

Past Repairs

It seemed too good to be true. I had sat down at Google, and typed in - being careful to restrict the results to web-sites in the UK only - my search for 'fast repairs'. Only, I was thinking of something else as I typed. And there was www.pastrepairs.co.uk, which seemed to promise quick and speedy rectification of those mistakes one had made in the past, without which...without which I would be a far happier man today. Without further ado, and never any regret for my mistaken typing, I clicked on the link and the Home Page for the 'Past Repairs' came up.

'No job too small, no project too large' they boasted. 'Find yourself in the best of all possible worlds' - this was too Voltairean for words. 'Live life to the full again, rub out that silly mistake and start again'. So far so good, but - 'see Terms and Conditions ...' I clicked on the 'Terms and Conditions' link and discovered that there was a proviso that a job or project might be turned down if it was considered that it would badly skew the time-line of the status quo. This seemed to me to be the most cowardly get-out clause I had seen in years, worse than the bland denials in the small print of insurance policies: surely everyone knew by now that even a tiny change in the past could have cataclysmic effects on the future. Mention was made of 'the Horseshoe Effect' - for want of a nail, a shoe was lost and so forth onwards, until the kingdom was lost. 'A repair to this kind of scenario,' admonished the folk at Past Repairs sternly, 'is one which we cannot possibly entertain.'

Under FAQs, I found other disheartening matters, of a similar nature. 'No.1 - Can I avoid repeating the same mistake at a later stage in my life?' (*No*.) 'No.2 - Can I cancel a request if I find the result does not suit me?' (*No*.) 'No.17 - Can I make a request on behalf of another party?' (*Not normally*.) And so on - plenty of negative responses, few positive ones - one of those few exceptions being 'No.23 - Can I make my life even worse by changing the past?' (*Very frequently*.)

Not in the least bit encouraged by the apparent lack of options, I idly clicked on the 'Charges and Payment Methods' section, to discover that I need only remit 5 Euros along with a request, as a deposit, fully refundable in the event of the request not being progressed. This was not what I expected. 5 Euros as a non-refundable fee - that would make sense; and would make the company directors very rich indeed in a short space of time. There was a button that was marked 'Submit Request'. I yielded to that madness which comes over Everyman when on-line, and clicked it. A form opened up asking me to state my email address, my request and payment method.

Where was I to start? The world was in a mess. I was in a mess. Everyone else was in a mess, and I didn't care because I was in a mess. It wasn't necessarily the world's fault that I was in a mess, but it might be a place to start. Without much more hesitation, I provided my details, and typed in 'Overthrow of Capitalism'. I pressed the 'Submit' button again, and prepared to go back to Google to find what I had really wanted in the first place - someone to repair my bicycle tyre.

But before I could get there, the 'Past Repairs' page refreshed, displaying the message - 'Sorry, your request has been turned down. Reason: Special Project.' Special Project - for whom? No further details were given, just a note: 'You have not been charged for your request - please try again.'

I tried something less contentious. 'I wish I had not started on repairing the water-pipe under the sink'. Back came the response - 'Please state date of botched plumbing work'. 'Last Thursday', I replied, a little astonished at the sophistication of the database that lay behind this. 'Sorry,' replied Past Repairs, 'minor repairs can only be made within 24 hours of the original mistake.' Well, that was clear enough.

'I wish,' I requested, 'that I had not gone to work by bike this morning, and so I would not have had to walk eight miles home, wheeling my bike and its flat tyre.' I pressed the submit button. 'What flat tyre?' it asked. 'The back tyre,' I replied, feeling a little impatient. 'What flat tyre?' it asked again. I was about to remonstrate with it when a thought occurred. I went to find my bike out in the hallway. There it stood, both tyres full inflated, frame free of all the mud that had plastered it during my dismal return home. Astonishing. I returned to the computer. 'Your credit-card has been debited 5 Euros,' it said.

I tried a new tack, having fed another 5 Euros into the e-slot. 'I wish I had not missed my final degree exam due to late night drinking. Date: 25th May 1975.' I submitted the request. 'Your credit-card has been debited 5 Euros,' came the response, almost without hesitation. I looked around - nothing seemed to have changed. No fancier furniture, no large house with a Mercedes in the driveway, no smart suits hanging in the wardrobe. The only thing that I had not seen before was a tattered and yellowed piece of paper stuck on the wall, pinned in place by a dart that had lost most of its feathers: I stood up and looked at it closely. It was my degree certificate, the one I'd never had. So, I got my degree, but nothing else had changed. That tells you something.

You have to be careful what you wish for, I suppose. This required some thought. No point in pouring piles of Euros into gaping maw of Past Repairs.

How about: 'I wish I'd invented the Internet'. 'Sorry,' came the inevitable response, 'that request is simply laughable. Who do you think you are?' Well, that's me told.

Dates with desirable women? I tried a couple, and all that happened was my surroundings suddenly got shabbier, and emptied bottles of whisky appeared on the floor. So - some of those women were not necessarily the paragons of virtue that they had appeared to be; or I had not the moral character to match them. And worse, I could not remember a single detail of the dates in question: they might have been unbelievably great, a night of grand passion, worth all the trouble that had flowed from them.

Things were going from bad to worse; I had moved on to dangerous ground. My life was already different, at least in some details, if not in overall appearance. Was it better to stop and cut my losses, or keep going and hope for the 'Big One'? My hands shook. 'I wish I had never started my requests,' I submitted. Quick as a flash came back: 'You are not permitted to cancel any requests - see FAQ No.2.' I suppose that made sense - and they already had my money.

What to do?

'I wish now that I'd never been born'. My finger was raised poised over the mouse - should I click the Submit button? I had no idea what the answer was. If Past Repairs took my money, I would disappear in a puff of smoke, and know nothing of it. But if I had never existed, surely they could not take money from my credit-card? Indeed, here was a problem. Would it be best not to try? Or should I just see how it coped.

I clicked the button - it's so easy to do when you're on-line - rational decision-making flies out the windows.

The progress-bar at the foot of the screen slowly went up in increments. Some kind of submission procedure was under way. I waited, scarce daring to breathe. Should I hit the Stop button? Was it already too late? The progress bar stopped at the half-way point. We were going neither backwards nor forwards. I had slipped temporarily into Limbo. And then -

'Unhandled Error Exception at 800FA1000CA - permission denied.'