When Janet met Tilly

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Introduction

Janet has known Tilly Bud (aka The Laughing Housewife) for about a year through blogging on Wordpress.

One day, Janet decided to visit Tilly in Stockport, in the north of the country.

Janet took her 12-year-old son Ben with her.

They spent £130 on rail tickets, and the train took them from Southampton to London Euston, then to Stockport.

Janet and Ben stayed with Tilly and her family for 5 days.

Ben and Janet both survived, and they had a fantastic time, but they’re not quite sure how Tilly was coping.

Here’s a list of blog posts about Janet and Ben’s wonderful trip, from 27-31 May 2013. I hope you enjoy reading them.

Janet Williams (My blog: Janet’s Notebook)
In the Dream of the Red Chamber 红楼梦, the classical Chinese novel, entered a clumsy Granny Liu.

The country bumpkin, Granny Liú, or Liu laolao, 刘姥姥, visited the Grand View Gardens, and was totally overwhelmed by new experiences and opulence.

Today I feel like Granny Liu in the north of the country, clumsy and excited. This is the first time I have visited the unknown north as a tourist. I still wear a thick fur jacket to try to fight the northern rain and wind.

This place is rich in history. I was already introduced to Stockport Air Raid Shelters today. The presence of the Second World War remains real.

I had a wonderful discovery today. My friend and her family speak English rather differently. English is their mother tongue, but they seem to drop the ‘t’ sound whenever they say the word ‘but’. Perhaps they are just a bit lazy, so they just say ‘bu’ all the time.
If I had pronounced ‘bu’ as an English student, I would have failed my English oral test. Then I wouldn’t have been able to go abroad to study, to marry and have a child in England. My life would have been totally miserable.

Therefore I think my friends should start taking the pronunciation of ‘but’ very seriously. Luckily my friends speak with pleasing musical intonations with a marked rising tone. They will make excellent Chinese speakers one day.

Of course I don’t mean my northern friends are lazy. My friend fixed a new toilet seat all by herself and it didn’t wobble.

She made me four cups of tea in 8 hours, of different flavours and strength. I think she recycled her tea bags for her own family, but for her friend, she is generous enough to make me fresh tea each time with a new tea bag.
Two: Who is that dog walker?

Today I had a new discovery: my newly met friends not only dropped the ‘t’ sound for the word ‘but’, but also the ‘h’ sound at the beginning of a word. For example, they say, “do you ‘ave” when they mean, “do you have”. Their sloppy English is getting me worried about the future of the Queen’s English.

At this rate of their missing consonants, by the end of the week, I gather this family will only have 20 alphabets left in their English, while poor English learners around the world are coping with 26 alphabets just fine.

The fun of living in the house of a blogger-turn-friend is the surreality: you think you’ve known the person quite well through her writing – witty, amusing, intelligent, grumpy, snoring and self-deprecating, but in reality, she’s merely a frumpy dog walker who is battling daily northern rain to walk her two cute dogs.

Judging by the amount of dog poo littered on the pavements, Tilly Bud possibly is the only conscientious dog walker in Stockport with dog bags in all her pockets.
Have I just said their dogs are cute? Indeed. They are tiny and adorable. They are so well behaved and talented that they can do Gangnam Style.

These cute, well-trained dogs have transformed my mind.

I’m now convinced that dogs are the best friends of human being. I now also think that eating dog meat is such a bad idea after all.

By the way, Chinese people describe dog meat as fragrance meat 香肉, as dog meat is known for its fragrance.
Three: The North-South Divide

People in the UK are aware of the north-south divide in this country. I certainly believe so.

Normally, in a standard house for a small family, you’ll have one landline and one phone. This family has 3 landline phones, one in each room.

“Son, your tea is ready!” Message was given via the phone.

Sometimes they somehow managed to dial the wrong numbers and spoke to the wrong person.

Welcome to Upstairs, Downstairs.

The house is rather quiet, almost Zen-like. Why do I say that?
There are 2 fish tanks in the lounge, and more fish tanks in the kitchen. The sound effect is constant from the fish tanks, and I’m not sure if the background sound would turn them all into Zen or slowly turn them mad.

Now I understand how Tilly Bud can be both silly and enlightening, and so moody and unpredictable in her blog. The secret must be with the fish tanks. That’s why she has more than 1000 followers.

How many fish tanks do you need? Tilly’s household has 5 fish tanks.
Meeting a WordPress friend in real life was actually a weird experience.

Tilly Bud (famously known as The Laughing Housewife) and I have been in contact via WordPress for about a year. We seemed to have known each other well before she opened her house for me and my son, for 5 days.

It was very brave of her.

I’m a small Chinese person with a funny accent visiting a suburb in the north, dragging along a 12-year-old boy with me, because, to be safe, you should always bring a friend when you meet an online friend. In my case, I brought my son along.
The train was a few minutes late. My phone rang, and a strange voice (with a gently rising tone) asked nervously, “Janet, are you still on the train?” That was the first time we ever spoke.

My son was shocked. “What? You’d never spoken to each other before?”

View from the train: On our way to 'the north'
I said Tilly Bud and I had known each other well online. We shared joy and tear before. We knew each other’s family set up. We understood each other’s taste (or no taste). However, when we were sitting down slightly nervously for our first cup of tea, the first questions to me were: “What’s your real name? How do we pronounce your Chinese name?”

After their few attempts saying my name in Chinese with a twisted mouth, we decided that from now on they should just call me ‘Janet’.

Tilly and Janet enjoyed an Italian meal.
What is Tilly like? Tilly’s 1,000 followers are bribing me to reveal more.

I think, the most important fact you should know is that, this family is genuinely full of laughter and love. Richard Curtis should just visit this family one day for his next film.

This weekend, Tilly and Paul are celebrating their wedding anniversary. I’m privileged enough to have seen their wedding photographs projected on a big screen in their house. The couple were leading a more active life in South Africa then: parties, motorbikes, horses, trucks, beaches, and I even saw a size 6 Tilly in bikini.

Now, Paul has been “a bit poorly” and their lifestyle has changed dramatically, but, their love is ever so strong.

They held hands and kissed (in public) so often that I couldn’t stop taking their photographs.
Five: Oxo cube: Good or evil?

I’ve never been a great traveller. On our honeymoon, we went to Jersey for 2 weeks. We couldn’t have gone abroad for our honeymoon like a lot of people do, as we had no money, and the Home Office had also kept my passport just to make sure that I wasn’t staging a fake marriage to a gullible white man.

After a week in Jersey, I was terribly ill. My body went into a complete meltdown due to a lack of rice in my diet. We had had a week of potatoes and pasta but no rice. My husband only realised then the high price of marrying a typical oriental, rice-eating wife. But it was too late for him.
Over the past 12 years, my body has slowly adjusted to a mixed diet with pasta, spaghetti, potatoes and rice. I’m almost weaned off rice now. When I took the plunge and visited my online friend Tilly in Stockport, I was ready for anything thrown at me.
For 5 days, we had very interesting meals. Our first meal was minced beef with some sort of ready cooked rice and pasta. I think the meal was some sort of wet risotto, but I’m not quite sure. It could have been Tilly’s creativity worthy of a Master Chef challenge. Though the dish looked mysteriously browny to me, I had 3 helpings. (I was tired and hungry after nearly 6 hours’ journey.)

I found the family used quite a lot of Oxo cubes in their cooking — Oxo cubes in chicken, beef, vegetable flavours:

A small family would normally keep a small pack of the Oxo Cubes (in 12, 18 or 24). I was astonished to see that Tilly actually keeps a whole large tin of them. Their meals were tasty, rich with Oxo flavours.

Oxo Tower image by Wallygrom via Flickr
I also found out some facts about the **Oxo cubes**.

They were part of the soldiers’ ration packs during the World War 1. In 1908, OXO was the official caterer of the London Olympics supplying an OXO drink to runners.

The Oxo cube has been a British icon since 1930s.

I’m not sure how healthy the Oxo cubes are.

Perhaps I’m not used to their flavours, I felt they’re tasty but a bit too salty.
Six: Milk in first with Earl Grey?

How do you like your tea?

I’m now addicted to caffeine after drinking too much tea in Stockport last week.

It’s a universal truth that Tilly Bud drinks Earl Grey Tea. When she made me the Earl Grey tea, I noticed she would always pour milk in first.

If you have your tea with milk, do you add the hot water first, or do you add the milk first?

I’ve always been fascinated by how English people make their tea. Some people told me the Queen would add milk in her tea first, but some people told me she would add the hot water first.

I’m on my quest to find out the answer.
Kate Fox, a social anthropologist, in her fascinating book, *Watching the English* (2004), wrote about the hidden rules of English behaviour, especially the British class system. She mentioned some social observations about tea.

In ‘Breakfast Rules — and Tea Beliefs’ (pg 311), Kate Fox mentioned that

“The upper-middle and upper classes drink weak, dishwater-coloured, unsweetened Earl Grey. Taking sugar in your tea is regarded by many as an infallible lower-class indicator: even one spoonful is a bit suspect (unless you were born before about 1955); more than one and you are lower-middle at least; more than two and you are definitely working class. Putting the milk into the cup first is also a lower-class habit, as is over-vigorous, noisy stirring.”

Based on this research, as Tilly doesn’t add sugar in her tea, I think Tilly is possibly somewhere between the upper middle and working class.
We took two buses to visit Manchester last Thursday. To entertain my 12-year-old son, we had to visit a place with dinosaurs and lizards. Luckily Manchester Museum was the perfect place.

On our way back to the bus stop, we came across this cafe called teacup on Thomas Street.
My son asked why Tilly and I giggled so much when we saw these words, “50 Shades of Earl Grey’. It was hard to explain. Tilly patiently explained to him that 50 Shades of Grey is a book for some adults, and the concept of 50 Shades of something has entered the lexicon of English.

Look, this is how Tilly pronounced the word, lexicOn (con as in corn). I told her I pronounced this word differently with a schwa. I pronounce it ‘lexiken’ (as in the vowel in ‘earn’).

In the few days together, I heard myself saying, “Excuse me. Sorry. I beg your pardon? I didn’t catch what you’ve just said.” Tilly must have been so fed up with this Chinese person from the south.
For those readers who are not familiar with the fuss about the novel, *50 Shades of Grey*, please don’t ask me for details. I have no intention to read this book.

I also told Tilly that some British hotels removed the Bible, and replaced it with this erotic novel in their hotel rooms. Tilly was shocked. Here’s the link to the report:

[Vicar condemns hotel after it replaces Gideon Bible with 50 Shades of Grey](#)

Finally, I would like to thank [Ghostly Tom](#) from Manchester for kindly sharing his two 50 Shades of Earl Grey images on this post. I sent him my request and he kindly agreed and even promised to take me to this cafe next time.

I think the people in Manchester are really very nice.
Seven: What would you do for a friend’s friend?

The first morning in Tilly’s house, she had some visitors.

Alison came to visit with a huge cheesecake. Tilly said, “Alison has just made this for you.”
Alison is Tilly’s friend. Because I’m Tilly’s friend, Alison made this cake for her friend’s friend.

How sweet was that? I instantly felt in love with the people from Stockport.

Not long afterwards, another friend Pam knocked on the door. Again, Pam came to see me because I’m Tilly’s friend.

It was such a wonderful world.

Tilly can “phone a friend” easily. She can phone many friends.
I’m old enough to know that it’s unwise stereotyping people, but I must say the few northerners that I was lucky enough to have met were very warm, funny and kind.

Do I have a friend who would spend her own money, make a fuss and make a large cheesecake for my visiting friends? Probably not. Because I’m just not as nice as Tilly. I don’t have a friend like Alison.

I’d have to bake one (if I could manage) or buy one from the shop.
Before I left, Tilly forwarded me an email from Pam.

“Next time, I will take them to the Trafford Centre! I had hoped to do that last night (which is why I asked what time you had your evening meal) but I didn’t feel well so wasn’t up to the drive. Maybe next time!”

Pam had thought about Tilly’s friends and wanted to help entertain us.
It reminds me of a more traditional way of life. The bond with neighbours and friends were closer. Barriers were low. Friends helped out each other more directly. Friends just popped in. The community spirit was stronger.

It seems that in the north, at least in Tilly’s world, it’s surrounded by warmth, friendship and kindness.

Because Tilly’s a magnet. She’s just so nice. It’s impossible not to love her. And her lucky friend got the cheesecake.

I really envy her.
Eight: Stockport Air Raid Shelters

We *only* visited 4 museums during our 5 days in Stockport, Greater Manchester.

However, these visits had proved too much for our host, who was quickly turning into a jelly.

We visited Stockport Air Raid Shelters. Stepping back in time to 1940s wartime Britain was quite surreal. Inside the shelters, I was amazed at such an orderly community, and a world of volunteering.

The instructions given, in modern terms, were equivalent to “every little helps” (food rationing; making tea), health and safety and team building.
As we had a heated debate as to how to make the perfect tea a few days ago, I’m going to show you in the wartime, how people ‘put the kettle on’. From the poster:

**Tip for making the most of your tea ration at home... You can save that ‘extra one for the pot’ if you get the best out of your tea.**

- As soon as the kettle is boiling, you should be ready with the well-warmed teapot.
- The teapot should come to the kettle, not the kettle to the teapot.
- You should give enough time to brew and stir it just before pouring.
- If you do all this your ration will go further.
I was also very surprised by the modern toilet facility. Some of the toilets in the shelters were actually connected to the main supply. In my house in the south of Malaysia, we lived in a small compound that our toilets were only connected to the main supply in late 70s.

Here are some pictures to share with you; some were taken while we were out walking the most delightful dogs in the UK.

Just imagine that you’re visiting the shelters with Tilly next to you.
Nine: Where’s Stockport’s new landmark?

I know a new landmark in Stockport.

Does this place look familiar to you?
No?

It’s the same place where Tilly had her famous photograph taken, which is now used as the header of her blog, The Laughing Housewife.

We climbed up the same climbing frame which Tilly did last time.

I think it’s a very important landmark in the Stockport history, at least, it’s to me.

If Tilly’s fans all go there and climb the same frame (not all at the same time please, as the climbing frame may collapse), we may also improve the tourism industry in Stockport.
About Janet Williams

I am Janet Williams, an academic, a mother and a wife in a foreign land, in the southeast of England, UK.

My humble blog is called Janet’s Notebook.

English is not my mother tongue. I speak and write it as a second language. You may find some odd grammatical errors, but they are not intentional. For example, I don’t seem to be able to use ‘a, an, the’ in the right place. Sometimes singular or plural nouns also baffle me.

I blog about family, cultures, particularly my cross-cultural experiences.

I thank God that I met Tilly on Wordpress.
About Tilly Bud

Tilly Bud’s world famous blog is called The Laughing Housewife.

Tilly describes herself:

“I am a little fat. I like food; what can I say? I have dull hair: mousey. I don’t wear much make-up and have no need of a dressing table. If I look like a bag lady, I chose my own clothes. If I look nice, the Hub picked them for me. Despite all this, I am a little vain. This photograph is from 2003. I had to go back that far to find one of me that I liked. But I don’t really care: my husband still thinks I’m beautiful and if he doesn’t, he loves me enough to lie about it. I’m lucky. I have two boys. They never lie to me. Still, you can't have everything.”
Further Reading

The blog posts in this ebook are from my blog [Janet's Notebook](#). You can click the links below to see the original posts, from 27 May to 7 June 2013. Under each post, you’ll also find some very amusing comments from other blogger friends. I’ve also added some links to relevant posts from Tilly.

- [Granny Liu](#)
- [Who's that dog walker?](#)
- [The north-south divide](#)
- [Laughter and love](#)
- [Oxo cubes: good or evil?](#)
- [Milk in first with Earl Grey?](#)
Perfect tea

What'd you do for a friend's friend?

Stockport Air Raid Shelters

Where's Stockport's new landmark?

What is the secret of expert tea tasters?

Epilogue: Did Tilly really recycle her tea bags? (By Tilly Bud)

A belated happy birthday, Janet! (By Tilly Bud)

Somebody went to prison and all I got was this lousy anniversary card (By Tilly Bud)

Absence makes the blog grow longer (By Tilly Bud)

I did something I've never done before (By Tilly Bud)