

**Narrative of a visit to**

# **South Africa**

**21/22 September to 5/6 October 2000**

**JPW**

## **Introduction**

This is not an analysis of South African social or political development, after five years interval, but rather a record of entirely subjective, but fascinating, personal experiences, over no more than two weeks, not shared by wife or partner, and so exposed to criticism.

I was advised by my friend Michael Oatley, who flies regularly (first class) to Johannesburg on business, that Virgin was now the best service. We always used to fly on South African Airlines. Oatley kindly sent me from his London Office, two pills, very small, amusingly marked 'suicide', to help me sleep on the eleven hours night flight. Aided by alcohol, the pills worked, with no side effects, in my cramped economy seat.

I was astonished to hear my young neighbour on the 'plane talking, from the moment he sat down at Heathrow, to a girl in Johannesburg. He proved to be a Unilever marketing man for Europe, clearly well off, who, since the spring, had commuted at his own expense to Johannesburg every Thursday night, returning on Sunday night, for work on Monday, to see this girl, of Greek origin and unhappily married. I said I hoped he found it worth while! He said it was, and on arrival he hared off for an interview for a job, which he had found on the internet, with a generous starting salary and house, in Johannesburg. All this opened my eyes to contemporary life.

## **Friday 22 September**

No problem with (entirely black or brown – no visible red-necked Afrikaners as in the past) Immigration and Customs. My rod case carefully segregated as 'fragile' by a courteous Virgin agent – all Virgin staff noticeably helpful – and there was 'Bushman', the Thornycroft's Tswana driver, holding up a board with my name. Competent and careful driver as he is, Bushman lost the way to the car, a pick-up or 'bakkie'. I urge him to consult someone (his English is limited) and he spoke to two passing blacks. When I asked him what language he used, he said 'Zulu'. We found the bakkie on an upper level. Modern bakkies have two rows of covered seats, with a truck's open back.

Bushman wore an elegant medal in the form of a cross. On our drive I asked him what it was. He said 'my Church'. Verity told me later he was, as many others, a member of a growing and powerful form of 'Christian' community who meet in the open air, certainly not in any Church, and chant and dance. I could hear them chanting loudly in one of the employees' two villages from my bedroom on Sunday. Bushman has his family house in Koster, a small ramshackle town, but with a Post Office, some 25 km from Morningside, but sleeps at the farm during the week.

He does all personal driving and chores for Hugh and Verity, including the 6.30am school run to the platinum mining Afrikaner town of Rustenburg, forty minutes away. Despite his rather curious name (how did he get it?) his first name is even more curious – Judas. But he could not be more faithful or reliable.

On coming out of the air-conditioned airport building, and smelling the warm and moist air on the grass, I was reminded, as before, of the quotation from Jung, on his first arrival, in Rian Malan's book *My Traitor's Heart*, which was a best seller in the early nineties, and contains one of the most striking first chapters I have ever read. Jung said "This country smells of blood".

Our exit from the airport and two hour drive (about 80 miles) to the North West, was uneventful at a steady 125 kph, the speed limit, ie 75 mph, on good roads up to the approaches to Morningside, where it turned into red-topped bumpy dirt.

The road from the airport, itself well away from the city, was lined by endless modern white buildings, light industry and distribution centres for all kinds of internationally recognised corporations. More developed than remembered. Plenty of traffic, with blacks at the wheel of all the big trucks and many family saloons. High standards of driving, no aggression, and courteous pulling over for passing vehicles. No police.

As we got into the country, I noticed how full, though scruffy, the rivers were. I had read about the exceptional rains. And we passed the first groups of appallingly squalid, crowded, tiny corrugated shacks, the greatest blot on the South African scene, and embarrassingly so. Yet plenty of cars and pickups among the ramshackle dwellings. Village huts (Rondavels) in the bush at least looked better, or am I crazy?

In two hours we had passed Derby and Koster, where Bushman collected post, and then Bushman pointed out a distant stretch of water among low blue hills, and said 'that is Morningside'.

Up to this point the country was farmed. Crops looking good, and many cattle grazing. But beyond Koster, it was, increasingly, arid, prickly, rocky bush, stretching for ever to Botswana. Only a few isolated farmsteads.

We came to a gate-house, barred gates, where a black guard, after opening up with a switch from within, saluted.

Then down a red-topped road to a green oasis, white fenced and scrupulously tidy. Horses, cows and huge sheds for pigs. Various houses visible. Deodars and gums (both originally imported) giving shade. Concreted roads in the farm areas. We drove to the office, where a young and pretty woman appeared and said in a strong Afrikaans accent, she was 'Marcia, office manager', who would show me to my room. It was about 1pm and everyone, she said, as Verity had warned me, would be at the 'topping out' or, as they called it, 'roof wetting', for 'Millvale Lodge', the huge, Georgian style, 30 room creation for the owner's friends and, later, to be an exclusive commercial refuge and party playground for individual millionaires and their friends, Japanese, American or even Brits. Is it a dream? Not for want of hard work and determination.

I felt, after the plane and drive, I must have a shave and a bath. I had a huge room (the house is on one level), looking out on the garden and flower beds, with bath and piping hot water next door.

So I bathed and changed, not really sure of my bearings, and found Marcia waiting for me. She walked me from Hugh and Verity's house, a few hundred yards across the grass, where water was sprinkling from automated outlets, past the owner's house and up to the lawn in front of Millvale Lodge where a group of about thirty men and their wives, the men in shorts and the women dressed up, were sitting or standing around with drinks. I found Hugh and Verity, who welcomed me with huge hugs, though fully occupied with the guests and buffet. I was the only, and conspicuous, outsider, but everyone was welcoming, if some almost blushing shy. They were the contractors, engineers, architect, plasterers, electricians and so on, all building, miles from anywhere, this sensational edifice. The owner of the main construction firm, a beaming bearded man, told me he was a third generation Italian, and talked Italian still in the family. He described the complications of planning delivery from Johannesburg of a correct sequence of different materials.

I was given several glasses of a robust red wine and food, and introduced to all. After a while I was introduced to Richard Charter, the owner, to whom, though far from assertive or self-important, all deferred. He is tall, late forties, with an easy, confident manner. He made a charming speech, thanking the assembled work force, after the buffet. His wife, younger, is pretty, elegant and unassuming. They have just had a baby daughter whom Janet brought from the house to show to the company. Richard Charter told me that the village of Derby, through which we had come, was named after the 'Derbyshire Regiment', who had been in these parts in the Boer War, but who had been ambushed and lost twenty eight men to the guerrilla fighters of the dashing Boer General, Piet Retief. He went on that his grandmother had been Retief's daughter. At some point she had married a British soldier, but had died in a British concentration camp. He told me this in an even-handed matter-of-fact manner, but I cannot help wondering what resentment such a shameful tale may confer. I have heard lately that 20,000 Boers, men, women and children, died in these camps.

I rather stupidly commented that I had never met or heard of the Derbyshire Regiment, though I had soldiered alongside the Derbyshire Yeomanry (Lt Col Sir Ian Walker Okeover Bart, a true hunting Yeomanry commanding officer) who were in tanks, during the War in North Italy. Richard Charter did not argue. But I had to eat humble pie. Hugh gave me later Thomas Pakenham's monumental *The Boer War* and there was an account of the ambush of the Derbyshire Regiment. All the same they no longer exist, I am sure. I wanted to apologise to Richard Charter, so, after the weekend, when he and his wife had gone back to Johannesburg, I drafted, and Verity typed for me, a fax to apologise for challenging the name of the regiment in his story, thanking him for his hospitality (of course he had paid for the lavish buffet and drinks) and wishing him success in his aim of making Morningside 'the best estate' in the country. I have since learned from a friend who is an expert in military history that the Derbyshire Regiment was raised in 1823 and eventually amalgamated with the Sherwood Foresters, now the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters.

Hugh and Verity thought that my fax was calculated to please Richard greatly, but in fact I never heard any reaction. He seems to be so busy that he

cannot have much time for trivial personal exchanges with strangers. It seems that he owns one or more internal airlines, and deals world-wide in aeroplane sales. He is also British Aerospace's representative in South Africa. During my two week visit he was in Australia and then the UK on business. When he comes to Morningside at weekends, often by helicopter, he and Hugh meet for business discussions at 6 am. And they are on their mobile phones (which they call 'cell phones') to each other at all times. So indeed was everyone else I met. I suppose, because of the vast distances and isolated properties, this constant communication by 'phone, or, in the estate, by radio, is a comfort, and in some cases essential, but I felt it was often used unnecessarily, just as I do in the UK. All the same it works miraculously and Hugh speaks to his brothers in Zimbabwe or Mozambique with facility.

I think Richard Charter is involved in big deals of equipment, including military equipment, but, although Hugh alluded to a particular current deal, I do not think he knew the details. Richard keeps a very low profile and avoids all personal publicity.

When the new mansion is completed, in the New Year, Richard and his wife will occupy part of it, and Hugh and Verity will move, with Blake, nine years old, and the labrador 'Jag', into the Charters' present house, in fact not much better or bigger than the one in which they now live, which has five bedrooms, a large dining room, and also a large sitting room, study and T.V room, and big kitchen. Two maids come in at fixed hours and do the wash (in the machine) and ironing. But Verity cooks, very simply, for the family and personal guests. Fresh and creamy milk, straight from the grey Swiss cows, lots of eggs and salads; biltong (no use to me) for snacks, too much ham for my taste. Plenty of beer (not for me), whisky and wine. I was more and more impressed by South African wine. Perhaps the best is not exported?

Hugh later told me a story about Richard Charter which illustrates his single minded business resolve. It came up casually, and Hugh had no ulterior purpose. Richard and Hugh found a large parcel of unproductive, sandy farming land in the Northern Cape which, they knew, was the best area for sand grouse shooting which is was possible to acquire. There were about twenty Afrikaner small farmers there, each owning and eking out a hopeless livelihood from his own parcel of land. Richard summoned them to a meeting, offered them all a good price and gave them a month to decide. He stipulated that all had to agree to sell. Otherwise no deal. When he came back all but two agreed to sell. The two held out, perhaps for a better price. Charter gave them another month. When he returned, the obdurate two still held out. The remainder begged him to buy, and free them from their penury. Richard did not haggle, but said 'no deal', and flew off in his helicopter. I said, 'But you wanted the land.' Hugh said, 'Yes, but that's the way he operates, and he put it behind him.' Hugh said he himself would have loved to build up the shooting. I said he was crazy as he had more than enough to do developing Morningside. He assented wryly.

Hugh Thornycroft is just 50 years old. He grew up on a large farm not far from Harare, Zimbabwe. His father, from a Shropshire family, served in the

Norfolk Regiment in the War. Curiously, Lee, an expert genealogist, traced one of her English ancestors to Thornycrofts in the Middle Ages, and once led me to the area of their ancestral house. I cannot remember that we found the house, or perhaps it had been pulled down.

Hugh's father was a noted wild fowler and wrote a classic book on wild fowling. An article in the Shooting Gazette in 1999 commemorated his book and Verity asked me to get it for Hugh. This I did by calling the paper, and kept it till I could bring it with me on my visit. Hugh is now trying to get a copy of his father's book on the E-net. Apparently no copies are left at the family house in Zim.

Hugh's parents had five boys of which Hugh is the second. They all grew up living a wild and sporting life in Zim under severe discipline from their father to whom Hugh refers, in John Buchan-like style, as 'the Old Man'. One of his brothers was killed flying his own plane, some years ago, leaving a wife and child. Another is a successful commercial pilot, carrying strange cargoes all over the world. The third survivor keeps a crocodile farm and a restaurant in Mozambique. Hugh is looking forward to visiting him before Christmas to shoot, fish and help him catch the crocodiles. He has not done this before, but says cheerfully, 'I think you just go in and grab them'. Typical of Hugh, who is afraid of nothing. The last brother runs the family farm in Zim, with his 90 year old mother in residence. So far they have escaped Mugabe's mobs or expropriation, but they have boldly taken options on land in Mozambique, now safe and developing prosperously, as a precaution. Hugh's mother has discovered ancient drawings or paintings on the farm, previously unimagined, and she has become a respected leading expert on African antiquities. When she came to Morningside before my visit she had flu but recovered to go back to Zim by air, unaided, very game at 90. Hugh told me on the telephone: 'That is one tough piece of biltong!'

Hugh did National Service in Zim, then went abroad to farm in the Argentine and then Europe, doing various jobs, but returned to join the Rhodesian Army as an officer and saw a lot of action. They refer to action as 'contacts'. In S Africa he managed Chris Saunders' (Chairman of the Hulett Tongaat firm, North of Durban) stud farm near Nottingham Road for 12 years, then put himself through a business school in Cape Town, and then, when Tilla and I visited them at Ballito in 1996, he was managing a golf course and housing development at Princes Grant. But his heart was in farming and wild life, and he came out above 200 applicants for Morningside, helped by an enthusiastic personal reference from Chris Saunders, who had previously (and, as he admitted later, mistakenly) sacked him at a day's notice, when Hugh told him, in an informal talk, that one day he would want to leave for a fresh opportunity. Such are the whims of millionaire 'owners', even with friends, as Chris and Hugh remain. Relations with Charter seem close and intimate, and also between the wives. But in the end, it's the owner's whim which governs the future.

Verity has an equally interesting history. Her father, called Engels, escaped from Antwerp when the Nazis invaded, aged 19, and joined the British Navy. His family owned a well known chain of restaurants in Belgium, to the management of which he was destined to succeed. But he met and married a Bristol girl, with

whom Tilla and I went to tea, now a widow, in Ballito, living comfortably and owning a gift shop. She and Verity's father boldly discarded the Antwerp business and set sail for South Africa, where they created and managed a hugely successful restaurant in Kwa Zulu, on the coast, well to the North, where, I gather, they catered largely to blacks. Verity and her two brothers grew up with liberal values, opposed to Apartheid. Her brothers have successful careers in Cape Town, one in the African pop music world. She entered upon a career in journalism and lectured, making a good income, at Durban University. For some years she worked as Communications Director of Hulett-Tongaat, which at that time had some 35,000 employees (now 15,000) making textiles and sugar. She edited a readable and stimulating house magazine, called the *Condenser*, which contained original articles on African antiquities, history, art, and sociology, as well as news about the firm's activities. She married Hugh about 12 years ago as his second wife, and Blake (9) is their only child. She is now 40 and tried for another child, but lost it, earlier this year, after a birthday party for 40 of her Natal girlfriends in Ballito. In their contract with Richard Charter, Verity insisted that she and Blake should have six free air passages a year back to Natal, to escape from the cultural desert of the Transvaal. Verity does a big job at Morningside, running a crèche and clinic for the employees, managing a good deal of the office and communications, and supporting Hugh, with whom she shares many decisions, though Hugh runs the farm and wild life on his own judgements. Verity had a sticky start with Richard Charter, but confronted him, and now all is amicable.

Tilla always said that Hugh looked like Robert Redford, and he does, but Hugh is much bigger and taller, 6 foot 3 inches. Though well proportioned and lean, he is enormously strong. He can shoe a horse, build or mend a petrol engine, fish and shoot anything including poachers, deliver a foal, and can plan a budget. He works almost fanatically hard, and keeps control of everything on the estate, as well as planning all the extraordinarily ambitious development of golf course, game farm, acquisitions of neighbouring land, and agricultural and domestic animal care and production. He knows every bird and beast and pointed out some exotic nests in the garden which I would not otherwise have seen. His stories of boyhood in Zim are like the *Jungle Book* or *And a River Runs Through It*. Once as a boy he and one of his brothers found a huge snake (did he say a python?) and Hugh picked it up with his arms stretched. Suddenly, as it was so long, its tail coiled round him, and he was in trouble. I think he had to get his brother to shoot it. They all fished daringly on the Zambesi.

Hugh and Verity are a devoted and loving couple, and combine brilliantly. Hugh is positive, cheerful and resolute, but always modest and civil to all, especially the black managers and employees. He speaks Zulu, not Afrikaans or Tswana. He addresses the black employees, always courteously, even when correcting a fault, in English.

Verity is more emotional with a great capacity for friendship. She is well read and is sad that she has no-one who really shares her literary and cultural interests at Morningside. She loved Tilla with whom she talked freely. The white managers' wives, though friendly enough, and Verity is warm to them, are short on culture. The Afrikaner small farmers' wives in the neighbourhood, and the

platinum mining community in Rustenberg, are even shorter. I could not understand them, when we were shopping, and they could not understand me. Verity does however speak fluent Afrikaans, as well as Zulu. Before she was married Verity was selected, with a group of young women, including blacks, to represent South Africa, on a debating tour in American Universities. One or two of the group were rabid supporters of apartheid, but Verity stood up to them and defended her liberal values against all opposition.

Blake is an enchanting small boy, bright and athletic, but with some form of over-excitability in his brain, which leads to severe mood changes. He has to take pills to calm him. The advice is that he will grow out of it. He goes to a private school in Rustenberg, run by nuns, but with lay teachers. When he is 11 he will board weekly in Pretoria. Verity encourages him to read or listen to talking books, and reads classics to him most nights. Hugh is splendid with him and brings him on in all country matters. Apparently he is popular in school, and has done well, as Verity faxed to me on my return, in the swimming gala. I grew fond of him, as Tilla and I also felt warm to him in 1996 when he was very temperamental.

Verity is patient and lovingly encouraging to Kent and Lara, Hugh's twenty plus children by his first, sad, bitter and alcoholic wife, in Pieter Maritzburg. Hugh supports all three generously. Kent is talented and good looking but moody and idle at his university. Lara is even better looking and doing very well. Tilla and I met them both five years ago.

Now to return to my first day. After the lunch I came back to my room and slept till 6.30pm. Meanwhile John and Linda Benwell arrived from Cape Town via Johannesburg, for the weekend, and we all met for drinks before supper. Hugh and Verity were pleased with the way the lunch party had gone. Verity had done all the food, as Hugh had had to sack the man, English by origin, who had been appointed as catering manager; he had come with false references about his skills as a chef and proved a fraud by his performance at Richard Charter's shooting party (?for guinea fowl), his first test.

My cold, caught on the return plane from New York, was streaming, and I was embarrassed by the absence of Kleenex in the house. Verity admitted she had run out and not restocked. All the same I felt well enough even after the long night flight, and lunch festivities. I handed out the presents I had brought, the copy of the Shooting Gazette, a Hardy reel and malt for Hugh; bottles of Verity's preferred scents and chocolates; and for Blake, a travelling chess set, which he wanted, and a Leeda reel. Blake's delight was a joy to see.

Linda and John Benwell were both previously married, each with grown up children. Linda is an attractive, strikingly clear minded, 46 year old, who runs a travel agency outside Cape Town, in the wine district, with 19 employees. She has previously been a publicity director for a chain of hotels. And managed large hotels in Pieter Maritzburg and Johannesburg. She and Verity met when both were selected to be part of the South African debating group in America, and became close friends. She used to be an outstanding tennis and hockey player. In conversation she went straight to the heart of any question.

John Benwell, 60 or so, was large and dominating; he was once a trade union leader, but now runs a number of businesses, providing health and pension insurance, and travels widely throughout South Africa. The Thornycrofts said he was a brilliant businessman. He has a macho attitude to family life and claimed that the only way to bring up children, even in their late teens, was to beat them. Linda rebuked him openly and robustly for these and similar opinions. I think he had a kinder heart than his aggressive opinions indicated.

It was curious to me that neither with the Benwells nor others whom I met later, did discussion turn to the current A.N.C. government's social and political policies, though all commented freely on economic matters, prices, crops and investment. I do not remember Mbeki or Mandela being mentioned, except later with Hugh and Verity alone, in the case of Mbeki's curious views, on the subject of AIDS. Hugh had said that two of the farm's employees had died of AIDS. He thought others had it, largely due to the blacks' open and socially accepted sexual promiscuity. In general there seemed to be a tacit acceptance of black political government, coupled with a resigned condemnation, born of practical experience, of black character faults and inadequacies. But Hugh and Verity are shining examples of determination and success in training their employees in disciplined skills. Not once did I hear throughout my stay any expressions of nostalgia for a past white government. The circle I met openly disliked Afrikaners, though outwardly they get on with them, as they must.

### **Sunday 23 September**

After breakfast, eggs and bacon cooked by Verity, I and John Benwell went with Hugh through the nine foot steel meshed fence, in Hugh's bakkie which he drives on and off the tracks like a tank, into the game park. The purpose was for Hugh to refuel two isolated water pumps. The estate is dotted with automatic water pumps, and sprinklers on the farm itself, which are controlled to come on at set times or at will individually by a computer in the office. Hugh designed and controls the system.

The whole estate, the bulk of which is the game reserve, totals 16,000 acres. There is a contract team of 30 erecting fencing, which has been done from scratch in 18 months, as has the beautifully designed (by Gary Player) golf course. Nine holes now and work is starting on the next nine holes, carved out of virgin rocky bush. The greens are perfect, kept by (Hugh said) the only black fully trained head greenkeeper in South Africa. Other than the fencing contractors, there are 120 black male employees, game wardens, gate keepers, pig managers, gardeners and so on. Electricity provides cooking, heating (it is bitterly cold in winter, and sometimes snows) and power for machinery. There is a reserve generator. Holes are bulldozed in the bush for all refuse. The only weakness is the telephone and fax line which frequently suffers faults. The employees live in well built cottages, inspected at unannounced intervals by Hugh, with free light, no rent, and free water, but not telephones. Many, however, have their own cell phones and the Morningside football team organises its matches by this means. I did not ask if they have television, but assume so.

On our drive to the pumps in the game reserve we saw wart hogs (who burrow holes under the fences), wildebeest, springbok and ostrich. We did not see the pair of rhinos, but Hugh pointed out their droppings. Hugh is buying hippos, which come in huge trucks, to put in the dams, of which there are several on the estate, full of bass, which take the wet fly. There is also a huge dam outside the estate on which Hugh has his eye. There are cottages on its banks where people come, with boats, for the weekend. Hugh is minded to buy and develop there. No-one seems to be worried about a shortage of water, and they use it freely in the house, for the pool (not yet filled, as not hot enough), for the garden, farm and the golf course, sprinkled extensively several times a day. Hugh said there were leopard in the hills but they were very rarely seen. The game is so far quite interesting, if not as exciting as the Kruger, for instance, which Tilla and I enjoyed in 1996, but Hugh aims to build it up, but not with lion or elephant, nor, I think giraffe.

On our return, we found Janet Charter and the game manager's wife drinking on the lawn with Verity. Janet's charm confirmed my first impressions. She talked about the house they were building in Hermanus in the Cape, but did not know Sally Graaf, who lives there and is a good friend of mine.

At intervals during the rest of the day, we all watched the Olympics, fully covered on the television. I had a good walk, after a rest, round the golf course. Spectacular and enticing water holes. My back and leg normal after a bad time in the summer.

Quiet supper. Everyone, except Linda and I, to bed at 9.30pm. Hugh and Verity are up and in the office by 6am. No wonder they are early to bed.

### **Sunday 24 September**

I had breakfast at nine alone, but Hugh joined me for his porridge and fresh cow's milk after his usual 6am session in the office with the owner. The sky was a clear blue, with a breeze, and it was hot by 11am.

John Benwell and I drove out with Hugh about ten miles to a few scattered houses called Moedvil, on the road to Rustenburg, to buy the Sunday Times. The small shop was black owned. Hugh, as usual, bought and drank Coke, and smoked cigarettes in the bakkie, though he does not smoke in front of Verity. On our return to the gate, Hugh learned from the guard that James, one of the game wardens who maintain a constant mounted patrol, had fallen off and lost his horse. Hugh immediately set out, with two security guards in the back to find the horse. We eventually found it, deep in the reserve, but it ran off the other side of the fence. The two guards, like monkeys, climbed over the fence with ease, and after a long pursuit, headed the frightened animal back to the road to the farm where they caught it and returned it to the paddock with the other horses. It transpired that James had been bucked off, had caught the horse and tied it to the fence but it had broken its bridle and galloped off. A typical adventure on the farm, and decisively co-ordinated by Hugh.

I had suggested to Linda that we should take Hugh and Verity out to dinner in Rustenburg, and Blake too if he wanted to come. It was half term so he did not

have to go to school on Monday. There was some hesitation on the grounds that no-one knew if anything would be open on Sunday, and the restaurant scene was said to be far from attractive. But a plan was made, on my urging, and we all set off in two vehicles. Contrary to all the warnings, we found an uncrowded restaurant open in a sort of big shopping centre, and had a splendid time, with a first class meal and plenty of wine. John Benwell and Hugh took Blake off while waiting for the meal to play a sort of automated lottery. To his great delight Blake won a fine watch and a woolly animal and they all returned triumphant. The menu was amazingly varied, with plenty of fish, to my surprise. I and the girls had mussels and sole, both delicious, and the two men had steaks. We all had elaborate desserts, and drank two white and two red bottles selected by John Benwell, who knows his Cape wines. I was glad to use up my rands, at 10 to the £, and paid - only £75 for six of us, including 10% tip, which, Linda advised me, was the norm.

### **Monday 25 September**

We said goodbye to the Benwells after breakfast. Linda planned to look at an hotel in Johannesburg for her clients. She later told us it was hopeless. She also said she would meet me at the airport for a drink before my departure as she would be going down to Cape Town at the same time.

Hugh invited me to come to a game auction at which he wanted to bid. His game manager, Stuart, about 30, short and dark, came too. Hugh told me that Stuart, though knowing his game, was hopelessly and obdurately averse to any innovation. Hugh had to try to persuade him to adopt any new and improved practice by careful but persistent suggestion. I have a feeling he will not last forever unless he becomes more positive.

We went by way of Rustenberg and Brits, in the general direction of Pretoria. On the way I asked Stuart what were the characteristics of the local Tswana people. He said 'lazy and insolent'. This hit me like a slap. It came out so pat. He went on that while the Zulus were warriors, the Tswana normally occupied clerking and commercial jobs. Hugh did not comment; nor did I pursue it.

We had a two hour drive, for the most part on good tarmac roads, and then, turning off, for half an hour down a series of chokingly dusty red-topped tracks, until we entered an evidently huge estate, well fenced, and after twisting about, emerged to a series of large sheds, and a large crowd of men, women and children, crowding in from their vehicles for a day out. It was apparently a public holiday called 'Heritage Day' but I could not find out what this meant. It was very hot.

Nearly all the people were Afrikaners, the women mostly elegant and the men large, with big hats, and some pot-bellied and bearded. But everyone seemed good humoured. There was a bar and food was being cooked by teams of white women.

We walked, led by Hugh, round a long series of sheds, with stalls into which one peered for a sight of the animals to be auctioned. Hugh had registered an entry as a buyer and we all got auction catalogues. The catalogues, in Afrikaans and English, listed the sellers, 'Sable Ranch', where we were, 'Kwalata', 'Thaba Tholo' and 'Willie Powell'. But I did not see any black buyers, though blacks were doing

all the work around the animals and driving the huge trucks which transported them. There were rhinos, both black and white, giraffes, zebras, and every kind of buck, nyala, gemsbuck, kudu, impala, wildebeest and others, some in pairs or threes, some females with calves. Hugh wanted nyalas and made notes as we went round. At 11am the buyers, and some spectators, crowded into the huge auction shed. I guess over 300 people. It was increasingly hot. Then the auctioneer began to shout. He had four assistants up and down the hall who stood shouting 'yes' and pointing to any bidder. The noise was frightful. After an hour I went out and sat and smoked a cigar in the shade and watched the people. Hugh and Stuart emerged and we got curry and rice lunches and beer. It was difficult to find a seat at the trestle tables. Hugh said the auctioneer was useless; the prices were absurdly high and above his budget; he had failed to buy anything; but, as usual, he accepted the situation calmly. We went back into the shed where there was more room now, but still Hugh dropped out of the bidding. As we were sitting, a shifty looking, slightly built man with a moustache, sidled up to Hugh and offered him some nyala, to be sent from the Zim border. After some bargaining Hugh did an oral deal over price, cheque on delivery., though he continued afterwards, in spite of telephoned assurances to Morningside, to say he would not believe it until the animals (and the seller had offered more than originally) were all safely delivered. And up to the time of my departure there was no sign of them.

So we drove back to Morningside. In the game park Hugh drove boldly across country, up and down steep declivities, to show Stuart where he had come to an agreement with a householder to buy part of her land, create a walk way along a stream and fence it off. It was in a huge gorge. I was too tired by then to accompany them into the gorge on foot. Hugh, as usual, indefatigable, and indicating to Stuart, always in the form of a suggestion, what he wanted him to do while we were all away at the fishing lodge near Dullstroom. Stuart, true to character, showed no enthusiasm.

We went back to the house for tea, drinks and casserole of guinea fowl, shot by Hugh, for supper. The auction had been for me an astonishing experience. It seems that there is a huge market for live wild animals. Game parks are being created everywhere.

After supper I talked with Verity. Quite casually she began to tell me how a year ago Bushman had been kidnapped, on the way to fetch Blake and two other boys from school in Rustenburg. He had stopped to buy some groceries at a store, as instructed. When he got to the school, with the boys waiting, nuns in attendance, two blacks tapped on his window. He opened it (Verity said this was a mistake) and they said he had not paid fully for the groceries and had to return with them to make amends. Bushman protested and got out his receipt. The men produced pistols, got into the bakkie and told Bushman to drive off. The nuns and boys, mystified but unsuspecting, were left of the school's steps. The men threatened Bushman continuously and hit him. Verity said he was wisely submissive and did not look them in the eye. If he had, she said, they would have killed him. They took him to Soweto, some 90 miles, and beat him up. Verity said that their objective was to take the vehicle. After a while, by now in the dark, they threw him out and told him to run or they would shoot him. Terrified, and with no

idea of his whereabouts, he ran for his life and by extraordinary luck came to the house of a school teacher who took him in and helped him and asked where he came from. Bushman knew the Morningside number but was too shocked to speak himself. He had no idea where he had been taken in the Soweto maze, where one house looks like another. The school teacher called Verity, who had been almost overcome with anxiety. She said that when Bushman had not returned from the school, she had a vivid premonition that he had been kidnapped. Thereafter Hugh in the office had co-ordinated a huge search with the aid of the police, and helicopters produced by Richard Charter. But until the call from the school teacher, who described where he lived, there had been no trace of the bakkie or Bushman. Verity got the school teacher to take him to the nearest police station and herself drove all the way to fetch him. She took him back to Morningside, wrapped him up and put him to bed. He was severely shaken, but not seriously damaged. The bakkie was never found. The villains had quickly disconnected the tracking device from which the vehicle could be traced. So, except for the bakkie's loss, it all ended without ill effects. I have heard before from Verity of appalling murders and robberies in Natal. To me the wonder is that these incidents take place in an otherwise comfortable, normal world, and those who experience them, take them in their stride, accepting the need for every kind of precaution and alertness even while on their normal pursuits. The boys were entirely untouched by unpleasantness. It all reminded me, in some ways, of Northern Ireland.

### **Tuesday 26 September**

A glorious blue day. At 11.30am, after a lot of telephoning, José and Lori du Charmoy arrived with their pretty 12 year old daughter from Sun City, which is about 50 miles away. They had come up from Natal in their 4-wheel drive vehicle for a holiday, and stayed at Sun City and visited a game farm. They left, I think, two older children, late 'teens, at Sun City. Tilla and I had visited them on their large sugar cane farm near Ballito in Natal in 1996. Lori, about 58, slim and fit, produces exotic flowers, whose name I can never remember, under glass, and sells them in Johannesburg, but she said that it was increasingly hard, though I am not sure why. José's family originally came from Mauritius. He is bearded, thickset, practical and friendly. I reminded him that in 1996 he had terrible union problems, and had then sacked all the disaffected workers, relying on separate contractors. He said all the troubles were long since gone, and his farm workers had returned contritely. Verity said that he was not only successful, but very successfully rich. Lori has this year completed 'the Comrades', the annual fifty, repeat fifty, mile race run between Durban and Pieter Maritzburg, starting alternately from each town. Thousands run, and many complete it. I looked at Lori with admiration. 'Once is enough', she said, in answer to my question. Modestly José admitted that he had completed the race himself some years ago.

We had a happy cold lunch on the lawn. Conversation general and not serious. Mostly about commercial affairs in Natal. The du Carmoys said that Sun City was sensational, and great fun. They all went off at 4.30pm. I walked for an hour round the golf course. We all busied ourselves with packing for the following day's journey.

### **Wednesday 27 September**

Hugh packed the bakkie brilliantly, and we took off on the 300 mile drive to Millstream cottages near Dullstroom, 120 miles N.E of Pretoria. We first collected Andrew, Blake's friend, from his suburban house, well fenced, on a road above Rustenburg, lined with similar middle class high-fenced houses. Andrew proved the opposite of Blake, nicely mannered, stolid and unemotional; but they got on well, like puppies. The boys enjoyed a hole under the tarpaulin at the back of the bakkie, whence emerged constant giggles. Hugh drove at 145 kph, above the limit but very surely. The outstanding feature on the first stage was the huge dam, Hartbeestport, its steep sides lined with holiday homes, restaurants and antique shops, some forty miles out of Pretoria. Like an inland sea. Small black boys offered strawberries. Verity haggled for some, and said 'I love haggling, and you have to do it'. After some discussion, Hugh decided to drive right through Pretoria, which proved easy enough. The jacaranda trees were coming into bloom, a beautiful mauve colour, the glory of Pretoria, and a contrast to the grim Voortrekker Monument.

Beyond Pretoria the country is flat, open, dull and stretching for ever, only broken by the ugly coal mining town of Witbank, which the road luckily skirted. We havered about a place for lunch, but in the end decided to press on, turning left at Belfast, and climbing quickly among attractive grassy hills, with blocks of trees dotting the crests. We arrived in Dullstroom, which looked like a small resort or retired people's place, at 12.30, 300 miles or so in 4 hours. We chose the Old Transvaal Inn, very Afrikaans, but welcoming, and had an excellent lunch and shandies on the porch. I had chicken liver pancakes, as did Verity. Hugh had some strange Afrikaans dish.

Then we drove back to Millstream about 3 miles south of Dullstroom. Down a track, sign in at the gate, kept by an alert looking black, and to the Reception. Then to the Thornycroft's time share cottage, situated above one of the larger dams - fine views to the hills all round. There are some fifteen cottages and about the same number of dams, of different sizes, linked by streams, and all stocked with well conditioned rainbow trout. Catch to kill is limited, and catch-and-release encouraged. The estate is full of zebra and every kind of buck, quickly identified by Hugh. Two maids come to clean every day, and bring the paper on Sundays.

The cottage had five bedrooms, four baths (piping hot water), and a huge kitchen and living room. Thankfully no T.V. Verity brought loads of food, beer and wine, and quickly arranged everything tidily. Hugh and I put up rods and drove off to fish on an upper dam. Fish were showing and I thought, mistakenly, I would set an example with a dry fly, but no use. Hugh got a 3lb fish with a sinking line South African "Mrs Simpson" wet fly. The wind was sharp and I got cold and walked a mile home as it grew dark. After all, we were at 6,000 feet above sea level, so not surprisingly cold. Hugh lit a log fire every evening.

### **Thursday 28 September**

Blue sky, sun and wind. We all drove into Dullstroom and left Verity to get herself coffee and shop. Hugh and I then left the boys to have milk shakes in

another café, run by a charming girl who said she would look after the boys. Then, ignoring the Afrikaaner tackle shops, with names like 'Piet's Fishing', we went up a side road to another shop kept by an Indian called Mahmood, which Hugh remembered from the past. Mahmood said he was the third generation from Bombay. He seemed well settled but when I asked Hugh later if Mahmood would be accepted by the Afrikaaners, he said it was unlikely. All the same Mahmood had a huge variety of tackle, was willing to make bowlines for leaders or put on backing and lines, and showed himself vastly knowledgeable about local conditions and tactics. I should have listened to him, as all his talk was of going down deep. I was amazed to find his Hardy rods and reels were half the price I would pay, and did pay for Hugh's reel, in UK. Mahmood explained that he imported at a handsome discount. I bought some South African flies and some leaders, and Hugh bought himself a new economical Japanese rod.

Back at the cottage, again after a lot of telephoning en route, Serge and Suzie Gaboreau arrived, after a six hour drive from Tongaat, Natal, in time for lunch. Tilla and I met them in Tongaat in 1996. They are close friends of Hugh and Verity; indeed, I think they introduced them when Hugh was living alone after his divorce at Chris Saunders' stud up above Nottingham Road.

Serge was born near Orléans, one of a large family, and after training as a chef, went to work as a cook for Baron Bentinck, the Dutch Ambassador in Paris. There he met and married Suzie when both were very young. They are now about 50, with two, South African rooted, grown up sons. When the Baron was posted away from Paris, Serge and Suzie decided to come to South Africa, though they spoke not a word of English. They had a French friend who was head cook in Johannesburg for Harry Oppenheimer and his wife, who encouraged them. They started a restaurant in Johannesburg which, it seems, was successful, though they were cheated and robbed by Serge's partner. Eventually their friend decided to retire to France and recommended Serge to the Oppenheims as his successor. They were taken on, and a close and successful relationship developed and lasted for a number of years when Serge was tempted by an offer from Chris Saunders to come to Natal as catering manager and chef for the Directors of Hulett-Tongaat. The parting from the Oppenheims was painful, but they still maintain good relations with Harry Oppenheimer's widow. Both Serge and Suzie have a happy capacity for close relations, often as confidants, with their employers. Now, after many years, they are an institution and the repository of knowledge about people and events in the company. But with the decline of the company and hard cost-cutting by Chris Saunderson's successor, they are uneasy about the future. Meanwhile they enjoy a most comfortable life, generous salary, free house, free car, and their only duty to produce lunch during the week for about a dozen directors plus the occasional evening party. Talks turned during their stay at Millstream on the possibility of them offering to go independent, as contractors, and supplying the same services to the company and to others privately. Verity said they would be very much in demand. Serge said he would no longer be at home in France, and knew no-one, though he described with gusto, and with every course explained, a large family lunch recently in honour of his mother's eightieth birthday at a restaurant near her home. Despite their intimacy with Chris Saunders, who comes

to chat with Serge daily, and his successor, they are timidly resistant to any idea of broaching their future with either, perhaps mindful of what happened to Hugh. So they will probably sit tight and hope for the best, like Mr Micawber. Suzie is as good a cook as Serge, and never stops working. She is small and fit and has also run the 'Comrades' fifty miles, with success. She is sensible as well as nice. They both now speak English well. I talked to them regularly in French, but not when Hugh and Verity were present. Serge is more temperamental than his wife, but loves cooking and produced for us delicious and original meals. So much so that he was much opposed to my suggestion that we should all treat ourselves, at my expense, to the best meal in the neighbourhood. Verity knew of two excellent restaurants and even booked, but Serge was so sulky that nothing came of it till our last evening together, a Sunday evening. Suzie said he behaved so badly and critically in restaurants that he spoilt the occasion for all!

Serge has become a fanatical dam fisherman. He knows nothing of rivers and is frightened of the South African spates. But he is clever, and successful, in dams.

### **Friday 29 September**

I felt tired and wondered if it was my cold or the height, over 6,000 feet up. Serge caught two good fish before breakfast and returned for a breakfast of calves' liver and white wine. Verity and Suzie walked to Dullstroom and back, some six miles in all. The boys went off to fish with Hugh. I had already given them both some casting instruction, flattered by Hugh's descriptions of my expertise. But I was already somewhat disillusioned by my abject failure to connect, even with a wet fly, and I knew I no longer had appetite for flogging at an expanse of flat still water, even though continually tempted by the sight of moving fish. But I don't think they were feeding on the surface, even on the clouds of midges in the evenings, and Hugh and Serge caught all their fish deep down on sinking lines, perhaps as deep as eight feet. Of course I could have gone back to Mahmood for a sinking line, but I could not be bothered. In fact Hugh had many hours blank himself so I did not feel too incompetent. But Serge got a lot of fish and was triumphant.

So I painted the view from the cottage terrace, though my hand is shakier than it used to be. And I did three paintings on successive days. I did not have a small stool or table to take further afield and so restricted my posture to the terrace furniture. Everyone seemed pleased with what I did, and asked for photocopies, which I have sent from Somerton. Verity has an original of the large landscape I painted at Invermoi, (the stud) in about 1988, and I was proud that it was in their living room at Morningside. Serge has a photocopy of one I did in 1996 at Rainbow Lakes, after breakfast, when he, Hugh and I went up to fish from Ballito, leaving Verity and Tilla to have fun in Durban. Serge is very clever with wood and said he would put all my pictures together in an elegant frame!

### **Saturday 30 September and Sunday 1 October**

Our routine continued without drama, but happily. Very hot sun and wind during the day. Clouds building up at tea time with rain, thunder and lightning, and, on Saturday evening, hail. I did some desultory fishing, and got two pulls, in

the small dams half a mile away. When I saluted the workmen going home on foot, they made a friendly noise which Hugh said meant 'I see you' in Zulu. Trying for a short cut I found myself among deep declivities, rocks and tough bushes and took half an hour to cover a hundred yards. It's a hard land. Serge cooked trout, guinea fowl casserole, and interesting cauliflower salad and chopped hard boiled eggs. There was wide-ranging talk including one animated discussion on whether homosexuality was due to genes. Serge caught more fish; Hugh fewer. We drank a lot of wine and I also, alone, drank whisky before and after supper. The boys were happy together and gave me hugs and high fives before going up to bed.

On Sunday night we all, even Serge, resolved to go into Dullstroom for pancakes, sour or sweet. But all the pancake places were closed and the only place open was the Trout and Duck pub. It was darkened inside but with a cosy log fire. The people were friendly but the chef said he did not have the ingredients for pancakes. So I had ham and pea soup and lemon meringue pie. The others had various desserts. We drank two bottles of Merlot. I was happy to pay. Ridiculously cheap. I said goodbye at bed time to Serge and Suzie who planned an early start the next day.

### **Monday 2 October**

Our last day at Millstream. Hugh fished. I went for a long walk round the dam without any sciatica problem at all. I am in fact completely mended. The boys and Verity went to Reception, played water polo in the indoor pool, and watched television. We all packed. After dinner Hugh and I drank whisky and, at my prompting, he talked about his early life in Zim, and soldiering, and UK politics. Before Verity went off to bed they told me about a terrifying experience they had, when Blake was five, on a sailing holiday in Hugh's fishing boat on the north coast of Natal. A huge storm blew up very suddenly and Hugh was hit by lightning. He was knocked over but not badly hurt. They were unable to get the boat back to shelter and Verity really felt, as she held Blake, that it was the end, as waves came over the boat. Somehow they gradually got the boat in the right direction though it was so dark and stormy they were unsure what that was, and finally fetched up at the shore. They take these adventures in their adventurous country in their stride.

### **Tuesday 3 October**

All of us up early. Hugh loaded the bakkie and then cooked bacon and eggs. We signed off at Reception and got out of Millstream at 8.15. Uneventful drive, through Pretoria again, and a stop after Hartebeestport Dam at a white owned antique shop and café. I and Verity had scones, strawberry jam and thick cream, the boys sausages and milk shakes, and Hugh pancakes. We got to Andrew's house at 12.30 and delivered him to his very sour grandmother (Hugh said she was always sour). Then to a mall in the town where Hugh and Blake had their hair cut in a unisex salon. I bought wine and cigars. It was extremely hot. We got to Morningside at 2pm and I ate some of Serge's left over paté and drank half a bottle of wine labelled Portuguese but actually made by a Portuguese family at the Cape. Verity said she had bought it because she thought it was imported.

### **Wednesday 4 October**

Verity drove to Johannesburg in her BMW for a hair-do after taking Blake back to school at 6.30am. She showed no sign of thinking that it was risky to drive alone and park in the heart of the town. She said she had no friends in Johannesburg so could not meet a girl friend for lunch. She came back at 5pm. I went for a good walk round the estate, but not into the game reserve, and watched Sri Lanka trounce the W.Indies at cricket.

In the dusk Hugh and I went to fish the hippo dam inside the estate for bass with wet fly. Hugh had two and put them back. I had two on, one big, and lost both. I felt chilled on our return and had a temperature. Verity gave me some pills like aspirin which did the trick though I did not feel too good the next morning.

### **Thursday 5 October**

My 79<sup>th</sup> birthday. I had hoped to take Hugh and Verity out to dinner again for my birthday celebration. But I felt sufficiently uncertain of incipient flu or feverish cold that I did not want to impose myself as an invalid, and, because I was uncertain how I was, I wanted to get home. Despite protests that I was no trouble, Verity and Hugh agreed in the end and worked wonders with the airline, and phone calls to England, and got me on the plane the same evening at a penalty of £100 which, in the event Virgin forgot or decided not to levy. So, although I actually felt OK, I went off with Bushman at 1pm, after most affectionate farewells. My rendezvous with Linda did not work out, and I spent the time in the airport watching England play Bangladesh. The plane took off punctually and I remember nothing of the flight, after taking another 'suicide pill' and several whiskies.

### **Friday 6 October**

Driver Malcolm, from Ruby's Taxis, met me and we got home in two hours on a sunny autumn day. Lots of mail and messages for my birthday, and a fax, already, from Verity to say I was missed. I soon recovered from my malaise, but felt I was sensible to come back a day earlier than planned.

### **Epilogue**

In discussion with friends on return I told some anecdotes about the visit and said that my general, highly subjective, impression was that despite all the problems, South Africa would in the end come through as a mixed race nation. I was attacked for my optimism by Michael Oatley who said I only mixed with the rich, as I did in Northern Ireland! And I should certainly not reach any political conclusions from my limited experiences. Penny Smith, born and brought up in a wealthy family in Durban, and fiercely liberal, was pessimistic about the future, if only on grounds of preponderance of the black population. She thought that the people and their way of life that I mixed with would wither and disappear and their children emigrate. I am not sufficiently persuaded as to moderate my cautious optimism. I doubt if I shall go back again, but it will be fascinating for those who survive to see what R.S.A will be like in five and ten years time. I hope I am not wrong.

JPW  
15 November 2000  
Somerton