

Christmas Letter 2016



I always think that Christmas is a good time to reflect on the year just gone and look forward to one that's yet to come (almost poetical?). Last year, I was presented with a long service award by my line manager, having worked for BT (in one form or another) for 40 years. I suppose I've been lucky really, to have enjoyed that sort of stability of employment, but I would like to retire at some point. My line manager took a voluntary redundancy package, soon after presenting me with my award and various other people have either retired or moved on, leaving our team somewhat depleted, so I think it's more a case of 'when', rather than 'if' I retire.

Meanwhile, here I am in Sevenoaks... It seems that Openreach don't have enough trainers available to meet the demand for Ethernet planning courses again, so I'm here, doing delivery, for the second time in as many weeks. I don't mind really, it's good to be back in class... It makes a pleasant change from designing eLearning packages and reminds me why I came into training in the first place. I must admit, having worked in this area for over 20 years, I can't think of anything else that I'd rather do.

Enough of my ramblings... What about the rest of the family? Well, Edward is still studying for his MSc at Staffordshire University, but has opted to drop to part-time hours, due to his health. He's been following a strict gluten free diet for over a year now and it seems to have made a slight improvement, so we remain optimistic. He organised a trip to Malta for his Scuba diving club in May and is hoping to arrange another one next September (when the sea is warmer). This September, he went to an Origami convention in Swansea. He was particularly keen to go to this one, as he wanted to meet the guest speaker (Maria Sinayskaya) to discuss her [modular designs](#). So, we took the opportunity to go down with him to share the travel cost and spend a couple of days seeing the sights of South Wales.



At the beginning of the year, Richard announced his engagement to Victoria. So, they're now busy making wedding plans, in between working and running their home. They both work long hours... Richard looking after his team based at Keele and Victoria, now working as a theatre nurse with a private healthcare provider. Earlier in the year, they moved from their ground floor apartment to a much larger penthouse apartment in an older building just a few yards away (complete with its own poltergeist). The site is a former hospital, set in beautiful grounds in the Churnet valley, near Leek. Leek, being a much larger town than Stone, has a good range of independent shops and restaurants, in addition to the usual offerings. So, it's a place that we like to visit when we're up that way.

Alison now works 3½ days at her school, after finishing at the nursery, when the original owners sold the business. Her time is split between providing scheduled (and sometimes unscheduled) teaching cover and working as a teaching assistant in different classes across Key Stage 1. Her school is now part of a MAT (Multi-Academy Trust), which is run as a business, with no local authority control. I'm not sure how well the idea will work in the long run... After all, the NHS was forced down a similar route (with hospitals managed by trusts) and look where that got us!

In February, I attended a Learning Technology event at Kensington Olympia... The buzzword is 'Gamification'... It seems that linear eLearning is boring for the 'Y Generation' (who are used to playing labyrinth style computer games). I have to admit that the end result can be impressive, but I'm not sure if the benefits justify the increased development cost? Speaking of technology, Staffordshire University's computing department moved off the Stafford campus this year, after 50 years of pioneering research in this area. So, I was pleased to be invited, with Edward, to a couple of guest lectures on the subject and reflect on just how far things have moved on in my lifetime.



In June, I was called for jury service for the first time... It was an interesting few days and the experience does at least give you some confidence in the criminal justice system. Later that month, we were invited over to Colwick Hall, for a meal to celebrate my sister Elaine and husband John's ruby wedding anniversary. It was good to meet up with cousins and friends again and recall that hot summer of 1976 and my uncle Mansell's joke about 'Ten ton of tinted toilet tissue', destined for 'Timothy Whites at Tottenham'... 'Our sole agents'!

This year has been a bumper year for evening bike rides with my colleagues (and ex-colleagues). Over the summer, we clocked up well over 400 miles, traversing the Staffordshire countryside via the many lanes, canal towpaths and disused railways. Ironically, some of the most picturesque local villages lie directly in the path of the new high speed rail link from Birmingham to Crewe... The price of progress I suppose?



We've enjoyed a couple of short breaks again this year. Apart from a church day trip to Llandudno, we had an enjoyable few days in Christchurch. We walked from Boscombe Pier to Bournemouth and then through the lovely gardens to the coy pond upstream. The lower garden hosts the annual illuminations ([thousands of tea lights](#)) and we were also there for the [Poole Harbour Festival](#) (live bands etc). Our trip to Swansea (combined with Ed's Origami convention) allowed us to visit some interesting NT properties in the area, including [Dyffryn Gardens](#) and the [Aberdulais Tin Works](#), where water power was harnessed, to drive the wheels of the once prosperous welsh tin industry.

In May I went with Edward to the Lyceum Theatre, Crewe, to see [Suggs](#) (of Madness fame), who was touring the UK with his one man show. It was good to learn about the things in life that influenced his songs. It seems that 'Baggy Trousers' really was based on his school days in a 70s London comprehensive. He told his story through songs, accompanied by Deano, who played a piano and various other instruments. If you're interested to know what sort of music Suggs likes, then I can recommend '[The Suggs Selection](#)' (bought for me by Ed). Instead of going to the Panto this year, we've booked to see Showaddywaddy at Stoke... I last saw them in Nottingham at the 'Commodore' around 1980. Apparently, it closed in 2002 and was subsequently demolished and replaced with a local Sainsbury's! The thing that I seem to remember the most, is the warm up act, an Aussie playing a twin-neck guitar... He was very good, but everyone just talked over him while they waited for the main act. When the main act did come on stage however (accompanied by pyrotechnics), there was absolutely no chance of talking (you wouldn't have been heard even if you shouted!).

We've not been to the film theatre much this year, however we did see 'Eddie the Eagle' and enjoyed it, so if you've not seen it, keep a look out for it on disc or perhaps watch on demand? Likewise, 'The Theory of Everything' and 'The Imitation Game' are well worth a watch. Not so sure about 'Steve Jobs' for entertainment value... It certainly doesn't put Apple in a good light, but well played by Michael Fassbender and Kate Winslet is good in the supporting role.



Whilst I was working away, Edward and Alison went to the monthly pub quiz organised by Bakewell Friends and they were on the winning team, so that means we'll have to devise the questions for a future quiz! We held our usual summer BBQ and I've organised a couple of walks for the friends, although it's always difficult to choose a date and time that suits everyone. As I write, they've just arrived back from the Christmas lights switch on in Stafford, with some video clips of the Motown band that were playing in the square. Joe Clarke ([our local gold medal winning canoeist](#)) switched the lights on in both Stafford and Stone this year (Note: If you watch the above video clip, you might see someone that you recognise). Meanwhile, I opted to stay at home and tidy up the garden, after the annual pruning of the willow tree, apple tree and other shrubs... So, we now have seven bags of shreadings to put back on the borders.

Speaking of Joe Clarke, Stone town held a celebration, when he returned from the Olympics and Alison and Edward were able to get his autograph on a souvenir postcard and the picture above. Alison taught Joe at Pirehill First School when he was a pupil, back in 1998!

Well that's a bit of our news for 2016, as always, we look forward to hearing yours.

Wishing you all a Happy Christmas and a Prosperous New Year.

Nigel, Alison, Richard & Edward

P.S. If you want to view a PDF version of this letter (with working hyperlinks), you can download one from: www.holmelee.co.uk/xmasletters/2016.pdf.

