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An explosive idea

QUESTION In the film *Saving Private Ryan*, a soldier, in the absence of a mortar tube, is seen banging the shells on concrete and hurling them at the Germans. Would this have worked?

MORTAR bombs and artillery shells containing high explosives are fitted with a fuse device in the nose, intended to detonate the projectile when it strikes its target — usually the ground.

The fuse contains a steel pin which bears against a small explosive pellet. When the shell hits something hard, the pin is driven into the pellet which detonates and sets off the high explosive.

If ammunition were that simple, shells would be going off whenever a clumsy squaddie dropped one on its nose or if it were bumped during transportation, so a safety device is incorporated in the fuse, often in the form of a small piston which locks or shields the firing pin. When the gun is fired, the rapid acceleration drives the safety device to the rear and makes the shell 'live'.

In the film, banging a bomb on its base replicates this rapid acceleration by jolting the safety device to the rear, making the bomb live when thrown, ready to detonate when it lands.

A mortar round fired from a tube is propelled by a firing pin striking a small cartridge (like a shotgun cartridge) in the tail fin assembly. This fires the main propellant charge.

Anyone intending to use mortar bombs in the delivery method in the film should remove the propelling cartridge — otherwise they would probably set off the propellant in their hand, with disastrous results.

Mike Norfolk, Portslade, Sussex.

QUESTION When I was a child, I used to borrow books from my library (Warndon in Worcester) about Mary Bear and Ant and Bee. Who wrote these books and can I buy them today?

MARY BEAR must be the delightful Mary Plain stories by Gwynedd Rae, published by Routledge of London in the 1930s and Forties.

Mary Plain is 'an unusual, first-class bear, from the Bear Pits in Berne', befriended by the patient and understanding Owl Man and Fur Coat Lady. We get to know Mary both in the Bear Pits and further afield as she travels around Switzerland and goes to London.

There is a period-feel to Mary Plain. The language, together with references to motor cars and descriptions of passenger aircraft and airfields, add to their charm.

The Mary Plain books are refresh-

ingly free from messages teaching children how to behave. Mary is slightly greedy and conceited, enthusiastic and trouble-prone, but the affection between her and Owl Man, and between Gwynedd Rae and her characters, shines through.

The first title was *Mostly Mary*; other titles include *Mary Plain In Wartime*, *Mary Plain's Big Adventure* and *Mary Plain Goes Bob-A-Jobbing*.

Despite several print runs, these books are no longer published.

Second-hand copies from sites such as Amazon and AbeBooks or a booksearch specialist cost between £10 and £500, depending on edition and condition.

Teri Marsh, Chippenham, Wilts.

ANT and Bee books by Angela Banner were published by Edmund Ward (later Kaye & Ward Ltd) in the late 1950s and Sixties.

There were three main characters. Ant lived with Bee in a cup. He was playful and fun, but often found himself in trouble. Bee was a more sober-minded creature who spends much of his time keeping Ant in check. And Kind Dog was a friend of Ant and Bee, who often joined them on their adventures and was their main link to the human world.

There were 13 stories in total, all with an educational storyline. Book 1: *Ant And Bee, An Alphabetical Story For Tiny Tots*, first published by Edward Ward in 1950, introduced children to the alphabet; and Book 9: *Ant And Bee Time*, sees Ant and Bee visit a zoo, meet lots of animals and learn to tell the time. These

books are now out of print but they are available second-hand. A first edition of *Ant And Bee, An Alphabetical Story For Tiny Tots* can cost between £300 and £1,000, depending on the condition.

Heinemann (London) republished 13 of the titles in the late 1980s to early 1990s, producing Book 1 as *Ant And Bee And ABC*. The front states this was first published in 1966, long after the true Book 1; while its reprint of *More And More Ant And Bee* (Book 6) was first published in 1961.



Apart from Book 1, most early first and reprint editions sell for between £20 and £500, while Heinemann reprints can sell for between £12 and £250. It depends on the edition and condition of the book.

Humphrey Boon, Fullerton's Booksearch, Fakenham, Norfolk.

QUESTION When did the mown lawn become a feature of gardens? How were they maintained?

FURTHER to previous answers, in my early childhood we lived in the deepest part of the Warwickshire countryside. While my father was away fighting in the 1914-1918 war, farmers would sometimes cut our grass with scythes. We also had a goat tethered on different parts of the lawn to keep the grass down.

Some time after Father returned he began to cut our lawns using a pony towing a cumbersome mowing

machine. The pony had an open stable in the back orchard in the summer, but a brick one in the yard with hay bales for the winter. When needed to cut the lawns, he had leather shoes strapped on. He always lifted each foot in correct rotation for each flat shoe to be fixed.

A man guided the mower but the pony knew exactly when and how to turn for each row. The man used a series of clicks to communicate with the pony. No words were spoken.

Small hand-machines on long ropes were used up and down the banks. I was allowed to give the pony a carrot as a reward when it was back in its orchard.

In about 1924 the auto mower arrived (I think the pony had died). It was petrol driven, noisy and smelly.

Even the grass smelled of petrol and the compost smelled for days (and wasn't as good as when the pony's offloadings were added to it). It often got clogged up by sending the cuttings into the engine.

My father used to call it the 'ought-to-mow' — as it often didn't. Father was still using a scythe in 1953 to keep the churchyard tidy when he was 79.

I'm 93 now and have always loved gardens. All the things in my garden have been grown from seeds, cuttings and pips, pride of place goes to my forest-high James Grieve apple tree which was grown from a pip.

Lois Hibbard, Old Beaconsfield, Bucks.

QUESTION A recent Liz Jones article (Mail) used the phrase 'the magazine maven'. What is a 'maven'?

A MAVEN is a trusted expert in a particular field who seeks to pass knowledge to others. The word, from the Yiddish *meyvn* (which has the same meaning), is a recent import into English.

It is more common in the U.S. than in Britain. In the past few years, it has been used specifically to describe people who actively gather information, picking up on new or nascent trends and broadcasting them.

Dr Graeme Davis, Hove.

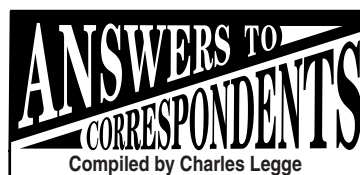
QUESTION Did Henry Jenkins (1501-1670), of Yorkshire, live to the age of 169?

FURTHER to the earlier answer, I was recently doing some research in old Cork newspapers and came across this death notice that appeared in the Cork Constitution newspaper, dated May 10, 1834. I cannot vouch for its veracity, only that it was in the obituary section:

'Died in Maury County, Tennessee, on 10th January last, Mrs Betsy Frantham, at the advanced age of 154. She was a native of Germany and arrived in North Carolina in 1710. At the age of 120 her eyesight became almost extinct but during the last 20 years of her life, she possessed the power of vision as perfectly as at the age of 20.'

Not as old as Mr Jenkins, but still a remarkable age — if true.

Ronnie Herlihy, South Douglas Road, Cork.





Mortar madness: Copying the scene from Saving Private Ryan would have disastrous results