

# THE TROPICAL TELEGRAPH

Christmas 2014, No. 13

## Another year in the life of an old expat



Bruce Hugman

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- Works at **Freelance**, Uppsala and wherever they'll have him
- Studied **University of Oxford**
- Lives in **Chiang Rai, Thailand** and **Oxford, UK**



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Bruce Hugman Yesterday at 2.45 PM





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## This year's irresistible stories and lively commentary



## Seasonal greetings to friends and family everywhere!

**T**his annual effusion comes with the hope that 2014 has been a positive and happy year and that 2015 will bring many more pleasures for you. No year is without its problems or sadness or loss and you'll find acknowledgement of that inevitability in these, otherwise, rather exuberant pages. I shall skip my customary rant about the iniquities and absurdities of the contemporary world and keep to both the highs and lows at a personal level.

2014 was a year of extensive travels and meetings with family and friends, as well as including some very long and intense periods of writing at my desk. It came to a slightly frantic climax with visits to six countries in the last four months which, not yet concluded at the time of drafting the text for this

edition, fills me with both excitement and some apprehension.

Among many wonderful events, settling into my new home in Oxford for six weeks stands out as the most exhilarating - and the most profound for the future course of my life. But you will see from these pages that there are other trips and experiences competing for the top spot!

Whatever you may be doing at the end of the year, or wherever you may be, I hope you will have good times!

Once again, my thanks to my old friend Mr Neung of Chiang Mai, whose design talent has served the Tropical Telegraph generously for over a decade.



**Firm friends:** Nana Yaw and I get on famously, in spite of the nearly fifty years between our ages



Peaceful mornnig by the Akosombo River

## Travels in Ghana

**W**ork and holiday in Ghana at the end of last year provided some wonderful times, especially in the company of Nana Yaw whose vacation allowed him to spend the whole fortnight with me.

It was the first time I had travelled far beyond Accra and it was a revelation to be out and about in the northern bush.

The full story and many more photos - of this tale and everything in these pages - appear in the monthly diary on my website in Notes and Jottings and in the picture galleries at: [www.brucehugman.net](http://www.brucehugman.net)



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*Day out:* Nana Yaw, Rafe and I had an expedition to the far west of Ghana. Here, Rafe, looking elegantly professorial, is on the banks of the Akosombo river



*Cheerful young staff at the excellent African Dream Hotel in the far north*



*Rare and splendid tree at the Wli Agumatsa wildlife sanctuary*



*Tragic reminder: on the edge of a charcoal burning plot, the remains of a once noble tree*



*Holy bus: Rafe and I were in Accra for a WHO meeting and were entertained by the sacred credentials of our transport.*



*My absolutely favourite roadside sign on a street in Tamale.*



*One among many amusing (and often didactic) brand names found all over Ghana*

*More entertaining branding*



*Small business: in the cabin on the top floor of this bar, Nana Yaw used to run a small TV arena, where people paid to watch live football matches. That's his marketing blackboard next to him.*



*Banku and tilapia*



*Atlantic rollers and steps down to a great bar on the outskirts of Accra.*



*Wildlife in Mole National Park: a tough four-hour drive from our hotel in Tamale, we had a great time with our armed guide. We didn't see much large game, but lots of kobs like this (male, I think).*



*On the way to Atimpoku: great selection of African mangoes, quite different from those we have in Thailand*



*Crumbling roadside and local enterprise in Atimpoku*



*Explorer: typical bush in the Mole National Park*



*On the long, difficult journey to the National Park, we passed lots of villages like this. No evidence I could see of the electricity cables being connected to the huts.*



*A very common sight, but always enthralling*



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# At home in Thailand

I've been away from home much more than usual this year, more than six months, on and off, out of the country. The major impact of this has been on Ui, who's had a difficult year and clearly misses having me around, especially for long periods. His mother's unpredictable and irascible and upsets him dreadfully from time to time. He calls me quite often when I'm abroad (that is to say he calls my number and hangs up after one ring) just to chat or to sound off about some recent outrage. He's doing OK, welcomes me home with real feeling, but I am anxious about his future and am relatively helpless, I think, to influence him at any serious level.

## Rural matters

The farm's been in great shape this year mainly because I have two such capable and trustworthy workers living there and taking care of it. We took our first two crops of rubber, weighing in about 400kgs of latex in all. It's not a serious commercial enterprise, but our equal sharing of the income helps the workers out. There have been lots of coconuts and bananas, some enormous jackfruit as well as a good crop of rambutan. It's a beautiful place, now with some pretty large twelve year-old trees.



Misty view from high on the farm (where there were no trees twelve years ago).



Mr Chai checks the first rubber crop on the farm



Old Swedish friend, Jacob, with his Thai wife Naam at the farm



A coy Miss Naam with frangipani among the trees



Ditching the boat became something of a hilarious obsession during the visit to the farm

They did spend some time in the boat, paddling about quite normally.



Young Thais simply love to play in water



One of the boys from the village comes to my garden to pick mangoes



Excess bananas from the farm: two of the boys from the children's home unload a bunch or two for everyone to share



Nowhere happier than up a tree at the farm, it seems



Less interested in boating, these boys have other serious matters in hand



One of the boys struggles with an enormous jackfruit

## Children at Baan Rai Arun

Boys and girls from the children's home in my village have been to the farm several times. Twice, I took a group of about a dozen of them and some members of staff. They had the most wonderful time and I was profoundly happy to see kids enjoying themselves so much - especially exuberantly climbing trees and mucking about in the boat on the pool. They've also been out picking rambutan while I've been away and it's great to know the crop is not being wasted.

Discussions about the possibility of their charity taking over the farm continue, though there was also an introduction for me to the very outer perimeters of Royal circles that I hoped might lead to transfer of the land to a Royal project. After a promising start, that's gone quiet, which I am assuming is the Thai way of indicating that the idea's not going anywhere. Still, these things take time, so maybe there's hope yet. I want to be sure the land is safe and protected long into the future.



Made from New Zealand pine, this is the enormous bookcase Khun Paradorrn built for my Thai library

## Reorganisation



Celebration bookcase party: while the adults took rather more serious refreshment inside, the youngsters stuffed themselves in the garden



My artist friend, Khun Paradorrn, on the very spot at Chiwit Tamma Da he painted the portrait that he gave me for my birthday

**M**y artist friend, Khun Paradorrn, built me the most enormous **bookcase\*** out of New Zealand pine. It allowed me to sort out the piles of books lying about all over the house and reorganize the entire library. It also prompted a fairly radical spring-clean of all kinds of old rubbish and disorder (including the discovery of an entire ant colony in the bottom of a wardrobe). We had a small party to celebrate the arrival of so magnificent a piece of furniture. (He gave me a portrait of myself for my birthday, the first ever painting that's featured me, I think. I'm standing in the garden of Chiwit Tamma Da, my favourite coffee house in Chiang Rai.)

\*This has been the year of enormous bookcases: I commissioned another for the house in Oxford (see pp 8-9)



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We had some wonderful food and wine in the excellent hotel restaurant. We were impressed with the napkin-folding.



Equestrian interlude



## Phuket

Bui in the warm waters of the hotel pool



Always on the lookout for good coffee, here I am in Phuket at a branch of our famous northern brand, Doi Chang.



Bui at the Kamala tsunami memorial

**F**ive, simply lovely days in Phuket in a fine hotel on Kamala Bay, with my dear old Thai friend Bui. One day, we met up with my lawyer and went to the Land Office where ownership of my plot of land in the north of the island was transferred to Bui. Our hope is that the simpler processes of sale and purchase between Thais will make the proposition more attractive and encourage a potential purchaser to take the plunge.

Other than that, we had a great time in our modestly luxurious hotel room with its double jacuzzi and in the excellent restaurant. We had a hired car, so went out on trips, including the tsunami memorial in Kamala and Patong Beach (where I was when the tsunami struck). It was a time of great harmony and peace - and too short by far!



Kamala Bay from our hotel balcony



A remarkable piece of equipment, expertly handled. When flying it, Bui can see what the camera sees on his smart phone.



Aerial view of our Phuket land from Bui's quadcopter. You can just see us both on the road below.



New owner: Bui with the title deeds to the Phuket plot and the sign we hope will encourage someone to buy it.



Helicopter fan: Bui flew his quadcopter in Phuket, but, sadly, this piece of serious machinery was not available for hire on the day we visited.



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## Reflections on 2014

*A year of serious writing*

### Medicines for Women

**T**he year began with the seemingly gargantuan task of composing a chapter for a new book, to be published in New Zealand, solely concerned with medicines for women - for me, a new field. I was to tackle the complex and important subject of risk communication for women in healthcare. It embraces topics like the risks and benefits of oral contraception, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), medication for epilepsy in pregnancy and vaccination against the human papillomavirus (HPV), as well as the broader issues of what risk is, how it can be communicated intelligibly, and what exactly doctors might say to their patients. Just preparing myself for the task, by reading about the situation of women in society and healthcare in as many parts of the world as I could, was pretty

demanding, though utterly fascinating and, in some measure, very depressing: women get a rough deal everywhere in so many obvious and hidden ways, not least in healthcare.

The research and writing took hundreds of hours and resulted in a text far longer than commissioned. The editor of the book, however, impressed with my content, decided to make it into two chapters. Eventually, after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, the text was accepted, and it's now in the long production process. Completing the job felt like a liberation from imprisonment, though there had been many exuberantly productive days along the way.

### Out of Bounds

**T**his was also the year that saw the near-completion of another major semi-literary project: the story of the first thirty years of my life, called *Out of Bounds*. On the stocks since 2012, the 300 pages are now in their final stages - being designed and typeset, photographs being placed, negotiations with printers in hand. My hope was to have copies available for my 70th birthday in January, but that's looking unlikely now. It's been an amazing journey, both psychologically and creatively, and I've been lucky enough to have immense, effective support from my two-person editorial team, Phil and Caroline. I've no idea if it will have any kind of public appeal, but that's not really the point. The point is to do it: something I've thought about for nearly four decades since I wrote the first draft in 1975. We'll be doing print on demand (POD) and e-book versions, but what I dream of is holding in my hand an elegant hardback edition; and that's what there will be!

### Teaching

**I**n March I took my usual week-long class of two hundred undergraduate pharmacy students in Pathum Thani. It was as exhausting and exhilarating as ever, though I do wonder how much they'll remember (or care to remember) once they get into tough old world of professional pharmacy practice in two years' time when they graduate. As usual, I received about two hundred Facebook friend requests after the classes and am now bombarded with gossipy nonsense in Thai that I can hardly understand. But it's nice to be taken seriously!



*A group of student pharmacists at Rangsit University take a break during my annual week's teaching*

UMC in Sweden has provided a range of teaching activities, not least helping those who will deliver my kind of materials when I am no longer compos mentis (signs are: not yet). We've had some excellent sessions on communications theory and practice and on cross-cultural communications. This year, much of the work has been done in collaboration with my new boss, Paula, who has taken up the new post of Head of Communications. A communications professional, Peruvian by birth, she has worked all over the world in some very trying situations and is full of wisdom, interesting experiences and lots of good, straight sense. We get on very well and it has been a delight to see communications taking a central role in the organisation's thinking and planning under her determined leadership.



*Earthquake in Chiang Rai. Early in the year a lot of damage was caused in the Province. Wat Rhong Khun suffered badly and you can see the broken top-knot on the viharn. I was abroad at the time; apart from a few skew-whiff pictures and some tumbled food tins, there was no effect at home.*



# Memento mori Thai politics



*Eric Sainsbury died this year. A life well lived*

Two special losses this year. The first, Eric Sainsbury, my friend and ally over the years since the beginning of the detached probation project in Sheffield in the early 1970s. His long, wise, ironic, handwritten letters have been an uplifting feature of my postbox for many years. He was one of the kindest, most attentive men ever born, a characterisation that generations of his students would instantly assent to, and his many friends would confirm. He touched the lives of thousands and brought humanity and wisdom to university teaching, the magistracy and everything he did.



*Passing of a great character and talented writer - Sigrid Kahle's coffin in Uppsala*

*Sigrid at the door of her 'Writing House' before she sold the estate and I moved in*

The second is Sigrid Kahle, not an intimate friend, but a benign and influential presence in my recent life: she was the owner of the little estate that Ralph and Marie bought in deep rural Sweden, about six years ago, where I have my little wooden cottage. It was her 'writing house' in which, when she was not traveling with her Ambassador husband, she researched and wrote for half her lifetime, achieving a considerable reputation as an expert in Islamic and Far Eastern affairs. I am writing this at the enormous partners' desk she left in the cottage, at which she worked for so many decades, and I think of her often. We met occasionally, and she was benign and wise and impressive. A fine model, at whose desk I hope to continue to find inspiration.

Just a short excursion into these troubled waters. Prior to the military coup in May, the country (principally Bangkok) was in a state of alarming civil unrest, though daily life for most of us was not really affected at all. The military leadership has restored order and has been working with vision and efficiency to tackle the sources of the political conflict. It has also addressed a whole range of major social and economic problems, including corruption in many sectors, that had been largely neglected by previous democratic governments. While there have been some concerns about human rights and freedom of speech, their energy and efficiency have been impressive and they have high approval ratings. Plans are to return to democratic elections in 2015, but one does wonder if Thai politicians will ever be able to match the junta's record of positive achievements.

## Old age

Arriving at seventy (in January) inevitably prompts thoughts about the past and the future: have I made good use of seven decades? What time might be left and what should I do with it? The answer to the first is a positive, if qualified, yes. I've always tried to make the best decision at the time, to follow my instincts and seize opportunities; to act in ways that were least likely to store up regret for the future. By and large, I have been true to those principles and have no regrets at all about the major decisions. The qualification relates only to the fact that I never focused on developing a career as a writer, not necessarily as an alternative to everything else, but alongside. I've written a great deal, including a good number of books, but none of it makes a coherent, memorable corpus. Maybe I should be happy that I've made a small mark in several fields rather than limiting myself to just one. I'd like to have written a best-seller. Perhaps that's the target for the next decade!

I still feel that I have so much to learn in all my areas of interest, but I have come to the pleasing conclusion that, in a number of ways, I have reached a position of competence and maturity and that I can hold my head up amongst my peers. I am not a thinker or researcher of the first rank, but I am an excellent teacher, a genuine expert in communications, a competent writer - and an enthusiast for living. I have had immense good fortune; rich and memorable relationships; the most wonderful friends round the world. There's more to come (how much we can never know), but what I have is enough, and I am satisfied. I can, I think, say goodbye comfortably, when the time comes.

## Chinese translation



My book on crisis management in healthcare, *Expecting the Worst*, has just been translated into Chinese and is about to be published. Last year it was published in Japanese.

## Medical news

My rheumatic disease (polymyalgia rheumatica) continues to be well managed with a slowly reducing daily dose of steroids. I had a highly successful operation in Bangkok for varicose veins in my right leg. Both my eyes have now succumbed to PVD (posterior vitreous detachment), a non-serious affair, common amongst the elderly. On the whole, I'm in pretty good shape.

My one disappointment, after ten years of part-time foster-parenting, is how little influence I seem to have had on the character and behavior of young Ui. He's not a bad boy, but he's wasted the unique opportunities he's had being close to me (speaking English, for example, or learning about the wider world). He's scatty and disorganised. He does not try to help or please me beyond the minimum, and then it's often more a question of good intentions than action. I've provided him with a more or less daily anchor (and snacks and TV) in his insecure existence, but he has not flourished as I had hoped. He makes his own choices, such as they are, and I have to live with them. I do realise that things could have been a lot worse.

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# A piece of heaven

**R**iver House, my new home on the bank of the Thames in the middle of Oxford, is an extraordinary and wonderful place. It is so much the place I dreamed of that, when I was there in the summer, I kept expecting it to evaporate when I woke up. It combines all the elements I could have wished for as a generous and fulfilling home for now and for *old* old age.

It's on the towpath on the south bank of the Thames, opposite Friars' Wharf; five minutes on foot from Folly Bridge and ten from Christ Church; over the nearby footbridge, ten minutes to the city shops, fifteen to Gloucester Green and Worcester College. It has a lovely little garden; a garage and (amazing for Oxford) parking space for two cars within the property. There are three bedrooms, a study and living room; large kitchen and bathroom, all with views over the river. The kitchen and living room have French doors onto the garden. There's a first-floor balcony overlooking the river. Built in 1914, it has high ceilings, picture rails and some plaster mouldings. It was entirely redecorated, inside and out, and recarpeted before I moved in.

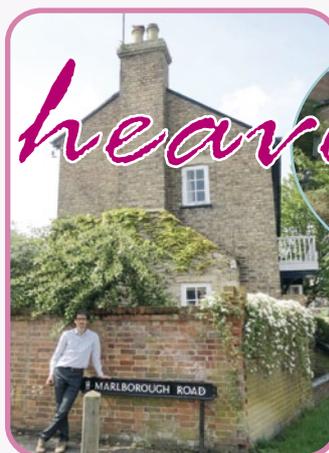
My stored furniture and possessions have fitted in more or less perfectly, though there is still a slight shortfall in bookshelves. My time in the summer was characterized by exuberant shopping, online and on foot, for beds, garden furniture, wardrobes, kitchen equipment, and a hundred other things. A wonderful local carpenter put up shelves and assembled flat-pack items; a lovely local secondhand furniture shop provided a dining table, a mirror, a lamp and a bookcase; I've found an enthusiastic gardener to remedy the years of neglect and to plan new planting (she also volunteered to clean and take care of the house). It was utterly exhilarating!

My sister-in-law sent me a suite of Edwardian furniture, superfluous to her needs, that had been in the family for maybe a century. Nephew Andrew drove it up from Pembrokeshire and it's a treat in its contemporaneous new home. Jenny also sent some hats and coats of my brother's which I have been using with great pleasure. (It's been a year of hats as you'll see from some of the photos.)

The whole experience was rich and rewarding, not least because of the generous support of my old friend Mark and his partner, Rose. They have welcomed me to the City with exceptional warmth and kindness. Introduction to their network of interesting and capable people has led to all kinds of opportunities - including a graphic designer who's taken on the design and typesetting for *Out of Bounds*. We've been to films and on country walks, had cocktails and dinners - giving me a remarkable and rapid sense of belonging and being at home.

Riverside life is endlessly entertaining: on the water, all types of craft, from narrow-boats to canoes; on the towpath, lots of cyclists, joggers, families with babies in strollers, fishermen - everyone going about their business quietly and purposefully. When my editorial team was visiting for a working session on the book, I hired a small launch for an afternoon trip; the skipper brought it right in front of the house for us to board; I was as thrilled as a child.

There was a generous crop of pears on a tree in the garden, so I managed to bottle a few pounds in syrup and ginger. I didn't get round to making bread on this occasion, but that's another of the foundation activities for a new home; next time! (I filled the fridge and the cupboards through the magical services of Waitrose online home-delivery: my oh my, what fun!)

**River House - Mark on site with me after the deal was signed****River House: a pretty place, embraced by greenery****The balcony is a great place to watch the world go by****Proud resident: at risk of suffering an excess of joy in his new home****Just minutes from my house: Folly Bridge at sunset****Just a few hundred yards along the towpath from my new home.**

Everyone asks about the risk of flooding, but it seems that the very end of Marlborough Road, where my place is, has not been inundated in living memory, though properties further down the street, built on lower ground, have had considerable problems over the years. So that's alright!

The last piece of good fortune in this story of so many good things, was the serendipitous discovery that an American contemporary of mine from undergraduate years, with whom I'd had no contact for half a century, was looking for a place to stay for his term as a visiting scholar in the English Department. So, as I left after my six weeks of settling in, Steven arrived for three months. He's a man of considerable reputation and distinction in a number of fields, with an enormous, worldwide network of influential contacts. I shall see him again when I return in December for the Christmas season I have decided I shall spend in my own English home.

**Note on elderly finances:** I am renting River House and intend to do so for the rest of my life, if all goes well. When I sold the house in Balham, I made a good deal of money with which I could have bought River House or its equivalent outright, but leaving little or no spare cash. However, I have decided I'd rather have lots of dosh in the bank (and invested) and spend to my heart's content. There's a reasonable hope that investment income will cover the rent. As River House is the perfect place for me, and it wasn't for sale anyway, it's the ideal solution all round.



**Editorial team:** Phil and Caroline came for a couple of days to work on *Out of Bounds*. Here, we're looking through dozens of family albums and assorted photos from a century of collections. [Pic Phil]

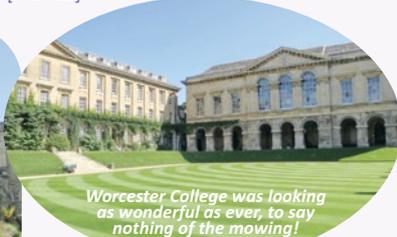
**Thrilling pickup:** our launch arrives at the house for an afternoon's working cruise (that's the edge of my property in the background on the right). [Pic: Phil]



**Work on board:** Caroline and I worked hard on the text of the book before we broke open the wine for the last half hour.



**First visitors:** on the way south-west, Rafe and Marie arrived after I'd been in the house for three days. Here, in Worcester gardens.



Worcester College is looking as wonderful as ever, to say nothing of the mowing!



**Osney Lock:** Dear old friend and colleague David Pickup called in with partner Vanessa on their way from Kent to somewhere else.



**Day trip to Bath:** with Mark and Rose outside the impressive building where daughter Alice has her apartment.



The very seat on which I sat and read English literature, fifty years ago.



Invaluable assistance with self-assembly garden furniture.



Mark and Rose (with Jumble) in the gardens of Dorchester Abbey during a sunny Sunday walk in the countryside.



The top of the great glass-fronted bookcase arrives from storage. The house has this very private garden with a garage and parking spaces.



The great family bookcase, perfectly at home in the living room.



Before: the study while waiting for the commissioned bookcase...and after



I spent Christmas 2013 with the family in Pembrokeshire, where great-niece Chloe was a new arrival. In the summer we had a happy day on a lovely, sunny beach, building sandcastles. They are well settled in their remote corner of Wales and have made enormous improvements to the little estate.



Chloe Hugman my great-niece, born October 2013



Nephew Andrew and sister-in-law Jenny prepare the turkey for Christmas 2013 in Wales



## Family visits

**Weekend with the family:** I travelled to Pembrokeshire to see my sister-in-law, nephew and great nephew and niece. We went to this lovely Pembrokeshire beach.



Family with sandcastle



Nephew Andrew and great-nephew George in the sunshine



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*Old lumber: with visiting German friend Dr Ulrich near our home*



*Spring came with a rush to our little estate*



*Shopping for spring flowers.*



*Viking style dinner: for the training course dinner, we were kitted out with vaguely Viking gear and ate good food with our fingers. Here we take a smokers' break (Marie has given up for good).*



*Outside the ancient village shop in the open-air ethnographic museum in Västerås, there was a bench where the old men used to sit and gossip. It was known as the 'liars' bench.' Here we go...*



*Day out at the magnificent Skokloster castle*



*A splendid 'loppis' (flea-market) in an old windmill near our home. Irresistible junk...*



*Dinner in the big house: Marie with daughter, Anna.*



*Cinderella, our enormous home for twenty-four hours*



*Sunshine all the way through the Stockholm skerries*



*Lovely loppis find. I now have three chiming clocks, two in perfect working order.*

*Fellow Russian smoker and all-round good chap and UMC colleague at the annual training course in Uppsala. (When I mentioned to my lovely Oxford gardener that I was gay, she said she knew as she had seen my lilac trousers on my website...)*



*Sunset over Stockholm as we leave in our cruise*



*Cosy winter cottage - though it can be a bit nippy at floor level*



*Happy resident. 'Duck or grouse' as they observe wittily in old pubs.*



*Forest walk near our home with Rafe and Marie*

**I**t won't have slipped your attention that I now have three homes. As the years pass, I expect I shall gravitate more and more to Oxford, but English winter even in Oxford still looks much less appealing than the same months in Thailand, to say nothing of the other all year-round pleasures of south-east Asia. My cottage in Sweden would never be a place of permanent residence; there's no running water or bathroom, but, more to the point, the long-term future of Rafe and Marie's plans and the estate are uncertain. It remains another place of dream-like qualities and my times there are hugely satisfying, especially in our communal life, but also when I am alone. As long as I am travelling and working in Uppsala it will be a place I love to be.

Trips to Sweden this year have been busy and productive, both at UMC and at home at my enormous desk. The three of us have had lots of interesting expeditions to castles and flea-markets and, in September, took a 24-hour cruise on a huge Viking Line ship from Stockholm to the Finnish island of Åland. With a capacity of 2,500 passengers and only 1,000

on board, the whole experience was very relaxed and agreeable, with good cabins, fine food and drink and - in the EU - the exceptional privilege of duty-free shopping (being one of the chief marketing messages for the trip). The sun shone, the sea was calm (though I quite like a moderate storm) and we were very happy.

The little estate produced an enormous crop of apples and I managed to get my act together to make a few pounds of chutney, which turned out pretty well, in spite of sketchy shopping for ingredients (I didn't have any malt vinegar and had to make do with red wine vinegar, though some would say that was an improvement anyway).

I shall be back in January when my wardrobe of heavy clothes and woollen underwear will come into their own again, but I suppose I shall have to think of migrating some of them to Oxford for chilly visits (though it rarely gets quite as cold as Sweden on that side of the North Sea).

# Life on the Amstel

*Early morning calm on the Amstel as I drink my first cup of coffee on the pontoon*



*My home on the Amstel, with its cocktail pontoon alongside*



*The spacious interior of my houseboat, White Raven*

*Moving tribute to suffering and struggle. Roy and I came here on our colourful trips in the 80s*



*The view from my bedroom window and a neighbour heron*



*Curiosity and the freedom to buy took me to a coffee shop where I chose this brand from the extensive menu. Anxiety about falling off my pontoon prompted caution and I gave most of the haul away*

**A**t the beginning of October, Paula, my new boss at UMC, and I attended the conference of the European Association for Communication in Healthcare in Amsterdam. (It was useful but not remarkable.) Surfing for a place to stay, I came across the not-to-be-missed opportunity to rent a houseboat. White Raven was moored on the Binnenamstel, right in the city centre. Apart from being a spacious, fully-fitted apartment (enormous living area, kitchen, washing machine and all), it had a pontoon moored alongside on which one could sit with coffee or G&T and watch the world go by. At peak periods there were dozens of craft of all kinds passing by every hour - vast tourist boats and the entire catalogue of middle- and small-size boats, mechanical, pedaled and rowed. Being thought, I suppose, to be a local character in his eccentric, floating home, I was photographed and waved at by people from all over the world throughout the time I sat there. The observer became the observed. It was all wonderfully entertaining. Paula and a local friend of hers came for cocktails and we consumed a considerable quantity of potent and aromatic Dutch gin, watched by the passing hordes. Amsterdam was, as always, intriguing and seductive.



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## Travels in the Netherlands and Asia

### China

*Paul, English student, and new friend from the hotel*



*Lively and interesting shopping in the reconstructed old quarter*



*Marie and impressive, smoggy architecture from a boat on the River Hai*



*The great ferris-wheel and our hotel as we return from our cruise on the River Hai*

**I** helped run a training day at a big conference in Tianjin. It was an impressive, smoggy city, with some remarkable modern architecture that we saw close-up from a short cruise on the Hai river, but not beautiful, I think. We had some good food and an entertaining hour or two in a modern historical quarter where there were shops selling all kinds of interesting things, including stunning, intricate jade objects and all the equipment for Chinese calligraphy. Lots of counterfeit watches and leather goods bearing prestigious international brand names. Rafe and Marie were there, so we had some fun and some happy times together. One of the young men on the hotel staff, Paul, took a bit of a shine to me and we have since been engaged in a busy email exchange; he's studying English at university which makes the relationship a bonus for us both.



*Stunning Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai*

*Old friend Mr Wit, in his new hat, on the terrace of our hotel room by the River Ping, when I went to Chiang Mai to get my Chinese visa*



*Lunch at Chivit Tamma Da with Mr Wit. It was his birthday and they brought him a slice of lemon meringue pie with a candle in it*





**Bruce Hugman**  
Christmas 2014, No.13

## Malaysia and Vietnam

**M**y old Balham friend, Roy, is coming over for holiday in Malaysia with me at the beginning of November, a week ahead of the time I am writing this. We are going to the World Heritage city of Malacca and then for a couple of days to Penang. On the last day of the holiday, I am dashing off to Hanoi for twenty-four hours to present a session on crisis management to a meeting of WHO experts planning the roll-out of new drugs for the treatment of multi-drug-resistant TB.

*After a pretty extravagant few days in Bangkok, Roy and I set off for Malaysia, first Melaka, then Penang. Melaka was a treat, especially the World Heritage old town and the utterly charming and delightful local people. Penang will be too late for inclusion in this edition of TT, but here are a few shots from Melaka. (I was reminded that I sailed through the Malacca Straits on my container ship en route for Singapore and Thailand in 2002)*



*Trishaws in Melaka: high kitsch, but efficient and entertaining transport around town and to and from the hotel.*



***Big man of Melaka:** Dr Gan Boon Leong won the Mr Universe title and many others. He was also the driving force for the restoration of the historic centre of Melaka and especially the famous Jonkers street. I was accosted by this team of school pupils involved in some kind of commercial game to sell the largest number of what turned out to be scrumptious profiterole-like creamy puffs.*



*Charming riverside walks and interesting old buildings along the Melaka River. (Formerly Malacca, Melaka is the modern spelling.)*

*Impressive reconstruction of Sultan's palace in a part of town with a plethora of museums and interesting old buildings.*



*Part of a multi-religious site on the 2,000 foot top of Penang Hill, above Georgetown, reached by a very fast and efficient cable-hauled train.*

*The pagoda on a stunning, huge new temple complex, Kek Lok Si, high above Georgetown.*

## Finale for the year

**2014** started out by looking calm and relatively uneventful; it ended up by being quite crazy and, in some respects, momentous for my future. While I feel I exist in a muddle a good deal of the time, the year's achievements have been substantial. Especially exciting are two books on the horizon (my chapters in Medicines for Women and Out of Bounds) and, of course, the new home in Oxford. I shall spend Christmas and New Year there and will be seeing family and lots of friends. It opens an entirely new, rich and promising dimension in my life.

Waterside life has been a feature of the year: the house in Oxford; the houseboat in Amsterdam; the hotel in Chiang Mai when I went for my Chinese visa; even the Holiday Inn in Tianjin overlooked a great river. I've always loved being on boats and at sea (think, container ship to Asia, long-tail boats in Thailand, sailing in the Stockholm archipelago); now I've discovered I feel comfortable and at home living by water, connected to some immanent, if unpredictable, strength and essence.

## Happy Christmas!

**T**his thirteenth Tropical Telegraph ends, as they all do, with my hope that you will enjoy the festive season; have lots of prezzies, good grub, oodles of decent booze and uplifting gatherings of family and friends. While far away, it's been wonderful - as always - to stay in touch with so many friends through the wonders of email, but I hope there'll now be more opportunities for meeting face-to-face, with trips to Oxford (as well as Thailand) on the cards.

*Bruce*

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