

Remembering Hatton's Hollywood horrors

Throughout history, those with marked physiological differences from the norm have suffered discrimination by the majority. I suppose we should regard it as progress of a kind that persecution has given way to exploitation.

Undoubtedly, the best known example of this is the disfigured Joseph Merrick, who enjoyed fame (if either "enjoyed" or "fame" could be said to apply) as the Elephant Man in an East End freak show in the 1880s, before being introduced to an altogether better class of punter by the physician Sir Frederick Treves.

There was another sufferer of physical deformity, however, whose audiences were far more numerous than Merrick's. Indeed, they may well have surpassed those of all his predecessors put together. His name was Rondo Hatton and he was Hollywood's first — and, as far as I know, only — acromegalic star.

Acromegaly arises from hypersecretion of growth hormone from the anterior pituitary — a condition that is usually, although not exclusively, caused by the presence of a tumour. If it occurs in infancy, the result is not acromegaly but gigantism. The child develops normally but reaches up to eight feet in height. In adulthood, however, the epiphyseal discs of the skeleton are sealed and growth is only possible in certain areas — principally the hands, feet and face, and particularly the lower jaw.

The condition can take decades to develop fully. The first signs are as innocuous as coarse skin and greasy hair. This is why it is often misdiagnosed or is overlooked during the stages at which it is still treatable with somatostatin.

Hatton's case was unusual in two ways. First, the development of the condition was almost certainly a consequence of being gassed in



the trenches as an American volunteer in the 1914–18 war. Secondly, it developed rapidly, and was already pronounced by the time he left hospital after treatment for the gassing.

Hatton returned home to his native Florida, his boyhood dream of becoming a football coach in ruins. Instead, he became a journalist. More than a decade later, in 1929, he was sent to write a report on a Hollywood film, 'Hell Harbor', which was being shot on location in Florida. He caught the eye of the director, Henry King, who offered him a small part, thinking it would help his story. Hatton accepted and, when the filming was over, King asked if he would consider moving to Hollywood.

Hatton turned King down flat, but seven years later he suffered a severe attack of arthritis, which had two far-reaching results. The first was that it put paid to his journalistic career. The second was that his doctors recommended he relocate to a drier climate. So he decided to see if King's offer still stood.

Seven years playing thuggish bit parts followed before Hatton landed his first major role — as the "Hoxton Creeper" in the 1944 film, 'The pearl of death', in which he starred opposite Basil Rathbone in the sixth in a long series of melodramas loosely based on the works of Arthur Conan Doyle. He was to reprise the role twice (dropping the "Hoxton") in 'House of horrors' and 'The brute man'. The titles of these films may tell you all you need to know about them.

Hatton's death preceded the release of both these latter movies. Shortly after completing 'The brute man' he fell ill with myocarditis, another complication of his condition. He was confined to his home for the last few months of his life, succumbing to a heart attack on 2 February 1946, aged 51.

Are we due another of Parliament's failed attempts to regulate time?

Those who search for symmetry in everything may care to note that this year sees both the 80th and 40th anniversaries of failed attempts by the UK Parliament to regulate time. Perhaps this suggests that another attempt is due — particularly as we currently have a Government that seems keen to introduce new legislation affecting just about everything under the sun.

It was 80 years ago that Parliament passed the Easter Act, fixing Easter as the Sunday after the second Saturday in April. This simple formula was intended to replace the old dating system established in AD325 at the Council of Nicaea, by which Easter is to be held on the first Sunday after the 14th day of the Paschal full moon. And if you have never heard of the Paschal full moon, that is probably because it does not actually exist, in that it is whichever full moon the church says it is. (This is also why it is perfectly possible for the Orthodox churches to fix a different date from the Roman Catholic church.)

You may well have noticed that the Easter Act 1928 does not appear to be widely

observed. Indeed, this year Easter Sunday was as early as 23 March, causing problems for those who fix the dates of school holidays. The nation's continuing failure to observe Parliament's 1928 wish is because a proviso was inserted in the Act at the last minute stating that it would not come into force "against the opinion of any church or other Christian body". In practice, this meant not ever.

Then, 40 years later, Parliament's second failure to regulate time was a decree that the practice of putting the clocks back an hour to Greenwich Mean Time in October would be dropped in order to determine, once and for all, whether the benefits of retaining British Summer Time outweighed the drawbacks. The experiment was abandoned after three years, when it was decided that the increase in accidents involving children walking to school was unacceptable. (Yes, in those days many children really did walk to school.) Even then, there were those who questioned this decision, suggesting that the lighter evenings had led to a compensatory reduction in accidents occurring as children

walked back home. But you cannot prove a negative, so out it went.

So what might Parliament try to do this year? How about the introduction of an international "part day" to regularise the length of the year? For centuries, we have tried to accommodate the fact that the earth revolves around the sun 365.24 times as long as it takes for it to spin on its axis, giving us 365.24 days a year (or 365 days, 5 hours and 46 seconds to be more precise) — hence the introduction of the 29 February leap day every four years. This formula would have worked if the ratio was 365.25 but, as it is not, it has required further refinements, such as "00" years only counting as leap years if the first two numbers are divisible by four.

How are we supposed to remember that? Why not do away with 29 February completely and have a 32 December instead — and have it each year for 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds? That would allow just enough time for a lively new year's eve party.

Has anyone got Parliament's telephone number?