

2nd April 2022

Ink

“Every drop of ink in my pen ran cold.”

Horace Walpole, in a letter to George Montagu (1752)

My printer ran out of ink! It's not an unusual occurrence, but this time I didn't have a replacement cartridge to hand. Bad forward planning on my part! So I had to wait for a day or so till a new source of ink was found.

I recalled other occasions when my ink ran dry. The ball-point pen that seemed to write forever but ran out of ink when I had an important cheque to sign; at a wedding when the “fountain pen with black, liquid ink” – a prerequisite for signing the Marriage Schedule – had no cartridge in it, and I had to borrow a pen; in the car at traffic-lights, when I wanted to jot down a random idea for a “Thought for the Day” and the pen in the glove compartment wasn't working. It's no fun running out of ink.

Horace Walpole didn't run out of ink, but he reported to his friend, George Montagu, that the “ink in my pen ran cold”. I wonder what that meant? Was it because this eighteenth century writer and connoisseur had something nasty to say to someone? Was it because he was so angry that he couldn't even put the words on paper? Was it because his pen constrained the true meaning of his thoughts? I simply don't know ...

But isn't it better to run out of ink than for your pen to run cold? Isn't it better to know what you *can't* say than to say something that might be harmful or hurtful – *even* if that's what you're thinking? Isn't it better to say nothing than to use your words to convey something that's cold, or nasty, or angry? Let your pen run out of ink *before* it causes you to say something destructive. Let your pen run cold, and then stop writing ...

Lord Byron wrote in *Don Juan*:

*But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling, like dew, upon a thought produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions think.*

It might be better if you stopped to think of the effect of “a small drop of ink”, conveying your words to “thousands, perhaps millions” – or even one person. If that's a destructive effect, maybe it's better that your printer, or your pen, runs out of ink after all ...

A prayer for today

“Be careful little words what you say”. And guide my pen when I write too, Lord. Amen