



# CHRISTMAS LETTER

## 2013

It's November and here I am in Exeter, delivering training for Openreach Ethernet Planners. It seems that I get asked to do this around the same time each year... which I don't mind, because it's good to deliver 'real' training, to real people (face to face), instead of talking to a computer screen. Don't get me wrong, virtual/e-learning has its place, but you can't beat classroom based training and if you could then we wouldn't need any schools! Mind you, if the government gets its way, they will have forced all schools to become 'academies' or similar before too long!

Anyway, back to Exeter... this is the second time that I've been down here this year. The first occasion was back in July, just a few days before our niece, Natasha's wedding. It happened to be a week when Exeter University was holding graduation ceremonies. Consequently, all the hotels in the vicinity were full with parents who'd travelled to see Sons and Daughters receive their degrees. So where did I end up? Answer, 24 miles down the road in Torquay, staying in a 'Fawlty Towers' style seaside hotel. Having said that, it was a smashing week weather-wise, there was a nice outdoor swimming pool and the owners were very friendly, so I'm not complaining!



There are constantly new challenges for the ever diminishing technical training team that I'm a part of, so life is never dull. One of our senior managers left recently, after 5 years working for BT (along with our CEO, who took his £9M bonus to become UK trade minister). It seems that 5 years is considered to be a lifetime to spend with any one company, if you are an 'upwardly mobile' sort of person... Some of us have worked for BT (in one form or another) for almost 40 years and there's one man in our office that's been here for almost 50!

At the other end of the spectrum, there's Richard, who is really just getting established in his career. After a few shaky starts he seems to have finally been recognised by Phones4u and now manages a team that deals with high level and written complaints. As for Edward, apart from his year's work placement with Capula, he hasn't even started his career yet, but is now completing his final year at Staffs Uni. He thoroughly enjoyed his summer in the USA and has been asked to go back and do it again next year (before he has to work for a living!).



Last Christmas was spent at home and over at my Sister and Brother-in-Law's in Chester on Boxing Day, plus Beauty and the Beast (rock 'n' roll style) at the Stafford Gatehouse Theatre... talented musicians that could act and also add all the traditional pantomime fun for the children.

In January, Edward started the process of submitting his USA summer camp application, uploading a video profile etc. followed by jobs fairs and visa application.

In February, we had a trip around Keele observatory. Unfortunately it wasn't a clear night, so we didn't see too many stars, but the Prof. that led the evening was very entertaining and 'down to earth' in his approach to complex scientific concepts, such as The 'Big Bang' theory... Mind-blowing stuff!



In April, we used up our remaining air miles to book a flight to Barcelona, which was one of the limited number of destinations that we could fly to with BA... It turned out to be a good choice, as there is much to see and do in the capital of Catalonia. Gaudi's influence is everywhere in and around Barcelona, from the magnificent Sagrada Família, to the colourful Park Güell. We also hired a car and took in many of the other sights, including Montserrat, Tibidabo and the Olympic stadium. Around this time, we were asked if we would like to join a group of friends from Bakewell Drive, which is where we lived when we first moved to Stone, would you believe, nearly 18 years ago!

The 'Bakewell Friends' organise quizzes, and other social events. Since joining, I now arrange walks every month or so in the local countryside and I also put my home built barbeque to the test in July, by cooking large quantities of steaks, burgers and sausages for everyone with relative ease. On reflection, it was probably slightly over engineered (I used concrete lintels to support the charcoal tray, instead of the usual protruding bricks) but it is extremely solid and provides a useful platform when cutting the laurel hedge!



The garden is a constant source of work and enjoyment in roughly equal measures and provides many challenges. I spent some time over the summer rebuilding the petrol lawnmower, so hopefully that should be good for another 10 years. The shredder (also left by the previous home owners), comes in really useful at this time of the year for recycling the wood cut from the willow tree, apple tree and other shrubs. We compost a lot of garden waste, but also constantly fill the garden recycling bin and regularly visit the local tip with car loads of conifer cuttings etc. (again, this waste is recycled).

The weather was fine for the local carnival in June and glorious in July for Natasha & Stuart's wedding, when my aunt (Jessie) came over from Canada and travelled with us to

Marbury Church. Edward was on summer camp at the time but was able to pass on his congratulations by phone. The reception was held at Iscoyd Park and the festivities continued the following day with a hog roast at Overdee, so a good time was had by all. For Richard and Laura, this was just one of three weddings that they attended this year!

After finishing his work placement at Capula, Edward took off to Pennsylvania to work for two months at Camp Wototka, which is a 'science' camp for boys aged 7 to 15. The boys come for 2, 4, 6 or 8 weeks and are grouped by age, with up to 8 boys looked after by two adults. Edward went to the camp partly to teach electronics and take part in the many other activities, but also to visit different parts of the USA in the following month. The details of his tour would fill a book, but suffice to say he had a great time and is really looking forward to going back again next summer.



In September, Edward returned from the USA, Richard and Laura went off on holiday to Crete and we took advantage of the Indian summer by having a few end-of-season barbeques. The weather remained mild into October with plenty of colour in the garden. In fact, there are still flowers out now and we are almost in December.

During the half-term week Alison and I spent a couple of days in Liverpool, via Port Sunlight, where there is an excellent museum, exhibiting all the fabulous items collected by this famous soap manufacturer. On the other side of the Mersey, we followed the Beatles Story, 50 years after it all began and then went home via Crosby beach, where Antony Gormley's 100 figures are slowly being eroded by the sea.

Last weekend we visited Alison's friend from college (Diana) and her husband (Bill) who took us to see the 1000+ seals that come onto the Lincolnshire coast at Donna Nook to give birth to their pups at this time of year, followed by fish and chips at Sutton-on-Sea... What could be better!



Once again, I've been volunteered to organise the works Christmas meal, which is a bit of a thankless task, but hey, someone's got to do it and no doubt we'll have a good night out at the company's expense, so who's complaining?

Once again, we hope that you are able to enjoy Christmas with your family/friends and have a prosperous and healthy new year. Looking forward to hearing your news.

*Nigel, Alison, Richard & Edward*