

# The mystery of the garbage lady

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Last year, my good friend and colleague Sarah transferred from the Redmond offices to Microsoft UK in Reading. One of her most popular lunchtime stories is the mystery of the garbage lady, which she finally got around to posting on her blog. Some of my other favorite stories from her blog:

- That mountain [sic] where they cut down all the trees: How the geography where you grew up clouds your interpretation of geography elsewhere in the world.
- New Schrockmobile: It's a car-eat-car world out there.
- Why are my memories being Britishized?: How moving to England changes your memories of things that happened in the States. How much can we trust our own brains?
- Stampede: What's in your pocket?
- Our backyard: The lovely countryside.

A colleague of mine experienced the phenomenon of clouded geography in reverse. He was temporarily assigned to Microsoft UK and while living there had occasion to drive out to Wales. He pulled out his handy road map and studied it: "Okay, I need to take this highway west, over the mountain range, and then take that exit, and then I'll be there." He hopped in his car and started driving. After a while he started getting nervous. It was getting late, and he still hadn't reached the mountain range yet. He started worrying that the people he was meeting at the destination would be concerned when he failed to show up on time. (I guess he picked up the British habit of worrying about other people being worried.) And then he saw the exit, and boom, he was at his destination. Afterwards, he went back to the map to see what happened. The first issue was one of scale. His map was of all of Great Britain, and he assumed that the scale of such a map was comparable to maps of large areas of the United States. A route that goes halfway across a large map, say a map of the state of Washington, will take a few hours to cover. The UK is comparatively much more compact. From Reading, you can get to the Welsh border in 90 minutes.

The second issue was one of geography. What was notated on the map as a mountain range was, to someone more familiar with the mountains of western North America, just a hill.

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