

## Memories of Dennis Shearing from Ken Edwards and Derek Minter

**(please beware some of these tales are true – some of the facts have been somewhat rearranged to suit hiatus of memory over time and of course poetic licence - it is entirely up to the audience to verify details at their leisure)**

- **Ken's First encounter –**

**1972-ish** Being a shift worker starting my day fairly early and half awake in a semi dark .English winter I tried to open the front door to our shared rented house (32 Vicarage Rd. Maidenhead). It appeared to be blocked by a pile of clothes which I quickly realised was a body. Not having the time or early morning emotional energy to socialise with said body, I pushed past and headed off in the Thames fog to walk to work at Fairey Surveys Ltd. Later I was introduced formally by a fellow house mate (Ron Russell) to the body – Dennis.

Ron and Dennis were surveyors in the company, often working overseas, whilst I was a lowly photogrammetric machine operator stuck in the office.

- **Life at the Vicarage –**

I rapidly learned that Dennis was the quintessential peripatetic bloke – the perfect itinerant. He would appear, as if by magic, retrieve his beloved Land Rover (named Camel) from some hidden cave, and commence life where he had left off last time.

When suitably lubricated with volatile liquids he would release snippets of information about field survey life – mostly mishaps. An instance being escorted on a survey in Burma by armed personnel – the guard in front of him accidentally discharging his rifle and shooting, in the leg, the leading armed guard. Not a good way to get your first aid practice. Dennis was at his best in dealing with the indigenous inhabitants of various developing nations. Rather than employing the colonial/imperialist pith-helmet approach, he would engage with the locals and communicate (as much as possible) the technical details and reason for the survey, so that when colourful ranging poles were deployed and maybe coincidentally a cow died, the locals understood it was not 'bad' white man magic and thus he avoided ending up in the cooking pot.

Dennis had picked up a smattering of basic words in many foreign languages. The one we were regaled with mainly was a polite Arabic exclamation (probably roughly translated as “thanks be to God”) on hearing one of our house mates emit a belch or sonorous flatulence (in such a respectable establishment this of course was an infrequent event). I believe on good authority that Dennis was fluent in Spanish when ordering beer. I am unsure whether the beer was the cause or the cure for a bout of meningitis Dennis suffered from in Ecuador.

We did manage to move Dennis' sleeping arrangements away from the front door but had to be aware of the landlord directive of only 4 male occupants in the premises. So Dennis had to disappear from the inventory, along with assorted girlfriends, when inspections were due.

Dennis astounded us with his gastronomic abilities such as his determination to dry strips of beef on our rather dilapidated washing line. He was attempting to create the South African delicacy called "biltong" in "tropical" Maidenhead. Though the colour was a spectacular shade of green, unfortunately the taste and smell lacked that quality required by the connoisseur. Brewing and wine making met with a little more success. The pear wine was suitably alcoholic but the ale contained too much sugar with a most explosive final result.

If you were a guest of Dennis it was always worth checking "used by dates" of food in the pantry and freezer!!

- **Introduction to Aussie mates -**

Dennis has always been a social animal in his own way. Early on in our friendship he decided it was time for our rather hermit-like existence (we called ourselves the "vicars") to branch out into society. So he persuaded us to meet some of his Aussie mates down at the local pub (The Norfolk Arms). With rather poor grace we dragged ourselves away from the TV and walked down the road to put antipodean relations on a sound alcoholic footing. Arriving at the pub with a quiet and virtually empty bar we thought this was one of Dennis' wind-ups. Where were the cork-hatted blokes we had come to meet? Apart from a wizened local clutching his ale there was only a quiet gathering of young ladies in the corner. These were his "mates" - Cecily and Jean and at a later meeting Christine and Rose. This caused a major upheaval in our celibate lifestyle and led eventually to two marriages but that is another story. Cecily and Jean already knew some of Dennis' idiosyncrasies when they had previously undertaken a road trip around Ireland with him. When they stopped for a sandwich at a remote western Irish hamlet Cec and Jean pointed out some maggots in the ensemble. Dennis quickly reassured the squeamish diners by brushing the interlopers off and tucking in with gusto. We all look back and recognise the part that Dennis played in those wonderful and youthful years in UK and his continuing involvement in all our lives ever since.

- **Aussie memories -**

I was the first "vicar" to "brenxit" in Nov. 1973 with all the other vicars and associated Aussie mates waving me off at Southampton docks on the SS Australis along with half of Holland and West Germany as ship companions as well as English families and those returning home to Oz and NZ. Jean had returned to Melbourne earlier and she met me on arrival at Port Melbourne. Having spent Xmas in Geelong I was put on the "Overland" and headed off by train to Adelaide to start work in the new year. On passing the ticket barrier I was pulled up short by Dennis in his trade-mark bush hat. "What are you doing here?" I ungraciously exclaimed. Dennis replied "I

was born here – what’s your excuse?” He then, over the next few days and weeks introduced me to the Youth Hostel Association club and the delights of Kentucky fried chicken and Hungry Jacks. Dennis’ intro to the YHA club also, incidentally, led me to meeting my future wife Shirley.

I had a spell as a photo-mapping adviser in Thailand in 1987/88 and Dennis rocked up a couple of times during that time. He gave us a contact in Northern Thailand so that we could arrange a Hill Tribe Trek for our family and two other couples. Our maid was initially very concerned with the appearance of this “cowboy-like” apparition but his charm soon won her over and he became one of our honoured guests from then on. Dennis’ initial appearance probably was not helped as he had waded for half a mile thru Bangkok floodwater to reach our apartment block. Our two young daughters, Rebekah and Susannah, were equally charmed by Uncle Dennis’ cheeky disposition who flouted all the rules and insisted that mum and dad have sugar and salt readily available. Dennis used to make multiple trips to Bangkok Airport to try and get cheap stand-by flights to eke out his field survey allowance. I think the tuk-tuk and taxis fares would have paid for a flight in the end!

Dennis stayed at our Adelaide house for a while on our return from Thailand and could often be found weeding our “native” lawn with his antique pocket knife – a real labour of love. He used to come and go as usual and left his trusty Subaru with instructions to drive as much as possible, which we did as we only had one car for Shirley’s daily commute to teach out in Elizabeth. One day when Shirley was reversing the car into our drive after a hectic day at school she realised there was an object blocking the drive. Who would leave a filing cabinet in a drive way? Dennis had seen our hap-hazard filing system and decided we needed to upgrade and this was his way of saying thanks for putting him up while he planned his dream home on KI.

As well as being a surrogate uncle to our daughters he got to meet two of our grand children on trips to see him at the “Last Resort” on KI. I remember Dennis teaching both James and Jessica how to play “shit-head”. It was a “Wow we can say rude words in front of adults moment” Later Jessica (aged 8) was put in charge of bread-making with his well-loved baking machine. Dennis had an innate love and warmth for children. He reached out to children everywhere in the world, language was no barrier and children responded to Dennis’ warmth and interest in them. Our children all loved Dennis visiting and, likewise, he followed their paths with interest.

I am reliably informed by a subsequent Vicarage Road resident, Derek Minter, that Dennis was a frequent visitor to his eventual home in Maidenhead and often helped out with the DIY projects. Dennis introduced Derek’s children to take-away curries and even the now illegal ‘Bombay Duck’ fish dish later banned by EU regulations on hygiene grounds! Dennis was content to overnight on any available floor space. One morning he was awoken by Derek’s three year old daughter delivering him a breakfast of cereal directly to him in his sleeping bag! Both his children loved him and he always called his son ‘Thomas the Tiny Terror’, in fact he still did last summer (June 2018) when he met up with Tom, now 35...

Dennis had travelled to the most amazing places on earth and had the most exciting life experiences but the day that he rang Cecily to say “Guess what, I have a brother and sisters” was the highlight of his life. Connecting with his new found birth family meant the world to Dennis. He was so excited and the stories that followed were truly amazing.

Dennis had a wonderful, and at sometimes quirky, sense of humour. No matter the mood or circumstance, his humour lightened lives.... No matter how tough life was at times. Dennis was a great and loyal friend which has become so evident during the last few months of his illness. He was generous by nature, with cards and gifts for birthdays and Christmas, but was particularly generous of spirit. It was the giving of himself for which we shall always remember him. As Derek has said Dennis was one of a kind, a real character who enjoyed his life, his work in so many countries and developing his property on Kangaroo Island. I echo with Derek and all that knew him that it has been a privilege to be included amongst his many friends and we will miss him. Rest in peace at the Salt Lake Dennis.

20th March 2019