

Val's Grand Day Out!

The year is 2031. Val has been standing at Boots Corner for over 2 years answering every enquiry. She has become a friend to everyone, and most Cheltenham people would be upset if you referred to her as a 'robot' or a 'humanoid'. No, she is Val to everyone. She is an **Intelligent Street Assistant**, not only able to answer every kind of question, but also having nearly-human sympathies and intuitions, thanks to her advanced 'neural engine'. And she never tires, even though she works 24/7.

Cheltenham is still home to its Festivals in 2031. There have been changes at the Racing Festival. Robot jockeys have arrived, though racegoers' preferences mean that prestige races such as the Gold Cup are restricted to human riders. The robot jockeys are allowed to visit the town. Val has encountered them, but she finds them rather unintelligent creatures! But she thinks much the same about the human jockeys.

This year the Race Course management has broken with tradition, and invited the Town Council to choose a Cheltonian to present the Gold Cup to the winning owner. First thoughts were that this should be the Mayor, but it was quickly decided that local people should choose from a list, including the Mayor, in online voting. Someone then had the bright idea that voters should be able to make their own choice by writing in a name - forgetting about the 'Boaty McBoatface' affair, and wrongly thinking that the Mayor's prospects of election would be improved!

Well someone then tweeted "What about Val; she'd be just as good as the Mare (sic) - or any of those fancy Society ladies". And the idea caught on through Facebook and Twitter and "Nextdoor in Cheltenham" - and even through chats between senior citizens using old-fashioned telephones.

The result came out. The winner was Val, her name having been written in by 26,453 voters. The Mayor was 2nd, with 19,219 votes. A distant 3rd was the u3a Chairperson, with 1,238 votes and the rest were nowhere.

So it had to be Val. The Race Course was told that Val would be able to handle the Gold Cup safely, and could be trusted to make appropriate remarks when making the presentation. A retired engineer remembered the Popemobile and with the help of his Cheltenham u3a group he built an eco-friendly pedal-powered Valmobile.

On Gold Cup day, Joe arrived at Boots Corner pedalling the Valmobile. He gave Val a special polish and a brand new battery and then installed her in the plexiglass compartment. Joe then pedalled the Valmobile along to Martin & Co, to collect the Gold Cup for Val to carry. Then off they went to the Racecourse, with a police electric motor-cycle escort. They were accompanied by waves and toots all the way, finally passing in front of the crowded grandstand in the lull between races.

Val made many new friends that afternoon. Then, when the Cheltenham Gold Cup race ended, Val was guided to the Presentation Platform. Shortly after that she heard the announcement "The Honourable Nigel Wykehambury-Ffoulkes will be receiving the Gold Cup on behalf of his mother, the owner of **Bright Butterfly**, Lady Cynthia Cholmondeley". Val presented the cup, and knew that a little conversation was expected. "How is Lady Cholmondeley. Did she watch the televised race at home in the Dower House". Chinless Nigel briefly replied. Val's next words were for Nigel's whimsically behatted wife. "Everyone has heard of your daughter, Clodagh Wykehambury-Ffoulkes and her recent marriage to Mr Ronald Smith. How is their business going?" Nigel looked glum - and even glummer when his beaming wife answered "Ron's done some luvverly tiling in the Dower House loos, and put in a gold bidet for gran ". There was silence - and she was quickly ushered away before the presentations to the Trainer and Jockey.

Joe soon came along and took Val back to Boots Corner in the Valmobile. Late that night, when there were no people around, Hal called across to Val. "How did it go, Val?". Val replied "Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned Ron Smith, the plumber. But it was A Grand Day Out!"