

Greenmount March 2015

We didn't do much on Sunday 1st March, not having stirred until late morning. Matthew and Carrie came round just after lunchtime and we spent most of the time talking about their holiday in Mexico. Rachel paid us a pleasantly unexpected visit later in the day.

I was planning on lunching with Mike and Frank in the Bull's Head on Monday 2nd March. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

Treacle, one of our cats, had been ill for some time and had taken a turn for the worse in the night. When I greeted her in the morning, her back legs seemed to be almost paralysed and walking was almost impossible, accompanied by cries of pain. Her eyes did not seem to be focussing properly and she seemed to have lost some of her sense of smell again.

We took the cat to the vet after breakfast and the consensus of opinion was that it was better to end her life rather than prolong the agony. It was an emotional moment, having had our two cats for some 16 years.

The rest of the day was a sad and leisurely one.

After lunch, I wrote a letter to the tax man asking if I could offset some of my tax against Jenny's unused personal allowance. If HSBC could do it, I didn't see why I couldn't.

I then turned my attention to kicking IF into touch. The bank had written to Jenny, in whose name our savings were held, on several occasions advising of the ridiculously low interest rates and I decided to transfer all of our savings to our current account with Santander and then invest in some over 65 National Savings bonds offering a guaranteed 2.8% over twelve months.

Taking the money out of IF proved a lot more difficult than putting it in, requiring personal authorisation before anything moved anywhere. I resorted to sending IF a secure message using their web site. Unfortunately, it didn't cater for pictorial gestures. I was also going to send a personal letter in Jenny's name to the Head of IF at Bank of Scotland plc in Edinburgh giving the necessary authorisation in the written word. Subsequent events rendered that unnecessary.

It occurred to me that IF (Intelligent Finance) should have been renamed Intelligent Finance For You (IFFY) because that's what it had become.

I finally made progress with the plastering of the small bedroom wall on Tuesday 3rd March. I smoothed down the plastering I had already done and, using another one and a half packets of general purpose Polyfilla, roughly filled the remaining, gaping hole. The rough finish was because the filler had a tendency to bulge as it dried so I thought I stood a better chance of a smoother finish if I left the surface short of plaster level and then skimmed it with a thin layer of filler later. Time would tell.

I spent the rest of the day, as I did any spare time I could find between other work, updating web sites and progressing my free, self-learning Java course.

I had intended to skim over the plaster on Wednesday 4th March but Jenny wanted to go into Ramsbottom and, in any case, the filler from the previous day was still quite wet, although it had set. We toured the charity shops, as usual and I found a DVD of train journeys in New Zealand while Jenny found a couple of books she wanted. We ended up at Tesco, taking advantage of their special offer on Highland Spring bottled water and little else.

For the afternoon, I was back at my Java and I had got as far as writing a program to accept input from the user, open a file using that information and then list all the web pages (text files with the extension htm) in the folder. The reason behind this feverish activity was to have a piece of software that would perform a repetitive edit on all the web pages in a folder in seconds instead of my having to perform the edits manually, taking about a minute for each page and when there were hundreds to do, the software would save me quite a bit of time, not counting the mistakes I would make undertaking such a boring task. Besides, I liked a challenge.

More plastering on Thursday 5th March saw the plaster skimmed with a reasonably smooth finish. It would need a bit of sanding and touching up when dry and I thought another couple of days should do the trick.

After that, I washed the car, with a break for lunch before wiping it down and tidying up.

With still a few hours of the day left, I made a start on the wood that had been piled on the side of our drive, under the car port, looking decidedly unsightly, for what seemed an eternity. It needed cutting, bagging and storing for use in our stove and I managed about four bags plus a barrow-load of wood for bagging before both the light and I started to fade.

On Friday 6th March, we made an early start on our weekly grocery shop and we were back home for about 2 p.m., having managed a rather comfortable journey round the M60, averaging about 60 miles to the gallon.

I put the rest of the day to good use, progressing my Java instruction and Jenny went to have her hair cut as I settled down to watch the tea-time quiz shows we usually enjoy together.

There was so much choice of entertainment on Saturday 7th March that it made the decision difficult. There was a village spruce-up at 10:30 a.m. while noon. There was the weekly cycle ride to Bury and back at 11 a.m. There was the village drop-in at the Old School from 10:30 a.m. with a hot lunch for those who wanted it for just £2 at noon and there was still a pile of electrical equipment to test and price for the next jumble sale.

We decided to visit the drop-in and test some of the electrical equipment, although I did not take my usual toolkit with me because we were not sure whether there would be a room available in which we could work, most of them being occupied by the drop-in. As it turned out, there was a spare room and we made a little progress without my bits and pieces.

We came home for lunch and I spent a couple of hours in the afternoon attacking the wood on the drive again while Jenny tended her potted plants on the patio for the first time this year, all of which were looking just a little sorry for themselves.

It was good to have had two really nice, sunny days in succession and I can't remember when we last had decent weather with temperatures in double figures.

Rachel telephoned in the late evening to say she had lost power to everything except her lighting. I was not able to talk her through flicking the switch(es) on her distribution board circuit breakers over the telephone so I made arrangements to go down early the following day.

And so to Sunday 8th March. We had an afternoon lunch appointment with Matthew and Carrie in Bury at 1 p.m., so, since we had to go down to Manchester and back to fix Rachel's electrical supply problem, it was an unscheduled early start.

We arrived at The Clarence on Station Road in Bury just in time for a nice Sunday lunch for Mother's Day, a week in advance, with Matthew, Carrie and Carrie's parents, Bob and Marie. I had the roast beef dinner and Jenny had the lamb.

We arrived home about 3 p.m. and decided it wasn't worth doing much for the rest of the afternoon.

I was determined to make progress with the small bedroom on Monday 9th March and I declined a personal invitation from Frank to join the lads for lunch at the Bull's Head. I had reached the stage where it was a case of smoothing down and touching up the plaster on the walls and ceiling in preparation for a final smoothing down ready for washing and painting. I had forgotten about the small crack in the ceiling that needed quite a bit of attention. Unfortunately, I did not feel at all well after lunch and ended up sleeping in the chair for most of the afternoon.

I was up at the Incredible Edible plot for 10:30 on Tuesday 10th March. As I understood it, Tracey was bringing the wood for building the back support for Phase 3 and Tracey, Frank and I were going to concentrate on doing that. When I arrived with my trusty workmate, Donna was the only person at the plot and she was turning over the rough ground with a fork, digging out the rubble.

Donna informed me Frank was not coming and since he was our joiner, Tracey would not be there until 11 a.m. and Donna had to go at noon, we discussed plan B, which was to turn over the rough ground and dig out the rubble. I carried my workmate back home, loaded my tools and plastic rubbish bags into the car and drove round to the plot.

Tracey arrived with a van load of wood about 11:15 and she talked me into starting the construction work, having brought all the necessary tools and screws. The first task was to clear the very large pieces of concrete rubble from near the back fence so we could get in to work and we succeeded in installing the first length of board to protect the fence.

We packed up and Tracey came round for a coffee and a chat, Jenny having just returned from Ramsbottom, exhausted from her walk back. She had given up on the busses, the one on the outward journey having been half-an-hour late.

We enjoyed Tracey's company until about 3 p.m. and then had a late lunch, by which time there was little point in starting anything else.

I replaced the third of the three bulbs in the outside light at the back of the house on Wednesday 11th March, before the rains came yet again. Afterwards, I confined myself to the small bedroom, touching up the plaster and starting work on the crack in the ceiling. The latter task involved chipping out a two-inch wide channel of plaster, centred along the crack, brushing the bare plasterboards and the join between them with glue, sticking on some joining tape and then brushing that with glue. This was the same technique I had used on our bedroom ceiling and it had worked very well.

Unfortunately, I had to leave it to set before I could do any more plastering so it was a case of finishing for the day and catching up on some IT work.

On Thursday 12th March I spent some more time in the small bedroom, plastering up the bit of ceiling on which I had been working the previous day and several small holes in the ceiling caused by removal of the textured paint.

Friday 13th March was an unusually long day of foraging and what's more, I didn't realise it was Friday 13th until the following day.

We started off with a visit to John Lewis at the Trafford Centre where I bought Jenny the very expensive LED reading lamp we had seen some weeks earlier and, as if that were not enough, some plastic dryer balls to help our clothes dryer work more efficiently. Jenny also looked at bread-makers and I looked at DVD players. I decided we needed to do a bit more research on those items before purchasing either.

We arrived at Unicorn later than usual and I was surprised that Waitrose still had a good selection of food in the café by the time we arrived there for lunch.

The return journey was through fairly heavy traffic and I took the scenic route to Asda at Pilsworth rather than crawl round the M60 and M66 in first gear. That, thankfully, was our last stop for the day with Jenny expressing a need to visit Tesco in the near future.

Having successfully completed my first Java program to automatically edit my web site picture gallery pages, I decided to write a second Java program, this time to automatically generate web pages for my web site picture gallery so that I could add lots of new pictures in a fraction of the time it had been taking me. This task was ongoing and consumed a fair amount of time in between other, less-interesting tasks. This explains why I did not achieve a great deal in practical terms on Saturday 14th March.

In the evening, we went to John Seddon's 60th birthday bash at his home. We walked there in about twenty minutes in the very cold evening to find most people milling about on the lawn and patio at the back, with a large wood-burning fire to keep everyone warm and, would you believe, a separate barbecue. A group of less hardy people made for the comfort of the lounge while the more robust of us remained outside, mingling and chatting, venturing in only to avail ourselves of liquid refreshment and, for those who wanted it, traditional Lancashire hot-pot with mushy peas. I settled for a couple of burgers from the barbecue and a chicken leg I was handed. It was a very pleasant evening and it was very nice to meet up with many people we don't often see as well as those we do.

We walked back, not feeling the cold so much on the return journey and arrived home around midnight, smelling like packets of smoky-bacon crisps.

I continued my software exploits on Sunday 15th March until it was time to meet Rachel at her apartment in Manchester. Rachel treated us to afternoon tea at Tea 4 2 in Manchester. We had tea, sandwiches, a sweet and cakes, the surprise being a complimentary glass of very nice Champaign as we were seated at our table. It is one of the few eating places in Manchester that asks about food allergies before presenting the menu and caters for, amongst others, those with a gluten allergy.

Rachel took us to meet her Matthew at his apartment, after which we walked back to collect our car from outside Rachel's apartment.

Manchester was very busy with quite a few Irish people celebrating St. Patrick's Day and everyone seemed to be having a good time.

I was back in the small bedroom smoothing down the plastering using my Bosch Professional Multi-tool and its sanding attachment on Monday 16th March. That made very short work of what I expected to be a mammoth job and, after tidying up and cleaning my tools, left the room ready for cleaning prior to sticking up the coving.

By the end of the day I had also made considerable progress with my second Java program.

I was back at the plot, eventually, after a late start and washing the pots, on Tuesday 17th March and we (Frank, Tracey and I) continued to dig in the mud and erect more of the backboards while Dave carried on digging and weeding the raised beds and Donna was busy planting. We took an executive decision to abandon the idea of the stone walling along the path and to use boards instead on the basis that it was quicker and cheaper.

I came home afterwards to collect some bits and pieces to fix the toilet door at the Old School and I collected Frank from the plot. We refitted the door using bolts through the frame for the hinges rather than trying to use the screws that had given up trying to support the heavy door in the pathetic, compressed, veneered sawdust that passes for fixtures and fittings these days.

I was back home to an empty house, except for the cat, for lunch, Jenny having gone out to Ramsbottom. Apparently it was the maid's day off.

Jenny turned up quite soon after I arrived and, after lunch, it was back to Java.

The plan on Wednesday 18th March was to go to B&Q and purchase some coving for the small bedroom, Wednesday being senior citizens' discount day. I had arranged to go walking with Mike Frank and Steve at 9:30 and I expected to be back in time to go to B&Q. I should have known better.

We walked down to Bury along the Kirklees trail, ending up at Costa Coffee in Tesco (where else?) where we chatted and reflected on life in general before deciding to head to Ramsbottom along the Irwell Valley for lunch. As we reached Summerseat, time was pressing and we headed up to the Hamers Arms there for lunch instead of continuing on to Ramsbottom. I arrived home about 4 p.m., full of goulash and beer and not feeling very much like going to B&Q.

On Thursday 19th March, I had arranged to fetch some soil with my trailer from the Incredible Edible plot in Ramsbottom that was being dismantled, as I understood it, due to some disagreement with the owners of the Hearth of the Ram restaurant, in the grounds of which the plot was sited, albeit on council-owned land. The soil was destined for the Incredible Edible plot in Greenmount and Dave Archer and I made a couple of trips, with an estimated good half-dozen more to do at some future date.

After a quick lunch, the trailer safely back in the garage, I went to Christine Taylor's house to set up her new HP desktop computer. This was running Windows 8, which I had not used before and, contrary to my expectations, knowing Microsoft, the installation was surprisingly easy. The biggest challenge was setting up E-mail. The application that was included with Windows 8 was utterly useless and I succeeded in downloading Windows Mail, which Christine had been using with Vista. Not only that but I managed to configure it for IMAP, thanks to some very simple configuration instructions from TalkTalk. Were these people reading my blog?

I left with a few items still to resolve and arranged to return the following Monday.

I completely missed the solar eclipse on Friday 20th March, busy working on the computer before heading out to Unicorn and Waitrose. We reached Unicorn without a hitch and averaging almost 70 mpg, thanks to freely-moving traffic on the M60. Although traffic was heavy, the temporary 50 mph speed limit with average-speed traffic cameras helped to keep it moving smoothly and I reflected that making the arrangement permanent would not be such a bad idea.

I should have known better than to expect this good fortune to continue. Road works on the A56 while travelling from Unicorn to Waitrose extended what should have been a fifteen-minute journey to almost an hour and played havoc with my fuel consumption. The idiot at the council who sanctioned these repairs during a weekday on one of the busiest roads in Greater Manchester should have been buried in tarmac up to his/her neck and left to rot. As if that were not enough, the delay put our return journey in the middle of the end-of-day school-run.

Our bad luck continued on Saturday 21st March as we journeyed into Ramsbottom mainly because I needed to replenish my supply of Saw Palmetto tincture only to find the shop on Bridge Street (Earth Mother) had sold the last bottle and wasn't expecting any in for a good few days. This wasn't the first time this has happened and it beats me how anyone can run a retail business when they keep running out of stock.

The bit of good luck we had was in finding three DVDs in a charity shop.

We came home for lunch and spent most of the afternoon testing electrical equipment at the Old School for the coming jumble sale.

Sunday 22nd March was a lovely sunny day and I spent much of it working in the back garden, tidying up after the ravages of winter.

I had finally managed to get my second Java program working and would have completed the task in hand, namely adding another two sets of pictures to my web photo gallery had my desktop computer not been acting up yet again. This time, I had to reinstall Mozilla Firefox.

I did finish the task on Monday 23rd March though.

I then concentrated on fixing the Windows XP search function. While the search window opened, there were no options in the Search Companion pane. I thought this was a problem with the software that implemented the search and I found out how to reinstall it, having to find the installation files from the Windows XP issue disc and the Service Pack folder on the hard drive, the latter holding later versions of some of the files. I worked through that process file by file and successfully completed the exercise only to discover it had made no difference whatsoever.

I started again and found that the search function, as well as many other processes, relied on a file in the folder c:\windows\system32 called jscript.dll and that was missing. I recalled a recent disc corruption that had resulted in this file being deleted. I found a copy in the Service Pack folder, copied it across and re-registered it. Problem solved.

Not only did it fix that problem but it also fixed a couple of other problems I had discovered.

I used Mozilla Firefox to browse the Internet because Internet Explorer was too old for some web sites, later versions of IE not being available under Windows XP, that being no longer supported by Microsoft. When Firefox had recently developed a fault, I resorted to using IE, briefly, only to find it was not running Java scripts. Restoring jscript.dll brought IE back to life, not that I cared much.

The other issue was with Adobe Photoshop and importing scans using an HP Twain driver. The import failed with a Java script error. That disappeared as soon as the jscript.dll file had been fully restored and re-registered.

After lunch I was back at Christine Taylor's house working on her new HP PC installation running Windows 8.1. Progress was slow as I implemented the latest updates from Microsoft and HP, installed hardware and imported and tidied up E-mails from the old system. It was during this exercise Christine discovered there was some data on the old system she needed and I discovered an interesting comment from one of Microsoft's web pages regarding the webcam driver software. Essentially, I could not find any drivers supporting the webcam under Windows 8 and the Microsoft web site suggested I should look to the webcam manufacturer. Sound advice, you would think. Except that the webcam was marketed by Microsoft.

I was up at the Incredible Edible plot at 10 a.m. on Tuesday 24th March, ready to start more digging and weeding and back home again before 10:30 a.m., pretty well soaked through. The showers forecast for 11 a.m. onwards had arrived early and I walked home, pushing my wheelbarrow full of tools, in a heavy hail storm.

After a quick change and rub down, which sounds more exciting than it was, I pondered on what to do next. We decided to remove all of the dust cloths from the small bedroom, give them a good shake outside in the light rain and then Jenny washed them and hung them out to dry in the afternoon sunshine. Not having any spare ones to put down, I could not work in the small bedroom so I decided to install Windows XP on the old PC tower that Matthew had lent me and which had been sitting idle in the conservatory for some months.

It was too cold and cluttered to work in the conservatory so I decided to clutter up the lounge as well. Installing Windows XP Service Pack 2 from the original DVD was easy enough and I thought it strange that the PC was not trying to communicate with the Internet until I realised that the onboard network connections needed the software drivers.

After lunch, I went to finish off Christine's new PC installation.

Returning home, I resumed work on Matthew's old PC and the first challenge was to find the make and model of the motherboard so I could download the network drivers onto a memory stick using Jenny's laptop and then install them onto Matthew's old PC.

I hit on the idea of using a very useful, free PC Audit tool called Bellarc Adviser. I downloaded that onto the memory stick and installed it on Matthew's PC and ran it. The board was an ASUS Commando Rev 1. I subsequently downloaded the network drivers from the ASUS web site and installed them too. Strangely, the PC had not tried to contact the Microsoft web site to automatically source updates for Windows XP, not that I was bothered because I needed to install Service Pack 3 from a DVD I had.

SP3 installed from the disc without a hitch and I was still not receiving updates from Microsoft. Even though support for XP had ended almost a year earlier, I still expected to be able to receive updates for XP produced prior to that.

I then discovered the copy of Internet Explorer I had, required for Microsoft updates, was version 6 and the update mechanism required version 8. And thence appeared catch 22.

When I tried to download Internet Explorer 8 from the Microsoft web site, I was informed it was not supported by the operating system I was running and my only options were to either install a later version of Microsoft Windows or to replace my PC. So why was my desktop, running XP, also running IE 8?

Fortunately, I had saved the installation download for IE 8 on my desktop and I used that to install IE 8 on the old PC. That worked fine. So what skulduggery was going on at Microsoft? Is this yet more evidence of Microsoft's devious and dubious business practices?

With IE 8 installed I was able to download and install all of the XP updates needed.

Wednesday 25th March was a better day, weather wise and there was no excuse for not working in the garden. I cut the grass on the back lawn (I use the term loosely) and continued cleaning the patio block paving, one of the jobs I had started the previous Sunday.

I had to pack up at lunchtime to go to Bury to dump some rubbish at the tip, to pick up a few groceries and to take Jenny to Radcliffe for a repeat scan of her sensitive parts, which went well.

Back home, I succeeded in installing more drivers on the old PC and identified the TV tuner cards as AverMedia. Obtaining the software for them from the AverMedia web site was impossible and I ended up sending the company an E-mail asking for it. If this brief

encounter was typical, I was very pleased my own TV hardware was manufactured by Hauppauge. The Hauppauge web site was much easier to use and their support to date had been pretty good, not that there wasn't some room for improvement.

We settled down after tea to watch some DVDs, as usual and discovered the DVD player was exhibiting the error it came up with a day or two earlier. The conclusion was that it was not very well and could well be in the next tip consignment.

The plan on Thursday 26th March was to meet with Dave Archer to bring collect more soil from the Incredible Edible plot in Ramsbottom for the plot in Greenmount. Overnight snow and morning showers invoked plan B, which was to update this blog and check my E-mails.

We made a reasonably early start on Friday 27th March with a visit to the vet. The vet wanted to check over our remaining cat, Toffee, before prescribing her any more tablets for her ageing kidneys. The check up, blood test, tablets, a new 4 Kg bag of renal food and a urine test kit cost me a small fortune.

Notwithstanding that expenditure, after bringing Toffee home, we embarked on our usual Grocery shopping trip to Unicorn and Waitrose. I collected a copy of Windows 7 Ultimate from Matt on our way out and started to install it on Matthew's old PC when I returned. The installation was to replace Windows XP I had recently installed and which was problematic.

We spent most of Saturday 28th March at the Old School, preparing the electrical equipment for the coming jumble sale. In the evening, I finished the Windows 7 installation only to discover that was causing problems as well. I checked for the cause of the issues and discovered I should have installed the 64-bit version. I started again. Third time lucky.

We were back at the jumble sale preparations on Sunday 29th March and I ended up bringing a load of equipment home to test because I needed to download drivers for it and there was, thus far, no broadband at the Old School despite my repeated requests, along with others, for same. In the evening, I continued with the Windows 7 64-bit installation.

We were both completely shattered by Monday 30th March. I started the day continuing the Windows 7 64-bit installation. Leaving that running, we went to Bury to dump rubbish from the jumble at the tip, collect the cat's urine test kit that was not in stock the previous Friday and purchase a few groceries from Tesco. We came home for lunch and we were back at the Old School for about 2:30 p.m., just in time to prepare for the jumble sale at 4 p.m. After that, we stayed behind for a while to help tidy up and came home for tea. I finished off the Windows 7 installation. There were still some underlying problems on Matthew's old PC and I suspected an intermittent fault on the power supply.

We had a lie-in on Tuesday 31st March, bad weather inhibiting the plot, the IE plot, that is. I updated the village web site, processed my E-mails and had a bite of lunch before spending the afternoon at the Old School, this time helping to prepare for the Antiques and Collectors' Fair on the coming Monday. Jenny helped with the bric-a-brac and I helped Frank with the CDs, DVDs, records, etc.

Matthew and Carrie called round briefly in the evening to show us their new, white, Audi sports car and I had a short spell at the business end, albeit a stationary one.

And as one busy month faded into history, another equally challenging one loomed on the eastern horizon. Will Matthew's PC behave itself or burst into flames at the attempt? Will the cat manage to pee into the minute test tube? Will Jenny get a good price for my remains at the Antiques and Collectors' Fair? Find out in next month's thrilling instalment of this riveting epic.