

Hunters' Tales

Pablo's Armchair Treasure Hunt 2017

Immediately following the publication of the poster, with its depictions and allusions of Messier, Messi, and Messiaen, some teams were already speculating on Messing as the treasure location (and even on Conyfield Wood). We had joked in advance that this might be the shortest Hunt on record, teams waiting for us in the wood when we came to plant the treasure box. In fact the first recorded trip to the wood came three days into the Hunt, and a steady trickle of visits turned into a positive torrent towards the end (with nine teams reporting a trip in the final two days).

Altogether there were 29 reported visits to Messing, including seven teams making the journey twice (all successfully). Some highlights from these reports follow.

Early Visits: 17th-19th December

The first two teams to the treasure, **Psychologicals** and **Alcoholus Lubricatum**, each found it on the 19th December, only four days into the Hunt, yet each already on their second trip! The **Psychologicals** report that on the 17th:

Nick (and Mary) make first visit to Messing. Find locations of the first 6 blue-edged pictures on route into Conyfield Wood. Notice the fallen tree and lots of bird boxes in the trees around the pond. Nick even searches the fallen tree, but misses finding the box!

Similarly, **Alcoholus Lubricatum** on the 18th:



A little further beyond that pond is a fallen tree and then a further pond beyond that. There are many trees, lots of clefts and no success this time. Gut feeling is that with the previous instructions being 20-30 meters distance was that whatever we are being told in the 7th blue boarded card would leave us close to this pond

Each team persisted, and they both returned on the 19th to claim the first and second cards.



The Festive Lull

Following that early rush, there were a few more visits in late December. One of the **OWLs** made the trip on Christmas Eve, noting:

There is also a magnificent fallen tree here. I've searched it really thoroughly - nothing!

(and, along with several other teams during the Hunt, finding a geo-cache concealed in another tree). The **Cachew Nuts** on the 27th nearly missed the treasure due to a wild pine chase:

But at this point one of B's sillier ideas nearly derailed the mission. He was convinced that "Another Fine Mess" was a clue, via Laurel and Hardy, to "the trail of the Lonesome Pine" especially as the penultimate River Mess card had PINE prominently at the top. We walked on, for 50 yards or so, to find... an avenue of pine trees crossing the path. "Got to be right," we said (stupidly!). And for the next two hours we searched the pine trees and found a footpath leading off it with orange markers on the trees. A clear trail... but it led nowhere. By this time the snow was falling and in near white-out conditions we crossed and re-crossed the "lonesome pine" trail, even, in desperation, investigating a dog poo bag hanging in a tree!! Well the message did say PICK UP MESS!



Increasingly despondent at the prospect of a four-hour journey back home with nothing to show for it, B investigated every tree he could find, including one in the middle of a particularly vicious swathe of brambles. Finally, he retraced his steps back to the blue tree protector and the pond and then investigated a fallen tree halfway between the two ponds. He'd already looked there but not very thoroughly. This time, he put his hand into a stagnant and very cold puddle of water in the "TREE CLEFT", wiggled something he found there... and it rattled. Heart thumping, he drew it out and then shouted to the others. Never has a found geocache given so much relief!

Beef Leamington made two visits on consecutive days, using (as we had hoped some team might) experience of the site to inform their progress with the puzzle:

Having not solved 'in a fallen tree', but having solved 'in a tree cleft' at that point we looked in various tree clefts visible from the pond but to no avail, but we did spot the fallen tree as a noticeable landmark. We returned home after lunch at The Old Crown, and managed to solve 'in a fallen tree' that evening, partly prompted by seeing the fallen tree. We returned the next day, 29 December and found the treasure very quickly, securing the fourth card. After a second lunch at The Old Crown we returned home (we did book a table that day).

The old year was rounded out with a successful trip by **Apopheniacs Anonymous**:

Appropriately enough then that we should retrieve Treasure Object M5 from the cleft in a fallen tree at Coneyfield Wood, Messing, at approximately 11:30am on the morning of New's Year Eve, leaving ample time to get a table for a splendidly palatable roast lunch at the nearby Old Crown, not to mention plenty of time for New Year celebrations later in the evening. [...] We had also via the miracle of Google Streetmap eliminated many of the public footpath signs around Messing, leaving the one

north of Coneyfield Wood as a prime candidate. Our sequence of wintry blue card photos did the rest, and we alighted on our fallen tree. Bereft of our cleft pointer, we briefly searched in vain. But finding a sort of split half way along the fallen tree, a beautiful chorus suddenly emerged from the numbered bird boxes in the trees above us that sounded not a little dissimilar to the fifth piece of Messiaen's *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*, and we felt sure that we had hit exactly the right note!

The New Year

One member of the **Tim Tam Slammers**:

[...] by coincidence, spent New Year's day near Messing. As there are only two places in England starting with Mess..., and as one of the hexagons was of nearby Inworth, she decided to have a look. The Messing coat of arms confirmed that she was in the right place and she even found all pictures from the cards with the blue borders. In the end, she stood within one metre of the treasure, but without the "in a tree cleft" clue didn't know what to look for.

On the same day, two of the **Pathfinders**, with a speculated "POST THEN TREE" clue:

[...] made the trip up to Messing on New Year's Day. The pictorial directions worked perfectly – starting with the strange wagon-wheel/wreath decoration that had eluded us on Google Earth. (The owner said Mitch was the fourth person she'd seen photographing it!). However at the pond, POST THEN TREE, didn't make sense, and the trail went cold. After a discussion with Matt (at that point staying with friends on the outskirts of Paris – sadly no visit to Saint Chapelle, Musee de Cluny or Sainte Trinite this time!) we decided that TH could be LL, meaning it could say something like BY FALLEN TREE. There was indeed a prominent fallen tree, but despite extensive searching, and without the confidence in this clue, we came away empty-handed, convinced there must be additional directions hidden in the remaining codes.

(the Pathfinders later solved the remaining clues, made a correct virtual claim, and submitted the best overall solution).

Two days later, this dry patch in finds was extended by the **Dave Kee Team**, who may have been the first team to visit the site who did not ultimately go on to find the treasure:

We identified all the pictures to the frozen pond but there we ran out of steam. We had a sortie, before the pub and after, and raked a lot of leaves but no luck (or love).

Two weeks left of the Hunt, and only five successful finds! Things would soon turn around....

First weekend of January, 6th-8th

On the following Saturday, 6th January, the **Rookies** took a trip to Messing (despite being quite determined, early in the Hunt, that the treasure must be in Blackmore or Ingatestone). Without all the clues:

We found the blue post etc from the pictures, so we knew we were in the right place, and we had a look around the roots of the right fallen tree, but to no avail.

Also on that day, three teams with rather better luck met in the wood. Here's the **Strange Brotherhood's** account:

As we parked the car, we saw what looked suspiciously like another team of hunters; we lost sight of them while we were kitting up, but on following the route we had deduced to the treasure site (and identifying the landmarks), we met them again in the vicinity of the pond. After a few minutes of studiously ignoring each other, we decided to introduce ourselves, and were somewhat encouraged to hear that they also hadn't solved ADD SENDER TO STAMP, but were discouraged by hearing that they had visited the site a week ago, searched every tree, and found nothing...

We decided to poke around anyway, but 90 minutes search of the area revealed nothing. The large fallen tree looked inviting, but was being searched by the other team, so we ignored it and searched the rest of the site. The other team went for lunch, but we carried on.



I was looking at the trees on the small island in the larger pond and trying to work out if I would be able to cross the fallen trees which led across the water to reach them. As I uncertainly put one foot on them, I radioed my hunting partner to ask if she had by any chance already searched the island, to be told that she had searched the fallen tree again and found the treasure, thus saving me from an almost-certain wetting reminiscent of that experienced by a certain stuffed kangaroo...

The team they met were the **OWLs**, hoping to do better than their solo visit on Christmas Eve:



Rather awkwardly, as we were walking into the woods, a couple of people were also walking up the same path and we realised they were holding ATH printouts. We congregated by the pond, so we introduced ourselves and I explained I had been before, but not found the treasure. It was really nice to meet some other people who've been going through the same processes as we have, and we were all careful enough not to divulge key info to each other, while managing

to establish that we were more or less in the same position in relation to finding the treasure - one clue short!

Since I felt that I had focused so hard on the area behind the pond, previously, we took ourselves up to the 'crossroads' paths and did a thorough search around there. We came back to the bird copse area via the back path - noting on the way that the (probably geocached) camera had now disappeared from underneath the interesting tree! We exchanged some updates on our lack of success with the other team, who had covered much of the same searching that I had, previously, and after checking out the area by the bigger pond we had to go back to the village for lunch. It seemed likely the other team would strike lucky while we were gone, but that was okay - we were cold and hungry and would have time to come back after lunch.

The Old Crown's food really is palatable, so after a fantastic meal we set off again - passing the other team by the front door of the pub! They had found ticket #6, which was great news, so after swapping a few more anecdotes about our shared experiences of doing the ATH, and some encouragement from them, we set off again. We turned left at the stile to shortcut up to the pond, and Rachel wanted to check out the fallen tree. I knew I'd already checked it really thoroughly but it was so distinctive that going over it again was definitely a good idea. Within five seconds, Oscar spotted the white tupperware box in the deep, water-filled cleft along the main trunk! I had poked into that cleft with a sturdy stick previously - I remembered all the sludge and water inside it, but I obviously hadn't got right down low and used my eyes, which was really frustrating. But hindsight is a wonderful thing :-) Don't rely on feeling for something with a stick!

Rachel and Oscar opened the little box to find a lovely pack of cards, with backs printed up with the poster design, and each face showing a different Messier object. We took Messier object #7, Ptolemy Cluster, looked through the rest of the contents, and took a few photos. As we hotfooted it out of the woods, we passed a family with two excited kids just entering by the stile. Rachel said: "They're holding ATH printouts!" so we called out "Good luck!" and got some smiles in return.

That family group were **No Management Potential**. They were one of two teams to find the treasure with neither of the final clues (IN A TREE CLEFT and IN FALLEN TREE), but perhaps their four-year-old child could be considered an unfair advantage. Their bittersweet tale—of frustration, redemption, and triumph—wins this year's *Best Hunters' Tale* prize, and is reproduced here in full:

Another Fine Mess

With all clues pointing to Messing in Essex, and a confident sequence of pictures to follow, I headed down for a treasure hunt with my wife and young boys about lunchtime on Saturday January 6.

We did however spot a couple going to have lunch in the pub that The Reverend B confidently identified as "clearly more treasure hunters", but they didn't look happy so perhaps they too were barking up the same wrong tree. Still, a good session on the slide and swings by the village hall and sandwiches in the car fortified the boys for the hunt ahead and we headed down to School Lane. Even an encounter with Bushes Sr & Jr in the church didn't dampen our spirits.

Parking near the church, alongside the village sign replete with now-familiar crest, we looked around the church, village hall and pub for signs of the wheel. Alas nothing but the village sign dumped unceremoniously round the back of the hall ever since those upstarts from Wickham Bishops took the Best Kept Village title. Or perhaps an attempt by the setters to stop our spotting the link with the Essex crest. Devious...

The Hunt

On the right of School Lane is a row of raised cottages called Osborne Cottages and we were happy to report that the occupant of Number 15 had erected a wheel to the left of her door since the Google StreetView car last visited. Sadly though, our visit came a mere 12 hours after Twelfth Night, meaning no festive greeting in the form of a wreath.

*Round the corner, a distinctive footpath sign beckoned us to go for a walk in the woods, though the **stile** at the entrance of Conyfield Wood was less welcoming in its state of repair. At this point a trio whom we had spotted while we sandwiched in the car emerged from the wood, with their intrigue at our attention to the stile an immediate giveaway to their reason for visit, and their greeting of "good*

luck" an even clearer sign. Still they can't have been in the woods more than fifteen minutes so I asked if they'd "already been", to which one responded that it was their second visit.

An unusual tree was a mere 10 metres further along the main path, and from there it was straight ahead to a blue pole where it met the next path, 50 metres along. Turning left took us to a pond, a mere 20 metres or so further and, though no longer frozen, the stick sticking out of the water, moss, and trees behind allowed sure identification. So far so good.

Going round in circles

So was the treasure close or would the remaining pair of rectangles on the puzzle be essential in narrowing our search? We started behind the pond, alongside a larger pond with surrounding earth banks. Here were a surprising number of bird boxes in trees, hanging bird feeders and the like. Was one of the boxes fake? Several were at head height, and a couple at ground level, but all proved to be treasure-free. From there we looked in vain, heading ever further south-east until we were much of the way to the road. The wood is replete with an unusual number of anomalous items that attracted our attention, very few of which I ever encounter in my sylvan orienteering, but each of which raised our hopes briefly; some impressive metre-high piles of twigs, some even larger piles of coniferous branches, an unusual animal box, an even more oddly-shaped bird box, and a momentarily encouraging bit of plastic strapped to a tree. We were clearly far off the scent so turned back north again, with The Reverend B taking the eastern perimeter while I took an unmarked path back to the large pond. We were back where we'd first started looking.

Success!

"Where will it be?" asked my four-year-old. "Well, I suppose they'd hide it off the ground as there was snow when they brought it", I responded, "in a tree, but not too high maybe". "Like this, Daddy?" he said, pointing to a substantial fallen tree. To oblige, I had a look in its obscured nooks, and bending down to a water-filled branch a couple of feet off the ground I spotted a plastic box well-hidden within. **Eureka!** Time 14:41 GMT, 40 minutes after reaching the wood.

Beyond the final card was an extra piece of paper advertising **Apopheniacs Anonymous**, complete with Rorschach image. Given my Only Connect history and ill-founded attempts to see stellar patterns in messy tea stains I will be giving them a call soon.



Inside, the word "Congratulations" confirmed our find. Evidently the 8th team there, **The Lagoon Nebula** became a metaphor for our murky search. Still, the boys were both delighted, but rightly amazed that we'd found it, brandishing the professionally made *Eight of Spades* that makes a permanent souvenir. The cards don't extend to M110, stopping instead at M52, just one higher than my childhood favourite Messier Object, the Whirlpool Galaxy, but 51 higher than the great Crab Nebula, that may just have been ours had we followed our hunch on that first weekend back in December.

So back towards the village. Unfortunately, the revelation to my four-year-old that there was no more treasure to find brought tears, a fitting expression of the emotions of many a treasure hunter once the hunt has finally thrown up its bounty.

The following day, Sunday 7th, saw **Daphne HQ** make a less-than-completely-fruitful trip:

Went into the Church and found the treasure chest, a Tree of Life carving, and stained glass windows, including one dedicated to Saint Cecilia, the patron Saint of Musicians and the subject of a poem by Alexander Pope (whose verse had helped us earlier)

Having turned out of the Church, I passed the Round Window, readily found the footpath sign and followed it past the former stile, the forked tree, reaching the blue post I turned to the pond. I think I walked on to the area thick with bird boxes and feeders, and then started to hunt. Without success. I still thought that treasure was buried. After a couple of hours I gave up, having sat on the fallen tree to have a drink, and having dug around its roots. It was the place I thought would be obvious to hide something - I was just looking in the wrong part of it. I also looked in bird boxes, that weird rabbit hutch thing - generally all over. I also got lots of odd looks from dog walkers as I ferreted around in leaf litter. Downhearted, I stomped at considerable pace back to the station, not even having time to grab a pint at The Old Crown. On the plus side I did see two lovely Shetland Ponies!

Never mind, he would return within a week.

On Monday 8th, **Team Norway** went to Messing, trusting to fortune. Any treasure hunter who has come this close will sympathise with the frustration they express:

The only mistake that we know we made was to go down that path beside the blue post, deep into the wood, instead of carrying on the main path. It also took a little while to work out exactly where your picture of the pond had been taken from, but we think we found it.

We had no detailed instructions for finding the treasure, but we had been encouraged by your message on 1st January, suggesting that it was possible to "strike it lucky". We know that other teams have successfully done this in the past.

Well, we didn't. No luck. Zilch. Zippo. Never found anything. No treasure. Nada.

We spent well over an hour combing the area, but never found anything. We were assuming that the treasure was somewhere near that pond. If we had gone further down the main path, past the pond, then pretty soon there is a crossroads, and you would have needed to supply another direction. (Maybe you did, on the two cards which we haven't deciphered.)

We checked on the other side of the path, opposite from the pond. But we concentrated on the area around and beyond the pond in the picture.

As you'll know, beyond it is another pond, and between them is a spectacular, large fallen tree. That's probably where we would have hidden the treasure - especially when we saw that, standing beside it, we could see the tower of the church in which the hexagon 65 treasure lies. There is also a clearing with lots of bird feeders and bird boxes, and a very large heap of branches on the ground in the middle. We did have a look in the bird feeders that we could reach. The bird boxes were all too high.

We had a poke around the heap of branches, but it looked as though it had been deliberately set up to provide a habitat for wildlife, and we didn't want to disturb anything that was hibernating, so we really hope you didn't put the treasure there.

We were looking for a mark on a tree – not the Logica 'L' from old days, but maybe a 'P' for Pablo – but we never saw anything. We'd noticed earlier – when we were lost - that many of the trees had orange lines or dots painted on them, so we discounted those when we saw them.

We had a good poke around – literally, using branches to poke into all the nooks and crevices – but never found anything. We feel that we have been within feet of the treasure :(

... which of course they had.

The final few days: January 11th to 14th

The **Chiltern Fellowship** tried their luck on Thursday January 11th, possibly hoping to steal a march on weekend Hunters:

We deduced that the PINE PORTER card with its bird theme is indicating the group of bird feeders in the tree by the pond as the start of the final step noting that PINE PORTER is an anagram of TRIP OPENER. We also note the nearby messy pile (very appropriate!).

Using the ADD STAMP TO SENDER direction re the postcards, we have further decoded the associated message as IN FALLEN TREE. However we searched thoroughly in and around the large fallen tree which lies immediately between the pond and the tree with the bird feeders [...] and did not find the treasure there.

After that site visit, we have further decoded the postcard information to obtain the additional message BEECH BEARS L(ogica)L and take this to be a hint to look for a Logica L painted on to a beech tree close to the treasure to help locate its precise position. We did not find that L during our site visit.

We presume that the ordered Messier objects or some use of the vectors/celestial positions obtained from deciphering the BE-GERM card on Page 2 are needed for the final steps to the treasure, unless IN FALLEN TREE and BEECH BEARS LL are expected to provide sufficient information.

Although we still consider it possible that the treasure is within the fallen tree which we searched thoroughly (or has been removed from there), we concede that we have not been able to use the information from the BE GERM card fully and so accept that we may not have found the actual treasure site.

When the weekend arrived, so did a rush of Hunters. The **Eh? Team** was there bright and early on the Saturday morning, claiming card number 9.

The **Rookies** made their second visit: having solved some remaining hints, they

could go back to Coneyfield Wood and find the treasure in 30 seconds flat.

They were followed by Kathy and Andrew from the **Puzzle Club**:

Here we met Mark who was already searching. He has taken part in the hunt for 10 years and told us what he was expecting to find. (It turned out he was wrong!) We all searched together for about an hour without success. Mark gave up and left us. Shortly after another team arrived, the Rookies. They went straight up to the tree and found the treasure right away. They took M10 and we took M11. We all celebrated together. We found the treasure at 1.05pm on 13th January.

We think Mark was from the **Stragglers**, who wrote:

Our man on the ground, Mark Horton, used these directions in a valiant effort to find the treasure in Conyfield Wood. Apparently he came very close but he did not find it.



Next came Noel from **Tweleve Pack**:

To the left is the blue post, modeling the latest in treasure accoutrements. If one could hear what the post was thinking at this moment, it would have been, "I survived a treasure hunt and all I got was this messy globular cluster!"

I passed two guys on the way back to the car. They clearly weren't bothered about stealth, because I could hear them discussing the hunt before I could see them. They said hello as they passed, and I replied "it's a bit messy". I'd expected this to trigger a conversation but they obviously thought I was just talking about the mud. They then spent a long time photographing the wooden stile and the distinctive tree. I was tempted to follow them and then run past them as they approached the treasure site, to teach them a lesson about treasure hunting. But it was lunchtime.



We don't know who those "two guys" were: possibly **AfterMATH** or **Roboogle Riddlers**, both of whom visited Messing on dates unknown. The final known visit that day was Andy, from **Les Messieurs**:

Andy was very happy with his find! Treasure ticket number 13 – The Hercules globular cluster! Nebula would be proud!

After that rush, Sunday 14th—the final full day of the Hunt—was surprisingly quiet, with only two recorded visits to the wood, each a second attempt. The **Tim Tam Slammers**, having solved “IN A TREE CLEFT” by this time, and also having come mob-handed, were better equipped than before and apparently had little trouble finding the treasure. Which was good for **Daphne HQ**, who deserve a special mention for understatement, as we’ve highlighted here:



*Returning on the 14th *knowing about looking in a cleft* I headed straight to the pond - no messing. I also made sure I was holding a pointless piece of paper to look, well, less odd. One dog walker asked “Are you orienteering?” “No, I replied, I am on a treasure hunt” “Jolly good!” he exclaimed! I started by doing a broad loop looking at cleft trees before coming back to the pond and heading to the fallen tree. From the woods emerged another group. We fell into friendly conversation, and as we stood by the fallen tree, one pulled the treasure out. **This clearly was a help** - but I am sure I would have found it a few mins later had I been alone! They took card 14, I took 15, then we beat a hasty retreat as it looked like another group was approaching. This time I did make it to The Old Crown for a pint - alas I have no idea if the food was palatable, as I hadn’t booked a table...*

Clearly many teams had an excellent time in Conyfield Wood. Of the 29 reported visits, 15 ended in treasure. Of the others, seven led to subsequent successful visits, and one to a successful virtual claim. So only six teams visited the wood and never found the treasure. Of these, only one (the **Stragglers**) had solved both the clues IN FALLEN TREE and IN A TREE CLEFT, and they fully deserve their Nearest Miss prize (although both **Team Norway** and the **Chiltern Fellowship** also describe thorough searches of the tree—we’re not sure how they missed it).

In any case, we are grateful to all teams for their participation, and especially for these good-humoured Hunters’ Tales.