

## Christchurch, New Zealand 2011

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 at nine minutes to one o'clock, Jan and I, together with Jan's brother John and sister-in-law Chris, were in the ChristChurch Cathedral visitor centre, New Zealand when the earthquake that devastated that beautiful city, occurred. The previous September, an earthquake of magnitude 7.1 had occurred during the early hours causing few injuries but weakening many structures in the city. A particularly good exposition of the facts concerning this quake can be found on Wikipedia or alternatively on the NZ History website. My interest in this short article is twofold. One is to honour the pledge that I gave to the redoubtable AoL editor Bob Cartwright, shortly after our return from NZ when he asked me to write an article about our experience. I promised him that I would when the time was right, but that it was far too traumatic for me to consider at that moment. Now, exactly ten years after the awful event, I feel that I can face up to the challenge.

The second reason for wanting to write this, is that I and all our party and I suspect many if not all visitors to the city on that calamitous day, owe the people of Christchurch a huge debt of thanks for the way in which they went out of their way to assist us, notwithstanding their own suffering and loss, and the fears and trepidation for what the future held for their city, homes and jobs. This is a heartfelt thank you to each one of them.

Our antipodean holiday had consisted of a two-week tour of Australia starting in Perth and 'making our way down the road abit' via Adelaide, Melbourne (the coast road) and then to Sydney. Afterwards flying into Christchurch arriving Monday midnight to spend two further weeks travelling in NZ. We checked in to our apartment located in the heart of the city in what had formerly been the NZ Treasury building, close to the Cathedral Square. Our party immediately retired to bed but I, having purchased a litre of duty-free, had a wee dram to calm my nerves, having twice been selected by airport security, taken aside and suffering the indignity of the unseemly proboscis of the explosive detector shoved into my luggage, all the while laughed at by joyful companions. Fortunately, it was only the luggage...

I awoke the next morning with a hangover, which was ridiculous considering the miniscule quantity I had consumed, so I put my groggy condition down to a bug caught on the plane. It was a slow start to the day, the weather cold, grey and miserable and we finally got to the Cathedral square shortly before midday, whereupon we entered the cathedral itself. By this time, I had no interest in the building whatsoever. I could only feel the pressure of something that I could not understand or explain and so, when John noticed that the tower was open and would I join him, something I would normally have jumped at, I replied in the negative saying, you go up if you want but It's not for me today. Just at that moment, Jan came over to inform us that a communion service would shortly commence, and we agreed to join her. I recall a lady presiding over what was to become the last service held in the cathedral. As the service reached its conclusion, I became strangely emotional for no reason that I could understand. But, the benefit of hindsight has enabled me to realise that it probably had more to do with my dowsing ability and sensing the immense pressure building up in the earth's crust under our feet than any prescient knowledge of the 185 poor souls, that in minutes would lose their lives. For, as soon as the actual event occurred, the pressure I had been feeling evaporated.

### **The Event**

At 12.45 we had entered the visitor centre attached to the cathedral and the ladies were in their element. I noted that the building was a recent construction of steel, stone and glass and so, when the quake struck my immediate thought was, we're ok in here. That was until

huge stone blocks from the cathedral tower hit the ground just outside and burst in through the plate glass windows close to us. The event was so unbelievably quick and violent. Jan and the others were on the other side of the shop and I found myself sandwiched between two revolving display stands which conveniently fell toward me. I grabbed one in each hand like ski poles and rode the violent east-west movement of the floor, which according to scientific accounts, was simultaneously moving up and down. Ten seconds of absolute mayhem.

The violence stopped as suddenly as it had started, but nothing could be seen through thick white choking masonry dust from the collapsed tower and all that I could hear was endless screaming from the other side of the shop. I made my way through the rubble toward where Jan and the others had last been, terrified at what I was going to find, but as the dust subsided, I could see John and Chris pulling Jan out from under a table where she had fallen and apart from dust and shock, all were ok. People were rushing out of the building but in the background the screaming continued. Get Jan outside whilst I give a hand to the injured, I said. Carefully, I picked my way over to the lady who was still screaming and lying curled up on the ground, the shop manager was kneeling by her prone figure. The lady had collapsed as she had presumably tried to escape by the electronic sliding glass doors of the main entrance.

Outside the doors, tons of masonry lay on the ground but thankfully the doors had jammed, saving her life. Reaching the victim who was still in full voice, the manageress looked up at me and said, 'She's going to be sick', repeating it. You must appreciate that at this point we are all in a state of profound shock and so, taking in this vital information, I recall slowly looking around the devastated interior thinking to myself, well, there must be a plastic bag somewhere in here for the lady to be sick into! At that moment reality hit me and swinging around I snapped sharply at the screamer. Stop that. There is nothing wrong with you. This was based purely on the fact that I could see no blood or exposed bones and in the Morgan emergency field kit of life experience, that counted for good to go. In an earthquake situation there is no time to be lost, you must get out before the next shake comes and brings more debris down. Then, turning to the manager, grab her arm, we must get out now. Immediately, the victim fell silent and assisting her to her feet we picked our way out, via the cafeteria, into open air and relative safety. There appeared to be no injury to the lady other than an understandable panic attack and I left her in the care of the manager and re-joined the others. We all looked like trembling ghosts, covered in thick mortar dust and a group hug ensued, swiftly followed by Chris offering a short but very meaningful prayer of thanksgiving. This was quickly followed by calls back home to reassure the troops of our safe delivery.

### **The Lady in the Window**

As we stood, still in a tight group, shouts of help reached us and looking up we saw a lady, blood running down her face, framed in a window about 20 foot up and trapped in a room that was just at the side of the tower. Jan, who had spotted a policeman in the distance shot off to ask him to get a ladder to rescue her. Shortly afterwards he returned with a ladder and got the poor woman safely down. We were later to discover that she was a seamstress, who fortunately had left her workstation to enjoy her lunch sitting in the window. Her workstation and the floor it stood on had been destroyed.

During this period, a series of aftershocks, some severe, shook the city, continuing to damage buildings and underground services. On the roof of a nearby building close to the square, a fancy cupola had been dislodged by the initial quake but was still leaning precariously and with every aftershock it revolved on the roof, never quite falling off, but I watched it, fascinated, like a child distracted by a toy. By this time, the square was filling rapidly as people evacuated the narrow streets for open space. Several passengers had been killed or

injured on buses, hit by collapsing buildings, although we were only to discover this later from news bulletins. But I shall never forget the strange realization that we were on the other side of the world with nothing but what we stood up in; we were not allowed to go back to our accommodation to collect our luggage. Three of us had had the common sense to wear our coats, but one, a certain Mrs Morgan (always a concern to her mother) had steadfastly refused to bring her coat, despite the more farsighted among us recommending it. Worse still, was the fact that all our medication was now out of bounds and being semi-bionic creatures of a certain age, a flutter of consternation ensued. However, the good news was that we all had our passports upon our person, and I cannot recommend the practice highly enough when travelling beyond the environs of Nantwich.

Fortunately, the Christchurch marshals in their bright orange tabards were swiftly on the scene and started to move us out of the immediate city centre, ensuring that we walked down the centre of the roads keeping away from the buildings and treading carefully. The roads, once neatly paved were now an uneven, fractured surface, exposing pipes and services, masonry and broken glass abounding. We arrived at Victoria Square by the river Avon, which was itself a grey, seething surface of liquefaction, a term I had never taken note of previously. Apparently, the earthquake, occurring at a shallow depth of just 2k underground, had forced through the surface up to 400,000 tons of silt and sand causing massive destruction of services. We saw wheelie bins which residents had submerged in deep holes in the roadway, to warn motorists of the danger. Whilst in Victoria Square, we saw trapped residents waving and calling for help from a high-rise block. Their stair well had collapsed, and the lifts disabled, but they were a long way up, well beyond reach of normal ladders. It must have been terrifying for them as the city experienced six big aftershocks that day plus many smaller ones and 361 in the week following, but they were eventually rescued. We resolutely chose to sleep on the ground floor of motels after that.

From Victoria Square we were led along Oxford Terrace past the Pyne Gould building that had collapsed on one side, some people were lucky on the upper floors and able to walk out and some below were not. We made our sombre way down to Latimer Square where despite the wide green space of safety, the mood and scene of tragedy deepened with the sight of multitudinous ambulances and rescue teams. They were attempting to find survivors at the Canterbury TV station that, despite being a relatively new building, had collapsed in its totality, trapping and killing many people, a party of visiting Japanese students among them. Shortly after our arrival a big 5.9 shock came through, one of several such strength, that day.

### **The Gentleman in the Welder's Helmet**

Among the many distressing memories of this event, the one that haunts me most, is witnessing a large gentleman of Maori or Polynesian origin and wearing a welding helmet with the visor raised, walking through the crowds shouting out for the whereabouts of his son. Has anybody seen my son? I did not see or hear any response, but during the week following we saw news footage of an exceptionally large young man of obvious All Black rugby ability, heaving massive blocks of fallen stone over his shoulder, for all the world like they were like empty cardboard boxes, as he vainly tried to reach a young woman trapped underneath. At that moment one of the many aftershocks brought down more rubble, killing him instantly. I shall never forget his bravery, nor the fear and consternation of the man in the welder's helmet, whom I suspect may have been his father.

## **The Walk Out**

During this period, the redoubtable Christine had been mega busy on her phone, the only one we had that worked out there, to try and contact their NZ friends from previous visits. We were due to see them anyway and so it was decided that we should start to walk out of the city toward their home in the suburbs. On the way, attempting to obtain the medication we needed at any pharmacy we came across, but without success as prescriptions were required. What we did see as we walked out was the extent of the devastation to many churches and much of the older housing stock in the city, many of them timber framed construction, which had collapsed or were irreparably damaged. Also, the sewage and water services that had been destroyed. One elderly lady was outside her badly damaged house and desperate to salvage her grand piano. Such images stay with you.

After some time, we were fortunate to be given a lift out of the city by a kind gentleman who managed to stuff us all into his car and drove us out to the suburb where Anna and Chris lived. However, upon arrival, we found their house empty and locked. We were standing on the street pondering our next move when a lady in a neighbouring property appeared. Jan enquired if she knew where Anna was and explained our situation. Without hesitation this young woman said, come and stay in my house tonight, I won't be here (she had just got a new boyfriend, she informed us) and you are welcome to stay until Anna turns up. Just don't tidy anything until the insurance people have seen it as it's a bit of a mess. And don't flush the loo, you may need the water in the cistern. Use the stream at the bottom of the garden when you need to go. With this and leaving a key in case we should lock ourselves out on that trip down the garden she turned to go, saying finally, there's a case of wine in the kitchen, help yourselves and don't worry about it, but there is no food in the fridge I'm afraid. I said to her disappearing back, what's your name? Flick, she shouted, everybody calls me Flick. And with that she was gone. What an angel and with a NZ accent to boot. Thank you Flick.

An hour and a bottle of wine later, Anna turned up and explaining that her house was too damaged to stay in, took us over to her mother and father-in-law's, Colin and Cushla who with enormous kindness put us all up for the night, showering and feeding us all and arranging an emergency doctor's appointment the following morning to get the medicine we required. This was followed by taking us to the airport to collect the pre-arranged hire car so that we could drive out of the city and head north away from the devastation.

## **The Recovery**

We all felt so guilty as we drove away, knowing the devastation that had taken place and yet realising that there was little or nothing we could do to assist and indeed that our continued presence would only be another hindrance to the rescue operation. Our first stop was in a small town where the girls had spotted a lady's outfitters who had thoughtfully placed a large 'Sale' sign in the window, that had apparently caught their attention. The owner must have been somewhat surprised when the orders came in thick and fast, I will have two of those please, followed by a second voice saying, and the same for me. Apparently (we men were not present you understand) this process started in the foundation department and proceeded until sufficient cladding and structural reinforcing had been acquired.

The next week was spent close to Blenheim, staying with David and Pat, Anna's father and mother who very kindly and with great empathy, put us up whilst we regained some semblance of normality. But it was hard to forget what we had seen, felt and experienced and

sleeping did not come easily. We did learn how little in the way of clothing and luggage you actually require, when on holiday. Replacing our two suitcases with one holdall from a charity shop easily contained all we needed for the remaining fortnight of our stay. Our original luggage was eventually returned by the NZ authorities some six months later once the buildings had been deemed safe to re-enter. The Treasury building we spent one night in, is still standing sound, a testament to its architect and builders, but the nearby Grand Chancellor hotel, previously the tallest building in the city had to be demolished on safety grounds, a metre out of alignment at the top.

According to Wikipedia the earthquake had one of the highest Peak Ground Accelerations ever recorded in the world and experts consider that such a quake would have severely devastated any major modern city. The fact that Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's cathedral did not collapse entirely is probably down to the fact that the movement was east to west enabling the gothic arches in the nave to absorb the motion. Had the movement been north to south, it would have been a different story.

**Thank you people of Christchurch, thank you again.**