



We've just put some more logs on the fire and gazed out of the window to look for inspiration. Not that there's a huge amount out there – big, snow-covered mountains under a deeply dark-blue sky with a full moon and millions of stars, each dazzlingly bright. And the usual four lights at neighbouring farms that are the full extent of "civilisation" here in the valley. Since our dramatically-complete failure to even write a Christmas letter last year we ought to describe the whole year-and-a-half since we moved here, but since we've told you most of it along the way and we keep our news fully up to date and extravagantly illustrated on <http://family.rishton.info>, we're not going to.

But we'll allow ourselves 2010 words to summarise the year. The year started coldly, with 5 feet of snow falling a week before Christmas and remaining intact until well into March when it started to diminish. But we were snowed in even for the Good Friday service in April. Driving was interesting, even with all the snow equipment. We bought a little petrol-driven snow clearer but even that didn't (as expected) ensure an immediate heatwave. The lakes froze to the extent that there were frozen fish lying on the surface. Tracy nearly wrote off her car on a stalagmite. We ran perilously low on both firewood and milk cartons (fire lighters in Norway consist of cardboard milk cartons stuffed with wood shavings and half a cup of diesel – wash cup before using it for coffee, especially if smoker). Worryingly, as early as October the snow was back in force, closing roads until motorists who were caught on the hop got round to changing their tyres. But from Spring to Autumn we had generally fantastic very hot, dry, sunny weather, with the thermometer well up in the 90s for weeks on end and we've had to go swimming in the river to cool down, except whenever we've had visitors, in which case it has poured down. The farmers in the valley have said that if there's another drought next summer they'll club together and pay the tickets for anyone who wants to come and visit us - as this is the one way of ensuring rain. But they also want warning of any visitors planned around harvest time, as they'll need to get the hay in before they arrive.

The year has featured a lot of animals. The garden is constantly full of sheep, so we got a couple of our own as well – Andrew and Katie had a lamb each which provided much entertainment. There's also a family of deer, a few hares, loads of red squirrels and lemmings, a lynx that was seen trotting up the drive one night and tracks of both moose and wolf. There's an eagle that lives in the cliffs at the top of the garden and every kind of bird comes to tap on the kitchen window if we've been lax about putting food on the bird table. And endless supplies of mice which keep stealing mousetraps.

We've enjoyed following the news. News in Norway is quite different from anywhere else. The national news headlines stories like "Priest forgot to put clock forward: service started 5 minutes late", "only 4 out of 12 guests made it to 8-year-old's birthday party because the road was closed due to avalanche" and – bizarrely - "Mysterious masked person is visiting Norwegian churches, imitating Martin Luther. The police are hunting for him". Or of course the visit of President Obama to receive his peace prize, when a Statoil security officer attempting to rehearse security procedures accidentally staged an armed robbery of a Shell petrol station, causing complete mayhem there. The regional paper is even better. Crime was reported in our local city: "A police foot patrol discovered early Sunday morning at 1.45 two young men who were walking through the centre of Egersund and who had kicked several lamp posts. They did no direct damage, but the police stopped the two to warn them". Or again, "a police patrol attempted to stop a motorist at 3.30am, but he got away at high speed on his moped". Another (or maybe the same?) criminal mopedist took two trays of eggs from a roadside stall, ignoring the "honesty box" payment system. The thief was however traced by following the trail of broken eggs along the road. The high-speed getaway isn't always the thing. The paper also reported a crisis at our local borough council meeting. When the Mayor declared it was time for the customary sandwiches, coffee and coconut and

prune cake with yellow cream filling the councillors as usual sang grace before eating. One member of the council challenged this and the rest of the meeting was devoted to discussing whether grace should be dropped at future meetings. The proposal was heavily defeated.

But what is there to do here? A surprisingly important part of every-day life is our forest of twenty-odd thousand silver birches spread over 20 acres or so of the mountain that goes with our farm. As this forest provides all our heating we go out regularly with the chain saw, cutting down trees and dragging them down to where we can load them into a trailer and take them to a neighbour's industrial-strength log cutter and splitter. Forest notwithstanding, we've planted four copper beeches in the garden - one for each of the children - so we're going to enjoy watching them grow over the years to come. There's canoeing, fishing and swimming in the river and lake, a trip on the lake with a neighbour to look at some of the old farms along the banks, a sea-fishing trip, days on the beach, the mid-summer bonfire by the lake at which all the village gathers for a midnight barbeque (and optional swim). There's fire practice (we're so far from the nearest fire station that there's no point at all phoning them in the case of fire: we have to ring the neighbours instead. We all have access to the key for the little fire station in the valley, with its pumps and hoses, so we have an annual practice at using it) and a fortnightly club for all the children in the valley. One evening there was a dozen 14/15-year-olds in our lounge (parents exiled upstairs), watching some film or other and eating popcorn; they'd all made their own way here, so there was a neat line of tractors outside the front door. Teenagers ring each other: "You coming out muckspreading?" and Andrew and friend Kjell Arne spend time up in the mountains looking for lost sheep (very biblical). Tracy has bought a loom, which is now installed in our cellar.

It's funny to see the reactions of people who come here for the first time. After the half-hour journey from the nearest village, along a single-track, winding lane over (and from time to time in primitive tunnels under) the mountains, with overhanging rocks on one side and a steep drop down to a succession of cold-looking lakes on the other, some people arrive grey and trembling whilst others say: "wow, it's fantastic". Most say: "I'm glad I don't have to drive it every day". The road's given some trouble this year. They surfaced part of it this spring (the part furthest away from us and nearest the village). Because the road is narrow (one car's width) this means that they simply closed it, without warning, for an hour at a time while they re-surfaced a section. One day we arrived just as the road had closed. A few cars pulled up behind. Were people stressed about it? No, of course not. Some people wandered down to the river (it was a bit cold for swimming), but others produced picnic baskets and coffee flasks (which with typical Norwegian generosity they shared with anyone who wasn't so equipped), and soon there was a fair roadside buffet, with rolls and a good variety of toppings. Quite a social event. After an hour the road was re-opened and we all piled back into our cars and drove off. Later in the year, though, there was a whisper in the valley that the Highways Agency was closing the road to the village for avalanche-prevention work - from 8am to 9pm every weekday for the next two months. As of the following day. "Surely it can't be possible", we all said. "Someone would have mentioned something", we all said. "How will the children get home from school every day?", we all asked. We emailed the Mayor and called in to see him at 8 o'clock this morning. It was true - and they hadn't told him either. He was rather cross about it. There was talk of re-opening the old school in Ørsdalen for a couple of months. But it was all sorted at the last minute with special permission for the school bus to drive past (the workers took an extra coffee break at that point, which they didn't object to). And so for two months we lived "on an island", allowed out from time to time. The work's finished now, but we never quite trust that we'll be able to get out. There's now a rumour that some work is to be done on our tunnel ...

Andrew and Katie have both settled in very well at the school in the village. There used to be a school here in Ørdsdalen but the parents of the valley have voted to send the children off to the village in order to give them a chance to mingle with what our kids call the "townies". Apparently this is not a great success at integration – the Ørdsdalen children tend to stick together even there. But of course, the school is not exactly like the British model. Apart from the obvious – no uniforms, children call the teachers by their first names and so on – there's a lot of outdoor activities (survival in the mountains classes etc). One day there was a note home from school reminding us that for the forthcoming school trip in the mountains (Andrew's class) all pupils should have with them a good, sharp hunting knife. As the summer holidays approached, Katie's class spent one day down at the beach, followed another day by a class party for children and parents by the lakeside, with barbeque and swimming or fishing in the lake. Andrew had a class trip this year to Poland. In Andrew's class there's a regular exchange of banter between pupils and teacher about good and bad makes of tractor ...

Tim and Tracy both spent many days this summer painting the house. We borrowed a hydraulic platform in order to do the highest bits (such as the boards at the highest points on the roof). So we started our wedding anniversary at quarter past midnight with Tim wielding a scrubbing brush heavily laced with white spirit, removing paint from Tracy's hair.

We've talked about our impressions of living here as compared to Britain. A few of the main points are:

- The way things are. We've enjoyed the relatively non-confrontational way of things in Norway. Even the politicians disagree politely: "you might be right, of course, though I feel that ..." There's been no economic downturn or recession in Norway, either: everything is "business as usual" and ordinary people are unaffected by what's going on in other countries.
- Community. There is a sense of community in this valley. Everyone consults with each other, knows each other's business, and helps each other.
- We are enjoying having absolute silence. You can sit outside on the balcony in the evening and hear nothing - no traffic or general clamour. Just the river (except when it's frozen as it is at the moment). We also get absolute darkness (except in mid summer when it doesn't go dark at all): we have no street lights, no light pollution in the sky, and only a scattering of distant farms. It's all very peaceful and we love that.
- Not everyone would, of course: we must be vaguely nuts.
- Security. Not just a matter of not bothering to lock the car. When an unfamiliar car comes into the valley people actually ask each other "do you know who that was?". Last autumn I was in the bank in the district's main centre, Vikeså (half an hour's drive away). The sole assistant at the bank had gone out on some errand or other, so the place was unattended. And on the counter were rows of bundles of thousand-kroner (£100) notes. As I stood and waited for the assistant to come back another customer came in, and we joked about the bank going over to self-service. The assistant eventually came back in through the front door and apologised for making us wait ...
- Despite the winter's snow, the weather's a lot dryer than we've been used to for the past few years, and the summer is hotter and sunnier than it ever gets in the UK.

One highlight of 2010 was Matthew coming home – to live. After completing two years of organ building he was offered a wonderful and highly paid job in Norway as computer and youth courses officer for an organisation – and moved in here. We're all delighted, and so is he. His address will be the flat in the cellar, once this is completed – but for the moment he's making do with the guest room. Beth is still loving life in mid-Norway and has done a lot of travelling with her horse during the year. She moved recently into a larger flat and is enjoying the extra space!

We had a few lovely days in Denmark at the start of the summer (including a visit to Legoland where Tim, in a break with tradition, didn't get his head stuck in any modern sculptures) and a week and a half in Andalucia just before schools went back.

Tracy's church has had huge progress this year, after a tough start dealing with problems inherited from the past. Congregations are growing and there is a new feeling of optimism in the air. People are daring to stick their heads above the parapet and offer to do things, which is wonderful. Tim's had the usual crop of concerts and has been working on a couple of recordings, some writing and has just started as consultant for a new organ in the far north of Norway.

So it's been a full year for us all; varied and memorable. None of us regret coming here! We hope that you've been as blessed as we have – and that the coming year will also be full of good things.

Love from us all

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You can ring us on 0161 408 4878. (Yes - this is a British phone number and charged accordingly - it's redirected to us thanks to the marvels of Skype) or:

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Do read the "blog" on <http://family.rishton.info>!