

As Christmas draws perilously close, and every day's post brings fresh waves of despair at not having sent any Christmas cards yet, we're nevertheless thankful not only for the opportunity to enjoy another year but for all the wonderful things that spring from that first Christmas.

The highpoint of the year was marked by a service at Kelbrook in the summer in which Tracy was made priest, marking both the end of a long process and the beginning of a new chapter. Where future chapters will lead we'll have to see, but it will not be boring! For Tracy it's been a busy year, with 15 weeks away from the family, in Nottingham, as well as a conference in Stockholm and other shorter journeys. She's glad (and, given dad's cooking, → so are the rest of the family) that next year will not involve so much travelling. We hope.



Tim also has had the usual sort of predictable year. A proposed concert tour in Brazil was postponed due to a dozy British Council representative over there, but a number of other overseas concerts made up for it – especially one in Bach's "home" church of Eisenach. During the Summer he was suddenly summoned back to Norway as Chair and Director of Undergraduate Studies at a university that was setting up a new BMus course and a few days before the students arrived suddenly remembered that they didn't have anyone to design and run it. Tim spent 10 weeks commuting between Kelbrook and Norway (flying out on Mondays and back on Fridays) until things were running smoothly, when he switched to a Director of Studies job at Lancaster University (rather nearer home).

Beth (16) has now finished her first term of 'A'-level work and seems to be surviving. Indeed, judging from the number of funny stories she brings home from life in 6th form, it all seems to suit her. The ordeal of GCSEs passed safely, without taking too much visible toll on



Beth. A week before the exams she was busy re-ordering her bedroom; panic revision was at any rate not in her calendar. She ended up with a dozen or so GCSEs, with a fair sprinkling of As, so everyone was very content. Still delightful company, she specialises in not understanding jokes and then suddenly laughing a few days later when she finally "gets it". She works a few hours a week down at a local stables and generally enjoys horasing. She's also been very pleased this year to enjoy the company of her oldest friend:

Marianne (16). It's a long way from her home village of Måndalen (she was one of our neighbours there), but Marianne is staying with us for one school year, studying 'A'-level subjects together with Beth and improving her English. We're all enjoying the experience, and life in this family is generally so full and exotic that an extra 16-year-old really is neither here nor there.

Matthew (14) divides his attention between reading, bell-ringing and being in a good-natured way disgustingly good at all things scientific and mathematical (and apparently at everything

else at school as well. In the family shuffle that was necessary to accommodate Marianne, Matthew has moved bedroom to the back of the house (appreciably colder than the front and not properly heated) so he's looking forward to being able to thaw out in the warmer weather.

Andrew (11), starring as a butler in a school play this week (but don't give him a job - he's dropped glasses in two of the performances so far!) is counting down to a new school after the summer. He's chosen a fairly academic C of E school, slightly out of district but not as far as Matt and Beth's school. Still fascinated by everything to do with farming, he was to be found at market last Saturday chasing sheep around the ring.

Katie (5) Having sorted out both hearing and vision last year, Katie (now seeing and hearing) has become even brighter and more extravert than before. She loves school, gymnastics, parties – life in general in fact – and keeps us all occupied.



Assorted reptiles (100s of) are living with us, but don't ring Rentokill just yet. They're supposedly rare creatures (though fairly common in this house) in connection with zoo breeding programmes. Just to add a little spice to life and frighten unwary visitors.



So what does life look like here? Take this weekend as a typical example. As well as the seven of us, we're looking after two extra infants and having two independent adult visitors – one former parishioner up from Norfolk and an old family friend visiting from Wales. Another friend from Wales popped in unannounced this evening and has just left. Around all this, Tracy has meetings, Beth is babysitting for someone else, Tim has a rehearsal, Katie has gymnastics. On Sunday Tim and Tracy are leading/playing for a combined total of six different services in three different deaneries in addition to an outdoor nativity play (with real inn, shepherds, animals, genuine baby (pre-born), stable and so on - just waiting confirmation from the angels). And then there's all the usual things to do as well. Wonder why I'm on the last minute writing to you? Next year, though, is going to be peaceful. Tim and Tracy will sit every evening on a comfortable sofa and watch television, read or play board games, lazily swatting the occasional pig as it flies too close. Seriously, though, we wouldn't have it any other way (though it might be fun to try!).

We do hope that all is well with you all, and even though we've not seen you this year we still live in hope!

With every blessing and all our good wishes for Christmas,

Tracy, Tim, Beth, Matt, Andrew, Katie, Marianne, various dogs, reptiles and visiting clergy