

PERtinance

The PER newsletter No 184

Bi-Monthly November-December 2025



There are four main themes in this issue of PERtinance, (1) the sad demise of Sheila Richards, a founder member of the P E R Group, (2) a growing sense that the bubble of AI is moving towards a catastrophic Burst, (3) the emergence of Looking for Growth, a newly founded ginger group which is targeting practical opportunities for volunteers to pave the way towards cultural renewal, (4) a note on the publication of a new lucid philosophic book...based on Wittgenstein's commonsense insights into meaning,

[The following is slightly edited eulogy at Sheila's Funeral in All Saints Anglican Church, Blackheath on 21st October. In the event it was circulated to the congregation, as Chris was only able to summarise its main points.

Sheila died, sadly, and rather unexpectedly, on the 18th of September in the Harley Street Clinic where she had been taken to have a stent inserted into her oesophagus as a possible cure for the infections she had been having in the previous two months. Fortunately her three daughters Catherine, Sarah, Emma and husband Chris were able to sit with her during the morning of the 18th : before she fell into a peaceful sleep and passed away in the early evening. She was one of the now small active band of founding members of the P E R Group in 1993. She was also a member of the initial Committee of ten which steered the early development of the Group's thinking. In addition she served as the Group's Membership Secretary for several years. CPO]

A Deep and Sorry Loss: Sheila Rosemary Richards

We are here to solemnly celebrate Sheila's life. It was long, because she entered her 90th year on July 12th. It was full of interest, because she had lots of self-discipline, stoicism, and responsibility, but also lots of learnability, creativity, fun, and a capacity to show genuine interest in others, people from backgrounds quite different from her own. It also, unfortunately, included some painful shocks.

Sheila's own background was the Cassiobury Estate in Watford¹. In the parish church there, she acquired her lifelong commitment to Anglican Christianity. In later life it was still strong, as shown by the hundreds of times she came to this church to pray. Another lasting trait was Sheila's royalist commitment, which she, not unexpectedly, acquired at an early age, and maintained throughout her life. One of her most bitter setbacks was when her mother sternly forbade her from joining two school friends who were determined to sleep in a tent in the Mall on the night before Queen Elizabeth's Coronation. Another early commitment was Sheila's lifelong support for Watford FC, whose training ground she had to walk past every day on the way to school. During her last 30 years she and I attended Wembley Stadium four times to cheer Watford on.

Sheila and Stephen were married in 1961. Stephen had also grown up on the Cassiobury Estate. He came from a deeply religious family, the Richards. Stephen's father, Dick, was for a time, the official chaplain for Watford FC. One of his brothers, Charles, was a missionary in South Africa, where he brought large numbers into the Christian religion.

After marrying Stephen, Sheila had three daughters: Catz, Sarah and Emma and one son, Charlie.

There were two more dreadful shocks in Sheila's life: when her first husband Stephen, died in his early 40s, and later when her much adored son Charlie, died in a fire in Bangkok. Sheila and Stephen had moved to Blackheath in 1969 and they started a Discussion Group at Ingleside Grove. A decade later Stephen sadly passed away, and Sheila, who had been an English teacher before their marriage, was obliged

¹This is to the North of the city on the Western side of the A41.

to resume her teaching career. She took jobs in two local Primary Schools. Later she became Head of English at Eltham College Junior School. She was soon put in charge of the school's annual play and she showed her creative mettle by staging invariably memorable, much enjoyed, colourful productions. Each time more than half of the school cohort was involved. The unique staff camaraderie at Eltham College provided her with a very congenial circle of friends.

In 1995 she and I were married in the Chapel at Eltham College, and afterwards at the Lotus, a floating Chinese restaurant in Millwall Dock. A strong group of PER Group friends came along. Sheila had been a widow for nineteen years. I had been a widower for five years. We restarted the Ingleside Discussion Group and managed to stage talks in conjunction with the PER Group with outside speakers, on a wide range of topics.

Two minor setbacks were having her purse stolen in Madrid, and later again in Beijing. In the former case we went to the local Police station, but nobody there spoke English. Fortunately a man in the waiting room introduced himself and translated the Spanish for us.

Some highlights of Sheila's life since 1995:

After Sheila retired from Eltham College she soon found a congenial part-time job at Colfe's Junior School. It was during this time that she extended her teaching repertoire to cover early maths and early science, and ---even more significantly--- to teach English to boys from Japan and other overseas countries. The other accomplishment which she had taken-on at an earlier age had been classical guitar. She often remarked that her two most successful specialities - --classical guitar and teaching EFL--- had been acquired entirely by self-tuition! Her membership of the Widmore Guitar Group led by Paul Brown was one of her main interests for many years.

Sheila had an amazing memory for faces. At a conference at Oxford in the 1990s she spotted a former friend across the room whom she had last seen at school forty-five years earlier! On our walk across Magnetic Island off the Queensland coast, she spotted just the *claw* of a hidden Koala Bear! No one else on that busy walk had spotted it!

Her long source of interest was the garden. Sheila was apt to go out and do essential gardening in all weathers. When a lot of the flowers bloomed at the same time, the garden at Ingleside was dazzling. She volunteered (and served for several years) as an EFL teacher in an initiative set up by the Church of the Ascension to help new arrivals in England.

We did interesting trips to Australia, Canada and the USA (several times) China and Japan, France (several times), Spain (several times), Italy (several times), Germany, Greece, Egypt, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Croatia, Prague, Ireland, Sicily and the Channel and Scilly Islands. In Cairo she went on her own to the Zoo while I was at the maths Conference. She realised at once that she was the only non-Egyptian person there. But help was at hand: the manager came up and insisted on taking her on a personal circuit round the Zoo! We also did three fascinating cruises with Swan Hellenic, the last being along the West Coast of South America. Richard Harries, an old friend, was one of the lecturers on the boat.

Sheila was always up for a walking opportunity, and she took part in walks with the BATTs, the TOTTERs (which she led for several years) and Jane Crispin's Ladies' Walking Group. On one occasion her birthday fell on the same day as a BATTs walk. Bobby Richardson, who was leading the walk, waived the rule, and let her join the all-male group as "an honorary man"!

In 2000 we decided to think of a new interest in which we could both participate. It turned out to be painting. So we began by attending Ken Bright's special painting class at the Blackheath Conservatoire. This led Sheila to twenty-five years of unique-style painting which she kept up in various classes and more than a dozen painting weeks at Dedham Hall. It also led to her many characteristic Easter cards, Christmas cards and Calendars.

In Tokyo in 2000 we met-up with one of Sheila's former students, whose family had gone back to Japan. His parents invited us to a typical Japanese supper at a special restaurant in the city. The boy, now several years older, joined the conversation, but, surprise, surprise... in a fluent, distinctly South East London accent!

Sheila's last Hurrah was at her grandson Daniel and Ellie's wedding at Wooton under Edge in June 2024. She joined in the fun and had a great time. We were able to celebrate 30 years of happy marriage on August 3rd, Sheila was chairbound. I overdid the preparations, and uncharacteristically fainted,... followed by 7 hours in the QE hospital. On the 18th of September Catz, Sarah, Emma and I were able to sit with Sheila ---and talk to her--- on her last day in the Harley St Clinic. She lapsed into deep sleep in the

afternoon, and died peacefully around 7pm. Sheila's passing leaves a gaping hole in our lives, but priceless memories will remain.

After the Service, members of the close family went to the Greenwich Cemetery, where each mourner threw a rose onto Sheila's coffin as it was lowered into the grave. A Reception followed at the Clarendon Hotel near the Church. It included a moving song by Bethan, one of Sheila's grand-daughters. CPO

The knife-edge on which AI is balanced

During one day of trading in early November the official value of the seven major Silicon Valley companies which are promoting AI nosedived, sinking by about 1 trillion dollars! This is a measure of the knife-edge on which the future of AI presently lies. It has the capacity, in effect, to destroy higher education and wipe-out the cognitive confidence of the human race² ... *but only if we let it*. Many have swallowed the compelling hype which the tech companies' PR departments have put out. It is NOT, however, a simple case of "welcoming the future" ---but of learning how to trust bots which, admittedly, make ludicrous mistakes, like saying that Elon Musk is no better than Hitler, or talking nervous teenagers into committing suicide. Computers were sold from the beginning, around 1960, partly on the line "this will take a heavy load off your back!". But taking the trouble to do onerous things, is a vital part of the give-and-take of genuine relationships, a vital part of what holds civilisation together. Letting microchips programmed by algorithms take over all these "onerous things" means that there will be no lifeline of serious involvement holding societies, parties, companies, families and couples together. Left unchecked, these bots now also have the capability to turn education into a sick, lazy charade... a sure way to create boundless bafflement. The mere existence of AI ---treated as its' hype implies--- takes away much of the motivation to try to achieve a fruitful, realistic, uplifting understanding of the world around us.

But if the AI bubble bursts as a consequence of a widely agreed judgment that it lacks the kind of *veracity* and *feeling* we urgently need, the result will most likely be a nosedive of confidence for millions of deflated optimists. Thankfully there is a new source of optimism: the new logos of Anti-Maths. This is the "logos of life, and for life", because it can generate an abundance of stable, but transient, abstract objects... including us and all living beings. We live in a universe which contains living organisms: so we need a kind of logic which matches the transience of living things. It has now arrived, unexpectedly, and under-prepared-for.

Looking for Growth, positivity embodied?

A new organisation called "Looking for Growth" recently staged a meeting at the O₂ which ---it claimed--- involved 1,200 supporters. It says it aims to try to use voluntary effort to plug holes in the Services needed to keep communities viable. We suggested a joint meeting with the PER group, but they showed no interest whatever. There could, though, be room for voluntary "Genuine Educational Awareness sessions" with teenagers, but this new organisation doesn't seem to want to know.

Philosophy in the Borders, Michael Bavidge, 2nd Edition, Biggs Books, 2025

A complimentary copy of this philosophical block-buster was received by the Editor recently. It treats a variety of philosophical problems from a sensitive, caring, ordinary language point of view. The result is a very readable script, with sensible, commonsense conclusions. It could be described as a prime example of "philosophy as therapy". The downside, though, is that there is very little engagement with the mega-crisis and loss-of-faith-in-civilisation through which we are presently passing.

²Those who overlook this are mostly those who already *have* a lot of confidence. But there are millions who haven't had the good fortune which implants this.

DfE Report on the Curriculum The Report chaired by Becky Francis has recently been put into the public domain. It talks as if the current education system is working... to a limited degree! Well, it isn't *anywhere near to where education should be*. There is no sign that its authors have realised that youngsters cannot be brow-beaten into becoming educated. They have got to be shown today's world in a light which makes 100% sense for them and raises their hopeful expectations. The Report apparently advises that the total burden of memorisations expected of students needs to be reduced... a token-gesture towards "reform" which might sound about right. But it is fundamentally flawed, because modern youngsters won't be educated by any amount of imposed, unpalatable memorisation. Students need to be shown things which visibly interest them and, "turn them on". (And to teach-with-this-in-mind means that a great mass of pivotal information needs to be worked-over in advance to make it look genuinely, palpably, interesting and hopeful from a youthful point of view. There is a yawning chasm between the typical mindset of youth and the mindset of weary adult presentation.) The very *raison d'être* of memorisation is that it has tacitly given up trying to interest children. CPO

NARRATIVE MATHS EXAMPLE 17

A tug has been commissioned to pull a small Southern iceberg (composed of non-salty ice) slowly towards Saudi Arabia. It is currently composed of 1000,000,000 litres of clean frozen water and is 2,000 kms away. On arrival the ---by now diminished--- iceberg will be kept in a

special dock and used to back-up the country's fresh water supply. How quickly the tug manages to complete this mission will depend on the amount of fuel-consumption the organising agency are willing to pay for. If the speed is set at V kilometres per hour



the cost in fuel will be $K + kV^2$ per hour, where k and K are known coefficients. It is believed that every hour during which the iceberg is at sea will result in on average a 0.01% loss of ice. The value of the ice on arrival will be worth 50p per litre for the organising agency.

A Question: What speed should the operating organisation set, in order to gain the most beneficial supply of water at the end of the journey? [Your answer may be left in the form of an equation, which can be solved by computer methods.]

PUBLISHED ARTICLE The Editor has now had a 24th essay published in the online *New English Review* which hails from Nashville, Tennessee (November edition). The essay has provoked a ---largely supportive--- 5 page feedback commentary by Andy Thomas. The main theme is that we need to defend and maintain logic and reason... as the preferred, cool, civilized, mode of airing and settling dilemmas and developmental projects. It also broaches the need for a return to a mindset with a genuine "Progress Agenda" ... to give our lives a sense of a hopeful, purposeful future. We need such an awareness of genuine *meaning*, because there are numerous distractions (such as football, gambling and substance abuse) which have sprung up to cover the vacuum of life-warming cognition which has been generated by the abysmal failure of the gurus of physics and maths to understand the nature of the universe. The vacuum can now be forgotten, because Anti-Maths provides the elusive, unguessed satisfying meal we so urgently need.

PER News 184 December 2025 Editor Chris Ormell, The PER Group, Box 16916, London SE3 7WS. Tel: 020 8858 3364 email: per4group@gmail.com. Websites: PERTinence.co.uk PERTinence.co.uk/news
philosophyforrenewingreason.com mathsforrenewingreason.com

Copyright © 2025 The P E R Group