Malcolm Cockburn

Born 1940.
Autobiographical life story.
Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk

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Note: These chapters are extracted from a longer printed memoir by Malcolm Cockburn entitled Memorabilia. Lives Retold also carries a life story of Malcolm Coockburn's father Jim Cockburn here: https://livesretold.co.uk/jim-cockburn

1. A Journey in 1945

I remember nothing of the journey south from Scotland, but I was only five. We were met at Dorchester station by the man who would become my Uncle Hugh. His car had a ‘dickie’ seat which was revealed by opening the boot. Jan and I sat there, in the open, behind our mother and Hugh. I now know that he would have liked to marry our mother before the war but he had to make do with her sister Catherine. We stopped in High West Street and it was there and then that we learnt of victory in the war with Japan. It was August 15th 1945, VJ Day. ‘Mummy’ I said ‘What will be on the news now that the war is over?’

We drove down to Weymouth where the seaside resembled the sunny pictures in my book Puffin, Twink and Waggle at the sea, but the beach was cordoned with barbed wire. The road to Hilfield went through woods where we saw concrete bunkers and tanks full of water; this was where the invasion force had been concealed before D-Day.

St. Paul’s after the Blitz.

The next memory was of our return to Scotland via London. Our mother asked the taxi driver to drive us round the City, she was shocked to see St.Paul’s Cathedral surrounded by ruins. We took an underground train to visit my Aunt Edith in Clapham and I was amazed to be told that the line was passing under the River Thames. How could this be? Jan and I were indulged with a lot of fizzy lemonade which was to prove a mistake when I brought it all upon the train from Euston. The mess on the seat was bad, but we were saved from suffering all the way to Lockerbie because the engine broke down and everyone was told to get on another train and our new compartment had clean seats.

We next made that journey in 1947after the coldest winter on record when we had been snowed up for six weeks. This time our father drove us in his Hillman Wizard. At Hilfield the sun shone all summer and I believe our mother was happy for the first time since before the war.

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2. School and Beyond

At Sherborne Prep we had a choice, you could be a scout and join the fourth Sherborne Troop of scouts known as the ‘Droop of Sprouts’, or join the so-called Arts Club run by dear Miss Armitage. The latter was definitely my first choice and in no time we were catching stickle-backs in the river and swimming among the leeches. We took our tin tea-trays to Cerne Abbas where we slid down the famous Giant. (I don’t believe any of us could understand why his ‘member’ pointed in the opposite direction to ours).

Finally, and best of all, Miss Armitage arranged a private train. The steam engine was connected to a single carriage and waited at the Sherborne station siding for a dozen little boys to board and carry us down to Axminster, where the train left the main line for the branch to Lyme Regis. Miss Armitage had a sister who lived in a bungalow at Lyme, there we had tea and cake after playing on the beach.

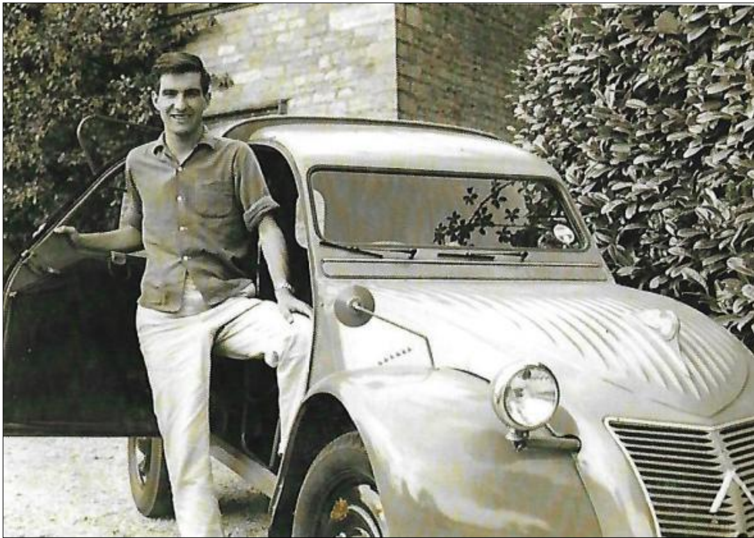
At other times Miss Armitage had us acting; there were excerpts from the Shakespeare plays where I was cast as Lady Macbeth and Helena in A Midsummer Night’s Dream but my favourite role was Captain Hook. Sadly she left the staff and went to be a missionary with the Intuit in the far north of Canada. As a parting gift she gave me a book titled ‘Brains and Bravery’ which seemed to be about Triads and opium dens in China. The Arts club came to an end and I was obliged to join the scouts.

Baroo was the scout master; his real name was Mr Carter who taught us French. I was put in the Kanga patrol. Every week one of the patrols would be on flag duty. The patrol leader had to hoist the Union Jack on the school flagpole in the morning, bring it down and fold it carefully at sundown.

I rose to be patrol leader of the Kangas in my last year, 1953, and it was on my watch we heard of Stalin’s death. I was aware that Uncle Joe had been our ally in the war, but I also knew about the burgeoning Cold War. Should I hoist the flag at half mast in mourning, or consider his death to be a cause of celebration and raise the flag to its full height?

Sherborne Prep was run by an eccentric headmaster, Fred Lindsay. At the beginning of each term he would read out The Rules. ‘And the first rule of Sherborne Preparatory School is that there shall be no bullying’. Nor was there. With hindsight, it was a happy school, far happier than ‘The School’ (Sherborne School) where sport dominated, there was a new boys’ boxing competition, dormitories were freezing and I was beaten after missing a morning cold bath. My best subjects were Maths and Physics, but I learned to love English when taught by Robert Powell, the headmaster.

It was a relief to leave and discover the wide world. I had expected to serve in the RAF for two year National Service but that ended in 1957 and instead I set out with a friend, Michael Hawes, to drive a 2CV Citroen to Ceylon and from there by ship to work in Australia, continuing round the world by ocean liner before further education in Cambridge.



Malcolm with the 2CV at Hilfied, 1957.

2CV in Iran.

Leaving Sydney by ocean liner.

3. Apple Picking in Tasmania

The SS Taroona, built in Glasgow in 1934, plied between Melbourne and Tasmania.

Fifty years ago we sailed from Melbourne to Tasmania on the old ferry Taroona. My cousin Simon Lister came to see us off. I shouted down to him from the deck 'Do you have a film for my camera?' 'Yes', he said, and threw it up so strongly that he canister went clean over the ship into the harbour beyond. I remember Easter Monday in Hobart because it was there and then that we decided to start job hunting. We had already spent two days hiking from the north towards the orchards south of Hobart; we liked what we saw on the way, early Autumn and warm, the hop fields bare except for the poles and tattered wires, but the apple orchards full with fruit. They told us the crop was less good than usual and that we might have difficulty finding employment, but they also told us to try the Huon Valley where picking begins later than in the north. Between us we were optimistic.

We set out from Hobart over Mount Wellington. The track winds up out of the city through tangled scrub under tall eucalyptus gums, the bark hanging in curious festoons from the white trunks of these fine evergreens, thick and moist. The climb takes about three hours and the summit, rocky and bare hangs 4,000 feet above Hobart. Misty, very blue coves, bays and channels define the contortions of the coast. The fields and orchards were blue-green, the apple ships grey with bright coloured funnels were lying in the Derwent River.

We turned down to the main road and hiked south into the Huon valley. Here the Huon River widens into an estuary and the estuary opens to the Southern Sea; the Southern Sea embraces Antarctica. The valley was full with orchards, they pushed up from the river into untouched scrub which skirts the mountains on either side of the valley. Over the mountains to the east lie two thousand miles of Tasman sea till New Zealand and over the mountains to the west a hundred miles of uninhabited 'horizontal jungle' and then ocean till South Africa. We knocked on the doors of every farm, talked to farmers and farmers' wives, but nowhere did they need new pickers, and packers must have experience. It was almost dark when we were

surprised to find a slightly sour, dwarfish farmer reckoning that we might be useful. 'Had we picked before?' Indeed we had, we lied, and we were in.

The Huon Valley, Tasmania.

By the time we reached the pickers' huts we were very tired and it was quite dark, so it wasn't until next morning that we found our hut to be modest hen-size and filled with hay. We already knew that the hay was shared with rats though. It had a fire-place and there was wood, we were even lent some blankets which, we were told, had been stolen from prison by our predecessor (who was now back in prison after an orgy the day before). We liked our predecessor; to him we owed both our jobs and our warmth for the next month.

The hut was in a field, away from the farmhouse; pickers apparently are not good neighbours. So we observed our picker-neighbours. The apple harvest is complementary to the sugar-cane season so many pickers come down from Queensland. The old-time in the next hut was one of these; he chewed tobacco and grumbled away to himself; at weekends he 'went on the plonk'. The plonk is very cheap Australian sherry, so going on it is self explanatory. So Monday morning would have been short handed if it hadn't been for our other neighbours next door, a very loud mouthed mother and her slightly simple son. She opened clams the rest of the year and was paid less to pick apples, a grievance which became so loud by Wednesday that to our relief she quit picking for the rest of the week and stayed off till short-handed Mondays. Perhaps this was the reason for her unsatisfactory pay.

The farthest hut from us was the home of our most lively colleague, a Londoner who had spent most of his life working a lathe in Bermondsey. In his fifties he tired of London, bought a bicycle and set out towards India. Mike and I had followed the same route in a small Citroen some months before; we were delighted to have this humorist enliven our picking.

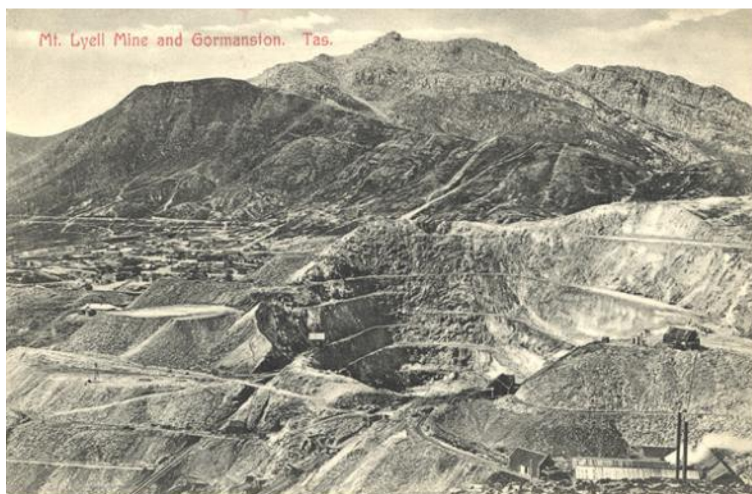
For the next month we rose at 6.30, lit the fire and cooked breakfast; an hour later we were out in the misty orchard blowing our fingers and ready to start the pick. By eight o'clock the mist would lift and dissolve, slowly warmth would come back to our fingers, the sun would shine and attract us further into those top branches (ladders were provided); here it was possible lazily to enjoy the view over row upon row of apple-filled trees and the wild mountains all about.

We picked into tin boxes hung on the branches – when filled, the boxes would be gently emptied into a low trailer. Half one day's pick went into that trailer and when it was magnificently full a tractor towed it away into the mysteries of the packing shed.

In April we left the orchard and the Huon valley. I had planned to go north to Queensland before setting off back to England via New Zealand and North America. To do this I sailed first on the Orient Liner Oronsay, then the Orsova, and finally from New York on the Queen Elizabeth. But first I wanted to see that wilder, western half of Tasmania.

Perhaps I should explain that the Island is divided into two very different regions. Draw a line roughly from Hobart to the North West Cape; to the east of this line are fine dairy farms, orchards and hop-fields, but to the south and west of it mountains and remarkable jungle which grows horizontally from gully sides make the country almost uninhabitable. Only the minerals attract investment and the ghost towns of the north west tell of their fallibility. (Note: since this was written western Tasmania has become a battle ground between environmentalists and the state government over mining and hydro-electric power development).

The road west from Hobart leads up alongside the Derwent River. Pastoral country with lines of Autumn golden poplars which would suddenly become inverted as reflections in the quiet river. Soon the river became rocky and bounding, the fields gave way to tough moor. Scrub, rocks and powerful mountains closed in. Near Lake King William the road became unsealed, it passed over the watershed and fell into a steep valley, winding and diving between thick coarse bush and over sharp eroded gullies. Suddenly, an open plain and across it Mount Lyall, mountain of open-cast mines. Nothing grows in or near Queenstown because the fumes from the copper refining plant kills all vegetation! (Note: the plant was closed years ago as part of the protection for the West Tasmania environment.



The copper mines of Mount Lyell

At night the huge copper mountain was lit up with floodlights for late-shift working. The bars in the corrugated tin-roofed hotels were lit up too. A little cog railway ran steeply down from Queenstown to the port, Strahan. One train a day carried two fine Victorian passenger coaches behind trucks of copper sheet. The train went very

slowly and energetic passengers could jump out while travelling and run up to the engine; there a welcoming driver showed me the fine brass handled controls and a brass plate: ‘Glasgow 1901’.

Strahan in about 1950.

Strahan was once the port for many of the old mining towns which are now derelict; it was dominated by a huge stone Union Steamship company office, empty, as only the occasional copper tramp steamer ever tied up to the wooden jetty. Otherwise there as the usual stone hotel, large and waiting (for whom?), a weatherboard chapel and a cold wind. The English district nurse gave me welcome cups of tea and told me the gossip of everyone west of Hobart; she seemed quite content in the bright, lost little bungalow.

Another rough bumpy railway, owned by a different company, ran north to Zeehan. I was the only passenger that evening; I helped the guard load some sacks of manure, the only freight, and then took a seat in the cabin of the diesel engine. Our huge headlight picked out wallabies on the line, they jumped slowly away into the bush as we came nearer. Zeehan, once with a population of ten thousand, was by now a relic, with a few indestructible hotels, a town hall and even an empty theatre. But most of the intervening plots showed only the foundations of wooden houses. The weatherboard house dies gracefully and leaves only a grassy patch; but deserted mines, graveyards and loitering inhabitants seem to fade away less conveniently.

Forty miles of rolling virgin bushland lie to the north of this done town. There were may grey wallabies but no Tasmanian Aboriginals; early settlers pushed these people slowly west into this unwanted bush and then shipped the few remaining tribes off to Kind Island. The last of them, a fine heavy woman, died in 1880. An early photograph of her ‘decently’ dressed in Victorian finery, hangs in the Hobart Museum.

Two days later I was back on the old ship Taroona, sailing out of Launceston through the soft green Tamar estuary towards Melbourne whither I had come five weeks before.

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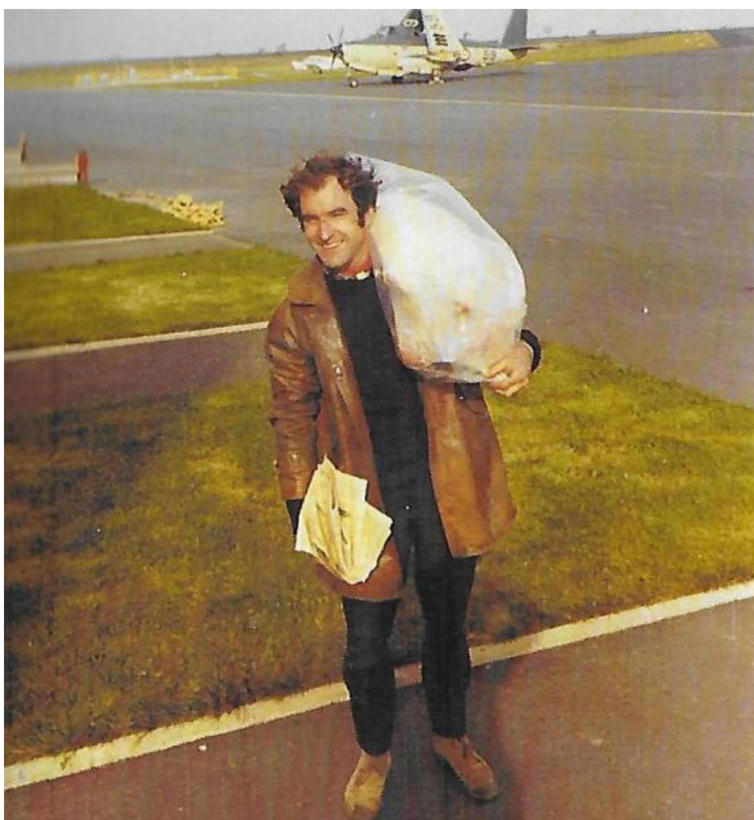
4. The Lamb



The lamb at Cherbourg.

There was a time around 1970 when the price of a lamb in France was nearly double that in England. I was then farming a flock of sheep at Pond Farm and producing several hundred lambs per year. I determined to profit from this difference by taking a slaughtered lamb by light aircraft to Cherbourg along with John Luke, a fellow flying friend, who was enamoured of a lady dentist in that town.

I collected the lamb from the butcher and we flew from the farm to Bournemouth to clear customs and fill up with duty free petrol. In those days it cost barely £2 to buy enough duty free petrol to fly across the Channel and back. The flight to Cherbourg would take about forty minutes and we were quite familiar with Cherbourg Maupertus Airport and the flying club there.

On arrival the sole customs man inspected our passports and asked what we were doing with the lamb carcass over my shoulder. 'It is a present for the chairman of the flying club' I relied and we set off for the town. I went to a likely looking butcher and he bought the lamb, producing about £15 from the till. A profit of about £8 not counting the transport!

We then telephoned the friends from the flying club who explained that the chairman was away on holiday. Since the airport is small and everyone knows everyone else, we realised that we could be in trouble. On return for our onward flight the customs man spied us and asked what had happened to the lamb. 'Well', we said, 'Since the chairman is on holiday, we gave it instead to Madame X, the

dentist, who is also our friend'. 'What is her telephone number?' he asked. We gave him the number and while he disappeared into his office we ran to the aircraft and flew away.

The following year I was again at Cherbourg with friends. W were there to clear customs before flying on to stay with a psychiatrist and his wife near Nevers. Unfortunately the customs man noticed that my passport was a few days out of date. 'You must return to England', he said. 'We really can't do that', explained Pam Bagnall. 'Monsieur Cockburn has an appointment to see this famous psychiatrist'. She gave his name, understanding the importance of that profession in France. 'Well alright', replied the customs man, 'But go there directly. Pas de promenades!' And then he added, 'I remember about the lamb'.

Cherbourg Maupertus airport.

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5. The Crash

In 1966 I had a De Havilland Chipmunk two seater aircraft and I promised my friend and vet Michael Woodford that I would fly him to a vets conference in Geneva. First the aircraft had to be collected from Exeter, where it had been undergoing a Certificate of Airworthiness test (like an MOT test for aircraft). We flew to Bournemouth to clear customs and put in a flight plan for Paris. As we were crossing the French coast to the east of Cherbourg I noticed that the oil pressure was reading zero. Although I doubted that the gauge was giving a correct reading I called Cherbourg Control to tell them I may to divert. Almost at once the engine began to run roughly and I knew I had to look for an emergency landing place.

There were nothing but small vegetable fields and I hesitated too long before fixing on what turned out to be a carrot field. We were still in the air when the engine seized up due to lack of lubrication. The stopped propeller acted like a brake. There was a road with telephone wires immediately before the field and our tail-wheel caught in the wires. It was like an arrester on an aircraft carrier and we came to rest directly across the country road. Although we were safely down, the aircraft was plainly a write-off and our relief at being almost uninjured led to unnatural fits of laughter. It also transpired that Madame at the nearby farmhouse, remembering aircraft crashing in the war, had rushed to the telephone to alert the ambulance but her call was frustrated by the telephone wires being broken. She invited us into the farmhouse and laid on a lunch. Michael, still wearing his lifejacket, was seated next to a very nubile young lady whose job was to wash carrots, which pleased him until we took him away from her to catch the train to Geneva.

I returned to England carrying the Chipmunk's propeller on the air service to Bournemouth. There were jokes about spare propellers and my lack of faith in the old Bristol Freighters which operated the service at the time. Eventually I received a bill from French Telecom for the destruction of their telephone wires but luckily my insurers paid that. Madame's telephone number was Valconville 3. The Presse de la Manche came out with the headline 'Route baree a Valconville', and a photograph of the poor Chipmunk.

6. Ancestors and Islands

Of my quasi-ancestors, George Cockburn and William Dampier, the former served in the Royal Navy and the latter was a buccaneer turned naval captain and renowned hydrographer. A more direct ancestor, Alfred Hold, founded the Ocean Steamship Company which at one time boasted the largest fleet in the world. None of their seamanship has been inherited by me. However in the year 2005 I sailed on the last Royal Mail Ship, the RMS Saint Helena, from Portland in Dorset to Capetown, calling at Ascension and Saint Helena islands.

William Dampier was born in West Coker, Somerset and in 1674 went to work on a Jamaican sugar plantation, he hated the job and quickly joined the Buccaneers in the Caribbean. Later he changed to Privateer where government encouragement was lent to harass the Spanish. His skill at navigation and observation of ocean currents was recognised by the Admiralty and in 1698 he was offered command of The Roebuck, an old 290-ton, twelve gun ‘fifth-rate’ warship. In this ship, with a crew of fifty men, Damper sailed round the Cape of Good Hope to the far East, explored the coast of West Australia and spent three years surveying the seas around Indonesia and the Bay of Bengal.

Aerial view of Jamestown, capital of St. Helena.

His journals and marine observations were carefully preserved through many storms; finally he returned to the Atlantic in 1701 where the rotten hull sank at Ascension Island. The island appears totally dry, but on our visit from the RMS Saint Helena we were shown a small source of water on the central volcanic mountain. It is known as ‘Dampier’s Drip’ and saved the lives of the Roebuck crew until rescue arrived.

Sir George Cockburn (Bart.) served as a Royal Navy Captain in 1797 during the French Revolution and by 1809 commanded several warships in the Napoleonic War. Later, in 1814, he directed the capture and burning of Washington during the brief war with the United States. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 at Waterloo, Cockburn was charged with conveying the Emperor to exile on Saint Helena. His ship, HMS Northumberland, met with the ship carrying Napoleon at Plymouth; during the subsequent voyage the two men evidently struck some rapport and

shared the considerable consignment of port wine, a supply demanded by and supplied for Napoleon. While on the Island, Cockburn continued to intercede between the Governor and Napoleon, the two were often at logger-heads.

There are many reminders of Napoleon's exile on the small island; Briars Pavilion his first dwelling, Longwood House where he lived and died and the place of his original tomb (his body was moved to the Invalides in Paris). Longwood House was ceded to France in the late 19th century and is home to a resident French Consul.

I foolishly took a bicycle with me without realising that the climb from the capital Jamestown is so steep; a sign forbids cycling. However an elderly charabanc is available to take visitors over the narrow roads and view stunning countryside, lush and dramatic high above the Atlantic and barren rocky cliffs.

The RMS Saint Helena was retired from duty in 2018. It had been the only service to the Island for many years, now an airport has been built. I have no idea how the livestock, tractors etc which came with us on deck will now arrive to serve the four thousand population. But I am happy to learn the 'our RMS' has not been scrapped, now, armed to the teeth, she serves as a floating armoury for a private security company based in the Red sea.

Royal Mail Ship St.Helena.

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7. The Tin Chapel

On my return from Australia in 1964 I was immediately purloined by the Sherborne Amateur Players to perform in the musical Salad Days. It soon transpired that I had a reasonable singing voice but in the dance routines my sense of rhythm was lacking and I had to be consigned to the back row. Since then I have appeared in many productions. Finally in 2016 I bowed out as the Narrator in Great Expectations, and excellent role because I was allowed to sit in an armchair to the side of the stage and, not being ‘on stage’, I was able to break the holy rule about alcohol and tipple from a glass of Port.

Performances up to that time took place in the ‘New’ Digby Hall and rehearsing was done at Sherborne House (the old girls’ grammar school). The props and costumes were kept at the coach house/stables of Sherborne Castle. Then we were told to quit both venues; there seemed no solution until I noted that the Tin Chapel was for sale.

It seemed to fit our requirements, the interior was not immediately suitable for theatre production but these always took place at the Digby Hall. The chapel could contain all the costumes, flats and props plus a comfortable club room.

The corrugated iron chapel was built early in the 1880’s on land given by the Digby Estate; it had been recognized that no place of worship was available at the North of the town where the stone quarries employed several families living in Coombe. These corrugated iron buildings could be bought, delivered and erected for a few hundred pounds and it is likely that the Marston Road chapel would have been bought from the catalogue of William Cooper in London and transported by train to Sherborne Station. The congregation were Baptist; a four foot square of floorboard can be lifted to reveal a deep cavity near the altar, this may have been the baptismal font. In 1928 a new brick Baptist church further up Coombe was built to replace the Tin Tabernacle.

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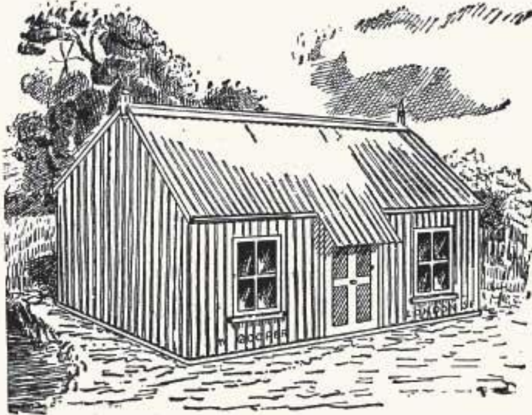

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26ft. by 16ft.	60 0 0	40 0 0
30ft. by 18ft.	65 0 0	45 0 0
40ft. by 20ft.	90 0 0	60 0 0
50ft. by 24ft.	125 0 0	80 0 0
60ft. by 30ft.	175 0 0	110 0 0

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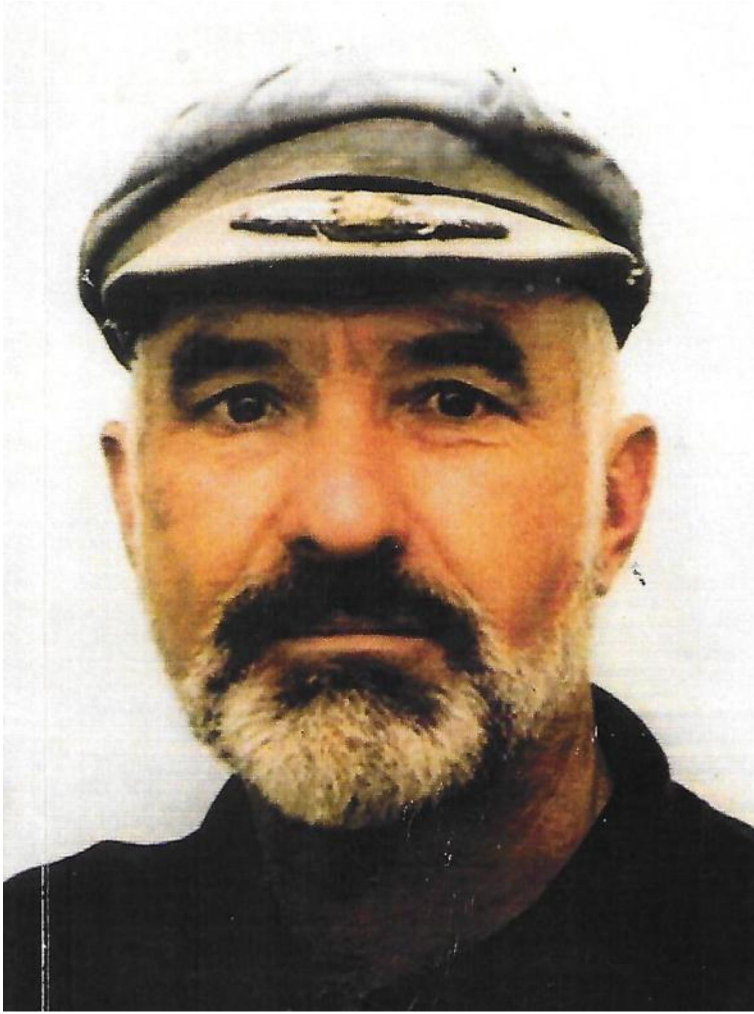
When the new Baptist Church was open, the Tin Chapel was sold to Messrs Easons, undertakers at Newell close by, and used for the manufacture of coffins. The sturdy workbench is still in the chapel, but the deeds state that he building should never again be used for that trade. After the second world war it was bought by Dodge and Son, for furniture restoration and then in the 1980s by Piers Pisani Antiques as a workshop and sale-room. Piers put it for sale in 2011 and I bought it.

We stripped the exterior paint to bare metal, it revealed corrugated galvanised sheet entirely free from rust, and that was after one hundred and thirty years. More recently the main body of the chapel has been cleared of the walls and floors inserted in the twentieth century, leaving the full original space plus a half balcony (for lighting and sound control system). Next a stage was built; toilets and a green room fitted into the old lean-to vestry. Now we have a studio theatre ready for an audience of up to fifty visitors! It opened on Midsummer Day 2018 with a week long production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, to much critical acclaim.



Malcolm Cockburn

3.11.19