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1. December 2016 Competition

The December competition with clues by Puck and cracker grid by Sirius with a Christmas Cracker theme, was won by Alison Ramage and Andre Sonnet of Saltcoats. Excellent solving!

Amongst the conventional themed clues there were those that required a thematic treatment after solving. In the manner of pulling a cracker, first and last letters were removed and then the contents went bang in an anagram.

Feedback included:

What a cracker! Thank you very much for another year of super puzzles, ending with your/Puck's brilliant invention for Christmas. So much to enjoy here and what a lot of clever twists and turns.

Pauline and I hope you and Mrs Sirius have a great Christmas and we look forward to more puzzling next year.

By the way, it's nice to have the printed calendar again. Apart from its aesthetic appeal, it acts as a reminder to do each month's puzzle. JM

This was a super crossword and testing in the extreme. Full marks to your good-self as the grid constructor; simply outstanding. Plus excellent cluing from Puck. I started it Christmas morning thinking that I'll move onto Elgar's Telegraph Toughie later. I was still trying to tie off the loose ends on Boxing day evening.

As with the very best thematic crosswords there were a few layers to peel. First the cracker contents with the trickiest one for me being the mischievous 28 6di MOTTO where Puck the setter cleverly misdirected us with Puck the character.



December
2016
Puck
Sirius

Next the jokes which were great fun especially the "Knock Knock" example. Then the modifications which really were very difficult, my favourite being 33 32di AD LIB with definition "like a Horse" for RIDABLE raising a smile. But perhaps my favourite clue was 16 8d HALF TWO which took far too long for the tooth hurty penny to properly drop.

A fitting end to a great year of 3D crosswords. Many thanks AG

Had a great time solving Puck's 3D with a bit of stuttering and knocking before I got my engine restarted with a slight push from Who? Dr, of course. Many thanks, Puck. PC

Another fabulous puzzle. Thank you Eric, Puck and Nora. Thank you everyone involved in 3D crosswords. I relish them all! JR

I'm afraid I could not fathom 'The Rough and Tumble' and so had to makes guesses at the modified answers. JS

We didn't think we would get anywhere with this puzzle. Perhaps we haven't!
JM & DL (Janet and Dot cracked it!)

What a cracker!

Thank goodness you allowed extra time to complete this one.

It has been sitting half-done for weeks. Occasionally added to, put aside in disgust, lost, found, lost again, started from scratch again etc. etc.

I got the 8 highlighted clues early on. CRACKER, and its contents: Bonbons, Earring, False teeth, Jewel, Joke, Motto and Paper hats.

But I had terrible trouble with the 10 *asterisked clues.

I thought of various ways of reducing the 7 letter answers down to 5 letters.

I just had to pull the ends off but that didn't seem to fit. Maybe dropping 2 random letters?

The actual method - pull the ends off and jumble the remaining letters - I had thought of at one point and dismissed - because surely as the definition part of the clue referred to the 7-letter answer, any jumbling before grid entry would mean possible alternative answers. Of course this doesn't happen given the crossing letters, but you need those crossing letters first.

Indeed I had ALL the other answers in the grid before I had properly answered and understood ANY of the 10 *clues.

Thus most of the * answers were already visible in full in the grid. Even so it took me ages to understand the method.

Indeed it meant I doubted many of the answers I had entered and spent a long time double-checking the crossing letters.

For instance I could see Day 4 28d* REICH but couldn't understand how that related to any part of the clue at all "It's flogged by bride abandoned outside church". This clue shows just how devious the whole enterprise is. The long answer is BIRCHED from (BRIDE)* around CH[urch]. Then this is "cracked" like this B[IRCHE]D -> (IRCHE)* -> REICH

I had particular trouble with Day 2 SHORT: However did that relate to "Irish Darling ..."? Or even ASHORT_ (the long answer had to begin A)? Actually that was one of the last I understood having never heard of the word ASTHORE. The very last one was Day 33 AD LIB having failed to notice the (2,3) letter count!

On checking I realised that I still had one blank square at 47 - I hadn't full finished the Knock Knock joke, so it was with great pleasure I entered the D to create the classic "Dr Who?" joke

But the travails didn't end there. I found this the hardest one ever to transcribe neat for scanning and sending off. What is attached here is the third attempt. I kept writing the circular answers starting in the wrong place. So, if you see such website figures, don't take any notice of the number of times the answer grid has been downloaded - at least 5 of those downloads is me! AJR

You've done it again! What a biscuit, - that takes the cracker! I even managed to solve two jokes which I hadn't heard before - both very giggle-worthy.

I had a wonderful time sorting out the sub-plots, as per the instructions. My clue sheet has never looked so messy; with circlings, asterisks question marks and ticks all over the place. (My dog gets a tablet for those - ticks, I mean.) I was half expecting to meet a clue which led to, 'Pull the other one'.

Puck's clues are superb but I am still left with 5 whose parsing eludes me. No doubt I will go 'doh' when all is revealed in January. Tom Smith had me puzzled until I Googled. I'm sure that I won't be alone to have tried to do something with Percy Shaw - clever Puck! Grrrrrrrr.

Re. my book prize, I am about to shuffle through the Amazon library (watching out for pirhanas and jaguars) and will let you know. I'm still hankering after a new atlas, in spite of Mr. B. I really need to know where all those Stans are. JanB

Another brain stretcher but so pleasing when an answer floats by. Still, quite a few late nights.

Thanks for a super year of puzzling.

Best wishes for Christmas. BB

Here's our entry for your cracker of a December puzzle. I'm glad to say I had to rely on my family for providing the punchlines to most of the dodgy jokes. AR&AS

What a fantastic puzzle! I don't know how you come up with your brilliant ideas, but keep them coming. This was a joy to solve with humour appropriate to the theme. I've often wondered who writes the jokes for Christmas crackers.....JP

.. a really enjoyable puzzle. D&TE

A good Christmas theme! A few headscratching moments with this, but once I 'cracked' the method of entry, I was away. PD

There's only one word for it 27di! MC

I almost gave up on this one! Puck was feeling particularly Puckish, and to cope with the asterisked clues I needed several boxes of mince pies, a family conference and a relaxing back massage at Liz Earle. I'm excited to have it finished, and the final grid ready before Christmas. DS

A nice slow burner this month. As usual there are two or three clues I do not fully understand. No doubt all will become clear in January's Newsletter. GB

The CRACKER of December 2016 - I think I SAY and INWARDS should have been alphabetically swapped.
In WASHERMEN, I couldn't see how rare = R. And I didn't quite follow some of the clues (RIDABLE, SEESAWS, MOTTO and OLIVIER).
But I was very pleased to see one of my favourite Knock Knock jokes on the bottom tier. And I hadn't heard the SUBORDINATE CLAUSE JOKE before; it made me chuckle.
Hugh Everett

Note on alphabetical order. To establish order, two solutions are compared by their first word in the solution. Thus in comparing, I SAY and INWARDS, it is 'I' which is compared with 'INWARDS'. This is the method that WORD seems to use.

P.S.
One really strange thing about the December crossword is that I got the theme with the very first clue that I answered, but I actually got the answer to the clue wrong - I thought xxx was "a pair of crackers" rather than "a pair of knickers". When I got a couple more clues the latter became the obvious answer, but there is a very good personal reason why I came up with the former first.
(I don't know if this is entirely suitable for the news letter by the way, but I think it is quite interesting anyway.)

We aim to acknowledge solutions sent in by email or post This is by no means foolproof, but should you not receive an acknowledgement nobody here would mind if you contact us to check we have it.
We offer modest prizes to encourage entries and a bit of fun. Money for prizes does not come from funds raised from selling the puzzle calendar Money for prizes comes from anonymous private subscription knowing that money will go to prizes.
Feedback is absolute gold dust We are still an experimental project. Feedback helps curb our worst excesses, encourages promising developments and generally guides our development Feedback is very much appreciated.

A few Christmasses ago I went out for the Christmas do of a place I used to work at in a lab doing food and water quality testing. I'd actually left there about 6 months before so it was really good to see them all again.

After a couple of pints and some catching up we went to a Chinese restaurant for a meal. I ended up sat opposite a quiet girl who I didn't know too well and who was wearing a very low cut top that was probably drawing a bit more attention to her than she was entirely comfortable with. Being Christmas everybody had a cracker on their place mat so I offered to pull mine with her. She won and inside there was something quite good by cracker standards like a little car that lights up when you roll it or something like that. I can't remember the exact item but anyway she seemed pretty happy with it. She put it on the table.

I went on to pull another cracker with lad sitting next to me. This time I won and got something rubbish like a plastic beetle or a tatty little fish that's suppose to curl up if you lie. Nothing to get excited about anyway.

While I was putting on my hat, the girl opposite me pulled another cracker with the lad next to her. She was on a hot streak and won another pretty good novelty item (the exact nature of which I once again can't recall), which which she placed on the table in front of her next to the first one. I looked across at her prizes and, suitably impressed, said "What a smashing pair of crackers you have there". This, judging by the surprised silence that immediately fell, turned out to be exactly what everyone else around the table was thinking, and not about her new toy collection. It also seemed by the look of extreme annoyance on her face that she wasn't overly pleased with the complement either.
One of the interesting things about doing crosswords is that they demonstrate how any word in the English language can be interpreted in a huge variety of ways given the right circumstances and delivery. Another intriguing and closely related fact that I discovered at this point in the evening's proceedings is that it doesn't take much to turn practically every word or phrase in the English language into a double entendre. I tried to say something to convince the people around me of the complete innocence of my comments - "I was just having a look at those great toys", "I meant those things there in front of you", and so on and so on - but at this point absolutely nothing I could possibly say was going to do anything whatsoever to get me out of the episode of Terry and June in which I'd become trapped. In the end I just shut up, ate my food and slipped away quietly when we were on the way back to the pub, never to be invited to another of their dos again.

...And that's why temporarily as far as I was concerned "a pair of crackers" was a legitimate answer to 7 across, leading to me getting the theme of December's puzzle way ahead of schedule and going on to crack this puzzle in record time (for me). TC

2. December 2016 Puck Clue Explanations

Background:

Wikipedia: Tom Smith invented crackers 1845 -50. He copied the French Bonbons – sweets in twisted paper and developed the idea after sitting by a crackling log fire.

41 clues, including:

- ? 8 yellow highlights: CRACKER and 7 likely contents (no definition)
- ? 4 orange highlights: Jokes
- ? 10 asterisked clues: Fantasy crackers (solution to be modified)

No	SOLUTION	Direction Clue Enumeration	Explanation	Notes
1	A PAIR OF KNICKERS	37C 23: What do you call a couple of bank robbers? (1,4,2,8)	Joke	23=Joke
2	ASTHORE	5d-2,14antiC-2,13d-2* Irish Darling taking lead from fast horse, second away (7;5)	[f]ast hor[s]e	(SHORT)*
3	BATTING	3di* Bowled former English captain, first out at crease (7;5)	b + [G]atting	(TITAN)*
4	BIRCHED	28d* It's flogged by bride abandoned outside church (7;5)	Ch in (anag of bride)	(REICH)*
5	BLUEISH	17di Go red around penis regularly, being a bit risqué (7)	[p]e[n]i[s] in blush	
6	BONBONS	1d Stuck-up chap with head stuck up (7)	(snob + nob)rev.	No definition
7	CRACKER	27di Ace, King or Queen	Crack + ER	No definition
8	DATUM	12di Bit of info that's a bit backward, I'm thinking (5)	Tad(rev.) + um	
9	EARRING	26C-7 Garnier styling product (7)	Anag of Garnier	No definition
10	ENCAGE	24di,20C-2 Key note composer put <i>behind</i> bars (6)	E + n + Cage	
11	EVIL EYE	30di One with bad looks some revile? Yes (4,3)	Hidden answer	
12	FALSE TEETH	33di,19di River off the Tees (5,5)	Fal + anag of (the Tees)	No definition
13	FEIGNED	20C* Define G-string's use, if crudely simulated (7;5)	Anag of (Define G)	(GENIE)*
14	GEN UP ON	41di Learn almost enough about wrapping presents, primarily before noon (3,2,2)	P[resents] in (anag of enoug[h]) + n	
15	HAKEEMS	44up Muslim physicians fish German river (7)	Hake + Ems	
16	HALF TWO	9d Another way of saying "Time to see the dentist"? This is one! (4,3)	"Tooth hurtee" =2.30 =half two; half two=one	
17	HELLION	31di* Supreme misery, one being charged as troublemaker (7;5)	Hell + ion	(OLLIE)*
18	HOUSER	51C-2,52di One providing roof over head for John in LA? (6)	Ho user	

19	I SAY!	11d Cor anglais's beginning to replace piano in game (1,3)	I-Spy, with a[n]glais for the 'p'	
20	INWARD	7d Private patients here? (6)	In ward	
21	JAMAICA	38di 23: My wife went to the West Indies. (7?) No, she went of her own accord!	Joke	23=Joke
22	JEWEL	21C Chap in suit - slippery customer around women (5)	[J[ack] + (w in eel)]	No definition
23	JOKE	21d-4 French setter, keeping very well (4)	Ok in je	No definition
24	KNOCK KNOCK, WHO'S THERE, DR, DR WHO?	48C-5,48C-5,50C-9,47C-2,47C-2,50C-3 23: (5,5;3'1,5?;2;2,3?) Yes!	Joke	23=Joke
25	KOP	49up Red area from ring holding nuts firm? Just the opposite (3)	0 in KP	Ref. Anfield Kop
26	LASAGNE	36di Dish in oven (gas), already rotated (7)	Hidden (reversed)	
27	MECCANO	25di Construction set in St Andrews, for golfers on round (7)	Mecca + on(rev.)	
28	MOTTO	6di Return of character 80% classified by Puck? No bullshit (5)	[B]ottom'[s],rev. [cl]assified	No definition Ref. AMND (ass's head)
29	MUTATOR	8di* One making changes in menu initially involved a trout (7;5)	M[enu] + anag of (a trout)	(TATOU)*
30	OLIVIER	4d Actor collecting Oscar is half drenched in beer (7) OR Actor having a little orgasm, with long thin erection in organ (7)	O + (i[s] in liver) O[rgasm] + (l in liver)	Clean Smutty
31	PAPER HATS	40di,35C-2,34di A pet with sharp moves (5,4)	Anag of (A pet + sharp)	No definition
32	RECOUPS	42di* Makes good soup after cycling past sports ground (7;5)	Rec + soup(cycling)	(COUPE)*
33	RIDABLE	32di* Bug biting fish like a horse? (7;2,3)	Dab in rile	(AD LIB)*
34	SEASICK	45di Off-colour green on roughly deep blue (7)	Cryptic definition	
35	SEESAWS	46di More than one bishop's tool suggestively goes up and down (7)	See saws	
36	SNOODED	16di* Odds on criminal hiding drug held in hairnet? (7;5)	E in anag of (odds on)	(ODEON)*
37	SUBORDINATE CLAUSE	2antiC-8,10di-3,15d,53di-2(NNE) 23: What do you call Santa's little helper? (11,6)	Joke	23=Joke
38	TOM SMITH	3C-8 Our inventor of Cat's-eye, reportedly during month off? (3,5)	Tom's + (homophone of "eye" in m[on]th)	Off=not on
39	TYSON	43di Santy's only keeping one or two for Boxing Day? (5)	Hidden answer	Ref. Mike Tyson and Tyson Fury
40	WASHERMEN	18di* Women like hunks, including rare ones who do the laundry (9;7)	W + as + (r in he-men)	(HAREEMS)*
41	WENCHING	23antiC-2,22di,29C-3 Doing the twist, suddenly runs off, spending time with prostitutes (8)	W[r]enching	

December 2016 Extra Augeas



The December 2016 Extra competition with a Pearl Harbor themed grid and clues set by Augeas, was won by Nick Inglis of Nottingham. Excellent solving!

Feedback included: December Extra attached – brilliant! RE

Herewith my solution for the December Extra, which I enjoyed solving very much. I did not find the puzzle very hard on the whole but am glad, given the theme. I have long thought that the Hawaiian islands would make an interesting theme for a puzzle and this was a great treatment of the idea, mercifully gentle given that those names seem such unlikely combinations of letters.

A good grid and some nice clues; I thought the thematic clues were great. Favourite non-thematic clues were those for ACKERS, AHIND, BLUNGE (new to me and another unlikely looking word to my eyes!), LADDIE, LIKEABLE, and PULPIT. Incidentally this year I have tended to ignore the illustrations until after finishing the puzzle, finding them too cryptic in themselves to help with twigging the theme, and I usually have the answer grid hidden under the clues except when I fill in answers or look for checking letters. Consequently I only realised after finishing the puzzle just how helpful the photo was, for once!

Bravo Augeas and many thanks. BL

Busy month! Here is our December Extra solution (a nice bit of sun for this gloomy weather). And hopefully one more to come before the end of the month! Cheers, AR

There are alternatives to the answer at 1d, as HELO is a slangterm for helicopter, giving HELLO, and HALO is a type of helicopter (Russian) Mil Mi-26, giving HALLO. DH

Another excellent topic! DS

Pearl Harbor was a clear favourite for '15! Had to look up most of islands. Few other new words but only needed to check them as well-defined.

Thanks for this and other ones this year. HNY! DM

The last 3D grid of 2016 attached. Something of a relief after the main December puzzle which was much more tricky.

This was completed over a very short time.

I had all the non-theme answers in place and many of the theme answers too before inevitably having to consult references for the names of the Hawaiian islands - in truth of the 8 I knew only Oahu, Maui and Hawaii itself so while I got close to the rest given the crossing letters and (in many cases) anagram fodder - there was no way I could have guessed MOLOKAI just from the anagram of highlighted letters. AJR

Please find appended my solution to the December Extra 3D crossword. This was such an enjoyable exercise, since it didn't tax the brain overmuch and the subject matter had particular relevance to me, as I was lucky enough to celebrate my 60th birthday on Maui, as well as exploring 5 of the islands in the group. I was so pleasantly surprised, as I imagined the whole area would resemble Waikiki beach, and nothing could have been further from the truth. Even the 'experience' at Pearl Harbour was most tastefully presented!

Many thanks for providing a welcome diversion from the minutiae of everyday life, SF

Thank you for your New Year greetings. January has finally brought the snow to Switzerland and temperatures have not been above zero for a couple of weeks now. Just the weather to stay indoors and do crosswords, especially those which transport us to warmer climes!

Attached is my entry for the December Extra with many thanks to Augeas for a very clever and entertaining puzzle. JB

Always pleased to see an 'Extra' appear and this one was a –pleasure to do. Thank you. BB

SOLUTION		Direction – Clue - enumeration	Explanation
ABRADE	1	11aw Wear down a hair band from the sound of it (6)	A braid homoph
ACKERS	2	17aw Naval ludo (not seen by anyone – adults only) for money (6)	Uckers with A for U (cinema)
	2	17aw Supporters b- off for cash (6)	
AHIND	3	23up Bambi's mum was at the back in the glen (5)	A + HIND
ALBAN	4	17up Mother Teresa was, ignoring Scotsman, an English saint (5)	ALBAN(ian)
AMATI	5	26up Luthier in dramatic circumstances (5)	hidden
BLUNGE	7	9aw Mix clay with water – messy bungle (6)	(BUNGLE)*
BOUVIERS	6	13ac Jackie was once followed by small dogs (8)	Jackie Kennedy + S
CANNIBAL	8	12ba Maybe Dr Lecter had toff in passage (8)	CAN(NIB)AL
GLOBAL	9	15to Type of conflict commemorated here – madly go ballistic without it (sic) (6)	(GO BALListic)* - It sic
HARBOR	11	1aw American refuge returns plunder – hurrah! (6)	ROB RAH <
HAWAII	10	28to* *The cricketers left India a whitewashed side (6)	ia a whi
HELLO	12	1d Greeting 50 in chopper (5)	HEL(L)O
HONOLULU	13	1ac 20 -1 defeat location (8)	Pearl Harbor
		1ac City's near disastrous 29-10 defeat (8)	
HUGER	14	7d Mightier embrace Queen (5)	HUG + ER
IMPS	15	19ac Empress has sons – mischievous ones (4)	IMP + S
INDIA	16	27up Confused din in Iowa – could it be heard from here, half a world away? (5)	I(DIN)*A

KAHOOLAWE	17	18ba,16aw* *Tribesmen make wool hats for the tourist trade (9)	ake wool ha
KAUAI	18	22up* * When called to speak I automatically stammer (5)	ak i au
LADDIE	19	3aw Perhaps Oddjob loses crown of bowler replaced by M's predecessor – for young Connery maybe (6)	bADDIE L (before M) replacing b
LAGGARDS	20	14ac Latecomers returning in pairs drag gals (8)	Hidden>
LANAI	21	3d* *I wear a red bandana like this (5)	ana li
LARGE	22	24up Elgar's variation – great! (5)	(ELGAR)*
LEEWAY	23	4aw Southern general with freedom of action and room to manoeuvre (6)	LEE + WAY
LIKEABLE	24	21ac Worthy of being positively regarded on Facebook – as if clever (8)	LIKE + ABLE
MAUI	25	8ba* *The oldest puma in the Delhi zoo has died (4)	uma i
NEIGHS	26	2aw Red Rum's cries – what Walton's on, we hear (6)	Naze homoph
NIIHAU	27	10aw* *The cricketers left Mumbai in a hurry (6)	i in a hu
OAHU	28	6ac* *Tea house of the August moon (4)	a hou
PEARL	29	20up Frosted type – she's a prized example (5)	4 defs
PULPIT	30	20aw Trashy fiction – it might be denounced from here (6)	PULP + IT
REBEL	31	5d Head of lager follows frothy beer revolt (5)	(BEER)* + L
REINDEER	32	5ac Seasonal draught animal, "rhodorhinate" perhaps?(8)	rhodo- = red; rhin- = nosed (Greek)
WALDO	33	25up Hood lawyer sent down concealing zapper (5)	Reverse hidden
WARFARIN	34	Muddled fair warning: no mixed gin – it thins the blood (8)	[FAIR WARNIng – (gin)*]*

5. The deadline for the first January 2017 Arachne/Bozzy puzzle is midnight Wednesday 15th February. Do send solutions in. It cheers everyone up!

6. Thank you for so many messages of support and good wishes for recovery, all very much appreciated.

Finally, thank you for supporting our project to help youngsters in need.

Best wishes Eric Westbrook
Registered Blind RNIB Member & Public Speaker
3D Crossword Designer Sirius