

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

QUESTION Is there still an award for pipe smoker of the year?

SADLY, no there is not. The UK award was officially discontinued in 2004 due to strict tobacco advertising and promotional laws.

The award ran for 40 years from 1964 when it was launched by the Briar Pipe Trade Association. The title of Pipeman of the Year was presented each January at a lunch held at London's Savoy Hotel, and the resulting roll call of winners reads like a who's who of British pipe smoking.

Prime minister Harold Wilson, who was seldom pictured without a pipe, was the sole double recipient, winning in both 1965 and 1976, when he also picked up the award for Pipe-man of the Decade.

Fellow politician Tony Benn received the award in 1992 as a result of his heroic pipe smoking from the age of 16 across 51 years. Comedian Eric Morecambe won in 1970 and celebrated by blowing soap bubbles from his pipe at the acceptance photocall.

Actor Warren Mitchell won in 1967 but refused to accept the award, calling it 'silly' and commenting, 'I also use a lavatory brush. By the same token you could make me "lavatory brush man of the year."'

Other notable winners include the actor Peter Cushing (1968), TV presenter Jack Hargreaves (1969), cricketer Ian Botham (1988), DJ Dave Lee Travis (1982), astronomer Patrick Moore (1983) and footballer Jimmy Greaves (1985). The final recipient was Stephen Fry in 2003.

While celebrity pipe-smoking awards may be long gone, the global pipe-smoking community remains highly active, with the focus now on technical skill and craftsmanship.

The Committee, International of Pipe Clubs hosts the World and Continental Pipe-Smoking Championships each year, with contestants given a brand new briar pipe, three grams of tobacco, two matchsticks and a wooden tamper. They are challenged to see who can keep their pipe lit the longest.

In what could pass for a Monty Python sketch, strict rules are adhered to with stewards monitor-

How pipes ran out of puff



Victorious: Harold Wilson won four elections and three pipe awards

ing the smoking room, and demanding that a competitor exhale smoke on command. If no smoke appears, the participant is disqualified.

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