

## Clegg News 1993

**T**aunton has a magnificent parish church. It also has talking wastepaper baskets. Windhoek has lampposts that talk and a church that ought really to be on top of a Christmas cake covered with snow. Lifted architecturally from Bavaria a century ago it is the centrepiece of the German colonial architecture which flavours the town. The flavour is still there, artificially sweetened, in the modern architecture; post-modernist Afro-Disney.

Windhoek struggles to be Namibia's capital. With its neat tidy streets, planned suburbs and lists of rules forbidding things, it is at ease only as the capital of South West Africa. Namibia really begins at a big fence that stretches across the whole country in the north and is designed to stop the free range cattle that overgraze the common lands in the north from giving nasty bugs to the sleek Brahmins in the (white) ranches in the south.

The real capital of Namibia is Oshakati, a never-ending unplanned village-merging-into-a-town in the north. It is a place where you have to kick the chickens away to get to the automatic bank teller. It is a place where the cows feed on the rubbish in the streets (they can digest cardboard and there's more of it than grass and so the children tear it up into grass-shaped strips for them) next to the phone booth from which you can phone direct to anywhere in the world. It is a place where a single room house can have the latest Mercedes coupe parked outside it. It is a place where, in the open market, you buy your meat either slaughtered while

you wait or preslaughtered and covered with flies, whichever you please. But it is a place where somebody will always recognise you and welcome you, or not recognise you and welcome you just the same.

**E**ileen lives up beyond Oshakati. She arrived in September to teach toddlers English at the Anglican pre-school at Odibo, near Oshikango on the Angolan border. She was immediately given a previously teacherless GCSE history class and told to get them through the November exam. She was the youngest in the classroom and knew nothing whatever about Southern African history. But so what, things in Africa never turn out quite as you expect them.

**O**dibo Mission, where Eileen teaches is a few metres from Angola. The second time I visited there was a big hole in the dirt track which had to be circumnavigated. Land mine they said. In Odibo, everything seems to be pregnant. A dog called Madonna has spent much of the time since E arrived gestating on the stoup and eating the breadcrumbs put out for the semi-naked hen sitting a touch uneasily on top of a heap of 16 eggs under the bench outside her door. Most of the eggs were left over from previous sitters.

Hens, chickens, goats, dogs, puppies, kids and children coexist in a fully integrated ecosystem which penetrates all activities. On the first Sunday in the month the eucharist starts with baptisms. Just bring along your baby, pay the fee, stand in the queue with the others (20-50) and take your turn. This lengthens the service by an hour or two but as the service

is usually 4 hours anyway nobody notices. Most of the chickens and goats remain respectfully outside but not so the dogs. The altar is on top of a number of steps made of pseudo marble. These are cool. A nice mannered dog, obviously related to Madonna, knows about this and comes in for a little lie down. It settles comfortably between the incense swinger and the bell toller. A lady member of the congregation comes forward and kicks it. It lumbers over to the other side nearer the man with the little tinkling bells and flops down again. No more kicks, she has done her Sunday bit of bringing order to a chaotic universe.

**E**ileen passed her driving test just before she arrived and for her work she needed a four wheel drive bakkie (pickup). I bought one in some haste. Like most bakkies here the front wheels don't point in quite the same direction as the back ones. Our first attempt to get up north ended after about an hour when Eileen stopped and asked what the steering wheel was for. Whatever function it controlled, it was not the direction of the vehicle. I told her that in Africa the steering wheel was a mere decoration, somewhere to put your hands on a long journey. She was sceptical. But I took it back to the garage where they replaced lots of things that were OK and few that were not. Now the steering bears some tenuous relation to the direction of the vehicle but the two front wheels are pointing in different directions and make a curious squealing sound and leave black tracks on tar. Luckily there isn't much tar around Odibo. And gear box oil drips out of the speedometer onto your feet. Odd that.

**A** lot changed this year. Eileen flunked her A levels (that is to say she got the

same grades as I got 31 years earlier) and was turned down by all her four universities and both her polys. So she wrote about twenty letters to others telling them that she was about to disappear to the Namibia-Angola border to try and teach english to toddling Kwanyama and if they wanted her in their classes in September 1994 they had better look sharp about it. She got two immediate offers by phone. One, the one she accepted, particularly pleased me as it was at big Eileen's old University, Liverpool.

Tom moved as well, up to Tavistock Comprehensive, which seems to be a well-run, friendly, sort of place. He enjoys it a lot. Rose continues to make progress. To me, seeing her only at intervals, it appears dramatic. Her speech and her understanding of speech has made great headway but she still finds the phone very difficult, which I find sad as I can't talk to her as I can to Tom. Dan, poor Dan, is coming up to his GCSE's in the knowledge that Eileen has just cleared her hurdle. He finds the pressure harder, much harder I think, than he is prepared to say.

**B**ack in Namibia it has rained. This was predicted by my barber. If the rains come on the Kaiser's birthday, he said, it will be a good year. They did and it was. (Except in parts of the north where the Good Lord, it seems, had not been told about the Kaiser.)

My barber tells me many other things. He tells me that my Queen and Adolf Hitler share the same birthday ('they keep that quiet in England'). He also tells me exactly where in the Namib 'our stupid government' is planning to bury the rest of the world's nuclear waste. (There is at least a certain symmetry to this as most of the original uranium came from a hole

in the Namib anyway.) He is a German colonial born out of his time. Civilisation ended for him in 1918 when the government was handed over to the Afrikaners and Independence in 1990 was just another minor event on a seventy year slide into chaos. He has a clock next to the mirror, locally made, that goes anticlockwise. 'Time, in Africa', runs the inscription in German, 'runs backwards'.

This year I haven't been far from Windhoek. Instead, friends fly in, use the old combi and then tell me where it's been. Its very nice to see a lot of old friends. To those who have not yet been here, I've got lots of beds, I'm convenient for sea, desert and animals, but hurry, the combi won't last for ever.

Three places I visited stick in my mind. One is Cape Cross, famous for its 80000 seals which do nothing but sit around all day in their own urine creating a smell which defies description. But it wasn't the seals that impressed this time, it was mum playing the King Cnut game. You know the game. You see how far out to sea you can get fully clothed before a big wave comes to get you. To cut a long story short mum, not far off 80, ended up having to be rescued fully clothed from the Antarctic Benguela current. Amazingly she and her friend Noreen produced from their joint handbags, an almost complete change of clothes. Tom and Rose spent 20 minutes as human washing lines baking their grandma's underwear in the desert sun.

Solitaire was another place. It is clearly marked on even the large scale map. It is on the way down the desert road from Walvis Bay. I ought to have guessed when I phoned Peter who lives there and his wife answered 'Hello Solitaire'. Peter and his wife

are Solitaire. There is no other house with a phone. There is no other house. They have a village shop where there is no village, just a dead tree. It sells sweets and outsize trousers. On the counter is a glass terrarium with a rare horned adder in it which is not exactly deadly (unless you are lucky); the bit that is bitten rots and drops off. A little notice on it advises customers not to play with it. There was a live skink in with it for food but it hadn't touched it and probably would not do so for a couple of months as it had recently eaten and so will not be hungry for a while. Peter and his wife have a self catering 'flat'. We pulled the Landrover up to the side of it as the lights ran off our battery.

The desert always has a different mood. This weekend it was benign and beautiful. The late summer flowers were out. They grow nowhere else and flower only in seasons when rain falls. The now-dead grass was a warm silver colour and covered everything. It grew and flowered almost overnight when it rained in the desert this year. It is very rich and attracted the magnificent Oryx and Springbok and also the quite rare Mountain Zebra.

We were there to visit nearby Sossusvlei, a place where a seasonal river is prevented from reaching the sea about 60km away by a great pile of sand. The river floods the vlei now and then leaving a cracked baked pink surface. All over the vlei are ancient Camelthorn trees. The Camelthorn is an acacia; it can grow in ground which is dry for most of the time and has very deep roots and is a feature of western Namibia. We photographed them from underneath, from the side and then, by climbing an immense dune, from on top. They are the biggest things in a unique system which includes bright blue beetles that seem

to do nothing but rush across the hot sand and little gekkos that stand on legs 1 and 3 while waving 2 and 4 in the air to cool them. They bury themselves without trace or movement in the sand when you blink. There is another vlei nearby which no longer floods. It too has stands of Camelthorns but they are different; they died 1000 years ago.

Otjimbingwe is in the middle of some where between here and the sea. A days wagon drive from the coast, it was, until about 1890, the capital of Deutsche Südwest Afrika. It has a tower in it about half the size of a small tree which was used as a repository for gunpowder. Being of military significance it is yet another mind-blowingly dull National Monument. The powder was used mainly to slaughter Hereros.

Otjimbingwe also contains a delightful Rhenish mission church (1867) beautifully preserved by its present congregation. Its white walls are inscribed immaculately with biblical texts in German, Dutch (not Afrikaans), Nama (lots of!'s which were then drawn as //') and OshiHerero (lots of ng's). The result of these German influences was that the Herero Nation (the biggest in southern Africa) rapidly developed a tendency to be either Christian or dead (or both). As national monuments here tend to be concerned only with mass slaughter, the powder tower is but the church isn't.

Also in Otjimbingwe are other remains of what was once a major trading post. The General Dealer closed almost a century ago but could have been occupied yesterday. There are the remains of a windmill (1896) which ran a variety of machine tools and even a fountain. These substantial monu-

ments to colonial ingenuity have not been put to other use in this now Herero village and are very slowly decaying. The stucco has fallen away from the mud bricks here and there but the kind climate (on the eastern edge of the Namib) has only washed away in a century what would have gone in a month from Devon cobb.

In 1890 somebody built the new railway from Swakopmund to Windhoek about 100km further north. Otjimbingwe died. Now accessible only with difficulty, the once capital of an African outpost of a great European empire is a small Herero village, with few vehicles, many goats, a pipe smoking grandma visiting the wheelless mobile clinic, and a town centre inhabited only by a few children, a baboon and ghosts.

In May I went home to Somerset. Partly because it was the children's half term, partly because there is no finer place on the planet to be in the last week in May, but also because Eileen's Oxfordshire Youth Choir was performing Duruflé's Requiem in Dorchester Abbey. It was a warm still late spring evening with the roses heavy in the churchyard. At the end of the first half they sang an old Irish Blessing. It was not easy to break the silence.

*May the road rise to meet you  
May the wind be always at your back  
May the sun shine warm upon your  
face,  
the rains fall soft upon your fields,  
and  
until we meet again, may God hold you  
in the palm of his hand.*