

Christmas Letter 2011



Well, it's mid-November and here I am in Croydon again, this time delivering some training to Ethernet Planners. Prior to that i.e. since the end of March, I have been looking after the training needs of a team based in Bristol, that provide support for engineers dealing with fibre-based ('Superfast') broadband. The central training organisation that I belong to, has recently been split in two, with half our number now working for Openreach. I have remained as part of BT Group, so therefore I can continue working on behalf of all BT Lines of Business. This suits me, because I enjoy variety, although it looks as though I will be working mainly in a design/consultancy capacity in the future.

I like to take a decent break over Christmas/New Year, as it is usually a quiet time at work and it gives me a chance to catch up on all the little jobs that I have somehow not managed to get around to during the rest of the year... Plus, of course, it's nice to spend time with family and friends over the festive season! My brother-in-law (John), like myself, has his birthday in January, so we were pleased to go over to Chester this year to help him celebrate his 60th with a party! Richard started a new job, working at 'Delice de France' (suppliers of part-baked frozen bread, confectionery, pastries, desserts and savouries to the UK Foodservice market), when his contract with n-Power came to an end. Richard has worked for Delice previously, i.e. when he first finished college, so he soon dropped back into it, "hitting the ground running", so to speak. Last month, he won an award for 'best sales person of the year' (over and above his more established colleagues)!

We've not had much chance to go to the film theatre this year, although we did get to see 'The King's Speech' in February, which we both enjoyed. We also got to see 'Black Swan', on DVD... Natalie Portman is very good in the part, however it certainly lives up to its dark reputation! In March, the drummer with the 'Stone Washed Blues Band' organised a charity gig at Wheaton Aston (the Staffs village where he lives), donating the proceeds to 'Help for Heroes'. It was a good gig, well attended and they managed to do a credible cover of Dire Straits 'Brothers in Arms'. Last weekend, we took off up to Yorkshire (North Stainley to be precise), where I was accompanying the band as "Sound Man / Laptop DJ" at the lead singer's "60th Birthday / Ruby Wedding Anniversary". I had accumulated enough points on one of my loyalty cards for a free night in a hotel, so we travelled up to York the day before, then had a leisurely drive across the back roads to Ripon and on to the gig. After spending a night in a lovely guest house in the village, we travelled back via Gedling, in order to visit Alison's cousin Geraldine. So, after spending an enjoyable weekend, I had just enough time to unpack and repack before returning to Croydon!

In May, as the evenings started to draw out, I joined my colleagues for the 'first bike ride of the season... As you probably know, I cycle to work most days, when I am in Yarnfield but it's also good to explore some of the many back roads and villages in the Staffordshire countryside. The route can be anything up to 30 miles and usually includes a stop off at a 'local hostelry' on the way home... What could be better! Edward gained his "Ocean Diver" qualification, certifying him as safe to dive to a depth of 20m! Edward, Richard and Laura still like to visit Alton Towers at least a couple of times in the summer and this year was no exception, although of course, you need to take advantage of the half price admission offers in order to avoid getting ripped off!

In June, we joined the annual church trip (going to Beverley this time) and took the opportunity to visit Elaine at Hull en-route, meeting at the Humber Bridge, before going on to Beverley, which is a charming place with, of course, a splendid minster. You may know that Alison belongs to a ladies group (NWR) and one of the challenges this year (based on the Radio 4 program 'I've Never Seen Star Wars'), was to attend a live recording of a TV show, as a member of the audience. So on the appointed day, we both travelled up to Manchester to see an afternoon recording of three 'Countdown' programmes. It was interesting to see the behind-the-scenes view and how slick the presenters are at fitting the content into the allocated time-slots.

Jeff Stelling seemed to be a genuinely nice chap and Rachel Riley is certainly a worthy replacement for Carol Vorderman!

Edward, having finished his studies for the summer (now in his second year at Staffs University), went on a SCUBA diving trip to Spain and thoroughly enjoyed himself, whilst we stayed for the weekend at Elaine's flat in Hull (re-visiting Beverly also). On our return, we began to prepare for the arrival of a black and white kitten (dark brown and white actually) named 'Guinness'. We did have a black and white cat previously, named 'Lucky'. Sadly, 'Lucky' by name but not by nature as he got run over, not long after moving house 7 years ago. I think we are past the worst of the "mad kitten" stage now and our house seems to have survived remarkably intact. We have tried to confine him to just 3 downstairs rooms of the house but he is an opportunist and never misses the chance to run through an open door and hide in the most inaccessible places!

In July and August, we learned to live with the cat, Edward showed another of Alison's NWR ladies (Marilyn) the 'Art of Origami' (her challenge) and I took advantage of the good weather to paint the house. The house has UPVC windows, barge boards and fascias but the soffits still needed painting as did various other bits of woodwork. The front is half rendered and we also have a wooden storm porch and garage doors which needed staining, so the job dragged on into September and beyond, but I'm pleased with the result and hopefully it will be good now for a few more years to come. We also had some professional family photos taken by a friend and previous colleague from work (<http://tonynorman-photo.co.uk/>). It's something that we've been promising to do, ever since we had significant birthdays... Edward was 18 at the time and will be 21 next!

In September, we were pleased to take advantage of an opportunity to stay at our friend's (Diana & Bill's) new apartment in Madeira. It was a relaxing break and their apartment (<http://holiday-rentals.co.uk/p829717>) was truly luxurious, with everything you could wish for, including a laundry room, which was fortunate really, as our 11 year old washing machine packed up just before we left! The island is very beautiful although extremely steep in places (due to its volcanic nature) but we would definitely like to go back at some time to explore some of the places that we didn't get to see this time around.

Richard and Laura decided to take a late break in October, going to Corfu, whilst we started to tidy up the garden in readiness for the winter. I had not had a chance to cut the conifer hedges this season, due to working away, house painting etc. so the local green recycling facility benefited from a car load of cuttings... How do people manage without an estate car I wonder?

Alison continues to work at the Nursery 1-2 days per week as well as working at a local first school, either voluntary, as a Supply Teacher or sometimes as a Teaching Assistant. She is very conscientious and I'm sure her flexibility is appreciated.

We went into Stone last Thursday to witness the switch on of the town's Christmas lights, before going square dancing... We graduated in 'Mainstream' back in July, which means that we should now have mastered most of the usual moves but there is always something new to learn! On Saturday, we went into Stafford, to see the switch on of the lights there (with fireworks also this time!). It's easy to be cynical these days and just consider the commercialisation and exploitation of Christmas but beneath all of that and particularly in smaller communities I believe that the true meaning of Christmas does break through! So with that thought in mind, may I wish you and your families...

Happy Christmas & a Prosperous New Year!

Nigel, Alison, Richard & Edward



Square Dancing Graduates



Alison at the eastern-most tip of Madeira



Family photos taken by a friend



Guinness



Laura & Richard

Flowers in Funchal



Edward & his SCUBA diving companions