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1962/63

It was the year of the big freeze & southern england was to suffer three months of arctic conditions the like of which we had never experienced before

Snow had fallen heavily over the Christmas holiday period, thawed slightly then froze even harder until the surrounding countryside looked sheathed in glass. Harshly beautiful but almost impossible to work in if so we did you worked mainly outside.

During this time most building contractors laid their men off. Others kept their men on by paying them a small retainer to do nothing. Our firm with far more foresight bought up an old bldg & used our existing outside staff to renovate the inside for offices & drawing board space. The idea being when the weather broke we would take ~~work~~ ^{WORK} from those having to restart

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their business. This took care of most of our labour but having just recently increased our cladding force to avoid subcontracting^{OUT} it was decided to carry on working on some sites where it was at all possible if not economical. One such site was in Bowborough away to the east. The construction was complete on the steel work & storage side & because it was to be used for ^{THE} storage of grain large bins called hoppers^{WERE} erected for this purpose had shielded the site from the worst of the snow. The original cladding crew from Winchester was sent there & five men with previous cladding experience were sent there from their home district of Portsmouth.

We arrived ~~there~~ from the two different directions the Winchester crew who I've already introduced & the crew from

portsmouth. This consisted of two hard
 men one of whom was the foreman, one
 quiet spoken reserved chap who hated
 the cold & apparently after a few
 beers loved nothing better than to
 smash up Chinese Restaurants after
 first refusing to pay the bill also
 a newly married blond haired adonis
 who figured he was generally gods
 gift ^{TO THE FEMALE GENDER} ~~for the female gender~~ & a decent
 sort of chap that kept himself to
 himself read newspapers avidly
 from cover to cover & studied the
 financial pages with something
 approaching insatiable lust. He ~~the~~
~~apparently~~ did something in those
 days which was completely foreign to
 the ^{AVERAGE} working man. Invested money.
 He was also once you got to
 know him a much travelled &
 interesting person. ~~person~~

~~He was also~~ ^{THE} first person I've ever met who was a merchant seaman during the war & a whaler for several seasons after. His main claim to fame however is one which most chaps were curious to see was a photograph of himself ^{STOOD ALONGSIDE} ~~with~~ a ^{BLUE WHALE WITH THE} male whale's most important appendage on the deck behind him draped up over his shoulder & down along the deck in front of him & this in bitterly cold weather. There are certainly more things in heaven & earth. We had a works van for transporting us about but I had also brought my own car to enable our crew to get home for a few hours over the weekends. Not luxurious travel ^{HOWEVER} ~~though~~ ~~although~~ it was a Ford Popular & nearly new ^{BUT} ~~it~~ had no heater ^{OR} windscreen washers & demisting was from what

can only be described as a one bar electric fire ^{WORKED FROM THE CAR BATTERY} attached by suction cups to the inside bottom edge of the windscreen. This worked fairly well with two adults in the car but with four bulky lads puffing & blowing visibility was down to only a few feet sorry metres. The driver appeared from outside was ^{ONE OF} ~~an~~ a short sighted demented ^{OLD MAN} ~~the~~ ~~man~~ hunched over the wheel nose pressed against glass.

Having ascertained material would not be arriving until the morrow we went down into the town to look for digs knowing in these ^{CON} conditions they would be at a premium.

Having looked just about everywhere we took up residence in what was laughingly described as a com-

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mercant Hotel having suggested we only wanted to hire some rooms & not take up the peckhold which the proprietor did not think very funny. We compromised on a price with us sharing three to a room although neither we nor the proprietor were too happy about it but needs must so they say.

We also figured being three to a room would be warm. Some hopes however as the ice on the inside of the windows was certainly as thick as on the outside. There was no central heating in our room the only form of heating was an old fashioned electric fire fuelled by a meter alongside that took half crowns. Took them I might add quicker than a one armed bandit the only difference ~~was~~ ^{being} we never

got any cook book. Not only did it cost the earth but with demand on supplies being so heavy because of the cold it didn't even get very hot. With the fire laid on its back we couldn't even ^{HEAT} up four small tins of beans above luke warm. Well not before you died of starvation anyway. It was obviously time to go to bed. I lay in the darkness for what seemed an age trying to get warm but with little success.

Apparently I wasn't the only one as there was considerable movement & conversation coming from the other two lods. Turning over & switching on our one & only table lamp caused us all to erupt into uncontrollable laughter. We all had our issue donkey jackets (complete with logo) & best coats on our beds as well

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as the bed covers & interestingly we had all put on jerseys over our pyjamas. Two of us were also wearing woollen bobble hats pulled well down over the ears while the third was wearing a noval issue arctic style belochava. At least the laughter warmed us up a bit & we were able to get some sleep. The next morning after a very nice but light full english economy breakfast we went off to the site to await delivery of our material. As previously stated the building we had come to clad was one of our agricultural storage type made up of steel bins. The building was situated in a railway goods yard & was spanning a set of rails. The hoppers were set well above

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the track & the tapered bottoms
were closed off by a handle that
operated a sliding door to each
bin. This would allow for trucks
to be shunted under & filled with
grain which was a very quick &
efficient way of loading a train.

The hopper would be loaded
from farm trailers from around
the surrounding area using an
escalator system into the hopper
top.

A full height scaffold had been
erected around the building so
the access for work was very good.
Materials mainly asbestos cement
sheets started arriving & these were
offloaded as near as possible to
where they were required. While
all this was going one of the
lads was sent off to make the

tea. After being ^{10.}tealer for some time another lad was sent off to find the first. Both come back looking very dejected. Whats up said the foreman. Theres no water any-where said the first lad all the pipes are froze up & a mobile water tanker isn't due until this afternoon. When it does come it parks down by the houses & then only for a couple of hours.

If we need water for a whole day or so we will need some containers one kettle won't go far.

While this was going on the rest of us finished off loading & came over to go through the original routine. Whats up no water, why. Then the whales joined in no water were surrounded by the bloody stuff

all that white stuff called snow it only needs reconstituting. By the way you'll need a much bigger lump than your kettle as it tends to shrink in the process of melting down. It's also probably cleaner than you'll get from the water tanker. We were all very impressed with this practical outburst & immediately elected him chief tea boy.

The other chap that suffered the cold badly was at the same time elected chief fireman & set off to collect firewood that was fairly plentiful about the site. He also found an old oil drum & filled it full of holes by using a pick. Set up on stones it made the perfect

brozer. At least now we could come down off the scaffold & get a warm when it was needed which I might add was pretty frequently.

The second night at our hotel was no better than the first, again the evening meal was quite nice but not enough to sustain a man working outside in such harsh conditions. We decided therefore no matter how cold it was outside we would go out that evening & look for additional food.

I together with my roommates scoured the whole area & ~~could~~ ~~not~~ come up with something that only remotely resembled a cafe.

It was apparently the latest fad called a coffee bar. Serving something called espresso or capuccino. & hot bubbly stuff on triangular bits of toast

we ordered four cappuccinos & four bits of toast stuff.

When the cappuccino arrived at our table having passed through this huge gleaming machine with dial & handles everywhere & sounding like a steam express train it was in low bowl shaped cups. The cups were one third full of liquid & two thirds full of brownish froth. It tasted strongly of something but of what escapes me. We stayed there for the rest of the evening because it was much warmer than our hotel. Under the baleful eye of the Italian proprietor however we felt obliged to order more coffee & ended up having seven cups each.

Back at our hotel it was still as cold but this ^{time} with that

much coffee inside of us we stayed awake to enjoy it.

The next day at work we all decided that the one week we had booked at the hotel was going to be the first & last. While the rest of us got on with the job we went off to the nearest large town to look for better digs. He was gone most of the day having looked at several possible digs & said the one he'd booked for the following week was the best of a fairly mediocre bunch. The town in question was Royal Tunbridge Wells & the house was one of these large victorian terrace houses on three floors with an attic room used previously for a maid. The usual warning problem prevailed however no central heating but with fine ^{PLACES} ~~spots~~ in every room. That'll be great then

Sorry not quite. Plenty of fire places but no coal. Would there be a problem with using the fire places if we could come up with some fuel. The next week we moved ^{INB} found it to be much more acceptable than the hotel. The lady of the house was far more used to the eating needs of working men & we had a nice lounge with armchairs so the need to go out was far less pressing. We had a nice wood fire going on material scavenged from the site wood of any size shape or type was being cut into suitable lengths for the lounge fire. The only problem now was that keeping two fires going one on site & one back at the dig was using up our natural resources at an alarming rate. New plans were

needed. We ¹⁶needed logically something that burned much longer than wood & in smaller amounts for the lounge fire. Across the rails from our site was an area set aside as a coal yard. First we tried buying, no chance not sufficient for regular customers then we tried begging even less chance - it wasn't in our nature so we didn't sound convincing. We could have tried threats but they outnumbered us. No something more subtle was required. One of my granddad's favourite sayings came to mind. There's always more than one way of skinning a cat's paw.

A germ of an idea what we need today is the occasional snow ball fight ~~remember~~ remember as kids you would try & catch those thrown at you to throw them back well any thrown from the direction of

the coal yard & caught won't be going back. During the rest of the short time I spent on site we were able to just keep the lounge fire going.

The site fire was a different problem so even if we could steal enough coal we certainly couldn't burn it in full view of the yard. Plus we couldn't have that many snow ball fights without arousing suspicion.

The chief stoker came up with what we all considered a brilliant suggestion.

There was what appeared to be a disused siding close to our site with evergreen bushes shielding it from sight of the main yard. The idea was we would dig out the snow & remove every other railway sleeper so required using off cuts to wedge the rails up & replacing the snow. It was working well ~~during my time~~ ^{UP UNTIL I LEFT} site but what happened when the snow thawed I don't think.

After our second week at Crowborough
my mate & I were recalled to our
yard because a more urgent job
was available.

We were not unhappy to leave
there ^{APART FROM ANYTHING ELSE.} I'm sure the snow tea
was suffering from local gas works
fall out or something even worse.