

The Telegraph

QI: Quite interesting facts about slowing down

A quietly intriguing column from the brains behind QI, the BBC quiz show. This week: QI slows down



The thrill of the chaise: Miss West felt no need for speed Photo: EVERETT COLLECTION / REX FEATURES

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4:15PM GMT 25 Nov 2010

Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly

Mae West

Slow notes

[QI: Quite Interesting facts about mountains \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/8097317/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-mountains.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/8097317/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-mountains.html)

[The QI cabinet of curiosity \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/8080884/Quite-Interesting-the-QI-cabinet-of-curiosity.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/8080884/Quite-Interesting-the-QI-cabinet-of-curiosity.html)

[QI: Quite Interesting facts about brown \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/7979762/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-brown.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/7979762/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-brown.html)

[QI: Quite Interesting facts about the colour purple \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/7744089/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-the-colour-purple.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/7744089/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-the-colour-purple.html)

[QI: Quite Interesting facts about happiness \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/7801535/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-happiness.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/7801535/QI-Quite-Interesting-facts-about-happiness.html)

[QI: Quite interesting facts about speed \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/8147859/QI-Quite-interesting-facts-about-speed.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/qi/8147859/QI-Quite-interesting-facts-about-speed.html)

The longest and slowest piece of music in history is John Cage's *As Slow as Possible*, originally written in 1985 as a 20-minute piece for piano. After Cage's death in 1992, a conference of philosophers and musicians set themselves the task of seeing just how long the eight-page score could last. As a result, it was adapted for organ and has been playing since 2001 at the church of St Burchardi in Halberstadt, Germany. It is planned to last 639 years, the first organ in Halberstadt having been built 639 years earlier. After kicking off with a 17-month pause, the organ's six pipes have managed eight chord changes since and a new chord is due on February 5 2011.

To check on progress, or to order a (somewhat faster) CD, visit www.john-cage.halberstadt.de.

Slow plans

The Long Now Foundation was established in 1996 as an attempt to counterbalance the short-term, speed-obsessed nature of modern culture. As well as arguing for the adoption of a five-digit date notation (for example, 02010 instead of 2010), they have built a prototype of a Clock of the Long Now, which is planned to run for 10,000 years with minimal maintenance (it is intentionally made out of cheap materials to discourage looting by future generations).

They have also launched the Rosetta Project, which plans a record of all the thousands of languages expected to become extinct in the next few generations. Long Now Foundation board members include the musician Brian Eno, the neuroscientist and author of *Sum*, David Eagleman, and Chris Anderson, the editor of *Wired* magazine and author of the influential bestseller, *The Long Tail*.

Slow cars

Early motoring was very slow. Such was the fear of the damaging effects of the motor car (hugely exaggerated by the railway companies) that a series of laws were passed in the 1860s known as the Red Flag Acts. They limited the speed to 4mph in the country and 2mph in town and required each car to have a minimum crew of three, one of whom was required to walk 60 yards in front of the vehicle, waving a red flag. It wasn't until 1896

that Bridget Driscoll of Croydon became the first pedestrian to be killed in a road accident in Britain. She was crossing the grounds of Crystal Palace when a car hit her, travelling at 4mph (the speed limit had been raised to 12mph and the red flag abolished).

Slow play

Elijah Williams (1809-1854) was one of the great English chess players of the mid-19th century and played in the first London tournament in 1851. Nicknamed the Bristol Sloth, he averaged two and a half hours per move, which unnerved all but the steeliest of opponents. Howard Staunton, a fellow British grandmaster, once remarked during a match with Williams: "My God, Elijah, you're not just supposed to sit there – you're supposed to sit there and think!"

Slow books

Das Deutsche Wörterbuch or German Dictionary probably boasts the slowest publishing history of any book. Started by the Brothers Grimm (of fairy tale fame) in 1838, its 35 volumes weren't completed for another 123 years, in 1961. Having conceived it as a 10-year, six-volume project, the last surviving brother, Jacob, died halfway through the entry for "fruit" in 1864. The editors of the second edition expect to complete the A-F volume before the end of 2012. There is no official end date for the whole edition. The Oxford English Dictionary looks speedy in comparison. Like the Grimms, its editor James Murray originally planned it as a 10-year project. He started work in 1879; five years later his team had only got as far as "ant". The 12-volume first edition was published in 1928 (Murray had died in 1915), and the

20-volume second edition appeared in 1989. The third edition, due in 2037, will be more than 40,000 pages long and only available online.

Slow sales

Oxford University Press also holds the record for the world's slowest selling book: a translation of the New Testament from Coptic into Latin. Some 500 copies were printed in 1716; the last one was snapped up in 1907.

The Second Book of General Ignorance by John Lloyd & John Mitchinson (Faber & Faber, £12.99) is available for £11.99 plus £1.25 p&p from [Telegraph Books \(http://books.telegraph.co.uk\)](http://books.telegraph.co.uk).

The new 'H' series of QI is now on Fridays at 8.30pm on BBC One. The extended version (QI XL) is on Saturdays at 8.45pm on BBC Two.

Next week QI collects seeds

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