

## Recollections of Dr. Michael Egan

My abiding memory is of a strong-willed, assertive (when necessary) and yet humble man. Inquisitive and very good company, always with interesting insights and generous with his stories. I was always struck by his strong interest and skills in communication – he talked fondly about public lectures on geology and geomorphology that he delivered while at UEA, and I remember some of his unique expressions, such as describing patterns of rock fractures as looking like “a mistimed rowing eight”.

In Russia ('98), he took with him – much to the consternation of our hosts, who clearly wanted to have tight controls on our movements – a folding bicycle as well as a vintage compass and a Geiger counter. When the core team left the country after about four weeks, we were stopped at the security/X-ray machines (prior to checking in) because something in his luggage had set off the alarms. The authorities closed the queue behind us (about an hour long) and young men with machine guns appeared at the machines. It was evidently not the bicycle (folded into a normal suitcase) or the Geiger counter that were the problem, or even the plans of the nuclear power plant that we had with us (but had not declared), but the fact that our passports were stamped with Minatom visas and a source of radiation had been detected.

It turned out that Alistair's compass (from WWII) was luminous due to radium paint. While one of my colleagues, who had clearly had enough of Russia for the time being, became seriously concerned that we might never be allowed to leave, and I did my best to be a professional leader (“if you confiscate that, we will need a receipt”), Alistair sailed serenely through it all, regardless of the fact that he had an extra stamp in his passport from the police because he had “violated” the planned duration of his planned field work before returning to Moscow, without making an official notification. And, of course, it all turned out well in the end – despite further challenges at the check-in desk and passport control.



In Moscow (Kremlin in background) with colleagues, James Stansby (left) and Neil Harman (right)

## In Levice, Slovakia

Near the end of the project in Slovakia ('94), we were taken out to dinner and rounded off the evening with a singing contest. My recollection is that our hosts had a much broader collective knowledge of national folk songs - we probably sang *On Ilkla Moor Baht'at* at least three times after running out of ideas... Alistair was of course the perfect person to ensure we all took part enthusiastically.



Michael Egan (right) with Károl Fejk

## Alistair's recollections of the singing contest (as retold by Alice)

In later years, Alistair often liked to recall this evening. According to his account, one of the Slovak team members was a young man from a rural background, whom Alistair thought was looked down upon by older more urbane members. Yet Alistair thought the young man was therefore more likely to know old Slovak folk songs. Apparently, he proclaimed, "I call on ye Slovaks to sing us a song, sing us a song, sing us a song, sing us a song ...". Sure enough, he had a good repertory of folk songs and the others joined in. This was Alistair's covert bonding exercise for his Slovak colleagues.

## Back to Michael Egan

Relationships with our hosts on the Russian project were somewhat less jovial. At a dinner in Udomlya (a province mid-way between Moscow and St. Petersburg) it seemed that our hosts were trying to test us with an interminable sequence of toasts - in vodka, washed down with German beer. All done very politely and correctly, but Alistair was certainly cautious on both occasions about the leadership of our counterparts and their intentions. He would often share his observations and reflections with me with the aim of helping the overall management of the work.



Further impressions of Levice and Udomlya are in 'Cycling at Work'

Among Alistair's photo collection from Udomlya is a memorial to the famous Russian geographer and explorer, Nikolay Przhhevsky, whose name is associated with the wild horses of Mongolia.