

*An Ant Forward – by Professor Robin Marshall FRS*

I first became aware of what James Maw was capable of during the summer of 1995. As I write, this was 17 years ago and probably 17 years or thereabouts after James became aware of Adam Ant. In that epochal year of 1995, the TV quiz show, University Challenge had been resurrected, with quizmaster Jeremy Paxman consigning whatshisname to oblivion. Trinity College won in a canter and I recall thinking that a member of their team, young Kwasi Kwarteng, would probably run a country (African?) one day. He now looks set to run England. I say England, because that is likely to be all that is left to run in a few years. In 1995, the Master of Trinity College was by chance, simultaneously the President of the Royal Society into whose hallowed marble staircases I had been elected in February of that year. The Master President, Sir Michael Atiyah, thought it would be a wheeze to pit his victorious college team against his choice Royal Society team of old dodderers at a special ‘Royal Society University Challenge’ event at Carlton House Terrace, just off the Mall. Jeremy Paxman was in the chair. I invited James to the event, flexing my newly elected muscles.

If Sir Michael made one mistake on the evening, he ‘crossed the line’ without balance. If you are the most eminent scientific body in the Universe and you decide to bring in a contrasting discipline, you should think carefully who that should be. Biting my tongue at a Fest reception at the research laboratory, DESY in Hamburg in 1974, I congratulated the German President, Walter Scheel, on West Germany’s victory in the football World Cup that summer.

“Ja Danke, Herr Doktor, but I did not kick a single ball and moreover, I would not like to have the team round for dinner.”

Sir Michael was not so astute, and he had invited a ‘comedian’ to the event, who pretended to be the explorer James Cook. The ‘comedian’ was no more a comedian than he was ‘James Cook’. His ploy during the pre-quiz reception was to interrupt private conversations, lean back expansively, displaying his un-Cook-like girth in alpha silver back gorilla mode, and emit:

“I am James Cook, the explorer! Who are you and what, pray, do you do?”

Nothing in life had prepared ‘James Cook’ for the consequences of addressing James Maw in this fashion. Three seconds of silence elapsed before James went for the jugular. Three seconds is a long time. You think you have not been heard and already the initiative has been taken away.

“I produce maps, Sir!

‘James Cook’ rose like a trout to the fly.

“Ah indeed Sir! In my profession, I might be interested in such things. What have you produced recently?” The alpha gorilla girth expanded.

“The A-Z of London Sir; is that of any use to you?

The alpha gorilla girth deflated considerably and the ‘explorer’ could utter no response. James then finished him off. I was reminded of our team of physicists in the Hamburger Fischmarkt at 6 am, skinning smoked eels.

It turned out that ‘James Cook’ did not even know the date of his own birth (7 November 1728), nor the date of his own death (14 February 1779), let alone where he was buried.

By the time he was generously given a lifeline and asked what he had ever discovered, if anything, he was a gibbering idiot. It then seemed churlish to test the poor chap further by asking what he thought of his sailing companions, Sir Joseph Banks, FRS, PRS and the subsequently infamous William Bligh. I really wanted a preview of Bligh, but ‘James Cook’ let James and me down.

The relevance of this yarn to this book lies in the date of publication of its pre-cursor ‘The Adam Ant Story’ and the A-Z of London. Both the 1981 ‘Adam Ant Story’ and the 1981 edition of the A-Z of London were pivotal in their day. But the world is gasping for the 2012 editions. Just as the ‘street jargon’ of 1981, penned by James at the time, has now been largely superseded, some of the streets of London in 1981 have also now disappeared. It is a time to refresh. If we compare what James Maw wrote about Adam Ant in 1981 with what James Maw said to ‘James Cook’ in 1995, you will get the measure of Adam Ant.

I first became aware of Adam Ant by proxy, as it were, during 1981, although it was completely disconnected from this book. The proxy was my daughter, Alison, who became 16 in October of that year. I should have seen it coming sooner, but like many cricket enthusiasts, I had been utterly distracted during the summer when Ian Botham and Bob Willis, steered by Mike Brearley, single handedly wrought the Ashes out the sweaty paws of an Australian team that thought, prematurely, midway through the afternoon of Monday, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1981, that the urn was theirs. Australia had scored 401 in their first innings, to which England had replied miserably with 174. Headingley became a coliseum and

England were asked to follow on and face the Oz lions again. With England 135-7 second time round, the game was over. Yet it wasn't. Step up Botham, 149 and Willis, 8-43 and the rest is archaeology.

I present this detail in the vain hope that some readers will accept my excuse that in 1981, I did not see Adam Ant coming. Nor that he had already come. My daughter had, and during that halcyon summer of 1981, she plotted her outing. This outing was not the family holiday of that year which was spent in a magnificent flat overlooking Bournemouth sea front, exploiting a late cancellation where I even got an extra discount from the owner because he knew me to be a clean, stable, formally dressed scientist, trustworthy with bills. Her outing had to do with hair, ear and nose metal and dress. And Adam Ant.

All I knew was that my daughter liked the sort of sweetish music that did not interest me at the time; music by Depeche Mode, Marc Bolan and especially the Pet Shop Boys. I even smiled benignly at her worship of Marc Bolan, tragically killed before his time by a sycamore tree and an under-inflated tyre. I would choose an oak.

If she listened to Adam Ant at all, and I suspect she did, then it was done covertly on the Sony Walkman that she had brought back from Hamburg the previous year after one of my physics jaunts. She quietly liked the raucous stuff.

The irony is, that all the music I was sniffy about, and which other parents in 1981 were hysterical about, is now part of my iTunes collection (15,000 tracks and rising). I regularly listen to Antstuff in my garden in the South of France.

But whilst I was distracted by a combination of the 1981

Ashes series, and the glittering view of the Channel from a penthouse in Boscombe, she had already made her preemptive strike. My expensive black, woollen Crombie winter coat had been surreptitiously secreted from my wardrobe and given a makeover. She slashed the coat lining with a Stanley knife, but mercifully, not the outer ‘shell (?)’. To overcome its size with respect to her slender frame, she glued a padded coat hanger into the shoulders, using several litres of my Evostick. When she finally emerged, one Friday evening, shortly after the Michaelmas Term had started at the Headington School she attended, she shed her school uniform for the weekend, and took on the appearance of a liquorice all-sort, which had been assembled by a machine, 90 degrees out of phase. Her fluorescent orange spiky hair competed with her fluorescent orange leggings (tights? leg-warmers?) and the two optical spectrum-defying layers sandwiched the black rectangle of my former winter coat between them.

It was pure art. Both she and I are ‘artists’. My school reports for art were far better than those for physics, in which subject I became a professor at the leading physics university of all-time (Manchester). She took a degree in art; damn how I envy her. At the time, (to avoid marital cataclysmic consequences) I had to applaud her style covertly and secretly, almost enviously, although I did honk at her about my Crombie; they don’t make them like that any more, even then.

I had also failed to notice that for the previous month, she had been wearing a day wig for school, under which was her new punk hair style waiting to be unveiled like the latest Aston Martin model at the Motor Show, which I think I went

to in the autumn of that year, 1981, with the boys.

My enduring memory is of her 44 yr old mother, now my ex, stockily running, nay staggering, out of our Abingdon suburban drive, trying to catch up with and stop her daughter going to ‘that place’, whilst completely forgetting that Alison had recently run cross country for Cheshire County and was the Hamburg 1500 m champion for her age. Her mother reached 20 yards before imitating what it looks like when a red hot poker is thrust down the windpipe, whilst Alison swept into the receding distance, a supersonic liquorice all-sort, with Crombie winter coat barely flapping, on her way to an Adam Ant evening at ‘that place’. ‘That place’ was a house in Abingdon, just over the river on the way to Stevenage, an open house for young girls, who could simply show up, bring six Fosters as an entrance ticket and learn from the single female owner, all the things that the single female owner had wanted to do when she was 16, but had not been allowed to.

In the 1981 version of this book on Adam Ant, which I confess I never read at the time (sorry James, but too busy with the *b*-quark), I now note various things that I can relate to. When I became the ‘boss’ in my field, I went to great lengths not to piss on my team in the way that I had been pissed on as a junior. Few people grasp this and I recognise Adam as a fellow spirit for his humanity. If the heavy gang at my laboratory, who could drop 20 tonnes of delicate equipment into place in Hamburg, with a claimed precision of 1 mm, yet did it to a quarter of 1 mm, I would write to director of the laboratory and praise their unparalleled skills, hoping to accelerate their promotion. I see that Adam Ant

held the same philosophy dear, and I salute him.

I also note in the 1981 version, that James had a dig at Northerners, even those in York, a city he holds dear, because they were two years behind the punk times in their dress. James missed a scoop. He should have written and published the national 'Punk Times' and made an early fortune. In Abingdon, my daughter and her contemporaries were, without a doubt, up with the times, yet they pragmatically realised how far they could go and still get away with, in a small conservative town:

'She who punks and runs away, lives to punk another day.'

© *Quote Robin Marshall.*

After all, her family did live next door to the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, who invited us every New Years Day for sherry in front of him and his fireplace.

"Have you ever been to the Reading Drugs Festival young lady?" he enquired of my daughter, stomach thrust out in alpha silver back gorilla mode.

"Erm, drugs?" replied a startled Alison, adjusting her day wig, she who was almost as abstinent as Adam himself

"What? Oh! Agh! WhaddidI say? Um Pop, yes, Pop. The Reading Pop Festival. Pop. Have you ever been? Can I have another sherry, Betty?"

Alison and her friends probably wanted to go further than they did with their dress and knew exactly what they needed to do to match London. But they also wanted to continue the enjoyment for as long as they could in Abingdon.

So to conclude: Adam and James talk a lot about the Antfans in this book. But they don't know everything about them ;).