



## Behind the pages of Pennine Pens

This piece was inspired by Viv and Dave Boardman inviting me to take part in an episode of their podcast series, [Real Voices of Happy Valley](#). They wanted to talk about how Elaine Connell and I originated the small press we called Pennine Pens. So, before we met up for the recording, I started making some notes about what I might say. As I did so, I found I had far more to say than would fit into a short interview and decided to write what follows

### **Background: alternative papers**

In 1968, as a student rebel, I helped create *Ginger*, an alternative to the boring student newspaper. This was before alternative magazines and papers had properly got going. There was really just *International Times*, founded in 1966. I think there had been a recent change in printing options, so we were able to pioneer new ground. There were only a few issues of *Ginger*, but it made waves, was controversial, got people talking and even provoked questions in the House of Commons.

In the early 1970s, I was part of a group that created the *Hackney Gutter Press*, produced with Letraset and Cow Gum in the basement of our Hackney squat. We reported on housing issues, political court cases, the Claimants' Union and the like. Again, there were just a few issues but it inspired the much longer running *Islington Gutter Press*.

Also in the 1970s, I helped with the *Windsor Freek Press*, a daily paper for the Windsor Festival and other festivals.

### **Towards a small press**

It was a few years into my relationship with Elaine Connell in the 1980s that we considered the possibility of producing books. We both loved reading and had aspirations to write. By 1986, we needed a break from the chalkface - we'd met as teachers at Calderdale College in 1981.

Elaine and I were both socialists so running a business didn't come naturally, although I had experience of selling my handmade crafts at flea markets in the 1970s. Our first lessons in selling came from producing a selection of Christmas cards each year, cards with

a seasonal poem inside. Local shops were happy to take them, and they sold. Our first modest success.

One of the better Tory schemes to deal with the unemployment they'd created was the Enterprise Allowance. Anyone who was unemployed and could come up with a business proposition, would be eligible for an allowance of £40 a week for a year, from the Government. We took a year off and signed up. Our 'business' was as writers, and we decided to research - on bikes - medieval heretics of southwest France.

## Self publishing

*Cycling In Search of the Cathars* had just come back again from yet another publisher. They'd enclosed a note saying how much they'd enjoyed reading it but it didn't fit in with their list. We'd heard it all before. They couldn't see a market for it, it was rather a minority interest, they weren't taking on any new writers at present and they wished us "every success in placing it elsewhere."



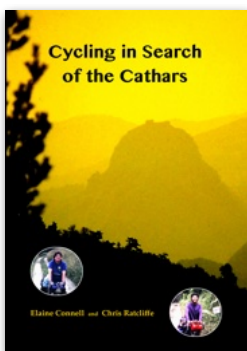
"We could try publishing it ourselves," I suggested.

"Do it ourselves!" Elaine retorted, with a hint of exasperation. She knew I had a habit of trying many things myself. We were in the process of selling our separate houses and buying one together. I was working on the conveyancing for all three transactions.

"If self-publishing was good enough for William Blake, Mark Twain, Beatrice Potter and TS Eliot" why shouldn't we have a go?"

In the 60s and 70s, I had been a bit of a luddite in respect of computers. The first desktop computers I came across were in the early 80s when I was working as a teacher, and forever seeking to create the best looking worksheet for my students. Astonishment! It seemed that I actually had a knack for IT and could often solve problems when others had lost patience.

## Our first book



To our surprise, we received the first order for *Cycling in Search of the Cathars* a week before it was delivered from the printer's. The buyer had read an advance review. We almost framed the cheque but it was only the first of far more than we ever dreamed would be possible. The book received what we now appreciate was good coverage in papers and magazines of widely varying types, from the local press, cycling magazines, new age publications and even a magazine aimed at the expatriate community in France.

*Cycling in Search of the Cathars* continues to sell. A few years ago, I created the eBook version and last year, completely reworked it (not the text) with colour photos and the full colour cover we couldn't afford back in 1991.

## Sylvia Plath

Long before Sylvia Plath became as well-known as she is now, Elaine had a passionate interest in the poet. She was so enamoured of Plath's work, it sometimes felt that Sylvia Plath was a third person in our relationship. Inspired by our initial publishing success, when Elaine finished her MA thesis on Plath, we decided to develop this into a book, one which would introduce the poet to a wider public. Disappointingly, we did not receive as much publicity as we expected for this publication. Yet, in spite of this, sales for *Sylvia Plath: Killing the Angel in the House* exceeded that of our first book, being reprinted several times.

While on this subject of Plath, Elaine created the Sylvia Plath Forum, undoubtedly one of the first online arenas of literary debate. It was hugely popular, attracting contributions from all over the world. People would actually visit the UK just to meet with Elaine and discuss Plath. Peter Steinbeck, who went on to edit two volumes of Plath's Letters for Faber and Faber, stayed in our house. Elaine had an amazing memory that enabled her to recite Plath's poems and recount all sorts of facts and anecdotes about her. By the time Elaine died in 2007, she was probably the leading expert on Sylvia Plath.



Chris at a book launch, 1994

We were still learning about selling books. We arrived at the view that people buy books because they have a special interest in the subject, or they have had them recommended by word of mouth.

One of our authors told us that it is one of the best kept secrets in publishing that reviews don't sell books.

Books which fitted into some kind of pigeonhole seemed easier to sell - local books, books on Anne Lister, the Cathars or Sylvia Plath. More creative writing was much harder to market.

Nearly 30 years ago, in 1994, we were approached by our friend Jill Liddington to publish her first book on Anne Lister, *Presenting the Past*. Jill is a nationally renowned historian. So that was a real feather in our cap. Other writers started approaching us. We'd even arrive home from work to find some dishevelled poet on our doorstep clutching a folder of his work. As well as the books above, by the end of 1994, we'd also published *The Occasions of Love*, poems by Simon Fletcher and *Gone Walkabout*, local walks from Anna Carlisle. Over the years, more titles were added. In 2003, Jill asked us to publish another book she had written on Anne Lister - *Nature's Domain*. We had no idea what this would lead to, many years later.

## Finance

Back in the 1990s, it was necessary to print at least 500 or ideally 1000 copies of a book to gain from economies of scale. Such a financial commitment made it harder to decide what to publish. If we were going to invest thousands of pounds, we had to be reasonably sure of recovering our costs. A book of poems or a novel by an unknown writer was unlikely to do this. Fortunately, for most of the books we published did eventually cover our costs but not all made much of a profit. We soon tired of applying for grants as the work involved was tedious and the reward limited.

However, we did get one Arts Council grant for publishing a book of poems. Another interesting strategy was seeking payment in advance for a publication. We did this for *Once upon a Time*, the autobiography of Eileen Colwell, the founder of children's libraries. Our costs were completely met, even before the book was published.

## Along comes the Internet

When we started publishing our books, no-one had ever heard of the phenomenon which was to become the main part of our publishing business: the Internet.

Early in 1995, we started experimenting with web pages, firstly as a way of publicising our books. We knew that there was a potentially world-wide interest in the Cathars and Sylvia Plath. So I started learning how to do web pages. It wasn't easy at first - there were no books on the subject, no Google, no Facebook, no Twitter and no YouTube. I was emailing people in the States with questions about how to do basic html. After we had put web pages up for Pennine Pens, others started to approach us to do the same for them.

Also, as the Internet started to take off in the mid 1990s, people found it wasn't that easy to connect computers to the new 'world wide web', and my help was in great demand. Just walking into Hebden Bridge, I would be stopped several times, to be asked technical questions, or whether I could go round and help.

## Building websites - and the HebWeb

One of the first websites we created was for the Circus Factory in Old Town Mill. I remember bumping into H, the manager, a week or so after the site went live. "It's unbelievable!" he told me. "We've just had a big order from Japan. Because of the website!" As Viv Boardman pointed out when she interviewed me for the [Real Voices of Happy Valley podcast](#), it's easy to forget that such things were hardly possible before the Internet.

**Poet's work goes on to superhighway**

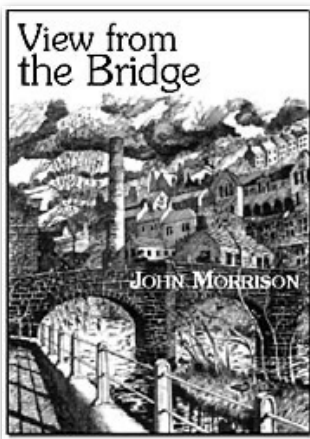
A POET will see his prize-winning poem on the Internet, thanks to a new venture by his publishers. Hebden Bridge poet, Mr Simon Fletcher, was a runner-up in the Ilkley Literature Festival Poetry Competition with his poem, "Ockham's Razor". The poem has been put on the Internet by publishers, Pennine Pens, Windsor Road, Hebden Bridge. It appears as part of the Hebden Bridge Web, a collection of information connected with the town. Mr Chris Ratcliffe, a partner in the company, said: "There are increasing numbers of people with computers and modems and they will become more and more common. "The information super highway will be an important form of communication in the future."

Hebden Bridge Times, Oct 1995

In the summer of 1995, we purchased the domain name hebdenbridge.co.uk and published what was the first community website in the UK - the Hebden Bridge Web, soon becoming known as the HebWeb. The site now has thousands of pages, images and visitors.

The forward thinking, creative community of Hebden Bridge tend to be radical, imaginative and adventurous. Many of them, especially writers and photographers, were able to see, very early on, how the Internet would help them develop their work. I was soon able to give up teaching to work full-time on Pennine Pens, mainly producing websites. An added advantage was that I would generally be at home to care for Morgan, our young son. In the past 25-30 years, Pennine Pens has helped with hundreds of websites.

### View from the Bridge



But back to books. As well as providing a space for news, discussion, events, etc. the HebWeb started an online column, written by John Morrison. We called it *View from the Bridge*. It affectionately mocked our town and featured characters such Willow Woman, “inhabiting a world that shares a common border with Fantasia and Never-Never Land”; Wounded Man, “not gay, exactly, but happy to pitch in if they were ever short-handed;” Town Drunk, “intoxicated stalwart of the Grievous Bodily Arms, the naffest pub this side of the Crab Nebula”; and Dope Dealer, “attempting to go upmarket by styling himself as a Substance Abuse Negotiator”.

Occasionally, if an episode didn't appear for a while, we would get enquiries from people around the world about when the next one was due. So we decided to publish them as books - *View from the Bridge* was the first, followed by *Back to the Bridge* and *A Bridge Too Far*. We think this was probably the first time a book was published from material which had appeared on the new-fangled web. Would people actually buy the book when all the words were available online?

The editor of the *Hebden Bridge Times* gave us a big publicity boost by refusing to have any references to John's book in the paper. For some reason, she believed that “the crap local paper” with its head- lines of “Bus Routes Stay The Same” and references to Lunchtime O'Booze was her own. John had been interviewed and a feature on him and the book was about to appear in *Hebden Bridge Times*. It didn't. The Editor pulled the piece just as the paper went to print. John's appointment with sister paper *Halifax Evening Courier* Arts Editor was cancelled without reason.

This was great for us as we were able to put posters all round town: “The book they want to ban!” The ban meant of course that everyone wanted to read the book. We understand

that the Editor of the *Hebden Bridge Times* wanted to sue, until their lawyers advised them that they would be laughed out of court.

One afternoon, life began to resemble art a little too closely when Nigel, the manager of Forbuoy's newsagents, phoned. "I just thought I'd better warn you that I've had this bloke in here, a Hell's Angel called Dave, going on and on about *View From The Bridge*. Says he's gonna sue because he's in it and everyone's making fun of him. I hope I'm not alarming you but he's coming to see you!"

"No, no," Elaine lied.

"Wait a minute," says Nigel, "Cheryl here tells me he's not an Angel. He's a Satan's Slave. Let me know what happens."

Elaine phoned John, the author, to inquire whether he's like to come round and talk with 'Biker Dave'.

"You must be joking," laughs John in a nervous manner. "I'm staying at home - under the bed."

As we heard the roar of the Harley Davison pulling up outside, I mumbled, "Listen, I think this kind of situation is probably much better handled by a woman" and escaped upstairs.

I heard Biker Dave tell Elaine, "Ah'm very upset by this 'eer book. I walked into the Hole In The Wall (only possibly The Grievous Bodily Arms) and I noticed everyone were laughing at me. They sez, 'ere Dave, yer famous, yer in a book." Elaine used her teacher skills and he seemed to leave reassured and with enough information to persuade his fellow drinkers he was not the character in the book.

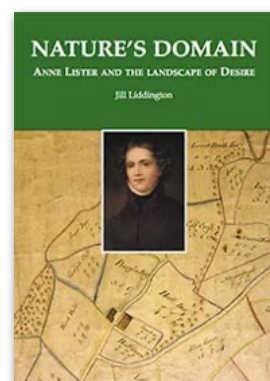
For sometime afterwards, we feared the knock on the door bringing visits from other characters from the book. One who we felt most likely to sue was the repulsive Councillor Prattle. We felt he was just so easily identifiable. As it turned out he was such an insensitive politician that he apparently went to The Book Case, bought a dozen copies and went around showing them off to all his mates.

## **eBooks**

Pennine Pens was producing early forms of eBooks before Apple and Amazon, usually as PDFs. We would put them on a CD and post them, until broadband came along and emailing attachments became easier. But once the Kindle came along, it made sense to produce eBooks in what was becoming the standard ePub format, a format which had many advantages over PDFs. Pennine Pens currently has about 25 books available as eBooks, some of them not available in printed form.

## Anne Lister and Gentleman Jack

While book publishing has never brought in as much money as we would have hoped, we've had various successes. The *View from the Bridge* Trilogy was one locally. But unexpectedly, another one came along in 2019 with the TV production of *Gentleman Jack*, about the life of Anne Lister. Sally Wainwright, the writer, based the first series upon 2 books by Jill Liddington and one of them was *Nature's Domain*. Pennine Pens was able to negotiate a deal with the production company and the huge swell of interest in Anne Lister meant that in the 2-3 years following the series, we sold in excess of 5000 of *Nature's Domain* and *Presenting the Past* combined.



When we first published *Nature's Domain* in 2003 we never ever imagined that in 2019 it would be the basis of a successful, mainstream TV series. Elaine would have been delighted, telling everyone she had ever known.

When Elaine and I took our first steps in publishing, it never occurred to us that the very nature of publishing itself was about to change. The arrival of the Internet is a change as big as the arrival of the printing press. It enabled us to publish the HebWeb, unrecognisable today when compared with how it was when we started it in 1995. While episodes of *View from the Bridge* ceased with the new millennium, today we have regular episodes of the offbeat *Murphy's Lore* from local writer George Murphy (currently up to 130 episodes), George has also interviewed around 35 interesting local people as part of the *HebWeb Interviews*.

The next leap forward is AI, and Pennine Pens is already looking at what this upcoming technological revolution might mean for Pennine Pens, other small presses and the websites we produce. When I posed the question, "What do you know about the HebWeb?" one AI response was, "The HebWeb is one of the most successful community websites in the UK and reflects the vibrant and diverse spirit of Hebden Bridge."

Pennine Pens has allowed me to make a living working from my terraced house home among the hills and wooded valleys that surround Hebden Bridge. While Pennine Pens has tried to give encouragement to local writers in some of their inspired endeavours, none of this would have been possible without the wonderful support of friends, and the imaginative, creative community of Hebden Bridge. Thanks everyone!

*Chris Ratcliffe, August 2023*

### Links:

[Pennine Pens at penninepens.co.uk](http://penninepens.co.uk)

[HebWeb at hebdenbridge.co.uk](http://hebdenbridge.co.uk)

[The Podcast with Dave and Vivi Boardman](#)



Hebden Bridge publisher Mr Chris Retcliffe, who runs the small press publishing company, Pennine Press, encourages his six-year-old son Morgan to read at the small press publishers' and writers' roadshow at the Ground Floor Centre, Hebden Bridge. The book fair, which has also been to Horsforth, Leeds, was organised by the Yorkshire Small Press Centre, run by Ms Anne Price of Luddeston Press, to boost public interest in books which have been written by lesser-known writers and published by less well-known printers.



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# HEBDEN BRIDGE WEB

HebWeb - UK's first community website

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**Discussion Forum**

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**News, Discussion, Info, Features, Events and much more**

**New Sally Wainwright Drama set in Hebden Bridge.** The 6 episodes of *Hot Flush* centre on the lives of five women of a certain age who come together to create a makeshift punk-rock band in order to enter a talent contest. [See BBC report.](#) 24 Aug




**Flood Alleviation Scheme: Trial hole work** a series of trial holes are to be dug around the town during September, October and November, in order to fully map the various utility services beneath. [More info](#) 25 Aug

**Tech Festival returns to Hebden Bridge** for the first time since 2019. Ten years of Wuthering Bytes! 25-27 August 2023. Talks, workshops and live demonstrations designed to feed the curiosity in technology. [Read more](#)



**The Sun and the Northern Lights** - Speaker Martin Lunn told a recent meeting of the



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**LARGE E-BIKE**  
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**THE SMITHERY B&B**  
[Where to Stay](#) (24 Aug)

**2 BED TO LET**  
[Small Ads](#) (23 Aug)

**WANTED: 2-3 BED**  
[Small Ads](#) (23 Aug)

**PAINTER DECORATOR**



## VOTERS GO ON LINE FOR DEBATE

**IN THE political world of sound bites and image makers, it would seem old-style electioneering with public arguments in crowded halls is long gone.**

But for political pundits searching for live serious discussion, there is one arena where the spin doctors are not weaving the political debate - the Hebden Bridge Web.

For as the General Election approaches, democracy has gone on line in the Calder

**By VAL WATTS**

voting for them again?" It is even attracting attention from the other side of the globe. One observer from Borneo wrote: "Found your website while browsing and it seems well laid out. I was looking for some comments with reference to the General Election which I found here: "I am definitely out of touch here in Borneo. Thanks to technology I can even get a say."

The Liberal Democrat candidate Stephen Pearson has made his web debut. "I had actually heard of the existence of this web through one of my friends who makes use of the internet on a regular basis."

But will politics on the internet ever play a significant role in elections?



**"It's another dimension"**