

WRY SOCIETY

the bridge night

Rick Cooper blamed the novelist Somerset Maugham for his separation. It was, he believed, the colonial writer who had provided the means to the end of his marriage and prosperity. Although, it has to be admitted that, until a furious row with his wife, Camilla, about her indulgent afternoon fix of white wine and True Movies, Rick had not heard of the early-20th-century scribbler.

After "the domestic", Rick had slipped out to the local pub in his commuter-belt village for a consoling pint with his friend David Johnson. And his drinking thum – in an attempt to offer crumb of comfort – quoted the author who had specialised in chronicling the dreary lives of British Empire expats: "When all else fails – sports, love, ambition – bridge remains a solace and an entertainment," wrote Maugham.

The words inspired Rick to take lessons at his local adult education college, a 10-week beginner course for £96 that described the indoor sport as "a friendly, social game played by two sets of partners that is very similar to whist". Rick took to it like a gambler to a Mississippi riverboat. He quickly mastered the art of bidding (predicting the number of tricks a partnership expects to make and scoring accordingly) and pinned a bridge school that met one evening a week at The Manor House, owned by the widow Lady Jane Lowenstein. It was the sort of "school" that is prevalent in large houses, village halls and small-town

institutions up and down the country. There were, for example, half a dozen tables of four, each occupied by those who had played the game badly for much of their adult lives, and Rick found that he could enjoy a rubber (the best of three games) with any one of the players. But he played best with Lady Jane. They had an easy rapport that allowed each to know what the other was thinking and, therefore, the strength of each other's hands.

The American Harold S Vanderbilt invented the modern game of contract bridge while on a cruise in the summer of 1925. He developed it by adjusting the scoring and making the bidding more challenging so that within a few years contract bridge – the word "contract" was soon dropped – supplanted all other forms of the game. In the 1930s it became so popular that it was covered in newspapers, magazines and on the radio, and then quickly became an integral part of the life of the well educated, which, unfortunately, included Camilla Cooper's mother, who subsequently taught it to her daughter.

As Rick devoted more and more time to Lady Lowenstein's bridge school, Camilla found herself frothing with alcoholic jealousy. And so, as she had played bridge as a child and was still, she believed, something of a dab hand at the game, she announced that in future she would partner her husband.

The rapport between partners is a subtle one. The game, like golf and sailing, has myriads



manners and mores, which include, according to the definitive 1928 manual *Contract Developments* – a book on *Bridge* by Lella Hattersley, "any untoward display of mannerisms which may prove irritating to others". Hattersley highlights playing the "devil's tattoo" by drumming one's fingers impatiently on the table and "ignoring personal grooming". Players are furthermore advised to "avoid giving any offence to your partner".

The latter was not an easy achievement for Rick and Camilla, but they managed to muddle along with only the occasional snide remark until they played Jane Lowenstein and her ageing partner, the retired merchant banker John Neville. Rick's concentration was broken by the fragrance of Lady L and Camilla's cello play wasn't helped by the after-effects of that afternoon's cheap chardonnay.

When Camilla bid seven spades – in other words, she thought that she and her husband could win every single trick – Rick tapped her ankle with his foot to indicate that he didn't have the cards to achieve such a feat. Unfortunately, the ankle in question belonged to Jane Lowenstein, who thought that John Neville was making unwanted advances towards her and kicked back, hitting Camilla's shin. She in turn kept up like a scalded cat, accused the aristocrat of sleeping with her husband and said that she now intended to name her in the divorce. Rick, meanwhile, opted to no one in particular that it was "all Maugham's fault". **ADAM EDWARDS**



THE GANNET coach class

I have always loved pubs. Growing up in Cambridge, with its bitterly cold easterly winds, pubs were beacons of warmth and fellowship. And there were plenty to choose from, among them a trace of old coaching inns. There was The Cambridge Arms, where I had my first pint of Abbot Ale in an indecently young age, and there was The Eagle, a scruffy old barn of a place just off King's Parade, full of disaffected townies skulking guiltily in the courtyard shadows.

The Eagle, nonetheless, had a claim to fame as the only public house in which the secret of life was actually discovered, rather than just discussed at length. On February 28 1953, a young scientist called Francis Crick came into the bar and announced to anyone who would listen that he and his colleague James Watson had come up with the double helix as the structure of DNA, rather as Archimedes might have run, dripping from his bath, into the Syracuse Arms, screaming "Eureka!" and scaring the barmaids.

I recently returned to Cambridge for the first time in many years. The Cambridge Arms, I am sad to say, has gone (just one of 52 pubs that close every week in the UK), but The Eagle is still there. It's much glossier than before and though I do not recommend lunch, the beer is still kept well and the ceiling bearing the ghostly graffiti of long-gone servicemen has been nicely preserved.

I have a new favourite coaching inn, however, or at least a new old one. The Olive Bell in the tiny village of Hurley, Berkshire, is – for the most part – a charming, ancient hotel and restaurant, the sort where the legend on its shutters should read "You Will Bang Your Head Later".

It is also a proper pub not just a restaurant occupying, hermit crab-like, the shell of a dead hostelry. The public bar is small but perfectly formed, serving distinctly superior bar snacks – Welsh rarebit or a half pint of pawns (both £5.50), for instance – and a very fine pint of Rebellion IPA from the Marlow-based brewer.

The restaurant (above) is spacious and rather beautiful. The menu demonstrates a very contemporary preoccupation with gutsy Britishness, but with a delicacy of touch that shows great skill and restraint in the kitchen. My starter of smoked eel (€7) was particularly fine; eel needs to have been smoked very recently to be at its best, and this was miraculously fresh – the tar from the wood still singing in the nostrils. A main course of local woodpigeon (€22.80) was similarly accomplished, and there is an excellent wine list.

Not all the rooms have yet been refurbished but those that have are in the same idiom as Babington House (also designed by Ilse Crawford) with Roberts radios, Angouleme lamps and a clutch of penguins (books, not birds or biscuits). The Olive Bell might not vouchsafe the secret of life but it is certainly the certain secret of a good weekend. **BILL KNIGHT**

The Eagle, 5, BENT STREET, CAMBRIDGE CB2 3RN (0330) 509 005; THE OLIVE BELL INN, HIGH STREET, HURLEY, BERKSHIRE, SL4 0JN (01494 8818); WINTERHOLM, DORSET.



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the smart money

There's snowy drama aplenty at the Winter Olympics but it's the high speeds on the slopes that really steal the show, reports Jamie Reid.

The Winter Olympics, one of the biggest sporting events of 2010, take centre stage in Vancouver from next Friday, and the ranks of winter-sports devotees and casual spectators will be joined by plenty of hawk-eyed punters seeking to make a profit from the daredevil action on ice and snow.

Alongside the demonstrations of courage, flair and skill, the Winter Olympics have, on occasion, been riven by spectacular levels of feuding and, on others, provided moments of comedy bordering on farce. The best example of the former was the extraordinary saga of the Americans Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding, bitter rivals for the women's figure-skating medals in 1994. Kerrigan, graceful and self-possessed, was favourite for the gold. But then she was attacked by a man wielding a metal

baton who injured her knee so badly that it was feared she would miss the games in Lillehammer, Norway, altogether. Sensationally, a subsequent FBI enquiry revealed that her assailant had been hired by Harding's former husband and her bodyguard.

Although under suspicion herself, Harding was still allowed to compete in the games where Kerrigan, having made a dramatic recovery, was one of her opponents. The clash was portrayed as the sporting equivalent of good versus evil, resulting in general satisfaction when Kerrigan took the silver medal and Harding, who had assumed the mantle of the wicked witch, finished down the field.

In complete contrast, the unintentional star of the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary was Eddie "The Eagle" Edwards, a bespectacled British ski-jumper – if that's not too flattering a description – who came

last by a very long way in both the 70m and 90m jumps. The Eagle didn't so much soar in to the air as drop like a stone, and his well-intentioned efforts were so comically inept that he briefly enjoyed cult status in the UK and beyond. He didn't come close, though, to the genuine admiration won by the Jamaican bobsleigh team. They were even the subject of the 1993 Disney movie *Cool Runnings*, which starred John Candy as their fictional coach Irving Blitzer.

But whatever the distractions provided by events such as bobsleigh, skating, and ice hockey, the main attraction at every Winter Olympiad is the Alpine skiing, which takes place this year on the famed slopes of Whistler Mountain. And at 11.45am local time a week today all eyes will be on the select group of competitors lining up for the men's downhill, which is the blue ribbon event of the Winter Games and akin to the 100m sprint on the track.

Downhill racing is all about speed, speed and more speed, and the qualifiers will attempt to hurdle down the perilous slopes in around 1 minute and 45

seconds. Unsurprisingly, the greatest Olympic skiers have all been charismatic figures, and none more so than the dashing Frenchman Jean-Claude Killy, who pulled off an almost unprecedented hat-trick when he won all three Alpine skiing golds – the Downhill, the Slalom and the Giant Slalom – at the Grenoble Olympics in 1968. In an age when amateurism was still officially the Olympic creed, Killy was a professional in all but name, and with his Gallic good looks and enviable line in fast cars and glamorous girlfriends he captured the spirit of the age.

The sexiest new sport on the Winter Olympic agenda is snowboarding, which resulted in an American first and second place in both the men's and women's halfpipe – a kind of snowboarded version of the U-shaped bowl used in skateboarding – in Torino four years ago. But in the elite sphere of Alpine skiing the Europeans have traditionally dominated and will once again be determined to put the upstart North Americans in their place. The US veteran Bode Miller might just squeeze in to the frame but I'm backing the talented young Swiss skier Carlo Janka, who won over the Birds of Prey course in Colorado in December, to be the fastest man down Whistler Mountain at 5:1 with Ladbroke's. ☛

