RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Popular Errors Explained

Stewart McCartney

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About the Book

In 1841 John Timbs wrote a book called *Popular Errors Explained*. It went on – with Timbs' other great series 'Curiosities of …' – to become one of the great popular books of the nineteenth century, running into many editions and selling hundreds of thousands of copies. Some say the popularity of his one hundred and fifty volumes led him to outsell a certain Mr Dickens.

Stewart McCartney, under the Timb's title of *Popular Errors Explained* has created a new book, capturing the zeal and enthusiasm of the original, to be 'agreeable, by way of abstract and anecdote so as to become an advantageous and amusing guest at any intellectual fireside.'

The book has completely new material – around 200 or so 'popular errors' from science and literature, history, sport, popular culture and so on. Each one explodes a commonly held misbelief.

About the Author

Stewart McCartney is a strange and wonderful fellow. A legend in television he has the most extraordinary job. He was a supremely successful player in the quiz leagues around Yorkshire and had made numerous TV and radio appearances when he was asked if he wanted to be a question setter and verifier on *Brain of Britain* and *Mastermind* (having been a competitor on both). He has gone on to work on a plethora of other quizzes, game shows and comedies, including most recently *Weakest Link, The Krypton Factor*, *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Round Britain Quiz*.

POPULAR ERRORS EXPLAINED

Stewart McCartney

preface
publishing

For the three reasons I do what I do – Emily, Molly and Daisy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WHERE TO START? I think it best to follow a mostly chronological order. Firstly I'd like to thank Raymond Spencer, 'The Maester', for letting me be his quizzing apprentice. Also thank you, Ebb Saxton, Worthy (Ian Sutton) and Pete Foster for being the rest of the dream team, be you Babes or Cellar Men. Thanks to Caroline Stewart for persuading Celina Parker that I might have some use working for her in television. Thanks to Simon Magson for inviting me down to London. A huge thank you to radio's finest Paul Bajoria and Jon Naismith, the conduits by which I was introduced to my publishers Trevor and Nicola, who I'd also like to thank for giving me the opportunity to write this book in the first place. On a personal note, I'd like to thank Ang, without whose patient level-headedness I would never have done anything, and thank you, Lisa, for supporting me with grace, tolerance and wonderful humour (for that read 'putting up with me') through the long hours of the process of writing this book.

INTRODUCTION

‘A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE is a dangerous thing,’ wrote Alexander Pope. Well, that’s the popular error. He actually wrote the following in his *An Essay on Criticism* in 1709, a work that was published two years later:

> A little learning is a dangerous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:
> There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
> And drinking largely sobers us again.

For those who do not know, in Greek mythology the Pierian Spring was near Mount Olympus in northern Thessaly (now a Greek ‘periphery’ or region to south of Makedonia), Pieria being the seat of worship of Orpheus and the Muses. The spring can be regarded as the original fountain of knowledge, as drinking from it inspired the individual to artistic greatness. As to the misquote’s origin, I know not from where it sprung, but it seems its continued use lies in a general misrepresentation of Pope’s original phrase. Pope seems to be saying that one should not try and produce great art without first seeking inspiration from those things that one can learn from, the great artworks of the past. Only when you have ‘drunk deep’ of what has gone before, will the muse truly visit your endeavours. Indeed, if you do not take the time to study and draw inspiration from the great works of the past, you will be incapable of adding to art’s future value. You will be deluded into thinking your work is marvellous when it patently isn’t. As to the misquote, by substituting ‘knowledge’ for ‘learning’ the

meaning changes: guidance to an artist becomes a catch-all statement that a basic understanding of something does not make one an expert in the field. A person might endanger themselves socially, physically or by reputation if they act as if they are. The misquote can thus be used widely as a put-down in our cynical times, whereas a reference to learning now seems to limit any meaning to a reference to our now widespread and formalised educational system. To criticise any sort of learning, be it a little or a lot, seems perverse to the modern mind, and the original quote without the following three lines appears to be a strange thing to say.

Pope's essay also provides us with another aphorism now in common use in English: 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread'. Interestingly, the song inspired by this phrase, often associated with either the man who had a huge 1963 hit with it, Ricky Nelson, or Elvis Presley, who didn't record it until 1970, was actually written as long ago as 1940. Although often thought of as a pop or rhythm and blues song, the first to have a hit with Johnny Mercer and Rube Bloom's work were bandleaders Glenn Miller (vocals by Ray Eberle), and Tommy Dorsey, who had a young Frank Sinatra doing the warbling. I'll come back to Sinatra later on in this book to explain a different generally held misconception.

That aside, I hope that the way I have constructed the opening paragraph of this introduction encapsulates the purpose of the book as a whole. It is not my aim to flatly correct a series of generally held beliefs that hold a degree of misinformation in their details and then leave the process there. I see no value in that. Rather, I hope that following the exposure of the popular error I can provide some information as to the original truth from which the error has digressed. Then to a greater or lesser degree I will explain the reasons why the error has become widely and popularly accepted. Sometimes I will be armed with a

factually proven and definitive explanation, while at other times I will have to speculate. I see knowledge as a wonder in itself; I love knowledge for knowledge's sake, and I love information. This volume is not, however, intended to be an encyclopedia; I hope that it will be an engagement between you and me. What you will read is not an attempt to give you a neat, definitive package of bare facts in which I move quickly and mechanically from one to the next; the pieces vary in the amount of chiaroscuro they hold, and in their depth and breadth. Most are by no means fully comprehensive as it is also not my aim to provide every morsel of information that I can. Each is as long or as short as I want it to be. Sometimes I will pepper the articles with supporting facts that in themselves do not add to the debunking of the myth. I will sometimes digress to provide additional related information that is, although not specifically related to the core of the subject in question, an eye-opener in itself. I take this approach because I draw my inspiration from the man who wrote a book with the title I have borrowed for the one in your hands – or in these modern times possibly on your screens.

In his preface to the original *Popular Errors Explained*, Victorian antiquarian John Timbs started with an explanation of the purpose of his work. Seeing a possible fault in the other 'plans … devised for the spread of knowledge' around at the time, he outlined his aim by quoting from Laurence Sterne's *Sermon XX* – 'The Prodigal Son'. He hoped 'to take us from the track of our nursery mistakes, and, by showing us new objects, or old ones in new lights, to reform our judgements'. This might seem a little paternalistic to a twenty-first-century ear, and to be truthful I think if I took that approach I would quickly alienate my readers. It's from what he says a little later in the preface that I drew my inspiration. Referring to himself in the third person, he says, 'He does not instruct the reader how "to tell the clock by algebra," nor "to drink tea

by stratagem," though he aims at being accurate and agreeable, by way of abstract and anecdote, so as to become an advantageous and amusing guest at any intellectual fireside.'

This I feel is much more on the money. One has to remember that Timbs lived in an era when good works and helpful instruction bestowed by the haves on the have-nots were all the rage and not seen as patronising. He saw his books as part of the process of improvement. Books, newspapers and similar media were far less accessible to the general population, and information was almost infinitely less available and immediate than it is today. The only quizzing that went on down at the local hostelry was as to your ability to pay for your drink, and a 'man of knowledge' wasn't seen as someone who might be able to win vast amounts of money on a television game show. Rather, his knowledge was a passport to friendship and fine discourse in a convivial setting. While not denigrating the quizzers of the world – heaven knows I stand firmly in their ranks – this is not a work to fill heads with facts to win anything from a gallon of ale to a million pounds. Use it in a different way – perhaps to start or to contribute to a conversation by introducing matters of interest to your companions, not to be either a sophist (in the modern sense) or a know-it-all who always gets the last word. Treat what I outline as just a beginning, and use the strings of information I provide as bases for your own future enquiries.

Some of the subjects covered you will know, some you will have a passing acquaintance with, and others you will never have given a thought to. Some discussions will be of more interest than others. You might even fundamentally question some of the things I say, and to that I respond, 'Hurrah! The day is saved.' Good conversation is based as much on belief and faith as on proof. To me, an opinion counts as much in a conversation as bare knowledge. I

defer to that great historian Asa Briggs, who advised me via the medium of television that history is about interpretation of the facts. Rather than merely placing cold bricks of fact on other cold bricks, only by taking this approach can mankind hope to enrich its collective knowledge.

I hope that you will be intrigued by the nuggets of knowledge scattered throughout this book, and that they encourage you to investigate further yourself. As a coda, I return to my reference to Makedonia, the most northerly area of Greece. Why do we call the country Greece when it is known to the Greeks as the Hellenic Republic? Why is there a province in Greece called Makedonia when there is also a newly independent former part of Yugoslavia with the same name? Actually, why is it referred to as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia? Why is it Makedonia in Greek when we call it Macedonia? Well, go and find out. Please believe me when I say: if you are a fan of knowledge the answers to all these related questions are intriguing. Then the real challenge will come, in the way that you impart what you discover to others.

CAN YOU BE IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND THE MIDDLE OF LONDON AT THE SAME TIME?

A LOT OF people believe this, but it just ain't so. In Ye Old Mitre near Holborn Circus is a glass case holding the stump of a tree around which Elizabeth I reputedly danced when she was a girl. This is not beyond the bounds of possibility because the pub was built at the edge of what were once the grounds of Ely Palace, that bishop's London residence until the eighteenth century. She could have easily tagged along on a visit by the grown-ups while still a little princess. On the other hand, the location of the former palace, now replaced by a fine cul-de-sac called Ely Place, has led to the unsustainable legend that the bishopric's lands in London were, and remain, technically in Cambridgeshire. As late as 2005 the *Independent* newspaper even claimed this to be so in a perhaps tongue-in-cheek article. It just isn't the case; nor is it also required that the Metropolitan Police stop pursuing a suspect at the ornate gates to the street and call in the boys from Cambridgeshire. (This idea, that officers of the various police forces in the UK only have powers of arrest in their own area, is another common misconception that I will cover later.)

The area had been the property of the see of Ely since the late thirteenth century until an act of parliament allowed the bishop to sell the land to the crown in 1772.

There are a number of arguments that undermine the popular legend. First, let’s consider one of the most powerful landowners in history, the Catholic Church. Like many religious foundations throughout England in the Middle Ages, Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire owned vast stretches of countryside. Many of these parcels of land were outside the boundaries of the county in which the abbey was located, but this did not make those far-flung properties part of Yorkshire.

If the legend is based on the idea that land owned by the see is not in London but in the home county, it is Dover Street that should lay claim to being in the Fens.

Second, let’s look at the important dates relating to the development of the land in question. The area had been the property of the see of Ely since the late thirteenth century until an act of parliament allowed the bishop to sell the land to the crown in 1772, which in turn, three years later, sold the area to a private developer. The dilapidated

medieval buildings were flattened, with the exception of St Etheldreda's Chapel, and replaced by those that stand to this day. The clergy of Ely in the meantime lifted the hems of their collective cassocks and tripped over to Dover Street near Piccadilly, where we now find Ely House. This is still the house of the current bishop when in the capital. So if the legend is based on the idea that land owned by the see is not in London but in the home county, it is Dover Street that should lay claim to being in the Fens.

However, the clincher is that even if the bishop owned the land until 1772, at that time the Isle of Ely wasn't even in Cambridgeshire! Since the Dark Ages it had been the Liberty of Ely, a county palatine in its own right ruled by the Church on behalf of the monarch. It was not until the Liberty of Ely Act in 1837 that the direct rule of the bishop was taken away, and although designated at that time as a division of Cambridgeshire, the Isle regained its independence in the 1880s. It was not until 1965 that the majority of this historic area was merged with Cambridgeshire, nearly 200 years after the bishop had upped sticks from Holborn.

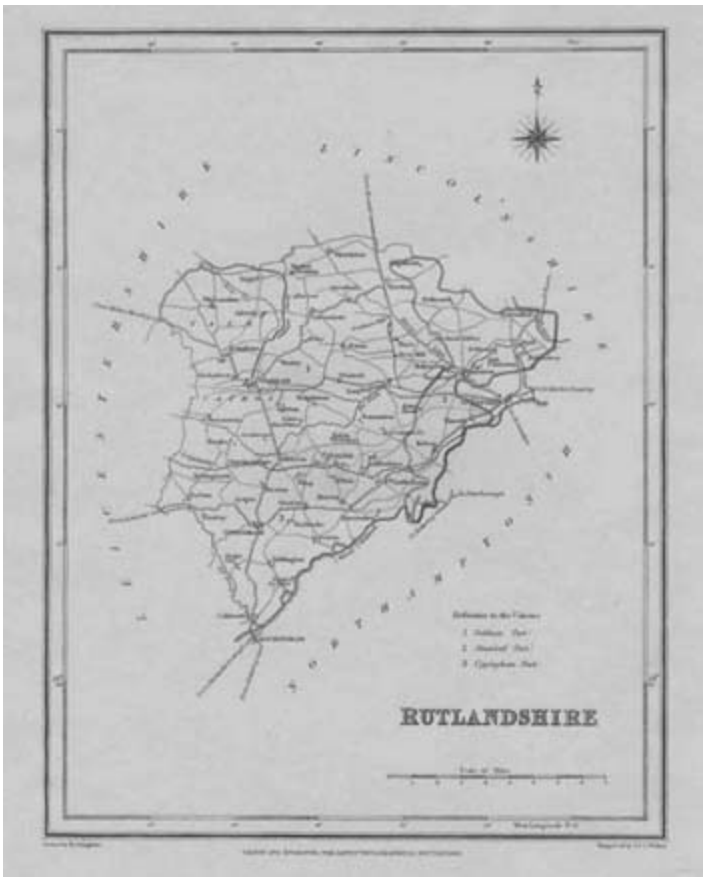
The belief that Ely Place is in Cambridgeshire may also have arisen from an 1842 act of parliament that established a body of commissioners for paving, lighting, watching, cleansing and improving Ely Place and Ely Mews, thus creating a sort of self-government. Unfortunately for believers, the locations were described in the act as being located in Holborn, 'in the County of Middlesex'. The area is now part of the London Borough of Camden, and that, as they say, is that.

Oh, and sending a letter to the pub marked 'Cambridgeshire' and then claiming its prompt delivery is proof just highlights the tolerance of the Post Office – they deliver to Father Christmas, do they not?

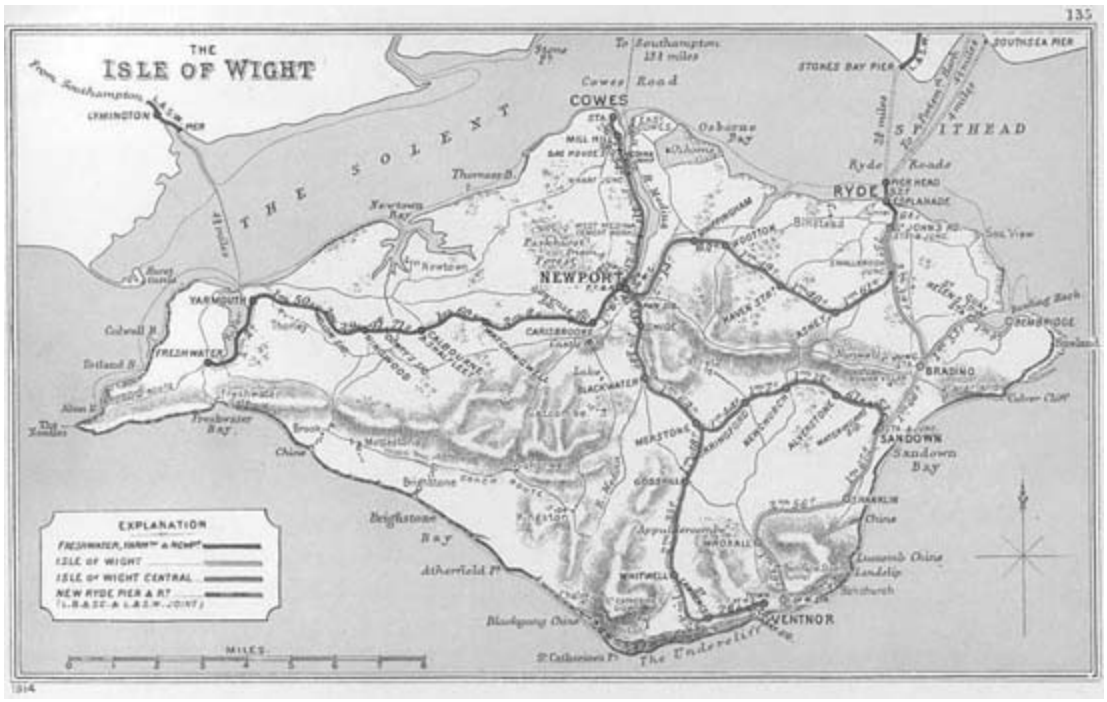
RUTLAND V. THE ISLE OF WIGHT

RUTLAND HAS LONG been recognised as the smallest county in England. If one supports this theory and one goes back before the 1880s, then one might have an historical point. The claim is generally accompanied by the proviso that Rutland holds the status of being the smallest ‘traditional’ county. However, due to the developing legality of what constitutes a county, Rutland has not held the title since at least the 1880s, apart from a brief period in the late 1960s and early 70s, and that was only on a day-by-day or even hour-by-hour basis because the claim was seemingly dependent on the phases of the moon. Confused? Let me explain.

The county system and local government in the United Kingdom in general is very complex and far more changeable in recent times than we might at first think. For many years Rutland sat to the north-east of Leicestershire, safe in the knowledge that its eighteen miles length by seventeen miles width gave it a certain prominence in the analysis of county statistics. Sadly for Rutland, in 1889 the County of London, which now approximates to what a modern man would call inner London, was created and in being created robbed Rutland of its smallest county status.



This affront to the East Midlanders was soon to be compounded in the battle for the honour of being the smallest county authority. For years there has been a separate popular error that the Isle of Wight was for a long period an integral part of Hampshire. Before the rapid increase in the importance of local government in the nineteenth century it might have been convenient to lump it in with its mainland neighbour to the north, even if the reality was that the island effectively looked after itself. It was only with the creation of county councils in 1888 that the Isle of Wight began to be controlled from the mainland. However, the independently minded islanders didn’t think much of this imposition and within two years were looking after their own affairs again.



It was only with the creation of county councils in 1888 that the Isle of Wight began to be controlled from the mainland.

So within two years Rutland found itself officially falling to third place in the smallest county stakes – at least when the tide was in. This is because Rutland and the Isle of Wight are so similar in size that the evidence points to the Isle of Wight being bigger than Rutland at low tide, and smaller at high tide![1] All at sixes and sevens you might say, or in this case, at twos and threes.

And so the capital was the smallest county for many years until, with the need this time to reorganise London into the larger Greater London Council in 1965, Rutland stepped up one place in the league table. So for nearly a decade it regained its up-and-down on-and-off pre-eminence. This was not to last. A huge national overhaul and reorganisation in 1974 found Rutland being lumped in with Leicestershire as a district council. For over twenty

years it lost its self-determination, and it stayed in that position until under a further reorganisation in 1997 Rutland achieved ‘unitary authority’ status and thus regained self-government at a local level. To add a little lustre, the reinstatement of its lord lieutenancy allowed the citizens of Oakham and Uppingham to feel secure in the knowledge that they lived in a separate county once again. Then again, to take off a bit of the shine for those citizens who feel a competitive edge in the matter, the same reorganisation that robbed Rutland of county status in 1974 had, despite another brief flirtation with Hampshire, confirmed the Isle of Wight’s status as a county authority. So the island found itself for a period England’s solitary smallest county while Rutland groaned under the occupation of its bigger neighbour.

Since then, in what seems to be a national government mindset of feeling the need to tinker continually with local governance, both the Isle of Wight and Rutland have probably lost any chance of reclaiming smallest county status. In the last reorganisation to date, in the 1990s, the cities of Bristol and London, both smaller in area than Rutland, became ceremonial counties in their own rights. Sadly for the traditionalists and romantics the chances of Rutland regaining its long held status now look very slim, with the Bristol conurbation being a third of its size, and the City of London being over a hundred times smaller!

Still, there is a way for Rutlanders to feel some sort of succour in the political tides that have washed over them in the last two centuries. In terms of population, they still have the edge.

1 Investigation of the figures puts the maximum difference in area at around two square kilometres.

THERE IS NO PROOF DR JOHNSON PATRONISED YE OLDE CHESHIRE CHEESE

ALONG WITH MANY little knots of appreciative tourists from across the Atlantic, I found myself in this world-famous Fleet Street pub[1] the other day, and a pretty fine pub it is. I am, however, intrigued that despite its many more substantial claims of connections with men of letters such as Oliver Goldsmith, Tennyson and Arthur Conan Doyle – the pub is even alluded to in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* – it's the associations with Dr Johnson that are given pride of place. I'm intrigued because there's no proof that he ever called in for a snifter.