

Christmas Letter 2003



Christmas comes but once a year... but doesn't it come round fast?! I know it's just a symptom of old (middle) age and Alison says that I write the same boring stuff every year, so I won't harp on!

The year started off well, with us booking a flight to Canada to visit my Aunt (Jessie). This was something that we had been meaning to do for a long time and kept putting off (as you tend to do when there is always something else to spend the money on!). So we were somewhat surprised when my Aunt announced that she would be visiting the UK herself in the spring. She had decided that she would like to spend some time with my Mum and Dad. As it turns out, spending those air miles was one of the best things that she could have done. They had a month doing all kinds of things and spending quality time together.

However, it was during Jessie's stay, that my Father tripped and fell... Jessie insisted that he visited the local G.P. and get himself checked out... it then became apparent that all was not well. My Father was eventually found to be suffering from Cancer of the Pancreas. At this point my Aunt, who had by now returned to Canada, immediately booked herself on the next flight back to the UK and was a tremendous help during Dad's relatively short illness. It is at times like this that you realise just how important family can be!

As things progressed, it became apparent that it was not going to be possible to look after Dad at home any longer, so we were fortunate in securing him a place at the local hospice, where he received the best possible care. My Father died on 27th May just a couple of weeks before his 84th birthday. It is easy to forget sometimes that he is no longer with us and of course life still goes on, but understandably it is going to be some time before Mum is able to adjust to life without him... They were married for over 52 years!

We were still able to visit Canada in the summer, spending virtually all of the school holidays away. My Aunt and Uncle (Don) gave us a wonderful holiday, touring the magnificent Canadian Rockies, Drumheller and the Okanagan Valley (BC), visiting my cousin (Jane) and family in Slave Lake, plus seeing many of the local sites. My other Cousin (Andrew) was home for the summer and was a great help keeping Richard and Edward amused with the many attractions to be found at Edmonton Mall (one heck of a big shopping centre!) Ok, I did have a go on what must be one of the biggest indoor roller coasters myself... but it would have been a shame to miss the opportunity!

On arriving back from our holiday (and still suffering from jet lag) we went to collect Richard's GCSE results, so that he could secure a place at Newcastle-under-Lyme College to study IT. He opted not to stay on into the 6th form at his school. Despite having "Technology Status", the IT facilities at Alleynes High School are not particularly good. So far this has proved to be a good move, as he is thoroughly enjoying the course and making excellent progress. When not at College, he works at the local paper shop, not only sorting papers but also serving customers, cashing up, ordering stock etc... He is now familiar with all aspects of running a small business! So, between college and work, we don't see him that much these days but, at least he has some financial independence and as 16 year olds go, he seems a lot easier to live with than some of the friends that he brings home!

Edward returned from Canada determined to use his remaining spending money on a huge K'nex Roller Coaster set. This is no longer available in the UK and had to be specially ordered from a schools supplier in the USA! So, one day in November the eight-foot model was assembled in our lounge, along with various other fairground attractions... We have only just persuaded him to let us have our lounge back! He has recently taken his first

Keyboard exam after playing for just a year. He seems to have a natural ability and can also play a conventional piano quite well. He is progressing well at school and still belongs to a local scout group and swimming club, where he continues to gain ever-increasing distance awards.

The highlight in the autumn for Alison was her Goddaughter Sara's Wedding. Weddings are just one of those things that women get all excited about! I suppose it's refreshing in a way that people still want to make such a commitment to one another in this day and age. It also gave us the opportunity to visit Gedling Church again, which was a bit like putting the clock back, although of course we were married at Attenborough which is Alison's home church and one that we do still frequent several times throughout the year.

I am working from home quite a lot these days as a "Virtual Coach" for a training program undertaken by new Accenture System Analysts. I use a PC to deliver training to the chosen faculty across Europe and support them during their delivery. It certainly makes a change from conventional face-to-face contact, plus it has given me an opportunity to dust off some old skills and pick up some new ones in the Software Development field.

Alison is now working as a Supply Teacher at a local first school. She gave up her job as a Classroom/Teaching Assistant in order to be available at least one day per week to cover for an "Advanced Skills Teacher" who visits other schools in the locality giving Teachers coaching. Fortunately things have calmed down a little now on the lead up to Christmas but only last week she was asked to work 4/5 days, which those of you who have taught will realise can mean a lot of work by the time all the prep and marking has been done!

Life in Stone goes on much the same as ever, although of course we have noticed a number of changes in the last seven years. There has been quite a lot of new housing and the town centre is thriving with lots of new shops. The downside is that free car parking is almost none existent now... but that's progress I suppose! The Christmas lights are up now, they had "the big switch on" by some local celebrity plus a couple of bands in the square and all the usual street market stalls, so I daresay that we have done our bit by helping the local economy again as one does on these occasions!

Please pay us a visit if you are in the neighbourhood... we are always happy to see old friends.

Best Wishes of the season to you and your family

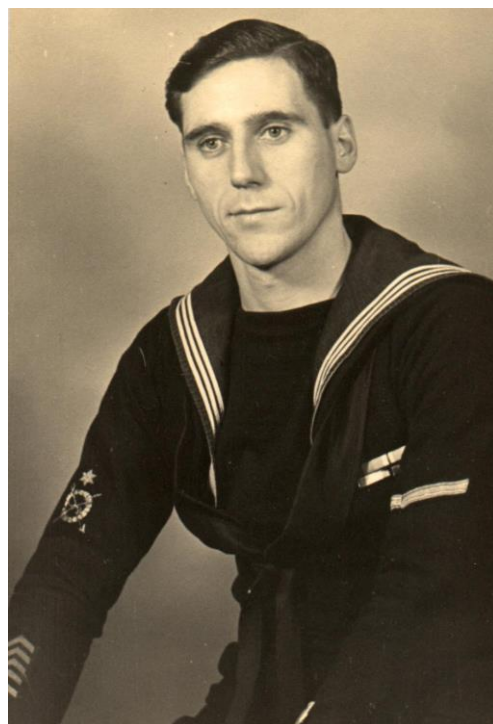
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1919 - 2003*