

## Clegg News 2005



Way below me, 198 stairs down, a man is sweeping up the Red Sea. He was sweeping up the sea when I got up this morning and he is still sweeping it up now as the sun plops into it. That is what he is employed to do. As fast as he sweeps it up more splashes into his little 'family' (ie, women allowed) restaurant area. Pity Moses did not leave instructions.

I'm starting this letter sitting on the 9th floor of a hotel overlooking the Red Sea. This may sound romantic but it's not the word that immediately springs to mind when you visit Al-Hodeidah unless you are particularly attracted to discarded polythene bags and feral cats. But that's only one side of the coin; I'm here on the Yemeni Red Sea coast because I have been asked to help organise a workshop on mathematics and science teaching not many kilometers from Zabeed, one of the epicentres of mathematical civilisation where it is said *al-jabr* was first invented.

It is a humbling privilege, and taking part in any workshop with Yemenis is exhilarating and rewarding. And remarkably easy; you just light the blue touch paper, quickly retire to a safe corner, and sit back and enjoy it.

It is inevitable, working on an education programme in Yemen, that the issue of the proper place of women looms large, Yemen being at the bottom of the 4th division in all such matters. In earlier visits we were an all-male team and, as such, we had few problems with the daily issues of life, like getting food in a cafe. But this time the moment I entered the cafe with Dede in our team, it was clear that we were not going to be allowed to sit with everyone else. We were very quickly shown around the back to a little cubicle where she could eat without upsetting all the male clientele.

It all took me back to another day and another world in a little dorp called Beth-

lehem (South Africa) some twenty five years ago when we had a similar experience when our multiracial family entered a cafe there and it was quickly made clear by the large lady behind the counter that she would prefer we were elsewhere. Jane, my wife, asked if perhaps they had a stable for us but the request was lost on her. We didn't end up somewhere else because Jane had an interesting way of adding, like Microsoft Word, a whole lot of unsaid code in the last paragraph mark of whatever she said. In this case the code stated that if we could not sit down and have a cup of tea things would happen that would frighten the horses.

Between Al-Hodeidah and the capital, Sana'a, is a range of mountains, the highest in the middle east. In summer there, the rain falls and an amazing 95% of it, they say, is captured by the terraces which stripe most the steep hillsides from the peaks to the valley bottom, kilome-

tres below in the haze. The Yemenis live, not in the valleys but on the peaks and pinnacles in their vertically constructed villages.

On one visit, led by Scott, an arabic-speaking American running the project at that end, we spent a brief half-day walking in these spectacular hills and staying at a Yemeni hotel eating Yemeni food to the sound of Yemeni lute music.

Earlier in the year we held a workshop at Dhamar University, north of Sana'a. For this we were assigned a 24-hour security guard called Ali, in full fatigues together with his Kalashnikov. This was because if we got kidnapped and ransomed, apparently until recently a routine procedure for foreigners, the senior university staff would have been locked up and they were taking no risks. Ali accompanied us everywhere, joining us for breakfast in the nearby cafe, where they did our egg and



Wherever there is a good hilltop, the Yemenis build a house on it. This is about 3000m up

beans in the traditional Yemeni fashion with a flamethrower in which the omelette is pyrolysed for 10 seconds in the flame, quickly flipped and then given another 5 seconds. At the end of the workshop Ali got a certificate along with all the other participants.



In March, I acquired a biokineticist. Well, she is not exactly my personal biokineticist as I share her with many others. She is about sixteen years old (though you can never tell with Afrikaners) and blonde (though you can never tell with Afrikaners) and I pay her money to give me silly things to do. One of which is standing on one foot on the bed. It is good for the foot, she says, but she did not say which one. Picking up peanuts with my toes was another. (Though not the two activities simultaneously, I was advised)

The first silly thing she gave me to do, however, was to spend five minutes riding nowhere on a bicycle. This bicycle has a little screen in front of me which told me my energy output in calories and my power output in watts (must be American-made). Having nothing to do except study these things I noted that my power output was about 80 watts which, it struck me, could not be much more than the power output of my daughter's hamster as it ran around the living room inside its transparent hamster ball (before it died). My biokineticist was clearly taking no risks.

I glanced at the man next to me who was walking very fast getting nowhere. I recognised him as the former Prime Minister. It occurred to me that walking fast and getting nowhere was a particularly conspicuous feature of Namibian politics so I

should not be surprised. I share my biokineticist with a former Prime Minister.

I was then introduced to the esoteric experience of standing on a stationary football and making it move around. After that the excitement mounted as I was shown all sorts of interesting things that you could do with a bit of old innertube. And finally the ultimate; leaning against a wall. I have to lean against a wall for two lots of 30 seconds per day, three days a week. It is, so they say, very good for walls. Watch this space for progress reports.

My biokineticist has deep brown African eyes.



It is usual in these kinds of documents to report on all the holidays taken during the year. You will be relieved, therefore, to hear, that I have not had any (unless you count a week of kissing in South Africa as a holiday - more below) because of the unrelenting pressure of work that always takes me twice as long as estimated (and charged for). So, as trial, I set up the landrover as a mobile office and three hours later was sitting in the shade of a huge granite boulder, typing a training manual for UNESCO in the middle of the Erongo hills listening to the combined voices of the Tredegar and Rhos male voice choirs singing 'Cwm Rhondda'. ('He's been in Africa too long', I hear you say.) I recently got a lot of new essential features for camping wild here in Namibia, one of which is a neat little inverter that converts the camping battery's output to 240v AC so that I can simultaneously type UNESCO documents and listen to the sound of Wales on the iBook.



ACTcc Erongo office

In the bush you are watched all the time. By little things and by big things. Mostly they stay silent and just look. Sometimes you spot them, most times you don't. The pair of Klipspringer was easy to spot because the male made noise like a duck and rose vertically twice his height onto the top of a boulder, the better protect his lifelong spouse. Classic Disney pose, feet close together. The guidebook says that the Klipspringer is a small antelope that has rubber suckers in place of feet and that its fur is hollow like quills so that if it falls, it bounces. It has big dark African eyes.

Not all of the animals are watching, however. One of the largest antelopes in the Erongos, the oryx, probably has no natural predators around here as there are, so I'm told, no lions. And so when, on a ramble, I stumbled across him sleeping under a tree and he leapt to his feet we were both equally taken aback. Facing me at 3 metres, he clearly had two choices, turn

and retreat or run me through with one of his long straight pointed horns. (The guidebooks say that a cornered oryx is an animal to be avoided. Some add it has a perfect understanding of where in your body are your soft vital organs.)

So I had did the Namibian thing; I hung around and waited while a decision was made. After much thought, he turned and crashed silently off through the bush. I returned unpunctured to the office.

It was a thirsty walk. I took with me a litre of water freshly drawn from the new tank installed behind the rear wheel of the Landrover. It was the first time I had tested the tank and realised that I perhaps should have filled and drained it a few times. But when you are thirsty its surprising how quickly you get used to the taste of silicone. Returning to the office I realised that I had to face the tedium



Many species in the Erongos are not in the books; they have evolved in their own way. Like the rather surprising black Mongoose. This is the local variant of the Mountain Chat - now Mountain Wheatear - which everywhere else has a white or grey cap

of yet another perfect Namibian sunset over the desert, so I thought it wise to resist the temptation to drink to much silicone water in case I was not able to do justice to the beer necessary to make the sunset bearable. Its a struggle but one eventually gets used to privations of life in the tropics.

It was a very successful experiment, not because the UNESCO thing was written, but because I ceased to worry that it



wasn't. Instead I spotted a bird that was not in Roberts and a black mongoose that was not in any of the books either. This being a family newsletter it is inappropriate to include the full details of the Erongo experiment but for those who have got this far and still thirst for more on *dassie* shit, leonine halitosis or the amazing foreplay of the Red-breasted Korhaan and suchlike, its all there on [www.act.com.na/namiblog/erongos.html](http://www.act.com.na/namiblog/erongos.html). Or something like that.



You can't get music CDs in Namibia so when I'm back in England I often go to Taunton where Gillian Grieg runs the best sheet and recorded music shop in the west of England. My CD collection is now very considerable not because it is based on what I like but because it is based on what is in Gillian's reduced-to-clear boxes.

When I called in this year I was welcomed like the prodigal son. 'Mr Namibia' she said 'I haven't seen you for a long time' (Gillian has long solved the forgetting name problem by inventing her own). I looked apologetic and explained that the Americans, as part of their efforts to bring sweetness and light to us all, instituted a digital radio channel via the Worldspace satellite called *Maestro* ('the channel where Beethoven lives'). For a while I used it instead of listening to my CDs as it was cheaper. However, two problems developed.

The first was that they appeared to have permission to play only one CD, Mussorgski's 'Night on a Bare Mountain' which saturates before you have heard in the first time never mind *ad nauseam*. The second problem was that after a year or so they decided that Maestro should be encoded and that we should have to pay for our nights on bare mountains.

So this year I returned to Gillian's reject box.

Now, the really disturbing thing about Gillian's reject box is that it dates you. These days it contains CDs by all those people who, in my era, were the most popular artists;

Emma Kirkby and Anthony Rooley/Andrew Parrott. Even Evelyn Tubb was in there. Evelyn. My thoughts drifted back to that pub, 'The Bridge', at Grinton-on-Swale in the Yorkshire Dales, so many years ago.

I can't remember the precise date. It was about a quarter of a century ago. I was in the One-stop-shop at Reeth buying a few provisions. I was with wife Jane and the children and the Stackhouses (Glynne Stackhouse, a university contemporary, was British Council director in Botswana and associate conductor of the Gaborone Orchestra and Chorus. No less). We came out of the shop (now shoppe) to notice that a group called the Consort of Musicke was singing the Cries of London on Reeth Green. It was a trailer, we later discovered, for the Ockeghem Requiem (the



In March we organised an expedition to Spitzkoppe, just south of the Erongos, to look for Easter eggs

earliest surviving setting of the Requiem so we were told) that was to be performed that night in Grinton Church, just a mile or so down river and for which tickets were apparently not going too well among the Dales shepherding community.

As it happened, one of the lead singers at the Grinton gig was Emma Kirkby, a Somerset lass that was at university with me but whom I had never met but who was an old friend of Glynne's. She introduced me to Anthony Rooley who was in charge. Anthony latched on to my name Clegg. 'Are you related to the former director of education for the West Riding?' He went on to explain that he was a washboard player in a skiffle group in Harrogate (or somewhere) and my father personally interviewed him, not because of his academic success but because of his musical ability, and he was given a County Major Award to study music. He subsequently founded the Consort of Musicke, dedicated to unearthing, editing and recording all the lost glorious music of the golden age of English music, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

And Evelyn? She was the young raven-haired second soprano soloist in the Requiem, singing some duets with Emma. She had a wonderful voice; a young Emma. We chatted in the bar of the Bridge after the Requiem; that is to say, I gazed into her deep brown African(-like) eyes. 25 years ago. Yesterday there they were, the same eyes, smiling up at me from Gillian's sale box.



A decoction from its roots is good for hemorrhoids (important these days), a poultice of its leaves will cure cattle of

blindness, its flowerbuds, when pickled in vinegar can be used as capers, cattle feed on it during droughts and a fine one where I walk regularly smells strongly of the Wildebeest that use it as a rubbing post. And the Afrikaners make coffee from its roots, but then the Afrikaners make coffee out of pretty well anything. Its the *Witgat* tree ('white bottom\*') and you must not cut it down, they say, or your calves will be only bull calves. There is one in the garden.



if you chop it down all your calves will be bull calves. So you build the fence around it.

A few feet from each other we also have two other indigenous trees, the *Knoppiesboontjieboom* and the *Klokkiesboontjieboom*, which are two entirely different species. One, linguists will recognise, has knobs on and the other, bells\*\*. The *Knoppiesboontjieboom* is also known as the *Maerua* which gives its name to the area in which we live.

In spring, that is to say, autumn, our *Maerua* is covered with delicate flowers with extraordinary long stamens and is the larder of two pairs of tiny dusky sunbirds who can tolerate neither us nor each other. One of them has paroxysms of irritation if I walk through the livingroom when he happens to be in there explor-

ing the potted *Ficus* for insects. Later the *Maerua* will be the larder of millions of caterpillars of a small white butterfly which will, in just a few days, turn every one of its leaves into slimy green shit and then, with no leaves left, die of hunger and fall off. Only then can our *Maerua* relax and start a life.

Part 2 of this absorbing series, entitled 'Composting in the tropics', can be found at [www.act.com.na](http://www.act.com.na).

\*'gat' in Afrikaans means 'anus' but any literal translation from Afrikaans is a dangerous business because it's a language where almost every word has almost any meaning. It all depends on context

\*\* The *Fluitjiesboontjieboom* is a tree that does not yet exist.



The southernmost tip of South Africa has two significant ecological features. The first is that it has its own unique biome called *Fynbos* and the second is that it is inhabited by a large number of retired Ooms and Tannies who live in rows of houses overlooking the sea, most of whom are related one way or another to Santjie. This year one of them was 80 and it was decided that I should accompany her to the party be introduced to them all at one go. Jumping in at the deep end.



Its the last straw that breaks the Camel-horn's back. (I've been looking for a picture for this caption for years)



To get to the Cape from where I live is quite simple; you just turn left and go straight, (very straight) and 20 hours later you are there.

We broke the journey twice, the first time at a place called Augrabies, just over the border, where the Orange river, flowing through semi-desert country disappears into a 200m deep ravine at the rate of 200m<sup>3</sup> per second, releasing about one sixth the power required to drive Namibia. In the wet season the flow can reach 50 times this but these days it's controlled by large dams upstream. As this is a hot semi-desert area with good irrigation water they make raisins. By the tonne. In fact anything anyone can grow, the people around here hang up and dry; we were very taken with the mango, sweet tasting strips of leather.

From the Orange we crossed the Karoo. Not a great deal happens in the Karoo. Santjie was brought up there but lit-

Social Weaverbirds nest everywhere in southern Namibia. They are sparrow-sized birds that build immense condominiums in trees adding to them each year until the tree falls over under the weight.



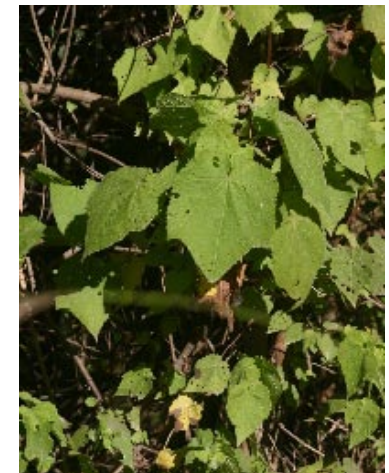
A 180 degree pan of the Great Karoo. The exciting bit is the distant windmill which cannot be seen on the left.

tle of significance has happened since. We stayed a night with her stepmother in an incongruously named place called Aberdeen, before crossing the mountains to brave the embraces of the ooms and tannies.

The fynbos biome on the South Coast is a unique one. Unlike the rest of Africa, the rain falls in winter which means that plants have adapted to a hot dry summer when they have to conserve moisture. One thing that is immediately obvious when you get there is that the fynbos provides the basis for much of the British herbaceous border, from the Christmas Roses to Red Hot Pokers to Gladioli. Wherever I looked there was something from my mother's garden. And how infinitely more delicate and attractive - and scented - are the originals than the genetically over-selected garden versions. A small part of the fynbos area is a World Heritage Site; all the rest is being systematically destroyed by the South Africans who are replacing it all with end-to-end 'Golf Estates', a mechanism for legally setting up exclusive gated housing estates in which nothing is allowed to grow without permission and most that is allowed, is non-native grass.

In the old West Riding they became known as 'Sir Alecs' (as in 'Go and water Sir

Alec'). When the plant that my father grew in the house (and my mother still grows) reached the ceiling he took a cutting and passed the big one to one of the West Riding primary schools. I grew up with the plant and also grew it in my school labs when I was a teacher, mainly because it had a flower that is touch sensitive. If you touch the stamens they move delicately and gently wipe pollen all over you. Walking down a path near the estuary of the Storms River I realised that the steep valley sides were covered with them - *Sparmannia africana* - another fynbos endemic species.



*Sparmannia africana* in the wild

The area around the mouth of the Storms and Blaukrans rivers, fortunately, is protected. These two rivers have cut vertically sided ravines through the rocks, at some places only a few metres wide and



hundreds deep. The rivers are pristine, the forest trees covered with long racemes of filamentous lichens as old as the Yellowwoods and Ironwoods on which they grew. And the place was full of birds, including the rare Knysna Lourie, a sort of pink and

purple parrot, now renamed, along with many other species in an act of ornithological imperialism thrust on the south by the north, as the Knysna Turacao. We also spotted a Knysna warbler; even rarer but forgettably dull.



One of many out-of-focus shots of Knysna's tarted-up version of the Go-away bird

A Manchester-made 4-8-2 hauling the regular commuter+tourist train along the coast railway



The forest around Knysna is a protected area. It contains a huge variety of endemic plants such as magnificent old hardwoods like Ironwood and Yellowwood and ancient Cycads, tens of metres high. Here, ancient filamentous lichen hangs from an old Yellowwood,



The Blaukrans - pristine water at the bottom of a deep ravine

One other new country this year, the jackpot, Nigeria, one fifth of Africa. These country visits always involve a besuited courtesy visit to the Minister. The gist of the brief dialogue, or rather monologue, is always the same (a) we (ie they) have made a few mistakes in the past but (b) things are different now he is in power and then (c) please make sure you (ie we) organise universal secondary education by the middle of next week.

In Nigeria, however, the lady minister had more constructive ideas. Firstly, she was worried about misleading information corrupting Nigeria's children and she wanted us to make sure that we correct all the textbooks dealing with chicken rearing. In northern Nigeria, she explained at great length, contrary to what the books say, you dont need an incubator, you just leave the eggs hanging around and they incubate themselves.

Our visit to the Minister was the day after Kofi Annan had demonstrated the \$100 wind-up labtop computer that some Americans had invented to save the world (he broke the handle off). She wanted all little Nigerians to have one to use in their spare time when they were not incubating chicken eggs, to prevent them, as she explained, 'drifting off into a life of street crime'.

And of course she is right; personal laptops would indeed be the ideal tool for budding Nigerian criminals. This was a week or two after the Ig Nobel prize for literature had been awarded to, as the citation explained, 'The Internet entrepreneurs of Nigeria, for creating and then using e-mail to distribute a bold series of short stories, thus introducing millions

of readers to a cast of rich characters - General Sani Abacha, Mrs. Mariam Sanni Abacha, Barrister Jon A Mbeki Esq., and others - each of whom requires just a small amount of expense money so as to obtain access to the great wealth to which they are entitled and which they would like to share with the kind person who assists them.'

The guidebooks are surprisingly silent on the Elephant bar in Abuja Sheraton. And in a letter such as this, so indeed must be I. Suffice to say I survived reasonably intact to write this. It was not on the shoulder that I was tapped when the words 'watis yo roomnammer?' were whispered simultaneously in both ears as I braved the crush on the way out. 'No thanks, I'm English' I hastily explained. A friend called it Russian roulette with five chambers loaded.

In July I was briefly in England. Down Somerset way the Glastonbury Festival had started which probably accounted for the bad weather we flew into. Each year 100 000 people from the towns think it's neat to wade up to their knees in Somerset mud. Generally regarded as among the World's finest, Somerset mud has a thick yellowish colour and sticks to all the parts not often reached by ordinary mud. That week the mud parted and up to the podium strode Saint Bob; 'Say after me, 'MAKE POVERTY HISTORY''. Many of them got it right first time.

Thanks to St Bob, Africa was relieved of 50 000 000 000 dollars of debt; which sounds quite a lot of zeros until you realise that its less than half what the US federal treasury is spending on tidying up New Orleans. And Switzerland has even

made a small *ex-gratia* payment to Nigeria in gratitude for the billions laundered through its banks by past presidents. (As yet there has been no similar gesture from British banks.)

Elsewhere at least two of Mr Blair's Commission for Africa team, having published their report, returned home to lock up or shoot their opposition leaders. Here in Namibia the corruption and sleaze of the Nujoma years is surfacing through the courts and I can buy dumped Kerrygold butter in Windhoek at £1.50 for 500g (inc 18% VAT), the dumping price carefully calculated to keep the local market well suppressed. In other words, business as usual in Africa. Great work Bob, but don't hold your breath.



Back in England, Eileen increased her family of SLO\* (Dominic) + son (Andrew) + hamster by the addition of 24 pet ants in their own self-contained transparent ant environment (£16.99 rrp). They apparently should have dug tunnels and indulged in other innocuous ant-like behaviour but it appears they just sat around and ate each other and then the five remaining ones escaped. Eileen lives in Southport which may or may not be a contributory factor.

Andrew, now 6, is getting increasingly adept at not doing what Eileen tells him to do. His latest ploy is to respond to the call for a bath by saying 'No A'm skypin' grandad'. He not only skypes, he

googles, sometimes simultaneously; while skyping me on one occasion he googled, a little to his amazement, a whole screen full of rhinos.

Eileen, finding that a doctorate in neolithic Jordanian rubbish was not opening many interesting doors, has embarked on a Dip Ed and will, next year become a fifth generation teacher. Dan has moved back into the house in Somerset where he is a first, second and third generation Orange phone salesperson.

Sadly, my mother, earlier this month, had a colon cancer removed. She is now out of hospital and learning to manage without a lot of internal bits and pieces and with some additional external ones. Not that easy at 89.

A happy 2006 to everyone.



\*TLAs (three letter acronyms) are a key component of WorldBankSpeak, a language that I'm currently working on. The TLA, SLO (spouse-like object) was recently nominated neologism of the year.