

## 2015-2018

Just to be clear: this is a combined 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 Xmas newsletter from me. In other words, the 2015 newsletter is 37 months late, the 2016 newsletter is 25 months late, the 2017 newsletter is 13 months late and the 2018 newsletter is 1 month late. So the 2016 newsletter is a 32% improvement on the 2015 newsletter, the 2017 newsletter is a 48% improvement on the 2016 and the 2018 newsletter is a 92% improvement on the 2017. I'm quite pleased with my progress (and my ability to lie with stats). Why so late? I'll try to be brief...

The last 4 years have been, to say the least, eventful. 2015 was largely taken up with a prolonged conflict with my then manager (the one from hell) including grievances flying both ways and significant amounts of stress. The good news is that this ended when our team was shut down and I was offered a generous redundancy package. The bad news is that I remained pretty much unemployed for about a year and a half. I then began doing temporary work at the "other" Bristol university (UWE, or University of the West of England), first in timetabling, then in research governance, then with the Strategic Programmes Office (I didn't know what it was either when I joined). They liked me enough at the last one that I was offered a fixed-term contract, so now I'm a real boy! (for the next 6 months anyway)

Matthew left home to go to Coventry University in September 2015 and, after a bit of a roller coaster ride, dropped out at the end of the year to take the vacation from education that we'd wanted him to have in the first place. He decided to stay in Coventry living with chums and trying (slowly) to get a job. After 5 months or so of never quite getting one we all agreed that the best option was to move back home where he'd spend less of the money he doesn't have and we could gently prod him in the direction of employment. This worked, and he's been doing the archetypal millennial job of barista at a local coffee shop. We're all pleased while at the same time recognising this as not a long-term kind of thing.

Tricia's job at the University of Bristol has remained the one constant in all this, although she gets a dreamy look in her eyes whenever someone says the word "retirement." It's safe to say (with two deadbeats in the house) it'll remain a dream for a little while longer, although there is a plan afoot to reduce her hours to something less exhausting.

This newsletter could easily turn into a book, so I'll just give a brief list of the high points of the past 4 years – or at least what I can remember or piece together, which means it'll mainly be trips and theatre and choir. The spasmodic nature is due to the fact that it's cribbed together from failed attempts at writing less-belated newsletters...

2015

Having fallen in love with Iceland back in 2014, I made a unilateral decision to go there on my own for 5 days in February 2015. The result: I fell in love with it all over again, only this time with snow. I snorkeled in 1 degree Celsius water in the continental divide, I explored a lava tube, I attended the funky Sónar music festival and I ate some absolutely stunning food. I have been chomping at the bit to go back ever since I returned. And in case anyone out there is thinking of going, I've written up a little guide to Reykjavík which you may find useful.

In February my old friend Kim (Adkins Motz) Johnston died at the untimely age of 53. Cancer.

April 2015 arrived and with it a double family landmark: I turned 60 and Matthew turned 18 (I can assure you that Tricia is still 39, although this will doubtless have to change when Matthew gets a bit older). Appropriate festivities were held, though for me the real celebration was a trip back to Rome at the end of April, where I learned that you don't want to be there on May Day. It was astonishingly crowded (Piazza Spagna was shoulder-to-shoulder) and hot, but we nonetheless managed to work our way down my list of must-see Caravaggios (including a few I'd never seen before) and must-eat gelati. We also saw Keats's grave, which was quite moving, and discovered the monstrous glory that is Eataly, a multi-floor temple of organic, natural, artisanal and just plain great food which has transformed food shopping in Rome.

The misery of another Cameron government elected in May was slightly alleviated by seeing Matthew vote for the first time. May also saw our choir compete in the first Upton choir competition, winning a stunning moral victory, i.e. losing. The next few weeks included a visit from Raphaële, Matthew's school formal at which he was voted the person most likely to appear on Jeremy Kyle (North Americans, think Jerry Springer), another film school reunion which delightfully if hectically coincided in time and location with the London Pride parade, an invasion of Shaun the Sheep statues in Bristol, a visit with the hard to pin down Duncan in London and our end of year choir concert.

Somewhere in the midst of all this we managed to see Harriet Walter and Antony Sher in *Death of a Salesman* at Stratford, a theatrical high point for 2015.

Then a family visit to Canada, as Tricia and Matthew were getting pretty sick of me going off on my own. Visits in K-W, Toronto, staying at Sandi's lovely cabins and campground near Madawaska, visits with cousins and the family reunion in Belleville, the Toronto Aquarium and a nostalgic return to the Lion Safari at Rockton.

The Choir's summer concert was a biggie: the Bruckner F minor Mass. Well, most of it: we didn't have time to learn the 55 page long Credo. It feels good to have done it, but I hope



We came 3,500 miles to look at a rock?

I never have to again. The Christmas concert was far more manageable and, truth be told, far more fun: we did (most of, again) Britten's Ceremony of Carols.



Self-portrait with fish.

2016



Matthew practising his horizontal turns.

I spent 2016 trying and failing to get a job. Fortunately, my redundancy package meant that, aside from that, I had a pretty enjoyable year. And boy, did we travel! It began with a brief trip to see Oscar and Angela in Bern with Matthew to do a bit of skiing (and falling down in Matthew's case). At the end of January I was lucky enough to be picked to present a spoof paper at the first UK BAHFest, held at Imperial College. If you don't know what this is, check the website ([bahfest.com](http://bahfest.com)). You might even find a video of my talk.

Being an even-numbered year, there was another FASS reunion in Waterloo in February which I managed to get to. While in the motherland, I managed to visit numerous relatives and friends and achieved a long-held wish when I met up with my grade 4 teacher and thanked her for being so wonderful to me when I was 8 years old.

March was a bit less delightful when my scheduled root canal turned into an extraction, but on the plus side we went to Paris at the end of the month to attend the wedding of the daughter of our friends Gail and Kent, and in April Raphaële came for another visit.

May saw the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our wonderful theatre, the Bristol Old Vic, which is (just in case I haven't mentioned it to you) the longest continuously running theatre in the English-speaking world. And a great theatre it is: in April we saw Jeremy Irons and Lesley Manville in a fine production of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The anniversary was marked with an all-start gala celebration which was capped when, in the crowded bar after the event, one of the horse puppets from *War Horse* walked in to the amazement and delight of all.

May also saw Tricia's 99 year old mother fall and break her femur. This would kill most normal humans, but for Pat it just meant a couple of weeks in the hospital and a few more in rehab. The silver lining was that she decided it was time to move out of her house and into supported accommodation and in the autumn we were able to move her into a wonderful Quaker-run home only a few minutes from our place.

At the end of May our choir once again entered the Upton choir competition and actually won an award! We've not been back since...

This was followed by a few days at the Hay Literary Festival with Gilles and Nina. Then, in June we went with Matthew to Inishbofin, a small island west of Galway in Ireland, to hang out with Susanna and Lee and see the end of another festival. At the same time, Andrew and Ulrike came to house sit for us. Unfortunately, the kitchen's new roof was still in the process of being put on, so their holiday was less than ideal.



June, of course, was Britain's opportunity to show the rest of the world what gullible fools we are by voting to leave the EU. I'm too depressed to say any more about this.

July was the choir's summer concert, and another biggie it was: the Brahms Requiem. It's not until you learn and sing something like this that you appreciate just how good it is. Everyone should have the opportunity.



After a couple of months not travelling (shock horror!), we went to South Carolina as guests of the aforementioned Susanna and Lee and had a marvellous (if rather hot) time. My personal highlight was the surprise trip to the Moog factory in Asheville NC.

Come October and I had another solo jaunt, this time to go back to Crete for the first time in over 20 years. I was simultaneously amazed at how much had changed and how much I still recognised. I also managed a couple of days on Santorini and one in Athens. The only problem now is that I want to go back again right away.

December was a full and thrilling month, beginning with going to Stratford to see Simon Russell Beale in *The Tempest*, perhaps the most mind-blowingly wonderful Shakespeare production I have ever seen. We watched it again a couple of months later at a live-to-cinema performance and it was still amazing – though not as amazing as being there had been.

The choir's Christmas concert was once more Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, only this time we performed the whole thing. After that it was necessary for another holiday, so Tricia and I popped off to Rome for a few days (while we can still do so without a passport).

And the year ended with another cancer death, this time my friend Janet Graham, who was only 51. Janet's husband Harry died in a horrible plane crash in 2003, leaving her with three children under the age of 9 to raise single-handed. The youngest is now 17 and they are all now orphans.

2017



2017 began with sad and happy events. Our cat died at the not very ripe age of around 10 due to a thrombosis; and Tricia's mum Pat celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. She received the requisite card from the Queen which she duly ripped up and threw away the next day because she thought it was ugly.

In March I took a pruning course in an attempt to get better at looking after the fruit trees. It was a failed attempt, but I still enjoyed the course. I also went to the Royal Albert Hall to see what's left of The Who perform Tommy. I'm glad I went, but it wasn't the great musical event I was hoping against hope that it would be: Townshend has turned into a miserable old git, but Daltrey still tries his best to make it real.



Some wonderful visits in the springtime: Duncan and his wife Mee came from Thailand and passed through Oxford at high speed, and Heather came and stayed with us long enough to see a

play in Stratford and be serenaded in Anne Hathaway's garden with a sonnet.

Around that time the choir changed its traditional 2 concerts a year format by adding a third spring concert where we wheeled out the Fauré Requiem again. It seems so much easier now that we've done all those other works! We've subsequently decided to go back to 2 a year.

But the big news was that in April Tricia suggested that if I couldn't find a permanent job I could still work at temporary positions. I applied to join the temp pool at the University of the West of England and within 2 days had a full-time position timetabling courses. Surprisingly satisfying: like being paid to solve puzzles.

Summer saw a reunion of some high school chums in Canada in June and a week in Brittany in July. That month the choir performed the Verdi Requiem, which was a monster of a piece to learn – and a very successful concert.



We were visited by our German friends Jens and Uta in August. Also that month our chum Kim came over from Australia doing a bizarre research project where she re-enacted a week in the life of an 18<sup>th</sup> century actor, giving us all lots of chances to do play readings of very odd pieces from the past, e.g. Colley Cibber's version of Shakespeare's Richard III.

Come the autumn and I finally got Tricia to deliver on a promise she's been making for over 20 years: to take me to Sicily. It more than lived up to the hype: incredible food, scenery, food, architecture, food – and we saw the Montalbano house! Did I mention the food?



The Breton artist perfectly captured just how humdrum slaying a dragon can be...



Salvo wasn't in.



Steve where he is happiest.

My first temp posting at UWE ended and a second one began immediately, working in research governance and repeating the pattern of really nice colleagues and really poor pay.

The year ended with the choir's Christmas concert. No big piece this year, but rather a collection of standards and newer pieces.

2018

And at last we come to 2018, which sadly began with the third cancer death of a friend in just under three years. Ulrike Burgdorf-Wedman, Andrew's lovely wife, was only 56.

January was also the month of a visit from our Canadian friend Adrienne, followed by another trip to Canada for the FASS reunion which was, as ever, wonderful.

I decided to do something a bit different for my birthday this year and hired a little 18-seat cinema in the centre of Bristol. I showed *La Jetée* (unfortunately the horrible English version) and *Providence*. Don't know how everybody else felt but I had a great time.

April came and with it Alex from the US (even if she is Canadian). We took her to see a great production of *Mary Stuart* with Juliet Stevenson at the Theatre Royal in Bath.



June 2001



June 2018

May we received another visitor, this time Gail coming from the US. I also had a bit of a nostalgic thrill, going to a venue in the centre of town to see *The Rutles* (well, the 50% still performing as *The Rutles*).

June's high point was a wonderful holiday in Italy for the three of us (yes, Matthew grudgingly agreed to a fabulous all expenses paid break), largely due to our wonderful friends Oscar & Angela and Susanna & Lee. We saw a reasonable amount of Puglia and drank wine and ate seafood and swam and had gelato, all the things you ought to do by the Med when the weather's wonderful.



When we returned our choir had its most ambitious concert yet: Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. Yes, there's only about 25 minutes of choral singing in it, but, come on, it's the 9<sup>th</sup>! And we were very pleased to see an audience member waving an EU flag during the finale.

It had been so long since we had a holiday, that we went off to Lille for a week in July as guests of our friend Francine. While there we achieved a long-term ambition of touring some World War I sites, including Tyne Cot (12,000 graves), Langemark (44,000 graves including a mass grave of 25,000) and the truly overwhelming memorial at Vimy Ridge. Seriously, you don't have to be Canadian to be moved to tears at this remarkable structure. Everyone should see it once.



It takes a miracle to find a parking space in Puglia.



In August I resumed something I had only dabbled in about 40 years ago when I began taking yoga classes. I chose the type of yoga very carefully: I looked at various classes and picked the one closest to our house. It's having an effect but, damn, your body sure takes a lot longer to respond than when you were younger...

September was a good month for local theatre: *Touching the Void* at the Old Vic (not a complete success, but fascinating how they

transposed mountain climbing to a stage) and *Henry V* at the Tobacco Factory (a great production with the inspired idea of making the Dauphin and Katharine one character so that Henry marries the very person who has most fiercely been waging war against him).

But for me the cultural high point of the year (if not the decade) was the return to the UK of Ry Cooder. Words fail me.

The other notable events of the autumn were a few trips to the dentist to fit a crown and a bridge, a trip to Sardinia (because we don't get to Italy nearly enough) and the realisation of a dream I've had for 47 years...



In November I abandoned my family for 3 weeks and went to Cambodia to see the temples at Angkor. 6 glorious days touring amazing ruins and eating (amongst other things) crickets, scorpions and tarantulas followed by another 5 days in Pnomh Penh where I was variously charmed, delighted and utterly horrified. Before reaching Cambodia I had 3 ½ lovely days with my nephew Chris in Bali, watching gamelan and shadow puppet performances, scuba diving and getting used to wearing a sarong in very hot weather. And after Cambodia I had another 3 ½ days with my old friend Duncan in Bangkok, checking out the cultural highlights and trying to decide which of the young Thai women hanging around with old Western men were actually women.

As a side note, preparing for this trip I determined that in the past 10 years I've set foot in countries outside the UK 38 times:

- Canada 13 times
- France 5 times
- Italy 4 times
- Switzerland 3 times
- Germany 2 times
- Iceland 2 times
- Belgium 2 times
- Spain 1 time
- Denmark 1 time
- Ireland 1 time
- USA 1 time
- Greece 1 time
- Indonesia 1 time
- Cambodia 1 time
- Thailand 1 time

So *that's* why my pension looks so bad...

The year ended with two notable events: the choir, instead of a traditional Christmas concert, performed the St. Nicholas cantata by Benjamin Britten. It's a wonderful piece to perform, and surprising that it's not better known: quite a lot of fun to sing and to hear.

The second notable event was a sad one for me personally. In 2004 or 2005 I had started up a film club at my son's then primary school (the one he shared with Cary Grant and Paul Dirac). In 2007 we expanded it to include films for grown-ups on 6 Friday evenings over the course of the



Me doing my best to make Chris look taller.



school year. The kids' film club ended some years ago due to health and safety concerns, but Big Screen, as the one for the old folks was known, continued without interruption for over 11 years. The licensing situation, however, has changed and it's now not economically viable to continue, so the last Big Screen was held in December. *Sic transit gloria mundi* or, to put it in the vernacular, Gloria got carsick on Monday.

And that's it until (hopefully) next year...