

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELDS

Dulce et Decorum est...

THE Wilfred Owen Association has asked Wirral town planners to protect 88 poplar trees around a former school playing field, each one representing a former pupil who died in the First World War.

Site owner Tranmere Rovers FC wants permission to build 100 homes on the former Birkenhead Institute Memorial playing fields, which the club snapped up as a training ground when the school closed in the 1990s. The cash-strapped club now wants to sell the site for development to fund a new training ground nearby which will also have facilities for locals. All very nice – but at what cost?

The plans, due to be considered the day after Remembrance Sunday, include preserving a

plaque from the wall of the pavilion by moving it to a “landscaped area” of the housing development. But the 88 mature trees around the edge of the field face the chop. Ornamental memorial gates added to the site in the 1930s are long gone.

One of the 88 Birkenhead Institute pupils represented by the trees is war poet Wilfred Owen. The Wilfred Owen Association is “asking the planners to go back to the drawing board and to think of a way of sympathetically sustaining the memory of the old boys”. The association warns that whatever is decided in Birkenhead could have implications for other playing fields that double as war memorials and are at risk as potential development sites. What passing bells indeed.



LIBEL TOURISM

No smoke without ire

JUST as MPs were discussing how to reform the archaic libel laws, solicitors for one Stanko Subotic popped up in the high court in London to remind them why they needed to.

British readers are unlikely to have heard of Mr Subotic. The “Serb Tobacco King” lives in Switzerland, his cigarette-dealing empire is in the Balkans, the newspapers and broadcasters he wants to sue are based in Serbia and Croatia and, naturally, publish in Serbo-Croat, not English.

His name ought to ring a bell with the Metropolitan police, however, because there is an Interpol red alert out for him. Serbian detectives want to question him about his alleged involvement in fraud, organised crime and international crime.

Only the week before last, a special court in Belgrade sentenced him in his absence to six years in prison and ordered him to pay a vast fine for running a cigarette-smuggling racket that deprived the state of \$6m in tobacco duty.

True to form, his libel lawyers in London have assured the wanted man that the fact that he has no connection with England worth mentioning will not inhibit the English judiciary from trying to punish his critics.

Nor, in their claim for damages, do they dodge the issue that there is a bit of a stink around Stanko – they accept that he is on an Interpol’s wanted list. But they say that the charges against him are lies invented by his enemies. His lawyers claim Subotic is a victim of defamatory accusations, including “murder, smuggling, drug dealing, fraud, money laundering, and even having plastic surgery to conceal his identity for the purposes of evading justice”.

Their main target is Ratko Knezevic. The former chief of the Montenegrin trade delegation in Washington DC provides the only flimsy English connection in this blatant example of libel tourism, because he now lives in London. They want to sue him, along with newspapers and websites that carried remarks he made in open court in Zagreb accusing Subotic of being associated with a “tobacco mafia”.

Knezevic and the Balkan journalists are now having a crash course on the absurdities of the English legal system that MPs would do well to study. They have hired Robert Dougans, hero of Simon Singh’s fight for free speech (see Eyes passim). Surely the trial could never go ahead, they might say – Subotic would know that if he left the sanctuary of Switzerland and came to London to give evidence the police would hold him on the Interpol arrest warrant.

Er, no. English judges let Roman Polanski give evidence by video link to spare him the embarrassment of coming to London and being arrested and deported to the US.

But surely, the Serbs and Croats might say, English judges will say this case is none of their business? Possibly – but the United Nations and US Congress have condemned the English judiciary for its willingness to let fly with draconian verdicts in cases that also have nothing to do with it.

To make matters worse, costs in England are 140 times the European average, so this could set each defendant back £1m, maybe more.

‘Ratbiter’

 YUNUS BAKHS

About bloody Tyne!

YUNUS BAKHS, the psychiatric nurse with a 23-year unblemished record, was last week awarded £105,000 – the maximum permissible – by an employment tribunal over his unlawful sacking for trade union activities (*Eyes passim*).

The tribunal judge was scathing of Yunus’s employer, the Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Trust, describing its conduct in refusing to re-employ him and flouting court orders as “utterly reprehensible”. He also condemned the trust’s waste of taxpayers’ money – with legal costs it now faces an estimated total bill of around £250,000 – and questioned if those involved would have acted in that way with their own money.

The judge added that he found it incredible that Elizabeth Latham, the head of human resources who had been criticised by the tribunal for her part in Yunus’s downfall, had been involved in the trust’s decision to ignore the court’s ruling.

Eye readers may recall that Yunus, suspended and eventually sacked as a result of anonymous false allegations of bullying, had discovered his downfall had been predicted on the neo-Nazi Stormfront website. (It turned out that one of his secret accusers

was fellow Unison member Kerry Cafferty, who was linked through Facebook to the white supremacists.)

The anonymous claims went to Latham, who was accused of colluding with others to get rid of the troublesome “leftie” nurse. (Yunus had angered management by publicising their hefty pay rises at a time of service cuts.)

The cap on tribunal damages means Yunus is still heavily out of pocket, facing legal bills and having lost three years’ wages and accrued pension rights and indeed future pay. His lawyers are investigating whether they can pursue individuals in the civil court for damages over their conduct.

MPs want an inquiry into the affair and Yunus himself is going to complain to the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the General Medical Council about individuals criticised by the tribunal.

The problems for the trust do not end there. It is fighting another deeply embarrassing employment tribunal case in which child psychiatrist Dr Antoinette Geoghegan is claiming health chiefs turned on her after she blew the whistle on unsafe working practices in the child and adolescent mental health service team. Watch this space.



MIND SPORTS

A ludic-rous figure

THRILLING news for those of a ludic turn of mind: this month London hosts “the first UK Festival of Mind Sports” – featuring bridge, chess, draughts, Go and Xiangqi.

“With over 1 billion Mind Sports players globally and the growing impact of digital applications and social networks giving the players almost unlimited ability to interact, this is an exciting and unique worldwide audience,” says Don Morris, the organiser.

Who he? *Eye* readers who cast their minds back eight years may recall our many exposés of Brain Games Networks plc, the doomed brainchild (*sic*) of waddling, bow-tied chess impresario Raymond Keene, aka “The Penguin”. Don Morris was described in BGN’s private placement memorandum as the company’s events director, and he participated *inter alia* in the negotiations over a dodgy website deal that helped to siphon off almost 10 percent of the BGN investors’ cash (*Eye* 1046).

With BGN having cost its financial backers all of their £3m, one might have thought he’d know better than to venture back into the world of mind sports. No such luck. Morris now signs himself as president of the UK Mind Sports Association and a director of Mind Sports MSP.

Somehow he appears to have inveigled himself into an alliance with the International Mind Sports Association (IMSA), a *bona fide* body based in Lausanne that has been promoting events where bridge, chess etc are combined into one big mindfest, with a seasoning of poker now added to

the stew. The limited company Festival of Mind Sports has as its sole director and owner Tony Buzan, another long-time Keene crony, making one wonder how many of the Penguin’s pals are involved with the new venture.

Morris’s “UK festival” will take place in two pods of the London Eye on 17 November, and he intends it to be the launch pad (or indeed pod) for the 2012 World Mind Sports Games, the host city for which will be announced that day. Many of those in UK mind sports hope London will be chosen for the 2012 event, especially since the previous (and first) World Mind Sports Games were held in Beijing in the last Olympics year. But if Morris is in the driving seat, and the cackling Penguin clammers aboard, passengers can expect a bumpy ride. Send for Batman and Robin!

TAX

Freedom of disinformation

WHAT news of the government’s grubby deal with Switzerland to sweep offshore tax evasion under the carpet?

With great fanfare HM Revenue & Customs estimated that the agreement would raise between £4bn and £7bn that would otherwise not be collected. Critics point out that it’s full of loopholes, and that by allowing tax evaders and their accomplices in the banks to escape any

prosecution, it’s a dodger’s charter.

So how will it raise so much money? The *Eye* asked under the freedom of information act for the calculations – exactly the sort of thing the legislation is there to reveal. But HMRC has refused on the grounds that disclosing the information “is likely to reduce the revenue raised by the UK-Swiss Agreement”. No suggestion of *how* it would do this. Nothing to hide, surely?

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