'd like to offer my time to my local writing group too. If you need help with any stage of the publishing process please do get in touch. I offer structural and copy editing and proofreading (prices from £16 an hour, budget to be agreed in advance). I also offer general advice about writing book proposals and working with agents. My blog [thepublishinginsider.wordpress](http://thepublishinginsider.wordpress.com) has posts about life as an editor and the publishing world if you want to read more and get a feel for what I do.

**Bloomsbury, for example, say no to 'unsolicited manuscripts' yet get boxfuls every day.**

I get asked about book publishing at parties, at the school gate, on the train and via social media. One of the top questions is 'do I need an agent' and I guess that is of interest to Veracity readers too. The quick answer is 'yes', if you write fiction, and 'maybe not' if you write non-fiction. Bloomsbury, for example, say no to 'unsolicited manuscripts' yet get boxfuls every day. It is a tough business to get spotted. For



non-fiction – if you are an expert on something, whether food, fashion, history or sport, you might be able to make a direct approach. The catch is that the publisher has to be able to sell your book in large numbers so whether you are sellable or not is a whole other question. It's not an easy process...

I wish you well with your writing, whether you wish to be published or not. Being part of your local writing community is a positive place to be. If I can help with practical matters, then please do get in touch:  
([becky.alexander.editorial@gmail.com](mailto:becky.alexander.editorial@gmail.com)).

## The White Hart

*Jonny Rowland on VW nights at the pub.*

**Manuscript evenings are a popular staple of all meetings for Verulam Writers. However, while most are familiar with the official atmosphere of St Michael's and our formal manuscript readings, those with a more informal bent spend the alternative week haunting the White Hart.**

As well as being one of the oldest pubs in St Albans, the White Hart boasts a long history of being haunted. As tour guides may tell you, the upper rooms doubled as a courtroom and was occasionally used for hangings. Although manuscript evenings are not typically visited by visitors from beyond, the Tudor hotel does summon a great atmosphere for reading fiction.

The informal meetings at the White Hart take place at 8pm on the alternate Wednesdays when the meetings at in St Michael's Church Hall are not being held. If you have never been, or would like to take in the ambience, drop in for one of the manuscript evenings.

## How to Keep on Topic

Tina Shaw on how to keep on the same train of thought.

**There is money to be made writing non-fiction articles and a wealth of blogs and essays on the internet, but how do you stop yourself from rambling? How do you keep to the point and not lose the thread of your chosen theme? This was the challenge put to me by the Veracity editor - to write about keeping on topic when it is not a subject that lends itself to me, so watch out for rambling in the following!**

There is no magic solution to keeping on topic but there are key questions as to why you are you writing the piece. Are you trying to persuade, inform, argue, or entertain? Is it merely to make some money, is it at the request of a tutor, or a boss, or simply for effect, to impress someone else? The answers to these questions will all effect the manner in which you write.

The dictionary definition of keeping on topic is staying relevant to the subject under discussion. However, one of the biggest problems writers may face is the word count target. Many articles and essays require a certain number of words and if the author has run out of things to say they will inevitably ramble off topic.

The Veracity editor complained that he was motivated to request this article by some work related job applications which went into rambling mode. How difficult when you are trying to sell yourself to a prospective employer but can't boast gold stars or Olympic medals. Lying or rambling to fill those dreaded spaces on the form are the likely result.

Recommendations for succeeding are as follows- plan an outline of what you wish to say; know your topic; address your main points; decide what audience you want to reach; research resources; reach a conclusion. It is sound advice but the danger is that it will result in some very dry writing. Sometimes, going off at a tangent can liven a piece up and give it a more creative feel.



Not this kind of rambling...

One of the difficulties of keeping on topic and not losing the thread of what you are writing is what else is going on in your head as you write. Do you have other agendas, other problems bothering you? Can you minimize distractions-phones, coffee breaks, noise?

For me to succeed and stay with the subject matter, I have to care about what I am writing. One of VW's most successful non-fiction writers who writes for *Hertfordshire Life* clearly researches her topics and cares about what she is writing. Her passions shines through all her articles. I fear that this article reflects the author's struggles to care enough!



## Rejection: the One Constant of Human Experience\*

Anne Ellis *knows no's*.

**Rejection. It's a fact of life for writers, but that doesn't make it any easier to bear. Life may at times seem like one long round of rejection when submitting stories to anthologies, articles to magazines and books to agents and publishers. So what do we need to remember?**

### It's not you, it's them

There are many reasons why a perfectly good story is rejected. The editor may have just accepted one with a similar premise. The tone of your work, although good in itself, might not fit with their publication. There may simply have been too many good submissions to accept them all.

Try not to take it personally. The editor isn't rejecting *you*, or your entire body of work for now and evermore; your submission simply isn't right for this publication at this time. Six months from now, the editor's situation may be entirely different—by which time you may already have

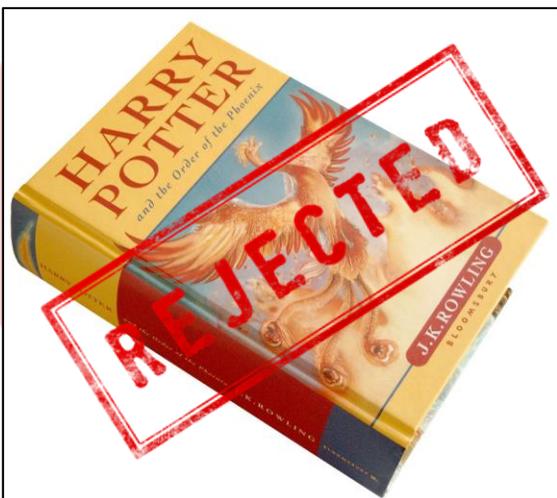
sold the work to someone else.

Your book may be perceived as too long for the publisher's market, or fall foul of received wisdom in another way: too slow to start, or to get into the head of its protagonist. The characters we meet first may be seen as too unlikeable, or too hard for the audience to relate to. Sometimes it's down to personal taste. The editor (or agent, etc.) may simply not enjoy reading stories about, say, plucky orphaned boys who find out they have magical powers. And yes, the examples in this paragraph are all reasons that have been suggested for *Harry Potter* being rejected 12 times before its final acceptance by Bloomsbury!

If there's anything to learn from JK Rowling's experience, it's that it's worth it to keep on trying.

### It might have been you, after all

Rejection can be a learning experience. Did you read the submission guidelines? Did you *really* read them, or did you just assume Times New Roman 12 point, double spaced, would be good enough? Did you check you'd followed the guidelines *to the letter* before sending in your submission?



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Submission guidelines have a purpose, and sometimes that purpose is to winnow out the slush pile. After all, does the editor really want to work with someone who can't follow simple, clearly laid-out instructions? Your story may be a literary tour de force and perfect in every way, but if the editor can't be bothered to read it (because you couldn't be bothered to follow the guidelines) then the most you'll get is a rejection letter.

It's also a matter of common courtesy—no matter how unnecessary the guidelines may seem to you, the editor may have set them for a reason. Rtf or body-of-email only? Perhaps the editor's fallen foul of a virus in a Word document. Odd choice of font/spacing? Perhaps they print out the submissions to read in paper form, and don't want to have to reformat everything first. Or perhaps they have issues with vision or dyslexia.

Did you send in your best work, self-edited as far as possible, and having had at least one other person cast an eye over it to catch the things you inevitably missed? A brilliant story may shine through a fog of grammatical errors—but on the other hand, it may strike an over-worked editor as just too much of a fixer-upper. Or it may not be read at all. I know when I'm checking out a book on Amazon, if there's more than one SPAG error on the first page (one could happen to anyone) then I'm out of there. Life's too short, and there are plenty of other fish in the literary sea.

## How to deal with rejection

Here are a few practical do's and don'ts:

**DON'T** write back to the editor and try to argue them into taking your story—or worse, tell them what a mistake they're making. All this will do is ensure they'll never accept any of your work ever again (and neither will any of their colleagues they tell the story to). Similarly, don't moan about them on social media.



*I got so many rejections for Chocolat that I made a sculpture... – Joanne Harris, on twitter*

**DO** thank the editor if their rejection is more than just a form letter. If an editor has taken the time to constructively critique your work, it's a compliment. If they've sent you a "revise and resubmit" it's not actually a rejection at all.

**DO** get a second opinion on whether a rejected work needs revision before you send it anywhere else. It's hard to be objective about your own precious brain-child.

**DO** leave it a few days before making any changes to your work. Make sure any feelings of hurt don't influence you unduly.

**DO** keep submitting it until it finds a home. And meanwhile,

**DO** keep writing!

\*Howard Jacobson



## The Christmas Jumper

Phillip Mitchell's *Christmas story*. Warning – not to be read while eating!



Last Christmas, my wife, Laura, handed me a parcel as I headed to the dining room for Christmas dinner. The children, Lola and Peter, scampered around me.

‘Open it, Dad,’ they chanted.

The parcel was neatly wrapped in snowman-patterned paper, tied with red ribbon. I held it to my ear and gave it a shake, the contents silent.

The children jumped up and down, tugging at my shirt.

‘Come on, Dad.’

I untied the ribbon and roughly tore the wrapping paper, screwing it up, and dropping it to the floor. I unfolded the parcel's contents and held it out for everyone to see. It was the same gift I received every year: another Christmas jumper.

This one was different though.

‘I didn’t have time to knit one this year,’ said Laura. ‘But I saw this one in the shop and thought it was great.’

On the front of the knitted jumper was an image of a reindeer’s head with large piercing eyes and a protruding red plastic nose.

‘Squeeze it,’ said Laura.

I pinched the nose between my fingers and a light within it flashed. The children laughed.

‘Put it on,’ they said.

I pulled it on over my head. It was snug under the arms but comfortable enough. I nodded my approval. They took turns to squeeze the nose, delighted when it flashed.

‘Dinner time,’ said Laura.

The children and I sat at the table as Laura served up food, placing dishes piled with turkey, roast potatoes, Brussels sprouts, pigs in blankets, carrots, parsnips, cauliflower, and cranberry sauce,

accompanied by an enormous jug of steaming gravy. It was far more food than we could eat between us.

I loaded my plate high and we ate. It was delicious.

As I forked the last of my dinner into my mouth I leaned back and sighed with satisfaction. Lola pointed at my jumper and said, 'It's flashing.'

I hadn't squeezed the nose. Suddenly, I became hungry, like I had eaten nothing at all, and I helped myself to more turkey.

The children looked impatient.

'When can we open presents?' Peter asked.

'As soon as I'm done,' I said. The nose flashed again and I helped myself to more roast potatoes and carrots. My stomach felt completely empty.

'How much turkey have you had?' Laura asked, raising an eyebrow. 'I was planning turkey sandwiches for lunch tomorrow.'

Each time I was too full to continue eating the nose flashed and I found enough room in my stomach to keep eating until I'd consumed every morsel. I even ate the half-chewed sprout left on Lola's plate. The children watched me, glum and impatient. The reindeer's eyes distorted in a lopsided wink as the jumper swelled to accommodate my stomach.

'You won't want dessert,' said Laura.

Yet, when she brought out the Christmas pudding with brandy sauce, the nose flashed as I made sure there was nothing left. The jumper's stitches strained at the seams.

My stomach was so heavy I almost tipped forward as I stood from the table. I waddled to the living room and I slumped in my favourite chair. The nose flashed as Laura passed carrying a tray of mince pies dusted with icing sugar. Again, suddenly, I felt hungry. I tried to grab the tray from her and in her surprise the tray fell from her hands, the pies landing on the floor in a sticky mess.

'What has got into you?' she shouted at me.

I scooped pies off the floor. They were delicious.

'Why are you being so greedy?' Laura asked.

Just then, somebody pinched me hard on my back. 'Ow!' I cried. I turned and prepared to shout at one of the children, but there was no one there.

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Laura shook her head and walked away.

Enough was enough. I tried to take off the jumper, but as I pulled it over my head it screeched in my ear, like a hundred squeaky bicycle breaks engaging at once, and clung tight over my face. The nose flashed rapidly in my eyes.

'Help me!' I shouted.

The children laughed as they pulled at the jumper, thinking it was a great joke.

The jumper tightened its hold. I was suffocating.

'Pull harder,' I gasped.

The children pulled with all their might and the jumper screamed as it flew off over my head. I grabbed it, screwed it up, and threw it into the corner of the room.

We watched in amazement as the jumper sat up, and using its arms as legs, sprinted to the fireplace, and disappeared up the chimney, sending a cloud of black dust across the room.

Laura stood in the doorway.

'What's all this commotion?' she asked, choking on the dust.

'Dad's jumper is up the chimney,' said the children.

Suddenly, a torrent of part-digested dinner and mince pies spouted from my mouth over Laura and the children. They stood there shocked and dripping.

'You're sleeping in the spare room tonight,' said Laura.

Faint laughter came down the chimney.

A scabbling sound came from the roof and I raced to the window to see the jumper fly away, using the arms as wings, nose brightly lit.

So merry Christmas one and all,  
But beware the Christmas jumper.  
It'll make you eat excessively,  
And you'll end up much, much plumper.



## Christmas Gifts: An Original Script (working draft....)

*It's back! Wendy Turner on Christmas gifts for writers, where she takes her search to the silver screen...*

**Me:** Hello Santa. I may be a bit too big to sit on your knee but I have a list of people to buy presents for. Can you help?

**Santa:** Of course my dear. Are you sure you don't need a little sit down?

**Me:** Um....it was a long drive, thanks Santa.

**Santa:** Well then, let's start with coffee.

**Me:** Coffee? I've only just got here. And isn't that a bauble for the tree?

**Santa:** You can hang it where you like but this is a special Christmas bauble. Whittards rich hazelnut Christmas coffee. At least that's what it says on the tin.



And try one of these mincemeat, nut and cream cheese pies.

([www.goodtoknow.co.uk](http://www.goodtoknow.co.uk)).



**Me:** They look like a tray of chattering teeth.

**Santa:** If you say so. Who's first on your list?

**Me:** Man-mountain Uncle Fred. In fact, those pies look a bit like his invading army of choppers....

**Santa:** Perhaps he would like this then - a hamburger telephone. £10.99 from Ebay.

**Me:** Wow! As long as he doesn't slap mustard all over it.



**Santa:** It could be his personal hot line. And if he doesn't like it you could always whack him over the head with this lovely embossed Christmas rolling pin... £5.99 from Ebay



**Me:** Shall we move on to my great aunt Cynthia? She goes to Verulam Writers. Do you think she'd like a pen?

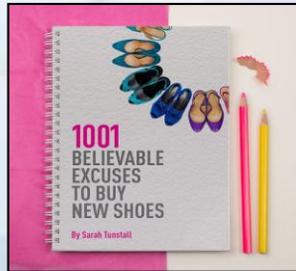
**Santa:** Oh come on. That's so 80s.....she needs something inspirational to write about.

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**Me:** Oh? Like what?

**Santa:** Like this - 1001 excuses for new shoes will keep her happy over Christmas. You could give her a few ideas - my big toe has come through my trainers, at my age I need boots with ankle supports....

**Me:** I don't want to mention her age. Or her bunion. She might throw her pension book at me...



**Santa:** Alternatively, she might enjoy a spot of thumb wrestling ([www.thumbsup.co.uk](http://www.thumbsup.co.uk))

**Me:** I'd probably end up in casualty after a bout with Uncle Fred.



**Santa:** Next!

**Me:** What can I give a street-wise young man who already has everything that's new, cool, electronic and wears clothes that look like they've been pulled out of the dustbin and run over by a steamroller?

**Santa:** Ah ha! We've got him there. Bet you he hasn't got one of these! ([www.gettingpersonal.co.uk](http://www.gettingpersonal.co.uk))



**Me:** Brilliant Santa! He can chomp his way through his street name.

**Santa:** What is it?

**Me:** Tornado

**Santa:** Tornado Toblerone does have a certain ring.

**Me:** OK. What about my brother Tom? He's a city gent.

**Santa:** First off, he needs to junk that image. Why anyone would want to be something in the city when they can be whizzing up and down chimneys mystifies me...

**Me:** Can we get back to Tom please?

**Santa:** Indeed. Here's the perfect gift. The odd sock exchange ([www.gettingpersonal.co.uk](http://www.gettingpersonal.co.uk)).

**Me:** Wow! And he can always team up with Cynthia and write about his socks.

**Santa:** You're looking a little tired dear. Are you sure you wouldn't like to sit down? I can recommend this especially for you. And you can choose your colour at the touch of the magic button, pink, blue, purple, azure.... illuminated loo (amazon)

**Me:** Thanks for the thought Santa. I'm off! Happy Christmas shopping!



## Verulam Writers 2018/2019 Competition Winners

First	Second	Third	Gnome
<b>David Gibson Cup</b> <b>Topic:</b> An object that changes lives. <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 3 <sup>rd</sup> October 2018			
Claire Morgan	N/A	N/A	Michael (aka Sue Pine)
<b>Lisbeth Phillips Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> Revolutionary thoughts. <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 28 <sup>th</sup> November 2018			
Dave Weaver	Phillip Mitchell	N/A	Phillip Mitchell (aka Trey Flick-Light)
<b>President's Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> TBC <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 6 <sup>th</sup> March 2019			
TBC	TBC	TBC	TBC
<b>Crystal Decanter Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> TBC <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 15 <sup>th</sup> May 2019			
TBC	TBC	TBC	TBC
<b>Howard Linskey Competition</b> <b>Topic:</b> TBC <b>Adjudication Date:</b> 26 <sup>th</sup> June 2019			
TBC	TBC	TBC	TBC

## The Lisbeth Phillips Competition

*The adjudication of the 2018 Lisbeth Phillips competition, by Robert Paterson.*

**On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, Tina Shaw set the theme of this year's Lisbeth Phillips Competition as write a briefing aimed at providing politicians with a long-term solution to the transport problems the UK is facing.**

The evening of November 28<sup>th</sup> was marked as adjudication night and the two entrants read out their briefings for all to hear.



Dave Weaver read out *Fixing The British Transport Problem*; a broad, in-depth article that highlighted all the (considerable) transportation problems in modern Britain. He proposed a sweeping and radical shift over towards rail travel, to ease road traffic congestion. He also proposed new travel cards, much like London's Oyster card system, to be instigated nationally. Speaking personally, I was particularly impressed by his business model for a privatised rail company that would be disbanded over time into smaller firms that handled the running of the railways in a more focussed manner.



Phil Mitchell then read *Hovering Into The Future*. His briefing examined whether hovering vehicles could solve the world's transport problems. Alas, he claimed they couldn't. Hovercraft have all but disappeared from the English Channel, maglev trains are prohibitively expensive and, like the helicopter, far from reliable. In fact, Phil claimed that not travelling much would be the way of the future, with people and socialising working from home instead, thanks to better information technology.

It was Dave who took home the winner's certificate in the end, but Phil had the honour of claiming two prizes that night, because his pseudonym "Trey Flick-Light" won him the Gnome de Plume by a landslide majority of votes!

So, a big cheer for Phil, and an even bigger one for Dave. We'll have to see how your Lisbeth Phillips theme fires up members' minds this time next year.

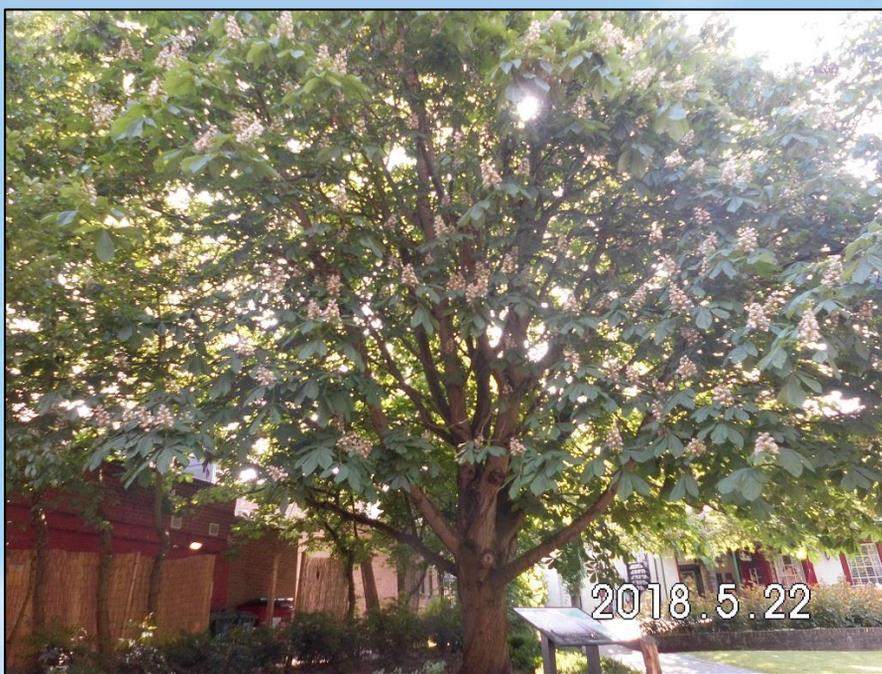
## The Remembrance Tree

*Avid article-writer Wendy Turner found inspiration from a local landmark. This article is reproduced with kind permission from The People's Friend magazine.*

I have often walked past the Verdun Horse Chestnut Tree at St Albans but only recently noticed an info board nearby. The Board tells the story of how the tree was grown from a conker from the last tree left standing after the savage Battle of Verdun in the First World War. The Tree somehow found its way to St Albans and is now looked after by St Albans Civic Society.

A lone Horse Chestnut tree stands in a public garden outside a tea shop in the shadow of St. Albans Abbey, Hertfordshire. Nearby is an information panel written in English, French and German depicting the tree's unlikely beginnings and its journey from the devastated battlefield that was Verdun to leafy St Albans. It was planted in January 1976 to mark the 60th anniversary of the Battle and in loving remembrance of those lost.

The Battle of Verdun in north-eastern France was one of the longest and fiercest of WW1 claiming the lives of a quarter of a million French and German troops. The battlefield was left a desolate, mud-churned wreck with a single surviving tree, a Horse Chestnut. The St. Albans



tree started life as a sapling grown from a conker from that last surviving tree. Bryan Hanlon of the St. Albans Civic Society says: 'Our tree isn't unique but we are extremely proud of it. We chose Armistice Day 2016, the Centenary of the battle to unveil the information panel that now stands beside the tree. It was a perfect day for the ceremony with sunlight flashing between the branches of our tree and a brilliant blue sky.'

The Horse Chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) was introduced to Britain from the Balkans in 1616. The name may have come from the practice of

the Turks of feeding ground-up conkers to sick horses to relieve coughs. But nature bequeaths its own unique mark: when the leaves fall, the stalks break away too leaving behind on the twigs perfect miniature horseshoe scars, complete with nail-holes.

Horse Chestnuts can grow to around 35m. In full splendour they are more than just a feast for our eyes, they provide nectar, pollen, shade and shelter for a host of insects, birds and bees. Kate Bretherton, author of *Remarkable Trees of St Albans* explains: 'Our St Albans Horse Chestnut is tall and beautiful. In



late March we see leaf after leaf, a flower bud and then more leaves. It's like a magician pulling strings of silk handkerchiefs out of a hat until the tree is covered in masses of yellow-streaked flowers that turn pink after nectar has been taken and the flowers resemble candles balancing on its branches. In autumn it produces gorgeous mahogany-glossy conkers each in its round spiny green case.' What an amazing tree!

The Horse Chestnut has another property which makes it an appropriate tree to mark a battle: starch from conkers produces acetone, a component of cordite, an almost-smokeless explosive. When fired there is virtually no smoke, as with gunpowder which can give away a soldier's position to the enemy. So

highly prized was the conker that in the autumn of 1917 the Government rolled out a national campaign encouraging schoolchildren and organisations to collect and hand in every possible conker. They responded with millions for which they received payment of 7s 6d per hundred-weight!

The beautiful Horse Chestnut has another surprise as Kate

describes: 'When mixed with cold soft water, the saponins found within conkers make a lather which is an effective soap. You could try pouring a little water over a horse chestnut leaf and rubbing vigorously until you get a slippery lather that leaves your hands soft and clean.'

In November 1920 HMS Verdun was commissioned by the British Government to bring the Unknown Warrior from France to the UK. The burial took place in Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day, 11th November 1920 in the presence of King George V. When King George VI married Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, she sent her bouquet to the Abbey to rest on the Unknown Warrior's Grave in memory of her brother Fergus who died in 1915 at the Battle of Loos. The custom has continued with many royal brides similarly sending their bouquets to the Abbey to rest on the Grave.





on



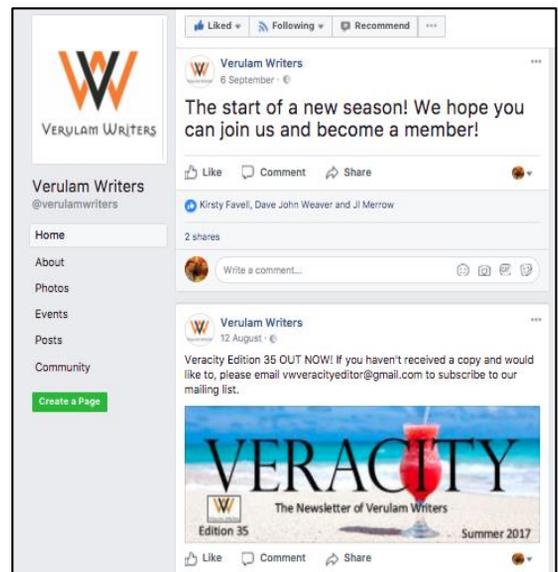
## @verulamwriters

Do you have some writing news such as an event or publication of an article or book?

- **Visited a website that could be a good resource for other writers?**
- **Like to find out more about the VW?**
- **Seen a good quote?**

Then head to @verulamwriters on **facebook!**

We'd like to encourage all members to visit and use our Facebook page. It's full of news from the VW and a great way to stay connected! As long as posts are writing-related and appropriate, we'd love you to post too!



## Gender Offender?

*Chastised by Mary Beard, Nick Cook goes on a gender quest.*

Three or four years ago I went to a brilliant lecture by Mary Beard. Her fame rests largely on talking and writing about ancient Rome. But this one was different. Wearing her trademark scruffy clothes, trainers, unkempt hair and a radiant smile she strode onto the stage of the British Museum's main lecture theatre and spent the next hour describing how the voice of women had been silenced throughout history. **Mainly by men.**



Penelope.

At the end of the lecture there was time for questions. Summoning up courage I asked for the microphone. "Years ago most jobs needed male physical stamina whereas today the skills needed for survival are more intellectual and interpersonal. Do you think that as a result the balance of power between men and women is shifting?"

She smiled. She did.

I should have left it at that. But emboldened by her positive response I then suggested that men's chauvinistic attitudes today were genetically rooted in our hunter gatherer past. The smile remained fixed but became ferocious.

"You are not getting away with that!" she roared. "Blaming bad behaviour on your genes!"

Whatever she said next was lost in a tidal wave of applause from the capacity audience. It was a chastening experience that confirmed a seismic shift in the balance of power between the sexes.



Over time literature has highlighted this shift. The mythology of ancient Greece by and large reflects and reinforces the intensely patriarchal attitudes of its time. Women were not allowed out unchaperoned. Nor could they own property. Their place was in the home, cooking and weaving. Women who dared to be independent were depicted as a threat to civilisation (e.g. the Amazons) or psychopathic (e.g. Medea who kills the children she had with Jason to punish him for his

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infidelity). The role model is Penelope, the wife of Odysseus who remains loyal throughout his twenty-year absence at the Trojan war.

Women were regarded a scourge sent by Zeus to punish men. If you are a man you need women to provide heirs, but you must watch them like a hawk to ensure your heirs are in fact yours. You do not want your wealth passed on to someone not of your blood.



In Greek mythology there is only one exception to the rule that independent women must have something wrong with them. This is Queen Arete, the wife of the king of the island of Scheria in the Mediterranean. According to Homer she settled disputes among the powerful nobles. She also helped Medea avoid forcible deportation back to her vengeful father. And when Odysseus washes up on her shore more dead than alive, he is advised to seek help from Arete, not her husband.

Overwhelmingly, the literature and mythology of the Ancient Greeks reinforced a male dominated status quo. But now that balance is changing. Today's stories celebrate these changes, none more so than modern interpretations of the ancient myths.

One of the most striking examples is Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* published in 2018. This looks at the Trojan War not through the eyes of the male heroes but from the viewpoint of a slave girl, Briseis. In Homer's Iliad she has no importance in her own right. She is simply one of the spoils of war, triggering the bitter rivalry between Achilles and Agamemnon. But in Pat Barker's novel she becomes the main character and we see the events depicted in the Iliad through her eyes.

Other examples of books looking at Greek mythology through women's eyes include *The Penelopiad* (2005) by Margaret Atwood and *Circe* (2005) by Madeline Miller. This year also saw a new translation of *The Odyssey* by Emily Wilson, the first ever English translation by a woman writer.

So, what is the message for writers? Simply this: reflecting current concerns can increase the relevance of the fiction you write. This applies even to stories set in the distant and mythological past. And even more important, stirring current concerns into your fiction can make it more entertaining.

But you also need to be aware who you may offend as I found out with my ill-fated question to Mary Beard. Underling this point, Lionel Shriver (author of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*) recently warned of publishers who hire "sensitivity readers" to look for perceived slights.

## The David Gibson Cup

Phillip Mitchell *reports on our annual competition.*

October the 4<sup>th</sup> saw a great turnout for the judging of the David Gibson competition. The competition theme was set by last year's winner, Phil Mitchell. Entrants were asked to write a short piece of fiction where the character or characters find an object that changes their life/lives forever. There were twelve entries.

The much-loved, some say abused, David Gibson cup, tarnished, battle-worn, possibly once used as a Cluedo-style murder weapon by Colonel Mustard in the drawing room, glistened under the fluorescent lighting as stories were Blu Tacked to walls and tables. Attendees moved silently around the room to read them all before voting for their favourite.

The quality of the stories was impressive, with four stories tied for second place. But there was a clear winner, Claire Morgan, with her deeply moving story of a soldier finding a postcard in the hand of a fallen enemy and returning it to the dead man's family.

Excitingly, the winner of the *nom de plume* competition came down to a coin toss after it couldn't be split by popular vote. The winner, with alias Sue Pine, was Michael.

Congratulations everyone and we look forward to seeing what theme Claire will set for next year's competition.



## The Verulam Writers' Block *The Verulam Writers Showcase*

**Gerwin de Boer** has been a Verulam Writers member for nearly two years. Following a creative Writing course at Oakland College, taught by Nick Cook, he decided to keep going: submitting short stories for competitions and plucking away at a spy thriller novel. He manages to stay out of trouble - unlike his characters.

### Bridge of Fire

The fagot is a portable missile system used to knock out advancing armour. Produced by the old USSR, Syrian and Ukrainian soldiers and rebels still use it in anger. Across Russia and former Soviet client states, thousands are taking up space in ammo depots. Tank armour is getting better and smarter though. These things are going to be worthless soon. Unless you know the right buyer.

It is launched from a tube. Guided by wire. One gunner operates the system. The tube goes on a tripod with a targeting piece. It weighs less than 30 kilograms and easily fits into the back of a Ford Transit.

At the press of a button, the missile leaves its casing at about 180 miles an hour and quickly accelerates to over 400 miles an hour. The tracking system can only cope with a target going 60 though. Which is fine. It is nowhere near the speed of a tank struggling up a muddy hill, or a car in London traffic.

The Prime Minister is driven around in a Jaguar XJ. Its cabin is titanium and kevlar lined. Its windows are made from triple-glazed polycarbonate toughened glass. Bulletproof.

A fagot has a 1,7-kilogram warhead. It is designed to go through armour plating of up to 400 millimetres thick. It can do so from 2.5 kilometres away. Westminster bridge only spans a tenth of that distance.

It is 11.00 on a crisp autumn morning in November. A black Jaguar XJ leaves through the back gates of Downing Street. It turns left up on Horse Guard parade. A black Land Rover Discovery follows closely.

A white Ford Transit breaks down on Westminster Bridge. On the discontinued bus stop. Out of the way. Traffic keeps flowing.

The Prime Minister's Jaguar turns left on Great George Street. Recently placed car barriers have turned the intersection into a bottleneck. Sirens on the Jaguar are switched on.

On the bridge, the van driver gets out the cabin, leaves his door open, walks around the front and pops the hood. He jumps back from the steaming engine, and climbs over the car barriers, onto the pavement. He grabs his phone and dials a number. The call is accepted.

"The engine is broken." The van driver says. He runs his left hand back through his thick black hair

and starts squeezing his own neck. He has a black eye.

Nothing unusual happens within sight of the Houses of Parliament without receiving the immediate and full attention of the Metropolitan Police. Two police officers, bobbies, are walking up the bridge towards him. A police car, a BMW X3, comes up the road. It drives past and parks neatly in front of the van.

"Police are here." The man hangs up and puts his mobile back into his pocket. He sees the passenger door of the BMW open and an officer step out. Tall guy, bald head, wearing a stab vest across his green yellow jacket. There is a pistol on his belt.

"It just stopped working." The van driver says. Arms extended. Pleading innocence.

The officer walks up and takes a sideways look at the boiling engine. It is steaming like a pressure cooker. Blown head gasket. This van is not going anywhere by itself.

"I need to see your driving license." The police officer says. He glances at the black eye.

The van driver pads the pockets of his jeans. Then those of his black utility jacket. There he finds his wallet. He folds it open, uses his thumb to pull out the license from amid his other cards, and hands the license over.

"I heard this hiss, and then felt this shudder. That's when the engine went dead." The van driver said. The two bobbies have reached the scene now, but seem to think things are well in hand. They don't get involved. One twists his head awkwardly to speak into the radio on his chest.

"Driver present. All clear." The bobby says.

Passing tourists walking across the bridge still give the van all space they can. Most people just glance over their shoulder curiously and walk on. The police are here. It is fine.

A few hundred meters away, the Jaguar has wrestled through traffic, cautiously runs the lights on Parliament square, past the statue of Churchill, and drives up on Westminster bridge.

The van driver hears the sirens, looks down the bridge, sees the blue flashes, and keeps talking.

"I can't believe this. I've had this van for years and never come through London. Now this one time, this one time, and it fucking betrays me."

He takes three steps towards the van. The officers look up. The driver bangs his fist on the side panel of the van. Hard.

The van back doors swing open. A man jumps out. He runs on the traffic lane. Hands up.

A double-decker hits the breaks. The PM's Jaguar swerves onto the bus lane, keeps going, straight behind the stranded van. Caught between a bus and the new car barriers on the bridge.

A missile streaks from the van with the sound of a car crash. Metal striking metal. The fire and shock of the rocket's plume escapes through the open driver's door. The blast knocks back the police officers. Tourists fall over. The van driver stays on his feet. He starts running.

A loud explosion rocks the bridge.

The missile hits the Jaguar. It punches through the hood and denotes on contact with the heavy engine block. The High Explosive Anti-Tank warhead rips the front half of the car apart. Pieces of engine and molten metal generated by the missile drill through the cabin lining. Through the four occupants. Through the lining again. Through whatever and whoever was close to the car.

Terror spreads. Everyone starts running now. The van driver is joined by tourists, down the bridge, away from danger. The man who jumped out the van, in front of traffic, crosses the bridge and blends into the panicked crowd as well.

The van side door slides open and another man jumps out. He is shot by the bald officer and falls back into the vehicle. The bobbies run towards the carnage.

What is left of the Jaguar is burning down. No one gets out. Smoke fills the air. Passengers are stumbling from the double-decker caught in the blast. Bleeding. Bodies, in parts, lie on the pavement. People are drowning in the Thames.

## About Us

Verulam Writers meet fortnightly on Wednesday evenings at 8pm in St Michael's Church Hall, St Albans, AL3 4SL. Informal gatherings are held every other week in a local pub. To find out more and for a full list of events, visit the VW website at: [www.verulamwriterscircle.org.uk](http://www.verulamwriterscircle.org.uk)

## Get Involved

If you would like to write for VERACITY (we'd love to have you!) or have any comments or feedback please email the editor Sam Ellis at [VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com](mailto:VWVeracityEditor@gmail.com)

## Publicity

If you have anything you'd like to publicise (a new publication, an event etc.) then we'd love to hear about it at: [VWPublicity@gmail.com](mailto:VWPublicity@gmail.com)

The editor would like to thank *The People's Friend* magazine and all of the contributors to this edition of VERACITY.

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Wishing all Verulam Writers and VERACITY readers

# Season's Greetings