

Tuesday 29 November 2016, Lower Otter Valley with David Buss

"RUSSIAN ROULETTE AND REDEMPTION"

It all started so well. Smug, from our environmentally sensitive journey to the start of the walk by bus, David led us off at a brisk pace, as he had a train to catch. Well, a bus actually. There was the most beautiful clear blue sky, from which a late November, and surprisingly warm sun shone down on us, as we headed south from Newton Poppleford along the west bank (not that one) of the Otter, towards Colaton Raleigh and Otterton.



We enjoyed outstanding views across the Otter Valley to the west, vying with each other to identify familiar landmarks: East Budleigh church and village sitting in the hill folds, Bickton College, the obelisk; and to the east, the cliff tops of High Peak and Mutters Moor, and presumably, the sea, although we couldn't see it.



Then it happened. Arriving at Stantyway Farm, just half a mile south of Otterton, the group gathered around the entrance to the recreation ground, while our leader asked questions to anyone who cared to listen. Just what were those structures? White, painted wooden frames 5 inches square, planted 8 yards apart, with a cross-member to join the uprights together at the top, 8 feet from the ground, imitating Stonehenge. It seemed local custom was for fishermen to use these frames to hang their nets on to dry. Well, I for one, and I was the only one, was mentally wrestling with this extract from the "Round Britain Quiz", when a lady and her dog appeared through the gate and engaged me in conversation about the history of the Recreation Ground and its benefactor, George Northcott (not Orwell), who donated the land to the village in 1984. Beguiled by her intimate local knowledge, I decided that she would be a suitable subject for, "The Listening Project": ordinary people with a tale to tell. If you missed the programme, this dear lady, let's call her Gladys, had, once upon a time, owned the Kings Arms Public House in Otterton. In the name of exciting radio, I deliberately provoked her, by asking what she thought of what the latest owners "had done to the pub". As I hoped would be the case, there was no stopping her.

"It's not a pub anymore, they've ripped the heart out of it", she erupted.

"You're right, I agree with you", I encouraged her.

"My daughter came down to visit, and her and her husband went in for two Lasagne and a bottle of wine. Guess how much that cost?"

I didn't hesitate. "£25"

You must be joking, she chastised me.

"Alright, £40", I ventured.

She paused, and then with a mixture of disbelief, distain and disgust she spat out the words, "Seventy three pounds!" "Would you believe that?"

"That's outrageous", I concurred. Spinning on my heels, throwing my hands in the air and turning round, to see..... No one! We wished each other well; she extricated her dog from the hedge, who trotted off in the direction of the village. I had been abandoned.

If you know Stantyway cross-roads, you will be aware that there is a choice of four routes and 50 yards away, a fifth route. Keep calm. This is not a time for Russian roulette. Instead, put your amazing intelligence quotient to good use. How difficult could it be to decide which path they had taken, and catch them up? Put aside those self doubts that they had deliberately crept away, while I was talking, because they wanted to be rid of me. Clinging to my self-belief, I dismissed the route on which we had arrived at this point; why would they retrace their steps? No. What about the road that my interlocutor and her dog had taken? Why would the group return to Otterton? What could tempt them? Certainly not the pub! No. That left three possibilities. Ninety degrees to the west, to the coast via Monks Wall and Ladram Bay. Hmmn. A definite possibility, but would make the walk to our destination at Budleigh too long, for our Leader to catch his bus. So, no. By skipping down Stantyway Lane, round the corner, to the top of the hill, I would be able to see them, surely? And that would be a good path to our destination via Colliver Cross! Five minutes later, there was no sign of even the slothful laggards traditionally bringing up the rear. Now, my research concluded, I set off confidently along route five, the track that is Lea Lane, with splendid views to the coast, and along, and along, and along..... Until I reached that point where the path turns sharply to the right. That's far enough, I thought.

They must have taken a different path. Either a sixth unbeknown to me, or what about that route to Ladram that I had dismissed? Indecision was getting a grip on me. Nothing for it but to bury my pride and seek assistance. By the time I had returned to the scene of the Group's desertion, found my phone, and turned it on, Jon was ringing me (or was it my neck he was wringing?). A brief conversation ensued, during which Jon relayed the message that he had been told that my mobile would not be switched on, because "he never has his mobile switched on". David intervened, and once I'd bribed him to tell me the route they had taken, where they were, and would they wait, I was on my running way. Yes, you've guessed, it was Lea Lane, that I had given up on; top marks for decision making, but let down badly by appalling lack of conviction.

As I gathered pace, I could hear the referee's whistle, and finally, putting on a spurt for Stella, who was posing as the paparazzi, I entered the fray somewhat sheepishly. Predictably, a red card was issued to me; equally so, was the complete lack of sympathy offered. At that point I didn't dream that it would not only be my pride that would be sharply hurt, before the end of the walk.



The scene was Colliver Lane, and I was deep in conversation with Jon regarding cutting edge research into the use of neutron scattering to separate polymer molecules, and failed to anticipate a bramble branch whipping towards my face that had been set in train by one of the group, walking in front of me. I made it to the conclusion of the walk with judicious use of a blood splattered handkerchief to my face. Worse was to come. Lunch was decreed in that new café in Budleigh, the one with "London style and a Devon vibe". Seething with rage, resentment and revenge I shared a lunch table with my perpetrator, and felt rather pleased with myself.

Chris Buckland

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