

23 July 2012

More showbiz news and gossip, the latest trek to TV studios for an appearance nearly went wrong but in the end proved a timely reminder of the importance of listening, and of the value in trusting life.

I was originally invited to appear in a debate about religion. I just hadn't paid enough attention on the phone and had heard I think three words; you, studio and invite. In reply I managed to utter I think three words; yes, accept and bye, the consequence of which was arriving there completely unprepared for the programme. It was too daunting, not only the risk of being misinterpreted put me off but the reality of not having the first thing to say... I could only walk (not storm) off the set and make sure they knew why. It was uncomfortable, but they didn't seem too troubled, and invited me onto the next show instead, which was about obesity, and which gave me chance to do myself justice.

I had chance to think of a few things to say for this one, including a story of how dad lost a lot of weight when he turned vegetarian. I had to add, I was not recommending it, just providing that perspective. Overall, I think it went well.

It was also mentioned that Kaz TV wants to go global and will need English speaking presenters, obviously I accepted the provisional offer and also asked for my own show, if they thought I was joking they'll soon find out otherwise :)

Considering a holiday, somewhere cheap and not England, although I have nowhere to stay there these days. Egypt and Turkey spring to mind although I honestly can't see there being a week plus flight and hotel available in Cairo for \$500. Apparently there would be in Turkey. Local holidays are out, what I need right now is to miss Kazakhstan, to be away for a few days and want to come back. Sometimes it pays to need things.

Like koshary, what more could I need on holiday? Wahid koshary kibeer, and tainy are close to the only Arabic I remember, and the only Arabic I would need for a stay in the Tameya City. I remember a hotel there, I won't name it because it is the grimmest ditch in the world... but they do have a reasonable gym, where reasonable = better than nothing.

Olympics start soon. I will not be going. Let's hope they hit the headlines for the right reasons.

10 July 2012

I think I should rename this page Showbiz News, considering that the blogge this time revolves mostly around TV and video appearances and many related things.

The first would relate to the football in Kiev which admittedly presented a rather one-sided game, this in spite of the Italians playing reasonably well, but against a team simply too good by far. The Spanish performance may not have been a full-throttle job for the full 90 minutes, but when they cranked it up the pace was unbelievable. I remarked that, in the same way as they occasionally pit two martial arts against each other to see which the most effective is, that Sunday night on Abai Square, we watched an ice hockey team playing a water polo team.

Italy are the second best team in Europe, probably the world on the strength of the Euros. The best team, is simply toooooo good.

What makes this relevant to showbusiness is not the fact that football is on TV, more the fact that the City of Almaty had put on a bit of a do for the final match with the giant screen being set aside for the final, and hundreds of people milling round in the square. At the final whistle I managed, quite inadvertently, to attract the TV crews over and say a few words of concession to the cameras. I regret to say that I do not know the Kazakh words for 'thrashed' or 'stuffed', so I simply had viewers know that Spain were superior, and that of course, I would have been supporting Kazakhstan had they got there.

Next time.

I met a very famous dombra player last night through a mutual acquaintance. He was nice enough to come to see me in the café where I live and was even nicer in appreciating my own performance which it has to be said was very much like a Kazakh meeting Eric Clapton and playing the guitar for him. Assylbek

was very nice and very encouraging, and has in fact agreed to coach me in my development. I am not sure the assertion I will become rich in a few years owes solely to my musical ability, but who knows how strong the foreigner/dombra/quite good connection can prove when performing is concerned?

Then, this morning, I was in the studio recording a few riffs for a track composed by my friend Son Pascal

who has become famous in Kazakhstan and has invited me to join him. The latest song is called, I think, 'You Should Speak Kazakh' and is a humorous piss-take out of Kazakhs who only speak Russian. It seems to be. Anyway, harmless fun, and I play the dombra. The video will be shot in Turkey coming up, and I have been invited to join them. Seems doable, only I hope they can pay for me.

Seems also the travel website has been launched, check Kazakhstan out and note that I only wrote 90% of the content so any lapses of cohesion and repetition of lexis will mean that such copy was provided by someone else ;) STOP PRESS, launch due next Monday.

Anyway, if I am going to accrue the wealth promised me by my new mentor, I think it's time to get to the strings :)

22 June 2012

So here we are again then. Well, here I am, still finding site statistics to show only a handful of visits to this page, Egypt being the main provider. I hope things there pass off nicely, moves to democracy are welcome but it's a bit useless if this results in an inconclusive election result which is then only disputed on the streets. I won't say what I want to happen, but it is still one of my favourite places and I know how much stability would help things.

I was in another of my favourite places this week, Bishkek, which I have to say betrays its reputation more than ever, with extensive evidence of a lot of progress since I lived there.

It's approaching six years now, back then it seemed to be surviving, moderately

prospering in some places and struggling in a few. I guess the proportions have only tipped slightly, but very clearly in the right direction. This week was unlike last year, when I couldn't wait to get back to Almaty, Instead, I wanted to stay longer. This, to check out some of the classy clothes shops and plush cafes springing up around the place. No smashed windows, no litter, no frightening looking people, we are talking a little Almaty across the border inhabited by very happy people and seeming to be doing far more than simply surviving. Let's hope it stays this way.

Incidentally, there were a lot of American tourists there this week, and they seemed full of the joys of late spring. OK, so they were all obese like you'd not believe, without exception, but they had rosy smiles and liked being in Bishkek.

I decided to combine the visa trip with a week off which I intended to take in Issyk Kul region, by the lake. But then I wanted to come back to Almaty and experience the rather unusual feeling of being off work and in my home town. Not so common that. First up was joining a gym, the membership of the old place having expired.

I had a few choices, firstly, not to bother, which was a no hoper. Secondly, reinstate the existing membership, but this was beyond the budget in visa month and with summer coming up I decided to save a bit for a month off. Then there was a new gym which is basic but serviceable, at a decent price. But finally I opted for another branch of the gym I was at before, taking an off-peak six-month membership at a price similar to that in the basic gym place which constituted option 3.

I was persuaded to take a sports medical test, and although I was determined not to listen (not difficult for me, admittedly) expecting it to be some way of trying to sell me supplements, but in fact it was fascinating. They did a few basic tests like BP and heart, pleasingly nothing wrong, but then they did body composition tests, and based on my height and weight, it turned out that I am 5 kilos overweight. Odd that now I weigh 87 kilos and 8 years ago I was 66 kilos and my trouser measurement is the SAME, comfortably so. Anyway, I suggested some of it might be muscle, after all, I have been training for 18 months now, and he showed me another set of results. It said that of my excess weight, 61.5% is composed of muscle. So I am quite bulky in the right way, for the most part. It was the other 40% which my trainer was asked to focus on this morning.

I honestly don't know where on me is excess fat amounting to 40% of whatever, incidentally. Although I was pleased to learn I have bodybuilder sized biceps :)

The final stage was a fitness test on which you can score up to 10, I only got 5, which is disappointing but I have been lazy this year. I do see the positive side though, being fit is one thing, and very welcome as we all know. But there is something quite fun about getting into shape too, of feeling the improvement. They do say happiness is a journey, not a destination. Fitness is fun to gain as well as to have. It would be wrong for so many reasons to have been 8 or more yesterday on this test. The 5 will spur me on, and I know in that case I can improve so much. It might also explain my fatigue, although I know EMF is also a factor, as well as being a teacher and it being June.

EMF, electromagnetic fields, is not just a concept discussed by hippies. It's a phenomenon proven by science, disagreement as to its effect on the human organism notwithstanding. Let us not forget that those disputing the links tend to

be the ones who stand to gain from public ignorance of the facts, or those who simply cannot afford to believe in them. I am acutely sensitive to EMF, right to the extent that recently I have decided to limit my use of PCs to lesson planning plus 15 minutes a day on email etc, and my use of Wi-Fi to 'only when absolutely necessary'. Wi-Fi is categorically proven to emit shocking EMF levels

and any more than 10 minutes using it, I feel giddy. For this reason, I have decided to sell my Acer iPad thing. I only use it for two things, both of which I can do with my notebook (although I hate this for other reasons) so the Acer thing, useful though it may be, is very much surplus to requirements. Useful, in this context really only means that I can find some things to do with it I have persuaded myself I need. But the camera function is pointless because who wants a book sized camera? The dictophone is useless because you can't hear anything you record, which in turn makes the video camera useless for about the same reason, plus the reason before. The only things I use it for are to log my teaching hours on a spreadsheet, and to log onto Wi-Fi when I don't need to, and now, should not.

For sale, it's as good as an iPad apart from the dodgy dictophone, 32GB memory plus USB adaptability and mini SD socket. I paid 90,000 Tenge, yours for 40,000, good as new.

Another thing it does I can more comfortably do with something else is read books. I have a Kindle for that. OK, there are about 100 things on it still waiting to be read, but I hate reading, so they'll have to wait. Except that is for the latest Billy Ingham adventure, the Yorkshire rugby playing ordinary lad leading an ordinary but also extraordinary life.

I bought this immediately I was told it was out and read it as soon as I could find time to take the Kindle to a Wi-Fi spot (gurrrr!) and download it. Then I read it in a few nights, despite needing to get as much sleep as I could, being, as I said, a teacher in June. (Wasn't there a song in the 50s about it? Something about asking the stars and the moon up above, why must I be a tea-aacher in June? Ah, if there wasn't, there should have been.) Anyway, back to Billy, who features far more prominently in this episode than in the previous, which is what we fans really want. I don't think the story quite has the awe of the third in the series, and by now the author's very clever way of digressing two thirds of the way through the story lead the seasoned Ingham fan to the conclusion before the final page, but this is not to criticise, the Billy books are as good as ever, a reminder of the value of nine parts simplicity to our ten-part adventure.

It is plain what inspires the author, Peter Ardern, much of his own childhood values interwoven into the reality of modern day Britain leaving us feeling we are reading about a life from a bygone age yet still set very much in the present. If that's possible. In any case, the Billy Ingham adventures are very real, not that canal boat fires are so commonplace nor that identical twins start them, but in that the personality of the characters, when seen in context, are those of everyday people doing everyday things.

I should point out, Sunday night comes the time I have to make the choice I have known, for more than ten years now, would in truth not be particularly difficult. England play Italy.

I will be supporting ITALY! 100%.

FORZA AZZURRI !!!!!!!

29 May 2012

I did not watch the Eurovision Song Contest. Sorry, folks. It's a sick joke. We live in a world with musical offerings ranging from Mozart to Gershwin, The Beatles, Nirvana, Queen, Led Zep and even less classically appreciated artists like Lady Gaga and Madonna. Some of our musicians have influenced the thinking of the whole world, Lennon for example and others have brought generations together, read Oasis. I could say so much more. The passionate interest in a few shinily clad ameoba prancing round and miming plastic tunes that make Bros sound like Pavarotti for me is unfathomable in a world inhabited by people who at least claim to be intelligent.

Liking it for the sheer joke it is, is for me the only reason for watching, schadenfreude at its most harmless. Many, dare I say most, people think it's an offering of musical genius, like the Russians I met once who laughed at me after the British NOOL PWAN (which I did not even know about anyway) claiming therefore that British music is the worst in Europe. In fact, Britain has written the history of music post-1945, and it's shocking to the highest degree that they should have to subject themselves to a ritual humiliation every May in this way, given that people do take it seriously.

It's not really about music but while millions of people think it is, it remains for me the most ludicrous of shows and yet more evidence that the powers that be are trying to brain-numb us with over-hyped mediocrity which challenges our collective ability, as mass society, to think for ourselves. If we can rise above that and just scoff, that's good. But most people are sucked well and truly in. If there is any such thing as a New World Order then this is one way of imposing the brain deadness that the common people need to suffer from to just shrug and let it happen.

OK, rant over. I honestly have nothing against the ESC, but this is a heartfelt opinion.

Another shamefully superficial pursuit is that of the consumption of football, a lame excuse for many not to have anything meaningful to attach themselves to in life or for others a way of escaping that which they are lumbered with. I never quite worked out which group I belonged to. Yet the years of hedonistic tribal grumbling in the cold and coming to fully understand even the deepest hidden meanings of that wonderful book, Fever Pitch by Nick Hornby, have once again paid off...

First, let me recount a previous blogge from May 2009...

Over the years I have however supported or had a soft spot for a number of teams. Although it pains me to say it, from age about 7 to 16 I thought I supported Liverpool. I now realise it was an illusion, something connected with bed wetting and craving for raw cauliflower. In any case, they won the league most years during that period so I was able to enjoy my football then. Divorcing them in 1991 left me free to start a more meaningful relationship with my local team, Crewe Alexandra, which has essentially never ended but to which commitment waned massively around 2003. During that original period they went

from the old Fourth Division to the Championship, a remarkable success story which brought a lot of pride to a small town. The decrease in my involvement and interest strangely parallels the decline in the club's fortunes, as they once again find themselves in the basement division. Liverpool, I add, have not won the league since, well, 1991.

Around 2000 I discovered Italy and needed a side. I chose Roma, mainly because of the colour of the shirt but in spite of this rather arbitrary reason it was a choice that I very quickly justified emotionally, watching them fight for a second successive championship under the now England coach Fabio Capello, with a young Francesco Totti still at his dazzling best was gripping stuff, and although they lost out to Juventus on the last day of the season, it was another year of footballing success.

I have also enjoyed successes during minor flirtations with teams who have themselves strangely ceased to play so well as I have moved on. I watched Puglia side Fidelis Andria make the playoffs back in 2004 and then go up to Serie C1. That season I never saw them lose. I moved on to Crotone and learned that Andria had gone bust, as I sat watching Crotone get into Serie B and almost Serie A. Once again, I left town and they too were relegated. Then a year in Verona supporting Chievo during the season in which they made the top four. After I moved away from there they failed to get into the final stages of the Champions League, and then got relegated.

Add to this a World Cup victory, an African Champions Cup win (possibly two if you count the one I followed on TV) and a victory in the African domestic league and you can see why my sustained interest in the game has been so worthwhile. It's an ironic correlation. I watch, they win. I just hope it gets noted at Lo Stadio Olimpico and they offer me a free season ticket.

Well all this has been rendered a little redundant given the result on Sunday which saw my real true team promoted via the playoffs to League One, to play Portsmouth and Coventry, among one or two other pretty big teams.

I think if we keep hold of our manager we will go up again in a few years, or less, having stormed up the table to make the playoffs and then win them in a way that never really saw it in any doubt.

But this time, I cannot take the credit. All I have done this year is check the results on Monday, when I've gone back to work. I did not go once, did not follow a single game via live internet updates. I am a traitor. It was always me who brought them success in the past, you see the proof above, and you cannot argue with it. But they do not need me anymore. The talent of the players and the bright skills of a young coach do the job quite nicely on their own. It's quite a fall from grace, from being in sole control of the club's fortunes simply by showing an interest, to being a bloke who checks the results on the web. What magic I had is now redundant, the spells I cast are now surplus to requirements and very much on the transfer list, and like the retiring striker whose self-esteem can no longer depend on the nourishing seasonal tally of 25 or so goals, I am consigned to the club yearbook.

Ah, what the hell, I'll still order a replica top and hat from the club shoppe :)

20 May 2012

I thought it was high time I wrote something. I must be honest, recently, despite

being busy I can't blame that, this blogge has just not really been forefront in my mind. I think for a couple of weeks I forgot that I even had it.

I suppose the irony might be that the more I have to say the less time I have to say it. And then when the time comes there isn't as much inclination to bother anyway. I guess I'll press on, we go through phases of relative inertia, sometimes even I don't play the dombra, and then play for hours on end one evening.

The main news would be that I can now say for sure that I have been on TV. Most people haven't but can never be certain, you know, public gatherings featured on the news etc. Well I got a little more attention than that. It is some kind of soap opera type programme, nothing special I guess but screened on national TV on Saturday evenings. I understood my part and the scenes I was in but not really the raison d'être of the programme itself. And in some ways I don't understand why they put me in it, with my complete lack of acting experience and less than perfect Kazakh.

That's not what they would call putting oneself down. I managed to do that last night when I saw the broadcast and felt I looked ridiculous. If they invite me back I'll go, but I'm not sure of their plans and the original suggestion of 24th 25th May has not been followed up yet.

Other news, not fully enticing enough to write up in full:

Crewe in the playoff final
Busy at work
Missed nearly two weeks at the gym but have started going back
Plan to join a new gym for a quarter the price
Trip to Atyrau

May 2012

I think in some ways the blogge needs life breathing into it. It's not first mental port of call when I arrive home now, while in the past I would always write when I felt I had something to say. Something to say has not been an issue recently, as you'll read, it's just that the format is a little tired and needs rebranding. So I have decided to rename it the Threapton Chronicle. That will make it a great read :)

Writing largely these days takes a prominent place on my daily calendar but instead of being for this page instead gets sent to clients

who so far are overwhelmingly pleased and keep asking me for more. Lots more in fact, and ironically the agency I was writing for before, who I thought had dispensed with my services on discovering my website, have started sending me more work. I don't think they can complain, for two months before they learned that I am now working from home, so to speak, they had not sent me anything, and with more genres to get my teeth into, it made sense to advertise on my own. I agreed not to write essays, other than for my own friends and students, but other than that, I am a freelance writer and seeking to get as much work as I can. Not that I have capacity for much more at the moment.

Why? Well, as I write now I don't fully remember what I said last time, so can't be sure you know about the TV channel taking an interest in me. Yes, they came, they saw, they pointed the camera. But then they invited me to the studio, upon

which they invited me back. Twice. Apart from a forthcoming appearance as a panellist on a popular culture show (peak time viewing) I now also have a part in a kind of soap opera which features Kazakh speakers, some not Kazakh. My role is, well, an Englishman who speaks Kazakh and plays the dombra, and early suggestions are that my character is not just a one episode bit part. That suits me, not so much for the fame but for the fact that I have an on-screen girlfriend as beautiful as any person I have ever seen in my entire life. Probably as beautiful as any person you have seen in your entire life too, but of that I cannot be sure.

Ironically, my character, as I said, apart from being based on me (funnily enough I AM an Englishman who speaks Kazakh and plays the dombra) is a bit of a Casanova, the first episode already seeing me lovingly handing out (plastic) flowers to said girl AND one also very pretty before her. My (chat up) lines were as smooth as my writing (I hope) although in the second scene I kept forgetting them, which amused the crew but annoyed me. Then they gave me an abridged second line to utter and I started saying the original version perfectly. So in the end they just let it go, and I expect will edit it reasonable, and show what they end up with. More notice next time might be helpful, an hour to learn a series of complex lines in your seventh language when already overwhelmed at becoming an imminent star in the space of a week or so is more than enough to jair-jiggle your memory.

Incidentally, this opportunity has arisen not because I am a supremely talented thespian nor extremely attractive or what have you... it has come about because I have learned a language that at the start some people said was useless. If I knew what, 'up yours!' was in Kazakh I'd say it to them now. Only they wouldn't understand.

The new flat is settling in very nicely, I mean, into my life. Here are a few pictures from the kitchen window, although please note that exactly the same view give or take a few feet trajectory is to be had from the bedroom window.

The mountains are, well, rock things covered in snow. I think they are the Alatau Mountains. In any case, they form part of the Tien Shan, the northern reaches of the Himalayas, and the peaks in the background are probably 4,000 metres high. Ish. These pictures didn't do the scene justice since I took them at a time when the sun illuminated the snow-capped peaks magically. The photos don't quite show that, although they're worth a place on the page. Judge for thineself.

Back to the idea of TV, I did suggest that I had an idea for a programme but I'll hold fire on that one before I put it in the Threapton Chronicle. In fact I might suggest we call it Threapton Today.

Anyway, on that basis, the only other remark I have to make today is a whinge about the amount of people who've received messages from me today and just ignored them, like I'm some kind of flyer shoved in their letterbox. This doesn't concern anybody on my web updates mailing list. I think maybe with the exciting changes in my life it could be time to rethink some of my personal relationships and go and make some friends who have time for me, and dare I say, are worth my while?

Yes, I dare.