

Greenmount – May 2015

The shopping trip on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> May was as uneventful as ever and my mind was still on my desktop computer's disc problem. By the end of the day, all my hard drives, except for the system and My Documents, had been backed up to the external 2 TB drive, leaving me to consider my next step. Was it time to buy a new computer? My reluctance was driven by Microsoft's obsession with bringing out new and worsening operating system versions in rapid succession. For me, and I suspect a lot of other people, there had been nothing better than XP since XP SP3 had been released. And now it was no longer supported.

We went round to the village "drop-in" on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> May. After my feverish activity at the IE plot and mammoth updates to the village web site recently, I had only the smallest twinges of conscience in not helping with the village tidy-up or preparations for the village party on the coming Monday. Instead, we sped off to Asda. On second thoughts...

Our objective was to acquire some essential supplies but the price of Yellow Tail wine had risen from its offer price of nearly £6 to its normal price of nearly £7 and we were not paying that if we could help it, so we did not buy any. We did find a few other items though.

After coming home for lunch, I felt quite tired and decided to rest for the afternoon, watching snooker. Needless to say, I fell asleep for a short while.

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May was a morning of administration, bringing the accounts up to date, updating my web site, dealing with my E-mail and, not least, sorting out my tax.

I had discovered that my tax calculation for 2013-14 was wrong and that, according to my thinking, I had not been allocated the correct value of personal allowance. I decided to contact the tax man using the HMRC web site and my personal log-in, using the secure messaging system.

The web site had recently been redesigned and, while I could find the messages the tax man was sending me, I could not find any way of sending one to him. The facility appeared to have disappeared. I wondered why? Perhaps he or she did not understand some of the expletives people used.

I completed a questionnaire regarding the new web site design and told HMRC it was rubbish. I also sent an E-mail to the help-desk, asking where the secure messaging facility had gone and if it had gone permanently, I was not going to use the on-line system any more, reverting to pen and paper.

I spent the rest of the day trying to work out why the response on my desktop PC had suddenly declined.

On Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May, I should have been at the village party, taking pictures of the event for the web site and posterity. Instead, I grappled with my desktop PC system while Jenny went to help with the collectors' sale in the Old School, one of the many events of the day.

I decided to copy all my desk-top PC documents to Jenny's laptop, a task that took most of the day, so I could use that until I had a more permanent solution to my problem.

I did manage to get outside for about half an hour to pick all the dandelion flowers on the lawn at the back, the front and the side to prevent them from generating yet more seeds. I ignored the three piles of dog poo I found on the side for the present.

We placed a short order with Abel and Cole on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> May, intending to include a leg of organic pork. That, it seemed, had become the latest casualty in the dwindling stocks of A&C, a company clearly with a limited existence.

That was followed by an order to a company on Amazon for some organic chia seeds and some organic psyllium husk powder, specialty health-food items Jenny needed for her latest healthy, gluten-free, cook-book recipes. I must say that my experience of eating gluten-free cake, now that Jenny was mastering the technique of cooking with buckwheat flour, which was not easy to do, proved it to be much easier to digest and the organic white baguette I had purchased from Waitrose I had found to be hard work.

The problem until recently with baking organic produce was that organic gluten-free flour was impossible to find in domestic quantities and using organic buckwheat flour had not been a great success, the results being very heavy. Experimentation and adaptation of recipes with added ingredients had improved matters considerably.

After that, we looked again at wooden step-stools for the kitchen, prompted by an advertising brochure from Coopers of Stortford in the Radio Times. They had a wooden step-stool that looked reasonable for about £30. We decided to take another look at the Internet to see what else was available. All the other UK offerings did not look particularly appealing, the best appearing to be those produced by the Amish community in the USA, sadly, not imported into the UK. We decided to order the one from Coopers and went online to their web site only to discover the item was out of stock. Wonderful, we thought. I left Jenny's E-mail address so they could contact us when the item was back in stock. My guess was that we would subsequently be inundated with E-mails of irrelevant offers as well.

I turned my attention back to the PC problem, the desktop still running like one of the horses my dad used to back. Needless to say he did not pass out of this world a rich man.

I decided to synchronise my documents on Jenny's laptop with those on my desktop and downloaded a very useful and, more importantly, free piece of software called FreeFileSync. The name says it all. It allows you to compare two folders (including sub-folders) and identify the differences in the content. You then have full control in selecting what is synchronised and what is not. Synchronisation can be bi-directional or not as you desire. Once you have made your choices, a single click initiates the process and you can let it plod on in the background. You can even synchronise across a network.

That, of course, did not solve my desk top disc or performance problem but it did mean I had two machines functioning with the same set of data just in case one of them failed entirely.

Matters did seem to improve a little when I unplugged the SATA cable connected to the failed disc from the motherboard – until Norton Internet Security came up with a serious error in the wee small hours. I started off the repair from Norton, which involved an un-installation, reinstallation and a root-kit scan, whatever that was. I went to bed and left the damn thing to un-install overnight.

Surprisingly, the reinstallation and root-kit scan all went very well and the machine spent most of Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> May performing a full system scan while I spent the morning dealing with the programmes I had recorded on Jenny's laptop overnight and in the early morning.

The next task was to prepare the fire. The weather, apart from being very wet, had turned quite cold again.

The rest of the day I tended my PC, which seemed to improve somewhat.

By Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> May, my desktop was as useless as ever and I decided I'd had enough and wasted too much time on it. I installed Windows 7. That seemed to go quite well and it was very quick. Windows 7 was brilliant at finding drivers for hardware and I started to become quite excited. It doesn't take much, these days.

Jenny and I ventured into Ramsbottom in the afternoon for a bit of fresh air and a potter round the charity shops. We called at the chemist for another box of disposable, plastic gloves and at the polling station to vote in the local and general elections on the way. There is no connection between these latter two events since I was unlikely to get close enough to David Cameron to strangle him.

I checked on my desktop computer and the Windows 7 installation of updates was progressing well, except for one major snag. There were no Windows drivers for my Leadtek graphics card. I sent a rather curt message to Leadtek, not that I expected it to do much good. Nevertheless, I continued with the Windows 7 installation, the graphics card functioning in basic VGA mode, which meant it would not play videos or live TV. I did manage to record a TV programme in the evening using Media Centre though.

On Friday morning 8<sup>th</sup> May I was up early for the Abel and Cole grocery delivery and we sped off to Unicorn as usual, followed by the routine lunch and tour of Waitrose near Altrincham before our last stop at Asda Pilsworth.

The interesting part of the day over, I set about the boring process of reinstalling Windows XP on my desktop computer for the umpteenth time. It was the only way I was going to get it to work properly again. That took up the rest of the day, leaving the process to continue in the evening while Jenny and I went to the Scout Group A.G.M.

Jenny had been invited to the A.G.M. so that Rick, the Group Scout Leader, could present her with a parting gift for her five years or so being a Beaver Leader, the last three years running two colonies and saving the Friday colony from closure. During her time as Beaver Leader, she had also recruited two other leaders. It was nice to see everyone again.

The installation of Windows XP continued on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May and went surprisingly well. I did have the Windows XP Professional Service Pack 2 issue disc and the Service

Pack 3 disc, which helped and, despite Microsoft ceasing support for Windows XP, the updates were still available online once I had manually installed Internet Explorer 8 from a downloaded file I had.

It was then a case of installing the various drivers for the hardware, which I had in downloaded files. That was just as well because the motherboard manufacturer's (Abit's) website was about as much use as a chocolate tea pot.

That and installing all the software I needed took most of Saturday and Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May.

There was pleasant diversion on Saturday morning in the form of a visit to a friend's house, or, to be more precise, garden. Geoff had telephoned me to invite us round to see his garden and talk about plants that tolerate shady conditions following a brief discussion with him on our recent trip to Clitheroe Castle. His garden was full of plants, trees and flowers and, while well tended, had more of a rustic rather than cultivated look. Geoff, for example, saw the dandelion as a very complex plant, all the parts of which are useful rather than as an unsightly weed.

We left with a gift of four carrier-bags full of plants for our garden, cuttings and seedlings Geoff had placed in pots, something he was always doing for other people.

On Saturday afternoon we attended the church rededication ceremony, following the repairs, alterations and redecoration. The service was followed by tea and cakes in the Old School. On returning home, I found that our Amazon food order had been delivered and left on the patio at the back of the house, underneath the table. It was fortunate it was well-sealed.

A further diversion took us to Summerseat Garden Centre on Sunday morning for some organic top-soil and, after lunch, we bedded in our new plants.

I managed to squeeze in an update to the village web site and more PC work followed on Monday 11<sup>th</sup> May. I ordered the wooden kitchen step-stool from Coopers after Jenny had found her E-mail advising her that the item was in stock, sent a message to the tax man regarding my tax for 2013-4 and resent the letter to the tax man regarding Jenny's tax for 2014-5, this time to the correct address. Since we had received no reply to the first letter, I assumed the office in Liverpool had ceased to be.

I did succeed in creating an online account for Jenny, but since she did not send in a tax return, she did not have access to the secure messaging service to send messages. She only had access to receive messages. Such was the user-friendliness of the HMRC web site.

By mid-afternoon, I had finished all of the immediate IT work and thought it would be a good idea to cut the grass, having given it sufficient time to dry off from the previous night's rain. I finished all three lawns by 6:30 p.m., just in time for tea. That wasn't bad going, I thought.

We decided to nip into Bury for a few grocery items on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> May and, rather than wait for the bus, we walked down the Kirklees Trail, all the way to Tesco.

The first port of call was Costa Coffee in Tesco for a refreshing cup of tea. Jenny and I had not been to Costa Coffee for some time and it came as a very pleasant surprise to find a reasonable choice of gluten-free products available. Well done Costa Coffee. They could teach Waitrose a lot. We had a most enjoyable lunch there.

I had carried the rucksack for our purchases and, this being the last day of the Yellow Tail wine offer, we loaded it with three bottles of red and one of white wine as well as other bits and pieces.

Our next stop was the market where we purchased two bottles of cranberry juice, amongst other items, that also went into the rucksack.

We decided to catch the bus home. Unfortunately, Greenmount ceases to exist after 2:15 p.m. according to our local bus operators, so we had to catch one of the many buses that serve Longsight Road and walk the ½ mile or so from there. I couldn't help thinking that it wouldn't make too much difference if every alternate bus on this route were diverted up Brandlesholme road to Greenmount.

I spent Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> May gardening while Jenny made cakes and buns for the funeral tea the following day. I thought it best to keep out of her kitchen. We decided to lunch outside on the patio and admire my handy-work.

Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> May was the date for Joan Barnes' cremation in Sheffield at the Grenoside Crematorium. Joan was the mother of Andy Cox, Jenny's niece's (Tracey's) partner. We arrived at Joan's house in good time and helped to set up the table for the early afternoon tea.

We had an excellent evening meal at the Heaton Park Beefeater on the return trip.

We spent Friday 15<sup>th</sup> May grocery shopping with lunch at Waitrose in Broadheath as usual. There was no diversion to Asda on the return journey because (a) Jenny had forgotten to take the cool-bag for the frozen and refrigerated produce and (b) we didn't need anything from Asda anyway.

I rounded off the afternoon catching up on the accounts and deciding what programmes to record for the following week.

Eunice called in to ask advice about installing a water butt for her daughter.

We were up for 8:30 on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May and at the Old School by 10:30, testing and pricing electrical equipment for the next jumble sale on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

We finished about 3:30 p.m. and we made our way to Eunice's daughter's house in Bury, having told Eunice earlier in the day that it would probably be easier if I installed the water butt for her.

The installation went as well as could be expected for a B&Q product. Drilling the hole in the water butt to take the hose could have been easier; the drill bit shot through it and went all over the place, making the edges of the hole a little jagged. Fortunately, the flange on the hose and the securing nut covered up the edges so it wasn't a problem.

The instructions for fitting the bit that captured the rainwater from the down spout could have been clearer. I fitted it and positioned the butt, only to realise the fitting was too high. The principle employed was that when the water level in the butt reached the level of the run-off from the down spout, the rainwater would bypass the run-off and go straight down the drain, otherwise the butt would overflow. It was necessary to raise the butt stand by the thickness of two house bricks to ensure that the height was correct.

The other issue was that the hose from the down spout entered the butt at the side and, given the placing of the butt, it would have been better entering at the rear. Unfortunately, there was no pre-stamped position for drilling at the back, only one at each side.

Nevertheless, the butt was positioned, awaiting some rain and, while it was not a perfect installation, there was nothing to suggest it would not work as intended.

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> May should have been a car boot sale day. The weather forecast was for rain so we decided not to risk it. It was very cold and very dull but it didn't rain until late evening, so we probably could have had our pitch, although the last time we did so under similar weather conditions, we struggled to make a profit on the day.

We went out to deliver the leaflets we had picked up in church at the Rededication Service. These were advertising the jumble sale on the 25<sup>th</sup> and the church fund-raising theatre evening at the local rep in Ramsbottom on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Oops!

I spent the rest of the day updating web sites and general IT work.

We decided it was time we did something really useful on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> May and we spent the whole day tidying, cleaning and polishing the lounge, after which it looked a lot lighter and smelt a lot fresher.

Jenny went out with the girls for an evening meal at the Bull's Head. I stayed in, relaxed, had a well-deserved pint and a pizza and watched DVDs, with Rachel's company.

We had planned to go to Stockport, for reasons which will become clear in the next few paragraphs, on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> May until the heavy rain and hail persuaded us it was slightly warmer and much dryer inside. Instead, I spent the day testing computer devices for Jenny's car boot sale and for the Old School jumble sale.

With the promise of blue skies and sunshine, we set off for the bus stop at 9:30 a.m. on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May, Jenny calling at Cream in the village to book a hair appointment on the coming Friday. We caught the 9:50 bus and arrived in Bury in a light rain shower. Fortunately, the Metrolink tram station could be reached without breaking cover and we boarded the Altrincham-bound tram that was waiting in the station. Unfortunately, that tram did not go to Piccadilly train station and we had to alight at Market Street in Manchester just in time to catch a heavy rain shower that subsided as we entered the station after a ten minute walk.

Many trains from Manchester Piccadilly go to Stockport and we picked the one bound for Bristol Temple Meads. Why not, I thought. It took about six minutes to reach Stockport once the train started moving.

We made directly for the factory of H. T. Hughes where I purchased two cotton-drill boiler suits for those jobs where I needed to impress observers, saving me £6 postage had I ordered them online, the transport costs being covered by our senior travel passes.

We subsequently made for and pottered round the town centre. We were not impressed. Bury was much better. We lunched at Costa Coffee, spending the £6 I had saved in delivery charges plus a further £4 or so and continued our reconnaissance, visiting two or three charity shops, before returning to the train station and our trip home, which was almost a reverse of the outward journey except we caught the tram back to Bury from Piccadilly station and we had to catch the 474 back to Longsight Road because the last bus of the day through Greenmount village had long since gone. I reflected on the blue sky and sunshine that had appeared late in the day as we walked home from the bus stop.

Jenny's lap top had been left on since the previous evening to record TV programmes and had behaved itself after a recent spate of the Blue Screen of Death crashes and non-responsive, blank-screen hangs just as I was beginning to suspect a module of Norton Internet Security was responsible.

It was later in the evening when the computer was showing signs of very poor response that I discovered it had lost 2 of its 4 Gb of memory again. This is the problem PC World was supposed to have fixed months ago.

Was there a connection between the crashes and hangs and the loss of memory? I couldn't remember.

I spent Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> May investigating Jenny's lap top problem and researching the various types of memory and its configuration in computers, having come to the conclusion that the memory in slot 1 had failed, thanks to a very useful piece of software called Belarc Adviser, which even gave me the serial number of the memory that was working in slot 2 so I could easily identify slot 1. It was more complicated than I had anticipated and, by the end of the day, I had discovered that the type of memory was DDR3 SDRAM clocked at 1333MHz. While it was possible to purchase memory that ran faster (up to 2400 MHz), the Intel Core i7 processor could handle nothing faster, so 1333 MHz it was.

Since the memory installed was 2 Gb in each of the two slots, my assumption was that it was dual channel, meaning that each slot had to have the same amount of memory in it, so, for example, replacing the faulty memory module with a 4 Gb module was not going to be sufficient. If I wanted to upgrade the memory, which I thought I might as well do, I would have to purchase two 4 Gb modules at about £30 each.

That aside, I turned my attention to grocery shopping on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> May and we set off just after 9 a.m. so that Jenny could call at Asda on the way out to Unicorn and Waitrose and still be back in time to visit the hairdresser at 3:30 p.m., while I went round to the Old School to start preparing the electrical equipment for the jumble sale on the coming Monday. Coincidentally, we both finished at the same time and we were home for 6 p.m.

Needless to say, but I shall anyway, we spent all Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> May at the Old School.

Likewise, Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May with the added attraction of bringing computer items home to test while Jenny prepared tea. Many of these were consigned to the rubbish due to the lack of Windows 7 drivers. Well done Microsoft.

I was up at 7:15 on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> May and had showered, added the cold items from the fridge to the breakfast table Jenny had laid the night before and tested most of the telephones I had brought home by the time Jenny was downstairs. After breakfast, I finished off the testing of all but a couple of the devices I had brought home, leaving those for a later time and possibly date and we made for the Old School at about 10:30.

It was a case of tidying up and preparing for the sale at 2 p.m. The sale itself was very busy and we did quite well, all the proceeds going to help pay for the new church roof and the internal renovations and redecoration. Afterwards, at 4 p.m., we helped tidy up and squirrel away a couple of boxes of the better items we had not sold for next time before returning home at about 6 p.m.

I spent all Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> May in the garden, cutting grass, rescuing the plants from toffee's latrine and tidying up the fruit bushes and borders. The fruit bushes looked as though this year's yield was going to be a good one again and that would keep us busy during July and August, fruit picking, washing and jam making. I was still surviving on the previous year's stock and it seemed that would last until this year's harvest. This was the first year I had managed without the need to supplement my own production with commercially produced preservatives. Was this the beginning of the Good Life?

After the recent long and tiring days, Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> May came as a welcome change and we set a more relaxing pace, not rising until after 9 a.m. and pottering round Bury for a few groceries with the added attraction of a trip to the tip. We managed to fit all of the rubbish that was in the trailer into the car boot and dumped it before our mid-week shop.

We came home for a late lunch and while I was wondering what to have, Jenny offered to make me a BLT with some bacon I had forgotten we had bought a couple of weeks earlier and which was in the freezer. That just about made my day.

A brief rest was followed by a fire-cleaning and making session as the late afternoon turned cold and wet, a pattern not unfamiliar during the month, warming up the room just in time for the regular early-evening 1½ hours of TV quiz shows before tea.

Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> May was yet another cold, dull day but at least rain was not forecast, so we decided to walk into Ramsbottom, after a late start. We did experience a light shower on the way and dodged a heavy downpour in a charity shop. My search for yet more media to clutter up the lounge was unsuccessful. Jenny managed to find another novel and we nipped into Morrisons for a few items before catching the bus to Longsight Road, from where we walked back to the village.

Our usual grocery shopping trip on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> May turned out to be a trifle more expensive than expected, boosted by a bottle of organic, Argentinean Chardonnay from Unicorn, our regular supply of Yellow Tail being too expensive everywhere at the time. We had that for tea with the line-caught tuna we had bought at Waitrose and I have to say it was a little disappointing, with flavours of elderflower and lemon.

I had received a reply to my request to Waitrose to restock their Duchy, organic Harvest Chutney. It seems that the product was too slow-moving for them, so they stopped supplying it. So, it would be a great help if everyone reading this wrote to Waitrose to ask them to bring it back and bought a jar to try it. It is one of the best sweet pickles I have ever tasted, the other being Opies, which is also unavailable due to lack of demand. I was beginning to think perhaps we should make our own.

Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> May had a bright sunny start and I woke about 6:30 a.m. The alarm clock went off at 7 a.m. and I finally crawled out of bed at 8:30. When it was sunny, there was much more incentive to rise to the occasion, until one stepped out of bed into the very cold room. Our central heating had been mostly switched off since the warm spell back in the beginning of April and we were making do with the log fire in the evenings when necessary, which was most days. That meant the mornings were very cold and it took me back to when I was much younger, living in a council house with only a coal fire that had to be set and lit by the first one up. It was interesting to note that I was feeling much better in myself not having the heating on and I was convinced that central heating was not good for the metabolism even though it felt nice. It seems not everything that feels good is necessarily so, the corollary to that being that some things that feel uncomfortable are not necessarily bad. The pursuit of the soft and comfortable life is not necessarily the pursuit of the good life.

While on the subject of the good life, we had been invited to the “Jumblers’ Lunch” at the Bull’s Head Toby Carvery and we joined the others there at noon. I was going to drink orange juice but finally settled on a large glass of Chardonnay to accompany my meal. Having bought the first round, Mike bought the second and my request for a medium glass of Chardonnay turned into another large one.

We came home about 2 p.m. and I continued the Radio Times crossword I had started Thursday evening in bed. That was not such a good move because it had a tendency to send me to sleep and, helped by the Chardonnay, I fell asleep in the chair for a couple of hours. Needless to say, it was not a very productive day.

Another wet Sunday, 31<sup>st</sup> May, prevented us from going to yet another car boot session. Instead, I decided to cut some wood for the log fire and made significant progress in clearing the pile of tree branches and such from the side of the drive, under the shelter of the car port. Jenny helped me bag up the logs after she had cleaned the dining area. I had managed to generate almost eight sacks of wood for burning, plus two I had left over from the previous wood-cutting session and a bag full of wood in the lounge for burning in the evening if required. My efforts left a good few large tree trunk pieces to cut up, which would take a while and probably fill at least another half a dozen sacks. I was hoping I could save most of these until the autumn but the weather would need to improve considerably for me to do so. It also occurred to me that I would need to forage for more wood and I might have to switch our grocery shopping trip on the last Friday of the month so I could join the local woodland management team of volunteers before autumn, when tree lopping and shaping would next take place.

Prior to that, I had checked my E-mails and read again the reply from the tax man. It seems the enquiry I made regarding my tax for 2013-14 had gone to the web site help desk and not to the people who sort these things out. The reply gave me a contact number so I resolved to telephone the office the following day. There was, apparently, no way of sending a message to the tax man.

Meanwhile, I had another look at my tax account and was astonished to discover that the amount I had paid in tax for 2013-14 back in January was an overpayment and I was entitled to a refund. I did not hesitate in requesting same. I could only assume that the tax man had decided to deduct what I owed from my tax for 2015-16, which is what I asked him to do. He just hadn't bothered to tell me. This would be a point of clarification when I telephoned.

That brought to the end the wet, windy and miserable month of May and led into the very wet, windy and miserable month of June. I had enough to keep me busy indoors, so it didn't really matter too much to me. Jenny wasn't happy though.

So would my desktop survive yet another month? Would Jenny's laptop get its memory back? Is the tax man still my friend? Will I ever finish decorating the small, front bedroom? Will I have enough logs for the fire for the winter, which seems to have arrived early. All these and other burning questions (pun intended) may well be answered in the next thrilling episode of this never-ending saga. Then again...