

Kent

Planning Assistant

On the first of May, 1966 I started working for Kent County Council in England. After leaving Africa I stayed with my lovely aunt Edna (my father's sister) for a short time while I managed to get a job with the Planning Department of KCC.

I became a Planning Assistant on the basis of the geography aspects of my degree.

I have always been 'lucky' and after a few weeks, I was given a great job. I became responsible for Landscape Control which, in one of the most beautiful parts of England, was fantastic.

My predecessor, Jack, briefly taught me the ropes and then I was on my own. Surviving on my wits as always.

When the department approved a planning application we frequently included a condition that a landscaping scheme must be submitted and approved by the council. This had no legal force but as soon as a developer saw it they would ring the planning department to ask what we wanted. Those calls went to me. So I would organise a site meeting.

Our policy was to plant vegetation which was native to the area. Knowing nothing about plants, I followed the advice of my predecessor and went early to the meeting giving me time to wander around with a plant identification picture book before the meeting.

When asked for my advice, I would remember the Latin names of plants I had identified. So I would authoritatively say "plant Quercus Robur here" without a clue as to landscape gardening. Most of the time I got away with it as the developers had even less idea than I did, but occasionally I would encounter someone who appeared to know what they were doing so I would quickly shut up and nod my head in furious agreement.

I was more in my element when asked to attend a site meeting regarding the location of structures such as power lines. I could drive around and imagine the impact on the landscape coming up with some ideas on how it could be improved. Theoretically, I could have forced them to relocate the line but in reality, the electricity company had more power than me (pun intended).

I was given a large file about an application to construct a Readymix concrete plant near Maidstone. The people of Kent do not like concrete plants and several possible sites had been rejected by the department. Eventually, the Planning Manager herself had agreed on a site with the developer and the preservation of screening vegetation became my responsibility.

The problem was that the site was on a hill which could be seen from Maidstone so I put a condition on the approval that they had to keep some trees and bushes to screen the site. Just before I left Kent to go to Australia they cut down the bloody trees so the plant was a great eyesore on the skyline of Maidstone.

I was responsible for managing Tree Preservation Orders. These were a nightmare as old ladies were continually ringing the council to complain about people cutting down trees and I had to deal with these. My job was to find out if a TPO was in place, consider the possibility of applying for a TPO or just gently tell the complainant "bad luck" there is nothing I can do to stop it.

The people Kent love their trees (as do I) and get very irate when somebody cuts them down. Sometimes I had to go out and placate them, which was always interesting.

The worst TPO I had to deal with was a farmer who owned land through which the Sevenoaks Bypass passed. There were huge elms lining the road growing on his land. He was worried that they might fall over and kill somebody on the bypass. However, the trees were subject to a Tree Preservation Order and he was not allowed to fell them.

There was a huge thick file on the issue, as he had repeatedly said he had to cut them down as they were too dangerous. Our foresters had examined the trees and said they were healthy but they would not take any responsibility for them. So it was Catch 22 for the poor man. He would be liable if the trees squashed a car but he could not cut them down and the Council would take no liability if they did cause an accident.

Lo and behold, I received a panicked phone call from a nearby resident screaming: "he's cutting down the trees" As his action was illegal I consulted the county council solicitor first and he said that before I talked to the guy I must caution him.

So I arrived at the farm and made my way to the felling field. The farmer was there and I started by saying to him that anything he said might be taken down and used against him in a court of law.

Consequently, he refused to say anything to me (smart guy)

So I warned him that he was committing an offence against the Tree Preservation Order, took some photos and made some notes and left.

I was scheduled to appear as a witness in his trial but I left for Australia before the date, but that is another story.

Marriage

While I was living in Kent, every weekend I drove through the centre of London to Harpenden to see my girlfriend, Lesley. I proposed marriage to her and she accepted. Lesley was very attractive and artistic, but she was also a bit excitable and 'highly strung'. Most of my friends warned me not to marry her, but at that time I could manage her moods and loved her, so I didn't take their advice.

Her temperament may have been influenced by her being mollycoddled in childhood. She had a form of spina bifida at birth which led to problems in one foot. As she was growing up she had several operations on the foot. Lesley was always very concerned that her foot looked ugly and she had a slight limp but otherwise, it didn't seem to cause any problems for her.

Her family were a bit alien to me. I was brought up in a very relaxed creative environment with my mother teaching piano and my father forever reading poetry aloud to himself. Our dinner tables were noisy as we discussed various issues.

I would have dinner with Lesley's family and nobody would say a word. It was very strange to me. Lesley's father, Stan, was a sales director for a mosaic company and travelled regularly to the Middle East. He would come home after a trip and join us at dinner. There would be a stony silence, nobody would even ask him if he had a good trip. Very odd.

I remember he used to go to Germany and bring back smoked eel that I enjoyed.

Their house was new and they were definitely up-market compared with my family, I think they considered themselves posh. Even though my father was a partner in a firm of accountants, I never really fitted in with Lesley's folks, who tended to be stiff and formal. Lesley was also a bit rebellious and perhaps my more casual approach to life suited her.

Her family were not religious, so we were married in a registry office and had the wedding reception at her house. It was a surprisingly wild affair, perhaps due to my friends. Everybody got very drunk and I remember nobody could get in the downstairs toilet as somebody had collapsed in there blocking the door.

We were sent off in my old Wolseley 440 with its nutmeg dashboard. The car was covered with shaving cream and tin cans clattered off the rear bumper. Several days later I discovered that there were also fish on the engine block.

We drove to my flat in Kent as we could not afford a honeymoon.

I had been living in a small single room flat with a kitchenette, where I existed on vegetables, sprats (small cheap fish) and bacon scraps. I was only earning a pittance. When Lesley came we moved into a bigger room upstairs above a big bar. It was very noisy at night.

This was the sixties, and the sexual revolution was just taking off, but we had never 'slept' together and on our wedding night, we consummate our marriage. Unfortunately, it led to Lesley bleeding profusely and she was very worried and upset. I said it was just her hymen but she was not convinced and the next day I arranged for a doctor to visit her.

He said he was very surprised that a lady still had her hymen intact on her wedding night and was encouraged that there are still virgins in the world. He added that there was nothing wrong with her. Of course now we would just research it in Google but in those days we had no source of information.

I was looking for work as a geologist but couldn't find anything suitable in the UK so we decided to emigrate.

We obtained visas for both Canada and Australia. In the case of Canada, the High Commission told me to travel there and apply for a job but the Australian High Commissioner helped me apply for a job with the Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited (BHP) which was Australia's biggest steel company and needed geologists.

I got the job and we received an assisted passage to Australia. Those were the days when the Australian government subsidised your travel by sea so it only cost you ten pounds that is 'A Ten Pound Pom'

BHP wanted me to start work quickly and so it was arranged for us to travel by plane rather than the 6-week sea voyage.

BHP wanted me to work in the manganese mines of Groote Eylandt up in the Gulf of Carpentaria (a place I later became very familiar with) but there was a concern that Lesley's foot could cause problems in the hot humid climate and being a long way from major medical facilities.

We travelled to London and had an interview with BHP's representative in the UK to discuss the problems. Having recently lived in Africa, I remember asking him if the Aborigines worked as servants. A question he treated with appropriate Australian derision. Anyway, as a result, I was reassigned to Whyalla in South Australia.

So it was that we told our friends we would be back in a year or so and emigrated to Australia.