



Red Barn, Station Road, Onneley CW3 9QQ  
Christmas 2022

Dear Friends

Here we go again, it seems like no time at all since last year's Christmas letter and in some ways remarkably little seems to have changed since then. Once again I am writing the first draft of this from the Scottish boat house where we come every October to recharge. We reckon this is our seventh year here. One thing has changed though – they have added a hot tub to the side of the building, and if we can get over the terrible implications this has for the environment it is quite fun to strip off on a cold October evening and luxuriate in the hot bubbling water, knowing that the only soul likely to catch a glimpse of our naked flesh is a passing duck, or a very unlucky canoeist.

The biggest change at Red Barn is the arrival of our donkeys, Bonnie and Millie. We are officially donkey guardians, with a badge and everything. They arrived in July in a huge Donkey Sanctuary van and were introduced to their new home under the watchful eye of our neighbours and theirs (the alpacas). Next door's horse was most excited, and immediately ran off to get their goats to come and watch too.

Our initial plan to put manure into a trailer for occasional collection has had to be completely rethought due to volume: who knew that donkeys produced so much poo? This is by far the hardest aspect of keeping donkeys, getting rid of the waste. We have finally found a farmer who will let us empty our trailer into his yard for muck spreading, and we are planning to have a proper muck heap built as soon as possible, so that the farmer can come and dig it out with a big digger every few months. Despite this it is lovely to have some animals that are so gentle and which welcome human contact. The alpacas seem quite jealous of all the attention the donkeys get, my theory is that they secretly wish they were brave enough to come up to us for a cuddle, but their instinct to flee just kicks in whenever they get too close. But aren't we all slaves of our own instincts?



The other change this year has been Robert moving out and Phoebe moving back in. The Sainsbury's job wasn't paying enough for her to stay in York so she's now working locally as a trainee dental nurse. Although she isn't quite as tidy as Rob, it is lovely having her home and she is a great help with the animals and with Grandma. Rob has barely been in contact all year. He says he is "busy working" which is *exactly* what a spy would say when he'd been travelling the world seducing Bond girls in hollowed out volcanoes. He did manage to meet us in Durham for a much delayed graduation ceremony this summer. Ellie is still working as a vet in Manchester: enjoying the animals, less so the office politics. She visits and calls frequently, (but it's easier for her as she's not deep under cover drinking vodka martinis).

Edna is still very much the same, living largely on Roses chocolate and caffe lattes. When faced with more conventional nourishment she started flushing it down the loo, until the waste pipe blocked and we had to get a man out to rod the septic tank. Since this incident she has started ordering her own choice of dinner from "Room Service" but at least she usually eats it, and as this is usually a boiled egg we aren't really complaining, especially since we have restocked the chicken coop and currently have eight. Edna's lounge was converted into something of a chicken coop for most of the summer so she could open the French doors without letting the chickens in, but since it got colder we have removed the wire netting so it feels a bit less like Strangeways. And of course bird flu has put an end to free ranging for the time being (for the chickens I mean, Edna is welcome to get out of her chair any time she likes!)

In other animal news, Ruby is still going, age 19, at the time of writing, although she has to be carried up and down steps. The three cats are all fine, although Buzz is still wandering off to whichever neighbour he can con into serving him fine foods. We have now attached him to an Apple Air Tag so we can locate him when he disappears off on one of his gourmet trips. For several months we were disturbed by scrabbling noises inside the wall despite the best efforts of Dave the pest control man. Eventually we came downstairs one morning to find Virgil (our hero) proudly displaying the corpse of a large rat and we haven't had any problems since.



Phoebe's hamster Boethius sadly died this year, but he was a good age for a hamster. For her birthday we got Phoebe a pair of rabbits called Craig and Jeffrey, but sadly Craig died within a few days, and his replacement from the same litter, Amos, lasted even less time. Thankfully whatever congenital problem was affecting his brothers didn't seem to affect Jeffrey, and eventually we got him a new companion called Deborah. Our first attempt to have Jeffrey castrated failed because his balls refused to drop, but a few days with Deborah seemed to do the trick and now we've had to have both of them done to stop them breaking the hutch with their vigorous activities.

Jill continues to volunteer at the local foodbank, and I have become one of the trustees. The Newcastle (Staffs) Foodbank comes under the umbrella of the Trussell Trust and is doing great work despite a massive increase in demand in the last few months which is only expected to continue to grow. Jill has continued her upholstery despite the increasing overheads. (At one time I would have thrown some humorous political aside in at this point, but this government stopped being funny a long time ago.) If you want to see some of her projects you can follow her on Instagram

@redbarn\_upholstery. These activities, together with care for her animals and her mother, keep Jill pretty busy.

I keep myself out of mischief too, what with church activities, singing in a local choir as well as work. I am working from home 3-4 days a week at the moment, mainly because the trains have become so sporadic that all trips to the office involve a painful 2 hour car journey each way. I have also started trying to lose weight at a local Slimming World group, and am about half way to my target.

So our immediate plans are to host my parents for Christmas, hoping that the new heat pump currently being installed makes the house hot enough for them, then build a muck heap in the new year. Truly living the dream, as always. Have a lovely Christmas and a great 2023 (well apart from the looming recession, the ever present threat of nuclear war and the astronomical price of gas obviously).

Stephen and Jill x x x

