

The Trent

Burton on Trent, Christmas 2018

He drove into town, for the first time for ages. The floods were very bad – the worst for years. Even the swans sought refuge. Rivers Trent and Dove merged to form a new inland lake. The floodwalls just manage to stop an invasion of the town. Christmas lights sparkled on the water, daring it to come closer.

The Trent keeps flowing.

He recalled the times he walked the Burton streets. Drinks at the Queens, bowling on Saturdays, browsing in the bookstore on Station Street. Later, walking in the Trent meadows, maybe getting lucky. There were no fancy restaurants, and the pubs just had beer. The market was by Royal assent and was the only place for both potatoes and presents. Now of course Sainsbury's vie with Tesco.

The Statutes Fair still takes over the market in October. It was founded in 1824 “for the hiring of servants” and was once called a “human flesh market”. It doesn't change. As he walked through the marketplace, he remembered that day in 1966, when he first went to the Fair with his girl. And he remembered the party where “Good Day Sunshine” was the dance music du jour.

Today the Abbey, a thousand years old, is a restaurant. The car parks are bigger than the market stalls. As he dined, the staff was knowledgeable about the history of the place, with tales of monks trying recipe after recipe to create the perfect beer.

Local brewers, who ran the town, later built the Victorian swimming pool. Now the global Coors sign glows across its fiefdom.

In his day, the pool was due for demolition, but that took years, and the heavy smell of chlorine was still a persistent memory. He did remember submitting a design for the new pool, in a contest at school. But no one bothered to reply, even though he built a cardboard model with a curved roof.

Today they claim a “state of the art” fitness centre.

He was fiddling to get Wi-Fi, a sign of the times which would have been magic in the clubs of old. Yet, even with this modern twist, faces from the past floated by, like broken branches on the swollen river. He wondered what became of them all?

“We will be at war with the Chinese in 5 years” said a school friend – in 1961. The Power Stations both sides of the town were deemed nuclear targets. What was it like to live in their shadow? He could barely remember.

The Trent keeps flowing.

Meeting family is overdue. The ancestral tree shows that nearby Tutbury had been “home” for over 500 years. The antique shops in that High Street bear witness to so much, and the graveyard in the

Church to so little. Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned there for a night – but who remembers anything else of that town?

He wonders what happened. How was his line broken, and why was it fragmented to allow him to wander the world?

There is much news to swap, and many stories to tell. Pictures are shown. Yet there is a sense of flood. The waters cover the details of the land and make it all murky and brown. Detail gets lost, and things merge.

Generations flow, and people move on. Learning happens. Success and failure. Dreams change. Things shatter. Conversation takes unexpected twists.

There are new bars in town, and the old schools are no longer there. The new hospital gets mixed reviews. Family is treated there, yet it all seems rather a perfunctory experience. They weren't really happy about it. Is it just a personal view of entitlement, or a thoughtful perspective on patient care?

When he walked these streets, there was no such concept. He cut his thumb, building balsa planes, and the nurses seemed fine. He still has the scar. Just physical, not mental of course.

Aubrey de Grey says we can all escape death by surfing the longevity curve, waiting for technology to catch up and solve the problems we have. A fantasy? Not really. It already happens. What is now routine surgery was unimaginable when he was growing up.

It would have been considered magic (or at least that's what Arthur C. Clarke wrote).

Family conversation often takes strange twists. Let's debate the new migration that makes the town a melting pot – welcome to some, unwelcome to others. Respectful debate veers so close to lines which are moved as generations move on.

How can anyone forget that the town has centuries of history, of Romans and monks, of battles and beer.

He leaves. He's really pleased to have seen everyone, and thoughtful about what it all means. Yet he knows he will never know why it all happened as it did. He will never be able to connect his sense of himself, of where he is today, with that understanding of where he came from.

But the Trent doesn't forget. The Trent knows.

The Trent keeps flowing.