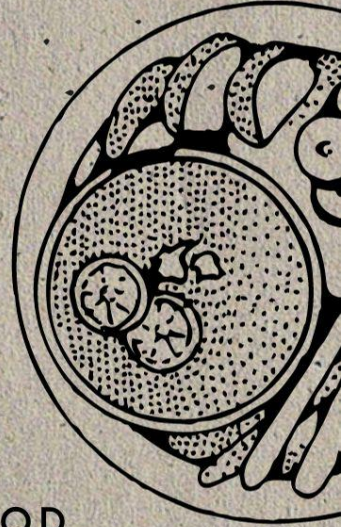


Memorable Meals



A LIFE'S JOURNEY WITH FOOD

DAVE FRANCIS



MEMORABLE MEALS: A LIFE'S JOURNEY WITH FOOD

I dedicate this, “My Version,” of the book that Jenny and Geoff Paddock, gave to me on the occasion of my 65th Birthday; especially to Jenny, who very sadly, left us all very recently, but left a remarkable legacy, for which she will be remembered, for a very long time ahead.

The original book is called “**Memorable Dinners**”, edited by Derek Nimmo, from contributions, made by the Rich and Famous.

Not being Rich or Famous, I call mine “**Memorable Meals**”.

Thank you, Jenny and Geoff, for ‘kick starting’ this, “My Version”.

*In life as we live it, there are No magic Waffles and No
indispensable Menus.
There are really only Family and Friends Occasions
and reliable Recipes.”*

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the phrase “Recollected by the RICH” which appears on the cover of the original book, “Memorable Dinners”, this is actually a collection of food memories from the life of a RARE but ‘simple working-class lad’ from Birmingham*. Who discovered at a very early age that food plays such an import part in life, that you only have to sit and think long enough; especially with a glass of wine (Merlot or a Burgundy preferably) or even better, a glass of single malt whisky in your hand (Dalwhinnie will be fine) to discover how many moments there are which have coloured, and even influenced a person’s life and which finds a common thread through food.

Like the book that inspired me to ‘put pen to paper’ – “Memorable Dinners” – it is not intended to show just the bright side of a person’s life but may go deeper to discover a wide range of experiences and circumstances that really do “colour and influence” the way we have lived and experienced, people, situations, places, emotions and senses. I hope you find some of those who I have met and experienced, some of these moments through and with, of interest? Suffice perhaps, to allow a larger story to emerge should the opportunity arise – along with a glass of vintage Port or a Laphroaig– other favourites of mine?

When browsing through the list of contributors to the original book, I was surprised to see names of people that I too have had the pleasure of sharing some moments with; Col. John Blashford–Snell (both after Dinner speakers on the same occasion), Sir Ranulph Fiennes (on a stage of snow we had made over night, at the launch of South – Scott and Amundsen- at the Royal Maritime Museum), Sir Chris Bonnington (Lecture) and Anton Mossimann (in the House of Lords Dining Room, congratulating him on his

menu, that Chela and I had just enjoyed); are to be found somewhere among these jottings no doubt.

However, unlike the original book, it is not a compendium of stories from the Rich and Famous, including other people such as Barbara Cartland, Countess Mountbatten, Alan Whicker, Lord Carrington and many more; nor is it sponsored by an exclusive Cognac producer. It is simply a modest record of someone who has been fortunate to have had and survived a 'rare' childhood – in today's terms at least - and employment, which not only allowed for many of these people/travel/food experiences to come into my life, but also funded many of them in the process - so I guess it is sponsored after all!

All this has taken place at a special time in history, from war and its aftermath to when travel became open to the 'common man'. Long may that last, as I believe the experiences have helped make me who I am today and would with the opportunity, do similar for many others to come? Though as I continue, from time to time, to open these pages to add or edit, I am seeing, almost on a daily basis, this freedom of movement being eroded or attempts being made to do just that, in surprisingly different parts of the World.

This reminds me of a discussion I was having recently with a good Yorkshire friend of mine, Stuart Williamson**, who pointed out that in spite of the EU, our membership and waning popularity; that even before that, it was actually easier and safer to travel to many parts of the World without a problem or a question of ethnicity, colour or religion entering into it! Which made us remember our own early adventures on motorbike, motor scooter* and the first car! And yes, the only problem we both recall, was running short of money!!

So far this has taken over six years of occasional 'jottings' late in an evening to record what follows. It is not the end, as other moments, past and present will come to mind and new ones happen in the months and years to come. So, for the moment, I hope you will ENJOY what have been Memorable Meals – rather than Dinners - and food related moments in my life and much more?

I can't let this introduction pass, without referring to a comment made by Prince Phillip on Wednesday, 19th. November 2015, during a visit to the opening of the new Central Station in Birmingham. Talking with a member of the station staff, who actually was one of the team who makes the announcements over the Tannoy, asked "When you give out your announcements, do you speak English or 'Brummie"?

So, in the eyes of Royalty, does that make me bi-lingual then?

*I even recall coming from Geneva on my Lambretta on a deserted, typically tree lined road and riding straight past a French Customs post, that I hadn't noticed and seeing in my side mirror, a man in uniform standing in the middle of the road waving his arms frantically – I often wonder if I'm still a 'wanted man' in France or Switzerland – dream on; they've better things to worry about!

**Stuart, you will find if you look up his name on Wikipedia, is among many things, an extremely well-known, internationally, and talented portrait sculptor. In fact, you are certain to have seen his work had you visited Madame Tussauds in London or Warwick Castle! He is now a Poet too, more about that later!

IN THE BEGINNING

Where and when did this all start?

Just Imagine, being dumped in a cot at the Sorrento Maternity Hospital, in Moseley, Birmingham on a cold April night in 1939, just before midnight, from the safe hands of a Midwife; without the constant warmth and supply of food and drink one had been used to for the past nine months and subconsciously wondering when the next meal was going to arrive?

Food! That's it! You can't get away from it. Like it or not, food IS life! In this case MY Life!

Add to that moment, the fact that in five months time the apparently comfortable and caring World I had just joined, was going to be ripped apart and latterly, blown apart, with the start of a World War!!!!

The truth is, my world and that of the family I had become part of, was to be blown apart a year later in 1940, when our home, along with several others in the road, were destroyed by Nazi bombs! Later, I was told that six people died that night. On reflexion, nobody before then, could have told my parents, that our road was on the flight path for enemy bombing raids on the Lucas factory (vital to the war effort) two miles to the East of us, off and on for almost four years!

Homeless, but my family cared for by my God-parents for a while and me now being fed via a Ration Book - I was still not consciously aware of food.

So I can imagine that it came as some comfort, when having found rented accommodation (in the same road as the home we had just lost!), my parents were able to

establish a regular food supply as well as give some safe shelter to my brother and I, in the pantry under the stairs, every night, as the air raids had not stopped and my father was often out at night when the sirens wailed, patrolling the area with other men from our road, as Air Raid Wardens; along with a bizarre piece of fire-fighting equipment (which was actually a household galvanised iron water tank with hand pump, on wheels – I played with its rusting remains as some sort of ‘fort’ down the bottom of the garden when I was older, along with being a proud owner of my own ‘armaments’, a catapult and a Jacques bow and arrows.)

On this one particular night however, there I was under the stairs in my carry-cot fast asleep, when another stray bomb exploded nearby, shaking the house and inevitably, the pantry!

I guess that this must be my very first lifelong memory of food, as the shelves carrying the precious cans and packets of the stuff, collapsed and the contents tumbled down on top of me trying to sleep there in my cot!!

Food had entered my consciousness in a very dramatic way!

1. JAPAN



These cameos span a period between 1982 – 91, when I first went to Japan and subsequently spent the next nine years working with MMK on the development and sale of artificial snow sport facilities and the associated surface – AstroGelände. During that time, my visits took me to the northern island of Hokkaido, to the Winter Olympics city of Sapporo and the most southern part of Honshu in Fukuoka. In 747's packed with businessmen, all in navy - blue suits and white shirts! Always in the careful hands of Kenji Enzaki, a most gracious of colleagues and friend. It was a most valuable period of learning, which gave me the confidence in knowledge to expand my thoughts on design and possibilities for the use of artificial snow surfaces, in the work that followed in the years to come.

THROW-UP OR GIVE UP!

This was the objective of two Japanese staff of the Mitsubishi Monsanto Chemical Corporation, Ito and Enzaki, when we stopped off in Kyoto to view an artificial ski slope, halfway up a mountain in the middle of a typhoon. (Typhoon and Hurricane are the same climatic condition outcome.)

Later, the two very wet executives took me to a bar where they proceeded to order a whole range of local food as well as beer, in the hope that they would end up the ‘top dogs’. At the time, Japanese beer was not that strong, even so, the locals still only drank small quantities. I should add that the three main brews, Kirin, Sapporo and Asahi, were very palatable, reminiscent of a Carlsberg, Stella Artois or even a Labatt Blue; so, I was on to a winner with that one.

However, following a large and varied selection of food (small servings), washed down with several cans of Sapporo, their ‘piece de resistance’ was to serve a green mousse (jelly fish) which was tasteless and then a little pot of purple squashy things which turned out to be snails in garlic sauce; which I wolfed down with relish saying ‘these snails taste just like those I eat when I’m in France!’ At which point they gave up and rushed to pay the bill and with me in tow, rather unsteadily left the bar; Round One to me!

HAIRY ARMS ON THE MENU!

My first visit to Japan was originally to visit an old friend, Kazuo Takase, his wife and daughter Masami, who back in 1969 had befriended my first wife Pat, when she was hitch hiking round that country, ostensibly to meet her pen friend of many years, who lived with her Shinto Buddhist Father in a temple on an island in the Inland Sea.

From that time on, we watched his progress in speaking English, which he frequently did when he was rather tipsy. On such occasions when he was showing off to his friends, he would make an international call to us at bizarre times like 3am in the morning.

However, on this particular occasion, some fifteen years on, he and his Family were to be my hosts. So it was that at mealtimes at Kasuo san's house in Hachioji shi, Tokio. His wife would sit on the step leading to the tatami matted dining room, with me enjoying her Japanese home cooking, while she and Grandma looked on.

Some nights Kasuo san would leave the table in a hurry (rushing off to one of his three mistresses!) leaving me with his daughter Masami, her Mom and Grandma who was still sitting on the tatami mat in the doorway to dining room.

Grandma would sit there and giggle behind her hands – as they do. What was she laughing at – me, I guess? As the evenings passed, she began to venture more into the room until one evening, she finally came and sat next to me making strange giggling noises behind her hands. Eventually, she reached out and started to stroke my arm. Of course, it was the hairs that fascinated her, as Japanese men have no hair on their arms (other than on the few remaining indigenous ones) – in fact they are devoid of any body hair except a few wisps! With Masami translating, they turned out to be very amusing moments. At such times you see the stark contrasts of the different cultures as well as remarkable similarities in Humanity.

I am reminded of those moments and the whole of the following nine years experiences, visiting cities and meeting people, in the extreme north and south of the country; when I now read emails from a friend Paul, who recently moved to Tokyo, with his wife Maribel and son Thomas, to take up

a prestigious appointment in the city. I should add that it was shortly before the Earthquake and Tsunami that devastated such a large section of the coast North of the capital.

He was actually travelling in an elevator up to his office, when the first shockwave struck. Thrown around almost like a 'rag doll', he survived and wrote me an email, in which he made it quite clear that had it happened in any other country than Japan, he is sure he would not be alive to tell the tale. Subsequently, he has also said that perhaps no other group of people, could have mastered the tragedy so completely and efficiently in such a short space of time and start to 'bounce back'.

Though here, I have to mention the people of Christchurch, New Zealand, who also recently suffered TWO major 'quakes, which has virtually destroyed the whole city centre and set of the continuous chain of 'aftershocks' that "terrorise" the emotions of those people even today!

In spite of all that and the gross effect it has had on that small country, over the past twelve months; they have not only managed to stage a World Class event – the Rugby World Cup, but win the trophy as well*.

Which leaves me asking, what is the common thread between these two very culturally different nations of people, in such situations?

* In 2015 the 'Kiwis' repeated their win, being the only team ever to do so.

SING FOR YOUR SUPPER!

First, I should thank Paul Goldstein (owner of Nevica skiwear AND a Porche 911 Carrera! Plus, much more now, as I write this.) for this timely advice – 'never choose the

largest Sake cup on the tray; never offer to take a Geisha home if you don't have a lot of money; always be ready to sing a song when called upon to do so'. Two out of three I have experienced!

So it was, again on my first visit to Japan, that one of these warnings turned into reality.

One weekend, Kasuo san and I joined a group of fellow printers who were going to a mountain spa for a 'stag weekend'. From living in a yukata for two days (eating, sleeping and drinking in a glorified cotton night gown), bathing naked in boiling hot springs with a towel balanced on one's head – to keep it dry -to a formal meal (dish of the day, raw carp) sitting crossed legged on tatami matting, served by 'middle aged' Geishas, who were jostling to serve the 'long nose' with the hairy arms! Never ever thought that my hairy arms had that effect on women, but at least I got seconds when it came to the delicious, fresh, melt in your mouth Carp - not Koi I should add!

The meal concluded with the chief host performing an ancient miner's dance, followed by my host Kazuo - san doing conjuring tricks, which he proceeded to explain how they were done, to rapturous applause. Looking on, seeing how his audience responded to the comic take – off of a real magician, reminded me of Tommy Cooper, without the fez.

Not quite the end though, as at the moment the applause ceased, everyone turned towards me waiting for a response!

With Paul's words of advice ringing in my head, and more than a few sakes inside me, I stood up, faced everyone and bowed.

Being a bit of a sucker for mass participation, I decided on a rendition of the famous Rugby ditty 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot'!

So, standing there dressed in my 'cotton night shirt', for want of a better description of a yukata, I began singing it with ALL the gestures; then got them all up on their unsteady feet to do it with me. So enthusiastically was it received that they demanded an encore.

The hotel didn't know what had hit it; these happy 'Japanese gentlemen' would not stop gesticulating and uttering "comin' fo to cally me hom", as they walked unsteadily around the hotel— even at breakfast the next day!

Incidentally, the evening concluded with a visit to the 'in – house strip show'! Quite bizarre, as all the audience were dressed in their night wear (yukatas), ready for bed!

A week later, in a busy street in Hachioji shi, I heard someone shout 'Dave san', from one of the cars stuck in the inevitable jam; it was our host, shouting and gesticulating like he had done when he was drunk the week before - the Japanese are really a fun-loving people in an odd sort of way. They certainly won't forget Takase's friend Dave san, the 'Long Nose' with the hairy arms, for a long time!!

DON'T TOUCH THE MERCHANDISE

TERRIYAKI prepared at the table, is an experience in its own right. Each item of food to be served is placed individually in a boiling broth in the order of the time it takes to cook – meat first and delicate straw mushrooms last. But when the sake, that goes with it, is served by a 6 ft. tall Chinese beauty, who would have got my vote in the 'Miss

World' contest any time, the pleasures of dining in Japan go into another orbit.

I have never eaten so slowly, consumed Sake so quickly, to have the tiny porcelain cup filled yet again by this beauty and been more distracted.

At the end of the meal, she and the lady owner accompanied us to the lift, got in with us (I was sweating) and then began to bow continuously as we walked out into the busy street and continued until we were out of sight; phew!!! The words of advice from Paul Goldstein come to mind!

Cosy little restaurants specialising in only one type of cuisine; conveyor - belts of Sushi passing before your eyes, tempting you to eat more; green tea before the beginning of a business meeting; raw carp – just like a very rare steak; pickled vegetables for breakfast and noodles for elevenses; that's Japanese eating as I remember it, from my visits in the 80's and early 90's. During which time I travelled the length of the country, from Hokkaido in the North, to Kyushu in the South. I was never short of another gastronomic experience or sight of the spectacular architecture and varied scenery that make up these still mysterious and complex islands and which influence its culture, arts and its deeply fascinating people!

2. UZBEKISTAN



These cameos span the period 1990 -94 when I found myself involved with, first persuading, and then, as an Honorary Attache to the National Olympic Committee, preparing the brief for the Mayor of Tashkent, to bid for the 2000 Summer Olympic Games (it went to Australia).

IN AT THE DEEP END

Having been dressed up in traditional square Uzbek hat, long quilted coat, sash with dagger, then presented on the stage of an auditorium seating 5,000 people; only to be whisked - off in an official car to a distinctly dark and car-less suburb of Tashkent, was quite an interesting first day introduction to this Central Asian Republic, newly freed from the controls of Moscow – it was 1991.

The car ride took us to the single storey dasha belonging to the then Head of the Uzbekistan National Bank – lovely guy, but too nice for the cloak and dagger stuff that was going on there during that nervy period; the birth of a new Republic, existing President securing his future – which lasted up to his death in 2016, KGB officers re-inventing themselves as businessmen and all that.

There were fourteen of us, sitting round the table, which on arrival, was covered completely with plates of cold food; nuts, pomegranates, grapes and raisins, cold meats including horse meat and large round loaves of unleavened bread. There was just enough space left for the fourteen place settings and a plate. What a spread; and as the vodka was being served, we were encouraged to sample the food.

Following the first speech of welcome by our host, a group of short stocky middle-aged ladies, dressed in the colourful local costume, came in with large bowls, which turned out to be soup with parts of the legs of goats sticking out of them.

You've guessed it, the food already covering the table was only for nibbling between the six courses that were about to be served, following the soup. Eating was regularly suspended by speeches and vodka. One soon learned that there was a pecking order to the speeches and on this

occasion, no one was going to be left out – being at the bottom of the pecking order, I ended up thanking the ladies who prepared the ‘banquet’.

While another lasting memory of that night were the magnificent silk carpets hanging on the walls and the gold leaf ‘painted wallpaper’. Oh! Not forgetting all the gold in the teeth of the men round the table (it reminded me of a certain James Bond film – and so did some of the antics our ex-KGB hosts tried to play on us later in the visit!).

A TRIBUTE TO JIM MUNN’S DIPLOMACY

At some point in our second visit, our group was split up and Jim Munn, Colin Chilton (the battery chicken man and Aston Villa fan) and I, were taken to a food - processing factory (E Coli HQ!), to discuss the possible deal of supplying them with chicken breeding systems.

Unknown to us, they had laid on a luncheon in the middle of the factory floor! Toasts, vodka and another full table was the order of the day, with the main dish of ‘boiled’ sheep’s head – it was positively grey and very difficult to eat - a. because it was sooo tough and because it looked so ghastly.

Jim and I were the key players on this occasion, so my job was to watch what manoeuvres were going on and keep him briefed, while Jim was doing the diplomacy bit; “World Stage” was a favourite phrase of his I remember, God bless him.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw it! THE SHEEP’S HEAD, on a tray and being proudly carried round the tables towards where Jim and I were sitting. At that point he saw it; “Oh Bugger! Francis, you’ve got to bail me out of this one,

for Christ's sake", were his only words before the head landed on the table in front of him.

Suffice to say, we shared the experience, but neither of us dared to touch the eyeballs that seemed to be staring at us, in an "I dare you" kind of way, from their grisly sockets, as we gingerly picked at the few bits of meat that appeared in odd places around the ears, on the slimy grey skull.

As Jim ate, I looked up to gauge the reactions of our hosts. They looked well pleased at our efforts/suffering and I whispered to Jim to stop. That deserved a good swig of neat vodka to clear the palate, if anything did!

They never did sign up to a purpose-built chicken factory. But some years later we heard that Colin had landed a contract with the Japanese; at least he made a few bob, that's more than we did!

A Sequel to this: quite recently, I was watching one of the episodes of Ewan MacGregor and Charley Boorman's "Long Way Round" series. They were in Kazakhstan (next door to Uzbekistan) and during their 'adventure' there, they too were subjected to the 'sheep's head' treatment, and I just knew how they were feeling at the moment the head appeared!! Not to mention the assorted testicle soup they were given in Mongolia later on in their journey!!

A SERB LOOKING FOR A FIGHT!

Yet another 'banquet', but this time it was serious stuff. We were back in the country on this occasion, because they were planning to make a bid for the 2000 Olympics and Jim Munn, who had been the Director of the highly acclaimed Birmingham bid for the '92 Games, had been invited to advise them on how to prepare their bid – I was his

assistant and 'bag carrier'; (it was a privilege to be so, as he is the finest operator I have ever worked with in sport). In fact, as newly appointed 'Honorary Attache's, we were both assisting the bid team – me drafting the letters for President Karimov to IOC President Samaranch, among other things!

On this occasion, our hosts had arranged for one of the two Russian IOC members to be present and he, unknown to our host, Ulugbek Estaev (ex KGB Colonel), had brought along the then Serbian IOC member – a former Olympic javelin thrower – a big nasty bugger as it turned out.

This was going to be hard work with lots of 'speeches' and a considerable amount of vodka (unless you learned the trick of topping up your glass with Coca Cola). Before the gathering, Jim and I agreed that I would sit on the opposite side of the table just off centre, so that we could keep eye contact while I was watching the faces and actions of the Russian and Serb who were sitting on either side of him.

While the objective of the evening was to secure support for the Tashkent bid, the whole affair broke up into four separate scenarios; one involved Aslan Rusmetov's (boss of the then new Uzbekistan Airlines; another ex-KGB colonel!) arrogant slob of a son, who was just loud mouthing for the pleasure of it. To such an extent that our host lost his cool and threw him and his girlfriend out, with much shouting and cursing and much embarrassment for the guests.

The second was Colin 'Chickens' Chilton, slowly getting 'pissed' at the end of the table with a couple of the hosts bodyguards and placing bets on who could drink the most – I had to try to keep the lid on that little lot, while trying to watch the main players.

The third was the Russian IOC member, who was trying to do a deal on trading shipments of dried fish to the Uzbeks in exchange for giving them his vote!

Finally, the arrogant Serb, who basically set out to insult everyone just to start a 'fight' and nearly succeeded with his host, who had a natural 'short fuse' and who had expected a more friendly and supportive 'guest'. I had heard about the 'War like' nature of the Serbs and that evening, plus the subsequent events in the Balkans, makes me feel very uneasy with that group of people today.

Frankly, it was one of the tensest meals I have ever experienced and I can't remember a thing of what we ate – most likely horse meat! Vodka definitely!

Oh! Uzbekistan Airlines DID eventually buy some Air Buses from BAE, unlike the chicken farms! While Jim and I were appointed as Attaches to the Uzbekistan National Olympic Committee and got to meet Juan Samaranch and his merry IOC people in Lausanne some months later.

Footnote: in the three-year period we were to be associated with this group, I was to discover that violent rows at meals were not uncommon, when Ulugbek Estaev was around; wherever or whoever was hosting!

3. CANADA



These cameos took place between 1956 and 1991. The first being a part of the Walter Rhodes Educational Trust Scholarship tour of eastern Canada. Followed, 21 years later with a journey from Alberta to British Columbia and back and a further three subsequent lecture visits; the last being in 1991.

NO RATION BOOKS

It was 1956, and we still had some rationing of food in Britain. I was in the throes of completing my 6th form studies, when I found myself in the early stages of a journey through Eastern Canada on a Walter Rhodes Educational Scholarship - that would also have influence on my life from there on. To be cruising up the St. Lawrence River on an ocean liner was a 'fairy tale' opening to what was to be a journey of a lifetime.

Early on, it was clear that here was a rich country, which on the face of it, from a teenager's perspective, was untouched by the recent war in Europe (I was later to learn of the sacrifice made by the Canadian forces, especially on D - Day and in Belgium and the Netherlands; not forgetting WW1).

But it was the lunch, held in our honour, at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, on an island off Toronto on Lake Ontario, that brought it all home to me. On the vast table laid for sixty people, were items of food that we had either only dreamed of or only seen occasionally in the shops back home. Celery comes to mind, as this was a hot August day and there were large sticks of this in cut glass jugs on the table. One of my favourite vegetables back home; I never saw it on the table until mid-November, when my Mother bought it from a lady who used to sell it from an old tin bath, outside our local post office on the Stratford Road.

All I remember of that meal was the celery, 'exotic' food, speeches and the grand surroundings of the yacht club, which I later came to realise was a reflection of the remnants of 'Old Empire'.

FISH FOR STARTERS!

Still in Toronto, we were guests of the President of Canada Packers, the country's largest meat handling and processing plant. Our first stop was to be lunch (again); followed by a tour of the plant.

Two things struck me; one the apparent informality of our host the CEO, he didn't wear a jacket – very un-English! Second, they served salmon as the main course; very diplomatic I thought later, when we came to see cattle and pigs being stunned with a sledgehammer and gutted before our eyes, less than an hour after the meal!

Such a young and vibrant country; we saw so many things we had only read about in our geography books, and as W. H. Rhodes Trust Scholars, we were treated so courteously, by Mayors, Government Ministers and company Presidents.

I returned 20 years later to see the other coast. This was followed by a four-month sabbatical working in Vancouver, and a later visit to Sault St. Marie in 1991 to speak at an international conference on Winter Cities. What a beautiful country and I still have links there today!

FISH, A SAUNA AND POLITICS!

1991 and it was at “Soo Saint Mairee” – Sault St. Marie - Ontario, that the Winter Cities conference host invited my dear friend, Prof. Larry Neal, Gerry from Alaska (with the beaver fur hat that stopped my brain from freezing later that week) and myself, to his home in the snow - covered forest on the edge of town, for a barbecue and sauna. (Can't tell you about the sauna in Uzbekistan, as there was no food involved – only ladies! Maybe if you pressed me!!!!!!!).

Of course, we started with the sauna, but our host being on the impatient side, dragged us out of the heat in our towels, into the minus 24 C night to his barbecue, which, while we slowly froze in our towels, he started to light. Fortunately for us, we left it to heat up and returned to the sauna. We declined the second visit to add the fresh wild salmon steaks, but stayed in the sauna until we were called to get dressed for supper.

Still tingling from the sauna and cold outside air, we sat down to lightly smoked fresh wild salmon, a 'Jilly Goulden style' Ontario white wine and delightful company.

Little did I know that the next day, I would meet a real live Indian Chief – Chief Billy Diamond, head of the Cree Indians; multi – millionaire and owner of Air Creebec and then be chatted up by a real Inuit 'Princess' – Norma Cassie to none Inuits! Plus meeting the man who led the First Nation Indian negotiations with the Canadian Government, which concluded several years later, with the Canadian Parliament ceding over half the Northern Territories to the First Nation people to self-rule within the framework of the Dominion. Can you imagine the Americans doing that?

Nowhere is there a better example of such a meaningful return of land to its original inhabitants in the World. Something that an American historian cites as an example of a more effective way to establish a lasting peaceful and co-operative relationship between indigenous people and the 'newcomers'; in essence, a Commonwealth of Nations, small and large. Something the USA and Australia could still learn from and certainly the Spanish, who most definitely failed to even aspire to in Latin America, in my view.

OVER A BILLION SOLD!

Back in 1976 few people had heard of McDonalds in the UK, but in Canada, the Big Yellow M sign was everywhere. On The Trans-Canada Highway on the outskirts of Calgary there was one particular golden M sign, with the phrase “over a billion sold” underneath. I was impressed, but not so much as when, on the most westerly point of the Canadian Pacific Rim National Park on Vancouver Island, in an out-post called Uculet, Pat and I found a wooden shack advertising food and drink.

On a recently painted sign outside advertising their hamburgers, it read “Over One Hundred Sold” – there’s optimism with a touch of humour for you, David and Goliath of the catering industry. We were tempted but it was closed.

After the earlier experience, that day, of flying in a single engine Otter float plane over the Pacific, chasing Killer Whales and spotting Walruses, a burger and a beer would have been very welcome. Instead, we settled for a freshly cooked steak on a log fire at the campsite in the Pacific Rim National Park later that evening, which was reward enough. In fact, there were a few tasty meals cooked on open fires during that memorable first visit to the Pacific Northwest – I still have the photos to remind me.

What this cameo fails to say is that, throughout that journey, we didn’t eat one McDonald’s burger! Nor again the next year on a lecture tour of BC and Alberta; In fact, it wasn’t until I was back to work in Vancouver two years later with the Brooms, that, on a trip down to Seattle, to see the Tutankhamun Exhibition, that we had breakfast in a McDonalds and my first was to bite into an ‘Egg McMuffin’!

IT'S NOT ALWAYS WHAT IT LOOKS!

Northern Ontario is nothing but forest and lakes for thousands of kilometres – the Canadian Shield - it was in this setting that I spent five days of huntin', shootin' and fishin' with the rest of the Rhodes Trust students, back in 1956.

Each day we would assemble outside to stand to attention as the Canadian flag was raised – a new experience for us all as, back home, we only saw that on the films or TV (if you had one in those days!) Immediately after this we would go to the 'mess' for breakfast.

On this particular day I happened to be first at the table and grabbed the jug holding the hot coffee just as the others arrived. I remember someone shouting, but I was too busy pouring the milk into my coffee. It immediately curdled and at that moment the girl who had shouted was standing by my side roaring with laughter and holding a large plate of pancakes! The curdled coffee turned out to be the hot Maple Syrup destined for the pancakes – OOOPS! You have to learn fast in this World.

4. VENEZUELA



Cameo from 1991

CROCODILES AND THE LAMBADA!

Lake Maracaibo is really an inlet from the blue seas of the Caribbean and one of the few remaining sites in the world, where villages are literally built on floating man-made islands. The first Europeans saw the similarity with Venice, hence Venezuela “Little Venice.” Its other claims to fame are its oil, Simon Bolivar - who masterminded and led the overthrow of the Spanish rule in South America and more recently, a President named Hugo Chavez!!!

It was here in Maracaibo, that Howard Darbon (Sports Council, Bedford Office) and I were speaking at the Pan American Physical Education Conference in 1991; the topic being ‘Sport for All’. There were delegates from Colombia, Brasil, Chile, Costa Rica, Aruba, US, Mexico and of course, Venezuela.

As you can imagine, it was a lively affair, especially as the speaker from Brasil had brought ten of her post-grad students to help her with her presentation “Sport for All through Dance.”

We travelled daily, by school bus through the rush hour traffic, with the Brasilians. On the day of her talk, they decided to play the theme music and rehearse their presentation on the bus! The next thing I recall were two of the young students grabbing Howard and I and proceeding to show us how to dance the Lambada – sexy or what; on top of a hearty breakfast and in a careering bus! The journey was long enough for us to grasp (bad choice of words) the rudiments of this hot dance, so that on arrival we all ‘Lambada’d’ off the bus, across the car park and into the lecture hall, much to the amusement of the other delegates.

Where does the food come in you are asking? Who the hell needs food when you’ve got the Lambada!

The next day, however, our host Carlos Vera Guardia of the World Leisure Organisation, had arranged for the Head of the PE Faculty, at the University of Zulia, to take us to a unique restaurant in town; where, in a dusty backyard, on the most uncomfortable benches I have ever sat on, we were served with Crocodile steaks!! UMM? Tastes like guinea pig, or is it hedgehog, a touch of rabbit may be, but more like ----- CHICKEN!!!

The place mats were crocodile skin; the menu cover was crocodile skin and crocodile skins hung from the trees and on the walls around us!

Care for seconds? No thanks, I prefer the Lambada, or should it be a Lambrusco?!

5. USA



Cameos in the period between 1978 - today

YOU MUST GO TO MO'S!

How often has someone said to you, “If you’re going to ...X you must go and eat at ...Y?” Certainly, for me, before going to the Pacific Northwest of Canada and the US, someone in Brum, heard I was going to Oregon and they said, “you must go to MO’s.” Then again, when I was in British Columbia, three different people at different times and different places ALL said, “you must go to MO’s”! Why?

All I knew was that MO’s was in a place called Newport on the Oregon Coast and they served the finest Clam Chowder these people had ever tasted.

So it was, that on a late autumn Sunday morning, I was driving away from Eugene, where I had spent a stimulating week with my dear friend Prof. Larry Neal and his students at U of O, that I made the decision to return to Portland via the Oregon coast, for no other reason than I wanted to see the Pacific again.

I had been driving along the shoreline, for around an hour when I approached an inlet and what appeared to be a small fishing settlement. Ahead of me was a long arching bridge over the inlet and a road sign saying Newport. With the name buzzing in my head ‘where had I heard it before’, I came over the brow of the bridge and there, to the right of me, painted in 6ft high letters on the side of a white clapboard grain store was a red sign saying MO’S and an arrow pointing down to the village below; serendipity!

Turning off the highway and down into the main street with its white clapboard buildings, it all looked deserted apart from one house or was it a shop, with cars and pickup’s outside and a red sign over the window announcing – MO’s! There, the noise of many people chattering and laughing

plus the steamed- up windows spelt action and I was DESTINED to be inside amongst it all.

I remember being greeted by a youngish woman in a long white apron, who ushered me around the crowded tables to the only one with a spare seat – the place was heaving!

Around this table sat a couple from New Zealand, another couple from Belgium and a guy from the East, New York, or Boston or wherever and me. The weird thing was- every one of them told the same story – they were all told by friends, that “they must go to MO’s” if they got to Oregon!

Oh, and the Clam Chowder was delicious. So, in time honoured tradition, I will say it once more – “If you ever go to Oregon, you must go to MO’S in Newport”; you won’t be disappointed (if it’s still there of course).

PEOPLE NOT THE FOOD!

Here, I will be honest and say that beyond the memory of Mo’s, in Newport, Oregon; it is people that are key to my experiences and memories in that country, not the food – I still have to get the Katz Delicatessen in New York City and enjoy one of their ‘Yiddish’ home cooked Corned Beef sandwiches, or should it be Pastrami?!

Surprisingly, it was through the Daily Mail Ski and Snowboard Shows in London, where I met some of the memorable Americans, I mention here. Two that I am only connected with through Facebook now, but who became good friends through those shows. Dan Egan, extreme skier, of international repute, sailing expert and journalist, among other things. Jim Salestrom, who annually entertained us all with his ‘John Denver’ style songs, for a number of years and who, so loved his visits that he and his

wife Pam, ventured regularly to the Western Isles of Scotland, guitar in hand and perform with the Locals!

Between 2012 and 2015, in San Antonio, Texas; Boulder, Colorado; Saint Louis, Missouri, I had the pleasure of meeting, getting to know and work with two memorable people. Both connected through my work and the ski product, Mike Jones, sales head, at Grass Worx LLC and Brooks Crosby, creator of “Shredder Ski Gym’ in Boulder! Perhaps the most exciting project I have ever been involved in, in my career. A real story of a dream, beginning and outcome in just ten years! And I am honoured to have been there from the beginning – I still have the drawings I produced for “The Journey” and the pleasure of being there on site, to see it evolve.

Mike sadly moved on, and his personal efforts to reintroduce the ‘Original Product’, created back in the early ‘70’s; were not progressed by his superiors on his departure. We stay connected through Facebook! However, it was with Mike that I made my second visit to Vail, though not in the snow season! By chance, I already knew that Hayden Scott, one of those youngsters I knew in the early days of the English Ski Council and worked with at the Daily Mail events in the ‘90s, lived there. So, I had emailed him ahead of the visit and got to enjoy a beer, long overdue chat, and a visit the Colorado Ski Museum, where we enjoyed a final hour together.

6. United Kingdom



Cameos from a period 1968 - 2006

LUNCH WITH THE MAN WHO DESIGNED 'GORGEOUS' GUSSIE MORANS' FRILLY KNICKERS!

Teddy Tinling, the late international Haute Couturier of women's tennis, with clients such as 'Gorgeous' Gussie Moran, Maureen Connelly, Billie Jean King, Chrisie Evert, and Yvonne Goolagong, was also crazy about tenpin bowling! That's how I met him, back in the 70's, when, working for the Sports Council in London; among other exciting things, I was responsible for looking after the grant aid affairs of the British Tenpin Bowling Association – Teddy was the President.

Remember the 70's, silver platform shoes, purple flared trousers, medallions, and tight-fitting flowery shirts? You've got it – that was Teddy; but he was already 6' 7" in his stocking feet and very bald. In fact, he had the countenance of the Mekon (Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, and all that!), which made his image more incongruous; but an absolutely charming man.

Coming from a 'silver spoon' family he had that inbred confidence and style, which goes with the breeding and education, and he knew the best places to eat. So it was that one lunchtime he 'called a meeting' at Simpsons in the Strand. Like many exclusive clubs and restaurants in London, the management NEVER forget their special clients. So it was with Teddy, who, having been welcomed on the stairs by the Maître D, then led us to his usual table; at which point Ted proceeded to tell us of his first time there. When at the age of fourteen, his Father took him for the first time and not only introduced him to all the staff, but also the table he always sat at AND the member of staff who would always serve his meals when he went again. Not forgetting the fact that Simpsons specialise in the 'grub' all public schoolboys are familiar with- roast lamb, beef or pork, mashed potatoes, cabbage and gravy, plus steamed

pudding with custard. Those are the specialities of lunch there.

More importantly, the staff never forget which type and cut of meat you prefer and even after all the years, the table the family always sat at!! So, it was for me, a Brummie in the 'land of kings', on that day. (I remember that I chose leg of Welsh lamb, new potatoes, peas, gravy and the essential, for me, mint sauce, followed by sponge pudding and custard.)

Pat, my first wife and I were to enjoy his hospitality on numerous occasions during the time we lived in London, including 'Ladies Night'** during Wimbledon fortnight – Billy - Jean King, Yvonne Goolagong, Chrisie Evert et al. With people like Ted around, London was a great place to be in the '70's.

Later, Teddy, who had been 'Black Balled' from the All - England Lawn Tennis Club many years earlier (he was gay), was the only non – aligned person in the whole international tennis 'Establishment' who could be called upon to mediate without bias in the turmoil, which heralded in the world of professional tennis and in particular, money prizes at the All- England Club.

He was a remarkable guy, with more than a touch of English eccentricity and memorable dining experiences.

I think it is worth adding that he was so keen on ten- pin bowling that, on his frequent flights to New York, he took his own personalised bowling ball with him, cabin baggage!!!!!! Try doing that now!

Not only that but over the years he had become friends with an Italian American, Yellow Taxi cab driver. On arrival, this

taxi driver was waiting to collect him, not to go to the hotel but to their favourite bowling centre for a game!

Depending on the time of his arrival, his taxi friend would then drive him back to his home to have a good honest Italian Family meal before facing the 'pressures' of the New York 'Rag Trade'!

** I was watching the ESPN channel the other night and by chance it covered a short interview with Djorkovic, in which he was arguing for the removal of the middle weekend break in the tournament!!!! How lacking in taste and culture - then he is a Serb after all!

BREAKFAST AT PLAS Y BRENIN – OR A DAY THAT GAVE A NEW MEANING TO MY LIFE

1979 was not the happiest year of my life, and it was in the early hours of an April morning that I decided to drive to Snowdonia with my climbing gear, with the simple idea of losing myself.

It was dawn as the car crested the moorland that separates the course of the River Dee, back through the border to Cheshire and the River Conwy, which flows out through the Conwy Estuary into the Irish Sea. At that point on the A5, you get your first view of the heart of Snowdonia, with the Snowdon Horseshoe, Moel Saibod, Tryfan and the Glyders in all their glory and on that morning in the early morning sunlight, I could see that they were all covered in snow.

To get to the base of Snowdon you have to pass the National Mountain Centre, Plas y Brenin, in Capel Curig, which had almost become a second home to me, over recent years. On that day however, I had not intended stopping but at that moment I caught sight of Roger Orgill, the Director, and an old friend, so I just stopped to say hi!

“You must come and have breakfast, because there are two old friends you must meet”, he said. Though I had other plans on my mind, I hesitatingly accepted the invitation.

There in the dining room sat John and Mary Samuel, friends from the British skiing establishment – John being the Sports Editor for the Guardian newspaper and at the time, principal UK correspondent for World skiing. They were so welcoming, and the mug of tea and a hot English or should I say Welsh breakfast, toast, and marmalade, slowly drew my thoughts away from my plans and into theirs!

The April snow conditions on the Snowdon Horseshoe were the best for a number of years and apparently, the plan was for Roger to take John and Mary up to the snowfield and further, should they feel up to it, as John wanted to write an article for the newspaper on the dangers of ‘winter climbing’! I was hooked; so, kitted out with ice axes and crampons we all set off.

The plan was to take the Miners Track and hopefully make our way directly up the snowfield to the top of Crib Goch – normally a zig zag stony track.

However, shortly after arriving in the Horseshoe, we saw the yellow RAF Mountain Rescue helicopter hovering over the South Ridge of Snowdon and in the icy clear morning light we could see a lot of activity. In short, it turned out to be a group of ATC cadets and the helicopter was searching for the body of their Leader, who had fallen down the steep side of the South Ridge an hour or so earlier!

Roger had to make a quick decision, that group was in disarray and trying to get off the mountain! They were ill – equipped and leaderless. So, we decided to make a snow hole to protect Mary and John took care of her while Roger, cramponed and with ice axe, cut steps up the packed snow

face to the cornice that overhung the top of Crib Goch, while I belayed him with my ice axe – joining him, shortly after, once he had set up the belay for me.

We were just in time, as the group of teenagers, in shock, arrived on the col. As quickly as possible we set up a rope, sending the most senior and who also appeared to be the most responsible lad of the group, down to safe ground in the base of the cwm, from where he could encourage the others. We lowered them one by one through the snow cornice down the rope to safe ground – yes, their leader was dead, but a mountain rescue team was on its way to lead them ‘off the hill’.

Even though Mary was suffering from boots that were badly chaffing her ankles and by now, cold as well, all four of us eventually assembled on the col to make the final steps to the crest of Snowdon together.

Photos taken, we set off with a warm drink inside us as time was pressing and the light was going off the mountain. As Mary was really suffering, Roger decided that I should push on ahead and get to the Youth Hostel at the top of the Llanberis Pass and telephone the centre to say that we were alright but that we would be late back, and would they keep some hot food for us?

I remember clearly that John opted to walk with me for a while, during which time we talked of many things, including life and death after our earlier encounter AND the beauty and danger of mountains. At some point I must have quoted a piece of poetry by William Ellis –

“Downhill I came, Hungry yet not starved;
Cold, yet had a warmth within me that would guard me from
the North Wind;

Tired, so that sleep was the sweetest thing beneath a roof...
....”

Suffice to say, we returned safely – hungry yet not starved – and had a truly welcoming meal and a quiet and reflective evening.

About two weeks later, under the Travel section of the Saturday Guardian there appeared a full - page article and photographs, written by John, recounting that day, with the heading -

‘How to climb Snowdon and Live!’

It concluded with the words I had quoted on the journey back down the mountain. That’s a professional for you and a grand couple - they will never know how much that day meant to me, then and now. I still have the cutting of that article to remind me of the importance of LIFE!

UPSTAGED!

C.O.L.A is short for the Camping and Outdoor Leisure Association and every year they hold a big trade exhibition in Harrogate. It was in the ‘heady’ days of the English Ski Council that I use to get invited to a variety of functions as its Director.

On this particular occasion I was a guest of the president of COLA at their Annual Dinner. Of course, there is no such thing as a ‘free lunch’ and on this occasion I was expected to toast the organisation. What they didn’t tell me was that they had a principal speaker who would give the keynote address and who was none other than one of the finest ‘after dinner’ speakers known at the time - Col. John Blashford - Snell – he must have been knighted by now for all his explorations and Operation Raleigh? Frankly, he

deserves a knighthood for his *speeches* alone and I had to follow that.

However, what THEY didn't know was that on that very day, Sir Edmund Hilary turned up unannounced, to launch one of his company's new mountaineering products (Kayyam). Of course, the only thing they could do was (a) invite him to the top table and (b) ask him to say a few words! That meant five of us speaking – the COLA President, Col. Blashford - Snell, the Secretary of COLA, Sir Edmund Hilary, and me!! Followed by a cabaret act featuring the TV Celebrity, Dickie Henderson! AWESOME!

It was way past 11.30 when my turn came, and everyone was flagging. So, I threw away my speech, thanked them on behalf of ESC, made the right noises about the importance and influence of COLA in the outdoor leisure market and concluded by saying something like "Now it's over to you Dickie"! I have no idea what we ate that night, just the memory of those two remarkable men!!

However, I cannot forget this giant of a man, with a spirit to match, who we all lovingly remember as the first men to reach the summit of Mount Everest – Edmund Hilary with Tensing Norgay. Or were they first? Could it have been the famous duo of Mallory and Irvine, who on the 6th of June 1924 were last seen just 800 feet short of the summit? Strange, Hilary and Tensing reached it in the same month and almost on the same day back in June 1951.

All I know is that six months before he went missing, Andrew Irvine wrote these words in his personal diary, which touch me, deeper now, than I could have ever imagined; "When I am an old man. I will look back on Christmas 1923 as the day when to all intents and purposes I was born. I don't think anyone has 'lived' until they have been on skis."

(These words now hang on the wall in my study as I look out on the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes, just 40 miles north of the snow - capped Cotopaxi and daydream of my moments on skis, up in that magical white 'Heaven' and 'Bluebird Skies'.)

A SEQUEL - how life can be so interconnected! In another Cameo in the section on 'Memorable Meals in Ecuador,' entitled "Gas – tronomy, Poker and Rugby. The host, Peter Taylor, had two unmistakeable, signed original photographs of Mount Everest on his dining room wall.

It transpires that his Grand Father was a member of the previous unsuccessful attempt on the summit in 1922, again lead by Mallory and with Irvine in attendance.

I was privileged to be shown other photographs of that expedition and to share in other related stories past, present and future of this great era of British expeditions with him. With such a close connection, I am sure that in the years to come we will hear more about his Grand Father, the 1922 connection and perhaps more of Peter in the process?

Well, almost twelve months later, and having returned to my 'scribing' for a few hours, I can add a fascinating and very topical sequel. The Grand Father was Arthur Wakefield, and recently his relatives discovered a Gold Olympic Medal among some of his remaining possessions. Apparently, it had been cast specially for Alpinism, as Baron de Coubertin, founder of the Modern Olympic movement, considered it as a most pure activity and wished it to be recognised along with the other sports represented at the Games.

So, following the Paris Olympics in 1924, the Baron travelled to Chamonix, where at the foot of Mont Blanc, he presented medals to the complete 1922 Everest Team. Never before or since has this Olympic medal been cast and presented for Alpinism.

The story is not finished, as Arthur Wakefield's relatives contacted Kenton Cool, the Gloucestershire mountaineer, who was planning to attempt a TWELVTH successful ascent of Mount Everest in June 2012, the London Olympics year. They asked if he would carry the medal to the summit, not only in memory of the 1922 Team but also as a tribute to Mallory and Irvine who died in the attempt, as members of the fateful 1924 Expedition.

Amazingly and with much relief, Kenton Cool succeeded in reaching the summit yet again, along with the Olympic Gold Medal in what has been a truly memorable year for Britain and its people.

CLIFF HEAVEN AND THE SKILLS AT CARVING.

Cliff Heaven was one of the most talented amateur craftsmen I have ever met. He was also my Father- in- Law for nine years. While he was head of department and buyer for the furniture section of a large department store in Birmingham for all his working life, his real love was making, altering, re-building, re-laying or decorating things in and around his house, or anyone's house given half the chance. He came from that breed of men, who grew up learning not to waste anything. His shed was full of tobacco tins and jam jars filled with screws, nails, gadgets, and widgets of all kinds, which he knew 'would come in useful one day' – and likely as not they did! My Dad did the same!

The son of a coach - builder and wheelwright, I sometimes think that the underlying factor in all this was his desire to be skilful in all he attempted, which he undoubtedly was.

There was no better example of this than in his skill and understanding of carving meat.

The memory of sitting down to a Sunday roast of 'silverside' beef or a special occasion and watching him first 'wipe' the blade of the carving knife over the steel before starting to carve, lives on. I learned the difference between carving beef, lamb and pork; carving a turkey or duck – there was a correct cut for everything, and he knew them all.

Every Sunday, his wife Nancy, would roast a piece of silverside beef to perfection, bring it to the table to be carved and go back to the kitchen to collect the vegetables and her 'Yorkshire Puddings'; at which point Cliff would call out "this beef isn't cooked enough!" Of course, this was immediately followed by Nancy flying back into the dining room in a state of apoplexy. Poor lass, she fell for it every time - week in, week out!

I suppose it is memorable to me because, not only was he so good at it, but that as a youngster, I had never experienced it with my own Dad, who left all matters relating to food for my Mother to do. He lit the fires and tended to them, and all the other household and garden chores, but never cooking.

For me, there is a real satisfaction in carving meat properly, and a carving set we had around that time, is still, over 40 years later, dutifully 'wiped' on the steel before I carve – which I do regularly, when we are all at the table or we have guests. It's a very satisfying feeling to see the meat slices on the plates of Family and friends.

“Thanks for all the guidance and encouragement Cliff and your friendship”.

I never did manage to beat him at Crib though.

IN POLITICS TRUST NO ONE or THE DINNER THAT ALMOST WASN'T!

The Recreation Management Conference was THE national event of the year for those involved in sport and leisure management in the UK back in the 70's and 80's.

On this particular occasion, it was to be held in Cardiff at the Welsh National Sports Centre and on the final evening we were to hold the conference dinner, in Cardiff City Hall, for around 400 delegates and guests, including the guest speaker, Sir Robin Brooke, the then Chairman of the Sports Council.

Around 4.30pm a phone call was received from City Hall, saying that they were waiting for the caterers as no one had arrived? At this, my boss Harry Littlewood turned to Harold Oakes the CEO of the Welsh Sports Council and asked what was going on. Red faced he called his secretary, who basically said “what caterers?” – they had failed to arrange the food for the dinner!

Those are the moments when you really do wish the ground would open up and swallow you! But Harry was not one for giving up and he called every one of us to his room. In less than an hour, we, his team, had organised for the catering staff at the centre to stay on and prepare a makeshift three-course meal for 400. While the local hospital provided bed sheets for tablecloths, plates and cutlery and the transport for taking the food to City Hall. All we needed was the booze and serving staff.

North London Polytechnic, who was running their first national recreation management diploma course, had sent all their post grad students to the conference – they became the waiters! While Sir Harry Llewellyn (Olympic Show-jumping Gold Medallist on Foxhunter), Chairman of the Welsh Sports Council –seeing his plot to discredit London failing rapidly – called the brewery he owned, to arrange for boxes of wine to be delivered to City Hall immediately.

The delegates had to be stalled, but for how long before they got restive? While the Polytechnic guys were laying the tables. The big guys in our team, two Johns I remember, volunteered to keep the delegates ‘at bay’, while we were frantically opening wine and filling glasses until THE ONLY bottle opener we had, broke!! I can see it now, Roger Bottomley, from the London region office rushing out into the street, hailing a taxi, and disappearing into the night.

To cut a long story short he went to two pubs and ‘bought’ their bottle openers, to finish the job.

The impressive foyer of Cardiff City Hall was full of very merry and hungry delegates by the time we opened the doors to the banqueting suite – where I must add, the caretaker, in his shirt sleeves, was sitting up on stage at the grand piano playing the most delightful light classical music! While we rushed to the kitchens to start serving the food!

Speeches given – Sir Robin Brook, Chairman of the Sports Council was guest speaker - and delegates staggering home well content after ‘a good night’, is all I remember as eight of us were joined by some very notable doyens of the industry at the time and friends of ours, to do all the washing up!

Menu:

Minestrone Soup (packet)

Sliced Ham – warmed up.

Chips (soggy) and mixed vegetables (packet)

Pudding – can't remember!

Oh! In six years of the conference being held, it was the only one where we received letters of thanks or congratulations from delegates! Must have been the wine?

AN EASTER BIRTHDAY WITH MUSLIM FRIENDS

Just married but no wife in the country (Chela was finishing her contract in Galapagos) I was faced with celebrating my 50th birthday alone. When I received a phone call from some Malaysian friends inviting me to join them to celebrate my birthday.

Fawzia Ariff was a good friend of mine from working with the Daily Mail exhibitions and her cousin Lan had been introduced to me shortly after he arrived in Birmingham to undertake post – graduate studies at the university.

He lived in an apartment in Edgbaston with his new wife Fadzi. They were top draw people in Malay society, where Fawzia's dad was HM Queen Elizabeth's representative in Penang.

On this particular occasion, Easter Sunday, we gathered for a typical Malay meal of lightly spiced food, Halal chicken, fish, rice, and vegetables, all eaten with the fingers. By that time, I had become quite adept at shovelling the food with my thumb, off my three fingers and into my mouth, not an easy matter if you don't want it all in your lap!

At the end of the meal, they presented me with a really big birthday cake, candles, and all, with a big 50 on it, but at the

bottom my birth date written to the Muslim Calendar; I still have the photograph of the moment when I cut that cake.

Equally memorable was later, sitting watching a video of a debate between a South African Muslim cleric named Deedat and the subsequently, infamous, American Evangelist, Jimmy Swaggart, on the topic "Is the Bible the Word of God?" Well, that is a question for each individual to ponder and answer for themselves!

Not only a milestone date but also a new spiritual viewpoint to mull over in quiet moments later on in my life; beats balloons and streamers any day for being memorable and touching.

While all of them are now back in Malaysia in the 'bosom of the Family' we remain in contact by email, Facebook, or Skype all these thousands of miles apart and years on.

However, recently I was inveigled into responding to this very same question, again orchestrated by Fawzia; who, since her return to Malaysia, in recent years has become a very devout Shia Muslim. In a rather more than forthright way, on social media and directed at both Chela and myself.

While I am reluctant to enter into such discussions privately, I consider social media as a public domain in which you keep most if not all opinions to one-self. So, after the third 'intrusion' I broke my silence and from the following poem I wrote as part of my reply, I think you will get the gist of where I come from: -

Written by - Ghiyath al-Din Abu'l Fath Omar ibn Ibrahim al-Nisaburi Khayyami. Better known as Omar Khayyam, mathematician, astronomer, and poet.

The Poem is called “Profession of Faith”

The temple I frequent is high,
A Turkish – vaulted dome – the sky,
That spans the world with mystery,
Not quite a Muslim is my creed,
Nor quite a Giadour; my faith indeed
May startle some who hear me say,
I’d give my pilgrim staff away,
And sell my turban, for an hour
Of music in a fair one’s bower.
I’d sell the rosary for wine,
Though holy names around it twine.

And prayers the pious make so long
Are turned by me to joyous song;
Or, if a prayer I should repeat,
It is at my beloved’s feet.

They blame me that my words are clear;
Because I am not what I appear;
Nor do my acts my words belie –
At least, I shun hipocracy.
It happened that but yesterday
I marked a potter beating clay.
The earth spoke out – What dost thou strike?
Both thou and I are born alike;
Though some may sink and some may soar,
We are all earth and nothing more.

I dedicate this poem to Fawzia – Auntie Jah, as she is
sadly no longer with us.

BECKY'S FIRST 'BLACK TIE' EXPERIENCE

The 40th Anniversary of the founding of the Midland Ski Club, one of the largest English ski clubs outside London, was to be cause for a celebration.

Rebecca was sixteen and we thought it would be fun for her to be my partner at the celebratory dinner to be held at the Edgbaston Golf Club ***.

One lasting memory I have of the MSC is that its members always did things in style, and so it was to be on this occasion. Attended by many of the founding members as well as the 'youngsters' of the club, it was both a time to reflect upon the happy, fun and adventure packed past as well as, for me, being re-acquainted with old friends, from the heady 70's and 80's, supported with good food and wine. It was hard to remember that all this was organised by 'volunteers'; something I never fail to applaud when working with such people in the name of one or other sport. Yet another group of ordinary people achieving extraordinary things!

For Becky, it was her first 'formal' dinner, with speeches and personalities from the sport. On this occasion, old friends, Konrad Bartelski (British World and Olympic downhill racer), and Nic Fellows (British Slalom and GS racer, now Channel 4 television producer and commentator for skiing and snowboard). I recall her chuckling along to the well-honed anecdotes presented by John Arnold, MC for the night, prior to introducing one of the speakers; quite masterful.

Nights like that remind me of how special this sport is and how it has influenced much of my life, both privately and professionally.

Four years on as I write this, Becky still remarks on the night and how welcoming the group had been to her – snowboarder as she is!

Footnote – in early 2016, whilst rummaging through some papers, I came across the menu for that celebratory dinner - Saturday 21st May 2005!

We had a choice of dishes, which we had to choose in advance I recall, so here is what I chose:

- Smoked Mackerel Gateau
- Gressingham Duck Breast
- Warm French Apple Flan

*** Here is a Family connection; my Grandfather, Richard ‘Dick’ Bowden, was a member of the Edgbaston Swimming Club, who would gather annually at the lake in the grounds of the golf club, on Boxing Day, break the sheet of ice and take a swim, before returning home to yet another hearty Victorian Christmas time luncheon! I have discovered recently that such acts of exposure to extreme cold, was very fashionable among men in the late Victorian period. He even swam across Llandudno Bay, from the Great Orme to the Little Orme on his 40th birthday; clearly Dick Bowden was one of the boys!

TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

John and Gail Turnbull must be two of a ‘dying breed’ of staunch traditionalists when it comes to Christmas and especially on the food side of the festivities.

The Turnbull Family had been our next-door neighbours from the time of Chela and my wedding and the growing up of our respective children, Emma, Mark, and Becky. You often hear of the ‘Neighbours from Hell’ but little of

‘Neighbours from Heaven’! They were the latter and such an integral part of our family life that we (both families) shared many happy and sad moments together, often up the garden on the deck, sitting by one of John’s roaring log fires, at any time of the year. But the most memorable moments were when we shared Christmas Day together.

I first realised that John was an aficionado of traditional food when one day I looked up the garden and saw smoke coming out from under the eaves of his shed and John emerging, coughing, and spluttering. I rushed out to see if he was alright, only to find that he had been checking the ham he had hanging up there, being smoked!! An old Virginian (or was it Kentucky) recipe he had ‘lifted’ from the Internet. The second thing I discovered was that he was a fanatical Delia Smith fan – his desserts are out of this world, especially his ginger trifle! Like Delia he never skimps on the cream!

Christmas dinner for John and Gail began earlier in the Autumn (just like our parents) with the making of the Christmas pudding and mincemeat. While on the day itself, it was a team effort with John as ‘Captain’, steering the pots, pans, mixing bowls and whatever else was needed for what would become a ‘culinary tour de force’. Nothing came out of a packet or jar; home-made stuffing (two varieties), white sauce, you name it. Gail’s speciality were the sprouts and roast potatoes – I’m still trying to emulate her on the latter. All of this crowned by a beautiful turkey, roast to ‘Delia’s instructions’, while we all pulled our crackers and donned the traditional paper hats, before tucking in, truly generous hosts.

The timing of everything was perfect, because by the time we had enjoyed the Christmas Pudding and home-made Brandy butter AND home-made custard, we ‘waddled’ into the lounge to take our seats for ‘the Queen’s Speech’, an

occasion that had slipped from my life many years earlier. In fact, I can only recall listening to it on the radio and that means King George 6th and then the young Queen Elizabeth!

That is what I call a traditional Christmas and one worthy of putting on record, thanks to the Turnbull Family.

I guess I should also add here, something about the first Christmas Dinner I cooked!

It was an anxious and subsequently sad time; I was 19 and home on Christmas leave from the RAF. I arrived to discover that Grandma 'Nannie' Rose Bowden, my sole living grandparent had taken to her bed, 'very poorly'. So much so that she had called all her children, Uncle Reg, Uncle Sid, and my mother, along with their wives, husband, and 'children'.

Nevertheless, as was the norm at any gatherings called by my Grandma over the years, I was not included; therefore, on this occasion, 'volunteered' by the others to prepare the Christmas Dinner! A slightly daunting situation to say the least, though not impossible, as my mother had taught me to cook way back when I was 10 and I had subsequently cooked many meals during her illnesses and of course mastered the campfire and Primus stove, in my teens.

Rose Bowden passed on peacefully on Boxing Day, while I was cooking.

CHELA'S FIRST ENGLISH CHRISTMAS

Having travelled a bit in my life, I have come to realise that unless you are in some part of the 'far flung outreach of the Empire' no one does Christmas like us Brits! So, it came as

a surprise to Chela when she discovered that plans for December 25th began in some homes around October!

What is it about Christmas in England, she would say? The day grew closer and though well pregnant by that time, she wanted to have some input to the proceedings and made several suggestions on the menu including how the turkey should be dressed (Ecuadorian style) and that we had soup as a starter course – soup is very traditional and popular at any time in Ecuador.

However, she suggested a sherry consommé she had tasted before. Christmas Eve came, and it was time for us to prepare some of the dishes in advance of the big day. The consommé was one of these and Chela took charge, until we had to find a way of ensuring the soup was clear and free from residual bits of vegetable/ meat clouding the finished dish.

The words of a well-known Harry Belafonte song came to mind; “Then strain it dear Liza, dear Liza - strain it”. “With what do I strain it, dear Henry, dear Henry, with what?” That’s it, a nylon stocking!! It took ages to clear the liquid through one of Chela’s new stockings, but once the sherry was added, the finished product was delightful and well received by all on the day.

This was not the only thing she recalls, as course after course arrived and finally, one dish I had not really explained to her – plum pudding and brandy butter appeared with due ceremony. To her amazement, I carried it into the darkened room ablaze with the brandy I had liberally doused the pudding with. It has become a highlight of her Christmases since; sneaking downstairs early in the morning on Boxing Day to eat a slice of cold Christmas Pud, has almost become a routine for her.

TWO “P’s” and an “F”

If you were ever associated with the hard core of the Midland Ski Club back in the 70’s and 80’s the names Parkin, Paddock and Foggo (Burns) were seldom out of the limelight, not only for their avid approach to skiing but also for culinary skills, often of the most imaginative type.

I’m referring to Sylvia Parkin, Jenny Paddock, and Carol Foggo Burns (not forgetting Alan, Geoff and Graham, the well-fed men in their lives). For me, they all epitomise the fun loving, daring, adventure seeking spirit of the Brits, combined with a love of style and occasion and the ability to deliver it, without apparent fuss. For me, all this is highlighted by a series of occasions when either one of the three would plan something special, with the other two working in support.

Sylvia was one for ‘the occasion’ and still is, and her planning of an event, for want of a better description, always involved the other two. So, it was really a team effort, with Captain Parkin TA (now Deputy Lord Lieutenant for the County of West Midlands), orchestrating the whole thing. One such occasion remains vivid in my mind; one of their famous pre- Christmas, black tie, dinners. Well dinner is not quite the right word, because it does not do justice to all that went into it.

On this particular night, Sylvia had chosen a 19th century menu, which included suckling pig, brought to the table whole, to be carved in front of us all.

All the associated vegetables, sauces, and extras, I cannot remember; but the sight of this nutty brown roast piglet with an apple in its mouth brought visions of great banquets and kings and queens, lords and ladies, minstrels and all the other trappings of our gastronomic history. That we drank

good wine, shared laughter and in between courses, read a favourite piece of prose or poem, added the 'something special' which made those occasions so memorable.

In the haze of the past, I recall that at the end of the meal, which included delicious desserts from both Jenny and Carol, a Victorian food game was played. I remember a beautiful large bowl with flaming brandy and large raisins in it, I think? If my memory serves me right, we were blindfolded and had to retrieve the raisins.

Suffice to say, all was created and presented by these three highly talented lassies who not surprisingly live very full lives away from the food and are also great skiers.

DINING WITH LORDS, LADIES AND AMBASSADORS!

When I re-read the original book, "Memorable Dinners", that inspired me to write these recollections. I came to realise how lucky I was to be able to even relate in some small way to those experiences described by aristocrats and celebrities in that book. Me a 'war baby', whose parents had lost everything and yet managed to teach both my brother and I some social graces and some good old fashioned Victorian values.

I realise now, more than ever before, how much of that has stuck and how valuable it has been to me over the years; a 'working class kid' among Royalty, Earls, Lords and Ladies, Ambassadors, Generals, Dictators, Ministers of State and Personalities; and no, I will not name drop on those such special people I have known – without a story that is.

Though I am not ashamed to say that among those friends I have been privileged to know in the aristocracy and in high office, I have not only seen and experienced real style, but also an understanding and appreciation of quality,

excellence, efficiency, humility, AND real friendship. To the extent that, when I see societies denounce these values in the name of 'A New Order' or whatever suites them in order to be 'top of the pile', I am deeply saddened at the passing.

However, this is not the time for me to launch into my favourite 'hobby horse' of politics being no different to horse racing – especially the horses!!

So, I will bring you back to an occasion when I was first called to a meeting with the Swiss Consul General about putting on an international 'dry' bobsleigh event in Manchester, featuring the famous Jamaican Bobsleigh Team 'Cool Running'; along with the Swiss, Italian, Austrian, Dutch and British 4 - man teams.

The planning of this event involved memorable occasions concerning 'food and beverage' among the elite of society!

The first, at a very long planning meeting at the Swiss Consulate in Manchester, where I arrived exhausted, having driven for nearly two hours in heavy motorway traffic, to find no offer of tea or coffee awaiting – normal in the UK before the start of a meeting. Nor I should add, at any time in the three hour- long meeting.

It was only during a brief break, for the loo, that I noticed bottles of water and some glasses on a table in the corner of the room. As I found myself getting rather bored by the discussion, I decided to go and get some water – which I did and returned to the discussion with a bottle and TWO glasses! At which point I took a sip from the one glass that I had filled, while I added some white powder to the second. All this time a heavy discussion was going on at the other end of the table.

However, I sensed a hush descend upon the group as I proceeded to add a little water to the powder in the glass, which then began to expand rapidly to the point where, looking like snow, it overflowed the glass. They were stunned and I got their attention. (Polymer Snow, one of the many substances used in the film industry to simulate snow)

The meeting closed and the Vice Consul said he thought I had been taken ill, while Wolfgang Amadeus, the Swiss Ambassador's advisor up from London, rushed across and implored me to give him some of the powder to show to his 'boss'. We sent some to his office and the demonstration so impressed the Ambassador apparently, that he insisted on doing the 'trick' himself during a speech he was going to give at a dinner later in the month at the House of Lords.

The dinner was to launch the United Nations initiative called "Dialogue Across Mountains", which was to be presided over by Lord Selston, as a prequel to Switzerland becoming members of the UN – no, until 2004, the Swiss had never been members of the UN! The dinner was also to highlight the bobsleigh event I was helping organise in association with the Commonwealth Games, to be held in Manchester, later that year.

So it was, that Chela and I found ourselves at the House of Lords being greeted at the door (the side one that everyone uses, other than the Queen) by very polite and helpful Bobbies, who ushered us across a small courtyard to where pre-prandial drinks were being served. At which point I caught the eye of Wolfgang Amadeus, who came rushing over to say, "don't mention the powdered snow to anyone!"

Apparently, everything was set for the trick to take place at the dinner, until that lunchtime, when someone in the kitchen of the 'Lords', discovered some unidentified 'white

powder' – shock, horror, it was all over the London papers later that afternoon! One can imagine a quick check of the Ambassador's coat by security, discovering white powder on His Excellency's personage?

At which point we were called to join our table for the dinner. Being an all - Swiss affair, it was Anton Mossiman who had created the menu and no doubt, did his bit in the kitchen before donning his dinner suit to join the top table? However, the food was eclipsed by the company we found sitting at our table.

It is at such moments that you realise how influential we were as a Nation not so many years ago; I'm referring to winter sports here. So, when you hear the Cresta Run mentioned you prick up your ears. Especially, when sitting across the other side of our table, are both the President and Hon. Secretary of the prestigious Cresta Run and Cresta Club. Lord and Lady Brabazon of Tara to be precise, our table hosts for the evening.

He is the son of Lord Brabazon of Tara, the founder of both the race track and Cresta Club in St.Moritz; who, back as an eleven year old I knew of, because I had seen the Brabazon, - then the world's largest aircraft, and named after his lordship - flying over the Bristol Channel, while I was on holiday at Weston super Mare, with my parents. I can also recall photographs of him now (in the Picture Post), lying face down on the 'skeleton' wearing an old - fashioned leather motor cyclist helmet, goggles, and heavy sweater with padded elbows.

The modern skeleton toboggan, seen at the recent Sochi Winter Olympics, is derived from these origins. Another British sporting creation! Plus, another British Gold Medal!!!!!!!

Apart from our hosts the other two people at our table were both 'scribes'. One a lady journalist who worked for the Swiss government, the other, an author, who while not an aristocrat, lived comfortably in a very fashionable part of Chelsea, in London as we discovered through the sometimes deliberately vague table conversation. He also proved interesting to listen to as he had just completed writing the biography of Captain Beaufort, the man who, among many achievements, invented the Beaufort Scale – the method of classifying wind speed and the associated symbols found on weather charts.

One thing that fascinates me about the aristocracy is how they establish your social position through their style and order of conversation. So it was for me, that when they asked where my office was, assuming it to be in some prestigious building in the centre of London, they simply uttered a disappointed "OOHHH!" when I replied 'Birmingham'; followed by an expression of incredulity when I threw in a quick repost of, "the Centre of the Universe for some"! That shows the lack of breeding or 'nonconformist attitude' on my part, I guess?

Anyway, as the speeches were given and liqueurs served, I felt good about it all; the surroundings, this great hall with walls hung with paintings depicting the history of our 'United Kingdom', the excellence reflected in the people present and style and courtesy of the occasion. So, it came as no surprise that at the close, Wolfgang Amadeus beckoned for Chela and I to go over to him. He was to introduce us to Ambassador Bruno Spinner and his charming wife, plus the great chef himself, Anton Mossiman.

Professional to the end, among the Ambassadors' parting words were a reminder that we would be meeting again soon at the Residence for a 'working lunch'!

Anton Mossiman's choice for the menu was:

Gateau of Cornish Crab, with Avocado, Plum Tomato with
Ginger vinaigrette

Cannon of English Lamb, marinated in Rosemary, Garlic
and Red Wine, flash fried served with Vegetable Timbale

Dark Chocolate Tart with White Chocolate Curls and
Drambuie Orange Salad

House of Lords Sauvignon Blanc
House of Lords Claret

Tasty!

Moving on.....

'Working lunch', is what it was and 'professional' is exactly the way it was conducted. On this occasion, my project manager and myself, were in the company of four Ambassadors – Swiss, Austrian, Italian, Jamaican (He was actually a High Commissioner) and the presidents of two National Bobsleigh Federations, Swiss and British plus the President of the World body.

Over lunch, we were to discuss the practicalities of putting on a Bobsleigh event as part of the forthcoming Commonwealth Games in Manchester that was being proposed (it was my idea actually). I was almost mesmerised by the way Ambassador Bruno Spinner orchestrated the 'agenda' through the four stages of the meal – fish mousse, roast duck, chocolate, and pear fondant - to arrive at a summing up over coffee and Swiss chocolates - truly masterful. I had to get up from the table and do a quick slide show as the table was being cleared between the mousse and the second course. This formed

the basis of the discussion round the table as we ate; with the Ambassador, once again summarising and moving on to the next item as we prepared to tuck into the next course.

Later that month, while we transformed the Residence garden into a snow covered 'Winter Wonderland' (actually called "Swiss White in West One") for adults and children alike and received much praise in the process. We were to be deeply disappointed at the cancellation of the main event owing to the collapse of Swissair and the financial crisis that struck Switzerland as a consequence.

Oh, and Wolfgang Amadeus really were his Christian names! Plus, shortly after this, he was to become the first Assistant to the first Swiss Ambassador to the United Nations in New York.

Maintaining this theme a little longer, the "Twelve Days of Christmas" just popped into my head. Though rather than ten Lords a leaping", this is about "Three Lords"; Richard Boyle, the Earl of Shannon (for those old enough, he was the first husband of Katie Boyle the TV hostess of the 50's and 60's); Sandy Melville, the Earl of Leven and Dennis, Lord Howell, FA referee, "traditional" Labour MP and Brummie to boot. All, from different stages in my life, became a friend and an inspiration.

I suppose of them all, the one that I related to the closest and also knew the longest – 25 years – was Dennis, Lord Howell. Many will remember him as "Minister for the Drought" in Harold Wilson's Government. While I, and a number of others, remember him as THE ONLY truly aware and active Minister of Sport the country has ever had to this day. Dennis was a 'champion of the people'; someone, who like me, believed that the right opportunity being presented, enables ordinary people to achieve EXTRA – ordinary things. While, back in the 70's I worked on a number of

projects he initiated from the House of Commons. However, it was when he headed the Birmingham team in their bid for the 1992 Summer Olympics (Barcelona won) that both Chela and I became close to him and his wife Brenda, Lady Howell as she was known by then.

Like all those 'DOERS', who God fits with a clock key between their shoulder blades at birth and winds it up so tight that it doesn't completely run down by the time of their passing. All three of these men were 'doing their bit' to the end.

Richard – an Irish Earl, was an active parliamentarian as leader of the Cross Benchers in the Lords (until Blair scuppered the constitution of House of Lords), high in the Masonic movement and long-time Government spokesman for the Armenians and their plight. To read the names inside the Christmas cards on his mantle over the log fire, was like reading a 'Who's Who' of Eastern European politics.

Sandy was a Scottish Earl and he too was a parliamentarian and who steered British skiing, through troubled waters in the 80's. I worked closely with him to guide a meaningful and lasting transition, of the 'old school' of British skiing to an 'Egalitarian world' for everyone; while maintaining an active role as Chairman of a number of notable Scottish companies. He was to out-live his son, who died tragically, having lost control of his car on a snowy Swiss mountain pass, returning from the Family chalet.

While Richard and Sandy were hereditary peers, Dennis was a working-class lad from Small Heath in Birmingham and who later became a Labour Member of Parliament for that Ward; Minister of the Crown and a life peer. Much of his later years, throughout the 90's and early 2000, were taken up with his favourite charity, the CRAB APPEAL,

cancer research at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. It was at one of his famous charity evenings for CRAB that following yet another of his witty speeches (delivered in his well - honed Brummie accent) that he sat down and simply passed away.

I will always remember him, with his cigar and sometimes cutting comments, 'holding court' just like I imagine Churchill to have done, but with that homely Birmingham accent.

All three, in their way, were driven by the desire to make changes in order to help other people in one way or another.

What about the memorable meal, you may be asking? Well. I remember clearly a Boxing Day around 2003, Chela and I going to Richard's cottage, "Pimm's Cottage" near Reading, the home of the 18th century Prime Minister of that name. To enjoy a lovely succulent 'English Roast', which he had prepared and subsequently carved at the table. The beef was cooked, just as I like it with a touch of pink and he carved it with a well- practiced hand; just like Cliff Heaven – the son of a coach-builder and wheelwright in Sparkhill, Birmingham.

I never did dine with Sandy but was always fascinated by his stories of taking afternoon tea in some of the most exclusive hotels in Switzerland. Why afternoon tea you ask? He just loved cream and fancy cakes and as you may know, the Swiss pastry chefs are experts! Like me, he was also a collector of books of matches and among others he swapped with me, was one of his 'own' carrying the Family Crest. It is still on my desk as I write this!

Dennis on the other hand, will always be remembered for his black- tie charity dinners, with the usual 300 odd diners

and guest speaker, usually someone from entertainment; oh! and plus good company.

One in particular, when, as guests of Jim and Fay Munn, Chela, and Judy Roberts with Robin, were with us. Another CRAB Appeal evening, which began with an Irish Sweepstake, ending with a large cash prize. Our table was very tense, as Chela was still in the competition – which she actually won! To much applause and a happy table!

Whatever the food served was, it was eaten with gusto! As it was followed by the entertaining presentation by Dave Ismay; another Brummie, with the similar ‘brummie’ humour of Jasper Carrott!

Re-reading “Memorable Dinners” recently (the correct title of the original book – but I’m too lazy to make the editorial changes at this stage!), I was amazed to read that it was the Victorians who introduced dining-out in the evening and originally only for men. Ladies only came on the scene in the late 19th century – by what I see in French Impressionist paintings, it was probably the French who started that fashion? Who better?

Having been to both, ‘men only’, like a professional association gathering and mixed ones, like the CRAB dinners, or dinners at the British Ambassador’s residence in Quito, the ladies make the evening, hands down! Thanks must go to the Victorians for that; then we have a lot to thank them for don’t we! Or was it the French? Quelle damage!

UPSIDE DOWN DINNER – AND OTHER MOUNTAIN MOMENTS!

Dining is not always the convivial atmosphere of a table in the warm and friendly environment of the home, restaurant,

or hotel. It can be on a windswept mountain, open moor or close to the sea, tucked in behind some convenient boulder or stone wall or, if conditions are really bad, inside a tent itself.

From the age of 14, when I had my first experience of camping and having to feed, not only myself but others in the group out in the 'wild'; right through to the times I took Chela and Becky away camping for the weekend, to the Bristol International Balloon Festival, the Snow Business Balloon Party and the National Adventure Sports Show at Shepton Mallet – the Natural World, its beauty, way of life, challenges and dangers, have played a significant part in my life!

I did enjoy the moments when Becky made her first cup of tea on the camping stove on a very damp early morning in Bristol and also watching her crawling out of her sleeping bag to help rig the balloons for a dawn flight in the Cotswolds.

Not being a natural 'early riser,' it was both a surprise and a delight to see her enthusiasm for the procedures one follows to prepare a balloon for launching, especially at sunrise when the air is chill and so still.

But then, if you have ever flown in a balloon as she and I have, it does 'intoxicate' you with the silence and that strange feeling of being almost 'at one' with the elements, standing in a basket with only that separating you from it all. As does the pleasure of sipping that first steaming cup of tea and holding it with both hands wrapped around it, in that early morning chill one encounters, as one freshly climbs from your sleeping bag, a bit like a butterfly emerging from the cocoon into the harsh World beyond.

I realise more now than ever before, the importance of getting connected to the Natural World; seeing youngsters from the city, 'blossom' and 'find themselves' within days of being in that environment.

It was on one such occasion that I lead a party of Sixth Formers to the Lake District for a week's hill walking and camping. We camped in a field along-side the lake at Grasmere and set out daily to tackle one Lakeland peak or another. There were only ten of us in the group, so it was relatively easy to establish a bond within the group, though there is always the 'odd one'. In this case it was a lad named Bayliss! Even after 50 years, both his name and his general countenance stay with me.

The lad never stopped moaning about, "when were we going to reach the top" or "when are we going to stop to have a drink". So much so, that on the fourth day, when we were climbing Helvellyn and planning to complete the horseshoe of Swirrel and Striding Edges, we had to find some way of shutting him up. It came to us to tell him, that like Mount Snowdon in Wales, there was a café on the top.

He was a bright lad and we feared that he would see through the lie, but he didn't. We reached the very wide, almost flat summit of Helvellyn before he twigged.

Whether it was revenge or a subconscious action or not? That evening everyone, including Bayliss, were very tired and very hungry. So, you can imagine how willingly everyone buckled down to help prepared the meal? I recall it was a sort of chunky spaghetti sauce and rice.

At the point when one of us declared it ready to eat, in what seemed like a slow- motion film, Bayliss reached forward and lifted the large billycan full of this sauce, with his bare

hands and let out a scream before dropping it upside down on the muddy ground at his feet!

You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife, as the group stepped forward towards the stricken lad nursing his burnt fingers – lynch mob comes to mind.

I believe it was the actions of a very mature thinking 18 year- old, named Cooper, stepping into the middle of the group holding a large spoon, that took the heat out of the moment, saying something like, “No problem Sir, we can scrape up the good without having mud in our food!” With that he got on his knees and started to spoon the best onto the plates; I remember that I joined him in the chore. We ate in silence I remember, but nevertheless we had our fill.

On the way home on the train, Bayliss was like a transformed person. The tales he recounted of the past days bore no resemblance to what had actually happened. He was the great mountaineer!!

The joy for me, however, was that he was the first to come up to thank us for organising the trip and he was the first to sign up to the next one we advertised on the school notice board!

The pleasure of having a hot drink and warm food inside you at the end of a tiring and often personally challenging day in wild - country, is something that one never forgets.

What you actually eat is long forgotten; except for one I remember, the porridge we ate at a night base on the Watkin Path, Snowdon, in December 1964.

We were on our Mountain Leadership Award training programme (actually the first group ever to do this new Award at Ogwen Cottage Mountain Centre) and someone suggested we did an ‘Alpine Start’ in order to climb the

South Ridge of Snowdon in time to see the sun rise on the summit. Such a start means exactly what is implied. You climb in the dark and freezing cold – it was -5C and ice rimed much of the exposed rock and in places horizontal icicles clung to windswept outcrops.

Wake up, 2am to be precise and we had to have hot food before we started. Full of carbohydrate and easy to cook – normally – the chosen food was porridge. The trick is to put it into the billycan the night before for the water to be absorbed by the oats. This we did, but at minus 5 everything including the tent fly- sheet, water bucket and the porridge were frozen solid when we woke. We had to eat and drink before we started; so, this was a time when the stoves and the food came into the front of the tent and we, only semi-emerged from our sleeping bags, set it all in motion before going back inside them to steal those extra minutes of warmth the cooking time afforded us.

I remember it was creamy, sugary, and absolutely delicious at that moment in time. Under such conditions one's senses are just that 'extra sharp' and for all these years I have tried to recapture the 'taste' of that moment. Another time, another place, AND another taste.

We eventually made it to the summit before Dawn and sat freezing to watch that 'cold' pale December sun rise over Moel Siabod to the East of us, before we beat a hasty retreat from the summit.

However, that is not the end of the story, because, as we struggled, roped together, to keep our footing down the ice rimmed edge of Crib Goch; the cold, ice crystal filled air and the angle of the sun suddenly combined in a 'chemical mixture' that produced a "Brocken Spectre" of our silhouette, out there in the void of the Horseshoe. We were in awe of the sight, speechless and in great danger of losing

our footing, when at one strange moment it felt to us all, as if it was beckoning us to reach out and touch it!

It is a phenomenon that few full-time mountaineers ever experience in a life - time in the mountains. Edward Whymper was one however. He, along with his team saw one on that first fateful climb of the Matterhorn, when three companions fell to their death on the decent. In his account of the experience, he too expressed awe at the sight: a humbling, awesome, spiritual moment that crosses aeons to touch but a very few.

HOW DID I GET TO LEARN TO COOK?

Re-reading and making changes to what I have written seems to occupy more of my time than writing down a new story in all this.

However, having just come through “the other end of Christmas” again, when a lot of what is offered has been prepared and cooked by Chela and myself! It got me thinking of how I actually got started onto this cooking lark?

As far back as my early days in Infant and Primary School I look back and realise that I liked ‘making things’ and doing drawings, especially in pastel and making Plasticine and papier-mache models. So, I guess it comes as no surprise that sitting by the coal fire in an evening watching my mother sewing, darning and knitting and likewise seeing my Grandma doing embroidery, (she taught me too, in a moment of weakness, for I was not her favourite grandson) got me interested and more involved in ‘making things’ and the next step was the kitchen!!! (Licking the bowl of cake mix as a reward for having given a helping hand was the start – we have all done it!!)

But it was when, around the age of 10, my mother was taken seriously ill and as the lowest priority, I was to stay at home to 'look after' her and my grandma- who lived down the road. You see, for all those years, Nannie as we young ones called her, was a widow and my mother always prepared and cooked her food, while my brother or I used to have to take it in a basket to her house. It was not that Nannie couldn't cook - her 'bubble and squeak' was wicked – but it was a 'duty' my mother was bound to.

So it was that with my elder brother Brian, expected to go to school and my father expected to go to work, I was the only one left to not only do my mother's 'duty' for her but feed the Family as well.

We had a folding table I remember, that my dad took upstairs and put it in the bedroom alongside the bed; and it was from this table, that the cutting, chopping, and mixing was done.

My mother would write a list of 'tools' needed along with the ingredients for the meal and I would take them, bit- by- bit, upstairs from the kitchen and pantry and put them on this table. It was from here that my mother, propped up in bed, would instruct and guide me through the stages of preparation before I went back downstairs to either put something in the oven or into a saucepan on the stove – vegetables, meat, fish, custard, and pies, I recall. Mind you making pastry is still a real hang up for me! Thank Heaven for JusRol and those "Just add Water" packets we get now!

Several weeks on, mom recovered sufficiently for me to return to school where I was shortly to sit my 11+ for Grammar School – I scraped through but that's another story.

However, this was not to be the end of the learning process because four years later my mom was diagnosed with cancer, resulting in a long period in hospital followed by a very long recovery. My brother, now abroad in Malaya (Malaysia today) on Military Service, meant that once again I was back to feeding the Family, principally my dad, as Nannie actually began to cook for herself from time to time - she was 88 at the time. I had become more practiced and varied in my menu by then, so my only memory is of 'getting on with it' as well as doing my homework and all the other extra-curricular things one does when you are enjoying your educational experiences, as I was. Oh! I went to the only 'Co-Ed' Grammar School in the city; was there something in that I wonder???

Within another year and my mother recovered, I was out there camping and hostelling, fending for myself along with three friends in leaking tents or mouse infested youth hostels (I still vividly remember the live green caterpillars in the lettuce, at the Youth Hostel in Winchester!). So, cooking on a 'primus' stove and feeding myself, and others, became just another part of life. Though I really didn't appreciate the joy of food in all its varieties until later, with my contact with other countries, first France then Canada, in my late teens. Then later, mainly on a Tuesday evening, my dates at the restaurant in the Burlington Hotel in New Street or the Los Canarios Spanish Restaurant, behind Aston University!!! I remember that it was around this time that I started to enjoy wine and quickly moved on from what the majority of 'wine innocents' drank, Sauterne (a dessert wine really!), to Mateus Rose, that one in the green round bottle!!!

Today I cook because I like to – most of the time - and to experiment a little along the way; but still I consider myself a "camp fire cook" with a touch of 'Victoriana' in the menu planning, definitely not a 'chef' (though just having discovered the brochure for the 'Weinhaus – Happ', in the

Friedrichstrasse, Innsbruck, where I had eaten with Belgian and French colleagues; the head chef there is called the 'Kuchenmeister'; now I do like that!).

The likes of Jamie Oliver, Nigella Lawson, Delia Smith and recently, Jacques Pepin, inspire me with their 'down to earth' philosophy and "no frills" style. Oh! And going to a 'Co Ed' school – looks as well!

CAKES!

To be precise, Birthday Cake, Christmas Cake, and Wedding Cake.

While I have touched upon this earlier, I realise as I've been writing. How significant the place Cake has taken in my 'gastronomic life' Beginning with the amazing 'themed' Birthday cakes that my Uncle Reg presented me with, as a youngster. Two I remember clearly - the first, an airfield, with hangar, warplane, and 'windsock'! All laid out on the top, flat space; quite superb and of course, including the marzipan and royal icing!! The second, was a scene from 'Snow white and the 7 Dwarfs', set in a woodland with a stream, bridge, and cottage. The dwarfs were on a path over the bridge and the cottage had Snow white waving to them from a dormer window – quite stunning.

I remember to this day, the joy of receiving them and impression they left. So much so that, when it came to celebrating Becky's first Birthday, I chose to make and decorate it myself; designed especially for her. This was not 'three-dimensional', like mine were, but it was a Clown, juggling. It was pretty good, even if I say it myself. And spurred-on, by the reception it was given. I decided to go 'three -dimensional for the second Birthday and built a train – red I recall. To be followed in year three, with a 'Barbie' in a crinoline. At which point later in the year, Becky

announced that her fourth birthday cake would be designed by her!!! And so it was, for a number of years to follow.

We now have to jump many years, to my 65th Birthday and a special, rich “Jamaican Fruit Cake”, made by a friend of Chela’s, especially for the occasion. This was to be the beginning of a five-year cycle, here in Ecuador, with the first being a replica of my vegetable garden, for. My 70th Birthday. Followed by one, representing a sow covered mountain, with me skiing down it! In a table setting of ‘Red, White and Blue’! For the last one, my 80th, a tribute to the dogs, around another snow-covered mountain and skier, made by Sylvia Arteaga – in her Victoria Sponge recipe! My 85th, who knows?

Before I move off this “Sceptred Isle” and its unappreciated variety of food, I must not forget to mention MacSween’s Haggis (the shop in Edinburgh), the finest I have tasted and accompanied by ‘neeps and taties’ and a ‘wee dram’, personify for me the uniqueness of Scotland. While the Black Pudding and ‘Faggots and ‘Paes’ personifies the uniqueness of the Black Country – the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution and Britain’s once industrial greatness in the World. The last I tasted, was in an old Victorian pub in the Black Country, with Geoff and Jenny Paddock, the friends who gave me the original book “Memorable Dinners”, that inspired me to write down my own experiences!

However, I will leave it to an American, R.W. “Johnny” Apple Jnr., New York Times journalist, political correspondent and travel/food writer in his later years, to highlight some other truly “Best of British” gastronomic delights for you. I was reminded of them when reading “Far Flung and Well Fed”; a book dedicated to his writings and given to me for Christmas 2011, by my daughter Rebecca.

In the book, a compilation of wonderfully descriptive stories of Michelin Star chefs, restaurants, bistros, street vendors and particular dishes or types of food. Where in the British section, he touches upon a number of my own favourites. Living far away from them now, reading the book reminded me of how much they were either a part of my life or were always a highlight and delight to eat when they were available.

So here they are, in no particular order from the book but equally, subconsciously memorised on my taste buds as I write:

-Summer Pudding, with all those soft red fruits of the summer, from an English country vegetable and fruit garden, combined and with a dollop of double cream – Angela’s and Carol’s come to mind as being special. I’ve just made my first!

-Clotted Cream – both Cornish and Devon varieties. Though Devon has the ‘cream teas’ as their sales pitch (which enjoyed with Cousin Mary on numerous visits to East Devon, over the years. I love them both.

-Worcestershire Sauce – found in bars around the world, for putting the finishing touch to a “Bloody Mary”. I use it with Welsh Rarebit, with black pudding and a host of other foods. One thing is certain, it is a world-wide accompaniment; first imported into Peru of all places, in 1846!!!

-Marmalade – an English or Scottish Breakfast would be nothing without it. Having read about it in his book, I have been able to work out the stages and timing for the production of, Wilkins of Tiptree, famous ‘Thick-cut Tawny Marmalade’. I now have ‘followers’ who even pay for a pot of it; though I should add our Ambassador here, Patrick Mullee, got his pot for free!

-Dover Sole – a truly English fish, moist and delicate and a favourite of Winston Churchill.

-Oysters – I have already written about this most ‘royal’ of shellfish, so I will stop there and just drool with a glass of Brut Champagne in my hand!

-Scottish and Irish Smoked Wild Salmon – there is no comparison with any other version to my mind and I have eaten local Canadian, Chilean and Japanese varieties.

Having highlighted these from the book, I will stop salivating when I finish typing my own additions to this list.

- Potted Shrimps – sealed by melted butter and found mainly on the East coast, reminds me also of those eaten in a pub, outside the oil refinery in Antwerpen, accompanied by a glass of Grimberger beer.
- Fresh Devon Crab – with a salad or made into light brown bread and butter sandwiches by my cousin Mary.
- Craster or Manx Kippers – the first I ever tasted was when I was about 10 and my Father was sent a box full from the Isle of Man. The smell of them being grilled and the taste mixed with melted butter and a squeeze of lemon, stick in my memory - delicious. So does the memory of their aroma coming from the smoke houses at Craster, south of Alnwick, in the North – East of England, way back in the 70’s.

Now we must move on, across the English Channel or La Manche, to continue the tales.

7. BELGIUM



These cameos come from the period 1987- to now.

FROM SEA TO TABLE – DIY STYLE

December 2006 found me flying back north from Athens, where I had just installed the first outdoor ice rink in Greece, with our partners AST, Austria; especially for the then Mayor of Athens.

As my flight brought me back via Amsterdam, we decided that the family meet up in Antwerpen, to spend a couple of days just prior to Christmas, with our dear friends Monique and her then husband Marc and Adi and Gerarda De Cock, Monique's parents.

Even though we were all tired, Marc was quick to remind us that there was to be no 'lie in' the next morning as we were going early, to the Dutch boarder. He also reminded us that we should be sure to wear warm clothing! Ominous!

Getting up early and loading empty buckets into the back of the car, wasn't so bad, as the prospect of a quiet doze in the car was appealing, especially to the 'ladies'; small chance for me, as I am like an OWL when I'm travelling – night or day!

It was not long before the dykes and windmills heralded the boarder. Following the line of one dyke eventually led us to the windswept shore of the North Sea, steely grey under a similarly coloured sky. The sea was being whipped into a frenzy by a biting wind coming directly from the Arctic.

Was this it? Yes apparently, as we were each handed a bucket. We then dutifully followed Marc to the edge of the water, where we were instructed in the ritual of gathering OYSTERS! In spite of the biting wind and a debilitating wind chill factor, we gathered oysters for almost an hour before feet, fingers and noses were hurting from the cold. With four buckets full, we loaded them into the back of the car and

'beat a retreat' to a warm bar for a stiff drink and a hot coffee.

Later that evening we were treating ourselves to our spoils. Love them or not, the smell and taste of the sea in a fresh oyster is quite magical and the taste as they slip down, accompanied by fresh baguette and a light white wine – a touch of luxury.

Being with Belgians, you can be sure of something extra special in the way they prepare and serve food; no wonder they had more Michelin Star restaurants than the French!! Zoot Alor; Quelle Domage!

So, it was no surprise to be eating the second batch of oysters baked in butter with a touch of garlic – delicious and another light white wine compulsory!

It was just one of many culinary memories I cherish about Belgium, where seafood "Rules OK". From potted shrimps with Grimberger beer, at a bar in the middle of an oil refinery; mussels on the sea front at Ostende (which I masterminded back in the UK as a business meeting to discuss the Daily Mail International Ski and Snowboard Show, with my Dutch and Belgian co-ordinators of all the ski aerialists and other performers, Michiel de Ruiten and Peter Rottier); or prepared by Gerada in her kitchen; eaten with fresh baguette and washed down with a dark and very strong West Malle Triple beer; Adi's barbecues of shrimps and fresh sardines, accompanied by good wine, a cigar and bizarre conversations in Wallonian French and 'English French', in their tiny secluded garden. Where after copious glasses of wine, we finally agreed that his French was definitely different to mine! I nearly missed the Hovercraft back to Dover that day!

Gerada's unbelievably delicious Flemish rabbit casserole, really deserves many more paragraphs than this brief reference, but other journeys await.

I must not forget the beers in the 16th century Aigle, just across the square from the Hotel de Ville, in Antwerpen, where we had, only minutes before, witnessed Monique and Marc's civil wedding ceremony.

Most recently, when travelling back to Amsterdam from a meeting in Wavre in Belgium, I stopped over to say a quick "Hello" to Monique, Koen, her new and delightfully interesting partner (an arachnologist - spiders) and of course Adi and Gerada; all based in Antwerpen; for my mind one of the most 'under sold' town in West Europe!

Imagine a 'seaport' way inland up a very large estuary, which goes back very many centuries. Cosmopolitan mixture, all the merchants' great buildings and of course one of the most spectacular cathedral spires I have ever seen anywhere. That is the heart of 'old' Antwerp and all bordering the enormous expanse of the Schelde and a city that both Chela and I fell in love with on our very first visit together back in 1987.

At this point, I think it also worth mentioning that had it not been for a very smart manoeuvre by the Canadian Forces in the closing stages of the last World War, when they outflanked the Nazis and captured their gun batteries on the north - east outskirts of the city, that the 'old city' avoided being destroyed, which had been the intention!

Well, on this occasion, it was a cold grey damp and drizzling February afternoon when I arrived at the central station – architecturally among the great 19th Century train stations anywhere – again unsung! To be met by Monique on her bike!

After a few complicated arrangements, I found myself in her new, but very ancient home in the old city, which had a small window view of that magnificent cathedral spire I have already mentioned. So, following a quick tour of this very old building, we headed off across the old square in front of the Hotel de Ville and round the corner to a restaurant specialising in mussels, what else!

A delightful meal with the inevitable 'supportive' beer; Mussels in Belgium have to be a MUST, when they are in season as you will have gathered from earlier comments. However, it was actually only the start to the evening!

Out into the drizzle again and back across the square we go off down an old narrow cobbled street where we found a small 'pub', packed and with the buzz of many conversations and lots of atmosphere; with dried hops hanging from the ceiling and clear evidence of a "lot of beer" around!

This IS the "Kulminator"! For those of you who don't know, this little pub was voted No.1 in the World by the international professional brewing press. With beers with a specific gravity of a strong red wine and stronger! Others that have a 'shelf life' of up to 25 years if 'cared for' and over 600 varieties available, I really can't think that any other bar, anywhere in the world, can match that?

To round off such a delightful evening, after sampling three different beers of 11% and more, a much-welcomed taxi ride got us to Adi and Gerada's house where the usual warm welcome was waiting; as well as Adi's usual selection of beers and more light food was on the table and 'catch up' conversation began!

Yet another special evening followed by a good sleep before departing on the next stage of my travels; to meet

up with Becky and celebrate her 21st Birthday with a series of gatherings which took place over a two week period, beginning with a Family gathering at the Bell in Belbroughton, followed by a Post-Graduation party with the Clemson's, Begley's and Turnbull family; a day in London walking through Green Park among the Daffodils, theatre, walk to the Thames and Parliament and finally a Sushi before catching the train back to Edgbaston where excellent fish and chips, in a very beery batter were waiting to end a very special Birthday day. Then a curry birthday party at Red Peppers with The Begley's and the Turnbull's, with champagne; finally, a farewell party, again at Red Peppers with Karen and Neville, Max, Anne and Leo, John and Gail, before I flew back to Ecuador.

All these, colour and dare I say, flavour a friendship of over twenty years and which was highlighted in my choosing to share my 65th Birthday, on the actual day, with Adi and Gerada – again enjoying special company with good food, wine at a converted Pump House which originally served the dock from which Middle and East Europe immigrants sailed to America, as far back as the late 19th Century.

Of course, I can't forget the beer!

Adi always had a 'new' selection waiting down in the cellar in anticipation of our arrival.

That last evening at the Kulminator and later at their house was to be the last time we would spend together as Adi passed on in 2014. A friendship I will hold so very dear "til we meet again".

8. SPAIN



THE MID DAY FLIGHT TO MALLORCA

The 'Seventies' were punctuated by 'the three-day week', power cuts, strikes and more strikes, the nuclear threat and the Cold War. But on the other side of the coin, Macmillan, told us 'we'd never had it so good', cars were hundreds not thousands of pounds, and the 'package holiday' was getting into full swing. Oh, and the "Rise of the Iron Lady"!

In the West Midlands, there were two travel companies - Hards Travel and Horizon Holidays and it was at the latter that a group of friends emerged from my increasing involvement in skiing, on arriving "back home" from five years of working in London. At the time, one in particular comes to mind, Jacqui Money. She was one of the winter sports team, who, in those days, could slot you in for a couple of days skiing in the low season, at the drop of a hat, because of empty seats on their charter flights.

More particularly, were the summer flights, where large sections of the office would simply pack their bags and jump on an under booked flight for a couple of days away.

However, Jacqui was one jump ahead on this, as on one occasion, I had just walked into the office when I received a call from Pat to tell me to be at Birmingham airport by midday, with my Passport, as we were going out for dinner!!! In short, we were flying to Palma de Mallorca, and we were going to grab a taxi to Magaluf, where there was a particularly good fish restaurant in those days!

On arrival, with time to spare, Jacqui negotiated an empty room at one of their hotels, to change into our swimwear, for a late afternoon dip in their pool, before making our way to the restaurant. I remember it was a balmy June evening and the meal was dominated by an enormous platter of grilled fish and seafood which the four of us struggled to finish!

As you do, we finished our wine, paid the bill and hailed a taxi back to the airport. Dawn was just breaking when we landed back at Birmingham airport.

This experience was repeated, but on that second occasion I was on crutches with my right leg in plaster; I had earlier ruptured my Tendon Achilles playing Squash.

WAITER – THERE’S A FLY IN MY SOUP!

Again, in Mallorca, on one of our numerous visits to Graham and Suzanne’s boat, Dream Princess, in Port de Pollenza, Suzanne had suggested that one night she ‘baby sat’ while I took Chela out for a ‘romantic’ meal at a restaurant she had recommended.

So off we go and of course, being in Spain, we end up being the first clients there, as it was before 9pm! Seated quietly on a terrace we order the dishes. I chose avocado and Chela chose soup for the first course and while we were waiting, quietly sat enjoying our drinks.

The food arrived and following one mouthful of soup, which at that point met with approval, the second spoonful revealed a FLY!

We called the waiter, who subsequently called the boss, who proceeded to interrogate Chela along these lines; “was the fly kicking?” “Was it flat out? Quite taken aback by the questions, Chela asked what had all that got to do with the fact that THERE WAS A FLY in her soup?

The owner calmly explained that he needed to determine whether the fly had fallen in while the soup was being prepared, or while it was being poured into the soup dish or it had fallen in on the way to the table!!?? AND would she

like another dish or chose something else from the menu? All this while my dear wife was trying to contain the churning contents of her stomach.

It goes without saying, we left, without being charged.

FEELING LIKE A MILIONAIRE – DAWN AND NIGHTFALL

Two special memories I have of our time, holidaying on Dream Princess, which was a beautiful 45 ft motor cruiser that slept 6. One tradition developed whereby, before changing to go out for our evening meal (not before 9 pm in Spain remember), we always sat on the upper deck as dusk and finally night fell across the harbour and the town beyond. Here, having been to the market at some point, we would sit and enjoy olives and other nibbles along with, in my case a large gin and tonic. Over the conversation, all you could hear was the sound of the water lapping against the hull and the halyards slapping against the aluminium masts of the sailing boats moored around us. In fact, it was just those sounds that were to lull one to sleep later that night and wake you the next morning!

Which brings me on to the Dawn bit.

On one visit we did a 'red eye' charter flight to Palma and finally arrived at the boat just as dawn was breaking. First, we sat again on the upper deck in the chill of the dawn, drinking a mug of hot tea and watching the light grow stronger over the Tramontana Mountains behind Port de Pollenca.

Finally, with a touch of warm sun on us, we sat and enjoyed fresh warm croissants, butter and jam washed down with yet another mug of hot tea. What a way to start the first day of your holiday?

Now to a little episode on another motor cruiser in San Rafael harbour, in the South of France!!

So, I will 'transport' you to FRANCE for this side of the boat stories!!!

9. FRANCE



Cameos from 1953 when I travelled with a school group to Paris – my first time ‘sur le Continent’. While returning ten years later and regularly since; France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia and once only to Andorra.

CHAMPAGNE BREAKFAST IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE!

During my time as Director of the English Ski Council, in the early 80's, I was single again and a very supportive friend, jumped at my suggestion that she come with me to the South of France for a couple of weeks? Truth is, I had friends, Jacqui** and John, who owned a garage in Frejus, which was attached to a caravan park, frequented by Brits during August.

It was here that I used to 'go and hide' for a few weeks away from the very 'public' life I lead as the Director of ESC. I earned my 'free bed', which was one or other of the caravans that were vacant at the time, by driving backwards and forwards to Nice Airport Customs shed to collect spare parts for the Brits cars, which had invariably developed some engine problem on the 700 mile trip down from Calais!

On this particular occasion, my friend Ngaire and I arrived in Frejus to be told that we were to spend the night on a boat; obviously there was no caravan available. I immediately thought of what it would be like to sit on deck early the next morning drinking champagne and munching on fresh croissants.

Fine! Champagne was chilling and that morning I went to the boulangerie to buy the fresh croissants etc. I set everything up on deck and noticed that neighbours on other boats appeared to be doing the same thing. One big problem, she wouldn't wake up!!! So, I ended up sitting on my own, raising my glass, saying "bon jour" to passers - by and eating the croissants and fresh melon!!

To make matters worse, as the saying goes "There's no such thing as a free lunch" - we had to clean the boat from top to bottom before the owner and his family arrived at

noon!!!! Not only that, but we had to be clear out of sight and pretend we had never seen sight of the 'b' boat before.

Suffice to say, later when we were introduced to the owner, we remarked on what a beautiful boat he had, which pleased him immensely. So much so that he invited us to join him and his family on a trip to the Iles de Lerin later in the week!!! What can be better than a picnic lunch on board and a swim in the crystal water later, before cruising back to the moorings in San Rafael.

Being poor among the rich has its moments I discovered!

BAGUETTES, CAFÉ AU LAIT AND GUALLOISE.

For me, France has always held a fascination from the first time I ever 'set foot upon its soil'; in fact, that story goes back to my schooldays, when at the age of fourteen I found myself looking out of a carriage window at dawn, on the Calais –Paris train. The memory of the smells and the sight excites me even now as I write about it over 60 years later – the smell of grubby old railway compartments with slatted wooden seats, mixed with the smoke billowing back, scudding past the carriage windows; reminiscent of the smell of the coal fires at home! Oh yes, we are talking pre-central heating and North Sea Gas!

On this occasion I was standing peering out through the smoke and morning mist into the silver-grey dawn, to fields dotted with the vague outlines of cattle and odd shaped buildings with unfamiliar shapes, or were they?

For it was at that moment I turned to a classmate who was standing beside me looking at the same view and said, "I've been here before!"

Obviously, I got a strange look back and the moment passed; but to be sure, time after time in the years to come, when I arrive back on the other side of the Channel – La Manche - I feel more at home than ever I do, in England! Maybe there is more to the meaning of my surname than just a name?

One thing is certain, I fell in love with Paris as a teenager, with its Apple blossom – it was Easter time - wide boulevards, smell of fresh bread and coffee and magnificent buildings and monuments – it was only many years later that I ‘found’ London! Of course, we must not forget that Hitler avoided bombing Paris, thus leaving all its fine historic Napoleonic as well as pre-Revolution architecture untouched. So, I have to admit that a trip down the Seine beats a trip down the Thames by a ‘short head’ – though both are special and hard to beat anywhere else in the world.

I can’t let this moment pass without mentioning Ella Fitzgerald’s rendering of “April in Paris”; I get goose bumps even now when I hear her sing it, because it brings back those early teenage memories.

I digress, as it is food that I am writing about and French food in particular. However, unlike the late and famous American journalist and food writer, R. W ‘Johnny’ Apple, Jnr. (I mentioned him earlier), who, with a bottomless expense account, ate at the best and most diverse ‘eateries’ from the north to the south of the country – Paris, Lyon, Marseilles and the Cote D’Azur. I got by with the odd experience, and many markets, boulangeries and charcuteries and ‘Plat de Jour” to satisfy my appetite. Even today, no-one can go wrong with ordering a ‘Plat de Jour’ in some township off the beaten track away from the Auto-routes that now criss-cross the country.

WRONG INTERPRETATION.

In the early 60's I took several trips through France to Switzerland; first on my motor scooter with David Shell and then with David and 3 friends, Martin, Roger and Pete.

It was on the first trip with David, that it became customary to stop in a local town or village around noon to buy food for lunch. This usually took the form of a visit to the boulangerie for 'the baguette', then a store to buy tomatoes, cheese and fruit. The strange thing was, if we arrived after 12 noon, the whole place seemed deserted! Except, that is, for the sounds of voices coming from inside bars and cafes. Back then, provincial France closed for a two hour 'lunch break' around midday!

On this particular occasion, we had bought the bread, cheese, tomatoes and were looking for something for dessert. When I saw a large tin on the shelf, with a picture of Plumbs on it and thought I would buy this for us to share for 'pudding'! With that, we jumped back on our scooters and headed out of town to find a quiet field to eat our lunch in. Happy with our bread and cheese, we turned to the tin of plumbs and proceeded to open it. Eh, Voila!! It was JAM!!!!!! Of-course "CONFITURE" is French for JAM – I just didn't twig; BUT THEN, I DID FAIL FRENCH 'O LEVEL!!!

But, on arrival in Switzerland I do remember the enormous, fresh cream filled, delicious Meringues in Interlaken and the bottle of Chianti we strapped on the back of the scooter and drove with it all the way back to Paris, before opening it in the Bois de Boulogne campsite – "Shaken but not Stirred!"

LUNCH AND PICASSO.

Added to those lunches for the 'common man', are several of real note, like St. Paul de Vence, just outside Nice,

where, in the old Auberge court yard of La Colombe D'Or, high above the plain that stretches out towards the beaches and the blue Mediterranean, you sit under ancient fig trees, sampling one or more of the 14 different au d'oeuvres on offer, before tucking into one of the daily specialities; be it fresh sardines, lamb, hare or some indelicate part of a cow! It was magical and delicious in equal portions. The smells, sounds of laughter and buzz of conversation from tables occupied by the rich and celebrity; all so out of context from their public lives, they were naturally 'incognito' in this ancient hotel courtyard.

It was a place that one just knew had many tales to tell and true enough, the 'grand dame', dressed all in black, holding a silver topped cane and sitting on a massive oak seat at the entrance, greeting everyone, with equal attention, was able to tell many! For it was she who ran the auberge in the earlier days of the 20th Century, when Matisse and Picasso were still struggling to gain the attention of international art lovers – and rich buyers.

Apparently, there were times when she fed both of them and received no payment! Instead, she would expect them to give her a drawing; dashed out in monochrome on the back of one of the cleaner paper tablemats. Believe me, it is true, because there they were, framed and hanging on the wall in the corridor leading to the 'Gents' toilet! In the poor light, you could miss these priceless items if you were in a hurry? Unlike other countries I know, no-one saw fit to nick them! – having been to their web-site just recently, it is clear that this is no longer 'a back water hide-away for celebrities', but is now visited by masses of tourists – I am talking about the early 80's, when I was there!

Oh! I mustn't forget the fresh, lightly sparkling, slightly cooled Vin Rose, so special to that part of France, in particular Provence and Var. I did return to the same table

under the old fig trees several times; which I should add, would occasionally add to the fare already on the table by shedding the odd ripe fig or two!

I JUST LOVED THEIR HOR D'OEUVRE

However, I really must share this little incident there, at this particular table even though I was not present to experience it! I call it "THE FLYING PEKINESE"!

I have already described the table along-side the ancient wall overlooking the view to the Mediterranean, the fig trees, plus on this occasion a large parasol.

It was here, again on a Sunday, that John invited his mother and stepfather to join them for lunch to celebrate the parents Wedding Anniversary. Just picture 'Mother in her late 60's', dyed blonde hair— a touch too yellow – back-combed 50's style, which added to her already imposing, rigid backed persona. She had been a dancer and latterly a dance teacher, before becoming owner of a large caravan and leisure park near Frejus. With her, tucked under one arm was her pet Pekinese dog, her pride and joy, followed by 'Ernest' her second or possibly third husband, who in contrast was more like a door mouse.

Being an important member of the party, the discussion as to where everyone would sit was centred upon the Pekinese dog, which would "need to see everything that was going on!" So it was decided that it should sit upon the old stone wall alongside the table. However, because there was a 30' drop on the other side, it was agreed to attach the dog's lead to the upright of the parasol in the middle of the table, for safety.

Their famous hors 'd'oeuvres came and went, the wine was being enjoyed and everyone was becoming pleasantly

relaxed, when all of a sudden, an enormous gust of wind hit the wall and then caught the parasol, lifting it straight out of the centre of the table and across the courtyard dragging the Pekinese with it, across the table, scattering plates and glasses as it went, landing in a shivering heap among the broken bits of parasol – just close your eyes and visualise that if you will! Hollywood hasn't bettered that for sure; without CGI that is!

A WEEKEND VISIT TO "A YEAR IN PROVENCE"!

Now bringing you back to my story, when around 2005, Chela, Becky and I flew into Marseille to meet up with a French business colleague of ours, Joseph, to discuss some project or other relating to Disneyland Paris, where he had an entree.

I must admit that I thought we were to spend our time around the 'old port' area and enjoy the atmosphere and of course the food (Bouillabaisse!) and wine, while 'talking shop'! But no, Joseph had another plan and knew that really any Englishman would be captivated by an "R Mayall Experience" however brief it may be. So instead of a "Year in Provence" we were to spend a "Weekend in Provence" starting with a light 'repas' in the 'old town' of Aix-en-Provence – going as far back as the Romans at least. It was still Spring- time, in fact it was another Easter, but the air was warm and full of the natural scents, typical of the region. I recall that I had fresh grilled sardines and the obligatory local Rose.

Heading out of town we were driven towards the heart of this region, to the ancient hillside village of Esse. Dominated by the citadel, this ochre- coloured village literally clung to the escarpment and we were to spend that night in the most delightful stone farmhouse, just across a deep ravine looking up at this magical and historic place. It

was as if Joseph was ‘pulling the rabbit out of the hat’ every time.

So, it came as no surprise that he did have another trick up his sleeve – a restaurant situated in the little square alongside the citadel – well more like the front room of an old house with an open kitchen at the back. The kitchen was actually smaller than ours at home, the cooker no bigger and the dining room sat no more than a dozen people. I remember that the décor was not particularly striking, though there were some ‘give away’ memorabilia dotted around. The owners were a couple of middle- aged French – Canadian guys from Quebec.

There are two things I remember about the food; one was the full and succulent asparagus, fresh from the nearby fields down in the valley and the other was Chela’s courgette and fresh basil soup; in-fact ten years on, she still talks about it.

Before I leave France however, I want to touch upon six more culinary experiences, two from the Tarentaise, three again from the Cote d’Azur and the most recent in Burgundy, Clamecy to be precise.

THE COTE d’AZUR -ENJOYING BEING INCOGNITO

These relate to those summer’s I spent quietly away from the public eye, with Jacqueline and John in Frejus. Over the four years I visited, there were obviously many meals in a variety of villages and towns, stretching from St. Tropez to Monaco. However, apart from those I have already mentioned, three more stand out in my mind as memorable - Eze – ‘La Chevre d’Or Hotel’ – breakfast of croissants beside the pool on the edge of a precipice and Grande Corniche; Antibes – ‘La Pied sur la Plat’ - the Foot on the Plate – snails in garlic served in a ceramic block; St. Tropez,

'Club Cinquant Cinq' - Club 55 - Restaurant on the beach where they come and collect you from your boat in an inflatable dinghy – fresh langoustines and white wine, among totally white surroundings and incognito celebrities – I learned to water ski in the bay and then being towed in turns, all the way to Cannes.

THE END OF ANOTHER ALPINE SEASON – CRAYFISH, RACLETTE AND A DISGRUNTLED CUSTOMS OFFICER!

Travelling almost due North, close to the Swiss and Italian borders, is the Isere Valley which is home to the ski resorts that made up the core facilities for the Albertville Winter Olympics. Here in 1985, I spent a week with a young friend and member of the British Alpine Slalom squad, who I had been helping with supporting his sponsorships activities. Nick Fellows, who, still in his early 20's, was 'earning his stripes' in Life, following the FIS Europa Cup Ski circuit throughout the winter racing seasons, at times living from hand to mouth, out of the back of his sponsored Audi estate.

It was the last week of the season, and he was completing his 'warm up' for the final Giant Slalom of the season, which he hoped would help him cut his FIS Seeding points further, ready for the next season.

I joined him in Les Arcs, a large ski complex and well known to the British skiing fraternity. It was another Easter and my birthday. Nick had decided that he wanted to treat me on this occasion, so he took me to a restaurant in Arc 1650, where they specialised in fresh seafood.

It was true; beside the entrance door stood a huge fish tank full of fish, lobsters and crayfish, which by the end of a busy evening will have been emptied by the appetites of the clients.

I remember choosing an enormous crayfish, and enjoying both it and Nick's company and forever, enthusiastic conversation.

However, I can't forget another evening when we went down to the old dim 'Gualloise' smoky café outside the railway station at Bourg Saint Maurice, in the Isere valley.

A bit like one you would find in a 1950's black and white French film, dark, hot and smoky; full of the buzz of conversation of either local people, off-duty soldiers from the local garrison, or travellers filling in their time before getting on the overnight train to Paris.

Here they serve the famous Raclette, the melting strong flavoured mountain cheese, combined with thinly sliced smoke-cured ham and the obligatory boiled potatoes. A true 'country' dish that has been a favourite in the mountain communities around this region for centuries – love it! White wine obligatory.

Little was I to know that two days later one of these very large 'wheels' of strong-smelling cheeses would be accompanying us on our long drive to Calais and thence to London.

Just picture in your mind, an Audi coupe, full of a season's ski kit – including two pairs of very 'high' ski boots and personal gear waiting for Mom to wash AND this cheese. You get the 'atmosphere'?

After a 6 - hour dash to the ferry, the crossing, we arrived in Dover, at British customs late in the evening and of course, were signalled to pull over to be met by a Customs official (by this time the interior of the car was 'pulsating') who indicated for me to put the window down. Not satisfied with just standing there and talking, he decided to put his

head in through the window – POW! The mix of dirty socks, stinking ski boots AND the Raclette Cheese, hit him and he shot back waving his arm rapidly to indicate for us to get the hell out of it!

Two smelly innocents abroad so to speak!

Nick was a member of the British Ski Squad for several years and became so immersed in the whole sport, that it was inevitable that his future life would have some association with it. Today, among numerous other activities, he is one of the Channel 4 and NBC snow sport commentators, of 31 years.

CORDON BLEU AND A BURGUNDY!
HOME OF A CORDON BLEU CHEF, EPOISE CHEESE,
PARMESANO DELIVERED FRESH FROM MODENA AND
'PLAT DE JOUR' WITH THE FIRE BRIGADE.

As I write, this is my last time in France, working with a wonderful team from Prisme Events, headed by Joseph Mathieu, who I first met in the Netherlands back in 2012/14.

By the time I arrived in his office in Clamecy for the first time, we (his team and I) had completed the design and installation of a large, 9,000msq 'Astroturf Snowsport' centre in Turkey and were currently working on the design, for the Belgian Snowsports Federation's very own, year-round training centre in the Ardennes. It was intended that we visited the site and assess the possible lines of descent for the main slopes, in thick woodland (Which reminded me of the "Battle of the Bulge" all those years back.) and enjoying yet more Mussels, before returning to his office in Burgundy – Clamecy – for me to brief and train his two key staff in the design principles we had agreed on earlier at the site, for the rest of the week, before returning to Schiphol to fly home.

They were great guys, Berto and Mathieu and very clued up to what was expected. I had a great time with them; especially as they were to introduce me to “Working Lunches”, French style! And three I remember most clearly. All full, with people having a ‘working lunch’ but, so very different and ALL in this small provincial town, in the middle of Burgundy!

While I cannot remember what we ate at the first one, I remember clearly, that, with the exception of the manager, all the staff, were in the ‘Special Needs’ category and working so well as a team – an eye opener and a privilege!

The second was a little Bistro on the edge of town, run by two brothers, who were Italian. I remember ordering Parma Ham and salad – no room for the salad on the plate; which was full of Ham and liberally covered in ‘freshly grated’ Parmesan Cheese. Obviously, plus the obligatory glass of red wine.

However, while I was praising the excellence of it all, Mathieu Sonnet told me that one of the brothers, drives all the way to Parma, to buy the Ham, Parmesan Cheese and Balsamic Vinegar, every Wednesday – you can’t get it much fresher than that!

Another speciality of provincial France is the little Bistro run by a husband and wife and it was on the last Friday with these two, that they took me, to what appeared to be a ‘hole in the wall’, with peeling faded blue paint. Inside it was not any more appealing, but for a dozen members of the local Fire Brigade enjoying, yet another ‘Plat de Jour’!

I chose the fish on this occasion.

However, to ‘top’ all this, Joseph had booked me into L’Hostellerie de la Post, directly opposite the Hotel de Ville.

A touch of true French provincial history, dating back some 300 years and clearly the main stop – off for all, travelling to Paris.

I discovered that it was owned by a former ‘celebrity chef’ in that part of the world. I witnessed he and his wife, arriving and sitting at the ‘special table’ reserved for the couple, every night. They obviously received undivided attention from the staff, as I sat and observed, between the four courses (for 28Euros) that I enjoyed for the four days I stayed there.

Being the only ‘foreigner’ there, I did attract a little attention. Especially when I came to the cheese board, containing some twenty different cheeses, many local. One in particular caught my fancy – Epoisse – a local cheese, soft centred, with a slight flavour of young Camembert! Once they recognised my taste for cheese, the whole board was presented to me at the table on following nights!

This memory ends on a very sad note. In 2020, Joseph Mathieu died of Cancer; a young Father of two boys and leader of a wonderful young team, who I had the honour of working with. Many of us in the business miss him dearly and I will always remember our times together.

FROGS LEGS FOR CHRISTMAS DINNER!

For three Christmases, before departing on my first adventure in Ecuador. I had travelled by car, across France, to one of their Ski Resorts for a week’s skiing before the rush of the New Year hoards! On the second visit, we had chosen Chatel, close to the Swiss Border.

I recall, this was a few days before Christmas Day and there was very little snow, barely one run open! But we were lucky, as, just a day after arriving it began to snow heavily,

so much so, that magical 'white world' almost appeared over-night. To the extent that we were able to ski on full runs, without wrecking our skis.

So, it came to Christmas Day and a full day's skiing was enjoyed by all. What we had failed to recognise, was that the French treated it as a special holiday – for themselves, with little regard to visitors. Which meant, everywhere was closed, especially restaurants!!

We were hungry and began to search for a place to eat! All I remember was, it was a beautiful moonlit night, snow everywhere – but empty stomachs! Eventually we found just one place open and they welcomed us in, to what was a warm and cosy little restaurant - BUT empty except for the five of us!!

When we came to order the food, we were told that there was only their "Plat de Jour", so we had no choice and waited for it to arrive. Soup as the 'starters, hot and wholesome. THEN the main course! Out came a very large dish, full of hot and crispy FROGS LEGS!!

Well, we were aghast, but so hungry by then that we eventually devoured the lot!

So, what do I think of Frogs Legs?

Well, you need a lot before you have 'eaten your fill' for sure. However, what meat there is on these legs, tastes very much like chicken to be honest. And certainly, it was a "Memorable Meal"!

10. ECUADOR



Cameos begin in 1986 and continue.

FIRST MEAL WITH MY NEW “IN – LAWS”

It was New Year’s Eve and Latin America goes wild on this day and Ecuador is no exception.

On this occasion it was midday and I was travelling in the rear of a battered old taxi, going through the central business area of Guayaquil. Packed with cars and buses and thousands of people dashing around finishing their shopping ready for the night’s festivities, I was shocked by the sight of a small group of people rushing out of an office building with what appeared to be a body stretched across their shoulders!

They dashed into the middle of the traffic jam and threw it to the ground and proceeded to set it alight! I sat there wide eyed at the incident, only to be calmed by Chela who took my shaking hand and informed me that it was a dummy and was part of the New Year’s Eve celebrations; but that was not the end because having tried to assure me, the dummy began to erupt in a series of explosions, all in the middle of the street milling with people! As she said, I was going to see a lot more of this later in the night, when at the stroke of Midnight, people rushed out of their houses and flung these dummies into the middle of the streets and proceed to set them on fire – “War Zone” comes to my mind.

With five days to go to our wedding, my first night in Guayaquil was to be spent meeting my new ‘in laws’. How apt that title, as my father-in-law to be, was an eminent Criminal Lawyer, along with one of my ‘new’ brothers, Jorge (more recently the other brother Enrique also)!

Chela collected me from the hotel and following a short but hairy taxi ride – another very battered taxi actually! I arrived in San Martin to be met by the whole Family – Don Eithel, Dona Lenny, sister Gina, and brothers Enrique and Jorge.

While I was truly warmly welcomed, my extreme lack of Spanish and their lack of English made for a 'stiff' start to the evening. However, this was greatly eased by the fact that in addition to Chela, Enrique her eldest brother, speaks English too and after a couple of glasses of 'courage', helped 'break the ice'.

Obviously, 'Mother – in law was in charge and like all 'Latina Moms' she was ready to win me over via my stomach! A grand meal of roast turkey and a mixture of fruit- based stuffing and sauces; which is something I have come to really enjoy about having turkey here over the years.

The highlight of the evening was not to be the food however, but the formality I had to follow, of officially asking permission to marry their Daughter!

With Enrique acting as intermediary and translator, I say my bit. However, I was not ready for the response from Mother – in –law, who shocked even her own Family by asking whether I was happy to have a bride who, and I quote – "cannot cook, cannot sew and is STUBBORN!"

I think I replied by saying that I had already sampled Chela's cooking, and I was happy with what I had eaten so far. As far as sewing was concerned, I was sure this was not going to be a problem in our life? However, as far as the 'stubborn' bit was concerned, I think I threw it back on myself by inferring that I too could be a bit awkward, much to the amusement of the rest of the family.

To this day, Dona Lenny and I still burst into fits of laughter, not long into any conversation we ever have. Of course Chela still gets a sharp reminder from time to time that her first responsibility is to feed and look after her husband! – Latina culture!

Just as a reminder to anyone coming to Guayaquil, some taxis are still battered wrecks, apart from those you get from the airport! After 26 years, they still 'blow up' dummies in the street on the stroke of midnight on New Years Eve. Sadly, similar things happen almost daily in real life in some areas of the world!

WHERE GUINEA PIGS ARE NOT PETS!

Rabbit, yeah! Pigeon, yeah! Suckling pig, yeah! Crocodile, yeah! But Guinea Pig, NO WAY!

Living here in the Sierra amongst the indigenous people, you often see someone, usually not more than 5' 2" tall, or smaller, bowed down under an 'enormous' sack filled with what, for all intents and purposes, are weeds! Alfalfa actually.

When you have seen this sight regularly in your travels to the supermarket, you get curious and eventually have to ask, "what the hell are they carrying?" "Oh, that's the food for the guinea pigs", I am told! But I haven't seen any in the pet shop at the shopping mall, say I? No you won't see any at pet shops only restaurants!!!!!! We eat them in the Sierra, in fact throughout the whole of the Andes and have done for many hundreds of years!

Here they call them CUY (Ku-ee), and in a small village near us, a whole street is dedicated to the cooking and selling of CUY. Some are spit roasted or barbecued (I won't describe the bamboo stake!!). Others, like the one I finally got to eat, 'deep fried'.

It was on a trip up to Piquiucho (a Quechua word meaning 'red hot chilli pepper), to see the site of a new soccer field, to be funded by Ulises' Foundation, Funde Cruz, that Chela and I joined a larger group of representatives of the Ministry

of Sport, Ulises project architect and members of the De La Cruz family, at a meal laid on by Uli, at a special restaurant outside Ibarra, where the speciality was CUY!

At this point, I want you to cast your minds back to those early “Zoo Quest” TV series, when David Attenborough was a young man - all in black and white of course! I for one remember seeing one programme dedicated to the Flying Fox. The skin of this animal hung down to its paws and when it ‘jumped’, from one branch to another, it spread its legs wide, stretching this loose skin and fur into a sail cum parachute – a bit like Base Jumpers. By this quirk of Nature, it glided across enormous gaps between the trees.

It was like this with my CUY. It looked as if it had been caught in ‘mid-flight’ by a very deep frying - pan full of boiling oil, and instantly, in this stretched out position, ‘cooked in flight’!

Nut brown in colour and delightfully crisp, it covered everything else on my plate – potatoes, corn, spices and salad; tasty, mmmh? Just like rabbit, that had been starved especially for the occasion! I crunched my way through this mass of crispy ‘parachute’ in search of meat, which finally amounted to about a tablespoon full!

Desperate for more meat; and here you have to get the picture in your minds- eye, of the top of the crispy head of this little creature with closed eyes; – that is all I could see up to the moment when I decided to turn it over!

NOW, imagine the scream you would let out if you found yourself hurtling in free-fall, towards a vat of boiling hot oil? THAT was what I saw on the face when I turned it over, in search of more meat = a SCREAMING guinea pig!!!!

“You went through ALL THAT for me?” I thought to myself and immediately gave up the quest and waited for ‘pudding’!

THE BUPA GIRLS OR ‘PUTTING’ GREEN FIRST!

Both phrases conjure up either a play on words or a coronary infarction! Take it whichever way, but the two - the BUPA Girls and the ‘putting’ green are related. Thanks to our very pro-active and creative British Ambassador Linda Cross, who during a time when our government didn’t really give a damn about the far reaches of ‘old Empire’ that exist on the South American sub- continent, did more to unite the disparate GB groups and companies and the ‘ex-pats’, than any previous Ambassador has done here in recent years; AND ‘carry the flag’.

One event she created has been the Ambassador’s Cup – an amateur golf team event made up of ‘British and Commonwealth’ companies and organisations, which has become much more than a PR exercise, judging from the turn out last year at the Quito Tennis and Golf Club. They even flew in from outside the country to be there, either supporting or playing.

Added to which, the ‘added value’ attendance of the Canadian, German, Russian and Spanish Ambassadors to give further credentials to the event.

This was the third – sorry second – one was cancelled due to the attempted assassination of the President earlier that day – which Chela and I have attended. Like similar events, the companies try and outdo the others with their presentations both on and off the Greens. BUPA with its ‘Girls’ doing their best to persuade you to join their health schemes or in my case, bring on an early “Coronary” is one of the examples!

On our first occasion, in slightly cramped conditions they were literally 'pressing' on the backs of our chairs while we – Raymond Williams, the then new Head at the British School, and I; sitting with our backs to them and our wife giving us extremely dirty looks, got hotter and hotter! First the jackets and then the ties came off, while downing wine and water to 'keep cool' and trying to keep in touch with round the table conversation at the same time.

For nearly 2 years now, Raymond and I kept reminding ourselves of the moment, while secretly hoping it would be repeated a second time! It was not to be, sadly, because at the new venue for the event with many more people involved, you had to be out on the BUPA Tee to get the full effect, as I am sure the passing teams received? Besides, they were only wearing black leotards unlike the royal blue and silver ones they were 'poured' into on the first occasion!

On this occasion, we were again treated to free sampling of Chivas Regal, a variety of wines and a decent beer from the National Brewery (British owned) AND the 'BUPA girls'. All that before a delightful meal based upon traditional Sierra recipes and a Merlot, finishing off with coffee and more Chivas Regal. Whisky is really a popular drink here.

All this was followed by the Prize giving and a delightful presentation by the Ambassador on a project the Embassy is supporting in Amazonia, based upon providing solar panels for lighting and powering computers for an indigenous 'jungle tribe' and its community. Oh! and a Raffle with a Caribbean Cruise as top prize! No, we didn't win!

There is a sequel to all this as, after a rather fitful night's sleep- probably the two A's – altitude and alcohol. I went into a deep sleep around 7 am to be suddenly awakened

by the bed bumping up and down and the tiles rattling on the roof!!!

Yes, an earth tremor of about 5.6 on the Richter Scale giving the whole of Quito DM a 'wake up call'! It was quite local, i.e. epicentre was about 15km North of here and it was 10km below the surface. Being on the "Ring of Fire" we have to expect this and one reason why I am one of the appointed Honorary Consular Agents who are expected to be 'on call' under such circumstances; not this time though, as there was no recorded damage or people in trouble, thank God!

Barring another national incident, I have just accepted my invitation to this year's Ambassador's Cup, in two weeks time; I wonder.....!

Another thing arising from that particular golf event were the snide comments about my style of card playing, by a small group of younger 'Brits', which brings me onto -----

GAS – TRONOMY, POKER AND RUGBY!

Men enjoying each other's company is as special to them as it is for women taking pleasure in their own company also. The funny thing is, neither group cannot for the life of them understand what the other finds so special in it?

Notwithstanding, when a group of like-minded 'chaps', particularly from Britain, West Europe and the 'colonies' get together, many facets of their individual characters emerge – from the knowledge of taste and variety of innumerable alcoholic beverages, connection to impressive adventures, cuisine and their own skills in that field and of course sport.

It was the latter, namely the Rugby World Cup in New Zealand that brought together such a group – four Brits, an

Irishman and two 'colonials', one American, the other Dutch! (I don't know how they will take that description if they ever read this – sportingly I hope?)

The idea came from Peter Taylor, an avid England supporter, who suggested that we met at his house, had a few drinks, played Poker for a couple of hours before the start of the Match. Well, it was Matches actually, the two Quarter Finals between Ireland and Wales and England against France! Being a live broadcast from New Zealand, the first match started at Midnight and the second around 3 am in the morning; so, there was a long night ahead of us.

To play several rounds of Poker to start with: combined with a selection of cheeses – and if you are a cheese lover, a decent cheese is hard to find in this country; one of them was OUTSTANDING and had to be of Italian origin, not a local 'rip – off** - drinks, which I remember included a Hungarian beer, brought by Matthew Blair and a 15 year-old Tequila, was a very good 'ice breaker' as some had not met the others before.

For me it was a whole new experience, as I had never played the game –only Blackjack and that's another story, which I will leave to Pete Haden to tell!

So, with half the group either new or 'nearly new' to the game it started cautiously, with lots of explanations along the way. As time passed, little nuances emerged which revealed that Jeff, our American friend, knew more about the game than was first perceived. To the point when he pushed ALL his chips into the centre of the table calling "All In!"

Which prompted the question "how long have you been playing this game Jeff?"

Well,10. our jaws dropped when he proceeded to explain that, for five years, he had been the Commander of a US Nuclear Submarine! Where, often up to 70 days at a time, they were submerged somewhere in the vast ocean network which covers $\frac{3}{4}$ of our Planet either chasing Russian subs or lying in wait for them!

Apparently, the lying- in wait period could last anything up to 30 days and it was in this time that a 'submariners' gambling skills were honed.

Quite fascinating to hear the tales, but one thing really niggled me! During the whole of the 'Cold War' how much of any submariner's (Russian, American, British, French) time was taken up with "waiting" for the 'enemy'? A considerable proportion of the time under water I would imagine? So, who was paying for these guys to be sitting around playing cards and gambling away their wages – ME, YOU the tax - payers of these countries!!!!!!

I was even less impressed when on the final hand, before turning to the TV for the Rugby, Jeff called, "All In" again and won the jackpot! I thought, 'a ha, my time will come!'

All good fun really, as we played with chips that we were issued in exchange for a single contribution of \$15.

Those of you who follow Rugby, will know that none of the games followed the pundits' predictions; England and Ireland lost!

However, to bring in the culinary connection, Peter had laid on two lots of food. The first was an excellent selection of cheeses (I later found out, one he had flown in with from Venice a week earlier) and assorted nibbles, which we enjoyed with our beers or Tequilas while we played Poker.

The second, a great lasagne, served up between the games at around 2.30 am.

You can imagine how 'tired' we were getting by then – toasting every 'try' with a shot of Tequila and as the second game progressed one after the other began to doze off.

I must admit that even though I had not had much to drink, my head felt muzzy?

As the final whistle blew and we saw England depart the competition (no Knighthoods this time round), one of the two Matthews shouted. "My God, open all the windows! The house is FULL of gas!!!!"

To be sure, it transpired that at some point when Peter was preparing the lasagne, he must have caught one of the taps to one of the rings on the gas stove, by mistake. On reflection, it must have happened after Peter had taken the lasagne from the oven and turned off that gas, otherwise I think there would have been a large explosion and who knows what the result would have been?

Imagine the headlines in the Times – "British Fans Blown Up watching Rugby World Cup Quarter Finals".

It only leaves me to say that with ALL the windows and doors in the house open, we left Peter standing on the doorstep with his dog, still smiling as Dawn was breaking.

You can imagine what the comments were in the emails that flew backwards and forwards after that - cruel, cutting, unsympathetic come to mind. Obviously, Jeff came in for 'a lot of stick' too, and like any good submariner, he took it on the chin and gave back as much as he got.

As you know a Quarter Final is the precursor of a Semi, then a Final and it was the latter that saw us again round a table, at Raymond's this time, preparing to do battle with the cards for another three hours, before the start of the Final, between the host New Zealand (always my favourites) and France (how the hell did they manage to get that far?).

Not liking to drive late at night, I turned up early to 'give a helping hand'. So, on this occasion I was able to witness the culinary skills of this Dubliner.

No Boxties –an Irish potato pancake - on this menu, but homemade Spanish Omelettes and homemade burgers for half time - 4 am! Here was an expert at work, as no one had ever told me that once you had diced the potato for the omelette, you par-boiled them before adding them, along with the slightly translucent onions to the egg mixture.

As a starter to the evening, with a beer, rum, or tequila, whichever took your fancy, a little of Raymond's Spanish Omelette proved an excellent ethnic accompaniment and received praise indeed! The burgers, prepared by Raymond and his young Daughter Rachel, again lived up to the juicy flavoursome 'patty' that to my mind, personifies a homemade burger made from local beef, not the flat brown, flourless 'shoe sole' that 'Ronald' makes!

A burger and beer at half time, what more would a man want - albeit 4 am in the morning!!

Another selection of good drink, good man-made food BUT! No attempted gassing this time and as far as the Poker is concerned, something had to happen in Jeff's absence?

With three absent from the group, it was left to three amateurs and a 'cagey' Peter – who revealed his

experience by occasionally slipping out “we used to do.....” comments, which I haven’t yet decided upon whether they were by design or accident!!!?

What I do remember is Matthew No1. – a born organiser – suggesting that if we stopped “burning the cards” it would make for more interesting deals and hands! Who am I, a mere novice to argue with that? Besides, I had come to rely upon Matthews’ words of advice, from the very first evening, when he said repeatedly, that the last card you get dealt could change your hand from ‘nothing’ to ‘something’!

By the middle of the games, we had all had a win and the distribution of the ‘chips’ fairly even around the table, though Peter and Raymond looked the stronger! So much so that with minutes to go before the start of the final, Peter, feeling lucky, suggested a last round. With Matthew dealing, it was clear that neither Peter nor Raymond had a particularly good hand, while I had low numbers but apart from two missing cards, I could have something!

Well, the penultimate deal gave me one of the cards I needed and with Jeff’s words ringing in my ears and one card remaining to be dealt, I called “ALL In” and pushed all my ‘chips’ to the centre of the table. The final card was dealt and mine gave me a “STRAIGHT” – the highest hand of the evening and the ‘Jackpot’.

To say that Peter, Raymond and Matthew were “gobsmacked” would be an understatement. Me, having never played the game until I met these guys, I was left somewhat bewildered by it all but a few Dollars to the good for the experience.

From the emails I am receiving, the next evening is billed as the “showdown”.

Watch this space!

A MYTH BECOMES A REALITY - IRISH BOU(LL)ES AND CHILEAN BBQ.

Aberdeen Angus beef, it's good; Kobe steak, yes, that's fine too; but if you really want flavour in your beef, you have to have had the beast fed on the grasslands of Uruguay or the Pampas of Argentina to have real flavour.**

That is why roasting meat on a wood fire in South America, is the epitome of outdoor cooking.

This brings me to a rather un-seasonally grey and cool Sunday in late February (well in 'seasons' terms as everything 'is' upside down south of the Equator, it was like a typical August Sunday in England!). We were among a group of friends, at a 'South American' BBQ at Raymond and Fabiola's house. (It is important to take careful note at this stage, that Raymond is a Dubliner, from the south side of the Liffey and Fabiola, his wife, is Chilean).

Before going any further, I want you the reader, to have the fullest picture in your mind, as the 'characters' at this party do add 'seasoning' to the occasion, while some, an inter-connection with an 'incident' which occurred at our house back on New Year's Day, which I will come to later as it is key to this story.

When you are an Ex-Pat, you do tend to gravitate to your own crowd and in this case, it was an off shoot of our Poker Group and their wives and families and even extended families.

On this occasion, Raymond met Chela and I with, "just in time, the meat's ready and you MUST meet Stuart!" Leading us quickly to the garden where everyone else was already in the swing of it all.

While searching for 'Stuart' I found Matt, my poker guru, bon viveur and whisky, whiskey, tequila, rum and wine expert and CEO of an international NGO; Peter, former London business 'trouble shooter', Damian, new to the group as CEO of a new UK travel company; Rob, and Irish former NATO Peacekeeper, now with the UNHCR and much more; making for a very eclectic and interesting group to be among – not forgetting the Ladies in all our lives and their 'off-spring'.

Then I saw Stuart and recognised him immediately from several occasions at the Embassy Residence. I knew he lived in a beautiful house close to school, but I did not know that he was a highly acclaimed international portrait sculptor.

As his story unfolds amidst the glasses of Chilean Merlot ** it appears that he was formerly one of the top sculptors for Madame Tussauds, travelling around the world with their exhibitions and creating new 'personalities' as the moment demanded – you can visualise the level of the skill of this man. I have seen his work in real life, quite stunning and his portfolio is impressive. So, you will see that on this occasion he was the focal point of the conversation. Especially as he happened to mention the name Kylie Minogue, and the famous nude sculpture of her bottom! He was that sculptor!

A modest but assured Yorkshireman who I connected with immediately, as he and his sons are crazy about WW2 planes!!!!

With stories like that and a 'peacekeeper', on a covert assignment, falling off a bridge with 90 lb pack on his back, bouncing around the conversation, you get the gist that it was a fun time and with the Uruguayan and Argentinian beef, Ecuadorian salchichas (sausages) and morcillas

(black pudding) cooking away on the wood fire , it became tasty too.

The Chilean bit comes in the form of a grand earthenware pot into which you put the hot embers of the fire, then add a second slightly smaller bowl on top of that, containing all the cooked meat and sausages – a bit like a Bain Marie without the water – topped off with a big lid to keep in the heat. So, when you get up for seconds, the food is still hot.

Now there's a thought for you all; especially, John T, Max T and Tammy McH! I have started using a Le Creuset Casserole pot as a warmer – works fine! *

*Several years on from this story, I now have my own earthen oven in the BBQ area.

Mentioning the Irish, brings me naturally back, to the 'incident' on New Year's Day, when we held our annual 'post New Years Eve Hangover' party, a tradition we brought with us from England. On this last occasion it was the 'Poker Group' and their families and some other stalwarts of past 'do's', enjoying an absolutely delightful warm and sunny afternoon in our garden, enjoying a modest BBQ but two very special, 'Chela's Curries' as we call them.

With the children playing all over the gardens, and the 'ladies' in their usual Latina huddle, the men settled down to some 'sampling'.

You see, wherever the 'poker group' gathers, we/they bring their own 'bar' of rare and expensive, whisky, tequila and rum; strictly for sampling (you don't knock back a \$180 bottle of 25-year-old tequila in an afternoon!). So, it was in a brief interlude in sampling three whiskies and two tequilas, that I introduced them all to BOULES.

Clearly, the innate competitive spirit of these ‘youngsters’ was not dulled by the alcohol, as challenge after challenge took us into the twilight and I had to turn on the garden lights for the last few ‘ends’.

Eventually they all departed, leaving Becky, Chela and I to reflect on what had been a lovely day with friends.

You can imagine how shocked I was the next morning, to receive an email not only thanking us for the party BUT also declaring that, in the writer’s view, there had been CHEATING going on in the games of Bou(LL)es and what was going to be done about it?

Slightly non-plussed, but not entirely phased by this, I devised a cunning plan. I called upon a ‘life-long friend of mine, Anthony de Frauncey (French by birth and French by name) to rule upon the incident, being an expert in the game.

In his opinion, from the information he had at hand, it was clear that few, if any of the players knew anything about the game. Moreover, he felt that at least they should know that it was not only an honourable game played to strict rules but also that there were numerous derivatives of the original game to be found throughout the regions which, through history had come under French influence.

Well, I discovered from de Frauncey that BouLLes, spelt with two LL’s is an Irish derivative, found and played occasionally in the Dublin communities South of the Liffey.

So, with this in mind we return to the gathering in February at Raymond’s house. Moreover, to add further detail, it should be noted that Raymond is a Dubliner, from the South side of the Liffey!

Good food and wine downed, Raymond calls us all to attention to start the games of Boules. There was to be a twist in the story however, when we saw a black leather box (probably an old briefcase really) being brought to the lawn by his Daughter Rachel.

With due ceremony the leather case was opened to reveal six 'bouLLes' and a jack – they were all POTATOES!!!!

With an umpire present (ME) the next two hours passed without incident as potato after potato was tossed towards the 'jack' and a winner eventually emerged.

I love the Irish, especially those who play BouLLes!

DINING WITH AN M.B.E AND AN IMPROMPTU CHORUS OF "GOD SAVE THE QUEEN"!

A year or so after coming to Ecuador, I was invited and subsequently joined the Board of the British School, Quito; an amazing multi-national "cradle to university" school. It was from this that we became closely associated with the British Embassy and the British community.

All this coincided with the arrival of a new and very dynamic Ambassador, Linda Cross and her late husband Mike. She worked miracles and pulled the community together like no other recent ambassador had achieved. Being Honorary President of the Board, it was not long before we were seeing a lot of each other.

One particular annual event being the "QEB", (Foreign Office jargon for 'The Queen Elizabeth's Birthday!) and it was held in the gardens of the Residence.

Well, having already attended two, we were already preparing something special for the next, which was to be for 150, disadvantaged children, held in the grounds of the

Residence. So, it came as a surprise, to receive a private invitation to dinner the night before the “QEB”.

There were twelve of us, including the Chairman of our school Board and his wife, Paul and Maribel McEvoy: at the time, Paul was General Manager of Lloyds TSB, Ecuador. Two others from the Board and the rest I later discovered, were also from the banking world.

However, just prior to being ushered into the dining room, Linda called for our glasses to be topped up as she had an announcement to make – being just on 8 o'clock (past midnight in the UK) it seemed appropriately timed, that it was to toast the Queen? But no, - that was to come later – it was to announce that Paul had been awarded the MBE – for services to banking and British business in Ecuador. What a joyful moment, and a privilege to be part of the occasion.

Again, because by this time it was after midnight back in the UK, Linda called our attention, raising her glass to toast the Queen and an impromptu rendition of the National Anthem (first verse), before being ushered into the Residence dining room to enjoy a celebration meal.

Sadly, shortly after this Paul was given the thankless task of closing down the Lloyds TSB Ecuadorian operation, after a 97year presence in South America; they left to go to Japan, where, shortly after their arrival, the great Tsunami, earthquakes and nuclear melt-down took place. Which, following being thrown about like a rag doll, in an elevator on its way to his 17th floor office, during the earthquake that hit Tokio, prompted Paul to write that ... “had I been in another country when this happened, I would most likely not be here to write this note to you!!!”

Such is the preparedness of the Japanese, that afar

as the earthquake and aftershocks were concerned, the loss of life was remarkably low. Amazing too, how quickly they have recovered, unlike the tens of thousands in Haiti, who still remain homeless four years on.

What about the meal, you ask? Well, the details I can't remember, but one thing did stand out as far as the Ambassador, Paul and Maribel were concerned; and that was the fact that the caterer had not followed the Ambassador's menu instructions! They served pork as the main course and Paul and Maribel are vegetarian!!!!

Having concluded his 'tour of duty' in Japan, Paul chose to give up a banking career, after 27 years, and returned to Quito, where they both had spent such a happy time among friends. It's good to see them back and Paul back to the board of the British School, Quito. While now General Manager of the Quito Stock Exchange.

A QUIET LUNCH FOR 6 DURING 'COVID'

Visualise, the most exclusive club in Quito, closed like other clubs, restaurants, cinemas etc. during "Lockdown", with a 7pm curfew on top of this; and you get the picture of a 'desolate city'.

It was in this situation, that our 'boss', our Ambassador, Katherine Ward KVO, had invited five of us, Honorary Consular Agents, for the Consular Section of the British Embassy here, to a private 'Thank You' lunch, shortly before her departure to another esteemed posting elsewhere; an absolute joy to have 'served,' over the past four years.

Albeit closed, but when you get a request from an Ambassador's office, you 'are open' for them exclusively!

And so it was, one security guy at the entrance (with mask), ushered us, individually, up a massive flight of steps, into an empty library, except for us, arriving one by one! Then to be escorted to the restaurant – absolutely empty, with a single large dining table, set for six people, and silence, except for voices from the kitchen nearby. This table was Large! Allowing an acceptable distance between us, but still had a kind of unique cosiness about it. Probably, this was due to Katherine’s natural warmth and friendliness towards us all. I should add that among her five guests, there was a General and two MBEs, so I was in special company and friends – Sylvia, Andy, Luis, Dominic, Katherine and myself!

Unlike that ‘working lunch’ that I attended with the Swiss Ambassador, way back, to discuss the Manchester Bobsleigh event and so carefully ‘orchestrated’. Instead, we happily chatted around a variety of ‘relevant topics’, throughout the meal and wine.

At one point, I remember Andy asking Katherine, what was the most significant achievement for her during her term with us? Without hesitation, she told us, that in spite of the Foreign Office reluctance to change its stance; her single efforts in clearing-up the “Assange Affair”, along with the division it had created between the two Governments, was her most important achievement and for which she received official recognition from the Ecuadorian President and Assembly, shortly before her departure!

Where do Ambassadors and Consuls go at the end a term in a country – good question. They apply for a posting, which is decided upon by the Foreign Secretary at the time! For Katherine, this was not to be an Ambassadorial position! She was ‘sent’, on behalf of the late Queen, to Malta to become her High Commissioner, the now King’s representative!

11. THE NETHERLANDS



While my first visit was a stopover in Amsterdam, on my way back from Stockholm back in 1969. Amsterdam then was still 'rustically real', full of history and its special style of well-scrubbed urban architecture, before tourism, international businesses and modern, sustainable urban expansion began. Though I should add that 'urban' is difficult to define in one of the most densely populated countries in Western Europe. More like hundreds of 'Henley-in-Arden', linked by avenues of Poplar trees, dykes and canals.

The city and the country appealed on this first visit and has grown into yet another rather special country for me, where I have gained real and lasting friends, done good business and enjoyed a great culture, food and hospitality.

It was back in 1980, having spent the day walking round the old city and then, standing in front of Rembrandt's 'Night Watch' in the old Rijksmuseum, that I recognised the role that the Dutch have played in its influence on the world, not only the arts but also science, medicine, agriculture and much more over the centuries. Sometimes allies, other times opponents, influenced by our long-time adversary Spain.

And the painting? It is an awe-inspiring work of art and one that I would love to see again among others in its new home.

We were there on a long weekend visit and being situated in the heart of the old city, the scene was dominated with canals and the famous multi-storey merchants' houses, squeezed together, yet each displaying its own individuality, if you cared to crane your neck and look upwards towards the roof and gables.

WE MISSED “THE SINGING FROCK!”

One evening down a dimly lit street alongside yet another canal, we discovered the historic Restaurant d’Vijff Vliegen – The Five Flies. I recall that we sat on high backed oak chairs, which carried little brass plates with the names of famous people fixed on them. I can’t remember any of the names on mine, but I do remember one extra-large one at the head of an empty nearby table, which was clearly signed as ‘reserved for the Singing Frock’, Demis Roussos. I do remember eating mussels and that after all these years feeling that it had been a bittersweet occasion.

Several years later, in 1985, we opened Creative Leisure Associates for business, and I was to be re-connected with the country and what has become a longstanding business association and friendship with Michiel de Ruiter and his family, Margriet, Michael, Maxine and Macey – all the M’s!

Before I forget, I should quickly say that the only recollection of food from the first visit back in 1969, was buying a loaf of dark brown Rye Bread, which displeased me so much that it was thrown overboard on the channel ferry from Zeebrugge to Dover!

Of course, adding to my travel experiences since then, I have become a fan of this misunderstood loaf – well, from an English point of view that is. Today, I would choose it first over many of its wheat flour alternatives; “On Rye” conjures up a very wholesome sandwich to me, closed or open style, even today.

From Winter Olympics, ski aerial jump shows to producing large quantities of manufactured real snow, is how Michiel’s snow sport and business career has grown. So memorable meals have often been overshadowed by the complex and sometimes stressful snow production situations we found ourselves in together, from Munich, Ingolstadt, Brescia to

London, Birmingham, Manchester, Hard Rock Café, Berlin, Kaoshiung, Taiwan, Singapore and other places in between over the years. Though whatever the situation, there was always a beer at hand, be it in a tent by the side of giant compressors at 3 am in the morning making snow; in Harvey Floorbangers after a show; Schiphol Airport between flights; a bar near his office watching World Cup soccer, wearing an orange wig among a packed audience of Dutch supporters or ISPO at the Messe in Munich with a Weissbier, meeting up with Rainer Klimachevski and other friends in the business.

ART DECO EATING WITH BEER TO MATCH

However, a more recent visit to Amsterdam, on my way to Taiwan, I was taken to a very special restaurant, the Restaurant Lieve, an Art Deco style Belgian eatery. On this occasion I was with Michiel's former Business Director, Niels Bonenkamp and I let him choose/recommend – the Belgisch Barok. Well, there were twelve courses accompanied by eight different Belgian beers, chosen to fit that particular part of the menu. I have the menu with me as I write, but frankly I can't decipher the Dutch, but I can certainly remember that it was all very delicious and the beer choices exactly appropriate to the dishes, just like one would do with wine.

REAL TEPENYAKI – WITHOUT THE TRICKS

With such a cosmopolitan society one is never short of choice in Amsterdam and another occasion I recall was when Kenji Enzaki, Michiel and I ate Teppanyaki, truly Japanese style, in a hotel in the city. Unlike the noisy versions you come across in the UK, none of which have a single Japanese member of staff, this one was managed by Japanese and the food prepared and cooked in true

Japanese style; quietly, meticulously prepared before us and tasting just as if we were in Tokio.

A RUSSIAN AFFAIR OR VODKA AND CAVIAR AFTER A HARD DAY

There is always a surprise round the corner in this country and during a four day stay in Bussum, recently, where I was presenting a three- day seminar to a small select group that included two Dutch, a Pole, Romanian, Russian, Italian, a Belgian, French man, and two Brits. Following my first day with the group, Michiel, our host, invited us to join him at a local Indian restaurant, where we enjoyed a 'Dutch style' version of Indian curry and the inevitable beers. I recall that the meal was more subtle in flavour than the usual British version and certainly, there were no mouth burning dishes on the menu.

We were all tired, so we made our way back to the hotel where we decided to have a 'night cap' at the minute bar. Standing there quietly chatting, no one noticed that Sergey our Russian colleague had disappeared, to return a little later carrying a bottle of very smooth Vodka and a large tin of Caviar!

To keep the bar staff happy, we bought them a drink each (the manager was fast asleep by then) and then asked for six small glasses and a tin opener! Sergey began to open the Caviar while another in the group poured the vodka. It was after midnight and I had another two days of lectures to deliver; but that strong 'sea taste' of the caviar smoothed down with the most excellent vodka, sent me to bed a very contented and sleepy man.

Caviar and Oysters are truly special and different both in their flavours and textures and worthy of their 'nobility', especially for the taste buds of a simple Brummie!

AIRPORT FOOD – JAPANESE STYLE

I can't leave the Netherlands without recording the existence of the most excellent Sushi Bar in Schiphol Airport. The last time I was there, I ordered a dish of Tuna sashimi and a small 'vase', for that is what they look like, filled with warm Sake.

I remember getting into conversation with the Japanese staff member who prepared the dishes, fresh throughout the day. He told me that they receive a very large fresh tuna fish every week; flown in from Tokio fish market. I gave him my card and told him he could have it even fresher if I arranged to send it directly from the port of Guayaquil, on one of the daily KLM flights! Though I never thought I would have a response, I do recommend you look out for this little gem at the airport.

Oh, and you can buy boxes of smoke herrings from the food shop there too, along with a three-year -old, mature Repenaer Dutch cheese – recommended!

12. TAIWAN



This all began, back in 1982, when I was on my way to Japan, to stay with Kasuo Takase and the Family. Kasuo was a remarkable man, who somehow was able to gather 'foreigners' around him; my first wife being one.

However, over the years knowing him, we got to hear of a young American lady he had befriended, Mary MacKenzie, who lived in Taipei, Taiwan. So, it came as no surprise to me, that in planning my visit, he suggested – well, insisted – that I stop and meet her! Travelling China Airways, I had to change planes in Taipei anyway, so on the way out, I had sufficient time to go out to meet her and say 'hello'. However, she insisted that on the return journey, I stay over for a couple of days and in the process, she would arrange a meeting with staff of the Taiwan Olympic Committee, to talk about skiing! Just like that! I rushed off, to catch my flight to Tokio, saying that I would see her again on my return journey, in three weeks- time!

MANCHURIAN BARBEQUE.

It was on that return stop-over that among other things, I experienced my first Manchurian Barbeque! Imagine an enormous round hotplate, about 2m in diameter, at which stood a number of men, wearing sweat bands, aprons and wielding, what looked like large stainless steel, 'paint strippers!

The first thing you get given is a large empty plate and directions to 'join the queue' and pile your plate with a wide selection of raw meats and vegetables and go to this enormous hot plate, where one of the men would take the plate and tip the contents onto this enormous hot surface. While you help the empty plate, you would watch him turn the contents vigorously, rapidly cooking your chosen food – which in the process, shank in size as it cooked! Take note!!!!

Cooked, its returned to your plate and you go and sit down to eat this hot mixture. Dressed with the selection of sauces on the table, it was tasty.

Years later, we discovered that they had opened one in Birmingham. So, knowing a little of what to expect I took Chela.

Exactly like the first time in Taipei, there was the selection of uncooked meats and vegetables; so, I told Chela to pile her plate with as much raw food as it would hold – now knowing that it would shrink when cooked!

Enjoyable, like Chop Suey, very oriental. Oh! and I did meet staff of the Taiwan Olympic Committee, to discuss skiing and discovered that they have two ski areas up in the mountains, which dominate this small island country. In fact, when I was collecting my bags at the airport carousel, I bumped into two Taiwanese, skis n'all, who had just arrived from skiing in France!

I must add that during this visit, I was taken by Mary, to a little shop, where, behind the counter, I first had to squeeze, sideways down a little 'corridor' into a large airless room at the back of the shop, lined on both sides with large glass cases, full of "Watches"- Rolex, Omega, Longines, you name it – ALL FAKE.! I was asked to buy as many as I liked – "This will pay for your trip", was the gist of the comments from various people there – including Mary! \$25 was all I needed to spend, to buy a 'top of the range' Rolex, I recall! I didn't.

However, I couldn't forget being taken to the "National Shrine" of the "Founding Father" of Taiwan, Chiang Kai Shek. Almost a direct copy of the one in Washington, of Abraham Lincoln! What I was to see, however, was the

Military ‘drill parade’, by the two guards on duty. Boy, it was worth the wait. I have never seen such precision and rifle handling – ever!

YOU ATE WHERE? YOU ATE WHAT?

These were the two questions that met us when we returned to our hotel, on my second visit to the country. This was a visit to check out a site to develop a three month long public winter feature, using real snow and ice! I was with Darcey Crownshaw, of Snow Business International, and Alan Albretti of Cousins Entertainment – yes Robin Cousins company. We had to check the site and come up with proposals on what features we could build and operate. It was big and turned out to be the site of a massive Wave Machine and “Beach”; all cleaned out and dry for refurbishing in the closed season.

It was the first night there, in Taipei, and we were hungry. We decided to go out and sample some of the so-called ‘Street Food’ we had heard of, in that part of the world! So, we asked one of the hotel staff, and he directed us to a street running parallel and behind the hotel. We found it and started walking looking for food! We passed a ‘seedy’ eating house on the way, before we came to the ‘genuine thing’ of people with what looked like small karts, which were steaming with food cooking on charcoal on the kart!

Then doubt set in!

Was that ‘seedy’ café we had seen, less ‘seedy’ than what we were looking at right there? Well, yes, it was and there were people back there, eating! So, we turned on our heels and walked back to this place. At the front was a large glass cabinet with raw ‘meat’ and vegetables. Directly behind was an area where they were cooking the food. Behind that was

a room with chairs and tables covered in plastic tablecloths and a few people eating!

I recall, it was Darcey who went up to one group eating and looked at their food. Satisfied with what he saw, called a member of staff and pointed to the dishes and, raising three fingers, pointed to Alan and I. We got served and ate it all, paid and returned to the hotel replete.

The next morning our hosts asked us what we had done that night and we told them! They simply repeated what the title of this meal says!!!!

Just to say that dog, cat, rats and more, can be found being cooked around such streets in this part of the world!!!!

Having seen the proposed venue for the event and made some measurements and taken photos, we returned to Taiwan to catch our return flight. However, we had time to spare, so we decided to go to see 101! Then the world's tallest building – 101 levels, with wax images of David Beckham and Kylie Minogue on the top floor - bizarre!!! It was an impressive building though.

Then I took them to the “National Shrine”, that so impressed me the first time. The drill presentation by two, highly trained soldiers, was equally impressive! And so were Darcey and Alan.

CHOP SUEY LIVERPOOL STYLE

It was to be another four years before we were called back to deliver the event we had proposed, following that last site visit. The only problem was, they had changed the venue! Not only was it very different but situated in disused docks in the city of Kaoshung, at the very southern end of the

country from Taipei, and two hours on one of the world's fastest train!

Not only that, but the average daily temperature was 30C, and we were expected to provide, REAL ice rinks and REAL snow slides, trails and snowballs!

Now living in Ecuador, but as I had worked on the proposals and designs, I was invited back to help in the build - up – trying to teach Chinese workers to shovel snow a particular way and to fit skis and snowboards, was a 'linguistic challenge' if ever there was – trying to do all this through eager, yet equally ignorant interpreters (to what we were trying to teach)!

It was a project jinxed from the start, as it proved in the weeks to come, when it was closed a number of weeks earlier than planned! Everyone got paid though!!

But, every lunch time, Bill Meadowcroft, Creative Leisure, project manager and I went to a 'steamy' workers café, where we indulged in their version of 'Chop Suey', prepared by several ladies, who spoke excellent English, with a Liverpudlian accent! Yes, they had "served their time" working in restaurants in Liverpool.

We were made very welcome!

A ROOM IN A 'LOVE HOTEL' WHICH LED TO A JOYFUL REUNION!

Many years back, our dear friend Professor Larry Neal, was passing through the UK and on that occasion, had with him, one of his Masters students, a young Taiwanese student, Pearl Lin. She went on to do her PhD and eventually became a Professor herself, at one of the Taiwan Universities. As Larry knew I was going back there, he

suggested that I contacted Pearl in the hope of meeting up with her again after all those years?

I did, and yes, we did meet up in Taipei, prior to my flight back to Amsterdam.

On her instructions, I was to go to a hotel, owned by a friend of hers, and close to the Central Station, where I had arrived, off that incredibly fast train from Kaohsiung a little earlier. I found the 'hotel' and went to Reception, where I was given a key and told which floor I was to go to.

What was strange, was that when I reached the floor, there was another lady at a desk, who proceeded to direct me to THE room! All was normal, bed, armchair, TV etc. so I sat down and made myself comfortable, waiting for Pearl to arrive. A knock on the door and there was Pearl; quick greetings and she said that she was taking me to her favourite restaurant to enjoy some traditional Taiwanese food, before going to the airport to catch my plane.

All this, as we left the room, passed the lady at the desk, passed the two (rather surprised) young ladies at reception and into a taxi to the restaurant!

Delightful Taiwanese food of the finest quality and charming company, which was crowned, by the story Pearl told me. First, the hotel was indeed, owned by a friend, but it was a genuine "Love Hotel" (Hence the reaction of the staff to our very 'brief visit!'). But know this; the last time Larry – a devout Mormon - had been there to lecture, Pearl had put him up in THAT hotel for a week. He never knew or found out its 'real life'!!!

13. GREECE



THE FIRST REAL OUTDOOR ICE RINK IN ATHENS AND FISH SOUP.

After all the wonderful travel experiences, this was my first time in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. Added to which, I was being driven to the capital, Athens, and all that ancient city has to offer!

It was 2003 and we had just landed a 'Real' outdoor ice rink project there; the very first in the country in fact, and this was my first 'site visit' and meeting with those we were going to be working with, during the build-up and operation of the rink!

Little did I know then, how important the site was -The National Gardens; situated just behind the Parliament buildings and overlooked by the Zapion Building. Quite stunning and with an added bonus – to our right, sat the Parthenon, overlooking the whole city, below – awe inspired, is how I felt about it all.

Added to which, my host was how I imagined Zorba the Greek to look like in real life! Yannis was his name, a 'larger than life' personality. Time was short, as I had to make my return flight in three hours. But Yannis had his own agenda and first, we had to drink a 'Greek coffee'! Wow, that was something I had not expected, powerful and combined with the (much needed) obligatory glass of water! I had been in 'Japanese Tea Ceremonies', Uzbek Tea Houses, but this was drinking 'dynamite'! All this, before we inspected the site and discussed requirements- water, electricity, carpentry and much more. The trouble was, Yannis had his own agenda and that was focused on 'Food'! Fish Soup to be precise. A must, if you are in Athens, according to Yannis! The clock was ticking, and a plane was 'waiting', but Yannis insisted that all would be OK and that the driver

had been briefed – even the local police at the market, I discovered later!

The market was heaving with people, as we wove our way through one section after another, until we ‘smelt’ our arrival at the fish section! Squid, Octopus, Tuna, you name it, it was on a slab of marble. I followed him as he shot down between two laden marble slabs, and there it was. An equally heaving café, staff carrying plates above their heads to hungry customers. Along one wall were large steaming pots on gas rings, bubbling away – the Soup!!

Yannis was clearly known and we were barely seated, when the large, steaming bowls of assorted fish bits in a thick broth arrived at the table. With the clock ticking, handling the boiling hot soup enthusiastically, was a challenge, but completed. With empty bowls, I was rapidly ushered out into the street, to the promised car, engine running and the driver chatting to a conveniently stationed policeman, who, as I bid farewell to Yannis from the back seat of the car, stopped the traffic and off we went

Several months later, I was to meet up with Yannis and his team and enjoy working round the clock with them, to hand-over a completed frozen ice rink on time and jump back on a plane to return home to Christmas with the Family.

We repeated this project, with a larger rink the next Christmas, 2004. Which turned out to be an emergency, when the enormous under sea earthquake struck in the Indian Ocean, causing major Tsunamis and affecting the weather as far afield as the Mediterranean; bringing with it, unseasonal torrential rain! The effect on the rink, was to leave 30m long ‘crevasse like’ gouged-out strips in the Ice! This was December 26th, and I was enjoying a Family Boxing Day in Nottingham, when I received a phone call from Athens, explaining the situation and asking the

inevitable question “What do we do, we can’t skate on it any- more?”

Fortunately, I had been briefed by the technician beforehand, on mending Glycol leaks in the pad and ice repairs. So, expecting to catch the earliest flight back, I told them to have 200 bags of crushed ice ready for my arrival!

By the time I arrived from the UK, the first delivery of ice bags was just arriving! Fortunately, others happened in quick succession, and I got the team pouring the crushed ice into the enormous ‘craters’, while the chillers were turned up to maximum. As the crushed ice settled, we added water in order to level-off the repairs. And as Dawn was breaking the ice was well on the way to setting and then the dressing, to level the ice. Suffice to say, public skating began on time and I was able to catch a flight home to enjoy the New Year’s celebrations.

So, what about food, you ask? Well, a real Greek Salad is worth mentioning, with its quality olive oil and the large juicy Kalamata Olives – my favourite!

14. IRELAND – NORTH and SOUTH



Over the years I have had the opportunity to go to both the north and southern, independent parts of this lovely island; and enjoy the wonderful hospitality that both parts of the island offer.

GAMESMANSHIP, ON AND OFF THE FIELD!

Loughborough, 1962 and I was selected to play in the 1st hockey Team, to play a series of UAU matches, away from home! North Wales and Eire to be precise. We were to travel by minibus, first to Bangor, to play against the varsity team, before journeying on to Holyhead, to catch the ferry to Dublin!

I remember, we lost to Bangor by a single goal, before boarding that ferry across the Irish Sea! As you can imagine, to play these UAU games, there is a lot of correspondence in organising it all; accommodation being one.

Trinity College, Dublin, had assured us that all this was organised and that we were to be hosted by students, in their private 'suites'. Which, on arrival, for me, turned out to be an armchair, not a bed! That is where I was expected to sleep, comforted by a large heavy blanket – for three nights!!!

During our stay, we had organised a 'warm-up' game with a local team, called 'Tree Rock Rovers'; well, that was what it sounded like in Irish! They were actually "THREE Rock Rovers! Another loss, but I recall the freezing conditions – driving sleet most of the game, to be precise – at least a warm blanket and armchair were waiting!!!!

Not the most successful of trips, as we lost to Trinity College as well! Nevertheless, there are two memories I will carry through life. The first, buying a genuine Petersen 'Sherlock

Holmes' pipe, with silver band, from the original 'Petersen Shop' in Dublin - still sitting in the wooden pipe bowl by my chair, all these years on. While the second and most memorable experience, was the meal that Trinity had organised for us, before we caught the ferry back to Holyhead that evening.

Chicken and copious greasy Chips, along with more Guinness!

They knew more than we did, I am sure of that! For there was a ranging storm in the Irish Sea that evening. Hitting the boat as we passed the outer harbour wall and continuing for another six hours, before we hit the harbour wall, on our arrival at Holyhead, over three hours overdue!

Seasick, not me! I found a quiet safe place, next to an exit to an upper deck, while watching the waves breaking over the top of the boat, to the stern – a touch frightened, maybe?

A somewhat quiet journey back to Loughborough followed!

NORTHERN IRISH HOSPITALITY DURING "THE TROUBLES"!

One of the Qualifications that the original National Ski Federation of Great Britain had handed over to the newly founded English Ski Council to manage, was the Ski Party Organisers Award (something I refer to in a later 'chapter' of my "Personal Narrative"). I had received a request to go to Northern Ireland to deliver the contents to this award, at a weekend "Sports Conference' organised by the Northern Ireland branch of the CCPR, at the University of Coleraine.

As it happened, NI had several artificial ski slopes and a small but enthusiastic Ski Association. One of its coaches,

Gordon Tait, who I had met during one of our newly created Coaches Courses, wrote to me, inviting me to see two of these slopes, before being driven off to the University for the course. I remember going to Craigavon, outside Belfast and seeing a well-used, slope and a somewhat 'boarded up' ski lodge – which was sadly burned down a year or so later! The second, was an indoor slope at Queens University in Belfast. Why does it stick in my mind after all these years, you may ask? Well, the 'run-out' was short indeed; but worse still, it ended with a brick wall!!!! And they used it for teaching!!!!!!!

I suppose, to set the scene, of that small country during such dramatically turbulent times. I should add that there were military roadblocks, everywhere. Police Stations surrounded by vast coils of barbed wire and the entrance to Belfast's main shopping area, blocked by enormously high steel gates and manned by police! Such were the sights I experienced in the brief three days I was over there.

So, the new and brightly designed university in Coleraine, up on a hill, dusted in snow for the occasion! Came as a relief to what I had witnessed in Belfast earlier. Everyone was so welcoming and the 'students' I was working with, so attentive and interested; that it was difficult to come to terms with the fact, that there were young people in my 'audience' who would be at each-other's throats in different circumstances!

So where does the food come in, you may ask???

Well, it was really the DRINK actually; as the whole event was sponsored by Bushmills Whiskey!!!! And it was their Whiskey that I remember – and 'sip' from time to time – to this very day!

But get the picture – Ireland, is a totally windswept island, green and beautiful on a ‘calm day’. But, regularly really wild, with the Atlantic Ocean battering it constantly.

And like that earlier experience on the Irish Sea sailing from Dublin’s port, it was blowing a “Hoolie” all of the weekend. So strong, that they had closed Belfast airport, where I was due to fly from, back to Brum!

Bless my former CCPR colleague, who was in constant touch with the airport; but who, in return for giving me the bad news – no flights! Proffered, yet another “Bushmills Black Bush”! Which, I have to admit, is a delightfully smooth drink!

Eventually the phone rang, and we were told the airport was reopening and that my flight would leave that evening - with me, well and truly ‘oiled’!

Windy still? You are not kidding. You could feel the wind buffeting the plane as it sped down the runway, but SIDEWAYS when the wheels left the Tarmac!

AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN LIMERICK, BOXTY AND ‘THE BIRMINGHAM SIX’!

It was to be the annual ICPHER conference for delegates in the physical education profession, from all over the world, and in this particular year, it was to be held at the university in Limerick – Terry Wogan’s hometown!

My dear friend of many years, Prof. Larry Neal, from the University of Oregon, had been invited to present a lecture, that related to Recreation Management. On this occasion, he persuaded the organisers to invite two of his close ‘colleagues, Colin Tilley – former U of O, Masters student and close friend and fellow consultant of mine, and myself,

as part of the presentation. As the three of us, were already, presenting a seminar on the same subject, to Sports Centre Managers, in Dublin, earlier in the week.

So, we caught the train to Limerick – lovely journey – met some old friends at the conference and were told that we were to deliver our seminar the next morning, at 10 am.

Preparations made, and 10 am came – no delegates! By 10.15 there were just two of them – AND three of us!!!! In the end the five of us sat in a group of easy chairs and just chatted around the subject we were meant to deliver to a wider audience!

We decided to ‘cut our losses ’and head back to Dublin (tails between our legs) and seek some lighter relief, before catching the ferry back to Holyhead. Temple Bar, that’s where the action is apparently and so it was. Colin had heard of a special restaurant there that served “Boxtys” a type of pancake made from potatoes. The place was heaving, but a smart thinking waiter, immediately took us ‘under his wing’ and guided us – more like pushing to me – across the busy street, to a Bar, which too was ‘heaving’ with, mainly men, drinking the inevitable Guinness! Before he shouted to the barman, he told us that he would come and collect us when a table became available. Then, three pints of Guinness appeared – handed over the heads of other drinkers, for us to enjoy.

And the waiter kept his word, and we were ushered out of the Bar, across the street, to our table in the restaurant. Not quite our table, because there were two young ladies already sitting there! They turned out to be two nurses, just off-duty and sharing a Boxty together. So, it was as much a surprise to them as us, to be sitting together, waiting to be served. Of course, we ordered Boxtys with the ‘trimmings’

and enjoyed both them and the delightful conversation that ensued.

UNTIL! The owner of the restaurant came to our table and introduced himself, asking if we had enjoyed the meal and got into conversation with Larry, being an American visitor. Suddenly he stopped and turned to Colin and I and uttered something I will never forget –

“To be sure, you’re sitting at a very special table tonight. The ‘Birmingham Six’*** sat here the last time they were in Dublin”!!!!!!

*** The accused perpetrators of the infamous “Pub Bombing” in Birmingham, in 1976, that killed numerous innocent people!

15. ITALY



WILD BOAR WITH AN ALCOHOLIC.

There are many delightful and very traditional meals I have eaten, over the years of visiting Italy, either as a 'tourist' or for work; not forgetting the wines, aperitifs and stronger ones, like Grappa – best with coffee beans floating in it and drunk, after the obligatory 'setting alight'!

However, the one that comes to mind as a "Memorable Meal", was one I shared with Mike Deathridge, Head of PR for Tarmac International, in Wolverhampton, and who I had worked closely with on the 'Tarmac Schools of Sport' some years before.

Mike was looking for a large, well- appointed chalet, to rent for the winter season, for the hosting of very special clients. I knew of such a place in Chamonix and also a nice hotel, through the other side of the Mont Blanc tunnel, in Courmayeur.

This happened out of season, and only a few places were open to eat. However, after numerous working visits to Courmayeur, I knew of a small hotel/restaurant, just outside the tunnel, on the Italian side and I chose this for our evening meal.

There were only two other people dining, but the Patron was very welcoming and unhesitatingly poured a glass of wine each as a 'starters'! We both ordered Wild Boar, as a main course, I recall. A strong flavour, but succulent and surprisingly tender.

However, in the middle of the meal, the Patron came to the table with an enormous bottle – maybe 5 litres? It was full of clear liquid, which he announced to be Grappa! Actually, his own brew as we discovered, after sampling several

glasses. It became obvious to me that sadly, this man was an alcoholic, and by the look of his eyes, seriously so!

We were 'merry' by the time we asked for the bill, and we were told to go and pay at the front desk. Who should be there but the Patron! Still amiably chatting away and at one point asked us what part of the UK we had come from? It transpired that he had worked in a bar in Manchester, and had many happy memories. At which point, he reached below the desk and pulled out a large bottle of Whisky, insisting that we "Had One for the Road". A Bittersweet experience!

16. SCANDINAVIA



Denmark and Sweden to be precise. I have never been to Norway, though I mention it several times in other 'Personal Narratives'.

The first occasion, another schoolteacher, David James and I, took my 'Beetle' up through Belgium, Holland, northern Germany, into Denmark, crossing its numerous islands. Stopping off in Copenhagen and then on to Helsingør to catch the ferry across to Helsingborg in Sweden and up to Stockholm – and back – in two weeks!

The second time was with Pat, my first wife, to Denmark, to stay with my then brother-in-law Malcolm and family, near to Copenhagen. Again, travelling by car and ferry, from our house in Essex.

However, I have mentioned the American journalist, R.W. Apple and food maven, several times. He too, along with his wife, Betsy, have enjoyed a number of visits to both Denmark and Sweden, and reminded me of two experiences, travel and gastronomic-wise, there.

To be precise, in 1969, David James and I decided to drive to Stockholm and back in two weeks!! Driving through Belgium, Netherlands, West Germany, into Denmark. Across the Danish islands to Copenhagen, where we stopped briefly, to enjoy a few of the sights and experience some new food!

PICKELED CUCUMBER!

One of the great attractions in Copenhagen are the Tivoli Gardens – one of the first, if not the first, Amusement Parks in the world – a real joy, then and now, refreshingly 'un-themed'! And it was here, having enjoyed the whole atmosphere, we were hungry. So, we went into one of the numerous 'eateries' in the Gardens and ordered some food and an inevitable Carlsberg! What sticks in my mind to this very day is.... They served "Pickled Cucumber" as a side dish! 'Pickled Cucumber' – never!!!

Well, you have to understand two things. Back in the UK we hadn't really got used to 'foreign food' yet. Secondly, winters in Scandinavia are cold and dark. Preserving food is a MUST, to bide one over those dark, cold, winter months. So, pickling is part of a cooks 'to do' list! Ironically, in spite of its soggy looks, the taste of Dill, made it very acceptable indeed. As were the 'Polsers' – hot dogs – we ate later. Never before had we eaten them with, tomato sauce, mayonnaise, mustard AND crispy, crushed onions spread along the top; quite delicious, fast food'.

We had a deadline to meet, so we rushed across to Sweden, via the Helsinor to Helsingborg ferry and up to Stockholm, consuming more 'Polsers' on the way.

The only memories I have of Stockholm in our very brief stay, were the wonderful open-air museum and the recently raised "Vasa"; the historic galleon, which sank in front of the King, on its maiden voyage! Preserved in the 'low salt' Baltic water for centuries – very impressive!

Rushing back, through northern Germany and Belgium, to catch our ferry from Zeebrugge, I recall, buying a loaf of Rye bread in Denmark, on the way and finding it, quite awful. So much so, that we ceremoniously threw it overboard, for the fish to enjoy! Now? I love it, along with Pumpernickel!

MY AFFAIR WITH BALTIC COD.

It was on my second visit to Denmark in the mid 70's, along with Pat. That my then brother-in-law, Malcolm, had arranged the hire of a fishing boat and skipper, to go Cod fishing, in the deep waters, just off the Swedish coast. We were joined by two of his work colleagues; clearly hardened sea anglers.

As we set sail, I was briefed on the etiquette of Danish anglers. This involved 'Gameldansk', a herbal schnapps concoction! First, this was the preferred drink of anglers and there was an order – very much like the formality of their dinner parties. Basically, the last one to catch a fish, buys all the others a tot of Gameldansk. Which of course, ended up being me! On the other hand, the one who caught the largest/heaviest fish of the day, got a drink from everyone else!

The deepest water in this part of the Baltic, is just off the coast of Sweden, some 20 miles away. Cod love deep water and so we cast and let the bait run and sink. Within half an hour, the other three had landed their first catch at least, while I patiently raised and lowered my line, in the hope of catching something. Suddenly, there was a tug on the line and then the fun began. That moment when you know that one has to be careful not to lose your catch – easily done!

Safely landed, I was to catch six or seven more. One of which was the biggest of the day, so I became well and truly acquainted with the merits and flavours of Gameldansk, along with the comradeship among anglers.

Malcolm and I were to take our catches back to the house and grill some of it on the Barbeque! Most tasty, and succulent freshly caught. I remember that following a brief stay in the freezer for the remainder, it was wrapped in layers of newspaper, put into a 'cold box' and placed in the back of our car, to be taken back home in Essex.

Quite a trip and such fun.

WHAT IS DANISH FOR 'BREAD AND BUTTER?'

You may ask! SMORREBOD is the answer, and what that word conjures up – the 'open sandwich'! So synonymous with both Denmark and Sweden, where it is called SMORGASBORD!

In all honesty, the Danish version is more of an artistic creation which is eaten! Either complex in content or a simpler mixture, this culinary work of art has to be seen, then eaten to appreciate its excellence, creativity and genius. As some say, an amazing way to use up your 'leftovers'!

On this second visit we were to enjoy them on several occasions; always beginning with the fish, before moving on to the other meaty delicacies that await.

I am reminded that, at that time, back in Birmingham, where we were later to move back to. The Danish farmers had opened a 'Danish Food Centre' close to the entrance to New Street Station, in the heart of the city. We were to enjoy many Danish delights in the years ahead, before it finally closed – in favour of a MacDonalds!!!!!!!!!!

17. ANDORRA



MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THIS LITTLE FELLA.

I began this tome in Japan and mentioned it there. So, I thought I would end, where I tasted it for the very first time! Passing through Andorra, following my first visit to Spain in 1967, along with three friends, teachers from Sheldon Heath Comprehensive School.

We were literally ‘just passing through’ on our way to St. Etienne, in the Central Massif area of France.

As it happened, it was lunchtime and we had just left the outskirts of Soldeau, the principal town and saw a restaurant just back off the main road, as I recall. We stopped and went in to find yet another Family business, though unlike in France, there was no “Plat de Jour”, just an interesting menu.

While we were enjoying our beer, we looked through the menu, deciding on what we were going to eat. When my eyes caught the word “Escargots”! That’s it – SNAILS! That’s for me, I must try them!

Prepared in a small ceramic pot, with butter, herbs and garlic, I fell in love with them at first taste! Obviously, I was reminded of the occasion, when I was served them in Antibes, at ‘The Foot on the Plate’ and went back for more. Then in Kyoto, Japan, all those years on. As they say -
“What goes round, comes round!”

The author apologises for this incomplete collection of stories, but HE CAN'T STOP EATING!!!!

