

NEWS

JACK TAYLOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Residents of Plaistow Grove where Bowie lived as a child, right, before he achieved fame worldwide



Barnes bows out with his 15th novel

Emily Prescott

Julian Barnes has confirmed that his latest book will be his last work of fiction.

The Booker Prize winner, who turns 80 tomorrow and is living with cancer, said completing *Departure(s)* was the right time to end. "I've played all my tunes," he said. "I shouldn't write a book just because it would be published. You ought to go on until you've said everything you've got to say, and I've reached that point."

Barnes has already written 14 novels. His first, *Metroland*, published in 1980, drew heavily on his suburban upbringing in Northwood, Middlesex. "I just thought it would be lovely to write a book that got published; and then I thought, well actually it would be really nice to have a second book published. So I was really going from one stepping stone to the next," he told The Telegraph.

Departure(s) is a hybrid of memoir, essay and fiction, exploring memory, love, friendship, ageing and death. "I do say goodbye to the reader at the end," he said.

The book reflects his experience with cancer. Six years ago, he was diagnosed with myeloproliferative neoplasm, a rare blood cancer. Barnes has daily chemotherapy in pill form and a check up every three months. He joked: "The obituary line, 'He died after a long struggle, bravely borne', should read, 'He died after cancer had a long, brave struggle with him'."

Barnes married the literary agent Pat Kavanagh in 1979; she died from a brain tumour in 2008, just 37 days after her diagnosis. Barnes was 62.

"I thought, that's a really crappy age to get widowed. I can't really start again," he said. However, last August he married Rachel Cugnoni, a publisher. The wedding, which was kept secret by eight people, took place in a registry office.



Bowie's street still has the gift of sound and vision

Ten years after the singer's death, the suburban childhood home that he longed to escape is at the centre of a lively community of musicians, composers and actresses

Rosamund Urwin Media Editor

David Bowie spent his teenage years in 1960s Bromley longing to escape suburbia. Yet on the same unassuming street in southeast London where he came of age, his musical spirit lives on a decade after his death. Today, residents of Plaistow Grove include a West End star, a classical composer and at least eight other musicians and performers.

Earlier this month, the Heritage of London Trust announced it had bought 4 Plaistow Grove, the home where Bowie lived from the ages of 8 to 20 and made his first steps to becoming a pop star. The charity plans to restore the property to its 1960s appearance and convert it into an "immersive experience".

Plaistow Grove has other claims to musical fame: according to local lore, the Sex Pistols held their last party at No 8, during which Johnny Rotten, the lead singer, ran down the street naked.

Although some musical residents were aware of the road's history when they moved in, most were not.

"We've been called here subliminally by Bowie," joked Ingmar Kamalaghan, 46, a drummer who has supported

Razorlight on tour, played at Glastonbury and helped to produce tours for acts including Imogen Heap.

He moved to the street in 2024. The previous owners had told him that when they bought the house 20 years earlier they found lyrics written on a wall and assumed they must have been Bowie's, but "they plastered over it". Kamalaghan is now head of education and future workforce at the UK Space Agency.

Annie Garrett, 85, who moved to Plaistow Grove in 2000, is an actress and drama teacher who helped to set up the Brit School in Croydon, where a studio bears her name. She still sings at the Drifter's Den, a folk night in Sidcup.

"Many musicians have come from Bromley – in the suburbs, the young rebel," said Garrett. Her partner was Howard Riley, the jazz pianist and composer, who died last year aged 81.

Rebecca Botterill, 33, who moved to the street six years ago, has starred in the musicals *Wicked* and *Frozen* in the West End. In *Wicked*, she was a "swing", meaning she learnt several parts and had to be ready as a stand-in. She ended up playing both Elphaba and Nessarose. Botterill said that the "heart of the street" is Julie

Davies, 69, a coloratura soprano, pianist and retired director of music, who is planning to bring the residents together for a concert on the street this summer. Her son, Josef, is an actor who has been in *Chernobyl*, *Andor* and *Call the Midwife*.

Other residents include the Welsh classical composer David Braid, 55, Dr Ruth Ayling, 64, a recently retired chemical pathologist who plays violin for the European Doctors Orchestra, and the flautist Maisy Shaw, 23.

Annalise Webb, 36, worked in musical theatre before becoming an agent's assistant. Rosanne Havel, 40, is a soprano who now teaches for Bromley Youth Music Trust, and her husband, Vincent Gray, 41, was the leading man in York Theatre Royal's pantos for a decade and played Rocky in a tour of *The Rocky Horror Show*.

According to his childhood friends, Bowie's 12 years in Plaistow Grove were unhappy. Dana Gillespie, the actress and songwriter, recalled in Dylan Jones's biography *David Bowie: A Life* that it was "a really cold house [with] a very chilly atmosphere". She remembered Bowie telling her: "I want to get out of here.

I have to get out of here. I want to go up in the world."

Yet his Bromley years were still highly creative. Bowie's first performance, aged 11, was an Elvis impersonation for the Boy Scouts in Bromley and he played at local venues including the Bromel Club.

Reggie Shortland, 67, a clarinettist, grew up nearby in West Wickham and was a massive Bowie fan in her youth. She moved to Plaistow Grove last year.

"I used to come into Bromley on a Saturday and see Bowie walking around. It was a draw when we were looking for a house and I found out he lived on the street."

When she was a teenager, she was once shopping with her mother when she spotted her idol.

"He was walking down Bromley High Street in these amazing platform boots and I happened to be begging my mum for platforms and I said: 'It's David Bowie! That's what I want!' As I said it, he crossed the road, tripped on the pavement and fell flat on his face. My mum said: 'And that's why you're not having platform shoes.'"

Burrowings of the 'worm whisperer' give farmers hope

Samuel Lovett

Jackie Stroud is known as the "worm whisperer". Every week between autumn and spring, when the country is at its wettest, she takes a finely tuned listening device to a field, pops it into the soil and dons a set of headphones.

It is something she has been doing for the past three years but she remains "amazed" by what she hears. "Worms sort of scrape through the soil in a rhythmic, kind of pulsing way," she says. "You can hear the differences between different insects and species. It's just this constant cacophony of clicks and pops and rasps. It's really quite exciting."

As an assistant professor of soil science at the University of Warwick, Stroud, 40, is at the forefront of an emerging body of research called ecoacoustics, in which scientists listen to the sounds of soil – most notably those made by earthworms – to determine its health. Noisy soil is healthy soil, says Stroud, whose latest research paper was published in November in the European Journal of Soil Science.

It is hoped the research will one day enable farmers to better monitor and manage their soil quality and boost growth productivity, and even inform the public about the emergence of invasive worm species in their own back gardens.

From ants to insect larvae, every creature generates a "sound signature" that can be identified and analysed, Stroud says: "The more we've looked into it, the more we've found that soil organisms communicate using these vibrations and sounds. They're tapping the soil. They're rubbing their body parts together."

Earthworms act as "ecosystem engineers" by burrowing through the ground and creating space for



Jackie Stroud, an expert in ecoacoustics, at work

offering data on the health of their fields.

The process would take a matter of minutes. As part of the research, probes and recorders have already been sent out to farmers across the country to sample the technology.

Stroud believes the equipment could be made available "within three years", adding that her "research group has doubled in size during 2025 so we have the capacity to quickly make progress". AI is being used to "accelerate results interpretation".

The British farming industry needs all the help it can get. A report published in November by McCain Foods found that a third of farmers are making a loss or only breaking even.

Stroud says ecoacoustics could be "transformative" for farmers. She points to the example of "leaf litter", in which general plant debris sits on the surface of the soil.

Earthworms break this down, preventing new crops and plants from being "smothered". Ecoacoustics could therefore let a farmer know that the field they're planning to grow their crop in has a low earthworm population, increasing the risk of disruptive leaf litter and a low yield.

The technology isn't yet able to differentiate between different species of worms. But Stroud hopes this will change, especially in light of the threat posed by invasive flatworm species in Britain.

Non-native flatworms, which typically live on the soil surface, are often introduced to the UK in imported pot plants. They voraciously feed on the earthworm, which aren't exactly good at defending themselves," says Stroud. "They hope her research will change how farmers do this."

Instead of digging up the ground, farmers would place a listening probe into the soil to record the different sounds, which would be analysed by computers.

Noisy soil is healthy soil...it's constant

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