

# Clegg News 2006



Hard at work on the new house.  
Yesterday he murdered his first wife's children

Yet another perfect November day in Namibia. The first rains have managed to squeeze a bit through and so the Knoppiesboontjieboom in the garden is in full bloom and there is even a virgin flower on the young Klokkesboontjieboom. What more could you wish for?

The Knoppiesboontjieboom is a boom that has seeds that are boontjie-shaped but with little knoppies on, hence its name; with Afrikaans you always know where you are. The English name is Maerua and it is a very common tree in this part of Windhoek, so much so that the huge out-of-town shopping centre that they have just built on our doorstep is called The Maerua Lifestyle Centre, no less. When I suggest that it would sound more homely if it was changed to the Knoppiesboontjieboom Lifestyle Centre I get that blank 'dont worry just keep taking the pills' look that as I get older I find increasingly common.

Our knoppies are legendary among the local bird population which come from far and wide. Because of this, we bought the new edition of Roberts' 'Birds of Southern Africa', all 1300 pages and 5kg of it. (Actually I bought a copy for Santjie and she bought a copy for me, in the same shop within 20 minutes of each other - £160 in all). Despite the 1300 pages, none of the birds that visit our garden is ever in Roberts. I'm told, however, that this is actually a general principle; no bird that you see is ever in a bird book.

This year, infanticide is a significant element of the general avian mayhem outside. Last year there was only one masked weaver and he was in disgrace because he poked out the eyes of a chameleon who was hanging around his tree. This year the masked weavers have built several sub-

urbs in the Monkeythorn, eight males now, each marketing about four nests apiece. As it is pretty obvious (from our observations) that there is no guarantee at all that any of the female occupants is gestating the builder's genes, suspicion frequently mounts and when the nests are full of chicks the males indulge in a frenzy of unweaving. My first task each morning is to help any remaining whimpering chicks on to their next existence.



We have not yet had any of these in the garden, probably because neither of us is sufficiently dead. (Etosha National Park roadside. November)

A new bird in the garden this year is the weeje-weeje bird which sits every evening, always on the other side of the knoppiesboontjieboom and says weeje-weeje extremely loudly

to his wife, who answers from the other side of the garden with an gently rising 'yes dear'. We have negatively identified it as the Cinnamon-breasted warbler (ie, it is not any of the other birds in Roberts) several hundred kilometres north of its usual stomping ground attracted, no doubt, by our knoppies.



The biggest event of the year in Windhoek was in January when they announced that they were going to pull the plug out of Avis dam which because of the exceptional rains, was getting a bit full. It's a small lake to the east of Windhoek that holds back a lot of silt and a bit of water which once supplied the town. But it has long since been too small to be of much use. Only in the last few years has it once again held water and the water birds, including a pair of Fish Eagles, have returned. Today it has a good population of cormorants, herons, pelicans and darters.

The announcement of the plug-pulling needs some contextualising. Most Europeans and Americans know what bridges are for, they are to stand on to look down into the lazy flowing water below, at the trees and the flowers on the bank, at the kingfishers and the wagtails and the dippers hopping around on the rocks, at the silent fish, now and again reflecting the sun. In Namibia however, if you look over a bridge, what you see is a parched riverbed of sand and stones and bits of beached plastic. And also houses, for Namibians have a curious habit of building their houses in, or close to, these apparently innocuous empty channels all set about with acacia trees. There are no flowing rivers anywhere in the country except those on the north and south borders.

When it rains – often several centimetres at one short go – these parched channels, just for a few minutes, turn into sudden surges. The channel is cleansed of everything, soil, rubbish, cars, trees. And houses. So Namibians get quite excited about rivers with water in them, and pulling the Avis plug for the first time in years was a major event.



The Afrikaner nuclear family consists of one bakkie<sup>1</sup>, two dogs, three children and a braai. So this morning, while waiting for the unplugging, heavy-duty cholesterol brunches

were being braaied from every bakkie back in the carpark. Groups with large coolboxes were positioning themselves at either side of the sluice race; bridges downstream were being occupied two or three deep; canoeists were preparing themselves for the first whitewater opportunity in Windhoek for decades. When it did come down it was not exactly a torrent but then it flows over several drifts in town that would easily be washed away if they overdid it (and they were). But dogs plunged into it dragging their owners with them. Grown men rolled up their shorts and paddled. The lead canoeist was a young woman expertly negotiating the rapids and raising a cheer at each bridge. And a little girl dressed in her best fairy costume dabbled a delicate toe.

To really understand water you have to live in a desert.



I did not go into the desert so much this year. In some part this was due to the fact that it was no longer there.

Instead there is an uninterrupted parkland of silver grass and, on the edges of the now grassed dunes, fairy circles had appeared of the kind that pock the whole coast from Angola right down through South Africa, their origins a mystery. We enjoyed the rock pools of the Uob, a normally parched valley which this year had had a Thames-size continuous flow for 53 days. The Uob is a tributary of the Kuiseb which this year broke through to the sea at Walvis bay, carrying with it out into the South Atlantic most of central Namibia's soil and the Walvis Bay water purification plant. We shared the pools with frogs and terrapins who spent a brief week or two frantically breeding before sinking back into many years sleep underneath the riverbeds before the next chance arises. An odd life but not, I suppose, unpleasant.

Its a curious feeling, lying under a Landrover having just heard your back snap, wondering how you are going to get yourself vertical again. Vertical I did eventually get but bending down to unscrew tight wheelnuts however was not on. Fortunately we had Sebastian with us. Sebastian was a young German who was here on his honeymoon and so unscrewing was but a minor deviation from his day-to-day activities. The new jack that the Afrikaner had given me as a birthday present worked a treat and Sebastian had the spare on in not time. For him, it was good training as he had to repeat it twice more over the weekend.

At Solitaire the puncture man removed a 3 inch bolt from my tyre and patched it. Solitaire is in the middle of the desert; it used to be an old trading post visited a few times a week by the farmers and anyone else mad enough to get there. It has always been known for the excellence of its bread and for the skill of the puncture man. It was also the local telephone exchange and the lady in the trading post was the operator diverting the calls to any one of six lines. I remember once visiting there and there was an injured horned adder, a local endangered desert species, being nursed back to health by the 7 year old son



Namib Desert, 2006

of the owner; it was in a glass herbarium on the counter with an advisory note about the possible consequences of you putting your hand in it (gangrene and amputation). But that was 15 years and a world ago. Now it's mains electricity, cell phones, Solitaire Lodge where the schoolroom used to be, and noisy Italian tourists enjoying Real Africa.

We camped in the dry Tsauchab riverbed, a set of camp sites under immense ancient fig trees. Afrikaners think it's neat to build things in hollow trees; up in the north there is a Baobab that doubles as a post-office but here, a hollow fig was converted into a bathroom.

We were on our way to Sossusvlei which used to be a very special oasis in the desert where the Tsauchab sinks below the pristine dunes, a place of silence and solitude and ancient Camelthorns. But now it's a massive theme

park where Italian tourists scream as their hired drivers compete with each other in a 4x4 dune scramble. Most sacred of all is the Dead Vlei a dune or two's walk away and which marks an older path of the Tsauchab where centuries, probably millennia, ago large camelthorns grew. Now long dead their skeletons remain there, natural sculptures waiting for the early-morning photographers or for the Italians to sit on them with their lunch packs. This is Namibia's ancient cathedral, unique and irreplaceable, each day crumbling more under the pressure of irreverent tourism. Would they, I wonder, allow Namibians, in return, to sit on the High Alter in Milan, and eat their fish and chips leaning back against the Last Supper.

Come and see the Dead Vlei soon; it has survived a millennium but it will not be there in a decade.



Ficus en-suite



A Dead Vlei sculpture



Grassed dunes and fairy circles



The key element of a good long drop is the view. (air freshener was kindly provided)



A repainted and rehoused Martin Luther, christened after his death in 1896 because he got 0.5 km from Swakopmund, took one look at the desert and expired, uttering with his last puff; 'Hier stehe ich'

not know why but he had to stop her. The eyes of the world were on the country those weeks but most Namibians had little clue what they were looking at.



It was my second time in Dhamar; a noisy active town in the high southern plateau of Yemen. We were, as usual running a workshop for the three Universities. One of the chemists had sent his apologies as he was running for President in the elections the next week. He was running as a backup opposition candidate just in case anything untoward happened to the main one. I didn't see his picture anywhere but the incumbent president, who appears to be Freddie Mercury, is everywhere, including stuck on a large illuminated molar outside my hotel. In Yemen, large illuminated molars are everywhere and are particularly useful at election times.

Dhamar old town was just down the road; a mass of tiny streets, flanked by mud-brick houses in various states of decay. We wandered around it collecting children like the Pied Piper. We soon had about 30-40 and they insisted on showing us all their special places; the long-disused caravanserai with its dry stone arches still standing; the old bath house now a warren of mysterious partly collapsed corridors. And the gate to the Jewish quarter; no Jews left now but the timeless wooden gate on its wooden hinges under the city wall was still there and appeared to be in working order. By this time the 30-40 were joined by a dozen or so girls at a safe distance. They ducked out of sight whenever they thought we might take photographs of them; they had better things to go hell for than being photographed by European males.

Swakopmund does not get easier to understand. There must be some appeal in this Bavarian town in a desert on a coast where the sea is 6 degrees, in a damp salty cold misty climate where nothing grows in the garden. But whatever it is has eluded me now for 18 years. The most significant recent changes are that Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse has been renamed S von Nujoma Strasse and Martin Luther has been given a lick of paint and locked away in what looks like a public lavatory.

So great is its appeal however that a little way down the coast they are building a New Swakopmund called Langstrand. Pristine modern houses of all shapes and sizes just emerge from the desert overnight and sit there surrounded by nothing but concrete and sand, silent and empty as they are all holiday homes. A few people are employed to water the blades of grass that some have planted around their braais and the mobile phone company has planted one of its plastic palm tree masts. Langstrand is known for two things. The first is a platform out to sea which is a communal long-drop for all passing seabirds and an enterprising German sells the sundried droppings in Europe, the last remnants of an honourable birdshit trade on which the German colony was founded a century and a half ago.

The second thing that Langstrand became known for this year was the chosen birthplace of the Joliebaby. Surrounded by sea on one side and sand on the other it was pretty well paparazzi-proof. It was not proof, however, to Santjie's aunt.

Santjie's senior aunt and uncle, Neline and Boet had been delegated by the family to come to Namibia and ensure that a proper order and dignity prevailed at her wedding (to me) in Katutura magistrates court. We then took them on a two-day honeymoon to Langstrand at the house a friend loaned us for the occasion. Tannie Neline plus camera walked up the beach past the Jolie hotel where she was summarily stopped by a guard and was told she could proceed no further. She asked the guard why and he answered he did



Al-Ahram Tourist Hotel plumbing. Shower works fine but don't move your feet or drop the soap

1 Heat up the Toyota diff with the flamethrower



2 Stretch out the dough



3 Bake



4 Serve - mind the spitting fool

Fifty yelling children plus five Europeans was more than the camel could stand. She was sitting in the narrow backstreet minding her own business with her owner who was long into his happy qat hour. His contemplations were rudely interrupted by his fleeing camel which he brought under control only with some considerable difficulty. The Jersey cow jammed across the road next to the camel was less phased by the invasion and continued shitting. Its owner, lying on the floor qatball in cheek, was slowly feeding the other end with rolls of grass. He took out his shot gun and waved it at us; wanting, it appeared, to look appropriately aggressive in the photograph.

I bought grandson Andrew a little Yemeni thobe, belt and dagger. I think that will land me in trouble; the dagger is real.

This time the Dhamar exigencies were not such a strain as last time; for a start we didn't have Ali with his AK-47 to ensure we don't get kidnapped (instead, it occurred to me we had an army of 6-12 year olds) and secondly, the place where we had breakfast served us off fresh newspaper. We had more or less learnt the trick of avoiding the spits from the boiling fool, straight of the flamethrower in its red hot carved stone bowl. The young man with burn marks up his forearms decided to show off by producing a sheet of bread which overlapped the table on all edges. Slapping, without roasting yourself, a thin bread lump rolled out the size of a football field onto the inside of the conical bread oven preheated to glowing by a roar or two of gas, was quite a skill. A minute or so later he pulled it out in

that brief interval between it being raw dough and black charcoal and tossed it in a single throw between us all. He showed me the inner secret at the bottom of his bread oven — a Toyota differential case that is heated to red heat by the flame thrower immediately before the dough is stuck to the side. Breakfast for the six of us cost 2.5 Euro. The Vrije Universiteit gives UN per diems; I don't think UN people eat beans and bread for breakfast.



There is a volcano near Dhamar that you can drive up in a 4x4. They drove us up in a little Datsun bus. The rim of the volcano had at some stage had been converted into a fort (actually all hilltops in Yemen have, at some stage, been converted into forts). On the way up we picked up a tribesman guide who sat next to me and used me to rest his AK-47 against, muzzle under my chin. I have no idea how to tell whether an AK-47 is loaded or not or whether a bump over a rock was, or was not, likely to spray my brains over the bus roof.

The view from up the volcano of the high plateau around Dhamar, was unbelievable. At least so I was told; all I could see was the backside of a poster stuck to the window urging everyone to vote for Freddie Mercury next week. Some way from the top the bus got stuck. When he tried reversing out of his hole in the direction of the edge of the precipice, someone calmly suggested we should walk the rest of it. As volcanoes go, it was pretty average; it smelt like Wath-on-Dearne and had little holes in it which were

hot and damp. Some of them had dry stone enclosures around them creating a kind of sulfuric acid sauna, but without the snow, which we were invited to enjoy. Inside these holes a lot of odd things grew; in fact it was a perfect place for any lifeform that thrives at 50 degrees and pH1 and there were a remarkably varied lot of them.

Our guide parked his AK-47 against a rock and leapt excitedly from hole to hole inviting us to poke our hands in here and our heads in there and scrape a bit of sublimed sulfur here or smell the plants that grew there. Then he bounded off around the fortified perimeter and gesticulated to us with his Kalashnikov what they used to do



with the marauders that tried to attack them up there. Not all that long ago I suspect.

You can get up a volcano in platform shoes but its not that easy going down. This presented Bushra, our fully-veiled teenage translator with something of a dilemma; fall down a volcano or lean on a male and book your passage to hell. After much communal agonism and telling of beads the

compromise was that she should lean on the Iraqi chemist as (a) he had grey hair and (b) he was accompanied by his wife. I hope it was the right decision.



The oxygen masks would, she explained, exhibiting large numbers of perfect teeth, drop down automatically in case of an emergency and if we wanted anything to make our flight more bearable, we just had to ask. Yes, it was Virgin Nigeria; with the same shaped flight attendants as the real thing but with green engines. The plane was an elderly ex- Balkan Air Tours airbus with original Bulgarian safety manual, carpet stains and captain who mumbled something about Abuja with a mouth full of marbles. We eventually got to the Abuja Sheraton where I wondered whether my credit card details would once again leak out to the benefit of a variety of nefarious internet dating agencies and blue DVD suppliers.

Later on we met in the foyer to decide on where to have dinner. We instinctively now keep a wary eye on the comings and goings and noted that a few ebony-shouldered tight-jeaned advance parties from the Elephant bar and the Aquarium Club had already started their intelligence



The new Abuja mosque at dawn

gathering patrols. Later we knew they would be sending out hunting parties as their clients were not queuing up as they did on our previous mission when there was an international HIV and Aids conference in the hotel. This was not the place for unaccompanied adult males and we slipped un-noticed into Luigi's, a relatively safe well-lit haven.

Or so we thought. In the middle of supper we were joined by Patience, a clear-thinking and straight-talking Yoruba colleague. She did not, however, eat with us; her one mission this Saturday evening was to introduce us to Jesus. She had us well and truly cornered; there was no escape as we knew the Elephant girls were watching the exit. I tried tamely to explain politely that what passed for my soul was not, at the moment, up for grabs, any more than my body was. But we survived and I returned stealthily to my room and slipped the chain, both body and soul still relatively intact. But with a nagging feeling that I might be missing out on one or two interesting elements of Nigerian life.



The curious thing about living in the middle of a Europeanized safari park is that you tend to take your holidays in places like Leeds.

Saltaire, just up the Aire from Leeds, is at its best on a grey February day with cold easterly gusts and freezing rain. On such a day I drove around it with Mum. Titus Salt, 150 years ago, built his huge wool factory here on the edge of the river in which, with the help of his large workforce, sheeps wool went in at one end and high quality woollen cloth, and rather a lot of rather dirty water, came out at the other. What he also did, which others did not, was to

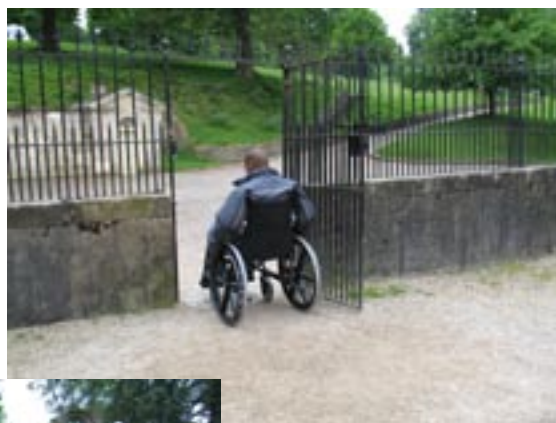
build a lot of high quality housing, schools, libraries and meeting halls for his workers all to a uniform not-too-heavy Victorian Italianate-gothic style; all built out of the local stone and built to last.

The problem is that the local stone is millstone grit which, in its raw form is somewhat less attractive than concrete. Over the years though, the smoke and grime from Mr Salt's big chimney, and all his workers' little chimneys, darkened the stone to near black giving it the characteristic colour of the West Riding which, though a bit dour, is not unpleasant.

Leeds and Bradford, however, have been cleaning up the few interesting buildings that they have not knocked down, restoring them to their original concrete-like dullness, and the clean air acts that they have implemented will ensure that never again will their pristine buildings attract the patina of grime that gave them their attractiveness and character.

Up the river at Bingley I walked over the new bypass that now blights the valley bottom up to the system of eight locks that raises the level of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal almost 30 metres. These must have been built sometime in the 1780s and its good to see them, and the canal, in such a good state of repair. I had no idea that the locks were so deep; each one lifts the boat the height of a house excluding the low water depth.

Later in the year, on an equally dull June day, we went back an additional six hundred years in the wool trade to Fountains Abbey where the Cistercians came to renew their vows of poverty and instead became a twelfth century WTO. Until Henry sorted them out in 1539.

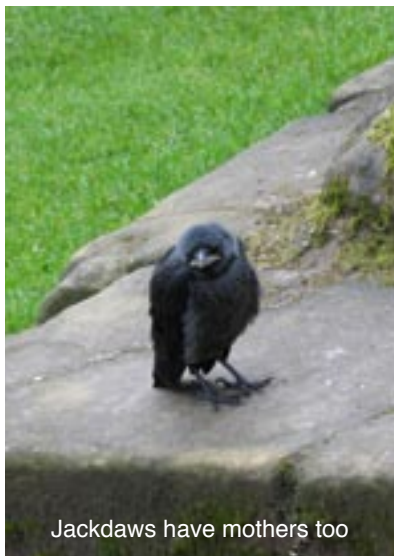


Studley Royal Park,  
Fountains Abbey



Fountains Abbey storeroom

The Cistercians had a knack of picking the country's finest spots but they probably did not realise then that they were picking a World Heritage Site that would host 300 000 visitors a year by the end of the millenium. And if Henry hadn't knocked it down it would probably now be as undistinguished as Harrogate



Jackdaws have mothers too



Cornwall is a separate world. I took Santjie there in June because she had never seen trees growing at 45 degrees and it was nearer than Scarborough. We stayed in a National Trust farmhouse where we were advised to rope up to climb the staircase safely. It was cliff-top walking distance from Boscastle which we did, and back, at 45 degrees, watching the seagulls in the air below us, facing the wind motionless. Beyond Boscastle is Tintagel which has a Post Office and a Castle. The twelfth century Post Office was full of those snippets of invaluable useless information that the National Trust guards so well, like the origin of 'sleep tight' – how well you sleep the night after your rope mattress has been tightened.

Tintagel Castle is on an almost island, a natural fortification commanding the Bristol Channel as far as Lundy

and now strimmed to perfection by English Heritage. It is a bleak and windy headland which, in June, was covered in spectacular wild flowers that could not grow more than an inch or two high. At various times, so the guidebook might have said had I been able to read it in the wind, it was inhabited, or at least visited, though not simultaneously, by King Arthur, Tristan, Guinevere, John Betjeman, Isolde and Joseph of Aramathea. It is not recorded how long any of them stayed, or even why. We walked around with a group of French schoolchildren who were wondering if this was as good as it gets north of the Channel.



Tintagel Post Office

The Eden Project is an amazing set of plastic bubbles that allowed us to see our Namibian garden in England but without the bugs, the murdered Weaver chicks and the neighbour's cat pee. And in another bubble was a whole lot of stuff from my former garden in Dar except for the monkeys and the tree snakes. Interspersed with all this were a few curious sculptures and also some 'native' houses to show how the poor people live who cant afford to visit bubbles. I was left feeling that if they really wanted to make a statement they should at least have included a few otherwise unsung English heroes of the tropical world such as a scratched paintless Series 1 Landrover pickup or a Lister pop-pop engine from Dursley standing on its diesel-soaked plot, generating this or pumping that, lots of which are still hard at work after 60 years and more and will remain so long after all today's Toyotas are dead.

If you want to see stuffed Choughs, Lanhydrock is the place. They have three of them. I have never seen an unstuffed Chough but I remember that it was the second bird in my childhood copy of 'The Observer's Book of British Birds' and that it had red legs. Lanhydrock is a large house in Cornwall which was passed on to the National Trust, it would appear, as a mechanism to prevent it getting into the hands of the last surviving (female) member of the family who had 'gone to Africa'. Enough said. The house has a most magnificently complete Victorian kitchen capable roasting anything over the fire. We shared it with a busload of large loud German hausfraus who were touching every-



thing, in the eyes of the National Trust guides, the ultimate sin.

The car park was some distance from the house and an enterprising retired cockney was selling lifts in his restored 1916 Humber convertible. He was the stunt driver in the early James Bond films and if you want to see his Humber in action,



Lanhydrock is also known also for its successful dormouse breeding programme. This is truly amazing as the dormouse spends 99% of its life asleep and exerting any control over the remaining 1% is a major achievement. It was of particular interest to me as the greenfield site outside my back door is to be sold to Tescos or somesuch and I had been informed by those that know about these things that if you

want to prevent your neighbourhood being turned into a Tesco car park, the best way to do it is to find a dormouse nest in a hedge somewhere. Dormice, it seems, beat bulldozers hands down. I'm working on it.



watch the next Miss Marple. He told us that there was a problem; the bus had gone off without one of the German hausfraus. This was serious; we drove home quickly.



Dan and Andrew in Southport



Mum (90 in December) and Santjie shopping in York



Apres shop



Cat  
1st Sept 1985 -13th Jan 2006