

The View from Vaupillon or Tacchi's Tittle-Tattle

Week 1

Monday April 13 to Sunday April 19

Monday April 13

Today is Easter Monday and as usual the main problem about Easter Monday is how to finish all the chocolate that arrived yesterday without undoing the good work of dieting over the previous three weeks. Currently I am trying to use this opportunity of enforced isolation to lose some weight. How much? I hear you ask. The answer in pounds (in which my scales are not calibrated) is 42, in other words the answer to Life, The Universe and Everything according to The Hitchhikers' Guide To The Galaxy. My usual tactic is to binge and try and get rid of it all as soon as possible, probably an achievable solution this year as my chocolate haul was much diminished from a normal Easter as no family were present and only a large dark chocolate rabbit that was given to me by Mrs. T. was forthcoming.

One of the ways I try and cope is to have some something to look forward to do on the following day. My normal routine is to make a list of things I either want or need to undertake and then immediately put them off for twenty-four hours. I always have something to anticipate. I quickly learnt that the list should not include everything as that then makes for a boring day as there is nothing left to be done.

Recent lists include a lot of self-improvement including improving my ability to write JavaScript, understand my Poser 11 software and to remind myself how to use more than the point and shoot capabilities of my Nikon DSLR. Hopefully I shall be able to report on progress on some of these activities in future despatches. Within my office there are many items bought on a whim and never completely mastered (or in some cases still in the box). A case in point was a drone I procured ostensibly to play with the grandchildren. These purchases normally revolve around Amazon Black Friday Deals and this was no exception. As they were not visiting this Easter, a few days ago I decided to try it out for myself and hopefully get it to take a video of me operating the said machinery. Taking a leaf out of Mrs. T.'s book I did not overtax myself with reading the instructions. I found sufficient batteries with the correct specifications and inserted them into the controller and the device. I then switched on the drone and before I could even get hold of the controller it

had shot up into the air and was then taken away by the wind to then land in a neighbour's garden. There was a successful recovery but no further tests have been carried out – they are on the list and state that instruction are to be scoured before the next flight and that it be undertaken indoors.

It is now after midday and I have already taken two walks, each of about 15-20 minutes. I am a slave to my Fitbit. It records all my exercise and steps. I am supposed to do 10,000 steps a day and at least 250 every hour. Whilst the total may not always be achieved I rarely miss the requisite number of active minutes. The worst thing to happen is that from time to time the Fitbit needs to have its battery recharged and that then you go off on a circuit but forget to replace the Fitbit on your wrist. Even though you have done the exercise you know it does not count as it has not been recorded.

I must now away and do something so that I have copy for tomorrow's report.

Tuesday April 14

Today I shall dwell on what happened yesterday after I posted the content below, but firstly news of my morning walk. My routine to start the day after a first cup of coffee and necessary ablutions is to make a circuit by foot around the locale for about fifteen minutes. Among the wildlife normally on view this morning I witnessed the pair of moorhens on the pond outside the doctor's house scurrying to safety when they saw me approaching and then when I turned the corner a hare was surprised by me as I was by him, after a brief moment where we each eyed the other it bounded off into the field of oilseed rape disturbing a pair of nesting pheasants who squawked loudly and flew off in different directions. Just before the end of my perambulation I happened upon a pair of partridges, it was the first time I had seen them this year, they have been noticeably absent in recent years though when we first arrived there were many coveys in the surrounding fields.

Yesterday I had expected to spend some time with my camera as I had the idea of adorning this prose with some pictures. Like the best

laid schemes o' mice an' men this cunning plan definitely went agley.

The first problem was that the espresso coffee maker decided it needed to be descaled and cleaned and would not produce further beverages until the appropriate action had been undertaken. Now if Mrs. T. cannot have her coffee then the quality of life in our house is greatly degraded. Thus I set about the task. This necessitated finding two things – the instruction manual and the relevant chemicals. Those of you who are married are probably aware of the activity wives perform called 'tidying'. What this means in reality is that anything a husband might require will be hidden in a spot that is both unrelated to the article's purpose and as inconvenient as possible to retrieve. Eventually without too much blood being split the articles in question were discovered. The process was now carried out successfully but took approximately one hour. Upon completion I rewarded myself with an excellent cup of espresso coffee.

The second cause of interference with my plans was this website. It came into being about three years ago as an exercise in learning some software to create websites. I did have some sort of idea that one day I would add a lot more content but as usual the idea came to naught. When the idea of creating a record throughout these 'interesting' times my mind came back to this effort as a base upon which to work. I checked and the site still seemed to work, even though the software was now no longer supported. So I added yesterday's offering and uploaded the content to the web. Immediately I had a problem in that when you visited the site a message was forthcoming that there was a problem. You could click through it and everything then behaved correctly but this was not very user friendly. Several hours later I resolved the problem – I am not sure if it just went away or whether I had truly solved it but I replaced all the fonts and that seemed to do the trick. The upshot was that I had spent so much time on the coffee machine and the website that although the camera, all its accessories and its manuals were strewn across the coffee table ready for study there was no time remaining for its perusal. I am hoping that in the not too distant future I will be able to take some photos and show them on these pages.

There was one event of some import yesterday, namely that in the evening President Macron addressed the nation. To sum up his half hour disquisition, which was surprisingly statesmanlike, we are all on lock-down for another four weeks whereupon the younger pupils will start to resume their attendance at school and certain businesses will be allowed to restart. He freely admitted that neither he, nor his government nor his scientific advisors had all the answers and that the current plans were subject to continuous review but he showed us he had a definite plan and the reasoning behind it. The reason the relatively simple message took so long to disseminate is the French habit of having to repeat something three times before it is considered true. If you were to insinuate to a Frenchman that his mother was impregnated by a cloven-hoofed porcine as no ordinary human would consider the task he would not be affronted until you had stated it thrice.

That's all today folks.

Wednesday April 15

Today's musings will be short as yesterday immediately after posting I had some bad news. My 96 year-old mother had had a fall and was taken to A&E with a suspected broken hip. Finally it transpired that she had 'merely' damaged some ribs and with a following wind will return home today. Obviously this state of affairs will be my main concern today.

So my camera remains on the coffee table, untouched and still awaiting action from me. Meanwhile I found an old photo of my office I took in a previous year, currently we are still about a week away from the Wisteria reaching that level of blossom but that will be my view in the morning when I go to my office.



Thursday April 16

Unfortunately mother's health is still an issue but not an issue for this place.

The last two days have seen the weather turn much chillier and windier thereby curtailing my exercising activities. Today seems a much brighter and warmer day so there are hopes of a cycle ride this afternoon. I am a very much fair-weather cyclist—a breath of wind and I refrain from taking to the saddle.

This morning I have taken my initial walk around the neighbourhood and there was very little of the natural world on view. This led to some introspection and I continued the thoughts I had during the night. Whilst I fall asleep almost immediately my head hits the pillow if I am awakened at some point during the night I find it difficult to resume slumber and thus my mind wanders. Last night I was contemplating how to make some animations with the Poser software. The strangeness of the workings of my brain led me to reverse the night's musings and consider so-called inanimate objects. My strongly held belief is that, excluding teenagers before noon on a Sunday, there is very little lifeless things in the universe. How do you explain that teaspoon you put in the sink that then liaises with the mixer tap to be exactly in the spot so that when you turn on the tap the water is splashed back over the poor creature standing there. How is it that the washing machine and the shower exchange information such that the washing machine decides to fill up with water and thus change the pressure in the shower to suddenly freeze the person trying to cleanse themselves. A prime example was this morning when I tried to attend to my morning toilet. The soap was too small to be usable, there was no shampoo left in the bottle, the tube of toothpaste was empty and the packet of aspirins was finished. All four elements conspired against me—that cannot be just chance, there is something going on which we do not yet understand.

Though I am on only day four of my diatribes it is evident to me that I will need in the very near future to change how this page is presented so this activity is on my agenda for today, and not one

of those items to be put off until tomorrow. I suspect some form of pdf with a single page per day but I do not want to prejudge my experiments.



Some of the Bluebells in full bloom in the garden of Mrs. T. She informs me that these are Spanish Bluebells - what that means I have no idea but I thought I would pass on the info.

Friday April 17

This morning's first walk was determined as I have lot planned for today. Yesterday's exercise was good as the sun shone brightly all day and I was not troubled by wind (no double entendre meant – probably) so three perambulations and one bike ride were the order of the day.

Investigations as to how to best change the format of these musings made some progress yesterday, they are becoming more urgent as I know that I doubled my readers to two yesterday. If I continue at that rate of expansion then by the end of the four week lock-down the whole of Europe will be reading this.

The main emphasis on today's activities is the kitchen. In these times and in these parts when the going gets tough the tough go cooking. I am planning tonight for dinner to have fajitas with coleslaw and pickled red cabbage, both homemade, though I have not decided whether to make my own tortillas even though I do own a tortilla press. I have some Aberdeen Angus bavette (you may know it as

flank steak) which I have defrosted ready for tonight's culinary escapade. Though I live in France I actually buy this in England from a 'posh' supermarket. Why? Well the answer is simple – the English do not rate this cut of meat very highly whereas the French consider it a prime cut. In the local cafés and restaurants for your lunchtime steak and chips you will frequently be served a bavette. The upshot of this is that the price in England is half what you would pay here. The same is true of both Ox and Pig cheeks and breast of lamb.

To further preoccupy myself in the kitchen today I intend to make some croissants. I know it is generally not worth the faff but it is very therapeutic and I intend to experiment by freezing some of them uncooked and then see how they turn out when next week when I defrost them. If the experiment is successful then later on I can make a huge batch so that fresh croissants can be enjoyed any morning one wishes.

The second challenge I have set myself in the kitchen today is make some aerated chocolate. Firstly because I have never done it, secondly I have all the necessary equipment (including vacuum machine and whipping siphon), thirdly I saw someone on the television do it recently but mainly because the old joke about a boy named William when he fell into a vat of molten chocolate everyone sang 'Billy Don't Be An Aero' crossed my path recently (there is a lot of whatsapping of doubtful jokes doing the rounds at the moment).

Before undertaking these activities the weekly shop at the local supermarket will have to take place. I get a weekly update in my inbox as to 'les promos' (promotions – the French always truncate long words when talking colloquially) which include: flour, tinned tomatoes, Quaker Oats, Maltesers and 'Magret de Canard' which shows that the shelves here in Le Perche are stocked differently to those in Perfidious Albion. Incidentally I assume you realise that magret de canard is duck breast but do you know the difference between magret de canard and filet de canard. The answer is one comes from a foie gras duck whereas the other is from a duck reared for its meat.

Saturday April 18

Mother returned home from hospital last night – good news!

Whilst taking my first early exercise I saw a pair of jays, a bird that seems to be on the rise at the moment in our region. I was bemoaning the fact that the wheat was now so high as to effectively hide the hares from view when as I was passing the field of organic Broad Beans a hare popped his head up and dashed into the centre of the field to disturb another who bolted off in the opposite direction. Mrs. T. has a cunning plan to liberate a helping of the beans when they become ripe as they are usually left to dry on the plant, I assume to be used as animal feed.

One of my readers (now numbering three) is anxious to know how yesterday's culinary exploits fared.

The fajitas were a tremendous success, though they were a little spicy for some tastes, but not ours. I found in my box of rubs and marinades a Mexican Chilli Rub which claimed to not be overly hot, however I think it was measuring itself against a standard that is uncommon in Europe. This rub was a present from my daughter-in-law who specialises in finding interesting things to feed my cooking habit, there remain further gems in the box to be used in future experiments. Actually finding the box itself was a minor triumph. I have previously mentioned the subject of 'tidying' and this box had been tidied, in fact I found it behind Mrs. T.'s stash of tins of ravioli (about which I am not supposed to know) right at the back of a shelf in the pantry. The box now rests on the kitchen table and I am receiving blandishments as to replacing it. I intend to put it back but reverse the positions of the box and the ravioli stash – what a jolly jape – but timing is everything. Too soon and it looks like I am succumbing to pressure, too slow and it will be 'tidied' and thus become undiscoverable.

I was very pleased with my croissants, below you can see pictures and they definitely look like croissants, they even taste like croissants. If they had been the technical challenge in the Great British Bake Off they would not have won a Hollywood Handshake but

I am confident they would have finished in the upper quartile. I have frozen some uncooked examples and will bake them next time I make some bread. I certainly intend to do this again and if the baking from frozen proves to be a success I shall make a huge batch and fill up the freezer.



Aerated chocolate was not a success, but as Meatloaf said, 'Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad'. I actually had the good fortune to see Meatloaf perform live at the Fabulous Fox Theatre on Grand Boulevard in St. Louis, Missouri. The problem with the chocolate was the equipment. I will have to be a little bit geeky here and explain the theory and why my attempt failed. The basic idea is that you melt the chocolate and then put it in a warmed cream whipper. You then charge it with N₂O (Nitrogen Oxide gas) and give it a good shake. You then squirt it out into a container, whereupon it will have some gas dispersed within it. You now need to increase the size of these bubbles by putting it in a vacuum. Everything went well prior to this step. I had ejected the chocolate into a small lightweight plastic box, place the cover on and made a couple of small holes. I then put this box inside a a bag and then proceeded to put the bag into my vacuum sealer. The idea being that the vacuum would expand the bubbles and that the plastic box would prevent the bag squashing the chocolate. Unfortunately the plastic container was so feeble it collapsed and compressed all the chocolate, so all was for naught. Am I disheartened? No is the response, as a friend of mine is wont to say 'What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger.' though I am not

sure Polio comes into this category. I shall be trying again in the not too distant future.

We are now in the weekend so today's activities might be a little more lackadaisical but I am aware that I need to do something about presenting these jottings (and get the camera off the coffee table).

Sunday April 19

As weather today is overcast, in fact more like low cloud, and the wind is from the East this morning's initial exertions were undertaken in a steely determined way but I cut them short by about 500 metres as the mist became more drizzle-like and I was in danger of becoming excessively moist.

My problem yesterday was that I now had a surfeit of croissants and fresh buttery croissants become stale fairly quickly. What was I to do? The solution was simple, and to my mind elegant, but then my mind is easily pleased. I made a bread and butter pudding substituting croissants for the bread and butter as basically that is of what they consist. To make an already pleasant dessert even more delicious I macerated some dried fruits in Cointreau before constructing the dessert. As I had no fresh milk I substituted a can of coconut milk and the results were wonderful. It has also given me the idea of next time making a Pina Colada bread and butter pudding, using pineapple instead of dried fruits and marinading it in rum or Malibu and keeping the coconut milk. Watch this space for a report later during the lock-down.

The macerating of the fruits led me to think of instructions on food packaging. For example on the dried fruit there could be a warning 'This Fruit will Improve Dramatically If Macerated In Alcohol'. The most common package information is a 'Use By Date', I like these as it frequently gives rise to produce being offered at reduced prices when the date limit is imminent. Whereupon if it is a foodstuff that I enjoy I snap up the bargains. There are some dates I do not understand, e.g. a UBD on salt! Cheese is another example, I would consider it bad form to consume a cheese prior to the date mentioned on the packaging. How come a piece of Parmesan which has

sat in a cave in Italy for two years suddenly has to be consumed in a matter of days because a supermarket has cut it into pieces and vacuum packed and kept it refrigerated?

I attempted to make progress on learning more about my camera yesterday afternoon. I discovered after a long search to my dismay that the technique I wanted to use was not available on my camera. I 'upgraded' my old Nikon for a new one about four years ago - the new one had lots more pixels and various other embellishments. The one thing it does not have that the previous one had is 'automatic EV bracketing'. Whilst many of my now six readers will be familiar with this term and the uses to which it is put I will give a short explanation. The first thing to understand is that the human eye, along with the associated processing by the brain, does not work in the same way as a camera. This is probably reassuring to a lot of us. The brain is capable of 'interpreting' what it sees whereas the camera just follows a set of physical rules to record an image and this image will differ according to the various settings within the camera. The EV referred to above is the ability to vary the exposure of the image. One can overexpose, whereupon the picture becomes much lighter or underexpose and the picture will be darker. Automatic bracketing means you can set the camera to take several images consecutively very quickly with varying exposures. One can then use clever software to take information from all of the photographs to produce what is known as an HDR image. HDR stands for High Dynamic Range and basically by using information from more than one image one can overcome some of the deficiencies within a camera and the final picture has a lot more of what digital artists call saturation (it's much brighter with a lot more contrast). You can easily spend an afternoon happily Googling HDR and find out how and why it works. Here endeth the lesson.