

159 Bower Hinton - Martock - Somerset

Christmas 1990 seems a curiously long time ago. I have vague memories only of giving up my job for Somerset County Council with some relief at getting out of the teaching profession but with considerable regrets at leaving teaching. One day, I suppose the two will again be the same kind of thing but not, I suspect in my active lifetime.

In the morning of the last day of the year Eileen and I got married. We went by ourselves to Yeovil registry office and waited. A lady came and asked if we had come for the wedding. Eileen said that we were the wedding. They had to get a couple of secretaries from the labour exchange to be witnesses as all theirs had taken the day off. We went for coffee to the victorian hotel across the road. It had a new conservatory where we sat and watched the roof leak into two wine coolers. A very elderly aristocratic lady arrived with two dogs and coffee was silently brought to her. A scene that probably had been enacted daily for the last fifty years. Then we saw 'The Seagull' at Stratford and saw in 1991 in the car under sparkling skies somewhere in Gloucestershire.

Soon, however, I was off. I had been asked several times to join a dutch team in Namibia but had resisted until persuaded by the family. We had, at the back of our minds, Eileen's blood pressure problem which had been normal in the heat of Botswana. We both needed to get back to Africa. The offer included some family passages and the continental rate of pay would allow a good number of extra air fares. We reckoned we would see each other every eight weeks or so.

Namibia is not Africa. At least not until you pass the veterinary cordon which marks the beginning of tribal lands in the north. It is all fenced off white ranches, some occupied but many with absentee owners; a serious political problem in the making. Afrikaners run the civil service, Germans the commerce. A Windhoek main street is called Goeringstrasse and Hitler's birthday does not pass unnoticed in some of the smaller centres. Windhoek was described by a colleague as a Bavarian town with rather a large Gastarbeit problem. Typically South African, it has a commercial centre surrounded by white suburbs. On the other side of the railway is Khomasdahl, the coloured suburb and a little further away, Katutura, the 'township'. Katutura means literally 'We don't want to go', a name reflecting its beginnings following the bulldozing of the original settlement which was rather too near the expanding white suburbs for comfort and the maintenance of property values.

We walked into the most spectacular chaos. A country of 1.6 million had eleven ministries of education, one for each identifiable population group (that made ten) and one for those who were unclassified. The staff of all these ministries, who had never before met each other, were put into a bag and shaken up. As they fell out they were given positions in the new ministry. Most of them ended up counting their toes because nobody gave them anything to do. A few got down to making a country and for them work was never ending. We rapidly came to dominate science education because there was nobody else and we soon realised that the essence of our job was the releasing of pressure valves. Teaching was a job which, under apartheid, had absorbed the educated black workforce. They could keep their heads down and wait. They suddenly started popping up all over the place as soon as they realised that our workshops were not places in which we stood at the front and shouted, the favoured teacher training technique of the old regime. And we

had on offer an alternative to the rote learning which characterises South African education. We started out as trainers; we have evolved into a team that is providing the structure within which self-help training can happen.

In March Eileen was ill. It turned out to have been pneumonia. Tom ran the household. She came out at Easter looking pale and thin and wheezing. A week of African sun all but cleared her lungs. We had a little holiday. We visited Swakopmund. It is obligatory to visit, and to like, Swakopmund. If you know, say, Southport, however, Swakop is something of a let-down. But it is unique; a Bavarian Southport with palm trees. It was founded by the Germans when the Brits kicked them out of Walvis Bay. They built a whole lot of churches and a prison; the vital organs of civilisation. We retreated to the desert, a unique and quiet place. When we got back across the desert by the scenic route I found the spare had been flat all the time. Time was when I would have checked before taking a six year old bus into the wilderness.

I returned here at the end of May. Somerset is incomparable then. Madame Alfred Carrière had reached the bedroom window and was enjoying her first mature season of flowers, as was our wisteria, growing in through the central heating duct. It turned out to be a white one. We put in a new kitchen.

I was up in Katima Mulilo when the call came through in July. Katima is in that bit of Namibia that stretches out to the right at the top. A bit of land seized by general Caprivi who was trying to link up with the other German colony now Tanzania. It gives Namibia access to the Zambezi. It is 1300km from Windhoek. I drove back overnight to Windhoek and we (Eileen and Dan had joined me) flew back the second night. Eileen had had a brain haemorrhage and a major operation by then and the doctors were talking of a recovery. But a blood clot blocked one of the fluid passages and gradually all brain activity ceased; her body living on under the control of a machine. She died on the day she was due to fly to Windhoek.

Martock church is one of Somerset's finest. Eileen used to clean it every few weeks. The village filled it for her funeral. She had become the leading actress in the rather good amateur dramatic society and she was a regular member of the church congregation. And of course the whole village knew Rose. Players and Church between them fed everyone at the back of the church afterwards. It was a still heavy summer day. She had died just as everything we had been hoping for since we started living together was beginning to come about. The major alterations to the house were almost finished. All the children were coming to live in it together. She had given up her job to do things she had long wanted to do but had never been able to, like writing. We had become part of a community here. She had begun to feel a peace in her life of a kind she had never known before and with that had come a self-confidence that had eluded her until now. She was justly proud of Tom and Rose and had in the last year established a very easy relationship with Eileen and Daniel. And she had turned this house into a place we all loved to come home to. We had come to realise that we would never move from it; it was a place to grow old in.

There's not much else to report. My employers gave me leave of absence until January. Tom and Rose are well established in Plymouth with Rob. We are particularly pleased with the secondary school that Rose has just started at; it is a very caring place for children with severe learning difficulties and she is at present making remarkable progress. Dan continues at Wellington School. His taste in music does not seem to have any point of coincidence with mine but he seems to be evolving a fine taste in girlfriends (though

neither he nor she has a well-developed sense of when cheap rate phoning starts).
Daughter Eileen is back with her friends at school in Oxford. She is living with an old friend whose help over the last months cannot be overstated. Her GCSE's were surprisingly good and the school welcomed her back eagerly despite being brim full. E has taken up the classical guitar and D the rather non-classical keyboard.

Where now?

A Happy New Euroyear