When and Where Was John Wyndham Born? * 

by David Ketterer

John Wyndham, best known as the author of The Day of the Triffids and The Midwich Cuckoos, has been called the Invisible Man of British Science Fiction. He did not want people to know very much about him. There is, at least, one understandable reason for this. He seems to have been born out of wedlock.1

Fig. 1. The question-begging birth certificate.

( Temple would probably not have known about Grace Isabel Wilson, JBH’s long-time companion, in the similarly meagre room next door.) Years later, on 22 March 1971, responding to a request for information about JBH from the Spanish graduate student Angel-Luis Pujante, Temple mentions, in the third paragraph of his careful and insightful letter, his over-30-year ‘acquaintance’ with JBH (no one ‘except maybe his wife’ ‘really knew him’) and how he ‘Visited him at his bachelor apartment at the Penn Club, only once – so far as I know, I’m the only s-f character who ever did

2 This diary entry was first printed in Joe Patrizio, ‘Extracts from Bill Temple’s Diaries 1955-66,’ Relapse, no. 19 (Autumn 2010): 20. Patrizio is married to William F. Temple’s daughter. A small room at the Penn Club (named for William Penn and founded by Quakers in 1920) was, with a break for the war, JBH’s Bloomsbury home from 1924 to 1930 (at its original location, 8, 9, and 10 Tavistock Square, until 1930, and at 21, 22, and 23 Bedford Square from 1930). He occupied room 45 at the Bedford Square location; he eventually married the school teacher Grace Wilson who lived in the adjoining room 44. Both rooms can be seen in today’s Penn Club. To date, three insufficiently well prepared attempts to make the actually very strong case that JBH’s residence should be marked by a blue plaque have unfortunately failed.

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1 For additional reasons, see David Ketterer, ‘John Wyndham and the Sins of His Father: Damaging Disclosures in Court,’ Extrapolation 46 (Summer 2005): 163-88.

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penetrate to that room, for it was only a room.' (see Appendix 1) (I am grateful to John Baxter for mailing me a photocopies of a carbon copy of this letter – and of its 20 June 1971 follow up – on 14 November 2011.) Temple’s most startling information is communicated in this paragraph on the second page of his first letter to Pujante:

He [JBH] lied – by a year – about his age, to his publishers. I caught him out about it. Accused him of behaving like an actress. He grinned and said: ‘Well, we none of us are getting any younger.’ Odd, I thought – I wouldn’t lie about it. This, I thought was uncharacteristic.  

(Pujante did not pursue this revelation; Temple died in 1989 and his wife in 2008.) Did Temple come across an inscription in one of the books he looked over that Thursday evening – a birthday present (from his mother?) with the year inscribed and an age also inscribed that Temple calculated was one year ahead of the age he had figured from the ‘1903’ birth year specified in all those Penguin capsule bios? Will such an inscribed volume surface some day? Probably not; JBH would have deliberately destroyed the evidence by tearing out and destroying the inscribed page. Alternatively and, I think, much more likely, Temple, on 20 February 1958 seventeen days before his 44th birthday, may simply have mentioned that prospect and JBH, unwell, affected by a glass or two of brandy, and forgetting his official age of 54, may have too speedily replied that he would turn 56 in July. (Temple would, of course, have thought about possible reasons other than vanity for JBH wanting to be viewed as one year younger than he actually was.)

It could follow logically that either JBH was born on 10 July 1902 before his parents’ by ‘Special Licence’ 27 August 1902 marriage at St. Mary’s Parish Church, Ulverston, Lancashire, or (and this is much less plausible) subsequent to that date but before the end of 1902. The 10 July 1902 date could fit with the likelihood that George’s relationship with Gertrude began in 1901, the year that he first met her father according to an anomalous in Grace’s diaries. Assuming that JBH had not told Grace his true birth date about any birth certificate problem.) JBH would have been very shaken at being so unexpectedly caught out if he had (knowingly for much of his life) gone along with the inaccurate birth certificate to prevent anyone figuring out the scandal of his pre-marriage birth on 10 July 1902.

begin on her birthday, 26 August 1948—she destroyed her previous diaries which she believed immature). Grace refers to JBH’s 10 July birthday on that day or in the vicinity of that day but (with three exceptions after his death—see below) she never notes what age he turned. The effect of Temple’s odd allegation is to unmoor JBH’s birth from time as well as space (there is no evidence, aside from the birth certificate, that he was born in Dorridge).

I checked Grace’s diary entry for 20 February 1958 and the entry following:

Thursday February 20th – I am heaps better, but J[ohn] not. Glad of ht[heat from electric fire]


Grace has here skipped three days. The 24 February entry is not cumulative; she visited Hove on the Monday only.

Usually Grace is scrupulous about a diary entry every day. In every other place where a day or more is skipped there is a clear explanation. Here there is no explanation given – or any that can be implied by contextual entries – for the three day silence. It is only Temple’s 20 February 1958 diary entry, combined with his 22 March 1971 letter to Angel-Luis Pujante, that enables that silence to speak. That silent gap is the most important of what I regard as a number of related anomalies in Grace’s diaries.

My guess would be that, on 21 February 1958, a worried JBH told Grace that, the evening before, Temple had mentioned, on the basis of whatever evidence he had stumbled across, the birthday lie (i.e., year of birth) to his Penguin publishers. (Temple would not have known about any birth certificate problem.) JBH would have been very shaken at being so unexpectedly caught out if he had (knowingly for much of his life) gone along with the inaccurate birth certificate to prevent anyone figuring out the scandal of his pre-marriage birth on 10 July 1902.

Assuming that JBH had not told Grace his true birth date before and elaborated on all the implications, Grace would have been as worried – indeed traumatised – as he. Now Temple also knew the truth! He would pass it on! But it seems he did not do so (except perhaps to his wife) until he wrote to Pujante two years after JBH’s death. (It should be noted that Temple had modestly suspected that Wyndham had not ‘enjoyed the jaw’ as much as he had; Temple, of course, would not have known what I now assume to be the real reason albeit he might have guessed at it. But he would have felt guilty about intruding on JBH’s privacy, perhaps after a drink at the Globe, and, in the course of that intrusion,

3 All Pujante’s Wyndham correspondence related to his 1972 University of Barcelona master’s thesis, ‘El mundo de John Wyndham,’ can be located as file Wyndham 14/15 (added to in February 2002) in the John Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool’s Sydney Jones Library. That file includes the ribbon copy of Temple’s 22 March 1971 letter (among the February 2002 additions). I had not focused on the paragraph about JBH’s age until I received John Baxter’s photocopy of what was originally his carbon copy of that letter. I am grateful to Pujante for sending me, in March 2000, copies of his 1972 correspondence with JBH’s widow and his brother Vivian. Neil Pollard now owns the originals of Pujante’s two letters to Temple and the carbon copies of Temple’s two replies.

4 To the best of my knowledge, I own all of Grace’s surviving diaries.
discovering his secret.) Grace could not put any of this in a diary entry for 21 February because she feared that someone (at worst, a biographer?) might eventually read her diary and figure out JBH’s illegitimacy at birth.

She was, I suggest, sufficiently disturbed about the whole thing that she waited until her Monday trip before continuing with her diary as if no gap had occurred. I regard the three day gap as near clinching evidence as is ever likely to be possible (consider Fig. 2).

I did meet and chat with William F. Temple on Saturday, 27 October 1973, at an H. G. Wells Society conference at Spade House, Wells’s Sandgate home in Kent, but, of course, did not then know the questions I would want to ask him in 2012. Only with access to a time machine capable of returning me to that four-decades-back encounter, could I ask Temple the now relevant questions (see Fig. 3).5

We can, however, now construct a plausible relevant chronology for JBH’s mother Gertrude, his father George, and JBH himself. It turns out that a 10 July 1902 birth date works!

12 September 1893: Gertrude Parkes, aged 24, marries Thomas William Hunt, aged 31. He dies five and a bit weeks later on 21 October 1893 of tuberculosis.6

1901: According to The Birmingham Daily Post and Evening Post for 8 March 1913 (reporting on the embarrassing 1913 court case in which George sued his father-in-law), John Israel Parkes, Gertrude’s wealthy father, first met George Beynon Harris at the Wesleyan Chapel in St. Martin’s Street, Edgbaston, Birmingham, because George knew Gertrude’s elder sister Emily.7 It is likely, therefore, that George’s relationship with Gertrude began in 1901.

October 1901: A JBH born on 10 July 1902 would most probably have been conceived at 77 Hagley Road, Edgbaston (George Beynon Harris’s home when his mother died on 5 October 1900) or George’s subsequent home, 15 Greenfield Crescent, Edgbaston (see 27 August 1902 below), or while they were on holiday, possibly in or near Ulverston where he and Gertrude would marry 10 months later. It is possible but very unlikely that Gertrude, aged 32, was living at the home of George aged 38.

1902-1903: The Kelly’s Directory of Birmingham has George Beynon Harris working as a solicitor at Forsyth, Bettinson & Harris, 63 Temple Row, Birmingham.

10 July 1902: John Wyndham, it may be posited, was born illegitimately in Birmingham (probably at Gertrude’s father’s home)? JBH believed he received a presumably post-10-July-1903 Church of England baptism. I and Vernon Brown have not, thus far, been able to locate the church, or the date of that baptism.8


6 See Vivian Beynon Harris, ‘My Brother’ John Wyndham, a Memoir,” transcribed and ed., David Ketterer, Foundation, no. 28 (Spring 1999): 47, n6; and, for further details, the Wednesbury ‘DISTRICT NEWS’ item, ‘DISTRESSING DEATH OF A YOUNG BRIDEGROOM,’ on page 8 of the Birmingham Daily Post for 24 October 1893.

7 “John Wyndham and the Sins of His Father”: 175

8 ‘Religion: I understand that once baptized one cannot cease to be a member of the Church of England, but only backslide, so I suppose I must be c of E. In fact, I was confirmed in it under pressure of schoolmasters at age of 14 [or 15?]. Went to first Communion the following Sunday. Was so shocked and nauseated that I have never been since.’ This is part of JBH’s answer to question 2 of Sam
26 August 1902: The entry for the union of George Beynon Harris and Gertrude Hunt was issued by the Faculty Office of the Archbishop of Canterbury according to the calendar of marriage allegations. Since 1900, such sworn allegations for ‘Special Licence’ marriages have not been retained by the Lambeth Palace Library. Consequently we cannot know why a Special Licence was sought, or George’s or Gertrude’s home parishes.

27 August 1902: George Beynon Harris marries Gertrude [Parkes] Hunt by ‘Special Licence’ at St. Mary's Parish Church, Ulverston, just south of the Lake District. George’s address is given on the marriage certificate as 15 Greenfield Crescent, Birmingham. Gertrude would, it may be assumed, have had six plus weeks to recover from giving birth. But the marriage would not have legitimated JBH’s birth if he was born on 10 July 2002; only the 1926 Legitimacy Act did that.

27 August-25 December 1902: In the 6 March 1913 Times report of the court case, it is stated that ‘Between his [George Beynon Harris’s] marriage and Christmas, 1902, Mr. John I. Parkes [George’s father-in-law] stayed with the plaintiff and his wife.’ It is much more likely that the reverse applied. George and Gertrude (and their baby?) stayed at ‘Mayfield’, Mr. Parkes very large home at 60 Harborne Road in Birmingham.

26 December 1902-August 1903: It is possible that during this period and perhaps for some months beyond,
Gertrude (with her baby?) and perhaps George were living at some unknown address in Dorridge, south of Birmingham. A Joseph Henry Parkes (then the only ‘Parkes’ in Dorridge or the adjoining Knowle) owned Avon Lodge on Arden Road in Dorridge at this time but I have not been able to establish a link with Gertrude’s family. There is no electoral roll or other record for the residence of George in Dorridge. Grace, of course, could not vote until 1918 with the passage of the Representation of the People Act but there is also no non-electoral roll record of her living in Dorridge either.

14 August 1903: The 10 July 1903 birth of John Beynon Harris is registered but no specific Dorridge place of birth or address for the father appear on the birth certificate.

1904-1908: Kelly’s has the Harris family living at the newly built 37 Fountain Road, Birmingham.

1906-10: Kelly’s has George Beynon Harris working as a barrister at 77 Colmore Row, Birmingham.

It is possible that JBH’s father, a strong-minded maverick, had forged the mysterious ‘antique’ document known as the ‘Lucas Annotation no. 1’ (that has become part of current Welsh folklore) involving one John Lucas the pirate in order to link the posher Stouthal branch of the Lucas family to George’s mother Ruth. He certainly seems to have been responsible for composing the outrageously fake Lucas lineage stated on the tombstone of Ruth Harris (‘Granddaughter of Richard Lucas Esquire, with whom terminated the lineal male line of the senior (or Port-Eynon) Branch of the family of Lucas of Stouthall in this Parish’). It would at least be consistent if George were also responsible for what could be the fake date and place of birth on his first son’s birth certificate.

The chronology above implies five very dramatic linked scenes: two in Gertrude’s life, followed by one shared by Gertrude and her first son JBH, followed by two in JBH’s life. (1) There would have been the shock and grief caused by the death of Gertrude’s apparently ideal first husband, Thomas Hunt, in October 1893, the month after their shared-faith marriage. (2) It can be envisaged that, in late 1901, the widowed and childless Gertrude would have had to inform her parents that she was pregnant by a not especially prosperous Welshman of dubious background. Eight years after the death of Thomas Hunt, she would have been susceptible to George’s advances. (3) It is likely that Gertrude would have informed JBH during one of his early-in-the-war visits to her Eastbourne or later Sidmouth hotels (in Sidmouth, the Bedford Hotel), that he was actually a year older than he thought he was. She would have speculated that this information might well have prevented his being called up and subsequently killed.

From 3 September 1939, the National Services (Armed Forces) Act imposed a conscription liability on all men aged 18 to 41. It is most likely that she would have imparted her dramatic news on some date between September 1939 and June 1941; by the latter date, 40-year-old men were being conscripted. However, in 1942, all male British subjects aged between 18 and 51 were liable to be conscripted. (According to JBH’s military service record, aged 40 or 41, he became an Army Private on 30 November 1943.) (4) The 20 February 1958 evening when William F. Temple unexpectedly dropped in on JBH at his Penn Club room. And (5) the fraught scene with Grace the next morning when JBH explains what happened the previous evening. I do not think that he had previously informed Grace about what I assume to be his true age following (3) above, his mother’s revelation. I do not think he (or his mother) ever informed Vivian. (Dramatic scenes 3 and 5 constitute deliberate revelation stages 1 and 2; the publication of this article constitutes the third stage.)

It follows from all of this that, from approximately 1940 onwards, JBH would have been conscious of the need to maintain an official version of himself while aware of a true version one year older. There was a fantasy/fake JBH and a real/true one. Did he ever slip up about his age (in addition to what seems to be the occasion on 20 February 1958)? When answering the 30 questions that the sf historian Sam Moskowitz (preparing to publish a biographical profile) mailed him in 1964, JBH typed, in answer to the first question, his official birth date. But in answer to question 3 about any brothers or sisters, he made what I regard as a tell-tale slip and typed ‘One brother, Vivian. 2½ years younger’, a one year error. Moskowitz repeats this age misinformation in his published profile and April-Luis Pujante rounds it to Vivian’s being born ‘two years later’ in a draft of the biographical chapter of his M.A. thesis that he sent to Vivian for correction. In a list of April 1972 corrections, Vivian wrote ‘I was born November 16th 1906 so I think that is three years [and four months] later.’ Or four years and four months? Did JBH mistakenly count from one year forward from 1903 instead of from one year back? (I have a three years younger brother. While I have my mental faculties, I would never say or write that he was 10 I am grateful to Neil Pollard for highlighting [in an email dated 11 June 2015] JBH’s letter to Grace of 11 April 1941 which includes this World War I recollection: ‘It seems odd to think that 22 years ago I had registered and at odd times was speculating on the possibilities of military future – it was rather impressed on me just then as I had known two youths of 17 who had short circuited the usual process by shooting themselves – and here we are again’ (see file Wyndham 10/5/19 in the John Wyndham Archive, Special Collections, University of Liverpool). If JBH had been born in 1903 then in 1919 – the year in question 22 years before 1941 – he would only have been turning 16 not 17, the relevant age that he mentions. However if he knew he’d been born in 1902 then he would have been about to turn 17.

11 I am grateful to the late Sam Moskowitz for providing me with photocopies of his questionnaire and, with JBH’s accompanying 22 January 1964 typed letter, JBH’s typed replies.


two years younger. But then I do not have to remember that I have an official birth date and an actual birth date one year earlier.) Moskowitz mailed JBH the copy of Amazing Stories that contained the John Wyndham profile and in a separate covering letter dated 21 June 1964 asked for 'any corrections . . . you would like to make' for the anticipated book version. JBH did not supply any; had he corrected his age gap mistake he would have drawn attention to its oddity. And, assuming that he had made a carbon copy of his answers to Moskowitz’s questions, he may have decided to destroy it. The ribbon copy questions are to be found in the original Wyndham Archive but no carbon copy of the answers. I later provided the Archive with a photocopy of the ribbon copy that Moskowitz had copied for me. Moskowitz was lucky to get those answers. JBH provided no further information to anyone else. As I recall in the ‘Preface’ to my completed work as yet-unpublished TROUBLE WITH TRIFFIDS: THE LIFE AND FICTION OF JOHN WYNDHAM, when, two months before his death, JBH received a request for biographical information for the volume eventually published as World Authors 1950-1975, JBH either did not respond or responded in the negative without retaining a carbon copy.13 His having typed an age error five years earlier in answering one of Moskowitz’s questions (on top of recalling Temple’s allegation) would have spooked him.

In a handwritten memoir fragment, Vivian gives his brother’s birth date as “August” [instead of July] 1903.’ Was he confusing the month of their parents’ marriage (or the month JBH’s birth was registered) with the month of JBH’s birth? In the same place, Vivian inaccurately states that his brother was born ‘in Fountain’s Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham.’14

JBH’s war letters to Grace (Wyndham Archive box 10) include one dated 10 July 1943. After thanking Grace for her present—a nice little registered packet from a Well-Wisher’, he continues,

So here I sit – on a milestone labelled ‘II Score’. Very queer. I don’t feel a bit like two score. That surprises the internal me which cannot give up expecting some kind of change. It shouldn’t do, of course, because nobody within sight [where JBH works at Postal and Telegraph Censorship] behaves as if he were more than 22 – his only change being that he wears his various false fronts for different proportions of his day than he did when he was actually 22 – but still, it does.

Perhaps I am older than a feel. If I weren’t I might not find this time of concentration on bigger and better things so adolescently tedious.

My assumption is that JBH knew he was actually 41 but that Grace believed he had turned 40. He cannot let her know the ‘truth’; instead he blurs age 40 with ages younger and older. It is a way of playing with his being both older than he feels and older than Grace thinks. His oddly conspicuous use of the Roman numeral ‘II’, a doubled capital letter ‘I’, may be understood as implying a split self, one aged 40, the other 41.

It seems significant, as noted above, that during JBH’s lifetime, Grace notes on the day or contextually his 10 July birthday in each year of her 1949-68 diaries (except for one) but she never mentions what age he was turning. The Australian JBH collector and researcher Neil Pollard (who drew my attention to JBH’s above 10 July 1943 letter) asks the right question in his email letter to me of 5 August 2013. I had asked him to check a version of this essay that I had sent him as an email attachment. I am grateful for his corrections and for posing this question:

[D]oes Grace’s diary for JBH’s birthday in 1962 (his real 60th) suggest a greater or lesser celebration than in other years? If they both knew it was really his 60 th[,] did they play it down (because he didn’t want to be 60) or make a little more of it because it was a milestone?

The answer is that they played it down totally. Grace makes no mention of JBH’s birthday on 10 July 1962 or in any nearby entry. In order to appreciate the force of this omission, it is necessary to check the 19 diary appearances of that birthday in JBH’s lifetime and the one complete non-appearance.

In her entry for 10 July 1949, Grace records that ‘For his birthday we went to the little Acropolis [restaurant in London] where I had good kebab.’ On the same date in 1950, she writes ‘J’s birthday, and he had his tooth out.’ On the same date in 1951, this appears: ‘J’s birthday. He had his peach [a favourite fruit] yesterday!’ On the same date in 1952, she simply writes ‘J’s b.day.’ Grace did not normally go in for expensive presents but, on 10 July 1953, she remarks that ‘J seems pleased with the F & M [Fortnam and Mason] seal wallet.’ They enjoyed a birthday evening out. It would seem that, on what Grace believed to be his fiftieth birthday, they did mark the milestone. On 10 July 1954, she writes ‘I got a peach for J and the Economist, which he is pleased with. . . . Dinner at Rule’s . . . .’ On the same date in 1955 this record appears: ‘J’s birthday . . . J’s birthday dinner at Akrop[olis] – very agreeable indeed.’ On the same date in 1956, in1957, and in1958 (when, I assume, on 21 February, she finally knew JBH’s true age and that William Temple also knew it), these entries appear: ‘J’s b.day . . . . we went to Akrop . . . ; ’J’s birthday. [W]e are going out to dinner . . . Akrop – lovely food’; and ‘J’s birthday . . . Akrop again . . . ’. In 1959 JBH is staying at his brother’s flat in Hythe over his birthday period: Grace records ’J to Hythe’ on 9 July, does not mention his birthday on 10 July, mentions ’J ret.’ on 11 July, and then, on 12 July, mentions ’J’s bday dinner at Akrop.’ Grace’s 10 July 1960 entry reads as follows: ’J’s birthday. I got some peaches yesterday . . . J’s birthday dinner at Akrop.’ In 1961 JBH once more stays with his brother over his birthday: ’J to Hythe tomorrow’, Grace writes on 6 July and ‘J back’ on 11 July. Although no

13 The article here published derives from the first section of Chapter 11 of TROUBLE WITH TRIFFIDS entitled ‘The Truth Will Out’

14 See page 44 of the fragment of JACK AND ME: GROWING UP WITH JOHN WYNDHAM, pages 44-48 of Vivian Beynon Harris’s memoir material cited in note 6 above.
mention is made of his birthday on 10 July, Grace is looking for cool summer pyjamas as a birthday present on 7 July and on 8 July, at a Harrods’ sale, she ‘against my better judgment bought trimmest pyjamas – could not think of another present.’

But on 10 July 1962, although JBH is at the Penn Club alongside Grace, there is absolutely no mention in Grace’s diary of JBH’s birthday (his sixtieth?) and no related mention on any nearby date (see Fig. 4). This is what she records on 10 July 1962:

Royal [Throat, Nose, and] Ear [Hospital]. such a nice atmosphere – Mr Savanne! He had my chart from 5 yrs. ago and was a perfect dear – Eczema! drums not perforated: hearing quite good: was I delighted. Heal’s for a lovely [chin-jaw – teak Danish & elm for bedroom – colours in my mind – wonderful. Blue cloth for china. Spent kindly wrote so I answered her.

Worried unnecessarily about a hearing problem, she is focusing on leaving her too-long-familiar pokey room in the Penn Club in 1963 and how her and J’s new home should be furnished. As can be seen in the photograph of the relevant diary page, both JBH and Grace would have been reminded of advancing age and mortality by the death of Joan Brownlie, the wife of Robert Lusty, the man who was responsible for the prestigious London publisher Michael Joseph Limited accepting The Day of the Triffids (see the diary entries for 26 June and for 1 and 11 July).15 (Knighted in 1969, Lucky was the Deputy Chairman of Michael Joseph when he moved on in 1956.) Clearly for more than a purely personal reason, JBH’s sixtieth birthday (assuming that it was not his fifty-ninth) was one to forget. I regard Grace’s diary entry for 10 July 1962 as the second most important anomaly among a number of her related entries.

10 July 1963 is celebrated: ‘have given J a special drill. [P]leaches this morning & dinner tonight.’ This was just before their 26 July 1963 registry marriage and move to a modest house named Oakridge in Steep, Hampshire. Bedales, the one school JBH attended which he regarded as a virtual utopia, is in Steep. On 10 July 1964 Grace notes ‘J’s birthday’ and his Steep best friend Harry “Biff” Barker (who lived at Row Cottage) coming over for dinner and bringing a ‘red & green vintage car for J.’ It is not clear whether or not Grace had bought this car for J. In 1965 JBH’s birthday is not recorded in Grace’s 10 July diary entry but on the preceding Friday, 9 July, she mentions having ‘decided to have J’s b.day dinner to-night’ and a consequent drive to Chilgrove [about nine miles south-east of Steep] for J’s ‘official’ birthday [dinner, presumably at the White Horse pub—see Grace’s 1968 entry below]. This is the third and final nearby-only birthday reference. Grace’s 10 July 1966 entry does not mention the word ‘birthday’ but it opens with ‘V[jivian] sent J instant camera [as a present] & he took a picture of me at the front door . . . .’ They go to the Barkers at Row Cottage for dinner after which ‘J kindly said why [not]go to White Horse [for drinks that he paid for]? On 10 July 1967 Grace records that ‘I gave J the Bewick J mug I got in Winchester’ and ‘J’s b.day dinner at West

15 On 11 July 1962 Grace leaves this diary record: ‘J much moved by the service for Joan – which he had not expected.’ Joan was JBH’s favourite female name. It is the female name that crops up most frequently in his published and unpublished fiction (followed by Mary and Sally). Joan [Brownlie] Lucky’s death would have reminded him of a Joan in his own life. His beautiful first cousin, Dorothy Joan Parkes (1902-1966)—known as Joan—was (it may be figured out) one of his two Mrs Rights who each found someone righter (see note 18 below).

On 11 July 1962 Joan Lusty (according to the England and Wales Death Index) and Joan Parkes were both aged 59; Joan Parkes was born on 25 October 1902. The other Mrs Right seems to have been the author Mary (known as Molly) Cathcart Borer (1906-94). For JBH’s ‘I met the right person twice’ claim, see the John Burrows’ interview, ‘Living Writers—4: John Wyndham,’ John o’ London’s Weekly 70 (2 March 1961): 225.
Meon [about eight miles west of Steep]. . . . The nineteenth and final JBH birthday that Grace was able to celebrate (as recorded in her surviving diaries) was on 10 July 1968: “Good Food Guide” my only mingy present for J – very few at White Horse Chilgrove & pleasant dinner.’

JBH died of a heart attack on 11 March 1969 aged, I believe, 66, not 65 as his death certificate and all subsequent references (except this one) state.

In Grace’s 1969-88 diaries following JBH’s death, there are three occasions where she does mention the official age he would have turned had he lived. The first is on 10 July 1972, the day he would have turned 70 if my interpretation of the evidence is correct: ‘J would not have wanted to be 69. & I don’t much. . . I must read all J’s birthdays.’ (She would have reviewed the diary entries I quote from in my preceding three paragraphs.) Did Grace understand that she was actually covering for J’s seventieth birthday, the true age he (like me in 2012) did not want to be? The second occasion is this entry for “Wednesday July 11th [1973]”: ‘J would have been 70 [actually 71?]. He wouldn’t have liked it even if writing [I am muddled with dates as usual] PB. Malcolm in transforming to love - I should try someone else & I am not really sorry. Horrible too – little too soon! I want to be loved and want an ‘filing - local v. fixed idea. ’

‘Wednesday July 11th’ written as in the night: ‘养老保险’ (the character of Grace’s name in Chinese) – no spelling – clear handed. Bombsfire after holidays. He was at my cancelled cliff. So I came manage & am digesting what I was told - but it is all converse making. Letters from India [for TA’s here]: They more in Reading in next sight. Marriage a partnership. ‘Bailey’s 99’ lovely value.

There are obvious logical threads to be traced between

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JBH’s sense of a split self (an official and a real self) and the following plot elements: the human doubles in the parallel worlds of the Time Schism Love Stories, the cloned Nazi duplicates of Plan for Chaos (a 1948-49 novel posthumously published in 2009), and the single-minded, blond(e) haired (Aryan?) Children of The Midwich Cuckoos.

Neil Pollard acutely noticed a couple of one year date discrepancies in the longest and most intricate of JBH’s parallel worlds stories, the 1961 “Random Quest” in Consider Her Ways and Others. The laboratory accident that causes the JBH-style protagonist Colin Trafford to be transported to a parallel world occurs in 1953 or 1954: “Received injuries in a laboratory demonstration accident in 1953” (Penguin p. 134); regarding a newspaper, “there was some reassurance of a kind, at the top, for it read: ‘Daily Mail, London, Wednesday 27 January 1954’. So it was at least the same day [not “date”, i.e., day and year] – the one we had fixed for the demonstration at the labs” (p. 144); and, later the same day at the Savage Club, “I went over to the periodicals table, and brought back the New Statesman, dated 22 January 1954” (p.150). The marriage of Otilie Harshom occurred in 1949 or 1950: “Well, he went on, ‘obviously you will have realised by now that that Mrs Trafford was born Otilie Harshom. It happened in 1928, and she married that Colin Trafford in 1949” (p. 159); and “I glanced at my watch – and there was a thing, too! It was a very nice watch, gold, with a crocodile strap, and hands that stood at twelve-thirty, but I had never seen it before. I took it off and looked at the back. There was a pretty bit of engraving there; it said: ‘C. for ever O. 10. X.50.’ And it jolted me quite a little, for 1950 was the year I was married – though not in October, and not to anyone called O.” (p. 145). Neil’s conclusion strikes me as very reasonable: “Most of JBH’s works are precisely detailed but these date differences suggest either a bit of a rush in some sections, or maybe a subconscious year variation which he was used to implementing because of his actual birth date” (23 November 2016 email to Ketterer). I would only add that the two one year “discrepancies” are (as Neil’s word choice above suggests) more likely to be deliberate variations (akin to Prime Minister Butler and other diversifications).

If the one year alternatives are not slips but intentional, it becomes even more significant that “Random Quest” ends with a truth revealing slip of the tongue akin to what seems to have been JBH’s true age admission to Temple. Searching for the his-world Otilie Harshom in Ottawa, the widower Colin Trafford refers to the widowed Belinda Gale as “Otilie.” Her startled mother then explains how Belinda could indeed have been named Otilie Harshom, the object of his search.

It is also important to recall that the son born in Stowaway to Mars to Joan Shirning and the Martian Vaygan is illegitimate. Joan and Vaygan were not married! The times do not allow the mother to live. Feisty Joan dies in childbirth. JBH’s identification with Vaygan (and Vaygan II if the son is so named) is implied if “Vaygan” is understood as a combination of letters and sounds from John/Whynham/Beynon and Vivian (JBH’s brother) plus the ‘G’ of George and Gertrude (and Grace). All those strange Midwich Children are also illegitimate if all the ‘mothers’ had been impregnated by alien sperm or had incubated alien foetuses. Although the conception or incubation occurred on a single day (27 September 1956) the babies are born on different days during the following June and early July. (The last birth referred to in Cuckoos, that of the child carried by the protagonist Zellaby’s second wife, occurs in July, probably on 10 July, JBH’s own birthday; this male child is not an illegitimate cuckoo.) In both Stowaway and Cuckoos, birth certificate issues are not raised. However, the christening issue is raised in Cuckoos. During the christening exchange, we learn that one of the Children is named Theodore (gift of God). We do not learn the names of the other 60 Children just as we are not informed about the name of Zellaby’s son. Theodore might, then, be regarded as the group mind name of the Children.

JBH would have lied about his age to Penguin to avoid the stigma (not much of a factor today) of being born illegitimate primarily to protect his mother. That would have been the most important reason for his not wanting a biography. The 1913 court case would have been the second most important.

In the context of their parents’ traumatic 1911 separation, it is not surprising that both JBH and his younger brother, Vivian Beynon Harris, did not ‘believe in’ marriage. Vivian also had a long-time companion, Lila Gann. In the latter part of his life, Vivian, who never married, shared a bunker-like two flat house facing the sea with Lila in Hythe on the south coast. She had the top floor flat. JBH’s response to his being born illegitimate (assuming that the compelling evidence above is persuasive) was to rationalistically question the legitimacy of marriage itself via, for example, his spokesman, Gordon Zellaby, in The Midwich Cuckoos (1957):

It is true that the institution of marriage as it is proclaimed by Church and state displays a depressingly mechanistic attitude of mind towards partnership – one not unlike, in fact, that of Noah. The human spirit, however, is tough, and it quite often happens that love is able to survive this coarse, institutional thumbing. 18

In spite of his negative view of marriage, JBH did marry Grace in 1963. But this was, for him at least, essentially for pragmatic reasons. As noted above, they moved after their registry office marriage from the Penn Club to the small Hampshire village of Steep (home of his beloved school, Bedales). His idea was not to set tongues wagging. As an exceptionally reserved and private man, that was the last thing he would have wanted.

But that is not the final consideration with regard to the illegitimacy issue. JBH would always carefully weigh every logical possibility when revising his plots. Consequently, he would have explored the real-life

possibility that his very own existence was the consequence of rape. Although it is indeed probable that, in 1901, George Harris and Gertrude Parkes were very much in love and that the sexual act that led to JBH's conception was fully consensual, it is possible (given the newspaper record of the 1913 court case of ambitious and aggressive – even rake-like – George's affairs with women) that that was not the case. I believe that the plot of Stowaway to Mars (with its 'gap' in the description of the 'romance' on Mars between Joan and Vaygan) implies the Darwinian, species-survival case for rape. The very same dying Mars rationale could apply with regard to the rape of all the Midwich women of childbearing age. If JBH's father had raped his mother (on 27 September 1901?), JBH would have wondered if the facts of his own existence and that of his fiction were adequate justifications.

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19 See, eventually I hope, Chapter 4 of my TROUBLE WITH TRIFFIDS: THE LIFE AND FICTION OF JOHN WYNDHAM — 'The Case for Rape in Stowaway to Mars: Joan Shirning and Dorothy Joan Parkes.' See note 13 above.
Appendix 1

The ribbon copy of William F. Temple's 22 March 1971 letter to Angel-Luis Pujante
(University of Liverpool John Wyndam Archive file 14.15).

Dear Senor Pujante,

Your letter is undated, so I don't know how long it's been on the way. As you may know, this country was shaken by a total post office strike some 2 months ago, which has only lately ended. I'm being deluged with a 2 months' accumulation of foreign mail.

I was acquainted with John Wyndham (pen-name of John Beynon Harris) for well over 30 years. I say "acquainted" because I can't claim I really knew him. I doubt if anyone did, except maybe his wife, to any depth. For he carried the English characteristic of reserve to an extreme. He would talk about anything except himself - unlike most authors, who can talk of little else!

We exchanged no more than half a dozen letters. I dined with him thrice. Visited him at his bachelor apartment, at the Penn Club, only once - so far as I know, I'm the only s-f character who ever did penetrate to that room, for it was only a room. But I did meet and talk with him hundreds of times over the decades at the WHITE HORSE and the GLOBE -- London public houses which were haunts of s-f fans. But we talked only about general subjects -- including, of course, writing.

Politically, he was 100% true blue Tory (Conservative). He was naturally courteous, an English gentleman. He -- especially in his later years -- had difficulty in finding new ideas for his stories. This puzzled me, as I told him -- new ideas always came easily to me. What I found tough was the sheer hard labour of getting them down on paper, in thousands of words.

We both admired H.G. Wells, and to some extent copied him. John did what Wells did -- make a fantastic idea, like, say, a Martian appearing in Piccadilly Circus, sound plausible. In this I think John had no peer -- except H.G. himself.

In THE KRAKEN WAKES there are some atmospheric passages describing London being flooded which are comparable with Wells. It's really a better novel than the TRIPFIDS, which has a plot construction flaw -- mankind being blinded by an accident at the same time as the Triffids begin to proliferate. Too much of a coincidence, as John admitted when I accused him of it.

I also accused John of re-writing Wells's THE WAR OF THE WORLDS over and over - the Menace to Mankind theme. Not quite fairly, as I admitted in an article about him. But he loved to
introduce me to people as the man who accused him of plagiarising Wells.

Nevertheless, I think he did, to some extent. His last novel, CHOCKY, was an admixture of Wells's STAR-BEGOTTEN and Olaf Stapledon's ODD JOHN. Before that, he'd been working desperately for years on a novel he called WEB, about intelligent spiders, communicating by ESP, spreading out from an island and methodically conquering Earth. Whether he realised it or not, it was another Wells admixture: from the short stories, THE EMPIRE OF THE ANTS and THE VALLEY OF SPIDERS - with a contribution from David H. Keller's THE HUMAN TERMINES. It never really worked out, and he was most distressed when his publishers, Michael Joseph, rejected it.

Around this time he kept telling my wife and myself that creatively he had dried up. Also, after nearly a lifetime of bachelorhood in central London, he asked our opinion about marrying and moving into the rural countryside, which he always loved. We advised both measures. He took them and I don't think he regretted them, late in life. He moved, with his wife, to a village called Fleet, in Hampshire. I may be wrong about this, but I've an idea it was near his school, Bedales, perhaps the earliest of the permissive or progressive schools in England, whose influence was always with him. One of his school-fellows there was George Sanders, that typically English film star, who appeared in the film of John's MIDWICH CUCKOOS - called THE VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED. Another was Robert Lusty (now Sir Robert Lusty, Chairman of the large publishing firm, Hutchinson's), who published all John's novels when he (Lusty) was manager at Michael Joseph.

One thing I always envied about John was a private income which, after his early years, enabled him to be free and independent, although not rich, and so have the time to write - whereas most of the rest of us s-f authors have to cope with full-time, exhausting jobs, which leave us only the drags of time and energy with which to write. Moreover, he never had family responsibilities.

In that he was lucky - or was he? He had no children. In his bachelor days he was a lonely man. We used to part late at night - often midnight - he to his lonely womb, where everything was taken care of for him, at the Penn Club - me to my suburban home and family. Even then the contrast struck me. He had so few possessions: He had, for instance, very few books in his rooms. My house in the suburbs was packed with books - and this one, here, far more so. How could an author live with so few books? But he was quite well read - I suppose he depended upon the libraries.

He lied - by a year - about his age, to his publishers. I caught him out about it. Accused him of behaving like an actress. He grinned and said: "Well, we none of us are getting any younger." Odd, I thought -- I wouldn't lie about it. This, I thought, was uncharacteristic.
Three years before he died (of a heart attack) he had a heart attack while mowing his lawn at Fleet. When I mentioned it to him, he said it was nothing serious at all—grossly exaggerated. A mere fainting fit. Underestimating, like a typical Englishman, to the last.

I still miss him very much. When I was a youngster, I read his stories in the Hugo Gernsback pulps and thought them fine. I still do, for that period. He was among the FIRST of the Few—long before s-f became a recognized and accepted branch of writing. We were all Weirdies in those days.

One thing he had which stood out even in those days—a polished style. I often envied it, and told him so.

One person who could tell you more about John is Walter Gillings, 115 Wanstead Park Road, Cranbrook, Ilford, Essex, England. He was editor of TALES OF WONDER, the British s-f mag. which published so many of John’s early stories. I remember him telling me once about John turning up on his doorstep plaintively inquiring why Walter had rejected one of his stories...

Then there is Ted Carnall, former editor of NEW WORLDS, 17 Burwash Road, Plumstead, London, S.E.18, and his friend, Les Flood, of the Fantasy Bookshop, who both visited John in his last days at Fleet.

Sorry not to be more helpful. Sorry, also, to be so late in replying—but blame that on our postal strike. Hope this is not too late for your thesis.

Kind regards,

William F. Temple

PS. Yesterday, our son, Cliff, flew back from San Sebastian. He had flown there to report on an athletics contest for the SUNDAY TIMES—he’s a sports reporter. En route, his plane had been diverted to Bilbao, which meant an 80-mile journey by road to San Sebastian. This was his first trip to Spain. He liked it—and the smiling, helpful Spaniards—very much.

PPS. In a fan magazine, STARDOCK, No. 3, I which unfortunately I do not have a copy, there’s an article I complete check list of all John’s published work (called John Wyndham, 1903-1968, by Mike Ashley) which would help you a lot. Address to the Editor, STARDOCK, 5 St. John’s Wood Terrace, St. John’s Wood, London, NW 8, England.