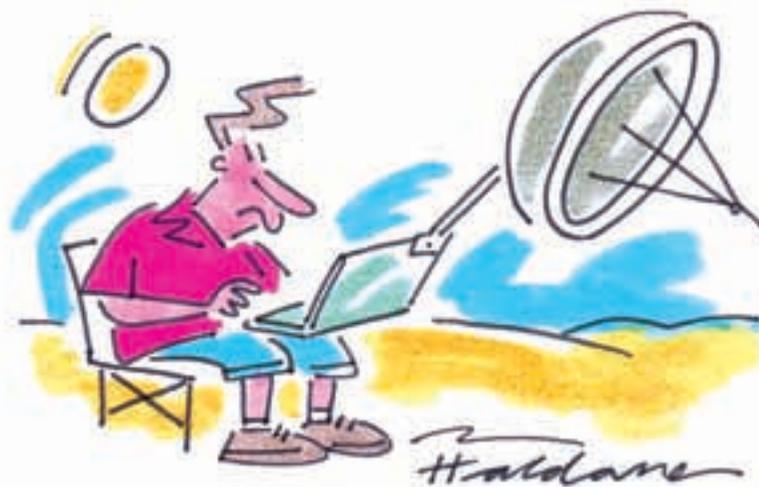


Shirley you can't be serious



“Surely you can't be serious,” I said to my wife when she decided that it would be a good idea to spend four weeks in Australia. “I am,” she said, “and stop calling me Shirley.”

While we have been in Australia we saw the passing of Leslie Nielsen, an actor who has played a leading role in some of my favourite funny films – the *Naked Gun* trilogy and *Airplane*. The original of that dialogue came from *Airplane*, and, sad people that we are, our family frequently quotes from those films.

One of my wife's favourite films is *The Dish*, the hero of which is a huge radio telescope which sits in the middle of a sheep field at Parkes in New South Wales and which played a key part in maintaining communication links between the earth and the various moon missions in the 1960s and '70s.

Fruity matters

Parkes now has a visitor centre but it has a quaint informality as shown by the sign for The Dish café which announces in large official letters: “Blackberry jam made and sold here.”

Which reminds me – I could not be away from work for so long and neglect my clients completely, so for me it was also partly a working holiday and I did it without resort to a fancy mobile phone.

Modern technology has made it easy to be away from the office and still keep in touch. Emails work as well from the other side of the world as they do from Norfolk. With the wonderful Scom (Scott Moncrieff Harbour & Sinclair) system all mail is scanned from the central office and emailed so that it arrives on the same day (or would do if we were not on the other side of the date line).

Even dictation is now no problem. With a simple digital dictating machine I can now record letters and documents and email the sound files back to my part-time secretary in England for typing and dispatch.

And all this can be done on a netbook computer that is no larger than a modest legal text book. I know there are those who have

telephones that call themselves after various types of fruit that can do all these things but I still prefer something with a screen that you have a chance of reading without developing myopia, and a keyboard you can type on even if you are not an ant.

I am shortly to launch onto the legal market the *Gooseberry* – a lemon coloured mobile telephone with such limited capabilities that you can only make calls by using an old-fashioned dial and which blows raspberries at people you don't like.

Submarine matters

On the way back from Parkes we came across a submarine. Not in itself very surprising but this submarine happens to be nearly a thousand feet above sea level and scores of miles from the sea. It was not in any guidebook but sufficiently unusual to make us stop for a look – and learn about a moving story.

At the outbreak of the first world war the people of the town of Germanton decided it was not politically correct to have a town with that name, so they set about thinking of a new one. Shortly before then, in the Dardanelles, Lieutenant Norman Holbrook carried out a feat of enormous bravery while commanding an antiquated submarine, for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Even though he had no connection with the town, its people decided to adopt his name and called it Holbrook.

They then caught the submarine bug and decided they wanted their own submarine as a tribute to the town's namesake and set about, at huge expense, acquiring and transporting the shell of a recently decommissioned submarine, the *Otway*, to the town. Lieutenant Holbrook did visit the town and after his death his widow was so taken with the gesture that she donated \$100,000 towards the cost of the project.

Whisky matters not

I knew best. We wanted to bring a special bottle of single malt whisky for Greg, my

step-daughter's partner. Although I don't care much for the stuff, he is a connoisseur.

But the man in the duty free shop at Heathrow said the Australians would not allow us to bring a full bottle into the country. Yet I knew from previous experience that the Australians were very laid back about that kind of thing. Reluctantly and with a very worried expression the duty free man relieved me of £35, sealed the bottle in a plastic container and sent me on my way.

At Singapore where we changed flights we confidently marched to the gate with our hand baggage and the malt. The officer put it to one side and went to find a supervisor. Shortly afterwards a small man with the demeanour of Inspector Clouseau arrived carrying a thick rule book. He then proceeded to turn to page 217 and pointed out rule 386A which specifically said that Richard Barr was not allowed to fly from Singapore to Australia with a full bottle of whisky.

“Surely you cannot be serious,” I protested, pointing out that the bottle had already flown for 12 hours without blowing up the plane so it was likely to behave itself for another eight hours en route to Melbourne. My best powers of advocacy were lost on him: he was not going to allow us and the whisky on board.

“I am serious,” replied Inspector Clouseau, but I waited in vain for him to tell me not to call him Shirley.

“At least you should drink it,” I suggested. That did not go down well either. He told me he did not drink and the bottle would be destroyed.

So, the moral is: it never pays to be a smartie pants and I am now £35 poorer for my arrogance. It is little consolation that I have saved Greg's liver a little stress.

Richard Barr is a consultant with Scott-Moncrieff Harbour and Sinclair. Contact: richard.barr@paston.co.uk