

DIARY 2021/22

December 31st – Friday

It is the end of the year as we know it. By the time you read this we may well be in another year, which would be good, but I do not want to tempt fate. I will cautiously wish you all a very Happy New Year and hope for the best.

Well, I could have hung up my pen and left it at that and perhaps I should have, you may say, dear reader, but then you would not have discovered what a rip-roaringly busy day it was. I presume that it had much to do with the weather and some to do with the day that it was but once again we had to wait until into the afternoon before The Cove started to stir.

After Tuesday's record day I had rather given up hope of it returning to such heady busyness again this week. I was concerned for our pasties and bread volumes remaining untouched but now I should start to worry about running out before the end of tomorrow, especially white sliced bread that I just noticed is looking a bit thin on the shelf. No one is delivering tomorrow, as you might expect.

Somehow or other I managed to key in the last few items of stock count. I had quite forgotten to count the swimsuits and shorts in the shop and boxed those off during the quietness of the morning. During the rest of the day, piecemeal, I loaded the numbers into our inventory system, fitting it in between serving customers and ensuring pasty continuity.

The latter is becoming something of an art form. You do not want pasties languishing and drying out in the warmer for very long but you also do not want people waiting, else they may not come back. Part of the trick is identifying the precise moment that the wave of pasty eating momentum breaks, after which the orders come thick and fast and the grumpy shopkeeper needs to be on his toes with a continuous cycle of pasty heating going on behind him. I think that there was something similar going on at the Sennen Cove Café next door as they had queues for most of the afternoon.

I mentioned the weather as a factor in our busyness, but it was not that different from yesterday. There was still low cloud and varying degrees of haziness in the bay, which allowed the occasional glimpse of Cape. The main difference is that it was a much brighter grey than the day before and it is surprising how much that little tweak raised the mood. The mist came back with a vengeance later in the afternoon, after we closed, and we could hardly see the big beach after that. From our business point of view, we were quite happy with that, thank you very much.

Whether we were busy or not, and we were busy, The Cove from end to end was filled with visitors, ramblers and promenaders. Many have discovered that the Land's End attraction is closed and some are at a loss what to do, especially as the beach is out of bounds for most of the day with the tide. Quite what the evening will looked

like, I would not like to hazard a guess but I am sure that the OS was exceedingly busy despite its bookings only policy.

I have backed out of public house going for the time being. For one, we have Mother to think about. I do miss the quiz, for sure, although I doubt very much that it misses me. For me, not going out is not a huge problem; I am quite happy slouching around at home in a totally non-social manner – as distinct from anti-social. However, I found myself discussing this with a young man who chefs next door and it did strike me that it is his generation and age group that I feel for. They are the ones that should be out and about enjoying themselves with gay abandon and they cannot, at least not responsibly. I know that tonight he had intended to have some fun down at the OS but has demurred on the basis that we are far too busy in The Cove just now. He is such a sensible young man and deserves much better.

Gosh, that was a bit serious, and I have not even started drinking yet, let alone reached the maudlin stage.

Talking of which, time presses on, so I had best get started as I would hate to meet the new year completely blessed with sobriety. I do hope, dear reader, that you had an equally pleasant night in whatever you did with it and greeted the new year, whenever that might be for you, with lightness of heart and vigour of purpose. Simply put: Happy New Year.

December 30th – Thursday

Alright, hands up for soup. You were right and I was wrong. Choughs do exist. Today is a day so momentous that every year after today will come with the optional suffix AC, Anno Chough. I have seen the light, or rather, I had seen the chough, two of them to be precise and they were not cavorting with unicorns and I was sober – to a degree.

It was halfway through the morning when one of our regular visitors stopped by with W, an old dog chum. He had come in for a newspaper but substituted it for beer when he discovered that we did not have any, the visitor that is, not W the dog. He excused himself after paying, telling me that he had to take a call from his wife but would wait outside the shop just in case there was some additional shopping required. He came back in to tell me that he had been advised to skirt around the old hotel block and not go across the front so as not to disturb a couple of choughs resting on the pipework there.

I have met the wife on a few occasions and she did not strike me as any sort of lush, taken to imbibing early in the morning. I did ask, to be sure, whether she had said that the choughs were accompanied by a couple of unicorns and perhaps a faun or two, but he said not. I explained that I had never seen a chough, not ever, not even once and therefore regarded them as a mythical creature that customers taunted me with sightings of. I let the moment pass and bade farewell and good luck to my

customer but he returned a few moments later to say that if I wanted to see the choughs in the flesh and open my eyes to a whole new world, I should follow him because they were still on the hotel pipework and in plain view from down in The Cove.

Dismissing the fleeting memory of being asked to view the blue goldfish in the toilets at school by the older boys when in my first year, I followed our customer to just outside the Lifeboat station. I had the foresight to bring with me the shop binoculars, which are quite powerful but compact. Sure enough, even with the naked eye, I could see that these were no ordinary jackdaw of which we have a bounteous quantity in the area. They were far bigger for a start and when I had the binoculars on them the beak and feet were a different colour. I cannot say they were red because at that sort of distance my colour blindness is marked but I had seen enough to be quite, well, chuffed, to be honest.

Had I seen them on my own, particularly after an evening on the beer, I may have doubted my own eyes, so I was grateful that they had been pointed out to me. I shall now wait until someone spots one and has the unicorns pointed out to me.

We had to wait until the afternoon to see any action at all in The Cove. Again, the weather was uninspiring but a little better than yesterday; I could just about see Cape through the mist. It was probably as well because the pasties were very late in arriving, – completely flummoxing me in my morning routine – a product of everyone ordering in abundance to cover the bakery's closed days. We had nearly 100 pasties, which I fretted about, seeing the empty street for half a day.

With the arrival of the afternoon came a better, bigger crowd of people, although they were certainly not as hungry as the crowd we had in on Tuesday; I suspect that was a flash in the pan. Many had come down to see the sea state and at near high water it did not disappoint. Earlier on it had looked a bit calmer than of late but it rather seems it was just saving itself for the tide. One man asked if the tide would be coming in any higher. It was already up against the dunes on the southern end of the beach. I told him that it was going out, theoretically, but not to expect much beach any time soon as the relentless waves would keep it high for a few hours more. It was obviously too high for some, and I sold some socks and flip flops because of it.

At least I had enough to do today that I did not have to resort to shredding any documents. That particular gap was filled by finishing off the stock count of hooded sweatshirts that I had been putting off and the fridge magnets and jewellery, which I had forgotten. I also decided that I did not have to charge up the batteries for the Christmas tree lights. I had been alternating the job on the four batteries each day but reasoned, even if it had been a little grey today they were probably good for another twenty four hours.

The Missus had suggested that we purchase a spare solar panel and battery kit and attach them to the other lights out there. They failed on the first day with insufficient

charge from their much smaller solar panel and no ability to charge the battery separately. The main problem with that is we need the correct connectors and just by chance I found some on the Internet that looked like they might do the job, perhaps with a bit of modification. Unfortunately, the company is based in Spain and a number of reviewers had noted problems with importing and delivery. I took the plunge and tried them anyway. The invoice duly arrived today with the items apparently in the machinery of the import and export system and on their way, eventually. Clearly, there are some huge hurdles to jump in the efforts to get the small components to me and the invoice has a page of legal assurances for the authorities including the one below.

“Annexes II and III of the R/CE 1236/2005 L-200 of 30-07-2005 and its modifications, on the trade of certain products that can be used to apply the death penalty or to inflict torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, are NOT included.”

I am not altogether sure what to make of this. Either the components I have ordered are considered exempt from the death and torture bit or they are just not bothering with it. I would hazard that the small lengths of wire wrapped, say, around my little finger and the ends pulled tight would probably hurt very much. I do not know if I should say something as I would like to avoid the risk of Special Branch knocking on my door in the middle of the night but on the other hand, I would very much like the connectors. If the authorities are now monitoring this page on the strength of my purchase, I promise not to inflict torture on anyone with them, although I reserve the right to change my mind should anyone else get shirty about wearing masks in the shop.

Must be time for my lie down.

December 29th – Wednesday

I seem to just tumble through my mornings and trust that my luck holds out that it all ends with me opening the shop on time. The ability to have any sort of control on the turn of events is a distant dream and completely unattainable. Much rests on the time any sort of hint of daylight seeps into The Cove, which is the earliest time I can reasonably take the bleddy hound out. I have mentioned before the strange phenomenon that delays dawn still further even after the shortest day. This then is the worst of all worlds when I have so little time after it to cram in all the chores.

This morning's tale of the unexpected was the pasty man turning up just as I was about to take the bleddy hound out. Fortunately, I was ready to take her out but had not yet collected her from the bed; the bleddy hound does not do disappointed. So, having been ahead of the posse, I was now on the back foot, rushing about trying to meet the opening deadline.

The chaotic flow of operations was further upset by the unavailability of bread from our usual supplier. On these occasions in the past, I have fallen back on our milkman

which supplies bread, albeit of the plastic sort and I did place an order with them for this morning. When I checked in the outside bin just after we opened, there was no bread with the milk delivery. Unable to do anything about it today, I threw myself into ensuring I could get bread tomorrow, so I called our normal supplier first.

Unable to raise an answer at first, I eventually established that the supply of bread was patchy due to the unavailability of staff this week. Assured that there would be bread tomorrow, if not jam, I duly ordered plenty to see us through to the weekend because, which I forgot, the bakery is not open on Friday or Saturday. It was not long after this that our milkman turned up with a big tray of bread. He was unable to bring it on the first run as it needed to be collected from their supplier. This turn of events necessitated a swift call back to our bakery to reduce our bread order accordingly.

Frankly, today was an utter disappointment. Having had my expectation of busyness continuing through the rest of the week, there was a very poor showing today. Our weather certainly did not help. The early rain that was gone by the time the bleddy hound and I slipped out, had left low cloud and murkiness along with a good deal of damp hanging around. By early in the afternoon, visibility was down to a few hundred yards at best and was probably much less further up the cliff. This would have put off even the most ardent of hikers, sightseers and left just the dog and child walkers. They did not seem hungry in the same way as our visitors did yesterday.

Indeed, the situation became so desperate I decided that the time had come to deal with the carrier bag full of out-of-date documents that we had extracted from the Aged Parent's filing cabinet. This had been placed on the floor just below the pasty oven. Its proximity to the oven was coincidental; we had no intention of trying to incinerate the defunct documents. It is just that it was close by the shredder that we have in the store room, which is a bit more capable than the average domestic shredding machine.

The bag had been in its place since the middle of November and had we extracted a few bundles of documents and fed them into the shredder each time we passed, the job would have been done by now. Dedicating time to the task is a mistake because it becomes tedious very quickly. It is also quite surprising just how much shredding it produces and this was partly why I started the job today – our commercial bin man was due today. Planning to coordinate with the bin man to collect the three refuse sacks of shredding (and still not finished) is also a mistake; he did not show up until late. I stopped shredding when this became obvious.

I had another pop at finishing off the beachware order when I finished in the shop. The basic principle of it was to check that we are ordering the correct amount given what we have left in store. This is complicated by the addition of something called 'show specials', which are the same goods at a lower price for getting them delivered early. I therefore have a list of 'show specials' at one price and another list containing goods at the normal price for delivery later some of which are the same goods as 'show specials' but at a different price. This required me to have three spreadsheet

windows open, the inventory system window and the supplier website open to check prices by volume. It helps having two screens but four would have been better. You then have to work out which screen is active when you start typing else you end up typing in the wrong window.

The whole process required such an element of concentration and continuity that I was compelled to have a beer. After a second the mists of complexity slowly started to clear and by the third, the world of spreadsheets and tables was my oyster. Naturally, I will have to check it all again tomorrow to see exactly what I did and, no doubt, repeat the process tomorrow afternoon without the aid of a liquid net.

December 28th – Tuesday

Time was a little more pressing this morning because I had deliveries expected. I expected them a bit earlier but they arrived after my initial foray downstairs in my new upside down, topsy turvey routine, which meant them waiting until the shop opened. They had to wait a tad longer than that because the pasties arrived when I came down to open the shop. It is of no matter as we have very few customers that early in the morning, although this morning was an exception.

The bleddy hound and I were nearly blown off our feet and paws when we went out for our walk. It was clear from the howling in the eaves that the wind had gone around to the west late yesterday, just before bedtime. The windspeed had peaked just before I opened the shop, it seems, at around 60 – 65 miles per hour, what we call light airs down here, or just about the time the bleddy hound and I were out in it. We did not tarry long.

The wind spent the rest of the morning testing the engineering securing our Christmas tree in place. Even I was impressed, and I was fairly confident of the anchoring we did. The tree danced around a good deal and the Merry Christmas sign across the back acted like a skipping rope between the two poles it is strung from. By the time the wind died down at the end of the day, the tree was still upright and in position.

The usual slow start of the day allowed me to complete updating the beachware stock. Now that we know what we have in a position that we can make sensible decisions about what to buy in and I can finalise that order. There is plenty more to do but that is a big tick on the to do list for next year's preparation.

Talking of preparation, I did not do too badly with my pasty order for the day. I had to call back last Thursday after placing the order for today to increase the numbers, having been nervous that I had not ordered enough. That change of mind paid off today when I was inundated with orders for pasties from around the middle of the day. I may have been well prepared with the numbers, but I was not expecting the world, her great aunt, several distant cousins and their families and the boy Frank's pet tarantula all to arrive at once. The oven has a finite space and although it was on

constantly, I found it hard to keep up the pace. No one went away disappointed, so I think that must be a win, then.

I should be a little cautious of being too self-congratulatory. It was an exceedingly busy day, far busier than anyone could have anticipated. It is certainly a year for record numbers and perhaps I should have guessed that the period between Christmas and New Year would be no different. I had not ordered bread for today, fearing that I had too much from the last order and was found wanting in that respect. I also discovered that when I came to place the order for tomorrow, our baker could not do the sliced bread either because of a supply problem. I will try our milkman, who supplies some bread products, and hope for the best.

One of the reasons we were so busy was that right up until the middle of the afternoon, we were blessed with blue skies and brightness, despite the wind. We also had a bay to wonder at as great, thumping waves marched across it towards the beach. The white water shone out in the sunlight and as it bounced over the rocks and crashed up the cliffs at Nanjulian, Aire Point and Creagle. I am sure that there was a fair few down, especially to have a geek, and not many less going home with wet trousers having got too close to the waves racing across the sand and up onto the rocks. I have it on good authority.

It did not take long for the streets to empty and by around half past three o'clock, the tumbleweed was rolling down Cove Road. The emptying out always seems to be a collective decision made somehow telepathically, as they all disappear at once. Of course, there are always one or two who do not get the message and are left wandering about, wondering where everyone went. It may also have had much to do with the sun going away and the grey and dismal cloud rolling in but that is far less mysterious and enigmatic and clearly cannot be right.

It was down to me at tea time to finish off the last of the left-overs from the weekend's revelries, which I had with a bit of haddock I found at the bottom of the freezer. Having taken one for the team, we can eat fresh food tomorrow. What a strange time of the year this is.

December 27th – Monday

There is nothing quite like holding with tradition. The BBC and the Meteorological Office both stepped up to show their mettle in this regard this morning. Yesterday, or possibly the day before we were told that today would hold some heavy rain for us and not be the best of days to be out and about. I just happened upon the Radio Pasty forecast while I was in the shop first thing getting ready for the day at about the same time as I checked the Meteorological Office website for the same information. I was staring at a rain filled afternoon, stretching way into the evening and beyond while a cheerful young lady on the radio was telling me just how bright and sunny the afternoon would be. Just for entertainment value, I also checked the

BBC weather website and discovered that it too disagreed with their colleague on the radio.

We do like to think that we have all the facts at our fingertips at anytime day or night through the power of technology. We do indeed have a very frightening array of information available to us, but can we be certain that any of it is actually true, as my little weather example amply demonstrates? Even cross referencing my information was inaccurate because the second site was wrong in exactly the same way. Naturally, dear reader, we must exclude your ever faithful Diary from such conclusions, where all the information is honest and meticulously accurate and the Diarist has never strayed from the path that is true, not ever, not even once. Honest, guv.

We did have some rain overnight; I heard it at one point pecking on the window above the bed. There were also deep gullies on the beach when the bleddy hound and I went down there where the rain had cascaded down the slipway. It fleetingly crossed my mind to take some rain protection with me but I was in a bit of a rush and it did not look too bad, anyway. In the event, the only thing we were hit by was a robust breeze heading around the corner of the Lifeboat station and up slipway. I could not quite work out where it was coming from but concluded it was probably somewhere in the southwest. I had the notion that it was likely a good bit stronger around the corner because there were a few white horses beyond the bay here and there.

Neither of the weather websites were wrong about the rain in the middle of the day. It came through in quite a downpour at one point catching everyone by surprise. It was, however, dry for my run down to the gymnasium in the morning to try and shift some of the slothfulness of the last few days. It was a short but blistering session and did me the world of good. What did not was discovering that our shower had become possessed since I last used it yesterday morning. I suspect the thermostat because it is cold one minute and red hot the next with only a trickle of water running through it. It could have happened on Friday, which would have been worse than it happening today but we will still have to wait until Wednesday before we can call anyone. I also think that the warranty will be invalidated because the electrician decided to go in through the top with the electrics even though there did not seem much option when the power had to be surfaced mounted. It does not look good.

On reflection, we probably would have done much better yesterday with our longer opening hours than today. The weather turned dismal and grey for the afternoon and was not particularly inspiring for even the most avid of fresh air seekers, especially if your trousers were still wet from earlier. We did get through the last of the pasties, which was helpful including our last one for a 92-year-old lady who had one during the summer and said that it was the best she ever had. I was pleased not to have disappointed her as 92 years was a very long time to wait for a decent pasty.

It did not take long to push me over the finishing line of stock counting as there was not much left to do. Correcting myself just slightly, I do have the hooded sweatshirts to count but it is finicky with the store room being so full. I will have to do it because we need to place an order at the show in a couple of weeks. Maybe tomorrow. In the meanwhile the Missus headed up to The Farm to finish the stock there so that I can conclude our beachware order with the right numbers. Mother would have gone too but it was blowing in with such strength up there that it would have not been very comfortable, we surmised.

We struggled through most of the last of the roast meat for our tea, although I still have some I am required to consume for breakfasts until it starts to smell unsavoury or goes green. This means we are officially released from our obligation to overeat so that we do not waste any food. Thank heavens we had Mother here is all I can say; she eats like a teenage rugby player.

December 26th – Sunday (Boxing Day)

Christmas Day had started out quite grey and damp but there was none of the rain that the forecasters had us down for, at least not in The Cove. I did notice later on that it had rained, and indeed was still raining, further up the Duchy.

This was particularly good news for the Christmas swimmers. You absolutely do not want to get wet on the Christmas swim day. These boys and girls, of which there was quite a number, were lucky today because despite the grey of the day, it was reasonably temperate and the water would have been a balmy 11 degrees or so had I wished to dip a toe in to find out, which I did not. There was also no great run to the sea as high tide had passed not three hours before and the water was still high up on the sand.

The weather also allowed me to meet up with the Highly Professional Craftsperson for a small libation outside. There was a small knot of we gatherers on the wide pavement opposite the shop and we tarried for an hour or so chatting and exchanging seasonal pleasantries.

Christmas dinner as well as the main meal on Boxing Day is served in the middle of the afternoon. This is tradition, apparently, but now happens a little earlier because we are not waiting on certain individuals returning from the alehouse at random times depending on the severity of the attraction of attending clientele. The later afternoon normally passes in a soporific haze but because certain individuals have not been to the alehouse, it was filled with puzzle making and other passe temps. Given that I had paid so little attention to the shopping list that we drafted when we saw our supplier a few weeks ago and that they would soon be pressing to see our order, I set to firming up numbers and updating the inventory. Perhaps a soporific haze was not that bad, after all.

Boxing Day decided to be a much better day to look at, with bright blue skies and a bit of sunshine. Earlier, we still had some of the greyness about but this did not bother the bleddy hound and I as we bounded for a sliver of beach that the tide had not yet arrived at. There was still a bit of active swell around and quite regular waves were launching themselves over the shore end of the Harbour wall not twenty metres from us that seemed to be quite exhilarating. A little exhilarating just before opening the shop was job the ticket.

I had only planned to do a few hours today, just to meet the needs of milk and bread for those having run out. We have not had too many requests for papers, although that may be because I telegraphed their absence at the latter part of the main season and on the website, I think. A grateful lady returned today to pay for the salt that I gave her yesterday when she stopped by all in a flutter. When I say she was grateful, she was very grateful and I wondered if I had in some absent minded moment that I could not recall, snatched her only offspring from the jaws of death. It was that sort of grateful. She offered money, far more than the salt was worth which I declined, but she insisted, telling me that it was only a small thing but it made a big difference to her Christmas event. I relented and I let her put a fiver in our collection pot.

We have not had many customers so far and most have dutifully put a mask on before they have come into the shop. I have had to issue reminders on occasion for the forgetful, although I suspect it is more lack of concentration than forgetfulness as it is not easy for forget such a thing. I was very surprised by a couple of gentlemen who came to the shop door and asked if they had to wear a mask to come in. They did not look like they had come from the planet Zog but even then, those Zoggians are meticulous with their pre-landing announcements and surely would have mentioned it. In any case, they would have had to come through immigration where they would have definitely been advised about mask regulation.

I spent the afternoon wondering if, perhaps, we should have stayed open for a little longer. I really cannot remember when I have seen quite so many walkers passing through The Cove and I feared for the state of the Coast Path under so many boots. The foot traffic seemed to develop from soon after we closed at midday, and at one point, standing talking to a neighbour while out with the bleddy hound, we were fair near mowed down by the numbers in both directions. They were all walking with determination and purpose and I doubt very much that the shop would have seen a great deal of business out of them.

You will be delighted to note, dear reader, that with my extended afternoon of leisure time, I managed to complete the order for our main beachware supplier. Well, almost complete, as the inventory at The Farm needs to be done before I can cross my eyes and dot my pants. The Missus has promised to shoot up there tomorrow to do the deed and then I can relax – as far as that order is concerned, at least. I also finished off the counting of the postcards, which was another feather in my capon.

With all this concern about business matters, I missed a natural wonder on our own doorstep, well, the night sky that we can see from our doorstep. During the penultimate walk out with the bleddy hound I gazed skywards to see what was up there given that we had clear skies all day. We may well be in an official dark sky area but the nearby streetlight rather throws a googly into the lap of officialdom and not a great deal can be seen from directly outside the shop.

However, out on the southern horizon, which is represented by the top of Mayon Cliff from here, was a bright point of light. It was either Venus, Jupiter or, as it very often is, Capella. I checked on the clever mobile telephone 'app' that I have installed and it told me that, indeed, it was Jupiter. Had I been out earlier and also had it been darker then, I might, with the aid of unnaturally good eyesight, have seen Jupiter, preceded by Neptune that was about to enter Aquarius then Saturn sitting in the middle of Capricorn just behind Venus, Pluto and Mercury all sitting up there in an area that could be covered by the palm of your hand held out ahead of you. Quite where Uranus was, I have no idea. Perhaps it was bringing up the rear and I missed it. Just below the horizon I would also have seen the splendour of Comet Leonard, blazing away across the sky, too.

I feel very small right now.

December 24th – Friday

It was already looking wet outside when I peeked through the living room window first thing but by the time I went downstairs it has started to rain a bit. When I stepped outside after doing the early chores, it was raining properly. After yesterday's fiasco of timing, I decided to reorganise the morning and today had my tea before I took the bleddy hound out. This paid off as not only had it stopped raining by the time we went out, bringing her back and feeding her dovetailed nicely with the opening of the shop. It might have been a little quicker had we not been chased off the beach by the tide and had to head to the car park instead.

The rain came back just to trick everyone who decided to trip out when it looked like it was getting brighter. By the time the afternoon hove into view, we were back to blue skies, wispy cloud and a hazy horizon with people coming out in droves. It seems that I had completely misread the tea leaves as I had not anticipated such crowds and once again I had to close off the pasty sales early from not having enough.

The biggest surprise of Christmas so far was fetching my breakfast out of the fridge. Since we do not order from our butcher on a very regular basis, I occasionally add a pork pie and some hogs pudding to the shop's list. Both are homemade and are rather toothsome and as I noted from the label, the pork pie was complementary, which, if you know the butcher, is to be cherished. Again, my anticipation of events let me down somewhat as I was not expecting a two hour breakfast in the quiet of a pre-Christmas morning. As with yesterday, I was distracted by a number of passers-

by who enjoyed a good chat, and this was most welcome despite the delay to breakfast consumption.

While it was busy into the afternoon, I managed to squeeze in some stock taking, finishing off the shop contents – if you exclude the groceries, which are in flux – the stationery and made a good dent into the postcards. The latter took quite a bit of time because it involves counting all the loose cards on the postcard stands but at least these can easily be keyed straight into the inventory database rather than written down first because they can be counted at the till. I must say that I was quite pleased with the progress I made and with the knowledge that we near enough emptied the store room during the summer, the shop stock is nearly all done.

It only remains for me to wish to all a Merry Christmas, dear reader, and to thank you for your supportive electronic mail this year, which I occasionally open and re-read. I may have it framed. As usual, there will not be a Christmas Day Diary, although I might have to be physically restrained from writing one as it has become such a habit over the years it is difficult to refrain. Perhaps there is some sort of patch I can wear. Anyway, all, have a wonderful day and above all be good else Santy will not come.

December 23rd – Thursday

I had decided not to get myself out of bed too early in the morning despite there being a clutch of deliveries expected. I had noted that the milkman, who is normally first up, had adjusted to a slower pace of life in the winter and was not turning up until later than usual. There was little point, therefore, in a very early start. As it happened, the alarm had to work very hard to get me out of bed in the first place.

Even at the time I had got up, I had finished ahead of being able to take the bleddy hound out as it was still dark. This threw quite a spanner in the works as it left me precious little time to sit and have a cup of tea before I started again in the shop. Today, I had even less time than that because our pasty man today was Mr Early Doors and he was waiting outside when I arrived at my desk with my cup of tea.

I saw the pasties in and opened the shop only then running upstairs to collect my tea. The dairy had arrived while I was out with the bleddy hound and that was first on the list after the shop was open. I quite forgot that I had ordered so much, and it took a while to price and put away. My tea was pretty cool by the time I got to drink it but the waiting for the daylight to arrive will be a constant problem for this opening session that will need to be worked around.

The expectation was that the first two days of opening would be exceedingly quiet. I had not expected to see more than a couple of people in the first few hours but even during the busier times of the year, things often do not get started until the afternoon. This gave me sufficient time to slowly work through the various top up items we had called in from local suppliers and get them onto the shelves and into the fridges. This

took much longer than I anticipated as I fell into conversation a few times with passers-by.

What surprised me most, and to a certain degree alarmed me, was the pasty sales. I had anticipated selling a few, maybe half a dozen both today and tomorrow but come two o'clock, I had sold both days' estimated volumes and some more. Given that I had to plan numbers covering through to the following Monday, I am now likely to be short. I also did not anticipate a demand for sausage rolls and now will not have any until Tuesday.

It should have been no surprise that there were a few people wandering around today. After yesterday's wet, grey and gloomy day we had a bright pastel blue sky and sunshine all day. Well, the end of the Harbour wall and half way across the beach had sunshine. We will not be seeing any until Valentine's Day at the earliest, which might have a bearing on a passing thought that I had regarding our forthcoming electricity charges – solar panels.

It struck me that the anticipated business costs for electricity are now such that we would probably pay off the investment in solar panels in about three years. The bugbear is that the jury is still out as to whether the whole roof is to be replaced or not but having made a decision to get solar panels any delay is only going to cost money, and lots of it.

On the same subject, I decided that it would be sensible to test the market this year for electricity supply. This year is extremely tricky as so many of the smaller suppliers have gone and others will be on the brink. I would normally choose to avoid the market comparison companies but thought that at least they would point me at someone who would still be around in three years, although that was a big assumption, too. Sadly, I ended up with a broker whose main and probably only concern was for their commission. They also do not like you taking too long in the decision making process, which became very apparent when I told the broker that I wanted time to investigate his company. There was much huffing and puffing and when he called an hour later to ask if I had finished my due diligence, I had not even started, which made matters worse. The nail went in the coffin of our 'supportive customer relationship' when I asked for the terms and conditions of the nominated energy company. I had a curt message back by electronic mail telling me that the company had withdrawn its offer.

As usual at the time of year we close at four o'clock. This works well allowing us to close up before it gets dark and me not to exhaust my thumbs by twiddling them in the absence of serving customers. It had been a much busier day than I had anticipated all around and I have become unaccustomed to such exertions.

Unfortunately, instead of a quiet zizz ahead of tea, the Missus had other plans. She had constructed small baskets of goodies to be given to the nearest and dearest in The Cove and had labourer long in the kitchen to produce them. It was now time to

do the deliveries, which included a struggle along Cove Road and half way up the hill with the bleddy hound in tow. Happily, it was almost dry with just a hint of dampness in the air. It was also temperate, which became tropical by the time I was returning from the climb up the hill. We were in darkness for the last two as the bleddy hound has never been a here to there sort of girl and in her dotage is even worse.

I will go out like a light tonight, aided and abetted by a small night cap, I think.

December 22nd – Wednesday

Well, I was not expecting rain this morning. I think that is probably because I have not looked at a weather forecast for several days and really have not missed seeing it at all. It is not as if I would have dressed differently had I known, although that might be true if it were teeming down but I think I might have noticed the sky before I went out. As it was it had barely started when I was down the Harbour with the girl. We were fair near bowled over by her best pal who came at us while we were still at the top of the slipway.

The rain had set in a little harder by the time I was ready to head to the gymnasium and I still did not bother to dress any differently. Even at its worst, the rain was barely worth bothering about and the breeze had settled a bit, too, not making it too uncomfortable in either direction. I would not have noticed too much on the way back even if it had; a blistering session makes all the difference.

The butcher had been in my absence proving that we were, indeed, opening tomorrow whether it was looking busy or not. In truth, it was not looking busy in the least and has not been for some weeks. I know that the Sennen Cove Café next door has been bumbling along with a few stops for coffee and cake and the local workforce gets a bit of breakfast there now and again. I am sure we will sell a few pasties and a few pints of milk tomorrow, especially if I remember to order them.

Indeed, I placed the order for the bread and pasties as soon as I got back upstairs after putting the meat in the fridge and freezer as appropriate. A local lady caught me just in the nick of time for her regular order – when we are open – of seeded bread. A little later, I sent in the order for fruit and vegetables and soft drinks. I also thought that we might sell a bottle of wine or two over the week, although the majority of visitors still descending on us will have their orders dropped off by Tesmorburys, no doubt.

Some in-laws descended on Mother during the morning. They waited with her while she had her fence fixed by the much maligned council's contractor. Her fence, one side or another, will collapse at the merest hint of a bit of wind mainly because the contractor will insist on using the cheapest panels and posts available. The workmen who come to fix it understand well, but quite how many times they will have to replace them before someone higher up the food chain realises that buying panels at

twice the cost but a tenth of the mean time between failure is quite a good idea is anyone's guess.

After the fence menders had gone, the in-laws brought Mother over to us. She is staying for the festive period and Christmas as well. We need someone to help with all the food that the Missus had bought and will cook regardless of the fact that there are only three of us. Mother also has her own selection of alcohol with her and promptly tucked into a large sherry just as the sun tipped the apex of the yard arm – well, somewhere in the world, no doubt. They certainly do not make nonagenarians like that anymore and she was still able to darn a hole that I had made in my Great Aunt Lily's cardigan that she knitted for me not long before she popped off.

Given that it was time to take the bleddy hound out again, I combined the requirement with the need to take a few things up to The Farm. The pile of things that were cluttering up the shop are now cluttering up the store room and some of those could be best accommodated up at The Farm. I also needed to take the rather full compost bucket before it walked up there by itself. When we are making more regular visits to The Farm, hopefully after Christmas, this will become a more frequent job and less of a chore.

The compost pile up there has not been extracted from since it was set up by the Missus at least a couple of years ago. It has been waiting for a second chamber to be constructed so that it can be turned, and the ripe stuff skimmed from the top. Despite two or three years of additions, it has not grown any higher and right now is a good deal lower than I recall seeing it since I placed a big wooden door on top of it after it looked set to escape over the top. I suspect that the very bottom is top grade compost by now and below that, the best growing soil imaginable. Further down still, it is very likely we will find fossilised Brussels sprouts. Similar to the mandate inside enclosed spaces of late, when emptying the compost bin, a mask is mandatory.

As ever, there are small irritations up at The Farm. These are things that should really have been addressed as they are probably easy to do and would not take much time, either. One of these is the drain downpipe – well, actually, it is more of an acrosspipe – that takes the rain water from the cabin roof to the first IBC (that is Intermediate Bulk Container of 1,000 litres that looks like a big white dice without numbers enclosed in a wire mesh frame – just in case you were wondering, dear reader, and I know I must not assume.). Unfortunately, the IBC has sunk unevenly under its own weight, mainly because I did not do sufficient preparation of the ground before installing it, and the acrosspipe no longer sits inside the hole at the top. I had tried to use a plastic flowerpot with the bottom cut out that worked for a while but now keeps slipping out as well. It has been awaiting a better solution for some time.

I could not quite remember where I put it but there was a length of launder somewhere lying about. A short length of that would, at least temporarily, bridge the gap between the outlet and the hole – about one inch as the crow flies. I know that it is a three acre field but everything is concentrated in the top corner. It took a few

minutes to remember where I last saw it and that was it being slowly being revealed when I took the trimmer out last. It took no more than a few minutes more to hack a length off the end and strap it with a cable tie to the acrosspipe. I felt quite accomplished after that.

Having actually achieved something that will in all likelihood work, I spent the next half an hour producing things that in all likelihood would be entirely ignored. The dreaded lurgi signage in the shop is a little out of date, so I printed off some more seeking to encourage the visiting populous to wear a bleddy mask when they come into the shop. This time around, we are closing the exemption loophole where anyone not wishing to wear a mask says that they are exempt from doing so. We will insist the exemptees have a badge, the sort seen on the lanyards decorated with daisies. Yes, I know that anyone can print off one of those badges, but I will go with the notion that if someone wishes to lie about their mask wearing status at least they have put the effort in to do so.

I have to say that after last time I am not wholly looking forward to the experience again. We will see what happens and make adjustments accordingly. The first day is usually a bit of a muddle, so I shall wish myself luck and drink to forget.

December 21st – Tuesday

A good late morning and I had to be dragged kicking and screaming out of the bed by the bleddy hound. How wonderful, but I cannot see it lasting. We did have to pull our socks up sharpish because the bleddy hound spotted her best pal outside waiting for her. The best pal would have been down the big beach but had been spooked by the much maligned council's waste lorry down by the OS. We all have our little problems and it seems waste lorries are hers.

We went our separate ways, we went on our way to the Harbour beach, strangely scoured clean by not the biggest, strongest waves we have seen. The sea has been quite calm of late, certainly in comparison to earlier in the month, so the very idea that these smaller waves have scoured out sand in some abundance is somewhat unthinkable. There is even a little ridge at the top of the beach where the tide did not reach, clearly showing the old level of sand, at least six inches above the rest of the beach.

I did not dwell on such things as, for a start, they were too huge to contemplate and secondly I had other fish to fry. Actually, the fish did not need anything done to it as it was smoked but the figurative fish was more to do with the payment bit of our website, which was not working. Not that it should worry you, in the slightest, dear reader. I also had to work out, as closely, as possible what I should order and when to avoid various supplier closures over the festive period. Our biggest problem is bread. Not only do I not have a first idea how many people are turning up over the weekend, but the bakery is shut for four days, which is roughly the shelf life of a loaf

of bread. Who would have thought that life could be so complicated? They will just have to eat cake and I will have to try and keep my head.

Having procrastinated and tried to put off the moment, I transferred my labours to the shop as I decided I could put it off no longer. The goods from yesterday needed to be put on the shelf if they were to stand any chance of flying off them. I also had to finish off the floor mopping and I was so glad that I started a few days earlier, else I would be playing a terrible game of catch-up right now instead of being a semi-lazy oik.

The clever solar powered Christmas lights on the tree across the road needed a bit of a helping hand today. They had switched off early last night, which was not bad going since they had been performing for more than a week. The solar power is clearly only just not providing enough power, so I plugged them in for the first time today. It was nearly dark by the time the Missus plugged the units back in again. They are all the other side of the railings, which is a little too near the edge for me, which is my little problem – a strong desire not to fall from great heights.

I suppose it could not have been more apposite that the solar powered lights failed today as it is, after all, the shortest day. Happy Winter Solstice everyone, although perhaps I should have put that in yesterday, so it was when you read it. Ah well.

December 20th – Monday

It was not quite the sunshine soaked day that we rather enjoyed yesterday, even if it was a bit chilly. The cloud had rolled in at some point, which gave us a bit of a duvet effect and to help things along, the wind, had diminished in The Cove. I had to add 'in The Cove' a little later as I discovered that it had definitely not diminished in St Buryan when I dropped Mother's iPad off that she had left behind yesterday. She was missing it as she uses it for all manner of purposes including turning on her lights so she can see her way home at night. If you are younger than ninety odd and just had to ask a five year old what an iPad is – read 'em and weep, my 'ansum.

It was not my mind craving exercise this morning, so I took my creaking frame down to the gymnasium to shake it about a bit. I had stopped to try and book in the truck to get the tyres replaced, those that need it, but could not get through. I was quite amazed when I tried again after a blistering session and got my breath back that the garage will probably be able to do the job before the end of the week or possibly between Christmas and New Year, when the Missus will have to drive it in. I did have to run out and check which tyres we have because I forgot to garner that crucial information before I called. It is a happy result as it means it will be done ahead of our trip to Exeter, somewhere east of Camborne, which is far enough on dodgy tyres.

I was quite keen to get the gymnasium and other morning chores, such as breakfast, out of the way early to leave a comfortable time to go to the cash and carry. I had

already prepared most of the list but went downstairs to recheck it anyway and to add the few things I knew I had not got around to. It was advisable to check it with the Missus so that I can at least spread the blame if it is wrong, but on the basis that I went and got it, it will still be my fault alone.

It is quite some time since I went off to the cash and carry and the last time was deep into the troubled time when they had very little to offer us. I was pleased to note that today, they had most of the items on my list, although the list that I had was not exactly extensive. However, looking around they did appear to have quite a few of the things that we had been missing at certain points during the year. As long as that continues, I might allow myself to think we will have a kinder run of it next year.

With no other errands to run I drove straight back home. I was quite surprised to see just how much traffic there was on the road. I had problems getting out to Hayle in the first place because between and including the Tesmorburys roundabout and the roundabout that splits the road between St Ives and Helston, one lane was blocked off for no apparent reason. I do not get out much, so it is gratifying to note that some traditions still hold good.

I took a brief detour and entered Hayle from the opposite end just so I could turn left into the petrol station at Foundry end. I had already passed all the ones in the Tesmorburys stores as I do like to seek out an independent provider on the basis that I would rather keep my hard earned in the Duchy where it is probably needed more than wherever Tesmorburys' coffers are kept. It is sometimes difficult to determine the independent from the national as there is a lot of franchising going on in the industry, but I know that this one is, mainly because it has a big sign that says so on the forecourt.

The whole going out effort had taken more time than I anticipated so there was not a lot of doing things when I got back, other than unloading the truck. To add to the jollity of the season, it is the time of year when I have to renew my energy contracts and I had already done the domestic one. Since I did not think that it would take that long, I had a look at the offer regarding the business one that had arrived in the morning and had nagged at me to do something about before I forgot it.

I was quite taken aback when I looked at the detail of the offer. I was, of course, expecting a fair old hike in the unit rate after all the fuss about the increase in wholesale rates of late. What I was not expecting was a 532% increase in the daily rate. This, the company website tells me, is to pay for getting the electricity from where it is generated to my distribution panel, in short, the infrastructure costs. I could not fathom for the life of me why an increase in the wholesale rate, of gas at that, should result in such an eye-watering increase in the infrastructure costs, which would have largely been unaffected – unless the company had decided to bring my own personal gas pipe to my door so that we could enjoy the wonders of natural gas. I wrote asking them to explain.

In truth, the most likely reason is that while domestic rates are capped, business rates are not. Nevertheless, it still irked me somewhat – no, actually, it irked me quite a bit, so I also asked what the company line was for people that raised the question, if all my electricity is coming from green sources, why am I paying for a hike in wholesale gas prices, just to be narky.

I felt much better after that, although I will still have to pay roughly double for my business electricity next year. I might consult the people that run the mews behind us and see if they want to club together for a wind turbine, which will go down nicely in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and right on the edge of a conservation area. At least it won't produce any light to disturb the new dark sky status – not until Christmas when the Missus will shin up and put fairly lights on it.

I think it might be time to retire for the day.

December 19th – Sunday

Up early two days running. This is no good, it is supposed to be my holidays. Well, you have to make these sacrifices for the things you like doing every now and again and heading to the range is quite the jolly jape and even more so for the Christmas shoot, which is always well attended.

I had left the bleddy hound languishing in bed until I was ready to take her out and there was a bit more light in The Cove. There was still plenty of beach to frolic around on and, today, no trigger fish to be sniffed at. I had put an extra layer on because I expected it to be a bit colder than usual up at the range later. It certainly seemed to be doing the job down in The Cove, particularly in the Harbour where it was a bit more sheltered.

The time evaporates very quickly while waiting for the appropriate hour to leave and really, I could do with getting up a little earlier still – or shifting my behind a bit quicker than I do. The Missus dropped me off and collected Mother on the way back. Today she would wait on my call to get the pasties in the oven and run them up to the range after the shoot. It was gratifying to note the good feedback from the pasty eating, although by now there should be little doubt about the pasties from our regular supplier.

The shoot itself was very good fun what with shooting the feathers off a turkey – just a picture of one, you understand animal lovers, and target shooting with a shotgun while being pushed around in a wheelbarrow. It was an individual competition even though it did include team rounds and the winners and losers were called out at the end. Each person pulls out a raffle ticket to collect a gift brought by another club member. By the time the numbered places came to twelve and my name still had not been called, I suggested that a simple 'next' would do rather than the place number. The suggestion was rejected, mainly by those in the previous twelve spots, I noticed.

There was no afternoon session and I was back home by the early part of the afternoon, just in time to take the bleddy hound around for her middle if the day walk. On the way back, I recalled that I had been meaning to check the truck tyre pressures for a while and top them up with our ball compressor machine – it saves fifty pence doing it at the garage. As I went back to the truck, I bumped into the Highly Professional Craftsperson out on his Sunday perambulation of The Cove. I had met him yesterday afternoon, too, doing the same thing – his walk, I did not do the tyre pressures yesterday – so we had exhausted all the topics of conversation that had cropped up since we had seen each other before. I explained what I was about and with his attention drawn to the truck's wheels he noticed some gouges out of the wall of the tyre on the nearside rear. Enthused by his discovery, he checked the others as well and discovered that the nearside front was almost bald along the outer rim. We agreed that it was not worth checking the pressures as those tyres, at least, would need to be replaced. I am so glad he came by at that moment and suggested he did not bother coming by again for a while as I could not afford it.

Since we are off to a trade show in January, I will have to pull my finger out and get the truck booked in pronto.

With nothing better to do, I returned to doing the new stock from our trade visit. I told you it took a long time. Whatever the Missus is cooking in the kitchen is also taking a long time. She was in there all day again today and still has not finished, although she did tea as well, which includes a bit of ham for Boxing Day. If she prepares too much she will have nothing to do all Christmas. I thought it best not to mention it, though as I would like to see Christmas, too.

December 18th – Saturday

I forced myself out of bed earlier than I had to this morning with the worry that I might miss our pasty delivery. The shooting club is having its Christmas event on Sunday and we are facilitating the pasty dinner, so you might imagine I was quite keen not to mess it up. After all, they have guns. As it was, I could have stayed in bed another two hours because our pasty man was late arriving, which also had me fretting.

There was not much choice about risking missing the delivery by taking the bleddy hound down to the beach. I had wrapped up warm for the occasion. That was another reason for having to force myself out of bed – it was darned cold in the bedroom. The easterly had whipped up again at some point during the night and had whistled through the bedroom window. It also whistled up the street all day long making it quite uncomfortable to be working outside, although down on the Harbour beach it was a little kinder. That trigger fish is still down there and the bleddy hound made a bee line to it and promptly dismissed it as still being too fresh.

Since there was little else to do while I waited for the pasties to arrive, I decided to set to with the order for our new year beachware. This develops from the list we made while at the supplier last week. It is not just simply transposing the written list

to the computer but each item needs to be checked against what we already have in stock and whether it can be had cheaper from elsewhere. It takes quite a while. It is better done after the stock has been counted but this year they will need the list quite quickly, I suspect, so I need to press ahead and worry about what we have currently later.

I had not got very far with the new order when the pasties arrived and disturbed the intricate process. I did not get back to it again until late in the afternoon because I was quite keen to get the shop presentable even if we do still have four days before opening. I will be at the range tomorrow and the cash and carry will take up another, so we really do not have that much spare time at all.

The Missus went off in the middle of the morning to do some shopping. She had planned an afternoon of cooking and I had planned being elsewhere while she did so. I did not bother waiting for her to come back but started in the shop when I was ready. As discussed, the first job was to manoeuvre the ice cream fridge back into position, which you might think to be an easy task. It would be if the designers had installed moveable wheels on both ends of it instead of just the one. This requires some patience and spatial awareness to perform a multi-point turn in the small area while being careful not to scrape the newly mopped floor with the static wheels. I left the bleddy hound home alone upstairs as she would have only been bemused by my antics as well as being in the way.

Job done, I moved the bleddy hound downstairs for the duration of my chores. One of these was to install the last of the Christmas lights on the front of the shop. It occurred to me while I was out in the darkness with the bleddy hound that the shop front looked particular dour compared to the tree opposite. There was a spare string of solar powered lights, so I resolved to pin them to the shop front as I thought that it would not take much effort. It would probably look like it did not take much effort, too, but it would be better than nothing in my view.

Obviously, thinking that something would not take much effort means that it immediately takes on a difficulty that would have been absent had I not thought it was going to be easy. First, the string was too long for a single run across the front and too short for a double run across the front. On reflection, I could have run it around the 'The Old Boathouse' sign but that would have meant advancing further than the second rung of the ladder and was therefore out of the question. I did a double run and hoped that it was central when I had finished, which it was not - obviously. I then had to screw the solar panel to the wood using the rubbish screws that were provided with the package and found that they stripped before they were fully screwed in and then would not unscrew again without the aid of a pair of pliers. I found a smaller, better made screw and left it at two screws to hold it up when there was room for four. I am sure for a couple of weeks it will be fine.

It was also bleddy cold outside with that fierce easterly blowing up my shirt as I stretched up to pin the cables. I was very glad to get back inside and concentrate on

moving the various displays back to their proper positions so that I could sweep the floor where they had been. I had made my mopping water sufficiently filthy with the small bit of mopping that I had done, I stopped my task after finishing just the one aisle. The other two will wait until next time, although they are swept and ready. The last job downstairs for the day was drafting a quick list of products we would need from the cash and carry just in case I had to call anything in from elsewhere.

I was quite grateful to retire to the relative warmth upstairs even if it was to immerse myself in the tiresome business of messing with inventory systems and stock orders. Entering the flat I nearly tripped over today's influx of greetings cards. We really are quite humbled by the number of cards we get from customers that we have got to know over the years. For many of these, we do not have your address, so although you may not read it, thank you very much and reciprocal season's greetings to you, too.

One card, however, stood out from the others not because of its size or shape but because of who wrote it and, for the first time, I believe, also addressed it. It came from L&L, north of the border which is quite a way the other side of Camborne. We must have missed a year or five because if these two are writing and addressing their own cards they must be very grown up ladies indeed by now.

We will just have to wish that you have the very finest Christmas ever, L and L, and one brilliant Hogmanay for you and the family. Thank you.

December 17th – Friday

Can I just get over this before we commence in earnest the business of the day? I am sure you must all be aware that there is a growing trend to inflict odd flavours on our common drinking spirits. Indeed, The Old Boathouse Stores has a very good line of flavoured spirits including our very special Dr Squid, flavoured with squid ink. We thought that the squid ink probably could not be topped for weirdness, despite it tasting remarkably good and having the additional quirk of it pouring out black and turning bright pink when tonic is added. That is until now.

I read in the trade press today that a London crew, The Real English Drinks Distillery, has turned out a vodka flavoured with cannabis. It is most efficient as you can now be bladdered and stoned without resorting to different products. The Master distiller noted that the UK is the second highest consumer of cannabinoids world wide – who knew, explains much – and that flavoured vodka is in growth so it made sense to combine the two. Of course it did, especially after several hours in the mixing lab. I am tempted to stock it. It was not that long ago that the authorities found large portions of the moor between Porthcurno and Penzance turned over to agriculture of a particularly avant garde nature and I am pretty sure that the demand for such things locally has not diminished much since.

Given that it is probably best not to dwell on such things, we shall move swiftly to announce that the easterly wind that was giving us a bit of stick yesterday – so much so it knocked our bin over – had abated this morning. I was distinctly over-dressed when I took the bleddy hound out for a wander down on the Harbour beach. She found a large trigger fish down there, washed up by the feisty sea of the last day or so. She did not pay much attention to it, so I assumed that it was quite fresh. If it is still there in a week or so I shall have to haul her off it.

We met up with her best pal just before we went back up the steps to the flat. Neighbour told us that there was a seal pup at the bottom of the OS slip when they went out that way this morning. It was making a big hullabaloo when they passed by, warning them off, so it was clearly in fine fettle. By the time they got back it had made its way back to the sea, which at the time was quite a hike when you have not got any legs. I covered the bleddy hound's ears while we talked about it else I will not get her down the Harbour for a week.

The Missus secured a spot with the veterinary surgery for eleven o'clock and I was away to the gymnasium by then, so I missed her being dragged kicking and screaming to the truck. I am guessing that the bleddy hound would not have been best pleased, either. They arrived back with Mother some while after I had returned, the bleddy hound looking no worse from the experience and hopefully a sight more comfortable.

I waited until everyone was settled and made my way down to the shop to continue the cleaning up ahead of opening at the end of next week. I wanted to get to the stage today where the front corner was ready for rehabilitation, which meant raising the welcome mat as well. This is usually a bit of a fuss and certainly at this time of year as it is generally permanently wet underneath.

It is not just wet but sandy and dirty wet that just mopping entails three or four changes of water until all the sand has gone out of the mop head. The best way of doing it is to pour more dry sand in to soak up the wet and sweep that up first. Quite often there is sufficient sand in the mat itself to do the job but today it was so wet underneath that I had to go down to the beach to get some more. The whole lifting, sanding and sweeping process took the best part of half an hour after which it was mopping.

I have in the past left the mat outside overnight, allowing the floor to dry inside the shop and the back of the mat to dry outside on the railings. Given that the Christmas tree is in place, I felt that hanging a dirty mat anywhere close by might detract from the general artistry of it all and, besides, I had no idea if the wind was coming back and I would have to collect the mat off the beach tomorrow morning. So, with little choice, I left the first electric sliding door in The Cove ajar to allow a reasonable airflow into the shop to assist the drying process. Clearly, if the first electric sliding door is open even an inch it is entirely obvious that the shop is open, even if there is a mop bucket in the way with the mop handle barring the doorway. Earlier, I had the

first electric sliding door open while I poured a great pile of sand in and had two enquiries at the door if people could come in. Next week with the first electric sliding door wide open, curtains up and the street display out I will have people telling me they did not think we were open.

I did not quite get around to putting the ice cream freezer back in place; I will do that tomorrow. Before we open, I will have to cover the contents from view else people will be bringing frozen items to the counter that we put in there from the fridges when we closed at the end of October. The rest of the shop is not in such disarray and once I have cleared the aisles of the street displays it will be just mopping up. When I am able to see the wood for the trees, it will be time to consider what we are missing and what stock need to be bought for opening at the end of next week.

It was gone four o'clock by the time I ventured back upstairs. There was the tail end of the Christmas cards still to write; this year we might even post them. Given that we are normally considering making the shop ready for opening, the day before we do and things like Christmas cards are sent out almost on the last posting day, we are in remarkably prepared territory this year. What could possibly go wrong?

December 16th – Thursday

It was not until after the bleddy hound and I came back from the beach that the easterly wind cut in with a bit more vigour and started to show its mettle. I was quite grateful for that because I was expecting another reasonably balmy morning when I went out in a light jacket, which I got, but it did not stay that way for long.

Along with the wind was quite a bit of clean swell. There were long waves chasing across the bay, holding up against the wind with capes of spray flowing out behind them. It was not long before the smooth sea between the rolling waves was dotted with surfers keen to catch some of the best surf we have had in a while. Later, when the bigger waves had gone we were entertained with bright, white water dancing over Cowloe while the rest of the bay cleverly hid the underlying swell.

I had got the bleddy hound out of bed this morning rather than the other way around, although she did not need much encouragement. She is not talking to the Missus at the moment having gone through the trauma of a two hour hair cut yesterday. She was not going to spend another minute alone with her in case she has some other dastardly plan up her sleeve. She did, but that was reserved for the afternoon.

The reason that I was keen to get started was that we were expecting our new plumber to arrive fairly early on and I had things to do before he got here. He arrived pretty much on time, which was welcome and did not take long to get going – he did not even need a cup of tea straight away and was nearly finished before he accepted one. Things just keep getting better and better. He needed me to hold the tap while he tightened the big nut underneath but other than that he was pretty much self sufficient. There was a bit of a hiccup when he discovered that the new tap and the

existing overflow would not co-exist. He thought that we might get a slimmer overflow on the Internet but when I looked it was hard to see if any of them were thinner than the original. The next thing I knew was that he had set about modifying the connector with a hacksaw and craft knife and eventually made it fit.

He was here for the best part of an hour and a half and did a clean and effective job. We now have a kitchen tap that does not leak – at least not that I have seen – and does not wobble, either and we have another plumber to recommend. We also do not have to turn off the valves at night so that we are not faced with a puddle in the morning. In all, what a relief.

Once again it left me with not a lot of time to run into town to visit the bank. I checked and discovered that it is open a whole hour longer than I thought it was, so I take back a respective proportion of my vilification. Town was remarkably quiet for a run up to Christmas, so I can only guess everyone was at Tesmorburys, which is very disappointing. I did my bit and bought some salad at a local independent shop then melted away back home again.

I detoured on the way back to post a parcel at the post office and then headed for The Farm. I thought I would give the gate post a couple of days to set into the concrete before attempting to reattach the gate. It all looked about right so I gave lifting the gate on a go without the aid of a net. That was never going to work because I was in the middle and could not see where the eye holes were in relation to the poles. It required a couple of concrete blocks to rest one end of the gate on while I addressed the other and was done in a jiffy.

The gate now swings perfectly back and forth without the effort we previously had in lifting it. It does, however, close automatically, which while being very clever points to a possible lean in the gatepost that I thought I had got perfectly straight. It could also be that the hinge brackets themselves are not true, which would let me off the hook so to speak. I had to find a temporary post to hold the gate open else it would close before we got the truck through it. I will find a proper post to hook it to next time I am up there.

The rehanging only took five minutes and I was back home to witness the bleddy hound's second trauma in a row, the shower. She would have had that yesterday but the Missus ran out of time before tea. We thought it best not to explain too soon that she had the veterinary surgery to go to tomorrow lest she run away in the night. I have a funny feeling she does not think it is Christmas any more.

December 15th – Wednesday

Well, that was the longest lie in ever. That bleddy hound is definitely slacking or is being suspiciously giving. Dear Claire, should I be worried?

The beach was veritably crowded when we arrived at nearly quarter to nine o'clock. At first it was just a lady with a couple of small dogs, the outrage of it, and then we spotted the bleddy hound's best pal down there, so that was alright then. They did the usual running toward each other like long lost cousins, then thirty seconds later, wandered off to do their own thing. I had a chat with our neighbour who regularly walks the best pal. She works in a big utility store in town and remarked just how busy she has been in the run up to Christmas. We are always hearing on the news how our neck of the woods is the poor man of Europe, but it seems there are enough people frequenting the shops of Penzance who think nothing of parting with £200 for Christmas decorations. Perhaps all the top five percent just go to that shop all at once.

We tarried longer than usual but even that is not very long. The bleddy hound's best pal insisted on walking us home and the bleddy hound insisted on waiting until she had departed before attempting the stairs. I do not know if she is embarrassed about her attempts or whether it was just another ruse to put off the evil moment that I make her do it by herself.

Since I was running late, I decided that it would be a very good idea to make myself even later by looking again for our roofing sheets. The company I contacted yesterday, the only one I could find willing to make custom sizes came back with a quote for delivery of more than two thirds the cost of the sheets themselves. I called them and asked if they had got this correct and they told me they were passing it on from their haulage company. Given that this was a 300 percent increase in about eighteen months, I wished them luck and goodbye. Another company I contacted did not even bother to quote the delivery charge despite specifically asking for it and a third, a manufacturer of the sheets, quoted something that made me fall off my seat.

Fortunately, I was pulled back from the brink by a couple of well-timed electronic mails informing me that there was a car stuck on the Harbour beach. I had a look at the Harbour webcam just in time to see the offending vehicle being towed off the beach by the Harbour tractor. Whoever it was would have had to pass a very strict attitude test for such a favour and been willing to be subject to the butt end of a very Cornish sense of humour. I have not yet established the facts of the matter but will undoubtedly be because it looked like the way back to St Just according to the sat' nav', thought it was an extension of the 'empty' car park but the free bit, or I can usually launch my boat from it no problem.

I decided that it was definitely time to stop procrastinating and get my sorry behind to the gymnasium in a bit of a hurry so that I could vent my frustration on some heavy weights and the rowing machine. I wholly endorse this sort of activity to relieve tension and probably rates just above kicking the cat or thumping your head against something solid and comes without the likely consequences. It was a blistering session, and quite right too for the time of year/point in my life/angle of the sun/general direction of the wind.

When I got home, I had one last shot at the roofing sheet problem, this time with a local crew in Redruth. It was good to talk sense to a down to earth Cornish fellow once we had got over the dialect barrier. His roofing sheets were about the same price as all the others. We would have to have them at fourteen feet and cut them down because, as with most others, they only do off the shelf sizes and we could have any colour we wanted as long as it was Redruth herring gull grey – it is the mining heritage, you know. Oh yes, and the delivery. That will come to “£25, if that is alright, but will have to wait until we are down that way with another run”. He suggested that we could collect if we wanted to but we had already established we were pushing it with thirteen feet on the roof bars and thought that the extra foot would really be taking the Mickey, especially on the A30.

I had thought about a run into town as we need to go to the bank but had left it a bit late for that. During the dark days of shops generally being shut, the bank shortened its hours because there were not so many people in town; they had a shortage of staff; the lights were not bright enough; the lights were too bright; the risks were too high and well, heck, we can do what we want anyway. After everything went back to normal sort of, the bank continued its shortened hours because ... well, they just can. It is highly inconvenient, especially if you are an afternoon person or, say, a business needing cash after an unexpectedly busy day. However, we struggle on.

With running errands off the menu, I decided that it was high time I addressed the mess in the shop, particularly as we intend to be open in, let me see, eight days' time. The mess is from a couple of months of 'just put it there and we will move it later' and the collection of bags and boxes left over from the outside tree and inside room decorating. There is also the glassware and other artifacts that we robbed, erm, took away with permission from the Aged Parent to liquidate if we could or dispose of in any appropriate manner if we could not.

I cannot say that I went about it with the efficiency that the Missus has with such tasks and by the time I threw in the towel, there were still bits on the floor in the way of doing the next bit. The Missus would not have thrown in the towel at all and, most probably, the next bit would have been done as well even if it took her until midnight. The next bit is sweeping out the muck that was behind the freezer by the window and all the muck, including Christmas tree needles that has accumulated since closing. I always remember the family motto – well, it is a family motto that started with me – never do today what you can very reasonably put off until tomorrow. Quite honestly, the 'tomorrow' could be interchangeable with dreckly, half the family being Cornish, you understand.

With all that tucked under my belt there was only one thing to do ... must be time for a beer.

December 14th – Tuesday

I do like to cut things to the wire, so I did not get up to The Farm until the afternoon just so that there was a timing edge to me installing this gate post. Actually, I was lucky to be able to see the gate post at all; the fog was thick as a bag up there.

The bleddy hound is getting very good at letting me lie in. It is difficult to know if she also wants to lie in or just cannot be bothered to try and wake me up. If she only knew I was just dozing at that time it would put a whole different complexion on matters, I am sure.

It was broad daylight by the time we got down to the Harbour beach, practically half was through the day. No wonder we are not getting very much done. The weather was just ripe for doing things, at least down in The Cove it was. I have no idea when the mist rolled in at the top, but it studiously avoided The Cove, so how should I know. We were bathed in bright, warm light from a sky that did not know whether it wanted to be cloudy or not. It was still warm, too, although markedly cooler than the same time the previous day.

One of the things I did at The Farm yesterday apart from attempting to dig out the gate post was to measure the wood store roof. We noticed the last time we were up there, when it just so happened to be miserable and very wet, that the bitumen roofing sheets were bowed in between the rafters. I had not expected that as they had seemed quite robust when we purchased them, although it was a bit of an experiment, and had lasted at least two or three years of good service. A quick read up later suggested that the rafters should have been much, much closer together for that sort of material. In retrospect, it was a huge and expensive mistake.

There is no fixing them, so I went looking for replacement steel sheets. Putting up the steel sheets will not be too much of a problem but taking down the bitumen sheets that are nailed in, will be a bit of a begger, which I am assured is a technical term. The other stumbling block that I should have anticipated – well, I did think they would have increased in price a bit – was that they had more than doubled in price. Ouch. The company we use is the only one I know that cuts them to size and, besides, I do not think I would get them significant cheaper elsewhere – I just checked and I cannot. Thankfully, it is the smallest roof area we have.

The Missus dropped me off at The Farm as she needed to take Mother shopping and would be back later to either pick me up or join me depended on whether I had finished or not by the time she came back. So, that was a guaranteed 'join me', then. I know that she takes her time shopping, but I had my doubts that even then that this would be a quick gate post.

Since I had significantly more time on my hands today, I moved straight away to lift the gate off the hinges, which would make the job of manipulating the post much easier, I assumed. It is a metal five bar gate and quite heavy, given its span and since I did not want to move it very far I let it fall in the open position into a thicket of brambles, which would make for interesting extraction later. Once the post was free

of its burden and after no more than half an hour further probing with The Destroyer, it lifted out of the ground cleanly as if I were King Arthur slipping Excalibur from a stone. Gosh, I was mightily pleased with myself, particularly as I had envisaged hauling it from the ground with the truck or the tractor I refuse to call Poppy, with a mass of concrete stuck to it that I would have to spend hours chiselling off.

My next assumption was that I would clear the existing rock and concrete from the area and dig a nice 18 inches square hole, three feet deep in the nice soft earth. The reality could not have been further from that realm of perfectness that I had created in my head. The geet lumps of concrete, fore and aft of the pole resolutely refused to budge but annoyingly rocked slightly when forced by The Destroyer levered into gaps around them. One of the lumps was actually part of the wall leading up to the post, so I had no hope of either removing it or making it more stable. It was one of those times I had to use the hand I had been dealt with.

The main focus of the effort of the next two or three hours was making the hole deep enough so that the post slotted in with the lower hinge at the right point above the ground. It seemed that no matter how far I tunnelled down, the darned thing was not going any deeper. I widened the hole with judicious use of The Destroyer on the sides of the hole and managed to extract some larger blocking stone debris with it from the bottom of the hole.

I lost count of the number of times I had reached in and scooped out by hand ridiculously pathetic amounts of dirt and tried the post again only to find I had managed an equally pathetic centimetre of depth. Towards the end, which is the point that I could reach no further into the hole, those pathetic centimetres were joyous leaps compared to the even more pathetic half centimetres or less increments I was making then. In the end, I had to hang the gate by the lower hinge and demonstrate to the Missus what it looked like and was that an acceptable gap at the bottom or not? Thankfully, she agreed that it was fine as long as she could swing the gate without having to lift it.

A bag and a half of post mix – the one for fixing posts, not the one for mixing Coca Cola – later, the gate post was standing upright by itself, carefully checked with a spirit level on two sides. I am not convinced that the heavy gate will not in a short space of time, erode the concrete in the direction of the weight of the gate. I am not sure what the answer is, either, but that is a huge amount of force given the length of the gate and if I were a mathematician or an engineer, I would probably be able to calculate how much force that was. As it is, I think I am very happy not knowing.

The other thing we did not know was whether the big birthday party was going to go ahead. I will take it as a certainty that you will not recall, dear reader, that I mentioned during the summer that one of our regular visitors told us that she would be 100 years old on this very day. I made a diary note so that I would not forget so that we could, at the very least, send her a birthday card to congratulate her on the achievement. She is the mother of one of the managers at the OS and we learnt that

she would be staying there for a few days. This would, of course, be very wise as she would not want to drive home in her Maserati having had a skinful of birthday booze, now would she? It also meant that we could drop in some flowers and a card to her in person. Under the current dreaded lurgi circumstances, we rethought that and dropped the flowers and card in ahead of anyone getting there, just in case. I am sure she had a rare old time.

We did not do too badly for our tea, either. The Missus went to the Asian shop in town and got some crispy aromatic duck with all the trimmings. I did point out that we really should have waited until Christmas Day when it is more traditional to have quackers.

Just getting my coat, now.

December 13th – Monday

As winter suddenly turns to spring, did I miss something? The temperature must have increased seven or eight degrees overnight and I did not have a short enough pair of shorts to compensate.

The bleddy hound and I had a bit of a lazy start, which might have had something to do with the oppressive heat and the flies. There was also very little breeze on our side of the world with it still coming in from somewhere in the south. Even the sea could not be bothered to act up on such a balmy day as this. There were no big waves to marvel at and no flogging over the Harbour wall, although we might not have expected it to at that stage of the tide we were down on the beach.

We were late enough so it was no surprise that we had been beaten down there by another dog walker; there were unmistakable marks of a big dog skidding to a stop having chased a ball or something. While I was getting ready to go down there the bleddy hound had caught sight of something from her throne in the upstairs window. I followed her gaze but could see nothing myself. I looked again and just caught a glimpse of something black and white disappear over the sea wall and against the Lifeboat station wall. It could have been a magpie, but we do not get any down here usually and the bleddy hound does not bark at birds, although what else it could have been, I have no idea.

I had a proper blistering session at the gymnasium not long after we came back. As expected, it was at least a few degrees colder in the room than outside but much warmer than of late, noted by the fact I was warmed up before I started rowing. During the half hour rowing session, I resolved to actually do something today, especially as the day seemed like it was going to be dry and temperate.

I am sure that last year we were spending most of everyday up at The Farm doing things. This may have been because the weather was kinder to us or that we were better motivated. If only I had a record of what we were doing this time last year.

Anyway, it seemed the thing to do to go up to The Farm and do something today. There is plenty on the list but the easiest thing to get started on, particular as it did not require two of us, hiring a mini-digger or getting lots of tools and equipment out, was to fix the gate post – or so I thought.

This, we surmised, had sunk forwards over the years to the degree that the gate does not open unless it is lifted. Since it had sunk forwards, I made the assumption that it would, quite easily, push back and therefore be loose. With this in mind, the plan of action was to extract it from its current hole, dig the hole out and put it back straight, secured by a bag or two of post mix. Well, we all know about plans, especially ones based on assumptions.

It seemed sensible to prepare for what I expected and to go over to the builders' merchants at St Just to pick up the post mix. This is a concrete mix for posts as opposed to the system they have in public houses for delivering soft drinks that relies on a syrup being mixed with soda water after it has left the container – post mix. I felt that I should be accurate and explanative here after the trouble we ended up in after I used the term IBC. No, I am not still harbouring hard feelings about having to explain what an IBC was – twice. I am simply being explanative. Really.

While I was in St Just, I picked up some bits for our simple tea that we had planned as everything is within easy reach if you are lucky enough to have been able to park in the square. I avoided the really expensive milk, which I still do not quite understand. I checked on the farm website and the Trink Dairy is a small family business on the moor behind Carbis Bay, which puts them closer to Hayle than St Ives. They sell the milk in their shop for 70 pence less, which I would not have minded paying at all. So, either the farm is not giving much of a discount to retailers or the retailer I bought it from is royally taking the Mickey.

Sorry, I digress. Now, where was I? Ah yes, gate posts. Having arrived back at The Farm I first extracted a spade to get to the bottom of it. Discovering more stone than earth, I fetched the sledgehammer and when that seemed to be having little impact I went back to the tool shed for The Destroyer, my substantial wrecking bar. It is this I have to thank for last year's biceps like Popeye. It is bleddy heavy and after an hour of wielding it, I have had a more blistering work out than I get at the gymnasium.

From all this I think that we have discovered that our gate post was not in the least wobbly. It was solid as a rock – at least until I started at it, and from this I think we may assume that whoever put it there, put it up squint to start with. Not only that, but they put it up squint rather well and despite two hours of The Destroyer and various other tools, it is still resolutely in place. Well, that is not exactly true. After I had run out of time and had to go home, I discovered that it had sunk forward from its previous position, and I had to lift the gate for the whole of its traverse instead of just the first bit.

Unfortunately, giving up and pretending it never happened is no longer an option and we all have a bit more of the same to look forward to tomorrow.

By the way, the Christmas lights are still going without any recharging intervention. I will keep you apprised.

December 12th – Sunday

I had decided not to bother setting an alarm for range day, although it is better to get up there early to help out. I still feel a bit guilty about not being able to attend when the shop is open. It used to be just through our busier times but it really has become difficult all the times the shop is open now. Despite not setting the alarm, I was up early anyway. This alarmed the bleddy hound so much she jumped down from the bed by herself just in case she was missing something.

Down in The Cove, the breeze has not re-established itself and it was quite pleasant wandering down on the Harbour beach with her. The sea is still ruffled and was thundering down the Tribbens in quite surfable waves. You would have to be reasonably insane to surf there as there are far too many rocks. It waited until we were ensconced back at home before it started throwing itself over the far end of the wall.

It would probably have been the better day of the weekend to do the tree as it transpired as there was not even a hint of rain all day. Since both days in the forecast were marked up as fairly similar, I would have needed a crystal ball to discover this. Certainly, in terms of the weather it would have been better, but we discovered later that it was much busier today and I would have had my work cut out fending off the well-wishers especially as I would not have been there. Mind, that is making the assumption that the additional visitors today were indeed well-wishers. I know it is hard to believe, but some people could not give a stuff about Christmas. Imagine that.

The rest of the day, until the middle of the afternoon was spent up at the range where the wind was far more in evidence than down in The Cove. It was coming from somewhere in the south and rattling the range flag on its post at the top of the quarry. It was with us the whole of the time we were up there and seemed to be increasing. By the time I went up to retrieve it at the end of the session, the wind was pushing me around like a big bully. It was worth it for the view; you can see for miles from up there.

Today, as a Christmas caper, we had a 'cowboy shoot'. This involved all sorts of cowboy themed activity with single action, six-shooter revolvers and lever action rifles. What a jolly wheeze it was. Some wag suggested that we get a bucking bronco for next time, although not one that turns around completely – it was suspected that might result in a serious shortage of range officers. Next week we

have a Christmas themed event including a turkey shoot and shooting the baubles off Santi.

The in-laws were waiting when I got back, so it was just as well that I was armed. They had come down to visit Mother and Mother visits us on a Sunday. The Missus pushed the boat out with a leg of lamb. I am not wholly sure that lambs have legs that big but I went with it anyway and very nice it was too. They did not hang around long into the evening; I had put away the guns by then, so it was not that, but they are heading home again, early doors in the morning.

The lights on the Christmas tree seem to be doing alright. We have no idea how well the solar panels are charging the batteries during the day as we get no sun in The Cove during winter. I suspect they are a lot more efficient than last year's and the solar panels are bigger. Only time will tell.

December 11th – Saturday

Today was tree day or bust. The weather deteriorates after today according to the weather forecast and we would have to wait another week to do it by which time it probably would not have been worth it.

First, though, a bleddy hound needed to be whizzed down to the much wider band of sand down in the Harbour and a much kinder sea by the look of it. The air temperature had increased quite a bit during the night and with the lack of wind we were quite comfortable out and about.

There was a sensible progression through the bleddy hound's breakfast, a bit of dabbing behind my ears and, indeed, my breakfast before we were ready to roll but I was quite surprised at just how quickly we got started. What we could have done with was starting the charging up of our hybrid solar and battery powered lights a bit sooner. With there being around five hours to lighting up time we started the recommended four hours of charging with just an hour to spare.

I was only permitted to lend a hand during the erection stage when someone had to hold the tree while the Missus pronounced it upright. It then took two of us to string in the guy ropes or as we like to call them bits of polythene garden twine to keep it steady. There are four strategically placed ties, let us call them ties, why not, which should be sufficient to hold the tree in place even in the strongest of winds, which it is very likely to have to withstand. This year there is an additional, erm, garland(?) strung between two poles at the rear of the tree that frame it with a big HAPPY CHRISTMAS message that the Missus spent all last night tying to connected kebab sticks. Absolutely everything, every string of lights, every run of tinsel and every bauble is held on by an individual cable tie or cable ties.

I was sent away to do other things and then I was called back to defend the Missus from well wishers passing by. She found that she was talking to well wishers for

more time than she was putting decorations on the tree, which was hampering her no end. Of course, when I went out there was never a well wisher in sight but all I had to do was to slip away back to the shop and another well wisher popped up. It could be said that I was doing a good job with deterring, but that sort of thing can weight heavy on a person; why did they not approach when I was there? It is a rhetorical question, dear reader, and after admonishing you yesterday for not remembering what an IBC was after a year, I can just guess what sort of responses I would get had I asked for them.

So that my time was not entirely wasted, I disappeared into the shop to do a bit of stock counting. I was quite surprised how far I got in quite a short time but there again, there is not a great deal of stock in the shop anymore. The counting of the gift cards was a bit of a labour of love as we had a few bigish orders in just in the last run up to closing. Other than that, there was very little left on the shelves. The biggest problem was negotiating the aisles as we have placed all the outside furniture down them. This made getting to some of the shelves quite difficult and I had to clamber over things to get to some of them.

Once I was distracted to help out outside again was pretty much the end of my stock counting effort but there is not a great deal left to do. The biggest time consumer will be the postcards, which I can probably do when the shop is open over the Christmas period – if indeed we are having a Christmas period!

My contribution to Christmas tree putting up was remarkably pitiful but there again, the Missus much prefers to do things without my 'assistance'. She laboured long into the evening to get the result that she desired but we will have to wait and see just how the solar panels and batteries perform.

It is beginning to feel, erm, possibly slightly, like Christmas.

Here is the tree, complete with animals from Santi-land such as the snowy coated polar bear. We are stretching suspension of belief with the penguins but a squirrel – really? I think the owl is there to keep the gulls off.

December 10th – Friday

Just a quick aside to start with. I have been inundated with an enquiry regarding my use of the term IBC. I thought that I had made this abundantly clear in the Diary entry from 30th November last year. Were you not in class that day? I think you probably were, scribbling rude doodles of where's Wally in your workbook. Pay attention, now. It is an "Intermediate Bulk Container, IBC ... this is a 1,000 litre water tank on a pallet". Here is a picture of one, which I nicked off the Internet. I probably should have had permission first but since you are in trouble already, I take it you will not dob me in for it.

Now where was I? Ah yes, Friday morning looked a whole pile better than Thursday afternoon did. There were bits of blue sky here and there, indeed it was something you could say about the whole day. It was cold and the persistent wind was back with a vengeance and that stirred up sea was still stirred up even though it looked like it was in decline yesterday.

The bleddy hound was having no more of it and risked heading down to the sliver of sand down on the Harbour beach when we went out this morning. I was dubious and told her so, but she was adamant. Both of us came back again, so that was something, but it was not the best place to be with the tide on the push and geet lumps of water breaking over the Harbour wall.

There was nothing of great import in the diary today as indeed there is nothing of great import in the Diary any day. The most notable event that had been planned was that my foot lady was coming early doors to give my feet the once over. It is an indulgence, I know, although there is a particularly resistant corn in an awkward place on the sole of my foot that if not treated makes perambulation painful after a while.

I did, of course, sidle off to the gymnasium after that for a bit of a blistering session. I can tell how relatively cold it is by noting when I start to warm up in the circuit. Currently, it is about a couple of minutes into the first fast strokes phase of the rowing. This starts off by making you even colder because the paddle at the front that provides the friction acts as a huge fan and blows air all about. Oddly, it does not do any cooling during the summer. As usual, it does not matter how cold it is because I always leave there glowing and refreshed.

The rest of the morning was spent not doing a great deal. I should really set to with the order for the supplier we saw on Wednesday but I am clearly putting it off because it is going to be hard this year. Usually, I will take the volume used from the previous year and order a similar quantity of that item for the new year. Many of those figures are useless this year because we ran out of so many things halfway through the season so have no idea how many we would have sold had we had some. It will be guesswork and I can hardly wait – to put it off some more.

It did occur to me in the middle of the day that we were supposed to drop the quarter end paperwork to the accountant earlier in the week. Given that we had no plans to go into town I decided that I had best make a special trip otherwise it would still be waiting this time next week.

The other reason for getting the truck out was that the second set of nozzles arrived yesterday, although I only remembered them today and picked them out of our box outside where they had been sitting since then. It was becoming a matter of increasing irritation that only one side was working so I hoped the second set would be better fitting. This proved true, to a degree. The nozzle did fit reasonably snugly into the hole in the bonnet and it fitted the hose perfectly, which is probably a

standard size on most vehicles. The only problem with the whole venture is that the elevation was wrong.

I recall years ago that the nozzle was a little ball in a socket and by using a pin you could change the direction of the squirt. It was prerequisite to carry a pin with you when out with your pals so that you could helpfully rearrange the direction of their squirts as a jolly jape while they were distracted. More relevantly to today's problem, you could actually change the direction of the squirt so that it hit the windscreen and not the wiper at the bottom. On the nozzle I had just installed, there was no such adjustment and I had to improvise.

I cannot really complain about the nozzle not fitting the truck perfectly because it was a nozzle for a completely different make of motorcar as I could not find one for ours. What I can complain about is that this nozzle was advertised as a misting nozzle and instead the water comes out in a squirt. Frankly, I do not give a care as long as it gets water to the windscreen in vaguely the right place. I will have to search again, however, because the bits of plastic I inserted to raise the elevation will not last there forever.

Moving on, I note that we in West Penwith have been awarded the dubious accolade of International Dark Sky Park by the International Dark-Sky Association. The first question that needs to be asked is why they are hyphenated and we are not. Then there are a whole lot of other questions and concerns such as is there any point in now erecting our Christmas tree because we will not be able to turn the lights on – at least not during the darkness.

Torches will be banned on the dark paths for revellers leaving parties and ale house sessions, although this year there will be none of those shenanigans anyway and small children will have to avoid Ready Brek in the morning lest their glowing on the way to school in the dark mornings rescinds our award. I have already seen the light, so to speak, and ordered some blackout curtains so that we are ahead of the stampede for such things in the January sales. Still, while we may be tripping over cliff edges in our dark world at least we can marvel at the wonders of the night sky while we wait the few hours for the ambulance to arrive.

December 9th – Thursday

Yesterday largely consisted of driving from one place to another with just the one windscreen washer operating. It was the sort of day that required lots of windscreen washing, too, as it was mainly dry but with lots of road spray. I should have been a bit sharper with my ordering of the new nozzles which arrived while we were out travelling.

The trip was for our usual supplier meeting, the one that provides us with all manner of beachware and some gifts. There was nothing particularly stunning and new but at least we might have some stock to sell this year coming, which will be refreshing.

The reward for all that driving was, as the skies grew darker, the view of a waxing crescent moon attended by Jupiter, Saturn and Venus hanging over Mount's Bay and teasing us all the way back to St Buryan.

Fully rested this morning, the bleddy hound sensing I could do with a lie in, I got up late. We missed the early rain that arrived at the time promised and headed around the block. The sea was still stirred up, but it is starting to calm after a few days of extreme agitation, thanks to that passing storm, and it is still further up the beach than is comfortable for walking down to. Grey and overcast it might have but it was reasonably mild and windless, too.

It was the fact that today was earmarked as being windless that suggested that it would be a good day to put up the Christmas tree across the road. That was when the forecast told us that there would be not much in the way of wind and not much in the way of rain either. The wind was absent today, but the rain was with us in abundance. The dry bit the bleddy hound and I had as went around the block was it for the day. The rest was marred with rain in different values of heaviness, which would have made Christmas tree putting up uncomfortable at the very least. The next weather window we have currently looks like Saturday. Fingers crossed.

When our plumber turned up on Monday, he provided some pertinent advice regarding connections and fittings. This was at the forefront of my mind while researching a replacement tap – this and the specification that the Missus provided me with, of course. This took an inordinate amount of time and effort. Just when you think you have found just the right thing you discover something wrong about the fitting or the tap does not do quite what we want it to do. In the end there was only the one tap that ticked all the boxes and, amazingly, it was available. The next thing we needed was a plumber to fit it.

Our usual man is so good we do not like to go elsewhere. Unfortunately, there are too many other people who obviously feel the same about him and he will not be available until well after Christmas. We do not mind being hampered in our use of the kitchen plumbing for a while but being so for more than a month was something more of a challenge that we were unprepared to put up with. Our man had furnished us with a few numbers of alternative plumbers that he clearly thinks suitable alternatives and a friend has given us another. On reflection, that could be reverse psychology. He might be offering us with complete nincompoops who would make him look even better. While that is unlikely, we also have the 'not belonging to a club that would have me as a member' conundrum – if the plumber is available perhaps he is unavailable because he or she is not that good at plumbing.

There comes a point where we have to take into account that we want our new tap installed as quickly as possible, so I took the decision to hire the first one who was available at the earliest opportunity and hope for the best. The new plumber is

coming early next Thursday, which is the best that we can do and given that the tap will not be here until Tuesday, that is not too bad.

With Christmas treeing off the books – and from the way the weather turned out in the afternoon, it was just as well – the Missus decided to buy an IBC, instead. She keeps a beady eye on the local social media sales rooms just in case something of interest turns up. At some point during the morning someone in St Buryan decided to sell their IBC that they no longer needed and it was going for a song. It also needed to be picked up this afternoon or it would go to one of the many other people who apparently were behind us in the queue.

It was the most appalling decision to agree to pick up the IBC at three o'clock but given the flow of chat between buyer and the Missus, we had very little choice. At two o'clock we decided to go up to The Farm to collect the trailer, which was full of cardboard and needed to be cleared out first. Also at two o'clock, the weather decided to close in with thick mist and various degrees of heaviness of silky rain, the sort that soaks you through without you knowing. The mist was even thicker up at the top and a person with a lamp walking ahead of us would have been most useful to show us where the road was.

With the trailer hooked up, we made our way over to St Buryan in the lashing rain and thick fog and this was the very best of the journey. When we arrived in St Buryan, it was school kicking out time and the narrow lane, down which the school sits, was full of poorly parked vehicles awaiting little darlings to issue forth. This also made the lane busy and with absolutely no hope of reversing into the IBC seller's driveway, I had to stop, blocking the traffic, while we struggled to get the trailer off the truck so that it could be manhandled into the drive. Fortunately, the Missus was able to womanhandle it into the drive while I cleared out with the truck to await a gap in the traffic when I could come back and reverse it into the drive after the trailer.

Getting the IBC onto the trailer was a piece of cake and we had a length of rope to tie it down with. There is the nagging thought that perhaps it looks a bit top heavy and might topple the trailer if we hit a particularly pronounced lump on the offside wheel, but what are the chances of that ever happening? I would say about the same as meeting, for the very first time ever, a bus coming out of the single track lane between St Buryan and Sennen after we had entered the lane. (It was later in the evening that it sunk in that the lane is not even on the bus route.)

Now, for those of you unfamiliar with towing a trailer, it is a piece of cake. Exactly like driving normally albeit a bit more slowly – except when you come to having to go backwards. With a bit of practise and a sensibly long trailer this become quite easy, too. I had acres of practice when the Inshore Lifeboat was being towed behind a proper tractor and became quite good at it. I practised a lot. No matter how much practise you get, with a short trailer you cannot see in the wing mirrors because it is so short, it is nigh on impossible.

So, there were we nose to nose with a bleddy geet bus. I think we know which one of us was going to have to attempt a reverse. There is one saving grace – the truck has a reversing camera. The picture was a bit misty given the amount of mud on the lens that sits directly and centrally above the tow bar, but, importantly, it shows the towing arm of the trailer. From this alone I am able to determine whether the trailer is going straight or left or right but it requires utter concentration, which means not looking in the wing mirrors and therefore being wholly reliant on special awareness to check if I am going to hit anything.

There is also good news and bad news. The good news is that a car following when I turned right has remained stopped preventing further traffic from racing past. The bad news is there are two lanes of traffic and in the other direction is a blind corner. I just rather hoped anything coming from that direction had good brakes.

It all went rather better than I had hoped. I only had to go forward to straighten up once, otherwise the trailer went in the direction that I was trying to steer it in. There was an option of turning into the open gate immediately left of the road turning but the field looked ever so muddy and I envisaged, even with four wheel drive, getting stuck in there, so I persevered. Happily, and to my relief the bus driver saw that I had created sufficient space for him to slip past me and did just that.

If I had imagined collecting an IBC from St Buryan and delivering it to Sennen at the most awkward time of day and then, just for fun, thrown in mean and nasty weather, it would have been nothing like it was. Those small gods of grumpy shopkeepers and IBC collectors clearly have a much keener sense of mean and nasty and they saved the worst up for when we arrived at The Farm. I was much relieved to be driving back home having parked the trailer back in the barn with a mental note that I need to fix the lights on the repeater bar at the back of it.

I had already decided to make the tea in the evening because it was intended that the Missus would have been outside in the cold for several hours putting up the Christmas tree. It would have been a tad churlish to rescind the offer just because the Christmas tree thing went west. It does mean, of course, that I will have to think of something else to cook on, possibly, Saturday when we try again. I just wonder when new marbles will be thrown under our feet and is this bleddy tree ever destined to be installed.

December 7th – Tuesday

For some reason I was awarded the grand order of the lie in by the bleddy hound this morning. I felt privileged and not for the last time in the day, either. It must have been my day.

It was raining when we headed for the door. I had not bothered with waterproof leggings as my shorts needed changing anyway, although, perversely, I did seek out my waterproof shoes. It was a significant rain, lashed on by a significant wind and

there was no avoiding it. Since it was coming in from the west at that time in the morning, it was gusting particularly around the Roundhouse rather than the Lifeboat station we discovered. Instead, the Lifeboat station had those super-drops of rain falling into that corner just where the public bin is. That was unavoidable, too.

The even more significant rain waited until we were safely back home and towelled down. Storm Barra threw the waterworks at us around nine o'clock and it is some time since we had seen rain like it. Smoking through The Cove horizontally, it pretty much closed visibility down to about fifty metres and almost immediately cascaded off the Lifeboat station roof in the manner of a fast-flowing river falling off a cliff – somehow, just writing 'waterfall' did not quite convey the severity. Our larger than normal laundries filled almost immediately and tipped over the edge. The deluge lasted just a few minutes and was gone. Within another ten minutes, you might be forgiven for thinking what a bright but breezy day it was and what was the fuss about.

I had thought that we would get maybe one more morning on the beach and had it been a normal day we might well have done. As it was the sea was a stirred up beast and had been lumping over the Harbour wall and swirling around in the Harbour. It was the sort of swirling that you give a wide berth to, just in case it swirls in your direction all of a sudden. We ventured into the Harbour car park instead where we were beaten about by the strong wind and slapped around by the lashing rain that had not yet thought to lash a bit harder.

After the front and the band of rain had blown through, it seemed a pleasant enough day for a journey out. It was easy to think that while standing behind a pane of glass. Stepping into the increasing wind, you may well have thought differently but it was too late by then. Still on my mission to clear out the shop floor a bit I decided to take a trip to the tip, sorry Household Waste Recycling Centre and also to take the old ladder towel rail to the much more user friendly, Wheal Alfred scrap metal yard where you are not made to feel like you are undertaking some criminal act by just being there. The old computer, minus its hard drive, and the old-subwoofer would go to the former establishment.

I waited until the Missus had returned from the F&L where she had just delivered the bad news that the Lifeboat station Christmas party was being postponed until information becomes clearer regarding the latest form of the dreaded lurgi. At present, any one of us catching the new form would require the whole attendance at the party to hide away for a fortnight, thus putting the station off-service. The powers that be thought that was probably not such a bright notion, and many of us were quite relieved, to be honest.

With the truck back outside the shop, I pushed the old office chair that I replaced some while ago, the computer bits into the back of the truck. I struggled to find a spanner big enough to remove the heating element from the ladder radiator, so it had to stay put but I was able to open the other end and tip out the murky water. This

made it a good deal lighter and I was quite surprised just how much murky water there was. Fully laden, I headed east.

Overly zealous tip, sorry, Household Waste Recycling Centre supervisor: “ere, you got a permit for that truck?”

Grumpy Shopkeeper: [standing looking at OZT,s,HWRCS with jaw near trousers.]

OZT,s,HWRCS: “You need a permit to bring that here, mate.”

Grumpy Shopkeeper: “Yes, I have a permit but on the basis that the operatives here have not asked to see it on any of the numerous occasions I have visited over the last, let me see, at least eight years, I have ceased bringing it with me.”

OZT,s,HWRCS: “Well, you need a permit today, because I am in charge.”

Grumpy Shopkeeper: “Well, I hope you can see my point that had all the T,s,HWRC supervisors pursued a consistently zealous approach to permit monitoring then I would not be confused whether it was required or not, would I?”

OZT,s,HWRCS: “So, in future you now know you need to bring it. On this occasion, out of the goodness of my heart, I will let you off.”

Grumpy Shopkeeper: [Bites hard on tongue and manages to not say 'You patronising ... erm, T,s,HWRCS. If you were that fastidious about following all the rules of the T,s,HWRC, you would be standing two metres away from me like it tells you to on the big sign as you come in. Instead, because Grumpy Shopkeeper still wants to get rid of his rubbish he says,] "Thank you, your supervisorness, I do in fact feel most privileged at your beneficence and I will forever be in your debt.”

To add insult to injury at the Household Waste Recycling Centre, I was advised to put the perfectly good computer, minus its hard drive, into the electricals skip. This was half full of rainwater ensuring that none of the goods in it could ever be reused for their original purpose. I left wishing I had put the diskless computer on the Internet auction site instead.

Talking of which, I had to go onto the same Internet auction site to try and find replacement washer jet nozzles for the truck. During the Missus' trip to Longleat Festive Lights, or whatever it is called, they first went for a trip around the safari park. On entering the monkey pen, they were advised to remove removable items from cars and to lock doors and boots as the monkeys had learned to disassemble motor cars quite efficiently and why would they not. In the wild they would have had their hands full looking out for their next meal and trying to avoid being someone else's next meal. In the safari park, they must be bored rigid and motor cars and their removable bits must have been a godsend, especially after an early find of someone's Haynes Manual in a fortuitously open boot. Our existing washer nozzles fell foul to monkey tinkering, the little monkeys, although happily the Missus found one of them after she got out of the enclosure – the nozzle, that is, not a monkey as that would have been a bit embarrassing and would not have fitted into the nozzle hole.

It was not the best of things to lose, either. I had the devil of a job finding exact replacements and had to go for something that looked a bit similar when searching

for our make and model returned nothing at all. I ordered two different sorts in case one did not fit, so we will have to wait and see if either of them does. In the meanwhile, we will limp along with just the one.

While I was away galivanting and picking up Mother on the way back, the Missus had stolen a march on getting the decorations completed. Much was done by the time we came back but she was still a way off the finishing touches and the illuminated wreath on the front door. I kept out of the way, and she finished the job shortly before teatime. It is definitely a work of wonder.

So too was getting a plumber to turn up before Christmas to fix our kitchen tap. Our usual plumber, the wonderful chap that he is, agreed to fit us in after his last job of the day today, which was in St Buryan at five o'clock. He must have saved some time during the day because he arrived with us not long after five o'clock, which was perfect. Sadly, his assessment of the condition of our problem was not quite so perfect – or rather his assessment was but the fact loomed large that we need a replacement tap and a replacement plumber who might be available for us before Christmas. Our man fixed up the tap as best he could. It still leaks, but not as badly and now we are aware of where it is leaking from, we can manage the problem for now.

It was onto the Internet in a bit of a hurry to find a suitable replacement and one that met our plumber's suggested criteria regarding the securing pin and the connections. Even if that tap arrived tomorrow, we still need to find an alternative and available plumber. Happily, our man had a couple of numbers he will let us have and, fingers crossed, we can get one of them in sharpish.

We are away deep tomorrow at a supplier's with a very early start pencilled in because we have to be back the same day. The likelihood is that you get a day off Diary silliness on Thursday, although I might yet surprise you.

December 6th – Monday

What a very strange interlude yesterday's little upset was. At the risk of sounding smug or tempting providence, it was the first time I had experienced being 'ill' for quite a considerable time. I have not had so much as a cold for years, let alone anything worse. Having an unusually raised temperature – for me even 36 degrees is raised – was something of a novelty especially as I did not feel the least bit poorly if you exclude a bit of joint ache, which to be fair is getting more normal by the day.

I must thank you all for your well-wishes, ahem – narry a bleddy one – and bunches of grapes obviously fed to me by the army of attentive nurses sent in to assure my urgent recovery. It is good to know you all care. Yes, I know you were all down the pub getting blasted with party poppers going off and streamers filling the air.

I felt quite full of beans when I eventually dragged myself from my bed. The bleddy hound was clearly unfussed about getting up at all until I made it perfectly clear that I was awake and was about to move. The wind that has been with us seemingly forever, appeared to drop out a bit late in the day yesterday but by the time we ventured out it was beginning to pick up again. There are signs that the bleddy hound is becoming a bit more comfortable with going down to the beach, just in time to be chased off by the tide again in a few days time.

We will not be the only ones chased off the beach by the look of it. When we went out again in the middle of the day, we noted that all of the active fishing punts have been dragged off the slipway. This is a sure sign that some big sea is expected and, having looked, Tuesday evening going through to Wednesday looks like the danger time just as spring tides are burgeoning again. It is arriving with a big wind behind it, although that looks like it might be coming in from the west, which is slightly better than from the northwest as it has of late.

The wind had increased considerably into the afternoon when we went out. It is particularly keen around the corner of the Lifeboat station where it can whip you off your feet if you are not paying attention. We paused just at the top of the slipway to get the full effect and while the bleddy hound did her Snoopy and the Red Baron impression with her ears streaming out behind. It was a poor show without the goggles and flying helmet. Because I had forgotten my flying helmet, which resembles a woolly hat and the hood of my hooded sweatshirt was not quite up to the job of adequate substitute, the bleddy hound decided to stay down on the breezy beach for much longer than was strictly necessary.

My ears were burning when we eventually got back but we had been lucky enough to avoid the relatively frequent showers that came blowing through every now and again. I had been careful to avoid them all day, including a trip to the gymnasium, which I could find no reason to put off even having not twenty four hours earlier being on death's door – alright, it is just a saying. I was still up for and enjoyed a blistering session with no apparent backlash of effects other than feeling a lot warmer than I had when I left the flat.

I was not entirely idle through the morning, although I definitely was for the afternoon. There had been a gradual build-up of cardboard and other packing detritus from the various things that had been delivered over the last month. This was strewn across the immediate area as you go through the first electric sliding doors in The Cove and was creating quite a hazard. Our big waste bin outside was empty and so I lost most of the non-cardboard into that while I flattened the cardboard into a box and tucked it away until the next collection.

In the meanwhile, since she could not do the outside tree, the Missus had become motivated to start the decorations inside the flat. This involves moving furniture around the room including the heavy sideboard thing where all manner of heavy things are collected. Once emptied, it is still considerably heavier than any other

single thing that we have. The Missus usually does this by herself, although heaven knows how, but even with two of us it required sliding rather than lifting. When we were buying our new electric chairs, we were offered, during the post-sale upselling period, special sliding casters made for sliding furniture across carpets at some horrendous price. I thought of these while we dragged the sideboard and resolved to purchase some for when we - or possibly the Missus by herself – moves it back to its non-Christmas position. If it does not make it easier it might help not leave tram lines across the carpet marking out our route.

By the end of the evening, the Missus had completed decorating the tree and putting up all the other lights and Christmas ornaments across the room. It is a real tree, she insists, and all the decorations on it are white, which is quite striking. There are many other things I could compliment the Missus on, but she certainly has a talent for Christmas decorating as you will have witnessed from the shop window displays. When we eventually get outside to do the tree, you will be able to bear witness for yourself before the next named storm comes along and tests it.

We leaned the name of the new storm, Barra, on the television forecast last night. I had quite forgotten what it was and had to look it up. We are allowed 21 storms this season, after which we will have to call them 'The Storm with No Name' or 'Arwen II' or maybe, 'The Return of Arwen' or better still, 'Arwen 2: Judgement Day'. I knew that we occasionally share the honours of naming with Ireland, but I was unaware that we also brought Netherlands in on the game, which is a bit random. We have to wait for storm eight for Herman.

Whoever said reading the Diary was not educational? Oh, alright.

December 5th – Sunday

The doctor said that I was likely to have some pain in my arm at the site of yesterday's injection. She was not kidding. It was like someone had hit me with a club hammer. As a consequence, I was up out of bed ahead of the bleddy hound waking me up, which was not a bad thing as I had to get my act together for a trip up to the range.

Our walk out in the morning was a good sampler for whether the clothes I had selected for the day were going to be warm enough. They appeared to be at the time but after five hours in the teeth of the gale up on the hillside, I was markedly colder than I would have liked. Nevertheless, it was a spiffing wheeze shooting lots of plates with a pump action shotgun. I am sure that it is not everyone's cup of tea but each to their own; it would drive me to distraction sitting for hours playing a game of chess or doing a jigsaw puzzle, but I suppose I might have been warmer undertaking those pursuits.

I agreed to discard the afternoon session in favour of the Missus taking Mother to the St Buryan Christmas lights switch on. There was a church service too and the St

Buryan Male Voice Choir in attendance. I was to stay at home with the bleddy hound but it required my attendance sooner than I would have been back had I stayed for the full range session. As it was, I had to tarry a little later than half time because it was the range AGM. Normally, these things can drag on but you are talking about a bunch of fellows and a girl who had better things to do than stand around listening to the sound of their own voices and business was concluded in just twenty minutes. There are meeting goers the world over who would pay good money to have their meeting conducted in such a succinct and efficient manner.

Possibly due to the cold or perhaps a side effect of the jab yesterday, I was pretty exhausted when the Missus dropped me back home with the bleddy hound. I was looking forward to a sit down with a hot cup of tea but when I went into the kitchen to make it, I noticed water all along the bottom of the under sink cupboards. I knew straight away what it was. For some time now, since summer in fact, we have noticed that the big multi-function snake-like tap has been wobbly. We were going to get the plumber in to fix it having tried and failed ourselves to tighten the nut. Somehow or other, we had managed to put it off and the work had remained wanting since then. It was only a matter of time, I suppose, that the wobbling would loosen the connection or weaken the hose leading to it. The upshot was, instead of sitting down with a cup of tea, I had to remove everything from the cupboard and find somewhere for it after wiping it down then mopping up the copious amount of water on the two shelves and the floor. I will be calling the plumber first thing tomorrow.

The act of cleaning my shotgun and putting all the gear away required extreme effort, far more than would normally be the case. I smelled a rat. It seemed that I was very probably facing a side effect of yesterday's jab similar to the one the Missus had. This was disastrous. As my strength slipped away, I had the choice of calling for an ambulance or, with a couple of paragraphs still to write, finish the Diary. I concluded with my last minutes of consciousness that I could not let you down twice in a week, dear reader. I dismissed the fact I was beginning to hallucinate and talk gibberish as any reader would probably never notice. I just summoned the last of my energy to press the 'send' key before I ...

Alright, it's a fair cop, guv but society's to blame. My descent into poorliness was nothing of the sort. It was a vague feeling of something not being quite right along with a mild aching in my joints that could well have been explained by my exertions at the range. My temperature was normal, so I dismissed it. It was not until about an hour later that the aching became a little more pronounced and my temperature was climbing but I still did not exactly feel ill. Even at its peak, my temperature did not reach the giddy height that the Missus managed last weekend where I was unsure whether to call for help or fry an egg on her head. The Missus was in bed for the best part of three days – alright, some of that was normal – and I managed three hours. By the time I went to bed, I was right as ninepence, although quite what is right about ninepence I will never know.

Well I never did. At least I did not have to do the washing up – we do not have a working kitchen sink.

December 4th – Saturday

Amazingly, things almost went according to plan in the morning. I had got up early so that I could dab behind me ears and make myself beautiful for the medical staff I was scheduled to see shortly into the morning, which, of course, did not take very long at all. I just had time to run the bleddy hound down the beach and feed her when she came back before I had to leave. Mindful that I could not have a late Diary two days in a row, I posted it without doing my morning check, so it came out warts and all. For those of you reading the Diary after ten o'clock, this would have been seamless, as I corrected it by then but for all you early birds, I must assure you that I am lucky rather than Lucy and my tenses are now all correct.

One thing I was not expecting in the morning was a particularly heavy and icy shower blowing at speed through The Cove. The wonderful Meteorological Office's website had assured me last night that we were in for a day of high winds and no rain at all. The website writers must have stuck their heads out of the window at some time during the morning and hurriedly changed the pictures to ones with rain on them as it was a little more accurate when I looked later. Having done that, of course, we did not get another shower for the rest of the day (alright, there was a minor shower for about two minutes), so it was still wrong. A somewhat lighter shower blew through again as we were coming off the beach first thing, which had the effect of giving the bleddy hound a kick up the bottom and hurrying her home a little quicker than we might otherwise have done. This was most helpful being as I was under the clock.

I took my time after an initial rush into town as I realised that I might get there a little too early for my appointment. As it happened, I was right on time. Even early doors it was deceptively busy at the medical centre. At first glance there was hardly a soul about but all the little honeycomb of rooms were occupied and when I was issued out into the waiting room, it was socially distanced full. There is something very surreal about a waiting room for after your appointment but we had to tarry for fifteen minutes to ensure we did not keel over at the wheel on the way home. Happily, there was no keeling over in the waiting room, either.

I was gone from home for less than an hour. I did not get my regulation cup of tea before I left, so I made sure it was the first thing I had when I came back. Heading back to the kitchen afterwards to prepare my breakfast I noticed that the Missus was getting motivated to get up and get cracking. She is super keen to collect the decorations from The Farm and press on with getting everything finished. I managed to persuade her that breakfast was a little more urgent than decorations and she grudgingly agreed to wait.

I left her at The Farm, collecting selected decorations – we only have the two trees and sufficient decorations for a forest – while I went and collected Mother who was keen to see the spectacle of me cooking tea for a change. By the time we arrived back, the Missus was still collecting, so I left Mother in the pleasantly warm cabin making tea and made preparations to change the battery in the stock shed.

I was a little disturbed that the Missus had reported that the lights in the cabin were dimmer than normal. It was not that long ago that I had changed the battery and she was adamant that she had not left the lights on at any point. The battery installed just before the start of hostilities at the start of the year had lasted through the summer, a good seven months, and the winter one last year had been good through until March, although it gets little use during the winter. When I checked, the leisure battery that was installed in the shed was not even registering on the monitor so it was less than 10 percent full but still worked the lights. I changed it out with the spare attached to the solar panels next to the cabin and will keep an eye on it. The batteries are supposed to last years and for the price of them, so they should.

With the truck loaded up with decorations, there was enough time for a cup of tea in the cabin and survey our land as it stretches toward the sea on the south coast. Our land actually stretches to the end of the field in the direction of the sea but it sounded better the way I put it first.

The grand plan was to put the tree up in the afternoon but the weather had different ideas. The northwesterly wind had kicked in again, blowing straight into the bay in 50 miles per hour gusts. This was no weather to be putting up trees in and would have severely hampered our efforts if we had tried. I was quite impressed last year that it withstood a 70 miles per hour storm at one point but at least we were able to erect it in relatively benign conditions first. Having not learnt my lesson from earlier, I checked the weather forecast and discovered that even higher winds are due to persist all the way until Thursday. At the moment, Thursday is penned in as tree day.

I am reasonably sure that you will not thank me for writing in detail about cooking tea. I will tell you that it involved using some of the meat that we had direct from a local farmer and very nice it was too. I will cut to the chase and report that we all survived the experience and I am all ready for an appearance at the range tomorrow.

December 3rd – Friday

Oh, it broke.

I am sure that has been a matter of huge disappointment to both of you that the Diary was not delivered to your screen in the usual manner today, or rather, yesterday. Alright, it was a minor inconvenience. No? Oh, well I was quite surprised that anyone noticed at all to be fair.

What happened was I made the schoolboy error of upgrading the desktop software to the latest revision and failed to test it. To be honest, had I done so it simply would have broken earlier but I guess the support people would have had a few extra hours to work on it. As it stands at present, which is late in the afternoon of the day in the title, I have had no response after the initial response that asked me to do something that I had already tried. I have just sent an electronic message asking if the support person got my previous message because if he did not I have just wasted five hours waiting for him to be beavering away fixing the problem when he was sitting twiddling his fingers waiting for the reply I sent that never got there. At present, it rather looks like you will be free of me for the whole weekend. You lucky, lucky people.

It was a grey old morning with mizzle swirling in the air. It did not get any better in the afternoon and, in fact, for a while it got worst with some proper rain. Naturally, this came in just as the Missus returned from her shopping trip and needed a hand to unload the truck. The bleddy hound was less than pleased as it also coincided with the time she gets to run out in the middle part of the day. I sent her out with the Missus since the Missus had already been out in it longer than me and there did not seem to be much point in us both getting wet, I told her, which unbelievably I got away with.

We had also got away light in the morning for our walk out with just the mizzle to contend with. As ever it was a short run too, although we did get as far as quite near the bottom end of the beach before the bleddy hound turned tail and headed back for her breakfast. It was still vaguely dry when I headed to the gymnasium a little later. It was actually later than I planned because it was a while before this time that I discovered we had a problem uploading the Diary update and spent some time trying to fix it. I sort of knew we were in trouble when it also failed to upload from the pre-upgraded version of the software on the backup laptop.

The Missus was in a bit of a desperate hurry to get out to do the shopping and left almost as I returned from my blistering session. At least that part was working. I was suspicious until I discovered that she was going to pick up the Christmas trees, one for us in the flat and the other for the pavement opposite the shop, like last year. She has found the ideal place to get them, too, because she likes to see them before they have been wrapped up in that netting they use.

I had a call when she was on her way back explaining the plan. The plan was that I would help get the tree out of the back of the truck, get Mother out of the front of the truck and head up to The Farm where we keep all the decorations in a big steel container between seasons. There is so much of it that it needs its own shed, which is a blinding improvement on keeping it in the loft and dragging it down each year. That was a particularly onerous part of Christmas and merely added to my dislike of the whole season.

You may have gathered, dear reader (if you are able to be a dear reader at the moment), that the Christmas tree across the road will, once again, supplant the tree

and decorations in the shop window. I cannot blame the Missus that after at least fifteen Christmases of doing it she has finally thrown in the towel. Yes, it was a masterly work of art that she created each year, but it was the result of extreme effort and several days of planning, buying additional bits and much time implementing. I hope that it has not left too many people broken hearted, but the Christmas tree will be splendid, I am sure.

Closing in on five o'clock, I started to panic a bit that I had not heard back from my website support man. They are usually pretty responsive and do not let go until a problem is fixed, so this was out of character. I telephoned about fifteen minutes ahead of their closing and was lucky enough to catch someone who knew what he was doing. I allowed him to login to our machine and spent about half an hour fiddling and trying things. I have no particular clue of what he did or what was wrong for him to fix – I usually like to know for future reference, but since our man had stayed behind school to fix the problem, I did not want to hold him up further just for my edification. It works, at least for Diary reading but I do have a bit of a problem with people buying things, not that this will bother you in the slightest, dear reader, so it was hardly worth mentioning.

After that close run thing, I believe I am worthy of a beer or two. Not too many as I am being jabbed in the morning and must drive there. I can hardly wait.

December 2nd – Thursday

Each morning in the week I receive a price list update from our fresh fish supplier. It always has a title showing their best offer of the day. It must be comedy day today because the special offer is for Wild Headless Halibut. That has got to be the punchline for a number of jokes or the subject of the latest Stephen King novel.

The content of the day was not the most dynamic that we have ever had. Much of it was dictated by the fact that it has turned quite a bit chillier overnight, so the sensible course of action was to stay in out of the breeze. This, of course, was not possible first thing in the morning because there was a bleddy hound to take out.

It alarmed me rather that I had to get myself out of bed rather than be forced out by the antics of said bleddy hound. I had awoken at the prescribed time but the bleddy hound stayed resolutely asleep by my side. All I generally have to do is to demonstrate in some way, such as breathing*, that I am awake, and she is pushing me out of the bed. This morning I was able to turn over, sit up and lay down again. I probably could have got away with dancing a jig or some castanet playing, and she would not have stirred, so, having arrived at fed up from lying there awake, I got up anyway.

By the time I was halfway through my early morning schedule, the bleddy hound was awake and keen for me to lift her down from the bed. This she can and will do this by herself but only if food is involved. We were a good half an hour behind our usual

time but there still was not a soul about in The Cove when we struck out for the beach. The big wind had stopped howling, but I was not sure whether that was because it had diminished from the previous day or just changed direction.

Whatever the case, it was still pretty breezy when we rounded the corner of the Lifeboat station and headed for the beach. The bleddy hound is only slightly more relaxed about heading down there but you can see that she is on high alert every moment she is there. Despite having a dickie arthritic paw she can make good speed back in the direction of the slipway when she is done. She was way ahead of me this morning that had me chasing after her like a wild headless halibut.

It is as well that I managed to string out our walk down to the beach to three paragraphs as the rest of the day rather paled into insignificance. I had already nibbled at the geet pile of invoices that had accumulated since we last input and filed any. The work had to be done so I set to it with some determination to get them all out of the way today. It is not a swift process as each invoice and entry needs to be checked for accuracy. Also, some need to be broken down into categories of type of expense and whether they have VAT or not. For some we need to calculate the VAT element because some of the expense is personal, such as the telephone bill.

I was so engrossed in my work that the next time I looked at any time piece it was two o'clock in the afternoon. The trouble was, just as I thought I had got to the end, I found more receipts and invoices tucked away. That made me about as happy as a wild headless halibut.

I took a breather to take the bleddy hound out when I noticed the time. As the tide was in, we had no choice other than to walk around the block in the biting cold. The temperature had clearly not put off anyone who wanted to head out and about as the car park was quite busy as we wandered through. They had probably heard about the raging sea but had missed it by 24 hours. The bleddy hound was clearly not of the opinion that a good brisk walk would get the blood flowing and the temperature up. She ambled along with no particular purpose and sniffed at every blade of grass that came within range. Regardless of the chill, it was still preferable to sitting at the computer screen inputting invoice details.

As if to provide me with some sort of reward, some happy soul over at the Lifeboat station decided that we should have an exercise launch in the evening. The inspectors had been there all day and the day before doing what inspectors do and also taking some of the Boat Crew through their paces in order to tick off their progress in the training schedules. The most prominent of these was one of the more experienced crew heading to be passed out as a mechanic. This had involved several weeks of training including a course at the RNLI headquarters in Poole.

Part of the final segment of the mechanic training happens at sea where the inspectors arrange for all manner of 'problems' to occur that the prospective mechanic has to identify and fix. These are predicted faults for which there are

manual fail-over systems such as the fly-by-wire steering going up the chute or an engine failure. We were told at our post launch review how our boat also joined in the fun by producing some real faults of its own that our boy gamely fixed without assistance.

Because we were expecting the weather conditions to deteriorate and this the need to recover the boat at near low water, we launched earlier than usual for an exercise at half past six o'clock in darkness. Initially, we were quite short on the shore side and as the Inshore boat was launching as well, I volunteered myself to take care of the Tooltrak which the few others catered for the big boat launch and recovery set up. It has been a very long time since I drove the Tooltrak Inshore launch vehicle and anyone watching might have assumed that it was being driven on this occasion by a wild headless halibut. I soon had the hang of it again, particularly helped by the fact that the Inshore Crew wanted to practice some launches and recoveries.

We were finished with the small boat well ahead of the big boat returning, which freed me up to help out on the long slip. The boat had been out a little less time than we anticipated mainly, as we were told later, that the inspectors had managed to fit much of the assessing in during the day time. It was in the direction of eight o'clock that the radio crackled into life to explain that the boat was waiting to come in. By this time we had more than enough on our team to execute what was clearly a textbook recovery with hardly any slack to be taken up in the cable come the time. The boat was brought up to the station doors, washed down, refuelled and put to bed in no time at all with our extended crew of half a dozen or more. We are, after all, a very numerous, very excellent Shore Crew.

There was just time to retire home and before bedtime sit with a small plate of black bomber cheddar cheese that the Missus let me have and a nightcap of malt kindly donated by the Aged Parent for me bringing the Missus up last week – the silly sausage but very well received, nonetheless.

*Yes, I know I still breathe when I am asleep, but it counts as a reasonable excuse to bleddy hounds who reckon it is time to get out of bed.

December 1st – Wednesday

Our raging wind returned during the night. I know this because the bleddy hound could not settle, either because of the howling wind but more likely because her routine had been upset by the Missus heading off.

She told me she had a blinding good time, the Missus not the bleddy hound, she is not talking to me at the moment. They had met up with some more family members on the way and had headed off to Longleat Festival of Light, which is something to do with Christmas lights, I think. Obviously, I would have been delighted if I could have gone but someone had to stay behind and look after the bleddy hound. It was also my day for polishing the carpet fibres and shampooing the goldfish and there

was an interesting patch of wet paint down the road that I wanted to see dry. What a blow, eh?

Later on in the day, the sea joined the wind in being raging but when we first headed out, it was chiefly benign. This had much to do with it being low water and a long and inviting beach was awaiting us. For the first time in days, the bleddy hound accepted the invitation and we had a wander about on the sand. Most of it had been swept clean by the previous tide with just a few strands of weed down by the water line at the bottom end of the beach. Luckily, it was still wet because otherwise it would have been blowing all over the place. I noticed that there is a pile of sand at the top of the slipway pressed up against the wall from the last northern blow we had.

The sea really started having a go as we moved toward the middle of the day and high water. The direction of swell seemed to be piling in from the northwest so there was not a great deal of crashing up the cliffs opposite. Most of the energy was reserved for slamming into the beach and over the Harbour Wall and it was fair boiling over Cowloe in a big white mess. I would say there was some sand shifting going on down on the big beach, but it was dark by the time we got to have a look.

It seemed sensible to stop in for most of the day and do things. I cannot say that I moved mankind forward any, but I did move the old computer down to the shop along with the woofer and speakers in readiness for taking to the tip, sorry household waste recycling centre. There they will be tipped into the furnace they have down St Dennis way, I imagine. The only bit of actual recycling will go on at Wheal Alfred, the scrap metal yard where I will take the old ladder towel rail from the bathroom.

I also took a nibble at the invoices that we have amassed since we closed. The Missus did a geet pile of them after I showed her how but neither of us had touched them since. It is the end of the quarter, so they will have to be done in the next few days and dropped off to the accountant. The end of the month rather took me by surprise, I think, as I did not expect November to evaporate quite so quickly.

When I headed into the kitchen to do my breakfast earlier, I noticed what a state we had made of the wall by the dishwasher. Various spillages had stained the wall and the floor around it and for some reason I felt quite affronted by the mess. I am normally not allowed near a broom or a mop in the flat on the basis that 'I do not do it right'. In the absence of anyone to tell me I was not doing it right I collected a mop bucket and scourer and had a go on my hands and knees. I was quite delighted by my efforts and considered doing the rest of the kitchen floor. Fortunately, I checked myself in the nick of time. It would be quite a tragedy if I discovered that I had 'done it right' and was asked to do it from hence forth. I went and polished by walking boots instead.

The Missus arrived about an hour before tea. I had pulled some steak out of the freezer in a symbolic killing the fatted calf moment but my efforts were spurned. The Missus had stopped by a shop somewhere and garnered some kebab meat from

their stock. I had no idea that you could buy such a thing anywhere other than a kebab shop, but I suppose it was only a matter of time. She shredded some salad to add to the meat and some warm pitta bread so we could make our own. I considered drinking heavily beforehand and throwing the kebab down my front then going to sleep on the sofa as a sort of homage to wasted youth. On reflection it would probably have been more of a wasted kebab - if not a late entry for the Turner Prize - so I ate it instead.