

ST. ANDREWS UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield, S3 7RQ

MESSENGER

Price £1.25

February 2020



Church Secretary Elizabeth Draper, 52 Highcliffe Drive, S11 7LU (230 7252)
 F.W.O Secretary Shelagh Beach
 Chairman Management Team: Prof Ian Cooke, 80 Grove Road, S7 2GZ (262 0718)
 Treasurer Elizabeth Cousley,
 Organist & Choirmaster Douglas Jones GGSM(Lond) PG CE, 96 Southey Hall
 Road, S5 7PY (257 6630)
 Messenger Editors Ann Cathels, email cathelsann5@gmail.com
 Elizabeth Draper, email elizdraper504@btinternet.com
 Barbara Macmillan email bjmacmi@gmail.com
 Paula Higgins email paula@buzzsheffield.co.uk
 Webmaster
 Website: <http://www.standrewsurcsheffield.org.uk>
 Buzz at St. Andrews Child Contact Centre Coordinator 07905417228

CALENDAR for February 2020

Sun	2 Feb	10.45am	Revd Fleur Houston - COMMUNION
Mon	3 Feb	2pm	Elders meeting
Tues	4 Feb	10 – 12	Community Choir
Tues	4 Feb	6.30 for 7pm	In:spire concert
Sun	9 Feb	10.45am	Rev Dr Walter Houston
Tues	11 Feb	10 – 12	Community Choir
Sun	16 Feb	10.45am	Prof Clyde Binfield
Mon	17 Feb	1.30pm	Funeral of Dr William Armstrong
Tues	18 Feb		NO Community Choir
Thurs	20 Feb	10am	Management Team meeting
Sun	23 Feb	10.45am	Mr Chris Limb
Tues	25 Feb	10 - 12	Community Choir
Sun	1 March	10.45am	Revd Captain Michael Reeder
Tues	3 March	10 – 12	Community Choir

ROTAS

Creche

FEB 2 Isabel Sandland
 9 Shelagh Beach
 16 Barbara Macmillan
 23 Jean Dickson
 MARCH 1 Isabel Sandland

Coffee

FEB 2 Kathleen Smyth
 9 Shelagh Beach
 16 Jean Dickson
 23
 MARCH 1

Flowers

2
 9
 16
 23
 1

The new rota sheets are up in the hall. Please sign up when you are able to help.

REFLECTIONS ON IONA

In 1989 the Sheffield Council of Churches held a city-wide service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, led by the Bishop of Sheffield, the Bishop of Hallam, and leaders of the Methodist Conference (Jenny Carpenter that year), the Baptist Union, the Moderator of the URC Yorkshire Province, and members of various churches. Two of St Andrew's members took part - Shona Bird led prayers and James Dickson gave the following talk.

I stand before you a simple pilgrim on life's journey. My daunting task is to try, in a few minutes, to share with you something of the spirit which pervades the holy island of Iona, and to convey a little of the joy and challenge of the worship in the ancient Abbey. In that spirit I am dressed as I would be on Iona where life is very informal and it can be distinctly cold. The name Iona sings in the ear. The island, the jewel of the Hebrides as accurately described in the Observer two weeks ago, delights the eye with its dazzling white sands and grey-green hills; the ear with the ceaseless noises of the sea, the bleating of sheep and the cries of the gulls; and the spirit with the ancient abbey standing calling pilgrims to its sanctuary.

It is a small island, only three and a half miles long. Today it is surprisingly remote. Always my heart has lifted at the first sight, across the narrow sound, of the island and its abbey. I recall arriving tired and very seasick, unsettled by the stark surroundings and the experience of meeting so many strangers, and joining in the hauntingly beautiful sung Benediction after the welcoming service. The music echoed in the dark heights of the abbey.

Night has fallen.
Gracious Father, guard us sleeping.
Keep us in Your love.
Gracious Father, guard us sleeping.
Now we go to rest.
Gracious Father, guard us sleeping.

And suddenly I felt restored and at peace.

On other evenings memorable services are devoted to healing, commitment, Holy Communion, and one has major contributions by the guests or the young people from the youth camp.

The Iona experience, certainly in the abbey, is not one of rest. It could not be with its two founders two turbulent priests. Columba landed with twelve followers on the Eve of Pentecost in 563. He was both going into exile and founding a mission whose missionary monks travelled throughout northern Scotland, into Northumbria, across the Channel to Brittany, and from there into Germany and North Italy. 250 years later the looting and slaughter of Viking raiders forced the monks to retreat to Derry. The Celtic Church survived into the 12th century when Reginald 'Lord of the Isles' founded the

present Benedictine Abbey. After the Reformation the buildings fell into decay and became romantic ruins visited only by intrepid travellers. So it would have remained had not the 8th Duke of Argyll at the turn of this [20th] century restored the abbey church and presented it and the site to the Church of Scotland, with the clear instruction that it should be available for worship to all branches of the Christian Church. And then in the depths of the great depression of the 1930s, the second turbulent priest, the Revd George MacLeod, a minister in Govan in the heart of Glasgow, conceived the idea of rebuilding the living quarters of the abbey. He raised the money, left his parish, and founded a community of ministers and unemployed artisans who set about the task. The vision which inspired them led to the founding of the Iona Community, and makes Iona relevant to today's world. Their discussions of faith and life were fired by the unity of work and worship and the need to tell the Church of Scotland and the Scottish people.

Pilgrimage ? Yes, but it is work and worship which dominate life in the abbey. Discussion, art, meditation, relaxation (not much time for that), fun, are all put in context by the regular abbey services - three times a day - and the recurring pattern of chores which foster relationships and are an essential part of abbey life. It was here that the leaders of the Church in Scotland, Cardinal and Moderator, met to discuss unity and were photographed together washing the dishes. And George MacLeod preaching to them declared, 'How can we convince the world that we are travelling together if we eat in different hotels ?'

From its beginnings the Iona Community has set out to challenge youth. For many years a 'Youth Camp' was run in tandem with the Abbey, using the original workers' huts as dwellings. Time took its toll and the building had to be demolished. In a great leap of faith the Community has raised the money to build the new permanent Macleod Centre, due to be ready for guests this April. It was there that I, with other guests, was able to join the work party from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, for a meal. It was a great privilege to meet, sing grace, and talk with these earnest young Christians.

For nearly all who go there, Iona is a total experience, of communal life, of shared devotion, and religious reawakening and challenge.

I was asked, 'What difference has it made to you ? What did YOU bring back ?' Reassurance, confidence, a recharging of the batteries. The Abbey has, justly, been called a spiritual filling station. Before Iona I would not have even considered, never mind agreed to, standing here before you.

In life's pilgrimage we all need our Ionas for respite and recharging. But wherever you go, do remember the words of an ancient Irish poet:

To go to Rome is much trouble, little profit.
The King of Heaven whom thou seekest there
Unless thou bring Him with thee, thou wilt not find.

The experience of pilgrimage will only come to the prepared heart.

Among pilgrimage sites Iona stands out, for Iona is a timeless, holy place. The island has seen the Columban monks slaughtered on the shore, the Book of Kells illuminated and then taken for safety to Ireland, the Benedictines come and go, their Abbey fall into ruin and be rebuilt, and still the witness is kept and the message proclaimed. The message that the love of God is for all peoples and all times, the message as proclaimed by St Paul in his letter to the Colossians: 'Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all'.

James Dickson



[It is not known whether this impressive ecumenical event was ever repeated. The Sheffield Council of Churches was scrapped when Churches Together in South Yorkshire was formed (1990-1). St Andrew's was part of Netherthorpe Council of Churches, formed in the early 1960s, with five other churches. In the 1970s on Palm Sundays they held an afternoon/early evening processing pageant through Netherthorpe from St. Nathanael's ending at St. Vincent's, with one of the Stations of the Cross enacted at each stopping point. Also ecumenical study groups in which the Revd David Hill took part. - Thanks to Jenny Carpenter for this history.]

LOOKING AHEAD

Lent study groups: We hope to be able to run some discussion groups as usual; Elders are working on this.

A Church lunch will be held in the hall on **Friday 13 March** catered by Open Kitchen, similar to the December one, which was very enjoyable. **12.30 for 1pm.** All welcome.

WOMEN'S WORLD DAY OF PRAYER

This year's main service in Sheffield will be held at **Central URC at 11am on Friday 6 March.**

The World Day of Prayer is an international ecumenical Christian laywomen's initiative. It is run under the motto "Informed Prayer and Prayerful Action," and is celebrated annually in over 170 countries on the first Friday in March. The movement aims to bring together women of various races, cultures and traditions in a yearly common Day of Prayer, as well as in closer fellowship, understanding and action throughout the year. The Day of Prayer is a significant date each year but Prayer is a 24 hour 365 (or even 366) day business so the work - informed prayer and prayerful action – lasts all year round.

IN:SPIRE CONCERTS

The next concert in the series is on **Tuesday 4 February**, featuring Rob Buckland (saxophone) and Peter Lawson (piano). Their programme is:

Chick Corea (arr. Buckland)	Children's Songs
Takashi Yoshimatsu	Fuzzy Bird Sonata – <i>No I. Run, Bird</i>
Rob Buckland	Altogenesis
Somei Satoh	Incarnation II
Barbara Thompson	Green
Tim Garland	Blues for Little Joe

The rest of the In:spire season continues with great variety:

Tuesday 17 March:	Hallmark of Harmony Choir
Friday 24 April:	Martin Cropper (violin) and Annabelle Lawson (piano)
Tuesday 9 June	Annabelle Lawson (piano)

Everyone welcome. Free entry; suggested donation £8 (cash on the door). **7pm**, doors open from **6.30pm**.

A concert with a difference took place here on Saturday 11 January. "Concerteenies" is classical music for 0-to-3-year-olds (and their adults and siblings). See the report on page 12.

LOOKING BACK

CHRISTMAS seems a long way behind us now but we must record the lovely events we had at St Andrew's. First was the festive lunch in the hall, catered by Open Kitchen - a delicious meal, which we shall certainly repeat. The Carol Service was a feast of music and seasonal bible readings, and the University Lunch-time Sing of local carols attracted some 80 people. The Christmas Day service was a delight: nine young people read the lessons, led the carol singing, placed the figures in the manger scene, took up the collection, and conducted themselves with great poise and ability. Many thanks to Sheila Dunstan and Margaret Fall who arranged it all.



The church was beautifully decorated with our wreaths and tree, put up as usual by Jean and James Dickson. And this year we were able to add a most realistic and touching stable scene, built by Dan Fall and holding the knitted figures made many years ago by Pat Campbell. Our thanks to them all for bringing the Christmas story and spirit alive for us.

Our donations in lieu of cards and the collection on Christmas Day were for Starter Packs, and a total of £429 was reached. Sheila Dunstan thanks everyone for their generosity. Each pack of new household goods costs about £75.

We have hosted the Soup Kitchen Christmas dinner for about 15 years now and received this email from Karen Whittaker:

I would just like to thank everyone at St Andrews for allowing us to use your premises to host our Soup Kitchen Christmas party in 2019. A great time was had by volunteers and guests alike. We had good conversations with guests, chatting about how they too can accept God's wonderful gift of forgiveness and how he can work for good in their lives too

Thank you once again for your generous support.

FAMILY NEWS

Happy New Year to everyone and we start with the lovely news of two births, coincidentally both on 15 January. Jackie (nee Callear) and Shabin Chohan in Newcastle are the proud parents of Sebastian Gabriel, and Alison (nee Cousley) and Stephen Moore welcomed Anna Florence, a sister for Benjamin. Congratulations and good wishes to them all. Jackie and Shabin plan to have Sebastian christened in Newcastle later in the year, and are looking at various Muslim traditions and will decide on what seems most appropriate.

Stuart Haxton is happy in his new job as a concierge in a block of student flats. The hours are regular, in contrast to his shift work at Meadowhall; the only drawback is that he works 9 to 5 on Saturdays and Sundays so he can never get to Sunday services now. Suzanne Westran has also left Meadowhall and is taking some time out for health reasons; she is busy making creative decorations for her son's wedding in March.

Sadly, we also have several deaths to record. Former member John Stirling died on 23 November; there is an appreciation of his life on page 14. Former member Brian Ogilvie died on 7 December in Anstruther, Fife, following a long battle with cancer. Jean Finlay (another former member of St Andrew's who now lives near the Ogilvies) will represent us at the memorial service to be held at Cleish church near Kinross on 1st February - a church where Brian did a lot of preaching. Ian McMaster's brother passed away on 27 December following a long battle with rheumatoid arthritis and latterly throat cancer. And on 17 January Bill Armstrong died in hospital after a long sad decline. (There will be a tribute to him in the next issue.) We send our profound sympathy to all their families and friends.

Some of our older members continue to find life difficult. Wilma Love still cannot drive after her fall; Alistair's time is full of medical appointments. Anita McVittie has a major decision to make about an operation on her hip. Lorna Drought had another spell in hospital after a fall in which she cracked a rib. Dorothy Adam's health is up and down but she is currently feeling a bit better. Ann Cathels is recovering slowly from her fall and severe lung infection.

News at Christmas: Former member Pat Hale, long retired in Northern Ireland, says that she is now an Emeritus Elder - and she has cut off her trade-mark plaits! We also received Christmas greetings from the Revd Sarah Hall, Linda Sadler (Nora Ferrie's daughter), Margery and Jim Woodhouse (Derek Collins' sister) and Sheila and Jim Sharp (Marion Howdle's sister), and later from Jean Finlay.

It was lovely to see Robert Beard in church on 5 January and in case you didn't have a chance to chat with him, his Christmas letter is on page 15.

OTHER NEWS

CONGRATULATIONS to Annabelle (Lawson) and Stephen Wiles on the birth of a second son, Quentin Ashley, on 27 November, a brother for Marty.



HONOUR:

Rev. Dr Walter Houston was installed as the President of the Society for Old Testament Study for 2020 at its Winter Meeting in Nottingham on 6th January. Walter's first duty as President was to sign the Presidential Bible, a rare Bomberg edition of the Hebrew Bible, which has the signatures of all the Presidents of the Society since its formation in 1917, and is housed in a specially made casket of acacia wood. Walter then proceeded to give his Presidential Address, which had the title, "What is 'work'? Reception and theology of the Sabbath commandment in the Decalogue". It is a great and well-deserved honour for Walter to serve as President of this Society. Another paper at the same meeting of the Society was given by Dr Iona Hine (a former member here), with the title, "Bible Translator as Theologian: the praxis of Miles Coverdale, 1488-1569".

David Stec

BOOK OF PSALMS AND HYMNS

Jenny Carpenter recently presented us with a copy of The Psalms and Scottish Hymnal (with tunes) dated 1887 that had belonged to her husband.

We are very pleased to have this fascinating book. It has about 600 psalms and hymns. The psalms and their tunes are split so that you can sing one to the tune of another. Each psalm has a recommendation for the tunes to be used.

Did you know ? - In the Highlands in times past, the words of the psalms were held in great reverence and only sung on Sundays. At choir practice or school music lessons, the psalm tunes were practised but were sung to different, secular words. The correct words were holy and sung only in the Sunday service.

Our thanks to Jenny for this very interesting book.

Jean Dickson

BUZZ

Claire Sidey has left Buzz and gone to work with the Macmillan Cancer Treatment Centre at Chesterfield. Kath Mardles is continuing as manager and she and Paula have taken on Claire's hours.

Buzz were shortlisted for a Community Champion award from Radio Sheffield and made it to the top 3. This was a new award by the South Yorkshire Community Foundation, who teamed up with BBC Radio Sheffield to find the unsung local heroes - the people or organisations who go the extra mile to make things better where they live. 350 nominations were whittled down to 24 finalists in eight different categories. The Finalists were Buzz (a group that's supported vulnerable families for more than 20 years) and organisations in Doncaster and Edlington. Buzz did not win in the end but received a 'Highly Commended'. Well done !

RAINBOW BABY AND TODDLER GROUP

This is our latest letting, and a joy to see on a Thursday morning.

They welcome people from across all cultural groups and all ages, grandparents looking after their little ones and parents new to Sheffield and here to study. On their first day here, to celebrate, they had a rainbow cake, which they shared with the Management Team meeting that morning. It tasted as delicious as it looked !



The **PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY NETWORK** publishes a quarterly periodical which is very interesting reading. Two copies circulate round the congregation - Please ask if you would like to see it. Revd Canon Adrian Alker is the current Chair of PCN. Their Spring Conference will be held on Saturday 25 April in York on the topic 'Science and Religion'. Professor Ian Cooke has been asked to take part.

NEW CHARITY GIN !

Seven Hills Women's Institute, which meets on the third Thursday of the month in our church, has teamed up with craft distiller Masons Yorkshire Gin to create their own bespoke gin. They call it Greetings & Salutations and all profits from its sale are going to the group's charity of the year, South Yorkshire Eating Disorder Association.

Greetings & Salutations is the latest in a long list of fundraising efforts from the WI. Its main juniper flavour profile is enhanced by the additional ingredients of heather, rose, orange oil and cubeb pepper, selected by the WI's members. *And if you wish to try it, Greetings & Salutations' can be purchased from Archer Road Beer Stop.*

CAN YOU HELP ?

Rosie Chitty runs a sewing class at the Jesus Centre. Many of the members are immigrants. She could use remnants of material plus any haberdashery, like old zips etc. Please contact Monica Hanna.

During the winter months please remember the Food Bank for those families in need. As well as food, toiletries such as shampoo and shower gel, and toilet paper, are all needed.

SHEFFIELD TEAM MINISTRY NEWS:

Synod Treasurer:

The Revd Simon Copley, one of the Sheffield Team Ministry, has agreed to take on the role of Synod Treasurer on a part-time (quarter) basis alongside his ministry. Simon was our Pastoral Advisor briefly in 2014.

Simon worked in the accounts department of an American oil and petro-chemical exploration company between doing his BA in Religion and Philosophy at St David's College, Lampeter, and his training at Northern College and MA at Manchester University. He then served in Cwmbran in South Wales. He also has 11 years of fundraising experience for various charities including *Care for the Family*, *Atlantic College*, *Lancaster YMCA*, *Tax Volunteers* and *Hollybank Trust* in Mirfield. In that time he raised £4.5 million from Trusts, Lottery and Statutory bodies.

Pulpit Exchange

While the Revd Zaidie Orr is on exchange in White Horse, Yukon, Canada, (February to end April), the Revd Bev Brazier from the United Church of Canada will be joining the Sheffield Team. She arrives on 4 February and there will be a welcome event to meet her on **Sunday 9 February at Central URC at 4pm.**

Vacancy Committee

The Synod Moderator and Synod Clerk met with the Vacancy Committee on 17 January to discuss bringing in a new minister in place of the Revd Jamie Kissack who will become Synod Moderator in June. An updated Pastorate Profile is being prepared.

Synod

The bi-annual meeting of Yorkshire Synod will be held on Saturday 14 March at Longcauseway, Dewsbury. Jean Dickson and Elizabeth Draper plan to attend.

CONCERTEENIES

As part of her In:spire series, Annabelle Lawson invited Polly Ives, who plays cello in the Woodfield String Quartet, along with Julie (viola), Hannah (violin) and Rosie (violin), to hold one of her 'Concerteenies' concerts for parents and children from 0-3 years in St Andrew's Hall on Saturday, 11th January. The idea is for very young children to be exposed to music and for their parents to relax and enjoy a mixture of classical and pop. Polly asked the grown-ups not to talk to each other, or their children, but just to listen to the music.

What an exciting occasion it was. A large mat of many colours was spread out on the floor for little ones to sit on, with chairs behind for Mums and Dads with little babies on their knees. There were 90 adults and children for the first concert (10.30am-11.15am) and 84 for the second (11.4am-12.30pm). The quartet played Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and Corelli's *Christmas concert*, when great clouds of bubbles were released to the children's delight, and Handel's *Fireworks*, when the children threw coloured nets in the air or over themselves. There were fluffy white balls looking like snowballs to throw around when Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* Largo for Winter was played. The musicians walked around the children playing nursery rhymes, encouraging actions: Twinkle twinkle little star, London Bridge is falling down and the Grand Old Duke of York. Stuffed soft toy animals were handed out while playing *The Bare Necessities* from *The Jungle Book*. A sky full of stars from Cold Play brought coloured lights swirling round the room, along with *Don't stop me now* from the pop group Queen.

The whole experience was fun from start to finish. Seeing parents together, sharing a happy, relaxed time with their children was a delightful experience for all of us who were there to help. I couldn't help contrasting this with what normally occurs in the Hall on a Saturday morning at the Contact Centre, when sadly families are divided and children are living with only one of their parents. If only they could be part of an occasion like that.

Sheila Cooke



JOHN STIRLING (known to some people as Ian)

John was born in Fife on a farm, The Barns, near Aberdour. He had a sister Anne, still living, and brother Bill. John was a bright boy who went to Edinburgh Academy, travelling daily over the Forth by train, and later went to Manchester University to study engineering. He was unfortunate to develop polio when he was 15 which left him with limited mobility. Work took him to the steel works of Rotherham and Sheffield where he lived initially in Broomgrove Road and joined St Andrew's (then Presbyterian) Church. At work he met Marion who was to become his wife of more than 40 years. The initial courtship survived what could have been a culinary disaster: when inviting Marion for a meal, and trying to follow his Mum's recipe absolutely ... he even followed her post script"remember the salt and pepper" ... which he duly put into the rice pudding!

They were married in 1961 and lived in Blackbrook Road close to St Luke's church. John was a member of St Andrew's URC on Upper Hanover Street for many years and even when travelling was difficult he could be found in his seat for Communion. Janet and Bob, their two children, in turn produced four grandchildren and the family enjoyed many holidays in Scarborough or back to the Barns at Aberdour, and on boats on the Norfolk Broads and the Thames.

John worked hard to develop a great knowledge of gardening, going to classes under Don Williams and after redundancy in 1989 became a founder member of FOBS. John was responsible for looking after three of the National Plant Collections (Weigela, Diervilla and Sarcococca) held in Sheffield.

After Marian's death in 2003 John kept himself busy and learnt to cook !. Hardy Plants, the National Trust, the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway group, the men's group and lunch club in St Luke's, enjoying train holidays and attending the Caledonian Society Saturday Arts group. John was just interested in everything and happy to keep learning. And he was so popular. He was a regular on Margaret's Holidays, whizzing around on his scooter to make sure he missed nothing out. He enjoyed his food: never late for meals, and wherever he sat in restaurants he was surrounded by others happy to join in his discussions. On the coach he was enormously useful to Margaret, naming trees and plants, the cattle and the crops he knew from his childhood, making her sound like an expert ! John had a famous relative in David Stirling who formed a new special operations unit, given the deliberately misleading name "L Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade" or the SAS as we know it. John proudly took us to visit the monument.

His faith, his family and friends were ever present in all he did. At his funeral at Skew Hill Crematorium on 10 December 2019 the chapel was full of mourners, and at his Service of Remembrance in St Luke's, many friends came to pay their respects and chat over tea and cakes of the happy times they had spent in his company.

Thanks to Margaret Fall

LECTIONARY READINGS for February 2020

26 January	Isaiah 9 : 1-4; Psalm 27 : 1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1 : 10-18; Matthew 4 : 12-23
2 February	Micah 6 : 1-8; Psalm 15 ; 1 Corinthians 1 : 18-31; Matthew 5 : 1-12
9 February	Isaiah 58 : 1-12; Psalm 112 : 1-9 (10); 1 Corinthians 2 : 1-12 (13-16); Matthew 5 : 13-20
16 February	Deuteronomy 30 : 15-20; Psalm 119 : 1-8; 1 Corinthians 3 : 1-9; Matthew 5 : 21-37
23 February	Leviticus 19 : 1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119 : 33-40; 1 Corinthians 3 : 10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5 : 38-48
1 March	Exodus 24 : 12-18; Psalm 2 or Psalm 99 ; 2 Peter 1 : 16-21; Matthew 17 : 1-9
8 March	Joel 2 : 1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51 : 1-17; 2 Corinthians 5 : 20b – 6 :10; Matthew 6 : 1-6, 16-21

NEWSLETTER FROM ROBERT BEARD

Christmas Eve 2019 - Happy Christmas!

This year started out much as planned. My sister Sarah and I sold our family home following Mother's death last year, I put my remaining worldly possessions in storage and, at the end of February, boarded a plane bound for Thailand. After a few days with a friend in Bangkok, I eschewed an internal flight in favour of the eye-poppingly scenic eleven-hour train journey north to Chiang Mai, where I was enthusiastically welcomed by my beloved honorary granddaughter Charlotte (aka Truffle, and very nearly 10 years old) whose mother Colette (an amazing friend from Sheffield) teaches at a local international school. I spent a month living with a friend of theirs in the walled and moated Old City, then found myself an apartment.

An illustrated account of my time in Thailand can be found in my (unfinished) blog series; suffice it here to say that I couldn't find regular work; imagine hearing "We don't hire anyone over 40" on repeat. At the end of June, I became ill and felt I had to cut my losses and return to the UK. I have no regrets whatever about going out to Thailand; a return visit to south east Asia was long overdue. I made new friends and had many extraordinary experiences, from visiting the White Temple, the Blue Temple and the Black House, to swimming with magnificent elephants and visiting Joe in Vietnam.

Since my return to the UK, I've been living with longstanding friends near Cambridge, fully recovered my health, run a children's drama group at a local library, played Father Christmas twice and donned Victorian attire to deliver a reading of A Christmas Carol. I'm now buying myself a flat in Peterborough, at the north west edge of Cambridgeshire, and working towards a qualification in proofreading.

Philip (30) has had a very busy and productive year in Orlando, Florida, pursuing his studies in music, working as a radio DJ among other jobs, and still finding time to write, record and release three singles.

Joe (25) continues to teach English in Ho Chi Minh City, where he also maintains a well-informed interest in post-colonial Vietnamese history. He spends his leisure time keeping extraordinarily fit, partly through practising ju-jitsu, and roaming the country on his motorbike.

This was not the 2019 I had planned in January, but it's turned out to be very varied and stimulating nonetheless, which is how I like my years. Now I'm on the move again, to a small, history-steeped English cathedral city – the BBC's 1982 "Barchester", no less! – with a view to many further adventures both here and abroad. I wonder how this will go...

Happy New Year!

Since then, Robert intended to visit a friend in China for six weeks but that plan has been scuppered for the time being by the coronavirus.

