

9.

FRED AND THE GREAT FREEZE

On arrival in Ascott-u-Wychwood in June, 1987, frequent advice given was, "You wait until the winter". Mr Harper of DIY had a sadistic smile as he told me that the road from Chipping Norton to Shipton was the highest in Oxfordshire, and could be cut off for up to six weeks. The Chadlington Butcher was equally knowledgeable, so much so that we bought our first freezer and quantities of meat, a duck and a hare. No Indian shops open 24 hours, 365 days a year, as in Hampstead.

There was no winter! However the thought of such weather reminded me of the previous winter in London. A chess club friend and his wife were about to encircle the world, leaving me in charge of their house. Unfortunately they forgot to let me know about their other flat in Highgate, soon for sale. A cryptic note was dropped into our letter-box en route to the airport, "Please give these keys to the Agents when they do the survey of Joanna's flat. Have a nice day". No briefing, added responsibility, and totally unexpected.....No-one could have foreseen the great freeze.

The worst winter in memory descended upon us, and I found myself looking after burst pipes in their house and our flat; but the real drama was yet to come. On Saturday a British Army Major phoned from Gibraltar. He had seen the BBC news and was in a state of panic. He owned the house in Highgate where Joanna had the top flat. He knew they were in Japan and that I had the keys, and that the roof space was unprotected. He feared a freeze-up, any damage for which, he would be responsible, as the Ground Landlord.

All London plumbers were fully engaged, so I had no option but to do the work myself - I have deep respect for Majors, having been only a Captain! The work would require some heavy lifting, so I needed a labourer's mate; I contacted another chess club friend. He was unemployed and happy so to be. I noticed him the first time he entered the Club. His gear would have been rejected by Oxfam, prolific unkempt hair, he rolled his own shag, very strong; a broken front tooth, a total lack of basic hygiene, but a very good chess player and a good friend, he was delighted to assist.

I made the recce on Sunday, we bought the materials on Monday, driving through deep snow and slush to Highgate. Having managed to get the tools and materials to the top of the house, we surveyed the tanks. (continued).

They were six feet long and two feet wide, three feet deep, and full of water with a foot gap between the tanks. The roof sloped over the tank area so that it was difficult to climb over them to the wall in order to start lagging. I asked Fred to climb to the end wall and receive the lagging as I passed it to him..... at this stage he advised me that he had a bad back, and could not do such work!

My immediate thought was to emulate de Bono and drain the tanks so that I could walk into them and so reach the back wall..all restricted by the pitched roof. I opened the taps to the bathroom, kitchen and W.C. The level went down very slowly - we could be there for six hours! After ten minutes there were screams from below; a very attractive young woman was at the foot of the stairs having hysterics. Water was pouring into her flat. I dashed into Joanna's kitchen to find it awash, the sink unit had only a bucket in the cupboard under the sink, with no connection to the waste pipes. Mopping up operations, a bill from the lady and a new approach to the problem. I asked myself "Why do I get into these situations?"

Panic over, I found myself hunched over water in a very dark space. I started to direct operations to Fred in dry dock. The first sheet of insulation was one foot short. I now realised that he could not read a measure! Added to which the lack of hygiene, and shag, in the confined unventilated space was beginning to tell. I passed the sheet back, asking for an extra foot on the next piece. Later I realised that I had risked electrocution as he held the lights over the tanks to inspect progress. Eventually all was protected.

I took him to lunch, and gave him £30 - a friend for life. He was most appreciative, possibly the first honest day's work he had done, and obviously the most profitable.

Next morning I received a phone call. "Are you the joker who was working in the roof yesterday?" "Yes." "Well you had better come over here sharp, as the whole block is in a shambles." Now I really was in trouble.

Fortunately the new problems had nothing to do with our efforts of the previous day, but caused by freezing external pipes. I decided to leave the keys with them in case of further troubles, and beat a hasty retreat.

The Major wrote a charming letter and paid the bill. Fred said he enjoyed the experience, and would be available if ever I had any other problems requiring his help! P.C.