

WHEN THE ENGLISH TONGUE I SPEAK

Sue Turnbull

When one decides to spice up one's life with adventure, it's a monty that travel will be involved, if not relocation of some sort. That's what happened to us in June of 2001. Our lives were ordinary, staid, North Shore Sydney kind-of existences and we felt that our little group of earthlings needed a shake up.

So shake up we did. In fact, more like an earthquake with a 9 on the Richter scale.

On 22 January 2002 four of our six headed off on Gulf Air flight blah blah blah to Heathrow, London, and the United Kingdom... via Melbourne!

Not a productive start.

The plan sounded so good in theory.

Eldest daughter, *The Princess*, just completed her Higher School Certificate (HSC) was already ensconced in a British School as a Gap student.

Second born, *the Heir Apparent* was finishing his HSC so was going to stay with his dad in Sydney, intending to 'come by for a few months at the end of schoolies'.

Number 3 child, *GameBoy*, had just done Year 7, so he had to be persuaded a little to let go of the new persona of an adolescent who knew everything, including the answers to the meaning of life.

Number 4, *ManChild*, had just completed year 6 at the local Public school, which all four of the children had attended since Kindy. He was feeling secure about himself and besides, wanted to play soccer (football) and see snow!

My partner was out of work feeling it was time for a career boost and I was in semi retirement having a fabulous time in a non-demanding position in the Legal department of a Copyright Agency.

What a package, how neat... it was perfect timing for La Grande Adventure!

Well, to modify the words of my dear mother from the days when being PC meant you had a computer before everyone else:

'We may as well be from entirely different ethnic backgrounds!'

We look the same as the English population, we definitely speak English! For goodness sake we are all from the same stock, even being that our side of the global family has a tarnished record. But in the nineteen months we have been residing in

the UK I have not only experienced most forms of bigotry but have struggled to comprehend the way of life, the work ethic and. ...Well let's get down to basics.... understand them and they understand me.

The biggest adjustment when going through this immigration process has got to be coming to terms with just that! *Terms!* I would hasten to add that I believe that this must be the same for all expats in all countries... it just comes as a bit more of a shock when one is in England... I just didn't expect it to be this hard!

Back in the days when I was a primary school teacher I used to use the expression, 'adapt and adopt' when looking at anything from revolutionary teaching methods to new supervisory procedures as outlined by the NSW Department of Education. Well, why not? Instead of a flat 'no' or a blanket 'I don't think so' I took the attitude that no matter what headed my way I could adapt it to suit my situation/location and then adopt the principles of whatever it was and be seen to be doing exactly what was expected of me... even when in essence I wasn't anywhere near the mark. And now I find myself in the 'Industrial North West' of England and I am hearing those words echoing resonantly through my head on a daily basis... just adapt and adopt.

Come to grips with the new expressions, the different foods, the various customs, the manners, morals and mores of my neighbours, adapt these protocols to my in-built systems and then adopt them as my own living-away-from-home-strategic-survival-plan-for-a-stab-at-getting-on-with-it-and-handling-the-fact-that-I-am-away-from-friends-and-painfully-missing-that-fifty-ninth-Chardonnay-and-23rd-cigarette-on-a-Friday-evening-with-my-'sisters', strategy.

All this magical revelation came to me only two days ago. It was one of those surreal situations that occur with exceeding regularity on this adventure. Most times I just take it for granted and do my 'adapt and adopt' crisis management theory and get on with the business. But this time a few tinkles of jagged pieces falling into inevitable positions were audible. So I stopped and *really* listened to what they were telling me.

I was sitting in the Market Square of Wigan, industrial North Western Lancashire town of the Orwell, 'Road to Wigan Pier' fame. The surreal bit was that I was waiting for *the Heir Apparent* to come past from his place of work, a seedy Aussie Night Club in the centre of Wigan. He was on a promotional trip around the town handing out pamphlets for the latest 2-4-1 drinks offer, dressed in a giant koala suit! Mmmmm!?!? Well, at least his Gran would be proud! She loved furry stuffed toys.

'Wigan Borough Royal Charter Granted In 1246 By Henry III'

Was engraved into the granite circles at my feet laid into the ground at the top of the hill, which for many centuries has marked the centre of the village. Wow factor 100!! Grubby, moth-eaten excuses for pigeons (my god how *do* they make these into a pie?) fluffing around chasing everyone's lunch scraps, street sweeper doing his job (well, almost, he stopped to talk more than he swept) and the sites and smells of lunchtime Wigan parading in front of me.

The first and immediate realisation was that I could sit there at midday, staying there for hours and I would not see *one person* I knew... not one! I am going to set you, my reader, a challenge here. One lunchtime, go and sit in the shopping centre of your local area. Just sit, and I will lay a bet that within 30 minutes you have grunted a 'giddy' at one person and stifled an obscure half edged smile at someone else... a recognition of familiarity, of times past and events enjoyed together. Not for the expat such joy.

And that's when the second thing hit me. I was eating my Steak Slice from the 'master craft baker' and realised that it had taken me a full 19 months to know that you buy a steak slice and not a meat pie when you are craving the junk food hit.

This may come as some surprise to those who have heard and been in awe of the Lancashire reputation for meat pie prowess... they are known the world over (I am led to believe) that they produce the best meat pies on the globe. (And all along we thought it was Big Ben... silly us!)

I was prepared to accept this and indeed the whole family put it to the test soon after moving up here from the South. Nup! Sorry guys! You're wrong. FournTwenty actually have it much more firmly under control than you lot. At least they use what is a facsimile of the correct colour of meat, not a pink and white grizzly mix hidden under mountains of mashed potato *in*, yes! I said *in* the pie, not on top as in that other Aussie classic the potato pie.

But this is where my 'adapt and adopt' theory came to the fore... we just don't buy the meat pies anymore. We buy 'steak slice', and blow me if it doesn't taste a whole lot like a real McCoy Big Ben. Bring on the Wallabies and another Tooheys or two! We had adapted and adopted.

So then I started to meander amongst other things that were, or had become, a source of problems for the family and me.

'Pants'

To the humble Aussie we are talking about those bits of fabric that you wear on your legs... not always trousers because that's what you wear with a suit, but 'pants'.

You know:

‘Thomas, have you put your pants in the dirty clothes basket’ as number 3 lumbers into the kitchen after school.

This family has given more humorous pleasure to the Northerners around here than I believe they have experienced in their entire lives. It is actually a positive outcome from our suffering as we watch them double up when we say ‘pants’ in an idle conversation rather than ‘trousers’, for in the United Kingdom ‘pants’ are Reg Grundies... yep! Under pants!

So when *ManChild* strides from the footie field saying he has ‘dirty pants’ you can hear the laughter in Adelaide. Poor souls.

But again, ‘adapt and adopt’...they want ‘trousers’ they get ‘em!

Adding to this monstrous tangle, ‘pants’ also denotes an understanding of something awful, ordinary and unsatisfactory. As in ‘this continual bad weather is rather pants, isn’t it?’

Then there’s the shop assistant in the bakery.

‘yer pop be from ‘ere?’

‘Pardon’, trying desperately to lip-read.

‘yer pop be from ‘ere?’

When I bought my steak slice I had already taken a bottle of Coke out of the fridge and had it tucked under my arm as I scratched for the 98p in my wallet.

It was only 15 minutes later sitting out in the marketplace having this epiphany that I realised she was asking me if the Coke was from her fridge! I still don’t know if I was charged for it as at the time I merely nodded, as I believe a boot-load of expats get very used to doing.

But the most prolific utterance providing daily humour to me is the Northern greeting of: ‘sroityer?’

I have been told that this group of sounds is derived from the words ‘Are you all right?’

Apart from the fact that it is unrecognizable as such, the Northerner who has uttered the phrase has absolutely NO expectation of a reply even though there is a definite upward inflection. It is merely a greeting, pure and simple, as an Aussie would say ‘giddyay’. Until we were accustomed to the fact that no reply was in order we would be going into long replies of ‘well I’m OK I guess although I was suffering from a bit of a flu last week but with the improvement in the weath...’

With puzzled face our voice would trail off like the passing of the questioner who was by now many paces away and completely disinterested.

A ‘push chair’ is a stroller; ‘nor’ means ‘no’; a ‘fag’ is *never* a homosexual and ‘lemolade’, ‘hospicle’, ‘lickle’ and ‘cucklery’ are self-explanatory, though strange.

'I gorritt' means 'I got it' and 'out' means 'nothing'.

It was only after an embarrassing conversation with an Events Company at my place of work that I finally realised the M.E.N. Arena in Manchester was NOT a gay, mud wrestling venue but a place likened to The Sydney Entertainment Centre!

Long live 'adopt and adapt!'



Sue Turnbull is currently living and working with her family in the UK - from Manchester and Wigan to Oxfordshire. After 22 months on this adventure she feels the 'unfamiliar' corner may have been turned, but the absence of friends and family will never be negated.

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