



Harrowing Times

MAY—JUNE 2014

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I seem to spend my whole time crouched in this position at the moment, there are definitely not enough hours in the day for all the sowing and planting that needs to be done but I am really

enjoying all the sun. My diary shows only 4 days of rain in April! Hope it bodes well for the rest of the year.



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DIARY OF AN INCOMPETENT SMALLHOLDER

from Richard Barr

We inhabit more than a dozen acres of land in North Norfolk. The house and land are in trust for a disabled member of the family. Our job is as caretakers. I make the point, because people tend to jump to the wrong conclusion: big house = stinking rich. If only they knew.....

Because of lack of money and time (and, of course, skill) things do go wrong. In the coming months I plan to share with you some of our disasters, with the message "don't do as we say or do"

The house used to be "the" house in our village. It was taken over by the army during the War, and in the 1940s and 50s the field in front of the house was the local cricket pitch. The garden, now largely overgrown was reputed to have been designed by Humphry Repton.

Now put our family into the landscape and watch as calamities unfold.

Take last Saturday.

Imagine the scene. I am standing in our stagnant filthy pond. It used to have large fat fish swimming in it. The previous owner tried to extort a large sum for the fish, but when he was told what he could do with his fish, he left them anyway. For a while the fish thrived. Water lilies grew. Frogs laid their eggs which turned into tadpoles, then more frogs. All went well until the arrival of the ducks. They had been reading the good pond guide in the Quacking Times, and chose us as their favourite people in all the world to stay with. They arrived in large numbers, made many nests, and then produced family after family of fluffy yellow ducklings which were briefly charming until they grew into adults and decided that they too wanted to stay here for the rest of their lives.

Ducks, especially lots of them, are messy creatures. They are also not house (or garden) trained. They refuse to visit the local public conveniences, but instead copiously pollute any pond they swim in. It was not long before the fish all gave up the ghost and floated to the surface, while the lilies wilted and sank to the bottom.

The pond became a stagnant toxic stinking pool which overwhelmed the filter. Added to the efforts of the ducks was the detritus from a weeping willow tree that started life as a branch and, until recently, annually dumped huge quantities of dead leaves into the pond each autumn. I don't know if the ducks also killed the willow tree, but last August it shed its leaves and expired. It is now a spindly skeleton.

DIARY OF AN INCOMPETENT SMALLHOLDER

From time to time life reaches a tipping point. That tipping point came last Saturday when I decided to “have a go” at the pond. I pumped it out till the pump complained bitterly that it was not designed to suck out sludge. Then I proceeded to scoop out large dollops of mud, in the process covering myself in goo.

There I stood when my wife arrived in the garden with the horse and the dog. Currently the horse is ill. Part of its problem is that it is elderly and has few teeth. It was brought into the garden to graze as I had not yet cranked up our lawnmower this year and the lawn was lusciously long. Then she (my wife, not the horse) noticed that the hens and cockerel looked hungry.

“Hold the horse” she commanded. Like a creature from the deep I emerged from the pond while she went off to grab some corn. The horse, unfazed by its alien minder continued to graze. The hens looked excited as my wife approached.

Then there was a shout and I turned to see my wife, with her leg caught in the hen netting, falling hard onto the ground. She lay there groaning in pain. The dog was first to act. She rushed over and started to lick my wife’s face. But what could I do? I could not leave the horse as it would immediately have plunged into the pond, run off into the road or done one of the many other silly things that horses are prone to. Feeling particularly impotent, the horse and I trotted over to my wife. The horse looked down and offered no suggestions.

I had visions of trying to explain to bewildered paramedics why my wife was on the ground being licked by the dog, while the hens & cockerel paced back and forth and a horse was surveying the scene held by a man who looked as though he was part of the cast of the Black and White Minstrels who had run out of white.

Fortunately someone knew what to do: my wife’s youngest daughter is a theatre recovery nurse. She answered the SOS. I was able then to put the horse back in the field. Neither horse nor hens were in the least bit concerned about the trouble they caused, and life goes on. The pond remains toxic. The horse remains ill and both of us walk with a limp.

Both? Yes one of the rams ran flat out into my back and sent me flying, but that is for another diary day.

