

Why the British passport is no laughing matter

I have a sign above my desk – I'm looking at it now – it reads 'Grumpy old man' and has a picture of a particularly curmudgeonly old figure peering over a garden gate.

I have no recollection of receiving said sign, but I'm sure it was given to me in jest at some point in the dim and distant past when I really wasn't that old or grumpy.

This week however, I have the distinct feeling that life is beginning to imitate art and I fear I have indeed become old and grumpy.

You see, my passport expires in the next few months so I ventured out to have a new photograph taken, and astonishingly I appear to have morphed into one of the most sad and miserable people I have ever seen.

To misquote Robert Burns, it really is an eye opener to "see ourselves as others see us".

In fairness, although I am one of those people the camera has never liked, and never lied about, the rules of passport photography didn't help.

Don't wear glasses, stare straight at the camera, don't smile – three things which conspired to make me look like a convicted criminal staring down the barrel of a ten stretch.

In these emotional days of Brexit and immigration controls, I wonder

if it is Government policy to make everyone carrying a British passport look so miserable that it might put some people off coming here?

It never used to be like this. Passport photos were first introduced just over 100 years ago, with the adoption of the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act and there were – initially – few rules to be followed. Silly hats, walking sticks, group shots and pets all featured in some of the earliest on file. We were clearly a much happier nation back then.

Amazingly, the notion of a document giving safe passage in foreign lands was first mentioned in the Bible back in 450 BC. In Britain, the earliest mention of such a document was in the 15th Century when King Henry V started handing them out. English citizens had to pay, but foreign nationals received them for nothing. Hmm... let's not go down that road.

In my own lifetime, this latest passport is only the fifth one I have ever had. I was 21 before I ever left the country for the first time.

Back then passport photographs were still reasonably relaxed... although my first one saw me wearing a shirt and tie. Husbands and wives could even travel using just one passport, which seems astonishingly old school for the



Bearer Titulaire		Spouse Epouse
Occupation Profession	JOURNALIST	
Place of birth Lieu de naissance	[REDACTED]	
Date of birth Date de naissance	[REDACTED]	
Residence Résidence	SCOTLAND	
Height Taille	1.70 m	
Distinguishing marks Signes particuliers		
CHILDREN ENFANTS		
Name Nom	Date of birth Date de naissance	Sex Sexe
Usual signature of bearer Signature du titulaire		
Usual signature of spouse Signature de son épouse		

The bearer (and spouse, if included) should sign opposite on receipt

■ Dick Lumsden's first passport... it's a bit different now

supposedly liberated 1970s.

You had to include your occupation and your height back then... and having the word "journalist" on my passport did lead to several interesting border crossing incidents over the years – including one particularly uncomfortable session in a windowless room at Checkpoint Charlie in East Berlin.

Being a bit sad, I have actually kept all four of my previous passports, and I noticed for the first time this week that I appeared to have shrunk three centimetres between 1977 and 1987 – maybe it was hair loss!

There is, however, a more serious point to the increasingly regimented and serious nature of the passport

photographs. I can see the point in trying to maintain a neutral expression, and allow facial recognition software at border crossings to match faces to database records by scanning the distance between eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

But a recent study by researchers at Glasgow University has found that, actually, when people are asked to put on a serious face, it distorts their facial features more than when they are photographed casually.

When shown a series of photographs of subjects being serious and non-serious, most people didn't believe they were the same

To those of us who enjoy travelling regularly, whether for work or

pleasure, a passport is the most valuable thing we possess – although we may not always treat it as such.

In an increasingly troubled world, where no destination is safe from the insidious reach of terrorism, a valid British passport still does give you the comfort of knowing that there is some small corner of almost every foreign land where you can get help if needed. No wonder so many people out there are trying their hardest to get one.

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