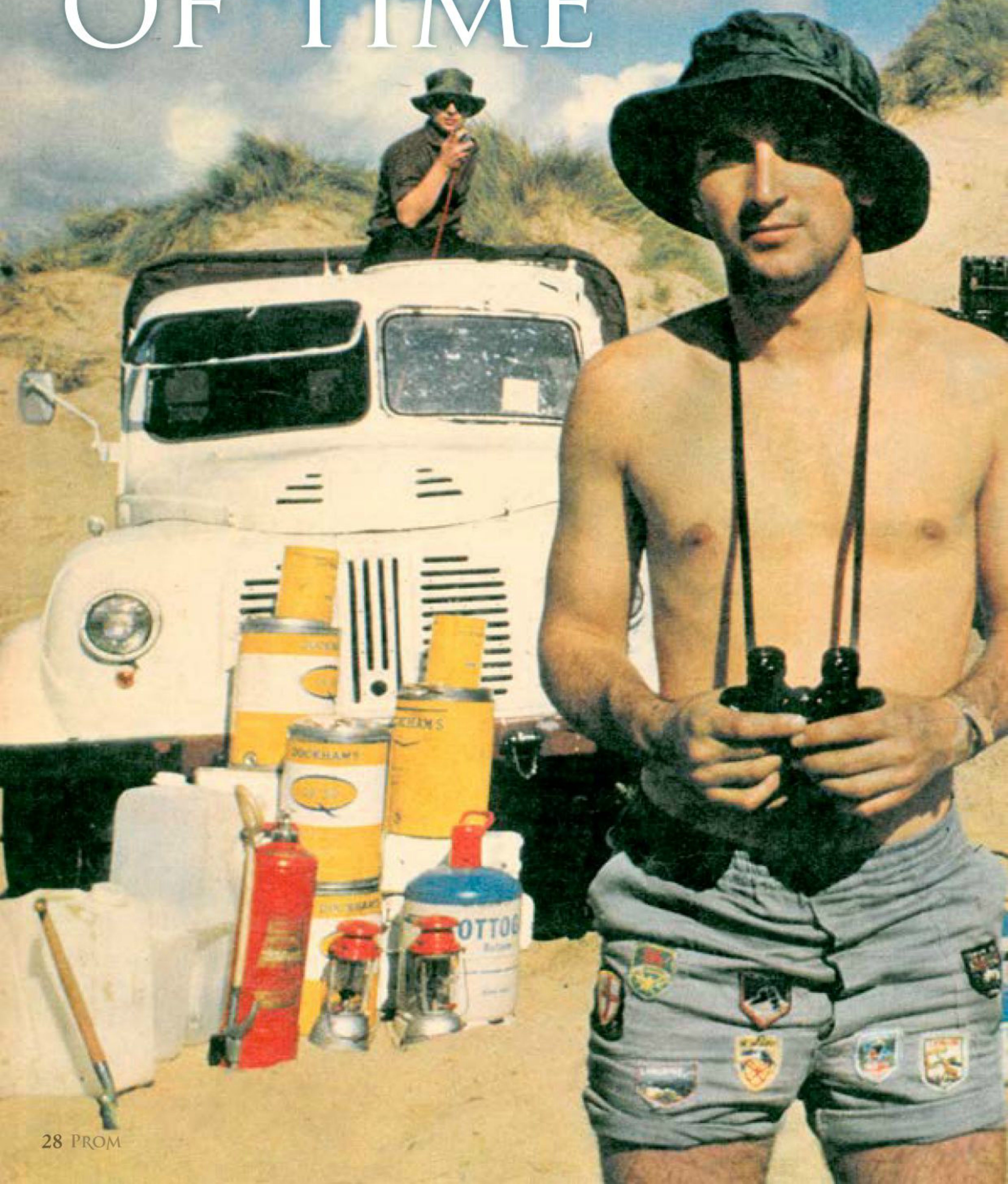


THE SANDS OF TIME



EXPLORATION SOCIETY TRIP ACROSS THE SAHARA

Words by Barrie Dennett



*Ready to embark
— a dry run at Ynyslas*



How are friendships forged?

Is it a fusion of like minds, a chance meeting with the pleasant realisation of company mutually enjoyed or is a friendship forged in heat and hardship? Maybe it's a combination of all of these things, and when the mixture is right, that friendship can survive the years, a little benign neglect and geographical distance.

Take for example a group of eight Aber students whose friendship began with the lure of adventure in the Aber Exploration Society's trip across the Sahara in 1966. Almost half a century later, the surviving seven members of the original group met on the Prom in Aber. Not all had stayed in touch with each other and every one of them had gone on to careers which took them all over the world, but they quickly slipped back into the easy camaraderie which had built a team capable of overcoming the extremes of climate, terrain, bureaucracy, mechanical frailty and conflict to make the journey across the Sahara to Nigeria and back via Timbuktu.

In the current fashion for gap years, aided by international air travel to almost anywhere, credit cards, mobile phones and the internet, it is easy to forget that fifty years ago none of these things were available. The team had to raise enough cash



Left to right: Bill Dean, Dai Pugh, Barrie Dennett, Dick Davies, Richie Baker, Bob Meddins, Bob Gardener

to take with them and then carry it, as cash, to exchange into local currencies as needed. Supplies were bought, borrowed or begged and stored in the Society's room at the top of Old College before being stowed in the vehicles. One team member told his mother that "of course everything would be fine; there was a daily bus service across the Sahara..."

In the end everything *was* fine, but their shared experiences of hardship, adventure and joy have truly forged their friendship. This is their story.

A few months ago I was clearing out my attic when I found an old diary describing a trip by a naïve group of students across the Sahara, the world's most inhospitable desert. The diary describes an extraordinary 12,000 mile journey made in the summer of 1966, nearly 50 years ago, by eight students from Aberystwyth.

It made a fascinating read. As they got into the desert, the group realised they were not prepared for the heat which at times was well over 50 degrees centigrade – hot enough to fry eggs on any exposed metal. Nor were they prepared for the impact on their vehicles – an ex-army truck and a long wheel-based Land Rover: both reacted badly to the heat, the fuel simply evaporating before it could reach the carburettors, making travel impossible.

The diary describes the pleasant trip from Aber down through Europe ending up at Gibraltar, then over to Oran in Algeria before preparing to take on the desert. There have been many books written about Sahara crossings, some describe the beauty and emptiness, others like *Trek* by Paul Stewart, are bleak reminders of the seriousness of a desert crossing, especially the Sahara, and how things can go fatally wrong. The team had only read the books with the good endings, they were young and convinced they could handle anything.

As they travelled south into the heart of the desert the diary tells of increasingly serious incidents of heat exhaustion causing hallucinations and extreme fatigue along with chronic dysentery. By the time they finally reached Agades, the ancient desert trading town in Niger on the southern edge of the Sahara and their target destination, they were in a sorry state. Two or three weeks rest and some scientific experiments later they started the return journey through the desert. They took a different route, detouring through Mali and the legendary Timbuktu. Driving was difficult, with mud and swollen rivers on the southern edge of the Sahara and countless miles of drifting sand further north. Ferocious sandstorms reduced visibility to zero and made travel and navigation extremely difficult. Two thirds of the way back through the desert, having just passed through a deserted French nuclear underground testing site, the diary suddenly stops. There are no last messages to loved ones, no final words. On the 4th of September 1966 it ends with the words "camped in very high winds, it's unbearable hot, we are all exhausted, the Land Rover has a bent axle..."

The mystery was easy to solve, I was the diarist and, although memory fades after all those years, I am guessing everything had become routine, we were desert veterans, or perhaps I had just lost my last pen!



Recently the surviving members of the University College of Wales 1966 Trans-Sahara expedition had a reunion in Aberystwyth. Sadly one of the team, Dave Thompson (1967 Geography) died a couple of years ago but the seven, all now 65 plus, met up at the Belle Vue on Marine Parade.

Bill Dean (1965 BSc Geology) had managed to pull together some old movie footage and a collection of the photographs taken on the trip. Memories flooded back, like the extraordinary visitor who rode his camel into our camp one morning when we were many miles from the nearest water. Another strong recollection was the gazelle hunt with a detachment of Algerian soldiers. After an hour long breakneck Land Rover chase across desert plains, a lucky shot finally brought the beautiful animal down. Dick Davies (1967 Zoology), skinned, gutted and butchered the animal and we had fresh meat for the first time in six weeks.

Bob Meddins (1967 Physics) and I were the 'expedition physicists' on the trip, as we had been sponsored by the Dry Lands Research Institute of the University of California and a large electrical company to test out variations on solar stills designed to extract water from soil or sand and organic material.

The team had a host of other projects, including Richie Baker's (1967 Geography) geological survey of a spectacular remote ridge about 100 miles south of our base camp in Agades. Richie was dropped at the ridge whilst the Land Rover went on another few hundred miles to Kano in Nigeria to pick up delicate scientific equipment which had been air freighted out to us. Richie still talks about his growing paranoia as he began to think about his isolation and fear that the Land Rover might not return for him.

Bob Gardner (1967 Zoology), who the year before had been on a University expedition to Arctic Norway with Richie Baker, largely conceived and put together the expedition. One dark winter's night, probably in an Aberystwyth pub, Richie drew a 5,000 mile radius circle centred on Aberystwyth and basically that's how we ended up in Agades.

He soon recruited a group of rookies for this adventurous trip including me, Bob Meddins, Dick Davies and Dave Thompson. Bill Dean and Dai Pugh (1963 Physics) were both expedition veterans; Bill had desert experience since he had recently led a team to Trucial Oman which is now part of the United Arab Emirates. Dai was an extraordinarily important team member; not only was he a physical tower of strength and an experienced traveller, but also he was a very accomplished mechanic.

Apart from the physical problems we all suffered, there were quite a few amusing incidents which showed our naïvety; like the occasion when we lost the marker barrels indicating the route through the Sahara. Having camped for the night and fearing we had gone quite a long way off our planned route, we thought it might be a good idea to check our location with the sextant the geography team had acquired. It soon became apparent that this was going to be a problem since no-one was sure how to use the instrument and it was useless anyway because we had forgotten to bring the tables which would have given us the latitude fix. Luckily for us our camp fire was visible for many miles in the blackness of the clear desert night and it attracted a French army convoy, which was sensibly travelling when the sun had gone down. They detoured to investigate and after sharing drinks and pleasantries they went on their way. The next day we followed their tracks back to the main route and the marker barrels.

The reunion in October of 2012 was quite something; we visited our old student haunts and tried to buy beer at 1966 prices. We visited the campus on the hill and the magnificent Arts Centre. We even reproduced, with two greying elderly gentlemen, a photograph taken in the Physics lab at the end of term in 1966.

It is interesting to see what an impact the Sahara has had on us all. Despite joints and limbs which don't seem to work as well as they used to, we all, without exception, still love adventure and the outdoor life. At the reunion we found we had a mountain rescue specialist, a long distance cyclist (John O'Groats to Land's End), long distance walkers (coast to coast and long European and Australian trails), long distance wilderness

canoeists and I think all of us have lasting passion for travel, wilderness camping and deserts.

It was also interesting to catch up on the lives we have lived since most of us last met up. Amongst the team we have a retired Lieutenant Colonel, a retired mountain rescue leader, a semi-retired head hunter, a seismic oil survey expert, a retired university lecturer, a successful company director dealing in plant and machinery and finally a retired jack of all trades who ended up running a huge Australian mining organization.

The Belle Vue with its faded charm was the perfect place to meet, but for our 50 year reunion we are already planning to meet in Tamanrasset in the middle of the Sahara.

This time, however, we can and will fly there. 📌

