

**MURIEL  
RURIAL  
2011**

## February 2011

I blame the weather. What for? Everything! Well not everything but most things. Why? Well let me explain.

Sun shining outside, you're feeling good, you drop your toast butter side down. No problem. You smile, pop another slice in the toaster, stroke the cat, the dog, put a fresh millet in the budgie's cage and slip a bar of chocolate behind your child's ear. "There you are son/darling, that's for you for being so good..." Same scenario next day except that it's cold and snowing. Toast drops butter side down. Immediately you "Dohhhh!". Perhaps all is not lost though. Maybe with a scrape here and a wipe there it's still ok. You pick it up, there's some bits of fluff and grit stuck to the butter. It's snowing so you shove the dog, shoo the cat. You break the chocolate over the child's head before running a fork across the bars of the budgie's cage. It cowers in the bottom of its wire domain, its little feet making scratching sounds on the sand sheet as it shifts nervously, moving its head in little jerky motions eyeing the fork poised above its bars. It's pleading now through song, tweeting and cheeping or that "Pretty boy Joey" drivel you love to hear on a summer's day. But now huge snowflakes are sticking to the window and an icy draft intrudes. So you're angry, angry with the toast, it did it deliberately.

Deep down you know you are being unreasonable but the snow's settling out there now, the garden tap isn't lagged and you gotta blame the toast not the weather. You gotta blame the toast. So, there, in you go bread, in the pedal bin. One, two, three, slice after slice, down to the crust. Gone! In goes the toaster too, the butter and the marmalade. You're not going to be hostage to the vagaries of those kitchen tenants. You call into the bin "Huh, you thought you'd land butter side down and get away with it, didn't you? Well this is your fate" and you slam the lid of the bin shut as another icy draft attacks your ankles. But you're still in denial that the weather's to blame for the way you feel...

Outside there's a leaden sky, subzero temperature, dangerous roads and paths. What to do? Have to stay in, put the radio on you suppose... "So I believe we've got Dave on the line. What do you want to say Dave?" "Oh good morning Steve, I'm ringing in to tell you about the times my ol' Dad used to say "Come on Dave jump on the back of the motorbike" and off we would go, yeah. Course didn't have crash helmets in those days". There was some dead air time before Steve realised that was it, that was the end of the story. And you're listening and you can't believe it. You're thinking come on Dave there's got to be more to it than that.... You rang in

with that? Well you wanted to hear him say "We got to Herne Bay, Dad gave me a shilling and said go in there and get two ice creams son, but when I came out he'd gone, but that wasn't the end of the story, oh no. Y'see after a couple of days I was abducted by a troupe of Romanian circus performers and during the years I was with them they taught me the trapeze, bareback horse riding and the re-soldering of faulty electrical appliances. But no, Dave. You just got back on the motorbike and went home.

At this point you unplug the worktop radio and throw it in the pedal bin. You'll probably sheepishly fish it out later but for the meantime it makes you feel better...

It's snowing even harder now so you put the telly on. See how insidious it is? See how the weather is making you do these things? Television! Inane gabble, meaningless twaddle, celebrities plugging their books, DVDs or shows. The public's embarrassing behaviour in their quest of fame. Ughhh! But the TV's on now and what's this? A man who looks like he is from Mars. His face has a strange orange hue. He has a bouffant hair style, he is caressing curios and estimating their value. Quick where's the remote, oh there you are, next channel please. Ahh this could be interesting, Julia somebody or other is walking the length of the Rhine in Germany. But ten minutes into the documentary she claims to have walked 50 kilometres that day over tortuous terrain, and she's not even perspiring nor a speck of dust marks her white T-shirt... You're sitting there with the fruit bowl on your lap, you start throwing grapes at the telly, all the while telling her you don't believe her. You switch channels again and it's a circus act. You call aloud to the radio in the pedal bin "Look at this Dave, could have been you, could have been you".

Channel 4 now. You're clutching at straws. It's a cookery programme. No! No! No! Quick Channel 5 - a fop telling us about interior design. No! Remote, remote, remote. ITV - DFS advert. Young saccharin couple cuddled up on one of their sofas. Irksome perfect looking children bouncing about on beds, was £899 now £499. Golden labrador on a hideous, gaudy, leather monstrosity. Was £4,000,000 now £299. Enough, enough and you're just about to throw the fruit bowl at the TV when DFS disappears and the word weather appears on the screen, heralding the arrival of a woman inappropriately dressed confirming that which we perceive beyond our window.

At this point you are close to tears. The elements have beaten you, or have they? Well not me, because when all else fails there is one thing that

will always pull me through. I put on an extra jumper, a hat, some gloves, my long overcoat and some wellingtons. I slip a torch into my pocket, ease the front door open and, bracing myself against the wind, begin to pick my way along Western Road. My progress is slow but eventually I pass Foreman's garage and I'm there.

It's Sunday so I knew it would be closed but that doesn't matter. I stand on the kerb and take in the full vista of the store's frontage. The door, the window arrangement, the gates to the open yard, everything. Adrenalin banishes the cold as I move closer to the main door, take the torch from my pocket and direct its beam through the window.

Look there are the bays housing the fittings and the batteries. double As, triple As, all the As, marvellous. And those gorgeous wooden floor boards echoing to the treads of tradespeople and villagers 6 days a week. Then my torch picks out the fabulous counter that seem to stretch for miles and miles as long and as bold as Blackpool Promenade. Amazing! And beyond that the key cutting area, and further still, fish tanks, pest control, everything... Ohhh Kent Aloominum, I love you. And all is right with the world all the while you are there.

## March 2011

I set off in the car with no particular purpose or destination. After a little while I came upon the Nurstead Church, Meopham, and, in that dream like state that was mine as I left home, I wandered through the churchyard stopping occasionally to read a crumbling gravestone.

Hmm? Peter T Waldecott. Born 1792 died 1857. I wonder if he was ancestor to my old English teacher, James H Waldecott. A glorious eccentric who was truly inspirational and whose love for the written word was contagious.

As I gazed at the headstone's flaking inscription I got to thinking about Mr Waldecott and recalled the day he retired. A day the whole school turned out to wish him well and the Headmaster presenting him with a gold fountain pen. Mr Waldecott was overwhelmed and, by way of a thank you, he wrote a poem and pinned it on the notice board.

I copied that poem and, amazing after all these years, still have that copy. Here is Mr Waldecott's "Thank you and farewell"

*Continued on next page*

### MR. WALDECOTT

O.K. , pay attention please  
Text books open, page thirty three  
Who threw that?  
Not the rubber, the chair  
Sit down Smith! ..... What d'you mean,  
it's not there

Blah, blah, blah, ramble on  
Right, that's Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth,  
all done  
Tomorrow we'll look at the works of  
O'Malley  
No he wasn't a poet, Brown,  
He fixed our telly

He fixed our toaster,  
He repaired our settee  
He invented the clothes line  
But no poetry

So you see Master Brown, there's always  
confusion  
If we don't pay attention and jump to  
conclusions  
Which means,  
To teach you a lesson, come out to the  
front  
And wear this big hat, with "D" ... "D" for  
dunce

Now it's come to my notice that those in  
the front  
Are nearer the front than those at the  
back  
So,  
Those at the back, come to the front  
And those in the front, go to the back  
But please avoid Brown in his conical hat

I think we've just time, to look at some  
maths  
Jones the swot  
Who always comes top,  
Answer this.

If "X" equals "Y", and "A" equals "B"  
And yellow and blue always make green  
How much would a car cost, "X", "Y" and "B"  
In yellow and blue, late forty-three

Oh, and by the way  
I'd just like to say  
The average age is nine, of you boys and  
girls  
But when I was your age, I think I was  
twelve

Now run along  
And tell your mum  
Old Mr Waldecott has finally gone

What,  
Off his head, sir?  
Straight to bed, sir?  
With vinegar and brown paper?

Good question, Palmer  
Here is the answer  
I'm not crazy, not mad, not "loco", insane  
It's just that..... well,  
I'm retiring today





April 2011

I enjoy poetry whether it's reading it, listening to a fine voice reciting it or attempting a few lines myself.

Actually it was a couple of lines from a poem that set me thinking recently. The poem is William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" and the two lines are

"The lamb misused breeds public strife,  
and yet forgives the butcher's knife".

Well William has got a point hasn't he?

Consider this: a family notice some sheep in a field. They stop the car and it's "Oh look kids, look at the lovely fluffy, wuffy sheep. Gambolling!".



"What's gambolling, Dad?"

"I don't know, it was a word in your pop-up picture book".

"Oh Daddy look at the ducky wuckies in the pond there. Can we give them some bread, can we Daddy, can we? Oh please".

"Alright, you can give the ducky wuckies Mummy's sandwichy wandwichy but be careful that she doesn't see you".

Ducky wuckies, sandwichy wandwichy. Little Princess on board. Special person on board. It's no wonder they turnout little \_\_\_\_\_. No Muriel, don't start, don't start ... So where were we? Are yes, the field... But look kids, in that other field. Cows munching grass, tails idly flicking at errant flies. Cows just sitting there, motionless, like figures from a model train set [Now that's better dialogue isn't? Yes, but it won't last].

"Are they real Mummy or are they plastic?"

"You are a silly boy Simon, of course they're real. Now does anyone have any other questions, sensible questions?"

Sophie puts her hand up "Yes I do, I have a sensible question. Why do those sheep have numbers painted on them, and the cows have pretty silver clips on their ears?"

"Well .... Well you tell them Mother"...

"Well, y'see, that's because they'll be electrocuted so we can eat them, like on those days Grandma comes for lunch or dinner".

"Hmm, so it's Grandma's fault then?"

"Yes it's all wicked old Grandma's fault, so to pay her back when she falls asleep in the armchair we'll paint numbers on her cardigan and wire her up to the mains. That will be fun won't it boys and girls"...



Of course parents would never say those things, they would make up a soppy magic numbers, silver clippy earrings story where everyone lived happily ever after. "Ding de ding. Ding de ding. Ahhhh." But is that the right thing to do, make up a softy, wofty story or should parents tell the children exactly how it is?

Let's face it, if you're a parent (and I'm not) you can't win. The child feels resentment when they discover you've deceived them but, if you do tell them the truth, you could deprive them of a magical experience.

I recall clearly how I felt when I spotted the wires giving movement to my heroes, Bill and Ben, on the original black and white television show "The Flowerpot Men". And my mother bursting into my room as I defaced the Flowerpot Men annuals.

"You never told me" I sobbed. "They're not real and you never told me".

And I'll never forget tearing every single page of the "Billy Bunter" annuals either. He wasn't an obese mischievous school boy at all. We was a middle aged actor, an imposter, posing as a school boy.



"You lied to me Mum. I hate you, I hate you" ....

Noddy never went anywhere in that little red and yellow car either. It was a cardboard carousel rotating behind him. I saw that same cloud and tree a million times. Noddy actually moved and I fell for it, took the whole lot in.



Tut. Noddy, Big Ears, Flowerpot Men, Billy Bunter,



all of 'em but, worst of all, my Mother deceived me...

But I admit it's been easy for me because I never married, never had children, never had to decide what's best for them. Now I fall asleep in the armchair with my mouth open, but there's no one there to paint numbers on my cardigan, no one there to wire me up to the mains...

Perhaps I've missed out on life? Perhaps it was never to be?

Ah well, let's revisit that field where we see the family return to their car, pick Grandma up on the way home and later, as they tuck into a hearty meal together, never give a thought to their morning.



## May 2011

Walking home to Western Road, from the bakers, I hear stumbling and a surprised cry. I look behind to see a woman face down on the ground, the contents of her shopping bag littering the pavement. I don't really know what to do. I look up and down the street but amazingly the street's empty. Come on Muriel you've got to do something. The woman is stirring, I eventually help her into a sitting position leaning against the Nat-West wall. She has a bump on her head, turning mauve, and her knees are grazed.

There is an agonising silence between us. Not only do I not know what to do, I don't really know what to say. The street is still empty. I am looking at her with a pained expression as if I am about to burst into tears. Not reassuring at all. I give her my handkerchief that she might apply it to her bump. She takes it from me and blows her nose.

At last a woman approaches, senses I'm useless in such situations and so immediately takes control. She is calm, reassuring and talks to the injured woman whilst at the same time checking her injuries. I realise there is something I can do. I pick up the spilt shopping and return it to its bag, and sheepishly place it at the wall beside the woman. The two women give me a cursory nod but I realise that's all I deserve.

Muriel you were useless, absolutely useless. I castigate myself all the way home. Supposing she had been bleeding to death Muriel, what would you have done then? Well I don't know, erm, a tourniquet I guess. You wouldn't have done that, you would have stood there helpless, pointing, saying "Oh no look at all that blood. Quick somebody help...."

Later, at home, drinking tea, it came to me. First aid! Yes that's it, learn first aid. Gain the knowledge, buy the equipment, take control in any accident situation... Right, first thing in the morning I'll go to the library and, what I can't glean from books there, I'll learn from publications in Waterstones. I've got book tokens, friends always give me book tokens. Oh what a great idea. Yessir!...

And that's what I did. Spent 3 hours each day for 4 days in the library and a whole day in Waterstones plus twenty-eight pounds. Then on the Saturday spent even more money in Lloyds Chemist on equipment, but saved a bit on a bargain rucksack in the Hospice shop to house everything. The plan was I would wear the rucksack at all times, prepared to snap into action at the first hint of an emergency. Naturally I would hand over to the professionals as soon as they arrived. What a wonderful feeling that would be though. The ol' blue light flashing, the ambulance screeching to a halt and me saying to the paramedics "I've stabilised him, he's all yours now". And I glance back at him before leaving; I see tears in his eyes, tears of gratitude and admiration...

Saturday morning, busiest time of the week in our lovely little village. Someone's bound to fall over. Better put the rucksack on and be out there. I stroll up to Shaktis, enter the shop and drag half the display shelf off with the huge rucksack, littering the floor with Kitkats, Crunchies, all manner of chocolate treats. I apologise for the mess I've made, clear it up, buy a paper and sit on the bench opposite, ready to attend my emergencies. I sit there for nearly an hour but my services are not required thus far. There were a couple of possibilities; the sound of breaks squealing up near the bank but I run up there and nothing. And just as I'm about to vacate the bench I hear a tinkling

of glass in the village hall car park behind me. I quickly investigate, finding a man and woman looking at the broken rear light reflector on the woman's car where the man had reversed into her vehicle.

Hurray, action at last. I address the woman first employing all I've learnt in my week's intensive training. "Ok just try to remain calm, sit in the vehicle and take deep breaths. Are you injured, if so where does it hurt?" The woman looks at me as if I am mad. The man enquires "Hang on a minute, are you one of those no win-no fee merchants?" I ignore him and speak to the woman again. "Do you have whiplash, are you allergic to penicillin?" She replies "I wasn't in the car at the time, I was just walking back to it when it happened". The man talks over me, addressing the woman "Look I'm in a real hurry", he offers her a twenty pound note and continues "Are you happy with that, it should be more than enough for a Fiesta reflector". She thanks him and he's gone.

I ask her if she's on any other medication. I'm rambling on, it's my first emergency, I'm nervous, so nervous it hasn't registered she wasn't even in the car. She's in the car now though, backing out, I'm still talking to her, I've spent a lot of money and time on the project, I'd like to use some equipment so I've got to ask her a few questions first. I'm walking along side her open window. "Headaches, stiffness, nausea. Any of those symptoms?" I'm calling after her as she merges into the High Street. "Nose bleeds, palpitations, swelling of the ...?" But she's gone and at the same time the pages of my newspaper blow up the street in her wake. Not a very successful morning so far so I decide I'll go home for lunch and patrol in the afternoon.

After lunch I put the rucksack back on but it seems heavier than first thing that morning. I'm tempted to take the blanket out but the golden rule of first aid is "Always keep the patient warm" so I decide the blanket stays. I'm ready to go, looking beyond the window into Western Road. A woman walks by slowly, she does not look to steady. I'm tempted to go out there and follow her but she speeds up and is lost from view. But then I realise that's the way. What? Well wait for someone to pass by who looks a bit shaky and follow them. Brilliant! And I didn't have long to wait either, because a couple of minutes later a chap hobbled past my front gate, wheezing, occasionally stopping and looking up to the heavens. That's it I'll follow him. He's bound to fall over. I'm excited now, I'm convinced this it. Right, check list Muriel. Iodine, tourniquet, coagulate, smelling salts. All present and correct, suh!

Then I'm off, following at a respectable distance. Fifty yards he starts to wobble, I move closer to him, he stops, looks round. I stand by the kerb as if I'm about to cross the road. He moves off, I follow him, he looks unsteady, I get nearer. He stops, looks round, stares at me. I do actually cross the road this time. He continues walking even slower. He's wobbling, swaying slightly. Go on, go on, over you go. He's teetering, he's going, he's going. I spring into action, run into the road to comfort him, first aid him - save him.

But I don't see the dozen club cyclists swing into Western Road then collide with me. And apparently it was only the double blanket that saved me.

June 2011

Spring, early summer; now's the time to tackle those jobs the winter created. This brings a sigh from husbands, partners, boyfriends when they are politely reminded of their promise "Yes I'll do that when the weather improves". Well it's improved chaps, so get cracking. And here's a poem to inspire you.

RELUCTANT HANDYMAN

He reached in his toolbox for a spanner, a wrench  
He moved sort of awkward then banged his head  
It was a drip at first and then a flood  
So he decided to use the hammer m'Lud.

To stop the leak, enquired the beak  
To club my dependent, cried the defendant

She gives me so many jobs the weekends have no fun In  
Painting, electrical and, worse of all, plumbing  
And how can I watch the snooker, the football, the tennis, the darts  
When I'm ringing round for replacement parts

The judge wiped his glasses, then blew his nose  
People in the courtroom, they all rose  
Then he read out the verdict with a terrible lisp  
Defendant not guilty, cathe dithmighted

There were gasps from the gallery when the verdict was read  
Then someone tipped paint over the defendant's head  
His suit was in ruins, he was in a rage  
A constable asked is that magnolia of beige

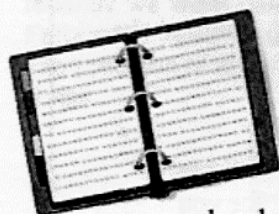
The judge declared the colour is beige  
And court's adjourned for five working days  
Give them time to mop the meth  
And me to clear the work from my dethk

Hoorahh they cried, let the holidays start  
Then someone produced a paint colour chart  
Look, you're wrong your honour it's not beige at all  
It's a new colour range, Edwardian fawn

The judge was embarrassed by the mistake he had made  
So he filled a bath with R White's lemonade  
And for the rest of his life that's where he stayed  
Thinging, thinging, thinging away.

## July 2011

It was nearly June already and what had I achieved? Nothing! I had had so many fine lofty ideas for the year ahead and so far hadn't realised any, so I resolved not to let any more precious time slip idly by. Nothing too ambitious, got to be realistic. Not a cure for malaria or a cross-channel charity swim. But I could do good work for the community and, when not thus engaged, to ensure that I do not fritter away the remaining hours I should gain knowledge through books, study and observation. Right I'll start tomorrow and keep an honest diary of the days, charting my progress... And here are those entries.



**MONDAY 6 JUNE:** Up early, washed and had breakfast, raring to go. Daphne phoned, she is making a cake for Hilda's birthday. We had a long discussion about Hilda and marzipan and I said Hilda was allergic to marzipan but Daphne did not agree... Lunchtime now, I'll have to start good work for community after lunch. Later sat in garden to let food settle. Read paper, started crossword, nodded off. Woke up, watered plants, filled wild bird feeders, hung half coconut from tree, went back to crossword. 7 DOWN "Inactive"? Hmm. Later Daphne phoned again, said she had changed her mind about cake, and would buy a goldfish instead. [NOTE. First phone call complete waste of time]. Started watching telly, don't know why I bother, only end up shouting at screen. Fell asleep in armchair, woke up late evening, made nightcap, went to bed with new book. "Fall of the Roman Empire". Trying to educate myself.

**TUESDAY 7 JUNE:** Woke up 4am. Light bulb crossword moment. 7 DOWN. Indolent. Yesterday's crossword completed. Got out of bed ready to seize the hour, oh and do a wee. Couldn't remember any of the book. A lot of those Emperors do sound the same don't they? Heard dawn chorus, put on bird song CD to learn to identify birds singing. After awhile was confused as to which was birds and which was CD. Couldn't be 100% sure but thought I heard the Dartford Warbler in my garden. Had a wash, ate some breakfast, planning constructive day ahead whilst drinking second cuppa. Couldn't think of any good work for community so decided to go to library, return Roman Empire book and take out one of Darwin's instead... Oh, perhaps pick up litter on the way there and back. That's community work isn't it? ... Return home with Darwin's theory book, six ice cream wrappers, two coca cola tins (crushed) and four cigarette cartons. Read 84 pages of Darwin by tea time. Lots of bugs and plants mentioned. Tried to convince myself I'm enjoying it. Did break off several times to read the Daily Mail and start



crossword. 16ACROSS. "To egg on"? Hmmm?... Fell asleep in armchair. Woke up 7pm completed crossword 16 ACROSS "Toast". Cooked late tea. One of Jamie Oliver's much publicised 30 minute meals.. Took me 3 hours and couldn't eat it as I put far too much salt in it. I'm still getting to grips with converting imperial to metric on my old scales. Watched Newsnight, shouted at politicians. Went to bed with Darwin book and jug of water to combat salt taste.

WEDNESDAY 8 JUNE: Woke 6am. Lights still on, Darwin book still open on floor. Couldn't remember a word I read. Must have nodded off. I'm definitely no anthropologist... Listened for birds. Nothing! Library closed today, will swap Darwin for something else tomorrow. Heard commotion outside in Western Road. Car bumped up on pavement causing obstruction on pavement and road. Wrote long, polite letter explaining the dangers of such action; put it in envelope to place it on windscreen, went outside car had gone. Daphne phoned. Did I know if Hilda is allergic to goldfish?... Planned the day whilst eating breakfast. Determined to do good community work today and drink in knowledge if there is time. Sorted out bric-a-brac and clothing, filled black sack with it and struggled to village hospice shop. Arrived exhausted and upset as porcelain statuette of Venus had fallen out of sack and broken her nose. Judy rummaged through the sack and was disparaging about its contents. She said in her rather loud am/dram voice "Shame you didn't pass a skip on the way here Muriel". She then held up Venus, lightly stroked where the nose once was and, playing to the gallery, said "Venus, goddess of love and light middleweight champion of Greece". I stormed out of the shop determined to deface posters promoting her next amateur production... Sulked for the rest of the day and out of spite didn't do any work for the community, didn't learn anything and ate a whole box of chocolates before I went to bed.

THURSDAY 9 JUNE: Woke 4am. Raging headache, felt sick. Drank lots of water, put bowl at bedside, eventually fell asleep... 10am Ate healthy breakfast. Muesli, natural yoghurt, nuts and raisins. Retrieved chocolate box from bin and trod on it several times. Nasty Mr Chocolate. Turned radio on, Radio 4's Woman's Hour for inspiration. Truly amazing woman made the point that she had helped hundreds of women simply by listening; and there was my inspiration. I took a postcard from the bureau and composed the wording "Female with sympathetic ear, if you need to talk just call me". I was so excited, at last a brilliant idea for me to do some good in the community. I asked Mrs Shatki if she would put it in prime window position straight away. "Of course Muriel"... I went home and waited for the phone to ring and didn't have long to wait either...





"Hello?"... "Hello is that your postcard in the window?"

"Yes, I'm listening".... "What are you wearing?"

"Well just casual clothes, why?"... "Are you in the bedroom?"

"Well I'm in the err, in the kitchen/diner I suppose you'd call it, yes, I'm in the kitchen/diner"...

"Kitchen/diner, casual clothes. Phhhh!"

Then he banged the phone down. How odd I thought, but then the phone rang again almost immediately.

"Hello?"... "Hello I'm responding to your advert".

"Well it's not really an advert, I'm doing good work for the community".

"Oh it's ok, I understand, got to keep it legal like, good idea"..

There followed a long pause where all I could hear was him breathing heavily. I thought perhaps he was nervous and I just waited for him to speak. Eventually he asked "How old are you? 20, 30,"

"I'm 70". There was an angry Errrr! Then he banged the phone down. And I got to thinking, how odd, there certainly are a lot of strange people out there. Well the calls went on continuously for the next hour. People, mostly men, talking at what seemed crossed purposes and with a strange fascination as to what I was wearing. Wierd!

And then a phone call from Linda; "Muriel you ol' chatterbox, I've been trying to get through for over an hour"... I said I was sorry and then went on to tell her about the postcard and the phone calls. "Why you silly old billy Muriel". She then explained probably what was happening and, although we laughed about it, I was embarrassed and a little upset so, as soon as Linda rang off, I unplugged the phone, ate a large bar of Galaxy and went to bed.

FRIDAY 10 JUNE: Went to Shakti's first thing to have postcard removed. Later returned Darwin book to library, bought cream doughnut in bakers, sat in my garden with cup of tea reading my diary. The week had been a failure. No community work, hadn't improved my knowledge or education. Fell out with Judy and demonstrated my naivety to Linda. Oh Muriel you are a hopeless case... And then guess what? From a tree top at the end of my garden, singing as if it were for me, the most wonderful bird song. The Dartford Warbler. Ahhh, isn't life wonderful.



In the library I trailed my finger across the spines of classic literature. Serried rows of masterpieces, the genius of women and men, long since gone, here briefly to leave works that live on. Bronte, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Shelley, Hugo, Rurial. Yes, Muriel Rurial. Why not?

And there was my next project. A novel hailed as a literary masterpiece by public and critics alike. A success similar to that of Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird". I was so excited I blurted out "I'll need paper, lots of paper" causing people to put fingers to their lips, "shushing" in unison...

Next stop, the post office for paper, pencils, in fact everything my creative energy requires... Later, to the woman behind the counter, "Yes that's six A4 pads, half a dozen pencils, four biros, two rubbers and a bottle of tippex." I half turned to address the impatient queue behind me "I'm writing a masterpiece". A young man leaning out from the queue calls out "What's it about then?" I don't know how to answer him, the wind of enthusiasm is knocked out of my sails.



There's an agonising silence broken eventually by a man in the queue clutching several road tax renewal documents. "Yeah come on, you've held us all up, bragging about a masterpiece, so tell us what it's about." Other people in the queue call out "Yeah what's it about then, this masterpiece?" This is echoed down the queue "Yeah what's it about then come on?"

I'm busking it now, thinking on my feet because they're angry, whipped up in spiteful mob fashion... "Well there's this man" - long pause now, interrupted by road tax person impatiently calling "This man, this man, go on". I continue "There's this man and he steals a loaf of bread. Oh it's set in France by the way, sorry I forgot to tell you that. Anyway he steals this loaf and what with one thing and another he ends up in prison for nineteen years".

A woman in middle of queue calls out "Ohh no not a prison book, there's loads of prison books. I suppose he tunnels his way out he" - I interrupt her "No it's not a prison book because he's

released and a good bishop saves his soul". A child in a pushchair starts crying; the mum who is following my synopsis quietens the child and I continue. "Well the man makes good, it's about redemption, lots of redemption in it. He buys a factory making jewellery, employs the locals treats them well, er, er, oh yes, and he cares for a child when the girl's mother dies". At this point the woman with the pushchair emits an "Ahhh" and hugs her own child. This throws me and I've lost my thread as a result. A deafening silence is broken as last when a man, wilting under the weight of his ebay dispatches calls out "Hang on a minute, your story, that's 'Les Miserables'. You've nicked that idea". There's a collective groan as the penny drops down the line of angry people. "Course that's Jean Valjean" they call out. "Yeah Jean Valjean". And fifteen pairs of eyes are trained on me, the imposter who needs the sanctuary of home in Western Road, so near yet so far...

Now, I've paid for the paper and other bits so I could leave the counter and slowly make my way towards the door, softly humming the haunting melody of "I dream a dream", hoping it might engender some sympathy. But it doesn't and I'm nudged and barged into the envelope and notebook shelves as my safe exit via the greeting cards is barred by "rogue tax and ebay" glaring menacingly. Eventually, having run the gauntlet of the unruly queue, I reach the door but, with my arms full of purchases, my predicament is obvious. Only one thing for it I think, I must wait until someone comes in then I can slip out as they enter. But I don't have to wait as a man stepping from the queue, emboldened by justice, a man elderly in years but younger in attitude, handsome in presence, radiating happiness, holds the door open for me, smiling a beatific smile as he does so. And as I made my way home I could not help but consider the similarities between him and Monseigneur Bienvenu, the Bishop Digne. Ah well perhaps I'll leave masterpieces to the genius of others and give this stationery to the charity shop..

## Les Misérables



## September 2011

I blame Shirley. If she hadn't given me those book tokens in the first place I would never have gone there. Oh I know she meant well but that's where it all began, the book tokens... "There we are Muriel, an early birthday present" [3 months early! Must have been given to her or she won them]. "Thank you Shirley, very kind of you". Ramble on, pleasantries, pleasantries, chitter chatter, bye bye. At home I put the tokens in a drawer and forgot all about them, then a couple of weeks later I came across them whilst looking for something else. As I held them I had a light bulb moment. Why don't I jump on a bus and go to Bluewater, Waterstones. It could be fun, an adventure.

Well following a brief phone call Hilda gave me her copy of the bus timetable and smiled as she wished me "Good Luck" in that mocking sort of way she has, clearly a legacy of her years as a bookmaker's clerk at Catford dog track. At home I studied the timetable to plan my day. The mistakes as early as page two did not augur favourably for the journey. From 10.51 to 13.51 journeys, according to the timetable, were only possible by time machine. Even so, undaunted I would optimistically wait the prescribed stop for the good ship 308 to arrive at the appointed hour then transport me and fellow passengers to all parts north and west enroute to Bluewater.

At 09.40 we mustered. In fact people were mustering, late musterers seconds before the bus left, but on the dot of 09.51 we lurched off. Half a dozen of us, a motley crew gazing at life given a different perspective viewed the dusty windows of a 308... Why were we there, what was the purpose of each individual journey. For instance the man opposite who had cut himself shaving? His stained red collar testament to clumsy ritual. His purpose I could not speculate, but me I was given some book tokens. I was bound for Waterstones. And fellow passengers? Well could be any reason they were my travelling companions. Anyway wonder no more Muriel, just take in the ride.

Wrotham coming up, then crossing the M20 we climbed steeply, occasionally glimpsing fantastic views through the breaks in the trees. Wonderful, wonderful but then to quote an old adage "After the Lord Mayor's show" comes Vigo. That explosion of homes in the middle of a wood where I imagined at any moment we would come upon a check-point and be asked by armed guards for "YOUR PEPPERS PLISS". But there were no guards, no people boarding or alighting either. I scribbled on Hilda's timetable next to Vigo "Unnecessary pointless detour". Perhaps I was being a little uncharitable but my bottom was protesting in revolt against Arriva upholstery.

A few miles later, passing Meopham Green and Meopham Station, I mumbled to my reflection "We're on our way now". But no, we turned off again. Istead Rise! Twinned with Higgledy Piggledy Town. GR783QR. Nobody got on, nobody around. Everyone's gone to the moon.

But worse was to come. Morrisons, Gravesend, Northfleet and then guess what? Dying of thirst, desperate for a wee, just me, the driver and blood red collar, we drove into a town. A ramshackle collection of buildings. Tumbleweed capering between abandoned vehicles. Failed commercial



enterprise clad in metal shutters. Swanscombe! We stopped there briefly allowing my sole companion to leave the bus. He thanked the driver, looked back at me, offered a wan smile then he was gone and we were on our way again. Five minutes later, true to our schedule, we arrived at Bay 5 Bluewater. One hour and a quarter since leaving Borough Green. I thanked the driver, it seemed custom, but felt there should have been a band playing and a welcoming committee as the journey was so long and arduous. Priority then, I needed a well earned cup of coffee, caffeine fix, before anything else.

Into the actual mall, I grabbed one of those mall guides to check out the lay of the land. Ah there we are, Waterstones and lots of coffee places to choose enroute. There's one, looks good, Coffee Republic. That'll do. "Yes what can I get you?". "Coffee please". "Mocha? Latte? Americano? Espresso? Double Espresso? DeCaff? Small? Regular? Large? What?" Her expression says stupid customer. "Yes!". "Yes what d'you want them all?" "No I just want a coffee and two of toast, thank you". "We don't do toast. We do flapjacks, muffins, frangipane, shortbread, crisps"... A long pause whilst deciding on the least worse option. The barista is not only impatient she is sarcastic enquiring if I am with "someone who can help me".

I don't want confrontation but she's pushed me too far now and I'm on the offensive. I look at her name badge and respond "You need some people skills Francesca. D'you know they would never ever speak to a customer the way you do in Kent Aloominum". "Kent Aloominum? I've never heard of Kent Aloominum". "Well you jolly well should have. You could certainly take a leaf out of their books. It's the best store in the whole wide world; better than any retail outlet in the entirety of Bluewater. They stock everything from goldfish food to half inch copper elbows. From two-way, three gang electrical fittings, to - "..... At this point she ignored me and turned to the customer "tutting" behind me so I made my way from the coffee area and joined the throng of people moving like cattle past shop fronts tempting them with posters declaring "Sale", "50% off" and "Special Offers". Gimmicks Kent Aloominum would never stoop to.

Ohh I had to get out of there, back to good ol' Borough Green. And not on the 308 from Bay 5 either.... "Hello Shirley, I'm ringing you to ask a favour. Well it is your fault indirectly I'm in this mess really." Blah, blah, blah. Waffle, waffle, waffle. "Ah thanks Shirley. OK I'll wait outside John Lewis in the car park below the cafeteria. See you soon then, bye.

Well I hadn't bought a book but reckoned I could always pick one up in the charity shop. And the tokens I could pass on to Anne, it's her birthday in October. She's always buying hoppity poppity, fluffy wuffy nursery rhyme books for her grandchildren...

Half an hour later Shirley arrived, picked me up then dropped me back in Borough Green. A simple ending to a very different day.

And the dish run away with the spoon.

## October 2011

I know I've touched on the subject before, some time ago, but the situation now is far worse so I'm obliged to mention it again. I refer of course to a trend that mirrors today's aggressive society. Monstrous four wheel drive vehicles with model names such as Mitsubishi Warrior, Nissan Invader, Ford Thunder and the latest example, spotted in a Culverstone garage, the Mitsubishi Barbarian. Huge vehicles designed for the wild west of America, transporting cattle that had strayed beyond the prairie, ie. not something one drives to Shatki News for a bottle of milk and half ounce of Old Holborn.....



Oh how I wish some manufacturers would respond with vehicles that represent a bygone age of kindness and humility, not the "every man for himself" attitude prevalent in today's society. Let us see on our roads the Volkswagen Blancmange, Renault Window Box, Vauxhall Pixie, Peugeot Hand Knitted Jumper. "After you sir". "No you go first, I insist". "Awfully kind of you". "Don't mention it old chap". "Perhaps one of us should go through, I think we're causing a tailback". "Oh they don't mind, nobody's irate. This is the 1950s after all". "By jove you're right. Look some people are out of their cars and brewing tea on little stoves, while others are playing Monopoly and chess". "Children are picking wild flowers and skipping. Ahhh".



Of course I'm exaggerating, it's what older people do. Our affectionate recollection distorts the physical truth. But didn't policemen maintain law and order with a torch, a whistle and truncheon? Footballers earned four pounds ten shillings a week. People said please and thank you. There were no traffic jams or tower blocks, and tea was brewed in a pot, brewing under a cosy.

Yes, yes, that's all very well but now we have the internet, mobile phones, skype, a technology revolution. That's progress surely? But good friends of the Borough of Green, in the Kent Downs (job lot of signs sixty quid) Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, have we come so far? Six numbers are not enough, we want the bonus ball too. Please forgive the lottery analogy, but it's true, for some £46 million is not enough. "Ohh why couldn't we have won it last week, it was £158 million then. £46 million soon goes y'know. By the time you've given the kids something, bought a big house, a decent car, personalised plates, well it'll be gone in no time".

So are we moving inexorably towards chaos or is this simply another cycle? Oh I know we won the cricket recently but that hardly



compares with the genius of Brunel who, gentlemen that he was, always kept his hat on. But they were different those heroes of yore. Suffragettes, engineers, anthropologists. Not actors, presenters, footballers, chefs. And one imagines that while the actors and chefs are fleeing the burning building, Emmeline "P" and Isambard "B" would be carrying children to safety... I do acknowledge there are modern day heroes, it's just that they are severely outnumbered. Such is the earth's growing population, there are just not enough heroes to go round. In fact even with six numbers, the bonus ball, a top hat and chaining oneself to some railings, a favourable outcome is still not guaranteed.

So what is the answer? The answer is signs. More job lot signs. Motivational, inspirational, throughout the land.

"Borough of Green - Home of the Vauxhall Cotton Bud  
Driven Sedately. Thank you."

"Borough of Green - Twinned with Toytown"

Signs like these, encouraging exemplary behaviour. Signs not in just this country but worldwide.

Well I think this idea is a winner and, before your scoff, remember they laughed at Brunel when he proposed building the Rotherhithe Tunnel. Incidentally, after the success and benefits of the Rotherhithe Tunnel, his detractors, with egg on their faces, maintained they were only laughing at his hat not the idea of a route under the Thames.....

NB Muriel is away this month.  
Away with the fairies!



It was no good, I had been in denial for too long. I knew I had to face up to reality, meet the problem head on. All those phrases applied. Self-motivational clichés. Grasp the nettle, seize the hour, onward and upward, he ain't heavy he's my brother, I did it my way, jailhouse rock, living doll. Whoa there Muriel, you've gone to far now, whoa.

But I was excited, I had identified the problem. Next, formulate a plan, a solution. Well the problem facing me, and millions of others, was the economic downturn. We were all affected. Well not all of us; not Russian oligarchs or footballers; Lady GaGa and Novak Djokovic. But the masses, we are ones suffering from the double dip, tumbling FTSE, crashing DOW, falling NASDAQ disaster.

It's a sad ol' country and western song played out for real. Life imitating art. "Now folks number one in Nashville, Vince Cable on steel guitar, George Osborne on drums, with their smash hit "Diesel six pounds a gallon now". But it's not just fuel, it's all energy, it's food, it's childcare, it's - — it's everything!

So this is how I took up the challenge of coping during a recession. First thing I did, put on a recording of Frank Sinatra singing "My Way". I sang along to it, an egg whisk my microphone, then as the music faded, on my knees, bathed in perspiration, in that state of high emotion I was able to pledge abstinence from one of my expensive demons. Chocolate and sweets! There that's probably three hundred pounds saved already. Excellent!

Food: I recognised as a huge expense, therefore with clever planning it could be an area for huge savings. How? Obvious! Grow my own. So some of the money I saved on the sweets, I spent on seeds. All manner of seeds. Tomato, lettuce, runner beans, potatoes, everything. And in two days of a planting, sowing frenzy, it was done. All I had to do was to wait for the sun and rain to put the finishing touches. I noted the seeds cost £80 - but with the sweets' savings I was still £220 up. Genius Muriel, genius... Cakes next. I spend far too much on cakes. They're a delightful treat, a reward but, thanks to Northern Rock and sub prime gangsters, my passion for cakes was a luxury I could no longer indulge.

But two days into that pledge of abstinence I was tested. My bread bin was empty, I had to go to the bakers. The bakers: that paradise for the senses. Sight, sound, smell, touch. You see a cream doughnut, you hear yourself ordering it. You smell that semi-erotic fusion of aromas. You feel its glorious shape filling the paper bag. Could I resist it? Could I calmly order a large wholemeal loaf then resist the cake temptation? Large wholemeal please, thick sliced".

She turned away, plucked a loaf from the rack for slicing. I tried not to look at the cakes. It was agony but I had to be strong. And then she turned towards me and spoke, the worst possible collections of words, arranged in perfect seduction. "ANYTHING ELSE FOR YOU?". I pressed my lips tightly shut, I tilted my head towards the ceiling, shut my eyes. I felt a little faint, I was swaying slightly. I heard a distant babble of voices and then, at last, I replied "No that will be all thank you." I felt the tension drain away from me, I walked home to



Western Road, strong, proud. No cakes for a year, I reckoned a saving of at least £200 per annum, making an estimated saving so far of £420. Brilliant!...

Energy saving next. Gas! Winter's biggest villain. He of the £100 quarterlies. Easily solved this one. Wear extra clothing, heating on low, oh and not forgetting a hat, or two in extreme weather. Apparently we lose 40% of our body heat through the top of our head. Which is why no bald person ever conquered Everest. There that's another couple of hundred saved. Total savings so far £620 - Wow!...

Another drain on cash strapped resources is electricity. The price of electricity has increased at an alarming rate and, to rub salt in the wounds, we have to read our own meters now. Either that or pay an exorbitant estimated bill. So I decided to have only one light lit in the house at any one time and, where ever possible, use my wind-up torch (a gift from Friends of the Earth). Might save £50 - that way. Savings would then stand at £670 - yes!

D'you know when I reckoned that magical figure of £670 - I was, to quote elated football managers, "Over the moon Gary" and yet there was something that still did trouble me. It was the letter we are afraid to open, the ringing telephone we can't bring ourselves to answer. The love that dare not speak its name - Kent Aloominum! My passion, my extravagance, my vice. I was faced with a moral dilemma. Even though I had saved £670 - could I reconcile myself to the denial of food, gas, electric, cakes and sweets all the while I continued to purchase items from Kent Aloominum. Items I don't really need. Things I buy for the sheer joy of being in there - I spoke to the self-portrait of Van Gogh hanging above my mantelpiece. I felt an affinity with him; a tortured genius. I often consulted him. I whispered softly "I love Kent Aloominum, Vince. It is my sunflowers, my field of Dutch peasants. You understand don't you?" His eyes, sad china blue, mirrored my pain. Yes he understood, pleading with me, by expression, to never abandon the Aloominum massive. "Thank you Vincent, thank you".



So my mind was made up. I would continue to frequent that mecca of hardware goods. Tread those hallowed aisles of stock, but - but I resolved still to adhere to my money saving regime. But could I survive such a Spartan existence? Well there was only one way to find out. I turned the boiler off. No heating or hot water. I wore two pairs of tights, four cardigans, one, sometimes two hats. I turned all lights and appliances off, except the radio and kettle. I had my wind-up torch, some PG tips and several packets of Rich Tea, left over from when I was cavalier with biscuits, before the financial gloom, when only a chocolate McVitie would do, or a KitKat or a Penguin and all else was consigned to a bin or the dark recesses of a cupboard. I reasoned that punishing myself with Rich Tea might assuage my conscience while I continue spending "you know where".



But living like that was purgatory and on that fifth day, on a freezing cold morning, dipping the last biscuit into a glass of water (all tea bags gone), I resigned myself to the fact that I may not be able to continue in that way any

longer. And then, from the depths of despair, a flash of inspiration. I would inspect my vegetable garden and if, from the seeds I planted, no vegetables were visible, I must take that as a sign that I should abandon such folly.

Needless to say, half an hour later I was rushing home with a bar of Cadbury's Whole Nut, two cream doughnuts, a packet of McVities' Chocolate Digestives, box of PG Tips, oh and an outside tap and some sandpaper.



## The Robin

A little robin flew round and round,  
And round and round, and round and round  
Then suddenly fell to the ground



The Fairy Queen looked sad and cried  
Convinced her little friend had died  
The pixies and a stray giraffe  
A buffalo in an old tin bath  
All joined the Queen's lament  
Then the lion roared and off he went  
Returning soon with his bestest friend  
The eminent Doctor Edward Mend



Who promptly said "I'll waive my fee  
I'll also wave my handkerchief"



And all at once the bird revived  
So they carried the doctor shoulder high

Hurrah, hurrah, yelled the crowd  
As the procession passed through the town  
And the robin flew round and round  
And round and round, and round and round.



## December 2011

I lit aromatic candles, I turned the lights off, I lay on the floor, my head on a thin paperback, in the classic Alexander Technique position. The faint whiff of sandalwood, the candles' spectral glow, I should be floating on a cloud of serenity, my mind empty, negative thoughts banished. Suddenly there was a loud clatter at my letterbox, ruining the mood I was attempting to create. I should have ignored it, let the letterbox rattle. It can't be important, leave it Muriel, leave it.



I closed my eyes again, took in deep breaths of sandalwood and lingering aroma of chip fat from my tea time fry up. Trying to empty my mind but it's racing all over the place and to make matters worse keeps returning to the letterbox and what important communiqué awaits me there. Don't get up Muriel, don't get up. I must, I must, I can't stand it any longer. Reaching the letterbox I find it wedged open with several pizza leaflets protruding half in and half out, allowing heat to escape and offering a clear indication to burglars that "Nobody's at home"...

I'm really angry, the mood is ruined, I've wasted fifteen pounds on the Alexander book, seven pounds on candles and then what do I do, I start reading the leaflets, looking at the pizzas. I don't even like pizzas! I'm so cross with myself for doing that, I rip them into tiny pieces and throw them in the bin. Well not all of them, in my temper lots go on the floor which I have to pick up with the dustpan and brush.

I snuff the candles and put the television on. Gardening, cooking, dancing, football, reality, panel games. Take your pick from the five terrestrial channels if, like me, you don't have a dish or computer. No thank you, so I go prospecting across the radio channels. It's mostly phone-ins or music we've heard a thousand times, or on the rare occasions there maybe a quality programme, but in this instance no quality programme to be heard, just a man waffling on about safe investments. What does he know? It was him we listened to in the past, before we queued outside Northern Rock clutching our passports, watching noughts falling from the page.

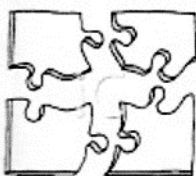
Ah well I'll watch the dancing, but after ten minutes I can't stand it any longer. Celebrities prancing about to the orchestrated cries from the audience, no thank you, I'm turning it off and my mind's made up. When they switch to digital next year I won't be buying a new telly and, what's more, I'll spend the licence wisely in Kent Aloominom and Shakti's sweet emporium. I might add in conversations I've had with other people there will be many more following suit. We'll be the analogue anarchists. I think I'll wear a beret, Doctor Marten boots and thick bright red lipstick. My placard will declare "DIGITAL - NOT AT ALL". Daphne and Hilda said that they won't support me on this issue, remarking they felt I was a troublemaker, quoting the warning notice I had on my bin recently for not recycling. Well the ice age, bronze age, stone age, it's



all cycles and to quote a succinct Americanism "What goes around, comes around" and climate change is no exception. Oh just remembered, must have bright laces on the Doc Martens. Apparently that means hard core anarchist. Yes I'm quite looking forward to it. Might even get a mention on Newsroom South East. Nice touch that, featured on the very medium I'm rejecting.

Anyway to go back to the beginning, the reason I was trying to bring calm into my life is so that I may enter into the spirit of Christmas. Christmas is indeed a joyous occasion, a time we celebrate the birth of Christ and that I most certainly will do but - but it's all the other stuff that gets me in a "Bah Humbug" mood, Well for a start I'm not really enamoured of children. I remember still that incident when I said to Stella's grandson Timothy, a precocious whotsit, I said "And how old are you Timothy?". He glared at me and said "Seven!". Quick as a flash I replied "When I was your age I was eight". Well the attendant company all laughed at his expense which prompted darling Timothy to kick me in the shin which left a bruise there for weeks. But it wasn't just that incident, Timothy merely compounded my attitude towards children. Yes, yes I know they're not all like that but -...

Animals too, not keen on them either. Smelly, furry things trying to lick us, or worse. No thank you, in fact I shudder now sometimes to think I had a cat once. Then there's sentimental films and cartoons. Worthless presents (oh we better buy him/her something). Rip off crackers. TV repeats. Push and shove, everyman for himself. And worse than that, worse than all that put together ... Jigsaw puzzles! Thousands of fiendishly interlocking pieces of patterned plywood. Hours of painstaking, time consuming effort to replicate the hideous picture on the box housing the demon gift. BAH HUMBUG!



Of course all this may change if I can perfect the Alexander Technique before Christmas. If not I may sit behind the street door waiting for the leaflet distributor to put his hand through the letter box again, then I'll grab hold of him and detain him at knife point over Christmas. Sit him at the dinning room table in front of a 10,000 piece jigsaw puzzle, depicting meat pies, not pizzas. And he won't be allowed his liberty until it's completed.

Ah well it might not be such a bad Christmas after all....

Merry Christmas