

## **1995: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten**

### **Not a proud year**

This year has not been a proud one, if you have been working for Shell for almost all your working life. The reorganisation of Central Office, the debacle of Brent Spar and the developments in Nigeria including the execution of Mr Ken Saro Wiwa did not reflect well on Shell, whatever the true state of all these affairs.

Of the above, the reorganisation has been of most direct interest to us, especially because it became clear that Health, Safety and Environment Division, Maarten's working place for eight years and his home base for personnel purposes, was going to disappear. The major activities are to be taken on by the business organisations themselves. Integrating health, safety and environment in the business is in itself an admirable objective, provided that the business organisations ensure that they have the necessary resources to do just that. With regard to health and environment this move is modelled on the example of safety, where integration has by and large been realised already. The question is of course whether this is possible for health and environment in the same manner. It appears to be difficult to understand that health and environment are only comparable to safety to some extent, because in contrast to safety, health and environment require more professional input than line management itself is able to provide. And with the obvious public and community relations aspects of environmental management, as evidenced by Brent Spar and by the developments in Nigeria, there would appear to be sufficient reason to tread carefully.

As matters stand at the moment of writing this, Maarten's future remains unclear. As will become clear later in this letter, he has become involved in exploration and production projects in the Commonwealth of Independent States in a big way this year. And it appears likely that he will be asked to continue to be the main environmental advisor for these business development projects.

### **Home and garden**

A major reason to want to continue to work for Shell is our new house. We are really enjoying living here, especially now that we have had a year's experience and also because the garden has been laid out and planted on the basis of a beautiful plan made by Riemke's twin sister Wiek, who is a landscape architect. Of course, the beautiful summer has helped and we have spent lots of time on our roof terrace and in the garden.

With the Dutch river dikes at bursting point early this year, we experienced flooding of our basement garage because of design changes to our house that had not been reflected in the design of the garden. We spent an evening rescuing removal boxes and draining the floods into our drainage system. Since that time we have had our garden constructed in such a manner that flooding can no longer occur provided our submersible drainage pump continues to empty our sump into the municipal drainage system.

In the summer we also discovered that the limited supply of water that we had experienced was not after all an environmental design feature of the house, but caused by the fact that the main water tap had never been opened fully. Compared to our previous house and given the 1995 summer, quite some water has been used to water the garden. With all the plants still being small, they needed the water to survive and grow. Riemke has also successfully grown tomatoes on our balcony from two plants that she had been given by a friend. The final crop, being still green, has been converted into tomato chutney.

### **Back to our Kentish roots**

Taking the example of last year's excursion to Scotland, we decided to try and go back to Kent for a long weekend including and following Ascension Day. As in 1994 we used our frequent flyer points to fly to London Gatwick and hired a car to take us round. Because we had not reckoned with the May Public Holiday, we found it fairly difficult to find accommodation at first. On our first night we stayed in a pub in a village close to Canterbury and were then fortunate to find an ideal bed and breakfast some twenty kilometres east of Maidstone.

Of course, we visited Canterbury and found that this had changed into an all year tourist resort and pedestrian precinct. Numerous French school classes were swarming in and around the cathedral. We also visited our first neighbours in Canterbury, who had moved from their original home but had stayed in the neighbourhood. The house where we had lived longest in Canterbury had been

changed dramatically by various extensions, which had doubled the size of the house. While we enjoyed being back and visiting many of the places where we had been when we lived in Kent, the feeling of home sickness that we used to suffer when back in that part of the woods, had now gone. We no longer felt that Kent is the place where we should really live.

Besides our former neighbours we also visited two of Riemke's fellow mature students, who both lived at the same places, as they had when we saw them last. One of them lives in the Medway towns, where we went to the local museum in Rochester, which featured a reconstruction of an old ship inside the museum that was very nicely done and of great interest. It also had a nice display of the battle of Chatham conducted by Michiel de Ruyter, who almost managed to conquer England for the Netherlands, had he realised how weak the English armed forces were at the time. Riemke's other friend lives near Kingston upon Thames, where he is a senior lecturer of accounting at the now University of Kingston.

Of course, what we share with all these friends is that our children have been growing up in the meantime, so that we could compare notes and think back of the easy times when they were all safely in primary school. Having re-established our contacts, we look forward to return visits especially because we now have an eminently suitable guest room.

### **Our beloved son**

Coming out of the army, Jurjen had drifted back into unemployment. He then surprised us by applying for a place at the Royal Military Academy after all. While he passed his physical examination and the entrance interview by the admissions board, his application was eventually turned down on the basis of his psychological examination.

However, Jurjen did realise that he had to go back to further education if he was ever going to achieve something worthwhile. Since September he is now studying communication at a polytechnic college at Utrecht. He continues to live in The Hague for the time being, because it is very difficult to find accommodation in or near Utrecht and also because he has found a much better room in The Hague (quite close to a railway station), having left his previous digs when it became clear that this was an electrical and gas hazard.

Perhaps surprisingly, he still qualifies for the basic student grant, which includes a season ticket for public transport throughout the Netherlands. He is also back on our payroll again, well aware that this is the final offer of assistance forthcoming. Fortunately, his course interests him and as it is more structured than the university curriculum, we hope that he will see his education through.

### **Jubilee year**

1995 has been a jubilee year. Maarten's parents have been married for fifty years and we ourselves look back on twenty-five years of married bliss. Our celebration has been as quiet as our wedding was, because that is the way we have been doing things all along.

Maarten's parents organised a weekend with children and grandchildren in a family hotel in Limburg, modelled on the weekend they gave ten years ago. As a nice gesture they gave us a photo that Maarten's father had made at the celebration of his parents' golden wedding in 1960, showing his parents with their grandchildren.

The end of September also featured the reunion of members of the Dutch Society of Young Naturalists, which celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary. Riemke and Maarten met there and it was great to meet many of the friends that we had during our active years in that society.

### **Cows that have come home**

During 1994 and again this year, some Shell cows have come home to Maarten via the Board of the Dutch National Trust for Nature Conservation.

Exploration drilling in the Wadden Sea and the subsurface natural gas storage project in an empty gas field next to a Trust reserve in the province of Drente brought the Trust in conflict with NAM, the Dutch Shell/Exxon exploration and production company. In addition, the Brent Spar issue led to a reaction by the Trust.

Such cases are primarily dealt with by the Trust's professional staff, but all the above were also discussed by the Board. Maarten contributed some background information but did not take part in the Board's decision making. And as he himself was not involved in the projects on the Shell side, there was not really a conflict of interests.

## **Politics in Leiden**

Riemke continues to be busy at the Department of Politics at Leiden University. She has been particularly successful in acting as a reference for former students wanting to enter the Dutch Diplomatic Service with a success rate of one hundred per cent.

As we wrote last year, her work environment has not been as stimulating as it used to be, but she enjoys teaching and overseeing final year students working on their thesis. Besides, she is busy with recruiting information and organising student recruitment activities. It is however not very clear what sort of time these new students are going to have, as there are many changes forthcoming. Leiden University is now opting for quality, apparently that commodity was in short supply until now. If all plans come through there will not be many students in future and thus proportionally fewer staff.

Also, her work as secretary of the Research School of Political Sciences "Polybios" is quite interesting, as it brings together senior researchers and PhD students of all Dutch political sciences departments together. Riemke organises workshops and seminars, but regrets that relatively few people turn up at these gatherings.

## **Shell partners**

By times organisations must bring their activities to a close, because they find that their goals have been reached. The Network Shell Partners, in which Riemke has enthusiastically been taking part since 1991, has recently changed from an action group for the interests of working Shell partners into a less active group of friends. Shell has grown wise and has decided to devote more attention to the "spouses" by employing a Spouse Employment Consultant and by setting up an Expatriate Information Centre "Outpost". These are positive developments, for which the Network should take credit.

## **Keeping fit**

Riemke has also decided that she needed to improve her physical condition. Fortunately, she was able to join a keep-fit group that meets weekly in a school close to where we are living. After feeling rather broken after the first meetings, she is shaping up rapidly and finds it both easier and more enjoyable.

With our moving house and Maarten's office moving to the main Shell offices, his commuting distance has trebled from eight to twenty-five minutes walking. While this is in itself not a problem, it meant that Maarten was less flexible with regard to his comings and goings. Therefore he decided to go biking to this office instead of walking, also because we now have plenty of space to have bikes again. At the Van Neckstraat we had a bicycle shed behind our apartment, which required walking the block and back to get the bikes out. Therefore, Jurjen used to have his bike in the downstairs corridor while Riemke and Maarten tended not to use their bikes at all. Then some years ago Riemke's bike was stolen during a grand bicycle shed raid and Maarten gave his Raleigh police model bike away to a son of our neighbours' who had moved to Amsterdam and could do with some cheap transport there.

We went to our local bike shop to promote local custom and found that he had some marvellous lightweight Gazelle bikes in stock of an out of date model. As he had both a male and a female model in the right sizes, we decided to go in for our first partner look and buy the same bikes for the two of us. Maarten now enjoys his freedom of going around between home, office and our P O Box in minimal time. And during the weekends we have made a number of cycle tours around The Hague, for which there are ample and beautiful opportunities. In the past we used to take our car to visit the closed dune area of Kijfhoek and Bierlap between The Hague and Wassenaar, for which we have special passes from the local Water Company. Now we go there on bike having bought some fearful extra locks to tie them to the cycle stands provided at the entrance gates.

## **To Russia with love**

While Maarten used to be engaged in the Caspian Sea Project and two of his colleagues were covering the other exploration and production projects in the Commonwealth of Independent States, this changed radically during this year. One colleague was asked to join Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria to oversee the Niger Delta Study, that Shell is commissioning to inventory current natural resource use and development options for this area. The second colleague was approached for a posting to Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij in Assen. It is good to find that our people are so much in demand at the coal-face in the operating companies.

However, pending the Central Office reorganisation their positions were not be filled. And because Maarten's third section colleague is on the Staff Council, all CIS projects were shoved in Maarten's in-tray. As a result, Maarten is now spending some ninety percent of his time on projects in the CIS and over the summer he spent some six weeks in Russia on trips to Central Siberia along the Yenisey River, in West Siberia on a site assessment survey and on a soil and vegetation survey in two oil fields and one a geological field trip to Krasnodar on the Black Sea.

In addition, he was sucked back into the Caspian Sea Project, for which he is now the co-ordinator of the Foreign Partners' Advisory Group on Health, Safety, Environment and Security and the director of an environmental management course for the Kazakhstan Ministry of Ecology and Bio-Resources to be held on the Caspian Sea in December.

## **Holidays that have gone East**

When Maarten went to Oman he had some fifty days of leave due, which he used to mark time waiting for his work permit to come through. As an expatriate in the Sultanate he used his leave to the full as everybody else does and decided that never again would he accrue leave because of the demands of the business. Famous last words!

Back in The Hague, he barely had a chance to take leave because of the pressures to contribute to the Caspian Sea Project. In 1993 we managed to compensate by going to South Africa but such travels cannot be managed every year because of the costs.

In 1994 it was the Caspian Sea Project again that prevented us from having a holiday, although our fortnight in Scotland in May provided some compensation. This year found us in a similar bind, when Maarten was asked to join a scouting trip to Central Siberia. While dates to go on leave had been reserved, we intended to do our usual thing, throw our tent and sleeping bags into the boot of our car and go off to France. You can hang on to that or decide that by missing out on the scouting visit, you remove yourself from having an influence on the project under study. With the Central Office review under way the decision to connect is easily made. We shall give going on holiday another try in 1996.

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies