

THE DESK

by

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The Coronavirus 'lock-down' has afforded many of us the time and opportunity to do some de-cluttering. In my house nothing was more worthy of this exercise than my desk. Over the last six months I had been involved in several projects all of which had one thing in common – they generated paperwork like you would not believe.

So yesterday I took a look at the mountain of potential re-cycling that lay before me and just shook my head. The time had come, the lawns had been mowed, and I now had no possible excuse to delay the task. It took me several hours, three black bin liners and at least four mugs of M & S Extra Strong Tea.

When I had finished I took a duster and several squirts of Mr Sheen to the blank two metre long desk surface. Replacing only those articles I needed for my immediate attention I stood back to admire my handiwork. So, flushed with my success, I decided to take a photograph of my new found domesticity and I emailed it to my cousin Pam in Queensland.

'What is that ship on the windowsill? Who is *she* in the photo-frame? You've never mentioned *her* before. Is that the calendar I sent you just before Christmas I can see on the desk?'

I took a closer look at the photograph. In fact I stared at it for several minutes. Slowly it dawned on me that the items on my desk and immediately above it were reflections of my life going back decades. Had I done this subconsciously? Would I be a psycho-analyst's dream? Like that TV programme '*Through the keyhole*' what would viewers make of me and my identity given the clues before them? Let me tell you a little about everything on view in the photograph.

Starting top left on the windowsill is a small porcelain dish about four inches across. It was recovered from the wreck of the *Tek Sing (True Star)* which sank in the South China Sea in 1822 in a typhoon whilst en-route to Batavia, now Jakarta. Over eighteen hundred souls lost their lives making it a greater maritime disaster than the *Titanic*. Captain Mike Hatcher, who recovered the '*Nanking cargo*' was also the salvor on this occasion and eventually brought the entire consignment to Europe, its original intended destination. I bought this small piece for about £100 at a subsequent auction in York, I think around 1986.

Next to this dish is a smart wooden box in which to convey a bottle of wine and the sommelier's tools of corkscrew and a sharp blade. It was a gift from my two God daughters Millie and Lucy when they were only small girls. They should not have encouraged Uncle Mark to drink even more! I treasure it.

Moving along the windowsill is a framed photo of a girl called Gemma whom I have never met. So why does it feature so prominently? It is worthy of a short story in its own right but I'll keep the explanation brief. Back in 2010 (I think) I received a 'letter from America' (I do so miss Alistair Cook) with a Greensboro, North Carolina postmark. Inside was the photo you see in the frame and a hand-written letter. From memory the words were roughly as follows;

'Hi Mark. My name is Gemma Hill and I have just read your latest books. I am your biggest fan and I wanna come visit you in England this summer. Is that OK? Please write me at the above address. By the way I am part North American Indian (Cherokee). Write me soon. Gemma xxx.'

My first thought was that this was a practical joke perpetrated by a mate in the States but I decided to reply and I told her that I would be pleased to meet her if she ever found herself in Yorkshire.

Two weeks later I received in the mail a very official-looking envelope, again postmarked Greensboro, North Carolina. The printed message inside read something like this.

'The person with whom you have communicated (G. Hill) is currently incarcerated in the Women's Correctional Facility, State Penitentiary of North Carolina.

She is currently serving concurrent sentences for Fraud, Money-laundering and Racketeering. You are strongly advised not to enter into any financial transactions with this felon.'

I can tell you that I never heard from 'Gemma Hill' again but I decided to keep the photo as a memento of my Cherokee Squaw.

Moving along, enclosed in a glass case is a nice scale model of the aircraft carrier HMS *Hermes*. I found the model in a junk shop around 2005 and covered in dust. It had no case, no plinth and not even any aeroplanes. However the rest of it was perfect and I think I paid £75 for it. The *Hermes* was special to me. It had played a famous 'gunboat diplomacy' role in Hong Kong in 1967 when I lived there. The intentions of Chairman Mao's Red Guards were uncertain to say the least and the threat of invasion was ever present. With *Hermes* in full view in Victoria Harbour and her squadron of Buccaneer bombers displayed on the flight deck, the message to the Chinese Government was clear. I found a professional model maker online, Peter Hall, who completely refurbished the model, built a teak plinth, made the glass case and provided me with two miniature scale models each of Buccaneers, Sea Vixens and Fairey Gannets – all for £150 – a bargain!

Just to the right of the glass case is a much bigger scale model of a Fairey Gannet which I bought online myself to complement the *Hermes*. The letter 'H' is prominent on the tailplane to denote *Hermes* and its registration number on the fuselage is 264. Closer examination of the two tiny Gannet models on the flight deck reveal that their numbers are 262 and 263. Unbelievable!

Further to the right is a beautiful 3D picture of a Star Ferry crossing Hong Kong harbour. It was a birthday gift many years ago from my old school mate Mike Davis. We probably did that journey over a thousand times together on the way to and from St. George's Army School in Kowloon.

The yellowish coloured postcard is actually a photograph of two seagulls sat on a trestle table with two Aussie surfers in the background beyond. It was posted to me by a girl called Annie Roberts, a talented photographer who hails from Mollymook NSW. Annie read my book '*One Thousand Days in Hong Kong*' and got in touch with me via Facebook. Amazingly it ends out that she too had attended St. George's School in Hong Kong but quite a few years after I had left for UK.

On the wall, on the left, is an acrylic painting of Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament as it might be seen from a gondola on the London Eye. The droplets are raindrops on the outside. Painted by my good friend and colleague, Cathi Poole, she also painted me the purple poppies just to the right of the computer monitor. What a talented girl she is.

In the centre is a gorgeous colour print of a tourist poster advertising my home-town of Scarborough as a holiday destination with the caption 'It's quicker by rail. Full information from any LNER Office or Agency.' It depicts Scarborough's South Bay Pool in its heyday before the railways were nationalised. Seventy plus years later how apposite it is that the name LNER has been revived.

On my desk itself is a Queensland calendar with April's picture showing the clock tower and War Memorial of Bundaberg – famous for its rum! There is also a map of Bruges and West Flanders to which I constantly refer to plan my next trip. And oh yes, confession time, a proof copy of the new edition of my book *MALTA 'My Island'* which I need to read, check and send back to York Publishing. I found it under a mountain of paperwork. Sorry, Clare, I'll get it back to you soon.

I have promised myself never to allow my desk to disappear under a mountain of 'stuff' again though I must confess that the exercise was most cathartic, as indeed was writing this story.

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