



Clegg news 2009

If you live in a desert you need water. Here it comes from the mist that often blows in at night. One little chap, called a toktokkie, seen on the next page in the process of ending its life, stands on its head all night every night and collects water on its back which runs down to its mouth. It is a walking water bottle for everything that is a bit bigger.

Amazingly we actually saw three Sidewinders. The one that made the tracks is just under the sand at the top



If the humans dont go away when you pretend you are not there you just pretend you are dead. They will soon get fed up.



The problem with the Sidewinder is that its an adder. If it bites you you dont die but the bitten bit tends to rot a bit. The sidewinder hangs around like this waiting for you, particularly if you happen to be a lizard. Sometimes it sticks the tip of its tail up above the sand and waggles it and short-sighted lizards mistake it for a beetle. When our guide showed us how to use the macro function on Santjie's camera to take this picture his nose was about 10cm from its nose.

What was rather amazing about this particular Sidewinder was that the guide had spotted it under the sand like this at 20 metres.

We had come on this tour all within a few kilometres of Swakopmund in the Namib to see what they call the 'little five'; some of the little creatures that have over the 150 million years or so since South America left, evolved (or as we prefer to say here in Namibia, were designed) to suit this strange desert.

The bottom layer of the desert food pyramid is bits of meusli - dried leaves that are shed by the few plants that survive here and blow around forming small drifts here and there at the base of the dunes. They are eaten by little insects in the sand. The insects are actually silverfish which, oddly, are the little things that eat all my carpets in Somerset.



The sidewinder is actually a remarkably small snake and what is special about it is the way it gets around, moving sideways continually lifting its body off the hot sand.





*This mini-gekko with the sexy eyes lives permanently under the sand. Her eyelids are not big enough to clean her eyes so she licks them instead. She drinks toktokkies for a living.*

*There is a curious burrowing spider that lives in the sand and eats silverfish. Our guide spotted yet another invisible sign on the surface and quickly dug one up. Its called a dancing white lady spider or sometimes a wheel spider because of its propensity, which we watched, for escaping predators by rolling up and wheeling down the dune face at about 44*



*cartwheels (1 metre) per second. They have eight eyes and can see a lot better than we can.*

*A friend of mine devoted three years of his life to studying its mating habits; he got to know many of them personally and stalked them at night. The Namib always gets you eventually.*

*Spread out and find a chameleon the guide said. We did and we did. It was Nicky, a chameleon he knew well and it climbed onto his hand knowing well that it was about to*

*get a free full toktokkie.*

*I was rather taken with its tongue (well I wasn't actually, the toktokkie was). I was unsure what it did with it between meals. It has a conveniently toktokkie-shaped hollow end richly coated with glue. These pictures are a thirtieth of a second apart so the whole business is over pretty well before it's begun.*

*A tongue like this would really enliven a night at a restaurant. But, on the other hand, a serious French kiss could be potentially hazardous.*



*One of the great things about my job is that every so often a few of us get to meet somewhere nice at someone else's expense to chat about why things dont work in Africa. As they never do we meet reguarly and this year we met at Tunis.*

*For most of its history Tunis, of course, was called Carthage which, as I recall from my semi-classical education, was founded by Queen Dido of the Phoenicians about 3000 years ago. Dido was smart. When she arrived there she was granted an amount of land that could be encircled by*





a cow hide. She then cut up the hide like you cut up a sheet of paper when you want to step through it and managed to claim a whole hill.

What is the maximum area of land you can claim by stretching a cow round has ever since been known to mathematicians as the 'Dido problem', or as some of us prefer to call it, the isoperimetric inequality.

When Aeneas dropped in one day on his way from Troy to found Rome he decided to change his mind and stay around for the fun. Unfortunately his mother had different ideas and sent him packing off to Rome. (She had quite bit of influence on things as she was the goddess Venus). Dido, altogether browned off with her future mother-in-law, threw herself on Aeneas's sword, an event subsequently captured for posterity, of course, in sound and video by Marlowe, Purcell, Rubens and friends.



I found remains of Queen Dido aplenty. Lots and lots of coins all stamped with her head were offered quietly for sale by people who surrounded us who clearly had pocketfuls. The



Almost as new - after 1800 years

really interesting thing about them is that they were made out of aluminium, a metal that, until then, I had always thought was first isolated by Wöhler in 1830.

Not much remains now of Dido's Carthage except for her artificial harbour but there are some incredible remains from the Roman period. A street of villas overlooks the sea from the side of the hill, a perfect south-facing setting. You are free to wander around at will trampling all over the 2000 year old mosaic floors covered with peacocks and antelopes, all in perfect condition.

The most impressive of all the Roman remains is the 136km aqueduct that brought water from a spring to the dry port. It is a completely covered duct and passes for much of its length over a multiple arch bridge, much of which is still standing. We did not actually get to see it because the local hotel people did not even know about it. They normally only cater for European tourists.

But we did see the massive water storage tank that it empties into on the hill above the settlements

Much of this still remains although it is largely silted up. Each of these tanks is 100m long by 7 wide and 7 deep. All the tanks were covered and most remain intact. I got to wonder what the mortar was that they were made of



Inside one of the tanks

because the stones forming the arches are not shaped, they are just held in place by the mortar and have been so for nearly 2000 years.

The Romans, it seems, knew a thing or two about mortars; they used to add silicates, particularly aluminium silicate from clay and they knew that it had to be prepared by heating but not by too much heating. This gave a largely waterproof cement that sets hard quite quickly and is resistant to wear and weathering that is defined by the European

Standard EN197.1.

And to think that I have come through life thinking that cement had been invented a man called Joseph Aspdin from Hunslet in 1824. The secret that the Romans had was ready-cooked silicates from Vesuvius. There never were any volcanoes in Hunslet.

Why did such people not invent the pointed arch or even resolve their isoperimetric inequalities?

Hannibal was another famous Carthaginian. In order to avenge one of the many sackings of the city during the Punic wars he took his fighting elephantmen across to Gibraltar and round over the Alps into Italy and hit Rome from the north when they were expecting him from the south. It is very curious to me that the Romans did not see a herd of elephants approaching even from an unexpected direction, but there's no accounting for Italians.

Apparently the North African elephant, like its sub-Saharan cousin used to be a touch unreliable and was known occasionally to take it into its head to squash its own side. So all the elephant warriors used to carry a hammer and sharp chisel to deal with it quickly if it got out of control. Which probably explains why it's now extinct.



**P**ale hands I loved beside the Shalimar, Where are you now? Where are you now?

I have written before of my favourite shop - Gillian Grieg's Music shop on the outskirts of Taunton. Over the years I've built up a CD collection largely by an annual rootle in her reduced-to-clear box. Sadly this year's rootle will be the last. But it has been the granddaddy of all rootles because she has, sadly, given up competing with Amazon and iTunes and all her CDs are in the clearing box at half price.

The great thing about Gillian's shop is that you buy things that you would never otherwise dream of buying. Recordings of Amy Woodforde Finden, Cwm Rhondda sung by all the men in South Wales, Stuart Burroughs Mother of Mine, Moira Anderson Thinking on Me, and even Christ on the Mount of Olives (just to be reminded of the surprising number of deservedly forgotten works Beethoven wrote).

This year's gem took me back to the early fifties to the very first concert my parents took me to. It was in Huddersfield Town Hall and it was one of Mozart's best known works, Handel's Messiah. Gillian had a copy of the 1946 Sargent recording in Huddersfield with the wonderful clarinet and horn parts in the arias that were Mozart's signature. It has real Yorkshire continuo on 32 foot pipes, the Black Dyke Mills sound of Harry Mortimer in the Trumpet Shall Sound; in those days there was a curious tradition of playing it in tune. Isobel Baillie's consummate swooping to her high Cs, and, above all, Sargents control of the perfect clear pianissimo of the big choir at the climax - t'Lord 'as laid on 'im t'iniquity of us all. I stood during the Hallelujah Chorus.

A performance that these days would trigger a knock in the early hours by the authenticity police.

Sorry, I bought Gillian's only copy.



**T**he Orange river rises in the highlands of Lesotho and collects water right across the continent. By the time it forms the Namibia-South Africa border it has already drained an area the size of Europe and is in its home straight. What you do if you are really crazy is canoe down it. So when the Windhoek Canoe Club block-booked a whole lot of canoes Santjie said I would have one, forgetting to mention that neither of us had ever set bottom in one. The worst rapids were only grade 3 they said so no problem really. We



OK we're ready. Maybe

were also reassured to learn that for some reason there were no crocodiles or hippopotamuses in it; maybe it's regarded as too hazardous by the croc-hippo community

Now, for the uninitiated, there are two key rules that you have to obey when you are paddling. Both of them are counter-intuitive, which probably explains why the Afrikaners are so good at canoeing. They both concern what you do when you realise you are about to smash at speed into a large boulder. The first is that the person in front must

The first thing you have to do is to work out which is the front and which way you have to paddle







Yet another perfect dawn on the Orange

*paddle. Really paddle, fast and straight ahead. The second is that on the point of crashing you must lean towards the rock, not away from it.*

*Unfortunately Santjie's grasp of these rules as we hit the rock was not entirely wholehearted. It was not, as she later*

*explained that she had little faith in the rules, it was her faith in me that was at issue.*

*I learnt a third rule a little later as I bobbed down towards the South Atlantic. 'Pee' Pierre shouted at me as I briefly surfaced, 'you will feel a lot better'. I did and I did.*



Santjie soon learned to just shut her eyes and paddle



They cooked for us, paddled all the food, set up our toilets, fished us out when we fell in..... All in their mid-teens except Vula, their unflappable taskmaster. Fortunately, Africa does not yet have regulations to forbid such things.

We ranged from pre-school to post-80



Big Anton and little Anton. Little Anton is not quite ready for school yet but he does not have a problem with grade 3 rapids

*The advantage of being the first to capsize on day 1 was that by day 4 when we faced the big rapid we had begun to get the hang of things. Santjie had got used to paddling straight and hard (by shutting her eyes) while I had developed a sensitive touch; I had grown to know the water and to respond skillfully to what it was telling me. We shot the big one without a drop touching us, and to the cheers of our watching (disappointed) fellow paddlers, beached our canoe perfectly. And fell out.*



Every few hundred metres a heron marked its territory



The best way to see a river and its wildlife is from in it. In this case it's the only way as nobody lives along this 100km stretch. It all looks green but it is actually



Darters have to oil their feathers in the sun. They are submarines; just their heads are visible when they swim



The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy has a few things to say on the subject of towels. "A towel, it says, is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have."

It is curiously silent, however, about duct tape.



Boere ancestor hunting; getting into the mood

This year we have been doing a bit of ancestor-chasing. Santjie is a Fourie. The original South African Fourie was a Huguenot called Louis Fourie expelled from his land just north of Paris in the late seventeenth century. He eventually found himself in South Africa via Amsterdam just before Christmas in 1687. He spent the rest of his life fathering 21 children assisted (sequentially) by two wives, a process he carried on well into his seventies. There are now about 40000 Fouries in South Africa.

Santjie's father did not score very highly on the Fourie productivity table; only four children from five marriages. But he got around a bit geographically speaking. I got the impression that there were few places in southern Karoo that he had not lived at one time or another and there were few trees that she and her brother Dirk had not climbed. We visited a lot of both and trod many cemeteries.

It was not always a pleasant journey. Santjie's memories of Humansdorp, a town a few kilometres inland from the South Coast, born out by old photographs that we saw, were of a town of some character with a lot of cast iron stoeps now replaced by dreary crumbling cement stucco.

The nearby little coastal town of Jeffreys Bay, the place of all her childhood weekends and once a world class surfing resort was now Blackpool without the class.





Now and then.

One of Santjie's childhood houses was now a car part shop, its staff toilet their original bathroom



Her ouma's house, where she did her homework each day and saw out her childhood illnesses, once a double fronted and gabled settlers house was now a second-hand shop and had been knocked around beyond recognition. Inside the remains of the polished wood floors were still there.

Langkloof, home of the Granny Smith, an apple bred, as are most things in South Africa for its durability under extreme conditions. Tough, leathery and full of sour juice. Santjie briefly lived in this farm



Aberdeen, in the Little Krroo was founded I suppose by a Scot who could go no further. It was where Santjie finished high school. It is a little Karoo dorp built round a big Dutch Reformed Church. After long years of decay it's now enjoying a resurrection as a place for people who cant face living anywhere else. This is her old house - and it was up for sale.

*My ancestor chasing has been confined to what we call in the consultancy trade, a desktop study. Old photographs which, as always perhaps, tell unfinished stories, like an uncle that nobody talked about or another who laid out Henry Irving when he died during his farewell week at the Bradford Alhambra.*

*He was a stage manager and carpenter and going through an old case with my mother we came across an article featuring him by Cecil Beaton in an old edition of the Illustrated London News. Attached to it was a little hand-written scrap of paper suggesting he might like to see it. It was signed Margot Fonteyn.*

*The urge to look a bit further into my ancestry was triggered to some extent by the death this year of an American cousin of my mother, Hewitt Phillips, whom I always remember as a very quiet man who said very little but who used to make, with us children, incredibly good paper aeroplanes out of bits of card and paper clips.*

I only learned this year what a significant role he played in the early days of NASA and his engineering autobiography is still on the NASA website. He was largely responsible for the design and building of the Lunar Excursion Module landing test gantry that is now a US national monument.

This year, on the fiftieth anniversary of its first real decent I tried hard to imagine, but couldn't, how he must have felt at that moment.



Every year my brother Peter organises a four day walk around his birthday at the end of August. Many of his friends join him who share a common passion; walking in pouring rain in England. This year they squelched their way across the Dales. We joined them.



Here is my wife, daughter and partner revelling in the rain at Malham Cove, a place where even the river Aire takes shelter.



Later in the year Santjie and I went back, after a long gap, to a farm in the Erongo hills where we can camp undisturbed, do a bit of walking but mainly just sit and wait and see what comes to look at us.



At Malham Show, enjoying a brief break from the longest dandelion root and the most deformed vegetable, and also from the rain



The Erongos have many locally distinct species like a black mongoose which I have seen once and this Mountain Wheatear which has unusual grey hair.



The mongooses are famed for eating puff adders and vice versa; this puff adder died choking on a mongoose whose skeleton head was still halfway down its throat.

The Erongos are a long way from Carthage but there is a connection. Energy. For thousands of years African rulers have sold their energy to the rest of the world. Carthage was built with slave energy. More recently it has been oil energy; the rest of the world profits while, as I saw this year in Abuja in exporting countries, the pumps run dry.

Now Namibia is up to the same game. Look on Google Earth just south of Arandis and you will see 40 square kilometres of total devastation. This is just one quite small Uranium pit. The hole goes down below the water table cutting the aquifers that sustain the desert plants. When the mine closes the hole will fill with dead water, poisoned by the newly oxidised solubilised minerals in the spoil heaps which will slowly seep into the aquifers. Five new pits began operations this year.

There is no example in the 2000 years of the African energy export trade that has not left the people poorer. But in



Namibia they think that just this once it will be different; a disturbing triumph of hope over experience. If you want to see *Welwitschia* and the rest, come soon.



Wherever you look in this area on the fringe of the Namib, there are rock painting panels. How long they will remain there we dont know. Come and see these paintings while they are still here.



*This year my mother was presented with a Certificate by the British Beekeepers Association marking 50 years of beekeeping. Actually she has been doing it for 70 years since she was married but they dont have 70 year certificates. Earlier in the year one of her stocks had obligingly swarmed a few hours before the gathering at her apiary of the members of the Wakefield and Pontefract Beekeepers Association, an eclectic mix of farmers, office workers, pensioners and at least one Professor of Peace Studies. We all learnt from the experts how to hive it.*



You dont really need veils with a swarm. They are drunk and happy. They hived this one in seconds



I've been doing some follow-up studies on bird shit since last year's report. Namibia was, at one time, second only to Chile in the supply of nitrates to the world. In the days before the Germans discovered how to make it out of fresh air it could only be found anywhere where there were lots of birds and no rain because, of course, it is very soluble.



While Namibia produced the quality guano from its offshore islands, the mass trade was with Chile. The company behind it was headed by the Gibbs family and it made them one of the wealthiest families in Britain.

One of the things they did with their wealth was to found Tyntestfield, a Victorian Gothic House near Bristol bought by the National Trust with all its inherited contents on the death of its last occupant George Gibbs who died there unmarried in 2001. We visited it twice this year.

In common with probably most fortunes made during the Victorian era there is a dark underside. The sailors, trapped for months on end on the ships loading and bringing the stuff back had to endure the continuous toxic stench of ammonia, taking it in turns to climb the rigging for a breath of fresh air.

Is it conceivable that the owners were not aware of this? The histories so far seem silent on the issue. Whether as a consequence or not, William Gibbs was a devout Christian and another

The Keble Oak at Tyntestfield. Planted the day the college was founded in 1870

place founded on guano money honouring John Keble of the Oxford Movement. was Keble College, my old high Anglican college in Oxford. By birdshit I am BA.

(And, thanks to the Dyson Perrins laboratory I'm PhD by Worcester sauce).



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