



adhoc

The Art of Peter Huby

Issue 08: The Lancaster Guardian Articles

Then and now: ten years in Greece

Linda and I moved to Greece in August 2004. In October of that year I began writing monthly pieces for the Lancaster Guardian about life here. Sometime in 2008 I stopped.

What strikes me when I reread these pieces of writing, is how much has changed in just a few years. The Greek economy is now in a state of collapse. The lives of the people I wrote about in the newspaper articles have changed too, and I find that I am not the same either.

My attitude to life here has, inevitably, evolved. So, what follows is a series of transcripts of the articles I wrote, to which I have added more recent thoughts in italics.

The newspaper articles are not in any strict order, partly because some of the original clippings didn't have a date, though I have tried to make it coherent.

Oct 2004. Megali Mantinia.

Megali Mantinia stands above steep olive terraces about a kilometre from the blue bay of Messinia. The foothills of the Taygetos Mountains rise behind the village.

On August afternoons it bakes, and a kind of somnolent silence hangs over the landscape. The only things that move are the ears of a donkey as it stands in the

black shade of an olive tree.

In May 2002 whilst motoring through Greece in an ancient Peugeot on a year long jaunt around Europe, we stopped off here and pitched our tent on an olive terrace outside the village with a sublime view out over the bay to the distant hills of Messinia and the Taygetos range rising mistily behind.

We stayed for three weeks, sleeping in our little tent and sheltering from the heat of the day under broad olive sheets strung between the trees, whilst we explored Mani and Messinia by car. The terrace where we had our encampment was for sale, in fact a big chunk of the valley side was for sale—about four acres....and 200 olive trees.

Richard and Lisa Garvey Williams, who had bought this land with a view to opening a holiday retreat, had been obliged to abandon their project. The price they were asking for the land was, we thought, very fair and at some point during our stay Linda and I looked at one another.

We can do this, we thought.



Megali Mantinia

Over a couple of days we arranged the money over the (GarveyWilliams') telephone, something called an equity release loan, using our house in Lancaster as collateral, and that was it, done. We owned an olive grove: no house, no water and the track from the village barely passable, but beautiful, beautiful.



Our House at Prineas

So, after a year back in England, having sold our Lancaster house, given over our jobs/commitments and said a temporary farewell to friends and family— we are hoping for a stream of visitors— and here we are again, bumping down the track from the village.

Nobody has been on the land for over a year and it feels a bit like Sleeping Beauty's castle, overgrown with burnt brown prickly stuff. The unpruned olive trees, green and shaggy, hang over the virtually invisible track and swags of green olives brush over the windscreen of the car as we nose

through the undergrowth.

Just inside the rusty gate to the land we spot a tap wired to the trunk of a tree. A whole year has passed since we received a letter from the mayor authorising our water supply and we have been negotiating with a local engineer by email to get a connection to the village tank. The pipe was connected yesterday, we gather later.

Getting out of the car we turn on the tap and water gushes out almost hot. Quite remarkable. We laugh out loud.

Unpacking the car on the same terrace where we camped last year, we make a cup of tea with the new water. Below us we notice that there is fruit on the fig tree and most of the figs are ripe. We split open the soft fruit and lick out the strange red flesh, like people in a DH Lawrence novel.

Almost all of these pieces were typed on a computer at an internet café in Kalamata and sent off directly to the editor of the newspaper. The other machines in the café were given over to computer games and the local boys were enthusiastic players, so the atmosphere tended to be frenetic. I didn't often make notes beforehand. This partly explains the slightly fractured style.

It was only much later that we got an internet connection at the house.

Oct 22 2004 Niko and Herbert

Our nearest neighbour, or at least, the person who owns the land which gives on to ours, is Nikos Avramis. He has the terraces above us on the valley side. Nikos, who is seventy, cultivates his olives - he has a thousand trees around the district - and he is also a shepherd, with a flock of fifty or sixty sheep.



Nikos Avramis

When he comes down for a chat and a cup of coffee, he brings the sheep with him. While he sits on one of our white plastic chairs, scowling at his coffee and trying to teach us village Greek, the sheep wander off in search of whatever is edible beneath the olive trees.

He speaks to us in a kind of pidgin Greek, as if we were idiots, which I suppose in a sense we are. Geros (old man) he says, pointing to his chest. Nonsense, we say, though in truth his chest is bad and he is thinking of selling his sheep. After a time, the sheep which have wandered out of

earshot begin to bleat anxiously and Niko stands up to shout at them. They go back to their grazing, reassured by the sound of his voice.

The life of a shepherd here follows a traditional pattern. He stays with his flock, often moving considerable distances as the sheep move about in search of good grazing. He is the father of his flock, the good shepherd.

When he is ready to leave, he shouts to them again and they materialise on the track. He wanders off in his straw hat and his split trainers in a sea of sheep.

The nearest actual dwelling to ours is about a quarter of a mile down the track to the sea, a marvellous sprawl of provisional buildings, ancient Mercedes trucks, flower beds, vegetable plots, palm trees and tree sized geraniums.



Herbert Loitzl

All this belongs to Herbert, who is Austrian. For 37 years he was a long distance truck driver, and now, at 66, a farmer and a recluse. He lives here alone, alone, that is, except for his animals: two gigantic German shepherd dogs, Attila and Suloh: a horse: ducks: geese: and 37 cats. He has been here for eight years and only in the last three years has he started to build a house for himself. He used to live in a caravan. The new house, a small structure resembling a Tyrolean chalet (Herbert comes from Tyrol) has a wall a yard thick, for 'isolation', he says. It is a while before we twig that he means insulation.

Herbert has been very generous with us, ferrying building materials from Kalamata, donating plant cuttings and vegetables from his garden, as well as sacks of siegen scheisse, goat shit, for fertiliser.

He exchanges goat muck for geese with a friend of his in the mountains. Often, when we appear on his land he is boiling pigs' heads, which he gets cheap from the butcher's in the market, in a pan for his dogs.

Though he has little Greek, and Nikos has no German at all, the two men are close friends. They harvest their olives together in the winter months and Herbert's truck is a great asset in the village. Though they clearly get on well, between spats, Herbert is dismissive of Greeks in general. 'They have no logic' he says, pointing to his temple.

Five years ago, Herbert took Niko back to Austria with him, the first time Niko had been out of Greece, and arranged for him to have dentures made there. At this time Niko had only two teeth left in his mouth. Now he has a flawless set of white teeth and his standing in the village is unquestioned.

Much has changed in the lives of Niko and Herbert, of which more anon.

Nov 19 2004 Wildlife

I thought I would write something about the wildlife in southern Greece, though perhaps I should say at the outset that I am no expert, and I have a tendency to take an anthropomorphic view and to interpret what wild creatures do as if they were really human beings in disguise.

Take dung beetles. We see them on the track disposing of the droppings left behind by Niko's sheep, chunky labourers manhandling their perfectly crafted spheres of dung across the stony slope.

When the ball of dung begins to run away, as it frequently does, the beetle simply hangs on to it until it comes to a halt. He (she?) then climbs to the top of the dung ball, looks about, climbs down again and continues moving in the appropriate direction.

Sometimes they work in pairs, like removal men. Dave and Dave. Dung removal. Reasonable rates. All orders quoted for. Occasionally you see a little fellow scurrying around the operation like some keen apprentice.

In fact, or at least according to the only short paragraph on dung beetles I could find, the pairs of insects are usually male and female (Dave and Dawn?) and the apprentice is really an offspring. It seems that they bury the spheres of dung and either lay eggs in them or eat them at a later date. Apparently, they bury much more dung than they will ever use.

One evening, Linda and I heard a very peculiar sound from the terrace above us: a sort of clunk-moan, clunk-moan sound. We climbed up to discover two tortoises mating, though whether it was him or her that was moaning we never discovered, since our arrival had obviously put them off their stride.

We crouched a few yards off, waiting voyeuristically to see if they would go to it again, but no luck.

We have seen snakes on several occasions, olive green jobs, about eighteen inches long, harmless, they say, though a dog, Toto, belonging to Richard, the Englishman who sold us the land, died after being bitten by a horn nosed viper. Everybody took to wearing sturdy shoes for a while afterwards. It seems that the bite is seldom fatal to adult humans, though.

Ants, of course, are everywhere. We step over ant highways all the time and clearly there are many species, from tiny, barely visible creatures that flow along their miniscule trade routes at great speed, like water, to more substantial insects you wouldn't necessarily want to get bitten by. I am an admirer of ants, their relentless industry and their capacity for cooperation.

What does it say? Look to the ant, thou sluggard. Today, I see a cornflake beneath the breakfast table apparently moving of its own accord. The cornflake is much, much larger than the two hero ants manoeuvring it purposefully through the fallen olive leaves.

There are other moments: a green lizard racing obliviously beneath my chair in pursuit of a dragonfly, which it then eats in sudden gulps, the wings hanging out at either side of its mouth: a praying mantis sitting on my hat eating a fly as if it were a hamburger and then cleaning its hands(?) afterwards. They have an odd presence, delicate and punctilious, like priests. Their heads move in a subtle puppet-like way as they watch you with arch attention.

See what I mean about anthropomorphic?

Now that Niko no longer grazes his sheep on our terraces, we hardly ever see dung beetles. These days he only keeps a handful of ewes and he would not be well enough to bring them down the valley side to graze. He had, in any case, graciously given up bringing his animals down after we started to grow flowers and vegetables.

We still watch the ants. A couple of years ago, on the track, I came across what I took to be the aftermath of some kind of ant war or raid. For several metres around the entrance to a nest, the ground was littered with ant corpses, most of them snipped in two. There were hundreds, maybe thousands. It was a salutary thing.

December 3 2004. Expats.

The expats, the other people from England who moved here, have an interesting network. There are networks of Germans too, and a group of Dutch people we hear, and there are bound to be others. You can see why they develop, these networks. EEWApart from anything else, it's so much easier talking in your native language.

Of course, we speak to Greeks, in our primitive way, to Niko our neighbour, to Voula. Kosta, Takis, and other personalities in the village, and I pass the time of day with the assorted builders merchants and suppliers I encounter in the course of making the wooden house- which is almost finished, i.e. it has a shower and a toilet, though some of the walls are still missing.

Our relations with Greeks are entirely amiable, but spending an entire evening struggling to understand what is being said, can be quite taxing.

Sitting at a table with someone who speaks your language can be a great relief, and it comes as no surprise that the English people who live scattered across Messinia/Mani tend to be aware of each other and

to seek each other out. The English expats are a strikingly diverse group. Many of them, inevitably, are retired, with pensions to support them financially, though there is a living to be made here. Linda, for example, has two part time jobs in Kalamata, teaching English, and we know people who make furniture for a living, work for tourist outfits, teach yoga and practice osteopathy.

Paul and Diana are typically untypical. They live above the village in an extraordinarily beautiful yurt, a genuine Mongolian specimen. Yurts, in case you are wondering, are circular tents used by nomads in central Asia. Paul was a navigator in the R.A.F. for twenty two years and Diana ran a bed and breakfast place on Exmoor. After some years living in France, they moved here. Their shared passion is for the self sustainable life, for home grown vegetables, solar power, composting toilets, etc.

Pam and Dave live in a modest house below the village with a boxer dog and a grumpy terrier. Dave's father was a gamekeeper all his life and the son shares his father's rustic outlook. He keeps chickens and rabbits in hutches carefully crafted from old pallets. Their garden is a vista of vegetables: cabbages, leeks, sprouts, potatoes. Both of these couples live here permanently, while other people also have a house in the UK and divide their time between the two. George Elliot and Mary Wray, for example, live for part of the year in what used to be the old olive press, and part of the year in North London.

Lisa and Richard, who live twenty kilometres down the coast, are in their thirties. She was in a hotel next to the World Trade Centre in New York when the aircraft hit the two towers in 2001. Their move to Greece, in search of a saner existence, was a direct consequence of that experience.

I did hear that the pilot of the Enola Gay, the aircraft which dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, lived for many years in Messinia and died only recently.

Paul died maybe three years ago but Di stayed on in the yurt, to which has since been added a picturesque huddle of more recent structures. The garden is a delight. She takes in paying guests now, holiday makers, to supplement her pension.

Dave's health failed and he and Pam moved back to England, where he died. Pam hasn't returned to Greece and the house currently stands empty and the garden is overgrown.

Lisa and Richard are now back in the UK, living in Devon.

We meet hardly any new arrivals, these days. There is a definite sense of the ebbing of a tide.

Some other retired people that we know have died or moved back to the UK, often for health reasons, or they want to spend time with recently arrived grandchildren. We hear that there are some hundreds of houses along the coast, belonging to foreigners, which are for sale at the moment.

George and Mary still visit regularly and seem to have changed not at all.



Dina, Niko's daughter, using the tournos

January 28. 2005. Hands on help.

Once the olive harvest starts in December, the sleepy landscape takes on a new life: knots of people moving about on distant terraces, the raw sound of chainsaws. Beneath the trees, capacious olive nets begin to appear, like fragments of patchwork and the sound of voices carries clearly across the valley. White smoke rises from the bonfires of branches.

We agree to work with Nikos Abramis and his family on their olives- they own upward of a thousand trees- as a kind of brief apprenticeship, before starting on our own trees- a piffling two hundred. Working with Niko's team will also, as we think, bring us closer to a sense of the Greek outlook.

Niko himself is the mastoras, the patriarch, dismissive and peremptory with his grown-up children, with Dina in particular, his dumpy, unmarried daughter, who works throughout in a thick coat and woolly hat, whatever the weather.

Giorgia, his married daughter, a slightly pinched presence, works energetically while her ten year old son sits on a sack of olives and makes no fuss. Kosta, Niko's son, who is some kind of bailiff for the law court in Kalamata, comes back at weekends to work.

Kostas is an amiable person, unlike Giorgia, who treats us with chilly reserve. Herbert, the Austrian, is also part of the team, though his relations with Niko are volatile. Herbert works in a permanent state of bemused irritation with what he takes to be Greek stupidity, while Niko seems puzzled by Herbert's noisy bouts of frustration. None of the Abramis family drive, nor do they own a motor vehicle, so Herbert's Mercedes truck is a great asset.

A problem with his head, Niko confides to me as he sips his plastic cup of viscous coffee. He says the same about you, I say in my faulty Greek and Kostas laughs.

Linda and I finally begin work on our own trees, and pleasant enough work it is in this splendid landscape. When we have picked about a dozen 50 kilo sacks of olives, which takes us maybe three or four days, we ferry them down in the pickup to the factory on the coast where they are pressed. Each sack yields about ten litres of oil.

The harvest is a very mutual business: everyone has olive trees, even if it's only half a dozen in the garden, and the yard of the factory is noisy with voices as we wait in the queue of battered, overloaded vehicles

to cross the weighbridge and unload our sacks.

The oil itself, when we finally sample it, is a revelation. It is green, for a start, quite a strong green, and cloudy for the first week or two, until it settles. The taste is surprisingly fruity with a sort of peppery bite. It is excellent. We pour some into a saucer, add a little salt and dip our bread.

Olives.

The land we own is steep, the terraced side of a valley overlooking the sea. Olive trees grow on the terraces and we have about two hundred of them. We begin harvesting



The track from the house

the olives in January and the whole process takes us some weeks, depending on the crop. Linda and I do it ourselves so it's not quick.

There are two kinds of trees on our land: one producing eating olives (We have about eight) while the rest produce olive oil. We harvest the eating olives by hand in November, using a ladder and a bucket,

picking as many as we need for ourselves and then inviting friends over to help themselves to the rest.

Eating olives are bigger than the other sort and quite inedibly bitter when you first pick them, so they have first to be soaked in water for up to a fortnight. The water is changed regularly until the bitterness is gone. Then comes the hocus-pocus with salt and vinegar -everybody seems to have a different way of doing it- after which they can be stored in olive oil or salt water. People put in fancy stuff like garlic and herbs sometimes.

Harvesting the olives which go to the press to produce oil is a bigger job and takes us maybe a month. We take off the olive bearing boughs with a saw and feed them over a sort of vibrator, a machine about the size of an old fashioned ice cream cart, which we wheel from tree to tree. Big nets or sheets are spread under the trees to catch stray olives which fly about like shrapnel. At the end of the day you find olives in your shoes, your pockets and even in your underwear.

We take the sacks of olives down to the press a couple of kilometres away on the coast together with empty barrels and return a few days later with the oil. You get about ten kilos of oil from a fifty kilo sack of olives. It's good stuff too, everybody says so. We don't use fertiliser, or what the Greeks call farmako and its cold pressed. Each year we get anything between three hundred and eight hundred litres, most of which we

decant into two and a half litre cans and ship to the UK. We sell the oil for twenty pounds a can, which I understand is quite reasonable.

We still harvest our own crop, until this year that is, when things changed a bit. The annual pattern for the past nine years has been that we pick our own olives, decant our own oil into cans, make up a pallet and ship it to England for sale to friends and family.

This arrangement wasn't ideal, partly because we don't know from year to year, what the yield would be- it has tended to go down because we haven't used fertiliser, nor indeed have we taken any particular care of the trees- so we couldn't guarantee to supply a given quantity of oil. Generally, people in the UK have wanted more than we were able to supply. That's one thing.

We finally solved that problem by taking our oil to a press in another village run by the Milionis brothers. Thimios and Ilias are students of the game and take a keen interest in the quality of their oil, so what we do now is to put our own oil into the common vat and send as much as we need to the UK directly from the factory. They take care of the shipping and bottling/canning.

And then something else happened. Over the years I have done various odd jobs for the Abramis family on their house in the village: put in some timber ceilings to cover the raw concrete, built a kind of lean-to kitchen and other bits and pieces. Each time I have done some job for them, I have refused payment and each time Niko has said, one day I'll bring you some help with your olives. (The subtext here is that Niko thinks I'm a piss poor farmer, and he's right.)

Well, finally, several years later, he was as good as his word, and he appeared after the harvest with Giorgo from the kafineion, to prune the trees. Giorgo is a fast and capable guy and he worked for some days, and Niko paid him. The work of pruning was still unfinished at the end of the agreed days, so I offered to pay Giorgo to continue. At 35 euros a day, who could complain? Business is bad at Giorgo's kafineion in the village, and he needs the work, I say to myself, smugly.

We had other paid help from Alexandros, Ismini's grandson, who recently left university, and has yet to find a permanent job. He needs the work, I say smugly. So, without quite meaning to, we've drifted into employing people to help with the work on the land. I find it suits me quite well, after nine years of hard-line insistence that we do the work ourselves.

Giorgia, Niko's daughter, whom I describe in the article as a chilly presence, gradually became much friendlier towards us. We like her very much. In the evenings she does needlepoint pictures. We have one hanging in the wooden house, which she gave us as a gift.

April 15 2005. A bird in the hand

Birthdays bulletin. 8.15pm. Feb 16. Sitting at the table, writing by the light of the diminutive solar powered lamp, with my birthday present bottle of Mythos Hellenic Lager in front of me and listening to the wind outside as it roars like a train out of the mountains.

Niko popped in before it got dark with his



The new wooden house, 2005

ancient Russian shotgun over his shoulder like some antique Maniot ruffian. The hunting season ends next week so the landscape is loud with the popping of shotguns at the moment. They shoot small birds, thrushes and other songbirds, and while you may not approve, it is a part of life for Greek men, and at least the birds are eaten after they have been shot.

I encountered Frosso and Dina the other week sitting around their fire, plucking small birds. They had two bowls on the floor in front of them, one containing the scarlet plucked corpses, the other piled high with un-plucked birds. Feathers everywhere, obviously.

We don't eat songbirds ourselves as a rule but Andriana, a Greek friend, once brought a tray of cooked thrushes as an addition to a Jacob's joint meal at our house. They are a tad crunchy since you are supposed to eat them, bones and all.

Greeks seem to refer to all small birds shot for the table as thrushes, though the hunting bag may include species which would be considered rare in the UK, black redstart, for instance, as well as blackbirds, blackcap and thrushes.

Housebuilding

It is my birthday today (59, if you really want to know) but it's also almost exactly six months since we arrived in the empty olive groves in the baking heat, when all we had by way of amenities was a water tap wired to a tree.

The house building project has gone pretty smoothly really, though I did fall off the roof in the early stages and crack a rib, which slowed me up for a week or two.

It's a wooden structure, standing on a foundation of concrete blocks, about eight metres square, divided by a mezzanine (the house straddles two terraces) over a timber frame, the walls are constructed as a sort of sandwich with tongued and grooved boarding on the outside and inside and solid polystyrene insulation between. We have a bathroom with a shower (but no bath), a washbasin, toilet and bidet. Power is provided by two generators. (6kw and 1kw) The toilet waste goes into a brick lined septic tank (which I have probably made rather small, so that I may have to shovel it out in a couple of years) Water comes from the village tank, a kilometre and a half away, down a black plastic pipe that runs alongside the track. In the summer the water arrives hot.

In the last couple of weeks since we finished our first olive harvest, I have added some decking and a balcony outside, which will double our living space in the warmer weather. I think Linda is pleased with the house. Certainly, she spends more time cleaning the new cooker and washing up, than seems quite healthy. Someone said, when they saw it for the first time that it was a very romantic house, which was a nice thing to say.

For anyone interested in the economics of the project: the four acres of olive grove cost us 45,000 euros, while the materials for the house (including timber, roofing, plumbing fittings, etc) probably cost a little over 20,000 euros. Harvesting the 200 olive trees was less testing and more enjoyable than we anticipated.

The oil will sell for maybe 4,000 euros, and of course, we get free olives, olive oil and firewood for the stove and the excellent wood burning water heater. Linda's two part time jobs teaching English in Kalamata bring in some hundreds of euros each month, though, by English standards, wages are very low, and my pension makes up the rest. We discovered, having conducted a couple of accounting weeks, during which we totted up our basic outgoings, that our living costs are fairly modest, maybe 200 euros per month.

It all seems like a long way from our life in the UK. We are planning a visit there in June.

The wooden house, after more than nine years, is weathering well, though Gordon and I did take off and replace the roof a couple of years ago to make it more weatherproof. We have re-varnished the exterior timber several times and the balcony decking gets an annual coat of old olive oil mixed with diesel. Last year I included the contents of the chip pan into this patent preservative. A faint odour of the takeaway hung about the place for a while after.

We moved into the big house maybe three years ago and the wooden house is now used by friends, family and couch surfers.

June 10 2005. Spring.

People say that if you want to see the Greek landscape at its best, then you must come in the spring, and it's true.

Under the olive trees lie carpets of white marguerites studded with red anemones, and we can find a dozen different species of wild flowers within a few yards, though we don't necessarily know what they're called. Linda found bee orchids near the house, and a woman from the village, Giorgia, taught her to recognise horta, the edible greens that grow wild on the land and wild asparagus.

Swifts and swallows arrived at the end of March and a few days later, a gorgeous troupe of hoopoes. The other day we watched a pair of what we took to be eagles rising in great spirals above the house. Owls call in the night from the caves at the end of the valley, where they have

their nests. Koukouvalia is the very evocative Greek name for owls.

Though we do get some rain and the sky can still be overcast from time to time, the perfect spring days grow more frequent and little by little the daytime temperatures rise as the sun passes higher across the sky. Through the winter the sun sets invisibly behind the slope of the valley, but as the days grow longer we begin to see the sun setting across the bay. We lose the sunset again at the end of September.

We have started gardening in a halting sort of way, laying water pipes and fitting taps around the outside of the house so that we can keep the place green through the heat of the Summer, and planting flowers and shrubs.

On the terrace below the house there are already young trees, planted by the previous owners three years ago: a lemon tree, orange trees, a mulberry tree and an almond tree, and they are all doing well.

In contrast to this spring optimism, we spent a melancholy afternoon in the ruined village of Mikri Mantinea which lies on a high spur about a mile from where we live. On August the first, 1944, a violent earthquake destroyed much of the village. There were deaths, it seems, and the surviving inhabitants moved down to the coast to build new houses for themselves, so that now there are two villages with the same name. The old village is now little more than overgrown ruins, though the two churches

have been repaired.

White lilies grow rank in abandoned gardens and fig trees push through crumbling masonry. One family stayed on after the earthquake, and the last member of that family, an old lady, died just a couple of years ago. We climbed the outside stair of her house and pushed open the door into the dim interior. The windows were shuttered and the slatted light fell across a floor littered with dusty trash: broken crockery, a spilled button box, yellowed letters. In another room, mildewed blankets lay tumbled on a bed and on the wall hung a fading wedding photograph. We step outside again into the springtime dazzle.

Earthquakes here are common. Sometimes there are several minor tremors a day, and they do give you pause for thought. About six years ago there was a significant quake in and around Kalamata, 5.9 on the Richter scale, which lasted for many seconds. Linda was teaching a class of kids at the time and when the first kid hissed Seismo!, they all shot under their desks, which is the drill.

School kids in Greece do earthquake drill annually, rather like English kids do fire drill. After the event, the whole school trooped outside to wait for the inevitable aftershock. Linda said the atmosphere was very emotional, and noisy with the sound of mobile phones as anxious parents tried to get in touch. No one was hurt and there was no structural damage, though the school was closed the following day while engineers inspected the place. They do say, cynically, that earthquakes never exceed 5.9

because beyond 6.0, the state has an obligation to pay for damage.

Kalamata's big recent quake came in 1986, after which 60% of the buildings in the city were condemned as unsafe. As I understand, only one family died, under a collapsing ceiling. A few months ago, twenty odd years after the event, an imposing monument to the event was erected in the town centre.

Historically, I guess earthquakes have always been significant in Greece. At Ancient Olympia, during what must have been a very violent seismo sometime during the fourth century, the colossal temple of Zeus went over. The great stone drums of the columns are still lying where they fell. What makes this even more interesting is that the ancient site of Olympia was entirely lost for centuries beneath gravel banks deposited by the river Alpheios and only rediscovered in the nineteenth century by German archaeologists. A cataclysmic moment buried and then found again.

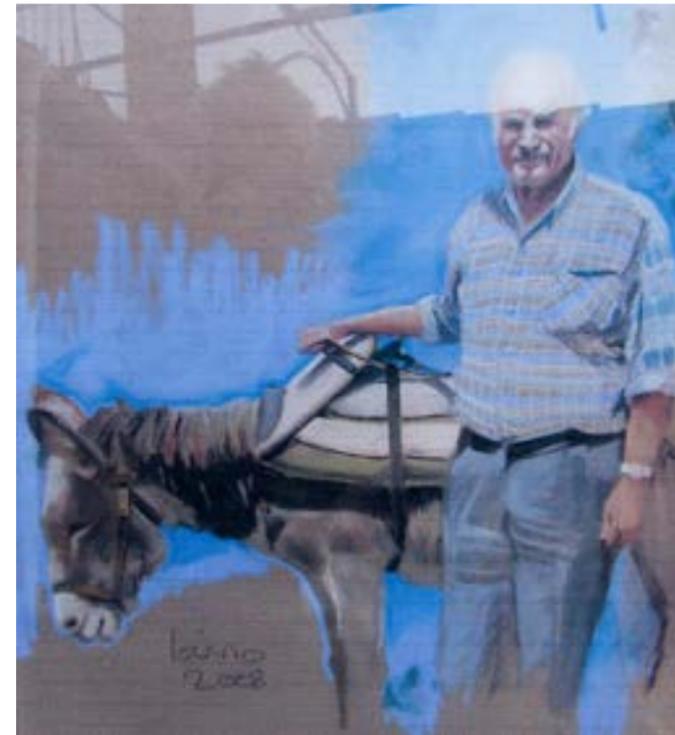
July 2008. Donkeys.

Donkeys appear often on Greek picture postcards and tourist bumf, and there are still a few actual donkeys to be seen in rural districts. Our neighbour Niko usually comes down for his routine cup of coffee on his donkey, particularly now that his chest is getting worse and he finds it harder to walk back up the long hill to the village. The donkey stands above the house munching whatever it can find and farting loudly, while Niko drinks his coffee. Until a very few years ago, he and his family used donkeys to bring out the full sacks from the

terraces during the olive harvest.

Tiny Kokonas, a spry widow in her eighties, still passes along the opposite side of the valley on her donkey driving her goats before her. It was Kokonas' donkey which was washed away in a freak flood a while ago and found later in the branches of a tree, still alive.

Eleni also rides a donkey. Eleni has land above the village, a ramshackle stretch



My drawing of Niko and his donkey

of stony hillside, dotted with goat sheds, chicken coops, rusting oil drums and abandoned tractor parts. A spinster of uncertain age with big calloused hands and a loud cackle, she rides side saddle up and back along the road from her house, in her black headscarf and voluminous skirts. Sometimes you see her leading the poor creature loaded with a mountainous pile of forage.

Before the coming of the motor car and in remoter parts of the country that was not so long ago, the first tarmac road to Megali Mantinia from the coast, for instance, wasn't built until the nineteen sixties—towns and villages were connected by a network of donkey tracks. Stretches of these tracks were often paved, with stone bridges over stream beds and beautifully engineered dry stone ramps up the steeper sections. Kalderimia, the Greeks call these narrow stone roads, although the word itself is probably Turkish.

There is a fine example a few kilometres from our house, a long series of ramps zigzagging up a beetling declivity, maybe a thousand feet vertically, to the half abandoned village of Altomira in the foothills of Taygetos. Niko remembers it well. When he was a boy, it was the route they took with their flocks of sheep and goats each year to the high summer pastures, returning only in the autumn.

The family, he says, had a house in Altomira, which they used in the Summer months, but as the years passed and the seasonal movement of livestock declined (transhumance, is it called?) the family house fell into ruin and is now no more than a pile of stones.

Last autumn, Linda and I climbed the stone road to Altomira. It is much overgrown now and the fine ramps have collapsed in places although it is still used. At one point we were obliged to hop on to the rocks above the path as a mixed flock of sheep and

goats passed down from the heights above, maybe two or three hundred animals. Behind them came a young shepherdess, the music from the earpiece of her walkman clearly audible.

Electric drill

As I was walking through the village the other day, Niko called me over to the junk filled shaded space across from his house, where he hangs out with his cronies. They were discussing electric drills. Niko is thinking of buying a drill to which he can attach an agitator, so that Frosso, his ailing wife, can stir the big milk pan more easily when she is making cheese. The family make a lot of cheese from their sheep, for themselves and to sell.

What she needs, he says is a drill that will go slow as well as fast. They tried a high speed drill and there was milk everywhere. When I appear a couple of days later with a cheap, variable speed drill from the supermarket in Kalamata, Frosso is not impressed. A wooden stick from the mountains is better for this work, she says.

Oddly emblematic of the changing times, this episode. The old ways are evolving, being subverted by the culture of the commodity. Take Kosta, for example, their grown up son, a nice man of about thirty with a slight congenital jaw defect. (This is klironomia again, heredity, the legacy of generations of intermarriage between cousins, when the village was more isolated from the world at large).

Anyway, Kosta has lived in Kalamata for years working for the law courts as a repo man, a bailiff, we might say, reclaiming cars, houses, etc, whose credit payments have fallen into arrears. He's a good man and I imagine he does his work as humanely as possible, but again, it's somehow symbolic: a Greek village boy making his living among the debris of consumerism.

Here, on the edge of the gilded dream world of the European Union, it's hard to know what to think. The old life is being replaced by something else, something which blots out the connection with the past. Past poverty was a bad thing, clearly, but prosperity has a double edge.

The gilded dream world of the European Union...

I wrote this only a few years ago when times were good and confidence was high. No one predicted the travails that were to come so quickly for Greeks. They say unemployment here is currently running at around 27%, and maybe one in four of the shops in Kalamata is empty.

One thing that you do notice, though, in these hard times is the sense that people are reclaiming their vegetable gardens. Around the village we see patches of vegetables in previously uncultivated plots. Giorgo at the kafineion has begun breeding rabbits and roosters for the table, which he sells around the village.

Megali Mantinia

The village of Megali Mantinia stands on the rim of the Rintomo gorge, a vast canyon cutting into the heart of the Taygetos Mountains. During the hot days of summer the balconies of the houses which hang above the gulf, catch the cooling airs.

About a month ago, Linda and I took a couple of days off to walk up the floor of the gorge into the mountains. We leave the car in Vorio, a tiny place a few kilometres further up the flank of the canyon, and drop down the steep track into the bottom, turning up toward the distant peaks. We pick our way up the dry river bed between white boulders and drifts of gravel, climbing a bad step here and there with the aid of old Via Ferrata style iron rungs: a prodigious place. High up, we spot the ruins of the old water powered corn mills which used to operate here, though there is no water now. We see what we take to be a viper, a patterned bootlace of a thing that slides lazily away across the white rock at our approach, and a dead wild boar, malodorous, half gone, though its razor tushes are still intact: a formidable creature in life, I guess.

The walls of the chasm grow closer and steeper until we are passing through a narrow vertical defile, chill and dank. We walk beneath the tiny double arched bridge which carries the path to Pigadia village, hanging high above us. We continue on for three or four hours toward the heart of the range, stopping briefly where the

gorge divides, at a surprisingly large church standing at the edge of the gravel beds of the canyon floor.

Our Lady of the Burning Stooks, something like that, and then on again. It's getting dark as we trudge into the abandoned hamlet of Rintomo, no more than a scatter of ruins. We build a fire of driftwood and make tea on the Trangia stove. We sleep, not entirely comfortably on the floor of an abandoned shed. If you think of Greece, think of mountains.

The Flood

After the first September rains, new shoots begin to push up: wild crocus, cyclamen, iris. New grass hazes the terraces and Niko the shepherd lets out his sheep from the concrete pen where they have lived on hay for the summer, to graze.

We get thunderstorms too, in the autumn. A couple of weeks ago, in the middle of the night, we had a serious storm, several hours of torrential rain, the sky flickering daylight bright, stupendous thunder and the rain absolutely roaring on the roof of the wooden house.

In the morning when we crept out, it became clear that this had been something out of the ordinary. The track which passes below the house was blocked in both directions by landslips from the terraces above. In one place an olive tree had come down with the mud and was standing in the road.

Herbert our Austrian neighbour appeared, clambering over the heaps of muddy earth, clutching his digital camera. He had walked down to the coast a little earlier and he showed us photographs of the flood damage: cars and trees in the sea, cars overturned in olive groves, a parked cabin cruiser turned over and smashed, mud and debris everywhere.

The storm made the main Greek TV news in the evening, with video footage of mud filled houses and sound bites from farmers who had lost livestock, carried away by the deluge.

The next day Niko appeared with more gossip: the road to the village had gone entirely, revealing the ancient paved donkey track beneath. Widow Kokonas' donkey had been swept away, a fate shared by turkeys, sheep and goats around the village.

Six days after the storm, Niko found old Kokonas' donkey in the top of a tree, where the flood waters had deposited it, still alive.

Niko felled the tree with his chainsaw and the hapless animal tottered off, unharmed but very thirsty.

A detail I didn't mention in this piece, is the damage the flood water had done to the big house, which at that time was at an early stage. Our land is not flat, it's very steep, and so, in order to build a structure of any size we had to make a level space.

We built a retaining wall from concrete blocks and the plan was to pull down earth from above

into the void behind this wall, thus creating a platform. The wall had been partly built but no backfilling had been done. What we had was a dam. During the night of the storm, the space behind the wall filled up with, it must have been hundreds of tons of, rainwater. At some point the wall failed and a deluge of mud and debris burst down the slope in front of the building. We found a concrete block a hundred metres away. Had I known, I could have knocked a hole in the wall and allowed the water to escape at a sensible rate.

It put the building work back some weeks.

2 November 2008. Katsiki Giorgo.

Up in the Taygetos foothills, near the empty monastery of Agios Giorgos, where a stream bed passes under the road and ancient walnut trees grow, lives Giorgos, his wife Maria and their three hundred goats.

Herbert and I drive up the hairpins in our respective trucks from the coast to collect goat shit, siegenscheisse in German, fuski in Greek. The manure from goats is widely regarded in Greece as the fertiliser of choice.

At this time of year, Giorgo's ramshackle goat pens which straggle up the stony hillside are deep in hard, trodden manure, and it takes us a couple of hours to load both trucks, under the sinister gaze of crowds of goats. Giorgo is always keen to get the fuski away before the autumn rains turn it to slurry.

He and his wife live up here through the summer in their tiny foursquare cement shack. There are chickens in a pen made of old pallets, and a fournos stands a few yards off, by the wire gate.

The fournos, the dome shaped outside oven, is a powerful emblem in Greece, a symbol of all things domestic, traditional, secure.

It's a straightforward construction of stone or cement, its internal diameter usually a little over a metre. What happens is that a fire is burned inside the dome, usually of thin olive prunings, until the whole mass of the oven is hot, when the ashes are scraped away and the bread, meat or whatever is placed inside, using something resembling a baker's paddle. The small door is closed off, usually with a piece of tin. The residual heat in the fournos allows you to cook for several hours.

When we arrive, Maria is just taking out a batch of big flat loaves, and the aroma of newly baked bread comes to us across the hillside. Later, we see her loading up the cooling oven with chunks of stale bread from a previous batch. This will become paximadi, twice baked bread. It's as hard as rock when it comes out, but it keeps forever, and you eat it by dipping it into water or some more interesting slop to soften it. Our neighbour Niko, who is seventy, remembers eating paximadi with cold water for his midday meal when he was a shepherd boy in these foothills.

Maria herself, with her black headscarf,

bad teeth, shrill voice and cheerful, unthinking generosity, is the very type of the Greek village matron. When we have finished loading the trucks, she calls us over to share a plate of baked potatoes, aubergines and salty cheese, which we wash down with water and a little vinegary wine. As we leave she passes us big chunks of paximadi, enough to live on for a week.

Niko's House.

The living room of Niko Abramis' house in the village, or more properly, the only room, save for a tiny kitchen and a sort of lean-to at the back, is a long narrow affair. It used to be two rooms, I realise as I am putting up a new wooden ceiling to hide the underside of the ancient concrete roof, though you can still feel a difference between the two halves.

The space nearest to the street door clearly used to be the best room, the room you see if you look in at the open door, and boasts dowry chests, a heavy polished table and a rag rug. Black and white family photographs in pitted chrome frames stand on crotchet mats. Old Frosso, Niko's dumpy wife, often sits on a chair just inside the open door, looking out across the narrow street. Above her head on the outside wall hangs an old tin Karelia cigarettes sign. Years ago, the family house was also a kafineon.

As you pass further into the house, you come to the space that used to be the living room,

and the atmosphere is different. Here stands the television atop the tall deep freeze with its orthodox Christian fridge magnets. In the winter, long branches burn in the big fireplace, the unburnt ends sticking out into the room. As the burning end is consumed, the branch is pushed further in. Saves on cutting logs.

There are beds around the walls; Niko's bed, he being paterfamilias, is placed most conveniently for watching the TV. There is a long plain table, a wooden bench and a few rush bottomed chairs; nothing like a sofa or an armchair, no carpet on the cement floor.

Last year, Dinah, Niko's unmarried daughter, asked me to put up a shelf on the wall above the table, on which now stands an assortment of little icons, lamps and other religious trinkets. Dinah goes to church twice on Sundays, but then why not? It's only fifty yards away down the narrow street.

I hear that there are more than twenty churches within the village boundary, most of them very small. Dinah's shelf is a sort of shrine, I suppose. She lights the little lamps on name days, at Easter and other church festivals.

In the summer when the weather is hot, the family spend most of the time outside, in the vine shaded yard that beetles over the Rintomo gorge. It's a most uplifting thing when you first pass through the gloomy house and come out into the back yard. The view is stupendous: below your feet the

gorge drops away a thousand feet, while further off the blue bay of Messinia hangs like a veil. To the left rise the summits of Taygetos. A number of village houses stand along this crest, to catch the cooler air, Niko says.

Though by more affluent standards, the Abramis house might be considered very basic, almost primitive, it is of central significance for the family. For village Greeks, the house, the spiti is primary, and even if they move away, to the city or abroad, the family house has an abiding place in their hearts.

Funerals.

Funerals in Greece are very different from funerals in England. When someone dies here, little black edged flyers go up on walls and telegraph poles, giving the name of the person who has died and the time and place of the funeral. In our village it's always the same little cemetery. I guess these little notices must go up very quickly since burial usually follows within a day or two of death.

Everyone gets buried. You need a special permit to be cremated, and, as I understand, the only crematorium is in Athens. The whole village turns out for the funeral and a big procession makes its way from the dead person's house, following the coffin which is usually carried to the graveyard by family members and friends. I've never seen a hearse here, though I imagine such things must exist in the towns.

The interesting thing though, for non-orthodox Christians is that, once buried, you only stay in the ground for a couple of years. The body is then disinterred and the principle bones either go to the family or are lodged in an ossuary in the graveyard. In our village this is a little shed-like place with a tin roof, lined with dusty shelves stacked with ageing bags and boxes, all with labels. The general idea seems to be that in order to be resurrected on the last day, you are going to need your long bones and your skull. Hmmm.

The state of the disinterred body is of considerable interest to the community. Clean bones used to be thought of as a good omen, a sign of a life well lived, whereas a body not fully decomposed was considered to be mark of previously hidden sins. In these cases the body goes back into the ground for another spell. The issue can be complicated when the dead person has been taking long term pharmaceuticals, which apparently have a preservative effect.

In Mani, there used to be a tradition of funeral laments, *mirologia*, sung by women at the graveside, passionate improvised dirges accompanied by breast beating and the tearing of hair.

I was in a small town near Delphi some years ago, where a group of local boys had been killed in a car smash. A number of families had suffered a loss and the heart rending sound of wailing was everywhere. Later, members of the bereaved families sat on chairs in the square while the entire town

filed past, some hundreds of people.

In a graveyard in Finikounda, we once encountered a group of women gathered around the grave of a lately buried member of the family, and they were giving out little plastic cups of sweeties, not sweeties exactly, but what seemed like sugared corn kernels. A traditional thing, they said, food for the dead on their journey, and for anyone else who happens to be passing. We wandered off, chewing.

Ismini's memories. 21 September 2009.

Last week we spent an evening at Ismini's house. Ismini is 66, a Greek colleague of Linda's at her school and a native of Kalamata. She has been reorganising her house, moving furniture, going through old papers and books, and is in a mood to reminisce.

She shows us an old identity card of her aunt's issued in 1943 by the occupying



The monument at Meligalas

Nazis. (Greece was occupied by the Germans from 1941 until 1944) Ismini remembers the civil war which followed the occupation. Her father was a communist and, following the civil war, the communist party was declared illegal in Greece. Known communist sympathisers were barred from jobs in the public services and many were imprisoned or shot. It seems that Ismini's father was condemned to death and only escaped the firing squad because of the chance intervention of a neighbour.

As young girls, she and her sister Eleni were required to sign oaths renouncing communism but were nonetheless forbidden from attending Greek universities. As a result, Ismini went to study in England, where she became a fluent English speaker and a lifelong anglophile.

A rough town, Kalamata, she says, in the years when she was growing up, a sea port with a string of dives and brothels along the waterfront. The town had a reputation as a haven for homosexuals in those years. Interestingly, the Greek word *sika*, meaning fig, also denotes an inhabitant of Kalamata -whose chief export used to be figs. It's also a popular term for a gay.

There is still prostitution in some parts of the city, but it's a licensed business these days, she says. Until a year ago there was a bordello a hundred metres down the street from Ismini's house, To Asteri, the star, but it closed its doors and the building now houses a kindergarten. Her son Stathi suggested that the new kindergarten should

be called To Asteraki, the little star.

When she was a girl, all the young people wanted to get away from Kalamata. It's a bigger, better place now. There are clubs, bars, facilities for young people. These days' people want to stay, bring up their children here.

Ismini was brought up near the centre of the old city, but the house she has lived in for the past thirty years is at the eastern edge, where it merges with the ancient coastal town of Pharai. Homer mentions Pharai in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus' son Telemachus comes here in search of his lost father.

June 1st 2009. Meligalas.

Twenty kilometres north of Kalamata lies the town of Meligalas, a dusty rural settlement like a hundred others in Greece. The name Meligalas translates roughly as milk and honey, but in truth it's a melancholy place. A mile outside the town stands a big concrete cross erected in the early 1970s, when Greece was being run by a military junta.

Across the road from the monument, tall slabs are inscribed with the names of hundreds of Greeks who died at the hands of fellow Greeks in mid September 1944, only weeks after the withdrawal of German occupying forces. It's a tragic, complex story, but the bones of it are as follows...

During the German occupation (1941-44), when members of the legitimate Athens government had fled to Egypt, much of

rural Greece, though ostensibly under Nazi domination, came to be administered by a communist resistance movement, EAM (the National Liberation Front) and its military wing (ELAS)

At the same time, the quisling prime minister, Rallis, recruited Greeks to form collaborationist 'security battalions' whose remit was to root out communists and communist sympathisers.

Following the German withdrawal from Greece in the summer of 1944 came the inevitable clash between these opposing elements. ELAS succeeded in disbanding some of the security battalions, but during early September, in southern Peloponnesos, the local battalions and their sympathisers began to gather in the town of Meligalas and to prepare to defend it against an expected ELAS attack.

The assault came on September 14 and lasted three days, but finally the town was overrun, though losses were heavy among the attackers. Anyone not routinely resident in the town was rounded up and over the next few days, executed. Estimates of the numbers killed vary, maybe as many as fifteen hundred. The big concrete cross stands over what used to be a dry well, into which many of the bodies were thrown. There are old people in Meligalas today who remember these events, and those that followed as the country slid into civil war.

Bitter memories and resentments are still handed down.

Maniot Feuds.

Mani, where we live, is that middle finger of Greece pointing south toward Africa, a strange country of rocky headlands and deserted tower houses.

In the past, the Maniots had a reputation as brigands and bandits, and the whole peninsula used to be known as *Kakovouna*, the bad mountains, or the land of evil counsel. The chief occupation of the maniot families seems to have been feud, and these feuds were not merely quarrels, but shooting wars, vendettas, which could persist through generations.

It seems that only boys and men fought. Male children were referred to as 'guns'. It was generally safe for women to move about during hostilities. As late as 1870, in the village of Kitta, a detachment of regular troops was called in to put down a particularly protracted affair.

But old habits die hard. I was speaking to an elderly woman in a village not far from where we live. Her family had been involved in a feud with a rival family for generations, and though the killings had ceased in recent years, she still sent her sons to live in America to ensure their safety. The population of Mani is much smaller than it was, many of its original inhabitants having emigrated, to Australia and elsewhere. Weekenders from Athens renovate the old tower houses, and in the summertime German camper vans cruise the

narrow road that loops around the coast.

An Athenian friend of ours told us that, years back, one group of Maniot families' intent upon emigrating only made it to the port of Piraeus. These families now run the dives and brothels along the waterfront. On occasion they shoot one another, in the time honoured fashion.

Oct 2009. Hoopoes

The other day, one of the two cats that live under the wooden house came trotting along the terrace with a Hoopoe in its mouth.

Now, if you've never seen a Hoopoe, and they are hardly ever seen in England, it's a pigeon sized bird with a curving bill, a long crest on its head, which it often erects on landing, and bold black and white stripes on its wings and tail; a bird such as a small child might draw, or Edward Lear.

Everything about the Hoopoe is odd. The broody females and nestlings have the ability to produce a foul smelling liquid reminiscent of rotting meat, to deter predators, somewhat after the fashion of the skunk. From the age of six days the nestlings are also able to direct a stream of liquid shit at intruders. They can also hiss like snakes. You couldn't make it up, could you?

One of its sources of food is the processionary caterpillar, which troops through the trees in long files. These caterpillars are covered in irritating hairs

and are inedible to most predators, but not the Hoopoe.

Hoopoes can often be seen lying on the open ground with their wings outspread. We have driven past them on the track several times in this supine posture and they seemed quite unconcerned. There are assorted theories to explain this behaviour: sunbathing, I read in one book.



Hoopoe

Even the Latin name for the species is peculiar: *Upupa Epops*, which probably derives from the sound of its call, a carrying oop-oop-oop. It's the sound of spring here, like the call of the first cuckoo in England.

So I called the cat over and managed to persuade it to part with the bird. It flew off frantically, apparently unharmed, leaving a single black and white feather behind.

The Odeio

One of my favourite buildings in Kalamata is the elegant colonaded pile which currently houses the Odeio the 'musical conservatory', as the new tourist guide rather grandly puts

it. It lies in the old town, up a steep street of stone steps, below the castle, behind the big church of Ipapandi (one of several names for the Virgin) Big palm trees grow in its shady courtyard and from the high ceilinged rooms within, you can often hear piano scales, the sound of a soprano voice or the creak of a beginner's violin. I had assumed that the building had always housed the music school, but it seems not. A church at one time and then a school, it became the Odeio in 1986, after the earthquake: one of several cultural initiatives, including the (now very successful) annual dance festival, and a visual arts centre.

Stathis Giftakis is the Principal, a highly regarded composer in Greece, with a well developed sense of irreverence and a taste for off colour jokes. Linda teaches English to his son Arionas, himself, at 14, a precocious violinist and guitarist. Stathi's deputy is the bear-like Ivan, a Russian voice teacher, who also conducts one of the town's choirs (in which Linda sings).

The Youth Orchestra, which rehearses every week at the Odeio, is currently on tour in Germany.

We go sometimes to the Sunday evening 'Music Café' where professional musicians from Athens and abroad perform as guests, while Stathi, with his goatee beard and owl spectacles, acts as the droll master of ceremonies.

It's a great place, but life is rarely simple. The new mayor, who controls the city's

finances, is no music lover, preferring to devote money to more visible improvements, fountains, tree planting and so on. Neither Stathi nor the staff were paid wages for several months following his election. It wasn't until staff, students and supporters mounted a sort of musical demonstration in the town square that wages began to be paid again.

And now the Odeio is under threat of closure. The Greek government in Athens is under pressure from its creditors to cut the number of public employees. Small provincial institutions make an easy target.

As it happens, we now know Stathi and his wife Lilly very well, having worked together on a number of occasions.

April 2009. Thanasis dies.

Thanasis died a few weeks ago at eighty-odd. His dapper little figure was a familiar sight around the village. He was deaf as a post and almost always alone, an isolate.

During the dark years of the German/Italian occupation (1941-44) and afterwards, it seems that Thanasis, who can only have been a very young man at the time, was an informer. The houses of suspected communists he had denounced, were burned. Our neighbour Niko says there were deaths, shootings.

Whatever may have actually occurred, Thanasis' ostracism by his fellow villagers was a palpable fact. We have seen him,

not merely ignored, but pushed aside by his fellow villagers, and this fifty years later.

What puzzled us was why he stayed, why he never left the village to lead a life elsewhere, free from his past.

The years of the occupation and the civil war which followed, are only remembered by the elderly. It seems that the then Prime Minister, Rallis, set up what were called security battalions, collaborationist militia groups, recruited from local communities, whose remit was to purge their communities of known communist sympathisers, which in rural areas could mean anyone you had a grudge against. Many people at the time thought that the threat of communism was a greater evil than the fascist occupation.

It wasn't until 1949 that anything like civil peace was restored. Old hatreds still lie not far below the surface.

March 2009. Frosso dies.

One evening, a couple of weeks ago, as I am driving into Kalamata to do my weekly stint of private teaching, I take a call on my mobile phone from Dina, our neighbour Niko's unmarried daughter. The signal is bad so I stop the car and stand on the windswept road by the sea with spray erupting a few yards off. Dina tells me, in Greek, that her mother died at lunchtime. My Greek is limited and I am not sure I have understood properly.

The following morning Linda and I stop

off at their house in the village. We knock and go in. Frosso is laid in an open coffin surrounded by flowers, and the house is full, solid with people from the village sitting in silence.

Niko, Dina and the other members of the family are sitting at the far end of the room with a priest and we edge through to offer our sympathy and then sit for a few minutes with the other mourners. An old lady comes in from the street. She stands by Frosso's coffin speaking agitatedly to her and stroking her face and hair.

The funeral takes place at noon, only twenty four hours after her death, but it seems to be the way it's done here, sensible I guess, particularly in the hot summertime. The whole village follows the coffin to the cemetery. Three priests in their tall hats intone the necessary prayers for what seems like a long time.

In the days that follow, we pop in from time to time and the house is always full of neighbours and friends, the fire always burning in the big chimney. Niko has stopped shaving and won't shave again for another year or more. It's hard for him. They were married for fifty years.

January 2009. Christmas.

I guess Christmases abroad are always going to be weird. For a start, in Greece they place a good deal less emphasis on Christmas than they do on Easter, or even New Year, though we happened to be

in a big toy store in Kalamata (Jumbo) on Christmas Eve and it felt pretty much like the commodity fest we remember from the UK.

We usually make our Christmas phone calls to family and friends from the public phone box in the village, using phone cards. It's cheaper than using the mobile, and you know when people have had their four minutes' worth because the line goes dead. Everyone under thirty in the UK that we spoke to seemed to have received a flat screen TV from Santa.

The walk up to the village to use the phone proved highly sociable. Today we encountered Dina and Giorgia, Niko's grown up daughters, on their way to feed the sheep: Dimitri, a nice bloke who looks a lot like Bing Crosby, on his way to feed his goats: Walter, an ex-foreign legion Austrian, emerging blearily from his tiny house after his post lunch nap: and a retired English couple out walking their dog. They rent a house in the village whilst their new house is being built, or, as it seems, not being built. The malign effects of the worsening Euro/sterling exchange rate, combined with reduced interest rates on what they have invested, means that, at the moment anyway, they can't afford to continue.

We had invited our neighbours Herbert and Mikhail and two other Austrian friends to the wooden house for Christmas lunch, and had bought turkey, the ingredients for stuffing, sprouts, etc, in order to give them an English Christmas dinner.

The turkey was in the oven and everything was under control, when Herbert phoned to say that he and Mikhail had gone down with the flu. A few minutes later, Holger and Margaret phoned to say the same.

One o'clock saw Linda and I, tousled, looking at one another over a giant roast turkey. Now the cruel part about all this is that Linda was due to fly to England on Boxing Day to spend a week with her parents, so I had a week of turkey soup/curry/rissoles/kebabs/pie/fricassee to look forward to.

Jan 2009. Egoismos.

To an English person, brought up with some notion of decent reserve, a concern not to blow one's own trumpet, Greece can seem like a nation of experts and heroes, the men, that is. Modest, unassuming Greek men are rare creatures.

There is a word in Greek, egoismos, which obviously has links with English words like egotism/egoism, but egoismos resonates differently. It covers conceit, selfishness and so on but would probably be best translated as something like self assertion. Far from being a source of shame, egoismos seems to be a part of male identity. A Greek man will almost always have an opinion in a given situation, even though he hasn't a clue, and in any group of men, opinions are always expressed simultaneously. If you watch news programmes on Greek TV, what you often see is a split screen with,

say, four politicians shouting at each other at the same time.

As I say, for an English person of my generation (almost 63) it can all seem a bit abrasive and not necessarily very productive, although Greek friends say that they can speak and listen simultaneously, and it's probably true.

Our neighbour Niko, when he comes down to the house for coffee or to have his hair cut, is always charming and friendly, but when we listen to him in the kafineion among his village cronies, he sometimes snaps and snarls at them like a terrier. It is as if these displays of egoismos are required among fellow villagers in order to maintain his place, his ascendancy, but with foreigners it's not necessary.

I have been reading a fine book recently, *A Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village*, by Juliet Du Boulay. It was written about forty years ago by a young anthropologist who spent two years in a remote mountain village. The book is full of perceptive observations about the ways in which the community manages itself, the complex network of conventions and obligations which allow people to get along more or less amicably. Egoismos looms large in the book, and maybe, in less obvious ways, we can detect it in ourselves.

Sept 2008. People.

We seem to meet a lot of people here in Greece whose stories make you gulp,

whose lives have been affected by events in the wider world, by history.

At a birthday party in the hills above Kardamili recently, I fell into conversation with a grey haired Israeli woman, Ala. We talked about Cyprus and she told me about Palestine, where she had lived for many years in a house built by a millenarian group from Germany in the last century who had come to Palestine to await the day of judgement. Ala's parents were Polish Jews who fled the Nazi invasion in 1941. They fled east into Russia, and Ala was born near Stalingrad just after the siege ended. On her birth certificate it says, under place of birth: Stalingrad. She and her mother survived to return for a while to Poland. Her father didn't. Ala feels an abiding gratitude to the Russians.

At another do, where Linda and the band were playing music, I found myself sitting next to a middle aged bloke who was here on holiday with his family. Amir, an Iranian by birth had gone to England from Iran in the 1970s, following his compulsory year of military service in the Iranian army, to do postgraduate work at Manchester University.

Shortly after his arrival in England, the Iran/Iraq war broke out, a war that was to last twenty years, a war in which he said two million people died. Had he returned to Iran, he would have been sent immediately to the front. Wisely, he stayed away, and married Liz, an Irish born Liverpudlian, and they had two kids. For many years now, Amir has worked for the local authority

in Leeds as a civil engineer, supervising the construction of motorway bridges and underpasses around the city.

A few weeks ago, at the end of our annual trip to England, we took a taxi in the early hours of the morning to catch a plane. The Asian cab driver tells us he was born in Uganda. When he was a child, his whole family had been expelled from the country, along with thousands of other Asians, by Idi Amin.

I remember reading reports in the press, in the mid seventies, I guess. At that time many Ugandan businesses were run by Asians.

Those expelled made new lives for themselves elsewhere in the world, some in England, and now, years later, the tyrannical Amin being long dead, the Ugandan government is asking Asians to return to the country to resume their activities. Our driver's family ran a quarry in the old days and his brother has already returned to restart the business. He says maybe he will go too, when his son is through university.

Mani.

We live in Mani, that peninsular of southern Greece which thrusts down into the Mediterranean Sea towards Africa. Traditionally, Mani is divided into two parts: Outer Mani in the North and inner Mani, the bony tip of the peninsula.

The little coastal resorts of Kardamili and Stoupa are to be found in Outer Mani.

Both places attract large numbers of English holidaymakers in the summer, mostly families, and the whole coast thereabouts boasts hundreds of holiday houses and apartments.

Inner Mani is a different place. The land of evil counsel, Kakouvouvia, the bad mountains. An empty place, most of the Maniots having emigrated over the years, many of them to Australia, though I did hear of one man who fetched up in Cardiff years ago and stayed to raise a family there.

The terraced mountainsides of Inner Mani are uncultivated now and the strange villages are deserted. There is a thin veneer of development, some tourism, a bit of heritage refurbishment of fortified villages, and there are churches, hundreds of churches, many of them very old and boasting byzantine frescoes. They are to be found everywhere, in the corners of fields, by the roadside, lost among thorns and prickly pear, often in a poor state of repair, though seldom abandoned. There is usually a lamp burning inside. Someone comes.

But off the single main road that runs south to Cape Tenaron, the southernmost point of Europe, what you become aware of is the emptiness of the mountains, the melancholy of absence. It's a three hour drive to Tenaron from where we live.

We motor up the tiny vertiginous roads to abandoned villages and poke about among the beetling ruins. We camp out sometimes, as we did last week, by the

sea at Tenaron, sleeping on the rock cut shelf that was once the foundation of a building, two thousand years ago, but now long gone. A whole city once stood here, where now there is nothing except a little ruined church overlooking the sea, built partly from colossal blocks of much older masonry. Pausanias, who travelled around Greece in the second century AD, records that a temple of Poseidon the sea god once stood here. Inside the roofless place a little altar stone is piled with votive offerings left by visitors: coins, finger rings, earrings, little posies of dead flowers, coloured hair bands, even a zip toggle.

We went to some quarries too, last week, at a remote location high in the mountains, at the top of an improbably steep road, where years ago they cut the red stone which was used to embellish the houses and palaces of the rich. They found fragments of stone from these quarries when they were excavating the palace at Mycenae which was built over three thousand years ago.

Homecoming.

Now, homecoming, returning to your own place after an absence is supposed to be a rewarding experience. The first twenty minutes following our return the other day to the wooden house, after spending a few weeks in the UK, was beset by an unlikely series of incidents.

Herbert, our Austrian neighbour, had collected us from Kalamata bus station in his ancient Mercedes- we had flown in

to Athens and then taken the bus. As we bumped down the last few hundred yards of the track, leaving a long cloud of dust behind us, we became aware of the sound of a pneumatic drill. This was Sunday and the valley should have been soundless, except for the cicadas, but a young Greek bloke, Andreas, who runs a fast food place in Kalamata called, quaintly, Adam's Chicken, is building a pied-a-terre across the valley. This was him shattering the Sabbath silence on his day off. A poor start.

As we unloaded our luggage from Herbert's car outside the house, it became immediately clear that our garden, such as it is, had been comprehensively devoured (by three escaped sheep, we learned later) Pretty much everything had been eaten down to the roots, including Linda's pet peach tree, which she had grown from a stone, and all the carrots, courgettes and tomatoes in the vegetable garden. The only thing which remained uneaten was the vleeta. Vleeta is a Mediterranean green vegetable which resembles a sort of tough spinach. We don't like it much.

So Herbert disappears down the track and we open up the house. In the porch outside the door we have two gas bottles, one of which runs a little gas fridge in the house, and the other the gas cooker. I had turned off the bottles before departing for England. Opening the tap on the bottle for the fridge, I went inside, lit the little pilot light at the back, and went outside again to open the other bottle. I turn on the tap. There is a hiss.

Hmmmm, I think, all the rings on the gas cooker are turned off, and there must be a leak in the pipe, a mouse job. The same thing happened last year: mice chewed through the gas pipe while we were away. After a fatal moment's thought, I close the tap and go back inside. Plaf! A blue carpet of flame explodes across the floor as the gas/air mixture in the room ignites from the fridge pilot light. A smoke blackened mouse totters from beneath the cooker.

Though it looked and felt quite alarming, there was no damage at all, nothing caught fire. I located and repaired the chewed hole in the pipe so that we were able to put the kettle on and make a cup of tea.

Half an hour later, Linda's mobile goes. An English woman in the village has been stung by a wasp and her arm is swelling up dangerously. Linda flies off in our truck to find an open Farmakio in Kalamata and the relevant antidote.

Some days are like that.

Andreas, who was building the house across the valley, we now know better. At the time I wrote the article, his fast food franchise seemed to be doing well and he was able to pay assorted teams of Albanians to build the house, a traditional stone structure on a very steep site. The business folded soon after, as the shadow of the recession lengthened, and work on the house stopped. At some point he went to New York to work as a builders' labourer but was back in Greece within months.

Conditions there were very bad, he said. These

days we see him occasionally as he mooches through our land to pick herbs and to give us the benefit of his latest thinking. Work on his house has more or less stopped, though his friends appear from time to time to do bits and pieces. He lives at home with his parents. The last few years have been difficult for him, and his young man's egotism has been dented. He is, of course, older than he was.

Oh yes...I couldn't absolutely swear that I saw a smoke blackened mouse. I rehearsed the story, including the mouse, often enough to make me a bit vague on the point. Journalistic licence, I guess.

Dina, Niko's daughter, had been watering the plants while we were away, by the way.

Zanetos

We live outside the village and our social relations are patchy. Take yesterday. In the evening we walk down the track with a bottle of wine to Herbert's house. Six o'clock and Venus is bright white over the bay. Nearby in the sky, another planet, Jupiter maybe. The fire is burning in the grate of Herbert's tiny living room and he graciously finds us an English language news channel on his TV. He usually watches Austrian stuff, naturally.

Herbert has had someone staying with him these last months, Mikhail, an unassuming, frail looking man, a drug addict/alcoholic back in Austria, finding his way to a better life here in Greece. He works around Herbert's place, gardening, helping with the

animals, odd jobs, and the old man feeds him and gives him a bed. Mikhail seems very content and it suits Herbert too, I guess, having someone around to speak German with. We sit with a glass of wine and listen to the gossip. He tells us in his fractured but effective English that yesterday a man with a dog appeared on his land, Hervig, with whom he has had a nodding acquaintance for years.

Now Hervig is a German though he has lived for many years in Greece and is long married to a Greek woman, the eldest of three sisters, daughters of Kokonas, the old woman whose donkey, you may remember, was washed away by a flood and later found alive in a tree. Kokonas is ninety this year, and still riding the same donkey.

So the two men spend a long German afternoon together over cans of lager, and Herbert discovers much....

The new news, from last week, is that two brothers from the village, Sotiris and Giorgos, have been injured whilst felling a tree: a fractured skull in the one case and broken shoulder in the other. Sotiris is in hospital in Athens and the outlook is not good. We know the brothers only slightly, pleasant, open faced blokes, who help to run one of the village tavernas.

The old news, the folklore of the family Hervig married into years ago, is various. Herbert discovers, for example, that the second of Kokonas' daughters was compromised as a young woman, by a local swain, and so her three brothers

(Kokonas also has three sons) took their shotguns and went to make a proposition to the cad in question. Marry our sister or we kill you.

Sensible fellow, he agreed to do the right thing, and now, twenty years later, there are grown up children and husband and wife get on well, as far as you can tell. The husband of the third sister, Zanetos, is universally regarded as a Mafioso and a bad character. He is from the island of Samos, where they are all villains, so it's only to be expected.

Well, anyway, Zanetos is in deep trouble with the law, having sworn an affidavit at the notary's office that he owns a piece of land which is not, in fact, his.

The real owner turns out to be an Athenian lawyer. Bad move, Zaneto.

Herbert's friendship with Mikhail lasted a few months. The young man would disappear for days, drinking in the bars along the coast. Finally, it was too much for Herbert. They quarrelled and Mikhail moved on.

I met him twice later, the first time in Kardamyli, where he seemed to be living rough on the beach. He blagued twenty euros from me, and I didn't expect to see the money again, but months later I encountered him again in Kardamyli, running across the beach to give me back the twenty euros. A nice man.

Kokonas died, fell out of a window, aged ninety eight.



Peter Huby worked as a teacher in the north of England for 26 years. He also directed festivals and community theatre. He has made a number of independent films and published 3 novels. He and his wife Linda who was Head of Performing Arts at Settle College in North Yorkshire have lived in Greece for the past 11 years.

She and Peter worked together building first a modest wooden house and later a much bigger structure. They share the work during the annual olive harvest too. Linda now also teaches some English and sings in a Greek choir.

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