

Dear Friends,

Christmas 2005

On Monday I was standing at over two thousand metres in sunshine with a glorious clear blue sky, though it was cold: even in the valley it had been -6 C. We could see from the Massif Central in the west to the High Alps in the east, and way to the south seven vapour trails criss-crossed the South of France. I wondered if we would look back at this time as the time when the world went mad with flying; flying everywhere: burning oil as if there were no tomorrow. The world will be a very different place if/when all our transport uses electricity. Cars, trains and boats can all run on electricity, but we may have to give up flying, and the world will be a much quieter place.

When asked what I would do when I had more time, I have often answered that I would spend more time leaning on a gate looking at fields of stubble. So how have I done this year?

In my first year after leaving the NHS Information Authority I finished up doing more work than I intended, so in order to be able to say I was too busy to accept locum work I thought I would take on a few other things. In March I joined Meeting for Sufferings, the archaically named national trustee body for the Religious Society of Friends. This involves going to London for a day most months, with about a day of reading papers before hand and a report to give to Monthly Meeting the following week. The good news is that I can't get to London and back in the day, so most months I enjoy staying with Matilda and Nick on the Friday night and travel by train from there to London on the Saturday.

In April I took over as Monthly Meeting treasurer, so now I am treasurer not only of our own little local meeting, but also of Worcestershire and Shropshire Monthly Meeting. That means a lot more work at certain times of the year, but probably averages out at about a day a week.

Then the silliest of the lot, was getting involved in local politics. Our local Liberal Democrat District Councillor had got a new job in Brussels, and needed to resign as soon as they could find someone they could persuade to stand in the by-election.

The by-election was called just after we had lost our local Lib Dem MP in the General Election, but our ex-MP was very keen to continue to run things in the area. He volunteered, nay insisted, on preparing the publicity material. Unfortunately he found the campaign meetings boring, so he didn't come to most of them. He had his own firm ideas of what he wanted in the publicity and rather less firm ideas about delivering the materiel on time! Some people thrive on chaos and last minute panic. I don't.

The canvassing was hard work, but at least in part interesting. I believe that we knocked on every door, and some people said that they had never been visited by a politician before. Some of my ex-patients were delighted to see me, and only one person was really rude. Between us we spent about 124 manhours to cover the patch once, and then I started trying to visit a few of the people that had been out on our first visit. Meanwhile some of the volunteer delivery people were getting near to rebelling, because they felt that their local knowledge was not being used properly. The whole thing was really a pretty good exercise in how not to manage. But I got over three times as many votes as the Conservative, and am now coming to terms with the frustrations of being a local councillor. I am not sure if I shall have the stomach to stand again!

As a result of all this frenetic activity, my GP locum work has reduced, though I am still averaging over three sessions a week. Debbie's Practice has settled down after the arrival of a new partner and a new practice manager, but it still seems to be fairly demanding, and she may give up her long-standing cardiology session at hospital so that she can spend another day in the Practice.

My Christmas letters usually have a theme, be it walks, or holidays, or meals. I am not sure what this years theme is. Maybe something about hectic lives, and displacement activity, but that is a bit heavy for Christmas. We have, nevertheless had some walks, holidays and indeed meals.

Two walks stand out in my mind today. One was that one last week in France The other was a sunny afternoon when we walked along the heughs at Auchencairn after uncle Henry had treated about thirty of us to lunch at the Balcary Bay hotel. It was a fine way to say goodbye to a generous, entertaining and amazing polymath. That was June, just a year after he died.

We have also had some holidays, of course. I had my pocket picked in Prague, which was annoying, but the city is worth looking at and the Prague Police kindly wrote to me after we got back. Who would have thought that I would find a Czech girl in Sandford Avenue who could translate it for me?

In the summer our trips included some time with Alistair and Michelle.. ah, time to move on to other peoples news.

And so comes the instalment from Southport. It's been another busy year here for Michelle and me. On New Year's Eve I proposed to Michelle in Dublin and luckily for me she accepted. We spent the next couple of months preparing and are pleased to have reserved our local Church and also a venue for the reception. As soon as we'd confirmed these, we got a little distracted and our "keeping our eyes on the house market" turned into looking around 37 houses and after a few highs and lows ended up finding a lovely house

next door to a colleague from work. We've already planned what we'd like to do to it over the next 10 years and have finished decorating the master and 2nd bedrooms. The bathroom needed a lot of work and we ambitiously (considering this house was our first experience of DIY) started to undertake it a few weeks ago. After working on it every night since then (including grouting the floor until 3 a.m. on Wednesday) it's nearing completion and is all starting to feel worth it. We're really pleased. Work is going well for both of us. I got a promotion at the beginning of the year and have managed to convince the school to migrate to using Macs. We now have over 150 and it's been brilliant both from a management and user point of view. We're looking forward a couple of weeks off over Christmas: a break from both work and working on the bathroom before we start planning our wedding for next year. It looks likely to be another eventful one.
Love Alistair and Michelle.

I am unsure whether I should retain the right to write a slot in this, since I am now an old married woman living in deepest Northamptonshire, but thought I would keep the tradition going a little longer. As I have been more-or-less in bed all week recovering from wisdom tooth extraction the distraction of writing is very welcome! Having said that, the thing which probably differentiates 2005 most significantly from almost every other year to date is that very little of great drama has actually occurred. This has come as a great relief and I have thoroughly enjoyed not having to study at weekends and evenings, being paid a salary and being able to take annual leave for reasons other than thesis-writing. So far, working life is suiting me well! Nick and I are very happy in Northamptonshire. The countryside is less dramatic than Church Stretton or Villard, but you can walk all day without really having to think about it or plan. We have had some beautiful walks: on summer evenings with local friends and their baby, in frosty sunshine crunching over the fields and collecting sloes and blackberries on autumn afternoons. We have been welcomed into the local community and are singing/playing/organising various activities and events, particularly over Christmas. Wash House Cottage is still not quite decorated, although we are hoping (fingers crossed: it could still go horrible wrong) to have it all done by Christmas, which we are hosting for the first time this year (BYO pizza could still be the menu)! Then next year's project is The Wash House itself. We have already had some nasty/expensive/interesting surprises, such as a 400 year old well under its foundations and there seems little doubt that it would be both easier and cheaper to knock it down and start again. But being in a conservation area we are not allowed to do this and of course it would be a great shame in terms of historical interest. Although I sometimes wonder what would happen if a freak attack of vandalism occurred and we woke one morning to discover that someone had knocked the whole thing down for us.....! Nick's main news is that he is moving jobs in January to Nottingham University. Fortunately an investment in a folding bike means that he can do this without our moving home (bike AND train, you understand, not just bike!), so we will be staying put for another year, with more beautiful walks, more log fires and more decorating, we hope. With all best wishes to you all for a safe and peaceful 2006. **Matilda**

So before my fingers freeze up, I shall draw my autumn ramblings to a close. Perhaps with a little pompous homily on the purpose of life and the value of friendship. Or maybe with the thought that maybe the advantage of having the children grown up and away from home is that I get to scrape out the brandy butter bowl!
Our love to you for Christmas, and for the coming weeks and months... *Charlie and Debbie*

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