

Colin Hodgetts

Social activist. Born 1940.

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk

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1. Early Life and Education



Jersey during the Second World War.

I was born in Jersey, Channel Islands, in 1940 and so spent four years under German occupation. Most of my schooling was at Elizabeth College, Guernsey. I played clarinet, piano and organ.

At St. David's College, Lampeter (BA), I held an organ exhibition. At Ripon Hall, Oxford, I prepared for ordination in the Church of England. I took a PGCE in RE and Music at the Institute of Education, London.

2. Early Career

I served my curacy at St. John-at-Hackney, East London. There I founded a youth drama group, assisted by Geoff and Chris Coward, with whom I wrote five plays which incorporated 'folk' music, dance and film slides. We performed in many London venues, including the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southwark Cathedral, St Martin-in-the-Fields, and the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and took one production to the Edinburgh Festival and one to Taizé, France.

I organised the first Caribbean arts festival in East London in 1964.



Loch Awe.

In 1968 I worked for the Inverliever Lodge Trust, attached to Crown Woods comprehensive school in Eltham, and was responsible for setting up a residential centre on Loch Awe, West Scotland, for school leavers unlikely to get a place on the usual field study trips. At the same time I edited *Sing True*, a song book for school assemblies, that was to pay my salary for three years.

3. Christian Action

After a short period as Peace Officer of the Martin Luther King Foundation I was appointed the first Director of Christian Action, a charity founded by Canon L. John Collins. Our main activities were in the fields of single homelessness, nonviolence and prison reform. With Nick Beacock (organiser of 'Crisis at Christmas') and David Brandon I set up a halfway house for alcoholic women in Stepney and a hostel in Soho.

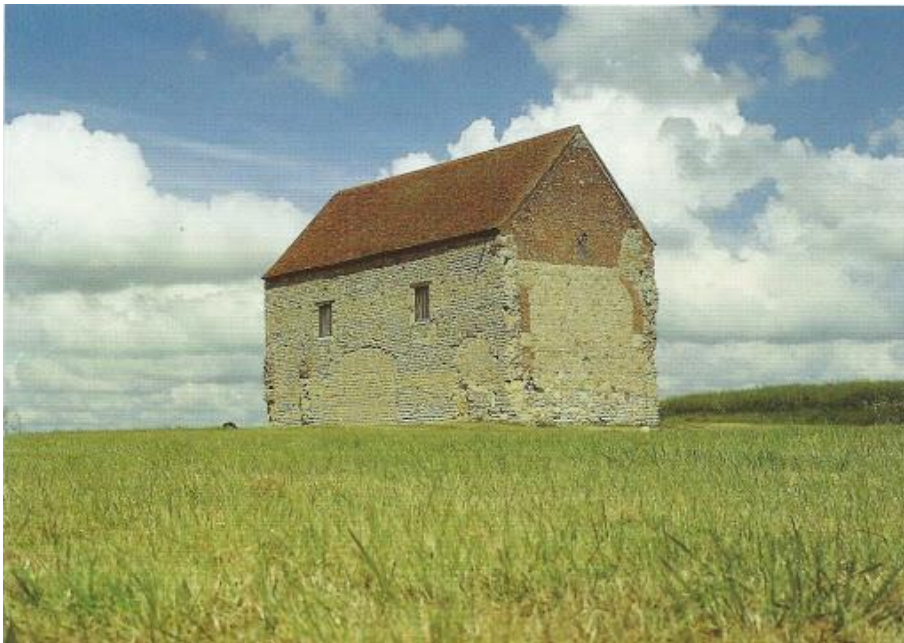


Satish Kumar.

Satish Kumar and I founded the London School of Nonviolence, which met in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the Fields where I had become an honorary curate. I founded Tent City (400 beds), at Wormwood Scrubs, and Hackney Camping, to provide cheap accommodation for young overseas visitors.

I was eased out of Christian Action after Canon Collins gave up the chairmanship. The organization ceased to be 'action' and became 'words'. Fortunately most of the activities became independent organizations. Tent City and Hackney Camping continued for another fifteen years.

4. Othona Community



Chapel built by St.Cedd in AD 654.

A short period as a member of the collective running the Student Christian Movement Centre at Wick Court near Bristol was followed by the chaplain/wardency of the Othona Community's centre at Bradwell-on-Sea. A core group of staff lived in wooden huts on the edge of the Essex marshes, keeping animals, planting trees, growing vegetables, welcoming visitors - up to 100 residents a week in the summer - and worshipping twice daily in the simple chapel built by St.Cedd in AD 654. I wrote the Othona Psalms, which the community published.

5. Vietnamese Refugees



Vietnamese boat people being rescued from a sinking boat.

After a few months out to write *Exploring Worship for Mowbrays*, I was invited by Save the Children to run their resettlement programme for Vietnamese Refugees.

We established a network of fourteen reception centres, from Montrose in Aberdeenshire to Hothfield in Kent, and a residential school at Bingley, Yorks. We had three main aims: to keep our reception centres small, average 80 residents with a staff of five; to get the buildings for nothing; to train Vietnamese staff to take over the programme. After 18 months, with the blessing of SCF and the Home Office, we set up Refugee Action in which Julia, my wife, and I were involved as trustees until 2016.

Regional offices were set up in London, Derby, Cambridge and Edinburgh with a Head Office in Derby. Lord Pratab Chitnis of the Rowntree Social Services Trust, was Chairman of Trustees. Projects included establishing mid-term support teams, organising family reunions, commissioning research reports on the Use of Interpreters and the needs of other refugee communities, including Ugandan Asian. The latter led to the setting up of the Asian Family Counselling Service, of which I was chair for eight years. A small overseas initiative was undertaken to rescue a group of women and children hidden in a basement in El Salvador.

In 1982 I became Settlement Director of the British Refugee Council, but resigned the following year, having hived off their Vietnamese programme to Refugee Action, because the organization of BRC was top-heavy.

6. Working with Satish Kumar

In 1983 I was invited by Satish Kumar, now editor of Resurgence and living in the North Devon village of Hartland, to run an alternative secondary school.

I was Head Teacher of the Small School, Hartland, for eleven years and wrote an account of the first five in *Inventing a School*. Naturally arts and crafts played a large part in the curriculum.

At the same time Julia and I bought a derelict barn and cowshed with two acres of land. With the help of a local workman, who undertook the septic tank, the stonework and the roof we were able to move in after five months. By that time I had become a dab hand at carpentry, plumbing, wiring and rendering.

During a sabbatical I lectured on education for a month in Japan and was invited to take the school there. As a consequence of performing three of the Chester cycle of Mystery Plays on that visit, a tour was organized for a production of *The Tempest* performed by former pupils and their university friends. Adrian Noble (right) became patron of the Small School Youth Theatre.

We toured Japan the following year with *The Winter's Tale*. The third year we toured the West Country with Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, for which I wrote the music. The youth theatre was forced to fold because financial pressure on students prevented them from giving up five weeks of the summer to rehearse and perform a play. Cultural exchanges between Hartland and Japan have taken place regularly since.

A change in my life came when I attended a course on Performance run by Anthony Rooley, at Schumacher College. I performed some of my own compositions. Tony told me quite forcefully that I had to give my music greater priority. Back in Hartland I joined the newly-formed Hartland Chamber Orchestra, became its conductor and started making arrangements and writing music for it.

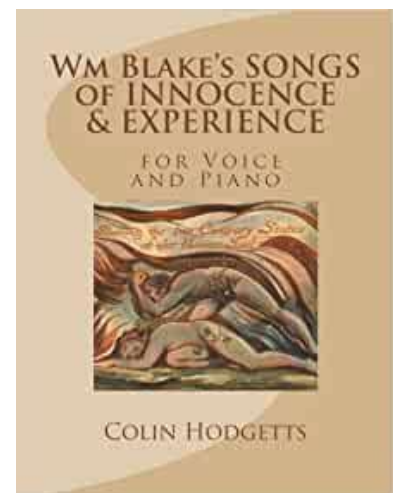
A performance of my *Shaker Mass* at the Beaford Centre led to an invitation to write a full-scale work that would reflect the varied musical life of North Devon to celebrate the centre's thirtieth anniversary. I chose nine of Ted Hughes' *Season Songs*, performed twice at The Plough by Evelyn Tubb, the Winkleigh Singers, and an assortment of instrumentalists.



Meanwhile, I resigned from the school and joined Human Scale Education to establish the Third Sector Schools Alliance to campaign on behalf of small schools, Moslem, Jewish, new Christian and Steiner schools for state funding.

Then I went back to the Small School to teach English. Finally, I got to write music full-time in 1999. A holiday in Japan, a visit to Sado Island, a late night sake session with a puppeteer, and a collaboration was proposed. The result, *The She-Fox of Shinoda*, an opera for Japanese puppets, took up a lot of 1999/2001. A Year of the Artist grant enabled us to take it on a tour of both the West Country and Japan.

There was a slight hiatus in my life of full-time composition. The new Head walked out of the Small School in November 2000 and I stepped in to run the school until August 2002. I continued to compose, setting all of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.



7. Vicar of Hartland



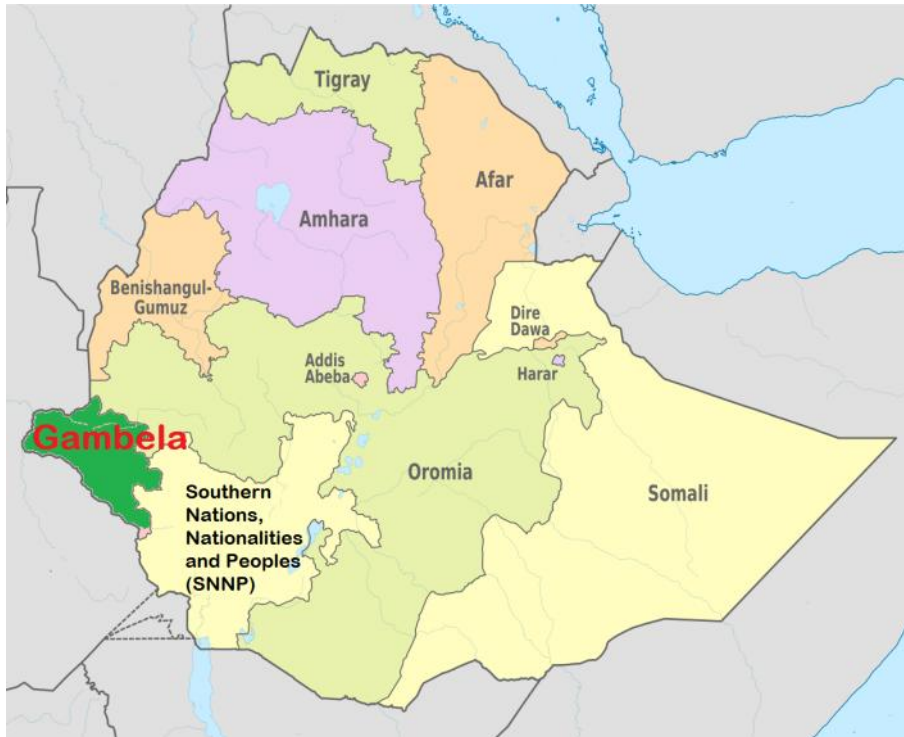
Parish Church of St.Nectan, Hartland.

From June 2003 to July 2007, no one else wanting the job, I became Vicar of Hartland. This has allowed me to do a lot more thinking about spirituality and the nature of Christianity. Although my contract ended in June 2006 I continued to serve the parish on a voluntary basis. At the same time I converted a barn to a holiday let.

In August 2007 Julia and I embarked on a seven-month journey, mostly by train, to Mongolia, China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, Russia and Estonia.

Poor leadership at the Small School prompted me to join the trustees, and I became their chair. To support the new head, Maya, I taught English for three mornings a week (2009/10).

8. A Year in Gambela, Ethiopia



Gambela comprises lush, humid lowland draining into the Baro River, a tributary of the Nile.

I don't usually read the Church Times – it is too depressing – but an ad. in a borrowed copy started it all. Searching to see how much organists were being offered my eye was caught by ETHIOPIA in large type. A clergyman, with experience of managing projects, was required to head up a project in the Southwest of the country and to train the local staff.

It took only seconds for Julia to agree that we should go for it, so I emailed my c.v. to Andrew, the Bishop of Ethiopia. His response was swift and enthusiastic.

We flew to Addis Ababa with one rucksack each to find Andrew, having just been appointed Bishop of Reading, packing. It would be many months before his replacement would be in situ. Could we stay for a year, and would I supervise the clergy? I would be Area Dean, and was told by Andrew's bishop boss in Cairo: 'When you speak, I speak'. That was something coming from a prelate described as 'pharaohic'.

Most of Ethiopia lies on a plateau, and Addis Ababa has a very pleasant climate. The Gambela region – our destination – lies just above sea level and is hot and muggy. It is on the South Sudan border and receives refugees from there. Some, including Bishop Mouneer in Cairo, wondered whether, at our very advanced age, we would survive such climate conditions. We did, with the help of long siestas and slightly shorter cold showers.



The project I directed, assisted by Julia, who was able to put to good use her financial wizardry, is based in a compound of buildings that were reaching completion. The library, seating 250, and the office were operational and the priest's house ready for occupation. We oversaw the completion of the guest house, canteen, training room and chapel, the equipping of the computer room with ten new Dell machines, the planting of hundreds of trees, including mangoes, and bananas (which don't grow on trees), and the laying down of paths. There were eighteen staff on the payroll.

The Anglican Church has grown rapidly over the past few years and fifty-two congregations are served by a dozen clergy. There are three tribal groups, the most numerous being the Nuer. They are pastoralists, used to roaming with their herds in South Sudan, who sought refuge from fighting there and ended up in Ethiopian camps before being settled in permanent villages. Many were Anglicans before they arrived but refugee camp life seems to have reinforced their commitment and increased their numbers.

Next are the Anuaks, whose tradition is slash-and-burn agriculture. Hostility between the two groups usually arose when Nuer cattle fed themselves on Anuak crops. Now conflict arises because Anuaks hold positions of power within local government. The third group, a small tribe, is the Opo. They live on both sides of the Sudan border, grow crops and smoke river fish.

Their one Anglican priest was the most effective community leader among the clergy. There is a fourth group: the Highlanders. These are people who were forcibly resettled here during the time of the Derg. They run most of the businesses and are resented by Anuak and Nuer. They are mostly Orthodox with a scattering of Muslims.

In the early days the library was not being much used, but with the school holidays came packs of young people, many to take advantage of the new basketball/volleyball court or to play football. It became obvious that for these youngsters the library needed hands-on kits such as meccano, lego etc. Friends from

Hartland visited bringing suitcases of educational gizmos. Christine, a former head teacher, played teaching games with the younger kids. Our staff found it hard to accept that such play could be educational.



The most successful of our projects was health education. Trained workers visited homes and taught families about basic hygiene, encouraging the construction of latrines. The effectiveness of our approach was recognized at a national conference. During the year over 7,000 homes were visited.

With the women's literacy project there were problems, but before we left we were able to set up a new programme with the help of the Mothers' Union, Tearfund and some trainers from South Sudan. It is holistic, encouraging groups of women to set up small businesses. The spur to literacy for many of the Nuer women is the ability to read the Bible.

Each day begins with staff prayers, up to a dozen of us reciting Morning Prayer in four languages simultaneously. One of the group would be asked to pray. No one ever refused or was lost for words. That was part of a novel experience for me: to be in a society where most people were committed Christians and not embarrassed to talk about things spiritual, in the market, on the bus, or queuing up at the bank.

It is difficult in just a few paragraphs to paint an adequate picture of day-to-day life in Gambela. I kept a diary and sent weekly missives to friends in the UK. If you would like to know more I can email it to you.

For Julia and me the year was a rich experience. We made many friends - we have since made two return visits to catch up with them - and we like to think that we made a small difference. However, development work is much harder than most

people imagine. To make a difference one would have to live for twenty years in a village, demonstrating through example how life can be improved by better water management, better agricultural techniques, and better handling of money. That cannot be undertaken by agencies or governments, only by committed individuals.

9. After Ethiopia



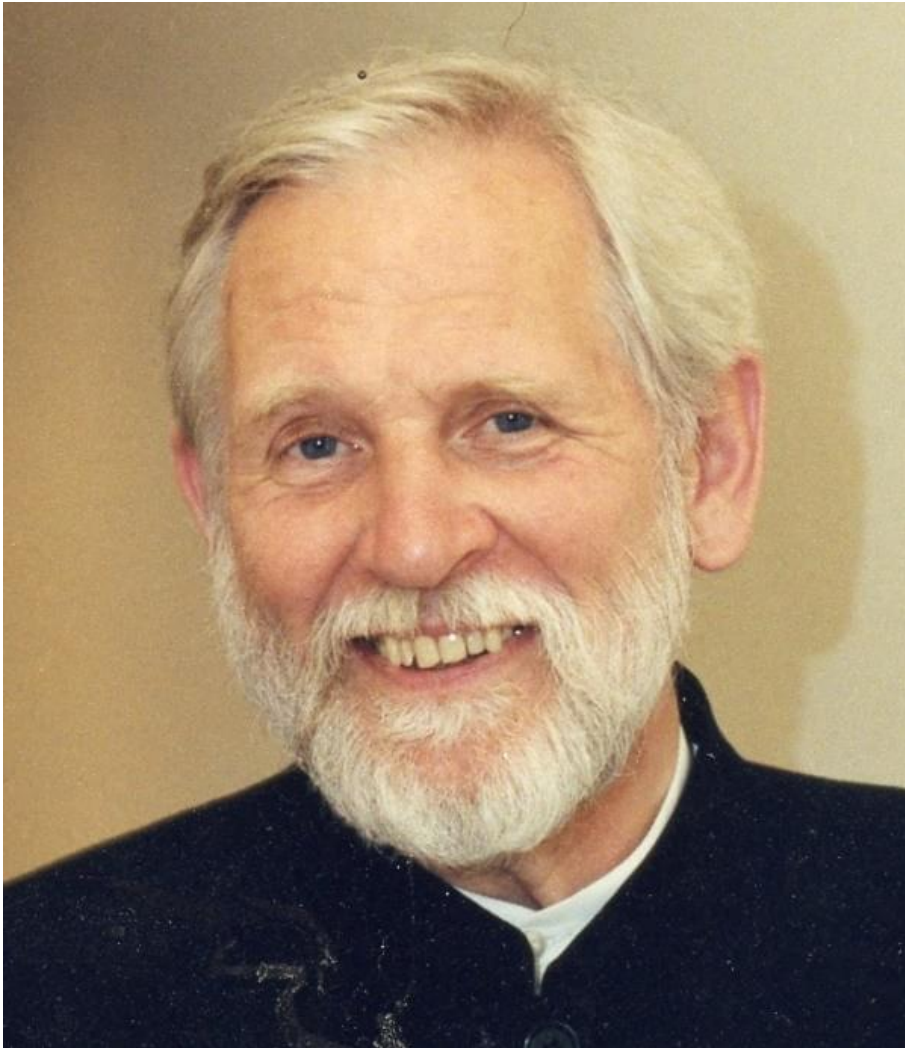
Abbotsham cliffs.

On our return I began writing my autobiography and revising the Othona Psalms, which I published for 'on demand' printing on Amazon. The autobiography I also put on Kindle. With a group of singers we recorded a number of the psalms in the chapel at Othona, West Dorset, and these can be found on YouTube. Search 'Othona Psalms'.

From 2016 - 2018 I was in charge of the parish of Abbotsham, a village on the outskirts of Bideford. The congregation had gone through several difficult years. I was tasked with creating a more positive atmosphere and taking the parish into a mission community, which I managed to do. I was also quite involved in the C of E primary school, both as a governor and in teaching music for assemblies and the twice-termly services in the church.

In April 2018 Julia bought us a flat in Edinburgh, and at the end of September I joined her.

10. Edinburgh



Julia and I have moved to Edinburgh. Looking after two acres of land, 1,000 pollarded willows, 12 cider apple trees and a polytunnel were beginning to prove too much. Also the house was demanding some loving attention. We wanted somewhere that was not 25 miles from the nearest hospital and 15 miles from the supermarket. We also desired easy access to concerts, films, plays and art. We looked at Edinburgh and found just what we wanted. Julia discovered a main door flat near the centre with a small front garden and access to a large one at the rear, which she manages. Free bus and coach travel has enabled us to ditch the car.

I am troubled by the lack of knowledge about Christianity, not so much a lack of faith but an absence of understanding. I was never much enamoured with RE in schools but it was better than nothing. If attending church is not the answer, what is? That is a question I asked the Othona Community to consider. Now I am writing an introduction to the Gospels for atheists. I am also a third of the way through an introduction to classical music for virgin ears. It will be in three volumes.

11. Books

The following are links to the Amazon pages for some of the books written by Colin Hodgetts:

[Action! A Cleric off the Leash](#)

[The Othona Psalms \(Keyboard\)](#)

[Jonah Jones - A Play](#)
