

Greenmount – February 2013

Friday 1st February was an early start, at least for me. I was up for 7 a.m. to take in the delivery from Abel and Cole when it arrived.

Jenny joined me for breakfast and we went on our usual weekly grocery shop to Unicorn in Chorlton and Tesco in Bury, where we would have had lunch at Costa Coffee had they had any decent sandwiches available. As it was, we came home for lunch.

On Saturday 2nd February, we were both up fairly early, Jenny having agreed to help out on a bric-a-brac stall at the Old School from 9:30 a.m. I went round with her, primarily to attend a meeting at 10 a.m. to discuss improvements to the village green, aka Naylor's Field. The primary objective, or so I thought, was to drain the field, which often became waterlogged, making the children's playground unusable. After some discussion, a walk down to the field and reconvening in the Cricket Club, adjacent to the field, there were a number of suggestions regarding developments and it seemed to me that if all of these were adopted, there wouldn't be a blade of grass left.

All this was a preliminary to applying for funding to finance the operation and it would be necessary to prioritise our plans in order to proceed. Any funding that was to be forthcoming was likely to be barely sufficient to drain the field effectively, let alone anything else. It seems the cost of drainage is huge and, were I still working, would make me think I was in the wrong profession.

After coming home for lunch, we nipped into Ramsbottom for some coloured card, from which the Beavers were to make "snakes" as part of their Chinese New Year (the year of the snake) celebrations during the coming week. We also obtained some of our favourite Cranberry drink and made the obligatory tour of the charity shops.

I had yet another early start on Sunday 3rd February, being due at the Old School for a day's Scout training course in First Aid at 9:30. I would have been there on time had Jenny's laptop not refused to load Windows Media Center (it is spelt like that – Microsoft is an American Company) properly. I just managed to correct the problem in time for it to record two back-to-back episodes of Heartbeat on ITV 3 before they started at 9:30 and I waltzed into the training room as the group was half way through the Introduction slide. One advantage of arriving late is that everyone knows who you are and doesn't forget you.

On Monday 4th February, I missed the usual weekly breakfast meeting again. This time, I had booked in the car at Kwik Fit in Bury for some attention to its tyres. It needed a slow puncture repairing, if possible and if not a new tyre. There was also a slow leak on another tyre that needed investigation. As it turned out, it needed the puncture repairing, the other tyre needed re-sealing to the rim and a new valve and another wheel required a completely new tyre. The tracking also needed adjusting and the wheels needed balancing. That was the best part of £150, which wasn't bad considering it included a good-quality, new tyre and a fair amount of work.

Meanwhile, Jenny and I went shopping in Bury. Jenny bought two cotton tops from M&S and I bought some cotton socks and some cotton boxer shorts. I also bought a new pair of

walking boots and some casual shoes from Clarks.

The morning's experience taught me that going out is expensive.

We came home for lunch and afterwards, I updated the accounts. It's fortunate I have plenty of red ink. I also updated my Monthly reports, sorted out my media on the computers and continued the re-development of my web site.

I attended the Village Community Committee meeting in the evening, the main business being to discuss plans for the village party on 6th May and for which arrangements seemed to be progressing nicely, which was just as well as I was scheduled to be away most of that week. As I ventured out on a bitterly cold night in blustery showers of heavy hail, even though I was only walking a couple of hundred yards or so, I uttered those memorable words "I may be some time".

On Tuesday 5th February, it was time to do some Beaver work in preparation for the Chinese New Year, interspersed with the final touches to and publication of my revised web site. Feedback from anyone reading this monthly update would be nice. Positive feedback would be even better. If the speed of response seemed slow, let me apologise. The server had been on the end of my basic broadband for some time and the upload speed was slow, to say the least. At the time of writing, BT had not been too helpful in moving me to fibre and I was considering alternatives.

Jenny would have gone to Yoga but it was cancelled due to another two inches of snow in the morning, which, by the evening had all been melted as it had turned to rain.

On Wednesday 6th February, we went down to the Trafford Centre shopping mal. I wanted to look at the new HP Envy PC, Dehumidifiers and DVD recorders at John Lewis and Jenny wanted a new Berghaus waterproof coat from Blacks. That's what we wanted. We didn't get any of it.

We started off with DVD recorders. It seems all manufacturers had given up on Freesat tuners in their DVD recorders. It was not possible to export recordings to external hard drives and play them on PCs because the recordings were in proprietary formats and not in industry standard MPEG. And recording of "play again" services, like BBC iPlayer was totally verboten. It seemed to me that technology was going backwards.

Fortunately, I could do everything I wanted to do with a little external, USB connected box from Hauppauge and any old, decent, PC. Aren't German's wonderful? I just thought having a dedicated box would be a lot simpler but I guess nobody wants to make life simple because making it complicated is much more lucrative.

On to dehumidifiers. John Lewis only had two in stock and neither of them, not surprisingly, would both heat and dehumidify.

The new HP Envy was a bit of a long shot, especially since the HP web site didn't have any details about it either. It will come as not surprise to learn that John Lewis didn't have one; in fact, they had very few desktop systems. John Lewis seems to think everyone wants a

laptop.

Onwards and upwards, I thought. We went in search of Blacks. Now I know they had had a lean time of it in recent months but I didn't expect the shop to have disappeared altogether.

It was back to John Lewis, first because we had parked the car just outside and second because we remembered we wanted a second mattress protector. Washing and drying the one we've got in a day was proving a little difficult in the winter months. That we did manage to find and, to celebrate our success, we had a late lunch in the café there before returning home.

On Thursday 7th February, I went walking with the chaps and following an 8 a.m. start at Steve's house, we were sipping coffee at Costa Coffee in Piccadilly Station by about 9:30 a.m. Having lingered and missed one train, we boarded to 10:27 Virgin Train to Macclesfield. We had to travel with Virgin because our tickets were only valid for that operator. I remember when a train ticket was a train ticket and not a company ticket. Once again, we have moved backwards about a century, before the rail system was nationalised, to a more complex and incomprehensible system, all designed to make the few very rich and confuse the masses.

We climbed the hill to the canal once more (we'd been here before) and, this time, turned right, heading down the 16-mile tow path to Kidsgrove. To say the going was heavy is an understatement. For the most part, the tow path was grass, or, at least, it had been before the previous army of walkers had ploughed it up and we ended up ankle-deep in sludge, water and goodness knows what else, slipping and sliding in the heavy, clay soil, often towards the canal. By some miracle, none of us actually fell in the ice-covered waterway.

To add to our enjoyment, my observations of a red sunrise came to fruition as it started to hail, slowly at first and then more persistently, necessitating a search for shelter in the form of a footbridge, under which I donned my waterproof trousers over my damp walking jeans. The hail turned first to light snow and then to rain and we reached Congleton, after struggling on for 11 miles, by about 2:30, not having had any lunch. Given that it was too cold and wet to eat in the open, we sought comfort in the Railway pub in the form of good ale and home-cooked food. Since we needed at least 45 minutes for lunch in the pub and we estimated we had another five or so miles to go, there was no way we were going to reach Kidsgrove before dark and we didn't see much point in continuing in the rain anyway.

Another pint and a half saw us at the station, waiting in the icy cold on the platform for about half an hour for the slow train (i.e. the one that stopped there) to Manchester. The days of manned stations with warm waiting rooms are long gone. That's what they call progress. We arrived in Piccadilly and headed for the café upstairs for a tea/coffee before making our way home on the tram with a taxi from Bury to Greenmount. I arrived just in time for tea.

On Friday 8th February we went on a mammoth grocery shop to Unicorn in Chorlton, Asda at Pilsworth and Tesco in Bury, lunching at Costa Coffee in the latter. Once again I am pleased to say that the bulk of our spend was at Unicorn, with Asda in second place and Tesco well down in the ranks.

On the whole, what we could get, we bought at Unicorn. We shopped around for the rest and Asda was almost certainly cheaper for the bulk of it, assuming they had it. Unfortunately, Asda's organic range was small and they had no organic meat any more. One major point in their favour was that their fresh Haddock, Cod and Tuna was all line caught.

We used Tesco mainly for organic meat and the odd item we couldn't get elsewhere, although their organic meat range had dwindled and for anything decent, we relied on Abel and Cole, when we remembered to put in an order.

The day was dawning when we would no longer visit Tesco.

We would normally buy some wine, especially when our stocks were low, but this was now priced well above its value and I refused to pay more than £5 for a reasonable bottle of wine. If more people took the same attitude, prices would soon come down, which would benefit us all.

I was supposed to go and help Jenny at beavers at 5 p.m. but she disappeared off to the Old School without me, so I assumed she did not need me. Did I feel disappointed and dejected? No.

The following Saturday, Sunday and Monday were spent preparing for, attending and tidying up after the Jumble Sale at the Old School, for which, I learned later, the taking was very good indeed, which, as always, goes towards improvements to the building for the benefit of the community.

It was Tuesday 12th February before we saw the light of Asda, shopping for the odd item we needed, which included me eating, or rather, drinking, my words above in that we purchased four bottles of wine at prices well above the limit I had set. My excuse for the white was that the Wolf Bass Yellow Label Chardonnay was marked at half price and cheaper than both the Yellow Tail Chardonnay and the preferred Nottage Hill Chardonnay. My excuse for the red was that the Yellow Tail Shiraz was really very nice.

Jenny went off to a two-hour, Scout-Leaders' meeting in the evening, so we didn't have an opportunity to sample the wine.

On Wednesday 13th February, I was up at 6 a.m. and, courtesy of Jenny, at the tram station in Bury before 8 a.m., with the chaps, on our way to Congleton. Following a quick coffee/tea at Piccadilly Station in Manchester, we caught the 8:48 a.m. service to our destination and we were walking along the Macclesfield Canal tow-path by 9:30 a.m.

As we had left home, it had just started to snow and by the time we started walking, not only had it become more persistent but it had started to settle. We trudged on for three hours in the muck and sludge with the unrelenting snow being blown into our faces by the icy wind and I recall thinking all that was missing was someone firing bullets at us.

We reached the junction of the Macclesfield and Trent and Mersey Canals to find a pub (Canal Tavern) that no longer served food. The chap behind the bar kindly pointed us in the

direction of a pub called the Red Bull Hotel, which was, thankfully, in the direction we were heading and about another half-an-hour's walk away. We pressed on, along the Trent and Mersey Canal in a westward direction, towards Sandbach and found and lunched at the very cosy Red Bull. The pub had a mission statement. "We do not do fast food, just good food as fast as we can". And it certainly did. The Red Bull Hotel can be found on the A34, just south of the junction with the A50.

After lunch, we were back in our stride after a few minutes, the snow somewhat heavier, the going much heavier and the wind blowing in our left ears and out of the other side. We were heading for the Romping Donkey at Hassall Green. We found the pub in ruins and, the snow having turned to rain, rapidly discussed Plan B. Needless to say, this involved pushing on another mile or two.

We eventually reached Wheelock, which had three pubs. Of these, the first one (The Cheshire Cheese) was closed, the second had turned into a restaurant and the third was also closed. We learned from a helpful chap that the nearest pub was a mile or so up the road towards Sandbach and we resolved to start walking towards the railway station along the busy, narrow, unlit road with no footpath as the light was fading, the icy wind was still blowing and the rain was persisting down. Three of us had passed The Cheshire Cheese and Frank was bringing up the rear. He stopped and called us back as the chap was just opening up and we dived into the bar, removing our outer, wet gear. A few minutes later I was sipping a Hydes Bitter and the other three were consuming some black, treacle-like Irish brew that tasted to me like sweaty socks, not that I'm an expert on the flavour of the latter.

Two rounds of sustenance later, we asked the chap in charge if he would order up a taxi to take us to the station and he kindly agreed. The fifteen-minute wait on the station with little shelter was a far cry from the comfortable waiting rooms of the days of BR. That's progress. About an hour on the train found us sipping a warm tea/coffee in Piccadilly, before boarding the tram to Bury and then a Taxi from there to Greenmount. As we approached home, it was evident that there had been much more snow here and, although it had been raining, much of it remained.

I arrived home, once again, just as Jenny was serving up tea.

On Thursday 14th February, after a good night's rest, I was up about 8 a.m. and, after breakfast, Jenny and I took advantage of our free travel passes to nip into Manchester in search of one of the few remaining Blacks outdoor clothing shops still open, situated on Deansgate. Not only did we find it but they had what we wanted – well, almost. Jenny bought a new Berghaus coat and two pairs of walking socks. I bought a pair of waterproof gloves. Jenny also wanted a pair of waterproof gloves and that was the only item they didn't have. Nor did we find any anywhere else.

We were back in Greenmount for about 2 p.m. and nipped into the Bull's Head for lunch. The pub no longer had the chicken curry I like on the menu. When I asked about it, the young lady said she would enquire if there were any still in stock. There were and she said I could have one. Since it wasn't on the till any more, she said she would bill it as a carvery meal, which was fine with me. I then asked for a Wainwright's Bitter. I couldn't have one because they had just changed the barrel and it had to settle. I settled – for a Tetley's. Jenny

asked if she could have a prawn sandwich on brown bread. Unfortunately, they only had white balm cakes left. Jenny finally made up her mind to have a carvery – until, she learned that there was no hot, roast turkey left. After some discussion, the young lady offered her a turkey salad, which was fine. That wasn't on the till either so that went down as a carvery meal as well. And, since we had had so much difficulty, we were offered the two meals at the meal deal price of two for £10. With my bitter and Jenny's half of larger, the whole meal came to just under £15.

While I would normally be critical of the unavailability of so many options and say that these things should not be allowed to occur, I have to acknowledge that the staff went out of their way to be helpful and the meal we finally had was very good. We also received the explanation that the restaurant had been very busy, this being a school holiday week and the previous day's snow had made deliveries later than expected, hence the unavailability of some items.

My afternoon was spent in relaxed mode while Jenny did a bit of ironing.

We passed up our usual grocery shopping extravaganza on Friday 15th February in favour of a somewhat briefer trip to Tesco in Bury. In the afternoon I started tidying up the land on the side of the house, collecting dead branches that had blown off the trees to use as kindling for the fire and cleaning, once more, the cat's latrine.

On Saturday 16th February, Jenny and Rachel went to Manchester while I started tidying up the garden by the side of the drive, making the most of the sunshine while it lasted.

In the evening we went to the Barn Dance at the Old School. The band was a different one to the past two years and the evening was most enjoyable, except that there were no tables in the main hall, which meant that, for some of the time, the band was playing to an empty room while all the people were sat at tables in the next room, mostly unable to hear it. Had I known about this change in the configuration from last year and the year before, we would not have gone and we certainly shan't be going again, should the event be repeated.

I spent most of Sunday 17th and Monday 18th February cutting logs for the fire and trying to further tidy up the drive.

We were up early on Tuesday 19th February so I could take Jenny and Rachel down to Bury to catch the tram to Manchester and, from there, the train to York, leaving me to fend for myself for the next five days. In the afternoon, I joined Frank at the Old School to sand and undercoat the two doors in the kitchen ready for glossing.

The remaining challenges of the day were to feed the cats and to prepare my own tea.

On Wednesday 20th February I spent the morning dealing with the mail from the last couple of days, paying bills and updating the accounts. After lunch, I finished off updating my web site. Having just finished rewriting it in HTML and CSS, learning these as I went, I put the finishing touch to it by generating the navigation menu using a Java Script, something else I am learning. The navigation menu is the same on each page and generating it in Java means that I now only have to change the script to change every page. Up to this point I have had

to amend each page separately and, since the number of pages is growing rapidly, this was becoming quite a chore.

That done, I turned my attention to the real job of the day – that of replacing the mould-ridden silicone round the kitchen sink, between it and the worktop. In theory, it was a simple case of using a sharp implement to dislodge the old sealant and then reseal it with new silicone. In practice, removal was not quite so easy and the back of the sink was difficult to access. I eventually gave up after squirting the latter with mould killer and leaving it to see it took effect.

It was time to cook my tea and, more importantly, the cats kept reminding me, time to feed them. I knew this because they were chewing at my ankles.

I had to forego the pleasure of continuing my attack on the dreaded mould on Thursday 21st February as I and the three other merry lads set off for Leigh at 8 a.m. Frank's wife, Gwen, gave us a lift to Bolton bus station where we found a café in the market hall for our early morning tea/coffee and, for one of our party, a span and egg butty. We all decided to forego the 21-item, Desperate Dan breakfast.

The plan was to board the bus to Leigh after 9:30 so we could use our free passes but good sense got the better of our miserly instinct and we were on our way at £4.50 each at 9 a.m.

The bus station in Leigh is very near the canal and we were walking into the bitterly cold wind at 9:40, back towards Stretford, along the Leigh branch of the Bridgewater Canal tow-path.

We reached Worsley, some six miles from our starting point, in two hours and found the Bridgewater Hotel, where we stopped for lunch. Our intention was to have an hour's break. An exceedingly and unacceptably long wait for our food stretched this to an hour and a half. If you want lunch there, your best bet is to arrive just after breakfast. Better still, find somewhere else.

We resumed our walk, somewhat later than planned and reached the junction with the main Bridgewater canal in just over two hours. It was then a case of turning right and repeating part of the walk we had previously done from Watersmeet to Stretford, where we caught the tram back to Market Street in Manchester, having completed about 13 miles in 4½ hours.

The walk had its interesting features, such as the swing bridge where the canal spans the Manchester Ship Canal (the canal on the bridge is sealed in a large metal box and the whole box pivots sideways on its central axis to allow large ships to pass underneath). There was also the section just past this point where we missed the "Footpath Closed" sign and walked along the section past the Trafford Centre where the towpath was being relayed in preparation for the tarmac surface. Fortunately, we did not disrupt the leisurely pace of the workforce and they allowed us to pass without challenge. The work was certainly improving the path and the chaps seemed to be doing a good job, if somewhat slowly.

It also had its less desirable spots and I have never seen as much litter and rubbish other than on a rubbish tip. Many local residents seem to have little or no pride in their immediate

environment and the local council must be oblivious to the dumped refuse. Local councils being starved of funds to finance environmental cleaning teams by the professional politicians at Westminster, many of whom have never had a real job in their lives, doesn't help.

Back in Manchester, we headed for an old pub called the Shakespear and three rounds of beer before walking to Victoria Station to catch the tram to Bury and a taxi home.

Arriving home about 7 p.m., the first task was to feed the cats, who, by that time must have been wondering what crime they had committed to be shut in the entrance hall all the previous night and all day with only one bowl of food in the morning and a bowl of water. Admittedly, they had a flap in the door for access to the great outdoors but, advancing in years and with icy-cold conditions, being used to a comfortable lifestyle, they only used it when they had to do so.

I still had enough energy left to warm myself a home-made Cornish (is that a contradiction in terms?) Pasty and some beans for tea before settling down in the chair for the evening. I even managed to wash the pots before I went to bed at 10:30.

I did sleep well and did not crawl out of bed until about 8 a.m. on Friday 22nd February, showered, fed the cats and, after a brief chat with my sister Edith in New Zealand on Skype, breakfasted. After that, the cats were demanding some attention and I settled in the chair, pinned down by one of them for the best part of an hour.

I was starting to feel guilty about doing nothing and proceeded to update my media library on the computer and to update this monthly account of the previous couple of days' events. I obviously didn't feel guilty enough.

I was interrupted by a call back from Dell following my most recent attempt to reach someone about repairing Rachel's laptop. I explained I needed a new graphics card and an engineer and asked for a price. The response was that they would get back to me. There's a surprise.

It was, I thought, time to resume work on the kitchen sink and I toiled much of the day removing the mould-ridden silicone from round the sink and cleaning behind it.

Dell did get back to me to tell me they couldn't fix the lap top because they didn't have any of the graphics cards in stock and they wouldn't be getting any more because they were obsolete. So that's a second laptop consigned to the recycle bin because graphics cards that had failed were obsolete.

I finished the work on the kitchen sink on Saturday 23rd February, having found some mentholated spirits in the garage loft with which to clean the surfaces before applying new sealant. What a messy job that was. Fortunately, there was plenty of kitchen towel on hand.

On Sunday 24th February, I collected Rachel and Jenny from the tram station in Bury. They had enjoyed their stay in York, although it had been very cold.

Jenny was impressed with the clean-looking kitchen sink and went on to explain that there was a bottle of meths under the sink which I had failed to find. She even produced it as if by magic. There's no wonder I stand in awe of women, well, some of them, anyway.

About 4 p.m., Jenny was suffering so badly with withdrawal symptoms that we had to nip down to Tesco in Bury for a few bits and pieces.

On Monday 25th February, I joined Mike and Steve (Frank had given his apologies) for a breakfast planning meeting at Summerseat Garden Centre somewhat later than planned owing to the fact that I had been volunteered to follow Rachel up to the garage in Tottington, where her car was booked in for a service. From there I was to give her a lift to work in Bury. Arriving at work, she had forgotten her ID and could not get into the building without it. I took a deep breath, sealed my lips and brought her home to collect it before making the return journey to Bury. I went straight to the Garden Centre and arrived just in time to sit down with my cup of tea as the two chaps were starting their second coffee.

Jenny and I were back at the Garden Centre for lunch and a browse, buying a few plants for the front side garden, aka the cats' new latrine.

Rachel telephoned later to say that she had been delayed at work and asked if I would collect her car from the garage. This was a euphemism for "would I collect it and pay for it", which I did. What else are dad's for?

On Tuesday 26th February, we went shopping to Asda. Nottage Hill Chardonnay was back on offer at £5 a bottle and we bought six. I'm glad we went. I didn't buy my usual quota of four beers for £5 though. The only organic ale they had was St. Peter's and, while it's not bad, I like a selection and my abstinence was a personal protest about the reduction of the number of organic beers from 3 to 1. Mr. Asda, take note.

The vertical blind on the right-hand living-room window surprised us in the evening as it took it upon itself to pull the right-hand fixing out and dangle from the left one. A good trick in anybody's book. In fear of the left-hand one giving way as well, I dismantled it, breaking three of the top plastic fixings in the blinds as I did so.

Jenny said she would be going to Bury the following day and I asked her to see if she could acquire replacement plastic bits. I wish I could.

On Wednesday 27th February, I was walking with the chaps again. (Sounds painful, doesn't it?) Steve's wife, Lavinia, gave us a lift to Bury at 8 a.m. and we caught the Tram to Victoria. After the obligatory but brief coffee/tea stop, we boarded the train to Sowerby Bridge in sunny Yorkshire and had a very pleasant, if somewhat short, walk to Hebden Bridge, where we stopped at the Shoulder of Mutton, a somewhat expensive pub for ale, for a decent lunch. We caught the train back to Victoria for another coffee/tea before boarding the tram for Bury and a taxi home.

The first quarter mile or so of the walk was thwarted by construction work on the towpath to repair leaks in the canal and we had to find a detour along roads by the canal. It would have helped if the alternate route had been signposted.

During tea, Jenny said she had been able to purchase only two of the blind fixings we needed and we resolved to try Ramsbottom market on the coming Saturday.

Jenny also told me that the Post Office had tried to deliver a parcel while she was out. I assumed this was the new graphics card for Rachel's laptop I had found and ordered off E-bay the previous day and wasn't expecting until the following day.

On Thursday 28th February we had a productive day doing Beaver preparation. What's more, I went along to the Beaver session in the evening. My instructions were to take pictures of the Beavers in church, where they were looking at and talking about scenes from the bible depicted by figures, all knitted by volunteers. The 33 scenes had been on view for over a month. There was no admission fee but people were asked to make a donation, all proceeds being given to Bury Hospice.

I even found time to refit the screw for the vertical blind into the window casement.

In next month's exciting episode, you will discover the fate of the fallen blind with the missing fitting (as opposed to the fallen Madonna with the big boobies) and what happened to Rachel's laptop with the faulty graphics card.