

Article for the Cornish Guardian

by Roger Farnworth, 17th December 2003

It's a lovely warm day with clear blue skies. The farmers have been ploughing winter wheat and bringing in the sheep to fatten on winter fodder. So, though it is winter in Palestine it is just like early September around Bodmin Moor. Here it is 600 feet above the distant sea - as my home in Warleggan. But in Palestine the ploughing is done by donkeys and the vintage 1960s Massey Ferguson has a trailer that is loaded with lemons, clementines and huge fat tomatoes that my polytunnel efforts at tomatoes at home look rather unsuccessful! And there's another difference. A soldier with his finger on the trigger has just told me that the gate to the farms is to be closed for the rest of the day. 'Orders', he says when I enquire.

The village of Jyyous is perched on a hill at the edge of the West Bank. From here you can straight across to Israel to the Mediterranean sea. Yet the villagers cannot go to the sea. At the foot of the hill is a high fence. It is our job - that of Peace Observers - to stand at a gate in the fence which is opened for half an hour three times a day. If the soldiers fail to open on time or refuse to let a farmer through we talk to the soldiers and try to persuade them to be helpful to the farmers.

This great fence was built two years ago, cutting the village off from all its fertile land. You can imagine how angry people in one of our Cornish villages would get if a separation wall looped around cutting farmers off from their fields! Although here on the West Bank agriculture is the only source of income for most families, many farmers do not have permits to enable them to pass through the gate. Those that do have permits find farming difficult since the gate is often opened and closed at inconvenient times. I have seen many of the greenhouses and the irrigation pipes dismantled and taken back to the high ground of the village - yet there is no water here in summer.

If the fence had been built for security reasons it would have been more logical to build it three kilometres away along the border with Israel. The reason for including Palestinian land behind the fence can only be that one day the gate may be closed permanently. If this happened the largest as yet untapped water supply in the area, which for millenia has been gathering under the lowland, would become part of Israel.

Three weeks ago the gate to the other part of the village land was closed permanently to vehicle traffic. Stakes were driven in the roadway. I saw a farmer weep as he turned away. The Israeli government plans to take more than a third of the most fertile West Bank by means of the fence. Even the Jordan Valley, so familiar to those who read their Bibles at home, will be taken, leaving Palestinians only the dry rocky hillsides.

Houses in the village of Jyyous have flat roofs and the street has too much litter, otherwise it reminds me of Cornish village life when I was young. No shopkeeper here would think of keeping an eye on children in the shop. If you stole anything it would never be forgotten. I go down to the gate at 6 am just as the few shops are opening. At ten at night most of them, and the vegetable stalls, are still open. People gather there to talk and I often join them as some speak a little English. They often mention the British Balfour Declaration of 1917 which gave Jews the right to settle in Palestine and thus is seen as the start of the present crisis. However the villagers are extraordinarily friendly and pleased that we are there to help them. Indeed I am glad to be here because over three quarters of the land their grandparents owned has been taken - and now almost half of what remains is under threat.

Last thing at night I buy a hot corn cob which the villagers cook on street fires to earn a bit of money and to keep warm. But the 'deep midwinter' the carol speaks of has been very mild so far. I hear I am missing one of the driest and warmest winters Cornwall has known for a long time.

The last thing young people do is put boulders across the entrance road. I will tell you why next time I write.