

Chapter 5

The Next Step (April-August 2006)

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans" – Allen Saunders

Since the beginning of the year, questions about my next step kept creeping into my thoughts. After more than two and half years away from Singapore, and approaching the completion of the sculpture course, I faced the life's question of what to do and where to go after Emerson. A few options that I explored in my mind were (a) stay on in the College either as a volunteer or as an independent student, (b) work in the area of art therapy either in the UK or some other country, (c) pursue a master's degree course in art therapy or (d) return to Singapore to be a part-time lecturer or an artist/art teacher. However, none of these options turned out to be my next step. What I did and where I went turned out to be a complete surprise to me.

Meeting David

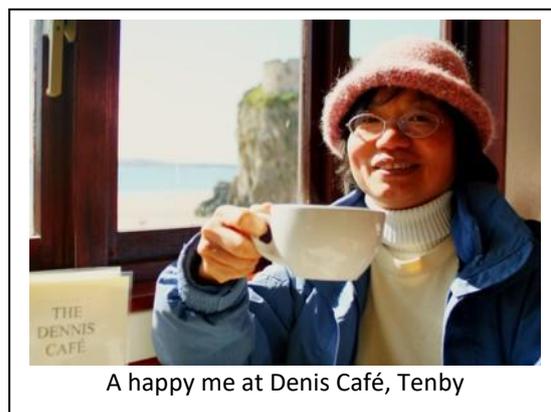
Sometime in the first week of January, I met up with a stranger, David Whitworth, the husband of Jenny whom I mentioned in the previous chapter. Jenny and David returned with their two young daughters to the United Kingdom in 1985 after working for three years in Ngee Ann Polytechnic in Singapore. A few weeks before Jenny passed away, completely out of the blue, an email from David arrived in my Gmail inbox. He contacted me after learning from a mutual friend in Singapore that 'Gek' was in England pursuing an art course after resigning from her job. He emailed me thinking that I was 'the Gek', another colleague of Jenny's, whom he had met when he was in Singapore. I told him that I would visit him and Jenny in Wales during the Easter Break, as I could not get away from the college till then. Sadly however, I did not get the chance to see Jenny as she passed away in December 2005.

As David would be in London in early January with his younger daughter Polly, we arranged to meet up at the Royal Academy of Arts where they were going to see

an exhibition, 'China: The Three Emperors (1662-1795)'. That was when he discovered that I was not 'the Gek' he had expected to see. The three of us had a good chat and it was arranged for me to visit Wales during the coming Easter Break.

I went to Bridgend by train from London in the first week of April. David met me at the station. When we reached his bungalow, Polly showed me a printed copy of the itinerary David had planned for my five-day stay. I was impressed. What impressed me further was the way he kept his bungalow, so compact, tidy, and neat. Being a DIY man, David had renovated it himself about a year ago when he bought the bungalow after returning from a year's stay in Italy. We had a pleasant time together, visiting Cardiff and Swansea, the two main cities in Wales. We also watched a musical at the Cardiff Millennium Centre together with his mother and Polly.

We exchanged our life stories while we went sightseeing in South Wales – visiting Ogmere, The Mumbles, Tenby, and Pembroke. When Jenny was diagnosed with breast cancer and subsequently with Alzheimer's disease in her early fifties, it was hard for David. He had to juggle looking after her and their two teenage daughters with the eldest still studying at



A happy me at Denis Café, Tenby

University, and taking charge of the household, while holding a full-time job as a university lecturer. He decided to opt for an early retirement at the age of fifty-five to look after Jenny who by then could no longer manage by herself. He hardly had any social life as he spent almost 24-7 with Jenny, keeping her clean and fed. He was a full-time househusband as well as a carer for the next four years. If this was not selfless love, what saw it?

Strangely, I felt very comfortable being with him although I had only known him for such a short time. At the end of my visit, he saw me off from the platform at Bridgend railway station. I was surprised when he came on to the train to plant a kiss on my cheek just before the train pulled away. Throughout my journey to London, the events of my stay in Bridgend kept playing on my mind. I was truly touched by David's unselfish love for Jenny. In fact, the time we spent in each

other's company was only about three days, as he had to go off to Birmingham for volunteer training from Friday afternoon to late on Sunday. Shortly after he lost Jenny, he had applied to be a volunteer with Volunteers Service Overseas (VSO), a British-based international development organisation. VSO had given him a two-year placement to work in Outer Mongolia, and he had to complete his training before his planned departure in May.

I did not return to Emerson immediately after leaving Wales. My plan was to spend the rest of the Easter Break with Yin Yoke in Manlleu. We had a relaxing time together at her home, chin-wagging as usual. We spent most afternoons going through the 24-step Taiji movements as she was interested in learning the exercise. There is no way one can learn the 24-steps in such a short time, but we did try.

David's visit

David came to Emerson College on the 8th of May, two days after Jenny's memorial service back in Bolton, her hometown. He had been scheduled to leave at the end of May for his VSO assignment in Mongolia, but there was a delay in signing the contract by the Mongolians. Whilst waiting he was at a loose end, not knowing what to do with himself. I invited him to Emerson, a magical place where many visitors experienced comfort and calm.

His visit took place during the final term of my course when no classes were scheduled to enable the students to do their final year project full-time. The next morning after his arrival, I asked him to accompany me to a centre for autistic children. The reason for the visit was to discuss with its Director, with whom I had made an appointment, the feasibility of me working there after leaving Emerson. I had earlier applied to do a Master's Degree course in Art Therapy at Roehampton University near London, but was told that my application could only be accepted if I had at least one year's experience working with people with disabilities.



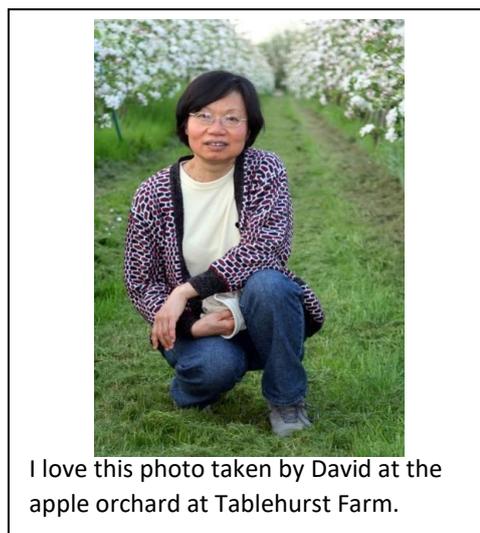
Seven Sisters

Somehow, after the morning visit both David and I felt that the place was not right for me, although the Director was interested in having me to work there.

We went to Seaford for lunch and to see the Seven Sisters after the disappointing meeting at the centre. Sensing that I was feeling rather down, David gave me a hug to comfort me.

Surprise, surprise

The next day, David expressed his wish to be with me, like forever. He had been thinking about it the whole night, going for an early morning walk to clarify his thoughts in the fresh air. We had known each other for such a brief period, and yet I felt that we had been friends for ages. Surprisingly I said 'yes' without much hesitation. I felt that we were just right for each other. The seeds of our mutual feelings were sown during my stay at Bridgend. Had it not been for the delay in his



I love this photo taken by David at the apple orchard at Tablehurst Farm.

departure for Mongolia we would not be together now. Serendipity? Now we always remember the 10th of May as the 'bottom-line' day.

During the rest of his stay in the college, we went around visiting a few places including Hever Castle in Kent and Petworth House in West Sussex. The latter has quite a few paintings by the English painter, J.M.W. Turner, who happens to be the favourite artist for both of us. David left for Bridgend after a week as he felt that he was distracting me from my final year project work. We communicated through email numerous times a day, and a phone conversation before retiring to bed.

We did however manage to see each other again sooner than expected. About a fortnight after his departure, David was in London for a few days to visit a technical college to prepare for his new job in Mongolia.

I went up to London to meet him there twice. It was good to confirm that our feelings had not changed since the week in Emerson, and we enjoyed a pleasant



Our first photograph together taken at V&A Museum, London

time together visiting the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Tate Britain to view its large collection of Turner's paintings. The second meeting was at Victoria Station for a few hours' chat about our future. I decided to go with him to Mongolia and he would find out whether VSO would allow him to bring me there as his partner.

My final project

Since attending Belinda's weekend workshop, 'The Next Steps', I had become interested in biographical studies. I hoped that going through the process of 'biographical sculpturing' in my final year project would help me to discover my next step. As sculpturing a sequence of forms during the study of 'Metamorphosis' with Rudolf had been intriguing to me, I planned to create a series of seven sculptures. The sequence would depict my development from the time I graduated from the university to a now unknown future.

I had no plan to sketch the sequence of forms on paper before I started sculpturing, simply let my hands and my heart guide me in creating them. Hopefully, the process would help me to see the connections between the phases I had gone through, leading to my present situation, and uncovering the future.

My planned deliverables for the project were the seven forms cast in plaster, plus an art installation comprising a sculpture or a huge painting to accompany them.

Towards the end of May, I was still in the process of changing the seventh form after finishing the first six, all in clay. An incident happened while I was working on it. The seventh form fell from the sculpture stand, resulting in a deformed shape as the clay was still soft. I got quite emotional, having spent so much time on it. In the process of the re-make, I effected some changes and it turned out to be a rather intriguing form. Even now, I still wonder how I managed to create it.

Preparation for the Graduation Exhibition

Weeks before the event, Rudolf finalised with us the venue for exhibiting each student's works. Mine was to be in Ruskin Hall where our weekly Monday college meetings were held. It was a huge space, and it got me thinking how to fill it.

By early June, the exhibits I had in mind were:

- The seven sculptures created earlier in the study of metamorphosis with Rudolf, and to have seven new paintings, each of a colour representing a planet. But this idea of the paintings was aborted as I did not have time to do them
- My biographical forms
- An art portfolio of my artistic journey in Emerson College
- Three sculptures representing developments in my artistic journey: the figure in clay done at the beginning of my first year, the figure in wood completed in my second year, and the stone sculpture which was still a work in progress.
- My first oil painting completed during the summer holiday in 2004
- The red painting, the largest and last painting done on the course

I was very grateful to Rudolf who helped me with the plastering of the sculptures, as the seven forms were quite chunky and needed two pairs of hands to do the job. He came to the college on a few Sundays to help me complete them in time for the big day. David was also a great help. He came to stay with me three weeks before the opening of the exhibition, to be my 'artisan' - painting the sculpture bases, sanding the plastered forms, and setting up the exhibition. I was still carving the stone sculpture days before the opening. He helped me to chip off chunks of the Portland stone when I found it too high for me to reach its top.

It took a couple of days to move my works to Ruskin Hall and organise the space for the exhibition. When I found the wall behind the three sculptures representing

my development too bare, I decided to put together a relief sculpture on it. I give credit to David for helping me with this, in terms of the designing and its making from wood and chicken wire.

During his stay with me in Oaktree House prior to my graduation exhibition, we took some time out to take long relaxing walks to East Grinstead and in the meadows behind the college and along old railway tracks that had been converted to cycle paths. David mingled well with my housemates. In fact, the residents thought that we had been together a long time when they observed us preparing meals in the kitchen. So well synchronised was our teamwork. On Saturdays and Sundays, I would return from Forest Row at around 10pm with a takeaway given by the Chinese restaurant's boss as I still had the part-time waitress job there. Both of us would enjoy a supper of fried noodles together before bedtime.

While getting the exhibits ready, David received VSO's approval for me to go with him to Mongolia. The VSO officer handling David's placement suggested that I applied to be a volunteer as well. We both thought it was a good idea. Then I could make myself useful in Mongolia in the two years while David was working there. This spurred us into action, filling in the application form and writing my curriculum vitae. What a delightful distraction it was from the exhibition preparation work.

Graduation exhibition

We were all very excited as the exhibition opening date drew nearer. Nick, the youngest classmate, designed a poster for the event. We had to present our projects to all the staff and students of the college as well as our friends and relatives on the 16th of June, the opening day.

Three friends flew in from Singapore to witness my graduation, arriving at

Emerson College a few hours before I was due to give my presentation.



Kwee Lain, Sock Hoon and Swi Neo were still in a daze after their twelve hours' flight followed by a couple of hours journey from Heathrow Airport. They could



hardly keep their eyes open as they attended the presentations of all eight graduating students. My English friend, Diane Whitehouse, travelled to Sussex for the occasion as well. I also invited Dorothy from Edinburgh as she knew all the graduating students when she was with us in the visual arts course. Other guests from overseas included Belinda who was with us in the first year, the teenage



son of my Australian classmate David, and the daughter of my Icelandic classmate, Arndis.

For each presentation, Rudolf would add a few words about the exhibited works of each of us. With my first sculpture done at the start of the three-year course in his hand, he reminisced my development in Emerson. As the exhibition was



spread over six different sites on the campus, the audience had to walk to the various places to attend the presentations of the individual students, which were limited to twenty minutes each.

A tender moment was experienced during Arndis's presentation. We were treated to the angelic soaring voice of her daughter who was in her early 20s, as she performed an Icelandic song while moving gracefully around Arndis's installation of a stone circle.

The next day the exhibition was open to the public, and we had to repeat our presentations to the visitors. My friends living London, whom I have known since my university days in the early 1970s - Wah Piow and Beng Lan came with another friend, How Ming, on the last day of the exhibition. Ruth came on the

same day. Ruth and her husband Richard, who lived and worked in London were David's close friends. Unfortunately, Richard could not make it to the exhibition as he was participating in a cycling event on the day.



I was overwhelmed by the comments written in my guest book, especially from the college staff who had known me from the start of my artistic journey.

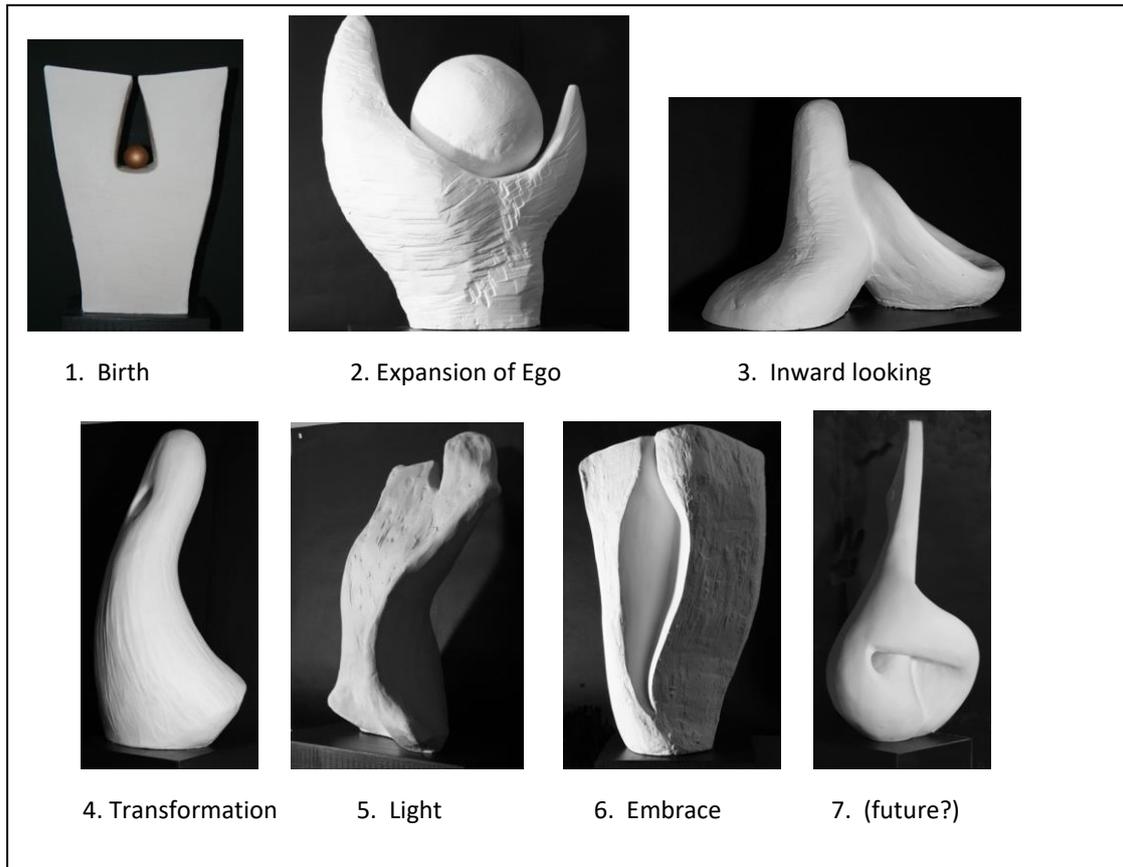
"It is really wonderful to see your work after these three years – how you have transformed yourself in so many ways to produce this exhibition, and I appreciate so much your sharing with us your inner journey as well." - Margaret

"I'm very moved, very impressed, ... I do not have words to express. especially the biographical journey." - Konstentina

"To have watched your journey here has been a privilege. I remember very well the key works of yours along the way that have been very beautiful – now today as it all comes together it is very moving.... I know the courage that it took to come here, to do your work and to go forward is reflected in your artwork and will continue." - Judith

"I'm so impressed with so much good work, really amazing what you produced in three years. Your exhibition is great! I especially like Form 7. A great future waits you!" – Luciana

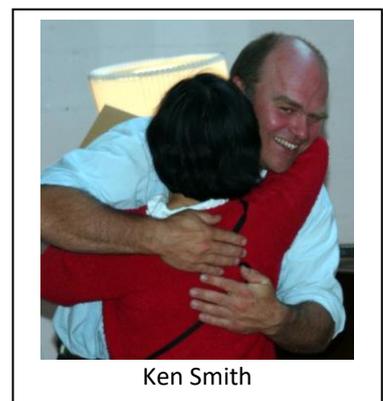
David, being a keen photographer, took 'studio quality' pictures of my biographical forms.



Graduation celebration

The Sculpture Department treated its students and invited guests to the traditional barbeque and skit performed by the second years. The skit drew laughter from the audience who knew those graduating. To my amazement, my painting teacher Margaret took part in the skit, acting in my guise and displaying Taiji movements. What a delightful surprise!

At the diploma awarding ceremony, Rudolf without fail captured the attention of the audience with his amusing accounts of the three-year journey of each and every one of us. His memory for detail was staggering. Ken also added a few words to express his impressions of us. They both received a big hug from me after the ceremony. They were the most wonderful tutors I ever had. I shocked the audience when it was my turn to give



a little speech on my experience of the course and my next move. There was an audible gasp in the room when I announced my intention to go to the back of beyond, Mongolia.

I organised a dinner to celebrate my graduation with some of my friends on 18th June. Unfortunately, Diane could only spend a few hours at Emerson, and had to leave immediately after my presentation, and Dorothy had to return to Edinburgh

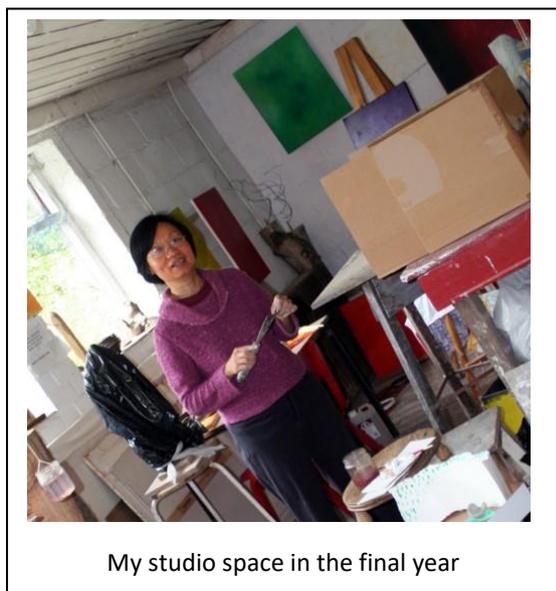


the next day. The Chinese Restaurant in Forest Row where I worked was the dinner venue. My guests were three British (David, Ruth, and Richard) and three Singaporeans (Kwee Lain, Sock Hoon and Swi Neo).

It was a double celebration for me as my birthday was a couple of days away. What an enjoyable time we had together, with the Singaporeans introducing the Chinese cuisine to the British, and Swi eagerly demonstrating to Richard the proper handling of chopsticks.

David and I also enjoyed another special dinner prepared by two Japanese students before our departure from the college. The 7-course dinner, organised by two visual arts students, was a gesture of thanks to Rudolf for being a wonderful tutor and to me who had been teaching them Taiji. The girls started work on the fare two days before. They had selected dishes usually served during Japanese festivities and these required some time to prepare. The dinner venue was Rudolf's house which provided us with more privacy than in the public areas of the college. Rudolf's wife, Thea and their two children were also part of the party. It was a feast of art, as each dish was artistically presented one after another. All of us looked with admiration, hesitating to spoil their beauty but consume we had to. After pleasuring our taste-buds and complimenting the culinary skills of the chefs, we were treated to a music piece by Boris, Rudolf's youngest son, who is a cellist. It was a memorable evening.

After graduation



My three Singaporean girlfriends stayed in the guest rooms of Emerson College for three nights following the graduation presentation day, and then moved up to London for a few days of sightseeing. David and I went with them to help them settle to their accommodation. I asked David to be their guide in London for a day while I stayed in Emerson for the closure of the course. He then helped me to dismantle my exhibits and to tidy up my studio space as we needed to clear all our

stuff away before the end of the term.

It was very kind of David to continue clearing my studio, wrapping up my artworks and transporting it to Bridgend while I went with my Singaporean friends on a pre-planned 12-day holiday in Eastern Europe. He had to hire a self-drive van to transport two big oil paintings and two sculptures (the wooden legs and the Portland stone) from Forest Row to Wah Piow's house in London for storage as David's bungalow could not accommodate them. I was very glad to see David again when he came to meet us on our return to Heathrow Airport. I had missed him very much while I was in away. On the way back to Bridgend, I bade my final farewell to Emerson College as I had to call there to retrieve the last of my personal luggage.

Reflections

An ex-colleague had said to me before I left my job in Singapore, that as one gets older, the 3Fs are important – *finance, family, and friends*. Even with wealth and an active social life, many elderly people still develop depression. A 'C' should be added to the 3Fs for *creativity* - which I feel is essential in keeping our mind active and spirit up as one advances in age. Discard thoughts such as "Oh, no. I am too old to learn, I can't do this, I can't do that....".

Many elderly people had walked through the doors of Emerson and emerged glowing at the end of their stay. I met a retired American school head mistress, Leilani, who enrolled on the same course I did, but two years earlier. She was recovering from cancer, and in her six years' stay in the College where she took a few short courses before completing the three-year sculpture course, her health had improved. She became stronger year by year. Another remarkable elderly English lady I met at Emerson was Lyn. Though seventy, she was full of enthusiasm, like a seventeen-year old schoolgirl. When I first met her in the kitchen of Oaktree House, she was looking forward to the three-month course in storytelling. These are just two examples of people who refused to believe that getting old means disability, depression, and disease. They experienced as I had, the benefits of doing art for the mind, body, and spirit.

I had never imagined that life would be so colourful when I first arrived at Emerson in September 2003. My time there was definitely a highpoint in my life, opening doors to novel and memorable experiences.

As someone said, "it is really difficult to get out of the groove after spending some thirty years in the same groove". It is not easy to leave a steady job after having grown accustomed to things as they are. Three years after leaving Singapore, I found that all I had given up had been worth it, and I had been right in taking the road less travelled. I had no 'great expectations' in 2003 when I left for Emerson, but I have now learned to expect the unexpected. David's coming into my life and our forthcoming trip to Mongolia was just amazing.

This feeling reminded me of what Robert Frost said in his poem written in 1916.

The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,*

*Because it was grassy and wanted wear
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads onto way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference*

Preparing for Mongolia

Soon after my return from Eastern Europe in July, I got my appointment to be interviewed and assessed by VSO in its London office. As the assessment required me to spend a whole day there, we arranged a couple of nights' stay with Richard and Ruth in East London. David accompanied me to the VSO office to give me moral support. All the applicants who attended the assessment were assigned to work in teams on specific tasks. A few VSO staff observed how we interacted with one another and how we tackled the problems posed to us. After the team exercises, we were interviewed individually. I passed! What a relief. Soon after, I was scheduled to attend a couple of residential training courses to prepare volunteers for their overseas assignment at the VSO training centre at Harborne Hall in Birmingham. The details of my placement would have to be worked out in Mongolia. We were now given a definite date to leave – 18 August. Usually it would take months from the time of application to leaving for an overseas voluntary service. I appreciated VSO's efforts very much for speeding up my application process so that David and I could leave on the same flight.

Before our departure for Mongolia, there were a lot of things to do – medical and dental check-ups, vaccinations of all sorts, shopping for merino wool thermal underwear, packing up and bidding farewells. David and I decided to go on a short 'tour' around England to visit his friends and relatives, and for me to meet them. To the north to see his mother who was living with her brother in Darwen, and to visit Jenny's cousins in Bolton. We also saw a friend of Jenny's in Stafford and my friend John at Keele University.

An interesting experience was attending an event organised by the Staffordshire Centre of the Morgan Sports Car Club, which was setup by David and another Morgan car owner, Janet, in 1986. This was the first time I had the opportunity to be a passenger in a Morgan as one of David's friends kindly let him drive his car around the field where the event took place. David was grinning as he was driving it. His love affair with the Morgan started when he was just seventeen years old. His father bought him a 4/4 Series 1, built in 1937, after he passed his driving test. But he could not use it then

because it was in such a dilapidated state that required a total rebuild. I did not know that the Morgan is a British motoring icon until I met David. The Morgan Car Company was founded in 1909 and each car it manufactures is unique, being hand-crafted with three basic elements – ash, steel sheets and leather. David's car



The Morgan

was one of the 'pioneers' as the first Morgan 4/4 model was made in 1936. He did finally rebuild the car – eighteen years later, in 1981. This was not because it needed a long time to be rebuilt but he could not start work on it due to various circumstances. He later swapped the car with another Morgan owner for a four-seater as by then David had two daughters. Over the years, he has owned a total of four Morgan sports cars.

In southern England we spent a few days with the Cooper family in Dorset - David's long-time friends. We also met up with Anna (David's eldest daughter), her husband and two sons who were living in Leamington Spa. Mark, David's

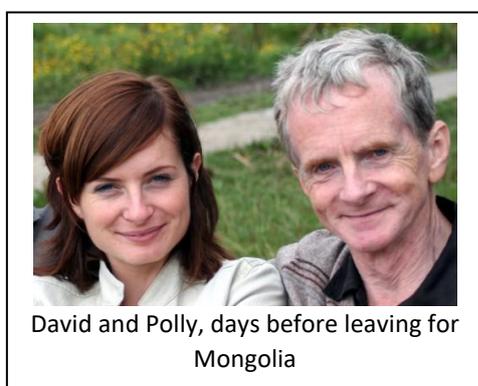
younger brother lived in Wales, just a couple of miles away and so we need not travel far to say farewell to him and his wife, Gail.



Once VSO had confirmed our departure date for Mongolia, we spent the remaining days sorting and packing up our stuff in the bungalow in Bridgend while an agent was appointed to advertise it for rent. Most of our stuff, including my sequence of seven

sculptures, was stored in the loft. The more important items were left with Polly who would be moving from Bridgend to Nottingham where David had a small bungalow. The University of Derbyshire had accepted her to do a degree course in Occupational Therapy starting in September. It was timely that the tenant of David's Nottingham bungalow had given notice to quit, and Polly would live there with her boyfriend Karim during her study.

It took only a few days to find a tenant for David's Bridgend bungalow. And he wanted to move in soon, more than a week before our departure for Mongolia. We had to stay with Polly and Karim for a week, and then enjoy the hospitality of Ruth and Richard in London for a few days before taking our flight from Heathrow Airport.



It had been such a hectic month. To add to our anxiety, our Mongolian entry visas were only ready for collection just a day before our flight. But, finally, on 18th August we were on an Aeroflot plane, with a luggage allowance of 15 kgs per person, heading to Moscow in transit to Mongolia – a strange land where I began my next adventure.