



Welcome to the December 2024 newsletter!

Philanthro-ho-ho, Merry Christmas one and all,

I hope you are all well, and getting ready to enjoy whatever the festive season brings. Personally, I am very much looking forward to downing my work tools and turning my attentions instead to eating my own body weight in Lindt chocolate truffles (which I think we can all agree is the *real* meaning of Christmas).

I was undecided about whether to put another newsletter out this year or to wait until January – in the end I thought I would go with the former, as otherwise I'm going to be drowning in philanthropy news by the time January rolls around. But I am definitely, DEFINITELY, going to keep it fairly short this time. And it is going to be slightly more loosey-goosey than some of the other editions of the newsletter (largely because I've got one eye firmly on the finish line at the end of this week).

So here are just a few stories and whatnots that caught my eye in December, plus some quick updates on what I've been up to. There are also lots of interesting plans in the pipeline for next year, which I will update you on further in the new year...

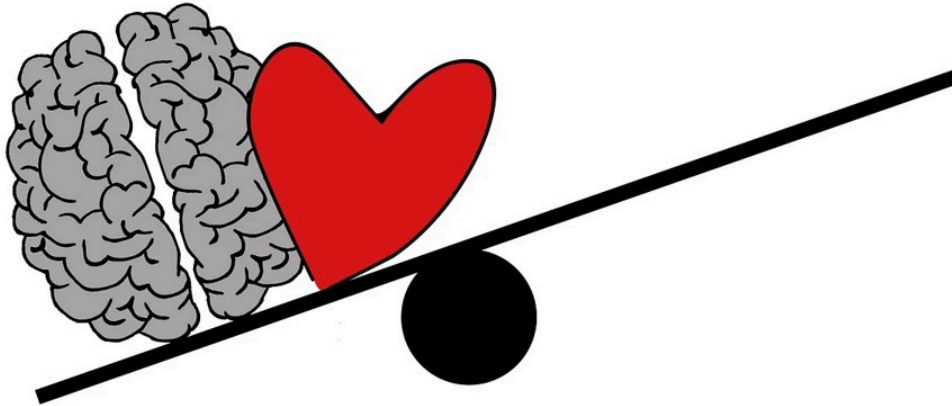
So for now, enjoy, and Nadolig Llawen ac Blwyddyn Newydd Dda. (That's "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year" for those of you unfamiliar with Welsh. Or Elvish).

Rhodri

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

Optimally sub-optimal giving?

There was an interesting back-and-forth debate about philanthropy this month, sparked by an article in the New York Times by Emma Goldberg in which she posed the question "[what if charity shouldn't be optimized?](#)" This was centred around a critique of Effective Altruism, but it is also part of a wider debate about the appropriate balance between "head" and "heart" in philanthropy that has been going for a very long time (arguably from the very beginning of modern philanthropy). Dylan Matthews of Vox couldn't resist taking the bait, and responded with [an article in which he argued that far from it being the case that US charity has become over-rationalised, the real problem is that the vast majority is still not optimised at all.](#)



What do I think about this, you say? Well, thanks for asking.

I think firstly that Matthews probably makes a fair point in arguing that the idea that EA has become the "dominant ideology" in philanthropy is a bit overblown, since (as he points out) the vast majority of giving is not done according to EA principles. (That being said, when it suits the purposes of the EA movement to big itself up, it isn't afraid to do so – and then at other times it is happy to portray itself as the plucky underdog. Which plenty of other organisations/movements do too, but I just point out as a reason to take some of this arguing about scale and influence with a pinch of salt). For my money, the NYT article made a mistake in over-claiming about the influence of EA - particularly as it didn't really need to since the idea of applying rationality and measurement to charity is not the sole preserve of EA, so the core debate goes much wider than this.

However, I think that both Matthews and Goldberg fall into the trap of presenting the other side of the argument uncharitably - offering up the best possible version of their own point of view in contrast to an obviously bad example of the counter-view (e.g. Matthews' "who would choose to give to a pointless wing of an opera house rather than buy a bed net for a child at risk of malaria?"). Given that an increasing amount of EA money goes to things like addressing AI X-risks, and a lot of EA literature suggests that the most effective use of money is actually to support the growth of the EA movement itself, you could easily frame this instead as "is it OK to give money to support the growth of EA rather

than giving it to a food bank or homeless shelter?" Which has a slightly different vibe, right? At the same time, implying that a desire for optimisation of any kind in philanthropy is necessarily a sign of coldness and lack of humanity and that, conversely, any giving that doesn't require measurement somehow reflects a deep spiritual communion between giver and receiver that nourishes the fabric of society, seems like an unhelpful caricature in the opposite direction.

I do think that the portrayal of Amy Schiller's views in the Vox article is a bit misleading though. Having read her book and [spoken to her about it for the podcast](#) I don't think it is fair to say that she argues we should give to the rebuilding of Notre Dame *instead* of meeting basic human needs. Her case rests on the assumption that acute needs should be met as a matter of justice, through taxation (of which there should be more), and that *at that point* we should see the purpose of philanthropy as supporting other things that foster "magnificence". But she freely admits that we don't live in that world yet, so a lot of philanthropy does need to focus on immediate need as a pragmatic reality.

The fact that it is arguably a precondition for the book's argument to work that we have far less inequality and that immediate need is largely met does admittedly set a very high initial bar (as Ben Soskis suggested in a useful series of comments in reply to my post about this on LinkedIn). I don't know that the book itself really deals with this head on, but I did ask Amy about it when I interviewed her (so do listen to that) - my take is that it makes the book more effective as a thought experiment about the role philanthropy could or should play in something closer to an ideal world, rather than necessarily as a prescription for what to do now. (Which the NYT piece seemed to be suggesting it was).

The interesting question, of course, since we're clearly not in an ideal world yet, is what philanthropy does in the meantime. It seems like there's a strong case for advocacy for wealth taxation (to address the fundamental inequality and injustice part), but assuming there's some superogatory bit on top of that, what then? If there's still injustice and need in the world after all the taxing, is the moral duty of the

philanthropist to seek structural reform (which BTW doesn't fit well into the EA framework) or to maximise impact within the existing system according to EA principles? And is there any room on top of THAT for "magnificence" (as Amy Schiller argues for), or things that "make life worth living, rather than just possible"? (If you want [some more thoughts on what philanthropy's role might be in an ideal world, then check out this WPM article](#)).

Personally, I'm willing to accept a pluralist view that all of these approaches to philanthropy are valid (and probably needed), but I know plenty of people would disagree (and they would certainly disagree about the appropriate balance!)

Once again here, I feel like EA – for all its faults - does an important job of framing the important questions rather than leaving them implicit. So even if you don't agree with the EA prescriptions (which I don't necessarily) it forces you to be clear about the choices you are making, and that is hugely valuable. (In addition to its practical value as a set of tools for giving effectively, even for those who don't buy into cause agnosticism. And if you want [some more thoughts on EA and why I'm not a fully paid up member, but do think it has value, then check out this WPM article](#)).

There is definitely a genuine and important debate about the need to maintain a balance in philanthropy between the 'head' (i.e. rational/strategic approaches to giving that aim for objectivity), and the 'heart' (i.e. approaches that emphasise the importance of human connection and individual choice). But since it is a debate we have been having as a society for, oh, about 300 years, I'm guessing we aren't going to settle it any time soon. (And [for a bit more on that history, you can read this WPM piece on “trust-based” vs “strategic” philanthropy](#)).

Closing Time (again)

I don't want to depress everyone too much just ahead of Christmas, but one of the big themes of the UK charity world this year has been that

many organisations are facing dire financial straits – some of them to the extent that it is posing an existential threat.



This month saw the announcement of two more big names in the UK charity world going under: the [relationship counselling and support charity Relate](#) (which has been going since 1938), and the [infrastructure body GMCVO](#) (the Greater Manchester Council for Voluntary Organisations). In GMCVO's case this seems to have happened particularly quickly, after a previously unidentified hole in the organisation's finances led to it being deemed unviable, and insolvency specialists were called in - much to the shock and surprise of the organisation's staff.

The loss of GMCVO and Relate is obviously bad news for the many people and organisations that rely on them, but they certainly aren't the only two charities we have lost this year, and there will undoubtedly be more losses in 2025 unfortunately. The combination of increased demand for services and, at the same time, a much more challenging funding landscape is putting an unbearable squeeze on many organisations, and it is quite hard at times to know where to look for optimism.

Normalised Radicalism?

There was an [interesting story in Fortune about Marie Dageville](#), who recently became a billionaire after her husband's cloud computing company Snowflake went public and is moving into philanthropy. What was interesting to me about this story is the narrative she offers about her giving; which is centred around justice and redistribution. She also questions, a la Mackenzie Scott, the idea that it is "hard to give money away quickly".



Whilst ideas about social justice and radical redistribution can be found in philanthropy going back a long way, for most of that time they have been marginal at best. But as a new generation of philanthropists emerges who are aware of these sorts of issues from the outset and are shaping their giving in light of them, I wonder if they are slowly becoming more mainstream? Added to which, these potentially more

radical donors now have access to a far wider range of role models and alternative narratives, thanks to philanthropists like Mackenzie Scott, Melinda French Gates, Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Marlene Engelhorn who are demonstrating different ways of doing things.

Just don't call them "philanthropists..."

[A piece in the FT this month profiled eight young celebrities who, it suggests, represent the crest of a new wave of "Gen Z philanthropy".](#)

This included Arsenal footballer Bukayo Saka and singer Sabrina Carpenter – the only two on the list I had heard of, because it turns out that I am really old and out of touch.



I am always slightly wary of stories which pitch anything as a “new trend in philanthropy”, especially when that involves making sweeping claims about an entire generation, but there was some interesting stuff in the article. Including a suggestion that these Gen Z donors don’t really like or use the word “philanthropy”- which I can well believe, as I have interviewed quite a few philanthropists over the last 18 months and many of them didn’t seem especially keen on the word either!

One of the other big trends the article identifies is that whilst these Gen Z philanthropists (or “changemakers” or whatever word we’re going to use) are happy to give their own money, they certainly don’t see their philanthropy beginning or ending there, and put just as much emphasis on activism and campaigning. This is interesting to me with a nerdy history of philanthropy hat on, as one of the things you find when you look back to the growth of modern philanthropy in the 18th century is that it was often just as much (if not more) about activism and political campaigning as it was about giving money. Indeed the first person to be called a “philanthropist” in the modern sense was the prison reformer John Howard – who undoubtedly had financial resources, but became famed more for his tireless research and advocacy. (Despite that fact that, by all accounts, he was an extremely difficult and irascible man). Fun fact, eh?

Finding a place for giving

[UK Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy announced this month that the government wanted to move forward on the development of a “place-based philanthropy strategy”.](#) There wasn’t much detail beyond this headline, but this is still an encouraging sign that the Labour government is giving some thought to philanthropy and the role they can play in developing it. It was also quite refreshing to hear a politician admit that work done by a previous government under a different party was actually good, which Nandy was willing to do.



Actually, do you know what? Scratch that. It was definitely all me – I'm claiming the win.

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

This is the section where I update you on what we have been doing at Why Philanthropy Matters over the last month or so

The Philanthropisms podcast:

Just one episode of the podcast this month, but it's our annual bumper end of year trends and predictions special, so it's basically as good as two episodes. (It's certainly as *long* as two episodes, anyway...) All kinds of musings on what 2025 might bring for philanthropy and civil society, so do take a listen and let me know what you think.



Philanthropisms

2025 Philanthropy & Civil Society
Trends and Predictions



[Listen to the episode](#)

Philanthropy Australia interview

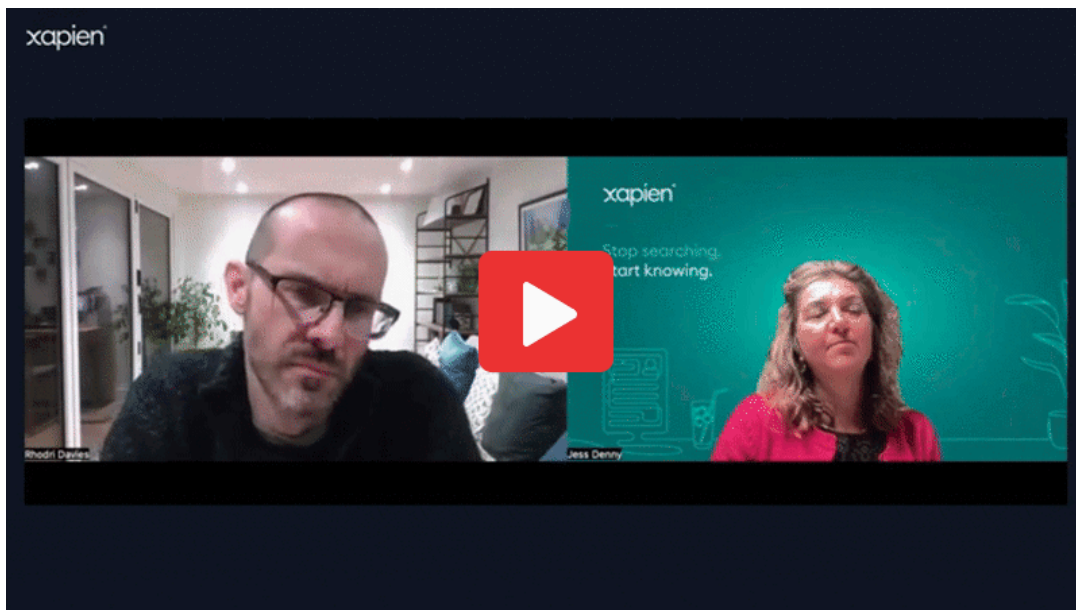
Following on from their UK study tour (which I mentioned in the last newsletter), Philanthropy Australia have published a two part interview with me giving some thoughts on key trends in philanthropy from a UK perspective. (I'm pretty sure it was originally meant to be a one-part interview, but it turns out that I talk a lot...)

[Read part 1](#)

[Read part 2](#)

Xapien webinar

I also took part in a webinar for Xapien this month, in which I chatted to host Jess Denny about the impact that AI might have on due diligence in philanthropy.



[Watch the video](#)

OTHER GOOD STUFF

This is the bit where I share other philanthropy-related things I have come across this month that might not quite count as news but are definitely worth checking out.

New philanthropy journal:

I was very excited this month to see the publication of the first issue of a new open-access scholarly journal, [*Philanthropia*](#), which focuses on looking at philanthropy from a humanities and normative theory perspective. I was even more excited when reading through an article in the journal about AI and “the cybernetics of philanthropy from 1974 to 2024” (which is about as far up my street as a topic gets) to see a couple of references to Why Philanthropy Matters! (This does obviously give the impression that I am an absolute egomaniac who only takes an interest in things if they mention him, but I promise that wasn’t the case. This time, at least).

Philanthropia



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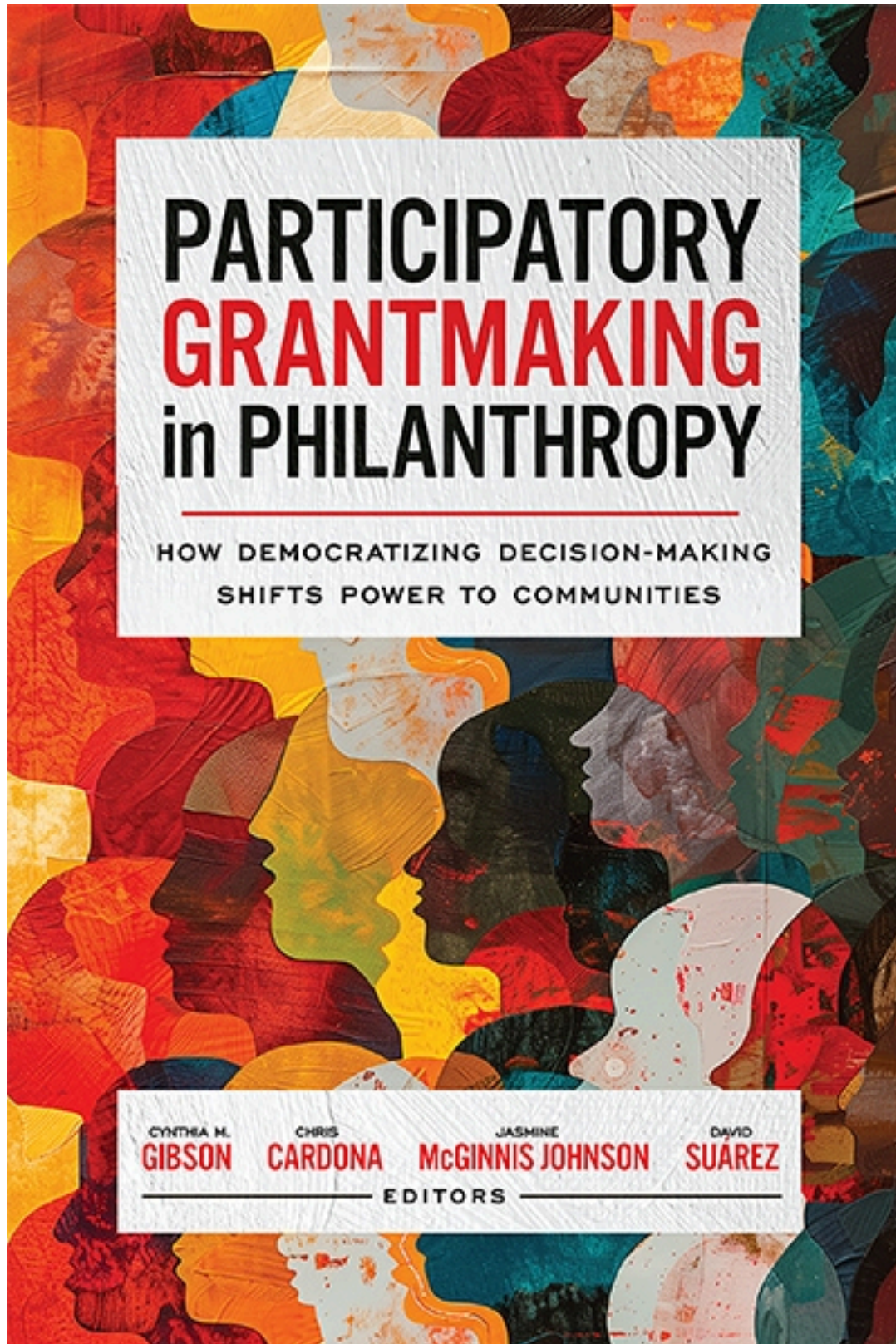
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[Read the first issue](#)

New Book on Participatory Grantmaking:

I also spotted this month a great-looking new book, "[Participatory Grantmaking in Philanthropy: How Democratizing Decision-Making Shifts Power to Communities](#)". This is an edited volume that brings together a range of really interesting-sounding perspectives on participatory approaches in philanthropy, and I can't wait to read it!



Get the book

How to give when there are more options than ever

I'm not normally that interested in "how to give" articles (as in the nicest possible way I spend literally my whole time thinking about this stuff, so most of it tends to be things I have heard before!) but [a how-to piece in the *Independent* caught my eye this month](#). What was interesting to me is that it was framed in the context of how to give when there are more options than ever before *beyond traditional giving*. (The article mentioned crowdfunding and mutual aid as examples). Given that I, and many others, have suggested that one of the potential explanatory factors for the apparent decline in giving is that generosity is evolving into different forms, it was intriguing to see advice on giving being pitched in this way.



Read the article

Pushback on Pluralism?

At a time when the idea of pluralism within philanthropy is increasingly contested, I wasn't that surprised this month to see [a critical response from Ben Barge at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy](#) to the recent [calls from Daniel Stid for a renewal of "responsible pluralism"](#). Barge goes big early on, equating pluralism with "appeasement", which is, I would say, a pretty loaded term to use right up front (but I'm guessing that might well be the point). There is

something in his arguments: one of the awkward realities of embracing pluralism is that it does come at a cost, because you almost certainly will have to allow things that you might not like to co-exist alongside the things you do like. And there are also valid questions about whether the theoretical ideal of pluralism is naïve in the face of the reality that money tends to skew towards maintenance of the status quo. But the problem with arguing that acceptance of pluralism automatically puts you on “the wrong side of the argument”, or makes you an “appeaser”, is that for many this will just lend further weight to the conclusion that the real problem is that we have forgotten how to “disagree well”. (For which the remedy is, er, more pluralism).

Anyway, this is too complicated to get into further in a newsletter snippet just before Xmas. Suffice it to say that there will be more on this in the New Year, and in the meantime you can listen to the [Philanthropisms podcast episode on pluralism](#) if you want more thoughts.

Read the NCRP blog

“Cakeism” in philanthropy

Axios's Felix Salmon suggested in a blog this month that we might be seeing a new trend towards “cakeism” in philanthropy – i.e. is a growing degree of overt self-interest in billionaire giving.

I don't know that there is enough to stack this up as a full-blown trend yet, but I would say that:

a) The accusation of self-interest in philanthropy is not in any way a new one, so this builds on a well-established narrative. (At times criticism of philanthropy for becoming too self-interested has exploded out into the mainstream too - mid C20th US concerns about gifts of corporate stock for tax avoidance purposes, which led to the reforms in the Tax Act of 1969, come to mind)

b) There's a healthy tradition of "enlightened self-interest" in philanthropy (just think of the model worker villages created by the likes of William Lever, George Cadbury and Joseph Rowntree, which were

definitely for the good of the working classes but had the extremely welcome additional benefit for their employers that they would help to ensure a healthy and productive workforce). This is obviously different to the kind of thing Salmon is talking about, but we should be careful about extrapolating to “any self-interest” is bad, because absolutely pure altruism as a motive for philanthropy is a very, very high bar.

b) it is certainly possible at this point that the examples of more overt self-interest that Salmon identifies are the outliers, rather than representing any sort of new norm. However, they could have a disproportionate negative influence on public perceptions of philanthropy as a whole, so this is worth taking seriously.



[Read the article](#)

Philanthropy and Men's Issues

There was a really interesting piece in Vox this month [looking at the role philanthropy can play in addressing some of the challenges facing men and boys](#), in terms of identity, mental health and wellbeing. The piece explores some interesting angles to this topic- such as whether gendered philanthropic or nonprofit programs represent necessary targeting or whether, as critics argue, they are unacceptably

exclusionary. (Arguments that are interesting to assess in light of the Fearless Foundation story earlier this year). There is also the question of whether an acceptance of the need to fund programs focussed on men's issues in any way undermines efforts to get more funding to women and girls, or whether it is in fact a necessary part of the overall puzzle. (As the article notes, a lot of eyebrows were raised when it was revealed during the summer that Melinda French Gates had given a \$10m grant to Richard Reeves's "American Institute for Boys and Men" thinktank, in amongst all of her other support for women and girls; however, on further reflection many see it as making total sense).

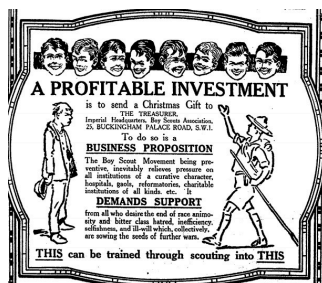


[Read the article](#)

AND FINALLY:

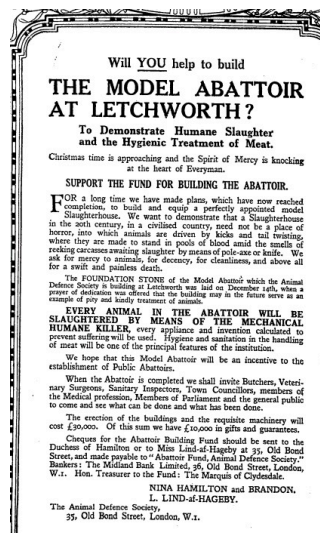
I couldn't really find a suitable light-hearted news piece about charity this month (also, I'm just really, really tired now), so I thought instead I would rummage in my folders of historical whatnots and find something suitably festive. So here, for your delectation, is a page of Christmas charity appeals from the Times in 1925. Including an invitation to "invest" in the Boy Scouts as a way of dealing with "race animosity and bitter class hatred"; an advert from the Royal Northern Hospital telling donors to "be selfish" and enjoy the gratification that comes from giving; and my favourite: a fundraising appeal for a new "Model Abbatoir" in Letchworth.

Because nothing says Christmas like the phrase "mechanical humane killer".



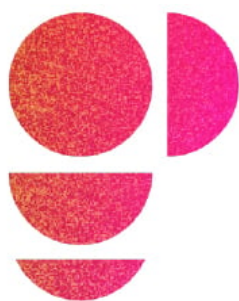
The Christmas Gift that comes first

To aid the suffering is a kind of selfishness because the doing of it gives so much personal pleasure.
Be a little selfish this year and feel this gratification for yourself by sending a donation to the Royal Northern Hospital. There abide the sick



Right, that's all for this year. Have a good Christmas/Hannukah/Festive period and I'll see you in 2025.

Rhodri



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House 152 West End Lane, London
United Kingdom



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