

Greenmount – August 2011

August started badly and seemed to have every intention of becoming worse.

My sore bum was back with a vengeance and I was back on the anti-fungal cream. That's what you get if you don't eat your pro-biotic yoghurt.

I discovered that clearing the weeds from the block paving is easier if you lift the bricks, clean them, replace them and fill the gaps with fresh, kiln-dried sand. This works well in dry weather, except that it takes a long time. I might even finish the job if I live long enough.

On 3rd August, the weather forecast being quite good, Jenny, Rachel and I went to York for the day. We parked at the Askham Bar Park and Ride facility and caught the bus into town at £2.30 each return for Jenny and Rachel and 50p concession for me with my bus pass. Jenny and Rachel wandered round town and I pottered round the ruins and the river bank.

I did intend going in York Minster but the entrance fee was £9 and another £4.50 to go up onto the roof. I don't recall any mention in the Bible of Jesus charging for His sermons. There are those officials who will, no doubt, point out the running and repair costs of York Minster. What they won't publically advertise is the extent of the wealth of the Church in question. Thankfully, our local minister is happy for anyone to go into his church anytime, any contribution being at the discretion of the visitor.

We all met up for lunch, after which Jenny and Rachel went to the Yorvik Viking Centre and I wandered back to the river. The rumbles of thunder should have been sufficient warning to head for cover but I had faith in the forecast and carried on. You would think I would have learned my lesson by now. No sooner had I reached just about the farthest point from shelter than did the rain commence. The torrential downpour persisted as I tried, with others, to take advantage of the shelter of a tree but even trees have their limitations and when the hailstones started, with soaked hat and cardigan, I made for more substantial cover in the doorway of a pub. If I'd had any money, I could have got wet on the inside as well. Once the rain stopped and the sun came out, I removed as many of my wet garments as possible and walked in the warm sunshine, trying to dry off my partially dampened T-shirt and trousers.

We eventually met up again about an hour later and caught the bus back to the car. I finished drying off on the way home and we called for a meal at the Beefeater pub at Heaton Park.

On 4th August, I thought I would have a bit of a lie-in. That was until Jenny, already up, woke me with the news that Treacle had come in coughing and spluttering, unable to eat, drink or even make a noise. It is almost a year ago she had exactly the same symptoms and we had to take her to the emergency vet to have a slither of pampas grass removed from her throat. This time, we took her to our own vets, Regan in Bury. The lady there examined her and then advised us to take her to another branch at Moston where they had better facilities. A fifteen-minute drive and an hour's wait later, Treacle was examined by the vet there who said he would need to keep her in and sedate her to look into the problem, the cat's throat and my credit rating. He

advised us to telephone back about 3 p.m. for the results and presented with an itemised account of the expected costs, for which I had an insufficient number of limbs.

We finally collected Treacle just after six p.m. The vet advised us to keep her in for four days, gave us some high protein food, some antibiotics, an itemised bill and a sedative for me after paying it. Amongst the items on the bill were a general anaesthetic, a drip to rehydrate her and a gastroscopy. The obstruction was a piece of grass and we now have the most expensive, short piece of pampas grass in the world.

While Treacle was housebound, we have decided to dig up and completely remove the pampas grass plant, this being the second time Treacle has had this problem and we made a significant start before we fetched her back.

On 5th August, I left my desktop computer backing up all my documents to my external hard drive while we went grocery shopping.

On returning, after lunch, I continued with the removal of the pampas grass, the hold it had being so thorough and the soil so hard that I resorted to using the pickaxe. Jenny came out to help. Once the offending plant had gone, I dug down to spade depth, dug out the soil, while Jenny riddled it and I tipped the fine soil back in the hole I had created. We left off about six p.m., having completed about a third of the work and Jenny prepared tea.

The following day, Saturday 6th August, we were up at 5:30 a.m. I had arranged to undertake a walk across Morecambe Bay to raise funds for Bury Hospice. Mike was joining me and Lorna was giving us a lift down to Bury to catch the coach, which left at 7 a.m. We arrived in Bury in good time and waited for the coach outside the Town Hall. I wasn't feeling too well, suffering from stomach ache and went to find a loo. The toilet in the Bury Interchange was still locked up and I managed to obtain entrance to the newly-opened Premier Inn opposite the Town Hall, courtesy of the night porter. And it's just as well. I shall not, at this point, provide unnecessary detail, it being sufficient to say I was not at all well.

Having returned to Mike, I told him I was going back home and called Jenny to collect me. Subsequent events proved this to be a wise move. At the same time, a chap wandered up to us and told us that the coach was departing from outside Bury College, not the Town Hall. Mike decided to go on his own and rushed round to catch the coach as I crawled to a suitable pick-up point.

I spent the rest of the day resting, save for a brief trip to go to Matthew's house to fit a new laptop battery in Rachel's PC and collect Rachel, dropping Jenny and her off in Bury to wander round the shops. I made a similar, brief trip later to take Rachel home and bring Jenny back, brief being the operative word in both cases for obvious reasons.

I attribute the malfunction of my digestive tract to the previous day's hard labour, wielding the pickaxe having an adverse effect on my non-existent gall-bladder area. Since there is more of this work to do, I shall have an opportunity to test this theory.

On Sunday 7th August, I was still feeling a bit groggy. I was sufficiently well to write a second Microsoft Excel macro in as many weeks, the first being to find inconsistencies in the data and the second to extract a list of DVDs from my consolidated list of DVDs and recorded programmes. With the latter, I can now avoid purchasing duplicate DVDs from Charity shops.

Most of the following week I spent assisting Mike install his new desktop and laptop computers I had helped him purchase from HP. The whole process went reasonably well, although there were more Microsoft updates to Windows 7 than I expected, suggesting that the systems had been lying around on HP's shelf for some time.

Another minor inconvenience was that the 27 inch HP monitor Mike had ordered was no longer available, not that it stopped HP from invoicing him for it. We managed to install his desk-top system with his existing monitor.

Mike's existing printer was not compatible with Windows 7 and we rushed off to PC World to look for a new one and, while we were there, Mike also purchased a 23 inch Samsung monitor.

The installation of the new HP All-in-one printer (printer and scanner combined) proved to be something of a challenge, for which the HP manuals or web site offered no assistance whatsoever. I had the printer connected to one of the four USB ports in the front of the desk-top system and it worked pretty well, except that the computer could not access the scanner. Having uninstalled the device and reinstalled it with no success, I connected it to one of the rear USB ports. Guess what. It worked perfectly. Not that I have ascertained any difference between the front and rear USB port configurations.

Mike had also ordered a decent pair of USB stereo earphones with boom microphone for use with his lap-top. I installed these and tested them. There was intermittent crackling on the right earpiece and I diagnosed a faulty connection. I advised Mike to contact HP and request a replacement. That was easier said than done. Bearing in mind the cost of these was about £6, HP must have wasted more than ten times that amount giving Mike the run-around with jargon like "a case needs to be made" and "I need to refer this to a manager".

It got to the stage where I ended up speaking to HP on Mike's behalf, having by this time established that the earphones seemed to be working satisfactorily. Nonetheless, I suggested that HP should replace them just in case there was an intermittent fault and it took me about ten minutes to resolve the issue, with HP agreeing to ship out a replacement within the next week or so.

On the whole, on a scale of 1 to 10, HP, in my opinion, scores about -5 from this experience and I would not recommend their products. Not that there is anything wrong with their equipment; far from it. It is normally very good. The main issue here is that HP's service and support is second to just about everyone else's and if you do have problems, there is little hope of expecting HP to resolve them.

On Saturday 13th August, Matthew and Carrie arrived back from their Med Cruise and we went to collect them from the bus station in Bolton. See, Bolton does have it's uses.

On Sunday 14th August, I was going to cut the grass but it was so wet and the unpredictable showers continued, so I decided to cut up some more wood for the stove for the winter. By the end of the session, I had filled another three bags, having tackled some of the more awkward pieces from the stockpile of logs under the car port. The pieces I cut were still spouting sap when presented with the axe and are now drying out in the garage-cum-woodshed.

On Monday 15th August we spent a good part of the day testing and pricing electrical equipment for the jumble sale at the Old School. During a late lunch, Mike arrived with more challenges involving his new desk-top computer and I returned with him to look into the matter further. About four hours further, having fixed his problems, I returned about 7:45 in the evening for a late tea.

On Tuesday 16th August, Jenny went to the opticians for a second appointment in as many weeks and the optician confirmed she had slight excess pressure in her right eye. Her brother, Wilf, having glaucoma, the optician referred her to her doctor for further examination and, if necessary, referral to a specialist.

After lunch, we went to Bury to collect a pair of shoes Jenny had ordered from Marks and Spencer. She can now remove the cardboard inners from her old trainers with the holes in the soles for recycling and throw the trainers away.

I took the opportunity to quench the car's thirst and donate £11.52 to the Chancellor by way of Value Added Tax. Somehow, the terms "value added" and "tax" seem somewhat incongruous.

Our final destination for the day, apart from coming back home, was Asda at Pillsworth for essential supplies of organic beer plus a few groceries.

On Thursday 18th August I finally managed to see the Sister at the village medical centre for my health check. The good news is that my blood pressure is alright. The bad news is that I am too short for my weight. She put all my details, including the results of my recent blood tests, into a computer program and I received a multi-page print-out, the bottom line of which has selected me for a 23% probability of a heart-attack within the next ten years, a prize I have no wish to win.

I do have a couple of options to improve matters. The first is to regularly take a tablet known as a Statin. The second is more exercise to remove some of the flab from my middle region.

I came home and cut all the grass.

Friday 19th August was our usual grocery shopping day, punctuated with lunch at Costa Coffee in the Tesco store at Prestwich. While Unicorn in Chorlton is still the best source of organic fruit and vegetables and many other organic products, their supply lines seem to have difficulties similar to those of Rommel in Africa some 70 years ago. Furthermore, enquiries indicate that now Suma has joined the Pure brand of Sunflower-based, organic, butter-substitute spreads and has ceased to manufacture their product. Matters are becoming so drastic that I may have to resort to using

organic butter, which won't do my cholesterol any good at all, especially after yesterday.

Saturday 20th and Sunday 21st we spent sorting, testing and pricing electrical items for the jumble sale at the Old School. This time, with the aid of Jenny's old laptop computer, I managed to test many of the computer items and price them more appropriately, knowing they were working.

The original plan for the Sunday was, you guessed it, a car boot pitch but on checking the weather forecast, it looked unfavourable and we decided against it. Yet again, while it was a little damp in the early morning, the day was fine and quite pleasant and another opportunity to acquire riches beyond our dreams was missed.

We took advantage of one of the rare fine days we seem to have on 22nd August to take the trailer over the Pennines to Sheffield to collect more items from Tracey for our car boot stock and returned with both the trailer and the car fully loaded. What's more, on arriving back home, I managed to reverse the car and trailer down our steep drive – eventually.

The 23rd August was another fine day and it gave Jenny an opportunity to spend most of the time sorting out the previous day's acquisitions on the patio. The result was a garage packed with so many boxes it was almost impossible to find anything and a car loaded with goods for the Old School jumble sale, a warehouse in Bury that pays for bulk, unwanted clothing, handbags, shoes and books and three boxes of rubbish for the refuse recycling point in Bury.

I left her to it and cut the grass on the side of the house again, trimmed back the ivy to prevent it encroaching into the garage, not that there's much room for it and swept and weeded the footpath, cleaning up the mess I had made.

By a quarter past five I was shattered and ready for tea. Unfortunately, Jenny was still surrounded by clothes and boxes on the Patio, the cats were looking for the tin opener and there was no sign of our evening meal.

I resisted the urge to open a bottle of beer and, after a few minutes' rest, mustered enough strength to feed the cats and help Jenny finish tidying up for the day, on the basis that in so doing I would get my tea quicker. And so I did, about a quarter to eight.

On Wednesday 24th August we decided to spend the day in The Old School yet again sorting, testing and pricing electrical goods. Having the place to ourselves, we made excellent progress, which is just as well since there was a good supply of items.

Thursday 25th was marmalade day. We made five jars of lime and ginger marmalade, which turned out a sort of murky yellow colour and tasted absolutely delicious, made using organic ingredients and spring water.

There were three snags to this process. First, we cut up the peel, ending up with larger chunks than intended and it did not soften sufficiently. It would have been better grated. Second, some of the peel caught on the bottom of the jam pan and the murky

yellow marmalade is flaked with black bits. While adding something to the appearance, these are not very palatable. Fortunately, they are easily removed and do not affect the overall bitter-sweet and slightly spicy flavour. This probably would not have happened if we had grated the peel. Third, in pre-heating the jars in the oven, one of them cracked as we were pouring in the first ladle of marmalade and we had to bin it. Thankfully, only a small amount of the preserve was wasted.

We were back again at the Old School on Friday after a mammoth trip, calling at The Old School to drop off items for the jumble sale, Tracey's in Bury to weigh in unwanted items for cash, the tip in Bury to dump rubbish, Unicorn in Chorlton, Tesco Prestwich, and Asda Pillsworth.

The Old School also took care of our long, bank-holiday week end, culminating in the sale itself on Monday 29th at 4 p.m. We had intended to do a car boot sale on the Sunday but, once again, true to tradition, the whole week end was wet. We finally arrived back home about 7:45 and decided to go round to the Bull's Head for tea.

As we sat down at the table, a young waitress asked if we were dining. Jenny was about to say "No, we always sit down at tables in restaurants when we want to chat" and thought better of it. The waitress then informed us that the carvery had no turkey or pork left and was just serving beef and gammon, at a reduced price. Jenny, who only eats turkey in the carvery, was not pleased and we came home. Jenny cooked potato wedges and peas and we had cold chicken (as opposed to going cold turkey?). At least it was organic.

Most pubs seem to think that the most important aspect of eating out is cost and the quality of the meal doesn't matter so long as it's cheap. In a way, they are right. Most people, in my experience, will eat anything. There is no thought of whether what they eat is good for them or what it contains. No wonder so many people suffer in later life and the big players in the food industry get rich.

For me, food has to be tasty, presentable and I like to know what's in it. What's more, I expect to pay a fair price for it and receive value for money.

We don't eat at the Bull's Head very often.

On 30th August, I finally managed to complete the forms for Jenny to receive all her interest payments free of tax, as the tax man advised. Who said the Inland Revenue was all bad?

On 31st August, my back, in which I pulled a muscle about a week previous, started to become more troublesome and I resorted to using the Chinese back-stretcher, also known as Chinese torture. About fifteen minutes on the back stretcher on the lounge floor was all about I could stand, or, lay, as it were. Listening to Jazz on the earphones helped somewhat.

I was determined to give my back some exercise and, after lunch, decided to go and chop up some more wood. Having sawn another hefty log in half with the bow-saw, I resorted to using the axe, but not for very long. All was going well and my back joined it. It went so well, I could hardly move. I hobbled into the house and lay down

on the settee to cries of “I told you so”. Not until midnight, after much rest on the settee and in the chair was I reasonably mobile, still in considerable discomfort.

And so begins another day and another month.