

Greenmount – January 2010

Welcome to a new decade. (Is that like an arcade where all the shops have ceased trading?)

Things really started to go wrong on the second. Up to then it wasn't a bad year.

My mobile rang about 9. Having ignored the alarm at 8 and gone back to sleep, it took me by surprise and I pressed the wrong button, so I missed the 0845 call. About fifteen minutes later, the house telephone rang with a recorded announcement from Santander (or Abbey National as it used to be called before the Spaniards invaded).

I followed the instructions but having an old-type telephone in the bedroom, pressing the keypad on the handset had no effect when I was asked to select options and I had to come downstairs to pick up one of the wireless handsets to call Santander back.

I eventually ended up speaking to someone from their fraud department. It appears they were concerned about the value of a large transaction I had completed with Sony for a new laptop on New Year's Eve. According to Santander, they wanted to confirm it was I who had placed the order and then proceeded to tell me they had rejected the payment on security grounds. If they had invoked the sanity clause, I would have understood their position, but, then again, everyone knows their isn't really any Santa Cluus.

The chap with whom I had spoken at Sony told me the order had been confirmed. Sony obviously inspires confidence.

The whole point of placing the order before 1st January was to avoid the 2.5% VAT increase.

I confirmed the transaction was legitimate with Santander and telephoned Sony to check the status of my order. The recorded announcement gave me the option to leave a message for someone to call me back, so I did and they didn't. My confidence in Sony grows.

Looking out of the window, overnight snow had settled to a depth of about two to three inches. We were going to visit relatives in Sheffield but thought better of it. A wise decision, I thought.

Instead, we decided to drive into Ramsbottom for a potter round the charity shops and a bit of fresh air. The first task was to persuade the car to go up the steep, snow-covered drive. A sensible person would have cleared the drive and put down some of the grit I happened to have acquired and stored in a plastic tub on the drive. Instead, I decided the car was going up the drive as it was.

The car had other ideas and after three attempts and sliding about, the rear off-side wheel arch scraped the rear car port pillar. The good news is that the sturdy, brick pillar was undamaged. The not so good news is that there were some nasty scratches on the car. Fortunately, these seem to have been covered by the liberal application of two coats of paint, although some filling will be required when the weather turns warmer.

It could have been worse.

I cleared the drive and gritted it before proceeding on our excursion. Stable doors and horses spring to mind.

On returning, empty-handed, except for two packs of recycled paper toilet rolls (by one get one free – an offer not to be missed) and a packet of organic digestive biscuits from Morrisons, we were greeted by a non-functioning central heating boiler.

The boiler has not been quite right (it's obviously in good company) for a couple of weeks and Rachel has been complaining about it. Every time I checked it, it was working alright, apart from one occasion when the hot tap in the kitchen defied its description and failed to deliver hot water until it had been turned off and on at least twice. I've known women like that.

The fault on the boiler was, by then, a constant one and I called British Gas with whom we have a maintenance contract. The first available engineer appointment was in two days' time. I think I shall be reviewing the contract this year.

In the interim, we had no hot water and no central heating. It's a good job we have a log-burning stove and a big pan.

So if the first couple of days are setting a trend, Armageddon should be around the middle of March.

On the 3rd, with no response from Sony, I telephoned the Sony Centre and placed the handset on my desk in speaker mode, playing nauseating music to itself for about fifteen minutes, resisting the urge to leave yet another message for someone to ignore. I eventually spoke to a chap who sounded as though he was still suffering from the effects of New Year's Eve.

He confirmed the order had not been placed and I asked if he could resurrect it at the original price. This he did and gave me a new order number. The status of the transaction was "pending", whatever that means and he said he would call me back later that afternoon to confirm the situation. Not unexpectedly, he didn't.

The morning of the 4th saw us rise at about six to a very cold house. Jenny was apprehensive about driving the car on the estate roads, the snow well packed and frozen, so I drove the car to the main road so she could go to work. The outside temperature was -9.5°C. The temperature inside wasn't much higher.

The gas man arrived soon after 8 am to fix the central heating boiler. I had turned off the boiler when it ceased to boil and the engineer found that all the pipes in the garage, normally kept warm by a frost sensor (a thermostat in the garage that switches on the boiler if the temperature drops below zero), had frozen. Three fan heaters, two of his and one of mine, a blow torch and a couple of hours had water dripping from the drain cock. The boiler's, not mine..

The engineer said that the exhaust fan seemed to have ceased up and proceeded to dismantle

the vent. I left him to it and went to light the log fire to warm Jenny as she returned from her school crossing.

By lunchtime the engineer had cleaned and replaced the exhaust fan and thawed out the pipes and we were back in the 21st century, with hot radiators and running hot water. The British Gas engineer's parting gift was a notice advising me that the boiler had a couple of "non-compliances with current standards" and a recommendation that we replace it for a more energy-efficient one. It might be worth mentioning that British Gas recommended, supplied and installed this one.

It snowed heavily overnight on the 4th and on Tuesday morning, very few people were going anywhere in the six or seven inches of snow on the ground, with roads impassable except for four-wheel drive vehicles. Rachel could not get to work. Jenny could not get to Ramsbottom and was asked to try to cover Hawkshaw, which meant walking a couple of miles across the fields. After landing in a snow drift up to her knees, she abandoned the idea and came back home, which is just as well because the school, like all the others in the area, was closed.

I went out about 9 am to take some pictures of the village and its deserted roads, normally bustling with traffic at that time.



The picture on the left is of our house and the road off the estate is under the snow somewhere. The one on the right is the main road through the village, just slightly quieter than usual, with the junction down to Bury and the Bull's Head pub on the far left.

I managed to clear and grit the drive but there was no more grit for the estate road. The council stocks were running low and the main roads and bus routes were being given priority, which would have helped if we could have driven the car off the estate.

Rachel managed to get to work on 6th January by bus. The local schools were closed again so Jenny did not have to work. I moved my car to the top of the drive and took Rachel's out of the garage and put it under the car port so I could retrieve the rucksack from the garage loft. The plan was to go shopping on foot to Ramsbottom for a few groceries.

I took the opportunity to bring out the boxes for the Christmas decorations and Jenny and I put those away in their proper place until next Christmas. Mike arrived for a chat and stayed over lunch, by which time it was too late for our planned excursion. Instead, after Mike left, we went for a walk through Old Kay's Park and across the golf course. The deep snow was

heavy going in places where it had not already been trodden down and the kids were making the most of it, sledging on the slopes in the park and on the golf course.

On the 7th, the old, black, stray cat we took in a couple of years ago and called Tabatha became ill again and we took her to the vet on the following day. There was little hope for her and she was, regrettably given a lethal injection to finally end her suffering. I was surprised how attached to her we had become and it was a very tearful few minutes.

Earlier in the week, Carrie had fallen on the snow while walking to work and injured her wrist. She joined the queue of several hundred other similar cases at the local hospital accident and emergency unit and had the injury strapped up. She was unable to drive and since Matthew has not passed his driving test for the car, Jenny and I gave them a lift up to their local Asda supermarket to do some grocery shopping on the 9th so we took the opportunity to acquire a few bits and pieces we needed, like beer.

The following few days hit a bit of a low point after all the excitement. That is until the 16th when my computer started to close itself down unpredictably again. By the 18th I was so perplexed that I telephoned Matthew to see if he could help. Unfortunately, Matthew was unable to think of anything I had not already considered. Windows XP is not particularly good at providing diagnostic information. Microsoft software designers and GPs have a lot in common.

On the 19th, having earlier attempted to resolve my credit card problems with Santander, I placed an order for the Sony laptop for a fifth time. This time I have an order confirmation E-mail from Sony so there is some hope of a delivery within the next four weeks or so. The delay has cost me an additional £15 for delivery and I shall be asking Santander to fund that.

My strategy is to scrap my desktop if I can't identify the fault and to replace both it and Jenny's old laptop with the new one. That's what I call planning.

Meanwhile, my desktop is back online after resetting the BIOS for the third time. It may be that the internal, rechargeable battery, which does something useful when the mains power is switched off needs replacing.

Jenny and Rachel ran an International night at the Beaver meeting on the 21st with an Australian theme. The new Beaver greeting appears to be "G'day mate!" We are in the process of forging links with a Joey Mob.

Rachel and Jenny went off on a Scout training course on the following Saturday and Sunday and left me in peace for the week end.

On Saturday I was going to wash the car. I took the rubbish to the bin and decided it was too cold to stay out. I was also going to go round and meet the new vicar who was being invested. Unfortunately, the strain of cooking my own lunch was too much and I decided to work on my computer instead.

On Tuesday 26th, the car went in to a bodywork repair shop in Bury, recommended by Mike, to have its scratches filled and painted properly. That's £200 worth of properly. We took the

opportunity to do a little shopping in Bury and we walked back to Greenmount. I could have used my bus pass to make the journey on public transport free of charge but Jenny would have had to pay the £1.65 fare for the 3.5 mile journey and refused to do so. She's definitely a Yorkshire lass.

Jenny's birthday came and went on the 27th and she certainly doesn't look her age. Thank you to all those of you who sent her a card and/or greetings via the Internet. Alas, I did neither and, fortunately, live to tell the tale.

I took Jenny and Rachel out for a family meal on the 31st to the Pack Horse Inn at Affetisde to celebrate her birthday. Unfortunately, Matthew and Carrie could not make it. Affetisde is a small village about ten minutes' drive away, up on the hills towards Bolton, on the old Roman Road, Watling Street. We didn't see any old Romans and Pack Horses were not on the menu.

Our decision to eat there followed our Scout Christmas meal experience and our great expectations were, unfortunately, not realised. The meal and service was nice enough but two items on the menu weren't and when we all ordered duck for the main course, we were told there were only two left. Jenny asked for the chicken stuffed with cream cheese without the cheese instead and was told it came ready-stuffed. No comment. She tried it anyway and it was not as rich as she had expected. The wine menu was not particularly inspiring and the Australian Chardonnay I chose was not one of the best. I would probably give the restaurant seven out of ten as opposed to Jenny's meals, which score eleven out of ten.

And on that note of praise, I close another month in the chapter of life.