***In reverse Order – the 2012/13 Season***

***We lead the game for 79 minutes and 30 seconds but lose in the last play of the match***

***Five Ways 24 - Barton 20****- 4th May 2013*

Tries from Jonny Simons and Dave Palin were converted by Birdy, who added two penalties, but it wasn't enough. We should have won but we shouldn't be in this position and the failure to put a side out against Bishops Castle earlier this year resulted in a 5 point penalty that means we are relegated from this league.

The Silver lining is that we have less travelling next season and will win the league.

***Long way to Tipperary but a sweet game***

***Tenbury 10 - Barton 31****- 13th April 2013*

It's a long way to Tipperary as the song says, and Tenbury's a few miles the other side, but it was worth the long coach trip to get a valuable win and relieve the relegation pressure until after tour.

***What a game, but how did we lose?***

***Barton 14 - Market Drayton 15*** *- 6th April 2013*

As Market Drayton reported on their website they were "shocking for 73 minutes, great for 7, snatching an unlikely victory, and promotion to boot, in final play against a very strong Barton side."

I could stop the report there because that nicely summed up the day. We were saddened by the passing of Dave Hughes; a fabulous former player, and this loss acted to further stoke the fire, as we played both in his memory and to remove our relegation worries - motivation was not an issue for the home squad.

It was a glorious start as we were buoyed up and ready to play despite the last game which ended in a 79-7 defeat.

Unbelievably, the pitch was bone dry and in glorious conditions for the first time in months, and there was a veritable feast of picnic treats and convivial crowd on the sidelines, Barton started at 100 miles an hour, bombarding Drayton's red zone. We almost scored after 2 minutes, when Shummy brushed off tackle attempts but as he stormed down the touchline, he was brought down just short of the line. Any attempt by MD to clear their lines were gleefully returned by Barton's impressive back triangle of Wooly, Shum and young Will Simpson, who clearly had a significant attacking edge on their Drayton counterparts, and the league leaders became well accustomed to their own 22, as they were ensconced therein.

MD were stable in the scrums, and could rotate them at will and within the first ten minutes their blind side sought to run the ball out in midfield. Woefully short of support, he was impressively stripped of the ball by Cleary Snr as he went to ground, and using Cleary Jnr we shifted the ball away from traffic, protected the two man overlap and Shummy scored in the corner for a 5-0 lead. We were very happy.

All Drayton's attempts to work up the park were frustrated by a litany of errors: knock ons, forward and intercepted passes, further ball stripping by the white shorts of Cliffy and Thorpey and for once they couldn't reply with their line out either. Ten more minutes passed and Birdy extended the lead to 8-0 when Drayton were caught offside, but we squandered a gilt edged opportunity to score when the ball was dropped just short of the line a few moments later.

Another ten minutes and Birdy added another 3 points after a penalty decision was reversed 25 yards out, and we hoped to add another before half time but MD suddenly woke up and after a series of phases they dummied and dived over under the posts from close range; a psychologically vital time to score. There was confusion with the conversion but the referee adjudged that the ball had travelled under the bar, and the visitors were not happy. Half time, Barton 11 MD 5, which was astonishing, considering how superior Barton had been.

The second half also started well. Drayton were pinged for pulling a man down at the line out, and Birdy was again on hand to slot the penalty for a 14-5 lead.

The game drifted on, and it was clear that the green and blacks best chance of winning was to take the ball up the middle with forward led drives. The game was opening up a little, and they finally realized that kicking possession away was counter productive, so looked to keep the ball in hand. They shuffled people around and their new standoff seemed to orchestrate things differently and we took a little time to react. Fortunately as we readjusted MD dropped the ball in try scoring situations twice, and gave us some breathing space, but then we did the same. Coxy's photos of Quidditch running straight, drawing the tackle and popping outside show why this move should have resulted in a try in front of the assembled hampers but we ruined a huge overlap opportunity, and the game stalled for a while. With neither side capable of crossing the line, the score remained at 14-5 for over 25 minutes and we rotated people on and off the park. With 7 minutes left, MD strung together a move that we would expect from the league leaders and their impressive open side scored. The quickly taken drop goal conversion attempt was shockingly wide and we questioned his rush as a sensible simple conversion would have made it 14-12 and one penalty or JWilkinson drop goal would seal the match, but he knew they had the bit between their teeth, and they went for the killer try to steal the game.

Barton were not having this and turned them over twice, but the scrums and the territorial pressure went against us and as the clock ran down they took the ball up the middle again. We gave away a series of penalties that were quickly taken, thereby compounding the pressure, until the referee had enough and binned Mouley for a further infringement although it could have been any one of us that saw yellow. By this stage, MD were 30 yards out, and the attack continued but we defended ruck after ruck, putting more players into defensive duties but this left an overlap out to our right. Those last few seconds passed like hours but they didn't rush and as their winger took the ball and ran at Wooly we saw in slow motion as he went low and short of the line, but his momentum secured the grounding over the line and with the last play of the game MD snatched a narrow victory.

MD stole the game in the final play, against a team who had been much stronger on the day, and had done the same against Uttoxeter the previous week so we should have known better. Uttoxeter did MD a favour by beating Cannock so we won't have the pleasure of beating MD next season as they're guaranteed promotion now, but we have our own league issues to deal with as we head to Tenbury. Go Bars!!

***What happened?***

***Five Ways Old Edwardians ?? - Barton ??*** *- 16th March 2013*

Well the RFU website shows the result as a 5-3 win to 5 Ways but there's a back story to this.

This part of Birmingham holds some odd memories for Bartonians. The 5 Ways club is next door to Kings Norton where Gary Bentley and I managed to dislocate our thumbs in the same game, and the pitch is the same one that Polly Snr. required a helicopter ride to hospital, so we knew that things were never going to be straightforward here. The facilities are fabulous - smooth flat pitch, upstairs bar with balcony and a big screen for super Saturday matches, nice changing rooms and friendly members. The smooth flat pitch looked very smooth as we arrived and we paused to watch the home side warm up by bailing water over the hedge in an attempt to clear the sodden pitch. It was wet. Very wet. I teetered along the touchline like I was wearing stilletos on an ice rink, and Wooly's blades were going to have to dig deep to find any traction today.

The game started and so did the hailstones. We cowered under Dicks umbrella singing "always look on the bright side of life" as the players stood still for five minutes while the left winger removed his tights which were not IRB approved (?! :) ). It was nasty weather and what we call in Scotland "a good day for golf".

We failed to do the basics right and in our own 22 often tried to run the ball. Granted, we had an awesome set of backs and apart from the homeside's stand off there wasn't a 5 ways back that would have made our second team, let alone the firsts, and so we fancied our chances with ball in hand. But therein lay the problem. Getting the ball in hand was a mammoth task. My initial draft of this report had so many "*...and he knocked it on*" statements that I used an asterisk to  save writing it out so often. Lineout on the halfway, Malcolm Gale off the top to Quidditch who passes to Bird \*. Scrum to 5 Ways, number 8 pickup, pop to the blindside winger \*. Secure Barton scrum in the 5 ways half, Quidditch kicks, full backs waits \*. You get my drift. It was a horrible day.

What was surprising given the conditions was the state of the scrums. Normally when we play rugby on low friction surfaces it is the scrums that suffer with slipping, collapsing and  rapid shoving the norm, but today we did not have a single collapsed scrum. They were fully contested, and often got a wheel on but at no time did they seem dangerous or likely to go down. Mouley, Tom and Giles were all over the field and Mouley was inspired driving everyone off the ball and tackling like a demon.

It was hard, and the tactic to put the ball up and see if the catcher screwed up was a good one and soon we found ourselves on our own five yard line having bundled the now tightless left winger into touch. What we didn't see was the referee's arm out for an infringement and a quick tap penalty and 5 ways were over. Bugger. That was the only time 5 ways came close to scoring. Woolly and Shummy both had great runs, as did the inspired Matt Cox at #6 but in all cases an innocuous tackle loosened the slippery ball and yes, \*.

The teams were evenly matched as Five ways showed they were well drilled up front and although not as organised as Uttoxeter they were effective. Their backs were spared a thorough drubbing from our backs due to the weather, and when you look at a team sheet that says wingers - Wooly and Shummy, Centres - Lee Coton and Grant Clissold, and young Will Simpson at full back you know there are not going to be big numbers on the opposition score line.

Myles Tydeman came on for the bleeding Malcolm and for a while we played the smallest combination of second row and number 8 with Will, that has been seen in our league. 5 Ways brought on a massive second row who was twice the combined weight of Myles and Will put together and was like Argon - colourless and inert. For a while he was the only patch of white in a sea of muddy brown players as by now everyone was liberally coated with the Warwickshire loam. Within five minutes he had absorbed the muddy colour and we lost him in the mire.

So Birdy slotted one of two penalties and is was 5-3 at the half. Then the surreal events began. The referee asked the captains if they wanted to abandon the game. Neither did, but the teams headed into the changing rooms - probably to warm up.

Damp and sodden we sojourned to the bar to warm up and pervade the room with the smell of wet duffel coats. The second half started and the rain stopped. The sun peeked through the clouds for a while but then retreated behind the dull, sad, boring grey that clearly wasn't the same shade as the source of EL James's inspiration. We played on, with lots of asterixes  and then suddenly, with 13 minutes of the second half gone, the referee stopped the game saying Birdy had called it off. Much debate ensued, and the referee then explained, correctly, that it was his decision to call off the game (it isn't up to any player to make such a call), and so we all headed into the bar to watch the 6 nations, somewhat saddened that we were not able to complete the competition as both teams needed a result, wanted to play, and wanted the teams; not the weather, to decide their fate.

The game will be replayed on 30th March.

***Great first hour then a scrappy end to the game***

***Barton 14 - Uttoxeter 25*** *- 9th March 2013*

It started off so well. The soggy Barton pitch caught out both sides and at the breakdown everyone struggled to stay on their feet. Birdy slotted his penalty but Uttoxeter failed on their two attempts, but soon showed us some dominant forward play as they rumbled in a try, which was surprisingly unconverted. Birdy's second penalty kept us in the lead but the Uttoxeter pack gave us a lesson in forward play today. It was slippery underfoot but the visitors pushed us all over the park and the sight of all eight Barton players with legs locked, being pushed north was not pretty. Quidditch at 9 and Bloxham at 8 did their very best to get the ball out of the scrums as quickly as possible. but this was tough when going backwards at speed.

That wasn't the only problem we faced as the Uttoxeter back row (6 and 17 especially) were big, fast and skilled and I don't think I've seen Blokko and Thorpey make so many tackles as today. Rowie and Mikey B were ever present, but the dark arts of the second row were nullified by a young referee who had a great first hour and expected quick release of ball and player and pinged anyone who didn't do this. As such the rucks were pretty clear affairs and anyone from the defending side quick enough to support the tackler would end up with the ball 9 times out of ten. I liked this for two reasons; a) because I wasn't playing (one of the few things I did well was to disrupt attacking rucks) and I would have been rendered powerless, and b) it meant there would be free flowing rugby  - which suits Barton.

So our forwards had a tough day of it. The front row of Robinson, Plant and Moule are not short of experience and guile, but this was a tough day at the office, and it was hard to get a platform to work off. The lineouts functioned well (even with Dodge helping the opposition with lineout calls :/) and Rich "I've played Rugby in Cumbria and survived" Plant didn't miss his jumper once.

But as we handed out sweeties and whisky to JC and the assembled spectators we didn't see the vastly superior Barton backs punish the Uttoxeter three quarters. It was very sad because I didn't rate the double digits from the A50 at all, with the possible exception of the full back, but we should have run rings round them. The soft pitch didn't help, and we did have chances but they just didn't come off.  We did have one piece of luck when Rowie found himself on the right wing and ran onto a chip through from Birdy, and kicked ahead for Wooly to dot down. It looked easy and other tries were bound to follow, so I headed off to the container to ready the fireworks. By the time I got back we were losing again as the visitors put another try from a sharp eyed scrum half who saw there was no-one covering blind and he shot round the ruck and into the corner. Bugger.

We saw some hard lines of running from Bloxham and some absolutely solid first up tackles from Matt Cox on the flanks, but we couldn't make the territory or possession count. Ben Estaugh had trouble on the slippery surface and made ankle tackles from the floor when he would normally have taken the man to ground and ripped the ball free every other week. Will Simpson on the wing and Matt Knight at full back showed two different styles of play. Knighty decided that full frontal attack was the best policy and would only go for a gap if he hadn't built up sufficient speed to smosh into the stand off which I think he relished. If only Em was there to watch.....

Will Simpson, had a couple of chances that he would have expected to put away but some demon cover tackling put paid to this. On one occasion Moule had wrestled the ball free from a ruck and Giles fed Quidditch who saw Birdy on the loop. We expected him to drift out to the touchline but he saw Will on the outside and only one defender ahead and straightened up beautifully, went for the inside shoulder, stood up the defender and released Will on the tramline. Then out of the blue (well actually the grey of the skies over the Waterfront), came two cover tacklers who stopped us scoring. We were not happy.

The second half saw another Bird penalty, but the visitors racked up another score. As Giles, Dean Palphreyman and Malcolm came on with fresh legs to support a weary pack, the game started to acquire a little niggle, and soon the penalty count from both sides started to increase. The referee struggled to keep this simmering resentment under control and after throwing a few punches, the Uttoxeter full back got a yellow card. We couldn't make the extra man play and when we thought Jamie had scored in the corner, our team were upset to see the ref with his hand out signaling the last pass was forward (it was). The resultant banter from the visitors spilled over into scuffles and Jamie ended up with a red card for failing to properly head butt the outside centre.

So the game sadly ended sourly. It had been refereed to a high level, where quick clean rucks were expected and which favour our style of rugby, but we couldn't make it count on a sticky wet pitch.

With Bromyard beating Telford, it raises the spectre of relegation which makes next week's away game at Five Ways a very interesting proposition. Will we need to sacrifice a modern day Joan of Arc to be burnt at the stake for the sake of a win?

***Great team performance as wingers finish off Harborne***

***Barton 31 - Harborne 26*** *- 2nd March 2013*

Two tries for the returning John Shum (who broke his jaw during the last encounter) and two tries from Dave Cleary capped a fabulous team effort on a smooth, hard pitch.

Jamie Maxwell scored the other try and added a few conversions to seal a wonderful, if somewhat tense game. A longer report may follow.

***“Le Cannock Crunch (or Grudge!)”***

***Barton 7 - Cannock 19*** *- 23rd February 2013*

Thanks to medic Bill for this match report;

*What a month February has been, 300 miles travelled and no wins and just one solitary point! Surely a home game and that being against Cannock, the old foe, might just see fortunes change, raise the effort with some attractive play and warm the supporters on what was another bitterly cold day. And to follow, the England France game in the club with warm pork baps to look forward to at half time?*

*As per norm the game started in the usual to and fro, Cannock dominating the scrums, the predictable ruck and maul game from them but as time went by we started to witness a Cannock side of quick ball, back play and some excellent kicking.*

*It was like Cannock had come to the home of fast back running rugby and thought, let’s do that to the Bars. It took time for the match to really get going and having been an even, and what can also be said unattractive contest for the first 30 minutes, Cannock scored a try and their place kicker had put his boots on this time and slotted over the conversion from a difficult angle on the right.*

*Birdy had the chance to grab a penalty score back, and from distance attempted to convert but having to apply a lot of power hooked his kick left claiming he’d seen Wooley pegging it down the left wing and a special play was on? We doubted him and a perplexed Wooley was in fact trying to keep warm on a wing where he’d seen little of the ball.*

*Half time and the mood was still upbeat within the squad, Bars were competing at the breakdown well, the scrumaging was not good, little control of the wheel and Cannock played well to the referee’s whistle. But overall there were good signs and a determination to move on, compete well at the breakdown and put their backs under a bit more pressure.*

*Well the second half couldn’t have started any worse, a try for the visitors within 2 minutes but heads were not down, we knew there was more to happen in this often tight fixture. But a second try within 10 minutes (0-19) and we were up against it, Cannock were showing why they are 3rd in this league and the way they played in all areas shows they’re not just a bump and grind forward unit any more. I’m sure the cocky “lets get 4 for a bonus point against this lot” from the Cannock captain was just the tonic to awaken the Bars?*

*Finally the pod system, well practiced rucking and running backs all came good in an attractive move that led to a Barton try from Ben Estaugh. Birdy converted and peckers were up, Barton upped their game in a last 10 minute show down that saw Bars really pressurising the Cannock line in the prospect of us getting the bonus point. Alas it was not to be, they really tried to nail it but Cannock, although wobbly by now, managed to hold out and leave with the score 7-19, a 14-19 score may have been a better refection of the game but we have to move on to the prospect of Harbourne at home next week.*

*In reflection, Barton were good, improving and settling in new blood which will hold us in good stead we hope for the future in this league. We just need points and badly, it’s now very tight for a place with Telford to 5 west north next season, we don’t deserve to go down, recent scores have not reflected what’s gone on around the pitch and with some attractive phases of play in the second half today against a team 3rd in the league, means there is real optimism amongst the players to strive on and get the team to safety.*

*Watch this space, it’s on a knife edge.......*

*Moment of the match? Blocko being cautioned for being too aggressive, a moment received with some hilarity.*

*Man of the match? Would be unfair to pick one person out, teamwork was the winner today, hope you enjoyed your pint Ben...*

***Clee Hill beat a weakened Barton side***

***Clee Hill 24 - Barton 3*** *- 16th February 2013*

The last of the long trips until the season closer at Tenbury in April, and it was a hard game with a lot of people out of position. It was great when Birdy put over the penalty, but when he asked the ref "how long left sir?" and was told "seventy eight minutes",  you knew we were expecting a tough encounter. But it was a game, and we now have a string of home games to play and finish off the season in style.

Thanks to the Titley family for supporting the club so well and to everyone who travelled the distance.

***Bishops Castle drag us down in the pack***

***Bishops castle 15 - Barton 10*** *- 9th February 2013*

It was a day of being bossed in the scrums and having more mauls than I've seen all season. A hard day for the forwards and a heavy narrow pitch that limited our backs. Woolly scored a fabulous last minute try after good work from Ben Estaugh and Lee Coton, and Birdy converted it which when added to our earlier penalty got us ten points.

I'll write a longer match report later but it's a long way to Tipperary and Bishops Castle is just on the other side, so well done to all who made the effort.

***Telford fall***

***Barton 34 - Telford 10*** *- 2nd February 2013*

We won! Wolly scored three tries and young Ben Estaugh two, and if someone gives me a match report I'll be able to give you more detail on what happened. In the meantime, just revel in the score line.

***The fall and rise of Barton Rugby***

***Barton 32 - Bromyard 0*** *- 12th January 2013*

Life is a series of ups and downs – “you must take the rough with the smooth”, “Its swings and roundabouts”, “for better or for worse” are all phrases we’re familiar with and Barton’s fortunes have certainly followed this cycle recently. There are times when you watch Barton play when you feel completely euphoric, and others when you are borderline suicidal. Last week we couldn’t get a team together to go to Bishops Castle and this week we put out two teams and provide a dominant team performance against Bromyard.

It started off so well. Dave “I only run straight” Palin thundered about in the centres and after a short passage of play found himself out on the right with a trembling winger to beat. He blundered over the poor guy and we were 5-0 up. Rich Welch and Dave Rowe were always first to the breakdown and Lee Coton got quick clean ball to feed Birdy at standoff. The first few passes were well collected off his toes but after that the service allowed Birdy all the options he wanted; run to the touchline, kick, pass to Jamie or pop to his back row. His kicking from hand was fantastic today and both he and Jamie made sure when it was time to clear our lines, they were well and truly cleared. Lee sniped and tackled hard all game as you would expect a frustrated openside with a 9 on his back.

The Weymouth touring front row combination of Moule, Bayley and Robinson were unbeatable. Mouley knocked on the kick off but after that had a great game popping up in the backs every now and again, carrying a lot of ball, or clearing out any stray Bromyard ruckers.

Andy Gillett packed down at 8 and played a blinder. At one stage he found himself in space on the right wing and plodded down the tramlines purposefully. Coming up to the winger he looked inside for support and found.....none. He straightened up and this simple action produced one of the most exquisite slow motion dummies ever seen at Holland Park. The full back came up to cut him off and the exact same move was repeated to roars of approval from the capacity crowd. The injured dad-to-be Jonny Simons was not impressed at this whippersnapper taking his number eight shirt, but Andy did the job well today. Meanwhile Jonny was handing out biscuits and sandwiches on the touchline and took my job today; a point not missed by JC who suggested that in order to complete the triangle of job swaps I would be rear gunner on an Afghan Chinook come April. Mmm not sure about that.

As our pack moved relentlessly upfield the fringing from the visitors became a bit much and we got a penalty which Birdy converted. Nice

Our two flankers of Bloxham and Thorpe may only weight 70 kg between them but covered huge amounts of ground and made sure the opposition didn’t, and soon we were in possession and moving back into Bromyard territory. We enjoyed being on the Bromyard 5 yard line but one of our flaws is that after the first phase we tend to lose shape and don’t have any runners from depth. Travis at full back was itching to come into the line but knew he had to cover back in case of a turnover, but both he and the crowd were frustrated at the lack of options after the first breakdown. To emphasise the point, Birdy ended up out of position and in running back to the stand off slot took the ball at pace from Lee and had the momentum to get over the try line. He converted his own try and we were 15-0 up.

Then came the try of the game. I think everyone was involved. Bayley and Moule secured the ball at a ruck and Travis kicked for position. Wooly chased and made sure the winger had no option but to lose the possession or go into touch; he did the latter. The lineouts clicked and we were off again, Jamie running hard through the centre, Palin following, Bloxham and Thorpey squashing any suggestion of a turnover, recycled ball and off again. Rich Welch was at every breakdown. The final move involved all of the backs as Wooly came into the line, the ball was spun out and Palin has possession five yards out. Everyone expected him to dip his shoulder and flop over the line but he drew his man and gave the ball to Dave Cleary for a lovely try in the corner in front of the crowd – lovely. Birdy missed the conversion from the very slippery touchline but things were all well in Barton. Then just before half time as we set up our campsite in most of their 22 Thorpey found he had the ball and no opposition so felt it right and proper to run over the try line and score. Good job. As was the conversion and as the ref blew for 40 minutes someone asked with the score 27-0 if I should ready the victory fireworks.

I did but the second half didn’t go quite to plan. Bromyard took their full back and put him into the standoff position and it made a huge difference. He read the game much better, could kick a long way when necessary and could protect the ball well when in difficulty. This frustrated our efforts somewhat but it was never a worry.

Cliffy came on for Thorpey and Evan Bloxham made the comment that Cliffy had a point to prove. As the Bromyard #4 took the ball at pace and straightened up, Cliffy tackled him, took him off the ground and drove him back – awesome. “Like that” said the ever wise Evan. Our old #4 Palin was in the action again and finding himself on the left wing after following one of Birdy’s mazey runs decided to head for the posts. We were convinced he was going to score but some desperate last ditch tackling held him up and the ball was spun out wide and knocked on.  I haven’t mentioned our scrums because they were efficient and secure. The referee managed the game and the rucks well but gave everyone very little time – he’s used to much faster games than the ones we’re used to watching! Lee came off and Mikey Bennett went on. Not a natural scrum half, MBUK decided to settle into the second row and let Dave Rowe take the 9 position.

The game progressed and Travis, Wooly and Cleary saw a lot more of the ball as Bromyard’s strategy of territory first, possession second brought them into the game. Our boys never missed a catch, were always well positioned and our forwards were always there to support them when the need came.

We trundled up field and Jamie put a crossfield kick in for Cleary to chase. He dinged his opposite number and the ensuing ruck gave us a penalty which we kicked for the corner. As I retrieved the ball and attempted to throw it one handed (it was cold and my other hand was in my pocket!) to Dean Palphreyman who’d come on for Mouley I managed to throw the ball straight into the hedge. I told Niall (the only person present) that this was a deliberate strategy to allow our team to decide what tactic to adopt. Dave Rowe had taken the scrum half role by this stage so it was wise for the team to discuss options. It worked as Palin went over for his second try, rueing the pass he gave to Cleary earlier in the match as his hat-trick went begging.

Bayley won the hammer for never missing a tackle but many other performances warranted the bling on the day. Great result.

So there we are, a 32-0 victory and a fabulous team performance. The wrist-slashing lows of last week and the buzz on Saturday; these cycles are not good for my blood pressure. I just hope these orgasmic highs aren’t followed by a thumping headache and reaching for the ibuprofen next week. Again.

***Confusion reigns on and off the pitch but at least we won***

***Barton 23- Tenbury 22*** *- 15th December 2012*

Our pitch was waterlogged / frozen so we elected to play up at John Taylor High School.

Five dozen mince pies were procured and the hip flask filled - I was expecting a good day. It started well as Birdy kicked two out of four easy penalty attempts and we were dominant. The Tenbury indiscipline meant that they were continually penalised and we felt that we were in control of the game. Our pack was awesome. Moule, Bayley and Tom Robinson have over 110 years of front row experience between them and it showed as they only ever went forward in the scrums. Rich Welch and Dave Rowe at second row were everywhere and with Blokko and Thorpey on the flanks, our lineouts were flawless too. Andy Gillett came out of the Vets team to bind down at number eight and the Rugeley based ref recalled games over 15 years ago when Andy and Mr Flint punched each other senseless while the rest of us played rugby. But there was none of that today.

The breakdowns were a mess. I have often been accused (or congratulated) at being disruptive in the rucks but I took my hat off to the Tenbury back row. Their ability to enter a ruck un-noticed from completely the wrong side makes Mouley's rucking look positively "through the gate", and the dark arts on the floor were appreciated by the aficionados on the touchline. The ref didn't appreciate it at all and pinged them every time, to the point where he drew a yellow card. Tenbury had scored a lucky try after a calamity of errors where virtually all our team seemed to knock the ball backwards until the grateful Tenbury back picked it up and flopped over for an unconverted score. We were 6-5 up and then we camped on their 5 yard line. Quidditch, who's passing was first class all game spun out a low ball to Birdy, Everyone expected him to knock on or fall on the ball and the Tenbury half backs readied themselves for a ruck, but somehow Birdy picked the ball off his toes and glided through the gap and dotted down under the posts. Conversion made we were 13-5 up and all was well.

The game should have been put away at this point as our scrummaging was fantastic, the line outs were great and with forward dominance such as this Birdy had a plethora of options to choose from. We were camped on their 5 yard line and had a huge overlap to the right but as Quidditch looked up he saw our flyers were lined up against the opposition front row on the left and spun the ball out to Sam who's pass out to Ben Estaugh on the wing was judged to be forward.

After half time when they were back to full strength we saw their danger man - the outside centre, find far too much space and he gained lots of yards downfield before some excellent tackling from Adam Dixon at full back brought him down. The ball was cleared but Tenbury had a lineout and right off the top to a running #5 saw him canter under our posts as no one laid a finger on him. It was heartbreaking, and we sensed some dissent in our ranks as the conversion went over. Score 13-12. Bugger me if they didn't run at us again and with some penalties going their way we were back in our half defending again. They scored again and neither the crowd nor the Barton players could believe that we were 19-13 down. Suck it up, clear the head and play like we know how to play. We marched up field and got a penalty ten yards out but took a quick one despite having some of the best set- piece penalty moves in the league, and it came to nothing. Fortunately Tenbury were offside again and we got a penalty and they got a yellow card. 16-19 was a better score but we were still on the back foot. Wooly was on the left wing and found lots of space, flitting in and out of our centre partnership and made lots of space but the ball came loose and the Tenbury ten booted it well downfield. Heads bowed we sauntered back into our own half. Tenbury really didn't exploit their outside centre like they should have and a lot of this came down to the shocking passing from the stand off. Blokko and Thorpey knew this and were up on the scraps like a seagull on a chip (sorry for the plagiarism but it was true) but went off their feet and the Tenbury second row took the penalty to restore their 6 point lead. They were still a man down and we knew we had to secure possession, kick for territory, and use our lineout supremacy to regain possession. It worked a treat and after a few phases of play we saw Birdy round the Tenbury #8, draw his man to make space for Ben Estaugh on the wing, but as the defender missed the tackle Birdy went himself and scored a try. 21-22, we were a point down but a fantastic conversion had us all cheering and breathing again. The last five minutes were tense. We got marched back into our own 22 and were awarded a penalty. Birdy couldn't find touch and all of Tenbury were screaming to keep the ball alive as the referee had signaled the end of the game. The played phase after phase after phase and our discipline held up as there were no penalties but we were ceding territory. Then we were awarded a penalty and Birdy kicked the ball well into touch and the game was won.

This was a tough game to watch and to play, and the tension after the game in the bar was palpable. We stuffed our faces with stew and dumplings and knew we'd been in a tough contest.

So it is the middle of the season and we are in the middle of the table, but wait a minute, why are we only in 6th place? 212 points for, 306 against. On average we score 21 points a game - one behind Uttoxeter in 3rd place, but way ahead of Cannock in second place who can only manage an average of 18 points a game!!. The answer lies in defence. Every team above us manages to limit the opposition to between 11 and 16 points a game, but I'm sorry to say this guys but our defence is the worst in the league. That's right. Worst in the laegue. We leak an average of 31 points a game while even poor old Telford at the bottom without a single win this season have a better defensive record than Barton. So here's my Christmas wish. In the next ten league games I want to see us score more than 300 points and limit the opposition to under 200. We have done it before, so please do it again and make an old man happy this Christmas. Starting with Cannock next week.

***Market Drayton make it look easy***

***Market Drayton 79 - Barton 7*** *- 8th December 2012*

It was cold, it was December, it was away, it was against the league leaders, but can we really only scrabble together 14 players when there are no other games on? Any other team in our league would have cried off but we are Barton and we certainly couldn't say we didn't have a front row - they were everywhere! We had Jonny Sutton on the blindside, Cliffy open, and Craig Hudson at second row, and also had a raft of new backs.

At one point we were 7-5 up but with a scratch side against a rampant Market Drayton it was always going to be uphill in both halves.

What it did show is the spirit of the Barton faithful who did turn up and played with all their hearts when lesser mortals would have stayed at home or headed into Argos to complete the Christmas shopping. As I heard someone say that evening, "Barton are a great club with a fantastic spirit, and we all played for each other today. This may be the low point of our season, and if it is, I can't wait for the highs.".

Well said.

***Uttoxeter double header ends in exit from Owen Cup***

***Uttoxeter 30 - Barton 14*** *- 24th November 2012*

Sad day. Coach load of supporters and horrible weather, but no win in this double header (the result counts as a league game and a cup game). We will take good care of the cup for the rest of this season, but where will it live next year?

***Tough lessons for us all at Harborne***

***Harborne 36 - Barton 8*** *- 17th November 2012*

Harborne's pitch is a lovely flat field in a lovely part of Birmingham that is surrounded by some lovely buildings and some architecture that wouldn't look out of place in the industrial outskirts of Prague. There is no focal point for the club, no clear identity for this new side, yet as a team they show discipline and organization that you expect from a group of guys who've played together forever. We played well all game and in the first half believed we could win here. 14-8 at half time and we had the bulk of the possession and the bulk of the territory, but as Warren said, "We're not making them pay", and it was true. We couldn't turn that pressure into points and it was heartbreaking.

The penalty count for both sides was heartbreaking too, and the tackling jaw breaking as Shummy took an accidental blow to the face and spent most of the weekend at Queen's Hospital in Burton. Get well soon big man.

The whole team played well but simply didn't gel like we have seen in previous games and we couldn't put away the points. Harborne were well drilled and their outside centre tormented us all day long as unless he ran straight at Dave Palin, we couldn't stop him in full flow. Quidditich played the best game I have seen him play in a Barton shirt and many wondered if this was pent up sexual frustration or spent sexual frustration; either way we were happy.

Ben Estaugh and Adam Dixon didn't put a foot wrong all match and were always well placed and confident in both attack and defence, but all in all it wasn't as smooth as we have seen. Dave Rowe scored our only try when he found himself out on the wing and Wooly drew his man and passed a nice ball out for the grateful second row, although we were all surprised when Birdy fluffed the conversion - very out of character. And so was the team. Moule, Palphreyman, Bayley, Hudson are all seasoned exponents of the front row dark arts but couldn't make an impact on Harborne, but neither could they on us. Richard Welch drew admiration from the home fans due to his ability to handle on the floor, avoid a shoeing and avoid detection by the vigilant ref all at the same time. Good job! Simons, Thorpe and Cliffy at back row had their work cut out for them and carried more ball than they have been used to in recent games but had to defend like demons in the second half.

Dave Ryder made a welcome return to first team rugby but an injury cut short his involvement and we never really got our backs into the game as we would have liked. With Shummy's injury curtailing his involvement for the next few games, we will need to rejig the backs a little bit for the crunch double header against Uttoxeter next week, but bring it on.

***A whole year without a loss at home***

***Barton 18 - Clee Hill 21*** *- 3rd November 2012*

It's a long time since we lost a league game at Holland Park. November 2011. A long, long time ago. Barton lost to Telford in the October and had just drawn against Clee Hill 13-13 away in the wilds of West England, Ryland was an unknown tosser from Essex (as opposed to today where he is a known tosser from Essex) and Jimmy Saville was a national hero. My how things change.

It started off so well. The ground was soft after a deluge on Saturday morning, but the sky was clear and the wind was a light south westerly breeze. Clee Hill managed to arrive in the car park 1 minute after the scheduled kick off time and wandered onto the pitch like a disheveled group of men who had trekked from Shropshire, and their heads were bowed and beaten. As the match got underway  Barton marched forward and after five minutes we had a penalty on the ten yard line in midfield and Birdy sent it cleanly over the posts. We were in control. You could hear the "oh sh\*t" mumbles under the breaths of the Clee Hill backs every time Quidditch spun the ball out to Birdy - we were bigger, better organized and faster than anyone sporting two digits on the back of a Clee Hill shirt.

All of the play was in the Clee Hill half and whenever ball was turned over they kicked for territory. This ended up in the safe hands of the well positioned Adam Dixon at full back, or in the hands of Dean Palphreyman who would throw arrows into our lineout. Clee Hill were hamstrung and had little to play with. They continued to kick and we ran it back with gusto. Dixon collects in his own half in the middle of the park, drifts out to the left and pops to Dave Cleary on the burst, Shummy's peeled off his wing to join the fun and as his opposite number stayed nailed to the touchline Shummy ran in and scored just as his parents and Daughter arrived on the touchline. Birdy converted and we were 10-0 up.

But the Clee Hill forwards were big. I've already said they were light in the backs but they were much heavier up front and played as if they had an extra man in the scrums. In the first half we managed to keep them at bay during our own put in by quickly getting the ball to Palin at number 8 and getting it out as quickly as possible, but on their put in they held it in as long as possible. Nothing clever, noting planned just energy sapping driving.  They worked forward, kicking for touch, our lineout on half way. Murphy came on for a bloody Quidditch and from the lineout on his first touch knocked the ball on three times - impressive!. Clee Hill kept possession at the scrum and kicked further downfield. The following line out probably ten yards from our try line led to a ruck where we were deemed to have handled on the ground. Clee decided to scrummage rather than kick (?) and they pushed us back. We held them. The scrum rotated well beyond 90 degrees and there was no whistle; the ball came out and Thorpey was up on the flanker in a flash but the ref decided that this was a deliberate attempt at preventing a try scoring opportunity (as most tackles tend to be) and awarded a penalty try. We were not happy but knew that dissent on the field got us nowhere (and in fact had caused us to be marched back 20 yards already) so we quietly fumed as the conversion went over. We knew what to do - shut up, suck it up, and play on. And we did. Another lineout, this time not tapped off the top but held in the forwards by Rowe, trying to bring the opposition backs offside to earn a penalty (it did and didn't respectively). We recycled the ball and Jamie took a nice straight line popping to Wooly out of the tackle who rounded his first man, straightened up and delayed his pass to stand up the full back and there was Shummy slightly too far in front....aarrgh!! Scrum, kick lineout to us on half way and off we went again. Welch took the ball into contact, Turner took a nicely timed run straight upfield (and into the ref - sorry), recycle the ball and this time Shum timed his run perfectly and dotted down in the corner. The conversion was missed but we were well ahead and in control at 15-7.

The second half took on a different look as Cliffy and Myles came on for Moule and Dean, and Mikey B went on for Rich Welch. Murphy went onto the far wing for Dave Cleary and we kicked off. It was getting cold and with all the whisky and Cadbury chocolate I'd consumed my cheeks had started to flush and I could feel a bit of red warmth; nice. On the field Cell Hill were not finding any red warmth as the crimson Barton tide kept coming at them relentlessly wave after wave. Another penalty, more time off the clock, Birdy kicks and we are 18-7 up. I readied the fireworks.

We put Ben Estaugh on for Adam Dixon and carried on  playing. There was more and more chat on the field and following a hard driving maul from Clee HIll Matt Bayley got tangled up in the feet of the rumbling forwards and ended up with shoe pie, mouthfuls of abuse from the visitors and a penalty decision against him all in one.  His enigmatic smile and quick back chat did not endear him to the visiting pack and the banter continued for the rest of the match. Clee Hill pushed us downfield following two penalty decisions against us in the loose in midfield and soon we were on our five yard line. Clee Hill's impressive 6 ran at us hard all day and always made the first tackle but was held up on our try line.  We were penalized in the ensuing scrum when Bayley slipped and went down and Clee Hill scrummaged again. We went backwards and were accused of having the back row breaking off early. The scrum was still moving forward, our back row were fully bound and Clee Hill were destined to score, but the referee was already standing under the posts with his hand raised; another penalty try. Conversion made Barton were 4 points up and ten minutes to go. Clee Hill knew what to do; keep it tight in their pack and keep it away from our backs. Anyone in any doubt of this tactic were put right when the poor Clee stand off was berated by everyone from outside Barton when he sliced a touchline kick to Shummy. We couldn't take advantage of this mis-kick and soon Clee Hill were rumbling back up field again. My watch told me I had 2 minutes and ten seconds to wait for the end to come; 130 seconds for me to hold my breath and 130 seconds for Barton to hold out a buoyant visiting team. The inevitable happened and from a 5 yard lineout they popped a short ball off the top to the prop curling round from the back and he made it into the corner. We were losing 19-18 and ruing the two penalty tries that gave them an extra 4 converted points that we didn't think they deserved. Then the Clee Hill kicker who hadn't made any attempt of converting penalties (we assumed because he was rubbish) put over a touchline conversion that Wilkinson would have been proud of - very nice. So perhaps he would have converted all three tries anyway.

So that's it. A twelve month winning streak comes to an end thanks to a Clee Hill side that assessed the pitch, the opposition, the referee, the weather, the crowd, the bench, the wind, and the environment and ultimately made the best tactical decisions on the day. Barton played hard, and had taken on a tough set of forwards, and everyone knew they had done their best and played well, but still our heads were bowed as we went in for the post match huddle. I put the rockets away, loosened my tie, and looked forlornly at the four posts as they stood tall and straight, almost whispering to us, "stand up straight like me, keep that head up, and learn from today. Our next winning streak starts tomorrow."

***It all starts to come together away at Telford; just like last year***

***Telford 14 - Barton 34*** *- 27th October 2012*

I like Telford. Not so much the place, but the rugby club. They are a good strong team with fantastic facilities, friendly supporters, and enjoy all aspects of the game.

I didn't like the look of their pack. They were huge.

It was a bright, crisp clear day without a cloud in the sky, and a gentle breeze behind the home side brought a chill to the Barton faithful, both on and off the pitch. We knew the tactics the home team would adopt. Kick over our wingers into the corners and force us to run at them, or force us to kick. That way they would play to their pack's strength and rumble on. But they didn't. Shummy, Dave Cleary and Adam Dixon saw a lot of the ball and Wooly relished the outside centre position. Any time the ball was kicked through, Adam collected confidently (apparently due to his Father's training and genes) and ran the ball back towards his support. The pack were there to protect and feed the ball back out. Our tactic was to involve the backs as often as we could and avoid a battle up front; and what a battle it must have been. Moule, Palphreyman and Bayley are an impressive front row and it certainly isn't their first rodeo, so when they tell me the opposition is strong and skilful, I listen with respect. I was very impressed with our tight five as they held their own in the scrums against a much heavier Telford unit, and also rucked with aplomb. The lineouts were a bit shaky at times; not due to Dean's throw ins but the way Telford managed to disrupt the jumper, the position or the maul that ensued. The referee allowed a very small gap at these lineouts which played to Telford's strength and we struggled a little on the day. In the tight, it was evenly matched in that both sides turned over the ball far too easily, and this uncertainty brought both back lines up flat as they were never sure if the next phase would be one of defence or attack.

Welch and Rowe locked well and bound as tightly as a silk tie round the alabaster wrists of an EL James novel reader, but they also put in a lot of hard yards and did a lot of clearing out at the breakdown. Our back row of Simons, Thorpe and Bloxham has got to be one of the best in the league. Sure the Telford Captain at 8 is huge and we did our best to bring him down early, as to see him on the hoof at full chat heading for the inside centre reminded me why I will always be a better spectator that I was ever a player. But we had Jamie at 12 and he never missed a tackle, and made his mark early by a lovely hit on the Telford stand off in the first play of the game. From then on the Telford 10 kicked 20% of the time and passed 80% of the time to "Manu" at inside centre who runs like Tuilagi but just simply didn't have the support on his shoulder to make the phases work for the home side.

Soon we were in control and Quidditch made sure there was quick ball out to Birdy who's route one option was a pass to Jamie or Wooly. Wooly relished the centre role and  took straight lines of running, drawing his man, passing back inside or out to Shummy. Adam Dixon came into the line a few times to stand up the winger and we had the run of play. There was no surprise that Wooly and Shummy ran up five tries between them, but the surprise was the number of tries Shummy didn't score. He knocked on four times in try scoring positions and luckily it didn't hurt us. His finishing on the second try was lovely though as he decided to kick it through twice and fell on it like an old prop. And on two other occasions he put the ball up for his forwards to chase. This perplexed our pack as when Shummy has the ball in hand they are used to walking back to their own half waiting for Birdy to kick the conversion - they are not used to having to run upfield for a sky ball!

But seriously to watch the Barton back line on a pitch like this, on a day like this, reminded us all what this game is about. The pack did what they needed to do to secure the ball, Quidditch was a pain in the arse the whole match and Birdy brought his team-mates in at will. It was so comfortable that Wooly's last try was a gift - Quidditch to Bird. Bird drifts out as if to pass to Jamie but then cuts back inside his centre and belts upfield. The full back is made to stand still and Wooly pops up on his shoulder. A converted try.

Kicking wasn't the big points scorer today - 6 tries, two conversions and no penalties is not a normal match, but there was a strong breeze that caught us out on a few occasions in the second half as we kicked the ball dead.

The second half was odd. Telford took off what they said were their two best players and the team was transformed. Their backs were much more confident, much quicker and brought the Barton defensive training into play for the first time. This spurred on the home side's forwards and they managed a lovely push over try just to the right our our posts and at 29-14 we were winning with 18 minutes to go but certainly not comfortable. Then we put on all three subs - Morgan, Estaugh and Mat Turner and the fresh legs helped a little bit but as the long shadows drew cross the field it got a little darker - like the lighting above a chaise longue in the Malmaison. Out to the left we turned over ball at a lineout and ran in another pod. Then Bloxham came on an inside line off Bird and cantered over towards the far corner, past the stranded lock. As he touched down, the lock put his knee in Blokko's back and got a yellow card and a whole raft of abuse from the visiting fans as a result. We missed the conversion but won the game and got those ever elusive bonus points - 5 Ways have only won one game but have 5 bonus points!

So at the end of the match it was a little sour and we felt it spoilt the game a little bit, but then I was sent this email :

Please pass this email on to the coach and first team players... I wish to pass on my sincere apologies for my last minute actions in the game against Telford yesterday. As your 7 scored in the corner i dived in with my knee after chasing him down in an act of frustration not aggression. I am not proud of this and would like to go on record with my apology to the player. As I left the field after being carded i also reacted to a chap in the crowd, so once again please say sorry to him from me. It was a good game played in the right way and my actions were not acceptable. I look forward to the return game at your place later in the season. Regards, Dave Kerr 2nd row, Telford

It brought back my faith in the game of rugby, the people who play it, and those who run the clubs. Thank you Telford for a great day out, and if Shummy's Sarah hadn't scoffed so many of the chocolates there would have been more for your supporters. We'll sort that out for the return fixture at our place.

***Four tries, Five Ways***

***Barton 32 - 25 Five Ways Old Edwardians****- 20th October 2012*

There was no second team game so we were able to field a very strong team with a full bench of talented subs. We played well. Bloxham scored the first try from an early period of Barton pressure and Bird converted and within 5 minutes we were 7-0 up. The 5 Ways kicker had missed an earlier penalty and this was to be their downfall because Barton's penalty count was very high, yet they couldn't convert our indiscipline into points. Our scrums were solid and with Moule, Palphreyman and Bayley in the front row, that was hardly surprising, and being locked by Rowe and Richard Welch there was going to be no nonsense up front. Sure there were the usual niggles that you get between two sets of forwards on a Saturday but Rowe and Welch made sure it was tamed and controlled. Our back row had a very good day, and when you look at Simons, Thorpe and Bloxham you know that there are not going to be many bad days, and a lot of hard yards were made. Quidditch and Birdy made a few tackles but didn't see much of their opposition as the Barton back row had done their defensive duties well, or we were in attack. A penalty was converted and we were into double figures.

Try number two came from a remarkable piece of "forward-like" thinking from Martin Woolston. Lee Coton was playing at full back and kept his wingers in position the whole game and they were always prepared for attack from deep or to defend anywhere on the pitch. Lee received  a long kick, sidestepped the opposing full back and passed to Wooly on the left wing, just as he left our 22. A quick burst down the touchline and the whole of the 5 ways pack drifted right to kill him. Wooly decided to avoid this conflict and ran straight for the centre of the field past the hapless forwards and off towards the right hand corner flag. Then saw he had little support out right and a whole bunch of 5 ways backs were looming down on him, so he cut left and headed straight for the posts. The Full back caught him with a tap tackle five yards out but his speed strength and height took him over - lovely. Birdy converted and we were in control 17-5.

Centre field was a tough place to be as Jamie and Dave Palin took straight lines of running or went for deft kicks ahead for the thundering Shum out right. We even saw Gary Moule intercept a pass, carry the ball, sidestep the outside centre, and pass the ball. Okay, the pass was to the opposition but the game was flowing well, we were in control and the crowd were thrilled at Moule's confidence.

Birdy added another penalty and then came an opportunity to see our backs in full flow. Now as an old fashioned purist I hate to see us try to run a ball out from behind our posts, but in this rare instance it worked, and oh how beautifully it worked. Lee popped the ball to Wooly who ran down the right wing and just out of our own 22 before cutting back inside to stand up the full back. Shum  was on his shoulder and took a scissors pass and sped out to the right hand touchline. A pair of 5 ways three quarters had tracked him down and just before the tackle was made he spotted Birdy inside and popped a low pass out to the grateful stand off who cantered in under the posts and converted his own try. Yes. 27-15 and it looked good.

Later in the second half we lost Bayley for ten minutes as he hadn't retreated ten before bringing down the scrum half who's taken a quick tap penalty. Rowe went to loose head, Palin moved into second row and 5 ways had no advantage up front as they had expected. They worked hard though and eventually managed to score a try in the corner after finally making one of the obvious overlaps work. They missed the conversion.

We then made a series of changes - Moule and Welch came off and Mikey B and Cliffy went on, then a few minutes later Moule came off and Myles went on with his lovely pink scrum cap. 5 ways made a few changes but seemed to be catching us up - they were tired and panting, and we were neither but they scored two more tries and I started to fret.

The score was 27-25 to us and the crowd were uneasy. 5 Ways had the ascendancy and we were praying for the whistle to sound. Barton marched upfield and from a penalty ten yards out on the left hand touchline Quidditch flung out a pass to Simons who ran at 45 degrees towards the right hand upright. The 5 ways openside took a perfect line to intercept him and clattered into our number 8. Jonny shuddered a little bit with the impact and turned 90 degrees to the left and set up a ruck. The ball was quickly recycled, we made full use of the overlap and Shum went over for a try in the corner. Birdy missed the conversion, the referee blew his whistle and the relief fireworks went off. Then the 5 ways openside regained consciousness and got up off the grass.

But in the end, we scored four tries and 5 ways, five. Our kicker made 5 successful kicks (two penalties and three easy conversions) and they made none. We won at home and kept our 100% home record but our penalty count robbed us of possession and gave away too many opportunities to the opposition, and a better opposition would have made us pay for these indiscretions. But for now we are happy to be mid table with 4 games gone and with Telford away next week.

***Away record 0%***

***Bromyard 30 - 20 Barton*** *- 6th October 2012*

“We're not in Kansas anymore” as Dorothy said in the Wizard of Oz, and she was right. Bromyard is a long way from Kansas.

But what a beautiful drive (after you get round Worcester), what a lovely club and what a lovely day for rugby too. The pitch was big and flat and although a bit soggy there was little wind, and we all looked forward to a dominant display from our backs. Dave Rowe sensed this too and opted to pull on the 11 shirt, and with Dave Palin inside him it looked a strange three quarter line but then I saw Dave Cleary, Birdy and Lee fill in the gap between Palin and the scrum, and with Shummy and Adam Dixon taking the big numbers I rubbed my hands with glee. Glee wasn’t happy but off we went and very soon we saw Dave Palin in yards of space romping down the field. The opposition were left flat footed and stationary and he was making so much ground over them that I was convinced they’d heard a referee’s whistle that I’d missed. But no. The try was given, the conversion made and we were in the lead. I started listening for the ref’s whistle a bit harder after that but needn’t have bothered; he didn’t miss a thing and ruthlessly punished every infringement. He did play lots of advantage to the attacking side which helped the game flow a bit but our penalty count was horrendous. Rich Welch had a good game but was singled out for slowing play down at the rucks because he didn’t move away IMMEDIATELY. Cliffy fringed beautifully and understood how this game was going to flow, and worked well with Andy Gillet and Jonny in the loose. We did use the penalties that were given against Bromyard well and soon we were 10-3 in the lead. Our front row of Dean Palphreyman, Tom and Moule were not going to be pushed around by anyone in this league and our scrums were set well, and solid, and Lee had a lovely first 30 minutes.

They scored another penalty and started to get back into the game but then a defining period of play took place that I would like to expand on. Shummy took the ball in midfield after Cleary cut back inside to avoid their very impressive #12. Jon cut back outside and burst past the outside centre into space and over the half way line. As he thundered down on the quaking full back, he decided to fake inside and cut outside in a style that we knew would result in a try and so confident were we, that Steve Hunt had already turned away to get the kicking tee. But Shummy slipped and fell under the full back who gratefully ripped the ball from his grasp and made upfield in search of support. A few rucks later and we were still very much in broken play, and their second row took a flat ball up the middle and we watched Thorpey come across to pick him off. But he missed a tackle – yes, Thorpey missed a tackle. Unheard of, and because the Barton team was so confident that the big lock would be stopped that there was no on home to stop him from making a further 20 meters before Adam Dixon took him down deep in our 22. As we tried to realign, their 12 very nicely pulled Birdy back as he ran past to make the overlap and as the ball spun out, there was nothing we could do to prevent Bromyard from scoring in the corner. They missed the conversion but at half time it was 11-10 and they could see that they could beat us. We saw three dead certs in a row (Shummy scoring when in open field, Thorpey missing a tackle, and not having a full defensive line) hurt us badly. Mentally we were up against it and as the second half started we knew that we had to get rolling to get our mojo back.

Dean came off and Dan Hodge came on but Bromyard were bossing us in the scrums as their confidence had built up their belief in the forwards, and the move of their 12 to number 8 only boosted this effort. We gave away penalty after penalty but kept our mouth shut (well for most of the time Birdy...), and very soon we were camped on our own 5 yard line defending ferociously. It was horrible. We knew if we had possession we could easily win this game but luck, confidence, and the penalty count meant we were always going to struggle. Then they scored a try. The relief was huge for the home side because just before we had successfully disrupted a four man overlap, and their confidence had started to waver, but this try had brought it back anew. Dean went back on but our scrums were still being wheeled, we were being pinged for early engagement, and the ball was always in our half - rarely in our hands.

Bromyard had a 16-10 lead and were running freely off the standoff making it a hard day in midfield for the guys in red, and soon Bromyard had an overlap which they used to full advantage and rounded Adam for a converted try. The touchline was sodden and as I watched from this quayside position, I thought “Oh my” as I stuffed my face with the half time Jaffa Cakes. 23-10.

Then we started to move upfield. We were patient, and organised, and showed the rugby we can play. It was calm, unobtrusive and efficient, moving slowly and steadily like a National Express coach on the M4. We held our nerve in the scrums, our lineouts were effective and soon we had the ball out to the wing and this time Shummy made sure with a try in the corner. 23-15.

Bromyard quickly came back and rumbled back into our half with the help on a bevy of penalties and some nice running and when we failed twice to clear our lines, the heads were down. We managed to turn over their rucks by ripping, counter rucking and aggressively defending in the 5 yard area, but in both cases we opted to run the ball out. In both cases we fumbled, giving them scrum advantage and us a lot of work to do. I saw Stewart Cox up on the bank, looking down on developments like an MP on the balcony of the Houses of Parliament reviewing proceedings. He was scowling like only Stewart can scowl. They finally converted all this territory and possession into points and another converted try brought them the bonus point and a realisation to me that the game was beyond us. Bromyard didn’t lose a league game last season and play well as a team but Barton and great and Barton kept on playing. We moved gingerly upfield, then were pinged for taking Andy Gillet off and putting on Dan Hodge without properly informing the ref. We turned the ball over and moved upfield once more. Then after some nice phases of play, punctuated by Bromyard injuries and momentum sapping breaks, we had a penalty ten yards out. We ran a set piece and despite a slight fumble from Rowie, Thorpey took the ball to the line and it was quickly recycled to allow Jonny Simons to touch down. The final ten minutes saw the 30-20 score unchanged despite us having to play without Moule (blood injury) and Tom Robinson (yellow card). Tom saw Gary go off and looking round at his team-mates took it upon himself to be the man who enters rucks from the side, but unfortunately Tom is not used to such tactics and performed a beautiful side entry in front of the referee who felt that this warranted a rest for the wise old prop.

So there we are. A very long way to travel for a game of rugby but a good team to play and one we know we can beat at home.....if only we can keep the penalty count down. It may not be the Wizard of Oz because we showed brains, courage, and heart; but that's no surprise. We are from Barton, and Barton's not in Kansas.

***Home record 100%***

***Barton 36 - 19 Bishops Castle*** *- 29th September 2012*

**Indiscipline, Frustration and a 5 Point Win !!!!!**

 What did we know about today before kick off?

 -        Bishop’s Castle have never beaten us.

-         Bishop’s Castle have never scored a point against us.

-         We need to maintain our discipline and be patient and if we do, we will see enough ball to win the game.

On today’s showing there is much to learn to get to where we need to be.

As it happens we won 36 – 19.

* Wooly scored one try.
* Blokko scored 2 tries.
* Shummy scored 2 tries.
* Birdy kicked 11 points.

We should have scored many more but some of our players need to learn when to pass.

So what do we know after this match?

-         Bishop’s Castle have never beaten us.

-         Bishop’s Castle have scored 19 points against us.

-         We need to maintain our discipline and be patient and if we do, we will see enough ball to win games.

-         Our forwards need to learn how to play rucking rugby when they don’t have the ball.

-         Our forwards need to learn how to maul and defend a maul.

-         Our backs need to learn how to pass and when to pass.

-         I need to keep my trap shut on the touch line.

Oh, nearly forgot, the music festival was great.

***Cup competition ends early***

***Manor Park 32 - 12 Barton*** *- 22nd September 2012*

**SLOW START COSTS BARTON !!!!!!!**

Barton lost today but were not defeated in a spirited team performance showing unity and pride. What does this mean exactly?

 Defeated – beaten or overcome.

 Spirited – full of or characterised by animation, vigour or courage.

 Team – to harness or join together.

 Performance - The act or style of performing a work or role before an audience.

 Unity - the act, state, or quality of forming a whole from separate parts.

 Pride - A sense of one's own proper dignity or value; self-respect.

I could stop there, but only those present on the day would understand. And whilst today was all about those that were present, those that weren’t need to know what happened in Nuneaton, Warwickshire on Saturday 22nd September 2012.

Why?

Because this day will be a defining moment, not only in Barton’s season, but in Barton’s future. Read on……….

With 3 of last week’s tight 5 unavailable and only 15 players here today, it was going to be a testing day in the forwards, or so it seemed. Gary Moule and Dean Palphreyman came in from the seconds to play loose head and hooker respectively, whilst young Richard Welch stepped up from the bench to start at lock alongside Mat Turner. Matt Bloxham started at 7 and James Thorpe switched to blind side to cover for the unavailable Rob Smith, skipper Jonny Simons starting at No 8.

Manor Park kicked off and Barton worked the ball up the field before knocking on and giving away a scrum. As the teams prepared for the set, Barton looked technically better than the week before when they had been pushed all over the park by Cannock.

The ball was fed and Barton pushed their bigger rivals backwards leaving their 8 no option but to pick and go, gaining good ground and when tackled Barton conceded a penalty for not rolling away.

Manor Park 3 Barton 0

Park gained possession from the restart and seemed to have 2 or 3 options available for the ball carrier. Barton missed first up tackles and when the Park 8 looked like scoring Adam Dixon brought him down with a covering tackle just before the line. Penalty to Barton for holding on and the lines were cleared.

The Barton lineout looked impressive early on and won quick ball but Matt Bird knocked on at 10 and from the scrum the Barton pack won turnover ball and went blind with a two on one opportunity. The ref missed the advantage and pinged the Park flanker for releasing his binding.

Barton again won clean lineout ball but Birdy knocked on again from the quick ball and we were looking frustrated.

From the next play Barton gave away a penalty for offside and the Park 9 showed some skill with the boot to convert.

Manor Park 6 Barton 0

From the restart Manor Park again worked the ball up field with good support play and were looking dangerous every time they had possession. Their number 8 was running the show and took a ball on the crash to score the first try of the day after 10 minutes.

Manor Park 13 Barton 0

The referee then gave a series of penalties against Barton for high tackles and Park took advantage by gaining territory from the boot of the 9 before putting in their strong running backs to score their second try.

Manor Park 20 Barton 0

With 15 minutes gone, Barton were trailing by 20 and Manor Park had scored with every phase of possession. They seemed to have more time on the ball, more options, and were applying more defensive pressure when Barton had ball in hand.

Barton then started to take control of possession and from a high kick; Dixon took the ball on before setting, only for Park to kill it. Jonathan Higgins took a quick tap and gained good ground before feeding Blokko, who in turn sent Birdy into space to feed Dave Palin who put in Martin Woolston.

Park managed to turn the ball over but were forced into touch for a Barton lineout 15 metres out.

Good ball was won and fed to Birdy just inside the Park 22 in midfield but he uncharacteristically kicked the ball and possession away.

Barton were now dominant and time after time won scrum, lineout and gained chances through good running in open play. We had 3 opportunities to score in 15 minutes but knocked on each time with the try line beckoning. It didn’t stop though and Jonny Simons was having an immense game carrying ball after ball before Quidditch took it on to set up his backs.

Jamie Maxwell was showing his experience in decision making and Dave Palin, with his first start at centre was proving to be difficult to contain. Wooly and Shummy had opportunities but it just wasn’t breaking for them and Dixon ran back ball and supported the attacking line from full back.

Manor Park were starting to look tired and agitated and their only tactic was to slow things down at the breakdown, which the ref spotted and penalised them for it but had left his cards in the changing room. Their other tactic was to go down injured to break up play, but then who can blame them when comparing Hawkeye to their Physio.

Half Time – Manor Park 20 Barton 0

Daniel Hodgkinson arrived at half time and Palph was asked to give 10 more minutes whilst Dodge warmed up. Then Mat Turner, who had shown huge power in the engine room today, came off with ligament damage to his knee and Dodge went in at lock.

Palph, Moule and Tom Rob had been awesome in the first half and continued their form into the second. Rich Welch was showing how much he has improved in the last 12 months and will be a real asset to this Club in years to come.

Barton continued to dominate and Blokko and Thorpey resorted to type, never missing tackles and gaining ground with ball in hand.

Still we couldn’t score and still we knocked on and seemed to be rushing things.

Then Park had a period of ten minutes where they controlled the game in the forwards as our boys started to tire. Their strong backs broke through and it was two against one with the try line beckoning as Dixon tackled the ball carrier forcing a knock on.

Shummy got injured and we were down to 14 men with 30 minutes to go, but still Barton looked the better team and when Blokko took a quick tap penalty he sent Jamie into space, who put Woolly in to score under the posts.

Manor Park 20 Barton 7

There was only one team in it now but we still couldn’t get the breaks needed and then against the run of play the Park 8 looked certain to score before being thwarted again by Dixon 10 metres out.

Park then scored a soft try as Barton’s tired legs began to show and they fell off the tackle.

Manor Park 27 Barton 7

Quidditch was everywhere and revealing his unrivalled passion and leadership and showing a mature head for one so young (when he is sober).

He put Birdy into space who saw the gap and made 20 metres before feeding Blokko to score in the corner.

Manor Park 27 Barton 12

Park scored a late try in the final move of the game to take them through to round 2 and good luck to them.

Final Score – Manor Park 32 Barton 12

As the Barton players left the field, Manor Park showed their respect in the tunnel by singing Mouuullleee; Mouuullleee; Mouuullleee !!!!!

This performance was phenomenal. Barton had only 15 players and dominated for 55 minutes, 20 of which were with only 14 men. Words cannot describe just how phenomenal but the lads who played today know how good it was and how good it will be again. Those that were not available, for whatever reason will need to fight hard to win back shirts and that can only be good for the future of this Club. Selectors need to heed this.

Manor Park were well organised, had a strong running set of backs, a very good attacking full back and strong supporting back row. They also were well organised and quick up in defence and we wish them well for the season.

Actually, Manor Park sound very much like Barton, so what was the difference?

Barton’s backs are formidable but in attack we knocked on too often and seemed to have little time, so rushed things when in possession.

In comparison, Manor Park appeared to have time on the ball and support runners giving options to the ball carrier.

So let’s take a look at Barton in attack and this sequence of pictures shows that whilst we start running at pace, we appear too flat and passes are therefore made either to players or behind players rather than in front of players for them to run on to.

This makes it difficult for the ball receiver and leads to poor handling whilst making it easier for the opposition to defend.

In defence, we were slow out of the blocks and waited for the opposition to come onto us, allowing them to create options for the ball carrier.

This is no criticism, just an observation. Our backs are as good as any and better than most. They are skilful and have good hands. A little tweaking in training and no one will live with them.

**Man of the Match**

Moule and Palph were immense; Jonny Simons excelled; Blokko tackled his heart out; Bergamasco had another good performance; Sarah shined but for me there was only one winner of this accolade this week.

Quidditch was head and shoulders above anyone on the pitch today !!!!!!

***The season commences***

***Cannock 30 - 17 Barton*** *- 15th September 2012*

**Barton Open with a Fabio Less Performance !!!!!**

The last meeting Barton had with their local rivals had resulted in a 25 to nil victory in the Owen Cup final in May, marking a second final victory on the trot against their adversaries. Cannock were out of character on that day and Barton dominated every aspect of the game in which the score line didn’t truly represent their domination.

Much has happened since this last encounter with Bradley Wiggins winning a first Tour De France for GB, the fantastic performance of Team GB in the Olympics and Andy Murray gaining a US Open Tennis Crown.

The retirement of Lee Coton due to injury, to join the Barton coaching team and the emigration of our skipper, Matt ‘Fabio’ Cox, to Canadia, would undoubtedly leave a massive void in our ranks. However, in today’s 18 man squad we had 4 new recruits making their Barton debuts in Dave Cleary, Adam ‘Bergamasco’ Dixon, Mat Turner and Dan Hodgkinson.

Barton have never won at Cannock but looked up for it more in the pre match warm up however, in the early stages of the game they struggled for any possession as the Cannock forwards dominated and Barton found themselves defending intensely.

The set piece was to prove vital and any possession that Barton gained from the scrum was always on the back foot, preventing quick ball and allowing Cannock to close down any attacking force from the dangerous Barton backs.

Barton seemed to lack in technique at the scrum and seemed to be struggling with the new laws whereas Cannock had clearly worked hard to master the changes in law.

Cannock won scrum after scrum against the head and whilst they were a bigger pack, they showed some skill in the fringes also and gained their ground well, providing a platform for a fly half who has a decent kicking game but struggles on the back foot when put under pressure.

Despite the amount of possession enjoyed by Cannock, they could not break Barton’s resolute defence and the new midfield partnership of Dixon and Cleary shut out any penetration from a lacklustre Cannock backline.

Resort to type springs to mind as Cannock won a penalty and kicked for the corner to set up a catch and drive from the resulting lineout for the first try of the day.

**Cannock 5 Barton 0**

Pre season work had paid off for Barton as they maintained a strong defensive formation and were quick in support at the breakdown however, a mixture of the official’s misinterpretation of the laws at the breakdown (bless him, he’s from Rugeley), and over eagerness, led to a penalty 20 metres out, which was converted.

**Cannock 8 Barton 0**

Barton, whilst strong in defence, frustrated with ball in hand and struggled to gain any momentum as frustrations grew and patience lacked.

Another penalty given away, another kick to the corner, another catch and drive and a converted try later, Barton were trailing by 15 points.

**Cannock 15 Barton 0**

Well the sun was shining and so did Matt Bird at fly half but choose what Barton tried in attack, it just didn’t come off and then we won a penalty 40 metres out. Birdy left it short but we were starting to get into the game.

Barton started to get some phases of play together and confidence started to grow. Then with 10 minutes before half time Birdy switched and went blind off the back of a scrum, beating two defenders before putting in Martin Woolston to finish in the corner. This was exquisite rugby, which no team could defend against despite Birdy being a yard slower than previous seasons.

**Cannock 15 Barton 5**

Another penalty given away, another kick to the corner, another catch and drive and another …… ‘yawn’ …… try to Cannock. Boring, one dimensional, but to their due, they play to their strengths and it proves to be effective.

**Half Time – Cannock 20 Barton 5**

So, with 3 tries conceded to catch and drives, there was no other way Cannock were going to score, unless by error on Barton’s part. Cannock deserved their lead due to their dominance in the forwards, but it does bring into question the decision not to compete at their lineout.

Barton competed better in the second half, saw more ball, had better platforms, scrummaged better (just), won their own ball at lineout, but rushed things and made too many unforced errors.

Cannock scored again when the ball shot out of the back of a Barton scrum that was going backwards fast and their player reacted quickest to grubber through and fall on the ball.

**Cannock 27 Barton 5**

The game seemed up and then suddenly Barton made their way up field following good phase work and Rowe found himself in midfield, ball in hand. ‘Don’t Kick It’ some unknowledgeable fool on the touchline shouted. Rowe chipped over the defensive line to put Wooly in for his second try of the day and it was game on again.

**Cannock 27 Barton 10**

Now it was Cannock’s turn to get frustrated and as they worked down the right flank there was some indiscretion and a sin binning for one of the home players.

Soon after this the Cannock scrum half passed from a maul but Birdy anticipated the move and intercepted, breaking 2 tackles before running forty metres, standing up the normally reliable full back and scoring his first try of the season before converting.

**Cannock 27 Barton 17**

Barton now had the ascendency and kept working well up the hill. Quidditch and Jonny Simons had played well under difficult circumstances today and now they started to penetrate and set up front foot ball. Shummy had seen little ball all day but started to gain ground and the back row of Pow Pow and Thorpey, who had worked tirelessly began to carry hard and straight.

Mat Turner at lock took the ball on, Rich Welch cleared out and the front row of Tom Rob, Bayles and Huddy supported and took it on again, the ball was spread, Dixon broke the gain line but his pass was intercepted 15 metres out by a player standing 5 metres offside. No whistle. Some things never change.

Again Barton came back at Cannock after Cliffy had ripped the ball from Cannock’s possession. Dan Hodgkinson was having a fine debut and supported play as it moved up the left wing. Barton broke though and Cleary was tackled 15 metres out. Cannock came in from the side, and then killed the ball. Jonny Simons drove them off and they were there for the taking. PING!!!!! Penalty to Cannock for not rolling away…….GRRRRRR!!!!

From the resulting play Barton conceded another penalty for being too young, fit, good looking, posh and trying to play quick flowing fast entertaining rugby, which tires unfit referees out. This was duly converted.

**Final Score Cannock 30 Barton 17**

Cannock played to their strengths today and deserved their victory, so well done to them and we look forward to welcoming them to Barton later in the season.

Barton can take a lot out of today but must work on their set piece. Maybe a call to Clive Chapman is needed to iron out the new laws at the scrum.

Next week is Cup week with a journey to Manor Park.

**Man of the Match – Matt Bird**

Quidditch was an inspirational leader; on his debut Bergamasco was flawless in both defence and attack; Woolly scored two good tries; but for me, Birdy won the day!!!!!!!!