

NOW YOU HAVE IT NOW YOU DON'T

“Do you know I'd pay a quid a hundredweight for that manure, honestly I would!” I pricked up my ears. I simply couldn't help overhearing the remark made by none other than Arthur Bromley, the Hon Secretary of the Allotments Association. I was having a quiet lunchtime pint in my local 'The Thorn' when the discussion took place.

The Royal Naval Air Station, Stretton near Warrington, Lancs or HMS Blackcap to give it its proper title, was running down. The former Fleet Air Arm WW2 base was no longer a front line Air Station and was gradually being decommissioned. As an esteemed member of the elite 'Buffer's Party' it was part of our daily routine to ensure the smooth running and compliance with the promulgated instructions were carried out to the letter. With the message that 'everything must go' emblazoned on our brains together with the golden opportunity to make a few quid if at all possible, nothing should be overlooked.

Arthur or 'Brom' as he was affectionately known, was referring to the huge mound of accumulated horse manure occupying an area behind the stables near the base where the former Captain and Commanding Officer kept his beloved horse Khan. Both had long since departed and the stables and surrounding area were gradually being cleaned before handing back to the 'Estate Management Authority' The manure had been 'weathering' for years and was ideal for agricultural fertiliser purposes.

“Are you really serious Brom” I casually enquired. “I most certainly am” he declared enthusiastically. I beckoned him over and we engaged in earnest conversation. “How much manure do you reckon” I asked him? Brom took a long pull at his pint and then his pipe before answering. “I figure there is at least 8 or 10 tons there” he said quietly. “I tell you what Brom, if you've got a trailer and someone to load it, I will get old Rueben to give you a hand. You give me 100 quid cash and I will see Rueben OK. There should be a little profit for both of us in it”.

Brom gazed at me intently. Another long pull at pint and pint, spit on his hand and we shook on it. “Saturday morning about 9oclock and it's a deal, I will see you in here at dinner time”, said Brom. “In the meantime, I will get hold of old Rueben and tell him to be there” I replied as I drained my pint and walked out

Having told Rueben about the manure I handed him a £10 note which I felt was money well spent I felt rather pleased with myself. I did not even have to do anything and I'd got a ton cash. In the meantime back to the Buffer's Store to see what else was in the offing. Everything was going well and the lads were all involved in some scheme or other in order to swell our coffers. Things were pretty quiet in general and apart from the weekly firewood and coal and coke run to married quarters there was little else to occupy us. Luckily for me I did have a couple of prior commitments. There were some pottery figurines and (antiques) to deliver to the American Base nearby and that was about it.

None of the lads had anything in the 'melting pot' and things were looking quite bleak. "Can't any of you buggers think of anything to raise a few quid" I complained during stand easy later that day. "Most of us are skint until pay day" said one. "We've all run out of ideas" said another". "What about the Yanks, they are always good for a laugh", said someone else. "Nothing doing from the Base" I offered. A gloomy silence and general depression settled over the room. A couple of the lads were playing 'Shove Ha'penny' in the corner. When the glimmering of an idea came to me.

"What about a 'Traditional English Pub Game Tournament"? The lads looked at each other and one by one they grinned. " That's a good idea we could maybe challenge the Yanks". 'What about the locals, they will be dead chokker if they can't take part". "Well, that's it then, somebody nip down to the 'Thorn' and run the idea by the Landlord, he is bound to think of something else". "How do we make a few bob then" asked someone else. More silence followed before someone ventured "We could charge an entry fee and so much each game" suggested one. "Someone will have to put up a kitty" said another. I suddenly realised that they were all looking at me.

"Come on JR, you've got all the money, start the ball rolling". Our 'Stand Easy' reveries were suddenly shattered by the jangling of the telephone at my elbow. I picked it up and a voice whom I immediately recognised as the Station Fire Officer bellowed in my ear. "JR, you and the other two Handlers, outside the main gate now, the appliance will pick you up, there is a house fire in the village and we will be there before the local Brigade". Repeating the message we were already out of the door and at the main gate as the Base Pump Escape slowed down to pick us up. we were all onboard within a split second and siren blaring we were off again.

As we reached the crossroads and turned left towards Appleton village we could see the smoke arising from a group of houses about 200 yards away. Within seconds we were there and hit the ground running. As soon as we reached the cottage a group of villagers told us that the elderly occupant was safe. Grabbing the hose reel a couple of us dashed through the rear kitchen door to be greeted by a pall of smoke obviously caused by a chip pan which had caught fire and exploded spewing its contents over the kitchen. One of the lads had already carried the burning pan outside and we soon had the fire extinguished by using another single line of hose.

When the smoke had cleared and following cancellation of the Fire Service we carried out an inspection of the cottage. The kitchen was in a dreadful state and all the furniture inside completely ruined. The cooker and cabinets were also a write off. The resident of the cottage was in tears and being comforted by friends. Nudging one of the Fire Crew I explained that we could replace all the furniture and fittings from our Barrackmaster's storage. After the departure of our Fire Tender and crew and as it was well past secure, the three Buffer's Party decided to grab a pint at the 'Thorn' nearby where the subject of conversation was of course the fire at the nearby cottage. Taking the opportunity to discuss the proposed 'Pub Games' with the Landlord we subsequently decided to donate the proceeds to the elderly lady who's cottage had caught fire.

Returning to the Base and having showered and changed into civvies and had a bite to eat we returned to the 'Thorn' and an absolutely packed house of appreciative locals no doubt impressed and excited at the prospect of the 'Pub Games' which we decided to hold in a couple of days time and donating all proceeds to the 'Landlords Fire Fund' and boxes were already in evidence on the Bar. I explained to the Landlord that I anticipated a nice little earner the following day and would make my contribution then.

About 10.am next day, Saturday I went down to the stable yard and to my surprise the huge mound of horse manure had completely disappeared and the area was scrubbed and spotless. " Good old Rueben" I remember thinking to myself, " He certainly was on the ball and no mistake I must call and see Brom and pick up my little bonus later, I smiled to myself as I made my customary Saturday morning rounds and administering to my regular customers before 'Tot' and lunch time. Calling into the 'Thorn' on Saturday afternoon was almost a ritual and when I entered the pub I was met with a huge cheer. Grabbing a pint which someone kindly thrust into my hand I remember asking the Landlord "What was all the fuss about"

"It's you, you bugger" he replied. Feeling extremely mystified I asked " I don't understand Albert". "It's your wonderful gesture towards Mrs Nolloth" Albert explained. " Albert," I almost grabbed him by the shirt "What is going on and who is Mrs Nolloth?". Albert looked puzzled. "Mrs Nolloth is the old lady who had the fire in her cottage yesterday". It was my turn to look puzzled. "Yes, I remember, what about her?" Albert looked relieved. "You remember the business you had with Brom and the manure?" "Yes", I replied now getting a little agitated. "Well you said that you would start the fund raising off for her and the money Brom gave me to give to you, I just put it into her Fund". He beamed feeling very pleased with himself. I looked at him incredulously. "You mean to say that you used my hundred quid"? Albert looked hurt. " I thought that is what you meant when you said you would start things off, you didn't mind did you?" I must have looked shocked as the penny dropped. "No Albert, of course I didn't mind" I replied shaking my head in total bewilderment.

As for the 'Traditional English Pub Games Tournament' a few days later, it raised the princely sum of £500 which was presented to a very tearful and grateful old lady who was able to completely re-equip her kitchen and living room after decoration by none other than the 'Buffer's Party'. The 'Tournament' proved so popular that it became a regular event up until the time that both military bases finally closed their doors for the last time. The story has a happy ending as the old lady, Mrs 'Emmy' Nolloth, our diminutive beneficiary decided to name her re-furbished residence 'Blackcap Cottage'

AH! WELL, EASY COME EASY GO, AS THE SAYING GOES. I'M CERTAIN THAT THERE WILL BE MANY MORE OPPORTUNITIES AND THERE WERE.