



Jon
Garvey
chews
the cud

Through the retrospectroscope

Everybody nowadays seems to be diagnosing the illnesses of people long dead in order to explain their actions. For example, in the art world, El Greco is supposed to have had astig-matism (he obviously took his glasses off to paint), Van Gogh suffered from schizophrenic hallucinations, and so on. By this token, you could say Veronese was a midget, and Hieronymus Bosch took LSD.

I can play at that game too. I recently happened to be doing research on Adolf Hitler in the *New Hutchinson Twentieth Century Encyclopaedia*, when various things about his life started to slot together.

In his youth he was unremarkable, and in early adult life he was an unexceptional stool-pigeon, political activist and insurrectionist. Nobody noted unusual behaviour during his short prison sentence. No, it was only as the years unfolded that the Hitler of popular memory emerged. The man of sudden, inexplicable rages alternating with the utmost gentility, the intractable headaches and, later on, the inability to make proper decisions. All these things add up.

It was when I saw a film of him making one of his famous speeches, with his strange, strained voice, the flushed face, the sweaty brow, and the hand placed on the heart as if to still its palpitations, that all became clear. The man obviously suffered from food allergy. If there'd been any decent doctors in British Intelligence, they'd have slipped Nalcrom into his Schnapps and prevented a world war.

Which just goes to show you can prove anything if you've insufficient evidence to prove something else.

Great oaks...

My wife told me this week of a girl of 10 who had just given birth to her first

baby. Many would view this as a tragic sign of the times, and perhaps it is.

But later on I happened to be toying with my calculator (actually it is a sort of Mickey Mouse musical synthesiser with a calculator function). Just suppose, I thought, that she had another baby next year. And even another. In these days of safe obstetrics she could easily clock up 10 sprogs by 1992, by which time her first child would be old enough to start producing her own batch.

If they all followed in their mother's footsteps (I'm sure any males would be just as productive as their sisters), another 20 years would see another complete generation. If this went on, by the time our original 1982 mum got her telegram from the Queen—though it might well be William V by then—she'd have something in excess of 100,000 descendants. Another century, and there'd be twice as many as the present world population.

Did you realise that this one birth could sound the death-knell for the world as we know it?

Unwedded blitz

A couple came to see me the other day. She was being sick every day, and her periods had been a bit light for a couple of months, and... and, interjected the boyfriend, they wondered if she could have a pregnancy test.

Pregnancy didn't seem very like-ly, as she was on a relatively high-dose pill, was sure she hadn't missed any, and had no other symptoms or signs. But how to explain the sickness?

It didn't take much gentle delving to discover that the root of the problem was common or garden conjugal discord. She felt ignored when he got home; he felt badgered.

Up to this point I hadn't realised they were living together, partly, 'tis true, because her notes were still filed with her family's, but mainly because they didn't look like people who were living together; they looked more the sort who would either be married, or saving up to get married. It emerged that they had, indeed, wanted to get married, but their relations had all advised them to live together first, "to see if it would work".

Of course, it was working, basically. They loved each other and wanted the

best for each other, and neither of them had suddenly em-erged as an alcoholic or a latent homosexual. But they had known that before.

Their difficulties were the sort that occur in any long-term relationship, as the participants begin to get past the hypnotic trance stage, and sort out their own places as individuals in the pair. Most people either come to terms with this, learning to communicate with one another and thus laying the foundations of a lasting bond, or else they fail to do so, and sow the seeds of dissolution.

The liberated parents had endeavoured to sow the seeds of failure at the very onset of their life together, by suggesting that there might be some mysterious, hidden problem between the two of them, which would supposedly only emerge three or four years after sharing a roof or a bed.

There are, of course, many people who prefer to avoid matrimony, either because they do not believe in long-term relationships (which is their problem), or because they believe that love doesn't depend on a piece of paper (which is quite true). Similarly, smooth running of a practice does not depend on a part-nership agreement, until some-thing goes wrong and you haven't got one.

However, repeated surveys and the marriage statistics show that most people are still keen on marriage, and it isn't hard to see why. Most couples want to share their families with each other, and not only themselves. They want their friends to know that they are, in fact, a couple (if only to avoid unwanted advances) and they want their child-ren to know that mum and dad aren't just sharing the gas bills for a few months between other arrangements. Marriage performs all these func-tions, and more, whereas a more casual arrangement achieves none of them.

One might well ask, then, why living together is viewed as such a very progressive thing to do, and why the only current apologies for marriage are the Pope, right-wing extremists, and columnists with camels. The answer, I think, lies in the same kind of thinking that said high-rise flats would free the human soul, or that LSD would produce a kinder, saner, world.