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ALL-ENGLAND THEATRE FESTIVAL

Reaching out to drama groups throughout England

ROGER CUNNINGTON (1946-20)

MEMORIES OF A LAST MEETING AND
A PERSONAL TRIBUTE



*The only countrywide,
competitive festival
of one-act plays.*

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The email from Roger came right at the end of the first lockdown: 'Hello, Ian....do you happen to know the whereabouts of the Geoffrey Whitworth Trophy? It needs to be returned'. I replied that it was still in the hands of the 2019 winner but as the person concerned lived only down the lane from me, I could reclaim it at very short notice. 'That's good,' came Roger's reply, 'when we come up, just leave it in your garden for us to collect' (the social distancing concern was commendable). This would have involved a round trip of just over 300 miles from Yardley, Birmingham to Pateley Bridge in the Yorkshire Dales which, even by Roger's zealous standards, went beyond the extra mile he regularly travelled (metaphorically speaking) in the service of festival drama. I suggested a compromise – a meet-up at Wetherby Services on the A1(M) which would cut fifty, non-motorway miles off his (still considerable) journey. We agreed to rendezvous on the late morning of 18 June. As is my habit, I turned up ridiculously early for the appointment but I knew, from long experience, that Roger and Jean would still beat me to it and so it proved. They emerged from their Volvo

looking the picture of post-lockdown health (Roger's normally trim beard had grown luxuriously during 'Covid confinement') telling me that, apart from a few short trips down the Coventry Rd to keep the car battery charged, this was their first outing since the start of lockdown in March. The trophy duly handed over, we spent a few minutes exchanging (rather grim) festival news before taking shelter from the pouring rain in the Services foyer where we hoped to sit down to a relaxing cup of coffee. Alas, stymied by the still rigorous catering restrictions, we decided to cut our losses, take advantage of the one facility still openly available (the loos) and return home. I waved Roger and Jean off with a wish for their safe journey back to Birmingham complacent in the certain knowledge that we would meet up again in October for the Executive Committee Meeting in Northfield. Little did I realise at that moment that Roger's journey back home would be his last and that I would never see him again.

The email next day from Jean came as a huge shock to all the Executive Committee. Immediately on return from Wetherby, Roger had been taken seriously ill, rushed to Birmingham Heartlands hospital and admitted to intensive care. For the next 2 weeks we waited anxiously for Jean's regular updates, wondering how on earth she, Karen and the rest of the family were coping with the heartbreak of not being allowed to see Roger. The news of his death on 1 July came as a thunderbolt – a stunned personal and a corporate bereavement.

Roger was a one-off. His job title (National Treasurer) belied the huge additional workload he shouldered (along with Jean) which covered all facets of the AETF's activity, including a lion's share of the administrative drudgery (a term that Roger would never have recognised, such

All-England Theatre Festival



was his utter commitment to the festival cause). The following list does less than justice to his additional, self-imposed 'duties' – deviser and manager of the organisation's membership scheme, editor and updater of its rules and constitution, procurer of chains of office, compiler of the AETF annual report (and incorporated financial statement) for the Charity Commission, keeper of the trophy inventory, compiler and analyst of festival statistics, 'cartographer in chief', procurer of new trophies, trophy cases and gobos – the list of tasks he took upon himself is endless. And then there is his huge (unpublished) history of the AETF (which still awaits an assiduous editor / midwife to pave its way to a wider audience.

Roger's loss is felt just as keenly across the three other home nations. He was as proactive and indispensable a member of the United Kingdom Community Drama Festivals Federation (UKCDDFF) as he was on the AETF National Executive. Roger was the UKCDDFF's treasurer and, for some considerable time, its stand-in secretary and meeting arranger / conference-call coordinator. In his capacity as UKCDDFF secretary his minutes were meticulous with every action item carefully registered. He took a leading role in framing the UKCDDFF's constitution (and that of its predecessor organisation) and operating documents.

Inevitably, however, his loss is most keenly felt among the people he knew best – his Birmingham Festival (BFAME) and Central Area friends and colleagues. It is no coincidence that under Roger and Jean's guidance and stewardship, Central Area has developed into the AETF's most active, financially stable and mutually supportive component body. It was a source of great pride to Roger as the driving force behind the AETF's membership scheme that Central Area accrued by far the biggest number of national members. No Central Area event at any tier of competition was willingly neglected by Roger and Jean and it was always a matter of regret when, on very rare occasions, they were unable to attend a local festival. It follows that few people were more tuned-in to festival drama's grass roots opinions and concerns than Roger.

Like Paul Fowler (in his eloquent eulogy at Roger's funeral) it took me some time to get to know the real man. To the committee newcomer Roger might appear unapproachable and overly zealous. This was partly down to an innate reserve and partly because of his high seriousness of purpose and commitment – after all he was always a wellspring of AETF business and debate and this necessarily involved a big agenda (with the 'Any Other Business' element frequently providing a lengthy 'tail!'). Underneath the stern carapace, however, lay a self-effacing, gentle and unpolished jewel of a man, the acme of kindness and generosity. During my 3 years as National Chairman I couldn't have received more willingly and assiduously given help, patience and kindness from Roger and Jean. No question was ever too stupid or ill-thought out to fail to elicit a prompt, courteous and satisfying reply. No journey was too long for the Cunningtons to travel to give festival organisers the benefit of much needed advice or discuss problems of pressing concern (or help fellow committee members get to the station); and after a few beers at any after-show event, you would be hard-pressed to get a word in edgewise when Roger got into his stride and unloaded a selection of copious people and festival memories.

Before closing, I would like to mention Roger's courage in coping with the adversity of dyslexia. He freely admitted and made light of his lifetime of difficulty with the written word but it never stopped him taking on secretarial jobs with dogged determination. Roger's copious submissions to me, as editor of the Newsletter, were always modestly prefaced with permission for me to 'wield the red pen as you think fit'.

We mourn the loss of a dear friend and colleague, a man whose knowledge, expertise, acuity and thoroughgoing commitment in the service of festival drama were without equal. Roger would have been delighted to know that the handsome 'Just Giving' sum raised in his memory is to be used to help drama groups cope with the added expense of mounting productions during this year's Covid-impacted festival. Perhaps, as a naturally unassuming man, he would have been a little embarrassed by the new annual award to be fittingly unveiled in his memory at this year's Grand Final in Bridlington.

Jean, thankfully, will continue to carry on her wonderful and indispensable work at the AETF's still beating heart in Birmingham. It is poignant that she and Roger should have met through amateur drama and have been parted in its service.

Ian Clarke

NATIONAL AND AREA REPORTS

(Please note that several of these were written before the latest national lockdown)



England

Well, what can I say about my first year as AETF Chair? 2020 was indeed a very strange, sad, and challenging year. We lost our much-loved National Treasurer and AETF 'godfather', Roger Cunningham, a loss felt deeply both personally and by the festival community as a whole. The majority of our festivals did not take place and much concern was raised about the future of Theatre, both professionally and at a non-professional level. Our members were isolated, deprived of the thing that, for many, provided their physical and emotional outlet. But as one might expect from theatre people, the cry 'the show must go on' rang out loud and clear and the troops rallied. Many really understood how important Theatre and the festival season were to them and that no matter how time-consuming their participation in it might be, life just wasn't as good without it. Many groups have organised online festivals, Zoom rehearsals, rehearsals in fields and gardens - anything to keep things going.

The big question though - what happens to our national festival in 2021?

Firstly, I undertook Covid Production training in order to be able to provide members with effective protocols and risk assessments for both rehearsals and for the organisation of festivals. These are available via the website, your local representatives and aetfpro@gmail.com.

Secondly, after much discussion, I proposed that the British Final be pushed back to enable us to accommodate as many

All-England Theatre Festival



festivals as possible in late spring and summer, allowing more time for rehearsals and giving us a much stronger chance of ensuring that festivals take place. We have also explored alternative options should any festival not take place. Rest assured, each Area will have a representative at the Grand Final in Bridlington in August.

Thirdly we agreed several rule changes. These included giving groups licence to remount their 2020 productions regardless of whether they were performed or not. GODA adjudicators have agreed to be more flexible and negotiate with festival organisers to help when a festival is faced with difficult Covid-related circumstances. Probably the most exciting news is that we are offering grant aid to groups and festivals who are struggling to either enter or mount events due to Covid-19. The grant also aims to help teams who have to travel further to festivals if their local event is cancelled and those who are trying to enter more festivals in order to help keep the AETF alive in these difficult times. I urge you to apply, even if it's just to buy a hand-sanitiser or contactless thermometer.

I can safely say that this has been a really tough first year in which to start my incumbency as National Chair. I am determined, as best I can, to guide us through safely and ensure that we grow stronger from the experience. I am immensely proud of, and heartened by the positivity that groups and festivals have shown – adapting, changing and moving forward with passion and energy. I am excited to see what 2021 brings. We will ensure that THE SHOW DOES GO ON!

Rebekah Fortune-Smith - National Chair



Northern Area

We start 2021 on a most ambivalent note – record daily cases of Coronavirus and another national lockdown set against an impending vaccination campaign that will, we fervently hope, see us all re-united with the freedoms of life we took so much for granted before the pandemic struck.

In October and November we convened two Zoom meetings of AETF North's affiliated festivals. It was hugely gratifying to witness the enthusiasm all participants had for getting Area festival events back on their feet despite the uncertainties hanging over us all. We were particularly impressed with the flexibility and ingenuity which some organisers were prepared to invest in bringing this about. The Durham and Sunderland festival, under Heather Prestwich's pioneering lead, is determined not to let Coronavirus impact on its usual timing, and will hold an entirely digital event in early March. The Cheshire Festival is flexibly set up to hold either a digital or staged physical event in Nantwich. The approach of most first round festivals has been to postpone to early summer. Although this has thrown up a venue availability problem for the Nidderdale, our solution has been for it to share a week of performances 'cheek by jowl' with my own Saltburn event at our Community Theatre. The Hull Festival will take place as late as possible at the end of May and we have just had further good news that the Manx festival is earmarked to take place in early March and the Leverhulme in its usual late April slot. Sadly, this year's Richmond has fallen by the wayside, but seven out of eight first round events is not bad going. If all these take place, we are

guaranteed a high quality Area Final at Saltburn on 10-11 July. We look forward to the pleasure of your company then and at the Grand Final in Bridlington on 7 August. After our Hull and East Riding colleagues put so much effort and enthusiasm into organising last year's abortive event, we are delighted that they have been given another chance to host the culmination of the AETF season in the magnificent surrounds of The Spa.

I could not possibly finish this article without paying tribute to our late, lamented National Treasurer, Roger Cunningham. His selfless devotion to the AETF cause, practical expertise, encyclopedic knowledge and generosity to all, will be hugely missed. We owe it to him to make sure that the national festival in 2021 re-occupies its respected place in the amateur drama calendar.

I wish you all a happy, healthy and fulfilling new year.

Susan Pierce - Chair, Northern Area



Saltburn Community Theatre



Central Area

As I write my first report as Chair of Central Area, I am aware of the size of shoes I am trying to fill. I realise that, despite having held the position of National Chair in the past, taking over the Area position from Roger Cunningham is almost impossible. We are all indebted to him for his inspiration, organisation and support. Roger was a driving force behind the AETF for many years. I will do my best to continue his work within the Area and build on all the positive attitudes he engendered.

In these difficult times, it would be so easy to sit back and do nothing, but this is something that Central Area refuses to do. When we held our first Zoom meeting, every first round festival was represented, which was heart-warming. They were all open to ideas that would help the AETF continue throughout 2021, culminating in the Grand Final. We felt that if we could programme our first rounds to take place later in the year, then they would be more likely to happen. If any first rounds had difficulties finding theatres as a result, then other first rounds would host them, so that all festivals in the area would take

All-England Theatre Festival



place. We also agreed to encourage teams to support other festivals by entering as many as possible. Once we were told that the English and British Finals had been moved to later dates for 2021, all the Central Area festivals were able to move forward. Preliminary Rounds will take place in late April and May, with the Birmingham Festival being hosted by the Worcester festival and the Shropshire Festival being hosted by Tamworth. Determined not to cancel our quarter finals, we have booked them for June. Our semi final will take place in July.

We hope that the plans we have put in place will give our teams the chance to adequately rehearse and contribute splendidly to a revived AETF in 2021.

Sue Fortune – Chair, Central Area.



Western Area

Here begins a Western Area (WA) saga, one with which I suspect all other Areas will sagely nod and say 'd'accord'.

Following the near washout of festival drama in 2020, thanks to the very necessary March lockdown (the eventual tiers brought tears to the eyes) further dark clouds of gloom gathered. These were caused by a predicted second Covid wave and, in turn, a second lockdown. In short order, theatre festival protocols were decided by various august theatrical bodies, including the AETF and included sensible requirements for the control of the intermingling of groups of not more than six people. Thus, inevitably, given the restricted space available at some of our usual venues, the organisers of some county events have resisted the idea of a festival in 2021.

Contingency plans were soon agreed to provide a WA entry to the Grand Final. Avon and Bristol, traditionally early events, intend, in this coming season, to mount a joint festival in February in a town hall large enough to cope with the protocols. The new virus antidote gives rise to hope, albeit modified by a lengthy 'rollout' programme, that we *might* see a relaxation of restrictions by next summer which would joyfully validate the AETF's plan to put back its Grand Final to late in the season.

There is now renewed hope in the counties, subject to restrictions being lifted, about staging first round festivals and, in the Area committee, of mounting a semi final. The organising committee is certain that the Merlin Theatre in Frome will cope, even if some restrictions remain.

Gloom lifted; smiles are back!

Ron Roberts - Chair, Western Area



The Merlin Theatre, Frome



Eastern Area

As I write this, the Government has announced that England will remain in some form of Covid-19 lockdown until Easter 2021, although it is possible this will be periodically reviewed and relaxed on a regional basis if the statistics and scientific advice permit.

This presents a very difficult landscape, particularly for the preliminary round festivals (PRFs) that feed into the AETF competition and have historically been staged during the February to April period.

It is clear that both festival organisers and competing groups face considerable challenges in complying with the restriction on numbers congregating and the potential unavailability of theatres and/or rehearsal venues.

Recognising these challenges, the AETF Trustees have postponed the English Final to 7th August, two months later than usual, thereby enabling PRFs and subsequent rounds to be deferred (where practicable) until after lock-down has ended. In Eastern Area, two of the three festivals are presently booked in for their usual slots, whilst the Maidenhead has delayed by two months:

Southern Counties Drama Festival (SCDF) 22-27 February

Waltham Forest Drama Festival (WFDF) 25 -27 March

Maidenhead Drama Festival (M'head DF) 18-22 May

Groups may want to improve their chances by entering more than one festival and this would be an exciting opportunity to visit other venues and compete against other groups in the area.

All-England Theatre Festival



The Area Final will be hosted by SCDF and is currently scheduled for 30 May. It is possible that a later date may be freed up for this, in which case we may defer the Area Final to allow even more time for the PRFs to take place.

SCDF has had an excellent response from local groups, with 18 confirmed and paid-up entries. Unfortunately, if Covid restrictions prevent staging the festival in February, the organisers may struggle to find a later vacant week as the host venue (The Barn Theatre, Oxted) is fully booked until late August.

In contrast, WFDF organisers report that several of their usual entrants have already concluded that they won't be able to rehearse anything and they presently have only four potential entries.

The later date for the M'head DF enables it to delay seeking a commitment from groups until the New Year.

Whatever happens, the three festivals are committed to putting forward a group to represent the Area at the Grand Final and (potentially) British Finals by whatever means possible – with the ambition of repeating the 2019 success of Woking College, who won both events!

It remains for me to wish you all a happy and healthy new year and to hope that the vaccination programme brings in its wake a timely return to normality and the resumption of live drama.

Ian Thomas – Chair, Eastern Area



The Barn Theatre, Oxted

OUR NEW NATIONAL TREASURER

Carol Hennessy has bravely volunteered to take over the role of National Treasurer in succession to our late, lamented colleague, Roger Cunnington. Carol is a hugely experienced and capable festival organiser who has been a mainstay of the Maidenhead event for many years and has coordinated two highly successful Grand Finals at Norden Farm Centre for the Arts. The AETF's finances could not be in better hands.

Ian Clarke



AETF COVID SUPPORT GRANT SCHEME

Due to the effects of COVID-19 and its disruption of amateur theatre and drama festivals in particular, we are running a grant support scheme in 2021 financed from the Crusoe Farm legacy fund and the Just Giving collection in memory of Roger Cunnington. Any AETF festival (or group that regularly takes part in the AETF festival) may apply. Precise details of eligibility and an application form may be found on the AETF web site. (Click on 'Documents' and 'Covid Support Grant Grant – Application').

DENNIS DUNFORD (1934 – 2020)



Dennis Dunford passed away on 7th May last year. The following memories have been put together by two friends who served with Dennis for many years on the same AETF committees. We have been helped by his wife Cathrin, who sent us the many messages and tributes she received from which we have taken just a few to highlight the man Dennis was, how well he was thought of, and how much he will be missed.

'A man for whom the term 'drama legend' is not overstating it.'

Dennis began his lifelong love of theatre at 17 years old when he joined the Dorchester Community Players. This continued through his National Service in the RAF when he directed *And Then There Were None* over the camp radio. This was so well received that his Squadron Leader asked him to do a staged production of the play for two nights. He then directed *The Happiest Days of Your Life* and, when the leading man was posted away, he successfully took over the role.

All-England Theatre Festival



Dennis left the RAF in 1955 and started his career as a legal executive in local government. While he was at County Hall he met Cathrin and they married in 1962 and went on to have two children, Christopher and Nicola, and a much loved granddaughter, Sky. During this time he also became a registrar.

'(Dennis) married my wife and me in 1998, and I will never forget taking his directions for that event - and during numerous productions as an actor and stage manager for him.'

After finishing National Service, Dennis rejoined the Dorchester Community Players and two years later joined Weymouth Drama Club and stayed a member for the rest of his life. Over the years he played many parts - actor, director, costume and set designer, make-up, stage manager, committee member - you name it, Dennis did it!

'I had the pleasure of working with him for many years – there was always laughter and smiles.'

'His eye for set-dressing, design and prop placements were second to none.'

'He must have held every position on the committee down the years.'

As an Actor

He was *'not beyond putting in fine performances himself.'*
'I still remember his speech in 'A Pack of Lies' delivered in spine-chilling fashion.'

'I will never forget his flamboyant dames.'

In costume and make up:

He was *'a whizz with the sewing machine'*.
I have *'very fond memories of Dennis and his blusher brush.'*
'He had a particular knack with beards.'

As a director:

'I remember everything he told me, especially.....'feet!'
'He was never afraid to push the boundaries and put on challenging productions.'

'Pantos in particular hold very dear memories' - 'Teeth and tits, darling ...teeth and tits.'

In 1962 Dennis directed his first AETF entry for the club. Over the years he directed over 30 entries, winning many awards and reaching the English Final four times. However, Dennis was not a man to just accept trophies and accolades; he was also willing to put in effort, time and hard work to help organise and run drama festivals. Over the years he was a member, and often an officer, on AETF committees at each tier of the competition, specifically the Dorset Drama League, AETF Southern Division, AETF Western Area and the National Executive.

Dennis was Western Area Chairman from 2011-2017 and subsequently its President.

'His knowledge and skills were very much appreciated, expressed as they were with vigour, a sense of humour and al- kindness.'

In 2018 Dennis was very proud to be invited to the Queen's Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in honour of his 50+ years

of involvement with theatre. He and Cathrin had a great weekend away.

Dennis's second hobby was flower arranging and he joined a local group (and served, of course, on its committee!) Here too his imagination, creativity and skills won many awards and accolades at local and national level of competition.

In 2001 Dennis, as Chairman, organised and staged the Area show for Dorset and Guernsey entitled *All The World's A Stage*, held over two days at Weymouth Pavilion. In 2013 he designed and staged a display in the foyer of the BIC in Bournemouth for the National Show.

'In 2009 he was honoured to be asked to help with an arrangement on a high window at Westminster Abbey. When the Queen visited he said he had an aerial view of her hat!'

His flower arrangements also graced many an award ceremony at AETF festivals.

'I will always remember his amazing ability to produce an outstanding display from a bunch of flowers.'

'We applaud you Dennis - but sadly will be denied an encore. Keep 'em wanting more, eh?'

THIS YEAR'S 'BIG TWO'

We hope we are not tempting fate by reproducing last year's promotional material for our own Grand Final and the British Final. Both events are due to be held at the same venues they were scheduled to take place in last year.

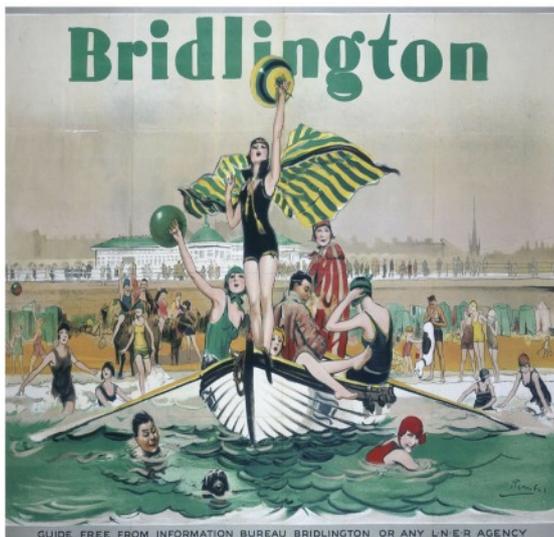
Please note the brand new dates.

THE AETF GRAND FINAL 2021

On Saturday 7 August our flagship event will take place in Bridlington, the most southerly of Yorkshire's 'big three' seaside resorts (a triumvirate completed by vibrant Scarborough and genteel Filey). The venue is the splendid Bridlington Spa complex (the white building viewed in the background of the historic LNER railway poster overleaf). The Spa, which dominates the town's South Beach and esplanade, comprises a dance hall, conference centre and 675-seater Edwardian Theatre (the venue for the AETF Grand Final).

The original Spa was built in 1896. Two fires (in 1906 and 1932) destroyed the earliest structures and it was reconstructed straight after the second conflagration in Art Deco style. Between 2006 and 2009 the venue was completely re-furnished at a cost of £20.5 million with funding provided by Yorkshire Forward, the European Development Fund and East Riding of Yorkshire Council (who own and operate the facility). In May 2016 the Edwardian Theatre was further developed to bring a centre aisle to the stalls area.

All-England Theatre Festival



The town of Bridlington is attractively located on the southern side of the impressive chalk headland of Flamborough Head from where a sweeping, sandy coastline runs all the way to Holderness and Spurn Head at the mouth of the Humber. To the north of Flamborough Head is the RSPB reserve of Bempton where the highest vertical sea cliffs on England's east coast provide nesting habitat for half a million seabirds between March and October.



The Edwardian Theatre, Bridlington Spa

Bridlington itself, in addition to having all the amenities of a modern seaside resort, contains much of architectural and historic interest. The town's parish church, restored by George Gilbert Scott in the 19th century, was established as an Augustinian Priory in 1133. Nearby is the 14th century castellated Bayle Gate housing the town's museum.

Since Bridlington is accessible by rail via either Hull or York / Scarborough, we hope that many of you will confirm your green credentials by leaving your car at home. In summer passengers arrive at Bridlington Station to find it beautifully bedecked with flowers. The rail journey north to Filey and Scarborough skirts Flamborough Head and the Yorkshire Wolds and is a delight.



Our dedicated, hard-working colleagues from the Hull and East Riding Festival who are organising and hosting the Grand Final on behalf of the AETF look forward to welcoming you to a glorious weekend of theatre, socialising and exploration.

Ian Clarke

87th BRITISH FINAL OF ONE-ACT PLAYS

This year's British Final will be hosted by our Drama Association of Wales colleagues at the Pavilion Theatre, Rhyl, on the evenings of Friday 24 and Saturday 25 September.

Although Rhyl's glory days as a 'bucket and spade' holiday destination are long behind it and the town has experienced many years of economic decline and social deprivation, it is now the beneficiary of an ambitious, multi-million programme of regeneration funded by the Welsh Government, Denbighshire County Council and private investment. The waterfront has been transformed as part of this programme and two new hotels built, one of which, a Travelodge constructed alongside the newly refurbished Pavilion Theatre (**pictured below**) is the lead hotel for the Final.



All-England Theatre Festival



Dedicated supporters of both our own Grand Final and the British will be lucky enough to have a true coast-to-coast experience in 2021. Rhyl's location on the North Wales Coast Railway from Crewe to Holyhead means that, once again, you can leave your car well and truly at home.



Pont y Ddraig, Rhyl's striking new, £4.3 million pedestrian and cycle bridge across the town's harbour.



YOUR COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS ABOUT THE CONTENT AND PRESENTATION OF THIS NEWSLETTER ARE ALWAYS WELCOME. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO PROVIDE COPY FOR FUTURE ISSUES, DO LET ME KNOW AND I SHALL DO MY BEST TO OBLIGE.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.

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