

THE ASCENT OF MAN

REX GOOCH

Letchworth Garden City, Herts, England

rexgooch@ntlworld.com

Because Tony Augarde was quoted as saying some very strange things about ten-squares in a British national newspaper, I decided to see how he tackled the subject in the *Oxford Guide to Word Games* (2nd edition, 2003), a review of which appears in W03-194. The newspaper had quoted an expert as estimating that 900 9-squares had been compiled: the book makes it clear that this was Dmitri Borgmann, so the estimate has long been overtaken by events. The newspaper also printed what it claimed was the first ten-square: this used one 4-letter word, two 5-letter words, one 6-letter word and seven unsourced 10-letter words. This effort had first appeared in April 1999, and was praised by Tony Augarde as “the best tensquare he has ever seen”. That is consistent with the *Guide*. A quick check in the book gives the latest as Frank Rubin’s 1977 incomplete square, which I prefer. The *Guide* is not of this century, and the revolution in ten-squares remains unnoticed. The reader should not assume that Tony Augarde was reported accurately in every respect, though he has declined to clarify what he did say. The back cover of the *Guide* claims it is not merely updated, but “fully updated”.

I decided to check the *Guide* for another, but earlier, topic on which I had written at length, viz. word ladders. Again, a good deal of space is dedicated to the history, with nothing dated later than 1925. Regarding the transition from APE to MAN, the book gives the 6-step Lewis Carroll solution: APE ARE ERE ERR BAR MAR MAN (spot the mistaken EAR!) and remarks that the best subsequent solvers have achieved is 5 steps:

APE APT OPT OAT MAT MAN

although it does mention that 4 steps will suffice if the rules are ignored, and the letters can be mixed at any point:

APE PEA PEN PAN MAN

Five steps seemed very poor. The shortest possible solution is 3 steps, and this can be done, eg

APE AAE AAN MAN or APE AAE MAE MAN

where AAE is an initialism for many organisations, such as The Association of American Educators or, thrillingly, the recognized organization for endodontics (root canal treatment).

Those who dislike initialisms will be delighted to see the following, which is perfect, as it is of minimum length and letter replacement proceeds from left to right:

APE MPE MAE MAN

MPE is a stream in the Central African Republic (6°13, 16°12), or a populated place in the Congo (-2°54, 14°43).

I found 385 4-step solutions, of which 17 consist solely of OED headwords. Here are a few of the 17 examples involving neither initialisms nor abbreviations:

APE ALE ALN AAN MAN
 APE APT AAT MAT MAN
 APE ARE ARN AAN MAN
 APE AWE AWN AAN MAN
 APE AYE MYE MAE MAN

In my solutions, all words are headwords in the OED, and places are from the NIMA database.