

**29 April 2011**

The yipps.

I wonder how many people get them at least time to time. You know, you're just ambling along confidently through life, when, wham, your trumper goes like tuppenny pieces in a Llandudno pier arcade game. Two of the greatest sportsmen produced by Europe's biggest and fairest island have experienced career disintegration as the stammering condition has robbed them of the sophistication that their talents allowed show to the world. Eric Bristow, the mighty fallen, and Stephen Hendry, the mighty falling. How things change.

Could you too be a yippee? Do you find that you're half way through that lesson when suddenly you forget what English is and what an -ed ending refers to? Are you ever in the middle of typing a quick memo and your typing speed drops by some dozen words a minute for no reason? Or could you be casually chatting to a romantic ambition when without warning you turn into a bungling idiot not even remotely given to coherent speech nor suave and humorous reverie?

If so, you have been afflicted by the yipps, an actual psycho-medical condition which is to your self-confidence as hydrochloric acid is to polystyrene. This transient condition tends to undercut people at the worst times, exposing them cruelly to humiliation or at least slight embarrassment. In spite of the name, it is a serious condition, recognised by ruling bodies of miscellany, and widely cited as the cause of faltering performance by many a class act.

I don't suffer from it. It attacks self-confidence, none of which I have. I am therefore immune, much like a quadruple amputee doesn't have to worry about athlete's foot. I suppose though in the same way as a quadruple amputee might suffer from ghost pains in a leg long since lost, I run the risk of suffering from some kind of phantom yipps tugging at my vacant poise, but not enough to bother me. Nay, the egocentric spectrum is as circular as the political one, with the extremists on each side sharing much. Those with actual confidence act robustly through the belief that everybody loves them. Those with none act robustly with the rationale that as nobody likes them anyway, they may as well do what they want. Welcome to the yipp free world of scam self-assurance.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the latest Billy Ingham adventure lasted a very gripping few hours a while back, leaving me painfully keen to tip a load of spoilers on the page here. I read it not long after finishing Larsson's Millennium Trilogy, a series which heralded the arrival of a new master of suspense. But with Larsson, in spite of the cleverly woven sub-plots into the main story, you know pretty much that something is keeping you in suspense. With Merry Christmas RIP, you manage to feel the suspense without even knowing it, I mean, without knowing that there's quite a surprise brewing. Then you get it and you realise you'd been on tenterhooks all along. I didn't know that was possible. I simply had no idea, even when it was put in front of me, that young Billy, sadly absent for too much of the story (given the level of empathy you feel for him, you want to see more of him), was about to be more than just the lumbered lad he became in sentence one on Page 1, but, well, I won't spoil it for you.

If you're local, please ask me to borrow it. If you're not, please buy it from Amazon.

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It feels strange to be blogging for about the fourth time in a week, not least given the exhausting week I've had. Tomorrow looks set to be quieter with only one evening lesson, so it'll give me chance to catch up on some admin, the side of teaching I always thought I didn't want to do, but which now doesn't offend neither nostril nor eardrum so much. Let's call it paperwork.

Maybe the adrenaline of the medley of tasks sitting atop my to do mentality this week has extended its usefulness into the nudging of words from my mental box of ideas onto the pixel receiver down below my fingers. Although, hey, maybe it shouldn't have, now there is a little more guilt tingeing my procrastinative tendencies, a pile of Russian homework yearning to be done and a bayan which I've hardly touched for two months. Even the dombra has lain idle this week, and with me due to play at a wedding soon, I do admittedly accept this status quo is not entirely appropriate.

But I'm walking round all starry-eyed this week, or trying to. Only I am afflicted by heady nitrogen in the yipp free gulf of the space where my self-belief should be, and instead of floating on air all I can do is constantly debate with myself about whether the silences and unavailability mean the one or the other thing. Cryptic this may be, but as the greatest genius ever put it in his poetic tour de force in 1978:

*I chase your every footstep, and I follow every whim  
When you call the tune, I'm ready to strike up the battle hymn  
My lady of the meadows, my comber of the beach  
You've thrown the stick, for your dog's trick, but it's floating out of reach*

*Ian Anderson*

The thread of encouragement in this is the fact that the author of his perplexity was none other than the woman he married that very year.

And a wordsmith more fine the world has never seen.

Saying that reminds me of something, a scene from that wonderful film, *Miss Potter*, the life and times of Britain's greatest ever woman, Beatrix Potter, she who hailed from upper class London and refused to join the bourgeois establishment, becoming instead a writer, simple, but of quite some repute. On making her fortune, she settled in the English Lake District and took to farming, not only keeping one farm alive but many others, ultimately leaving 4000 acres of land to the British people through a conservation group known as the National Trust.

The government over there these days wants to sell off its woodland. It might not be too bad if Miss Potter were around to buy it, but times change, don't they?

No, still not interested in the Royal Wedding.

## **28 April 2011**

It's been one of those days when you have absolutely no time to think... examiner retesting, lesson, meeting with boss, observation of teacher subject to complaints, lesson, English Clubbe...

I could recount the lot but a lot of it is bound by confidentiality, and of the rest, I can't think of anything interesting to say. I suppose the new contract might be worth a mention, with the absence of my thespian talents being duly noted and the word ACTING being removed from my job title as of the coming academic year. I guess it sounds better, Assistant Director of Studies (ADOS) without the prefix suggesting that it's all just for the time being. And in any case, the only time I ever went near a theatre stage was as a writer, not a member of the cast.

The hard slog of the day leaves me with a pile of things to do actually here, at home, as I sit wondering whether to plan a lesson or mark some tests first. Then I have Russian homework with a pile of gaps to fill, an exercise type common to almost any language teaching. I wonder how many students have tried over the years to fill them with something other than words.

Then today the brief moment off work was taken up by scouting round for a Beginner level English coursebook for the wonderful person I have met who doesn't even understand 'hello'. I suppose from a selfish point of view it would suit me not to change that situation, but if I may permit my dreams to reach such a level, the same person might not feel comfortable not understanding English if, let's say, it were to be the language I speak to our kids in. Dreams they remain at this moment, so if you have the tendency to make mountains out of molehills, no, I am not booking the registry office or prising up cots. Nor am I even sure she'll want to see me again. For the time being, while she can't understand this blogge nor even knows it exists, I am happy to announce that the aforementioned thoughts have indeed crossed my mind.

I really need to update my Kazakh page, for the simple reason that it doesn't do me justice any more. I heard a few days ago that a student had been reading it, and decided I was Upper-Intermediate level. That's nice, but I wrote it two years ago. There are other things I just can't be bothered to write, but one thing I really should, a tribute to my amazing grandma who passed away a few weeks ago. Inspiration might be something you can train to frequent your space more often, and a journalist who told their editor they were waiting for inspiration might find themselves very quickly out of a job, but otherwise, some days the thoughts just don't shift.

The more a person understands English the more they realise how odd it is. Take articles, a thorn in the side of most students either because their language has some twenty-odd, like Italian, or none at all, like Russian. We teach that a/an is only available for use with singular uncountable nouns, 'a cat', 'an octopus' for example. But I was thinking the other day that this rule is not true.

Consider this:

*I need to rest for a good ten days.*

What noun does the article collocate with? Days. But how many are there? The fact that there is an adjective does not alter things, this surely has to be wrong. We wouldn't change 'cats' to 'a cats' just because we said what colour they were. But it is not wrong, so what's going on?

I suppose the incidence of 'a days' really takes a different shape when we describe it as a whole entity, the idea that the block of ten days is a single unit. It's the only way I can explain it.

By far my favourite idiosyncrasy in English is the Black Country use of the verb 'to be' which you may have met on this page before. My tendency to double final post-vowel nouns and add E (blogge, vocabbe) has nothing on the good folk of the Dudley area whose traditional dialects deliberately omit the correct variant ARE and substitute it with AM. You AM, we AM, they AM. Because of this, and the corresponding contracted form of 'you'm', which when spoken with the relevant accent becomes almost YAM, the people of that region are lovingly referred to as 'yam yams'. Nothing to do with strains of potato, it's just the way they speak.

Coming back to yesterday's blogge about clayheads, the local dialect of Stoke has its own name, unlike most simple regional twangs... Owfertokerayt. Speakers of Owfertokerayt would have you know that this comes from four distinct words, ow, fer, toke, rayt.

In modern English this would be, how for talk right. You see, Stokies don't have infinitives of purpose. They use the preposition FOR instead. 'I'm going out for get some chips', which incidentally is one of only four sentences spoken in the city\*.

So 'ow fer toke rayt' really means 'how to talk right', and if you learn it, your IELTS score will improve not only to 9 but to 10, given your ability to use very uncommon forms and idiomatic expressions made of pure gold. Dialectic alchemy, I feel, and on that basis, my school could start offering Owfertokerayt courses very soon, and with my latest promotion, I could be the man to teach them.

Time for some snappin.

PS DO NOT ask me about studying the Royal Wedding in class. I am not anti-monarchy, but I don't care. I just don't care.

\* A Stoke-on-Trent phrase book consists of four entries, one of which I mention above. The others, in no particular order, are:

*What you lookin' at?  
We're low on firewood, go for chop up the front door*

and

*They've cut me benefits*

Five month course? Nah, don't think so.

## **27 April 2011**

It's like one of those times when you're listening to music, blogging and then start typing out the lyrics... only I'm not listening to lyrics right now, rather the rhythmic beat of forthcoming pay day outlay, the monthly shopping list which rather than be composed entirely of beer (as I don't drink the stuff) contains a modest plethora of useful items I could not stay my hand from writing here...

*Toaster  
Plastic sandals for gym changing area  
Soy sauce  
Smart trousers  
Sportswear  
Summer clothes*

I guess in a way this could double up as wedding gift list, although one perhaps premature, in spite of my recent change of desire. It's not that I had decided not to marry and have changed my mind, but rather that

I've recently realised how damn old I am and shouldn't wait too long. As for wives (expressed as plural to mean singular) I don't know but I have met somebody whose tendency to be busy has not led me to give up at the first.

I must be honest, I've never really understood the intricacies of the female psyche, in spite of having one myself. I won't elaborate, just know that my fickleness, complex unpredictable mind and tendency to 'see' a rotund figure in the mirror are not usually traits associated with men. But hoping not to be misunderstood in turn, I really don't understand Kazakh girls. It's not a linguistic thing, only, where I come from, 'busy' generally means 'bye bye' while here it means either 'bye bye' or 'keep trying'. I've always assumed the former, the latest girl is worth a curious exploration of the latter possibility. My mind keeps yelling at me to give up, and most of the time I believe it, but most of the time in my life I've believed it and it hath got me nowhere. Time for a change.

I have unearthed a theory about second etc language acquisition which never occurred to me before, in spite of all the times people have asked me how I pick them up so quickly. It has to do with mother tongue influence, and the density of the curtain that the native language puts up. When a child learns a language it has nothing to bias the new language towards so it tends to go in and take a pure form, albeit with inconsistencies. Taking on a second language can happen in the same way as the first language provided the new language bypasses the paths already well trodden by native ramblers (and I do a lot of rambling, it has to be said). I experience so many students trying to understand English as if it mimics their language.

'What's this in Russian?' they may ask. Well, it doesn't mean ANYTHING in Russian. It never has and it never will, because it's not Russian, it's English. What they should be asking (themselves) is, 'what does this do when we use it in English?' 'How does a person react if we say this to them?' 'What is the 'function' of this expression?' etc

Simply modifying a new language so it fits the mother tongue consolidates the way in which new language gels to the form of the existing language, a powerful hindrance to reaching a reasonable level of communicative ability. I suppose in some ways I have a strange ability to open the curtains and let the new order through.

I had my first Russian lesson today, at least for a while, and I was quite happy, in spite of a teacher working with very traditional techniques and not checking understanding in context. All this communicative teaching, however, is great but not for me, and I prefer to be force fed and then just go and jump in the deep end and use it. I learned all my languages in different ways, Italian was odd, I learned from a book, then by reading newspapers until when I finally went there a few months later I was already fluent by the time I had my first conversation. Not a lot of people can say that.

I learned Kazakh by force feeding it and then going and using it, as much as I could, making an incomprehensible fool of myself at times but by and large getting more than by. Russian I learned without knowing how, possibly osmosis but maybe also language fairies in the night. Arabic came from a book which I even opened once (and arguing with taxi drivers), and French came from school. Kyrgyz came from the fact that it's basically the same as Kazakh and that speakers of each can get away with conversing in either without much of a problem.

If we say ZH in Kazakh, we say J in Kyrgyz. S in Kazakh is SH in Kyrgyz. After that, I'm clutching at poo sticks\*, I don't really speak it.

I suppose if I want to push to boat out and inflate my list sneakily I could add Tatar as well, this being the Turkic language closest to Kazakh. The odd few Tatars I know here speak fluent Kazakh without having studied it, so I guess it must come pretty close.

But Clayhead dialect has to be the strangest language I know. Observe this mini Stoke-on-Trent glossary of terms, and be prepared to use them in daily conversation. I will be testing you:

*Snappin – lunch*  
*Wom – home*  
*Ice – house*  
*Theesen – yourself*  
*Wench – girl*  
*Swayt – sweet*  
*Wunna – won't*  
*Dust? – do you?*  
*Mon – man*  
*Conna – Can't*

Chonnocks – turnips  
Dine – down  
Brine – brown  
Faithe – dad  
Goo – go  
Wut? – will you?  
Afore – before  
Wayne gotten – we have to

Saying 'aaaaaaa' with a slightly falling intonation simply means 'yes'.

Speaking of wedding plans, I have to knock off now, I am due to play dombra at a wedding in June, which means needing to improve, somewhat.

*\*Poo sticks is a game in which two or more people throw sticks from one side of a bridge down into a river. They then dash to the other side and the person whose stick emerges first wins. It is a real sport with a world championship, but very little in the way of TV coverage. Ah, never mind, I always preferred Pass the Pigs anyway.*

## **25 April 2011**

I must say, it feels very odd to be rooting for Stoke City, but also in a way quite right. I have over the years spent more time in Stoke than in Crewe, and probably also spent more time with Stoke fans than Crewe fans, luckily at a time when of the two sides Crewe were clearly the better. Yet in these footy (as opposed to heady, I presume) days of what the Stokies might term 'normal service' the gulf between the two teams makes the idea of a local rivalry somewhat a bit of a joke. And with Port Vale similarly languishing in the bottom division, bereft of any chance of getting out of it for at least another year, the fact that Stoke now play in the Premiership and have reached the FA Cup Final makes it time for decent Crewe fans to put aside the immaturity and get behind a side who've never done us any injustice, harm, or even beaten us, if I remember rightly, in a competitive game.

Hee hee!

So on that basis, the FA Cup final, featuring the city clubs of Stoke and Manchester will be far from an uninspiring event, and I can honestly state, albeit with a bit of embarrassment, that on that very day, I will be behind the Potters 100% of the way.

When is it, by the way?

For those of you reading in black and white, Stoke is a city of about 220,000 people situated about half way between Manchester and Birmingham. Crewe is a much smaller affair, a town of 60,000 which grew up around the railways at the end of the Victorian era. 15 miles north west of Stoke, Crewe's fate is bound to that of the railways, it being a junction of some (massively reduced) significance, and its people have a reputation for being train spotters\*. These days the town rolls on with the aid of shunters since the emigration of its other great industry, Rolls Royce and thanks to a sizeable Polish contingent just about breaks even, inevitably meaning that many continue to live below the poverty line.

Just out of interest, Crewe is overwhelmingly working class but now has a Conservative Member of Parliament, for whom I would never vote, but considering the courtesy on show in his many retail outlets, Edward Timpson clearly has the good of his constituents at heart, in spite of being a politician.

Coming back to Stoke, this larger conurbation is the only multi-nuclei city in the United Kingdom (it has six city centres) and amazingly the only city whose actual city centre takes a DIFFERENT NAME FROM THE NAME OF THE CITY! Bizzz-arrre! It owes its extensive existence to the erstwhile success of the pottery industry with names such as Wedgwood, Spode and Royal Doulton all contributing to the nickname for the local people, clayhead. As with Crewe it is over-overwhelmingly working class with the top earners living inside the city boundary just about topping the minimum wage. It is famous for its famous, a clutch of household names being quite open clayheads, Robbie Williams being the most successful, but many of you may also know Sir Stanley Matthews, footballer, of the people, for the people.

Stoke, is a dump. Becoming famous is probably the only way to earn more than a stale crust there.

I am one of the very few people who do not know where they come from. This is not because I was found outside a monastery draped in a Crewe Alexandra away shirt, but because there are three towns with equally

reasonable claims to me. I was born in one, went to school in another, but never actually lived in either. The third, is another anomalous affair... the biggest English town not to have a railway station, the biggest English town to share its name, the biggest English town never to have had a league football club, and the biggest English town that hardly anybody has heard of.

Why? Well, it's a Newcastle (although to avoid wearing out their voice boxes locals refer to it as Castle, as will I from here on) and as you probably know, there is another Newcastle in England. Yes, up north, Shearer country, Paul Gascoigne country, Sting country. Castle, on the other hand is a Victorian market town living in the shadow of Stoke and in many ways sharing its culture and supplying a good 15% of its football supporters. Castle is the town that is, but isn't. The place I can't say I'm from because I always have to tell people where it is. The town I can't say I'm from because I'm not. I lived out in the sticks and had dealing with all three home towns, leaving me to this day stumped as to which one comes first.

I suppose it depends on the day, occasion. Come early May, I'll manage to be from Stoke, just for the time being.

*\* The verb 'to spot' means to see something that you were looking for. Train spotters spot trains. They stand on railway platforms and watch the trains, not with a view to simple entertainment, but as a source of self-esteem. They note the train numbers, and instantly know if they've seen this same train at another station before. They take videos and play them back at home several times. They know which places trains go to, by number, which railroad company owns them and what the driver had for breakfast that day (don't put it past them). These obsessives are by and large very timid types and I guess the power and presence of a train is some kind of recompense for their own lack of self-confidence.*

*The close association of Crewe and trains has led to this tag being put on the local people. I can assure you that at any time, there are only several dozen men, in anoraks, standing at the far end of Platforms 5 and 6 in Crewe Station. If one of them is attractive and muscular, passengers on the train go past in stunned silence.*

## **12 April 2011**

Another much overdue blogge, excused by the obviousness of another trip to the museum (England) for my grandma's funeral (tribute page coming soon), and this last few nights my jet lagged yet happy progress through the latest in the Billy Ingham adventures which has seen Peter Ardern step up to a higher level in terms of the rhythms of his prose without any corresponding sacrifice of the quality of the story. Merry Christmas RIP so far, young Billy gets roped into chores at the church, an American heir to the local realm turns up to fuel the dismay, excitement and selfish mercenary desires of various members of his family, and the dog retreats into a suspicious and subdued silence which means you just know something is going to hit the fan. As for young Billy, he still just wants to live a normal life, and to a great extent he does, but the compelling storylines paint a picture of a life in which normal actually becomes really rather exciting.

Some, albeit not many, of you will have heard of the recent general election in Kazakhstan which, as predicted, resulted in a landslide victory for President Nursultan Nazarbayev, his winning 95% of the votes. Now I'm not an informed political commentator, and nor am I given to blogging in any great detail about the internal affairs of a country I have only relatively recently, in real terms, come to regard as home. However, I find it vaguely insulting that international observers have cast doubt on the results when so called western democracies dare, and I say dare, to include the British model by which the Prime Minister got to be so after polling about 25,000 votes. That's from an electorate of about 48 million. Even allowing for the fact that I'm by not giving any credence to the intricacies of the parliamentary system, consider, the party primarily in power only got about 30% of the available suffrage, whether cast or not. And an election returning a president to power with 95% can be unfair?

Nazarbayev has presided over the birth and growth of a very successful country with a bright future. I won't go into detail about how, you can take it or leave it, but the reason that he did so well in the election is because of the results of his work, and how the vast majority of people living under him are doing fine indeed. The absence of an alternative is inevitable, there is simply nobody better to run this country than the guy in charge right now, and an election result of 95% to 5% is a reflection of this and not of any dirty tricks that the western media would have people over there think. Maybe the western mind can't accept prosperity and wealth exists outside their own grassy gardens, and perhaps acceptance of the idea of pure democracy, which they barely have anyway, falls foul of the same blinkered pattern. Kazakhstan is a free and fair country, not without its faults, but a very wonderful place to live, and I for one am very happy to know that the man who takes a lot of the credit for this has been returned to power to keep up the good work.

There's a referendum in England soon, as well as a Royal something or other, in which voters will probably just about care as to the choice of whether to change the abstention, er, voting system. Because I don't care, I don't know, but the system tipped to replace the antiquated first past the post system will thankfully increase the value of individual votes therefore increasing the power of individual voters. This can only be good, but given that most MPs in the UK are a of questionable ethics, intelligence and ability, the actual actual result, I mean the shape of the arses on the Westminster seats won't be any different, so ultimately it's an empty gesture. Most MPs will retain their seats, those who replace them will have done so through the same kind of campaigns and by beating on the same tired drums. I see no real difference the way they are chosen will make.

"Here you go, people. You can choose this slimy bastard either by voting system 1 or voting system 2. What do you prefer?" "Two, two!" they cry, Life of Brian style. And then they get lumbered with the same slimy bastard.

I bought one of those 'I heart London' sweatshirts in London (NOT FOR ME) on Saturday and then went to Barnet and saw one which said 'I heart making the playoffs' which I decided not to buy given that it's no longer a reasonable expectation. Last week we won 8-1 which is a dilly of a score, but since about January we've been dire and mid-table is probably where we deserve to sit. Rather like a plate of unleavened bread before it gets passed to English guests who can't eat most of the other stuff because it's all of very animal origin.

I find it annoying, although I'm not bitter, at functions etc when people mix spoons therefore contaminating the veggie stuff. It means I have to go first to the buffet and take a few helpings because it's inevitable that I won't be able to get any more after some well meaning carnie dips the chicken spoon in the rice. I may be inexplicably strict, but if this happens, I simply will not eat that rice! And it happens.

One time in a supermarket here in Almaty I struggled to make a girl understand that she couldn't use that spoon and could she please get a clean one, because I didn't have the Russian words for spoon, animal fat, clean and use. All I could do was gesture and mumble nyet nyet, which I have to admit was a little unclear. It reinforces a point I already know very well in that when learning a language, vocabbe is always the most important thing. Grammar is only a way of modifying the delivery of meaning, which comes from the lexis. Which of these would be more clear, when wanting to borrow a pen? Simply saying 'pen' and gesturing politely, or asking, 'excuse me, I am having a little trouble right now and wondered if you'd be so kind as to lend me your, er, er ...'

Vocabbe is why I can't speak fluent Russian. I don't know the word for, well, spoon, animal fat, use and clean. Still don't. If you care to email me the answers, I'll make a point to learn them and use them, for without the latter, the former is almost useless. I will in fact go back to the supermarket and attempt to purchase the potato wedges I missed out on last time.

I travelled first class on Saturday, on the train from Crewe to London. It wasn't a choice as such, but would you believe the advanced booking for first class was cheaper than standard class? This wasn't a mistake, it's something in the payment structure which is carefully considered although bemusing to most passers-by, as well as passengers-buy. But first class, I mean... I had a green seat instead of a blue one, and for most of the journey (until they declassified the train at Milton Keynes) had a lot more space, but having travelled on that service before, I simply don't see the difference between the two categories.

Just my luck, to finally get in first class, for it not to be any different to standard class and then to be called standard class anyway for the last hour of the journey. I suppose it proves the point about the grass being greener on the other side of the fence, or not so. Or have London Midland invented a new cliché... the seats are greener on the other side of the sliding doors?

I migrated from British Rail to National Express about 10 years ago because the cost of train travel became a burden in comparison with the rubber-wheeled variety. Yet last week I was able to make two train journeys for the cost of a single on the coach virtue of a few cheap fares I found very easy to come by. My next trip to the UK is not imminent, nor even anticipated before summer 2012, but my love affair with the sixty seater white coaches could be in jeopardy now, even though most of the drivers travelling to Heathrow from London have the coolest twangs in Britain, West Country accents. Every time I travel on a coach I get stuck with that Wurzels song going round in my head, you know the one, Brand New Combine Harvester. Used to be one of my favourite songs. Can't imagine why, now.

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Much as I slag England off, don't forget, I come from a particularly (self-)deprived part of it and DO accept that there are some corking places to be visited there. One of the places I would be happy to recommend to a

traveller keen on beauty and tranquillity would be the West Country countryside, you know, Somerset, Devon, Wiltshire and Herefordshire, as well as probably Dorset and Cornwall. Very pretty pictures aplenty.

I didn't take any pictures in England, although amazingly we discovered a nice place in Stoke. Bagnall is a place I'd never heard of nor been to, but the weekend's more sombre affair of finally parting with the most wonderful person I've ever met was concluded with a trip to this oldy worldy beamed pub still boasting real ales (which I hate) and a real dart board, which I had some trouble dragging myself away from. In any case, I felt suitably impressed by the Stafford Arms to post a link to their website. If you're ever in Stoke, and ever form the same opinions I have of the place, a short taxi ride north east (I think) might be a suitable antidote to the stress of seeing dozens of unemployed people shouting at other unemployed people.

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Benefits culture = culture of dependency = victims culture = vicious circle. I'm not against benefits but the fact they have become such a part of life (and I've claimed them myself) has resulted in a benefits culture and culture in which the claimants see no point in trying to better themselves, for two reasons. One, benefits are ridiculously easy to get, and two, most of the jobs on offer for these people would mean them working 40 hours a week for an income they already get for drinking and shouting.

But it's so easy to point the finger at them, or the benefits agencies and yes, they are very very much to blame. But surely if that 40 hours a week job only offers the same as the bare minimum the state has decided a person needs a week to live in then THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THAT JOB! With many career benefit cheats, there is very little we can do bar stop paying them, but for many of the people unemployed for a longer period, the way to get them back into work is to have work available that pays a decent living wage, and this has to mean more than is available to claim from the state.

I know I wouldn't pack shelves for £120 a week when I can get £130 a week from the state. And hey, I'm no idle beer swilling scrounger either! Think about it.