

Motorists earned this fuel break

Enjoy it while it lasts. We doubt very much that the current reduction in the price of a litre of petrol or diesel will be around for long.

Britain continues to have some of the highest fuel prices in Europe as successive governments have seen fit to soak drivers for tax.

Not only do they pay vehicle excise duty, they also pay fuel duty and VAT.

Those who are given the use of a car by their employer end up forking out more in income tax too.

So a bit of good news is long overdue. The credit for this goes in part to George Osborne, who could easily have refused to freeze fuel duty as he tries to bring the deficit down.

But he has at least been shrewd and sensible enough to know that Britain could not go on the way it was, with taxes rising automatically and no regard for the impact the cost would have had on jobs and growth.

The rest is because of oil producing nations like Saudi Arabia refusing to cut their output as they try to protect their market share against newer sources of oil in the form of fracking.

This shows the folly of the obsession Western nations like Britain have had with pursuing a green agenda, while countries in the East concentrate on making money.

For all David Cameron's promises to have the 'greenest government ever' he has had to realise that the economy needed to come first.

The green agenda meant the cash cow that is the British motorist could be milked for all it was worth.

If British manufacturers are paying through the nose to transport their products and components, passing the cost on to their customers, their customers will go elsewhere.

The AA dismisses the price-cutting of Ablewell Service Station owner Velautham Sarveswaran as a 'publicity stunt'. To his credit, however, it has certainly worked and led supermarkets to follow suit.

If the end result is cheaper motoring then so much the better.

It is high time the price paid at the pump represented the importance of being able to get from A to B.

The motorway network is the backbone of this nation, not hugely expensive projects such as high-speed rail.

Drivers have helped put this country back on the road to recovery. It is only fair they get a break.

Lantern fire was one too many

Majestic though they may appear, floating into the night sky, paper lanterns have proved a dangerous menace.

The biggest ever blaze tackled by West Midlands Fire Service was sparked by one of these objects falling onto the Jayplas recycling plant in Smethwick.

Now Wolverhampton City Council is looking at restricting their use at marriage venues and council-run events.

Some might see it as an intrusion on a practice that, the vast majority of the time, brings nothing but pleasure.

But the problem is that once released into the air there is no telling where the wind will take it or how far.

It is unlikely that a marriage venue will be within a short distance of a recycling plant. Even so, we can never know if there are animals nearby, someone's home or garden or a farmer's field.

At the same time, the fire service is facing deep cuts to its budget.

It is unreasonable to expect hard pressed firefighters to have to deal with the consequences of a moment of celebration when it goes wrong.

Regrettably some form of rules and regulations do seem the only possible action.

The damage at Jayplas cost millions. It was only one lantern, amid the many thousands that go up and never cause a problem.

Sadly that is sometimes all it takes and it cannot be left to chance.

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS

Mandy Stevens, aged 53
Weight: 15st



Mandy Stevens from Albrighton

Mandy Stevens is 53 years old, lives with partner Paul and their three children in Weston Road, Albrighton, weighs 15 stone and is 5ft 6ins tall.

She is community co-ordinator for Activeyes, an organisation set up by the Beacon Centre for the Blind and Wolverhampton City Council to help visually impaired adults to take part in more leisure activity and enjoy other events.

They are currently revamping an allotment in a project expected to feature in a forthcoming BBC TV programme.

Mandy blames the menopause for her increase in weight and explained: "I was never terribly overweight and was a comfortable dress size 14 before it hit me at 50."

"Now I am a size 18 and would like to get down to 12 or 14 but I am not expecting that to happen overnight."

Karl Woodhouse, aged 40
Weight: 21st



Karl Woodhouse from Penn

Karl Woodhouse is a 40-year-old father of two who lives in Hollybush Lane, Penn.

He tips the scales at 21 stone and said the weight started to pile on when he gave up smoking.

He also travels widely as the technical manager in this country for a German manufacturer of suspended ceilings, which makes it difficult to eat regular meals.

Karl said: "I was smoking 30 or 40 a day and started to put weight on when I quit. I have managed to lose some of it in the past but it just comes back again."

"The job does not help in that regard. I can be all over the country and sometimes have to fly to Ireland and back in a day."

"There is also a lot of driving and I lack the motivation to prepare the right sort of food for the day when I get up."

Who will triumph as biggest loser?

THE BIGGEST LOSER

The Biggest Loser competition is back for its fourth year with four lucky Express & Star readers poised to step onto the treadmill and fight the flab.

The overweight quartet are being put through their paces over the next month while getting free one-on-one advice and encouragement from a personal trainer at Chris Jewkes Fitness on Danescourt Road, Tettenhall.

There will be three visits a week to the gym and constant monitoring of their eating habits.

Last year the former Army physical training instructor helped four readers transform their lives with two of them losing more than two stone in the four weeks spent under instruction from his staff.

One of those taking on the challenge this year is Mandy Stevens, aged 53, from Albrighton.

She said: "I lost my dad last year and that did not help. I was not comfortable eating but eating at the wrong time and the wrong food while regularly visiting him in hospital during the final months of his life."

Travels

Karl Woodhouse, of Penn says he struggled when it comes to preparing the right sort of food in advance - especially as he travels a lot for work. He said: "I would rather shop at the motorway service station or airport."

"My wife Kerrie watches what she eats but does not have a go at me if I am putting on weight."

Karl, who is vice chairman of Trysull Tigers football club, said: "I am worried about my health. My dad died from a massive heart attack while walking along a street that was put down to poor diet and smoking."

"When I have gone to the gym in the past I have let other things get in the way."

Widower Sandra Harris, aged 66 - who weighs in at 13st 7lb - and 29-year-old James Hardman both of Upper Gornal have also signed up.

James, who weighs in at 21st 7lb is hoping to shed 5st and vows that this time it will be for good.

He said: "I have not been able to get rid of the weight in the past but hope that will all change with somebody helping me to do it."

● **There will be regular updates on our team's progress throughout the challenge.**

James Hardman, aged 29
Weight: 21st 7lbs



Foundry worker James Hardman, from Upper Gornal, Dudley

James Hardman, aged 29, is a married foundry worker from Priors Mill, Upper Gornal. He is 6ft and weighs 21st 7lbs.

He wants to lose five stone - although he appreciates that it will take a lot longer than a month for that to happen.

When he was 15 he developed Bell's Palsy, a condition that causes temporary weakness or paralysis of the muscles in one side of the face.

James explained: "I was put on steroids as part of the treatment and put on five stone in 12 months. People couldn't recognise me."

"I had been like a stick until then. I got rid of the Bell's Palsy but could never get rid of the weight."

"I am up and off to work at 4am and am neither eating at the right time nor eating the right food."

"I used to play football until I got Bell's Palsy but have not played sport since."

"I work hard in the foundry and like my fishing. My main problem will be finding the time to prepare the proper food I should be eating and cutting out the chocolate and crisps."

"I have already been given a diet sheet to fill in and at the end of the first week the personal trainer will give me more tips on what I should and should not be eating."

Sandra Harris, aged 66
Weight: 13st 7lb



Mother-of-two Sandra Harris, from Upper Gornal

Sandra Harris, aged 66, is a widowed mother of two with a grandson and lives in Fithern Close, Upper Gornal.

A former Special Constable, for 13 years she held a variety of different jobs including a post of company secretary before turning to voluntary work and becoming an administrator at Weight Watchers.

She is 5ft 1ins tall and 13 stone 7lbs. "It's about time I started practising what I have been preaching," confessed Sandra.

She continued: "I started putting the weight on when my husband Bert died in 1988."

"It was a terrible shock."

"He died from a massive brain haemorrhage and I found him when I came home from work."

"I retired from the Specials the following year because I missed his support."

"I was comfort eating and I went from slimbo to sumo."

"I was a dress size 10 in 1976 and now it's a size 22. I'm like a big balloon."

"If I get any bigger I will collapse and that makes me all the more determined to start getting this weight off before it is too late."

"I hope that having a personal trainer will help me to get on the right road to achieving that goal."

PETER RHODES



BLOGGER OF THE YEAR

A FRIEND has an appointment tomorrow to see the stroke nurse. Who dreams up these job-titles?

A MONTY Python sketch once introduced us to Brigadier Arthur Farquar-Smith, chairman of the British Well Basically Club, who began: "Well, basically." It got a laugh because 'well, basically' had become so embedded in 1970s chat that it had become a sort of spoken quotation marks without which no conversation was possible. Have you noticed the 21st century equivalent? It is the single word 'So . . . ' used by politicians, pundits and scientists as the first word in any answer to any question. "Chancellor, is your Budget a pile of piffle?" "So . . ." Watch out for it. 'So' is the new 'well, basically'.

GREAT predictions of our time. Last week I sang the praises of that little-mentioned movie masterpiece, The Grand Budapest Hotel. The very next day it got a staggering 11 Bafta nominations. How do I do it? Well, basically . . .

NATIONAL treasure alert.

In A Night at Hampton Court (BBC2) the wonderful Lucy Worsley ascended the scaffolding on the palace roof wearing the obligatory hard hat. And heels. And a skirt.



Lucy Worsley

SORRY, folks, but after much consideration, Je ne suis pas Charlie. I will march against terrorism. I will march in the bereaved and solidarity with the bereaved. I will march in rage and despair at the premeditated slaughter of fellow journalists. But I will not march to defend the absolute right to freedom of expression. There is no such right, and nor should there be.

THE dismay and anger over cartoons showing Mohammed is not restricted to the wilder fringes of Islamism. It is right at the heart of the beliefs and traditions of Muslims who make up 10 per cent of the French population. It offends the very people whose help we most need to defeat the psychopaths of jihadism. There is a cultural gulf here between Britain and France. There was a time when British newspapers and periodicals used the wickedest caricatures of Jews, Catholics, blacks, the Irish and other minorities. We have grown up and moved on; France has not. Today, the British relentlessly scrutinise the ruling classes but treat minorities with respect. The French media cheerfully overlook the corruption of their leaders but seem to think that offending Islam and other religions is a sacred right. Be very wary of today's mantra that laughter is the weapon of freedom and equality. Nazi propaganda against the Jews began with cartoons. Humour is healthy only when we laugh at those in power or at ourselves. When we turn it against our neighbours, a cartoon in a magazine can be as ugly as a swastika daubed on a Jewish shop. You don't build a better society by spitting in the faces of 10 per cent of your people.

MEANWHILE, you have to smile at the official advice for all Brits to be on their guard against terrorist attacks. Look at the average crowd in any street or shopping mall. The ones who aren't texting, surfing or chatting on their mobiles are probably insulated from the world by earphones and iPod. People have never been so closed-in and utterly unaware of what is going on around them. If you walked down a high street carrying a large smoking object marked 'bomb', would anybody notice?

