

Horseman from
the Soma-Nomaoi
Festival Japan

Konnichiwa, England!

*“Having recently returned to Bath
after some 20 years abroad I feel
a bit like Rip Van Winkle, albeit
in this story I’ve got older too.”*

I left KES in 1994 to study Classics at Cambridge. That was, it turned out, an impressively inappropriate preparation for my career to date; what you might call a non sequitur. I've spent most of the last 15 years in Japan, and, like many foreigners, my first job there was teaching English.

After a year of teaching, I stumbled into a job at a local engineering firm, one of the many suppliers to nearby Toyota. For 18 months I went to work each day in green factory overalls with the other salarymen, learned about drills and taps, inflicted my tortuous Japanese on colleagues and proofread the odd English document. When I didn't have much to do (which was most of the time) I studied Japanese, mostly writing out kanji characters over and over again.

In 2001, I decided to head home and went to London looking for a job where I could put some of my Japan experience to use. An unsolicited call to one of the Japanese newspaper bureaux found me a job assisting the correspondent of a Japanese broadsheet. That was barely a month before 9/11, so I kicked off my journalism career amidst the biggest story of the century so far.

Over the following year I helped the correspondent report on everything from the Nobel prizes to the Troubles in Northern Ireland. My jobs included setting up the interviews and asking my boss's questions. One particularly memorable interview took place in a poky flat in Copenhagen. It was home to an exiled former general of Saddam Hussein, then a contender to lead the new Iraq. (A very charming interviewee, he was later implicated in the gassing of the Kurds and vanished during the invasion.)

The best part of that busy year was meeting my wife, Yoshie, who was studying English in London. Not that long after we met she travelled back to Japan and I soon followed. This time I'd got a Japanese government scholarship to study politics at Tokyo University.

For the next 18 months I divided my time between learning yet more Japanese characters, taking weekend



Top: Ishinomaki two months after the disasters; Above: Tokyo commuters

bullet train trips to meet Yoshie, and writing stories on Japan, mostly for local English publications or US magazines like *Wired* and *Discover*. By the time the scholarship finished I'd just about learned to read a Japanese newspaper. And I was working as a freelance journalist. I'd also bought myself a Nikon SLR and started taking photos to sell with my articles. Photography became a hobby as well as part of my work. By the time I left Japan last year, the shutter counters on my digital cameras were showing a couple of hundred thousand snaps.

Tokyo must be the best place in the world to work as a freelance journalist: there are interesting stories everywhere; it's incredibly

photogenic; it's easy to get around; and the people you want to talk to are invariably polite and kind, albeit rather busy (as are most people in Japan actually). I wrote about 200 features on just about everything to do with Japan. Memorable experiences include photographing a man who makes insect sushi, 'interviewing' Honda's Asimo robot, and visiting a Shinto mountain so sacred that you aren't even supposed to say its name. On one occasion a sumo wrestler fell asleep on me mid-interview (not literally, luckily). It was mid-summer and he was sleepy after lunch.

In 2010 I got a job as the editor of a monthly business magazine in Tokyo and I was there when the March 2011



Yamabushi priest on a sacred Shugendo mountain

I enjoyed studying at KES, but I've come to appreciate some of the other important things I learned: on Welsh mountains with Frank Thorn, the rugby field with Andy Robinson, or extra-curricular theatre trips with Jill Ross. I am still in touch with a few friends, but would love to hear from anyone who remembers me, particularly those who live in Bath.

Life here is certainly quieter than in Japan and I actually quite miss the noise and chaos of Tokyo. But as I write I was just interrupted by an email from Japan asking me to write an article on the British Museum's collection of erotic woodblock prints. So it's not all dull.

Everyone tells me that reverse culture shock is much worse than the ordinary kind. There's some truth to that. One problem is that everyone treats me as if I'm from Bath (which I am). But, all the same, I'm still muttering to myself in Japanese and struggling not to bow when I meet people. Anyhow, as another traveller once said: "The person who finds his homeland sweet is a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place."

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earthquake struck. My colleagues and I watched the tsunami live on TV. Although there wasn't much damage from the quake in Tokyo it was terrifying, and the hundreds of aftershocks (not to mention worry about radiation from Fukushima) drove many of my foreign friends out of Tokyo. A few days after the quake, my wife took our two sons to her parents in western Japan. By that time the nuclear reactor buildings had started exploding. I'll never forget seeing the bullet train packed with grim-faced parents and children, all fleeing an atmosphere of incipient panic in Tokyo. I stayed behind to produce a special issue of the magazine, and (if I'm honest) to see what would happen if 30 million people in the metropolis decided Fukushima was too close for comfort. Mercifully, Tokyo stayed calm, although our local chemist did stock geiger counters for a while.

The first time I visited the disaster area was just two months after the tsunami. By then the immediate emergency was over, but the cleanup had barely begun. It's become a cliché, but the destruction truly was apocalyptic, the scale of the damage almost impossible to convey.

I have been back to northern Japan several times since the disasters, and I have been deeply moved by the resilience of the people who live there. The most recent time was just before I returned to the UK. I spent a week

with NHK (the Japanese BBC) for a documentary on the ongoing recovery. The crew filmed me taking pictures in Namie-cho, a town which was first hit by the earthquake, then by the tsunami, then made uninhabitable by the radiation from Fukushima.

My last salaried job in Tokyo was as an executive speechwriter at Nissan's Global HQ in Yokohama. Up to that point the biggest company I'd worked for in the previous decade had just 12 employees, so an organisation of several hundred thousand staff was a fun experience. The 90-minute journey each way on a Japanese commuter train was less so. (They really do have station staff to physically stuff people into the trains.)

At the time of writing my new career in the UK is just getting started. It should involve translation, writing and PR. My wife and I have just set up a limited company, www.wedojapan.com. Our two sons, Dan (6) and Joe (4) have now started school in Bath and are rapidly being Englified, or whatever the word should be. Predictably, they are adapting much quicker than their parents, and don't seem particularly culture-shocked. Their first language is Japanese so we are hopeful they will become bilingual. We are speaking as much Japanese as possible at home. I suppose it won't be long before they start correcting my Japanese grammar.

Being back in Bath has brought back plenty of memories from school.