

Schott's April Fool Almanac

A miscellany of hoaxes, rags, shams, spoofs, leg-pulls, flimflam, chicanery, hoodwinkery, legerdemain, and “cruellest month” eyewash — by **Ben Schott**.

APRIL FOOLERY OF NOTE

From Panorama's 1957 Italian “spaghetti harvest” to Burger King's left-handed Whopper in 1998, the litany of modern April Fool's Day hoaxes is well known. So, below are some of the more archaic and obscure pranks played on April 1, culled from the archives of *The Times* and elsewhere.



On April 2, 1803, *The Times* bemoaned the previous day's **PAUCITY OF HOAXES**: “Yesterday is supposed to have been the very dullest and most barren of jests for the last fifty years. No messenger came from Bonaparte. Mr. Addington was not diminished, nor did Mr. Pitt come in to make war. Even the Bulls and Bears in the Alley were unable to make a hoax or to take in Duck or Gall. With the exception of a few school-boys who went to buy pigeons milk, as usual, half-a-dozen miserable Frenchmen who were sent to see the lions washed in the Tower, and a fashionable or two who lost their dinners, owing to forged invitations, there was not a joke stirring all over the metropolis, and wit was as much below par as stocks.”



Arch showman **P.T. BARNUM** submitted his employees and members of his family to a curious hoax on April 1, 1851. Having obtained a swatch of blank telegraph forms, Barnum had delivered a series of “astounding intelligences”, including informing one man that he had become the father of twins, and telling another that his home town had been razed to the ground along with his house.



Lions owned by the sovereign were housed in the Tower of London from the reign of Henry III until 1834, when the entire royal menagerie decamped to Regent's Park zoo. As is mentioned above, one of the most famous London April Fool's Day hoaxes involved sending innocents to the Tower to watch the “**ANNUAL CEREMONY OF THE WASHING OF THE LIONS**”. In 1860, thousands were given printed invitations that read “*Admit the Bearer and Friend to view the Annual Ceremony of washing the White Lions on Sunday April 1st, 1860. Admitted at the White Gate. It is particularly requested that no gratuity be given to the warders or their assistants*”.

On April 2, 1857, the *New York Times* reported on the mood in America: “April Fool Day is going out of remembrance. There was less fooling yesterday than usual — thanks to **ADVANCING CIVILISATION**.”



In 1915, under the headline **HUMOUR IN THE TRENCHES**, *The Times*'s Paris correspondent reported that the French trench newspaper *Rigolboche* printed the following April Fool's Day jest: “A telegram dated April 1 announces that England, terrified by the German blockade, has left its ordinary position between the North Sea and the Atlantic and is being towed by its Fleet towards an unknown destination. Admiral Tirpitz wires, ‘Am in pursuit’”.



The Times also reported on April 1, 1915, that “an **AIR-MAN FLYING OVER THE LILLE AERODROME** dropped a football. It fell slowly through the air and the Germans could be seen hurrying from all directions to take cover from what they evidently thought was a bomb. That it bounced to an enormous height before exploding was probably taken to be due to a ‘delay action’ fuse, for it was not till the ball fully came to rest that they emerged from their shelters to examine it. On it was written ‘April Fool — *Gott Strafe England*’”.

A five-year-old boy died during a **TRAGIC APRIL FOOLS DAY MISUNDERSTANDING** in 1919. Tenants of a house in Pound Lane, Canterbury, ignored warning cries that a chimney fire was spreading out of control, thinking the alarm a hoax. As the flames cut off escape from the ground floor, one child was thrown from an upstairs window and caught by a neighbour, but a second died after falling to the ground. Four adults were taken to hospital with severe injuries.



Speculators on the **DETROIT STOCK EXCHANGE** were keen to trade in a new stock chalked up for the first time on April 1, 1922. According to *The Times*, trading in American Fire Protection (AFP) was “spirited”: the stock opened at 6, rose to 12, fell back to 2, and rallied to 8 before the Michigan Securities Commission reported that AFP stood for April Fool Preferred.

The First of April is the Day we Remember What we are the other 364 Days of the Year.

— MARK TWAIN

THE ORIGINS of April Fool's Day are almost as disputed as the placement of its apostrophe (*Times* style notwithstanding). Some suggest a Biblical etymology, citing as the first fool's errand Noah's fruitless dispatch of a ship-to-shore dove. Some look to the joyous Hindu festival of Holi — a five-day celebration of fertility that culminates in frenzy of hoaxes and pranks. Others suggest that April Fool's Day is an outlet for liminal exuberance as winter gives way to spring (just as Halloween is an outlet as autumn gives way to winter), citing Roman, Celtic, or Druidic precedents. Those with a historical turn of mind note that the adoption of the Gregorian calendar shifted New Year from March 25 to January 1, creating a parcel[†] of April fools who either objected to this change or simply forgot. Whichever of these theories is correct (all may be erroneous) April Fool's Day is now celebrated by misuse in many countries — notably in France, where the tradition of the *poisson d'Avril* involves sticking cut-out paper fish onto the backs of hapless victims and eating ichthyoid confectionary.

QUOTATIONS & PROVERBS OF NOTE

Fools chew the chaff while cunning eats the bread. ☞ *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.* [Pope] ☞ *A fool is often as dangerous to deal with as a knave.* ☞ *A fool walks with his mouth open and his eyes shut.* ☞ *A fool must now and then be right, by chance.* [Cowper] ☞ *He who discovers that he is a fool has found the right road to wisdom.* ☞ *Even a wise man may sometimes make a fool of himself.* ☞ *There is no cure for a fool.* ☞ *The fool finds a stone*

wall in his way by bumping his head against it. ☞ *Every fool has a goose that lays a golden egg tomorrow.* ☞ *A fool blames others for his faults; a wise man blames himself.* ☞ *The land of fools is the paradise of knaves.* ☞ *He is a fool who gets two black eyes to blacken one of his enemy.* ☞ *The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.* [Shakespeare]. ☞ *A fool may ask questions that a wise man cannot answer.* ☞ *Fools, bairns, and drunks tell all that is in their minds.*

ALTHOUGH Robert Steele described April 1 as “the merriest day in the year”, not everyone shares the joke. Laurence Hutton wrote that “April Fooling is the most asinine of all the performances of silly man; and its prosperity lies in the conduct of him who makes it, never in the action of him who is made its victim”. Similarly, *Poor Robin's Almanac* cautioned:

*It is a thing to be disputed, Which is the greatest fool reputed,
The man who innocently went, Or he that him designedly sent?*

Most agree that fools cannot be made after midday on April 1, and that the joke rebounds on those who attempt any post-meridial high jinks. *Notes & Queries* cited the following rhyme, said to come from Hampshire:

*April fool's gone past, You're the biggest fool at last;
When April fool comes again, You'll be the biggest fool then.*

(† This seems to be the collective noun. ☞ In Cockney rhyming slang, April Fools = tools.)

FOOL'S ERRANDS

Fool's errands (also sleeveless or bootless errands, or gawk [cuckoo] hunts) are absurd missions upon which innocents and ingénues are dispatched to fetch some illusory object, such as “a jar of elbow grease”. Below are some of the oxymoronic objects of these fruitless quests — ancient and modern:

Straight hooks · Tartan paint · Bodge tape · Universal solvent
Box of pixels · Bottled vacuum · Dehydrated water · Bag of sparks
Portable holes · Long stand · Long weight · Horseshoe grease
Left handed hammer · Prop wash · Rainbow ink · Glass nails
Golden rivets · Bag of steam · Electric anvil · Blinker fluid
10ft of shoreline · Threadless screws · Keyboard fluid · Brass-faced file
Soft-pointed chisel · Population tool · Medicinal compound
Grid squares · Error bars · Plinth ladder · Pigeon milk · Strap oil
Powdered water · Iced steam · Blackboard sharpener · Tulip powder
Curve straightener · Rust polish · Inch creeper · Ethernet tape
Yard-wide pack thread · Bluetooth paste · Hen's teeth · Worsted bellows
The Life & Adventures of Eve's Mother or *The History of Adam's Grandfather*
Crocodile quills · A pound of sleeve board · Eel's feet · WiFi ducting
Mousetrap porridge · One-ended stick · Half-round square · Sky-hooks

APRIL FOOLERY OF NOTE



According to *The Times*'s man in Constantinople, in 1924 the Turkish newspaper *Yeni Gun* perpetrated a *poisson d'Avril* hoax on its readers by printing that a **VAST FISH** weighing 500 okes (1,400lb) had been caught. Not only did great numbers flock to the spot where the monster had been landed, but the rival newspaper *Tanin* faithfully reproduced the story. When *Yeni Gun* admitted its deception, *Tanin* did not take the joke well, complaining that “although such a custom may be perhaps tolerated in the West, it is not understood here and is unsuitable to Turkey”.

In April 1941, *Paris Soir* (then under Nazi control) published a **POEM IN PRAISE OF ADOLF HITLER** submitted by an anonymous reader. However, a few days later the Free French paper *France* revealed that *Paris Soir* had been elegantly duped since, when the poem is divided longitudinally into two verses (marked below with “[]”), its meaning is quite different:

*Aimons et admirons | Le Chancelier Hitler
L'eternelle Angleterre: | Est indigne de vivre.
Maudissons, écrivons | Le peuple d'ouïre mer
Le Nazi sur la terre. | Sera seul à survivre,
Soyons donc le soutien | Du Führer allemand
Des boys navigateurs: | Finira l'odyssée:
À eux seuls apparent | Un juste châtiment
La palme du vainqueur. | Attend la Croix Gammée*

*With love let us praise | The Chancellor Hitler
Everlasting England | Is unworthy of life
Let's curse and crush | The people overseas
The Nazi on earth | Will be the sole survivor
Let's give our support | for the German Führer
For the navy boys | The journey will end
Only to them belongs | A fair punishment
The conqueror's palm | Will meet the Swastika*



On April 2, 1952, the Home Secretary was questioned in the Commons about top secret papers from the **HARWELL ATOMIC RESEARCH STATION** which had been found in the street and handed into the police. It soon transpired, however, that these papers were an April Fool's hoax played by 15-year-old London schoolboy Victor Paul Mehra, who admitted to “writing a lot of gibberish on foolscap sheets” using old Norwegian letterheading and a blueprint of a nut and bolt.

In 1982, Athens was thrown into panic when the city's radio station broadcast a hoax news flash warning that **POLLUTION HAD REACHED LETHAL LEVELS**. Given the dense yellow-green fog that shrouded the city, this warning seemed all too plausible, and schools and hospitals began evacuation planning. So serious was the April Fool's joke that three journalists were charged and tried with deliberately alarming the public. Only after politicians and journalists spoke in their defence were they acquitted.



In 1985, *The Times* Diary reported that “hundreds of phonecalls to Mr. C. Lion and A. Bear have taken their toll on **LONDON ZOO**. An answering machine [on April 1] told callers that if they genuinely wished to get in touch with the zoo they should do so through the operator”. The operator told *The Times* “London Zoo would accept no calls at all until the fateful day had passed”.

The Iraqi newspaper *Babel*, run by **SADDAM HUSSEIN'S SON UDAY**, became notorious for running April Fool's Day “jokes” taunting its readers. In 1998, the paper quoted President Bill Clinton as saying sanctions were soon to be lifted; in 1999, the paper said that rations would soon include bananas, chocolate and soft drinks; and in 2001 the paper claimed that all students would pass their end-of-year exams, and that a consignment of BMWs ordered in the 1980s would soon be delivered.



In 2006, the *British Medical Journal* reported that Australian doctors had discovered **MOTIVATIONAL DEFICIENCY DISORDER** (MoDeD). “The condition is claimed to affect up to one in five Australians and is characterised by overwhelming and debilitating apathy ... in severe cases motivational deficiency disorder can be fatal, because the condition reduces the motivation to breathe.” Many readers failed to spot the April 1 publication date, or a quote from Professor Leth Argos.



In 2007, Downing Street rejected an **E-PETITION** (submitted by someone calling themselves “Rodney”) which read: “We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Rename April Fools Day, Only Fools and Horses Day and make everyone say Lovely Jubbly.”