

HAVING A SOUPER TIME

OUR RICHARD IS TASKED WITH FINDING SOME NEWT SOUP - WILL HE SUCCEED?

I WAS ON THE TELEPHONE to headquarters. Headquarters is where the pantry is and where, recently, we completely filled a wheelie bin with food that was not only past its sell by date but also had started to come back to life because it was so old.

I was shopping, had just spotted a packet of Newt soup and wanted to know if we already had some.

There was so much food in the pantry that we did not know what was there, so we bought more jars of pickled onions, then forgot we had them so bought still more. That applied to cans of tuna, jars of thyme, packets of flour and 17 little tins of anchovies (which we almost never eat, so how they came to clutter the shelves I cannot say).

The shelves had also been so weighed down with all this merchandise, that they had started to bow and tilt - occasionally propelling unsuspecting condiments onto the floor. But they did not break because there was a thick fluvial layer of partially emptied packets of cereal to cushion their fall.

Over one weekend we cleared the pantry, reinforced the shelves and scrubbed the walls. The only trouble was that it now looked very neat, but it lacked food.

Our problem - one of our problems I should say - is that we do live in a certain amount of clutter. Books overflow their shelves. Horizontal surfaces tend, in a short time, to become covered in newspapers, unopened post (usually bills, and friendly communications from our not so friendly tax man) and cats. Yes we have a clutter of cats too - ever since Missy went out one night and came back with a glint in her eye.

Several weeks later, at a weekend (when vets' bills are at their highest), she tried to give birth but one of the kittens became stuck and she had to have a Caesarean section. We were warned that the kittens were unlikely to survive and her life might be in danger too. The resulting relief when she and eight kittens survived somehow took away our resolve to send them to good homes when they grew up.

Cats actually like clutter. There is nothing so pleasurable for them than sitting on a thick newspaper, particularly if someone is reading it. They also drape themselves over every available piece of furniture.

There have been news reports that tidy people have tidy minds. I am pleased to report that Einstein had a very untidy desk, and research has apparently shown that people think more clearly when all around is chaos. That explains why I am writing so lucidly(?) through a sea of paper.

So let me return to the pantry. I predict that in the months to come it will fill up again and once more we will have a glut of jars of pickled onions. In order to achieve this I have to go shopping. And that gives me pause.

Our main shopping town is the pretty metropolis of North Walsham, with its varied architecture, market cross and strangely crumbling church. But North Walsham, like most small Norfolk towns, is struggling for survival at the moment.

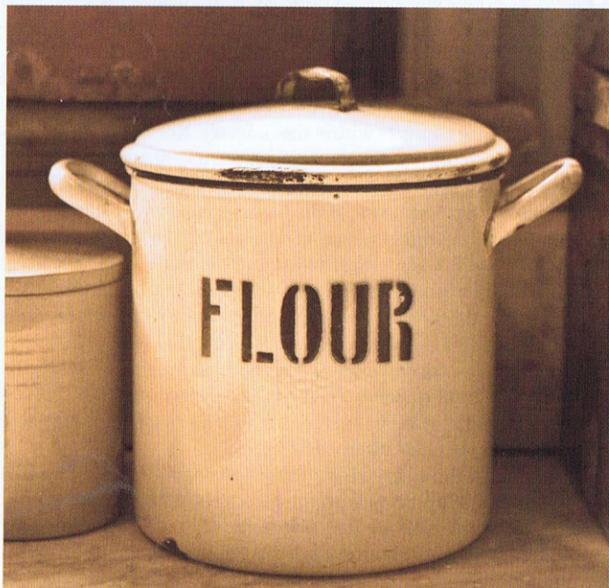
I feel for the local traders. They are being hit in all directions. The town now has three supermarkets, all with convenient car parks and all offering a range of goods that individual traders cannot aspire to supply. They are also being attacked by online shopping. It is now so easy to order a book or a gadget, only to have it delivered early the following day in a white van.

Alexander McCall-Smith (the author of the Ladies No 1 Detective Agency series) lamented the towns that no longer have book shops (sadly North Walsham does not) and he gave advice on how to fight back against mail order businesses. The advice has general application.

In a nutshell the answer is to offer something special in addition to the standard goods you sell. It could be coffee when you buy books, a deal to deliver newspapers free for half a year (one North Walsham shop is trying this), or simply extra special service so that customers positively want to go back. I cite the North Walsham post office as an example of that: most days I have something to drop off there, and I always find the staff friendly, welcoming and helpful. They have infinite patience not only with customers who are bewildered by all the forms we have to fill in these days, but also with me when I arrive at 5.27pm with my arm full of special deliveries.

But I do have a gripe. Why on earth does the North Norfolk District Council think it is a good idea to make people pay for parking? It puts town centre traders at a complete disadvantage against the supermarkets and mail order companies. There should be a parking free for all, so that we can spend time browsing the shops and using local services.

Which brings me back (in a completely uncluttered way) to Newt soup. You see, I was instructed to buy more soup for the empty shelves in the pantry. Soup comes in much greater variety these days, but I had never before seen newt soup. I was most disappointed when I put my glasses on and read that it was New! soup (I had mistaken the ! for a t). Regrettably it was tomato and basil - and we already have seven cans of that - and rising.



"WE BOUGHT MORE JARS OF PICKLED ONIONS, THEN FORGOT WE HAD THEM SO BOUGHT STILL MORE"

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