Trials and Inspirations

Autobiography of
John Myhill
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The names of some people have been changed to protect their anonymity.
Hong Kong Child

Birth

I was born in a tropical thunderstorm, never to be forgotten by the doctor called out to attend my mother. It was reminiscent of the storm outside Wuthering Heights when the ghost of Cathy tries to get in. But it was the spirit of Gandhi that entered my life. The date was September 28, 1948.

We were living in Hong Kong, where my father was headmaster of St Stephen’s College missionary school.

I cannot remember a time when I just experienced events without reflecting upon the experience, but my reflections were determined by what I saw and what I saw in dreams was more powerful than what I saw when awake. What I saw in films and cartoons, and later through books and conversation, was closer to my dreams and thus more influential on my thinking.

Before my memories begin, my father mentions in his diary: “Miss Scott Moncrieff” 12/03/1952. I would not be writing if the Scott Moncrieff (1889-1930) translation of Proust’s (1871-1922) great work had not inspired me. The certainty that one memory will provide another, until we not only understand the characters and their author, but ourselves and our own fulfilment of Being. The detail of a life entirely different from my own provokes parallels in my own experience, revealing subconscious longings and deconstructing symbols and relationships; enabling me to get back to the source of who I am.

Prison

My very first memory is of holding the bars of my metal cot and looking out at the land of freedom beyond. Dad was interned by the Japanese at Stanley Camp, Hong Kong. He never talked about his experience, but others have published accounts of this modest horror. Those years of unjust incarceration began my life-long fascination with control systems and unpalatable containment.

Dad did speak highly of William (Bill) Sewell (1898-1984) the Quaker, and that rare praise led me to pick out the word Quaker, when studying history, which led to some excitement on finding that these strange people were still around and still peculiar.

At the end of the war, dad was dying of dysentery. Even if the Japanese had not carried out their plan to kill all prisoners before accepting defeat, dad would have died if the war had lasted much longer. He was saved, and my birth made possible, by the dropping of the hydrogen bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a teenager I woke many times from a nightmare of nuclear explosion. I entered a Quaker Meeting House (Bull Street, Birmingham) for the first time in order to see the film “The War Game”. It was opposition to nuclear weapons, without which I would not exist, which led me to involvement with Quakers.

Likewise, if my mother’s first husband had not been killed by a landmine, she would not have married my father and I would not exist to campaign against land mines.

Mutilation

Before I can remember I fell over on the veranda and cut my lip on a geranium pot. Throughout childhood I was sensitively aware of the scar. But with puberty it became a sign of manhood, a “Red Badge of Courage”. Similarly when the tip of my little finger was hanging loose, having caught in a door, I was more concerned by the deformity than the pain. How ironic that when the girl I was in
love with proposed that I should be her blood brother, I was unable to cut my own. She cut both with ease, releasing only a token quantity of blood. When a student in sandals, I stood on an upturned library shelf, the metal penetrating deep into my bare heel; the sudden loss of blood caused me to pass out. Yet I have never had a similar sensitivity to the pain or loss of blood of others and found nursing an easy occupation.

The geranium pot was like a second circumcision (an operation still common in the forties and normal within my family). A purification of impure lips. My nursing, on a urology ward, made me aware of the advantages of circumcision. So often I have found a medical value in practices “from God” which must have seemed crazy to people living at the time. Thus the prohibition of pork in the Middle East or beef in India, of sugar, alcohol and tobacco amongst Adventists. In contrast the vanity of “rational” medical science in opposing alternative therapy, struck me as wholly unreasonable given my nursing experience of few cures and much iatrogenic suffering.

**Mad Dogs and Englishman**

They decided that the dog which bit me was not rabid, but gave me a course of penicillin injections, till my four-year-old bottom felt like a pincushion. I have no memory of the dog, but recall the pain and indignity of the treatment, as if it were yesterday (treatment worse than the disease).

The story was reinforced in my mind by a record often played on the wind-up gramophone, of “Mad Dogs and Englishmen”. I played it even after it was cracked. It was the songs of Noel Coward (1899-1973) that inspired my sense of Englishness as a colonial phenomenon. But despite Hong Kong’s mention in the song, despite Hong Kong’s similarity to the anonymous colony in his play “South Sea Bubble”, Noel did not visit until the 1960s, nor did he visit “very flat Norfolk” either. He travelled for pleasure not inspiration and spent most of his life in Jamaica (“No, he went of his own accord”).

**Danny Kaye (1913-1987)**

At the age of five I was taken to see the film “Hans Christian Anderson”. I was enthralled. I was the ugly duckling who would one day become a swan. Only 26 years later, when my daughter reached that age, did I realise that I was at my most irresistible aged five.

Instead I was taken into hospital twice. First for a grumbling appendix, which was left to grumble till I was 14 (unnecessary suffering to enhance my disbelief in medical science), then to remove my tonsils. A child of my parents’ friends had just died of the operation, so they were more worried than I was.

Sucking on ice-cubes after the operation and unable to speak, I was enchanted by the visit of Danny Kaye. My hero said: “de fond ich biery dearie coch; esh quelle de fuery bamba; nish feed und meinen krindan bloch; well dragget el carie conga.” Thus I realised that sound and rhythm are as important in communication as the meaning of words.

When I saw “Walter Mitty” I knew I was not alone. I had a life to live, imaginatively.

**Egg Beach**

School beach was where I learnt to swim, aged four, holding a football under each arm and kicking with my legs; then letting one ball go and swimming with three limbs.

Beyond the cliff edge, where you could walk only at low tide, was a smaller bay, where the rocks had been shaped into eggs by the tide. It was a magic place, like the “Secret Garden”, because it was ours alone and so I have visited it in waking imagination and sleeping dreams. I vividly remember one
special boiled egg, because I ate it in the morning before my first day at school. I was so excited, that boiled eggs have been special to me ever since. I was seven when I kept my first hens and I have had very few years of my life without hens. Beatrix Potter’s story of Mrs. Tiggywinkle, whom I associate with my mother and Denise, because they both loved ironing – that “singy smell”. The story begins with Henny Penny, who scratches holes in her stockings and has to “go barefoot”.

We would blow eggs for Easter as the empty shell was a symbol of the empty tomb. Jesus, who said he longed to gather the people together, as a hen gathers together her chicks, was himself the new life of the spirit that would hatch out, to leave the empty tomb.

My starting school left an empty nest at home during the day. But I was at home for the rising and setting of the sun.

To get to the school beach, we walked through the military cemetery, dominated by its grand cross, of those who had died during the war. The empty lives of the buried, the tombs, empty of spirits who had risen with Christ: or did their ghosts linger as darkness drew in? The Chinese boys at the school were very fond of ghost stories and delighted when they managed to frighten the headmaster’s five-year-old son, by telling him that there was a ghost on the other side of a door. We could not open it, because a bigger boy was holding it closed at the other side. But I feared it was a ghost, and started to have nightmares. Thus was born the story of “The Little Ghost” (produced by dad’s deputy, Rod Bowie) about a little boy called John, who makes friends with a little ghost. The book not only made me unafraid of ghosts, it also introduced me to “Uncle Charlie”, who had a time-machine. Dad had an Uncle Charlie, who died before I was born. He was supposed to bay at the moon and despite being grandfather’s elder brother, never worked and was cared for all his life by his sisters, who never married. No-one in the family would tell me what was wrong with him, so it would take a time-machine to find the truth. But I had an enduring fascination with time travel and madness, ever since. déjà vu experience connects the two.

**Coronation**

From “high windows” (Larkin) we had a splendid view of what I took to be the Queen’s coach going to her coronation. The dancing dragons were clearly necessary for any coronation, which I assumed would be taken by dad’s friend RO (Bishop Hall of Hong Kong). We watched with some of the richest men in Hong Kong, but to me they were just the parents of the boys of St Stephens. The wealthy watching the pageantry of church and state, people with honourable titles and funny hats. Why do they give up a day of commerce to watch these amateurs re-enact traditional ceremonies, when they would not spend the time seeing professionals staging a masterpiece? Because they needed to be seen. State events are a market-place for investors and entrepreneurs and a boost to consumers, who spend because they feel good and because they are dreaming of golden coaches and royal lifestyle.

The history of kings and queens, so prominent when I was at school, has given way to social, political and economic history, to such an extent that we are in danger of forgetting the impact of icons on culture. It is no coincidence that Victoria and Elizabeth II have been on the throne at times of relative peace, growth and increasing conservatism in Britain.

**The Fall**

From my earliest dreams, falling has been a positive experience. Exceptional dreams where I had a fear of falling, or experience terror as I fall or pain on extinction on landing, were far outweighed by falling deliberately, knowing it would be exciting and I would not be hurt. In waking life my fear of falling pre-dates any memories of falling. Actual falls could have been far worse. Perhaps that awareness directed my sub-conscious dreams.
When I was pushed from the top of the school climbing frame, I learnt the untrustworthy nature of my fellow four-year-olds. I did not gain a fear of heights. I have had a life-long delight in getting to the top of mountains. Nor did it affect my faith in adults or my sense of a benign universe. I felt fear, pain and betrayal, without losing confidence in my own values. (I tried to celebrate all this in putting the incident into my “Forest” novel).

**Discipline**

Perhaps my illnesses meant I was spoilt, but I never felt disciplined as a small boy. Colonial society was still rather Victorian and I accepted that in adult society, children should be seen and not heard, but then I was a shy boy. At the frequent “afternoon teas” at our bungalow, 50 to 60 ladies from some women’s group or dad’s staff from the school, or the governors and church officials, or interesting visitors to the island, would spill out of the house on to the veranda and into the garden and I would carry cakes and smile sweetly at the great and the good. I loved the delicate china cups, the silver tea service, the tiny coffee cups and triangular cucumber sandwiches. It was the world of Noel Coward.

In school I was desperate to do the right thing, but having missed so many months to illness, I could never understand what was expected of me. I could not get reading at all, despite my mother’s efforts: Janet and John books were so dull compared to the exciting stories she read to me. I learnt to smile and pretend to understand.

Only at grandfather’s was I really aware of my capacity to unintentionally upset adults. A capacity which became full-blown pubescent rebellion after his death, when I was eleven.

Once, when my parents were out, I climbed on top of the piano and drank half a bottle of Obridges, my favourite medicine. They were very worried and therefore cross, but there were no ill effects. One evening my brother and I blacked our faces as “commandoes” and jumped out on our Amah, as she walked home in the dark. Mum had to spend ten minutes calming the poor woman, who thought she had seen demons. Mother was still smiling as she washed my face; but my brother and I realised it was wrong to make fun of others and did nothing similar again.

My brother had, of course, already reached puberty, and my father was his step-father. It was reasonable for him to feel aggrieved because I was spoilt. We were having some sort of an argument, dad tried to intervene and Paul was rude to dad and then ran away and locked himself in our parents’ bathroom. Dad banged so hard on the glass panel of the door that it shattered and he cut his hand. “Domestic violence” we would call it now. I had a series of nightmares featuring a large bear. In the dream I stepped out in front of my mother and said “I will protect you”, then saw how big the bear was and went to hide behind her. I awoke in terror. Telling her my nightmares may well have got me into the habit of remembering my very vivid dreams - a habit that has assisted both my imaginative writing and psychoanalysis.

I had recently been taken to the Russian State Circus and seen bears riding bikes and motorbikes. Carl Jung (1875-1961) taught that a dream is not a symptom of a disease, but a link to an archetypal image shared by all humans. The fall and my fear of the bear are clearly such dreams, and relate to the start of a distrust of my peers (the fall) and adults (the bear).

**Real Weather**

What a child generally remembers is the reliable sunshine, the often daily swim in a warm sea, the reliable care of big brother (my winga wanga) when at play, and mum when I was ill; and those special times like Christmas: threading shiny baubles onto Chinese string, playing games and eating unusual food.
But I am suspicious of general memory. Yes, I recall very little rain, but largely that rain when it came was so torrential we would be kept indoors. When there was a typhoon the shutters were closed with typhoon bolts. Dad came back from school at the start of a typhoon: he had been blown over and his spectacles had been carried out to sea. After the rain, the water on the football pitch next to the bungalow was deep enough for a five-year-old to swim in cold fresh rainwater.

Boils were the downside of the hot climate. My brother thought I was fully justified in yelling at the prospect of having a boil lanced. A boil the size of a ten pence piece sticking out like Mount Fuji from a tiny inflamed arm, throbbing painfully and flooding the body with agony at the slightest touch, is truly a nightmare complaint.

Language had meaning and beauty

As an indulged child I knew that others would struggle to comprehend what I wanted to communicate. My “da, da” would lead my mother to offer me things till she gave me what I desired. The Chinese servants had a similar response to my broken Chinese. My teachers were brilliant at perceiving that I had the correct answer, albeit imperfectly expressed. In secondary school I chose subjects because those who taught them encouraged me. Inevitably, this led me to increasing generalisation and away from practicalities, where a “spade is a spade” nothing more.

Such progression was encouraged by a genetic musicality, where the sound of words, consonant or dissonant with their meaning, was a delight. So I was attracted to read by the sound of a piece of writing rather than its content. This has enabled me to love and be influenced by writers, whose opinions I find absurd or ridiculous. They give me access to worlds, where my opinions would be unwelcome. Science has as much musically beautiful language as poetry, but my science teachers were rarely aware of the treasure that lies beneath precision, simplicity, order and formulaic replication.

Public buildings in Hong Kong always had a sufficiency of spittoons, into which the Chinese would spit with unerring accuracy of a chameleon catching a fly on its tongue. Blink and you missed it. I was spell bound by this exciting excess of saliva. English city pavements today are decorated by chewing gum, but how often have you seen it get from mouth to pavement? The spit is the music of language, the spittoon the content, the gum on the pavement is science. Or again, consider the golden fans on every ceiling, circulating the humid air. Their hum is music, the air is content. Air-conditioning is the science which prevents acclimatisation to the real city.

My Animals and other Families

Like Gerald Durrell, I grew up on a paradise island with snakes in woodpiles and dangling from trees. The carpenter brought an eight-foot python to show us and let us touch. There were green lizards and poisonous white lizards on the storm shutters. Monkeys of many kinds, sharks and jelly fish regularly prevented my swimming and rock pools were brimming with fascinating life. So why did I not become a zoologist? Probably because I was too much of a dreamer. Illness made me full of wonder and reflection, where imagination is more valuable than collecting facts. I could imagine impossible animals, so why would I need to conserve real animals in a zoo? I am convinced that Gerald Durrell’s achievements at Jersey Zoo, were far ahead of his contemporaries and a model for the future; but it is his brother Lawrence’s (1912-1990) vivid descriptions of Egypt in his Alexandrian Quartet that move my soul by the music of his prose. I did collect botanical samples in my teens, inspired by the example of young Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) (the power of biography!) to counter my own ignorance coming to Britain with a different flora. But it was insects who grabbed my attention. We slept beneath mosquito nets and pools of standing water were sprayed with chemicals to prevent breeding, so I was not bitten by a “mossi/gnat” till we came to Hethel. But on our week’s holiday on Lantau Island, staying half-way up the mountain, a wasp settled just below my eye, whilst my mother
watched in horror. It flew away again without stinging me. But the tiny fellow had shown its power, and I was impressed. So it is to the work of Jean Henry Fabre (1823-1915) and Vincent Wigglesworth (1899-1994) that I turn when I want a really exciting story. (Thus Adephaga, the central character in my first novel, is based on the life of an insect.) I lack the patience to be an entomologist, but they are a fascinating tribe of human beings and their observations are some of the most reliable in science.

**Population not a Problem**

Hong Kong is a very crowded island. To be a small child in such a swarming multitude, gave me great respect for the complex organisation of social insects. I did not feel constricted by the tramlines, but liberated sitting on the top deck looking down at buzzing millions. Better still going up the cable car to the peak, or the star ferry, so close to the water, so pressed in by crowds. I felt part of the species, open to the group mind, a member of the hive. This may explain why I love to travel on the Underground especially at rush hour, and why I have so little sense of my own personal space. This despite being a privileged English child with a large bedroom (room for an entire Chinese family) in a large bungalow with a huge garden, in Hong Kong terms.

In Hong Kong I never saw poverty. Chinese came from crowded tenements and the hillside shanty towns, in shining clean white clothes, and their finger nails were always cleaner than mine. I saw very thin people, some were opium addicts, some merely underfed or diseased, but no beggars, none who admitted to poverty. It was only later, with western education, that I came to see their lack of space, lack of meat, lack of cash, as proof of poverty. At the time, they struck me as rich in the power of workers to transform their world, with bamboo scaffolding, cement and sweat. I could not imagine them hungry, when Chinese food was so superior to English food.

Fish (the Christian symbol) was an exception. I had seen a film in which a man puts a whole fish in his mouth and pulls out the perfect skeleton of the fish. I was impressed because I always seemed to end with a fish bone in my mouth, no matter how carefully my mother had deboned my fish. My fish prejudice was enhanced by a visit to Aberdeen – then the fishing centre of Hong Kong, where the stench of rotting fish made me nauseous. There were exceptions: tuna and fish fingers, and much later fish and chips, but fish has remained for me the least attractive aspect of the sea. Who would be a fisherman when you could be a “fisher of men”.

As a child I believed my family had invented all the games we played. Thus “happy families” was clearly a card game we played because we were a happy family. And when you said “fish” meaning that you did not have the card the other person wanted, this was because fish were smelly and not nice, and it was not nice to be told that your brother did not have the card you wanted. Likewise pick a sticks (also known as spillikins) struck me as a giant box of toothpicks (very common in my experience) so it was very inventive of my parents to invent a game where you had to remove a single stick without moving any of the pile - a task which I found impossible at first, but practiced for hours till I became adept. It became a skill of great value in more recent life when removing a branch from a large pile in order to saw it into logs.

**Dog of Fo**

We had a magnificent white chow, called Joey, who was the same height as I was. He was my brother’s pet and Paul was devastated when we were unable to take him with us to England. I was still at the unpossessive age, when I assumed everything was mine unless I was told NO. So, like a good Buddha, I was attached to nothing. It was only some years after leaving Hong Kong that I started to miss everything about this Eden childhood and sought desperately for substitutes that would recreate this time. No dog could ever be as perfect, no Scottish island quite capture the contours, no torrential downpour replicate the feeling, yet in my dreams I am there, in 1952 and everything is as it was. But the Chinese culture I remember is not the Hong Kong culture of the 1950s that I read about in the late
1960s, but rather the clash of East and West, of Ming and Mao. The world I find in the writings of Pearl Buck (1892-1973) who lived most of her life till 1935 in China and the rest of her life in the USA winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938.
Primary Guides

Now we are six

I certainly wanted to be “six for ever and ever”. My whole memory up till this time consisted of Hong Kong, much of it filled with illness and mother reading to me, but since my sixth birthday I had been rather better. I was enjoying school. I had learnt to swim “look at me swimming” Roo tells his mother. But now we were leaving, supposedly for a few months furlough so that when we returned I would be seven. I clung to my bear, Hugmetight, who wore the Chinese suit that had been made for me to wear at my Christening. He had been my brother’s bear, but apparently I squeezed him too tight and he lost his voice, so my brother gave me the broken bear. Bear and I had long conversations, like Christopher Robin and Pooh. He was the “me” who never grew up.

SS Canton, the last P&O liner to carry their traditional black and white livery, provided us with a month’s cruise to England, for half the price of the air fare! We toured Singapore with St Stephen’s alumina, visited Penang Zoo (planet of the apes). In Calcutta, lacking Chinese and sights, we made do with an old nun and some very poor people (Mother Theresa 1910-1997 had just begun the Kalighat free hospice). Colombo for Buddhist monks and temples. Bombay and the heat wave of 104 - no slumdogs.

I could have spent the whole cruise in the pool or on the rocking horse but bigger children put me off. Instead, like the hero of the film “Titanic” I made friends with a boy from first class and he took me on a tour. He felt he had the run of the ship but we were shouted at on entering a “crew only” section. He was the son of a wealthy American Quaker and later introduced me to Julie Nixon at the time when I first became interested in Quakers.

It had been an Arab Autumn with Nassar’s coup in Egypt and the French troops in Algeria. Exciting events for me, as we were sailing past those countries. A year later we would have had to sail via South Africa.

London Lingo

We went to South End House with Joyce Grenfell (1910-1979), to see Walter de la Mare (1873-1956). He could be a curmudgeonly old fogey with adults, but he let me slide down the banisters and suggested Joyce use my innocent expression in one of her sketches. I was deeply impressed by his dressing gown and the poem he read to me. His poem was about the music of words. Walter played games of imagination, whereby he would provide the situation and I had to suggest what I would do. “you are the spirit of a murdered man, inhabiting the body of a young boy. How will you go about getting revenge upon your murderer?” My reply: “I would not want revenge. I would want the murderer to know that he was forgiven and that God loves him, that way he would not want to kill anyone else.” He was as enchanted by my reply as I was with the game.

This led to my absolute six-year-old hero, AA Milne (1882-1956), and a game of Pooh Sticks, and 100 Acre Wood. I showed him my “Little Ghost” book and he was very impressed by the picture of the Time Machine, as he said he had been taught by HG Wells (1866-1946) so he was my time machine back to Wells and his own childhood, which seemed to be far more the basis for his stories that the childhood of poor Christopher Robin. I also showed him my Disney picture-book version of “Wind in the Willows” by Kenneth Graham (1839-1932) and he told me about the play he had written, which later had a big impact on my life.

TS Eliot (1888-1965) was very different from the other two. His combination of sound and meaning is mysterious and mystical, despite the often mundane nature of what is apparently being said.
No ghostly imagery or innocent profundity. Eliot interested me in three ways.

His wife had spent her last years in Northumberland House, Stoke Newington, and this was my first experience of being told not to mention mental illness. All adults were mad as far as I could see and the ones they labelled mad were usually the most accessible to a child. He seemed very old to me (he was 68) and about to marry a young woman of 32.

The sound of his voice reading his own poems was mesmerising, so that 50 years later, they remain of infinite value to me. To use such simple images to engage such profundity remains an unobtainable good.

His devotion to high church ceremonial has remained a balance to my genetic preferences for Quakerly simplicity. Did he use the mystical religion to protect himself from the logical atheism of Russell and Wittgenstein.

Prison Again!

London parks were perfect countryside in the centre of an apparently infinite city. I could happily have played all day in even the small gardens in squares. But my parents were simply crossing the green spaces in order to reach some gallery, theatre or museum. The Tower of London was a wonderful place for a boy to play soldiers, but I was bored by the Crown Jewels, which were far more impressive in pictures than in the darkened pokey turret room. What awoke my imagination was Walter Raleigh’s long years in prison, so like dad’s. The beheadings and torture seemed no worse than the Japanese and so I gained a sense of history, not as a record of kings and queens, but as a continuity of atrocities.

The Science Museum was far more exciting, with all its push buttons and turning levers, earphones and aeroplanes. I gained an impression of the size and scale, and rapid development of technology, but learnt nothing about how things actually worked, despite my brother’s running commentary. I have tried over the years to repair the infernal combustion engine, but have not got much further than my brother had already learnt at the age of 12. Motive and work are apparently insufficient to overcome genetic blindness to mechanics. My father accepted his impractical nature as a boy, whilst I have struggled all my life to overcome my genes, without success.

The Natural History Museum was much closer to my love for all animals so I fell in love with classification, with Linnaeus and Darwin, and creatures in glass cases, so much better than seeing them in the distance at London Zoo, so much better than the modern way of displaying just what the curator’s wish to communicate.

Yellow Peril – Mellow Yellow – Yellow submarine

I was horrified to hear that my Chinese friends (the culture I wholly identified with) were referred to as the “yellow peril”. They were not yellow, but I did miss the big yellow sun, in the cold damp days of my first English spring. Thus yellow became my favourite colour. Perhaps it was Van Gogh’s sunflowers or even the real thing, but when asked to choose my own ladybird pullover (not a hand-me-down from my brother) I chose yellow and wore it long after it ceased to fit me. I was put in Appleby House at school, and our colour was yellow. When I was asked what colour I wanted my bedroom walls, it had to be yellow. So it surprised no-one when I joined the Liberal Party.

FACE amongst the English
Much has been written suggesting that loss of respect (face) in Chinese society is the ultimate calamity. But it was only when I came to England that I found such an obsession with respect commonplace. What many westerners took for extreme formality was merely a reflection of their own conventions. As a child I always found the Chinese ready to play and talk, laugh and cry, whereas English adults were reserved, stood on their dignity and were afraid to relax in front of the children. I found English children in England were far more fearful of embarrassment (losing face) than the Chinese I had known. If I was bullied by unpleasant words or actions, I would simply agree with my tormentors, joining them in making fun of whatever weakness they perceived. I had no dignity (face) to lose, but when I pretended to laugh at myself, I was of course laughing at them, for being so easily deceived. I was always shocked by the suffering bullied children went through. They seemed unable to respect themselves, simply because the bully treated them badly. I recognised these children as outsiders like myself and chose them as my friends.

When I read Jaroslav Hasek’s (1883–1923) “Good Soldier Sjvek” I recognised in that anarchist hero’s pretended stupidity, the very act that had got me through school; which for many scapegoated children is an experience closer to William Golding’s (1911–1993) “Lord of the Flies” (1954). Golding was a friend of James Lovelock (1919–) He suggested the name of the Greek goddess Gaia for Lovelock’s hypothesis that the earth can be thought of as a living organism.

Our family were celebrating the collapse of the McCarthy witch-hunt of communists. For some it was a matter of solidarity with the oppressed, for others a hatred of persecution and belief in free speech. For me it was Charlie Chaplain (1889–1977), hero of every small child and victim of McCarthism. My parents were also talking of an evangelist who had recently visited London for his first “crusade” (first of many as his name was Billy Graham (1918–)).

**London Sights**

At six it is the height from the Whispering Gallery to the floor of St Paul’s that impresses, not the architecture. Before it was diminished by high-rise capitalism, the cathedral stood out above the surrounding buildings. It was the brightness and unexpected vision, rather than “great art” that impressed me in the National Gallery. I expected paintings to look like life and was therefore excited by pre-renaissance icons and surrealism equally. I saw nothing as impressive as views from SS Canton, or the contents of my dreams.

The Thames itself was majestic and reassuring to an island boy, but I was assured it was too polluted for swimming, which was disappointing. If they had said it was too dangerous I would have been tempted to disprove them. Parliament is memorable, but I was more taken with Boudicca in her chariot. Was that what people were like in Norfolk I wondered. The Myhills were notable for their Roman noses (my nose was a great disappointment), so at the time I assumed we Roman Myhills had conquered Boudicca.

I was keen to see Buckingham Palace as it featured in AA Milne’s poems and the guards with their busbies were wonderful, but the building looked like another office block and I could not understand why anyone would want to live in it.

London was making a poor impression till we went to Kew Gardens. Here in the palm house I felt wholly at home (an experience I gave to Adephaga in my first novel about Nixon, “Xinon and the Waters of Oblivion”) and then there was the Chinese pagoda and we rounded the day off with a proper meal in a Chinese restaurant.

I was delighted by the starlings but informed that they were “vermin”, which contributed to my very positive view of all creatures referred to as “vermin”.

I was getting impatient with London, especially as we seemed to spend most of the time indoors because it was raining. I wanted to “sail away” (Noel Coward song). My cousins were jealous because
I had had a couple of months without going to school, but for me the unusual thing was that I had not been unwell for two months. I had actually been fit to attend school.

My cousins, Ivan and Malcolm, being very close to each other in age, fought continuously despite getting a good spanking from their father. As I held my brother in awe, and wanted to follow his lead whenever possible, I could not understand this sibling rivalry.

**From Jerusalem to Galilee**

“What good can come from Galilee” showed the kind of urban disdain for the parochial at the time of Jesus. A similar disdain for Norfolk could be discerned amongst my mother’s family. We were to go from the “centre of things” to the wild empty places. Not just town mouse to country mouse; but capital city to the “back of beyond”. This is confirmed by anyone coming to Hethel from Norwich and passing “The World’s End” pub, en route.

The “street wise” Del Boys and wheeler dealers, have mostly moved out to the countryside, since the 1950s, many moving to the countryside, since the 1950s, on the profit from house prices. This has forced locals into the towns, resulting in a new territorial gang culture.

If Norfolk was Galilee, then Birmingham, where we moved next was Samaria: a foreign land wholly unknown to both Norfolk and London.

**Very Flat Norfolk**

Norfolk did not make sense to me as a child. No-one seemed to be in a hurry as they were in London. There were very few people: even Norwich in 1955 was much quieter than London. There were few tourists, fewer unemployed and many did their shopping in their local market towns. Yet this was not a poor city, like Birmingham and Hong Kong.

The yellow fields in those days were mustard (now they are rape) and Colman’s was a major industry. Surely everyone would have to be like grandfather and spread mustard on their toast, for such a singular enterprise to make a county rich! Norwich Union (insurance) apparently brought money in from round the world: “but what do they make?” I asked. You might as well have told me that canaries play football. Mackintoshes I understood: “they keep the rain off”, very necessary in England.

The castle made sense: bows and arrows, swords and shields, battering rams and boiling oil are life and soul for a small boy. “But why build the houses so close when the enemy might hide and shoot arrows from them?” The cattle market made sense: cows would want to visit Norwich as much as I did, it would be exciting for them. The market moved out of the city centre in 1960. But how could anyone say Norfolk was flat when Norwich was built on hills?

**Bullish – a load of bull**

Church Farm was already past its best. The railings put up in the 1920s beside the “new” road across the first church meadow, were still painted and upright, saying “you are crossing parkland to the Red House, the most important house in Hethel, since the demolition of the hall”. The house of an entrepreneur: with a small lake, croquet lawn, formal beds, a beech bower, summerhouse, stables and orchards on both sides, set in 180 acres of its own farmland.

But this was a small showing of the wealth of the business, so the farm buildings had become neglected and the woods overgrown. To me everything was perfect and the farm buildings certainly
have declined in my lifetime, but still I am aware of a golden age, when 14 men worked the land, which only employed three in 1955.

There was a splendid white bull in the bull shed, 30 cows in the milking shed, calves in the calf shed and bullocks in the bullock yard, hay in the hay barn and straw in the straw barn. But there were no horses in the stable block and no carriages in the carriage shed, although granddad did have a very plush Ford with running boards.

I was a six-year-old boy with reverence and respect for grandfather, because he was obeyed by so many adults, because he had made this whole environment it seemed solely for the enjoyment of my brother and I. We could look at the bull, talk with the cows, feed them and even try to milk them. We could feed the geese and hens, search the hedgerows for bird’s nests, make tunnels from the straw bales, be out all day without anyone worrying about us. After the restrictions of London, this was real freedom, freedom from adults, freedom of domesticated, safe Nature.

**A house as old as time**

My “aunt”, Dolly Wrafter (1890-1981) was my grandfather’s cousin. She grew up at Grange Farm, Fundenhall with her six sisters, who adopted boys’ names in their teenage years. She had gone to Austria at 17 as a governess/nanny, but found it less glamorous than “The Sound of Music”. Somerset Maugham’s (1874-1965) novel “The Moon and Sixpence” (1919) inspired her to take the ship from Hull (a significant place in my adult life) for Gauguin’s Tahiti and life with two remarkable painters: William Alexander MacDonald (1861-1948), and a man called Wrafter, whom she purportedly married in 1932 describing herself as “the widow MacDonald”. She returned to Norfolk in 1935 and stayed to look after grandfather’s sisters and brother.

She took on the spirit of the house, protecting it from change for the next 45 years. The farm house (1586) I saw for the first time in 1954, was the same as my great grandfather recorded in his daybook of 1842, the same as the house I moved into in 1985. It is a living creature, unique, independent, hundreds of years older than any building in Hong Kong, with no right angles, no straight lines, but plenty of wrinkles. Weathered but not beaten. Tiles replaced thatch in the eighteenth century, so the roofscape of farm buildings and courtyards reminded me of the older buildings of Hong Kong. She was then as old as I am now, but I thought she was as old as the house. I could not separate them in my mind. Her mind was full of low ceilinged, dark rooms, each with ancient furniture, books and cobwebs. A strange world, wholly beyond my experience, captured by Dickens’ description of Miss Havisham’s house.

She said it was “liberty hall” and we children could do whatever we liked. This was a huge contrast to the good behaviour required at the Red House, so, not surprising that this was the shelter we sought on damp or cold days. The attics were our favourite place, looking at 50-year-old copies of London Illustrated News, or more recent art magazines from the era of Emma (1868-1944) and Millie (1868-1951), my grandfather’s sisters. These poet spinsters had lived sparingly. They filled books with quotations from authors they admired and corresponded with aspiring authors. Margaret Barber (pen name Michael Fairless, 1869-1901) was their contemporary, and moved to Bungay near the end of her brief life. She was working on her best known book “The Road Mender”, which was published after her death. It captures country life at the time. The rural working man is portrayed as full of wisdom.

By the 1920s they were established radical socialist, vegetarian ladies in their fifties encouraging young artists. Mary Webb (1881-1927) was another contemporary who entered my aunts’ circle because they shared vegetarianism. This was no easy option in the 1920s, but “Precious Bane” and “Gone to Earth” remain classics for all those who treat our fellow mammals as equals.

When Aunt Dolly told me they lived on a dairy farm and did not eat meat, I was astounded, having never considered such a thing. Beef was my favourite meat and cows’ milk my only drink. This was what had first made me interested in cows. The thought that calves must die to produce these delights
had not occurred to me, nor did Aunt Dolly enlighten me. My innocence was more important to her than a convert to the cause. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a much more influential vegetarian in my youth as his plays were regularly performed in the 50s and 60s and I had seen most of them by the time I went to university.

Emma taught at Bracon Ash school and knew Betty, the head of Mulbarton school and Betty’s brother, Henry Moore (1898-1986) came to stay many times. He worked on a couple of sculptures (“woman with upraised arms” 1924-5 is clearly Millie, who was a keen cyclist).

Moore was born in Yorkshire, a Castleford miner’s son (little did I suspect that my grandson would start life in Castleford!) In 1931, Moore and friends rented another church farm in Norfolk, at Happisburg (pronounced Hazebar). These friends were Ivor Hitchins (1893-1979), Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) (type her name followed by Myhill into Google and be surprised by the first item) and Ben Nicholson (1894-1982). A holiday that led Ben to leave his first wife and have triplets with Barbara.

In 1936, a new writer moved into Stiffkey (pronounced Stookey) and wrote “The story of a Norfolk Farm” about his first year of farming. Henry Williamson (1895-1977) was very much an enthusiast for the natural world in line with Emma and Millie’s philosophy. His departure to Devon in 1946 was a loss to the county.

They were early supporters of the Maddermarket Theatre. They would have approved the return to Nugent Monck’s original plan for a Shakespearean era stage. They knew all the artists that are drawn to such an enterprise. They were friends of Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1963). They played the piano and wound the gramophone and sometimes took the train from Flordon into Norwich for a concert. Theirs was the whitewashed bedroom at the north end of the house.

**Great Uncle Charlie**

But it was Uncle Charlie’s (Charles Clement Thynne Myhill 1870-1947) room that fascinated us, with the huge cow horn on the old brass bedstead. Uncle Charlie was the eldest and should therefore have inherited, but he was different and was protected and cared for all his life by his sisters. I have been told he bayed at the moon and would retreat to his bedroom when anyone called. Aunt Dolly would not talk about him and my father claimed he did not know. It seems likely that he was eccentric rather than mad, as he left an eclectic collection of books and I was told the large collection of birds’ eggs was his, although it was Millie who knew where all the nests were. Whilst Emma was teaching, I imagine Emma and Charlie running in the fields and woods like Cathy and Heathcliff, or like my brother and I.

John Middleton Murry (1889-1957) was said to be “the best hated man in English letters” in 1934. But never by the Myhills, who bought Adelphi Magazine from the start. The aunts were naturally involved with the Langham Common Summer School and the connection bore fruit when Murry started the commune at Larling Old Rectory in Norfolk. A commune that was still going when I was editing the National Communes Magazine in the mid 1970s.

He was buried in Thelnetham church: the village that provided our first Hethel dog, Beano, in 1985. Murry became for me an example of the lifelong effort to discover a literate way of describing spiritual consciousness. Murry wrote about his pacifism and sponsored the Peace Pledge Union.

Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978) wrote “The Flint Anchor” whilst staying in Great Eye folly at Sallhouse in 1950. She was a contemporary of Aunt Dolly, and they both treated me with exceptional kindness.

**Ancestor Worship**
The Chinese practice of ancestor worship is merely an extension of the respect and power given to parents and grandparents in traditional Chinese society. It was much the same in Victorian Norfolk, so grandfather Myhill was never surprised that I treasured his letters as if they were Scriptures. He called me “Farmer John” so I knew from the age of four that that was what I would be. He sent me pictures of the farm and his family and cows. He gave me books on farming. He was a great patriarch, with a man (Adam) to assist him, and a maid (June) to assist his disabled daughter Peggy. He could drive, but sent his man to collect us from Wymondham station. He walked out with me and pointed as far as I could see and said “one day all this will be yours”. At six my future was secured, determined and wholly satisfactory.

The Chinese belief in Feng Shui is a mechanism for securing the ecology of the land: “you must not cut down that tree because someone will die” is a real threat, as deforestation has proven to lead to erosion and starvation. Great grandfather had planted most of the trees on the farm back in the 1880s and 90s. He loved trees as the diversity and landscaping of the area proves. Grandfather was no sentimentalist, but a cold-headed successful businessman. In the 1930s, when his neighbours were selling of timber, he preserved our ancient woodland, because of his respect for his father. Thus the Myhill culture and I felt wonderfully at home amongst these red roof tiles, courtyards and family traditions: a peasant mindset with intellectual aspirations. Acting locally but thinking historically.

**Biggles**

In 1913, the year my dad was born, a Swaffham sanitary inspector married the daughter of a local clergyman. Rev John Hunt, of Little Dunham was a friend of my evangelical grandmother, who organised a mission caravan at Hethel church and took her children to Cromer to share in the beach mission. She produced two missionary children and a member of the Brethren, and introduced WE John (1898-1968 into Hethel life. He was stationed at Thetford, before being posted to teach flying in France. He fell behind enemy lines and was sentenced to be shot. He returned to his family for Christmas 1918. It was not hard for a child to see in the old (58) man, the dashing young Biggles of the stories my brother read to me. All my fantasy play from six to fifteen related to killing the enemies of the British Empire, as crusader knight, or Suez paratrooper, fighting alongside my ancestors for the life I had known in Hong Kong. When I took my first flight (aged 30) it was as thrilling as I had expected. Knowing heroes from both wars and having dreamt of becoming one of them, till I was fifteen, I can never blame those who still believe in a “Just War” or even the necessity of war to grow heroes. Nor can I blame those who love the global warming delight of flying. But such heroes can often have poor judgement. In 1921 WE John interviewed and rejected “John Hume Ross” who was Lawrence of Arabia. Higher authority over-ruled his decision.

My brother was reading “King Solomon’s Mines” and telling me the good bits (I read the whole story to my daughter, Stella, when she was six). Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925) was born in Bradenham and lived in Bungay so it was unsurprising that the South African connection led him to my grandfather or that Emma and Millie’s support for the working class connected them to his daughter Lilias (1892-1968) whose idealisation of the working man was later to combine with my Maoist phase, leading me to writers nostalgic for all things rural like William Cobbett (1765-1835) and Massingham (1860-1924), to Tolstoy, Gandhi and the communes movement of the 1970s.

**Wimpole Hall**

Grandfather was renowned in the family for having a posh “telephone voice” for conversations with the aristocracy. His headed notepaper inserted a hyphen in He-thel, so that it should be pronounced according to its origin as the Heath on the Hill: the Myhills of Heath Hill. He held shooting parties to which local aristos were invited and he took great pride in being a judge at the Royal Norfolk Show. His seed business and herd of pedigree dairy shorthorns, enabled him to move in Norfolk’s
homogeneous County Set. He delighted in driving me to Stansfield Hall (site of the famous murders of 1848) to meet his old friend Mr Rackham.

He had a visit from Elsie Bambridge (1896-1976), who had no children. She left her home, Wimpole Hall, to the National Trust. She talked about her father, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). She was collecting an archive of his papers. Her older sister Josephine, for whom “The Jungle Book” was written died of pneumonia (1899) aged six. And she took a great interest in me, because I was a sickly child of six. She gave me the “Just So” stories, and when she read I really felt I was her “Best Beloved”. I think she missed her brother who was killed on the Somme, more than her husband who died in 1951. Like the hero of Kipling’s story “Theys”, she seemed able to see dead children of whom there were many in Hethel churchyard. She felt she could talk to me about such things because I was a child of Empire, like her father, and because I was a child who would forget. She gave me a life-long fascination with the past and a love of her father’s stories, especially the supernatural ones. How could any child forget an adult who talked to me as an adult about my ghostly companions, which most adults dismissed as “imaginary friends”.

Isle of Man

I did not visit this substitute Hong Kong until 1972, but at six I was the delight of childless ladies. Jean Bromett (1912-1992) was a few months younger than my mother. Her husband (1891-1983) had been Lieutenant Governor of the Isle of Man (1945-52) so she was in love with islands as much as I was. She was also the daughter of Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), who, like Kipling, had no grandchildren, but a deep personal need to believe in spiritualism. With such effective advocates (and there were many others in the 1920s) it is hard to understand why spiritualism faded in the 1930s and did not re-emerge after the second world war.

Jean had been to her Aunt Ida’s school. I also had an Aunt Ida (1930-2012), my grandmother’s niece. Having come from a hot country, I had just discovered Eiderdown, which I said was a fallen aunt. She found this very funny, and asked if I would hide under the covers if I saw a ghost? She said her father wanted Sherlock Holmes out of the way so that his work on Christian Spiritualism would be noticed.

Did I believe in fairies? Of course I did, I was six and had recently seen Peter Pan. I must have seemed like the boy in “Sixth Sense”. I saw incredible things because I expected to see them.

Ruth Ellis, 28, was the last woman to be hanged in Britain on July 13th, 1955. The name Ellis was meaningful in my family as several of that surname had worked for grandfather - only related in my mind. So was sown an opposition to the death penalty, and a delight in names, which both grew throughout my life.

My First Depressive

Grandfather was very proud of the important people he knew, and did not mind bowing and scraping, flattering and giving discount; but at six, I was everyone’s equal and they loved my naïve certainties. This was all different with one of his old friends, a man so famous that even at six I was awestruck and silent, a man who just wanted to be his youthful self, full of daring action, with his mates.

Grandfather had volunteered for the Boer War at the end of the nineteenth century and taken his own horse out to South Africa. He was mentioned in despatches, but lost his horse to the Boers. It was then he made friends with a young war correspondent, called Winston Churchill. So, one evening in April, grandfather and I were having our nightly game of draughts (he was huffing me as usual) when the newly resigned Prime Minister, was ushered in.

I was so tongue-tied, that grandfather sent me upstairs for his Boer War uniform (I have worn it every Christmas day since the late 1960s). The bright colours, the shiny buttons, and the memories induced,
seemed to take Winston back, and lift the “Black Dog” from him. He arrived looking grim and sad, but whilst I was getting into bed upstairs, I could hear gales of raucous laughter. Depression, I decided, only needed a time machine to lift you from the present moment.

I consumed biographies of Winston. I read his books. I had records of his speeches and could give a fair mimic of “We shall fight them on the beaches...” It was the start of a recurring desire to be Prime Minister. A desire which led me to study politics at university, and only then did I learn that real power lay elsewhere. That discovery was a sufficient explanation of Winston’s “Black Dog”. He had enjoyed the excitement of real life, as a journalist, and in two world wars, and knew that a Prime Minister was an orator, an actor, but not a god.

**Westerns**

Granddad’s fictional reading was largely westerns, which brought back the excitement he had as a cavalryman. I have never been able to read such stories, but have spent many happy hours watching westerns starting with Roy Rogers (the acceptable face of Country and Western music, which I generally dislike), Hopalong Cassidy (helped me cope with my malfunctioning hip in my teens), the Lone Ranger (where Tonto was my imaginary Chinese friend), Wells Fargo (“there’s a little bad in the best of them, a little good in the worst of them”) and Rawhide (for I was a boy obsessed with cows and here were “cow boys”).

I longed to lasso the cows in the field, although they were happy to let me put my arms round them. I was impressed by the old branding irons, although Hethel cows already had ear tags. Walter insisted that he was a “cow man” (a respectable skill) not a “cowboy” (someone pretending to have skills in order to cheat the gullible). As John Wayne gave way to Clint Eastwood, the cows and farm motif was lost in the excitement of the lone hero. Once I had experienced the reality of being a stockman (aged 27) responsible for 100 cows, I lost interest in this particular fantasy world, and the western was replaced with the murder mystery. My wife Denise can read several murder mysteries a week, whilst I can only watch them on television.

The yearning for a life with cows has slowly been supplanted by a yearning for justice.

**Et tu Brute**

The Missionary Guest House at Selly Oak, Birmingham was to be our home until our return to Hong Kong. It was here that my father received the news that the missionary society did not want him to return to St Stephen’s. He was still travelling round the country preaching for the missionary society about the work in Hong Kong. It was a huge blow to him, because Hong Kong had been his life for 16 years, because he felt he had responded properly to a sixth form revolt, in sending the boys back to their homes. Apparently the boys had felt nothing, but their parents had felt they had lost face and the school’s reputation had gone down. The deputy head’s view, that the boys should have been canned, was seen by the school governors, as the correct one.

The issue of corporal punishment, especially as part of colonisation, was not yet important for many people, but my father’s stand made him an ally of such libertarian educationalist as Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), who had run the Beacon Hill School, and AS Neil (1883-1973), whose school, Summerhill, was in Leiston, Suffolk (1927-73). Their idealism is still only shared by a few eccentrics like me, but their opposition to corporal punishment and the centrality of the needs of the child, have become enshrined in law and professional practice for many years now.

The change of plan meant that we stayed much longer at the guest house. I started to attend school at Westhill primary (now an adult college). Most days I went home for lunch, as it was only 100 yards away, but one day I stayed and was amazed to find we had to lie down for 30 minutes after lunch.
This seemed crazy to me, as I hated going to bed, even at night, as it reminded me of being ill. Some of the children actually slept. Another strange experience was playing shops. We were given pretend coins and had to calculate the right change for half a crown, when buying something for eleven and a half pennies: not easy for a boy who thought in dollars and cents.

I was there for less than a term. The only thing I learnt was that I was very foreign: children’s games like “Here comes a chopper to chop off your head” terrified me and gave me nightmares for years.

On Saturday morning we sometimes took our sailing boats to the pond at the bottom of the hill. To get there we had to pass Woodbrooke Quaker College (founded by George Cadbury in 1903) a place that was to play such a big part in my later life. After a month at sea, and several months on land, Paul and I were feeling land-locked and our little boats were to us sailing out across the oceans. He rigged his sails so that his boat blew out to the middle of the pond, whilst mine hung close to the edge and frequently blew over.

**Broken for Life**

Two more reminders that I had fallen from the Garden of Eden of Hong Kong, in case the cold weather was insufficient. Playing “murder in the dark” one evening I tripped and caught my two front teeth on the back of an arm chair, chipping their tops: 20 years later I had two false teeth. Playing tag in the grounds I tripped over a tree root and broke my right arm. Mother took me to hospital, again. I woke on a ward full of old men and was pleased to be one of the few who was able to sit at table for breakfast and to go home afterwards. After the luxury of my own hospital room in Hong Kong, this open ward struck me as huge, crowded and frightening: a new source for nightmares. I had gone to sleep in one place and woken in another. I loved the physiotherapy of dangling my arm in a whirlpool. The arm took a long time to heal. My brother had started his new school and I was impatient for new beginnings. We all knew we were going to move but the vicarage was not ready and each day was like Samuel Beckett’s new play.
Annals of the Parish

“Waiting for Godot”

My father, an ordained Anglican minister, was appointed to the parish of Cofton Hackett, which was in the patronage of the Bishop of Birmingham, Leonard Wilson 1897-1970 (who had been bishop of Singapore 1941-9, and suffered under the Japanese at Changi Prison. Leonard was not the first Bishop I had met so I was already convinced that being portly was an essential qualification for the role.

The Vicarage had 21 rooms, even larger than grandfather’s house which had only 17. After six months in a two-bedroom flat, the empty house looked huge. There was a large garden and an even larger meadow, and at the end of the road, the fabulous Lickey Hills, where a boy could walk for an hour without seeing anyone. Little Lord Fauntleroy had come into his estate.

The courtyard had a six-foot wall around it, a safe place for a seven-year-old to be left whilst his mother cooked tea on a sunny day. It became the deck of the ship, whose journey I wished to replicate. This was enhanced when my brother taught me how to climb the gate and walk along the top of the wall. This became the crows’ nest, from which I could watch out for land or other ships. Mum was not too pleased by this development: on 4/03/57 I fell from the wall and landed on the strut which held the pump to the wall, an inch further and I would have been castrated. Paul soon learnt to climb all the trees, and fixed a rope walkway between two large ash trees, which definitely frightened me. He also erected a rope swing, which carried you high in the air, as the land sloped, so he would jump off at some ten foot in the air. I just clung on and enjoyed the view. There were rhododendrons to crawl through and hide in, and giant hogweed for a jungle. So hide and seek was always popular, and the days were always sunny!

Black and White Photographs

On Sunday 3/02/1956 we went to the farm at the end of the road and chose a tiny collie puppy. We called her “Lassie” (after Eric Knight (1897-1943) who raised collies in the Quaker state of Pennsylvania.) She was my constant companion for the next five years. When I read “Black Bob”, I became Andrew Glen and Lassie was my heroine and the garden became the Scottish highlands. Our next dog, a brown mongrel, was called Dandy (Black Bob appeared in the comic and was called the Dandy Wonder Dog) What a thrill in 1957 on my first journey to Scotland to pass through Selkirk and meet the artist Jack Prout (1900-1978) who drew those evocative scenes of dog and landscape. No wonder I took my young family to Ross-shire in 1975 and worked with a real shepherd called Lesley Gray. I had grown a thick Andrew Glen beard and wore a flat cap by then.

My favourite Black Bob story was the one when he accompanies and protects a little boy who sets out alone from Scotland to find his mother in a London hospital. That adventure captures the time, as my mother spent 10 weeks in a St Luke’s hospital, London, recovering from a mastectomy, whilst poor Lassie was dying of liver cancer. But that was in the future: for now there was snow on the Lickey Hills and that meant sledging.

Barnt Green

Miss Thomas (Florence to my father) ran a Victorian-style dame school, in a corrugated iron shed, with two small rooms and a dozen pupils aged six to twelve, for reasonable fees. She was about 60 and understood children. The school had bullies and behaviour problems, but she never needed to raise her voice and always had our obedience. The building belonged to the local Quakers, and they have since built a smart new Meeting House and given the adjacent land, where our tin school was, to
be a public playground. But before I was eight, we had moved to a large house with beautiful grounds, which felt more like home.

It was Miss Thomas who taught me to understand numbers, which had previously made no sense, so that I moved from years of poor addition to successful long division and geometry in a year.

Miss Thomas took us on regular nature walks, when we would learn the names of flowers and trees and look out for birds and butterflies, find insects under logs and return with leaves and cones to draw. The outdoors was where children should be, as we learnt so much from nature. We had poems about nature, and listened to natural history radio programmes for schools. Again I realised my huge ignorance, as I knew about coconut palms, banana trees and exotic birds and snakes, but I could not tell a blue tit from a great tit, nor a coltsfoot from a dandelion. Yet my grandfather could distinguish 50 different grasses by feeling the seeds! I was far more excited by the Hungarian uprising because I had started collecting Hungarian stamps. It was a country I felt drawn to more than any other in Europe. On October 28th, Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest

When Miss Thomas retired, I found myself back in public education at Blackwell Primary - a pretty young teacher and my first music lesson. I was given a tambourine or a triangle, whilst the real instruments were reserved for the musical. The toilets gave me my first experience of urinals and embarrassment. The girls gave me my first experience of “kiss catch”. I was nine and starting puberty, but no-one told me. Avoiding the urinals and chasing the girls I probably aggravated my grumbling appendix, as I did a lot of vomiting at this school. Freud would have loved my wet dreams and toilet-seeking dreams. My confusion was normal, but I thought I was unique. Fear of the headmistress, who could be heard shouting and banging in the next classroom, may also have contributed to a return of my invalid lifestyle.

I sat next to Geoffrey, who was friendly, clever, and had lots of friends. Derek Hudson, notable for his cleft palate, was my first “best friend”. Perhaps my oddness was as apparent to him, as his oddness was to me. Neither of us were any good at country dancing, which was a weekly torment here. I had never done any kind of dancing before and so was unable to impress the girls with my skill. Likewise with marbles and sliding on the ice, at which my peers all excelled. Fortunately I had learnt through many changes in school, to make fun of my own shortcomings, to avoid being made fun of. I was also the tallest boy in my year, which helped.

We had lots of interesting lessons, which I enjoyed. But what I mainly remember are the figure-drawing exercises, to enable neat joined-up writing, which proved I would never be neat; and the constant learning of times tables, which we all hated.

**Back to Private Education**

Fortunately my parents decided that I was not learning enough to pass the 11-plus so I was sent to “The Mount”, a Bromsgrove preparatory school, where the magnificent Mrs Boyer made learning interesting and I began to read and understand.

“Pinocchio” was the first full-length story I read entirely for myself. Was I a wooden boy (Nochio means knot of wood) before I began to read for myself? Can we have consciousness without culture? Can we have morality without consciousness of others? As with most children, I was a fabulist. I had no sense that what I said was my own fantasy, because I had no sense that others had a separate reality. The truth was what I wanted to be the case. “The world was the totality of my facts, not of things” (Wittgenstein’s Tractatus misquoted).

In my long bouts of illness, my imagination had been my main companion, so when children asked me questions, I simply made up the answers and they were usually impressed. But Pinocchio led me to question this avoidance of confessing to ignorance and to feel my nose. If I was to be “a real boy” I would have to find out what was true and stick with that even if it was mundane and dull. Carlo
Colladi (1826-1890) was really Lorenzini, a volunteer in the Tuscan army (1845-60) a century before I read him. It was the complexity of the story that made me want to read more books.

Fred Kitchen (1891-1961)

“Brother to the Ox” was my first real life biography. It was nostalgia when it was written and ancient history now, yet it still resonates with my childhood holidays on the farm: the early mornings, the hard work before breakfast, the long days of harvest, mice, rats, cats, cows, cooling warm milk, only going indoors to sleep.

Walter Thorpe, head cowman at Hethel, was the real-life model for my reading of Fred Kitchen’s classic. There was nothing about the countryside Walter did not know. His day began at 4am, so on a summer’s morning, after feeding his own hens and weeding his own vegetables, he might choose to wait, totally still in a field above a mole hill. The slightest movement of soil and his fork would jab down to kill the mole. He would be horrified by the hundreds that now live under the farm.

I promised Walter I would employ him when I took over the farm, never thinking that he would be retired and dead long before that time. But Walter remained my ideal, the man I most wanted to be.

Adrian Bell (1901-1980) farmed 89 acres near Beccles, so came under the Rider Haggard connection. He caused my father’s enthusiasm for The Times crossword, but for me his account of starting life as a farmer was an inspiration. I could be a peasant intellectual, a writer, inspired by the natural world.

So my last two years of primary school were mainly pleasant and I made some enduring friendships. I was so happy at the end of my first day that I said “is it home time already?”, and received much ribbing from the other boys, for whom it was a matter of honour that school was bad and playtime and home time were the only good things. But they had not experienced the three state school which made The Mount seem so good to me.

Miss Thomas taught part-time at the school and it was reassuring to see her with the younger children. She also attended dad’s church on Sundays and we kept in touch until her death some 30 years later.

Under the Net

To point me in the right direction, after two weeks in my new school, we started the summer holidays with a visit to Oxford. We wandered round the colleges, meeting a few staff. I had been dragged round stately homes and I knew from that that a college was just a glorified school, so I was not over impressed by the architecture. But I was nearly ten and I knew a beautiful woman when I saw one. Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) of St Anne’s College was to play a huge role in my intellectual development, because her novels proved that ideas bring literature to life; and life experience moulds ideas; and ideas cross boundaries between academic subjects and cultures. In 1978 when I completed my great “Social Networks and Social Problems - Key to all the Social Sciences” I received a very nice letter from Iris, but by that time I felt I had become a character in her novels, as she was to become in mine. Oxford itself did not impress. I wanted to be part of something new, red brick and revolutionary.

Austin – Sense and Sensabilia

In my years at Cofton Hackett, the Austin motor company was steadily expanding. Its centre was two miles away, but it eventually spread till it was only a field away from the church and a screen of trees
was planted to retain our rural feel. Most of the men in the parish worked at Austin and some were quite senior in the business. It was a mark of dad’s values that church wardens, who had been boardroom people, were replaced by shop floor workers, with no loss of congregation numbers, but I know he found PCC meetings a struggle. A young John Edwards (one of the “gang of four” directors of the Phoenix Consortium – Austin Motors’ final incarnation) caught the bus with me each morning.

As we watch Lotus cars expand in Hethel, I remember the bubble of expansion and flouting of planning permission that saw Austin cover five square miles of one-time green belt. My wife, Denise’s maiden name was Austin.

They practice beforehand which ruins the fun

Football was another embarrassment as I had little ball control and did not understand the offside rule. Jeremy Paxman (1950-) was two years below me, but had total ball control and made even the reasonable players look foolish. He was insufferably cheeky for such a small boy, confident in his intelligence, then as now.

My father sympathised. He had been at Norwich School with John Mills (1908-2005) who was a great ball player and thus friend of Uncle Peter, who never had any interest in literature or drama, whereas dad loved Shakespeare and enjoyed teaching his plays. (My daughter Emma named her hamster “Chuffy” after John Mills performance of that role in Martin Chuzzlewit. At school he had played Puck in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” – Emma’s first play role was as Titania.) Because he was not sporty, dad had loathed public school and was determined that we should go to day schools. This was a disaster for my brother who went as a day pupil to King Edward VI, where day pupils were on the edge of school life. Paul was miserable and has blanked out most of his school age memories.

Thus began a lifelong abstention from this popular animist religion. Most men would rather watch and talk about football than join in a religious service or discussion. Most people in Britain today would rather go shopping or watch football than go to church. They are not atheist, most are not even agnostic, they are simply not interested. In just the same way, I have nothing against football and have no problem with people who enjoy it, I just have other things I would rather do. They cannot understand my apathy and I cannot understand the low value they place on the God question. Just as they enjoy a good argument with a supporter of another team, I enjoy a good argument with an atheist. I guess I just lack the football gene.

Out for a Duck

Instead of cricket, we played a bat and ball board game, which was more baseball than cricket. The bowler pitched, underarm, at a square wooden board about three feet off the ground. The batsman, using a large table tennis bat, deflected the soft ball away from the target. Runs were made as in cricket, but there was little skill in pitching or deflecting, which suited young children, who love to throw, hit and run, but are not very good at any of these activities.

This was the age of Donald and Daffy Duck, of “Duck Soup”, and of Charlie Drake; and we had duck for Christmas dinner. So I did not mind being out for a duck, but my brother was determined that I should improve my hand-eye co-ordination, so we played at hitting his ball on the end of a piece of elastic, or badminton or tennis on the vicarage lawn. I became quite proficient at tennis spending hours batting a tennis ball against the house walls and only breaking two windows in seven years. Unfortunately, one was the study window and glass landed on my father’s desk where he was attempting to write his sermon.

Perhaps this was why we got a table tennis board, which fitted in what had been the spare room. Not quite wide enough at each end, so we tended to knock bits out of the wall paper. This was a boy’s
game and we were very competitive, but the skills required to play in a confined space are very different from the athletics of the real game, where players stand back a couple of yards from the table. “Table tennis” became a euphemism for snogging once I gained a girlfriend, a safe place for romance, with no danger of interruption.

My brother had an air rifle, and practiced with targets till he was an excellent shot. Like most things that my brother did, shooting struck me as a “real” sport, something adults did for a reason (grandfather’s shooting parties, or soldiers in battle). This was a strong contrast to football and cricket, which seemed pointless activities to shut children out of an adult world. This view of most “sports” has certainly coloured my response to the popular spectator sports (I write this during the 2012 London Olympics). These are distractions to keep the working classes from involvement in politics and international relations.

On the other hand, my brother was an army cadet and later a navy cadet and only just missed national service, whereas my contempt for sport spread eventually to a horror of all weapons, which seemed to be used with the same abnegation of personal responsibility, and worship of victory that I found in sports. The warrior says: “I was following the rules, obeying my captain, working as a team, aiming for a goal, for a record, for victory, proving the effectiveness of my training, so I cannot have done anything wrong.”

But for the moment I was an aggressive tyke, playing fantasy games on my own or with others, whom I led to imaginary victories over: Romans, Saxons, Normans, native Americans, Boers and wild tribesmen, all to establish the British Empire. My board games were always about military tactics and victory, whether in games developed for that purpose like Risk and chess, or in games simulating capitalist gambling, like snakes and ladders and Monopoly.

**The Working Class**

My mother’s father, Samuel David Woodcock (1878-1968) was a worker in a factory. It was in his terraced house that I first discovered the sacred front room: with unplayed piano and all the best things, but only available for important guests and special occasions. When the four of us stayed with him, mum’s sister, her husband and daughter slept in the boys’ backroom, whilst we shared the upstairs front room with her two sons. Granddad remained in his room and the downstairs front room remained sacred and empty: no-one slept there unless they were in a coffin.

When he came to stay, he brought a snooker table and taught us how to play. It was a tiny quarter-size table and I became quite expert on it over the next ten years, but sadly the skills were not transferable, so that I always think I can play and want to play, when offered a game on a proper table, only to be surprised at how hard it is. Strangely if I relax, and stop trying, “the force” does often take over, and these brilliant but rare successes encourage me to persist. Fortunately my Myhill meanness would never let me gamble, but I can see how people get hooked.

Granddad was an enthusiastic Fabian and introduced me to the work of Sydney and Beatrice Webb (1858-1943). So it was, through him, that I came to meet Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990), who was married to Beatrice’s niece, Katherine Dobbs. His dramatic conversion to Christianity in 1969, when I was at university, made me realise that no amount of certainty against God, could ever shut Him out. Beatrice invented “collective bargaining” which became so important to me in my life as a union representative.

Grandfather Woodcock introduced me to “The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist, by Robert Tressel (1870-1911). The book, published three years after his death from TB, is an effecting story of the cruel exploitation of skilled working men like himself. It soon became a classic of solidarity for union activists everywhere. He wrote about what he knew, having suffered in an industrial dispute in Hastings. His pen name, after the decorator’s trestle table, was intended to protect him against blacklisting. His real name was Noonan and he had been Croker in South Africa, when he fought
against the British in the Boer War, and was interned by them. Strange to think that both my
grandfathers may have shot at him, when serving in the Boer War.

My dad, influenced by his aunts’ socialism, was an admirer of Tressel’s book, especially after his own
internment in Hong Kong. I love the symbolism Noonan (alias Croker, pen name Tressel) working as a
sign writer in Hastings. The Norman Conquest of 1066 being a sign of exploitation by a foreign
power of the British working class, ever since. I should have taken the sign and became a union
representative as soon as I started work, instead of waiting till I was in my fifties.

Granddad Woodcock (not to be confused with George Woodcock (head of the TUC from 1904-1979)
lost his eye whilst working as a fitter in a factory making Linoleum in Greenwich (a good reason for
being a health and safety rep). He had started work aged eight, because his father had died and his
older brother sold the market garden business in Norfolk, and went to America. Granddad lived in
Norfolk and worked on the boats that travelled down the coast to London. He married Elizabeth
Davidson and they had six children, of which my mother was the third. He kept two allotments to feed
them.

Where there’s Muck there’s Brass

My first venture into hard work and capitalism, came with six White Sussex and six Rhode Island
Reds. The real hard work was performed by our “gardener”, an itinerant gentleman of the road, who
lived out the winter in what had been the tack room, between the “stables”, used to store the
sideshow for the annual church fete, and carriage shed, which housed mum’s Austin A30 (1958-64).
He put an excellent fox-proof fence at the back of the house. I had been attempting to dig an outdoor
swimming pool, as I was missing the sea. With great effort, it was about six feet square and three feet
depth, but I was defeated by the subsoil. If I had been as energetic in cleaning out my hens, my mother
would have been saved some labour. As it was, I kept them fed and watered and collected their eggs
and sometimes cleaned them out. But they were “my” hens and I paid for the corn and my mother
paid me for the eggs. I kept a cash record of the income and expenditure and felt myself a business
man at nine. Of course I paid nothing for the hens or the fence or the land; and my mother had no use
for 12 eggs a day. She tried to store them in isinglass, but giving them away was probably cheaper.

Fortunately the excess was short-lived, as the hens soon succumbed to various ailments. One or two
required nursing, but most were perky one day and dead the next. My only veterinary success was
treating them for red mite (an irritating insect, not a socialist) with DDT – a fumigation that probably
took years off my life and damaged the hens more than the red mite. When we got down to one hen
(Henny Penny) – she was allowed the freedom of the whole garden during the day and would follow
me around like a small dog. She was the only hen I was really fond of, so that I cried for a long time,
when she succumbed to the inevitable fox. I expect my family were somewhat relieved: getting more
hens was never suggested. But I had become used to having hens around, and have rarely been
without them since 1972. Their other enduring legacy was an enthusiasm for keeping accounts and
avoiding financial risk. Thus I have combined the careful capitalism of my father’s father with the
Chartist ideals of my other relatives.

My other financial enterprises were for the church rather than personal gain, but they also impacted
upon my adult life. I would go from house to house selling tickets for the parish fete, getting to know
everyone. This practice prepared me for door-to-door political campaigning as a adult and for cold
calling as a salesman. Assisting on stalls at the fete gave me confidence in crowd situations: a
necessary step in changing a shy introverted child into a public speaker.

The Grandfather
My first novel “Waters of Oblivion”, written in my twenties, asks: ‘What if Richard Nixon (1913-1994, Xinon in the novel) had deliberately brought about his own fall to reduce the power of the American Presidency and gain his own oblivion?’ One of the main characters is the archetypal “Grandfather” combining the best of my own grandfathers with my own ideal of all the knowledge and wisdom I was trying to amass in my history of ideas thesis “Social Networks and Social Problems”

The Grandfather also had the brain power of the left wing intellectuals whom we met on holiday in North Wales (August 1958). Dad had been offered a free holiday for all four of us at Butlins in Pwllheli in exchange for light duties as camp chaplain. I think he took his duties seriously as we did not see much of him. But when we left the camp, we did meet with the Welsh Bloomsbury group who were drawn to Portmerion and Snowdonia walks.

1) RS Thomas (1913-2000) not unrelated to Florence, who wrote some of the greatest poetry of the twentieth century.

2) Eric Hobsbawn (1917-), whose Jewish anti-Zionism kept him in the Communist Party longer than most. In May 1968 he organised “Marx and Contemporary Scientific Thought” at the Sorbonne, which was very attractive to a first year politics student. The conference ended in marches and tear gas and the rift between my generation of revolutionaries and the older Marxists like Hobsbawn.

3) EP Thompson (1924-1993) had just combined with a young man called John Saville to produce “The Reasoner” a Marxist magazine, critical of the communist party. This later became “The New Reasoner” when they left the party. John Saville (1916-2009) was one of the attractions of my going to Hull University in 1967. Later in 1979, Thompson offered me a post qualification course in social work at Essex University. His brother, Frank, had been a close friend of Iris Murdoch.

4) Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) knew how to speak to a boy of ten. His “History of Western Philosophy” became my bible in sixth form and he sent a telegram of support for our university sit-in in 1968.

5) Joseph Needham (1900-1995) was the closest to my archetypal grandfather, as he was an expert on the technology of rural China. Whilst writing my first novel, I was also trying to make a Chinese wheelbarrow from pictures in Needham’s “Science and Civilisation”. It was this combination of theory and practice which inspired me. It was ideology made flesh, back to nature as part of the class struggle, Marxian Chinese culture.

Not that I made any impression on these great men at the time. What impressed me, and them, was my mother’s bright red jeans. I had never seen her in trousers of any kind and was very impressed by the impact of both colour and design, that one item of clothing could make on so many serious men. She could not have gained so many approving stares if she had gone topless. Dad rather liked the bold statement: “much better than the pink hat she wore for our wedding!” He hated pink: no watered down socialism for him.

Death of a Grandfather

Frederick William Myhill (1875-1960) was the first significant person to die in my life and I did cry. But, like our departure from Hong Kong, it was many years before I realised just how much I had lost: financially, culturally and emotionally by his passing the 100 metres from Red House to Hethel churchyard. At the time it simply meant fewer holidays in Hethel and thus less contact with Walter and the cows. Aunt Dolly was happy to accommodate Dad and I, but was unwilling to have her comfortable disarray of cats on tables and cobwebs in corners viewed by my house-proud mother, aware perhaps that mum would never look down on anyone, but might roll her sleeves up and clean the place back to its 1900s heyday.
Financially the loss was huge as my Uncle Peter, left in charge of the estate, which he held in trust for me, proceeded to sell off the Red House (£3,500 in 1960 – but the attached field sold for half a million in 2010 and the Red House for three quarters of a million in 2012) and the estate cottages (another million’s-worth sold for hundreds only). If Dolly had not outlived him, the farmhouse also would have gone before I inherited my grandfather’s diminished dynastic dream. Grandfather also expected his oldest son to leave the family business to his grandson. It went instead to his second wife’s children. A pattern of loss repeated in much greater country estates than ours.

Just after his death, dad took me to stay with Dolly for three weeks. Meanwhile my mother was at St Luke’s hospital for clergy having a mastectomy. Uncle Peter and his first wife, Margaret, and Dolly drove me back to Cofton and stayed overnight. It was their only visit, and Dolly’s only night away from the farm between 1936 and 1981. The cattle market was moved from the city centre in Norwich to the edge of the city off Hall Road. Peter Davies (alias Peter Pan: JM Barrie had been his guardian) threw himself under a train at Sloane Square at this time (Daphne du Maurier was his cousin). Great events surround the passing of a great man.

Judge not that ye be not Judged

At eleven I played the judge in our school play “Toad of Toad Hall” by AA Milne (1882-1956). When his mother died, Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932) was five. He was sent to live with his aunt at “The Mount” (this was the name of my private school and of the Quaker school in York). This was the setting for his story “The Wind in the Willows”. Toad was modelled on his son Alastair, who killed himself at Oxford, aged 20. The Wilde Wood was based on Quarry Wood (my first school was Quarry Bay).

My Boyar clearly saw the pontificating, judgemental, holier than thou, moral high ground, boy with his Empire English enunciation: characteristics which typecast me as chairman, manager, director and magistrate. But my heart remained always with the rebellious, adventurous, wanderlust of Mr Toad. Even then, it was only my dreamy reflective nostalgia that prevented me from revolution, and allowed the conformist respectability to be my default façade to the world.

Perhaps that was Alastair’s problem, that lacking the imagination of his father, he had nowhere to escape from the role of Oxford don. Kenneth had wanted to go to Oxford, so it was his dream for his son. He had been forced into the bank, but had his dreams to escape into and could not see that Alastair might feel forced in Oxford, without dreams.

This was also the year I saw Ben Hur (11 academy awards the previous year). The screen play was by Christopher Fry (1907-2005). He had produced “The lady’s not for burning” the year of my birth and became a mentor to me as he was to other young writers like Harold Pinter (1930-2008) and Tom Stoppard (1937-). The pomp of those Romans in Ben Hur certainly came across in my performance of the Judge.

Dogged Devotion

I have always been adored by dogs and small children. My first worshipper was a little girl of five (less than half my age: why do girls of 30 not have crushes on me now?) who had seen me as the Judge and thought I was utterly wonderful. Sadly for her I only had eyes for older women (of 12 or even 13). I have often been followed home by strange dogs, who had the same puppy love, devotion, dedication but without the sweet shyness of my first admirer. Small children and dogs bring out the puppy in me, which normally hides unsuppressed by socialisation: that wonderful enthusiasm, questioning, and capacity to be surprised.
It was soon after this that I fell in love with Philippa. Dolly’s niece, six months younger than me, was staying with her at the same time as I was and we spent a lot of time together. She was used to playing with boys having an older brother and I was enchanted to be playing with a pretty girl, just as if we were a couple of boys. All my schools had been co-ed, but boys and girls hardly ever played together (except for kiss catch: the relationship of Stone Age men). It was like Pip’s love for Estella. I decided we were in love and would marry when we were older and she went along with this game as she did with other pretend games. We told Aunt Dolly with great excitement and I think she was a little worried at first, till she realised this was Romantic imagination, not sexuality. Absence allowed us to discover new dreams.

In July I visited Slimbridge, bored by restrictions and landscape. Peter Scott (1909-1989) was the son of the famous Arctic explorer, and he had created a wetland for wild birds, and he had led Prince Philip to take up gliding; but he had only one thing of interest to me, his daughter Nicola (1943-). It was only when I had children of my own that I became interested in feathered birds.

**Discipline and Anger**

My father led a very orderly life. He had said the morning prayers before he had breakfast and was usually finishing breakfast when we got up at 7.30am. His mornings were usually spent writing letters and sermons or arranging events, and the afternoons in visiting his parishioners or attending meetings. At 12.55pm and 5.55pm there would be total silence whilst he listened to the weather forecast and lunch would start on the dot of 1pm and dinner at 6pm.

Noisy children put his teeth on edge, especially when they interrupted his routine, but an angry “humph” or “shust” was usually sufficient to make us behave. He had been brought up by a Victorian patriarch where children were seen but not heard. He had been a teacher and headmaster and could not understand why his boys did not respect him with awe and total obedience. The problem was that mum was our goddess, and we always wanted to do not just what she expected of us, but a hundred times more. She had this devotion because we were boys, whose every need was met by her omniscience. In contrast dad was a distant star, amusingly pompous, when he became cross and red in the face, but not to be pushed too far.

I learnt this the hard way, when I was refusing to eat properly at table. I was running about saying “shan’t”, when day lost his temper, grabbed me, put me over his knee and spanked me. He never needed to do such a thing again, and I never doubted that his action was wholly justified.

My brother had been less fortunate. Before I was born he had been climbing on the balustrade of the balcony, terrifying mum. He was told off but did it again. This time he was seized by an irate dad, and soundly spanked. At four this decisive action by his new step-father was his “first experience of violence and male anger and strength”. He felt it “caused an irreparable breech between us”. Later in life he came to realise that dad had had a hard life and was very glad that I was able to establish a close bond with him.

In later life I came to realise that I had inherited some of my father’s short temper, expressed as tantrums as a child, and rages as an adult. All the more miraculous that I should lose my anger in the year of his death.

Despite this, I remember lovely family holidays. A week in Lechlade: we visited Chedworth Roman villa and Cirencester, where Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was born. The amphitheatre at Cirencester was being excavated by archaeologists, and I wanted to be an archaeologist for several years. An interest rekindled later by the study of anthropology at university. It was on this holiday that dad first took me on “church crawls” explaining the architectural signs of each church’s age. And the house had a table tennis table, for evening entertainment.
Secondary Boyhood

Behold the Dreamer

It still amazes me that I passed my 11-plus. I had missed so much schooling. Miss Thomas had made sums make sense and Mrs Boyar had got me to enjoy reading, but I would still rather run in the woods or play with my Dinky cars. Television was a small distraction but it encouraged my day dreams.

I barely answered half the questions and many of my answers may have been wrong. I received the results on 16/06/1960; and on 16/06/1985 I moved down to Church Farm as my permanent home.

I soon realised that the range of ability within the grammar school was much greater that the range in the secondary modern. But, private education had given me confidence and I was not put off by the fact that others knew more than I did. In my first year I sat behind Richard Mugg, who printed his own magazine explaining physics. He went on to work for NASA.

Science

On the top floor, Mr “Cotyledon” was our form teacher and biology master. A charming gentle man, who made his subject really interesting, but persuaded me that I could not draw accurately, so I would never do well in biology. This worried me at the time because I felt biology was essential for my training as a farmer. Fortunately O level depended on human biology, and with my illnesses I found this easy. In my post-graduate research on the idea of a social network, I followed the network of ideas into studies of neurology and found the basic science I learnt at school most useful.

On the second floor, physics was about atoms and molecules and other invisible things which, as a vicar’s son, I found fascinating. I also found the maths fairly easy, but never managed to put it all together until at university I read Einstein’s book, since when I have been delighted by the developments in astronomy and particle physics, and often wish I had put in the work in those first few years, to become a real physicist. But I was not yet ready to learn cartloads of facts or practice maths equations until I was proficient. It was so easy to muddle along.

Chemistry on the first floor was quite another matter. Mr Lewis was an exacting disciplinarian: he had to be with 34 ignorant yobs and dangerous chemicals on every bench. We rebels on the back bench were especially keenly watched. The subject was presented in such a tedious way: rote learning of tables and formulae, without even understanding why. So I gave up after three years and only discovered my loss when studying pharmacology, used in the care of elderly and mentally ill. Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” (1962) would have brought the subject alive, but it was five more years before I heard of that book of chemistry.

Languages

Science was somewhere between challenging and difficult, but languages lay between pointless and impossible. Why learn Latin when no-one speaks or writes it anymore? Sadly the view I had then has become normal, whilst I have come to see the importance of Latin in understanding English. “Horace” (who taught Latin and music) loved to cosy up to the girls and make the boys look foolish, so he was not popular with either. He could not ignore my Latin ability, as my father’s supervision assured me ten out of ten for all my Latin homework, without my remembering anything, assuring me of 15 percent in the exam. Horace wrote tersely in my report that I was “erratic”. I had to look it up in a dictionary!
Nor, in a music lesson, could he ignore the pencil that I threw at my friend Simon Richardson, who ducked, allowing the pencil to continue until it bounced off the piano, an inch from Horace’s Roman nose. He thumped the lid closed, and turned to face the class in an absolute rage. He kept the class in for most of playtime, but no-one gave me away. Teachers it appears do not have eyes in the back of their heads!

We were not so fortunate with the regular music teacher, Mr Morris (why would you need a nickname when you lived in the heart of Austin Motors country and have the name of the opposition?) Simon and I were on the back row, playing about as usual in boring classes (George Formby (1904-1961) was my idea of music at this time). Morris had better hearing than Horace and leapt from the piano in order to see our noisy altercation result in school books landing on the floor. We were called to the front and asked if we preferred five debits, a number that led to a visit to the head and the issue of a “pin report” which the headmaster would send to our parents. Two such reports led to canning by the headmaster. Three meant suspension from school. Any further bad behaviour led to expulsion to the Secondary Modern School.

Or would we prefer to be slippered, here and now, in front of the class and get it over with.

Were we brave or foolish? The embarrassing part was having to return to my class room to get my gym shoes from my desk. Not that I wish to downplay the pain: small boys have very little flesh on their backsides and Morris was a large, strong and angry man, so the third strike made sitting down out of the question: but it was the public humiliation, the loss of face, which hurt me most at the time.

I was wrong to feel that, as many classmates who witnessed the whacking have said how horrified they were. For most it was the only public corporal punishment they ever witnessed and gave them a life-long aversion to such violence. Some of them even suffered a vicarious trauma worse than mine.

French was equally bad, as teachers would go round the room picking on pupils to translate and so my ignorance shone forth. At least I was able to give Latin up after a couple of years, but Francais had to be suffered for five. Four of those years were with “Fanny” Baxter, the deputy headmistress, whose skin condition was more discussed than her teaching. She was determined that most of the bottom set would pass French O level and she succeeded. My mother helped by working through linguaphone records with me, so at least I sounded French.

As an adult staying in Paris, I soon realised that an American accent would have excused me trying to speak French, whereas my accent made people believe I could understand their language, so they would speak quickly, until I understood nothing.

Art was a language in which I felt fully understood, as our teacher encouraged free expression and I loved it. Augustus John (1878-1961) kept me going till the third year, when we were taught and marked, and pictures had to look like photos, and I dropped art.

**Maths and English**

I found I understood new concepts as soon as they were explained, but became bored whilst the teacher explained the idea again and again, to those who could not grasp it. Sadly this meant I was careless when working out problems for exams. Those who found the formulae hard to understand were far more careful in their calculations and so ended up with better marks than mine. I was a hare in maths, often passed by the tortoises, as I searched for more challenging ideas.

It was the same with my essays, which were full of complex thoughts that I could not spell. Fortunately my spoken language came from conversation with intelligent adults, so précis, syntax, grammar and punctuation were all easy. Sadly my handwriting was messy and I was more interested in my thoughts than in making them interesting for my readers. Reading poetry aloud was a delight that kept me interested in the subject, despite clausal analysis and criticism from a pre-war generation.
I was reading Bulldog Drummond, Just William and Conan Doyle, whilst intelligent girls of my age were reading Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde. My brother was reading Lady Chatterley (2nd of November the book was found not guilty and by the 10th 200,000 paperback copies had been sold.) I sought the fantastic to escape the tedium of school, whilst they sought to understand adult life. I enjoyed my reading and lived in my imagination.

**History and Geography**

Imagination was essential for history, where I successfully placed myself in any past era. But it was a disadvantage in geography, where we studied the “facts” about Bromsgrove, a town where many pupils had lived their whole lives, a provincial backwater as far as I was concerned. One of the “facts” we learnt was that South America and Africa never did fit together: it was just coincidence that they looked as if they would fit. Wegener’s theory of continental drift had been out of fashion for 40 years and was only just becoming irrefutable.. Collecting stamps taught me more about the world than three years of geography lessons.

**Religious Education**

In the first year this was taught by the headmaster, who had a degree in science, as a way of getting to know the names of all 1,000 pupils in the school. An amazing achievement on his part. My achievement in this subject was always dismissed on the grounds that my father was a clergyman, which was rather unfair, as he never taught me anything about the Bible. The knowledge I had was from my mother. My success came from an innate (genetic?) interest in any strange stories of other cultures. 1960 was the year the Archbishop of Canterbury met the Roman Pope for the first time since the Reformation, and then he was replaced by Michael Ramsey the 100th Archbishop. I could not have named the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but I knew about church politics.

**Non-academic lessons**

Jacqueline Thomas, 15 years old, was murdered in Birmingham, during my first year at secondary school. But life in rural Worcestershire only felt threatening during physical education lessons. These were a nightmare. The terror of falling off a beam or horse, tripping over a hurdle or simply hurting myself trying to do a forward roll or a handstand.

Cross-country is no fun for overweight boys who have spent a quarter of their days in bed. I enjoyed walking at the back.

Woodwork and metalwork were really interesting, but I showed no special aptitude and received no encouragement. A lifetime of attempting DIY has proven my teachers accurate, but I continue to admire practical skills about intellectual cleverness.

**Parental Busyness**

Dad’s routines: mornings typing letters or sermons; afternoons visiting (two afternoons a week gardening); evenings meetings or more visiting (except weekend evenings usually watching a bit of television with us) and some reading. Sunday evenings I would sometimes help him add up the collection money, from the three or four services he had led.

Mum’s routines revolved around housework: Mondays were washdays and Wednesdays ironing; sunny days for gardening and everyday for cleaning. Then there were cooked breakfasts and dinners
to be prepared and cooked lunches on Saturdays and Sundays and holidays. Bread was an extra, never a meal as it is for me as an adult. Her evenings would be spent darning, mending or knitting.

Mum went with Paul and myself to Aberystwyth for the day to see where Paul was to start university in autumn 1961. When he had gone, she did spend more time on dressmaking, a genetic predisposition, she shared with her three sisters and a skill she really enjoyed. Attending classes brought her friends who shared this interest. But she did not reduce her work with Young Wives club, Mother’s Union, youth club and Sunday school. Women always were the majority of the congregation and the ones who involved their families in the life of the church. She won the hearts of the parish, whilst dad responded to their questions, and it was the same within the family. Somehow they found time to take us to Dudley Zoo, to Hereford Cathedral’s chained library, to hills for walks and country houses for imagination.

It was their busyness that infected us, so that we learnt to fill our own time: to never be idle, to always have several projects on the go, always attempting to engage with other minds.

**Pop Music**

I was too young to go to the Cavern Club in Liverpool to see the Beatles or the Marquee Club in Oxford Street for the Rolling Stones, but my brother kept me informed. He bought singles and played them on his gramophone, but I was much more impressed by his ability with guitar and piano accordion. I loved light music like George Formby (1904-1961) who met his wife at a music hall in Castleford in 1923 (my daughter married a man who lived in Castleford, through them both following Depeche Mode). Perhaps if I had seen these groups live, I would have become hooked on popular music. As it was, I heard a symphony orchestra playing Elgar, so that all the Third Programme and classical records I heard at home suddenly became my music, and I passed through the 1960s with knowledge but no enthusiasm for its music. The music I danced wildly to in my bedroom was Beethoven and Brahms. I danced in the same way at discos and parties in my 20s and 30s.

Only with the emergence of punk in the 1970s did I discover a sound (and sentiments) that matched the wildness of my classical music inspired dancing. Many of my instinctual movements became the trademark of head-banging heavy metal dancers and currently finds more elegant presentation in modern dance performances. Chinese dissonance, Bartok and punk, were all one to me. But I was part of the cultural shift, moving from Dixon to Z Cars (that gave our national treasure Brian Blessed) whilst “The Avengers” gave me the rolled umbrella. We were reading our first copies of Private Eye but no longer able to buy a sweet for a farthing.

In 1961 and 1962 we stayed on a farm a mile from Llanthony Abbey and dad and I went walking on the Brecon Beacons most days. There were already second-hand bookshops in Hay-on-Wye but no festival, no crowds. On really hot afternoons my brother and I went swimming in the river. There was no rain, hardly a cloud and everything was perfect. It was here that my mother tried to teach me to play the piano.

**White Christmas**

1962-3 was a real winter, reminding many of the horrors of 1947. But I missed most of it as I started to vomit whilst preparing for the parish New Year party. My grumbling appendix had finally come of age, and I experienced some of the worst pain I had known, and also acute embarrassment of being bed-bound in the next bed to an attractive girl of my own age. Not where a boy wants to be with post-operative constipation on a bedpan. “The screens nurse, the screens” (Goon show). By the time I was back to school, the three months of snow was almost over.
Annus mirabilis (Philip Larkin poem)

I had been back less than a month when I started to limp, because of a pain in my left hip. Despite visits to three GPs, it was another month before I was seen by a surgeon, who diagnosed a “slipped epiphysis” and ordered me into hospital for another operation. By the time I got into hospital, it was too late to operate. Instead I spent a month on traction (weights pulling my leg, as a mild form of the Medieval torture of the rack). After this I was put in plaster, from my ankle to my nipples, where I remained for a couple of months. I was so traumatised by this stage that my mum insisted on nursing me at home. I had a few weeks of privacy and loving care, but it was no good for her health.

When the plaster came off, I was declared to be a miracle, as I could walk without crutches and without pain, and the usual deformity of the condition had been prevented. I was exhibited to a couple of conferences of surgeons.

The miracle lasted for August, but on a visit to Ludlow Castle, I felt pain in my right hip and was straight back in hospital to have that hip pinned as the other should have been. Another month in hospital, due to the incision reopening when the stitches were removed, and life became almost normal, albeit on crutches and living at home.

Four days each week, I had a teacher visit me each morning for an hour with lots of homework. I had missed nearly two terms of school work and had to spend autumn term at home. On the fifth school day mum would drive me out to Clee Hill or Malvern and I would walk up with my crutches, a wonderful sense of achievement, after so long in hospital.

But, past all the fear, pain, discomfort, loss of privacy, family life, dignity, past the sense of being physically abused, was a most memorable experience of déjà vu, when I was first taken into the orthopaedic hospital on a trolley, and everything was familiar, although I had seen none of it before. The abiding sense that everything had already happened, that I had somehow been here before, gave me confidence that all would be well. Far from missing out on education, the experience made learning a joy. Four hours a week for one term, was all I needed to “follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost power of human thought”. I would have learnt far less in a classroom everyday for the whole school year.

Annus Horribillis

Caring for me through all these hospital visits was a great deal of extra strain for my mother. In January 1964 I was back to school, but mum was very ill with cancer. It spread to her liver and she died on Easter Saturday 28/03/1964, four years to the day after grandfather’s funeral. It all came as a huge shock to me as I had been the invalid throughout the previous year and no-one had told me of her frequent visits to GP and hospital.

On Good Friday at church I sang: “There is a green hill, close at hand, where my dear mum is suffering.” On Easter Saturday I was watching the Boat Race to distract myself and would not go to see her last moments of consciousness, because she looked so ill that morning. Oxford lost. The previous evening she had said that she did not really believe in an afterlife, which shocked me deeply at the time as an absurd idea, but I was not expecting her to die. In the years that followed, this thought ate away at my soul with a deep fear that I would not even see her again when I was dead.

My brother and father were similarly traumatised. It was painful to us when others eulogised her and we were quite unable to talk about her amongst ourselves. It was ten years before I was able to talk about her properly, and only then was I able to let go of my grief. Easter Saturday 1974 my daughter Stella was born: new life to replace the life I had lost.
Everyone remembers where they were on the 22/11/63, the day President Kennedy was shot. It turned out it was the day after my parents’ last wedding anniversary. The only news of note on the day she died was the launch of Radio Caroline!

**Awe to Déjà vu in 1965**

The year began with the state funeral of Winston Churchill on January 30th, and saw the passing of TS Eliot and Stan Laurel, as well as Somerset Maugham.

Schooling meant there was less time to lie on my back and watch the clouds, imagining the stories behind their changing shapes. Schooling regards the works of men above the works of nature. Rationalism, scholasticism and sophistry were taking over my life. Being an invalid encouraged me to books, when I longed for games. The loss of my mother led me to turn to study to forget the death horror that lies at the heart of nature.

Dreams were the great escape and by recording them, when I woke, I was able to relive the pleasure of this alternate reality. Thus I became aware in waking times that I had seen these events in a dream. Perhaps this was an illusion? But always such déjà vu was accompanied by a heightened sense of reality and I soon learnt to take such a feeling as a guide, encouraging me to take up a new relationship.

Dianne Pilkington (1946-1984) felt perfect to me. She was two years above me in school, wore glasses like my mum, had long curly hair and taught me how to kiss with passion, which we did after I walked her the mile home from youth club on Saturdays and from church on Sundays. We had one date, the film “It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World” at the Gaumont giant screen. I chose to sit in the front row and really enjoyed the film. This clearly reminded her that I was very young and she ended the relationship. I was miserable, but I had learnt that I could express the love I had received from my mother to any woman who attracted me.

**Measles**

This was my last proper illness. Dad was now my carer and he was clearly worried. For a week, I was too weak to leave my bed, my temperature was about 105. The doctor visited several times. The curtains were drawn throughout, as light was agony to my eyes. It was not a sitting-up-in-bed-reading illness and there was no mum to fuss over me. These factors seem to have persuaded my subconscious that illness was no longer a good thing and I have never had more than a couple of days in bed since. Sickly childhood ended with this dramatic near-death experience, in which I sought the darkness, life and health.

Daphne du Maurier’s (1902-1989) son died at about this time and I gained a mother surrogate. She was not bisexual, nor did she suffer incest from her father, as has been alleged, but she was a brilliant writer. She moved to Kilmarth near Par in Cornwall.

This was the year my great mentor Somerset Maugham died. He had been traumatised at the age of eight when his mother died and he was sent away to school in Kent, where he was bullied on account of his Irish accent, causing him to develop the stammer that lasted all his life. There was no stammer in his writing. “Human Bondage” got me through college and into Paris (in the novel he converts his stammer into a club foot, which related more closely to my leg problems). His writings set in China and South East Asia, brought my childhood to life. But it was Cakes and Ale and “The Theatre” that helped me comprehend the Du Mauriers, and Daphne’s grandfather, who helped me with my déjà vu experiences.
More Surrogates

My brother married Dianne Willets. Like my Dianne, she had long hair and glasses and was keen to be a housewife and mother. Her father, who died 21/2/1967, had known Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969), when they both worked in a London hotel before the war. Like many war time babies, Dianne met her father for the first time at the end of the war, screamed and ran away from him. Both Dianne and Paul were looking for continuing parenting.

David Wilkinson lived at the end of Cofton Church Lane, in the cottage next to the church. He was one of my most consistent friends from nine to 19: beating me at Monopoly, Risk, table tennis, tennis, sledging and anything else competitive. He was a substitute elder brother and role model. His mother played the church organ. His father, Andrew Wilkinson (1933-1991) taught education at Birmingham University and went on to be Professor of Education at the University of East Anglia, where he again met up with Malcolm Bradbury (1932-2000) who had previously taught at Hull University.

Andrew wrote several plays that were broadcast on the Third Programme. He introduced me to Richard Hoggart (1918-) who was Professor of English at Birmingham (1962-73) because they both worked on spoken language and its part in education. Richard Hoggart also had his first academic job at Hull University (1959-62); but before that he had been a student a Leeds University with Rev. David Main (1918-) who was vicar of Hethel at this time.

Aunt Dolly told the Rev David off at his first meeting with her: “You are not praying over me, I won’t have it.” They became good friends competing in deafness and art appreciation. David and his wife Molly had become missionaries in Egypt. Molly was a substitute mother to me for many years. She did exquisite still life paintings.

A New Age

I went to the Quaker Meeting House at Bull Street, Birmingham to see “The War Game” which had been made for the BBC, which decided it was too horrific to show. The real impact of a single nuclear bomb was so huge that civil defence plans were shown to be futile, and the Quaker discussion that followed impressed me with the madness of nuclear defence strategy. The film was shot in Kent – places that were to become familiar to me in the late 1970s.

At about the same time, I watched a party political broadcast by Jo Grimond and found I agreed with everything he said, mainly about devolution of centralised power and the necessity for young people to engage in politics and be the cutting edge of the Liberal Party. Within weeks I had set up a local group of young Liberals with 20 members, started attending adult party meetings and arranged for a visit from the national leader of Liberal Students; and I was five years too young to vote!

I arranged for the “The War Game” to be shown in Bromsgrove in a large church hall, followed by a ‘Question Time’ session involving local politicians. It was the most successful meeting I arranged as Chair of the local young Liberals, as the hall was full and the discussion lively. I had become a political activist with Quaker leanings. Aldermaston beckoned.

Freedom of Scotland

To celebrate my GCE O levels, dad took me to Scotland and we had rail tickets that allowed us to travel anywhere. We climbed Ben Nevis; took the ferry from Mallaig to Portree, where I experienced my first Presbyterian communion with individual glasses, real bread and a hell fire sermon; and those wonderful train rides from Kyle to Inverness and north to Thurso. The rugged countryside reminded me of Hong Kong and we both felt very much at home.
My brother had completed his teacher training and moved to Southend-on-Sea to take up his first teaching post. Southend was in the frontline for conflict between Mods and Rockers, and my brother had a Lambretta.

This was also the year of the publication of “The Concise British Flora” an amazing collection of flower drawings (every wild flower you could ever hope to find in Britain) by Rev Keble Martin (1877-1969) who served the wonderful parishes of Haccombe and Coffinswell in Devon. The book enabled me to recognise and distinguish flowers, so that 20 years later I was able to document the wild flora of the family farm.

Sixth Form

This was a time of increasing political awareness. I became chairman of the sixth form discussion group, which led to a girlfriend, Ann Askey, who became secretary of our Young Liberals. The other parties appeared to be controlled by big business or the unions. Neither was supportive of local needs, which were always overruled by the “national interest”.

But nationalism was “on the way out” according to Michael Flanders (1922-75) and Donald Swan (1923-94), a Quaker conscientious objector and member of Friends’ Ambulance Unit, gave me a sense of how English music might make fun of itself in words. English music for me at this time meant Worcester’s own Edward Elgar (1857-1934). Dad took me to see them in Birmingham, and their songs became shorthand for my political views.

History

Miss Scatchard (scratch-it-hard) had caught my attention in the fourth form with her tales of “blood running in the sewers of Paris at the time of the Revolution. She brought time and place vividly into our classroom, so that background reading was pleasure. History was always my best subject, both dad and my daughter Emma read history at university, and I loved writing essays. I would have been much safer carrying on with history at university, but I wanted to engage with the here and now, the “real world” and learn how I might change it. I wanted to be an MP, ideally PM. I was reading Bertrand Russell’s “History of Western Philosophy” and believed every word. I was reading GM Trevelyan’s (1876-1962) social history and getting a view of sociology as an intellectual subject (an error that took a university degree to dispel.)

Christopher Hill (1912-2003) was my hero, giving a political explanation of the seventeenth century English Revolution. I did not meet him till the 1990s, when he came to speak to Norwich Quakers about our seventeenth century origins. Inevitably I compared Charles I to Macmillan and Cromwell to Harold Wilson, Charles II to Edward Heath. I sought in my own times for the equivalents of Milton and Newton, Herbert, Donne and Marvell. I still want to be part of the Restoration (not of the Monarchy of 1660, but the freedom of the 1960s). I saw myself as John Lilburne, who suffered for the right of free speech, so well presented by Quaker Pauline Gregg (1909-2006).

English Literature

We went to see Richard II and Anthony and Cleopatra at Stratford. They went well together as both are tales of absolute power blinded by love, both are about the nature of patriotism and regime change. York’s speech: “this England” gave me an enduring interest in the nature of Englishness. Enobarbus speech, made “infinite variety” the essential quality I sought in all the women with whom I fell in love.
But it was Middlemarch which provided a measure of individuals and community. When I was writing my great “Key to all Social Sciences” I compared myself to Casaubon. Later in life I would often say with Mr Brooke, “I went into that a good deal at one time, but I saw where it would lead”, thus satirising my own optimism which presents false starts as valuable experience and failures as experiments.

The poems of Tennyson required more effort, but it was a worthwhile struggle, making me keen to discover in pre-twentieth century poets, the gems that can speak to every age. It also made contemporary poetry a real delight, because of its instant accessibility.

But, I was already looking beyond English literature; excited by Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” and Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment”. Reading great literature in order to understand the world, I was horrified by the shallowness of American writing, and what I saw as its impact on 1960s “kitchen sink” drama. I had not yet discovered the French.

DH Lawrence’s “Sons and Lovers” felt far superior to those who imitated him. This was a set book that “spoke to my condition”. My love for my dead mother, my passion for good Ann and my longing for more experienced women, are described so well in that novel.

The metaphysical poets and Dryden’s “Absalom and Achitophel” gave depth to my historical studies of the seventeenth century, which became the time in which I felt most comfortable, from that time forth.

**Theology**

I was nicknamed Dr Syn, after the Synoptic gospels, and because most boys had the odd “kiss curl” as part of their hair fashion, whilst I had a “snogging lock” (this later became a “comb over”, last vestige of the baldie man.) As in English, there were two boys and 15 girls in my class. From five years of kicking a ball and talking mostly with boys, I became an intellectual and a lady’s man. No longer Jolly John, but Don Juan!

If there is a religious gene, I had it. I had always wanted to be at church or Sunday school with my mother, and always felt closest to her when thinking of Bible stories. My father’s profession had set me apart (the Hong Kong childhood and Sunday services as the centre of the week) so I sought Confirmation to emphasise my separateness and persuaded my friends to come to Evensong, followed by games and kissing at the Vicarage. It was a respectable address to invite young people for parties. There was no real drunkenness, but many close relationships developed, and parents did not worry.

I loved studying the gospels and wanted to convert all my atheist friends to the “Truth”. I also enjoyed the strange stories of the Old Testament. Like the Chinese, the Jews were a more interesting and definable culture than the English, so perhaps I also have a gene for anthropology.

Some of my favourite people were in this class. We were aware of our fallibility and liked to laugh. We were not competitive, as many were in history and English. We studied for pleasure and for answers, not for marks. Several of the class became clergy, and I believe their congregations are fortunate.

**Dancing**

With Ann Askey, I attended private ballroom dance classes once a week and we also went to an after-school dance society: Cha-cha to Gay Gordons. This was very different from primary school country dancing, as close physical contact with girls was the prime objective.
Our teachers were preparing us for the social world of a past era. When I got to university, I was surprised and disappointed to discover that the annual “Ball” was a pop band playing and everyone “jiggling about” in free expression, for which dance lessons were of no advantage. Fortunately I had kept leaping about in my bedroom to classical music and could “shake it” like the best of them. But I loved those two years of waltz and quickstep, arms enfolding each other, chatting up every pretty girl of my age.

What has chiefly amazed me at school reunions, is how many of my contemporaries were unhappy at school. I was probably happier in my twenties or even my fifties; but I really did enjoy school. Perhaps because illness was worse than school, or because mum’s death made study a glorious escape from grief.

For the first five years I had been a rebel against authority, a boy’s boy, resisting the system and turning class time into playtime. In the sixth form, I became a ladies man, a prefect, a scholar and a pillar of the establishment, proud of what the school had done for me. Both roles were enjoyable and enabled me, in adult life, to avoid rebellion for its own sake, whilst remaining wary of institutional norms and establishment assumptions. I was deconstructing texts long before I came across Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).

**Hospital Visiting**

The school encouraged us to do some useful community work and I visited the local geriatric hospital wards. Listening to old (60+) ladies whose physical conditions made them unable to cope with independent living, proved to be an interesting way to spend a couple of hours, and afterwards I felt very fortunate to be young and healthy. A positive attitude to working with older people made running homes for the elderly in my 20s an attractive opportunity.

Christmas 1966 I went into hospital again myself, to have the three steel pins removed from my right hip. They had done their work. It was good to be visited each day by my dad and also by friends from school (Hopalong Cassidy had gained the gravitas of club-footed Byron). The surgeons carved the Christmas turkey into impressively thin slices, dressed in full operating gowns. My first taste of morphine injections made it easy to understand addiction to such a totally wonderful relief from pain.

**English Culture**

With my brother establishing his own family in Southend, dad treated me to a number of theatre nights out for Gilbert and Sullivan, and Bernard Shaw and the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. Theatres and concerts became my relaxation, and I only went to the cinema if there was “nothing better” on offer. Birmingham Repertory Theatre put on some brilliant performances. Shaw in particular made me think and I started to read his plays.

“Hassan” by James Elroy Flecker (1884-1915) set my expectation of romantic love for the rest of my life. I would gladly have died for a single night together with Ann Askey, but she would not permit me beyond her exotic stocking tops, and when I ceased to feel that level of commitment, I cruelly ended an excellent friendship.

I had fallen under the spell of the femme fatale, Sue Young, whose close friend, Trudi Styler (1954-) married Sting of the Police. Sue made me her “blood brother”, to establish that we would always be close but never sexually. I celebrated this in my last novel “Forest without Birds”. I also wrote her into the character of Zirea in my first novel “Waters of Oblivion”. She married my friend David Wilkinson.
Justice

The more I studied history, the more I became interested in current events. 1965 was the year the Kray twins were arrested, Ronald Biggs escaped from Wandsworth to South America and Ian Brady was arrested. How did their crimes compare to the Civil War of the seventeenth century? Clearly both were terrible for the victims, and neither involved more than a minority of the population. Most people it seems can pass through life without experiencing serious crime, yet it is this majority who decide our justice system.

In 1966 a sniper killed 13 and wounded 31 at the University of Texas at Austin. He was shot dead at the scene. In contrast Ronnie Kray murdered George Cornell in the Blind Beggar pub, but was not convicted until 1969, thus avoiding the death penalty, which was a hot topic of discussion, alongside euthanasia, abortion and war.

Cooking

Nellie Ward came in and cooked evening meals for us four nights a week. Two evenings we had reheated food or salads but I usually cooked Sunday lunch, whilst dad took the morning services. I never attempted anything complicated, like pastry or cakes and my Yorkshire pudding, I found when I moved to Yorkshire, were travesties. But, I had more experience than most of the lads in my self-catering hall of residence at university and that gave me confidence and status.

Sometimes Mr and Mrs Bushel, who farmed beyond the church and reservoirs, invited us to a real Sunday lunch, with sherry beforehand, huge helpings of delicious food and nodding off beside a roaring fire afterwards. This became my model of what a Sunday lunch should be: a ritual of excess, symbol of the day of rest. It was also part of the impossible dream, that a sickly bookish boy could combine intellectual pursuits, political action and the practical skills required for modern farming (none of which I had learnt). But a dreamer’s life is never limited by realism or even possibility.

University and farming were assumption. I never considered a degree would be difficult or that it would lead to employment. Ideas were sufficiently exciting to be followed for their own sake. The farm was responsibility which I knew I would have to shoulder one day, like marriage and parenthood.

What was important? What was true? What could prevent war, poverty, disease and greed?

How could I become an MP and change the world? I believed in my destiny, because I had received so much encouragement, from so many successful people.

Second Anniversary

Easter Sunday 1966 was the death of Evelyn Waugh (1903-66). He was a very funny man and his self-mockery has helped me through my life. He successfully sued gossip columnist Nancy Spain (1917-64) for libel. We should read a writer’s works and not believe the newspapers. On 28th March dad and I moved from the old vicarage into the new one that had been built next door. Mum had looked forward to a new, manageable home, but for dad and I it was still a large house. I had the largest bedroom as my study/sleeping room. A bright sunny room with light yellow walls, where homework and reading were encouraged by my classical LPs. I would take a break to dance round the room, or lie and read on my bed.

One memorable Saturday afternoon nodding off on my bed, I dreamt an atomic bomb exploded near by and it took some minutes of consciousness to realise that the bright sunshine was not the fire storm following the explosion. We all lived in expectation of total nuclear war, and this made life more vivid and more valued; but always with fear preventing contentment. We were a generation on the
edge, in a hurry, obsessed with peace and love, rejecting all things old and established. This was the year a B52 nuclear bomber crashed in Palomares in Spain contaminating 490 acres with plutonium. There was the theft of nuclear materials in Brazil and coups in Nigeria, Upper Volta, Central African Republic and Argentina. World politics were becoming important to me.

It was the year Walt Disney (1901-66) died, symbolic of the end of my own childhood and a move from cartoons to the new Star Trek. I was attending monthly meetings of the adult Liberal constituency party as well as the young Liberal meetings I arranged: including pushing a hospital bath from Bromsgrove to Birmingham, and mounting a float for the Redditch carnival. We all attended a meeting at Birmingham city hall to see Jeremy Thorpe (1929-). I invited Terry Lacey (1946-) the leader of the Union of Liberal students, who later became head of War on Want, to speak at one of our meetings and we put him up overnight at the vicarage. I attended the senior Liberals dinner dance, the youngest person by 20 years. The invitations said “formal dress”, 30 years before that would have meant white tie and frock coat, and my dinner jacket would have been “informal”, but by 1967 it meant “lounge suit. So I was the only person in a dinner jacket, but it did not matter. Regional meetings and propaganda magazines and books to read: no wonder I had so little time for…..

**Sport**

My hip problems had successfully got me out of the dreaded gymnastics and violent rugby football, but I was still able to enjoy swimming, cricket and tennis. Having a tennis court in the back garden had been a particular boost to that enthusiasm. But, just as my expertise at cricket with a tennis ball in the playground never transferred to the hard ball, and sea swimming from childhood made it hard to learn how to swim correctly; so tennis on grass proved quite different from hard-court tennis.

With intellectual matters, my direction has often resulted from the people I read or met, but in sport I was never inspired by watching the great players in action. I spent Wimbledon fortnight watching tennis because my friends were in exams, so there was no-one to play with. Watching has always been a poor substitute for doing. Often the effect has been negative. Watching my hero, Rod Laver, eventually persuaded me that I could never be a real tennis player and having made the decision, I gradually ceased watching tennis.

Watching musicians is different. I already knew I would not be able to play like them, but I continued to watch to see how they produce the amazing sounds I love.

The move to the new vicarage meant that tennis was replaced by badminton, often with six players on each side of a net; fast and furious, which explains why squash became my game of choice at university. Maximum effort in minimal time, meant healthy exercise did not impact on more important things, like political action and love.

**Class**

Like Little Lord Fauntleroy, I was aware of class. We had servants in Hong Kong, and dad was in charge of dozens of staff and hundreds of boys. In Hethel, granddad had servants and even Aunt Dolly had a lady come to clean. But as a child I had chosen the comfort of eating with the servants, or spending my time with Walter and the cows. They were adults and I looked to them for instruction.

At school most of the children were middle class, but I was only interested in playing games and happily played with anyone who would play with me. It was only in the sixth form, when working class girls chose me as a boyfriend, that I became aware of their contempt for my class background. Two phrases were particularly hurtful: “you want to have your cake and eat it” and “you’ve always been protected from the real world”. It was implied that I could not understand how hard it was to grow up in the working class. And of course that was true. But, my mother’s family were all working
class and London south of the Thames was much rougher than the Cadbury estate or Rubery; so I felt that my girlfriends knew as little of the working class experience of DH Lawrence or Charles Dickens as I did.

In retrospect, I believe they were pre-feminists, aware that their working class parents made university a huge leap for girls and resented my assumption that university was the inevitable next step. This combined with my political radicalism to determine my applications to Nottingham, Sheffield, London and Hull, where working class students and factory workers could be met with in abundance.

I did not realise at the time that membership of the working class had nothing to do with work. I had driven tractors, mucked out a cowshed and worked 12-hour days assisting with harvest, but I had not been paid. For Marx, I could not be working class, however strong my solidarity with and admiration for my fellow workers. Like Tolstoy, I enjoyed physical labour and valued it more highly than bookwork; whereas the working class worked because they had to, and longed for what they perceived as the idleness of wealth.

No matter how much I worked alongside the workers in the 1960s I would never be accepted, unless I dropped my posh voice, enthused about football or joined in sexism and racism. Such stereotypes are as rare in this century as working class solidarity. But in the 1960s I felt excluded from a club I wanted to join.

It was different when faced with those industrial cities. I thought Sheffield filthy and Hull damp and depressing. I found the lecturers condescending and my fellow applicants sheep-like. The redbrick newness was in stark contrast to the poverty-ridden back streets. I did not want Oxford or Cambridge, as I felt they were stuck in tradition and wedded to public schools and the ruling class. I was attracted to the London School of Economics, but they did not offer me a place, and Hull did. As so many times in my life, I was to find that what I thought “second best” was actually exactly what I needed.

It was “grim up north” and I never fitted in, but the cultural ferment gave me experience I could not have found in London.

**Girls Allowed**

For one of my parties at the Vicarage, I invited 12 girls and 11 lads to come in pyjamas, and made sure dad was shut up in his bedroom, before they arrived, so he would think it was just an ordinary party. He noted in his diary: “JF’s party – all away by 12.15am and he did a good job cleaning up.” It had been a memorable night for seeing girls in their night attire and some good snogging had been enjoyed. All very tame compared to clubbing in this century, but for rural Worcestershire in 1967 this was the height of hippydom and my new Chelsea boots raised me to six feet tall.

Jane Oldfield came to Cofton a number of times but only went out with me once, to see “A Lion in Winter”. She had wanted a friend to see a film with, but realised I clearly wanted more. She found my dad’s sermon was “above her head”, which he found sad as he tried hard to keep matters simple and she was an intelligent girl. She became a hospital administrator and now lives in a manor house in Suffolk.

Anne Swingler was a great beauty but she had eyes only for my great rival in history, Michael Shield. I would think of her when listening to the Swingle Singers or later watching Anne Swithenbank on TV.

Morag McNair was a gorgeous blond to whom I lost my heart. Carmen Webb was a wonderfully cheeky girl, as Pip thought of Biddy (in Great Expectations) so I often considered how happy I could be with such a consistently joyful woman who has remained unspoilt by time.
The longest summer holiday

After the A level exams, dad and I went on another rail journey round Scotland: five pounds for unlimited first class rail travel. The highpoint was visiting Arden House, where the TV series “Dr. Finlay’s Casebook” was filmed. Dad was Cameron, I was Finlay and Nellie was Janet. It felt like stories about our relationships, set in glorious Scotland before the war.

In August we had a few days in Hethel and in September I went to Blackpool for the Liberal Party Conference: a real rite of passage. I attended a special reception for activists, where Jeremy Thorpe gave me a greasy handshake and I tried not to think he was an orang-utan. More importantly I got my hero Jo Grimond (1913-1993) to sign his book “The Liberal Challenge”, which was my inspiration from 15 to 20. David Steel (1938-) and the other MPs all treated me with great kindness. I found the debates riveting and everything was so new and I so wanted to believe.

A fringe meeting with Des Wilson of Shelter indicated a future interest. The only homeless person I had ever met was our Vicarage hobo, and he was homeless by choice. Homelessness has grown even faster than Shelter and I have followed it as enthusiastically as many follow football. I have mapped it like Captain Cook and tried to cure it like Pasteur. Like an ocean it has tried to drown me in a force ten gale or bore me when becalmed.

It was clear that the Liberal Party in the 1960s really valued young people. At university we were the most popular parliamentary party. Labour Party students were a small group and the Conservatives a handful of “toffs”, who appeared to have come to the wrong place. But we were all outnumbered by the Young Socialists, not to be confused with the SWP or the SPGB or the Communist Party or Marxist Leninists. Of 3,500 students, half may have been apolitical, but the other half were committed to the Left. Like the young people in 1914, we wanted only a trench to fight from and the government seemed determined to offer this.

At Grosvenor Square my generation of students learnt a lesson of police brutality that inevitably made us side with anti-nuclear protestors in the ‘70s and the miners in the ‘80s and road protestors in the ‘90s. In Hull it was a relatively peaceful college protest, where many lecturers supported us. Some of us sought greater excitement in Paris. We had a sense of solidarity with our generation worldwide. When Mao praised the Red Guards, we all felt justified. When students were shot dead in the USA, we all felt threatened. We had the sense that real change was possible. This has been well expressed by Pat d’Ardenne, whom I was madly in love with at the time. She became a specialist in post traumatic stress: the opposite of the post passion ecstasy that was student protest: a memory that has assisted many of us through traumatic times.
University

Freshers’ Week Illusions

I was not happy about sharing a room, E4, in hall; something I had not done for a decade. My roommate, Jeff Cohen (1949-) from Manchester, did not arrive till 2am, waking me up. The warden of Nicholson Hall, John Philipps Kenyon (1927-1996) thought a vicar’s son and an orthodox Jew would misfit together. He was absolutely right. We bought a vehicle together, took a holiday together and had a number of adventures. He made me feel at home with Jews.

I transferred on to Jeff much of the affection I had for Simon Richardson (Ratty in Toad of Toad Hall). They were my alter ego, the person I would have been, had I been good at sport. Jeff taught me to drive, thrashed me at squash, and had gorgeous girlfriends. He now looks like Gibbs in NCIS; but then he was my Herbert Pockett, my Charles Darnay, Alexander to my Pierre.

I was so excited to be meeting people my own age, who shared my interests, that I assumed every student I met would be a friend for life. On Sunday morning I set out from Nicholson Hall, in Cottingham, to walk three miles to the main campus to attend an Anglican service. I met a fellow student and we had such a deep conversation we became lost and arrived late. Who was he and why did we not become close friends? When I graduated I had a list of over a hundred close friends, most ceased to remain in contact beyond that year. Questioning the nature and fragility of friendship became a major academic interest.

First impressions I found were almost always false. Philip Larkin gave an introductory talk about the library that was wholly unpoetic. But getting to know him changed my whole idea of poetry.

At the Freshers’ Bazaar I spent my first week’s grant money on joining lots of societies, which led to a busy social life and insufficient time for study.

Political Science

This began with a study of the British Political System, taught by Professor Anthony Birch (1924-) which I thought would assist me towards becoming an MP. I found the constitutional history superficial compared to what I had learnt for A level. The motivation for voting was fascinating, opening up deeper questions, which have lasted a lifetime. The local studies, Birch’s own specialism seemed dry, statistical and dehumanised. Surprising in retrospect, as community studies have been the basis of much of my own research. Studies of pressure groups and the civil service put me off those careers.

Political Philosophy, in contrast, taught by Dr RN Berki (1938-1992) and Dr Bhiku Parekh (1935-) was exciting. I remember coming out of the first lecture with a girl I fancied, and she said: “that was a waste of time, he makes no sense”. As I felt I had been at my first real lecture and learnt some really challenging ideas, I realised she was not the girl for me, but that the history of ideas was my destiny and being an MP was a trivial pursuit in comparison with intellectual challenge.

Within a few weeks of starting I had given up the motives which led me to study politics. I did not believe there could ever be a science of politics. I did not want to enter parliament nor have a career in the civil service. But I loved arguments, debates, lectures, seminars, essays and books.

John Saville (1916-2009) I found was in fact in the economics department along with radical Quaker David Rubenstein (1920-) whose critique of the Labour Party kept Harold Wilson from visiting the university. They were both influential in radicalising students towards revolt against the university as institution.
Sociology and Social Anthropology

As the professor and most of the staff had trained as social anthropologists, doing fieldwork in Africa and Asia, the subject of sociology was taught as an offshoot, an afterthought. The department itself was a bud from the Manchester School of Social Anthropology. The sociology we did study was mainly the participant observer work. Instead of a tribe in the African bush, the observer went amongst the natives of East London or the workers on a factory production line.

The principles came from Max Gluckman (1911-1975). His Marxist focus on inequality and oppression was continued by J Clyde Mitchell (1918-1995) and Elizabeth Bott (Spillius) (1924-). Our own Professor, Ian Cunnison, was a shadowy figure, a conduit for the ideas of others. This enabled men like Talal Asad (1933-) to add a post-colonial perspective, to a subject that had flourished because it had been functional to the British Empire.

During the course of my studies, traditional social anthropology was being taken up by the USA as they colonised South East Asia, South America and the Pacific islands; whilst sociology in the USA, used to justify the American Way of Life, as in the work of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was seeping into the study of British society.

My personal tutor was Peter Forster (1944-2003) who had just started teaching the year before. We shared a rare lack of interest in football and a fascination with religion. His own faith in Esperanto seemed unnecessary given his facility at learning languages. He was a delightfully open, fallible and caring human being, who tried hard to keep me focused on syllabus and exams, but I was intent on searching for truth, and jumping through academic hoops, was for me an A level activity.

Philosophy

This was supposed to be an ancillary subject: one lecture and one seminar a week. But the other members of my seminar group were all specialising in philosophy. I think they took pity on me, aware that our tutor Axel Stern (1912-1985), an eccentric, one-armed, Austrian logical positivist, was wholly unrepresentative of contemporary British philosophy. I found him rather exotic: he taught his own ideas and assumed we were as intellectually well read as he was, enabling him to drift off into little anecdotes from his life. But to the others, he was a figure of fun, a relic of a past age, who did not understand real (Wittgensteinian) philosophy.

After the first lecture, Stephen Champlin (1942-) took me to the student bar and talked philosophy with me from 4.15pm till midnight, when the bar closed. I learnt about his working class Hull childhood, his years at Queen’s College Oxford studying French and German and the importance of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) to any understanding of philosophy from Plato to the present day.

He listened to my metaphysical musings. He brought forth gold from every imperfect thought I expressed and was never dismissive. He was one of the most natural teachers I have ever met, and I learnt more from that one evening than from the whole ancillary course. His “The Reality of Mental Illness” (1981) became a prime text for me, when I worked in that field.

Soon after, he invited me to join him at the evening discussions held in the room of Eamon Duffy (1947-) then in his final year of philosophy/theology. Another philosophy student in this group was Flick Robbins (1949-) who combined speed of thought with classical beauty. I felt she was so far above me that I would never have considered asking her out, even if she had not already been with her future husband. After graduation they set out to hitch round the world. Like the Russians and Americans, they lost everything in Afghanistan, but continued that adventurous style of life that epitomises for me the "anything is possible" drive of the late 1960s.
& Mental Distress

Stephen’s great competitor for the philosophy prize was another “working class hero” Harry Rose (1948-) from a Brighouse back-to-back, who initially came to Hull to read theology and become a clergyman, but lost his faith and changed to philosophy. He was already married, so missed out on student social life, and was always totally focused on the subject of discussion.

The dedication of these students inspired me to read the books and articles they recommended and changed my understanding of my own studies. Harry’s intermittent struggles with mental distress, has helped me to see psychiatric labels through the filter of friendship. His first breakdown, during finals, was evidence for me for Tom Fawthrop’s (1947-) brilliant booklet “Education or Examination” (1969).

When Harry was given ECT and I visited him in Powick Hospital, Worcester, I was researching institutionalism. His adoption of the sick role, and careful (obsessive) monitoring gave him a career as a professional service user, explaining illness from the inside. He inspired me to work with people labelled “mentally ill”, and to be part of the anti-psychiatry movement. As a clergyman, he could have followed his philosophical interests, preached manic sermons and escaped the stigma of disability; and my involvement with the care system might have been more objective.

Inevitably books led me to people and philosophy at this time was full of alpha males (and some females) whose personalities were as startling as their ideas.

I was still heavily under the influence of Bertrand Russell, and so took to AJ Ayer (1910-1989) another radical aristocrat (Dutch Jewess mother from the Citroen family; father Calvinist financier who worked with Rothschild’s), who claimed that religious discourse was meaningless. He was president of the British Humanist Association, when I came across him.

But J Austin (1911-1960) had died at 48 (a significant number) had a significant name and provided arguments which I felt proved that it was meaningful to discuss religious matters. Ayer used words in a specialist philosophical sense to defend his mechanistic view of the universe, whilst Austin insisted that ordinary language was not about logic or truth tables, but expressed reservations about experience. Reducing language to sense data impoverishes our understanding of what others are saying. The task of philosophy is to clarify the implications of what is being said, not to produce meta-language to hide our own prejudices. Philosophy is an activity and should avoid absolutes, ideals and all attempts to transcend ordinary language. Shortly before his death Ayer had a near-death experience, which made him more open to ideas of belief.

The Professor of Philosophy at Hull was Alan R. White (1922-1992) who took Wittgenstein literally, and loved strange examples of usages of significant words; but he left little impact beyond those he actually taught. Richard Swinburne (1934-) was for me far more significant because he was determined to use the method to actually say something new about moral and religious ideas. I loved to watch Dr Paul Gilbert (1945-) and Dr Edgar Page (1940-2010) in disputation, in class or bar, they never ceased from mental fight.

HUSSO

The University had its own social care organisation, providing opportunities for students to support the less fortunate. I joined the decorating team and soon learnt painting and wall-papering. More importantly I saw real squalor, worse than anything I had seen in Hong Kong tenements. This grounded my left wing politics in reality. One such job I shared with a gorgeous social administration student, who went on to be a hospital social worker. Towards the end of our wall papering, I plucked up courage to invite her out.
“The Seven Deadly Sins” is not even a very funny film, but it was my first experience of snogging in the back row, and later sneaking out of a women’s’ hall of residence after midnight. Sadly she had just broken up with an older man, and was not going to make do with my naïve fumblings.

The social care organisation was the largest student society with a third of the students volunteering for one of its many teams: a reminder that young people only need opportunity to show their altruism.

Mark Phillips

Mark Phillips was another philosopher in our group. He devoted more time to social care, including a year as its chairman, than to his studies. He went on to spend a lifetime in social services. In our second year we went together to a different church each Sunday. I was studying sociology of religion and wanted to be grounded in real experience. He was an evangelical charismatic and wanted to tell other groups why they were wrong. I loved the diversity of worship and beliefs and felt like a real anthropologist.

He managed to have a good argument everywhere except the Quaker Meeting, where he was given a good listening to and came away nearly as impressed as I was. In our final year we shared a house. Mark was famous for his constant cheerfulness and lack of awareness of social distance: he would stand on a stranger’s feet, whilst arguing with them, inches between their faces, having backed them into a corner.

He was one of the people I knew best, yet, when he left Hull, he promised that he would NOT keep in touch with anyone. The past was over. I only contacted him by accident 20 years later, when the Council for Civil Liberties sent me some literature, with his address on. The irony was too much, so I contacted him. Yes, he was just the same, labouring in his vocation, with no desire to remember the past.

Thus he taught me the value of listening; of recognising the social distance needs of others; of not accepting cheerfulness at face value; but principally the importance of keeping in touch with old friends.

Liberal Society

I was very active in the Liberal group. One weekend, I went to Gorton, Manchester, to campaign for Terry Lacey, in a by-election. Saturday night in sleeping bags, five to a room next to a gasometer, knocking on doors till 9pm – then pub and chips, a short night and more canvassing. My first trip over the pre-M62 Pennines by car, nodding off to sleep, contentedly on the bosom of a gorgeous redhead called Alison.

We invited Liberal MPs: Richard Wainwright (1918-2003) and Michael Winstanley (1918-1993) to address our student meetings, and it was my job to eat with them and let them buy me a drink! I loved the excitement of discussing ideas with strangers, of feeling involved in really important decisions about the future. Devolution, real equality, workers co-ops, world peace, eradication of poverty and homelessness: all required big social changes: the peaceful overthrow of the ruling class and the ending of uncontrolled capitalism.

Student Liberals were a long way to the left of the adult party, which itself had only a handful of MPs and no real expectation of power. In the Easter of 1968 I gave a speech at the conference of Liberal students at Scarborough, and fell in love with the town. Yorkshire was starting to weave its magic. Sadly the conference had a different response to my motion and I never attended another one.
I was more successful in standing as deputy president of the Students’ Union, where I polled over 500 votes against a well-established female student, who won with over 600. However, students were voting more against her than for me.

The Labour Party students were well supported by their parliamentary party: Roy Hattersley (1952-) came to speak when he was undersecretary at the Ministry of Labour, and I went to heckle. Roy was a graduate of Hull, and John Prescott (1938-) was completing his economics degree: two deputy party leaders in one room!

In the summer I moved on to stand as Union President against Pete Hepple (1947-2005). Peter went on to be a circuit judge in Hull, which must have been easy, after his term of office, as he was well to the right of the students who produced the sit-in.

My mentor in Lib Soc was Martin Burch (1947-) who later became Professor of Politics at Manchester University.

**Popular Culture**

The first gig I remember at Hull was “The Scaffold” starring Roger McGough (1937-) (who had been at Hull in the 50s) and was Paul McCartney’s brother. Lily the Pink, you will remember, concerned the 40% alcohol herbal remedy of Lydia Pinkham and most of the students had taken something similar. I had not yet gained a liking for beer, and usually drank a double vodka or rum in half a pint of lemonade or Coca-Cola (thus inventing the alcopop of the 1990s). I eventually discovered real ale.

C Day Lewis (1904-72) was the first poet in residence I remember; but he seemed old and distant compared to the accessible Philip Larkin (1922-85), whom I saw so often in the library lift, and whose poems so clearly described the working class city, which the “high windows” (seventh floor philosophy books) of my ivory tower exposed to my view.

My personal guide to popular culture was Robert Morley (1949-) (not that one), who had the room across the hall from Jeff and I. Bob introduced me to such wonders as Jefferson Airplane, which no-one else seemed to have heard of. We were all caught up with Bob Dylan (1941-) Joan Baez (1941-) and Woodstock. We preferred the term “counter-culture” to the cat call of “hippy”. Bob read Geography and eventually became a sequence biostratigrapher, with his own company, “Palynova” using the analysis of pollen grain distribution in soil samples, to assist the oil industry and contribute to the mapping of evolution. He has spent much of his working life in South East Asia. Bob came from Suffolk – a foreign country for those of Norfolk origin: a traditional rivalry similar to that between England and France.

Lene Lovich (1941-) was in the sixth form at Hull during my first year, before she went on to art school in 1968 London. Her album “Stateless” (1978) was top of my chart for some years.

Stevie Smith (1902-71) was born in Hull and took regular holidays in Norfolk. Her willingness to break rules liberated me from the silly rules of English I had learnt at grammar school.

**Diverger**

In 1966, Liam Hudson (1933-2005) published “Contrary Imaginations”, a study of schoolboys like me, who had more diverse responses to questions, than “convergers”, who might have higher IQ. Liam was committed to moving across unnecessary boundaries between subjects; something I did instinctively, as a result of my Hong Kong experience. This was not an advantage in my studies, as our lecturers expected us to illustrate their teaching with original examples. It was not that I disagreed with their teaching, but rather that I found it obvious (poverty, disadvantage, class, secularisation, imperialism, dialectic). I wanted to go beyond this to how the system might change. I could not accept
that well-presented arguments with incontrovertible evidence would actually change the world. In this I have been vindicated. The great revolution of the twentieth century was not the 1960s, but the 1980s, and it went against all the academic evidence. Since long before Tolstoy’s arguments in War and Peace, history had ceased to be the study of great men, like Napoleon, and had turned to techno-change, class struggle and ideological fashion. Thus the academics applied the revolutionary techniques of the social sciences to studies of the past: but the public continued to demand biographies of the famous. As students we were united in opposing any “cult of personality” and determined to bring down anyone who seemed to claim to be more equal than the rest of us.

In this biography I have tried to give due credit to all those who have influenced my life and thought. The famous impacted on my life, not through personal meetings, but through their writings, and I have influenced them, not at all. Those I have become close to have influenced me by words, acts and the complexities of our personal relationships. It was in my first year at college that I started to analyses these influences, as part of my studies and as a source for the writing of fiction. I have continued this analysis throughout my life.

**Society of Anglo-Chinese Understanding**

With Benee Bunsee (1945-) I assisted in the formation of a branch of SACU. We arranged for a showing of “The East is Red” and worked nationally with Joseph Needham (1900-95), Derek Bryan (1910-2003), Liao Hung Ying (1905-1998) and Joan Robinson (1903-83). Reading “China Reconstructs” and other publications of Mao’s propaganda machine, made me aware of the simplicity of presenting good news (a characteristic of many modern business’s internal communications systems.) In contrast Western media with its emphasis on crime and corruption at all levels, seemed a complex way of undermining hope and enforcing compliance. I collected records of current Chinese opera and the works of Mao. I tried to persuade Professor Birch to put on a course on Eastern political philosophy.

The Cultural Revolution in China was the stimulus and guiding force for students worldwide to protest against the perpetuation of outdated systems. American imperialism and the Vietnam War, were obvious targets, but there were subtle differences by country. In Germany the young were questioning their parents’ involvement in the Holocaust. In France the rebellion was linked to post modernism and post structural deconstruction, which blamed rationalising modernism for genocide and atomic bombs. In England, students built on the success of CND. In every college there were local issues and we political activists built on these grievances, to develop a sense of outrage that would produce mass action. In our halls of residence, the university threatened to remove our cookers so that we would be forced to eat at the new refectory they were building. I collected hundreds of signatures against this, and it became an issue in the Hull student sit-in. One of the few issues resolved in our favour.

Edgar Snow’s (1905-1972) “Red Star over China” gave me a positive view of Communism in China. The Cultural Revolution had begun just before I went to university, so the student rebellion in Europe and USA was to mean admiring imitation of Mao’s student revolution in China. We were part of a worldwide movement led by the Chinese, taking us to the edge of utopia. In 1970 Snow visited China and reported that they would welcome a visit from the USA president. Nixon’s visit began the week Snow died. Nixon became the central character in my first novel begun in 1970.

**Sport and Drama**

Perhaps I have always enjoyed drama because of its similarity to my dreams, whilst watching sport felt like watching workers in a factory, controlled, regulated activity, lacking the freedom and
imagination of human life. This did not prevent me from enjoying playing both table tennis and squash, although the players were fiercely competitive, which took much pleasure from these “games” (a keyword in Wittgenstein’s language analysis). The pressure of other activities soon forced these sports out of my college life.

Instead, I bought an old bike and cycled the six miles to university and back every day. Sometimes the wind was so strong and I moved so slowly against it, that it was hard to keep my balance. The return journey was like flying down a steep hill. Another time the fog was so dense that I had a row of cars using my back light as a guide. I once watched Jeff playing football for the university, but even enthusiasm for my friend could not make me into a spectator. Life had to be lived, without rules.

Jenny Murry (1950-) studied French and drama the year below me, and by that time I had become a regular at the Green Room productions and later at the splendid Gulbenkian studio, where Chris Thacker, Michael McEvoy and Jenny Foreman performed wonderful enigmatic productions of Becket, Strindberg and Ibsen.

Another student of French was engaging my attention in the Easter vacation. Polly Oliver was home from Lancaster University and agreed to go to the theatre with me (more Bernard Shaw) more lively discussion and more snogging. France became attractive politically and romantically and drama was entering my daily life.

Alan Plater (1935-2010) lived in Hull. From Z Cars (1962-5) to the Beiderbecke Tapes (1985-88), his vision shaped my perception of the police.

**Motoring Offences and Trespass**

In our first term we used to pay half the bus fare for a lift in an old Ford Thames van belonging to two second year students from our hall. After Christmas, Jeff and I bought the van from them for £40, thinking to make money on our journeys rather than lose it. On our first trip to the shop in Cottingham the police fined us for four separate faults on the van. The fine and repairs cost nearly another £40. On my first driving lesson I reversed the van into a lamppost and nearly killed us both on a country road, when a large lorry skiddled past at speed, unaware of how little control I had of the vehicle.

A friend had a blow out at speed. The remains of his car were brought to the Lawns Halls car park. How he survived is a mystery as the car was in pieces. The university insisted he cleared the bits from the car park, so we loaded them into the back of our van to take them to the tip. Failing to find the tip, we were dumping this rubbish on a pile of other rubbish in a lay-by, when the police turned up. Jeff and our friend were prosecuted, but I was not as I was inside the van and thus technically not involved.

Jeff saved me again on the evening of my election defeat, when having consumed nine pints of ale, I would happily have driven home. Fortunately the sober Jeff was driving and I was sleeping when the police stopped us for a faulty back light. No fine this time.

Other forces were not as vigilant as Hull police. We were not stopped crossing the Pennines in a snowstorm with faulty window wipers, nor as I drove down the M6 from Manchester to Birmingham with my L plates displayed. Back in Cofoton at Easter I replaced the exhaust pipe (another £40). Shortly after that, I failed my driving test and just after that, returning from selling rag magazines in Bridlington, with ten students in the back, the engine seized, and we decided to scrap the vehicle. A blessing for all road users, as I decide never to drive a car again. A decision, with huge consequences for my life, which I have never regretted.

Travel by public transport has allowed me hundreds of hours of extra reading and many vital conversations. Hitch-hiking was a way of life for 20 years and a subject in itself. I have been able to
give my full attention to conversation or to my own thoughts, whilst travelling, without endangering the lives of others, by careless driving or carbon emissions.

In our second year at Nicholson Hall, a centre was built to provide facilities for meals (most of us remained self-catering), and a bar. Soon after it opened, some friends of mine discovered they could gain entry to the building through the skylights on the flat roof. One of these friends then fetched me and we enjoyed the excitement of burglary, without actually breaking in or stealing anything. At 2am a police car parked outside and the officers checked all the doors and windows, whilst we hid in the shadows.

On another occasion, we climbed through the skylight on the third floor of our hall and across a couple of flat roofs to descend through the skylight of the adjacent women’s hall. My companion, Gerald Barrington Smith (1949-) leapt up the six-foot walls between each roof, pulling himself over with the ease we see on film chase scenes. He then had to return and pull me up. No Police this time, but padlocks were fitted to all skylights shortly afterwards.

We felt no moral qualms about these nocturnal adventures, as the university rightfully belonged to its students and had been stolen from us by the undemocratic and officious administrators. We would certainly not have attempted to enter a private dwelling, nor caused any damage to “our” property. Crime was largely understood in terms of the ruling class’s theft of labour from the working man. Ours was direct political action liberating us from false rules.

As a boy in Cofton, I had camped beside the railway line and built tree houses with friends. We were once shouted at by a neighbouring farmer, concerned by our campfire, but we were engaged in adult-free scouting. Far from criminal intent, we were developing an independence sadly lacking in the PC-controlled childhoods of today.

Those of us who benefited from adventurous childhoods should resist the ever-increasing constraints placed on youths now. Several people have been killed walking on that high speed railway line, since my time, but the greatest danger I experienced was the sight of an adder, sunning itself, where I was about to tread.

1968 Sit-In

We had completed our exams in the usual sweltering heat. Young people were rebelling against their elders all around the world and we wanted to be part of that. There was a huge sense of excitement, of being on the brink of a real revolution. There were large gatherings of students almost daily. As usual I jumped too soon. I made a speech to a large gathering arguing that we should have a sit-in “NOW”. I was ridiculed and felt convinced that the meetings were mere talk and nothing would happen.

So Jeff and I went hitch-hiking up to climb Ben Nevis. In Fort William we read that there had been a sit-in back in Hull. We set off back to Hull, where I came down with a stomach bug, and missed the whole thing. It has been well described on the web by my friend Pat d’Ardene, who became a psychologist specialising in post-traumatic stress.

For me, Tom Fawthrop was the leading light in the sit-in. His book “Education not Examination” was lived out when he tore up his own finals papers and made a speech in the exam room. His subsequent career in South East Asia proves that you do not need a degree once you have learnt to think for yourself and to communicate with others.

His friendship led me to many other outspoken left wingers of the time, like Tariq Ali (1941-) a leading light in the International Marxist Group, whom I saw at Grosvenor Square, when policemen on horseback broke up our peaceful demonstration. I never became a communist or even a socialist, as I have always disliked state control, but I was certainly a Marxist, as his analysis makes sense of so much history, and at this time I had a naïve appreciation of the achievements of Mao Tse Tung.
Sweet Polly Oliver

Polly had been in the year above me at school and going out with my friend, Trevor Yates. In the Easter vacation, finding that relationship had ended, I asked Polly out. We had such a satisfying discussion of the Shaw Play that we spent much of Easter and summer vacation together. Polly was in her second year of French at Lancaster University. This combined with my missing the Hull sit-in to send me to Paris for the 1968 French Revolution. Perhaps it was great grandfather’s fascination with the original revolution and with Napoleon that influenced my genes. But Paris has always been to me the centre of western culture.

Jackie Derrida (1930-2004) was teaching at the Sorbonne, changing the way the world reads texts. Lawrence Durrell (1912-1990) was living in Semmiers at this time, writing the Tunc (1968), enchanting language with his Mediterranean colours. Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) was providing structures for reconstructing thought in triangles rather than pairs of opposites.

Polly was to spend her third year as a teaching assistant in a French school in the centre of France. She once told me that she loved me for my body not my mind. This shocked me at the time, as I could not believe female desire was as strong as mine, and I was constantly struggling to control my desire. Would she have allowed me to take her virginity if I had allowed my passion full flow? It did not happen.

Partly, I was still seeking a mother substitute. Polly was small and did not wear glasses. She enjoyed discussion but I never felt able to share my soul with her as I would with my mum.

Fortunately for her I met Judy in the autumn term, so our relationship ended at Christmas ’68. Unfortunately, she had a terribly lonely experience in France and only did one term there. She spent a lifetime teaching French and like me, had two daughters and two partners.

Bridge, Séance, Parties

In our end -of-year exams, Jeff Cohen and I suddenly realised we had had a wonderful year, but not done much work, so we spent a couple of weeks of serious revision and testing each other. At 10pm he would go to bed and I would continue revising, till 2am, when I woke him and he would work till 6am, whilst I slept. I knew far more than I needed, but I was a slow writer, more interested in my own thoughts than giving the expected answer, so I scored poorly.

This determined me to work harder the next year, and my social life largely moved to post 10pm and weekends. We played a lot of bridge in Nicholson Hall and at least once played through till the following morning. As our partners were female, we could still have been sent down for their overnight innocent presence in our room, but we never even thought about that.

The other nocturnal practice were séances, in which Bill Beales regularly went into a convincing coma and the glass gave us messages, one letter at a time. I received a message purportedly from my grandfather, telling me to “go to India and …” Perhaps that is why I have never been. I know I was not pushing the glass, nor could I tell who was. It was eerie and mysterious and I more than half believed it.

As I got to know more students I was invited to more parties. I hope it was my ardour for politics and discussion, but it was probably my wild, unpredictable dance movements, and a willingness to make a fool of myself without alcohol. The beat of the music was always sufficient. At a party at one of the women’s halls, I danced with a beautiful elf of a girl, whom I later knew as Di Basham. She was wholly unimpressed by both my dancing and my intellect, and snubbed me so successfully that I was put off small women for years.
Love

At another party I was more successful. The party was in a flat above an off-licence on Princes Avenue, belonging to a friend of Bob Edmunds who later took over editing Torchlight (the university student newspaper) from Chris Mullin (1947-). It was here I met Tim Poston (1945-) the great polymath and mathematician of catastrophe theory. He was already a research student and spoke like a Chinese sage, down to the flowing black cloak and beard, sandals and shepherds crook. Even more significantly I met Judy Noble, studying philosophy and English, knowing everyone, looking like my mother, and having her ability to draw out the depths of my soul. She was also very sexy. Needless to say, I fell in love.

The next party was at our wing of Nicholson Hall. By the time Judy arrived, I had decided she was not coming and drowned my sorrows. Knowing everyone, she had already been to another party. We soon retired to my room and settled to some serious snogging. She insisted on sleeping on the floor, as the bed was very narrow, but I was ecstatic to have her in my room.

21/07/1969 was the first moon landing, but the earth moved for me at Christmas 1968. Judy took my virginity on Christmas morning, whilst dad was at church. We had gone to the midnight service at Cofton the night before and she stayed overnight in the spare room. In the spring term of ’69 we usually slept together at her student house on Cottingham Road, at weekends, when her room-mate, Mary Boardman was sleeping elsewhere, so we could push both single beds together and have a proper double bed. I was already certain that Judy was the woman with whom I would spend the rest of my life.

Art

We went to parties, but also to films, (at the newly-opened Arts Cinema, at the Central Library) and plays. The intersection of art and philosophy certainly excited us physically and made us passionate lovers. Sadly I knew absolutely nothing about satisfying a woman sexually, and must have left her as dissatisfied as she left me contented.

Jan Horton had the room next to Judy’s and her lover was a mature student, Philip Weaver (1943-) in his first year of an English degree. Philip appeared to have read everything and his conversation was a delight; not argumentative, like philosophy and social science students, but meditative, engaging, unpretentious. Philip and I would meet over breakfast with the girls and later at parties and in the Student’s Union bar.

My love of novels and poetry meant it was easy to persuade me that political ideas could not be understood without reading the literature of the time. Philip also persuaded me to look at paintings, bringing art books and galleries into my weekly routine.

Through Philip I gained access to a set of Renaissance folk who saw art as the culmination of human endeavour. For us education was not a means to a qualification, let alone a job. We studied in order to understand and understood in order to study more effectively. Conspicuous consumption was evidence of a person’s failure to understand the world. Everything worthwhile could be accessed for free.

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997)

Isaiah came to Hull to speak about De Maistre (1753-1821). This was the kind of lecture I had come to college to hear. He spoke without notes, occasionally reading out quotations. He spoke so quickly and with such an extensive vocabulary that I had to concentrate hard to understand. I have devoured
hungrily everything published by Isaiah and his brief note thanking me for sending him my research document in 1978 is one of my treasured possessions.

Again I was pushed back to reading Russian literature and admiring Jewish intellect. The work of Primo Levi (1919-1987) introduced me to the idea of Survivor Guilt. The lack of this natural response amongst Zionists clearly puzzled Berlin. Survivor guilt is the key concept in Kazuo Ishiguro’s (1954-) work. Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki (you will remember the atom bomb there brought the war to an end, so that my dad survived, and my life became possible). He did a masters degree in creative writing at the University of East Anglia in 1980 and later worked for the Cyrenians – two points of contact. “Never Let me Go” (2005) shows us our lives as they really are, if we are prepared to see ourselves mirrored in the text; most readers would rather see it as a book about the dangers of cloning. The clones kept for transplant surgery, live a life like ours. Theirs is the human condition of living powerless; knowing that life will be taken from them, a bit at a time.

Berlin saw himself as a historian of ideas and this seemed to me the only basis for intellectual life. Material change was driven by the ideas of political thinkers, artists and analysts. All these ideas were texts, available for deconstruction: ideas that would be overturned by new paradigms or forsaken for new fashion, or falsified by new evidence. I sought objectivity, in mapping these changes.

In this sense my research aimed to provide a history of the idea of a “Social Network”. I chose the concept because it was becoming a fashionable term in many academic disciplines and was clearly destined to enter ordinary language, carrying some of this academic baggage. I could not guess that it would become the key concept in the new technology. The personal computer was 20 years away, a subject for science fiction.

Stephen Bostock (1942-)

Like Philip Weaver, Stephen was another mature student, who began his degree in 1968. He already had a degree in English from Cambridge and had been teaching for several years, but came to Hull to study zoology and philosophy: a combination which he created by swapping from one to the other, until both departments were willing to share him.

He was a clergyman’s son, and had lodgings at St Augustine’s vicarage, which was subsequently demolished and replaced by a bail hostel (which failed to give me employment in 1976).

We usually met in his room. He had already developed the habit of passing me a book each time he introduced an author I had not come across. I was as mesmerised by this form of teaching (constantly leading the other away from their fixed thought, to consider a related matter) as I had been by the polished perfection of Berlin’s lecture.

Stephen was a conscientious scholar and we only met a few times, but I was so delighted by the range and depth of discussion, that I have kept in regular touch ever since. When staying in his homes, or he in mine, the discussions have rarely ended before midnight, ploughing continuously through meals and rarely straying to the commonplace.

He was the obvious choice as my best man at my first wedding as he had the capacity to captivate anyone of intelligence, and to make everyone feel that they possessed it. He added evolution and animal behaviour to the growing list of subjects I felt I needed to understand.

Stephen also plays piano, violin and viola. It was very relaxing to listen to him play, whilst reading the latest book he had passed to me. We have also enjoyed concerts together, where intervals are never wasted by idle chatter.
In my first year I realised that I did not want to be an MP or work as a civil servant (my motivation for taking the course). British troops were in Northern Ireland. By the end of my second year I was wholly absorbed by ideas and wanted an academic career, so that I could spend my life seeking answers to the big questions. This in turn determined the friends I made. The more time I spent in intellectual discussion, the less able/ inclined I was to talk about trivia or practical matters.

I had become excited by the idea of a Social Network, which was to become the prism for redirecting my life. The anarchist ideas of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin were already leading me away from Liberalism. The party was just a vehicle for me to express more radical aspirations. Post-modernism changed the way I read everything, from a poem to a newspaper. What was the writer trying to sell? What was their agenda? How were they subverting my understanding?

I had started reading a fortnightly magazine called “Freedom” and made contact with intellectual anarchists. Perhaps this explains my spontaneous decision to hitch-hike with Judy down to Church Farm, to stay with Aunt Dolly for the weekend. There was six inches of snow in Norfolk, and Dolly found us both a worry, as we had no sense of danger. Judy was not impressed by the farm, nor was Dolly impressed by her.

JG Ballard (1930-2009) was living a parallel life, only he had been with his parents before and during their imprisonment by the Japanese. In “Empire of the Sun” he presents his experience as one of liberation. Life under the Japanese is actually more exciting for a boy, than life in a bourgeois enclave. Yet he chose to live a quiet life of his own in Shepperton, writing his real self into his novels of social breakdown. Childhood experience of a totally other culture and the constant threat of imminent violence, provides us with a love of the ordinary, which we assume will end suddenly in chaotic aggression. We were both drawn to the medical and to literature, as ways of dealing with our experience.

Despite all this I stood again for President of the Union, against such well-known students as Chris Mullin (1947-) (MP 1987-2010) who was editor of the student newspaper. But Tim Poston’s sophisticated cynicism won a landslide victory.

To drown my sorrows I took Judy hitch-hiking to Scotland and we climbed Ben Dearg near Ullapool. I wanted to camp, and have her all to myself, but she preferred youth hostels: in those days they were segregated institutions, far more basic and anonymous than prisons.

A Small Inheritance

Judy and I planned to move out of the university accommodation in our final year and share a room in a rented house. We went together to look at one place, but I thought it rather grubby and a long way from the university. Judy had decided to spend the summer in USA, working at a summer camp and travelling; but I wanted a summer of study and was disappointed that I would not see her for months. It never occurred to me that she was seeking distance, to escape my emotional dependence on her.

My father told me that my mother and her father had each left me small sums, to be inherited when I was 21. So instead of looking for a room to rent, I looked for a house to buy. Houses in Hull were absurdly cheap and I was able to buy a three-bedroom terraced house, 29 Exmouth Street, for £1,750. I was able to rent the three bedrooms to pay for the furniture, purchased mainly at Gilbert Bateson’s auctions, and pushed on handcarts the two miles to the house, for ten shillings a load. Judy and I were to have the front room as our bedroom; but the traditional room for laying out the corpse proved unlucky, as the relationship was ending whilst I made the purchase.

In the States, Judy had met a student from Germany who was to become her partner and father of her two daughters. Gunter was skilful at practical tasks, and they lived together in Germany and Wales: adventures I could not have offered. More importantly, he understood Judy’s need to have a career in social work, and believed in the value of the institutions she served. I could never have accepted such
a retreat from our ‘60s radicalism. She made the right choice. Jeremy Thorpe’s wife was killed in a car crash at this time: a case of shared pain.

I was blinded by my romantic notion of her as Hedda Gabler, Kitty from Anna Karenina; and my mother; all rolled into one. I was devastated and cried for days when she told me. My twenty-first birthday party was ruined by the loss of expectations and I felt I had wasted a summer buying a house I did not need.

**A Great Gain**

How wrong I was. The house made me independent, and able to be myself to the full and live the Bohemian dream. So many great writers have crushed their best years in brain-dead jobs in a bank or school or business or hack journalism. But I had a roof and income from three rooms: a life of poverty, but free from bosses and the state.

My first three tenants were Mark Phillips, (a replacement for Jeff Cohen, who had decided to share a place down Temple Street with Bob Morley), Gerry Smith and Philip Weaver. We each painted one wall of the living room: the philosopher (black), the chemist (blue); the student of literature (red); and me (yellow). We had a house warming and invited our neighbours, who had all lived in the street for years. The fish and chip shop next door and the corner shop opposite did very well from four students, who were often too busy to cook or shop further away.

We did have parties that went on till the early hours, but we did not play much loud music. Often voices raised in intellectual argument were the loudest noises, but 40+ people in a small house inevitably makes more noise than neighbours appreciate. We were fortunate that our neighbours were so tolerant.

The four of us were gathered one evening the first week, sitting on the 30-shilling suite, discussing ghosts, because of our séances at Nicholson Hall. Philip was making fun of the idea, when the light bulb above his head exploded. Later we found that the Jackson’s, whose house I had bought, had emigrated to Australia. They had been in the local newspaper, because of a poltergeist that had caused havoc at number 29. Perhaps the light bulb was a final farewell, as we never suffered any other incidents.

We did however receive regular visits from beneath the floorboards. Blatta Orientalis (cockroaches) were well known to me from Hong Kong. Larger than the English stag beetle, cockroaches have no fear, and multiply like locusts. Regular gas bombs placed beneath the floor boards simply forced the creatures to crawl below the houses further up the street.

**Final Year Studies**

In sociology I specialised in social theory, which did examine the men of genius, who established the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology; from Spencer to Weber to Talcott Parsons; from Malinowski to Margaret Mead. It was here that I first discovered Ferdinand Tonnies (1855-1936); who was to be so central to my own research.

The emphasis was on theories of method. How should data be collected and analysed? What could we really know about life in another culture. How could theories be tested?

In contrast, political theory was heavily philosophical. What did the texts mean? Were they logical and consistent? What is human nature? Hegel and Marx were central, but it was clear that modern political systems drew on theory from psychology, philosophy, history science and the arts. I became aware of the complexity of interconnections of ideas and wanted to know more than there was time for.
Sociology of religion was a very specialist area, enabling me to use my experience of other churches and of Christian theology to engage with theories of secularisation and institutionalisation. This was the time that Mark and I were visiting different denominations each Sunday. He to try out his conversion skills, and I to analyses contrary approaches to Bible, ritual, society and organisational structures. I still enjoyed the familiar form of Anglican worship and thought I believed, but the political and social action of Quakers was increasingly attractive.

I took two new courses in South East Asian studies, one in sociology and one in politics. The pure factual content of new information was huge. My background in Chinese culture helped, but I wanted to know everything and clearly reached saturation, so that I could not see the wood for the trees. Deforestation was just starting to be seen as an environmental problem, rather than a means of economic development.

We had to produce a 15,000-word dissertation on a narrow topic, and I chose Buddhism in Thailand. I kept to the word limit and others did not and they received higher marks, which I felt was unfair. I duplicated my dissertation on my Gestetner Xerox machine, so I could send copies to friends. But the results were messy compared to professionally typed papers paid for by my contemporaries; so I was left with a bitterness about the commercialism and unfairness of the process.

Great Expectations

The theory classes were brilliant with wonderful abstract discussion with Dr Parekh and Dr Berki and Dr Asad. But the other courses reminded me of geography tests where certain words and facts were expected and deeper questions were to be avoided nevertheless, the subjects all fascinated me and I learnt huge amounts; far more than could ever be used in answering an exam questions; or ever be used in any occupation other than university lecturing.

So I applied for various PhD opportunities in Thailand, Indonesia and Hong Kong as well as at SOAS and Hull. I might have ended my life with some jungle fever amongst native people, whose language I would have been unable to learn. Fortunately no university expressed an interest in any of my varied research proposals and I decided to chuck it all in and train to be a nurse.

1970

World population was half what it is now. The Nigerian civil war came to an end with the surrender of Biafra, but the end of hostilities was not the end of conflict, which still continues. Khmer Rouge civil war began in Cambodia and it would be another 30 years before they became a tourist destination again. Meanwhile Chile was enjoying a brief experiment in left wing democracy under Salvador Allende. Each continent of the poor south offered exciting prospects to a student of politics. If there was a new tribalism, why did some states clearly riven by tribal divisions remain stable? (13/11/70 Hafez al Assad came to power in Syria).

There was a strong sense that student power, begun by the Cultural Revolution, was over and reaction was setting in, as seen in the shooting dead of four rebellious students at Kent State University (4/5/72). Kneeling at the communion rail, I banged my knee and fainted.

A Gloom with no view

EM Forster (1879-1970) died, and in a short cul-de-sac called Temple Street, (long since demolished) next to the railway line (now a cycle way) by Stepney station and Beverley Road I met her. I had been invited to a party, but had already booked an expensive multi-cultural meal at the Catholic chaplaincy, for myself and a gorgeous student, who looked like a fashion model. I wanted to impress her, but she
only came for the food, knowing I was going on to the Temple Street party, and wanting to arrive there with a foil. I was enjoying the chaplaincy event and did not want to dash off, but we did.

As soon as we arrived, she disappeared. Next time I saw her, she was snogging a bloke I did not know. I had a couple of drinks and went home. At the door I had met Barbara Smith, who was going out with Jeff, and she introduced me to a fresher, whom I thought was about 18 and far too unsophisticated for me. Barbara’s father was a shop steward at Dagenham, a cause I had not considered at the time. I was fond of Barbara, because she had once held my hand whilst I was throwing up, as a result of a stomach bug. The only person, other than my mother, who had shared my intimate suffering in this way. I did not realise that she had dressed her friend to look like a fashionable 18-year-old, because she was actually a desperate 26. I was only concerned to follow my date and not lose her to another man.

The 26-year-old had greater success, returning to Exmouth Street to sleep with Gerry. Meeting her in my house, looking her age, and talking about intellectual subjects, my initial view of Penelope Bamford (1943-1991) totally changed. She soon tired of Gerry, although I think they had good sex and he later married a girl who looked very like her.

One night I had been out canvassing for the Liberal Party. I was on the list of Liberal Party parliamentary candidates and wanted to fight North Hull at the next election. Gerry and Penny were having a bit of an argument, but I ignored them and got on with cleaning the kitchen floor. Gerry was trying to persuade Penny that she should go home as he wanted to go to bed. I think he was trying to protect me from her, but I eventually persuaded him to go to bed and stayed up talking to Penny. She would have gone to bed with me then, and left me a few weeks later, but I did not want to rush into a sexual relationship.

**Sexless Passion**

We did start going out and had some fabulous snogging and intellectual arguments and she was very supportive when I was revising for my finals. She failed her own first year exams as her need for passion was far greater than her passion for mathematics.

Her father was Tom Bamford (1912-1987) a geneticist, who trained with JS Haldane (1892-1964) and was Professor of Education. She studied maths to impress him but she had inherited his artistic genius rather than his scientific determination. His love of his children was total and unconditional. Penny suffered from petit mal epilepsy, which had interrupted her schooling, prevented her from marrying her cousin, and the medication had made her so depressed that she had spent years at a psychiatric day centre, transferring her emotions from her cousin to her psychiatrist, and later to any man who would take her.

She had not introduced previous boyfriends to her family, knowing that rejection on either side would have forced her to side with her family.

She presented the Bamfords as if they were some Mafia family and Tom certainly had the Sicilian look. Tom and Anne were dedicated parents and I rarely met any of their friends at their house (100 Park Avenue) although he knew hundreds of people through work. He did not bring work home with him and concentrated on paintings and later amazing tiles. His sister Pem, a retired headmistress, had the house next door, but spent most of her days at 100.

Penny’s sister, Sue, was my age and a newly-qualified teacher. Her brother, Jim, was at Manchester University studying chemistry. I felt instantly at home in their slightly eccentric household. More at home than Penny, who was desperately trying to break free from the cloying cohesiveness of a family, who always stuck together and never tried to restrain self-expression but encouraged each to become fully what they were most capable of being.
Summer of Errors

When I left Hull at the end of my final year, I was not expecting to return. I had left Philip in charge of renting my house to three other tenants. He was to keep the best room rent free over the summer and send me the rent regularly. The house was an investment against a time when I could sell it and buy farm machinery.

I was to live with my Aunt Dolly at the farm house and work at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital as a trainee nurse. I would care for her in her dying years and be on site to take over the farm, when the tenant farmer retired. Dolly lived independently for ten more years without my support and Mr Rackham did not retire as tenant farmer until 1986, so my “Great Expectations” were premature.

Nevertheless, I worked energetically at clearing weed and planting vegetables, too late in the year and wasting my money on prize pigs, from whom to breed two profitable litters and “bring home the bacon”. All went well for a while. I developed some muscles and a good tan from hard labour. I started work on the men’s urology ward, enjoying the new people I met, the science I was learning, but mostly the sense of being genuinely useful to and needed by the patients.

The excitement of pre-operative shaving of a man’s private parts, with a cut throat razor, for the first time, and he thinking that I was trained and experienced! Giving my first injections, washing out bladders, assisting a doctor to fit a catheter, using a lift to lower patients into their bath. A thousand lesser tasks of nursing care which I knew because others had done them for me. The satisfaction of doing for others what others had done for me. The practical need for this work was such a contrast to all my academic learning and theorising. There was no-one here to share an intellectual thought or appreciate a complex idea or poetic image: but surely this was real life? Making the world a better place.

Fire

Disaster struck on August 14th, and fate took over. I was burning a bonfire in the back garden, when a spark caught the thatch of the old corn barn. I sprayed it with the garden hose, but it had been a long dry summer, and the roof was all ablaze by the time the fire brigade arrived. The stable and the bullock shed were ashes in 30 minutes and the fire brigade did well to stop it spreading. Mr Rackham’s bean harvester was destroyed and I had been terrified. It was only later that I realised how much my family had benefited from fire.

In 1951 my grandfather’s business was based at an old windmill, North Mill in Wymondham. There was a fire, and the mill burnt to the ground. It was as a result of this fire that “Myhill and Son” had moved to the old Hethel airfield, the highpoint for the firm. A hundred years earlier great grandfather had made a success of selling insurance and collecting taxes.

I could not face Dolly and set off on my motor bike back to Hull. Real life was just a bit too much when it went wrong. The trauma did not end there. Taking a sharp bend much too fast on my Triumph Tiger Cub, I came off and the lorry following narrowly missed my head. A local farmer kindly bent my bike footrest back into position, so that I reached Hull before dark.

After a weekend of intellectual conversation, I returned to Norfolk to face the wrath of my relatives. It was clear that Dolly had no need for such a chaotic person, more trauma than support. My pigs were sold and I moved into the nurses’ home.

But without my imaginary life as Leo Tolstoy, peasant/writer of Church Farm; the true brutality of nursing became clear to me. Not the body fluids, pain and death; not the 8am till 8pm shifts of constant repetitive tasks; not even the lack of any conversation beyond pop music, fashion and who fancied whom. I could accept all that.
I was starting to notice the flaws in the system: when the ward sister got us to change half the bed covers, so that uniformity was maintained (18 clean covers sent to the laundry, and I knew how much work that would involve). The cleaners could not nurse and the nurses would not clean and the porters would do neither. Specialists did not understand each other and leaders did not listen to those they led. Consultants were treated like gods and no-one listed to patients.

By applying social and political theories to my workplace, I was seeing problems that went far beyond the National Health Service, infecting every aspect of work and life. After the excitement of the new, after the relaxation of practical action, disaster had brought my intelligence back into focus on the relation of theory and practice. It was clear that more enlightened social structure could produce a healthier, happier environment for both patients and staff.

Happy Birthday!

My birthday was the last straw. No cards from friends and family and no-one on the ward knew. By the start of October I was back in Hull ready to start researching my “Key to all Social Science”, my “great work”!

In the years that followed, I missed the camaraderie of nurses, the bath full to the brim of hot water after a long day, the huge gratitude of patients for small acts of kindness, the physicality and intimacy of caring. For that autumn term I missed the privacy of my own room, as I slept in the lounge of my house, and had to be the last to bed and the first up, every day. But this got me into the habit of starting my reading in the library at 9am, when they opened and not leaving till 10pm when they closed, eating my sandwich in the Union bar at 4pm, when it was usually quiet and having a simple cooked meal in the evening.

I sat in the top seventh floor of the university library, with views across the city to the Humber, but pillaged books from every floor. I was interested in the intersection of ideas across the boundaries of academic disciplines; so I always had several books from each discipline on the go in the same week.

The social sciences and philosophy were my main reading but I would try to read novels and books on paintings of the same period as my scholarly texts. There were many expeditions into unknown territory as I researched the meaning of a network to electrical engineers or neurologists, and had to do background reading in physics, chemistry biochemistry, etc. I spent several weeks learning about the maths of matrices, as these are crucial to network analysis and the basis for computers.
Research

Caesar’s Division of Gaul into three parts

De Gaulle (1890-1970). I divided my great work into three parts. The first was to trace the use of the term “Social Network”, according to ten ethical ideals. Each ideal was presented as a line stretching from the GM (Gemeinschaft - the community: at its worst seen in the film “The Wicker Man”) to the GS (Gesellschaft – the bureaucratic organisation: at its worst Auschwitz). The terms coming from the work of Ferdinand Tonnies.

My ten ideals were: 1) subjective to objective. 2) group to individual. 3) conflict to moderation. 4) passion to professional boundaries. 5) judgement to tolerance. 6) holistic to latest technology. 7) dogma to doubt. 8) dilettantism to specialisation. 9) equality to hierarchy. 10) concrete to abstract.

In stage two, I showed that social structure determines ideas and technology. Each system produces problems. The GM calls its problems “contradictions” the GS calls them “dysfunctions”. But changes can only come through changes in network structure.

Part three examines hopeful signs of new structures breaking away from the GM to GS dichotomy. Thus cross-cutting ties, those close personal links formed with two opposing groups, can overcome boundaries. Recognising labels and stereotypes we give to others can be the first step towards really knowing these people. People do change their patterns of thought in order to understand others. By controlling who we become close to, we can change the way we and they think and thus change the world. Life viewed as a series of experiments can falsify the assumptions we have been socialised to accept. The world has been and will be different from the way it is now. We can be more objective if we develop a low density network of close ties.

A Day in the Life of

Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) won the Nobel Prize in 1970. At first I reached out to university staff for advice. I attended some of Professor Alan White’s (1922-1992) lectures on meaning and Richard Swinburne’s (1934-) on philosophy of religion and Alistair Kee (1937-2011) on the new theology. As a post-graduate everyone seemed happy to have me in their classes, and I felt that I was at last following the subjects that interested me, rather than preparing for exams.

But I soon tired of the undergraduate system, and concentrated on following my own lines of enquiry, pushing the limits of the well-stocked library, till I was ordering piles of inter-library loans and reading resources on microfilm and microfiche. This could have been a lonely time, but I was reading about fascinating people I had yet to meet: psychopaths and addicts, Doukhobors and geriatrics; Senoi and paedophiles.

I was sharing my house with Philip and three female students. Penny was very persistent, meeting me from the library most nights and listening whilst I ranted on about the amazing discoveries of my day’s reading. I was working at full stretch and must have been hyper-manic most of the time. Everything excited me and drove me on to new sources. I slept through mental exhaustion.

Room at the Top

In the spring (1971) I decided that I needed physical exercise. My Sunday cycle to church and Park Avenue for Sunday lunch was not sufficient. I made a larger trap door into the roof space, built a
wooden ladder, and laid a plank floor. I hammered a hundred chipboard square off cuts to the roof rafters to make a ceiling and covered these with polystyrene squares to match the carpet sample book squares (six old pence each) on the floor. It provided weekend exercise, when the library was closed and soon I had a room of my own – the largest in the house and very cold. The lack of windows did not matter, as it was primarily a place to sleep. It was so cold that I went to be fully clothed, with an extra pullover, inside a sleeping bag, with three blankets and an eiderdown, and my thick coat over my head. The bedroom temperature was rarely above freezing between December and April and I only lit the paraffin stove when I had visitors. Starving in a garret certainly gave passion to Penny’s embraces, or were we just keeping warm. Sexual intercourse was out of the question as that would have risked frostbite!

**Bohemian**

The clean-cut student of nursing was soon replaced by wild hair, long beard and manic twinking eyes, like Raskolnikov. I wore a dinner jacket and Dr Scholls sandals on my bare feet and no-one seemed to consider me odd. The sandals exercised my toes whilst I walked. Throughout the winters of my childhood in Cofton, in thick socks and sensible shoes, I had suffered dreadful chilblains; but now I was walking sockless through snow and my feet were warm as toast. Only once did my sandals let me down, when I stepped back on to an upturned metal bookshelf, which cut deep into my heel. The sudden pain caused me to pass out and library staff called a doctor. I was very apologetic about the blood and appreciative of the kindness shown to me.

The dinner jacket was smart and cost nothing as someone gave it to me. It went with the rolled umbrella, which I twirled in self-conscious imitation of Hull-born Ian Carmichael (1920-2010) in his role as PG Woodhouse’s Bertie Wooster. It was a form of self-mockery: the gentleman scholar, owning my own house and living on rent from poor students. The truth was that I had so little income that I frequently lived on bread and dripping or potatoes and root vegetables. Once I was down to dripping alone and melted it into boiling water for my evening meal. Yet, I did not get into debt nor accept gifts from family or friends, nor did I claim benefits, as I wanted total independence: “to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost power of human thought” (Tennyson).

**Dig for Victory**

In the spring I took an allotment and started to grow my own food. The exercise and sunshine provided balance to my hours of study and by July I was eating proper meals, albeit with “essential” cheap cuts of meat: belly pork, rabbit, haddock, heart and mince. I was also getting to know real working class old men, who spent their whole days on their allotments. They were full of advice and life experience and political opinions. They rooted me in a reality of toil and production.

To understand the extreme right wing views of some of the working class men I met (Margaret Thatcher became Education Secretary and got rid of free school milk – shades of things to come.) I turned to the Conservative guru of many politics lecturers. Professor Michael Oakshott (1901-1990) had a wonderful story of the Tower of Babel, which expresses the reasonable caution we should show when faced by new technology or new political systems. Like the mythical tower, the new may have side effects worse than the old regime.

Thus he held that humans cannot know, let alone produce, what is good, yet they can resist bad things.

This then is the commonsense conservatism of those working class people who have been offered “A home worthy of heroes” on returning from fighting for their country, or a better standard of living, better health care etc; only to find they are still the poorest in society, without jobs or prospects; but suffering new forms of pollution, or indignity because of the side effects of social and technological
change. Oakshott gave understanding through metaphor, when there was no Twitter, YouTube or Wikipedia.

Oakshott was an intellectual’s intellectual and inspired me to look for changes that the individual could bring about in the wider world, by changing aspects of their social network. Innovations in culture and technology were useless, unless they were matched by changes in personal relationships and the way people think.

JRR Tolkien (1892-1973) was hugely popular amongst my friends. Penny loved his writings, and my daughters were to become enthusiasts; but I did not appreciate the scale of his imagination till the films came out. I found Lord of the Rings unreadable, yet I delighted in Oakshott’s description of the Tower of Babel, which seemed to fit 1972; when it was so hard to find information on the motivation of the Angry Brigade (Jake Prescott got 15 years prison for what?) or the Baader-Meinhoff, who mixed criminality with idealism inventing a non-sectarian terrorism far more complex than the IRA.

Poets

Despite regularly sharing a lift with Philip Larkin (1922-1985) we did not become close. I was committed to following ideas every waking moment, whilst poetry was a leisure activity for him, as most of his time revolved around administering the library. Nor did I share his love of jazz. I did get regular gossip about him from Tom Bamford, who found him sombre and brittle in discussion on Senate. Only when poets in residence provided seminars for students, did we see a more engaging mercurial side to Larkin. Poet in residence C Day Lewis (1904-72) was followed by Peter Porter (1922-2010) whom I found the most impressive of the visitors, as he spoke quickly with great wit and a huge vocabulary, which always sounded like poetry, even when he was merely gossiping about other poets.

John Betjeman (1906-1984) was a close friend of Philip’s and visited Hull occasionally, although he was already well known to the public as a presenter of TV programmes documenting “this sceptred isle”. It was only much later that I penetrated beyond the humour of his verse to the troubled heart. I had come across Parkinson’s disease as a student nurse and took a professional interest when caring for the elderly. John started with the illness about the same time as Uncle Wesley, who wore his compulsory smile far less convincingly.

Ken Russell (1927-2011) had made “A Poet in London” in 1959 about Betjeman which launched both their TV careers. I had loved the film of Isadora Duncan (1967) relating my free form of dancing to her and knitting a long scarf in her memory. Likewise, “Eric Fenby” (1968) inspired my sense of learning from older men of genius. But it was “Savage Messiah” (1972) that I felt captured the dedication of my research years and my relationship with Penny. I have often wondered if he based the film on my life rather than that of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915).

Like Henri, I was totally obsessed with my art (writing rather than sculpture) and lived in poverty driven on by a crazy older woman (Penny), who was exotically foreign and wildly romantic, passionate and driven. The stability of our relationship enabled her to forget her epilepsy and her fear of mental illness. It kept me from feeling isolated, as I was able to tell her about my work, and she would listen, because she was in love with me.

I wanted her to write essays about artists, which we could then discuss. She even did some of these, but she did not want to become an academic but an artist. Our relationship was itself a central subject for my network analysis: diagrams of our social network, maths calculations, and plans of our network of thoughts. What kind of a network were we developing?

“Tales of Old Dartmoor”(Episode of the Goon Show)
The father of Daphne Glazer (1939-) had been a conscientious objector in World War I, imprisoned in Dartmoor for his refusal to fight. She had divided her life fairly equally between teaching, prison work and writing her wonderful stories; which so often describe people and places I knew in Hull.

I met Daphne at Percy Street Quaker Meeting House, and then discovered she had taught Penny at Newland High School; where Penny was a couple of years above Maureen Lipman (1946-). Later Daphne studied for her MEd under Tom Bamford. Penny and I were invited to dinner parties quite often, and were invited to her wedding in 1971. This was my first Quaker wedding and a significant step in persuading me of the value of the Quaker way. Guests included John Saville and the director of Northern Foods. Her husband, Peter, was studying politics with the mature advantage of having grown up in Glasgow’s criminal underworld. He was a brilliant student, but only studied to prove his ability. He returned to being a self-employed builder; fully aware that his skills with his hands enabled him to change the real world; whilst the lives of politicians and academics only add to the burden of society.

At about the same time, Dick Pooley (1928-2010) climbed my ladder to my attic chamber. He had spent most of the previous 20 years as an inmate of HM Prisons, but was now going straight and had started a trade union for prisoners. I agreed to duplicate leaflets for PROP on my hand winded Gestetner duplicator. These were then smuggled into prisons and a new movement for human rights was born.

Later we worked together with a college lecturer, Ray Flint (1927-2000) to give talks on voluntary work to adult education courses. By the 1980s, Dick was happily married with three children and running a hostel for ex-prisoners. He knew that personal transformation was possible and so succeeded, where many others had failed, in keeping men out of prison.

I had started, as a probation volunteer, writing to a man serving ten years in Parkhurst. When he came out, I met him off the train into London and travelled back with him to Hull. This was my own Magwitch and I gave him the affection Pip provides at the end of Great Expectations. Our daughter Stella was born by then, and Penny was concerned at my friendship with this once dangerous man. But, my Magwitch had emphysema and died within a year of release, in scenes very close to Dickens’ account.

These encounters were powerful in influencing my reading of prison reform literature and seeking alternatives to punishment.

Communes

One of my luxuries as a starving student was a subscription to Communes Magazine. I was sharing my house with four others. They paid me a very low rent, but in many ways we worked as a community, doing things together and supporting each other through problems. Some communes were in cities, whilst others were in remote countryside. I was also thinking that Church Farm might one day be a commune. More immediately the ideal commune in which all were equal and everything shared in common was the extreme “Gemeinschaft” end of my continuum. I read about such communities across the world and over the centuries. From the reading I developed certain theories which I tried to test on the communities which wrote about themselves in Communes Magazine. Andrew Rigby wrote a study of Findhorn and other communes (but was he the Andrew Rigby who later became Professor of Peace studies, or the one who became warden of Scarborough Meeting House? Both seem likely.).

My interest was shared by a Hull Quaker, Bob Matthews (1943-) a Cambridge University maths genius, who was running his own business filling cavity walls with foam insulation – a very new idea in 1970. For a short time, Bob and I shared the editing of the Communes Magazine. He visited a number of communes in Britain and Denmark, as he was looking to live long-term in a community. He eventually moved to Old Hall, East Bergholt, where he stayed for more than a decade. I stayed
with him there a couple of times, learning about building skills and enjoying the beautiful Constable countryside. People became wealthier at Old Hall and gradually became more private, losing the communalism that attracted Bob and I. He then built a number of houses, producing a series of books on self-build, which became very popular from the 1990s, with rapidly rising house prices. The Isle of Wight is currently seeking self-sufficiency, which sounds like Bob now back on his native island.

Old Hall lost idealism because of prosperity. This was the fate of most larger communes, as it had been for American communities, whose members gradually became owners of property and employers of labour. City communes were more like my house: poor people sharing through necessity. The most extreme home I visited was in Sheffield, where the interior walls had been removed so that everyone slept in the one room and shared everything in common. Such loss of privacy is hard for people who are used to their own space. As benefits improved, this level of interdependence was only necessary for squatters, with addiction problems or illegal migrants. Idealists moved on. The idea of community through lack of privacy was finally demolished by the television programme “Big Brother” – a distortion of 1970s urban communes.

**The Remarkable Mr. Birkby**

My own community had a regular turnover. Jane Lippet, moved in her boyfriend John Birkby, and then moved out to a flat of their own. John was researching John Galt, a quiet Victorian Scottish novelist, whose books remind me of John’s own self-effacing brilliance. A self-taught musician, John bought a piano for a pound from a church hall jumble sale (I have it still in my shed!). Understanding so much, he always pretended to know nothing, rather like his hero, Rupert Bear, who always saves the day but never makes a fuss.

When Jane returned to her parents’ home and married the boy next door, we knew John was devastated, but he never showed it. He went to work for Woolworths and soon became a store manager, but I doubt if they realised how absurd he considered his work. He quickly became a solicitor, back in his home town of Oldham, married and lived an apparently middle class existence, where walking on the moors, or playing jazz and drinking real ale were the highs of a quiet life. Yet I have met few men with his depth of compassion, integrity and humour. Rupert Bear for Prime Minister I say.

**Desperately Seeking Scotland**

In spring 1971, Penny and I hitch hiked towards Ben Nevis. We found ourselves on the edge of Glasgow at nightfall and camped on a motorway embankment near a housing estate. The next day we reached Fort William, but I had a sore throat and a high temperature and we had to book into a B&B which we could not really afford. This was one of many attempts by Penny to nurse me by sharing my bed, but I stoically refused. We returned to Hull by expensive train.

In the summer a similar adventure was more successful. I had saved and she was working as an usherette at the low porn, Regal cinema. We still hitched but stayed in B&Bs. My excuse for this extravagance was that I would seek a summer job in the highlands. A friend of my father’s, from Hong Kong internment camp, arranged for me to have an interview at Inverness psychiatric hospital. I was reading Maxwell Jones (1902-1990).

Penny and I then went on to Strathpeffer, where we shared a family room: she in the large double bed and me in the child’s bed, much to her annoyance. We took the post-bus to Gairloch and had a room virtually on the beach. A long walk through the “Flowerdale Forest” (no trees but amazing views) captured my heart for the North West of Scotland, and much of that ecstasy inevitably passed on to Penny.
Thus I was not unhappy to be told that there was no immediate vacancy for work at the hospital. I had had my fix of beauty and returned to my penniless research using instead patient contacts (through the anti-psychiatry movement) to enhance my reading on mental illness.

Each novel I read resulted in a network diagram, showing the relationships between the characters in an attempt to see if patterns of interconnections impacted on behaviour in fiction, as they undoubtedly do in ordinary life. It was also a new way of analysing fiction, that permitted a high degree of objectivity. This was a long way from “deconstructing text” or applying a feminist, or post-colonial perspective, as was fashionable at the time.

It worked particularly well with rational/philosophical novelists like Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing (a friend of John Saville). It was no help at all in understanding the difference between Smollett and DH Lawrence. But at this point, Phil Weaver introduced me to the meretricious persiflage of Peregrine Pot (Peri for short:1950-) an autodidact, who combined Smollett’s humour with Lawrencian passion.

**Weaver**

Philip also provided a string of temporary, beautiful, young ladies. He looked at this time like a character from the Beatles’ Sergeant Pepper album, and attracted daring, clever, English students, most of whom he passed over on discovering a new model. The exception was a down-to-earth commonsense girl, to whom he lost his heart. She realised she could not change him and left.

It was soon after this that he decided he was too old for a communal house and moved out to a place of his own. I had come to take conversations on imagination in seventeenth century English literature for granted. I expected him to be there to comment on my research discoveries of the day and listen to his musings on art. His moving out left a gap in my daily cogitations. Penny tried hard to fill this niche, and we had wonderful discussion, but she lacked Philip’s ability to jump from one subject to another, whilst holding to some obscure theme.

**The Moonstone Mystery**

Philip provided a replacement tenant: James Kliphuis (1943-) a Dutch intellectual researching Willkie Collins (1824-89). James’ English was more perfect than mine. He was horrified that I did not know that Cholmondley was pronounced Chumley and his spelling was as perfect as his accent. He was dedicated to our house cat, Woozie, although we did speculate that he might be sharing the cat food he kept under his bed. James was a wine snob, delighting in his ability to recognise the impact of Pierre’s feet on the south facing vines of a specific vineyard. I soon realised that I actually preferred cheap house wine, to the expensive stuff he raved about. He was the same with books, spending a fortune on facsimile editions, which are such a struggle to read, in preference to later editions in clear print.

Nevertheless, he was an exotic intellectual, who played recorders to a professional level and Penny was clearly romantically attracted to him.

This was the year of decimalisation, radio licences were abolished and Rolls Royce went bankrupt. I followed Claude Levi Strauss in believing that all explanations are either structuralist or reductionist and in preferring the former. Social networks were for me the structures that would explain everything.

**Xinon and the Waters of Oblivion**
This was my first novel and it began as a shared enterprise in which six of us wrote a chapter inspired by a painting: “Sadak in search of the Waters of Oblivion” by John Martin (1812). It was intended to turn Watergate on its head and prove that Nixon (anagram Xinon) had engineered his own downfall in order to permanently reduce the power of the president. I tried to use some of the varied styles offered by introducing five other characters, each with their own take on Nixon. Thus there was the Grandfather (Phil Weaver) wise and wordy, who used the language of agricultural history. I was sure that innovation of agricultural tools had gone astray, resulting in the soil destructive heavy machinery, oil dependency and unemployment of current agribusiness, and was collecting data from museums.

Zirea, the one archetypal female, was based on Cathy (Wuthering Heights) Anna Karenina and Dorothea; but increasingly she became Penny.

Adephaga (Peri), the noble savage of Rousseau (Ted Hughes published “Crow” in 1970) who eats everything, absorbs the universe, provided the opportunity for a naïf view, whilst Pshychson (John Birkby) the sophisticated psychoanalyst and organiser, was his antithesis, the Gesselschaft archetype. Xoc (anagram of Cox, writer of “The Secular City”) represented journalistic atheism, the turning of all things into sound bites and titillation of the masses jealousy (was James Kliphuis).

Paris and the Matterhorn

The centre of Paris has remained remarkably unspoilt by time. It retains the romance of enlightenment, revolution and post-modernism: of Toulouse-Lautrec’s Moulin Rouge, absinthe and Colette (1873-1954); seen through the haze of vin rouge and Impressionism. In May, full of chestnut and magnolia blossom, it was perfect. The USA/ Vietnam Paris peace talks had broken down on April 28th. Penny and I wondered at a Mexican stele in the Musee de l’Homme, at rural history of France and at the water lily paintings of Monet. So much we saw in just a few days, and every street we walked through seemed perfect. We stayed in a cheap hotel on Chateau d’Eau, where they insisted we speak our poor Francais.

It was magical, but I also wanted her to see my favourite mountain, so we went on to Switzerland and a few nights in Zermatt. I was enchanted, but Penny caught a touch of the sun and I had to climb alone. Following a summer path, alone, thousands of feet above Zermatt, I came to a snowdrift and sank to my waist. I managed to struggle free and decided to climb round the drift, as I could see the path continue in the distance, but I underestimated the steepness of the climb and soon found myself on a cliff edge, with a huge drop beneath me. Only rock climbers should go there. I retraced my steps and lived to climb another day.

Without fear I would have died, yet a more rational person would not have reached that position of real danger, that provoked the fear. It was fear that had fixed those alpine views, the beauty of that day and the whole holiday so clearly in my memory.

I was of course in love with Ingrid Bergman, especially for “Inn of the Sixth Happiness” (1958) where she played dad’s friend Gladys Alward (1907-1970). Gladys had visited us in Cofton before returning to Hong Kong in 1958. Her heroic escape from the Japanese with her orphans, was over mountains like these.

Inn of the Seventh Happiness

When I looked out from the seventh floor of the university library, as I did for over 300 days each year for five years; I saw houses, hospital, blocks of flats, and on a clear day the Humber, but I also saw clouds, the Matterhorn and other magical mountains. Through these I saw the facts and ideas I was reading as living images, and beyond the images, the interconnections to other ideas. Life was a continuous high of excitement and fear. It was also very exhausting.
In retrospect the intellectual freedom of the time seems astounding. As a graduate I had free access to a brilliant library, and for about three years I was ordering dozens of inter-library loans at no cost, until the system suddenly realised that I was not registered for a higher degree, but merely following a medieval ideal of scholarship. Similarly, I attended lectures in physics, zoology and history as well as the social sciences without ever being questioned. The wild beard, dinner jacket and sandals must have indicated serious intent. I was in danger of becoming an institution.

Our great luxury was a season ticket to chamber music concerts. We came to know the Allegri Quartet as friends, through parties at Loten Hall organised by James Booth (1946-) I was addicted to Bella Bartok and would beg Stephen Bostock to hammer our Microcosmos on the piano.

I had total confidence in the absolute rightness of what I was doing, and could not understand my contemporaries, who slid so easily into teaching and social work, industry and business. How could such a broken world be accepted? For me there could be no assimilation by “The System”. I had first to understand the world and then to change it.

**What Prospects?**

When my father treated me to a holiday on the Isle of Man (again I had the child’s bed, whilst he snored in the double), our week of walks criss-crossing the island reminded me of Scotland and I felt the absence of a woman who loved me. So I was able to confide in my father that I was considering marriage. I think he thought the idea was absurd for someone with no job, who could barely support himself.

But what made the decision was Penny’s increasing infatuation with James Kliphuis. I realised that she was no longer asking me to marry her on a weekly basis, nor seeking to seduce me during our evenings of snogging. So, on my mother’s birthday (August 10th) I took her for a day trip to York and in the quiet of St Olaf’s church I went down on one knee and proposed. She was surprised and for a moment I feared she might say no. Her father was amazed and could not believe we were serious. Uncle Peter was flabbergasted and started to persuade me towards gainful employment and a responsible lifestyle. But I had years of research planned and no intention of changing the perfection of my Bohemian ways.

Shortly after we became engaged, James went back to Holland for a holiday and then announced, from a safe distance, that he would not be returning. Perhaps he had real feelings for Penny. His sister wrote to say he was in an “Alptraume” referring to the holidays they took together mountaineering in the alps and his ability to lose himself in high thoughts. When we married, Phil Weaver went off to stay with him in Holland and I wondered if this was to comfort the broken-hearted James. In fact James soon developed a successful career with Radio Amsterdam.

**Obedience**

Living for ideas was not normal. I was not a hippy, dropping out to live a life of love and peace. I was not completing a research degree as a step towards an academic career, or taking a few gap years before settling to some profession. I was searching for the key to how societies and psychologies work, in the way that Darwin sought the key to understanding biology.

I was assisted by the work of Stanley Milgram (1933-84) on how people are fooled into obeying orders, enabling them to do things they know are wrong, like genocide or just leading grey pointless lives. I was assisted by Erving Goffman (1922-82) on the manufacture of mental illness and Ivan Illich (1926-2002) on the dumbing down effect of schooling.

Why had conformity become such an evil for me? Was I just rebelling against my conventional upbringing as all young people do? Coming from Hong Kong, I had seen British culture as foreign
and been attracted to those who criticised it as exploiting the poor, producing boring jobs, brainwashing the individual, enforcing barbarism and so on.

The freedom I experienced as a student was so exhilarating, in such sharp contrast to school and work, that I wanted that happiness to be available to others. The central idea in psychoanalysis was suppression of feelings, causing trauma. In sociology there was the suppression of the workers by the elite. In literary criticism, deconstruction of a text would reveal the oppressive intent of the writer. In politics we studied oppression in many forms. Wherever I turned academic writers were advocating disobedience. Quakers were advocating passive resistance and anarchists were dedicated to overthrowing all forms of oppression. These were the forces in my social network and I believed a person’s ideas came from their own social network.

**High Noon**

My wedding day (November 4, 1972) was superficially traditional: performed by my father in a large Anglican church filled with our families and friends; a quiet reception at the Bamfords’ house, 100 Park Avenue, and then off for honeymoon. But the bridegroom was unemployed with no prospects, wearing his great grandfather’s morning suit with eyes like Raskolnikov and his bride, was taken to church between brother and father, who feared she might run off at the last moment.

I was having a wonderful time talking with the guests and had to be bundled off with the bride and best man, so that the rest could go home. Uncle Peter had come with the specific intention of impressing my in-laws of the prospective value of my inheritance and my need to buckle down to serious business. It was the last time I ever saw him. Stephen Bostock, drove us on to Scarborough, he went on to stay with his mother in Robin Hood’s Bay. We had a couple of nights in a bed and breakfast – all I could afford, and returned to the freezing attic of Exmouth Street.

Yet a fortnight in the Bahamas could not have been better. When we arrived there were bonfires on the beach and fireworks to celebrate our romance. South Pacific was on TV: “If you don’t have a dream, how you goin’ to have a dream come true?” has stayed with me. My sexual prowess was feeble and Penny was clearly disappointed, but it was five years before I realised how disappointed, so my glow of happiness was unspoilt.

I deliberately sought a noon wedding, from the film “High Noon” and the song “Do not forsake me oh my darling on this our wedding day,” ran through my head continually.

Susan Hill was born in Scarborough in 1942 and I read her short stories, clearly set in the town, on our honeymoon. We visited Anne Bronte’s grave.

**Mathematics**

Moreno’s (1889-1974) idea of sociometry (a quantitative method for measuring social relationships) was one of many mathematical models I considered. He was a maverick who never gained the mass following of psychoanalysis. Yet his system offered an alternative way of considering a person’s problems, in terms of his close personal relationships or lack of them.

Network analysis itself is part of matrices, which in turn are crucial to the working of computers. Working before the computer age, I made calculations using cards with holes in and metal rods.

Kurt Lewin’s (1890-1947) field theory was another potential model for mapping personal relationships, and I was intrigued by this metaphor from magnetism - networks connected to electricity. This theory has been usefully applied in the “morphic fields” of Rupert Sheldrake (1942-). But there was enough variation within social network analysis to stretch my maths to its limits.
Voluntary Organisations

There is a sense in which we volunteer to form some relationships rather than others; so how did this compare to someone volunteering to join an organisation? And why were some voluntary organisations Gemeinschaft whilst others were Gesellschaft? And what was the social network connecting these groups?

I began my survey of voluntary organisations in Hull, as an application of the social network theory I was developing. I visited the hundred plus voluntary organisations in the city, asking each a series of simple questions. They were remarkably helpful, given that I was cold calling, with no authority. I arranged the organisations into groups, and suggested which groups needed to work more closely together. I published my findings and sent a copy to the director of social services for Humberside. He was quoted in the Hull Daily Mail as saying that the work was very useful. Ten years later I was back in Hull as his “Community Services and Voluntary Liaison Officer”.

Churches

Churches are themselves charities using huge numbers of volunteers to support good causes. But they also interested me as indicating a seemingly inevitable change from sect (Gemeinschaft) to church (Gesellschaft), a change involving increasing hierarchy, specialisation, ritual and wealth; but also increasing tolerance so that the way things are done seems more important than a creed. But was this a move towards secularisation (as claimed by Harvey Cox (1929-) – not to be confused with my friend of the same name who is an expert in Irish politics – or was it just a move away from the small-minded dogma towards the inclusivity of a world religion. Again it was possible to look at social networks in the new evangelical sects and contrast them with those in the Church of England.

I found Anthony Tyrell Hanson, professor of theology, very helpful as he had missionary experience from India whilst remaining an orthodox New Testament scholar. His own network seemed to indicate that close ties with contrary sets of people could provide intellectual independence.

Christmas Disaster

My brother, his wife and small children, Helen and Stephen, were back from three years’ teaching in Hong Kong, and staying for a few months at the Vicarage. Having got used to solitude, dad suddenly had a young boisterous family. But he had his routine of work in his study and visits to the parish, as well as meetings and services, so it was only his meals and TV habits that were affected. They were paying a contribution to board and Diane was doing most of the cooking.

Penny and I were invited for Christmas but I had to make clear that we could not afford to contribute to food. We could barely afford the return fares and the Bamfords would have fed us for free. I was keen to see my brother and I thought his children were great fun; but Diane had become a strict disciplinarian and did not approve of my getting the children excited with silly games. Penny did not want to be there and felt there was no role for her as Diane was in charge of cooking. I was pleased to see old friends and talk about my research, but Penny withdrew and became depressed. She and Diane were the same age, which did not help. Dad’s diary 31/12/72: “one of those repetitive bearing down dream sequences.” We left on January 2nd and Paul and family went on the fifth.

Shortly after this I received a brief note informing me that my wife would not ever be welcome at their house. They lived on the Severn near Bristol and we lived on the Humber and other distant places, so it was never likely that we would have visited more than twice a decade, so the note seemed unnecessary, motivated not by the need to avoid conflict but by the desire to hurt. I missed my brother
and felt again the loss of my mother. It was 18 years before I saw my brother again, when we had both parted from our wives and formed new relationships.

**China**

According to Mao Tse Tung, it was possible for the state (Gesellschaft) to direct all its attention to the smooth running of the village (Gemeinschaft). If this was true, it offered possible resolution of the antithesis I was studying. So I read Mao’s works, and “China Reconstructs” and other propaganda of the regime and I read village studies by foreign sociologists. The most inspiring of these was Jan Myrdal’s (1927-) study of 1963.

Like Jan, I wanted to believe that workers would function most effectively together as equals free from bureaucracy and control by the wealthy. Like him I was disappointed when the fall of Mao led to a return to centralised controls and venture capitalism, returning the peasants to their helplessness.

Of course I have been horrified by the abuses of power exercised by communist party leaders including Mao, but I am unconvinced that the loss of idealism has been beneficial.

**Sundays**

Rupert Murdoch (1931-) bought the “News of the World” in 1969, but this was the first time I had bought and read it. Each Sunday morning, I would go to the newsagent, trousers and jacket over my pyjamas, and then return to bed, where Penny and I would consume coffee and newspapers till midday. Usually the Sunday Times or Sunday Observer, but we would try another paper as well. Given that I was reading about strange tribes, deviance and genocide, I found the News of the World rather tame. I wanted to have the latest news, as well as the deep picture.

We usually went to the Bamfords’ for lunch and sometimes Aunt Pam’s for tea, but more usually we went to a church service. We liked the local Salvation Army because it was nearest and lively. The Methodists were a bit austere and the curate we liked had moved on from the church where we were married. We had previously attended the Congregational church, until the union with the Presbyterians, to become the United Reformed Church in 1972, as that was when the minister left to join a congregational church that was not joining the new body. If it had not been for that, we might have been married in a Congregational church. When dad retired he attended the local United Reformed Church. Place of worship is so much a matter of personal social networks.

**Arson and Guilt**

I have heard more hell-fire sermons than most people, but I could never accept that a loving God could wish to hurt his creation. I still suffered horror when I thought of the barn fire I had caused by my unlucky bonfire. In June there was a tragic house fire in Hull and years later Peter Dinsdale confessed to deliberately causing this fire, amongst many others. Peter suffered a number of disabilities, including learning, and it always struck me that his confessions cleared a backlog of arson and murder cases. It was later shown that the home for the elderly where ten residents died, was accidental, not arson, which threw doubt on his other confessions. The case has always been an archetype for me of the potential for justice to miscarry. So I followed Michael Mansfield’s career with great interest (he was of course a friend of Chris Mullin).

**High Romance**
Dad came to stay with us and took us on a day trip to Haworth. I was disappointed by the moors (tame and semi-urban) and the Bronte museum, more Charlotte than Emily. But my love of Wuthering Heights has drawn me back many times since, including a wonderful week at a farm near by.

Eric Fromm (1900-1980) was popular with the Quaker university group that Penny and I went to. He wants us to see love as a capacity for interpersonal creativity (which fitted with my social network theory) and not as an emotion which he lambasted as neurosis and narcissism with sado-masochist aspects. That was never my understanding of Wuthering Heights, which I take as support for the passionate absolutism of emotional love. When Penny expressed her deeper emotions, the things I loved her for; Quakers became concerned and curious; like bees to honey. I should have taken this as a warning.

**Glasgow Zoo**

We stayed with Stephen Bostock, who had become education officer for Glasgow Zoo and was living south of the city amongst rivers and dramatic hills. He was looking after a wildcat. We visited New Lanark to see the enlightened factory and community of Robert Owen (1771-1858). He later founded an idealistic community in the USA: a significant attempt to blend Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft elements. We visited a safari park. Stephen was working on his PhD and later published “Zoos and Animal Rights” (Routledge 1993). We were also impressed by the conservation work being done at Glasgow Zoo and Stephen’s contacts with other zoos around the country. Most importantly, the romantic setting and relaxation from research led to the conception of our daughter Stella.

**New Residents**

Bob Morley (1949-) from Nicholson Hall, was now doing a proper PhD on the analysis of pollen grains. He stayed with me for a couple of years, before and after a year in the wilds of Malaya, collecting samples and gaining a life-long taste for remote rain forests. We found it extraordinary that anyone could distinguish so many microscopic bits that looked so similar, and incredible that such knowledge could be useful in something as significant as knowing where to drill for oil. We were more impressed by his ability to learn to play Spanish guitar. Forty years on I remember Bob practicing whenever I hear certain classical guitar pieces on radio.

Another new resident was Michael McEvoy (1947-). Jenny Foreman (1950-), lead in Rites of Spring, completed her drama degree and split from lover James Booth to join a travelling theatre company, where she became close to Michael. When Michael came to Hull to study politics, and Jenny to do a teacher training course; she decided to live with James and dropped Michael. This was achieved by getting Michael a room at 29. He was an excellent tenant and stayed the full three years with us, whilst many others came and went.

Harriet Allen (1950-) was the daughter of a Cambridge professor and a remarkably wise and relaxed resident. Sadly she only stayed for her final year and then moved on to a career. Harriet replaced Jan Horton, a past girlfriend of Philip, who had nearly moved on to me. Jan was my first experience of a petit, West Yorkshire, working class dynamo. She was also ultra respectable, and once I became engaged to Penny she became “our” friend and ceased to flirt with me, which I found disappointing. She moved to live with Mike Chamarette, who was more than a foot taller and her opposite in many ways. They were a fascinating couple.

As a married man, it did not seem right for me to spend all my evenings alone in the library, so we sometimes went to the Bamfords to watch television. So, like many people in 1973, we watched Jacob Bronowski (1908-1974) “Ascent of Man”. He had taught maths at Hull (1939-42) when it was still a college of London University and had known Tom Bamford.
Bronowski’s eldest daughter, Liza (born 12 April 1944 - 30 years before Stella) married Nicholas Jardine (1943-) professor of History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge. She was Stella’s Professor of English at Queen Mary’s College (London University) in the late 1990s.

**Church Farm Hethel**

Across the road from the Bamfords lived retired Professor of Philosophy, TE Jessup (1896-1980), who popped in quite often. He was no relation to Augustus Jessop (1823-1914) who taught my grandfather and became head of Norwich School, where George Meredith’s (1828-1909) son was grandfather’s contemporary. George Meredith, as a young man, posed for the painting “Death of Chatterton” by Henry Wallis (1830-1916). The window in the picture is just like that in grandfather’s brother’s room at Church Farm, and was referred to as the Chatterton window.

I took Penny to Hethel and we stayed at the farm with Aunt Dolly. I was surprised how well Penny and Dolly got on together - so much better than Judy had done. It was not that we were married, given Dolly’s own disregard for such formalities. Perhaps Uncle Peter had set the scene, explaining that we lived in a roof space with no money, or that Penny had no interest in cooking and cleaning, just like Dolly. Probably it was simply love of art. They discussed Gauguin and Matisse, Mondrian and our time in Paris. Penny even did some pastel sketches. For her part, Penny was much more comfortable, in the chaos of cats, the cobwebs and mud, than she ever was at the Vicarage.

There were new people at the Red House, a lecturer at the University of East Anglia, Richard Wilson (1938- ) and his family. The Humphreys had had a new house built in grandad’s orchard. Dolly thought it a blot on the landscape. We called it “The White House”. Dolly had become good friends with Jo Sisley, whose husband’s great uncle was the artist Alfred Sisley (1839-99).

**Employment**

I had made a number of attempts to gain what would now be termed “work experience”. I wanted a few months working in an organisation that did not usually employ people like me. The Police were not in the least interested in recruiting a graduate. The Army training would have taken the full three months and might have been hard to get out of. The Merchant Navy would only take people without relevant experience and union membership. The pubs regarded me as overqualified, when I mentioned that I had O levels!

These were dramatic times, with four IRA bomb explosions in London in March. But the nearest I came to work was looking after the Vicarage whilst dad was in hospital and then looking after him for a week, whilst he recovered. Penny and I went to see “Clockwork Orange”, which reinforced my desire to understand violence and injustice.

**Phoneme Fire**

It was difficult to see employment as anything but an absurd abrogation of understanding. Not only did employers create irrational social structures which prevented them from achieving their avowed goals, they misused language so that no-one really understood each other. I was immersed at this time studying syntactics and the “generative grammar” of Noam Chomsky (1928- ). Here were hierarchies of language and networks of meaning for me to analyse. No wonder Chomsky, who could see the
structure of language, was able to provide persuasive reasons for the USA to get out of Vietnam. Nixon was persuaded.

I was working on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889-1951) Tractatus, drawing a network diagram of the connections between his key terms and researching the German meanings. The Tractatus became the model for part one of my great work and his “Investigations” the model for part three.

**Madness – Rubik’s cube invented**

I never set out to study mental distress. My friendship with Harry Rose had convinced me that most distress was socially generated, through social structures and that treatment of patients, especially ECT and medication, created dependency on medical professionals (creating what they claimed to cure). I was interested in the hierarchic structure of hospitals and the specialisms (Gesellschaft) which prevented people from listening to each other. This contrasted with the anti-psychiatry movement, which consisted of loosely-connected groups (Gemeinschaft) each advocating their own therapeutic community approach. It was by contacting these groups that I came to know the charismatic RD Laing (1927-1989) I became involved with “People not Psychiatry” set up by Michael Barnett. Society is sick and does not allow individuals to be themselves. By suppressing variation, social structure threatens the working of evolution, which depends on the selection of qualities we cannot predict.

John Boston, anthropologist of the Igala tribe, was one of my most supportive lecturers. His wife organised the local branch of the National Schizophrenia Fellowship, through which I came to know many remarkable people. My dream life was their waking experience. The voices which I heard, which provided me with comfort and direction in times of anxiety or fear; were for them voices of accusation and threat, causing misery, self-harm and suicide.

They were wonderful people, lacking superficiality, cutting through social convention, direct and open without pretension or the recognition of the pretension of others. They gave me contact with remarkable people. Talcott Parson’s (1902-1979) daughter committed suicide at 33. It was through the unusual gifted people, labelled “mad”, that I gained a new perspective on “normality”, saw the thin skin of civilisation and yearned for a society where the “successful, well-balanced” people could be more adventurous, less suppressed.

This led naturally to “Network Therapy”, which was developed by Ross Speck at the Family Institute in Philadelphia. Was Nancy Spurgeon, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in Philadelphia, one of his patients? She died with her partner Sid Vicious from a drugs overdose. I had followed the Sex Pistols since 1973, and continued to be fascinated by punk music for a decade.

**Science**

Here was another complex series of networks: Gesellschaft institutions focused on power and Gemeinschaft communities of specialists living only for their sub-section of an academic discipline. I was a follower of Karl Popper’s (1902-1994) theory of falsification, by which theories could be disproved but never established as certain: which I linked with the idea that “Everything is permitted” (in Dostoyevsky’s “Brothers Karamazov”). I was also attracted to Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) ideas, as the concept of a “social network” was clearly a new paradigm for reanalysing everything.
The evidence from studies of identical twins, which had suggested that IQ was inherited; had been re-evaluated, in line with the new paradigm that social interaction (social networks) is more significant than genetics in determining IQ. This was a source of interesting discussion with my geneticist father-in-law.

**Easter Saturday 1974**

On the tenth anniversary of my mother’s death, Penny gave birth to our daughter. (It was also April 13th, Sam Beckett’s (1908-1989) 66th birthday – “play it again Sam”) I had never seen such pain, or spent a night listening to screaming. Do all men feel this sense of guilt? And does that explain their risk taking and warfare, as attempts to redress the balance? Certainly the joy was proportionate to the suffering, especially as I was convinced by the newborn’s purple colour that she was dead. Then she began to breathe and cry and turned a healthy pink. I was so ecstatic that on my way home I hugged and kissed the first person I knew, who happened to be Penny’s aunt: an intimacy that shocked both of us, but seemed natural on this one occasion.

Penny called the baby Stella, because of Sir Philip Sidney’s “Asphodel and Stella”. I accepted the name as my daughter was clearly a star, a miracle of heaven; but also because I could see she would break hearts, like Estella in “Great Expectations”, and because of Stella Gibbons’ (1902-1989) “Cold Comfort Farm” (Aunt Dolly’s description of Church Farm, Hethel) and a lead in to the wonderful writings of Mary Webb.

The ecstasy of parenthood gave me a negative view of those who were negative about others. Marganitta Laski (1915-1998) had just edited Kipling’s poems, she took the view that communes would always fail because they would be dragged down by “lame ducks”. I loved her intelligence, as it always sparked my own contrary thoughts. She was a professional atheist, drawn to write about religion. Ironically in 1980 she wrote “Everyday Ecstasy”. Like so many women I have known, she went to Somerville College Oxford. The head of Somerville, was prison reformer and first woman magistrate, Margery Fry (1874-1958), who spent the last years of her life with her sister in Cofton.

Penny was a great admirer of Hull-born Tom Courtney (1937-) who played Pasha Antipar in the film “Dr Zhivago”, where he said “The personal is political”. But I saw myself as Omar Sharif (Zhivago) and Penny as my loyal aristocratic wife. These roles influenced our future dramatically.
Real Life

Moving On

Tim Poston had moved on to Warwick University, where he met Andrew Davies (1936-), who came to fame when he wrote “A Very Peculiar Practice” which was filmed at the University of East Anglia. The series accurately mapped the collapse of English universities from the idealism of the 1960s to the business schools they became in the 1980s. I had watched the decline from my ivory tower and was very glad to be out of them by then.

John Birkby had become a solicitor. Jeff was working for Social Services in mental health and Judy in North London. Even Philip had taken his unfinished PhD to Quorn, where he was working as museums education officer, giving talks in schools and realising how annoying bored children can be. Anna Dunton was giving tourist information at Waterloo. Harry Rose was in textiles back home in West Yorkshire, and Bob Morley was working in North Wales.

Identity

Parenthood changes who we are. Penny became a lovely mother and I realised I would have to earn some money. The reality of this tiny person, who was so much part of me, made my intellectual studies seem dry and unreal. Following Tolstoy, I believed that manual labour would root me in the natural rhythms of life. I would learn from the working class. I would toughen my body and release my mind from the obsessive world of ideas. I would provide a healthy life for my daughter in the countryside, far away from all the deviance and distress of urban life. (It was at this time that John Stonehouse (1925-1988) was found to have faked his own death, as he was actually living in Australia.)

Edgar Page (1940-) lectured on identity, obligation and rights. So I saw my emerging self in terms of my obligations to Penny and Stella and our right to a natural way of labour in food production. I was also identifying with my farming ancestors and believing that my destiny was Church Farm, now that I had an heir. The heredity also attracted me to the Munros, with their thousand years of tradition in one place (Donald Munro (1039) founder of the clan).

Edgar Page’s take on rights was rather different, as was shown in 1988 when he was made redundant and took the university through the courts and ran a five-year boycott campaign to protect the tenure of university lecturers.

Paul Gilbert (1946-) became Professor of Philosophy in 2000 and showed that philosophy had something useful to say about studies of society. This made me believe that I might combine theory and practice - a farm labourer during the day and an intellectual at night.

Alfred Adler (1870-1937) had shown that psychotherapy could be part of everyday life. Every person is unique and should be treated equally, not moulded to fit some theory, typology or label. Perhaps I could find hard work a therapeutic solution to mental distress. Our time on the farm was certainly Penny’s happiest time of life.

I had spent ten years in education since the then school leaving age of 15. I decided to spend the next ten years in “real work”. I wrote off for farming jobs advertised in agricultural magazines. Relief
herdsman near Northallerton, was clearly expecting someone with more experience and I was relieved not to be offered the job - 70 milkers, seven days a week, and often single handed and seven miles from Northallerton – but at least it was with cows. Tractor driver near Ipswich, would have been high tech, mainly driving, but it was closer to Hethel. A job near Hull was more old-fashioned and mainly caring for fattening cattle, but I did not get it. Farmers were desperate and I got interviews from most job applications. My application to Ross-shire, north of Inverness, was really a romantic gesture: the train fare and overnight accommodation was more than the weekly wage. I did not know that they had several new employees each year, as I was chosen by the foreman, who did not tell me he would be gone when I started.

Foulis Farms

So, in September 1974, I started work as stockman/tractor driver for the chiefs of the clan Munro. The current chief, Hector Munro, had just taken over managing the 1100-acre estate, consisting of five farms and employing five men, each with a tractor indicative of his own status.

It was my privilege to rise at 6.15am, 45 minutes before the other men, and feed a herd of bullocks on many wheelbarrows full of silage. I loved working with the cows, but felt my role was similar to a guard, feeding prisoners until their eventual execution. I developed the idea of “Ruralis”: not the deep subconscious need for countryside in every person, but as a place inhabited by “bedfast idiots” (the farming out to the countryside of large institutions, full of underclass, that respectable townsfolk cannot accept, but hidden in bleak places where there is ignorance of science and ideas). Thus the character of Shitgrubber entered my Xinon novel, as I tried to turn my experiences into an archetype of cruelty, as in asylums, prison, gulags and concentrations camps, animal experiments and factory farms.

When I came across Michael Faber’s (1960-) novel “Under the Skin” set close to the A9, as Foulis is, where aliens turning hitch hikers (which I had been) into meat for creatures on another planet; I recognised my own thoughts and experience on every page.

Faber however, does not capture the extreme beauty of the area between Ben Wyvis and the Cromarty Firth. The changing colours each day; the fierce storms; fabulous sunrises over the Black Isle; golden gorse, capercaillie, red deer, red squirrels, red kites, red sunsets. The changing seasons: fabulous autumn leaves, three weeks of dense freezing fog that hardly lifted; icy roads, when only tractors ventured forth; deep snow transforming all to arctic. The wonder that inspired Penny was the trawler fleet that anchored in the Firth, covering the blackness of the water at night with a scattering of fairy lights.

She used fluorescent pens on shiny paper to capture the magical scene. She also painted the passing colours of the fields, woods, lake and mountain on hardboard. The light inspired her and the joy of Stella growing and learning every day. In the evenings, beside a bright log fire, she would paint and I would type up my “Key to all Social Science”. Dorothea and Casaubon were happy.

Hard Labour

Some days were a delight; carting hay to where it was needed. Even the back-breaking effort of unloading hundred-weight bags of fertiliser, or throwing up heavier bags of “tatties” (potatoes) gave me a sense of glowing health and growing muscles. But there were dull days when there was no real work to be done and I would move a pile of loose hay from one place to another, or roll up a frozen pipe in a snowstorm or assist the shepherd, Lesley Gray, in burying sheep.
No two days were alike and I learnt practical skills of animal care, ploughing and harrowing, muckspeading, and using a tractor-driven circular saw: all of which I attempted to replicate ten years later on my own farm.

**Stewardship: preserving inheritance**

I spent one interesting day assisting Hector in sorting through old farm tools and machinery. We shared a dream of a properly labelled museum, preserving artefacts from a lost way of life. I went for an interview as a museum assistant at Edinburgh Museum. I did not get it but, over the next ten years, I catalogued a dozen agricultural museums’ collections using a system that was later computerised. The hundreds of hours of patient classification was not, for me, an end in itself. I was searching for those missing links in the evolution of tools and machines, when technology might have taken a different direction.

My inspiration was the “intermediate” or “appropriate” technology as it was known. Efficient irrigation that could be driven by wind or animal power rather than relying on the internal combustion engine. The forge made from an old barrel. The use of horses, where compression of land by heavy machinery was bad for soil structure.

This gave me a hobby for the years I was stuck in urban jobs. As well as visiting the museums and trying the machines, I was able to discover the complexities of making a cart wheel and a pole lathe, from wood borrowed from builders’ yards.

Meanwhile, Hector developed a real museum, beside the Cromarty Firth, just south of Evanton, which Prince Charles visited in 2010.

Back in 1975, the Highland and Islands Development Board was coming into existence. Penny’s brother Jim came to visit us from an oil rig in the North Sea, where he was based as a geologist. Her parents spent a week with us and Hector’s cousin, Bamber Gascoigne (1935-) took time out from University Challenge to see the challenge of Ruralis in the Highlands.

The museum aside, Hector has taken the Modernist route, no more tithe cottages (all our homes are rented out) all work is done by contractors. His now 1400 acres are part of a much larger co-op sharing costs of huge machinery. There are no livestock (no stockman, no shepherd). Unemployment remains high and alcoholism increases, but the estate remains intact and Munro dynasty has moved successfully into the twenty first century. There are new jobs in the restaurant, shop and museum down by the foreshore and in Foulis Castle. Much of Hector’s story was shown in the TV series “Monarch of the Glen”. I have tried to replicate his success on a smaller scale in Hethel.

**Unfinished**

Sadly I was not an enthusiast for tractors. I did not enjoy maintaining my David Brown tractor, nor, when spring came did I like driving up and down a huge field all day, finishing at dusk, so that I was too exhausted for my typing. Starting work at 6am and finishing at 8pm left no time or energy for intellectual work. So I was not too sad when my harrows caught in the estate gardener’s hedge and I was sacked.
It took me years to accept that I would never have become a skilled tractor driver, but I had been part of the end of peasant life, in a most beautiful part of the world. It was not sustainable work. Even if I had been brilliant I would have been redundant long before my planned ten years in agriculture.

When I first set out from Hull (overnight train York to Inverness) I took Woozie the cat in one cardboard box and four hens in the other. Woozie was killed by a motorist just outside our gate. The hens were left with Mrs Munro. I hope they inspired her musical career. The cost of moving our furniture was more than three months’ wages, so we came home poorer than we had set out and with nowhere to go, as I had rented out Exmouth Street till August. We stored our goods in Aunt Pem’s attic and spent four months living with the Bamfords, whilst I earned a tiny income digging people’s gardens for a pound an hour. I did not wish to surrender my new-grown muscles, nor my love of outdoor working. In the evenings I completed the typing of my great work, aware that both my intellectual and my peasant aspirations had gone as far as I could take them and I would have to consider something more mundane.

**Pat Clarke’s Wedding**

During our absence from Hull, Donald Coggan had become Archbishop; Maggie Thatcher leader of the Conservatives and Charlie Chaplain (1889-1977) had been knighted. On July 31st Walter Thorpe, my boyhood mentor and cowman of church farm, died.

Penny, Stella and I went down to stay with Penny’s aunt in Hove, in order to attend her close friend’s wedding. Pat and her husband have lived contentedly in Blaenau Ffestiniog ever since, and Pat has captured the bright waters and stunning landscapes of Snowdonia in a thousand canvasses, exhibiting widely. It has been a delight to visit her with my children and sleep in her studio. Perhaps Penny would have found a similar stability of artistic production had I remained by the inspirational Cromarty Firth.

**Teaching Taught me**

In September I began a postgraduate teacher training course at Ensleigh Roman Catholic College, with a three-week observation at a school in Beverley. As a married graduate aged over 25, I received a grant that was larger than my income as stockman/tractor driver, and most of the year was spent reading books. The craft lessons were great fun: Blue Peter meets hippy craft fair. The science lessons were a real challenge, as I had to learn to teach things I had not learnt in school, like chromatography; and the children could tell I knew little more than they did. In contrast, in English lessons I had to simplify what I knew and could not understand why they could not understand. In fact this was where I was learning most. I was learning to express complex ideas for ten-year-olds and this enabled me to express my network theory in ways that non-specialists could understand. I was escaping jargon and intellectual assumptions and relating my ideas to real people.

Maths had already moved on from blackboard teaching and books of questions of my schooldays, to a modular system, which pupils worked through at their own speed, and received individual tuition when they had difficulties, so pupils like me were no longer held back by having to wait for others to catch up.

For my first teaching practice, I volunteered to work in an open-plan school: three classrooms in one room allowing some lessons to be taught by one teacher speaking to all 114 children. Inevitably most lessons were spent in semi silence with three teachers each patrolling 38 children, trying to provide
individual support where required. My teaching consisted of a five to ten minute introduction of new material to my class, whilst the other two teachers were attempting the same with their classes.

**Discipline – Not Summerhill**

The only exception was science, when I took my class to the laboratory and tried to convince them that I was in control of my material and of them. Sutton Park was not a rough school by Hull standards but I had seen a teacher hit a pupil round the head with a book so that his ear bled and a ruler over the fingers was commonplace. Without giving out swift physical punishment, the children took the opportunity to play up. I was certainly not the worst teacher I have seen. I could not help feeling that many of them had the muscle power and temperament more suitable for farm work than teaching.

In theory I had been attracted to the open-plan multi-teacher classroom, but in practice it did not work well.

**“Sentimental Education” – Flaubert**

My second placement was as an old-fashioned Primary School in Withernsea, where I worked with a class teacher who had won the attentive devotion of her class. They were a delight to teach and well ahead of the open-plan children. There was no laboratory, but we went out on the beach and collected fossils and learnt together about the wonders of weather and the Jurassic period. Some of these ten-year-olds could read difficult words as well as I could and add up quicker. They may not have understood many of the words, but they soon would.

There was little class teaching as the children learnt at their own pace, mainly through following individual reading, writing and maths programmes; each working at their own level of understanding receiving individual or group tuition when required. I was impressed by how quickly they taught themselves, how much the teacher organised, guided or administered how little she needed to teach, supervise or discipline.

**Theory and Practice**

Penny really enjoyed my teaching practice, especially at the open-plan school, which had few books and used duplicated work sheets. She would do the artwork for my worksheets and I would type the information. We worked together each evening on lesson plans. She could have become a committed, organised teacher and enjoyed the work.

I was relieved to get back to the college library to write up my dissertation on transactional analysis and social networks as tools to better teaching, extending the work of David Hargreaves (1942-) who had taught at Hull Grammar School in the 1960s. This included a simple questionnaire filled in by my Sutton Park class and my observations of other teachers’ speech acts (analysing varying levels of information, discipline, practical instruction and so on.) My tutors liked my worksheets and my rapport with the children; but had no understanding or interest in my dissertation.

Compared to my farm work, this was a comfortable and easy year. I kept seeing big strong teachers who could have managed the heavy work much better than I; and seemed out of place with small children. But I also saw excellent teachers, who made me realise I would never have their vocation/devotion to the children for a lifetime. I was too interested in analysing the social psychology of the
classroom. When would teachers listen to their pupils? When would children be encouraged to follow what really interested them? When would practical skills be taught instead of information that would never be used in adult life? When would teachers become interested in learning and thus act as models for their pupils?

So I was not too disappointed when my applications for a local (East Yorkshire) teaching post resulted in one interview, in Scarborough, and no job. I had a qualification and references and obtained a job as assistant officer-in-charge of Kingston Villa (home for the elderly in Pearson Park).
Wisdom from the Past

Kingston Villa

My new job coincided with a three-day riot at Hull Prison, starting auspiciously on Oliver Cromwell’s birthday (September 3rd). Mrs Bunting, the officer-in-charge, had run a much larger place for British Rail staff at Peterborough and was coasting towards retirement. She was used to having a deputy (Sally Mennel) who knew her place, but found an assistant unnecessary and was most unwilling to give me any responsibility beyond routine tasks. This was excellent in that I had plenty of time left over to read my books. I had started several new research projects since finishing “Social Networks and Social Problems” and often spent half my shift reading arcane periodicals or writing my novel.

But it was bad in the sense that I gained no experience of budgeting, rotas, control of residents’ finances, payroll or working with outside agencies. Fortunately, I could read about all these things in Social Work Today (I wrote a classified summary of all the articles they published in their first three years, showing the gaps and fetishes of the editors, who surprisingly refused to publish my piece!). Thus I was able to impress interviewers that I had experience in matters I only knew in theory. When I took charge of a home myself, I found all these things were remarkably simple. The important thing was to know your staff and residents as individuals and my insatiable curiosity ensured that was always true.

The staff at Kingston Villa were wonderful people. Mr MacDonald, the handyman/care assistant, who gave his men the freedom he would want for himself. Mrs Usher, who controlled women twice her size, because they knew she worked tirelessly to give them all they needed. A brilliant cook, who introduced me to tripe and onions. Mrs Knox, who got down on her 60-year-old knees to scrub the tiled floors. The unique night staff deserve another section all to themselves.

Night Staff

Brenda Heffernan (1927-2009) had wanted only to be a wife and mother. She had grown up in a rough part of the Potteries (five towns of Arnold Bennett (1867-1931). She married a GI whom she nursed through terminal illness and a violent man from whom she fled with their baby. For 30 years she wrote the most intimate details of her life to me in letters, so that she became a significant character in my final novel (Forest without Birds). Most of our conversations concerned her daughter, whom I did not meet until 1982.

Mrs Henderson (1927-) had come from the West Indies, like the heroine of “Small Island”. When she talked about Kundalini, theosophy and other mystical matters she had the sensuality and mania ascribed to the mad wife in Jane Eyre. But she was a wonderfully caring mother, grandmother and care assistant. We shared a fascination for Richard Nixon, as the man who changed the USA in so many ways.

Drugged

I had seen the negative impact of “medicines” on Penny and Harry. I now saw the use of prescribed medication to silence the elderly confused, so that they did not get in the way of the staff cleaning and personal hygiene. They were kept warm and fed, but most did not leave their armchairs and suffered what Peter Breggin (1936-) describes as “Toxic Psychiatry”. My opposition to the medicinal model of enforced conformity became a major incentive for the rest of my years with social services departments and a stimulus for involvement with the anarchist movement.
Some residents needed no suppression. Mr Thundercliffe was 96. He had been a professional soldier, and was a sergeant major at the outbreak of the Great War. His first duty on arrival in France was to choose a firing squad to shoot some deserters. It was, he said, the worst night of his life; but in the morning he was sent to the front, and did not have to shoot the deserters.

His “girlfriend”, Miss Cooper, had spent her life from 18 to 65 in a psychiatric hospital, because she had had an illegitimate child. She said she had been much happier since coming to the home, where she lived till she was over 100. They were a romantic couple and spent their days together often in conversation, possibly the only residents who enjoyed and understood daytime TV.

The three youngest residents had come to the home together from De la Pole psychiatric hospital. Miss Belshaw said it was better than the workhouse, where she had been until it closed. Unlike Miss Cooper, they were heavily institutionalised and lived for their “smokes”. Their character was largely suppressed by medication. They were our “three little maids from school” (as in Gilbert and Sullivan’s “Mikado”) and shared an attic bedroom, opposite the sleep-in room – like the mad wife in “Jane Eyre”

Mr Hotham, a gentleman of good family, who had hardly any memory, but walked every day the two miles to Paragon station, where he had a coffee and walked home. Occasionally he set out in his slippers and was brought back by police car. He always wore an old Mackintosh and was frequently very wet on his return, but the exercise kept him healthy during my two years at the Villa.

Miss Smith was my first Seventh Day Adventist and first obsessive/compulsive hand washer – the combination helped her to cope.

Mr Bennet was the most sociable, he would come to the office and play chess with me in the evenings, and tell me what all the others were doing. He would greet me with “Do you know who’s dead?” “Everyone in the graveyard”. He was always cheerful.

Miss Sylvia Tweedale, was daughter of Rev Charles L. Tweedale, who had written a book on ghosts: “Man’s survival after death”; just before the Church of England decided that interest in such phenomena should be discouraged. Growing up with such a strange father, in a famously haunted vicarage, had left her permanently agitated and anxious. She made us want to comfort and reassure her, like a small child. She was always trying to help the other residents.

“Sidewalk Social Scientist” (Blondie song)

I felt I had read everything I could understand published in the year 1970. I decided to take a cross-section through the past, taking one year every 40, working backwards: 1970,1930,1890,1850. I began by reading “The Times” each day for that year and then sought out the books published in philosophy and social science, on education and of course novels, poetry and the arts.

The most obvious thing is the dumbing down. The Times used to carry lengthy arguments from conferences. Thousands of long words, in small print, have been replaced by far fewer simpler words. Novels were long and complex, presenting an entire world, without the clichés and tricks of modern novelists, who so often write to a formula and make you feel you are being manipulated; when all you want is a good tale, straightforwardly told. The writing of 1850 and 1890 was far closer than those of 1890 and 1930, where the rift of the war made it feel like a different world, certainly a different country.

I wrote up my reviews of 1890 for publications in 1990. I felt the real change had occurred in 1914. Joy and optimism had only re-emerged briefly in the 1960s. Sadly the “Naughty Nineties” were not repeated in the 1990s. I suppose I should now be trying to read everything from 2010. The problem is simply one of quantity. Even in 1970, I had confidence in peer reviews and felt I was reading the books and journals that would be seen as important 40 years later. But now, who is to say what
writing on an obscure website (mine included) might be seen as prophetic of the way forward; and what novels and ideas, so well received today, may be totally forgotten in 2050.

Good days off were spent in the university library. I met clever Andrew Motion (1952-), who was in Hull from 1970-81, and others who sought the reflected glory of Philip Larkin.

**Farm Implements and Machinery**

I was missing life in Scotland and planning for the future at Church Farm. I still dreamt of a job in museums, so I was busy cataloguing farm implements and visiting some of them. Sometimes Penny and Stella would come with me and I would make notes whilst Penny pushed Stella round the whole museum and we met up in the tea room, or a picnic, or the local shops. Yorkshire, Norfolk and Worcestershire were easy, later Kent, with occasional forays further afield; for nearly ten years, meant a large collection of file cards. The excellent Reading University collection required an overnight stay in a really miserable B&B. By then I had realised that many significant tools were only available as illustrations in books, whilst others, which were still in use when I was a small boy, were filling museums that catered for nostalgia rather than science.

Perhaps with computers, we are closer to a classification of tools as effective as Bob Morley’s work on pollen grains. But my search for missing links, species of tools that could have carried agriculture in a direction away from larger and heavier machines; away from dependence on specialist toolmakers and international monoculture; has remained a minority interest, left to a few inventors, engineers and academics; whilst museums come under increasing pressure to produce spectacle, entertainment, memories and distraction; keeping clear of all serious enquiry. The museum nomenclature committee have now classified agricultural tools effectively in Paul Bourier and Ruby Rogers report of 2010.

**Polar Bears and Arctic Foxes**

At home I would talk about the male residents as “polar bears” and the females as “arctic foxes”. The staff were “penguins” and the food was fish. This enabled me to tell Penny what had been happening, whilst making our conversation interesting to the four-year-old Stella. Homes for the elderly are always very hot places and this seemed a partial explanation for their inactivity. How could creatures from the arctic cope with such warmth!

Muriel Spark’s (1918-2006) novel, “The Abbess of Crewe” was said to be a take on Watergate; so I could see parallels with Kingston Villa: with matron (abbess) as Nixon and the residents as the people. A resident with Alzheimer’s had much in common with Adepagha: seeing everything as surprising and new, a tabula rasa. Some residents, like Mr Thundercliff, did have the wisdom of their years and much to impart.

Other big influences on my novel were John Fowles (1926-2005) “The Magus” and Iris Murdoch and J Cowper-Powys: whose books always have a background of mystical depth, wise and innocent characters and the sense that the lives of these few individuals have a huge significance for the human race. This is partly because the characters are archetypes and their relationship will be found in every small network of intense relationships. But it is also a claim that these characters are more significant that the grey lives of the people around them.

This sense of a wider significance has driven me on throughout my life. I always felt that the people I met were exceptional, unique, amazing. I felt the young ones would make their mark in the world and I was determined to discover in our elderly residents lives of historical impact. When they really talked, I was rarely disappointed. My high expectations meant that I found my work exciting and that the residents felt genuinely valued.
**Skipton 1977**

Dad paid for all four of us to have a holiday together in a B&B in Skipton. Stella enjoyed running round the empty rooms of Skipton Castle and I carried her up and down hills. We enjoyed the market, the gardens and a visit to the cinema.

Back in Cofton, 40,000 toolmakers were on strike at the Austin factory: the start of the decline of Longbridge with big impacts on the lives of the people in dad’s parish.

**Green**

My interest in the Liberal Party faded as I became more aware of environmental issues. I had weighed chemical agriculture by the bagful at Foulis. I knew the destructive impact of modern warfare from the personal experience of my residents. I was aware that fossil fuels would run out and that clearing the rainforests was removing the earth’s lungs. The Ecology Party (which later became the Green Party), allowed me to continue my enthusiasm for dissenting politics.

The hunt saboteurs had an active branch in Hull, where I found younger friends who shared my delight in punk music, my anarchist values and my determination to make a difference. None of us thought we would ever see a ban on fox hunting, anymore than my anti-apartheid friends thought we would see the fall of white supremacy in South Africa or CND friends thought we would see the fall of the Berlin Wall. These were all as unlikely as Burnham Wood moving in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”. The impossibility of change did not affect our belief that these things were wrong: so we had to do everything possible to stop them.

George Macbeth (1932-1992) came up to Hull at about this time to give a poetry reading and we had an enjoyably drunken conversation in the bar. George was a significant force in setting up the King’s Lynn festival, which became important to me when I moved to Norfolk.

As with most political movements, the music of the time was of huge importance. The riveting energy of Debbie Harry, the soulful lyrics of Lene Lovich; the justifiable anger of Crass, Stiff Little Fingers and lesser-known groups, were sought out by those of us who avoided the capitalist charts and mega-stores.

The joint Mind/Aristotelian Society came to Hull University and I adored its esoteric discussions. Here were “old” people who could talk nonsense like my residents, yet understand each other and enjoy the struggle.

**Elite Syncopations (Ballet Rambert)**

Sam Beckett’s fiction, when viewed from inside a home for the elderly, suddenly makes sense. The joy of certain memories, the slowing down, the sense of being buried alive, the struggle to express one’s experience. Working with the elderly I could feel myself shuffling slowly towards an obsession with bowels and inactivity.

So dancing became even more important, as a way of asserting my youth and energy. The Ballet Rambert was (and remains) a huge inspiration, encouraging my manic dancing, which allowed me physical expression of a delight with embodiment which cannot be expressed in words. Dancing has a sensuality that establishes intimate relationships, without the complications involved in sexual relationships. It impacts on the way we move in daily life, movements that are generally more pleasing to others than the stiff or lazy movements of the non-dancer.
If there is a work-life balance, it should be 90% life and 10% work, as it was for me at Kingston Villa; where less than 10% of my time was spent doing what my employers expected of me. Most of my time at work was spent following my own interests, which fortunately included conversations with older people and being helpful when possible. My later jobs were much more demanding, but I was in charge. I set the agenda and chose those activities, so that there was no divide between work and life. All work became life and all life was work.

**Harry Rose – Philosophy**

In autumn 1977, our old friend Harry Rose lost his wife. She could no longer cope with his depression and financial failure. He came to stay with us for “a week’s break” and stayed for six months. It was the first time I had had a non-paying guest, but I was now earning twice what I had earned on the farm and felt we could afford to be generous.

Harry was, on the whole, good company for Penny and Stella, when I was at work, and when I was at home, we would have lengthy discussions of philosophy. There seemed no reason to believe it would be long before he returned to work and reclaimed his wife: objectives that he claimed were essential to him. But whenever he seemed to be at his best, he would relapse into depression and spend the day or three in bed.

It was very important to me that I should not be defined by employment. There was some scope for social psychology at work, analysing the social structure of the home, and the structures that had influenced the residents in earlier life. There was time to read and think, to write poetry, novel and academic articles. But here was less opportunity for intellectual conversation. Stephen Champlin was working hard on “self-deception” and lecturing. Harry wanted to draw his bipolar label into all philosophical discussions. So I started to work on “identity”, a key concept in philosophy and psychology. Are you a network of labels put upon you by others, or is there an essential “you”, able to choose who you are going to be and work towards a becoming identity? Are individuals the units of society or are relationships the units? (This is parallel to the physics of subatomic particles versus superstring.)

**Pagan Holiday Tragedy**

It had been a long time since we had got away from Hull, even to Cofton. Dad was coming up to see us more often, as he was planning to buy a house in Hull to retire to. For £8,000 he could buy a large three-bedroomed house in Hull, which would have cost £40,000 in Birmingham. And he would be far enough from Cofton to give his successor a fair chance to avoid unfavourable comparisons with “Fred”, who had become so widely liked and admired, as to make life hard for the next vicar.

I was now earning enough to afford a touring holiday in the West Country. Penny had been on a course taught by Harry AW Burle (1926-) and was keen to visit some of the stone circles and Neolithic remains she had been studying. I wanted to visit some farm tool collections and sites described by John Cowper Powys (1872-1963). It was only when I had booked the trains and the B&Bs that Penny found she was pregnant.

But Penny was physically well and strong, so we set off to Calne by train. The next day, we walked to Avebury via Silbury Hill. It was amongst these ancient sites that she began to have pains. The next day we walked to Lacock Abbey, which she hugely enjoyed, whilst I visited the farm tools at the near by college. The pain returned so we took a taxi back to the B&B. On the third day we took the train to Bath, more walking but she was so excited by the architecture and Jane Austen references that she hardly complained and the only real problem was that Stella left her favourite toy, a dog, on Bath station and it was gone when we returned to travel on to Westbury.
The next day Penny felt too poorly to get up, so I took Stella to see The White Horse. When we returned, the baby, whom I always think of as Henry (after Henry VIII, whom I still regard as the founder of Britain’s greatness) had miscarried and the doctor was called. The holiday was over and it was nearly 30 years before I reached Dorchester, which had been planned as our third stop.

It was many years before I accepted that it was also the end of our marriage. Penny insisted that she could not manage three train changes, including crossing London, and arranged for her brother, Jim, to come down in his car and take her home, the next day.

I thought the car journey would be far more uncomfortable and insisted on taking the train myself. Stella and I checked the Bath station lost property and rowed on the lake in Hyde Park: a really good day.

**Denial**

I was devastated by what I felt was the death of my son (whom I called Henry), and refused to accept that an unsexed foetus of 8 to 10 weeks was probably aborted for some good reason. I certainly blamed the ancient stones and Penny’s obsession with her teacher. She encouraged this by telling me how much she was in love with him.

She refused to accept that I felt anything for the unborn. The suffering and loss was all hers and I was not supporting her through her pain. Any little thing became a subject for a row, so that each day we grew further apart.

When Stella and I had gone to view the White Horse, we had stopped to talk to a field of cows. I had told them my worries about Penny and the baby and they had listened patiently. How could I eat my dearest friends, when I could not even eat a chicken? So I ceased eating all animals. This was a huge change in my life and enabled me to think of time before and after Henry; as before and after becoming vegetarian. I was surprised how easy it was to change. At first I worried about getting enough protein, but soon realised that I actually felt better for not eating meat.

Penny turned instead to smoking and to Harry, as he seemed so much better at expressing misery. She disliked my new enthusiasm for animal rights and resented my excitement at finally completing the printing of 100 copies of my “Great Work” (Social Networks and Social Problems).

When I was away overnight visiting Bob Matthews at Old Hall, East Bergholt, she had: “the most incredible orgasms” with Harry. Had they had a secret affair, or even run away together, I could have coped, but she wanted me to know how superior he was to me in sexual passion; but that she wanted to be forgiven. It was her way of coping with the miscarriage and I accepted that, in theory, but my emotions were not at one with my reason.

Harry left and I applied for promotion to a head of home position, in a number of counties of England. A change of venue might enable us to recapture our golden togetherness in the Scottish farm cottage. Fifty applications, five months and five interviews later and I was offered “The Old Downs” at Hartley in Kent; where we moved in October.

This must have been a terrible disappointment to dad, who had retired and moved up to Hull in June, in order to be close to us. But I was determined to save our marriage. I thought separation from her Bamford support was essential if Penny was to take a full share in bringing up Stella and working with me. The new job was a considerable challenge for me, but living in a house in the grounds of this grand mansion, turned home for the elderly, seemed the best way to make the job a partnership, something Penny and I could work on together, as we had on the preparations for teaching practice.

**Optimism**
Iris Murdoch’s greatest novel “The Sea, The Sea” came out as we moved to a new life. In Kent there would be more chance of meeting old friends and rediscovering a sense of belonging. There would be countryside and new experiences for Stella, and a proper job for me, where I could really make an impact. Expectations were high again.

Robert Shaw (1907-1978), my childhood hero in his role as Captain Beamish in the Buccaneers, died. I was “all at sea”.

Nicholas Stacey (1927- ) had been an officer on the ship that rescued dad from Hong Kong and brought him home. Later he became chaplain to the Bishop of Birmingham and now he was Director of Kent Social Services, but that was not why I got the job. The interviewers simply liked the posh, confident, way I spoke and assumed that when I said I went to school at Bromsgrove, I meant the public school. I had shaved my beard off and toned down my usual flamboyant clothes. I had been turned down in Lincoln and Norfolk, Rochdale and London; but Kent was by far the best authority for a young man with fresh ideas. Kent was already assisting elderly people to stay in their own homes, if they preferred this to going into a home. But in some ways they were very traditional: my official title was “Matron” whereas other social services departments referred to head of homes as “officer in charge”. I enjoyed being “Matron”.

**The Old Downs**

Where Kingston Villa had the faded gentility of two town houses, designed for Victorian professionals, Old Downs was a real country house, with grandeur and pretension. In the extensive grounds was our modern three-bedroomed house and a Victorian greenhouse, which I repaired and encouraged the more able-bodied to potter around. It was a wonderful place for Stella to play and the residents delighted to see her. There were excellent walks all around. After three years in the city, it was a joy to be living in the countryside.

Penny did some brilliant charcoal drawings of trees and there was a resurgence of her Scottish art. She sometimes came up to London with me, when I went to the British Museum Reading Room (Colin Wilson, 1932-2001) or visited the science collection in Bayswater. I was researching her anti-epilepsy drugs, as I was convinced that the long-term impact was dangerous - Penny died of cancer at 47, with no history of cancer in her family.

I was at the cutting edge of new thinking about the elderly. I ran a small group for our “confused” residents, training staff to repeat simple facts, provide reassurance and help residents to enjoy the present moment. We had visiting speakers and entertainers (volunteers), and regular craft activities for the few who were interested. I encouraged reminiscence and therapy. The residents were involved in decisions about food, activities and the grounds. New residents were encouraged to bring in a cherished item of furniture and display photos of themselves when they were younger, so that staff could relate to them as whole people, and not just the body they could see now. I also persuaded local GPs to reduce the sedative component of the drugs they provided and to monitor all drugs more effectively. The residents were not cabbages and I was determined that their lives would be as full as they could cope with. Reminiscence was very therapeutic for those with good memories and I learnt a great deal from them.

**False Accusations**

A spoof science programme (Alternative 3) was thought by many to be factual, when it said climate change would force humans to relocate to Mars and the Moon. Jeremy Thorpe was accused by Norman Scott of getting Andrew Newton to shoot his dog. This had nothing to do with Thorpe who was finally cleared in January 1979.
This was about the time that a mother poured her heart out to Penny at the school gates, saying that she could not stop hitting her child. Penny was sympathetic and suggested the woman should seek help. The next day Penny was asked to see the headmistress. I went with her. That same mother had told a teacher that it was Penny who had confessed to her. I was horrified. Anyone less likely to hit her child than Penny was hard to imagine. Fortunately Stella was lively and outspoken and it was impossible to believe anyone was being unkind to her, although she did not like the school. This was the start of their dissatisfaction with Kent that eventually led me to move again.

**Territorial Imperative**

In many ways a home for the elderly is a compulsory commune. I was part of the movement towards privacy and dignity for residents, encouraging them to take pride in as much independence and privacy as they could manage. But, many were still living in multi-bedded rooms. Some had nothing personal from their long lives. All their physical needs were met, but they possessed nothing personal.

I introduced group living for the most able of the residents, so that they were able to look after each other, gaining relative independence. The scheme was welcomed by the social services hierarchy and councillors. The chair of the social services committee asked me how long before I would be available to become an assistant director!

But the residents themselves felt neglected. From being the best of the residents, often assisting staff and receiving praise, they had to see more of each other. Robert Ardrey (1908-1980) would have said that their personal territory had been restricted.

On entering the group living area one day, Mr Mosley (a “retired schizophrenic”) socked me on the nose. He was hugely apologetic and I refused to let the incident interfere with the friendship we had for each other. I recognised that my attempt to increase his freedom had in fact made him feel restricted.

The group living was abandoned soon after I left, but really it was I who abandoned them. It is hard to have an impact once you have moved on. Four years later the home was privatised and the new owners built a horrid mock Georgian house for themselves where the greenhouse had been.

**Mr Weaver found dead in the bath**

This beginning to one of Hanif Kureshi’s (1954-) films is a direct tribute to his neighbour at 48 Baron’s Court Road, where Philip Weaver had the top floor and Hanif the ground floor. Philip had moved through work with Cyreneans, housing the homeless, into social work and it is a social worker in the film who finds the eponymous Weaver dead in the bath. Philip had himself become a “Buddha of suburbia”: a wise man to whom others went for counsel. This was notable when Philip, Hanif and I went down to the pub. We both tried to talk to Philip, whilst he tried to get us to talk to each other.

We were also able to visit Anna Dunton who was living beside Ealing Common – a convenient stopover for the three of us after a visit to Kew Gardens (the setting for Adephaga’s main adventures in my Xinon novel). It was Anna’s parents who put me up when I went to meet my Magwitch, fresh from Parkhurst, and accompany him back to Hull. We also visited her sister Sarah’s house of finches in Leeds, so we felt part of the family. Philip and Anna came to stay with us and we took long walks in the Kent countryside, trying to recognise all the wild flowers in the hedgerows, whilst having heated discussions on the Bloomsbury set or the Pre-Raphaelites, or Wordsworth’s Pantisocracy. We wanted to be part of a community of creative folk, who would change the perceptions of ordinary people.

It was at this time I experienced my first death. I had sat with many dying people: “Please kill me” Mrs Green said repeatedly, but nobody did. But this time I was giving a bed bath to a gentleman of
90, when he simply expired. One moment he was talking, the next he was dead. He passed from a person to a corpse with a final exhale: such a total transformation. Death was no longer a mystery. The spirit departs leaving a worthless shell. This was a profound spiritual revelation to me.

**Friends and Family**

The Friends of the Old Downs met once a month, and consisted largely of relatives of residents. I was enthusiastic about this extended network, as it provided funds for extra comforts that social services could not afford, and ensured that there were always members of the community coming into the house, encouraging our hard-working staff, to maintain high standards of care. Residents did not feel forgotten in the way that most residents did at Kingston Villa. We organised an annual fete which was opened by a celebrity from the village. It was just like being back in the old Vicarage, with the parish fete, except that I had become the vicar. Dad came to stay and could see the parallels to vicarage life.

We visited grandmother’s sister, Dorothy Goulder, in Chatham, whose daughter Ann had spent her life working for the United Nations in Geneva. We spent a day with mum’s sister Celia and her family in Erith. Penny’s parents came to stay and expressed a childlike delight in all they saw and heard. We made friends amongst the local Ecology Party and I got to know the congregation of Fawkham church, as it was more like Cofton than the modern building in Hartley.

But Hartley was a commuter village, with some mothers and the elderly being the only folk at home during the day, and most workers not home before 7pm; so it was hard to build an inclusive community. But it remained my ideal in all the places I worked, that they should become part of a wider community. Penny and Stella were quite at home amongst the staff and the staff became part of my family. My deputy and assistant and the cook all mothered me. The younger care staff were like daughters and we all cared for the residents as if they were our own grandparents. My clerical assistant was like a good wife, who kept my ambitions practical, ordered and with everything evidenced on paper. But it was the kitchen cleaner, Margaret Simpson, who became a real friend, until her death 30 years later. We had a dance for staff and residents, at which I was so vigorous that I twisted my ankle and have it bandaged for a week. This is what comes of making your social life one with your work!

**Anarchists**

Angel Alley off Whitechapel, next to Whitechapel art gallery, became a favourite haunt of mine. Here at the offices of Freedom Press I met the brilliant cartoonist Donald Rooth (1928-2011); John Rety (1930-2010) who was born in Budapest and whose daughter, Emily Johns became editor of Peaces News; the deep artist and bus conductor, Arthur Moyse (1914-2003) and Colin Ward (1924-2010) who had such an impact on the way the Left sees transport. I felt closest to Vernon Richards (1915-2001) because he encouraged me to write articles for “The Raven” the quarterly brain of the movement. There were others who may be better known beyond Angel Alley, like Philip Sansom (1916-1999); the Canadian Professor of Anthropology, Harold Barclay (1924- ); Harold Sculthorpe (1923-2010) of “Freedom to Roam” and Peter Neville (1933-2003) of the Oz trial.

These anarchists became central to my second novel “Monopoly of Truth”, which I began in 1994; by which time the ideas of these incisive thinkers, political activists and publishers of alternative social ideas, had become part of my culture. People were to be appreciated for the thoughts they had and the actions they took, not for their position, pay or power in the world. If people understood these writers, the world would soon change for the better.

Tom Fawthrop was making films in Southeast Asia. Benny Bunse was a journalist in South Africa. Perigrine completed his course at Ruskin College and went on to read English at UEA. Daphne Glazer had become an established writer with stories read on Radio 4. Was it time for me to move on?
**The English Working Class**

Professor Thompson was head of Social Work Training at Essex University and offered me a place on a post-qualification course, accepting my research as evidence of my knowledge of social work. It seemed a great opportunity to return to university life, but Penny was unhappy with the coldness and snobbery of London commuters. To keep my marriage together it would be necessary to move further north than Essex and before September 1980. So I applied for the role of officer in charge of a brand new, jointly-funded hostel/day centre in Wakefield.

This was probably my last chance to become an establishment academic and I thank God I did not take it. My subsequent experience of those who suffer mentally or physically, and my life of hard labour and animal companionship on the farm, have led me to value the bovine and the sensual; imagination and intuition; far more highly than the intellectual. Radio Caroline sank.

**Kent Legacy**

I had made contact with my mother’s family and my father’s mother’s family. Dad stayed with us several times in order to visit them. Finding brave, clever and exciting relatives was a huge boost to my confidence. I had been supported by caring, hard-working and capable staff and encouraged by a supportive hierarchy. I had made personal contacts with great anarchist thinkers and would continue to contribute to their journals for the next 20 years. I had become a regular user of the British Museum reading room and other central London libraries. I had found that people with dementia could have enjoyable lives with caring support: as they disturbed their relatives but not staff who had not known them in the pre-dementia state.
Mental Distress

Holiday

In the spring of 1980 I spent a week on my own in Paris, soaking in the wonderful foreignness of the French. The students on the steps of Sacre Coeur, the artists on cafe pavements by the Seine, the dark Catholicity of Notre Dame, the revolutionary fervour or philosophers; all seen through a thick haze of vin rouge and Gauloises.

Post-modernism was moving on from Derrida and I found Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998) much more acceptable and relevant. His view that ethical statements were not universal statements but on the contrary, injustice was the enforcement of universal rules, which failed to account for individual circumstances: universals were the con of oppressors. This was making way for my defence of minority rights; the idea that more had to be given to the disadvantaged groups before they could be treated fairly. This was still a long way from recognising the huge contribution minorities can make to cultural diversity.

Jacque Lacan (1901-1981) was using Freudian analysis in a very French context. So it was not surprising that his ideas on “symbolism” and “reality” had more influence on the way I wrote novels, than on my work with those suffering mental distress. But I did love the idea that therapy is more effective without language. But it was chiefly his work with Francois Cheng on the classical Chinese writings, which resonated with me. This was a form of post-modernism that sought to discover beauty and wonder in other cultures. Zimbabwe had just become independent!

The modernist therapists would see “transference” as the patient putting expectations on the therapist based on some previously failed experience of parenting or love. Whereas I looked for the transference of positive expectations, on which could be built new hope. Likewise, the modernist looked for the patient’s projection of their own negative qualities on to their therapist; whilst I have always found positive qualities projected on to me, that are far more worth investigating.

Michael Foucault (1926-1984) was passing into his final study: the Iranian revolution: “political spirituality”. He saw clearly the impact Islam was going to make on the world, causing the end of communism and the rise of terrorism, as the loci of fear for capitalism. It gave his studies of incarceration and punishment a global perspective, which I tried to maintain in all my professional work with mental distress.

The Pompidou Centre was a revelation to me: architecture as exposing function, rather than attempting to hide technology behind a classical or ethnic facade. If we have pipes and cables, let us see them. If a society can be open about its sewerage system, perhaps they can stop hiding traumatised people in locked wards or prisons. Surely if we can see the hungry and suffering, we will attend to their needs. Thus I became part of the movement to stop segregation of all kinds: “out of sight, out of mind” must become: “in plain view, an opportunity for public compassion.

It all seems very idealistic and naive in hindsight, but at the time we were confident that resources would be made available for “care in the community” to replace the old asylums. The government only saw the opportunity to cut costs and sell off old buildings. In the decades that followed, many of those pushed out of the closing asylums ended in prisons or on the streets.

Warren Court

Stella was devoted to her pet rabbit “Bun”, so it seemed appropriate to be moving to a Warren. A series of burrows also seemed a fitting description of a hostel for those traumatised by psychiatric
treatments. For this was how I saw the “therapeutic community” I was employed to run by Wakefield Social Services.

The residents were to come from Stanley Royd Hospital (once itself modelled on Quaker Tuke’s revolutionary “Retreat” in York): a first step towards living independently. I insisted that staff and residents were all to be referred to as “members”. Community responsibility was to be the key to building individual self-confidence. The community of members made decisions about who joined, who left and what we did together. If things went wrong, we all worked together to try to repair the damage.

Appropriately, I began work on April the first, in a part-furnished hostel with three trained psychiatric nurses and a mature woman who had worked with difficult children in care. It took some time for them to accept the level of initiative I expected from them, as they were used to following instructions. The first episode of “Yes Minister” had come out in February!

The residents had a similar problem on discovering that they had to make all the decisions. Staff would help them achieve their individual objectives and the group aspirations, but these had to be expressed and discussed. Each morning began with a compulsory house meeting when decisions would be made for the day and plans for longer term.

We were supposed to have a cook and a cleaner, but I resisted these appointments on the grounds that the residents needed to learn to look after themselves if they were to cope in their own flats in the future. After a few months the hostel had lost its shiny newness and we were taking day members, so I accepted that another member of staff, who would concentrate on encouraging the residents to keep the place clean, would be useful. This turned out to be a life-changing decision for me!

We interviewed five applicants and my preference was for an occupational therapist, whose enthusiasm for craft work with those recovering from mental distress was inspirational. The other two on the interviewing panel preferred a rather fierce mother-of-two, who was working as a cleaner, but wearing a distractingly see-through blouse. I thought she might distract some of the residents, but I accepted that I was outvoted. Denise proved a really useful member of staff: enabling most residents to take pride in cleaning the hostel and having time to join us on outings to countryside, swimming and dancing; and the only person she distracted was me.

Deputy

My deputy, John Tolan, got the job, because he had seen “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and clearly agreed with my assessment of the total institutions, as harmful to originality, happiness and mental health. I needed an ally who would support my radical ideas, against the traditionalists in social services and the psychiatric hospital, and sometimes the other staff and residents. I soon discovered that John also shared my enthusiasm for punk and anarchism. So we would discuss work in the evening over a pint of Theakstons in the Roundabout pub, whilst listening to punk music. This led us to producing, on my duplicator, a local anarchist magazine and getting to know West Yorkshire anarchists. It was called “Waiting Rooms” because the oppressed spend so much of their lives waiting in job centres, surgeries, benefits offices, courts of law, and housing departments: always waiting for a busy professional, as in Kafka’s “Trial”. Unemployment was over two million (the highest since 1935).

John was adventurous. He took a group of residents for a camping weekend in the Lake District. This was a disaster, as gale force winds blew away two of the tents and the expedition had to return home wet and weary through the night. He also purchased a second hand litho-press – a big step up from my duplicator; but we never managed to make it work and it was soon replaced by computer printers. He was a good advocate for the residents and ensured that the more able ones moved rapidly to their own accommodation, gained employment and received the correct benefits. The less able were encouraged
to join in activities and express their ideas freely and openly, no matter how crazy they might appear to a psychiatrist. This gave them confidence and empowerment.

John lived in Crofton where Emily and Charlotte Bronte had lived at Crofton Hall and taught at the school there. Titus Salt, who built Saltaire, lived at Manor Farm, now a school. So Crofton was a place worth visiting, as was the Yorkshire sculpture park at Bretton Hall, where works by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were on permanent outdoor display. One of many excellent outings for our clever but distressed residents.

We also had exchange visits with Jeff Cohen, who was running a mental health day centre for Leeds Social Services. This enlivened both communities as we all felt part of a movement for more democratic psychiatry. It also led us to produce a video of our activities and to participate in some academic studies funded by the Department of Health.

**Suicide is Painless (MASH)**

Jimmy, a red-haired Scot, with fascinating stories and engaging personality took himself off his anti-psychotic medication, suddenly. His behaviour became unpredictable, which frightened other residents. I asked his consultant to visit and take him back to hospital. She came and told him that if he did not take his medication, she would take him back to hospital. He told me he would never return to hospital. The police arrived an hour later to say that a man fitting James description had jumped from the tenth floor of a tower block, in the city centre, and could I come and identify the remains. This was my first inquest, and it gave me a considerable respect for this arm of the justice system.

The pain caused to others by suicide, has often helped me in talking with those who are feeling suicidal. A young female resident told another resident that she was going to take an overdose and went to her room. I went up to talk to her. She said she had spoken to Samaritans, and they said they could not intervene. I said I was not Samaritans. She told me I had no right to prevent her from dying. I phoned an ambulance. I told her I would not allow her to murder an intelligent young woman, with her whole life ahead of her. She was unconscious when the ambulance arrived. She was later hugely grateful for my intervention and very apologetic. She soon returned to a successful career, and I always think of her when urging others to intervene to prevent suicide. But then this was the year the SAS freed the hostages at the Iranian Embassy, so perhaps we all had a more positive view of intervention.

Of course self-harm is quite a different matter and we had plenty of that at Warren Court. By causing themselves pain and releasing endorphins, some self-harmers felt better physically. Sporty people gain happiness in just this way, pushing themselves to the limit (tattooing, addiction and criminal actions are often forms of self-harm in this sense). They may also be punishing themselves, so that they can forgive themselves; or in order to prevent them from hurting others.

Part of my horror of anti-psychotic medication, is the number of cases in which withdrawal from the medication, rather than any “illness”, has been the cause of death. Jimmy’s suicide proved to me the importance of giving our residents a worthwhile and interesting life, day by day, in the certain knowledge that many of them would die young. I have heard of several who committed suicide in the decade after I left. Mental distress and anti-psychotic medication are a combination which reduce life expectancy for many people. I know that Warren Court was a largely happy experience for most of the members as it was for me.

**Misdiagnosis is Common**

James Stead (almost as perfect a gentleman as John Steed in “The Avengers”’) was a caring, friendly man in his mid forties, who had lost his job and been diagnosed with severe depression. He told me
that he had lost his job because he no longer had the energy required. He had not lost his work ethic or his rationality and he brought lots of commonsense and reliability, which had a positive influence on the others, who were mainly diagnosed schizophrenic or bi-polar. His excellent behaviour and lack of symptoms meant that we were preparing to move him on to a home of his own. The police called me to identify another body, and I was shocked to see him pulled out in a draw at the morgue, looking just as he had done that morning. Post-mortem showed James had been suffering chronic heart failure for some years. Any depression had been a result of this undiagnosed heart condition. I never again accepted a psychiatric diagnosis, without first pushing the doctors to discover some physical cause that might explain the change of behaviour.

Child Abuse?

Mary was a suppressed working woman, who had escaped bullying and abusive partners to live alone. She had no children and was lonely, so she allowed young lads to come to her house, eat her cakes and steal from her. Their parents did not like this and the hospital had “rescued” her. ECT and drugs had left her an empty shell. I wanted to get past her “treatment” (by male doctors and abusive partners) to the suppressed maternal needs. But the best we achieved was to partner her up with Doreen, who suffered chronic anxiety, to enjoy nights out on the town. They were very good for each other and mothered the younger men in scenes from “Last of the Summer Wine”.

Michael had had a lobotomy some years before. It did not prevent him from being a brilliant table tennis player, nor did it cure his addiction to smoking or his vivid imagination; but it did make it hard for him to express ordinary thoughts. I typed up a story he was writing, correcting spelling and grammar, and trying to make sense of extraordinary ideas, scrambled by surgery. As for the Jack Nicholson character in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”; Michael had no emotions and no desire to put any of his strange ideas into practice. He was totally amenable to the instructions of others and incapable of instigating action himself; except where he had been programmed to shop, clean, cook and so on. So said his psychiatrist, when Michael appeared in court; accused of “grooming” young children, by inviting them into his flat and giving them sweets. It was far more likely that they pushed their way in and demanded stuff from him. He would have obediently complied with whatever they suggested. It was they who should have been in the dock. At least a mental health order was better than prison, but it was clear he could not live on his own. Yet he was the nearest I came to philosophic discussions and wisdom at Warren Court.

In contrast, we had several young mothers, who came to us during the day, as a step towards taking full charge of their children. They were little more than children themselves and it shocked me to think of the impact they must have had upon their children. On one occasion two of them were found in the toilet with a male resident. Another time they were waving kitchen knives at each other. Such events seemed only to occur on my days off. In fact they were caring, capable mothers, but having never had a full childhood themselves, they needed a safe place to regress and act in ways that were not possible at home. At the hospital they had had drugs and ECT, but with us they learnt to make use of their time away from their children. They enjoyed the weekly craft class, the outings and the swimming and nights out dancing. They also realised, that their mental distress was nothing like that suffered by some of our other residents.

The Office

A small room with a window that looked across into the main hostel living area. It was a comfortable room for one person to work, or two people to talk: a desk for my typewriter and a table for my duplicator. Here we installed Christine, a young secretary, who had suffered a breakdown, but had fortunately not become absorbed into hospital life. She wanted to get back to work, so for six months she typed our minutes and other matters. She was much missed when she returned to employment, but
her presence had established that staff worked around the hostel or went out with members, but did not work in the office.

The Interview Room

This was a larger, lighter, more comfortable room with pictures and comfortable armchairs and windows on two sides looking out into the grounds: south and east-facing. Here we had staff meetings and I met with each member (staff, residents and day visitors all accepted the label “member”) individually. Here we held quarterly reviews of each member’s progress, with our enigmatic auditor, Nicholas (he had been a monk for ten years and could be saint Nick or even old Nick.)

The hostel had been his idea, and he was desperate to see it succeed, yet his thinking about mental distress was conventionally medical. Success was about moving people on to independent living, employment and routine lives. This was desired and obtainable for about a third of our residents. But for the majority, the hostel was as good as life gets. Here they had care, friends, and all the pleasures of retirement in their twenties or thirties: they had life and it was good. In the future they would have crises and end up back in hospital or worse. Hopefully Warren Court would provide them with happy memories to assist them through their next breakdown.

But Nicholas’ asceticism would not allow him to accept that Warren Court was a place for those enjoying remission from a chronic terminal illness. His view of mental distress had become the dominant model for government and institutions, which optimistically held up the image of total cure, to those who knew better. Hope is a wonderful thing, but not when it replaces enjoyable living today, with a programme of tedious tasks that will not enable you to live “normally” next year.

The Craft Room

This had been designated as a staff room, but we decided it was better as an activity room. A pottery teacher from Brecon College volunteered a free morning to teach our residents. Other volunteers came to share their skills. I ran a writing workshop. It was much easier to enthuse my imaginative members with Eliot, Larkin, Porter and Walter de la Mare, than it had been with eleven-year-olds. Here we had some deep discussions: some members took to the democracy of daily meetings and grew in understanding of the politics of madness, so that they liberated themselves from the role of victim and became well-informed rebels. Others needed assistance with basic literacy.

Penny came over for the pottery session and again her enthusiasm flourished. She felt comfortable with those labelled insane, and they accepted her epilepsy, in a way that my elderly residents could not. She got on well with the staff. Often Stella would be out on the grass between our flat and the hostel, playing with her rabbit or cycling in the driveway. The hostel felt like a family, but I probably spent more time with the residents than with my family. Penny supported me in theory, but it was not a sufficient role for her.

Wider Gemeinschaft

As leader of Wakefield’s innovative therapeutic community, I was welcomed to Rotary; I met local councillors at CND meetings: September was the first CND protest at Greenham Common. I learnt what was really going on in the city, via Quaker meetings. We worked with the voluntary liaison officer, and exchanged ideas at the unemployed club. Our survey of local residents’ attitudes to mental distress was taken up by others across the left-wing of West Yorkshire. This was a time of huge solidarity between workers and local politicians; who felt driven into a corner by the emergence of Thatcherism. Michael Foot became leader of the Labour Party in November, Oswald Mosley died in December.
Through Quakers, I became a Home Office-approved prison visitor, spending an evening a week with lifers in their cells at Wakefield top-security prison. These men had taken the lives of people who had once been close to them. Their mental distress was huge. As their friend, I never felt in any kind of danger. Thus began a series of visits to other prisons, where damaged people were seeking a safe place to recover before returning to independent living. These “psychotic murderers” turned out to be our most successful members as Warren Court allowed them to blossom, to be themselves and forget their past. They moved on, knowing they were part of a family, giving help and support to their neighbours, but not expecting anything in return. I wished I could have given them those wasted years in prison, but at least now they knew they were valued and appreciated.

Amersham

I attended a week’s course on day centres for the mentally ill and learnt the value of action research. These were remarkable people and again, the sense of being part of a national movement to transform lives that had for too long been incarcerated in asylums, was inspiring: lovely, loving people.

In retrospect, I feel we were deceived into enabling government cost-cutting. A government that never intended to put sufficient resources into community support. Lonely abandoned people with mental distress, were inevitably going to end up in the only remaining institutions: prisons.

It was some months after my return from Amersham, when a row with Penny led her to say that she had slept with John Tolan whilst I had been away. I knew by that time that John was an alcoholic and that his pregnant wife rejected him. I felt sorry for him, but it was the end of my hopes for my marriage. For a second time, Penny had found someone going through a bad time more sexually exciting than me. It was not her infidelity, but her insistence on telling me how much she had enjoyed it that really hurt me.

“Physician Heal Thyself”

I was suffering mental distress, whilst remaining responsible for many others whose suffering was so much worse. The complete craziness of some of their statements and actions were deeply therapeutic to me. They not only had catastrophic relationships now, but most of them had also suffered neglect or abuse as children. Visiting day members who still lived with their families, or meeting neighbours of those who lived alone, left me miserable, whereas the members were usually lively and full of interesting stories and ideas. Our therapeutic community certainly helped me overcome my distress.

Richmond Fellowship

This famous group, that inspired some of our ideas at Warren Court, ran a training course on small group work. There I learnt how I was perceived by strangers, who had nothing to judge me on beyond our interaction in the “here and now” (all external reference being forbidden). I also started to learn the triggers that make a group united and supportive, or divisive and scapegoating.

This was the start of my work on group gestalt theory. The group as potentially wiser than the sum of its parts: Rousseau’s general will theory; Chinese communist work on small groups; anarchist idealism and Quaker “centering down”; were all coming together.

Hethel Holiday
Aunt Dolly died 3/2/81. I attended her funeral on the seventh, staying with Peregrine Pot in his cottage in Bawburgh. As a solid atheist, she would have hated the religiosity of the service. My first funeral put me off for another ten years: there was no God in it.

In March I moved lots of old beds down to the farm and took the hundreds of Myhill books back to Hull. In the spring, I took four of the residents from Warren Court for a week’s holiday on the farm. We drove down in the hostel minibus. It was very basic accommodation: nearly two miles to the nearest pub or shop. The main problem was to persuade them it was worth getting up in the morning, let alone worth joining in the cooking or taking exercise. But we all got on together and their usual strange language and hallucinations seemed shocked out of them by the isolation of the countryside. With more than 60 years in institutions (between them), they were not going to suddenly appreciate the extent of their freedom in a week; nor did we form a gestalt, but they did prove that a diagnosis of schizophrenia and years of medication does not prevent mutual aid and human friendliness.

After a week, they were driven back to the hostel and Penny, Stella and the Glazer family joined me. I helped Peter Glazer to fit a dormer window in the Bacchus Chamber, which had been left windowless when the previous dormer had collapsed. The house had been neglected for so many years that it was more like a barn than a home; but it spoke to me of childhood and ancestors; of a life of physical toil: such a deliciously healthy contrast to the mental distress of my paid employment.

Even with the vibrant company of the Glazers, Penny disliked the isolation of the farmhouse and yearned for the bustle and noise of the city. I was so busy during the day, and so exhausted in the evening that I did not notice this final drifting apart.

Back in Wakefield, I was getting fit by taking long cycle rides round the Holmfirth hills, on my day off. The Royal Wedding in July was a perfect opportunity to travel on quiet roads from Holmfirth to Glossop, through Bamford to Sheffield – bunting all the way.

**The Burglary**

Peregrine and his girlfriend were staying at the farm house, but were out for the day, when the valuable Myhill antiques were stolen from the Keeping Room. For 40 years Aunt Dolly had left the front door unlocked when she went to Norwich for the day, twice each week. But in the year of her death, the locked house was burgled. I still miss the tick of the grandfather clock and the fun of the sideboard with its concealed hideaway for a priest. But, the thieves also gained some voracious woodworm and we had the chance to turn a redundant dining room back into a comfortable sitting room. Peregrine and his girl moved out soon after, partly because they were convinced the place was haunted. If it is, they are family ghosts, as I have always felt supported by the essence of the house.

**Budapest**

In the summer I went to an Alternatives to Psychiatry day at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, with Philip Weaver (now a mental health social worker), where I was adopted by baby Anna, whilst her political mother, spoke powerfully to the conference. In the lunch break, Piri Markus (1956-) asked if I could baby sit Anna, as there was a concert she really wanted to attend. I had planned to stay the night at Philip’s book-lined flat, but how could I refuse a beautiful, intelligent, Hungarian woman, who was willing to trust a total stranger with this delightful baby? I had not been to Islington before, nor entered a block of council flats, yet, when we entered, everything was familiar. The bare rooms, the tiny toilet bathroom, the basic kitchen: I felt it was a place I had often stayed in, although I had never visited anything like it before. In the years that followed, I stayed with Piri many times. Familiarity was retrospective.
On my second visit, I met Anna’s father, a widely-travelled revolutionary, who had worked with Danny the Red in Germany, and busked his way around Europe. These three remarkable Hungarians persuaded me to book a holiday in Budapest in October. (I had collected Hungarian stamps as a boy, because they were so pretty. Bartok had long been my favourite composer and George Szirtes was becoming my favourite living poet.)

Through Piri, I met her anthropologist mother and visited the museum that housed her work on Transylvania. I was welcomed into elegant flats and Stalinist minimalist accommodation blocks on the edge of the city. I had gone on the anniversary of a revolutionary protest, so there were candlelit vigils, and I met many revolutionaries, including tubists (underground musicians), but as in Bangkok, there was no violence whilst I was there.

In parallel, I used my respectable credentials as director of a psychological rehabilitation unit to visit Budapest’s main mental asylum where I was shown round by the deputy director, who had trained in London. I was looking for cultural differences, but when a patient broke ranks to introduce himself, I clearly recognised his schizophrenia. His English was good enough to show me that this was an institution little different from Stanley Royd. Certainly not the gulag for Russian political prisons I had hoped to find. The staff’s orientation towards Britain was flattering, but my ideas were clearly too advanced for them.

Hungary was also emptying its long-stay asylums, as a cost-cutting enterprise with no community care. Thatcherism was here. I also met a psychoanalyst in private practice and learnt about Freud’s impact on Hungary.

Hungarian is such a difficult language, that Hungarians have to be multi-lingual and this gave them a great advantage in becoming the most liberal of Russian satellites. Even so, I felt the difference between this police state and the one Margaret Thatcher was trying to build to crush the unions. When I watched the stream of police wagons off to quash groups of rebellious miners, I had to remind myself, that no-one would disappear to a gulag or be shot at dawn. Individually policemen were still willing to direct lost travellers. In Budapest, a policeman threatened me with a Bren gun to indicate that I must walk on the other side of the street. Their greatest rebellion was their music.

In November “Queen’s Greatest Hits” became the best-selling album of all time; and my father spent a few weeks in Hong Kong, to see his old boys and take part in celebrations of St Stephen’s college 75th anniversary.

Atomic

My fascination for the passionate energy of the person and music of Debbie Harry certainly transferred to the person and movement of Denise, as we took the residents swimming, walking or dancing. Both were small, lithe and comfortable with whom they were. But Denise was a mother and she brought her children, Helen and Stuart, along to our jumble sale. They were such pleasant, well-behaved, intelligent children, that I came to a new appreciation of their mother.

Worst of all, she would laugh at things I said. I felt appreciated, not for my intelligence, but for my sense of humour and this was much more important. There developed an electric chemistry between us, so I was hugely relieved, when she gained a better paid job as a social work assistant locally. As soon as she left, I made a date to meet up with her at the local CND meeting in the Labour club. What a romantic first date! We went on to the overcrowded American pub, for some Dutch courage. This was too noisy for either of us, so we went back to her house for coffee, where we were able to express the passion we had suppressed for so long.

I did not feel guilty, as I slunk back to my wife. I had felt more love in a few hours with Denise than I had experienced from Penny for several years. I thought it was probably just a wild fling. Denise and I were so different, it would surely not last! Besides, I had the whole culture and society to overturn!
My work was my life; this could only be an interlude of personal bliss, in a life dedicated to bringing out the genius inof others.

I was always surprised that Denise was willing to be my lover, to be available when I was able to get away. I felt it was less cruel to deceive Penny than to tell her, as she had told me.

**Time for change**

Penny was yearning to get back to Hull. Stella had a lovely Chinese friend called Mimi, but neither of us were happy with the school. I wanted to see more of my father and we all missed our own home. I had been clear for some time that my deputy, John, was alcoholic, and his condition was not helped by the guilt he felt for sleeping with my wife. But, when our deaf resident John Paul (yes this was the time of the first visit to this country of a pope, John Paul II) complained that John had bullied him when drunk, I had a job to persuade my superiors not to sack him immediately. Instead I persuaded John that we should follow the therapeutic community principle through, and put the matter before the house meeting. They felt that John should leave and he accepted this, handing in his notice the same day.

With Denise and John gone, I was forced by social services cutbacks to choose replacements from those facing redundancy from another service. They did not want to work at Warren Court and I did not want to employ them.

We were also spoilt by our own success. Social workers and hospital staff were now deluging us with referrals, but we were full and understaffed. There was pressure to process and programme long-term institutionalised patients, so they could live isolated lives on barren council estates, whereas our dream had been a community of mutual aid, some real happiness for those with often terminal mental distress.

I had learnt that my residents’ greatest need was to fill their days with useful activities. Those who gained employment or did voluntary work became genuinely independent. So I applied for a job as Community Development/Voluntary Liaison Officer for Hull.

**1982**

This was a year of distractions: On April 5th Thatcher took us into the Falklands War. A popular conflict that greatly increased her chance of re-election and on June 8th, Ronald Reagan became the first US president to address Parliament. Such events helped to distract from the 14% unemployment and the sale of 400,000 council houses. The government even changed the way it measured unemployment (only those claiming benefits were classed as unemployed). In Wakefield (and the rest of the north of England) there was no disguising the rising number without work, and my residents were the last people anyone would employ. The stigma of mental illness was worse then than it is now. Colin Chapman (1928-82), head of Lotus cars, based just beyond the Church Farm fields, died.

**The Interview – “High Windows”**

When two people chat with you informally for 20 minutes and you do most of the talking because they don’t seem to have much idea what the job is about: it is clear they have already made their minds up. Either they have chosen someone else, or they have chosen you. In this case the job seemed designed especially for me. I had done the research on Hull voluntary organisations. I had social services management experience and understood co-operative working.
My office was on the tenth floor of a tower block in the centre of Hull. From there I could see across the city to the university library, where I had spent years looking at where I now sat. But there was no time for books, not even much time for sitting at a desk, as most of each day was spent out at meetings.

I had a personal assistant, who also worked on the main reception. She kept my diary, filled in paperwork and took notes at some meetings and interviews of volunteers, once I had trained her. I also had use of an office pool of typists, for internal memos and letters sent out.

I shared the office with Dave Predgen, whose children went to the school where I had done my first teaching practice. Dave was in charge of admin and could fix anything. The other regular was Vera, who organised meals on wheels and at 60 trekked to Everest base camp with a sprained ankle. The others were, like me, out of the office most of the time. One was in charge of services for handicapped adults; another fetched runaway children when they had to be collected from London. We were all doing one-off tasks, outside the normal social services range, so we supported each other in what could have been isolating jobs.

Each Monday morning, I gathered with other senior staff in the board room, to learn what was happening across the city.

Romance

Meanwhile, each weekend, I would try to find an excuse to slip over to Wakefield to spend a night of passion with Denise. There were “loose ends” to tie up at Warren Court. There were anarchist meetings to attend in Leeds. Or I would get “a ticket” to a concert in Leeds (or Leeds Playhouse for Alan Bennett (1934-) or Michael Frayne (1933-)) and be surprised to find Denise in the next seat. I would hitch a lift from a couple of lorry drivers, or catch the train if time was short (although sometimes hiking was quicker). One weekend we even managed to take Helen and Stuart to the Lake District (such well-behaved children). Another weekend, Denise drove to Warwick and Stratford, passing back through Cofton, so that I could reminisce. I remained a dreamer, unable to let go of the past, unable to accept anything was ever final, especially not my mother’s death and my marriage.

What is Community?

My research made me confident that I could answer this question. Part of my role was to supervise three neighbourhood workers, each based in a large team of social workers, who saw them as providers of volunteers to care for the children of incapable mothers, or support the mothers themselves. East, North and West Hull were parliamentary constituencies, but they were far too large to be communities, so the “neighbourhood workers” found they were drawn into those neighbourhoods, where churches and community centres were already working with residents’ associations, schools, health centres and ward councillors. But the areas of greatest need also lacked voluntary neighbourhood groups.

It was much easier for me, operating at a city level, as most voluntary organisations operated city wide and were mostly based in the city centre. People providing services thought of Hull as the community. In contrast, people in need of support rarely looked beyond family and neighbours and many had no-one to support them apart from professionals. There was no community of the underclass.

I was also part of Humberside Research and Development group, with counterparts in East Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire: areas with much more clearly defined parish and small town communities. We had information sharing meetings at County Hall in Beverley, which flattered my research background, but we all yearned for an image of social work as bringing neighbours together to
support those most in need. Whilst Mrs Thatcher was taking social services to a policing role, where social workers would ensure that children were taken away from mothers and given to the childless rich, where funding would be given to private providers (foster parents, privately-run homes for the elderly etc) who could do the basics more cheaply than social services. R and D stood for redundancy of doing, as action was a luxury the taxpayer would not pay for.

Privatisation

How I loathed the selling off of vital nationalised industries:- BP (1979-87), British Ports (1983-84), British Aerospace (1981-85), National Freight (1982), Jaguar (1984) Telecom (1981-85), Municipal Bus (1986), National Express (1988), British Gas (1986), Rover (1988), British Rail (1989-96), water companies (1989), British Coal (1994), electricity companies (1996). These were just the worst of a much longer list. Worse, the sell-out was copied all over the world and the rich became richer. Worse “New Labour” continued the trend, selling what was left when they came to power. Each year was worse. No wonder that I concentrated on local communities, on micro economics, on co-operatives independent of the state.

Scotland by car

Penny thought I was hitch-hiking, but actually I had the luxury of Denise driving me up the West Coast: Loch Lomond, Fort William, Skye, Gairloch, Ullapool and down the A9 past Foulis Farms. We drank in the beauty of hills and lochs: we could sometimes look for miles without seeing a house, car or person. Free of all responsibility, we could delight in each other, like Adam and Eve before the fall.

Back home, I lived by deceit and this gave me confidence at meetings, where I was often seen as a source of funding and local government influence, a man worth being nice to. None of this was good for my personality, already vain from success. Worst of all, I did not spend as much time with my daughter as I had done. Stella had settled into the local Hull school as if she had never left Hull. It was her home, she belonged.

My Freedom

There were so many voluntary organisations relevant to social services that I could choose which meetings to attend, where to put my effort, who to work with and when. I did lots of evening meetings so I could have Monday mornings and Friday afternoons off and get a long weekend with Denise. I worked with community youth and the main disabled charity, because they were bringing about major improvements. I worked with some local groups because I felt a buzz of electricity when talking to their leaders, usually women who had found a role in which they could shine and I was in the fortunate position to encourage their genius.

But a lot of my work was with self-help groups. I had funds to assist them in setting up and could often find other sources of funding. They were the most effective means of building communities, because they knew each others’ problems from the inside, because they did not depend on paid professionals, who would need to spend half their time trying to raise funds to keep them in a job for the next six months; because they have experienced the need and will go the extra mile to help a fellow sufferer. Each mental and physical condition has a support group; each was led by a remarkable individual.

I was also responsible for recruiting volunteers for social services, which often meant providing training to help them discover where their strengths lay. My old friend Ray Flint was still running his course for volunteers at the further education college, to which I contributed a lecture on social
services. I persuaded him to let me put on an advanced course for experienced volunteers to extend their expertise as secretary, chair, treasurer, fundraiser and health and safety, but more crucially for me, their skills in working with clients, especially those suffering mental distress.

This was basic level counselling training, enabling participants to deal with their own problems in a supportive group, before unleashing them on those seeking help. As always, I tried to get my group to share their experience and hoped they would follow the same way, when organising groups of their own. This was very exciting and interesting work, but probably not what social services were paying me to do. One of my statutory jobs was to assess large grant applications for local government funds, which the committee would usually approve after reading my report. Thus I visited interesting empty properties, thought suitable for conversion to specialist centres. This was fascinating and my views were very significant.

Family and Friends

A colleague at work, Tony Petch, was in a collection of poems by Hull poets “A Rumoured City” edited by Douglas Dunn (I worked with Mrs Dunn, organising voluntary events at Ferens Art Gallery, where she worked). Philip Larkin had made Hull a city where it was respectable to call yourself a “poet” regardless of your day job, and there were many opportunities to meet with local poets and hear their work. I could even have claimed such contacts as part of my “work”; as creative writing has proven therapeutic value for social services clients, but I did not. I actually worked most days from 8.30am till 9pm, which clearly left little time for family. I would be at home for breakfast and an evening meal, and would pop to see my dad if I was cycling by (he went off to Chicago and Western Canada, visiting old boys from Hong Kong, in the autumn). But I was seeing dozens of new people every day. Many were dedicated, focused professionals with an organisation, which they were trying to grow. It was difficult to know these people as individuals. But how could I encourage their genius, if I could not get to know them properly. So I spent considerable effort bringing these professionals together in groups, where they could share experience with people in similar jobs. These people could see themselves as being in competition for limited funds and for more voluntary sector funding. Seeing them in groups enabled me to really get to know their strengths and weaknesses.

Public Expectations

Hull City Council gave away half a million in grants to voluntary organisations each year and it was part of my job to vet the grant applications and play the role of secretary to the council’s large sub-committee, who decided these grants. In a splendid panelled room, with luxurious carpet and oak furniture worthy of a stately home, I gave my report to a panel of 30 dignitaries. What I really enjoyed was that I had just cycled from Hull prison, where I had been visiting Peter Docherty, the lifer I had started visiting in Wakefield prison. The contrast between his cell and the city hall splendour was to me the joy of my job. At other times I would pass from sink estate (where rent defaulters, who could not be made street homeless, found themselves), to a committee of business men attempting to raise funds for a children’s home. Or I would pass from advising a volunteer, wishing to work in a children’s home (never be alone with children – always have a witness) to talking to a lunch club of community professionals about the benefits of good inter-agency communications.

Social workers wanted volunteers, volunteers wanted training, voluntary organisations wanted funding, councillors wanted positive publicity. My superiors wanted statistics and reports to show I was providing value to social services. The government wanted evidence that voluntary organisations could save the state money. All could be satisfied if I could improve the social networks at a neighbourhood level; but whilst I worked at the fundamental task, I had also to keep all the separate bodies happy. Like keeping plates spinning on poles, it was a fully engaging, exciting job, because it was essentially impossible.
**Madeira October 1982**

Even Penny thought it odd that I should be going to a tourist venue: no hospital or prison visits, just swimming, walking and sightseeing. Earlier in the year she had booked a flight to Spain to stay with her cousin. She and Emma had boarded the plane, but she had a panic attack and left before takeoff.

Denise and I had no such problem; although I would not have chose Madeira for Denise’s first flight had I known about its dramatic landing strip. Madeira is a paradise, and I soon understood why Winston Churchill returned many times to enjoy his painting hobby there. The light is perfect and reliable. The heat is dry and walking in the hills is delightful. The gardens and wildflowers are astonishing.

**Reality**

The voluntary sector was growing because Thatcher’s government was determined to cut public spending. How much work could be passed to volunteers? How much would have to be passed to private enterprise? Voluntary organisations had traditionally seen and filled gaps in state provision (mental health care in the eighteenth century, children’s homes and schools in the nineteenth). They did so until such time that they could persuade the state to take over responsibility. Thatcher was reversing this process, and this was changing voluntary organisations. There was a new generation of voluntary organisers: people who would previously have worked for local government, who had to constantly seek funding. Instead of dependency on popular support, these new organisations rose from nowhere under a wave of government funding, and sank without trace a few years later. This was clearly very upsetting for volunteers and those they supported, who had their hopes raised and dashed.

Traditionally most voluntary work was mutual aid. Neighbours helped each other, kept an eye on each other’s children, cared for elderly neighbours, organised local youths in local clubs, etc. But with the rise of new well-funded centres, children had nursery places, the elderly went to day centres and young people went to the city centre facilities. The volunteers also migrated to the new organisations, where there was training and the possibility of turning volunteering into a career. When the new organisations folded, the local support networks had disappeared, neighbourliness forgotten. Of course this is a great oversimplification; but I did try in my job to provided sustainable networks of support, independent of governmental whim finance. I also worked with organisations campaigning for state provision of essential services. All this was contrary to the privatisation ethos. If social Services were to work more closely with real neighbourhoods, they needed to be restructured into smaller, more localised teams.

**Visits to the Farm**

I made regular visits to the empty farm house, to do necessary repairs and some basic decorating. On one occasion I was joined by a delightful Danish young woman, who contacted me through the communes movement. She had never done plastering before, but she was better than I was. She taught me to juggle and painted a miniature of the house. I went back to work and she moved on to assist a proper commune, but I was inspired by her example of living for others, without possessions. I was still thinking of the farm as a commune, as I could not imagine Penny ever wanting to live there.

Easter weekend 1983, Denise, Helen and Stuart joined me for a long weekend. I was surprised to discover how enthusiastic Denise was about this derelict, cold, damp building surrounded by nettles. I thought she was just being nice, because she knew how much the place meant to me. It took me years to realise that she loved the farmhouse for itself and was happy to live as Aunt Dolly had done. Only
when we found her Suffolk, Cobbald, ancestors, did her instant feeling of belonging make sense genetically.

Aunt Joan paid a visit whilst they were with me and I do not think she believed my story that these were more communards, just visiting, like the Danish young woman.

Unemployment had gone above 3.2 million, the highest ever number. The compact disc (CD) was making my records redundant, and “round the end of the cucumber frame” (Peter Rabbit) whom should I meet but Ian Macgregor, who took over the National Coal Board on 28th March: the nineteenth anniversary of my mother’s death.

**National Significance**

The work I was doing in Hull was being done differently all over the country. I met up with fellow community workers in London, care of the Kings Fund, and in Norwich (another excuse to stay at the farm) at the School of Management Studies.

I invited national organisations to provide training for some of my volunteers, which we presented jointly in the social services board room or the local volunteer centres. I also sought further training for myself in Gestalt and psychodrama (another invention of my social network hero, Jacob Moreno (1889-1974)). These were skills that enabled volunteers to see their work and relationships in a new light - the cutting-edge of the future.

I published articles on my visits to Hungarian and Thai psychiatric provision. I was part of the Future Studies Network and other alternative community networks, and reviewing books for the British Journal of Social Work.

**All in Vain**

On June 9th, thanks to the defection of the SDP, Thatcher gained a landslide victory. The Labour Party lost a genuine Foot, and two new MPs (Tony Blair and Gordon Brown) marked the future. On the 15th, the first episode of Blackadder caught the craziness. On September 8th the NHS privatised its cleaning services and the future was clear to see. William Golding won the Nobel Prize - we were truly marooned on the island of “Lord of the Flies” and next year was Orwell’s prophetic 1984.

Searle’s work on “Intentionality” came out in 1983. This was not what Thatcher meant by “choice” nor was it the philosophical justification for volunteers, but it set me thinking about what we consider to be conscious decisions. The nature of consciousness has fascinated me ever since, and much of my writing returns to this theme. The philosophical question is well illustrated by my hitch-hiking visit to Loch Affric in Scotland. I got there in two days, stopping off with Stephen Bostock in Glasgow. But my first night, in a sleeping bag inside a plastic bag, in the pouring rain, left me so cold that even walking for four miles did not stop my teeth chattering. I was taken by ambulance to Inverness hospital. Instead of a week’s hiking, I found myself spending more time with Denise. Was that my real intention? Subconscious choice? Was it failure or success?

**Separation**

I was increasingly aware that Thatcherism was going to demolish the public sector and that I had many skills and contacts which would enable me to function independently of Gesellschaft institutions. So I decided to buy a flat in a restored warehouse on Hull’s High Street, to use as a base for a private counselling and advice service. It would also give me more space away from Penny and a chance to decide where my life was going.
But just before I moved in to the flat, Penny confronted me with the very reasonable belief that I was having an affair. I was hugely relieved that I could drop the deception and staggered that it had taken her a year and a half to find out. If she had forgiven me and begged me to come back to her, who knows? But in fact she was violently angry, wanted me out of my house, and to never see me again. Even then I hung on in Hull for another two years, keeping in touch with Stella and dad, unable to wholly let go of a marriage where we had shared so much.

One of my first single parent duties was to go and watch Stella perform as “Kinky” in her school play, without Penny. I soon became used to taking Stella for days out to Filey, Bridlington, or Bamford, but I felt like a much-loved friend rather than a father. I was getting to see more of Helen and Stuart than of my own daughter and it felt wrong.

New Direction

I organised a grand gathering of local dignitaries: John Prescott MP, senior councillors, heads of charities, etc for a bread and cheese charity lunch; to discuss closer ways of working together across the city. I did this to coincide with the arrival of the new Director of Social Services, David Peryer.

He arrived late and was clearly not pleased. The meeting disappointed me because many invitees failed to show. The meeting annoyed him because he wanted to slip into post without any fanfare, certainly without meeting local MPs.

His brief was to entirely re-organise the social services department. A huge cost-cutting exercise which would see the early retirement or redundancy of most of the second and third tiers of management. Area directors, principal officers, research and development, all gone. Instead, my ideal of 48 neighbourhood teams was to be brought in.

But would there be a place for me in the ideal structure that I had invented? I was determined to impress Mr Peryer with my organising skills and advanced thinking. Among other things I organised a training day for voluntary organisations in the skills of psychodrama. To publicise the event I spoke with a local journalist, who ignored everything I had said and used the “Psycho-Drama” tag as attack on local government. I then contracted flu and had to cancel the training day. But the harm was done and I had to appear in Mr Peryer’s office like a naughty schoolboy. He clearly regarded me (rightly) as a rebellious student (they had caused him trouble when he was teaching in university). He astutely recognised me as a follower of Ivan Illich (who had nothing to do with psychodrama), and was determined that I should cease all activities, till after the reorganisation. I felt humiliated a second time.

The Interview II

This sequel was far from the five-star feature in Hull. There were to be 48 neighbourhood teams and I wanted to manage one of them, after all, this change to smaller teams embedded in local communities, was my revolution, the last chance to reverse Thatcherism.

We each had a 20-minute interview, but mine was 40 minutes late starting. In a large room, I was sat, back to the wall, surrounded across a small table, so close it was hard not to touch Mr Peryer and his three stooges (each desperate to prove their worth to him, by probing, menacing, aggressive questioning). He chipped in with apparently irrelevant questions: “I think you would be happy as a monk”; just in case I had any concentration left.

And all I could think was: “why do I want to work with people like this?”
Clearly they wanted to see how I would work under pressure. I realised I could only work under pressure if I felt supported from above and I did not feel these men could be supportive. I thought of Michael Oakshott’s “Tower of Babel” and knew my career was over.

The national mineworkers strike had just begun, so I joined them in the horror of a summer of limbo. For three weeks I was made clerical assistant to the specialist social workers who represented social services in child protection cases in court; but then they also were scattered, as every new team had to represent its own clients in court.

I then became neighbourhood worker for Northern Hull, liaising with neighbourhood teams. Essentially the job below the one I had been doing. But this also was only temporary.

London Calling

Meanwhile I was attending interviews for jobs in London boroughs, thinking that I would work all week in London and spend the weekends at Church Farm. In residential work, I would be paid for sleeping in during the week and also save on accommodation costs. There was an excellent residence for disabled people in Camden: futuristic design, with control firmly in the hands of the disabled, which I liked. A huge old people’s home in Kensington – the size of a small hospital. Both clearly wanted someone with more medical training. A senior officer post in Southwark, whose eight-person interviewing panel was daunting, but not unpleasant. I returned to almost the same panel two weeks later for a job at the same pay grade, but in charge of a home for the elderly. By that time Hull had offered me an equivalent job running Aneurin Bevan Lodge, so I relaxed, and enjoyed the interview as performance. Sadly they offered me the job, so I lost my travel expenses.

I was attracted by the thought of living in London, being at the heart of protest against the government. Thatcher had encouraged the first Japanese car factory (what did it matter if British manufacturers ceased trading and profits went back to Japan, as long as there were jobs?) and she was making strikes harder, to encourage foreign investment. Our country was being sold abroad, piece by piece. The lightning bolt that struck York Minster, did not feel like God’s support for the Establishment.

Stella and Helen

All thoughts of leaving Hull revolved around Stella. There were times when I thought she would come with me, and times when I feared Penny would find a new a dreadful partner, who might ruin Stella’s life. The government were banging on about “Family Values”.

I was having decreasing contact, as my timetable was less regular and Stella often had a cold and was not allowed to see me. When I did see her, she seemed less well behaved, but I may have been contrasting her with Helen (five years older).

In August, Denise drove Helen, Stuart and I, for a week’s holiday on the Isle of Arran. A farmhouse on the middle of the island, which the farmer and his family vacated to live in a caravan. The contrast between this rural idyll, and my summer of discontent, was huge. Why was I hanging on to life in Hull, when I knew I belonged amongst green fields?

Two dramatic events made me admire Helen - a recognition of genius that time has proven correct. She and I went up the hill behind the farm house, intending to follow the path across to Goat Fell. At the top, it was foggy and a powerful wind was blowing. The path, a few feet wide, runs along the ridge of an ancient crater. The wind was so strong, we could hardly stand up. Helen suggested it was not safe, but I was for pushing on. At this point the mist cleared, showing the drop of several hundred feet, on both sides of the path. An exciting walk on a still day, but in that wind, deadly. Having saved my life, we returned to the farmhouse.
The next day was hot and the beautiful clear sea was irresistible. The others paddled, but Helen and I swam in the freezing water. As long as I swam I felt invigorated, but it was she who insisted we came out. She was fine, but I was shuddering with cold for an hour afterwards.

Flaubert had become my favourite writer and I was reading Julian Barnes’ (1946-) “Flaubert’s Parrot”. In literature, at least, there seemed hope. I had completed my Oblivion novel and sent it to all the possible publishers.

Temporary Solutions

I took on the running of Aneurin Bevan Lodge (even the name was ironic) knowing that I must make the move to Norfolk the following year. By then I would have been separated from Penny for two years: Helen would have completed her O levels – a good time for her to change schools. I also hoped, in vain, that I would have gained a Norfolk job and Denise would have sold her house. Stella might even join us. “Displacement activity” was first described by Julian Huxley (1887-1975), but developed by Jacques Lacan (1901-81) to describe our subconscious subversion of our real intentions to something harmless with a similar meaning. Thus we might hunt animals when our real desire is to kill our colleagues; or we might scapegoat an innocent person because we dare not attack the person we really hate. A bird will peck the ground rather than attacking an opponent. In my case, I cared for the old people’s home, staff and residents, when I really wanted to be caring for Church Farm and my family.

My need to nurture my responsibilities was sublimated by nurturing the 44-bed institution. I was assisted in making AB Lodge more of a family/community, by Juliana, a lady originally from Ghana, who was a close friend of Mary Baxter, who had been in Stanley Internment camp with my father. We also had a very motherly cook and some excellent young care and domestic staff. These young women were especially good with the old people who had lost almost all mental and physical control, and required constant nursing, like huge babies. Another displacement activity, but very beneficial as my own interest was focussed on the bright and wise elderly residents, who were so appreciative of conversation. One was a remarkable 104-year-old veteran of the Great War, whose longevity seemed unsurprising when you knew what he had survived in his teens. A lady resident had survived eight years in the home by staying mainly in her room reading romantic fiction.

I could have spent my whole time talking with my interesting staff and residents, but I had accounts and payroll, interviews for new staff and residents, liaison with social workers and relatives, doctors, volunteers and so on. It was a demanding job, but I did not take work home, nor put in extra hours, nor attempt to transform the home. It was excellent as it was, and would soon be destroyed by privatisations like every other set of functioning public servants in Britain.

My greatest pleasures were taking round the morning tea and training new staff and volunteers. Despite my experience I still could not get a similar job at Kett’s Lodge, the Norfolk Social Services home in Wymondham, and had to accept that I would go to Norfolk unemployed.

The Flat

In the meantime, to save money, I moved out of my flat and accepted free accommodation from Brenda Heffernan. I had not had much response from my advert for private counselling. I was rarely in the flat, being either at work or visiting Dad and Stella, or with Denise in Wakefield. Brenda’s house was much closer to Dad and Stella. 28/07/84 I moved my furniture and books down to Hethel.

My new room had space for a suitcase-worth of clothes and a few books and a bed. It was enough. It was hard to persuade Brenda that I could cook for myself, as she would happily have fed me as well.
Her house was crammed full of “bargains” that she would never use, but had collected to calm her anxiety neurosis, fuelled by years of night work and sleepless days. Her main worry was her beautiful daughter Anita: 18 years of age and as beautiful as a doll. Anita drew admiring/jealous glances, wherever she went. She could have been a model or film star; but she had such a strange mother, and so much change in her upbringing, that she was a mixture of the perfect and the deeply fearful. (I have tried to tell the story of these remarkable women in my final novel “Forest Without Birds”.)

Anita fascinated me, more for her hidden depths than for her beauty. It was clear she could not relate to her own generation, but was delighted by the company of the over thirties. She married next-door-neighbour David, a social work lecturer of my age. David and I were to lead parallel lives for the next few years, but I saw him through Brenda’s distorting lens (as slighted mother-in-law) and this encouraged me to take a positive view of my own struggles. It also made me question whether I was limiting Denise and our family in the way Brenda felt David restricted Anita and their three daughters.

1985

In January I moved from Brenda’s back bedroom to my father’s slightly larger back bedroom. The chaos and generosity of Brenda reminded me of Penny, and I felt unable to repay her kindness with the total transformation that her life needed. I also wanted to spend more time with dad.

It was strange living with him again after 15 years of independence. Not that he restricted me in any way, but I felt it fair to let him know my movements and plans, something I had only been sharing with Denise. It was good to be able to help him do a few things in house and garden, good that he was willing to relax his independence and let me help. We did not have heated discussions of politics and religion, as when I had been a rebellious teenager, but we still were unable to exchange hugs or cry together, as I would with my own children.

I was at work, or with Denise, most of the time, but dad and I did have evenings and mornings together a couple of times a week, and it was good. Stella would come round and we would go to the park. It felt more like a family, although he continued to lead a busy life and was often out at meetings or away for a week visiting friends.

March 3rd, the miners’ strike came to an end after a year of bitter struggle. On the 11th Al Fayed bought Harrods and later in the year there were riots in Birmingham and London, with deaths and many injuries. This felt like the right time to retire from the world and cultivate my garden.

There was a break-in at the farmhouse, probably children, a few items of silver, of sentimental value, were stolen. After nine years of responding to the suppressed potential of those suffering mental distress; I felt that suppression and distress had become the norm in the whole wider world.

In retrospect, I was delighted to have spent those six months with dad. We talked about all that we could talk about. I did not overcome his physical reserve, but we were emotionally close. I was sure he would live well into his eighties. But he only lived two years after I left. His death was a shock, but I was at his bedside at the end and I found talking about him therapeutic. It was the reverse of mum’s death, which had been impossible to discuss for so many years. After his death I soon came to accept and even welcome, aspects of my character that reminded me of him, aspects I had tried to suppress whilst he was still alive.
Hethel, Norfolk

June 16th

A barely habitable farmhouse, surrounded by equally decaying buildings, and waist-high nettles over what had been lawns and flower beds; nearly two miles from an expensive shop, with few savings and no prospects of employment; I set to work on basic cleaning, clearing and repairs. I was too busy to be lonely, but I would not have survived a year on my own.

Denise, Helen and Stuart joined me at the start of the school holidays. She had given up her job, but been unable to sell her house, so this was definitely “love on the dole”. It still surprises me that someone with as much commonsense as Denise was willing to throw up her job, give up her home and take her children to a derelict building in a strange area, with a strange man. Without her commonsense, my idealism would have led to real practical failure.

Stuart and Helen were essential in many of the large scale building tasks that were long overdue. Taking down buildings before they fell down and storing the materials for future repair work of the older buildings. Helen wood-panelled the large sloping ceiling of the long derelict Bacchus chamber, turning it into the best bedroom in the house - her room for the two years of her A levels and then her brother’s.

I wrote a factual account of the next five years, paralleling our practical labours with the lives of my great-grandfather and his family over 100 years earlier. I had a great sense of returning to simpler way, at one with the countryside, fulfilled by honest toil, learning skills of hand and eye (a bit of Tolstoy, a bit of nostalgia).

Disasters

Our first winter was terrible. The heaviest, coldest snowfall since 1963 and worse than anything since. We were cut off for three days and huddled round open fires, with no central heating and smoking paraffin stoves. After a slight thaw, pipes burst and we all suffered. (This was the time when it was announced that the Channel Tunnel was to be built!)

In the spring, I bought a horse and cart and tried to sell the vegetables I grew around the villages. The country people grew better veg themselves, the migrants from town went to the supermarket or farm shops on main roads. Some of the elderly housebound were pleased to see me and I did sell most of my surplus, but it would never have paid for the cost of buying the horse and cart. (This was the time of the Wapping dispute, where printers were replaced by computers!) At least we ate well and we were all too busy to think about buying things we could not afford. We did have a few excellent days out by horse and cart. I was not just saying No to Thatcherism, but to time itself; pushing back to Victorian ways. Each Christmas, I would wear my grandfather’s Boer War uniform and each Boxing Day great grandfather’s frock coat.

I bought three lovely saddleback pigs, intending to breed a herd, but they soon learnt how to dash through the electric fence. They were far too intelligent and I had to walk for miles with a bucket of food, slowly leading them home. A more competent farmer took them off my hands.

I sowed acres of carrots, broad beans, parsnips and potatoes in the first spring that I had the land (1987). We had good carrots and a few parsnips which seeded themselves for years after. The rest failed, for the soil was too poor (having been drained by years of corn and sugar beet) and only one species of polygonum sowed itself on the barren land that first year.
The gale of October ’87 brought down many large trees which kept my chainsaw busy. My first 40, end-of-lay, rescue hens were initially a great success (wonderful to watch them regain their feathers) but fallen trees broke the fence making way for foxes and they all died brutally.

**Triumphs**

We managed to dismantle, without accident, two Dutch barns (the most recent farm buildings) which were falling down. Similarly making a hole in the attic roof so I could put ladders up to the chimney from the attic, to re-point the brickwork, was a clever way of avoiding the need for scaffolding. (April prison riots saw many prisons de-roofed!)

Re-roofing the house came after considerable practice on the farm buildings. It has lasted well with fewer tiles blown off than in the years before it was done. Likewise the final brick wall I built was straight and even, a real contrast to my early attempts. Helen’s bedroom ceiling was a masterpiece of care and precision.

The greatest triumph was Denise’s, when our daughter Emma was born in 1986. This set a trend which was followed by the births of seven calves over the next six years. (I have told the tale of our beautiful White Park Cattle in full elsewhere.) They were the inspiration for my continuing struggle to be a good vegan. Originally intended for others to eat, they became family pets and died when they ran out of years.

We planted acres of grass, harrowing bare fields before and after scattering grass seed. No monoculture, but a variety of grasses – some flourished and others disappeared, new seed sowed itself. We planted six hectares of broadleaved trees, never thinking we would live to see them grown and looking like proper ancient woodland. We replaced hedges that had been grubbed up in the 1960s and I planted a small orchard to replace the old fruit trees, which were coming to the end of their lives.

Our first dog, Beano, part Gordon setter, part collie, was born at Thelneatham Manor and came to us as a puppy. He was a family dog, loyal to us all as his pack; but he did sometimes wander off and had to be rescued. Jemima, a rescue kitten was an excellent mouser, who sadly liked to kill birds.

**Green Norfolk**

We wanted other people to see our way of life and realise that there was an alternative to Thatcherism (re-elected for a third term in June 1987). We were part of the movement for self-sufficiency as seen in the works of John Seymour (1914-2004) and represented in the pages of Resurgence and similar alternative magazines. We were living the “Good Life” before the TV series. But as most people were desperately trying to hold on to their jobs, or to make money from the continuing privatisations, so it was easy to feel forgotten: an insignificant ant, always about to be crushed by monetarism and the growing multi-nationals.

So we became active in the local Friends of the Earth, trying to prevent the destruction of the countryside by new roads, working on recycling and reducing consumerism. On the farm, I could watch the soil recover from years of chemical agriculture and heavy machinery; regaining its structure, fertility, worms, diverse flowers and eventually animals.

But, we were as ineffective as King Canute. Art was increasingly a commodity, science was the new god. 1986 saw the death of Henry Moore (born 1898) and the publication of Richard Dawkins (1941-) “Blind Watchmaker”. On my mother’s death day (28/03/1987) Patrick Troughton (born 1920: the second Dr Who), died. The tide of Thatcherism was still coming in.
White Norfolk

In the late 1980s it was less likely to see a black face in Norfolk, and more likely to meet people who had moved to Norfolk to get away from a town with over 50% non-white population. January 1987 saw golliwogs replaced by gnomes in the reprinted Enid Blyton.

Meanwhile Terry Waite was kidnapped in Beirut. In June there were race riots in Chapletown, Leeds. In October the first IKEA opened, and the Soviets left Afghanistan. In 1989 we had the Fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the race riots in Dewsbury.

Literary Norfolk

Hilary Mantel (1952-) captured the hippyish residue that still lingered in the isolated hamlets of Norfolk in “A Change of Climate” (1994). George Barker’s (1913-1991) poetry is full of the delight of county life. But it was earlier writers like Adrian Bell (1901-1980) and Henry Williamson (1895-1977), Fred Kitchen (1891-1969) and most of all Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910 – contemporary of great grandfather) who were my role models in these years. I wanted to experience all the old crafts. I wanted my body to move with the rhythm of the scythe, the plane, the hoe, the cow, the seasons. But mainly I wanted to put that experience on paper to inspire another generation, as I had been inspired to leave the futile world of bureaucracy and cheating to return to the honest labour of nurturing the soil.

As an intellectual rather than a son of the soil, or genius of the pen, I was easily distracted. I used Keble Martin’s flora to find over 200 species of plant growing wild on the de-chemicalised farm. I followed Fabre and Wigglesworth in a search for beetles and their ways.

When it was dark or too cold or wet, I would be typing in my study. As well as my book on farm life, there were Anarchist articles for Freedom and academic articles on social psychology and a piece for the local churches’ magazine, purportedly written by the Hethel church mouse, called Durham, after the controversial bishop. Once my body became used to the physical labour, I found my mind less constrained, more imaginative, closer to my dreams and further from structures. I started to write poems and my prose became more poetic, as I completed “Xinon” and sent it off to publishers. This was the year Ian Paisley heckled the Pope’s address to the European parliament, calling him the anti-christ and the year Hello magazine was launched! The great storm and the King’s Cross Fire, which inspired a chapter of my next novel “Monopoly of Truth” (which used the game of Monopoly as a structure).

Spiritual Seeking

After Emma’s birth, and the derelict house becoming a comfortable home, thanks to Denise and central heating; and with a small income; and growing much of our own food; I felt I had time for a deeper spiritual quest.

I was “living in sin”, as my Aunt Joan reminded me, and could therefore not take communion. The local vicar agreed (the ordination of women was agreed in February 1987) and I felt dispossessed of my inherited Church of England membership. Then, on 13th August 1987 my father died, after a short illness and I felt free to seek true spiritual enlightenment, amongst my old Friends the Quakers - not that he would have objected. He had himself been a regular at the United Reformed Church since his retirement to Hull. But I felt a loyalty to the church for which he had laboured most of his life. On the 19th came the Hungerford shootings.

Funerals became part of my life. I ran away from my father’s funeral, partly because I had not been allowed to attend my mother’s. In 1989 there were the deaths of Daphne du Maurier (1907) Peter Scott (1909) and Stella Gibbons (1902). In 1990, Laurence Durrell (1912) and Malcolm Muggeridge
I had discovered Quaker funerals were so like Quaker silence with friendly ministry of happy reminiscences about the deceased, that I came to enjoy even the more traditional funerals.

I found a very warm welcome amongst Norwich Quakers and soon became involved in numerous local and national activities. No-one ever asked me if I would like to become a Member, but after 20 years of attending Meetings, I knocked on the door and found it open wide.

I had no problem with the idea of “that of God” (something specially good and remarkable) in every person, and I believed that the moral teachings of the Gospel were a firm basis for the various expressions of faith in action, demonstrated by Quakers over the last 350 years. But I could not believe in an all-powerful God, a prime mover and director of the universe. Nor had I any personal experience of spiritual transformation.

This did not matter to Quakers, as long as I was open to “Truth” from wherever it came. And it did not matter to me, as I was struggling to be self-sufficient, independent of others, a beacon of light to others, dependent on no-one.

I was clearly deceiving myself. Without Paul Riches at the local garage, without plumbers, electricians and vet; without Denise, I would not have survived a single year. But the self-deception ran deeper. My life was full of insufficiency; things I could not learn how to do properly, things that required a second stronger man, things which could not be done.

Added insufficiency came from the isolation and constant heavy, repetitive, tedious labour. I worked largely alone and rarely met people socially: a huge contrast to my nine years with social services. This insufficiency became an anger, which I could not dispel by chopping logs, or heavy digging. One evening, when I was trying to focus this anger by punching the wall, I decided I needed help. I walked to the local church and knelt in the dark for an hour praying that God would take this anger from me. It was December 3rd and the church was very cold, so I felt wretched and stupid when I went home.

“What was I doing, praying to a God I did not believe in?” Was I really just angry with God for not existing?

It was some years later that I really came to believe in God, but from that evening, I was unable to feel angry with anyone, not even myself. This could be very inconvenient, as I had to pretend to be angry with Emma, from time to time, but I was aware that I was acting. It has made me a bit of a pushover, and Denise has often been angry with me for letting others take advantage of my “good nature”. But it has been much better than the anger I felt before.

**Thatcherism**

Denise took a part-time job at the dispensary at the doctors’ surgery, forming a good relationship with Sue, the full-timer and other staff. And I did relief work in homes for the elderly around Norfolk. These supplements to our meagre income showed that we were accepting the impossibility of self-sufficiency and wanted to make new friends, but it was also necessary to meet the change in rates assessment which saw my annual rates bill rise by 200% in five years. The demands of taxation have always been used to destroy self-sufficient peasant life-style. 1988 house prices in Norwich went up 50%, nurses gained a 15% pay rise, postal workers went on strike.

After dad’s death I had very little contact with Stella, except when I visited Hull to discuss progress of the divorce. This was only finally settled, when I sacked my lawyer and accepted Penny’s reasonable demands.

Soon after this, Stella had an argument with her mother about a boyfriend, and ran away to see me. I was delighted to see her and know that she was safe, but I was also struck by the similarity of her impetuous actions to so many of my wilful decisions of youth. Penny came down to collect her and it was a shock to see how ill she had become.
Six months later, aged 47, Penny died of liver cancer, repeating for Stella the tragic grief at the same age as I had when my mum died. (Penny died on the same day as Graham Greene (3/4/91)) This shared experience drew us closer together and we saw much more of each other over the next few years. We had wonderful holidays, just the two of us, in Holland and walking around the Fort William area (my third trip up Ben Nevis in thick cloud), but also with the rest of the family. Stella became increasingly close to Emma as they grew older.

Stella had independently decided to become vegetarian, so she fitted in well at Church Farm. She also had a horror of smoking from seeing its effects upon her mother. John Gummer had become famous for feeding a beef burger to his five-year-old daughter, to prove that BSE was no danger to humans. Sadly he was wrong, and I was glad to have a veggie family.

**Miracles do Happen**

Ninth of November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. 3rd December, the day of my angry visit to the church, world leaders officially agreed that the cold war was over and the constant threat of total nuclear destruction was lifted.

There were many disasters: news from the outside world made us glad we were in hidden away in Hethel. 1988 the Clapham train crash. 1989 saw the Lockerbie air crash, the Hillsborough disaster and the sinking of the Marchioness pleasure cruiser. In 1990 I was a passenger in a car crash that cracked my sternum and my spine, but the bones healed in a few months, leaving no long-term damage. The same was not true of the Poll Tax riots, a 5.1 earthquake in Shropshire, Strangeways Prison riot and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Finally Mrs Thatcher resigned (22/11/90), hurrah. But the departure of Mrs Thatcher did not prevent her revolution from continuing through Major, Blair and Brown, leaving Britain and the world in the mess they are today.

**Why Farm?**

Because it was there and I had to do something with it. Because grandfather had given me a sense of dynasty and the farm represented continuity and stability in troubled times. Because I felt at one with great-grandfather’s tree planting, ecology and intellectualism and his daughters’ political radicalism. Because Fred Kitchen’s “Brother to the Ox” had been embodied by Walter Thorpe, and Andrew Glen and Adrian Bell were role models. Because of naturalists like Faber, Peter Scott and Keeble Martin, who inspired me to look at the minute life around me. Because of Romanticism from artists, poets and intellectuals, from JE Flecker to Leo Tolstoy. Because the Hethel murderer, Rush, had felt a bit of Hethel was worth dying for. Because I wanted to involve others in the land (inspired by the labour movement of Gooch, to the communes of Bob Matthews, the idealism of anarchists and benefactors like Robert Owen. Because I connected with cows, as Sheldrake and Mary Webb had done. Because I was a vegan. Because of Lovelock’s Gaia.

**Goat Lane**

The Quaker Meeting of Elizabeth Fry, where she became serious about the faith of her family, was the home of so many remarkable individuals, that I can only write about those who most deeply impacted on my life. Quaker worship and practical tolerance makes many feel at home, who would feel rejected elsewhere. It encourages the eccentric and strange, but also enables many “ordinary” people to discover and express their suppressed idiosyncrasies. Quakers are as fallible as all humans, personalities clash and many move on to other organisations, but they will have impacted on the community more than they often realise.
Most have come from creedal churches, having lost faith in those creeds, seeking to live righteously and avoid divisive statements of faith. We are attracted to a people who show their faith through action rather than their words.

But for many, the freedom from having to read the Bible, say the creed, repeat written prayers and hymns, means that these forms cease to have much value to them. So the tendency to move away from God language and from Christian teaching, towards a more personal meditation closer to Buddhism and humanism.

Strangely I found myself moving in the opposite direction; which puzzles many Quakers, but does not prevent them from supporting my “journey”.
After years of supporting those in prison; the prisoner’s union; my own Magwitch; working as a Home Office prison visitor; after years of protest and supporting: student rebellion; CND; anarchists; hunt saboteurs; peace demonstrations and anti-road protests: I found myself incarcerated in Norwich Prison, for a crime I did not commit (2/11/1992).

Was it a conspiracy, a government plot, or a vengeful police force? One thing was clear: I was totally helpless, a plaything of a justice system I had never believed in. This was not a game: if found guilty I could spend years in prison.

When the cell door first closed upon me, I knew that all my assumptions about being in control of my own life; master of my destiny; free, responsible; able to choose: were all so many delusions. I had spent my adult life blinded by my own egotism, believing I could change the world. Now I could not even change my clothes without permission. Self-sufficiency! I was dependent on others to feed me, open doors for me; and any of them might injure or kill me, at any time. “In the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23).

When that cell door closed upon me, I surrendered my free will. All my planning, thinking, analysing, theorising, had proven useless. John Myhill, the self-motivated, striving, self-confident, conceited ego – died.

Instantly I became aware that I was not alone. A presence calmed me. “All would be well”. What I had mistaken for a tragedy was part of His plan. This was not punishment, but opportunity. Not the loss of freedom, but the discovery of its true meaning. Not death but birth: not rejection but Grace, a call to new life.

“*I was in prison and you visited me*”

Quakers were wonderful. They appeared, a dozen at least, every time I appeared in magistrates court. They arranged bail accommodation with the Sommerville Greats, Lesley and Lucy Parker, and provided practical assistance on the farm. They supported me in sharing my experience more widely and they sat through six days of my Crown Court trial.

In prison, the Quaker Prison Minister, Michael Mitlehner, was especially good at visiting me and arranging for others to join us for a Meeting for worship in the prison. Other friends were supportive. Stephen Champlin offered to pay my barrister in the unlikely event that I was found guilty. The local vicar, Keith Crocker, visited. Jo Sisley came each day to court and friends from Yorkshire came to stay to support us through the trial.

At a time when prison officers, prison medical staff (I was physically ill and spent several days in the prison hospital) and police and prosecutors all spoke to me as if I was obviously guilty, this support was essential.

I was 44 and had visited prisons for 20 years. For social services I had liaised with senior police officers and lawyers. I knew what prisons were like and how the system works. How much worse must it be for a young person, with no experience of the justice system, who finds himself locked up for the first time?

I met such men. One had tried to hang himself in his cell and been rescued by Michael Mitlehner. Another was an orthodox Jew and seemed oblivious of the anti-Semitic feelings around him, the tribalism so prevalent in prisons. Another had no education and no understanding of what was
happening to him. In contrast, much of my life came together and made sense in prison. I could understand something of my father’s internment by the Japanese.

Most of course were guilty of serious criminal offences. There were dangerous bullies, picking on the weak and vulnerable. There were drug barons, controlling and benefiting from the addicted and there were bored and vengeful prison officers. Prison is a dangerous place and random violence is more likely there than on the worst back streets of our big cities.

But for a social scientist, the experience was fascinating. Never before or since, have I been accepted as a member of the criminal classes. Fellow prisoners talked to me as to an old friend, in a way that they would never speak to a prison visitor or prison minister. I wrote up my experience in a paper I presented to the Prisons 2000 Conference at Leicester University in 1996. I have also written about my experience in articles for “The Friend” and “The Raven” and used the experience in my “Monopoly of Truth” novel, where prison is the main setting.

I reached a number of conclusions, which I have refined by further study since:–

1) Diversity of sentencing: there needs to be as many programmes of transformation as there are unique individuals in prison. 2) There are far too many laws oppressing the least able and those with mental distress. 3) There are innocent people in prison, so authority should always be apologetic towards those it detains, considering that it may be mistaken. 4) It is not loss of liberty (most prisoners have never known liberty) but the dangerous people you are imprisoned with, that is the punishment.

Our youngest daughter, Emma Lucy (1986-) was inevitably a “little Princess” (after Francis Hodgson Burnett (1894-1924)) as she grew up in the kingdom of Church Farm, vegetarian from birth. In the film, when she is reunited with her father, I am in floods of tears. I have been that father, welcomed home from prison with her artwork, “recalled to life” (as in Dickens “Tale of Two Cities) by my beautiful daughter.

Transformation

Prison was for me a privilege. I really got to know some of the most despised people on the planet. Not as a social scientist, or a do-gooder, not as a professional, or lord bountiful: but as one of them. People who had fascinated me since my university days, climbed out from their labels and shared the full range of their original personalities.

Most of my hours were spent locked in my cell, which gave me hours to write: articles, letters, poems. I read the whole of the Old Testament and the proposed new version of Quaker Faith and Practice and a few novels. But mainly I enjoyed the silence, with my new-found personal Jesus.

Even to be reviled and abused by others, became a privilege. I was sharing a little of that horrendous ordeal that led Jesus to the cross. Like Simon of Cyrene, I was carrying His burden. There was even a point when I wanted to say nothing and allow the system to condemn me. But friends and family would not allow that, so I was eventually cleared without a criminal record; but having enjoyed the label for six weeks in prison.

Then of course there was the support of friends and family, which made me feel cared for, supported and loved. But this increased my concern for my fellow inmates, many of whom had no-one who cared about them on the outside.

Denise and I were married at Goat Lane Meeting House in April 1993. We had not thought it necessary to marry, as our commitment was total, without the legal bond, but the courts made us feel second class. I also needed to witness to her faith in me in front of my worshipping community. I also felt bad that Denise was suffering the role of prisoner’s wife and the extra work at home. Emma, aged six, was deprived of her father and that many others were concerned and upset on my behalf. I had to trust that He who supported me would also give them hope.
The joy of release, the welcome home, the ability to open doors for oneself and walk in the countryside.

Animal Cruelty

If you should ever end up in prison, through no fault of your own, make sure you declare yourself vegan. As a vegan, I received a regular box of dietary supplements (Marmite, tea bags, etc.) I was able to give the tea bags away and thus make friends. I found hot water was by far the healthiest drink. The meat, eggs and cheese were really horrid, but my vegetables were always excellent. Most prisoners were smokers, unable to afford sufficient tobacco, many were alcoholics and addicts: all suffered withdrawal.

Being herded into small spaces for long periods of time provides huge empathy for incarceration of most farm animals. I observed the intensification of pecking orders caused by overcrowding; the desperate fights between alpha males.

I recalled the injustices of my past life: of my first degree, of lack of recognition, of Christmas 1972, of Jeremy Thorpe; of Penny and the Kent school, of Peregrine suspected of complicity in the burglary of which he was wholly innocent; of the broken lives of people I had known. This helped to put my imprisonment in perspective. But that was all human error. The cruel imprisonment and slaughter of innocent animals, was an injustice of a violent, deliberate nature, so institutionalised that none of the perpetrators even saw it as injustice. My time in prison brought me closer to the suffering of farm animals.

I had a strong sense of identity: as a Myhill, a farmer, a social psychologist, and intellectual, a writer with solidarity for the working class, and an ex-pat Englishman. There was no chance that the prison could fit me up with a label of mentally ill or criminal. But I could see how others took on the identity assigned to them by the institution. I had to dig beneath these labels to discover the unique genius they hid.

“An infinite capacity for taking pains”

This was Schuman’s definition of genius. My cellmate for several weeks, Tony, had his own recycling business, and a great collection of aircraft pictures. He had done National Service in Egypt and had no problems with prison life, being at least 30 years older than most inmates. He was a non-smoker, an organised, relaxed man with whom to share a small space. We spoke at meal times but mainly read or slept on our bunk beds.

I played chess with two men. One had threatened to kill the chief constable and beat me every time. The other gave me a good game, but was more interested in reading me his journal, which laid out detailed plans for horrific murders, yet I never felt in any danger, even when I won the game.

William appeared the opposite of these careful genii. He stole expensive items for order and relied on speed: he was released and re-imprisoned twice during my six weeks. He took a particular shine to me: coming up behind me, grasping me round the throat and gruffly saying “what’s your last wish granddad”, to which I replied “good of you to drop by William”. He had a high IQ and found life boring. He took huge pains to enjoy the present moment. He had once spent £25,000 in a week. Only time was of value to him and he found there was plenty happening in prison. He was severely beaten up shortly after I left. His brilliance irritated the bullies.

Therapy – Family and Friends
We took a number of family holidays to get the burning fuse of machismo out of my nostrils, the brutality of the confined testosterone and the dependence on prison officers. Denise took Stella, Emma and I to Teesdale for a walking holiday, although we did see the fabulous Bowes Museum and some dramatic castles (ruined prisons!). Stella drove Emma and I to Loch Lomond for more wide open spaces, including a quick dash up Ben Lomond and rowing on the loch. The three of us also spent a week staying with Pat and climbing Snowdon; repeated the following year with Denise. Another year, Denise’s friend Val joined Denise, Emma and I for a week in Ireland near Limerick.

“There was from male cells set free
A man who longed to hug a tree
He ran over hills, wide spaces for thrills
And he travelled with women three.”

It was another ten years before I really enjoyed male companionship. I needed to distance myself from the chauvinism and brutality of the all-male institution.

The farm itself was a wonderful liberation. The quiet acceptance of cows, spring all around, demanding attention, promising new beginnings. The living family augmented by friendly family ghosts. Gradually those weeks in prison felt like just another holiday viewed from the familiar sense of belonging in Hethel.

In August 1999 Tony Martin, a Norfolk farmer three years older than me, shot dead a burglar and was sent to prison. I was disturbed because he was a farmer of my age, imprisoned unfairly. As a pacifist, I could never kill anyone, but it was a reminder that the wonderful peace of Hethel could be destroyed at any time. I needed to face the world for there is no hiding place.

**Therapy – Desensitisation**

One of the first things I did was to attend Tony’s trial. To re-enter Crown Court of my own volition, knowing I would not be in the dock, was still traumatic, as I associated wholly with my old cell mate. I later applied to become a magistrate, but was not appointed until 2003 (the presiding judge at the ceremony had been the judge at my trial and his approval was very important to me. He died soon afterwards of motor neurone disease – a more severe punishment than anything he ever handed out in court.)

In 1996 I became Quaker Prison Minister in Norwich Prison. This time I had the keys and could come and go to any part of the prison. I spent more time inside in this official, voluntary, capacity, than I had served as a prisoner. The prison never lost its inward look of despair. I was disappointed to find that I was once more an outsider, shut out from the camaraderie of inmates.

I heard their hard luck stories. I listened to their confessions and their ramblings regarding suicide; but felt these were performances, put on for “them”, for people with keys and freedom, who might be of practical benefit to their schemes.

I noticed a profound difference when I visited Grendon (the therapeutic prison) whose governor was a Quaker, Tim Newell. Inmates had volunteered to be at Grendon and many were seriously working to escape the causes of their offending behaviour. These prisoners saw no difference between staff and inmates, because they shared the same goals of rehabilitation.

1996 saw IRA bombs in Docklands (February) and Manchester (June). More seriously a 43-year-old scout leader massacred 16 primary school children in Dunblane. The prisoners I visited had done lesser things, but sometimes their guilt was terrible and no-one could have prevented their suicides.
Therapy – Respectability

Amongst Quakers I took my concern for justice around the country, speaking to small groups of committed Friends. I attended my first yearly Meeting (more than a thousand Quakers sat in silence, produces a powerful depth) at Warwick. The main subject was homelessness. Thousands of people had bought their council houses, failed to make their mortgage payments and found themselves homeless. I got to know the remarkable poet, Pam Coren (1949-), who was then lecturing in English literature. Soon after that I was appointed to Meeting for Sufferings, the national Quaker standing committee which takes decisions about Quaker work and prioritises Quaker concerns, between one yearly gathering and the next.

In the seventeenth century, this monthly gathering had recorded those Quakers who were “suffering” state persecution for their beliefs, and we were clear that this was still an appropriate name, as we recorded the names of several peace protestors, who suffered imprisonment during my six years as a member of “Sufferings”. There were more than 120 Quakers on Sufferings at this time, so it felt like a privilege to be called and listened to, when I spoke on justice and peace issues. For my last three years, I was a member of the “support group” which listened to any member of Sufferings, who felt that their views were not heard, or that the process was failing to work, or those with personal problems relating to their role.

Locally I was elected on to the Parish Council, and discovered the complexities of local planning regulations, the dangers of providing play equipment for children, the village hall committee and the bowls club, riveting stuff. Everyone was so sensible, so middle class, so predictable. I was glad when my four years was up. It would have taken a revolution to have replaced the annual hog roast: a red rag to a vegan.

In 1994, I presented an academic paper on my prison experience to the Prisons 2000 Conference held at Leicester University. It was exciting to be amongst academics and criminal justice professionals and I learnt a great deal from that conference, but they were all viewing the problem from the state’s point of view: “how can we best manage these incompetent people who break the laws and are caught, repeatedly?” Whilst I viewed the problem through the eyes of the remarkable individuals I had met, whose genius was crushed by a system that wanted only bureaucrats.

I found more humanistic responses at the Bishop of Lincoln’s conference. This gave prison chaplains, ex-prisoners and reformers, the chance to share their experiences. I was particularly taken by the film “Love is not a Luxury” in which long term prisoners in Brazil, chose a Roman Catholic run prison, where personal transformation was the norm. Proof that these prisoners, who chose a special regime, are most likely to discover their true calling and move away from crime.

Therapy – Mental States

Inspired by my experience of the mental distress of my fellow prisoners, I offered my professional expertise, as a volunteer with MIND. They passed me on to the National Schizophrenia Fellowship, which had a day centre, called “Bridges” in Norwich. I duly introduced myself and said that I had been sent by MIND. The person in charge assumed I was schizophrenic and showed me round. I was very pleased with Bridges, as it operated very much like Warren Court, with control in the hands of the members. I joined the creative writing group, and Bridges became my club for the next ten years. (Philip Weaver had at this time joined “Blacks” a London club for artists – we had each found our own equivalent of the Athenaeum: a place where we felt comfortable, with people we liked). Most weeks I would join with some remarkable individuals, in trying to produce poems and fiction, in a couple of hours. I accepted my given role, as just another recovering psychotic, because the experience was very therapeutic. The thing I had enjoyed in prison was the acceptance of my
fellow inmates, people who would never have been as open with me as a professional. The same was true in Bridges. Only our writing group contained people with a real feeling for the music of language. Words flowed from them in unexpected patterns. (It is a diagnostic characteristic of schizophrenia in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)

Dr Paddy Tarrant (1980-) has since made a name for herself as a writer of magic realism. Two others were just becoming noticed, when fear of success led them to commit suicide:-

Adrian Lenton (1958-98) had just published his stunning collection of poems, when he walked out into the sea to drown. Fiona Mitchell (1977-98) had launched her first record and appeared on a radio programme, when she hung herself. My own favourite voice was Nicola East (1968-) who also paints poignant swans of elegiac delicacy. Mai, had turned her name around to make “I AM” and jumped from a bridge on the fast flowing A11. She survived with two broken legs and went on to be a teacher. Fortunate children to learn from someone who knew the delight and horror of existence and did not seek to hide it beneath bureaucratic proceedings.

I cannot cover the full range of talents I met in this group. One self-harmer wrote obsessively about knives and aliens, but his talent was held back by poor school teaching. My particular friend, Stephen Pointer, who went with me to an “Asylum” (anti-psychiatry movement led by Professor Alec Jenner (1935-)) gathering in Birmingham. There I met the charismatic psychologist, Sam Warner (1978-), and enjoyed my wild dancing with people I admired. Professionals and those suffering mental distress working together to limit their mental distress by using their genius to turn past traumas into art and altruism.

**Therapy - Poetry**

It was through Bridges that I met my idol, George Szirtes (1948-) who ran his own writing group at the College of Art (later Norwich University of the Arts) which I attended a number of times. The paintings and sculptures of these young students are far superior to anything I have seen at the Tate Modern, where ideas so often replace talent.

I produced three volumes of verse during the 1990s, though many had been written earlier: 1) Rural poems, 2) Poems of Love and Death, 3) Political verse. I also contributed to Bridges own publication “Goldfish”. Amongst our writing tutors were Helen Ivory (1969-) ; Christopher Reid (1949-) who had also been born in Hong Kong and Hilary Mellon (1949-)

I also joined in a couple of public readings at “Take Five”, which were great fun. This led me to attend gathering of “Café Writers” first at the Forum and later at Wensum Lodge, where I read a poem or two along with many others.

Performance poetry is a strange activity. Even great writers can find themselves changing their style to maximise impact when reading aloud. This is a pity as they may sacrifice their unique gift (a poem to be savoured in 200 years’ time, by someone reading it in a book.) The greatest impact will always go to the performer (actor, musician) rather than to the writer. A great poem needs to be studied, repeated, considered and reflected upon; it cannot be instantly successful, like a stand-up comic.

I realised that I could give more meaning to the verse my friends’ wrote than they could, but this would never compete with the professional performer. At the same time, I was speaking more often in Quaker Meetings, when spontaneous movement of the Spirit resulted in something more startling than any performance poet. I now keep my writing for others to read and reserve my voice for the call of the moment.

The therapy was not performing, being the centre of attention, being listened to; but on the contrary, it was therapeutic to see others expressing their gifts for language, when everything in their lives
(including their use of words) was flying through chaos. Thus the best readings were at Bridges rather than amongst the talented, but undistressed writers of Norwich.

So I found myself drawn to others with mental distress, who would not have sought support from Bridges, nor written poetry, but yet they responded to the poetic in my personality. A real poet lives the life, thinks and talks poetically, completing set pieces for others to read is far less important.

**Six Characters in search of a Friend**

There was Anita Baptist, a very talented head teacher, who could not get a job in Norfolk, when her husband moved to Hethel. She suffered post-traumatic stress and valued her peace and privacy, but she was very friendly towards me, for most of her stay, but rejected me totally just before they moved away. Perhaps I was to her the spirit of Hethel: important whilst she lived her, but abandoned when she knew she was leaving. She had a romantic artistic soul, but suppressed it in order to present herself as an organised disciplinarian. I was unable to overcome the paranoia she suffered as a result of her PTS, but I was probably the only person who saw her suppressed creative genius.

Jane Sutherland was another remarkable woman with huge talent. She was living on benefits and suffering anorexia, because people were afraid of her intelligence. She had been attracted to Vedic wisdom and sought to attain a detachment from physical desires. This seemed to suppress her natural ability to be happy, but the benefits system was really to blame. Imagine forcing Mozart to work on the roads, or Shakespeare to work on a production line. Their attempts to force square pegs into round holes would never make Susan an admin assistant; but it did make her feel worthless and miserable. It was a privilege to know her, but I was unable to help.

It was much the same when I went to Spain to stay with Harry Rose. I had a wonderful holiday (everyone should see the Alhambra) he was living in a mountain village, with wonderful views and climate, but he was still unable to be the visionary prophet, I had known at university; because of his fear of suffering a manic attack, followed by years of depression. Years on, lithium was giving way to other drugs, supplemented by alcohol, which would ultimately kill him.

I benefited hugely from our conversations and learnt a great deal, but even these conversations made him worry about relapse to mania. I could not persuade him that healthy exercise, good diet and faith in a higher power would enable him to be fully himself.

Nita Ranworth suffered terrible abuse as a child. She had tried to work with other disadvantaged people in a support role, but her ability was so much greater than the role she was given, that she had withdrawn to the benefits system. She eventually found happiness in living quietly in the country with her many pets. We shared a love of poetry and concern for animals and oppressed people. We were both very vulnerable and it is remarkable that we did not hurt each other, as we shared memories.

Paddy Tarrant, was completing her art degree. She went on to complete a remarkable PhD and some mind-blowing magic realism. Her art work was terrifying. Despite a traumatic childhood and severe mental distress, she became a wonderful mother and one of the greatest writers I have known. Her tender kindness to others suffering distress was deeply moving.

I had re-established my friendship with Peregrine Pot. He had suffered a terrible sense of injustice when my furniture had been stolen, as he felt he was being accused. I always knew he was innocent, but now he was able to relate to the injustice I had suffered. He had also gone through an unhappy marriage/divorce and terrible trauma when teaching English in Saudi Arabia at the time of the first Gulf War. It was years before it was accepted that he was suffering from Gulf War Syndrome – another cruel injustice. He became my mentor and we exchanged letters: he as my “Guardian” and I as his “ward”. His letters are amongst my most prized possessions: a constant reminder that a great writer only needs one reader to justify the expenditure of genius in the production of a work of art.
These mentally distressed geniuses were essential to the writing of my final novel “The Forest without Birds”.

**Therapy – Rebellion**

I was attracted to Trident-Ploughshares because there was a possibility that people signing up for direct action against the Trident facility at Faslane, could be arrested for “conspiracy”, even if they took no action. I thought such action by government would be outrageous, so I signed up in order to protest against the absurdity of such a conspiracy law.

We were not prosecuted, but I did get to meet some brilliant, principled people and to do the Turning the Tide (TTT) training, which remains the best training for those faced with potential violence. I did go to Faslane and I did intend to get arrested, but I failed.

However, I was a member of Meeting for Sufferings at the time they debated whether Quakers should provide training for people intent on causing criminal damage (albeit in order to protest against the much greater crime of genocide by nuclear weapons). I was able to articulate my view that the training could also be offered to police and soldiers and even racist groups. It is a way of reducing violence regardless of the political intention of the participants. And the training was provided and no protestors suffered serious violence, although many were sent to prison (unjustly, as I had been). Solidarity with these brave, imaginative, moral people was hugely therapeutic.

Faslane base would be a horrendous blot on the landscape of beautiful Gairloch, even if it was only a factory. I hope an independent Scotland will allow the beauty spot to return to nature. I spent one delightful day at the main gates to the base, looking at the hills and loch and taking down the numbers of the lorries that delivered goods to the camp. I did not stay in a tent with the other protestors, but at a B&B in Gairlochhead. Speaking to the locals, it was clear that most jobs were dependent on the base. For them it was an ugly necessity.

April 10th 1998 Good Friday Agreement – a peace that still holds 15 years later – a peace that few of us expected. August 1998 the second Congo civil war began and lasted till 2003: 3.9 million killed: the worst bloodshed since 1945.

A large derelict hotel showed that tourism was an alternative to warmongering, but could not co-exist with it. I was the only tourist. This was the start of my interest in eco-tourism: not just reducing the environmental impact of holidays, but taking holidays to learn about human destructiveness and alternative lifestyles (as in Working Weekends on Organic Farms).

This led on naturally to Church Farm as a repository for Green Party bill boards for Norfolk; Church Farm study days: poetry to peacemaking; and Church Farm as a retreat – a place for spiritual regeneration – holy-day rather than holiday. The idea that I could earn a living by providing a place for people to learn from each other was another of my romantic notions. I put considerable effort into preparing publicity and materials for discussion. The few days that succeeded paid for the publicity, but not the effort. Like the horse and cart, it was a reaching back to a lost way of life, in which people sought understanding for its own sake.

I was very involved with Green concerns about climate change at this time, especially the impact made by producing animals for food. But people were not listening. By the time the majority understood the danger to human life; I felt it was too late. It may also have been that I was no longer seeking to be respectable. My romantic desire to rebel against the status quo, had overcome my need to be accepted. My opposition to nuclear weapons went back to Hiroshima – the mushroom that had permitted my birth and cast a cloud over my youth. My opposition to landmines was the same (the landmine had killed my mother’s first husband Cyril – whose death made my birth possible.) January 1997, Diana called for a total ban on Landmines – in August she died.
Therapy – Writing

My novel “Monopoly of Truth” allowed me to fictionalise my prison experience - to separate my idealistic, self-sufficiency, horticultural, anarchist self; from the dreaming poet of the prison cell. This was an introverted tale in which the characters represent aspects of my own life experience, an attempt to discover my own essence, a different kind of autobiography.

In contrast my articles on prisons and injustice, written for journals and magazines, were focused on academic research and rational arguments for dealing with the social psychological causes of law breaking and the negative impact of imprisonment.

I also self-published booklets of my poems, in which I attempted to capture the music of words in the style of Chinese Bartok, Rachmaninoff, rock and jazz. The rhythm of my wild dancing, expressed in words. An expression of what I felt.

My greatest writing mentor, Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) died, having lost her great intellect and memory to Alzheimer’s. Her death in life is written into every page of her final novel, “Jackson’s Dilemma”. I wanted my novel, to be as complex, philosophical and challenging as her greatest novel “The Sea, The Sea”: life swept along by wave and tide, returning us to first love, sucked back by current ties. My metaphor for life was prison: releasing memories and dreams, whilst keeping us from action.

Inevitably I had to deal with issues of guilt and punishment. Many people are so ready for scapegoats that any accused person deserves punishment. The system accepted that I was not guilty, but not until I had been treated as guilty and suffered punishment. I felt I was being punished for those I had let down, those I had failed to help, at work, and Penny and my beloved cows. Only when I accepted that all was forgiven, could I see prison as an opportunity, an adventure, a new start.

Beyond Therapy – Obedience

All my life, obedience had been a boo word. There could have been no war if young people had refused to obey the call to murder their neighbours. Industry would have been more efficient if workers refused to obey foolish bosses, until their experience and expertise had been recognised. Co-operation between people who all think for themselves must be better that “obedience”.

But now I had surrendered my free-thinking, self-direction to obey the leadings of the spirit. I did not choose the therapies I have listed: rather I felt led to try new things. Only on reflection did I understand their therapeutic value to me. At the time, they were daunting, even frightening. I asked myself: “why am I doing this?” But I obeyed: “not my will but thine”. As soon as I said this, the new task became possible.

It was the same when I spoke in Quaker Meetings. The quietness of the farm, the simplicity and lack of intellectual challenge, had left me feeling inarticulate. I wanted to listen, not to speak. But I felt a shaking of my limbs, I felt pushed to my feet, not knowing what to say, and then the words would come. I soon found it was easy to access the spirit in the silence, and easy to allow it to speak through me. But if the Spirit spoke through me, why were Quakers so unresponsive to what it said? Why did God insist I should stay with Quakers, when I was clearly “born again”, better suited to the passion, joy and excitement of the new evangelical churches.

Slowly I realised that all life is silent waiting and all speech is ministry, if we allow the spirit to direct us. Speaking at a Quaker Meeting was merely God starting me off easily. All I had to do was obey and follow where I was led.
The Twenty First Century

What do you remember about the end of the twentieth century? The Millennium Bug that threatened all cyber communications, revealing humanity’s new dependence on computer technology, which was already changing what it is to be human, even more drastically that the infernal combustion engine at the start of the twentieth. The lowered health and advanced obesity; that produces mental distress and weighs down consciousness with excess information.

Or perhaps it was the Millennium Dome, symbol of big government, wasting our money, when the minimum wage was £3.80 an hour. For me Harold Shipman (1946-2004) murdering his patients, raised a major dilemma for the new century. What to do with an excess imbalance of elderly people in an over-populated world? (Euthanasia, migration, population control, environment.) How to avoid media generated paranoia leading to micro-management of health and social care services, based on exceptional cases like Shipman? How to trust professionals, and leave them to do their work, without wasting most of their time proving to a computer that they are doing things that micro-management prevents them from doing. How can a society that fails to deal with primal screams of mental distress respond to someone who hides his distress from the world in order to act out his terrifying fantasy? There have been many parallel cases since, but each time we cut services that could prevent such horrors, in our rush to blame someone.

Or perhaps Tracey Emin’s unmade “My Bed” winning the Turner Prize (October 1999): the same problem as HSBC takeover of Midland Bank; should have worried us. The desire for unsustainable profit which led to overinvestment in housing, art, gold, etc, creating bubbles and recession and preventing investment in local industry and community harmony.

Or perhaps the first GM products sold in this country and Dolly the sheep, marked the start of a “Brave New World”, a return to eugenics, which Hitler had put us off for 50 years.

Restorative Justice

How can we get things back to where they were before the crime? The Berlin Wall had fallen, the cold war had ended; apartheid in South Africa was over. Even Northern Ireland had peace. Surely “Truth and Reconciliation” was the way forward for the justice system!

So I did “Alternatives to Violence Project” training, intended to enable people in prison to discover co-operative solutions to conflict. I liked the way ordinary people joined prison inmates for some intensive programme activities, in which all shared their human frailties and virtues. I still believed that society, rather than people in prison cause crime: society rejects/ fails/ maltreats the individual; society provides incentives/ models/ encouragement to material gain through crime; society forbids too much but only punishes the least able lawbreakers, as scapegoats.

Tony Martin was given a life sentence in April 2000. How could justice be restored in a case like that? Could he return to farming? Could the relatives of the dead man accept the shooting as a terrible accident? Could he renounce the use of weapons, which his fear had presented as self-defence? (Government laws on handguns and later knives demand that young people forgo what some regard as essential self-defence.)

So I took up Community Mediation Training, so that I could enable neighbours in conflict to resolve their differences peacefully without reverting to crime or false accusations. Surely this kind of local reconciliation was the only way to prevent events like the July 2001 race riots in Bradford (where the university holds the “Peace Studies Centre”!).

Then came September 11th and the “War on Terror”. As if a new century demanded a new conflict, having resolved the old ones. In Britain crime was at its lowest since 1981.
May 2002, the USA invaded Afghanistan and in December the second Congo war came to an end, forgotten thanks to the new war.

**Terror and Government**

Banks were getting “too big to fail”. RBS took over National Westminster in 2000. At the same time they were investing in financial bubbles, which provide much higher profits than steady growth, as long as you sell before the bubble bursts. You profit because those left in the bubble lose. This new gambling was compulsive. My school friend, Jonathan Edwards was one of the “gang of four”, the Phoenix consortium, who tried to make Rover (the old Austin factory near Cofton) work by “steady growth” to buck the trend and save 6,000 jobs. Inevitably they failed and were blamed (holding the parcel when the music stopped). Their failure symbolises capitalism’s dependence on gambling, rather than industry.

Clearly it was obvious to all of us who supported the anti-capitalist protest (1/5/2001) that the horrendous loss of life in the World Trade Centre, expressed desperation of people living simply in poor countries, suffering the exploitation of multi-national capitalism, which had long ago begun to destroy the freedom and independence they had enjoyed, “time out of mind”.

2001 was dominated for me by a different kind of terror. All year the government was slaughtering healthy cattle and making huge bonfires of their corpses, right across the country; instead of inoculating and treating Foot and Mouth. (Imagine if they did that to some human disease – avarice say, or warmongering!) Labour was re-elected and David Cameron became an MP – clearly there was no hope.

Harry Secombe (1921-2001) and Spike Milligan (1918-2002) died. Clearly we had lost our sense of humour.

My cows remained healthy. No BSE, no Foot and Mouth, no TB. But many farmers ceased keeping animals and some committed suicide. These were things to consider, on my silent vigils to “Stop the War”. Surely the terrorists are those with the most power and wealth. The Bush (president) burnt others, but was still re-elected, for the voice that came from this Bush was that of the bankers.

**Identity**

For many years, when asked for my identity, I would write “Chinese”, because birth and formative years in Hong Kong gave me an enduring respect for the people who saved my father from the Japanese and always treated him with such respect. Chinese phonemes and music determined my love of discordant European classics (the Lark Ascending is pure Chinese to me.) I saw all revolution through the eyes of Maoism. I viewed Christianity through Tao and Confucian thought. I viewed the English through Chinese eyes.

In the 1990s, I attended a number of reunions with people from my year at school. It puzzled me that so many had remained in the Birmingham area, despite the fact that many said they had hated school. My own memories of Bromsgrove are largely positive and I loved growing up beside the Lickeys, close to Birmingham for concerts and theatres, but I never considered living there as an adult. London, Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow would all have been higher on my list.

It was reading Zadie Smith’s wonderful novel “White Teeth” (2000) that made me realise I might be English, or at least East Anglian, after all. I was definitely not European (Germanic bureaucracy of Gesellschaft Max Weber) or British (subjugating Scotland and Wales then half the world in Empire). But it was the English of travelling Englishmen like Graham Green, DH Lawrence and Somerset Maugham that began a quest to understand what others thought it meant to be English. To see the mutual terror between American and Islamic extremists, from outside. To view the rise of Chinese
Imperialism from outside. To see the human world through the eyes of my White Park cows – the cows of ancient England.

The English mysticism of Julian of Norwich, Christina Rossetti and Thomas Traheren, was far more acceptable than the Germans my father read. Travels round Britain from Daniel Defoe to JB Priestley, were to provide a model for my own travels. Barbara Pym ousted Kafka and Hesse: Shaw pushes out Ibsen.

**Voice Within**

Perhaps most modern Quakers are hyper-rational and seek silence as an escape into the right brain? (the creative, artistic, subjective side they usually suppress). Perhaps I am too close to my dream life, my imagination, with days of quietness on the farm, so that I enjoy the rational ministry in Meetings for Worship, to escape my dominant right brain? Usually I like to listen, but when my body quakes, I know I have to speak, to give the voice within a chance to be heard.

This strange obedience has made the nature of consciousness an important question for me.

In 2001 Denise and I had a wonderful holiday in a log cabin in Killin. I climbed Ben Laws and we followed Glen Nevis to the source of the river. It was an opportunity to let go of the twentieth century, to get some perspective on whether I was poet or politician, a lone voice or a committee man.

There had been many deaths, of close friends, of our family dog, Beano, and of my wonderful bull Rondo, my great white hope, father of the herd, more Jonah’s conscience than Moby Dick.

In 2000, I became older than my mother and acutely aware of my own death. I wrote a Living Will and funeral plan, which was liberating. I began to enjoy funerals for their celebration of life and to recognise the huge debt I owed to so many now dead writers. The voice within me was within everyone I met: I just had to let it speak.
Busyness

Wilkinson House 2003

“The little boy who lived down the lane”, David Wilkinson, whose father became a professor at the University of East Anglia, who had married Sue Young, the girl of my dreams: “the name on the world’s sharpest blade”, a reason for not shaving most of my life. A name of significance. A nine-bed hostel for homeless men, where I was to spend a third of my nights as a project worker, for the next decade – more nights than any resident.

To get to Wymondham, to do this job, without the sweat produced by a five-mile cycle ride, I bought an electric bike, a concession to my grey hair comb over!

The immediate incentive for returning to employment when some of my contemporaries were taking retirement, was Emma’s costs as a history student at Royal Holloway. To have taken a day job would have meant paying someone to do my farm work, but part-time nights could be added to my existing life. In fact, the work was so undemanding that I was able to do much of my reading and typing at work.

Night staff were a necessity at this time because the office had been broken into at night, drugs were being dealt in the hostel and residents bullied. A previous hostel of the same name had burnt down.

Those interviewing me had little idea what sort of people they were looking for, and were very fortunate to get three capable, experienced staff. Alec had been in business for years and was training to be a social worker. Mike had been in the army and his day job was providing young people with outdoor skills. He remains a remarkably proficient rock climber. We all had grown-up children and life experience, which enabled us to cope with some volatile addicts and drunks. It took a year or so for residents to accept that staff were always around and would intervene to prevent drug dealing, bullying and destruction of property. During that time a number of day staff, including the manager, left. Only one day staff and the new night staff were still present two years later, but this was followed by seven years of stability.

Residents moving in tend to accept the system that exists. After two years the system was led by a stable staff team, working in harmony. Residents could see that we were working for their benefit, so there was a decreasing amount of physical violence, destruction of property and annoyance to neighbours. Not that we transformed our homeless addicts into successful employees. Most of them kept their addictions, some ended up back in prison; some learnt to pay their bills and keep a housing association tenancy, keep out of trouble and control their addiction. A few did come off drugs and give up alcohol, but they were exceptional individuals and I claim no credit for their achievement.

John MacDonald, was the only day staff who continued through to the new regime. He had been an addict himself and travelled the world. He had a real impact on our residents, and worked tirelessly to improve their lives. The other major change agent was meeting a non-addicted woman, for whom transformation was worth attempting.

I accepted that most of our residents had a terminal addiction and was determined to make their last years as pleasant and interesting as possible. We played chess and pool together. I listened to their lives and pointed to the advantages they had in terms of intelligence, or skill, insight or experience. I tried to persuade them of the positives in their lives, but mainly I was simply there for them, as a sounding board.
“What would you do John if I hit you?” “I would probably fall over.” Emerson was one of the first residents I got to know: a fearsome giant covered in chains and piercings with dreadlocks, who had spent many years in prison. He became the model for Jack the Smack in my final novel “Forest without Birds”. It was a huge achievement to keep him out of prison and alive, given the doses of drugs he continued to take. But he had high intelligence and 20 years of life in the underworld, so I learnt a great deal from him.

If Britain had gone into Iran in 2003 to assist survivors when an earthquake killed tens of thousands, instead of invading Iraq and killing tens of thousands, the world would be a more peaceful place. Thus I did not rush to the police every time there was a conflict at the hostel, but used my mediation skills and slowly developed relationships.

On 8th February our oldest daughter, Helen (1969-) married Adam Kaminski, a Polish born American, whom she had got to know as a post-doc student at Chicago University, where they were both working on anti-matter. They are both remarkably good at practical tasks, from programming computers, to repairing machines, to house repairs. So if they ever succeed in destroying the universe with their sub-atomic particles, I will be sure that it was done with great precision. They were living in Swansea at this time (the University of East Anglia did not even have a physics department).

In 2004 their first child, Emily, was born and we stayed in a converted barn and visited castles and seaside of that area. Then they were back off to USA where they both teach at Iowa State University at Ames. Soon after this, Stella began a Master’s degree at Swansea, related to her work for a London Mental Health Trust.

All Stand

This was also the year I became a magistrate, thanks to the support of two Quakers: Helen King (1949-), who had herself become a JP because of her experience of sitting through my trial in the Crown Court; and Jane Davies (1960-) who had been a barrister based in Norwich since 1996. Clearly I would provide balance for a bench that was largely made up of the well-meaning and those determined to maximise punishment; but I was still surprised that they would accept someone who had been through the courts and prison unjustly and would therefore, inevitably have a prejudice in favour of defendants.

I can never forget that I once stood in the dock with a policeman on either side of me. I am always searching for a way forward for the poor unfortunate in front of me. If they are pleading guilty, what sentence might assist them towards a better life? For the addict, this may make me more inclined to give them prison or probation, when my colleagues are considering a fine, as I know they are more likely to get help with a more severe penalty. But with others, I am wanting a lower sentence to keep them from becoming involved with hardened criminals. But it is in trials that I am most likely to disagree with my colleagues, as I would rather release a dozen petty criminals than give a criminal record to an innocent man.

One of the most disturbing aspects of court life is the search for precision. Legal advisors and JPs gain status by showing knowledge of the precise words appropriate for a particular case. But human error is a messy business and cannot be put right by applying the exact words laid down in a law book. Every individual is unique and requires a unique response if further error is to be avoided. But those with power usually prefer to hide behind a prescribed form of words, as the mess of human life in the dock is simply too complex to examine. The legal advisor says: “it is a matter for you your worships” (thank goodness I do not have to go beyond what the book says): and the JP says “well the guidelines say”. To which I reply: “but they are guidelines and we can go beyond them as long as we give reasons”.
This makes me sound like an awkward colleague to have, but usually there is very little option. “It was a fair cop” – the defendant pleads guilty and gets the penalty laid down in law, which is just what he expects to get. The only value of my presence, rather than an automaton, is that I am discovering a little about the people in court: defendant, witnesses, lawyers and magistrates - getting to know people whom I would not otherwise meet. (This you will remember is a prime directive of my Social Network research.)

Meeting up with old girlfriends, I realised how much I had changed since the 1960s. Assertive statements of belief no longer interest me. Argument now seems childish. Instead of confrontation I now seek points in common and work out from there.

“The first and last thing required of genius is the love of truth” (Goethe, 1749-1832). Amongst Norfolk Quakers, I was pleased to become involved with a Concern for Animal Kinship. This Concern originated from Mike Purton (1938-) a retired television documentary director, who rightly felt that Quakers should campaign for animal liberation, in the way Quakers had worked for liberation of slaves 200 years earlier. He argues that recent genetic studies show there is little difference between humans and other mammals. He had been on an animal rights protest with my dear friend Molly Stacey (1940-2006) and discovered that Quakers were welcomed to see conditions on the intensive pig farm, whilst more militant protestors were not trusted. Molly and I had recently been joint editors of Quaker Concern for Animals journal, and wanted to see Friends involved in a non-violent approach to animal liberation.

Despite the dilatory and lengthy discussion of Norfolk Friends, we did manage to launch a petition to the European Union, which gained a great number of signatures from Quaker Meetings throughout the country (including one of my favourite poets, UA Fanthorpe (1929-2009)), and this led Mike and his partner to representing those signatories in some meetings in Brussels.

Mike had by this time become interested in spiritualism, convinced that his beautiful rescued Alsatian was contacting him from beyond the grave. He wrote a very moving account of the life of his dog and suggested I submit a similar article written about my eight cows, for publication in an international collection of Quaker animal writings. This was eventually published in 2011.

At times I became exasperated with Quakers’ lack of understanding that animals should be cherished as much as humans, that animal production is a major cause of climate change, that animal experiments are unnecessary and misleading; that eating dead animals is bad for you. But then I found the other churches were even worse.

Receptive Ecumenism

I had started to represent Norwich Quakers on the local churches together body and was delighted to meet enthusiasts for ecumenism like John Minns (Church of England) Rosemary Bousefield (Baptist) and James Walsh (Roman Catholic). Here were many active Christians for whom the way of Jesus was more important that the singularities of their own forms of worship. Sadly, most of them had been involved in ecumenical discussions for a long time and had rather lost hope of engaging the rest of their congregations in working together, across the church boundaries, or even surrendering the comfort of their own services for acts of shared worship.

But there were signs of hope, and I aligned myself with new younger members like Diana Cooke, whose great uncle was Arthur Evans (1851-1941) the archaeologist who uncovered Minos; Madeline Light, an evangelical priest with great charisma, and Gail Stanley, a Salvationist who had been brought up a Roman Catholic in Stratford and gone to Hull University at the time I was Voluntary Liaison Officer for Humberside.
Mystery in Fact and Fiction

2004 was a year for conspiracy theorists: Dr Shipman was found dead in his cell, Diana Princess of Wales believed someone was trying to kill her and the Hutton enquiry exonerated the government over the strange death of Dr David Kelly and Blair’s government announced the smoking ban. Something was rotten in the state of England, at least if you were a working class smoker living in a hostel. A corrupt government is a great help in justifying crime and addiction.

In the autumn, Emma started at Royal Holloway and gave us an excuse to visit Kew Gardens, as well as the remarkable building that had recently featured in “Midsomer Murders” and the “Da Vinci Code”. Denise and I became increasingly attracted to murder mysteries on TV and Denise found herself reading crime fiction. Perhaps another impact of our experience of injustice - or a return to childhood enthusiasm for Sherlock Holmes - my family bought me the deer stalker, pipe and board game and Emma and I visited Baker Street. Before we moved to the farm, gardening programmes had been our main enthusiasm but the reality of our own weeds had dampened that interest.

We joined a local book group, partly to ensure that we would go out socially as a couple, as my life was becoming increasingly busy and Denise was still working long days at the chemist, and studying for qualifications. Sometimes she would return from work after I had set off for my night job and I would return after she had gone to work and then on her days’ off, I would be in court or away on Quaker activities all weekend. The book group made me read books I would not have considered. It gave insight into other readers’ minds, but it was very disheartening, when they failed to see the brilliance of writers I most admire like DH Lawrence, Ishiguro, Wedgwood Benn, Emily Bronte and Iris Murdoch. I dare not even try them on Cowper Powys or Proust. But it did show how well you can get to know people whom you only meet once every six weeks, and how it takes time for people to share something of who they are.

At least my trips to London meant that I saw my daughters: Stella’s time at Queen Mary coincided with my time on Sufferings and Emma was in London for my later Quaker committee and union meetings.

26th December’s tsunami in the Indian Ocean recalled many people to their religious roots. To me it provided evidence of the superior animal intelligence as many species had sought higher ground away from beaches, only humans went swimming.

Quaker Peace and Social Witness

This Central Committee of British Quakers oversees the work of 18 subgroups of Quakers involved in supporting peace work in this country and abroad. Thus in 2005, the government banned hunting with dogs, leading to a flurry of publicity about animal rights activists and their imprisonment. Each prison has a Quaker chaplain, and they are supported nationally by a sub-committee of QPSW.

There is another sub-committee, to which I was appointed as a link person QPSW, called “Crime Community and Justice”. This group included the wife of a chief constable, prison governors, the sister of one of Fred West’s victims, a chief probation officer, Prison Reform Society officer, Quaker Prison Minister and criminologist. One of the prison governors was Pat Midgley who had similar views on animal rights to those of the philosopher Mary Midgley, so we quickly became close friends, sharing a rather tangential view to the general liberal view of other Friends on the group, who sometimes seemed to forget that violence and theft impact most upon poorer people; that professional criminals are dangerous men, who manipulate human rights legislation and do-gooders to evade
punishment; that prisoners, who have proven they cannot be trusted in society, are much better treated than other species, who have done nothing wrong, but are tortured, killed and eaten and often kept in terrible conditions, reminiscent of medieval dungeons.

Quakers have often, quite rightly, broken the laws for the sake of peace, equality, justice and shared, as I have, the condition of prisons. The question remains: how can we support those who have to be contained away from society in dealing with their mental distress. How can we move society towards “apologetic containment” and away from vengeful punishment?

Knowledge from this committee and experience on the bench led me to advocate that my employers became involved in implementing the Corston Report. A women’s refuge was set up and the “four women centre” and bids put in for probation work.

Later in 2005, John Sentamu became Archbishop of York. He was born in Uganda, where QPSW employed several workers to support peace building in the 19-year-old civil war in Northern Uganda, and I had the job with another member of QPSW, of writing a review of this work, which led the committee to decide to close our work in Uganda and move our efforts to the more recent violent strife in Kenya, involving Kenyan Quakers.

The 7/7 bombings on London transport reflected problems of religious conflict in South Asia, where another sub committee of QPSW supported cross-national meetings of peace workers. Friends House was close to two of the explosions and Friends were very involved in provision of assistance that day. Another sub-committee: Peace Campaigning and Networking, worked with many other peace groups in Britain to prevent escalation of anti-Muslim feeling at this time. And of course our Quaker office in Geneva, overseen by another sub-committee, continued to work at the United Nations to unpick the causes of terror: arms sales, support for criminal dictatorships, the use of child soldiers, and the exploitation of poorer countries through controls on migration and intellectual property. On the 22nd, Menezes was shot dead, mistaken for a suicide bomber – the kind of injustice that involves many sub-committees.

Later I joined a sub-committee on Quaker Testimonies, examining those actions by Quakers which show we believe that all people are equally capable of responding to the light within. Actions that oppose the roots of war, that lie deep within the darkness of each one of us. Actions that reduce red tape and complexity to simple choices, where the goal is obvious and irresistible. Actions that show individual integrity and speak uncomfortable truth to those in power, fearless and without prejudice.

Where do Quakers find the inspiration to do these things and how can such action be encouraged, were key questions for this group; which contained some of the most experienced and respected Quakers, like Jocelyn Burnell (1943-), Jonathan Dale (1945-) and Marion McNaughton (1942-), and I felt very honoured to be part of it. At the same time, I was influential in persuading QPSW that this work was complete and should be laid down. Controversial and difficult decisions required great reliance on the Holy Spirit and I found huge spiritual depth in this Central Committee.

**Talent Recognises Genius**

Life is no longer about decisions, choices, and self-discovery; but about discovering otherness. It was easy to cherish those I perceive as weak, but harder to discover that of God in the powerful. It helped to remember the power I had over others (in work, in court and as a speaker in Meetings and committees).

Christianity is not a spectator sport. Luxuries in the shops have never interested me, so detachment from consumerism is easy. I relax and allow others to grow, having no need to control them. I am
surprised how positively young people respond to this, suggesting that others of my generation are experienced more negatively.

Grandfather Myhill started his seed business in a large corrugated shed on the farm in 1933. In 2005, I converted part of it to be my new study, storing my books, papers and memories. This made way for turning my study back into a kitchen, living room, so that Emma’s wing of the house could become a self-contained holiday let. This required three years’ of work, whilst Emma was doing her degree.

I was at home in my body, with none of the doubts that afflicted my growing up. I stayed a week with Harry Rose in Spain and visited the wonderful Alhambra. Another week with Stephen Bostock and this time managed to ascend Goat Fell and still have energy for discussion of artificial intelligence and consciousness. Denise and I had the joy of Jersey and Gerald Durrell’s wonderful zoo: scenes from Bergerac; red squirrels; and the set of Hardy’s “The Woodlanders”.

**Time Past in Time Present**

At my suggestion a group of us had started a new Quaker Meeting in South Norfolk, trying out various possible venues. By 2005, a dozen of us were meeting each week in the “upper room” (very Pentecostal) above the old Bridewell in Wymondham, where seventeenth century Quakers had been imprisoned for their beliefs. Prince Harry appeared in Nazi uniform and Harold Pinter won the Nobel Prize – it is all a question of silence in the right place.

I had become chair of Norwich Central Churches Together, so we celebrated the 400th anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot, by having Guy Fawkes (played by Professor of Philosophy, Rupert Read (1969-)) tried by three real magistrates, with a Quaker court clerk and Quaker prosecutor, and defended by my solicitor, before an invited audience from Norwich Churches Together. Coming so soon after the London suicide bombers, it was a timely reminder of how religious hatred can give way to tolerance.

I also became involved in setting up a group of Street Pastors in Norwich: older Christians patrolling the clubbing area of the city, on Friday and Saturday nights – assisting drunk and sick children to get home safely and mediating disputes before they became violent. The pastors can assist where police presence is seen as inflammatory, escalating violence. Just having caring older people around can lighten youth angst.

**Oppressed Genius**

“All Genius is oppressed by the outer world” (Mary Robinson (1758-1800)). In 2005 I became a Unite trade union representative and every year after that spent a week away at one of the union’s training centres, with reps from real work in factories, printing and transport. Losing my tithe cottage as a farm worker in 1975, losing my job in reorganisation in 1984 and seeing the horrors of Thatcherism in the miner’s strike and privatisation, had made me a convinced member of the working class and prison had shown me the rough side, so that made my fellow union reps seem almost middle class. I never fitted in, but I was accepted and came to admire their determination in the declining struggle against oppression. The training was also another aspect of the law (employment and health and safety law especially) and law as a tool to oppress unionism.

Quaker Peace and Social Witness led me to be interested in working conditions in Africa. I did an e-learning course on African unions and persuaded the union branch to form links with unions in South Africa.
New Lamps for Old

In 2006, eight schoolgirls were shot in an Amish school, and five prostitutes were murdered in Ipswich. My last three cows (Tempo, Andante and Bolero) died, ending 18 years of caring for White Park cows. At the same time, I lost Molly Main, a mother substitute who had been the vicar’s wife in Bracon Ash in my youth, and showed huge ability in still life drawing in old age; and Molly Stacey, the Quaker animal rights activist, who inspired so many by her love and devotion to animals (I took her Quaker meeting for funeral which was a large gathering). Also lost were PF Strawson (1919-06) Malcolm Arnold (1921-06) and Charlie Drake (1925-06).

But, at the same time, I met new inspiration. Visionaries, whose lives I celebrated in my final novel, “Forest without birds”. Nicki Smith was a magistrate, who was also in charge of Grace Fellowship, an independent church that lived out the line “I came into the world to save sinners”: those whom the respectable churches might regard as “sinners” were at least able to repent and find Grace, which the self-righteous find so elusive. They were a small but compassionate congregation, which supported Nicki in setting up an orphanage and school in South India. Small sums of money in this country can do so much. Nicki became the central character, Collette, in my novel. In Colette’s (1873-1934) novel “The Vagabond” the heroine writes a novel called “Forest without Birds”.

Alice Yaxley (1982-) represented Young Friends on QPSW. Her deep faith and sense of grace was just what we older folk needed to bring us back to discernment and away from our individual personalities and prejudices. The committee was less effective when she left us to have her daughter Edith. Alice became Iris in my novel (the name a tribute to my great mentor Iris Murdoch). Alice set up a food growing co-op near her home near Coventry, having completed a science doctorate. A genius to change the future.

Janet Wyer (1965-) was parish youth worker for Peter Mancroft church in Norwich and I knew our friendship would be significant as I met her at the culmination of a series of déjà vu experiences when I was shown round the church and Mancroft room: unusual places I had never seen, were very familiar and I felt I had known her all my life. Janet kept her name in my novel, although I changed much of her story. She became a Church of England priest and after a time in the countryside, returned to Peter Mancroft, where she speaks to all kinds and conditions, but especially the despised and vulnerable.

This was the year of the first female President of Chile. There were major earthquakes in Taiwan, Greece and New Zealand. Benedict became pope and Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death. And I got the opportunity to speak at a couple of Church of England churches about Quakers.

I had another strong déjà vu on visiting the Air Force Memorial near Egham replicating a recent dream. Yet the same day we visited Hampton Court and nothing was familiar from my 1958 visit. Far from escapism, I have found my dreams connect with my daily life (probably more than I realise) whereas the events in the news have hardly any impact on my life. If the news depresses you, look beyond it to see all the brilliant people who are working to prevent bad things happening or to care for those who suffer.

Another déjà vu occurred at the Unite training centre, Esher Place. I had dreamt of a military gentleman in a stately home reciting Gunga Din next to a pool table. Esher was the stately home (it was the home of two British Prime Ministers. The gentleman was ex-Indian army and had come to a British Legion event to listen to a Ghurkha.

I tried to incorporate my déjà vu experiences into “The Forest without Birds”, seeing the forest as time and the birds as moments in time. The bird can fly from one part of time to another, creating déjà
vu. What would time be without those special moments that are so new and special, yet so familiar? These years were probably the busiest of my life, but I had learnt to just BE, anywhere, any time: contemplative, not driven by busy thoughts; “the still centre of the turning world” TS Eliot.

“leave them kids alone” Pink Floyd

Having served a few years as an ordinary magistrate, I was eligible to become a magistrate in the family court after further training. We deal with private law matters: largely separated couples who cannot agree a pattern of contact with both parties in the best interest of the child. So many couples are fixated on their dislike of each other that they fail to prioritise the needs of the children. The court is there to redress the balance and is very effective in most cases. Sadly cutbacks have meant that most parents cannot get legal support to pursue their child’s need (usually for contact with an absent father).

The other private law has to do with financial support for children whose wealthy fathers’ are often determined to avoid paying, and here again magistrates can be very effective. This should not be confused with the work of the Child Support Agency, which seeks to recoup money paid by social security to lone parents, from the other parent, by inventing figures and billing the parent, rarely listening to the parent’s true financial position, and having almost total power, with the courts merely rubber stamping their decisions. Despite this the CSA cost more than it produced in revenue.

Then there is public law, where social services decide that a child should be taken into care (supervision, fostering, adoption) and the parents fight, usually unsuccessfully to keep their child. If the “public” were really involved, they would be horrified at the expense of these cases, where social services, mother, father and the guardian of the child may each be represented by a barrister. There may also be very expensive expert witnesses and interpreters when required – all at the taxpayers’ expense. This is all justified on the reasonable belief that to take a child from its natural parents is a draconian action, more serious that sending an adult to prison for a year (the most magistrates can do in the criminal court). However, as magistrates invariably accept the social services’ case, the intricate arguments of professional lawyers appear more for the ritual, a rite of passage, from home to care, to enable parents to accept their loss.

Drugs or drink are usually involved, as base reasons for deciding that the parents are incapable of raising their own child. No evidence is ever presented to suggest that adoptive parents, or in most case fostering and children’s home, will be able to do a better job. Appropriate therefore that 2006 was the year Charles Kennedy resigned as Lib Dem leader, admitting that he had a drink problem. The same year Glaxo Smith Kline had a major explosion.

As parents sometimes point out, their parenting is no different from that of others on their estate, who have not come to the attention of social services. I am certain that most of them would cope with their children, if they were provided with surrogate grandparents, instead of expensive monitoring to produce reams of paper evidence of their failings. Few parents would survive the ordeal of being watched 24 hours a day whilst they deal unaided with their first baby, in an institutional assessment centre.

Most of the men I have worked with in the hostel have come through the care system, rather than being brought up by their own genetic parents. Many of them have had their own children in care. At least the addict parent understands what his addict child is going through and may actually be more helpful than foster or adoptive parents, who have never experienced addiction.

I have become convinced that fostering should be a short-term solution till sufficient support can be provided for parents. Adoption should be reserved for orphans. I have seen many mothers who would
have stopped at one or two children had they been supported to care for them, but have instead had six or more: each time hoping they would be allowed to keep the baby.

2007 – Training

Emma graduated from “The Royal Holloway” (as Dan Brown calls it) and we climbed Ben Nevis - my fourth time, but my first view from near the summit. We stayed with Mrs Campbell, whose husband had organised the races up Ben Nevis and has run up it 48 times. Barak Obama became president of the USA (it traditionally starts in Helen’s state of Iowa, recovering from devastating tornadoes of the previous year), and the current recession began. These events were no more related than the Virgin rail crash in Cumbria was related to the Ladbroke Grove rail crash, or the earthquake in Kent and the flooding in Sheffield. But I was doing a great amount of travel around the country by train and I noticed these things, although there was no decline in train travel. I was travelling to at least ten Quaker committee meetings each year, four meetings plus training sessions for Unite and a similar number of training sessions and union representations for my employers. Then there was family to visit and possibly a holiday, also by train. Fortunately court work, and training, was restricted to Norfolk, but much of this was also by train.

In contrast, this was the first summer visit from America of Helen, Adam and Emily, in which various family traditions were established: the visit to the beach; to Bressingham steam museum, visits from Stella, Emma and Stuart, granddad reading stories, and the daughters taking pictures; Adam and Helen mending things and the sun shining. The number of grandchildren has increased, but the traditions have remained the high point of the grandparents’ year.

A Quaker Bishop

Quaker testimony to equality means that a member of the House of Lords sitting in a Quaker Meeting is likely to be the last person the clerk will call to speak. Thus when Norfolk Quakers wanted someone to represent them in meetings with Catholic and Anglican bishops and other denomination leaders, everyone took a step backwards. But I agreed to go because I believed the churches need to work together, at this time when the world is falling apart (hopefully more effectively than the Lib Con government).

This new responsibility was far from onerous: having lunch with the Bishops a couple of times a year. Relaxed gatherings where we could all behave as equals because we are not responsible for managing each other. Also various services and meetings to arrange ecumenical gatherings and the churches’ tent at the Royal Norfolk Show. It was nice to find myself prayed for every couple of months in churches across the Diocese. It was fun to process up the aisles of cathedrals and sit in the best seats when a new bishop or dean was installed.

Denise had retired from her work at the chemist. She and I had a series of county holidays to Armstrong’s Northumberland: stately homes, country walks, grand gardens, local history and archaeology (2009 Hardy’s Dorset, 2010 Munro’s Ross-shire, 2011 Mary Webb’s Shropshire, 2012 Emma’s Kent and Kipling’s Sussex). I was Boswell to Denise’s Johnson and wrote amusing notes as if we were visiting the people whose lives had impacted on those counties. This was about capturing moments in time and following the question: “what is English?” from Defoe to Bill Bryson.

A number of old friends died quietly without telling me they were ill, as disturbing as suicide. Perhaps I should have taken warning from the deaths of Edmund Hilary (1919-2008) and Bobby Fisher (1943 -2008), which showed that maintaining is safer than chess!
Suddenly Old

Just before my sixtieth birthday, I had a bronchitic cough that made me feel ill for a month. I was not fully aware of the damage it had done till the following year. I felt well enough to be treated by Stella to a weekend away walking the peaks round Settle (perfect weather for steady absorption of enchanting landscape). Then a weekend with Emma which included an 18-hour visit to Paris by Eurostar – eight hours of which was mainly walking. After that my hip, damaged in childhood, went into decline, causing increasing pain, until a total hip replacement in 2013.

The lung infection also put a strain on my heart and I underwent many hospital tests to prove that organ was coping well with the general decline in health. I did less on the farm, since the death of cows and horses and now reduced the amount of winter coppicing and the amount of summer gardening. In 2011, I gained the services of a local farmer to cut most of my 100 acres of grass. In 2012, Denise paid to have some strimming done, and in 2013 my circular saw saw failed and I gave up that dangerous but fast method of logging, which had once cracked a rib but kept the fires burning for 27 years.

However, none of this made me less busy. I simply replaced physical labour with more committee work, more meetings, more writing, more travelling. I became a trustee of the House of Genesis: a Christian home for ex-prisoners, where they could be supported in a motherly way rather than the bureaucratic processing so prevalent in the secular behaviourist housing association for which I worked.

I took on more trade union training in employment law and union politics but failed to get work with employment tribunals or the Norfolk Police Authority (just before it was abolished!). The cuts in public services mirrored the cuts in the effectiveness of my own body. The country and I were declining together. The courts tried to save money by shutting courts in Swaffham, Cromer and Thetford: just as I tried to save my strength by cutting back on farm work. But just as I found myself busier than ever, so the courts became busier, more chaotic and prison numbers continued to rise, despite falling crime.

I presented a paper to Quakers in Criminal Justice (at Glenworth Quaker retreat in Cumbria).

Crime Community and Justice Group starting a mapping exercise of Quaker experience of injustice. The Norfolk Ecumenical Justice Group started meeting at the Bishop’s House in Norwich: a regular attempt to keep Christians in touch with each other and with changes in all aspects of the delivery of justice.

I realised that it often takes years for a new initiative to have an impact. My failed nursing career (1970) had come to fruition when I was “Matron” for Kent Social Services in 1978. My failure as a farm labourer in 1975 had proven invaluable when I took over Church Farm in 1986. My failure as a husband in 1978 has given way to 30 plus increasingly good years with Denise. Prison in 1992 (benefited from my years as a prison visitor) became the start of so much, but I took another ten years to really make use of that experience.

Grandsons

In 2009, Stella and Lee Calverley were married in the Quaker Meeting House at Ackworth School. The following year, Helen’s third child, and Denise’s third grandson, Andrew, was born at ten and a
half pounds and on 7/12/10 Stella provided my first genetic grandson, at half that weight, but he looked a Myhill and reminded me of my own dad. Stella’s maternal drive was at last met and it was clear that Ethan would be as spoilt by his mother as I was by mine. I also felt completed and remembered my grandfather’s enthusiasm for his only grandson.

My physical debility made me consider my own death: dad died at 74, mum at 51, so the average was 63, so I looked to my sixty-third birthday as my last; not in a morbid way, but with the hope that I would soon be allowed into a new life, closer to God. Given all the wonderful things that have happened to me so far, why should the future be any less wonderful?

Moments of Despair and Hope

January 2010 was the coldest since 1982, volcanic ash from Iceland grounded most planes, when BA’s Unite workers were not on strike. Twelve people were killed and 25 injured by a madman in Cumbria. General Motors went bankrupt. Haiti was all but destroyed by a massive earthquake and the Gulf of Mexico spoilt by BP’s oil spillage. And Britain was saddled with the hopeless Lib-Con alliance. My devoted dog, Brandy, died 11/12/10 (the same week as the birth of my grandson).

But there was hope. In August, 40 billionaires in the USA arranged to each give away half of their wealth to charity. In September, I was at a Quaker committee in Birmingham, that coincided with Pope Benedict’s visit to Cofton (dad’s parish) to beatify Cardinal Newman (although dad was more worthy).

In childhood I had no difficulty in accepting that there would be a life after death, just the same as the life I had, but with no pain or death (the fact that Hong Kong has no seasons may have helped). In my sixties I was sometimes so overwhelmed by compassion for the suffering of others, that I forgot myself entirely and again I could imagine an eternity of Being for others. At other times I would organise a celebration with family and friends, raise my expectations of personal happiness and the slightest thing would upset me to the point of tears. Hopefully I am learning to enjoy happiness when it is given, but otherwise to feel the mental pain around me, allowing the spiritual equivalent of adrenalin in to enable me to respond.

A Time to Speak and a Time for Silence

In 2010, I undertook training to be a bench chairman, but found repeating set pronouncements from a book did not sit well with the inspiration of the Light within. I wanted to advise and warn those being sentenced. I wanted the law to have some spirit, beyond the dead letter of our “Guidelines”. This worried my fellow magistrates, who feared I would go beyond propriety. Fortunately, in 2011, I was struck with a cough that damaged my throat and made speech almost impossible for some months, so I would have been useless at pronouncing sentence in court.

2011 was also a year set aside to visit a different church every Sunday. More than 52 different shades of Christianity and an orthodox synagogue were reviewed by my kindly praise on the Network Norwich website. I learnt so much from these different forms of worship that it was hard to settle back into my regular Quaker Meeting. I knew there was more to God than could ever be expressed in a single tradition.

In 2011, St Paul’s spent £40million on restoration and hosted the Occupy movement’s protest against the bankers. The movement was largely supported by the church, but it was not until I met the new
Archbishop, Justin Welby, in Norwich in spring 2013, that I became persuaded that the Church of England might prove effective in opposing the worst excesses of the debt-inciting bankers.

I was saddened by the death of Ken Russell (1927-2011) whose films had kept my Romanticism alive and by the death of Amy Winehouse at 27, whose talent showed through her addiction, giving hope for those I worked with, who have the same, mostly terminal, illness. Steve Jobs also died young (56) but I continue to believe that computers, despite their many wonderful uses, are generally destructive of human consciousness, reducing most of us to machine parts. VAT went up to 20% but when registration went online compulsorily, I ceased to claim back the small sums spent on my farming business. I refused to be forced to become computer adjunct.

**Distractions, Deaths, and Dialogue**

2012 was the year we deceived ourselves. The papers were filled with Jimmy Savile. George Galloway won Bradford for his “Respect” party. Bradley Wiggins won the Tour de France and Britain won 29 gold and 65 medals altogether at the London Olympics. To top it all the Diamond Jubilee!

All of this hid the government debt as it reached a trillion pounds. When will we again see great men like Eric Sykes, Clive Dunn and Patrick Moore, who all died around the 90 mark. Celebrity had become tawdry with people famous for being in the media, whilst real people of genius lead hidden lives, free of the honours system and public acclaim, for the Hyde Park crowd shout “Hosanna” one day and “Crucify” the next.

Three such good friends died in car crashes. Piers Peach was a young Quaker osteopath and musician. His mother, Rosemary, had supported us through the injustice of ’92. Jo Sisley had provided similar support: her daughter Jenny also died in a head-on collision. John Miller, a retired priest and Quaker was always enthusiastic about my Bible study groups and ministry. These deaths reminded me how much more dangerous the motor car is than psychosis, more dangerous than drink and drugs (not involved in any of these accidents). You are far more likely to be injured by a car than assaulted in the street. Children are more at risk from traffic than from “strangers”. Sudden deaths remind us to “look our last on all things lovely every hour” (Walter de la Mare). Carpe Diem (seize the day).

What then can I say in defence of my years of committee work? Work with QPSW led to my leading the union into involvement with South African unions; CCJG led to my involvement with Corston and Stonham’s involvement with alternatives to prison for women; and domestic violence became a specialism for me in court and at work. But more important, I learnt to concentrate on people and the language of a committee, rather than being distracted by the agenda. I have met people of huge drive and intelligence, generosity and integrity, whom I would not otherwise have got to know. I have named only a few of the hundreds of fascinating people I have met though Quaker and church committees, through union, court and hostel. Clearly the personal conversations in the retiring room with other magistrates are quite different from the professional discussions with lads in the hostel, but my “insatiable curiosity” meant that each was the basis for a mini-biography, a socio-psychological analysis, a discovery of spiritual depth and slither of genius.

**Déjà vu – my Time machine**

Why then do I feel it is time to bring all this business to an end? Since my hip replacement operation in March 2013, I have felt physically better than at any time since 2008. I have never been more in demand for committees, union work and family bench. I feel respected at work and on the bench and could easily continue till 2018.
Quite simply I feel called to lay these things down, “in my prime”, so that I can be more open to the moving of the Spirit. I will no longer be able to say: “I cannot do that because I have a meeting on that day, or I am in court, or representing a client, or doing my night shift.” The busyness will be at an end and if I appear idle to those who have known me these last ten years, they should not be misled by appearances. I will go where God sends me, allow for spontaneity and surprises. Follow my leadings.

Whilst I seek to de-clutter my life of the hundreds of thousands of pages of committee minutes, justices’ guidelines, training materials and notes, case notes, reports from organisations and government departments, research findings and legal textbooks; my family are all taking up new challenges.

After four years working for the health service and nearly two years of temping, Emma started a new career with Hitachi high speed rail, this year. Lee has just gained a new job with an international school, taking Stella and Ethan to the Hague. Even Denise is getting involved with the local church council, thanks to our wonderful friends Cathy and Peter Nichols, with their enthusiasm for Hethel. They have taken the mantel of Jo Sisley in just the way that Denise took on much of Dolly Wrafter’s persona.

I am returning to the awe of childhood, to the dreamer that I was; to saying what comes into my mouth, as I believe great grandfather would have done in 1842.

**Charades – Film, Book**

I certainly see my love for my two wives through the film of Dr Zhivago. “The personal is political” as Strelnikov points out and we should all beware the Rod Steiger characters, who prove useful regardless of the ideology in power. My déjà vu experiences make “Groundhog Day” a top film for me, along with “Sixth Sense” and “The Others”. “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” is a quick route to understanding my long opposition to established psychiatry. Science fiction remains my favourite type of film because it enables me to think about life in a detached way. Thus “the force” in Star Wars is closer to what many Quakers understand as “The Light”. The “Time Travellers Wife” shows the romantic side of having a partner who suffers mental distress or is simply a dreamer like me.

Like Pip, I was a child with “Great Expectations”. Like Pierre, I have blundered through ballrooms and battles in search for truth. Like Alyosha faith is, to me, blindingly obvious, even when my mind is as complicated as his brother Ivan Karamazov. Like Levin in “Anna Karenina” I have laboured enthusiastically on the land.

**Pan-Tribalism**

I have come to belong to so many diverse tribes, that my ideal low density social network of close ties is fast becoming reality. I am anthropologist, social psychologist, philosopher of consciousness, critic of behaviourists, follower of Darwin: but I am also born-again Christian, working class trade unionist, advocate for those with mental distress. I am teacher, matron, prison chaplain and magistrate; but I am also ex-prisoner, protester, campaigner and rebel. I am rather Chinese and certainly ex-colonial, with strong Scottish and Yorkshire ties; yet I am also four centuries’ Norfolk, and Anglian to the core. I adore classical music; but feel equally at home at a punk gig. I am interested in all kinds of people; but could never identify myself as an atheist, materialist, bureaucrat, capitalist, state socialist, Muslim, or indie/house music lover. There are still some tribes I cannot understand, whose tents I do not enter, but they are few and far between.
One way of presenting my life would be as a series of traumas, illness, accident, education and employment setbacks, personal relations problems and philosophical doubts. “What does not kill me, makes me stronger”: “Every crisis is an opportunity”. These experiences provide me with empathy for those suffering mental distress and confidence that they can reach a deeper reality than more fortunate folk. Perhaps the mad and bad are my tribe?

**Intellectual?**

I still delight in reading: Einstein and Eliot; Wittgenstein and Proust; but it is much harder to find a stimulating conversation on arcane matters. Philip is more interested in the visual (but for me art must be beautiful), Stephen and Justin in the spirit world, and Harry in espionage (but then I believed in Churchill and the inner voice). Nor do I feel the absence of such talk, for I am more interested in the unbidden thought, the waking dream, than details of complex theories.

I am increasingly drawn to the mystical writers: Blake, Coleridge, Conan Doyle, Cowper Powys, Du Mauriers, Emily Bronte; to poetic language and surreal description. I now see the funny side of great ideas: Hasek and the Goons, Beiderbecke Tapes and Alan Bennett, Coward, Kaye and Wilde are lenses through which the absurd pretensions of those administering the collapse of civilisation may be enjoyed.

I have curbed my eccentricity these past ten years, in order to be accepted. I no longer feel the need to wear pink jeans at a formal social gathering, but still enjoy wearing a suit at a political protest.

The beard remains and I have a yearning for the dinner jacket, rolled umbrella and sandals; but sartorial attire is now an indulgence rather than a necessity. People generally are so shabbily dressed most of the time that any effort makes you stand out. I still love the busy city centre, but only because I choose to be there.

**Who’s Service is Perfect Freedom**

Anarchist pacifist from my early teens, thanks to “The War Game”, B Russell, Kropotkin, Proudhon and Angel Alley. I still believe in the politics of direct action, conscientious objection, vigils and “speaking Truth to Power”. People, left to themselves, will seek harmony and co-operation with others, as long as those who would organise and lead them can be kept from the drug of power. This is the role of the Taoist Sage.

But beyond freedom from and freedom to, lies “that peace which the world cannot give”, that comes when we submit to the higher power of love and compassion, the Light within, that leads us away from what we want to what we need, to goodness, truth and joy; especially in times of pain and tragedy.

I no longer look for justice in this world, nor believe that law can ever do more than disguise social inequality in defence of privilege. I am grateful to have been the victim of injustice. Without this experience I might have become part of the Establishment.

My train and bus journeys have led to really deep conversations, which reminded me of my hitchhiking days. Then I used what I learnt for novels and social psychology writing. Now it has become an opportunity for soul to speak to soul. These encounters with strangers remind us of our common
humanity and allow God to direct. How did the girl from De Montfort University get on in Eden California? How did the English teacher cope with retirement?

**What the Farm means to me Now**

It has become my access to the Tao: the detachment from the world that enables me to appreciate the world. I am at one here with the past, the family ghosts, the romance of history in so much of my reading. At one with nature that I first sensed in Fred Kitchen’s “Brother to the Ox”. My great white cows have gone ahead of me and like Captain Ahab, I follow where they lead, through veganism, through Faber’s minute study of insects and Keeble Martin’s flowers. Through the “sans everything” of Sam Beckett’s characters. I have so absorbed the spirit of the place that we are one, even if I cease to live here. This had been my “Little Gidding”, my “Heart of Darkness”, my “Island”, my “moment in the rose garden”, my Eden, my déjà fu, heroic adventure, “Xanadu”, “Varykino”.

As Cathy says in “Wuthering Heights”: “I am Hethel” (but also Hong Kong and Hull, etc.). “I am a part of all that I have known” Tennyson.

These days Piglet (Denise) and Pooh (I) see less of Tigger (London) and Kanga and Roo (Holland), and hear from Rabbit and Owl by email (USA). But Christopher Robin has not abandoned us and we will all be reunited one day.