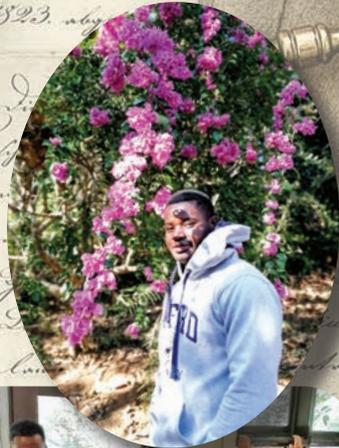


The Oxford Omnibus

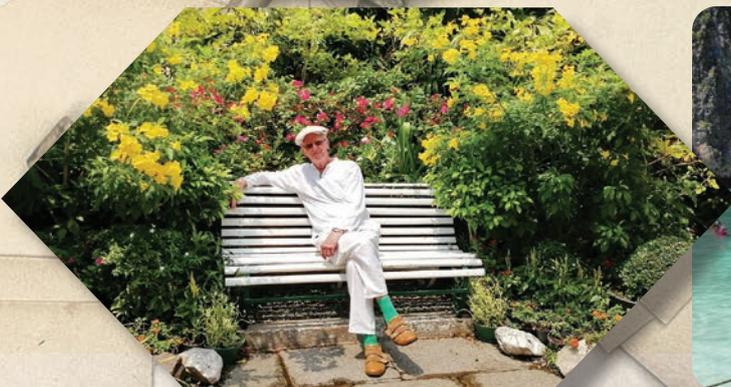
Oxford, England

No. 1 Christmas 2020

**GREETINGS AND GOOD WISHES FOR CHRISTMAS 2020
AND FOR THE TROUBLED YEAR AHEAD**



Although the sun is shining and the sky is blue as I write to you from the riverside in Oxford, I can't forget that it's the end of a dark and troubling year on our planet and there is much more suffering to come. It seems unlikely that Christmas and New Year will be anything like we are used to (London fireworks already cancelled); the prospects for 2021 are not encouraging. In the midst of threats to health and livelihoods, to rational discourse and the pursuit of truth, to peace and prosperity, I hope you will find some hope and pleasure. I have to remind myself of my privilege and good fortune when so much seems to be falling apart, when so many are anxious, insecure and hungry. I hope you will stay safe and healthy and will find reasons for optimism, at least at home if not in the wider, chaotic world around us.



GOODBYE TO THE TROPICAL TELEGRAPH WELCOME TO THE OXFORD OMNIBUS

From its first, wordprocessed, photocopied version on folded A3 in 2002, TT went through eighteen editions, most of them designed and managed by my talented Thai friend, Mr Neung. Now he is living with his wife and baby daughter in the Republic of Ireland; Raymond and I are permanently settled in Oxford, and a new Christmas bulletin is born. Happily, Mr Neung continues as our graphic designer.



This substitute for Christmas cards has, in one form or another, been sent to my long-suffering friends for about fifty years. It started as a pretty crude, typewritten, photocopied cut-and-paste job with cartoons and headlines from newspapers and magazines, hoping to raise a smile in the winter gloom. It's become more inventive and serious over the years, but its basic purpose has never changed: to send greetings and good wishes to family and friends at least once a year and to maintain contacts that might otherwise be lost. It's become more important as my commitment to the website has weakened in recent years (though that is something I would like to remedy).

Seeking an alliterative name for the publication, Omnibus seemed to do the job rather well - in its sense, of course, with literary connotations of a compilation of news and stories, but it does also provide a nostalgic nod to my many happy years of work in public transport. I hasten to add, however, that there is no risk at all of the bulletin morphing into a transport enthusiasts' journal or of there being more than the rarest reference to buses.



NOT SO MUCH TO REPORT

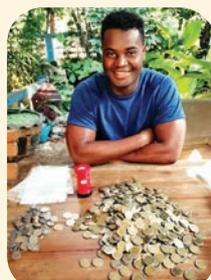
This year, the compass of our lives has been quite limited in terms of colourful events and travel. In the early months, after Christmas and Raymond's graduation, we were preoccupied with preparing to repatriate ourselves and such possessions as we couldn't bear to ditch after nearly two decades of accumulation (four years in Raymond's case). Once we'd overcome the hurdles of actually leaving Thailand, we found ourselves in locked-down UK, with limited options for doing anything much at all. So, fewer adventures and exotic locations than usual, but some achievements and lots of quieter pleasures to enjoy and report.



Christmas 2019 at Koggalae



Christmas lunch at Chiwit Tamma Da



A student's collection of 10 Baht pieces finally released for extravagance



An elegant fellow in his new weskit



Raymond whizzed about town on his bike when he wasn't driving the truck



Home preparations for fried chicken with cashew nuts

LAST MONTHS OF THE WARMTH AND TASTE OF THAILAND

After several enforced delays and cancellations, we managed to book a domestic flight to Bangkok, and from there a direct flight to London with Eva Air on 17 May. We did not feel 100% confident of our trip until we were in our seats and taxiing out to the runway, so much uncertainty had there been in the previous weeks. There was no more than a handful of people in the cavernous Suvarnabhumi terminals; there and on the almost empty plane we had a great sense of expansive ease and privilege.



In the almost deserted Bangkok airport on the night of our departure



Some of the boxes awaiting transport to the UK



My nearly empty study. I'd spent countless hours here reading and writing over eighteen years

We'd spent four or five weeks clearing the house and packing up the stuff we wanted to send back to the UK. The pressure was relieved by some happy developments. First, my friend Ian from Oxford and his wife, Pippa, who were visiting for the purpose, assessed our home as a desirable destination for their son and his Thai girlfriend to occupy sometime later in the year when they emigrated from England. This meant that much of the furniture could be left for them, along with the entire contents of the kitchen and a few hundred books.



Our stuff is loaded into the courier's van for the first stage of the journey home



Cocktails in the garden in Oxford with Ian, Pippa and Bob and Marina. The young couple are the ones planning to take over our house in Chiang Rai in due course.

Second, Naomi, the multi-talented teenage daughter of my Dutch friend Hans, expressed her enthusiasm to clear out our unwanted stuff that she could sell at a fund-raising event for her graduation party next year. Driven by Hans in his pickup, she and her friend took away four or five large miscellaneous loads, from decent stationery and books, to backpacks and luggage, ornaments and pictures and much else. I think she got rather more than she bargained for in the end (including, I blush to admit, a bunch of gay literature which was never intended for her school stall, and which I had to retrieve in a state of some embarrassment).



Naomi, Hans and friend on one of their clearance expeditions to our house in Koggalae

Third, my Thai teacher, the super Kroo Ploy, expressed a desire to take away anything she could get her hands on; in the end she paid me cash for my wonderful Yamaha piano, two filing cabinets, a big metal cupboard and my exercise bike.



Raymond took some Thai lessons from Kroo Ploy who had been such a brilliant teacher for me years ago

Kroo Ploy sets off with my Yamaha and some office furniture



REFLECTIONS ON EIGHTEEN YEARS IN THE TROPICS

HAPPY TIMES

One day I may write at length about my time in Thailand; for now, just a few reminiscences. Frequent trips to the beaches and islands of the south were always a delight. I came to feel very much at ease in Phuket; even after the tsunami, we went back often and it became a kind of second Thai home before and after Chai's death. Ko Samui called me back several times and there was one splendid holiday on Ko Samed with Marie and Rafe. The sunshine, the turquoise sea, the white sands, the food, the G&Ts in the evenings, the boys – all unique and remarkable.

We were very lucky not to have been injured or killed by the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 and not to have suffered any long-lasting damage to body or property. Jacob (my Swedish friend) and I were hanging from the eaves of a hotel bungalow as all three waves swept over us as high as our heads; somehow, we held on against the massive force of the water, filled with sharp and hefty debris. A quarter of a million people lost their lives that day; a time, like now, when one cannot but reflect on the fragility of civilization in the face of nature's power.



Glories of the Andaman sea



Patong Beach, Phuket; a home from home for many years before and after the tsunami



My bungalow the morning after the tsunami



The street just outside our hotel the day after

THE DELIGHT AND THE BURDEN THAT WAS CHAI

In the early years, my relationship with Chai brought me lovely, rich times, interesting, adventurous and memorable; later on he and his wretched family, especially after his death, were the cause of some of the darkest experiences of my life. Greed, exploitation, ingratitude, betrayal, dogged and wounded me for three or four years. While the ultimate settlement of the family's claim to ownership of all my assets was expensive, I did feel that the Thai civil court gave me a fair hearing and a tolerably just result. I owe a great deal to my loyal, hard-working and competent Thai lawyer, Khun Banjob who became a firm friend.

CULTURAL ADVENTURES AND DARK DAYS

My fluent, though elementary Thai, stood me in good stead, and locals were always amazed to find I could read and write the language, however tentatively. With Chai, visiting his home village in remote Isaan, I was able to go behind the scenes in rural Thai culture and see something of the life of poor rice farmers; their pastimes and their food; their markets and temple life; their social relations. He took me to places I could never have gone on my own or as a tourist. He was a great cook and we had many splendid meals at home and at parties we organized on the farm and elsewhere.



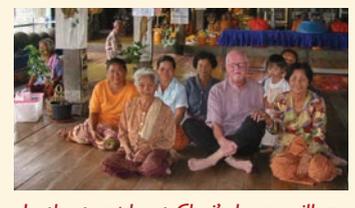
Chai was a creative and generous man with a deep, dark side that eventually destroyed him and wounded me on the way



Chai loved fishing; he was utterly at home in the natural world



Chai's funeral



In the temple at Chai's home village in Maha Sarakham



My long-time lawyer and his wife brought gifts for our last meeting



Happy discovery that Mr Banjob and Miss Pui were elephant enthusiasts and were keen to give a good home to one of my favourite possessions

But he was a gambler and an incipient alcoholic; without my knowledge, he had our truck repossessed to pay his debts; in the later years, his behaviour became more and more intolerable; once the diseases of AIDS began to take hold he was even more careless of his health and my peace of mind. His expensive weeks in intensive care were just postponing the inevitable. Treatment was stopped. He died. I was deeply saddened by it all, but relieved too. His funeral and cremation were elaborately and intensely staged in the village; we picked through his ashes for shards of bones to leave in the temple.

BAAN RAI ARUN

The singular achievement of those years was the reforestation and rewilding of my 55,000 square metres of hillside land (thirteen and a half acres), out in the countryside 15kms from home. From bare hillside growing rice and corn, it became a lovely wooded area, with tall, maturing teak, flowering trees and shrubs, fruit trees, banana palms, bamboo, interplanted rubber and much more. Strolling through its dappled light on a sunny day; seeing the clusters of coconuts grow and swell fifteen metres above your head (they were planted as mere sprouting coconuts); standing beneath the best of the lofty teak (two-foot saplings eighteen years ago); reveling in the rich colours of the bougainvillea and frangipani – were all deeply pleasing.

The fate of the land is uncertain. There have been some potential buyers, but nothing has come of them so far. I am continuing to pay the workers to look after the land in the hope someone will turn up with the desire and the cash before I am forced to abandon it to nature. I'm not very optimistic, given the state of the Thai economy and the shaky confidence of the expat community.



Bougainvillea at Baan Rai Arun



A sunny spot in our lovely woodland



Checking out the farm with our estate agent, Kay



Seeking a buyer - a forlorn hope for now, it seems



The wife of the main worker at the farm with her grandchild. I'm employing them for another year or two while we wait for a buyer

FOSTERING

It was Chai who said we should help take care of a single-mother neighbour's eight year-old son, Ui. Chai thought he was being neglected by his beer-drinking mother and her foreign partners. We began to fund his daily needs and to involve him in our domestic life and our trips. Chai soon lost interest, but I did not see how we could abandon the boy after stepping into his life. Even now, sixteen years later (he is 24), I am still his principal ally and supporter, trying hard to wean him from his dependence on me. He's an honest, affectionate young man, but infuriatingly disorganized and feckless. He is working and going to college, but does not earn enough for his needs. He shares a rented house with a friend, does his laundry and gets to work on time, so he is not a lost cause by any means, but I have no idea when he'll actually be able to stand on his own feet. He has said on several occasions that without me he would have been lost; that's lovely to hear, but there is so much more that I would have liked to help him achieve.



The two main chaps in my life prepare for badminton outside our home



Ui and I used to go regularly to a lovely family-owned restaurant in town. He always had fried rice, chicken breast stuffed with ham and cheese with a side of chips



Ralph and Ui many years ago

THE PLEASURES OF THAI FRIENDSHIPS



Lunch with Pravich at Chiwit Tamma Da

I have a couple of very dear Thai friends. I met Dr Pravich in 1994 at a WHO meeting in Bangkok. He visited us in Chiang Rai; we have been on holidays together and met regularly for dinner whenever I was in Bangkok. He is a conscientious, hard-working, altruistic medical researcher and teacher, with many years of clinical practice behind him. I think it took him some years to take me seriously but once he did we became firm friends. He's something of an Anglo-ophile and a gourmet, so we have lots in common.



Bui's mother and sister at their home in Koggalae. Raymond got to know Khun Bom from her wonderful noodle bar on campus



Bui visited us in our airport hotel in Bangkok on our last night in Thailand

The second important Thai person in my life is Mr Bui, the son of a neighbour in my home village, whose mother persuaded me to coach him in English when he was a teenager. We got on exceptionally well, had holidays together in Thailand, and met two or three times a year once he became a university student in Bangkok and then a sugar-mill engineering manager with a company in the south. His bright, affectionate personality brought great joy to my years in the country.

When I first came across him early in my time in Thailand, Mr Katai was the owner of a plot of land right on the River Gok, opposite the village where my farm was located. He had built a lovely little A-frame house where he used to go with his beloved pooch, Koko; he had spent a fortune consolidating the river bank with hundreds of tons of stone. Abused and betrayed by corrupt officials and the courts through all the years I knew him, he was eventually ejected from his little patch of heaven, because of nefarious goings on in the land office when he had bought the property in the first place. It broke him; he left his promising job in a big bank and, mentally, never recovered. He spent periods in and out of psychiatric wards. The smiling, toned man I had seen in a photograph of him on a beach before it all happened, never returned.

He spoke excellent English; he was kind and generous; more often than not, he drove me in his ancient car to the airport when I was traveling and met me when I returned. He brought me fruit and gifts and food from his mother; the family fed me in their home on many occasions. In the months before we left, he found a girlfriend which was the most wonderful news for him after years living with his overprotective parents.



Mr Katai's lovely house by the river



Mr Katai, a faithful friend over many years, with his parents and girlfriend



Mr Nay on his visit to Chiang Rai with his family. He was the bright student who gave me so much support when I was teaching at Rangsit University



Speeding south on the River Gok with Mr Nay, wife and family

Mr Nay was a student on the communications skills course I taught for ten years. for the Faculty of Pharmacy at Rangsit University. After living in the US for a while, he spoke English very well and was invaluable as interpreter for me with the 230-strong class, many of whom struggled with elementary English. He returned and helped me in later years before he left and set up his own highly successful pharmacy shops. His parents took a kindly interest in me and visited Chiang Rai a couple of times along with him and his fiancé, later wife. We were not really close, but he was a great ally and support.



THE PARADOXES OF THAI RELATIONSHIPS

Generally speaking, the warmth of the Thai smile is a genuine feature of the people, though, in some respects, it is disingenuous and superficial. Beneath it are complexities and contradictions that are difficult to grasp or make sense of. While the smile is often an expression of welcome and goodwill, it also masks feelings and intentions that are almost impenetrable until they manifest themselves in behaviour. 'Mai bpen rai' ('never mind') is part of this syndrome: however angry or frustrated a Thai might be, there is huge cultural pressure to suppress expression of such feelings – and to smile. Giving vent to strong feelings leads to loss of face – avoidance of which is a driving force in social relations. One example of this – and the inhibiting effects of deference – comes from the experience of my restaurant-owning friends: they will train and nurture staff, maybe for years, then one day they simply don't turn up for work and are never seen again. There are no signs of unrest and not a word has been said about anything that might have provoked the disappearance. I know to my cost just how impenetrable

can be the motives and feelings of some Thai people. Being the kind of fairly open-hearted chap that I am, and, conscious of my relative wealth and privilege, I've responded to (I guess) hundreds of appeals for financial help, a few of them substantial. Hardly a single Baht of those considerable funds, when 'borrowing' was the explicit transaction, has ever been returned. Some of my debtors continued to put pressure on me, week after week (with sob stories), even when they had failed to fulfil their promises or I had unambiguously said there was no more to come. In the early days, I lent our housemaid/laundress 3,000 Baht to help her buy a new washing machine. Within a couple of days she had vanished from the village, never to be seen or heard of again. And similar to that it was, very often.

Those of my Thai friends with whom there were no financial entanglements, said that this was a universal feature of Thai society, among Thais themselves as much as with foreigners. It is, certainly, common; whether universal I am not sure.

What I shall not miss is the sound of axes and chain-saws. There aren't that many areas of Thailand left with serious trees and the population seems driven by some manic urge to fell those that do remain. In my village, I saw the few mature trees (fifty and more years old) progressively cut down over the years; I had to suppress my sadness and rage whenever I heard the buzz of a chainsaw or the clunk of an active axe. When the pretty, purple flowering trees lining the village started to interfere with the telephone and power cables last year, they were simply cut down, leaving metre-high stumps. To protect the five trees outside my house, I employed a tree-surgeon to cut a clear passage through the branches for the cables, but there was no-one else who seemed to care about the loss of the lovely green environment we had once enjoyed. When Thais buy a plot of land for a house, they generally clear it of all vegetation, not a tree or bush or blade of grass remaining. Inexplicable.



The tragic result of impatience with trees in our village



My wonderful tree-surgeon all the way from Chiang Mai



These poor old trees in front of our house were the only ones left on the street after the obliteration of all the rest. I had to fight to preserve these

GOOD TIMES

Putting these (great) reservations about transparency and honesty (and trees) aside, I have also met lots of good, friendly, honest, generous Thais all over the country. I've had brilliant service in bars, restaurants and hotels; kindly attention in shops and road-side stalls; excellent customer service from big stores; even, on occasion, positive, disinterested help from members of the police force. (I have never been tempted, nor invited, to hand over

spondoolicks to any of those chaps in their tight uniforms, though I am pretty sure the practice is widespread and cynically accepted as par for the course by most Thais. I did once sponsor the local police football team for a match in the village and the odd bottle of hooch did find its way onto the desks of officers who stood by me during the worrying times of Chai's family's assault on my property.)



Evening indulgence at Swensens ice cream parlour in town



At an art gallery in town where our friend Cornelis Hoek had an exhibition of paintings



Raymond discusses one of the exhibits with the artist



The Dancing Tiger Temple, also known as the Blue Temple, just down the road from our home. It came from nothing to be a major place of pilgrimage in just a handful of years



The faithful truck. This was the second Ford Ranger; it was a simple, persistent pleasure to own and drive



I shall miss Miss Touch, my amiable local chiroprapist



Visiting the Royal Palace in Bangkok during the early days of the pandemic



A peaceful corner of the Royal Palace grounds



The Royal Palace like you've never seen it - just a handful of visitors



Even before lockdown, Bangkok's biggest mall was all but deserted

I shall miss spending most of my life in shorts and bare feet; waking up to sunshine most days of the year; the terrific markets, local produce and delicious food (including TOPS supermarket in Central Plaza mall, where we could get a whole range of Waitrose products); our robust, faithful Ford Ranger truck; the attentions of handsome young men in my bachelor days; the lovely, sometimes extravagant architecture of temples and their quiet, meditative garden courtyards; easy access to the sea and beautiful beaches.

FAVOURITE PLACES

The visit of Pippa and Ian gave us an excuse for a last whizz round all our favourite places – The White Temple, the Princess Mother’s garden at Doi Tung, Mae Sai, the Golden Triangle and more – in the capable hands of our No 1 taxi driver, Mr Chattawat. We had a great few days; for us, a farewell tour to places we’d been dozens of times over the years on our own and with many of our visiting friends.



The White Temple



The Golden Toilet at the White Temple



Ian met his conversational match at the White Temple



The great golden Buddha at the Golden Triangle



Processional elephants at the Golden Triangle



High in the hills at the Princess Mother's garden



An elegant couple in the Royal garden



The border with Myanmar



Military coffee at the Myanmar border post

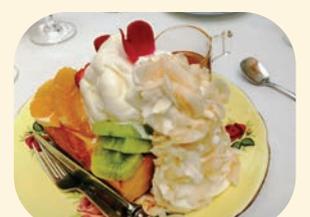
GOOD FOOD

I shall miss my talented restaurateur friends, Joakim and Hans. Swedish Joakim and his Thai wife Aon created the miraculous Chiwit Tamma Da, by several leagues, the best bar, bistro and restaurant I have ever known anywhere. The riverside setting; the white-painted, wood-clad buildings; the garden with its flowers, fountains, pools and huge ancient tree; the decorations, ornaments, china collections and pictures; the old piano and posters; the library with its snooker table; the lovely china, cutlery and table settings; the selection of a hundred or more single malt whiskies (for those who favour them) and the startling and brilliant menu – there is simply nowhere like it. I have had the best food and the happiest times in this place. Yes: I miss Chiwit Tamma Da.

Dutch Hans and his Thai wife Aye (parents of Naomi who relieved us of so much of our domestic surplus before we left), have so many achievements to their names it is hard to believe two people could do so much. A long-established Thai-Western restaurant in the middle of town; for several years an Italian restaurant just nearby; a richly stocked delicatessen; a recent Mexican eatery on the edge of town. And then: an organic farm with multiple crops, cattle, sheep, goats; cheese and fresh and home-processed meat; and, finally, a riding school and stables. Such energy and talent and such generous, affectionate people!



Lunch at Chiwit Tamma Da with Ian and Pippa



One of Chiwit Tamma Da's sumptuous desserts



Christmas Table at Chiwit Tamma Da



Even the home deliveries from Chiwit Tamma Da were stylish - a socially distanced table and tablecloth at your gate

Their incredible effort and investment over decades have recently been torn apart by loss of their land through what appear to be the forces of local corruption; they are having to retrench dramatically, dispose of all their livestock and build a new business. The absence of tourists from Thailand has also had a terrible impact on them.

I met with Hans every month or so for dinner, when he entertained me with the choicest dishes from his menus, along with a bottle or two of decent wine from his collection or mine. I shall

miss those gourmet evenings and his bright, critical mind.

But my new life in Oxford, with Raymond, is so substantial and vivid, that I am nostalgic for only a handful of those tropical pleasures. I do not miss the drama of the heights and depths, but I am very happy I had the chance to live through them and to settle for all those years more or less comfortably in a very foreign, brand new world.



Good food in Hans' Mexican eatery



Hans and Aye Verschuur, daughter Naomi and Aye's sister in their Mexican eatery



BACK IN BLIGHTY

I was sufficiently anxious about the pedigree of 'Blighty' to look it up before settling on it here. Its most recent use is certainly as an affectionate moniker for Britain, more specifically England. It seems to have origins in Hindi and Arabic (foreigner), used in India in the 1880s, but in the first world

war was the term for a soldier's wound of sufficient seriousness to require him to be returned home; from there becoming the term for home itself. (This is a pretty haphazard, on-the-hoof account of the etymology, so please do not take a stand on its accuracy.)



My comfortable study, now with a modest TV added to the facilities



Pippa and Ian in the River House sitting room



The lovely woodland just a short stroll from the house



Looking downstream along the Thames from the footbridge at Osney, a twenty minute stroll from the house along the towpath



Riverside wildflowers just upstream of the house



Bringing back the shopping across the gasworks bridge just by the house



Out for a stroll on the towpath on a sunny day



Standing by for Saturday lunch at The Jam Factory (where Frank Cooper used to work his miracles)



The river frontage of the house with our new planted barrels just visible

Be that as it may, we're back, settled and functioning now after five months. The house is a joy; another room or two would not come amiss, but, in truth, it is perfect for the two of us; it fits us well, and we fit it comfortably. The view of the river from all the rooms in the house is constantly interesting and agreeable; in the summer, half the world seems to walk, cycle, jog or amble past on the towpath; paddle or row on the water; chug or putter past in an astonishing range of craft. In both directions along the towpath are lovely, wood-shaded walks which go for miles. Just above the towpath to the west is mature woodland with open grassy areas. And we're within spitting distance of the city centre and the shops.

We've recently had a loft ladder and some decking installed. These have allowed us to migrate surplus stuff to the roof, helping to absorb some of the things we brought from Thailand. It's all labeled and orderly and should not be too much of a burden to deal with when the time comes.

Our small garden and the local area were a delight during the wonderful summer. We had no cause to regret the loss of Thai temperatures and spent time with friends for afternoon teas, cocktails and food in the open air. Raymond and I have taken to having Saturday lunch out in town and are trying out a range of places, hoping to find one we could adopt as our favourite. Currently, The Head of the River and The Red Lion are top of our list. When we are not cooking at home, Deliveroo is our supplier of good things.



Our comforting cottage garden in Oxford



A modest supper of pigs in blankets at home



Afternoon tea with Claire at River House



Marigolds and our vigorous old rosemary bushes



Exquisite flowers on the myrtle we're caretaking for an absent neighbour and friend



Potted delights by the French doors at River House



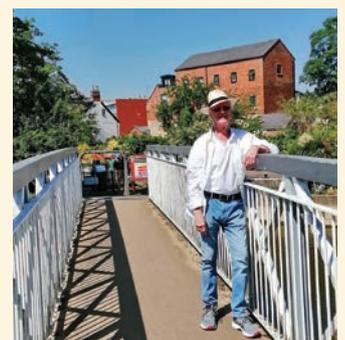
With Claire at home in Jericho after John's death early in the year



Raymond with a massive pot of protein shake for his training regimen



A first shot ever at banana bread. It was pretty damn good.



The footbridge at Osney Lock on a fine afternoon

It was rather different when we first arrived and were both at home full-time. Division of household duties sent cooking my way; I made more meals and did more baking than I have for many years and really enjoyed it. More recently, now Raymond eats at work and is on a strict training routine of fasting and protein shakes and stuff, there's less food needed in the house, but there've been a few diversions. A bowl of spotty bananas prompted me to look up banana cake; it's become very popular and I've made lots. Our crop of pears sent me off in search of something other than bottling, and I came across pear upside down cake; that was quite a success too (and another threat to Raymond's careful diet). There's quite a stock of homemade bread in the freezer, but we're getting through that rather slowly as I've discovered M&S green olive ciabatta rolls (bliss). We always have ice cream and double cream in the house and can't deny having the odd sticky toffee pudding or apple crumble for dessert. (We live well; we are so lucky.)

THE END OF THE IVORIES

After several years of almost daily, but desultory piano practice, I have packed away my electronic piano and finally given up the struggle. I had been incredibly conscientious at sitting down more or less every day for fifteen or twenty minutes, but never really committed my mind or my muscles to the serious business of improvement.

I had barely recovered the standard I achieved when I was seventeen, so I have given it up as a bad job. I do earnestly wish I had been more ambitious when I was young and had reached a standard that could have allowed me to play competently throughout my life. A blast of good sense struck me; now I've given up the pretence.



WORK

But for one project, my work for UMC and my travels to Sweden have more or less come to an end. As a celebration of my twenty-five years' work for UMC and (as it happened) on my birthday in January, I was invited to tell my story to the staff in Uppsala, to reflect on the growth of pharmacovigilance during that quarter century and what I might hope for the future of the organization and the science. About eighty people turned up to hear me; it was a friendly and gratifying event.

The remaining project is my supporting role in the production of an ambitious history of UMC and of the life of my friend, and ex-Director of UMC, Rafe Edwards. It's being written by Ian Hembrow here in Oxford; it's been a massive and complex task that he's tackled with his customary energy and brilliance. I'm his editorial assistant and kind of literary therapist. We hope to see it published next spring.

In the autumn, I was commissioned to deliver forty hours of communications training for officials of the Saudi drug regulatory authority. It was a massive challenge in terms of delivering substantial, credible content, but also technologically: remote teaching was almost entirely new to me, and Zoom completely unknown. Given quite short notice about the job, I worked ten- and twelve-hour days in the run up to the first session; four hours teaching a day for five days, with additional hours of preparation each day, left me pretty drained. The first group of five sessions went well and, as I write now, I am taking the weekend off before starting on work for the second group in a week's time. I'm very grateful to have had the challenge to keep my brain working at maximum capacity; I had started to worry that lack of use might lead to the radical loss of neurons. I do not know what I shall do when work finally



In January, the UMC communications team presented me with this doctored cover of one of my favourite pieces of work

dries up. I thrive on pressure (no matter how much I complain about it) and fear I may go into some kind of decline once there are no more external demands. I shall have to find some project to keep me going, but, as yet, I have no idea what it might be. Out of Bounds 2 is underway, but slowly.

Quite early on, one of Raymond's employment agencies offered him the chance of working at Oxford's drive-in Covid-19 testing station. He has four shifts a week, lasting twelve hours and is already on the path to promotion. With that work and his daily (sometimes twice daily) trips to the gym, he has a busy and tiring life. He cycles to work and has just bought himself a fine new model from Halfords. Pandemic testing is unlikely to determine the direction of his future career, but it has been great for him to get a job and a decent income so quickly. It looks as though that employment will be secure for a good time ahead as long as he wants it, at least until a serious opening in logistics turns up.

LATE ADDITIONS

It's now the beginning of November and Mr Neung needs the last words to complete the typesetting. It's one day before the US election and three days before the lockdown in England; it's also eight weeks before our final withdrawal from the EU, a third potential cataclysm that appears to have fallen out of sight (to say nothing of global heating). For better or for worse (and there's good chances of both) we shall be living in a reshaped world in 2021. Let's hope that wisdom and reconciliation and healthy democracy emerge from the current unnerving shambles.

On a rather smaller canvas, plans for Bob and Marina to take over our house in Koggalae have been abandoned and it now has to be cleared for return to the owner at the end of December. I'm back in discussion with a charity that expressed an interest in the early days; they look after street kids on the border of Myanmar and while Christian, do not appear to be distressingly driven by missionary zeal. All our furniture and possessions were bought by Ian and Pippa for the young couple, so that's a further loss they are bearing in what had been such a hopeful and imaginative plan.

No movement whatsoever in selling Baan Rai Arun.



A burst of autumnal colour in the garden

My Saudi training marathon ended well, according to reports, and they are talking about a new contract for the new year. I've dismantled my little Zoom studio set-up for the timebeing but may need to bring it out again in 2021.

Today, Raymond is in London, getting his last pre-lockdown Brixtonian haircut, eating at his favourite authentic Ghanaian restaurant and stocking up on essentials for the kitchen. I have an appointment at the barber's booked for tomorrow and an Ocado delivery on Wednesday. We are all set for a month's restricted domestic activity, while Raymond continues to work.

7 Nov 2020. SOME VERY GOOD NEWS TO END THE YEAR. WOW! WHAT A RELIEF!

PLANS

We'll be spending Christmas and New Year at home. Raymond will probably go back to Ghana some time next year; beyond that we have no plans for travel at the moment, and may not have the choice anyway until the pandemic fades.

THINKING OF YOU

Break times remind one (though one really shouldn't need the prompt) how important are friends and family; when so much else is in doubt, the confidence of affection and concern are more valuable than ever. Only the welfare of the natural world comes near in significance.

We hope you and your loved ones are doing as well as possible – in body, mind and spirit – and that you and all of us can maintain a degree of optimism about the future; that this threat to so much that we know and love will be overcome one way or another.

**BEST WISHES
FOR A HAPPY CHRISTMAS AND
A NEW YEAR OF EMERGENCE
AND RENEWAL.**

Bruce.

Nana Yaw

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