

Correspondence

Dear Editor,

Whilst preparing this Article (see [1]) for publication, an earlier paper was found which allowed a fuller version of the history of the topic to be put together. The paper [2] was by J. O. Irwin, resident at the time in Switzerland, and like [1], it was prompted by a letter in *The Times*.

The Irwin paper refers to two earlier *Times*' letters:

(i) one by Professor R. Lyttleton, St John's College, Cambridge, (13 February, 1970) which reminds "any superstitious among your readers that the 13th day of the month falls more frequently on a Friday than upon any other day of the week". No proof is given. It may be significant that the opening paragraph reads "If . . . eccentricity is one of the criteria for publication of letters to *The Times*, you may be willing to allow me . . ."

(ii) one by S. R. Baxter, Eton College (4 March, 1970) (cited in [1]) which refers to the publication of the proof of this point of fact in [3] (also cited in [1]).

Whether or not Baxter's letter was prompted by that of Lyttleton is not known but, appearing some 19 days later, it may well have been.

Having identified these prior publications, Irwin goes on to outline his own working. He first obtains the frequency distribution for January 1st over a 400 year period and from this he produces a table showing the number of times each day of the week occurs as the 13th of the month over the same period. Needless to say his results are entirely consistent with Baxter's. He refers to Baxter's work as a "remarkable achievement". (In a surprising editorial slip an extract from the paper reads "(e.g. 2000, 2400, 2800, 3200 etc. which are not leap years)", which is incorrect. This puzzling mistake does not detract from the overall quality of the paper.) Irwin goes on to deal with a number of other date/probability calculations.

Baxter's paper appeared 52 years ago. One wonders which is the more remarkable, the contents of the paper or the age of the author. Without question, his talent must be recognised as outstanding. What introduced him to this calendrical oddity and inspired him through to confirm the fact is not known. I am not a school teacher nor do I have any contact with young teenagers. Also, curricula and teaching methods will have changed since 1970. Nonetheless, one has to hope and trust that the system is still capable of finding and nurturing talent of this order.

References

1. P. Stanley, On the frequency of Friday the thirteenth, *Math. Gaz.* **105** (July 2021) pp. 222-225.
2. J. O. Irwin, Friday 13th, *Math. Gaz.* **55** (December 1971) pp. 412-415.
3. S. R. Baxter, To prove that the 13th day of the month is more likely to be a Friday than any other day of the week, *Math. Gaz.* **53** (May 1969) pp. 127-129.

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