



Long life of privilege

**From: Tim Mickleburgh,
Littlefield Lane, Grimsby.**

Sir, – I'm sorry, but I can't get at all enthusiastic about the Queen Mother entering her 100th year.

Yes, it's a great age, and it's good that someone can reach 99 feeling as fit as she does. But there again, she has all the advantages denied to her contemporaries – including a seven figure supplement from her daughter because she can't manage on over £600,000 per year.

And to me that's an insult to the ordinary pensioner, living on Income Support, or the basic state allowance. If they had such resources, more might approach their second century. But living in a council flat on an unattractive council estate isn't as good for your health as having a few castles to choose from.

So let's reduce the Queen Mother's income to a 'mere' £100,000 per annum, and use the money saved on those who make do on a darned sight less!

'Yorkshire Post'

Girt for a flirt alert

Tony Bradman (aged 43¾) surveys a selection of advice books for teenagers

1 **D**EAR DIARY – nice lady from The Daily Telegraph rang to ask if yours truly would review books that explain mysteries of life, relationships, and so on, to teenagers. Said yes, as own family contains (just) several adolescents, and yours truly realises teen years can be difficult and angst-filled. Have dim memory of going through it, and feel advice books might be useful.

2 Large parcel arrives and yours truly thinks of cunning wheeze: order offspring to read books. Alas, 13-year-old son engaged in permanent phone conversation (to Mars, judging by bills); 17-year-old daughter last seen leaving house on platform-soled trainers – estimated time of return, early hours of morning; their 19-year-old sister is now costing family a fortune at university. So thrown back on own middle-aged resources.

3 First book off pile strikes instant chord. Scan pages of **Help! My Family Is Driving Me Crazy! A Survival Guide for Teenagers** (Piccadilly, £5.99), by Kathryn Lamb, for tips on how to get son off phone, but no luck. Annoyingly, said book written from teenager's point of view, and includes excellent advice for adolescents on how to handle parents and siblings by using flattery, bribery and diversionary tactics. Have buried Kathryn Lamb's book

in garden.

4 **Friends or Enemies?** (Hodder, £3.99), by Anita Naik, very like reading magazine articles strung together to make book. Not surprising, as author is agony aunt of Just Seventeen, publication own 17-year-old subscribes to, and whose letters page tackles things even yours truly has never heard of. The book, however, not so hair-raising, but deals with friendships, and is full of sensible advice on subject close to every teen girl's heart.

5 Not quite sure how to take **Boys Behaving Badly** (Piccadilly, £5.99), by Jeremy Daldry. At first glance, said volume appears to be a handbook for teenage boys, with advice on puberty, looking cool, dating, and so on, all set out in a rIoT of wiLd tyPOGrAPHY. Also thought son had scribbled badly spelt, unfunny comments throughout, but suddenly realise this supposed to make book seem rather *sUbvERsiVe*.

6 Still cannot get son off phone, so forced to rely on own judgment. Feel this book has plenty of good advice and information, but am deeply irritated by presentation of same, although as yours truly is by now (according to offspring) well past use-by date, this may simply be a function of age.

7 Feelings regarding young Mr Daldry's book very mild,

however, compared to righteous indignation prompted by next book off pile. **Enter the Boy-Zone: Sport Sorted for Girls** (Piccadilly, £5.99), by Caroline Plaisted, turns out to be a bluffer's guide to sport for girls eager to impress teenage males with their understanding of the offside rule. Feel this is obscurely patronising to both sports-crazed girls and boys with brains.

8 Reach bottom of pile and find Victoria McCarthy's **Body Talk** (Hodder, £3.99), another magazine-style volume aimed at helping teen girls in the quest for "Lurve" by reading "body signals" as they go on "flirt alerts" and try to "snare" their men. Feel less said the better on this one, and am reaching saturation point with prose dominated by interjections of the "Aargh! I'm so depressed 'cos I can't get a boyfriend" variety.

9 Finally decide to come up with pithy conclusion on books under review. Feel some are good, many mediocre, and some not worth the paper printed on. No matter, as most adolescents, like son, on phone so much they have no time to read them. Things looking up, though, as good lady wife seems interested in **A Complete Guide to Kissing** (Macmillan, £3.50), by Nick Fisher. Perhaps yours truly not past use-by date after all.

'The Daily Telegraph'

Do you have to be pretty to be in Parliament?

WITH HIS hooded, falcon eyes, sensuous lips and unruly curls, wrote our television critic Allison Pearson a fortnight ago, the Italian footballer Paolo Maldini 'is clearly the love child of Sophia Loren and a Bellini angel'. 8 would say the same of Sir George Gardiner, readopted last Friday as Conservative candidate for Reigate. Various compared to a bloodhound disappointed in love and to Dracula left out in the rain, Sir George, by his own admission, is no Adonis. As he sorrowfully observed of the campaign against him, it is not his fault he was born ugly.

It is no use pretending that looks do not matter in 9. Robin Cook would have had a better chance of beating Tony Blair to the Labour leadership had he looked more like Pierce Brosnan – or even, perhaps, a bit more like Tony Blair. It is 10 that in presidential elections in the US, the taller of the candidates almost always emerges as the winner.

And yet, in the case of Sir George, there is reason to think that the exploitation of his ugliness was 11. He is, by general consent, his party's slyest conspirator. By spreading around the thought that he might be paying the price for the looks his maker gave him, he no doubt hoped to distract attention from the rest of his critics' agenda: his opposition to the Maastricht treaty, his inconstant loyalty to John Major, his support for Major's opponent Redwood a year ago when his local party backed Major.

Good looks may boost a Commons career, but the lack of them is not 12, as visitors to the Houses of Parliament can confirm for themselves any day. There are many other Tory MPs whom you would never see on a catwalk and yet whom local parties happily readopt, election after election. Even poor old Sir George is not so ill-favoured as he wanted us to believe. Few may warm to a Dracula left out in the rain. But what better to 13 than the soulful eyes and the droopy skin of a bloodhound's head?

'The Observer Review'

Oh, I can't complain

At last the British have learnt to complain but we still fail to get good service, says Miranda Ingram

1 **Y**ou know what we Brits
are like. We find a slug
in our salad and we're
more likely to wrap it in
5 a paper napkin and slip it into
our handbag than to summon
the waiter. "Delicious, every-
thing's fine," we nod when he
finally sweeps past our table.

2 10 If we do complain, we screech
like I do, more madwoman than
dissatisfied consumer. What we
can't do is the cool, calm, effi-
cient complaining at which the
15 Americans are so good. I used to
sit opposite one of these people.
She never raised her voice but I
would rather have paid for a re-
placement myself than swap pla-
ces with the salesman who had
sold her shoddy goods.

3 The key to this woman's suc-
cess, of course, was that she actu-
ally believed she *deserved* to get
25 what she had paid for, which is
the key difference between the
American and British attitudes to
spending power.

4 Or was the difference. At last,
30 it seems, we are catching on, ac-
cording to a survey by the Insti-
tute of Customer Service TMI,
which shows that today half of us
regularly complain about defi-
35 cient goods and services – twice
as many as ten years ago.

5 That is the good news. The
bad news, however, is that all our
newfound complaining tech-
40 niques are getting us nowhere.
We are becoming demanding
and aggressive but not successful.
You can complain all you like
but British organisations just
45 don't get the point.

6 "The point about complaints,"

says Cary Cooper,
Professor of Organ-
isational Psycho-
50 logy, "is that they
are an incredibly
cheap and accurate
form of market
research. Com-
55 plaints show you
the way to develop
your products and
services to meet
customers' needs.

60 Our organisations
are not used to
confrontation and
can't handle com-
plaints. They see
65 them as a waste of
the company's time and
something to be smoothed over
and forgotten as fast as possible."

7 These companies will be in
big trouble soon, though, says
70 Cooper. In his view, people over
50 dislike change. They will keep
complaining to their bank but
are unlikely to move their ac-
75 count. The under-30s, however,
are a completely different breed
and, having grown up in a 24-
hour, fast-changing world, think
nothing of switching brands and
80 loyalties.

Meanwhile, although we have
learnt to complain, we now have
to learn to do it properly. Scree-
ching and exploding may give us
85 instant satisfaction but to get *real*
customer satisfaction we need
more sophistication.

9 "First, keep cool," says Cooper.
"Think what you want to get out
90 of your complaint. Do you want a
replacement? An apology? A dis-
count? And be specific about what



Like John Cleese in Monty Python's dead parrot sketch, we have not learnt to get customer satisfaction

you want. Be logical about the
fault. And judge the person you
95 are complaining to – are they
senior enough to deal with your
complaint? Above all, be tena-
cious. Make it quite clear that you
are not going to give up until you
have what you want."

100 Cooper's personal opinion is
that it is really rather sad that we
Brits are turning into complainers.
The stiff upper lip that kept
us quiet before was what made us
105 so civilised. But in today's con-
stantly changing, time-driven
world, the ability to be tolerant is
no longer a useful tool. Now we
can stamp our feet and get what
110 we want along with the best of
them – but the cost is that it puts
us into a state of constant conflict
with others. "Sadly," says
Cooper, "those who remain
115 admirably relaxed and civilised
and British are just going to be
taken advantage of."

'The Times'

Vegetarian views meet opposition

From Professor R. T. D. Oliver

Sir, While I respect Simon Barnes's view ("A meatless diet isn't healthy, just wise", August 23) that factory farming is cruel, I was unable to understand, from what he wrote, why he is averse to eating a wild rabbit. Equally I wonder why he considers animal life superior to plant life, given our Lord's plea to consider the lily of the fields as one of us, and the fact that all animal life depends on plants to generate our oxygen.

I have an omnivorous cat that was made ill by living on an all-meat diet. Recently I observed a lion kill on safari in Kenya and was struck by how the first morsel the pride¹⁾ ate was the stomach contents of digested grass. It seems clear that so-called carnivores have a broader palate than conventionally believed. Observing the lions led me to wonder how herbivores in the field avoid eating insects on the grass and conclude that in the wild all animals are omnivores with a greater or lesser dependence on one or other extreme.

With evidence that pure vegetarians have more anaemia, it is clear that vegetarianism is not good for all of us, however much Simon Barnes may think it is wise.

Yours faithfully,

TIM OLIVER

Professor of Medical Oncology
St Bartholomew's Hospital,
West Smithfield, EC1.

'The Times'

noot 1

pride: group (of lions)

1 My daughter, aged 14 (or “practically 16”, as she prefers to be known), announced
5 some time ago that it was her intention to attend this weekend’s Reading Festival²⁾ in the company of older friends (who are all, we understand, “practically 18”). I was honoured to be invited to participate in her plan, namely by supplying the cash with which she could purchase a ticket.

2 This I managed by negotiating a small extension to our mortgage. “Aren’t rock festivals supposed to be all about rebelling against capitalism,” I asked my wife. “Or am I out of date?”

3 Anyway, tomorrow my daughter goes off to this event – and I am suddenly consumed with dark forebodings. Isn’t it funny how the human mind can hold two completely contrary opinions simultaneously, especially if they involve one’s own family? Case in point: education. In any newspaper office you find journalists who spout the most dewy-eyed, equal-opportunities-for-all sentiments in print. But when it comes to the schooling of their own kids, they turn into ruthless monsters, moving heaven and earth to get their beloved offspring into London’s most competitive cramming-factories.

4 In the past week I have discovered that rock festivals reduce me to the same state of hypocrisy. In theory, I think they are wonderful. Every teenager should experience one, if only to teach them how to cope with physical squalor, sleep deprivation and close encounters with gropers, muggers and dealers. But now that it is my own child’s turn, I have become paranoid on the subject.

Richard Morrison



A real fear – or much ado about nothing?

5 Every time I pick up the paper I seem to read something new and alarming. Primarily that is because of one awful disaster. Some time ago, at the Roskilde Festival in Denmark, nine young men were trampled to death during a set by the American rock band Pearl Jam. A long police investigation concluded last week that their deaths were a “freak accident”.

6 Well, maybe. But the conditions which added up to that “freak accident” – slithery mud underfoot, plentiful alcohol, and a tightly packed crowd of youngsters stage-diving and “surfing” (running over the heads and shoulders of the others) – are typical of every big rock festival.

7 Nor is the Roskilde catastrophe an isolated example of things going horribly wrong. Last year 54 people were killed at a rock concert in Minsk, when the crowd stampeded during a storm. Consider, too, the catalogue of woe at last autumn’s

Woodstock Festival – looting, arson and several reported rapes – and the 1,400 reported crimes at Glastonbury this June.

8 Of course we are assured that deaths or serious injuries could never happen at a modern British festival, where crowd control is organised very professionally. Not since 1985, when two people died at a Bon Jovi show, has anything gone seriously wrong here.

9 But when I hear Melvin Benn, the Reading Festival organiser, saying that he is “100 per cent

opposed” to restrictions on stage-diving or crowd-surfing because it would “take away all the excitement”, I do start to get nervous for my daughter – and the thousands of small, vulnerable boys and girls like her. Certainly, if crowd conditions like this were encountered at any British football match these days, the stadium would be closed instantly.

10 Oh well, it’s too late now. I have offered my old motorcycle helmet to my daughter as protection, but for some reason this well-intentioned suggestion was contemptuously rejected.

11 “What are you going to Reading for, anyway?” I asked her.

12 “Limp Bizkit,” she replied. “You shouldn’t bother,” I said. “We’ve got a whole packet of chocolate biscuits in the larder.”

She stared at me without a trace of a smile. “You are so sad,” she said. Gosh, what it is to be practically 16.

‘The Times’

Granada gave Lawrence suspects £2,000 holiday

THE five youths suspected of murdering Stephen Lawrence received a holiday worth at least £2,000 from the television company that gave them primetime exposure.

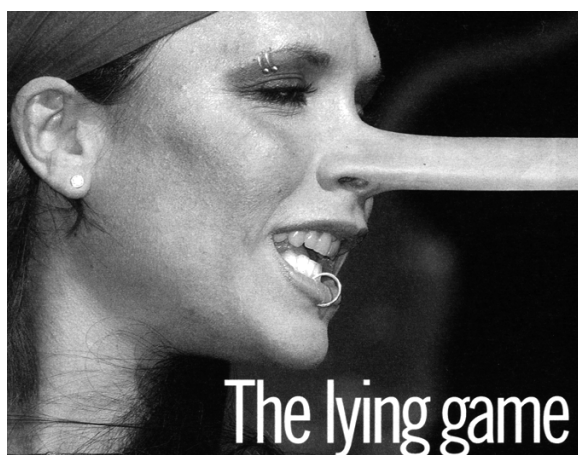
The racist gang enjoyed a 15-day break at Hennhill House, a well-appointed farmhouse south of Perth, where they played golf and football and watched satellite television.

The revelation appears to 29

assurances given by Granada, the maker of ITV's current affairs programme Tonight with Trevor McDonald, that the youths would not benefit in any way from the interview.

In a further blow to the programme, Scotland Yard was 30 to confirm claims by Granada that the holiday had been organised on the suggestion of the police, who were concerned about public order.

'The Sunday Times'



Politicians, celebrities, royalty – everybody's at it.
Telling great big porkies has never been so
socially acceptable, says LUCI HOE

1 **D**ishonesty is reaching epidemic proportions – and not just in the House of Commons. These days, everyone's telling porkies. Just look at Victoria Beckham, who took to the stage at Birmingham's Party in the Park at the end of August sporting a new lip ring. "It's really painful," she whined to the assembled thousands; but it emerged later that the piercing wasn't real at all. It was a clip-on fake – and the fat-lipped teenage fans who had rushed out to copy their idol were not amused.

2 Posh's fibbing may not be malicious, but it is symptomatic of a wider malaise. A recent Gallup poll found that, on average, people in Britain tell up to 20 untruths every day, while another recent survey revealed that a whopping 96% of women say they lie when they feel they need to (and one has serious doubts about the honesty of the 4% who claimed they are never untruthful).

3 While many of these lies are what psychologists call "false positives", the kind of fibs that serve as harmless social lubricants ("Ooh, you look nice in that dress", "The meal was wonderful" and so on), there are growing numbers of people who lie excessively.

4 "Anyone under pressure or with a big enough incentive is prepared to say something that isn't true," says Professor Leonard Saxe, an expert in lie detection at Brandeis

University in America. And these days, such behaviour seems to be increasingly acceptable. A recent survey found that at least 1 in 10 Britons exaggerates their hectic lifestyle to give the impression that they are high achievers, while one third admits to lying on their CVs – leading the French press to label the Brits as liars and cheats.

5 40 "People start by exaggerating their accomplishments to boost their self-esteem or for a specific gain such as trying to get a job," says Professor Aldert Vrij, a social psychologist at the University of Plymouth. 45 "The trouble is that once they have laid those foundations, they can't stop and they layer lie on top of lie." And the better educated a person, the higher their level of deceit. "Education gives people the vocabulary and the confidence to deceive," says Professor Bella de Paulo, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia. "So their lies are more sophisticated and plausible than you might find elsewhere in society."

6 55 Trying to spot a liar isn't easy, even for experts. Vrij has found that experienced deceivers are so aware of the usual giveaway signs, such as shifty eyes, that they take calculated measures to avoid them. Sometimes, however, the subconscious takes over. American scientists reported this year that a liar's nose really does get bigger, something they called the Pinocchio effect. Although the subtle swelling can't easily be seen with the naked eye, it makes the nose so itchy that it triggers a bout of scratching. "When we lie, the heart pumps quicker, swelling the nasal tissues."

7 And if the thought of your nose swelling doesn't put you off, consider your health. Baring your soul, it seems, is better for you. "Lying eventually takes its toll in all but the most extreme and compulsive individuals," says Vrij. "Constantly having to keep one step ahead of the game in the job you got because you lied about your previous experience can be mentally and physically draining."

8 And not just for the liars themselves. As Patsy Kensit said of her marriage to Liam Gallagher: "A thief's going to rob you, a murderer's going to kill you, but you never know where you are with a liar."

'The Sunday Times'



Silly walks

JOHAN PRESCOTT, the Deputy Prime Minister, is launching a campaign to push the nation back on the pavement. It emerged last week that his department has drawn up a “national walking strategy” to increase the number of journeys made on foot from 28 to 33 per cent in the next 10 years. This would be a most improving and laudable change in our daily habits.

Yet the mastermind of the policy is “Two Jags John” Prescott, so named because of his proud ownership of two Jaguar cars. Mr Prescott, we can see, is a man who richly appreciates the purr of a

good motor, and the caress of leather upholstery. He also enjoys a portion or two of fish and chips.

But we wager that Mr Prescott’s car journeys are not reserved for long trips alone. His “walking strategy” puts one in mind of the riposte given to the late and portly Reginald Maudling, who complained in the House of Commons that the British car worker took three days to build a car, whereas the German car worker took only two. To which Dennis Skinner, the Labour MP, shouted: “An’ ’ow long would it tek you, fats?”

‘Sunday Telegraph’

The week's films

Mission to Mars

116 mins, PG

Brian De Palma's latest offering is flaccid, tedious, trite, clichéd, unintentionally funny, sadly camp, self-indulgent and utterly pointless. It's devoid of tension, visual flair, characters we care about, good dialogue, ideas or any reason to stay awake. Poor De Palma, may he and his movie rest in peace. CL

Up at the Villa

116 mins, 12

It's 1938, fascism is on the rise and for poor but beautiful Mary Panton (Kristin Scott Thomas), love is in the air. She lives in a beautiful villa in Tuscany, thanks to the generosity of friends. But she faces a difficult choice: should she marry stuffy but stable Sir Edgar Swift (James Fox) or go for good-time guy and ladies' man Rowley Flint (Sean Penn)? Here, Scott Thomas has nice teeth, awful outfits, zero sex appeal and terrible lines such as this one to Sir Edgar: "But India needs you!" Penn's character, thanks to Belinda Haas's leaden screenplay, doesn't seem any more of an exciting prospect. CL

Earth

101 mins, 15

Deepa Mehta's film is a worthy, unspectacular history lesson, set in India in 1947. Independence is imminent, but so is the creation of Pakistan, and the celebrations are soon replaced by bloody sectarian fighting. Mehta focuses on a group of friends — all civilised liberals in their twenties — who constitute a microcosm of Indian society. Sure enough, the changing political climate infects some of them with unwonted bigotry, while those who refuse to take sides are placed in jeopardy: a



Mission impermissible: Brian De Palma's Mars movie is a stinker

love affair between a Muslim and a Hindu becomes a rerun of Romeo and Juliet. Well meaning and well made, but it does not teach us anything new. EP

L'Ennui

120 mins, 18

Cédric Kahn's film lives up to its title: yet another yawn of a French film about a bourgeois intellectual going through a midlife crisis. A philosophy prof develops a crush on a fickle, voluptuous teenager (Sophie Guillemin), who is happy to sleep with him but refuses to make a commitment. He finds her sullenness boring, yet can't get her out of his head. Kahn believes this to be an amusing paradox, and insists on studying it at tedious length. The only spark is provided by Guillemin's performance (her debut). EP

Once Upon a Time in the West

168 mins, 15

A new Cinemascope print of Sergio Leone's 1968 masterpiece, with the 20 minutes of cuts restored. Everyone is familiar with the opening sequence, in which three desperados wait at a deserted train station for Charles Bronson, who shoots them down before Ennio Morricone's unforgettable theme rips through the silence like a dum dum bullet. The rest of Leone's story, co-written by Bertolucci, Sergio Donati and the horror master Dario Argento, is just as fine. This is where poetry meets entertainment. SG

**Cosmo Landesman,
Ed Porter and Steve Grant**

'The Sunday Times'

FLASH, BANG, BOOM: SCIENCE GOES POP

A new wave of science centres will get your kids fizzing. Vincent Crump finds five sparky breaks for half-term

1 THE BIG IDEA, IRVINE

THE "WORLD'S first inventor centre" is a giant dune-shaped building topped by grass and heather on the Ardeer Peninsula, where Alfred Nobel built his dynamite factory. It opened in April 2000 and cost £15m.

What's the attraction? The Big Idea is a nuts-and-bolts exploration of how things work, using interactive models to strip away the secrets of everything from springs (the wristwatch) to rings (the telephone), and propellers (the hovercraft) to tellers (the cash machine).

If your children are more disposed to wanton destruction, they may prefer the History of Explosions. A volatile compound of movie and white-knuckle ride, it zips from the Big Bang to the atom bomb in seven breathless minutes.

The Big Idea aims to inspire the inventors of the future, so every visitor receives a free kit to build at home. Choices include an electric racing car, a kaleidoscope, a burglar alarm and a personal organiser.

The kids say: "I quite liked seeing Newton's apple — you pull a lever and gravity makes it drop. I don't know who Newton is, though. The inventor kits are fun to build — we've come home with five rockets and four cars!" — Sarah Mann, 10

Make a weekend of it: the Thistle Hotel (01294 274272), Irvine, makes a big splash with kids. Its Hawaiian-style pool complex has a water slide, and you can book a family room with patio doors opening onto the poolside. From £85 B&B for a family of four.

□ *The Big Idea is on the Harbourside in Irvine, half an hour's drive from Glasgow and Prestwick airports. Open from 10am-5pm Wed-Fri; 10am-6pm weekends; £7.95 adult, £5.95 children, £24 family of four. Further information: 0870 840 4030; www.bigidea.org.uk*

2 EARTH CENTRE, DONCASTER

IT'S TAKEN £40m to transform a smear of defunct South Yorkshire coal pits into this environment park beside the River Don. Less than 10 miles from Magna, the Earth Centre is a good place to blow off steam if you're planning a two-day trip.

What's the attraction? The galleries are a wow, weaving art and technology into a spectacular story about sustainability. Outside in the 400-acre country park, it's full-on fun: have a go at archery, skid down a zipwire and tackle adventure playgrounds fit for commandos.

What children will remember most, though, is being a water droplet on a gripping simulator ride through the water cycle; and the Living Machine, an organic sewage works that uses tropical plants to clean up the Earth Centre's waste. Not to be pooh-poohed.

The kids say: "I wanted to go on the water-cycle ride again and again, and the climbing wall was awesome. But it's a shame the Natureworks area was closed for winter because I wanted to see the insect houses." — Victoria Potter, 8

Make a weekend of it: The Ardsley House Hotel (01226 309 955) in nearby Barnsley has its own spa and swimming pool. Kids under 12 stay free when sharing; a family room for four costs from £84.

□ *Earth Centre is on the A6203 at Conisbrough, three miles from the A1(M), junction 36. Open 10am-4pm daily; £4.50 adults, £3.50 children, £12.50 family of four. Outdoor pursuits cost extra. Further information: 01709 512000; www.earthcentre.org.uk*

3 EXPLORE-AT-BRISTOL

OPENED IN July 2000, Explore-At-Bristol is part of a £97m fusion of three attractions, including Wildwalk (an undercover rainforest alive with birds and butterflies) and an Imax complex.

What's the attraction? It's certainly original. In the Brain zone you get to be a virtual sperm on a journey through the science of reproduction, and then visit the world's only Walk-in Womb (complete with wheelchair access). The Curiosity zone features a 7ft-high tornado; and kids can have a go at being top of the pops in the mini television studio. Encourage overactive youngsters to try the child-powered waterworks, driven by a giant human hamster-wheel.

The kids say: "I liked presenting the weather in the TV studio. The best thing is being able to touch so many things. Your parents would go mad, but at Explore it's okay. But I was disappointed that some of the exhibits weren't working." — Mark Jones, 10

Make a weekend of it: the spanking new Brigstow Hotel (0117 929 1030) is just a 10-minute walk along the harbour from Explore. It has great river views and there are ferry tours from outside the door. Inside, the bathrooms have built-in televisions, which should encourage even the muckiest pups to get clean. From £135 B&B for a family of four in connecting bedrooms.



□ *Explore-At-Bristol* is on the Harbourside in the city centre. Open every day, 10am-6pm; £7.50 adults, £4.95 under-16s, £21 family of four. The *Imaginarium* costs £2/£1.50 extra. Further information: 0845 345 1235; www.at-bristol.org.uk.

4 NATIONAL SPACE CENTRE, LEICESTER

OPENED IN June in a 140ft "rocket tower", the Space Centre cost an astronomical £52m.

What's the attraction? Five minutes of oxygen remaining, a meteoroid storm on its way ... and you're in mission control. Find out if you're made of the right stuff with a role-playing spin in the centre's space-shuttle simulator. That's a special treat for February (see details below), but the main exhibition is split into five portals, where eager space cadets can launch model rockets, train to be an astronaut or forecast the next day's weather using real satellite pictures.

There is £11m worth of serious hardware on display, too, including a Soyuz space capsule and a Blue Streak satellite launcher from the 1960s. The Space Now area offers a window on current interstellar action, as Leicester University scientists beaver away on instrument-building and research.

The kids say: "My favourite was using fizzy water to launch a rocket. And also when they take a picture that shows how you'd look as an alien. My little sister had a big, long chin — which scared her, because she's only two! The real-life space-craft were boring, though. You're not allowed to go inside them." — *William Kelleher, 7*

Make a weekend of it: the fun-sized, family-run Belmont House Hotel (0116 254 4773), in leafy New Walk, is close to the city centre; the family rooms are homely and Bowie's Bar is child-friendly. From £80 B&B for a family of four.

□ *The National Space Centre* is two miles north of Leicester city centre, just off the A6. Open 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun, and from noon on Mondays during school holidays; £7.50 adult, £5.50 under-15s, £22 family of four. Further information: 0870 607 7223; www.spacecentre.co.uk

5 W5, BELFAST

PART OF Belfast's £91m Odyssey entertainment complex, Whowhatwherewhenwhy (W5) opened in March 2001.

What's the attraction? Five exhibitions with a fun-and-games feel. Challenge fellow visitors to a mammoth tug-of-war to learn the principle behind fulcrums; build your own car and race it on the giant track; and, most startling of all, see the fire tornado, a 15ft vortex of flame.

Tot gourmands can find out about nutrition in a shrunk-to-scale supermarket (part of a dedicated zone for the under-eights); musical youths get to play a harp with lasers for strings; and larcenous little ones can learn to crack safes and beat a lie detector. There is also a chance to become the next Nick Park in W5's stop-frame animation studio.

The kids say: "It was brilliant. You can make a roller coaster, do puzzle challenges and I learnt how to send an e-mail. I didn't like the wheelchairs, though. They were supposed to teach you about friction, but when I raced my friend, my hands got sore." — *Kelly Murphy, 10*

Make a weekend of it: the smart McCausland Hotel (02890 220200) is a five-minute stroll from W5 away along the Lagan. It serves child-friendly food all day, with kids' CDs and videos for keeping youngsters occupied after supper. A "junior suite" for four with inter-connecting bedrooms costs from £320 B&B.

□ *W5* is at Abercorn Basin in the city centre. Open 10am-6pm weekdays and noon-6pm weekends; £5 adult, £3 child, £14 family of four. Further information: 028 904 67700; www.w5online.co.uk

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