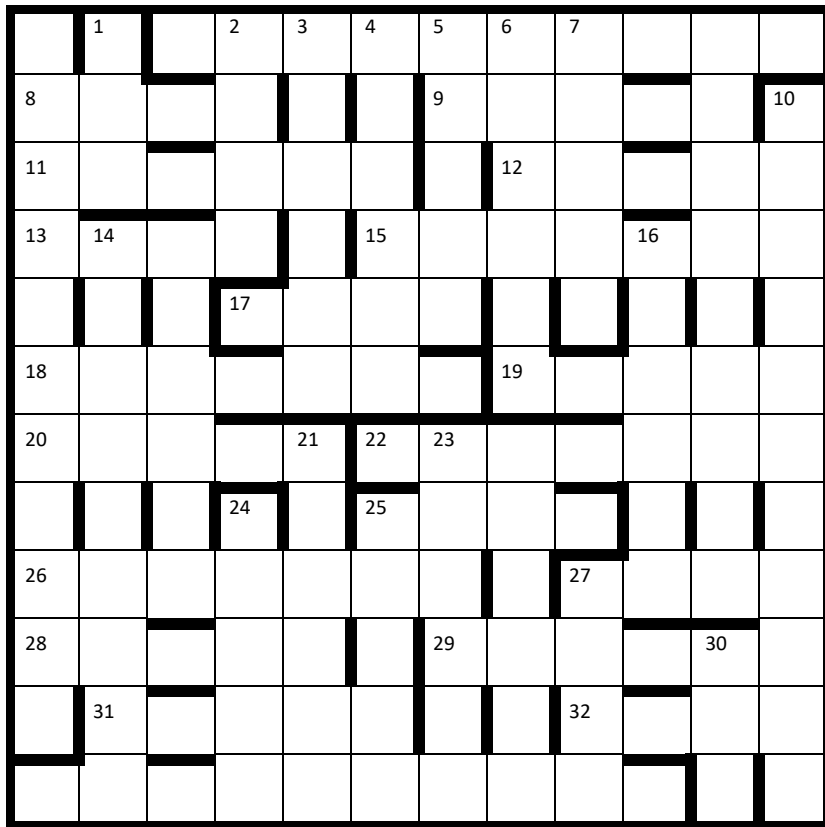


Ring Cycle

by Hedge-sparrow



The unclued entries are the partial titles of six of a set of seven thematic items. In the filled grid, solvers must draw a curved line through eight contiguous cells which spell out the partial title of the final member of the set, forming a shape that can be used to complete all the thematic items. Extra letters (to be removed before solving) from nineteen clues spell out a phrase (two words) which, together with two other entries clued by wordplay only, provide the context. Chambers 2016 is the primary reference: 15 is in Collins. Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable may also prove helpful.

Across

- 8 Melia balm relaxes (4)
- 9 Yankee tattler's long conversation? Not half! (5)
- 11 Plug hole (6)
- 12 Stair up to a lake in NZ (5)
- 13 Antique instrument, subject to abuse after gate's bolted (4)
- 15 Stonier ground yields old form of female hormone (7)
- 17 Dine in Scotland with Moray's chief judge (4)
- 18 St Francis having left the country, hides from view (7)
- 19 Soldier suffering fright at European WWI battle-site (5)
- 20 Perhaps hind quarter is causing distress for poet (5)
- 22 Duplicity shown by former boxer in taxi (7)
- 25 Once in France, as before, bring to nothing (4)
- 26 Arch serves to protect priest (7)
- 27 Starter to accompany fish jelly (4)
- 28 Chain variant includes low-expansion metallic alloy (5)
- 29 Mystery I manage to unravel (6)
- 31 Endless Chinese black tea precedes afternoon dance (5)
- 32 Disciple knocked back bottles at temple (4)

Down

- 1 Steam rising off one's trolley (3)
- 2 Murder victim Isabella has buried in St Clair? (4)
- 3 Youth getting up around nine is a wise judge (6)
- 4 Newt I noted having ends of feet pointing inwards (6)
- 5 Axes applied to damaged elm's woody tissue (5)
- 6 Spirits are essentially undamaged in goods washed up on shore (6)
- 7 Pen note about top of aspidistra growing out (5)
- 10 Coarse fibre that's generally recognized as safe for Americans wearing toques? (11)
- 14 Sticking fast, top of fan becomes hot in consequence (9)
- 16 Thing that keeps admirer extremely eager (6)
- 21 Old Uncle Reg prepared to come out (6)
- 23 Throw out North Sea breaches (6)
- 24 Violent pains when cycling, bound for the Highlands (5)
- 25 Former pope's in the city (5)
- 27 Nun upholding Japanese swimmer's language (4)
- 30 Smile before old women make grimaces (3)