

# THREE MINUTES TO EIGHT

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Nowadays, I get out of bed at three minutes to eight. From half past six, I will have lain there quietly, listening – with the volume turned well down – to James Naughtie and John Humphrys as they try to get politicians to answer their questions. Come three minutes to eight, I realise that I do not want to hear yet another weather forecast and get up.

In one of the most striking passages in *The Death of Gentlemanly Capitalism* (Penguin paperback: £8.99), Philip Augar points out that “The earliest train of the day in 1986, the 07.15am, left Haslemere for Waterloo at about the time the next generation of commuters would be starting work”. That passage brought home to me that nowadays I get out of bed later than when I got into work during my working days. If truth be told, I have always been a morning person, with my most creative period occurring before nine o’clock in the morning, but steadily sinking into imbecility after three o’clock in the afternoon. The pity was that there was no one around to see me during my most creative period.

My son, who does not seem to have inherited my early morning genes, struggled at first when he recently joined a US investment bank. He writes software, an occupation that I would class firmly as a backroom activity. Instead, he was given a desk off the trading floor, and found to his horror that the trading floor started work around 7am. Soon, his desk was moved into a backroom, and the pressure was removed for him to get in early for the conference call from Tokyo. On the other hand, he claims to have once worked all through the night, hunting down bugs on the latest software release, (although I suspect that he curled up beneath his desk and went to sleep at three in the morning).

As we must have totally different genes, I could never make a claim to have worked through the night. Correction. I once worked through the night at the Rumbley. I think this must have been at our year-end, when interest was credited to our savers on their annual statements. The savers would wait for the postman to arrive, and then run down to the nearest branch and join the long queue to withdraw their interest. If the annual statement arrived late, the savers would batter at the windows.

Whereas the Halifax would be able to produce gillions and gillions of statements a millisecond, all sorted by postcode, the Rumbley printer could only chug along like a two-stroke lawnmower engine and took all night to complete the print run.

We were already a day late in sending out the statements and our data processing manager had not slept for the previous two nights while he had been trying to track down some little glitches in the program that controlled the statement printing. (The last glitch was something very minor, like needing to put the postcode after the name of the town, rather than on the line below, else the full address would not fit in the window of the envelope and the selfish investors might complain).

He was swaying with exhaustion and, ever the person who cared, I volunteered to stay the night while the statements were printed. “What will I actually do?” I asked. “Do nothing at all,” came the reply. “You will get a nasty rash if you try to access the programs or the database, and you will get an electric shock if you try to touch the CPU. Just sit there but I would be very grateful if you would change the stationery when it runs out.”

This task did not seem very difficult. There was a box of multi-part stationery in place beneath the printer, and another box in the corner of the room. The first box would last until around four in the morning, at which point I was instructed to move the second box into position, fix the last sheet from the old box with sticky tape onto the first sheet from the new box, and go back to my chair and listen to the printer chugging away. I practised the sticky tape trick several times and bravely told the data processing manager: “No sweat. Don’t worry. I can do it. Now go home and get some sleep.”

The office grew colder and colder, and I had used up my supply of tea-bags and finished my paperback by three in the morning. The printer continued to go THUMPA THUMPA (a reassuring sound, but CHUGGA CHUGGA would signal trouble), and the clock moved round to 10 to four.

I jumped into action, moved the replacement box into position, and found the start of the roll of sticky tape. Then, the printer stopped stone dead. Stone dead, not a whine, not a whimper. I am not a technical man, and I could do no more than wait for the data processing manager to arrive, fighting his way through the crowd of disappointed savers storming the doors.

If you are interested in what happened next, I can tell you that the data processing manager stayed awake on the following night with an oil-can in his hand, and the statements were sent out very late. Myself, I went home to get some sleep.

Alright. Alright. I agree that reading a paperback and making myself cups of tea does not count as working all night, but for a morning person it was a supreme effort. **JF**