

# Rock of Ages

**Mark Christopher brings a little piece of Devon to our club night**

## **Boldly into the Avant-Garde**

Torquil Arbuthnot on the impossibly adventurous life of one-armed Modernist Blaise Cendrars

**THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NEW SHERIDAN CLUB • No.185 • MARCH 2022**

# DESIGN!





The New Sheridan Club traditionally meets in the upstairs room of the Wheatsheaf, just off Oxford Street. The Wheatsheaf is one of Fitzrovia's historic pubs, a one-time haunt of Dylan Thomas, George Orwell, Augustus John and Julian Maclaren-Ross. In fact Thomas met his wife Caitlin in The Wheatsheaf and, legend has it, he was known to flash at women there as well. Fitzrovia's associations with literature go back to the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century both Woolf and Shaw lived in Fitzroy Square; Pound and Lewis launched *Blast!* at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel in Percy Street. John Buchan lived in Portland Place and in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* Richard Hannay has a flat there. Both Lawrences (D.H. and T.E.) took rooms there, as did Aleister Crowley, Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke and Katherine Mansfield.

### The Next Meeting

The next Club Meeting will take place on **Wednesday 2nd March** in the upstairs room of the Wheatsheaf pub at 25 Rathbone Place, London W1T 1JB.

James Rigby will perplex us with a talk entitled *Mr Reimann, his famous hypothesis, and why it's important*. I looked it up on Wikipedia and I'm none the wiser, but it's something to do with Number Theory and is considered by many to be the most important unsolved problem in pure maths. So pay attention.

As usual we will be attempting to livestream the talk (very much at the mercy of the pub's wifi connection). The link to watch that is [https://youtu.be/\\_kLo1XKPVNQ](https://youtu.be/_kLo1XKPVNQ)

There is also a Facebook event at <https://www.facebook.com/events/3118660751719266>.

### The Last Meeting

In a whirl of high drama, we had a last-minute change of

speaker last month. James Rigby had been scheduled to give us his Reiman's Hypothesis talk then, but when he saw his name on the billing he reminded me that some months ago he had asked to move date, something which I had clearly instantly forgotten.

So Mark Christopher boldly stepped into the breach and brought forward his talk on Devon, his home county. It was a broad tour of the county's history and peculiarities, from the granite that used to be mined extensively to make kerbstones and buildings, the distinctive

longhouses where livestock housed on the ground floor kept the people warm on the level above, notable figures, the noble experiments with electric trams and compressed air railways, and the local dialect that Mark claims he slips into when back home.

You can see a video of the talk on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/jsBcprDjRks>.

An essay version begins on page 4.

Bernhard Riemann



Mark approaches his subject under the steely gaze (left) of Artemis Scarheart



Here you can glimpse the high-tech broadcasting suite that enables our talks to be enjoyed by millions via the Internet



Mark's audience, poised for any sign of weakness



Mark passed a piece of Devonian granite around the room



(L-r) Luigi Saffi, Stuart Mitchell, Barbara Giurastante and Adie Hess



David Robertson and Ian White propping up the bar



Frances Mitchell with Andrew Fish and Timothy Williams



# DEVON

## Historical Facts and Fascinating Stories

By Mark Christopher

**L**OCATED IN THE southwestern part of England, Devon boasts a rich geographical, architectural, industrial, and cultural history. It often surprises visitors who come for its outstanding countryside locations like Dartmoor to learn that Devon has also played host to transport inventions like I.K. Brunel’s “Atmospheric Railway” through to the earliest steam traction developed by Thomas Newcomen. While steam traction was of course pioneering, thought should be given, in my view, to the now long forgotten “Dolter Stud Contact System” used by Torquay Tramways, which sadly never gained significant “traction” before being abandoned in 1911. The legacies from the atmospheric railway and ground-based electric traction are manifest in some of today’s rail engineering. Not only does one feel nostalgia, admiration and courage for

these enterprises, but with a little patience and development, I believe these pioneering inventions could still have been in existence today.

Further drawing on its historic steam-driven transport past, Devon today still attracts visitors to two beautifully preserved railways set in outstanding country and seaside: the South Devon Railway and the Paignton and Dartmouth Steam Railway, the latter of which is unique in that its staff are paid employees not volunteers. As for the SDR, the breathtaking beauty of the River Dart as admired from the GWR-built No. 9111 King George Super Saloon coach as it passes, is something not to be missed. When the train finally pulls into Buckfastleigh station there is a short walk to the Benedictine monastery of Buckfast Abbey where you can enjoy the rose gardens and a very good roast lamb lunch—the cooking is simple yet wholesome.

South Devon’s mix of rugged and gentle coastline of has hosted both the landing of the



Neolithic site at Grimspound, evidence of hunter-gatherers c. 6000BC



Jawbone fragment found in Kents Caverns, dating back 44,000 years



Roman Britain, with Dumnonia as a client state

House”, a Georgian house on the banks of the River Dart, was home to Agatha Christie—whose literary legacy doubtless needs no introduction to readers of *Resign!*.

The historic and ceremonial county of Devon (a word deriving from the Celtic name of Dumnonia), occupies 2,590 square miles of rich agricultural land and the two national parks of Exmoor and Dartmoor. Devon, with its regional capital Exeter—or Isca Dumnoniorum if you prefer its Latin name, for the Romans occupied that far, with Dumnonia as their client state—traces its history back to neanderthal people living there around 44,200 years ago, established when a segment of jawbone was discovered in Kents Cavern, Torquay, in 1927. This artefact was confirmed by the scientific journal *Nature* to be the oldest modern human remains in northwestern Europe. “Hampsley Cavern” in Agatha Christie’s 1924 novel *The Man in the Brown Suit* is based on Kents Cavern.

Agriculture is long associated with Devon, but consideration should also be given to the quarrying of abundant granite deposits. This very hard-wearing material, consisting mainly of feldspar, was quarried in huge quantities in the mid-19th century, with two quarries situated

Prince of Orange (later King William III) on 5th November 1688 in Brixham, and the departure of the Founding Fathers from Plymouth on 6th September 1620. Its importance for foreign discovery, fostering industrial improvement and an agent of imperial change is certainly secure.

Devon has long been a popular destination for authors. The paving stones outside 6 Elliot Terrace in Plymouth, where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lived, are inlaid with copper strips engraved with the names of characters from his novels. Rudyard Kipling lived at Rock House in the historic hamlet of Maidencombe (a place mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086) between 1896 and 1898, and it was here that he began “The White Man’s Burden”. Evelyn Waugh wrote *Brideshead Revisited* at Easton Court in Chagford. In what is now a private home, I was lucky to have the opportunity to look around the main lounge where he drafted the novel. Finally, “Greenway



Two things made from Devonian granite, the old London Bridge...



...and the British Museum

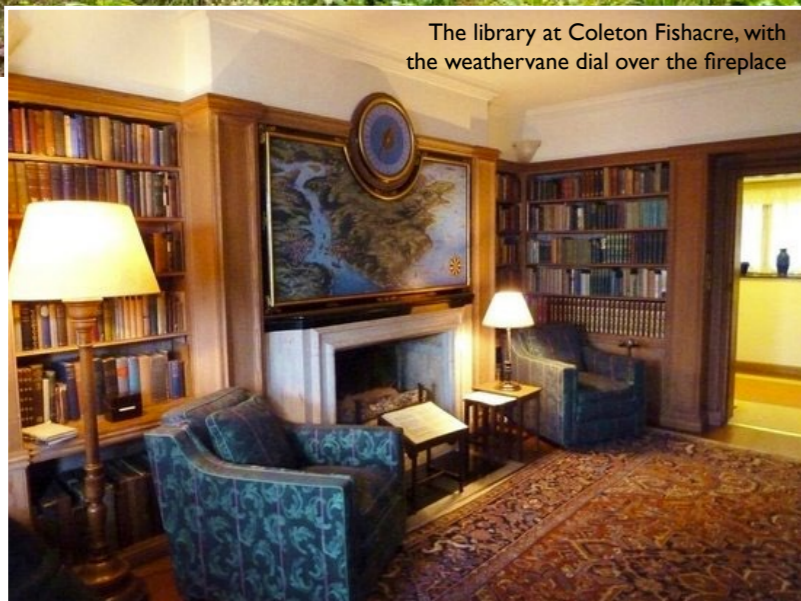




Greenway House



Coleton Fishacre



The library at Coleton Fishacre, with the weathervane dial over the fireplace

at Haytor and Merrivale in Dartmoor. Some of London's most famous icons, such as the British Museum and the old London Bridge,

were made of this material. As you descend from Haytor there is the beautiful Rock Inn pub with an unusual quirk—its splendid beer garden is located on the other side of the road. The Rock is especially beautiful to visit in winter when its beautifully carved wooden timbers contrast with the gentle glow of its magnificent fireplace to make the cosiest of venues. It's everything that a rural pub should have, together with quaint rooms and accommodation.

### Architecture

Devon is a place for writing and relaxation, where elegant Victorian villas meet thatched cottages, Norman churches with intact medieval rood screens survive, having escaped Henry VIII's purge, and Devon Longhouses and medieval pubs litter the countryside along with the occasional lime kiln—lime burning was a key industry in 17th and 18th centuries. Many of these buildings are to be found in the Devon hinterland where access without a car can be

difficult but reveals beauty and elegance. Two buildings deserve particular mention: Coleton Fishacre and Greenway House. Coleton

Fishacre, just a little outside Kingswear, Dartmouth, was the home of Rupert D'Oyly Carte of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, producers of Gilbert and Sullivan operas such as *The Pirates of Penzance*. What is striking about this building is that it is built in the Arts and Crafts style with a curious twist: the interior is Art Deco. And what a fine interior it is. If you

ever have the opportunity to visit, you will see in the main lounge a large dial built into the wall above the fireplace, which turns automatically to show the position of the weathervane above. Like so many venues, such as Compton Castle (a true buried gem of Devon and off the beaten track), it boasts beautiful, manicured gardens, some set in a steep valley to maximise vegetation and help grow some rare botanical species.

Just five miles north of Coleton is the summer home of Torquay native Agatha Christie, Greenway House. I have had the honour of staying there some years back and not only was it superb but contained a fine collection of porcelain and a beautiful piece of Bohemian glass dating from around 1912. As night fell the whole house took on a magical quality of silence and stars—a typical experience in Devon countryside. There is a beautiful Queen Anne dining table and a collection of medicine bottles—one can't help wondering if this generated inspiration for her novels.

The Paignton Picture House, built in 1914 and owned by the Paignton and Dartmouth Steam Railway, is believed to be the oldest surviving purpose-built cinema in Europe. Seat 2, Row 2 of the circle was Agatha Christie's favourite seat. The cinemas and theatres in her books are all reportedly based on the Paignton Picture House. The name Churston, a request stop on the Paignton & Dartmouth Steam Railway, is used for the letter C in her book *The Alphabet Murders*.



Disused granite quarry at Haytor

### Language

Just off the north Devon coast is Lundy, from the old Norse "Lundi", meaning "Puffin". Its true that Danelaw made its impact in the northern part of England, yet Devon faced raids and sieges from Norwegian Vikings which left a mark on its history and language. While the locals may be mocked for their often piratical accent, Devon's linguistic history is rich. Words like "ord", "gurt", "dreckly" and the greeting "Ow bist thee?" may not easily be recognised outside of Devon, but the roots are easily traced to Anglo-Saxon and Brythonic times:

*Ik bin* (Low German) > *I be/A be* (Devon) > *I am* (Standard British English)

*Du bist* (Low German) > *Thee bist* (Devon) > *You are* (or the archaic *Thou art*) (Standard British English)

So, the greeting "Ow bist thee?" can easily be understood and translated as "How are you?" If you hear the sentence "Where's that to?" while not sounding grammatically correct, it is, in the context of the local area. English is a distinct language, but it owes a debt to invasion, history and proximity. A common suffix to place names in Devon is "-combe" which is a suffix found also in other parts of southern England and means short valley or hollow on a hillside. The Welsh word for valley is *cwm*, so villages called Dacombe, Widecombe-in-the-Moor and simply



Pasties



Devon Record Office in 2006. Other searches revealed a pasty recipe also emerged in Devon in 1746. At this point it seems unfair to award either Devon or Cornwall the food, given the interconnectedness of the counties and the cultural heritage they share. (Cornwall appears lucky—it strived to keep its language.)

Some revision is also deserved for the famous Devon Cream Tea. This rich delight consists of scones, which may be plain or with added cherries or sultanas, and a specific technique whereby Jersey milk, naturally high in fat, is “scalded” to make the cream. Finally, you need a good home-made jam (I prefer black currant). Let’s also be clear in our order of operations: cream over jam and not jam over cream and the more refined of us eats the delight with dessert cutlery.

Sitting somewhere between a dessert and afternoon tea, it’s more likely that the origins of this dish are likely to be from a “Devon split” which has more of a dough texture and resembling that of a light sponge finger bun rather than as a scone. The scone part came much later, possibly from Scotland. Further investigation by local history groups suggest that “splits” may have originated from a since demolished monastery near Tavistock in medieval times, given to passers by in return for labour or help to the church. However, even if this is true it’s unlikely the cream would be the clotted kind used today, as the singular scalding technique was probably not available to the monks at that time.

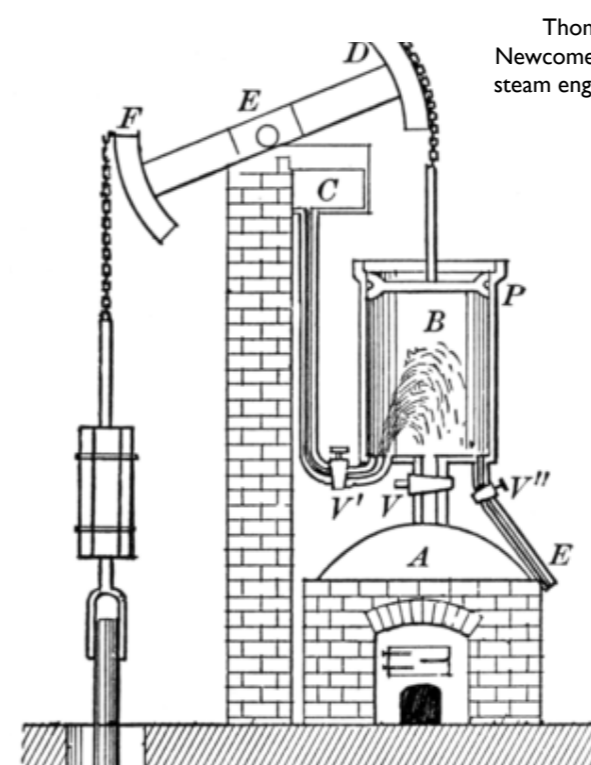
A cream tea. Note the jam on first



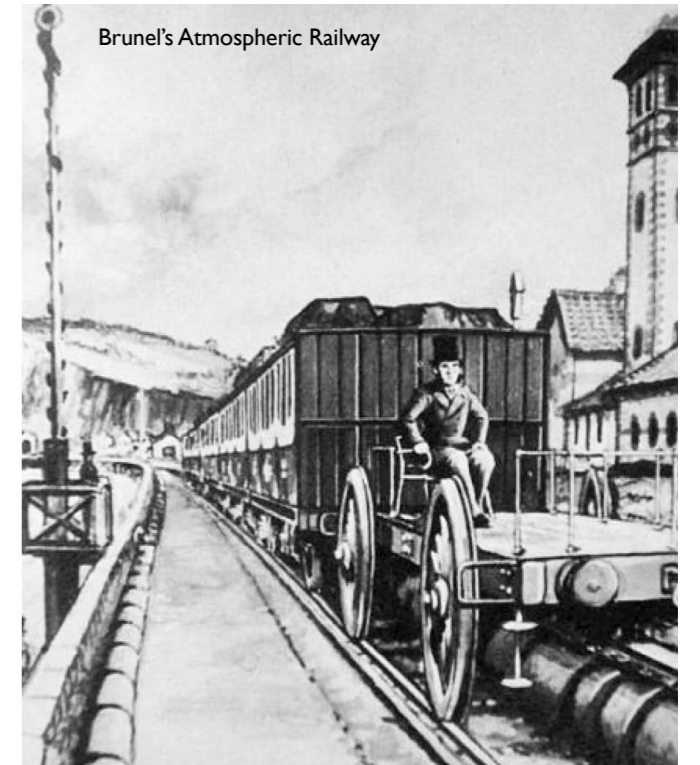
Coombe are not just historic but Brythonic.

### Food and Drink

Devon and the West Country in general produce some memorable food and drink, as you might expect from an agricultural area. There are some clichés that pasties are made strictly in Cornwall and originate from there and cream teas are strictly from Devon, but this claim needs to be adjusted. Both Devon and Cornwall have an extensive mining and quarrying tradition and evidence suggests that the first pasty recipe originated in Plymouth in 1510 after a search by a local historian at the Plymouth and West



Thomas Newcomen's steam engine



Brunel's Atmospheric Railway

### Steam Traction

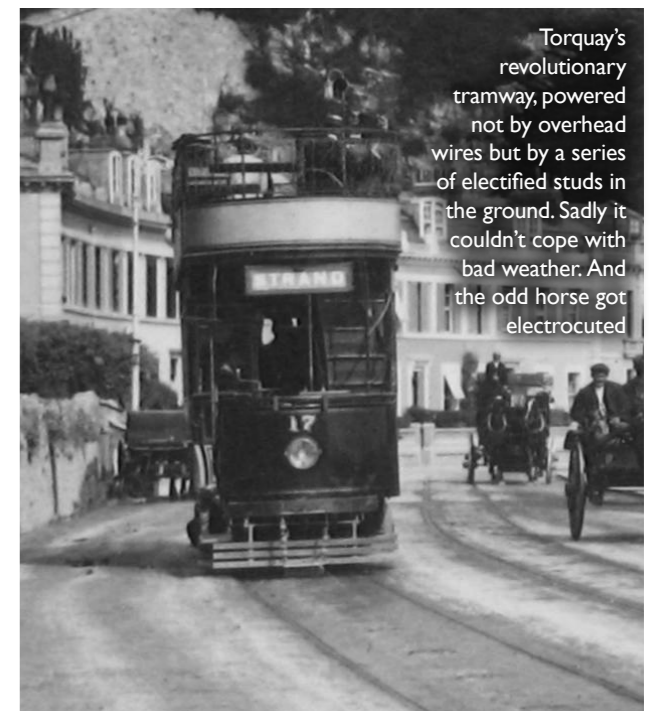
On the banks of the River Dart in Dartmouth, just a few miles from the Paignton and Dartmouth Steam Railway terminus and Greenway House, lies the museum that houses the “Miner’s Friend” or “Newcomen Engine” developed by Devon-born

Thomas Newcomen in 1712. Observing that mines often flood with water, he came up with a solution: boil water to create a steam pressure that operates a basic piston system which drives a a rod and beam process to draw the water from below. While honours and their place in history rightly go to James Watt and Matthew Boulton, they only perfected Newcomen’s steam pressure system—they did not invent it as is often perceived. A gentle amble along the riverside to the museum dedicated to his work reveals an original “Newcomen”—although it is not in use today.

I.K. Brunel is a towering figure in railway



Remnant of the Atmospheric Railway; note the slot along the top that was meant to be sealed with leather and tallow



Torquay's revolutionary tramway, powered not by overhead wires but by a series of electrified studs in the ground. Sadly it couldn't cope with bad weather. And the odd horse got electrocuted





Wassailing, a cider-making tradition



Ottery St Mary's burning tar barrel challenge



The May Queen being crowned in Lustleigh

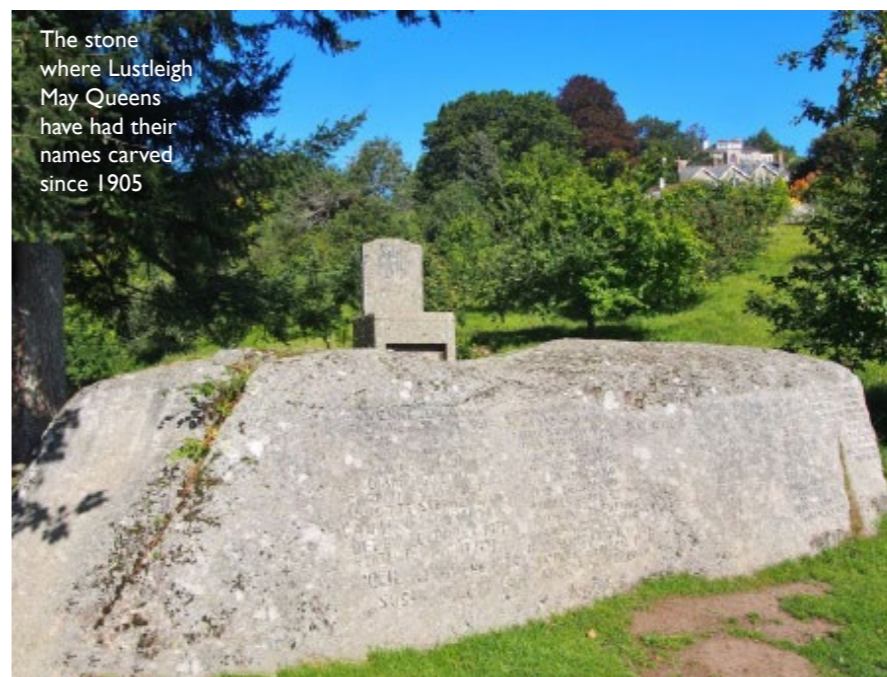
engineering. Known for his feats with the GWR, he embarked in 1848 on an entirely different mode of traction—"atmosphere". That is, air. Engineers would build "stationary houses" at three-mile trackside intervals, containing steam engines driving pumps that produced a partial vacuum in a large cast iron pipe laid between the rails. The partial vacuum allowed a piston attached to the underside of a carriage to be propelled by the greater pressure of the atmosphere behind. The piston was attached via a metal strip that passed through a slot in the top of the tube. To maintain the vacuum this slot was covered by a leather flap, kept supple and airtight using beef tallow. But it quickly emerged that this made an easy meal for rats to chew on. This, combined with leaky pipes, caused the "atmospheric caper" to be abandoned in 1848. But in Totnes, Torquay and Starcross you can still find beautiful stationary houses extant, built in the Italianate style.

**Festivals**

On the road north from Bovey Tracey to the



The Lustleigh May Queen tradition hasn't changed much over the years



The stone where Lustleigh May Queens have had their names carved since 1905

historic market town of Moretonhampstead lies the picturesque, thatched village of Lustleigh in Dartmoor. Situated in a valley this village, bequeathed by Alfred the Great to his son, hosts the annual May Day celebrations of crowning the May Queen with flowers, a carnival procession, and Morris and maypole dancing. In a pastoral and elegant touch, the names of the girls who have been crowned May Queen are inscribed on a granite stone



Devon cider—probably introduced by the Normans

and have been since 1905. A visit to Lustleigh is not complete without a visit to the Cleave Inn pub, part of which was once part of the station master's cottage where Lustleigh railway station once existed.

The elegance and refinement of the Lustleigh Fair is highly contrasted when in November the Ottery St Mary Tar Barrel competition takes place. Are you strong and brave enough to carry a wooden barrel on your back and run through the town centre—with the barrel filled with flaming hot tar? I have ruled myself out. Its origins are unknown, but this annual gathering has run since at least the 1600s and your guide to this honourable county has never deigned to get his Chris Ruocca suit remotely singed by trying this exploit. The atmosphere is fantastic and a good night out for fireworks and a slice of Lardy cake.

And finally, it's true that while cider is an old and venerable drink made in Devon (along with an almost forgotten drink called "Ashburton Pop" which by today's estimation is likely to be an early version of Champagne)—and probably introduced by the Normans—you can also drink it in a small village called Beer while enjoying Lyme Bay before your coastal walk to find fossils at the UNESCO World Heritage Jurassic Coast: Devon really is that old and you can take it from a "Janner".



# BLAISE CENDRARS

By Torquil Arbuthnot

The guillotine is the masterpiece of the plastic arts  
Its click  
Creates perpetual motion

– Blaise Cendrars, from “The Head”, *Dix-Neufs Poèmes Élastiques*

**B**LAISE CENDRARS WAS BORN Frédéric Louis Sauser in Switzerland in 1887, the son of a Swiss father and a Scottish mother. He claimed he was born on an Italian railway train during his mother’s journey back from Egypt. In 1904 he ran away from school to Moscow, where he was apprenticed to a watchmaker. After experiencing St Petersburg in mid-revolution, Cendrars stowed away on the Trans-Siberian Express, ending up in Manchuria where he worked shovelling coal on Chinese locomotives and briefly on a whaling ship.

These adventures produced his great poem *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (1913), a poem that telescopes past and present, and mixes realistic images of war with apocalyptic visions. The poem’s 420 lines originally appeared on a single sheet seven feet long folded like a railroad timetable, the text a jumble of typefaces in irregular blocks broken by pastel washes. Running the length to the left were Sonia Delaunay’s abstract forms in bright primary colours, culminating in a childlike Eiffel Tower.

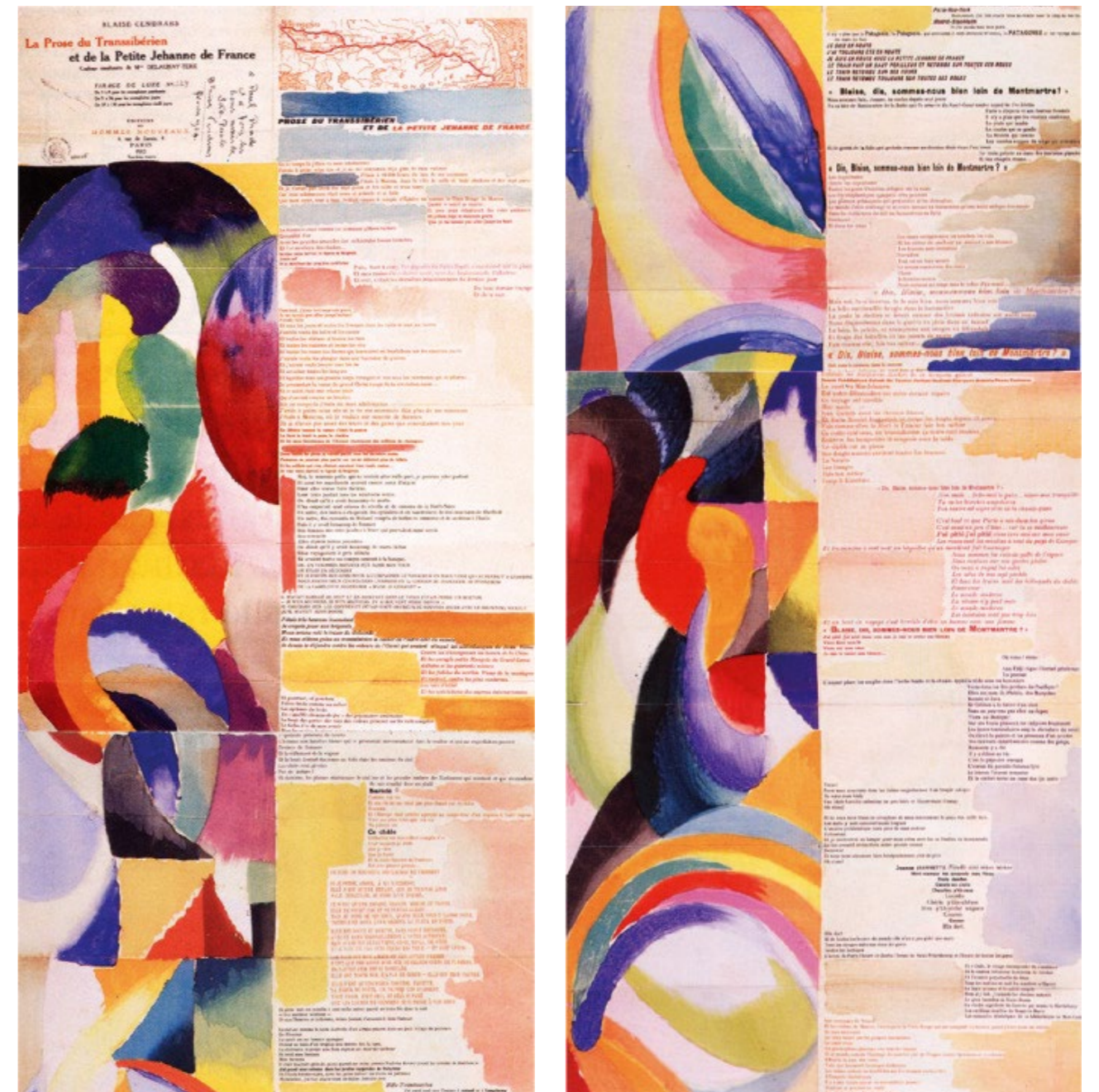
Cendrars returned to Switzerland in 1907 to study medicine, but soon decamped for Paris (where he met Guillaume Apollinaire) and to New York, where he married a Polish Jew, had three children and produced another poem, *Les Pâques à New York* (1912).



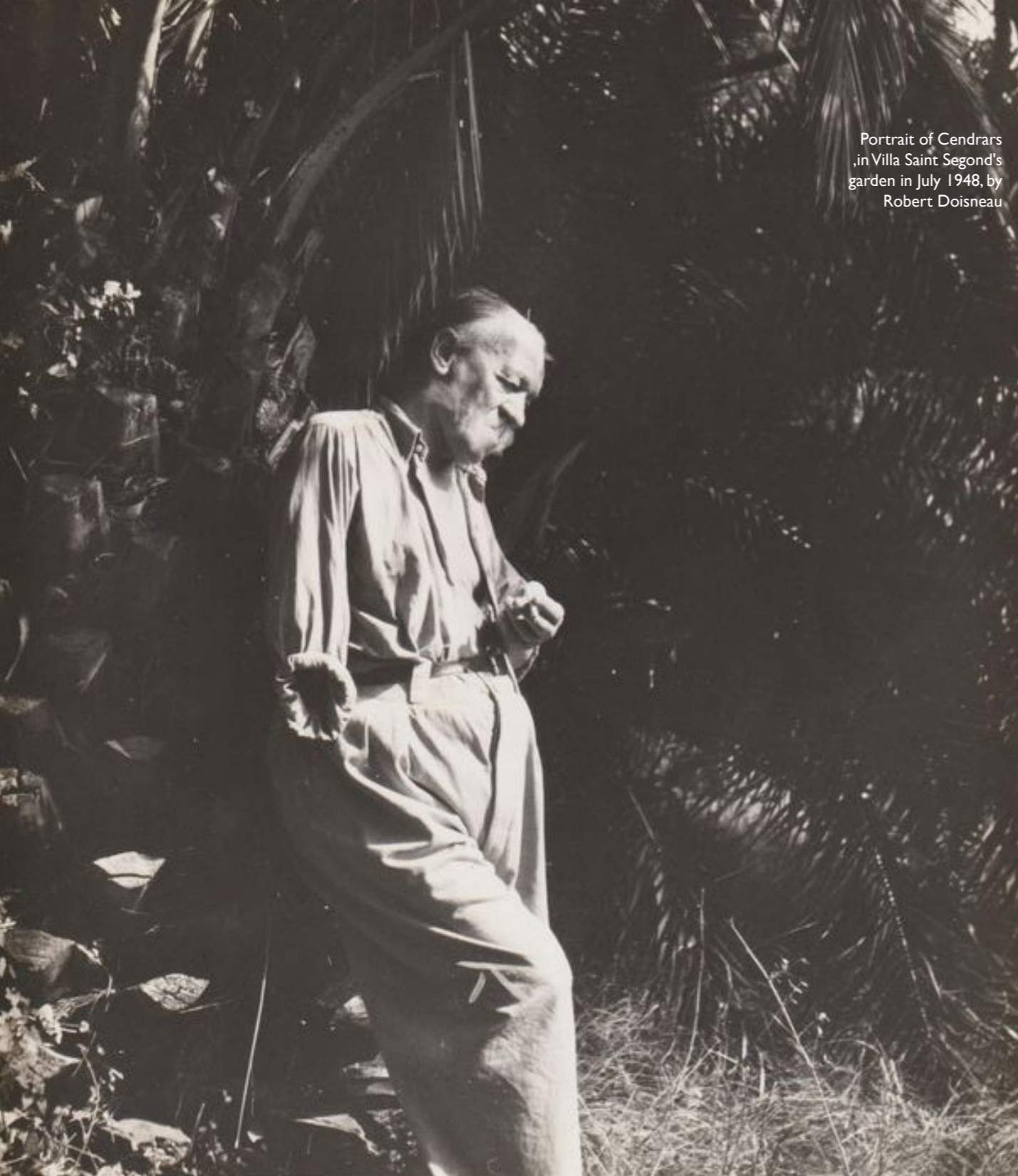
Circa 1907, photographed by August Monbaron

This was the first work produced under his pen-name, a combination of the French for “embers“, “ashes“ and “art”. In his early experimental poems Cendrars used pieces of newsprint, a multiple focus, simultaneous impressions and other modernist techniques.

He stayed briefly in London (working as pianist in a music-hall and sharing a room with a penniless vaudevillian called Charlie Chaplin) before returning to Paris. As a Swiss he could not join the French army when war broke out in 1914, so joined the French Foreign Legion instead. At the battles for Champagne in 1915 he lost his right (writing) arm, which also put paid to his dream of becoming a professional musician.







Portrait of Cendrars  
in Villa Saint Segond's  
garden in July 1948, by  
Robert Doisneau

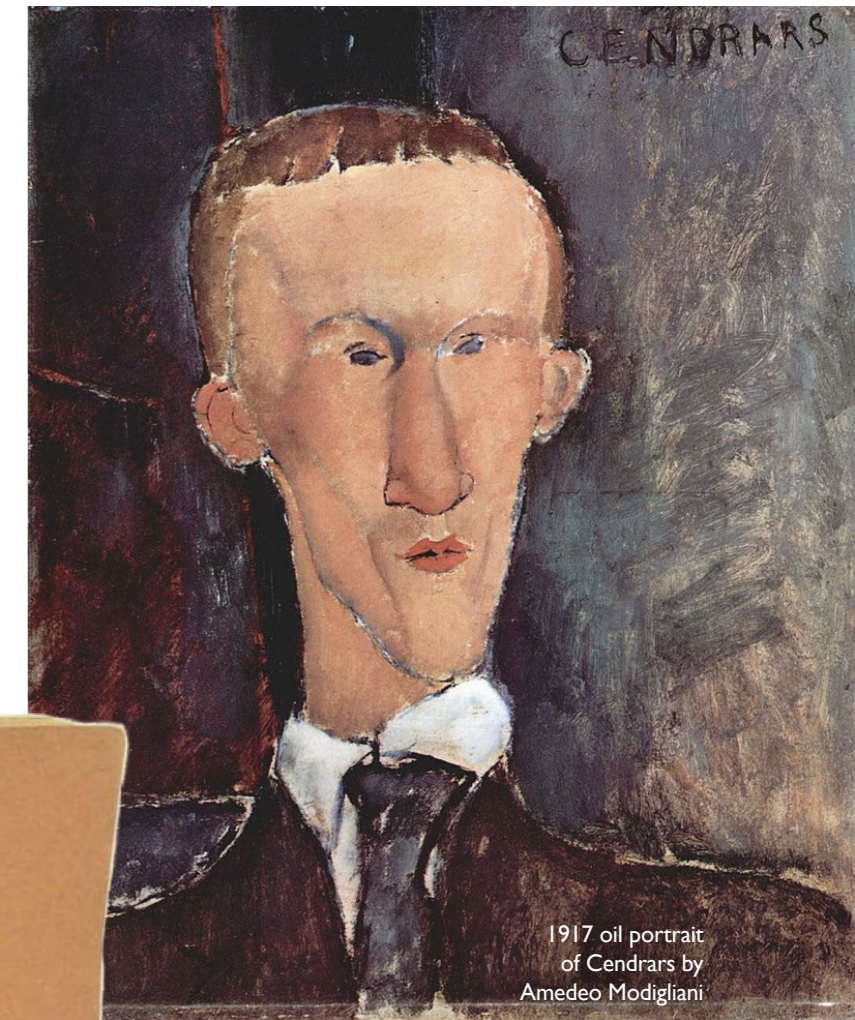
After the war he became a leading figure in the avant-garde, mixing with Cubists, Surrealists and Dadaists, and driving round Europe in an Alfa-Romeo that had been given a customised paint-job by Georges Braque. He also kept bees, as sales of honey were lucrative, and became friends with American expatriates such as Ernest Hemingway (who remembers him “with his broken boxer’s nose and his pinned-up empty sleeve, rolling a cigarette with his one good hand”) and John Dos Passos. The

Russian-born French painter Marc Chagall said once that the most important events in his life were “my meeting with Blaise Cendrars, and the Russian Revolution”.

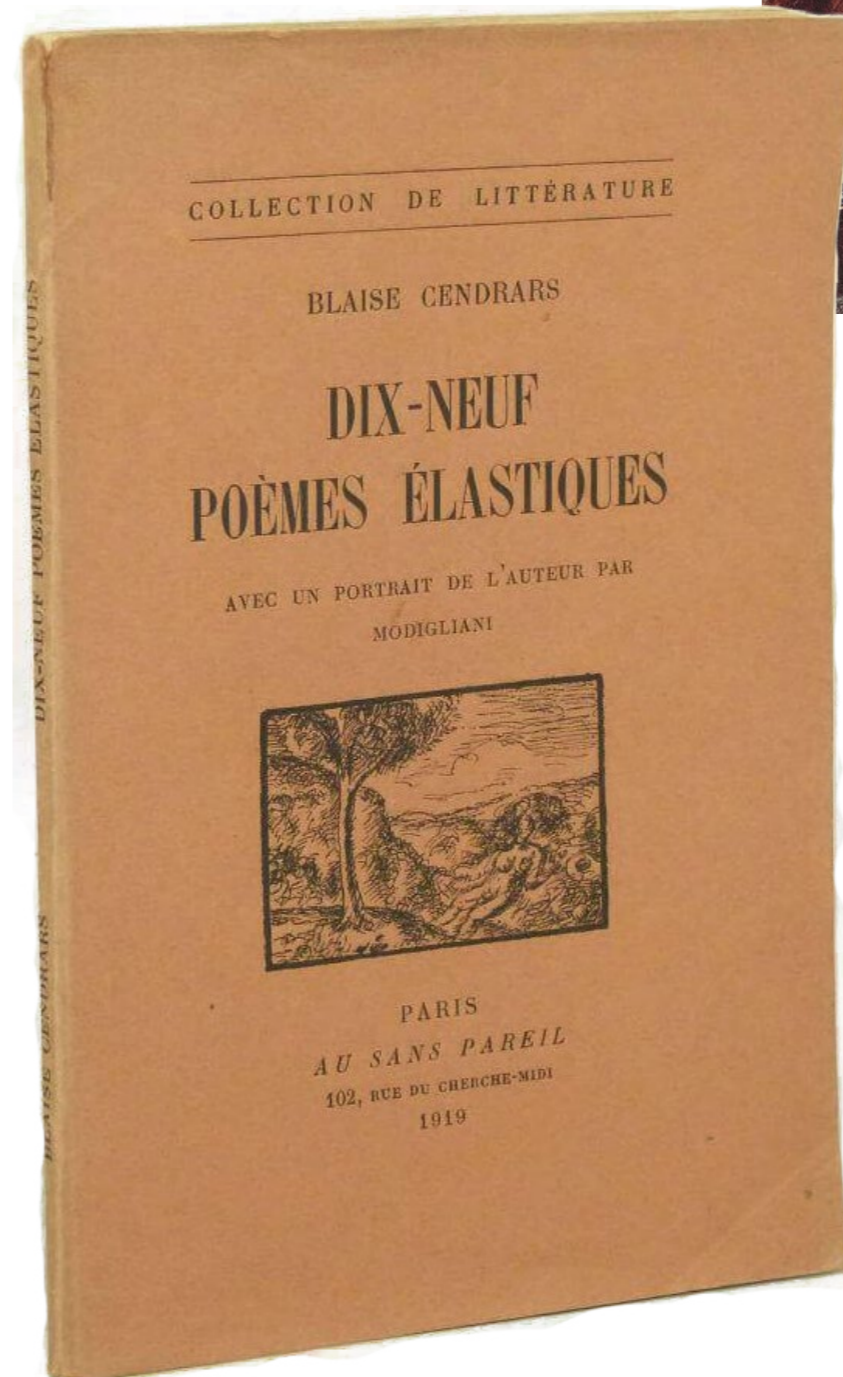
In 1925 he published the novel *L'Or*, about John Sutter, the Swiss who started the Gold Rush in California. (Apparently Stalin kept this book on his night table.) The Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein tried (unsuccessfully) to interest the Americans in a film of *L'Or* and Cendrars journeyed to Hollywood in the

1920s, ending up writing a gossip column. He also travelled widely in South America. Henry Miller wrote of his globe-trotting that “Cendrars is a voyager. There is hardly a corner of the globe whereon he has not set foot. He has not only voyaged about the world, but beyond the world. He has been to the moon, to Mars, to Neptune, Vega, Saturn, Pluto, Uranus.”

In 1926 he published *Moravagine* (a novel about a madman released by a doctor from an asylum) and in 1929 *Les Confessions de Dan Yack*. The eponymous hero, Dan Yack, is an eccentric English millionaire shipowner, a notorious hell-raiser and the envy of all St Petersburg. This strange travel yarn begins with Dan Yack finding out that he is no longer wanted by his lover, Hedwiga.



1917 oil portrait  
of Cendrars by  
Amedeo Modigliani



Rejection letter in hand, he is completely drunk and sitting in the middle of the street in a pool of horse’s urine. Eventually he wanders into The Stray Dog nightclub to fall asleep under a table. Sitting around the table are three hard-up young artists drinking vodka. Regaining consciousness, Dan Yack impulsively invites them to accompany him on a world voyage via the Antarctic.

After serving briefly as a war correspondent, Cendrars remained in occupied France from 1940 to 1944, being listed by the Nazis as “a Jewish writer of French expression”. In the late 1940s he produced a mesmerising tetralogy of memoirs full of ex-legionnaires, theatre types, black marketers, dubious aristocrats, circus freaks, drunken gypsies, and other picaresque characters.

He produced more poems and novels before dying in 1961. He claimed to have left ten finished manuscripts “in various strongboxes in South American banks”.





### CLUB NOTES

## New Member

A HEARTY HURRAH FOR Robin Woodward who has signed up this month, having heard about us from someone who attended one of the Oxford punting trips. Appropriately, given our main article this month, he hails from Devon. His areas of expertise include antiques, fine art and music, and he likes to sip an Old Fashioned. Sound like a pretty good life to me.



Robin Woodward

## Club Tie Corner

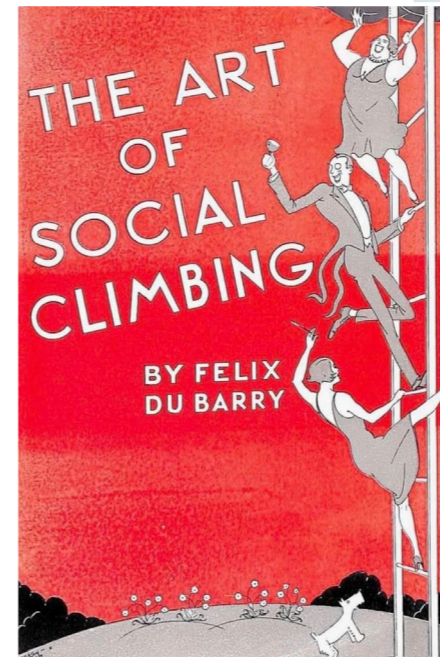
YOU COULD BE forgiven for thinking that the Club's tireless efforts are finally beginning to bear fruit, judging by this month's crop of tie spots. Clockwise from right: clear signalling going on in *Our Man in Havana* (1959) from Actuarius; likewise in Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), spotted by Colonel Choke; a blast from the past, Peter Powell on *Top of the Pops* from 1981, submitted by Oliver Lane (who is far too young to remember it); Robert Gates ex-Director of the CIA, quietly inducted into the Club by Torquil Arbutnot.



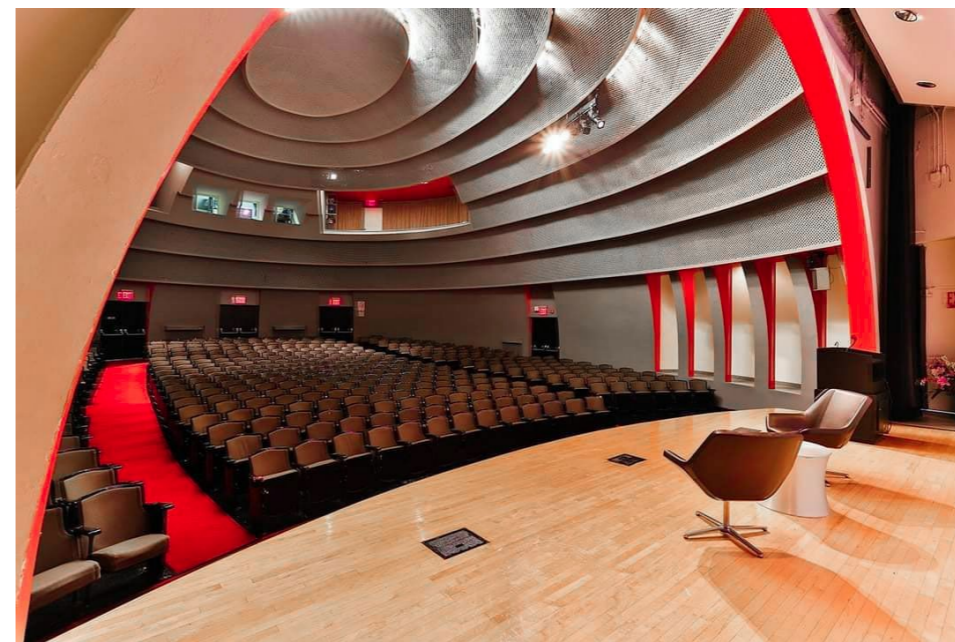
(Clockwise from top left) NSC ties tempt shoppers in *This Happy Breed* (1944), from Col. Choke; Melania Trump tries to borrow some of the easy trustworthiness summoned by Club colours; Debono has unearthed what he insists is "a young Scarheart"; Luigi met this fellow in Mr Fogg's Tavern, "but no tie, so he had to resign"; Herb Jones as Casablanca Charlie in *Irma La Douce* (1963), from Col. Choke







(Opposite page, clockwise from top) Col. Choke has also noticed that Cleopatra is making her affiliations known in the 1963 film of the same name; this 1936 number by Claire Gowns was spotted on the Roaring Twenties Facebook group; Suzanne Coles describes this painting as "NSC Ladies on a jaunt to the coast to take the waters (a.k.a. gin)"; Col. Choke again, this time offering a portrait by Corot of an exhausted Club servant, desperate for the Members to go home so she can close up the bar. (This page, clockwise from top left): Felix Du Barry clearly has a demographic in mind for this publication; Actuaris got excited when he thought the Committee had taken an interest in motor sports; Ivan Debono got excited when he thought the Committee had drunkenly purchased an aircraft carrier; Oliver Lane got excited when he thought the Committee had finally started work on the Clubhouse, beginning of course with an auditorium (or the Imperial Hall of Fist Shaking and Public Bluster, to give it its formal title); at the other end of the cultural scale, Stephen Myhill asks if Elvis has resigned from the building?







No time for an Events section this month, but the Candlelight Club will be popping up on 18th and 19th March if you fancy a vintage night out: here's a Negroni cocktail I captured in its natural habitat at the event in February [www.thecandlelightclub.com](http://www.thecandlelightclub.com)