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Dear Friends

I nearly didn't do a Christmas letter this year, after all Christmas is pretty much cancelled and its not as though we've done a huge amount this year to write about. But I decided I would not be beaten. We may have no parties or carols, but the strings of lights are still going up (even if it is technically a crime for my helper to set foot in my garden) and the letter is still being written. And frankly we've had less interesting years and still managed to fill two sides of paper.

Those of you who keep all our Christmas letters in a shoebox under the bed, or who scan them to a special folder in Dropbox, will be able to reread last year's letter and note that few of my optimistic predictions for 2020 were well founded. Phoebe didn't boogie herself buff. Ellie never made it to Sri Lanka. We didn't get a lot of take up for our open invitation to drop in. Our hope that "next year will be easier" was false, in fact 2020 was in many ways a pile of poo so large that even a well equipped pooverer like Jill was unable to deal with it. Even Collin the rabbit's much vaunted longevity was finally exhausted this year, truly the end of an era. 😞

Robert and Ellie came home in March and stayed with us for several months. They were both brilliant I must say, I was expecting the boredom of lockdown in a rural location would result in some fireworks, but it was actually a pleasure to have them here. Ellie managed to get to Devon for a couple of weeks' paid work lambing (which meant she was a key worker and allowed to travel) but Rob stayed at home for much longer than he would have wanted.

Phoebe stayed in York because her job in Sainsburys meant she was also a "key worker" and she enjoyed the power of rationing toilet rolls. It was too risky for her to visit while the grandparents lived with us. So she spent most of lockdown, when she wasn't working, alone in an empty student flat. Giles of course was the other keyworker in the family, working as a paramedic on the front line. It was pretty tough for all of the kids in different ways, and we are very proud of them all.

We do seem to have mastered the art of the box-set binge this year. We covered all seven seasons of the West Wing (an escapist fantasy in which almost all politicians despite their differences are reasonable and dutiful), devoured Friday Night Dinner, and dug out Our Friends in the North from back in the day. I can't imagine ever going back to watching weekly episodes of anything.



However the most exciting event of the year for us was finally building the cottage for Jill's parents, now christened "Little Stokesay". They took up residence in July and since then have been very settled. However sorting out the vast quantities of stuff in storage so that they get what they need without falling over the stuff that they don't has been a massive undertaking, impeded by their reluctance to throw almost anything acquired in the last fifty years away. NB They got to

keep our old phone number 750737, our new number is at the top of the page.

About my only prediction for 2020 which came true was that we finally got on top of our rat problem. Vast quantities of poison were laid and eaten, enough for hundreds of rats, although we only ever found a few bodies. We can only assume that we have solved the rat problem for the entire neighbourhood, so if our neighbours had about a hundred corpses to dispose of it was a small price for them to pay.

When Autumn came, both Ellie and then Rob went back to university. Neither of them got quite what they had originally bargained for: Rob's lab-based fourth year has involved a lot more online teaching than practical work, whilst Ellie's final year, which was supposed to consist of various placements and practical stints in the animal hospital, has also been restructured to involve much less hands on work. Phoebe decided that she didn't want to continue with her degree, and instead took on more hours at Sainsburys whilst she decided what to do next. She has really enjoyed this job and is looking into the possibility of a management apprenticeship with Sainsburys.

My work has been home based since March. I saw the writing on the wall a few days before lockdown 1 was announced so I packed a few essentials and left the office expecting to be away quite some time. I haven't been back since. When the government decided in August that we had to go back to save the sandwich shop industry, there was a plan for a graduated return to the office, but I wasn't in any rush, and government policy reversed again before my designated return date. I was quite pleased, as there didn't seem a good enough reason to risk travelling into a busy city centre, certainly not to protect the profits of Prêt's! (I don't even like Prêt's, all their sandwiches have raw tomato). Jill has managed to keep up with her upholstery, driving most weeks to the workshop in Stalybridge where she rents a bench. Part of the big tidy up generated by the move into Little Stokesay is to finally get the workshop space in our own outbuildings usable so she can do more from home, but we're not quite there yet.



Meanwhile both Ellie and Phoebe have acquired hamsters (Harold and Boethius respectively) to keep them company during lockdown. Each of our "grandhammies" lives in a luxurious tiered hamster palace made out of plastic storage boxes, and video-calls us regularly to keep in touch. Boe, living in England, has three tiers, and I would love to be able to tell you that Harold, living in Scotland, has five tiers (numbered from zero to four) but sadly he has just three as well, because structural stability is more



important than political comedy.

Current animal headcount in the mothership is: still three cats who just about get on, Ruby the dog plodding on, five chickens left (who loved helping the builders) and of course the four alpacas who continue to keep Jill busy and amused. Eric, the youngest, was castrated on Friday 13 November, unlucky for him. (It turned out that he was somewhat, ahem, unbalanced, a bit like the infamous young man from Devizes in the limerick, but I was banned from including any graphic photographs in this letter.) We also appear to have acquired a pair of ducks, but they don't require feeding.

So here we are, at the end of the year, scarcely daring to look forward to 2021 but convinced it can't possibly be worse. Giles and Aly should complete the purchase of their first house this December, and if all goes to plan we'll be driving a van down to Devon before Christmas to deliver a newly handmade sofa for their new home. I am hoping this move for them marks the beginning of a new season for all of us.



St John and Jill
XX

never been very good at photos...

PS This is a recent photo, I just haven't bought any new clothes for years, and always pull the same expression everywhere I go. We've