



The Handyman France Annual Awards for 2019 have arrived! As always, the vast majority of guests (the strangely consistent 98.5%) present no problems and most are instantly forgettable. Some are a little eccentric, even downright comical, with a tiny minority who cause problems. The tongue-in-cheek awards are available to all those who fall outside the instantly forgettable range.

Names and locations are, as always, concealed to protect the guilty.

You may wonder why we do these awards every year. Well, why not? There is no law in France, or anywhere else that springs to mind, that says work cannot be fun. And being slightly loony is the only thing that prevents us all from going totally insane. It's just the degree of looniness that matters. Most of the awards simply celebrate the varying levels we encounter.

Participating countries this year are -

Belgium
Denmark
France
Holland
Ireland
Italy
Spain
UK
USA

The season got off to a wonderful start. The very first guests of 2019, who were Spanish, said they would arrive between 12h00 and 14h00. We were there at 11h30. We were still waiting at 14h00. By 14h30 we gave up and moved on. Then, at 15h00 I had a text saying they would arrive at 16h00. It was no better at the end of their holiday. As it wasn't a changeover day, we didn't really care what time they left, so they said they would like to leave at around 12h00 but would text me as they were leaving. I received their text - at 15h00. It said that they had left at 11h00. They receive the **The Goons (*What time is it, Eccles?*) Award**.

Despite leaving the house at 06h00, a Belgian family left everything in exceptionally good order. But the same couple from UK who shared the win last year take the **Head Office Seal of Approval**. This is the first time this has been retained by the same individuals. (For those who don't know, *Head Office* is also sometimes referred to as *The Wife*.) To mark this historic event, and as the ladies concerned are Welsh, we asked Tom Jones to make the presentation. Unfortunately, poor old Tom doesn't get out much these days, especially since he lost his false teeth and wooden leg in a water-melon incident. (Oh, sorry. When I said Tom Jones, I didn't mean *Tom Jones*. I meant *Tom Jones*, the old bloke in the next village.) We believe they will be here again next year, and going for the hat trick. (OK, I made up the bit about Tom Jones.)

We often receive requests for information before guests arrive, usually along the lines of what times the shops are open, is there a decent restaurant nearby and so on. One couple wanted to know where to go bird watching. My knowledge of ornithology amounts to two-thirds of the square root of nothing, so I was tempted to suggest the *animalerie* at the local Tridome DiY store. **The Pet Shop Boys (Wings and Faith) Award** goes to Belgium.

Guests also often ask about availability of various things. Usually they want confirmation that there is a BBQ, pool towels, off-street parking and various other basic, but essential, matters. For one British couple, the life or death item was a salad spinner. Nothing else. A **Dead or Alive (You Spin Me Right Round) Award** is all we can think of.

Our involvement with a particular property amounts to just being available for maintenance matters. So I was unable to directly assist when guests rang to ask what time they could arrive, but gave them the contact details for the meeter and greeter. That didn't stop them calling me another four times on the day of arrival. First they wanted confirmation that someone would meet them. Then they called to say no-one was there. Then I had another call from a different member of the group asking where their friends were. Yet another call because there was no answer at the door of a notaire's office in the same street, but very obviously the wrong house. We never actually met the guests, but I think I may be able to guess their hair colour - so, a **Blondie (Call Me) Award** for UK.

As well as those people we meet who are memorable for their eccentricities, there are also some who remain in the memory banks simply because it's so much fun talking with them. I met a Danish family, all of whom spoke perfect English. I mentioned that, courtesy of the TV program QI, I only know two Danish words - '*fart kontrol*'. (In case you're wondering



'how do they do that?', it means '*speed trap*'.) They increased my knowledge of Danish - when you press the button to call a lift in Denmark, the illuminated sign says '*i fart*', meaning that it's moving. But what would be a suitable award for the Danes? **'The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind'...**



...but it doesn't end there. Less than 24 hours after this conversation, they rang me to say that the toilets were blocked. It was a Saturday, and I had a great deal of trouble getting hold of a plumber quickly enough. In the meantime, the guests cleared the blockage themselves as they were in a hurry. The Danish for 'clear in a hurry'? *Klar i en fart!* So, a second trophy for Denmark - the **Gone with the Wind Award**. (Yes, I know this is schoolboy humour, but I can't help it, OK? Remember, growing old is mandatory, but growing up is optional.)

A British family went out for the evening and left their hire car in a secure car park. A bit too secure because when they returned, it was locked. So they couldn't get into the car park, the car or the house - because, guess where the house keys were? A nice policeman got them out of trouble, so they don't actually win a **Cars (Drive (Who's gonna drive you home tonight?)) Award**, but it was close.

One family brought their dog with them, and although I've no idea what breed it was I know it could kill my son's Alsation - but only if it got stuck in her throat. They were a little concerned that it may escape through the driveway gate, but *pas de problème!* They had in their car a roll of plastic fencing to put on the gate bars, which they took away when they left. The fencing, that is. Not the gate. A **Gary Puckett & the Union Gap (Fillin' the Gap) Award** is the first of two pet-related trophies for France...

...because whilst it's not uncommon for tourists to bring the family dog with them, a cat is unusual. So when a French family arrived with their moggie, I found it impossible to stop thinking about the *Friends and Neighbours* episode of *Are You Being Served*. Mrs Slocombe: "*My only problem is, will my pussy feel at home in a strange place?*" This is only the second time **Mrs Slocombe's Pussy** has been awarded, the first time being in 2015 for entirely different reasons.

Speaking of family and friends, it is they who sometimes who cause the greatest problems – as this incident amply illustrates. A property that isn't rented out was occupied by the British owners' son and half a dozen of his mates. Numerous beer bottles and drinking glasses (some broken) were scattered around the garden and in the pool. The house was, to say the least, messy. If that was as far as it went, a **Men Behaving Badly Award** would be appropriate. But it doesn't end there. When *Head Office* set about sorting out an enormous pile of laundry (and at this stage she wasn't wearing rubber gloves) she found near the bottom of the pile a sheet that was (let's be polite) soiled. It was deliberately hidden without any thought for whoever had to handle the thing. Utterly disgusting. So much so that even the annual Steptoe Award is simply too good for them. Instead they win a **Buzzcocks (Oh sh*t (I wish I'd known that before now)) Award**. (The Buzzcocks are a popular beat combo. Apparently.)



Paradoxically, the Steptoe Award wouldn't have been won by anyone else – though it's a close call. Whilst a UK family left the house a bit grubby, it wasn't so bad – other than the bathroom. They win a **Wallace & Gromit Porridge Canon**. They could use that to dispense toothpaste, and it couldn't possibly make as much mess.

Guests complained that the pool had 'a mass of leaves and insects' in it. About a dozen leaves was all I could find. They had tampered with the pool, of that I am certain, so I was there for about an hour on a Sunday morning fixing it. The only conversation was them whinging about it, and not even a glass of water was offered. The **Queen Gertrude** (from Hamlet) (**'The lady doth protest too much, methinks'**) Award goes to UK.

'The sun has put his hat on, hip hip, hip hip, hooray' Award go to UK – Northern Ireland to be more precise. On a very pleasant day (31°) the guests arrived and said that they had already acclimatised themselves as they'd recently had nice weather at home – a blistering 20°. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't 20° only just above absolute zero?

One guest complained about having to lean out of the window to open and close the shutters. **The Four Tops (Reach out, I'll be there)** Award goes to Belgium.

So, this year we have a historic repeat winner of the **Head Office Seal of Approval** and no contenders for the **Einstein Award**, both of which are unprecedented. I think I'm worried about the latter. Have we just witnessed a step forward in human evolution? Or will it be business as usual in 2020?

UK wins just over half of the total prizes this year. And they range from the sublime to the ridiculous – so no change there, then.

The final word goes to Denmark. They provide the best anti-Brexit argument I've heard yet. How can the British possibly want to turn their backs on friends and trading partners who speak such a silly language...?