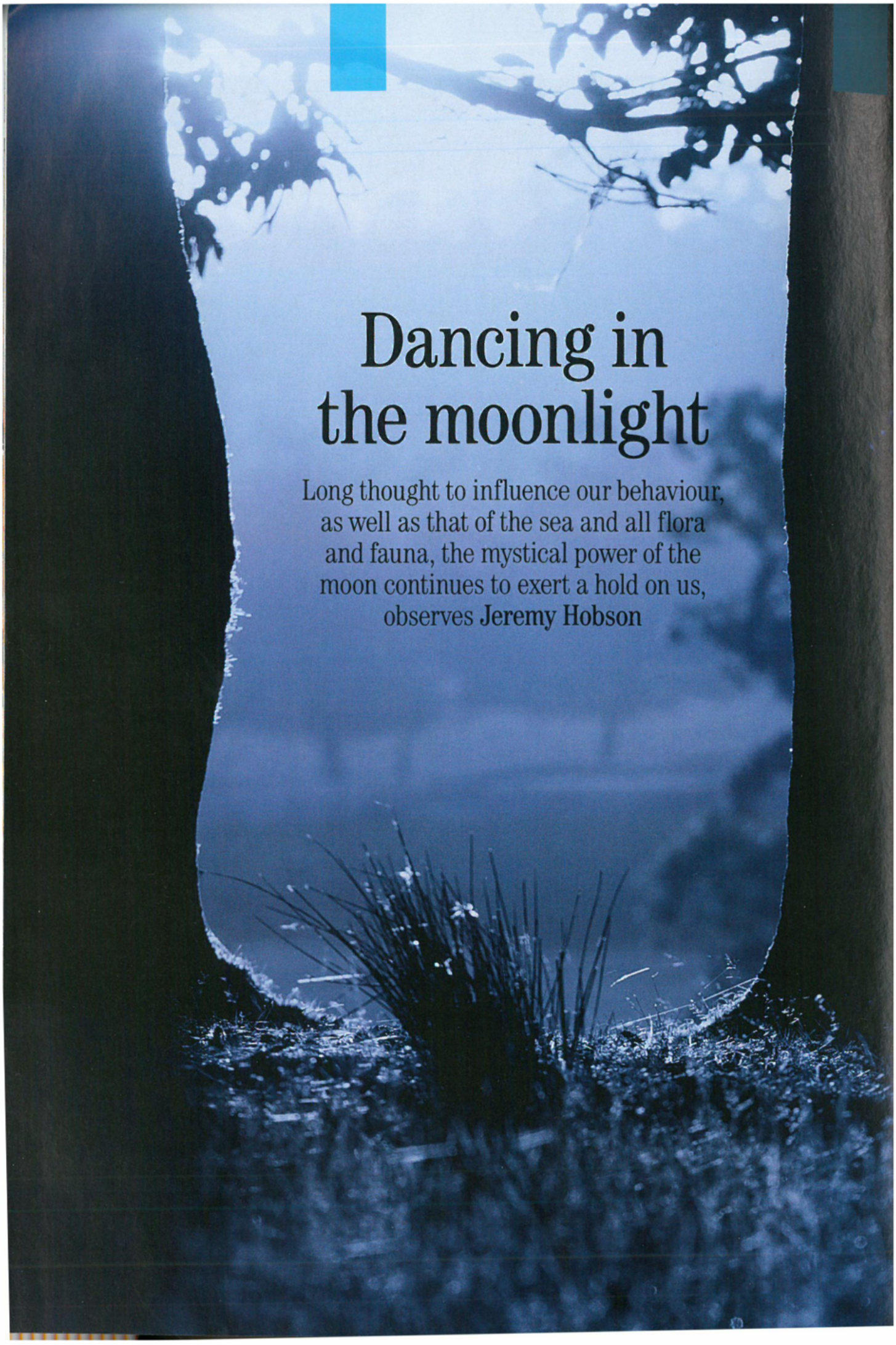
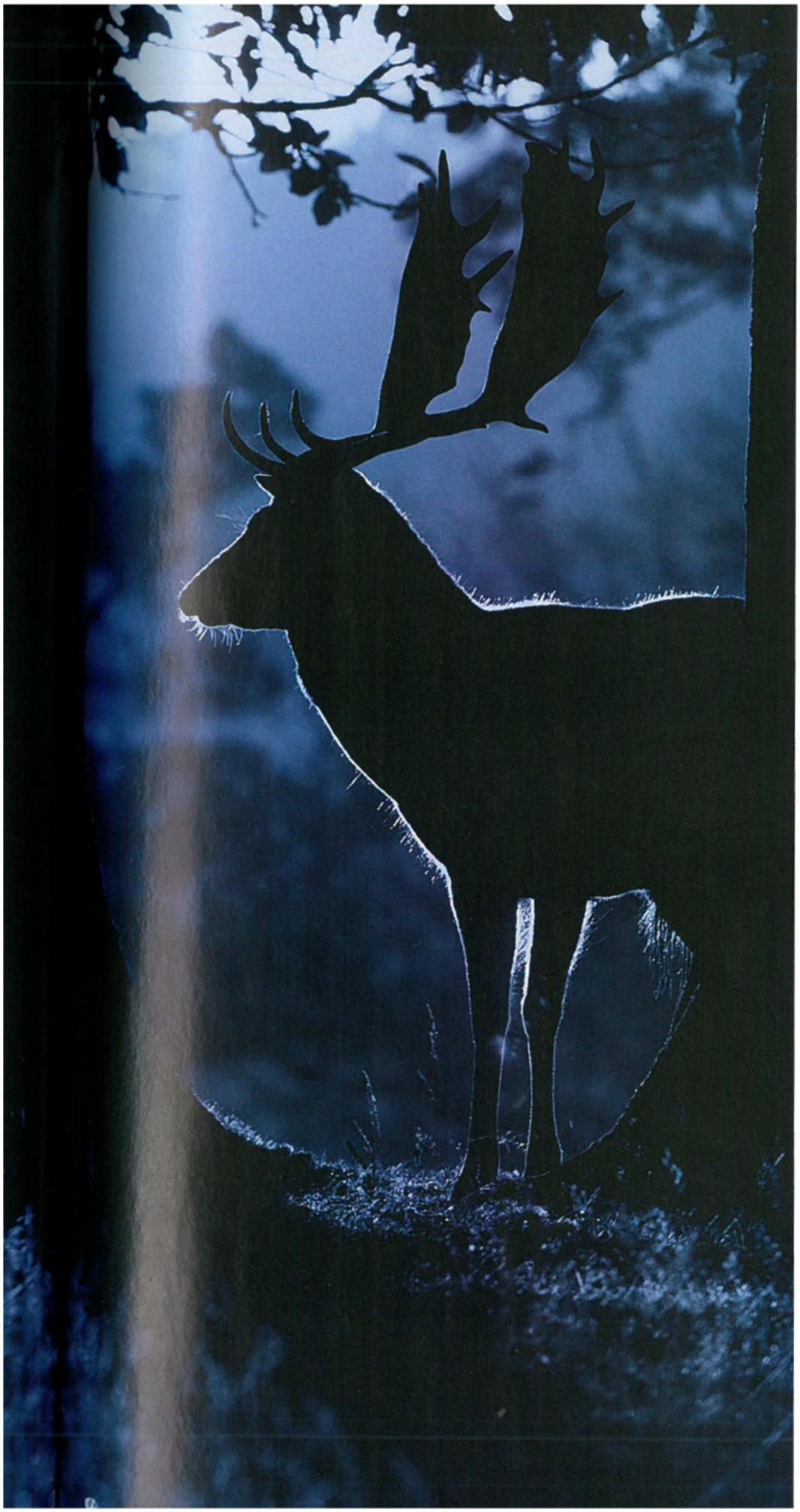


Dancing in the moonlight

Long thought to influence our behaviour, as well as that of the sea and all flora and fauna, the mystical power of the moon continues to exert a hold on us, observes **Jeremy Hobson**



HOW many have danced under the moon's spotlight or held hands, looked up into the heavens and promised each other the earth? 'I love you to the moon and back' might be a common phrase, but, beware, that which shines brightly does not necessarily bring good fortune. Indeed, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare advises that we should be wary of 'the fickle moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circle orb'. And, in *Othello*, that: 'It is the very error of the moon. She comes more nearer earth than she was wont. And makes men mad.'

> 'As Mark Twain wrote: "Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows"'

The full moon has long been said to influence behaviour. It's no coincidence that the word 'lunatic' is derived from Luna—the personification of the moon in Roman mythology. Hippocrates diagnosed those 'seized with terror, fright and madness during the night' as having been 'visited by the goddess of the moon'. In England, it was once possible for murderers to appeal for clemency if they committed an evil deed during a full moon. ➤

Reach for the moon

Inhabitants of Wiltshire are known as 'moonrakers'; an epithet resulting from the days when French and Dutch spirits were brought into England illegally and temporarily hidden in, for example, the murk of village ponds. At one location (perhaps the Crammer pond, Devizes), local smugglers were surprised by the excise men as they retrieved barrels sequestered there. They excused their activity by saying they thought the full moon was a round of cheese that had dropped into the water—the excise men, thinking the locals somewhat lacking in intelligence, went on their way.

Less well known is a tale from the Colne Valley, West Yorkshire, where the canal was a byway for trade and the perfect place to drop off illicit goods. Also caught when attempting to retrieve their ill-gotten gains, the miscreants claimed they were rescuing the moon, which they thought had fallen in the water—an incident recorded in Charles Napier's 1940 painting *Slaithwaite Moonrakers* (owned by Kirklees Museums and Galleries).

Wild deer, fat on summer's fruits, are said to be best under October's hunter's moon

It would seem that the dark side of the moon (apart from providing Pink Floyd with the perfect album title) is potentially a dangerous place for humans to travel, even if only metaphorically. As Mark Twain once wrote: 'Everyone is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.'

Looking on the bright side (did Pink Floyd miss a trick in not recording a follow-up album?), on a clear night, the moon and all its facets has much to divulge. From an early age, most of us have looked up to the 'man in the moon', but, in other cultures, the same shapes are seen as the 'hare in the moon'.

> 'January's moon was known as the "wolf" or "spirit" moon, at a time for contemplation'

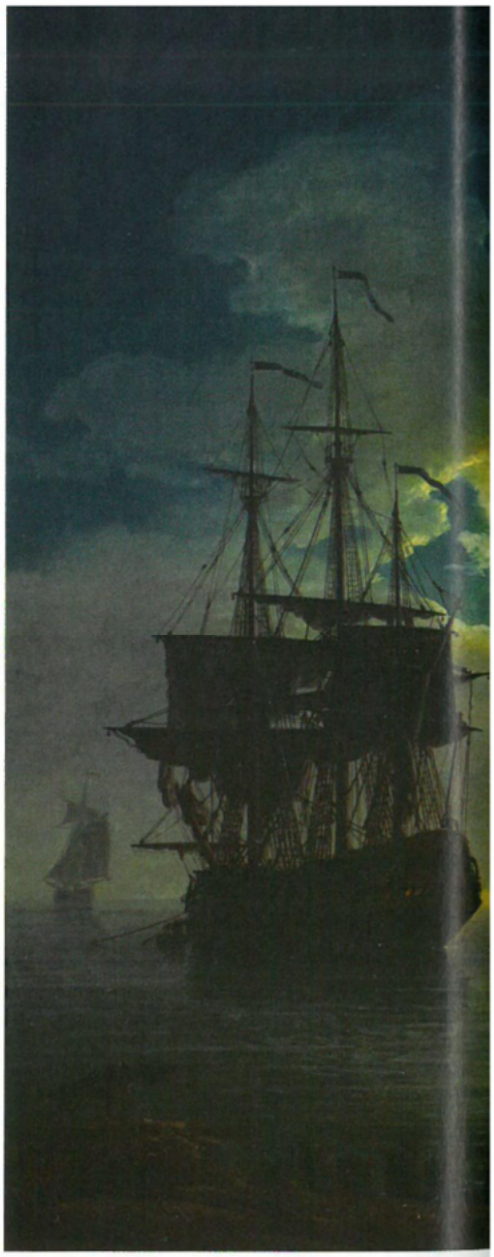
Its appearance reflects fertility. In Chinese folklore, for example, it was once believed that female hares could conceive without the need for male impregnation—either by the touch of the full moon's radiance or simply by crossing moon-struck stretches of water. Not only was the probability of a hare's fertility improved by the moon's phases, it was thought to influence that of women, too. Well, at least according to an ancient Assyrian astrological text, which was explored further in the 1950s by a Czechoslovakian doctor, Eugen Jonas, who based a family-planning programme on the erroneous fact that women ovulated when the moon was in the same position it was when they were born.

Many have waxed lyrical about the moon—its ebb and flow, its recurrent pattern of decline and regrowth. Its various phases are also supposed to bring wealth and good fortune. Turning over the loose change in your pocket at a new moon will, allegedly, ensure at least sufficient money for the coming month. If that fails and you happen to be in Cornwall, seek out an ant hill, for, so ancient tradition has it, should you place a piece of local tin into an ant's nest when the moon is new: the metal will magically transmogrify into pure silver.

During the Blitz in the Second World War, people began to call a full moon a 'bomber's moon', because its light aided aircrews in finding their intended enemy target. Native North American tribes also used the moon's appearance as a way of keeping track of the changing seasons and named each one accordingly. March's full moon, for instance, was known as the 'worm' moon, because this is when earthworm casts are often first seen—and are thus an indicator of spring.

April's 'pink' moon was named after the pink-flowered moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*), which appeared that month. Similarly, the 'strawberry' moon of June coincided with the ripening of the first wild fruits. For farmers, the 'harvest' moon of September was of great significance, but, for those reliant on harvesting wild game in readiness for winter, October's 'hunter's' moon was the one to watch, as deer were thought to be at their peak after a summer of foraging on the best vegetation.

The coming of winter earned December's full moon the title of the 'cold' moon or, alternatively, 'long night' moon. January's was known as either the 'wolf' or 'spirit' moon—the latter due to the fact that it was considered a time for prayer and contemplation. In that, the Native Americans were not very different to our Celtic ancestors who, when winter days were short and nights were long,



Time and tide waits for no man

The benefits of growing crops according to the phases of the moon have long been known to farmers and gardeners. As Maureen and Bridget Boland wrote in *Old Wives' Lore for Gardeners*: 'The effects of lunar rhythms on the earth's magnetic field... in turn affect growth... all water everywhere, including that inside the tiniest living organism, moves in tides like the sea [and scientists] say that a potato grown at constant levels of heat and light under laboratory conditions will still show a growth rhythm that reflects the lunar pattern.'

More generally, the moon's gravitational field is known to be so strong that it affects the atmosphere and even reaches within the solid crust of the Earth itself. More obviously, it affects the water in the oceans, thus causing both rise and fall.

In either its full or new phase, the moon at 'perigee' (the closest point in its orbit around the Earth) can produce the highest and lowest tides of all, the powerful perigean spring tides.

Under an artist's moon: *Night: a Port in the Moonlight*, 1771, by Claude-Joseph Vernet

held celebrations in an effort to encourage the return of summer. On Orkney, the two Stenness stone circles are noted in legend as being the 'Temple of the Sun' and the 'Temple of the Moon', where Celtic gatherings and chants were thought to bring together the energies of day and night in a fusion of beneficial mystical powers.

Perhaps when, in 1972, King Harvest was the first group to sing of 'when that moon gets big and bright, it's a supernatural delight' and how 'everybody was dancing in the moonlight', they were simply echoing the beliefs of past generations fearful of the shadow of the moon—and reminding present and future generations that, as sure as night follows day, its presence will always be with us. It's an illuminating thought.

Let me sing among the stars

SOME popular music about the moon has undeniably fired their authors into the musical stratosphere. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (*right*) is reckoned to be the third-bestselling album of all time. Before that, in 1917, Lew Brown wrote *Give Me the Moonlight*, made famous by Frankie Vaughan in the 1950s. In 1964, Frank Sinatra's version of Bart Howard's *Fly Me to the Moon* proved a worldwide hit.

However, Sinatra's wish to be flown to the moon was nothing compared with the belief of 17th-century scientist Charles Morton that some bird species, which disappeared from the English countryside in the autumn, migrated to the moon and returned in the spring. Said to be inspired in his thinking by a contemporary, clergyman, natural philosopher and author John Wilkins and his thesis *The Discovery of a New World in the Moon*, Morton worked out that, although it would take migrating birds 60 days travelling at 125mph, such things were, nevertheless, a possibility—for, as he simply reasoned: 'Whither should these creatures go unless it were to the moon?' Quite what would sustain these avian travellers over winter was outlined by Wilkins: 'The moon, with its borrowed light, is like our earth with its seas, streams [and] mountains.'