

Happy Christmas 2006



C & D with Matilda and Nick - France August 2006

Dear Friends,

Does it seem, I wonder, if each year the things our children do become more important and the things we do ourselves relatively less? And if so, does it matter? Ah well, I shall wait to see what Matilda and Alistair wish to add before I come back to that.

A mixed year for Nick and me. Started well, with a new job for Nick at Nottingham University, into which he settled quickly and has remained very happy. An interesting trip to Morocco in April and a lovely celebration for Nick's 30th in May. Then things got a bit tricky. My department (Clinical Psychology Outpatients) was threatened with closure, which subsequently happened, despite 3 months of hard campaigning. Most of the department has been made redundant in consequence, but I have been extremely fortunate in being offered a redeployment job. So from Jan 2007 I will be working as a Child Clinical Psychologist! A bit of a change and lots of new learning, but also a great opportunity to broaden

my skills and experiences. And our other good news is that, all being well, we will be becoming parents some time around the end of May! We are delighted and excited and already realising that children turn your lives upside down, even before they arrive, as I have had pretty awful sickness and am only now, at 15 weeks, back to working 5 day weeks! We are still very happy in Earls Barton, having been warmly welcomed by the "Barton Leeks" (Locals) and got ourselves thoroughly involved in village life and activities (perhaps too involved.....anyone would think we were related to Debbie and Charlie!). We really feel we have fallen on our feet here and all in all the year is ending very happily for us. We hope you have had a less eventful year than us and that it is ending on a happy note for you all. With love and best wishes for a safe and peaceful Christmas and New Year. Matilda and Nick.

"And so we come to the Southport news. It doesn't feel like long since this time last year, but on closer inspection it also feels like we have done a lot since then, so it must have flown because we were enjoying ourselves. Once Christmas 2005 was over our wedding started to return to the front seat and the planning proceeded at an ever increasing pace. I had no idea how much needed to be done leading up to the big day. Luckily, family and friends were very supportive and generous and Michelle had secretly been planning the wedding for the last twenty years. I won't pretend that the whole process was entirely stress free but the end result was everything we hoped for. We had a wonderful day and fantastic honeymoon in Vancouver and the Rockies. We've now completed two of the three supposedly most stressful activities but are happy to see how Matilda and Nick find the third before we do. On returning from Canada Michelle started work on her fifth class, and compared to last year's five year olds I think she is preferring the challenges of this year. She has also discovered, after going on an activity holiday with year 5, that she enjoys walking up rivers and getting muddy much more than she imagined she would! I'm now Network Managing at the same school and am currently looking at the possibility of starting a free-to-access wireless metropolitan network to cover all of Southport. We're looking forward to spending Christmas in our newly decorated lounge and are hoping to start our biggest house project to date: the kitchen and dining-room extension, in the spring or early summer. Happy Christmas and love from Michelle and Alistair."



Alistair and Michelle 5th August 2006

If I were to say that my plan at present is to wind down my medical work and wind up my unpaid work through a combination of politics and things that I do for Quakers I could go on rather smugly and say that it is all going to plan. Somehow it doesn't really

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feel like that. Yes it is true that I am doing less Medical Practice than I was, but sometimes the General Practice almost feels like light relief between the other things! After two years of trying to sort out the governance of a Quaker fund I have decided that my advice was not being heard and have resigned from two posts as treasurer. At the same time I have taken on three national committees so that probably takes up at least as much time, and means that I travel to London more frequently and to York occasionally. The York trip this week gave me a lovely sunny drive over the Pennines to the Mental Hospital that Quakers have been running there for over 200 years, and which I last visited about ten years ago. Unfortunately the motorways were rather busy and I had to dash back to get to a Council meeting. As a result I was sitting pretty well all day and my back suffered accordingly. So, overall Quakers have taken up quite a lot of time this year. And the Politics.. I am still not sure if it was a good idea getting involved in that. I have been asked to take over the chair of the constituency executive committee, partly because they couldn't think of anyone else, and partly because there are a number of personality clashes and someone thought that I might either bang a few heads together or act as peacemaker; I have yet to decide which it is to be. So that is another challenge. Next year we are due to have District Council elections, but at the same time we have been encouraged to put together a plan to merge our council with five others, so I can see myself treading the streets and knocking on doors for weeks on end, only to have the elections cancelled at the last minute. I had a fairly rough time earlier in the year when I was trying to run a project group looking at the possibility of improved sports and leisure facilities in Church Stretton. There were thoughts that a new sports hall might be funded by the profits from building some houses. And that brought all sorts of objectors out of the woodwork. Some would be happy to have a Sports hall but didn't want houses. Some would accept houses so long as they were affordable houses. Some wouldn't mind houses but didn't want them to fund the sports hall, and some didn't want anything to be built at all. So all sorts of rude comments were made about me, at meetings, and in letters to the local paper. It has gone a bit quieter now, but I suspect that it will blow up again when they discover that even if we have failed to get the sports hall, it is likely that the houses will be build anyway!

And so, as I say General Practice sometimes seems more rewarding. One lunchtime on a bright September day I walked in the sunshine between surgeries and looked down on the the weeping willows and wind on the water of the river Severn in Shrewsbury. The day before Debbie had been brought a present by a patient who wanted to say "thank you for giving me back my self-esteem". So General Practice is not too bad, though I have not such a short memory that I have forgotten the stresses of trying to run my own Practice, and indeed Debbie is now pretty heavily involved in the management of her Practice, and is having to grapple with the annual changes to targets imposed by the government. And even now, some patients are challenging, some problems intractable, and the enormous range of things at which one is meant to be an expert is rather frightening.

And so to Tuscany. We walked from town to town through woods and fields, through vineyards and olive groves. In the heat of June, we carried lots of fluids, binoculars and cameras. We sat under a tree eating bread and cheese, drinking red wine from a plastic bottle and spitting cherry stones out into the field (well, we each did some of those things). We had an excellent view of a nightingale in full song, and saw several bright yellow and enthusiastic singers which I thought must be escaped canaries, but turned out to be serins. The hill towns with their strange towers were fascinating and fun, but the second best one was the best, because the best one was too full of tourists. Just think, 700 years BC the Etruscans had the time and skill to make little bronze figures as ornaments.

It was birds and walking and ancient remains again in October; this time in Western Crete. The remains this time Minoan, and even older: up to 2,000 BC. We walked for seven hours looking for vultures, and though we saw lots of buzzards and had a lovely walk through rocky hills with goats, through glades of sweet chestnut trees, past fields of olives and through villages where all the locals exchanged a cheery greeting and oranges fell onto the roadside, we only saw one distant view of a vulture, until we were nearly back at our Eco-village. Suddenly we saw three vultures just above us, and when we finally got back there were seven sitting on the rocks up against the evening sky and three more circling effortlessly above.

So you see, life goes on. I made my maiden speech at a LibDem National conference. I spoke against the replacement of Britain's nuclear bomb, and now the cabinet has announced that they are going to allow a debate on the subject, but they are going to go ahead anyway. And everyone from churches to politicians says that climate change is the big issue, but I wrote about that last year, so I shall finish with our love, and greetings for a Christmas that brings peace, friendship and joy, Charlie and Debbie