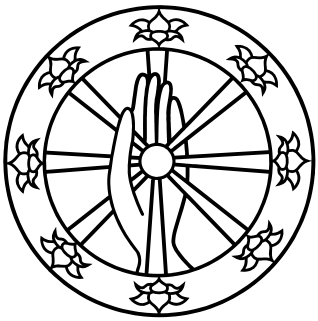
GEORGE SHARP

THE CHITHURST STORY

BEFORE & BEYOND

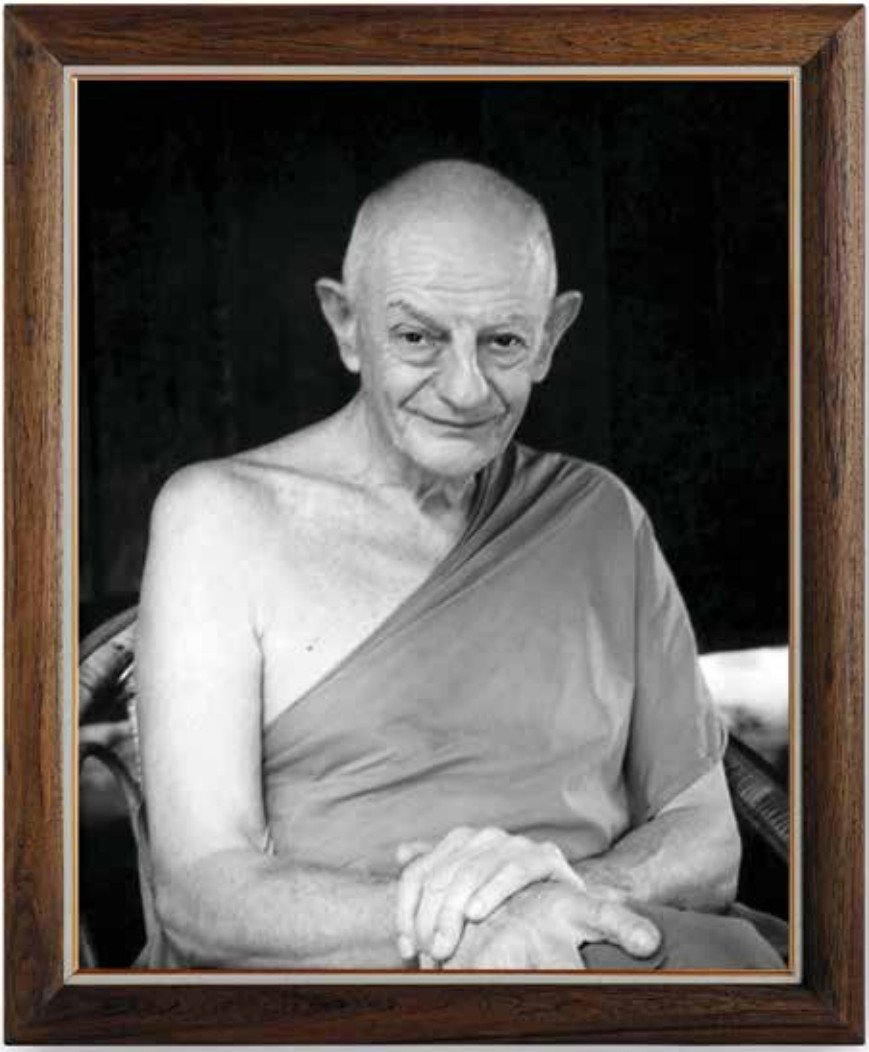
GEORGE SHARP



THE CHITHURST STORY

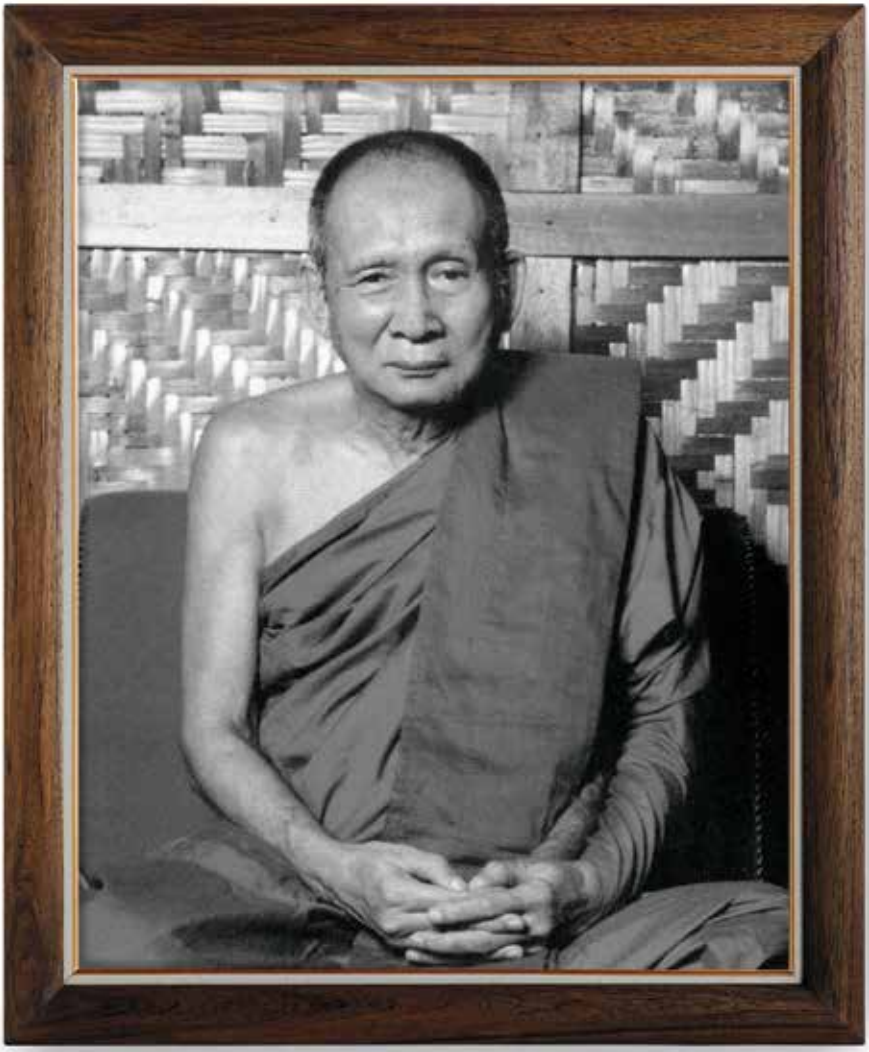
BEFORE & BEYOND

THE PHOTOS OF THE SENIOR MONKS ARE IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF WHEN THE AUTHOR FIRST MET THEM EXCEPT FOR EX-KAPILAVADDHO BHIKKHU.

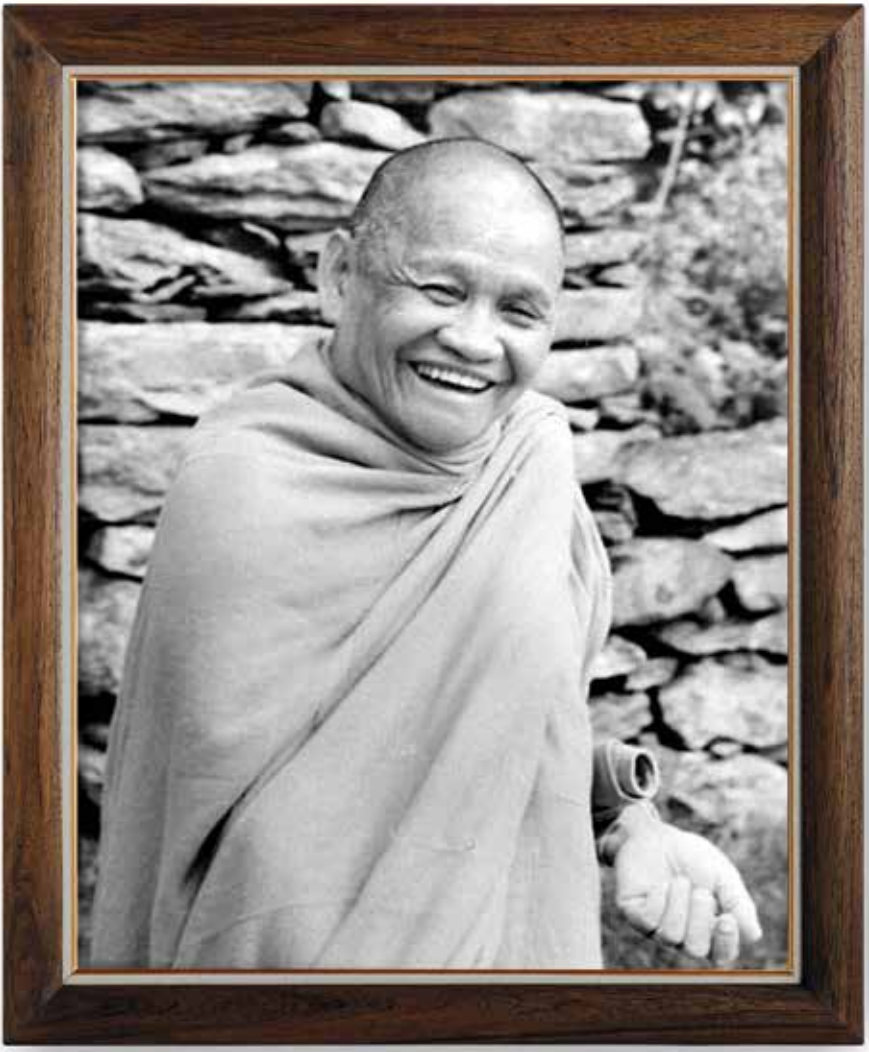


Ajahn Paññavaddho

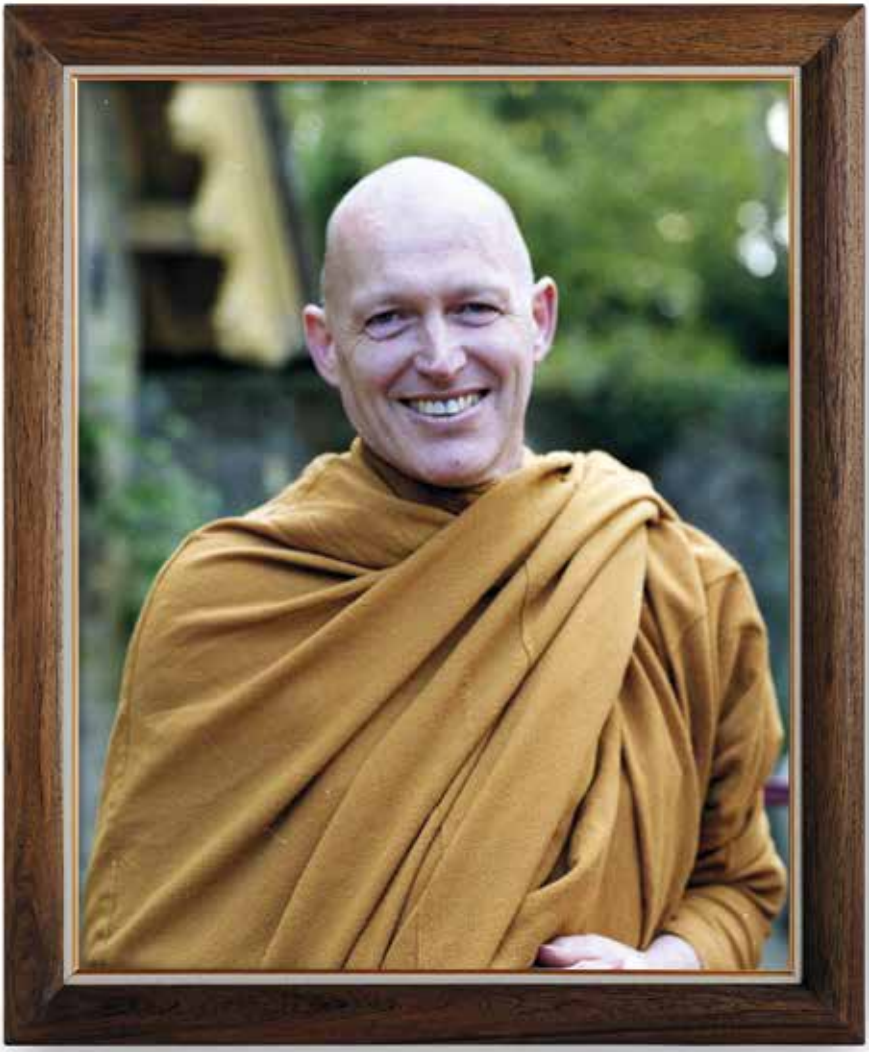
Ajahn Maha Boowa



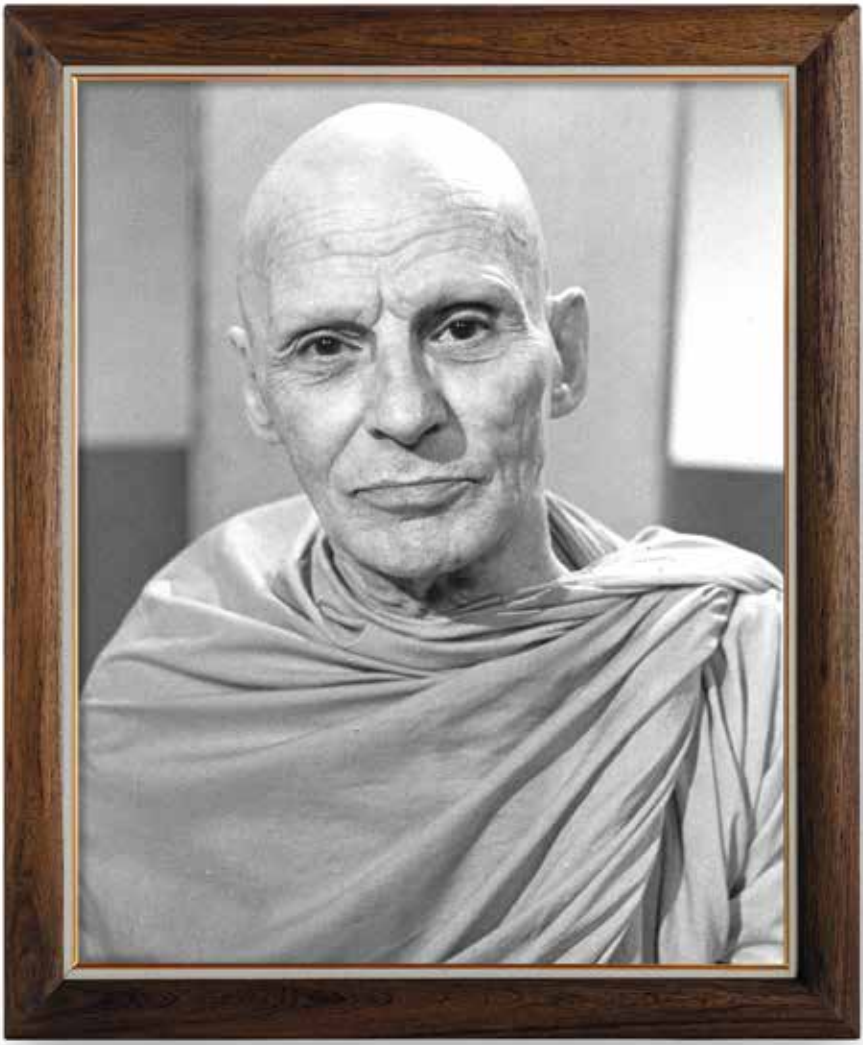
Somdet Phra Nanasamvara



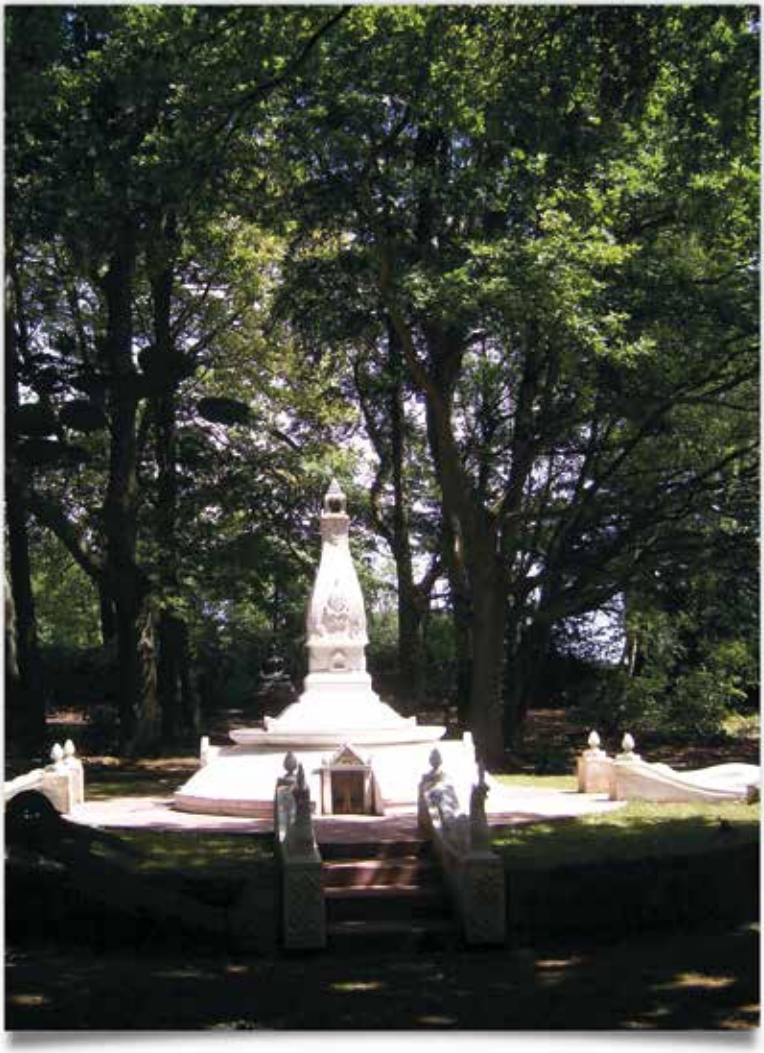
Ajahn Chah



Ajahn Sumedho



Ajahn Kapilavaddho



Bodhinyana Stupa in Chithurst

FOR LADDA

INTRODUCTION

BY LUANG POR SUMEDHO

I am very pleased with George Sharp writing down the history of the English Sangha Trust, the Hampstead Vihara and the time that I spent there. I lived for two years in the Hampstead Vihara, then came Chithurst Monastery and, later, Amaravati.

George has an incredible memory for detail – I'm very impressed because he remembers all the legalities and minutiae that were involved in the selling of the Hampstead Vihara, the purchasing of Chithurst House, acquiring of Hammer Wood and later, in 1984, the purchasing and development of the Amaravati Monastery in Hertfordshire.

He is the important person in this endeavour because when I met him in 1976 I knew very little of the Hampstead Vihara but was encouraged by Tan Ajahn Paññavaddho to contact George Sharp if I ever needed a place to stay while I was in London. I was travelling back to Bangkok – I flew from New York to London and I had to wait three days for a connecting flight to Thailand. During that time George would come to see me every evening and tell me of his intentions.

He was the first layman I met who, on my travels through America and then during my brief sojourn in England, seemed

to have some understanding of what was needed to establish a Theravadan Buddhist forest monastery.

In America, I travelled from California to New York and was quite open to possibilities of invitations to come and live, to come and establish this Thai Forest Tradition in the United States. Nothing really developed. Least of all was I expecting anything to happen during the three-day sojourn in London!

I was very impressed by George's understanding of what was needed, that we weren't going to be put in an impossible position of just becoming meditation teachers or writing newsletters. His whole emphasis was guided by the wisdom of Ajahn Maha Boowa and Ajahn Paññavaddho regarding the establishment of a forest monastery where the development of a bhikkhu could be made possible within the European setting. That impressed me so much that I encouraged George to come and visit Thailand and to meet Luang Por Chah because I thought that he should at least come and see what our life is like. Living in a city townhouse is different from living in the Thai Forest tradition. But if George came to Wat Pah Pong in Ubon, then he would see for himself: 'Is this what you really want?'

Of course, he came to Thailand a few months later. Luang Por Chah was always interested when I talked to him about what I had encountered in London, and about George Sharp, so I was very curious to see how Luang Por Chah would relate to him.

Luang Por Chah didn't go out of his way to pay much attention to George, who more-or-less had to fit into the basic monastic structure, which in those days was quite primitive. I think we all admired George's ability to – in his own humorous way – to be able to eat food from a chipped enamel basin and otherwise 'rough it'. He seemed able to not be offended by such things,

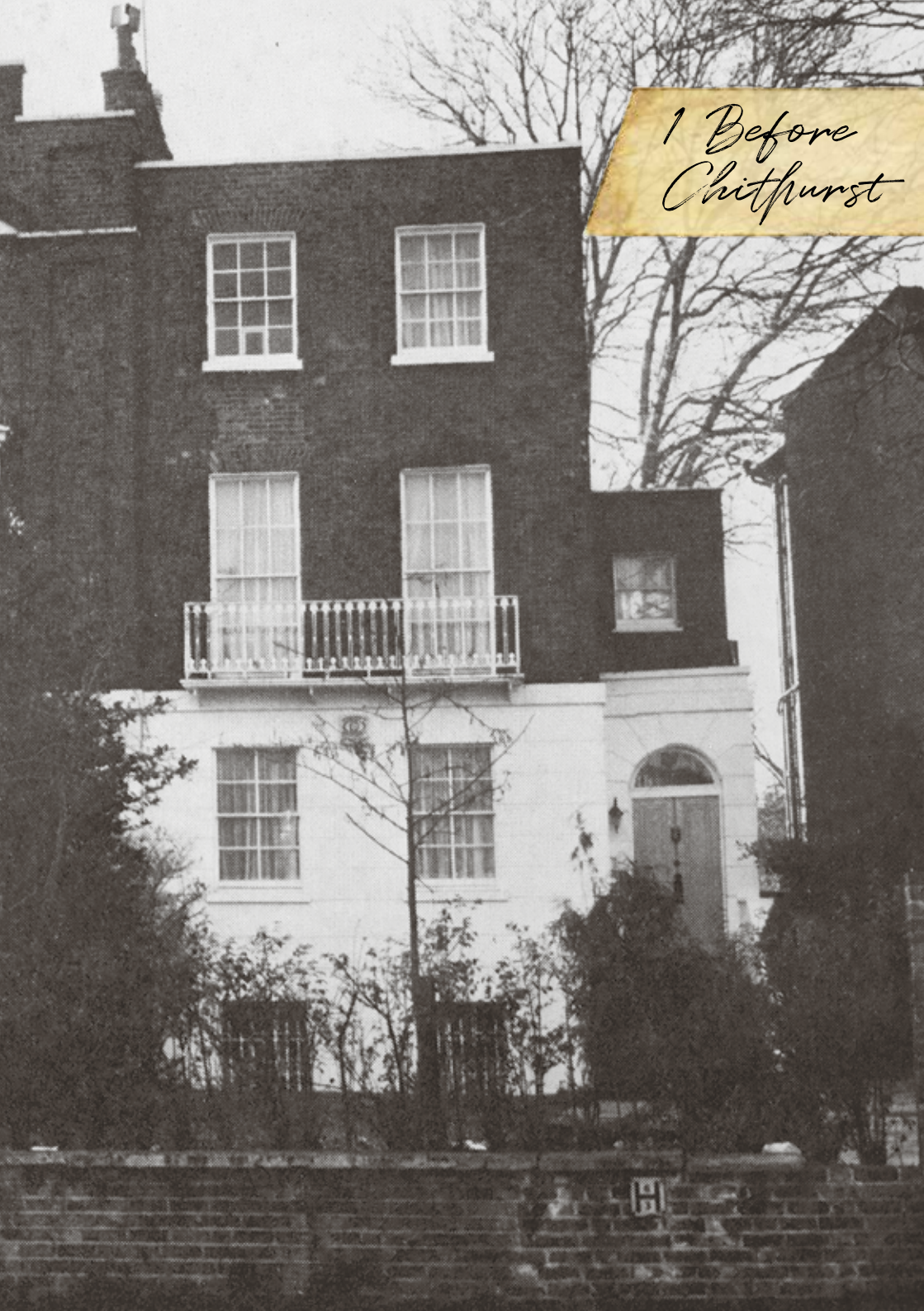
and when there was time to talk with Luang Por Chah, Luang Por seemed quite interested and had a very positive response to George. So when we were invited to England in May 1977, Luang Por Chah and I left Thailand and went to England.

All this is very nicely recorded. It is very rare that there is someone so clear – people in the West generally seek meditation teachers only because they are interested in learning to meditate. They aren't interested in the Buddhist religion so much, or in the traditional side but more on the meditative side.

I was thinking that Britain was very fortunate to have established the English Sangha Trust, which had already existed for twenty years by the time I arrived and had learned from its effort, its trials and errors, what was really needed to fulfil Kapilavaddho's original intentions.

I want to express my appreciation and gratitude to George Sharp who has been a loyal friend for all these years, from 1976 when we first met to the present time. And I want to express my appreciation to him for writing down this history which, I agree, is very important.

If George doesn't do it, there's no one else who really can do it.



1 Before Chithurst

A meeting of the English Sangha Trust in its early days, c. 1955. Kapilavaddho Bhikkhu is presiding. On the left is Peter Morgan who became Paññavaddho Bhikkhu.

IT IS DAY'S END, AUTUMN 1971.

I leave my office's glass tower overlooking Hyde Park and head down the steps of Knightsbridge Tube Station heading home. West Hampstead is not far and the train isn't especially crowded. What's it going to be tonight – listen to more music, watch another movie, dine out again?

I'm staring somewhat vacantly out of the window when a small poster displaying a large red word moves by as the train picks up speed. The word is MEDITATION.

That's interesting... didn't Hermann Hesse write about that in his book *Siddhartha*? A chap named Gotama, wasn't it? He meditated. Wasn't he a ferryman sitting by the river who got enlightened or something like that?

After ten years of depression, endless tricyclic anti-depressants that gave me a dry mouth, equally endless futile talks with psychiatrists, it was time to try something else. Meditation. Anything!

I looked up 'Buddha' in the phone book. He meditated.

The Buddhist Society told me there were only two people in Britain teaching meditation: one was Chao Khun Sobhana Dhammasudhi, a Thai monk whose place was in Kent. The other was ex-monk Kapilavaddho, now Richard Randall, whose place on Haverstock Hill, Hampstead was less than a five-minute drive away – I drove straight there.

Number 131 Haverstock Hill was the centre house of three. It had a sign at its gate displaying the name Dhammapadipa and gave times and dates of its activities. The front garden was mostly areas of crazy paving surrounding a rectangle of close-cropped grass, and like many Georgian terrace houses, stone steps led to its entrance.

The Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, Haverstock Hill, Hampstead, London.

I was shown into a small office to meet Richard Randall. I thought him to be in his late sixties – thin-faced, emaciated, wearing glasses, very bright-eyed and alert. He asked, 'What can I do for you?' I hadn't intended to say what I said, it just came out, 'I think I'd like to die please.' He replied, 'You've come to the right place.'

He told me to return on Sunday evening when he would be giving a talk.

The meeting room on the first floor was pretty full. Kapilavaddho (he was affectionately known as 'Kappi') stood on a dais. He had a good voice, quite deep and mellifluous, and spoke sometimes with emotion. I had never heard a talk like it. Actually, I didn't understand it all but I was absolutely riveted. It went through a series of fundamental observations about being alive and regarding oneself as being a person. The first observation was, 'there is suffering', and this was stated as being the beginning of everything that was to follow. Apparently, the cause of suffering was desire (whatever that meant). Then his talk was about there being a way out of suffering which involved a system of refining and controlling one's behaviour. It seemed all very deep and complicated.

Finally, he asked for any questions. I put my hand up and said, 'Is the Buddha saying that this thing I spend all my time trying to protect, the Self, doesn't exist? Is he saying that there isn't a Self?' Kapilavaddho said 'Exactly. That is what he is saying.'

For days after, I felt as if I had been injected with something which had the effect of disorienting, perturbing, disturbing and agitating me. It had really, really churned me up! It was as if the entire operating system of my mind was being overwritten and revised, and while that was going on normal perception and rationality were having to fight to maintain their place in the midst of chaotic underlying change.

There were two things in that talk that I knew all about: suffering and impermanence. But Non-Self? Nobody else had ever said anything like that to me!

You mean we are all empty phenomena just like the weather?!

No wonder it freaked me out. But I was absolutely sure it was true. What I can also tell you for sure is that from that time on I have never been depressed again.

Kapilavaddho explained the meditation technique to me. It was called vipassanā (insight meditation) as taught by Mahasi Sayadaw. From then on, I practised it one hour first thing in the morning and an hour in the evening.

My collection of Dhamma books grew. My wife and two young children were mystified by what I was doing, and not surprisingly so; I was like a man possessed. I was facing the most profound teaching, a system of psychological ethics which embraced the entire universe of the mind. It was philosophy and mental analysis vast beyond comparison. Throughout my life I had been a voracious reader of religion, philosophy, ethics – you name it, I'd read it. But never had I encountered anything approaching the sheer comprehensive scale of the teachings of the Buddha. In short, it was mind-blowing. I couldn't talk about it because I didn't fully understand it. It was so overwhelming.

A visit to the Pali Text Society bookshop, which in those days faced the British Museum, was to reveal the extent of the translated words of the Buddha. They ran to no less than 34 volumes, many of them the thickness of a brick. One set of books was dedicated to the discipline: the Vinaya rules of Buddhist monks. That alone ran to six volumes!

I had acute tunnel-vision trying to grapple with it all. I didn't know I should not try to do that, that meditation alone was enough to be getting on with. Right away I zeroed in on the ethical aspects and became so single-minded that I decided writing advertising commercials was 'wrong livelihood' and promptly quit a very well-paid job, not having another to move to.

That and the otherwise loony compulsiveness of my behaviour – spending so much time at Dhammapadipa, sitting in my glass-fronted office, bolt-upright with eyes closed in silent meditation where my children could look at me with wide and wondering eyes, not discussing any of it with my family – was incomprehensible to my wife. She told me she'd had enough and was leaving me, and promptly moved into an empty newly refurbished and furnished house I owned and invited her mother to join them. Poor Diane and the children. But the fact was, I simply couldn't explain what was happening even to me. I did understand it all later but by then it was too late.

Anyway, now there was even more need for me to keep earning.

Within days I was given one day a week's work as a Visiting Lecturer teaching graphic design. A few more days later I was offered a free West End studio and lots of work drawing storyboards for television directors at fees more than my previous freelance agreement. I was unstoppable; reading Dhamma, meditating, recording Dhamma and playing it back to myself when I was driving. It was just like I was 'on something', a drug. I had such energy and a phenomenal memory for everything I was reading. I even exercised with weights daily. I slept like a log and could wake up at any time I decided to. There's no explanation I can find for the effect Kapilavaddho's talk had on me. It was as if I had emerged into a different existence. Days were kaleidoscopic, rushing by, yet at the same time everything was clear and had an inexplicable purpose. I was convinced that in encountering the Buddha I was being swept along in the wake of the greatest genius the world has ever known.

Within weeks Kapilavaddho took ill. It seemed he was very ill.

I met and talked with his wife, Jacquie. I discovered that Jacquie had married Kapilavaddho the year after he had disrobed. I also met Alan James, a young man in his early thirties, formerly a samanera with Kappi. Both conducted meditation classes, helped with the administration and compiled the bi-monthly magazine *Sangha*. Jacquie was also the Company Secretary of the English Sangha Trust

I had little interest in how things worked at Dhammapadipa, much preferring to meditate on my own with Kapilavaddho as my teacher, but soon his condition worsened and he was taken to the hospital where he died a short time later.

News of his death reached me on the 19th of December, the night he passed away. After only three months of encountering the most profound inspiration of my life, I had lost my teacher and felt so shocked I sat up meditating all night long reflecting on what I had learned from his seemingly heroic efforts to bring the Sangha to England fifteen years earlier in 1956.

Apart from the short period after the ordination of the four bhikkhus that comprised the Sangha in 1956, and the creation of The English Sangha Trust whose Deed legally established its objectives and set out the way it was to be administered, there was no Sangha. It had fallen apart years before, leaving only Venerables Kapilavaddho and Paññavaddho. From then on they and every other bhikkhu 'incumbent' or teacher that followed had dedicated themselves to teaching the laity and generally doing what they could to spread the Dhamma. In short, Kapilavaddho's dream of establishing the Sangha in England had failed. That night I felt it to be a terribly sad thing. I made a vow to the dead Kappi: 'I'm young and strong and I will make happen what you could not bring about.'

Maybe I was being as idealistic and romantic as I think he was, but that vow turned out to be powerful stuff.

Alan James then became the teacher.

Of course, I didn't know how that happened, whether he had applied for the post and been accepted, or by whom had he been accepted. But he seemed friendly enough. I offered to help out and he welcomed my offer. So began my regular association with the workings of Dhammapadipa.

I took on minor jobs at first, attended to them with my customary vigour, and was subsequently given increasingly more responsibility until I was made Secretary of the Trust. This took me to meet the Directors. I don't recall all their names but the chairman was Maurice Walshe. Now he was an interesting man. I learned that he had been with the Trust from the beginning in 1956 when it was formed. From reading the available minutes of meetings over that fifteen-year period, it seemed he had always been there taking care of things. He was an eminent scholar, deputy director of the Institute of Germanic Studies London University, Vice President of the Buddhist Society, and codebreaker at Bletchley Park during the war.

Although as company secretary I should have been made acquainted with the Deed of Trust, I was not. It was quite a while later that I came to understand why it was never referred to. I won't go into the many duties of a company secretary. Suffice to say that working with the most active director (Alan James) I prepared all board meetings, submitted agendas and was responsible for keeping full and accurate minutes. I went every evening, joined the hour-long meditation sessions, and talked with Alan quite a lot. He was highly intelligent and very well read in the Dhamma classics, which by that time I was becoming familiar with. I liked him and thought him a good teacher.

About that time, on a regular basis, I encountered two other young men who were to prove of long-lasting influence in quite different ways: Paul Hendrick and Gerry Rollason.

Paul, who was 20 years younger than me when we first met at Hampstead, was to eventually ordain and become Ajahn Vimalo. Gerry Rollason was to become the ever-present stalwart at the very heart of the workings of those days in Hampstead during the 1970s. I don't know what we would have done without him.

Gerry was already there when Paul and I arrived about the same time. He and I began taking solitary meditation retreats. In the garden at the back of Dhammapadipa was a brick-built block of three meditation cells. There was a covered walkway and a wooden meditation hut. Each cell was only large enough for a single bed, a chair and small table. The doors were of obscured glass. They were available for solitary retreats with one meal a day and a single meeting with the teacher. Gerry Rollason was the cook, and a very good cook he was too, providing varied and delicious food. The practice was simple, demanding and excruciatingly boring. Every sensory contact was to be noticed and labelled for what it was; touch, taste, sound, sight, smell. I booked a three-week retreat.

I didn't bother to try and work out what it might do for me, I just settled down to do it with unrelenting vigour, hour after hour, day after day. Meetings with Alan were short because I had no questions. It went on like that for eighteen days, then after having the midday meal, I slumped back against the wall and said,

'Bugger this for a game of soldiers!'

A black cat crossed the glass of the door. Appearance, disappearance! A tingle ran through me. I stood up, opened the

door and looked out. It was raining heavily, there in front of me was a giant tree and it seemed to me that I knew all about that tree from the tip of its leaves to the tip of its roots, and from that moment everything was perfect all the time. There was nothing to criticise, nothing to want. Perfect. It stayed like that for four days. Practice ceased. Sitting still was fine, walking up and down was fine, the rain was fine. The food was just food, sometimes delicious, sometimes not to my taste, it didn't matter which. When I slept I woke with bed sheets undisturbed. It wasn't bliss, it was just total contentment.

Then it went away as swiftly as it had arrived and I wept. I sobbed as if I had lost a lover. All the ordinary craziness of my mind had returned, but at least I thought I'd had a glimpse of what the Buddha was talking about.

By then it was 1973 and dramatic change arrived in the shape of two young medical doctors: Michael Clarke and David Jones. They were in their early thirties, engaging, charming and very personable. I can only describe them as enthusiasts who had the Buddha's teaching in their sights and they were going to hunt it down to the end. Alan James seemed to take to them right away. They were his peers both in age and education and they certainly shared his enthusiasm for the *vipassanā* practice. What they talked about confused me somewhat, leaving me suspecting that they had in mind some kind of quick fix, a shortcut to enlightenment maybe. But whatever was at work was inspiring them all to very vigorous practice.

I don't wish to be disparaging but their talk of striving to attain the stages of stream-winner, once-returner and never-returner did not converge with anything I had learned from reading (say) *The Middle Length Sayings* or *The Path of Purity*. I coined the phrase

the 'Twofold training' to categorise their approach, describing the shift of attention and interest from the Threefold Training of sīla, samādhi, paññā to simply that of samādhi and paññā.

The hugely influential Path of Purity sets out the teaching in three parts: sīla, samādhi, then paññā. It makes it quite plain that the foundation of any possibility of attaining enlightenment is sīla. The Buddha himself made this clear by establishing the 227 rules of the Vinaya, following this by setting up the fortnightly recitation of those rules by a full assembly of bhikkhus (Pāṭimokkha), together with a requirement for bhikkhus to confess the breaking of those rules. These can, for some or even many, be onerous duties. And so it was that shortly after the Sangha was formed here in England in 1956 all attempt to maintain such strict adherence faltered then ceased to be. As a result, the Trust was to install, over the years, several new monks who were subsequently discovered to be sexually active. One was exposed as a sexual predator whose interest in young men who frequented Dhammapadipa led to one committing suicide on account of his abuse: a story which was featured in major articles in *The Guardian.*

When the act of teaching of Dhamma becomes the very reason to ordain it is hardly surprising that the Vinaya comes to be forgotten, not-to-say ignored and even relegated to the status of becoming regarded as a kind of archaic remnant. But at that time, this was just my own rather not-very-well informed and uncertain view of what was happening and I made no effort to express it. None of this was apparent to the regular meditators and those who came to listen to Alan give his talks. In telling of these events I don't seek to give a full account of what was happening at Dhammapadipa. It is far from my intention to do so.

All I seek to do is to explain as accurately as I can those conditions which led to a sea-change in the life of The English Sangha Trust which was to return it to fulfil its original objectives. It was, however, this energetic flux of opinions and actions at the level of leadership that gave rise to what eventually brought about what happened.

During this time, I was appointed to a directorship of the Trust. I was then both a Director and Company Secretary. Michael Clarke and David Jones continued to be a significant presence and it was clear to me that Alan placed a lot of trust in them. When Alan and Jacquie decided to take a holiday in Thailand, Alan announced that in his absence Michael Clarke would take over as teacher. They departed on holiday and a short while of normality ensued before there came a truly dramatic change. Both Michael and David decided to ordain and become monks.

Both of them were extremely clever men. They didn't make that decision without a jolly good reason. It wasn't a mere gesture on their part, that much I realised. What was their reason? I had no idea.

During this time, I decided to look at the original Deed of Trust Kapilavaddho had drawn up in 1956. That was a revelation to me. It is quite long and detailed, but there is a clause which runs to only a few paragraphs stating the objects of the Trust. There is no mention of teaching or spreading the Dhamma or involvement in any activity other than providing land, buildings and every other requirement to enable a Sangha to function in the way originally laid down by the Buddha. It is that clear. It states no other objective.

I began to imagine that Michael and David might have come to realise that it is only when a Sangha is created in a new country

and begins to function according to its own time-honoured rules that the possibility of fully understanding what it was that the Buddha had created, and why he had done it in that way, would be revealed. But I was to be sorely disappointed.

Once in Thailand, David decided not to ordain. Michael went ahead and did so. He then promptly returned to Dhammapadipa in his new robes and gave a talk dedicated to making clear to us all why the possibility of establishing the Sangha in England was out of the question. He then went downstairs, disrobed and has not been seen since. I felt sorry for him, but at least he was smart enough to recognise how deluded he was and then got out of the morass as swiftly as he got in.

What Michael Clarke had inadvertently done for me in the midst of all this madness, was to direct my attention to the object clauses of the Trust. This, I decided, is what we should be doing. If we don't do that then let's give up the whole thing. I was terribly hurt, I was angry, I wanted to take them all by the scruff of the neck and grind their stupid faces into the ground.

I called a meeting of the Board. There was only one item on the agenda and that was my reading out to them all the object clauses of the Trust they thought they had been serving.

The original Objects from 1956 read as follows:

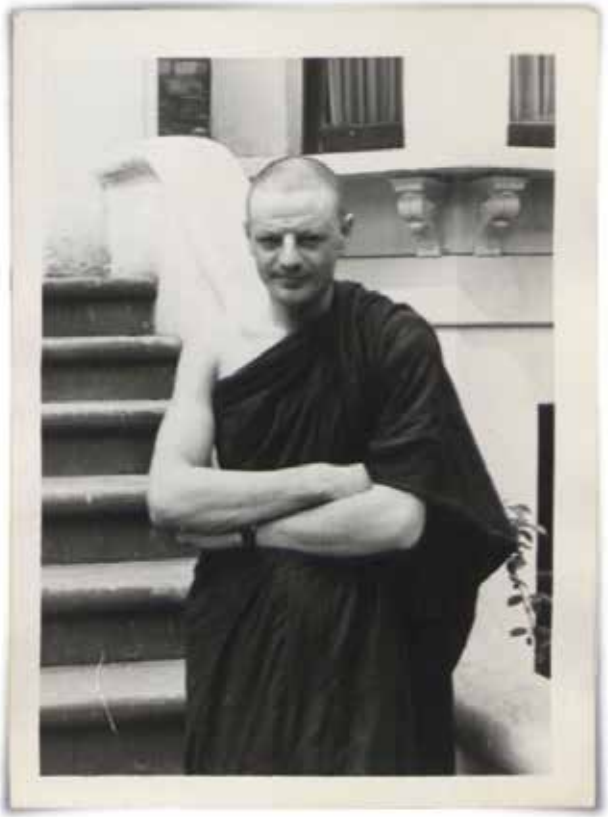
'The objects for which the Company is established are to promote and further the teaching of the Buddha (Buddha Sasana) in the United Kingdom by the provision maintenance and support of establishments as residential centres for Theravada Bhikkhus and such other persons as may be designated by the Sangha who have undertaken the Rules of Training (Sikkhāpada), and to accommodate, maintain and support aged and necessitous followers of the Buddha Sasana.'

Having made that quite clear to them all, I said,

'Anyone who can't vote for these being carried out should resign.' Everyone resigned except Maurice Walshe. It didn't take long before Alan James and his wife departed and the two houses on Haverstock Hill were empty save for the presence of a caretaker. Dhammapadipa was closed down. It was no more, and I didn't know what to do but reach out for help.

Whoever it was who led me to write to Ajahn Paññavaddho and seek his help I cannot recall (it was probably Freda Wint) but it was to guide and shape all that was then to come about. When I told Paññā what I had done and that I had closed the place down he was delighted. The next thing he urged me to do was to stop publishing the magazine *Sangha*. I did so immediately.

He then began to write to me weekly and at length, explaining in detail the life of a monk and the workings of a forest monastery and why it functions in the way it does. His teacher, Ajahn Maha Boowa, always referred to him as Ajahn Paññā or simply Paññā. It soon became plain to me why all the aspirations of Kapilavaddho had come to nothing: he and all those who followed his wake here in London had undergone no proper training under the guidance of one who had actually attained the highest understanding by living the life of a bhikkhu as laid down by the Buddha. This life involved keeping the Vinaya, the rules of training, meeting with peers once a fortnight to recite those rules and living on alms food gathered daily by walking on *pindapāta*. Instead, their only imperative had only been to teach. Teach what exactly? What exactly did they know beyond what anyone can find in books? Paññā's letters laid it all out, made everything clear. He too had followed that facile and futile path in London for five years before deciding that he should seek a



Ven Paññavaddho, who became the sole English Sangha Trust Bhikkhu incumbent after Ven Kapilavaddho disrobed in 1957.

proper teacher and then had the luck to find Ajahn Maha Boowa who *really* knew what he was talking about.

I was astonished that from the very beginning no one had sought to do something as basic as reading the objectives as set out in the Deed of Trust and then seek advice from a leader of an established Sangha with an unimpeachable reputation as to how this could best be implemented. What, it seemed to

me, had clouded the whole enterprise from the beginning was the desire to spread the Dhamma, and this was pursued despite the fact that the objects of the Trust never mention it. It is like everybody turned into Buddhist versions of Jehovah's Witnesses and, having experienced a glimpse of salvation, then forgot what they should really be doing in order to spread the glad tidings.

Ajahn Pañña knew that he now had the opportunity to guide events and to some extent control them because I was ready to follow his advice without question. All I had to do was keep the two houses on Haverstock Hill ticking over which was actually quite easy because of the presence of a housekeeper who did an excellent job, occupying the basement flat of 129 Haverstock Hill. And Gerry Rollason, that devoted giver-of-help and great cook, lived in the third floor flat of Dhammapadipa. I made daily visits and ensured they had essential supplies and got the money we'd agreed.

I learned that Ajahn Pañña, Ajahn Maha Boowa, and Bhikkhu Cherry were coming to London when Freda Wint (who I barely knew at the time) rang to ask if I could receive them all at Dhammapadipa. Of course I said yes, but it was pretty short notice. The first thing I did was call Gerry Rollason, tell him what was happening and ask him to move in and cook for our guests. Without hesitation, he agreed. Next, I went to see people I knew who made props for movies. I made drawings for them of a high chair, a medium-high chair, and a bench, all suitable for men sitting in the lotus posture. They had two days to deliver. Our cleaners were put to work and money made available to Gerry to pay for all his shopping needs. Two days later the lotus-seats were on the platform in the meeting room. The high one was Thai red and the others Thai green. I made no effort to publicise

the visit, nor did I arrange for them to be met and transported. Freda did that.

They arrived walking barefoot and continued to do so throughout their stay, adding nothing to what they would have worn in Thailand despite the fact that here it was cooler than a Thai winter at dawn.

I had to go to work every day so was only able to be with them in the evenings when the place was always packed with visitors arriving to hear Ajahn Maha Boowa give a talk.

While attending one of those talks, I found out why Ajahn Maha Boowa had a reputation of being both feared and disliked. At question time, a lady who was a known Buddhist scholar posed a complex question which I recognised as being from the high doctrine called *Abhidhamma*. Ajahn Boowa responded to it by saying, 'You are like someone who keeps chickens and eats the chicken shit instead of the eggs.'

The ostensible reason they had come to London was to meet with Bhikkhu Cherry's mother on her birthday. Maybe that is right, but maybe it was because (as I was to learn later) Ajahn Maha Boowa had been learning English and wanted to experience the West. Then again, it might have been that Ajahn Pañña wanted to check me out. Perhaps it was all three reasons. I have no idea.

I didn't get to talk with any of them much at all. Late one evening I asked Ajahn Maha Boowa, 'What do you think I should do now?' He answered, 'Wait for the right bhikkhu to come along.'

So that was it, and then they were gone.

I'm not clear on many details but I think Gerry remained after that in the flat above the meeting room. Certainly, he was

Ven.Paññavaddho with Ven. Ajahn Maha Boowa during their visit to London in 1974

around when I got a telephone call that was to change absolutely everything. It was from Ajahn Sumedho. He said that Ajahn Paña had given him my phone number and that I would offer assistance when in London. He told me he was at the Thai Temple in Wimbledon which was pretty crowded and short of room, and he had three days to wait before catching a Thai Airways flight to Bangkok. I sent a car to pick him up and bring him to the Hampstead Vihara.

Many years later he was to tell me of a vision he had had whilst meditating in a cave in Northeast Thailand. In this vision, he was opening a door and entering a narrow corridor. At the far end, a sharp-faced man appeared and he felt very afraid. Then a voice

said to him, , 'Trust this man.' This was exactly how we were to meet, in the entrance corridor of Dhammapadipa, a long narrow hall with him entering from the street and me emerging to greet him from the office. But for me at that time, he was just another monk to look after whom I knew nothing about.

Gerry Rollason was there to feed him. The place was properly looked after and I had nothing to worry about. I stopped by every evening after work to talk to this American monk and we got on together very easily and fell into long conversations which were to reveal many mutual interests and concerns. He told me of his recent travels through the States whilst holding a keen interest in somehow returning to the West. This interest was influenced by stories of communist insurgents entering Thailand from neighbouring Laos, then a country dominated by that regime, together with stories of monks being singled out for horrific attacks. He said he'd even thought of being able to save Ajahn Chah by being able to move the Sangha to the West. People eager to receive him in America were already well-funded and established teaching centres headed by widely regarded lay teachers, none of whom expressed any interest in supporting Sangha. All they were seeking were monks who, like Ajahn Sumedho, were Westerners and came with impressive credentials. For my part, I gave him a potted history of the English Sangha Trust's failure to actually do what it had set out to achieve and why I had brought it to the point of closure hoping that a new and proper start could somehow be made.

Before departing to catch his flight, Ajahn Sumedho invited me to come to Thailand to meet his teacher Ajahn Chah and explain to him what I was seeking to do. I had never heard of Ajahn Chah, but having met Ajahn Maha Boowa I guessed Ajahn

Chah could be a forest monk of similar calibre. But I didn't know. I thought Ajahn Sumedho was a serious monk committed to the forest life who knew his stuff, and better still, Ajahn Paññā approved of him. Could I go and check it out? Yes, I could do that. The key consideration was the quality of the monks I would be dealing with, their reputation and standing, and the kind of monasteries they had developed. Beyond that, I might well have been standing at a craps table with dice in my hand.

Please understand that at that time I had absolutely no understanding of what was unfolding before me.

Following the visit of Ajahn Maha Boowa, I met with Freda Wint. I went to see her at her home in Parktown in Oxford and was impressed by her quick intelligence and ever-present mischievous humour. Unlike me, she knew Ajahn Maha Boowa and Ajahn Paññā firsthand and had been many times living in a forest in the outer reaches of Thailand, meditating under their guidance at a time when the very notion of so refined and educated an English lady doing such a thing would have been quite astonishing. I invited her to become a director of the Trust and she accepted. The second most important contact I made was Geoffrey Beardsley. I can't quite recall how I came to meet with him. Maybe Ajahn Paññā led me to him, I don't know. Geoffrey turned out to be one of the most important people to figure in the whole enterprise. Why? Because he was a solicitor, a committed Buddhist, and his ever-available legal expertise was to prove invaluable again and again.

It seemed that the best time for me to visit Thailand would be in December when it would be cooler. All I had to go on was the address of Ajahn Chah's monastery: Wat Pah Pong near the town of Ubon Ratchathani in Northeastern Thailand. There was

only one place for me to go and that was to Stanfords in Covent Garden, where every map of the world anyone could wish to find could be found. Surprisingly there were very few maps of Thailand. The best available was an American map which showed every detail I needed. However, having bought it, I was never to need it.

Freda Wint had booked me into the Bangkok YMCA. But that was not the least she had done. Going down to breakfast the first morning I was handed a message which declared itself to be my 'itinerary'. It was delivered to me by someone called Khun Ying Sermsri, a very small lady dressed all in black who emanated great energy and decisiveness. She was like an army general. Everything, including the traffic in Bangkok, melted before her. She drove through Bangkok like Steve McQueen on a bad day. She also spoke perfect English and translated for me when meeting a monk whose name was Somdet Phra Ñāṇasaṃvara. I had no idea who he was or why I was to explain to him what I wanted to do. But I did explain and he was nice and that was that occasion done with. I had no idea that he was the monk in charge of foreign affairs and was soon to become the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand.

I boarded a plane Khun Ying Sermsri had booked, going to who knows where, and late in that day with twilight rapidly descending I found myself at the entrance to a forest. Khun Ying Sermsri said that because she was female she couldn't go further and I must go on my own. In the gathering darkness, I trudged up that forest track until I saw the light of a candle shining in a darkened building. I entered. To my right was a row of figures all seated, monks scarcely discernible in the gloom, and from the darkness beyond came a deep American voice saying, 'Good evening.' It was Ajahn Sumedho.

We sat talking in the gloom for a while before I was shown to my kuti. I was so excited I slept little and was up and about before dawn to find the monks preparing themselves for their alms round in the local village. Why I decided to follow them bare-footed just as they were I cannot recall, but it was not a good idea. For me walking behind them was excruciating to my tender feet. But what I was to see was absolutely enchanting. The sun was low and an early morning mist lay over paddy fields which stretched out beyond the track. A film director with all the resources of Hollywood could not have captured something more beguiling, romantic and inspiring than my walk to the poor little village of Bung Wai which was to culminate in my seeing a row of women, together with their children, on their knees beside the track holding up their offerings of food to the monks. It was an image so beautiful tears came to my eyes.

Back at the monastery, I witnessed the carefully choreographed way bhikkhus set about the meal. Their bowls were set before them with their lids on. Chanting began that I imagined being a blessing for the gift of food, followed by the removal of the lid and a short contemplation of its contents before beginning the solitary meal of the day. Noting every detail of their lives was important to me. I wanted to see for myself how the support of a properly constituted Sangha might prove to be so radically different to what had taken place with the English Sangha Trust for the past twenty years. It all was to become clear that very afternoon. All the bhikkhus and samaneras were hard at work on a wide variety of tasks which had been assigned, agreed and shared. For example: digging a well, roofing a kitchen or a kuti, dyeing robes, controlling vegetation or gardening – it was a long list. They did these things for specified periods every

day without fail before preparing themselves to meet together for a period of chanting, followed by meditation before listening to a Dhamma talk usually given by the Abbot. Go to bed. Sleep. Wake at four in the morning. Meet to meditate, then prepare for the alms round. To summarise, their days required a single word: discipline – persistent, ordered, unremitting discipline.

It was all explained to me by my American guide, Bhikkhu Pabhakaro, a big guy, capable, friendly, very practical, an ex-Vietnam helicopter pilot in his late-twenties who was really into the life. He almost seemed to be relishing it. He taught me more about monastery life in one afternoon than I could have hoped to learn.

Much later in my life, I was to see a phrase carved in stone there at Chithurst in England which reads:

'Vinaya discipline is the heart of the religion.'

What I realised then was, 'These guys don't need looking after, they look after themselves.' That realisation dispelled my greatest concern: 'What will I have to be responsible for when we actually create a monastery in England?' The relief I felt was palpable. So much had become clear to me during that single day spent in an emergent new monastery in that poor rice-growing district of Thailand, which was to be known as Wat Pah Nanachat. All anxiety I had formerly felt fell away to be replaced by a curious contentment followed by intense interest in what I was next to encounter. I felt absolutely no fear or uncertainty anymore. I was sure that what I had come to do would actually come about.

That conviction was irrelevant because it was not up to me to determine what would come about. It would be up to someone I had not yet met: Ajahn Chah, who was to be the most formidable,

remarkable, astonishing, beautiful, charming, engaging and brutally honest man I had ever met in my life. I decided that if I ever had the luck to meet a Buddha then he would be like him. Another way of my recalling meeting him was that I was like Carlos Castaneda encountering Don Juan.

On my second morning, Ajahn Sumedho took me on a cross-country walk to meet his teacher, crossing five miles of flat land and paddy fields with not a soul in sight. Halfway there we sat down to rest and out of nowhere appeared a man bearing a tray of drinks for us. Where the hell did he come from? It was like someone did a magic trick! Then we were in a forest glade where stood a thatched kuti with a paved area before it, and standing there was a small rather portly monk. Ajahn Sumedho said 'This is my teacher Ajahn Chah.'

Ajahn Chah said something to me which Ajahn Sumedho translated. 'He says you look happy.' Ajahn Chah then gave me a can of 7Up and said nothing more.

I then became a visitor waiting to be shown where I was to stay. Nobody seemed to know where that was likely to be. No arrangements appeared to have been made. After a while, a monk led me to an apparently deserted and rather dusty building and organised a thin mattress for me. Another monk came by offering a candle. And so the gradual acquisition of essentials went slowly on until I had a final, most important item, a mosquito net. It took quite a while to get me settled.

I slept longer than usual. On waking, I made my way to the largest of the monastery buildings which I assumed to be the place where monks were likely to assemble. One came out to meet me and I was led to a patch of bare earth on which had been placed a threadbare mat to sit on. Nearby lurked a couple

of skinny feral dogs. Another young monk brought a heavily chipped enamel bowl containing scraps of food: a small banana, a few leaves, a clump of sticky rice, a solitary and very small orange, all splattered with what I had learned to identify as fish sauce. He might as well not have bothered to bring it because I wasn't going to eat it. I thought I'd give it to the dogs. It did not occur to me that the very sparse welcome I was receiving was in any way unusual. I thought to myself that it is obviously a tough life in these forest monasteries. This is how it is. And on that basis, I had no cause to complain.

On the second morning, Ajahn Chah took me with him to a Dana before a wedding where he unwound some string and went around joining all the monks together before they started chanting. At the end of the ceremony, holding a leafy branch he splashed water over everyone whilst chanting something. Then, as he walked passed me, he remarked, 'All this has nothing to do with Buddhism but the people like it.' To this day that still remains an important part of the culture at all his monasteries. The people like it. That's why they do it.

I did get to talk to him for an hour or so every day. He didn't say much but obviously listened intently to what I was to tell him about the property we had in Hampstead and the kind of accommodation to be available in the beginning should he decide to check out the possibility of creating a Sangha there. I made it clear that I intended to provide a forest site out of London capable of becoming a proper monastery, one not dissimilar to those I had seen so far. Ajahn Maha Boowa's visit to London had proved that lively interest and support was already present and that Ajahn Pañña heartily approved of the changes I sought to make and was being a great help.

I spent most of my time with Ajahn Sumedho, getting to know him, talking things over. I stressed to him that the EST's primary interest was not in teaching. To what extent the Sangha wished to do that would be up to them. When we had a new board of Directors none of us would be serving for merit, reward, or even to have their expenses paid. It would be an honour to be in a position to provide for the Sangha's needs and assist its growth and stability.

At that time the foundations of a new temple were being laid at Wat Pah Pong and each afternoon a chain gang of bhikkhus and other helpers worked passing buckets of earth to pile on the growing platform on which the temple would be erected. When I approached, Ajahn Chah signalled to me to help out and join the bucket-passing line. I took off my shirt and did so. It did not occur to me that the scant nature of my welcome was Ajahn Chah's way of checking out the level of my personal pride or conceit. Actually, I just felt pleased with being regarded as one of them.

With Ajahn Chah I was trying to do what I do with everyone I meet; make a judgement about him, form an opinion, fix some kind of recognisable shape and form to his personality – in other words, get to know him. All such efforts with Ajahn Chah were to no avail. Many years later I was to encounter what the Buddha had to say about one who had broken the bonds, one who was free, 'He is trackless, like a bird in the sky.' And that is just how it was. On my return to England when asked by someone what Ajahn Chah was like, all I could think to say was, 'He's walking sunshine. He is not my friend, but he loves me.' I could never summarise him closer than that.

Whilst Ajahn Chah never tried to teach me anything, I was most interested to know of his method. I was told it combined the recitation of the word 'Buddho' with attention on breathing. I asked him about it. 'What is the purpose of Buddho? What does it mean?' His answer was short and sweet: '*mano viññāṇa dhātu*', which means 'mind consciousness element'.

Sometime later, when Ajahn Sumedho first introduced the sound of silence into his teaching, I gradually came to recognise that applying attention to the sound of silence was the same as applying attention to mind consciousness element. They are 'Buddho', the one who knows – awareness of mind.

As the years went by, I began to practice so as to keep attention on this element and it became the home of my attention – the place where attention returns all on its own, quite unbidden. Even more years further on, I had the pleasure of spending the day with Ajahn Preecha, who from the age of eight had been a servant and assistant of Ajahn Chah. He told me many stories of the great man. Before we parted I asked him a question. I said, '*Mano viññāṇa dhātu* is the home of my attention. It always returns there on its own. So now what?' To which he replied, 'You're already home, why do you want to go anywhere else?'

After a few days at Wat Pah Pong, it was time for me to go to see Ajahn Maha Boowa and Ajahn Paññā. Their monastery was 250 miles north and easily reachable on one hop by plane. But for some reason, I can't remember why I decided to get there over land. Nor can I recall quite how I did it. What I do know is that the trip went first from Ubon Ratchathani to Sakon Nakhon, then Nakhon Phanom, a lovely old town on the Mekong, and finally to Udon Thani, the town nearest to Ajahn Boowa's monastery.

There was a quite simple reason for me to go to Wat Baan Tard and also to invite Ajahn Sumedho to accompany me; that was to extend my invitation to England to embrace bhikkhus of both the order of monks known as Maha Nikaya (Ajahn Chah's sect) and the Dhammayuttika (Ajahn Boowa's sect). For me, this did not present itself as being a serious problem – but I was wrong.

Traveling, mostly on foot, across the Mekong plain with a six-foot-four-inch tall American monk whose reputation as a senior disciple of Ajahn Chah had already spread widely through Thailand, let me glimpse the powerful impact his presence was to have on the people of rural villages in our path. How they learned of our coming I could not imagine, but we would arrive in forest glades in the morning where tables were already erected and laden with offerings of Dana.

I knew from our conversations how much he dreaded giving Dhamma talks, but there was no way he was going to duck giving one when faced with so many people from miles around gathered excitedly to hear him teach them Dhamma in Thai with an American accent.

Whilst walking one day, he asked me, 'How do you meditate? What's your practice?' I told him it was Asubha meditation, which is the meditation on the foulness of the body. It is designed to decrease our attachment to our bodies and decrease lust – you concentrate on an image of the body in various stages of decomposition, and then relate that image to your own body. Ajahn Sumedho said very firmly, 'You shouldn't be doing that George. You should be practising Metta (loving-kindness).' When I asked why he thought that, he replied, 'Because you are already averse, you do that kind of reflection quite naturally. It'll only make you more averse and critical than you are.'

Remarkably, I had no doubt he was quite right. Over the next few days I devised a practice which involved pictorial visualisation starting from a spot in the centre of the heart, slowly extending outwards from my body to room, house, street, town, country, the world and further, like a long slow zoom, going on and on to the limits of the universe, then slowly back again, along the way treating every living being to a love that warmed every atom of their bodies. I then did this twice a day, every day, for four years. And I have to tell you that I felt a lot happier. I never actually told Ajahn Sumedho that.

What I do recall in vivid detail is being in the old town of Nakon Phanom. I booked us into a hotel there and, on the first morning, I was up before dawn, heading for the great river: the Mekong.

In the darkness, I found a place to sit and await the sunrise. The slowly moving waters were grey and deep. At that point, the river was well over two-hundred metres wide. In the gloom, not a single boat was to be seen. Nothing moved. Then from its far bank arose the sound of music; marching music, the music of war, the music of heroism and triumph. Communism was waking up in a town in Laos across the river. Sleepy denizens were being inspired to rise and work for a glorious revolution by a military band whose principal clarinet was in serious need of a new reed.

The sun rose over the waters of the Mekong, almost blinding me for an instant before lighting up every detail of a great river upon which not a single boat dared move lest it is fired upon.

Such was the fear of communism in Thailand at that time.

As we moved north to the town of Udon Thani, a little more understanding was to dawn about the political and military threat that hung over the country. The main street was full

of shops, bars and clubs formerly frequented by the U.S. Air Force from its huge base nearby. The base was now closed and shuttered, never to be reopened again. The United States military forces had been ejected from Thailand and all that was left for us to see were portraits of GIs and their Thai brides left in the windows of photographer's studios, fading in the sunlight.

Finally, we arrived at Wat Barn Taad and there, once again, was the formidable Ajahn Maha Boowa whom nobody could ever ignore. Why that was so I was never quite sure, but it was. He was like that.

He too seemed to think that his personality was like that – seemingly aggressive, angry and assertive, direct to the point of rudeness. But what really lay behind his persona was revealed after I decided to tell him off for being quite rude to me, saying that his manner was not befitting a monk. His face broke into a wide smile as if welcoming my criticism and he spread his arms wide and said, 'I'm like this! This is my nature, this is what I'm like!' I just started laughing. What he said was so completely innocent and disarming it was funny, and he obviously thought so too.

That same day I was to discover yet another extraordinary aspect of his abilities before my first day in his monastery was out. It was late afternoon, approaching what we English call twilight. In England, twilight is quite a lengthy period of gradual darkening but I was not aware that in Thailand it is a very short period indeed. I had decided to take a walk in the forest without a flashlight and within minutes the narrow pathway through what I thought of as a jungle became hidden from me in darkness. I could see absolutely nothing save blackness. All around the sounds of the forest increased. Screams were

followed by crashing sounds and all manner of other noisy and disturbing events which I thought likely expressed what happens when animals seek to kill and eat each other. All I could do was stand still. Imagination was in overdrive and therefore fear was developing. After a long time standing helplessly in the total darkness came the dancing light of a torch carried by someone approaching me; someone talking in Thai and laughing as they walked. There can be no other explanation: Ajahn Maha Boowa (for it was he) had personally come to rescue me because he somehow knew I was lost in the forest without a torch! How he could have known of my predicament I had no idea, but he obviously did. Wow! I thought that was weird. And as he walked with me back to my kuti he was, I imagined, telling me off in Thai for being an idiot to venture into the forest at sundown without a flashlight.

My meetings with Ajahn Chah had left me with the realization that he was beyond my capability to assess or understand as a person. In that regard, Ajahn Maha Boowa was the same as him whilst being not at all similar. These guys were seriously different, not obeying any usual expectations as to how they should be or even how they might be. In their company, I was always without any clear understanding of who I was dealing with.

I got the impression that they operated from an understanding of what was happening in the world which was quite different from mine. But that did not imply that I could not work with them. Not at all. They were as rational as I was. No, the question for me was 'How do these guys understand things? What do they know that I don't know?' But they were clearly way out of my league and the gap between us was never to be bridged.

Ajahn Sumedho seemed to have disappeared. He wasn't at the meal in the Sala and I didn't know where his kuti was.

After the meal, I was to visit Ajahn Paññā's kuti for a chat with him before meeting with Ajahn Maha Boowa. I had two reasons for being there: the first was to renew and strengthen my friendship with Ajahn Paññā, the second was to deal with the question of there being a clear distinction, even separation, between the two orders of forest monks. Both Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Boowa had been influenced by the great Ajahn Mun, a wandering monk, a solitary forest-dweller, one who kept faith with the original teachings of the Buddha. It was he who had been the teacher of both Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Boowa, yet they remained separated by their respective ordinations. They belonged to the different groups or Nikaya. Nikaya is a Pali word for 'class' or 'group'. Ajahn Chah belonged to the largest group called Maha Nikaya and Ajahn Maha Boowa belonged to the Dhammayuttika Nikaya, (Dhamma = Buddha's teaching; Yutti = in accordance with). But I was well aware of what actually united them, it was the strict keeping of Vinaya – the discipline.

I found Ajahn Paññā in a kuti raised on stilts as they all were. Inside the kuti was a thin bed on the floor and a mosquito net surrounded by a chaotic jumble of drawings and instruments that one associates with a designer or engineer. I didn't expect that. He lived in the midst of personal clutter I could not have tolerated whilst living a life of strict discipline, order and mindfulness. He was quietly spoken, a kind and gentle person of great humility. We talked for a long time reviewing all that had happened since I had closed the Hampstead Vihara, and then we were both about to meet Ajahn Maha Boowa

One thing to be sure of with Ajahn Maha Boowa, he listened intently whilst Ajahn Paññavaddho translated everything I said.

I have the kind of ordered mind which belongs in a courtroom and I do not get woolly or in any way unclear when I have something to say, so I made it quite plain and simple that in inviting his monks to join in an effort to establish the Forest Sangha in England then the English Sangha Trust would expect all monks would belong to only one Sangha.

Ajahn Maha Boowa's response was quite emphatic; he was not prepared to tell any of his monks to join such a venture. He said that if any wished to accept then they must do so on their own account. I was disappointed but I had too much respect and admiration for him to find fault with his decision. The two ordinations were very firmly established independent conventions and that was that.

Later, when I asked Ajahn Chah what the difference was between him and Ajahn Maha Boowa, he replied,

'We are the same in Vinaya.' And that simple statement, for me, perfectly established all that mattered.

I could understand why Ajahn Maha Boowa was against giving his permission for any of his monks to join with Ajahn Chah's trial movement of Sangha to England. For him, it was a matter of preserving a greatly valued, hard-won and respected reputation. Ajahn Chah taught his monks about the importance of strict adherence to Vinaya somewhat differently. On the one hand, he urged that they 'let go' of attachment to anything at all, but on the other hand they should 'cling' to the keeping of the Vinaya rules of training because without the keeping of strict moral behaviour there can be no final understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. Ajahn Chah had told me that as far as the keeping of

Vinaya was concerned he and Ajahn Maha Boowa were the same.

But now, it was over. There at the monastery where my mentor Ajahn Paññña lived, I had said my piece and got my response from Ajahn Maha Boowa who was definitely not going to join this enterprise of mine. I flew back to Ubon and said goodbye to Ajahn Chah. I went home with a distinct feeling that despite all that had happened I had accomplished hardly anything at all. I didn't even expect Ajahn Chah to respond to my invitation.

It was somewhat of a surprise, three months later, to receive a message to say that Ajahn Chah was about to arrive accompanied by two monks: Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Khemadhammo. I knew I could deal with providing for three bhikkhus quite easily. Similarly, when Ajahns Anando and Vīradhammo arrived in July, all it took was a few phone calls to arrange things. As to the rest of what was to take place at Haverstock Hill? Well, that would be up to the monks to decide.

Their tenure began with daily walks with their bowls covered by their robes. This was called *pindapāta*, or the seeking of alms food. But since nobody in Hampstead knew of this convention, no food was ever offered to them. I decided to write to the Chief Constable of London to explain what these monks were actually doing every morning and what their motive was. I got a reply from his legal department saying that what the monks were doing was against the law. They were, he said, in breach of the 1824 Vagrancy Act. Having established that the act of seeking gifts of food in this way was illegal, I went to see a lawyer in Lincoln's Inn whose skills centred on matters such as this. I took with me books marked with passages where the Buddha gave instruction as to how monks must behave whilst seeking gifts of food. A week or more went by. Our lawyer carefully read

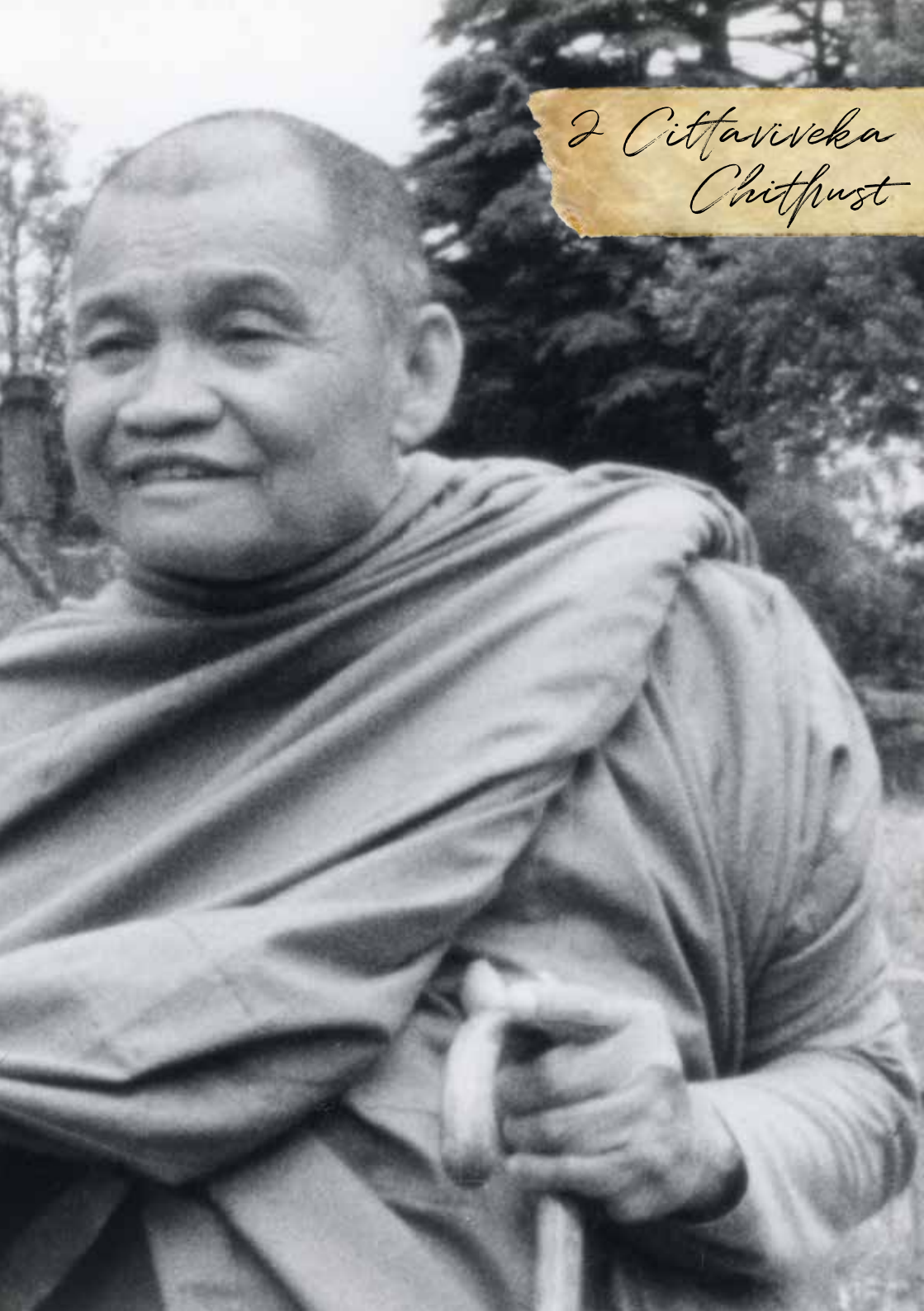
Alms-round in Hampstead, 1977. From the right: Ven. Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Khemadhammo and Samanera Jinavaro.

everything I had given him and he told me, with a big smile, that the Buddha had managed to pick a line straight through the middle of the Vagrancy Act of 1824 and emerged free of any fault. He was so delighted he almost clapped. I do remember his fee. It was a very substantial £400. In the year 1977 £400 was worth £2,341. That's a very weighty opinion. This document was entitled 'Opinion' and submitted together with our learned gentleman's credentials to the Chief Constable. No reply was ever received. *Pindapāta* was apparently quite legal.

I needed to catch up with and settle my own problems, so for quite a while I left them all to it whilst making sure money was available, money was banked and bills were paid. Then after

the four bhikkhus had been here nine months or so I went to see Ajahn Sumedho and asked him if he would like a holiday. Those were the days when talk of 'alternative technology', sus- tainability, zero-carbon Britain, free-range farms, organic farming and so on had entered the culture in a big way. The Centre for Alternative Technology is an eco-centre in Powys, mid-Wales, that had already been operating for a couple of years setting up and testing many entirely new ways of doing things. I had the feeling that this would interest Ajahn Sumedho, so I booked us a couple of rooms and we set off. My true purpose was to have him on my own for a few days so that I could find out whether his time in Hampstead had changed his intention to establish a forest monastery in the tradition of his teacher Ajahn Chah.

We explored the Centre, went for long walks every day, talked it over exhaustively, and finally agreed to go back and tell them all that we had decided to sell up and establish a forest monastery somewhere in the countryside.



2 Cittaviveka
Chithpust

Ven Kittisaro, Ven Sucitto, Ajahn Sumedho, Ven. Lakkhana a Ven Anañnabho.. Early days at Chithurst. Notice the Wisteria climbing up the walls, the gutters, and chimneys and conservatory.

THE CHITHURST STORY REALLY BEGINS early in the year 1978.

One sunny morning on Hampstead Heath when Ajahn Sumedho was walking his daily alms round, a solitary jogger came up to him and said, 'Hello. I've been reading about you in the local newspaper. They say you are forest monks. Is that so?' Ajahn Sumedho replied, 'Yes, that's how we best live, in forests. We are looking for such a place in the country.' The jogger was interested to find out more but, since they were on their alms round, it was not a convenient time to talk. Ajahn Sumedho invited him to visit the Vihara and more conversations followed in short order. The jogger, whose name was Paul James, then let Ajahn Sumedho know, 'I have a forest and I'm looking for people to look after it.'

Ajahn Sumedho told me of his remarkable meeting and suggested I check it out, giving me Paul's phone number. I called him and he agreed to drive me to his forest in West Sussex the following day.

We entered through a gate on the northern end of a forested area of some 110 acres near the village of Chithurst. Paul explained that it was not a natural forest but a failed commercial enterprise fallen into disuse and become overgrown. He wanted to restore it to health, something he did not have the resources to achieve on his own.

A slow traverse of most of that hilly woodland began. I was impressed not only by its scale but also by the diversity of its terrain. It is known as Hammer Wood and through its centre runs a stream fed from a spring a few miles away with a rain catchment area of about ten square miles. Over many thousands of years, the stream carved its way deep through the woods so that, at some points, the land falls away into deep precipitous

valleys. Despite its overgrown and untended nature where many acres were almost impenetrable, I decided that Paul's forest was beautiful and potentially ideal. But on its own, there was nothing I could do with it, so I suggested that the only way that his forest could be of use to the Sangha was if he gave it to them, and if he did this I would look to buy a big house as close as possible. The Trust would then undertake to ensure that eventually Hammer Wood will be restored to health and properly maintained.

To my surprise, within a very short period of time Paul had drawn up a Deed of Gift which I submitted to Geoffrey Beardsley, the Trust's director and solicitor who wrote twice to Paul stating that, once a deed of gift is legally enacted, it is impossible to undo. Despite the fact that Paul's gift was then worth at least £30,000, he did not hesitate to sign. For me, that settled the first question: location. The second question was, 'Where will the house be?'

That question was answered a week later. After a picnic in the woods with a friend, as we emerged from the gate on Moorhouse Lane, a lady living in the house opposite called out to me, 'Are you the new owner of the woods?' That lady, Mrs. Clarke-Hall, invited us in for tea. I explained the plan for the woods, but that it could not begin until I had found a nearby big house. She told me that there was a big house close by, not as yet on the market, but definitely for sale, and she knew its owner, a Mr. Hadley. At my request, she gave me his telephone number.

That evening, back at my apartment in London's Fitzrovia, I rang Mr. Hadley saying, 'Today I met Mrs. Clarke-Hall whom you know, and she told me you want to sell your house and land.' To which he responded, 'Thank you for calling me directly and not getting involved in local gossip!' It was a short conversation.

I was to see him at the house at 11.00 am the next day after Sunday morning service.

I reviewed every aspect of the venture. It meant selling our two houses on Haverstock Hill in Hampstead from which we expected to raise £120,000. The Trust had no debt, so the prospect of a mortgage did not trouble me. From my experience of Thai forest monasteries, I knew that I was not to be faced with managing the change of a large house in West Sussex into a working monastery, for I had seen many capable forest-trained monks at their daily work tackling a multitude of tasks, and how skilled, disciplined and energetic they are. The Sangha takes care of itself. What it needs to function is assistance of laity, gifts of money to be managed and spent at the Sangha's direction, gifts of food, robe material, work clothing and lay management of legal and financial matters affecting the maintenance of their monasteries.

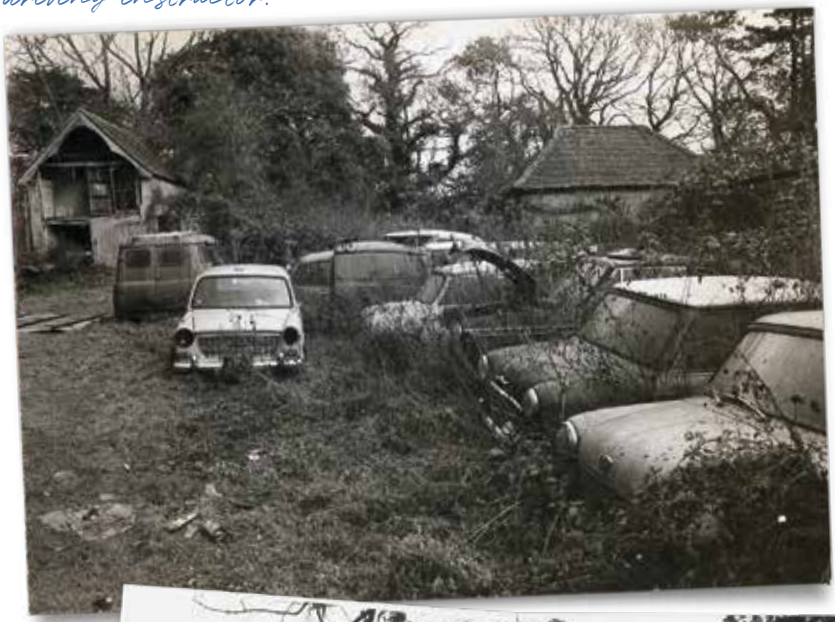
Nor did I have any doubt that opposition to the move could be ignored. I did possess, at that time in my life, an ebullient self-confidence often construed as arrogance, so this view may seem to be just that; but the fact was that the six-director board of the English Sangha Trust comprised me as Chair, Bhikkhus Sumedho, Vīradhammo, and Anando, also Geoffrey Beardsley, a dedicated Buddhist solicitor, and the widely respected Buddhist scholar Freda Wint. All of them were well acquainted with the Thai forest tradition and committed to the venture. In addition, I had been voted clear authority by the board to find and buy property I personally judged to be suitable. All anxious thinking done for that evening and looking forward to the morning, I slept well.

In those days I greatly enjoyed driving and had a comfortable car – a 3.5 litre v8 Rover. I welcomed the prospect of making frequent fifty-mile trips to Chithurst and back. Somehow, I had the feeling I had already found the Sangha's country home. Gunmetal grey was the sky and it was raining heavily as the Rover's tyres hissed their way down the A3 riding its tarmac, shifting water like an aquaplaning boat.

I was pleased to find that Chithurst House was scarcely more than a couple of hundred metres from the edge of Hammer Wood. When I turned into its drive, it was to reveal sights of quite astonishing neglect. Everywhere was overgrown, roofs of many outbuildings had collapsed, the main house looked as if no attempt had ever been made to repair any of its obvious defects. Abandoned and rusting cars seemed to be everywhere, lurking scarcely visible midst vegetation never to have encountered a scythe or a billhook. But there was much more to come.

A director of creepy movies would have been hard-pressed to create the experience that was to befall me that morning as I entered the hall of Chithurst House. Mr. Hadley greeted me in a most charming and welcoming manner, though I thought him somewhat nervous. It is difficult to describe the state of that hall. Imagine that over a period of thirty years or more you had kept every newspaper, magazine, and publication you ever subscribed to, bought or received, and begun storing them in carefully ordered piles in the hall of your house. Well, on the day I entered the house, the piles had grown higher than I am tall and almost entirely filled the hall, leaving a walkway through the middle scarcely more than a metre wide from the front door to the family's living room. It was the work of a most extraordinary hoarder. I have no recollection of being

Some of 30 cars abandoned in the grounds of Chithurst House, cars formerly used for Mr Hadley's business as a driving instructor.



This is the original side entrance to the house. It leads to the kitchen and larder, the back stairs, washroom, and the basement where the huge dry-rot blossom was found.

This window in the shrine room shows the ruin of a conservatory which was later completely rebuilt.

shocked or even much disturbed. All I remember experiencing was a keen and heightened interest which was to be promptly replaced by the pleasant domestic normality of meeting Mrs. Hadley, their daughter, and their dog in a spacious, carpeted reception room with a fire burning in the hearth.

Pleasantries over, it was time to talk business and Mr. Hadley was keen to do so. I asked, 'So, Mr. Hadley, what am I buying here?' He replied with remarkable honesty, 'If you want to buy it you must take it that it is all derelict.'

'May I look around the house?'

'No, I will show you no more than what you have seen.'

'How many rooms are there?'

'Twenty-two.'

'How many are useable?'

'Some.'

'Most of the gutters are broken. Is there dry rot?'

'Yes, but I don't think it's in the roof.'

'How much land is there?'

'Eighteen and a half acres, mostly pasture.'

'Will you walk around the house and grounds with me and tell me more?'

'Yes, of course.'

And so, umbrellas raised against the constant downpour, we walked together. As we walked we talked, but nothing he had to say or explain was to deny the truth of his simple statement, 'If you want to buy it, you must take it that it is all derelict.'

Then came the moment when, standing beside the conservatory, I asked, 'How much do you want for it all?'

'A hundred and twenty thousand pounds.'

My mental processes went into overdrive: 'we already have 110 acres of forest only a couple of hundred metres away. This is a twenty-two room house whose structure is of stone and essentially intact. There are extensive outbuildings all repairable and capable of extension. It is the same price the sale of the Hampstead houses will raise. There are 18.5 acres of pasture, a large copse, and an orchard ideal for kutis. The Sangha will return to being a skilled and adaptable workforce. Many young lay people will doubtless help, and the undertaking of this

original venture in England will be inspirational to many who will want to help with money.' And so my thoughts raced on.

Then without a doubt in my head, I put out my hand, grasped his and shook it and said, 'Sold!'

There was little I could then do to assure my fellow directors I had done the right thing. Paul James was the first person I told that a big house and land close to Hammer Wood had been found and bought. Paul was a man of subtle and intricate intelligence whose approach to whatever project he undertook was to first learn its every detail and then determine the cheapest and most direct way it could be accomplished. After a verbal contract to buy has been made, the usual next step is for a solicitor to contact all the relevant departments, in this case of the Chichester District Council, and conduct 'searches'. This is to find out if there are any impediments or problems to be encountered. Official local land charge searches are carried out and certified by the Council on behalf of a person buying land or property. Processing each search involves researching and supplying information recorded in the local land charges register. This relates to financial charges, conditional planning permissions, enforcement notices, tree preservation orders and various other notices, orders or agreements. The search usually also means answering standard questions concerning highway status and proposals, planning history, building control history, notices, contaminated land and many other considerations.

I passed the name and address of Mr. Hadley's lawyer in the local town of Midhurst to Geoffrey Beardsley and told him of the deal I had made. While the two solicitors were getting in touch, Paul suggested that he and I drive down to the offices of the Chichester District Council and do the local land charge

searches ourselves. This had two benefits: saving a lot of money and saving a lot of time. In no time at all Paul researched the location of every relevant department, had a full list of all the standard questions and made appointments to visit. In a single day, we personally ticked every box on the list and our visits had been verified.

Not a single problem was encountered and I was ready to sign the contract. To facilitate this, I then had Paul appointed to the position of Company Secretary to the Trust so that both our signatures would be on the contract. It was only a week or so later that the contract was ready to sign.

On that fateful day, the sky was dark and dismal and it was again pouring with rain. Mr. Hadley's Midhurst solicitor's office had the appearance of a movie set in the late 1930s in which one would expect to find an actor such as Wilfred Hyde-White playing the part of the lawyer. Mr. Hadley was very tense and agitated. All Paul and I had to do was sign. Once done, Mr. Hadley heaved a great sigh of relief so dramatic that I asked, 'Mr. Hadley, what's the matter?' He said, 'Oh, Mr. Sharp, the last ten days have been so distressing. It has been absolutely awful. People have been coming to my door every day pressing me to sell to them, offering more and more money. There was even one day when a man came with a suitcase full of money!'

'How much more money?'

'Oh Mr. Sharp, an awful lot more.'

'So why didn't you take it?'

He regarded me in astonishment and said, 'Mr. Sharp... I shook your hand!'

It was my turn to be astonished. At the same time, I confess to thinking that if what I had just signed up to buy ended in failure

then the Trust would not be faced with losing money. That was a rather soothing realisation. Sometime later, I discovered why Chithurst House was an object of such desire. It seems that a gentleman who played polo and kept polo ponies wanted it. Chithurst isn't far from the estate of Lord Cowdray and very handy for the occasional knock-about with the younger Royals.

On leaving Midhurst I made straight to Chithurst, took my camera and entered the field below the house to get a shot of it to use on the cover of a full-colour brochure I planned to have printed. Then came my second cause for astonishment that day; leaden clouds across the sky began to part above the house, a weak shaft of sunlight appeared and for a few seconds gave rise to a rainbow. 'Wow!' I muttered as I pressed the shutter.

Later, talking to Geoffrey, I told him that the brochure was already in production with an advertising agency I worked for. He wanted to know how much it was going to cost. I guessed it would be two or three grand. The following day I got his gift of a personal cheque for £3000 to pay for it all.

Once I had a printer's proof of the brochure, it was time for another trip to Thailand so I could explain everything that would soon be a reality to Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Vīradhammo and Ajahn Anando, leaving out nothing of the near-derelict condition of the property. The brochure showed a large fold-out aerial photo of the whole area: Hammer Wood and Chithurst House marked with an all-encompassing boundary defined by a dotted white line. It did look most impressive.

Freda suggested I stay again at the Bangkok YMCA and said she would get me booked in. She also informed Ajahn Paññā and arranged for her friend Khun Ying Sermsri to meet and take me to the monk in charge of foreign affairs, Somdet Phra

Ñāṇasaṃvara, at the Royal temple of Wat Bowoniwet. All that remained for me to do was parcel up all the brochures, get on a plane, go to see Ajahn Chah and tell him what I'd done. I was well aware that if he didn't approve then all this was going to get nowhere. It amused me to think of dealing with Ajahn Chah as being like doing business with the boss of a major corporation. So far, the whole process of development of the project had appeared to have been largely comprised of a confluence of random events and chance fortuitous connections which were somehow steering themselves, and all I was doing was pulling on the oars. I had little sense of being in control of events save that my intentions and vision of their eventual outcome remained unwavering, and that seemed to me to be a good enough way to proceed.

On impulse, I decided to take my eldest daughter Nicole with me on my second journey to Thailand. She was eighteen, a bright young lady of a kind and gentle nature, love of my life, already religious, an active member of a church and a committed Christian. Here, I thought, was an opportunity for me to expose her to a rare experience. Again on impulse, I contacted and met with the Thai Ambassador here in London, taking several of the brochures with me so as to explain to him how the move to establish the new forest monastery was developing. The ambassador was polite and attentive, but I subsequently heard that he shared the view, like so many others, that I was a nutcase.

Nicole and I flew via Thai Airways in a new DC-10 which for both of us was a very pleasant and unusual experience. Everybody was given a purple orchid and the female flight attendants were actually wearing traditional Thai dress. I thought that was pretty advanced marketing for 1978. Also unexpected was to be met at

Bangkok airport by Air Vice Marshal Sak, a personal follower of Ajahn Chah, who took us in our own private bus to the VIP lounge where passports and visas were expedited for us before we were driven to the YMCA.

Khun Ying Sermsri met us the following morning and, if I recall correctly, took us first to meet Josephine Stanton, wife of the American Ambassador, a delightful lady whom Nicole liked immediately. Nicole was to be her guest while I would be visiting Somdet Phra Ñāṇasaṃvara. I'd not seen him since my first visit in 1976. His English had really improved during that time and he seemed to have little difficulty in understanding the brochure's explanation of the quite dramatic step toward creating the first forest monastery in England, which had already been taken.

That evening Nicole and I dined with Josephine Stanton in her house adjacent to the grounds of the Royal Palace, where traditional Thai architecture met an exquisite garden replete with lotus blossoms flowering in a pool with a fountain, and something Nicole had never seen: the presence of geckos on the walls and ceiling. How serene it was, how lovely. Slowly, I was beginning to get a true picture of how my appearances in Thailand were being managed from afar. It was Ajahn Pañña with the approval of Ajahn Maha Boowa who had asked Khun Ying Sermsri be in contact with me and to organise and pay for my travelling to meet with all the most important people whose approval would be essential to the success of my quest. It should be remembered it was Ajahn Pañña who had given my phone number to Ajahn Sumedho which first enabled him to meet me in London, and it was Ajahn Pañña who had then contrived to keep me on an effective path to reinstating the EST's original intentions; something he was delighted to be

able to do after so many years when the Trust had completely abandoned its objectives. Success or failure in so many ventures relies on 'time and place', that is to say, when the time and place for one's endeavours meet with favourable conditions. Certainly, it seemed true of what was happening to me. It was as if I was being carried like a surfer riding a wave. Pay attention George, keep your balance, stop thinking too much and don't fall off, otherwise just let it happen. It didn't matter to me that I didn't know who all the important people I was meeting were, or indeed why I was meeting them, for I began to get a glimmer of realisation that people of great influence were guiding my progress. Also, it was true that I was not one of the 'people of great influence' and probably never would be. I was a nobody. The only thing this nobody had going for him was that he had the English Sangha Trust firmly under his control and had risen to pursue this quest simply as a result of a promise he had made during meditation to Kapilavaddho on the night of his death. That resolve was still vivid: I will make happen what you wanted in the beginning but failed to achieve. And that, in essence, is what this was all about.

Air Vice Marshal Sak provided transportation of Nicole and me to Ubon Ratchathani airport then on to Wat Pah Pong and I was in the presence of Ajahn Chah once again.

That man mesmerised me. I never met anyone so cool as Ajahn Chah. That little portly monk seemed to exude command of everything around him. He was as kind, charming and thoughtful as any host could be, but that was a mere patina over something about him much, much deeper. In his company, I always felt relaxed and happy, free to talk straight and honestly in my own

way. And that is what I set about doing. There was a great deal to tell him.

He took my parcel of brochures and set them down beside him. Then he greeted Nicole and gave instructions about how we should both be looked after. Nicole was to stay in a kuti close to the maechees (white-robed women given the status of aspirants or beginners rather than full participants in Sangha life: a condition which in later years was to foster, in the West, a deep resentment).

In the darkness, Nicole was led down a track through the forest to her little hut, shown its sparse facilities by the light of her torch and a single candle, then bade good night. A minute later Ajahn Pabhakaro and I heard her scream and rushed back to find her staring in horror at a very large spider. Nicole is still convinced it was a tarantula. Ajahn Pabhakaro extracted it with the aid of a wide-mouthed vessel and a piece of paper then released it outside, and Nicole was left alone for the night. I was assigned a comfortable kuti in a pleasant forest glade with a solitary deer as companion and left until tomorrow when I would begin my talks with Ajahn Chah.

Ex-Vietnam helicopter pilot, holder of the Silver Star, Ajahn Pabhakaro was the translator. I would sit by, waiting for my time with Ajahn Chah who always had a constant stream of visitors, both monks and laypeople. At one point I said to him, 'People come to see you and they all bow three times and then when they go away they bow again. Why do they do that?' He asked, 'Is that a problem for you?' I laughed at being challenged in that way, shook my head and told him, 'No not at all. I just want to know the reason for it.' Ajahn Chah gave the memorable answer, 'If you can't make your body bend, how do you think you're

going to make your mind bend?' After that, I too always bowed. In Thailand even the King bows.

My time with him was usually late afternoon lasting an hour or so. He almost never spoke or asked questions as I took him through the brochure explaining every aspect in detail: British property values, ownership law, operating money available, the estimated cost of repairing the house, the state of the forest, everything. In the meantime, I was having talks with other monks, mostly westerners, wanting to know their views about the possibility of the Sangha moving to the West, and getting all the information I could about the functioning of forest monasteries.

Nicole was spending most of her time in Ajahn Chah's company. She obviously liked him a lot. The quick and amusing way he dealt with her arguments about Buddhism versus Christianity made her laugh and she clearly enjoyed their combat. But she would not bow to him. On one occasion I came by while they were talking and I thought Nicole was being rather cheeky, so I apologised for her disrespect. Ajahn Chah said, 'You have no idea how many stupid people come to see me every day, but Nikki is a stone to sharpen my sword on.'

Later on, Ajahn Chah reviewed what he had heard from me. 'It's like you've bought a car and don't have enough petrol. We've got money in the thousands, but you come talking in millions of Baht. I'm going to have to come to England for six months to raise that kind of money.' I laughed and asked, 'And how are you going to do that?' To which he replied, 'I'm going to use my magnet.' What I knew for sure was that Ajahn Sumedho, with a mere ten years as a monk under his belt, had neither the international reputation and high level of lay support necessary

for this project to be likely to succeed. Ajahn Chah did, but he was going to have to have one hell of a magnet.

Several days into our visit, Ajahn Chah had reason to visit one of his many branch monasteries. It is called Tham Saeng Phet, built on the summit of a large rocky hill encompassing a thousand acres or more, a rare promontory on the vast Mekong plain. He decided to take us with him. A well-made bhikkhu-built road snakes its way to the summit where the first thing one sees is a huge reclining Buddha lying on the right flank, right elbow over a cushion, supporting his head with his hand. Beyond is a high and spacious open-sided Sala (dining hall) grouped with other buildings including a large kitchen. Massive surrounding rocks are riven by valleys of dense tangled scrub and harbour many caves, home to thousands of bats. Here and there, kutis are built into caves or have been made suitable as living quarters for bhikkhus beneath great banyan trees with majestic canopies and aerial roots that snake down over the rocks, filling crevices, forming curtains of roots which seek to obscure the mouths of more caves.

Ajahn Pabhakaro seemed to have moved into one of the caves. There were no other monks around, very few lay people and the place appeared largely deserted. I wondered what had been the cause of so splendid a place falling into such near-disuse? I was never to find out the reason. But one factor could have been the walk to the nearest village for alms-food was very long.

Nicole continued to enjoy her unusual holiday and appeared extraordinarily relaxed. She had a bed on the floor of the kitchen. Above her head were thick lateral beams from which hung all manner of metal pans and cooking implements. I was next door. Waking in the night to the banging and clattering of metal pans, I rose and opened the door to the kitchen. Nicole

Roots of a Banyan tree provide a curtain for the Wat Tham Saeng Phet cave Ven. Pabhakaro was using as his Kuti.

My daughter Nicole, a Christian, spent every day with Ajahn Chah arguing with him about religion. He seemed to enjoy making her laugh

was lying in her bed. She said, 'It's the rats, dad. They walk over the beams looking for food.' I found her unconcern somewhat of a surprise and was quite impressed. Rats were apparently much less of a threat to Nicole than spiders.

A Japanese gentleman with an air-conditioned Mercedes drove us all back to Wat Pah Pong. Our visit was over. It was time for us to go home.

On the morning of our flight, we waited by the little bus which was to take us to Ubon Ratchathani airport. Ajahn Chah arrived accompanied by Kum Fah, an American Maechee. To my astonishment, Ajahn Chah was holding a large bunch of white roses. He was actually going to see us off!

Our plane waited on its dirt runway with engines running. Inside reception, it was obvious Ajahn Chah had been expected as there was a roped-off area for him. Everyone save Nicole was on their knees bowing to him. Sister Kum Fah sat to one side ready to translate. Ajahn Chah bent forward, placed the roses on the floor before him and said, 'These are for Nikki.' She clapped her hands together and exclaimed, 'Oh how lovely, how beautiful! Can I kiss him?' He responded, 'Huh, she can't even bow, now she wants to kiss me.'

And there in front of everyone, she got down and executed a perfect threefold bow.

So that's why Ajahn Chah came to see us off with a huge bunch of fresh roses. He wanted to give Nicole the opportunity to bow.

Back in London, Ajahn Sumedho, as usual, did not seek to press me for information as to the outcome of my trip but seemed most pleased that his teacher would be coming back in the near future and would be likely to stay for several months. I must say that Ajahn Sumedho's unwavering level of trust was something I have never experienced with anyone else.

Right away I contacted the Charity Commission informing them of the Trust's wish to sell the Hampstead properties. This news seemed to please them, for a senior official rang almost immediately saying, 'Because your Trust seeks to dispose of its primary assets then it is the duty of the charity commissioners to conduct a public auction.' Seemingly, such an event is a rare one and so the opportunity to engage their staff in setting up and organising an auction over which they had complete control was welcomed. But it didn't please me at all because I already had an eager buyer offering £120,000. I just had to stand by and watch them do their thing hoping a public auction might top that offer.

All this activity was going on whilst I was working in an advertising agency. This is an environment where 'an ad a day keeps the sack away'. In the world of advertising, being sacked is par for the course. Hence everyone is stricken with constant tension, not to say naked fear of loss of livelihood. Advertising is adrenalin-driven. Add to that constant criticism for my stirring this venture at all, and now the uncertainty of raising the money we needed because we had no control over an auction, was, to say the least, rather unsettling.

The outcome could have been worse. The auctioneer's hammer came down on a bid of £115,000.

What then followed was equally disturbing. I had a phone call from an actual Commissioner of the Charity Commission. It went, 'Mr. Sharp, I have to tell you that we have received a serious complaint about recent activities of your Trust which we are legally bound to investigate. I think you had better come to see me.' It felt like being taken by the scruff of the neck and hauled before a judge to explain myself about heaven knows what.

I went with Ajahn Sumedho to meet that Commissioner and we sat before him as he said rather sternly, 'A complaint has been laid before us that property has been bought which the Trust has not had professionally surveyed or valued. This a most serious matter and I have asked you here to explain your actions.' I began by introducing Ajahn Sumedho, explaining that he was the head of the order of Buddhist monks for which the property had been acquired and its importance in their future development in England. I then asked the commissioner to ask Ajahn Sumedho if he approved of what had so far been done. He did so, and Ajahn Sumedho replied saying that he gave me his full backing. As to the allegation that I had failed in my duty of

care by not seeking professional appraisal as to the property's worth and fitness to be purchased, I said, 'Mr. Hadley, the seller, made it quite clear to me that if I wanted to buy his house and land then I must take that it is all derelict.' Then I added, 'So having accepted that before making our offer why would I want to waste money on paying for a survey?' There was a long pause. Then I said something that came out of the blue, unbidden, 'We are a religious charity and if we can't make an act of faith then who can?' The Commissioner raised his arms above his head, smiled and dismissed the complaint. I know who made the complaint, but his identity is not important.

Now two things needed to be attended to: getting the houses emptied and making arrangement for the bhikkhus to have some place to stay while we waited for the Chithurst completion. I have a scant recollection of those events save that the owner of the Oakenholt Buddhist Centre, Mr. U Myat Saw, offered the bhikkhus accommodation and daily support which they accepted. Then my primary concern was our need of money. I was aware that Ajahn Paññā had money in trust called the Arama Fund, set aside for future use in England should he ever return, and that Geoffrey Beardsley was its Trustee. He had invested in twenty-five acres of pasture land in Devon near where he lived. I suggested to him that he seek Ajahn Paññā's permission to sell it and buy land around Chithurst House with the proceeds. Geoffrey got that agreement, sold the pasture for £25,000 (that amount in 1977 would be equivalent to £146,339 today), bought the Chithurst land for the same amount, and put the money in the EST account. Now we had a little operating cash.

Not long after, Ajahn Chah, accompanied by Ajahn Pabhakaro and Air Marshal Sak, arrived and were settled into the gatehouse

of Oakenholt. News of his coming had got around and activity at the Oxford Buddhist centre increased quite a bit. I played little part because I had a demanding job to go to every day, and anyway all that interested me was getting possession of Chithurst House. But I did make a few trips to go for walks with Ajahn Sumedho and catch up with what was happening. Another important aspect of my keeping working hard while all this was going on was that I was paid no salary by the Trust nor did I ever claim expenses, and this was true of all the other directors.

Driving to Oxford also gave me the opportunity to see Freda Wint, who lived in an area of beautiful Georgian terraces known as Parktown, and take her views on what was going on. I always enjoyed Freda's wit, capacity for inventive thought and quick understanding. I especially loved her laughter when she teased any earnest certainty I expressed. She was making frequent visits to Oakenholt to give Dana and was well aware of what was happening there. The bhikkhus were giving meditation retreats for lay people, many people were turning up every day with offerings of food and other necessities. Ajahn Chah himself was giving talks and, to my astonishment, the great Burmese teacher Mahasi Sayadaw arrived to stay for a while. No one told me of this and I was sad not to have met him because in the early days he and I had corresponded many times.

I did get a message from Ajahn Chah saying he'd like me to put the purchase of Chithurst House on hold, but I didn't reply simply because the entire business was done and dusted. Only much later did I learn why he had sent that message. It was on account of having received several visits in Thailand from people protesting that the move to Chithurst was utter foolishness: it was too far from London to get daily support,

Ajahn Chah travelled to Manjushri Institute and Scotland. Anagarika Philip (later Ven. Vajiro) was the driver. The 2 lay people are Ven. Aranyakho's parents.

Ven. Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho receiving alms-food at Oaken Holt Buddhist Centre in 1979. Offering food (from the left): Freda Wint, Mr. U Myat Saw, Mrs Saw, Hla Saw.

the property was an absolute dump requiring more money to restore than could ever be raised and George Sharp was an idiot who needed to be stopped. It is only fair to say that even at that time I didn't think the complainants were wrong in thinking what they did. I was well aware what a step into the unknown it all was. It was not without justification they thought it was a madcap adventure. However, my unspoken mental rebuttal was this: the Trust now possessed 110 acres of forest, with a dry-rot-riven 22-room house with extensive outbuildings cheek-by-jowl with it and an additional 18.5 acres of pasture and copse, and was still left with £25,000 in the bank. (£146,339 in today's money. In Thai money then: 1,250,000 Baht). All this in exchange for two rather grotty houses in Hampstead, which also had dry-rot and were otherwise in need of expensive repair. At one stage I remarked to Ajahn Chah, 'You started Wat Pah Pong by finding a disused burial ground and began it all by sitting down under a tree. Well, what we have at Chithurst is better than that.' He didn't reply of course, and now things had got this far I still needed his approval. He had not yet seen the place.

It so happened, by chance, that a close pal, photographer Herb Schmitz, mentioned to me that he had just bought a recreational vehicle (four-wheel drive, of course) with an amazing capability of negotiating very steep inclines with nary a hint of tipping. He took me for a spin in it and I was most impressed. I thought it just the vehicle with which to take Ajahn Chah on a tour of Hammer Wood before showing him the house because my sedate Rover could well have encountered difficulty with some of the severe hilliness of those woods. Herb offered to lend me the RV.

The day of that fateful visit came. I drove my precious passengers down the A3. After almost 50 miles, we turned off that

highway to drive through the small town of Liphook, on past its golf links, down the hill beyond to make the sharp left turn which was to take us into the narrow, deeply wooded lanes, leading to the north gate of Hammer Wood. Once through the gate, the somewhat lurching and bumpy passage began which was to reveal to them the sight of most of Hammer Wood until, at last, we emerged near the house and were able to finally turn into its drive and take Ajahn Chah to the front door of Chithurst House.

I stood aside, not wishing to join them as they entered to begin their inspection. An inspection I had never personally made, so I had no idea what they were to see. It took a while before they all emerged. Ajahn Chah said something: a very brief comment in Thai. 'What did he say?' I asked. It was Ajahn Sumedho who told me, 'He says it's good enough.' The sense of relief I felt almost lifted me off the ground. 'Great!' I wanted to shout, 'We're on our way!', but I didn't do that. I was happy with a quiet sense of satisfaction.

For Ajahn Sumedho and the bhikkhus, my 'on our way' meant a return to the stern dictates of the elements and lack of civilised facilities they had learned to live within the forests of Thailand. Certainly, none of them exhibited any problem with settling into Chithurst House. On the contrary, they seemed happy to be there, and better still it was a period of very warm sunny weather.

I arrived a day or so after the Sangha's move from Oxford to find great activity. Additional helpers were busy tackling and burning piles of rubbish and setting about clearing the area in front of the stable block where thirty or so abandoned cars were waiting to be dragged away. The door to what had been used as a garage was broken open to find what had once been a brand new 1960s

Planting wild flowers.
That is the first Dhammiko (Ernesto, Italian) on the left.
And ex Ven. Vipassi in the background with the wheel barrow

split-screen Morris Minor half buried under a collapsed roof. One rusty wreck had a tree growing through it. We later learned Mr. Hadley's livelihood had been that of a driving instructor, but we were at a loss to understand why he hadn't disposed of his cars by the usual practice of trading them in. They weren't all junk. The Morris Minor didn't have that much damage and turned out to be worth a fair sum as a collector's item. Inside the house, a room by the kitchen was completely filled with empty bottles. The place was a nightmare of hoarding. I tried not to give the impression I was the owner come to inspect, so didn't venture further into the house. As far as I was concerned it was now all

Sangha property. I settled down to make a routine visit twice a week to meet with Ajahn Sumedho, discuss the community's needs and help out in whatever way I could.

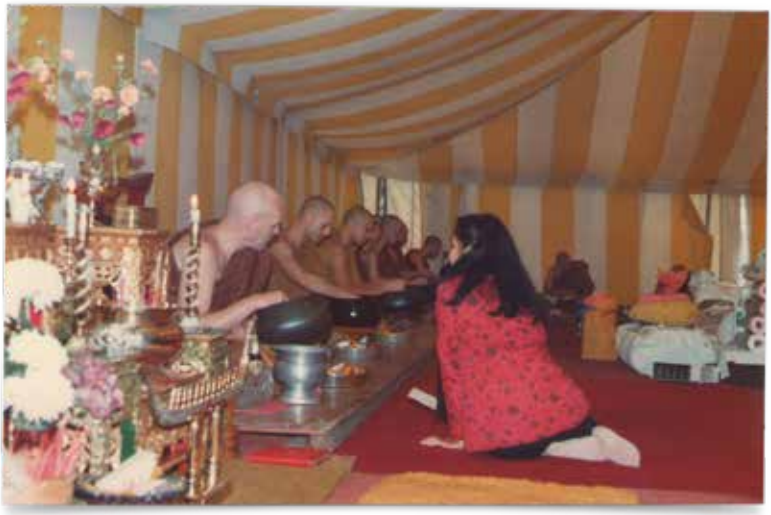
More bhikkhus kept arriving. Many young people, coming from heaven knows where, put up tents intending to stay to work. Lay followers set about fixing up the dilapidated kitchen. The influx of helpers with a wide variety of skills was startling. To the ground floor room chosen as the office came young Katie Cockburn chosen as Secretary to Ajahn Sumedho, alongside our Accountant Rodney Brenchley who reported directly to me.

Cittaviveka, Ajahn Sumedho's chosen name for the monastery, featured on a large professionally written sign erected at the gate. After only a few days, every morning we found that

Ajahn Chah on his brief visit to Edinburgh in May 1979. Katie Cockburn (later Sister Candasiri) is one of lay women in the foreground

someone had been throwing cow shit at it. Thereafter, every night, they found the sign completely clean. Again and again, those culprits went home with shit on their hands.

About that time a major contributor appeared in the shape of a gentleman who was in the business of making marquees. After discussing the Sangha's needs with Ajahn Sumedho he offered to supply and erect one of his large marquees next to the house providing not only shelter from the weather for the rapidly growing community but also a place where food could be prepared and served as Dana to the monks and also for the laypeople. Fortunately, in those days, there was no department of government called the 'Health and Safety Executive' likely to send jobsworth busybodies to impede efforts and cost us lots of money.



The marquee was loaned (or donated) by Brian Dias of the Southampton Buddhist Society. Brian is a very important friend who came to Chithurst because of the news in the paper.

There was, however, a government department that could right royally upset things: The Chichester District Council. Their Planning Control Committee responded to my application for a Change of Use from domestic dwelling to that of monastery by unceremoniously rejecting it. It seemed I had let loose a cat amongst the pigeons. The Councillors were in an uproar at receiving so grossly impertinent an application: one seeking to impose upon their time-honoured Christian County the presence of a strange foreign religion! How dare they? And who are they anyway? Hare Krishna freaks who will come tramping through our sedate villages banging cymbals every day or hordes of Maharishi tune-in drop-out loonies blissing out in their thousands in the heart of God's own acres? Such was the sentiments of the Councillors of Chichester, who I had unwittingly stirred to fiery passion. All this turbulence was apparent from headlines in the local papers.

I was working in my studio when the phone rang. It was from a newspaper seeking a statement as to the monks' intentions; who were they and what did they want to do? I spoke for several minutes explaining our intentions. What I said was printed word for word in that local newspaper the very next day. I had been recorded! A copy was in my hands hours later. I don't remember a word of it now but what I'd said proved to be pretty faultless. The next day I was called to be interviewed by a Portsmouth radio station. I drove there and told them the same story, again without making a major gaffe. And so it went on, interview after interview. Then Freda Wint stepped in, contacting a freelance journalist she knew who lived in Sussex. He was a correspondent of *The Guardian*, and she told him of the furore, suggesting it was worth following up. The following Sunday his article occupied

half a page in that national newspaper, which proved to be explosive. He wasn't a Buddhist, he had no axe to grind, he was just a good journalist who did his thing of checking out what was taking place amongst Chichester planning control councillors, picking up what they had said to the press, seeking their views himself – basically doing everything a skilled journalist should do. I wish I still had his article, but I don't. He wrote without a hint of rancour or bias and in so doing made the most vehement and religiously prejudiced councillors figures of national ridicule; none of whom will ever forget how they were depicted in *The Guardian*.

In the meanwhile, I picked up the date of the next meeting of the committee and made sure of being there. I went taking a small recording device (which I later discovered to be a criminal offence). The chairman was Mr. Kirkby-Bott, who was clearly a straight-as-they-come Englishman dedicated to clarity and fairness in all his dealings. How he chaired that meeting was impressive. All manner of passionate opinions and protests were aired which I thought he managed to gather together and summarise remarkably well. Back home I listened again and again to my recording until I came to the conclusion that Mr. Kirkby-Bott might welcome a way out of this mess.

The next day I rang the council switchboard and got connected with him immediately. I said directly,

'I think we should meet', to which he replied, 'I agree, Mr. Sharp. I'll fix a meeting for us with the chief planning officer.' What those councillors had known all along was that the chief planning officer and his staff had recommended granting our application for Change of Use, albeit with certain reservations, but they had been completely ignored.

I discussed our strategy with Ajahn Sumedho and we came up with the idea of inviting all the planning control councillors to tea at Chithurst House and then take them on a tour of the estate so that they might get a clearer idea of what kind of people they were dealing with and what we proposed to do. Mr. Kirkby-Bott agreed to set a date in the hope that all of them would agree to come. Came the day only one of the twenty councillors failed to get their tea and biscuits, meet everyone and be taken on a tour. Not long after they all had another meeting and approved Chithurst House becoming a Monastery with a thumping majority.

It was then necessary to agree with the Planners the number of festival days we could have per year and deal with their concern about increased traffic on Chithurst Lane. They set up a monitoring device on the lane for this purpose. Ajahn Sucitto initiated a survey of cars using the lane and coming to the monastery, to see whether there was actually any significant increase in the amount of traffic in the lane. Everyone took part, sitting out on the driveway in all weathers recording the comings and goings to prove to the anxious neighbours that their fears about traffic on the lane were exaggerated. It was after the results of that, about six months later, and our agreement to the number of festival days being five, that final application for Change of Use was granted.

Events moved on further when I was contacted by a BBC director of documentaries, David Thompson, who came to see me expressing an interest in what was happening in the Sussex hamlet of Chithurst which had caused such controversy. David had made a documentary in Thailand two years previously, entitled *The Mindful Way*, featuring the life of the forest monks of Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's monastery, including interviews

with some of his Western monastic students. As he was keen to film a new documentary, about the events currently unfolding for the community in England, at David's request I wrote to his boss. I described the situation and noted that David had already made a documentary describing fully the background and culture from which the Chithurst monks came. David got the OK and his money and set about making *The Buddha Comes to Sussex*.

Development went on apace. A new monastery was taking shape at remarkable speed. The serious problem of sewage was being addressed: collection and drainage of wastewater, treatment of raw sewage and the manner of disposal of what remains. Nick Scott and Ven. Sucitto were first to crack open the cesspit in the wildly overgrown garden and start digging out its vile sludge. The existing system had, like everything else, been neglected and now there were growing numbers of people. The cesspit system was under the lawn now almost surrounded by cloisters. It required enlargement, complete replacement, and a decision as to how the emergence of nutrient-rich water be channelled away unseen and unsmelled. Ven. Thitadhammo took on that challenge, getting advice from a wide variety of experts.

The Sangha's ability to take care of itself was being consummately demonstrated in every direction. Now we had all kinds of skilled lay craftsmen; carpenters and other skilled people working on replacing the entire roof under the direction of a young monk who possessed incredible energy, thoughtfulness, creativity and skill. A Thai gentleman I knew, Khun Dtoe who lived in Hampstead, arrived. He asked, 'Can I have one of those tiles?' I said, 'Of course. Take your pick. They fall off all the time.' He examined one. 'How many tiles do you

need?' I had no idea so I sent a message to the monk who was the boss of the roof project, and the answer came back, 'Forty-five thousand.' Khun Dtoe departed in his Mercedes without saying another word. A couple of weeks later two flatbed trucks arrived carrying forty-five thousand new replacement tiles made to match the originals. 'Oh, my gosh', I thought,

'The generosity is unbelievable!'

The Marquee was now replete with hot-air blowers. There was a fully functional workshop, re-roofed by Ajahn Vīradhammo. Bruce Miles appeared on the scene – an old pal from Barnes, a carpenter whose son Shelley was already in the robe and soon to become the Venerable Kassapa. It was Bruce who set about restoring all the dilapidated kitchen wood cabinets, its huge table and Welsh dresser, and suggested a square iron ring be made by the local blacksmith and suspended above the table from which pans and cooking tools could be hung. He actually moved to live close by so as to commit himself fully to the work.

Then a very important helper arrived: Mr. Clarke- Hall, former president of the Architectural Association and its School of Architecture in London, commonly referred to as the AA, the oldest independent school of architecture in the UK and one of the most prestigious and competitive in the world. He was the husband of the lady who first put me in touch with Mr. Hadley, the man who sold us Chithurst House. Mr. Clarke- Hall offered to redesign the interior of the house to meet the needs of the monks and promptly set about drawing up a detailed plan centring on a column above the lavatory in the hall all the way up to the roof where water pipes would feed lavatories, wash basins and showers. He did drawings of every detail, supervised the work of installation, advised on the choice of fittings, everything. And

The roof of Chiffurst House was designed in 1861 to collect rainwater which was channelled down through the house to an underground well.
In 1982 the entire roof was replaced, using tiles donated by Khun Ptoe and his family. Apart from three professional roofers the entire project was completed by the community.

he did all that seeking no payment. Further, he designed and had built the structure facing the garden exit which still exists: a place to store logs, the fuel of woodburning stoves which were to play a key role in heating and cooking.

An elderly but extremely vigorous man, former head gardener at Kew, Walter Stangl, came to offer to take over the work of taming the tangle of wild growth and creating gardens.

Somehow a tractor arrived. It must have been a gift, for the Trust didn't buy it.

Our bank in nearby Petersfield was receiving a steady influx of cash, which from time to time was bolstered by substantial sums from ceremonies known as Pha Pah, emphasising the importance of giving alms without any intention of return, a pure gift, through offerings to monks and temples. The emphasis is on selfless gifting which 'earns merit' and a better future life. At that time, it was the lifeblood of the Sangha's support which had been directed and supplied by Ajahn Chah, who on returning to Thailand had told his influential followers, 'We've got enough here. Go help Ajahn Sumedho in England.' Ajahn Chah did prove to have one hell of a magnet.

Ajahn Sumedho conducted himself throughout this turbulent time with an apparently effortless coolness and dignity, always with a ready smile, working daily alongside his fellow monks, yet also resolutely keeping the Sangha to a daily regimen of meditation, chanting and the fortnightly recitation of the rules of training known as *Pāṭimokkha*. No wonder Ajahn Chah had so much faith in him. At this point I must explain that I, as the principal representative of The English Sangha Trust, did not regard myself as a servant of the Sangha as a whole. On the contrary, I regarded myself solely as the servant of Ajahn Sumedho. All decisions we arrived at together, whether I fully concurred or not. I then implemented them according to his wishes and this relationship was not to change. I trusted him completely, he trusted me completely and I had no wish to

change that. He was in charge, and the Trust, as far as I was concerned, was in his service.

David Thompson and the BBC, with the collaboration of the local council, set up a meeting in a nearby hall, between the monks and members of the village community. This event was to be an important part of David's documentary: *The Buddha Comes to Sussex*. What took place is captured superbly in his movie, revealing the wide range of interested local characters' concerns and opinions in a serious yet gently amusing way. It was chaired by one of the local vicars, Chris Boxley, and with a Jehovah's Witness, Ven. Sucitto and Ven. Arañña bhikkhus on the panel, together with Luang Por Chah, to answer any questions that arose after viewing the first documentary, *The Mindful Way*. It was quite a meeting! It felt healthy in that so many people attended and obviously felt quite free to express all their concerns and have them responded to by members of the panel. Ajahn Sumedho listened, paying very keen attention whilst Ajahn Chah sat benignly bemused by the proceedings.

Accommodation for a growing number of women was becoming a real problem. Katie Cockburn, soon to be Sister Candasiri, was in the attic of the house, to be joined by Francoise Reynaud (Sister Sundara) and Pat Stoll (Sister Rocana). The dilapidated stable block and semi-detached pigsties were being cleaned out and their roofs patched up. These are now the new Dhamma Hall. An adjacent granary was cleaned and patched and became the present Abbot's Kuti. A young Spanish lady, Isabel Mingotte (later to become Sister Jotaka) at one time took up residence in the pigsty, having refurbished it herself to some degree. There was no heating so that was probably in summer months.

I recall Ajahn Sumedho and I meeting retired Brigadier

Anagarikas Sundara, Candasiri and Rocana. 'For the first eight months the nuns had their hair cropped; Ajahn Sumedho had thought this might be too shocking for people to see women with shaven heads.'

Chatterton and his wife at their home in Midhurst. They owned Hammer Cottage which nestles by the little bridge over Hammer Stream a couple of hundred metres from Chithurst House. Hammer Cottage was down a lane so deeply eroded by centuries of farmer's cartwheels, roots of flanking trees became fully exposed, their canopies closed overhead forming a leafy tunnel, inspiring me to imagine I might encounter Christopher

Robin with his friends Eeyore, Kanga and Roo, Rabbit, Piglet, Owl, and Tigger crossing my path. It was so idyllically English. The Brigadier was a charmer with a sonorous voice, kindly wit and readiness for conversation. Mrs. Chatterton had a lovely smile and a beautiful voice with enunciation redolent of the best English schools. They liked and approved of Ajahn Sumedho and the presence of the monks a lot. Their Hammer Cottage and lake were leased to and managed by Mr. and Mrs. Fothergill who ran a clay pigeon shooting school which regularly peppered the air with sounds like the shootout at the O.K. Corral. Hammer Pond was let to fishermen in return for expensive short-term licences and the regular restocking of fish. To facilitate fishing there were two wide flat-bottomed punts with punting poles. The manager's job was also to ensure pike did not become too abundant, for they are predators with voracious appetites. I once saw him dispatch a pike with a double-barrelled shotgun! Not an event to be seen again if ever the monks owned the lake.

The Fothergill's lease expired, was not renewed, and the cottage was rented to Paul James to enable him to be close to the woods and supervise the work he planned. This gave an opportunity for Paul to move into a room next to the garage and leave the cottage as accommodation for anagarikas and laywomen, who were later to use the garage as their shrine room. Towards the end of that first year, there was a real concern as the lease was running out and the cottage was going to be put on the market. It looked as though the nuns would lose that lodging and an alternative would need to be found. During the summer whilst working in the office, Rodney raised the question as to whether Katie would like to buy the cottage for the nuns – a bit of a surprise, as she really hadn't thought of it. He had

prepared some notes explaining how this could happen and the sort of agreement that would be needed. She realised that her parents would have something to say about this proposal! It all happened quite quickly. She told me, 'My parents were, of course, very concerned and suggested offering £37,500 (£2,500 less than the actual amount asked for) whereupon Jordan came forward with the balance plus whatever was needed for the purchase of Hammer Pond.' Brigadier Chatterton and his wife accepted £40,000. The deal was done. The Nuns kept the cottage, outbuildings and land down to the stream, and the Trust got the lake with its flanking woodland.

Paul was spending a lot of time in the woods but because of all

Aloka Cottage, formerly "Hammer Cottage" was originally used as accommodation for the nuns and shared with the laywomen guests. It is now used exclusively as female guest accommodation

the work to do at the house, few people were available to help him. He did have a preliminary plan of action which involved collecting fallen wood and using cut wood from acres of sweet chestnut coppice to feed into a shredding machine he bought and installed near the north gate. He intended to create huge amounts of wood pulp to use as fertiliser. I knew nothing of silviculture so couldn't help, but I did tell him that first comes essential work on the house, then we can set about seeing how best to tackle transforming the woods. Paul was rather impatient and wanted to get on and I knew that I disappointed him.

Another factor in the forest renewal project was the arrival of Nick Scott who had a PhD in Botany. His supervisor had put him in touch with local ecologists and botanists who gave him advice on how to begin tackling the woods, which he shared at length with Ajahn Sumedho. Their informed and expert advice differed markedly from Paul's approach.

This began to take the wind out of Paul's sails. I cannot say whether it was to some extent on account of these divergent views and lack of support for his ideas, but there came a gradual weakening of Paul's energy and resolve which was to eventually lead to his disenchantment with the whole endeavour. I do know that he came to blame me, even to the point of believing that he had been tricked into giving the woods to the Sangha, and this conviction persisted despite the fact that work began in earnest to thin out, clear and replant acre after acre of the ailing forest. Volunteer groups joined the effort. The Sangha appointed Mike Holmes, a retired airline pilot who lived on Chithurst Lane, to be its first Warden of the Woods. Mike had for many years immersed himself in the science of silviculture and was eager to take on the challenge. Sadly, Paul left and no longer kept in

touch. There were people who, in the past, had been granted permission to hunt deer in the woods. They came to see me and were very sad to be refused further licences. But no doubt some poaching continues. Local Master of the Hounds also paid a visit seeking permission to enter the woods in pursuit of foxes, and of course they too were refused. Without the monks making a great fuss, it very soon became widely known that the monastery's estate had become a wildlife sanctuary.

Neighbouring farmer, Mr. Baigent, came to ask permission to kill all the Sangha's rabbits by pumping a lethal gas into their burrows. I was called to meet him and soon realised why he was angry. His field of winter wheat closest to our pasture was being decimated. Rabbits were everywhere, hundreds of them. He was even angrier when I said I couldn't grant permission. Not interested in my explanation, he was going to complain to the Ministry of Agriculture. Only a few days later I was called to meet one of their officials who explained the law to Ajahn Anando and myself. To not obey the law was a criminal offence carrying a heavy fine. The law says we jolly well had to either gas our bunny rabbits to death or fence them in, and I was required to write to him saying we would comply with the law.

Ajahn Anando quickly took instruction on how to build an effective rabbit fence, estimated how much wire mesh would be needed, what tools, how many fence posts and figured out how much it was all going to cost. It would be labour-intensive and take workers (not to mention money) away from restoring the house and outbuildings, but it had to be done. The letter I wrote to the Ministry of Agriculture differed a little from full compliance. It said we would not gas the rabbits but if the Ministry entered to do the work then they would not be resisted, in the meanwhile

work had begun building a rabbit-proof fence on the perimeter of Mr Baigent's land, in order to keep the rabbits safely IN the Chithurst property; this was unheard of use of a rabbit-proof fence. I think they had the letter framed.

Once the fence was done it occurred to me that we had actually created a very large well-stocked larder for stoats, weasels, mink, foxes, even badgers who enjoy eating baby rabbits. However, it wasn't too much longer after that the dreaded myxomatosis virus descended on the poor embattled bunnies but did not quite succeed in altogether wiping them out.

Hammer Pond was created by Sir Peter Bettesworth around 1632 who had the stream dammed, building a high earthwork with a stone spillway over which a head of water drove a wheel. This provided power to the bellows of a blast furnace and a Hammer for forging iron, hence the names of Hammer Pond and Hammer Stream that has carried on to the present day. In periods of heavy rainfall, the stream becomes substantial, carrying a large volume of water collected from the entire parish, which often temporarily floods water-meadows nearby New Bridge in Moorhouse Lane and continues downstream to join the River Rother at Chithurst. What is left today is the spillway with waterfall meeting the stream below. It was already apparent that the spillway would soon be in need of repair, because in times of heavy rain the water level rose, pouring down the spillway in torrents, gradually chiseling into crevices in the stone. Right beside the spillway was a large tree which on inspection was shown to have roots growing into the stonework. It wasn't long before, in the middle of the spillway, a stone slab lifted and was swept away to fall into the pond below leaving a hole that water began to gouge out like a drill. It had to be fixed.

Hammer Pond

Ajahn Vīradhammo took the project on during a dry sunny time when flow was minimal. They dammed that off with wooden boards, tidied the spillway, filled the deep hole and cracks with cement and the job was done. Then that close-by tree was felled. Soon after, a letter arrived from some obscure authority demanding to know why work was carried out without seeking their permission. Weariness descended. Oh dear, I wondered, how many more things on our estate were of historical and environmental interest lawfully protected by Authorities we'd never heard of?

My letter of explanation gained no reply, so I guess it said the right things. I was to learn that the entire area of the hill in the

centre of the woods was the remains of a iron-age fort, including remnants of a Roman road, and that on it even the grubbing-up of tree roots was forbidden without permission.

Quite early in the development of Cittaviveka, a supporter of Ajahn Sumedho, a high-born Thai lady named Khun Ying Noy, took the opportunity to buy Ash House. This is a fine, somewhat neglected house with extensive grounds which include a pond sitting close to it in an ordered and defined way – clearly part of the architect's original concept. Close to the village of Stedham, it is only a mile or so from the monastery. Noy only sought to have an apartment for herself so as to be near the monastery, and I believe it was her wish to be able to offer accommodation to young people also attracted by the monastery's presence. So it proved to be. Ash House estate has since developed extensively.

Into the annals of Chithurst a lady called Pat Stoll appeared. She was to turn out to become a very influential figure indeed, affecting the lives of all the young ladies gathering at Chithurst. Ajahn Candasiri had this to tell me about Pat Stoll:

'I first met Pat Stoll in London in the springtime of 1979 on her first visit after returning from Thailand where she had met with Luang Por Chah. She had gone to see how the nuns lived there and to ask his permission to be ordained and live as a nun in England with Ajahn Sumedho.

'The story goes that Luang Por Chah agreed, but without consulting Ajahn Sumedho; in fact, I think the time I met Pat may have been the first time that Ajahn Sumedho had ever heard of such an idea. I remember him asking Pat if Luang Por

had suggested to her she become a maechee in Thailand, and she responded that Luang Por by that time knew of her wish to ordain in the U.K. (there may have been a sharp intake of breath from Ajahn Sumedho at that point, or I may be misremembering what happened!).

'Pat had been very inspired by the presence of the bhikkhus in London and felt that of course there needed to be nuns as well. Looking around, she didn't see any candidates so decided that she herself had better sign up.

'That evening was an observance night which was why I was there. Pat and I sat up with the monks. She shared stories of her time in Thailand and we also listened to a tape recording about the nun's life that had been made by Maechee Kum Fah for Hla, Mr Saw's daughter. After hearing that, Ajahn Sumedho looked at Pat and me and said jokingly, "That's our recruitment talk!"'

I think it largely as a result of this fateful turn of events, and Ajahn Sumedho's acceptance that ordination of women should take place here in England, that he decided to do something he had formerly never considered: to endow Western women with a status higher than that of maechee, bringing them much closer to full participation in the life of Sangha. What he did had never been done before. He created the brown-robed order of Siladharas committed to keeping Ten Precepts. Doing this prompted criticism from his peers in Thailand, but he went ahead and did it anyway. So when Ajahn Sumedho approached me saying, 'I think we need another place,' it wasn't simply the pressure of lay people wanting to be instructed in meditation and Cittaviveka not having space to do it, it was the need to properly accommodate a new order of nuns.

The first four nuns who later came to be known as 'siladhara' receiving pabbajja, the ten precept ordination, in the sima at Chithurst Monastery on 14th August, 1983

A remarkable helper came to stay named Kip Gurrin. Before arriving at Chithurst, he had been a rigger on the restoration of the Cutty Sark. He was a man of great energy, physical strength, and an ebullient desire to tackle his next challenge. He was like the Chithurst version of Ray Mears. He had studied survival skills in incredible detail not by reading about them but going out and facing problems in the wild. He knew exactly how to build shelters in a forest environment and he came to offer what he knew. It was Kip who taught the women how to make a 'bender'. This involved gathering hazel branches, stripping them, bending them in a special way, joining them together, and finally covering them with a tarpaulin, thus creating

a weatherproof tent. Two young women who were later to become nuns built one according to his instructions close to the Nuns' Cottage. Another one was built by the monks on the top of Hammer Wood's central hill and then they took it in turns to live there during the summer.

A Sima boundary, defining a consecrated area for ordinations and official Sangha functions, was helpfully created by Venerable Ananda Maitreya in June 1981 on the monastery grounds where at times, in a teepee, the Sangha held the fortnightly recitations of the discipline: the *Pāṭimokkha*. A stone was set into the earth with the inscription: *Vinayo Sasanassa Ayu* (Vinaya discipline is the life of the religion).

The first ordination ground was created on the side lawn adjacent to the house.

The other principal use of the Sima, for ordinations, was made possible by Somdet Phra Budhacarya who gave Ajahn Sumedho permission to ordain others as a preceptor (*upajjhāya*) with a letter of accreditation.

Three novices were ordained as bhikkhus there, bringing the total up to eleven. I turned up on that day, walked through the arch into the garden by the conservatory, and saw the ceremony in progress. A friend who saw me enter told me afterwards, 'You looked like the cat that got the cream!'

One day, when in my studio, the phone rang. It was the head of Air Canada customs division at Heathrow Airport. He explained that Thai Airways had asked to use their strongroom to hold a statue of Buddha. He said, 'It weighs 800 kilos and appears to be made of solid gold. It does not have any papers. All it has is your name and phone number on it. Do you have its import license papers Mr. Sharp?'

I was much amused and told him I had absolutely no idea who had sent it, but that I would ring the Thai Embassy and see if they knew. They did, because an hour so later a Thai lady arrived at my flat looking very flustered, holding all the import documents, some of which I had to sign. I rang to tell Chithurst what needed to be collected from Heathrow, giving the Thai lady's details, and the Sangha began organizing what was to turn out to be a difficult, prolonged struggle involving removing the bay window of what is now the shrine room, hoisting 800 kilos of Buddha rupa through the aperture onto its plinth, then restoring the bay window. And they did it without the aid of a fork-lift truck.

The arrival of the Buddha Rupa from Thailand, donated for the main shrine. It was transported from Heathrow Airport on the back of this truck. Ajahn Sumedho, Ven Sucitto and Ven Kittisaro look on

It took all of the male community to manhandle the new Buddha Rupa into the house.

The new Buddha Rupa held in position over where the main shrine was to be built. Later, it was carefully lowered into position

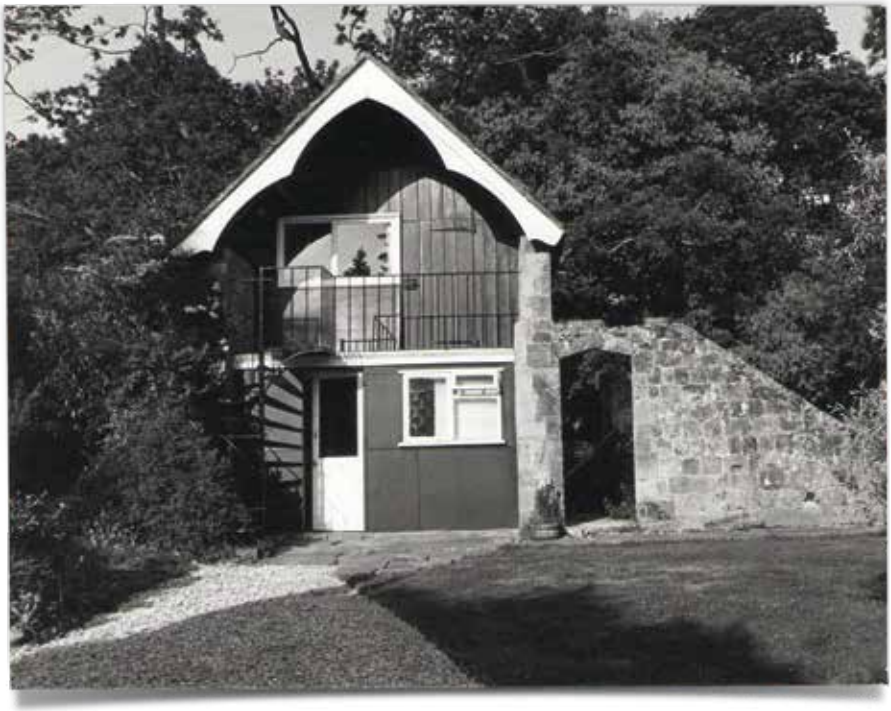
Another memorable day came with the opening of the cellars to reveal, in all its beastliness, their silent long-term tenant; a gray lemon-yellowish, weeping, suppurating, oozing, fungus blossom a metre across – the dry rot monster. Its tendrils extended throughout the house everywhere feeding on its timbers causing them to crumble. I was to always refer to it as 'the dry rot Deva'. Why Deva? Well, because had it not been there the value of the house would have mushroomed in a far worst way: perhaps way beyond our means. Thus it had been a Deva, looking after the house, patiently awaiting the arrival of the Buddha.

The front door of Chitfurst House. Some of the abandoned cars had trees growing through them!

The front door of Chithurst House in 2019

The two rooms that were knocked together and, in this picture are in the process of being converted into the main shrine room in the house at Chithurst Monastery. Note the entrance to the conservatory towards the back of the room on the left hand side.

The main shrine room in the house in 2019



To the left is what was described as "The Granary", at the side of which was the remains of a pigsty. This was later to become the Abbot's Kuti, and now the Nursing Kuti.

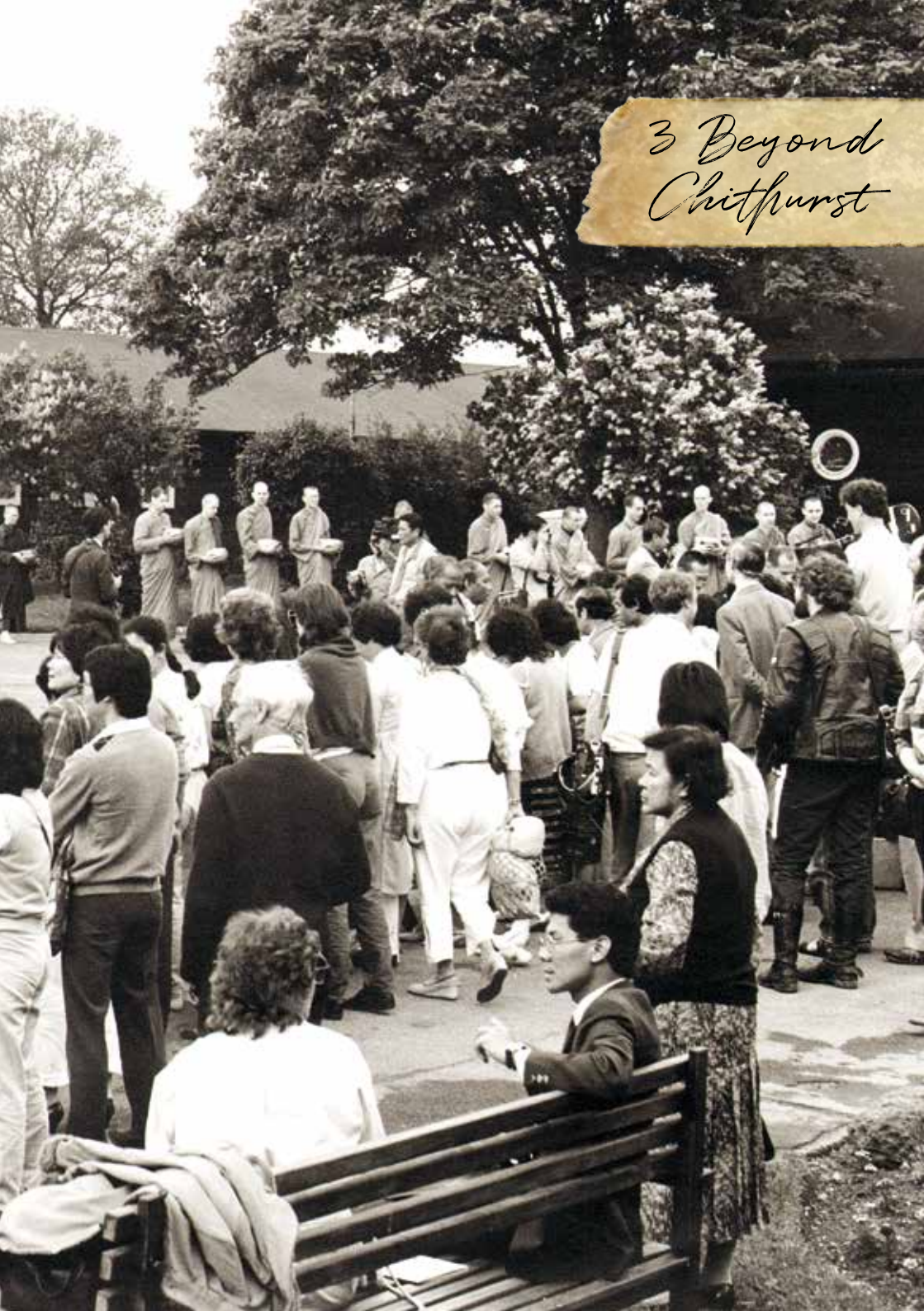
The "Mandala Nursing Kuti" formerly The Abbot's Kuti which has been extended and upgraded to a nursing Kuti at present.

An aerial view taken when the Chitpurst Monastery was established.

A more recent aerial view of the monastery


อมราวดียินดีต้อนรับ

3 Beyond Chithurst



The community in the sala at Amaravati, c.1985. At the centre of the line of Bhikkhus is Tan Chao Khun Paññananda (wearing a scarf).

The painting on the rear wall is of the Buddha at the moment of Awakening, by George Sharp.

NOW I COME TO THE DAY that Ajahn Sumedho took me aside and said, 'I think we need another place. A bigger one.'

I was really taken aback. Scarcely four years had elapsed and Cittaviveka was far from being finished. Money was no longer a great worry, yet now he wanted a bigger place, one suitable to house the growing order of nuns and for lay people to take meditation retreats, not to mention accommodation for more monks. My response was, 'Why on earth do you want to do this? You'll just make your life a misery!' But we didn't get into an argument. It was plain to me that he was set on doing it.

My first thoughts were that the Trust hadn't so far borrowed any money. Its fixed assets were now very substantial and financial support seemed to be steady at about £200,000 a year (in today's money that would be worth over £1 million). Geoffrey Beardsley had recently asked for £50,000 for the buy-back of the land around Chithurst House, and eventually, we agreed on £40,000 to be paid back to Ajahn Pañña's Arama Fund over five years. Geoffrey wanted the money to buy property in Devon which would become Hartridge Buddhist Monastery. Our finances were very closely controlled, and although we hadn't yet entered into surplus, what Ajahn Sumedho wanted to do was something our bank manager was likely to regard as being a sensible risk. I thought, 'What he wants to do is possible... maybe.' It was Peter Jackson who rang Ajahn Sumedho to tell him that, when his wife Barbara had rung the Bedfordshire Education Committee, on the off-chance that they might have some school properties for sale that might suit a Buddhist monastic community and also house a retreat centre, the official on the other end of the line had said, 'Mrs. Jackson, we've been waiting for your call!' The property in question was a residential school on a narrow lane near the

hamlet of Great Gaddesden located in the Chiltern Hills, north of Hemel Hempstead. What Peter told him was to thrust events forward at a remarkable pace.

It was one of England's obligatory miserable days when we met with Peter at St. Margaret's School. From conversations Peter had had with the headmaster of the school, he learned that the Bedfordshire County Council who owned the property wanted to sell it. This was confirmed by the fact that the school was already vacant and the staff were getting ready to move out.

When we got there the whole place was empty. It had the overall appearance of being like an army barracks, an austere collection of wooden buildings grouped on the top of a hill surrounding a playground. Flanking the huts was a large open playing field and across St. Margaret's Lane was a heavily overgrown wood which Peter had found to be the site of the

The storage building at Amaravati c.1985. The markings on the former playground are clearly evident in the foreground.

school's sewage system. Ajahn Sumedho and I walked around while Peter, whose profession was that of surveyor and valuer, explained his assessment of the site. After about an hour or so I said, 'This is what you want, isn't it?' Ajahn Sumedho said, 'Yes.' I asked Peter if he could put a value on it. A big consideration affecting its market value would be what the local council would permit by way of Change of Use, and that was likely to be very limited. I suggested we apply for a 'Monastic College'. Peter proposed we make an offer of £200,000.

The school had been built in 1939, originally to be a summer camp for children based in London. It then was coopted, whilst still under construction, to house evacuee children escaping from the Blitz and help them pursue their schooling in a safer environment, but it was built and donated by the Canadian government. That is why it is built of finest quality Canadian red cedar and also why the buildings have survived as long as they have. Later it became St. Margaret's Boarding School for children with special needs, jointly owned by Bedford County Council and the Health Service.

I wasn't entirely sure whether we could raise the money because what we would ideally need was a 100% mortgage, so I called the Trust's bank manager in Petersfield near Chithurst. I was told that he had moved to a larger branch in Bedford, less than twenty miles distant from Amaravati. That was a stroke of luck, for he knew our finances better than anyone and he was also well aware that in the almost five years since opening the Chithurst account we had never borrowed a penny and money had absolutely flowed in. I realised that as far as he was concerned the Trust now had very substantial collateral and a remarkable income.

When I rang him, he greeted me warmly. I said, 'You've moved. Is it a promotion?'

'Yes,' he said. Bedford was a much bigger branch and he went on to tell me that he was free to lend up to £8 million on his own judgement. I told him that today we didn't quite want that much. I explained what the cost of our buying new land and buildings would be if things went well.

'So how much will you need of that?'

'All of it.'

'And how will you pay it back?'

'As the money comes in.'

There was a pause, then he said, 'You know Mr. Sharp, I've been watching how things developed over the past few years at Chithurst and I have been very impressed. So I'll go along with that. You can have the £200,000.'

So whether buying the place would turn out to be an unsustainable burden or not, Ajahn Sumedho would have his new Buddhist Centre and the rest would be up to him. I certainly didn't envy him that. What I would be required to do compared with what he had just taken on would be a like a walk in the park.

Peter Jackson took on the business of dealing with Bedfordshire County Council and arriving at what they regarded as an acceptable offer. Peter's original calculation turned out to be spot-on. What then had to happen was that Bedford's intention to sell had to be submitted to the Health Service to be digested within the bowels of Whitehall. That process took a year.

Then there came a snag. Peter told me that during that year, political control of the Council had changed from Conservative to Liberal. As a result, the Liberals were refusing to sell to us

claiming St Margaret's School had been sold too cheaply.

Can you imagine how long it would take if we set our lawyers against theirs to argue it all out?

I decided to ring the Chief Executive of Bedford Council and got through immediately. He knew who I was and why I wanted to talk to him. I will never forget our bizarre conversation. It went something like this:

'I know why you are calling me, Mr. Sharp.'

'Okay. Can I make a deal with you on the phone? We have to get this settled.'

'I'm sorry Mr. Sharp, but I'm not in a position to do that.'

'Why not? You're the Chief Executive!'

He laughed and said, 'No, this is political Mr. Sharp.'

'So who can make deal with me?'

'I think the Chairman of the appropriate Committee can do that.'

'Can I talk to him directly?'

'Er, yes. I'll give you his number.'

My conversation with the Chairman was equally memorable:

'The Chief Executive said I should talk to you about St. Margaret's School. I'm ringing to see if you can make a deal with me here on the phone. The Council is actually gazumping us, but you know that, don't you? We can't mess about, there are lots of people ready to move in. We need it settled. Can you settle it with me now?'

'I can Mr. Sharp. I can use Chairman's Prerogative.'

'Okay then, ten percent more. That's it. Not a penny more.'

'That will do it Mr. Sharp. Leave it with me.'

That was politics in action. It wasn't really about money at all, it was about scoring points against the Conservatives. Doing that

cost the Trust £20,000, but probably less than it would have cost to pay lawyers, and we could move in without another long wait.

I wasn't there when the nuns arrived at the gates of St. Margaret's School after walking seventy miles, all the way from Chithurst. At the time, I thought that they had chosen to walk (rather than make the move the easy way) as a statement of intent

The nuns arrive at Amaravati on August 2nd 1984, at the conclusion of their tudong pilgrimage from Cittaviveka. Visible from right to left are: Sister Rocana, Sister Sundara, Sister Candasiri and Sister Cintamani.

and dogged determination. But Sister Candasiri tells me that it was not that at all. In fact, the nuns so loved being at Chithurst that the prospect of having to move to St. Margaret's School's collection of bleak army-camp-style huts had very little appeal for them. So they felt it necessary to make a bold and inspirational gesture, a gesture to sustain them spiritually and help them cope with what promised to be a rather demanding future.

I had no idea where in the rows of huts they or anyone else were going to find somewhere remotely comfortable to settle. But that was no business of mine, that was Sangha business.

Everything was on the move. Already it was getting so complicated I had no idea what was happening. More and more, day by day, events were moving out of my control and into the hands of others. Decisions were being made by members of committees and other dreaded talking shops. All of these decision-making structures were to become essential to the workings of what was to eventually be a very complex teaching centre.

Sister Sundara recollected arrival at the gates of Amaravati in this way: 'It was on top of a hill where the sky seemed to be stretching without end. When you looked up, the feeling of spaciousness was overwhelming.' What a divinely poetic vision that must have been, but let's hasten to remember the misery that awaited; the first two years at Amaravati were to be the coldest winters of the twentieth century in England. Heating, as I shall recount, would become almost nonexistent. But what was about to happen was not the mere moving of bodies to occupy a bleak and vacant former school, but a transformation of its very heart and purpose created by a vision in the mind of Ajahn Sumedho.

Winter 1984-5 at Amaravati Buddhist Centre. This is the sala, formerly the dining hall of St. Margaret's School as seen from the playground.

Here I quote him from a future time:

'I wanted this place to have a title which would give the people here a perception of the Deathless or emptiness because that was non-existent as far as I knew in Britain. In the 1980s there was a lot of paranoia in Europe, especially as the Americans were arming the Brits with cruise missiles: Greenham Common, anti-war and peace movements were the words of the day. Everybody was talking about death, destruction and war. But "deathless" was not a concept in consciousness yet, so I deliberately named it "Amaravati", a deathless realm. Besides it is quite a beautiful word in its own right.'

I had more mundane interests to attend to. For me, what was important was where the office was and figuring out who would

The front entrance of Amaravati Buddhist Centre c 1985. The Bhikkhus (from right to left) are: Ajahn Pabhakaro, Ven. Sucitto (who painted the entrance sign), Ven. Vajiro, Ven. Chandapalo.

be running things. Sister Jotaka was to be the office manager and Venerable Adicco (formerly Rodney Brenchley) the accountant. A young monk named Venerable Amaro would later become an important figure in Amaravati's management set-up.

They selected part of a block on the eastern side of the open playground area, and Ajahn Sumedho had chosen his quarters at the end of a block on the western side, in an area which would have been dressing rooms behind a stage which faced the school's assembly hall.

Essentially that was all I needed to know. From then on it was to those two places I headed whenever making one of my regular visits. Otherwise, I had little idea what was happening elsewhere on the site.

Whether Ajahn Sumedho knew it or not, from then on he was *éminence grise*, the powerful decision maker, and everybody knew it. This was his show and he was running it. That situation suited me extremely well because the last experience I wanted to face was meeting with more committees.

Here was the essential mechanism for me: meet with the decision-maker, discuss with him matters of pressing need, mutually arrive at the plan of action, convey decisions to the managers, instruct accountant on disbursement of money to enable projects in hand, check on income and outgoings, then go home.

I had an unwavering trust in the capabilities of all those young bhikkhus and nuns getting stuck into the task of making a go of things, and their willingness to rough it, to put up with what they didn't want to put up with. They were all Ajahn Chah's disciples in spirit and were going to conduct themselves as he had taught them. Well, at least that is what I hoped of them. I was in awe of what was actually happening, what they did, what they endured day after day. And it didn't stop. It just went on and on as the deep-laid horrors of former St. Margaret's School were revealed layer upon layer. No wonder Bedford County Council wanted to sell it!

I am at a loss to enumerate the problems unearthed. 'Unearthed' is the right word, for the most serious problems were to be found under the ground. The principal of which was the heating system. This was powered by a very large oil-fired boiler situated behind the kitchen near the north gate. It pumped its heat along underground pipes to all the buildings. The dumb-cluck who designed and installed it had decided that its entire extent should be un-lagged, thus what it did achieve

was to keep the ground really nice and toasty and never did much to heat the buildings. I think about all those deprived kids who lived there throughout winters every year. What must it have been like for them? That stupid soil-heating-system had been costing Bedford £40,000 a year in 1984. That's £450,000 in today's money. And nobody on Bedford Council had bothered to ask why it was costing so much!

It didn't take the Sangha long to shut the whole thing down and seek some other alternative. That meant living with little electric fires, paraffin heaters and things like that, just trying to keep warm in winter atop that windy hill, wearing lots of warm blankets and stuff. And in the meanwhile, that meant very limited hot water and cold showers for many.

The sudden spike in Amaravati's electricity usage had its effect on the village substation. Amaravati was running into danger of overloading its supply. Our request for an upgrade in power was initially met by the electricity board quoting us a very large bill to replace the existing equipment. So the Sangha set about making economy measures. It was a few years later before the electricity board decided to substantially increase the power of that substation.

My regular contact with most bhikkhus and nuns was almost nil. I drove to Amaravati, I went to see Ajahn Sumedho, we discussed things, often in lengthy detail. He possessed recommendations coming in from all over the site about what next required his say-so. Where money was needed, there it went. At that time, progress was all rather piecemeal. The whole site appeared to be a struggling mess of constant activity.

Then there came a big shift. Ajahn Sumedho told me, 'All our regular supporters, our visitors, they have nowhere to

be comfortable. They can't see where all the money they are giving is going because it is all going into holes in the ground. We need to do-up the Sala and the kitchen; make it welcoming and nice and functional, make it into somewhere they can happily congregate.'

'Okay, so what do you want, Bhante?'

Now comes an insight into the Sangha in action.

What he was about to ask for had been analysed, reviewed, measured, researched and its entire cost already determined by the Sangha, by all those people who comprised his committees. He said '£30,000.' That wasn't a guess. He knew what he was talking about. All I had to do was release the money for that purpose. All the rest was the work of Sangha and lay helpers in which I played no part. It seemingly happened in no time at all and it worked beautifully. Amaravati had its first fully functioning Sala and kitchen.

In Amaravati's seven-acre wood across St. Margaret's Lane was our extensive sewage system, which on expert examination proved to be working well. Clean water emerged from it. This discharge had the effect of feeding a soggy and impenetrable tangle, mostly of young saplings and nettles, so widespread and dense that walking through the woods was then impossible. It had to be left to function like that until several years later when Dacorum Council decided to introduce piped sewage for the whole village. The woods took a long time to dry out but eventually work began clearing it. That work was to take years, but eventually our seven-acre wood became a place of peace, meditation and thoughtful walks – and once a year it now has an enchanting carpet of bluebells.

For the first time, Ajahn Sumedho began to raise with me his

interest in building a new temple. At that stage he was musing, imagining, toying with the idea and sharing his thoughts with me. I had a close friend, also a Buddhist, the architect Tom Hancock whose body of work was considerable and widely admired. I suggested that Ajahn Sumedho meet with Tom once a week. 'Take him for a few walks,' I suggested. 'Share your thoughts with him and see what comes of it.'

Tom had the extraordinary ability to be able to create a precise three-dimensional drawing of whatever he imagined; not just a vague sketch, but a proper visual statement anyone could understand. Every time they went for a walk, Tom had a drawing of what they had last discussed. At that stage, there was no suggestion that he be appointed as the architect to build the temple. It went on like that between them for quite a while.

The senior bhikkhus discussed the prospect of having a new temple, taking the view that so important and original a building should be put to the architectural community and made the subject of an open competition. Now ordinarily that would perhaps be a good idea, but in this case we were dealing with Ajahn Sumedho's personal and essentially private intentions; after all, everything so far in the development of the Forest Sangha in England had come about as a result of his own radical and original objectives and now the idea of having a temple was the next one to arrive. For me, it hardly seemed likely he would want to leave the visualisation and step-by-step design of the Temple to someone else.

Nothing like Ajahn Sumedho's spontaneous and inspirational initiatives had ever landed in Tom's lap before. He had to come up with a solution to embrace all that was required, a simple and honest solution, with the Sima (consecrated boundary)

its central feature, a space for hundreds of people, free of unnecessary embellishment and expensive adornment. It was emerging very gradually, week by week, meeting after meeting, drawing upon drawing.

I'm pretty sure that the senior bhikkhus all thought I had chosen the architect for the temple without consulting them, but if Ajahn Sumedho had preferred taking a different approach to appointing Tom to build the temple he jolly well would have done so.

One weekend, I went to stay with Tom in his home close to the village of Weston Underwood near Bedford. There was just the two of us in a very large house. I woke about five in the morning and began to wander around rather aimlessly not knowing quite what to do when I heard sounds of Tom's presence. He was in his studio. He saw me at the door and said excitedly, 'Oh good! Come in, come in.'

There on the table before him was a little model made of thin stalks of balsa wood, the kind of structure one expects of a builder of model aeroplanes save that this one had the shape of a kind of pyramid.

'Put your hand on top of it and push down,' he said. I extended a hand and pushed down on the flimsy structure rather gingerly. 'No, no,' he urged, 'Push down hard.' I did so and it didn't buckle under my pressure at all. It remained completely rigid. Tom was so delighted he could scarcely contain himself. 'It's the temple structure,' he said. 'That's it!'

He intended it to be akin to the structure of a medieval barn made from green oak involving the work of craftsmen Tom knew personally. From then on, I left it up to Tom and Ajahn Sumedho to continue their collaboration. During ensuing weeks and

Over the winter of 1995-96, the oak structure was shaped in Wiltshire by Carpenter Oak and Woodland, brought to Amaravati by truck in April 96, and assembled over one week with the aid of a crane.

The first stage of construction only included one-quarter of the Cloister, which was enough to connect the Temple to the Sala.

months, he and Ajahn Sumedho set about quietly refining and developing the temple's plan. Cloisters were added and became joined to the Sala. The design of the temple's roof underwent many subtle modifications. As part of the overall scheme, the block where Ajahn Sumedho had his kuti was demolished and a Sima established in its place. The Temple was then to arise over the Sima.

At one point (I can't recall when) everybody began addressing Ajahn Sumedho as Luang Por. His base then became a splendidly restored traditional wooden caravan, whilst the temple complex plan became extended to include the building of an Abbot's Kuti alongside the school's original swimming pool flanking the former playing field.

Once the Buddharupa was installed, the morning sun through one dormer window brought its own enlightenment.

When a final design for the entire site had been arrived at, Tom had a model made of the whole thing; a manageable size for travelling. Luang Por was going to take it to Thailand to show the many supporters there what he was intending to build. Interest was keen and it wasn't too long before Luang Por felt sufficiently confident that he had the necessary support to begin building. Finally, he (not me) commissioned Tom Hancock to be the official architect.

While all this was going on, the retreat centre was created. More huts got newly rain-proofed roofs. A large workshop gradually acquired more machinery. A block of six rooms nearest the gate was decorated, furnished, made comfortable for lay-folk and families and named Bodhi House. Inroads were being made into the replacement of some 600 windows. Walls of all the huts

Model of temple made by Tom Hancock circa 1993 [note big extension behind Temple into Abbots quarters that was never constructed.]

Showmans wagon with the deva picture where Luang Por Sumedho stayed before the temple.

For the first years, 1984 - 1994, the Amaravati Community worked tirelessly on 14 Buildings taking down exterior boards, adding additional studwork.

Opening ceremony for the 'Christmas Humphreys Library' circa 1987

were being insulated. More lavatories and washing facilities were built. The Christmas Humphrey's Library started life with a bequest of 10,000 books from a lady on the Caribbean Island of Curacao. Not to mention gifts of a car and a people-carrier plus ceaseless gifts of furniture and all manner of appliances.

Progress was relentless in every direction.

From the very beginning, from the time we took ownership of St. Margaret's School, our relationship with Dacorum Council was somewhat delicate, requiring care in how our communications were worded.

First came the application for Change of Use. We had no wish to stir even the slightest concern about 'intrusion of a foreign religion' and other such tender sentiments amongst the Councillors of Dacorum. In order to keep our intended use as close to that of a school as we sensibly could, I chose to describe Amaravati as a 'monastic college', which was actually very

accurate. I filled out the application form detailing proposed activities, and then (and this turned out to be a momentous decision) I wrote a letter describing a building which, at some point, we would want to build. I stated its purpose, dimensions, height, position on the site. I called it a 'chapter house', not a 'temple'. And, most importantly, it made clear that the letter was to be regarded as part of our application for Change of Use.

Change of Use was then granted.

Gradually the Sangha's affairs became more complex and more minds were brought into management. Venerable Jutindharo joined the office team. Venerable Attapemo was appointed Secretary of the Trust (formerly one of my jobs) responsible for compiling the agendas of meetings, the keeping of minutes, submitting annual accounts to the Charity Commission and a host of other duties. A limited company registered as a 'charity' is the best, and possibly the only way that the Sangha's legal and financial affairs can be conducted according to English law. But that law was not written to take account of the unique way the Buddha structured how the Sangha works. Ordinarily, a charity is a fundraiser. A charity collects gifts of money, property, land and buildings and disburses those amongst its beneficiaries. But the English Sangha Trust cannot properly conduct itself in this way because absolutely all gifts are made directly to the Sangha and are in fact (but not in law) the property of Sangha.

Misunderstanding of this relationship on the part of Trustees has in the past led to tension and dispute. The true role of Lay Trustees, in this context, is that of servant or steward. This is how The English Sangha Trust eventually came to function. In his recent book *Roots and Currents*, Ajahn Amaro sets out the intricate ways in which the relationship between the Sangha

and its lay Charity Trustees have developed during recent years.

Venerable Jutindharo and Venerable Attapemo were soon to find themselves at the centre of a very serious dispute, for once Luang Por had given Tom Hancock the go-ahead to build the new temple, Tom submitted an application to Dacorum Council for building permission. This was promptly refused.

Before making any appeal, the party seeking permission should first consider re-engaging with the local planning authority to discuss whether any changes to the proposal would make it more acceptable and likely to gain permission. So Tom submitted a modified design. That too was refused.

Tom, who had met such difficulty on several occasions in his career, then appealed to the Secretary of State. His lawyer was Christopher Lockhart-Mummery QC, a gentleman who was to prove a great blessing. It was said of him, 'His style is far less aggressive than many silks and is much more effective as a result. Most importantly, however, he has laser-like precision when it comes to framing a case. Christopher has the confidence to identify the one or two critical points that he thinks will achieve a win and to focus on them to the exclusion of the others. This shows a degree of confidence and ability that few of his competitors have.'

With remarkable alacrity, the Secretary of State appointed a Planning Inspector and set a date for the hearing only a few weeks later. This took place in the offices of Dacorum Council. It seems the Councillors of Dacorum had succumbed to embracing the same prejudice (though not with quite the same heat) as those Chichester Councillors who had contested the Chithurst estate becoming a monastery. Bhikkhus Jutindharo and Attapemo were called upon to search their files for every scrap of supporting evidence they could find for Mr. Lockhart-Mummery and they set about doing this with incredible thoroughness.

Luang Por, Tom, Bhikkhus Jutindharo and Attapemo and I attended the hearing every day. Tables were arranged in a horseshoe shape with the open end facing the solitary figure of the Planning Inspector. On the left-hand side was the young lady solicitor representing the Council. On the right, opposite, was our QC. I felt quite some sympathy for that young lady, for she was well aware what a heavyweight adversary she faced. A few of the Councillors were clearly agitated, intensely focused on winning, but proceedings were quiet and rather leisurely. On the first lunch break, I found myself sitting facing Mr. Lockhart-Mummery at a table in the staff canteen. He wasn't interested in eating, he was going through a stack of papers provided by our redoubtable bhikkhus. He extracted a number of documents, set them aside and broke off for tea and a sandwich. I asked him what had led him to prefer this aspect of the law. 'It's the detail,' he said. 'The devil is in the detail.'

Returning to the papers, he read through them very carefully then lifted one up and asked, 'Did you write this?' It was the letter I had appended to our original Change of Use application describing in detail the large building we intended to have as the centrepiece of the monastery. He was clearly delighted to have found it, and so was I for I had quite forgotten it.

In addition, in that same stack of papers, Ven. Attapemo had chanced upon a letter from the local MP, on House of Commons headed notepaper, to the Little Gaddesden Parish Council. This letter clearly described the MP's intent to help find any way to obstruct the Planning Application and that 'traffic' seemed like the best bet. This was a 'smoking gun'.

On his return to the fray, I was impressed that his quiet and modest demeanour continued unchanged as he introduced this

new, and for our opponents, very important and troublesome consideration. The letter was passed to the Planning Inspector for him to read.

What then ensued was a battle over semantics: what was the difference between a 'chapter house' and a 'temple'? Did they mean the same thing or was a different meaning intended? Again, our QC did not enter into protracted conflict over the issue but instead lightly passed it by to deal with the next objection put forward by the Council. And so it went on, day after day, during which time I amused myself doing pen drawings of everybody. It was all over in three days. The Planning Inspector would, in due course, report his finding to the Secretary of State and his ruling was final. A few weeks later Tom was told his appeal was upheld and he could proceed with either of his two designs. All lingering antipathy on the part of Dacorum Council melted way and building began.

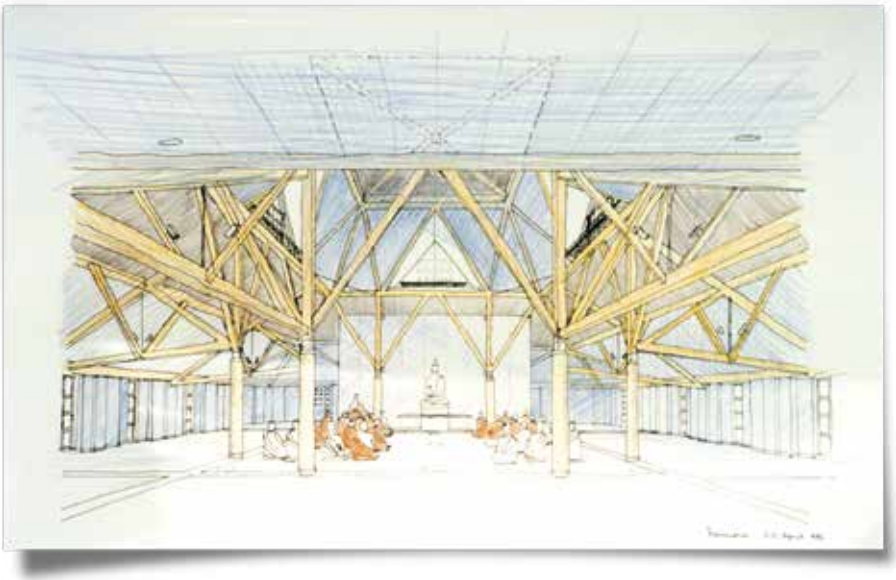
By that time I had retired as Chairman and took no further executive role, but I still made frequent visits mostly to have coffee and chats with Luang Por and witness some of what was going on. I felt it was the right time to go because it had become like running a sizable corporation. Board meetings had become just like my dreaded committee meetings all over again. They involved not only Amaravati's affairs but Chithurst's affairs too. I simply wasn't good at it. Most of my working life I had been a loner, a freelancer, free to move through various skills, switching from graphic designer to art director, producer of advertising commercials, then a storyboard artist and finally becoming an illustrator – making a pretty good living on my own.

I still met with Tom socially and was very taken by dining at his club, the splendid Reform Club in Pall Mall, one of the finest

Victorian buildings in the country, a palatial masterpiece by Sir Charles Barry that has remained largely unchanged since it was completed in 1841. It is the haunt of political heavyweights, economists, historians and political theorists. Not that all of that interested me, I just liked it because it was so elegant and gloriously swanky. Tom was really enjoying building his new temple and told me that as far as he was concerned it was the high point of his career. I was very happy for him. Apparently, his choice of opting for a structure of green oak using craftsmen skilled in the manner of builders of the great barns of ancient time had caused a stir with his Engineers. They were Ove Arup, a multinational corporation of engineers, designers and consulting services for building systems. Their engineers had never seen how such a structure is assembled. What Tom Hancock achieved was to transform the entire site of Amaravati. He gave it a supreme centre from which emanated the vital supports of all its workings. Everything was connected: temple to Sala, temple to Ajahn's kuti – its very presence determined where everything else stood. By setting it all in place Ajahn Sumedho had achieved his aim.

For my part, I was content.

Kapilavaddho's original ambitions had been finally realised and Luang Por Sumedho had been provided with the infrastructure necessary to begin to fully establish the Sangha in the West. Ajahn Sumedho's work here in England over a period of a mere thirty years or so had proved to be of extraordinary weight, influence, pervasiveness and effectiveness, resulting in a constantly growing worldwide presence of monasteries of the Forest Sangha tradition emanating from the incomparable influence of his teacher, the great Ajahn Chah.



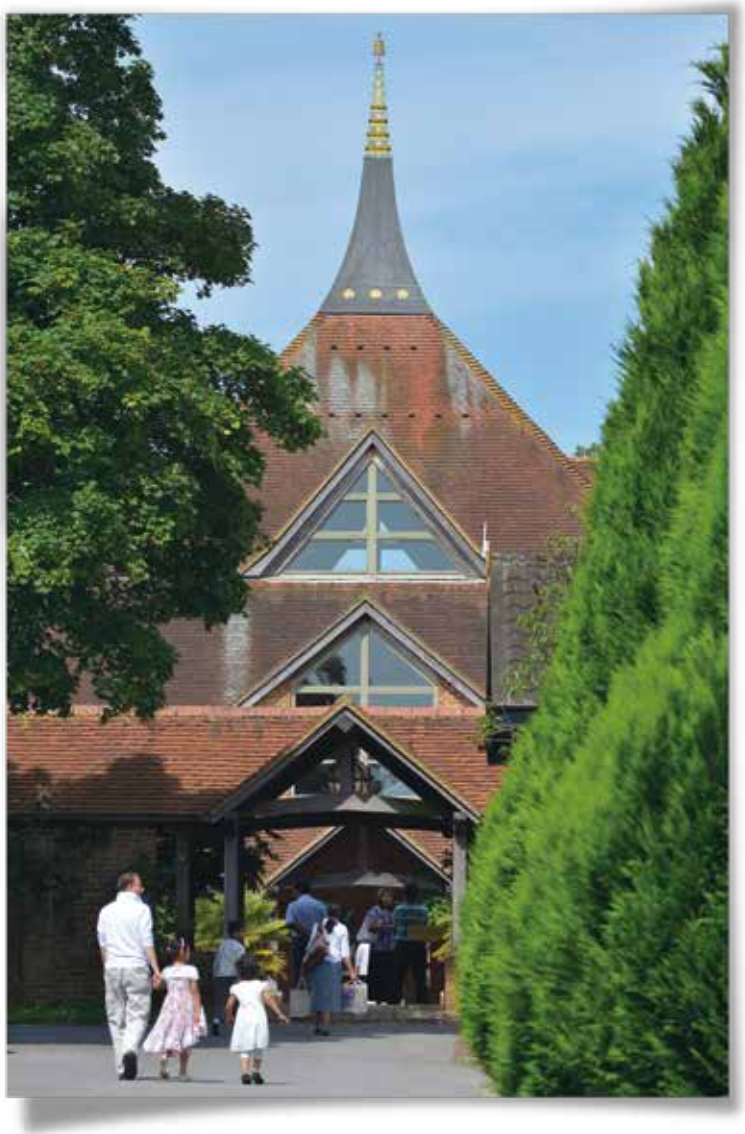
Visionary watercolor of interior of the Temple in anticipation of its construction; by its architect Tom Hancock.

Temple interior circa 2016

The first Stupa at Amaravati created by Ven Sukkato and Alan (Vipassi) in time for Opening Ceremonies May 1985, lasted approximately 10 years.

The second Stupa Brought Back from Indonesia By Ajahn Viradhammo around 1997

The oak structure of The Temple went up in 1996.



The Temple was completed in 1998

Amaravati circa 1986

Amaravati circa 2017

EPILOGUE

Since the founding of Cittaviveka in 1979 and Amaravati in 1984, Ajahn Sumedho established two more monasteries in the UK (as of the writing of this book). Monasteries and Buddhist centres directly stemming from the Forest Sangha Tradition established by Ajahn Chah are now found all over the world. These include:

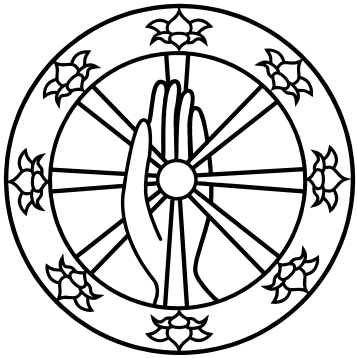
ARUNA RATANAGIRI (HARNHAM, UK)
HARTRIDGE BUDDHIST MONASTERY (DEVON, UK)
MILNTUIM (NUN'S HERMITAGE, NEAR PERTH, SCOTLAND)
SANTACITTARAMA (ITALY)
SUMEDHARAMA (PORTUGAL)
LOKUTTARA VIHARA (NORWAY)
KLOSTER DHAMMAPALA (SWITZERLAND)
BUDDHA BODHIVANA MONASTERY (AUSTRALIA)
BODHINYANARAMA MONASTERY (STOKES VALLEY, NEW ZEALAND)
VIMUTTI BUDDHIST MONASTERY (SOUTH AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND)
TISARANA (ONTARIO, CANADA)
ARROW RIVER (NORTHERN ONTARIO, CANADA)
BIRKEN MONASTERY (BC, CANADA)
ABHAYAGIRI BUDDHIST MONASTERY (CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.)
PACIFIC HERMITAGE (WASHINGTON, U.S.A.)
TEMPLE FOREST MONASTERY (NH, U.S.A.)

IN THAILAND:
WAT NONG PAH PONG
WAT PAH NANACHAT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORGE SHARP, now aged 85, is the former Chairman of The English Sangha Trust. In May 1977 he initiated the invitation to Ajahn Chah to come to England and establish the first monastery in the West in the tradition of the Forest Sangha.

George was formerly an art director, as well as being an award winning artist, painter and illustrator. His work includes illustrations for James Clavell's *Thrump- O-Moto* and M.M. Kaye's *Kipling.*



GEORGE SHARP

THE CHITHURST STORY

BEFORE & BEYOND

ISBN: 978-1-78432-134-5

PAGE DESIGN & FORMATTING: NICHOLAS HALLIDAY HALLIDAYBOOKS.COM

EDITOR TO FIRST EDITION
ADAM LONG

WE EXTEND OUR GRATITUDE TO THOSE WHO GAVE PERMISSION FOR THEIR
PHOTOGRAPHS TO BE PRINTED IN THIS BOOK:
AJAHN CHAH DHAMMA-HERITAGE COMMITTEE (SOON MORADOK THAMM);
THE SANGHA OF AMARAVATI BUDDHIST MONASTERY, CHITHURST,
SUMEDHĀRĀMA, MILTUIM HERMITAGE;
FOREST DHAMMA MONASTER: AJAHN DICK SILĀRATANO,
MAE CHEE MALITA HALIM; TERRY SHINE.

THIS EDITION PRINTED 2019

FIRST EDITION PRINTED 2018

I want to express my appreciation and gratitude to George Sharp who has been a loyal friend for all these years, from 1976 when we first met, to the present time. And I want to express my appreciation to him for writing down this history which, I agree, is very important.

If George doesn't do it, there's no one else who really can do it.

AJAHN SUMEDHO

GEORGE SHARP