

Christmas Letter 2006



And so this is Christmas and what have you done, Another year over... etc. Lyrics by John Lennon and Yoko Ono of course and unfortunately played so much at this time of year, that you are probably fed up of it by now. As much as I like Christmas, I also tire of hearing Slade and Wizzard bursting forth from every shop! Believe it or not, I was 14 at the time that these records came out on 7 inch vinyl... Who would have thought that I would still be listening to them 33 years later!

And so what have we done? If you are not totally disillusioned by now, at the prospect of having to read yet "another Christmas letter", then please read on... This year has been a time for contemplation: For me, the questions have been: do I want to pursue a better paid position at work, that would inevitably mean spending more time away from the family, or even go back to BT to resume a final salary pension, but with no guarantee of a worthwhile job? Sometimes it would seem that the best course of action is to take no action (in my case at least!).

After much deliberation, Alison decided to give up her supply teaching job at Easter. Although she was only paid for 1.5 days actual teaching, she found that she was spending at least as much time again on prep and marking! She now works 2 days a week at a local nursery and voluntarily for a further day at two first schools (which she enjoys). Whilst the pay is not so good, she certainly doesn't miss the prep and marking!

Against all our advice, Richard gave up his 2nd college course last Christmas. Despite being very good at his subjects, it seems that he became fed up with "too much IT"! After a month doing nothing in particular, he registered with a local employment agency and took up a job in Telesales. Not content with breaking all sales targets; he sought promotion (twice) and now works as a rep for another part of the same business (IAWS Foods) with a company car etc. Again, time will tell if this was a good career move, but in the meantime at least he brings home a few free samples of bread and cakes from time to time! In the summer he participated in a sponsored abseil off the top of the YMCA building in Hanley, in aid of Kidney Research (see picture).

Edward is in his final GCSE year at school and finds that all the homework, coursework and revision makes big demands on his time! He is not sure what he wants to do when exams are over, so he will probably stay in the 6th form. He is still interested in electronics and has acquired so many components etc. that I have set him up with a workshop in a shed at the bottom of the garden! He has also taught himself to code in HTML and has developed a website dedicated to his interest in geometric shape making: home.btconnect.com/shapemakingclub. He still enjoys helping at Beavers and playing his keyboard, for the time being at least, although he is due to finish his weekly lessons soon.

Rather than book a holiday abroad this year, we decided to put our resources into the house... Having been a "cat free" family for a couple of years now we thought that it would be a good time to replace the three piece suite! We also embarked on a number of less costly DIY projects for example: re-cycling a neighbour's unwanted full-length mirrored wardrobe doors. Whilst it seemed

like a good idea at the time, what I hadn't allowed for was the fact that Edward's bedroom ceiling was, in fact, two inches lower than the neighbours! Projects outside the house have included re-building the fishpond and landscaping the front garden.

Rebuilding the fishpond turned out to be a challenging project. It took several weeks to complete and thus it was necessary to construct a temporary pond to house the fish (plus numerous frogs and a few newts) in the meantime. It is certainly fun digging out clay from the bottom of a pond, that despite your best efforts to empty it is filling up with rainwater! We rebuilt the shelves using thermalite blocks, rounded all the edges and then fitted it out with old carpet and underlay before installing the new liner and around 800 gallons of water! Finally I finished the top with a layer of decorative blocks taken from the patio wall (next year's project!)

Despite all the hard work I was very pleased with the finished product and the fish seem to be happy in their re-furnished home also. Possibly the hot summer weather has helped, but it would appear that our goldfish population has at least doubled (if not tripled?). We bought two more small carp to add to the two 17 year olds ("Jaws" and "Hoover"). These have now doubled in size and even the two old carp appear to have produced an offspring... Let's hope that they survive the winter!

In addition to all the DIY and gardening (a hobby that we seem to have discovered in our old age!) we did manage to find time to venture out in the summer... As far south as Culham College, Oxford - This is where Alison did her teacher training and although the college closed the year she left (now an international school), the staff and students still hold an annual summer reunion. Alison was pleased to meet with her old chemistry lecturer (now in his 80's!).

Our most northerly excursion was to Alnwick, Northumberland. We spent an enjoyable few days mainly exploring "Barter Books": www.barterbooks.co.uk (a very unusual second-hand bookshop in an old station building), the castle and gardens. The castle: www.alnwickcastle.com was featured in some of the scenes from the early Harry Potter films and the building of the "Grand Cascade", in the Castle gardens: www.alnwickgarden.com was the subject of a TV program that Edward watched, so he was keen to visit both places to see things for himself!

We were also able to spend a day in Lincoln, visiting one of Alison's old college friends and a couple of days in Nottingham, visiting all of our old haunts. It seems that everywhere these days (Stone included), all available plots of land are disappearing under bricks and mortar. This was most noticeable on our recent visit to Gedling, although I suppose we, ourselves, are partly to blame for the trend, as both our previous houses in Gedling were built on "green field" sites!

Anyway, enough of my ramblings... I must make sure that I leave space for the important message (to quote the words of Noddy Holder and Jimmy Lea):

"MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYBODY"

(follow the link below if you want to know the connection between Slade and John Lennon?)
www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/soldonsong/songlibrary/merrychristmaseverybody.shtml

N.B. To save you a bit of typing, you can go via: www.holmelee.btinternet.co.uk, where you should find an electronic copy of this letter.

Kindest Regards

Nigel, Alison, Richard & Edward

Phone: 01785 811876



The Temporary Fishpond



Reconstruction Underway



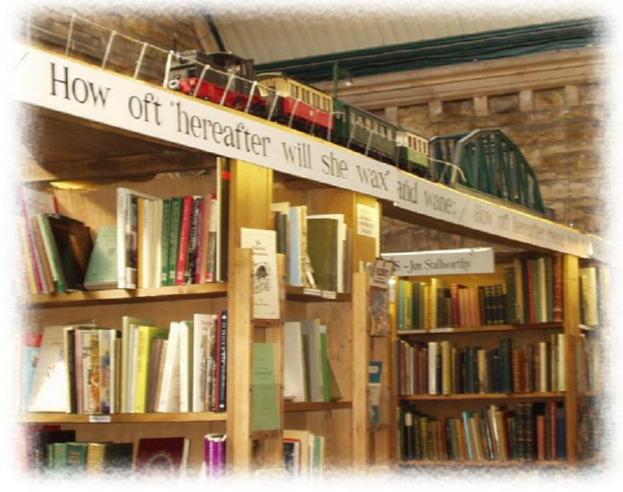
Almost Finished!



Richard Abseiling down the YMCA Building



Alison meets her old tutor at Culham



Barter Books



Alnwick Castle



The Grand Cascade - Alnwick Gardens