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SERVING THE COMMUNITY
SINCE 1870

No surprise to see grammar school debate reignited

Education secretary Justine Greening has only just stepped into the role, but talk of whether the Conservative Party will bring back grammar schools is already back on the agenda.

Supporters are optimistic that under new prime minister Theresa May, the 18-year ban on the creation of new grammar schools, brought in by Labour, will come to an end.

Former prime minister David Cameron branded the debate over grammar schools “entirely pointless” and said “parents fundamentally don’t want their children divided into sheep and goats at the age of 11”.

But those who disagree hope Mrs May, a former grammar school pupil, will think otherwise. Last year, she backed controversial plans for a new “annexe” for a grammar school in her constituency of Maidenhead.

Her new chief of staff, Nick Timothy, has also backed new selective schools in the past, which has been fuel to those clamouring for a return to the grammar school system.

Interesting, then, that the education secretary, almost uniquely among those who have held the post, went to a comprehensive school.

Understandably given she is just settling into her new role, she was a model of diplomacy over whether she supported the calls for new grammar schools, saying she was “open-minded”.

She is correct to point out that the education landscape has changed in recent years, thanks to government policies which have created free schools and academies. Is yet more change and upheaval really what education needs?

What a glorious return

The sun shone down on Dereham as the town enjoyed its first carnival in 20 years. And what a comeback, thanks to the hard-working volunteers who organised every detail with military precision and the local individuals, groups and businesses who supported them.

From the colourful singing, dancing, drum-beating parade to the array of stalls and entertainment on the ‘rec’, the organising committee laid on a carnival which will hopefully return to being an annual fixture after yesterday’s triumphant event.

When the idea was first mooted more than a year ago, after an absence of two decades, organisers thought it would be great to celebrate what this diverse mid-Norfolk town has to offer and engender a little more community spirit.

Even they can’t have expected the incredible turnout, as picnickers lined the parade route before seemingly most of Dereham flooded through the gates onto the Recreation Ground.

People have voted with their feet to send out a resounding message: We wanted our carnival back and now we want to keep it alive. Roll on next year.

Have fun but stay safe

It has taken its time but the sun is on its way at last – and just in time for the school summer holidays.

The warm front on its way from southern Spain, which will see temperatures soar to about 31C, is of course great news for the tourist industry in the region and will hopefully give them a summer to remember.

And while the prospect of some fun in the sun on our beaches and waterways should be welcomed, it must also be tempered with a note of caution – particularly with schools about to break up.

The hidden dangers that lurk beneath the surface can all too quickly result in tragedy if care is not taken around the water; so enjoy, but please be careful.

READER'S PICTURE OF THE DAY

iwitness24



■ This picture of a small tortoiseshell butterfly at East Ruston was captured by Pamela Culley. If you would like to submit a picture for possible publication in the EDP, visit www.iwitness24.co.uk

Discriminating by accent is a prehistoric way to do business

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Why do people pronounce English differently in different parts of our country? Why don't speakers from Northumberland sound the same as people from Norfolk? Why is the Somerset accent different from the Suffolk accent?

There are two different ways of answering “why” questions like this. If the question means: “how did it come about that people from different places have different accents – what is the reason?”, then we know the answer. All languages are constantly changing, and they change in different ways in different places. Even if you started off with everybody speaking the same, after some generations regional variation would start to set in.

But – and this is the second ‘why’ question – why does that happen? What is the purpose? What on earth is the point of different accents?

Dr Emma Cohen, an anthropologist at Oxford University, has argued that there was an evolutionary advantage to the development of accents. When early human beings lived in relatively small groups, you could always tell whether someone was a member of your group or not because you knew everybody personally and could recognise them. Outsiders



■ Peter Trudgill asks if it is right for companies to discriminate against candidates because of their accents.

Picture: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

were easily identifiable as such. But when groups got bigger, that was no longer the case.

However, once different communities developed different accents, then you were able to recognise outsiders just by listening to them. If someone had even a slightly different accent from you, you would instantly know that they were not a member of your group, that they might be hostile, and that you should be careful.

Accents functioned as badges of membership. And, crucially, they were badges of membership which were rather secure against being used fraudulently. For early humans, there was an evolutionary advantage to the fact that, after childhood, it is very difficult to acquire a new

accent perfectly. Someone attempting to imitate your group’s accent and getting it wrong would be a person to be particularly wary of.

Sadly, in modern England, these badges of membership are often misused to make sure that outsiders stay outside – for example by denying them access to certain jobs. A report which came out last year found that elite firms in this country are still heavily dominated by people from privileged social backgrounds, because companies are systematically excluding bright working-class applicants from their workforce by including a candidate’s accent in their selection criteria.

Firms like this may be elite, but they are also disarmingly palaeolithic.