The Owl Club

NOTICE

Tuesday 19th August 2025: Notice of meeting #1374

Founded 1894

Visit our website at www.owls.org.za for current notice, back notices, Constitution (as amended 2021), In Memoriam 1894-2023, list of members and more.

Committee 2025/2026

President: Mike James

Senior Vice-President: David Little

Junior Vice-President: Owl Nigel Gwynne-Evans

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Treasurer: Richard Morris

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Additional Members: Paul Murray, Julian Wannell, Peter Sutherland, Peter Hyslop, Kevin Rorke, Anthea Serritslev, Martin Hess, Keith Mac Hutchon and Kate McCallum.

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A/c no. 071 818 006

Bank branch code: 051 001

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Dear Fellow Owls

The 1374th meeting of The Owl Club, preceded by dinner, will be held on Tuesday 19th August 2025, 6:00 pm for 6:45 pm start, in the Grill Room, Kelvin Grove Club.

Chairman: **President Owl Mike James**

Guest speaker: **Grant McLachlan,** on the topic of: ***"Music's Greatest Love Story: Robert and Clara Schumann"***

"The story of Robert and Clara Schumann is one of the great love stories in classical music. He, an introverted genius and she, one of the greatest pianists of the era. Grant will take us through this extraordinary story, involving many of the major musical figures of the 19th century."

Music: **Christopher Culpo**

"The musical entertainment will be provided by Christopher Culpo, a versatile performer and composer whose artistic vision spans the realms of contemporary jazz, contemporary classical music, and free improvisation. His performance will cover several of his own compositions for solo piano, mixed in with some Duke Ellington!"

WPB: **Owl Rob Skelton** on the topic of**: *"Smuts' Mongrel: the Shaping of Fynbos"***

" Owl Skelton is Associate Professor of Plant Ecophysiology at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. His focus as a plant ecophysiologist is to understand how plant form and function have evolved, and how this remarkable story reveals itself in the vegetation patterns that we see around us."

Dinner price: R350. PLEASE NOTE THE NEW PRICE.

Dress: Black tie (or similarly elegant attire).

RESERVATIONS & PAYMENTS:

Any Owl who does not have internet access is welcome to telephone the Secretary Bird at 082 440 8204 or 021 671 3121 to book a perch.

All other Owls are encouraged to use the Pay'n Perch procedure by paying their (and their guest's) dining fee into the Club's bank account by EFT and instructing the bank (using the option provided) to send a remittance confirmation email to secretary@owls.org.za whereupon their perches will be booked.

Besides details of your invited guests (see above), no further emails will be needed from you unless you also have special dietary needs or if you are using a dining credit.

In all cases, bookings will close at 6:00 pm on Sunday 17th August 2025.

All bookings will be acknowledged.

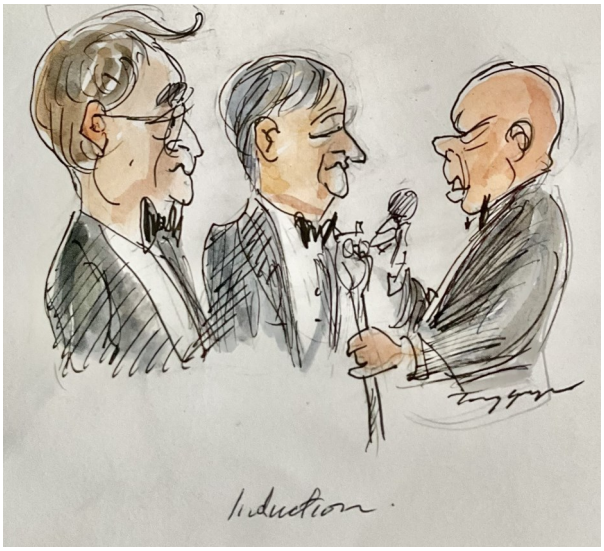
The July 2025 Meeting

On Tuesday, 15th July, 64 Owls, 5 Guests and 3 post prandial musicians, gathered in the Grill Room, Kelvin Grove, Newlands for the 1373rd Meeting of the Owl Club. The proceedings started at 18:45, with President Owl Mike James welcoming all and Owl Martin Brossy delivering the Grace. This was followed by a three-course dinner.

Owl President Mike James then congratulated the 17 Owls celebrating birthdays in July. Three Owls turned 88, two of whom were in attendance (John van der Linde and Christopher Ussher), the 3rd being Bob Blyth (who was not at the meeting). Mike Cherry turned 83 on the 14th, while Kate McCallum, Kevin Rorke and Michael Beckurts also celebrated birthdays (but later in July).

Owl President Mike James then announced the return to the Parliament of Owl Peter Grassow. Owl Peter has recently returned to Cape Town, and Owl President Mike James warmly welcomed him back to Owldom.

New Owls, Gerrie Van Niekerk and Sebastian Van As were then (with due ceremony) inducted, welcomed into the fellowship and invited to dwell in harmony with fellow Owls. The President then (requesting that guests remained seated) ordered that the lights be dimmed whilst he proposed the traditional Toast to Our Guests.



Above: Tony Grogan, *Drawing of New Owls, Gerrie Van Niekerk and Sebastian Van As being inducted by Owl President Mike James.*

Following the induction ceremony, it was time for the club flutter, and the President invited Owl Richard Morris to handle the quarterly draw. Once the club flutter was concluded, Owl President Mike James invited the guest speaker, Tommie Meyer to address the assembled Owls and guests on his topic: *Artificial Intelligence – the Full Story*.

After the address, Owl President Mike James thanked Tommie Meyer for his insightful talk and presented him with a bottle of port. Following this, Owl Julian Wannell introduced the first set of the music programme for the evening, presented by guitarist James Grace.

The first musical interlude complete, Owl President Mike James thanked James Grace, following which there was a Bar Interval of about 20 minutes, and then the second set of the music programme. At the conclusion of the performance, Owl President Mike James once again thanked James Grace for his contribution to the evening's entertainment.

The parliament, clearly having enjoyed the second set of the music programme, then listened attentively to Owl Teresa Raposo fill the WPB on her topic *Exodus of Portuguese Colonists and Descendants from Angola*.

Owl President Mike James invited Owls and their guests to raise their glasses in a Toast to the Owl Club, following which the President wished all a safe flight home.

Above: Tony Grogan, *Drawing of Guest Speaker Tommie Meyer.*

Guest Speaker: Prof Thomas (Tommie) Meyer "Artificial Intelligence – the Full Story"

In the AI magazine in 1995, Pat Hayes and Ken Ford introduced the Simon Newcomb Award for the silliest argument against AI. The background to this award was that in October 1903 Simon Newcomb advanced a well-reasoned, rational, carefully argued case as to why heavier than air flying machines were impossible. Six weeks later the Wright brothers proved him wrong!

The term AI was first coined at a workshop in Dartmouth in 1956 where a group of scientists gathered together to explore the possibility that machines could simulate human intelligence. Since then, there have been many (perhaps 10-15) differing definitions. To answer the question "what is AI?", Tommy took us on a brief tour through the history. One of the most fascinating examples of an apparently intelligent machine dates from the 18th century and was known as the Mechanical Turk. This was a chess playing machine that took on all comers and generally beat them. It was full of bells and whistles, but hidden in its interior was a chess master who actually managed the games. This was only revealed about a hundred years later.

In 1966, Joseph Weizenbaum at MIT created a profoundly influential programme called ELIZA. This was one of the first computer programmes designed to process natural language, enabling it to engage in conversations with humans. Although it was fairly simple, ELIZA captured the imagination of users and set the stage for future AI development. People soon started engaging seriously with the machine and many reported feeling understood by ELIZA, even though they knew that it was just a machine. This was the result of the perceived intelligence that was projected onto ELIZA by the users.

The big breakthrough for AI came in 1990 with the development of the Deep Blue chess programme that finally defeated the world chess champion, Garry Kasparov. Kasparov felt it was an alien form of activity that frightened him. However, this was sophisticated programming and not real intelligence!

Years later, this was followed by Google's Deep Mind programme, AlphaZero, in 2016 that mastered the game GO, which is technically even more demanding than chess, and could self-instruct by learning from its own games. The same technology was used for the programme AlphaFold, an AI system that predicts proteins' 3D structure from its amino acid sequence that achieves accuracy competitive with experimental data. Work in this field won the Nobel Prize in chemistry for David Baker in 2024.

These achievements raise the question "are the machines really thinking?" Since ELIZA in the 1960s, some people have been hard to convince that the machine was not displaying human intelligence. In 1970 Douglas Hofstadter predicted that machines surpassing humans at chess was not something that would happen in the near future and would require machines to develop a kind of actual general intelligence.

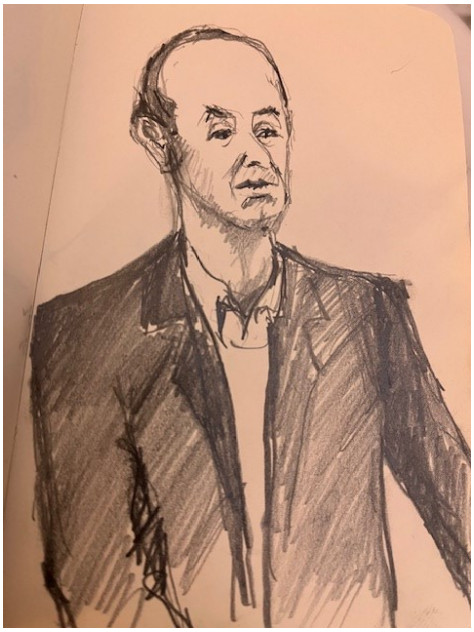
In AI development there are two traditions. The first is the neural networks approach involving machine learning, bottom-up processing, vast data collection, high-speed and function fitting, essentially attempting to mimic brain functioning. The other tradition is the symbolic, top-down, physical symbol system hypothesis, with some tension between the two schools of thought. Within these traditions, ELIZA and Deep Blue represented symbolic AI, whereas Alpha Zero and Alpha Fold are a mixture of symbolic AI and deep learning. By contrast, Large Language Models (LLMS) are purely exercises in deep learning.

Hofstadter was probably wrong, in that the programming in Deep Blue was not truly intelligent. It later emerged that the signal move that baffled Kasparov was actually due to a bug in the system that resulted in a random choice of move!

Whether or not machines can think is probably the wrong question. A useful comparison was to ask "do submarines swim?" What machines do is clearly different from human intelligence and the way in which humans relate one to another. To illustrate this point he referred to the Isaac Asimov story "Robbie" in which a family uses a robot programmed to act as a nanny to a human child. Inevitably, the child becomes fond of the robot and pines when the parents, in an effort to break the attachment, send the robot back to the factory. In order to show her that the robot is purely mechanical, they take her to the factory where Robbie is now working and, in an accident, Robbie saves the little girl from being killed. The parents relent and the child and robot are reunited.

He went on to talk about "compatabilism" meaning things that can be programmed versus the concept of "free will" and to resemble human emotion. This emphasis the difference between AI and human decision-making and requires that valid AI decisions must display transparency, logic and explainability. Whilst the existence of true free will can be debated, it is good to pretend that in fact we have such a property. Will machines, therefore, be able to make decisions that will lead us to treat them as real thinkers? That is unclear. Going forward, it is probable that the technology will combine the best of both the neural and symbolic approaches leading to a neurosymbolic structure that may approach real thinking. The current problem is that these newer devices appear not to learn as quickly as older versions and there are often significant problems.

In the final analysis, machines, at least for the present, do not display consciousness.



Above: Sheila Camerer, *Drawing of Prof Thomas (Tommie) Meyer .*

Musical Notes: James Grace: Guitar Recital

Hailed as "A highly gifted performer" by *Classical Guitar Magazine*, UK, James Grace is one of South Africa's most accomplished and versatile musicians. He maintains an extensive performance schedule, has appeared as a guest soloist with every South African orchestra and has performed at all the major National Arts Festivals, both as a soloist and in collaboration with various artists.

The first music set included:

Joaquin Malats, *Serenata Española*

Granada from Isaac Albéniz's *Suite Española Op. 47*

Tango from *España Op. 165*

Miguel Llobet, *El Testament d'Amelia* from *10 Canciones Populares Catalanas*

Enrique Granados, *Andaluz* from *12 Danzas Españolas.*

The second music set included:

Lennon / McCartney: *Medley*

Carole King: *You've Got a Friend*

Stanley Myers, *Cavatina* from *The Deer Hunter.*

It was a privilege for assembled Owls to listen to such an accomplished performer.

James Grace won the *KANNA Award* for Best Male Artist at the 2010 *Klein Karoo National Arts Festival* and the *KykNet Fiesta Award* for Best Solo Production in 2011. His seventh solo guitar studio album, *Andaluza – Music of Spain III*, won the South African Music Award (SAMA) for Best Instrumental Album 2019. A graduate of the Royal College of Music in London, James Grace made history as the first guitarist to receive the *Tagore Gold Medal*, an honour presented annually to the institution's most outstanding student. Currently based in Cape Town, James performs, records, and lectures, directing the guitar programme at the University of Cape Town's South African College of Music.

Above: Michel Beckurts, *Drawings of James Grace in performance.*

WPB: Owl Teresa Raposo: “1974/75 – The Exodus from Angola of the Portuguese Colonists and their Descendants”

Fifty years ago, in July 1975, my mother, sister, and I boarded a Belgian plane in Luanda, Angola, bound for Lisbon. We left during the Battle of Luanda, when three Angolan liberation movements – who had spent 13 years fighting the Portuguese Army – turned their weapons on each other, vying for power ahead of Angola’s independence, scheduled for 11 November 1975.

That day, alongside hundreds of desperate people, we sat in a car outside the chaotic Luanda airport, now a makeshift refugee camp. The anguish was intense. Services had collapsed, violence was rampant, and we were leaving behind lives we had built over decades, stepping into complete uncertainty. Many refugees, born in Angola to Portuguese ancestors who had settled over a century ago, were headed to a Portugal they didn’t know, with no family waiting.

The Portuguese arrived in Angola in 1482 with navigator Diogo Cão. For centuries, their presence remained coastal, focused largely on the slave trade. By the late 1600s, Luanda was exporting 8,000–10,000 slaves annually to Brazil and the Caribbean. Colonization of the interior began only in the 19th century, after Brazil’s independence and the formal abolition of the slave trade.

The 1884-85 Berlin Conference marked Angola’s recognition as a Portuguese colony during Europe’s "Scramble for Africa." Effective occupation continued into the 1920s, with full indigenous subjugation not completed until the 1940s.

Portugal’s internal politics had long influenced Angola. After decades of instability, the 1926 military coup brought António Salazar to power. His dictatorship, lasting until 1974, controlled Angola’s fate. Large-scale Portuguese migration to Angola began in the 1950s, with settlers granted land. From 1955 to 1974, Angola’s white population tripled – from 100,000 to over 300,000 – due to economic growth and infrastructure development driven by the colonial war effort.

The liberation war began in 1961, led by the MPLA and later the FNLA. Ironically, this conflict spurred Angola’s economic development. Portugal invested in infrastructure, education, and health, trying to win over the local population. Meanwhile, back home, the war drained Portugal’s finances and manpower: around 100,000 young men were deployed annually, and in 1973, 22% of Portugal’s GDP went to the colonial war effort.

Eventually, dissatisfaction at home boiled over. On 25 April 1974, the Portuguese military staged a coup, ending the dictatorship. A democratic revolution followed, and with it, the inevitability of decolonization.

Not all Portuguese settlers in Angola welcomed independence. Many newer arrivals quietly left, including government employees – within months, the number of public doctors fell from 300 to 180. But families like ours, deeply rooted in Angola, were hopeful about transforming a mismanaged colony into a thriving nation. How wrong we were.

Above: Michel Beckurts, *Drawing of Owl Teresa Raposo.*

In late 1974, the three liberation movements, with Portugal's consent, brought their armed forces into Angola's cities. Though they agreed to elections, infighting quickly resumed. Angola plunged into civil war.

By March 1975, Luanda was in chaos. Armed groups clashed. Looting, assaults, and mass killings erupted. Portuguese troops, already demobilizing, could do little. By April, their numbers had dropped significantly. Ill-equipped and unsupported by revolutionary Portugal, they couldn't control the escalating violence.

Airlines stopped flying to Luanda. By June, civil war raged. Portuguese forces withdrew to major cities, which became evacuation hubs. Civilians were caught in the crossfire. Armed militias looted homes, committed sexual violence, and indigenous people fled rebel witch hunts in the townships. Skilled workers fled to Portugal and South West Africa. Entire industries collapsed as homes, businesses, and farms were abandoned.

Those who fled often couldn't access their savings. Many left by sea in small boats or sailed south to Luanda, while others drove dangerous roads to South West Africa. The airport was overwhelmed. With no staff, passengers carried their own luggage. Each person was allowed one suitcase; the tarmac was littered with what had to be left behind.

By August 1975, more flights to Lisbon became available. In October and early November, 3,000–4,000 refugees arrived daily in Lisbon, some camping in the airport with Red Cross aid.

My parents, an architect and a pharmacist, moved to Luanda in 1953 after marrying. I was born there and was six when the liberation war began. As the countryside became dangerous, we stayed near the coast. I didn't experience winter until much later; we only visited Europe during the Northern Hemisphere summer.

In July 1975, besides my one suitcase, I carried something far more precious – my newborn daughter Ana, just two weeks old. While my university peers debated politics and dreamed of democracy, I was busy with motherhood. Ana was born during a curfew, in a private hospital. My husband wasn't allowed in. My doctor was busy treating war casualties and sent a midwife in his place. Thankfully, all went smoothly.

The next morning, a mortar crater at the hospital's front forced my husband to enter through the back to meet our daughter. Though we never directly witnessed gunfire, the consequences of war surrounded us. Friends displaced by skirmishes often stayed with us. From our apartment balcony at night, we watched the eerie glow of tracer bullets.

We tried to maintain normalcy. My husband would whistle as he walked to the bakery each morning. Eventually, shortages hit hard. We moved in with my parents, who had stockpiled essentials. With bakeries shut, my mother baked brioche – our own Marie Antoinette moment in Africa.

Between May 1974 and November 1975, 90% of Angola's skilled population left. Unskilled labourers returned to rural villages. Infrastructure collapsed. Services stopped. The economy imploded. The country fell into a civil war that would last 27 years.

Most of those who left took only a single suitcase to a country they barely knew, stepping into an uncertain and often hostile future. The hope many of us once had – to build a new, independent Angola together – was crushed by violence, fear, and chaos.

Members' News

Excursion

The next excursion will be to Owl Petre Prins's private museum on geology and precious stones, to be held at: 11h00 to 12h30 on Friday, 3 October 2025, at Prins & Prins Diamonds, Huguenot House, 66 Loop St. Owl Petre Prins will be the host. The excursion is limited to 20 including guests, on a first come first served basis. Bookings to Owl Bruton please.

A New Book by Owl Jeremy Lawrence

Owl Jeremy Lawrence has recently published a delightful book of short stories entitled *Tall Tales from Table Town*. He states, in his "Author's Note", that all his characters are 'fictional composites' of real-life people or institutions. However, in the chapter on the "Hadidah Club", Owls will detect a distinct similarity with their own club, although the "Too Whit Too Whit Too Woo" chorus has been replaced by "Haa-Haa-Hah-Di-Dah", the meeting venue is the Procrustean, and the Wastepaper Basket is referred to as the "Posterior". Jeremy's writing is witty and sometimes outrageous, reminiscent of Alexander McCall-Smith or Nicholas Ellenbogen, and every linguaphile will find his little book well worth reading.

A Discussion on the Topic of "Environmentalism and Religion"

Owls are invited to join an informal tête-à-tête between Owls Geoff Davies (the "Green Bishop") and Mike Bruton that will be held around the fireplace in the ground floor lounge leading to the Grill Room from 17h00 to 18h00 preceding the next Owl Club meeting on Tuesday, 19th August 2025. The topic of the tête-à-tête will be "Environmentalism and Religion". All Owls are welcome to attend and there is no need to book.

Owl Club Apparel

As male Owl Club members have the option of buying Owl-patterned bow ties, waistcoats, and cuff links, the Committee is pleased to announce that Owl-themed evening clutch bags are now available for women members to buy. Convertible to sling bags with a silver chain if so desired, the clutch bags sell for R475. The same Owl logo is available individually at R150 if you wish to sew or glue it to an item of apparel or a favourite evening bag. Key rings with the Owl logo can be used as a key ring, hung from an evening bag zipper, or converted to a pendant. The price is also R150. Below are pictures of the items, which will be on display and for sale at the August dinner for cash or EFT.

If you would like to pre-order an item – or order at any time – please pay the relevant amount into the Owl Club account, using your surname + bag/logo/ keyring (whichever you have chosen) as your reference. Please send the POP to Kate McCallum at kate.mccallum4@gmail.com in order for stock levels to be monitored. We wish you well to wear them!

Seen & Noted at the July Meeting

Above left: Tony Grogan, *Drawing of Guitarist James Grace.*

Above right: Tony Grogan, *Drawing of Owl Teresa Raposo.*

Above left: Owl Michael Beckurts and his guests.

Above right: New Owls, Gerrie Van Niekerk and Sebastian Van As being inducted by Owl President Mike James.

The Owl Club
Tuesday 15 July 2025
The 1373rd Meeting

President: Owl Mike James
Dinner @ 6.45 pm
Grace: Owl Martin Brossy
Dinner:
Toast: South Africa: The Owl President
A break for the tables to be cleared
The 1373rd Meeting @ 7.55 following dinner:
Announcements: The Owl President
Inductions: Owls Van Niekerk & Van As
Toast to our guests: The Owl President
Talk: Tommie Meyer: Artificial Intelligence
Music: James Gace Part 1.
Bar Break

Food for thought
The Winter Solstice

At the turn of the century (2001) the Shakespearian actor Ben Duff had the following thought about AI.
"Here's a line from the King James Bible (1611)
"The spirit indeed is willing, but flesh is weak"(Mattheew 26:41)
A friend of mine works in the development of Artificial Intelligence. (AI) Apparently one of the … problems with AI is Natural Human Language Processing – in other words getting a computer to tell the difference between, for example the economic sense of the word depression and the psychological sense. A … way of testing an AI's language processing ability is to get it to translate a phrase from language A to language B and back again. In one of my friends experiments he took the line above, translated it into Russian and back into English
It came out with:
"The whisky is great but the steak is terrible"

KG
KELVIN GROVE

The Owl Club
Tuesday, 15th July 2025

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Starter
Vegetarian spring roll
Served with pickled ginger on sweet chili sauce

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Main Course
Prawn Tagliatelle pasta
Served in a creamy sauce

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Dessert
Mince pies

***

Filter Coffee

I ask you all, to stand for Grace which I will try to read with pace

Good Owls remember and note thee well, the land's less wealthy we can't short sell in our new country

You must take heed make sure to help, all others in need in winter rains

It's warmth we seek so share your bread and feed the meek

Now bow your heads and praise the Lord for food and wine, upon your board.

Grace by Martin Brossy.