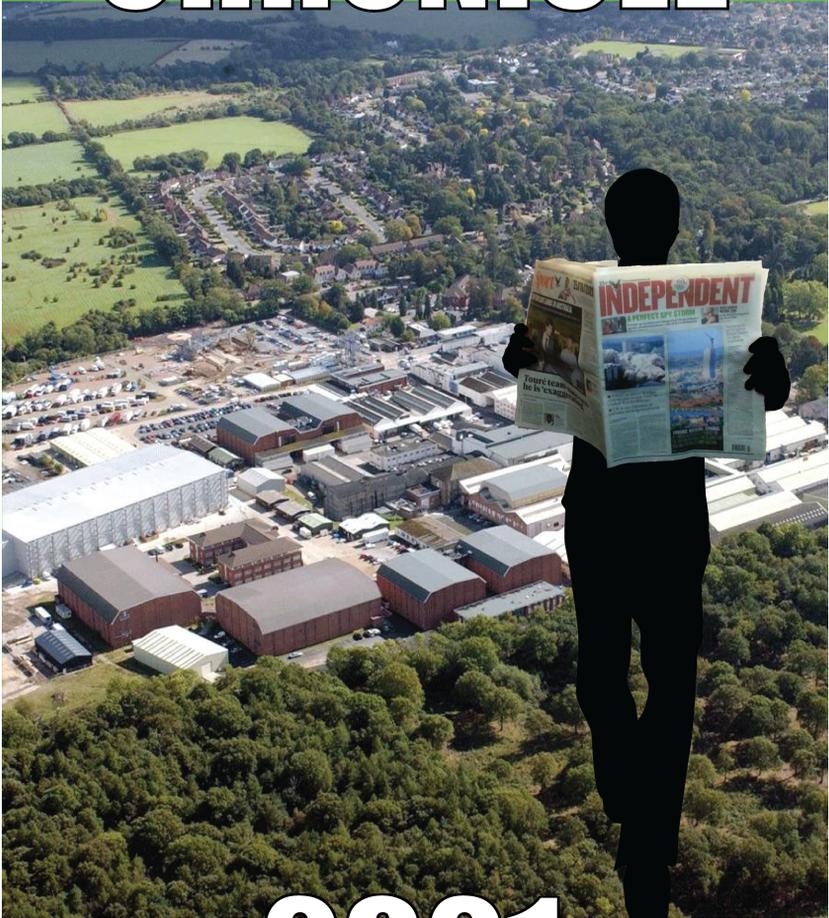


CHRONICLE



2021

Andrew Woodmaker

**A disaster that could have been avoided,
the blame game starts and the rot sets in.**

In this eighth year's worth of entries from a diary stored on a futuristic recording device found after a house fire, an avoidable disaster sets Andrew Woodmaker at odds with those around him.

In 2021, scenes of destruction from the other side of the world destroy the soul of a nation, but theirs isn't the only country to face disaster.

Andrew Woodmaker begins the year with his amazing birthday present, which may catapult him to international stardom, or at least, earn the admiration of friends and family.

Nobody knows if this is a work of fiction or a true record of how things happened, and will happen. By reading the diary, some things may have already begun to change, and the future is not what it was.

But it could be that this is how it would have been.

CHRONICLE 2021

by

ANDREW WOODMAKER

Edited from recording device by

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Dedicated to Cheryl

The inventor of the Coca Cola catapult.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Friday, January 1st to Saturday, January 9th 2021

Right, New Year's resolutions, I have them. I made one of them before I'd finished watching the London fireworks on TV, and the second didn't take too long either. I thought about a third, but really, I'm pushing my luck with two, so I'll just leave it at that.

No. No you don't get to know what they are yet. Why do we have to go through this every year? You'll find out later, I promise.

So, first new week of the new year, what have I been up to?

Well, New Year itself I spent being quite lazy. Simon, Gerald and I sat around in my house playing some Xbox games while Kylie, CoNN and NewCat played.

Well, CoNN watched from under the bed, and NewCat tried to play, but Kylie is a bit bigger than she is now, and so the playing sometimes got a bit too rough for such a small cat.

In breaks between Xbox games though, we played tug with Kylie, who has a bit of rope that she's very attached to. She just loves playing tug with it. NewCat was fascinated with the concept, but didn't seem to want to join in. She did go as far as walking up to sniff the rope as we played, not at all concerned that there was a growling dog on the other end of it.

It's nice when the new year follows right on with a weekend, although for some reason I was working on the Saturday. I'd arranged to meet Max Butler, the builder from Bristol who wanted to talk to me about the partial collapse of the Insurance Tower a few weeks ago.

If I'd thought ahead, I wouldn't have arranged to meet on Saturday, I'd have waited till Monday when I was back at work. That way I wouldn't have lost out on one of my weekend days, and I'd also have been able to skip the meeting.

I got to Bristol in the early afternoon, and told my car to drive me to the address he'd given to me. I read through the email again, just to make sure I had all the facts to hand, and when the car arrived, I got out and rang the doorbell.

The guy that answered the door isn't at all who I'd expected. I'd

expected a two metre gorilla with arms as thick as my legs, but instead the guy was in his mid 50's, and probably no bigger in build than me, which is to say, not very big or beefy at all.

He invited me in, and I met his wife, Ella, who made us all a cup of tea. I set my lenstop to record instead of my pad, as I wanted to just get it all in a normal conversation instead of a more formal interview style.

'So, Max, what is it that they've done that's wrong?' I asked. 'You said it was an accident, surely that means it should be investigated by the HSE? They're the ones who have the authority to check up when things go wrong.'

'The HSE has been and investigated,' Max replied. 'Nobody was hurt, so they sent round one guy, and he didn't even go on site. He just talked to the managers, who assured him it was a one-off problem. If nobody's hurt, they don't have the manpower to do anything about it.'

'That sounds a bit crap.'

'It's been like it for years, ever since the government started all the cuts about ten years ago. I haven't heard of them prosecuting anyone in the last five years, they just show up, make the bosses sign some bits of paper, and go away again.'

'So you feel it would be good to get some public awareness of what's going on around here. Maybe make the government pay attention, and start enforcing the rules.'

'Yeah. The funny thing is, when the HSE was all over everything, we hated them. They were always sticking their noses in, and being a pain with every last thing we did, but now it's just swung too far the other way.'

'So, tell me, what exactly did the management do that was so wrong?'

'Well, they're employing these builders from India to do a lot of the work. Now, don't get me wrong, I have no prejudice against anyone who does the job, but these Indian builders haven't got the first clue what they're doing. The thing is, they're cheap to hire.'

'The management have hired them, and most of them have never worked on a building project like this. They're house builders, stuff like that. The engineering for a building like this is much more complicated, you can just throw up a house and it'll probably stay up,

but when you're talking about 70 floors, it's a bit different.'

I was a bit on guard at this point. As soon as someone says they have no prejudice and then go and immediately group people by nationality when complaining, I get a bad smell.

'So what was it these Indian builders did wrong?'

'They used the wrong type of beam as a support. The plans call for reinforced concrete beams, which have got steel inside them, and they just used concrete beams. They weren't even fully cured, it was crazy.'

'And that's bad?' I asked, displaying my profound ignorance.

'Yeah, very. Without reinforcement, concrete beams are shit at bearing loads horizontally, they can crack too easily.'

'So the builders that did that made a mistake.'

'It's more than a mistake, it's displaying a complete ignorance of how to build big buildings. Anyone with even a hint of training would know not to do that.'

'OK, so the big problem is that some of the construction teams aren't properly trained in this type of construction. Anything else?'

'Yeah. Even if they had been trained, I'm still not sure this building, if it does go up, will stay up. As well as cutting costs on the teams they're using, they've been buying in some really crappy quality concrete. I've been a builder for a long while, I've worked on Canary Wharf, The Shard, and The Pinnacle, so I know a bit about concrete. For a building like this, you want good quality stuff, maybe with Silica fume, but this stuff they're using, I can tell you right now, it's cheap, and it's nasty. Its pH is way lower than it should be, and that means that even when we do use reinforcement in the concrete, in 20 years, the concrete will have cracked, the steel will have corroded, and this thing is coming right back down the quick way.'

'It's all about cost cutting. They should be spending loads more than they are, but the bosses all want their bonuses for hitting their cost targets. They don't care what happens in 20 years time, it won't be their problem then.'

He went into some more detail about the concrete. I won't write it all in here cos it was pretty boring, but you get the gist.

I left his house in the late afternoon with a load of stuff to read up on. I needed to understand a bit more about the building of

skyscrapers before I could do a reasonable investigation.

That was for later in the week though. I was a little grumpy about losing my Saturday, and so I made sure that Sunday was full of absolutely nothing that needed any effort. And that includes cooking. Pizza was definitely in order.

On Monday, on the way into work for the first really useful meeting of the new year, I caught up on the news I'd missed over the long weekend. It didn't take long. The only thing of note was that Montenegro and Macedonia both joined the EU as of the start of the year. Nobody really cared, to be quite honest. It barely made a footnote in the news compared to future predictions for 2021 from absolutely *everyone* I've ever heard of.

It always makes me laugh the way that news is full of predictions for the next year during the first week. I don't think they've ever even come close, and yet they continue. Trying to predict the future isn't just bordering on pointless, it's the capital city of the nation of pointless.

Of course, in the meeting, when we got to the point where they assigned tasks, I was told to do an article on, you guessed it, future predictions. I had to do a 'this year in science' article. I'm not putting it in here, because I know how wrong it was, I just had to make it sound awesome. I know the UK won't get a man on the Moon this year, no matter what we do with our new huge science budget.

On Tuesday, I spent the morning in the hospital, waiting to have the plaster cast removed from my wrist. As I wasn't an urgent case, I kept being bumped down the queue, and I was there for about five hours before someone finally got round to removing it.

I spent the next hour scratching it. Wow, did I need that!

My wrist seems pretty much back to normal now. It still aches when I use it too much, and I've been told to be gentle with it for the next few months, but it seems the worst is over. I have some whopping scars on my wrist where the bone broke through the skin though. Luckily they're on the inside, so it doesn't show much.

Because people will notice two small scars on my right arm, when my entire left side is just a mass of them.

Now that I've ruled out putting in my future gazing article, I'm going to add in a real science article, from the Euclid space telescope.

Euclid confirms dark matter observations from Fermi

The ESA's Euclid Space Observatory has confirmed the observations of NASA's Fermi telescope, which reported signs of the elusive dark matter last year.

The evidence so far is from the presence of gamma rays, which seem to have no observable origin, and could be coming from dark matter just beyond the fringes of our galaxy.

Both telescopes, which have a similar range of detectors on board, have located the gamma source in a region of space that extends without stars to beyond the edge of the galaxy, ruling those out as the source of gamma rays.

While dark matter is completely invisible to light, meaning it cannot be seen, it is believed that collisions of dark matter particles will create gamma rays, leading to the current observation.

Dark matter is still hypothetical, and while it is the best explanation for many observed phenomena, it may yet be that it does not even exist, and scientists must look elsewhere for their answers.

Sunday, January 10th to Saturday, January 16th 2021

Monday was a terrifying day for me. Absolutely horrible. And yet, I came out of it unscathed.

Overnight on Sunday it had snowed. Not heavily, but enough that on Monday morning, it was a few centimetres deep.

I came very close to getting on the train instead of using my car, but I knew I'd have to trust it in the snow one day, so I may as well get it over with.

I got in and told it to drive to refuel. I thought it was safest to just try a small trip first, before I risked the motorway and then London.

The car started up just fine, and drove off confidently. It was moving more slowly than usual, which made me happy, and the wheel was forever making very minor corrections, it was almost vibrating it was making so many of them.

The effect of the corrections, however, was a very smooth ride. The car made it to the garage with no problem whatsoever, and after filling up, I told the car to park close to work.

It took me onto the motorway, and while I was beginning to be confident with the car, I wasn't confident about all the other idiots on the road. It was still snowing closer to London, and so the road was a bit slippery, and there were morons in the outside lane doing probably 140km/h.

I was very happy that my car stayed solidly in the left lane, and kept to about 70km/h just as the temporary speed signs advised. I didn't see any crashes, but I think it was more by luck than the judgement of some of the other absolutely insane drivers.

I didn't do any reading, I didn't nap, I stayed wide awake and focusing on the journey the whole time, in case the car's computer decided to give up and hand control back to me.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the car pulled into the car park, and I could get out.

I love my car, I really do, but I wish I could have gone on the train. They don't tend to slide sideways unless the snow is much deeper than it was.

The meeting was its usual pointless self, and I wouldn't have mentioned it if not for the journey in. I was so glad to have made the trip, risked my life on the roads of doom, just to sit in a room full of people and contribute absolutely nothing.

Thankfully, the trip back was less traumatic. The snow had stopped by then, and the motorway was clearing up nicely. Other drivers were still driving like lunatics, and I spotted a crash in the other direction, but I got home safely.

The Volkswagen Dart, their first self drive car, was released on Monday. I didn't need to do an article on it, they'd already bought out a ton of advertising space in the paper, so it would have been a bit pointless. Not to mention I was told not to, so that they wouldn't have a reason to not buy the adverts.

Apparently the people advertising in our paper are getting a bit more clever now, and they'll now only pay if someone opens the page that the advert is on. We can tell based on the way the paper moves, it is electronic after all.

Having digital papers also means that as soon as they think they've got as much value out of the ad as they think they're going to get, they can just pull it from the paper, which is driving the marketing department crazy. Always before they'd rely on advertisers just believing they were getting value for money, now they needed to prove it.

Poor buggers, having to do work for a change.

Tuesday I went back to Bristol to do a bit more work on the alleged problems on the Insurance Tower.

The damage from the partial collapse had been cleared away, and Max, my whistleblower, had told me that the rubble had been dumped to one side of the site.

There was no security on the site, not during the day with workers going in and out, but there were signs saying to keep out. I just walked in and walked round the site to the point where I'd been told the rubble was.

The task was to verify that the concrete was of low pH, meaning it would be of low quality. The lower the pH, the less alkaline the material is, and the more quickly it'll crack and let in water, which is acidic in comparison. In reinforced concrete, this will then begin to corrode the steel reinforcements, or in the case of non-reinforced, it'll just start to crumble, like potholes in a road surface when water turns to ice and expands.

The test was simple, pour some distilled water onto the concrete, wait a minute, drop a bit of litmus paper into the water, check its colour.

I tested the concrete in a half dozen places, and each one of them

came back with a pH of between 7 and 8, so only slightly alkaline. That was pretty bad, as concrete needs to have a pH of between 9 and 11 to be considered good quality concrete, the kind that's used in a big building like this.

This first bit of evidence seemed to corroborate the claims that'd been made, but it wasn't enough to print a story, or to call in the police or anything. It could just be that the rubble had been rained on, which could have reduced the alkalinity on its surface.

The next step was to investigate the concrete suppliers, see what I could find out from them. First of course, I'd need to find out who they were.

That was quite easily done, just by sending an email off to Max, and waiting for his reply. As he didn't reply, I expect he was somewhere working on the building site above me, so not likely to be checking his email. I decided I wasn't going to wait around all day, and so I got back in the car and drove home.

That evening I got a reply from him that he didn't know, but he'd do his best to find out.

On Thursday there was a bit of good environmental news, possibly the first I've ever covered. Usually it's all gloom and doom and we're killing the planet. Don't misunderstand me, I believe that that's the case, and it needs to be covered in the news, but it's nice to get good news for a change.

Tasmanian Devil reintroduced into the wild

Extinct outside of zoos since 2016, the Tasmanian Devil is being reintroduced back into the wild in Australia.

For most of their final two decades, Tasmanian Devils were victim to a contagious form of facial cancer, which could be passed easily from animal to animal, and caused them to develop tumours which prevented eating, and so caused them to starve to death.

Unlike many extinctions in recent years, human activity was not thought to play a part in the depopulation of the Devils.

Zoos across Australia had been collecting uninfected specimens since the extent of the disease was understood, and when the last known wild population died in 2016, plans were made to reintroduce them back into the wild, as soon as an amount of time had passed to ensure that the disease would not be able to reinfect the new colonies.

The new Devil colonies have been placed in three secret locations in Tasmania, to prevent poaching for these now rare animals.

It is expected that it could take up to thirty years for a significant population to once again be present on the island, and for the species to be considered out of danger.

Meanwhile, Australian zoos are continuing their breeding program, in case this reintroduction fails.

*

I remember reporting on the extinction back in 2016, as I was lying in hospital recovering from the Mecca bomb. It may have even been my first article I wrote from hospital, although I can't quite remember now, and to be honest, I don't actually care enough to look back and check.

Yeah, I'm lazy, but it was just a side comment, not something I'm betting my life on :-)

On Saturday morning, I was definitely getting excited, as it was next week that I needed to be in London for my birthday pressie. I'd considered booking myself into a hotel in Elstree for the week, but I decided that now I have the car, it's only an hour and a bit to drive there, so I may as well save the money and sleep in my own bed at night.

I start on Sunday, and it's going to be awesome.

Sunday, January 17th to Saturday, January 23rd 2021

Sunday morning I was up way before the crack of dawn, and I was on the road by 6am to make sure I was there on time. It may be the first time in my life I've ever got up so early and been happy about it.

I got to Elstree Studios at around 7:30, and it was already a bustle of activity. I guess making a new Star Wars film isn't something you can just do with a handful of people and one cameraman.

I showed the security guard at the gate my booking details, and he pushed parking area information, and the location of the reception to my phone. I thanked him, and told my car to park at the specified point. As my car is linked to my phone, it knew where I meant. It's just that clever.

After parking, I walked through into the reception area, and told the receptionist my name. I was told where to go, and ended up in a fairly large waiting room. It felt a bit like a doctors waiting room, as there were a fair few people there, and nobody was being called through.

At 8am, a woman came in and read our names off of a clipboard, and told us all to follow her. She asked who'd been an extra before, and about half of the people there put up their hands, which made me feel better, there were at least a dozen or more who didn't. I was glad I wasn't the only noob in the group.

She gathered us into experienced and non-experienced, and we were sent into another room, and told we'd be given a day of training so we knew what we were doing.

We lucky dozen filed into the new waiting room and hung about for the next hour or so. Some of the more gregarious of the bunch were happily introducing themselves to each other and making friends, but I, along with a couple of others, sat quietly in the corner, happy with our own company.

I exchanged a wry grin with one of the guys there, after we'd both rebuffed the enthusiastic attempts by one of the others to get us to join in with the rest of the group. I know he meant well, but I didn't want to, and it seemed neither did the other guy.

He baulked a little when I turned towards him to grin, and he saw my face. I'm so used to it now, I rarely notice, but I never stop hating the looks on peoples faces as they see what a mess my left side is. He

seemed to collect himself though, and didn't get up and go sit somewhere else at least. That happens sometimes.

Just before 9:00, a guy came in and told us he was going to run us through the basics of being an extra.

Rule number one, he said, was don't talk. Not ever. We were there to do non-speaking roles, and be background. We'd either have to walk somewhere, stand somewhere, or sit somewhere, and look busy. If we talked, the whole scene would need to be shot again at great expense, and it was guaranteed it would be shot without us in it.

Rule number two is that the main actors are off limits. We aren't to try and become their best friends, to give them pointers, or to even let them know we exist. These people can charge a thousand pounds a minute or more, and we definitely can't afford for them to spend a minute noticing we're there.

It all sounded a bit draconian to me, but I wasn't going to argue about it.

He had us all stand up, and organised us into height order. He stopped and looked at me when he got to me.

'Is that real, or did you think we needed some fancy makeup job?'

'What, my face? It's real. I wouldn't look like this by choice.'

'Real? Interesting, never seen a burn mark so straight before.'

'I'm not surprised. Not many people have stood as close as I have to a nuclear bomb before.'

'Is that supposed to be funny?'

'No,' I replied, 'it's supposed to be a legacy from Mecca.'

He opened his mouth to reply, and I could see the light bulb moment as he worked it out. He closed his mouth, looked at me for a few more moments, and then moved on to the next in line.

Once we'd finished in the line up, he had us all doing exciting things like walking, sitting drinking in silence, lying down pretending to be dead, and sitting with our back to him.

That last one was the worst, strangely. He arranged a set of chairs all facing away from him, and had us all sit on them, and told us our job was to sit and face the far wall, and film was rolling.

And that was it. Nothing else happened.

After about 15 minutes, one of the guys turned round and asked how long we'd be doing it for. Immediately he was hauled out of his

seat and told his services would no longer be required. If the camera was running, he'd have just cost the studio a million pounds.

He tried to protest, but was ushered out of the room and told to go home.

It was harsh, and the rest of us didn't move or say a word for another 15 minutes until the instructor guy yelled 'CUT' right behind us and made us all jump.

I thought it was a bit harsh what had happened to the guy that had been fired, but then again, I guess it would be more than possible to be in a scene where there isn't much noise behind us, and we're sitting there for an hour or more, you never know.

We spent the rest of the day doing more of the same. One other guy got kicked out when his phone rang in his pocket, and the rest of us made it through to the end of the day.

The instructor split us into two groups, and the other group was told to get in for 4am the next day, as they'd be putting on masks and makeup to play the part of background aliens. I was a bit disappointed for a whole three seconds not to be in that group, until I realised that that lot would never have their faces seen, I was much better off where I was.

I drove home that evening, glad to be in the better group. No more than a few minutes after I'd got home, Simon and Gerald were knocking on my door asking how it was, and if I'd seen anyone famous yet.

I had to disappoint them that I hadn't, and that the day had been full of rules and training. I hadn't seen a single famous person, in fact I'd hardly seen anyone all day.

They shrugged for comedic effect, and went back downstairs, as there was no gossip.

Monday, and I was back there for 7:30 again, and was directed back to the room I'd started from on Sunday. One of the newbies that had been in the group not assigned to alien makeup duty was missing, and I wondered if they'd been fired or just not wanted to come back.

The other guy who'd been hiding in the corner yesterday was there still, and he introduced himself as Charlie Perry, from Reading.

I introduced myself back, and told him I'd learned to drive in Reading, and occasionally do some work there.

The conversation didn't really carry on much beyond that, neither of us were the talkative type, or the type to just chat to random strangers.

At 8am, the woman with the clipboard was back, and she walked us all onto one of the sets, and told us all to sit in the seats right out of the way until we were called to do something.

She grabbed me as I was heading over there and told me that due to my face, I'd have a more specialised part.

This sounded quite exciting. Of course, I hate my face, but if it lands me an actual part in a film, well, I'll still hate it, but I'll be glad for the opportunity.

She told me that I'd have nothing to do for the day, but that tomorrow, I'd be pretty busy. I nodded, and she said she'd prefer it if I hung around for the day to watch and learn, which I was more than happy to do.

Most of the day involved actors acting in front of green screens, and I saw some famous people at last. Mark Hamill was there, Carrie Fisher was there, obviously no Harrison Ford as he's been dead for three years, and Maisie Smart, among many others. It was pretty awesome to see them all in the flesh.

The whole process seemed to involve doing the same thing over and over again several times, with the director having them change small bits and try again, or just to do it several times even if it was good, just to make sure it couldn't be any better.

It wasn't actually that exciting, and I went home feeling a bit bored. The buzz of seeing famous people had faded into a desire to have a nap by then.

Tuesday was completely different. It was very very cool, and I had things to do.

The rule was still not to say anything, but I was told that I'd be taking the part of a Sith force user, and I'd be a minor obstruction to the good guys, before being killed.

That sounded good to me.

They put me in some fairly badly fitting robes, and had me sit and wait for my part to come up.

That wasn't until about 2pm, so I was fairly bored by then. However when they called me up, I was anything but bored.

They gave me a lightsabre, which was actually just a lightsabre handle prop, with a thin flexible plastic stick sticking out of it. The stick bit had some blue marks on it, which I knew from watching behind the scenes films were for the CGI. My job was to walk round a corner and see Luke and Mara, and attack them.

It was absolutely awesome. I was told exactly what to do, where to move, where to put my feet, and all that lot, so there was no spontaneity at all, but that was fine with me. They had me force-push Luke backwards, attack Mara with my lightsabre, before she made quick work of me, and I fell down dead.

We probably did it a half dozen times. I felt a bit bad for Mark Hamill, he must be 70 by now, and there he was, falling back onto a crash mat over and over, but he seemed to be fine with it.

Neither of them did more than play their part during the scene, and didn't say a word to me afterwards, but I didn't mind, I was having a great time anyway.

The next two days I was in a number of other shots, usually close to the front of groups of extras so my messed up face could be seen. I'm guessing they were all shots from earlier parts of the film, where my character, who seems to have no name, needed to be there to set him into the subconscious of the viewer, so that I wasn't just someone that shows up and dies. I'm someone that's there, and who exists, before showing up and *then* dying.

Each evening I gave an update to Simon and Gerald, who were really interested, and squeezed every last bit of gossip from me. It was almost as tiring as waiting around to do things all day.

On Friday, I had one more bit to do that was more than just complete background. I had to stand in a group of people, about half of them aliens, and be directed to 'go that way', which I suspect was the scene just before my untimely demise.

And then that was it. I was done.

I'd spent a lot of time being bored, but the times I was doing things, well, they were definitely the best birthday present ever.

I called my parents on Saturday morning, and told them all about it. They seemed suitably impressed that I'd got to do way more than just sit around and be background noise. Just for once, my face had been to my advantage.

I spent the rest of the day on Saturday catching up with what I'd missed in the world, while I'd been swanning around with my new Hollywood friends, and discovered that I hadn't missed much.

About the only thing that's happened of note is that Todd Akin has been sworn in as US president. Evidently, he had good speech writers and so he didn't seem to be too slimy as he gave his speech.

Obviously he is, but that'll come out later, I'm sure.

Sunday, January 24th to Saturday, January 30th 2021

I spent Sunday at Amanda's place. I've never been there before, but she invited me over so I could tell her all about how it had gone with the acting. I don't think I shut up for about an hour, and she was really impressed I'd got to fight Luke Skywalker!

'Yeah, and if it hadn't been for his wife, I'd have got him too, he was completely on the floor, I had him at my mercy!'

She laughed, and we carried on talking about it for the rest of the afternoon.

On Monday, after the meeting in London, I was heading into Bristol to see if I could learn anything more about the supplier for the concrete. I'd finally received the information over the weekend from Max that the supplier was a company called Harrison Aggregates, and I was going to see if I could arrange a supply of concrete from them, and see what they'd offer if I balked at the price.

I never got there though, my pad started beeping a warning at me, and so I looked at the feeds, to see there had been an attempt on

President Akin's life.

Unfortunately they didn't succeed this time. I say unfortunately, I mean, I never want terrorists to win, I really don't. In this case though, I think I'd have counted it as a net positive effect for the world to be rid of Akin.

They'd tried to kill him by stealing a helicopter and crashing it into the presidential limo as he was being driven somewhere. It looks like those limos are more resilient than I'd have expected, as his car withstood a helicopter full of fuel crashing into it at full speed. It was scratched up, and all of its tyres burst, but it didn't crash, and the president's compartment wasn't breached.

It wasn't so great for the normal cars accompanying them, and five police accompanying on motorbikes were killed in the explosion.

They loaded the president into a different limo, and whisked him back to the White House in short order. The whole of Washington DC was locked down, and nobody was allowed out on the streets for the rest of the day.

Of course, I wasn't one of the people supposed to be covering this kind of story, but even so, I turned the car round and went back home, just in case I was needed to write something on the attack. I wasn't, as it turns out. I should have known better really.

As expected, al-Qaeda for the martyrs of Mecca claimed responsibility. I expect their website got more hits than Google's did in those hours, with people checking there to see if they'd make any more claims. It's odd, we know their web address, but we don't know who's updating the pages. I wonder how that can happen, I mean, surely someone somewhere is typing on a keyboard, and the data has to go from A to B, how hard can be it be to find A if you know where the web server at B is?

I dunno, maybe it's hard, I'm not a computer specialist. They make it look hard in films, so maybe they're accurate, with all this 'bouncing off of five satellites and using seven layers of encryption,' or whatever they do.

Regardless, they obviously don't know how to track them down from the website, or they'd have done it last year after the first attack.

The attack was big news all week, and not much else made it into the papers. I wrote an article about a new drone fire fighting system

that was being used in Sydney, Australia to tackle the latest bush fires in the area, and it didn't even make it into the paper at all. Usually even at the worst of times I can make it into pages 20-30, but nope, big fires and high tech drones didn't make the cut.

On Friday, I got to my next appointment with Dr. Smith, my first for the last few weeks, after being so busy recently.

She seemed to be most concerned about the fact that I'd been singled out by the film studio to do a bigger role in the film because of my face. She was worried about how it would affect my self image, knowing that I looked so hideous that I was picked to do a role that would have usually taken several hours of makeup to make someone look so bad.

I admitted that it wasn't the best reason in the world to be picked, but I pointed out that it was the first positive thing to happen to me because of the injury.

She accepted it was a good thing to happen, but was a bit concerned that I didn't start to look upon my injury as a positive thing. She said she'd always encourage me to make the best of any situation, but I had to be sure I was clear in my mind where the boundary was between good and bad.

I pointed out that I'm looked at like a freak wherever I go, I've had to drink through a straw for the last four and a half years, and my fiancée had died on the day I got the injury. Just how many more reminders do I need that it wasn't a positive influence in my life?

She nodded and let it drop. I guess she was just checking it wasn't doing some twisted good/bad reversal thing in my head or something.

Not that that would be likely.

Sunday, January 31st to Saturday, February 6th 2021

It looks like CoNN's fur has finished growing back on his head now, so I'll have to stop calling him baldy. His face looks a bit different, the places he got scarred in the fight, his fur has grown back white, so now as well as being black and white patchwork, with salt

and pepper grey hairs, he has a bunch of white stripes on his face. I think he's been unlucky that each and every one of them were where black fur was growing, so they stand out quite noticeably.

The meeting on Monday was actually useful for once. I got a lead on a new piece of technology that I wrote about. Of course, I'd have had the same lead if we'd done the meeting online instead, so my main complaint is still valid.

mRFID chips - Security or Spying?

Marks and Spencer have today been the first company to roll out the controversial new mRFID chips on their product line.

These chips, like the RFID chip before them, are designed to protect store purchases from theft. They are small microchips, invisible to the eye, which are attached onto the surface of the product they are designed to protect. You will never notice them, they are smaller than the width of a human hair.

The old RFID chips were designed to work with those detectors that most shops have at their exits, the ones that we've all seen beeping when someone tries to steal something.

RFID chips work by electromagnetic induction. When they pass through the magnetic field generated by the detectors at the shop exit, an electric current is generated within the chip, and they broadcast an identification number, which the detectors pick up and alert shop security.

mRFID chips are much more advanced. Whereas an RFID chip is only useful in the shop you bought your product, an mRFID chip will continue to work anywhere on the planet.

If a product with an mRFID chip on it is stolen from a shop, then as soon as that item comes within range of any strong magnetic field, including one from an inductive charging surface, the chip will broadcast its location via 4G, allowing shops to recover their stolen

goods.

Only the shop which owns the goods can deactivate the mRFID chip, as it requires a complex exchange of encrypted information to cause the chip to deactivate itself when it is legally sold.

Advocates of the technology claim it will reduce theft from shops, and allow police to track down offenders to recover stolen property.

Opponents have called it the next stage in Big Brother culture, allowing items, and even people, to be actively tracked wherever they go.

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It was quite a big article, it turned out in the end. It only made it onto page four, but as soon as people found out about it, all of the conspiracy theorists were getting up on their grassy knolls and complaining as loudly as they could.

There were thousands of comments on the website forums about it. One of them even had a guy so angry you could see him drooling, but then, I suspect he had other problems causing the drool too.

It got so popular that they ended up bumping it up to page two, which doesn't happen very often. Usually articles get dropped down as their popularity wanes, it's rare they get promoted.

There was some pretty bad news overnight from Australia. The bush fires in the Sydney area had reached the outskirts of the city, and people were being evacuated from their homes in the Emu Plains area, after Springwood, Blaxland and Glenbrook further out had all been destroyed by the fires. There were hopes it could be stopped at the Nepean River, which is a fairly significant watercourse, but the fire department was advising people east of the river to be ready to evacuate if the fire managed to jump it.

I watched the reports coming in as I drove back to Bristol. I hadn't really had chance to get back to Bristol last week, what with all the assassination attempt stuff going on, but short of a major event, I was determined to get to talk to the people at Harrison Aggregates.

I got there at about midday. I confess I didn't really start work too early or I could have made it there a bit sooner. I parked up, and asked to speak to someone about buying a supply of concrete for a block of flats that my mythical company had just won a contract for.

I thought a block of flats would need the same kind of stuff, but wouldn't be obviously fake. They aren't going to be building a second giant building in Bristol without people knowing about it.

I'd got some suggestions from my contact Max about what I needed to ask for, and roughly how much, and so I wasn't going in there completely blind. I was playing the part of the clueless manager anyway, so it didn't matter too much.

I recorded everything on my lenstop, but the discussion was a bit long, so I'll just summarise.

I went in and introduced myself to the manager there. It's not a huge company, just a dozen or so people in diggers and bulldozers moving mountains of gravel and sand around, and four people in an office in a portakabin.

The manager introduced himself as Freddie Cooke, and he gave me a battered old plastic chair to sit on while we talked.

I told him about these supposed blocks of flats that we'd been contracted to build, and told him that we'd been told he was the best person to come to for good quality cheap concrete supplies.

He agreed that he was, and asked me what it was I needed.

I took out my pad, and read out a list of stuff, and he nodded and said that all that was fine, and then gave me a price.

That was my cue to go 'ohhh, that's a bit pricey,' and start to tap my finger as if I was thinking.

I told him that as the company owner, I wasn't actually a specialist in concrete, or in building at all, I was just there for the money. His quote was about twice what I wanted to pay, and was there something in the list that I'd been given by the engineer that could be, well, trimmed down a little.

He suggested some alternatives to the materials I'd asked for, all of them a bit cheaper, a bit lower quality, but nowhere near half the price, as I'd asked for.

I sighed and thanked him for his time, but said it was still too expensive, and I'd have to look elsewhere.

I got up to leave, and he opened the door for more negotiations.

‘I can get it cheaper, but the quality really starts to go down from here.’

‘How much cheaper, and how bad a quality? If it won’t pass an inspection before opening, I’ll be out of business,’ I told him.

He told me that he could get me half price, but he wouldn’t recommend the concrete for anything over a two storey house.

I said that that was fine, the engineers could just reinforce it.

He looked at me suspiciously, and shook his head.

‘Nope, sorry, we can’t sell you anything that’s unsuitable for your needs, I’ll have to ask you to leave now.’

And that was that, he bundled me out of the office, and sent me on my way.

I’d kindof expected that, and so as soon as I’d driven out of their car park, I went and checked out the laser microphone I’d placed behind a bush pointing at their window as plan B, so I could listen to what they’d said after I left.

See, not so dumb after all. :-)

As soon as I left, Freddie, the guy I’d been talking to started talking.

‘You know what, he was just too eager to get me to offer something that wasn’t safe.’

‘Maybe he was just trying to save money, it wouldn’t be the first time,’ one of the others replied.

‘Yeah, or maybe he was someone from the HSE checking up on us.’

‘The HSE never checks up on anyone any more, they don’t have the time or manpower, unless someone’s died.’

‘Either way, I didn’t like it. Especially for the amount of money he was offering, it would hardly be worth our time. It was worth it for the tower, that was a huge sale, but for a block of flats, if it even exists, it’s just not worth the risk.’

‘I’m still a bit uncomfortable about that you know,’ one of the other people in the office said. ‘Selling the lower quality stuff for the tower.’

‘It’s not a problem, they do safety inspections all the time on big buildings, they’ll catch any weakness and repair it way before it

becomes dangerous. Nobody's gonna get hurt, except the insurance people who'll have to pay for repairs, and who cares about them.'

'What about that collapse a couple of months ago though?'

'That was *nothing* to do with us, I've already talked to them about that. That was their own stupid fault for not knowing what they're doing. The idiots didn't reinforce a beam, what did they expect. To be honest, on that basis, we may as well sell them concrete that won't stand more than six months if they're just going to knock it over with bad building practice before it's even had time to dry.'

They laughed, and I stopped the playback. That was all I needed from these people.

I headed home. It still wasn't enough to do more than confirm that a supplier had supplied products to a customer that may not be quite good enough, but that doesn't mean anything. The supplier was just fulfilling an order, the customer may have made a mistake, or may have been using the concrete for other things.

There was way way more work to do on this one.

On Wednesday, there was a mix of good and bad overnight news from the Sydney fires. The bad news was that the suburb of Emu Plains, with 9,000 residents, had been engulfed in flames despite the best efforts and technology of the Australian firemen. The good news was that the river seemed to have stopped the fire's advance, and due to the evacuation, nobody had been hurt.

The Sydney fire department was working flat out to ensure that burning debris from the far side of the river didn't start fires in the Penrith area, and bring the fire closer to the centre of Sydney, thankfully with a good deal of success.

On Thursday, following the massive outcry because of my mRFID article, Marks and Spencer announced they were cancelling the roll out of mRFID tags in their shops. They announced that they'd misjudged the public's dislike of such invasive tracking, and would instead continue to use traditional anti-theft measures.

I don't know what the conspiracy theorists think they'll gain out of M&S not using mRFID. I mean, if they think they're all going to have chips implanted in their bodies, how will it help for M&S not to

use them? I don't get the link.

I'm obviously not paranoid enough I guess. I'll work on it.

That evening the news from Sydney was good, the fires had died down after burning out most of Emu Plains, and the river had held the advance of the fire, so it looked like the city was safe. The fire was still raging in the forested areas to the west and south of the city, but the fire teams were having some success keeping them from moving any closer.

On Saturday evening, I went out with all of my local friends, it was great. Simon, Gerald, Amanda and me all went to see X-Men Origins: Gambit. We're all geeks, and it was good to get out of the house for a change. I can't remember when I last went out except for work.

The film was pretty good, but then, Gambit has always been one of my favourite X-Men. I don't know why they didn't feature him much in the other films, it always seemed like a mistake to me.

Sunday, February 7th to Saturday, February 13th 2021

On Sunday morning, the news was back in Sydney again. The fire that had seemed to no longer be a problem was again a problem, and bigger than before.

They'd managed to stop it from burning across the river from the forests to the west of the city, but the fires in the south had overwhelmed the efforts of fire fighters to stop its advance, and it was burning its way through Heathcote National Park, which was less than 10km from the southern suburbs of the city. There were mass evacuations of the south of Sydney, with tens of thousands of people blocking the roads with cars and trucks, piled high with possessions that the insurance companies would probably replace if they were lost.

People always take the wrong things when they run from a disaster. They go for the expensive things that can be replaced, not the

unique things that can't, like photos, letters, and other stuff they'll really miss one day.

By Monday morning UK time, the fires had consumed the Heathcote, Lucas Height, and Kentlyn suburbs of Sydney. They were being driven by strong winds from the south, and the large forests just kept feeding the fires, no matter what the fire fighters did.

As the day progressed, our daytime, their night time, Sydney burned. The fire destroyed Sutherland, and everything south of Botany Bay, but couldn't jump Georges River. To the west though, the densely packed Campbelltown, Minto, and Glenfield areas were wiped out. There seemed to be nothing that the fire fighters, or the soldiers that had been brought in to help them, could do. They were risking their lives, and dying, to give residents time to evacuate, with little hope of stemming the flames.

You know what I wrote about as all this was going on?

The recall of butter in the Gloucestershire area, due to too high a level of salt being added to a large batch.

Do you think anyone gave a damn about that when a whole city was on fire? I doubt anyone even looked at my article. I almost begged to be allowed to cover something meaningful, but both of my editors refused to let me step on the toes of the foreign department. 'You have your area, please stick to it,' was the final word from Sam Rice, the senior science editor.

I swore as soon as I was out of earshot. I swore a lot. But did as I was told.

Throughout Monday night, I watched the TV as more reports came in. The fire spread throughout Fairfield, Blacktown, and Parramatta. For a while, the fire fighters thought they'd contained it and saved Bankstown, but while they stopped the spread from Fairfield, the fire burning in Parramatta outflanked them, and Bankstown burned just like the rest.

At about 7:30, the Sun came up in Didcot as it was setting in Sydney. People were fleeing north, or being carried by boat from the

harbour. Many had died from the smoke that hung close to the ground across the city, and the stories of courage from the firemen were without number. But still the fire advanced, and by the middle of our day, Sydney's central business district itself was burning.

I'd never seen anything like it. Nobody had. There were a dozen or more fairly sizeable skyscrapers in Sydney, and by midnight their time, they were all ablaze. I watched as the roof of the world famous opera house collapsed in on itself, and I saw the stadiums from the millennial Olympics burn down, and I saw a ship that had been evacuating survivors fall prey to the flames as it headed out into the harbour, with hundreds of people diving from its decks into the bay, to be rescued by some of the other ships brave enough to risk a rescue.

A few hours later, around mid afternoon our time, the wind shifted, and started to blow from the north, blowing the flames back onto the areas they'd already destroyed, and giving the people on the ground a chance to finally try and save some of what was left of Sydney.

Everything to the north of the Parramatta River, for the moment, was safe. The flames couldn't jump such a wide river. Further west, where the Parramatta was narrower, things like the M4 motorway, the train tracks running west out of Sydney, and the Prospect Reservoir, all formed natural barriers that were used to defend the northern half of the city.

With additional help from across the country, and with more help flying in from around the world, the fire teams held their ground.

The wind stayed blowing from the north throughout the night, and by morning in Sydney, the northern suburbs of the city had been saved, but the heart of the city had been burned to a cinder.

I had nightmares about the fires as I tried to sleep that morning. My brain mixed up the burning skyscrapers, combining them with the Mecca bomb, and the people that burned were all half-burned like me. It was nasty, and once it woke me up, it took me hours to finally get back to sleep.

When I finally got back to sleep, I slept till late afternoon on

Wednesday, and once I got up, I spent the little that remained of the day just reporting on the wires as I watched the firemen still working to keep on top of their temporary reprieve from the flames. By the evening, the general consensus was that the worst was over. The fires still within the area were all under control, and even if the winds changed again, the fires were likely to remain contained.

Nobody was speculating on the casualty count. Sydney is a city of over five million people, and with over half of the city gone, well, you can probably guess as well as I can.

On Thursday, the TV was full of interviews with survivors and firemen, the people who'd been on the ground as the city burned. Many of the firemen had seen colleagues die, and the survivors had lost everything. It was really depressing, and in the end I had to switch it off. I just couldn't deal with seeing one after another after another horrific stories of how they'd survived, or how their friends and family hadn't. It was awful.

At around 1pm, my pad buzzed loudly at me, and I didn't want to know, I didn't want to hear more bad news about the fire. I kept on giving CoNN some chin-rubs, but it kept on buzzing and buzzing as more and more news feeds tagged their latest article as urgent. Finally, I caved in and checked to see what was going on.

There was some news coming in from the States, as Todd Akin's wife, and two of his children, had been taken ill about an hour previously with what was first believed to be severe food poisoning. The news feeds were all breaking the news that all three had been pronounced dead at hospital. They'd been eating in the White House, and at the last minute the president had been called away on an emergency phone call. The obvious speculation was that it had been another attempt on his life, and his family had paid the price.

Nobody had really known much about the American president's family, and so to be honest, there wasn't much of a sense of upset over it, as he'd only been president for a few weeks. A lot of people on Twitter were saying how, if she was married to such a nasty piece of work, maybe it wasn't much of a loss. While I admit to being a little in that camp, it's a bit too much speculation to judge a woman by her husband's policies, and I draw the line at blaming kids for the

opinions of their parents. Although then again, all of Akin's children are adults, and so able to make their own decisions.

There was surprisingly little response from the US government following such an attack within the White House. I'd have expected them to nuke someone for that, but no, it's been surprisingly quiet. That worries me.

Assuming it was an attack, it could have just been a bad fish or something.

On Friday, *finally* I got to write about some tech news. Up until then I'd had to spend all week of reporting on inconsequential things on the wires.

Intel announces laser based CPU

Intel, the worlds largest chip maker, has announced the launch of their new Librium line of CPU (Central Processing Unit) chips, which live at the heart of all computers.

The Librium processors are the worlds first production CPUs to use photons of light from lasers instead of electrons to move data around.

Unlike electrons, which move at a relatively slow speed, photons move at the speed of light, and Intel has claimed that the new processors will be over 10 times faster than any other chip on the market.

With the new Librium processor, it is expected that supercomputers will take a large leap forwards, giving improvements in weather forecasting, energy management, and financial markets.

Rival chip manufacturer AMD has called the new technology 'a publicity stunt, with little real world value,' and has pledged to continue to evolve their competing Athlex processor line, which uses traditional silicon materials, and has already seen them achieve big gains in the market.

Unfortunately for computer owners, this new technology is not going to be available just yet for home computers and pads, as the computers require expensive infrastructure and a high voltage power source to be able to run.

Intel has promised that Librium II CPUs will be available for home use within two years.

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It sounds cool that I could have a pad 10 times as fast as the one I have now in a couple of years, although, my problem is, what could I do with it that I can't do with this one? It already does everything I could possibly want, and runs fast while doing it.

Unless of course someone finds new things for it to do, in which case, yay, awesome!

Speaking of new awesome things, this morning (Saturday), I found the best thing to do with my pad. As it has projectors on it, to be able to project onto desks and side walls and stuff, well, I downloaded an app that projected a mouse onto the floor.

The cats went *bonkers* chasing it. The app tracks the cats' locations, and so makes the mouse avoid them, but they kept on the chase for hours until CoNN ran out of energy, and a half hour more before NewCat gave up and went to sleep.

It was awesome :-)

Sunday, February 14th to Saturday, February 20th 2021

On Monday morning, the meeting in London was all about Italy. Good job I went to the meeting eh. Cos I'm allowed to write about Italy. Or not.

The news was that a tourist visiting the Vatican had seen one of the priests that was on the Interpol watch list for kiddie fiddling. He'd been in St. Peter's Square, and the priest had been sitting on some

steps, quite intently watching a group of schoolchildren on a school trip.

The tourist only recognised him because he was a member of the German police, who happened to be on holiday and visiting the Vatican.

Because Vatican law has given the priests immunity, there wasn't much he could do, but instead he took loads of pictures of the ogling priest, and uploaded them to Facebook, and the images went viral and were on the front page of just about every newspaper in the world.

By lunchtime, we'd received word that the both the Italian and the German governments had issued complaints to the Vatican, who in their typical arrogance, had responded that the Vatican sovereignty was absolute within their borders, and a priest receiving sanctuary was allowed to be anywhere the Pope allowed them to be on the grounds of the Vatican.

The idea of letting a bunch of paedophiles wander around at their leisure is just another example of the moral bankruptcy of that religion. And there's nothing the rest of the world can do about it. I wonder how they manage to sleep at night I really do. Well, I guess they sleep on expensive beds made of gold, paid for by the donations of the poor to help the even more poor.

Golden beds. Good use of charitable giving.

In the afternoon, most of the world had forgotten about the minor story of a molesting priest publicly eyeing up kids with impunity.

The US government, with all branches under the control of the republicans, was drafting a bill in response to the assassinations and attempted assassinations of the past six months.

If this law passes, all Muslim or Arab US citizens would be banned from going within a mile of the White House, or any state capital building.

The Democrats in the US government had collective apoplexy at the announcement, especially Keith Ellison, the long time representative of Minnesota, who is the country's only Muslim congressman. Even though they were completely unable to stop it due to the overwhelming number of votes of the Republicans, they did the next best thing. They refused to participate, and walked out of the

government en masse, refusing to legitimise such a disgraceful law.

Even the right wing news sources had a hard time justifying the law, although Fox News gave it a damned good try. The general view was that it was completely unconstitutional, citing the first amendment's right to freedom of assembly, but the government responded that they were in no way preventing freedom of assembly, as the people barred from the area around the government buildings were more than welcome to assemble in any way they wished outside of the exclusion zone. There was no difference between this law, and others that prevent people wandering into other restricted areas, such as military bases or prisons.

Unsurprisingly, as the week went on, protests erupted, and many Muslims in the States started to wear a crescent shaped badge on their clothes, as a not too subtle reminder of the laws passed in Germany requiring stars to be worn by Jews.

On Friday, the bill was passed simply and easily into law, with no Democrats showing up to vote against it. Immediately, the ACLU launched court appeals against it, citing two violations of the first amendment alone. I expect that if those fail, then they'll find a whole bunch of other ways to try and block it.

By this point, I was absolutely hacked off with covering local fluff. I took a last minute decision to take a week off work next week. If I can't cover anything good, what's the point of going in in the first place?

Sunday, February 21st to Saturday, February 27th 2021

It's been such a relief to not have to work this week. I was just getting frustrated and angry all the time by not being able to report on anything worth reporting on.

Of course, this week would have been different, as there have been a couple of major science articles I could have covered. Typical really. That always seems to happen.

I also really should be working on the next stage of the Bristol investigation. I'm not really too sure where to go to try and prove that

the builders were deliberately cutting corners, instead of just making mistakes.

I say 'just', mistakes when building skyscrapers are never *just* a mistake.

I'll have to do something about it next week. I think I'll drive up there on Monday. Being on an investigation will get me out of the Monday morning meeting too, which will be a bonus. I don't have a plan for what to do when I get there, but I'll think of something on the way there.

Following the new law passed in the States, the police have been ordered to stop and question anyone that fits the profile of an Arab or Muslim. I'm not sure what they're going to do about Muslims who're white, I mean, they do exist. Hrm, all white people with beards? Good job mine was lasered off if I ever want to go back over there.

They've already arrested one Muslim for showing up to work in the White House. I mean what on Earth are you doing America? You gave him a job and then arrested him for showing up to do it. Is it just me or is that insane? Apparently he's claiming he phoned up and asked if he was allowed to come into work, and was told yes.

I wonder what they'll do about Muslims or Arabs that *live* within their new exclusion zones. Are they going to arrest them for going home?

Keith Ellison was allowed to go to work on Monday, which was a bit of a surprise, but I wonder for how long. Will he show up one day and be hauled out of his office and sent to jail?

To give myself a break, I drove over to see how things were going with the new Centre for Advanced Theoretical Physics that's being built to the west of town, on the same site as the Diamond Synchrotron. It was a bit of an anticlimax to be honest, it just looked like any other building site.

Afterwards, I drove over to Culham to check out the new buildings for Reaction Engines. That was a bit more satisfactory, seeing the new buildings, one of which was the size of a large aircraft hanger.

What I completely hadn't expected was the extremely large construction to the north of the science centre. They seemed to be building their own runway!

I couldn't resist, I nipped in and asked at reception if I could speak to someone about the construction. I flashed my press card, and was asked to wait.

I was introduced to Richard Varvill, who I knew from my discussions with Alan Bond was one of the founder members of the company. I didn't know much more about him though.

We shook hands, and I asked him about what was going on with what seemed to be a runway being built outside.

He told me that for a full test of Skylon, no existing runways in the UK were capable of launching the vehicle. Due to its size and weight, it would be too heavy for any current runway surfaces when fully fuelled and carrying a maximum payload. There'd been plans to use a NASA runway, but with the situation between the UK and US governments, that option wasn't going anywhere, and so they were building their own.

I said I was surprised that I hadn't heard about it, and asked how they'd managed to get planning permission to build a 5km runway in the middle of rural Oxfordshire without the whole county bursting into flames with the protests.

He told me that after a great amount of planning, they'd devised a runway layout that would completely avoid having to knock down anyone's houses and was all on private land, which had been purchased from farmers and local companies. Due to the importance of the project, the planning permission wasn't a problem, and with the whole thing being built on fields, nobody was complaining too much.

The flight path had been taken into account, and the Skylon, when it's capable of launching from the runway, will take off over the Didcot power plants, avoiding a direct overflight of any houses until it was at a significant altitude. On the landing path, it would indeed fly over the edge of Oxford, but landing is silent, as it uses a glide system instead of engines.

They'd thought it all out. It was an impressive piece of logistics. I told Mr. Varvill that I was considering an article on the new runway, but asked if he'd prefer if I didn't mention it, in case it brought out negative local feeling as the building of new runways often seems to

these days. I suspected that as I hadn't heard about it, they were trying to keep a bit quiet for that reason.

I think he was surprised I'd asked permission instead of just writing a hatchet job to raise public outrage as newspapers usually do. He said he was fine with me to write the article, but hoped it would be fair and balanced.

I asked him if he'd settle for a pro-Reaction Engines angle instead, and he laughed and said he'd definitely take that.

On the way home, I decided I'd do the article next week. There was really no rush, the runway construction would likely take ages.

The week ended with a double science flavour on Thursday. I woke up to the news from the ESA that the *ExoMars* rover had reached its target of a gassy vent in the Martian surface, and over the coming months would probe the gasses and the vent itself to try and determine what was causing the methane outgassing. The hopeful theory was life, the probable theory was either geological, which would still be cool, or chemical, which would be less so, although apparently still scientifically useful.

The other bit of excitement was on the medical front. Scientists at Barcelona University had announced that they'd managed to successfully cure Type 1 Diabetes, using a gene therapy to introduce a glucose sensor into muscles, which would allow muscles to increase or decrease their uptake of sugars based on the levels available in the blood.

According to the report on TV, the first therapy had been confirmed to work in 2013 in dogs, and since 2017, a human trial had been under way. The announcement that this trial had been a complete success is definitely going to be a huge thing. About 20% of people in the developed world have some form of diabetes or sugar problems, and it could be a massive thing to be able to cure so many people.

It's just a shame we didn't do it first really, but hey, Spain needs the money, so I don't begrudge it to them.

It's ironic, isn't it. I take a week off cos I'm sick of having nothing cool to write about and want a bit of a break. In that week,

three articles come up that I could have written, and two of them have now been written by someone else. I still have the Reaction Engines runway article, but that's not going to get the front page like the Diabetes cure did on Friday, is it.

I did have one nice surprise on Friday though. I got two deposit alerts from my bank, which confused me. The first I was expecting, as it was the last day of the month and so it was payday. The second, not so much. I checked and discovered that I'd been paid £900 for my six days working on the Star Wars set.

I had absolutely no idea I was being paid for that, I thought it was a freebie thing, but no, apparently I got £150 a day for being there. It was completely unexpected, but very welcome.

I should do this acting thing more often. It pays better than reporting. I guess it isn't quite as fun as working on the best stories though.

I went to see Dr. Smith as usual on Friday evening. I told her I'd had a week off, and when she asked me why, and I told her work was pissing me off, she seemed very interested.

I realised too late that it'd be just what she'd want to hear about. I know I shouldn't keep secrets from her, but she makes me think about things, and I don't like it.

Now she's got me doing a day by day diary of my thoughts and feelings. I don't have to say much of what actually happened, just outlines, and how events make me feel. I have to fill it in every day, and we're going to go through it every week for the next few weeks, to see how it goes.

I did *not* need this.

Sunday, February 28th to Saturday, March 6th 2021

I spent Sunday as I usually spend Sunday after a week off work - trying to forget I have to go to work the next day.

I watched all three Avengers films, which was good, although you