

## VICTORIAN BATHING MACHINES ARE ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN FIDDLERS HILL.

**D**ID YOU THINK that summer was going to give us a miss this year? Well it was beginning to go through my mind as the longest day (June 21st) approached. As gloomy, chill days followed one another leading up to midsummer my wife's aunts, whilst shopping in Bourton, were amused when an elderly lady, and complete stranger, sidled up to them with the reassuring news that "Never mind the snow is keeping off!"

The chap at the garage we use in Freeland observed quite cheerfully that with the longest day the nights start to draw in. The revelation did nothing to encourage me, as frankly I feel absolutely cheated when we click for a rotten summer. I do like the sun on my back or more to the point I suppose, on my bald pate. There is more of a spring to my arthritic gait on a bright warm sunny morning with chirpy sparrows and starlings keeping up a continual banter from nearby trees and rooftops.

There is this hope in spring and summer which of course is not apparent in the winter months. Anyway the longest day happened to be the hottest day for ages and maybe, just maybe, we've cracked it in time for Wimbledon.

I'm a cricket man myself but I do quite enjoy the biff-bang, thirty- forty fortnight. Lissom young gels in their dazzling white flouncies and bronzed adonises attempting to pin their opponent to the wire netting at the back of the court with rocket propelled

services that bring forth from their weary tortured bodies a grunt that any self respecting porker would be proud of. What would Gottfried Von Cramm and the other long flannelled brigade have thought of it today?

Possibly because of the lack of strong sunshine the countryside has retained its verdant colour and all this is enhanced, at the time of writing, by the intense blue of the fields of flax and the contrasting oil seed rape yellow which is never better displayed than from a car taking the road to Chipping Norton from the Wychwoods.

Our garden robins have taken their annual holidays to nearby shady woodland wherein the dappled sunlight there are plenty of insects for them to feed on. By the end of August however they will be back in our gardens again marking out their territories with a stern tic tic call.

With it is the realisation that autumn is approaching, we have had an abundance of blackbirds in our garden this year, at one time I counted no less than seven, mostly all were black crocus beaks courting the seemingly unconcerned brown females. The results of the controversies evident soon after when the odd squawking fluffy youngster was to be seen clamouring to be fed by a parent. Smart brown infant starlings have also made their appearance plus the inevitable wing-fluttering baby sparrows.

(continued overleaf)

Sadly the song thrush is now just an occasional visitor coming to hop across the lawn to listen for worms below the surface. They are very fond of snails too and now and then you may come across a thrushes 'anvil' a stone used to smash the shell of an unfortunate mollusc. There is nothing lovelier than the early morning song of this smart speckled bird and it would be a dreadful tragedy if we were to lose them completely. The decline has been blamed on the increase of magpies, once kept in proportion by the gamekeeper, but there is a train of thought that a disease has accounted for their diminishing numbers. It's all rather sad.

My wife has never been accused of letting the grass grow under her feet and over the recent months she has considerably reduced the lawn area by widening shrub and flower borders and ripping out completely an area alongside the conservatory. We had about 10 tons of shingle delivered, the majority being scattered in the driveway at the front, the rest at the back of the house by the conservatory. If you are conversant with the Chesil Beach the front drive is now very similar and it's quite a trudge to get to the front gate! I am told it will all settle when we get some winter rain on it.

On Friday 2nd June the good people of Fiddlers Hill all received a present from the local county council.

This was in the form of a brand new wheelie bin in austere dark hue but emblazoned with the West Oxford District Council coat of arms. There it was awaiting us as we returned from work, rather reminiscent of a cross between a Victorian bathing machine and one of those terrifying cable cars. We had all been warned previously of course that we were to receive one but the suspicion some folk gave them you would have believed they had been the recipient of a car bomb. Tentatively they propelled them out of view only to come out on Fridays (bin day). They are a vast improvement it must be said.

Well we shall be on holiday at the end of the month if the weather remains kind I think I will get the deckchair out, roll up my trouser legs, apply a knotted handkerchief, plonk the chair somewhere on the "beach" in the front drive and await the progress of the bathing machines, particularly on Fridays! By the way, I don't actually remember them in real life but I have seen pictures, in case my age is being questioned.

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