

Chagos News

*The Periodical Newsletter of the
Friends of the Chagos*

No.16

January 2001

EDITORIAL

The Ilois

The English High Court, in November, upheld the claim of the Ilois to have the right of return to BIOT. It quashed the 1971 Immigration Ordinance and a new Immigration Order is now in force. The BIOT Government is also setting in hand further studies on 'the physical, financial, social, environmental and economic feasibility of settlement of the outer islands'. As we go to press it is by no means clear how all these matters will be worked out or on what timescale.

Meanwhile, this Association has been asked for its views on the scientific work that might usefully be carried out in BIOT. We have made a number of suggestions, some of them urgent, while emphasising that responsibility for establishing an environmental strategy and, more particularly, for promulgating a Management Plan

and its implementation, rest squarely with the Government.

We will keep pressing for full information on these matters of vital concern to our members. As is well known, the Association itself is neutral, in accord with our non-political status and tradition, on the issue of resettlement, but that is no reason for holding back on the expression of our views on environmental matters, whether collectively or as individuals. Please let me know what you think. We want to know and pass on your views. Please e-mail me at

johntopp@barclays.net

E-mail

Your Committee is increasingly doing much work by e-mail and it would be useful to have your e-mail address so that if there is an important message to pass on before the next Chagos News, we can communicate quickly.

John Topp

CABLE AND WIRELESS IN DIEGO GARCIA

Michael J Fleming

It seems a little odd to me that John Topp should invite me, the manager of Diego Garcia's only independent practising capitalist outfit to write for the Friends of Chagos. I should qualify my remark by admitting that the US Military, by their very presence here, are practising Capitalism in a far more altruistic way than we are at Cable & Wireless. They however are not permitted to make a profit and we, well, that is what we do.

In all other respects my qualifications are good, I've been here seven years in all, five years on this current stint and two years back in 1986/87. John wasn't entirely clear about what I should write, only that it was my chance to get my own small piece of immortality by having my words recorded in the British Library archives. Are they really so desperate? They may as well get the name right. There is only one "m" in Fleming, OK?

I regret that I am not a biologist or a botanist and cannot regale you with exciting stories of sightings of various flora and fauna. It does seem an ideal opportunity to tell you a little of our history on the island, and maybe even a chance to vent a little on environmental issues that concerns me.

Cable & Wireless Diego Garcia (CWDG) came to Diego Garcia in 1981 with a contract to build, operate and maintain an earth station ostensibly to receive American Forces Radio & Television for distribution by the US Navy to the troops resident here. The opportunity to provide a telephone service was, at that time, secondary. Until our arrival all personal calls were made by use of an amateur HF Radio Station.

I am not privy to the truth of this but I would imagine that CWDG were awarded this contract because Her Majesty's Government at the time owned us lock, stock, and barrel. It wasn't until Margaret Thatcher's Government that our Company was, amongst many others, privatised. If you bought shares at that time and still have them, congratulations: your investment then must be worth a fortune now!

Strangely, although we provided a telephone service it was for outgoing calls only, i.e. it was impossible to phone into the island. The reason for this was political not technical. Even our Head Office, if they wanted to contact us, had to send a telex and we would then call them when we were ready. Such blissful days!

OK, does anyone still remember Telex? The original system we installed is still operational! At that time there were also very few phones on the island, so if you wanted to make a call you had to physically visit Cable & Wireless. It was 1992 that we finally were permitted to allow calls in both directions and in late 1995 the Navy installed a new Telephone Exchange and phones were provided by the Navy to almost all military accommodation. Sadly this privilege was not as generously extended to the Filipino/Mauritian contract worker community (and still isn't). A link was installed between the CWDG International Exchange and the US Navy Base Exchange and suddenly the Military could call home from their room.

It took C&W several years to gear up into the real commercial world after privatisation, and we were undoubtedly 'stodgy' with centralised control and little enthusiasm for adventure. I was fortunate to arrive here as Manager in early 1996, well into the period when CW were devolving power from the centre and encouraging businesses to take control. In 1997 we opened up DG's first Commercial Internet Service, CWNETDG and we now also offer a rebroadcast Satellite TV Service.

Has the Island changed in the Intervening years? As a casual observer I would say not, it has always been immaculately groomed and remains so. There are, sadly, always a few careless and destructive people who drop or even throw litter. However, even this small aberration is addressed by regular "Island clean-ups" involving all parts of the community. Having lived, visited and worked in many countries I can safely say I doubt you'd find any country better kept anywhere. We wouldn't do too badly in a tidiest village competition either!

We have had a succession of 'Brit Reps' who have shown real concern for maintaining the environmental record and also for preserving what is left of the original Island buildings. This remains so with the current incumbent Peter Lewis. With almost half the Island personnel changing every year continuity of this commitment is always the problem here, what you set up today may get 'lost' a year later but Peter Lewis is trying hard to overcome this.

The cat eradication program seems to have been effective, I haven't seen any myself for a while, but I believe there are still some stalwarts around. Once the Cats were gone there was a very real fear that might be overrun by rats. This certainly seemed to be the case: they were popping up all over the downtown area. We even had our own infestation in CW. Then we heard that rat eradication was out and rat reduction (or rat control) was in. This seemed to be a recipe for disaster. Initially this made little difference and the effort to reduce the population was increased. This does seem to be

making a difference, I don't see so many any more, at least not around the downtown area.

If you can accept that there is a need for a military presence in DG then I think we can be grateful that the Island is in the hands of people who do genuinely care about the environmental issues. Given that they have been here for around thirty years we have much to be thankful for that this island remains as good as it is and that the outer islands remain (I am told) as unaffected by human intervention as can be expected almost anywhere on this planet. There is no specific reason to believe that the recent High Court ruling declaring the removal of the Ilois as illegal will lead to any change to the environment but there is plenty of evidence elsewhere to suggest that it will take an unusually well equipped and environmentally sensitive population to maintain the status quo. I have no wish that anyone be denied their home but I can't help hoping that this is all about compensation and not about a genuine wish to re-inhabit.

In this age of communications I would be remiss if I didn't leave you a couple of websites where you will find some information about Diego Garcia that may be of interest to you.

www.cwnetdg.io (Mostly about CW services but click on the "telephone cards" link to see some great photos of crabs, coral and DG).

www.zianet.com/tedmorris/DG (Ted has gathered together anything and everything he can locate web-wise with regard to Diego Garcia. There is a mine of information here, with many links to reputable sites and some to less reputable sites. All in all I think he provides a very good free service).

If you wish to know details about the recent High Court Case where HMG was judged to have removed Chagos Inhabitants illegally then the following sites may be of interest: -

<http://news.bbc.co.uk> (do a search on "Chagos")

<http://fco.gov.uk/news> (click on the calendar for Nov 3)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk> (do a search on "Chagos")

When the Island seems to become unbearably small, or maybe things are just not going my way, it is very easy to pour myself a long cool Gin & Tonic, pull up a chair on the beach, listen to the sea and watch the sunset. In such absolute splendour it is very hard to take any problem seriously for more than a moment. Now if I could just bottle it and sell it, I'd make a fortune.

Friends of Chagos are most grateful to CWDG for their friendly and generous support over the years

AGM CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman's intervention was longer than usual, reflecting the increasing number of issues facing and tackled by the Association during the year. Readers unsatisfied by this summary are of course welcome to write in for the unexpurgated text.

Environmental Monitoring. Nigel Wenban-Smith raised four issues under this heading. First, the failure of the BIOT Government so far to undertake the ongoing scientific work merited by an area agreed by all to be of World Heritage Site importance and essential for the assessment of the impact of the 1998 coral mortality. Second, the prospect of re-settlement of the northern atolls; on this copies of an initial feasibility report were made available. Nigel explained that the Committee's position was that the Association should not take a view on the desirability of re-settlement without compromising its political neutrality, but could and should press strongly for the maintenance of existing levels of protection. Third, after reporting the Committee's work in obtaining and commenting upon the BIOT Government's accounts of commercial and recreational fishing activities, he called for tighter restrictions on the latter and supported Dr. Mark Spalding's recommendation for 15% of the BIOT reef area to be preserved as No-Take sanctuaries. Last, he commended the efforts (detailed in the last issue of *Chagos News*) of all those who had helped improve conservation standards in Diego Garcia during the year.

Promoting Scientific Visits. Nigel referred to several projects in preparation, notably one to prepare for the restoration of the habitat of Eagle Island, by eradicating its rat population, and a cetacean survey, which Dr Charles Anderson plans to mount in 2002. He mentioned too the ongoing work to draft an Environmental Charter for the Territory.

Links with other students of Reef Ecology. In addition to highlighting the professional contacts made by Drs Sheppard and Spalding in the course of their regular work, Nigel drew attention to his own attendance at CALPE 2000, a conference held in Gibraltar to compare the problems and experiences of those engaged in conservation work in all of Britain's Overseas Territories, and also to Dr Charles Sheppard's attendance at the ICRI Conference in Bali to survey progress made on the International Coral Reef Initiative.

Historical Research. Nigel congratulated Dr Donald Taylor on his two outstanding articles in *Chagos News* and introduced John Loader and

George Cox, who later gave the meeting a lively account of their wartime experiences in Diego Garcia and their ongoing task of editing archive film footage dating from 1945.

Expansion of membership. Nigel once again exhorted all members to make further efforts.

Promotion of Education about the Chagos. Nigel congratulated those involved in various initiatives undertaken during the year - to bring The Friends into the Web (www.ukotcf.org/members/chagos.htm); to man a stand at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's two Open Days; and to design a poster (with funding assistance received through the Overseas Territories Conservation Forum).

The Chairman concluded by expressing the Association's continuing appreciation of the good relationship they enjoyed with the FCO and, in particular officers of the BIOT Government.

Childhood Memories of Ile Boddam, 1930.

Charles Sheppard

Very recently I received a letter from a lady called Mrs. Frances Watkins, now living in Great Yarmouth, who had just seen an article in the *Geographical Magazine* written by myself 20 years earlier. She saw it in a hospital waiting room. Mrs. Watkins found herself looking at a photo of the (already derelict) Manager's House in Salomon – the house in which she had been born, in 1930.

I have corresponded with Mrs. Watkins subsequently, and she has kindly allowed me to edit some extracts from some of her letters here. We all know a bit of history of the Chagos of the last 20 years, and I was delighted to see pictures of the settlements from as early as the 1960s taken by Donald Taylor (reproduced now on the CD *Images of Chagos* for all to see), but her reminiscences of childhood in the early 1930s are fascinating.

“Somehow the memory of the island has never left me. My father (Andrew Thompson) was a captain in the Merchant Navy, and gave up his job for a while to become Administrator, first on Diego Garcia and then on the Salomons... it was to be with my mother and his children as before that he was always at sea.” (Her mother, Yvonne, was French, from Mauritius.)

“There were seven of us, three boys and four girls. My sister who is two

years older than me was born on Diego Garcia, and after a while my father was transferred to the Salomons where I was born..”

“I remember that most evenings two rugs or blankets were spread on the grass on the side of the house. We used to tumble on them while my mother and father sat in deck chairs watching us. Sometimes my mother used to get up to go into the house to play the piano, and often my two older brothers used to join in: one played the violin and the other the accordion – often my father used to sing...”

Then Mrs. Watkins’ mother died in childbirth, and she relates a sad story of help arriving just too late to save either her mother or infant sister.

“I remember her funeral, though at the time I did not know it was her funeral. We were in a building standing almost in a circle. Everyone was crying. I was in my father’s arms and lifted my head to look at the ceiling where there was a small boat hanging upside down just above us. We were in the Church, but we very rarely had a Minister, so the Church was often used to hang up small boats.”

Shortly afterwards, most of her brothers and sisters went back to Mauritius with her grandmother, but she, and her elder sister, stayed on with her father in the Salomons.

“We stayed with my father with two nannies. Often in the morning we rushed outside to see if the ducks had laid their eggs in the grass beside the house. If so, we lifted our nightdresses in the front, put the eggs in them to carry back, but unfortunately most of the time they were all broken before we reached the kitchen. Each day after we were dressed the cook would put our breakfast into a round basket with a lid on, nanny would take us for a walk through the woods with lots of breadfruit trees until we reached the beach, where there was a long rustic table with benches where we would eat eggs, banana or papaya – the milk was always very sweet, I think it was condensed. After breakfast we played on the beach picking up shells. I don’t know which part of the beach we were at, I don’t think the sand was very white. We only left the beach when we heard the gong the cook used for calling us for lunch. There were no other white children on the island though there were about five white families, one with a teenage son.

“On occasions, perhaps Christmas, my father would give the natives a barrel of wine. They would light a huge fire, the men would play the drums, the women would wear colourful clothes and would sing in patois and dance the ‘Sega’ all evening. My father used to let us watch until our bed time.

“I remember the beautiful flowers and the huge turtles which used to bury their eggs in the soft sand. Sometimes the natives used to turn the smaller ones upside down - I used to scream until they turned them round again as I

felt they were hurting them. I also remember the beautiful birds; there was a white bird that the natives call les Fouquets, whose plumage was a soft down, and their skins were used to make large, expensive powder puffs that were sold in Mauritius – I thought that was awful.”

Then Mrs. Watkins went back to Mauritius. Her father later went back to sea and two brothers went to sea in 1937, both subsequently drowning when their ship which was carrying cattle from St Brandon was caught in a hurricane. She, with some brothers and sisters came to England after the war; she was married (for 46 years) and had a family. She says she is sorry she has no photos of the Salomons, only her memories, though she did send me a collection of shells she was given by an old worker in Salomon, collected by him from the beach on the day she was born in 1930.

The letters Mrs. Watkins writes are evocative with poignant memories, some about the sad deaths of her family probably too private for publication. The above are merely small abstracts. I have sent her prints of her house, the jetty and the beach - her front garden as she would have known it - taken in the 1960s, and they arrived on her 70th birthday. She says she recognised the Norfolk Island Pine, a landmark to modern visitors, though it was a lot smaller when she knew it.

I hope that I may go back to Chagos shortly for other purposes, and have received from Mrs. Watkins a sketch map (interesting in its own right) of where she thinks may be found the graves of her mother and infant sister. Whether I can return or not I am not sure, so if anybody reading this knows that they will visit Ile Boddam shortly, please contact me and I will copy the map with other details, in the hope that you can photograph the site for her. “I have so often thought of Boddam, of the house, the shores... I remember the beaches, the birds... and if I close my eyes I can still see the small lilies which grew on my mother’s grave and I can hear the sound of the waves breaking ... I have so often dreamt of seeing it again. I can hardly believe that I now have news of Salomon.”

Chagos News " is a private newsletter produced in England by Friends of the Chagos, Registered Charity Number 1031561. The views expressed are those of individual contributors and are not necessarily those of the Charity or the Editor. All rights reserved. Permission to reproduce any part of "Chagos News" must be sought from the Editor. Copyright 2001.