

Waiting for Godstow

This is an account of The Magpie's first treasure-hunting trip to Godstow on 18th December 2022. The author apologises for the more opaque (and perhaps apt) references to Catastrophe!.

On the evening of 17th December, Mark casually solved the Cooke and Wheatstone telegraph code around the Barnwood advert on page 9 as if it were a Caesar cipher (based on having seen "something similar" in a crossword once, several years ago), yielding "29m from Bukell's bounds" (meaning the old Oxford city boundary). My first thought was to the effect of "that could come in handy later"; Mark's first thought was closer to "how soon can I get to Godstow, and do I really have to wait until the morning?".

There were two immediate consequences, the first being a rapid re-evaluation of my own travel possibilities. The second was a two-hour "journey" (as Google now nauseatingly calls it) into the bowels of the internet to dredge up 19th century maps, 21st century drone photographs and historical accounts of bound-beating by the sometime Mayor of Oxford.

During the course of this "journey", Mark remembered that he was ill and vicariously decided that he shouldn't spend the day outdoors in sub-zero temperatures. For every wise action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and thus shortly afterwards I (researched a few more Oxford college witch connections and then) set my alarm for 3:45am, intending either to roll over (proverbially speaking – recently broken ribs would prevent the actuality) or spark into action, based on a gauge of my enthusiasm level at that time.

Somewhat surprisingly, the result of the enthusiasm assessment was "sufficient", and by 4:30am I was inching my jalopy slowly through Cumbrian lanes, not quite sure whether or not I was hoping to meet an impassable snowdrift or ice patch which would curtail the day before it had properly begun. I did not, and at quarter past five I was southbound on the well-gritted M6 and able to relax and enjoy the journey.

This relaxation lasted approximately 15 minutes, which was the length of time it took me to reach and accidentally sail past Lancaster services. Before this point I had been vaguely aware that I needed fuel. After it, I checked the electronic reading: 17 miles' worth remaining. The next services were 26 miles away. This was a problem, and not one well suited to 5am on a Sunday in December. I swung off at the next junction and frantically checked my options. One nail-biting deviation to the nearest 24-hour garage later ('Remaining fuel' reading on arrival: 5 miles), the journey resumed.

On arriving at Godstow, I was dissuaded from parking in the Trout Inn car park by the stern "Patrons Only" sign. I did so anyway, partly because (i) I thought it likely I would be a patron at lunchtime, (ii) Mark had eaten there once and (iii) it was still dark.

The first instalment of treasure hunting went swimmingly. Google Earth proved accurate with respect to the fallen tree's location and likewise Alice regarding that of the hollow stone containing the "game prize". Ticket #1 and blue cat duly claimed, my already numb fingers shot off an electronic claim to the setters, also asking whether we should keep the cat or leave it in situ.



Next came the "29m" part. I started near the old Godstow Road and soon found a Tupperware box in a narrow slit in the ruined abbey wall. Somehow I wasn't as excited as I'd expected; perhaps this was almost

disappointingly easy? But at least we had found the treasure, or so I thought. Eagerly I opened the box: think again, said the Binsey Lane Cat. I returned the box to its original location, feeling slightly foolish.



Meanwhile, DaphneHQ had responded to say that yes, we could keep the cat, and by the way it was Egyptian and probably 3000 years old. Sensing inevitable disaster, and rather embarrassed at my hitherto casual handling of this extraordinary trophy, I broke off from the search to return the antique to the safety of my car, taking the opportunity there to re-warm at least a smattering of fingers before continuing.

The next three hours were mostly spent at my best approximation to 29 metres from something that might once have been the boundary of the City of Oxford, investigating every tree, rabbit-hole and other nook and/or cranny I could find. About 90% of this time involved detaching myself from thorn bushes. I also searched all the abbey walls quite thoroughly, finding a second Tupperware box in another hole much closer to the main part of the ruins; this contained an identical Binsey Lane Cat message to the first. Further south I managed to find a couple of Bu(c)kell's boundary posts, both thoroughly overgrown, but no sign of treasure. Thematically, I did find a lot of twigs and sticks, although it didn't seem an appropriate time to make a broomstick and anyway, what would I sweep?

During the morning the rain thoroughly set in and by midday I was losing impetus somewhat, and starving. Intending to make good on my tacit promise of patronage I headed for the Trout; however, the other clientele just arriving made it clear that this was not an establishment for "my sort" (bedraggled, sodden, filthy). Luckily, one of DaphneHQ's myriad interns, Maureen, had recommended the Jacob's Inn in Wolvercote, where the "All welcome; dogs preferred" sign was much more inviting. Fish and chips followed; when asked, I confirmed that lunch had been delicious but added that I'd have liked more chips. "You should have said!", I was told. This instruction to overcome natural British sensibilities has been duly noted for any future visit (and passed onto Maureen).

Whilst in the vicinity it seemed only sensible to check out the cat's residence of Binsey Lane, which itself was not so far from the old city boundary and also (as advised over lunch by another team member, John) led to a healing well referenced as the "treacle well" both by Lewis Carroll and the main hunt PDF – a possible lead? Half an hour later I was standing in the hallowed grounds of St Margaret of Antioch, which reminded me of one of my favourite crossword clues (possibly written by Mark?): "Cars in Antioch could possibly be _____ (13)". The church gave the impression that it had stood unvisited for decades if not centuries. The well was where it was supposed to be, but despite a rigorous search of walls, ivy and trees, nothing materialised.



As I prepared to look further afield, a stream of people began to arrive. Note to self: 2:30pm on a Sunday is not a good time to go hunting in a churchyard. One of those making her way slowly to the church door bore a striking resemblance to the old woman from the text adventure game; I was briefly tempted to shout "Alios age rabidos!" before thinking better of it, and anyway she probably wouldn't have replied. Realising that my own presence might be questioned, I began solemnly to pay my respects to the various gravestones, including one "Tish Speight" whom I noted was also commemorated on an engraved wooden bench nearby.

Once the congregation had assembled inside, I slunk back out to the lane, searched the accessible areas nearby and then walked the mile back down the road to my car, searching the hedgerows but broadly resigned to abandoning for the day. But en route, a nagging thought crystallised; belatedly, I realised that the two "Mind the cat" signs I'd passed whilst driving up Binsey Lane were not only thematic but also familiar. The Starquake page! I hurried back to the car and fired up the PDF. Yes! And the recently released poem, about following the cats – surely, then, this page had to represent Binsey Lane? A quick bit of graphic editing confirmed this – and re-reading the poem, *surely* the treasure had to be after the Perch Inn (indicated by the northernmost cat on p5) and around the second bend?

Daylight was fading, but in a rare show of aforethought I had thrown a torch into my car in the early hours. One more go, I decided. Rapidly I headed back up the road, reciting the poem to myself ("carved Venetian stones"... "my words are somewhat softer"... "cut perhaps in wood?") and soon found myself once again in the churchyard, before stopping and realising I'd already searched everywhere, twice.

A candle was burning in the church doorway; jinxed, perhaps, or with wax too hot to handle? Either way, it illuminated the graveyard just enough to make out the trees, the gravestones, the bench... the bench! The engraved bench! "Words.. cut perhaps in wood" – yes, it must be!! And given its shape, the only hiding place would be on the bottom of the seat. With fluttering heart I lay down in the muddy puddle, craned my neck and directed the torchlight upwards...

How can one describe to someone who has not participated in Pablo's ATH, or perhaps any puzzle or treasure hunt – or even a total non-puzzler – how can one describe a moment such as this? A silly alarm, four hours of driving, seven of searching in freezing rain, more than 10 miles walked, drenched to the skin, sprawled in a pool of water and with twilight descending rapidly – what could ever convey the feeling? My trembling fingers searched one, two, three corners of the underside of the bench – finding nothing, each time – but then, just as hopes were about to be dashed, there came from the fourth corner, incredibly, the unmistakable glint of Tupperware!



We had done it! With a little help from the Binsey Lane Cat, we had found the treasure at the eleventh hour, and were surely the first to do so! Of course, this glorious denouement coincided precisely with the *clunk* and *kerplangle* of the church door opening. The service had just finished and, not wanting to raise suspicion nor give away the concealed item, I waited in a dark corner for the exiting worshippers to walk slowly, v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y, back out to the lane. Finally, with the frisson of excitement still coursing through my veins, I dived back under the bench, tore off the box (apparently literally, since the Velcro detached completely – whoops) and – for added secrecy and also temporary relief from the elements – scurried into the now deserted but fortunately still open church.

By the light of the dying candles inside, and (less romantically but more effectively) a Petzl Tikka, I carefully unclasped the lid. Not wanting to rush the moment, I tried to calm the butterflies in my stomach as the box's contents spilt out onto the pew...

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...turns out the Binsey Lane Cat gets around. For Godstow's sake.

I left the church. It was nearly 4:30pm and pitch black. The crushing disappointment of being told, again, that "this *isn't* treasure" was temporarily outweighed by panic at the failure of the Velcro which meant I could not replace the box as intended by the setters. Seeing no other option I cursorily buried it under the bench and protected it from frenzied squirrels using what I hope was a piece of rubble and not an ancient religious relic, a memorial stone or a frozen but perfectly preserved pizza.

The journey home was uneventful but silent, owing to an enforced radio ban so as to avoid any mention of the outcome of the World Cup final (the first I have missed since discovering football during Italia '90). I succeeded, only to glance at my phone once home to see a preview of a message from a friend, blissfully unaware of my alternative activities for the day, comprising a stream of flags, presumably of the winner's nationality. Hopefully, by staying up late enough to type up this report, I shall forget about that completely and be able to watch the match tomorrow in ignorance.



To be continued...

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([email](#))

