

Coincidence

by Peter

How is it that sometimes, not always of course that you find, when away on holiday, that the people next to you on the beach live in the same street? It's actually not that unusual to meet a neighbour or a colleague when away from home but some things do seem so unusual that they appear to be more than a coincidence.

Was it a coincidence that William Shakespeare died on the same day of the year (23rd April) that he was born on? Or - that it's St George's day and he's buried in St George's church in Stratford. Actually dying on one's birthday happens to 1 in 365 of us every year. But it surely must be more than chance that Cervantes died on the very same day in the same year.

Is it a coincidence that my three grown-up children all live in fields? What - can't they afford houses I hear you say? Well it's simpler than that - the oldest one lives in Petersfield, the middle one in Northfield and the youngest in Macclesfield.

Travelling by Numbers

Back in the early days when we lived in Lancashire, we were taking my mother back home to the Midlands and decided to make a day of it by going via North Wales. We stopped alongside a quiet country lane for a picnic but were disturbed by a stream of boy racers risking their lives along the narrow road. They were a sideshow from the Welsh Rally which was taking place about twenty miles to the South. When we rejoined the main road we were in heavy traffic, most of which was travelling in the same direction to watch a forest road section of the rally. As we passed a lay bye my mother remarked that there were two identical cars parked and the drivers were talking to each other alongside one of the cars. They were both bright yellow Austin Sprites, one with a hardtop and the other a soft top which was up. As we travelled south they caught up and the leading one overtook us; the other one followed behind. After a few minutes, I asked my wife to read out the number plate on the car behind. "CWW160", she replied. I asked her to confirm and then view the number plate on the car in front. "CWW160", she replied. Now I never found out what the drivers of the two Sprites were up to but it certainly was not a coincidence.

A Near Miss

Later in life I met someone in Blackpool who has remained a good friend to this day. We swapped stories about the past and he told me how he had built the bridges along the M4. We had both studied Civil Engineering and, before being persuaded to go to Manchester, I had been awarded a place at Aston where he went. Had I taken up my place there we would have been in the same year on the same course.

A minor coincidence or just chance?

Gloves, Food Mixers and Tweezers

And there are little things that occur and are often forgotten about because they lack significance.

I was visiting a friend near Reading and had some time to spare so I decided to photograph the centre of Henley on Thames. It was market day and very cold so I put my leather gloves in my side

pocket and put on the thin cotton gloves that I wore when using the camera. I left the car park and wandered around the town taking pictures of the older buildings. When I decided that I had had enough, I took off my thin gloves and rooted in my pocket to find the thicker leather ones. I was a little dismayed to find that I had only one and had obviously lost the other. After a warming cup of soup, I made my way back to the car park and as I approached the car I saw a black leather glove on the ground close the rear door of my car. I stooped to pick it up thinking this must be where I had dropped it but when I tried to put it on I found it was much too small. It was not my glove.

Years ago, I used to enter the competitions that were run by retailers to promote their goods. So I was a little disappointed when I won a food mixer about a month after we had bought one. Not long afterwards there was a country-wide promotional competition run by Pedigree Petfoods which involved collecting the labels from their tins and posting them in by a certain date. The published list of prizes was very impressive including cars as top rewards. As, at that time, we were working with an animal charity, I 'bought' all of their labels and had an enormous pile to send. We waited with baited breath for the publication of the list of prize winners and got more and more despondent looking down the list until we spotted our name – we had won a food mixer.

A few years later we were parking the car in Oxford city centre close the theatre where Denis Loccorier was giving a concert. I went to the pay-and-display machine and bought a ticket which I took back to put in the windscreen. As I placed it there was a gust of wind which enabled the ticket to slide down one of those narrow gaps which you get around the dashboard of a car. I could see the edge of the ticket but could not reach it. My wife looked at it and proffered the advice that I needed a pair of tweezers. I thought for a short while and then remembered that I had a first aid kit in the boot which might include one. I walked round the back of the car and was amazed to see a pair of bright steel tweezers lying there on the ground.

Birthdays

But what about my two great nephews? One was born to my younger nephew and his first wife. The other was 'adopted' by his older brother and is treated as a member of the family as if he had joined in the 'normal' way. When they first met and stayed overnight at my sister's house, they had a complicated conversation about uncles, aunts, grandparents etc. and how family relationships work. Eventually, these two lads, who had never met before, got round to when and where they came from. They soon discovered that they had been born on the same day and in the same year.

The Big Match

One of my jobs, in the water industry, concerned new technology and I got a trip to Guernsey to look at the digital mapping system which they had introduced. I was accompanied by a computer specialist from ICL who was responsible for the software. Over dinner that evening we had a bottle of wine (each?) and talked about business and our backgrounds. We soon discovered that we had been at Manchester University at the same time – me doing civil engineering and him reading maths. We then talked about the halls we had stayed in – me at Montgomery House and him at Dalton Hall. We discovered that we had both played soccer for our respective halls and I asked about the big grudge match in 1963 between the two halls on which the destination of the 'Torrington Trophy' depended. He remembered it well and the furore it had created as Dalton had a professional player for them. We were struggling to keep up and were losing 1-0 at half time but Tony, our

skipper, said that the opposition were in danger of falling apart as he heard one of the full backs remonstrate with their professional skipper who had been issuing orders as if he were a sergeant major. "If you shout at me like that again I'll kick you in the balls," is what was reportedly said. I related the tale and Ian laughed. "That was me," he said. The match ended 1-1.

London Pride

After my first 'retirement' I worked for the international branch of the company. I was tasked with taking some bid documents to South Africa for signing by our partner company. My boss, Malcolm, an expert in manipulating the system had booked me onto a flight with Virgin Atlantic just after they had introduced their 'Premium Economy' class. You got most of the advantages of business class without the exorbitant cost. The flight was fairly empty for some reason and I was given seat J8 which was a window seat at the front of the new class and I was the only one in the row. After takeoff, the stewardess came through the curtains from the galley and asked what I would like to drink. "Have you any beer?" I asked. "Yes, London Pride," she replied – would you like two?" "Thank you," I said and enjoyed a very pleasant flight. After delivering the documents and getting them signed I had a day off before flying back. On the return flight I sat in seat J8 and again had the row to myself. After takeoff, the stewardess came through the curtains from the galley and asked what I would like to drink. "Have you any beer?" I asked. "Yes, London Pride," she replied – would you like two?" "Thank you," I said and then asked her if she had seen me before. "Oh", she said – "you were in the same seat two days ago and we had the same conversation". Déjà vu perhaps but hardly a coincidence.

Traffic

I didn't enjoy my final year at university; I found the course content irrelevant for a practising engineer and did as little as I could to get by. The exception was traffic engineering which had just been added to curriculum but was not considered to be a real 'engineering' subject. We had to choose a subject for our third year dissertation and, after some trouble, I managed to wangle a project concerning the speed/flow relationship of moving traffic. After some observations on Princess Parkway, and a lot of research into papers on the subject, I determined that the prevailing opinions about it were wrong. The TRRL (now TRL) had the graphical relationship as a straight line but this was only half of the story. I proposed that the straight line was, in fact, just part of a curve which had to go back on itself to join the origin. Proving this would take a lot of time but my conclusion was accepted and my dissertation was amongst the best presented.

Some years later. I was working in Trinidad and was discussing engineering with some other professionals over a few beers. One of them told me he was a traffic engineer and I mentioned my college project. "Yes", he said, "that's how it is in the text books now – it's actually a parabola."

My next project was in Guyana and the staff had asked me to umpire their annual cricket match between the two main offices. I agreed but thought I should brush up on the laws and asked if there was a book shop where I might get something to help. I entered the only technical bookshop in Georgetown through the front door and was confronted by rows of book shelves. Something caught my eye on the top row of the first shelf and I stopped to pull it out – 'Highway Traffic Analysis and Design, Third Edition' by Soultter and Hounsell. It opened at page 129 and I was confronted, at the top of the page, with a diagram of my parabola.

The Huntsman

When we did our world tour and spent time with relatives in Melbourne, we were taken out for a meal at a very nice restaurant on the final evening of our stay. For some reason, halfway through the main course, I turned and noticed a very large spider approaching my seat along the floor. The room was air conditioned and quite cold so the spider was moving quite slowly. Excusing myself, I took the large ashtray from the centre of the table and gently place it over the animal to prevent it getting lost amongst the diners. As the waiter came past I told him there was a large spider beneath the ashtray and he gently removed it outside where he let it go. He explained that it was a Huntsman and, whilst they were poisonous, they rarely bothered humans, preferring to scuttle away.

Two years later, I offered to take my sister out for lunch on her birthday and she decided to take us to an unusual pub on the outskirts of Worcester. We travelled a few miles into the country and went across a narrow bridge over the M5. When we came to the pub I found it was called 'The Huntsman' and I was reminded of the enormous spider in Australia. We had lunch.

Two years later (not actually to the day) I was invited to go to a beer and skittles do and, never having done it before, I agreed. Then I discovered that I had been invited because I would be driving as my friend did not have his car on the road. He didn't know what the pub was called or where it was precisely but he knew how to get there. We drove down the M5 to Worcester and then took the A38 to Kempsey. At the Post Office, he told me to turn left and we wandered along a dark country lane for a couple of miles. As we crossed the M5 on an overbridge, I got a feeling of déjà vu. As we pulled up in the car park I read the sign – 'The Huntsman'.

Cnict

Many years ago, when my hobby was photography, I went with a photographic club to North Wales for a long weekend. The main attraction was a day-long visit to the slate quarry above Trawsfynneth and the weather was good. This is a haunting place which is a favourite with Midlands' photo clubs as it offers so many wonderful scenarios. We got lots of good pictures amongst the ruined buildings and slate tips and then wandered to the far side of the site. We came to an almost sheer edge and looking over there was the remains of the incline where the slate bogies took the stone down the valley to a narrow gauge railway which would take it the docks for export. I wanted to explore but the rest of the group thought that the weather was deteriorating and wanted to get back to the town. I stood at the edge of the incline looking down on the valley below and vowed to come back.

Many years later, I went out to walk in the snow which covered all of the mountain tops but not the valleys. My friend Charles took us to a small car park and explained how, because of its shape, Cnict was known as the Welsh Matterhorn. We set off and as we started up the 'mountain' (it's actually less than 1000 ft high) we found ourselves in the snow. It was a crisp clear day and we could see that only one pair of walkers had gone before us. We followed their tracks straight up the near side and reached the top in less than an hour. After a short break we carried on along the ridge which lies at the back of the mountain and walked for quite some time until I started to experience a feeling of déjà vu. It became clear to me that, as we approached some derelict buildings, that I had seen them before – even photographed them? As we got amongst them, I looked back at the way we had come up from the valley and saw that I was at the top of the incline where the slate was taken out for export.

Lizzie's cottage

My friend Charles booked a cottage for us near Beddgelert and we enjoyed a long weekend of walking in the hills and up a nearby mountain. I found the cottage unusual to say the least and thought I might return there one day – as you do when you've had a nice experience somewhere. I slept in a bed which was situated on a sort of mezzanine floor with an open front onto the main living area. I found it strange but slept well so put it down as an experience. A year later, I visited my friend Lizzie and after dining we talked over a bottle of wine and caught up on what we had been doing and where we had been. As usually happens, this kind of conversation tends to concentrate on holidays and such. So it was no surprise that Lizzie told me how she and a group of friends had hired a holiday cottage in North Wales. Eager to swap notes as I had been to Snowdonia the previous year, at my prompting, she described the cottage and then, to her surprise, I described the route to it and then the strange layout with the half upstairs bedroom. It transpired that we had slept in the same bed, a year apart.

Master of the Universe

I went to work in Mexico City and did not know anyone in the team over there, however, I soon found most of my colleagues were sociable and we often went out to eat in the evenings. One night, Jeremy and I went to an Argentine restaurant in the Polanco district and swapped notes on our careers. He was about 15 years younger than me but we had both qualified as civil engineers and gone on to specialise in water. After a while I asked him what had made him decide to become an engineer. Almost without hesitation he said that it was the way he was taught to love maths and this was down to him having been taught by the best maths master in the world. "No," I responded, "you can't have had the best maths teacher because I did." "Where did you go to school?" he asked. "Hartlebury," I replied, "and where did you?" "Halesowen," he saidand you can see what's coming.....we both had the same maths teacher – James Bartle – a 'master of the universe'?

4, Dunley Road

I was brought up on a council estate in Stourport on Severn and my mum worked as a cleaner/housekeeper for a family who lived about a mile away on a road with very nice 'bought' houses. Their house, No. 4, Dunley Road was quite big and obviously built for a well-off family as it had a servants' bell system in the kitchen. It was owned by the Millicans; he was chief colourist for Worth's Carpets and she was a teacher.

Years later, when I worked in project appraisal I had to meet up with an engineering consultant at the company offices in Burton on Trent. After we had concluded most of the business we went for lunch in a cafeteria overlooking the river and got talking about our respective careers; both being civil engineers. After university I had gone into local government and then the water industry whereas he had always worked for consultants.

I then lived in Coventry and he informed that, having taken up a new post in Birmingham, he had bought a house within commuting distance to the west. It transpired that he had moved to Stourport and when I asked where, he told me that he had bought a very nice house – the first one he looked at – from a Scottish couple who had recently retired.

"Was their name Millican?" I asked.

“Yes.” he replied, “How did you know?”

He had bought No. 4, Dunley Road.

Lucy Baldwin in Egypt

My employers asked me to go to Egypt to prepare a proposal for a training scheme to be set up at a new centre in the Nile Delta. I had some difficulties engaging with the local support as all of them appeared to need to be elsewhere when they were most wanted. After a week of frustration, we were invited to join a tour of the water facilities which served the area, which would give us a clearer picture of the training needs. I was, therefore pleased to meet a fellow Brit on the coach and introduced myself as we walked around the water treatment plant.

“Hello, I’m Peter and I’m representing Severn Trent International”.

“Hi, Peter, I’m Ernie and I’m with Thames Water”.

After discussing the various stages of treatment and the state of the plant, we were offered refreshment and sat down in the shade. I noticed that Ernie was a similar age as me and after swapping notes on our careers, I asked him where he came from.

“Oh, a little place in the Midlands that you won’t have heard of,” he said.

“Try me,” I responded, “I’m from the Midlands myself.”

“A small town in Worcestershire called Stourport.” he replied.

“I know it well,” I said. “I was born there – so when were you born?”

“May 1943,” he responded, “In the Lucy Baldwin Maternity Home.”

“Great,” I replied, “I was born there in April 1943.”

In all my time abroad I have never met, before or since, anyone from the same place and so near as regards their date of birth.

Somerset Levels

The Levels suffered severe flooding in the winter of 2014/15 and being a (retired) water engineer I set about looking at the problem in detail. All of the public and press were moaning about the lack of dredging on the River Parrett and would not accept the view that, as a tidal river, it would have made no difference. I bought a detailed OS map and set about plotting the extent of the inundation and looking at the infrastructure. I soon noticed that the solution did not involve the rivers at all but the main overflow channel the ‘King’s Sedgemoor Drain’ which discharged excess flows to the lower reach of the tidal Parrett. The problem was that the ‘Drain’ only discharged at low tide so was unable to cope with the vast volume of flood water. I determined that the solution was to install pumps on the outfall of the drain and this was what was eventually done.

During the spring, I went with my walking companion, Charles, to see the Levels for myself and visit the key points. We parked near Burrow Mump which had featured heavily in the television coverage

of the flooding and followed a circular route along the Parrett and then the River Tone, returning along a narrow country road which ran parallel to the river. At one point we stopped and admired a small garden which was quite immaculate, unlike the others along the road. I noticed that the raised bank at the back of the garden was actually the bank of the River Tone and I discussed whether it would be reasonable to knock on the door and ask to have a look at the river. We decided not and continued on our walk.

Several years ago, I joined 'Friends Reunited' and contacted a few persons who I had known in my school days. One was my girlfriend from junior school who I had not seen since we split up after 'eleven plus'; she went to the girls' High School and I went to the boys' Grammar School. After a few years exchanging pleasantries, I asked if she would like to meet up and asked where she lived. "I live in the Somerset Levels," she replied, "but you don't need to worry about the floods as it's all gone now." She gave me address and we arranged to meet in the car park of the pub in Burrowbridge. We exchanged car registrations so that we could recognise each other, not having met for 60 years.

I drove down from the Midlands and, being an hour early, I decided to find her house. The complication was that I had left the paper with her address on it at home but I could remember the car number. I drove about four miles along a narrow road which I eventually realised was the one which Charles and I had walked back along last year. I spotted her silver hatchback parked alongside the road and as I manoeuvred into the vacant space behind, the door of the adjacent cottage opened and a lady looked out. "Peter?" she asked and I nodded. She came across the perfect little garden to greet me – it was the one we had stopped by last year.

The House in Balsall Common

In the early 1970s we lived in Coventry and, having failed to get the school place that we wanted for our eldest son, we set about moving house to a catchment with expectations more in line with our own. After a few failures, we were shown round a bungalow in Balsall Common by a charming lady and we decided that we liked it. The sun was shining and she was so engaging and cheerful that we decided that we would buy it. Looking at the façade we were taken with the idea that it looked a little like a Spanish hacienda and we could achieve that look by replacing the grey slate tiles with orange pantiles. The day after we made an offer, subject to survey, and this was accepted.

I briefed our solicitor and engaged a local surveyor to carry out a full survey of the bungalow as it had been altered by the man of the house who was a builder. They wanted to move quickly as the lady of the house was pregnant and did not want to be moving around the time she would give birth.

We arranged for a second visit and went back. The lady had already moved to her mother's as she did not wish to give birth at the house. It was a dull day and the husband showed us round. When we entered the dining room, which was a single story extension, with an old oak door, I got the strangest feeling - that there was someone behind me. He explained that the floorboards and door had been rescued from an old property which had been demolished in nearby Temple Balsall. Outside there was an oval swimming pool but it was empty and neglected – due to crack in the concrete we were told. Under the dining room was a sunken garage which we could hardly make out as the light did not work. Again, I had a sense of foreboding.

That night my wife had a severe nightmare and when questioned, she related it to the house which we were considering buying. She had a strong sense that something bad would happen to us if we bought it and asked me to reconsider. I responded that we should at least hear what the surveyor had to say, and then we would decide whether to proceed.

The surveyor rang and asked me to go into his office later that day. As soon as I sat down he indicated sheets of notes which were the list of numerous faults. He started by asking if we were determined to buy the property as it had so much wrong with it. In addition to the 'Gerry built' extension, the lounge window was unstable and much remedial work was required. He then went quiet, almost conspiratorial, and suggested that there might be something underlying the lack of care. I asked him what he meant and he responded that he had had the most unusual feeling when he entered the dining room. The hairs had stood up on the back of his neck and he had suffered a cold shudder down his spine. I asked what he thought had caused this and, after a long deliberation, responded – the floorboards. There's something evil attached to them. We decided not to proceed.

The year afterwards, I was in the area and drove past the house. I was gratified to see that the new owners had seen the same potential as we had and had converted the roof covering to Spanish pantiles. It had a distinct 'hacienda' look.

As our children grew up we settled into our new house in Solihull and entered the 'taxi driver' stage of life where you seem to spend all of your spare time ferrying children around. Saturday morning was the time for swimming lessons and I was sat up in the viewing area overlooking the pool when I spotted a colleague from work who was there with his own children. I struck up a conversation and we chatted for while; I explained that we had moved to Solihull for the schools and he informed that he had moved to Balsall Common for the same reason. He lived in School Road – near where the bungalow that we nearly bought stood. I mentioned the improvements and how nice it looked.

"Yes," he replied, it was bought by a very nice couple who spent a lot of money doing it up but, tragically, they both died shortly afterwards."

What of it?

Well, nothing much; we all experience coincidences in the course of our lives and they do give us food for thought if not something a little different to talk about in the long winter evenings.

Hope you enjoyed mine.