

Chapter 13 – Wales

(2006)

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(27th May 2014 – Penang)

What to do Next?

I was very grateful to Mandy for not only coming back all the way from South Africa just to support us after Jenny had died but also for taking us away to Hooke for the New Year and allowing us a much needed time away to rest and recuperate from everything. The party started at Jenny's wake continued at Mandy's place if a little more subdued than the normal welcoming in of a New Year.

Early in the first week of the 2006, Polly and I took Mum back up to Darwen in one of Mandy's cars, a very nice XJS Jaguar, which made the 250-mile journey pass in no time at all. On the way back to Hooke to return the Jaguar, I arranged for Polly and me to spend a couple of nights with Ruth and Richard in Blackheath so that Polly and I could visit the Three Emperors Exhibition then showing at the Royal Academy of Arts. As we were going to be at the Royal Academy, I had also arranged to meet Gek there, an ex-colleague of Jenny's from her time at CCS in Singapore. In the autumn of the previous year I had an email from another ex-colleague of Jenny's, Angela Goh, also from Singapore, to say that Gek was in the UK and studying at an art college to the south of London. After a couple of email exchanges between us, Gek and I arranged to meet at the RA's coffee bar on the day she was to be up in London.

After Polly and I had our fill of the Three Emperors, we adjourned to the coffee bar to await Gek. I had set up the meeting mainly because I thought the Gek we were about to meet was the Gek who had been in the private ward opposite mine during my hospitalisation for my bottom operation in Singapore. By coincidence, she was in hospital to have the same procedure done as mine, which gave us an immediate empathy, "How is your bottom today?" starts to conversations, always causing a chuckle. I remembered sitting at the foot of her bed for chat after our evening visitors had left the wards and so I got to know Gek quite well. I thought it might be nice to meet up with her again.

The Gek who kept her appointment with us that day in the RA coffee bar was not the Gek I expected to see. This was a completely different Gek, Lim Gek Kheng, and not Thai Gek Ching. Well not to worry, I toddled off to get this new Gek some light refreshment from the bar, leaving Polly and her to chat a while. After an hour, Gek had to leave but not before she accepted an invitation to come down to Litchard and stay with me for a long weekend in April, just before she was due to leave for Spain to visit her friend from school days, Yin Yoke.

After returning the Jaguar to Hooke, Polly and I made it back to Bridgend to pick up our lives where we had left off, but now without Jenny. I had a few financial issues to sort out. My income each month had been halved, having no longer the benefit of Jenny's Income Protection Insurance money and getting only half of her teacher's pension. I had still an

outstanding £4000 due on the No. 4 refurbishment loan I had taken out with Lloyds Bank and I would have to take a six month 'mortgage holiday' on an outstanding loan I had with Cheltenham and Gloucester Building Society on the Nottingham bungalow. What was I going to do for money now?

I searched the local press for job advertisements in the hope of finding suitable employment and even applied for a job with the police as a curriculum development officer at their Bridgend Police Training Centre. But, guess what, I was much too old at 59 to get any kind of job. And I do mean any kind of job. Then I remembered a passing comment of Emma's at on one of my subsequent visits to Hooke that, "VSO are looking to recruit old wrinklies like you, why not try there for a posting?", or some such words. So, I did, what to lose. A couple of days after I had sent off the application form with my CV, I got a call from a guy in the London office of VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) asking me if I would like to go to Mongolia for two years. Since I had nothing better to do for the foreseeable future, I said "OK then, why not?". I had not a clue as to what I had just volunteered for, but two years in Mongolia sounded real interesting whatever it was I was going there to do.

The first hurdle in the VSO recruitment process was to get through the assessment day at the VSO office, which was located in Putney, West London at that time. As this was to be a full day event, I again blagged a bed for two nights with Ruth and Richard, travelling up to Putney on the train from Blackheath on the day. The assessment day was very interesting, not only for meeting all the other volunteer hopefuls but also in the kinds of tests and assessments you were subjected to. These were designed to tease out whether you were the sort of character to survive in some of the remotest places on the planet and at the same time be flexible enough in your approach to tasks to accommodate the differing work cultures you would likely be meeting. VSO is in effect a job recruitment agency, specifically to fill existing vacancies in foreign Non-Governmental Organisations. In other words, the VSO assessment day was only to see if you were a suitable candidate to have on the organisation's books. Most people on the day I went for assessment had, unlike me, no offer of a placement.

I also got to meet my VSO 'handler', Alan Large, who was responsible for recruiting me onto this Mongolian project. This Asian Development Bank funded, three-year project was to develop curriculum for short term vocational skills training courses related to the building industry in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. My curriculum development experience seen as relevant to this project was work I had with Edexcel courses in the local Further Education Colleges during my time with Staffordshire University. The building expertise, which formed the content of the courses, would be provided local by Mongolian professionals. My job would be to set up the course structure and a framework in which the quality of the courses' delivery could be monitored.

Well, I passed the day and it was game on for Mongolia.

(28^h May 2014 – Penang)

VSO Training and Gek's Visit

Alan Large, my VSO placement officer, had told me on the assessment day that I would most likely be leaving for Ulaanbaatar in the middle of May with the next batch of volunteers bound for Mongolia. As it was already the end of February, this would mean completing the three residential VSO awareness-training programmes at the organizations Harbourne Hall, facility in Birmingham in double quick time. It also meant that I would have to get on and organize Jenny's Turton memorial service P. D. Q.

For Jenny's memorial service, I asked Jenny's ex-colleague from Staffordshire University and close friend, Liz Frondegon, if she would conduct the service at the St. Ann's Church in Turton. Liz had on occasion taken Jenny out for the odd day after Jenny's retirement from the University due to her Alzheimer's condition. Liz had also taken early retirement due to ill health having been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease some time earlier, after which she had taken up training to be an Anglican parish priest. I realised that if I was to get Jenny's ashes buried in the church at Turton, then there would need to be some sort of religious type ceremony beforehand. As Liz had been a close friend of Jenny's and knew of her take on things religious, I felt confident that Liz would put together an appropriate memorial service for Jenny. Liz kindly offered to make the arrangements for the service in the church with the vicar at St. Ann's and 6th of May became the day set for the service.

At the end of March, I attended the first of the three VSO training sessions, 'Preparation for Change', over a residential weekend at Harbourne Hall. And what a great weekend it was. The event was geared to checking whether either you or VSO had made a mistake in thinking you could be a volunteer. It worked. The workshops, case studies and roll plays pulled no punches and I really felt that my resolve had been tested. I still very much want to go out as a volunteer. I spent some time in the resource centre following up on my placement in Mongolia. Apart from the 'standard' books covering the different countries, it was fascinating to read the volunteer accounts of their experiences, as well as the VSO briefing sheets. A gold mine for any traveller. An unexpected benefit from the weekend was meeting and spending time with so many bright and positive people. It was a joy.

The second training session, 'Volunteers and Development', that I was booked onto clashed with the weekend that Gek was due to come and stay with me in Bridgend. After a couple of email exchanges between us, it was decided that Gek should still down to Wales anyway and use No. 4 as a base whilst I was away in Birmingham. Gek was due to arrive on the Wednesday before my weekend away and leave for Spain the following Tuesday, which meant that we would still have three days together. She also wanted to visit an old friend who had been an external examiner for the courses at CCS from the University of Glamorgan. Another friend she wanted to see was now a student doing his Masters in Cardiff. This all fitting in nicely with my absence.

I picked up Gek from Bridgend railway station in the early evening on the Wednesday and we drove back to No. 4 where I had prepared us a dinner. My Mum had been staying with me for a time and since I had only the one spare bed, Mum moved over to stay at Polly and Karim's place in Dewi Pritchard whilst Gek stayed with me in No. 4. I had wondered what to do with Gek during her visit and had a prepared itinerary with which she was duly impressed, more by the fact I had prepared an itinerary than what was in it, I think. That evening, we spent chatting about how and why Gek had resigned from CCS in Singapore at the age of 50 and come to the wilds of East Sussex to spend the last three years pursuing her dream to be an artist. I also learned a little about her past and her family back home in Singapore.



The next day I took Gek down to Orgmore for a walk along the cliff tops, and a bracing walk it was too. The wind was coming off the sea so strong that poor little Gek had to lean into it to make any head way against it. And it was a very cold wind too, this being very early in the spring. Not a very auspicious start to our time together. Next on my itinerary for the Thursday afternoon was a visit to Cardiff and the City Art Gallery. I had no idea of Gek's taste in art, but the Cardiff Art Gallery has quite a wide variety of paintings and sculptures ranging from the renaissance to the modern. I felt pretty confident that my new artist friend would find something of interest there. My own personal favourite in the gallery is the La Parisienne painted by Renoir in 1874, perhaps the gallery's most

admired art piece. For the evening I had bought tickets for Noel Porter's musical, 'Anything Goes', then being staged at the National Millennium Theatre. The story concerns madcap antics aboard an ocean liner bound for New York from London, all very light and entertaining, being the source of popular songs like, 'Anything Goes' and 'I Get a Kick Out of You'. Mum, Polly and Karim joined us in Cardiff for the evening performance, all very jolly.

On Friday morning, I drove Gek over to Swansea to visit a small exhibition on Isambard Kingdom Brunel. He was a Victorian engineer responsible for major infrastructure projects such as the Great Western Railway, the Clifton Suspension Bridge near Bristol and many, many more buildings and tunnels still in use today. The exhibition was a little disappointing, so we decamped to Mumbles and had a light lunch in the café by the slipway, sat looking out over Swansea Bay. After lunch, I dropped Gek off at No. 4 before driving up to Harbourne for the evening start to the second weekend of training to be a volunteer with VSO.

This second session, 'Volunteers and Development', covered issues such as,

- HIV and AIDS - get the stats, get the impact, look at ways it is being tackled.

- Acquire at least an understanding of what the IMF, World Bank, UN, GATT, World Trade organizations and others are and how they relate to each other and development.
- What are "Neo-Liberalism" and "Community development" and how they differ?
- Globalization - a commonly used word but what does it mean to different groups of people?

It was getting a bit heavy now. On the lighter side, at the Saturday night relax-time in the training centre's bar, I overheard snippets of a conversation between two ladies stood next to me as I was ordering my pint. They were talking about previous jobs they had had working abroad and specifically in developing countries. One of the women kept mentioning Ghana and when she dated her time there as the late 60s, I couldn't resist introducing myself to her to see if our paths had crossed before. And low and behold, they had. She had been a colleague of Jenny's in 1969 at the Wesley Girls School in Cape Coast where Jenny had taught mathematics and she even remembered me as her husband. The two of us had met at a social event and during our small talk, I had told her about my previous job working on Concorde. I must have been a bit of a bore because she remembered the conversation we had in some detail, whereas I had no memory of it at all. Oh dear. We spent the rest of the evening together reminiscing and we exchanged contact emails etc, but I sadly lost them when my email account was corrupted a year later.



Gek

The training sessions at Harbourne ended shortly after lunch on the Sunday and I hot footed it back to Bridgend to find Gek quite happy ensconced in No. 4. She had managed to meet up with her friends in the Cardiff area as prearranged and so 'All Was Well'

The next day, a Monday, Gek and I drove over to Pembroke and on the way called in at Tenby where we walked along the deserted beach. Well it was still early

April. After our amble, we retired to The Dennis Café for a warming cup of coffee. This is the earliest photograph I have of Gek, all wrapped up against the cold, there to be no repeat of the bracing outing we had the previous week on the cliffs at Orgmore. From Tenby we motored over to Pembroke town and visited the castle there before heading for the coast at St. Govan's head. It was at Govan's head that I first got an inkling that Gek was my kind of gal. We had parked the van on the official car park and had strolled down the steps to take a look at the chapel dedicated to Govan, a 6th century hermit and, as legend has it, an Irish monk. Govan had actually lived in a small fissure in the rock face, which now forms one wall of the chapel. The chapel was built much later in the 14th century after he was recognized

as a saint. Once at the cliff bottom I rued the fact that I had left my camera in the van back at the top of the cliff, to which Gek retorted that yes, it might have been a good idea to have brought it in the first place. I scooted back up the steps again to retrieve the said camera with a grin on my face, as I said earlier, this was the first inkling I had that we were going to be friends.

The memorial in Turton having been arranged, I invited Gek to attend it too, but she was going to be busy preparing for the final exhibition of her artwork to afford the time away from the college. But I was welcome to come and stay with her for the week following the memorial if I wished to. I wished to. After the Jenny's funeral in December, in the new year I took a tour around the country visiting old haunts and friends which I had found quite depressing. I should have remembered the adage about returning to places where you were once happy. A bad idea, as things are never the same as they were. So, going somewhere completely new and different after the memorial service seemed a really good idea to me and I accepted Gek's invitation straight away.

The Friday after Gek had left Bridgend on the Tuesday for Spain, I was again back in Harboune to take part in the last VSO training before I was to leave for Mongolia, the 'Skills for Working in Development' or SKWID for short. This last residential series of workshops and role plays were really quite intense. The sessions lasting from 9 am until 9 pm each of the five days and even on the Saturday morning before we volunteers all went our separate ways to different places on the planet. There was a couple at this weeklong training session scheduled to go Mongolia with me, John and Mary Cosgrove. John was a theatre nurse and had a placement in an Ulaanbaatar (UB) hospital to assist in training theatre nurses, whilst Mary was going to join a child protection agency working with the many street children in the capital. Being with people so intensely for eight or nine hours a day, all of us on a mission to prepare for an unpredictable future lead to a lot of camaraderie. I am still in touch with John and Mary through Facebook, and Marvin Cordwell, whose placement was to be in Vietnam. Marvin came to visit Gek and me in Penang recently as he was here on a short holiday from Singapore, where he is now based, with his Singaporean partner. If I had not lost my email account soon after I got to UB, I am sure I would still be in touch with most of the participants on that last weeklong session in Harbourne.

Tuesday 25th April, I got a call from Alan at VSO. Would you Adam and Eve it? My departure for Mongolia had been put back to August! The groundwork for the start of my project had not yet been completed on the Mongolian side, something to do with incomplete paperwork and missing signatures or something. But the good news was that the Mongolian minister in overall charge of the project had accepted me as a volunteer. I would be going to UB, even if the date of my departure had to be delayed. So, three months..... what to do?

The first thought was to go travelling. I had two outstanding invitations to stay with friends in Thailand, one from my old school days pal Raymond, and a chap I had known during my time in Singapore, David Tandy. That should pass the summer months quite nicely, thank you very much, perhaps I could even fit in a return flight via Ulaanbaatar? Then I did a reality check. That is, I conducted an in-depth financial analysis of the project and of course it wouldn't taxi, never mind fly! Back to the drawing board.

A couple of emails later and a much better/feasible plan had emerged. I managed to arrange a couple of working visits for some, what VSO called, 'Self Briefing' to a University and an FE college both of which ran courses in construction. This should go some way to plugging my knowledge gap on things concrete and brick built. This, together with Gek's invitation to stay with her in May and later visit her final year art exhibition at the college in East Sussex, would take me to the end of June at least. Sorted.

(29th May 2014 – Penang)

Jenny's Memorial Service

During the week before Jenny's memorial service up in the Turton church, I collected her ashes from the Bridgend undertaker. They came in a small wooden box with her name, Jennifer Whitworth, engraved on a brass plaque secured to the lid. How to describe how I felt about Jenny's return to the bungalow as a box of ashes? I guess very uneasy covers it. I now truly understood what seeking closure means. Something needed to be done to draw a



St. Ann's Church, Turton

line under the life Jenny and I had together if I was to have any meaningful future. I hoped that the memorial service in St. Ann's church and returning Jenny to be with her parents in death would do that. Once Jenny's ashes had been buried in Turton, I intended to arrange for a commemorative stone with the words "Jennifer Whitworth, PhD." cut into it. This stone would be placed next to those of her Mum and Dad's, Annie and Fred Mottershead, in the St. Ann's memorial garden. Drawing a line did not mean forgetting, it meant pigeon holing that part of my past as a memory and in so doing it would enable me to move on to the next chapter in my life. I still think about Jenny every day, even now, nine years after she passed away.

The 6th of May was a bright and sunny day.

The gathering in the church included not only Jenny's Bolton cousins but also my cousins Lyn and Diane who had travelled down from Cumbria to be there. Also, in attendance were Hillary Chilton, a Staffordshire University ex-colleague of ours, with her young family, David Watson and his wife from Jenny's CCS days in Singapore as well as Jim Bennetts, my friend from grammar school days. I was very touched that they had all made the journey to be with us on that day. The service in the church that Liz had prepared was spot on, hitting just the right note and I was pretty sure Jenny would have approved of her friend's words. Anna had sewn a quilt for the occasion which was on display and she also said a few words of goodbye. After the 'service', we all gathered round a small hole dug in the church grounds, and after a few appropriate words from Liz, I placed the box containing Jenny's ashes into it to be covered with handfuls of soil by those assembled. A final goodbye.

Following the church 'service' we all moved to the Chetham Arms up the road for a buffet lunch I had prearranged with the landlord and, of course a pint. This was a repeat of the party we had had back in December at No. 4 following Jenny's cremation and it did not break up until quite late in the afternoon when the pub was closing. Again, I knew Jenny would have very much approved and I did feel the closure I was looking for at the end of that day.

Emerson College

Once I had settled up with the pub landlord, I set off back to Bridgend. I was due to spend the next week with Gek down in East Sussex but did not really fancy driving around the M25 on a weekend day and had opted to make the trip on the Monday instead. Gek and I arranged to meet in the Sainsbury's coffee bar in East Grinstead. She thought I might have a little difficulty finding the college where she was staying, it being housed in an old manor house on the outskirts of Forest Row, a small village some five miles from East Grinstead. After a little chitchat, a cake and a very welcome cup of coffee, we motored over to Forest Row, and drove up the long, shady drive into the grounds of Emerson College.

On her weekend visit to stay with me in Bridgend, Gek had explained to me how she had ended up here from Singapore, as a student at a private anthroposophist art college in the middle of the Sussex downs. At the turn of the millennium in 2000, Gek had decided that she had had enough of the rat race in Singapore and wanted out. She had been working for eighteen years in Ngee Ann Polytechnic by that time and felt an urgent need for a change. Whilst she had initially enjoyed her early days as a lecturer, a series of merit promotions she had been given over those years had taken her into the management side of the organization and a move into work she had become increasingly uncomfortable with. It took a further three years and her watershed 50th birthday for her to pluck up the courage to make the change and to find a new path for her life. It was going to be either now or never.

Art had always been a hobby for Gek, and it had only been in the interests of having a career that paid that she had taken the science and not the arts stream in her school days. The decision as to 'what to do' with her life post fifty was clear, go back and pick up where she had left off with her art. The 'where to do' was a little more difficult to answer, although Gek did know where she did not want to start her new life - Singapore. At a conference on Steiner education principles in Hawaii Gek had attended some years ago, she came to hear about Steiner colleges from other conference participants. With this in mind, searching the internet for suitable places to study, she alighted on Emerson College in Forest Row and Parsifal College in Sydney, Australia. Gek had friends living in Sydney and she took the opportunity to go and visit the Parsifal college, only to dismiss it as a candidate for study. The college was in a 'shop house' on the edge of the city's China Town, a much too urban a setting for where Gek had a mind to study. Emerson on the other hand rang all her bells, it being in a remote rural setting but within striking distance of London. Gek had already spent a couple of years in the UK, studying for her master's degree at the London School of Economics and later on study visits in England with her work in CCS. She was therefore comfortable with Englishness.

Gek, the successful IT professional, owner of not one but two condominiums in Singapore and, as I was later to find out, a third one in Penang, gave notice to quit her job at CCS. She rented out all three of her properties, packed a suitcase and departed her old life for an unknown future in a small village in southern England she had never before visited. That takes a lot of balls to do, that does.

In the email exchanges before my arrival at the Sainsbury's coffee bar that Monday, Gek had insisted that I came to college and share her room with her for the week's stay, it having two single beds. I had suggested that perhaps she would be more comfortable having me around if I stayed in the visitor's accommodation in the old manor house. But Gek said that the visitor's accommodation up in the attic of the old house was not very pleasant at that time of year, the rooms up there being very hot and stuffy, even at night. Ok, then, so be it,



I would bunk down in her spare bed. Gek had a room in a purpose-built student accommodation block in the college grounds, which was only just about big enough to take two undersized single beds and a small desk with chair. The tiny wardrobe was built into the wall to save space. There was not enough room to swing the proverbial cat. And to think she had given up a 1700+ square foot apartment in

Singapore with all the usual facilities that go with a condominium, such as a swimming pool for instance, to spend three years in student accommodation in the Sussex countryside. Crazy.

Miracles do Happen

The next day, the 9th, Gek was due to visit a local care home for children with special needs with the prospect of taking part-time employment there over the coming summer months. Gek had been thinking about what to do after her graduation from Emerson in June and was contemplating taking a further qualification in Art Therapy at Roehampton University. An admission requirement for that course was to have had at least twelve months work experience in some capacity as a carer of children or adults with special needs. We visited the care home together and after a briefing by the director of the home and a tour of the home's facilities, we decided to take a run out in the van down to the south coast at Seaford. Gek was very quiet on the drive to the coast, thinking about the morning we had just spent at the care home. I had been in Gek's company for only three days before this Monday morning visit, but I already knew that art therapy, as a future, was not for her.

After lunching at a café in the town, where we briefly held hands crossing a busy road, we drove down to the cliffs just east of the town. Parking up the van, we took a walk up to the cliff top path heading towards the Seven Sisters, a series of seven striking limestone cliffs on



Hever Castle

the English Channel coast. When the cliffs came into view, I got down in a ditch to take what I thought might be an interesting photograph of the cliffs and the fence marching off together into the distance. Gek also took the opportunity for a little rest and lay down on the other side of the ditch from me. She looked so forlorn and lost lying curled up there opposite me that I offered to give her a cuddle to cheer her up. And that was the beginning of our whirlwind romance: I cannot think of other words to describe it, twee as it may sound coming from a guy in his sixtieth year as I was.

The next morning, the morning after the night before, Gek left me in her room to go to the college kitchen where she was scheduled to help prepare breakfast for other college residents. I also got myself out of bed and went for a walk in the fresh morning air to clear my head. The last twenty-four hours had been quite extraordinary, not to say exhilarating, but I had now to decide where it was

going from today onwards. One side of me was say, "What are you thinking of? You have been a widower for less than five months and now you are contemplating having a significant other in your life? Only three days ago, you were at Jenny's memorial service! What would your daughters make of it? You are nuts to even think about a future with Gek! Besides, you are bugging off to Mongolia in three months, how does that square with a life with Gek, buster?" The other me was answering, "Sorry but this is a twice in a lifetime opportunity which, if you do not follow through with, you will regret for the rest of your life." These were the thoughts racing through my tiny mind. But it was a no brainer of a decision: I now wanted Gek in my life. I had to ask her if I could be part of her future. She might after all say, "No way Houssay, leave Emerson now! Out, out, out damned spot, out!"

When Gek returned to her room from her chores in the college kitchen, I straight way asked her if she would mind me spending some time with her, meaning like forever. And she said, "Yes, OK".

(31st May 2014 – Penang)

From that morning on, Gek and I were as Darby and Joan. How could we come to know each other so well in less than four days together, well enough to want to be in the other person's company from that time on? All humans make instant character judgments upon meeting someone new. It is a survival instinct genetically passed down to us from our distant ancestors, "Is this person going to do me harm?", being the question asked. I know I do make character judgments of the new people I meet very quickly but, in my own defence, I have to say that this initial assessment as to the person's personality is not often overturned on further acquaintance. Even today, eight years on, Gek is to me still the Gek I came to know on her first visit to stay with me that April in Bridgend. I had loved being with her that weekend and was very sad to see her leave on the train to London, early on the Tuesday morning. Much to Gek's surprise, I had bounded up the carriage steps to peck her on the cheek just before she had time to close the carriage door. But from 'loving' being in

someone's company to being in 'love' with them, without even taking the time to 'fall', is quite extraordinary.

The rest of my week's planned stay in Emerson was taken up with excitedly mapping out alternative routes for our future together. Apart from the art therapy masters at Roehampton University, Gek had also found a college in Turuna, New Zealand offering similar training but without the need to have the pre-admissions experience of working with



people with special needs that the British university required. And then there was what to do about my Mongolian VSO placement? Well, there was no way I was going to Mongolia if it meant leaving Gek for two years. By the end of the week, we had decided that we would both go together to Mongolia if VSO would accept Gek as my partner. Spouses and partners were allowed to accompany a volunteer on their placement if



Modelling in Clay to Cast in Plaster of Paris

it was at all feasible, this policy increased the effectiveness of the placement by helping to settle the volunteer into his/her new posting more quickly and more securely.

These discussions as to our future together took place against a backdrop of Gek's daily routine in the college and a couple of trips we took out in the van, one to Hever Castle, the 16th century family home on Anne Boleyn and Petworth House in West Sussex. It was at Hever Castle that the question of marriage cropped up. In a conversation we were having walking out of the castle grounds the word 'marriage' came out of my mouth, in an abstract context which I cannot remember now. The word suddenly turned Gek silent and a little po-

fac-ed. When I asked her, what was the matter, she responded by saying that she did not want ours to be a short-term relationship. I returned the smile to her face by proposing that we should be married perhaps after our Mongolian adventure, assuming of course that she still wanted to be with me after that. Two Mongolian winters I felt would surely test any fledgling relationship. That very short snippet of an exchange between us, slotted in with our everyday day kind of chitchat, sealed the deal. Two years later, on the 9th July 2008, we did indeed get married in Singapore.



Our First Photograph Together at the V&A

Reluctant to Leave

My presence at the college was, of course, a bit of a distraction for Gek, taking her away from her preparations for the final year exhibition as it did. The exhibition was to open in just five weeks' time on the 16th of June and Gek had set herself an awful lot to do before then. We decided that I should leave at the end of the week as planned and returned to Emerson at the beginning of June to help Gek set up her art works in the college hall for all to view. Very, very reluctantly I left Gek at Emerson at the weekend and drove back to Bridgend wondering when I would wake up from this dream I was having. The first thing I did on reaching Bridgend was to drive round to Polly's place to tell her about what had happened to me over the past week. I was more than a little apprehensive as to how she would take the news that her dad now had a new lady in his life. As she opened the flat's door I was physically shaking and on the verge of tears, not at all sure as to her reaction to all that had gone on. "I was hoping something like this would happen" was her exact words, followed by tears of relief from me. The very next day, Monday, I drove up to see Anna in Leamington Spa. My news was the kind of news that could not be delivered but by a face to face meeting. Again, my apprehension was greeted by immediate acceptance. In taking the opportunity for a new beginning, I would not have to break with the past. Total relief I felt and gratitude to my two daughters for being so understanding.

The next couple of weeks were a real struggle to stay away from Emerson but I was sensible enough to realise that Gek needed to focus on her work for her exhibition. This was to be a summative exhibition of the past three-year's effort, and nothing could or should get in the way of it being the best she could do. I had already set up a visit to Ruth's college in Lambeth and the following weekend after leaving Gek at Emerson, I arrived in London to stay with Ruth and Richard. I loved coming "up to town", Ruth and me always doing the current exhibitions. On that Saturday, we did four!!!! By far the best was the Modernism and Design exhibition at the V & G, a superb history lesson on the influence of Modernism from the post Russian Revolution period to the present. The visual displays and the links made between art, design and engineering were extremely well presented and the massive influence that the Bauhaus group have had on our lives today was well pointed up. As we wandered around the ten rooms, I wondered what our world would be like now if they had had computer-controlled machine tools back then which can create free forms and not just flats and circles.

On the Sunday, I spent the day with Gek up in London and we picked up where we had left off seven days before, as if we had not been apart. It is a wonderful thing to be so at ease in another person's company. We visited a few museums and art galleries, including the Tate. I had learnt of Gek's admiration for J. M. W. Turner, the late 18th, early 19th century British painter, on our visit to Petworth House. The house, once owned by one of Turner's patrons and now a National Trust property, has many of Turner's early works hung on its walls. I shared this love of Turner's painting, particularly his later works, the ones that inspired

Monet and other continental artists who evolved this late style of Turner into what became known as 'Impressionism.' All too quickly, the day was over and Gek had to return to Emerson but not before we had agreed to meet in London again on Thursday for lunch before I was due to catch my train back to Bridgend.



Taiwan's Pacific Coast

It has been a while since I wrote about the here and now, there having been some heavy stories to write about in the first decade of the 21st century. But now we are through with all that.

Earlier this year Gek and I took a twelve-day trip to Taiwan, a country neither of us had been to before but where Gek has many friends she made during her days at Emerson College. We have already been to mainland China a couple of times and were expecting Taiwan to be something similar in terms of the people and the culture. But no, both are quite different. Yes, the temples and the associated spiritual life are much the same but the Taiwanese are so much more friendly and open handed. I would give the Welsh, Penangites and the Taiwanese the same tag line, lovely. And the scenery on the Pacific Coast is something else. As you can see in the photograph, the sea is coloured a brilliant blue by the marble sediments washed down into the sea from the mountains by the rivers. There are, of course, more photographs on our website gallery.

This coming month is going to be very busy for us. At the weekend, we have a wedding to attend here in Penang and we leave on the 15th for Darwin, Australia. There we are to take the Ghan Train across the desert to Alice Springs to visit the Rock before returning to Singapore for a second wedding, that of Gek's niece Audrey. A busy time ahead, as I said, terrible life, but someone has to live it!!

Ruth had arranged a busy schedule for me to meet both the construction staff and the engineering staff at her college on the Tuesday and Wednesday. I was asking myself, am I ready to be thrown back into a work situation after so many years out of it? Tuesday and Wednesday, I travelled with Ruth up to Lambeth College and I spent two great days with the College staff in the Construction Department, a Centre of Excellence for Construction and the Mechanical Engineering Department. What days. Absolutely brilliant. They were all so enthusiastic about their work and eager to help, I was bowled over! The Departments were involved with a number of high-profile projects in the London, something they were justifiably proud of.

The upshot was that from them kindly sharing their knowledge and expertise with me, I could now see that taking what I knew from mechanical engineering across to construction was not going to be as problematic as I had first imagined. That came as some relief, I can tell you! There were still clearly big gaps in my knowledge base, but the other members of the VSO team assigned to this project with me were almost certainly going to cover my shortfalls. Now I had got back into the saddle and felt comfortable with it after a 5-year absence from the world of work, I was really looking forward the Mongolian challenge ahead.



Snowstorm – Steam boat at Harbour Mouth...
(Turner – 1842)

(1st June 2014 – Penang)

As arranged, Gek and I met up again on Thursday and had lunch together on Victoria station, a very romantic place to meet! I had travelled up to London from Blackheath with Ruth, hitching a lift with her on her drive to Lambeth College from where I walked across the river to visit the Tate for yet another time. I went into the Turner galleries and sat in front of the 'Snowstorm' for at least two hours contemplating my future. This had been one of Jenny's favourite Turner paintings, a whirl of waves and clouds with just a glimpse of a ship in distress through it all. Pretty much an analogy of my life over the last twelve months. But now, the storm was over and bright days were ahead. "Why worry? There should be laughter after pain. There should be sunshine after rain. These things have always been the same. So why worry now? Why worry now?" - Mark Knopfler

Lunch was a buffet where you pay to enter the eatery and then eat as much as you want with just the one-off payment. We collected our food and went to sit and chitchat about our futures, confirming to each other that we were not totally nuts to be going off to Mongolia together after so brief an acquaintance. Then, to my surprise, Gek went to the

buffet tables for a second round after which, once her plate was cleared for a second time, she went back a third time for a load of food. Where was she putting it all? When I commented on the three visits to the food table, Gek told me she could not understand me either. Why had I only taken one plate of the food on offer? A cultural difference!!! The time to leave to catch my pre-booked Bridgend train came and went. I simply did not want to go home but eventually we had to go our separate ways, after all it was only going to be a matter of days before we would be together again. I had a return train ticket booked for a specific seat on a specific train, which had long since departed for Wales. At the ticket barrier, I was denied access to the next train's platform, my ticket home now having expired, like the proverbial parrot. I had to go and buy new ticket for an already packed train and had to stand for three hours, practically all the way home. The things you do for love.



Gek in her Studio

The time passed very slowly until the day I left Bridgend again for Emerson. I did in the interim visit my old friend Angela from my Staffordshire University days. She was now the Head of Engineering at Derby University and she kindly agreed for me to visit her department as part of my self-briefing on things construction. I was not going to be setting up such high-level courses as degrees, or anything close to them but Angela did provide me with documentation which defined course structures and management procedures that I was to find extremely useful as reference material later when I subsequently was preparing the curriculum in Mongolia.

Summer at Emerson College

On my return to Emerson at the end of May to stay with Gek, I resolved to be a little more helpful than on my first visit and as a result I became Gek's artisan for the time leading up to her all-important final exhibition. Whilst Gek was about getting creative, I was making bits and pieces to support her work, for instance, making the wooden stands for her plaster sculptures. It was a very busy time for us both and working together, complementing each other's skills, very nicely. I was even allowed to apply hammer and chisel to the lump of



Life Series

Portland stone Gek was turning in to a piece of art, under supervision of course. Why is it that the smallest person always seems to take on the largest tasks? This lump of Portland had been part of a doorjamb at some big mansion long since knocked down and it was almost as tall as Gek, it certainly was a lot heavier than she.

A few days before the exhibition was due to open, we got confirmation that Gek

could indeed accompany me to Mongolia as my partner and there might even be a possibility of her coming as a VSO volunteer to boot. This was brilliant news and a load off both our minds. We were moving into a new future together. How exciting. For Gek to go to Mongolia as a VSO, she would have to pass the assessment day up in Putney, which I didn't see as a problem, if I could pass the day, I was sure that Gek could too, we two being of very similar character. But that would have to wait until after a trip to Eastern Europe Gek had planned with her Singaporean friends who were coming especially to the UK to be at her exhibition. With the exhibition less than a week away, and the possibility of a placement in Mongolia, these were frantic and exciting times. So much to do, so much to think about. So much had changed and been gained in only four weeks. It just did not seem possible.

For the exhibition, Gek had been allocated the Ruskin Hall, a large auditorium on the first floor in the college's main building but fortunately, there was direct access to this floor from the back of the building, otherwise I have no idea how we would had gotten the Portland Stone up there. As the exhibition was to be a mixture of sculptures and paintings, I spent the week helping Gek set up the props, which included a zig-zag corridor of screens against

which were to be mounted her Life Series sculptures.



The Big Day

On the morning of the exhibition's opening Gek's friends, Swi, Sock Hoon and Kwee Lain arrived at Emersion straight off their flight from Singapore, looking very jet lagged and tired. But now they had to freshen up and ready themselves for big day, the grand opening and tour of inspection of Gek's work by the

rest of her classmates and tutors and anyone else that happened to be on the college campus that day.

(3rd June 2014 – Penang)



Gek with her friends, Swi, Sock Hoon and Kwee Lain

Gek's final year sculpture exhibition went extremely well. The seven forms which represented the stages of her life from the end of her education at university through to the present day and on to a perceived but uncertain future, were well received, as the visitors' book records. You can view photographs I took of the event itself and the individual art pieces at www.gekart.net.

Gek's friends, not to mention her family, had been very surprised by the recent news of her 'picking up' an Englishman and were naturally very curious as to how that had happened and no doubt about who this Englishman was. I was given the third degree as Gek's three newly arrived mates, sat opposite me on the bed in Gek's small room, as though I was at job interview or being questioned in a court of law. I pleaded guilty, of course, as it was I who had offered the first hug, it had to be admitted. But all went well, and with a cautionary note from Swi that I had better not hurt her friend or there would be dire consequences for me, they all became good friends of mine too and are still to this day.

Preparing to Leave for Mongolia

As Gek ended her three-year summative talk to her fellow students and tutors on the last day of the exhibition, she drew a gasp of surprise from her audience when, in conclusion, she informed them she was off in a couple of months to spend the next two years in Mongolia. Difficult act to follow that was. My three new friends left Emerson to spend the following week sightseeing in London whilst Gek and I sorted out her studio and prepared for her to leave the college. The idea was that Gek would move in with me at No. 4



Gek meets Morgan

whilst we awaited our departure date to Mongolia and that she would store most of her artwork there whilst we were out of the country. I was to hire a transit-sized van to transport her work to Wales, as the wheelchair van was way too small for the job in hand, whilst Gek and her three friends were away on a ten-day tour of Eastern Europe.

Gek stayed up in London with her friends on their return from Europe until they were due to fly back to Singapore. On the day of their departure, I drove up to Heathrow to meet up with them all again and to say my own farewells. I was early at the airline check in desk for the prearranged meeting and as soon as Gek saw me standing there, her face lit up with a huge smile and she raced across the departure hall to put her arms around my waist, a memory I will treasure until the day I die. After saying our goodbyes to the 'girls', Gek and I motored back to Bridgend, via Emerson where we loaded the last of Gek's personal belongings from a storeroom there into the van before she said her final goodbyes to the college staff still on campus.



Morgans over Mongolia

At this time, we still did not have a departure date from VSO for our flights to Mongolia. In the short time we probably had left in the UK, Gek had still to have her assessment day at the VSO office in Putney and there would only be time to have one awareness-training weekend in Harbourne. We decided to go on a lightning tour of the UK, visiting relatives,



Gek with Thomas and Florence.

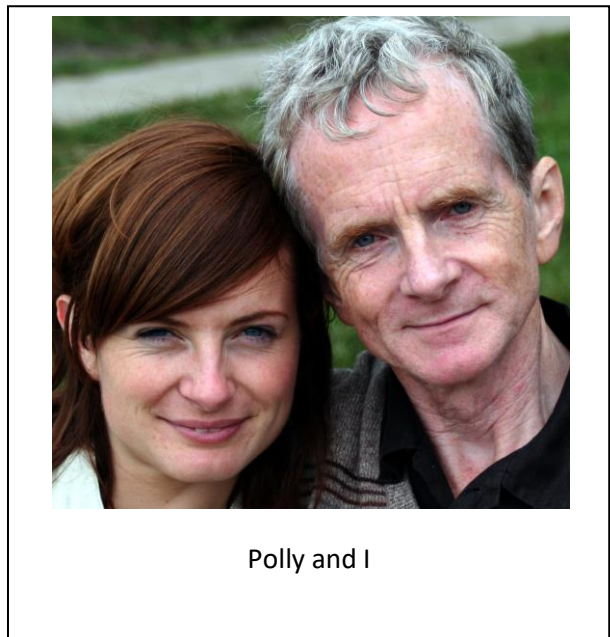
friends and places from my past, a sort of 'get to know more about David's history' for Gek. Of course we visited my Mum up in Darwen and Anna in Leamington Spa but also one of Jenny's cousin, Betty and her daughter Janet, in Bolton, all a bit intense for Gek, meeting the relatives, something I would be experiencing in a six months' time when I was to meet Gek's family members in Singapore for the first time.

But there were lighter moments, such as the visit to a Staffordshire Morgan Club Centre gymkhana meeting in Stoke on Trent where I introduced Gek to Morgan's and my friends from the Morgan club gathered there. Of course, this was the first meeting between Gek and the Morgan, and although I cannot say it was love at first sight, it did bring a grin to her face, particularly when Bob kindly let me drive the two of us around the field in his beautiful

+8. The smell of the leather upholstery, the sound of the engine and the feel of the Mog, was overwhelming. It all came flooding back to me. How can you love a car so much?

Janet and I had started the Staffordshire Morgan Club Centre, Staffs. Mog., 20 years ago that year. I would not be in the country for the official 20th anniversary celebrations in September, and so the members presented me with an all-weather coat and woolly hat with "Morgans over Mongolia" embroidered on it. Who knows, there may be 'Mogs In Mon'? Amazingly, as it was to turn out, we did see a Morgan in Mongolia as it passed through UB on the 2008 Peking to Paris Rally.

One of the last visits we made to friends was to the Cooper family down in Dorset. We spent a weekend at Hooke where Gek got to meet the whole Cooper gang. Gek and I took Sarah's two children Thomas and Florence out for a day at the seaside. Thomas and I had spent three days out together on a previous visit I had made to Hooke earlier in the year. In three days, we had visited both Exeter and Herne airports together to watch the planes take off and land as well as driving over to see Emma at the Branford Forum Army Base. So, Thomas and I had gotten to know each other quite well before this day trip to the beach. Thomas and Florence were very sweet kids and both Gek and I enjoyed the day together with them immensely. As a leaving do, Mandy organised a dinner at a restaurant on the coast for us and the whole family where we could say our farewells to them all.



Gek had had a successful VSO assessment day on Tuesday 11th July and by the time we were visiting the Coopers, we had at last been given a departure date, the 18th of August. We were now both set to be volunteers in UB, and although the details of Gek's placement had still to be worked out, the main thing was that we were now, for definite, going to be together, no problem. Time was now spent sorting out our things for storage, getting the bungalow ready to rent, making plans for Gek's training days in Harbourne. Polly was to move to Nottingham to live in my bungalow there as she had been accepted on a course at Derby University to study for a three-year, government funded Occupational Therapy degree. We also contacted quite a few people we now knew are connected in some way with Mongolia and gained a lot of information on accommodation and what things to take and what to buy in country.

My new tenant for No. 4, Malcolm, wanted to move into the bungalow on the 7th August, which meant that Gek and I had to find a bed or beds for the next eleven days before our

flight out of Heathrow on the 18th. Polly and Karim kindly put up with us for the seven days before we left them to go and stay with Ruth in Blackheath, as had become my habit whenever I was leaving the island. Our last night in the UK was spent in Piner, conveniently just north of Heathrow, at the house of Gek's student days friend Wah Piow and Beng Lan. I had been to their house a couple of times over the summer, the last time being to deliver the Portland Stone sculpture in the transit van I had hired. The sculpture was to become part of Wah Piow's garden display.

There had been a terrorist alert during the week at UK airports, and we had had to re-think our packing policy as no hand luggage was allowed on any flight out of UK airports, everything but everything had to be 'checked in'. Security checks on the access gates to the air-side of the terminal were also very thoroughly carried out. VSO had us booked on to the cheapest flights to Ulaanbaatar with Aeroflot, first leg to Moscow and a second leg over night to UB. In the departure lounge, we met up with two other VSO volunteers that Gek had come to know during her one and only training day in Harbourne, Pam and Ruth. Gek and I had no idea how many other VSO volunteers were scheduled to go to Mongolia and it was only by intelligently spotting other likely volunteers at the boarding gate that we came to realise that there was going to be quite a few of us arriving in UB. In fact, as it turned out, this was the largest single group to be sent to Mongolia by VSO.

The flight to Moscow was quite comfortable it being on a modern Boeing. In Moscow we were met by other VSO who had flown in from continental Europe, which brought our number up to eleven. The outward flight to UB from Moscow was not so comfortable, it being on an ancient Tupolev 154 and not only uncomfortable but also a plane with a pretty dim safety record. I was clearly not the only one aboard that flight who was aware of the plane's propensity to fall from the sky. As all three sets of undercarriage wheels touched the tarmac on landing at the UB airport, the passengers broke out in a spontaneous bout of clapping. We had survived a Tu-154 flight.

Memory Litter Bin.

1. **VSO assessment day.** – The VSO assessment day is intended to sort out those individuals who might make a meaningful contribution to their assigned project from those who might impede the projects objectives. The sort of personal characteristics that VSO were looking for were such things as being empathetic to the feelings of others and being able to work as a member of a multicultural team. As part of the assessment exercise on the day, we were divided into small groups and set a task to produce as many items from a kit of bits and pieces in an allotted time. The group of potential volunteers with whom I was to work were a great bunch and we all worked well together but this was not the case with other groups who had fallings out on how best to complete the allocated task. You had to wonder about the common sense of these individuals given that there were four VSO personnel in the room with you, taking notes on your 'attitude' as a team member.

As a rule, VSO do not send people on assignment until at least twelve months after the bereavement of a close relative. Luckily for my case, somehow, this rule was short circuited, and I was allowed to proceed to the next stage of training.

Notes