

WISHING YOU ALL A MERRY CHRISTMAS

From the Southampton Anthonys [Christmas 2008]

Dear friends and family: this is written by Chris on behalf of Liz, Clive and Hugh.

Risking allegations of *autoplagerism* I start by noting that this is being written on a grey wet windy November morning. We have just received our first Christmas card [from Karen and Roy], provoking seasonal panic. The past year is not so different from last year but with fewer dramas. My happy endorphins have just been raised by hearing Maria Callas appropriately singing the mad scene from Lucia di Lammermuir; so off I go.

Christmas was celebrated as usual with various oriental waifs and strays, providing a vegetarian challenge to the generously tolerant turkey [Hugh says that is no way to speak of his mum]. Sadly for us Rams and Alan and Lydia have now returned to Chennai. Almost immediately after this wonderful Christmas I was off to Tirupati in India for 5 weeks teaching molecular biology in Sri Venkateshwara University. After all the inevitable stress of preparation and strain of abandoning my home and family it was so heart-warming to be met at 2.0 am in the exciting heated dusty noise of Chennai airport by my friend Gopi to be driven off to a couple of days recovery on the beach at Mahabalipuram. This joyful experience was sadly balanced five weeks later when I was delivered back to the airport at 2.0 am by my friend Madhu. The previous visit had been very special as Liz came with me. This year arriving in Tirupati I was greeted by Guest House staff, and University staff and students with the disappointed question "But where is madam sir?" I will be repeating the experience next year in January/February, this time accompanied by the small booklet of snapshots of the birds of Tirupati that I have been compiling this year from 5 years of pictures [see also website, below].

Madam has had a good year doing her thing in Highfield Church, playing flute in Laura's band, organising her home group, mentoring, praying [for you], working on the PCC and Diocesan Synod, and looking after me and Hugh and our friends. As if keeping fit by cycling or walking everywhere is not enough, she swims 30 lengths of the University pool every week. Our camper van continues to serve us well and Liz shared it with a neighbour and friend at the New Wine Conference this year in Somerset. Another highlight of her year was a 'retreat' in Holy Island off the coast of Northumberland. A stained glass window in the little church there commemorates her Great Grandmother on her mother's side of the family and has provoked internet searches into family trees and led our greying web-wise woman to the satisfaction of knowing that her family once owned much of the Island. The retreat was 'silent' but subsequently made up for by enthusiastic recounting of the wonders of the place. Liz's 18 year old Peugeot finally died [the traditional disaster of a broken timing belt wrapping itself round the big end - whatever]. By a wonderful piece of logic this led to its replacement by a newer Mondeo for me [OK, I know, Me as Mondeo Man], leaving Liz to enjoy driving our 18 year old Rover which remains too healthy to put down yet.

Although the School of Biological Sciences will not vacate the Boldrewood site until summer 2010, they are saving money by moving out of as many rooms as possible, so I was finally evicted. I left 3 metres of book shelves in the office of a generous friend but had to 'decant' the rest of my academic life into the small space I have been allocated in Oaklands Way. Much had to be finally discarded including 35 years of academic diaries; a final flick through them reminded me of what a lot I have to be grateful for – especially for all the great colleagues, science collaborators and competitors, and thousands of students. The Boldrewood bureaucrats have not noticed that their process of 'Decanting' [their term] obviously implies that the best is decanted – leaving the unwanted dregs behind. I still attend research talks and coffee in the staff room whence I can survey the demolition of the best lecture theatres in the University. A lowlight of the year was the need to take part in a celebration at the University of Warwick of the life of my best friend in Science who died in January [Sir Howard Dalton]. I was later contacted by a member of the audience – "for 30 minutes I listened to your lecture wondering if you are the boy from my class in Watford

Boys' Grammar School". I was, and so I was captured to publish my lecture in his review journal. I suffered a minor operation [hernia] in April [boy, how I suffered] but was assured by Hugh that it was nothing compared to his major heart surgery of last year; of course I explained that I am more sensitive than him. I have continued producing publicity materials for the City of Southampton Orchestra and playing wonderful music with them, a highlight being a performance of Dvorak's Cello Concerto with an outstanding young cellist Pei-Sian Ng; our most recent concert contained a brilliant bit of programming [I chair the program committee] – Britten's Sinfonia da Requiem, VW's the Lark Ascending and Elgar's 1st Symphony.

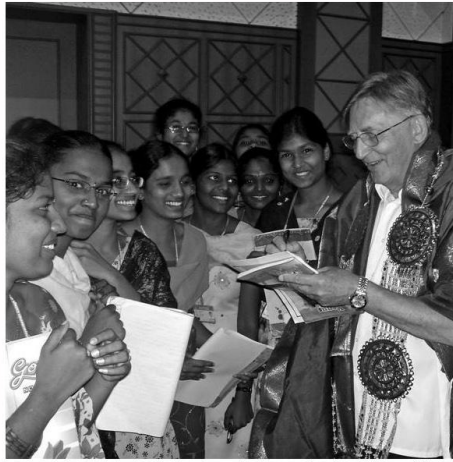
Hugh has had a good year, completely recovered from his huge heart operation, maintaining his fitness by walking 3km to work at the hospital library, often accompanied by Liz. While I was safely away in India Hugh fulfilled a small dream and rescued a cat from the Blue Cross. After a vetting process more thorough than that for adopting a baby, our house and family was grudgingly conceded to be suitable for Peggy, although doubts were expressed about the absent parent. To protect my birds she is only allowed in the back garden where Hugh has trained her using a toy with feathers on a string to leap up and grab hedge sparrows from their nests. She has [as they do] taken over MY house but I have to concede she is usually a positive addition to the family. Hugh continues playing violin in the Southampton Concert Orchestra, a highlight being an outdoor performance of the 1812 overture with fireworks and genuine cannons from Waterloo, manned by gunners in original uniforms, . He is going through a stressful time as he faces possible redundancy, inevitable with the easy electronic access to academic literature. He is remaining cheerful and relishing the prospect of changing his job through the University redeployment scheme. A highlight of the year was his visit with a friendly insider to McLaren's headquarters in Woking. AND the final formula 1 race of the year that, in the last seconds of the last lap, sealed the World Championship for our hero Lewis Hamilton. AND Barack Obama was elected in the same week, allowing us to love and admire the USA again.

Clive's busy life continues in the Police, stationed near his home in Hythe on the edge of the New Forest. Our grand daughter Kenny grows most enjoyably [as they do] with Tiffany's children Carrington and Bailey. On their recent birthdays they were introduced to Lego which Clive found so stimulating that he went out and bought himself a bulldozer kit. He also raided our loft to find some of his old stuff [You see, it **is** worth keeping stuff in the loft].

Our summer highlight was, as usual, campervanning down through France, starting with Liz, Me and Hugh and losing Hugh half way through as he returned by air from Perpignan back home to earn our pensions. We set off in June during a long period of rain which meant that our Dordogne river kayaking was impossible, the river and its rapids being metres higher than usual. We found alternative idyllic sunny lakes further south, and eventually forgot our wet English summer in the Pyrenees and on the Mediterranean coast. After decanting Hugh [leaving the dregs?], Liz and I drifted gently back up through the Languedoc and the Auvergnés, eating, drinking and walking, to home.

Liz's brother's daughter Clare chose the wettest day in Wales this century to marry Andy in a mountain barn, the reception being held in a flooded tent in Pembrokeshire. Spirits were not dampened of course and we had a wonderful time which we followed by visiting an old cellist friend near Aberystwyth on our way home.

As you see, it has been a very special year for us all. Thanks to you all for your friendship and support, with love from Liz, Chris, Hugh, Clive, Tiffany, Carrington, Bailey, Kennedy and Peggy the cat.



One good reason for going to India



Liz's Great Grandmother in Holy Island Church



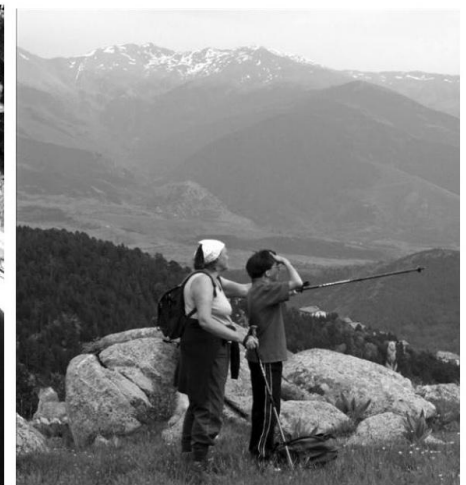
Hugh playing Bach to an appreciative audience



Peggy the cat during bird-catching training



Grand daughter Kenny with daddy



Liz and Hugh in the Pyrennees