

In early March 2020 I watched a new BBC television documentary about the Vietnamese so-called ‘Boat People’, who were headline news around the world at the end of the 1970s. The programme packed in a lot of information, too much I think for a single programme, and there were only a few brief glimpses of Sopley Reception Centre. Filmed forty-one years ago, not surprisingly the scenes looked old and the images had a grainy quality, whereas my memories remain vivid and fresh, although in the last few years on thinking back to the time I spent at Sopley my feelings are tainted by grief and a sense of loss.

In mid-July 1979 I turned 26. My mental, spiritual and emotional health was not good and I had no idea about the future. I was in a Bournemouth bed-sit and just surviving day to day, temporarily teaching in an EFL school in central Bournemouth. My classes included holidaying German tourists and Libyan children following in the footsteps of a former student, Colonel Gaddafi.¹ On 7th January 1979, during the so-called ‘winter of discontent’, I made a deadly serious suicide attempt, following a decade of chronic mental health problems. Strictly speaking I should have died but divine providence saved my life.



Philip Baker (left), a friend from teacher training college, was teaching in the Upper School at Sopley and when a fieldworker vacancy came up in early October, he told me, I applied and was accepted (I remember phoning up from the EFL school premises where I was working, to find out). In an extraordinary turnaround my life was about to change, and I would be free of mental and emotional pain. However, for the first two weeks at Sopley I probably looked like and I felt like a refugee; I remember not washing my hair for that period and I wore a grubby green army style padded jacket. Half-term approached and David Hardisty, the Activities Organiser, was struggling for ideas to occupy the time usually taken up by school and adult education classes. I suggested a treasure hunt. Clues were dotted about the site e.g. in fieldworker Helen Clifford’s car, the Medical Centre and a shop in Bransgore. The event was a great success, won by Dinh Van Hiep, a man with polio (from Hut 24 I think), who fieldworker Eamonn Doherty had wanted to win. A crowd gathered in front of the Admin. building to see Hiep receive his prize. That treasure hunt really kick-started my new life at Sopley; I washed my hair, smartened myself up and embarked on what still is the best period of my life. I never thought about the reception centre closing, that it was a temporary situation etc. Instead, and really for the first time, I lived, as the saying goes, ‘for the day’.

I and my fellow workers from that time have many good memories (not forgetting at least two tragedies). It was an unforgettable life-enhancing experience, ‘magical’ according to Eamonn but as he also says ‘You had to be there’. But for me the contrast of what I had endured previously and what I experienced at Sopley was so remarkable – put simply, at long last I was free to be myself. It was like an oasis to someone lost in a desert. I found a level of stability and well-being that was entirely foreign to me. Inside Sopley, a ‘world within a

¹ Hinton School of English where I met John Linfoot and Felicity Robinson; both joined the Adult Education Department at Sopley. John took the photograph (top right) at Poole in the summer of 1979.

world', I had a role, I belonged. I was normal - I felt, ate and slept well; I was present and engaged and enjoyed nearly every aspect of what went on. I made friends, I do not recall a harsh word with any of my colleagues and I had never been so well remunerated, £60 per week - plus full board.² Desolation had been succeeded by consolation - and fun. I have only ever been drunk twice, both times at Sopley wedding parties, one in November and the other in December 1979. I recollect a few of us running around and around in a circle laughing hysterically before collapsing in a heap on the floor - and no hangover the next day. On one of those two occasions a young English staff member provided me with my only sighting thus far of projectile vomit, thankfully outdoors, near the entrance to the staff canteen.

My immediate colleagues were young British fieldworkers and Vietnamese interpreters. Most of the fieldworkers were from Bradford University Peace Studies Department, their placement arranged by Brigadier Michael Harbottle (Sopley's first administrator), after which they had to write up a report of their experiences and return to Bradford for the final year of study. Eamonn, Shirley Stainton a 'Geordie', Sue Millman and Chris Bartlett were in situ when I arrived. Formerly a policeman in Hong Kong, Chris spoke Cantonese. Sue was a bundle of well-meaning frenetic energy. Shirley and Chris were more self-contained; both went to Thorney Island Reception Centre and Sue moved to a new reception centre in Ashford. Replacements included Helen Clifford (née Ashworth) who enjoyed - and still does - what she calls 'banter', the generally serious Andy Palmer, the urbane Peter Cox, who had attended Southampton University and fresh-faced Simon Foster, a Community Service Volunteer, who had given up his job (a pharmaceutical drugs rep.) with which he had become disillusioned. Andy also a CSV was from Herne Bay in Kent.³ Eamonn from Strabane in Northern Ireland returned to Sopley in 1981 and stayed until the bitter end in 1982. The fieldworkers' job description specified a range of duties but being at Sopley never seemed like work to me but a way of life among congenial colleagues and our Vietnamese guests.



Most of the mainly South Vietnamese interpreters had been in England a few years, and were led by Diep (right) who looked forbidding. She was married to Scott an Englishman. Diep was supported by Siu Sing Ling, Ngo Ngoc Tuan (below right) the life and soul of any gathering, the rather lugubrious La Khai Xieu (known as 'Xieu/Siu 2'), Christine and Neng, another Christine (left)



who also went to Thorney Island, Huynh Van Duc, Duong Dung Minh known as 'Thin' Minh', Nguyen H Hai who married at Sopley in November 1979, and not forgetting Khouv Tchun Seng and Annie Lim.⁴ Two sisters, Kim Bien Mai and Kim Chuong Mai, both Catholics, came from a higher strata of South Vietnamese society, and were quite different and distinctive in manner. Each fieldworker was teamed with an interpreter and I was paired with the tallish and always very correct Kim Bien Mai who also had a quaint voice. Her sister Kim Chuong Mai married Duc in 1983. Their 'masks' sometimes slipped and



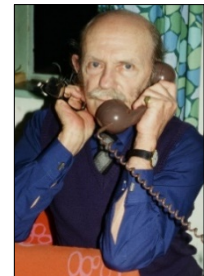
² Salaries rose to £3700 in 1980 and to £4854 in 1982.

³ Andy moved to London in 1981. During a resettlement trip he identified the need for more support for the Vietnamese. I admired him for moving on to what must have been a much more challenging environment. He married Sopley interpreter Kim Bien Mai in 1984.

⁴ Seng and Annie were Cambodians; Annie, the Medical Centre interpreter, was replaced by her sister Madeline.

seeing them giggling together was quite a sight. Diep went to Thorney Island & was replaced by Siu. An accomplished young man, Siu was literate in Vietnamese, Mandarin, Cantonese and English. He played guitar, passed the driving test at Sopley, and developed the habit of calling me ‘Chris baby’. Siu arrived in England in December 1978, knowing no English.

Now, in no particular order, more Sopley scenes culled from my memory bank. Bear in mind I was not present when the centre opened (it was meant to be used for only six months) & I was at Sopley for less than eighteen months (1979-80 & 1981-82). I begin with the Administrator Major Edmund Donovan invariably addressed as ‘Don’ (right).



Don’s flat cap which he wore much of the time, his prominent moustache; Don smoking cigarettes, his cough and wheezy laugh, and driving his Austin car around the site - to the Admin. building, up to the canteen and after work from the Admin. block back to his room. Occasionally Don sat in the office shared by fieldworkers and interpreters - I think he was looking for some ‘light relief’ - and he usually found it with the irrepressible and sometimes hysterical (in the best sense) Tuan whose high-pitched voice occasionally emitted a voluble shriek. Don’s health was ropey;⁵ the diminutive Duc, at 20 the youngest interpreter, provided barefoot manipulative treatment for his back.

In one of the uninhabited storage buildings, Peter, who addressed me as ‘CB’, and I found two rather worn leather jackets, his a ‘bomber’ jacket for which he was offered £100 (a lot of money in 1980) in a pub and mine a sleeveless jerkin (reminiscent of those worn by the men who delivered coal in sacks on their backs in my childhood), which I later oiled and used for a number of years. An amusing and surreal incident took place in our office; Peter and I were alone when a young man walked in, spoke quite animatedly to me in Vietnamese for what seemed a long time, but apparently satisfied with my reply ‘Doy kum beit’ (spelt phonetically, and meaning ‘I don’t know’), promptly turned and walked out.

Andy was in charge of preparing huts for new arrivals, but we all helped out; I recall Eamonn, and I working up to midnight on a cold 1979 December night assembling bunk beds and ‘making them up’, then on finishing standing outside and looking up at the starry sky. ‘Cin da Ella’ was the 1979 Christmas pantomime, concerning a missing young Vietnamese girl, written by the fieldworkers and performed in the Admin. building including David Hardisty wearing a flat cap as Don in car driving mode along the main corridor⁶ and Eamonn as Upper School headmaster Gordon Griffiths complete with a Welsh accent - ‘The children will be delighted’ is a favourite line he remembers and repeats with pleasure and a little pride.

The retired Major Harry Harrison in charge of supplies, (bedding, cooking utensils etc) was frequently overwrought, surprising as he had worked in bomb disposal. Meals were eaten in the huts but food was prepared in separate kitchen buildings (right) situated between the huts (originally utility



⁵ Don died in 1983 in Tunbridge Wells where he lived with a sister, less than a year after the closure of Sopley. Eamonn and I were among the mourners at his funeral.

⁶ David Hardisty, also from Bradford University, provided another moment of mirth. A couple of us were sat outside the Admin. block and on returning to Sopley in a PSA van, David parked behind the building and on re-appearing was guiltily holding up a van door handle. He was much amused by my inquiry ‘What’s happened to the rest of the van?’ (it was funny at the time).

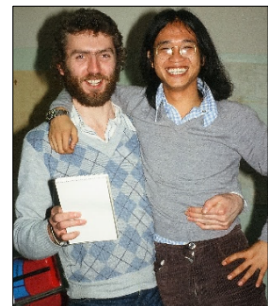
rooms) fitted with four calor-gas powered units (eight gas rings), two units per hut. Inventory check-lists for new arrivals were signed for and checking-out lists for departing folk, both supervised by fieldworkers, occasionally needing to be diplomatic if items were missing - and at the same time pacify an increasingly agitated Harry.

A RAF station covering twenty-eight acres, built in the early 1940s, Sopley was effectively a village, population of around 625, set in a quiet rural environment bordering The New Forest. All that was missing was a pub and post office. Greenery was plentiful (trees, bushes, hedgerows and grass) and although the buildings were basic and drab in appearance, they were single storey and in consequence not overwhelming. I have been told that psychologically green is a calming colour; maybe some benefit accrued to all of us who lived & worked there. There was a sports field, and the tennis court attracted some youngsters, albeit wearing debateable footwear (right).



Helen Clifford, secretaries Pam Palmer, Karyn Smyth (Don's secretary) and Liz Purchase drove in to work, Helen in her blue 'Triumph'. Frank, a driving instructor, found some eager clients among the fieldworkers and interpreters. Deputy Administrator Roger Jones (left) owned a vintage 'Humber' car (he motored to Cheltenham, with me, to see our respective families). Intelligent, knowledgeable (he spoke seven languages), positive, with a sense of humour (who could forget his booming laugh), his speech became hesitant when he felt pressurised. On peering into our office, he exclaimed 'aha' if he spotted someone to do his bidding. Tuan habitually pronounced Roger as 'Row-ja'.⁷

Mention of Sopley and cars is a sore point for Eamonn; his left ankle was shattered on a cold winter night when a car in which he and I were passengers hit a telegraph pole. Neng⁸ drove as we travelled the short distance back from a pub in Bransgore. The cause of the incident may have been icy conditions and a loss of control but it emerged that Neng did not have a license. Eamonn was hospitalised in Poole. After his return to Sopley and still on crutches he beat me at table tennis (I kept hitting the ball straight back to him, he did not reciprocate). One Saturday in April 1980, Andy, Eamonn (still on crutches) and I decided to go to the Norwich versus Wolves football match, travelling via London and enjoying egg and chips and drinking cups of tea in a café near the ground after the game. Right: Andy Palmer and Siu Sing Ling



On Sunday mornings a coach took some folk (left) to the Hurn Christian Fellowship; Don, a Catholic, concerned about vulnerable people susceptible to proselytising, had more than one discussion with Pastor Roy Hicks. I attended a couple of the evangelical style services; Chinese choruses of

⁷ Roger, a practising Anglican, spent his retirement in Cheltenham where he penned music reviews for the local press, wrote a novel and travel guides, and answering an advert in the 'Oldie' magazine' played the role of Father Christmas in Lapland. He died in Africa early in 2017, while on holiday with his brother.
⁸ He and his wife Christine worked in the staff canteen and prepared an alternative Vietnamese menu.

‘Thank-you, thank-you Jesus’ (phonetically, ‘Doy-chay, doy-chay Yea-su’) were sung by the entire congregation. In early August 1980 I attended the wedding of ‘Michael’ Lok from South Vietnam to Julie Morton an English member of the congregation. In 2005 when the church closed Pastor Hicks claimed 250+ baptisms, about one-tenth of the total Sopley population 1979-82, some of whom he had kept in contact with.

Among many English volunteers I remember a childless young woman and her noticeably older husband, wishing to befriend a child – for whose benefit I wondered. Memorably when introduced to the scandal-hit Jeremy Thorpe (accompanied by his wife), Tuan exclaimed ‘I saw you on tv’. The elderly Fred Chant & the officious bespectacled Nick Williams provided ‘security’ at the entrance to the site. Refuse collections (not to be confused with one letter I saw addressed to ‘Sopley Refuse Centre’) were regular and a team of residents patrolled the site picking up litter. DHSS staff visited, after which the recipients, mostly women and young



children, trailed up to Bransgore to spend their small allowance & so support the local shopkeepers.

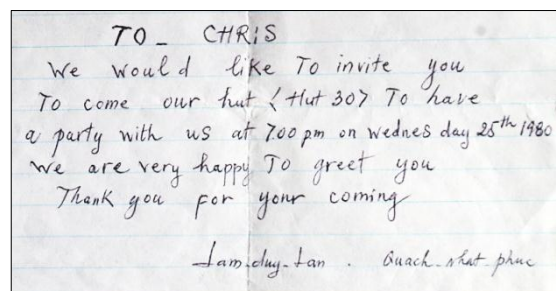
Autumn 1979. Setting off for Bransgore. The seven ladies were Cambodians. The push-chair and clothing were donations.

blasters obtained in Hong Kong where the ethnic Chinese from North Vietnam were allowed to do paid work. On hearing one song I liked, I sang the four-word refrain in our office, only to be told by an interpreter from South Vietnam it extolled the virtues of the North Vietnamese Army! The first intake at Sopley in June 1979 comprised people from South Vietnam, some with nothing, some with gold and dollars, rescued at sea by the British ship *Sibonga*. Over time the balance equalled out, although when I arrived Hut 3 was occupied by Cambodians including ‘Pop’ (right). One unexpected consequence of the changing demographic was the staging of a football game South Vietnam versus North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese team included a former professional player Lam Duy Lan. Slim and skilful, he pulled the strings in midfield. The team strips were donated but he played clad in white long-johns, what we now call ‘one-sies’.



A Staff versus Vietnamese football match was arranged; the former had Nick Rhodes and John Linfoot from Adult Education, David Hardisty and fieldworkers including me. I recollect making an unsuccessful overhead kick on goal in ‘their’ penalty area. Tuan and To Minh Huu (with whom I was becoming acquainted) were among our eager opponents. Andy almost certainly refereed the game, played on the sports field in front of a small but mixed enthusiastic crowd. Lan wrote an article about his career for an edition of the Sopley Newsletter, an occasional A4 photocopied document containing much information on life at Sopley and contact with the outside world.

At the time of the Chinese New Year in February 1980, Lan’s (right) well-written note was one of several invitations I received to celebratory meals. Eating and drinking in



moderation was necessary before tactfully leaving for another feast (I use the word advisedly) in another hut. Whenever in the huts I was met with genuine hospitality as coffee, Chinese tea, cake, sweets and cigarettes were proffered. There was a lot of smoking at Sopley and 555 State Express cigarettes were readily available at the on-site WRVS shop.

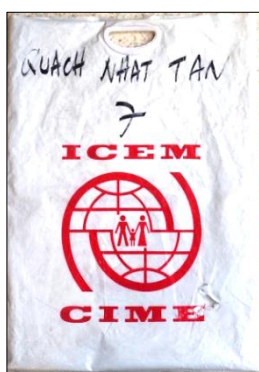


The rudimentary huts the Vietnamese and few residential English and Vietnamese staff occupied, provided the basic essentials. However, all huts were centrally heated and the much in evidence supply piping was well insulated (left). I had a large room,

containing a comfortable single bed, large table, a chair, wardrobe, sink and a bedside table for my Hitachi radio/cassette player.⁹ Each morning I stepped over piping as a short cut from my room to the staff canteen, anticipating a ‘full English’, cereal, toast and cups of tea - a satisfying way to start the day.

Rooms the same size as mine contained tables, chairs and bedding (for 3 bunk beds) for as many as 6 Vietnamese i.e. for larger family units who sometimes needed an extra small room with a bunk bed, plus table and chair. Having seen photographs of the large warehouse style accommodation used in Hong Kong, the rooms at Sopley definitely afforded more privacy.¹⁰

Fieldworkers and interpreters were the ‘eyes and ears’ of the ‘village’, there was no part of the site that was off limits to us; we spent time in the huts, socialising, helping out with English words and phrases, and homework - Eamonn in this instance (right). When accompanied by our assigned interpreter we answered any concerns and if necessary, reported back to the relevant office i.e. admin., resettlement, education or medical personnel. Quyen a newly arrived young woman in one of my huts (33 I think) had a problem tooth and I informed the medical centre staff. She was grateful and later made a point of happily showing me the temporary filling.



Of particular concern to the medical team were those people who had TB. All arrivals were isolated for a time in emptied out huts. All came with a chest X-ray, plus other records inside an ICEM (International Committee for European Migration) plastic bag; in the featured example, Quach Nhat Tan was head of a family of seven). The family group were part of the 10,000 people Prime Minister Thatcher agreed to accept (a small number compared to Canada, Germany and of course France and especially the USA); she gained credit for her decision but at the time I did not know she had to be really persuaded to do so.

⁹ My only other luxury was a 35mm Mamiya Sekor 1000 DTL camera, 28mm and 200mm lenses plus an electronic flashgun.

¹⁰ I recollect Eamonn telling me how he survived a ‘close shave’; one afternoon he almost stumbled in to a room when he realised a young married couple were making love; he withdrew promptly without disturbing them.

News filtered back to Sopley after resettlement and the elderly Mr Tan would feature in the October 1981 Sopley Newsletter (below).

Perhaps the most encouraging story of all concerns an elderly gentleman by the name of Quach Nhat Tan. Mr. Tan, who used to be a fisherman, was discovered to have "green fingers" by Ann Loweth, our gardening teacher, and we could picture him on resettlement growing prize blooms for the local flower show.

Alas, this was not to be. His place of resettlement turned out to be a flat on the Isle of Dogs - an area where there is hardly a blade of grass or tree to be seen. Surely this would mean an end to Mr. Tan's gardening career?

But surprising things happen in the East End. It appears that a local headmistress has heard of his skill and offered him a part-time position as the school gardener. Although the pay is nominal he seems to be enjoying the job and has a little allotment for his own use.

So if you are visiting Tower Hamlets at any time watch out for dahlias and chrysanthemums - a sure sign that Mr. Tan is about.

Roger Jones
Deputy Administrator

Part of the fieldworker and interpreter remit was administrative e.g. carrying out inspections, checking on health and safety matters etc. The creative yet dangerous electrical wiring arrangements in some huts, whereby ghetto blasters were wired up to ceiling light sockets, was an obvious concern. Imagine our surprise when we came across homemade rice wine being distilled, utilising metal waste paper bins from Harry's store. It was potent stuff. Puzzling to us, were the few new arrivals who slept between blankets rather than bed sheets.

When I began my first stint at Sopley, one hut accommodated single men only but it was wisely decided to disperse them among other huts. Initially I had the thankless task, when I was the designated liaison fieldworker, of tracking down truants from adult education classes; I recollect one 'student' from South Vietnam, a rather recalcitrant youth named Hoa(?) (right) who, thankfully, was found work helping out in the food store. Each hut had a leader appointed by the



responsible fieldworker, tasked to arrange cleaning rotas. Drains blocked with rice were a common problem, not only in the separate kitchen units but also in the huts as some families had electric rice cookers bought in Hong Kong. Visits to huts were not always strictly altruistic or administrative; in Hut 33 a married couple (the man, Vu, was hut leader) had a small colour television set, and Eamonn and I popped in to follow the World Snooker Championship. Left: April 1980, Eamonn and Chris, about to sip Chinese tea, photographed by Vu.

Hut 28 was the scene of a tragedy, the suicide of a wife and the mother of two small children from North Vietnam, following an argument. The widower had a number of relatives at Sopley for support but she may have felt very alone, bereft and homesick. A single fleeting memory tells me she wore her hair in a ponytail. A subsequent, understandable, difficulty was the reluctance of other folk to move to the room concerned, only resolved when a new intake of people arrived. I had first-hand experience of the issue because I was in charge of allocating rooms. I suspect the newcomers were never told what had occurred.

A rare flashpoint involved Eamonn and I. Without an interpreter, we were precipitate in our actions towards two newly arrived brothers; we tried moving back a piece of furniture taken from an empty room; in what seemed like the blink of an eye, doors and cupboards were slammed shut and suddenly we were confronted with two angry young men, one armed with a meat cleaver. Too stunned to make any quick movements we instead withdrew slowly and quietly, our hands held up in a palms-facing pacifying gesture. Our pale faces were noticed when we sat down in our office. The incident was duly reported, the men told such behaviour in England was inappropriate and carrying weapons was illegal. It was a useful way of educating our guests in a way that allowed them to save face, an important issue we had been made aware of.¹¹ I was surprised on approaching Hut 33 to come across the quite frankly shocking sight of a youth with learning difficulties masturbating. His parents were politely informed a repetition in public would scandalise English people; again, the emphasis was placed on the ramifications of a possible future repeat incident.

Wendy Orr (Head of Adult Education, who lived on site in another hut) knocked on my door in the middle of a very cold winter night after she was awakened by a fire alarm sounding off; we went over to the far side of the site to see if anything was amiss, to be met by a PSA 'maintenance' man.¹² I am not quite sure where he appeared from although he and his colleagues were to be seen doing various jobs during the daytime. Another memory from the 1979-80 winter - fieldworker Jonathan (right) driving a few of us back in a PSA van from Christchurch after pizzas in a restaurant, on a beautifully crystal clear cold starlit night and travelling at speed straight across a frosty grass covered roundabout. Jonathan left early in 1980, not caring for admin. work, but called in briefly on his motorbike in August.



Gus, the cook and his assistant Rose served up traditional English fare in the staff canteen. Gus, certainly of pensionable age, was probably Polish. He sported a bristly ginger moustache and a ginger wig. The young dark-haired Rose was quiet and moved around slowly but steadily; her deep dark eyes were drawn towards Eamonn, who tried to avoid her gaze and was the butt of some remarks. Mealtimes were convivial, the largest gathering at lunchtimes when the secretaries and other non-residential staff were present.



The English volunteers who came to Sopley were one part of a two-way system in so far as many Vietnamese went out for a variety of reasons e.g. the 1980 Christchurch Festival when I photographed a mixed troupe of young dancers (left), singers and musicians led and supervised by Duc, with Siu Sing Ling in support, playing guitar and better able to communicate



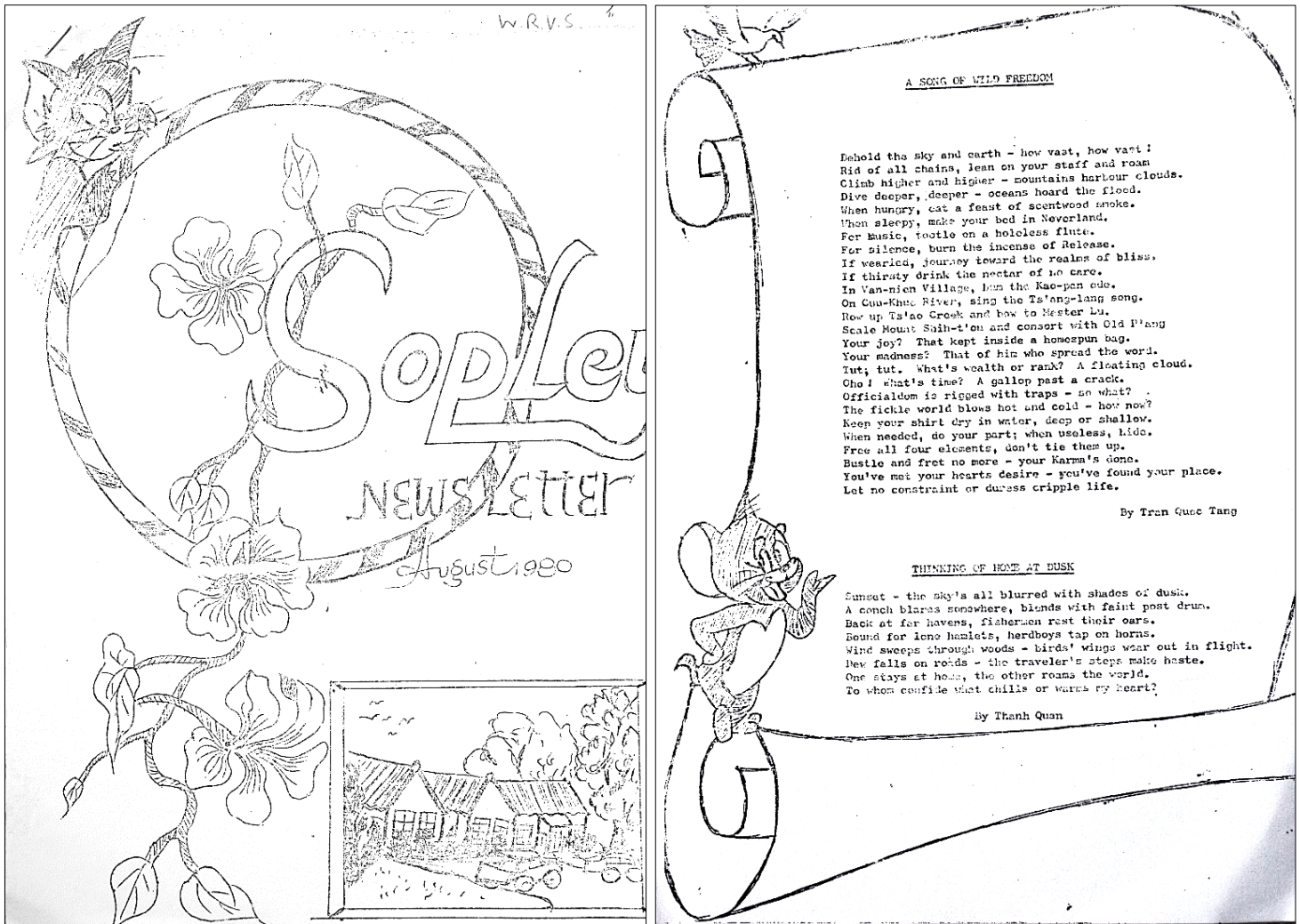
conversationally with English people, than the younger and somewhat diffident Duc. However, in fairness to Duc he explained the dances and songs to the audience (right). The dancers were colourfully attired, waving chiffon scarves and manoeuvred themselves over and around long, thick bamboo poles, decorated in red and yellow stripes, manipulated by Duc and helpers. Roger Jones compiled a report for the August 1980 Sopley Newsletter (extracts below).

¹¹ Eamonn told me he would write about this episode in his end of placement university report – and he did.

¹² When I spoke to Wendy in 2019, she had no memory of the incident. She knocked my door because I was the fieldworker then attached to the Adult Education Department. Her non-resident deputy was Nick Rhodes.

This concert also featured a premiere - a short play by Mrs. Khanh Nga about her escape from Vietnam and rescue by the British freighter, 'Sibonga'. Despite the language barrier the drama depicted forcefully the trauma the Boat People have had to endure.

The grand climax of the evening was the exquisite candle dance which transported the spectator into the realms of the ethereal and initiated him into the mysteries of Asian culture.



Cover artwork by Miss Luong Phi Phi – evidently a fan of Tom and Jerry. This issue edited by the author.

I recall an evening trip to see a swimming pool entertainment, also an evening game of cricket between a Sopley XI versus (so Eamonn tells me) a Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra XI. We had a secret weapon in the young tall 'Khan'; he had the physique of a fast bowler and was put through his paces at Sopley prior to his debut. Suffice to say his enthusiasm far surpassed his skill as a cricketer. My abiding memories of the encounter are Eamonn fielding at 1st slip, taking an excellent two-handed catch by his right knee, watched by me at 2nd slip, and secondly the orthodox, yet studious, slow bowling demonstrated by the mild-mannered Michael Meadows. He was the senior player in our team; because he spoke French and Cantonese, he had been assigned to the Resettlement Office at Sopley.

On weekdays there were outings to attend appointments at local hospital clinics; memorably before one morning trip a furious young single woman (she had a limp as a result of polio) from the Catholic Le family stormed in to our office, absolutely livid after her name was

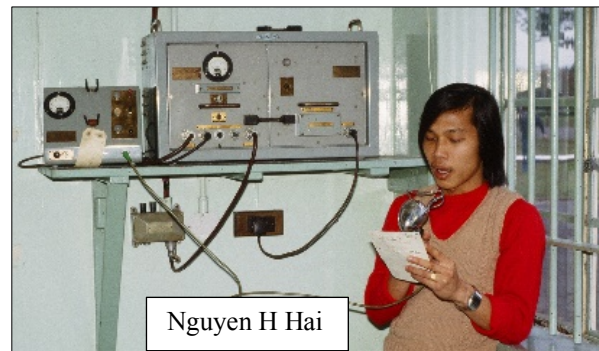
tannoyed along with those of pregnant women due for ante-natal tests. A corrective tannoy announcement was hurriedly made.

Looking through copies of the Sopley Newsletter reminds me how frequent were the ‘comings and goings’ at Sopley. It was a busy place and some nights film shows, discos and concerts were held in the cinema. Peter Cox recalls one concert; tempers frayed when some children began to sing, punches were exchanged and chairs thrown. A bemused English contingent looked on; the ‘song’, Peter learnt, was the North Vietnamese National Anthem, unsurprisingly resented by the South Vietnamese present. In the cinema during my first



month, I saw a scramble for donated clothes as large black plastic bags were ripped open and emptied out; shoes were in short supply and as winter beckoned a new appeal was made. A Punch & Judy show for First School children (left) was put on during the autumn half-term break.

Tannoying (audible in all thirty-three huts) was the preserve of the interpreters but being able to count and say a few words and phrases in Vietnamese was useful for fieldworkers e.g. for a particular person to come to our office to take an incoming phone call in five minutes (‘nam phuc sow-wah lie nya’ is how the message ended if my phonetic memory serves me correctly). The often-repeated announcement for someone to come to the office was easy to remember – ‘Attention, attention, name and hut number, come to the office. Thank-you’ – phonetically, ‘Sin loo-e, sin loo-e, c-moy, name, hut hi moy nam (25), len van fom gap. Kamun’ (above). On the subject of language, I noticed how some words were pronounced differently e.g. the phrase - again I spell it as I heard it in English – ‘kum cor chee’ was the South Vietnamese version whereas people from the north said ‘kum cor zee’. Another example, ‘do roy’ and ‘do zoy’ meaning ‘enough’. I checked out my observations and they were confirmed.¹³



To follow, some ‘snap-shot’ memories: short-sleeved shirts worn in February (unheard in Cheltenham); small tightly bound feet (since childhood) of one old lady; David Hardisty’s shuffling short-stepped walk, hesitant speech, and shirt never properly tucked in; Simon Foster, Middle School teacher Gill Tovar and I attending evangelical church gatherings in Canford; handmade model boats given as presents, Helen Clifford (left) and Simon still have theirs; sudden flare-up between Eamonn and Siu which calmed down just as quickly; Pam Palmer’s bustling determined walk between the office occupied by Karyn and Liz and the resettlement team at

¹³ The interpreter known as ‘Thin Minh’, was a heavy smoker (as were Tuan and Siu), whose wife Mai Thi Phung Lan helped out in the staff canteen and later gave birth to a son. Minh’s spoken English occasionally included a peculiar mechanistic click-like sound which affected his pronunciation of certain words.

the other end of the corridor; burly motorcycling local policeman Dennis Tall; June Dickeson and Lucy Riegler in the Medical Centre; smell of burning joss sticks; grim discovery of the buried remains of a still-born Vietnamese infant; large decorated metal thermos flasks that everyone seemed to possess (bought in Hong Kong); ‘Number One handsome man’ called out to me (very perceptive people, the Vietnamese!); hand-made kites; Eamonn answering the telephone, ‘Hello, I’m fine, How are you? Who is it?’; colourful stamps on letters from friends and relatives, eagerly awaited by the tannoyed recipients; speculating if anyone had escaped Vietnam with gold bars; rabbits hunted in adjacent fields ending up in Vietnamese stomachs; learning to use chopsticks, firstly to select food from communal dishes, then eating from a bowl which involved a degree of hand to mouth skill and dexterity; learning that cockroaches fly in Vietnam; women squatting when preparing certain foodstuffs.



John Silver (left), was an interesting quietly spoken character - tall, broad, bearded, he had the look of a seafarer. As the caretaker he lived on the site; he (and, for a short time, fieldworker Richard McNeil) organised the transport rotas and maintenance for two white transit vans. John drove, as did Andy, Roger, Helen Clifford, David Hardisty, Simon and Siu. The main driver was Joe Schafer, a former chauffeur; his wife Pam did the accounts.¹⁴ ‘Father John’ and his wife Peggy developed good relationships with some of the Vietnamese and ‘held court’ in their house. He once came into our office and announced I was the only person who had a reliable record of where everybody lived on the site thanks to my card index. Sopley was an ideal place to hide things and rumours persist of secret underground facilities.

The card index matched the names of residents to their individual hut numbers. A typical hut (used by the RAF ‘rank and file’), contained different sized rooms and Huts 30-33 were configured differently again, maybe for the use of female personnel. The smallest rooms were best for single persons, but sometimes a couple with an infant had to make do, until a bigger room became vacant as people moved out and were resettled. I received lists of new arrivals in advance, so could make the necessary arrangements (Andy too, so he could requisition items from Harry’s store). To cope with a large influx of people huts had to be emptied, which meant re-allocating any current residents. In between times I tried to be sympathetic and accede to requests to move. The system worked well and I do not recall any major upsets.

John Silver occupied a small office in the Admin. block, as did Sue Joslyn (a Careers Advisor who visited weekly from Southampton), and Harry too, shared later with his assistant Geoff Landells. He was usually clad like a gamekeeper, in shooting gear, even sometimes appearing with his shotgun (maybe to shoot rabbits), with a dog and a girlfriend often in tow. Like the barrel-chested Harry (who said ‘Vetmanese’ instead of ‘Vietnamese’) Geoff seemed to lack a real interest in the Vietnamese.

¹⁴ Joe’s catchphrase was ‘Put yourself down for a fiver’: he and Pam bought houses, did them up, sold up and moved on. They took me to see their current house/project. Joe told me he had chauffeured a lot in London.

Harry, the type of person who need to ‘get things off their chest’, took his concerns to Don who listened respectfully. I was in a privileged position to overhear conversations in Don’s large office after a desk was set aside for me in one corner for my card index and associated paperwork. I recollect Don and I smiling after Harry had let off some steam and all over nothing – it was amusing. Poor Harry! Obviously, Don trusted me as I was never asked to leave when he had visitors, such as Roy Hicks, Robert Hood from BCAR headquarters in London who headed up the Indo-China section or an assortment of local officials.



Don was astute, his experience included working in the Sudan. Short, undemonstrative and quietly spoken, he had his finger on the Sopley pulse. Not long after I arrived, he replaced Major John Leatherbarrow and his female assistant, who ran the food store, with three paid Vietnamese men; in charge was the quite burly Truong Hai Minh, known as ‘Food Store’ Minh (left 2019 in Florida), his assistants Liang Ming Jen and Tran Vinh Loi, joined by the aforementioned Hoa. All four, I believe, were rescued by the *Sibonga*. A common sight was the trolley loads of provisions collected from the Food Store and being pushed back to the huts, sometimes encountering difficulties depending on the surface of the roads. Vitamin D deficiency was a problem; in Vietnam it could be synthesised by the action of sunlight on the skin but here it is mainly found in dairy produce that the Vietnamese did not eat or drink e.g. the Vietnamese could not digest milk, due to the lack of an enzyme; for use in coffee very sweet, thick tinned condensed milk was used instead. ‘Food Store’ Minh married at Sopley, his bride Hoa, a beautiful woman whose face bore a sub-continental Indian look. Ming Jen married Tran Thien Quyen (the ‘problem tooth’ lady) at Sopley. Loi also married at Sopley. Minh, sitting behind me, attended Don’s funeral in 1983 and as the coffin disappeared from view, he quietly said ‘Goodbye Don’. It was a touching moment.

The fieldworkers and interpreters were the youngest group working at Sopley, only matched by the attractive staff in the First School e.g. Alice Merritt, Toni Burke, Marian Gheissari and Jan Jackson (stridently walking around in her knee high leather boots, and with a posh accent to boot!). They cherished their pupils and little wonder that Simon took great pleasure in his role as their liaison fieldworker. A concert held in the First School during the first Sopley Christmas is a stand-out memory including an appearance by Santa Claus. I snapped a few photographs and snippets filmed by a television cameraman (right) featured in the recent television documentary. It was a happy occasion for the Vietnamese present, along with some of the resident and non-resident staff, and invited English guests. Sadly, a tragedy was brewing. An older member of the First School staff, who I only remember from two photographs, took her own life by setting fire to herself in her back garden. I have an idea she was inclined towards Buddhism. She was Vivian Lawton-Hurst who died in autumn 1981.



Left: Quach Binh Loi’s farewell meal on the eve of resettlement to Cheltenham, June 1980. Such meals were common and English staff were invited.

The Resettlement Office at one end of the Admin. block was ‘home’ to Brian Heddy, Rev. Michael Meadows and the tall, slim and quiet Val

Walling. Brian was in charge and spoke with a refined accent; Pam Palmer was his secretary. Michael was a Christian and formerly a missionary in China and Saigon, he spoke quietly with an educated accent. He was the contact man for the Hurn Christian Fellowship (HCF). The 'resettlement' interpreter was a bespectacled Chinese Christian, Dorothy Wang, who also interpreted at HCF services. Many, maybe even the majority of the residents, wanted to resettle in London but the government favoured a policy of dispersal, fearing the possibility of ghettos. A few Vietnamese hired taxis to visit their intended resettlement homes, resulting in refusals to move, much to the displeasure of Brian who after making his feelings known found his car tyres slashed!

Soon after my arrival Dorothy's friend, the petite and slight Mabel, also a Chinese Christian, made a brief visit. Mabel and I went to Bournemouth one Saturday; it was on that autumn day-out that I purchased a pair of evidently well-made blue/grey trousers in M & S which I still have and wore to the most recent Sopley reunion in October 2019.

There were a number of Christians on the staff; apart from those already mentioned, Peter, Eamonn and Philip Baker my college friend, were Catholics, as was Helen Granger, another fieldworker. The always obliging secretaries, Pam, Karyn and Liz, were non-Conformists. Another later arrival, Ann Lee, made a commitment, aided by Simon, that she immediately



Photo courtesy the Sunday Telegraph

witnessed to me by telephone. But we were outnumbered by another group. One of the stranger sights we came across in some huts were head and shoulder photographs of Pope John Paul II, plus items of personal piety such as rosary beads; these only appeared after the arrival of a large contingent of extended Le family members, headed by the nonagenarian matriarch Le Thi Luc (left). They were Catholic fishing folk from North Vietnam. Numbering 150, they were among the last residents to vacate Sopley in 1982.

The enterprising Ly Thieu Bao put on video film shows in his hut and charged an entrance fee. He was made Chairman of the Vietnamese Committee and soon obtained a car. A HCF devotee, he cited his beliefs in the 1980 Sopley Christmas Newsletter (below).

GOD IS LOVE - A NEW YEAR MESSAGE.

"Let us love one another as the love of God towards us." This is one of the sentences in the Bible to teach the people to love each other as he has loved us. I also realise that it is not a simple love of a nation, but between all nations which I heard the priest from the Church near Sopley say. I don't know if the British people have read this sentence yet? But what they have done for us is as kind as they would do for their relatives. For example, the teachers do not just teach us the English language, but far more than that they have also helped us to learn about the Western Culture, so that we can integrate into society easily in the future. They have also tried to find out about our lives and our culture to discover the problems which we have faced and give us good advice and help.

Administratively, from the Administrator, Mr Donovan downward to all the staffs, they don't just look after our daily life while we are in the Reception Centre, but continuously they also help us when we are resettled. They have built their trust into our hearts from the very first time that we stepped into a new homeland, England, away from the cruel Communism.

So many beautiful pictures which we found from the British hearts, I don't think I could find any words to describe that, but also I can say that what the British people have done for us is not their duty, but their love, their humanity. They have obeyed what Jesus has said: "Let us love one another as the love of God towards us".

Therefore, in Christmas time, we pray to God to bless you all. We also would to thank all the people who have been helping us and may we say:

A Merry Christmas and a Very Happy New Year to you all !

Ly Thieu Bao Chairman of Vietnamese
Committee.

Don invited me out to share a meal with him shortly before my first stint at Sopley came to an end in September 1980. An obvious question arises, why did I decide to leave?

Apart from a new life I found something else at Sopley; Eamonn says we were all looking for something and I found love with To To Kim from North Vietnam. Andy and I delivered some extra blankets to her family in Hut 27 in January 1980¹⁵ and I liked the look of her immediately. I remember asking Andy if he had noticed her. When the family left North Vietnam, a married sister stayed behind and Kim had to say goodbye to her boyfriend. I think she had worked in a factory. Strangely I never asked where the family lived before fleeing.

In the evenings, while Eamonn and co. frequented 'The Lamb', I began helping Kim with English words and phrases and a brother To Minh Huu too - a rather too 'forward' individual for my taste, who stood too close for comfort but who learnt English very quickly - and then finally just Kim. It was a relatively long time before she came to my room, initially with her younger sister acting as chaperone. She was a delightful companion. Kim was 24 and quite different to her loud extrovert sister Lien. She had a gentle nature and was clearly intelligent. Her brothers, twins Thai and Phat, remind now me of boisterous adolescents but were perfectly friendly. To To Quang was Kim's twin brother and the parents were Nghi and Mui. My abiding memory of Mui, the mother, is her croaky voice and the six heaped teaspoons of Nescafe she used to make a cup of coffee. I heard later she developed diabetes. Nghi generally had a benign expression on his face, at least he did whenever I saw him. Mui learned a few mispronounced English words (e.g. 'tomorrow'), not so Nghi.

As our relationship developed, Kim and I 'stepped out' e.g. the aforementioned swimming pool show. With some residents including her brother Thai, we watched the 1980 Borg v McEnroe Wimbledon final on television in the staff common room (near the staff canteen - and where the aforementioned parties were held). We were enthralled as the titanic match reached its climax. My observations about the differences in the pronunciation of some words between South and North Vietnamese (page 10) were confirmed by Kim. Another time she was very amused to hear me say 'Zimbabwe'. I never knew why it made her laugh so much.

On a sunny May Saturday, Kim and I were among a coachload from Sopley who enjoyed a day-out in London, including some of the best-known sights such as Piccadilly Circus and Buckingham Palace.



Right: Kim in London 17th May 1980



I was familiar with reports about the 'Boat People' from television images at sea and also 'boats' moored in Hong Kong, but the reality became immediate and personal when members of Kim's family recognised themselves on a double-page spread in a magazine (left). Now, four decades later, I can only identify Quang with certainty.

Signs of affection between men in public were common, (two men walking along arm in arm while their womenfolk followed behind or one man sat next to another and placing his hand on his

¹⁵ Kim's family were part of the big intake in December 1979 that Eamonn and I helped to prepare for (page 3).

neighbours' knee). I experienced the latter with Kim's brothers; it was explained how such a move might be interpreted by English men.

Signed card on my leaving Sopley

Including

Three kisses from Tuan!

*

'Keep your fingers clean' from Don

*

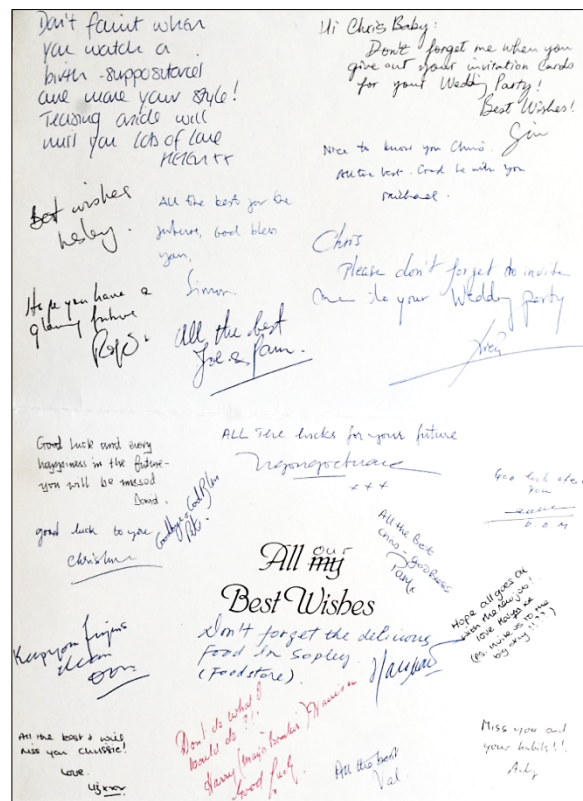
Harry's contribution in red biro

*

'Please don't forget to invite me to your wedding party' from Xieu

*

'Miss you and your habits' from Andy



I had no qualms about leaving Sopley; on Friday 5th September 1980 I went to Heathrow Airport by coach (almost certainly accompanied by Kim Bien Mai) to meet a new intake of Vietnamese, and over the weekend I left for Bridgend to commence nurse training.¹⁶ Kim and her family were already resettled in Risca, a drab council house estate near Newport. I knew God's purpose was active in my life and dared to believe Kim and I had a future together. I was wrong. I was fine for a couple of days, but then all the well-being and confidence engendered at Sopley simply drained away, replaced by mental health issues pre-dating Sopley. I visited Kim, but being with her was not the same; worse I could not explain myself to her or comprehend myself the true meaning of what was happening to me (insight and understanding came later). I struggled on for ten months, but after opposition from her family and my mother refusing to meet her, Kim, I was told by Siu, sought advice from a friend; she ended our relationship in summer 1981.

Thanks to Eamonn, I returned to Sopley, albeit in a state of mental and emotional turmoil. I lasted a few months, then joined Sr. Anne Furlong RGS early in 1982 in Chepstow, where about 80 Vietnamese were living in what had been a mother and baby home. Adding to my woes an ill-judged relationship with Tuyet a South Vietnamese woman failed. Sr Anne and I visited the family of Luu Dao Quy (Sopley Hut 25) in Cardiff. Quy's wife and a female neighbour were chattering away and were startled to be interrupted by Sr Anne in fluent Vietnamese.¹⁷ Their embarrassment was obvious and afterwards I asked her what they had said; she replied they wondered what I was doing in the company of an old woman. Siu Sing Ling married Tran Thi Lanh in Cardiff during this time, and together with Sopley colleagues I attended their wedding (right).



¹⁶ I thought it an appropriate way to conclude, i.e. my ending coinciding with a new beginning for them.

¹⁷ An Irish Roman Catholic nun, Sr. Anne worked in Vietnam for a number of years; she was on one of the last flights out of Saigon in 1975, shortly before North Vietnamese troops occupied the city.

Chepstow closed a month before Sopley and I returned to Cheltenham. I contacted Robina Brand of Refugee Action about working with the Vietnamese and visited the Catholic Le family from Sopley temporarily housed in a large building in Hythe in Kent. I drove to London with a couple of the Le men to purchase supplies at a Chinese supermarket. Contact with Sopley colleagues was kept up & a group of us met in 1983, 1984 & 1988.



Roger, Peter, Chris, Eamonn & 'Food Store' Minh



Eamonn, Chris, Peter & Duc

Friendships forged at Sopley have been nurtured and maintained to the present time. A well-attended reunion was held in May 1994 (left and above). Roger and I travelled down from Cheltenham in his trusty old 'Humber'. Everyone looked much the same. Some of us strolled around the Sopley site on what was a damp Saturday. Photographs were taken, and

then we retired to a pub with a hall extension for refreshments, joined by more former colleagues, spouses and various children. The Vietnamese contingent included Diep (with husband Scott), Siu and Lanh, Ming Jen and his wife Quyen, 'Food Store' Minh, Duc and Cambodians Seng, Annie and her sister Madeline. It was a happy occasion. More photographs, and then it was time to say goodbye. Peter wrote and included some photos; he anticipated more get-togethers, neither of us thinking twenty-five years would elapse before we would meet up again, although we would be less in number and no Vietnamese present.¹⁸

1994 group photograph, adults only from left to right:

Duc, Diep's husband Scott, Chris, Angela (Eamonn's wife) & Eamonn, Siu & wife Lanh (standing top), Diep, Roger, Helen Clifford, Veronica Handscome, Joan Mathes, Madeline, Lucy Riegler (in charge of Medical Centre), Annie and Quyen. Photo lacks Alice, Seng, Peter, 'Food Store' Minh, Ming Jen, Liz and Karyn.



Above: Ming Jen, 'Food Store' Minh, Siu & Seng



Above left: Annie, Lanh & Scott
Left: Veronica Handscome, Joan Mathes, Lucy Riegler, Roger
Standing: Quyen, Siu, Ming Jen, Madeline, Helen, Karyn & Duc



Above: Liz Purchase & Siu

¹⁸ The 40th anniversary reunion last year on 5 October was actually close to my Sopley starting date 7th October 1979. Helen Clifford began a week or two later.

In March 2016 Eamonn visited Cheltenham with his pal Bill who had enjoyed a holiday at Sopley in 1982. Eamonn was always pleased to see Roger Jones who took him and Bill to the races, put them up and drove them out of Cheltenham to his favourite hostelry. Eamonn admired Roger especially for his ability to converse on any subject. He read a poem at Roger's memorial service in the Minster Church Cheltenham in March 2017, where Roger had been a stalwart parishioner.

Quach Binh Loi was at the memorial service too and my wife Joanna and I stayed in contact with him for over a year. Loi said he had tried to gain accreditation to practice dentistry here; his work was fine but his English was deemed not good enough. He found work as a cook and car mechanic; now retired he buys guitars at 'car boots', repairs and sells them. His daughter, married to an Englishman, lives in Gloucester. Loi's son, who has no memories of Sopley, lives in the same house as Loi and sings in the town centre; he has an excellent voice.¹⁹ Loi's sister, who smoked (untypical for a Vietnamese woman), husband and two sons lived in a flat near my mother. She and I visited them once (right) but they, like others elsewhere, subsequently decamped to London.



Loi's relative, Quach Kim Phan, (who learnt English quickly at Sopley, and became an interpreter at Thorney Island), married Kim's brother, Thai. Roger helped them to set up a basement restaurant in Cheltenham's fashionable Promenade, where Loi cooked. Phan died in 2005 and Thai later remarried. At Roger's memorial service he was unrecognisable, smartly attired in a suit and tie, and at ease chatting to Roger's brother Nigel, Lord Jones of Cheltenham; he did not approach Eamonn or me, although we chatted to his son who runs a nail bar in Cheltenham. Huu (Kim's 'forward' brother) has a restaurant in the town; as reported in the local press some years ago he was reprimanded for brandishing a shotgun at customers who queried their bill and were not inclined to pay up.
Above left: Phan smiling and waving alongside a sister



Looking back, fieldworkers had status, perhaps for the first time in a working situation. We were invested with both authority and power with which to exercise our responsibilities, that basically amounted to a duty of care for people (in some instances instructing much older people, probably not the usual order of command in Vietnamese society especially so in the case of female fieldworkers). Our usually polite clientele respected us, appreciating all staff were there to help them. Ours was a roving commission, with a good deal of flexibility and freedom. Moreover, we were valued and respected by our co-workers.

Above: the last fieldworkers. Clockwise (top) Simon, Eamonn, Michael O'Donnell, Helen Clifford and John Baker. Summer 1982. Michael, a librarian, died in Malawi in 1984. He replaced me when I moved to Chepstow.

¹⁹ Google 'Yeuey Qing', scroll down, click 'Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps' for an extract of him in action outside M & S. He has performed in a local restaurant and other venues. He told me he turned down an approach from the BBC as coming too soon, wanting instead to build a fan base that will, he hopes, lead to better opportunities.

The fact that Sopley resembled a village, and the resident population far outnumbered the residential staff, meant that sometimes as we went about our daily work, it was as if we were the guests and the Vietnamese our hosts.

Not everything was sweetness and light as my account illustrates, how could it be with traumatised people. But Sopley ‘worked’ as a ‘good enough’ model of ‘community’, small enough in space and numbers to be intimate and not too big in terms of space and numbers to be anonymous. It was as if the whole of the site ‘belonged’ to us, accordingly when I left my room in the morning to walk over for breakfast, I was not on strange soil but home territory. The staff knew everyone or at least recognised everyone and vice versa. The Vietnamese probably took comfort from security in numbers; Sopley was ‘home’ albeit temporarily.

The adults remembered their teachers primarily, the main recipients of notes and letters from resettled ‘students’. When Sopley closed most fieldworkers had to find a place to live, employment, the singles to meet spouses/partners, raise children etc, which left little time for much else. Except Karyn, no one else at the 2019 reunion had kept in long term touch with any of the Vietnamese, unlike Roger a bachelor, who kept up with the folk resettled in Cheltenham and maintained links with staff members, both English and Vietnamese.

With a few exceptions, a good spirit pervaded Sopley. An open disposition was a necessary prerequisite and some faces did not fit but those of us who were fully engaged share a special bond; interestingly of the nine of us who met up in October 2019 seven had gone on to work in the education and social care sectors, and as an Anglican vicar, Simon cares for soul.

The recent television documentary raised mental health as an issue for some folk (particularly following resettlement) but as a group the Vietnamese struck me as resilient and resourceful, and I have had no real cause to think differently. Would a group of English people fare any better in similar circumstances? I do not recall feeling sorry for the people in our care; they were not inclined to speak about their experiences and we were not inclined to probe. They put on happy faces and, I am told, tend not to look back. Also, they were survivors unlike an estimated 200,000 of their compatriots who drowned or were the victims of Thai pirates.

Le Thi Luc reached one hundred and many of the Le clan live in the West Midlands. Not all, Helen Clifford says Le Thi Dan and her daughter Mo have a nail bar in Lymington. And the succeeding generations born and raised here; what are their thoughts, feelings and aspirations, especially during young adulthood when a major task is to establish a separate identity for themselves?

Whether from North or South Vietnam, all the people were ‘in the same boat’. Unlike the thirty-nine people ‘trafficked’ and found dead in a container in Essex in October 2019, the people I met were ‘official’ not so-called illegals. They could look forward with some confidence without fearing that one day they might be discovered and deported. Being ‘official’ had another advantage, as facilitating family reunions remained government policy until 1989. Currently the Vietnamese community in this country numbers between twenty and thirty thousand.



Left: Kim, Risca September 1980

Was the relationship with Kim too good to be true? All I can say is it did not seem so at the time. It was not infatuation on my part; I maintain there was a mature connection between us, triggered by a mutual attraction. I recognised

the vulnerable position Kim was in, which was why I did not force the pace. I talked with Siu Sing Ling on a couple of occasions; all the signs pointed to a positive outcome. But I turned out to be very vulnerable after leaving Sopley. Kim made a better transition. Fieldworker John Baker married Lam a Vietnamese woman and that marriage has lasted.

I saw Kim for the last time early in 1982 in Newport, when she was staying in a basement flat with resettled friends from Sopley. A limited number of comprehensive English/Vietnamese dictionaries costing £17 became available at Sopley and I obtained a copy for her in 1980. However, at the conclusion of our final meeting she attempted to hand it back. I refused the offer. It was not the best of endings. She married within months (Luu Ha Sinh) and they have three grown up children.

It was Simon, at Sopley, who advised me ‘Always stay close to God’s people’. Wise words. After Chepstow my mental and emotional health deteriorated further but from mid-1985 to November 1992 I lived and worked in and around a monastery, Prinknash Abbey, where my recovery began. At Pentecost in 1991, in a moment of clarity, I understood the meaning of human existence, encapsulated by the phrase ‘the search for life and love’. I found both at Sopley, but only temporarily, and afterwards, just like before, I experienced many difficult testing periods. My ongoing recovery, involving an inner journey back to the roots of my being, has been supported by my wife Joanna who I met in November 1990 at Prinknash.

Now, as then, a long narrow country road, allows approaching cars to travel speedily to Sopley. Then, the first buildings sighted were staff huts and large outbuildings, shortly a left turn in to the main gate manned by Fred and Nick, based in what was originally the guardhouse. Now only one outbuilding remains. Helen Clifford is familiar with the site as a son lives in a house where Hut 8 stood. Going back, especially when some of the original dilapidated buildings were still standing, was unsurprisingly, a strange experience for her.

A favourite tape at Sopley was, still is, Phoenix by Dan Fogelberg, especially the poignant final song Along the Road, and the lines

‘A part of the heart
Gets lost in the learning
Somewhere along the road’

Cheltenham: Summer/Autumn 2020

chrisbentall@gmail.com



2020



1979



40th Anniversary Sopley Reunion
King’s Arms Waterloo London
5th October 2019
Clockwise (right)
Alice Merritt, Simon Foster,
Eamonn Doherty, Helen Granger, Peter Cox,
Helen Clifford, Chris Bentall,
Liz Etheridge (nee Purchase)
& Karyn Smyth

