

# THE TROPICAL TELEGRAPH

Chiang Rai, Thailand

Greetings and good wishes from Thailand

No. 9 Christmas 2010

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Your annual bulletin from the land of smiles (mostly)



# Freedom from persecution

It was just a few days after my 65th birthday in January that the threat of losing my farm and the student dormitory to Chai's greedy family was lifted. In a very expensive civil court settlement, a comprehensive agreement was signed guaranteeing my right to remain, undisturbed on the farm, and to sell the dormitory to a buyer of my choice. That ended two years of miserable uncertainty, lengthy and unsuccessful negotiations and court appearances, and living with the oppressive greed and ingratitude of a family I had done so much to help in the past. It was a liberation which profoundly affected my life and largely restored my peace of mind.



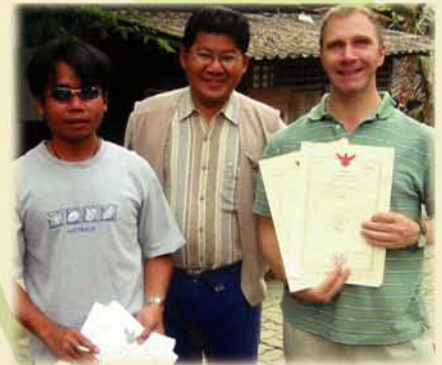
**Reluctant parting:** this is what a million Baht looks like, and how a disgruntled farang looks when he has to part with it for the benefit of settling the claims of grasping, ungrateful ex-family members. This photo taken in the lawyers' room of the court, just before the final settlement was agreed.



In Peter's absence, I hand over the deeds to his land to the new owner, who'd waited patiently for two years.



And this scion of a rich Thai-Chinese family, previously a tenant, is the new owner of the student dormitory. We were fantastically lucky to have buyers at the time the whole court case was being settled, even if we had to hand over a large percentage of the proceeds.



**A piece of history:** Chai and Peter hold the title deeds to our properties six years ago on the day we made our original investment. The other chap was our lawyer at the time.



My last visit to the student dormitory (Sirimongkhon) after the new owner had taken over.



**Portraiture:** I rather liked this shot which Phil took while he was in Chiang Rai.



**Car wash team:** this is the bunch of cheerful folk and their manager who keep my pickup bright and shiny inside and out for a couple of quid.





## UK trips and a new Hugman arrives

**Six Hugmans + dog:** a rare sighting of the whole of our clan in one place at the same time. The (so far) exclusively male line continues with the arrival of George. (Jenny, on the other hand, has a flock of sisters and only one brother.)



**Picture perfect:** the Hugman residence in Whittlebury is a lovely place, though its maintenance and repair are never-ending commitments.



**Early spring in Northants:** here I am with Iain's dog, Nelson, after a long walk across the fields in front of their cottage.



**Compost time:** Iain watches while Andrew feeds the hungry maw of the shredder with tree prunings and leaves.



**Autumn fruits:** the Hugman orchard was heavy with fruit and the chestnuts were sending cascades of conkers on to the ground.



**A great-nephew's first year:** here's the new Hugman from a few days old to ten months. George is seen with his father, Andrew; a toy moose from Sweden; Iain's flat-coated retriever, Nelson; and with a great-uncle.



**B**abies, as you will know, are not a category of persons to whom I am deeply attracted, but the arrival of a great-nephew at the end of 2009 quickly lifted the proscription for a very special instance. Our branch of the Hugmans is a very small family (now just six bearing the name), so the arrival of George was a matter for celebration on all counts. It prompted me, untypically, to make three trips to the UK this year, including Christmas which is yet to come as I write.

Parents Andrew (my nephew) and Laura live in Pembrokeshire, but travelled up to Northamptonshire where I was staying with my brother and sister-in-law, Iain and Jenny. George seems to be a peaceful and contented baby, with big blue eyes, a look of wonder on his face as he surveys the world, and a big, ready smile - all of which make it easy for him to get high ratings on the avuncular approval scale.

Iain and Jenny live in the most lovely stone cottage which they dragged from dilapidation thirty-odd years ago. There's a productive garden and, when I went in the autumn, we were dealing with the huge apple crop and sweeping up the mass of conkers which had fallen from the ancient chestnut trees.

In the midst of the delight at George's arrival, we've been stunned by the news that my brother is seriously ill and is facing a programme of aggressive therapy and surgery with uncertain prospects ahead. That has cast a cloud over everything, though he is facing things day by day with an extraordinarily strong spirit.





# CELEBRATORY HORTICULTURE



**O**ne response to my new freedom from persecution was to take in hand the plot of land in the valley with its fish-pool and island. With nothing in mind but creating a lovely place, a fleet of lorries brought topsoil to the island and an army of workers laid paths, built a bamboo house and a gazebo, planted trees and flowers and, more recently, dug a deep well for year-round water supply, and cleared ditches and raised the banks round the pool to cope with the occasional inundations of the rainy season.



There's an enthusiastic new, young worker who lives in the house with his wife and baby; ten ducks and hens, which are now breeding, laying enthusiastically and raising chicks and ducklings; and a peaceful garden, with comfortable places for thinking and reading and talking. The latest acquisition is a little rowing boat. It's another little piece of heaven on the estate. If there is anything missing, it is more friends with whom to share its pleasures.







## The story in pictures

I thought it might be interesting for you to see how the pool and island progressed from its origins as five rai (8,000 sq. m.) of paddy when we bought it, four years ago, to being a gentleman's pretty garden. It's been very exciting and has taken place over just seven months this year, from the middle of the cold season in January, through the hot, dry season, and now into the rainy season.

The pool was dug when Chai was still alive (you can see him marking out the ground in one of the photos) but, beyond stocking it with fish, nothing was done with the land until this year. The sub-soil turned up by the digging of the pool was tough, grey clay, unworkable and hostile to almost everything but weeds, and so I ordered 150 lorry-loads of topsoil to provide a more welcoming basis for flowers and trees. Mature trees were brought in by lorry (the big palm cost two hundred pounds - by far the most expensive); huge rocks were delivered and established; a bamboo house and a grass-roofed gazebo were built; paths were laid, turf rolled out and expeditions to garden centres brought in more flowers and shrubs. Apart from a disastrous storm which demolished the first gazebo, everything has gone well and almost all the vegetation is flourishing.





# Ban Rai Arun in all its vigour and loveliness

It's a year to celebrate the farm and its preservation from marauders, so here's a spread of pictures showing it from its earliest days, when we first saw it in 2001, to its currently forested glory and pleasant leisure opportunities.



**A very fine worker:** this is Mr Yut with his wife and baby. He has been around for only about three months but has helped transform management of the farm and ensure the meticulous care of large and small practical and horticultural tasks. They live in the bamboo house on the island and are responsible for the ducks and hens too.



This rather bedraggled fan palm (probably *strelitzia nicolae*) started to put out massive flower buds in August, which caused me a rush of excitement. It wasn't until October that the flowers began to emerge, but they were disappointing, straggly things, quite unlike the smaller cousin on the right, flourishing elsewhere in the garden. I had Mr Yut stand next to the plant to show the scale of it.

**Exciting limes:** I don't know why citrus fruits give me so much pleasure, but these bitter, juicy limes are one of my favourite crops on the farm.



**Exposure:** Mr Yut and the day-workers build up the bank round the main pool.



**Ditching:** here the workforce clear ditches and raise banks in the pouring rain.



Mr Yut and Ui bring in the little boat on its arrival at the pool.



**Garden trimmings:** this is a small percentage of the total bamboo and tree trimmings from the farm, which I refused to allow to be burnt, given my obsession with environmentally responsible forestry. We tried a shredder, but it would have taken weeks to process this volume of material, so my part-time manager arranged for them to be carted off and dumped. I fear they may still have been burnt, but no-one was foolish enough to admit it to me.



Front driveway up to the farm, over what was originally the rice crop.



Ui entirely at ease in the new boat in this idyllic scene.



Here are the ten ducks on a dull, wet day, when the valley plot was inundated by days of heavy rain. Our ditches and outlet pipes were insufficient, so a major project was launched to ensure rapid flow of water off the land, while making sure the fish didn't swim out of the pool with it.





This is the naked hill I bought nine years ago, with its hillside rice crop.



This is what it looked like after the rice had gone and Chai and I moved in. We scratched out a rather ambitious roadway straight up the hill (below left), which we abandoned later. The bare patch in front of the picture is where the house was soon to be built.



This is the same house plot, viewed from the top of the hill. Not much vegetation, you can see!



Here's the house a couple of years later, with evidence of some horticulture around it and everywhere else. The land beyond the house is my neighbour's.

Taken this year from a different point at the top of the hill, with the house, invisible, far away to the right of the picture.



This (above) is the east-facing side of the hill which Chai and I bought four years ago - bare, but for a maize crop, as you can see. The track at the bottom leads up to the house and the very top of the hill. The pool had just been dug.



More or less the same viewpoint as above, but taken this year: the house roof is just visible above the foliage in the centre of the picture.



This is taken from the house (same viewpoint at the photo with the red roadway on it), looking way up to the top of the hill about 500m distant in the centre of the picture, now covered with serious young woodland. In front is the maturing domestic garden.



The same hillside, four years later, planted with a thousand rubber trees and several hundred other trees and shrubs. The pool and its environs are now looking a little less wild.





**Freezing brilliance:** not every day was as bright and glorious as this, but the big house looked especially exotic on this day.



**Another tropical guest:** here's Rafe and Marie with our friend Alex, from Ghana, with whom I was working for a couple of weeks in Accra at the end of October.



**Stark contrast:** there was a difference of 50 degrees in the temperature here in Utmyrby on the day of my arrival from what it had been in Bangkok, just eighteen hours earlier when I left Thailand. But it was so beautiful, I had to take a photo even before I'd taken my luggage inside.

**Shredder at work:** Rafe deals with the first of the autumn avalanche of leaves and garden trimmings in his shredder, before adding the finely chopped output to his gourmet composting plant.



**Well-insulated Hugman:** Rafe and me in the chilly sunshine.



**The big house:** barely visible behind the pair of ancient ash trees, planted when the house was built over a century ago, this is Marie and Rafe's house, with the roof of my cottage just visible on the left.



**Ancient accommodation:** and here's the very writing house which Sigrid Kahle used for forty years of literary and journalistic output. I shall never be of her distinction, but I am inspired to write in her house and at her desk.



## Sweden through the seasons

**Lindquists at large:** here's grandmother Marie holding Lily, son of daughter Anna and husband Gunnar, and Rafe with Ludwig.



**Memento of Chiang Rai:** here's the distinguished Swedish writer, Sigrid Kahle, accepting one of Nong Pantukit's bamboo paintings as her birthday present from me. I live in the cottage which used to be her 'writing house' on the estate which Rafe and Marie bought from her.

**Yeasty curiosity:** when I left my Swedish retreat in March, I overlooked these two packs of bread in the breadbin. When I returned in July, they were still almost as fresh and soft as the day I bought them. I thought it was absolutely incredible, and wondered just what percentage of the contents was preservative. This picture is of bread that is FOUR MONTHS OLD!!



**Heavenly fruits:** it was a summer of the most exquisite Swedish strawberries of which we consumed several kilograms.

**Rural loo:** Last year we cleared out and renovated the old loo in the barn, not least so I could have use of facilities that didn't require me to invade the big house (there's no running water, bathroom or kitchen in my cottage). Here you can see the comforting polystyrene seat (which is warm when you sit on it even when the outside temperature is minus 20) atop the clever separator, which diverts pee into the ground, and collects more or less odourless shit in a bucket which can then be composted.



**M**y trips to Sweden, for work at the Uppsala Monitoring Centre, and holidays with my dear friends Marie and Rafe in deep country, continue to be a delight. I've been three times this year - late winter, summer and autumn - and am as much in love with my old wooden cottage as ever: I have as much difficulty leaving it as I do leaving Chiang Rai when it is time to travel again.

The first visit was towards the end of one of the severest winters Swedes could remember. With deep snow and temperatures down to minus twenty, just keeping warm and moving around were major challenges. The countryside and the forests do look magical and otherworldly, especially on sunny, blue-sky days, of which there were a few. Sitting snugly at home in deep winter is a pleasure I'm very happy to enjoy for a week or two, but I do prefer the freedom of light clothing and bare feet and the absence of woollies for most of the time.

In the summer - when it was as warm as it had been when I left Thailand - we went sailing in Rafe's boat for four days and had some exciting times on the great Lake Mälaren with brisk winds and one incident of a drifting anchor. At the furthest point of the trip we docked at Mariefred - a lovely lakeside village - where we read, talked, wandered about and had quite splendid food.

We went to the birthday party of Sigrid Kahle, previous owner of the estate and noted Swedish lady of letters, in her flat in Uppsala, and met a number of her distinguished academic and literary friends. We had some writerly conversation about my work and the latest volume of her autobiography, though I am under no illusion that I am anywhere near her league of distinction.





**Fairytale castle:** Mariefred is an enchanting lakeside village with lovely old buildings and a selection of excellent shops and restaurants. We were even able to indulge our love of flea-markets in two or three absorbing emporia of seductive junk.



**First mate on watch:** Marie takes the helm on Arwen, on a brilliant day with good wind.



**Captain's snacks:** my role as cabin boy was to provide victuals for the Captain and First Mate, with occasional bouts of crewing on deck.



**Life at 45 degrees:** the bright sky belies the strength of the wind which had us often at this crazy angle as we tacked home. Mercifully, the Captain eventually took in the genoa, and the drama eased.

## Writing, lectures and teaching

The biggest project of the year was the second edition of my 2003 book, *Expecting the Worst*. This was commissioned by the Uppsala Monitoring Centre for its worldwide audience of pharmacovigilance and patient safety professionals. The book is a manual for crisis prevention and management in healthcare. The first edition, a very modest publication, went down very well, and this second edition was planned as an almost complete reworking of the original, with lots of new material and case studies. I worked closely with the designer and we've produced what I think is a handsome and impressive volume. We'll have to wait and see if the world agrees!

I was a keynote speaker at the Thai Food and Drug Administration's annual meeting in Bangkok. Feeling more stage nerves than I ever remember, I delivered the first five minutes in Thai to the audience of four hundred or so, and then got into my stride in English with Thai asides. It went down very well and they supplied me with a very high quality DVD of the whole performance.

I had two weeks of teaching pharmacy undergraduates at Rangsit University this year. The new session was with fifth years, concentrating on just how pharmacists can be most effective in their relationships with patients. For the first time, I used a lot of excellent videos from YouTube where there is rich and interesting material covering practically every topic in the world. I had taught the basic course with this group last year, so they knew me and my methods and I had to spend less time waking them up from their undergraduate passivity and torpor.

One outcome of the course was a landslide of a couple of hundred requests to become friends on Facebook. That is one aspect of social networking which I just haven't yet discovered how to manage: how can one possibly keep up?

**The new book:** including case studies from the most recent crises round the world (BP, the Vatican, Toyota and many more) this is a manual for preventing and managing crises in all aspects of medicine and healthcare, but its relevant to crises in every field of human activity.



**Bangkok assignment:** while Rafe and Marie were in Thailand they and I took part in some training for drug safety professionals. Here we are at the hotel with my good friend Dr Pravich, who was part of the team. Marie is holding 'An Idiot's Guide to Noodles'.



**Supporting undergraduate art:** I bought a couple of drawings from an exhibition of student work.



**Charming students:** here's a couple of shots of some of the Rangsit pharmacy students from this year's two week-long classes. They're just as delightful and amusing as they look.





**Big grins:** Phil and Miss Chome in the restaurant at her mountain guesthouse. This Lisu encounter was to have quite an impact on me for the next few months.

**Elephant Mountain:** if you had any doubts why it was thus named, here's the evidence, with Phil recording it on a lovely day.



**Natural creatures:** these boys are taking their midday break in the shade, from work in the coffee fields, cracking macadamia nuts, which grow all over the mountain, scattered among the coffee bushes. We stopped to ask them the way, and were struck how perfectly at home and attuned they seemed to be in this remote natural setting.



**Sun-dried:** we found our way to a coffee processing plant, where, amongst much else of interest, we saw the beans raked out in the sun to dry.

**Lakeland scenery:** this is a great reservoir on the southern side of the mountains. It was stunningly beautiful on the bright day Phil and I went. Just a few weeks later, when Tony and Maire and I went, the water level had dropped to almost nothing and the beauty was gone.

## Mountains, coffee and hill-tribe culture

**O**n my birthday in January, my old friend Phil Roddis from Sheffield, Mt Katai and I set off for Doi Chang (Elephant Mountain) and a day of - now familiar - off-roading in the mountains. It turned out to be one of those days of wonderful serendipitous encounters and memorable experiences which leave one wide-eyed with amazement. The pleasures were intensified by Phil's professional photographer's eye and the scenes and details we might otherwise have missed without his acute observation.

The main encounter of lasting significance was with Miss Chome, a highly-educated Lisu woman, whom we met in her shop when looking for supplies of local coffee. Lisu are an ethnic group with origins in southern China, who, about a century ago, started migrating into the mountains of Thailand (and much further afield too). Miss Chome has ambitions to start a Lisu coffee collective and to try and sustain and promote Lisu culture.

It all ended up, some time later, with my sponsoring a photographic record of the annual Lisu cultural festival

on Doi Chang, a studio-recording of Lisu music, and the design and production of CDs for both. There are plans for a Lisu cultural history, coffee marketing - and probably more if Miss Chome's fertile brain has its way.

We stopped and talked to lots of people we passed on the road and, as we left the mountains, were enchanted by the lovely lakeland scenery of a great reservoir. It was a splendid day!

Doi Chang was also the destination when Maire and Tony and, later, Roy came to visit.



**Water world:** another view of the charming scenery round the reservoir, with the little community of bamboo fisher huts at the waterside.





**Depleted ford:** this is me driving my undiminished Ford in the dry season through the much-diminished ford which is one of the gateways to Doi Chang and the mountains. This picture was taken by Tony Kennan who heroically waded across for the assignment.



Roy and Gumpone high above a misty landscape.



Roy and Gumpone as we drive up the track to Doi Chang in the hot season in May.



**Ethnic youngsters:** while many young people are moving away from the hills and their Lisu origins, at least there are some being brought up in the traditions.



**Lisu festival photographer:** Here, with Miss Chome, is Mr Neung, whom I commissioned to photograph the Lisu Cultural Festival on Doi Chang. He is also the talented designer of the Tropical Telegraph - and a good friend.



**Lisu Festival:** a glimpse of the colourful crowds gathered from all over the region earlier in the year.



**Lisu handicraft:** a wonderful example of Lisu fabric work, here for a small wallet or purse and the beautiful CDs and covers Mr Neung designed.



# This year's grouses

I've written about these before, but they bear repeating as the provocation is unending, and I can't believe I'm the only person constantly irritated.

The first is the dreadful verbal performance of TV presenters and reporters:

1. I don't want the news delivered as if it's some kind of party-piece for the hard of hearing and the mentally-challenged, nor do I want the facts glossed with preposterous personal comments. ('It must be really hard for those poor people')
2. I would like to hear one reporter a day start his or her piece without a preliminary, 'Well' and then deliver the information without ums and ers every five words.
3. I would be very grateful if news professionals would keep their hands still for the entire length of their appearance and not look as though they're trying to imitate wind-turbines or paddle-steamers.

The second is TV advertising. Now, I don't watch much TV beyond BBC, CNN and CSI, but I'm sick to death of the interruptions to service by endless, repetitive and mind-numbing adverts and trails for programmes and services. On some commercial channels, you now get adverts immediately after the opening titles, and before the closing credits, as well as every few minutes in the middle. The BBC runs basically the same stuff week after ghastly week, several times an hour. And if you watch two bulletins on the same day, you'll not only get the same bloody trails and adverts, but much of the same news and reports as well. I told the BBC about this, and all they said was that they were loved the world over and I was out of step. (Oh! And how do you feel about smug bank advertising in the wake of global meltdowns and all: Standard Chartered: 'Here for people. Here for the long term. Here for good.' 'Here for good'? Dear oh dear. It's nothing short of infuriating and insulting.)



# The complexity of Thailand

**E**ven after nearly twenty years of visiting Thailand and more than eight years living here, I remain impressed by the enigma of Thai people and their culture. There are some things I know about and understand; many things I know about and don't understand; and a whole universe which is mysterious.

The violent political disturbances earlier in the year, which rumble on with occasional frightening outbursts, belong to a long history of military coups, civil unrest and political instability in what is now a young, fragile democracy. Yet the violence and deep bitterness, expressed so flagrantly, seem so out of keeping with Buddhist virtues, and a historically largely peaceful nation and its unquestioning loyalty to the monarchy, especially to the current, now ailing King. There seems little hope that the deep social divide will heal soon, and it will be further inflamed if, as is likely, the exiled PM Thaksin continues to pull strings behind the scenes, even returns home if the political landscape changes.

The divides between rich and poor, between educated and barely-literate, remain huge, and, I think, lie at the heart of the conflict. Thaksin earned the gratitude and affection of the rural poor for his practical attention to their needs, not least in healthcare and the promotion of local skills and crafts. There is a belief that the metropolitan élite, currently the ruling party, don't care about the poor. The sadness is that the only popular

alternative is an allegedly corrupt, authoritarian, super-rich and largely discredited man of apparently overweening ambition.

## Personal needs and ethics

I've reflected on these issue before, but they remain major concerns in my life, as those I've tried to help continue to exert pressure for more and more support. There are several young Thais, some with families, whom I've helped in the past and who, from time to time, turn up with apparently irresistible financial needs - a child is taken into hospital for an operation, a parent dies, a landlord demands a deposit prior to occupation, and so on. How does one refuse? How can one stem the apparently unending needs of the poor for one's cash? There are some who are feckless and need a kick up the arse to take some responsibility for their lives; but there are others whose lives seem to be a series of accidents and disasters who are, in most respects, without resources and quite helpless.

I no longer lend money to anyone, having discovered beyond doubt that Thais have no sense of obligation to their creditors, whether Thai or foreign. I have Thai friends who are owed hundreds of thousands of baht by other Thai people, just as I am owed similar sums by a bunch of irresponsible, deceitful people who exploited my goodwill in the past. It's all very disappointing and does tarnish one's joy at being in so lovely a place.

## [Life in Young Ui Koggalae]

**N**ow fourteen, and quite demanding of food, attention and computer time, Ui is generally moderate in his requirements, and will, on occasion, refuse to buy new clothes or food or equipment which he regards as unreasonably expensive. He shows no more concern for tomorrow than he ever did, and I fear for his future, but have largely given up being the anxious uncle harassing him about grades and careers and all that. He's an affectionate boy of goodwill, amenable to benign control, and really that's pretty good, especially if he can maintain such qualities in the face of adult life in a few years. But I do worry about what he will do with his life.

His treats this year have been a new bicycle, a new mobile phone, and (I blush to confess) a new computer: those seem to be the basic needs of a teenager, and I think he knows he's lucky to have them. The problem, of course, is getting him away from the computer and on to his bicycle, but we do have a fairly strict schedule of respite and exercise which he largely (and uncomplainingly) adheres to (I should adopt a similar kind of balanced schedule myself).



**Stolen nestlings:** the bulbul babies which Ui and his friends reared from the wild. The gape of their hungry mouths is astonishing.



**House bird:** after a couple of months the bulbul was flying about the house and sitting on our shoulders, and starting to sing beautifully.



**Games companion:** the bird would sit quietly near Ui while he went online for games and chat.



**Happy boy scout:** Ui with the bulbul in its cage at my house in town. There was a tragic outcome to this happy relationship: we left the cage inadequately protected one night, and a predator (possibly a cat or even a small bird of prey) upset the cage and left nothing but a few feathers and a pool of blood. We both shed some tears.





**Spring clean:** as well as a general spiritual and psychological cleansing after the end of the court case, I set about organising my study: new, rational office storage furniture, removal of all piles of papers and boxes from the floor and, on one memorable day, reducing the emails in my inbox to single figures.



**New Year visitor:** a rare sighting of my dear friend Mr Bui at home in Chiang Rai. Now he's working in the south, he's rarely seen here in the north.



**Smart garden:** at his new home in Nonthaburi, Mr Bui has made an elegant little garden.

**Verdant garden:** my neighbours think I am mad having such a riot of plants and trees in my small town garden, but I continue to resist all attempts to make me follow the Thai habit of slaughtering every tree in sight.



# Home life

**Lazy dinner:** a couple of times a month we order delicious home-delivery pizza. Few things (except peanut butter on bread, which Ui calls 'heaven's food') give him more pleasure.



**Y**ou may wonder what an elderly expat does with his time in a quiet village in the tropics. It's all quite low-key, with little extravagance or drama. I get up when I wake up, usually at about nine o'clock, brew local coffee and work at my computer for a few hours. Then I have toast and bitter orange marmalade, maybe watching BBC World news; go shopping, collect my mail from the post office, visit the farm or go swimming at the local resort hotel. I may read a book, do some more work, have a snooze in the afternoon, go into town for supper by myself or with Ui, watch a film or read a book again. Some days friends will visit and we drink coffee and chat.

There are occasional expeditions: to garden centres to browse and buy trees; to the market at the border town of Mae Sai; to a local art gallery for new exhibitions; rare evening concerts by the Chiang Rai Youth Orchestra; out into the hills to temples or forest parks. Then there are the bigger trips when friends come from abroad to visit - all the pleasures of long-tail boats on the river, elephant camps, the Golden Triangle, drives into the mountains, the Queen Mother's gardens at Doi Tung. A few times a year I spend a few days in Bangkok (often en route abroad or back home) where I meet Pravich and we eat great dinners, go to films, concerts and clubs and talk endlessly.

Twice a week I go for my two hour Thai language tuition; several times a week to the farm to read or do my Thai homework, inspect the land and discuss progress with the manager and workers. Sometimes it all seems very ordinary and uneventful; at others, I am astonished and exuberant that I am here and busy and at how beautiful it all is.

I have two problems: one is an uncomfortable addiction to email and my computer, which I regard as a weakness (comparable to Ui's addiction to computer games); the second is a degree of demoralisation when I don't have any major projects in hand. This is relatively rare, but when there are no commanding external demands I have a tendency to slump and feel sorry for myself. I don't, like my brother and Rafe and many of my friends, have absorbing pastimes (painting, gardening, mechanics) into which I can sink myself and forget the passage of time. Only writing does that for me and when there isn't any to be done, I'm at a bit of a loss. I wish it wasn't so, but it is. (I do read two or three books a week.)

I have some kind, loyal and trustworthy Thai friends, and we have shared some good and some very good times together. They have also provided me with invaluable support at difficult times, especially when the problems involved discussion and negotiation with Thai people who spoke no English. I speak little but Thai from day to day, but I can't really cope with complex conversations yet, though the entire affairs of the farm are managed in Thai. I do miss long and intense conversations with my native English-speaking friends.

Free time is much enriched by the arrival of visitors. In the early part of the year Rafe and Marie, Tony and Maire, Steve and Sue, Phil, Jacob from Sweden and Joseba from Spain all spent time here, and, with Roy I went to Koh Samui where we had a lovely, relaxing beach holiday in the scorching heat. I hope more friends will call in on their travels, knowing that Thailand in general is as safe as other destinations in the world and at least as beautiful.





**Xmas beaches:** a trip to Phi Phi Islands took in Maya Beach, this utterly spectacular tropical spot. This trip was with Jacob, lover of Thailand and my friend from Sweden.



**Lunch stop:** another magical spot on the Andaman Islands.



**Super standards:** my Xmas guesthouse in Phuket last year welcomed its guests with these extravagant decorations. It was one of those rare places which really did look after us as if we were family.



**Boxing Day remembrance:** huge numbers of people turned up for tsunami memorial activities on Patong beach including children digging words into the sand and lining their messages of love and sadness with candles. Here I am at twilight, just before the speeches and the concert started.



**Dodgy Jeep:** Pravich and I decided to hire this rattling old vehicle for a day's driving round Phuket, not least to visit my one rai of land which is still unsold.



**Elegant teak:** these ocean-going long-tail boats are a treat to ride in (much longer and heavier than the ones on the river at home). They take to swells and rough seas like corks bobbing on the water and can make good speed too.



Jacob was one of the visitors again this year, and here he is with my artistic friends Khun Paradorn and Nong Pantukit in the Chiang Rai Night Bazaar. Behind them is one of Khun Paradorn's huge and gorgeous flower paintings, one of which is now hanging in Marie's private office in Uppsala.



**Relaxing at the farm:** Tony and Maire take it easy at Ban Rai Arun.



**Busman at the bus station:** after their holiday in Chiang Rai Tony and Maire wait for the Chiang Mai bus with Ui.



**New student:** never missing an opportunity, Miss Chome had me teaching English to her nephew, Mr Jo, when he was on holiday from college. Here he is at Ban Rai Arun



**Old acquaintance:** last Xmas in Phuket Somchai unexpectedly tapped me on the shoulder, eleven or twelve years since we last met. I later met him and his son, Ton, in Bangkok. I had first known Ton when he was a baby, on the several visits I made to Somchai's home in deep rural Chaiyaphum. Though I'd given up his father as a bad job, I decided I would help the youngster continue his education for a while - at least as long as he genuinely takes advantage of the opportunity.



**Spanish connection:** I met Joseba in the berry fields of Blairgowrie more than forty years ago. I had some extravagant holidays with him in the Basque city of Vitoria and, while we have kept in touch, we have not met since the 1970s.



**Song Kran:** throwing water or being in it or near it is the obsession of all Thais at the great New Year waterfestival in April. Here Gumpone (right) my ex-monk friend, and Mr Att and his family eat on the bank of the Gok River, with hundreds of others.



Mr Att and son Nong Gitaa at the swimming pool and a view of the flower festival.







**Devastation on Doi Chang:** this photo represents for me much of the tragedy of modern Thailand and the rest of the world: a previously richly forested range of mountains utterly wasted, with not a tree remaining. You can see the water erosion channels in the bare earth. To make things worse, all over the province and the country, people are burning stubble and brush, polluting the atmosphere for weeks on end in the early months of every year - that's not mist hiding the mountains, but filthy, irritant smoke.

## Where are we all going?

**I**t's been a rich, interesting and, in many ways, successful year for me, but, in the midst of it all, I have often paused to reflect on the dreadful state of the world and the fearful prospects for the human race.

Wherever I have been - in the big cities (Bangkok, London, Accra, Abu Dhabi), or the quieter rural places (Northamptonshire, Utmyrby, Chiang Rai itself) - I have been struck by the stark contrast between the self-absorbed and confident daily activities and projects of everyone (including me, what with my concern with fonts and fullstops), and the perilous state of the world at large, with its uncertain future in terms of economic stability, food production, environmental pollution, extinction of species, climate change, international hostilities and war itself. How can we all just go about our mundane business, reproduce, plan, consume - as if all were well and we were not at the very edge of catastrophe? It's crossed my mind that those protesting on the streets about raising of the pension age might be better employing their energy drawing attention to the fact that a generation in the not too distant future may not survive to any pension age at all, or middle-age or even majority age, if there's anyone left on the planet.

Following the failure of the Copenhagen climate talks, and with little hope of progress in Mexico in December, George Monbiot (that visionary journalist) recently wrote in *the Guardian*: 'There is not a single effective instrument for containing man-made global warming anywhere on earth.' Greed in all its forms rules: spectacularly excessive fishing quotas; stunningly exploitative banking practices and disgusting bonuses; tyrannical shareholder demands for short-term dividends at any cost to longer term sustainability;

corporate disdain for the environment and the lives of the poor; the growth of fatal religious fanaticism; corruption and deceit; political obsession with anything but the big tough issues of keeping the planet and its people safe; and, if anything suggested fiddling while the world burns, nothing characterises it more than the plague of contemptuous TV programmes which ridicule human misfortune and failure and distract us from all that matters in social relations - compassion, respect, humility, affection. And this listing, of course, is not the half of it.

The other startling contrast with all this dark matter, is the continuing brilliance of human beings - in science and medicine; in practical, humane projects all over the globe; in art and literature; in product innovation; in the ability, if only it were harnessed and funded, to find solutions to so many of the apparently overwhelming problems. But governments don't care, the wisdom of philosophers and Nobel laureates is ignored, industry and the banks have other self-interested priorities, and the rest of us are more or less helpless to influence anything on the big scale.

These are not very festive reflections, but they account for a significant part of my current view of life, and may explain the fact that, this year, I have experienced wilder fluctuations in my energy and morale than I've found entirely comfortable. I continue to enjoy much of my life, but with the eerie sense that it's conducted in parallel with another world which is utterly unaffected by anything I, or my dedicated friends and colleagues, achieve or hope to create, a world which is heedlessly racing towards a terrible transformation which will engulf us all. Is this gloom the effect of my old age? No, I don't think it's just that.



**Village life:** a band of men fishing together on a tributary of the River Gok, a few kilometres from Chiang Rai town



Chiang Rai's annual flower festival is always a treat and the tulips are a happy sight.



# Coda



### Snapshots of Ghana

Here are welcoming drummers from the National Dance Company, including my friend Alphonse, third from the left; Marie, a new friend Raymond and me at the Gala Dinner (Marie had had her hair braided for the occasion); Rafe on the Dodi Princess on the Volta Lake above Akosombo dam; a group of children welcoming us to Dodi Island and hoping for tips; and two members of a group of Chinese young men who adopted me on the boat after they begged fags from me.



### Oxbridge

For the first time, I went to the Thai Oxbridge Annual Dinner in Bangkok, on my way back home from Ghana. There were about 135 Oxbridge graduates and 70 or so guests. It was a delightful evening in Bangkok's premier hotel (The Oriental) and I was lucky enough to sit at a table of lively and interesting people of five nationalities.

As I write this in the middle of October, I'm preparing to go to Ghana next week for a couple of weeks for two big meetings and some lecturing and teaching. In December, I'll be off to Abu Dhabi for a few days to discuss possible funding for a huge patient communications project which may get started next year. Then, almost immediately, it's off to the UK for Christmas and New Year, when I shall spend time with the family, and also hope to see friends on home territory.

I have started another book, this time in the field of popular philosophy, but it remains to be seen if I have the willpower to complete it and, more to the point, endure the endless, depressing trial of trying to find a publisher. That process itself knocks more authors' ambitions on the head than anything else, I should think. I must get prepared and organised.

## Greetings and good wishes!

I hope all is well with you and your loved ones and that you'll have a good time over the holiday season. For once, I may be enjoying turkey and Xmas pud in England and I hope you will have plenty of good victuals and good cheer too. Do come and visit, share the beauties of the farm with me, and enjoy this lovely part of Thailand.

สวัสดีครับ!

Sawasdee khrap!

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