

Episode 5



The House with Two Numbers

Hello, I'm Richard Winterbottom.

This is Rick's Bite-Sized English, Season Three, Episode Five.

Each week, I tell a short story and then pause to look closely at a word or phrase that's worth noticing and trying out for yourself.

There's a new episode every week. Follow along if you'd like to stay with the series.

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It had been a long, uncomfortable journey and I was relieved when the bus finally drew into the town and stopped at the edge of the main square. I hauled my bags from the luggage rack and stepped into the street. I was the only passenger leaving the bus.

The town was unremarkable, the square a large expanse of concrete, slightly raised in the middle, but with no fountain, no monument, no defining feature. It sloped gently down towards the edges where it was bordered on two sides by

tiny, two-storeyed cottages while on the other two sides it petered out into wasteland.

It was just after midday and there was no one around.

I'd memorised the address I was looking for, but checked again on my phone: 14, Luke Street.

Leading off from one of the corners of the square, Luke Street was a narrow, winding street. I walked past a greengrocers' with baskets of unpolished fruit on the pavement, and a small, general store outside of which stood, arms folded across his heavily stained apron, the burly, unsmiling, proprietor. His gaze followed me as I walked past and crossed over to the even-numbered side.

A large building displayed number 86. It seemed I still had a fairly long walk, but I was pleased to be stretching my legs after several hours cooped up on the bus.

The street was eerily silent and this heightened my sense of not belonging here. Would I be welcomed by the people at number 14?

The silence was broken by a dog. It sounded like a large one, barking, and a little further along I noticed a curtain moving in an upstairs window and a figure retreating into the room.



A quarter of an hour later I came to number 16, the door brightly painted canary-yellow. Next door was a shabby, tired looking house, number 12. In between, nothing.

I walked back as far as number 22, then walked slowly along the street again. I counted, 22, 20, 18, 16, 12, 10. There was no number 14. I'd been sent to a house that didn't exist.

Apart from a large black cat that watched me nonchalantly, there was no one around.

What was I to do? I'd promised to be at the house by early afternoon and in any case I had nowhere else to sleep. I

was considering going back to ask the shopkeeper for directions, when an elderly woman emerged from a house on the odd-side of the street. I explained my dilemma. She smiled, and said, ‘ah, number 14, they call it number 27 these days, it’s up there on the other side just past the pub, ‘The Sunken Moon’. I crossed over and walked up towards the oddly-named tavern.

A group of men were sitting outside The Sunken Moon. They eyed me suspiciously as I walked past. I was aware of how much my appearance marked me as an intruder in these parts. ‘Looking for number 14, are you’?, shouted one of them, an extremely tall man with a strangely trimmed moustache, the left half neat, the right side sprouting a few wild hairs. His companions laughed. ‘Well, as it happens, it’s just down there”, and he pointed to a narrow lane, the entrance to which was full of tall-growing weeds.



The old woman’s directions had seemed more reliable. Could I continue up the street, ignoring what the men had

just told me? The men were looking at me expectantly. The man with the moustache was grinning broadly. I decided to follow their instructions.

I pushed my way through the weeds. Was this just another turn in what was starting to feel like a wild-goose chase? But then, almost at the end of the lane, I saw it. A modest building with two plaques side by side. One read '14'. The other read '27'. Both looked official, as if no one had ever thought to choose between them. I pulled my bag up the steps leading to the door and knocked hard. There was a pause, then the heavy sound of footsteps. Another pause, and a faint voice cried out, 'I'm coming'. The door opened and a tiny and very old woman stood there.

I'd arrived. But at which house?

This happened a long time ago. It wasn't the most auspicious of beginnings to life in the town, a town that, even today, is rarely visited, or even known, by outsiders.

When I travel further afield, which isn't often, I still find it hard to explain where I've come from, or even what kind of place this town really is. Nonetheless, I can't help smiling when I think of my nervy introduction to what has now been my home for so many years.

I never did find out which was the right number, though in the end, it hardly seemed to matter.

Well, as it happens, it's just down there", says one of the men sitting outside the pub.

Why does he use as it happens? The narrator is clearly lost and expects the house to be somewhere else, perhaps much further away.

The man's reply is surprising, not only does he know the place, it turns out to be very close.

'As it happens' signals this element of chance and mild surprise. It suggests that the answer could have been different, but by coincidence it is conveniently nearby.

Here's another example: A friend told me recently that she had been looking for a piano teacher for her eleven year old son. She hadn't been able to find one anywhere. She didn't know it, but she'd spoken by chance to exactly the right person.

'My next door neighbour is a piano teacher, as it happens,' I told her.

Here the element of pure chance makes the use of 'as it happens' particularly appropriate.

Use this as a set phrase when you want to express a small degree of chance or coincidence. You don't need to change the phrase itself, but you can put it at the beginning at the end, or sometimes in the middle of the phrase.

'As it happens, my next door neighbour is a piano teacher,' I told her.

See you next week for episode 6, but in the meantime it would be great to hear from you - why don't you leave a review or a comment, you can do this wherever you listen to the podcast.

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