Decisions I made in early 1963 changed the course of my life for the next 50 years. Swaneng Hill School was key to those decisions.

In January 1963, I returned to university to begin the final two terms of my degree course. I was studying ‘natural sciences’ - Physics and Mathematics. I would be graduating in six months time. What then? I knew that I was interested in three areas of work – international development, teaching and medical physics. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my secondary school teachers for sowing the seeds within me of an interest in the wider world. They had all served as officers in the Second World War. My headmaster was a passionate supporter of the UN and the Commonwealth. What they passed onto us boys was the message: – ‘The future is in your hands’ ‘There must be no World War III ‘. They encouraged us all to work for greater peace and understanding in the world. In 1963 that school education was to lead me to Southern Africa.

So, in January 1963 I made two important decisions. I applied to International Voluntary Service (IVS) for a volunteer teaching placement somewhere in the so-called Third World. I was interviewed by their General Secretary, Frank Judd, in IVS’s small basement office in north London. After being accepted as an IVS volunteer, Frank said to me “I think I have just the placement for you. IVS has been asked by a certain Patrick van Rensburg for a Maths and Science teacher for a new school he and his wife, Liz, are founding in the village of Serowe in the Bechuanaland Protectorate in Southern Africa”. Within a few weeks, I heard that I had been accepted by Patrick so I knew I would be off to Africa in eight months.

My second decision was to apply to the Cancer Research Dept of St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London to undertake a two years research degree course in radiation physics. I was interviewed by the remarkable Polish physicist Prof Joseph Rotblat. It was only 30 years later that I realised just how remarkable he was – when in 1995 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work for promoting international understanding between nuclear physicists from West and East during the long years of the Cold War. Prof Rotblat accepted me and so I knew I would be working at Barts for two years from 1964-1966. So my future for next three years was settled.

When I told my parents that I was going to work in Bechuanaland for a year, I expected them to know nothing about the country. How wrong I was! They immediately said something like – " that’s where Seretse Khama comes from “ I then learnt that the romance and marriage of Seretse Khama and Ruth Williams had been one of the biggest political news stories in both Britain and Southern Africa during the 1950’s. I then wondered if I would get to meet them whilst I was in Serowe. I was to do so the following year.

In February 1963, something happened that was also to change the course of my life. I met a fellow student, Jan Shapcott. Our relationship flourished over
the next 2½ years – although for one of the years, it was through weekly letters between Serowe and Cambridge. Jan was finishing her third year at college whilst I was away living and working at Swaneng Hill School in Serowe. We were to marry in July 1965. We are now looking forward to celebrating our Golden Wedding Anniversary in 2015!

Back to August 1963. I remember well the day at London Airport (not yet called ‘Heathrow’) taking a BOAC flight to Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia -with two stopovers en route for refuelling-then the long train journey via Bulawayo to Palapye. There I was met by Patrick for the dusty and bumpy ride to Serowe. How vividly I remember my first sight of Rra and Mma Swaneng and their ‘children’ – those hills that we walked up and around so many times over the years that were to follow.

I quickly settled into my white-washed rondavel next to the cooking area and the main common-room building. How liberating it was to have so few possessions. My rucksack contained just basic clothes and some teaching books. My rondavel was adequately furnished with a bed, a chair and some shelving made from wooden planks and bricks. The bed four legs were in tin cans to stop ants and scorpions climbing up into my bed! I felt I lacked for nothing. There was good company, basic food, clean water and a refreshing climate. And then, of course, I got to know the exhuberant young Batswana who were our school pupils. How much I was to learn from them over the years to come! They were to greatly influence my life, my attitudes and my values.

Life at Swaneng was very communal. We were a small group in September 1963 – Patrick and Liz with baby Tommy, Don and Joan Baker with their daughter Rosemary, and Tholo Molefe. Have I forgotten anyone, I wonder? We ate together in the common room. At the long wooden table I prepared my lessons and marked the students’ work under the not-very-strong light of the gas lamps Patrick, Liz and Tommy lived in the adjoining room until their new house was built on the top of the nearby hill.

During 1963/64 news reached Swaneng of two world-changing events. The first was sitting at the common room table one evening in November 1963 when I heard over the radio that President Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas. The second was hearing news from South African visitors to Swaneng that the Rivonia Trial had begun in Pretoria. Nelson Mandela and nine other ANC leaders were charged with sabotage and treason. The following year Mandela was found guilty by the court and sentenced to life imprisonment. This memory adds poignancy to the news just announced that Nelson Mandela has passed away.

So what are my abiding memories of my year at Swaneng Hill School from Sept 1963 to August 1964? The following remain vivid in my mind 50 years later – probably more so as one looks back on early life experiences with the benefit of hindsight.
• First and foremost – working alongside Patrick van Rensburg. I am fortunate in my life to have known some very extraordinary people. What they have in common is that they have all been committed to doing their bit to changing the world for the better. They have lived and worked for the ‘common good’. And none more so that Patrick and Liz. To share in the development of Patrick’s thinking about the real purpose of education in those common-room discussions was an immense privilege. And equally, of course, to work alongside Patrick during those hours of voluntary work – digging foundations for new buildings, digging holes for planting trees, building small dams across dongas, mixing concrete for laying the foundations for new classrooms. For Patrick personified the integration of thinking and doing. He was a man of extraordinary integrity. He would never ask anyone to do something unless he was prepared to do it himself. He always led by example. Patrick also taught me another important lesson that has stayed with me for the rest of my life. I am a person of faith whilst I felt that Patrick regarded himself as a humanist and an agnostic. From Patrick I learnt that the divine is at work in every person irrespective of their religious faith. It is people’s humanity and their dignity that is important at the end of the day.

• The early Swaneng students, many of whom were not much younger than me (and some older – I was 22) were an immense source of inspiration to me. Although to my shame, I never learnt the Setswana language, I gained so much from the culture of the Batswana whom I both taught in our classrooms and worked alongside in those seemingly endless voluntary work sessions digging foundation trenches! I absorbed so much from their infectious enthusiasm and sense of fun, their love of meals eaten together, their wisdom about life, and from looking at things from a different perspective. Although one hesitates to mention names of individuals, I have to say what a pleasure it was to both teach and learn from Swaneng’s first head student, Otsogile Pitso. I think the greatest memory I have of Swaneng students was their love of learning. I hope I’ve carried that on throughout my life – both for myself as for others with whom I’ve lived and worked, and of course, now with my four grandchildren.

• A fundamental characteristic of Swaneng’s approach to education was the importance of ‘community development’. No school or training centre should be elitist nor should it be divorced from its surrounding community. This commitment led to the formation of the brigade movement and a wide range of ‘training with production’ schemes. It was the foundation of a Cooperative Society that was most important for me. I remember the day when Patrick talked to me of his ideas to form a Consumers Co-operative Society to help Swaneng’s workers to buy basic foodstuffs – mealie meal, sugar, tea etc – at a cheaper price. Patrick asked me (as the school’s Maths Teacher, I suppose) to set up a simple accounting system for the Co-op. I remember doing so using a foolscap exercise book. What a great experience it was for me to help our workers to record their orders and then their purchases. I also have such a clear
memory of travelling with Patrick to Palapye for the Tribunal Hearing in our first attempt to legally register the Co-operative against stiff resistance from Serowe’s white traders who maintained a monopoly of Serowe’s trading sector. We lost on that occasion but subsequently won. Another important lesson I learnt from Patrick was to ‘never give up’. His quiet persistence in working for justice is something that has stayed with me throughout my life. In hindsight I know how that experience instilled in me a lifelong commitment to the Co-operative movement – and then to Traidcraft, the Trade Justice movement and Fairtrade. I like to think that living as we do now in Lichfield –‘A Fairtrade City’ – is linked to my involvement 50 years ago helping to establish the Serowe Co-operative Society.

• Serowe was, of course, the home of Seretse and Ruth Khama. Imagine my surprise when once they invited Patrick and Liz to supper – and Patrick asked me to join them! It was an evening to remember. There were two main issues that Seretse wanted to discuss with Patrick. Firstly the initiative that the South African government had taken to ask the British government to hand over the Protectorate to SA control. This as we all now know came to nothing – and set Bechuanaland on the road to independence. Secondly, Seretse could see that it would be elected politicians who would hold power in a future independent Botswana, and not tribal chiefs. And so, Seretse discussed with Patrick his plans to establish the Botswana Democratic Party. The rest, as they say, is history! But I felt so fortunate to be in the home of Seretse and Ruth that evening in 1964.

How quickly the end of my third term at Swaneng came around. It was time for me to leave Serowe. I knew I wanted to return because a year is a very short period of time to spend in a new job in a new country. But I also knew I wanted to undertake my two years of medical physics research work in London – and also I wanted to find out if my year of corresponding weekly with Jan would bear fruit when we met up again in September 1964. But I leave that to Part II of my account of ‘How Swaneng Changed My Life’.

Mike Hawkes December 2013