

Thought for the Day Wednesday 12th July 2017

Good Morning

With so many things 'going pear-shaped', like cyber-attacks on banks and hospitals, I've been considering the origin of the phrase. One of the best attested comes from the training of pilots to do loops in the sky. Failure to create a perfect circle is 'going pear-shaped'. And I've begun wondering what we'd do if everything went pear-shaped at the same time. If computers crashed in a massive hack, if banks collapsed under a huge run for cash, if the energy supply failed and super markets folded. What then?

It's made me think about our garden and its ancient apple tree that never fails to blossom into a thousand apples. Things that you can depend on. Perhaps in the future, having a strip of land, a garden, or an allotment, however small, will be the key to survival. It would be like going forward into the past. In a book called "The Gardens of the British Working Class" the author shows how in the turbulence of the Industrial Revolution in London and in the Northern Cities some workers would turn their small plots of land into little homesteads. People living in tenements would grow flowers and herbs in their window boxes. This wasn't so much 'the good life' as 'the necessary life'.

I spent yesterday at the opening of the Great Yorkshire Show. Unsurprisingly there was talk about the future of farming and how we should use our 'green and pleasant land'. Should it be for food, for fuel, for forests or maybe housing? And however we balance it, will it be secure and sustainable?

In my search for the origin of 'pear-shaped' there was another suggestion that it came from the world of pottery. Once the clay on the potter's wheel begins to lose its form it's gone pear-shaped.

That image conjured up a picture from the Bible, where out of desperation in a time of national crisis the prophet Isaiah called out to God, "We are the clay, and you are our potter." Things had gone badly wrong – cities had become wildernesses, the Capital desolate, houses destroyed by fire and 'all our pleasant places have become ruins'.

It's an apocalyptic scene straight out of a disaster movie. And it's a story about the end of a social order. That's a hard thought to bear in an era of unprecedented wealth and scientific optimism. But the complexity of our world is its blessing and its curse. Contemplating its future risks brings into sharper focus the potential and the limits of our own self-sufficiency.

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