

## **24 October 2011**

I'm rite to say that this blogge marks a passing and a new beginning. The trusty old laptop that I have had for about 5 years, which was old even when I got it, which had been behaving strangely for a while seems to have given up the ghost and is now refusing, it seems, to start. It isn't even Greek.

I don't really have much choice and despite perhaps being able to live without a computer, finding a relatively cheap one that claimed to do all the things I need it to led to the chain of (two) events culminating in me writing my latest news, for the first time ever, on something other than the old Toshiba.

You'll notice the separate keyboard which I bought to be able to type more comfortably, I won't use it most of the time, but that and the mouse will make heavy duty writing easier. Besides, they gave me the keyboard and mouse for free, not perhaps because of my Kazakh but just because I was in a very sweet mood and they seemed to take to me.

It seems to do what it said on the tin, although it's all in Russian making the occasional function harder to work through, and sadly it doesn't have a full version of Word, just a starter version, which I am using now. The software I installed has no licence number, or, at least I don't have it, because it was installed (legally) on my last PC half a decade ago. I may be able to locate it, but for now, I'm operating on a limited use basis and can only open MS Office programs another 17 times before they revert to reduced functionality. It could be that this only means I lose the things I don't even use, so I'll hang fire before buying a new installation package.

I spent most of the day using it, not out of enthusiasm but actually for work, as I sat redesigning tests for our new courses which now involve Cambridge Exam testing at the end. The tests therefore have to reflect the new requirements and prepare students a little better for the more formal exam. Much of it remains the same, but the speaking, writing, listening and reading elements are different. You may think that's all there is, but we test grammar and vocabulary too, as stand-alone entities, which is not ideal but students seem to demand it to a degree. Or to a language school certificate.

It's one of those periods in which the things you are learning to do seem so much more difficult. My fingers felt like lead on the dombra this week, I simply cannot explain the lousy way I tried to finger frets I've located with increasing ease. I know it's a normal part of learning, those weeks which remind us not to be complacent. But it's annoying just the same, especially seeing as I have an audience these days, not too much to say about it in the public domain perhaps but it's a commitment type audience and one which does not necessitate playing outside my own home. I'll leave you to ponder over that riddle.

Pondering over riddles is though quite comfortable compared to the way Dr Spooner would have said it, as another water conveyance in my flat needs a little attention with the back of the bog trying to leak. I fixed the flush a month ago just after the flood, although the two were not related. But this kazi trouble shouldn't be so bad as the amount of water is barely enough to fill a small bowl. I will get it seen to but it's not such a crisis right now.

Not sure how you spell kazi, but it's a slang word for toilet. So too do we have loo, bog, and rest room, which I find baffling. What do Americans do in the lavvy? This is no time for a snooze, just take a wiz and get back to work!

I think that'll do, as you can see I'm not reporting anything Earth-shattering, just wanted to Christen the new pixel bearer.

## **14 October 2011**

I lead a sheltered life. I hate it when people nudge my rose tinted spectacles. Although admittedly I find them too bright when I look west and I take them off. It gives a different perspective on life in the old continent, but not a very informed one.

Greece, for example, they say about to run out of money, potentially. What does this mean? They owe money, I know, it's like a person being declared bankrupt, and if they can't pay their debts I guess it means they can't fund things back home, not even production of taramasalata and houmous, which I suppose makes it a double dip recession.

I was in some tree hugging do once and a fellow tree hugger said to me with an astounding level of confidence that this year would be the year of the financial crash. Arguably, she got the year wrong as the crash really happened about four years ago, and since then people have been struggling to get on an even kiel. What strikes me though, is that the past four years have seen people do this with the limited funds that were available to do it with. Put simply, the final rot, final papering over the cracks with the dregs that are left. The wall may well be about to fall down, at least in the Eurozone. Like I've said before, me and the rats know how to swim, those who've struggled know how to get by on little. It's the middle classes who are feeling the pinch the most.

But I don't understand where all the money has gone. Debts, they say. So who owes who? Is it inter-planetary borrowing, because every country on the face of the earth seems to have a borrowing deficit. Plainly I'm not cut out for economics, never having bought anything more expensive than a Mars Bar, but might I be forgiven for thinking that the people in charge of the purse strings have, in layman's terms, f\*\*ked up a little? I await the outcome.

I should be getting a new dombra soon, and will publish a collage of near identical photos on the blogge page here, so be ready. It has me on tenterhooks, which I always mistakenly thought were tender hooks, my correspondingly wondering how they could really be any use. Depends what you hang on them, I concluded. I will I imagine hang the old dombra on the wardrobe which is where the other one used to live before I upgraded and gave it away. The new one will spend non-performance time very tidily stored in a very hard case. Not the Vinny Jones type, but one made to measure the nineteen frets.

Remember when Vinny Jones came to stay? I do. It must be 18 months ago now, the shock of discovering there was a British household name in my own household, give or take, has subsided but I remember very well that walking across the car park thinking, 'that bloke looks like Vinny Jones' to discover the reason later on. You don't expect it, I mean, if I thought, 'ooh, she looks like the Queen' in the Almaty Mega Shopping Centre I don't think my snap judgement would be 'she IS the Queen'. Vinny came out of the blue, the dark blue of Wimbledon FC, before the days of the Milton Keynes and the consequential A. I wonder which if the two sides he would back if they played each other. I guess we'll find out next season.

As for Crewe, we'll find out at this rate if they can beat Barrow-in-Furness away from home. Mind you, it would provide excuse enough to go to Ulverston which is one of the only things I miss about England. But it takes on the role of reminder, stark reminder, just how much time has gone by since the first time I discovered a little town full of amazing pubs, in that it's nearly 20 years since I did so. I last went a couple of years ago and enjoyed it as much as ever. But we move on, it's not a suitable day trip from Almaty airport and nor I believe does it have the same atmosphere these days, mainly because of the economic woes in Europe. Pubs are still trading but do so undercut by the smoking ban (for which I extend them no sympathy) and the extensive sale of cheap alcohol by supermarkets (which is bad for just about every connected reason).

I drink these days about three times a year, and even that seems excessive. Back in the day-trips-to-Ulverston days I still rarely drank more than once a fortnight but it featured more heavily on the calendar. Yet I have never consumed any alcohol at home. Not out of principle or any realisation that it's bad, but simply because it seems so pointless. I liked

pubs, still do, liked meeting new people in them and playing darts with them. I can't relate to the choice people make to sit at home with a can of beer or what have you, on their own. If you want to play football, you join a team, or a club or something. You don't stand in your living room with your foot on a ball. Guess it's cheaper that way.

## **11 October 2011**

First up, happy birthday for yesterday to my old mate Bert who may well have gone by another name but has never, to my knowledge, unless he's really the Queen, gone by another birthday. It was also the birthday of an old friend of my sister whose name I am sorry to report remembering, but it is the language of Mordor, which I will not utter here. And today is Soapy's birthday so if you are on my Facebook friends list, dig him out and wish him all the best.

Speaking of Mordor, I wonder to what extent Kazakhstan fuelled the literary creations of the Oxford literati back in the last century. I mean, I have friends called Aslan, Nazgul and a student called Tolkien, so there has to be a connection somewhere. How can three people all be wrong? Nazgul is a girl's name, while Aslan is a man's. I'm not aware that Nazgul rides any kind of flying Loch Ness Monster, although Aslan does have a long mane and thin tail with a tuft of hair at the end, so I can imagine that CS Lewis got his ideas from my gym somewhere back. Tolkien, well, she's clever, but doesn't appear to smoke a pipe, so anybody heading for the blower with a mind to ask me to send autographs should slacken their pace somewhat.

So what's made me happy this week? Well, yes, England losing in the rugby world cup (I'm not especially pro-France but their players probably have better social skills than the England team), and Wales winning. If Wales beat France in the semis I'll chance to take down my dragon and wrap myself in it down the local, The Shakespeare, which shows the matches live. In case you're wondering, I don't know anybody called William, nor Shakespeare for that matter, although some of my students do seem to speak in a strange dialect of English which I guess may also have inspired his prose.

I don't really follow rugby, my experience of it at school was being mauled about in the mud, OK, not any excuse to remain muted about a great sport for another three decades, but memories also include public schoolboys from the area taking great pleasure in using their developing body mass to kick the crap out of similarly aged boys, getting away with it because of daddy's influence locally and also the fact that their mob mentality kinda scared people. On the pitch, rugby players exude respect and as a sport it is more worthy of being called a gentleman's game than football, for example. Off the pitch, especially where booze is involved, many rugby players are pure brutes.

Speaking of daddy's influence and people getting away with things, a few of the references in this blogge have me think of a close friend, who I don't believe had a silver spoon upbringing in any way, but whose erstwhile (I may be wrong with that adjective) friend somehow got away with driving his car through the front wall of a local pub (nobody getting hurt) causing thousands of pounds worth of damage but not suffering any serious consequences as a result. Why? Well, what do I know, but the lad himself told me that his dad was mates with the landlord. His dad also owned a very successful haulage company.

His surname wasn't Stobart, incidentally.

Stobart is a fairly well known name in England because you'd be hard pressed to drive along any stretch of the M6 without seeing it go past on a lorry of some kind. In England, perhaps more so than any other places, exist people known only by their official title of geeks. These mostly male specimens substitute meaningful life pursuits with the accumulation of repetition. What's that? Well, a train spotter is a boy / man who watches trains and writes their number down in a notebook, to then get excited, yes, truly excited when he sees that same train at another station. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Anyway, there are such types who shun the trains and instead keep actual records, sometimes highly sophisticated

ones, of when and where they have seen an Eddie Stobart lorry pass them on the motorway. A lorry goes past, they write down the time and place, and that's all. There's even a club, maybe a link?

Which I suppose vindicates them to an extent in that there are quite a lot of them, but then again, maybe not.

Obsession is something I refer to as mental obesity, although to make that clear I'd have to dip into a number of different theories. I guess we could sum it up by saying that the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of a person comprise the same essential cycles only with different densities of matter. Einstein said more about this than I will here. Essentially, the healthy process is to take in, refine it to the level of constitution of the body, mind or spirit, and then to get rid of what is not needed.

Eating is how this plays out physically, we eat, digest, the food becomes us and we plop the rest out into a paper bag and throw it at passing cars (come on now, be honest with yourself). Obesity is the failure of the system to transform and transport the food thus disabling the elimination function - to whatever degree - and leaving the erstwhile fodder to accumulate in the physical body.

But we also learn, digest ideas and forget things. Although intangible, why is this process any different? Take in, change, shed. Why can't a reduction in this same function not lead to thoughts piling up in the mind and failing to shift? This is why I call obsession mental obesity, because the mind is full of things which it finds hard to lose. Any recurring theme becomes obsession, OCD sufferers have basically experienced a breakdown in this natural function, and when continued, it becomes almost a normality. For the low on confidence, this essentially means that the habit becomes a source of self-esteem, and the obsession begins to play out in the sphere of daily life.

So for all of you finding it hard to lose thoughts which are not serving you any longer, for those stuck and needing to get life moving, for those repeatedly fascinated by things which are essentially useless... get on a diet!

I went for personal training this morning and was surprised to be put on a programme which involves training each muscle group only once a week. I know overtraining is an issue, but once a week seems tokenistic, and I'm standing to be corrected that it will actually result in a lot of muscle growth. However, the trainer is very well built and featured on huge billboards round the city with bulging biceps, so the proof of the pudding being in the eating, I guess I have been corrected already (besides, I'm sitting down). I did discover that a lot of the training I'd been doing was 'junk' training, basically meaning that I had been expending a lot of energy with very little gain, for example by not pushing my shoulders back which meant the chest exercises I thought I was doing were actually not working my chest muscles. Lighter weights too do not have to be scorned upon, although I will miss the chance to show off on the peck deck by lifting the whole stack.

## **6 October 2011**

It's high time once more I wrote something for what was intended to be a daily toe dip in the telecommunications water. But for the seasoned, perfectionist writer, as opposed to the reporter, daily ideas alone do not suffice and do not make it into pixel country other than by means of literary inspiration. Consider, yesterday I invented a new kind of mobile phone which does not emit EMF, ran the Sydney Marathon, discovered a cure for migraines and oversaw a diplomatic agreement between the warring states of Blethsvetia and Bultania (like Herge, and unlike Sacha Baran Cohen, to avoid offence, invent new countries rather than slandering those really on the map), yet I did not document it because my adverbs were shunting into my modal verbs and making a right well mess on the page.

Today, all I did was open a tin of chick peas, and here ready to pour out of me are a number of hitherto unacquainted conglomerates of alphabetees duly organised into neat little rows.

Well, first up will be a mosaic of photos of President's Park, Almaty...

which as you will see is a relatively new park established to represent the city and country in its entirety. Plenty of flowers, plenty of trees, a green space let down only really by the fact that it is so young, as the flora is not really yet up to full strength. It's a popular spot for weddings, some probably thirty couples ambling there after (or is it before) their legal ceremonies ahead of the journey to their somewhat extravagant wedding receptions.

You might be able to pick out some photos of the Zhailyau golf course on the collage

which remind me that not too long ago I volunteered at the Kazakhstan Open, this year playing a more active role by operating the radio scoring equipment for the lead group. The event was at the other Almaty course this time, one a little more accessible in its pricing but also in the fact that ten volunteers, including me, were given passes to play one round on the course, an interesting development as walking the whole length of a course watching professionals drive greens and sink putts does tempt even the wildest swinger ever to hack his way round 18 holes.

I remember getting my score down to 109 at a place called Malkin's Bank in Cheshire, England. Let's see if they have a website...

well, sort of

I remember it being a very decent course, varied and challenging, although putting balls across a carpet into a horizontally placed mug would be challenging for me. The Kazakhstan Open last month at Nurtau was fun to participate in and it'll be nice to have the chance to try and get round myself without losing too many balls.

Musically at a crossroads, with my teacher trying to get me to work on my basic technique, successfully, but with a corresponding reduction in the quality of my output while I make the necessary adjustments. It's a bit of a mess, my fingers can't get used to the changes although I can sense it's coming together. I've just finished learning one of the famous melodies and it's not so difficult, but it highlights the need for a new dombra because mine has structural limitations which mean that the higher notes cannot be produced cleanly. The strings are catching on the frets because the frets stand out too much towards the neck. Note that bad workmen do sometimes actually have bad tools. Anyway, I will get a new one specially made this month, nothing too extravagant, but to make progress I need an instrument that will produce the quality of sound that I need to hear myself playing. Twanging is not conducive to progress.

Aaah, no more kids classes, having changed mine for adult individual students thus leaving the challenge of basic English for 7 year-olds to a few colleagues who are probably better at that side of the job. But interestingly not all of my teaching is currently English, having taken on an English student wanting to learn Kazakh. It seems to be going well, just as well as teaching Beginner's English has ever gone, and probably slightly better than its Italian counterpart. Must say I'm better at English teaching, but for zero beginners the empty receptacle is surprisingly hard to fill.

OK, well, need to leave a little creativity for the two strings, friends I will renew acquaintance with right now.