

Tales from the Bar: II

Bill arrived, as usual, exactly at six. Marko had arrived a few minutes before, but not long enough for him to do more than order his customary ginger beer from the bar and walk over to their usual table. He was well aware that Bill was uncomfortable if that table was already taken – though it rarely was, at least out of the tourist season – and they had to decant to another one.

Nothing ever seemed to change in the bar of Le Strange Arms. The labels on the beer pumps occasionally promoted some different whackily-named beverage. But as Marko never touched alcohol then it was only the punning names and nifty graphic designs which ever rose, albeit briefly, into his conscious attention. Even the bar staff seemed to have become part of the furniture – the pleasant-enough lass who had been working here over the winter months smiled as he walked toward her before asking if he wanted his usual.

Bill ummed and erred for a few moments as the bitter he had been drinking for several weeks was now discontinued and he had to decide on what to have instead. Marko knew that this was the sort of change to Bill's routine that was likely to make him grumpy. At least for a few minutes. Marko mentally lined up a few jokes to distract him. But they weren't needed. Bill spoke first. 'Hello Marko. When you were in my office on Monday you said there were some interesting developments with the sand mine museum railway. But then said nothing had been decided and it was long-winded to explain.' Marko nodded. It was indeed long-winded.

'I know we have a rule about not talking too much about work when we meet up in the evenings,' Bill continued. 'But would you be willing to tell me at least a little more. At least let me know if anything needs to change. Although the volunteers have nearly finished the locomotive and most of the wagons.'

'No, Bill, I don't think you need worry about having to change the rolling stock. Although they may be doing somewhat longer distances than we first thought.'

'Is this something to do with the brouhaha that the local council have created about the golf course? There's been a lot in the *Brindlecliffe ECHO!* for months now. Seems the leader of the council has a bit of a thing against golf clubs.'

'To be fair, Bill, I think it's more that Abbe Dore, the leader of the council, has made some fast moves to try to stop the land being used for a housing development or just yet more caravans.'

'Really?' responded Bill. 'You seem to know more than is the paper.'

'Well as I don't read the *ECHO!* every week then I'm not sure exactly what they've been saying. But Dave, the best of my trainees at the diving class, his dad is the Secretary on the golf club committee and been in the thick of things. And fair to say it's been a challenge to him. Dave's mum isn't the sort of gal to get involved in such matters. And as, at one point, it looked like the committee members might be personal liable for some big debts, Dave's dad kept this from his wife. But did talk to Dave about it. When the idea was floated a few weeks back that the sand mining museum might benefit from the proposed changes the Dave shared with me some of what he knew from his dad.'

'Well I know the golf club was made bankrupt and a new organisation had to be created, this time with limited liabilities. And when the new club tried to renew the lease on the land then the *ECHO!* starting saying that snooty members-only golf clubs were a thing of the past and the land needed to be used for a much wider and more inclusive variety of leisure pursuits.'

Marko nodded. 'Yes, that's a very succinct and polite version of what happened. Seems Dave's dad has a much longer and far less polite version.'

'Well everyone is entitled to their opinions,' acknowledged Bill. 'And I'm sure as a member of the golf club committee Dave's dad may not agree with it been snooty and so forth. Is there anything you can add to what I know which would help me understand better?'

Marko took a good sip of his ginger beer. 'Well, I guess there is quite a bit more which could be said. Though whether it would help you understand better I'm not so sure. Seems in recent years the Friar's Ambling Golf Club had been caught in a bit of a vicious circle. The idea of spending four hours or so doing a round of golf does not fit in with the lifestyles of many people. And the ones who do have the time are, quite literally, a dying breed. Or at least getting too infirm to do a round of golf anymore. The younger generation of serious golfers prefer to play elite courses –

even though they're more expensive. This means local clubs have less income to maintain greens and club houses, so become even less appealing as places to play.'

'I thought Tiger Woods had been an inspiration to younger people to take up golf,' interrupted Bill.

'Yes, but that was over twenty years ago, Bill. The youngsters who took up golf then have grown up, got married, had children and have no time left to play golf.'

'Yes, I suppose that's right. And, if I recall correctly, Woods had some personal problems which rather damaged his standing as a role model.'

'That as well, Bill. And, in the case of Friar's Ambling, it doesn't help that there have been reports of a very large black cat occasionally prowling the greens. The committee all say it's impossible. But several golfers swear it wasn't their imaginations and call the trees nearby "Tiger Woods".'

Marko knew the pun would most likely be missed by Bill so continued without allowing Bill to say that tigers aren't black, or some other pedantic correction. 'Anyways, whatever the exact reasons,' Marko continued, 'paying suppliers' bills increasingly began to be postponed until members renewed their subs in January. This was especially true of their catering supplier who had to wait for several months until money became available. A couple of years back the catering supplier put them on credit stop early October. The golf club committee managed to get another supplier, despite their abysmal credit rating. When the club hadn't settled up with the original catering supplier by the end of February the unpaid supplier applied for bankruptcy proceedings.' Marko looked at Bill, but Bill seemed to still be interested.

Marko continued. 'The members of club suddenly discovered that they – and not just the committee – were jointly liable for the club's finances. Cue general apoplexy and many fallings out. Somehow some sort of deal was done. But it involved 'folding' the original club and forming a new entity. But no one thought to check with the local council, who owned the land and had issued a long lease, as to whether the lease was automatically transferable to another 'entity'. It wasn't, and the terms of the lease clearly stated this.'

'Ah,' said Bill. 'That was when the *ECHO!* took an interest.'

'Indeed,' confirmed Marko. 'They saw a chance to increase their circulation figures dramatically by promoting the cause of the "common man" against elitist golfers. At the very least their campaign meant that Abbe Dore, the leader of the council, deferred re-issuing the lease to the golf club until after a public consultation. Though I don't think she took much persuading as she remarkably swiftly commissioned a preliminary "public benefits" report. This confirmed that – what did you call them?'

'Snooty members-only golf clubs.'

'Yes, indeed. With all their dress codes and such like, were far too exclusive to offer enough benefits to the local economy and community. More inclusive uses of the land for leisure would have vastly more benefits.'

'But surely the course could easily be sold off for houses or yet another caravan park,' Bill contributed.

'Precisely!' responded Marko, loudly enough that the two other customers in the bar looked over. 'And that was *exactly* what Abbe Dore wanted to avoid,' he continued quietly. 'She said this was not the right part of the district for either – although plenty of developers were trying to persuade her that it was, as they could make a mint. So, by creating support for the diverse leisure options she would be able to side-step them.'

'Very convenient for her that the *ECHO!* asked their readers to suggest possible leisure users,' observed Bill.

'I think you might be missing the point there, Bill. With all due respect.' Marko paused and Bill looked at him. 'My guess is that Councillor Dore took Jim Stevens, the editor of the *ECHO!* out for a few drinks and told him what she needed him to publish in his paper.'

'Do you think politics works like that Marko? It seems a rather cynical view, if I'm allowed to say so.'

'Well, if you asked me to prove it then I don't have evidence for a single word I said,' Marko acknowledged. 'But if I wanted to get some support for a key project then I'd

be happy to stand Jim a few pints if it was likely to get any help. And,' continued Marko after a sip of ginger beer, 'since when were leaders of local councils not mates with the editors of the local papers? Not always best mates, to be sure, but there's usually some mutual respect and assistance.'

'From something the Property Manager said to me – seems she'd had a chat with Councillor Dore too – the strategic plan for housing and other developments which was drawn up just over a year ago specifically excluded more houses and caravan parks in the region between Friar's Ambling and the outskirts of Bishop's Snoring. Instead, that zone had been set aside with the hope of extending the nature reserves and providing more leisure facilities.'

'So planning applications for housing would have been turned down,' Bill observed.

'Well that's what supposed to happen. But then the developer appeals, the local council is faced with a prospect of a massive legal bill with no money to call upon, and have to say "yes" anyway. But Abbe Dore is not your usual low-calibre councillor and realised that getting the public behind her – after all it was *their* ideas submitted to the *Echo!* which she was now trying to bring to fruition – would mean that any legal appeal to allow more houses or caravans would get vociferous objections.'

Marco paused. 'There may be an element of bluff in this strategy too, Bill. With luck the developers would back off as they could be the ones picking up hefty legal costs to no benefit. Only in about fifteen years time would the strategic plan be reviewed, by which time the new leisure facilities and such like would have become well-established.'

'Well, Marko, I would never have worked that one out. But now you've explained it then it does make a lot of sense. Asking people what they would like then trying to make sure they get what they asked for does sound like a clever strategy for politicians to adopt.'

'But of course all this just stirred up another hornet's nest of problems, not least for Dave's dad. He finds himself trying to lobby all the councillors urging the re-leasing of the land to be "rubber stamped". Just when there was a fairly rabid attempt by the *Brindlecliffe Echo!* to secure the maximum number of objections to this ever happening.'

'I was impressed by the variety of ideas that the readers put forward,' Marko said. 'Some were a bit too obvious, like reusing the clubhouse as a wedding venue or a spa. I rather liked the idea of a community farm. But that wouldn't pan out as the soil is too sandy and useless even for grazing. Some even wanted a zoo, complete with a large enclosure for wolves.'

'People living in the nearby villages didn't seem too keen on that,' Bill dryly remarked.

'I can fully understand,' Marko responded. 'But the idea of a falconry centre seemed to be more acceptable. But most people seemed to think the land could be used best for a nature reserve-cum-park where people could go jogging and orienteering, or cycling and horse riding. With an area for outdoor gym equipment and zip wires. And, predictably, while yet more caravans were not welcome, there was more support than might have been expected for a camping and glamping area.'

'Yes, I was a little surprised by that,' remarked Bill. 'I can only assume that the people who can afford to go "glamping" spend more money in restaurants and pubs than the ones who rent caravans.'

'Quite likely. But then,' Marko continued enthusiastically, 'some Bright Spark floated the idea of adding a heritage element so the project is eligible for grants from Heritage Lottery Fund. Whoever it was – I don't think the *ECHO!* ever named them – suggested the former club house would make an excellent heritage centre for the sand extraction formerly on the site and local glassmaking industries etc etc.'

'But the sand mine museum was already being developed, less than a mile away,' Bill rightly remarked.

'But the point is that those original proposals for the museum are not where the sand mines actually were.'

'Oh, I didn't realise that,' admitted Bill.

'The museum site was chosen simply because it was close to Friar's Ambling ruins, so the two tourist attractions could feed off each other.' Marko paused and looked at Bill. 'Do you not know where the sandpits and mines actually were then?' he asked.

'Well I know they were quite extensive, all the way to Dodd's Hill Staithes, before the sea retreated and loading boats became impossible. Do you know Marko?'

'I agree that there were lots more. But the sandpits and mines nearest Friar's Ambling are exactly where the golf course was built. It was built there precisely because, back then, the land had few other uses.'

'So by making the golf course – the former golf course,' Bill corrected himself, 'the site of the museum instead then it would have more historical veracity. And, if I've read the enthusiastic article in the *ECHO!* the week before last, then they would have the benefit of the former club house as a rather splendid heritage centre, instead of the much more modest bolted-steel industrial unit that had been envisaged.'

'So the two-foot gauge railway won't be built at Friar's Ambling now, but near the club house?' Bill said, trying to clarify.

'Well that's exactly where it gets interesting,' teased Marko. 'Yes, the part of the railway built to look like a mine would, if all progresses, be within a few hundred yards of the former club house, now the heritage centre. And the passengers will board the train close to the heritage centre and ride to the mine. But, if we can get Crown Estates to agree – and they've not come close to saying no – then we can get wayleave over a corner of their lands to run track all the way from the heritage centre to the platform which has already been built close to the ruins. That would be just over a mile of track.'

'Oh,' said Bill, clearly trying to take this in. 'That means the rolling stock would indeed be travelling much further each day than was thought when we designed them.'

Bill paused and Marko realised he was thinking, so finished his drink.

Bill finally spoke. 'I don't think there's anything that needs changing, Marko. We've already made provision for the loco to be able to carry a spare LPG cylinder so it can always get to the station. The lads building it thought two smaller cylinders would be better than one large one, and I've already agreed to that change.'

Bill paused again for several seconds before continuing. 'Thank you for explaining everything to me Marko. There's much there I didn't know. And the idea of making the golf course partly into a heritage centre was such a good one. I presume it doesn't stop the rest of the former course being used for the wide variety of recreational activities you mentioned?'

'Not so far as I'm aware,' Marko replied. 'You know, Bill, that suggestion about the heritage centre reminds me of some of the ideas which came out of nowhere when the railway – our railway – was still in its early stages.'

'Yes, indeed, Marko. 'Some of them were almost devious, at least to my mind. But they worked out well.'

'And you know who was responsible for most, if not all, those more imaginative – though I think your word, "devious", is at least as accurate – suggestions?'

'Well, Marko, the ones that come to mind – shall we say the more imaginative or the more devious ones? – came from the Property Manager.'

Marko smiled. 'Just between you and I, there's a good chance that The PM was behind this suggestion too.'

'Why do you think that Marko? Did you ask her?'

'Not likely!' retorted Marko with mock indignation. 'If she was behind it she would just dodge the answer. She can do the neither-confirm-nor-deny routine better than anyone I've ever met, without ever using that phrase. The reason I have a sneaky suspicion is simply that about a week or so before the *ECHO!* published that suggestion she'd come over to my office on some minor pretext. And then asked me what I thought about the golf course "politics". And, this is what stuck in my mind, in a roundabout way, asked if the sand mine railway had to be built as planned or whether it could be moved closer to the old mines.'

'Well,' said Bill, clearly surprised. 'That is a bit of a give-away. And such a brilliant idea contributed anonymously has all the hallmarks of The PM at work. But why would she get involved with the golf club "politics" as you rightly called them?'

‘Why not?’ Marko responded. ‘Anything which is good for tourism in this corner of Norfolk is good for our railway too. And The PM is fully aware that we – and I really do mean you and I – are the ones setting up and will be managing the running of the sand mine railway, even though the rest of the museum has its own committee.’

‘Yes, The PM does tend to see – what do people say – “the bigger picture” better than anyone else,’ concluded Bill.

‘Anyway, we can talk about this further another time. I’m a bit on the late side for getting over to the training sessions. See you here next week, if we haven’t had a reason to meet up at work before then.’

disclaimer

There happens to be a golf course on the site of extensive former sand mines – for exactly the reasons given – in the part of Norfolk where this tale is set. However it is one of the elite clubs and, so far as I am aware, has never had any financial problems. The rather splendid clubhouse is not destined to become a heritage centre any time soon. Indeed, part from the almost inevitable reuse of former sandpits as a golf course, everything else in this story is, so far as I am aware, entirely fictional. And if, unbeknown to me, this is not the case that would be an unfortunate coincidence.

sources

Knowledge of golf clubs and their woes was non-existent before reading this article:

www.thegolfbusiness.co.uk/2020/02/insolvency-expert-says-some-golf-club-committees-need-to-be-more-professional/

Although not necessary an accurate paraphrase, the discussion of planning issues is based on

parissmith.co.uk/blog/planning-policy-issues-around-golf-course-redevelopment-part-2/

Tiger Woods pun provided by Ian. Thanks! (I think...)